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All of This Will End

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All of This Will End

BY

Sean Dolan

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

ADVISTORY COMMITTEE

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Master's Thesis

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Artwork credit and consideration given to Leonard Koscianski.

Sean Thomas Dolan

19 May 2023

All of This Will End

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By

Sean Dolan

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Abstract

All of This Will End is a short story collection that pays tribute to the suburban gothic subgenre popularized by Shirley Jackson in the 1950's. Also drawing influence from contemporary writers such as Kelly Link, Kate Folk, and Blake Butler, among others, the collection aims to deconstruct conceptions of normality – both in and outside of the American suburb – by planting subtle signs of strangeness across its ten stories. Although most of the work wouldn't fall into traditional genre conventions, the collection borrows from both horror and science fiction, blurring the line between traditional realism and genre work. Much of the writing contained could be categorized as literary horror, another subgenre Shirley Jackson helped popularize, and one recent writers like Carmen Maria Machado and Agustina Bazterrica have revitalized in contemporary fiction.

These ten stories aim to interrupt domestic realism by integrating unusual twists to their narratives. A family is visited by a tax collector searching for a bizarre tariff. After a slight shift in his rigid daily routine, a man discovers he is a minor character in someone else's simulation. A man and his grandfather wait out the end of days in a living situation that may not be exactly as it seems. The stories in this collection are linked by a variety of qualities – abnormal metaphors, gaslit characters, characters experiencing feelings they've never felt. But the most ubiquitous element is a feeling that can be expressed in only three words: something isn't right.

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I Want to Write What They Write: Identifying Specific Craft Moves Writers Utilize and How I Integrate Them Into My Own Work

This past fall, I wrote an essay exploring the relationship between tone and specific craft moves, analyzing several writers and three key aesthetic decisions to determine how tone can intentionally be created within short fiction. At times, it felt like an impossible task. After all, so much conversation around tone in literature concerns what cannot be seen, as if it only exists as a lofty, undefinable term. But when I looked closer – or, more specifically, when I read a copious amount of short stories – I found it both necessary and valuable to deconstruct the tools fiction writers use to create tone. How, concretely, are writers making readers feel a certain way with their language? I focused primarily on suburban gothic fiction, a subgenre of literary horror concerned with fear, isolation, and the domestic horrors of American suburbia. Shirley Jackson and Don DeLillo are foundational writers of the form, while films like *American Beauty* (1999), *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Twilight Zone*'s “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street” contributed immensely to its formation as a subgenre. In my search to demystify the relationship between tone and authorial intent, I identified three specific craft moves where these two components could be further understood: the first sentence, strange and/or uncanny metaphors and descriptions, and traditional realism interrupted by a significant twist. These three narrative elements more or less constituted a space where craft and tone existed simultaneously, further helping me understand writing as an intentional practice. In other words, looking specifically at these craft moves helped me become a better reader, but more importantly, it helped me understand my own work better than I had before.

If that essay analyzed those three specific craft decisions writers made in their work, then this introduction will analyze those craft moves within *my own work*. How do I employ a powerful, evocative first sentence and whom did I learn that from? In what ways do unusual descriptions and metaphors enhance my stories and why is that an objective I want to achieve? How does a significant twist disrupt realism and why do the ones I choose to write further imbed these stories deeper into the suburban gothic subgenre? Ultimately, I want to place the vast canon of short fiction I studied, my craft essay, and my own collection of fiction under the same microscope, which will then help me determine which craft moves I imitate, which styles I'm drawn to, and which narrative threads show up in my own work. When I am able to articulate the exact reasons I connect with a story, I am be more equipped to recreate tone and craft decisions within my own work.

The First Sentence

The first sentence is the most important moment in a short story. I don't mean this as hyperbole and I don't think it's a bold conviction. To begin with, it creates a precedent for the remainder of the work. This is a given. But more importantly, it allows an opportunity for the writer to draw readers in immediately, to make them forget about anything else besides the story in front of them. Writers have one chance to pull off an effective first line, and oftentimes this opportunity is put to waste. How many times has the first sentence of a short story not produced something effective?

There are a variety of ways a masterful first sentence can be accomplished. It could be a unique, singular voice. It could be a precise, sharp succession of prose that directly addresses the reader and eliminates any notion of heavy exposition. It could be foreshadowing to a mystery that demands unraveling. A first sentence can also conjure the existence of strange physical

elements in the world of a story, and when introduced early enough and with absolute confidence, there's no question to whether or not those qualities are real.

In my time as an editor over the past year I've seen the ample number of stories that wait three or more pages to propel the work forward with action, language control, narrative movement, etc. The time spent with a short story is so much more compressed than the novel, meaning writers lose extremely valuable time and space to achieve effective results. Perhaps no first line is more famous than Franz Kafka's opening to "The Metamorphosis." Its English translation varies, but the most common reading from the 2003 reprint of *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories* goes: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 7). The reader doesn't need to know what happened before this moment. We don't need a physics lesson on how or why this occurred. The line propels the reader to suspend their disbelief and meet the writer on the page. We know that this (probably) would never happen in reality. But in the world of this particular story, it is truth, and so we treat it as such. A great first sentence asks its reader to forget anything else and accept the line as fact. Not as scientific fact in the outside world, but in the absolute truth of the story.

More contemporary writers whose first sentences had me hooked include Alissa Nutting and Katie Chase, both of whom inspired me to create sharp, precise first sentences that suggested something sinister to follow. Nutting might be responsible for my favorite first line of all time. She writes: "I am boiling inside a kettle with five other people" (Nutting 1). Language control, energy, and a strange, exciting situation have all been established within ten words. She doesn't tell us what happened beforehand, or how this character arrived in this situation. This is what the reader is presented with and there is no turning back from there. I have paid attention to these

examples and translated this to my own fiction. Below are five examples from stories in this collection that illustrate the importance of the first sentence and the weight it holds for the remainder of the work:

- “When I wake from slumber my lover’s face has transformed into one I don’t recognize.”
- “Tyler was consumed by the ball pits.”
- “We rent out son on a Wednesday.”
- “The first time Ella sees the faceless men, the late evening sun casts a thin golden streak across her head.”

It’s not my intention to place my first sentences in the same echelon as Franz Kafka and Alissa Nutting – maybe someday I’ll possess that level of overconfidence. Rather, I want to signify the ways in which studying first sentences translated into my own work. Take, for instance, the first example from the list above: a sentence that begins with action, energy, and a strange occurrence that pushes the reader to discover more from the narrative. So much power of the first sentence lies in what the writer chooses not to say, in addition to the words themselves. I don’t need to tell my reader why any of these events happened, regardless of their physical possibility. According to the story – and to any writer who writes a successful first sentence – these things occurred, and the reader accepts that as truth. That’s all that matters.

Strange Descriptions & Unusual Metaphors

This next move speaks more specifically to the *something isn’t right* feeling by highlighting how strange descriptions and unusual metaphors further entrench a story deeper into its world of weirdness. The two pieces I discussed in the craft essay – stories whose influence

live throughout my collection – double down on this idea, both of them existing in the liminal space between reality and unreality. The first of these is Kelly Link’s “Stone Animals,” a borderline novella that journeys further into uncanniness as the story progresses. Inside, objects develop unspeakable qualities. No household item is safe from the peculiar changes occurring – toothbrushes, televisions, and paint colors all possess eerie auras, to name a few. What much of this comes down to is defamiliarization, a concept the story plays with both directly and indirectly. Link takes concepts the reader is familiar with – the family, common household objects, office life – and distorts them, creating a house of horror without including any murder or gore. Nothing quite summarizes the creepy descent into the uncanny as page 97, when Henry and Catherine discuss the recent alterations in household objects. On the nature of the television, Catherine says: “It’s working fine. But the kids won’t go near it. Isn’t that great? It’s the same thing as the toothbrush. You’ll see when you get home. I mean, it’s not just the kids. I was watching the news earlier, and then I had to turn it off. It wasn’t the news. It was the TV” (Link 97). Catherine then confesses the alarm clock isn’t the same anymore, either. “It does sound different... Just a little bit different” (Link 97). Catherine doesn’t like the sound the water makes, she cannot find a paint color that doesn’t induce paranoia, and the dishwasher is inexplicably haunted. Why? We never really know, and that’s the horror of it all. These events precede the story’s enthralling conclusion, which finds Henry on the lawn with hundreds of rabbits, ready to wreak havoc on the quiet suburban comfort the story stealthily satirizes.

The second of these examples is Blake Butler’s brilliant and eerie “The Copy Family,” which also emphasizes the unusual metaphors and descriptions to create an ominous atmosphere. Rather than suggest defamiliarization of common household objects or play with a character’s

inexplicable fear of them, Butler utilizes metaphors that don't quite make sense and descriptions that appear slightly askew. Here is a sampling of some of the images Butler induces:

- “Their copy eyes were wet and stretched with strain.”
- “The only thing that made the family different from the copy family was instead of teeth the copy family's mouths were lined with mold.”
- “She could hear their tiny teeth.”

What Butler does here – and what so many great suburban gothic stories accomplish – is subvert expectations of American normality. This story posits a scenario in which a happy family is usurped by a harrowing, unrecognizable version of themselves.

In writing my own strange, uncanny descriptions and metaphors, I not only aim to follow in Link and Butler's footsteps, but also in creating my own iteration of what suburban gothic style can look like. Furthermore, this is a prime example of how a specific craft move creates tone. Rather, if the foundation of the suburban gothic subgenre is comprised of strangeness, fear, and unspeakable qualities, then metaphors and descriptions that evoke those qualities are contributing to the deliberate creation of tone. One key to successfully accomplishing this craft move is via confidence and language control. In other words, understanding that the descriptions and metaphors don't fully make sense, yet trusting the reader to piece together the ways in which they can be effective. Here are a few examples from some of my own work:

- “The air conditioning hum is apocalyptic.”
- “The words coming out of her mouth are facsimiles.”
- “The worry in his eyes is a sinking ship.”

Once again, the metaphors and descriptions might not make sense independent of the story, but when they're added to the peculiar world the story suggests, they can add depth to the work's

tone. I don't know if I'll ever be able to write a line as effective as "She could hear their tiny teeth," or create a metaphor as uncanny as Kelly Link can, but by recognizing how and why unusual descriptions can be effective in a story, I can imitate the moves of writers I deeply admire.

Realism Interrupted by a Significant Twist

This third notion implies the closest link to genre and was prevalent throughout the work I read this past summer. Although I am definitely a fan of twist endings, this craft move is more focused on narrative turns that disrupt reality. In other words, I'm looking specifically at stories that abide by traditional realism for the majority of the narrative but are supplanted by a substantial alteration in said narrative, oftentimes suggesting otherworldly implications. Famous examples in short fiction include Aimee Bender's "The Rememberer," Haruki Murakami's "The Iceman," and of course, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." These sort of stories can almost always be summarized by a brief "what if" question: What if a woman's lover turned into a turtle? What if a normal woman married a man made out of ice? What if a quiet town had a sinister, wretched lottery system? How can a conventional situation be turned on its head with a single narrative device?

I ran into this quite a bit with my composition reading – the stories I discussed primarily were "The Prospectors" by Karen Russell and "Heart Seeks Brain" by Kate Folk, two writers whose work played a significant influence on my overall conception of this thesis. The former of these stories takes two friends in the early 20th century attending a party at an elaborate, remote ski lodge. The catch? All of the guests – besides Aubergine and Clara – are dead. "They're dead... Everyone. Everyone but us" (Russell 17). The indications are there from early on in the story – they're inside the wrong lodge, golden eyes on all of the other guests, Aubergine's

amplifying fear. The success of this story (and others in this category) is completely reliant on the dichotomy between the narrative and its unexpected, unreal twist, which operates as a tonal crux for the story itself. And with “The Prospectors,” the eeriness isn’t in the *fact* that most of the supporting characters are actually dead, but in the way the reveal is prolonged – in the space between when the reader has no inclination of their zombified state and the reveal itself. “Heart Seeks Brain” operates under the same circumstances: a first-person protagonist and her friend meet for drinks to discuss their preferences for human organs. Most people are into kidneys, some are into the heart – Folk’s first-person narrator notes the waiter is an abdomen guy, a slightly ostracized subgroup in this alternate universe. This story dares to ask: what if people were attracted to organs instead of external physical features? And for the rest of the story, the reader is along for the ride.

Many of the stories in this collection attempt to follow in these writer’s footsteps. What if a woman began to notice that everyone in her life had been replaced by carbon copies of themselves? What if a young girl in a quiet suburban town began to notice faceless men in her family’s garden? What if a group of twentysomethings walked into an abandoned mall, only to find that the mall itself might not be as abandoned as they think? Adding these significant twists to an otherwise conventional narrative creates an incongruent tension that allows the story to take shape as something singular and exciting. Even before I began this thesis, I had always been attracted to stories that lived on the threshold between realism and anti-realism – how can stories accomplish both of these without compromising one or the other? Beginning with my composition readings and craft essay, I took that interest and explored it in numerous new ways, eventually making it one of the founding elements of this collection.

Other Narrative Threads

In writing this thesis, I've also noticed a variety of other narrative components and connections between stories that I didn't necessarily plan going into its original conception. The first quality: characters experiencing feelings they've never felt. Inside at least three stories, a given character – usually the protagonist – experiences an emotion for the first time, always in a way that feels integral to both the narrative and their character arc. This particular moment became exciting to write, feeling these emotions alongside the characters, writing the way they discovered something new about themselves, ways in which their lives were changed. Another significant thread that appeared throughout this collection's creation were gaslit characters, or rather, characters who feel their truths were not met with support. Again, this trope happened much more often than I anticipated, and when I noticed it becoming a trend, I leaned into its possibility as connective narrative tissue for the collection as a whole.

Other transparent connective tissues include child characters, characters discovering monumental (sometimes even revolutionary) qualities about their environment, characters breaking free from said environment, and characters not saying quite precisely what they feel, among other elements. Although these narrative decisions aren't necessarily craft moves – at least in the sense that they don't deal directly with elements like syntax, rhythm, language, etc. – I do think recognizing them as congruent writerly decisions has been immensely important to my overall writing process.

Conclusion

If this introduction has accomplished what I intended, then it will feel like a bridge from my composition/craft essay into the fiction. This thesis process, although sometimes arduous and complicated, can essentially be divided into three different periods: reading as much fiction as possible, recognizing which craft decisions I admired and wanted to incorporate into my own work, and then writing said work. I hope the throughline through these periods is transparent, and more importantly, I hope you thoroughly enjoy the stories that follow.

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All of This Will End

Tithing

I

The Collector knocks on our door in the middle of the night, beating on the cherrywood to the rhythm of an old incantation. We awake, startled. We were not expecting any nocturnal visitors.

We arise from our slumber, walking past the bedrooms of our sleeping children. Greta, the eldest, doesn't make a sound. She dreams of apple orchards and mango trees, always telling us the following morning of the peaceful places she visited the night before. Simon, our only living boy, rustles in the sheets, restless and agitated. He likes to dream of dragons and duels. We know one day, if he works hard enough and follows his heart, he could be a great artist. Olive dreams of nothing at all. She is only four years old, too young to understand the ways in which the world works, how far others would go just to see her fail.

One day, We will tell her of the siblings she never knew. We will talk to her about Thomas and his green eyes. We will mention Adeline – how wide her smile reached.

We will show her the photograph of Thomas holding her as a newborn, how he swung her from side to side, and how We watched on, suspended in time, one of those rare moments where the past and future do not exist.

Our children will never understand this, but We love them more than We could possibly love something.

We love them so much We wish they were never born.

We creep downstairs, trying our hardest not to accentuate the creaks in the old wooden floorboards.

We open the door.

At first, The Collector doesn't say anything, as if he is waiting to be addressed. His silence suggests We should have been more prepared for his arrival.

"Would you like to come in?" We ask.

He enters without speaking, flicking his cigarette onto the porch swing.

The Collector is quite handsome. He wears a slim fit suit the color of oat bread, a pork pie hat the color of charcoal. He smells of pine needles and oak.

Often, when We are more prepared for his visit, We despise him for all of the things he has taken from us. But tonight, when he arrives unplanned, when he places his palms on our shoulders before taking a seat at the dining room table, deep down in the pits of our hungry stomachs, We feel something holy. We do not understand why.

"Coffee or tea?" We ask, forcing a smile.

"Neither" he says. "I think we should get right down to business."

The Collector has not informed us of any business. There's usually a pamphlet or a town meeting or at least a phone call.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

Deep down, We do, but it's impossible to say out loud.

"Have We missed one of your newsletters?"

The Collector chuckles, looks down at his expensive shoes.

"There's no need to mince words: the tithing is two months early this year. We simply can't afford to wait any longer."

It is not our turn to tithe. We thought We had at least another year.

“We understand the timeline has changed, but difficult decisions had to be made,” The Collector says. “There’s no other way to move forward.”

We are so afraid but nod our heads to signal attentiveness.

“Everyone understands how difficult these sacrifices can be. But think of your community. Think of your brothers and sisters in this time of need.”

The Collector glances over to the five photographs of our children, living and passed, spread out like Russian nesting dolls across the mantle above our fireplace. The candles in front of Thomas and Adeline’s pictures remain lit, two wispy flames smelling of lilac and lavender. When the house is silent and the night is still, We like to sit downstairs and listen to the sound the fire makes, the candles whispering underneath the weight of the room.

Ever since their passing, their flames remain ignited. Their candles always burn.

The Collector carries on.

“I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause. I really do hope you understand.”

He speaks as if the death of our children is a transaction, something to be recorded. But We cannot dissent, for he could take more than one.

“You have until noon on Sunday to decide. You know where to find me.”

Before he leaves, The Collector walks over to the mantle and places his dirty hands on each of the photographs, thumbing the corners of each frame, as if even he remembers the ones We have lost – like he is thinking of the one We will soon let go.

We arise from our chairs, feigning politeness.

“Choose wisely,” he says, and slams the front door.

When he leaves, We collapse into each other like crumbling pillars, the weight of our bodies no longer enough to keep each other standing.

II

In the morning, our children wake from their sleep, stretch out their little limbs, yawning. They walk downstairs together, as they do every Saturday morning, invigorated by the promise of a hearty breakfast and endless hours of cartoons.

We don't tell them immediately. We aren't able to.

They devour pancakes. They inhale their orange juice like they are consuming sugar for the first time.

We don't know what to say, or when to say it, or how to let it leave our mouths.

It may just destroy us.

They watch a television show about a dog named Butler who is always running into trouble. They laugh together, uproariously, like they have never belonged to anyone or anything.

When We think of which one to let go, when We reluctantly allow the thought to swim around in the back of our brains, our heart aches so much We can feel it in our bones.

When the cartoon ends, they want to go to the park, but it's beginning to rain and We have yet to tell them the news.

"Come children," We say. "Sit down with us."

They take a seat one at a time, smiles slowly dissipating from their young faces.

"What's wrong?" Simon asks.

It is impossible to say, but we begin to cry, because everything is so small and so short.

"Remember how Thomas and Adeline had to go far, far away?" We ask.

Greta sees through the thin veil of our white lie. Simon nods his head. Olive is playing with her fingernails, humming a song she heard on the television.

Before We can utter anything else, Greta meets our eyes. She is old enough to understand there is no other option. She does not cry, though. Rather, she holds her brother's hand as we explain to him the abridged version of what this means for our family. He does not understand, but his sister holds him, tells him she won't be gone very long. He begins to cry.

Simon tells us he is scared, and even if Greta is too brave to admit it, and Olive too young to put the feeling into words, they are sharing in each other's suffering.

They are learning what it means to allocate grief.

To share something unwanted.

All We want is to make them feel better, to promise them that everything will be okay.

But We cannot save them. We can only hug their tired bodies. We can only listen to the rhythm of their heartbeats, teaching them what it means to hold, how it feels to be held.

III

Sunday morning comes, uninvited. It's sunny and cool, a bright October morning. We make a pot of coffee and stand together in silence, waiting for our children to descend downstairs. We make a breakfast fit for kings and queens, but no one is hungry.

Simon doesn't say a word. Olive plays with her pancakes, confused. Greta is still upstairs, braiding her hair, listening to classical music. She is wickedly wise for her age, old enough to understand that this will be her last day, not quite old enough to understand the toll it will take on the family she leaves behind.

We walk to the chapel, Greta leading the way. She moves with purpose, her hands held together behind her back.

We have so much love to give. One day, they will take Simon and Olive too, and then we will have no one left to share it with.

We arrive at the chapel, an old wooden building with two dozen pews on either side of the narrow aisle. Inside, it's already full, the collective of townspeople – our neighbors and fellow citizens – anxious for this year's expedited tithing.

An old man We don't recognize is playing the organ in the corner of the chapel.

Everyone settles in and The Collector approaches the podium.

For everyone in this chapel, on this particular day of the year, he is more infinite than God.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.”

Everyone chants good morning in return, but We dare not say a word.

Their postures are perfect, their eyes focused. We are slightly slouched, our neck and shoulders sore from a night of restless sleep. The pew leaves splinters on our back. It creaks with the slightest movement.

“Thank you all for being here today,” he continues. “I know I may have caught some of you by surprise, but we couldn't afford to wait any longer. We had to act fast.”

One of the mothers on the opposite side of the aisle is barely able to breathe in between frantic bouts of tears. The children behind us are antsy, too young to understand the ceremony. The father to our left is motionless.

Simon, unsettled, whispers into our ears.

“When will this be over?”

“Soon, my love. Soon.”

The pit in our stomach is so heavy it could consume us.

The Collector takes the microphone from the podium and walks toward the audience.

“This year, six families have been generous enough to offer up a sacrifice for this community, so that we can be prosperous. Today is about thanking them, about giving back and moving ahead.”

Everyone nods their heads to his spirited convictions, forgetting they too will soon offer up their own sacrifices. That they too must tithe.

When The Collector finishes his opening remarks, We applaud, but it doesn't feel like our choice, our hands creating movements We don't understand, following through with motions We don't consent to.

The Collector calls each child by their name, one at a time: Charlie. Marcus. Lucy. When he reaches Greta, we despise the way it leaves his mouth.

It sounds like it doesn't belong, as if he is saying something forbidden.

We stand together, holding each of Greta's hands, our palms soaked in sweat.

The pianist has transitioned to a minor key.

When We walk toward the altar, it feels the way it does in a dream, our movements heavy and stilted, like We are walking through water. Greta's hands squeeze tighter. She does not shed a single tear.

When our feet reach the altar steps, our toes touching the carpeted stone, Greta slips through the cracks of our fingers, turning to wrap her arms around us. We want to tell her how much We love her, how We would take her place one thousand times over if it were an option. There are so many things We wish We could say.

Wish We could do.

But there isn't enough time.

There is never enough time.

She exits our embrace and joins the other children, their hands now conjoined in a straight line behind The Collector.

Whatever is to be done, wherever they must go, they will do it together.

The Collector starts to say something, but We do not listen. We can't even look him in the eyes. We stare at the painting hanging above our daughter, Mother Mary holding Jesus as he bleeds, arms wrapped around his battered chest, her eyes sunken and shadowed, how she cannot look at his brittle body, how all of the angels watch on. How they could allow this to happen.

Orange Juice, Cigarettes, Salt

When I wake from slumber my lover's face has transformed into one I don't recognize.

His eyes have softened and his hair has grown shorter. The birthmark on his chin has disappeared, a semicircle of patched black hair where there once was something oblong and red. His skin has hardened.

He flounders out of bed with a stretch and a roar, either unaware or unbothered by this sudden metamorphosis. He's still my lover, still appears to be the same person he was when he went to bed the night before. But someone (or something) has taken hold of him, crawled inside his mouth or eyes or ears and found a home where there once was an ordinary man.

He's eating dry cereal when I ask him about this sudden change.

"Do you feel any different today?"

"Same old me."

"I had a dream that something broke into our home and crawled inside of our bed and burrowed under your skin and replaced you."

He's reading the newspaper and smoking a cigarette, eyes glazed over a report about lowering salt intake.

"Well," he says. "I hope my insides are comfortable."

And he laughs into his orange juice and I laugh too but the paint on the walls is thinning and the linoleum on the floor is cracking and I can't stop thinking about the alien inside his body.

He speaks words from his normal lexicon but they don't sound right. They sound false and wrong and misplaced, like when you say a word over and over again until it's just meaningless noise.

Orange juice. Cigarettes. Salt.

These sounds are absurdity.

At work, the clacking of keyboards sounds more precise than usual. Sharper clicks.

The fluorescent lights shine brighter.

The air conditioning hum is apocalyptic.

Someone asks if I want anything from the donut shop across the street and their voice is a gong in my ear. They're wearing a new outfit.

I call my mother on my lunch break. She wants to talk about her plans for the summer – road trips and sailboats and ripe hot days that never end. I tell her this summer I want to feel normal again. I want to feel the earth and its reliable rotation.

“How's Peter?”

“Fine,” I reply. “When I woke up this morning he looked like a different person.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that happens all the time.”

I can tell she's doing something else in addition to our conversation – painting her nails, slicing a lime, sifting through the daily mail.

“When your father was still alive he woke up a new person so many times I stopped keeping track.”

I'm wondering if she's serious or not.

“It's perfectly normal to act like nothing ever happened.”

But the words coming out of her mouth are facsimiles.

Later I'm out for drinks with a friend when I confess my suspicions.

“It's like everyone's a copy of themselves. Or a clone. I can't quite put my finger on it.”

She's stirring her negroni with a paper straw, disinterested. The bar is sticky and crowded and there's a piece of hard old gum on the floor beneath our feet.

"Am I making sense?"

"What's next, the bartender's a robot?"

She's being sardonic.

But when I look toward the bartender, I can sense he doesn't belong.

He isn't supposed to be here.

The next day I am with my therapist and she asks me if we've discussed the matter. If we have identified the elephant in the room.

But I tell her it is far more than just my lover. My mother has been hijacked. My friends have been infiltrated. Something has permeated my coworkers.

"To be honest, I can't be sure you're not in on all of this, too."

Her voice sounds heavier, her sweater more pilled. The sunlight reflecting off a glass of water casts a streak of golden light across the wall in a way I've never seen in this room before.

"If I were in on this whole thing, would I be helping you right now?"

But her words mean nothing. They sound like they belong to a language I don't speak.

On the walk home, the air feels thick and altered, pregnant with an unfamiliar form of pressure.

When I reach the end of the hallway I hear sounds coming from my apartment. I insert the key into the lock and the noise subsides for a brief moment. Until it returns.

Happy Birthday, a chorus of people shout. Confetti flies into the air from all corners.

My lover wears one of those little birthday hats.

My mother blows a party horn and makes a joke about no longer counting age.

My coworker, Janine, plays one of my favorite songs from a loudspeaker.

People are dancing and chatting and being cordial with one another.

A sense of relief flows through me. Foolishness, too, realizing this is why people have been acting so strange.

In the kitchen, away from the social pressure of a crowded room, Peter offers me cake.

“I’m sorry I’ve been acting so weird,” he says. “You know I’m bad with surprises.”

We embrace.

His face looks like it used to, like it always does. He feels like he used to, warm and soft and safe. He leaves to talk to my mother.

From the kitchen, I stare into the living room at the dozen or so people standing together.

They are saying things I don’t understand.

I can’t read lips over the pulsing music.

They make movements that don’t seem regular, like their normal bodies never would.

I take a bite of my cake and it tastes synthetic. It tastes like it’s pretending to be cake.

Everyone gathers around me to sing happy birthday, to make a big scene.

They sing and laugh and take pictures.

They speak to me.

The words don’t sound like anything at all.

A Ghost Story

Tyler was consumed by the ball pits.

At first we thought it was nothing – a joke, a trick our eyes played as they adjusted to the darkness.

He sank into the pool of foamy black buttons and then he was gone.

It happened quickly, too fast for any of us to understand what was actually going on. The physics and whatnot. How someone could disappear into nothingness.

He didn't even make any sounds. He was laughing with us and then he wasn't, some stupid joke I made about not having enough cash to buy anything from American Eagle.

Aaron said he saw him sink into oblivion, like that was a normal thing to assert to your friends when you were otherwise alone in an abandoned mall. We laughed it off, unable to make out each other's flailing limbs, our muscles softened by cheap weed and Admiral Nelson's.

"I'm not fucking kidding," he said, and we couldn't decide if he was frightened or laughing or both.

"Tyler," I said, expecting a response.

Nothing.

We were playing music, some shitty indie stuff from Aaron's brother's band, but Malik turned it off and shushed me and Aaron even though we weren't saying anything.

"Tyler," Malik said. "This isn't funny. Get out from under there."

You'd think we would hear breathing or something. Some sort of indication he hadn't left. That he was still here with us.

But it was silent.

Not even the rhythm from our chests or a ding from our phones.

You know that sound when you're all alone in an empty room? It's not white noise or static but just a quiet hum emanating from your ears, reminding you that you're real? That wasn't even there.

The balls just sat there motionless.

I finally heard a sound. Malik's breath.

"Tyler," Aaron said, his laughs now fully transformed into some foreign form of fear.

Tyler. Tyler. Tyler.

We said his name so many times it started to sound like a prayer.

No matter how many times we begged for him, a response never came.

The three of us just sat there, paralyzed.

After what felt like an hour, Aaron jumped into the pit and started tossing all the balls back. It was so dark I couldn't see my own hands. He pulled and pulled and pulled and the balls kept hitting our bodies and it did feel better just to hear something. Anything.

He reached the bottom of the pit and slapped his hand on the cold, hard surface, signaling there was no sign of Tyler, dead or alive.

We didn't scream or cry or shout or curse.

We just sat there.

We waited for something to happen.

Tyler was the one who wanted to go in the first place. He became obsessed with *The Backrooms*, which led him down these YouTube rabbit holes where he'd romanticize the openness and mystery of vast empty areas – malls, hotels, abandoned office buildings.

"Liminal spaces are beautiful, man," he said. "There's something about them."

The four of us were devouring burgers after a particularly hard day on the job.

We all worked construction, same hours and same company, hanging drywall and laying carpet and renovating old buildings. College wasn't really in the cards for any of us, and none of us had the money to leave town.

So we stayed.

We spent a lot of time together. Too much, sometimes.

"They're fucking creepy," Malik said, French fries still in his mouth.

But Tyler was crazy about them, no matter what we said. He'd stay up all night reading stories about people getting lost in places they didn't think were physically possible. He played *Fallout* and watched *The Shining* and listened to old ballroom music. He told us about this phenomenon called *kenopsia*, a sort of bittersweet eeriness felt from empty public spaces that once bustled with people. He even talked about getting the word tattooed on his chest, which we all gave him shit for. He didn't care.

"I want to go to the abandoned mall with you guys," he said one day while we were laying down tile for a new gas station.

He said it like he had thought about it constantly, as if he had rehearsed it multiple times, prepared for the limitless ways in which we might react.

"Have fun," Aaron said. "But no fucking way."

We all chuckled except for Tyler. He kept working, acted like no one had said a damn thing. He always did things like that, ignoring something someone said because he didn't want to react.

"What exactly would we do?" I asked.

"I don't know. Hang out. Walk around. Experience something new."

More chuckles.

We knew how much he wanted this. You could sense it in the way he spoke.

“I’ll go with you,” I finally said, not sure if I actually wanted to go or if I was just being nice.

“You won’t regret it,” he said. “This will be a night we’ll never forget.”

We had nothing better to do.

“What the fuck do we do?” Aaron finally asked from the bottom of the pit.

“He’s the one who got us into all this,” Malik said. “He needs to get us out.”

“How is he going to get us out, Malik? He’s gone,” I said.

“But he can’t be.”

Aaron and I gave him a look like we don’t know how or why or where he went but he’s *gone*. As in he isn’t with us anymore.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here and go to the police,” Aaron said.

“We just broke into an abandoned mall. We’ll get charged,” Malik said.

Aaron and I agreed that it didn’t matter. The charges would be minimal.

Shit from a video game, Malik whispered to himself, but he reluctantly agreed.

“We need to leave. Now.”

Aaron and Malik turned on their phone flashlights and led the way out of the play area. By now, the three of us were drenched in sweat. I shivered, the perspiration from my armpits cold and raw.

Malik, usually the de facto leader of our quarter life crisis quartet, could barely move.

“Does anyone remember the way out?” Aaron asked.

“I think it’s a left right here, a right at Auntie Anne’s, and then two more rights.”

He nodded his head, agreeing, or maybe just passively avoiding disagreement.

I tried my best to lead the way but my feet felt heavy, like they would in a dream, walking through water or quicksand.

We moved slowly at first, partly out of apprehension, mostly because of the darkness.

The floor was covered in dust.

We could hear our footsteps echo off the giant walls.

We could see the paint on the walls beginning to crack.

“Do you think we’re alone?” Aaron asked.

Malik was still silent, his eyes set toward his feet, chin tucked into his chest.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Like what would be worse, if we were all alone right now or if we weren’t?”

And then we were quiet again, left to only our heavy breathing and patient footsteps, beads of sweat hitting the cold linoleum.

“Why the fuck would you ask something like that?” Malik said.

But Aaron didn’t say anything back. Maybe he was worried that someone – *something* – might hear him.

“Someone needs to be the talker,” Malik said. “Keep saying shit so we don’t go insane.”

Before any of us could respond, a song came on the intercom.

A faded, crackling melody from the ‘40’s – something with a baritone crooner and some brass. It was slow and melodic and reverberated all around us, coming in and out of focus, on and off again, muffled sound through the loudspeakers.

Aaron's speculation had been confirmed, one I'd been secretly harboring from the moment of our arrival.

We were not alone.

When it was time for us to go inside, Malik almost chickened out.

Everyone had come around to the idea except for him. He was convinced something weird was going to happen, even when we told him it was nothing.

"I don't think anyone understands how fucking weird this is," he said.

But Tyler didn't care. This was more than just something he wanted to do on a weekend with his friends. He *needed* this. As if it might change him on a molecular level.

I can't stop thinking about it, he said over and over again. One of those things you just can't get out of your brain.

Maybe it was the avoidance of boredom. Maybe it was loneliness. But I still think he wanted to find something in there. Wanted to find something out about himself.

Aaron didn't say much at all – he was along for the ride, whether weird shit went down or it didn't. I tried to be Tyler's cheerleader in all of this.

We smoked a joint in Malik's beat up Camry and took turns taking pulls that tasted like rotten cherries and nail polish remover.

We walked toward the entrance. There was no moon above us and no parking lot lights. We relied on each other's bodies to guide us forward.

Aaron carried the pry bar to feel useful.

"What if alarms go off?" Malik asked.

“This place has been shut down for years. There’s no way the security system is still up and running.”

Tyler had an answer for everything.

We didn’t have to work the next day. This was better than boredom.

“What if there’s a monster?” Malik asked when we arrived at the entrance to JCPenney.

Aaron and Tyler laughed quite a bit at that. I did too, if only for a moment.

But then I couldn’t stop thinking about the history of this place – its secrets and revelations, everything it had taken inventory of over the years.

I wondered what could be waiting for us inside.

The music from the loudspeakers played again.

It was the same song, fading in and out. It would go silent for a second or two and then fade back in, as if someone were manually adjusting the volume as we tiptoed our way through the darkness.

There was some unspoken mutual agreement between the three of us to not further exacerbate our panic. We spent a brief moment alarmed by the music, about our situation, about Tyler, then we huddled together and convinced ourselves that this was not the end.

“We should just run,” Malik said. “As fast as we fucking can.”

It was too dark, even with our flashlights. Malik reluctantly agreed.

In the quick panic of our predicament, we made three rules.

We walk quickly but don’t run.

We stick together.

Someone must always be speaking.

The third rule was the hardest, but at one point I just started reciting poems I knew by heart, which in any other context would have gotten me relentless shit.

Aaron sang made-up lyrics to the song on the intercom.

Malik cursed.

Our flashlights told us we passed Auntie Anne's and we were close to the exit.

We took a right at the end of the aisle near a defunct Pepsi machine.

We took another immediate right, before the bathrooms and employee break area.

There was no JCPenney.

There were no exit doors.

Only a massive sheet of drywall, similar to the ones we hung every day.

Malik walked right up to it, placed his palm on its cool surface. He put his cheek up to the drywall. It looked like he was whispering something.

"We were wrong about the exit," I said, which sounded obvious, but it needed to be spoken out loud, and we had gone a moment without talking, mostly out of defeat or shock or surprise. We were approaching a rule break by giving in to the silence.

"What do we do?" Aaron said.

I turned off my flashlight to save battery, so I couldn't see Malik in my peripheral, but I could tell he was pacing across the corridor, plotting something.

"We head the opposite direction and find an exit," I said.

Aaron muttered something that sounded like approval, and before I could shout out at Malik to see if he was on board, we heard a crash.

He slammed a hole into the drywall with a large blunt object.

At the same time, the music on the intercom faded out, and in the corner of my eye, I could tell that a faint light appeared at the opposite end of the mall.

Aaron began sputtering nonsense to drown out the newly formed stillness.

“What are you doing?” I asked Malik, who continued to pound at the drywall, enlarging the hole, creating a thick film of dust in between the three of us.

“I’m getting out of here,” he said. “This is where the exit is supposed to be.”

“But it’s not,” I said.

He kept banging. Aaron began to cough.

“There’s nothing in there,” I said. “You’re just going to find another dead end.”

Malik stopped smashing and ran toward me. He came so close I could smell his sweat. I felt the heat of his breath.

“How many times did we come to this mall as kids?” he asked.

I could tell that Aaron was sitting down now, unwilling to participate in this argument.

“The exit was always right here,” Malik continued. “Always. And I know you know it too. I’m not about to walk around the rest of this fucking place and disappear like Tyler did.”

There was no point in trying to stop him.

He slammed the object into the drywall three more times before crawling into the hole he created. We approached it and tried to figure out what was behind. What Malik was going into.

It was still just darkness, the same kind Aaron and I were up against.

The only kind we knew.

We could tell from the reverberation of his footsteps that he was walking far away from us, into something vast and unfamiliar.

The music returned on the intercom.

We listened for Malik's footsteps until we couldn't hear them anymore.

"Malik," Aaron shouted.

We didn't hear a response.

He shouted again and again until the dust from the drywall entered his lungs.

Malik was gone, far off into somewhere unknowable.

Somewhere endless.

We didn't have a plan when we found our way inside.

We cruised through JCPenney, Tyler leading the way. He was filming the whole time but none of us had the nerve to tell him that it was all going to be too dark to watch.

He was happy, though.

We laughed. Sometimes out of nervousness, other times because Tyler or Malik said something funny. We were four friends with nothing better to do, inside a dead mall in a dying town. We were having some version of fun.

We were broke.

We were lost.

Tyler led us out of the department store and into the concourse, the lights from all of our phones illuminating the names of storefronts still standing.

I thought it would be creepy but it was mostly just sad.

It made me think of how young we all once were. How different our lives could have been.

There was dust and moisture and some wear and tear but the letters on the storefronts still hung on the walls. We passed dead plants and tattered furniture and a fountain emptied of water.

It was cold, our breath swirling and foggy.

“What should we do?” Aaron asked.

He was the only one not into it. Even Malik was finally getting along.

We passed a play area in between a Hollister and a Bath & Body Works. The one with the purple walls and the tumble drums and the ball pits.

Tyler looked thrilled, like he had found something he'd been looking for his whole life.

“Anyone want to go inside?”

I had to pull Aaron away from the drywall.

“We need to keep going,” I said.

He didn't say it, but I could tell from the way he looked at me, from his dumbfounded, empty stare, that he wished he had gone with Malik.

I grabbed his wrist and walked him toward the light coming from the opposite end of the mall.

I had gotten used to the music by now. It was better than silence.

“We're breaking one of the rules,” he said.

“I didn't know you cared about those.”

“It just feels better when we're talking, you know?”

Sounds emanated from the room as we came closer.

We rounded the corner and a bright purple glow emerged.

It was an arcade – fully functional, with working games that made sound.

We walked inside.

I could see Aaron without a flashlight for the first time since we walked into the mall. His face was wet and his hands were clammy and his clothes were covered in dust.

All of the machines were running.

“What are we doing?” Aaron asked, on the verge of tears.

“I don’t know where else to go.”

“I thought you knew another way out.”

“I don’t,” I said. “We can still try, though.”

“What do you mean?”

It was the loudest it had been all night – the music, the electric hum of the games, the sound of our voices, shaking.

“Try?” Aaron asked. “You *know* the way out.”

I looked at him, hopeless.

“Malik was right about the exit,” I said. “That’s where it was supposed to be.”

I was going to keep talking about Malik and where he might be and if he had seen Tyler and how an infinite vast room may have replaced the exit doors but before I could respond Aaron started to cry, his weary face shrouded in the neon glow.

“Then why didn’t we go with him?” Aaron asked, sitting down in a car seat driving game, wiping his cheeks with his sweatshirt sleeve.

“We both know where he went was not outside.”

He thought about it for a moment and started to cry again.

“How are you so calm right now?”

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m just tired.”

“What the fuck? I mean, actually, what the fuck?”

He slammed the steering wheel of the racing game. He punched it so hard he had to rub his knuckles, which cracked and started to bleed.

“I know this is insane and I know that we don’t want to admit this is real right now,” I said. “But it is. And we can’t just give up.”

“Do you think they’re dead?”

I really didn’t know, but my blank face must have told Aaron I thought they were. He began to weep, which made me follow suit, and then we were both just balling and thinking about our lost friends, about this place and its power and its ability to make us fall apart.

After a moment of silence, our bodies no longer able to produce any more tears, I asked Aaron if he wanted to play the racing game.

“Are you fucking serious?” he asked.

“I am,” I said. “Why not?”

He scoffed and then chuckled. He agreed.

Lit by the neon purple around us, we played the game twice, each of us winning once. For the first time since before Tyler disappeared, we laughed, genuinely.

“Best two out of three?” I asked.

We sat at the top of the play area and passed around the bottle of rum.

We talked about our favorite memories of this place from when we were kids.

Aaron loved the merry-go-round when it still existed. He’d come here with his mom and his sisters. They’d get ice cream and make stories up about the people that passed by.

Tyler and Malik loved coming here in middle school, when they walked around without the burden of work in their head. Without its weight left on their bodies. They said they liked not having to think about the future. All that mattered was what they brought home from Hot Topic.

I remembered when I came here with my dad. He'd pick me up from school and tell the front office I had a doctor's appointment, but we'd come here and see a movie and eat cookies and walk into stores we couldn't afford.

We all had memories attached to this place. We could sense the people we used to be, smaller and less tethered.

Those versions of us were still here – in the walls, in the air, in the fabric underneath our feet. It's why I couldn't shake the feeling we weren't alone.

Something lived in the silence between us. Something unnamable, that we could never begin to understand.

Tyler moved his way toward the ball pit.

He picked up one of the black orbs and squished it until it popped, before he laid down in the pool of foamy black buttons.

Aaron left the arcade to piss, the first of us to confront the darkness since the two of us arrived.

“Don't go far,” I said.

I couldn't hear him over the intercom or the games in the arcade.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I thought about Tyler and Malik, if they had found each other. If they were even still here.

I got up from my seat and walked out of the arcade, hoping Aaron would be right outside.

He wasn't.

I called his name and heard nothing in return.

I was tired of repeating these names to no avail.

I could shout his name, scream it until my throat cracked. It would make no difference.

It was less lonely to remain quiet than to hear his name replayed back to me as it bounced off the mall ceiling. I turned my flashlight back on in hopes he may be around somewhere. If I stayed in the arcade any longer I was afraid I would never leave.

I walked toward the food court with a dying phone battery and a sudden ravishing hunger. Even without Aaron and Tyler and Malik I stayed true to our rules.

I talked quietly to myself. I walked quickly but didn't run.

I had no one left to stick together with.

Maybe it was my sweat or I just hadn't been paying attention earlier but it started to smell weird, like dampness or mold. It got colder, too. Freezing. My hands were shaking and my breath fogged the light in front of me.

The music still went in and out. One second it would be there, guiding the way to somewhere else in the mall. Then it would fade out again and even my whispers made echoes in the open space.

I was losing energy.

I was losing focus.

Until a light from across the mall turned on, bright enough to guide the way.

It wasn't just a light – I heard voices, too. Real, continuous, voices; the sounds of belonging.

The sounds increased in volume and the light kept shining from across the concourse, a piercing white glow with pinkish hues.

I almost collapsed, my heart swelling with joy and relief and astonishment, and then sadness that I couldn't share those feelings with my friends.

I gathered the energy to run toward the light, to the noise. I heard music now, not the song from the intercom. Something from the food court, livelier, that actually belonged in a mall.

I ran past the Abercrombie and Foot Locker and through the old decrepit fountain.

I reached the end of the concourse and found the escalator that would take me closer to the sounds. For a moment, I wondered if Tyler and Malik and Aaron could be there. If they had been found.

I was so close I could make out particular voices.

When I reached the top of the escalator, the bright light illuminating the sweat all across my aching body, I looked down into the food court and everything it contained, at the dozens of tables, at the horizon of rundown restaurants.

There was no one there.

I could hear the human noise.

I could hear the sounds people were making – the laughter, the shouting, the music.

Hazy ballroom stuff behind me and the 80's pop in front of me.

There were people in my ear, in my head, all around me.

They were everywhere except my eyes.

Why couldn't I see them? Why wouldn't they save me?

My voice shot to shit, I screamed into the openness, wondering what it might say back.

Trying and hoping, one last time, to find out what lived here. To know what it was and what it wanted.

I waited for something to happen.

With Which You Are Presented

Otto is on his front lawn thirty seconds later than usual.

His robe is a different color (maroon, when it's always olive green) and he's looking around the neighborhood, which he rarely does, if ever. He typically just beelines to the mailbox to retrieve his packages before going back to his lawn chair to read the newspaper. He is, almost always, an immensely punctual individual.

He looks like someone who thinks they're being watched.

When I descend down the stairs to greet him for our morning chat I wonder if he will now notice that because of his lack of punctuality that our conversation will feel slightly askew, that it will not possess the regular cadence and rhythm it habitually does, that because of the change in robe color and the tardiness and the general change in demeanor that our rapport will lack its usual *je ne sais quoi*.

I wonder if he knows it will be his fault.

"Good morning, Otto!" I shout from across the yard.

"Good morning, Theo."

I don't know if he knows that I know but I don't want to give anything away.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Right as rain," I say.

He eventually plops down into his lawn chair, golden rays of sun bouncing off his moustache, one that I've often thought (in private, of course) didn't fit his face very well. He opens the newspaper (yesterday's) as he does every morning of every week of every month, licking the tip of his index finger before turning the page.

This is the part of the day where I then check the mail, when Barbara comes by and delivers us something to appreciate. She is usually singing or whistling, the former on cloudy days and the latter when the sun shines. That means today she would be whistling, if she were here, which she is not, and I do not hear any motor vehicles approaching, and when I look across the street at Roger & Lola's they're not worried about their lack of incoming mail at this hour of the day.

They look like they don't have a worry in the world! And maybe they don't. Maybe they have figured out the optimal attitude in which to approach all of life's patterns, an attitude predicated on the notion that if the mail arrives later than usual (or God forbid, not at all) then that's okay. That's just fine. It will come eventually, or maybe it won't come, but we will still just sit here enjoying the day. To possess that level of nonchalance! I could never.

Roger is drinking lemonade and Lola is reading from her gardening magazine.

"Beautiful day to be alive, isn't it Theo?"

Roger asks me this every morning of every week of every month but today, the sharp click of his tongue at the end of my name causes his plastic smile to dissipate quicker than usual, and rather than respond *Sure, thing Rog!* as I do every morning of every week of every month I only nod my head and offer a meager thumbs up towards him and his wife and their Italian greyhound, Pickles.

But he smiles exactly the way he would if I had said what I usually said which I could have but I didn't because this day is already the strangest I have yet to experience and it's only just begun. I haven't even had my banana. I haven't said good morning to Nick.

The feeling I have standing at the mailbox is one I have yet to feel, and although it's only existed for approximately three minutes and fifty six seconds, it's growing, rapidly, and I don't know when it will cease multiplying.

Pickles approaches me and kisses my leg. I still tell him he's a good boy like I always do, because he is, and he lays down at my feet, his long, soft body bathed in a pool of sunlight.

"Well gang," I say. "I hope the rest of your day is filled with joy and positivity."

They all wave at me with wide smiles and sunny dispositions, which I reciprocate, like I always do, but when I walk back to my front porch, for the first time in my life, I am worried for what's to come.

Nick is working in the living room office drinking cold brew out of a mug, which he does every Friday *because it's fun and why not*, he likes to say. I kiss him on the cheek and walk toward the fridge, hoping some increment of food will provide me enough sustenance to quell the rising of this unusual feeling.

What a delight! The fridge is stocked as fully as it was yesterday and the day before and the day before that – oranges and peaches and broccoli and wild sockeye salmon. Almond milk, cage free eggs.

"Any good mail today?"

Sometimes he asks this and others it's *any good mail for me?* or *I hope we got something from our friends from home* but this is our home and it's hard for me to remember anywhere else than here, in our loving community, where things are safe and patterns are abundant.

I tell him Barbara has yet to arrive.

He seems surprised but not in the way I want him to be, more *huh that's weird* and less *Barbara arrives at our home at 9:05 every morning of every day, why on earth hasn't she arrived with our daily mail?*

"I'm sure she'll come soon," is what he says.

To me, it sounds like he doesn't care.

I eat my daily banana and ask Nick if work is busy today.

"Oh, you know. Same old same old."

I usually just agree, because yeah, it's just same old same old, it's work. Expense reports and crunched numbers and bosses who are on you about you don't even know what.

But I don't know. Today is different.

I don't even know what the same old even is, for I've never inquired further than baseline questions regarding my husband's work. What is the same old comprised of? Can I hold it in my hands?

"Tell me more," I say. "Tell me what's on the to-do list today and which coworkers you hate. Tell me all about this same old same old."

He's flummoxed by my question.

No one has ever asked him this. No one has ever asked him anything other than what they usually ask him, what they ask him every morning.

When I walk toward him I see that his laptop shows a blank white screen with a blinking cursor. It blinks and blinks and blinks and it doesn't stop. Like it's trying to tell me something. Like it's alive.

My husband is sitting in his desk chair beginning to cry.

"Nick," I say. "What are you working on?"

He doesn't know. He tells me I'm scaring him, that I'm making him think about things he's never had to think about. He tells me I'm making him feel odd inside, that this is very much not an average Friday morning.

"I don't want to have an average Friday morning," I say.

I tell him to tell me more.

"It's just what I do," he says. "Every morning, I walk downstairs, I brush my teeth, I grab some coffee, and I sit down to work. That's the way it's always been."

"I know, honey."

"Why are you asking me all these questions?"

What can I possibly tell him? That our neighbor walked outside thirty seconds later than usual and now my entire body feels like it belongs to someone else and I just discovered my husband doesn't actually accomplish anything when he sits down to work and our mail hasn't arrived yet.

"I'm worried," I settle with. "Things are changing in a way I wasn't necessarily prepared for. And it's happening fast."

He touches my face. The worry in his eyes is a sinking ship.

"What are we going to do?" he asks me.

"We're going to figure it out."

I take Nick's hand and walk us back outside where we're greeted with ripe sunlight and a bevy of friendly waves. But this is not the time to be friendly. No one seems to care that Nick is still in his pajamas. I don't know why they don't notice the minute details of our shared existence the

way I do. If Otto or Roger walked out in an outfit they had never worn in public I wouldn't be able to handle myself (hence my reaction to Otto's maroon bathrobe).

"Friends and neighbors, I'd like to have a courteous discussion."

I begin a speech. I think that's about what it is. Maybe it's more of a proclamation.

Maybe it's an invitation.

No one's listening. They are locked into their daily activities: Otto, of course, sunbathing. Gurpreet from down the lane is mowing the lawn. Roger & Lola are playing badminton as Pickles watches the shuttle go from left to right, left to right, left and then right again.

"Does anyone remember the last time they left this neighborhood? Does anyone remember where they were before this?"

Again, I'm met with neither verbal answers nor any physical indication that anyone registered my question. They are probably thinking: *that Theo is sure on one today*, which in a way, they are right about, but for the wrong reasons, and if I could only say this to them, if I could only look them in the eye and alert them to my recent discovery, then maybe they would listen to me. Maybe then they would understand.

I squeeze Nick's hand, give him a look indicating I will be back in a moment.

I walk to Roger & Lola's.

I grab Roger by the shoulder, interrupting his neighborhood famous badminton swing.

I have never done this, I have never thought about doing this, I have never even conceived the possibility of doing this, but in the 4.27 seconds it took to walk from my house to Roger & Lola's yard, I had the slightest morsel of time to think about how I would feel if someone interrupted Nick & I's badminton game (we don't even play badminton). The answer: not good.

Roger, however, showed little anger (if any emotion at all) when I grabbed his wrist, causing the shuttle to fly into the street, which still has seen no sign of Barbara's automobile.

"Oh shoot," Lola said. "Guess you'll just have to serve again."

"I guess you're right, honey. Sorry about that, Theo."

They continue their game, gleefully bouncing the shuttle from side to side, completely unbothered by my presence, by the man standing in the middle of their badminton game, desperately wishing for his neighbors to listen to a single word he has to say.

I sprint back to the other side of the street and approach Otto (moustache), who has returned to his quotidian ritual of sunbathing.

"Hey Otto," I say, standing above him like a column.

He drops his tanning mirror and looks up at me, the back of my head blocking the hot sun.

"Why are you wearing a different colored robe today?"

He doesn't quite understand the question.

"Every day, you wear that same bathrobe, but it's always olive green. Today, it's maroon. I would like to know why that is."

Nick watches us from the other side of the lawn. I am unsure whether he feels better or worse than he did a moment ago, when we slowly worked out the revolutionary breakthroughs of his work life.

The look in Otto's eyes is the same my husband held a moment ago.

"I truly don't wish to frighten you, but as you can tell by the cadence in my voice, your wardrobe alteration has led me to quite an interesting morning, and if you don't have an answer

for me, that's okay! But I think that, if this is the case, we should develop a plan of action on figuring out what is going on this morning, and what we can do about it."

Otto looks down at himself, touches the felt on his robe. Nick walks over to us, finally removed from the spell that had him immobile near our mailbox. He notices that Otto (although the observation not quite as monumental) is undergoing quite precisely what he did just minutes ago. He stands next to him, a beacon of understanding. A spiritual guide.

"Don't be afraid, Otto. Something strange is happening and Theo is going to help us."

He looks at me. He gives me a look *right, babe? You understand this situation more than we do and you're going to lead us in the right direction. You're going to be our hero.*

I may be further along in my journey of this groundbreaking discovery but that does not mean I am unafraid.

Otto can't stop touching his robe.

"I always wear olive green, and yet this is maroon."

Nick pats him on the back as if to say, *yes, Otto! You're onto something!*

"That's right, Otto. Your robe is a different color than it is every day of every week of every month. Do you want to figure out why? I, for one, am quite curious."

But he just keeps touching his robe as if it were the most valuable piece of clothing ever worn. His face turns from dumbfounded to joyful to immensely frightened, a triad of emotions that cycle over and over again.

"What do we do? You said we were going to figure it out."

"We should find others to discuss with our qualms about today's discoveries."

Nick agrees, not fully understanding what I mean.

“We should walk, as far as we can. We should figure out if anyone else understands what we are feeling,” I say.

But when I bend down to grab Otto’s hand in hopes he may join us, I hear Barbara approaching. She parks her automobile on the street outside our home.

She’s seventeen minutes and thirty three seconds later than usual.

“Ring, ring, ring, who wants the daily mail?”

The oddities don’t cease! Barbara usually only says *ring* twice. And (more importantly) she never asks who wants the daily mail. We all do! Every single one of us! Rather, she says, *I have the daily mail*. Anyone would notice that. Even Roger & Lola, who are still deep into their badminton game, not paying any mind to the drama unfolding across the street.

Otto, the most eager mail receiver on the entire block, remains glued to his lawn chair, his daze unbothered. Barbara approaches us, unaware of the different ways in which we are acting.

“Otto, don’t you want your newspaper?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“We’ll take it, Barbara. Thank you.”

She leaves mail in our mailbox, too.

I wonder if she knows how tardy she is, if she’s even aware that her arrival usually happens at the exact same time every day of every week of every month.

I considered inviting her on our journey, but it does not seem as if she would be interested. She has people to see, mail to deliver.

When she drives away down our tree lined street, I notice the newspaper looks familiar.

“Say, Otto, would you mind going into your house to grab yesterday’s newspaper? And while you’re at it, maybe the day before and the day before that as well?”

He doesn’t say anything, but he does arise from his lawn chair, the first time since my quasi-confrontation that he’s been able to do anything besides ogle at his own bathrobe.

I ask Nick if he’s okay with this journey only including the three of us – if that worries him, if he’s ready to discover things he didn’t know were possible.

He says yes. He grabs my hand.

“We’ve got this.”

And we do.

I look into his eyes, the same ones I have for I don’t even know how long anymore. In them there is the understanding that wherever we go, no matter what other surprises are in store for us, we will go there together.

Otto is back outside with three different newspapers – today’s, yesterday’s, and the day before.

They are all the same.

Verbatim, down to the photographs and bylines and grammatical error on page 7.

“Let’s go,” I say to Nick and Otto. “I don’t want to wait any longer.”

I lead us to Roger & Lola’s and give them one last chance to join our team as we discover the secret unraveling before us.

But they just stare in our direction until they’re back at their badminton game.

Before I take us further down the street (a street I have never left) I approach Pickles and kiss him on the forehead. He licks my leg.

“Good boy,” I tell him, and I really mean it.

I wonder if I'll ever see him again.

I give Nick a signal like *hey let's get the hell out of here*, and he grabs Otto by the wrist, leading him down the street.

I begin to jog and the others follow right behind me.

The breeze feels good in my face.

We take a left at the end of our street and run down a similar lane, the houses almost identical to ours.

"Where are we going?" Otto asks, running out of breath.

"Somewhere new," I say.

This is enough to keep him going.

We keep running and running, hoping to see a new face. I want to ask someone if they've ever felt what we are feeling, if they've done what we are doing.

At the end of the lane, east of the next row of houses, I can see a large group of people standing together in a wide open field. They seem to be communicating about something.

I look behind me and see that Nick and Otto are out of breath, but I don't want to stop, for this is what we are seeking out. This is why we left in the first place.

We rest for thirty seconds and then go again, headed toward the group of people, wanting to join in their communion.

I signal that we should run faster but we're beginning to sweat profusely, our bodies beholden to the searing summer sun.

We are so close we can see what they're wearing, the color of their hair, their posture.

We're only seconds away from an answer.

We reach the end of the street, yards from the new people. I don't know what to say.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you all. We—”

Otto is on his front lawn thirty seconds later than usual.

A Good, Honest Man

Father turns on the television.

Liam hopes for baseball and I want Sunday morning cartoons but Father turns on The Ministry and heads back to his writing desk, pens and papers scattered all across the stained oak.

We watch the old man on the television talk to us about Jesus. It's the hottest day of summer and our air conditioning is broken but Mother is making key lime pie and school is still tucked away like little popcorn kernels in the back of our brains.

The man's name is Pastor Paul and he talks to us as if we are the only people listening. He says words like *love* and *savior* and *lamb* and his hair is as white as the whipped cream Mother spills all over the counter. She whispers curse words under her breath, hot and fast like the crumbled graham cracker crust she pulls from the oven. She thinks we can't hear her, but this is where we learn to say them, turning words like *fuck* and *ass* and *good goddamn* around in our mouths, sounding them out with our teeth and tongues.

Liam's favorite one is shit. He says it in class, on the playground. He says it wherever he can get an audience. He has been telling all of the boys in class his new favorite fact: *people shit themselves when they die*. Sometimes we listen to what he has to say the same way we listen to Pastor Paul. Like desperation, or a form of ardent worship.

"In Heaven, we won't have names," Pastor Paul says. "We will just be God's children."

I'm the only one paying attention. Liam is on his new cellphone and Father is still grading papers.

"I have to run to HyVee," Mother says. "Won't be gone too long."

She grabs her purse from the rack hanging next to the television, wanders around the kitchen looking for her keys.

Liam and I have wet foreheads. He's starting to grow tiny follicles of hair on the curve of his lip. Father tells him to shave but he lets them grow. He thinks they make him look older.

"You boys better be paying good attention," Mother says. "Pastor Paul speaks the truth. A good, honest man."

Liam and I aren't quite sure what that's supposed to mean. She always says we need to grow up to be good, honest men, like it's something we should know how to do.

Mother exits through the front door after she finds her keys underneath the lamp in the kitchen. Her car sputters out and she's down the road.

Pastor Paul's voice is loud and earnest. He gives extra attention to the vowels, his southern drawl curling around long O's like molasses.

"God is asking you to spread your seeds of faith," Pastor Paul says. "He has told me and he is telling me again."

Liam Chuckles.

"Spreads his seeds."

The joke goes over my head, but I run to the kitchen and find a bag of ranch flavored David's, the remaining remnants too stale to savor.

"Turn this shit off," Liam says.

"Watch your mouth," Father says from his desk.

"Impossible either way," I say. "Father won't let you change the channel."

"This is better than baseball, boys," Father says. "Pay attention."

"God is watching you," Pastor Paul says. "He's watching all of us, all of the time. He loves you and he loves me and he loves every single person on this planet."

But I don't know how I'm supposed to feel loved by God when I can't see him.

I can't hear him.

I can't touch him.

Liam tells Mother and Father he can hear God, but I think he's just lying, like when he tells them he's studying but he's really looking at the *Sports Illustrated* with the girls in the bikinis.

Mother and Father know how hard I try. I turn off the lights and think of the tallest man I can imagine, like a human column, bursting through clouds and into space.

They tell me to think harder, because God is watching. God is speaking to me.

But his voice just sounds like silence.

The thoughts never last. No matter how hard I try, I end up thinking about Lucy or the Yankees or what I'll have for lunch tomorrow.

Pastor Paul asks a young couple in the front row if they've planted their seeds.

They smile and say yes, their hands clenched together.

"I can't spread the word of God without help from all of you. Every seed you plant means another donation toward me, toward the faith, and toward God himself."

A phone number flashes on the bottom of the screen in big white blocks.

Liam walks back in with a plate of nachos and a bottle of red Gatorade.

Pastor Paul points at the screen.

"You call this number right now and plant your seeds for The Lord. The highest donation by the end of the day will get to have dinner with my wife and I at our summer house in Savannah."

The camera pans to the crowd, hundreds of people pulling out their cellphones, calling Pastor Paul's hotline in the name of God.

Father does the same. He takes the home phone and dials the number and talks to someone about spreading the good word.

I don't know why. We already don't have enough money as it is.

But he's so eager for something – approval, attention, reconciliation.

I see Father and the way he looks at the television, the way he aches for what Pastor Paul promises, and I see a man who will never find what he's looking for.

The Dinner Party

Mary didn't want to go from the beginning.

This is what she thought as Edward drove slowly down another tree lined street, stopping every few minutes for a speed bump, the dwindling promise of magic hour leaving ribbons of orange light on the dashboard.

She had already told him multiple times she didn't want to go.

"It will be fun, sweetheart," Edward said. "Everyone has been dying to meet you."

He didn't look at her when he spoke, his eyes focused on the road. There were hardly any other cars out. He adjusted the radio, turned the volume up two notches.

"You guys are just gonna talk about work the whole time," Mary said under her breath.

"Maybe some of the time," Edward said.

She didn't think he had heard her.

"They're all going to have their partners there, too," he said.

He was trying to get Mary on board.

"Besides, it's about time we met some more people in the neighborhood."

She agreed with the last part.

"My stomach feels funny," Mary said.

This time, Edward didn't respond. She rested her head on the cold glass, droplets of rain beginning to fall on the foggy window. She listened to the sound of music drown out her ambivalence.

She sensed a shift in pressure, as if the car had lost or gained oxygen.

They drove past another row of houses, almost identical to the ones they had seen on the street before – white plasterboard with a bluish hue, black shutters, three small windows on a

jutting A-frame. It looked as if the houses belonged to each other, like they could only exist in succession.

As they drove down another street, Mary noticed faint lights emanating from somewhere in each home – a lamp glow, a lit candle in the kitchen, a gentle shine near a porch swing. Each house had some indication that a person had been inside.

“That’s weird,” she mumbled under her breath.

Edward heard her this time, his eyes still glued to the road.

“What is it?” he said.

“The lights are on but nobody's home.”

“They’re probably all going to the party,” he said, not fully involved.

Each house they passed had a single light on. In windows and doors and garages and kitchens. Mary couldn’t find anyone inside, no matter where the light shone.

After two more streets of the same houses and the same solitary lights, Edward parked his car underneath a towering maple tree at the end of a cul-de-sac, the homes on this street looking slightly different than the rest – larger yards, colored shutters, more than one light on.

This time, she heard music coming from the home, and could see from the corner of the bay window, thankfully, that there were people inside.

“Please just smile and try your best to make new friends,” Edward said.

Mary agreed.

They would talk. They would drink. They would have fun.

They would share the warmth and buzz other people provided.

But no matter what she told herself, no matter what Edward said to alleviate her reservations, Mary knew, unequivocally, that if she walked into this house, something wicked would take place.

A tall woman in a long dress opened the door and welcomed Mary and Edward into the home.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Mary. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Her name was Eileen, the wife of Edward’s boss. She and her husband lived in this house, this crowded two-story Victorian with portraits of women all across the living room. Paintings Mary had never seen before. There were dozens of portraits of smiling women all in the same pink dress sitting in front of a turquoise background.

Mary wondered if she was supposed to know who these women were.

“May I take your coat?” Eileen asked.

Mary didn’t respond right away. She watched her husband spill off into the living room. He placed a firm squeeze on the shoulder of a man telling a story to another circle of men, their faces hidden behind thick clouds of cigarette smoke.

Eileen took the coat anyway.

“This is your first dinner party, yes?” Eileen tried again.

Mary nodded, now entrusted to the only other person she knew here, a woman she had met just thirty seconds prior.

“Don’t be so nervous, darling,” Eileen said. “Let’s get you a drink.”

Eileen pulled Mary through the sea of men, each dressed the same – white dress shirt, black tie, heather gray blazer. Edward kept all 3 buttons clasped, both his hands buried deep into

the pockets of his trousers, the confidence of his initial party entrance dispelled by a taller man whose hands flailed as aimlessly as the story he told.

When they entered the kitchen, Mary could see the living room, foyer, banister and the open door to the guest bathroom on the first floor.

By her estimate, she and Eileen were the only women at the party.

Rather than confirm her suspicion to the gracious party host, she struck up a conversation with an aloof man standing alone in the kitchen, hidden by the silver shine of the refrigerator, drinking beer from the bottle and looking at something on his phone.

“Hello. What’s your name?” Mary asked.

Eileen was making margaritas.

“Cory,” he said, his eyes locked toward the screen.

Mary swallowed, her throat beginning to sore. She noticed Cory wore a silver band on his left ring finger.

“Where’s your wife tonight?”

Cory looked up from his phone and made eye contact with Mary.

“She couldn’t make it this evening.”

Eileen finished the drinks and handed one to Mary, salt coated all around the wide rim.

“Drink up,” Eileen said with a smile, and Mary drank, reluctantly, as she looked out into the living room toward the mass of babbling men.

Each partygoer said the same thing, albeit in slightly different deliveries.

A lanky man with a loose necktie said his wife wasn’t able to make it tonight.

A boyish employee who constantly blew his nose told Mary that his wife was no longer with us. She thought he might be joking but he began to cry before excusing himself upstairs. Even if Mary felt pity for the poor fellow, it only made her feel stranger.

Nate from accounting told her that his wife was home sick.

“You know that damn flu has been going around.”

Mary sipped from her margarita, the neon green pool floating around in her concave glass, moving from side to side, as if it had a pulse.

Nate pulled out a photograph of his children and showed it to Mary. A boy and a girl, each of them wearing dollar store cowboy hats, the boy holding a toy revolver.

“My pride and joy, right there.”

Mary nodded politely but her mind abandoned the conversation, her eyes averted to the corner of the living room, where Edward stood with a group of significantly older men, whispering something into each of their ears.

As Nate rambled on about his son’s most recent baseball game, Mary wandered back into the kitchen, worried an interruption on the opposite side of the room would upset her husband.

Eileen was making a pot of coffee. A woman stood next to her.

Mary introduced herself immediately. When she reached out her hand for a greeting, she spilled a cup of hot coffee on the woman’s legs, and although this new partygoer seemed slightly annoyed by the inconvenience, she didn’t react in the way Mary expected.

Eileen didn’t seem surprised, either, as if this had happened before.

Mary grabbed a towel and offered it to the new woman. She performed a perfunctory wipe of her leg, then tossed the dirty towel into the sink along with a piling mound of dirty dishes.

A silence wedged its way between them, quickly drowned out by the trumpet-laden soundtrack and cacophony of howling men.

“Mary, please forgive me. This is Delores,” Eileen finally intervened.

“I’m so sorry for spilling that coffee all over you. You must think I’m a klutz.”

Delores blushed, but didn’t say anything in return, offering only a faint indication that what had transpired was anything more than a social blip.

“I’m always a bit nervous at these things,” Mary said. “Have you been to these parties before?”

Delores nodded.

Mary wanted to inquire more about the situation the three of them were in together, but Delores began to leave before she could say anything.

“Anyway, it was nice to meet you,” Mary said.

“It was nice to meet you, too.”

Mary was surprised she said anything at all.

There was a flatness in the way she spoke, some unfamiliar form of languor. Mary wondered what would happen if she cut her wide open, tore back every layer of skin – if she would find anything underneath.

Mary pulled Eileen away to the bathroom, her hot, coarse grip leaving patches of red on each of their wrists.

“What are you doing?” Eileen asked through nervous laughter.

“What’s going on?”

Eileen looked flummoxed.

“You grabbed me and dragged me into my bathroom,” she said, her playful demeanor dissipating into something more firm. “It feels like I would be the one with more questions.”

Mary could hear the music through the door, muffled and indistinct.

“I don’t even know how to say it,” Mary said.

“Well, why don’t you try? There’s no going back at this point.”

“It just feels like something isn’t right here,” Mary said.

Eileen offered a sympathetic smile but offered no solutions to Mary's concerns.

“I can’t quite put it into words, I guess. I feel like I’m dreaming or lost or waiting for something to happen that just never will.”

“You didn’t have to drag me into the bathroom to tell me this.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary said. “I just don’t really quite feel like myself.”

“No one ever does at these things.”

They each took a swig from their salted glasses.

“Does it ever go away?” Mary asked.

Again, Eileen indicated that she was listening. That she heard Mary’s reservations. But she didn’t say anything. She kissed Mary on the cheek before opening the bathroom door.

“Eileen,” she said, softly.

“Yes?”

“Do you ever feel like something bad is about to happen?”

Eileen inhaled, exhaled with fervor. She looked Mary up and down. She sighed.

“For the love of Christ, Mary, get yourself together.”

The party had quieted down, at least to the extent Mary could hear individual conversations taking place when she left the bathroom.

One group talked about their new cars. She heard multiple mentions of promotions.

The room felt lighter, as if some form of pressure had been released.

For the first time since their arrival, Mary noticed Edward alone in the kitchen, topping off his bourbon glass, licking cream off his fingers.

“Sweetheart, there you are! I’ve been looking for you all night.”

“It’s not that big of a party, Edward.”

He didn’t register her shift in attitude, couldn’t sense the tension emanating from her nervous body.

“Let me get you another drink.”

Mary said she didn’t want another.

Edward took her glass anyway and poured freely from Eileen’s neon mix.

“I want to go home,” Mary said.

Edward offered her a look indicating that maybe she should know something she didn’t.

He kept pouring.

“I don’t feel very well and I’m tired and I want to leave.”

Edward set the glass on the island, wiped his forehead with his sleeves.

“Honey, there’s one more thing I really want you to see. We can leave afterward.”

Eileen and Delores were off to the corner of the kitchen, whispering to each other.

“What do you think?” Edward asked. “Just ten more minutes.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Glasses clinked. Boisterous voices became whispers.

One of the older men from Edward's circle moved to the middle of the living room and stepped onto a small wooden stage.

Mary couldn't stop looking at the portraits on the walls. Such unusual decor.

"Friends. Family. Colleagues. Thank you for being here this evening."

A round of applause.

He spoke with an effortless charm, like a pastor trying to sell something.

He paused and studied the room before Eileen appeared by his side, wrapping herself around his stiff arms.

"Most of you know me, but for those who don't, my name is Alfred."

Mary sensed, without having to scan the room, that she was the only one here who had never met this man.

"This is me and Eileen's first time hosting the dinner party, and I must say we are just delighted with the turnout. We couldn't do this without the support of every single one of you."

Another round of applause spread through the living room, now packed together tightly with warm, loose bodies. Some of the men embraced.

"This tradition is quite important to me. Essential, in fact."

Alfred kept talking but Mary tuned him out, slowly inching backward toward the side door in between the kitchen and bathroom.

She looked for Delores.

She looked for her husband.

She found neither.

Alfred spewed platitudes about hard work and honor. Some of the men looked at him like he was God himself.

Mary picked the right moment to open the door, to sneak outside and leave.

She twisted her hand to the right and to the left.

The door was locked from the inside.

“It’s too late now.”

Mary turned around to see Delores standing next to her, staring, offering no help. Her eyes were fixed and finite. Mary could see right through her.

There is something inside all of us. A pulse, a thrum, a rhythm.

When Mary looked into Delores’s eyes one last time, she knew, somehow, Delores didn’t have that anymore.

She couldn’t decide if that made her frustrated or deeply, deeply sad.

“It’s time,” Delores said. “They’ve been waiting for you.”

“What are you talking about? Why are you saying it like that?”

Mary’s body shook, her hands rising from her side.

“Let it happen,” Delores said.

She grabbed Mary by the arm and dragged her back into the crowd. Mary didn’t resist.

“Listen to him,” Delores pleaded, her hand still clutched to Mary’s arm.

Much of the attention in the room still was directed toward Alfred, but a few of the men surrounding Mary looked at her, anticipating something she did not quite understand.

“Let us be thankful for another dinner party. For another year of prosperity.”

Everyone lifted up their hands in prayer.

A bitter silence spread across the room until Alfred called Edward up to the stage.

Mary couldn't say anything, even if she wanted to.

"We're so happy to have you on the team, Edward."

A final round of applause, one that shifted Mary's insides, as more and more eyes found their way to where she stood, her feet shaking in place.

She watched as her husband received praise, sheepishly.

She didn't know who he was anymore.

Mary's ears stopped working. She couldn't hear Alfred or Edward or the smattering all around her. There was just ringing and shaking and a deep, dull melody.

It wasn't until every eye in the room stared at her that she realized she was invited up on stage, to join Edward and Alfred and Eileen.

She wasn't able to move.

It wasn't an act of refusal. Her brain and body simply wouldn't allow it.

Delores grabbed her again and walked her toward the front of the room, where Alfred, Eileen, and her husband stood watching. Waiting.

There was a little part of her deep inside that thought: *here is where we escape. Now is the time, Edward. This is where the dream ends. This is where we leave.*

But the dozens of partygoers just watched her, waiting for her to say something.

"Everyone here is so thankful for you, Mary," Alfred said. "We couldn't do this without you. You are the only way."

Edward stood on the corner of the stage, cowardly, hands tucked into his pockets, unable to agree or disagree with his boss. Unable to look his wife in the eyes.

Mary had never had this much attention.

Everyone stared at her, their eyes white hot and desperate.

From this angle of the room, she could see another painting she had not yet seen: Delores, in the pink dress in front of the turquoise background, smiling.

“Is there anything you want to say?” Alfred asked. “Now’s your chance to steal the spotlight.”

Mary looked out toward the violent eyes, the sweating faces.

They wanted her to say something.

She started to cry, wishing she had trusted herself before the party started.

“I want to leave,” Mary said.

A small gasp, murmurs.

“I want to go home.”

Laughter.

“Home?” Alfred said. “Mary, the party’s only just begun.”

Ten out of Ten

I am standing outside the kitchen smoking the second half of a cigarette when Rachel slams the door open, sobbing, her face buried into trembling hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“Take a guess,” she says, wiping her cheeks with an apron.

I imagine she didn’t average a 7.5 for the week, which means no Vouchers - Sustenance, Shelter, or Merriment - and another week of having to fend for herself and her baby boy. I vocalize my inclination, and she nods her head, looks up from the cracks in the dirty concrete, the grease stains on her shoes.

“I can’t afford another week without vouchers. I just can’t.”

She looks more defeated than sad, like she knew it was coming, could sense it in the way her customers behaved. I think about Jack, his little hairs and rosy cheeks and the way he calls for his mother like it’s the only sound in the world. Then I think of my empty apartment, the echoing sounds of silence after a Saturday night shift, all the vouchers that would go to waste.

“You can have some of mine,” I say.

She responds without a beat.

“If Tony finds out, you’re fucked.”

“I know. But he won’t. I’ve given some to Luke and Marcus before and there hasn’t been an issue.”

Rachel ponders the offer for a second. She needs them more than I do.

Before she can say anything, a new line cook I don’t recognize walks outside, pops open a bottle of beer.

“Don’t tell Tony,” he says, and slams half of it down, small bubbles of foam resting on the corners of his lips.

Rachel gives me a look indicating she will accept my offer, and I tell her to meet behind the dumpster in ten. When I hand her five Vouchers each, fifteen in total, she wraps me in a warm hug, and for a moment, I forget about the winter wind pressed up against us, the numbness in my toes. She will go home and hold her son close to her chest and nothing else will matter.

I walk home to my apartment. The hallways stink of rotten mangoes and over-salted stew. A scurry of mice eats at the remnants of a moldy bread loaf in the corner. I would be angry or upset about the filth and the fleas but when I open my door Ruby greets me with wet kisses and whimpers.

I take her out to piss. Winter is only just beginning. Short days and long nights and relentless fatigue, the kind you can feel all over your body; the kind that holds weight. My legs tremble as she does her business, undeterred by her lack of privacy, an array of cars passing as she turns white into yellow. I love my Companion very much, more than anyone or anything.

When we come back inside, I put a Merriment Voucher into the Recreation Box, and we fall asleep together on the sofa to the sound of snow, an animated program about a talking alpaca emitting bursts of light into the darkness.

The next morning it is Monday which means the start of a new week which means Tony will gather us all for his weekly meeting where he berates everyone and demands that we thank him for all the opportunities he affords us. I rub the weight off my eyes and walk down to my building’s common room, put two Sustenance Vouchers into the rundown coffee machine, which drips sludgy black liquid into the mug I stole from work. I wave to my neighbor, Sasha, but she

is going blind and cannot see me. Her Companion approaches and licks my leg, and for a moment, I don't care about having to go to work, or how awful I slept last night, or how lonely it feels to watch the warm glow of sunrise in a city far from home.

When I arrive, a few of my coworkers are discussing which mad theories they have a certain affinity for: Luke says he would bet his life savings the JFK assassination was staged, Taylor swears everyone is at least a little bisexual, Rachel thinks some animals are self-aware.

“What about you, Henry?” Luke asks.

I admit the odds of this all being a simulation are pretty high, and everyone agrees, but it was merely an affectation, something to say in the spirit of workplace camaraderie. My answer sparks a conversation though, and when Tony walks in, two of the bussers are still debating whether or not reality is a figment of our imagination.

Tony is fat and bald and usually wears clothes that are either too large or too small. His shirts always have stains. He is two sectors above the waiters and bartenders, three above the cooks and cleaners, which means he gets Vouchers every week no matter how we perform, but *the higher our collective rating, the more Vouchers for me, and everyone else too* he loves to remind us.

Tony begins his speech as he always does.

“This week wasn't our worst, but it definitely wasn't our best.”

He goes on about two negative reviews from Dine & Dash, the first concerning the quality of the food:

My husband and I will NOT be returning to Happy Plate. Our pork chops were SEVERELY undercooked. My husband got food poisoning and is not a happy camper right now. AVOID THIS PLACE AT ALL COSTS.

In the other review, Rachel gets chewed to pieces after an asshole who left a zero saw her eating the remnants of loose goat cheese off the board he barely ate from.

Yeah so we saw one of your waitresses eating cheese off of the cheese platter we had ordered (which took 45 minutes to arrive) and that's just unprofessional. We left a zero. Would have left a negative 5 if we had the option. We will for sure not be returning.

“This is why you always average below a 7.5, Rach,” he says, not looking up from his two pages of notes. “Figure it out.”

She doesn't respond, only nods her head, solemnly, avoiding his eyeline.

Marcus has the second highest average of the week, an 8.9. He's the only Black server on staff, and he's always busting his ass twice as hard for rich pricks to underscore him every time. He nods his head as Tony offers him praise, happily accepting any extra Vouchers.

I have the highest average of the week again, a 9.2, giving me five extra Vouchers in each category. Johnny leans over and whispers something into my ear, although it's loud enough for others around us to decipher.

“You get to watch the good stuff this week.”

He winks at me, which feels weird, because I've never really liked Johnny, even if he thinks we're friends. He can be funny sometimes, but mostly he's just too loud or says questionable things about immigrants or gives backhanded compliments to the guests. He dreams of being on the opposite end of the table someday. I once told him he was closer to houselessness than he was to being able to afford the food we serve, and he laughed at me, told me I didn't understand the ways in which the world worked. Another time, he invited me and Marcus over to get high and watch a film, but Marcus had to cancel and Johnny's wife went to shit so we ended up talking about a bunch of different things, including his five-step plan to achieving billionaire

status. *One day man, you're gonna see me on all the screens in the city. Just watch.* To this day, it's the saddest thing I've ever heard.

Tony hears Johnny's feeble attempt at a whisper and tells us both to be quiet.

"I need everyone to be stellar this week," he continues. "The Suits are coming in for the annual review, and if there aren't quantifiable improvements from last year, we're all in deep shit."

By *we* he means *he*.

"Henry, I want you to take them."

I'm shocked. It's my first year here. I've only heard stories about The Suits, and you don't know what to believe. We're all just looking out for ourselves, or our Assigned Partners, or Companions. You do anything and everything you can for as many Vouchers as possible. Whatever your body will allow.

Tony is now reading from his favorite book, the paperback life manifesto from the Belgian pseudo-psychologist about taking charge of your own destiny. He reads it as if he were reading from a bible.

"You are only as good as the person you are tomorrow," he says.

The bussers listen with intent. They are young and foolish and incapable of deciphering bullshit. One of the line cooks is beginning to fall asleep. The Monday meeting is lasting much longer than usual. When Tony is nearing the end of his speech, Luke interrupts with a question the entire room can hear.

"If we knock this weekend out of the park, do we get Voucher raise?"

His question incites a room of whispers.

“I cannot speak to that at this current moment in time,” Tony responds, and everyone understands that this means no.

“I shouldn’t have even asked,” Luke says to himself.

Me and Marcus and Rachel steal a beer from the loading dock outside, colder than they would be from a fridge. The liquid burns my throat, like drinking ice cold water after popping a breath mint.

“What if we just didn’t give a shit all weekend?” Marcus asks.

We laugh at the idea, our shivering bodies now slightly warmer from the sensation, the booze warming us down to our bones.

“I’m being serious,” he continues, but Rachel and I are still laughing. Marcus is rarely serious, even when it involves Vouchers.

He lost his son to a drunk driver two summers ago, and some of his Vouchers go to his Assigned Partner who moved out west with her sister. I would have given up after something like that, sold all my shit and moved to a beach town in the middle of nowhere. But Marcus figured out how to survive.

It’s only the three of us. Marcus looks at Rachel, and then he looks at me, and then Rachel looks at me, and we all take another long pull from the cold glass bottles we are rotating between frozen hands. Rachel’s look indicates she believes he was being serious, and I am now halfway convinced. Marcus turns toward me.

“Come on man, just think about it. It’s not like you’re gonna stay here forever.”

I shuffle my shoes through the snow, avoiding an actual response.

“You stay here long enough, you end up staying forever. Sooner or later, it’ll kill you.”

Rachel says she has to get home to Jack, and we tell her goodbye before Marcus grabs one more longneck, asks me if I want another.

“I’m tired, but thanks. I’ll think about what you said.”

He chuckles and shakes his head.

“Yeah, bet you will. Bet you will.”

Ever since I’ve started at Happy Plate, I’ve really only had three dreams. The first one goes like this:

I am reliving my first shift at the restaurant and things are going mostly how they do in my memory when I’m awake, except no one has a face and no one is acknowledging my presence, and I am trying to work at a fast pace but my legs are weighed down and it feels like I am walking through water and everything is happening all at once, and then I am beginning to panic and wonder if anything or anyone is real, but I know the thought alone proves I must be someone, or at least something. I shout as loud as I can, feel the ache in my throat and the pining in my chest.

And then I wake up.

It is Wednesday which means it’s my only off day which means I will watch the Recreation Box with Ruby and maybe when the sun sets, earlier than yesterday, I will drink some rum with Luke and Marcus and I’ll go to bed not thinking about what the weekend will bring, how miserable it will make everyone.

Before I can even pour food into Ruby’s bowl, someone is at the door. Four knocks.

I open to see my Shelter Officer, Melvin, looking at his feet, blowing his nose into a dirty handkerchief. Sasha is sitting outside her apartment door, unaware of the rodents playing with a chunk of cheese underneath her rocking chair.

“What’s going on, Melvin?”

He looks up at me, but his eyes are so glossed over I can’t tell what he’s thinking or how he’s feeling.

“It’s the third of the month and I don’t have any of your Vouchers,” he finally says.

“I gave some of mine to a friend. I’ll send them your way by the end of the week.”

“It’s always the end of the week this, end of the week that.”

He’s walking away but his mouth is still moving, going on about how none of his tenants pay their Shelter on time and how *goddamn disgusting* this place is getting. When he reaches Sasha’s stoop, she hands him twenty Shelter Vouchers, and after he thanks her, he takes her cane and swings at the rodents, who scurry off past my door and into the street.

The second dream goes like this: I’m with Ruby in an otherwise empty field, open and infinite, miles of tall, yellow grass surrounding us. I have a stick and two of her toys and a wet, tattered tennis ball. There is a familiar silence, like we’ve been to this field before in real life.

I throw Ruby’s ball as far I can, and it bounces three times before settling on a wet patch of grass. She picks up the ball and returns it, sits down at my feet, whimpering. I throw the ball again, this time a bit further. Ruby runs off again, as fast she can, finds the ball in a bush off to the side of the field. She returns it once more, begging for another throw. I oblige.

I throw the ball one last time, except I do not see where it goes. I have thrown it across the field into somewhere I cannot see. Ruby runs off into the distance, hoping to find what she so

desperately desires. She runs and runs and runs, her little legs doing their best to keep up with her heart. She runs so far I cannot see her anymore. She is somewhere beyond my field of view, looking for something she won't be able to find. It makes me so sad I can't do anything else. I sit in the grass and let the whistle of the wind wither into nothing.

And then I wake up.

It's Thursday which means The Suits arrive tomorrow which means Happy Plate is fully staffed, preparing for the weekend ahead. Tony is giving Rachel and I some lecture about the way the tables need to be arranged. It sounds so arbitrary out loud.

This section needs to have 6 tables, it always gets sat the quickest.

Those chairs are too fucking close, they need more space.

Put the Suits by the window, they'll enjoy seeing the city lights.

I watch his mouth move, the way he stutters on certain consonants, how he pauses before swearing. I listen to the rhythm of his words and feel nothing.

"Henry, you listening? You're out of it, today," Tony says.

I nod my head.

He gives me that look, the one I've seen too many times, the one I never want to see again.

"Better get some sleep tonight then. It's showtime tomorrow."

Luke, Marcus, Rachel and I go out for drinks at Winky's. It's busy and bustling and smells like piss and stale potato chips, my shoes sticking to the stains in the old wooden floorboards. I need the social time, the space to vent before the weekend. Luke is the tallest, so he sneaks his way up

to the front of the line, holds up four fingers to the attractive bartender, who hasn't stopped moving since we've arrived.

Luke carries a beer in each hand and one under each armpit to a corner booth Rachel snagged when we arrived. It's pretty loud. We can barely hear each other over the music, something I don't recognize with a thumping bass and static synth. Luke chimes in first.

"Who's ready for tomorrow?"

We all take a sip from our beers. Another. It's hard to hear anyone over the music.

Last year, two servers lost their jobs because their shirts weren't tucked in, another because she spilled champagne on the VP.

"You think you can handle the big wigs?" Luke asks me over the pulsing beat.

"I hope so," I say, taking another drink. "I'm still surprised Tony picked me."

"You're gonna do great, kid," he says.

Rachel leaves early, says the babysitter can't stay too late.

Marcus has been quiet the whole night - on his phone, looking around the crowded bar, playing with his fingers, nervously. Luke asks him between drinks, his words slow and slurred, if he's okay.

"Just peachy."

The three of us sit together in our own shared silence, the buzz of the bar and the echoing music filling in the spaces between us.

The third dream I have is neither at the restaurant nor with Ruby. I have it the most out of any of them.

It's me and a handful of bodies with faces I don't recognize. We are seated at a long, wooden dinner table with fresh olive linens in a room lit only by candlelight. There are twelve of us, maybe fifteen, and everyone is laughing and referencing things I don't understand, but I laugh anyway, because I want to feel included. I want to belong to something. There is a feast under way, but I can never tell what we're eating. Whenever I look down at my plate, it's empty, a big white oval with nothing on top. A full moon.

The only light in the room is from the candles, dripping hot wax onto the table, spilling closer and closer to me, and now the faces are disappearing and it's just bodies with empty, blank heads, but they're still laughing, pushing invisible food into their invisible faces, and the wax is getting closer, eventually reaching the edge of the table.

And then I wake up.

I arrive at work on Friday afternoon to chaos. Someone has broken into the safe. Hundreds of Vouchers are missing. Tony is pacing around the bar when I walk in, shouting obscenities into his phone.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I'll tell you what the fuck is going on," he begins, louder than he was on the phone. "Someone stole half of my fucking Vouchers, that's what's going on. And now, I can't even fully staff my restaurant on the biggest night of the year."

Marcus quit. He called in late last night after we left Winky's. He found another serving job in the east part of the city, a place with minimum Voucher payments and free healthcare. I wish I could have said goodbye.

Luke called in sick, hungover. He barely made it out of the bar.

One of the line cooks is late.

The Suits arrive in an hour and nothing is in place.

I don't know where to go. I don't want to be in the kitchen, or the front of house, or setting up any of my tables. I want to be home, curled up next to Ruby, as far away from this place as I can manage.

I'm sitting on the floor outside the break room when I get a text from Marcus.

I'm sorry to leave you hanging tonight, man. I had to do what I had to do. Get the hell out of that place. ASAP.

I read it over again. I read it three times, the final one out loud. I'm not even mad at him for leaving. I'm happy for him, and hoping, more than anything, that he has found some peace. But I still miss him, and I wish he were here, making all of this bearable in some way.

I ignore my side work and leave it for the busser who decided to show up, which would normally lead to a mouthful from Tony, but he's so consumed with other shit he doesn't even notice I'm not the one setting up my station. He's on the phone with the Voucher Theft Unit when The Suits arrive, welcomed by our hostess, Alice.

"Last year's welcoming was much more involved," says Gray, and he takes out a MyTablet and begins typing out notes. The other men nod in agreement - Tan, Navy, Black - and begin to whisper to each other, as if Alice isn't even there.

"Where's Tony? He was supposed to be up front when we arrived," Black says.

"He's in the back, I'll go get him right away for you, gentlemen," Alice says.

I make eye contact with Navy.

"Aren't you going to offer me anything?"

“Yes, of course, gentlemen, how could I have been so forgetful,” I say, elevating my customer service voice, reaching for my ten out of ten. “What will it be tonight?”

They give me their drink orders, each more particular than the last – single malt whiskey, IPA in a frozen glass with a lemon slice, 2026 reserve Bordeaux, an old fashioned with an extra orange rind – and head to their seats. The other tables fill up quickly, and we’ve got half a restaurant full within ten minutes.

I head to an empty freezer to collect my thoughts, lighting a cigarette before I walk in. Rachel beat me to it.

“Nice to have someone else here,” she says.

I nod my head, take a long drag, and blow the smoke away from the meat and bread.

“Why aren’t you out there yet?” Rachel asks. “Tony’s going to kill you.”

“Those guys fucking suck,” I say. “I’ll get back to them in a second.

I give her a drag and she heads back to her phone.

“Who do you think stole the Vouchers?” I ask.

She gives me a look as if I’m supposed to know something that I don’t.

“Dude, it was Johnny! That’s why Tony wasn’t up front when The Suits arrived, he was taking questions from the pigs.”

“No fucking way.”

“Well it was, so you better start believing it.”

Johnny is Tony’s nephew, a nepo baby who had easier access to the safe codes.

“He’s probably halfway across the state by now,” Rachel says.

I wonder how he got away with it. I wonder if this was part of his 5-step billionaire plan. I’m still too shocked to even process what happened.

We leave the freezer and I walk toward my table. The Suits are looking at their menus, typing out notes furiously on their MyTablets, talking in muted whispers. Tan is already finished with his IPA.

“Good evening, gentlemen, and welcome to Happy Plate. Allow me to reintroduce myself: My name is Henry and I will be serving you tonight.”

I’m interrupted before I can talk about tonight’s specials: coconut shrimp chowder, coq au vin, and crème Brulé.

“We’re not ready yet. Come back in ten,” says Navy.

“I need another beer,” Tan says.

“Bring us a sample of that soup while we’re waiting.”

“Right away,” I say, leaving before I can respond to any other requests.

I run back to the kitchen and am reminded of why I don’t loiter here, overwhelmed by the metallic music of pots and pans, the speed of knives slicing through duck flesh and cucumber skin, the smell of jasmine rice and oregano, the rising and falling of blue flames.

Kristofer, the head chef, looks in my direction, signals that he needs me to leave.

I sneak a bowl of soup as quickly as I can and bring it back to The Suits.

“Oversalted, grainy, tepid. No thank you.”

And then they are back to their notes, their furious typing and tapping, their huddles and whispers. Tony calls me over when he finds me just standing there, watching them work.

They’re my only table of the night. I’m supposed to give them complete attention.

“Henry, what the fuck are you doing just standing there? Go get them more samples. You’re barely at a 5 right now.”

“Yes sir, you got it,” I say, but the words don’t mean anything, and I begin to feel outside of myself, my mouth making sounds my body is not prepared for.

“Go! Are you fucking stupid?” Tony says.

I don’t respond this time, don’t even acknowledge him. He hasn’t moved.

I grab Tan’s beer from the bar, walk toward Tony, and drink half of it, the cold liquid cooling my throat. I feel the buzz immediately.

“Cheers,” I say, and he doesn’t respond. Maybe he’s too shocked, or pissed, or both, but he just stands there, mouth agape, motionless.

I walk toward The Suits before realizing I haven’t thought any of this through. I am moving before I am thinking, letting my body lead the way.

“Why is it half-empty?” Tan asks me.

“Because I drank the first half. It was delicious.”

Tan doesn’t say a word.

Black stands up, furious, points his fingers toward me.

“Get Tony over here,” he says. “Now.”

“No, I’d rather not,” I say, taking another drink from the glass mug.

By now, Rachel and the only busser who showed up can hear me from their section.

“You’re mad if you still think you’ll have a job by the end of the night,” Navy says.

I listen to what my body wants and toss the remaining beer all over Navy, and now he’s covered in cold foam, sopping and sticky. Tony sprints over and he is no longer speechless. He’s spewing obscenities I’ve never heard him utter. Some of the surrounding tables are snickering.

The busser is recording the scene on his phone. Everything is happening all at once.

I know that I no longer have a job. I know that I will need to find another way to make ends meet. But it doesn't matter. I've never felt this good in my life.

I've never known the freedom of self-destruction.

I can't even hear what other people are saying anymore. Tony is yelling in my face. He is so close I can feel the heat of his breath. Eventually I come to, and I'm left to listen to the chaos I created. But I don't stay for long. I don't apologize or figure out who's going to finish serving my table. Tony is still shouting while he wipes the beer off Navy with a towel. I keep walking toward the door, when I run into Rachel, who still hasn't moved. I reach into my pocket and hand her whatever I have on me - three Merriment Vouchers and a pack of cigarettes.

"Say hello to Jack for me," I say, and I hug her quickly, leaving the embrace before she gets the chance to return the warmth.

I'm out the door, into the street, engulfed by darkness and snow and car horns. I hail for a taxi, open the door, and step in the backseat.

"Where to?" the driver asks.

I haven't thought of where to go. I could go home to Ruby or go visit Marcus at his new restaurant. Maybe I'll figure out where Johnny ran off to, rent a car and go spend a week or two with him. I could go all the way home, get a train ticket and leave this city for a while and see my parents, remember what it feels like to be looked upon by eyes that cannot unlove you.

"Could you just drive for a little bit?"

"Sure thing."

We're parked at a red light.

I am thinking about Tony, who will go home tonight to an empty house and a bottle of scotch, the expensive kind he can afford with his extra Vouchers. He will weep so hard he won't

be able to breathe. The Suits have just berated him. They've told him he has one more chance to save his job. They will come back next weekend and Rachel will serve them with honor and grace.

I am waiting for the light to turn green.

I am thinking of Rachel, who is, like all of us, learning how to survive. She will do anything for her boy, no matter the cost. She will eventually become the highest earning server at Happy Plate, week after week obtaining the best average, until she saves enough Vouchers to move somewhere warmer and more forgiving.

I am waiting for the light to turn green.

I am thinking about Ruby.

I am thinking about Luke.

I am thinking about Marcus.

The light is still red.

In The Garden Where We Speak Our Secrets

The first time Ella sees the faceless men, the late evening sun casts a thin golden streak across her head.

She is standing near the screen door, nose nearly touching the mesh, her eyes fixed outside toward the garden in her backyard, one little band of light falling across her tiny body. Her father is making dinner in the kitchen – grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. She’s clutching her baby monkey, Harvey, teeth pressed against her left thumb stuck in her mouth, a habit her parents cannot seem to eradicate.

Ella sees a tall, faceless man in the garden and he waves at her.

“Daddy, look,” Ella says. “There’s a man in our garden and he’s looking at me.”

Daddy isn’t paying attention. He’s listening to a podcast about cryptocurrency. He’s burning the bottom half of the sourdough bread he leaves sizzling in the skillet, the charred hot black sending smoke through the kitchen’s ventilation system.

Ella shifts her attention back to the garden, where she sees the tall, faceless man, standing, his shoulders slouched, his head cocked forward. It looks as if he’s reaching for something.

“Daddy,” Ella whines again. “Come over here and look into the garden.”

This time, there is a trace of fear in her tenor, a tremble in this strange feeling, one she has never felt before.

“Mommy will be home from work soon, sweetheart,” he says, swinging the smoke away from the fire alarm with a wet kitchen towel.

Mommy's been working extra late since Daddy lost his job assembling parts at the auto factory. Ella likes that she gets to see more of her father, even if he seems a bit different. Even if he stays in his bathrobe for entire days.

Ella remains bravely fixed in her position, the orange sash of sun now a pool of warm glow on the carpet, her body now cloaked in cold shadows.

A third time, Ella thinks, should surely do the trick.

"Daddy, I'm scared. He isn't leaving."

Her hopeful request rings true. Daddy spills a cup of soup on the counter and walks toward his only child, sees her pointing toward the garden with its fresh tomatoes and basil and ripe mulch.

He places his hands on his daughter's shoulders and looks out toward the garden.

He sees no one.

Nora drives home from work, pours lukewarm white wine into a dixie cup. She slams it back as she puts on a podcast about impending civil war in a country she's never heard of.

It's almost seven and her back aches and the setting sun spills through the windshield, making her forehead sweat, an aggressive indication that summer isn't going anywhere.

Nora is drained. She takes another sip of wine before her phone dings.

Coming home soon?

Yes, she speaks into the device, throwing it into the passenger seat.

When Andrew was laid off, Nora didn't want him to rush back to work. He was going to stay home with Ella. He was going to make her cranberry turkey sandwiches and be the PTO dad and work on his novel.

Andrew has done none of these things.

Time, as it always does, has marched on, insurmountable and cruel.

It has stretched too thin and produced one hundred tired sunsets and today has become tomorrow and their savings can only last so long.

Nora sits in traffic and thinks of her growing daughter – who she might become one day. The mighty, kinetic human that she is in this exact moment in time. And when she gets home, she is welcomed by her enveloping embrace, an act so simple and innate it quells some of the aches Nora holds across her body.

“How was your day, little bug?” she asks.

“It was good. Daddy made grilled cheese and Harvey and I played outside and then I saw a man with no face in the garden, but I didn’t talk to him, I promise.”

A strange closing detail, Nora thinks, but she hopes it’s also a harmless one, given her five-year old’s budding imagination and penchant for whimsical creations.

“Ella, what do you mean by faceless men? He was imaginary right?”

Nora’s daughter nods her head, a large bite of cold grilled cheese preventing her from providing any verbal indication.

Ella wants her mother to read with her but all Nora can think about is food.

She sees the burnt sandwiches near the stove and eats one without hesitation.

“Five minutes, little bug,” Nora says. “And I’ll read you whatever story your heart desires.”

Ella rushes down the hall to her bedroom, Harvey clutched to her side.

Nora bites down on the bread, the cold, hardened cheese providing salty relief. She thinks of how it will feel to fall asleep tonight – another glass of riesling and two melatonin – and wonders if tomorrow will be any better.

Andrew is passed out in their bed, *5 Steps To Writing Your Novel!* splayed out across his chest. Nora almost wakes him up, but when she reaches the foot of the queen-sized mattress they share, when she looks up at his scrunched, drowsy face, she decides to let him rest.

Her daughter, meanwhile, wants nothing more than the sweet release of a bedtime story, even if, she too, is just as tired as her parents. Nora provides.

She makes a new one up on the spot, a skill she has harbored since the day Ella was born. Tonight, pirates and buried treasure and a secret that must not be named. Ella listens intently, her eyes dozing off, valiantly resisting impending slumber.

Nora finishes the story quicker than expected, hoping to ask Ella one last question before sleep takes them both.

“Little bug?” Nora says.

Ella nods, her eyes almost fully closed.

“When you were talking about that strange man earlier, was that real or make believe?”

But before she can finish, Ella is asleep.

Later, no matter how tired she feels, Nora cannot sleep. She is thinking of the prospect of a faceless man in her garden, even if it was just Ella’s blossoming imagination.

She is thinking of how difficult it is, even as an adult, to decipher reality and all of its distinctive mysteries.

The second time Ella sees the faceless men she is playing outside, another hot and heavy day amidst the apex of a midwest July.

This time, there are two. The tall, slouched stranger from the other night has brought a friend. Smaller, but more decisive. His movements are more direct.

Ella drops Harvey to the ground, leaves him on the dewy grass, and runs toward the massive oak tree at the side of the yard. They move closer toward her, their black shoes picking up specks of dirt from the clumps in the mud from the relentless summer rain the night before.

Ella's heart beats quicker now, some unfamiliar feeling rising from her belly button, a deep heavy rumbling that turns into a sound she has never made before, a sound she didn't know she was capable of making.

Ella knows what it means to be afraid.

She has snuck out of her room to find Daddy watching the loud movie with the pumpkins and the white-faced killer.

She thinks of the time at the grocery store when Mommy realized she had forgotten cereal when they reached the checkout lane. She made Ella run and grab two boxes of Frosted Flakes. *The blue one with the smiling tiger, sweetheart*, her mother had said. *And be fast*. But Ella got lost in the ocean of boxes – dancing leprechauns and sneaky rabbits and Fred Flintstone. She imagined all of the boxes falling onto her at once, and she felt trapped, like they could prevent her from moving. She couldn't find the blue one with the smiling tiger, and by the time Mommy came rushing back to her side, full cart in hand, they had lost their place in the grocery line.

Ella cried the entire way home, even when her mother reassured her it was okay.

Ella knows what it means to be afraid.

And as the faceless men come closer and closer, she knows this feeling is something different, even if the rising knot in her stomach tells her they are more alike than not.

Either way, she is not prepared for this, whatever name one gives to this sensation.

This is a new experience with people she does not recognize.

This is something she has been taught to avoid.

Mommy is at work. Daddy is taking a nap.

Ella doesn't call out for help.

She feels secure at the top of the massive oak tree overlooking the garden, where the faceless men now stand, looking up toward her, their eyes behind thick filmy veils, their hands behind their back.

The smaller one extends his hands, reaching out to Ella, a greeting of sorts.

But Ella does not reach back, her arms wrapped around the outwardly extending branch, hoping the men either choose to leave or say something nice.

She isn't sure if they are even able to speak, their mouths covered up by a thin coat of translucent skin. She waits for them to either say something or move closer.

They do neither, but the tall faceless man places a hand over his heart, and the other offers up a peace sign. She does not understand the gestures they make, and this new feeling slowly churns over in her stomach, formulating its way back into what she knows as fear.

The smaller one takes another step forward, and through his veil, he speaks.

“There's a place I want to take you.”

Ella knows what it means to be afraid.

Andrew is writing in the guest room when Ella opens the door, panting, drenched in sweat.

“Oh my God, sweetheart, are you okay?”

She can't respond immediately. She is figuring out a way for this five-year old lexicon to convince her father that two faceless strangers have been in their family garden.

She's trying to convince him that this is more than just her imagination.

“Did something happen?” Andrew asks.

“Do you remember the other night when you were making sandwiches and I told you that I saw strangers in the garden?” Ella asks through frantic tears.

Andrew nods, but struggles to remember the exact moment, recent days blending together in a fuzzy amalgamation.

“Daddy, they're back, and they just stood there while I climbed the tree.”

Ella wants more words to formulate but the tears and quick breathing supersede this wish.

Andrew holds her gently, isn't sure exactly what to say or do. Isn't sure of whom to be for his daughter, other than a beacon of support and safety.

“How about I make us some chocolate milk? We can watch *Peppa Pig*, too.”

Ella quickly agrees, and after he sets her up on the couch with her favorite drink, Andrew texts Nora at work, tells her to call him when she gets the chance. *It's urgent*, he texts. *Well, not urgent urgent, but you know. Ella's fine. Call soon*, he follows up again.

Nora checks her phone six minutes after the text. She's in a status update meeting for a storyboard with their new client. She steps out, and more worried by the second text than the first, calls immediately.

“Urgent, Andrew? What's going on?”

“Ella keeps saying she’s seeing faceless men in the backyard. It might just be her imagination, but still. I just checked to see if they were still here. She seemed pretty shocked.”

Nora recalls the other night when she couldn’t sleep.

“Has she told you about any of this?” Andrew asks.

Nora takes a moment.

“Yeah, she told me the other night. But she didn’t seem that scared. She was just recapping her day.”

A silence hangs on the line, the two of them not quite sure how to proceed.

“Faceless men, Nora,” Andrew finally says. “I wouldn’t be worried if it were princesses or pirates or talking giraffes. I’d even take ghosts at this point.”

Nora doesn’t respond, but she thinks of Ella, and wonders what’s going on in that little head of hers. She thinks of when she was only five, how strange new things could seem, how frightening foreign experiences could feel.

“We can talk more tonight,” Andrew says. “She’s feeling better now.”

“Okay,” Nora says, and before she says anything else, Andrew hangs up.

Mommy and Daddy sit with Ella by the television after dinner.

They put on one of her favorite stations but turn the volume all the way down, and they ask her to look at them, to really look at them, to be with one another.

It is dark outside and Ella is tired and she feels as if she has done something terribly wrong. But she doesn’t cry. Not yet at least. She is too confused to process these feelings. There have been so many new ones in such short time.

“Ella,” Mommy says. “Daddy told me you saw some people again today.”

Ella doesn't nod or shake her head or indicate any answer at all.

“Do you remember the other night when you told me about them and I asked you if they were real or imaginary?”

Mommy asked this twice – once when Ella wasn't listening and once when she was asleep.

“Little bug, I need you to tell us if these strangers were real or imaginary. There's no right or wrong answer,” Mommy says.

“We're not going to be mad,” Daddy chimes in.

The tears are held at bay until then they all arrive at once. In a rushing moment, uncontrollable. Her parents are sitting so close, staring, looking at her in a way they never have before, as if they want something more from her than just her usual self.

Ella cannot give more than what she already has. She can only tell Mommy and Daddy that the faceless men are real, as real as Harvey and Grandma and the spaghetti they had for dinner. She does exactly this when her tears subside, if only for a brief moment.

“I didn't know there were more than one,” Mommy whispers to Daddy, although Ella hears it, and it worries her more.

“They're real. I swear,” Ella pleads.

The three of them huddle together in a warm embrace.

“I swear,” Ella says again.

Andrew doesn't believe her. Nora does.

“She's our daughter, Andrew. This isn't something that just happens twice.”

“She's five – aren't they supposed to make up stuff like this all the time?”

Nora can't believe the shit that comes out of her husband's mouth sometimes.

They are pacing around their bedroom, the floor covered in heaps of dirty clothes, the bed unmade.

"She's five, not two. She's smart enough to know the difference between real and imaginary, especially when it concerns faceless fucking strangers in our home."

"I just think maybe we should take some time to think about it, that's all."

Andrew isn't ready to admit that this might be more than Ella's imagination.

"You're the one that saw her this afternoon," Nora says, her breath slowing down.

Andrew doesn't respond.

"You were with her. You saw her shaking and helpless. You suffered alongside her."

She is trying her hardest to break down his walls. She is handing him her heart, convincing him to see what is right in front of them. Begging him.

They are running out of ways to wound each other.

Andrew and Nora sit together on their mattress, both of them looking at the wall.

"What do we do?" Andrew asks, a croak in his voice.

"We need her to talk to someone besides us."

"Like a therapist?"

"Or her teacher. We can if she's talked about it at school at all."

For the first time in over a year, Andrew sobs.

Nora holds his head in her hands, tells him everything will be okay.

Neither of them speaks.

When he's released all he can manage, feeling cleansed and weightless, Andrew tucks Ella into bed.

“Am I in trouble?” she asks him as she drifts off to sleep.

“No, little bug. Not at all.”

Later that night, he can't fall asleep. He listens to Nora's snore fill the silence of the room. He thinks about all the ways he's let himself down. His family, too.

They always figure it out, even when they have no solution.

But this is something new, something they could not have prepared for.

This is something he didn't believe could ever happen.

Ella wants to know why Mommy and Daddy are in her classroom after school is over and all the kids have gone home. She should be home too, playing with Harvey, thinking of all the new things she learned in class, like how to spell *moon*.

But she is sitting in the corner of the room playing math bingo on the class iPad while Mommy and Daddy talk to Mrs. Salazar.

“She says she's been seeing these...” Mommy pauses before she can finish the sentence.

“Faceless men,” Daddy finishes. “We know how crazy it sounds. But we're worried.”

Mrs. Salazar takes notes in her binder, listens intently.

“Has she been acting strange lately? Maybe she's told some of her friends about it too.”

“She's been just fine in class,” Mrs. Salazar says. “She's even one of my brightest students.”

Ella's parents like hearing this, but it doesn't distract them from the matter at hand.

“What would you do if your daughter told you she saw faceless men in her garden?”

Mrs. Salazar laughs, but Nora is completely serious.

“I would talk with her. I would tell her that she’s done nothing wrong. I would make sure she knows she’s being listened to.”

It feels as if they’ve done these things, as if Nora and Andrew have exhausted their options, at least the ones that don’t require sending her to some sort of doctor.

“But what would you do? Would you want her to be telling the truth?”

“What is the best next step for us?” Andrew asks.

“For now, I would just keep listening. Don’t be afraid to talk to her about it. If it keeps happening, come back to me, and I’ll give you the name and number of someone I really trust,” Mrs. Salazar says. “Ella is a fantastic student and a lovely child. Everything will be okay.”

These are the same things Nora and Andrew have been telling themselves, but it feels good to hear it from someone else, someone who knows their daughter in ways they might not, who sees her in ways they might not never get the chance to see.

Ella is almost finished with a new picture – Mommy and Daddy and holding hands underneath a red sun, Ella right next to them, a puppy laying to her side, something Ella has wanted for over a year now.

But before she can finish his little paws, the real mommy and daddy take her hand and tell her it’s okay to get up now.

They tell her they’re going to get ice cream.

Ella gets mint chocolate chip and the green cream turns to sticky liquid on her cheeks.

For the first time since any of them can remember, they’re not worried.

The third time Ella sees the faceless men is the last.

They haven't shown themselves in weeks, and when Ella is busy drawing or playing or watching her favorite shows, she sometimes forgets they ever existed. Nora and Andrew become hopeful too, thinking maybe it was just a bad daydream or a game that went too far.

This third and final time occurs at a dinner party when Nora and Andrew have friends over, an occasion they rarely host. But things have slowed down at work and Ella has been happy and they are beginning to think they may be building back their family one piece at a time.

Ella has a friend over too, a girl named Chelsea who colors with her and keeps them occupied, away from the adults and their boring conversation.

Andrew and Nora drink syrah in the kitchen and talk about what television shows they've been watching.

Meanwhile, Ella and Chelsea are playing with Play Doh in the living room when the former hears something outside: a rustle of branches, a shift in the wind.

Ella gets up from their crafts and approaches the same door she saw the faceless men for the first time. Chelsea keeps playing, unaware of the sounds her friend is compelled by.

Like the first time, Andrew is unaware of his daughter looking out into the garden.

He's talking about his fantasy football team with one of Nora's coworkers, already two and a half glasses in, when Ella screams, pointing out to the garden once again.

She sees three of them this time, she thinks, and they stand in the garden, waiting for her.

Ella screams.

A glass breaks in the kitchen. Gasps ensue.

Nora runs right toward her daughter, Chelsea and Andrew and a few of the partygoers follow right behind.

They see nothing or no one in the garden.

Ella never sees the faceless men again.

She will grow up wondering if they were real, asking herself over and over again if they existed outside of her head.

All she knows is that her feelings were true.

The fear, the awe, the novelty.

She will one day realize it doesn't matter whether or not they existed outside of her mind, for she felt each emotion throughout her entire body, regardless of their physical existence. Isn't that all that matters?

One day Ella will have a daughter of her own. She will pray to the God she doesn't believe in that what transpired isn't hereditary, that her brief curse cannot be passed down to her daughter.

She will place a fence around her garden.

She will not let her daughter watch horror films.

She will feel safe.

Until her daughter, teddy bear clutched in hand, points to the front yard, her eyes lit up with a familiar shine.

“There's someone outside.”

Anticipation

We wait outside and watch morning fog roll across the empty field, while nothing or no one emerges from the woods two hundred yards from our home. This is what we do every morning, what we have done for months, what we may just do for years. This is something we will do until we are no longer able.

I wake up and drink black coffee with Grandfather.

Some days we drink it in the foyer. Some days we drink it on the porch, dewy, cold condensation sticking to the side of our mugs. I can't remember where we drank it yesterday, or the day before.

Today, we drink it in the kitchen, the air brimming with too much December frost to enjoy anything outside. Silence lives in between his amplified slurps and my blowing and cooling.

Creamer is nonessential. The coffee is always black.

"Any plans today?" I ask him.

He's reading a tattered book about World War II planes. It helps him think of older times, when people and machines still had objectives. Times he swears he can remember.

"Might go down to the river, see if I can catch anything," he says without looking up from the book. "I'll go crazy if I have to eat mac n cheese for dinner again."

"That sounds pretty fun. Can I join you?"

He takes a deep breath in, exhales.

"You know we can't leave the cabin unattended."

I nod my head, but it doesn't mean that I agree.

I cannot remember the last time I saw another human. My guess would be years.

He takes another long sip from his mug, swishes the liquid in between his cheeks, and then scribbles down the list of chores I'm expected to complete by end of day – clean the porch, check expo dates on the dried fruits, pick weeds from the garden out front.

“Better be done before I'm back. No excuses.”

His words hold weight his body lacks.

I nibble on a dried banana chip and listen to the sounds he makes as he clears the table – the wheeze in his respiration, the dry sniffles, the clearing of his throat.

When he leaves for the day I am left alone to the woods and the walls and the silence, a five hundred square foot studio cabin probably only meant for one.

Each day, things get hazier, like my brain is disconnecting from my body, as if the two don't seem to get along anymore.

I'm beginning to forget how I arrived here, what all happened leading up to this.

I trust what Grandfather says. He is all I have.

Which means there's something on the other side of these woods and it is dangerous.

This life that we've created – the silence and the solitude – is all there is anymore.

When we watch, we look for movement. Human bodies, of course, are highest priority, but anything that could produce energy is fair game – animals, trees, plants. Once, on a night shift, Grandfather's roaring snores filling the quiet night, I swear I saw a bush move. The cold white moon and a lavender candle were the only light around me, but I squinted and strained, and it felt like it gained some form of life. Like it had the same sort of soul as any of us.

On nights like these it can be difficult to tell the difference between awake and asleep. I spend so much time staring out into that field, watching. Waiting for something to happen.

Desperate for something to happen.

My dreams spill over into reality.

I have this dream where dozens and dozens of bodies emerge from the woods. Slowly, at first. And then all at once. Their speed increases. They aren't really running, but it isn't walking either. They move with intent, and they all move toward Grandfather and I and this sad tiny life we live and in the faint light around me I can see their shiny faces glowing in the dark. They have no eyes and no teeth. They don't wear clothes but their bodies glow like fireflies. They're naked but they don't have genitalia. I don't think any of them have names.

It feels more like a premonition than a dream.

Maybe, deep down, I am waiting for the night when this happens in real life, what I will do when I am unable to pinch myself awake.

Maybe I'm more terrified by the possibility that this won't happen.

When Grandfather is out fishing I see a figure in the distance. I'm eating stale BBQ potato chips and whistling a familiar song, the name I don't remember, but it makes me happy and sad at the same time.

At first, I imagine it's a deer, something we haven't seen in months.

I'm ignoring my daily chores, for now at least, until apathy forces itself into urgency.

I grab the binoculars from the kitchen and step back outside.

At first, the figure looks stationary. I see blue and red, a collection of colors against the brown and gray and green of the forest.

But then there's movement, and the movement makes sounds makes shadows makes shapes.

Behind a tall oak tree at the end of the field where our land turns to thick, dense forest, a man stands, writing something down into a book. He is taking notes, making observations.

I had forgotten what another person could look like. Another face.

He closes his notebook.

He exits the forest.

The last night I can remember clearly was my birthday. It was in April. I turned twenty-three.

This was when things were still bearable – when Grandfather's presence wasn't cumbersome.

We still had fresh clementines and cucumbers. We had meat in the freezer and soap and bottled water.

The days felt distinct.

Now they just bleed into each other. I usually don't even know what day of the week it is.

Grandfather says it's not important.

But on a rainy night in April we ate pork jerky and played music and I listened to Grandfather tell me stories of the life he once lived.

He usually doesn't like to talk about it. He says it's futile to discuss the past, that forward is the only way to think. But I told him it was my birthday and since I didn't get to open any presents, since I didn't get to have any cake, that this was what I wanted. That this was enough.

He obliged.

We opened a bottle of bourbon we were saving for something special.

“What would you like to know?” he asked.

“Anything,” I said. “Tell me one of your favorite memories.”

He told me about the time he went to Paris.

I had never been. Couldn't even picture it in my head. But I loved the way he talked about it, like he was discovering the city for the first time all over again.

Nights like this is all I have.

I don't have any books or films. I can't remember my friends. I don't get to be around anyone else.

These stories are essential.

But we haven't had that in a while. Grandfather's been pretty grumpy ever since. We've been keeping to ourselves more often than not. And when we don't, there's just this sheet between us. You can't see it or taste it or smell it, but it's there.

I wonder sometimes if I said something to hurt him. I think he's just angry that things aren't the way they once were.

That things will never be the way they once were.

The man slips his notebook into a small satchel he wears around his shoulder and walks toward the cabin. It looks as if he's walking directly toward me, like he knows I'm here.

My view of him is no longer impeded by the trees and shrubbery. He is completely vulnerable, becoming a small figure in a vast, open field.

He is seventy yards away, sixty, fifty.

I wait for him to speak first.

“Hello,” he shouts.

I'm not frightened by him, nor do I want him to go away. My only concern is what would happen if Grandfather came back right now. What he would do to this man. The things he is capable of.

"My name is Chris," he says

He reaches out a hand like some sort of white flag.

"What's yours?"

I can't find the gumption to respond. He's too beautiful. Plain, small, stocky. His hair is unkempt and he has no features that are particularly fine. But he's beautiful, because he is someone besides Grandfather.

He's alive.

"I don't have any weapons," he says. "You can check my pockets if you'd like."

The shotgun sits in the closet. I don't like to touch it. I've never even pulled the trigger. It's heavy and it makes my stomach swirl with something unfamiliar.

"May I approach further?" Chris asks.

His breath leaves his mouth in cold bundles of air. He's wearing a sweatshirt that says Yale University. It makes me think of life before this, even if the specifics are hard to come by. I remember Yale. Their mascot was a bulldog and people who went there were really smart.

He reaches out his hand again, his feet immobile.

"Please, will you tell me your name?"

"Charlie," I admit. "My name is Charlie."

He writes that down in his notebook.

I feel like I'm being interrogated.

"Charlie, why don't you tell me more about yourself?"

Grandfather likes to recite this monologue on the imperativeness of avoiding strangers at all costs. He always delivers it with fervor, like it's a performance, as if someone besides myself is watching, waiting for the most dramatic moments. The whistles at the end of his s's leave his mouth the way tea steam exits the kettle, sharp and swift.

“You do understand, Charlie, how dangerous other people can be?”

He asks me like we haven't had this conversation before, like he's telling me for the first time.

“Their breath alone could kill you. Their touch could destroy what we have built together. Our life, our home. You don't want that, do you?”

The first time he said these words they may have meant something, when I was younger and more afraid. Now it's all just noise, like when you say a word over and over again, turning it around in your mouth until it doesn't sound like anything at all.

“No one enters this cabin except for you and me.”

He likes to close with a few platitudes.

We are in this together.

We are only as strong as we chose to be.

Luck favors the prepared.

“Of course, Grandfather. We've got this,” I sometimes say.

The only way we survive this is together. You and me. Nothing and nobody else.”

“It really is nice to meet you, Charlie,” Chris says after I don't answer his earlier question.

He opens up his notebook again and writes something down again.

“What are you writing?” I ask.

“Oh, just some notes. I can never let an idea pass.”

It seems odd but odd is better than nothing, better than how I would feel if I were alone.

I cannot begin to describe how good it feels to talk to another person.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“I mean no harm,” Chris reiterates. “I live on a farm about four miles west of here. I was foraging for berries when I saw a streak of smoke rising from somewhere over this way. And then I found you, and this cabin. I had to come say hello.”

He gestures to our tiny cabin.

“Four miles? You must be exhausted.” It feels like I should offer him something – water, firewood, food.

“Listen, you should consider visiting us sometime,” Chris says. “There’s about fifteen of us, give or take. We have room for more. Provisions to last through the winter, at the very least.”

He says it like it’s a sales pitch, and it reminds me of one of those Mormons who used to go door to door, selling modified versions of God.

“I’d have to talk to Grandfather first.”

Chris once again writes in his notebook. He seems especially excited about this recent revelation, seems happy that I mentioned Grandfather’s name.

“There’s someone else here,” he states as a fact. “How many of you are there?”

“Just two. Grandfather and I.”

More notes.

“Well, you and *Grandfather* should have a chat, and then you can make up your mind about whether or not you’d like to come visit us. Follow the path at the edge of the woods North until you reach the river. Then, turn left.”

“Okay.”

I wonder if he’s ever seen Grandfather by the river, or if Grandfather has seen him.

But I don’t ask.

He stands there for a moment, unmoving, a living, breathing thing.

He then waves goodbye, a feeling of peacefulness usurped by unease.

I can’t remember my mother’s face.

She’s the last person I can still somewhat recall.

I don’t know when we saw each other last.

Her name was Judy and she worked in a department store and she smelled like fresh lavender. She didn’t vote because she didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. She and Grandfather had a complicated relationship because he didn’t support her dream to become a dancer.

I used to ask Grandfather why we didn’t get to see her anymore.

I’d ask him if she was okay, and where she lived, and if she thought about us, too.

He’d get really angry when I talked about her, even if only for a moment.

I wish we could talk about her together. I could ask him what she looked like and why she couldn’t be here with us.

Maybe then we could live in harmony, unburdened by the weight that lives around us.

Maybe then we could be a family once again.

Grandfather returns from the river with a basket of fish, one of the long, scaly carps still alive, flopping around in desperation.

“Dinner for the rest of the week,” he says.

I pull the excess weeds sprouting from the earth. I made sure to be active upon his return. I offer him a smile, one of the few times we’ve made eye contact recently.

He paces around me, watches the way I complete my tasks.

“Did you see anything today?”

“Nothing much. Just a couple of squirrels.”

“All right, now. You know if they’re big enough you’ve got to get the shotgun out.”

He stands behind me and looks out into the open field. My hands are freezing, but I can’t go back inside until the chores are finished, until Grandfather says it’s alright.

“Are you sure you didn’t see anything?”

The way he asks this makes my stomach hurt.

He walks around the garden like he’s looking for clues, but I reiterate my previous answer and he pats me on the shoulder before walking inside.

At the end of the yard where the grass stretches out into the vast open field, I can see the faintest sign of footprints where Chris stood earlier today.

That night, Grandfather pan-sears the fish in expired olive oil while we listen to an old Chet Baker record. He even lets me open some of the white wine, our alcoholic provisions dwindling significantly.

“I feel good today, Charlie. I don’t know why.”

He whistles to the tune of “I Fall In Love Too Easily” and drinks from his glass of lukewarm chardonnay.

The wine ties knots in my stomach. Makes my head feel thin.

“Charlie,” Grandfather says.

He looks at me. Really looks at me. He wants me to be the one to speak next.

“You would tell me if someone visited our cabin today, right?”

He knows.

“Of course, Grandfather.”

He gets up from his chair and walks closer to me.

“And there’s *absolutely nothing* you want to tell me, correct?”

I’m sweating all over. He is looking into my eyes. He is so close I can see gray hairs sprouting from his chin, the tiny follicles.

I can see his two golden teeth. I can smell the vanilla on his breath.

I don’t even have time to decide whether or not I want to admit anything.

“Charlie, do you know how many people would be eternally grateful for the life we built? There are people who would kill for what we have.”

I shake my head. I don’t know if he actually wants me to answer or not.

My head is pounding.

“What we have is rare. *A gift*. And if that were to be taken away from us because of some silly mistake you made.”

He pauses before finalizing the thought.

I want to tell him he didn’t get within twenty feet and that I was so shocked I couldn’t tell him to go away and that for a second, just a brief moment, it seemed as if he knew you.

But all I can manage to say is sorry.

Grandfather doesn't accept my apology. He slams the door and walks outside for a watching shift.

When I wake in the morning, my head pounds and I can't remember much that happened from the night before.

Grandfather is still on the porch, watching, the binoculars and shotgun both right beside him. He's usually in the kitchen when I wake.

I'm ready to address him, to talk about what's been weighing on my mind – why I can't remember days, why we're stuck here and refusing to leave, why the chasm between us is infinite. Until I see what else is out there.

He's not alone.

Chris is sitting next to him, pursing through the same notebook from the other day.

It is abundantly clear – the body language, the pace at which they speak – that this is not their first time meeting.

I cower back into my small corner of the cabin and wait until Grandfather pulls back my sheet at the usual time, when he tells me it's time for black coffee and watching. I don't know what to think, how to feel. I don't know how to figure out the situation I find myself in.

When we get to the kitchen two things are clear: Chris is gone and Grandfather doesn't know that I saw him. He acts as if nothing happened, unaware I snooped on their secret rendezvous.

For the first time in as long as I can remember, it feels like I have the power.

I can sense the upper hand.

I am less afraid around him than usual.

He sips his coffee as I look directly at him

“See anything on your shift this morning?”

He shakes his head.

“Not a goddamn thing.”

“You sure?”

He looks up from his book, one I have grown to despise.

“Did I stutter?”

“I just have this feeling that maybe you saw something unusual,” I say.

I am wondering who will break first.

“Well you can bury that one away because it was a slow shift. Not even a squirrel.”

“I woke up before my usual time this morning.”

“You never wake up before 9,” he says. “Never.”

“I did today.”

He sees it in my eyes. He has accepted the shift in our dynamic.

“What’s going on?” I finally give in.

“Why didn’t you tell me you saw Chris yesterday?”

“Why was he on our porch this morning?”

His knuckles turn as white as the coffee mug he tightly holds.

“Charlie, there are not many rules to the life we live, but –”

“He was right next to you this morning! What if you’re the one who gets us infected?”

I get up from my chair and start pacing around. I don’t really have anywhere to go.

Grandfather is blocking the door.

“Calm down, son,” he says. “Take a breath.”

I am breathing too fast for my body to handle. I look into Grandfather's eyes. I'm looking to see if they're saying anything.

"You didn't see me with anyone. It was just me."

I don't know what to believe anymore. What to think.

I know what I saw.

"Why don't you just sit back down?" Grandfather asks.

He takes out a cellphone from his pocket I didn't even know he had. He thinks I can't see him.

I begin to sit back down but before I'm all the way in my seat I'm throwing the rest of the hot coffee onto his face. I take the pot from the stove and pour it all down his shirt.

He writhes on the kitchen floor, screaming in agony.

I pick up the phone he didn't see me see and there are two texts from Chris and a missed call from someone named Dr. Jackson.

I can't make out exactly what he screams but I know through the noise that he is asking: what have I done?

I open the cleared door – the only exit in the cabin. The windows are always barred shut.

When I walk outside, Chris is standing there.

A team of people are with him, three figures in white coats holding clipboards.

"Hey, Charlie. Can I ask what you're doing?" Chris says.

"I don't know."

That was the truth, at least part of it.

"Why don't you go back inside? We can talk things over."

"I don't want to talk things over."

Grandfather's screams continue, their volume increasing. It's quite clear Chris and this team of strangers hear them, too.

I haven't even gotten the chance to register the three new humans standing right in front of me, although I don't anticipate I'll know them for very long.

They don't look as though they'll be my friends.

"Charlie, is Brian okay?"

This is the first time I've ever heard Grandfather's real name. It sounds sort of funny out loud, like when a name doesn't belong to a person's face.

To me, he was insurmountable. Someone or something I couldn't figure out, preventing me from being the best version of myself.

To them, he is *Brian*.

"I poured coffee on him. I think he'll be okay."

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't know."

This time, a lie.

"Please, can we just go back and take a seat inside? I'm worried," Chris says, taking a pause. "I'm worried for Grandfather. We should help him."

He recognizes his mistake.

I see the shotgun standing in between us, perched up on the ledge of the deck, closer to me than to Chris and the three new humans.

All this training Grandfather and I went through, all this sitting and staring and waiting for movement, and now there are four people standing in between what I once knew and what I want to know, who could save me or kill me or set me free.

Brian won't stop screaming.

I walk closer to the gun that separates us.

I've only held it twice.

But I pounce toward it, twist it around and point it toward Chris and the white-coated strangers.

They don't even seem worried, a calmness I didn't expect.

"Just put the gun down, Charlie. Let's figure this all out."

For the first time, I pull the trigger.

Nothing happens.

Just a quiet click.

I look at Chris. He looks at me.

I throw the shotgun down and Chris rushes toward the deck. When he reaches the staircase on the right, I sprint to the staircase on the left.

Chris shouts at the doctors to run after me but they're stuck in place, unaware I even had the capacity to dissent. He enters the cabin for a moment to ensure Brian is okay. The screams have subsided, at least by a small margin.

I run as fast as I can straight to the open field.

"Do something!" Chris says to the white-coated people.

I turn around and see the dumbfounded looks on their faces. This isn't something they expected to write in their little notebooks.

I keep running and promise myself I won't look back until I reach the woods.

I can sense that no one has come after me, not even Chris, who is probably calling other people to come get me. From where, I don't know.

All I know is that I can't go back to that cabin.

I can't look at Brian again.

I know there's not a safe haven four miles away like Chris had promised.

I know that I have no one on my side.

I now know that there probably never was a sickness, that something inexplicable was happening. Something I may never understand.

I know that if I stop running I will die.

When I reach the end of the open field and enter the woods, I see a deer.

She runs further into the woods.

I follow her.

Everything Not Saved Will Be Lost

We rent our son on a Wednesday.

My husband parks our newly acquired station wagon at the end of a forlorn strip mall, dozens of empty spots to our left and to our right. It is beginning to rain.

We walk inside the squat rental shop and I am surprised by the emptiness of the room. The sounds of the store make me anxious - the clacking of typewriters, the drips and gurgles of a bubbling water cooler, that awful hum of fluorescence. A nice woman at the front desk hands us a flier that says *Welcome to Parenthood Provisional*. We are the only customers here.

A tall man in an oversized suit waves us over, but my husband wants to take a look around first. He wants to scope out the place. He knocks on the wall and ponders the paintings and talks to the receptionist. He leaves me alone with our salesman and we talk about the only things one can talk about in a situation such as our own - the weather, the upcoming holiday, my choice of outfit for the day.

“Those are some lovely earrings,” he tells me.

“Thank you, sir,” I say.

The man is nice and good and clean. He is not ugly nor handsome. I can tell from the softness in his hands, the cadence in his voice, that he is forgiving.

When the business has earned my husband’s trust, our salesman in the oversized suit presents us with a catalog of fine options. He says things like *this one has big bones* and *this one is afraid of dogs* and *this one will have his heart broken more times than you can imagine*.

George doesn’t like these choices, scoffs underneath his breath, clenches his fist.

“We want our son to be strong,” he says. “Like my father. A man’s man.”

“Of course,” our salesman responds, trembling.

He is the kind of man my husband does not want our son to be: Thin and scrupulous, lacking assertion.

George catches my eye, expecting me to validate his preliminary conditions. I do, in a way, by nodding my head and smiling. But when I picture our son, I think of words such as gentle and warm, avoid words like brute and provide. When I think of our son, I think of a quiet baby boy with kind eyes and a good heart. I want my son to be tender.

The man keeps flipping and my husband keeps coming up with reasons to pass. *Too short. Too plump. Too many freckles.*

George has agreed to a one month free trial for our son. One month for us to see if this is a good fit. We do not have the money to rent for anything longer, and we certainly do not have the money to buy.

I am staring at the mustard stain on this sweet, affable man’s tie. I wonder what his life looks like outside of work, outside of this child rental company, outside of people like my husband demanding better options. I imagine he wakes up every day and puts on one of his oversized suits and combs his wet hair and drives to the place with the empty parking spaces and fluorescent buzz and then he shows couples like us all of the different ways the new American child can make you happy. All of the different ways a boy can become a man.

I look outside the window and it is cold and gray. The parking lot is gray and my husband’s suit is gray and the carpet underneath our feet is gray.

“You know, if none of these options work for you, I’d be happy to show you our newest collection of baby girls,” he says, a croak, a shift in his voice.

But before he can go any further my husband slams his fist into the table, loud enough to startle the other salesmen in the room.

“We want a boy or we want nothing at all.”

He touches my leg, and it does not feel good or bad, only cold, almost flat, like a can of cola that has lost all its bubbles.

“Right,” our salesman says. “Let me grab another catalog for you.”

He disappears through a door marked *employees only*.

“We’re making the right choice here, right honey?” George asks me.

“Yes, I believe so.”

He looks down at the floor.

I wish I knew what he was thinking. I wish I knew what he believed in.

When the salesman returns, he brings with him a much smaller binder, filled with sticky notes and scrap paper and loose photographs of toddlers and baby boys.

“I think the both of you would really appreciate our original models,” he continues.

He looks like a name that is just good enough, maybe Dale or Robert. I wonder if he has a wife. Kids of his own, rented, bought, or traditional.

He has caught my husband’s attention, who is now flipping through the catalog himself, stopping every few seconds to read a sentence of description.

Benjamin wants to be a firefighter when he grows up.

Arthur likes to watch football and play dodgeball after school with his friends.

Francis is three inches taller than the average boy his age.

“So each of these boys are programmed to accomplish these things?” George asks.

“Yes sir, only the finest in this category.”

A smile grows on my husband's face, one of pride and fulfillment, but I remind him we want to rent a toddler, politely indicating he is looking at boys aged six to nine.

He nods his head, albeit a bit let down.

"What about him?"

George points to an option with a full page dedicated to his profile – a healthy toddler who will grow into the tallest boy in his class.

"He isn't included in the free trial options," the salesman says.

My husband looks as if he is about to give up, until the salesman flips toward the back of a catalog, landing on a toddler with green eyes and thin black hair.

"This little guy *is* an option however."

We both shift our bodies forward.

"James is special. The only original model we have between two and four."

My husband reads through James's chart, touches the photograph on the page as if he were touching our son himself, his thumb tracing the paper, the contours of his tiny body.

"What do you think, honey? A month with this guy sounds pretty nice," George says.

I agree. He is adorable.

But I do not want him for a month. I want him for a lifetime.

I want him when he is young and foolish and figuring out what it means to be a child. I want him when he is fifteen and he feels so far away it is like he is in another world. I want him when he is all grown up and wearing suits like his father, when his days are long and his nights are short and he discovers that there is not much more to life than waiting.

I figure a month is better than nothing at all.

We go over some paperwork, my husband nodding his head every so often to assure the salesman he knows what he is reading.

The men shake hands, an action indicating we are one step closer to becoming temporary parents. The salesman once again leaves for the back room and returns with a bulky box with a boy inside.

The plants all around this shop are dying.

He hands us a list of instructions, rules we are to follow.

No smoking near the child.

Do not place near sources of excessive heat.

Bathe with cold water, never hot.

“What does he eat and drink?” my husband asks.

I have read the manuals plenty of times by now to know he is programmed to stay away from food. The salesman confirms my beliefs.

“A tiny bit of water won’t hurt him, but he knows to stay away from food. It shouldn’t be a problem. Once he’s charged, he’ll need around thirty-six hours to jumpstart, and then he’ll be good to go.”

“Just like that?” George asks.

The salesman nods his head.

“It’s all in the manual, too. I promise it’s not very difficult.”

It all seems so mechanical, transactional, arbitrary.

“You two are going to be excellent parents,” he says.

“Thank you,” I respond. “And forgive me, but we never caught your name.”

He puts his hands in his pockets, his feet closer together.

“My name is Stanley, mam.”

I begin to say something to Stanley but George is already out the door.

The next morning George leaves for work without saying goodbye to our son. Well, I am not sure if he is our son quite yet, but still. I thought he would have wanted to see him, outside the box, closer to life than he had been the night before.

James is laid out on the living room floor, charging, his arms and legs sprawled out like he wants to receive something. His eyes are closed. He is wearing a blue onesie that curves up and around his neck. His skin is so soft I want to live inside it.

My husband is an accountant. He commutes to the city every weekday to a tall, brick building with massive windows that look down to the busy people below. At least, that is what I like to imagine. I have never been to his office, and he does not tell me much about his colleagues. He works long hours. He crunches numbers and closes accounts and thinks long and hard about new ways to impress his boss. He says the work he does is quite important.

He likes to go out drinking with the other accountants and they make jokes about allocation that no one else would understand. They laugh about their secretary, Margery, and the way she pronounces her T's.

He comes home late while I am watching television. I see his headlight through the crack in the window. This tells me he is near, and I prepare myself for his arrival.

“Honey, I'm home.”

The door opens and then clicks shut. The weight of the room alters.

I wrap my arms around my husband. He reeks of whiskey and stale cigarettes. I can smell it on the satin of his shirt, on the small follicles of hair on his chin. He exits the embrace before

heading upstairs. My husband says that he is tired, that his day has been long and his head hurts like hell.

“George,” I say. “Are you excited for tomorrow? We could talk about it over a nightcap if you would like.”

He stops his ascent, stands still for a second, before cocking his head to the left, thinking of why I might be so excited for what another sunrise could bring.

“Our son,” I remind him. “He will be alive tomorrow morning.”

He remains silent for a moment, before turning his body all the way toward me. We are separated by a flight of stairs and I can still smell the whiskey, the way it lingers, the way the cigarette smoke cloaks him in a thick coat of soot.

“Of course, my love,” he finally says. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

But he says this into the banister, into the walls, into the staircase. I do not know whom he says it to but he does not say it to me.

Before I can say anything more he is at the top of the staircase and into his bedroom. His snores fill the empty space between us within minutes.

I walk toward James at the edge between the kitchen and living room. Over the course of the day, he has generated more quickly than I expected. His skin has hardened. He has grown follicles of hair from his skull, like the photograph in the binder promised.

I can feel the heat emanating from his little body. I do not want to wait any longer. I pick him up, his charging cord still plugged into the outlet in the wall.

I rock him back and forth, side to side. I hum him a song, something I make up on the spot. He looks so real.

I already know that I love him. I love him so much I wish he did not exist. Because then there would be a world in which this sort of love could not be taken away. Could not be removed.

I wake up at six and make a pot of coffee, feeling restless and excited. I ask George to take off work so that he can stay home with me. With us. Our first day as a family. But he has new accounts and numbers to crunch and new ways to impress his boss. He is going to compliment his tie clip today, he says. This revelation exhausts me.

Sometimes I think he tires of our home, this life we share together.

Sometimes I think he just needs to be around other men. It makes him feel important.

It makes him feel satisfactory.

“I’m sorry honey, but please do let me know how the day goes.”

He says goodbye to James, who is moments away from birth, or whatever the manual calls it now. *Generation.*

There is something perfunctory in the way George utters the words, as if it is already cyclical, already part of his daily routine.

I scan the manual for tips and reminders that I need to keep handy.

Remember, when your child loads to full capacity, he will already have the knowledge and understanding of an average three year old boy. He will be able to speak. He will be able to walk. Do not be afraid by this sudden burst into life.

I stand above him at 7:59 and watch his eyes begin to open, slowly, and then all at once. Seconds later, a loud, ambient sound emits from his belly, like the beginning of a song or an

intercom announcement. It is somehow both calming and assertive and it takes me away from the holding gaze I had directed toward his eyes.

When the sound stops I am standing above my son for the first time.

I had seen him in pictures. I had held him late last night when his warm, soft skin was only a promise of what he would be. But now, here I am, watching him wriggle his arms and laugh and smile.

I unplug him from the outlet. I help him up from the ground and he is already walking around the living room like he has lived here for months, like he has crawled this carpet and played with these toys and lives in this home, day after day after day.

“Hey little guy,” I say.

He smiles, wide as the sun, and offers an embrace.

I am so happy I could dissolve.

I show him a chest of toys we bought in preparation for his arrival. He holds a stuffed monkey close to his body.

“I am going to be your mama for a little while,” I say, and I hope he hears me, but he is now on to the firetrucks and the army men. I kiss him on the cheek and he giggles.

I watch him walk around our home. He touches things - the couch, the carpet, the clothes. He is adventurous and curious and keen. I could watch him all day, just walking about, no goal or motive in mind.

I have so much joy I do not know where to put it.

George will not answer at work and James does not understand that he is the source of this newfound bliss. I pick him up and walk toward our neighbor’s home, one that looks just like

our own, a ranch with white siding and red shutters. James is tucked into my chest, his head nuzzled tight. I knock twice on the wooden door.

Debra opens with a smile, but when her eyes move toward James, it dissipates, quickly.

“May I come in?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says. “I’ll put on some tea.”

Debra’s son, Alexander, is playing with a bevy of toys in the living room behind us, with a calmness I have never seen in a boy his age. His curly brown hair falls in front of his eyes. He pushes it back and smiles, waves toward James and I, his rosy cheeks suggesting he wants to be friendlier than his mother.

Debra is surprised to see me with a new appendage, one that’s blathering and squirming and wanting to play with another boy for the first time. I let him down from my arms, tell him to go play with Alexander. Debra sees the two of them together and her jaw tightens.

“Haven’t seen this little guy yet,” she says.

Debra says this without looking up from the sink. She is washing a bowl of strawberries.

I am not sure if it is a question or a comment so I muster a laugh and say that I have not seen much of him either. Debra does not find any of this amusing, and I decide she must certainly have an enmity for the way we brought our son into the world. For my son himself.

I feel queasy, and for the first time, worry that James may be in some form of danger. He is playing with Alexander. They look so happy together.

Debra does not want them playing with each other. She turns the faucet off, wipes her hands on a dish towel, and picks up her son, taking him away from mine. I go and do the same. James looks confused. He is playing with a wooden square, mulling it over, wondering where it goes, what it does.

Debra walks her son to his room and closes the door.

When she walks out of his room and back into the kitchen I hold James tighter, and he buries himself into me, indicating he understands the atmospheric shift taking place.

“He’s a rental, yeah?”

I do not know what to say. I nod my head and hold James even closer than before.

“I’d be awfully careful about who I bring him around to. Not everyone in this neighborhood agrees with what you’re doing. With what he *is*.”

She is playing with a strawberry in her hand, running her finger along its stem.

“Why?” I ask.

“It’s just not natural,” Debra says. “It’s aberrant, and those companies know exactly what they’re doing.”

I had not considered any opposition from our neighbors. George and I thought they would be happy for us, pleased for the family we could become.

Debra asks us to leave. She does not want us staying for tea.

“I don’t want any trouble, but I want you and that *thing* out of this house.”

James starts crying, and I almost do too, before I ask Debra a question.

“If you saw James at the grocery store, and he was with parents you had never met, would you be able to tell?”

She stares back at me, penchant and unnerved. She whispers *James* under her breath, like it is a word she is unfamiliar with.

“Probably not.”

James will not stop crying.

“So does it matter?”

Debra takes a bite from the strawberry. Alexander has emerged from his room.

“Yes,” she says. “Because it’s strange.”

My attempts at reconciliation have failed.

“You and your husband need to keep him close. Be *very* careful who gets to see him. I’m one of the nicer ones.”

I cannot tell if this is more of a warning or a threat, but I do not want to leave it to chance.

James and I exit through the front door, but I pose one more question before we leave her porch.

“He looks real and feels real. Is that not enough?”

She neglects to respond, and then I am finally running back to our home, hopeful that nobody sees James swaddled up my arms.

I put James down for a nap in the late afternoon. The manuals say they are necessary for his growth and regeneration. I simply hold down the little button on his tummy and hear that peaceful sound from his birth not long ago. This signals he is going to sleep, or shutting down, or recharging. I do not know. But he is peaceful when he sleeps. His legs twitch and his lips tremble just like any other boy his age.

I discover that I like to watch him breathe. Or at least, the mechanical function that makes him look like he is breathing. Every little thing I notice makes me understand him in a new way. Makes me want him for longer than the free trial. His chest rises and falls with the rhythm of his breath. His nostrils flare, his lips quiver. I cannot look away.

My husband comes home earlier than usual, eschews post-work drinks for some time with the son he has yet to meet.

“Honey, I’m home.”

When he sees James awake for the first time, he smiles. His eyes do not light up like mine, and there is no magic in his response. But he still smiles. It looks more like a father who has seen his son before, week in and week out, arriving home after a long day at work.

I watch as he holds him, sways him back and forth from side to side.

“I went over to Debra and Franklin’s today,” I say.

George is still holding James. He does not respond to my attempt to produce a reaction.

“She disapproves of our choice to rent.”

He puts James down, who runs into the other room.

“We knew this would happen,” he says. “Just one of the many downsides to renting.”

“We thought there might be heads shaking or scoffs here and there, maybe. George, she threatened me!”

My husband’s back is turned toward me. He grabs his bourbon from the bar cart and pours himself two fingers.

“James might not be safe,” I say.

It sounds silly coming out of my mouth, but I saw the way Debra looked at him.

“We only have him for a few more weeks,” he says. “You’ll be okay.”

He says what I have secretly feared: he never planned on a life outside the free trial.

I thought that maybe George would fall for James like I did. We would find the money to rent him for longer, to allow him to become a real part of this family.

I should have never gotten my hopes up.

I ask my husband what I have been too afraid to ask.

“Do you love him?”

He ponders the question for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Does it matter?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean that we shouldn’t get too attached.” He takes a sip from his whiskey.

“I mean that all of this will end.”

I expected something similar to this but the words hurt regardless.

“What happened to your dreams for him? To play football and to make friends and to be the best in his class?”

“I still have those hopes,” George says. “Nothing has changed. We’re just not going to be the ones to see them lived out.”

He turns his back toward me and puts on a record.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s dance.”

I do not want to dance. I want to hold James in my rocking chair.

So that is what I do. George reads while I hold our son, who tells me about his favorite toys that he played with earlier.

I can feel the bones around his neck. I can feel his heartbeat, the mechanical rhythm programmed at a steady pace.

“How are you not real, little one?”

He does not understand the question.

I cannot get George’s words out of my head, his desire to end our trio prematurely.

It feels like I am longing for a future version of my son, pining for the one who is loved by a different set of parents, when he is older and has scars on his body and talks to other boys at

school. And then I remember he is still only three and I think of how he might not remember me and the ache in my stomach feels like a boulder.

No matter what he says, no matter what silly face he makes to keep me smiling, I cannot stop thinking about my son in the arms of another.

Days blend together like sand. I wake up, say goodbye to George, and spend the day with James. Naps and burps and books. I fall into the pattern quite easily. Enjoy it, in fact. It feels like we have known each other for three years, like I have known him since before he was born.

At night, George and James sit together in the big wooden rocking chair in the living room. It seems so easy for him, natural almost. I cannot shake off the feeling that he has done this before.

Most evenings, my husband suggests we take him to the park, or into town. I remind him of Debra, why I leave the blinds closed even when the sun is shining.

“I am not lying, George. You should have seen the look in her eyes.”

He sips his bourbon, looks down at our baby boy as he drifts into slumber.

“Why does he need to sleep again?” he asks.

I do not answer. The line between what I know and do not know about our son is so thin I am beginning to think it does not exist.

“He looks so tired,” George says. “He looks like he’s dreaming.”

“Maybe he is,” I say.

James likes to go to the grocery store. He loves looking at all the different boxes of cereal, the blue and yellow and red, the limitless possibilities of sugar rushes. I take us two towns over so that I do not see Debra.

People even love to say hello. Most of them do not know what he is, or at least they do not make out that they do. He is just a normal boy, joyful and kind and energetic.

On the night before the free trial ends, George asks if I am ready to say goodbye.

I am not. How could I be? How could anyone?

“Sure,” I lie. “It has been a good month.”

He agrees, unable to decipher what I am thinking.

“Maybe one day we can rent for longer, darling,” he says.

I do not think that day will ever come.

I return my son on a Friday.

It is the last day of the month and I wake up before the sun rises and watch James sleep. He is due back at noon today so that Parenthood Provisional can get him ready for another happy family. I look at the features of his body I have yet to appreciate – the dimples when he exhales, a small mole on the bottom left of his face, the way his toes twitch when he is dreaming.

George flicks on a light in the hallway and props open the bedroom door I had closed.

“I’m headed to work,” he says.

“Are you going to say goodbye to our son?”

I already know what he is going to say.

“He’s not our son anymore.”

A month ago, this would have made me crumble. I do not care what he thinks anymore.

“He was never our son,” he continues.

“You could still say goodbye.”

He walks past me toward the crib. The sun is just barely rising and the lamp is still off so I can only make out his shadow as he stands over our sleeping boy. He looks like a stranger. Like a big bellowing column, towering over James.

I do not see his face but I can make out his arm reaching down. He touches our baby's face, lets his hand linger. They will never see each other again.

When my husband leaves the room he places his left hand on the small of my back. He closes the door. He takes the bus to work and leaves me the car so that I may return our son. Like he is a library book or a gift that went unwanted.

The sun rises and James does too and I let him explore the house one more time. I let him run his fingers along the wall. I let him stomp in the kitchen and play with toys and wander around aimlessly. I ask him if he wants to go for a ride and he nods his head fervently, shakes his body around.

Before we leave I go to George's bedroom and grab his favorite bowling ball that hangs on the wall above his mantle. It is yellow and sixteen pounds and has his initials carved in the space between the three holes. I place it in the box that James came in and leave out his charger and his manual.

I take him and the box outside with me, making sure none of my neighbors are out on their porch. The neighborhood is so quiet. No birds or crickets or squirrels. Dozens and dozens of houses all lined up and nothing or no one is making a sound.

I place James in the back seat and buckle him in.

I drive slowly, carefully.

The drive to the little squat shop in the strip mall is quick. I park in the same spot my husband chose a month ago. The lot is mostly as empty as it once was, save for a few extra cars

parked near a new diner. I ask James if he can stay inside the car for just a few minutes while I go inside. He is playing with the stuffed elephant that came with his box.

I can see inside the store.

Stanley is working on his typewriter. He is wearing a different colored suit but it is still far too big on his bony frame. He has gotten a haircut since I have seen him last.

Another salesman is with an older couple, two men with expensive clothes. He gives them a box with a picture of a baby girl on the outside, and one of them places his head on the other's shoulder.

Stanley looks surprised to see me. Maybe he expected to see my husband instead.

"It's so good to see you," he tells me, standing up from his chair. "How was he?"

"Such a joy," I tell him through clenched teeth.

"Have a seat."

I place the box on the corner of his desk and hope he cannot sense the small shift in weight, the minor alteration in pressure.

"We just need to do a tiny bit of paperwork and you should be on your way."

I nod, politely, before looking back at the car. The lot is still empty, but I am too far away to see James.

It seems by now Stanley will not look inside the box while I am still here. The hum of fluorescence is louder than I remembered.

"Any big plans for the weekend?" he asks.

I plaster on a smile again.

"George and I are going to spend a few nights in the city."

He nods his head as he types.

“That sounds delightful.”

I am tapping my feet. I am breathing heavier than I normally do. I look around the room and it seems as if the salesmen are watching me, like they have nothing better to do.

Stanley pushes forward a sheet of paper.

“I need you to sign here, here, and here. This just says he’s still in good condition, and the other two conclude you can’t sue us for emotional distress.”

I nod again.

I pick up a pen, click it open.

“Have you ever felt held?” I ask Stanley, who is still typing.

He looks up for a moment.

“I’m not quite sure what you mean,” he says.

I click the pen closed.

“Do you know what it feels like to be held?” I ask again. But the face he shows me indicates he has no idea what I am trying to say.

“I’m going to take him to the back room while you finish up the paperwork, okay?”

He grabs the box and makes his way toward the back, past his coworkers and the water cooler and the receptionist.

I place the pen in my purse and sneak out through the front door.

I twist my head around to see if anyone is watching me.

Every single one of them is. But no one is saying anything. No one is standing up or running to tell Stanley or doing anything to stop me. I walk faster until I get to the car.

James is not crying or whining. He is still playing with his elephant, happy to see me.

I am happy to see him too.

When I start the car no one else has left the store.

I imagine they will come after me but I cannot be certain. None of this is in the manual.

I take a left out of the strip mall and keep on driving until we reach the interstate.

We keep driving.

I drive for five miles. I drive for ten. Fifteen.

The sun is a fat golden ball above us.

I glance toward the back of the car.

I look at my son. He smiles at me.

I have never been this far from the neighborhood in my entire life.

I do not know what I am feeling but I know I have never felt it before.

This feeling is something new. Something I cannot describe. But it lives in my stomach
and rises and rises the further we go.

We keep driving.

I still wonder if my son can feel. I wonder if he can think.

James is looking out the window, watching cars as they pass by.

He says the cars are going too fast.