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## A Hermit's Tale

Richard W. Ayers  
Bard College, [ra3386@bard.edu](mailto:ra3386@bard.edu)

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Bard

The Hermit's Tale

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Richard W. Ayers

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## The Legend of The Hermit

*Cal's father once told him a story of an old hermit who had moved to his hometown. Wearing soiled and torn clothing, he wandered into Dick's Pharmacy one midsummer day, and those who saw him fell silent and stared, and rumors that the hermit was up to something sinister began to circulate around the town. Children often ventured into the woods to catch a glimpse of the hermit yet never got clear sight of him because they feared passing the cluster of birches that separated their woods from his, for their parents had warned them that traps set by the hermit waited on the other side to ensnare them.*

*Cal's father was in his late teens, back then, and worked at Mercer's Hardware. One day, Mr. Mercer asked him to deliver a truckload of bricks to the hermit's hidden property and told him to keep his mouth zipped as he handed him a torn paper with directions and the keys to his truck.*

*The directions led him to a dirt road that snaked into the forest. With bricks rumbling in the bed of the truck, he drove over stones and potholes for some time before coming upon a clearing and a patch of greenery where the road ended. A row of boulders blocked his way. Cal's father left the truck and trekked through the high grass until he came to a gate of woven branches tied together with grapevines.*

*On the other side of the gate, Cal's father found an enclosure where birds—red, black, yellow, and blue—flitted about like fairies, confirming his theory that the hermit must have been a magician. Goats frolicked in a smaller enclosure also constructed of intertwined materials, and just nestled under two knotted trees, a shack was situated which he had only seen once from a distance. Colossal zucchini plants bordered the front of the rickety structure, their*



*flowers yawning upward like dainty yellow trumpets and their leaves the size of elephant ears.*

*The garden dripped with plump red tomatoes, broccoli forests, and icy clumps of cabbage.*

*“The gate,” his father had said, “might as well have been the archangel Uriel standing between me and the Garden of Eden.”*

*But that was just a story, a legend.*

## I

The Dollinger account was large, a remodel of an expansive penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park West, one that any esteemed architect would strive to design with great attention and love for detail. Even as he put his final touches on his design, Cal Theis felt his own lack of enthusiasm, yet the fast approaching deadline left him feeling tense and unsatisfied.

He worked in a cubicle, a tinier sector within a vast New York City office with still more cubicles furnished with drafting tables and ergonomically incorrect desk chairs and a lobby littered with equally uncomfortable Wassily chairs. He had worked in the office for fifteen years, since he had finished his master's degree in architecture at MIT, but never moved past the cubicles to the more spacious glass offices. He hadn't put much work into his plans, anyway. Ideas came to him passively. His attention failed him at work for the most of his life, submitting mediocre renderings, and he resigned himself to watching interns climb the ladder, some stepping atop his plans and benefitting from his lack of motivation. At times, he wanted to get somewhere, driven by the dictates of his age, but not enough to make him strive to excel at his job. His heart just wasn't in it and the job had become just that—a job.

“Boring and meaningless,” Cooper said as he poked his finger at the blueprint. Cooper had a second-tier glass office with a view over of the employees below and accessible only by a grand marble staircase. “Do you even realize the money these people could bring in? MIT, huh? Look. How many years have you been here Cal?”

And it was the same conversation he'd had with Cooper several times. The same disappointed loss of an account over Cal's mediocre approach.

“Where's the functionality? Where's the umph?”

They worked on salary. The 20% commission they offered for each account won when Cal first started at the firm had dropped over the years, first to 15%, then to 10%, the most any employee under a senior position could hope to make. Senior positions made a whopping 25% in addition to profit sharing. In his years at the firm, Cal had only managed to make four commissions. Most of his plans were rejected for lack of innovation and more of his time was spent assisting in accounts led by senior architects rather than bidding jobs. While his salary never went down, it never went up and bonuses disappeared.

“So you called me in to tell you that I won’t make partner again this year.”

“Don’t get smart. I called you in out of concern.”

“Concern?”

“For your future.” Cooper tapped his fingers absently on a windowed envelope. “I don’t know how to say this, Cal. Perhaps this will help.” Cooper stepped around his desk and walked to a shelving unit that held multiple scrolls of plans, both past and present designs, separated by colored stickers. He removed one and before returning to his desk, lowered the slatted blinds over the windows. Cooper sat at the edge of his desk, pushed aside his pen sets and photographs of his wife and two children smiling in Central Park with dandelion puffs flying by, and rolled out the plans he extracted from the cylinder. The title page was a beautifully designed drawing of the completed rooftop garden rendered in color. Subsequent pages followed suit with first blueprints and then sketches of the completed project. The vision of the space drew upon Victorian concepts, closing in spaces to manage sunlight and framing passageways with carved wooden door casings, and mixed them with the sweeping lines found in Frank Gehry’s work, distorting the perspective, whereas Cal’s design took the crisp and modern approach of Bauhaus, taking advantage of the open space.

“See here. This is attention to detail. This is what architecture is about.

Unconventional? Perhaps. A risk? Likely. But for Chris-sake, Cal, where are *your* risks?

Where’s your adventure. Don’t think I’ve seen any of that since we started working here.

Remember? God we were young. You had it in you. What happened, Cal?”

He didn’t know how to answer. He did have it in him once, he thought.

Cooper adjusted the photo of his family on his desk to face Cal. “How are things at home?”

“Going,” Cal said. “I guess. We’re getting by, under the circumstances. Apartment’s still up for sale.”

“No way to work it out, huh? Too bad you two couldn’t have kids,” Cooper patted his photo as if kids were the solution solving troubled relationships.

“What makes you think we couldn’t have?”

Cooper raised an eyebrow. “Well, you’re both...you know.” He gestured towards Cal’s crotch. “Then again, I’m no plumber.”

“Well, we didn’t want any,” Cal said. “Who drew these?”

“Amanda.”

“The intern?”

“It’s not the first time, Cal.”

“Not the first time?”

“Sometimes just to make corrections.”

“I don’t understand.”

Cooper turned the computer screen on his desk to face Cal and pointed his pen at it.

“You don’t show any bathrooms. Where are they going to shit? This is basic stuff.”

“I must have been...I don't know what I was thinking.”

“Maybe your heart's not in it, Cal. Look. I've been up to bat for you behind the scenes because you're my friend. We've been here a long time together, Cal. But you're, how old?”

“Forty-three,” he mumbled.

“Forty-three, and you're still sitting in that same cubicle. And I'm here, and Jimmy is in his glass office. And Tiffany. I like you, Cal, and I like you here, but I can't do anymore favors for you. They're pressuring me.”

“Who are they?”

“The partners.”

“But *you're* a partner.”

“Yes. Well, we made a decision.”

“About my future, I suppose.” His voice had gone flat.

“About your future, Cal.” He picked up the envelope and flapped it against his leg. “I've been lobbying for you, buddy. You have to know that. Got a nice severance package for you, for the years you put in. Here. It's yours.”

The plastic window of the envelope flashed into his eyes though he looked away and sideways at Cooper. Cal had never noticed that behind his serene demeanor, his display of personal control, there also flickered a cold pleasure, like a reflection off of a shark infested ocean, in sinking his razor-sharp teeth into Cal's flesh, in flaunting his heteronormative lifestyle with arrogance as if Cal and Steve's union were substandard. Cal realized he never liked Cooper any more than he liked his job.

“You’ll have to leave today, of course.” Cooper’s voice was soft, inflected reason. “I asked that building security leave you alone. No need for embarrassment. Just pack up and say your goodbyes. Thank you for your service here, Cal.” He placed the envelope on Cal’s lap. “Give Steve my regards.”

\*\*\*

One by one, Cal removed photos of Steve and him from the cubicle’s bright orange partitions. He detached each with consideration of the moments they contained, ancient memories of laughter and togetherness frozen in time, each insensitive to the pangs they inflicted. Three months had passed and he had failed to jump this hurdle until now, until forced by unemployment, though it wasn’t really a jump but a reluctant climb over the inevitable truth, one he had trouble accepting—he and Steve were over. He and his career were over. He stacked the photos face down on the drafting table.

Laughter erupted from Amanda’s side of the cubicle where she chatted on the phone, on company time, likely with her boyfriend.

“Don’t be silly. You are far too much.” Her voice escalated to a screechy falsetto.

Cal winced. He had never expected his last day at S.H. Lindeman and Partners Architectural Firm to be a glamour-filled festival bearing a gold watch, but he had expected dignity. As Cooper promised, no security guard came to escort him, but his password no longer opened his computer and from each second-tier office window white collared faces peered down upon him.

\*\*\*

Like his father, Cal took gin in his martini, preferably top shelf, and liked it shaken until a thin film of frost developed on the metal of the cocktail shaker. A suspended lemon twist

glowed in the chilled alcohol, illuminated blue by the club lights. The sedatives in his front pocket were the drug of choice he had inherited from his mother. Rather, he inherited the anxiety that called for their occasional use, but he never mixed them with his alcohol, though now it crossed his mind as he traced the three nodules the pills made on his thigh. He tried to avoid his reflection in the mirror behind the bar—his face, still young, blue eyes still clear and sparkling yet downturned at the corners by the weight of sadness, framed by a selection of liquor.

Aside from Quincy and him, only two small clusters of men populated the club, a group of three leather clad bulls holding beers and shooting pool and a larger group of five twinkles enrapt in animated conversation.

“Who’ll hire me now?” Cal asked. “I was all but escorted out.”

“Oh, sweetie. You poor dear. It must have been mortifying. What are you to do?”

Quincy frowned and pressed her dainty lips upon the ridge of her cosmo, leaving behind a whisper of her lipstick. She sat upon her barstool petite and self-possessed, an elfin queen of Oz, her legs crossed at the ankles and tucked sideways. Under the dimmed lights, diamonds twinkled on her wrists, and her hand landed like a feather onto his. “Is it because—?” She gestured to his glass.

“No. I don’t day-drink. Well, I didn’t,” he said, realizing it was not yet four o’clock.

“You understand why I asked, dear; don’t you? I worry about you so. Such a fresh young face for such despair.”

“I’m washed up.” He laughed and lifted his hand for the bartender.

“But darling. You are so lovely to look upon and so dear to me. Not a cell in my little bones could bear to witness such sadness. What could I possibly do for you?” She lifted her

Hermes pocket book onto the bar and poised her fingertips over its mouth. “Let me cushion your fall; you’ll surely find something within a month.”

“Don’t you ever feel inadequate, Quin? You know, sometimes I do, like I don’t belong. Don’t fit in. While everybody else is having their little kiddies, their little families, climbing their little career ladders in jobs they don’t even like, doing whatever the television tells them to do, I’m here feeling like I never fit in to this to begin with. I can’t hold down a relationship. I can’t even pretend to like my job. Fuck, Quin, I even felt relieved when Cooper fired me, like I don’t have to deal with those assholes anymore.”

The bartender, a strongly pectoral man wearing a tee-shirt, set another napkin and martini in front of Ca. He ran his fingernails up and down his chest and gazed at Cal, who absently traced lines across the condensation on his glass. Quincy lifted a twenty from her purse, and the bartender snapped it from her hand and sashayed to the register.

“You’re sour,” Quin said. “Perhaps, you should take it easy with those. That’s your second in like ten minutes, love. The other one didn’t even get a chance to start evaporating.”

“We’re in a machine and I’m just a spinning wheel that does nothing to contribute to its function.”

“You do realize that bartender was flirting with you, love. Look at me for a minute. How are things at home? How’s Steve?”

“Sucks. We’re nice and all, but the place is still for sale. He’s joined some cult. Grew his hair and rolled it into a bun on his head. Forty-six years old and he’s got a man-bun.” Cal laughed and drank half his martini. “I think he’s screwing the head Hare Krshna of the group.”

“Then Cal. Love, love, love. Do me a favor and give that bartender the time of day.”

“And how’s your husband?”



“Who knows?” Quincy’s faced reddened and she folded over in laughter. She was privileged, had been since birth, played wife in a marriage composed merely of surface to a dandy who was also born in Manhattan and spent most of his youth in school in Switzerland. She owned a midtown fashion boutique that sold high end clothing including pieces by her well-known designer friends made exclusively for her shop and paid for by her obscure husband. Cal had known Quincy since moving to New York fifteen years ago—she was his best friend—and he had only met her husband twice, a man just as mysterious in person as he was in Cal’s imaginings of him, a man whose eyes looked to some distant place that interested him more than the present moment, who barely appeared to take notice of Cal when they met. He didn’t even appear to notice Quincy, even when he held her by her thin fingers.

“What are you going to do now?” Quincy asked, creasing her forehead.

“Go home. Have dinner.”

Quincy slapped his shoulder. “I don’t mean right now, Silly. I mean now. Like not that you’ve been fired.”

Cal sank his head into his shoulders sullenly. “Like I said. Go home. Have dinner. I really don’t know after that, Quin.”

## II

He fidgeted with his keys, missing the keyhole many times before jiggling the doorknob to their brownstone in Chelsea. It clicked open. The brick and metal fireplace mantels were cleaned of soot and the first level rooms opened to an expanse where he and Steve could entertain. Back when they entertained. World music played on their overhead speakers and evening sunlight beamed through the window and backlit Steve who danced, wearing wide legged gauze pants and a flowing shirt, his unkempt beard and the ball of hair balanced on his head glowing like a halo around his silhouette. His accent had changed from Brooklyn to beachy California over the past few months since he met *Manny*, the ever elusive and mysterious figure that increasingly dominated Steve's conversations.

“You look drunk,” Steve said, still dancing.

“Had one martini with Quin. Am I home too late for dinner?”

“One martini.” Steve chuckled and shook his head, then he took a deep audible breath and dropped his shoulders as he exhaled and, his tone forgiving, said, “Dinner's in the oven. Look, I don't care where you drank or with whom. We need to talk.”

Cal pinched his eyes. “Sure. Why not. Makes sense.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just a bad day. Everything just keeps happening to me.”

“Then you've gotta stop letting things happen and start making them happen. That's what Manny says. Start making life happen. It's kinda what I want to talk about.”

“Can we do this later? I need to shower this day off me.”

As Cal walked up the stairs, Steve said, “Oh. You got a call today. Some woman. A lawyer.” Cal closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then continued up the stairs without a word.

\*\*\*

The hot water was tranquilizing. Cal stood under the steaming spray, letting it flatten his hair over his forehead and roll past his nostrils, constricting his breath, as though one quick inhale would draw the flow into his lungs and drown him. Thoughts sped into his head, crowding his skull. He felt propelled into a world of unknowns, not much unlike the unknowns he'd been living in, though more imminent, not like the wispy questions of what any of his days actually meant but more like the overwhelming sense that the limb he had been hanging from was about to snap. Imbedded in these unknowns—employment, Steve, and now, a lawyer—was the potential for his ultimate demise.

His head still under the shower-head, Cal inhaled as fast as he could.

He didn't drown.

\*\*\*

Silently, they sat over plates of roasted pork, mashed parsnips, green beans sautéed in butter and sprinkled with oregano. Steve had a particular talent for cooking, perhaps because he was an artist and able to mix his media to create any effect he desired, and mouthwatering dinners seemed to pour out of him, particularly when something deeply bothered him. Cal learned to expect an explosion from Steve when he dedicated an entire day to the kitchen—reducing wines into savory sauces, braising tough meats into tender morsels of debauchery, and steaming ratatouilles that melted like butter. Salivating like Pavlov's dogs—because the succulent aromas caused a reluctant masochism in Cal, devouring those meals with greedy pleasure while Steve stirred in his seat ready to erupt.

“Rita's showing the apartment tomorrow,” Steve said, shattering the silence like glass.

“That's wonderful,” Cal muttered.

“What happened today? Something’s going on.”

Cal shook his head and stuffed a forkful of mashed parsnips into his mouth, making Steve wait while he let the parsnips dissolve on his tongue. He needed time to process his words, to process what had happened to him.

“Cooper fired me today.” It came out of Cal as a whisper but echoed in the room as a shout.

“Oh jeez! Cal. Why?”

“The jerk basically called my work subpar.” Cal stabbed at his green beans with his fork, ran his fingers through his hair with his other hand. It was getting long. Not as long as Steve’s, but approaching disobedience. “The intern’s been redoing my work, and now they got her doing her own drawings.”

“Hey. Sorry, Cal. That’s bad news.” Steve’s voice softened to a tone of genuine sympathy, yet behind it sounded a snap of pleasure. “Certainly doesn’t make what I have to say any easier. See, I’ve been thinking a lot lately, meditating on things Manny’s said. I’m *making* it happen, Cal. Manny says you have to *make* it happen if you want it to *happen*. I want to *make* it happen and I’m working towards it. I’m working towards it, but you’ve been just sitting here. Just sitting and letting the world *happen to* you. Manny says...well, I believe we relive our issues until we stop reliving them and start *happening*. I’m stopping reliving mine, Cal. I’m *making* it happen from now on. I’m *happening*. You can’t do that for yourself, and if you’re not *making* it happen for yourself too, I need to *make* it happen on my own.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want you to move out. Rita thinks it’s going to take a long time to sell this place and this arrangement just isn’t working. At least not for me.”

Cal didn't know when the animosity began. Memories of when they first bought the brownstone overtook his mind's eye, images of Steve and him of sitting on the front porch during the summer when geraniums and wave petunias spilled over the planters and wandering tourists sauntered past. They had only been together six months before coming upon the brownstone while sipping wine and browsing the New York City real estate sites for the fun of it, before they giddily approached Rita, before she sold it to them, before Cal wondered what he could have been thinking to jump in so quickly. They barely knew each other then, and three years later, they barely knew each other still. Perhaps, he thought, the tension had arisen from their unwillingness to step into the other's world, to go beyond asking questions to actually take an interest outside of their singular lives that they had already been so settled in. Cal had wanted to get to know Steve better, genuinely loved him, but found himself afraid to move beyond the pretense of their relationship, and though they each seemed to try, they were still two lonely men who met on the internet and settled for each other because, as Steve had said, *no one gives it a try anymore.*

"We could make it work," Cal said, pleading. "You and me. Together."

Steve leaned forward, rested his elbows onto the table, considered Cal. "Nah. You've got luggage."

Cal wanted to snap back, to laundry-list Steve's own luggage, but he knew that from experience the viper Steve would become if he ventured down that path. "What about the brownstone?"

"I'll stay here till Rita sells it. I'll pay you rent for your half. It would just be easier for both of us if you leave," Steve said.

"Why me? Why don't you go? You're the one who wants out so bad."

“And what? You, the jobless wonder, will hold down the fort? I don’t think so.”

A cloud passed across the sun, dimming the room and casting an askew shadow on the brick wall he had refaced when they moved in, replacing bricks that were turning to powder and filling in hatches where the mortar had crumbled. It was getting close to sundown. Cal thought about the photos he’d taken down at the office, Amanda’s laughter in her cubicle, the unexpected turns of his day—the lawyer. He jerked back to the present with a renewed alertness, and said, “Did you say a lawyer called for me?”

“I wrote her name down in the kitchen. She sounded confused, like she wasn’t sure about something. You don’t think it has to do with your job, do you?”

“I don’t see how. Why would they send a lawyer after me? I mean, they gave me a severance package.”

“Well, she didn’t make sense to me. You might want to give her a call.”

Cal collected the plates, blue Spode china. They belonged to Steve, so they would stay behind. “Maybe it’d be a good idea for me to get away,” he said. “Think some things through.” The mission furniture belonged to him, so it would go with him—if he knew where to go.

\*\*\*

His room creaked at night. The sound appeared to come from behind the poster of Mikhail Baryshnikov, a framed black and white of him in midair, five feet high at the least, his sinewy legs extended—one leading him, one behind—his torso and chin lifted, arms reaching elegantly, his mid-length hair wafting upward to form a mane around his head. Sitting on the table beneath it was a photograph of Cal at seventeen, his arms in the same position, his legs not so far reaching, and his leap not nearly as elegant. Cal had moved them into this room when Steve decided it was time for them to sleep apart, while they “worked” on their relationship. He

suspected the creaking came from the neighbor's floorboards, but it often felt like the protests of his own bones, as though his dissatisfaction with the life-choices he had made weighed so heavily upon him that his physical frame could no longer handle the load.

Cal never wanted to be an architect. Captain Theis, his father had imposed it upon him, calling it a prudent career track, one that would provide for a lifetime, a respectable choice. He had been suspicious of dance and what it meant for Cal, and he made it clear the moment he learned Cal had been taking ballet classes while he flew his Boeing 747 packed with passengers, for whose lives he assumed responsibility, earning an honest living so that Cal could attend a good college and have a successful and secure future. When his father showed up to the dance studio, a surge of fear disoriented Cal as Captain Theis' face, swollen with red heat, approached from the parking lot to the studio's picture window. He yanked Cal, fourteen years old, by the shoulders and brought him face to face, scrutinized his eyes as though he might find a hidden secret, and shook him, perhaps to dislodge the evil spirit that had taken possession of him. He told Cal he'd never be like Baryshnikov, that people like Baryshnikov were special, few and far between, and that dance was like acting and singing, not a real job, not for real people. Those were false dreams, his father told him, and people who followed those false and irresponsible dreams struggled and remained immature their entire lives. Yet, here was Cal, right where his father said he would be if he pursued dance—unemployed at forty-three. As he lay with his face smooshed against his pillow, he realized his father might have been right, that perhaps he wasn't that special after all.

Before he drifted to sleep, he reminded himself to call the attorney in the morning.

## III

The attorney was a disheveled woman with ratty hair, as though she spent a lot of time twirling strands around her fingers or just didn't brush after leaving her pillow. She introduced herself as Tamara. She chewed gum, and lint covered her suit jacket, a black polyester blazer that had faded to splotchy slate gray. Steve lifted a teapot over a cup he had situated on the table in front of her. She put out her hand and shook her head. "I'm fine, thank you."

"My job doesn't usually take me out of the office and into the living rooms of fine folks like yourself. Usually, I just make a phone call. This wasn't my case, so I never met this Roger Barnes. It was my partner's, Leilani, before she was hit by a car. Jogging at her country home in Connecticut."

"Sorry to hear," Steve said.

As she spoke, she flipped through her briefcase, which also teemed with lint, withdrew a merlot file folder, and handed it to Cal. "Thanks. It happened years ago. We thought she'd make it through. She really seemed to be pulling through. But we were talking in the ICU and, you know, she had a lot of cases—we all do—but she only mentioned this one. Said if I ever do one thing right, let it be this." She chuckled. "She made me promise to hunt you down. He made quite an impression on her."

"Did she pass on?" Cal asked. He held his attention on her as he absently flipped open the file.

"I'm afraid so."

"How awful. Sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," she said as she shoveled cosmetics aside in her purse in search of a pen. "This Roger didn't even know your last name. I had to do some investigation. Had to ask people



in your childhood neighborhood. No one connected you with this Roger guy, but you're the only Cal I could find in Eastbury. Case has taken me so far out of the office, thought I might as well come to you. It is nice to get out, though. Nice place you boys got."

Cal studied the documents, a will and a deed, each sloppily stapled so that the pages aligned unevenly, the sheets photocopied, the print tiny and blurred except for the names typed in a larger font—Cal Theis and Roger Barnes. His will left his estate to Cal, the deed accompanying "I don't understand it."

"Yeah. Well, neither do I. Not one person in that town put you and him together. Yet, here we are. You're certain you knew this man?"

"With certainty. He was a hermit I knew for a short time just before I left for college, just before my father died. I'd forgotten about him. I only knew him for a month or so. He lived in a shack in the woods near a development that was abandoned some time ago." His voice drifted off as his thoughts soared back to the summer he discovered Roger in the woods. He had not only been a friend, but an integral part in healing his relationship with his father.

"The fifties," She said. "The land was being built on illegally. The contractor apparently skipped town as soon as Roger arrived."

Cal continued to look over the papers, touched Roger's name with his fingertips. "How did he die?"

"Stroke. According to the police report, some kid was riding his skateboard in the abandoned development and smelled something bad. His body was badly burned. They think he might have fallen into the fire, but the doctors said he definitely had a stroke."

Cal and Steve both held their hands suspended over their opened mouths.

"It's likely he didn't feel anything," the lawyer said, rifling through her purse again.

“Why would he live in a shack if he had land he could develop?” Steve asked. “How much land?”

“Twenty-five acres. There’s a sum of money as well. He was smart enough to put it into some high-interest roll over CD, had a guy managing his money at the Eastbury Savings and Loan. Name was George Bantam. He was kind enough to direct me to all of his accounts. One account paid the taxes. That and the land are yours. The other accounts go to his brother, Benji.”

\*

Tamara wanted to meet Cal at the property in a week. He hadn’t visited his hometown since he his mother’s move to the Lutheran Home ten years ago. After his father had died, she took more tranquilizers, rendering her unable to care for herself anymore. Cal had pushed aside many of the memories in Eastbury, only a few filtering through but always feeling like a distant scene, and he even scheduled his mother’s moving day to be such a mad rush that he didn’t have time to notice his surroundings, couldn’t be reminded. His fondest memories took place on Roger’s property, and sadly, his fondest memories of his father took place during his illness, but because of Roger, he was able to see his father for the first time, accept him unconditionally no matter how rigid his world. He hadn’t known Roger for a long time, but it was a significant time.

“I didn’t even know he had a brother,” Cal said.

Steve massaged Cal’s shoulders that evening, opened a second bottle of wine and invited him to straddle a chair at the dinner table.

“You’ve had quite a week already,” Steve said.

“Crazy week,” Cal replied. “Barely even been a week and it’s already nuts.”

“Yeah. Let’s get these knots out.” Steve squeezed and kneaded, rocking Cal’s head from side to side.

Steve could be considerate, no matter how catty he became when angry. They both could be civil for the most part. Their largest difficulty was the underlying resentment of living in such an arrangement, unable to sell their brownstone, unable to officially dissolve what had come apart long ago. Cal didn’t consider himself resentful or jealous of the guys that left Steve’s bedroom crept out the front door early mornings, Cal often catching a glimpse of the back of a head as the door latched behind it; regardless, he found himself avoiding eye contact with Steve and fighting an urge to lash out at small offenses. For Cal, the push and pull he felt from Steve, sometimes tightly wound to the point of snapping and sometimes welcoming—like old times, resulted in confusion. Cal thought they could work things out, really wanted to, couldn’t think of life without Steve, and yet, his hands on his shoulders unsettled Cal, as though from the branched the mycelium of a noxious fungus, unseen beneath the surface but spreading poisonous webs throughout its host.

“What a gift,” Steve said. “Imagine, an entire property. Twenty-five acres of developable property. You’re an architect. Damn! A bank loan and we could make it something big in no time. The returns in an area like that would be phenomenal.”

“We?” Steve wriggled in his chair.

“Yes. I mean, why don’t we make a go of it. We can give you and me a try again. Think of it.” He slapped Cal’s arm. “You’ve got the design and construction, and I can market the shit out of the place.”

Cal jerked his shoulders from under Steve’s grip, feeling suspicious. “You haven’t been interested in me for months. Not since Manny came into your life.” He waved his arms

dramatically in the air and said, “Manny,” in a sing-song way, distantly aware that his outburst bordered on the edge of comical. He sarcastically added, “Maybe we should develop the property and give all the money to Manny.”

“That’s not such a bad idea,” Steve said, seeming unaware of the inappropriateness, of Cal’s anger. “He’s been talking about starting a *living spiritual community*.”

Steve met Cal’s eyes, questioning like a child pleading for a candy bar in the checkout line at the grocery store. Cal didn’t offer a response. Not right away. He held the silence, let it seep into the air, becoming increasingly awkward, until Steve’s elevated and particularly rosy cheeks fell and his gaze shifted inward and then outward again, carrying with it the knowledge that he may have just fucked up.

“I think you’re right,” Cal said. “I might want to spend some time alone. This might be the opportunity for it.”

They sat together in tension. Cal wanted to make it better somehow but didn’t know how. Each seemed on the verge of saying something pleasant, mouth spread into a grin, but then let the silence hang, dropping the thought with the heaviness of futility. Adding to the weight was the realization of the familiarity they felt with the futility, the same kind of familiarity one feels with the customs of home.

“A psychology course I took in college,” Cal said, the break in the silence startling both Steve and Cal. “Positive Psych, I think. The professor gave us a handout listing a selection of life events. Things like moving, marriage, death. Each was assigned a number, a scale indicating the length of time it takes to process the stress of that particular event. Losing a job was high up there. Pretty close to death from what I remember. Selling a home and failing relationships were pretty high up there too. I don’t want us over, Steve, but I do think I need to

take some time to process all this. Maybe think about what makes me drink so much or need those pills. I've been letting stress steer me too long. Maybe I haven't been fair to you by not knowing myself more. Maybe Roger leaving me this property is a sign."

"I saw you today, Cal, looking at those legal papers," Steve said. "You were like something I haven't seen in a long time. Your face was relaxed and your eyes got dreamy and it looked like you were genuinely happy. I don't know who this Roger was, but there was a depth to that happiness I've never seen in you. It made me want some of it for myself."

"There was this one night," Cal said, snickering. "He took me to the carnival."

"The carnival?"

"It was abandoned."

"Creepy."

"It was surreal. I remember wanted to go home the first time we went there. He said to me something to the effect that life doesn't offer the chance to see things that no one else sees, to grab the opportunity when it comes."

"Maybe we can make a go of it when you come back. After you think."

\*

A text beeped as Cal prepared to shut and latch his suitcase, Steve letting him know that he left early to meet Manny for breakfast before going to the gallery. Cal wondered if he simply forgot he was leaving to meet the lawyer. His phone beeped again. It was Steve.

*Let me know what you think of the development while you're there. Let's make life happen.*

Cal looked down at the ring Steve had given him over champagne and a movie in Bryant Park just days before they bought the Brownstone. Silver with stars and moon crescents

around its circumference, Steve gave it to him as a commitment, a ring because it signified the commitment they were making to one another by buying real estate together, silver because the commitment still didn't warrant a diamond—at least, that's the impression it gave Cal. The moons and stars were still a mystery, and he would have been embarrassed to ask. He loved Steve then, and he loved him now; at least he believed he did. He couldn't summon any particular moment when their relationship took its turn, couldn't recall if there were clues, whether it was Steve or he who initiated the distance that wriggled its fingers between them and inched them apart. Cal gripped the ring and pulled it over his knuckle. The pads around his fingers had thickened since he first put it on and he struggled to slip the ring over them, and after moments of concern that he'd have to have it surgically removed, it dragged painfully past the second knuckle, pulling flesh with it. He put it in Steve's room, in the intricately carved rosewood box he'd brought back from Thailand long before he'd met Cal, carefully placing it atop strands of prayer beads and 'holy ash' from Sai Baba's ashram and told himself he'd retrieve it as soon as he returned.

When the cab arrived, he turned to take one last look at the Brownstone. It felt like his last look.

## IV

Looking at his childhood home made him uncomfortable, though it was the same rectangular box composed of the same rigid lines and just as bare of plant-life as when his mother still lived there, all the same except the canary yellow siding. Cal rolled down the taxi window and wondered if the new owners, who moved in after his mother settled into the Lutheran Home, lived in the same desperate silence his mother had. He struggled against a deluge of childhood memories, playing leapfrog with Chad and Mary in summer as their shadows grew long on the grass and wearing aviator sunglasses by the pool as water beaded on his Tropic Tan slathered skin—his father smelling of airport gin and women’s perfume after long flights.

“Hey Bud. Meter’s running. Can’t spend all day here,” the cabbie said.

Cal pulled a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to the driver. “It’s not far,” he said peering through the window dirtied with dried raindrops.

The taxi jerked forward, knocking Cal’s head against the back seat.

The cabbie took the main road through Eastbury, his hometown, once a modest farm village on the verge of residential development, where cosmopolitan ideas emerged only through the introduction of city folk, like himself. The town had developed into a metro center of activity, cars clogged the artery running through the commons. The health food store that had once seemed to earthy and progressive had relocated from a wooden building with crooked floors to a more centrally located strip mall. Its sign tiered outward from the roof calling to the traffic that marched in and out of the automatic doors as if it were a sophisticated anthill. Its hips pushed aside the smaller shops. The high school remained unchanged, a flat brick building on Breakneck Hill overlooking its chalk-lined football field and the equally flat town hall. Even in

the heat of August, steam rolled from the shack-like Denmo's Burger Stand. It seemed even the same cars of ten years ago surrounded the building, leaving just enough room for two wooden picnic tables.

They passed the Victorians and the antique stores of the historical village. As they left town, the houses grew farther apart. Patches of woods separated colonial after colonial, as they rode past, with occasional interjections of cul-de-sacs.

Cal looked down at his fingers, rubbing and pinching the skin of his index, giving it his full attention, as they passed the cemetery where his father had been laid to rest seven years ago. A car in front of them slowed and the cabbie stomped the brakes, forcing Cal to look up. Marble intermingled with pitted stone slabs that protruded like teeth on the rolling green mounds. He pulled his attention back to his fingers and tapped his teeth together behind the tight hold of his lips. He rubbed his finger close to the knuckle where he had worn the silver ring Steve gave him. It looked and felt naked, pale and slightly swollen with alternating welts, moon crests and stars.

The taxi turned off the main road. Cal let his hands fall onto his lap and watched the thick woods stutter by. The road became dirt, narrowed, and snaked through the trees until it aproned to a small opening, Roger's wooden shack just visible ahead.

The taxi stopped, and Cal was jerked forward in his seat.

"That's as far as I drive, Buddy," the driver said. "Middle-a-nowhere? Broken down shack? I don't do creepy. Pay up and I'll be on my way, thanks, Bud."

"Just let me get my bags." Cal rolled cash into the driver's hand and stepped out onto the reddish dirt where he had a better view of the shack. A few boards had fallen diagonally across the exterior walls and weeds swept sideways by the wind some time ago had overgrown the fire pit.



“Step it up with those bags, Bud. I can start the meter again anytime.”

Cal lifted two suitcases from the trunk. The dirt billowed and surrounded him as the taxi drove around him and down the snaking road. He sneezed the dust away. Grit settled in his throat. As the cloud cleared, Cal noticed someone standing outside of the shack. The figure, silhouetted by the evening sun, held its ground, ramrod straight, arms folded, heavy with gravity.

“Roger?” Cal squinted at it, waited for it to move.

Cal gripped the handles of his suitcases but stayed short of lifting them. He peered at the figure that still hadn't moved. It occurred to him that, except for the figure, he was alone. The woods were silent. No birds chirped. No animals scurried past. No life at all but the figure and him.

The man released his arms, setting them wide at his side, and walked toward Cal. His square shouldered frame and heavy-footed walk were remarkably like Roger's, as were the thick jaw and broad forehead, all with the exception of the well-fed cheeks and a clean shave. The man stretched a thick arm at Cal with all five stubby fingers extended.

“You Cal? Benji. Roger's brother.”

Benji's hand was cold and limp in Cal's, like a holding a rubber chicken.

“Didn't know he was alive until he was dead,” Benji said. “Come up from Virginia with the lawyer. Slept the night. What a shit-hole.”

“He never mentioned a brother,” Cal said.

“Wouldn't of. I just come here out of curiosity. See what'd become of him. The lawyer'll be back around soon. Property shoulda gone to family.”

Benji slapped Cal's shoulder and walked toward the shack where he pulled the slanted door half open and turned, hooking his eyes into Cal's. "I ain't come to take nothing from you. Just come out of curiosity. That's all. Place is a shit-hole anyways."

"When was the last time you saw Roger?"

"No tellin'." Benji raised a nostril and swung the door open.

Beams of light pierced the darkness through holes and open slats in the walls. Cal had never been inside. He touched the makeshift table made from a burl slab and whittled branches. Dented aluminum pots hung from the wall. In the corner was a rucksack spilling with leaves and covered with a wool blanket. Benji lit an oil lamp next. The fireplace had been built of stone and mortared with sand. Ashes and charcoal spread from the firebox and blackened the hearth. Cal knelt and hovered his fingertips over it.

"Guess the stroke done him in. Fell right into the fire and couldn't get out."

The black ash took on Roger's shape. Cal reached his hand into the firebox. Burnt scraps of cloth mingled with the scattered pieces of half charcoaled wood, and coils of hair knotted into the stone corners, an alchemy experiment gone awry. Cal grasped a piece of cloth and lifted it into a stream of light. It blackened his fingers, almost made them burn. The flannel pattern of Roger's shirt was barely visible under the grit.

"Lawyer said he left these for you."

Benji pointed toward notebooks and loose pages stacked near the rucksack. Beside them was a pair of glasses. Cal grimaced to hold back a bubble of emotion.

The summer he knew Roger, Cal had noticed Roger's difficulty identifying objects in his pathway and often stumbled on rocks jutting up out of the ground. Concerned, Cal made Roger read off an eye chart he stole from the pharmacy wall, and after taking notes, he gave his

self-made prescription to his father's optician friend, told him the glasses were for a project. The optician ordered the glasses and sold them to Cal at cost. When Roger put them on, he looked to his left, then to his right, then at Cal and tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Thumbed through them a bit,” Benji said, startling Cal out of his thoughts. “Outta curiosity. Nothin but some silly stories. Don't know what happened with that boy's head. Anyways, there they are.”

## V

Cal stayed close to the door. Light now peaked from inside the shack through the cracks in the walls. The glowing streams gave the shack an otherworldly glow. It became a mystical structure. A UFO.

Splashes came from the creek, heavy, filled with great intention. Cal turned his head too quickly. Shooting pain electrified an inflamed line over his scalp and spread like lightning down his temple and forehead. He gritted his teeth and rubbed the sore lump in his neck.

Benji had left him uneasy. Fall whispered its approach under the August evening breeze. Cal hugged his arms across his chest and scratched his rounded shoulders. He struggled with the increasing humidity for his breath. He yawned for air and a squeak of a wheeze choked his air passages. His thumb and forefinger stretched and curled in his back pocket just touching the cold rounded edge of his inhaler. He pushed deeper until the web of his fingers pressed against the edge of his pockets. Finally catching hold of the metal container, he pulled it from his pocket and put the red plastic mouthpiece between his lips. He took three rapid breaths and squeezed the device. Cold bitter air flowed down his throat and filled his lungs. He held it, counting. He tried to remember the day he met Roger.

\*

It was early morning. The garage door below Cal's bedroom hummed, a sound that signaled the return of Captain Theis from his weeklong absence. Cal had slept restlessly that night before he turned down his summer linens and made his bed so that the sheets were pulled taut and the corners were creased into origami folds, the way his mother had taught him. Outside his opened window, birds chirped to welcome the rising sun.

The stairs creaked as Cal walked down, but such mornings deafened Captain Theis to any sound short of an atomic bomb.

The newly built colonial sat sterile and clean in the overgrown weeds of the Bridle Path Development. Minimal furniture obstructed its expansive rooms and the hardwood floors were cold, the den's Berber carpet abrasive on his bare feet. Unable to see in the dawning day, he stubbed his toe on the hardened wheel of the piano. Blue dim stillness anchored the rooms in halted time which felt vaguely different from the stillness of day but was truer to the suspended loneliness coiled in the atmosphere. In their four years there, his mother's meticulous housekeeping kept the interior as bare as when they first moved in. Even the basement stairs had been swept of storage dust and cobwebs. Carefully stacked cardboard boxes filled with Christmas ornaments, each carefully replaced the previous year, filed away construction paper crafts, and retired board games—hungry hippos and an old edition of Trivial Pursuit—walled in half the basement. Cal flipped the switch that lit the overhead bulb on the other side where his father's electric saws were placed in line with each other, leaving just enough distance to work safely. Hammers and screwdrivers, each traced with pinstripe tape, lined a wooden peg board, and nails and screws were organized by type and size in plastic square drawers on a precisely built workbench that bent around the corner wall. Studs and sheets of wood were sorted along the concrete walls.

Awaiting his father were the half-built frames that would rib the wings of the single engine plane his father built in his spare time. Only three ribs had been built since he began piloting for SouthWest. The only image Cal could summon was of his father's square frame in his navy-blue uniform, tapering at the legs, an image fading in his consistent absence.

Cal sat on one of the metal stools and swiveled with one hand gripping the seat between his legs and turned on the under-counter lighting with the other. He touched the panel to see if the glue had dried. Dark pieces of red oak in the shape of a duck in flight were inlaid

within a square of birch. Cal used the wood burning iron. The birch smoked, smelled like wintergreen, and toasted with the letters spelling Captain Theis' name.

To Cal, his father was ageless, a stiff fifties memory of Wally Cleaver living a black and white life, pipe dangling from his lip while reading the paper at the breakfast table, his forefinger ringed into the ear of his coffee cup. So today, his father's birthday, felt like any other, except that Cal felt something significant would happen, like his father skipping the pleasantries and simply embracing him the moment he saw the effort, the skilled jigsaw work, the care he took to choose an iron tip that would burn a strong triangular rut, maintaining the pressure so that the rut had consistent depth throughout the flawlessly smooth loops of the lettering. Though he was behind schedule, his final job sealing the art piece with a single coat of urethane he predicted would be dry enough by 10:00, when he expected his father to be awake.

He held the brush by the very end of the handle between his forefinger and thumb, his elbow high, and dipped the stiff bristles into the yellow can, dragged the excess off along the edge of the can, and brushed the straight lines with the grain of the wood until it melted into the fibers.

When the coat dried to touch, his Swatch was at 9:50, and his father's baritone mumblings filtered through the floor, Cal lifted his head from the workbench, spun once in the stool seat, lifted the panel by pressing his fingertips along its edges. Frames still hung from it, but he had drifted and was unsure how long his father had been awake. He ran up the stairs holding it before him, presenting it first to the stairs then to the door.

Captain Theis sipped a cup of coffee and read the paper at the breakfast nook. A beige slipper dangled from his toes, his bare legs crossed, covered only by his morning robe.

Cal's mother stood at the stove behind the kitchen counter poking with her wooden spatula at something in her non-stick pan. Cal stepped lightly onto the green, orange, and blue polka dot carpet.

"Cal." His father lowered the paper and craned his neck.

As he rounded the corner, Cal expected his father's usual smile along with his usual, "Looking tan, son. Been hanging at the cement pond? You ever hear that expression? Cement pond?" Instead, the face that greeted him was hardened with forehead lines that dipped below his eyebrows.

"My copilot, Charlie, had a heart attack before we took off for Phoenix, Saturday, but what I want to talk about is my dismay, Cal, when your mother handed me the mail this morning."

"Jim," Cal's mother said in a tone, he assumed, she intended to be scolding while she continued stirring.

"What I found, Cal, is an acceptance letter. An acceptance letter, Cal, from a dance school. You hear? A dance school. A *dance* school, Cal? I thought we decided on RPI. Didn't we decide on RPI, Katherine?"

"Jim, the poor boy just got out of bed."

"He's not a boy. Not anymore, Katherine. He needs to be responsible for his actions. Who told you that you could do this, Cal?"

"Do you want scrambled eggs, Cal? Your father's having them with wheat toast. I can make you white if you like." She patted at and adjusted the strawberry blond bun just behind the crown of her head.

"I can't believe you're attacking me already."

“Well, I’m finding it difficult to understand, Cal, how you go from architecture to dance out of nowhere. And it eludes me, your choice of wishy-washy over a solid foundation. A solid future. Don’t you take your future seriously?”

“It didn’t come out of nowhere. You know that. I’m good at it, Dad. My teacher, says I can have a great future in it. Just as good as architecture.”

His father searched him with squinted eyes and a twisted, confused face, as if he had just discovered that everything he thought he knew had been something entirely different all along, something dangerous, a dragon fly cupped in his hand that turned out to be a scorpion, and beneath his suspicious contortions lay the foundation of disbelief that he had been so deceived for so long. “Who are you? I don’t even know you.”

“No. You don’t,” Cal said. He slammed the panel he’d made next to his father’s scrambled eggs and sped through the kitchen and out to the garage.

He tugged his bike from a pile of hoses and wire plant stands. The chain jerked taut when he engaged the pedal. He pumped his legs hard and his pajamas flapped in the wind as he raced around the long curves of Sleepy Hill Road, struggling to breath air into his tightening chest. The bike’s chain rattled, and the pedal’s resistance broke loose, no longer cooperating with his feet. He gripped the handlebar until his knuckles turned white, tucked his head between his arms, and assessed the drooping chain, sparking when it hit the asphalt. Cal squeezed the back brake. Nothing. He tested the front brake, squeezing just until he just reached the threat of toppling over the front and then released his grip.

The bike was moving too fast for the tight corner at the intersection of Sleepy Hill and Owl Ridge, so Cal let the bike glide down the hill, past a yellow sign with the outlines of a truck rolling downhill, squeezing the break with the lightest of grips in his losing fight to control his



speed. He closed his eyes as the road leveled out at the sleepy intersection and felt the tension in the handle bar loosen as weightlessness took the bike to flight where the road dropped to a steeper slope. His front wheel relaxed to the right, and he soared. When he touched down, his front tire swiveled against the shock. He absently latched onto the brake handles with his last three fingers as he squeezed the handlebars.

The world spun, and it stung. Asphalt dug into his elbows and knees, jagged points scraping and burning as his limbs and torso dragged across the granulated tar. He attempted to protect his head only to find his hands were already cupped over him to his neck. The frame of the bike and spokes entangled his arms and legs; twigs stabbing, breaking, and stabbing again; hands and feet thudding against stones and stumps; and a sudden cold disorienting pain radiating from an epicenter at the base of his skull, forming jagged shards of light behind his eyelids when he tried to move, was all followed by a darkness that swallowed him as his body and limbs unfolded—limp.

\*\*\*

There was a creek, Jeffery Palmer, his best friend from middle school had told him, at the very end of Sleepy Hill that had been long forgotten since the development project that was meant to go there was abandoned. Cal had never been to the end of the road, but he figured the trickling he heard was the creek Jeffery had told him about. The back of his head was cold and wet, and his eyes were slits, too heavy to hold open, so that the woods transformed into a moist blue haze and silhouetted stick figures. A thick shadow moved across his field of vision accompanied by crunching of the forest floor and heavy scrambling.

Cal pushed onto his elbows, letting out involuntary grunts, while water streamed from his hair down his neck and under the back of his shirt. The shadow gently pressed down on his chest,

and Cal found himself relaxing under the weight, accepting the comfort of the current pushing against his head. He heard clinking and glimmering stars floated within his blurred world. The shadow plucked one of the stars from the air and brought it down to Cal's mouth. Smooth cold glass, the thickness of the lip of a bottle, parted his lips and a lukewarm bitter liquid dribbled down his throat. He tried to fight it, flung his arms, which responded without eagerness to his brain's commands. The shadow chuckled and pushed his shoulder back into the river.

"Your head." The voice was gravelly.

Cal's vision cleared. A thick mane of rustled hair covered the head and face of the hulkish man hovering over him. His face was wrinkled, but friendly. He wrangled himself up, splashing water in the process. "My bike. Dammit!"

"It's bent. There." He pointed to the bike, with spokes pointing in several directions and paint scraped to metal shrapnel.

Cal rubbed the back of his head, looking back and forth between the bike and the man, as he crawled toward the mangled mess. The bends in the frame formed a (art history). Cal touched it, and then crushed the heel of his hand into his forehead. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

As he lifted his leg over the frame, Cal swooned and grabbed his midsection. "What did you give me?"

The man held a stick tied with leather securing twigs that hosted dangling bottles holding varying colored liquids, each tied with a length of leather. "Wild chamomile. Grows in the fields." Again, the man chuckled. "Come. Your head needs a bandage."

\*

Coyotes howled from across the creek somewhere on the outskirts of the town. He heard the desperate cries of the animal they had caught, fighting for its life. He let out his breath and pulled open the door.

The light from the oil lamp seemed brighter than it had in the day. The charcoal smudge on the hearth twisted and roiled under the shifting light, not clinging to but coming to life. He sat on the wooden chair in the center of the shack's only room. Empty. Lonely. Cal's soul settled within him like lead making him uncomfortably aware of the sounds coming from the unadulterated woods. The shack. Himself. His stomach rumbled, and he remembered he hadn't eaten since the bagel he had at Maddy's Café with Quincy before boarding the train. Dented pans on the wall were useless without something to cook.

Cal checked his watch. It was past eight. Without a car, he was stuck, and everything was so quiet. He started at each sound and tried to decide whether it was hunger or fear or perhaps, the sounds outside were making him edgy. He found himself contracting in his seat, unmoving, his hands folded on his lap, elbows drawn in, and shoulders rolling over his chest. He searched the room for something to grasp onto, something that would release him from his cage.

His sedatives were in one of his suitcases. He forced himself out of his mannequin posture, dragged his red suitcase closer to the lamp, and dug for the amber bottle plastic bottle. He found it under a layer of dress shirts. The lid jammed as he pressed and twisted it with his palm. He pressed harder and twisted while he fought a wave of anxiety. The lid gave. He dry-swallowed the pill, and it stuck to his throat. The many nights of wiping drool from his mother's chin as she fell into a drug filled slumber entered his head. He tried to swallow that part of his childhood away. He was frightened of becoming his mother but was also afraid of letting go of his sedatives.

\*\*\*

Throughout the night, Cal shifted and fidgeted to get comfortable on the rucksack. The leaves inside had dried up long ago and provided little cushion from the floorboards. A pebble dug into his shoulder which was tensing against the hardness of the wood beneath.

The end of August brought in a chill, a prediction of September's approach. The fire he built warmed the air and cast dancing shadows, sometimes crackling so loudly, Cal wasn't sure if he should be alarmed.

He left the rucksack, wrapped the sleeping bag around his shoulders, and sat in front of the hearth. The ashen shadow of Roger danced with the flames. He resisted the urge to reach into his suitcase for the sedatives again.

"What is this all about?" Cal asked the shadow. It didn't answer.

A stray flame flickered light into a darkened corner and illuminated the stack of journals Roger had left him.

"What, indeed, is this all about?" Cal reached into the corner and rested his hand on the journals. The undated pages were thick and rough, embedded with flower petals and leaves. Cal wondered how much effort it must have taken to make the journals with so few resources.

Roger made his own ink. This Cal remembered from arriving at the property while Roger boiled what he thought was a tea. They sat over the blackening liquid, steaming with crushed bits of woody material in it, for half a day as it reduced and became opaque before he asked Roger if he was casting some kind of a spell. Roger had laughed, gravely, Cal remembered. *Water and black walnut*, Roger told him, *boiled down. Stains everything*. Cal ran his fingertips across the pages, the ink having browned from the shimmering onyx in the pot. Then he read the first sentence on the page.

*Morning. Boy showed up.*

Strange it was to see Roger's words, to almost hear them in Roger's gravelly Baritone.

Cal anchored his eyes to the page and read.

## Roger's Journal

Sunny: Morning. Boy showed up. Another person. He was hurt. Bleeding on the head. Found him in creek. He hit his head on a stone. Eyes were closed. Asleep.

Baby squirrel licks at the bottles of medicine and I let him. Left remedies with baby squirrel. Mama is nursing. She needs the extra energy to gather nuts for both babies. Her belly is swollen at the nippers. Looks red. Squirrel brings her nuts. She doesn't always come down anymore. Not much. Babies come down. Both of them. Maybe when baby licks bottle, they'll put the medicine on her nippers when they nurse. I can't get up there to help her.

Swamp maple finally fell. Branches broke easy. Armfuls of wood for the winter. Mornings still hot.

Boy showed up in the creek with his cracked head. Asleep when I got back. Green bitters poured down his throat easy. He was hurt outside and inside. Anger, red as squirrel's hurt belly.

The boy. Hair color of river sand. Eyes color of water droplets on spring leaves. Anger beat in him. Like a scorching heart. He spoke. He yelled. He rattled his bike. He yelled. And the sore on his head hurt him. Stone was big. Lots of sharp ends. Stone is now red. He came home to see squirrel. I didn't speak. I tried. Years since another human. Mouth didn't work. Mind the words but mouth can't make them. Not anymore. It's been too long. Tongue won't move right. I click it at squirrel, but can't move it right to speak. He understood and let the cloth take the blood from his head. It hurt him. He was hurt.

#

Rain: Rained most of the day. Squirrel stayed in her nest. Didn't see it was coming. Good I brought more water for the barrel. Brewed tea from dried blackberry leaves. Sweet and

green. There won't be many more berries from that bush. Bear's been picking at it and crushed some canes.

Stomach is sour. Boy brought his anger here. Anger at his dad. I feel it in my stomach. Could be why squirrel won't come down. Making everything uncomfortable.

#

Cloudy: River's full from rain. Current so strong it pushed my feet. Creek side is overflowing. No bugs out. No fish in sight. Birds were quiet too. Found a deer bed near blackberries. Must been the deer crushed the berry bush.

Still feel storm inside from the boy. He left it behind with me. Humans filled with such torment. Such anger. Can't see past their things.

#

Cloudy: Boy showed up again. He brought a wood carving. A fish. Looks like a trout. He made it. And a book. He gave it to me then got embarrassed. He thinks I can't read. I went inside and showed him Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Emerson. He looked confused. I gave him Emily Dickinson to bring back later.

He wasn't angry outside, but he was inside. It's there behind his eyes. He grinds his teeth and wheezes. He holds fists. And squirrel won't come down when he's around. Squirrel senses it and runs. Baby squirrels stayed behind the tree flicking tails. They are curious.

The boy lingered. I cooked up rabbit. He asked questions and my mouth still didn't work right. He said that's why he thought I can't read. But he listened to what I said.

#

Sunny: Strange. Shack is silent after the boy left. Almost forgot. Forgot it was so silent. Forgot once that silence was new. Makes me wonder how life is like for boy. Hadn't wondered about anyone in years. How's he live? With all that noise? T.V.s. Radios. All that chatter. No wonder he's so angry. No time to think.

#

Sprinkles:        Been thinking about back then. About when I was at McCrory's Factory fixing machines. About the schooling they sent me to. Was supposed to be two years and then I just stopped. Was going to be supervisor. But I stopped. Been so long since I thought about it. About why I stopped.

                    Boy brought it back to me. He keeps showing up. And he acts like the outer world. Moving so quick. Not noticing what he's stepping on.

                    I forgot I noticed the silence once. Back when I came here. Forgot my head was so noisy.

#

Cloudy:            Boy showed up crying. Asked his father about dance. Said NO. Boy cries but he's angry. I once had Mexican jumping beans. Came from the carnival. Hard shells. Felt like something inside snapped, like wire snapping from tension. Then they jumped. Even when they didn't jump, felt like pressure was building in them. How taut they were inside. About to snap again any minute. Boy is like that inside. About to snap.

                    The carnival.

                    But first. Got to tend to squirrel's belly. Came down yesterday looking for medicine. Sleeping in box near fireplace. Found honey bee hive in dead oak. Let me take a handful wax and honey. Making squirrel salve for her. She can stay here til she's good again.

#

Rain:                Walked with boy in woods. Boy. Cal. He complained about rain. It cleared by the time we got to river. Asked him how he lived with all that noise. Said he never noticed any noise. Asked why my fingernails are always so dirty. Funny. Never noticed til now. Never notice much about my body anymore. Not unless it's important, like squirrel's belly. Guess nothing's been that important for me to take notice in a while. Boy worries about some silly things.



Brought squirrel out for boy to see. Showed him salve. Squirrel breathing faster than normal and a white spot raised on her belly. The white spot's got angry red ring around it. Babies watched near bottom of tree. Heard one cry out. Worried about squirrel.

#

Hot: Boy showed up with cloth bandages and some sticky stuff in a tube. Put the sticky stuff on squirrel's sores and wrapped up her belly. Said squirrel could keep it. Said it should clear up quick. Squirrel breathing real fast. Sleeps all day now. Morning, babies scratched at door but wouldn't come in. They smell their mama but don't know the human smell of bandages and sticky stuff.

## VI

Distant rumbles awoke him. His head rested on an open page of Roger's journal. He didn't remember falling asleep. Cal counted the seconds between the flashes of lightning and the thunder, couldn't remember the rule of distance per second but counted anyway. The air thickened with humidity and stagnation, lying oppressive and heavy on Cal's skin, which had beaded with sweat. Cal propped himself up on his elbow, ignoring the uncomfortable debris beneath it. The journal entries were still fresh in his mind, and scenes of Roger's life, some inspired by the entries he'd read and some of his own creation, still played in his mind's eye. The shack lit up and a bang followed.

The storm was nearing. An occasional breeze slipped through the cracks in the walls, hurriedly riding upon an icy undercurrent and accompanied by the sounds of rustling leaves outside. The shack creaked against the pressure of the sporadic gusts. How different it sounded from his neighbor's creaking floors at the brownstone, how foreign and imminent. Storms in the city often faded into the constant buzz of traffic and pedestrians, into the humming that wormed its way into every city dweller's brain. Cal had heard that humming in the earlier silence of the evening, and for the first time in years, he heard the urgency in the thunder and the storm approached, sounds he hadn't heard since childhood.

The wind whipped. Trees creaked. Droplets tapped lightly upon the roof and were quickly overtaken by pelting rain. The loosened boards in the walls rattled. Some visibly flapped from side to side, each likely hanging on a solitary bent nail.

Cal groped the floor for his phone and found it almost stuffed under the journal. Its glow comforted him, the glow of technology, his connection to the outside world, and quite possibly, his sanity. He thought of texting Quincy and decided it was too late when he saw the time—3:48

a.m. He thought of texting Steve, who suffered from insomnia and would likely still be awake, surfing through news stories and dating sites. His battery life was at forty percent. He decided to let the phone rest, wondered how he would charge it, felt insecure at the thought of it dying. He felt more alone.

The wind beat at the little building, unleashed a guttural reverberation that fluttered beneath and chugged like an approaching train. Shadows of trees whipped past when the interior shack was illuminated with lightning.

Cal wrapped his arms around the back of his head and pressed his face into the ground. His ears popped with the building atmospheric pressure. Unseen objects hit the shack, some with brittle taps, maybe twigs, and some with a thud, sounds that Cal couldn't reconcile with an image. There was a great crackling, like fireworks, followed by the sound of a large object shifting. The ground quaked under a crash.

Cal wished he were home.

## VII

The morning after the storm was bright and saturated with lush greens dripping the evening's violent rains. Twigs and branches were scattered over the ground. A soft humid breeze carried the scent of wild flowers.

It was strange to be alone, flooded with memories of Roger, a past he had forgotten, days of helping Roger split wood and carrying water in two wooden buckets from the river to boil. He even helped put medicine on a sick squirrel. He remembered the carnival grounds where Roger first took him the day Cal learned his father was sick. The magic he felt on the grounds swelled into him again, swirls of red and yellow lights and stars sparkling overhead. No rules existed there; it was so free of the world. There he could tell Roger anything, and he could dance.

Cal looked out over the clearing and to the morning mist caught in between the trees. The urge to go to the Carnival grounds overwhelmed him. He had promised Steve he would assess the development, but the day was young and so was his stay. He grabbed a large branch from the ground and walked into the woods. The maze of Roger's paths had overgrown, altering the forest. Tangled rose bushes blocked access to routes they had once followed and hooked thorns into his clothing as he wrestled through them. Two red oaks that he had heard falling during the storm lay across the path with smaller trees broken under the thick trunks. He climbed over them and slipped on the moss covering the bark. He navigated the woods on instinct, knowing by feel the direction they used to go, occasionally recognizing the placement of a fern or a cluster of trees even after their years of growth, and he continued until he finally came upon the canoe, still like carved ivory, leaning against a boulder on the riverbank. Remembering to take off his shoes first, he pushed the canoe into the current, jumped in when the water reached his ankles, and floated down the creek.

\*\*\*

When Cal got home from the woodworking summer course his father had signed him up for, his mother had already slipped into a deep sleep on the sofa. Her jaw hung open and drool collected into a line running down her chin. Her right hand clutched an amber prescription bottle to her chest. Beside her sat his father holding her left hand in both of his, caressing with his thumbs.

“Think I’ll be staying home, Buddy.”

Cal looked between his shadowed father and his listless mother.

“She’ll be okay. She didn’t take any more than her usual amount. But, I got some news. Today, I—your mother and me—we got some news, son.” His father’s face contorted into intense sorrow. His father whimpered into his mother’s limp hand then took a deep breath and straightened his spine. “Son. As of today, Captain Theis is retired. I guess they can find someone to take your place that quickly. This comes as the result of some news your mother and I got. Now, I’m not going to lie. I had a drink or two to take the edge off, so if I seem at all... Well, I’d gone to see the doctor about a few weeks ago. It was this sore throat. Well. Cancer is the short of it. I knew something didn’t feel right. Dr. Price told us today.” He lifted Cal’s mother’s hand and then let it drop. Her head wobbled gently from side to side with the disturbance.

\*\*\*

The canoe lodged between two stones and water pushed it to an awkward angle threatening to take his control. Cal pushed his branch against one of the stones as he had once seen Roger do and dislodged the small vessel. He was still only half-way to the carnival.

\*\*\*

Cal sped down his road to Roger's property, his vision blurred by tears that had burned his eyes since his father told him of his cancer. It hadn't been quite dusk when Cal arrived to the shack. Roger was sitting by the fire in the clearing, poking at the logs and turning them so that flames flared what the logs got more oxygen. When Cal told Roger about his father, he didn't respond. He just poked at the fire with a frown. They sat in silence long enough for it to become uncomfortable, until Roger's chest rumbled. The sound traveled past his Adam's apple, and he spoke.

"Want to take you someplace."

"Where?"

"A magical place." Roger rose from his place beside the fire. He looked more disheveled than usual, his hair nested on his head, caught in an ancient struggle. His thick wiry beard widened when he smiled, his teeth surprisingly white and straight under his lips, browned with sun and dirt, the smile somber.

Evening's golden haze already glowed through the trees and cast long shadows, while the clouds flamed behind the entangled brachia of the forest.

"I have to be home by six for dinner," Cal said, leaving out that he'd have to cook because his mother was in a drug induced-stupor.

Roger ignored him and disappeared into the thicket. Cal followed and as Roger darted barefoot around the brush, too fast for Cal, branches and saplings flung back. At the river's edge, they came upon a canoe that leaned against a stump that had been chewed to a taper, probably by a beaver. Cal stroked its wooden surface which had been chipped into shape with markings that resembled those on the stump.

"Where are we going?"

“Where we could talk.”

“What’s wrong with back there?” Cal asked.

“It’s not over there.” Roger’s eyes squeezed shut, and he laughed as he dragged the canoe into the river.

Distance widened between them and the woods Cal knew as they floated on the current. Roger steered with a thick branch that he stabbed into the riverbed when the stream eddied and pulled them toward shore or when they dragged over stones in low water. The canoe rocked and Roger hummed, occasionally allowing indecipherable strings of words through, a spiritual perhaps or a song of nature he had learned in his years of solitude. A mist lifted around them.

Cal hugged himself.

“How are we supposed to get back?”

Roger threw the branch into water as they approached a grouping of boulders and stepped over the canoe’s lip into the water to bank the canoe. When the it was secure, Cal climbed out. Grit seeped into his shoe.

“This way.”

Roger rushed from the beach to the edge of the woods where he slipped through the trees and out of sight. Cal untangled his soaked shoelaces and removed his shoes. Cold sand squeezed between his toes as he followed Roger’s footsteps, head down, into what appeared to be a forest but was a thin line of trees. On the other side, Roger leaned against the rolling door of a brightly painted truck, last in a caravan hosting ropes of vines, the only vertically growing vegetation besides the grass that had flattened into hay so thick it formed a straw netting that almost bounced under Cal’s step. Above the rolling door, colorful lightbulbs spelled C-A-R-N-I-V-A-L.

Cal approached a van, the face of a clown painted on its side melted by rain, the clown's face drooping, its make-up flaking. Its eyes followed Cal. He thought he heard tiny feet scutter by. He wandered within the circle of cars where a kiddie rollercoaster missing rails, suspended in the midst of either construction or demolition, whispered a memory of cotton candy and happy screams of children.

A glass casing, skirted by dried grass and painted with the once vivid but now weathered yellows and reds warned passers-by to *Approach if you dare!* under which a cartoonish red-haired female, nude but for her green scaly tail, posed seductively toward her audience, her grin pierced by jagged fangs. He pressed his fingertips on the casing to balance himself and stretched his head over the glass. Under the smudged panes lay a skeleton, jaw set wide, caught in a scream, perhaps gasping for air, arms bent, fingers curled as if clawing at the glass. Her top half hosted the ribcage of a human under which her spine twisted and writhed down the length where her legs should have been. Beneath the casing and netted in the grass were fish bones the size of goldfish.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Died here. A long time ago." He gestured to the buckling frames of the carnival stands.

He turned away and looked up at the sky. It had darkened to navy blue and the moon glowed red and large as it peaked over the horizon with a lone star twinkling beside it.

"Why hasn't anyone ever cleaned this up?"

Roger laughed. "People are afraid to look at the past. They're afraid to go into the woods. Maybe, no one knows it's here anymore."

"It's creepy."

"Makes me remember," Roger whispered.



“It’s getting dark. Chilly, too.”

“You’re never going to see anything like this again? Dinner can wait. May be the last time you ever get a chance. When you’re offered something like this, to see or do something special in the world, take it, Cal. Nothing is constant in life.”

“You said it makes you remember. What does it make you remember?”

“Everything dies.” Roger was silent then said, “Your father will die one day. You too. And me. But what about this shell? The memory of something is there. Laughing kids, lovers holding hands, winnings and losings. That doesn’t go away. Suppose it all depends on what memories you decide to hold on to.”

\*\*\*

Cal stood at the fringes of the Carnival, this time facing it alone. It had been their place to meet, where they could talk about anything, where Cal was free to be himself, where their friendship was solidified in this magical formation of a separate reality, one where the rewards for being oneself were great. Roger had been right—everything does die. A part of Cal believed that somehow, in death, Roger might be orchestrating a plan, something greater for him to learn. As he walked past the house of mirrors, resisting the urge to sneak into its dark passages, he realized he saw not just Roger’s reflection in the carnival but also that of his father, and perhaps Roger knew that when he created his will.

Roger had lived at the shack as a hermit, yet Cal wondered why he had chosen to live this way when he had land he could subdivide and sell, why he had chosen to let his money accrue interest in CDs and stocks instead of using it to find a more acceptable structure.

Cal found the platform that had once been used as a stage at the carnival, on which he had danced when he and Roger first visited the grounds. Roger had clapped his hands when Cal

showed off his ballet moves, his *Pas de Bourrées*, leaps, and *Pirouettes*. Cal touched the stage and this time he didn't think of Roger. He thought of his father, and he missed him and tears streamed down his cheeks.

## VIII

When the sun had reached a high point in the sky and burned off the morning haze and after Cal had inched the canoe upstream with his branch, hunger raged in his stomach and it occurred to him that he hadn't eaten since leaving the city the morning before. With no car and town several miles away, Cal found himself in a quandary, wondering how he was to obtain food, realizing he hadn't put any thought into it, realizing he had never had to put much thought in to it for much of his life, until now. He tried to remember what Roger ate but could only recall him eating rabbit and fish.

Cal's phone still had thirty-five percent battery life. There was a message from Quincy: *Hope all is well, love. Miss you already.*

Call wrote back: *Peachy. Come visit soon.*

His signal was strong. Cal searched for the nearest pizza place that would deliver, no longer knowing the names of many of the businesses in the area, and ordered a large pie with everything, so that he could eat what was left over in the evening while he figured out how to manage food while he was there, while he tried to decide how long he would stay there.

\*

His first few days were spent learning how to live without the amenities of civilization. If he wanted to eat, he needed to find a way to store food or walk daily to the gas station five miles away, so he opted once a week to buy as many nonperishables as he could carry—crackers, chocolate chip cookies, potato chips—and on those days when he went to the store, he treated himself to a bean and cheese burrito heated in the microwave or the fried chicken from the deli with a side of coleslaw the size of a fifty cent piece. He ate at the green picnic table on the side of the building while he rested his legs for the walk back.

Although he realized the gas station diet was not ideal, Cal didn't want to put too much effort into solving such a temporary issue because he was only there to think, to pass a few days without his tranquilizers and without his martinis, to connect with his past and perhaps understand how it resulted in his future. Instead, he found his daily concerns became far more demanding, blocking his ability to think of the loss of his job and his increasingly complex relationship with Steve.

He hadn't considered what it meant to live without running water. At first, he trekked to the river daily with an aluminum pot from the shack that he dipped into the current and carried back, but found his need for water far greater than the one trip could satisfy, so he spent an early portion of each day gathering water in the smaller pot and storing it in a lemonade dispenser he bought at the gas station. Roger once told him he got sick shortly after he found the property and blamed the river. The water Roger offered was always piping hot and in an old clay cup that looked like it had belonged to a family of Pilgrims, and remembering this, Cal boiled his water before drinking it.

\*

Cal woke one morning on the floor, a puddle of saliva under him and his arm numb under his head. He remembered noises again in the night while he had read. A deer perhaps. He hoped.

Thin bands of air seeped up through the floor boards. Cal allowed it to cool his side as he oriented himself to the shack, the dark corners, the rotting wood smelling of mildew, the scarcity. The construction of the shack defied the rules of architecture as he remembered them. It was a wonder the roof had supported any snow load for the number of years it had. No windows meant no light to dry up the morning condensation on the floorboards.

The days exhausted him, and aside from the occasional walks to assess and then reassess the partially developed acreage, Cal felt just as stagnant as he did at S.H. Lindeman and Partners Architectural Firm. He knew why he was there—alone—but he was learning each day that he had no idea how to assess and process his life. His thoughts only left him depressed. His failure to follow his dreams of becoming a dancer only filled him with regret. He couldn't stop or even slow the whirlwind in his head, and the silence made it more unbearable. The loss of his job seemed so distant, like he had been lying on the shack's floorboards for eons, like the past had always been so distant and that it was only now that he existed, his shirt soaking up the moisture from the floor.

His hip ached from rolling on the hard wood. He finally rolled onto his back to free his numbed arm.

A squirrel ran across the roof of the shack and particles of rotten wood fell on his cheek. It was moist. He slapped it off, remembered he was here to heal and not to fall apart, realized he spent more time each morning lying in his own drool instead of facing each day ready to pull himself from under his own weight, and he pushed himself up from the floor.

He walked to the river, sat on a pebbled beach, and watched the water roil past, the sun gleaming off the eddies dazzling him. His eyelids drooped and the trickling currents soothed him. The cool air refreshed him, and he inhaled greedily.

In his mind's eye, he saw the ashen image of Roger on hearth. He let it float in his mind, suppressing any reaction, considered it until another image emerged from it—Roger standing next to him, smiling. Cal heard his laughter, felt his presence. The ghost of Roger pointed down at the hearth and it crumbled under his feet, and splinters of wood rained down around him followed by larger blocks until entire boards crashed downward. Roger's shack became a pile of

dust, and just as Roger's ghost had risen from the ashes, so new shack ascended from the sawdust that was left behind.

A splash followed by a great squawk startled him. He opened his eyes to capture the ascent of a bald eagle ascending from the river, wings stretched upward, water drizzling from its hind feathers, its talons wrapped around a fluttering fish. It flew in the direction of the abandoned development.

Cal had planned to stay only as long as it took to sort out his feelings, his goals, had planned to work out a plan for the development and discuss it with Steve as soon as he returned, but the memory of the times he had on the property, the light Roger's journals shed on the meaning of the property to the old hermit, the meaning the property held for Cal seemed to make plans of development seem cold and insensitive. The shack had already been falling apart when he met Roger. Now it rotted from the inside out, the interior smelling like mildew and possibly a dead animal. Cal looked around at the overgrowth of ferns and day lilies that lined the river's edge, the jagged shadows formed because of the same sun that warmed him, the silence. Reality crashed upon him—he was no longer in the city and didn't have a job and his cell phone had died, and he really didn't know what he was doing there, why Roger had left the property to him and not Benji. He had forgotten Roger in an attempt to forget a painful time, was embarrassed that he'd done so. More-so, he was hurt that he could have let go of a memory so special as the month or so he spent with Roger that summer.

He went back to the shack and rifled through the journals. A clue had to exist there. Although, many years had passed, and the journals spanned those years. He started reading entries just past the September, when Cal stopped coming around, when his father started his

chemotherapy. Many of them were merely recountings of his days, the time between each entry indeterminate, and he read through several passages before finally finding it.

#

Last Entry: Miss the boy. People didn't matter much till the boy came along. Didn't realize how much I missed people. Don't feel comfortable around them anymore. Too loud anymore and too frazzled. Makes me nervous. The boy, Cal, was quiet though. Let the rhythm of nature get into him. Somehow needed to be in nature. Thrived on it. Brought me joy to see it, see the outside world leave him. Like the boy Mary-beth and I never had. Been so long since another human come along. Been so long since I had a friend besides the animals. Cal made me think of life again and why away so long. Not so much me as no one took notice of me here. No matter. I had a friend, maybe for the first time in my life. He gave me glasses and I could see again. No one ever did something like that for me before.

#

The shack and the property were his only possessions, his most precious possessions and deserved more respect than a subdivision of McMansions. He needed to restore the shack, make it livable again without obliterating the memory of Roger, perhaps make into something that many could come to remember a man they had never known—a legend.

## IX

He took his time, scoping the perimeter of the clearing, probing the solidity of the ground, assessing the construction of the current shack and watching the motion of the sun in relationship to it. The structure was in serious disrepair. It had been built on two logs blackened by decomposition and eaten by termites, and each day they crushed a progressively and unevenly under his daily activity, causing the floor to tilt. Though he decided to pour a concrete slab, which would likely encase and suffocate any termite eggs left behind, the ground where the shack now stood had likely softened too much from the worm activity beneath the logs, leaving Cal's only option to move his plans to another area.

Mornings, he drew ideas for the new structure on it with charcoal or sketched images of his dreams in the dirt and then spent the rest of the day gathering water and splitting wood for the fire. The edge on Roger's ax sliced through the logs easily, and often he considered planing larger logs into planks, an idea that felt interesting and arduous at the same time. He imagined himself stroking each log with a planer, curls of wood flaking to the ground, his arms and shoulders aching under the July sun, and his initial excitement over his innovative idea quickly slipping away. He decided to make a trip into town to buy his concrete and to visit the library to YouTube natural options for building small structures and charge his phone.

Cal chose a cooler morning to leave for town. It had rained the evening before and the wind pushed the lingering humidity leaving the air just warm enough to go without a sweater. He walked alongside the road on the dirt shoulder and dragged a twig along the metal cable guardrail. He kept his head down, mesmerized by his feet trodding rhythmically, and after being deceived by a seemingly shallow puddle, Cal didn't let himself get too deep into thought. As the sun heated the asphalt, Cal's pant leg dried and stiffened.



He stopped at the cemetery and sat beside his father's grave for the first time since he'd been in town, for the first time since his funeral. Adjacent headstones donned small urns with flowers and unopened notecards, but his father's was bare, with the exception of the dandelions that formed a rectangular carpet over where he lay. Cal touched the granite, traced the letters that said *Beloved Husband and Father*, imagined that he touched his father's arm. Between the time Cal was six and fourteen years old, they would fly in his father's single engine plane to New Hampshire for breakfast, Cal's eyes often squinting with drowsiness, the rumble of the engine soothing him as the plane raced the dawning sun over the horizon. The trips stopped after his father learned of his ballet classes.

Cal had only known his father from the perspective of that child. He wondered what his father would think of him now, if he'd accept Cal's homosexuality. Society had changed substantially since his father died, but Cal wondered if his father would be among those who resisted the evolution of attitude toward sexuality and gender. Before he died, Captain Theis reached passed his hospice bed, plastic tubing wriggled from his arm, and he gathered Cal's hand into his and rolled his head on his pillow so that his clouded eyes met Cal's. He said nothing, but his eyes welled with tears before falling empty. Cal wondered why he had such a hard time deciphering what that moment meant, why he stuck to his father's game plan and pursued a degree in architecture. Perhaps, Cal thought, it was time to assume responsibility for his choices rather than pin them all on the dead.

His stomach growled. Cal picked a dandelion and placed it on top of the headstone. As he walked away, he brushed at the green wet spot the grass left on his jeans. It only smudged, so he accepted that it was there and walked to town.

The tightly buttoned librarian sitting at her computer snapped away from Cal, whipping her ponytail at him as she turned. He waited at the counter and slid his thumb up the edges of stacked bookmarks and flyers, yet she remained focused on her screen with increasing intensity.

Cal cleared his throat. "How do I get into the computer?" He softened his voice to the soothing sales voice he used to use at client meetings at S.H. Lindeman and Partners Architectural Firm, but his words didn't appear to register. "I'd like to use the computer with a guest password if possible."

The librarian turned her focus to a flyer on the desk and circled words.

An elderly woman with gray knitted hair set three large-print books on the counter beside him and the librarian promptly left the seat and rotated the books while inspecting them. "All set?" She asked.

"I believe this gentleman was ahead of me," the elderly woman said gesturing to Cal.

"Just the three books, Ma'am?" the librarian asked and continued to scan the barcodes into the checkout system.

The elderly woman put her cold hand around his wrist and smiled apologetically, and Cal smiled back, turned, and left.

Kendall's hardware was just down the street tucked around the side of the strip-mall where the pumpkin patch used to be and hayrides once brought autumn joy to the town's children. The air conditioning felt good, a sharp contrast to the direct late morning sun. Goosebumps plumped up on his arms and neck and he shivered, not unpleasantly, against the cooler air. The clerk behind the counter, a boy no older than twenty, raised his head from his cellphone and looked at Cal, and instead of acknowledging his entrance, he picked up the receiver on the landline and pushed a button. The boy turned away from Cal, and Cal walked

down the wide aisles, past the green and yellow handles of garden supplies and fifty-pound bags of birdseed and spray paint cans sealed off in a plexiglass display-case. An air-compressor, red and low on the shelf, caught his eye. He reached down, realizing that he didn't have the electricity to run it, when a hand lightly grasped his elbow.

"May I help you, sir?" A white-haired man wearing rounded glasses asked and smiled ironically. The badge pinned to the pocket of his white button down read *Jack Kendall*.

"I'm looking for cement."

The man appeared to get caught out of sync and raised his eyebrows. "You're looking for cement?"

"Yes. I'm looking for cement." Impatience sounded in his voice, though he had tried to suppress it.

He had barely finished speaking when the clean clerk strutted down the aisle with his skinny elbows flared. "That's him, Mr. K. That's the homeless guy."

Cal looked behind him, hoping it wasn't but knowing it was him that they the boy was calling homeless. He was aware his own hair had become overgrown, and his ability to care about it waned as the weeks passed, and the only way to ignore the inconveniences of living without electricity and running water, was to focus every bit of energy in the project. He had never taken apart the effort involved in such simple tasks as washing clothing or even making his morning coffee, each having become a brain teaser of necessity.

"I'm not—." Stumped. In his life he had never prepared himself for a moment such as this. He didn't even know how to articulate a response.

"Do you want me to call the police," the boy asked, glaring at Cal.

“I have this, son. Why don’t you hold down fort. Take care of the register, would ya?” He turned to Cal, placed his hand softly on his shoulder blade and said, “Cement is this way. May I ask what you’ll be using it for?”

They stopped at Aisle 8. Grayed fifty-pound paper bags of Quikrete were piled to toppling.

“A slab,” Cal said. “For a shed.”

“Is that so? Funny. Haven’t seen you in town before. New to the area?”

“I’m not homeless,” Cal said and thought of adding, *at least I don’t think so*, but instead said, “I grew up here, near Bridal Path. This is my hometown. My father was a pilot.”

“A pilot on Bridal Path? You’re not talking about Bradford Theis, are you?”

“Yes. I’m his son. Was. Was his son—am his son.”

“Why, I thought that house was sold years ago. Your father used to buy lumber here. Good man. Say, he ever finish that plane he was building in his basement?”

Cal snickered and shook his head.

“Good man,” Mr. Kendall repeated thoughtfully. “I’m sorry for the error—uh.”

“Cal. Cal Theis.”

“Cal, yes. Jack. I’m sorry about that. Sometimes a person will wander through town, and—you know.” Jack slapped him on his back. “So how many bags you need here.”

“A few. Here, I made a list.” He gave him a torn piece of Roger’s handmade paper. Jack stroked the traces of flowers and stems in it with his thumb.

“Right then. Show me your truck and I’ll have Victor load it.”

Again, Cal had forgotten to consider something so basic, so essential, like the bathrooms for the Dollinger account. “Don’t have a truck,” Cal said.

“Well, we don’t deliver, son,” Jack said, then stared down the aisle for a moment before returning to Cal. “Listen. Leave your address with Victor. I’ll have him drop it off tomorrow morning.”

The boy at the counter—Cal assumed he was Victor—took Cal’s credit card by reluctantly stretching his thumb and forefinger and pinching the very edge of the plastic then asked for identification. “One with a photo,” he demanded.

\*

At the gas station, Cal found a loosely wound length of fishing line and a packet of three hooks, which he paid for with his debit card. A dollar thirty-nine. He dug into his memory for Roger’s instructions on how to tie a hook, a little more than just a slip-knot, the line wrapped several times around itself, but the manner in which it was wrapped required several tries. He struggled with touching worms—they simply did not exist in the city, and the ones that left behind minuscule beads of black castings wriggled like snakes, left a sensation wriggling up his spine. Hungry for something other than bean and cheese burritos and hot dogs, Cal finally turned his scrunched face away and plucked an emerging nightcrawler from under a mat of decaying leaves and, with closed eyes, forced it onto his hook as it curled around his fingers. The line, he tied to a thin green stick. The first fish he caught presented a new challenge to him; it wagged in a way that reminded him of the worms, but the movements were more sudden and startling, making him reflexively retract his hand.

His trip to town had left him disoriented. The contrast between the cars rushing down Main Street and the absence of mechanical noise other than the occasional plane flying like a dash through the clouds affected him internally, unexpectedly. He was tired, perhaps from the

walk, but the exhaustion he felt more as though his life-force had been bled from him to feed the constant buzzing underneath the construct of the town.

It took him several days to look at his phone. There were messages, myriad from Quincy; none from Steve. She was concerned, hoped he was well, and pined for his return message. He left the phone with the journals without texting her back.

Several days had passed since the boy, delivered the bags of concrete, actually threw them off the gate of the truck as if throwing garbage into a dumpster, his face down-turned and avoidant as he answered all of Cal's attempts at conversation with *Yep* and *uh-huh*.

The days merged into one another. Just as he imagined happened with Roger's missing dates on entries, Cal could no longer define the space between several days anymore—it could have been yesterday, or it could have been a week ago. It no longer mattered in Cal's world. He napped under the shade of the trees one day and wandered up and down the edge of the stream trying to catch crayfish without getting pinched another. He'd spent an entire day considering the trees that had fallen the evening he arrived, and another day, he dug under the shack and found a rusted cast iron skillet, a crowbar, and a rolled leather packet with tools in it—a hacksaw blade, a mallet, and a coiled rope—all still dry and in usable shape. In another tightly wrapped packet, Cal found an old stenographer's notebook. Inside were earlier entries, these dated from the Sixties.

\*

May 15, 1964:     Doing it. Leaving this place. Virginia. Had it here with Mary-Beth's running around. Been sneaking Britt Ephron into our bed. I'm off at McCrory's daytimes and night school nights, for her, and she's making heat with Britt. Whole town knows it. Laughingstock. Had it with my brothers. Benji the most. Always taking advantage. Aiming to scare me off Pa's property. Pa left it to me and they got theirs. Still they wanna snatch it up for their

own. Benji saying I don't belong in the family. Says because my ma isn't their ma, I'm a bastard. Says I don't deserve nothing.

Doing it, and that's why. Tired of it. Laughing at me for my wife. Laughing at me for night school.

Carnival's in town. Took Mary-Beth. Talked to a man when she was on the Ferris wheel. Leaving tonight, and I'm going. Not telling anyone. Just getting out. McCrory's can have their promotion. Heard they been paying Marcus McCarthy more than me, and he been there just a few months. Don't wanna pay me anymore for my promotion neither. Ma's got a property up in New York. Says it's near a river. Gave me a deed. Says when I want it, just show it to someone in the town hall there, and they'll show me where. Carnival eventually goes there, man said. Didn't know when, but it goes there most definitely. Eventually gets everywhere. Says to just hop on the wagon and I'm in.

#

June 19, 1964: In Memphis. Hotter than French love. Thought maybe saw Elvis at the carnival. Wasn't him, but had the same hair and curly lip. Light at night make people look like lit up shadows. Like they're ghosts of their selves. Man in overcoat all evening handed me a book. Asked if I might like it. Sat all day reading it on a bench. Poems. Some brutal. Reminds me of nature. Walt Whitman. Man who gave it to me just smiled and patted my shoulder. Said to savor it. To drink it like a good wine.

Nights sleep in a tent with Asher Prescott. A big red headed guy. Arms like boa constrictors. Runs the Strongman Game. When he shows-'em how to hit the lever, holds the hammer a special way no one can notice. That way, he can ring the bell. Nights, always complaining boss-man Mr. Zakrzewski cheating him pay. Says he'll crush his head.

Miss Mary-Beth. Sometimes think I could a lived with the cheating. Hers and my brothers. Then, I come to Memphis and don't know if I really miss em.

#

July 10, 1964: Still got no pay. Talked to Mr. Zakrzewski. Says he'd remedy it soon as possible. That was last week. Carnival food is free, so not missing food, but can't go anywhere. Can't do anything. Never thought to bring money. Thought it'd come with the job. Didn't have much to start with anyway. Thought of leaving, but don't got nowhere to go. Not with no money. Here I get to eat. Asher says it's what they do. Squeeze you dry so you can't go nowhere. So you have to stay. Says Zakrzewski has me by the cojones. Says he picked up the word—cojones—last time carnival was in California. Says it looks like we're headed there.

#

Aug -, 1964: Head is burning angry. Finally money from Zakrzewski. Paid me only a quarter what he promised. Going back home if I can scrape it up. Don't know where we are. Headed for California. Maybe can work my way back. Join another carnival headed east. Something more honest. Get back home to Mary-Beth and my kin. Back to normal.

#

-- 1964: Days fading into each other. Don't remember what day it is anymore. Don't know the month. All I know is I'm trapped. Nothing traveling my way in sight. Nothing to take me home.

Been punished for talking up. Said I wanted the money he owed me. Zakrzewski sicked his thugs on me. Even Asher took his turn at me. Says he was sorry later. Still tent mates. No choice. Zakrzewski makes the rules. Don't know I have the will to fight.

#

--1964: Picked up a guy in Pueblo Colorado. Stan. Talented with the rope. Can hoop up three calves at one. Young guy. Chummied right up to Zakrzewski. He's in our tent with me and Asher. Talkative fellow. Always chewing and spittin' tobacco. Says he told Zakrzewski he knew where to go to get hold a real mermaid. Says one was living in Utah. Was small enough to stuff behind a glass case and show off.



First off, unless she's living in the Salt Lake, aren't no mermaids living in Utah. Second off, the way Stan—short for Stallion, he says—the way he talks about stuffing live peoples in glass cases makes me uneasy. He's gotta tattoo of a kewpie doll on his forearm. Says he's going to join the army once we're on the east coast to help Lyndon fight in Vietnam. Said those commies won't take our freedom. Was real angry about it too.

#

1964: In a small town in the Rockies. Rained all day and lots of wind and Lightning. Cold at night, and sometimes flurries. Bought a book in Denver with the money Zakrzewski gave me. More poems. Miss Emily Dickinson. Heard of her before. Read it tent. Asher and Stan been out. Maybe drinking. Not much to do on a rainy day.

Zakrzewski threw a big dinner last night. Roasted a pig, apple in its mouth and all.

Just want to go home.

\*

The journal ended abruptly, but the remaining pages were either torn or burnt, except for the last page with a final entry:

1964: Carnival landed near my mother's property. Woman at the clerk's office asked me for I.D. Told her I didn't have none. Didn't matter. She asked me questions about my mother and my family then handed over the deed.

Zakrzewski won't be having Asher and Stan lay hands on me no more. Lit a match under the Carnival to burn it down. Nothing burned though. But the smoldering made so much smoke, they thought it was on fire and ran. Just left the place behind.

Free.

\*

Cal wrapped the journal in plastic and buried it in the clearing where the new structure would be erected.

The slab didn't have to be flat because he planned to put a sill around its edge and lay out the subfloor above it before installing hardwood slats. He pieced together broken boards he'd found under the shack to build a form. It took him until the sun just reached the west side of the yard to mix the cement, a process that involved carrying water from the river as it sloshed in the bucket and stirring the gritty mixture in a plastic bucket that he found in the woods—plastic bottles, tires, lawn chairs, something always floated upstream after a heavy rain—until his forearms and shoulders ached. The mixture threatened to dry too quickly, making for him the first sense of urgency than he had felt since losing his job, since leaving the city.

The concrete plopped as it landed on the weedy dirt within the form. When it was finally filled, he had already built a fire and it was dark. Pushing his body past its capacity to move through exhaustion, he scraped the excess off using a rusty pipe he found in the development.

\*

He sat beside the fire the way he and Roger used to and stared up at the stars, and almost felts Roger's presence. He thought of Steve, too, the way they used to go to that outdoor restaurant in little Italy, how Steve teased him whenever he ordered eggplant parmesan, again. He couldn't help missing Steve.

Cal poked at the fire, stabbed at it, threw the stink into the flames and cupped his face into his hands.

He had thought he'd do anything to make it work with Steve, even if Steve acted like Cal was merely his personal assistant at art openings, even if he failed to introduce him to gallery owners or friends he'd acquired during his time with Perry.

“See, you’re not the only one not moving forward,” he said to Steve into his palms, and then dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. He lifted his head and laughed out loud, testing the silence of the woods in the dark distance.

“Look at me. Talking to myself now, Steve. That’s what this is doing to me.” He shifted his stance as though he were talking to someone. “I may be talking to myself, but you.” He stabbed his index finger into the air. “You’re the one who couldn’t let go of Perry. You’re the one who made me sit in the car rather than introduce me to your mother during that quick stop we made through Massachusetts. Next time would be a better time, you said. Don’t you remember? ‘She’s busy making dinner for Dad. It’s pointless to go in, he doesn’t even know who I am anymore,’ you said. “Wow! You really said that to me. I mean wow, Steve. Who does that? Four years and I haven’t even met your damned family.”

As he spoke and the flames grew higher, he let himself slip into a zone that felt filled with therapeutic possibilities. He spoke louder, almost yelling, allowed his voice to fill the void between him and the sky.

“Can’t hear me, Steve? Don’t think you ever could. Maybe I’m done talking in such a soft voice.” His voice cracked. He shivered and tears welled up in his eyes. A stick cracked in the darkness, followed by a thrashing of leaves and brush. Something ran through the thicket.

Cal clutched his chest.

The moon had set, and the fire cast shadows around him. Whatever it was could have been the critter that was coming up to the shack at night.

Cal laughed at himself. He had forgotten himself. Let go. It felt good, the space between embarrassment for being caught and utter freedom.

He sat on the log and let the fire show off its glorious power through the night, watched it flicker until it mesmerized him, drifted off to sleep under the stars.

\*

He still missed Steve in the morning even though the sun cast a dazzling clarity over the dew spattered landscaped that took his breath away. From the ground next where he slept next to his sitting log, he squinted at the sun, then rolled to find that the ashes from the fire still smoking. He didn't miss the city though. He did, but the smell of last night's fire, the actual presence of stars at night, and the silence had a calming effect that he didn't want to lose. He realized he hadn't taken any sedatives since the first evening that he moved to Roger's property. Regardless, he missed Quincy and wanted to share this world with her.

His arms buckled from overwork when he pushed himself off the ground. He grabbed his phone from on top of Roger's journals and texted Quin. *Sorry not to get back sooner. All's well. Exciting really. Lots going on her. Come visit. Bring Trina, Maggie, and Jerry if they can come. Kisses.*

Her text came through immediately after he pressed send as though she had been holding the phone waiting for him. *Promptly, dear! Miss you tragically. We'd luv to help w. ur project.*

He dialed Steve. No answer. He texted. No immediate answer.

He dialed Kendall Hardware and asked for paint brushes and sealant.

## X

Shale crunched, drew Cal's attention away from his hammer, from where he squatted near the new foundation and to the Quincy's BMW rolling past the patch of maples, approaching as though suspicious of the alien rural landscape. It sported the shine of a city car with reflections of autumn swirling on its black hood and eased to a stop alongside the trees. The doors slowly opened.

Jerry stepped out from the backseat and fluffed his scarf, an oversized orange and yellow knit. He pliéed and extended his arm into the passenger doors from where a dainty hand wrapped its stringy fingers around his wrist and Trina drifted out of the car, her neck lengthening, like a white swan. He whispered into Trina's ear and her platinum pixie-cut hair bounced as she laughed. Quincy emerged from the driver's seat and dwarfed by the car door, smoothed her white lace dress over her round hips. She patted her wide-brimmed hat, set slightly askew on her heart-shaped head, while she peered through the trees as if trying to discern their presence, then turned to Cal and jumped up and down and waved.

"Cal. Look at you. What a glorious site you are," Quincy said.

"Glorious indeed. So many trees, like my toothless Aunt Patty's place in Virginia." Jerry said and waved at Cal. "Hey, Cal-boy. What up, girlfriend?"

"Hey, Sweetie," Trina said. "Maggie wanted to come but she had an audition. Don't hate her."

They floated toward him through falling leaves in colorful swaths of cloth like characters from *Pricilla Queen of the Desert*, their flowing materials foreign to the roughened landscape, headed by Quincy who led her entourage with grace. Cal put his hammer on the concrete slab alongside a foamy roll of sill seal and a box of three-inch nails.

Quincy met him at the foundation, kissed each of his cheeks, and hugged him like a brittle boned bird, nuzzled her nose in his chest, the brim of her hat awkwardly bent, then held him at arm's length. "I know you said you needed something new, but Cal. This is simply insane. You're in the—what's the word, Jerry?"

"Boonies, Q. The word is definitely boonies."

"It's home," Cal said.

"Don't get me wrong, Love. It's a splendor, truly magnificent what you're doing here. Oh, I was just being...you know me. And this new look you have going. Oh, Cal. How honestly rugged."

"Flannel?" Jerry wrinkled his nose at Cal and flapped his hand at the shirt.

"But it definitely goes with the environment. Tell us you're happy, Love," Quincy said with her head tilted and almond-shaped eyes widened and her hair spilling like melted chocolate from under her hat.

"I'm happy."

"We miss you so much," Trina said. "I'm so sorry you were fired. It was such a good job. Oh, dear! Listen to me being so insensitive. Cal, dear, it's so wonderful to see you doing so well."

"Are you okay, dear?" Quincy said into his chest.

"Yes. I believe so. Recovering."

"Well, Steve's an awful person. You should have left him long ago. Barry saw him getting coffee on West 23<sup>rd</sup> with that 'guru' of his and refused to say a word to him." Her arms became a vice around his waist.

"I'm okay. Seriously, Quin."

She released him, her hat finally free from destruction, and scratched his shoulder with her scarlet fingernails. “Moving on. The shop is doing quite well. A new line of Milly on the racks, and—where is it that you’re living?”

“There.” He pointed at the shack alongside a wall of mugwort yellowed by autumn and browning with seed.

Jerry lifted his scarf over his mouth and muffled, he said, “Oh, dear God.”

Bent over her lanky leg, Trina rolled her socks away from her capris while looking at the shack. She turned to Jerry then to Quin then back to the trailer and said, “It has to be as big as my apartment. Yours, too—right, Jerry?”

“Uh-yeah. Give or take.”

“Yours too, Jerry. Your place is a tuna can. Not fooling anyone, Miss Diva.”

“Oh, Cal. It is quaint. As quaint as quaint can be,” Quincy said. She walked toward the shack with her hand stretched outward as if to read it psychically. As she approached, she diverted her hand to the Port-o-potty and stroked the blue plastic. “Is this what I think it is?”

Cal’s cheeks warmed against the October chill. “No running water or septic yet,” he said.

“But where do you get your water? Where do you...” She jerked her hand from the blue plastic then, with the other hand she searched inside her purse, withdrew a monogrammed handkerchief with which she wiped her hand, crumpled into a ball and stuffed back into her purse.

“No worries. Really.”

“Better watch where you step, girls. You’re in Cal-boy country now. Don’t want to step in squirrel scat. What do they call the area, Cal? Shit kickin’ country?” Jerry laughed and waved his hand dismissively at the others.

“And what do we have here? Is this the house?” Trina scampered toward Cal beside the foundation. Jerry followed her and they explored the concrete floor and the plastic gallon bucket stacked on which four brushes rested.

“It will be.”

“We’re going to paint? What color” Jerry asked, holding a brush. He bent down and read the bucket. “Not purple, I’m guessing. This is sealant. Is that for this slab? I’m not dressed for this, and Quincy’s definitely not.”

“Quincy’s a fashion bug,” Trina said.

“What do you mean? These are my rags. Nobody wears white after Labor Day. Oh Cal, you know we always find your projects so interesting, but I thought we’d have a picnic instead. It’s such a lovely day with the blue sky and all, and there are some fantastic sandwiches and lunch salads in the car. I even packed two bottles of Veuve Clicquot to celebrate. What do you say, Love? Let’s have our very own Dejuener sur l’herbe overlooking that lovely river.”

\*

True to Quincy’s promise of luxury and preparedness, in her trunk, a smorgasbord had been efficiently packed into three easy to carry containers, each lined with a thin blanket they could sit on. They spread the blankets on the rocky beach and laid out the iced egg salad and what Cal called “Quincy’s Four Cs”—crackers, cheeses, chilled fruits, caviar. The champagne glasses were Waterford, each wrapped in elegantly folded butcher paper.

“I helped Maria put this together at four o’clock this morning,” Quincy said, lengthening her spine in expectation of acknowledgment.

Jerry snap-clapped.

“Well, it’s certainly gorgeous,” Trina said with surety.



They sat. The thin blankets barely gave any cushion against the shifty rubble beneath. It hurt like deep acupressure, and Jerry huffed and rearranged himself then stood and walked along the creek. Meanwhile, Quincy sat balanced on her hip, her legs tucked aside like a siren on a rock.

“Have some champagne, Love,” Quincy said as he tipped the bottle over his glass. “When are you coming home. I feel I just drift aimlessly through my days without you around. It’s pure torture; jump in the car with us.” She pouted.

Cal took a bite of a cracker stacked with a meat wrapped cream topped with a pimento stuffed olive. “What is this? It’s delicious.”

“It’s prosciutto and something or other. More importantly, when are you coming home?”

He exhaled, harder than he expected, and turned his head to the river, then back to Quincy. “I really don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Lovey!” She held his wrist as though her hand were a tennis bracelet. “But you have no electricity. And how do you entertain? Perry spoke to a friend of his, and you can be employed in an instant.”

“I don’t know, Quin. Something is really happening here. I haven’t taken any anxiety medication in...How long have I been here?”

“Nearly two months,” Quincy said as a matter of point.

“Yes. Nearly two months,” Cal exclaimed. “Think about that. No pills; no drink in two months. Quincy. This has been a challenge. Simple things sometimes take all day to accomplish, but I don’t think I’ve ever been happier. Lonely, sometimes, but so happy making my own choices each day.”

Quincy studied him for a moment, then seemed to study herself, and finally leaned close to him and said, “So be it. As long as you are happy, love. Eat up. We have a lot to explore today.”

Although they stayed, walked through the forest pathways he had restored, splashed their fingers in the creek and screeched when a minnow swam against their knuckles, the underlying string that had held Quincy and Cal together for so many years was suddenly absent, their actions unchanged but the energy enlivening their connection vanished.

They pecked cheeks when they left, and Cal waved at them, smiling.

## XI

Cal stared down at his phone after Quincy had gone. Only a return call from Jack Kendall confirming an upcoming visit with his wife, Laura. Still nothing from Steve. His battery-life was low. He called Jack and then retired to the old shack.

He started a fire. Roger's ash outline still darkened the stone hearth. He didn't know Roger for long and so much time had passed since that summer, but he was the most genuine friend Cal had ever had. Their first journey to the Carnival on the day Cal learned his father was ill taught Cal that it was up to him to create the memories he wanted with his father. Moments formed through the chosen actions between two people. He remembered Roger saying, *Life doesn't just happen. Have to do something for life to happen. Have to take responsibility for what's good and what's bad. Choose what to keep and what to throw away, but make sure, Cal, you make the life your father has left happen.*

Quincy and the gang weren't ever coming back. Cal knew that. He didn't know what happened inside of her, but he knew that his living in outside of her parameters of expectation was too much for her, too much for Trina and Jerry. That didn't matter, though—he was building his home.

\*

He spent many days contemplating the fallen trees. The strongest structure he could build on the property was a log cabin, and the trunks were straight. He tried sawing through with one of the saws he'd found under the shack then realized that, although he had the time, he would never saw through the logs before the shack crumbled.

His battery still held up; he kept his phone off. He dialed Jack to ask if he could recommend someone to hire.

\*

The red truck pulled alongside the trees. Out stepped Jack, Laura, and Victor, all smiling, Laura holding a gift-wrapped box.

“Have some chains, pulleys, and a picnic table in the bed,” Jack said. “Thought we might help move those red oaks out of the woods for you. Get this cabin built. Expecting some help on the way. Ah. Here she is.”

A monster-truck pulled in as he spoke. A stout woman wearing a cap with the firehouse seal on it jumped out of the cab and strutted toward Cal.

“Erica Bailey,” Jack said. “Does logging when she’s not dowsing out fires.”

“Pleasure.” Erica nodded at Cal as she shifted on her feet.

Laura kissed Cal’s cheek. “It’s so nice to meet you. Jack can’t stop talking about all you’re doing here. It sounds like an adventure.” She pushed the gift box into his hands. “For your house.”

Cal peeled the orange and blue polka dotted paper to reveal a deep-blue cardboard box. He opened the lid. In it, a crystal attached to a strand of fishing wire rested on a swatch of batting. He lifted it and it dazzled him.

“It’s for your window,” Laura said. “To bring in light.”

Erica, drove her monster four-by-four into the woods, and Jack and Victor wrapped the chain around one of the oaks. She hauled each tree out with the excitement of a child on a rollercoaster, the logs leaving deep ruts on the forest floor.

As they sawed the trunks and rolled them to meet the slab, the aroma of barbecued ribs filled the air. Laura set the picnic tables with plastic-wrapped cold salads and pies. They all

worked, their many hands taking turns sawing, balancing logs atop other logs while hammering pins in them to hold them together, and installing plywood sheets onto the sill-plates.

It grew dark and using branches that had been thrown aside, Cal started a fire. He tended the flame until it flared high. While he warmed his hands, his phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Steve. Cal let it ring through to his voicemail.

\*

Steve showed up in a rented car the day after the cabin was finally roofed. He stepped out of the car with his arms wide, his hair cut short and beard shaven, only his mustache left over, and he embraced Cal, slowly wrapping his arms around Cal's shoulders, like the generic hug of a preacher. "You look fantastic for an old hermit," Steve said, attempting humor. "And just look what you've done here. It's magnificent." He ran his fingers over the cabin's logs.

Cal blushed. "Had some help."

"Yeah. I guess it'd be a lot to do on your own."

They were silent. Steve stuffed his hands into his pockets and traced circles in the dirt with his toe, and Cal picked up sticks around the yard as though he'd been doing so all along, as though Steve's presence had interrupted him.

"You want to see inside?" Cal asked absently.

"Sure. Yeah."

Cal led him into the cabin which was larger inside than it appears outside. In it, Cal had already situated a small wooden table with two spindly chairs and an overstuffed recliner that Erica Bailey had given him.

"You cut your hair," Cal said.

Steve rolled a few strands between his fingers and huffed. “Yeah. I kind of grew sick of it.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Cal said. “Maybe your guru was right about *making* life happen.”

“Yeah. Well, he turned out to be a fraud. Was taking money from his nonprofit and stuffing it into his own pockets. Stealing money from his own cause.” Steve chuckled and shook his head and then sat at the small table.

“I’m going to plant daffodils around the perimeter,” Cal said, as though he didn’t hear Steve. He pointed out the window space cut in the wall. “After I put glass there. You want tea? Raspberry leaf?”

Steve shook his head. “Nah. I just wanted to talk.”

“The brownstone sell?”

“No. That’s what I want to talk about,” Steve said. “Let’s take it off the market. Look. I’ve been stupid with this whole Manny cult thing. I can’t believe I fell into it. But he’s gone, and I could use you by my side. Come home.”

Cal smiled involuntarily, a reaction formed from a mixture of victory, confusion, and absurdity. “I am home, Steve.”

“Home? Who lives like this?” Steve stood, stricken. “Get in the car and come home. You can help me with the gallery until you find another job. This is a fine project, but let’s be realistic.”

“Why don’t you stay here?” Cal asked. “I’m all for working this out, but we have to be on equal terms.”

Steve slumped in his chair and picked at his nails. “I was hoping to take you out to dinner.”

“Let’s order in,” Cal said. “See what it’s like here for a while.”

They ordered eggplant parmesan from The Pizza Villa. Cal canoed Steve down the creek to the carnival site and Steve explored, curious of all the broken-down game kiosks and rides. Cal showed Steve the old journals, which Steve thumbed through, asked questions about the paper, about Roger and the shack.

“I think I’ll write his story one day,” Cal said.

“You should write your own someday, too,” Steve said, taking in the cabin, the yard, and Cal. “I don’t think I can stay. What’ll you do?”

“Finish this cabin. Maybe find a job. Maybe just be happy.”

“Sounds nice,” Steve said. He placed a jewelry box in Cal’s hand before getting into the rental car. Cal opened the box as the car rolled out of the driveway. Inside, resting on a pad of batting was the ring Steve had given him long ago, with stars and moon-slivers cut into the circumference. Cal waved, but the car had already gone.

The End