

FRINGES

A Thesis in Creative Writing
and Media Arts

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Master of Fine Arts

by
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FRINGES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories that I have written throughout my time as a graduate student in the University of Missouri-Kansas City Master of Fine Arts program. These pieces were picked because, and I believe that they represent the best of my work completed during my time in the program, they also represent the progression of my writing skills during my time in the program. I picked the order of stories for this collection based on chronology. The first story in the collection is the first piece I wrote for the program and the last piece in the collection is the last piece I wrote for the program. I did this because I believe that there is a clear progression in the quality of my writing and in the content displayed in the pieces.

I have titled this collection of short stories FRINGES, because I believe that each story presents characters that live on the fringes of society. Whether that be queer people, people struggling with mental illness and generational trauma, robots, widowers, single mothers, murderers, orphans, or victims of capitalism and old traditions, this short story collection offers a full range of ostracized psyches.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Fringes” by Douglass Ross Whitehead, a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	vi
The Old & The New	1
Animals	52
The Principal's Office	72
Traditions Plaza	87
Gigi	103
Josey & Her Baby	118
Train Teeth	170
VITA	186

Critical Introduction

The first short piece of fiction I ever wrote came as if out of thin air. I sat in front of my laptop, pictured a 60's era housewife and just started typing. I had no outline, no plan, I just started typing, allowing the first word to guide me to the next word and then on to the next one until I had fifteen pages of words that formed a story.

Since then, that is how I approach all my writing. I sit in front of my laptop with no plan, a scenario or character pops into my head and I let my fingers move across the keyboard until a story forms itself onto the page.

As this collection of short stories shows, most of my work is character driven. I am inspired by the works of Jonathan Franzen, Otessa Moshfegh, Lauren Groff, Emma Cline, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanya Yanagihara, all who I believe are masters of character study. I typically shy away from any genre that requires world-building but, when necessary, the world I build is a mirror of our own and I leave some things up to interpretation. I do this because I want to spend a majority of my words forming and building my characters and placing them in situations that reveal all of the corners of their psyche.

My characters are flawed and three dimensional. I do not waste words trying to get my readers to blindly root for them, I would much rather have my words spark internal debates within my readers about whether my protagonist is a good mother or a bad member of their community or a good son. I want my readers to hate my characters and then by the end feel empathy towards them. That is my approach to writing.

With the pieces of fiction that make up this short story collection I was able to collaborate with my peers and lauded professors here at UMKC through writing workshops. Through workshops, I have been able to see my work through other writer's eyes which has

allowed me think about the content of my writing in terms of plot holes, the likability and relatability of my characters, whether certain narrative twists were successful and earned, but most importantly, whether my content says something important about our world.

Not only is my writing character driven, but I always want to make sure that all of my work has a central message that makes a statement about our society at large. I chose the pieces to include in this collection because I believe they each have something to say.

With my short story that is featured in this collection, “The Old & The New,” I wanted to explore the differences between the ways in which younger gay men and older gay men are able to navigate the world. With “Animals,” I wanted to explore the ways in which powerful men are able to get away with murder (literally). With “The Principal’s Office,” I wanted to explore generational trauma and its effects on parent/child relationships. With “Traditions Plaza,” I wanted to explore the ways that tradition and capitalism have turned into a vicious cycle. With “Gigi,” I wanted to explore what it is like to grow up queer by pulling from some of my own personal experiences, however, the scenarios and characters are fictional. With “Josey & Her Baby,” I wanted to explore prejudice and motherhood and aging. And finally, with “Train Teeth,” I wanted to explore the brutishness that plagues our modern society.

As I said earlier, I arranged the pieces in this collection chronologically. When looking at the content of each story individually, I feel more pride towards the pieces I produced during the latter semesters of the program and I am now able to see that the pieces I produced during the early semesters of the program show some novice; specifically, the first piece in this collection, “The Old & The New.” I wrote this piece during my first semester of the program for a fiction workshop course centered around “the novel.” It was not a

requirement that we produce a novel throughout the semester, however, it was encouraged, and because I was bright eyed and bushy tailed, I decided that I would follow the suggested route of the course.

While producing material for the course, I made sure that each of my submissions would be narratively connected and that by the end, I would have a fifty-page novella. Reading through the piece now, almost three years later, I wish I could go back in time and tell myself to slow down and to not take the writing process so seriously. I was trying so hard to write a serious piece about being gay in New York and felt the need to prove myself amongst my talented peers. I'm not disappointed in the writing, which is why I have included the piece in the collection. I am more so disappointed in the fact that I was trying too hard and not allowing myself to have fun and I think the content reflects the anxiety I felt while producing it.

I now know that the range of style, content and form of my peers' work varies and that no matter how novice I think my work is, there will be fellow writers who think my work is valid. This allowed the sort of competitiveness that I felt at the beginning of the program to alleviate as I attended more and more workshops. These factors allowed me to have fun while writing pieces for submission.

The piece I am the proudest of in this collection is "Josey & Her Baby." This piece is heavily inspired by Kazuo Ishiguro's "Klara and the Sun." Ishiguro's novel is about a robot named Klara who was designed to be a companion to a little girl. It's about what it means to be human. Ishiguro's world building is spare; he only tells us what we need to know and manages to not bog the narrative down with too many science fiction tropes. After I finished that novel, I had the idea for a robot who was created to give birth for women that are not

able to get pregnant on their own. I wanted the piece to be about connection and what it means to be human. The pride I feel towards the piece comes from the spare world building, the alternating perspectives, the science fiction elements of it, the literary elements of it and the core message of the piece.

The version of “Josey & Her Baby” that appears in this collection is not its final form. I would like to eventually have this piece be novel length with a different ending and more elevated dialogue. I also think there could be more world building integrated into the narrative. In “Klara and the Sun,” there is always some sort of futurist element in the periphery of the narrative. For example, the characters will be discussing a secondary character and mention how they were a part of a factory worker revolution that Ishiguro never fully fleshes out, but it is meant to signal to the reader that the narrative takes place in the near future. I admire how Ishiguro manages to keep these world building elements in the periphery of the narrative rather than bogging the narrative down with concepts that readers are not familiar with, and I want to adopt that style and use it in “Josey & Her Baby.”

Overall, I am proud of all the content I was able to produce during my time in this program that gave me so much. It gave me the confidence to sit in front of my laptop and write. It gave me the chance to read work by up-and-coming writers like me. It gave me the chance to have my work read and critiqued by published professors who know how to get a story accepted and a novel published. However, the thing that I’m the most grateful that this program gave me, are the pieces that comprise this collection as they are all collaborations with each student and professor that make up this incredible program.

The Old & The New

When I find myself in a new situation, I sometimes imagine how a caricature artist would sketch the moment. My oversized cartoon head is set atop a neck and a body that cannot bear the weight, so I stay stock still or else I'll get crushed. My teeth buck out over my bottom lip, my ears the size of bird wings, ready for flight, eyes glazed over. I often feel like a cartoon being controlled by a sadistic, crafty artist, but in actuality, I am that sadistic, crafty artist, it just feels a whole lot better to blame someone else for the situations you put yourself in.

The current situation I find myself in is this: I'm sitting at a hotel bar with a death grip on a vodka water with lime juice, awaiting a stranger. My hands are slick with a combination of nervous sweat and condensation from the twenty-dollar drink. I wipe them back and forth on the red velvet barstool next to me and hope that no one comes to take a seat on my makeshift napkin. The lights hanging above make me feel like a chicken in a rotisserie, and I begin to worry that I'll sweat through my clothes. I feel like the only way I can feel comfortable again is if I strip naked, puncture the top layer of skin and shed the rest. I use the constant, dull murmur from the diners and drinkers that sit in booths behind me as a source of comfort. I listen in as they carry on about the mundanity and madness of their day to day.

I can make out a few sentences from the couple behind me. It started with their daughter's soccer practice and now it has become a conversation on pegging. Apparently, the woman's best friend tried it with her boyfriend, and it was "stimulating for both him *and* her," and now, every time they have sex, "he begs for it."

I then tap into a conversation with a trio behind me. “Listen, we’re both interested, and we really think this will save our marriage... we’re also willing to give you financial compensation, if that’s something you’re looking for.” Soft jazz begins to play, concealing some of the more discreet conversations several tables over and serenading us all so that not even for a moment are we alone with our thoughts.

I tug at the collar of my shirt so that the sweat running down my neck doesn’t stain it. Over the past few days, a cold front has been blowing through New York so for tonight, I picked black jeans, a baby blue button up and a maroon sweater on top with the collar from my button up strategically placed so that it poked out from the neck of the sweater. I saw it in GQ magazine and figured it would be appropriate, but now I feel like my caricature artist would draw me as a jester with a comically large bow tie and a dunce hat that came to a sharp point. I had also slicked back my thick, dark hair with gel, and I felt as though my forehead was giving off a glare bright enough to light the stage of a low budget play.

Now I pictured my caricature’s hair like cake fondant with a glossy, plastic finish. I felt like a spectacle, yet no one was paying attention to me. I kept my back straight and head down, avoiding eye contact and disappearing into myself.

Then, all at once, the focus of the room shifted to the entrance of the bar as a herd of flashing cameras waltzed through the lobby and out of the front door of the hotel. It happened fast enough that no one was able to make out who was being photographed. The topic of the room collectively switched to the identity of the mysterious celebrity.

“Who the hell was that?” I asked the bartender.

“I have no clue, but they seemed like a pretty big deal.” The bartender pretended to be aloof, but I had seen him whip out his phone to take pictures.

Once things had settled down and the soft jazz was the only sound ringing in my ears, I reached over the bar and grabbed a stack of napkins so I could blot my forehead. As beads of salted sweat formed, I could only imagine how my caricature artist would portray my shaking hands and incessant need to scan the bar. I had shown up an hour earlier than planned. I knew that I would need to be drunk enough to say yes, but sober enough to get the job done. I counted myself down from ten as I chugged the watered-down drink and slammed it back on the glossed wood bar.

“Another vodka with water?” The bartender shot finger guns at me.

“Yessir! And lime juice.” I shot the finger guns back and held them up for too long, winking. As I sat awaiting my next drink, I realized that my presence here was not under contractual obligation and I could leave at any moment. It wouldn’t be the first time I removed myself from such a situation. There was that time when I was on a business trip in Seattle when I opened the door of a cab and tugged and rolled without paying my fare, all to avoid the cab driver’s advances that I had welcomed. Then there was the other time on that cruise with the room service guy, and I threatened to call his manager, only because I had talked a big game and had no intention of following through.

As the bartender put my second drink down in front of me and I began to suck on the straw like it was my mother’s milk, there was a voice in the back of my head telling me that I was where I was supposed to be and that I shouldn’t flee. I checked my watch and saw that I had another thirty minutes to down as many drinks as possible. My tab was going to be high, but I often found that alcohol is a worthy expense when belly flopping into the unknown.

I began to feel a familiar ache in the center of my forehead and started playing tug of war with the box of cigarettes nestled in the pocket of my jeans, nearly crushing them in the

process. I motioned to the bartender and mouthed *I'll be right back*, as if we had any kind of rapport. As I stood, I realized I was drunker than I predicted. Smiling to myself, I headed for the lobby door.

Because this hotel had been around since World War two, I understood the necessity to maintain the novelty of a landmark, no matter how tired my eyes were from taking in the gold dusted ornate trim, red velvet accents and intricate rugs with dark flowers and twisted, thorny vines. I wanted a space that matched the occasion. I wanted the tacky, romantic melodramatics and I felt accomplished in my aesthetic choices. After tonight, this would be one of those places that when I pass by on my way to get drinks with friends or dinner with a colleague, I will look at the hotel and remember how I stumbled through the grandiose lobby feeling as though I was fulfilling some sort of destiny.

Going through the revolving door, I patted my jeans to feel for a lighter and came up short. I looked around for a lifeline and of course, amid the bustle of any typical New York City block, I spotted a boy in a crisp white busser uniform polluting the winter air with smoke. The apron that was tied around his thick waist had the name of the ancient hotel stitched into it in a gold, swirling font.

“Hey, can I get a light?” I asked, motioning my cigarette towards him.

“Of course, man.” He handed me the lighter. I put the stick between my lips, lighting it and inhaling the sweet, bitter smoke. The first puff heightened my drunken state, and I began to wonder if I was overdoing it. As the minute hand on my watch continued to move, I wondered if any amount of alcohol would be able to prepare me for what was coming.

“Is the food here any good?” I asked the boy, who looked too young to be working at such a high-end hotel, let alone smoking what smelled like marijuana.

“Not unless you like food poisoning,” he chuckled.

“So, who the hell was that earlier being followed by the paparazzi?” I handed the white lighter back to him.

“My friend said it was... uh... Marilyn... Marilyn Monroe!” I gave him a confused look and decided to let it go. Marilyn Monroe had been dead for decades.

“Hey thanks for the lighter, may I ask, how old are you?”

“Who’s asking? Pig!” The boy yelled, dropping his cigarette, and stamping it out with his foot before disappearing back into the hotel. It was like I had been smacked in the face, but I realized that in my drunken state I needed to be careful whose personal space I invaded. As I began to stumble back into the hotel something on the darkened sidewalk caught my eye. It was stepped on and ripped in several places, but I could make out a picture of the Statue of Liberty and above it the words, “RENT YOUR TOUR NOW!!! CALL (800) 593-8790!!!” The cigarette slipped out of my fingers onto the pamphlet, and I quickly stubbed the embers out with the toe of my black leather shoes.

It was several years ago on a particularly dark day, that I found myself on a Statue of Liberty boat tour with a woman. I met her through a mutual friend, and this was our third date, so we decided it was time to see each other in the daylight. However, it was the middle of October leaving the sky overcast, and daylight scarce. The breeze coming off the bay was biting so Candace hung off my arm, sharing her body heat. She was in her mid-twenties, making the age gap between us around a decade. She smelled of lavender and old books and always seemed to be reapplying a lip salve that made her kiss taste like cherry limeade. All of

these qualities, while endearing, made me feel all the more ancient compared to her youthful disposition.

We were in line, awaiting our tour time. She was new to the city and wanted to see France's gift to us. Part of me couldn't help but be embarrassed by this blatant act of tourism.

"You know it's nothing special right?" I chuckled and received a playful punch in the arm.

"You're such a cynic, red flag."

"How many red flags are there now?" Over the course of our three dates and two nights that she stayed over at my apartment, she had begun to tally up my red flags. Most of them were petty observations, but some of them were things that my therapist had told me to work on, which made me resent both of them.

"Well, you tip less than twenty percent so that's one."

"That was one time!"

"And your father has called you twice this morning and you've ignored him both times, that's another one." This is one that my therapist would have been equally mad about.

"I'm with *you*! I'm not going to answer the phone, that's rude."

"Fine, we won't count that one."

"So, I'm at two red flags? How many do I get before you kick me to the curb?"

"Well, it depends on the severity, but by the fifth, something's gotta give. Just know, you're on thin ice." She winked up at me and I pecked her forehead. I could think of about ten more red flags that she hadn't scoped out yet. It would be my mission to hide them and maybe in doing so they would vanish completely.

After about thirty minutes of waiting, with the smell of soft pretzels and processed cheese hanging under my nose, we were herded onto the boat, Candace and I found two open seats in the back. There were enough tourists to fill every seat in the boat. It was mostly couples with one or two kids, the moods of which ranged from screaming bloody murder, laughing hysterically and glazed-over eyes as if their parents had slipped something in their morning OJ. As the boat took off, I zoned out staring at the point where the sky grazed the water. I caught the unadulterated joy on Candace's face as she scanned the bay for the statue and wondered when I had stopped finding the joy in mundane activities. Whenever I see joy up close, I envy it. I often catch myself experiencing something akin to joy, but after the fact, I come to the conclusion that I was just acting in a way that I thought I should be acting and passed it off as genuine joy. *Red flag.*

"Hey, are you enjoying this?" Candace asked.

"I'm enjoying being with you." I tucked a few hairs that had blown in front of her eyes, behind her ear.

"How was therapy today?" she asked. I knew that I should never have told Candace that I went to therapy, but most girls find it attractive when men can talk about their feelings.

"It was great... normal," I lied for the sake of not having to relive the session that had ended not even a full hour ago when I had fired my therapist.

I had been speaking about my lack of motivation to do even the most menial tasks and how I often find myself envious of my coworkers, mostly female, that constantly talk about their perfect marriages, as if they had won something.

"Now Michael, have you ever thought about exploring your sexuality... with other men?" Dr. Porter had asked, smugly. He might as well have smacked me in the face.

“How did you come to the conclusion?” I had asked, standing up ready to storm out.

“You said that you feel a lot of jealousy towards your female coworkers, and I can’t help, but wonder why...” I’ll never forget the look on his face when he had said it either, like he had just discovered the cure for cancer. I had stormed out and canceled my upcoming appointments.

As the dock became invisible behind us, we saw the statue through the dense fog. I was able to get a few pictures of Candace posing at the bow of the boat. The tour guide began yelling through a megaphone the extensive history behind the origins of the statue, but he was being drowned out by screams of jubilation from children and adults who acted like they had never seen a hunk of copper before. *Red flag...*

Once Candace approved the pictures, we took our seats again to escape the crowd and my phone began to ring.

Candace looked over my shoulder at my phone where DAD was splashed across the top of the screen. “Seriously, you can answer it! I *want* you to answer, please,” she said.

I let out a sigh and with a shaky hand, I took the call. “Hey Dad, sorry, if it’s loud, I’m on a boat and the waves are vicious today.” At first, I thought the phone was going in and out of service, but I soon realized that it was just my father sighing heavily.

“Your mother has died, son.” At first, I thought that I had heard wrong, but when he repeated it a second time, my vision became blurry, and I began to feel suffocated. The large group of people that swarmed the boat began to look feral by nature, as if they were all there to eat me alive. I wanted to jump into the water and swim to shore rather than be surrounded by so many bright eyed, bushy tailed midwestern tourists as I was being delivered news like a bullet to the head.

Their exaggerated smiles and extreme whooping and high-pitched squeals of laughter made me inconsolably angry and irrationally frightened. I felt the first hot tear trail down my bone chilled face, the anger dissipated and turned into utter panic, which soon turned into a crushing embarrassment as I realized that I was a thirty-year-old man on a tourist boat, crying. I hung up the phone and sat back down next to Candace.

“Oh baby, what’s happened?” she asked. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I put my head between my thighs to try not to pass out. “My mother is dead.” I began to taste copper in my mouth and realized I had bitten my tongue.

“Michael, are you serious?”

“Why would I lie about that, Candace?” I snapped. I found that I had very little control over what words came out of my mouth. “Sorry, I think I’m in shock.”

“Of course, you are, don’t apologize, we’ll be back soon.” She laid my head on her shoulder and I let her. At the time, she could have moved any of my limbs and they would have stuck there, as if I was Gumby.

The journey back to land was grueling. I could feel Candace tense up next to me periodically, as if she was about to say something and decided not to. Once we were docked the tension between us was thick and growing like a cyst waiting to be drained. I walked her home that day, her hand rubbing my back, me wiping tears on the sleeve of my coat. She did everything I wanted her to do in that situation, but I knew as we walked the polluted, autumn air that this date would be our last and I never saw her again.

I made my way back to the barstool, checked my watch, and found that only ten minutes had passed since the last time I checked. With each subtle movement of the minute

hand on my watch my stomach twisted and knotted, but with each sip of my drink I could feel it loosen. I wish I had something stronger than liquor to flush my nerves. Something to make me feel so numb that all I had to do was go through the motions. I recalled a particularly heinous night during my college years when I had experienced just that.

I had been trying to become a member of whatever fraternity would take me. It was a Friday night, which meant consume as much liquor as possible and hopefully that would get you laid. That night, as I stood in the dark, mildewed basement of one of the fraternity houses on campus, the president of the house was going around handing each of us a little white pill. At first, I had thought it was ecstasy or acid, but another brother quickly reassured me that if I put this pill in a girl's drink without her knowing, then I would get laid, guaranteed.

The whole house had become abuzz with the news of the date rape drug. Once everyone in the basement had a pill in their hands, they began whopping and stomping like feral animals awaiting the hunt. The look of pure joy in their faces as the promise of raping an unconscious body lay ahead of them, confused, and tormented me. In a room full of the worst display of humanity, *I* felt like the odd one out. What kept me from having the same animalistic reaction to that devilish game is beyond my comprehension, but as I stood in the corner of the dark room that smelled of beer and testosterone, stunned by the haunting sneers and snorts, I had swallowed the pill. When I woke up in the hospital the next morning, I told the police that the last thing I remember was taking the pill. I gave a cop the information on which fraternity had the drug, but it had been too late.

After I finished my third drink of the night, my bladder started begging for attention and once again, I motioned to the bartender to tell him I would be back. Standing up, I could

tell that the third drink had done its job and I was having to make a concerted effort not to trip over my own feet. I stayed close to the edge of the bar and began to scan the area for the men's bathroom. There was an intricate gold panel that marked a separation between a hallway of rooms and the bar. I peeked past the panel and looked to my left then to my right and all I saw was a disorienting row of doors with ascending numbers screwed into the wall. I made a split decision and headed to my left. 124... 125... 126, behind every door lies a private humanity, and soon enough I would be one of those numbers. Hotels had always fascinated me. It's a community of strangers partaking in activities ranging from discreet sex, to shooting drugs to kids being tucked into bed and falling asleep to cartoons. Every room had a psyche and secrets that morphed with each new occupant and with every new night that passed.

I finally found a small corridor that split off from the dizzying hallway. It had two vending machines and two bathrooms. I would have preferred a private bathroom so I could wait until the precise moment to walk into the bar as if I hadn't arrived an hour early, but after seeing that all of the stalls were empty, I decided that I would set up camp in the last stall until the clock struck 10:00 PM. Currently it is 9:48 PM and I figured being between 5-10 minutes late would be appropriate.

Not even a minute into my waiting, I hear the door open, and my heart skips a beat. The man locks himself into the first stall. I hear tapping, on what I assume is the metal toilet paper dispenser and then a long sniff. I contemplate asking if the man is willing to share what he had just snorted, but instead he starts to speak.

"Hello," he says. At first, I think he's talking to me and just before I'm about to say it back, he continues to talk, and I realize that he's on a call. "Yeah, I'm here... Yes, I have it..."

I won't... okay damn... alright bye." I then hear the door open and shut and I'm alone again. I have an idea. I walk on tiptoe out of my stall and into the first one. I grab my driver's license out of my wallet and begin to arrange what's left of the white powder that the mystery man had left behind into a thin, short line. I hadn't snorted anything since college, but it's just like riding a bike, I suppose. I plug one nostril, put my face to the cold metal and clean up the powder. I couldn't feel the loose powder enter my nasal cavity, but after whipping my head back up, I could taste the chemicals that burned and dripped down the back of my throat.

All night I had been acting out of character and this just put the icing on the cake. I didn't know what I was supposed to feel, but I instantly began to feel the placebo effect one feels the second after taking a drug they've never done before. I check my watch, it's now 9:59 PM.

I try walking in a straight line back to the bar but the vines in the pattern of the carpet begin to pulse and knot, causing me to stumble over my feet. Before I know it, I'm back at the bar and the familiar humming of conversation and soft jazz slightly sobers me up. I sit back down in my original seat and get the bartender's attention.

"Can I close out my tab and start a new one once my friend arrives? We'll be sitting in that booth." I point to the only empty booth in the place. "Also, if you could act like we haven't met, that would be great."

"Of course, sir, that won't be a problem," says the bartender. I know he has seen his fair share of downtrodden individuals that have to get roaring drunk before they're able to meet up with new sexual partners. I'm not under any illusion that he hasn't spotted my

intentions from a mile away, but it doesn't make it any less humiliating. I take a seat at the two-person booth and once again, find myself waiting.

This had all started about four months ago. My then wife, now ex-wife and I were at a restaurant opening in Hell's Kitchen. She was then, and still is, a food critic for The New York Times and she was there for work. I was there for food and a second opinion. I could sense something was off since I had gotten home from work that day. I knew that the opportunity to write about this new restaurant that the city was abuzz about, was a huge deal for her, so I decided that it was best if I didn't press. Because she was an up-and-coming food critic for the Times, we were treated like normal patrons and because they were packed to the gills, I could tell that Marie was taking mental note to not be too harsh, for she had been a waitress in her first years in the city and knew of the struggle firsthand.

We were breaking bread and drinking chianti, when I decided to fill the dead air between us, "I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti."

"Ew, don't say that you know I hate that movie," she scoffed. She hadn't been able to make eye contact with me all night and I continued to write it off as nerves.

"Do you think they serve liver and fava beans here?" I continued to try to lighten the mood with minimal success.

"I fucking hope not," she responded. I could see a little bit of a smile from. "Is that what you're ordering if they do?"

"Hell yeah, that's my favorite meal, don't you know me at all?" I asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, I know that you're a psycho just like Hannibal the Cannibal." Now she looked me dead in the eye. Her hair had been snatched back into a high ponytail and her black

eyeliner was winged out, pointing to the ceiling, giving her eyes a slight lift, which made her stare all the more sinister.

“What’s the matter, babe?” I asked.

“God, it’s just like you to ruin my first big article.”

“What are you talking about, babe?”

She leaned in and lowered her voice to a whisper that I almost couldn’t make out.

“I’m talking about all the gay porn I found on your computer, that’s what I’m fucking talking about,” she spat. My first instinct was to laugh and lie to her face. She was smart for bringing this up in public and during a big night for her. She knew that I would do anything I could to defuse the bomb and that started with me admitting everything.

I sighed heavily and tried to push the shame aside. “I was going to talk to you, I really was, but there’s never a good time to admit that your marriage is over,” I said. I could see tears breach the surface of her dark eyes that I had once loved, but now they just represented all of the secrets that I harbored.

“So, how long have you known this about yourself?” I appreciated the approach she was taking, but it hurt even more, because I didn’t deserve her sympathy.

“I mean, I guess I’ve somewhat always known,” I said. It was hard to articulate what I was trying to express. “But I guess I wrote it off as something else for so long. I thought I was just an unhappy person. I had never fathomed that there would be a solution.”

“And the solution is what? Dick?” She was starting to get mad and all I knew what to do was take it.

“More or less,” I responded. I tried my hardest to not make this come off in a jokey way, but I found it rather tedious.

“Jesus, so when exactly did you make this self-discovery? Have you been cheating on me?”

I leaned in to gain maximum reliability, “No Marie, not ever, not once, I can promise you that from the bottom of my heart, I would never.” This was the truth. “And there really wasn’t a light bulb moment, I just started to see clearly.”

“It was your therapist, wasn’t it? Did he help you come to this conclusion?”

“More or less.”

“God, stop saying that, it’s either yes or no.”

“Yes, then.”

“I don’t even want to know all of the things you’ve said about me to him, and I hope to God I never have to find out,” she said.

“I have never said a bad word about you, Marie. I know this is hard for you, but...”

“Don’t even say what I think you’re about to say, please, don’t pity yourself, you’ve had plenty of opportunities for that.” That stung.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. I could tell that she was ready to kick the conversation into high gear, but then something behind her eyes changed and she leaned in.

“You know what, let’s just eat our fucking food, so I can write the shit out of this review and become hot shit while you wallow away in your self-pity in a pile of naked men.”

I couldn’t help but laugh and soon enough, she was laughing with me. We ordered our food and ate our last meal together as a married couple in silence.

Weeks later, I was walking the seven blocks home from work, when I passed by a familiar bodega that I knew sold The New York Times. Marie's article was set to come out that day, so I bought two copies from the mute man behind the counter.

Marie had filed for divorce the day after the dinner. What followed had been rather amicable, and Marie even suggested that we go forward without lawyers, which when I thought too much about, I would get overcome with the grace she was showing that I knew I didn't deserve. She would keep the apartment, the furniture, the cat, and I... would start over from scratch.

When I arrived at my temporary studio apartment that I had rented from a friend the day after the last supper, I searched for the article under the food critic's section. At first, I couldn't find it and I began to worry that the Times had pulled it and if so, then it would ultimately be my fault, but as I flipped through the remainder of the newspaper, a large, bolded headline under the Modern Love column caught my eye, "I Found Out My Husband's Gay on the Biggest Night of My Career," it read.

Part Two

I held the pink apparatus under the sink and filled the rubber ball about three quarters of the way full by way of the thin, ribbed spigot attached to the ball like a turkey baster. This was the worst part of it all, but there was a time in college in which I still get flashbacks and realize that it will, in fact, be well worth the awkward uncomfortability of squatting over the toilet, awaiting a clear flow of water.

I glance in my toothpaste speckled mirror and gnash my teeth, looking for removable impurities. I swish with Listerine mouthwash and cover my body in a cloud of Calvin Klein One. My familiar routine is complete. I stare at my naked body in the mirror, but it only

captures me from the waist up. Stretch marks, some translucent, some a stark red, some a deep purple snake their way up my body from the confines of the mirror. My skin is pale, covered in places by patchy dark, thick hair. My nipples sag, but when I puff my chest, they make their way back to their original location.

The bruise under my left eye has turned from a deep red purple to a fading yellow green. I applied some concealer with my middle finger to the fading signifier of what I now call “The Incident” and licked my lips. I sigh at what I see but know that with each illicit hookup and tender stroke of a man’s hand, I gain some respect for my temple. The coping mechanism that I adopted in college has become somewhat of a game at this point that ends with a bath of confidence that lasts about a night and a half day.

Tonight’s escapade is a white-collar newbie with an ex-wife. He even booked a hotel for the night, which I find a little disheartening. Will I feel obligated to stay the night? I have other plans later tonight with some friends that are new to the city, and I’ve promised to show them around. However, I wasn’t going to say no to the hotel, but I was willing to say hi, fuck yeah, and bye before he could even get his pants back on.

When hooking up with someone who has never been with the same sex, there is always some emotional risk that you must take into consideration. I knew he wasn’t a newbie to sex itself, but he was new to throwing normality to the wind to fill a lifelong gap in the grimy depths of his psyche. I knew that my face would be imprinted in the folds of his mind for eternity. That’s why I would request dim lighting so that the image will at least be blurry.

I lived alone in a small loft in Harlem, so I typically hosted my escapades. But I find that sexually inexperienced men feel more comfortable when they have control over the location. They need a foolproof escape plan and a conversation starter about their home bar

or where the bathroom is located. Before the incident, I didn't mind giving over control to strangers, but tonight is the first time since The Incident that I'm pursuing sex, an activity that always brought great comfort and clarity. I would be treading lightly, not letting my guard down and always anticipating the next three moves.

The night It happened I had taken the train to Hell's Kitchen to meet a friend for drinks. Women in furs that almost touched the polluted sidewalk, men in custom suits and crocodile skin loafers occupied the sidewalk. It was times like these that I wish I had the ability to read minds. Who were these wealthy socialites that dripped with old-school-fashioned sensibilities as if they had lost track of decades of time? Who were the sex workers and who were the gold diggers? Who were the cheaters and who were the embezzlers? Who were the rapists and who were the dreamers? I wanted to take a scalpel to the psyche of the city on a Thursday night. What fantasies were played out behind the high-rise apartment windows when the streets would finally clear at around 4 am before the 5 am risers made their way to the coffee shops before their 9 to 5's? I had moved to the city not just for school but for the lore and allure of nights like these. Answers to my questions would never fall at my feet. It was only through a wandering eye that I would be able to answer the unanswerable questions.

It wasn't these opulent socialites that were walking to their reservations at a steak/cigar bar that I was following. I was stepping in tandem with the genderless entities that clomped the sidewalk with their leather boots; their shaved heads and wigs so tall and quaffed that they could belong in an exhibit at the MoMA. The underaged, fresh faces with gender marked fake IDs they bought from the dark web, donning eye liner that reached up to

their dyed hairline. This is the kind of city that was promised to me and the one that I had found myself a part of. What used to be the punk underbelly of society had now become mainstream. I saw mainstreaming as a form of staunch resilience. I'm not old enough to have seen the way it used to be, when this unapologetic side of humanity had to walk in the shadows.

I had been a little late, but as I scanned the crowded gay bar, I could see that Maddy had made a friend. This was typical of Maddy. She was always trying to bring a new gay into her network, collecting them like baseball cards.

"Who do we have here?" I asked, bitterly. I didn't want to have to put up with her unwanted matchmaking.

"This is Connor." She drew out the "r" in Connor and gestured to him like she was presenting him at a dog show. "Connor this is my friend, Andy that I was telling you about!" She had to raise her voice over the dance music and dull murmur that bounced off the walls.

"So, you were talking about me?" I questioned.

As I said this, Maddy sprung up, wrapped her arms around my neck and whispered, "He's 28, he's an investment banker and he's clearly a top and just look at those arms... fuck."

"Maddy, I came here to see you, not for an arranged marriage," I whispered back.

"Oh, lighten up Andy, he's gorgeous and you were late, and I wasn't just going to sit here by myself." We sat down at the corner booth. Maddy made sure to sit in the middle, because even though she was trying to set us up, she still had to be the center of our attention.

"Hi Andy, I've heard great things," Connor said extending a hand. Maddy was right, he was gorgeous, and he gripped my hand firmly, his long, thick fingers enveloping mine,

not breaking eye contact. I knew guys like this. I could have pegged him from a mile away as someone on the DL that came to gay bars in the hopes of what? Getting outed so they didn't have to do it themselves? An easy lay? Their intentions were never clear.

“So, what brings you here tonight, Connor?” I asked. He readjusted himself for optimal eye contact.

“Well, I'm new to the city and I wanted to check out the scene.” He looked down, picking at the skin of his right thumb. “I've never been to a gay bar before and... well... I'm still trying to figure some things out, ya know?” He half smiled, the kind of smile that I recognized as someone who still hasn't figured their sexuality out or was too afraid to say it out loud. He knew he could relate to me and that I would understand.

“Well, you're in the perfect place to figure it out,” I said.

“Yeah, I would say so, I'm lucky to have found this crazy bitch!” He pointed at Maddy who slapped his arm away and laughed.

“You got the crazy bitch part right, that's for sure.” I looked down at Maddy who had her hand over her mouth.

“Connor doesn't need to know that!” Maddy said playfully.

“Oh yes, I need to know all about that,” said Connor with smile.

“Did she tell you about that time she tried to get me to have a threesome with her and her boyfriend at the time?” I winced as I recalled the memory out loud to a stranger. Connor slapped his hand over his mouth.

“No, she didn't, but now I think I need the full story,” said Connor. Maddy had been hiding her face in her hands, imitating embarrassment.

“He was bi, okay? And he thought Andy was hot... and so did he,” said Maddy as she put her arm around me and kissed my cheek.

I looked down and saw that their drinks were empty. “Me personally, I need to figure out a drink in my hand. You all need a refresher?” I asked.

“Yes,” they said in unison.

“I’ll come with,” Maddy said.

“Here, I’ll give you some cash for mine and I’ll save our spot,” said Connor as he started for his pocket.

“No, I got it, it’ll be my welcome present to you. Welcome to New York!” Maddy grabbed my hand as we made our way across the dance floor. It was still early, so we didn’t have to fight our way to the bar, just some slight ducking and weaving. The DJ booth was to the left of the bar. It was wrapped in blue lights that pulsated along with the beat of the song and was connected to the bar.

The bartender was shirtless but had leather straps that wrapped over his defined shoulders and buckled across his chest. His skin had a dusting of glitter that caught the pink and blue lights that strobed across the entirety of the bar. Atop his head sat an oversized leather sailor hat. Of all the gay bars in New York City this was one of one hundred that welcomed this kind of chiseled white guy and turned up their nose to anyone that didn’t fit that description. I found myself hiding my body behind Maddy as I ordered.

“So, I see that Maddy is up to her old matchmaker ways,” I said as we waited for our drinks.

“I’m sorry Andy, I know we haven’t seen each other in months, but you know how I feel about strays. He looked so sad.”

“He is cute,” I said as I glanced back over to Connor. His eyes were glued to his phone. Was I his type? I had always assumed that guys that look like him would never come near guys that looked like me. He looked like he belonged here, whereas I looked like I belonged at the Irish Pub across the street, nursing a pint of Heineken and pounding down an order of oversized onions rings.

“He’s gorgeous and I showed him pictures of you, and he thinks you’re gorgeous too,” said Maddy. I felt betrayed, but then that turned into gratitude.

“Goddamn it, Maddy, you’re impossible.” The bartender slid our drinks across the bar, and I set down a wad of cash that covered all three drinks.

“Thanks babe,” Maddy said as she got on her tip toes and kissed my sweaty cheek. “I really fucking missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

If I think too much about that night, I begin to retreat inwards, the bad thoughts used my insecurities as a generator, thriving off the sharp head pains. The onset of the flashbacks made me want to cancel my plans with Michael, stay in my apartment for life, and drink cheap vodka straight from the bottle until I couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore. The bruise under my eye throbbed at the most inopportune times, causing my stomach to knot. I knew that in order to make these thoughts go away I would have to get back into my normal routine and find comfort in old habits. I would need to replace the dark memory of The Incident with new, sexually freeing memories. Ones where my legs are in the air and my nails break through the skin of a man’s back that I met online.

It had been a couple days since I had started my correspondence with Michael and about a month since The Incident. I had been drinking wine alone in my apartment when I began to feel that familiar itch. I thought the incident would have made me never want to see another man again, but the wine had lowered my inhibitions to the point that my famished hormones screamed for nutrients in the form of precum that made my underwear stick uncomfortably to my thigh.

I thought I could masturbate the thoughts away. I had put my hand down my pants but didn't recognize my own member. It hung loosely in my hand, lifeless. It needed the validation of someone else's touch. I couldn't be the one to get the blood flowing, it needed a notary, a witness that it was still functioning flesh.

I unlocked my phone and scrolled to the last page of apps. I had hidden this specific one on the last page, as every time I opened my phone the familiar icon glared at me, winking seductively, then gnashing its teeth, growling, then moaning. I had seen no use in deleting it. I knew this night would come; it was inevitable. I tapped on the app and my phone began to vibrate instantly, signifying all of the messages I had received during my hiatus.

Most of the messages were from blank profiles and when opened I came face to face with penises ranging from all sizes, colors, and camera angles. I deleted those instantly, knowing that they were either from bots or from men that got off from simply pressing send on a photo of their junk. I started to scan the profiles of people within a five-mile range of me. Blank profiles got immediately blocked to make room for more detailed profiles. I didn't care about age as long as they were able to drink.

I got a few messages while I scrolled, but nothing more than Bud Light ads and more penis. It wasn't until I was about to lose hope that I got a picture from someone with the screen name "M". His profile picture was a shot of him in business attire, but it was only from the neck down. His profile said he was 48 years old and "recently single". I clicked on the message, and it was the same photo from his profile picture, but this one had his face in it. He had salt and pepper hair and a clean-shaven face. He had an angled jaw that came to an end at his oval-ed chin. He was smiling which created lines that curved like ripples on his cheeks and under his eyes. Under the picture was a second message.

M: Hey man, how's your evening been?

I didn't want to be too honest, for in my drunken state, I was likely to blow my cover. I wanted to seem cool, but not aloof.

Andy: Just staying in tonight and getting wine drunk on my couch!

My relationship with alcohol had become pretty significant since The Incident and it was very much a one-sided relationship, the alcohol bringing everything to the table. I figured if I lost consciousness then I wouldn't have flashbacks. The logic was all there but waking up hungover every morning had turned me into a shell, meandering through life in a polluted, smog filled cloud that was always raining and never let up.

M: I remember being 26!

Him bringing up our age difference right off the bat was a sign that that was the only reason he messaged in the first place. He had a thing for younger guys. This meant that I had the upper hand.

Andy: Living the dream. How has your evening been?

I poured myself another glass of wine and stepped onto my balcony. The sun had set, allowing the lights from the buildings that surrounded me from all sides to take over. When the sun goes down in the city, it looks like suddenly all of the stars are parallel to you. So close within reach you can touch them, however, once you realize that it's just cold metal that you're admiring, the illusion is shattered completely. On nights like these, ones where I stayed in, avoiding the inconveniences of others, and lubricating my inhibitions, I liked to sit on my balcony and observe, like a transfixed pigeon waiting for fallen breadcrumbs. Most of the windows on the apartment building I faced were open, allowing me to peer into lives unknown, like a television screen.

One of the screens showed a couple intertwined in each other's arms, transfixed with a blue light coming from a wall that was blocked from my view, mouths slightly agape. Another showed a woman talking on a landline, wiping away tears and sipping on something red. I felt connected to her, then envious of her sheer display of almost-fake looking theatrical emotion. I wish I was able to cry when it felt as though nothing else would cure the pent-up anger and desperation for reprieve. I felt the pressure of tears un-cried behind my eyes, but they never broke the surface.

What did these people see when they looked through my window? A slightly overweight, poorly dressed, un-showered drunk who binged reality television until the sun came up, only leaving to pick up more wine or for a shift at the coffee shop around the corner? Yes, that's exactly what they saw, but what they didn't know is that they were looking at someone who was in mourning, but if they were to look now, they would see someone who is readying themselves for an encore.

I had lost a lot of myself and The Incident made me lose even more, but with each message “M” sent I could feel parts of myself coming back to me. It had to do with a connection to this microcosm of the city. Each profile, whether blank or detailed, was like peering into one of these apartment windows. I saw them and they saw me.

M: I'm just seeing what's out there. I'm fairly new to this...

I respected the honesty but hated the responsibility of the statement, *I'm fairly new to this...*, put on my shoulders. I remember my first night on a dating app. I felt like a little kid who couldn't find their mother in a crowded department store. All I had wanted was for someone to grab my hand and lead me in the right direction.

Andy: Well... welcome! haha

I always liked to offer an out. Give a short, snippy response followed by a “haha” or an “lol”. If they were interested, they would continue the conversation despite any effort from me.

M: Thank you. The dating scene has definitely changed since the last time I was on the market. I've seen more penises tonight than I've seen in my entire life LOL.

Andy: Sounds like your lucky day lol. Your last boyfriend must have been hung.

I didn't know what had come over me. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was my hormones that had been lying dormant for so long.

M: So funny story, I've actually never been with a guy... I was married to my ex-wife for 13 years.

When Maddy and I got back to the table Connor had put his phone away. He was now anxiously picking at his nails. I admired his bravery for coming to a gay bar alone. Judging

by the clothes he was wearing, he seemed to be rather old fashioned. He was wearing khaki pants and a baby blue buttoned up shirt, which was a stark contrast to the tank tops and leather straps that every other person in the bar was donning. I appreciated the modesty; it made my insecurity loosen its grip.

“Thanks for the drink,” said Connor before taking a sip. “I got the next round.” So, he was sticking with us for the night? I felt a slight resentment towards him for taking Maddy away from me. However, Maddy was known for giving hard truths and I knew if I told her about my part time barista job, my wine addiction and hermit-like behavior she would come at me with objections and tough love. All things that I needed to hear but would just be white noise going in one ear and out the other.

“So, what brings you to the city?” I asked.

“Cambridge Wilkinson Investment Bank,” he answered. That was gibberish to me, but it sounded lucrative.

“Well, cheers to that,” said Maddy as she raised her plastic cup that was already half emptied. Connor and I raised our cups and took turns clunking ours into Maddy’s. “Wait, wait, wait,” she began. “You have to look into the eyes of the person you’re cheers-ing with or you’ll have five years of bad sex!” I made eye contact with Connor as our cups met and we both chuckled.

“That wouldn’t be anything new for me,” said Connor with a chuckle.

“Well, let’s change that tonight, shall we gentlemen?” Maddy glanced back and forth between Connor and me.

“I’m sorry about my friend,” I said to Connor. “She apparently hasn’t had anything to eat today.” We all three laughed and Maddy smacked my arm.

“Shut up! I didn’t say you two had to fuck, I’m just giving Connor some well wishes!” Maddy knew what she was doing and even though I could feel my cheeks turn red, part of me was grateful.

“I appreciate it. Cheers to good sex,” said Connor as he raised his glass for the second time and as we rammed our cups together, we stared into each other’s eyes. That was the last thing that I remember from that night. Everything else comes in dark, grainy waves, like a nightmare. I see visions of myself, arms wrapped around Connor’s shoulders as we dance under the veil of blue lights and smoke. Sometimes I can even feel the vibration of the bass from whatever pop song they were playing as I put my hand under Connor’s shirt and stroked his nipples until they hardened beneath my thumb, the smell of stale alcohol wafting from his mouth into mine and then back to his. I sometimes see Maddy, her nose touching mine as she screams. I can’t quite make out what she’s saying, all I can remember is how red the whites of her eyes became as she screamed over the deafening music.

Since then, I’ve experienced flashes of Connor above me, going in and out of my body, his hand around my neck and his fist in the air repeatedly making contact with my half-opened eyes. I remember looking over at my arms, dead and splayed out at ninety-degree angles, wondering why they weren’t moving, why they weren’t listening to my brain that was telling them to fight back. His knees had dug into the meat of my thighs and I could feel the pressure on my muscles, causing me to yelp out in pain between blows to the head.

When the blood work came back, it showed that I had been drugged. I had always heard about date rape drugs, but never thought it was something that would happen to me. The aftereffects were physical and mental; relentless. The raised bruises became a blueprint

of the evening, sketching and mapping out where his body had come into contact with mine, where he had used tactical force in order to keep me submissive.

Maddy says that we were dancing and that I told her I wanted to go home with Connor. She says that she tried to get me to just leave with her because she knew that I was too incoherent to be making rash decisions, but I hadn't listened. That's where the screaming visions had come from. I woke up to her holding my hand in the hospital. She said that when I was coming to, I tried to call her and that all she heard on her end was a kind of terrorized moaning, like that of a dying deer that had been left on the side of the road to freeze. She came to my apartment and found me naked and unconscious, the door had been unlocked and Connor was never heard from again. I didn't press charges. No matter how many times Maddy told me I was being too hard on myself, I had still felt somewhat responsible for constantly allowing myself to trust strangers. Maddy was the one who bore the brunt of the guilt, so she stayed at my apartment with me for two weeks. It helped, but I knew the only thing that would actually help, was to find a way to regain my trust in humanity.

Maddy suggested therapy, but I knew I would never be able to afford it and telling my parents was out of the question. If they caught wind of my assault, they would immediately blame me and have me shipped back to them before I could even lie and say, "I'm fine".

As the minutes came and went, I started to have flashbacks of that night. Because we were meeting at a hotel, I felt safer. I knew that one scream would catch attention and I could be saved with only a few scratches.

Before we made the arrangement, we both agreed that we would take things slow for his sake. I hadn't told him about The Incident, so he didn't know that the idea of taking things slow was for me just as much as it was for him. In an odd way, I knew I could trust him. We were both delving into the unknown together and that brought great comfort to my unsettled stomach.

I usually liked to have a few shots of whatever liquor was in my freezer before a hookup to ease the anxiety, but tonight it would have to be more than just a few shots. At first, I thought about going to the hotel early and getting drunk at the bar while I await my suitor, but judging from the hotel's website, I figured that they would charge an unreasonable amount for a vodka soda, so I decided to get drunk in my apartment. Mixing bottom shelf vodka with Red Bull to keep me alert. I put a record on my turntable and went to sit on my balcony.

I stared at the windows across the street. The couple that's usually intertwined on the couch watching television had some people over and it looked like they were swaying to music, taking shots and snapping photos of other couples. The crying woman wasn't crying anymore. It looked like she was cooking something, wine in hand, cat making a figure eight between her legs. The window under the cat lady was occupied by two men in their underwear and white t-shirts in an embrace, rocking back and forth. They didn't seem to be dancing or doing much of anything at all.

With each night that I sat on my balcony, observing those across the street live lives separate from mine, I got more and more hopeful. The scenes I witnessed were never constant, they changed with each passing day, hour even. Sometimes I would see a window

plagued with tears and loneliness, then the next day that same window struggled to capture everyone within its frame, bursting with laughter and celebration.

Every morning I wake up in my bed, look out of my window at the city, and wonder when I will feel essential to the inner workings of this place that I have become a parasite to, leeching off of other people's emotions and wishing they were mine. Since graduation, I have struggled with my mortality. In order to grow up, I would have to slowly kill off who I was. Tonight, would be a step in the wrong direction. Once again, giving myself over, mind, body, and soul, to a stranger. Allowing him to hold me in his arms and hope that he doesn't squeeze too hard.

Lost in thought, I had chewed up my plastic straw to the point that hardly any liquid was coming out. I felt a slight buzz and knew that I would have time for one more drink, I would make sure this one was strong.

Part 3

"Michael and I got married so young... and all the problems were already there. He was always distant... always secretive... and at first, I had found that sexy," Marie said as she stared at the pile of shredded pieces of tissue that had collected at her feet and continued to twist the damp one in her hand. "But then once the sexiness wore off, it became so damn unnerving." Marie stared up at her therapist. The one that came with a glowing recommendation from her colleague that had also found out that her husband was gay. Dr. Andrews had tiny reading glasses perched on the end of her pointed nose. Her bony fingers writing with ease on a yellow legal pad, circling and underlining as Marie recalled her failed marriage.

“Unnerving... in what way?” Dr. Andrews was soft spoken, it took a couple beats for Marie to register the question.

“Unnerving in the same way that it’s unnerving when you hear your parents having sex for the first time... like seeing an elephant walk on its hind legs... unnatural,” Marie responded.

“So, Michael’s secretive nature felt unnatural to you?”

“Well, yes. I would see the ways my colleagues were with their spouses, and I found myself... jealous,” Marie said with a wince. She was always someone that took satisfaction in being the source of everyone else’s jealousy.

“What were the discrepancies that you noticed?” Dr. Andrews asked.

Marie searched her brain but found it difficult to pinpoint an instant where she felt like a failure compared to the women around her. It made her feel lightheaded just to think about it, or it could be from the lavender and jasmine candles that burned on the table next to her.

“I guess I just felt like Michael always knew what to say and how to say it. He knew what I wanted to hear and how I wanted to hear it.” Marie’s voice dropped a few octaves. “If he couldn’t come to one of my work events, it was because he didn’t want me to feel any added pressure. If he had to get out of bed in the middle of the night, it was because he didn’t want to disturb me. He always found a way to craft a narrative where he was doing something for me, when in reality, he was doing and saying whatever he could do to get rid of me.” Marie’s mouth started to get dry, and a thick paste began to form around the corners of her lips.

“Marie.” Dr. Andrews took off her glasses and stared into Marie’s hazel eyes that had turned a light shade of pink from the sniffing. “It’s clear that you really loved Michael and maybe you still do. Now, what we’re going to do in these sessions is find ways that he failed you and ultimately find ways in which you failed him.” Marie’s eyes shot towards the window

behind Dr. Andrews. The afternoon sun hung between two skyscrapers, making the white curtains, white furniture, and white accents of Dr. Andrew's office appear fluorescent, creating sunbeams that bounced around the room like a spotlight, practically blinding Marie.

I did not fail Michael for Christ's sake, Marie thought, he just doesn't like pussy!

“There are going to be times when you feel like a victim and in many ways, you were,” Dr. Andrews said. “But when you start seeing yourself as someone who was a bystander to Michael's self-discovery, then you will have won.”

What am I trying to win? Marie thought. I've already lost.

“How about this, before our next session, which is...” Dr. Andrews flipped through the pages of her decrepit notebook and continued, “in three days, you go out with some friends from work. Maybe you'll meet someone... a guy. Now, I don't think you should rush into anything, but some quality time and a little physical touch could help you get out of this funk. Now, I'm going to be expecting to see this in your journal entries, so don't disappoint me and you won't be disappointed.”

I made it to the train station a few minutes early, there was a notice of several delays that flashed across the pixelated screens in bold red. Police and paramedics were redirecting the heavy foot traffic, meaning that someone must have jumped in front of one of the trains again.

What an easy out, I thought. To take a step forward and be rid of all obligation and trauma seemed a little too simplistic of an explanation, but as I made my way to the platform, I began to wonder when life stops being worth it. At what point does the human psyche shatter, leaving nothing but a step forward to your death? As I pondered this, I walked to the

platform and stood next to the equally frustrated New Yorkers that were going, where? It was about 9:30 PM on a Friday night and almost everyone around me was sporting business attire, bag in hand, phone two inches from their faces, consuming, what? Who had just received an unsolicited nude photo from a stranger? Who was making plans with their spouse because the kids were with their grandparents? I had become so used to peering into the windows of the people around me that my curiosity had become insatiable. I wanted to see how others lived so I could adjust accordingly and therefore be seen.

After another fifteen minutes of tapping my toe on the littered concrete, I heard the familiar rumbling of an incoming train and propped my chin up, replicating the confidence of those around me. I checked my breath and began nervously pulverizing an old dinner mint I had found in my pocket into dust with my teeth and stepped through the automatic doors of the J train.

When I entered through the front door of the hotel, the first thing I noticed was that I was completely under dressed. I looked down at my sneakers that were caked with randomized flecks of dirt and the fabric from my jacket that was practically fluorescent compared to the black suits that waltzed about the lobby. I quickly realized that I was probably the youngest person in the lobby by at least a decade and hoped that when people saw my outfit, they would just chalk it up to immature ignorance.

I spotted the entrance to the bar and began to walk towards it, scoping out the area with each step I took. The hotel was ancient but had been modernized enough that it was still charming. As I grew closer, I noticed a pair of eyes that peeked over the top of a two-person booth and quickly recognized them from the pictures that Michael had sent.

As soon as he walked through the front door of the hotel, I knew it was him. Not just because he looked like his pictures, but because he stood out. He was wearing black jeans, cuffed at the ankle with white socks and low top, white sneakers. He had on a gold, velvet shirt with a light washed jean jacket unzipped over top. I continued to peer over the top of the booth across from me and waited for him to make his way to the bar. My heart was a hummingbird doing everything to stay afloat with forty-eight-year-old wings. His brown eyes have a slight squint to them causing little wrinkles to form that encircle his eyes. He smiles, causing even more wrinkles to ripple across his plump cheeks. My heart pulsates with a sort of comfort, and I begin to realize that this was the part that I was the most nervous for. The moment that he would see my face and have a split second to react.

“Michael,” he utters as he stands over the vacant seat. Surrounding him was a sweet tang that filled my nose, giving me a headrush, making my mouth water.

“Yes, that must mean you’re Andy.” We broke eye contact for the first time as he sat down. I outstretched my hand to him, thinking a handshake was an appropriate form for meetings like this, but his eyes were lingering on my emptied glass, so I put the hand to my side before he could notice the failed gesture.

“Sorry that I’m late, the train. Someone, uh... jumped in front of it,” Andy said.

“That’s fine, I understand.” The nerves were manageable now. Seeing his pink, wind broken cheeks and slightly chapped lips was comforting. He wasn’t a formless entity behind a screen anymore, he had blood flowing in his veins and adrenaline that waxed and waned with each passing second. “Would you like a drink?” I asked.

“Sure, what’re you having?”

“Vodka water with a lime,” I respond.

“Sounds perfect.”

“Alright, coming right up.” I slapped the table and made my way to the bar, feeling his eyes on my back like daggers.

I noticed the slight slur in Michael’s words and immediately knew that he had shown up to the bar early. As Michael made his way to the bar, I could tell that he was walking in a way that he thought would make him seem sober, but it had the opposite effect, instead he looked like a robot that just learned how to walk, his arms stiff at his sides, his face frozen on his destination. I found his nerves charming, unthreatening. It made me want to wrap my arms around his head to keep it safe from whatever outside pressures he must be plagued with.

There was no doubt that he was wildly handsome. It’s rare when photos on dating apps don’t do justice to the real thing, but I found myself even more intimidated now that I had seen him in person. His face was a sum of sharp edges and manicured stubble, his eyes, chestnut and warm. His hair flowed like shiny, black frosting on a wedding cake and faded into the back of his head like it was sewn with experienced hands. I could feel my face getting flush and knew that I had become undoubtedly beet red.

After what felt like several minutes, he came back to the booth with only one drink in his hand and my heart immediately sank, then began pounding so hard that I could hear it behind my ears. Flashbacks from the night with Connor started playing like a supercut. The empty drink in my hand, the strobe lights dancing across his face as he cupped my cheek, him on top of me with dead eyes that drilled holes into my bed frame.

“You know what, I’m not that thirsty anymore, I’m still recovering from the cold,” I said, trying to keep my voice from breaking. I wiped the sweat from my hands on the velvet booth and plastered on a convincing smile.

“Ah, that’s no problem, we can share it.” He picked up the drink and took a gulp. I smiled with newfound trust, grabbed the drink from the center of the table, knocked it back, clearing what remained of the liquid and instantly felt the warmth return to my cheeks.

“So, I guess you were thirsty after all,” he said with a chuckle, grabbing the red cloth napkin that had been resting in his lap and wiped the corners of my damp lips. His hand stuck around a little longer than necessary and I could feel a familiar tug in my jeans as a wave of calm left a slight tingle at the crown of my head.

“If I’m honest, I just wanted you to have the first sip.” The greatest thing about one-night stands is that there is no point in being dishonest.

“Were you afraid that I was going to drug you?” he asked, calmly. I shook my head yes, awaiting his reaction.

“I remember one time in college, this fraternity that I was trying to get in gave us all a little pill and told us that we each had to drug one girl before the sunrise.” He looked up at me with a look of regret and sighed. “Or we would be cut from consideration.”

“Holy fuck,” I said. It suddenly became hard to look at him. “Did you do it?”

“No, actually. I swallowed the pill myself,” he said with a half-smile.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” I was relieved with his answer, but duly confused.

“I knew that if I would have been conscious that night, that I probably would have gone through with it,” he said. I could see the regret in his eyes of a life filled with great privilege. Was it I who was the privileged one? Out since high school, not a single care in the

world about who saw the slight swish in my hips or heard the high-pitched intonation of my voice. Michael lived a staggering majority of his life in the shadows, married to a woman, clinging to a lie. How bleak. How exhausting. I grabbed his hand, still slicked with condensation. He looked down at our now interlocked fingers. I could see the fear in his eyes that came with holding the hand of a man in a crowded room. I took my hand away and once again wiped it on the velvet booth.

The door to Marie's office was cracked slightly, giving the illusion that she welcomed visitors. Ever since the article came out, she had garnered new levels of respect. She was moved into a corner office and people were always asking for advice on how to put a spin on their food critiques. As much as she loved that her career was skyrocketing faster than she had envisioned, she felt the piercing of pitying looks. She noticed when people stopped talking after she walked into a room to stop themselves from getting caught spouting rumors of her failed marriage. Most of the respect she earned from the article came from readers and higher ups at the magazine, but her peers were showing their teeth, not afraid to let jealousy get the best of them and gossiping incessantly.

There was a familiar knock on the door, three knuckle raps. Christina peered through the cracked door and entered only after Marie gave her a welcoming half smile. Christina was Marie's closest confidante at the magazine. She already had a corner office, so the jealousy was not one sided, it was mutual.

"Hey Marie, how was therapy?" Christina whispered as she closed the door behind her.

“Same shit, I swear she wants me to kiss Michael’s feet and beg for his forgiveness, no thanks.” Christina sat down on the couch that ran the length of Marie’s office. The couch had been Michael’s before they even knew each other and she couldn’t bear seeing it in her apartment anymore, so now it lived in her office under a wall of windows that looked out across the sun-soaked city.

“I’m sorry sweetie, therapists are the fucking worst. She sounds worse than my mother... always saying what you need to hear rather than what you want to hear. It’s mind numbing,” Christina said as she kicked off her heels and put her head under one of the pillows that lined the old couch. Before moving the piece of furniture into her office, she had to remove two stains that had come from sex. She knew that she should have given it away or driven it out into the suburbs and burned it until it didn’t exist anymore, but it was a damn good couch and why waste something so practical, even if it had been soaked in fluids from her ex-husband.

“Everything okay with you?” Marie asked, even though she couldn’t care less.

“Okay is the right word, yes.” She couldn’t afford to carry anyone else’s baggage on her shoulders, hers were already aching from the thought of admitting that she could even be partially to blame for her failed marriage. “John has been begging to meet the people I work with. He said his last relationship ended because he always felt like the secret.” Christina had a look on her face like she was smelling something awful. “But I think it’s just because his ex was fucking her boss the whole time that they were together.”

“Jesus Christ,” Marie said, putting her hand to her forehead to slow the progression of an oncoming migraine.

“Yeah so, do you have any plans tonight?”

Fuck, Marie thought. *Was she going to ask me to meet her new boyfriend? How insensitive.* However, her therapist had given her the assignment to go out with friends and she figured this would count and it would mean that she wouldn't have to come up with a lie and get a look of disappointment from Dr. Andrews, which is something that she had become all too familiar with after only two sessions.

"I do not," Marie uttered, wishing she could wrangle the words back in as soon as they had been let out.

"Well then, how about you come over for dinner and a few drinks. That way John will get off my back and we can watch him cook for us. He's quite the chef." Christina winked at Marie, confusing the invitation even further. Marie had seen pictures of John and was rather impressed with Christina's ability to capture a man that was far out of her league.

Maybe she has a golden vagina, Marie thought.

"Um, yeah that should work." Marie couldn't muster up the enthusiasm to hide her regret.

Andy let go of my hand after what felt like several minutes and I quickly broke eye contact. After all of the anxiety leading up to this moment and the drinks, the amount of which I lost track of, I forgot what it would look like to other people for an older man to be sitting with a younger man in a hotel bar. People could think I was Andy's father, but judging from both of our nervous ticks, we might as well both have STRANGER tattooed on our foreheads.

"Do we want to move this conversation to the room?" I asked. He looked up from rubbing his hands on the velvet of the booth and smirked.

“Sure, yeah, let’s go.”

Michael pressed the UP button on the gold panel next to the elevators. Thick silence hung in the air between us. With each passing second, I was becoming more sober, causing the cruel hands of anxiety to creep up my chest and grab hold of my throat. Michael’s intentions seemed pure, however, when he had handed me that drink, the flashback had been conjured up faster than a subway car and now I knew that at any moment, visions of that night could ruin any semblance of peace.

When the elevator doors opened, we were met with our reflection staring back at us. I was about a foot shorter than Michael and about twenty pounds heavier. We both had brown hair with rectangular shaped heads that came to a rounded out point at our chin and for a moment, I felt as though I was looking into my future. After a couple beats, we stepped onto the elevator and it was only until after the elevator doors closed again, entrapping us in a box made of mirrors, that Michael broke the silence.

“So, have you ever been with an older guy?” he said. I was glad that he took the initiative and was the first one of us to bring up the topic of sex. He could have been like most first-timers and expected me to do all of the heavy lifting, but our triste was getting off to an acceptable start.

“I have been with guys older than me but none as...”

“...old as me,” he laughed as he finished my sentence. “That’s okay, you can say it.”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “None as old as you.” It was the small moments like these, the awkward laughs, the hand holding that only lasts seconds, that got my heart racing the most.

“Well...” he was struggling to get the next part of his thought out, gulping several times to pass what seemed like a lump in his throat. “I’ve never been with a guy period, so it’s safe to say that I’m the odd one out in... our situation.” The more and more time I spent with him the clearer it became that he was roaring drunk.

“Yeah, I remember you telling me that,” I said. I usually tried not to get too personal with the guys I had casual sex with, but this would be different. I felt like his spirit guide. A shaman who has the responsibility of taking him safely along on this drug trip of a night.

“Does that turn you off?” The elevator doors opened before I could answer. The doors opened to reveal a man and a woman. The woman was wearing business attire. A navy-blue blazer with a white buttoned-up shirt underneath and navy-blue slacks. She had her brown hair tied up in a bun and frames that had the lenses popped out on the tip of her nose. In her left hand she had the handle of a dog leash gripped firmly and on the other end of the leash there was a man on all fours wearing a black, leather bodysuit and a leather mask that had holes for the mouth and eyes only. Where the man’s nose should have been, there was a leather snout with small holes for breathing and on top of his head there were rounded, leather triangles that resembled dog ears.

The man saw us and without missing a beat, imitated a dog barking.

“Spike don’t bark at strangers,” the woman said, and slapped the man on the back of his head. “Excuse us.” Michael and I quickly stepped to the side and out of the elevator doors to leave the room. Before the elevator doors closed, I could see the woman reach into her pocket and pull out what resembled a piece of jerky and fed it to the man.

“What the fuck was that?” Michael let out a raucous belly laugh and doubled over, putting his hands on his knees.

“I have no idea, but it’s kind of refreshing to see that they aren’t afraid of their fetishes, I guess.” At this Michael started laughing even more maniacally and let out a small burp.

Once Michael had righted himself, he began to look for the room number. He took a right down a long narrow hallway lined with rooms. The carpet was crimson with a gold, checkered pattern that ran diagonally down the hall. I could tell that seeing the couple from outside the elevator had sobered Michael up quite a bit. He was walking in a straight line, but not in the same robotic nature as before.

“Ah, 712, this is it,” Michael said and waved the white, magnetic key card in front of the black door handle, which seemed rather out of place against the antique fixtures and ornate stylings of the hotel.

The thought of being alone with a man in a locked room made my stomach do small back flips. I could feel my brain working on overdrive, trying to get my body to go through the familiar motions of casual sex. I would lay on the bed first, then he would lay next to me. I would then await a signal from him, and we would start kissing. Once the kissing began, the adrenaline would take over and I would slip into automatic, letting my instincts and desires take control of the wheel.

The layout of the room was like any other hotel. Bathroom to the left of the front door. Tiny hallway that led to the main area. King sized bed that faced a tv inside a chest of drawers. Window to the right of the bed that looked out onto the city. More red wallpaper that matched the wallpaper in the lobby. Gold-trim mirror above the bed. Lamp fixture that provided mood lighting.

“This is really nice,” I said.

“It should be, I paid enough for it,” he said the last part under his breath, and I could tell he immediately regretted it by the way he put his hand up to his forehead. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that at all.” His voice trailed off as he sat on the foot of the bed. “I’m just so nervous.”

I sat on the opposite side of the bed with my hands in my lap ready for this to be over. “Don’t apologize. We can take things slow,” I said. He turned around and looked in my eyes with relief.

Marie entered the bodega outside of her apartment to get some wine to go along with dinner. On her commute home she had workshopped a long list of excuses as to why she couldn’t have dinner with Christina and Josh, but she decided that if she was going to appease her therapist, she might as well go and get it over with. She picked out a sweet red from the top shelf and made her way to Christina’s apartment that was only about five blocks from hers.

Ever since her divorce, which had been finalized only a few weeks ago, she had looked at men with a fierce hunger that shocked her. She had never been the type to be too wild when it came to sex. She had always described it as “making love” when she had been married to Michael and the most spontaneous that they had ever gotten with each other was when they were camping with his father in Wyoming, and they had sex in an outhouse. No wonder, she had made him give up hope on women.

It’s not that he wasn’t attracted to you, he just isn’t attracted to women at all. You must realize that this has nothing to do with you and everything to do with him, Dr. Andrews would say.

Yes, I'm painfully aware that this has absolutely nothing to do with me, trust me,
Marie would respond.

Despite a lifetime of prudishness, she had been surprising herself quite a bit lately. She bought a vibrator, one of those that looks like a little animal with ears and had been using it most nights before bed and, more recently, most mornings before work. It made her feel dirty and she was still trying to figure out if it was good dirty or bad dirty. She looked at her male coworkers differently, even fantasizing about calling one into her office and demanding that he eat her out under her desk, or she'll have him fired at once! Christina would be proud of her. She was always the one that was trying to get Marie to go out with her John's friends, but they were impossibly too young for her. Plus, she just got divorced. She was tired of everyone putting this pressure on her to live a life that had already passed her by.

"Thanks, Andy," I said. I felt like a kid that just got scolded by their teacher.

Andy started to inch closer to me and I to him. We were still sat on the foot of the bed awaiting permission from the other to proceed, but neither of us wanted to be the first one to dive in. His hand was a fist and when he was close enough to me that I could feel his strained breath on my arm, I reached out and wrapped my hand around his. We made eye contact once more. My first kiss had been with a girl older than me and she had taken the reins, grabbing my chin and pulling it to her lips. I always thought that my first kiss would be my only first kiss, but sitting here, I feel thirteen again.

I think Andy could sense this, because he reached out to grab my cheek and when I felt the pressure of his hand pulling me to him, I let go and dove in.

Michael opened his mouth and drew his face into mine. He tasted like cigarettes and lime. He smelled like pepper cologne and cold air. I could feel him tensing up at times and then letting go only to tense up again and let go once more. I could feel his heart pounding as I threw our bodies backward and he landed on top of me. His breathing sounded forced, almost as if he was about to choke, but never did.

It only took a few moments of wet kisses before I could feel his penis harden under his pants and rub against my thigh. I reached down, cupping the bump, using the newly awakened flesh as a source of heat for my wind-chapped hands.

After dinner, Marie, Christina, and Josh sat at Christina's kitchen island, each nursing a glass of red wine from the third bottle they had opened. Dinner was chicken parmesan with angel hair pasta and a salad with vinaigrette.

I never cooked like this for Michael, but then again, Michael never cooked like this for me, Marie thought. Dr. Andrews had told her that any time she feels like she did something that made Michael want to leave, that she should put herself into his shoes and himself in hers.

Every situation in a marriage is two-sided, Dr. Andrews would say. *When thinking about all of the things you didn't do for him, flip that and ask yourself if he did those same things for you.*

"Dinner was excellent," Marie said after downing what was left of her portion of wine. "But I must be heading out." She looked down at her watch-less wrist. "It's getting late."

“No stay, I think we have some cards, we could play a game,” Christina said disappointingly.

“Or we could play truth or dare,” Josh said. For most of the night he had been rather quiet, allowing Christina to do most of the heavy lifting, conversationally.

“Oooooooooooooo truth or dare is always fun!” Christina squealed.

“Truth or fucking dare? What are we? Thirteen years old?” Marie snorted.

“Oh, come on,” Josh said, looking Marie dead in the eyes. “It’ll be fun.” Marie felt a flutter under her slacks. When she had first seen Josh in person she was even more taken aback by his beauty. His arms were chiseled, his dark curly hair was slicked back, showing off his olive-colored skin, angular jaw, and prominent nose. His aloofness and cooking abilities made Marie question whether she could be the mistress.

“Fine.” Marie had to bite her tongue to keep from slurring her words. “Dare.” Christina laughed, elated by the risky choice.

“Hmmm,” Josh said, making eye contact with Christina. It was hard to discern whether it was the wine or if Marie had actually seen it, but she could have sworn she saw Christina nod her head, yes, and wink. “I dare you, to kiss Christina... on the lips.”

Marie’s mouth dropped and she looked over at Christina, hoping to find that her face matched Marie’s shock, but instead she was smiling eagerly. Christina then took her finger and traced Marie’s lips stopping at the center. Without thinking, Marie opened her mouth slightly, inviting in Christina’s finger. The finger rested on Marie’s tongue and tasted slightly of dirt and olive oil.

“Jesus Christ,” Josh said, sighing with pleasure as Marie leaned forward and welcomed Christina’s lips onto hers. She had never kissed a woman before, but as she invited

Christina's tongue into her mouth, she realized that it's not so much different from kissing a man. After about ten seconds of slobbery motions and groping, Marie pulled away, laughing. Christina joined in the laughter and then Josh. The entire kitchen was filled with uproarious laughter that ended with a pregnant pause

"Christina," Marie said, breaking the silence. "Truth or dare?" Before Christina answered she smoothed out her hair and looked at Josh. They exchanged a look of familiarity between the two, like they had done this before, and they were once again finding success in their escapades.

"Dare," Christina shouted without missing a beat.

"I dare you, to give Josh a little strip tease." Marie didn't know what had come over her, but she was not going to let her emotions get in the way.

"Oh, I like that," Josh said. Christina got up and stripped-down to her bra and underwear and began rubbing her ass on Josh's crotch, but instead of looking at Christina, Josh stared into Marie's eyes who was returning the glance. Josh licked his lips as Christina rubbed her breasts on his chest, but still did not break eye contact with Marie.

Once Christina sat back down, she looked at me again and said, "truth or dare!"

"Dare!" Marie practically screamed.

"I dare you... to have a threesome with Josh and me." The room fell silent, and Marie instantly felt lightheaded. It was as if someone had taken the needle off a record, sucking the air straight out of the room, leaving a dense silence.

"Christina, are you serious?" Marie said. She looked at Christina, then back at Josh. Both had the same smile plastered on their faces. It quickly became obvious to Marie that this had been the plan all along. "I have to get going, I'm sorry."

“No, Marie, I’m sorry.” Christina stood over Marie as she tied her shoes and said, “I had a little bit too much to drink and that kiss messed with my head.”

“Christina, it’s okay, I’m just going to head out, I’ll see you Monday.” Marie grabbed her coat, her purse and walked out of the apartment entering a new stage of single womanhood with her dignity trailing behind.

“I’ll go grab you a towel,” Michael said, getting off the bed and disappearing into the bathroom. I stayed on the bed, covered in a mixture of Michael’s semen and mine, trying to get my breathing back to a steady rhythm. My knees and hands were shaking, but this time, it was from the familiar feeling of euphoria after good sex, not the feeling of humiliation that had been with me for too long. This hadn’t been like most hookups from the past. Michael had been experienced. Not in the ways of sex, but in the ways of regard. I looked at the clock on my phone and saw that I had about thirty minutes until I was to meet my friends in Hell’s Kitchen.

“I’ll go grab you a towel,” I said as I hopped off the bed. When I got into the bathroom, I turned on the sink, wet my hands and splashed water across my face. My breathing was still not back to normal, but with each inhale, the exhales got easier. With each new movement and each kiss shared, I felt mini tethers being formed between us. It felt life affirming. My body was beginning to feel weightless with each new flashback, when I was inside him and he whispered in my ear. I wanted to call everyone I knew and tell them. In the past, when it came to sex, I had just seen it as a necessity, not something that I would ever do just for the hell of it. Now, I saw it as a hobby, as a reward, as a healthy obsession.

“Hey, um, I gotta head out, I’m meeting some friends in Hell’s Kitchen,” Andy muttered as I threw a towel towards him.

“And just like that, he disappeared,” I said with a chuckle, trying to hide my disappointment.

“Don’t you have plans tonight? The night is still young.” Andy had cleaned off his bare chest and was now trying to find his clothes that had landed in various directions across the room.

“The night might be young for you, but it’s past my bedtime.” I looked at my watch and saw that it was almost 11.

“Have you ever been to a gay bar before?” Andy asked, as he slid his legs into his tight pants.

“No, I haven’t. What’s it like?” I asked.

“Well... it’s a lot of muscled up gays that don’t give you the time of day, a lot of sweat and a lot of coke,” Andy answered.

“Sounds magical.” I reached out my hand and placed it on the small of Andy’s back before he could get his shirt back on. He turned around and ran his fingers through my hair.

“That’s not quite how I would describe it, but maybe you’d have a different experience,” said Andy.

“Hey, what if I came with you?” I posited. Andy’s head whipped back to me. “You can just introduce me to your friends as a coworker, or...” I reached for Andy’s hand, kissing the back of it softly. “You could tell them the truth.”

“And what is the truth?” asked Andy.

“That I’m an old downtrodden fuck who has been reborn after spending his entire life hiding,” I said with a pitiful sigh. I was shocked by my own forwardness but judging by the way Andy kissed the top of my head, I knew that he saw me.

“Yeah, you can come, I’m sure my friends won’t mind.”

END

Animals

The air was bitter and piercing, causing the petrified corn stalks to crunch underfoot. A chilled fog hung over the isolated landscape, casting a gray hue over northeast Iowa. With each hurried step towards the body, an echo rang in Detective Langford's ear, traveling through the stagnant atmosphere and bouncing off the cedar lined parameter of the deserted field. Detective Tayce paced slightly behind Langford, pointing out a sort of imbalanced power dynamic between the partners that had already been present, but was now being physically manifested on this unnaturally cold September morning. The occasional gust of wind brought about some levity between the two men, creating a whistle in the air that filled the silence. Tayce, who was fresh out of the academy, had been assigned to Langford and the transition had been all but smooth. Langford had remained partnerless for nearly three years following the death of Wilburs, his first partner. Langford was used to taking charge and not having to answer to anyone. Now he had someone he had to delegate to, someone that didn't know his shorthand, someone that had not seen the same things he had seen.

Three officers were circling the body, studying the land around it for evidence and scribbling in state-issued notepads. Langford had never cared for the police, a sentiment he inherited from Wilburs. He saw them as gnats, buzzing information in his ear that he always took with a grain of salt. They were too excitable, like toddlers, making it easy to fumble evidence and make impulsive decisions. Langford had been a witness to one of Wilbur's notorious outbursts where he put an officer in a head lock for forgetting to read a suspect their Miranda Rights. Wilburs' reputation latched on to Langford after his death. The detective was still trying to decide if that was a benefit or a hindrance.

His wife had answered the call at around five that morning, in an understated fury. Langford had to be shaken out of his slumber. His tongue was coated with a flaky paste and acid filled his chest. As he grunted himself awake, his own bourbon-laced breath traveled up his nostrils making his stomach somersault and slosh with bile.

“Hello,” he said into the wired landline. Mucus coated the back of his throat, stifling the greeting. His wife walked out of the room and into their shared bathroom, leaving the door cracked slightly open. At the beginning of Langford’s career as a Detective, when alcohol was recreational and not yet medicinal, Shelley would hang by his side during his phone calls with the local police. When the case was especially unreal, he would angle the receiver out towards her so she could listen to all the gory details along with him. But as the years passed, the job consumed more and more of Langford, chipping away at the nuance and excitement that once fueled their late-night chats about gas station robberies and domestic disputes. Now, any time he received one of these calls, Shelley would leave the room, knowing that the house would be empty for the next few months and that the dark corners of their shared space would be more menacing.

“Yeah, Detective Langford, we found a body in a cornfield off Stanport. Jane Doe. Markings on the victim correlate with the Thomas case.” His eyes, which had been previously covered to avoid the harsh, yellow light coming from his bedside lamp, snapped open and he swung his legs off the bed, his bare feet grazing the cold hardwood floor. He wasn’t sure if he had heard that name right.

“*The ‘Thomas’ Case? As in, Ellie Thomas?*” questioned Langford. He was now standing, gripping the receiver in his hand tightly and pressing it hard against his ear so as to not miss a single detail.

“Yessir, the similarities are... hard to ignore.”

As they walked closer to the victim, flashes of Ellie Thomas’s body played on a loop behind Langford’s eyes, presented through a cloudy filter. He had studied the crime scene photos so intensely, that they were still branded into his psyche three years later. Her long blonde hair had appeared brown due to the mixture of dirt and dried blood and snaked across her back like an arthritic finger, pointing out the shapes and symbols that had been carefully carved into her lower back with a Bowie knife. Some of the cuts had been stitched and well cleaned, while a majority had been fresh - bright pink and filled with mud.

Langford took a beat to consider warning Tayce about what they were about to see but thought twice. The three cops scurried like roaches when they saw Langford and began hanging on the fringes of the scene like students waiting for instruction.

“Good God,” said Tayce as he squirmed and let out a half hiccup, half burp, causing Langford to sigh loud enough to show his annoyance with the rookie.

“God’s not here Detective,” Langford muttered as he crouched over the body. The first thing Langford noticed about the body was that the arms and legs were splayed out and bent at cartoonish angles, like a crime scene you would see on the cover of a children’s novel. This led him to believe that the body was killed elsewhere, then transported to the field. The killer must have intended to make the scene look as though the victim was murdered in the field, but the body had been displayed so unnaturally, almost comically, that that could not be the case.

“She wasn’t killed here. Look at the way her legs are both at perfect ninety-degree angles,” Tayce said, tracing the angle in the air with his pen.

“Nice work,” Langford muttered.

Next, Langford noticed the scars on the victim's back. Like Ellie, some of the shapes had already healed before her murder and some had happened within the span of a few hours. The most massive design being a triangle that was still leaking blood that had since either coagulated into a thick blob or had raced down her side, painting the brown, flattened corn stalks red.

"Some of these scars were made while she was still alive. Do you think it was torture? Or... some kind of ritual?" asked Tayce as he crouched low, now on eye level with Langford. He tried to avoid staring at particular areas of her body for too long, but the symbols were everywhere.

"We've seen this before," said Langford. Tayce looked up quizzically at Langford, who was still studying the body as he spoke. "About three years ago, markings and everything." Tayce stood up, feeling like any further contribution would be futile.

"Did you catch the guy?" Tayce already knew the answer to the question and instantly regretted asking.

"We thought we had," Langford said.

Three years earlier, Ben Langford had nursed a bourbon against his chest as he had watched a group of women walk into Jack's, a bar where more than half of the clientele were usually local cops and detectives who gathered to numb their psyches after a day of dealing with the worst of humanity. *Someone's gotta do it!* A common phrase amongst Jack's regulars, immortalized into a neon sign on the wall behind the bar.

Langford had consumed enough dark liquor at this point of the night that his vision was deceiving him, casting a glow onto even the most mundane objects. All three of the

women had an orb around them, making it seem as though they were from another planet. One at a time they would throw back their curled hair and let out a contained laughter that sounded more like a mating call than an expression of joy.

“God, they just keep getting younger, don’t they?” Langford whistled, dabbing his forehead with a bar napkin as he studied one of the woman’s tight, light washed jeans and ruffled top that left little to the imagination.

“No, you’re just getting older, my friend,” Wilburs proclaimed. It was Langford’s thirty-eighth birthday, which meant that he would have to be carried home at the end of the night. Shelley was at home, having already cooked his favorite meal. She had also gifted him a new tie wrapped in old Christmas paper from last season. It was a black tie with thin, pink stripes that ran horizontally down the fabric. A tie he would never be caught dead in at work for fear of being hassled.

Shortly after they were married, they tried to get pregnant. Shelley took every measure documented to make the odds higher, but when the issue is biological the odds fall to zero. After over a decade of trying, their marriage shifted. Shelley stopped drinking altogether and Langford felt as though he wasn’t needed anymore. He felt that his sole purpose had been to give Shelley a baby and because he couldn’t, his manhood had been brought into question, causing a rift so wide that it felt as though everyday was a struggle to crawl out. Langford began to pity Shelley, seeing her as something broken - delicate and untouchable. The way she walked around the house like a corpse and flinched when he walked past her. He had only hit her once, but it was hard enough that she had slipped into the fringes, only speaking when spoken to and creating private joys for herself that didn’t

involve Langford. The pity and distance Langford felt had invited some dangerous desires within that often boiled over when he pumped alcohol into his veins.

Langford didn't take time to feel bad for the ways he disrespected their marriage behind Shelly's back. He filed that part of himself away, keeping it at an arm's length and viewing it as a response to the ways in which Shelley made him feel inferior.

"Well man, it's getting late. Do you need a ride?" Wilburs asked. He had been mentally keeping track of the number of bourbons that Langford ordered. He had just finished his fifth and could see Langford's eyes scanning the bar, intending to order a sixth. Langford was known for going to the bar after work, often ending up in a bed at the end of the night that was not his. Wilburs evaded judgment, as he had a reputation of his own. If Langford was able to wake up for work in the morning, what he did at night Wilburs saw as trivial gossip, not wanting to be involved for fear of creating a rift between him and his work partner.

"No," Langford hiccupped. "I'm probably going to hang around a little while longer..." Langford began to trail off, staring at the glossy, wooden booth that the three women had seated themselves at. "Going to see what I can get my hands on."

"Alright, partner, stay out of trouble," Wilburs said as he punched Langford's arm. "Happy birthday." As Wilburs walked out of the bar, he felt a pang of guilt for leaving Langford at Jack's unattended. He had only met Shelley once when she invited him and his wife over for dinner shortly after Langford had been assigned to him. He knew of Langford's infidelity and could see in Shelley's eyes that she knew too. She would flinch when he entered the room, like she feared him. When he talked, she was silent, not even chiming in when he was finished. It was almost as if he didn't exist to Shelley. She was making him

slowly disappear in order to survive. Wilburs didn't blame her for it, in fact, it made him respect her more and as he drove the short distance home to his wife, he considered giving Shelley a call.

Back inside Jack's, Langford ordered his sixth bourbon, cracking his knuckles against the bar as he waited. He glanced back at the three women again, trying to determine which of the three would be the easiest to coax into bed. He had a system for finding women to sleep with. He would start at Jack's, where he slammed a few bourbons to mask the adrenaline. Not many women frequented Jack's, but there were nights when the women came to him with a goal in mind, which meant little to no effort from him. Most nights, he would leave Jack's and coast the Main Street area, drunk and driving in a circle until people began to pour out of collegiate bars, looking for someone to spend the rest of the night with. Tonight, he wouldn't have to go far, there were three prospects seated not even five yards away.

Just as he was about to make a move towards the table, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Even before turning around, he could smell something sweet over the stale beer, almost chalky, like candy. She was young, early twenties if Langford had to guess. Her long, unnaturally platinum hair spilled onto her shoulders and down her back in waves. The way her eyes curved up at the ends, extenuated by hand-painted black wings, gave her a look of menace that was quickly warmed by the pink gloss on her lips that glittered under the neon.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked as she sat at the empty bar stool next to Langford before he could give an answer.

"It is now." Langford returned her smile, adding a wink that looked more like a nervous twitch, thanks to the bourbon.

“Ellie Thomas,” she said, resting her chin on her fist and offering up her other hand as a greeting.

“Ben Langford,” he said, not moving his eyes from her lips as he shook her hand.

Ellie Thomas lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Her roommate from beauty school was away for the night, visiting her parents that lived a few hours south. From Ellie’s bed, Langford stared up at the white ceiling that was slanting and morphing through his inebriated eyes, making his stomach queasy. Ellie was in the bathroom, washing Langford from her. He smiled to himself as he slipped back into his underwear under the covers. The bathroom was about two yards from the foot of the bed. When Ellie had closed the door, it bounced off the frame, leaving about an inch of light that poured into the room, illuminating Langford’s bare chest. He stared at the space between the door and the wall. He was able to make out the sink that Ellie had turned on to stifle the sounds of her pee splashing into the toilet bowl. As she washed her hands in front of the mirror, taking a wet towel to her eye makeup, Langford noticed a patch of raised skin on her naked back. Her hair covered most of it, but just above her hips there were translucent pockets of skin that formed a triangle, with a thinner scar that cut the triangle down the middle. The thin, raised edges looked freshly healed, no scabbing or sign of infection. It looked like a very specific symbol, as if it was put there on purpose by someone that knew how to preserve their work.

“What’s that on your back?” Langford asked after Ellie turned off the bathroom light, leaving them both blind.

“What do you mean?” she asked, slipping into an oversized t-shirt.

“There, on your lower back.” Langford hoisted himself onto his elbow and lifted Ellie’s shirt. He began to trace the scar as she bent over and pulled her underwear up.

“Ah.” She jerked away from Langford’s touch and covered up the mark with her hand. “It’s... uh... just a burn, uh, from when I was a kid.” Langford sucked his teeth, knowing he was being lied to.

“It looks fresh,” Langford pressed. “And oddly specific.” Langford often found that what he did for work bled into his daily interactions. He saw every new acquaintance as a case and looked at mundane abnormalities as evidence. *What is your story?* he wanted to ask. He knew why he was here, and he wanted to know what had brought her to tap on his shoulder at Jack’s. Why would she invite him into her home and trust that his callused hands wouldn’t crack her thick skull?

“If you’re going to be nosy, you can get the fuck out,” Ellie shot back with a chuckle. She turned her back to him, resting her head on to her pillow and pulling the bed spread up over her neck. Langford considered sleeping off what remained of his inebriation in his truck, but he wasn’t finished collecting evidence.

“Why were you at Jack’s tonight? Seems odd for someone like you to be in a cop bar.” Ellie turned her head back towards Jack so now they were facing each other. Their heads on their respective pillows, faces about two inches from each other, the stench of alcohol mixing in the air between them.

“*Someone like you?* What does that mean?” She was quick to get angry, an attribute that Langford found endearing, even comforting. The antithesis of what he was used to at home.

“Someone young, someone beautiful... what were you looking for?” He rested the palm of his hand on her face, inviting his thumb into her mouth before she buried her head into her pillow.

“Stop that,” she said. Langford returned his hand to his side. “My friend is seeing the bartender, so she dragged me along.”

“What brought you over to me?” Langford returned his hand to her, this time he squeezed her shoulders like he was milking her for answers.

“Fuck, that feels good.” She let out a slight giggle as Langford dug harder into the tight muscle, not answering his question. “I didn’t even know it was a cop bar.”

“You wouldn’t, not many of us wear our uniform there.” He continued to work her shoulder and began to move down her back. As he rubbed the muscles, he began to feel patches of raised skin that had once been covered by her hair. Now they were just below his fingertips with nothing but a piece of fabric between them. Ellie started to squirm under his touch but didn’t protest. His thumb grazed against another scar; *how many do you have?* He wanted to ask but was afraid of the consequences. So, he continued to move his hands farther and farther down her back, until her giggles turned into moans.

Langford woke to the sound of an electronic bell; a high-pitched ring accompanied by a lower-pitched ring. The sound repeated three more times, each time filling the dark bedroom like a symphony. After each ring, the silence that followed sucked the air out of the room, leaving a buzzing in Langford’s ear. The doorbell had no effect on Ellie, who’s steady breathing persisted through each ring. Langford pulled back the covers and got to his feet,

not bothering to put on clothes. The ringing had stopped, but Langford could make out a shuffling noise from outside, like a rabid animal digging through leaves.

If he had his gun, he would have brandished it, scaring off whatever entity was threatening his secrecy. *To kill or be killed*, he thought. A sentiment that, when necessary, Langford would employ with little to no mercy. It was what brought him to the force. That animalistic instinct in us that we are hounded to suppress. Langford didn't have a reservoir of repressed anger that festered in the psyches of most. He released it with no concern for the damage left in his wake. If he had his gun, he would have grabbed for it, unlocking the safety as he walked into the night. But he was defenseless, meandering half-nude into the foyer.

The door had a peephole that Langford squinted through. All he could see was the sidewalk that led to the road and the leaves that tumbled and rolled with the wind. He unlocked the door in both places and opened it quickly. There was no one around. The air was warm, the breeze bringing life to the humid air. He stepped onto the concrete sidewalk with his bare feet and stared at the empty black sky. The inevitable hangover had already started. The middle of his forehead was throbbing, and his muscles ached. He couldn't remember how he and Ellie had gotten home, but he could see his truck at the end of the sidewalk. The wheels were turned towards the grass and the truck bed was slightly angled out towards the road, leaving just enough room for traffic.

Then something to his right moved and quickly stopped. His head snapped in the direction of the movement before his ears picked up a sound that made his stomach roil. It sounded like something tough was being torn in two with a jaw that snapped violently. The tears sounded labored, like individual veins were being ripped and arteries popped. He could see the struggle about five yards away and immediately identified it as an animal hunched

over something struggling for life. As he walked closer, he saw that it was a dog tearing into the body of a rabbit. When the dog sensed Langford's presence, he stopped and began wagging his tail, completely disregarding the blood that dripped from his jowls. Langford stood above the dog, still aware of the presence of whoever had rang the doorbell. The dog then grabbed the half-eaten rabbit carcass and began walking towards the front door of Ellie's apartment.

"Where are you going, you fucker," Langford whispered under his breath. He walked back towards the apartment, trailing behind the dog who had just dropped the rabbit on Ellie's front porch and sat, wagging his tail, showing off his kill to Langford.

"Nice job, buddy." He tapped the dog lightly on the head in hopes that his recognition would satisfy the animal enough so that he would trot away with his trophy dangling in his mouth. However, the dog became more excited and began nudging Ellie's front door with his nose. Before Langford could kick the dog away from the door, he noticed a folded piece of paper that had been taped to the door frame. The detective ripped it off quickly and unfolded it, revealing a message.

Come back 2 The Tracks.

Weeks passed before Ellie Thomas's body was found.

"Langford, we found a body in a ditch off Stanport," said the officer on the other side of Langford's landline. It was a Friday morning and Shelley was already in the kitchen, the smell of bacon wafting under their bedroom door. Langford hung up the phone and rushed to put on his suit. He wanted to be as sharp as possible, so he poured coffee into a to-go mug and grabbed two pieces of bacon that Shelley had wrapped in a napkin for him.

“Thank you, baby,” he muttered as he leaned in to kiss his wife’s cheek. Shelley grimaced when she smelt the bourbon that wafted out of his mouth, but welcomed the kiss, not looking to invite an overdue argument.

When Langford reached the scene, he immediately began scanning the area for Wilburs. He could feel the brutality buzzing in the air, sending goosebumps up and down his forearms. His adrenaline was pumping, and he couldn’t help but equate it with pure excitement. After years of poring through case evidence of murders that made some of his peers’ legends in the field, he was stirred to tear open this case and get a glimpse at the evil he knew was present on the fringes of his small town.

“Where the hell is Wilburs?” he asked a local cop that had just arrived at the scene.

“He’ll be here shortly, he just asked that you oversee the collection of some evidence,” said Office Ryder who wasn’t making eye contact with Langford. She began twisting her fingers with her other hand, cracking the knuckles. Langford knew she wasn’t telling him the full truth, but he began marching towards the body with Officer Ryder following quickly behind. *Wilburs will just have to catch up*, he thought.

“Is it brutal?” Langford asked Ryder with a crooked smile.

“I would say so.” She still wasn’t making eye contact with him as they made their way to the body in tandem.

The air was thick with humidity, but the sun hung behind a cloud, offering some relief from the heat. About four cops circled the body, two were hovering above the ditch, looking down at the two other officers who were studying the mud for evidence.

Langford and Ryder approached the ditch which was about eight feet deep and three feet wide. A massive tree branch had fallen so long ago that it was now fused with the side of the ditch making it difficult for the pair to see the body that was hidden under the dense foliage of the branch.

“We need to get some chainsaws down here to cut away at this thing,” Ryder said, as she watched the two cops that were in the ditch struggle to maneuver their way out. Langford had never been the lead on a case before, especially one of this magnitude. He was confident that he wouldn’t destroy evidence by getting a closer look at the body.

Once the two officers were out, Langford began his descent into the ditch, grabbing onto the branch for support. The slanted edge of the ditch allowed for easy access to the base, where the body lay face down, completely nude. As Langford made his way down, he was able to make out a few details. The victim was a woman, with long hair that covered most of her back. Her hair was caked with blood and mud, making it almost impossible to decipher the natural color of it. It wasn’t until he was right over the body - staring past a thin branch that had a knot of blonde hair wrapped around it - that he was able to make out the symbols etched into the victim’s lower back. He felt his heart turn to lead and drop, making his intestines squirm. The pores on his forehead opened, releasing a cold sweat that made his vision blurry. He recognized the symbol immediately. A triangle with a straight line that cut it perfectly in half. He was looking at the body of Ellie Thomas. Now, his heart was beating in his throat, and he knew he had to make his way out of the ditch before he passed out in it and had to be airlifted out.

Once he had made his way out of the ditch, the effort had left him pale in face. He pointed a shaky finger at Ryder and said, “I’ve already asked her this, but do any of you

know where Wilburs is? Have you contacted him again?" The cops stayed silent, staring at their shoes, kicking at the mud on their soles. Langford could feel the familiar pang of anger rise in his throat, wanting a release.

"Somebody tell me where the fuck Wilburs is, or one of you is going to lose their fucking job."

"Woah," one of the cops that had made their way out of the ditch was holding up his muddy hands to Langford. "We were told to keep it to ourselves, he'll be in contact with you shortly."

Without missing a beat, Langford put his hand to his side where his gun was perched in its holster. "Tell me right now, or one of you is going to get fucked up!"

Ryder glanced at the other officers with pity before she spoke. "Photos of the body were already sent to him this morning," she said. "The victim is Ellie Thomas, Detective Wilburs' niece."

The day after Ellie Thomas's funeral, Ben Langford made a choice. No one knew about his night with Ellie, or that he had a major piece of evidence in the form of a note found on Ellie's door frame that read: *Come back 2 The Tracks*. In the week since Ellie's murder, Wilburs argued with the state that he should be the one put in charge of the investigation. His request was denied, sending Wilburs into a manic tailspin that resulted in a smashed fender and a broken mailbox, both of which had been promptly replaced without any media scrutiny.

Langford had avoided Wilburs as much as possible. He sent flowers and attended the funeral where he hugged a sobbing Wilburs and watched as each of his partner's immediate and extended family members shared their eulogies.

Now, he slipped out of the back door of his home, dressed in black, with the note in his pocket.

As Langford climbed into the ditch where Ellie Thomas's body was found not even a week ago, he thought about how he should have taken a few shots of bourbon before his descent. The air was still, the humidity that had been present the last time he was at this spot was gone and the moon hanging overhead provided ample light. The earth was still slick with mud, so he had to cling on to the decaying branch as he edged his way down. He could feel the presence of the note in his front pocket as if it had been charged electrically, buzzing, and burning his skin. During the last few nights, he laid on the couch, staring at the ceiling, not able to sleep, planning for this. He was going to plant the note where the body was found and hope that someone would find it, ultimately ridding him of this guilt that was festering inside, slowly burning holes in his stomach.

When he made it to the base of the ditch, the still air suddenly became filled with a crunching noise. Langford looked up towards the edge of the ditch and could see two beams of light cut through the night. A truck was pulling up on the gravel road that ran parallel to the ditch. Luckily, Langford had parked his car a mile and a half up the road and had walked to the site. He ducked under a thick branch, waiting for the car to pass before making another move. He waited as the truck approached, completely still, but as the vehicle got closer, the crunching sound of tire hitting gravel started to dissipate until it completely fizzled out.

Langford's heart dropped as the lights from the truck were cut. Whoever was here at the scene had parked their car about ten yards away from where Langford was hiding. He reached for his gun as silently as possible, ready to fire at whoever was here to threaten his plan.

The buzzing sound of insects allowed Langford to catch his breath and adjust the position of his legs without being caught. After what felt like ten minutes of gut churning nothingness, Langford saw a flashlight flicker over the edge of the ditch. Whoever held the flashlight was walking closer and closer to where the fallen tree merged with the side of the ditch. Langford had to think fast, *I am a detective, there could be a multitude of reasons why I'm at this murder site*. He began running through excuses he could give as to why he was in the ditch. He decided that it would look better for his case if he wasn't found suspiciously hiding under the branch, so he contorted his body and made his way to his feet, ready to be seen.

The flashlight edged closer and closer until the darkened figure stood over Langford who was blinded by the beam of the flashlight.

"Langford? What the hell are you doing here?" Langford recognized Wilburs' voice immediately.

"Wilburs... you scared the shit out of me!" Langford felt a weight in his stomach and spots began flashing in front of his eyes like he was going to black out. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought I would come out here and see if I can find anything... that might have been missed." Langford's voice cracked and he stumbled over his words.

"Well, I appreciate that... I guess," Wilburs muttered the last part under his breath. "Now why don't you get the hell out of there and we can look together." Langford felt an

immense sense of relief as he untangled himself from the branch and freed his shoes from the thick mud. He could feel the weight of the note that hung in his pocket as he climbed his way out. Wilburs grabbed for his hand, pulling Langford up through the mud.

“Where’s your car?” Wilburs asked when Langford was over the edge of the ditch, kicking the mud off his shoe.

“Oh... I parked it up the road about a mile there...” Langford was struggling to catch his breath. “I had a few drinks at home and needed to walk them off before doing any more digging.” Langford investigated Wilburs’ eyes as he spoke. It was clear now that Wilburs was inebriated, his eyes were halfway closed, his shirt was untucked, and his hand that held the flashlight was shaking.

“You’re a lying son of a bitch, Langford.” A sinister smile formed on Wilburs face and for a second, Langford thought Wilburs was going to burst into a manic fit of laughter. But the smile remained as he swayed, blinding Langford with the flashlight. “On the night of August 15th at 0500 hours, a truck was spotted in front of Ellie Thomas’s apartment by a neighbor, license plate Q84-L66. Who does that license plate belong to Detective Langford?” Wilburs put his hand to his side, jostling with his holster before removing his gun and pointing it at Langford. “Who does it belong to?” Wilburs yelled, sending an echo through the air. Langford reached for his gun quickly and pointed it at Wilburs.

“Wilburs, calm down, I can explain everything,” Langford said. He could hardly hear his own voice over the ringing in his ear. “Just put down the gun, and we can talk, like men.”

“You’re not a real man,” said Wilburs. His voice caught as he spoke, and Langford could see the tears that ran down his partner’s face. “You can’t even stay faithful to your wife... you have to go around fucking young girls to feel like a man, you’re not a real man.”

At this, Langford began to feel that familiar itch in his throat and a fire started behind his eyes. He started walking towards Wilburs and reached into the pocket for the note, ready to confess. But as he inched closer, a sharp, metallic explosion filled the space between the two partners. The bullet from Wilburs gun missed and hit the tree line behind the ditch. Langford didn't even allow himself time to react before he pulled his trigger, sending a second round of piercing soundwaves through the air.

Wilburs fell onto his back with a thud. The silence that followed enveloped Langford and he began to feel claustrophobic. He fell to his knees and watched as blood began pouring from Wilburs chest. He would only have a little less than an hour before someone called the police to report the gun shots. He got up, walked towards Wilburs, and checked for a pulse. The skin under Langford's finger was still.

Three years later, Detective Tayce stood over a body in the field that stretched behind the ditch where Ellie Thomas's body had been found three years earlier. Detective Langford had just told Tayce that they had seen a murder like this before and that they even thought they had caught the guy.

"You thought you caught them? Is this man still in custody? Can we question him?" Langford pitied Tayce's childlike approach to his job. Like cops, he was too excitable, too unaffected by the system, too unaffected by life.

"No, he's not in custody, he's dead," Langford said, putting a thumb to his temple. "It was my old partner, Detective Wilburs."

"Your old partner was a murderer?" Langford could tell that Tayce was fighting off a smile.

“Yeah, the victim was his niece,” Langford said. Tayce whistled in disbelief and went back to examining the victim. After three years, the lies Langford told to cover himself had become his reality. Staring down at the body in front of him, he began to feel his reality splinter.

END

The Principal's Office

“Mrs. Riley, are you listening to me?” My eyes snapped to the principal like I had been caught looking at something private. The man’s face was flushed, and spittle had collected in the wrinkles of his thin, paper white lips. He had been tapping a marbled pen on the wood of the antique desk like a metronome. The walls on both sides of the principal’s office were made up of dark wooden bookshelves, stuffed with black and maroon leather-bound encyclopedias and several variations of the Bible. The smell of coffee breath and after shave fought for the attention of my pinched nose.

When I had gotten the call from St. Martin's Catholic, I assumed it was because Michael was sick or up for some award. Up until now, I didn’t know Michael was capable of trouble, but as I sit next to him in the principal’s office of his high school, he hasn’t been able to look at me.

“Yes, sorry, I’m listening,” I lied. The truth is, I was having trouble focusing on the frog-faced man because I had been focused instead on a stain near the big toe of one of my son’s tennis shoes. At first, it looked like cranberry juice, deep red, dried and cracked. Then my eyes morphed it into a gunshot wound with no entrance or exit hole, just an uncleaned splatter of blood. It could have also been the result of a bloody nose, but Michael hadn’t had one since he was eleven... as far as I knew. The shoes had been expensive and when Michael had picked them out for his birthday, I told him that they’ll stain easily, but apparently, they were “in.”

I didn’t understand the appeal of those thick, chunky white shoes that were “in,” but then again, I didn’t understand a lot about my son’s generation. Their lives were at once so

public, yet so secretive, only posting stills with little to no context of what came before and what would come after.

As he sat slumped in the chair next to me, eating away at the loosened skin on his thumb, I wished I could crack his head open. His every opinion and desire would spill out on a scroll for me to annotate. Most of our conversations at home were left with much to be desired. *Good*, was the only adjective he seemed to know.

How was school?

Good.

I mark it up as hormones mixed with the realization that youth doesn't always last. His father left us when he was five, so, even though he hasn't shown it, I allow him some wiggle room to explore his anger. I live with a cancerous fear that something has been welling up inside him and that I am the last person he would allow to help him when it finally erupts.

The principal let out another croak. I squirmed in my chair waiting for the verdict.

“Michael was seen on camera smoking cigarettes during his lunch period.” At first, I was shocked, then confused, but as I stared more into the principal's smug face, I thought, *that's it?*

As I was about to snap back at the principal, I felt guilty for justifying Michael's behavior and decided that I needed to match the principal's stern energy. This is something that I'm working on.

I backhanded Michael in the arm and said, “Michael, what the hell, those things will kill you from the inside out!” Michael let out a grunt and the troll glared at him as if he and I were on the same team. I hated that.

“He will have to serve a week of after school detention and give us his next two Saturdays. If this poses a scheduling problem, you will need to let my secretary or me know before tomorrow,” the principal said. He passed Michael his sentencing in a dignified way. He probably got off on punishing teenagers, the sick bastard.

“That shouldn’t be a problem. Should it, Michael? I think that’s fair,” I said as I nodded in Michael’s direction and plastered on a fake smile. “Am I finished here? Sorry, I had to cancel a meeting for this and need to get back to the office.” I needed the troll to know how much of an imposition it was for me to have to cancel my fake lunch meeting.

“Yes Mrs. Riley, we are finished. Michael, I hope I don’t see you here again this year.” He pointed his cracked, sausage finger at Michael as we awkwardly made our way into the hallway. Michael sauntered past me without a word, and I let him go.

“Oh, Mrs. Riley, one more thing,” the principal croaked once more, and I rolled my eyes into oblivion before turning back around. “I didn’t want to say this in front of Michael.”

“Yessir?” *Sir? Really?*

“I have been noticing that Michael...” He scratched his beard, and I could see dandruff littering the dark oak desk before him. “He is getting mixed in with the wrong crowd.”

“What do you mean by that exactly?” I glared back at him.

“I think it’d be best if you talked to him yourself... before he gets dragged down.”

My engine sputtered and the red gas gauge on the dashboard moved two ticks. There was a station about two minutes up the road from St. Martin's Catholic that would have to suffice. Pulling out of the parking lot, the red light in front of me put me in a dull trance. The

pixelated edges of the light began to blur as I lost focus. The center of the orb cracked, and white creases cut through the circle like veins. The sound of my turn signal became slightly muted, turning the high-pitched tick into a heartbeat.

... I should... say something to him... shouldn't I?

A blaring crescendo from behind my shoulder brought the world back into focus. From my rearview mirror I could see that the lady behind me was slamming into her horn repeatedly, an upturned scowl slashed across her wrinkled face.

Fuck off.

“Can I do twenty dollars on pump four, please?” The blue haired, pimple faced teenager behind the register counted my miscellaneous bills. I watched as the chain around her neck, a silver pentagram charm hanging from it loosely, bounced across her pale chest. The same symbol was sloppily tattooed on her left wrist in red ink. This generation of teenagers are so obsessed with maintaining an intangible image. I bet if I asked this girl what the symbol meant, she would have to pull out her cell phone and Google the answer. It’s all a crock of shit.

Why can't you just be fucking normal, and stop being so obsessed with identifying yourself to the world? You're a piece of shit, I'm a piece of shit. I wanted to shake the girl's shoulder, snapping her out of whatever overly medicated state she was in and help her realize that the world does not owe her anything.

Behind her was a wall of cigarettes. The off-white boxes with gold trimmed labels that I usually ignored took on new meaning after this morning's meeting.

What was his brand? I scanned the shelves and my eyes fell on a white pack with a red circle in the center. LUCKY STRIKE overlapped the circle in black, bolded letters.

Before it was legally required to have a warning splashed across the front, this was the brand my grandmother smoked. She would sit in her stained, olive green, corduroy chair and roll a lit cigarette between her thumb and pointer finger, grimacing at anything eye level. Sometimes it would be at you. She would lose herself in the dented curvature of your head, the crooked shape of your nose, your teeth that bucked out.

Her eyes are too far apart and one of them's lazy, she would mumble to no one, still rolling the cigarette even when crumbs of ash spilled onto the floor for the cat, *she didn't get that from my side of the family...*

“Actually, can I also get a pack of Marlboros?” I said, shooing the memory away.

“Yeah, totally, which kind?” she asked. I looked back at the display and saw that more than half of the boxes were Marlboro's, each kind distinguished by a color.

“I'll take the red ones.” The teen turned towards the wall, not able to wait until she had her back to me to roll her eyes.

Bitch.

“Thanks sweetie,” I said, adding extra sugar to my voice. I slid a ten-dollar bill onto the counter and grabbed a lighter at random from a glass bowl that had \$2.50 written on it in black marker.

“This too,” I said, sliding the lighter across the counter, studying the design. A big breasted red devil that flashed its forked tongue, stared back at me winking. The cartoon held a flaming pitchfork between her black nipples and a cloudy speech bubble hung above her horns.

Need a light? The devil asked.

Yes... yes, I do!

Smoke wafted from the lit end of the Marlboro Red, filling the kitchen with smoke. My lungs still ached from my first drag. When I inhaled for the second time, I let the smoke sit in my lungs for an extra second, allowing the burn to settle into all the right places.

When the nicotine entered my blood, a calming lightness spread through my limbs. My heavy eyes closed while my nose got used to the chemical smell that was now spreading throughout my home, staining the walls, and clinging to the fibers of the carpet.

The acrid smell brought me back to when my brother got a new BB gun for his birthday. I was perched on the couch and through the window I saw the front yard. It was October. Kenny was stomping the leaves covering our grandmother's yard like a colorful film, BB gun at his side, aiming at trees and cars.

Now with the sundown, Kenny was inside, gun was pointed at the center of Grandma's chest. Her face had a natural scrunch, so it was hard to tell whether her eyes were open or closed, but by the way her chest moved, it was clear that she was asleep. A pile of ash collecting on the carpet from a Lucky Strike fixed between engorged fingers.

Kenny stared at me with an odd smile, like putting on a show just for me and who would think otherwise. But as he gnashed his teeth and lowered his eyes, I didn't dare make sudden moves. He put his pointer to his mouth, warning me: if I made a sound, I would be the next.

He was moving with menace as if daring himself to shoot but resisting. Like an urge he couldn't control. He put his finger to the trigger, aimed, then dropped the gun, stamped his foot, and reared back, grunting in frustration like he had changed his mind. After each fit, he returned the barrel to our grandma without hesitation. I was paralyzed, words stuck in my

throat. Binksy the cat was perched in my lap, immune to the unsettling electricity that snapped in the air. He wasn't going to shoot her, but at seven years old, *how was I supposed to know?*

With each time Kenny took aim and broke it, his stomps became more pointed. Binksy began to squirm in my arms, resisting against the tight grip that brought me minimal comfort. It was as if the static in the room permeated Binksy's intuition. As she continued to struggle, I continued to grip harder until Kenny's most violent fit caused the floor to vibrate. I felt the skin on my forearm pop as the cat secured her teeth into me. From my aching stomach, I was able to muster a scream that reverberated against the low ceiling and tightly closed in walls.

Looking back, I'm grateful that I didn't get the chance to see the look in my brother's eyes as he moved his aim from my grandmother's chest to mine. After the snap of the trigger being pulled, Binksy's body jerked back against my chest. Sharp snarls and aching moans came from Binksy.

The barrel of the gun brushed against my shoulder as Kenny silently passed me and ran out of the front door. I looked down at Binksy. Some red began to mix with her orange and yellow fur as I stared into the small void. The circle got bigger as more blood poured out of it, some of it leaking onto the cream-colored carpet.

While the shock began to travel through my body, I looked to my grandmother. She was still sitting in her chair. Her white hair clinging to her cheeks with cold sweat and her feet planted firmly on the floor. Her chest was still moving at a steady pace. The cigarette had gone out.

Kenny returned that night while I was asleep. He crawled into bed next to me, putting the covers over our heads and shaking me awake.

“Is Binsky dead?” Kenny asked, as tears welled in his eyes. I nodded my head as my own tears streamed onto my pillow, leaving wet patches that smelled of salt.

“I’m so sorry,” Kenny whispered through the tears. “Sometimes I get these ideas in my head and if I don’t do them my entire body shakes and my throat gets bigger until I can’t breathe...” I just laid frozen in the bed, feeling the cold void against my chest where Binsky had slept every night before her violent end. Kenny put his arm over my shoulder and was too afraid to shrug it off.

After smoking my first Marlboro to the filter, the feeling of lightness was dissipating. I wasn’t ready to let the lightness go completely so I opened the pack and grabbed another cigarette. As I took a drag and felt the now satisfying sensation of warm smoke bathing my lungs, I heard the front door to the right of the kitchen unlock. A slight breeze followed Michael in, sending the smoke into a frenzy. His head was hung low and white headphone wires were plugged in. The music was loud enough that I could hear it pumping from the mini speakers.

“Mom, are you smoking?” Michael asked, taking the headphones out.

“Yeah, I am. Don’t we do that in this house now?” I took another drag and turned my head to blow the smoke. “You want one?” I angled the pack out towards him. He glanced with squinted eyes, probably in the throes of a craving.

“What’re you trying to do here? If I take one of these, will you ground me?” The last question, sarcastic.

What exactly was I trying to do...?

“Michael, coming to your school was a really big imposition for me today.” I took another drag as Michael sat next to me. “How could you be dumb enough to smoke in front of the security cameras? Were you trying to get caught?” I let the smoke trail out of my nose and began to feel a little embarrassed. Michael looked down at his hands, just as confused as I was by my little performance.

Say something Michael, anything!

“I don’t know mom,” he said. He had picked the skin around his thumb to the point that it was starting to bleed so he balled up his hand to suppress the flow of blood. “It didn’t cross my mind. I don’t even smoke, a girl just gave me the pack for free, so I took it.”

Ah, so it was about a girl. Was this girl who the frog faced principal was talking about after Michael left?

I took one last drag before stamping the cigarette out into a pink ceramic bowl.

“Just don’t get caught again, okay?”

I popped a sleeping pill into my mouth and drank the water that sat on my nightstand.

I am a bad mother.

Michael always played video games before he went to bed. Sounds of gunshots and whistling arrows lulled me to sleep every night, thanks to my little pills. I had them prescribed to me after the divorce. The void in the space next to me where he used to lay kept me up at night.

Before I got the pills I would roll over, shove my face into the pillow that used to be his and inhale. His smell was long gone, but my brain was able to trick my nose into smelling

his shampoo. I would put the thick comforter between my thighs and writhe around until I felt a release.

There were a few moments in our marriage where I thought he was going to kill me. I would catch him staring at me while I slept, his hand reaching out to my neck, light brown eyes glazed over. He blamed sleep paralysis brought on by past trauma, but that excuse became null and void when one day, after he had come home from drinking with God knows who, he picked up a knife from the counter and started towards me with it. Michael had been perched on the couch with a small yellow xylophone that I had gotten him for Christmas. He was mid beat, slamming the red mallet into the keys when I yelled. The beat halted and his little eyes were now fixed on the knife that was firmly placed in his father's hands.

Now all it takes is a pill and a gulp of water to put me out...

I was in my grandmother's house, standing at the end of the dark hallway, a light in the living room was weak and ebbing. I picked my foot up and noticed that I was wearing my old pink, pajama pants that had yellow animated crowns littered down the sides. As I walked, I passed by the open bathroom door and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I was seven years old again. My hair long and blonde, the skin underneath my eyes untouched by the hands of time. I continued forward slowly, the edges of the orb were pulsing, like a flame.

When I got to the end of the hallway I peered over the edge of the wall and felt warmth running down my leg. I was completely unaware of the sheer terror that was coursing through my seven-year-old body until I saw the puddle that had collected at my feet.

Looking up, I saw an exact recreation of my grandmother's living room, except now, the green corduroy chair that was usually parallel to the window, was now positioned in the

center of the room, empty and angled out towards me. As I moved across the room, the chair followed me on its swivel, like it was ready to dual.

The cushion started to speak, the seam functioning as the lips, moving up and down with each syllable it threw at me.

Smell me, touch me, smoke me, rip me, tear me, fuck me...

I had to clamp my mouth with my tiny hand to keep from screeching. The chair was silent for a few beats. I couldn't get my legs to move. The seam started to open wider now and out of it fell an orange cat.

Binsky!

Binsky began pacing around the room as the chair started to vibrate. A hole was forming, and blood dripped from the opening. It flowed slowly at first and then as the vibrating reached a high and it felt like the floor was going to crack under my feet. The hole was now bursting with blood, soaking me from head to toe in the sticky matter. As I let out a high-pitched wail, blood dripped from my lips onto my tongue, coating it with a stinging metallic taste.

Suddenly time began to slow and the walls around me warped until I looked down and saw that I was in my red underwear and oversized white t-shirt that I had worn to bed. I had covered my eyes with my blood-soaked finger that was now clean. I heard a soft thud.

I looked up and found that this time, I wasn't alone. A figure that wore the pink floral nightgown that my grandmother used to wear was standing over the body of my brother who appeared to be unconscious. The figure had its back to me and was methodically driving a butcher knife into my brother's ribs. The soft, wet thuds of the knife entering, and the wet

spray of the knife being yanked out sent cold sweat across my face, plastering my bangs to my forehead.

Stop, you're going to kill him!

The voice came from some omniscient presence with a toddler's lisp. The figure continued to stab my brother, sending flecks of blood all over the wall. I wanted to rip the figure away from my brother, but the terror was starting to get physical, and I could feel bile welling up in my throat.

I grabbed a gold candle stick holder that was situated on the windowsill, thinking that if I put enough force behind my swing, I could save my brother. It turned around. I looked into its eyes and fell back in shock. The eyes that looked back at me were my own.

Reeeeeecck

My eyes snapped open. A sound coming from Michael's room had taken me out of the nightmare. My t-shirt was drenched in cold sweat, and my chest ached, like someone had just kicked me.

"Michael!" I yelled. The silence chilled my blood, and I could feel the pores on my forehead opening and cold sweat ooze out. Remnants of the nightmare still lingered, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, like I was being watched.

"Michael..." More silence. "Michael what was that noise?" I glanced at the clock on my phone and saw that it was almost three in the morning. I walked to Michael's room, taking an extra peek at the corners of the hallway, and moving slowly. When I opened the door, the TV was still on with an idle video game playing a tune on a loop.

The covers on the empty bed had been thrown back. I picked up the duvet and sheet and threw them on the ground, not expecting to find anything, just looking for a release,

something to destroy. Along with the sheet, a harder object hit the ground with a soft thud. I unraveled the blankets and found a small, black leather-bound notebook. I began to flip through it, like one of those moving picture illusions. Every page was covered in black ink. Opening it to a random page, my knees went weak when I saw what image the black ink formed.

A figure with long hair that curled out like mine, was drawn with red ink; my cartoon mouth was in the shape of a perfect circle with lines coming out of it, indicating a loud scream. The other figure in the drawing had no hair, like Michael's father and was drawn with blue ink and was brandishing a red knife that was held over his head, by a stick hand. "RED=EVIL BLUE=MISUNDERSTOOD" was written in bolded chicken scratch above our heads.

Flipping to the next page the words EVIL PROSPERS littered the page in all different sizes and styles of lettering. The words covered the next page too and the next. My blood ran cold, and I threw the notebook across the room, leaving a small dent in the white wall above Michael's headboard.

I walked towards his window. The night was still, the streetlights illuminated the dead leaves that littered the ground.

As I was about to search the rest of the house, I noticed that the latches that locked the window in place were flipped.

That fucker.

I got into my car and started driving. The house in my neighborhood flashing past as I drove well over the speed limit. Cream colored brick with brown roofing... cream colored brick with brown roofing... All the windows were dark except a few, signaling someone up

in the middle of the night to relieve themselves or of a young couple in the throes of sex. Behind each façade, there were unique frequencies that bounced off one another creating reactions. How do they cope?

Unless someone picked him up, he couldn't be far.

I exited the cul-de-sac and turned right, coasting along the tree lined road. I was moving slowly, peering in-between the trees, looking for any sign of light. I had my phone on, calling him with no answer, just the three chimes signaling that the call ended.

I was about to make a U-turn in the middle of the road, when I noticed a rusted, electric blue pickup truck parked on the side of the road a few yards ahead. Something about the car felt familiar and my skin raised as my body shuddered.

That fucking bitch!

Earlier that day at the gas station, this was the only other car parked in the lot besides my own. The girl with blue hair with her blue pickup truck with my son.

A girl just gave me the pack for free, so I took it...

I pulled up behind the truck, shutting off the engine. There was no sign of life in the car. I shone the flashlight from my phone into the back window and saw empty energy drink cans and empty packets of cigarettes.

Where the fuck are you, you little entitled shits.

I approached the line of trees that seemed to have no end. I took my first step into the forest, avoiding the ropes of thorns that clung to the earth. There were areas that were dense with trees and foliage making it hard to keep my balance. My heavy breathing was the only thing keeping me from screaming just to fill the void with something familiar.

After trudging for about three minutes, I heard a loud snap and turned the flashlight off. About thirty yards ahead, I saw a soft glow and figures that were standing over the source of the glow. My vision started to become blurry as tears welled and bile rose in my throat.

“Michael what the hell are you doing out here?!” I yelled, shattering the deafening silence. The heads of the figures snapped back and then just as quickly as I turned my flashlight on to walk the thirty yards that separated us, the two figures took off running. They had to lift their legs high to not trip over the foliage.

“Michael where the fuck are you going, get your ass back here!” My vocal cords were shredded from the screaming, and I had to take a break from running to hack up the bile that wouldn’t stay down.

I wiped my lips on the back of my hand and started walking again. My legs were bleeding from the thorns, but I didn’t care. I was starting to see black dots in the corner of my eyes, slowly fighting to stay conscious.

It took my eyes a second to focus and adjust. There were about five candles in a circle surrounding something that the light wasn’t touching. Under the candles, there was some kind of white grainy powder that formed a circle. The powder continued inside the circle in lines that formed a star. As I got closer to the circle, I could feel the blood drain from my face.

In the center of the circle, a brown cat was slumped over, lifeless. In the center of its belly there was a hole that was oozing fresh blood.

END

Traditions Plaza

Maria was on hour eight, sitting in the most discreet nook of her university's library, the one in the basement, far right corner, two oak panels blocking her from view. Her bony ass clung to the seat, aching, and itching since hour two. Rain assaulted the metal windowpanes overhead but was drowned out by the Coffee Shop Vibes playlist that trilled in her brain through cordless headphones. As hour eight approached she found herself staring at the raindrops that raced down the windowpane. The caffeine and Adderall in her bloodstream were barely holding on, carrying the weight of her entire dissertation on their shoulders.

The cursor on the blue light screen highlighted her most recently dredged up research on the future of cryptocurrency in third world countries, a topic that she had picked out of a hat. The traditional drunken game of chance that would decide their most important piece of graduate research consisted of three hats that were soaked in the waters from a fountain in the center of Traditions Plaza, a stretch of cobble-stoned land on the eastern edge of campus. The first slip Maria pulled from the first hat that dripped bacteria-ridden water read, "THE FUTURE OF," the second slip from the second hat said "CRYPTOCURRENCY" and the third from the third said "THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES." She had been thrilled by this dumb act of fate because after pulling slips from all three hats, her best friend Ashley had to find a way to make "THE FEMINIST APPROACH TO," "STOCKS AND BONDS" and "ASIAN AMERICANS" work.

When Maria first heard of the tradition, she laughed out loud, rolled her eyes, and scoffed. But as her three years of studying economics at Kamphaus University unfolded, she heard the stories.

Ariana Campbell's laptop AND hard drive burst into flames on the quad, leaving her with third degree burns covering forty five percent of her body... Terilisha Bass was hit by a bus minutes before her presentation and died instantly... Kim Polansky's girlfriend of four years broke up with her over text sending her into such a deep depression that she was sent to the hospital due to dehydration... Tristan Noor was shot in the temple by a three-year-old with a BB gun and slipped into a four-month coma...

It doesn't stop there. An underground operation sells a one hundred-and-thirty-seven-page, hard bound novella for fifteen bucks a pop consisting of vignettes about the terrors that befell past economic graduate students who foolishly believed they could escape the grips of fate at Kamphaus.

If you wanted a copy, you had to connect to a server that has access to the dark web, place your order and then put cash in a secret location that comes in GPS coordinates on the receipt from your order. As absurd as Maria felt sticking her hand in the drenched hat and pulling out soggy slips of notebook paper, she wasn't going to take any chances.

As thunder roared, Maria snapped out of her dissociative state to a text from Ashley.

Hey babe, take a break and let's go to Kings pleeeeee. We deserve it! And we still must do our ring dunk before midnight tomorrow...

Maria checked the time, 9 PM. The bars around Kamphaus stayed open late during finals week, welcoming in the downtrodden who had to have their bodies surgically removed from the sharp, oak chairs that the university bought in bulk in the 1800s.

Kings was a retro hole in the wall of a bar that was often referred to as E Bar because it was the spot where economics students met up to drink, decompress and dish on who was sleeping with who and what teacher got fired for sleeping with which teaching assistant.

Kamphaus bar culture was strictly divided into cliques; Roxy's was for the comm majors, West Side was for the med students, Alley Way for the business majors and Steve's for freshmen, etc. Not only did they have their own bars, but each field of study had their own traditions with dark histories, putting Kamphaus University at the top of the list of Most Dangerous Campuses in America with three hundred and sixty-eight deaths and one thousand four hundred and ninety-nine injuries. When Maria applied at Kamphaus her entire family urged against it, knowing of the top ranking that Kamphaus held, however, Kamphaus was also on top of the list of Most Successful Graduates in America, having produced six hundred and thirty-seven CEO's, thirty-seven Nobel Prize winners, sixteen Oscar award winning producers and four presidents. Many believed that these two extremes were connected in some way. Like the lives lost and injuries suffered acted as some sort of sacrifice to the "Kamphaus Gods" so that the graduates that follow tradition, make it out alive and go on to live the most successful of lives.

The ring dunk that Ashley was referring to is the second tradition for econ students. It consisted of dropping your class ring into a pitcher of beer and chugging it until the pitcher's empty with the ring fixed between your teeth. Maria had ordered her class ring six months in advance in fear that it wouldn't come before the stroke of midnight the Friday night of finals week. One of Maria's senior classmates last year, Kyle, didn't order his class ring on time, believing himself to be the exception and the Saturday after finals week he fell down a manhole, adding a number to the list of ghosts that haunt Kamphaus.

Fuck, how could I forget. I'm at the library, I'll meet you outside Kings in 15, Maria sent back.

Maria saved her progress, stuffing her laptop into the pale purple backpack that she had sported since freshman year of her undergrad. There were holes in every pocket which left pencil lead wedged into the USB on her laptop and black ink damaging new textbooks. But she wouldn't dare part with the now stained piece of fabric that her mother had gifted her.

The amount of coffee she had consumed along with the water that kept the Adderall from dehydrating her system, had Maria making a beeline for the bathroom after all her good luck chachki's (a gorilla keychain from a gift shop in Denver and a plastic bear figurine from the inside of a Kinder chocolate egg that her grandmother had put in her stocking the Christmas before she died) were packed away.

After locking herself into the last stall she placed a toilet seat cover over the white porcelain, a habit that she adopted after she overheard her freshman year roommate tell her mother that she had contracted chlamydia from a toilet seat on campus. As she sat, she heard the door swing open and slam against the tiled wall. After the girl made her way into the handicapped stall next to Maria's, she heard sounds of gags and burps that culminated into a monsoon of what sounded like vomit hitting the toilet water.

"He's dead?!" the girl sobbed. "They just found him like that?!" The sobbing continued as the girl flushed her mess down the toilet.

Outside King's, Ashley stood with wet hair under the green and red striped awning. She was wearing a black crew necked sweatshirt with KAMPHAUS across the center in embroidered red letters. Maria walked up to the awning with her Kamphaus umbrella, shaking off the rain droplets before throwing it in her backpack.

“Sup bitch, how’s the dissy going?” Ashley questioned as she threw her dripping hair into a bun.

“I should be asking you that... have you managed to make sense of whatever the fuck you pulled out of the hats from hell?” Speaking about the hats left a sour taste in Maria’s mouth and she noticed Ashley’s wince. She knew to respect the traditions and followed them like a sheep, but that didn’t stop her from questioning what was coincidence and what was the workings of an alleged omniscient, evil presence that hung over Kamphaus with such unrelenting power as feared by so many alumni.

Maria believed in energies left behind after tragedy, like a footprint, and Kamphaus was like a lightning rod for negative energy. She also believed in coincidence and in the ways the human brain concocts false realities to cope. Above all, she believed herself to be of sound mind -- and she believed in the power of rumors. She didn’t know how many stories published in the book were real and how many were faked for the sense of keeping tradition alive, but she did know death and had seen it up close because of a broken Kamphaus tradition. She had been walking next to Kyle when he had met his demise. One minute, he was talking about all the dick he was going to get during his year off to backpacking across Barcelona and the next, he was gone, leaving Maria on the quad, alone and confused.

Best to not mess... with Kamphaus tradition, Maria read from the back of Ashley’s sweatshirt.

“It’s going...” Ashley looked down and murmured, “I know it’ll all fall into place. I mean, the hats said so!”

Maria and Ashley claimed the only open booth left. The bar was packed with econ majors nursing empty pitchers of beer. There was a group of three guys at the table across

from Maria and Ashley with three pitchers. Each struggled to get their rings off, rubbing the skin on their middle fingers raw. After they got the rings free, they all looked each other in the eye, probably sharing a sentimental memory or thanking the Kamphaus Gods for all the successes that were sure to come their way after graduation. One of them was even tearing up as the others patted him on his back. They dropped their gaudy rings into the pitcher and let out a guttural cry as they slapped the plastic pitchers together in the center and began to chug.

“Chug! Chug! Chug! Chuuuuug for Kamphaus!!!” The bar began to erupt, cheering them on as the first of the three guys downed his pitcher and stood up with the gold ring fixed between his teeth, his mustache matted and dripping with the brown liquid, both fists pumping in the air.

“Jesus Christ, this is embarrassing,” Maria said with a snort.

“Don’t be like that! It’ll be fun!” Ashley said.

“Can we at least be discreet about it?” Maria asked. “I don’t need the whole bar seeing me struggle to down my pitcher.”

“Of course, you know how I feel about hypermasculinity, and this is like the fucking convention for that shit,” Ashley said.

After Maria slipped Ashley a five for her pitcher, Ashley sauntered up to the bar as another group slammed their pitchers together and the bar erupted.

These traditions are just a result of fucking capitalism... playing out right before our eyes! Maria thought. We buy the Kamphaus hats, we buy the class rings, we order the pitchers, all in the hopes that we make it out of finals week intact and alive...

After Ashley made her way back to the table with two pitchers of beer, Maria wedged her two-carat diamond class ring off the middle finger where it had become one with the skin and bone.

“Here we go, I guess,” Maria said, feeling her cheeks go flush, anticipating all eyes in the bar being on her as she gagged.

After Ashley managed to get her finger loose from the ring’s grip, she put her hand over her heart. “This is like... a big deal Maria,” she said with a goofy smile.

“Yeah, I suppose so... I’ve been waiting for this moment since I started grad school here, and it seems so silly now that we’re here,” Maria said.

“Here’s to Mitchell,” said Ashley. Mitchell was one of Ashley’s teaching assistants her second year of graduate school who got mauled by a dog after refusing to take part in the ring tradition. He had to get his arm amputated.

“And here’s to Kyle,” said Maria. Before they slammed their pitchers together, Maria froze. “Wait, do you actually think this is a matter of life and death?” she asked no one in particular. Ashley rolled her eyes at the question and held her beer up with a smile that said, *just come the fuck on and chug, bitch!*

Maria opened her throat as wide as she could, allowing more volume to enter with each chug. Just as she had predicted, the entire bar noticed and was now cheering, fists pounding on high tops and boots stamping puddles of alcohol left on the floor.

“Chug! Chug! Chug! Chuuuuug for Kamphaus!” reverberated in her ears as she felt herself get lightheaded from embarrassment and alcohol. She managed to open her eyes a little as the pitcher got lower. She could tell through the cloudy plastic that Ashley had already finished her pitcher.

“LET’S GO, MARIA, LET’S GO!!!” Ashley started chanting and soon every econ major in King’s was chanting her name. As she felt bile rise from her throat, she paused for a second and let the gas from her chest escape through her nose. She only had about two more gulps before the ring would be fixed between her teeth.

She opened her throat wider than before and felt the cool piece of silver hit the back of her throat. She slammed the pitcher down and reared her head back preparing to cough up the ring, but it had slid down. Her body’s anti-choke instincts kicked in, pushing the ring down the rest of her throat, gone.

The collective gasp and silence that followed pierced her psyche as she realized the magnitude of what she had just done. She stared at Ashley who had her hand clamped over her mouth.

“Ashley, what the fuck does this mean?” Maria asked as they fast walked down the sidewalk outside Kings. After a few beats of silence that followed the incident, Ashley got out of the booth and grabbed her arm, leading her out of the bar as every drunk econ student stood in silent shock.

“Ashley, what the fuck does this mean?!” Maria repeated.

“I don’t fucking know okay, let’s just get you home in one piece,” Maria snapped.

“One piece? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know, Maria! We should probably take you to the goddamn emergency room.” Ashley jerked to a halt and grabbed Maria by the shoulders and said, “Okay, listen, it’s just a stupid fucking tradition. Sure, people have gotten hurt, but they’re not you, okay? We’re going to get through this...” Ashley hooked her arm under Maria’s, and they started

fast-walking towards Ashley's apartment. The rain had stopped, but the clouds covered the moon, leaving the sky an ominous gray and the sidewalks a saturated yellow from the outdated streetlight above.

"I'm not going to the goddamn emergency room; my parents will fucking kill me if I slap them with a hospital bill for something this fucking stupid. You're going to get through this Ashley because you didn't swallow your fucking ring like a fucking idiot, as for me..." Maria paused, all doubts of the power of Kamphaus traditions gone and replaced with every possible scenario that ended with her violent demise. "I'm going to end up on the fucking evening news after my body is found in the fucking sewer. I'll be just another story to add to that stupid fucking book!"

Maria had a copy of the book on her shelf, like most Kamphaus students. It had become a joke on campus. Death was so common here that it was an embarrassing abnormality like peeing your pants at a party or throwing up in the bleachers at a football game.

"Listen, you're not going to die and you're definitely not making it in that book," Ashley said as they approached a four way stop. She put her arm in front of Maria, like her mother used to, shielding her from the dangers of the world and oncoming traffic. "You're staying at my place until you turn in your dissertation. You aren't leaving my side until you press the fucking submit button, okay?" Once the light finally turned green, Ashley's grip on Maria tightened, making Maria feel idiotic and safe all at once. "We'll order food, we'll get liquor, we'll get Adderall, we'll get whatever the fuck you need. You're under house arrest for the time being."

The fluorescent light in Ashely's minimal lobby space flickered. A 24-hour security guard, with his hand resting on his belt that sported a gun and a taser made beads of cold sweat run down her spine. She imagined the Kamphaus Gods taking hold and the guard grabbing his gun and firing it at Maria's chest. But he just hung in the corner, staring at the floor.

As they entered the elevator to get to the sixth floor, Maria thought of all the ways in which she could die. The steel cords could break, sending them to the center core of the earth to burn. Or the walls could close in, crushing their bones until their hearts and brains popped against the steel. Or Ashley could be taken over by an immovable force, causing her to bite into Maria's neck, painting the walls of the elevator red.

However, as Maria watched the numbers on the pixelated panel above the door increase steadily, she got her breathing back to a healthy rhythm.

"Do you know anyone that has survived, breaking tradition?" Maria asked, scratching the skin on her arms like an addict needing a fix.

"I've never heard of a case, but that doesn't mean it's never happened," said Ashley as she snickered, hoping to lighten the mood. Maria bit into her lip, drawing blood. "I'm sure it's happened though," Ashley continued. "We just never hear about stories with happy endings here."

Because they don't exist here, Maria wanted to say out loud, but she couldn't muster the energy to work her vocal cords. As the elevator doors opened, Maria took a step behind Ashley, shielding herself from a possible assassin awaiting the perfect chance to send a bullet through Maria's vulnerable skull.

Ashley stuck her head out. After a few beats, Ashley waved Maria into the hallway from the elevator. Ashley's apartment was a few doors away, so it took just a few quick steps on the outdated, stained carpet before they were in the safety of the four concrete walls that now served as Maria's haven and prison.

After Ashley closed the door, she secured the main lock and dead bolted the second in place, the room was pitch black. Maria fumbled for the light switch that hung slightly above her head. Once she flipped the switch, washing the small living-room space with yellow light, she let out a high-pitched yelp at a figure laying on the couch, a baseball hat covering its face.

"Woah, woah, woah..." Maria said, immediately recognized the figure as Ashley's boyfriend, Nate, who was now on his feet with his hands up. "Holy shit, Nate, you scared me." Maria put her hand on her heart as adrenaline washed through her.

"Why were you sitting in the dark? Fucking weirdo..." Ashley mumbled the last part under her breath. "Nate, you can't stay here tonight, I'm sorry, but Maria is going through a lot and we're about to pull an all-nighter to finish our dissertations." Maria was grateful that Ashley was kicking Nate out. However, she wasn't even sure she could trust Ashley. She once heard of someone years ago that broke tradition and was beaten to death by her own father who was visiting Kamphaus for the first time. The damage was so severe that she had to be sewn back together for her visitation.

"But baby, I've been waiting for you to get home all night, like, what the fuck?" Maria wondered what Fate had in store via Ashley's scorned boyfriend.

"I'm sorry, Nate, plans changed, go jerk off or something," Ashley said as she walked into her bedroom, leaving Maria alone with Nate.

“I don’t appreciate your attitude. But, okay, I’ll go have a great fuckin’ time,” he yelled. As he swung his crumpled-up rain jacket over his shoulder, Maria caught a certain glint in his eyes that read to her as a despondent malice that was beyond his control.

“Stop! Don’t!” Maria yelled as she threw her hands up over her face, bracing herself for an impact of unknowable force.

“Maria, what the fuck's the matter with you?” Nate asked, before Maria realized that she was blocking Nate’s only exit.

“I’m sorry Nate,” she said, struggling to catch her breath. “I just drank too much... too much Adderall...” She walked over and lay on the couch that was still warm from Nate, putting her hand over her head and staring at the ceiling.

Nate let out a labored chuckle. “I remember writing my dissertation. I was up for four days straight,” he said.

“During your grad years, did you follow all of those stupid ass traditions?” Maria asked nonchalantly, sitting up now.

“Fuck yeah, that shit’s life and death. My junior year roommate jumped out of our high rise... he didn’t die though. But he’ll never be able to use his cock again.”

“Ew, you’re so fucking insensitive, Nate,” said Ashley from her bedroom.

Maria watched as Ashley rolled a joint with pink papers. The weed would counteract the Adderall and alcohol that was keeping Maria’s eyes plastered open, no chance of sleep.

How did I let this happen? Maria thought, as Ashley passed her the perfectly rolled joint. She felt the smoke wash her lungs in a warm bath, letting light-headedness take over and that familiar hum start at the crown of her head and flow down to her fingertips.

Since she was six years old, she dreamed of being the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, living in a high-rise apartment in Manhattan with a husband and three to seven dogs, one cat, several plants and zero kids. She'd have her wedding at the New York Public Library, like Carrie and Big from the first *Sex and the City* film and she would force her fiancé to steal *Grapes of Wrath* from the library and mount it in a glass case and hang it somewhere in their bedroom.

But I swallowed the goddamn ring...

“Maria,” Ashley interjected. “I think everything is going to be fine.” Maria could hear the slur in Ashley’s words, voiding any feelings of reassurance.

“You’re just high, Ashley.” Maria plopped down on the couch and pulled her knees towards her. “Everything is not going to be fine,” she said as she stared at Ashley, smoke seeping from her nostrils.

“Okay, so you know economic determinism, right?” Ashley asked, the remaining smoke exiting from the corners of her lips.

“I’ve heard of it,” Maria said dryly, turning her gaze to the popcorned ceiling.

“You already bought the fucking ring, and I bought the beer...” She paused to take another drag. “Who’s to say that that’s not all it takes to satisfy the *Kamphaus Gods*?” She deepened her voice and raised her arms, sending black ash flying and all over the electric-blue fuzzy carpet. Maria considered this, her mind reeling with the possibility of Ashley being right about the intentions of the *Kamphaus Gods*.

“Guess we’ll just have to wait until 11:59 Sunday night... when that fucking paper is due.” Maria grabbed the joint from Ashley’s outstretched hand and took a drag... then another... then another... until her eyelids closed for the night.

“Maria... Maria... Bitch, wake up!” Ashley screamed as she shook Maria’s shoulders. Maria awoke to a phone screen shoved in her face. “Bitch, you’ve gone viral!” Maria sat up on the couch and grabbed the phone and wiped sleep from her eyes, as a video of Maria and Ashley sitting in King’s looped to the beginning. Ashley had an empty pitcher of beer in front of her and was cheering on Maria. Ashley had her ring fixed in between her front two teeth as she pumped her fists in the air.

The other girl in the video jerked her head back, a guttural gasp escaping her gaping mouth, and then she put her hand on her chest. The video went quiet and then as Ashley grabbed Maria and led her out the front door of Kings, the video turned around. A guy with a backwards Kamphaus hat on stared into the camera in disbelief and looked over his shoulder and whispered, “she’s fucked.”

“Look at the caption,” Ashley said, closing out the video.

#SWALLOWTHERING, glowed in light blue lettering above the video.

“Hashtag swallow the ring?” Maria groaned. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know, bro, but apparently the freshmen started it,” said Ashley.

Maria sat up and grabbed her phone. Light from the window over the couch washed over her as she tapped the screen. It was 12:34 PM. Her eyes went straight to the seventy-four notifications. Texts from numbers she didn’t have saved were congratulating her for her bravery. Old TAs were telling her to stay safe. Two exes reminded her how “fucking stupid” she was for thinking she would make it out of this alive.

She ignored the texts and immediately went to twitter where she had four hundred and thirty-seven new followers, one of them being an account called

@SwallowTheRingMovement. She clicked on the profile and its one and only tweet read:
#SWALLOWTHERING to end the reign of terror @KamphausUniversity!!! We stand with
@MariaJo in her efforts to combat the traditions that plague KU! Join us tonight at midnight
on Traditions Plaza for a peaceful protest and pledge to #SWALLOWTHERING
#THEYCANTSMITEUSALL

Her silly little mistake had been turned into a movement.

“Ashley, turn on the local news,” Maria said. Ashley turned on the tv and the first
image she saw was a girl in a Kamphaus shirt with a picket sign that read
“#SWALLOWTHERING”.

“What is this movement all about?” a blonde-haired reporter asked before angling the
mic out towards the freshman.

“It’s about stopping the cycle of violence that plagues Kamphaus University. We
come here to be young CEO’s and Oscar winners, not victims of senseless violence. THEY
CAN’T KILL US ALL!!!” A crowd that had formed behind the speaker started cheering.
Maria, jaw dropped, turned towards Ashley’s apartment window that overlooked the quad.
She could see the news vans and the crowd of freshmen protestors that formed in her name,
but it didn’t console her. All it did was assure her that the Kamphaus Gods would see this
movement as her doing, and she would ultimately be the one to suffer the harshest of
consequences.

That night as Maria and Ashley typed in the safety of Ashley’s apartment, concluding
their research on feminism, economics, third-world countries and Asian Americans, fire
rained down on a group of three hundred and sixty-three freshmen from the fountain in

Traditions Plaza. The Beethoven symphonies that pumped through the duo's noise-canceling headphones drowned out the screams as the Kamphaus Gods were too distracted to worry about some girl who swallowed a ring.

END

Gigi

As a twelve-year-old on the edge of a metamorphosis my chin reached my grandmother's shoulder, the tips of my short brown hair grazing the fried tips of her bleached bob, her stark black roots never graying so they appeared like scars, scabbed over. Her eyes, blue, lips painted red, teeth that filled every syllable with a menacing white.

My grandmother had a punctuated twang, an affectation that she got in the southernmost tip of Missouri when she left my father's father for a retired member of the House of Representatives who she was a secretary for. She swapped political parties (staunch republican to even more staunch democrat) and area codes for him, leaving my father to finish high school alone, living in the attic of my great aunt's condo.

She eventually brought the twang back to Jefferson City with the nature of its authenticity neither here nor there. No matter how much she talked, she would still find something political/judgmental/volatile, to say, reviving the dead air in her condo with the grating accent, making the dust particles that clung to her various tchotchkes (ranging from marble dolphins to busts of iconic Missourians') flex.

She had a white Bichon Frise named Stella, a name that came from the song (the Ella Fitzgerald cover, not the Victor Young original). When I spent weekends in her condo at the end of a cul-de-sac for residents of a certain age, I would take Stella outside for her morning shit. When she wouldn't go and after I had exhausted some quite colorful verbal cajoling, I would resort to the physical, yanking on her retractable leash, making her yip and hack as the black leather collar bent her tiny vocal cords.

I was scared of my grandmother, who I, from now on, will refer to as Gigi, because that is what she asked to be called when her first granddaughter, my older sister, was born.

Now I know that the feelings of terror that Gigi caused had come from things I had been internalizing.

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My metamorphosis started at the funeral for some great aunt with some form of cancer, who used to pinch my cheeks so hard that I would run to my mother, tears welling, scrubbing the accompanying lipstick stain off the side of my face with a sweaty palm. My mother would glare at me and tell me to *be friendly*, but then immediately proceed to tuck me under her protective wing and lick her thumb to wipe away the streaks of rose scented lipstick that still clung to my cheek with the strength of a 24-hour wear.

This time, my mother was not here to protect me from distant aunts who claimed they knew who I was and that I had gotten *so big since the last time they saw me*, putting their palms parallel to the ground to signify a significant height difference from where the tips of my spiked bangs stood then. I was tall for a twelve-year-old and their comments filled me with a twinge of juvenile pride at my body's hard, yet natural work. Only later in my life did I realize that my body was the only thing on display for distant family members, ones who I met when my brain was the size of a pea and just as mushy. They could only judge me based on the physical. My newfound pudginess being the topic of a car ride home. My high-pitched voice an area of unspoken speculation.

She was not here to protect me from uncles who called me "big man," punching my arm a little too hard and getting on their knees, wafting their whiskey-soaked breath towards my burning eyes. They would make some comment about a pretty girl in a dress standing in the corner who they figured I was attracted to; someone I was probably related to.

Look at that one over there. This was before I realized that these men were putting their fantasies onto me. They lived vicariously through a twelve-year-old who didn't even know what they were attracted to yet.

Looking back, these were the moments when I began to see all the men in my family as brutes; large, beefy creatures made of flesh and stone, whose default intensity setting was always maxed out. They would barge into any room, stomping their pork-ish feet, showing their flaming red bald head that was always slick with sweat, filled to the brim with whiskey and tobacco, constantly needing another man to validate their insatiable appetite for female flesh whether that be a fifteen-year-old or a fifty-year-old. I've never been comfortable around men, and it started around this age, and it was because the men of my family were trolls and luses who did everything in excess, constantly trying to catch their breath and a little sweaty from reigning in all the attention by any means necessary. I could go on, but I have a story to tell.

My parents were not in attendance for no notable reason at all. Probably a business trip or a vacation that had been planned a year in advance, one that would not wait on the death of an insignificant great aunt. My older sister, Savanna, was my only saving grace. Savanna had the ability to hold a conversation with anyone, oversharing and laughing at a volume that made anyone she spoke with feel special, like they had a future career in stand-up comedy, the way she would throw her long blonde hair back and cackle, exposing her tonsils. I watched as she made her way around the room, leaving me to the sharks. *Traitor!* I wonder now how many of my male relatives secretly wanted to fuck her.

“Hey there sugar,” Gigi said. Her twang rang behind me and my eyes snapped from my sister’s blonde hair to hers. “This is Jerry, I grew up with her in New Madrid.” Gigi was wearing a platinum wig and a cylindrical black, lacy dress.

“Hello,” I said, straining myself to make eye contact, but dropping it immediately.

“Jerry, this is William’s son, Andrew, he, and Savanna have a great relationship... I like to brag about it,” said Gigi. Jerry extended her hand, and I shook it lazily, not wanting to rip the raised, wrinkled skin straight off her spidery fingers that she then used to pinch my young cheeks that bounced back into place and glowed a soft pink. If my father would have been there, he would have pulled me aside to tell me that I needed to work on the firmness of my handshake.

“You’re just as adorable as I remember,” said Jerry. She placed her hand slightly below her knee and proclaimed, “you were about this tall the last time I saw you!” I fake smiled and looked back up at Gigi who glared down like she wanted to shake a proper greeting out of me.

Before the funeral started, I sat in the second row. A fried Velma-from-Scooby-Doo bob blocked my view of the closed casket. As the bleak pageantry began, the bob began to shake and tremble, and soft sobs escaped from its owner. As Velma bent down to wipe her eyes with a fraying Kleenex, I made instant eye contact with a headshot of my great aunt that was perched on an easel next to the mahogany casket. In the photo, she had thin brows and electric blue eyeshadow. Her smile held a genuineness that extenuated the laugh lines that rippled along her blushed cheeks. I immediately felt an aching sadness for this woman who I had met, but never knew. The photo showed me a moment suspended in time; a moment meant to evoke emotion from its intended audience. Even though my mother hadn’t been

there to comfort me from the overstimulating onslaught of distant relatives, the dusted, hazy headshot took the edge off.

As I settled into the overproduced hour of mourning, my shoulders relaxed. My family had no particular religious leaning, but because we were registered democrats in a red state, we went to Methodist churches for funerals and weddings. This meant that the man giving the eulogy behind the photograph of my great aunt was not a priest or a deacon or a bishop, but a pastor. As the black blazer clad pastor recited quotes from the bible and told a few stories about the person that my great aunt was and who she wasn't, I started to feel a pressure in the zipper region of my husky-sized khakis. I had heard about something like this from the boys in school and in a movie that Savanna and I had watched when my parents were out of town, but I had never experienced it for myself.

As most humans with penises know, erections can happen unprovoked when going through puberty, but as a twelve-year-old going through a metamorphosis, with my pants getting tighter by the moment, I scolded myself for what appeared to be my newfound Velma fetish. My cheeks flushed and I put the funeral program over my crotch. When I looked down to make sure that I was fully covered, the eyes of my great aunt stared back at me.

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During the hour-long drive back to Jefferson City after the funeral, Savanna read a book in the passenger seat under the glow of an orange book light, and I sat in the back staring out the window, my eyes turning the dark blobs that whisked past us into trees, barns and farmhouses. On the dashboard of Gigi's black Lincoln Navigator, a small blinking light flashed and chirped like a bird any time the car came anywhere within a mile radius of a cop.

The little red light gave her the freedom to go over ninety miles an hour on the highway, turning the hour-long drive into a thirty-seven minute one. Anytime the red light blinked and chirped, she would slow down until it quieted again.

When I had enough of taking in the scenic route, I pulled my Gameboy from the pouch that puckered out from the back of the driver's seat. Reaching into the pouch, I started to feel the familiar tightening in my pants. I froze as my face flushed. I then started aimlessly grabbing for the Gameboy, hoping to use it for concealment. As the screen illuminated, Gigi peeked in the rearview mirror, her blue eyes meeting mine.

"I read an article in Reader's Digest the other day about Blackberry thumb," Gigi croaked with concern.

"Blackberry thumb?" Savanna piped up from the passenger seat, sliding a bookmark between the pages of the latest Harry Potter book.

"Yes, Blackberry thumb. It affects people that spend too much time clickin' away on their Blackberry's, but I'm sure it also applies to that gaming system you're always playin' on." My eyes fell to the silver Gameboy and my cheeks turned red as Gigi continued, "their thumbs turn blue from all the typin' and the only way to cure it is that a doctor has to cut the tips of your thumb to release all of the pressure that builds up from the clickin'." My stomach dropped and a lump formed in my throat as I imagined my thumbs turning blue and swelling until they popped, blood squirting from the tips of them like garden hoses. I shut the Gameboy down and my eyes fixed themselves back to the tinted window as I used my pointer fingers to massage out the phantom ache that began to form in my thumbs.

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Once back in Jefferson City, I stayed quiet, listening for the sound of Stella's paws scratching at the off-white paint of the door that led into a tiny hallway. Once you entered the tiny hallway, you had to turn to the side and suck in your gut to avoid bumping into the wrought iron shelf of curiosities that was decorated with pastel visors advertising Country Clubs in Alabama.

As soon as I opened the door of the car, leaving Gigi and Savanna behind, eager to get into the basement where I could hide in front of a screen playing a VHS copy of Pink Panther, free to have as many boners as the rogue hormones in my brain saw fit, a streak of white burst between my legs.

"OH NO, STELLA!!!" Savanna shouted as the white puff snorted her way into the garage and under the gap just in time, leaving her unscathed from the bone crushing force of the collapsible garage door.

"Go run after her," Gigi sighed, thick with exasperation as she hoisted her way out of the driver's seat, scaling the side of the massive truck with her tiny body. My heart leapt into my throat, my eyes darting every which way, my body recalibrating, seething with an anxiety-induced nausea.

"GO!" Savanna said, smacking the large illuminated, white button that lifted the garage door again. As the garage door slowly moved up, I saw Stella darting up the hill that started at the end of the long driveway and stepped up to the right. She disappeared behind a condo, out of sight. I ran to the end of the driveway, the cold wind turning my throat to sandpaper and tears blurring my vision. I stared up at the behemoth hill, the top indecipherable, moonlight casting its glow elsewhere. Silence filled the sleepy neighborhood for a few suspended moments while I decided whether or not running up the hill was worth

saving the rat from cars or a life in the wild. I stared into the dark, silently urging the flash of white to return and jump into my arms. The darkness seemed to groan at me, the steepness of the hill gnashing its teeth.

“Do ya got her?!” Gigi yelled from the comfort of the yellow lit garage, her twang echoing throughout the neighborhood, bouncing off brick and vinyl siding.

“Not yet!” I yelled back. My eyes were still fixed to the darkness. I put my right foot forward, rocking back and forth, false starting. *I don't want to run up this fucking hill*, soon turned to, *I don't want to run into this fucking darkness*. My mouth went dry as I pictured a monster of darkness feasting on Stella, staining her whiteness with red, her tail a dessert for rotting fangs.

“She's probably up the hill!” Savanna yelled. I wanted to hit her and tell her to run her fat ass up the hill. After a few more beats, I heard snorts and paws padding the pavement getting clearer and clearer. The swelling in my throat subsided as Stella ran past me and darted into the garage.

“Make sure you close the garage door behind you,” Gigi called as she closed the white door, killing the breeze of the bitter night's cold.

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For the first ten or so years of my life, Savanna and I shared the same room in my childhood home. Not because there weren't enough bedrooms in the house, but because I thought Edward Scissorhands lived behind my bed. Savanna slept in a twin bed near the door of my bedroom, guarding me, even in her slumber.

The year she moved back into her old room, each night after, in order to fall asleep, I had to look behind my bed a ritualistic number of times to make sure that Mr. Scissorhands

wasn't posing in the window frame behind my bed, inching closer and closer with his silver knives. Once, I was sure there were no fictional characters behind my bed, I would stuff the top edge of my blanket in my mouth, making sure that my jaw was clenched shut hard enough around the soft material because I had intrusive thoughts of someone sneaking into my room and spilling a vial of poison into my open mouth during unconsciousness. If it took too long to fall asleep the edge of my blanket would have rows of bite marks, some still soggy, some crusted over. My favorite part about staying with Gigi was that Savanna and I slept in the same room, back to the way things were, and back to the way things were meant to be.

I walked into the downstairs bathroom while Savanna sat on the toilet, my breath still shaky from my run back into the garage. The bathroom was tiny. Pictures of hand painted, and pastel seascapes covered the walls. One of the paintings was an optical illusion, making it appear as though there was a white framed window looking out onto the beach with a red and white striped umbrella sticking from the tan sand. I wished I could crawl through, into the sunlight, away from the darkness that I had just been confronted with.

"Max is going to be calling me tonight, so I'm going to sleep in the other bedroom," she said. My skin prickled. *Traitor!* Savanna was in high school and had just started to date Max, her best friend turned boyfriend. When he met my parents for the first time, he showed up at the front door in a pink and orange Hawaiian shirt.

"Savanna, no, I won't listen, and I'll fall asleep super quick, please, no," I whined, tears welling. The hallway beyond the bathroom took on a new kind of menace that I felt breathing down my neck as I stared at Savanna, poking at her empathy with my eyes.

“Andrew, no. There are just some things you don’t quite understand yet about being a grown up. You’ll be fine, don’t leave your room though, Gigi will tell mom and dad,” she said, still squatting on the toilet with her arms crossed around her midriff. I stamped my foot, putting my whole body into a high-pitched groan and marched out of the bathroom. “I call dibs on The Blue Room!” she called from the bathroom as I stepped into the hall.

The Blue Room was the room across from the one we usually shared. The one that Gigi aptly named for its blue walls, blue comforter, and blue sheets. The one with the window. This was good, because rooms with windows are rooms unprotected from outside eyes peering in through the gauzy shades, staring at my silhouette, with my blanket clenched in my jaw as I sleep. This meant that I would be staying in the room that Gigi had aptly named, The Tiger Room, for there were three tiger print lamps, a tiger print recliner and tiger print bedspread and pillows on the trundle bed that was pushed up against the back wall. I entered the bedroom and immediately locked the door behind me. The silence of the room was like a vacuum, and I suddenly felt like the eyes of the various tiger chachkis were staring at me, crouching for the kill.

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The haunting started as a heavy breathing that traveled across the hall, then dipped underneath the door of The Tiger Room. My eyes snapped open, but I hadn’t been sleeping due to the piercing white light from the lamp that I left on at the foot of the bed. Gigi said that I was “too old for night lights.” The sound then turned into a deep groan punctuated by a grinding of metal sound that seemed to shake the floor. The sounds weren’t continuous. I was given short bursts of relief when I would consider curling back into the sheets before they started up again, freezing me in my tracks as I attempted to escape The Tiger Room and the

basement altogether. Most children at that age would probably have just retreated under their covers until the noise subsided, but once I had an intrusive thought, my gut reaction would be to prove that thought wrong as soon as possible, even if it meant traversing through a dark hallway in this haunted senior living condo.

I glanced at the space below the door and saw that there was a light on the other side, a soft orange emitting from the bathroom light that Gigi insisted we keep on so we wouldn't trip over her golf clubs that lined the hallway during an inevitable late-night bathroom run. As I reached for the silver door handle, the sound began to intensify and then when I opened the door, popping the lock out, the noise stopped, the hallway a vacuum of silence. *Don't leave your room or Gigi will tell mom and dad!* Savanna had said. *But that doesn't apply to potential hauntings*, I subconsciously replied. This was as good a chance as any to flee from the spirit, Gigi would understand.

I quickly walked on the balls of my feet down the hallway, passed the living room and turned to the left where I was met with a staircase that led up to the main level. The door at the top of the stairs was open and apparently so was the door to Gigi's bedroom, because a soft blue glow from her television washed over the white ceiling and spilled onto the walls that bordered the stairs.

Fuck, she's awake! I thought. My plan was to just sleep on one of the couches in the sunroom, avoiding the haunted basement. Then when day would break, I would carefully make my way back into The Tiger Room and pretend like my embarrassing fit of dramatics never happened.

As I contemplated turning back, the noise started up again, but this time, it was different. The low groans and metallic shrieks were now accompanied by a painful, ghoulish

whine that stopped as soon as it had started. I turned around to try to locate the specter, but the sound seemed to be sourceless, bouncing off the walls and the ceiling before reaching my ears. I stood still with my right foot on the bottom-most step and my left on the white carpet.

“AAAAAAUUUUUUHHHHH!”

My blood ran cold, and I booked it up the stairs, trying to be as silent as possible, but making noise was the least of my concerns. Before reaching the peak of the hardwood stairs, I slowed down to a crawl, getting down on all fours. As my hand reached the top step, another noise was introduced to the melee, but this one was immediately identifiable. The snores from my step grandfather were like a chainsaw being raked against bone, starting softly then growing in volume until reaching a crescendo then starting from the top, on an endless, blood curdling loop.

I peered over the top step and as my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw a dark figure standing in the doorframe of Gigi’s room. My mouth went dry, a scream catching in my throat. The figure was backlit so I could only see its outline, but as it crept closer, I started to make out some details, turning the figure three dimensional. The first thing I noticed was that it was completely naked. Its breast hung low, appearing like an upside-down McDonald’s logo, the tips of the arches coming to a point rather than a curve.

“What the hell are you doing up?” the figure croaked. The voice was immediately recognizable as Gigi’s. The nudity immediately changed from menacing to comforting as I had seen Gigi naked several times before; she was a firm believer that nothing should be kept from family. “Get up!” she snapped. I shot up from my crouching position and stood dumbfounded.

“I-I-I heard a noise downstairs,” I stammered, thinking about Savanna’s warning, trying to avoid eye contact with the pendulous breasts. The shadow that covered the area between her cellulite ridden thighs was becoming less and less of a shadow as she approached.

“It’s just the air conditioner, get back to bed, it’s late!” Gigi said. A response wasn’t necessary from me, and I needed to escape this standoff as soon as possible, so I turned around and clomped back down the stairs with a death grip on the rail.

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Back in the basement my heart was racing, and the walls seemed to be closing in on me. The first thing I noticed when I reached the hallway was that the haunting noises had stopped, but the bathroom light wasn’t there to guide me back to The Tiger Room, because the door had been closed.

“Savanna...” I whispered with my nose pressed up against the bathroom door.
“Savanna, I’m coming in.”

“NO!” I heard as I swung open the door. The scream that had been caught in my throat escaped as I quickly picked up that the person behind the door was not my sister, but a man. The man was crouched over in the shower, his back turned to me, showing off a pale ass with thick, dark, wiry hairs sprouting from the cheeks that jiggled and bounced in every direction as he attempted to cover up his front with a towel. As the man turned around, putting his finger to his lips, shushing me, I caught a glimpse of his penis, poking through the towel, erect. The same thick, dark, wiry hairs from his ass grew around the base of the penis, as if the girthy appendage had no beginning.

I quickly fixed my eyes to the floor to avoid seeing any more skin as I had had enough for one night. I wanted to cry at the inescapable images of various sex organs that were branded onto my brain with a hot poker. My eyes immediately made eye contact with a pink and orange Hawaiian shirt crumpled in the corner.

“Oh no, Andrew,” Savanna whispered, sneaking up behind me. I jumped at the sound of her voice and turned around. She had wrapped a blanket around her seemingly naked body, her hair lifted and matted, a blonde bird’s nest. “Please don’t tell mom and dad,” she pleaded. The haunting had not been a haunting after all.

Back in the Tiger Room, curled up in blankets, exhaustion struck. I closed my tired eyes and as darkness washed over me, I began to see Max’s naked form build like a puzzle behind my eyelids. It started with his shaggy brown hair, then his hazel eyes, then his tanned chest that had thick, dark curls sprouting from it like a lush field in an Italian riviera. Finally, the floppy appendage appeared and the now familiar tightness that formed in my underwear caused my eyes to snap open, terror rising in my throat.

///

Years down the road, after my father found incriminating messages on my phone revealing my darkest secret, Gigi called me up one day.

“Hey, we need to go to the mall and pick out some new fashions,” she said to me over the receiver, like a high schooler. My cheeks flushed as I realized that my father had told her that I was gay.

At the mall, as I grazed over patterned button ups and black skinny jeans, my suspicions cleared as Gigi told me that she had let her pastor in on my secret and that he told

her to love God's children for better or worse. I tried to hide the waves that were crashing in my stomach and mask them with the appreciation that was just poking at the surface.

From time to time, I think about the night that Max crawled into the window of the Blue Room and how Gigi had forced me back into the basement, into my discovery. I thank her subliminally for it and hope that someday I will find the words to thank her out loud.

END

Josey & Her Baby

1: Josey & Her Baby

Josey adjusted the ten-pound baby, moving her to the left to give the right some relief. The bones that were forming underneath the thin layer of fat that made up the baby's powdered bottom were rubbing against Josey's hip. Each time she positioned the baby to straddle her hip, she pictured the baby's malleable bones suspended in red fluid molding against her hard, formed bone, leaving the baby with a misshapen butt that would be a lifelong insecurity traced back to that very moment.

The sky was cloudless and blue. Humidity clung to the air, hugging Josey in a cloud of warmth that made her skin prickle. The nameless baby girl was quiet, her entire fist in her toothless mouth, spit burbling and dripping onto the right pant leg of Josey's light washed overalls. Once the baby was through with her fist, she moved onto Josey's curly auburn hair that fell slightly past the mother's shoulders. The thick strands were wound around the wet chubby fingers in an instant and the baby began to slightly tug, trying to free her hand, giving up and instead shoving the cocktail of wet hand and tangled hair into her mouth, satisfied with the new sensation.

Josey had heard The Sound before leaving her air-conditioned condo behind and stepping into the back yard that she shared with her neighbor Dennis. Dennis is the old man who called the police the first week that Josey brought her daughter home due to the incessant infantile screams. When she opened the door that night to the blue uniformed man with the thick, too-straight mustache, a wave of relief washed over her as if the uniformed man could help solve the case of her daughter's wails. The young officer had only assured Josey that her daughter's wails were not a threat to the old man and that she should consider

a pacifier because that is what he and his wife had done to stop *their* newborn from crying. That was the first time that Josey felt as though she was officially a member of the Cult of Parenthood and that by having a child of her own, she would now be subjected to unsolicited parenting advice from strangers that felt as though they had mastered the practice.

The Sound had started as a low hum, mechanical, staccato-ed by unnatural clicks. With each click, the click that followed came faster and louder. While Josey stood unmoved from her spot in front of the kitchen sink - she had been rinsing a soft pink lipstick stain from last night's wine glass - she braced herself for an explosion as the clicks started to get closer and closer together to the point where there was no discerning when one click ended and the next began. The Sound was clearly coming from somewhere outside as the sheer volume of it had made the leaves on the Lonely Tree that was framed by the window above the sink, shake and the islands of green grass amongst the brown flex. As The Sound reached its highest decibel, the window in front of Josey's face seemed to wobble. She covered her eyes with a wet rag in case the glass splintered sending charged shards towards her brown eyes.

Standing outside now, a breeze fighting against the humidity, birds chirping a pleasant tune, Josey began to wonder if she had made the whole thing up. There was no evidence to the contrary. The Lonely Tree, as well as the kitchen window, were intact and it seemed as though Josey was the only one in the entire neighborhood of condos that was brave enough to step outside to find the source of the halting crescendo. *Brave, or stupid?*

With the baby still bouncing on her hip, Josey walked to the edge of the yard toward the brown picket fence that extended about ten yards from the back of Dennis and Josey's shared unit. At the start of her lease, Dennis told her that he would tend to the backyard, and he had kept his word. There was no hose hookup, so keeping the grass alive was something

Mother Nature had to take care of on Her own, however the backyard of a \$450 a month condo unit was not on Her radar, leaving more brown patches than green scattered across the yard like boils scabbed over. Dennis did the best he could with what he had. The grass never grew past Josey's ankles, and a border of yellow daisies ran along the back row of fencing that Dennis watered with a dark green watering can. Watching Dennis water his daisies from the kitchen window, seeing the way his back arched and his old knees bent had once brought a tear to Josey's eye.

The Lonely Tree that sprouted from the center of the fenced in land could hardly be considered a tree at all, but its presence brought a snap of serotonin to Josey every time she looked out of the kitchen window. During the winter months, Dennis would fix a white, wire angel decoration onto the topmost branch. Every morning, the cheap decoration would be hidden in a green patch of grass, having freed itself sometime in the middle of the night. Josey would run outside and fix it back onto the branch before Dennis could notice the fallen angel.

Once she had reached the far end of the fence to investigate The Sound - careful to avoid stomping on any of Dennis' Daisies - she peered through a gap in between two wooden slats that were shedding splinters. She knew exactly which gap had the best sweeping portrait view of the land beyond her backyard due to her frequent visits to peek at her parallel neighbors during states of listlessness that made her act out of character.

Behind the fifty-yard strip of identical tiered condos that faced the main road, was a neighborhood of subtle affluence. The houses that littered the neighborhood - most hidden by dense clusters of weeping willows and thick oaks - had a midcentury flair that masked the

wealth inside. Most of the houses had been gutted and modernized by local lawyers, restaurant tycoons and tenured professors.

It was before noon on a workday, the quietest time amongst the land of the working. The shade the abundance of trees provided made the neighborhood appear as though it was suspended in time, perpetually dusk. Josey scanned the neighborhood for any sign of a source to The Sound. There was no one within her periphery that had the same mission as her and that filled Josey with an aching sense of dread. The Sound had been literally earth shattering, something like an earthquake, but coupled with a noise that was still ringing in the back of Josey's psyche.

The new mom looked down at the baby and her blood ran cold. It took until just this moment of abbreviated reflection for Josey to realize that the baby had not reacted in any way to The Sound. She hadn't cried. She hadn't wailed. Once the noise ended, Josey ran into the living room and scooped the baby up from off her blanket that laid evenly on the carpet and headed outside to find the source, the baby resting on her hip, not making a peep.

Josey took one last glance between the slats, once again taking in the eerie calm that made her feel like her and the baby were the last two on earth. There was no way The Sound had been a figment of her imagination. She felt the ripples that it emitted in the marrow of her bones. It had nearly brought her to her knees where she would have wrapped her arms around her shins and begged for forgiveness, but it had ended before any true terror could set in.

2: Dennis & His Anxieties

Dennis was pouring himself a cup of hot, black coffee when he noticed Josey and her stolen baby saunter up to the edge of their shared backyard. He winced as Josey's shin grazed a rogue leaf that arched out from the yellow of his daisies. His heart rate settled once the toe of her tennis shoes planted finitely, right before it could cause any damage to the yellow.

Dennis often noticed Josey spying on the neighborhood behind theirs. He would silently scold her from his kitchen window, telling her subconsciously that it does not do to be jealous of those that have more, reminding her that wealth is simply a result of being at the right place at the right time. Today was different however - she seemed to be in a state of distress - moving the stolen baby from one hip to another and craning her neck more than usual as though she was trying to fit her head in between the half inch gap in the weathered, wooden slats to get a better view into the lives of those beyond the fence.

After staring for a few more beats, Dennis realized that he was doing exactly what he was scolding Josey for doing: sticking his nose into matters that did not concern him. After looking away and adding some heavy cream to his coffee, he justified his behavior by telling himself that he is only concerned for the baby resting on Josey's hip. Josey had stolen her after all, and every day Dennis had to live with the guilt of not turning her in. He tried to, once. He even managed to dial 911 without having a heart attack, although he did have chest pains for the following hour as he heard the cop's knuckles rap on Josey's door that was only a few feet away from his own.

He hadn't told the cops that Josey had stolen the child, only that the child had been crying incessantly for hours (which had not been a lie). His hope was that they would recognize the baby from the multiple photographs that had been splashed across the local

news for weeks begging for any small crumb of information regarding the whereabouts of the child. Every time Dennis caught a glimpse of the child's photo on his tiny television, he changed the channel before the anchor could utter the child's name. If he heard the name, the synapses of his brain would cling to the syllables, and he would fall hard into a spiral of anxiety that would elevate his heart rate to dangerous, deadly heights.

The idiot cops had not recognized the baby and Dennis's plan had failed. He wasn't even sure that the cops had checked on the child for Dennis had downed his nightly glass of whiskey and fixed the rim to the wall that he shared with Josey and put his ear up to the cool bottom of the glass, amplifying the cops exchange with Josey.

Your baby crying is no direct threat to the old man, have a good night, the cop had said. Dennis had been slightly relieved that the cops hadn't recognized the baby, for that ran the risk of Josey screaming obscenities at Dennis through the walls which would have undoubtedly sent Dennis's heart rate through the roof, leaving him dead on the floor with piss staining the already piss colored carpet.

Even though the plan had failed, the attempt made some of Dennis' guilt dissolve. As if attempting the plan meant just as much as achieving it. However, in the past few days he could feel the grueling monster slowly claw its way back, grabbing onto his neck. The previous night had been particularly hard for Dennis. He sat awake, his old flip phone - that he refused to trade in for a phone from this decade - inches away from his face. He had memorized the phone number to the information hotline:

818-181-8811

The numbers were now taunting him from behind the pixelated, fluorescent glow, all he had to do was press enter and the monster would be shaken from his back. But something

stopped him. He wasn't exactly sure what, but he had always felt a sort of kinship to Josey, an admiration that extended beyond initial attraction, and had developed into something more meaningful. He knew that Josey would never feel the same and that made his feelings towards her more impactful, as if he was her long lost father trying to reconcile with a daughter he abandoned. Dennis shook the thought aside, threw his brick of a phone to the floor and watched it bounce and slide underneath the recliner that sat adjacent to his twin bed where he did his reading. Grateful to have the piece of technology out of his sight, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

3: Josey & Her Promise

Josey had lost track of time since she had stolen the baby. Days welded into one another, the baby crying through nights and through most days, fixing Josey's eyes at a constant alert. Her guilt for what she had done waxed and waned, simmered at the surface, never boiling over.

She had been spying, something that she was neither proud or disappointed of, just something that her body did on autopilot. She would be washing a dish in the sink and then the next thing she knew, she would be unlocking the back door and walking toward the border of daisies, meandering toward that one perfect gap in the fence and fixing her eye in between it. The baby had been strapped into a gray and black car seat inside of a cherry red Volkswagen sedan that sat idling about fifty yards beyond the fence. The baby was the only one in the car and the door was wide open, amplifying the siren like screams that came from the baby that echoed through the neighborhood.

Still on autopilot, Josey found herself back inside of her air-conditioned apartment, heading towards the front door with a despondent, gliding stride. On the porch, the wooden wind chimes that the last tenant left hanging on the edge of the vinyl awning swayed, producing a hollow clunk. The screams from the baby fought against the song the chimes sung. Josey skipped down the concrete stairs to the sidewalk that ran parallel to the quiet road and began to make her way around the fence, towards the wails.

Once she had reached the end of the long concrete driveway that snaked up towards a large red brick home, Josey stopped. The home was about thirty yards away and not a soul was present in her periphery, but she could feel a nagging sense tugging at her, as if someone was breathing down her neck. It was the house, she concluded, that made her feel this way, as if the garage door was going to slide up and a deep, menacing voice was going to escape from its depths, providing Josey with a list of all the things about Josey that made her inferior to the human residences within. The house would spit at her from its black garden hose, sending Josey back to her small, one bed, one bath apartment on the other side of the fence.

The wails from the car grew harsher, freeing Josey from her own imagination. She took a step from the black tar of the road onto the beige of the driveway and walked with a newfound confidence towards the wails. Once she had reached the baby there was a click in her ears as if something inside of her had fallen into its rightful place. The straps of the car seat were easy to undo and within seconds the wailing baby was resting its head on Josey's bony shoulder. Josey rested her palm on the top of the baby's head and the wails fizzled out creating a buzzing silence that Josey worried would alarm the baby's mother. Without wasting another beat, Josey turned on her heels and with her palm still resting against the baby's peach fuzz, she whispered, *you're safe now, I promise*, and walked home.

4: Dennis & His Discovery

Dennis had taken up residence at the Shady Oaks apartment complex five years before he witnessed Josey with the stolen baby. His late wife, Trudy, died of an insidious form of cancer and, because they were never able to have children, her death had left Dennis purposeless, floating without an anchor. His gleamingly positive attitude wavered as the passing years and plenty of whiskey weathered his psyche, screwing with his sleeping schedule and, in turn, his social life. With Josey moving in next door three years into stay, Dennis had a shiny and newfound purpose. The day she moved in, Dennis watched from the glossed window that made up the top quarter of his front door as Josey made her way up the steep concrete steps with medium-sized cardboard moving boxes in tow. The bevels that rippled across the glass made it difficult to get a full portrait of his new neighbor, but he could make out a head of brown curls and a slim, tall stature that made his heart flutter. Not for a second did Dennis think that she would be occupying her new space by herself, but as he continued to observe, he noticed with joy, and a twinge of sorrow, that she was alone. Dennis would have her all to himself.

After the last of her boxes were hauled and unpacked, Dennis began to imagine Josey becoming a key figure in his life. He imagined her ringing his doorbell with a freshly baked apple pie in hand atop a blue and white checkered oven mit. She would introduce herself and he would invite her in for tea and apple pie, striking up a friendship and maybe even something more. He waited and waited and waited to no avail. Once he realized that Josey was a part of the younger generation, the one that only spoke with each other digitally, he began to take care of her in little ways: decorating the tree in their shared backyard during the winter months and planting daisies in the spring. Josey had given him a gift that he would

never repay her for: a reason to keep busy. He watered and cut the grass, he laid down salt when it was supposed to freeze, and he cleared the concrete stairs that led up to their unit when it snowed. She had only thanked him a handful of times and when she did, it was quiet and she didn't make eye contact, giving her an edge of mystery that only made Dennis more intrigued and anxious to help her with matters of vanity that seemed to evade her altogether.

All of this changed when one day Josey was outside with a baby resting on her hip. Dennis had been doing dishes when he saw Josey and the small bundle from his window. He quickly dropped what he was doing, unlocked his back door with a *thatch* and stepped outside. He could see out of the corner of his eye that the sound of the door unlocking had caused Josey to jump. She was mid stride, her hand almost on her back door, trying to escape the interaction before she realized she had been caught.

“Josey!” Dennis rang out with a smile.

“Oh, hey Dennis,” Josey responded, using her free hand to get a strand of loose hair that was stuck to the corner of her lips.

“Who is this little one?” Dennis said, sauntering closer. The question seemed to shake something behind Josey's eyes as if Dennis had thrown a brick at her. Her hand jerked up towards the baby as if she was going to protect its small face from Dennis's eyes, but instantly changed her mind and straightened her hand out to the side.

“Oh, um, this is my sister's baby, I'm, um, watching her for a couple days.” Josey's lie caused Dennis' smile to fall. He remembered the very first time they met. After waiting long enough for Josey to introduce herself, Dennis had taken the initiative which led to a clunky conversation at their shared mailbox where Dennis had divulged his widow status and Josey had offered up that she was an only child, raised by a single mother. It was clear to

Dennis that Josey could read the nature of his downturned expression. Not wanting to cause Josey any further duress, Dennis quickly plastered on a fake smile.

“Well, isn’t she precious,” Dennis said in a singsong tone that seemed to calm Josey’s nerves for the moment. This was when the baby turned its head towards Dennis, their eyes locking. Something about the auburn tufts of hair, droopy cheeks and hazel eyes reminded Dennis of something, however he would not pinpoint the feeling. The situation had caused his heart to race, and a dull pain began to bloom in his chest. He took a mental photograph, made some excuse about leaving his water running and retreated into his apartment.

5: Josey & Her Plan (Part I)

“You didn’t hear anything sweet girl?” Josey asked, staring down at the baby’s glossed over, auburn eyes, running the back of her pointer finger across the soft peach fuzz that bordered the top of the baby’s forehead, like a halo. Josey adjusted her pink flannel pajama pants and rested the baby on her thigh, positioning her hands on both sides of the baby’s head. Josey then licked her dry fingers and snapped them next to the small ears, alternating between the left and the right. With the first few snaps, the baby dug her jawline into the same side of her neck that Josey snapped, signaling that she had, in fact, heard the *crack!* “You can hear!” Josey sang. The baby smiled a toothless smile and let out a high-pitched coo, celebrating her cochlear abilities.

Outside, the sun was setting, casting a dull, honey toned filter on the back road that was framed by the long, rectangular window next to Josey’s front door. The baby was yawning, her breath was slowing, and Josey needed some time to herself to sort out the events of the day. In Josey’s small room, she lowered the baby slowly into a blue crib that

she bought at Wal-Mart the day after she unfastened the baby from that car seat. As soon as the baby's head hit the cool white sheet, her eyes lowered like automatic blinds and her moist lips hung open in deep, frozen slumber. Josey envied the baby's ability to power down and hard reset, her squishy brain wiping the events of the day that passed like a warm void.

Josey returned to the living room and sat down on the far end of the couch, the one that came with the apartment. The inner workings of the used couch sagged enveloping Josey's legs in the thin, brown cushion. She picked at a stain on the arm rest with her index finger as she stared into the dimly lit kitchen and realized that she needed to plan. But before she could do that, she poured herself a glass of wine.

She was sure that Dennis was beginning to put the pieces together that she had stolen the baby. It was not even a few days ago that Dennis had seen the baby's face in their backyard. When he had, Josey noticed a slight shift in the facial muscles that rested shallowly beneath his aged skin. It was only for a moment, but the aftereffects had lingered in the dead air between them. She also knew that Dennis frequented the local news channel as she could hear the night anchor's grating accent through the walls of her living room.

The baby had been in Josey's care for a slow moving three days when she was surfing through the channels on the tv that was drilled into the wall - between courtroom procedurals and trashy reality television - she saw a photo of the baby flash across the screen. The baby's unique features did not register to her at first, but once it had, she choked on her wine, spilling a few dribbles across the already stained arm rest.

Authorities report that the child has been missing from parental custody for three days now. The parents are requesting that any information about the child's whereabouts be

reported straight to the police. The child was last reported to have been in the mother's vehicle in their driveway in the Foxboro subdivision. Police are suspecting that the child was abducted.

For the week following the broadcast, Josey avoided television altogether. She could feel reality closing in on her as the person responsible for her potential demise lived just beyond the wall to her right. This morning, The Sound had altered something within her that she couldn't quite put her finger on. It was like a dense, wet fog had rolled in and was toiling inside the confines of her skull. The Sound was distracting her from Dennis and what he inevitably knew, but she couldn't shy away from the matter at hand.

The only thing in her life that grounded her was the baby. The threat of being caught extended beyond authorities and jail time. The thought of losing the baby had become unbearable to the point where she was only getting three hours of abbreviated sleep a night, the rest of the dark hours were spent staring at the crib where the baby slept, her steady breathing an incantation that banished any negative thought that plagued Josey.

Now, as she sat in her dim living room with the baby put to rest, listening for any sign of activity from her nosy neighbor, she was met only with silence.

"What to do? What to do? What to do?" Josey whispered to the wall, her knee bouncing with anxiety, her fingernails shredding between her teeth.

6: Dennis & His Date

"How's the chicken?" Dennis picked up his crystal wine glass and took a slow sip, letting the red coat his lips.

“Oh, it’s just to die for,” Marjorie said as she rested her paper-thin wrists on the edge of the table with her fork and knife pointed towards the heavens. “This place is just immaculate.” She chuckled to herself. Dennis could tell that the black carpet and crystal chandeliers had put stars in her eyes. He smiled to himself for making reservations so far in advance.

“It is quite immaculate,” Dennis said in between bites of his butter-soaked green beans. With his mouth full, he continued speaking out of the side of his mouth, “when I heard that they were opening a restaurant fully run by Automations, I figured the food would be soulless, but I have never had a more mediumly rarer, medium rare steak in my fifty-seven years.”

“You humans have no faith in us.” Marjorie shook her head, a wide smile against her crinkled cheeks.

Dennis’ face fell at his faux pas. “Marjorie, I am so sorry.” He reached across the table and rested his hand atop hers, expecting to feel cool metal, but her skin was as warm as the belly of a puppy. “I am having such a nice time with you that it totally slipped my mind that you are...”

“Not human?” Marjorie finished, eyes down turned, hand still resting under Dennis’.

“I have put my foot all the way in my mouth, haven’t I? Both feet!” Dennis let out a nervous, manufactured chuckle. Marjorie joined in, removing her hand from under Dennis’ to grab the red napkin that had been resting in her lap.

“Here, let me,” Dennis said grabbing his unsoiled napkin and reaching over the dim candlelight housed in a crystal cylinder, to dab the corners of Marjorie's eyes. “Now are these sad tears,” he said before switching to the other eye and continuing, “or happy tears?”

“A cocktail of the two, I suppose,” Marjorie huffed, then chuckled loosely, going back to cutting into her wildly realistic looking chicken dish.

Dennis had never been on a date with an Automation, and besides the occasional food delivery driver, he had never spoken face to face with one, until tonight. He wasn't even sure if Automations were able to eat human food. After meeting Marjorie online through an app that connected humans with Automations, he visited *AutomationsInfo.Gov* and found that they could eat flavored fiber cubes and drink real fruit juices - including wine! Along the ledger of the government owned website, he found an advertisement for the first restaurant “by Automations, for Automations,” with a picture of a steak that appeared like a real steak but was made entirely out of a flavored fibrous paste made for optimal digestion. Under the name of the restaurant, *Fibreggios*, in fine print, Dennis read, “specializing in Automation *and* Human delicacies.” He immediately made reservations.

Ever since Dennis' induction into the Widow's Club, he promised that he would never date again, his love life had died along with Trudy. As she clung to her last breaths, Trudy whispered into Dennis' ear that he was not old enough to lock his heart away completely. Dennis shrugged this off with a quiet bitterness, and whispered back to Trudy that the love he felt for her transcended the physical realm and that no other human could stand in the light of his love the way Trudy had since they were children.

That all changed when he saw a television commercial advertising an app that connects lonely humans to Disconnected Automations. *Are you lonely and looking for something fresh? There are Disconnected Automations seeking opportunities for purpose and connection, RIGHT NOW! Download the AutoConnect app to join the revolution. That is AutoConnect, join AutoConnect now and watch sparks fly!*

Discourse surrounding Automations had overtaken the news cycle. They had been around for nearly two decades and in that time, the validity of their existence had become a bipartisan issue. Many believed that they were going to eventually overtake us all and humans would be obsolete. Dennis and many others saw this as a bogus take that was rooted in ignorance.

Before marrying Trudy, Dennis had a conservative view on the world. Trudy spent many months during their honeymoon phase converting Dennis into someone more accepting of people who did not look like him. When Trudy was alive, the thought of Automations excited her, and she was beside herself when their next door neighbor had gone on an anti-Automation tirade one morning when Trudy was reading the newspaper on their front porch. She had stomped into the house and assured Dennis that they would never be inviting the man over for tea again and no wonder his wife had left him.

After Trudy's passing, Dennis remained staunch in his more liberal viewpoints, but after seeing the ad, a tornado formed behind his eyes. He had vowed to never love any human like he had loved Trudy, but because Automations were not technically human, the weight of the betrayal was softened. He knew this way of thinking was rather ignorant as there was a recent movement started by left wing youth that called for Automations to be considered human under the court of law, but knowing that Trudy would want him to be happy, he allowed himself to use this ignorant justification to sooth his conscience and downloaded the app.

From Marjorie's glowing profile on AutoConnect and their preliminary bouts of small talk through the app, Dennis learned that she had originally been designed to be a secretary at an advertising agency and because Automation skin was built from actual human

cells, Automations appeared to age like normal humans. Once the first couple of wrinkles started to appear on Marjorie's forehead, she was released out into the world. Her “Secretary” chip was swiftly replaced with a “Retiree” chip, a rite of passage for every Automation that allowed them to navigate the world as any normal human. Along with the “Retiree” chip - that uploADED a sense of fulfillment, a penchant for leisure and a desire for connection - Disconnected Automations were also given a randomized “Personality” chip, gifting the Automations with a personality that better suited the real world - versus the more stoic, attentive, *robotic* one that they had when on assignment.

“Are you going to ask me into your bed tonight?” Marjorie asked, swallowing the last bite of her chicken. Dennis nearly choked on an ice cube at Marjorie’s question. “Sorry, that was rather frank, wasn’t it?” Marjorie covered her mouth, chuckling at her forthright behavior.

“A little,” Dennis said with a cough. “It’s refreshing though... your frankness.” Marjorie didn’t break eye contact, a sly smile crept across her cheeks, clearly expecting him to answer the question.

“Well? Are you?” she asked with sarcastic distress, placing both hands on the table.

Dennis could feel his heart rate pick up as his cheeks flushed. He hadn’t been inclined towards sex for many years now, he didn’t even know if Automations had the proper workings for it. *Would it be hard? Rigged? Cold?* He thought to himself.

“Forgive my silence, it’s just been so long since...”

“Since you’ve had a woman in your bed?” Marjorie finished.

“You’re a little firecracker, aren’t you?” Dennis said, feeling his heart rate settle and his excitement rise. Trudy had been rather passive when it had come to sex. He remembers

early on in their marriage when he longed for this excitement that Marjorie was awakening in him. He was starting to warm up to the command that she had over him. Her confidence, her allure was entrancing him, and his heart rate settled, the wine washed over him. “Can Automations... you know...” Dennis began, trying to match Marjorie’s confidence before continuing, “perform?”

“Wouldn’t you like to find out?”

7: Josey & Her Plan (Part II)

As Josey poured her second glass of wine, she heard Dennis’s door unlock, open with a creak, and slam against the wind. Dennis typically never allowed the self-closing door to slam into place as the force behind it caused their shared wall to shake, but tonight his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. After the slam, silence filled her unit like a vacuum. It didn’t last long for Josey then heard an unfamiliar giggle permeate the white walls. It was sharp and tuned with a subtle femininity. It wasn’t a familial laugh, it wasn’t a friendly laugh, it was a lilting laugh that was punctuated with an, *oh, Dennis!*

Dennis rarely had visitors. He had once introduced Josey to some man called Leroy that had worked with Dennis at... the memory escaped Josey as the conversation had been so utterly boring and bereft that Josey had just stared at Leroy’s pupils with an intensity that had caused Leroy to avert eye contact several times as he retold a story from “back in the day”. The story began with a mishandling of something or another that left Dennis with a broken something or another. The story was punctuated with a walloping of laughter from the pair. Josey then fake laughed convincingly enough to legitimize the lore of their days “in the trenches”, satisfying the men enough to get the pair off her section of their shared porch.

Other than Leroy, Josey knew Dennis to be void of complex human interaction, like herself. However, where Josey thrived in the void, Dennis floundered.

The laughter that was overflowing into Josey's apartment now was definitely not the rugged, guttural laughter from Leroy, in fact, it could not have been more opposite.

"*Dennis?*" Josey whispered to nobody but herself, turning her head to look over her shoulder as if she could see through the walls. A smile crept across her face. Josey had never seen Dennis as a sexual being. It kind of made her skin crawl to imagine Dennis in the throes of passion with anything other than his daisies, but tonight Josey was proud of the man and secretly hoped that the woman would be a distraction and that Dennis would forget all about the baby.

This plan was one that would not require any effort from Josey (her favorite kind of plan). Dennis and the voice without a face would fall in love, Josey pondered, her charmed by his compulsion for order, him charmed by her whimsical spontaneity. A perfect harmony of staunch personality. An opposites-attract union for the ages. He would move in with her; his one-bedroom, thin-walled apartment would simply not do. Once they had settled into their shared existence, he would never compromise his new life over the information he was harboring over Josey. It would invite too much unnecessary melodrama into the whirlwind of their honeymoon phase. The introduction of cops and court rulings were burdens more so reserved for the second or third phase of a relationship.

Josey put her ear up to the wall and closed her eyes, cutting off one sense to amplify the other. She heard a slight muffling, but the pair must have bypassed the living room and went straight into the bedroom. At this realization, Josey put her hand up to her mouth in giddy shock.

Even though Josey often saw Dennis' proclivities towards spontaneous social interaction as a nuisance to her day-to-day life, she cared for the old man and appreciated all that he did for their tiny community of two. Josey was self-aware enough to know that her desire for Dennis to find love came from a selfish place, but she also wanted the man to be happy. She often felt as though they were the only two each other had and despite his nosiness that had led to his discovery of the baby, Josey didn't want anything bad to happen to Dennis. Her plan for the security of her and her baby began and ended with this woman who Dennis had just whisked away into the depths of his apartment.

"Don't fuck this up for us, Dennis," she whispered.

Josey's eyes snapped open to a bubbling wail. *Fuck*, she thought, dropping the empty wine glass, the red contents of which had been soaking into the dingy, frayed carpet. She had fallen asleep on the couch midway through her fourth glass of wine of the night. She glanced across the room into the kitchen, a neon green 1:34 AM glowering at her from the microwave.

She followed the cries into her bedroom and picked up the baby from her cushy prison. Spittle and clear snot created venous rivers across the baby's fuzzy, elastic cheeks.

"*Shhhhh...shhhh...shhhh*," Josey whispered, bouncing her knees, and rubbing her thumb against the back of the baby's small melon. "Are you hungry, little one?" Josey walked herself and the baby into the kitchen, placed the baby under a pink mobile that sat where the carpet met the linoleum and warmed up some formula.

Josey stared at the plastic bottle rotating inside of the lit-up box. As it made its third revolution Josey started to feel a small rustle in the back of her head, a prickling that

intensified as her eyes lost focus on the small yellow nipple atop the rotating bottle. A heat began to radiate behind her eyes before the microwave stopped, the beeping signal that the bottle was finished rang in Josey's throbbing ears. She rubbed against the pain with her pointer finger.

The baby had been silent, but the wails returned, pulling Josey out of her reprieve. She grabbed the warm bottle from the microwave and tested the white liquid against her skin. The droplet rolled off the back of her hand and onto the linoleum with a *plop*. The temperature was at a comforting warm, but Josey hated to think about the possibility of burning the baby's little, pink tongue so she opened the freezer and hovered the bottle above a frosty package of frozen broccoli.

With the baby now in her arms, sucking at the bottle like a calf, eyes closed, Josey paced the kitchen. The warmth of the baby in her arms washed a comforting sleepiness over her and tears started to form in the corners of her eyes. Josey had rarely been afforded moments of reflection since becoming a mother, but as the clock ticks its way to 2 AM and the still unnamed baby rests in her arms, she begins to slip into the past.

It's blotchy and gray, almost like she is colorblind to the memories. She recalls hospital rooms, clamps, metal, skin, oil, blood. She then recalls a dusty brown recliner and a pounding sensation in her gut, a taste of acid as it washes across her throat. A pain blooms between her thighs as the memory slips even further from her, turning from gray to dark gray to black. She recalls The Sound she heard that morning and her arms begin to wobble, the insignificant weight of the baby begins to feel like a leaden burden and her knees shake, the bones vibrating.

Thwack! Josey's eyes snap open along with the baby's. The bottle is empty, and small milk burps escape from the baby's tired lips. Josey recognized the sudden noise as that of Dennis' door slamming into place. She positioned the baby and began to burp her as she quickly stepped over to the window. Peering through the blinds of the window that looked out onto her porch, she was able to put a face to the woman.

The first thing Josey noticed was that she was rather old, wrinkles created small rivers across her forehead and parentheses of skin framed her eyes. Besides the surface level imperfections that come with age, the woman was rather beautiful, and her smile had a genuineness that Josey forgot existed up until this point. As the woman turned her face away from the porch light and made her way down the concrete steps with a youthful ease, Josey noticed something rather odd. The woman lifted her hand and reached around to her back. Her hair was curled and short like a helmet so Josey could see the back of her neck as she pressed down with her pointer finger on the top of her spine. A small orange light emitted from the back of her head and began to blink like a strobe. Then a small compartment sprung open from amongst the tuft of graying hair and the woman grabbed a small piece of plastic material from the compartment and slapped it shut, continuing into the night as if nothing had happened.

Josey's mouth was agape as she took in the absurdity and let it wash over her, leaving her skin prickly and her head light, devoid of any blood flow to the brain. Then something beyond her control happened. She lifted her free hand from the baby's warm shoulders and went to touch the back of her own head. As her fingers made their way to her scalp through the tangled mess of auburn, she felt a small crease at the base of her neck, right above her spine.

8: Dennis & His Admission

“Oh, Dennis!” Marjorie squealed as Dennis grabbed her hips and planted a kiss on her thin, pink lips. He had been giving her small pecks since they left Fibreggios, his heart racing less and less with each small contact, but now that they were in his apartment, free from prying eyes, he let his lips linger, his hand traveling from her hips up the small of her back, careful not to let her feel the nervous shaking of his nimble fingers.

During the car ride home, thoughts of Trudy crept and lingered, leaving behind a stinging guilt. He used her dying words to him as a defense against his anxieties, playing them repeatedly, like a song, or a prayer. *You are too young to lock your heart away.*

Their first kiss had come out of nowhere, initiated by Marjorie. It happened under the dark green and maroon awning that hung above the golden facade of Fibreggios. He was holding open the door for her and before sneaking through, she rested her hand on his chest and pressed her lips into his. He had always assumed that his first kiss since Trudy died would rip a hole in the atmosphere and suck him into a new galaxy, but it had caught him so off guard, that it was almost as if it didn't happen. He initiated the second kiss as he held his car door open for her and it was like skin adjusting to cold water, or eyes adjusting to darkness. He was adjusting. With each small peck his infatuation grew.

In the passenger seat, Marjorie sang along to the 80's pop song that was pumping through the speakers of Dennis's old Jeep. Dennis only turned the radio on a handful of times in his adult life, preferring the silence that car rides provided, but he was quickly learning that Marjorie was bursting with the kind of life that couldn't stand the emptiness of silence, that she had the kind of spirit that needed to be constantly inundated with groovy stimuli.

“So, who *are* you, Dennis?” Marjorie asked, her arm at a ninety-degree angle, head resting in her open palm. Dennis was lying next to Marjorie in his queen-sized bed, his arm also at a ninety-degree angle, head also resting in his open palm. The position was slightly uncomfortable, his age-stiffened spine and neck were strained, but the closeness made him feel youthful, like a lovestruck teen.

He was taken aback by Marjorie’s question. They had just had a very open conversation at Fibreggios. Dennis spoke to her extensively about his time as a married man and even told some stories about his time at the plant where he and his old buddy Leroy used to cut up, resulting in not only one, but a few onsite injuries. She had laughed in all the right places, leaving Dennis feeling as though he had a sort of control over the moment and over his anxieties.

“You don’t know by now?” he uttered, managing not to drop the soft smile that had been stuck on his face since the pair fumbled into the bed.

“Well, I mean,” Marjorie said, breaking eye contact and staring up at the ceiling. “I know about your late wife and your old buddy Leroy.” She had said Leroy’s name with a doofy twang that felt to Dennis like a low blow. “But I feel like I don’t know who you are quite yet... I’m still trying to pin you down and you’re not budging.” Marjorie squinted her eyes and flashed a playful, crooked smile.

Her comment left a tightness in Dennis’ chest. The dinner had left him feeling comfortably exposed and warm. He was satisfied with the amount he was able to share with this beautiful woman without stuttering or spiraling into anxiety-induced despondence. But she was right, he avoided speaking about himself outside of the context of his past interpersonal and romantic relationships. He racked his brain for something, anything that

would make him not seem like just another old, lonely man who spent his days watering daisies and reminiscing about times long past by.

Dennis had to take a risk to keep even a loose grip on Marjorie's wild disposition. He knew that her personality was just hardwiring, chips and data, but weren't even human personalities manufactured? Aren't we all just a product of the hands that shape and solder us? Dennis decided to act on an impulse that had been tapping on the back of his shoulder since his second glass of wine was poured at Fibreggio's.

"Have you heard about that baby that was kidnapped?" Dennis' heart raced. He couldn't believe he was doing this, betraying Josey, and stroking the fires of his anxiety in such a brutish way, but he could feel Marjorie's interest slipping through his fingers and he couldn't let that happen.

"I did!" she exclaimed, widening her eyes, and grasping his wrist with her free hand. "Was it you?" she asked. Dennis managed a chuckle, but his heart rate was increasing by the second and his voice was starting to shake. If it had been him that had stolen the baby, that would tell Marjorie everything she needed to know about Dennis, and he would be effectively pinned. But, once again, he was avoiding conversations in which he was the focal point. Seeing Marjorie's bubbly reaction to his word signaled to him that he had already let the tiger out of the cage, she was hooked, and Dennis would do anything to maintain her dewy-eyed excitement. The nuggets of Dennis' inner hopes and desires that Marjorie craved would have to wait until the second date.

"No, no, no, it wasn't me, but I think I know who did it."

"Oh, now you must tell me! Stop being so coy, sir," she said, angling her face down, giving Dennis a look that he had not seen from a woman since the last time his wife wanted

something from him and had resorted to using her feminine appeal that she knew would make her husband fold every time.

Dennis began, “Alright, the other day I stepped outside to say hello to my neighbor... She's a single young woman and I like to... check up on her now and again, and when I stepped outside to say hello, she had a little bundle of joy of her hip, and when I asked her who the baby belonged to, because, mind you, I had never seen her with child so it didn't even cross my mind that it could be hers, and so I asked her who the child belonged to and she said it was her sisters. But you know what?” Marjorie was clinging to every word, making Dennis feel like a performer on a lit stage. His heart rate had settled and all he felt now was a rush of relief, like he was shaking the devil off his back, confessing his sins at the church of Marjorie.

“What?!” she yelled to fill the silence, rolling her eyes in faux exasperation.

“Well, when she first introduced herself to me, down by the mailboxes, she said she was an only child, so right off the bat, I was confused, but decided to brush it off, until...” He let the thought trail off.

“Until what, Dennis? Come on! Now you're stringing me along.”

“Until that baby turned around and we locked eyes... I swear to God in heaven that baby is the same one that has been splashed all over the news.” Now that Dennis finished his grand proclamation, Marjorie's mouth was fixed into an O shape. Dennis was proud of his admission. Proud that he had something this major, something this *newsworthy* that he had an exclusive scoop on. His thoughts then quickly diverted to Josey and what it would mean if she were to get caught. Feelings of regret crept in mixed with the guilt that he would exploit Josey in this way.

Even though Dennis knew Josey was so irrevocably wrong for what she had done, his stomach lurched at the thought of her life getting blown to pieces due to this self-indulgent piece of gossip that he was using to impress a woman, an Automation no less.

“Oh, my goodness, what are you going to do? I mean, you must turn her in, right? You’re going to turn her in, right?” Marjorie was slapping Dennis’ thighs softly, which he found to be rather erotic, or maybe that was just the rush of endorphins that came along with his admission.

After she settled back into their mirrored position, Dennis answered, “and therein lies the dilemma.”

9: Josey & The Sound

“Josey M, Automation ID number 2496, Childbearing Department, Level 15, ready for artificial insemination.” Josey’s back was against the light green plastic, under the fluorescent UFO-shaped light that hung above her half-naked form in the white, antiseptic smelling clinic room. She had heard these words before, altered slightly with each new level she acquired. Level 15 signified that this was her fifteenth and final time going through the Childbearing procedure. After the nine-month pregnancy, she would be given a randomized personality chip and would get shipped off to an undisclosed location where she would be able to live an autonomous life amongst the soul-bearing population she had been created to help populate.

Her eyes were fixed despondently on the white-tiled ceiling, each tile dotted with tiny holes, like a dash of pepper thrown onto a mountain of salt. As she felt the cool metal device part her thighs and wedge its way past her lubricated opening, she began to count the

minuscule dots. After she reached 47, she felt an internal tug and release, signaling that the procedure was complete, she felt empty and full all at once. She then felt a hand wedge itself underneath her back and guide her into an upright position.

“With the completion of this procedure, and after nine months of pregnancy, Josey M will have fulfilled her duties as Automation 2496 of the Childbearing Department, and she will be released into the wild!” Josey’s sponsor, the woman who had her hand resting on Josey’s back, sighed in exasperated pride.

Her sponsor, the doctor who completed the procedure and the nurse who hadn’t left his position in the corner of the room, began to clap, congratulating Josey for the miracles for which her body had been the vessel. Josey looked to her sponsor, tears streaming down both of their faces. They embraced, both laughing to keep from choking on their joyful sobs.

“I have sort of an abstract question,” said Josey. Her right arm was resting atop her now seven-month-old bump, the other arm was supporting a cerulean mug of hot water, it helped her sleep. She was sitting in her small living quarters in a cheap, faux leather armchair facing her sponsor, Lily. Lily was sitting at Josey’s desk, having just finished filling out some release paperwork for Josey’s eventual departure from the Automation complex. Lily preferred traditional paperwork over electronic paperwork for she was prone to mistakes and always had an arsenal of erasers in her beige satchel. The satchel was stuffed with journals of various sizes and colors that Lily was constantly updating and could never seem to get rid of. Josey had peeked inside of one of the well-used journals once when Lily had fallen asleep in her room. The care that Lily took to record her days spent with Josey had brought a tear to her eye.

Lily was also supporting a cerulean mug, but hers was filled with hot coffee, cooled down by a splash of heavy cream, a night of paperwork and tears ahead of her. Behind the two women, a medium-sized window overlooked a bustling cityscape from nine floors up. The skyscraper served as an apartment complex of sorts that exclusively housed Automations. Each floor held Automations that made up different departments, ranging from Secretaries, Waste Managers, Baristas and Child Bearers.

“Ask away Josey, that’s why I’m here,” said Lily. Josey knew she didn’t have to announce every time she had a question, but from the sitcoms she consumed during her entire existence of pregnancy induced bedrest, she knew that precluding a question by asking permission seemed to burden the question with a weight of significance.

“When you speak about the human world, why do you always refer to it as *the wild*?” asked Josey.

Lily sighed, putting her mug down and resting her elbows on her knees before answering, “I call it the wild Josey, because it’s filled with animals.” Lily paused before continuing, “I was going to have this conversation with you eventually, but I guess we’re doing this now... when you get released from your duties, Josey, you are going to realize that the people out there are radically different from the people in here.”

Josey placed her mug on the small, light washed wooden table that sat next to her chair and leaned in. “How so?” she asked.

“There are going to be people that are going to have a prejudice against you for... what you are... what you represent,” Lily said with her eyes low.

“And what do I represent exactly?” asked Josey, a knot forming in her stomach.

“You represent an Other, something new, something that most people will see as unnatural, something that others will not be able to relate to and this, Josey, is where ignorance festers and grows... like that mold we found in your closet last year.” Lily and Josey let out a light chuckle at the memory of the menacing spores.

Josey contemplated Lily’s words. Every Automation dreamed of setting foot outside of their assigned steel monolith. Life inside was warm and cushy, the crime rate rested at zero percent. Inside also had Lily, who was assigned to Josey the day she was crafted and was the first person that Josey saw when she opened her eyes for the first time. Having spent her life in front of a television set, outside for Josey was Cosmopolitans, brunch, sex, art and Vera Wang wedding gowns. She wanted to cry over boys and get drunk and smoke cigarettes in front of her computer screen while she published her escapades and, more than anything, she never wanted to be pregnant again. There was no “prejudice” in Sitcom Land. The word echoed in her head.

“You’ve gone silent on me, Josey,” Lily observed.

“Well, it kind of feels like you’ve dangled something great in my face and now you’re taking it away,” Josey said with tears welling.

“I’m just trying to prepare you, Josey,” Lily said. She reached out for Josey’s hand and Josey gave it over, folding her fingers into Lily’s palm. “We will keep an eye out on you, as you know” - Lily let out a long sigh before continuing - “and we do have a procedure that helps protect the reputation of Automations and we believe that the procedure is the reason why Automations have been able to live peacefully amongst humans for as long as they have.”

“The procedure?” Josey connected her eyes with Lily’s and took her hand back. “And what does *the procedure* entail?” Josey asked.

“It’s called The Sound.”

Josey stayed silent, waiting for Lily to continue. “If an Automation breaks a law or finds themselves amid a public scandal of any kind, we activate The Sound.” Lily paused for a beat giving space for Josey to speak, but her silence persisted. “It wipes a part of the Automation’s memory, making it so that the Automation doesn’t know that they are an Automation.”

“And how does that keep humans from developing a prejudice?”

“If you don’t know who you are, they won’t either.”

10: Dennis & His Hangover

Dennis awoke to an empty bed and a splitting headache. *Fine wine my ass!* he cursed internally, rolling over, taking in the remnants of Marjorie’s perfume on the cold pillow. He inhaled deeply, sighing longingly. Even though their relationship had remained chaste, Dennis felt an overwhelming sense of shame. Shame for how he betrayed Josey mixed with the shame for how he still hadn’t gone to the police.

Maybe he told Marjorie because he secretly hoped that she would turn Josey in and the burden would no longer be his. When Josey screamed obscenities at Dennis from beyond their shared wall as the police dragged her out of the door, Dennis would feign innocence, saying he had nothing to do with it, which would only be a half lie. Dennis closed his eyes again, hoping to slip away into unconsciousness, but his throbbing headache had other plans.

He rolled back over to his side of the bed and grabbed his cell phone. Once his tortoise shell reading glasses were fixed onto the end of his nose, he opened the phone and saw a pixelated text from Marjorie:

I had a great time last night, thanks for opening up x.

After Dennis spilled his guts to Marjorie about Josey and her baby, Marjorie looked at Dennis with a glint of wild excitement. A look that made Dennis feel as though the two had momentarily swapped personalities. Now Dennis was the alluring one, the one that blasted 80s music on the radio, the one that went in for the first kiss. Josey's secret gave Dennis an edge, placing him atop a proverbial pedestal.

"And therein lies the dilemma," he said.

"You're bad, Dennis." Marjorie's already wide smile widened. The grip of Dennis' initial anxieties were slipping away and he began to puff his chest. The wine gave him a head rush.

"I just would never want anything bad to happen to her, that's all."

"Does someone have a crush on their neighbor?"

"Now don't be ridiculous, she's half my age."

"Do you think this is the first time an old man has had a crush on a little girl?"

"She's not a *little* girl, now you're just being crass."

"Oh, have I scandalized you Mr. Dennis?"

An image of Trudy flashed across Dennis' vision. In the image, she had her arm resting atop her engorged belly and an earnest smile was fixed across her bare, dewy face. He bit down hard on his tongue trying to keep a rogue tear from welling over.

“I once had a little girl,” Dennis looked down, not able to see the expression on Marjorie’s face, but he could feel a shift flex in the silent air that hung between them. “Well, I guess you could say I never really had her.” Dennis fixed his eyes on Marjorie’s now, her face now baring a look of confusion filtered with sadness.

“Stillborn,” he flashed a crooked half smile to signify that he was not asking for sympathy, only the feeling of release that comes every time he speaks of his late daughter, which is hardly ever anymore.

Marjorie rested her hand on Dennis’ shoulder and made small soothing circles with her palm. “I am so sorry Dennis.”

“It was a long time ago.” The smile he flashed was now full, genuine. He rarely thought about the little girl who came out of Trudy blue and distended. After they grieved the passing of their daughter, her death became a blip in their memory that they rarely accessed. Since Trudy’s death, when he thought about the baby, he was no longer mourning the baby, but Trudy. If the baby would have survived, Trudy would have lived on, but there’s no returns on the debts of life.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” Marjorie leaned forward and pressed her lips into Dennis’ lingering for a beat and then pulling away.

“Hey, do you mind if we call it a night?” Dennis asked. He was feeling warmly nostalgic and was yearning for silence and some shut eye. “I really enjoyed my time with you, and I don’t want to taint it with sexual frivolity.”

“Always the gentleman Dennis.” Marjorie leaned in for another peck.

The pair got up from the bed, Dennis’ bones cracking as he straightened his knees.

“I guess you don’t have to deal with aching joints,” Dennis said with a chuckle as he stretched his back.

“Not as much as you humans,” Marjorie snickered. “I’m a well-oiled machine!” Dennis and Marjorie chuckled their way out of the bedroom all the way to the front door. With his hand on the doorknob, Dennis leaned in for one final peck. Before he could stick the landing, Marjorie leaned away.

“Personally, I don’t think you should turn your neighbor in. What if your eyes were deceiving you? Why ruin your good standing relationship with your neighbor over a hunch?” Before Dennis could respond, she planted a kiss on his cheek. “Just my opinion!”

11: Josey & Her Lily

Josey stared out the window. The morning sun was just rising above the shortest skyscrapers that littered the landscape like toy soldiers. Black birds peppered the cloudless sky; wind howled against the thick window threatening to crack the transparent glass. Ringing in her ear was the familiar sound of the buzzer she had just seconds ago pressed. Her water had broken all over the floor and she was awaiting the arrival of Lily and a wheelchair to transport her into the birthing room. The contractions caused her to sweat, but other than the tiny beads rolling across her forehead, her face remained stoic; the pain was familiar and bearable.

Lily burst through the door, a look of distressed panic on her face.

“Oh Josey, it’s time, come sit, hurry!” Lily’s command broke Josey from her reprieve.

“Oh, relax Lily, this is my fifteenth pregnancy, we can stop with all of the theatrics.” Josey had her hand pressing into the small of her back as she waddled over to the wheelchair and sat with an abbreviated grunt.

“Oh Josey, shut up and breathe through your nose.” Lily wheeled Josey and her unborn baby down the carpeted hallway. The ugly brown wallpaper with the small yellow flowers flashed in Josey’s periphery.

“Lily, slow down! I’m not even fully dilated yet.”

“You never make this easy on me do you, Josey?” Lily slowed down her pace and rubbed the base of Josey’s neck with her palm. Josey welcomed Lily’s comforting touch, leaning into it and shutting her eyes.

This was the day that Josey had been looking forward to and dreading for her entire existence in her tiny ecosystem of metal. The bittersweetness created a war in her mind that made her eyes red with tears. Lily had been her mother, her sister, her best friend, her first love and after her month-long recovery after which she would be pushed off a cliff into the bustling realm of the city, Lily would become the first person to break her heart.

In the white antiseptic room, Josey is positioned on her back, legs in the cushioned stirrups, preparing to be turned off. Her eyes count the dots on the ceiling while Lily instructs her to breathe as if she forgot how to. Josey scoffed at Lily’s controlled panic. Lily treated each of Josey’s pregnancies as if it was her first; aggressively massaging Josey’s legs and shoulders, spouting out breathless words of encouragement.

“Heeee heeee haaaa haaaa hoooo hoooo,” Lily would begin to chant which would make Josey chuckle and then roll her eyes playfully. Josey’s exasperation towards Lily’s care was all a feigned charade. It started as an attempt to not get too attached to Lily; however,

after fifteen pregnancies together, the charade was no longer a defense, rather an inside joke that had become a part of their strange, familial dynamic.

Once Josey became fully dilated, the doctor would enter the room and Lily would fade into the background, taking a seat in the corner with her elbows on her knees, resting from all of her hard work.

Unlike the screaming, bloody births that Josey consumed on television, the Automation birthing process was significantly less traumatic to the body and mind. Once the doctor arrived, a two-inch metallic rod would be placed a centimeter or two away from Josey's ear. When activated, the metal rod will give off a sonar that will send Josey into a realm without dreams, something deeper than sleep, a void so black you wake up feeling as though you have been reborn into your first day of existence. This makes for a holistically painless procedure, after which Josey will wake up in her warm bed as if she had never been pregnant in the first place. Not only was this physically painless, but it also makes any potential attachment to the baby obsolete as the bloody mass of flesh and blood is whisked away to its biological mother before the Automation is turned back on.

"Heeee heeee haaaa haaaa hoooo hoooo," Lily continued to chant. As the pain between Josey's thighs turned from a nuisance into something much fiercer, she put her previous attitude aside and began to chant along with Lily. During each of her fifteen pregnancies, there was always a moment, right before the doctor came in to put Josey to sleep, that Lily and Josey would lock eyes. The air between their gazes was tangible, soft, and sharp all at once. It was the only reprieve Josey knew as her artificial body began to push something out that had been with her for nine months. She would never be able to run the back of her finger over the baby's blood-soaked peach fuzz or kiss the sticky forehead.

Staring at the edge of Lily's pupils that pushed up against her brown irises made her forget about the task at hand.

This final time was different. Their locked stare only lasted for a few seconds before Lily's eyes shut, creased, and began to flow like parallel rivers.

"Lily... what the fuck?... Are you crying?"

Lily dropped her hand from Josey's and put it over her own mouth, stifling a laugh while the tears continued to flow. Josey began to chuckle through the pain and locked her eyes back on Lily with her mouth open in exaggerated shock.

"Josey, stop." Lily grabbed a paper towel from the metal desk to her left and began blotting her tear ducts. "My heart isn't made of metal like yours," Lily let a small laugh escape, but it came out more like a hiccup.

"You're... such... a bitch," Josey said under her breath. As the pain reached a plateau, Josey began to chuckle and grabbed at the air for Lily's hand.

"I love you, Josey." Their eyes locked once more.

"I love you, Lily." Josey allowed the tears that had been sitting behind her eyes to flow as the doors to the birthing room opened and the doctor walked in.

Josey had just awoken from a brief spell. Lily was asleep in the recliner next to her bed, covered with a baby blue blanket up to her neck. A sour taste coated Josey's tongue that no amount of chilled water could wash away. It had been two weeks, give or take, since Josey had gone under for her fifteenth and final pregnancy. The days since had been long, the scenes outside of the window dark and cold, winter rolling in ahead of schedule. She had

trouble sleeping and often found herself gazing in the dark corners of her room for hours without blinking after which she would find that her gray nightgown was stained with tears.

Josey was used to going through a brief period of foggy emptiness the days following the birthing procedure. This final time, however, something foreign and new plagued her. She was being haunted by a heaviness that began in her chest and spread up behind her eyes, causing an endless stream of tears that made her head throb.

Lily hadn't left her side since the procedure. Josey could tell that something was haunting her as well, for Lily was typically attuned to Josey's emotions and had the ability to calm and control them with her soothing words. But for the last two weeks, Lily worked with a quiet fierceness. She would ask Josey what was wrong, but when Josey scoffed and mumbled *nothing* under her breath, instead of pressing further, Lily would just fix her eyes downward, giving up, defeated.

A resentment was growing within Josey that frightened her. Lily was her entire world, but with each passing day, as the dark clouds rolled in from the south, covering the city in a glowing darkness, the world she thought she knew was beginning to slip through her fingers.

"Lily, wake up." Josey sat up in her bed and fixed a sharp stare onto Lily's closed eyelids. "Lily... wake up." When Lily's slumber pressed on, Josey grabbed for a pillow that had fallen onto the floor during the night and sent it flying towards Lily. It plopped onto Lily's sleeping form, awaking her with a start.

"Josey, what the hell?" she said, eyes still closed, arching her back with a yawn.

"Lily, wake up, we need to talk." Lily adjusted her recliner into the upright position and brushed her sleep frizzed bangs from her forehead.

“Well, good morning to you too.”

“This is a serious conversation I am trying to have with you, Lily, I would really appreciate it if you would treat it as such.”

“Yes ma’am!” Josey let the twinge of sarcasm in Lily’s words roll off her back.

“Lily, why me?” Josey’s fixed gaze did not waver from Lily’s half squinted eyes.

“What do you mean by that Josey?” Lily asked. Josey recognized this tone; Lily had been jolted awake by her question and her therapist hat was on. Josey had Lily right where she wanted her.

“Why was I chosen to be placed in the birthing sector?”

“You weren’t chosen for this Josey; you were made for it.”

“My body was made for it, yes, but my personality... my *soul* was chosen. Maybe my body could handle carrying a child for nine months and then getting it ripped away, but *I... me... ME... I can’t handle this... feeling anymore!*” Tears flowed freely and Josey broke eye contact. “I want a baby, Lily.” The air got sucked out of the room like a vacuum. Josey had never said this aloud before and, up until this moment, she hadn’t even known it to be true herself. “I want a baby and I will never have one, because of this. Because of you and your... people.” Josey’s heart dropped as the words escaped her lips.

“How dare you, Josey; you don’t mean that.” Lily choked the words out, tears blurring her vision. “Your body is a thing of magic. You can provide people who can’t have children with the precious gift of life.”

“Yes, privileged people with tons of money who don’t know what else to do with it and need a child to fulfill some sort of weird fantasy about continuing their legacy of wealth and privilege. How do you sleep at night, Lily?” Josey felt a cruel power wash over her that

allowed her chin to raise and her eyes to clear. “How do you sleep knowing that you are a cattle herder and I’m the cattle. I was *chosen* for a life of pain, of detachment, I am a human incubator!”

“But you aren’t human, Josey.” Lily’s face had turned, a look of stoic sorrow behind a sinister mask. “You’re a machine, Josey, you’re not human, you were *created* for a purpose and that purpose has been fulfilled and now you can get the fuck out of here since you are so goddamn oppressed. What do you think the outside world is like, huh? If you think you are going to walk out of these doors and be embraced with open arms and be given a warm bed and three meals a day, then you are a fool and I have failed you.”

“Fuck you, Lily, get the fuck out of my room, I never want to see you again.”

12: Lily & Her Personality Chip

It has been two months since Josey escaped the complex. Well, I guess escape is the wrong word entirely, because she didn’t escape at all, she simply left without saying goodbye...

Since she left, I have cried enough tears for fifteen babies. I’ve prayed and asked for absolution, but in Josey’s eyes, I wear the hat of the enemy.

I joined this line of work to advocate for change from the inside. I joined this line of work in hopes of reforming the amount of life that is given to Automations, because Josey’s parting words to me were correct. Why the fuck are we pumping these Automations full of life and personality and soul if we are using them as birthing machines, or as Josey had described it, cattle?

The powers that be believe that the only way for birthing Automations to be proper carriers, is for them to have the same emotions that carrying, human mothers have towards their unborn babies. Even though I don't believe the same, their beliefs aren't by any means... unfounded.

When birthing Automations were in the testing phase, in order to ensure minimal attachment to the unborn baby, the women weren't given a personality chip, the space under the skin behind their neck left vacant, hollow. The function of these test-Automations was to exist as a singular mind, copied ten times and uploaded. They slept at the same time, ate at the same time, did yoga at the same time, and as their birthing time approached and their bellies grew, they revolted at the same time.

Ten personality-less test Automations were artificially inseminated, and ten unborn fetuses had been miscarried... terminated... slaughtered. The test Automations had treated their engorged bellies like foreign, cancerous growths taking over their bodies like a parasite. For example, one of the pregnant test Automations couldn't discern what was happening to her body, so she took a steak knife and sawed her own abdomen off. I saw the photos with my own eyes. The way the blood and torn skin mixed with the blinking control panel and tangled wires... It was pretty gnarly.

The solution: give birthing Automations a personality chip so full of empathy and motherly instincts that they would put their own lives on the line for their small bump. It was one of two extremes; no middle ground had been explored or tested. Ethics and morals had been chucked out of the fourteenth story window.

Just another example of how the patriarchy puts all the responsibility on the mother. I have brought it up in countless board meetings: if we hire more staff to provide around the

clock care, we can make it so these Automations can feel less while still having successful birthing numbers. But alas, money will always trump ethics and morality and humanity chips cost less than actual humans.

I lie awake at night, thinking of Josey and how I had failed her. She had been the first Automation that I had ever been assigned to, so can I really blame myself? She was my guinea pig and she had escaped. Again, not escaped... she had simply walked away.

It's now been about a year and six months since Josey left the complex. My grief still waxes and wanes, but I have channeled it all into my work.

I left the birthing sector, the memories so painful that they got in the way of my work. I lost the ability to connect with the new birthing Automation that I was assigned to named Izzy. I would leave myself, completely despondent, not able to pick up on the cues that Izzy needed me to respond to. I was failing miserably and quickly becoming a danger to Izzy and to myself. I had to take back control.

After sharing my grief and Josey's story with the powers that be, they allowed me to switch sectors and I am now able to do what I came into this line of work to do. I work in chip production where I spend all day in front of a screen, crafting personalities for birthing Automations.

After many months of trial and error and sleepless nights and headaches and tears, I have crafted a personality chip that allows birthing Automations to care for their engorged bellies without getting attached to what lies underneath. They see the belly as human mothers do, an extension of themselves that is to be nurtured and cared for. Where they differ from human mothers is that they see pregnancy as part of the human condition, an event, like

Christmas or the Super Bowl, something that comes and goes and will come again and eventually go again. This allows for an attachment to the act of being pregnant, versus the actual child.

I wish I could turn back time and gift Josey with this chip. My heart breaks for all the birthing Automations before who had their pride and joy ripped away from them. I see this new project as my greatest achievement and will always see Josey as my biggest failure.

It's been two years and three months since Josey left the complex and she is in trouble. She stole a fucking baby and had to have her memory wiped with The Sound. Memory of the complex, memory of being an Automation altogether, memory of me... gone.

She, like all other Automations that had to have their memory wiped, will still have all of the instincts of an Automation, they just won't be able to put into words why they are the way they are; why they can only eat fiber, why they only require an average of three hours of sleep a night, why they have trouble connecting with humans, is all a big mystery to them.

An Automation that has had their memory wiped lives in a sort of idiosyncratic limbo of painful trials and errors. Not only does it ensure that the public won't know that an Automation stepped out of the bounds of what is societally normal, but it also acts as a sort of cruel punishment. Like a fish that has been snatched from the ocean and placed in a tank, a memory wiped Automation will never truly acclimate to their surroundings.

No wonder Josey stole a fucking baby! After fifteen pregnancies, of course she wanted a baby of her own, she was programmed that way! Yes, she was assigned a new personality chip upon exiting the complex, but some programming can never be fully erased.

I was right all along, and I now feel a misplaced sort of validation in the countless hours that I spent perfecting the new birthing Automation chips. My work is not for nothing, and all the eye rolls and sighs of exasperation that have come my way from the powers that can be shoved right up their ass. I was fucking right.

After hearing word that Josey had gone through The Sound procedure, I knew that I had to do something. Ever since Josey left the complex, I knew that I would one day see her again and this quickly became my excuse to go out and find her. I needed to save her, clear her name, absolve her, return the baby under the cover of darkness, and make her remember. I began to plan.

It's been two weeks since Josey endured the Sound and since I had begun the work on my magnum opus.

I knew I couldn't just track Josey down and tell her she was an Automation (and that I am the love of her life). Like how we're told not to wake someone in the middle of sleep paralysis, I couldn't simply grab her by the shoulders and shake her back into herself, I had to have more tact than that.

I have been working many hours of (unlogged) overtime creating a new Automation. When it's completed, I will upload myself. I have been studying Josey's release profile where I have been able to find her address. From there, I was able to hack into the duplex's landlord database where I was able to find out information about her neighbor, a single, seventy-six-year-old named Dennis. I will craft the Automation to appear to be around the same age as Dennis (a little bit younger, because that's what men like).

Through the information provided in the landlord database, I was also able to find everywhere that Dennis is present on the world wide web, and it appears that he is a member of that new dating app that connects humans to disconnected Automations. Dennis, you foxy man, you've made this all too easy on me!

Through this new Automation, I will infiltrate Dennis's life, getting closer and closer to Josey until I can steal the baby, return it to its mother and make Josey remember who she is... who I am.

The Automation is complete. My request for two weeks of vacation time has been approved, but I know that I will never be coming back.

She's beautiful; tall, curled blonde hair, thin lips, beauty mark. I held the chip in my hand that holds everything that makes me, me. Before inserting it into her neck, I stared at the small personality chip. I could crush it into my hand, continue working to create birthing Automations that will never have to go through what Josey has gone through. Or I could continue my mission and save the love of my life. The decision was all too easy.

I dream of us living together in a small, red brick house in the suburbs, raising an adopted child as a couple and dying in each other's arms. I've lived my life for Josey for so long that my happiness has molded itself to fit her form, I am empty without her.

When I fit my chip into the Automation that I had crafted from the ground up (outside of the bounds of my jurisdiction), risking my job and my livelihood, I wept and wept and wept and I named her after my late mother.

Marjorie.

13: Dennis & His Decision

“Thanks for agreeing to meet with me today, said Dennis. He sat across from Marjorie, coffee cup in hand, warming his palm.

“Of course, Dennis, I had such a great time with you the other night, I was sad that it had to be cut short, but I get it, we all have torrid histories, memories of which could pop up at any moment.” Marjorie rambled on, a cup of hot water resting between her palms.

For the past two days, Dennis hadn't left his house. Opening to Marjorie about Trudy and her miscarriage had reopened multiple old wounds and he felt like he had started the grieving process all over again, any previous progress made, wiped clean. The wounds festered as his mind wandered to Josey and what Trudy would do if she knew what Dennis knew now. He had come to a decision and Marjorie was the only person that he could share it with.

“I think I have to report my neighbor to the police.” Dennis had trouble making eye contact with Marjorie after admitting his decision, but out of the top of his vision, he saw her face turn.

“Oh Dennis, why?” she asked dispassionately before pausing, awaiting a response that Dennis was unable to provide. “Why get involved?”

“Because it's what Trudy would have done.” Dennis looked down at his wrinkled fingers, contemplating his words. This had been the driving force behind Dennis ever since he lost Trudy. It's why he took care of Josey in small ways, planting daisies, decorating their tree during the holidays, shoveling the snow on their shared sidewalk, because he had done the same for Trudy. Going through the motions had become his only motivation since joining

the widow's club. He needed to find some way to break the cycle and doing what's right was a start.

"Oh Dennis, but you care so much for Josey." Marjorie looked down at her steaming cup. "How could you do this to her?"

Dennis was not expecting Marjorie to push back in this way, a subtle anger flared behind his eyes. "What does it matter to you Marjorie? You've never even met Josey. Yes, I care for her, but she doesn't care for me!" Dennis had never admitted this to himself, but deep down he had always known it to be true. Josey avoided Dennis like he was some kind of leper, and she didn't seem to be concerned with shielding Dennis from these feelings. "She avoids me like I'm some sort of plague doctor. She never takes her garbage can to the curb because she knows I'll do it and she never says thank you! Why should I protect her? She's a criminal! She stole that poor child, and her mother is dying inside on the news every night! I'm a criminal for keeping this to myself, I could do jail time! I must do this, Marjorie... I must." Dennis's frantic speech didn't seem to have any effect on Marjorie. Her eyes didn't break contact with his and her lips stayed pursed as if the words were flowing in one ear and out of the other.

"Dennis, quiet down please, we are in public. I just don't think someone in your condition needs to involve themselves in something this serious." Marjorie locked eyes with Dennis.

"My condition?" Dennis was dumbfounded by Marjorie's bluntness; he was having trouble finding words. "Whatever do you mean by that Marjorie?"

"I just mean... I know my brief presence in your life has opened some old wounds concerning your late wife and I just don't think it's right for you to blame your guilt on her.

Just because it's what she would have done, doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. And who's to say she would turn your neighbor in? You can't put words in a dead person's mouth Dennis."

Dennis felt like he had been sucker-punched, immediately regretting ever setting a virtual foot into AutoConnect. Marjorie didn't understand him like he thought she had. She had poked and prodded and threatened her way into his withheld emotions and weaponized those emotions against him. His breathing was shallowing out, his chest heaving, the crushing blow of betrayal threatened to collapse his heart. Betrayal coming at him from Marjorie and betrayal coming from him at Trudy's memory. Dennis began to panic, wishing he had a shell where he could hide his head in a hollow void of shame and regret. He wanted to get up and leave the coffee shop in silence, but he owed it to himself and to Trudy to leave no doubt in Marjorie's mind that they will never be seeing each other again.

"I knew this was going to be a mistake." Dennis put his palms to the edge of the table and swallowed. "I should have never gotten involved with someone without a soul." At this, Dennis got up from the orange, metal chair, and stepped out onto the rain-soaked sidewalk, leaving Marjorie and his coffee behind.

14: Josey & Her Memory

Josey fingered the crease at the base of her skull. The skin around the crease was smooth, but the flaps were rough. Touching it sent a chill down running down her spine. The skin, although rough, was movable, the sensation was like if you were to touch the skin underneath your fingernail, uncanny. Once her finger had traveled about a centimeter or two into the crease, she started to feel something plastic and flimsy. She let out a startled yelp and

removed her finger from the back of her neck as if she'd been shocked. Her mind was wandering. Fearing that she was going to crack, Josey sat down on the couch, pulling her knees up to her chest and hugging her legs tight.

Black spots outlined in a staticky haze danced in the corners of her eyes. She felt light, like her body was full of helium and she was in danger of floating off the couch and hitting her head against the speckled ceiling where she would eventually pop, sending splashes of gore against the pewter walls.

Who am I? She pondered. *What am I?* Questions exploded in her head like fireworks, the force and weight of them vibrated against her skull, her vision slowly being overtaken by the small dots.

One...two... three... she began to count the dots to erase the dreaded voices, a hard task due to the sporadic nature of them. She looked up, eyes scanning towards the ceiling, her blood ran cold. The ceiling had morphed into an unfamiliar tile pattern, white, with small black dots, like pepper.

Josey M, Automation ID number 2496, Childbearing Department, Level 15, ready for artificial insemination.

Josey's eyes snapped back down. She was lying on her back, her knees were fixed at an angle, her feet in cold, metal stirrups and she was in a papery, baby blue, shapeless gown. The sting of antiseptic coated the walls of her nostrils and the harsh fluorescence that shone from above threatened to cook her irises. A scream stuck its way up from her throat, unable to escape her closed lips. She felt a tug between her thighs, then a sticky, warm wetness that sought to rip her apart.

With the completion of this procedure, and after nine months of pregnancy, Josey M will have fulfilled her duties as Automation 2496 of the Childbearing Department, and she will be released into the wild!

Josey's eyes snapped to her right and saw a woman standing next to her. She was blurry like an undeveloped photograph, but Josey could smell her perfume. A heaviness threatened to collapse her chest as her eyes locked with the woman's and her vision cleared. A flood of emotions halted her breathing.

Heee heee haaa haaa hooo hooo!

The fluorescence began to dim as the stirrups disappeared, her feet falling, landing on her carpeted floors. The room, the doctor, the woman, vanished, returning Josey to the familiar living room. Silence filled Josey's unit, but only for a moment. A noise ruptured, vibrating Josey's ear drums. As Josey cupped her palms against her ears and closed her eyes, the familiarity of the noise shook her out of her reprieve. It was the same noise that she had heard a few days ago. The one that no one else had seemingly heard, the one that had altered her brain chemistry, the one that remained a mystery, until now.

It's called The Sound... If an Automation breaks a law or finds themselves amid a public scandal of any kind, we activate The Sound... It wipes a part of the Automation's memory, making it so that the Automation doesn't know that they are an Automation... If you don't know who you are, neither will they...

15: Josey & Lily & Dennis & Denny

Josey stared across the blue expanse of the glistening lake whose waters were being pushed and pulled by the spring wind. Behind her was the three-bedroom, two-bathroom

cottage that she shared with Lily and Dennis and Denny. The cottage stood empty. Lily and Dennis were picking up Denny from daycare.

As Josey approached the lake, allowing the fishy scent to wash over her, she thought of Dennis and the baby. Not Denny, but the unnamed baby that she had stolen three years prior. She recalled the day that Dennis came pounding on her door demanding that she return the baby, or he will get the police involved. It was the same day that she remembered who she was, or what she was...

Lily has since described the memory regeneration to her as a glitch in The Sound, but Josey chalks it up to the power of love. The love she had for Lily forced her hardwiring to correct itself and that's how Josey will always remember that head splitting moment in her old living room when she thought the ceiling was going to cave in on her, a moment when love overcame technology.

Josey remembers allowing Dennis to yell at her because she knew she deserved it. She had stolen a baby for fuck sake!

That very night, under the cover of darkness, Josey swaddled the still unnamed baby in a yellow blanket, placed the sleeping bundle on the doorstep of her rightful family and, after ringing the doorbell, she fled.

After months of Lily apologizing to Dennis for using him to get closer to Josey and months of Josey and Dennis and Lily forming a bond forged from loss and longing, Denny happened.

Denny had been Josey's idea. After a donation from Dennis and a visit to the doctor's office, Lily got pregnant and gave birth to Denny. The trio was apprehensive about Denny being swapped back and forth from home to home every week, so they went all in on a

quaint cottage with a communal lake and two floors: Dennis on the first floor, Josey, and Lily on the second.

“Josey, come inside! We got wine!” Josey broke her gaze from the lake and turned around to see Lily on their deck with a bottle of wine in each hand. Dennis sauntered up behind her, Denny on his hip. Josey turned back to the lake for just a moment to allow a tear of gratitude to splash onto her bare foot, unnoticed.

END

Train Teeth

Tate felt the train before he heard it. The vibrations under his feet brought him out of his daze as the rumble turned into a hum, which turned into a strained chugging punctuated by a fierce whistle that caused Tate to squint his eyes in disillusionment. An advertisement in Deutsch for a tooth whitening, cavity fighting toothpaste smiled over at Tate from across the tracks. The sun crept above the too-white teeth from the disembodied mouth. The sun rays that had shone through the gaps of the terminal across the tracks were quickly cut off by the black and silver locomotive, bathing Tate in a cool shade.

Doors opening

The stocky, mustachioed man that had been sitting next to Tate on the uneven, steel bench sprung up, causing Tate's end of the bench to dip like a seesaw. Tate reacted dramatically to the slight shift in altitude, sighing heavily before rolling off the bench onto his feet, his knees cracking.

As the herd of passengers departed, Tate studied their faces. Each expression is just a variation of the one before; clenched jaws mixed with faux confidence, an illusion of the experienced traveler whose main priority is to avoid missing a step and tripping onto the concrete platform. Tate's gaze lingered slightly longer on a certain female passenger whose auburn hair flounced as her quick stride created a wind just for her. Tate fell into a fleeting love that extinguished as soon as the woman disappeared behind the metal terminal.

Once the train was mostly empty, save a few stragglers whose journeys were not quite finished, Tate plastered on an expressionless mask, watching his step as he followed his bench mate into the second train car. As his white sneaker lifted from the concrete and planted itself onto the linoleum floor of the car, the air around him shifted. The car was warm

and had a damp, chemical smell, like black plastic left out in the sun. He swung his canvas backpack to his front and took a seat in the back row behind a straggler with a yellow stocking cap on who smelled like cheap, oaky shampoo and moth balls.

Doors closing

The man was breathing heavily, head resting against the murky window, arms crossed in front of him for protection. Tate stared at the sparse yellow ball of yarn that sprouted from the center of the man's stocking cap, the frayed ends of the fabric were dyed black with age and abuse.

As one does when they look out the window of a moving train, Tate began to think about the passing of time, the aging of things and its incapacity to be slowed down by even the strongest of forces.

Once, when he was a child, Tate's mother came home from the corner store with a fluorescent yellow bouncy ball that when held up to the light looked as though you could fall into it and swim against the grainy material. She bounced it across the creaking wooden floor of their small kitchen, and he bounced it back, rolling the ball around in his hand before doing so. Back and forth they went until Tate bounced it a little too hard. It hit the floor, then the ceiling, then the wall to the right, leaving a dent in the off-white plaster, then rolled under the small gap between the floor and the cabinet under the sink, lost forever.

You always ruin the fun with your brutishness and disregard. Why don't you have any respect for our home?

His mother hadn't said these words aloud, but it seemed that when she noticed the shallow dent, the wrinkles that creased across her forehead spelled out the words for Tate to read.

Recalling the memory now brought a mist over Tate's eyes. To shoo the tears away, he moved his gaze from the rolling green landscape passing by in flashes to the dull metallic of the train car walls. Just under his sight line sat a woman with a baby wrapped in a cloth that tied around the woman's body, latching the baby to her. The baby's eyes were closed, the eye lashes comically long, the tiny lips parted to take in stale air with each breath. Tate began to worry for the mother and had a fleeting urge to move closer to her as if he had the ability to protect the duo, which he knew he didn't.

Tate began to ache as his eyes moved from the baby's face to the mother's hand which was resting against the baby's wrapped back. Her fingernails were short and unpainted, they looked gnawed at, the skin dry and cracked. He wished to be wrapped up against a mother in a cocoon of warmth under damaged hands. He could smell his own mother's skin, feel the dried flakes of her palm. He then rested his head against the window, mirroring the position of the stocking capped man in front of him. The drone of the train lulled him quickly to sleep.

“Sie war überall auf meinem Schwanz. Sie bettelte darum wie eine Schlampe mit Papa-Problemen.”

Tate woke up as the train lurched to a halt. His eyes adjusted to the fluorescence as he oriented himself. For a split second he had forgotten where he was sitting and why. His destination was blurry in his memories, but became clearer in his mind as he yawned, taking the stale air into his lungs.

He glanced up at the blinking red pixels that spelled out the name of the next stop. Tate had been asleep for two stops, which weeded out most of the passengers leaving the car mostly empty.

Doors opening.

Three men that he hadn't originally noticed were shouting about their escapades from the previous night at the front row of the train car. Tate cringed at their brutishness, hot anger flaring up in his chest as they spoke without hesitation or filter, filling the train car with their fetid breath.

Tate glanced over at the mother. It appears she had not moved an inch from when Tate observed her last. Her eyelids were low, feigning slumber, but she had a responsibility to the small bundle wrapped around her and she was staunch in it.

The man in the stocking cap stood up with a deep gruff and shuffled his feet horizontally, wedging himself between his seat and the two in front of him. When he made his way into the aisle, he hiked up his baggy khakis that had been threatening to fall around his ankles, Tate caught a glimpse of the top end of his hairy crack and for a moment Tate imagined himself falling from the sky into a dense forest. The man's movements brushed some of his scent off and Tate closed his eyes as dandruff and dust and the rotted scent of mothballs swirled into his nostrils.

"What the fuck is that smell, man?" One of the brutes at the front of the train car had shattered the steady silence. Tate's eyes shot over to the pack of three, all of whom were pinching their noses and squinting their eyes in animated disgust. Their lips downturned creating a ripple of deep rivets along their cheeks.

“It’s that one right there!” The one on the right pointed towards the stocking-capped man, making sure to use his free hand and not the one that was protecting his nostrils. “Yo man, you smell like a fucking baboon!” Tate turned from the pack to the stocking-capped man who was making his way to the opened sliding doors, head down, hands in his pocket.

The stocking-capped man exited the train, head still down, silent, avoiding eye contact with the hyenas. As he exited the train, he appeared to miscalculate the gap between the baby blue floor of the car and the gray of the terminal. A sound like he had been punched in the gut escaped him as his top half lurched forward and swung down onto the wet concrete of the terminal below with a dull smack. Tate lunged forward from his seat as the sliding doors connected and the train let out an ear-splitting whistle, signaling take off.

Tate’s eyes snapped back towards the front of the car as the pack began to sneer and cackle. Gnashing their jagged, yellow teeth as spittle collected in the corners of their lips and dripped down onto their lapels. A fiery hotness simmered and brewed inside, traveling through Tate’s blood stream. His leg was bouncing so rapidly that it felt like his kneecaps were shaking loose. It was a familiar rage that he was able to keep at bay with a few deep breaths. He knew if he were to stand up to these cajoling clowns, he would be their next target, so he sat quietly and folded his hands in his lap, trying to wring the anger out of his fingers like they were wet rags.

The sky had turned a dusted melancholy purple and as rain droplets traversed across the window with a spitting ferocity, Tate averted his gaze back to the window. A memory flashed in his mental periphery.

You ungrateful child! You're just like your dead-beat father, the spitting image of him too! If you're lucky, you'll pull as many whores as he did when he was alive! That shit runs in your blood!

“Wah! Wah! Wah!”

Tate was yanked from the memory by a piercing, gurgled scream from across the aisle. The baby in the mother's lap seemed to have had enough with the idleness of train travel and began to wail, the emotions within bubbling over the child's pink lips. The baby's bald head turned tomato red, threatening to burst all over the foggy windows.

The wailing made Tate nervous. Not because it was an ear-piercing nuisance, but because he was fearful of how the volatile pack at the front of the train car was going to handle this harsh display of infantile impulse. However, they seemed to be distracted by something on one of their phones that they were huddled around, necks craned, mouths agape. They were laughing, sighing, groaning, spitting, and snorting towards the light of the small screen. Tate began to run through the gamut of possible atrocities that they could be so taken by that they were able to ignore the wails.

A busty woman giving a slobbery blowjob to an uncircumcised prick.

A rhinoceros crushing the skull of a cheetah with its dusted hoof.

A group of drunken men beating a homeless man to death with broken beer bottles.

Tate shook his head and clenched his eyes shut, warding off any further demented, pixelated visions. Flashes of his destination played like a slideshow; creaky hardwood floors, cobwebbed windows, the smell of gas boiling a pot of water.

Home had been a foreign concept to Tate for so long that he felt formless, floating through his days untethered. Making money had become the end and the beginning of his

small existence. The odd jobs he took seemed like they belonged to someone else, and he controlled that someone else from a place where time and matter didn't exist. Chain smoking cigarettes out into the frigid air that hung outside the window of his studio apartment that he shared with Joel, a former coworker who masturbated through the night without shame. The sound of Joel's testicular release from across the wood-floored studio had become a small comfort, one that he would miss tonight in the hostel he would inevitably have to book. Thinking about his destination lodged a lump into his throat that threatened to bring hot tears to his eyes. He pushed the thought away as the baby's screams reached a climax.

The small, chunky arms of the baby continued to flail robotically like they were attached to a broken animatronic. The mother was bouncing her knee and breathing out calm shushes in a steady rhythm. The screams persisted, the baby reaching its hand towards the mother's breast. Tate watched as the mother realized what the baby was yearning for. She scanned the bus with a blank expression. Tate, picking up on the mother's cues, quickly averted his eyes down to the thumb in his lap that he had picked raw. He placed the gnarled appendage into his mouth to wash the blood away with his tongue.

Out of his periphery, Tate could see that the woman had moved her scoop neck sweater down to accommodate the baby's mouth. Nausea rolled in the base of Tate's gut. His impulse was to shoot up from his seat and sit in front of the woman, blocking her body from the hyenas while the baby fed. However, Tate was not the kind of person that acted on his impulses. Instead, he lived vicariously through them. He even went as far as identifying himself as the part of his psyche where the impulses came from. This internal practice inflated his ego for a moment of power-soaked bliss, however as soon as it was stretched, close to bursting, it deflated before the impulse ever had a chance to become an action.

The pack seemed to still be distracted by the phone screen that they were huddled around. Some chuckles arose from the circle, but for the most part they were behaving themselves. Their potential for cruelty against the exposed mother was overwhelming to Tate. He felt like a protector without credentials which only added to the mounting blow of nausea that waned like a foamy tide.

Tate fixed his eyes towards the window. The sun was shining on the sporadic trees that broke up the sea of green and brown. He could see the mother's face through the clouded reflection that the window projected. As his eyes traveled down the reflection, he saw the curve of the woman's breast that plateaued at the baby's mouth. He felt a slight tug in his pants and snapped his eyes shut with a quiet ferocity. He began to picture a dog with its head blown off. The hole brimmed with maggots that writhed against each other like a bowl of boiling pus. The tension in his pants dissipated and he opened his eyes again, landing his gaze on the pack. Tate's blood ran cold as his fears had become realized.

The pack was no longer huddled around the screen. Their bodies had staggered, two sitting across from one another, the third was up on his feet. Their gazes fixed onto the woman whose gaze was fixed on the top of her baby's fuzzy head. Twisted smiles crept across the men's faces seemingly in unison. The one that was on his feet pointed with his finger, elbow bent in a discerning fashion. The other two looked up at him for further instruction, signaling to Tate that the standing man was a sort of leader figure amongst their cult of personality.

“Aye men, look, her tit's out!”

“Oh, to be that baby, man, am I right? Sucking on that tit, I envy the son of a bitch!”

The pack began pulling their phones out of their pockets, putting them parallel to their faces, snapping photos of the woman with an ear splitting *cuh-chuh!* Tate's stomach flipped, churning the bile in his gut. His face became red hot with a rage that he could feel behind his eyes. He looked at the woman whose face was twisted with panic. She pulled her scarf up towards her bare skin with a shaky hand.

“Aye, ma'am, move the scarf love, you're hiding the good stuff!”

The woman snapped her neck towards Tate, her chin quivering, eyes watery and wide, pleading. His tongue turned dry and scaly with fear. The train began to feel like a microcosm with its own unique food chain. Tate felt claustrophobic and exposed, wishing he had camouflage abilities like those Amazonian moths that hug their wings to thick tree trunks and dissolve themselves into the speckled brown.

The woman continued pleading with her eyes, her lips opening and closing, words trapped in her throat. The pack continued to chortle and plead for a glimpse of the woman's skin.

“Help me,” the mother managed to whisper. Tate sat frozen, breaking his gaze away from the mother, staring at the back of the seat in front of him as his hands continued to shake. He fixed his eyes on a black skid that slashed across the floor, unblinking. The cajoling pack was not letting up and now the mother's pleas towards Tate hit his ears with a subtle fierceness.

“Aye, that boy is not going to help you my dear, he probably wants to take a peek for himself!”

Doors opening.

Tate's gaze had not broken itself from the black skid as he began to plead internally for the mother to exit the car. As the train halted and the doors opened, the woman and her baby sprung up and fast-walked out of the car with a blur in Tate's periphery, the pack hooting as her foot hit the concrete.

With a dry lump in his throat, Tate's eyes blurred with tears. The absence of the mother in the train car made him feel as though the steel walls were closing in. He hadn't realized the consolation the mother and her baby had brought him on his journey. It was as though the innocence and instinct cast a field of protection over Tate, however the men in the front had quickly proved him wrong. Even in the face of such innocence, on the fringes there was festering violence.

Her departure had been so abrupt it felt like the air in Tate's lungs had been walked out along with her. Had the train reached the mother's destination? Or, had she run from the men who had made a mockery of her body that was providing sustenance to her newborn? He wanted to take his hands and alter the men beyond recognition, splitting their skulls in two as the onboarding passengers watched in transfixed horror.

Doors closing.

As the trail of rose scented air that the mother left behind dissipated, Tate fixed his gaze on the doors that were slowly closing. Right before the two doors were to meet again a fist shot between them along with an elbow that pried the metal doors back into their fully opened position. It was a man of indiscernible age, his brown mop of hair bouncing with staccato-ed movements as he frantically scanned the car. The new man and Tate made brief eye contact before he scanned the front, taking in the pack of brutes who were once again

huddled over a phone, their chuckles now sparse. The man turned back to Tate as he was the only other passenger on the train.

“Yo, man, you speak English?” he asked towards Tate.

“Yeah... yes.” Tate hadn’t spoken in so long that the words that escaped his throat were chiseled and cracked.

“Sick, alright, I know this is a tall order, but can you watch him for a couple of stops? He's visiting his mum and I gotta get back to work before my ass gets canned again. I’ll give you some money for the troubles, just make sure he gets off at Tucker, his mother will be waiting on the platform.” Tate looked down, making eye contact with a small boy whose eyes were fixed on the ground, his finger picking at his ear lobe.

“Yeah... uh... yuh...yeah...” Tate stuttered, not hearing his own words or even managing to comprehend his verbal agreement.

“Ahh, thanks man, you’re really savin’ me. Off at Tucker, his mum will be there. Thanks again man!” The father picked up the boy and placed him in the empty seat next to Tate. After cramming a couple of crumpled notes into Tate’s hand, he kissed the boy’s forehead and ruffled his hair before departing the train just as the doors were closing.

Doors closing.

Tate sat frozen for a moment with his eyes on the seat in front of him. He could see from his periphery that the boy was staring at him, burning through Tate’s left ear with his blue eyes that were too big for his face. It took Tate a moment to settle into the role he had been unwittingly placed. He rarely found himself in the proximity of children, let alone strange ones that he was the sole guardian of. He didn’t know how to be a friend to a child let alone a father...

Tate glanced up at the pack, they seemed to all three be asleep which washed Tate in an overwhelming calm. If they were asleep, Tate and the boy would be safe.

“My name’s Trevor, what’s yours?” The boy asked. His voice was as small as him, muffled sounding as though underwater.

“I’m Tate.” Trevor didn’t budge or blink at Tate’s introduction, he simply sat with a small smile on his face waiting for Tate to continue. “Uh... where you headed?”

“To stay with my mum for a month,” Trevor said, pleased with Tate’s question. “Where are you... *headed?*” Trevor shoved his thumb into his mouth as though he was expecting Tate’s answer to take some time.

“I’m visiting my mum as well,” Tate answered.

“What’s your mum called?” Trevor questioned, a string of saliva connecting the tip of his thumb to his bottom lip.

“She was called Jenny.” Tate hiccupped.

“Did she change her name then?” Trevor looked at the ceiling as if his answer was painted on it, shoving his thumb back into his mouth.

“What do you mean?” Tate stalled.

“You said, ‘*was*’...”

“You’re a curious little bugger aren’t you... I said, ‘*was*’ because she’s... dead.” Tate expected Trevor to give something like the reaction that Joel had given him when he broke the news; fake sadness mixed with fake anger, fake concern, fake empathy... but Trevor just sat with his thumb stopping words from escaping. When Tate remained quiet for several more beats Trevor shook himself from his reprieve.

“Your mum’s... *dead*?” Trevor asked as if tasting the word on his tongue for the first time. “How is... What is *dead*?” Tate’s mind toiled, thinking about the three bills that Trevor’s father had shoved into his hand and how if he was to explain the complexities of death to his son, he could have added a few more bills to the crumpled stack.

“Well, dead... er, death, is the end of life. It’s like falling asleep. People die every day, but not to worry Trevor, your dad and mum will protect you from it.” Tate felt the lie in his throat before he said it. What kind of father left a child young enough to be ignorant to the concept of death in the hands of a total stranger on a train in the hopes that the child’s mother will be there waiting for him?

“It’s like falling asleep. So, death is darkness?” Trevor asked. He appeared to be unfazed by this existential conversation, loosening Tate’s reserve.

“Well, some people think when you die you go to heaven, but... between you and me that’s a load of horse shit,” said Tate.

“Heaven?” asked Trevor

“Yeah, Heaven. It means something different to everyone, but it’s this place where your soul goes when your body dies so you can live out eternity with your loved ones.”

“Sounds amazing!” said Trevor. A bright smile exposed his jagged baby tooth.

“Now don’t get too attached. Like I said, it’s horse shit! Heaven was created by people who can’t face death... cowards if you asked me...”

Trevor locked eyes with Tate as his thumb fell from his mouth with a wet *squeak*. Tate’s heart began to race as Trevor’s eyes welled up, turning red and slick with tears. He had said too much. Soft whimpers began to escape from Trevor, quickly growing in

desperation and volume. Tate glanced at the pack, still asleep, heads jostling with the movement of the train.

“Oh, Trevor, come on man, don’t cry, I’m just being silly, Heaven is real if you believe it is,” said Tate, but none of his empty words seemed to register to Trevor as the whimpers turned into full blown sobs, punctuated with the sharp growls of innocence lost.

Tate glanced up at the electronic screen that hung from the ceiling, blinking the name of the upcoming stops. The name of Trevor’s stop blinked above, 9 MINS blinking to the same beat next to it. Tate had nine minutes to calm Trevor down, as though he owed it to the father to deliver Trevor to his mother in high spirits. The task seemed impossible as the child’s hysterics only continued to roll like warning waves before a tsunami.

“Please calm down Trevor, I should never have said any of that, you and your mother and your father are going to live forever.” In between words, Tate glanced up at the pack making sure their slumber persisted.

“I DON’T WANT TO DIE!” screamed Trevor. His sobs had reached their climax, Tate covered his ears, clamping his eyes shut.

“Oy, man! Shut that child the fuck up before I punt him off this train!” One of the brutes had awoken.

Nausea washed over Tate as all the air in the train sucked out. The whole pack had sprung awake as if they had never been asleep in the first place. They quickly got to their feet to study the origins of the outcry.

“Where the fuck did that boy even come from man?” one of them said while slapping the other and rolling his head back in laughter.

“Since when do they leave little boys alone with faggots? Ay, little Johnny, is that faggot touching you?” The pack chortled and guffawed, bending their spines at impossible angles. Their jaws seemed to be double jointed, in danger of cracking open, their teeth in danger of busting free from the bounds of their gums and scattering themselves across the floor. Trevor’s cries turned into a piercing sonic eruption that threatened Tate’s ear drums.

The symphony of guttural noises caused a dissonance in between Tate’s ears that seemed to reset his inhibitions to their factory settings. Gray clouds bloomed and rolled at the corners of his eyes, a storm closing in, leaving him blind. The last thing Tate remembered was balling his fists up and stomping to his feet.

The events that followed played out like a dream that you can’t remember in the morning. He felt the reverberations in his fingers and knuckles crack and split, but pain never came. Sticky, warm blood covered his hands, but he didn’t know who it belonged to. Grunts from walloped flesh fill his ears, but he doesn't dare stop.

What keeps him going is a memory played like the burst of a flash bulb. His mother’s pleas as his father presses forward across the kitchen hardwood, towards her, pale fist balled up, bruised eye covered with thick makeup.

Doors opening.

Tate’s vision returned to him, the fluorescent lights of the train car highlighting the red liquid and white flesh splayed before him.

“What the fuck have you done?” Tate spun around, looking for the source of the question. He made eye contact with Trevor whose arms were wrapped around the neck of a blonde woman whose hand stroked the child’s hair.

Before Tate could answer, the woman quickly walked from the train, the doors closing behind sealing Tate off. Through the cloudy window Tate caught a glimpse of Trevor whose rosy cheeks had gone pale, blue eyes despondent with reverberating shock.

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Back in his original seat, Tate wiped the blood from his fists with the small coat that Trevor left behind. He glanced periodically at the three bodies at the front of the train car waiting for them to wake up to enact their revenge, but they laid like rocks. Tate's stop blinked above him along with a bolded 13 MINS. He fixed his eyes on the window next to him, the rolling green hills lulling him to sleep.

END

VITA

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