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Avali

by

Taylor Jon Simon

A Creative Work

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English Studies

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Prologue

It's a good possibility that I'm floating through black space. Wrapped in darkness, my feet unplanted. Feels like I'm *in* something. That is, I wear skin and beyond the skin, is another epidermis, perhaps synthetic. Astronaut's suit. Probably. Familiar faces come to mind. Nostalgic. But I can't attach names. *A tall woman with light hair and thick makeup. Cold fingers on my face. A boy and girl ride a merry-go-round. One smiles. The other cries.* Perhaps I've fallen asleep and this is a lucid dream of nothing. Or, maybe, I'm having surgery that, in my drug-induced state, I've forgotten about. Maybe I'm being reconstructed against my will—like, my whole nervous system—in some crazy post-mortem experiment. So, when my mind commands my right arm to move upward, I'm actually moving my neck. That wouldn't be so bad. One could get used to that.

But, probably still space. Yeah, I'm separated from my crew. A ship will approach momentarily. I try to focus my eyes, squint and see if I can see distant light specks—suns, planets, rocket machinery—to confirm my expectations. It's too dark. It won't work. "Pivot," thinks Mind, "pivot and look for specks on the other side of—wherever you are." *A balding man with a stern look of disapproval. Paper in my hands.* Pivoting doesn't work. I get a sense that I've moved in the blackness, but no visual affirmation of the fact. *An adolescent boy bearing a sly grin beckons me to his computer. A birthday cake, I blow out the candles.* Unless—maybe I'm not an astronaut. Recall your schooling. Were you an engineer? Physicist? Surely, you were someone of worth. *Are.* Surely you *are* someone of worth.

Something is heavy, something in my head.

A middle-aged woman stares melancholically into the open casket of the one-time stern, balding man. I take several gulps of liquid brown spice. A young woman holds me in her arms. My face is wet. I fall asleep.

I think I'm upset. Why? There's a pain in my chest—not emotional—and an absence in my being—not existential—and I think tomorrow I'll have—

I'm on my knees displaying the contents of a small box to the young woman with a perplexed expression. She wears white. Decorative lights. Making love.

—to think more about all this. I mean, meditate.

How long has it been? Curious that I haven't felt the compulsion to defecate. Curious also that I—

The melancholic woman lies in a hospital bed. I hold a small hand. My peripheral is blocked.

—don't have the urge to eat anything.

Still waiting on the ship and rescue crew. The crew. Wait—what crew?

I pick up a small boy and throw him into the air, he returns to my arms.

Still waiting on—something. And I think it's my fault, the reason I'm here. Why is this happening to me?

There's something like glass, it's something I can touch. She's on the other side of it.
And I can't get to her, I can't get to her, I can't get to her, I can't—

A soft voice, barely audible.

That tightness of heart again. Why is this happening to me?

What is that? That—thing.

Chapter 1

It was Saturday morning. Edward sipped stale coffee at his living room window, losing interest in the brick wall of the apartment across the street. Two women in matching jogging gear walked a Yellow Lab on the sidewalk along his small yard. They crossed paths with a mail man. He nodded at the women. The women waved. Seemed early. Too early for mail—

How old is this coffee?

If overtime weekends were still an option, he considered, he could have opted-in—

Sorry, Mom. We're swamped these days. Hands are tied.

When he arrived outside her duplex with a bag of newly purchased cleaning supplies and a birthday card, he was interrupted by her landlord, Kyu—the eventual recipient of the card. Kyu was in his late thirties, sporting a soul patch and neon orange flip flops and had just finished weed whacking along the side of the house. He removed his earmuffs and approached Edward. They locked palms.

“Ed,” said Kyu. “How ya been? How are things?”

“Fine. You?”

Edward wiped his palm on his pants.

“Good, good,” said Kyu. “Rachel and I just bought another house.”

“Congrats.”

“Yeah.”

Edward began to walk toward the front door when Kyu put out his forearm to stop him. He caught a whiff of the landlord's poor breath, the foul heat of something like fast food or chunky milk between his words.

“Talk to your brother lately?” he asked.

“No.”

“Could you get ahold of him for me? Your mom’s late on rent. No big deal, but these things tend to snowball, you know, so ASAP. But hey, no pressure.”

Ed pulled his wallet, removed a few hundreds, and handed them to Kyu. “I’ll give you the rest on Tuesday.”

“Something wrong with Henry?”

“He’s fine.”

“Well, thanks.” He strolled over to his white pickup and gave Edward a goodbye-nod as he placed the weed whacker in the back. “Take care, dude.”

“Yeah.”

Edward approached his mother’s front door and put his finger to the black button of the intercom she’d had him install the previous year. A series of speaker holes were arranged in the shape of an ear and, below, written out in her half-cursive handwriting on a small square of notebook paper, were the words “Please use speaker.” He heard the muffled buzz of the intercom go off inside the house, and then—

Kfffft, went the active-line static from the box. *Kfffft*.

“What?” she said, the amidst the crackle. “Can I help you?”

“Mom, it’s Edward.”

Kfffffffffft—

“Yeah?”

“It’s Saturday.”

“So?”

“Open the door?”

Kfffffffffffffffffffft—

“Where’s your key?”

“I lost it.”

“*What?*”

“It’s not a big deal.”

Kfffffffffffffffffffft—

“Not a big deal? Whaddya mean *not a big deal*? What if one of the—

“Don’t say it, Sara,” Edward said to his mother under his breath.

“—immigrants picks it up and comes into the house to root through my jewelry case or worse—

“Seems pretty unlikely.”

Kfft—

“Suppose you dropped it on the ground outside?”

“Then I hope they come back with a copy for me.”

Kfffffffffffft—

“Where’s your brother been?”

“Ma, the neighbors can hear us.”

Kfffffft—

“Yeah, yeah. Coming.”

Edward sat on the recliner. His mother wore pajama pants below a Motley Crue shirt and sat on the loveseat. An old dime novel was open and placed text-down on the coffee table alongside a TV guide and a paper plate of barely eaten chicken nuggets.

She grabbed the remote and flipped through channels. Resting on the loveseat next to Sara's bouncing knee was the wireless microphone for the intercom.

Edward pointed to the microphone, "There are apps now that can hook up to your security system."

"So Uncle Sam can know my every move? No thanks." She yawned. "Saw on the laptop those nuts in Washington are making threats to the public for speaking out."

"What were they speaking out against?"

"Well—I suppose—they felt mistreated in some way."

"You read this?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"On the internet, I said. Didn't I say?"

"Right, the internet."

"You pick up Kyu's card?"

"Yeah."

She sneezed, pulled a hanky from her pocket, and wiped her face. "Well? Where is it?" She returned the hanky.

Edward dropped the card on the coffee table. The front cover was a photo of a kitten trying to swat at a string of yarn just out of reach above it. The inside was blank.

"That's not a birthday card."

“It’s whatever you want it to be. You’re supposed to use your own words.”

“You gotta be kidding.” Sara shook her head. “Well, I dunno what to say.”

“Say *happy birthday?*”

“They coulda printed *that!* What’s the point of a blank card if all you’re gonna say is happy birthday?”

A framed family portrait, faded with age, sat on a nearby shelf. The boys were seven or eight. Choppy bowl cuts. Fake greenery behind them. Edward and his mother sat side-by-side and, above them, with a hand on each of their opposing shoulders, Henry stood wearing a burgundy turtleneck and a half-smirk.

“You’re late on rent,” said Edward.

“Am I?” Sara modeled an expression of contemplative thought, and muttered the months chronologically under her breath. Then, “Shit.”

“I can help, it’s fine.”

She chuckled and put the tips of her fingers to her mouth, as if hiding her smile. “Your brother can float me the cash.”

“I don’t think he can this time.”

“Why not?”

“That’s his business.”

“Did he get laid off? Adrian’s daughter was just laid off the other day and—

“We shouldn’t pry.” Edward’s stomach tightened at the thought of his brother. He briefly ground his teeth. “You know, keep his dignity intact.”

“Well, I hope everything is okay.” She returned her gaze to the television and continued flipping through channels. “Say, when you clean the bathroom make sure you let those bubbles

soak in the toilet for a good long while before you scrub, or I might as well be pissing in an outhouse.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not some animal.”

Chapter 2

The cab of the company truck was littered with coffee cups and crumpled fast food bags and permeated the pungent body odor of the coworker who drove before him. When Edward arrived at a potential client's office, bits of garbage escaped the cab. He scooped the mess and tossed it back into the vehicle through the half-open window.

It was his second occasion meeting with Freddy. It had been about a year and Edward didn't expect the man to remember him. Before Ed could begin with any sort of preliminary introduction on behalf of his company, the host was already halfway into an anecdote from his recent thirty-year high school reunion.

"I was never quite the kinda nerd that hung out with the D and D nerds," said Freddy. He wore a sky-blue polo and crew cut with the kind of complexion that always looks as if it had just finished sweating. "But I also never wanted to hang out with the jock types so my friends and I always did our own thing, usually we talked about film—like Francois Truffaut. You know Truffaut?"

"Can't say I do."

"French. Pinnacle of film in the 20th century." He waved to a woman behind a desk and then opened his office door, letting Ed in first. "Anyway, a friend of mine made a joke about the recent Hollywood barfing of sequels and pathetic over-budgeted hero adaptations and some jock stops us and says, 'See the last Tarantino?'" Freddy chuckled. "The ignorance of those guys who used to pick on us, I tell ya. It's great. It's a spectacle, really."

"Ah," said Edward, looking at his feet.

"So, you're here to sell commercial batteries."

Freddy pulled a small tub of Carmex and dug his finger into it.

“That’s the goal,” replied Edward. He was guided to have a seat in a pleather chair as Freddy dropped into the one across the desk.

“You get into film much?” he asked, applying the lip balm.

“Sometimes, I like anything clever.”

“Clever,” Freddy looked confused. His eyebrows raised. “Hmm.”

It was the first silence of the meeting. 9:21 AM. Edward’s ear caught a distant *buzz* that may or may not have been present. *buzz—buzz—buzz—* A fly on the clock? A fly on Frederick Newmann’s nameplate atop the desk. A fly on Freddy’s forehead. A fly on Edward. A fly on the nucleus of human life, rubbing its tiny hands beneath the bulbous, dark protrusion of its many, many eyes. Its many, many eyes. Its many, many—

“Well?” said Freddy. “I’m all ears, salesman.”

Edward shook himself into focus and gave his pitch, which was, at this his second year selling batteries, now of near-perfect synthesis with the company pamphlet.

“So, these batteries—they’re, like, organic?” asked Freddy.

“What?” said Edward. “No. They’re environmentally friendly.”

“What’s the difference?”

“It just means that it won’t, you know, hurt the planet.”

“But *how* won’t they hurt the planet?”

“Well, your standard long lasting batteries tend to be lithium.” The flies were gone. The flies were gone. “But, you see, lithium is harmful to—um—vegetation, and stuff.”

“That it?”

“The information is a bit complicated—

“Gotta say, Ed, you’re not really selling this new age battery thing. I mean, I love the environment and I believe in global warming and all that, but I don’t know that I wanna buy from someone who doesn’t know their product.”

Edward pulled a pamphlet from his briefcase and slipped it across the desk. “Everything you need to know is in here,” he said.

“Ed, Ed, Ed, you’re not speaking my language. You can’t make your client *read* the information. He’s a busy man. These are *busy* times. It’s clear you weren’t paying attention in— wait, do you have a degree?”

“Excuse me?”

Freddy leaned across the desk, coffee on his breath. “Did you go to college?”

“Well, I dropped—

“See, that’s your problem.” He leaned back on his chair. “You’re missing out on the ethics and fundamentals and benefits of informed communication. Gotta get that degree or you’re gonna drown. Hear me?”

“I don’t see how that has to do with anything I’ve said about batteries.”

“Are you upset? You seem upset.”

“No. I’m just a little lost.”

“That’s funny. Reminds me of a podcast I once heard about how people have egocentric responses in situations where they find themselves confused.” He sighed and tapped his pen on the surface of the desk. “I’ll tell ya what, I know your boss on a somewhat personal level. See her down at the jazz club now and then. Good, *strong* woman. I’m gonna give you a pass here with this botched sales pitch, and I’ll meet with you, say, next Thursday at eleven?”

“Okay.”

“Sound good?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. That sounds fine.”

“*Good.* Sounds good.”

“Sounds good.”

Freddy walked Edward to his vehicle where he suggested that Edward do a little homework on the batteries before he return and—would it kill him to keep the company vehicle clean? It’s a poor reflection on the corporate image to drive around with such a nasty mess.

Chapter 3

The bar was brightly lit and had a modern aesthetic of charcoal gray and cream, and several works of abstract art hung at eye level with dangling price tags. A brown spiral with bright green drips bleeding into the center. Monochromatic animal prints made in shapes of men. An impressionist piece—what looked like the profile of a woman in pink watercolor.

Edward was two beers into catching up with Patrick when something like a lead ball began to churn in his chest. Patrick talked about the necessity of good rest and, if Edward wasn't careful, he could become a nervous wreck. Somewhere in all that, Patrick mentioned another thing or two about a date with a woman he'd met on an app who'd withheld a recent mastectomy from her profile.

“No second date?” asked Ed.

“Are you even paying attention?”

“Sorry.”

“I'm supposed to meet her at 9 at Ruts.”

“But you don't want to?”

“No.”

“So cancel.”

“If I cancel, she'll think it's because of her surgery. She'll think I'm superficial.”

“You're not?”

The bartender poured Patrick a shot of vodka.

“Ed,” Pat whispered, scooting closer. “It's not abnormal to not wanna date someone who has like, a half breast thing going on. I don't need your judgement.”

“Then—why bring it up?”

Patrick chuckled and sighed, “Can’t get a beer with a friend without being demonized.”

Patrick downed the shot and then followed it with a contorted face and an overly aggressive, thin-lipped inhale as if his shot of liquor was the equivalent to a medieval flogging. “You know, if you were me in this situation you wouldn’t meet her again.”

“Hard to say.”

“I’m not superficial. I’m—normal.”

“It’s normal to be superficial.”

“No, the guys that run the firm are superficial. My sister is superficial—

“Why is it so difficult for you to admit that you have a physical standard?”

“Because that’s not what’s happening, here.”

“That’s what it sounds like,” Edward said.

“Well that’s not what it is.” he laughed, distressed. The sludge of drunkenness began to manifest in his voice. “What’s gotten into you? Why so hostile?”

“I doubt I’m being hostile. I just don’t think it’s the end of the world to admit you have a standard.”

“I agree. I definitely agree. We are in agreement on that, Edward. Just—we see the world differently when it comes to things like, like, like—

“Like what we just talked about.”

“Yea. See. You get it.” Patrick’s face became flushed as he gave Edward a quick pat on the shoulder. He pulled out his phone and swiped the screen several times—his eyes fluttered. “I mean, I’m not without my own issues.” Focus still on his phone. “I’m not perfect. You know, I gamble here and there, and maybe have too many drinks when I’m stressed but—Hey, how’s your brother been?” he asked, swiping. “That guy usually posts the best stuff.”

“Good. Henry’s good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I mean, he’s a little quiet these days.”

“Did something happen?”

“What?”

“Did something happen to Henry?” Patrick’s eyes returned to Edward.

“No.”

“What—he in jail or something?”

“Pat—

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll stop prying.” Patrick checked his watch and cracked his neck. “So,” he sighed. “I have to ask you for something. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Yeah?”

“Could I—maybe—borrow some money?”

“Didn’t you just drop fifty bucks on drinks?”

“Yeah but that was my credit card.”

“Well—

“Forget it, it’s not a big deal.”

“It’s fine,” Edward pulled his wallet. “How much?”

“Two.”

“Two—

“Thousand.”

“You need *two thousand dollars*?”

“I’m a month behind. I mean, I have some of what I need already, it’s just—

“How soon can you pay it back?” Edward asked as he pulled his checkbook.

“I’m taking a loan from my 401k so as soon as I’m able.”

“So?”

“As soon as I’m able.”

“Patrick.”

“What?”

“This is two grand. I can’t just float money to you without any idea of when I’ll get it back.”

“When I know, you’ll know. Promise it won’t be long.”

Edward tore the check and slid it across the bar to his friend.

“Gotta say, man,” said Patrick. “You really make a lot of things about yourself.” He slipped the check into his coat pocket and asked Edward to wish him luck. When Edward asked “What for?” Patrick made a gesture to his chest and then rolled his eyes as he stumbled out of the bar.

Chapter 4

A dream came to Edward that held no comprehensible narrative and was absent of human character. The experience was a bombardment of indistinct imagery and sounds that coupled an attraction from an unseen force, something that felt to Edward like malevolence—

An eyeless, mouthless face arrives from Black, a chilling howl behind it—a tube of electricity slithers in gray mud under the cacophony of shaking clouds. A violet skinned man laughs in darkness. And a clank of wood. Something SLAM- SLAM- slams and its echo spreads into a dark, cosmic plan. Quiet. An abrasive repeating burst like the artificial laser sounds of a sci-fi epic. The voices of children. The manic shrill of a man. All turns to white. The tender voice of a young woman—

It was the morning following his meeting with Patrick when Kyu called to remind him of his mother's late rent. Edward had said he would give him the money on Tuesday, it was now Thursday. Kyu would like to give her more time, he assured him, considering how thoughtful she'd been recently, but he can't bring himself to do it. That would be unfair to the other tenants. Edward winced and claimed he understood, and though he was tempted to say he should have some money soon, he was quickly reminded of the hypocrisy of making a promise without a certain date; the image came to mind of Patrick and his contorted post-drink thin-lipped face at the bar.

"I'll swing by and drop it off today," said Edward, unsure of how he would accomplish said task.

Kyu then inquired of Henry's thoughts on the matter.

“It’s not a problem, really.” Edward grit his teeth and shook his head, attempting to be rid of a sudden bout of neurosis. “I’m so sorry about this, Kyu.”

Kyu thanked him and told him to have a good one.

“Why haven’t you paid Mom’s rent?”

“Come on, Ed.”

“I dunno what to do.”

“Sell something.”

“I have nothing.”

“You have Grandma’s jewelry, and you have the ice chest.”

“Isn’t it called a freezer chest?”

“What’s the difference?”

“One only preserves temporarily, the other—never mind, dude.”

“Whatever. You also have a willing spirit and two hands.”

“And less than a day. We’re short like nine-hundred bucks. All of my crap combined is hardly worth that. You don’t have anything laying around?”

“Ed—

Freddy’s face was red and his dark suit was wrinkled.

A whiff of artificial fruits and spices.

Edward looked around the office, checking for flies—

“Okay, my man,” said Freddy from the office chair on the other side of the desk. “Let’s hear it.”

Edward delivered the same commercial battery pitch, word for word, that he had delivered at their previous meeting. Freddy responded with a mute shiver, a peaking elation as if a rush of endorphins had been surging through his body. It was likely, Edward surmised, that he could have insulted the man's mother and still received a like response.

"Much better," said Freddy after collecting himself.

"Thanks."

"Guess all you needed was a good push in the right direction." Freddy winked and rolled up his sleeves. He pulled a black binder from a drawer in his desk and let it drop on the surface. He opened it, unclicked his pen, and inquired as to who or what, specifically, he should write out the check.

Freddy's request pierced Edward's mind as if from a godlike entity who, through the words of the man across the desk, was assuring Edward of the balance it was keen on keeping. *To whom should Freddy write the check? The check... The check...* Edward then had a moment of contemplative thought that hit, briefly, like a storm of whirring sensations, like the dream he'd had early that morning, and he replied, "You can write it out to me."

"To *you*?"

"Yes."

"Why would I write the check out to you?"

"I actually purchase the batteries," lied Edward. "From the company, and then pocket the difference."

"Since when?"

"It's only for salespeople who aren't yet hired on."

"I see."

“Contract stuff.”

“Hm.”

Freddy wrote a check for six-thousand-forty dollars and twenty-nine cents, tore it from the binder, and handed it to Edward. He asked when he should expect his batteries. Edward informed him that demand was higher than supply and it may be a few weeks, that he had no certain date as to when the products would arrive.

“How did you manage that?”

“I’ll make an order for five grand and add a promotion code in the online transaction thing.”

“Doesn’t Freddy already know about the promotion?”

“If he did, he wouldn’t have made the check for the full amount.”

“So the extra money for Mom’s rent came by serendipity?”

“No, I *expected* him to not pay attention to me, as is his custom. And I chose not to remind him of the promotion.”

“Still seems serendipitous. Did Kyu ask where the rent money came from?”

“It’s not his business. But, yes, of course.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him I got it from you.”

Chapter 5

At his company computer, chewing his pen with a bouncing knee, Edward placed the order for Freddy's batteries without clicking the "completed payment" box under the electronic invoice. The system allowed an order to remain open for seventy-two hours while the shipment was received, documented, and prepared, which meant that his friend Patrick had seventy-two hours to pay him back. Upon said payment, Ed could go to Freddy and inform him that he forgot about the promotional sale, write a check for Freddy to return his original amount, and then request that Freddy write a check with the final price—that is, minus the nine-hundred—out to the company (rather than Edward), all the while apologizing for his incompetence—about which Freddy would certainly be in no way surprised—

but what of the salespeople's responsibility to be the middleman until hired on? Write the check out to the company? Why now the change? *Ah, Edward hadn't thought of that.* Suppose there is a tax credit, he considered, the company receives when it offers a promotion—in which case there would be a specific clause in Edward's "contract" with the company. An individual cannot offer promotions or claim the tax credits for them, but the company can. *Then*, the check would have to be written out to the company. So, you see, Freddy, the company would then reimburse the contracted salesperson at the end of the quarter and, if enough promotional deals have been sold, the salesperson may even receive a bonus—

The phone rang.

"Why can't I get ahold of your brother?"

"Mom, he's busy."

"With what?"

"That's his business."

“Well that’s unacceptable.”

“In what way?”

“It’s just not like him. You don’t think—do you think he could be kidnapped?”

“Doubt it.”

“You sound stressed.”

“I’m fine.”

“Go ahead and hide from me. Nothing new there.”

“What could I possibly be hiding?”

“I dunno. I just know your tones, I raised you. Plus, with everything going on with Henry—

“What’s going on with Henry?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Everything?”

“What?” said Sara.

“You’re trying to figure out everything?”

“About Henry, yes.”

“Maybe that’s your problem.”

“Who said I had a problem?”

“Maybe you think I’m stressed because *you’re* stressed. You know, like projection or whatever they call it.”

“Who’s *they*?”

“Maybe you should turn the TV off and read a book or something. Or, go for a walk.”

“Who died and made you Oprah?”

“Do people die and then appoint the living to inspirational daytime talk shows?”

“What?”

“I have to go, Ma.”

She sighed. “The next time you talk to him, tell him to visit his mother.”

“K.”

“I have something important to share.”

“What is it?”

“That’s between me and Henry.”

He had his hair trimmed, he shaved his scruff, and, in front of his bathroom mirror, Edward practiced speaking in a courteous tone.

In fourth grade, he paid his brother ten dollars to go to class for him while he spent the day hidden in their attic, playing a Gameboy. It hadn’t occurred to the twins that Henry’s disappearance in his own class in light of his immaculate attendance would warrant a call to their mother and, consequently, an investigation into which Waters boy was actually attending Ms. Anderson’s class. The false Edward’s unusually good behavior was the true tip-off to the school’s administrators and, when cornered by the soft inquiry of adult voices who assured Henry he would not get in trouble if he would only reveal the location of his brother, the boy caved and cried and, in twenty minutes’ time, Sara—frazzled from leaving work early—pulled a sheet from the top of a cardboard box and found her son in the fetal position with a machine grip on the portable game console and a look that implied, “Try it.”

Ed, wearing a black baseball hat and one of his brother's flannels, put his finger to the button of her intercom and waited.

Kfffffft—

“Hello?”

“Afternoon, Miss! Could I interest you in a presentation on Froozle vacuums?”

Kfffffffffffffffffffffffft—

“The hell are Froozle vacuums? Never heard of them.” *Kfffft—* “Thanks but no thanks. Please see your way off the property.”

“Mom, it's me.”

Kfffft—

“Henry?” said Sara.

“Yep,” said Edward.

Kfffffffffffffffffffffffft—

“Is the man selling vacuums gone?”

“He was never here.”

“Of course he was, I was just talking to him.”

“That was me. I was just—I was pretending. Trying to make you laugh.”

Kfffft—

“Well, that's odd.”

“Sorry.”

“Why didn't you just come in?”

“I don't have my key.”

“You and your brother would lose your heads if they weren't attached to your body.”

After giving his mother a hug for the first time in months, Edward strolled around the home as he imagined Henry might. He made an affirmative nod at the sight of a new knickknack and gave a playful “Mmmm!” when he found Henry’s favorite foods in the fridge, placed methodically in varying Tupperware containers on the top shelf. Edward gave a moronic attempt at maintaining the moronic lie, he realized, that he was his brother who hadn’t contacted their mother in weeks. But, an act of playful lying was to Edward the only means of maintaining a sense of homeostasis in the family; peace in the life of the small Waters clan.

“Will you quit moseying about and come sit down?” said Sara from the living room.

Edward did as was requested, but tried to keep his distance.

“So,” she said. “Where have *you* been?”

Enamored with himself that the trick was working, Edward nearly broke character. Only at the sight of a portrait of Sara and Henry in matching Christmas sweaters did he regain his focus. “Away for work. Overseas. They said I would have cell service over there but, you know—

“Say no more.” She picked up the remote and turned on the TV. “Could have at least told me you were leaving, though.”

“Again, I didn’t think I wouldn’t be able to.”

“But you kept in touch with Edward. How’d you manage that?”

“Web cam,” lied Edward.

“Web cam?”

“We used cameras on our computers to talk to each other.”

“You’d never catch me using that trash.”

A sudden thought hit Ed—most days she was able to tell the brothers apart. Why *now* was it so easy for him to fake it? Maybe something between Henry and Sara had her ashamed to look at him for too long. Maybe, he considered, they'd fought recently. Maybe that was why she was so eager to see him. To make amends. He was used to his mother avoiding eye contact. But, with Henry, was it normal?

He shook the suspicion loose as if it were water in his ears. And he decided to blame his mother's general distracted psyche for her gullibility. "So," he continued. "How are you?"

"I don't wanna talk about me."

"No?"

"No. I wanna talk about Edward." She muted the television and scooted closer to him as if someone might hear her speak. "I'm worried."

"You—have nothing—to, um, to worry about. I mean, as far as I can tell Ed seems pretty good. Heard he just made a big sale at work."

"Oh, you and I both know that's a flash in the pan just like everything else he tries."

"Right."

"Besides, I'm not talking about his work. Could care less about his work." She looked out the window, her expression blatant with dramatic appeal. "Do you think—Henry—do you think Edward could be gay?"

Edward exploded into laughter.

"No, Ma." He wiped a tear from his eye. "Ed is straight."

"It's not funny. Do you really *know* that he's straight?"

"Mom. He's been w—I've seen him—he's not gay. Just trust me."

“I don’t appreciate the laughter. This is serious.” She put the tips of her fingers daintily to her throat as if she were about to cry.

Edward then considered that, though to him the assertion was absurd and of no serious gravity, Sara’s world was in true turmoil at the consideration of his orientation. He began to wonder if she had been trying to figure him out for several years and that—not the theory of Edward being homosexual, but rather the mere thought that she had to surmise a theory at all in order to make sense of him had troubled her to the point of near-tears.

“He’s always been distant—not like you,” said Sara. “And I know he’s artistic and he worries and I read on the internet that alotta gay guys don’t have good relationships with their mothers and—

“Mom, stop giving the internet so much credence.”

She ignored him, her head now shaking back and forth. “And your father isn’t around and hasn’t been for decades—not that I want him to be around, the sonuva bitch prick—” her face reddened and her body shivered in a momentary spasm as if that of an ill-tempered child. She put her fingers to her temples and rubbed, vigorously, trying to erase away some thought or attitude that had suddenly come upon her. “Henry don’t do that again.” Her eyes to the floor. “Please. Don’t do it. Oh honey, don’t do that again please. Please.”

She grabbed the ash tray from the coffee table and threw it at the wall behind Edward. He felt a chunk of ceramic glass fall down his shirt.

The television remained muted. Figures on the screen were dancing, jumping. They had won a contest.

And somewhere, perhaps in his mind, Edward heard a buzz come from—a buzz, buzz—

“Don’t do—*what* again?” he said, his heart racing. “Mom...”

“I’m sorry.” She stood and walked toward the kitchen, then paused and stared at the empty corner for a moment. “I’m sorry I made a scene, Henry.”

Edward returned home. The knuckles of his right hand were sore from punching the ceiling of his vehicle. He wrapped them in ice and sat on his couch, and something—maybe the hot knuckles meeting the ice, or maybe it was seeing his mother—pulled him into a trance, and his eyes nearly rolled to the back of his head when the click and drone of the furnace snapped him out of the daze.

He rubbed his face and sat upright. Something surreal had made its way into his view, like the flies in Freddy’s office—only, more vivid. At the top of the basement staircase, squatting at waist level, was an amphibian-man hybrid. Human shaped head, webbed hands, black eyes. Something about the monster was recognizable, as if he’d seen it on an old black-and-white fantasy sitcom as a child. *Star Trek* or *Twilight Zone*. Maybe, he considered, he’d fallen asleep on the couch and was having a lucid dream. This *thing* could have been the projected, imaginative result of passing a frog on the sidewalk, or a man squatting to pick up fallen keys or coins.

Edward slapped himself, the pain affirming at least some semblance of consciousness.

The creature descended the stairs. And an intangible force under Ed’s heart, perhaps it was intuition, beckoned him to follow. The amphibian visitor disappeared when Edward reached the bottom.

Below pale lights in the basement were several worn toys from his childhood, a dozen cardboard boxes with miscellaneous decorations, old clothes, and a tub of pictures from his school years. A five-foot long, three-feet high freezer chest that’d come with the house occupied

the furthest corner of the room. Edward trudged through the boxes and dropped to the floor, his back against the freezer.

“I should clean,” he said, his mind stuck on the phantom he’d witnessed. “I should—take a nap.”

The buzz of the freezer’s motor. Something in the basement dripped—dripped—dripped—

Edward heard the crackling of the lid of the chest as it opened above, followed by graceless, heavy movement—

and Henry dropped to the floor next to him.

“You’re bluer than usual,” said Edward.

“Could say the same about you.” Henry cracked his neck, bits of ice fell from his brown hair. And for a moment he glared at new lesions on his forearms.

“You should get that looked at.”

Henry sighed and dropped his arms to his sides. “So, how’d it go?”

Another Time

June, Twenty Years Ago

They were at the lake house. His father reached an arm into the dark room and felt around for the light switch to the study. Edward, in the hallway, held a crate of toy train parts he inherited from Dad's dad. It wasn't a video game or action figure, and the wheels had dots of brown rust on them like Mom's car. Dad said it was an "antique" and that Ed was lucky to get it for free. Like when the people from the church came with a box of Thanksgiving food and Mom was so happy she cried. Except, someone died before he got the train.

His father flipped the switch. The room was cluttered, most of the mess surrounded an old dining table. There were board games with worn boxes, and you could hardly see the floor with all the stacks of newspaper. A towering shelf was on the wall to the right, books sticking off the edges. Westerns, faded yellow binding with bold lettering.

Standing in the dark hallway, Edward became convinced of another presence there—somewhere in the lake home.

"Did Henry get anything from your dad?" asked Edward, looking down at the train parts and trying to distract himself. "From Grandpa."

"No." He turned to Edward and pointed at the crate. "Put that thing down until we're done."

"But—

"*Ed.*"

Dad handed him a box of newspapers, which was heavier than he expected, and began telling stories from when he was a child and his father would take him and his brother out fishing. Ed, distracted, locked eyes with a strange face staring into the study from the window.

The rest of the being's shape was too abstract to make out—it presented itself in human form, but undefined. They were up at least twenty feet. The thing, whatever it was, was hovering.

A fire was rolling in the backyard. They were burning most of the old man's things. "Even stuff you shouldn't burn," said his father. "So, don't tell Ma or she'll have a liberal fit."

After they were done taking the old newspapers outside, they had to start hauling out the books. Dad was gonna burn those too, but he decided against it. Instead they put them in a couple big plastic tubs to be dropped at Salvation Army. They brought the old board games out to the fire. And Dad dragged the old dining table onto the grass and broke it up with an axe—

THWAP-CRACK!

Bits of wood scattered.

THWAP-CRACK!

"Dad," said Edward between swings of the axe. "Is there someone else who lived with grandpa before he died? Who still lives here?"

"No."

THWAP-CRACK!

"I just thought I saw someone when we were cleaning the study. Someone who looked sick."

"Someone who looked sick?"

"Yeah."

"Nobody's here, Ed. It's just us."

THWAP-CRACK!

"Dad?"

"What?"

“Sun’s going down.”

“I know that, Edward.”

THWAP-CRACK!

“Just making sure you know. Why are you breaking up the table anyway? Was something wrong with it?”

“Go inside and grab the spray bottle from under the sink in the kitchen.”

“Then what?”

“Then spray down the bathroom.”

“But it’s nasty in the bathroom.”

“That’s why we have to clean it, son.”

THWAP-CRACK!

Edward held the crate with the train set on his lap during the drive home. When they would arrive, his mother would question his father on the safety of a nine-year-old with a pile of junk that could give him tetanus, and Dad would shrug and say it was Ed’s payment for helping. And Edward would ask Henry what it meant to be a liberal, and Henry would say it meant you liked trees and Bill Clinton.

Edward would wake up early the next morning to pee and notice soft whimpers and heaving breaths coming from the living room. He would tiptoe across the linoleum of the kitchen, peek his head around the corner, and see his father on the recliner. The light in the living room too dim for Ed to see his face, but bright enough to illuminate an open western novel face down, hugging the man’s knee.

April, Eighteen Years Ago

“You ready?” asked Ed, who sat on a concrete slab counting out playing cards in increments of three. Behind, Henry paced and hummed and looked to the sky.

“Who am I again?” said Henry.

“You’re Walter McMarty.”

“Who is Walter McMarty?”

“You are.”

“No, I mean in real life.”

“There is no Walter McMarty in real life. I made him up.”

“Oh. Why do we need playing cards?”

“For a smart kid you sure suck at paying attention.” Edward pointed to the sets. “Four piles of cards. Each pile is one of your futures as Walter McMarty. If you get an ace or a ten it means you get cancer and die, and if you get a queen you marry Britney Spears.”

“Are there other ways to die?” Henry squatted next to his brother. “Or other people to marry?”

“If you get a six it means they hang you.”

“Who hangs me?”

“They.”

“What if I get a six and also get a ten?”

“Then you get cancer and they hang you for it. Stop asking so many questions.”

“I have an idea.” Henry grabbed the deck of remaining cards from Edward’s grip and sifted through them. “When you get a two it means you die at Y2K.”

“Y2K isn’t part of the game, Henry.”

“You’re just making it up as you go along, anything can be a part of it. You prolly don’t even know what Y2K means.”

“I do. It’s when the computers come to life and start killing people.”

Henry laughed. “No, dumbass, it means the computers forget how to count and the economy falls apart.”

Edward was convinced the economy was the name of the bank that takes your house, but saw no point in arguing with his brother. “Fine, we can make Y2K parta the game.” He pointed at a small notepad on a bench. “Go grab my list and I’ll change stuff.”

When Henry returned, he asked Edward why they hadn’t been playing Avali, why they hadn’t suited up as the mercenaries and approached the door of the universe. Ed, paralyzed by the question, recalled the arrival of characters in his fantasy world, characters that’d become out of his control. No longer at the will of his imagination, they appeared in his life without his say so, and to admit the blunder to Henry would be like admitting his own Crazy, admitting Crazy like Mom.

“Avali sucks,” said Ed, averting his eyes from his brother’s gaze.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well it’s not yours, so you don’t have a say. It’s not your universe.”

They played the card game for the rest of the morning as they waited for the end of Mom’s shift. In one life, Walter McMarty was a successful business man who was robbed by one of his employees and then stabbed in an alleyway by a masked gunman. In another, he was a pirate off the coast of Scotland who married Britney Spears and then was hanged because the king of Scotland was jealous for his wife. He was a lawyer, a police chief, a garbage man. McMarty was a—

“Potato?”

“What? No.”

“He should definitely be part-potato.”

—McMarty was part-potato, part-man and he was killed by an earthquake in San Francisco brought on by the villain Guss Bruntly.

When Edward was prodded as to why he was not given a fake name, and no fate by way of playing cards, he informed Henry that he had no name. Edward was a faceless creator with no place inside his universe.

“Sounds like a cop out.”

“No.”

“Yes it is! You’re afraid of what’ll happen to you if you’re part of the game. You don’t wanna be hung or shot or any of the other bad things that you made for this, so you make *me* a part of the game because it’s easier for you and ‘cause you know I’ll play along.”

“Shut up.”

They heard the holler of a familiar voice from a nearby vehicle. It was their father, calling them over to his truck. Edward, frustrated that his game had been interrupted, argued that they should stay and ignore him, that it didn’t matter if they went to Brian—even if only to say “hi”—because Brian was done being their dad. But when Henry, without rebuttal, leapt and jogged over to the man’s truck, Edward felt a sudden excitement under his chest. Maybe today mattered, maybe today brought them a different set of cards and they would get to leave the parking lot and go home before Mom was done with work to surprise her.

He caught up with his brother, whose arms were crossed and rested on the man's open driver's window. Ed caught a whiff of booze on Brian's breath. He was in the middle of giving Henry instructions.

"—underneath the staircase," he said. "Remember which one I'm talking about?"

"Yeah," Henry replied. "Gray tub."

"That's right." His eyes darted back and forth, as if unsure of where they should rest.

"Okay, I'm gonna get going. Remember what I said. Keep it from your mother."

"Yeah."

"Good boy."

"Hi Dad," said Edward.

Brian gave Ed a subtle nod and turned back to Henry. "Eleven PM, down the street from Cousin Anna's."

"Got it."

When Brian was out of sight, Edward asked his brother about the gray tub but was met with a one-word response:

"Stop."

"But—"

"That's for me to know. He wants *me* to meet him. Not you."

It would be a number of weeks before Edward would finally get his brother to cough up the truth of the matter, and as a payment he had to promise Henry they could keep playing Avali.

Henry was instructed to track down a family member's class ring. And when he met his father to deliver the ring, there was a woman in the car he didn't recognize, in the passenger's

seat. She waved and smiled. But Brian pushed her arm down before he came out of the car. She looked like Mom but younger.

“That was it?”

“Yeah.”

“He didn’t say anything about me? Or about Mom?”

“No. Why would he?”

Chapter 6

In the booth of a small diner, Edward awaited Patrick and a check for two thousand dollars.

There was a counter to his right where a young woman with thick glasses and subtle curves poured coffee for a few college students. The window to Edward's left was clouded in speckles of a kind of brown film he took to be aged grease stains, as if the grimy vapor had permeated the air to the point that it now affected the view of the outside world. And two kids, a boy and a girl of about five and seven, bickered in the neighboring booth while the woman with them swiped around on an iPad.

It was five minutes past his lunch break. Pat was more than a half-hour late.

An itch overcame Edward's conscience, a nagging reminder that he'd pretended to be his brother to appease his mother. And his mother—

It couldn't be helped, he reasoned—

it's just the way things have to be.

The children in the other booth quieted. Edward took notice of the soft demeanor of the woman as she spoke. Though, he couldn't make out what she was saying.

And—

silently, he cried.

Patrick had a funny way of acting when he lied. He would fumble his words, regress to the tone of a child, and scratch the back of his head. And though his folly was obvious, he remained persistent with his supposed view of the truth. It was as if he ceased to be Patrick and took on the demeanor of a June bug that *thwap, thwap, thwapped* against clear glass with no

frame of reference for the invisible material, no understanding that one cannot pass through the chasm by simply ramming one's head into it again, and again, and again—that one was simply too small, too weak, too dimwitted in the attempt—

and this was the analogy Edward constructed as he stood in Patrick's doorway, and his friend said, "I tried to text you but it wasn't going through, and then I tried to call and—sorry man. Come on in."

He thought of asking Patrick how his date with the breast cancer survivor went, but the certainty of becoming annoyed by Patrick's lies or pseudo-masculine vocabulary plastered the front wall of Edward's conscience like a billboard that read "DON'T BOTHER" and, so, he didn't. Instead, he entered Patrick's apartment and sat silently on the leather loveseat nearest the door, across from a glass coffee table.

"I have your money," said Pat. "Just gimme a sec, it's in my room."

When he returned, he handed Edward three big bills and a twenty. Ed was about to open his mouth and remind Patrick of the missing difference of seventeen-hundred when Patrick interrupted him and said:

"Gotta hit the gym, man. Hate to kick you out so soon but—this busy schedule of mine. You understand."

Edward stood. "Pat, man, I need the rest. This is kind of a big deal..."

"I said I'd have it soon," Patrick subtly guided Edward to the door. "I gave you most of what I have. I'm tapped out."

"You don't have anything I could sell?"

"If I did, I would sell it myself." He slowly shut the door. "Bye Ed."

"Bye..."

Henry had cooked up a rare steak on the stovetop despite his decaying joints and poor dexterity. He then sat on the other side of Edward's small dining table, cut into the pink meat, and shoved a chunk through his navy lips.

"He didn't give me what he owes me," said Edward.

"Uh oh," replied Henry with a mouthful of beef.

"I'm screwed. I'll be fired. Probably prison time for fraud."

"Sounding a little dramatic, bro."

"Cut me a piece."

"No." He swallowed. "Get your own."

"That's *my* steak."

"Mom sent it with you thinking *you* were *me*. So, it's mine."

"I just want—like—a third of it. I haven't eaten anything today."

Henry rolled his eyes and cut into the meat. "Hey," he said as he tossed a slab across the table. "Doesn't Patrick have that gold chain?"

"The one around his neck?"

Henry swallowed. "If he's at the gym, he's not wearing it. It's probably in his locker."

"It's at least a half-ounce of fourteen karat."

"Would it be enough?"

"He would know it was me."

"Honestly," he shrugged. "He probably won't even make the connection and wind up blaming it on a janitor or something."

On the wall behind Henry, a mutant beetle the size of a toddler scuttled about. Edward tried to ignore it. It moved to the ceiling and became idle above Henry's head.

"What?" said Henry, looking back at the wall. "You okay, man?"

"Yeah. Fine."

Chapter 7

Heather's office smelled like a blend of peppermint and turds. It was as if a dog had dumped on the carpet and then Heather tried to cover the scent with a cheap Christmas candle. Zoning out on the office guest chair while his boss paced around, Edward imagined the dog turd scenario and wondered if it happened on a weekly basis. To keep this kind of scent upkeep, he reasoned, it would have to happen somewhat regularly.

“So,” she said. “Your Freddy sale.”

“Freddy?” said Edward.

“Newmann and Sons.” Her boss-voice was activated. “You know what Freddy I’m talking about, Ed.”

“Right.”

“Anything to confess?”

“Yeah. The truck’s a little messy. Sorry about that.”

“I know you took a check written in your own name.”

“Right. Jazz club.”

“That’s right—saw him at jazz club.”

“What does that guy drink, anyway?”

“He doesn’t.”

“He goes just for the jazz.”

“Apparently.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me.”

“I should fire you.”

“Yeah.”

“Really, Ed, I should.”

“You won’t?”

“The payment was made on time.” Heather sat in her chair. “No money is missing.” She took a sip of her coffee. “I don’t know what you were up to. Not sure I wanna know. Something’s off. You hardly talk. You trudge around the building with your eyes at the floor. And apart from Newmann, you haven’t made a large sale this quarter. To be frank, I’m tired of looking at you.” She opened her laptop and swiped the screen. Heather continued after her pause. “Take three weeks to get your head straight.”

“Three weeks?”

“You’re suspended without pay.”

“Hm.” Edward stood nonchalantly and flicked a ball of lint from his shoulder. “Well, this was anti-climactic.”

“Would you prefer me to yell?”

“Guess not,” he said as he turned to leave.

Edward spent forty minutes staring at the blank wall of his living room before he descended the stairs. Henry’s mouth tended to freeze, so his exit from the ice chest was often followed by Edward grabbing the back of his brother’s head and shoving a pocket blade into his mouth, splitting the fused lips.

“I was suspended today.”

“Are you surprised?” said Henry as he placed his right heel on the chest and stretched his hamstring.

“No. Good thing, I guess. I’m—tired these days.” Edward started to pace. He thought of Patrick and the woman with breast cancer, and then Freddy and his condescending tone. “Why are people the way that they are?”

Henry laughed. “Do I look like a minister?”

“Just—thinking out loud.”

“Ah.”

“The other day I saw Wendal.”

“What—like a drawing of him?”

“No.” A heavy knot in his throat. “He was squatting upstairs, staring at me. Then he brought me down here and disappeared.”

“Should I be psychoanalyzing you?”

“Shut up.”

“Well, I dunno what you want from me.” Henry jumped and grabbed a pull-up bar. “Is this the first time you’ve seen—things?”

“No.” The two of them digressed. *Henry grunting from his pull-ups, and the subtle hum of the ice chest.* And the image of the obscure figure at the lake home came to mind. “Remember my train set?” He asked his brother.

“No.”

“Got it from Grandpa Waters when he died.”

“Nope.”

“It was junk, but it was the *one thing* I had that I didn’t have to share with you.”

“Real nice, Ed.” Henry, now on the floor, stretched his back and yawned. “What I do remember about the old man is when you guys came home from the lake house. Mom and Dad fought about you all night; about how you needed to talk to someone. Like a professional.”

“Talk to a professional, huh?” said Edward.

“Yep.” His brother stood, his blue hue discolored by the pale lighting. New marks akin to bruising appeared about his body. Henry turned to ascend the stairs and said, “Imagine that.”

It was Saturday. Despite the temptation to fake Henry again, Edward was himself upon return to his mother’s. They didn’t speak more than a few words to one another—he, for the secret knowledge of her suspicions about his orientation was too much to bear and faking authenticity in conversation was not something his low energy would allow and, she, he surmised, had nothing to say due to her recently subsided concerns about his brother’s location. Unless conversations about his brother arose, very little seemed to matter. So, she napped while he cleaned, a repeating whistle escaping her snores along with an occasional, distressed groan.

Edward started with the bathroom. One of the two florescent lights were out, making for a dim glow on the pale green bathroom décor. The brown hand towel stank of must and something off-putting.

He scrubbed the grout build-up in the cracks of the shower tiles.

There were miscellaneous hairs cluttered about the toilet and sink—

and smudges on the mirror—

and the faucet dripped. And dripped. And dripped. And he had the sense that something Dark hovered over his shoulder. And he wiped the bathtub and he plucked and he scrubbed and he wiped and the Dark put a hand on his shoulder and—

Edward thought he heard the doorbell ring, and then the buzzer from Sara's intercom. He paused cleaning and hoped she would wake up and answer.

The *buzz* sounded again.

"Mom, you hear that?" he shouted from atop the staircase. "Mom?"

There was no movement from where she lay in the living room, only snoring and the subtle whistle.

Ed descended the stairs and reached for the door, but stopped when he saw through a window that no one stood on the other side. He assumed it was one of her neighbor kids playing a prank.

He was about to return to the staircase when he noticed, to the right of the door, the slow sway of three sets of keys which hung on small hooks. The keychain farthest right had a cheap, red bottle opener attached and, in faded marker on the handle were the words:

lake house #1

"Mom," said Edward.

No response.

"Mom!" he shouted down the hall.

"What? For cryin' out loud. Tryin' to sleep."

He strode down to the living room and peered around the corner. "I thought you sold the lake house."

"Ed." Sara's eyes were still closed. "Why the hell would I go and do a stupid thing like that in this economy?"

"Is the economy in a state in which selling real estate would have no benefit?"

"That's what I read."

“Right.”

“Don’t say *right* like that—

“Like what?”

“Like I don’t know what I’m doing. I know what I’m doing with my property.”

“Okay, okay. When was the last time anyone was up there?”

“Uncle Dale goes up to make sure the pipes don’t freeze in the winter. But, otherwise, I guess it’s been a while. Couple years maybe since anyone stayed overnight.”

“But it’s still—usable?”

“Should be. Talk to Dale.”

“I haven’t talked to Dale since I was fifteen, when you invited him to our family Christmas party and he asked if I had any blow.”

“Dale doesn’t do drugs.”

“Maybe not. But it, still, it was weird.”

“Why do you want to know about the lake house?”

“No reason.” He was about to return to cleaning, but stopped and asked, “Does he ever try to come back for it?”

“Who? *Your father?*” She laughed. “That would require he talk to one of us. Changed the locks years ago. That place is as good as ours.”

Chapter 8

Henry was in the passenger's seat, singing some pop song from the nineties. They were approaching their second hour on Highway 61. Walls of oaks and pines in late September tones towered along the road. Ed's attention faded into the stretch of white strips and amber leaves above cracked tar. He imagined the truck spreading wings, catching air, hovering, and then abruptly soaring into the cosmos. His twin ran out of lyrics to sing and asked Edward what he hoped to accomplish by driving out to the old cabin. Before he could respond, Henry reminded him of the potential triggers; of watching Mom and Dad holler at each other; of the familiar sight of the shore where, their father once told them, an old neighbor had drowned due to a condition that incited random paralysis. They were so young, said Henry, too young to hear that story. He laughed. The kinda guy Brian was—total douche. Right, Ed? And they sat in silence until the tank was empty.

There was a young brunette woman fueling up an ATV at the station. She couldn't have been older than twenty-three. Dark blue jeans and a gray sweater. Pink baseball hat with the bill forward. She looked like she'd been crying. She *was* crying.

And Ed was caught staring as he attempted to screw the fuel cap. He averted his eyes and fumbled, and avoided her when they passed on his way to the restroom. Later, Henry would give him crap for not starting up a conversation.

"Yeah," replied Edward. "Hit on a crying girl. Real smooth."

You've been single for too long. Henry's voice, as though bodiless, carried on; an echo of Ed's very thoughts. *Way too long and you're a good guy, too good of a guy to be alone. You should have stayed with Tiffany. Tiffany was hot and wicked smart, and the best part about her was that she could hang with the guys without pretending—like those girls who act like they can*

hang just for their image, just for the selfies with jerseys of men whose first names they don't know. Tiff could run circles around us and keep up when drinking. Yeah, you should have stayed with Tiffany. It's too late. She's married. Hell, they're all married.

It was a burgundy bungalow with white, weathered trim, built forty-five yards uphill from the lakeshore in 1960 by their grandfather and his brother. There were details Edward hadn't remembered, like the bomb shelter on the north side of the property and a worn tire swing hanging from a large maple in the front yard. The house was virtually empty of clutter and furniture except for an empty gun safe, a loveseat and rocking chair that faced the fireplace in the living room, a single twin bed in the study room he and Brian cleaned out when his grandfather passed, and a full-sized bed in the master bedroom with an adjacent dresser set and mirror.

Unable to get the freezer off the back of the truck, Edward ran an extension cord from the four-season front porch and triple checked that the motor for the chest had clicked-on. As he held an ear to the lid, listening for the hum of power, his eyes met the fire pit where Brian destroyed his grandfather's personal belongings and chopped up the family table.

That first night back, on the floor of the living room, heated and illuminated by the brick fireplace, Ed and Henry played a half-dozen games of cribbage and reminisced about the better times they'd spent in the bungalow. The times of better moods, grilled meat and corn on the cob, full moons and fireflies, sticky s'mores, bug spray. Though, the conversation often digressed as Ed became regularly distracted by the dull egg-white color of the walls, making mental plans to paint during his three-week stay.

Then, around midnight, Edward noticed a scent of rot coming from Henry. But driven by loyalty and complacency and a desire for peace, he kept the observation to himself. And, when it

came time for Henry to return to the chest, Ed sprayed deodorant over the spot on the floor his brother had been. It only served to help the living room. The haunt of the scent remained in his nostrils overnight and kept him from sleep.

Early in the morning, Ed had a cup of stale coffee and a shower and then ventured out to the bomb shelter. As he unlocked the steel door, he wondered if something abominable would be under the surface, waiting on the stairs to pounce and annihilate him. He backed up as he let the door follow its hinge and bang on the concrete slab below; the sound caused his heart to jump and a few birds in a nearby bush dispersed. And he descended.

Ed pulled the string of a bulb that hung a yard from the base of the stairs. There were two sets of thin bunkbeds with Army green blankets across from a shelf of canned food and a small black safe sat atop a corner table next to a disconnected toilet and sink.

He sat on a bunk and sighed, and then pivoted and stretched across the bed. The springs above began to awkwardly shake as if someone occupying the bunk was having trouble getting comfortable.

Henry's pale gray face peered over the edge. "Why don't I remember this?"

"We weren't allowed down here."

"Makes sense." Henry disappeared, likely laying prone with his arms up and hands crossed beneath his head. "Man, the early Cold War years must have been nuts," he said.

"Especially at the beginning."

"I guess."

"What's your opinion? Like, do you think it actually ended?"

"That wall fell."

“Doesn’t mean the Cold War is suddenly over. Just because a wall fell.”

“And the Soviets couldn’t keep making nukes.”

“But nukes still exist.”

“I guess it depends on what you consider a war.”

“I guess. Hey, we should decorate,” said Henry. “Bring in some posters.” He yawned again. “A beer fridge. Big screen—

Edward drifted, his brother’s voice fading to a dim and incoherent hum. He slunk backwards as if into a dark hallway, crippled and contorted in half-conscious writhing, aware of a physical presence, of Being minus Body and the coherence of his thoughts gave way to abstraction and for a moment he felt solace, wrapped by sweet nothing—

The echo of several knocks against hard metal.

“Henry?” he called out, rubbing his eyes.

Edward sat upright, nearly bumping his head on the top bunk. On the cold floor below was a small pile of brown hairs. He stepped out of the bunk and saw that Henry was gone and in his place on the mattress was more hair.

He heard the knock again and ascended the stairs to find the door had been shut and locked from the inside at some point during his sleep. He unlocked the latch and pushed the door. Whoever was on the other side helped it open. The afternoon sun to the back of the stranger made a silhouette. The figure was hunched, but tall and stoic.

“Can I help you?” asked Edward.

“I should be asking you the same thing.” The stranger’s voice was hollow and direct, but unthreatening. “What are you doing at the Waters’ place?”

“That’s me. I mean, I’m a Waters.”

“Oh yeah?”

The stranger backed away so Edward could climb out of the shelter. He looked to be in his late fifties, over six-feet with a goatee, wearing dirty jeans, and an open blue flannel over a plain white t-shirt.

“Heard something over here,” said the man. “Figured I better check. I knew Dale wasn’t coming around for another month or so.” He stood with a thumb in each pocket and stared at Edward as if he were a foreign object. “Randy,” he said, extending his hand. “Jacobs.”

“Edward,” he responded, completing the shake. He noticed a white ATV at the edge of the driveway.

“Don’t think Dale’s mentioned you,” Randy said as he crossed his arms.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “So what brings you up?”

“Vacation, I guess.”

“Good time of year for it. Teenagers are off the lake and back home, but the weather’s still nice enough you usually don’t need a coat.”

“Yeah?”

“I’d say so.” He coughed into his sleeve as they shared a silence. “You’re a young guy. Interested in making a few bucks while you’re up?”

“Well, I would. But like I said, it’s a vacation so—I mean—

“Say no more, figured why not offer. Suppose I’d better be off and leave ya to your vacation.” He stopped, distracted by Ed’s truck. “Say, that freezer—”

“What about it?”

“That a Fridgid or Arctic or what?”

“Not sure.”

“I’m in the market. Mine’s a P.O.S. How’s she work?”

“Fine.”

Randy took notice of the extension cord. “Need a hand getting it in the house?”

“It’s not here to stay.”

“I see. Well, hey, if you change your mind about makin’ money,” he stopped and pointed through the clearing just beyond the bomb shelter. “I’m north about a quarter-mile. Or, hell, even if you just wanna have a beer and shoot the shit.”

“K.”

“Have a good one.”

“Bye.”

When the ATV was nearly out of sight, Henry appeared alongside Edward with a stick of beef jerky. He bit a chunk and chewed as they watched Randy disappear beyond the trees.

“What’s with that guy?” Henry said, a whiff of rot and jerky breath permeating the air between them. “Looks like one of those retired UFC fighters or old bikers.” Out of his peripheral, Ed could see most of Henry’s hair was gone, and he made a point to avoid discussing it.

Chapter 9

They went to the only hardware store within reasonable driving distance from the lake house. As they searched for the paint aisle, upon passing the lanes, Ed would see the squatting frog-man from the previous week, the sight of it flickering like an old silent film. It seemed to be beckoning him again, mutely calling out for help or a conversation he refused to entertain.

Ed's decaying twin followed close behind, now completely bald.

"Let's go out," said Henry. "Find a diner or something."

They reached the paint aisle, where the frog-man disappeared, and then stopped and stared at the cans and spray and various brushes. "Stop whining about food," said Edward. "Help me pick out a color."

"I don't see why the living room needs new paint anyway." He plucked a candy wrapper that was wedged in a shelf, spread it, and licked it. "It's fine the way it is." Henry laughed. "Your obsessive hatred for plain white is borderline psychotic."

"Says the guy licking an old wrapper."

When they returned, Edward moved the furniture and laid plastic sheets along the floor, then taped them to the frame along the bottom of the walls and covered the fireplace. After he finished the first coat of forest green, they each cracked open a beer and dropped their butts on plastic lawn chairs in the four-season porch.

In the morning, his mother called to ask where he'd been. He lied. She retorted by asking about Henry. Why hasn't he answered his phone? Did he leave again without telling her? She doesn't like what's going on, Edward. If something is happening to Henry, she ought to know about it.

He knew that his consistent assurance could only go so far. She didn't trust him. Henry was in the other room, he told her, and if she would calm down and wait one second, he would go and get him.

Edward did his best impression of his brother. Meanwhile, the bald, foul-smelling Henry looked on with a smirk as he sat on the countertop of the small kitchen. Edward was relieved to hear the panic in Sara's voice subside and normalcy return. He even found, for a moment, that he enjoyed being Henry. He felt he could tell her anything and she would respond with affirmation and spikes of vicarious joy. As his acting continued, he nearly shared with her his cathartic experience of having painted the inside of the lake house. But, Henry wouldn't share anything like that. Henry would continue to ask her how her days have been, he would ask about the health of her friends, or if she'd read anything inspirational recently. So, that's what he did. And when it was time to say goodbye and the warm blanket of "I love you" entered his right ear, Edward wondered if—perhaps even unconsciously—a part of Sara knew he was lying to her, and hoped he would continue to do so.

In the years following Brian's departure, Sara had attended a nearby community college and worked part-time at a salon, thriving under the schedule of bedlam and the challenge of the stacked responsibilities handed by Fate.

On her better days, the boys would come home from school and often find her dancing in the living room, eyes closed and hips swaying to Neil Young, notebooks and textbooks stacked crooked on the coffee table.

Though, a night in which the twins cooked their own meals was not uncommon. Sara was prone to locking herself in her room and grumbling incoherent obscenities, falling asleep in the

early evening to the artificial sounds of nature she played to rouse peace. The boys would do the family chores—fold laundry or scrub the bathroom. Henry was always quick to volunteer for oven duties, the only bit of the house they'd seen their father clean.

The twins were often absent on weekends during their junior high summers, attending church conferences or camping with a friend's family. The thought often struck Edward that his mother desired to join on the trips. But, because of her homework and overtime, he reasoned, it wasn't possible.

On the weekend of July 4th, Edward opted to stay back and spend time with Sara while his brother went to a retreat with their neighbors. Sara returned home from a night class that Friday and, before setting down her bag, crossed her arms and asked why Ed was still home.

"I paid for you to go to that camp place."

"I'll pay you back," he replied, his eyes to the floor.

"With what money?" Sara dropped her stuff on the dining room table and walked to the fridge. She sighed as she opened the door. "I was really looking forward to a quiet weekend."

"Sorry."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Iunno. Play video games or something."

Sara pulled a leftover rotisserie chicken from the fridge. "What about your homework?"

"It's July, Mom."

"Don't talk to me like that."

"Like what?"

"*It's July*. Like that."

She dropped the chicken on the counter.

They ate the microwaved poultry opposite one another underneath the yellow light of the small dining room. The song “Monday, Monday” echoed from a small stereo in the corner. And outside, children’s voices, muffled firecrackers, laughter.

After a long silence, she asked, “Where’s Henry?”

Edward chuckled.

“Is something funny?” she looked up, biting into the leg and wiping her mouth with a greasy napkin.

“Sorry. I thought you were joking. He’s in Alexandria.”

“Stop the bullshit. Where’s your brother?”

“Mom. He’s at a retreat. You paid for us to go. We were *just* talking about this like ten minutes ago.”

She let the chicken leg fall to her plate, cleared her throat, and slammed a fist on the table. Her eyes were foreign and a vein protruded from her temple. The music seemed to Edward to be increasing in volume. And he suddenly wished he was with Henry. An icy wad clung to his throat. Henry was in the country, thought Ed, staring at a starlit sky and sharing stories and lighting firecrackers. What prompted him to stay with her, anyway? He’d forgotten...

Sara stared.

“Why are you freaking out?” he said, breaking the silence.

“Where’s my son?”

“He is at a retreat,” Edward said, as if to a child. “You signed the permission slip last week. You said it would be good for us.”

“*Don’t* talk to me that way.” She slammed her fist again as she stood. “And do not bullshit me you little fucker.” She picked up her plate. With one downward stroke, shattered it on

the edge of the table. Chicken chunks and brown skin flung. She held a shard of ceramic glass. A crack of blood funneled in her palm. The red droplets fell to the floor. She let go of the ceramic, collected herself, and casually slid her fingers through her hair. “Where is he, Ed? Please just tell me, honey. Please just tell me where your brother is. I need him, you know? He can’t just leave like that. Not like that.”

Edward carefully pushed himself away from the table, stood from the chair, and walked out of the dining room. He heard her footsteps follow as he fled, but they stopped as he left through the front door. She said something he couldn’t make out. And he walked to a nearby park, where he curled up in a plastic tube among the cacophony of distant fireworks and party laughter. And he laid there until daybreak.

Chapter 10

The spark of inspiration to paint hadn't subsided, despite completing the living room. Ed and Henry returned to the hardware store in search of navy blue. When they reached the checkout line, a familiar voice came from behind Edward.

It was Randy, the lake house neighbor. He stood beside a woman who looked to be a few years younger than Ed. Randy asked what he planned to paint.

"Yesterday was the living room." He began thinking of ways to escape the small talk. "Today I was thinking one of the bedrooms. Haven't decided which."

Randy said how rude it was of him that he hadn't introduced Ed to his daughter, despite her being right next to them.

Her name was Dakota. Ed shook her hand.

He realized, then, as Randy started to rant about being unhappy with the color tone of his shed, that Dakota resembled the woman with the pink hat he'd seen at the gas station on the way to the lake house.

Is it—

Yes, said Henry over his shoulder.

Coincidence.

Or fate.

No such thing.

The inner dialogue was interrupted by the store clerk giving one of those "I'm clearing my throat just to get your attention" things. And Edward noticed he'd been holding up the line. He apologized and paid for his paint. When he was about to leave, Randy invited him over for

supper. Edward tried to politely decline, claiming there was painting to do, but was coaxed into it regardless.

Henry was driving a customer-use-only electric wheelchair as they ventured to the parking lot.

“Wish these things had bells,” he said, “like bikes do.”

When they reached Edward’s truck, a German Shepard in a nearby Ford was barking and snarling at the ice chest on the back. Ed backed up, put his truck in *drive*, and locked eyes with the dog.

They were in the master bedroom, naturally lit by two partially open windows. Ed rolled thick strips of wet blue across the egg white wall. Portraits and cheap paintings wrapped in plastic were stacked in the opposite corner. And Henry laid on the floor, exercising his fake burps and humming to himself.

“When was the last time you tried to call Brian?” Ed asked his brother.

There was a long pause.

“I haven’t,” he said. “You?”

“A few years ago.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

Ed tried to scratch an itch on his forehead without getting paint on himself. “It was stupid. I mean, it was a waste of time.” He glided the roller. “You’d think he would at least try to call the golden boy.”

“He did. I never answered.”

“Oh.”

Henry laughed, quietly. “His voicemails were so *sad*.”

Edward moved to one of the windows and pushed it up so it was completely open.

“You could hear the booze in his words,” Henry continued. “Practically smell it through the speaker. ‘Henry James, how the hell are ya? Miss you, my son, my son. How’s work? Any ladies in your life?’ It was like he gave off this needy energy about him—this idea that, if only he could reconnect with me, he would have his fill of validation for the year; if only Henry James would bear his heart and soul, then Brian could convince himself that his life of selfish pursuits had true purpose.”

Edward switched to the medium brush and dipped it into the blue puddle of the pan.

“You never called him back?”

“No. He doesn’t deserve forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness requires deservedness?”

“I’d like to see you try. You have more a reason to hate him than I do.”

Edward turned. “What?”

“You know what I mean. You might as well have been a piece of furniture—”

“I guess so.”

“—the carbon copy, discolored and harder to read.”

“You’ve made your point.”

“Or the holiday sweater he didn’t ask for but was forced to wear.”

“That’s enough. Seriously.”

Henry now stood behind Edward. “What about the time he took us to his work, but made you sit in the car?”

“Mom was no better when we were kids.”

“Mom was a saint compared to that douche.”

“You never saw the Mom that I saw.”

“The difference between the two of them is that mom’s insanity was leveled by pharmaceuticals and Dad’s was self-influenced, self-involved, and wrapped in negligence.”

“Alcoholism is a disease, Henry.”

“Bullshit. Human beings are addicted to the Self—to what numbs pain, helps us forget, brings us into a place of existential aggrandizement. Dad drank for the same reason he left, to get away from that which he was convinced destroyed his happiness—you and Sara.”

“Mom was psychologically abusive.”

“And Dad wasn’t? He did far more hurt in his absence than she ever did with her presence—”

A knock at the door prompted a welcomed end to their conversation.

Ed descended to the entryway and carefully peered through the curtains. Dakota stood on the porch, arms crossed, wearing the same pink hat she wore when he saw her at the gas station.

He waited a moment, collecting himself and half-hoping she would leave, an eye still through the curtain. She knocked again, quick and aggressive.

He jumped and moved to open the door.

“Are you still planning on coming to dinner tonight?” she asked.

“Hi,” he said, trying to avoid eye contact.

“Hi. Are you still planning on coming?”

“I—

“Has Dad offered you any sort of work?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you say?”

Dakota’s resilience and boldness caught Edward off-guard. And something about her, an unexpected tender energy, warmed his chest.

“I told him I was on vacation,” Ed collected himself. “Wasn’t really looking for work.”

“Is that actually true? Or are you just avoiding us because we’re strangers?”

“Excuse me?”

“Because it looks like you’re working to me,” she pointed to a stripe of paint on his forearm. “He needs a guy to give him a hand. His hip is bad and he won’t let me do anything other than care of Truman. He’s old school like that. Too much pride.”

“Truman?”

“My horse.”

A quiet breeze made its way through the porch.

“So?” said Dakota. The wind moved the hair under her hat. “Will you help him?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Bring it up tonight when you come over for dinner.”

She turned and left without a goodbye.

Edward looked down at his plate of fried chicken, corn, and biscuits. It’d been a few days since he’d had a complete meal. In part, because of the stench of his brother putting him off from any idea of food—but also due to the intimidating level of commitment a complete meal required of him. He’d been surviving the last few days on beer and nuts and microwavable pizza bites.

“This looks great,” he said to Dakota.

She shook her head and pointed to Randy.

“Appreciate it,” said Randy. “Kota would be lucky to put together a grilled cheese without burnin’ the house down. Gets that from her mother.”

Randy offered to pray. And for a while they ate in silence.

Their cabin was single-storied. There were a few bedrooms down the adjacent hall, and most of the place had hardwood flooring except for the carpeted den on the east side of the house. It reminded Edward of the first family home without Brian, a rambler in the suburbs.

Dakota spoke, “Not much of a talker, Ed?”

“No.” He stared at his chicken. “I mean, of course I talk. Just—kinda tired.” He thought of his mother and her moment of madness and the way her chicken dropped to the plate, limp and pathetic. And her protruding veins. And the drops of blood falling from the ceramic cut on her palm. And the flies in Freddy’s office. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” said Dakota. “Do you owe us something?”

“Guess not.”

The silence continued.

“Ed,” said Randy, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “What do you do?”

“For work?”

“Sure.”

“I sell batteries.” He arbitrarily moved his pile of corn around with his fork. “They’re organic, or environmentally friendly—or whatever.”

“Lotta money in that?”

“No.” Ed picked at a drumstick, and then became distracted by the sight of Henry and a stranger at the window. Henry’s dark eyes locked-in on the food. Standing behind him was a

violet skinned man in an all-black cloak, what looked like a white bandage or rag on his mouth. The slender figure slowly put its arm around Henry and nuzzled him with its forehead.

Randy mentioned something about having been a cop or detective.

Henry placed his palm on the glass and slid it around, leaving smudges. The Violet Man brought his head closer to the window and ran its fingers through Henry's hair. And there were *drips and drips and buzzes* and—

And Edward put his head in his hands when Randy abruptly began to share stories from when he was still on the force.

Ed made it a point to focus on Randy's words; to imagine the man as a young cop, to play out the coming stories in his mind. Not a lot happened in the suburbs, Randy shared. But, when it did, it wasn't the petty theft and occasional assault he'd encountered in his younger days. The suburbs, when they weren't quiet, gave way to a deeper darkness. The occasional meth bust; *speechless grandparents look on with grandchildren as Randy walks the cadaverous parents to a squad car*. Or the child killer on the rural end of town. *A large, balding, pale man with blank stare. Detectives perplexed by a wall of photographs—the taped-off scene of the kidnapping, a school portrait of the missing twelve-year-old girl, a single pink shoe in a ditch*. And, it seemed every week there was a suicide—

Randy stared off, away from the other two. Edward could have been anyone, he realized, and Randy would have approached the soap box with the same grave tone in his voice.

“Don't get me wrong,” he went on. “There's murder in the city and all that—hell, a buddy of mine who transferred some years back works in human trafficking. But there's a different darkness out here, in the burbs and farms. Not any better, not any worse. Just *different*.”

People close off when they aren't around other people, you know? Let badness take over or something. Then again, sometimes people *are* the problem. Sorry, I'm babbling."

Edward looked toward the window and saw that his brother and the Violet Man had disappeared.

There was another silence. Ed locked eyes with Dakota and recalled what she'd asked him earlier. Work would be good, he thought, it would be good for him. He couldn't say why. But, surely, it would.

"Still looking for help?" Edward asked Randy.

"Wouldn't say I need it," he replied. "But, sure, if you're willing." He stretched and yawned and picked at his teeth. "Be here at six tomorrow?"

The night at the Jacobs' ended relatively soon after.

When Edward returned to the lake house, a chill climbed his spine at the sight of a dark figure sitting on the rocking chair by the fireplace. Henry's voice came from it. It questioned Edward's intentions with Randy and Dakota and, if he meant to make friends with them.

He flicked on the living room corner lamp, which illuminated half of Henry's face. A blackened burn covered his forearm, a new addition to his brother's appearance. And his skin had reached a new level of gray.

"Did you agree to help him?" asked Henry.

"Yes."

"This can't last forever."

"I know."

Chapter 11

It was the August following the night he'd slept in the park tube. Henry was in the basement, building a model racecar track and whistling the theme of an 80s sitcom. Sara came home from work to find her school materials scattered about the living room floor. And Edward, standing a few feet from her and picking at his nails, imagined a life of sticks and bindles, harmonicas and tattered clothes, and sucking down brown-bagged drinks through bad teeth.

“What are The Elements?” said Sara. She held up her sketchpad with lists of first and last names, heights, weights, skin and hair color. “Who are all these people?”

“I made them up a long time ago,” Edward looked down at his bare feet. “It’s for when me and Henry go outside. It’s like a character list.”

“Oh.”

She glanced up and down the paper. He waited for Sara to tear the page and rip it to shreds, to break something, to swear, to turn mean— “What is it called?” she asked—or, at the very least she would tell him to go to his room.

“What is *what* called?” he said.

“Your story.”

“It’s not a story, it’s a universe.”

“I see,” she read aloud from the page. “Theo, Lee, Brutus, Maria—

“They’re space mercenaries.”

Stick figures were grouped near a semi-circle on the bottom half of the page. Written on the inside of the curve was the word, “Avali.” One figure held out an envelope and a perplexed expression. A rough sketch of a ship lay a few inches behind.

“What’s happening here?” she asked, pointing to Avali.

“You don’t care,” Edward replied.

“Of course I care.”

“Avali is another universe.” He pointed his small finger at the curve. “The mercenaries were adventuring and found it by accident—only, there’s no way to get to Avali without help from the aliens on the other side. They can only write microscopic letters to each other and send them through a wormhole.”

“Hm.”

“Me and Henry play it.”

“That’s nice.”

His mother smiled. Perhaps it was a real smile.

“The Elements,” he continued, excited. “That’s the name of the mercenaries—they dedicate the rest of their lives trying to get to Avali, but they never do. It’s impossible for them to enter the door of the universe with their technology, no matter how advanced.”

“Why not?”

“They don’t listen to the alien’s letters. The aliens tell them how, but they’re too focused on other things to pay attention. Can I have the paper, please?”

She carefully removed his drawing and handed it to him.

“Sorry I used your sketchpad. I know it’s only for your school stuff.”

She grazed his hair with her fingertips, “It’s okay.”

A moment later, Henry came into the living room wearing a frog costume and asked if Ed was ready to leave. Alexandra IX was fueled up and cleared for takeoff. But he should know that rations are slim this go-around, so excess physical activity is discouraged for the sake of

preserving energy. The time for chatter with loved ones can wait, he'd said to Sara through the mouth of the frog, Captain Theo has work to do. The universe isn't going to save itself.

An itch in his mind kept him from sleep for another night. Edward saw the alertness as an opportunity to add the second coat of blue to the master bedroom. When he was finished, he folded up the plastic sheets and brought them to the large closet at the front of the lake house. He entered and flicked the light switch, illuminating a dim bulb. As he lifted the plastic sheet to an empty shelf adjacent the closet door, an eight-by-ten portrait fell and landed face down.

He picked up the frame. A few bits of glass remained on the hardwood floor.

It was an elementary school portrait of his father. The child version of Brian had lighter hair, a thick neck, and a small dimple on his chin shared by Henry and Edward. Brian's resemblance to them was closer to a reality than Ed wanted to acknowledge.

An alarm rang on his phone, informing Edward it was ten minutes until six AM, and that it was time to head to the Jacobs.' He returned the portrait to the top shelf and, with his foot, he pushed the broken glass to the far corner of the closet.

"You're on time," said Randy at his doorway. "Surprised. Figured you'd be a little late, a young guy like you on vacation."

Randy helped Ed get the motor of the leaf blower on his back, adjusting the shoulder straps for security and comfort. He asked Edward if he need a walkthrough on how to use it. Edward lied, assuming it wouldn't be difficult to push leaves into a pile. Randy rambled on about having a broken rake as a kid. The pinecones, he'd said, always slipped through the spokes.

Avoid raking pinecones at all costs, Ed, *a raspy chuckle*, it's just not worth the effort. Randy pulled the string of the motor and slapped Edward's shoulder when it was time to begin.

He was a few dozen yards away from the house, swaying the nose of the tube back and forth, the leaves rolling ahead and dancing out of synch. Every few moments Edward would look up toward the front of the house, where Randy—apparently unaware Ed was watching—moved a wheel barrow, bringing mulch to a large pile behind the shed and quite obviously in pain.

Ed turned and found large gray nostrils an arm's length from his forehead. He hadn't noticed how close to Truman's fence he'd wandered. It was the first time he'd caught a glimpse of the horse.

He clicked off the blower motor and put a hand to Truman's broad snout.

The horse neighed and shook its head.

Dakota had coffee and thick turkey sandwiches ready on a short table in the den. Randy, caked in sweat and mulch, jumped to hug her. She pushed him away, laughing.

"Sit," Randy said to Edward. "Eat. Drink. I'm gonna shower." And he went out of sight.

"So you can't cook dinner but you can make lunch?" said Edward, unsure if it was right of him to say, wondering if perhaps he was too awkward, if she didn't find the joke funny, if it was even a joke, if—

"I do what I can," replied Dakota, sitting on a nearby couch. "Saw you met Truman."

Ed picked at the bread crust. "I did."

"He had to make the first move."

"I guess."

She pulled a magazine from under the table and leafed through it. After a few moments, she stopped and asked, “Why haven’t I seen you before now? We’ve had this place for a decade.”

“It’s my dad’s cabin, technically. Well, it might be Mom’s now. I don’t know how that worked out.”

“So?”

“So, after he split we never wanted to come up. Or, Mom never did. And when I became an adult I guess it didn’t cross my mind.”

Ed expected her to attempt to console him for his parents’ divorce, as was the custom of many when delivery of the fact would disrupt shallow conversation. Instead, she replied, “Ever stop at the overlook?”

“We barely left the yard.”

“Sad.” She tossed the magazine to the end of the couch. “Let’s go. After you’re done picking at my peace offering.”

Twigs and dried leaves cracked under their feet. The late September sun beat on their backs as they walked in silence on a thin, dirt path. Ed hadn’t seen the Violet Man since the previous night at the Jacobs,’ or Henry for that matter. His attention was drawn to every rustle and movement in the surrounding woods, a paranoia he hoped Dakota didn’t notice.

When they reached the overlook, a single grimy bench occupied a clearing before a short fence. The spot was the highest on the lake. But apart from its geographical standing, there was nothing special about it.

“Bored up here?”

“Maybe,” she laughed and picked up a handful of small rocks. “But it’s better than being in the burbs with Mom. I love her. But, it’s just better here.” She pressed her finger into the stones in her palm and pushed them around, flicking a blob of mud from her index finger. With a tone of playful mockery, she asked, “So, Ed, *who are you?*”

“I dunno if I wanna have that conversation,” he said. “I’m kinda tired.”

“*Tired?*”

Edward told her it was a bad idea for him to have followed her to the other side of the lake; that he barely had the physical energy to stand, let alone the intellectual energy to maintain a conversation.

“Fine,” Dakota said. “I’ll share.”

She was an only child. If anyone was a sibling to her it was Truman, who was heading into his nineteenth year. She and her father hunted. They argued over sports. They enjoyed the same buddy comedy movies and played the same games. *Ed noticed a shift in the tone of her voice.* But, at the end of the day, she’d said, she desired to be more like her mother, who would rather stay in and read with a glass of wine, whose best quality has always been a strong sort of silence. “Mom can do more with a look, or three or four words,” said Dakota, “than a lawyer can do with a thousand.” She often wondered if Randy could tell; if he ever felt left out or jealous, despite the amount of time they spent together. She expected so.

The sun on her face. Her eyes squinted.

“You should hear Dad talk about *science*,” she said. “He’s into that pseudo stuff, the documentaries you only hear about from a friend-of-a-friend or the guy at work no one wants to take seriously.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He’s getting weird. Maybe bored with retirement already.”

When Edward asked about her closest friends, she digressed and shared a story about Truman getting through the fence and running away the previous Halloween. She wasn’t superstitious, she assured him, but why Halloween? “Plus,” she went on. “We had a harvest moon that night. I dunno if that makes a difference. But animals are nuts during full moons.” She blew strands of hair away from her face. “Your turn, amigo. Share.”

He rejected her. And he would continue to do so for the following days while at the same time accepting her invitations for walks on other trails, and yard games with Randy. And supper and breakfast. They ate burgers and steak, egg bake and hash browns. And, on the third night, after several hours of board games and more food, he fell asleep on their couch.

On the fourth day, they returned to the overlook. Dakota sat cross-legged in the dirt, looking through the cracks in the fence. Edward zoned out at the sight of the lake while the memory of his mother holding the Avali sketch echoed in his mind. He felt naked. Exposed. And then he said, “I remember one time—watching my mom through the living room window as she chased down some scrawny kids after my brother came home with a black eye. She was wearing a faded Def Leppard shirt and holding a TV remote like a dagger. The kids were terrified.” He paused. “And Dad got his fourth DUI that night.” He noticed Dakota was now standing next to him. “It was embarrassing. It was like we were a reality show family; people who make other people glad they aren’t them. The people who become memes.” He kicked at the dirt. “I was ten. Now, I’m twenty-nine and there are stains on most of my shirts and I sell batteries for a living. My mom is still crazy and my brother Henry is—well, my brother.”

Dakota tossed the handful of rocks into the lake. “Wow.”

“What?”

“I didn’t peg you for a whiner.”

“I’m not, just—the other day you asked about childhood so there it is.”

“Did I?” She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, that’s not your childhood.”

“No?”

“No. That’s you taking a memory of a single night and, from that, wrapping up the entirety of your family life into a cynic burrito and eating it in front of a stranger. *So poetic, Ed.*” She bent and grabbed rocks. “Surprised you didn’t cry.”

Something made a splash a few yards from the overlook. It was a duck. Aimless. Squawking.

“Sorry,” said Dakota. “I mean, you’re sharing stuff and I’m making fun of you. Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He laughed. “Your illustration was too elaborate to be offensive. Besides, I grew up with a twin. I can handle it.”

“Where is he?”

“Moved away.” Edward joined her in tossing rocks.

“Where?”

“What?”

“Where did he move?”

Henry sat on a nearby rock, smirking. Gray skin hung loosely above his collar bone, flapping in the wind. And his eyes were—pale, and they were glossed. And the smirk seemed—malicious and purpose-driven and—

“Alaska,” Edward replied. “He went to Alaska for work.”

It was dark. At some point during the night he'd fallen unconscious. Or, at least, that was the feeling he'd had until a cold rush came upon him—

followed by a strong grip on each of his ankles.

And something yanked him from the mattress.

Edward's head hit the wooden floor, and he was dragged through the bedroom door and down the hall. He clawed at the floor, pounded on the walls, wondered if he'd be taken down the stairs and become paralyzed.

He was brought past the open bathroom, through a ray of moonlight. It happened too fast for Ed to get a glimpse of the captor. And then the master bedroom approached, and the moonlight came again. Time seemed to stop in the revelation. The one who'd had him by the ankles was the Violet Man; the thing he'd seen with Henry the other night at the Jacobs.' Its face was long and its eyes were narrow and it wore a rag over its mouth.

He thought of screaming, protesting, kicking his legs. But a lifelessness overtook him, perhaps a leftover haze from sleep, and made Edward apathetic. And something in him *wanted* this to be happening; a warm, twisted, almost-anger under his rib cage beckoned for the thing to do its worst to him. He closed his eyes. His arms went limp. And he let the stranger take him down the stairs.

Chapter 12

Ed wakes to a heavy, hollow knock. A *throbbing* with the consistency of a leaky faucet *drips—drips—drips* in sync with the knocks. And the electricity of hurt—

He takes a deep breath and opens his eyes. He's curled up on the floor, facing the gap under the loveseat, and shivering. Another knock. And Randy's muffled voice follows. Edward remains in the fetal position. He stares at a layer of floor dust, bits of food, and a single playing card. Subtle wafts from the nearby vent drift underneath the furniture and graze his face.

Sharpness. Drone. Sharpness —the back of his skull and right shoulder. He attempts to close his eyes and drown them out, drown it all out. And Randy knocks again. And again. And it throbs and throbs and throbs and—

It breaks.

Footsteps. Foot. Steps. A hand on his side. A voice in his ear.

Nameless hospital help shave the back of his head and stitch the wound. There are beeps, and shoes clicking against tile, and scents of disinfectants, and instructions for Ed to remain still, and to follow a small flashlight with his eyes.

In the parking ramp, Edward sits in the passenger's seat of the Jacobs' SUV and wonders why he drove two-hundred miles from home to begin with. *Heather at her computer. Freddy writes out a check. Sara throws her ashtray.*

Suddenly, his twin, gray and bald, stands on the other side of the car window with a decrepit hand pressed flat against the glass. "Edward?" Henry says. "You okay?" Ed rubs his temples with the tips of his fingers, suppressing the macabre image, ignoring the question. Henry pounds on the window—

Randy jumps into the driver's seat and shivers, and says something about winter coming early. And, dammit, why doesn't Ed have an emergency contact? Don't worry, though, they'll be home in no time. It's an hour drive doing eighty. If the situation calls for it, he could always pull the "retired cop" card to get out of a ticket. He'd done it before. But—speeding wasn't something he liked to do, he assures Edward, only if the occasion calls for it and he's sure no one is in harm's way. After all, they're in a small town just off the interstate, the only signs of life on the way to the lake would be roadkill and maybe some turkeys.

Henry hits the window with his palm. Edward twitches.

"You okay?" Randy asks.

"Fine."

Again, Henry knocks.

"It's no problem to go back," Randy says. "How's the pain?"

"The meds help. It's fine."

"Whatever you say, bud." Randy glances out Edward's window. "Got Dakota worried sick. She won't stop calling." The vehicle backs up.

"She hardly knows me."

"What?"

"You hardly know me."

"The hell does *that* mean?"

Edward hears a muffled "stop" from his brother as they exit the ramp. The most recent dose of painkillers sets in, wrapping him like a warm blanket and filling the space between his thoughts and fingers with mellow static and—

Randy clears his throat, then, "Ed..."

“*What?*”

“Try to get some sleep.”

Edward watches Henry in the side mirror as Randy pulls the vehicle onto a dead street. He calls out. Incoherent. Something is happening, something about Henry. And, he can’t—*Something* turns to numbness and the numbness turns to—

He spends the next day and a half at the Jacobs.’ Every now and then, when the pain meds wear off, Ed thinks about the chest. He’d forgotten why he brought it with him the first place.

Maybe because *bump on head*—maybe amnesia—

He considers asking Randy to check on it, to make sure it was still plugged in and running, but something like instinct pierces the numb curtain in his heart and begs him to remain quiet. It informs Edward of the stupidity of allowing Randy, an ex-cop, to root around his personal things—that the man, however trustworthy, wouldn’t understand what was happening to him. He wouldn’t understand what the ice chest means. So, he keeps the worry himself and he lets the worry fester in the back of his throat between naps and distractions and bowls of soup.

The hospital people instructed Edward stay away from overly exciting activities; no exercising, no TV, minimal sun. So, Dakota reads to him. She burns through a National Geographic magazine the afternoon of the first day, and moves onto an old Goosebumps book. It’s her childhood favorite, about a werewolf and a swamp and a little boy. Ed will forget most of the story, in part due to his condition, but in larger part due to the soft allure of Dakota’s voice. Since coming back from the hospital, her demeanor has shifted from the sassy, energetic Dakota to a motherly one. She’s almost saint-like apart from the occasional outbursts and dark jokes. It

doesn't matter what was going on with the werewolf or the little boy and if there was a swamp or not. It doesn't matter that national parks are losing funds. The ice chest doesn't matter, nor the dull pain in the back of his cranium or the fact he had an image of his mother, at home, pacing and biting her nails.

As his mind clears, he remembers that his twin—or what must have been a hallucination of him—had stood outside the SUV in the parking ramp of the hospital. And Ed wonders how he wound up in this situation to begin with; what series of events led to the injury. He occasionally asks Dakota and—“I already told you” she replies. “We just found you that way.” When she isn't around, he asks Randy, and Randy— “Just the way we found you. Curled up and cold. I looked for evidence of assault but couldn't find anything. The only break-in was *me* busting your deadbolt to come get ya.” They confer that the likeliest of scenarios is that he awoke to use the restroom and, on the way back, took a wrong turn and tumbled down the stairs. Then, disoriented, he crawled into the living room just shy of the love seat where he fell unconscious.

“I guess,” Ed says. “That makes sense.” Though, he feels, somehow, that agreement with their conjecture is a lie to himself. So, he lets the mystery of the accident embed itself among his other concerns; the Henry hallucination, Mom stuck at home, and whatever the ice chest means.

Chapter 13

The lake home isn't the same. The house no longer stirs comfort. It's as if the nostalgia, what little nostalgia Ed experienced of it, was ripped out of his memory and replaced with an empty chill, a *nothingness*.

He feels inclined to call a friend to appease an immediate sense of isolation, a compulsion he buries as he approaches the kitchen counter.

Edward sways in the thick silence, holding a paper bag of pills and clothes. There is duct tape over the busted frame from when Randy had kicked down the door. Streaks of blood have stained the floor from the bottom of the stairs to the living room. Ed pulls his bottle of pain killers from the bag and drops the rest of his things on the counter. He pops a couple pills, runs the tap water, and puts his mouth under the facet.

As if she'd become a part of his conscience, he feels Dakota's absent influence inform him to eat something with the painkillers. Her voice tells him his liver is at stake. He rips a chunk of dry bread and chews it while he paces around the house.

He wonders if something will pop out of a closet or bedroom and nab him, if he will turn the corner at the end of the hall and be tackled by a—a—something or another.

Ed heads for the stairs, but he feels the need to *stop* as he approaches the first step. The impulse is stern, as a parent who scolds a child for running out into traffic. Upstairs, he's certain, is a realm that he cannot not enter. And he spends the afternoon cleaning the floor and looking for a better way to fix the door frame.

That night he uses the sink of the first floor's half-bathroom to bathe, and then curls up on the loveseat with a small fire dying out next to him.

He realizes it's been a few days since he's heard from Sara, something akin to guilt provokes the call.

"Henry's not picking up again. Is he still with you?"

"No."

"Well, dammit. I went out to go to church this morning and my car was gone. I knew one of those foreigners got ahold of your copy of the house key. I just knew it."

"No one stole your car."

"*What?*"

"I got a loan with it," says Ed, scratching his neck. A dull pain arrives as his fingers graze his bandage. "Or, I think I did anyway."

"The hell you mean you *think* you got a loan with it?"

"Well—" *Ed stands in Patrick's gym locker room. He holds Patrick's gold chain. Someone—an old man—walks in. He returns the chain to Patrick's locker.* "I took the car to a guy and he gave me—enough." *Ed stands at the locked entrance of a junkyard at sunset, checking an address on his phone.* "I'll pay him back soon. It's fine. You hardly drive anyway."

"Ed. What the hell? Is that even legal?"

"Probably not—"

"Why didn't you talk to Kyu? I'm sure he would have given me a couple days. He's a nice guy."

"I *did* talk to him and he *did* give us a few days. Don't worry about your car. I'll get it back. What about October's rent?"

"This is why I need to talk to your brother. He would know what to do. He probably has money hidden away."

“Henry hasn’t talked to you?”

“What? Why are you saying it like that? You sound—different.”

“Henry isn’t around?”

Henry in the side view mirror at the hospital parking ramp.

“Of course he’s not around,” Sara says. “He hasn’t been for weeks. Last I talked to him, he was with you. Edward, what’s going on?”

“He’s just *gone*?”

Through the window of the kitchen, Ed sees Dakota riding Truman. She wears a tight flannel and her dark hair is heaped about her shoulders. She strokes Truman’s mane and smiles, speaking into his ear.

“Wait,” says Sara, her voice is choppy through the phone. “Henry left for work again and didn’t tell me. *Again.*”

Dakota turns her horse toward the lake house.

Ed, frantic, replies, “Guess so. You know how his job is. Gotta go, Mom. Call you later.”

Dakota is tying Truman to the porch when Ed approaches her. Light rain falls in rhythmic waves, as if breathing on his neck. Dakota asks how his head feels, and if he needs anything. He lies and tells her he feels fine, and then mentions that he has only another week and a half left before he’s expected back at work. She scratches her nose and crosses her arms, as if waiting for something. And then—

“What’s with the ice chest?”

“What?”

“You always do that. You always say ‘What?’ when I know your hearing is just fine. I asked about the giant box on the back of your truck.”

Something has its fingers pressed into his brain, it's the same something that warned him to keep Randy away from the house and to remain downstairs the previous night. It warns him that if he lifts the lid and peers inside, his world will *implode—collapse—die—destroy—*

“I didn't know what food storage was gonna be like up here,” he responds. “Brought it with just in case.”

“You brought an entire freezer *just in case?*”

“Yes.”

She sniffs. “We have to re-dress your wound.”

Chapter 14

She notices his eyes darting back and forth. And a subtle tremor in his hands. As he guides her from the front door to the bathroom at the end of the hall, Dakota makes a mental note to, if the opportunity presents itself, check the pill count in his bottle of pain killers to see if he's taking too many—or, not enough.

The bathroom is small, a half-bath. Barely room for the two to stand comfortably, let alone change the bandage on Edward's head. A brown paper bag is rolled up on the edge of the sink.

"Ed," says Dakota. "Is there a full bath upstairs?"

"Yeah." He unrolls the bag and removes a packet of gauze and tape. "Why?"

"This isn't gonna work."

He protests using the upstairs bath. He says something about the water being off up there—and some tiles are removed. Dale must have been in the middle of fixing the pipes or remodeling. It would disrupt the work to use it. She suggests asking her father about the pipes, but Ed distracts from the conversation and leads them to the kitchen. He jumps on the counter, makes a funny face toward the rocking chair in the other room, and turns his head away.

The patch of hair around his wound is sprouting new life. Dakota, hesitant, plucks at the corner of the old bandage and slowly peels it off. She drops a dab of disinfectant on a cotton swab and brushes it along the pink valley of his stitching. He shivers.

"So, your uncle. Dale."

"What about him?" asks Ed.

"What's he like?"

"I don't remember."

She removes the gauze from its box and creates a makeshift bandage with the medical tape. She notices his prescription bottle is within arm's reach.

“He’s your dad’s brother?”

“Yeah,” says Edward.

Dakota reaches for the pill bottle. “And where’s your dad?” She picks up the bottle and peeks through the orange plastic, focusing on the mound of cylindrical tablets. The bottle is mostly full—where it should be if he’s been taking the standard dose.

Edward whispers something incoherent. Dakota, as she places the bandage on his head, tries to ignore it. “Where’s your dad, Ed?” She repeats.

“Hard to say.”

She tosses the used bandage into the nearby trash can. “All set,” she pats his shoulder. “Busy tonight? Dad’s making casserole.”

Edward’s gaze is fixed on the empty rocking chair. “I think I’ll stay home.” He clears his throat. “I mean, I think I need to sleep for a while. Maybe the whole night.”

“He’s acting weird,” Dakota says to Randy as she butters a roll.

“He’s always kinda weird.” Randy dries a mason jar with a hand towel. “I like that about him. He’s, you know, interesting.” Randy fills the mason jar with milk and takes a long swig.

“No, I mean, a different kind of weird. It’s like a piece of him that was around before the accident is gone.”

“Yeah. He’s all—doped up.”

“Is he? I’m pretty sure they gave him non-drowsy stuff because of his concussion, so I don’t think it affects his mood.”

Randy sits at the table and picks up his fork. “Well, what are you trying to say?” He loads his mouth with a scoop of noodles. “You think when he fell down the stairs a couple screws came loose?”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“You’re overthinking.”

“I’m not. I have this feeling—he’s hiding something.”

“Waters are a private people. Hell, Dale only ever talks about the weather and pro wrestling. And, from what I’ve heard from people in town, the old man wasn’t exactly well liked. It’s probably genetic.” He laughs, softly, and scrunches up his sleeves. “You know what Ed said to me when I took him home from the hospital? Said ‘you hardly know me.’ Like I have no business helping—no business being, you know, a concerned neighbor.” He pushes his noodles around with the fork. “I guess, thinking about it more, he was a little odd. Kept looking out the window like it was a matter of life and death. Then he passed out.”

“What if we call Dale?”

“Slow down.” He wipes his face with a napkin. “No need to get up in his business. I’m sure he’ll be back to normal in a few days.”

“Hm.”

Randy swallows another mouthful of casserole. “Well,” he said. “Tomorrow I take him to the clinic to get the stitches out. I’ll press-in about something or another and see what I see, and we’ll go from there.”

“Dad.”

“What?”

“Don’t be weird about it.”

“Weird?”

“You get weird when you try to be sentimental.”

That night, unable to get the suspicion out of her head, Dakota opens her laptop and looks for Edward’s social media profiles to get more information, and finds that his accounts are all in private mode.

She recalls his brother’s name and enters *Henry Waters* into the search bar. A young man, identical to Ed, appears on screen. She clicks his face. A feed of images and posts. Henry fishes with a friend. He complains about a football game. He stands in the back row of a group, a photo taken at a restaurant. Abruptly, the posts have stopped at about a month prior to today’s date. The last photo, posted in late August, is of Henry taking a selfie with a fifty-something woman wearing a tight, black shirt and messy brown hair. Her name is *Sara Decker-Waters*.

Dakota follows the link to Sara’s profile and learns that Sara is Edward’s mother. Like Henry, she hasn’t made a post in weeks. Though, in general, her account shows little sign of use. There are old links to obscure websites that compare the current presidential cabinet to the Third Reich, warning its readers of the uncertainty of freedom, of the likely removal of basic human rights. The last personal post by Sara is:

only a matter of time people! Get your heads straight

The post directly below reads—

Nineteen years since Brian took his baggage and ran! Never felt better about it!

—it has twenty-three likes and several comments affirming her for her courage and strength as a single mother.

Dakota returns to the search bar and types *Brian Waters*.

She finds a man from the same area as Sara. This Brian is bald, tan, and fit. He wears a bright polo in several photographs. He smiles with straight teeth. And his profile is filled with group photos and status updates with exclamation points and words of encouragement. He has a wife, Tina, and a nineteen-year-old son, Brent.

August 21st —

Happy anniversary, sweetheart!

September 1st —

Can anyone help me out with some car troubles!?! I'd greatly appreciate it!

October 9th —

So much arguing politics on these sites. Come on guys and gals, can't we all just get along???

Dakota writes Brian—

Hey Brian. Random message, sorry. But I was wondering if you were the same Brian Waters who owns the red lake home at 148 Pinewood.

Chapter 15

They were thirteen. Brian and the twins were at a batting cage. Henry, on the inside of the fencing, wore a red helmet and swung at the neon yellow balls that shot from a tube at the end of the entrapment. Edward watched the conveyer as it recycled the balls from a gutter on the side. And Brian, quiet, sat on a nearby bench with a bouncing knee.

“You finish registering?” asked Henry as he swung.

“Yeah,” said Edward he grabbed the cage, his fingers curling through the fencing as Henry readied his stance for another pitch. “Physical science, P.E., German, and something else. Can’t remember what.”

Between the *tink!* of each hit, Ed awaited the inevitable with a pang in his heart; the knowledge that, as always, Henry had found him out and it was only a matter of time; the true reason his brother wanted to talk about their coming classes—

“Mom found it, didn’t she?” He swung, making contact.

“Yes,” Ed replied. “You’re a sharp one, you know?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Talking about next year’s classes just to *casually* bring up my report card.”

For a moment, Henry remained silent, and then, “Well?”

“She didn’t say anything.”

Henry laughed. “First time he gets all A’s and he throws the proof in the trash. What was she supposed to say? I guess...”

A man wearing a blue uniform scolded Edward for hanging on the cage. Ed backed away, apologizing. Henry rolled his eyes at the employee and swung again, missing the ball.

“Choke up, son,” said Brian from the bench. “Your swing’s too slow.”

Henry moved to where only Ed could see him and silently mocked his father's words.

Edward laughed.

Brian cracked open a newspaper.

They were parked on Sara's driveway, ready to be dropped off two hours earlier than was planned. Henry sat in the front passenger's seat of the sedan, Edward in the back. Brian told them he was going away for a while. His job was taking him—somewhere else. Henry made a comment about the proximity of Brian's new job to his wife's family, and Brian changed the subject to Henry's baseball swing, giving him a friendly pat on the knee. Edward felt a yearning to run inside, grab his trash-stained report card, and give it to Brian as a keepsake—but he decided to hate the yearning, to bury it.

"Guys," Brian glanced back at Ed, and then at Henry. "It's not anything I can control, you know?"

Henry climbed out and slammed the door behind him. The vibration caused the keys in the ignition to jingle and sway. Edward noticed that Brian had been staring out the opposite window. Something was there, on the other side—the thing that was floating at the lake home four years prior. It could only be seen by the corner of Ed's eye, as one sees more of the sun without looking directly into it. It seemed to be calling Brian, beckoning him.

Trying to distract his father from the thing, Edward said, "I was mad at first when you and Mom broke up. But I'm over it now. Want me to talk to Henry?"

Brian looked forward and sighed. "Go home, Ed."

"Dad—

Brian laughed, distressed, and rubbed his face in his hands. Then: “Please—just—get the hell out of my car.”

Their mother was passed out on the couch. Ed heard his brother’s footsteps stomp around their room at the end of the hall. When he approached, he noticed a shrill in Henry’s voice as he mumbled something incoherent. The door was cracked open. Ed slowly pushed it open.

Henry had a piece of notebook paper and a mechanical pencil and was pacing around in the dark.

Ed flipped on the light. His brother’s face was wet and puffy.

“Turn the light off and go.”

“But—

“Turn it off!” Henry threw the pencil, and sat on his twin bed. He crumpled the paper in his fist.

Ed flipped the switch and carefully crossed the room, then sat with his brother in the dark. He pulled the paper from Henry’s hand. “Avali’s closed, blocked off by the coalition. No letters for the time being.”

Henry chuckled between soft whimpers.

Ed balled up the paper and tossed it behind them. “Wendal can’t write anyway, not in English.”

“No?”

“No. Amphibian cloudstalkers have webbed hands. Makes their written language way different.”

“Cloudstalkers?”

“It’s what I’ve been calling non-human intelligent species.”

“Why?”

Edward shrugged. “Seems appropriate.”

“Can I be Captain Theo?” asked Henry. “Next time.”

“I dunno if we should keep playing like that. It’s probably a waste of time. High school soon. You know?”

“Yeah.”

“But, if we did, I would let you be Theo.”

Henry wiped his face.

Henry

[*undated entry*] So, I've been going to school part time for like seven years. In my PHIL 202 class, the professor told this story to start the course. I'll do my best not to butcher it.

There's this guy, say his name is Wilbur. Thirty-three. He comes to realize that his "glory days" of partying—and in general, doing what he wants—are at an end. This revelation doesn't hit him while he's face down at the end of a bar, it doesn't hit him with the dispersal of his half-friends into their various family lives, and it doesn't hit him by way of a sit down with his parents.

Instead, the revelation comes to Wilbur in a parking lot by way of a piece of scrapped notebook paper—a torn little triangle—that lands in his grocery bag.

He pauses as he's about to enter the car, looks around for someone who might have ripped the paper and flicked the pieces into the wind. But, the parking lot is empty. Wilbur considers the probability that a chunk of grocery list had been dropped earlier in the day, by a previous patron and, thanks to a breeze, has found a home in his bag.

When he climbs in his car, he flips on the dome light, pulls the paper from the bag, and reads:

wash time

In that moment, though the words came from a customer in search of a certain brand of detergent or anti-bacterial soap or sponges, the words echo in Wilbur's mind as though they were speaking directly to him.

Of course, Wilbur is sane and recognizes that this note's origin was as a part of a grocery list—

But, is it *still* part of a grocery list?

Or, has it now become a cosmic message meant just for him? To clean his conscience. To clean his life. The partying days—that is, those considered to be “acceptable” in his culture—they are—What? Ages eighteen to twenty-five? After that, time to grow up. And here he was, early thirties, nothing of worth attached to his name apart from an associate’s degree and a studio apartment. It’s the partying, the seeking of the cheap and immediate, costly pleasures—surely *that* has paralyzed him, Wilbur concludes. If only he can rid himself of the toxins of whiskey and cigarettes and the occasional bong hit, *then* he will be made right. *Then* he will find himself clean.

It is, indeed, wash time for Wilbur.

After all, what are the odds that this piece of paper, this piece of trash, with these exact words—words that apply to *his* life—would fall into his grocery bag? Think, also, of the implications of a grocery bag:

It is the vessel that holds the things that nourish and cleanse your body.

Ah, another layer added to solidify the certainty of the message as a personal one! Surely this note was a sign from—from—something.

“It’s time,” says Wilbur aloud. “It’s time.” He then folds the cosmic message and sticks it in his wallet where he hopes, from time to time, to gaze at the words in awe and find his fuel to move forward with his new, clean life.

That was where the story ended. A few of us in the class raised our hands, all inquiring as to Wilbur’s future. The professor, in a cliché moment in which she removed her glasses and looked around the room with an expression that implied she was about to blow our minds with her wisdom, said, “Does it matter?”

A young woman down in front, before I could have the chance to, asked “So is this one of those stories where we’re meant to have our own interpretation?”

“What do you mean when you say your ‘own interpretation?’” asked the professor.

“Suppose I wanted to believe Wilbur did improve his life...”

“Is that what life is about? Coming up with your ‘own interpretation?’”

“Well, we’re not talking about life. We’re talking about a story.”

“In this class, we mean both/and.”

“But—

“What’s your name?” the professor asked the young woman.

“Bri.”

“Where’s your manifesto?”

“Excuse me?”

“If you, Brianna, have the answers to life’s questions, the answers to the end of Wilbur’s tale, why are you not sharing them with the rest of the world?”

“Well, that’s extreme. Other people should have their interpretations too.”

“Ah,” said the professor. “So, we’re all truth bearers? It doesn’t matter if our truths contradict? Suppose this gentleman,” she points to a guy with a backwards hat, “believes the scientific method, in its practice, is not conducive to reality. And perhaps she,” the professor points to the girl next to him, “has staked her entire livelihood on the certainty of *hard evidence* in making meaning in life; in making everyday decisions. No trust in the unknown, no faith. Now, suppose the two of them are paired together, as Wilbur and his note—by cosmic chance—to make diplomatic decisions for the most powerful country in the world. Is it viable, their working together, despite their different ideas of truth?”

“Well, I’m sure they could come to an agreement.”

“They have completely opposite viewpoints. How could they *possibly* come to an agreement?”

“I just believe that if we’re nice and respectful, everything will come out fine in—

“Nice and respectful has absolutely *nothing* to do with this scenario, Brianna.”

“Bri.”

“Excuse me?”

“I prefer to be called Bri.”

“And I prefer to call you Brianna. Does that bother you?”

“You’ve made your point. I just think that the story means that we all find our own ‘wash time’ notes one way or another and how that happens for everyone is different.”

“And what if someone has a ‘wash time’ note that leads them to commit ethnic cleansing? To genocide? It’s easy, here in the fruitful west, to disagree with our neighbors and go about our business—but these things, our ideas about life, they shape our thinking. That is why religious wars are fought—the ones that last, anyway. Not out of revenge for an assassination or for land or oil. They’re fought because we don’t know what the hell we’re doing on this planet, and that widespread ignorance, that *chaos* in our equilibrium comes to a futile head. And then we stake it all—our lives, the lives of our children,” she continued. “On a random grocery note.

“Of course, it’s only futile if you believe the note *was* random, and not a cosmic message. But, that’s what we’re here for—to debate the ‘wash time’ note and what it means for Wilbur.”

[*undated entry 2*] I called Ed at four this morning. He had this raspy sigh to his voice. Must have been in one of his moods.

“Yeah?”

“Havin’ issues man.”

“Yeah?”

“Today I was at the market where all those Chinese people are,” I said. “The ones who—who knows if they’re legal, you know?”

“I think they’re from Mongolia. And I’m pretty sure they’re legal.”

“I was digging around a used movie bin when this old woman came up next to me with a little white dog—like a Pomeranian or something. She was carrying it under her arm. The thing was yipping. *Yip yip yip yip!* And, I forgot I was awake—

“What?”

“Yeah. Forgot I was awake. I started thinking I was in a dream. I got mad, the thing wouldn’t stop. It even snarled at me. Then I started to think she was gonna grab the movie I was looking for. *Then* I started *acting* like I would in a dream. I got mad—the dog wouldn’t stop. It snarled again. *Yip yip yip!*”

Ed sighed, “Dude...”

“Let me finish. So I grabbed the thing right from under the woman’s arm and wrapped my hand around its neck and started squeezing and—

“Are you high?”

“Shut up and *listen* to me. I was squeezing the life out of this little dog—just to get it to stop that nasty yip sound. Part of me on the inside, my conscience or whatever, was screaming for me to stop. But I couldn’t. I *wanted* to do it. The pup interrupted me, interrupted my day, got under my skin. I started thinking—there’s no point for it to exist. It’s small and hardly cute and even had that nasty eye leakage, where that brown gutter sort of clings to the bridge of their nose.

What did she love it for? What could this thing possibly provide to this old broad that it needed to continue living? And that *yip*. I mean, come on... Anyway, I didn't kill it. She started hitting me with her purse, so I dropped the thing and ran off.

“I was just journaling and I started to think—is this how I live my life? When I'm not confusing dreams with reality... And I thought of that Wilbur guy, from that story I told you about. Doesn't everyone, in some way, live like they're in a dream? Like their actions aren't important, like they don't matter. Why can't we figure out our lives until we're at a time when it's practically too late? Why are we so—*stubborn*?”

“I have to get up for work soon.”

“I don't wanna live that way, Ed, like everything is meaningless and—anyway, I guess maybe I just feel guilty about the dog. But, you know, I was dreaming—or thought I was—and I guess I wanted to hurt it. So, I dunno, maybe I'm not even sorry, you know?”

“Henry...”

“I'm trying to say—Ed—I'm trying to tell you—

“Really, I'm not in the mood.”

“Am I turning into Mom?”

“I'm not a doctor, Henry.”

[*undated entry 3*] today is my birthday

Chapter 16

It's a bleak morning. There's an overcast above and a chill in the wind. After eating, Randy goes in search of a science magazine. He then grabs his favorite hat, checks the fluids in his SUV, and drives to the Waters' lake home. He pulls onto the end of the driveway and nearly hits Ed who sits cross-legged in the dirt. Edward approaches the passenger's side and climbs in.

"Hey bud," says Randy.

"Hey."

"No jacket?"

"Didn't pack one." Edward pulls the seatbelt over his torso. Flecks of dark paint are revealed on his hand. "I'll be fine."

Randy backs up the SUV. A few miles separate them from their respective homes when he knocks open the glove compartment. The science magazine falls out and lands in his palm. He hands it to Ed.

"It's about dark matter and dark energy," Randy says. "Well, this one is. Figured maybe you wanted something to read on the way—better than me chatting your ear off."

"*Dark matter?*"

"I love that stuff. Such a mystery."

Edward is silent.

"It makes up so much of the universe," Randy continues. "And they hardly know a thing about it."

"They..."

"Science. Or, you know, scientists."

"I'm not supposed to read."

“That’s right, I forgot. Your—head thing.” Randy reached over and returned the magazine to the glovebox. “Interesting articles, anyway. Sometimes I wonder if dark matter is the thing separating us from other forces, or if it’s the closest thing we have to proof of them.”

“I see.”

“Like the supernatural. If dark matter is their channel or something like that. I mean, if it’s a thing and it *makes up* the universe, why not? You believe in supernatural stuff?”

“You mean God.”

Randy shrugs. “Or aliens or whatever.”

“I dunno,” says Edward. “Doesn’t really matter. Plus, aliens would be natural, if they exist. Not *supernatural*.”

Randy clears his throat. The awkwardness between he and Ed seemed to spike. He checks the speedometer, the temp gauge, the gas gauge. He looks to the gray sky and hums as he taps his fingers on the steering wheel. And then, “Well, what about the—you know—bad stuff? Like evil. Is the way people treat other people—is that *natural*?”

Edward remains silent.

“So much garbage in the world,” says Randy. “Hard to deny there’s something wrong with it. I think a lot about evil and all that.”

“I see.”

Randy notices Ed’s eyes are distracted by something outside the vehicle and he begins to consider the conversation he’d had with Dakota, how he told her he would press-in. Try to get Edward talking.

“The way I see it,” he continues after a silence. “*If* there’s something living in dark matter, and dark matter and energy make up—you know—most of the universe. And, supposing

dark matter has something to do with action. Then, it's gotta operate in a way that they make your ideas seem like good ideas, you know? I mean, if dark matter orchestrates what goes on around us, why wouldn't it have a hand in what *we do*? Gets me thinking about being young and doing dumb things—things some people don't come back from. The bad things. Things like addiction and denial and the way that people justify their actions—like, the way we use *demons* in that expression about our past might be more literal than we think. Follow me?"

"Denial is part of grief."

"Does that make it okay?"

"Maybe it's necessary."

"Just spit-ballin' about it," Randy shrugs. "Who's to say?"

"Isn't that the nature of debating this stuff? You wind up going in circles. Say one thing, mean another. Say another thing, get back to what you thought you meant about the thing neither party is really sure of. It's like back in the day when sci-fi and fantasy used to be all about Mars and Venus and other planets—it was a playground for mystery and people could put whatever idea they wanted into them, like you're doing now. But now that we know there's *nothing* out there but rocks and gasses, the magic is gone. Venus is *just gas*. The same thing will happen with dark matter. At the end of the day, living dark matter or angels and demons or whatever you're talking about, is all too abstract to entertain as a reality."

"Not if we're talking the lies they influence. Lies aren't abstract. They're rejected or suppressed truth by way of—of—imagination, and distraction, nonsense. And they come from a skewed kinda self-preservation. They gotta have their footing in rotten roots; their source being maliciousness and maliciousness being—just—wrong."

"You're losing me, Randy."

“Sorry. Just so much of it all doesn’t make sense. The things that happens to us, I mean, the things we do to other people. Genocide, drugs. Makes me wonder if there’s not more to the story, that’s all.”

“Is it hard for you to reconcile an earth that falls short of perfection?” Ed says, distressed. “Or, are you upset that *you* fall short of perfection?”

“Well, no, but—

“It wasn’t me!” Ed’s voice mockingly hysterical. “It was the demons! The dark matter!”

“Thought it might interest you. Sorry.”

“Honestly, I didn’t expect a philosophy conversation, today.” Ed again leans his head on the window. “With my concussion and all, it’s probably not a good idea.”

Randy pulls onto a state highway. “We’ll be there soon,” he says.

Dakota is in the kitchen, talking to her mother on the phone when Randy returns from the clinic. He enters through the side door, nearly knocking her over. Dakota abruptly tells her mother she loves her and ends the conversation. Randy leans against the counter and slaps a rolled-up magazine against his palm.

“How is she?”

“Fine,” she says, coldly. “Did you talk to him?”

“Yeah, sorta.” He drops the magazine in the nearest drawer. He removes his hat and coat and hangs them on a nearby rack. “Hard to say what’s going on with him when he doesn’t seem to wanna talk about anything of—importance.” Randy moves to the fridge and pulls a carton of milk. He fills his mason jar and takes a swing. “How’s your mother?”

“You already asked. She’s fine.”

“Is she?”

“Yes.”

Dakota sits at the table. Randy puts a leg on a nearby chair.

“Why are you so invested in this kid, anyway?” he asks.

She pulls her phone and swipes around.

“Dakota...” He clears his throat. “Honey.”

...

“Fine, we won’t go there.”

“I checked out the place,” she says, “while you guys were gone.”

He joins her at the table, “You broke in?”

Randy finishes his glass of milk.

“No,” she replies. “I stayed in the yard. Glanced through the windows. Couldn’t see much.” She runs her fingers through her hair and pulls a stray. She stares at it a moment and lets it drop to the floor. “Tried to look in that freezer—the one on the back of his truck.”

Randy leans backward. “And?”

“He added a lock to it.”

“Well, bears aren’t super common up here these days. But I’ve heard a few stories. Never hurts to be safe.”

“Bears?”

“What? They get into food and all that.”

She moves to the kitchen window and cracks it open while making a comment under her breath about the stuffiness of the cabin. Outside, Truman stands under a tree. He neighs and shakes his head. Dakota crosses her arms and smiles.

“Invite him over,” says Randy.

Still looking out the window, she replies, “I’ve tried that.”

“So—be persistent.”

She turns to Randy. “Why don’t you try?”

“Nah.”

“I think I intimidate him.”

Randy smirks.

“You’re not funny,” says Dakota.

“I’ll head over tomorrow morning. He’s had a long enough day—going to the clinic and me badgering him.”

Randy presses the doorbell and waits. He hears muffled movement on the other side of the door but no affirming response. He thinks of calling out to Ed, knocks instead.

Randy presses his ear against the door. Between the scattered pops of rain dropping on the porch roof above, he hears Edward mumble something about stalkers and liars. And his voice grows faint.

“Ed,” his ear still pressed against the door. “Can I come in, buddy?”

He moves to the knob. It doesn’t budge.

The sound of footsteps moving away from the front door.

Randy heads from the porch to the west of the building and attempts to glance through the kitchen window. But it’s too high to get a good view, and something like a black curtain has been placed over the other side.

A half page of notebook paper flies out and flutters by Randy's outreached hand. It lands near a weed-infested fire pit, wedging between two stones.

He plucks it.

A rough sketch of what looks like a spaceship has been scribbled out, with the words written below:

t she ~~now~~ knows th

The rest of the sketch is cut off by a tear.

—provoked by a sharp *wallop* from inside, he runs to the back of the house to try and gain entrance, stuffing the sketch in his back pocket.

The lake water slaps against the rocks at the foot of the hill. Birds chirp. Randy catches a whiff of rotten fish as he approaches a window. It's blacked out, along with the other three windows facing the lake.

He places his palms to the first window and pushes. It's stuck. He moves to the third, on the northeast side. The bottom is cracked open. He sinks his fingers into the crack and lifts. The window raises with moderate ease and Randy, despite his hip, slips into the dark house.

Alexandra IX

From the data drive of Captain Theo Woodbury—

March 27th, 2072

Had it always been this way? This air of swamp and indistinct garbage. If I had the time, if it wasn't so wet and my feet weren't trudging through this *sticky*, dark mire, I would spend more time observing, analyzing, gathering minerals. Then again, the idea that I would one day return to A9 to report the findings seems farfetched. It's day three on this planet and I'm losing hope. I also fear I'm losing grip on my psyche.

I've made a hammock out of some large vegetation and thin rope I managed to dig out of the sunken pod. It's not great, but it's comfortable enough for sleep. That is, if I can get over this smell.

Today is Lee's birthday.

If you hear this, Lee, happy fortieth. We don't share name nor blood, but you're my brother.

I'd like to keep this transmission open, to be always on record, so that my entire time down here is documented should someone find me. The battery life of the suit is of more importance.

Goodnight to—whoever.

Dawn, March 28th, 2072

I hate March. Back home it's a bipolar season. That ebb and flow of dry and dull, wet and windy. This planet seems stuck in a cyclical Midwest March temperament. Makes a man wanna stay in his hammock.

Night time isn't as dark as it is on Earth. Here, it seems, the sun never completely sets. Or, if it does, some kind of residual illumination emits from the perpetual overcast until it rises again. Last night, after I turned down power, I saw the first sign of a lifeform that wasn't squid-like or plantae. It was about fifty yards out. Possibly bipedal. Though, it was squatting, digging into the marsh. Hard to say how tall. I contemplated calling out to it—to see if it was intelligent—

—but despite my isolation, I heeded to wisdom. Today, with a fresh mind and body, I intend to seek it out.

Late Morning...

I've sat down to eat a quarter-ration. It's been three hours and I have yet to find the creature. It seems whenever I find something close to a sign, whenever a phantom blur appears just outside my direct vision, it turns out to be—well, nothing. Can't explain it. Wendal would know.

...

I miss my mother.

Haven't seen her in years. Now, in this loneliness, there's a yearning where, before, there was nothing. And that yearning is yoked with the regret that I never found a wife, never had a family of my own. Talk about a phantom blur. Sure, there's my crew and my ship—my ship, but—

My ship.

For the life of me, I can't remember her name.

...

Best to continue without harboring. I can't see the thing that I stalk, but it must be near.

Afternoon, March 29th, 2072

I'm running out of food. It was expected, of course, but upsetting nonetheless. It's especially cold in the suit today. Not sure if I should attribute that to the weather—I've now made my way to a harder surface, something akin to tundra though not as harsh—or malnutrition.

I'm still holding onto the hope that I can find that creature. Now that I'm on day five without having seen anything else like it, I'm more convinced of its importance. Something so rare, surviving these conditions without a pack, is likely to be of a special breed. Make no mistake, my excitement to meet the thing is still mixed with apprehension. After all, I'm vulnerable here in this place. This place of malevolent environments. This place absent of hope.

Early Evening

I've found it.

It's—right here—in front of me. It's of material, but the material has an obvious brittleness to it, as if made of a soft, rotten black wood. And moss has gathered about its arms and torso... This likely won't make sense to whomever is listening, but I'll do my best to explain it as I experience it—it—

Clickclickclick—hissss—

It has no mouth. Not one I can see. And yet—

Hite sa hite sa—

—yet it makes sound.

Its height varies. When first I approached, it was digging around a pile of—some material, and it seemed a few inches shorter than myself at six feet. But now an easy eight, possibly nine.

It's turned its back, as if uninterested in me, and begun to head northeast.

Dawn, March 30th, 20—

I can't recall the year.

I would replay transmission for reminder, but—the battery—

Eleven percent.

My legs are sore, and I'm officially out of rations.

I wonder if it's—this—if, following this thing, I don't know—is in vain. If I'd stayed where I first made camp, I might not have gone through sustenance so quickly. Might still be—energized.

Only a minute ago, before I first began this record, the thing stopped at a large plateau that protrudes from a drier land. The first time it's stopped moving since it continued its migration last night.

I haven't stopped my feet for fear that my knees would buckle.

And, so, I come closer to it.

It's speaking, now facing me in what appears to be defensive stance. As I approach, I feel—somehow—calmer.

As I relax, it relaxes.

I've stopped six or seven yards from it. Its black eyes are, are—

Why are you here, Theo?

I don't know. Lost maybe.

What happened to make you lost?

I was with someone and now they're—gone.

With whom?

People, I think. People that I care about. Somewhere else. Up there.

In the sky?

I think so. How do you know my name? How do you know—English?

I am more than this body.

Why?

I am here for you. To lead you. Don't you see, that's what I've been doing. [the creature points to the tip of the plateau]

But, I followed you unprovoked.

No one follows unprovoked.

I think it's time for me to leave.

And go where?

But—

Surely your people would have found you by now. It's clear—and, trust me, I can see them from here—that they have given up. They're exhausted to the point of resentment.

They resent me?

Surely at least one resents you. Simple logic would dictate it.

Who?

That's for you to surmise.

I know who you're talking about. It's the—well, I don't recall his name. But I believe he wronged me before our separation.

And now, he's up there in the sky, telling the others that their search for you is not worth the time nor effort.

The bastard... To hell with him. To hell with *them!*

Theo, listen to your tone.

You're right. I shouldn't be so upset. After all, it's likely...

Go on.

It's likely I'm the one at fault for this separation.

Hm.

Do you think it's *my* fault?

Weigh what you believe to be the facts, Theo.

There was an argument. An argument about a place. I don't remember the place. And now I'm broken off from him—from them. It might be the case that— yes—yes, when I think more on it, this whole ordeal is my own fault.

Ah...

Goodness! It's my fault!

There, there, Theo. Come closer... Yes, that's it.

By my own wrongdoing, I've—marooned *myself*.

I know that place. Come—even closer.

The place?

Your destination.

I don't remember its name.

Of course you don't. You're merely flesh. Forgetfulness is in your weak nature. Do you want me to take you there?

Where?

The place, Theo. Avali.

But, I don't know—

If you don't want to go, I will not force you. I have other things I can be doing, helping those who actually desire it.

Please don't. I just—I—

In this place, Theo, you will no longer be at fault.

No?

You will find solace.

Solace.

The one who wronged you. He will not be there. He will be far from you. Do you want solace?

Of course, yes, but how?

Just a few more steps. That's it. Do you know it? That cold. That empty. That—thing.

That empty...

Feel my embrace.

Chapter 17

The scent of paint lingers in the dark of the Waters' lake home. Randy attributes the absence of light, initially, to the newly added black curtains. But, after fumbling around for the switch—

—fresh, black coats on every wall, the floor, the ceiling, on the large, cracked-open safe in the corner. The whirl of a fan in another room, the *click, click, hiss* of its repeating oscillation. Randy's heels stick to tiles below and make a *smacking* as he steps forward.

He cracks open the door.

—something like a dark hallway, barely illuminated by the light behind him.

Randy recalls a drug bust that occurred ten years prior. Bullet proof vest. Broken lamp and the stink of rot. He led a team through the negligence—animal feces, candy wrappers, ants, crumbs. He held up a fist, stopping the train of armed men, when he heard a slow, quiet whining akin to that of a hurt child. It was revealed upon kicking in the nearest door, that the sound was the sexual assault of a young adult male on an elderly woman who'd been drugged to oblivion. When they busted down the door, the man, without moving from his position, reached for a model samurai sword on the nearest wall. Though, it was useless. It was decided he would be shot before his attempt was made. It didn't matter, Randy had thought in retrospect, that he might've been mentally sick or taken over by the drugs. Someone that far gone, to do something like that. Well, he'd known his men would fudge the report—put the assailant by the door with the sword, pants around his ankles and ready to pounce on the nearest intruder, especially if that intruder was a state policeman.

Randy stops after his first step into the dark hall.

A compulsion to call Dakota is buried.

A compulsion to move forward is adhered to.

He shuts the door, entering the black, moving slowly to keep from the *smacking*. And he recalls the pale and empty look in the assailant's eyes—a look that desired demise.

Randy feels around, using the walls on either side as guidance.

A sound down the way. Something is being dragged. Someone—Ed, is talking to himself.

He tries to remember the layout of the first floor. *You enter in front and, immediately to your left is a small kitchen, to the right is the living room where he found Ed hurt the other day. There's a hall—by the stairs. The stairs are to the right of the kitchen. From this side, the opposite side, if Randy is in the same hall, he's coming to the living room.* A faint glow, which he hadn't seen due to the light of the previous room, is now visible.

A fire place?

He listens for the crackle.

Randy pulls his phone's light and points it forward. He sees half the living room or, what used to be the living room, also painted black.

And he turns the corner.

Lit by glow of the fire, Edward sits cross-legged in his underwear, wide-eyed as if he'd heard Randy coming, with a rifle in his lap and pieces of notebook paper scattered about the black floor.

Chapter 18

She'd given Edward her grandmother's quilt. He sits, cloaked in patches of miniature horses, American flags, gray-brown jumping rabbits, and suns. And there's a softness to his voice, Dakota notices, that wasn't there before. Some kind of catharsis. A beam of sun rests just past his left ear, hitting the beige carpet of the Jacobs' living room like an oval spotlight. And his eyes remain in avoidance of hers.

"My mother used to steal from families whose kids she babysat," Ed says. He adjusts his place on the love seat and leans back against the cushion as he crosses his arms. "One day one of the dads of the family saw her and blackmailed her, manipulated her. Well, you get the picture." He cleared his throat. "She never told me. Dad did, last I saw him."

"Yeah?"

"He came to our grad ceremony and then took us out to this sports bar." He chuckles, distressed. "Congratulations on the accomplishment boys, here's some of your mother's dark past that's not my place to tell you about. I think he did it to make himself look better. Somehow in his warped head, you know, he was trying to prove to us she was damaged goods and it was okay to leave her."

Dakota cautiously makes her way to Ed and sits on the other end of the couch.

"Guess she spent a lot of time hiding," he continues. "Closets. Cupboards. In the woods out back. Then, when she was—I dunno—sixteen or seventeen, she took off for Vegas. She must have thought she was a genius." He shakes his head. "Didn't get past Missouri. A trucker recognized her from one of those missing child alerts."

"She tried to hide it for a long time—the past abuse. Then one day it just sorta came out in her actions and in small things she would say around my grandma. She hadn't even realized it

happened until it was too late. It was like—bit by bit—this underneath part of her, wouldn't let it be. It tortured her. The more she buried the truth, the more power it had on her.”

Dakota scoots closer to him.

“Ed?”

“Yeah?”

“What are you saying?”

The question rings in his head. His heart thumps. He's numb to her, about her, about Dakota. What does she care—really? She doesn't care. Right?

“Right,” says Henry, whose eyes are missing, whose body is all but a skeleton with saggy gray skin, who lays sprawled on the carpet with an arm hugging a bag of potato chips. Above him, on the recliner, sits the rag-mouthed Violet Man in a black cloak with eyes closed. “Ed buddy,” continues Henry. “Eddy, Ed, Ed. Time to drop this one. She's boring. There's nothing in her worth keeping, you know?”

“Stop,” he whispers, hoping Dakota doesn't hear.

Henry stands up and begins a series of leg stretches. The Violet Man now plays the violin, humming along to his own tune. “Honestly,” says Henry. “Not sure why the old man hasn't just offed her. Tossed her in the woods. Am I right?”

In his mind, Edward moves from the living room, taking the two phantoms with him and away from Dakota—

Brown-red rock surrounds them. They're at the shore of a river, in the bottom of a canyon. The sun is either setting or rising, Edward can't tell the difference. And there's a desert chill in the air.

“Why’d you go and do that?” asks Henry. “I was only kidding.”

“You won’t stay,” says Edward. “You won’t stay anywhere I put you. I have to take you everywhere I go. It’s killing me.” He tries to avoid looking Henry in his empty eye sockets.

The Violet Man continues playing violin. He circles the twins. His humming crawls under Edward’s chest.

“What did you think would happen? Come on.” Henry looks around. “Your imagination leaves something to be desired. Of course I won’t stay put. Look at this place. It’s like a generic Grand Canyon—half the price, half the view. You should start taking us to—somewhere with more lights, with music, somewhere to have a drink or something.” He shoves a handful of chips in his mouth and munches, he then balls up the chip bag and tosses it in the river. “Know what I was thinking?”

“I’d rather not know, Henry. I have to get back to Dakota before she takes me—takes us—to the hospital.”

“Yeah. Who needs that crap?” He slips his black tongue through purple lips and makes a loud, long fart noise. “Hospitals are for people who can’t hack it, for the needy. We’re not needy.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Were you gonna tell me what you were thinking?”

“I don’t remember. Forget I said anything.”

His self-induced vision is interrupted by Dakota—

“Maybe I shouldn’t be asking,” she says. “Sorry.”

Edward pivots to her, and replies, “Sorry, it’s fine. Sorry.” He clears his throat. “Uh. Yeah,” he continues. “It’s just—

The Violet Man is six inches from Ed’s face, scratching the violin to the point of—*shriek-shriek-shriek*—stab his ears, stab his ears, stab his heart, stab his ears—there are buzzing flies now, buzzing on the walls, buzzing on the TV, buzzing on Dakota—

Edward closes his eyes.

“It’s just difficult.”

“What is?” she asks.

“This—thing.”

“What *thing*, Edward?”

“Can we just—

“Yeah.” She gently strokes his head. He jumps. “Sorry.”

Chapter 19

Edward, in a two-way agreement which entailed the Jacobs' not forcing him to go to the hospital, agreed to stay at their house for the last few days of his suspension and to, upon his return, make an appointment with a counselor and call Dakota periodically throughout the following week.

Currently, they walk over to the Waters' cabin to grab Ed's luggage and amenities. Randy and Edward walk first, Dakota close behind.

Fifty degrees and partly cloudy.

Off in the distance, a neighbor uses what sounds like a band saw.

As they approach the house, Edward stops.

"Want one of us to go in with you?" Dakota asks.

"No."

"Too damn bad," says Randy as he charges the steps.

Edward, red in the face, asks that Dakota stay in the yard.

"But—

"Please. I don't want you to see."

"See what?"

"It's—not me in there, in the house. It's someone else. Please, please just don't come inside."

"Okay..."

"I don't want you to see."

"Fine," she says. "Yeah. I got it."

The two men enter through the porch.

Dakota leans up against Ed's truck and stares into the sky. She shudders in the cold, crossing her arms and making an audible protest of winter's certain arrival. She then yawns and turns her head where, out of the side of her vision, she notices a key at eye level, hanging from the padlock on the freezer chest behind her.

She turns, peers at the lake home to her left, and then to the barren dirt road on her right.

Birds sing. A breeze hits the back of her neck.

She puts her hand to the key and turns. The arch of the steel lock jumps out of its locked position, Dakota jumps with it and briefly laughs at herself.

The sound of the front door slams from inside the four-season porch. She pushes the lock down partway and turns from the chest as if she hadn't moved since they entered.

Edward approaches his truck, and says, "Almost forgot." He pulls the key from the lock.

"Bears," she says. "Never hurts."

"We'll only be a minute," he heads back to the lake home. "Please stay. I don't want you to see what's in there."

"You mentioned that," Dakota says under her breath.

"Not that it's terrible or whatever. It's just—I'm embarrassed."

"Yeah."

"Everything is, well, black."

"I know."

Shaken and embarrassed by her suspicions, Dakota steps away from the truck and climbs into the nearby tire swing.

Ed is sprawled on the Jacobs' floor, reading an old western novel, content—possibly for the first time since she'd met him.

There's a nagging knowledge in Dakota's throat, like a big, pulsating nerve or an ignored cyst. The e-mail she'd sent to Brian Waters the previous week; his ambiguous reply and surface concern for Edward.

"What's wrong with you?" Edward looks up from the book.

"Nothing, just tired."

Her father comes in, sweating with a hand on his hip. He asks her for help with the wheelbarrow. As they leave the house, she notices the wheelbarrow is empty and leaning upright, against the shed. Two lawn chairs are set up nearby, overlooking the east side of Truman's field and a split in a line of trees, giving a window to the Waters property. Randy drops on one of the chairs and points to the other, telling Dakota to have a seat.

For a while, they're silent.

Then, Randy starts:

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Should we call someone?"

"I thought you wanted to preserve his dignity."

"No dignity there. Not in that place." Randy crosses his arms. He then pulls a pack of cigarettes from the side pocket of the chair, plucks a stick, and lights it.

"I knew it," she says, looking at the cigarette. "I smelled it on you."

"Hard to see the point in avoiding it."

"So dramatic." She runs her fingers through her hair.

He takes a puff and lets the smoke slowly seep from his lips.

Their conversation is cut short by the sight of a white sedan pulling into the bungalow driveway, parking perpendicularly to the left of Edward's truck.

Dakota comes into the living room and pulls the book from his hands. Edward sits up and cocks an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry," Dakota says.

"For what?"

He hears the front door open and two sets of feet stepping into it. Ed stands and bends at the waist, peering around the corner and sees the hunched back of a bald man kicking off a pair of generic running shoes. The man turns. It's Brian. The missing hair and a tanned, wrinkled skin are the only differences in his appearance since their ceremonial dinner when Ed last saw him.

Randy takes a half-step in front of Brian and says, "Someone's here to see ya."

"Yeah," says Edward. "I guess so."

"Takin' care of the ole bungalow?" Brian asks as he steps toward Ed.

"Not exactly."

Brian reaches out his hand and links it with his son. He pulls him to his chest and wraps an arm around him. Edward's body is tense, awkward. Brian whispers an apology in his ear.

"Well let's go check it out," he suggests. "Haven't been there in years."

"No," says Ed. "Sorry. Just—not right now."

"What?"

Randy interrupts. Brian must have had a long drive, he says. The Jacobs were planning on having one last barbeque before the cold hits. Maybe he'd like to stay for that. Brian agrees, reluctantly.

They're around the table. Burgers. Chicken. Corn on the cob. Green beans.

Eyeless Henry sits on a stool behind Brian, directing a decrepit middle finger to the back of his father's head. The Violet Man sits in the living room, completely still and barely visible out of Ed's peripheral.

"So," sighs Randy. "Brian. Tell us—what you do."

"I'm in sales." Brian stabs a green bean with his fork. "Food service. Great job, good benefits." He crunches. "They treat me well."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Let's see," Brian takes a sip of water. "Love to golf, ski, go to high school hockey games." *A burst of excitement in his tone.* "My son. He's—well, different mother, his name is Brent. Best forward in the state for two years. Ask anyone. Sad to see him graduate, you know?"

"Of course," says Randy. "Bittersweet."

Brian locks eyes with Ed. "You should connect with him. Facebook or something. He's your little bro."

Dakota, who sits next to Ed, reaches over and grabs his hand under the table. She squeezes it tight and pets it with her thumb.

"Sure," says Ed to Brian. "One day."

"One day?" Brian repeats. "Hm."

Chapter 20

Brian and Edward walk across the clearing that separates the Jacobs' from the Waters.' Brian asks how much longer until Ed returns home. He quietly replies. The two clear their throats as they approach the house.

“You know my dad built this place with his bare hands?” says Brian. “He and—was it, his brother?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Men,” he chuckles. “Don’t make ‘em like they used to anymore.”

“Guess not.”

“Everyone’s so sensitive. So—dainty. Like a bunch of girls. If you ask me, trade their iPads for some tools.”

Dead leaves crunch under Ed’s reluctant steps until he reaches the worn wood of the porch. He pulls the lake home key, reaches the door, and unlocks the deadbolt. He pushes it open and lets Brian enter first as he flips on the living room light.

The black walls and curtains are softly illuminated by the bulb on the ceiling. Except for a standing fan, kitchen stools, and a few boxes, the first level is empty.

Brian looks around at the newly painted walls, perplexed. He laughs to himself, sighs, and pulls a stool from the kitchen counter over to the middle of the living room. “Well, what the hell is going on here? What’s with all the black?”

Edward doesn’t have words.

“This some kind of message?” Brian says as he sits. “Some kind of—artist’s statement?”

“No.”

Brian puts his face in his hands and laughs again.

“How’s your mother?” He lifts his face.

“What?”

“It was only a matter of time.”

“Matter of time...”

“Yeah.” Brian stands and motions to the dark walls. “Before you, you know, turned into her.” He puts his hands in his pockets. “Though, I must say, this might be a *new* level of crazy.”

“We’re not the same.”

“Edward, buddy. Look around you. You’re better off admitting it now, getting that prescription, and saving us all some energy.”

Soft music, heard only by Ed, plays from the staircase. Henry steps down it, looking like the Henry of old; looking like Edward. When he reaches the last step, he sits, resting his crossed arms on his knees and glaring at Brian.

“What?” says his father. “What are you looking at?” He snaps his fingers. “There’s *nothing* there.”

“When was the last time you talked to Henry?”

“Why?”

“Just wondering.”

“Called him, I dunno, five or six weeks ago on you guys’ birthday. Said he was busy, didn’t have time for me.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, no. He went off about him having anxiety and that it was worse when I call. As if all of life’s problems are one man’s fault.” He chuckles, eyes darting around the room. “Then he started—he wasn’t making sense, something about a dog and old woman at a market making him

crazy. I told him it was all in his head. He was always the sane one. Course, he never listens to me.”

“Oh.”

“Well,” Brian cracks his neck. “Suppose we’d better head to the store. Take care of this mess before Dale sees it.”

He turns to grab the knob of the front door.

Edward slams his father’s head into the busted frame. Brian reaches behind him, trying to stop it. Ed swats his hands, and slams him again, this time into the black wall. A blotch of dark paint sticks to his cheek.

Edward punches his father’s side once, twice, three times, and shoves him to the ground.

Brian, disoriented, makes another attempt to stop him.

Ed climbs atop his father’s torso and wraps his hands around his neck, pressing into his soft, brown throat with palms and thumbs.

The eyes, the veins, the cheeks bulge.

Decrepit Henry whispers into Edward’s ear, “That’s it...” He puts an arm around Ed’s shoulder. “It’s okay. Shh. It’s okay. He doesn’t matter. What has his life been? If not a complete waste of air. He needs this. You’re doing him, and the world, a favor.”

Brian’s face is red. Spit escapes his lips.

Outside the bungalow— *the muffled saw of the distant neighbor, birds singing, the hum of a boat motor, children playing*—

Dread plasters Brian’s face, as if he’s realized some fate.

A small hand grabs Ed’s wrist, and Edward makes eye contact with his younger self.

Brian throws Edward off and rolls away, jumping upright as he holds his neck in pain. He flings open the door and hustles toward his car.

Ed follows, stopping at the edge of the porch.

The white sedan starts and immediately backs up, ramming into Edward's truck and then pulling away, spinning dirt and dust and rocks. And the ice chest is cocked at an angle from the collision, half-off the tailgate.

Brian's car disappears behind the trees.

Ed moves toward the truck.

As he steps down from the porch, the freezer tips downward, landing with one end against the dirt and the other in the air. The padlock, apparently loose, falls to the ground. And the lid pops open.

Chapter 21

Having heard a loud crash, Randy and Dakota rush to the lake home and find the large chest at a forty-five-degree angle, leaning against the truck. And Edward sits against the back tire, holding a frozen, naked man's body—hugging it between his legs. It's roughly the same size as Edward in height. But the face is contorted and purple, and the torso is bloated.

“Hey,” Ed says to the Jacobs.

Randy fingers a handgun wedged in the back of his pants.

“Ed, honey,” says Dakota. “Who are you holding?”

“Holding.” He moves the head so he can see the face and then rests it against his shoulder. “The violet man.”

A bird swoops down and lands on the front of the truck.

“Kota?” says Randy.

Still, they stare on, wide-eyed at Ed and the frozen body.

“Yeah?”

He pulls his hand away from the gun and relaxes his arms. “I cheated on your mother last spring.”

“I know.”

Chapter 22

Henry had been a recluse for most of their adult lives. Their twenty-ninth birthday wasn't of any particular significance, but special enough of an event that Edward knew he could coax his brother into going out without much effort. They'd made the plan a week prior. Though, except for a late-night call from Henry the previous Friday, Edward hadn't heard from him.

It wasn't abnormal that Henry would avoid texting or calling Ed. But, it was abnormal that on the day of their planned hang-out, Henry had yet to try to get out of it.

Edward buried the thought and buzzed his brother's apartment number.

The wait.

Nothing.

buzz

The wait.

Nothing.

buzz—buzz—buzz—

He stepped outside and moved around the corner of the building, where Henry's window could be seen from the alleyway. Whether it was cracked open or not was hard to tell from the current angle. He climbed the fire escape and approached the window, hoping no one would see him from the street.

Peering inside, he noticed that the fridge was open and the kitchen counter was cluttered with miscellaneous office supplies and loose papers.

Edward pushed the window open and climbed inside.

The scent of rot penetrated his nostrils. He shut the fridge and went to the nearest light switch. The hallway to his left illuminated. His brother's old pair of purple Converse Chuck Taylors were helter-skelter near a closet.

Edward called for him but received no response, and became distracted by the sight of Henry's small dining room table and the various clutter atop it.

His brother had several stacks of playing cards, in sets of three, lain out on the table, along with a sheet of notebook paper bearing words Edward couldn't make out, and a single die. It was a year prior, on the eve of their twenty-eighth birthday. Henry wore a forest green flannel, beige denim pants, no socks, and it was clear he hadn't been showering.

Ed sat across, recognizing the similarity between the game Henry beckoned him to play and the game he'd invented when they were kids.

"Can't believe you remember this," Edward said.

"I never stopped playing."

"Really?"

Henry shrugged.

"But it has no ultimate end. It's just—pretend."

"What's your name?" Henry said as he touched pen to paper. "So I can start your story."

Edward's mind was blank. A tremble in his brother's fingers inspired him to say the first thing that came to him—

"Theo."

"*Theo?*"

"Why not?"

“Okay,” Henry rolled his eyes and scribbled on the paper. “You haven’t been original in years.”

“Who are you gonna be?”

“I’m gonna be me.”

Henry slid the die across the table. Edward rolled—*three*. Henry instructed him to roll again—*two*. Again—*five*. Henry’s eyebrow perked as he circled something on the sheet of paper.

“Well?” said Edward. “What’s my fate?”

Henry shrugged, took the die, and rolled it for himself.

Four—one—four.

After he’d written a few things down, Henry smiled, said “That was fun,” and suggested they get a beer. A tick in his eye, a bounce in his knee, an enigmatic and new excitement in his voice; red flags to a state of mind Ed had yet to see in his twin, red flags he would ignore.

When he found Henry dead in his bathtub the following year, Edward noticed the water had been slowly pouring over the side from the non-stop drip of the old faucet. And his brother’s skin had turned a dark pink—maybe, Ed thought in that moment, maybe from the electricity. And a white rag had been placed on his face, as if he were trying to hide himself from whoever discovered him. Except, being wet, it must have slid and only covered his mouth.

The possibility of calling someone had—

No one would want to take care of this. This was for him to take care of.

A sad event, truly.

Truly.

Edward imagined the coroner, the paramedics, the gurney and black bag. They wouldn't want to take care of a suicide. Suicides are so pathetic, they'd think. A waste of their time. He imagined them arriving with an eye roll. "Great," one of them would say, "another loser, another quitter." Such a nasty mess.

Plus, Ed thought, it would be unnecessary. This was something he could do himself. Why bother letting anyone else in on the nasty mess?

It was settled.

He would take care it.

As he should—family and all that.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me.”

“What the hellshit are you doing lately? You’re pissing me off the pot—

“You’re creative today.”

Kfffffft—

“Well? What do you want? Did you bring my car back?”

“Yes.”

Kfffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffft—

“Be right there.”

The door opens. Sara’s hair is greasy and in a ponytail. She wears an old, yellow bracelet Ed recognizes from his childhood and a *John Mellencamp 1987 Lonesome Jubilee* tour shirt. Her eyes bulge in confident urgency as she holds out her hand, awaiting the return of her car’s spare key.

Ed pulls the spare from his ring and drops it in her palm.

“That was rude,” says Sara. “I know we needed the money. But that was still rude. You know better. Lately—I dunno—it’s like you’re eight-years-old again.”

He makes eye contact with her.

“What?” she says, coldly.

Edward cries and leans into her.

They sit opposite one another at the dining room table. Sara blows on her mug of recently microwaved leftover coffee and, looking at her fingernails says, “Well? What’s going on?”

Edward adjusts himself in the seat.

“Henry’s not away for work,” he says.

Sara remains quiet, averting her face from her son.

“Ma,” continues Edward. “Henry killed himself.”

“I see.” Again, she blows into the mug. The steam billows and vanishes. “Well, I suppose we have some arrangements to make.”

“That’s all you’re gonna say?”

Edward imagines her tossing the hot coffee in his face and slamming the mug on the table. She wails. She pounds. She climbs atop him and claws at his face. She blames him. She blames him. She blames him.

But—

she doesn’t.

“I was there,” she says.

“What?”

“I came to his apartment on your birthday to surprise him. I never get out of the house and—and you boys are always giving me shit for it and I thought a birthday would be the right occasion. And I got there. And there he was.” She remains cold. Distant from the moment. Separate from her own words. “There he was. Right there in the water. A thing. Nothing more. Just a *thing* floating there in the water.”

“You were there first. You didn’t say anything to me? Didn’t call anyone...”

She sighs. “Well—shit, Ed—neither did you.”

“You knew it was me that day. That day I was him. You knew I was pretending.”

She sips.

He clears his throat. “We need help.”

“Help is for the birds. I’ve been there. Nothing works.”

“Well, I’m going to the hospital. If only to talk to someone. I dunno for how long.”

She shakes her head. “No. Bad idea.” Eyes shifty. “Those people are sadists.”

A lump in his throat, *the image of her with the ceramic shard and rotisserie chicken on her plate and that faded look in her eyes.*

“Henry killed himself,” says Edward.

“What’s your point?”

“Henry killed himself.”

“Stop. I know that. Stop please.”

“Mom, you can’t bury this one.”

“Like *you’d know.*” Her tone shifts to that of a teenager. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. You don’t know *anything.* You’re still a fucking kid.”

“He’s not coming back.”

“Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop—

“He left us. Like Brian left us.”

Sara stands. She moves carefully to the nearest window and closes the blinds. She picks up her chair and slams it against the wall. It bounces back, leaving a small dent in the sheetrock and knocking her shoulder. She tries again. The chair is too strong, the only thing that breaks is her voice as she heaves the chair across the dining room, missing Ed’s frozen head by a foot. She collapses to the floor with her arms frantically clawing her chest and a contorted, red face.

Saliva. Tears.

Snot. Howls.

On her knees, she slams her palms against the linoleum beneath her until they're raw and pink. Then, she curls into the fetal position and weeps and weeps, and fades into a whimper.

A few quiet moments pass. Her son joins her on the floor.

His brown hair against her chin. Her arm around him.

She recalls a time when he and his twin had tried soccer for the first time. They weren't natural talents, quite awful actually. But rather than spend time in practice, they set up a meeting, a kind of intervention with her. One of the boys guided her to the couch while the other prepared a statement on a piece of sketch paper. And she wanted to laugh, but knew that would hurt their feelings. And it took a long time for them to get to the point of the matter—they were done with soccer. They'd decided they didn't want to endure the humility of being the worst players on the team. And they were sorry. *Sorry Mom. We know you wanted this for us, but we just don't want to do it.* She couldn't understand the look on their faces, why their eyes were wide and avoiding hers, why they shook when they delivered her the news. She could care less if they wanted to play soccer—

and it had dawned on her when the son with the sketch paper folded it and put it in his pocket, that her twin boys feared her. And she wanted to cry, but she couldn't—because she knew if she were to cry, they might think she was hurt by their quitting. So, she said nothing. Paralyzed, she nodded and let out a half smile.

And the grown boy now in her arms on the hard floor, her only living boy, he's shivering—

And she thinks of the things she'd said, and the things she'd done, and there's nothing left in her—no room to continue pretending, no room for lies to herself.

And, silently—

she apologizes.

And she kisses the top of his head.

“I didn’t think you’d go with me to the hospital,” says her son. “I hired movers to take your stuff to the lake house. There’s a family up there. They know you’re coming. They’re decent.”

“Where’s your brother?”

“I had him cremated.”

“I’d like to be with him.”

“He’s at the lake.”