

THE GOD-MACHINE CHRONICLE



a fiction anthology for
the **World of Darkness**

THE GOD-MACHINE CHRONICLE

In 2004, the World of Darkness Rulebook introduced a concept that intrigued, tantalized and inspired readers and players, and left them with the question:

WHAT IS THE GOD-MACHINE?

You hold in your hands the book that might answer that question...or might simply complicate it.

The God-Machine Chronicle Anthology contains new fiction by Justin Achilli, Eddy Webb, Stew Wilson, David A Hill Jr, and many others, as well as previously published stories by Chuck Wendig, Ray Fawkes, Rick Chillot and Matthew McFarland. All of these tales feature encounters with the God-Machine, and serve to pave the way for the God-Machine Chronicle itself.

What rises may fall. What has fallen may rise again.



THE GOD-MACHINE CHRONICLE



A World of Darkness™ Fiction Anthology
Curated by Matthew McFarland

Written by: Justin Achilli, Dave Brookshaw, Rick Chillot, Sarah Dyer, Ray Fawkes, David A Hill Jr, Wood Ingham, John D. Kennedy, Danielle Lauzon, Matthew McFarland, John Newman, Mark L. S. Stone, Eddy Webb, Chuck Wendig, Stew Wilson, Filamena Young, Eric Zawadzki

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Developer: Matthew McFarland

Editor: Michelle Lyons

Creative Director: Richard Thomas

Front Cover Art: Jean Sebastien Rossbach

Cover and Interior Design: Mike Chaney

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This book uses the supernatural for settings, characters and themes. All mystical and supernatural elements are fiction and intended for entertainment purposes only. Reader discretion is advised.

Check out White Wolf online at <http://www.white-wolf.com> and the Onyx Path at <http://www.theonyxpath.com>

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In 2004, White Wolf Game Studio published the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, a slim volume designed to act as the core rules for all of the forthcoming World of Darkness games. It was an approach that we had used with some success in the **Dark Ages** line, in which the core rules were provided in **Dark Ages: Vampire** (and later released for free download), so as to free up space in the game books for line-specific material.

So as to keep the **World of Darkness Rulebook** from being purely a collection of system mechanics, though, the first chapter was a series of fiction pieces and “found documents” establishing the setting. The book as a whole was better received as a setting book than many of the people who worked on it were expecting — it was pleasantly surprising how many fans expressed interest in playing “mortal” chronicle using that setting material. But one piece in particular seemed to capture readers’ imaginations:

Voice of the Angel

From the Testament of Marco Singe, the so-called “Pain Prophet” of New Delhi.

When I was 12, my father beat me after hearing what I had done with another boy. It was as I lay on the cellar floor, feeling the blood on my back become sticky and cold, that the angel first spoke to me. She filled the air with the scent of metal and surrounded me with a circle of blue flame, and I was frightened.

“Don’t be afraid,” she told me. “I have come to speak to you, and through you. At the command of the god-machine you shall hear my words and know them to be true.” Her voice was like the notes of a flute and their vibrations calmed my fear. And that was how I learned the secret history of the world.

The god-machine built our world as a resting place for its First Children, whom men called angels or Ancient Ones. After a time, the ancients desired servants to dwell with them, servants who walked upright and had pleasing shapes, and who could speak. They sent the proper prayer-signals to the god-machine and were granted leave to do so. First the Ancient Ones took the beasts of the field and granted them the knowledge to speak and walk. But these animals retained their wildness and did not make good servants. They grew wicked and violent, and were cast into the wilderness. They were the Second Children, whom men called demons.

So the Ancients called new servants into being and commanded them to spread across the face of the Earth. And these were the Third Children, called mankind. And mankind served the ancients in peace and contentment. Mankind knew not death then. Those whose bodies became worn and aged were sent to sleep in the shadow of the Earth and returned after a time restored to health and youth.

The Ancients commanded their servants to build a great city, a city so vast that a child setting out to walk its length would be an old man before reaching the other side. Calling on the power of the god-machine, the Ancient Ones raised their city into the dome of the sky, fixing it at the place where the orbit of the moon crossed the orbit of the sun. And in the city they placed a third of mankind to serve them as vassals and slaves.

In the city of the Ancients, man lived closer to the First Children than ever before. And some of the men began to wonder, “Why do the Ancients spend their days in rest while we must toil without relief? Why do the Ancients enjoy the pleasures of this city when it is our

labor that built it?" And so resentment rose among the Third Children. They made the proper calculations and sent the prayer-signals to the coordinates of the god-machine, saying, "We are your children, too. It is not right that we be enslaved. Will you not look on us with favor?"

And they received this answer: "What rises must fall. What has fallen may rise again."

The men of the city debated for seven years. Finally, they decided that it was the will of the god-machine that they raise themselves from slavery. Determined to kill the Ancients and take their place as the favored of the god-machine, the men of the city plotted carefully. When the time came, they fell upon the Ancient Ones in their sleep, murdering them with their own weapons and devices in a single night of betrayal.

The streets of the celestial city ran red with blood. A great cry rose up from the Earth, and the mountains shook and the skies were filled with storms. The Ancients struck back at their servants, but too late. Just eight of the Ancient Ones survived. As they fled, they cried out, "We are undone, our time is over, but while our time was long and joyous, yours shall be short and painful." And they became known as the Furies.

The first Fury was named Silence, and fled to the center of the Sun. It cursed mankind to forget the art of speaking to and receiving the signals of the god-machine.

The second Fury was named Death, and fled to the hidden side of the moon. It cursed mankind to forget the way back from the shadow of the Earth.

The third Fury was named Torment, and fled to the star Venus. It cursed mankind to be split into two beings, wyff-man and wo-man, each imperfect and forever seeking its opposite.

The fourth Fury was named Fear, and fled beneath the highest mountain on the Earth. It cursed mankind to be hated and dreaded by all the beasts and birds and fish and all creatures everywhere.

Of the other four surviving Ancient Ones nothing here can be said, for they chose to withhold their curses until such time as they saw fit.

And then the city of the Ancients shook to its foundations. The men marveled at what happened but could not stop it. The city was loosened from the moorings that held it to the firmament. The men cried out in horror, rushing to flee the city before it crashed to earth. Some set upon the roads of light that the Ancients had built, and became lost among the stars. Some reached the silver-sailed boats and descended safely. But many were trapped within the city, and screamed their last as it fell. And when the city crashed and sank beneath the waves, the world shook, the sun hid its face and everywhere people were afraid.

And here the angel paused, regarding me with a hundred eyes. "Fear not these words I speak to you. For the news I bear is this: The god-machine has not turned its eye from your home. What has fallen may rise again. The Third Children shall have their chance to achieve what they once desired. But the way will not be easy. The First Children are set in judgment over you, and the Second Children seek to trap you. It is their workings that take your world through its turnings."

The angel then bade me to warn mankind of the hidden forces that seek to thwart the destiny of the Third Children. Their handiwork appears again and again throughout history. Regard the mighty Sphinx of Egypt. Recent studies of the water erosion on its rocky surface indicate that the monument dates back to the days when the Sahara was green and lush. Far older than the pyramids it guards, the Sphinx comes from a time

close to the fall of the Ancients. The Second Children roamed freely through the world then, greater than man in power and knowledge. The demons shaped primitive man into a civilization that revered them as gods. But their hubris was against the will of the god-machine, and they failed. The great civilizations of Egypt, Sumer and Babylonia rose later from the dim memories of that failure, revering gods with the forms and features of beasts.

The Egyptians called the proto-kingdoms that preceded them the “first time,” or the Age of Osiris. They considered it the source of all wisdom and knowledge. The pyramids and surrounding structures, built to mirror the locations of the constellation of Orion and other celestial objects (with the Nile representing the Milky Way), was essentially a vast time machine used to teach the pharaohs how to “swim upstream” against time and return to the Osirian age. By understanding the layout of these structures, the pharaoh of any era could visualize the location of a secret chamber that would grant him access to a bygone age.

Somewhere beneath the Sphinx, that chamber awaits discovery. The cults of the Second Children protect the Sphinx from a distance, inhibiting attempts to uncover it completely, preventing further exploration of its tunnels. When their own servants discern its location, the Second Children will enter the chamber and attempt to recreate the world that slipped from their grasp so long ago.

I asked about the four Furies who withheld their curses on the night of the murder. “Some of them dwell beneath the earth,” the angel told me, “And wait for the permutations of the god-machine before they unleash their wrath.” One of them, upon fleeing from the Celestial City, came to rest in what is now the continent of Australia. Touching down in the desert, this Ancient was certain it would remain hidden from man, and so it laid itself down to rest and heal its wounds.

But the Ancient One did not realize how widespread the tribes of mankind had become. No sooner did the Ancient close its eyes than natives of that land crept close to gaze upon the being that had fallen from the sky. They were a people skilled in reading dreams, and their magicians peered into the mind of the sleeping Ancient. They saw that this visitor held a deep and bitter hatred for mankind, and they saw the awful curse it prepared to unleash.

The people grew afraid. They had no weapons mighty enough, no warriors powerful enough to slay one of the Ancients. All they had were songs and stories. And so they whispered and sang in low voices until they had woven a careful dream that deepened the Ancient One’s slumber, stilling its anger and quieting its thirst for vengeance. And the magicians covered the angel with soil, piling it higher and higher. When they were done they changed the mound to stone, calling it Ula-ru.

And the Ancient One, hearing the stories and dream-songs of the natives, was pleased. It made a pact with them, agreeing to stay its wrath and share with them stories of how they and their world were created. But if the people stopped telling the stories and stopped singing the dream-songs, the Ancient would awaken and unleash its curse. So today the aboriginal Anangu people continue the songs and rituals laid down by their ancestors. Ula-ru remains a place of great power, where spirits gather and strange energy flows. The government of Australia has ceded management of the surrounding land to the Anangu rather than try to deal with reports of lights in the sky, fluctuating magnetic fields and unusual animals.

Of all the people of the earth, it was those who came to dwell on the South American continent who carried with them the greatest knowledge of their time in the city of the Ancients. Their journey from the fallen city to what would become their home took

many generations, and some understanding was lost. But they remembered much and built mighty civilizations, rediscovering and developing the arts of writing, mathematics, astronomy and farming. The children of this group became the Xi, and their children the Mayans, Incans, Toltecs and Aztecs. As their various tribes, city-states and empires rose and fell, secrets of the Ancients were spread and understanding became more refined.

Yet that knowledge would be their downfall. At the bottom of the world, one of the Ancients watched. It saw that the elite among the cultures of the sun were close to mastering the Star Rites, the rituals of becoming which opened holes in time and changed men to gods. “It is not right for the Third Children to become Luminous Ones,” the Ancient said, and begged permission of the god-machine to deliver its curse. The god-machine transmitted: “You may speak your curse, but let it be but a whisper, for I desire that secrets be only hidden, not destroyed.” So the Ancient took the name Strife and sent its voice far across the world to a ship in the south Atlantic, where a pilot dozed at the wheel.

“Steer south,” the Ancient One whispered. “Steer south.” Half-awake, the sailor turned the wheel and the course of an entire fleet of ships was altered. Shortly after, a storm hit, and the ships were battered. They were blown south to the isle of Cozumel. From there, the fleet’s commander Hernando Cortez led his soldiers to the mainland and the eventual conquest of the Aztec nation. The fall of the Aztecs, sooner than might otherwise have happened, allowed a rush of European colonization that doomed the native cultures.

But not all was lost. Despite the best efforts of the conquerors, some of the ancient traditions of Mesoamerica were secretly preserved by the conquered and are honored today by their descendants. The 20 calendars of the Maya, the Incan Skulls of Wisdom, Toltec maps of the Black Sun — for those who are diligent and wise, the formulas to step outside time can be pieced together.

I asked the angel if mankind will ever hear the voice of the god-machine again, or if it is truly lost to us.

The angel explained that with the discovery of the electromagnetic spectrum, mankind took its first halting step toward communication with the god-machine. For electromagnetic waves are the shadow of the voice of the god-machine. They are the edge of something that can only be fully understood in more than three dimensions. The Mayan high priests called them the branches of *ceiba*, or the tree of life. In 1870 — more than 20 years before Marconi demonstrated his famous wireless — British inventor and scientist David Hughes crafted a device capable of sending and receiving wireless electromagnetic messages. He did not reveal his invention to the world, however, because he believed he’d stumbled upon something more important than the invention itself. When he first turned on the receiver, before activating the transmitter, signals were already being sent.

Hughes was a mathematician and musician. To his keen ears it seemed clear that the sounds he heard were not random, but some kind of encoded pattern. He spent seven years trying to interpret what he heard. Hughes made little progress until he showed a curious friend a diagram he’d made to represent the pattern of signals he’d studied. To the surprise of both men, Hughes’ friend had seen the pattern before — at the British Museum of Natural History. The next day, Hughes visited the museum. He saw an exhibit of stone carvings taken from Mayan temples dating back to the first centuries of the common era.

After several more years and copious correspondence with experts around the world, Hughes was convinced that he could translate at least part of the message that awaited him when he first activated his machine. He confided to his friends and colleagues that he would soon have

a spectacular announcement to make. But he died three days before the event. Following the directives of his recently re-written will, his attorney removed all references to the mysterious signals from Hughes' notes and records. Aside from the comments and testimonies of those who knew Hughes, the only extant reference left is among the final pages of his diary:

“Long and painful hours, months, years, have brought me to this. But a small fraction of a greater whole, made finally clear to my understanding. And yet these few words, I cannot bear to hear. Let them reach no other ears. Let what is fallen remain fallen.”

In the century since his death, some of Hughes notes have come to light. In the early 1950s, a group of amateur short-wave radio operators claimed that Hughes had not only decoded the signals but had left diagrams of a machine that would reply to the code. Though no one could locate the signals Hughes described, instructions for building Hughes' “responders” were widely circulated, and hundreds of the machines are believed to have been built since. They continually transmit automated sequences of numbers, words, tones, music and other sounds, much to the consternation of governments and commercial broadcasters worldwide. Also known as “numbers stations,” the devices transmit today, and can be heard on conventional short-wave receivers. According to Hughes' apocryphal statements, their intended recipient is “the ruler of Mictlan, the Mayan Tartarus.” What Hughes believed would happen when the proper signal was received is not known.

What of the Second Children, I asked the angel. Do they ever make their presence known to mankind?

“Their influence is widespread and insidious,” the angel said.

As the premier political power on the American continents, the United States acquired much of the secret knowledge that had been plundered by Europeans in South America. Its capitol city was laid out according to geometric principles of Aztec cities such as Tenochtitlan, as interpreted by European freemason architects. The lines of the streets are oriented to channel energy from the Earth. Numbered and lettered boulevards allow power to be ritualistically directed for various purposes. The result has allowed a country of farmers and immigrants to grow into the most powerful nation on the Earth.

In 1898, a cabal of government officials, wealthy industrialists and media moguls triggered the Spanish-American War as a way to gain influence over Cuba and possess certain pre-Columbian artifacts located there. The most notable of these was a fragment of one of the Black Sun Maps of the Toltecs. America's secret government was capable of translating a part of the map, which enabled it to contact and entreat with one of the Second Children, a demon who agreed to perform certain services in exchange for blood sacrifice.

But for the most valuable service of all — complete translation of the map fragment — America's patron demanded tribute on a scale beyond the capacity of its clients to provide. So the secrets of the Black Sun remained unspoken for decades. Then, as the 20th century approached its mid-point, the requisite “knife of flame” revealed its presence at last. The enigma of atomic fire was unlocked and the word's first nuclear device was created. On 16 July, 1945, the weapon was tested in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Its purpose was ritualistically sanctified with the chant, “I am become death, destroyer of worlds.” Weeks later, the detonations in Japan satisfied the demonic contract, and in exchange the meaning of the Black Sun Map fragment was revealed.

“And what was the secret of the map?” I asked the angel.

“To the Toltec people, it was a warning,” she said. “But in modern times, it has become an irresistible lure.”

On May 25, 1961, U.S. President John Kennedy declared before Congress an imperative for the nation to achieve a successful landing on the moon before the end of the decade. What was not announced publicly was the true reason for the project. The elite faction operating behind America’s corridors of power now had a translated version of the Toltec Map fragment, which revealed a detailed topography of the lunar surface. Most importantly, it contained an atlas of the moon’s so-called “dark side,” as well as a comprehensive description of what lay entombed there.

The American Apollo missions were so named to curry favor with the various sun deities who were in fact aliases for the Second Children. Publicly, it was Apollo 11 that first put man on the moon. But in fact, American astronauts began exploring the lunar surface as early as the 1968 Apollo 8 mission. Apollo 10 confirmed the location of what the Toltecs called “the crypt of the butterfly.” By Apollo 15, the outer vault was cracked, and it was 1972’s Apollo 17 — the final manned lunar mission to date — that brought back what classified documents referred to as “Packet Theta.”

The angel has warned me that the relic brought back from its receptacle on the moon has the potential to be much more devastating than any atomic weapon. What was retrieved was the skeletal form of one of the Ancient Ones. Specifically, the very being that pronounced the curse of mortality upon humanity. As the portal through which death itself entered our universe, it was changed into a thing neither dead nor alive. Those who learn to control it, as its current jailers seek to do, will exert ultimate power over the tides of life and death.

With each passing day, dark forces come closer to gaining that power. Those who seek must unify and stand against them. Our world needs warriors of light, defenders of life, seekers of truth to thwart their wishes. The god-machine waits. The angel has shown me how. I can teach you. We are fallen, but we might rise again.

The Truth

What is the god-machine? We had no idea. It wasn't intended to be the basis for anything in the World of Darkness going forward, it was just an evocative piece of fiction to help set the mood. And yet for whatever reason, it was a piece that people asked about — when was White Wolf going to release something about the god-machine?

Since then, it's been referenced on occasion. Pieces of fiction (including "Residents," which initially appeared in **World of Darkness: Mysterious Places** and is reprinted here) and game material (including "These Mortal Engines" in **Saturnine Night** and the Holy Engineer bloodline in **Danse Macabre**) made mention of it, but the god-machine (or "God-Machine," depending on what book you're reading) was never defined or explained. Was it a literal machine? A technognostic system of understanding? A metaphor for the unknowable intelligence and design behind the World of Darkness? The actual answer wasn't important.

With this anthology and the forthcoming **God-Machine Chronicle**, though, we are examining this phenomenon, making some decisions about what it is and what it does, and allowing characters in World of Darkness games to become part of the machine. This is your first glimpse into that greater, horrifying truth.

Welcome.



The King Is Dead

Halfway through the seventh drink, and I can't stand it any more.

I came in here to have a good time, damn it. To celebrate my freedom. I knew it was a bad idea, but I had to get out of the apartment. Big mistake. Entering the bar, there was a sudden silence, like in an old western when the bad guy walks in. Mike didn't even look me in the eye when I put my money down between us.

You know you're in trouble when your bartender is trying to distance himself.

Six and a half bourbons later, and the whispers have grown all around, whenever I'm not looking at them. Pricking at the edge of my awareness while my stomach churns on the booze. A dozen or more pairs of eyes, glaring daggers in my back.

What gives them the goddamn right? Why do they get to be angry?

He was *my* father, after all.

• • • • •

I was eight when I realized that dad was more than the center of my world; he was the center of everyone else's, too. I spent most of my time up at the house, just me and him after my mom passed. Trips into town seemed magical. The cramped square with the constant thunk-thunk-thunk of the old clock tower seemed vast, main street was the most stores I'd ever seen and the people... The way everyone tipped their hat to him. Paid their respects. He never had to wait, didn't pay for his meals in Boyd's place. He did his paperwork in the town hall, but the business of being Mayor — that he did out among his people, the central cog in a well-oiled machine.

He seemed so important, at that age.

I soon grew out of it.

• • • • •

Nine drinks, and the fire in my belly shouts down my good sense.

"Alright. That's *it*."

I turn around. Everyone — Boyd, Patrick, Frances... People who usually leave me alone. People who should know to leave me the fuck alone. Everyone quickly looks away.

"Anyone got anything to say?"

Boyd grimaces into his beer.

“Hey. Fat man. You have something on your mind?”

He doesn’t answer. Doesn’t even have the guts to look at me, not while I’m watching. He mumbles something or other, gets up and bugs out. The door flaps on its hinge as Boyd shoves his bulk through.

Silence, still. Pin drop.

I shrug, and go back to my drink.

“Mike. Another”

Here comes number ten.

• • • • •

I was eleven when I first saw a city. Sure, I’d seen them on TV, but for some reason they never seemed real. Dad couldn’t drive, not with his hand. I never asked, but somehow knew that he’d lost it when we lost mom. A literal piece of him missing.

One night, much earlier, sneaking out of bed, I’d caught glimpse of him screwing his prosthesis on. I screamed the house down, convinced — utterly convinced — that he was some kind of machine. That the bare metal plate behind his plastic wrist was what he had instead of flesh on the inside.

Anyway. The city. Field trip, me and the rest of my class. All six of us, crammed along with Miss Holland into an aging minibus. Three hours, watching as forest and mountain gave way to fields and towns. When we drove past the first big town, on our way to the freeway, I thought we’d got there already.

I stood for minutes on the museum’s steps, just looking up while Holland gave us a lecture about not wandering off, not touching anything and not trusting strangers — city folk would rob us and leave us to die.

The museum wasn’t nearly as much of an eye-opener as the drive. I knew, on that long drive home, as the sun set and the other kids dozed, that I wanted to live in a city. But part of me knew I never would.

And that pissed me off.

• • • • •

Twelve empty glasses, and the usual suspects have arrived as the sun sets. Emma, Connor, and Drew. Making noise, and pushing the night away. One by one, the mourners leave too, casting dirty looks at us as they go, but we drink enough that Mike doesn’t mind.

The door opens behind me again. Great. It’s probably Sheriff White, come to stick his nose in. Boyd probably waddled straight to him.

Emma, opposite me, frowns. Mike looks up, surprised, and welcomes whoever it is in. He doesn’t call them by name, which means...

“Eric Chase?”

...I look around at the sound of my name.

I’ve never seen this guy before in my life.

That’s new.

• • • • •

I was seventeen when disagreement turned hostile. I'd watched over two or three years as my friends found their callings — Drew helping his dad with the garage, Emma working for Patrick at the store. I had it in my head to travel, to see the world and find somewhere — anywhere — else to make my home.

My old man was having none of it. I'd learn from him and replace him as Mayor when he retired. That was the plan.

"And what, spend thirty years running unopposed until I can hand it over to my own kid? Dad, I want to do something worth a damn," I'd plea, hoping he'd see sense.

No such luck.

"There's a system, Eric," he'd say. "The work we do is vital to this community"

That was his holy writ. There's a system.

• • • • •

"What did you say your name was?"

Twenty minutes later, and I'm out in the cold October gloom, trudging through leaves and looking at the burnt-out wreck of my family home. The guy from the bar picks his way carefully up the track, trying to not ruin his shoes.

"Dan Kane. I'm a journalist with the *Explorer*."

"Never heard of it," I mutter, picking up a lump of wood and dropping it, wincing as the tendon in my hand pulls.

"You don't get many papers out here, huh?"

I've had enough of this outsider already, asking to come out to see the ruin.

"You want something. Spit it out."

He buries his hands deeper into his jacket pockets, shifting from foot to foot as he tries to decide whether to lie.

"I'm doing a piece on the fire. Your father was Mayor for — how long? Most of his working life? And your grandfather before that. There hasn't been an election yet, the fire hasn't been explained. I've been in town a day, and I can tell people are still cut up about it... Do you have any comment?"

I squint up at the moon, considering.

"Two things. First, I have an alibi. A dozen people saw me."

He nods. He already knew that. He's been checking up on me.

"Second, I'm glad the old bastard's dead."

• • • • •

In the end, it came down to money. And pride. I found out that my mother had left me... A lot. Enough to start a new life with, but my dad was in control of the account. He refused to give me my inheritance until I "shaped up" and "became useful" — two phrases for "become his younger self" — while I refused to leave penniless or give in to his demands. So by the time I was 21, we'd arrived at a hostile truce. I didn't leave town, but I lived in my own place and made sure everyone knew why I was still around, hating almost every one of them.

But that's all going to change. As soon as the will is read, I can finally put this place behind me.



I'm trying not to think about Kane and his prying. I'm pretty sure he's following me, but fuck him. All he's going to see is a man buying booze and food, waiting. Day by day, my salvation gets closer.

I have a run in with Boyd. As confrontations go, it's a non-starter. He stops me in the street, courage bolstered by the surrounding crowd. He accuses me of disrespecting my family, my people, as if I have any people. I tell him — in front of all the gawkers — that I know my dad fixed the health inspection on Boyd's place in exchange for... Well. Money, no doubt. Money that I'll be sure to spend wisely just as soon as it's mine. That gets rid of him.

I walk past the garage as Drew raises another beater up, trying to get her working. He really has turned into his old man. Everyone has a place. Everyone has somewhere they fit. Drew never wrestled with it — he just knew. He's satisfied by his small life, just another cog in this run-down machine. I won't miss him. Him and the rest of my "friends," just hangers-on attracted to my position. No. Not my position. I don't have a "position." My inheritance.

Well, it's been fun, man. But I'm leaving, and I'm not taking you with me.



I push my way through the fallen leaves in the town square — winter seems to have come early, stripping the trees bare, but old Tom — the council's handyman — is too busy putting up the signs for Mayoral elections to clear them.

I sit on a park bench and watch the proceedings until I get bored, then close my eyes. The sound of the clock tower's mechanism becomes clearer to me than the hubbub of conversation or the car going past.

When I open my eyes again, I'm not alone. Sheriff White is sat next to me.

"Eric," he touches the brim of his hat, a mock-salute. Kow-towing, like everyone did to HIM.

"Stephen," I say, trying to stay civil

"New Mayor soon, and not before time." He's conversational, casual. Leaning back, putting an arm out across the back of the bench.

"Big shoes to fill." I can't keep the sarcasm out of my voice. He just calmly nods. Yes, they are big. Ass.

"The mine's struck out. They need an good investor to open a new shaft. And the farms have lost their contract. 18 people unemployed, and still early days."

"It's a fallow season. It'll change." Why did I say that?

"I'd best get back to it." He says, standing up. "Good to see you, Eric."

I grimace and half-shrug, then watch him go.

I need more drink.



I hear my phone ringing as I get back to my apartment. Fumbling the keys — I think I've really done something to this hand — I miss the call. The service picks it up, though, and as I finally get through the door I hear that it's Kane and relax. Not important. Not the will.

He's asking me something about the elections. I don't really pay much attention. Something about candidates.

I can't get that encounter with Stephen White out of my head. It's not what he said, it's the tone he was saying it in.

He was being friendly. And that makes my skin crawl.

• • • • •

I'm in my father's office, which is also the parts store at Drew's. Somehow, this makes sense.

"There's a part here that doesn't belong" says my dad, clucking as he inspects Drew, Emma, and Connor, ticking them off on his clipboard.

Finally, he peers at me and shakes his head, disapprovingly

"Here it is! No, this won't do. It's entirely the wrong shape"

He gently pushes me down onto the work bench, and puts my arm in the vice. I protest — I'm not the wrong shape. I'm a different part than he's looking for — but he doesn't listen.

"Soon have this fixed," he says, carefully drawing a guide-line on my wrist with a pencil.

I'm still begging when he starts sawing.

I wake up clutching my hand, covered in sweat. Jesus, I hope I didn't yell out. The walls here are paper-thin, and old Miss Holland keeps complaining about the noise as it is. I can't deal with another 15-minute lecture on how I used to be such a good boy.

Just a dream. A stupid dream.

• • • • •

I decide to settle my stomach with a proper meal, and spend lunch at Boyd's. He's nervous after the day before, and waives the check as an apology. Score.

"See that it doesn't happen again," I say, on my way out. The fat man looks suitably ashamed of himself, and I leave, whistling.

The leaves have all been cleared now, giving my town a certain stark beauty. New growth will come, but I won't be around to see it.

Whoever it is following me is back. They're good, but I grew up here. I know this place like the palm of my hand.

I lead them through the streets for ten minutes, around the back of the building supply store, before ducking behind a stack of pallets. When they pass me, I step out.

"Hey!"

Patrick and old Miss Holland. They nearly jump out of their skins, then realize I've lead them into a dead end.

"Want to tell me what this is about?" I put on my best tough-guy pose, as though ready for a fight rather than confronting two old codgers. They look ashamed of themselves, Holland especially. Patrick coughs, and does the talking.

"We're sorry. We... We thought you were, ah, leaving soon. And we wanted to make sure it went—"

"Smoothly? Don't worry. I have it all under control. You can have the election soon."

He starts, as if trying to hide a greater reaction.

“Patience, Patrick. It will all be over shortly.”

At that, he bows. I step out of the way, and they hurry off.

I blink, standing there, my brain slowly catching up with my body. What the hell was that? Why did I say that?

Patrick and Holland today. White yesterday. I hate these people. I have done all my life — why be pals now?

What's happening to me?

• • • • •

I head back home, feeling dizzy and sick. When I enter my building, there's a strong smell of paint — but I can't see any fresh paintwork. I lie down, trying to let the nausea pass.

Boyd must have done something to the food. No such thing as a free lunch.

I hear the electric buzz of the line long before the phone actually rings. Wincing at the piercing sound, I answer as fast as I can.

“Eric? It's Dan Kane. Please... You have to get over here. *Now*. Please... You're being followed, Eric, and I think I know what they want.”

“What's the—“

He shouts something unintelligible and alarmed. There's the unmistakable sound of a gunshot, and then the line goes dead.

• • • • •

Kane was staying at Kathleen Pole's old place on 8th street, before she passed last year. He was renting it for cheap from Connor's big brother, who owns and rents out the cheaper houses.

Tracking down the address isn't hard — all the neighbors heard the shot, and by the time I get there White has taped the place off.

I tell Connor that Kane was working for me, looking into who might have started the fire at my father's house. Money's one thing, but I want to know if anyone'll come after me as well — and he buys it. By the time the sun goes down, and the Sheriff has driven back, I've got the keys to the back door and I'm letting myself in.

• • • • •

The place is a mess. Connor's family stripped it of all but the bare minimum furniture, but Kane's been decorating with crazy. Photos tacked up on the walls, and scrawled, hand-written notes scattered across available surfaces and much of the floor. Pride of place are record books stamped property of the county.

He didn't do this in a day. And he wasn't a reporter.

Whoever he was, his blood has made a hell of a mess of his work. The body's gone, taken away to the clinic until a proper ambulance can come up the mountain road.

I leaf through anything that catches my eye — hand-drawn symbols that look like a cross between Arabic and a black-metal band logo. Copied etchings and descriptions of human-shaped funeral pyres, which spark a memory from an old film I once saw. Photos

of me, of dad. Half-drawn family trees — which I realize, as I look down them, are of *my* family.

My hand hurts like hell. A line of fire running through my wrist, and numb aching in my fingers.

Then I find it. A photo, face-down on a table. Kane or someone else has written on it; “Frederick Chase, 1948.” My grandfather.

I turn the photo over, and feel a chill.

This is the first photo of the man I’ve ever seen. I didn’t know. I couldn’t know.

He’s missing his left hand.

• • • • •

Searching around where I found the photo, I dig up a sketch drawn of my great-great grandfather, founder and first Mayor of this town. He, too, is missing his left hand, cut off at the wrist. A wound from the Civil War.

More than that, though, I know. It’s not a reoccurring wound. It’s not a wound at all — it’s the socket of a wrench, the threading on a screw, the head of the nail. The point where the tool performs its function.

The point where it *fits*.

I don’t know how I know that. I don’t know why knowing it makes me feel so satisfied, like everything’s going my way even in the middle of this horror.

My mind is not my own. I laugh at myself, at my own fear. And then whatever is thinking for me lets go for a moment, and I can think again.

The pain in my wrist is agonizing, now, and the skin is turning red and peeling. I stumble into the table and send it over with a crash. Lying there, I hear the man White put on watch opening the front door to investigate. Gritting my teeth, tasting blood where I bit my tongue, I get out before I’m caught.

• • • • •

I can’t drive, not like this, so I run. The fastest way back to my apartment is through the town square. I just need the money I’ve already got stashed, and then I can get out of town somehow. I’ll go... Anywhere. Anywhere at all.

Please, God, just let me get out of town.

No. I will fulfill my function. Replace the part that was lost. Complete the town, allow the engine to run.

Oh God, there’s something in my mind, thinking for me. How long has it been here, twisting me around?

Heart pounding, I make it the six blocks to the town square and double up, heaving. The sound of the clockwork is overpowering, beating in time with my heart.

The election posters in the town square have my name on them.

• • • • •

The symbol from Kane’s room is painted on my apartment door. I think it might have been there all along.

I can barely stand. My hand is now the color of raw meat, and the bones are starting to show as the flesh peels away.

I make it five feet into the apartment before my legs give out. I lie there, broken, weeping for lost chances, as the flesh withers and crumbles from my hand, leaving only a raw, broken stump.

The worst thing, though, is the certain knowledge that I gave myself every chance. If the boy had just accepted his role, there wouldn't have been a need to force the issue. He could have gone years before substitution.

Patrick, Holland and White enter the room, chanting in a language full of glottal stops and tongue-clicks. Symbolic clockwork, helping me into the rhythm of the change.

He — I — am losing energy. His — my — struggles are getting weaker.

All I ever wanted was to not follow my father's footsteps.

Not like this. Please, not like this.

• • • • •

I feel the three in proximity. Their functions meshing with my own. White helps me up by my remaining hand.

“Welcome back, sir,” says Holland.

“Thank you. All of you. This was difficult, but it is done.”

My words are working, but they still worry. The edge of the system is erratic, malfunctioning. I was gone too long, this time.

“Don’t worry about the farms, or the mine,” I tell them. “The election will take place. This town will be repaired.”

Somewhere deep inside, the last remnants of my son’s mind are ground down and erased. It’s been the two of us since the fire. The fire he thought he’d gotten away with setting.

The fire he thought was his idea.

Now there’s just me.

At the center of the system, I feel everything falling into place.

Chicago Politics

Mayor Lucas Jameson gripped the podium, and looked to each of the other three on stage. The cameras explored the sweat on his forehead in glorious high-definition. “Deputy Mayor James Pierce, what would you do for the Chicago public school district?”

Cameras focused on the stately, confident Pierce. “It’s no secret that I’ve worked with you for the past decade, Mayor Jameson. The education system reflects on my competence as well as it does yours. I feel that if it’s not broken, don’t fix it. Chicago’s public school system produces innovators and success stories. While education gives us our future, we cannot have a future living beyond our means. I vow to keep property taxes at a manageable level and keep those successful people from moving away from our fair city.”

The mayor gave a nod, then looked to the next participant. He tapped his mic to quiet the audience’s tepid applause. “Mister Eric Marcus, the same question. What’s your take on the state of Chicago public education?”

Marcus straightened his tie, smiled, and gave the cameras a full three seconds to bask in his charismatic glow. “If we’re going to teach the children to be successful in the private sector, we’ll have to set an example. My opponent says, ‘The same,’ I say more of the same. Not to fawn, Mayor Jameson, but your Take Your School to Work initiative—the same one I’ve been working on since I began my internship—has had smashing results. Privatizing education funding is the American way, and I want to take it to the next level and take the burden off our taxpayers.” He winked to the cameras. Live polling data said that forty-one percent of viewers thought he was winking directly to them.

Jameson smiled softly, then looked to the third contender. “Commissioner Michelle Jameson, the same question. What would you do for the public school system?”

The young commissioner looked to the camera, and cleared her throat. “My father’s run was an outstanding one. But it’s my responsibility to improve upon his methods, and try to make amends where he made mistakes. Our education system is failing. Test scores are the lowest they’ve been in decades. We need reform.” He only felt the first jab. Education, jobs, crime, taxation, she didn’t stop. Every point she raised pushed harder against his temper. Cameras snapped across the floor, and fixated on the betrayal on his face.

“I’m sorry, Father.” She mouthed to him from across the stage as the cameras dimmed.



“I can’t believe it. Jameson’s endorsing that weasel Pierce?”

A young receptionist quailed but kept typing. “I don’t know, Chief Randall. I just work here.”

Randall threw her copy of the Tribune down on her desk. “I told Jameson he should have fired that fucker years ago. I will not work for that panderer. He’s lobbied to cut funding for the precinct every single year he’s been in office.” She loosened her tie and crashed down into a worn, leather office chair.

“I don’t know, Chief Randall.” The receptionist shrugged, but continued typing. Once the chief had passed her desk, she rolled her eyes. “I think Michelle’s going to win, anyway. She’s got the devil in her.”

“He picked that slime over his own daughter!” She fussed with the supplies and garbage on her desk, “Where’s my coffee?”

“Remember what the doctor said, Ma’am. No coffee.”

• • • • •

“Father.” Michelle knocked for a third time. This time, Jameson’s name placard fell from his office door. Michelle knelt to replace it, and the door opened as she straightened her skirt. “Thank you.” She slid into the office before he could deny her entry.

“What do you want, Chelle?” A haggard Jameson stepped back and leaned against his desk.

“I want your support in the election and you know it.” She took a seat on one of the office chairs before him, and looked up, nearly pleading. “I’m going to win this. I want your blessing.”

“You weren’t just critical of the schools, Michelle. You stepped on every single policy I’ve championed over the years. Did I do *anything* that was good for Chicago?” He shook his head and scratched the back of his neck. He wore the five o’clock shadow of five o’clock a week ago.

“You did the best with what you had, Daddy.” He winced when she used that word. “I’m running on change. You taught me from when I was a little girl: Chicago’s never satisfied. And you have to give her what she wants. She wants change. She wants hope for better times. That’s a campaign message that works, and I wish you would respect that.”

“So it’s all about winning for you, Michelle? It’s all about politics? I know I’ve screwed up in my time, but you know that I’ve always done what I thought was best for the city, within my means.”

“I know, Daddy. And that’s what I’m trying to do. But if I want what’s best for the people, losing the election’s the worst way to go about that. Those two are going to drag you down with them. You know I’m the best candidate.”

“Do I? If I’m such a worthless wretch of a mayor, how can I trust the daughter I raised? Isn’t she a failure, just like everything else I’ve done?”

“Eat your fucking pride, Dad.” She stood and put her hands on his lapel.

“Don’t speak to me like that.” He brushed her hands off his jacket and stood up straight, towering over her. He took a breath, opened his mouth to dress her down, but then he paused. When he looked down to her, he briefly heard two hearts beating. His own, and another, calmer. “You should respect your elders,” he said finally.

She looked up to him, face calm but eyes furious. “My elders? Are you that out of touch?” She shook her head, turned on her heel, and slammed the door as she left.

• • • • •

Chief Randall looked up from her newspaper when the sound of the crowd outside the precinct drowned out her ability to read. Pierce stood on the steps, yelling over a bullhorn at the gathering mob.

“Chief Randall! Is it true?” No sooner than she could fold the paper, a microphone knocked it out of her hand.

“Did you use city funds to solicit prostitutes?” Another reporter butted in. Then another, then another. Randall extended her arms to keep them at bay and looked over the crowd.

“Pierce.” She proclaimed, and ignored the growing mob.

The deputy mayor stood at the steps of the precinct with a bullhorn, staring down the chief of police. “We have footage, recordings, and eyewitness reports that put you at the center of a prostitution and human trafficking ring that is not part of a current investigation. How do you explain yourself?”

“Prostitution? What in the hell are you talking about, Pierce?”

“I’m sorry, Chief Randall. Pierce got a warrant.” An officer interrupted, and three more worked to disperse the mob. “You’re under arrest for suspicion of solicitation of prostitution. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law.”

“You’re never going to work in this town again when I’m done with you, Pierce!” Randall spat on the ground and offered up her wrists to her arresting officer. “Michelle Jameson’s going to win, and you’re history.”

• • • • •

“Turn that shit off, Mickey.” Marcus gulped down a glass of Johnny Walker, then put the glass to the bar.

“Mayor Jameson’s daughter, Michelle Jameson, has decided to run on an independent ticket. In other news, Representative Paul stirred controversy when he declared the Bill of Rights unconstitutional.” A perky young blonde newscaster read her lines with a passing competence. “We’ll go to our Washington correspondent, Tom Worth. This is Trisha Bailey, and you’re watching—”

Mickey hit a button, and the television faded first to blue, then to black. “What’s your problem, Eric? That girl’s got you riled up?”

“Nah. Nothing like that. My boyfriend just finalized his book deal. It’s one of those exposé things. I get what he’s doing, but I’ve been trying to get him to wait until after the elections. It’s nothing about us, but it’ll look bad if someone close to me releases something like that. It’ll just look like a political attack at my enemies. With that and confirming our relationship, the pundits will eat me alive. But he said the publisher wants it on the shelves yesterday.”

“I don’t care who you’re fucking, Marcus. You know that. But he’s not talking about us now, is he?” He gave Eric a knowing look, and put another glass down in front of the mayor’s intern. “Can’t give the mayor’s daughter anything to hang us on, can we now?”

Eric twirled a straw in the glass, and glanced up to Mickey. “She’s never hanged anyone.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. You’re changing the subject. He’s not, is he?” Mickey repeated. “No.”



“It’s not that I think you’re guilty. I just think it’s best if you wait out the trial somewhere else. The kids don’t deserve to wake up to news crews every morning. You could stay with your sister.”

Edna Randall stood at the door to her North Chicago home with a duffel over her shoulder. “My sister’s trying to sell her condo. I can’t do that to her; she’ll never sell with that kind of attention.”

“Then get a hotel. It’ll do you some good. You can clear your thoughts, and you won’t have to worry about this place, or getting the kids to school on time, or anything.” Her husband stood in the door, barring entry.

“Clear my thoughts?” She repeated back to him, with tears welling in her eyes. “I ain’t going to clear my thoughts. I’m gonna going to find out what’s going on with Pierce and Marcus, and I’m going to see to it they both end up in jail where they belong. I know they’re in this together, Trevor. If you didn’t believe me, you wouldn’t have bailed me out. I’m not stopping until they’re in prison and Michelle’s in office.”

Trevor sighed. “Why do you even care about Michelle? She’s never done anything for you. You do what you’ve got to do, Edna. But don’t do it here. I bailed you out because I trust you, but I can’t drag our kids through your crusade.” He pressed against the door. She backed off and turned down the stairs.



“We can’t swing the numbers more than, say, two percent. Anything more, and we attract inspectors and pundits and bears, oh my. Besides, Mickey’s got points on Marcus. Marcus could be a very lucrative investment for a gambling man.”

“But you’re not a gambling man, Anthony. You don’t take risks. He’s a fucking intern. He doesn’t have the chops and people see it. Polls have him five points behind me.” Pierce paced across the dark floor, a single hanging lightbulb cast a glow over his frustrated face.

“If you’re such a surefire bet, why are you even trying to buy this thing?” Anthony crossed his arms, and put his feet up on an old card table.

“Because I have a lot riding on this and I have to account for last-minute mistakes. Michelle Jameson’s fourteen behind, and one paper’s already called it for her. You know what they say about poll numbers?” Pierce stopped his pacing and glared at Anthony.

“Yeah. They dictate your market value.” Anthony grinned up at Pierce. “Look. I like you. You’re doing good with the numbers, so I’m going to do you a solid. It might look like a close call but not so close we’ve got to do a recount. We’re not Florida, over here. I’ve got a guy. He wants no-bid jobs. You get him fifty cushy I-9s once you hit office, and we’ll call it even.”

“Fifty? That’s at least two million,” Pierce snapped, then looked away. “I can promise thirty.”

“Two million, but it isn’t even your money. You can promise fifty.” His look grew stern.

“All right. Fifty.”



“Look. I’m sorry. Please, Michelle. I know you’re in there. Just answer the door.”

Mayor Jameson rapped on the door twice more. Light shone through one of the basement windows. He heard a slow, pulsing rhythm. Like a heart, but slower. Jameson wandered off and around the patio and knocked on the window. Michelle?” The beating stopped.

He sighed and wandered off.

• • • • •

“I don’t care how much you’re going to lose on this one, Mickey!” Edna threw Mickey into the liquor rack and hoisted him by his collar. “If you don’t talk right fucking now, you’re going to spend the rest of your life in prison. And that’s if you can stop bleeding long enough to make it to trial.”

Mickey threw up his hands defensively, and shied away from eye contact with the woman. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Chief. I know Tony’s got a thing with Pierce, but I don’t know the details, and I sure as fuck don’t know anything about Marcus. We are not friends. He hasn’t even been here for a drink in months. Not since I called his brother a tramp piece of shit.”

“Is that right?” She grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head back hard enough to shatter a bottle of Midori. “Because I’ve got three guys that put him here last Friday, giving you an envelope.”

“I’m done with this line of conversation, Chief. You don’t have a warrant.” He shook his head in defiance. Some of the blood from his injuries dripped into the sliced limes on the bar.

“Do you think I need a warrant?” She pulled back a fist. They stared at each other for a long moment.

“Fine.” He looked away. “But you’re going to have to make me a deal to get out of town.”

• • • • •

The office door opened, right as a bottle shattered against its frame. “Damn, Jameson. You’re starting to sound like my husband.” Edna walked into the mayor’s office and closed the door behind her. She moved toward his desk like a driven machine. “We need to talk.”

• • • • •

“I’ve never been to Ikemoto before. Are we always going to eat at the most glamorous places in town now that you’re a big-time author, Mister Joe Lansdale?” Eric Marcus spooned up a bit of miso soup and grinned.

“I’m not big-time. Publishers just treat authors this way so they don’t pay attention to their contracts. A hundred dollar a plate release party is nothing to the cut they’re getting even if this book doesn’t hit the New York Times.” Joe blushed and looked to the door. “Don’t fill yourself on the appetizer. There’s still like four courses to go. He stirred his soup absently. “And don’t call me by my pen name. It’s kind of creepy.”

“Oh, you know you like it.” A couple of suit-wearing diners passed by and congratulated Joe. Then a couple more. “I think I could get used to this kind of attention.”

“For one, they’re giving me attention for a book they haven’t even read. For another, you’re going to be mayor of Chicago, so I don’t know why you’re going on about me, saying I’m big-time.”

Eric blushed. “If I win the election. The back cover copy of your book says we’re engaged. I know it’s 2012, but that’s still political suicide. You can’t get them to push back the release date a little, can you?”

“Babe, you know that’s not how release dates work. They have all this money wrapped up in signings and paid reviews and whatever else. You’re going to win the election. It’s going to happen. Just accept it.”

The server delivered a tray with an exotic fish, splayed out like a buttered autopsy. Eric made a face as the server dished it to the couple. At that, Edna Randall entered the restaurant and flashed a badge. She had a uniformed officer at either flank.

“Whatever. I’m trailing by three points in the polls.” He looked to the door, and his heart slowed to a rhythmic crawl, “What’s that kid-toucher doing in here?” Edna argued with the staff, held up in the lobby.

“Only one if you follow Pollmonkey.” Joe shrugged, and took a bite of the fish. “This is great. You should try it.”

“You know how I am about fish. I’ll have some sushi, but this is just disturbing.” Eric smiled to his partner.

His partner did not smile back. He didn’t say anything in response. Chief of Police Edna Randall closed the distance, her legs like pistons, and stood beside their table with her police entourage in tow. Joe pointed to his throat. Eric raised an eyebrow.

“Are you okay?” Eric stood and put a hand on Joe’s shoulder. Joe looked up to Eric, now with a fully reddened face. “Waiter? He’s choking! Anyone? We need a doctor!” Eric panicked, and wrapped arms around Joe’s abdomen in a clumsy, amateur Heimlich Maneuver. Eric forced air from Joe’s lungs. Joe’s grunts refused to become breaths.

A crowd gathered. Joe’s loss of breath drew spectacle. “Joe! Damn it, Joe!” Eric cursed, cried, and screamed out until paramedics arrived and parted the crowd.

They yanked Eric to the side, and held him back. “He’s gone.”

“You’re going to have to come with us, Mister Marcus, for suspicion of murder.” Edna pulled Eric back from the scene, and one of her officers applied cuffs.

“What are you talking about?” Eric snapped.

“Your friend Mickey told me all about your plan.” Chief Randall stared at Eric. He glared back, and saw a glint of gold in her otherwise hazel eyes. It was the gold of memory, the gold of an ancient soul—a soul with a purpose. Eric flew into a panic and tore at his restraints. The second officer moved in to restrain him.

• • • • •

Mayor Jameson knocked at his daughter’s door. With each knock, he swore he heard something downstairs. It stopped when he stopped. “Michelle. Please. Just open the damned door.” In a huff, he kicked the door and stormed off.

• • • • •

“It’s like witchcraft. With the arrest of Mayor Jameson’s intern Eric Marcus, Michelle Jamison sees a surge in the polls. University of Illinois Political Science Head, Professor Yearling has a few words to say on the shift in polls for tomorrow’s election.” Trisha Bailey gave an insincere smile and the camera shifted to a university office.

“Thank you, Trisha. Mayor Jameson is known for his shrewd political mind. He’s managed to keep a notoriously difficult office for two decades. I see this as a situation of like father, like daughter. Despite the mayor’s daughter, she wisely distanced herself from the policies of her father’s cabinet. Since she had a closeness to these officials, she was able to see their weaknesses.

“As we’ve heard all about, Eric Marcus’s late partner had just published a book representing Marcus as a party to organized crime. Michelle Jameson might not have predicted the murder, but she knew Marcus’ career wasn’t long for the world.

“Unfortunately for her, she’s still trailing behind Deputy Mayor Pierce. Unless she knows something we don’t.”

James Pierce squeezed his remote angrily, jabbing at the buttons until the television shut off.

“On the bright side, you don’t need to worry about Marcus’s poll numbers.” Anthony grinned and lifted a glass of bourbon across the desk to Pierce. “To Mayor Pierce.” Pierce just looked at the glass. “You’re not toasting?”

Pierce shook his head, then looked up to the office door. Anthony shifted to look as well. Edna Randall came through the door with a manila envelope and two other officers.

Anthony sat up, cleared his throat, and adjusted his salmon-colored tie. “How can we help you, Chief Randall?”

Edna dropped the envelope on Pierce’s desk. “That’s a good question, Commissioner. It’s just that I have these pictures and a tape to go with them.” Pierce opened the envelope and flipped through the photos, biting his lip. His full attention went to Randall.

“You can’t do anything with this. It doesn’t prove anything.” Anthony stood, pleading.

“Judge Powell sure thinks it does. So, are you going to come with us, or are we going to have to make this difficult?” Edna held up two sets of handcuffs.

“You are going to burn for this, bitch. You should have taken the message and backed the fuck off when you got hit with that sex charge. I don’t need your fucking cuffs. I’ll walk out. And tonight, when I walk out of jail, I’m going to have a nice chat with my friends in Internal Affairs.” Pierce stood and walked confidently to the officers.

• • • • •

“This is Trisha Bailey. In an unexpected turn of events, Deputy Mayor James Pierce and Elections Commissioner Anthony Brandon have been arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to commit elections fraud.”

Mickey shook his head, looked away from the television, and returned to his march through the O’Hare concourse. Idly, he wondered if he’d packed enough warm-weather clothes. He hadn’t been to Mexico in years.

• • • • •

“But Chief Randall, aren’t you concerned the case will drop due to your conflict of interest with Pierce?” A reporter put a microphone to the chief’s face as she descended the precinct steps. “You have to admit, this looks like a vendetta.”

“Vendettas don’t need evidence and witnesses. I’m confident justice will take its course here.” Edna Randall ducked into the crowd and forced her way forward. “Last question.”

“One more question, Chief Randall. Is it true you’ve been offered an HBO original series about your experience with the sex trade?”

Another tabloid journalist slid in to interrogate her. “Chief Randall? Chief Randall? Is it true?” The man stopped. “She’s been stabbed!”

“Chief Randall?” An officer intervened to stem the blood flow. Edna Randall’s eyes closed as she slid to the floor.

• • • • •

Mayor Jameson knocked on his daughter’s door. He looked to the side and noted the light in the basement. He knocked once more and the door creaked open. With a step inside, he called out, “Michelle? Michelle, are you here?”

“I’m downstairs, father.”

Jameson wandered through the house and to the basement. When he reached the bottom, Michelle stood along the back wall, faced away from him, adjusting her earrings. “Sorry I’ve been so busy, father. But you know how elections season goes. Since *None of the Above* isn’t too popular in the exit polls, I just have to make an acceptance speech.”

“Yeah. Elections season. About that.” Jameson stood across the room from her. “There’s something I can’t wrap my head around.”

“Oh?” She said, and fidgeted with her skirt suit and stockings.

“Eric Marcus was slime—I just couldn’t pinpoint what he was doing. But why did his boyfriend deserve to die for that? And how did you do it?” He took a step forward. He saw that she was standing before a small table, laden with candlelight.

“Did you know the fugu breed of puffer fish kills with remarkable speed even with a single bite?” she said, her back still turned to the mayor. “It wasn’t hard to pay off the kitchen staff. A little flirting, a few hundred dollars, and they were willing to put whatever I wanted on the plate.” She turned around and faced him, then shrugged casually. “I liked Joe. But if Joe could dig up all those skeletons, what’s to say he wouldn’t write a follow-up exposé featuring mine?”

Mayor Jameson’s mouth fell wide. “You’re a monster.”

“No. I’m Chicago Mayor Elect. Don’t try to tell me you’ve been innocent all this time. You’ve cut corners.” She rolled her eyes, and ran a brush through her hair.

“I might have cut corners, and I might have to answer for that. But not cut throats.”

She turned and gave her father an amused smile. “Daddy, I’m asking you, step aside. Go home. Enjoy your retirement. Please. You’ve earned it.”

“I can’t just stay quiet. I can’t be party to murder, even if it’s my own daughter.” He backed away from her. “You really haven’t heard a thing I’ve taught you, have you?”

“I did, Father. I promise I did.” Michelle dropped her a head a bit. “But there were other lessons. Other teachers.” Michelle stepped aside from the dais, revealing a morbid conglomeration of flesh and steel. She motioned to it, presenting it in the way one might show off a prototype sports car. A wet human heart stood suspended in the center of the rough box, penetrated from eight sides by steel rods and wires. It pulsed with a cadence just slower than the mayor’s own heartbeat. Despite his initial gag reflex, the sight of the rhythmically-throbbing monstrosity calmed his nerves.

“What is—“

“It’s hard to explain.” She stared for a moment and sighed. As horrible as it was, Mayor Jameson understood. The rhythm was soothing. “When people talk about a political machine, they’re usually being metaphorical. But there really is a machine. If it’s running right you don’t see it. But it needs its representatives in government, too.”

“But I never knew. I never did that. I’ve never seen—“

“I know.” A tear fell from her eye. “I’m sorry, Father.” She lifted her hand, and said a word he could not understand. He felt the first jab, the claws of a creature he could not see. “I’m going to be late for my acceptance speech.” Another shred across his chest. Another rending down his back. He closed his eyes, and the pain gave way to numbness. He heard her heels snap across the floor as she walked past him. His legs gave out. He stopped resisting.

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“My father used to say, Chelle, you’ve got to work within the system. Sure, it has its problems. But if you want to see change, the best way is from the inside. And that’s why he ran for office, term after term. He led this city to greatness for decades, and I intend to lead it for decades to come.” The audience howled out in applause as Mayor Michelle Jameson bowed before her city. Her heart sped with excitement, just for a moment, and then it became slow and steady again.

The Observer Effect

I don't know how long I stood there, staring at the stairway up to Justine's apartment. This was the last place I'd wanted to end up, yet here I was. Nobody else could help me anymore, though not for trying — I'd already been to see Mama and all her sisters, and they'd given me crash space and money as long as they could. Nobody had too much to spare, though, and inevitably I'd used up all they could possibly give.

"All right, Janelle. She won't say no. She can't say no. She's your sister. She *has* to take you in." I hadn't had the nerve to call her before showing up, and I knew that was going to piss her off, but it's harder to run someone off your doorstep than to tell them not to come at all, right? God, I hoped so. I was banking on her not being able to say no to my face.

I sighed, braced myself, and headed towards the stairs. The duplex was cute, not too big, with a nice little side yard and an outdoor stairway leading to her second floor apartment. First time I'd been there, and it was as a mooch. Too busy trying to figure out what to say, I didn't see her come out the door till she'd nearly bowled me over. She was half in her uniform, a large duffel in one hand and her phone pressed against her ear with the other. The look on her face even before she registered who I was said she was already annoyed. My timing *sucked*.

"Hey, 'Tine. Surprise?"

"What the he- oh no. No no no. You cannot be here." Aw, hell. "Tory, I'm gonna have to call you back." She hung up the phone, staring at me, obviously trying to find some kind of polite way of telling me to buzz off.

"Tine, I'm sorry I didn't call. I just need a few days—"

"Don't, Janelle. You can't be here right now. I can't...you have to...ugh." Justine dropped her bag on the ground and sat down on one of the stairs. I hesitantly joined her, ready to weather the inevitable torrent of sister-scolding that had become the intro to every conversation we shared. "Janelle, now is not a good time. There's a lot going on at work, and I just...it's not a great idea for you to stay here. Tonight is okay, but you have to go see Mama or something tomorrow." Instead of the usual chiding tone, her voice was level and measured.

"Mama can't do it. A tree fell through the roof, and she has—"

“Then find somewhere else. I’m sorry. You just can’t stay here.” She reached over and hugged me tight, then stood up. “Door’s unlocked, spare key under the fake ficus, and stay out of my room.” She grabbed the duffel and darted across the lawn to her car, leaving me bewildered. She’d been way too calm and hadn’t once looked me in the eyes. Something was definitely going on.

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From the day she could walk, Justine had been trying to take care of me. She’d helped me clean my room after taking care of her own. When I was struggling in school, she’d taken time after all the homework for her advanced courses to help me with my own work, no matter how long it took. She stuck up for me when I was bullied, helped me learn to catch a ball — and with every helpful gesture, that chiding voice, telling me that I’d done it wrong.

I tried not to mind it. She was usually right and she’d always had my best interests at heart. She’d always been blunt, though, and she came across as gruff and cranky. It took a long time for us to learn to talk to each other, but we’d done it. She figured me out — I can’t hide what I feel. I figured her out — she can’t keep advice to herself. We made it work, but it was probably better that we didn’t talk often.

Like that time with Owen. I knew she’d been rattled when she called me. We hadn’t talked for a few months at that point, with her being busy at school and my hours at the diner. She’d called me three times that day, though, and when I turned my phone on after work I called her back immediately. She’d been not-crying, the way she does — holding it back as much as possible, which only served to make her voice hoarse and tight.

They’d only dated for six months, but she’d really liked him. Getting close to new people was hard for her, and dating was especially difficult. He’d put in the effort to get close to her, handling her distance and privacy with grace. When she finally let her guard down with him, she got attached quickly — and three weeks later he confessed he was married. His wife was in Korea for a year teaching English, and he’d stayed behind for his job at the library. He’d waited till the day before her return to say anything to Justine, and she took it hard.

I think I’d been the only person to ever see her cry over a breakup, but that’s how I could help. She was my protector, my support system, and my quiet cheering section. I was her safe refuge, the one she could come to with the hurt feelings she’d never show anyone else, and that made the distant response I’d gotten today that much more worrisome. I’d never before felt like she was actively trying to hide something from me. Sure, we’d always had our secrets. Everyone does, right? But those were things that didn’t need to be shared — the little details that disappeared in the larger picture. I didn’t need to know everything, because I knew the important things. Suddenly there was something I didn’t know, some secret she was actively trying to keep from me. Had my little sister gotten herself into some kind of trouble?

‘Tine had been a cop for a few years, working her ass off to make a name for herself on the force. Sure, it’s rough work, but that’s all she had ever talked about doing and she loved every minute of it — at least, she had the last time we’d spoken. Granted, that had been about seven months earlier. Maybe that was it? Maybe something had gone wrong on her beat? But then, why would she avoid telling me about it?

I got a soda out of her fridge and sat down on the couch. This wasn’t my usual role and I didn’t quite know how to proceed. Even if I did figure out what was going on, what could I possibly do to help her out? I thought about how she’d looked, how she’d sounded.

She looked worn, but not washed out or sick. She looked busy, but she always did. I sipped the soda and reflected that her fridge was near empty, and then remembered she'd made a point of telling me to stay out of her room.

She'd always been private, though. Why did she need to tell me to stay out of her room? She knew I wouldn't pry into her life. Maybe what she'd stashed in there would have some answers.

The chest in the corner was impossible to miss. It was an eyesore, a scuffed and battered wooden box with a large padlock on it and a throw blanket tossed on top. It looked so out of place in her apartment full of pre-fab, flat pack furniture. Whatever 'Tine had stashed in there was important and too big to fit anywhere else, and thus too interesting to just leave alone.

Tugging on the lock showed just how much of a hurry Justine had really been in, as it came open in my hand. The lid was much heavier than I expected, and I saw why as I propped it against the wall. Weapons lined the lid and outside edges, while books and bottles and odd miscellanea filled the little separations in the center. Scattered in amongst the strange objects were familiar things — handguns, a sawed-off shotgun, nightsticks, and stacks of ammo boxes.

I took a step back, staring at the box for a few moments, but I had absolutely no idea what to do with the stuff and even less clue why she'd have so much of it. I closed up the box and resolved to talk to her about it in the morning. Closing the door to her room behind me, I settled myself on the couch and dozed off watching infomercials, waiting for her to come home.

• • • • •

Justine still hadn't showed up by noon the next day, so I set out to find her. Her phone was off, which was a bit worrying, so I called the station to see if they could get in touch with her. They told me it was her day off. Great.

She'd mentioned a coffee shop not far from her house the last time we spoke, so I figured that would be as good a place as any to start. It took some doing without a car or a map, but I found it, just in time to watch her heading out with a small group of people. I figured them to be cops, at first — don't cops pretty much hang out with other cops? — but the mix was weird. Black woman with dreadlocks, a white girl with a ponytail, two white guys, one our dad's age and one about mine. I didn't recognize any of them, so I followed them for a few blocks as they headed to a small warehouse, carrying duffel bags and some kind of large case. Nobody seemed to bother them, though, or even look twice, and they went into the warehouse apparently without noticing me.

I found a ledge to climb onto, peeking through the cracked window. The group was there, sitting in a rough circle around a table in what looked to be a kitchen nook. The area was surrounded by boxes and shelves, with a couple little walkway gaps. Not quite a room, but definitely organized to function as one inside the mostly open space.

"All right, so we can't do that. We know she's there, though, so what are our options?" The girl with the dreadlocks was pacing back and forth behind the older guy, who turned to look at her.

"Once we get the door open, it won't be hard to find her. Long as we time it right, we can catch her before she leaves." His voice was rough and gravelly, and he spoke with authority.

Justine piped up from her seat on a box. "Look, we just need to get there and get the box. I don't much care about her. Do we have any idea where she'd be hiding it?"

"Not really. We don't have blueprints or anything for the building. No telling what hidey holes she may have found, or what escape routes she could have. We don't know if there's a basement or sewer access either. I don't really think so, though." The younger man, a blond guy with gentle features, sighed and rubbed his face a bit. "I think we'll need her to tell us where she's stashed it. There's only so much we can do in the time we have."

"How do we catch her, though?" Justine's leg was bouncing. I'd only seen her do that before exams or dates. "What do we have that will hold her? Can Tory rustle something up, or can Samuel do some kind of...?" Justine gestured, and the others seemed to know what she meant. I sure didn't.

Samuel — the blond guy — rolled his eyes a bit and shook his head. "A little outside my wheelhouse, and we don't have a good way to get anything big inside. I don't know if cuffs or rope will hold it. Do we have info on that? Max?"

"Shit, I don't know. The ones I've met were all really different. I don't know if there's a magic bullet." The girl with the ponytail was just as twitchy as Justine, drumming her fingers on the table. Max. OK. "Tory? Any ideas?"

"Anything I could make would take too long — we have just over an hour before dusk." So that's Tory, that girl with the dreads. "My mom used to pour salt on windowsills to keep evil spirits away."

Justine furrowed her brows at the woman — Tory, I guess. "Seriously? Your mom told you?"

"You know something I don't, bitch?" Tory was annoyed, but Justine didn't react angrily. That meant they were friends, because 'Tine didn't take the word 'bitch' from just anyone. "Mike, you have rock salt cartridges for the shotgun, right? We may need them." Mike, the older guy, nodded, and Tory rummaged around in a cabinet for a moment, returning with a container of sea salt. "This better work. This is good salt, not that iodized crap."

"Then I say we load up and move out. The earlier we can catch her, the better." Max smirked a bit at Tory and stood up, disappearing behind the shelves, while the rest of the group shrugged and nodded.

"We've gone in with less, I guess." Justine shook her head and climbed off the box, heading towards a corner. She picked up her duffel, then followed Max. The rest of the group wasn't far behind, grabbing supplies and spreading out to places I couldn't see.

I followed them. I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I kept trying to come up with reasons for this, for some easy explanation that would make smack my forehead and say, "Right! It's so obvious! They were just..." but I couldn't come up with anything. All I could think was *they're going to kill somebody*.

Oh, 'Tine, what the hell are you into?

• • • • •

It was getting on towards dusk before they emerged. They were all wearing dark clothing, looking tense and focused with bags and that case in hand, putting it all in the trunk of a large sedan. I darted off to the main street to wave down a. It shouldn't have been that easy for me to get a ride, but I didn't think about that at the time.

They made quite the circuitous route, seemingly looking for something as they retraced and overlapped their path, and eventually ended up all the way on the other side of town in front of another warehouse. This one was much larger, set in a row of them, leaving the area quite dark and shadowy. I ignored the dread that crackled down my spine to settle into a frozen lump in my stomach. Whatever they were doing, I definitely didn't want my sister involved.

By the time I'd gotten up close to the building, I was wishing I'd grabbed a flashlight and one of those spiked mace things 'Tine had in that chest, but the small crash and squeal of metal on metal brought my focus back to the group. They were forcing a rusty door open and not being terribly subtle. They made quick work of it, though, and slipped inside. The blond guy very carefully closed the door behind them, making it impossible for me to follow them, so I went in search of another way in.

After a bit of poking around, I found a stack of pallets and a broken window and climbed on up. The window was just a smidge too small for me to fit through, but the warehouse was mostly open and I spotted them quickly. They had already started to spread out, each person taking an area and searching it silently. They didn't say a word, communicating in gestures and working methodically. Obviously not their first time — maybe they *were* cops. The older guy, Mike, disappeared around a stack of large wooden crates for a brief moment, then appeared again with a gun pointed at something, backing away.

The group moved into a formation around him, seemingly preparing for a fight. That's when I noticed Justine's hair — the ponytail she'd pulled it into showed a huge scar on the back of her head, healing well but still obviously fairly recent. What the hell was she into? They definitely weren't cops, and that blond guy wasn't even armed...

That was the last thing I saw before the warehouse went pitch black. The inside of it just...went away. I couldn't see or hear anything, and the window I was looking through turned cold. I stared at that blackness for a second, and then shook myself. Scrambling back down, I paused just long enough to get my bearings, then sprinted towards what I hoped was the door they'd come in through. Something was wrong, though. The building must have been a lot longer than I remembered, or maybe I'd come around the other way...I was already getting a bit winded by the time I turned the corner.

I stopped cold as I came around, staring at the woman in front of me. It must have been a trick of the light, because she looked seven feet tall and so gaunt I didn't know how she balanced. She held a clipboard in one hand and watched the wall intently as it cracked and rippled outward, giving her a perfect view of the blackness inside. Her head turned towards me and time seemed to slow. Space melted, and the walls of the buildings around me warping and extending in sickening ways. I don't know if I was melting, too. I was too scared to look at my own body. I just stood there as she turned, slowly flipping a page on her clipboard and making a mark. She looked up at me then, eyes milky white and deep, and her voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. "You are not supposed to be here."

I remember thinking she sounded frustrated, and thinking about that sister-scolding voice that Justine used with me. And then the world shattered.

• • • •

I woke up on Justine's couch. She was coming in the door with her duffel, a bandage on one arm, and a bit of a limp. She tossed her keys in a little bowl by the door, the clang of metal on the thick pottery making me jump — but not. I flinched, but my body didn't.

The light came on a moment later, bright and harsh, and I groaned. The sound startled Justine and she jumped, her hand moving instinctively to her hip holster before she realized. “Shit...I’m sorry, Nell. Work got crazy and I forgot you were here.” Why was she lying to me? I started to call her on it, but she kept going because I hadn’t actually spoken. “Did you eat? Give me a minute to get a shower and I’ll take you to this awesome burger place. We need to catch up a bit before you leave, right?”

I heard myself speaking, but they weren’t the words I wanted. “That sounds great! I’ll call Aunt Edie tomorrow, see if she has a room I can use...” I tried to stop, to ask what happened, where she’d gone, what she was into, how she’d gotten out of that darkness, but the words wouldn’t come out. My body was no longer my own, and Justine didn’t seem to notice that I’d changed. It was perfectly me, and there was nothing I could do but watch.

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I left for Edie’s the next day. She’d kicked out her most recent boyfriend and was open to letting me use her spare room. The following months passed in a haze, but I gradually found my stride. I got a job at a casino serving drinks — what else would I do in Vegas, dance? It wasn’t a bad gig, though, and I finally started to get ahead. In a matter of months, I’d gotten my own place, complete with hanging plant and a dog.

I don’t know when I realized that I was back in control, but somewhere along the line I guess I just picked things up. It felt good, living a normal life. I even went out with a few non-skeeezy guys for the first time in years, finding one that I actually liked a lot. I’d finally turned things around, and I was happy.

Justine came to visit about six months after I left. It was a nice surprise to see her — she’d never come to visit before, even when she’d moved out and I was still living at home. I showed her my favorite places on the Strip, took her to a show, even convinced her to play a little craps. She seemed genuinely proud and happy for me, and for the first time in my life I felt like I deserved it.

We chatted and laughed, spending the last two days of her visit watching crappy movies and eating ice cream. She never mentioned the scar, and I never mentioned what I’d seen. It just...never seemed to come up. I think that’s okay.



Road Gospel

1.

Killing the highway gave it life. People don't always realize it, but death has its own ecology. A fallen tree is home to pill bugs, beetle grubs, consuming mosses, lichens like scabs. A human corpse is a bonanza of bacteria, eating from within and from without, eventually meeting somewhere on the bones, which they will soon clean to an astonishing whiteness. That's not to mention all the maggots or the turkey buzzards that might come to pick at the meat, too.

Thing to remember about this kind of life is that it's the lowest of the low. Bottom-feeders. The garbage-men of nature. The equivalent of that fish that clings to the shark's belly, eating whatever fish parts float near its mouth.

Death of a highway, it's the same thing. From the outside you might expect it's just a sad collapse, a strip of forgotten civilization that isn't much more than cracked asphalt and pine trees. Wait till night falls. Wait and see what comes crawling out of the road shadows to feed on the remains. Hoping that some food falls near its hungry mouth.

2.

I had an accident. I don't mean the "shit-your-pants-in-history-class" kind of accident. I mean the "had-too-many-drinks-crashed-into-drainage-block" kind. No seatbelt. When I hit the concrete, I just slid down below the seat. All the heavy business up in the front of the car came up into my lap, and I guess the way it moved . . . it crushed my one leg pretty badly. Spun my foot around like a twist-tie.

For a bit over a year, my life was all pins and braces. Metal framework around the leg. Had to swab the parts where the pins went into my skin, because they got crusty with this moist rime the color of cheese.

Couldn't really work. Couldn't really do much of anything.

Got a little fat.

Got a lot depressed.

I pretended everything was on the up-and-up. What few visitors I had wouldn't see my sad and shameful side. Couldn't let that happen. It was all smiles and rude jokes. Some at my expense. I let them know it wasn't any big thing. Sure, I said, I wasn't really that drunk. The leg'll be fine, I'll be kicking my heels together soon enough.

Lies, of course. Oh, not to myself. I wasn't convinced of my own bullshit. I knew the score: if I walked again, it'd be with a herky-jerky limp. Forever. And if I ever *drove* again (they took my license, gladly outing me as a fool's example of What Not To Do), then I'd never drive drunk and I'd never drive fast because I was too afraid of what might happen. I was drunk then, and didn't remember the accident. But after? I have dreams. Dreams I can't make myself wake up from, nightmares of shrieking metal and the sound of my leg breaking (lots of little pops and snaps, like a boot falling on a bag of bird bones).

Whole time, my family wanted to see me. Mom and Pops, they lived a few hours south of me in a town called Buckler, a rinky-dink pisspot of a town, a crippled burg that was breathing its last gasps of life. They wanted to see me, of course. Neither of them could drive, though: Mom had macular degeneration, middle of her vision was all blurry (though God had sought to spare the vision in her periphery, which was about as useless a gift as He can give). Pops was hard of hearing, which is another way of saying he was a deaf as a dead dog. Neither of them was allowed to have a license anymore.

I couldn't get to them, and they couldn't get to me.

Then there was that whole "shame" business.

Even with her eyes gone all funny, I knew my mother would look at me in a way that cut to the quick. She has this guilt thing. A deep and terrible voodoo. Pops . . . well, he'd just look at me and call me a worthless shit, then maybe throw me a Coors Light. That's just how he was. Still would've stung.

So. For a long time I didn't see them, and they didn't see me. We talked on the phone once in a blue moon. Never for long.

And here I thought maybe the shame would go away. Time, so the story goes, heals all wounds. But that's a basket of crap. Time rots the wound. Time is the enemy.

While I was feeling all sad for myself, the already beleaguered highway went and sang its last hurrah — not only did the fine politicians of our government go ahead and decommission the highway, but the bridge that lead into town started to collapse. Boards dropped into the muddy, slow-going river below. The whole thing developed a kind of *tilt*, like an old person about to fall out of their chair. You could drive over the bridge, as I'd do soon enough, but you did so with the fear of God, wondering if you might shimmy and shake into the dark waters below.

A year after the highway died, Pops died, too.

Same day they gave me my license back. Shit.

3.

Buckler. Population: Damn Near Nobody.

Towns aren't supposed to die, at least not the way I figure it. America is a country of prosperity. Streets of gold. Limitless opportunity. So they sell it. With a population swelling like a tumor and people driving cars with seats that warm your asses, how the hell is it that a town can up and die? How is it that a highway — that once did a fine job indeed of getting people across the country, from coast to coast, from Canadian hockey to Mexican tacos — ends up as useless? Thrown to the rats and vultures and potholes-like-sores? Highway dies, the town dies. That simple. Most of the rats know to jump a sinking ship. Some don't and drown as it drops.

Funny thing is, Buckler used to be bright and shiny. Buzzing neon from two bars. Shiny diner, always full. No community pool (hey, we weren't *rich*), but there was a swimming hole not far from the playground.

Going back, though . . . let's just say that Buckler had officially lost its shine.

4.

Besides the minister, two people came to Pops' funeral: me and Mom. I wouldn't even suggest that the minister was really there, not in the strictest of terms. You could catch the whiskey on his breath every time he extolled some virtue that he just made up, and sometimes he just stopped talking to watch a bird or jump at a shadow.

Rest of the town around us had gone to the birds. That's not a figure of speech, either: I mean everywhere you looked, birds. Pigeons warbled on drooping power lines. Crows hopped from tree to tree, frolicked in the empty street without fear of ever being disturbed. Black turkey vultures circled and circled. Never saw one land. Just saw them orbiting the invisible space, same way they might do to a car-struck deer on the highway that hasn't given up the ghost just yet.

The funeral was in the late afternoon, and by the time the minister ran the crank and started dropping Pops into the ground, Mom seemed to get edgy. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes and looked around at the lengthening shadows — the same shadows that the minister seemed to shy away from.

"Evening's coming," she said. "We ought to go."

"You don't want to sit here for awhile?" I asked. "Pay our respects a little longer?" My shame wanted me to hold fast, to stay here all damn night if I had to. Apologizing for not coming to see him. Apologizing for not knowing that he got sick with the flu but didn't go to the hospital (which was East Jesus from here, easily an hour's ride in perfect conditions, and here my folks couldn't even drive).

But Mom hissed at me, pulled at my elbow, pleading with me to go home.

I couldn't bear disappointing somebody else. We went home.

5.

I'd always heard that in nature, you've got your predator, you've got your prey. Everything eats something else — it hunts for it, kills it, eats it. And, in turn, that thing is probably hunted by something bigger and faster and meaner.

Except, that isn't quite true.

It misses the third party: the scavenger. Like hyenas eating the lion's leavings or ganging up on a limping gazelle. Or crows and vultures, counting on fast-moving cars to serve them their meals with smashing tires and bone-breaking bumpers.

Road's full of scavengers, as it turns out.

Not hunters. Scavengers. They wait for a blown tire. A wayward traveler who can't find his motel. A drunken fool who falls asleep in his car on the shoulder. Their meal is always the sick gazelle.

Sometimes, scavengers get a feast. Buckler was that feast.

6.

Under the light of her crooked lamp, I could see that Mom didn't look so good. Sitting there in the ratty recliner, I knew she was old, but she wasn't *that* old. In the pale light of the poorly lit house, her skin almost looked translucent. The way it hung off her in places, sags of skin unanchored to muscle or bone.

"You sick?" I asked her. "Be straight with me, Mom."

She waved it off, held out a plate of macaroons. I took one, but noticed that she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were searching over my shoulder.

The window. She was looking out the front window.

“It’s night, Mom. What do you think you’re gonna see out that window?”

“Nothing.” She said it too fast. Too sharp and short. Brittle hands tightened.

“You sure? Someone been bothering you?” Not that I knew who such a *someone* could even be, given that the town appeared to have very few people left in it. I hadn’t seen a moving car all day, and what few people I’d seen weren’t outside for long — hurrying into their homes, heads down, same haunted shoulder-droop of the minister.

“Eat a cookie,” she said.

I ate a cookie. Stale. Shit.

“Mom,” I said, mouth full of too-dry crumbs, “I just want to tell you that, shit, I’m real sorry about —”

The house lit up like the FBI was outside pointing its floodlights into the place. And the ground rumbled with the sound of a grumbling engine. My ears constricted with the shrill keening of tires squealing. And then, laughing. Cackling, even.

Someone was outside, bright-ass headlights pointing inside the house.

“This what you’ve been worried about?” I asked.

Mom said nothing, just sank deep into the chair. The woman was shaking.

“Fuck this,” I said, and limped my way down the hall to my old room. As it had always been, my bedroom was a monument to my childhood: baseball trophies, posters of bikini-clad models faded from where the sun came in during the day, models of Hess trucks on a dust-caked bookshelf. Over to the bed I went, reached under, and felt around until I found what I needed.

Louisville slugger. Good thing my parents kept my room like a memorial tomb.

I marched up past Mom and out the door.

Into the lights.

I had to shield my eyes, those headlights were so bright. I could make out a shape just past them — a car, some hot rod like a Mustang or a Camaro from 30 or 40 years back. I held up that bat like I was about to break bad on that beautiful car, screamed at them, told them to leave my poor mother alone. They didn’t move, and I could hear that cackling from inside the car, though in a way it sounded a million miles off, too. Something was wrong here. Something I didn’t understand, not yet.

So I took a step forward, raised the bat with every intention of bashing open one of those headlights —

But the car jacked it into reverse with a shriek of rubber on road.

And then it gunned it back down the street. The chorus of hoots and cackles fading with red brake lights that looked more than a little like a pair of mean eyes.

“I got rid of them,” I said to Mom when I got back inside. I leaned the bat up against the table. “Sent those vandals packing.”

“Vandals,” she repeated. “Yeah, vandals.”

“What’d they do to you? Smash up the mailbox? Break up the fence around the garden?”

Mom, though, she didn’t answer. Just cowered in on herself and wept a little bit.

More shame for me: I can't bear my mother crying. And not in the way where I seek to comfort her. It's that way with me and any woman. She cries, I have to go. Feel like a caged animal as soon as those tears start to fall.

So, I did just that. Got in my car in search of a drink.

As I said, more shame for me.

7.

Five shot glasses, overturned in front of me. Each catching the amber-hued lights of the bar. Each sitting in a ring of the cheapest whiskey imaginable, some acid brew that was probably just as much Drano as it was old oak barrels.

"I earned these," I said to the bartender, who wasn't listening anyhow. "Haven't had a drink in years. But my Pops died. And my Mom's crying. I *earned* these."

The bar wasn't in Buckler, because the tavern there — Milly's — was just a boarded-up shack whose neon beer signs had been shattered. This place was maybe 10 miles out of town, which necessitated another rough-and-tumble drive over that wobbly bridge. I swore as I drove over it I could hear the splashes of bridge bits plopping into the mud-colored depths below.

In the bar was me, the bartender and another man. He sat down at the far end of the bar. Looked familiar. Mostly bald with a comb-over that wouldn't fool my blind mother. Kind of bug-eyed, like someone had squeezed his neck and made them pop out of his skull. He fidgeted with some peanut shells. Sipped at a light beer.

Fuck him, I thought.

I gazed into the one-eye of a freshly poured shot. Pondered how it would feel going down my throat. Raking up my esophagus.

"You're Al's boy," the man said. He was sitting next to me, suddenly. I hadn't seen him move from his spot at the end of the bar, and he scared me enough where I almost spilled my shot. I told him as such.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to spook you."

"Well, you *did*. Now, if you don't mind, I'm having a conversation here with my dinner date." I held up the shot to show off my true love. "She was the Prom Queen, and we're going to get married." Then I gulped it back. Felt the burn.

"It looks like she left you," Bug-Eyes said.

"Guess so. Have to find someone else to love me." I snapped my fingers at the bartender to splash some firewater in another shot glass for me.

"Listen. Your Dad, he didn't die of the flu. Well. Maybe he did. But you best ask your mother how he caught that flu. Maybe see what diseases she's got, too."

"Hell, I know you," I said, pointing a finger right in his face (my depth perception was starting to get off-kilter). "You were that neighbor down the street. Kenny, right?"

"Kenneth."

"Kenny, sure, I remember you. Neighborhood kids always thought you were a bit goofy." Before he could say anything else, I clarified: "I don't mean kid-toucher goofy. I mean, you know, strange. Like a hermit."

"Yes. Well. Listen, I want to help you."

"Help me how?"

“I can help you save your mother’s life.”

“Uh-huh.” Rolled my eyes.

“Perhaps even save the whole town. Give some life back to it. It’s about the highway, don’t you see? Pinch off the artery and the heart dies. I can show you how to read the Road Gospel. Together, maybe we can —”

“All right, did I not tell explain myself well enough? I’m drinking. *Alone*. I didn’t ask for any conversation from some weird, old —” I stood up. “You know what, forget it. I need to get back anyhow. Forget this shit.”

He called after me, but I just yelled back that he *was* creepy, and damn well may have been a kid-toucher after all. Then I think I gave him the finger and left.

8.

There, but for the grace of God, go I. Drunk. Driving. Dumb.

I wasn’t so drunk I don’t remember the drive, but drunk enough to think that I could speed over that bridge without a care in the world. Bits of rotten wood disappeared into the darkness beneath the onslaught of my tires. I also thought a turn was a straightaway, but somehow I took the curve even though my brain didn’t see fit to carry that information to my hands. Almost felt like the road carried me where it wanted to go. Heck. Maybe that’s what happened.

Back at the house, I sobered up real fast.

Mom was sitting in her chair still, jaw slack. Not dead, but weak. Wanted me to wet her lips with a washcloth, so I did.

I noticed some things. A few spots of blood on the collar of her robe. A couple more on the back cushion of the chair. I asked her what happened.

“Vandals,” she whispered. “It was them vandals.”

Somewhere, far off in the distance, I heard the pop of gravel under tires, and mad cackling over a roaring engine. I felt my heart cinch up. I took Mom into bed, and crashed out on the couch. Sleep didn’t come.

9.

Next day, I went to Kenny’s house, see if he still lived there. He did. Not long after I knocked, he opened up the door a crack to see who it was. Etched into the frame, up and down the wood, were all kinds of weird symbols. Burned into the wood, by the looks of it.

“I thought you might come back,” he said.

Kenny’s house was a museum left for the spiders and dust mites. Bunch of Route 66 paraphernalia hanging on the walls, some of it pretty rusted. Had a bunch of car parts — chrome hubcaps, some side and rear mirrors and weird hood ornaments from cars I’d never seen before. Maps, too, hanging everywhere, marked up in red pen. Strangest of all were the mason jars of different types of stone and gravel sitting on a few bookshelves.

I reached out and grabbed a fistful of his shirt. Pulled him close.

“Start talking. Tell me what’s going on around here.”

He told me. I wish he hadn’t.

But you already know the story. Highway dies. Town follows suit. All the creatures of decay settle in for a meal. All the scavengers, hungry for blood.

Except, Kenny — excuse me, *Kenneth* — told me that I was wrong about one thing.

“The highway isn’t dead,” he explained. “Make no mistake, it’s dying. Drying up like a snake baking in the sun. But there lurks a little life left in the road. And you can help me stir that life anew.”

Took a deep breath. Then I told him I’d help him. Of course, then I figured he was just talking in metaphors. Turns out that wasn’t the case.

10.

We walked over the rickety bridge at noon. Sun beat down on us. Even though it was just us, the bridge still shuddered and swayed. A hammock of broken bones.

Didn’t talk much. Words don’t suit me, and Kenneth seemed lost in thought. He had a heavy backpack with him, and I could see his small round body shouldering the weight. I almost helped him. Don’t know why I didn’t, other than maybe I still felt he was a bit weird and repugnant.

He took me to a spot, an old closed-down exit off of the already decommissioned highway. The macadam was cracked in some parts, downright destroyed in others. Pricker-bushes and thistles pushed up through the road. Nature was reclaiming its land.

“This is the spot,” he said.

“Great. Now what?”

“Kneel,” he said, unzipping his bag. “You need to kneel. Cup your ear to the road. Listen to the sound.”

“I’m not Tonto.”

“Please.”

I spit, sighed, then tried it out. Whatever New Age crapola he wanted me to do, fine, I’d play the game. But only so long. One way or another I was going to get some answers.

I didn’t have to wait long.

Ear to the road, I wasn’t hearing much of anything except maybe a dull hum and some cicadas. I had to *ptoo* a couple of ants from trying to climb the mountain that was my nose. Growing frustrated, I tilted my head just a little to see what Kenneth was doing, and suddenly he was there, blocking out the sun. Small man towering over me.

He hit me in the temple with something heavy.

I rolled over, growling, starting to come to my feet.

But there he was again, and I saw that he had a goddamn broken *gear shift* in his hand, topped with an eight-ball. He told me he was sorry and moved too fast for such a dumpy sonofabitch: the shifter nailed me again in my temple. I saw black spots. Stars. Bright lights.

I limped backward, fell on my ass like a fool.

Blinking through the spots and lights, my jowl sticky with blood from my temple, I could see Kenneth come up to me with an old Coke bottle. He splashed something in his hand and flicked it on me like it was cologne, except it wasn’t cologne: the acrid stink of gasoline filled my nose.

“Sacrament of baptism,” he muttered.

I tried to stand, but he easily pushed me back down. Had another, different bottle in his hand: a plastic Mountain Dew bottle, filled with something dark and gooey. Poured it over my head. I mumbled something, tried to wipe it away, found my hands slick with ... motor oil, I think it was.

He whispered: "The blood of the road."

Then: "And now the body."

I heard the sound of metal on glass, saw him spinning the lid off one of those mason jars from his house. Couldn't stop him from pushing a palm full of gravel into the wound on my head, really *pressing* it hard into the blood and oil. I started to protest, but he kicked me hard in the face. All went dark.

11.

Wasn't long before I woke up and could read the Road Gospel. It was written on all parts of the road. Verses etched into each piece of gravel. Painted onto the macadam, written with cracks and fissures. Ants formed the language, too. I'd gone mad, I thought. But it all made so much sense.

I could hear the road, too, like Kenneth wanted. A dull pulse beat, a deep and distant heart that sounded more than a little like a piston pumping.

Kenneth stood behind me as the sun was going down, setting the horizon ablaze.

"You see it now," he said. "The highway is a part of you."

He was right. On my skin I could feel every bug that crawled atop it, every worm that squirmed beneath it. I could even feel the bridge, its bones broken much like my leg had been, splintered and thought to be ruined. But not ruined. Mendable. I strained, and thought maybe the boards moved. Not enough to do anything. Not yet.

I stood up, and that's when I felt the other thing.

Tires vibrating deep inside me.

Someone was coming. Someone with a '67 . . . no, '68 Mustang. Had an engine that roars. Passengers that cackle. The scavengers were coming back.

But I was the road now. I did not want them here.

In the distance, I saw their headlights. Just pinholes of light right now, but winking, growing, coming closer. I clenched my fists, and I felt the asphalt beneath me *tighten* — cracks easing shut, biting off roots and weeds that had grown up through it. Through me.

Kenneth made a sound, a kind of mad giggle.

I told him to step back. "I think I got this," I whispered.

"Amen," he said, as the headlights came closer. I gritted my teeth and grinned.

Prodigal

Thomas closed the door of the confessional behind him and all but collapsed onto the kneeler next to the screen that separated him from the priest.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I can’t remember my last Confession. It’s been ten, maybe even twenty years. I know I was raised better than that, but...you know...”

Thomas shifted his weight, and the kneeler of the confessional creaked.

“I’m not even sure what I did was a sin, but I...I just don’t know where else to go.”

His voice dropped to a whisper.

“I’m a lamb among wolves, and I’m so very frightened.”

A hand ran over the wide, sweaty bald spot among Thomas’s fringe of grey hair.

“I’m not saying I haven’t sinned. I’ve lied and lost my temper. I’ve lusted. I’m no stranger to pride, and I haven’t been to Mass except on Christmas and Easter since the kids were small.”

A heavy sigh. Another creak of the kneeler.

“I’m here because I think I’m a pawn in some kind of massive conspiracy. I’ve worked in the governor’s office for thirty years. Took a job right out of college and just sort of worked my way up through the ranks. Kept my nose out of the politics. Half a dozen governors could’ve replaced me, but what crony wants a post making sure paper is pushed around properly? I’m pretty much an assistant office manager in the state records archives, so it probably never seemed worth the bother to anyone.”

A nervous laugh.

“The archives are a maze if you don’t know how to find things. Records get lost or misfiled all the time. Bad handwriting, a typo, a sleepy or indifferent clerk — all those mistakes add up, and sometimes it takes me days or even weeks to find a record, and I know the archives better than anyone. We archivists are human. We make mistakes. Except sometimes those mistakes aren’t accidents. Sometimes they’re ones I was told to make.”

Thomas licked his chapped lips nervously.

“They sent me my first instructions twenty-five years ago, back when I was still in the mailroom. Typed letter on a plain envelope with no return address. It told me fortune

would smile on me if I kept my eye out for a letter from a particular address intended for the Department of Natural Resources and put it in the mail slot of the Department of Health, instead. I don't know why I did it. Maybe it was because I felt unappreciated. Hated my boss and most of my coworkers. Besides, it seemed like such a strange request and harmless. It wasn't like I was giving a senator's mail to a rival, right? So I did it just to see what would happen. Two days later, an assistant from Health brought the letter to Natural Resources, and that was an end to it all. No one was hurt. No one was even terribly inconvenienced."

Thomas rubbed sweaty palms against his expensive suit pants.

"A week later, my number got called for the grand prize at a charity meat raffle — a year's supply of steaks from one of the best butcher shops in the city. We had steak dinners once a week that whole year. It wasn't a new car or a million dollars or anything, but it was a real treat for us. I was a mailroom clerk, and my wife was between jobs, so we couldn't afford steak dinners on my pay. It really gave us a taste of a life we had never imagined we could have, and when that year was up, going back to casseroles... It was hard."

Thomas's thick-fingered hands toyed nervously with the end of his tie.

"I had no proof that the letter and the raffle were connected. How could they be, right? It's just luck of the draw, and my ticket was as likely to be called as any other. But after three months without steak dinners, I got another letter. I think it was changing a phone number, but it was a long time ago. I didn't hesitate. The promotion came a few weeks later."

A wringing of hands.

"The last twenty-five years have all been like that. I get a letter maybe once or twice a year. Mostly I've delayed mail or misfiled documents, but once in a while I've changed a digit on someone's records — a phone number, an address, a birthdate. It's not like they've ever had me change something that couldn't be fixed. Usually no one ever notices or cares. At worst, someone has to make a few phone calls or send some documents to fix the mistake. 'It's just a clerical error, sir, but regulations require that you send us a copy of your driver's license to correct it. It will only be a few business days, and we apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you.' That kind of nonsense. People expect that the government is going to lose their paperwork, so no one is ever really surprised."

Another uncomfortable laugh.

"You'd think computers should have made this harder to hide, but it's easier than ever. It used to be hard to change a 4 into a 7 without it being obvious, but now they're just buttons half an inch away from each other on a keyboard, and that mistake happens every day. Keystroke loggers and change history logs are out there, but I.T. isn't going to review them unless they're convinced someone is embezzling or stealing information. They're not going to pull those records over a typo or stray mouse click. They don't have time for that crap."

Thomas's hands were on his tie, again, rolling and unrolling it absently.

"Anyway, the meat raffle was just the beginning. Promotions. Raises. I've got to be careful around slot machines because they tend to get generous with me, and the casinos get wise to that real quick. Flat tires and petty burglaries are problems other people have, not me. Used to be I was doing it all to get something out of it for me and my wife, but now it's all about our kids. They get all my luck, now — no serious accidents or illnesses. My daughter is a gifted pianist. She's had all the right music teachers all her life — a kind one when she was uncertain, a tough one when she needed to push herself to the next level, a well-connected one when she was ready to enter the public eye. Now she's at the New

England Conservatory. Full ride scholarship, too. Otherwise we'd never be able to afford it. My son? Charter high school for math and science. Most prestigious in the city. Only takes a third of the students who apply, and it picks new students by lottery. My family is incredibly lucky, incredibly blessed, and the only price I pay is to make mistakes that anyone in my position could have made."

Thomas paused for a long time, as if working up the courage to continue. The words came out in an explosion.

"But a couple months back the largest bridge in the city collapsed in the middle of rush hour. Thirty people killed, close to a hundred injured, a tanker truck filled with gasoline set two miles of the river on fire. It'll cost millions to build a new bridge. A lot of people are laying it all at the feet of Governor 'Cut Highway Spending' Walker, and I hear he's getting clobbered in the polls with Election Day just a couple months away. Everyone wants to know how this tragedy could've happened. What has me so upset is I know why it happened."

Sweat ran unnoticed down Thomas's back as he spoke. He took a deep breath and slowed down.

"Not terrorism, if that's what you're thinking. Investigation confirmed the bridge supports just gave out. Ordinary wear and tear. Would never have happened if some critical repairs had been performed five years ago as was recommended in the inspectors' last report. It was my job to find that report in the archives. Took me three weeks to do it because it was one of the ones I was instructed to lose. Except when I was told to lose it, it didn't recommend any such thing. The bridge had a clean bill of health, and I remember wondering why anyone would want to hide it in some obscure file folder. It would be like a kid hiding a report card that was straight As from his parents. But when I found it, I had to pretend I hadn't because my name showed as the last person to modify the file, and it didn't match the one the inspectors had on their records — the one that showed a bridge in desperate need of repairs."

Thomas's hands clasped together tightly in desperate supplication.

"I renamed and moved the file, but I swear to God I didn't make any of the other changes! The report was changed from 'needs immediate repairs' to 'no issues found' before I lost it. Who with any scrap of human decency would make such an obvious, potentially catastrophic change to a record like that? I thought about that long and hard, and I think I'm starting to put the pieces together."

Thomas sighed heavily.

"I think they've got lots of people in my office working for them. One person changes the report from 'needs immediate repairs' to 'needs repairs soon' — a minor change that wouldn't hurt anyone. Another changes it from 'needs repairs soon' to 'additional repairs recommended.' Voila! Crumbling bridge looks perfectly safe on paper. Then the record was moved and renamed by the only person who knows the archives well enough to find it again — me. If I admit I found the record, I'm implicating myself. Even looking at the change history, no one is going to believe six or eight people made honest mistakes. They're going to assume it was something I orchestrated, and they're going to want to know why. And so I'm trapped."

This last came out as a croak. Thomas cleared his throat.

"While I was still figuring out what to do next, I got another letter — this time in a thick manila envelope. I put it through the shredder without even opening it. I figured they can't blackmail me with things I haven't done. But when I came back from lunch it was still sitting on my desk. No matter how many times I shredded it or threw it away or tore it

into tiny pieces, it kept coming back when I wasn't looking. It still took me three days to work up the courage to open it."

Thomas shuddered at the memory.

"I kind of expected some kind of appeal, begging me to keep working for them. Maybe they would feed me some line about how this tragedy I helped cause was for the greater good, that it would mean better roads and safer roads for everyone in the state. I'm used to listening to that at work, even if I keep my nose out of it. But it wasn't a plea."

He sobbed once but quickly regained some modicum of self-control.

"It was a doctor's report, complete with photos of my daughter after some kind of horrible attack. The worst part was her hands, which the doctor said were beyond reconstructive surgery. They had pounded them with a hammer or something — shattered them like pottery and flattened them like they were steaks. Not only would she never play piano again but she was going to lose both hands. The hospital had notified the police, the report read, but they had no leads, and the victim had no memory of the attack. I...I had to know."

Thomas wiped his nose on his sleeve without seeming to notice it.

"She answered on the second ring. I was so surprised I just babbled, at first, begging her to tell me if she was okay. She assured me that she was fine, nothing was wrong, and why did I sound so upset? That's when I noticed the date of the attack on the report was tomorrow. I mean, the next day. Of course I rushed my baby home. Took steps to keep my family safe. We have a beautiful lake house. It was the longest night of my life."

The tie was stretched tight between Thomas's hands, now, the colored silk twisted.

"The next morning, I found the envelope on my bedside table even though I left it at home. I have no idea how it got there. The doors were locked and barricaded, and the burglar alarm hadn't gone off. I ran to check on my family, but they were all fine. I opened the envelope where they couldn't see it. This time, it was a doctor's report describing a horrible car accident that had left my son paralyzed and badly brain damaged. And again, the date was the next day. The report said it happened on the way back from the lake house. And that's when I finally got it. It wasn't just the governor's office they were into, it was everything. Everywhere. The message was clear. All the good luck they've given my family they can take away. They can turn it all into bad luck."

Thomas moved his face so close to the screen that his lips almost touched it, and he whispered very softly.

"And that's when I realized the truth about the bridge. They knew five years ago that it would happen, before our governor started talking about how the state is too broke to start new road projects. Before he was even running for governor. I looked up a couple of my other little clerical errors, last week. Compared documents to the originals. Figured out the consequences of those errors. None of them is as bad as the bridge, but I think people have lost homes, custody battles, driver's licenses. One criminal who should have been freed on governor pardon hasn't been, yet. I feel like there's a pattern in all this, like someone is laying out plans years or even decades in advance and using planned mistakes to make them come true. But that's impossible. No one can predict the future that clearly. We can't even be sure of tomorrow's weather."

Thomas paused as if to give the priest a chance to tell him it was all in his head, that he needed a vacation or a therapist.

Instead the priest spoke a single word in a New York accent. "Continue."

Thomas drew back from the screen a little and spoke in a rush as if he expected to be interrupted at any moment.

"I think there's something unnatural going on. Devil-worshippers, evil psychics, I don't even know what. I never believed any of that was real, but the bridge, the doctor's report, the envelope that follows me around — it's not just a conspiracy. Even after the envelope, I thought maybe it was just really well-connected people, government, men in black, I don't know. But then I saw the wall."

Thomas craned his neck around in the confession booth, as though trying to look out of it. He reached out his hands and touched the walls, and then dropped his voice. "I saw it outside my daughter's school. I took the day off to watch her play, and as she was walking into school ahead of me, I saw the wall of the building...God, I don't even know how to describe it.

"The wall *breathed*. It *pulsed*. There was a rhythm to it, and I stood there, watching. I tried to walk up and touch it, but I couldn't make my feet move. But I really had to face it then.

"I don't want to kill anyone else, but I don't think anyone who doesn't have powers to match theirs can protect my family from them if I disobey. So I got to thinking that if there is one conspiracy out there that's in touch with...I don't even know what, there must be others. I just have to find them. The Masons were the first ones that came to mind. Everyone knows they're up to something. But I don't know what they'd want in return, and that's how I got into this mess in the first place. And then there's the Church. Been around for thousands of years. Wields tremendous, worldwide power. I remembered something my grandmother used to say, in the gospel of Matthew — whatever you ask, it shall be given. Something like that."

The priest coughed a little, but Thomas didn't notice. Hands clasped together in supplication once more, he started to cry.

"I beg you, Father. For the love of God, please help me! Even if you don't know anything about the Church's secrets, you surely know someone who does or who knows someone who does. Don't let these monsters hurt my little girl! Take me under the Church's wing and shelter me from them. I promise on my hope of heaven to come back to the faith and serve God until my dying day if you'll just help me get free of this conspiracy."

Thomas was breathing heavily, as if the confession had been a kind of marathon. For a long while, the priest said nothing.

"Father?" Thomas whispered. Sweat rolled down his face.

"My poor, lost son," came the gentle reply. "The Church welcomes back every prodigal that returns to Christ. Speak words of contrition for the sins you have committed, and God will grant you His absolution."

Thomas scrubbed the sweat on his face with the back of his hand. He hesitated, seeming to wonder if he had been wrong to come here for help. At last he spoke words he had learned as a boy.

"Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and detest all my sins because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, my God — who are all good and deserving of my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace, to atone for my sins and amend my life. Amen."

“Christ in His mercy died for the forgiveness of our sins, and all those who come to Him receive his mercy. I extend to you and your family the protection of Christ.”

Thomas’s countenance brightened. “Does this mean you can free me from these agents of evil, Father?”

“Of course, my son. Did not Christ preserve the adulteress’s life from those who would do her harm? Were not the apostles and saints able to work all manner of miracles in His name? Did you think the age of miracles ever ended?”

“I’ve never...seen a miracle, Father,” he admitted carefully.

“All of God’s works in their proper place, my son. I say again the Church will protect you from these evildoers. If God is for us, who can be against us?”

“I...” A choking sob of relief. “Thank you, Father!”

“As penance I would ask that you return to the Church as you promised and live out your Catholic faith.”

“Of course, Father.”

“Live out Christ’s teachings. Come to Mass. Give to the poor.”

“I will, Father.”

“One other thing.”

Thomas froze, and it felt like all the sweat soaking his clothing had turned to ice. “Yes, Father?”

“It concerns us that someone is wielding occult influence in the governor’s office. It worries us very much. As part of your penance, you will use your influence to do Christ’s work there. It may resemble some of the work you have already done for this conspiracy, except this time you will know whose work you are doing. You know the Church will not ask you to do anything that is sinful.”

Thomas trembled at these words. “Father, I... I don’t really want to continue...”

“The servants of the Enemy are many, my son. We will protect your family, but we need you to help the Church in return. If they can cause one catastrophe, they can cause others, and you can help us stop them.”

Thomas swallowed hard, and tears welled up in his eyes. He seemed on the point of refusing, of taking his chances elsewhere. “As the Lord commands,” he managed in a tight voice.

“You will receive letters from us. The inside flap of the envelope will be marked with a cross. Read and obey.”

The kneeler creaked as Thomas wrung his tie until his knuckles were white. “Please don’t make me do this. Give me any other task, but not that.”

“Would that I could, my son,” the priest said gently. “You are the only one we have in the governor’s office, the only one who can help us.”

Thomas took out his cellphone suddenly and looked at the wallpaper — a picture of his family together on a cruise they had won in some sweepstakes. They all looked so happy, so content. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt the way he looked in that picture. He stuffed the phone back in his pocket and exhaled slowly.

“I’ll do it. For my family’s sake.”

“For God’s sake,” the priest corrected.

“For God’s sake, as well.”

“Then I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Go now in peace and sin no more.”

“Amen,” Thomas mumbled almost unintelligibly as he stood up and all but staggered out of the confessional.

On the other side of the screen, Father Patrick took a deep breath and clutched his crucifix. He trembled as he whispered. “Master?”

The shadows in the confessional seemed to move ever so slightly. The outer wall seemed to pulse in time with the priest’s heartbeat. The priest swallowed hard.

“Your...asset in the governor’s office...”

The shadows pressed closer, and Father Patrick shrank back from them reflexively.

“Thomas Moore. He’s been...retained. He won’t stray again.”

The shadows were still for a moment as though considering this, but the pulse continued.

The priest squeezed his crucifix, fighting against the terror his master’s presence always inspired. “You don’t need to hurt his family. He might stop cooperating if you do.”

A voice spoke in Father Patrick’s mind. “The next asset comes. Retain it.”

And then the presence was gone, and another pawn — a policewoman in her late 20s — stepped into the confessional and begged the Church’s protection. “Oh bless me, Father, for I have sinned....”

Quality of Life

JoAnne hopped out of the car and rushed to the front door, leaving Bill behind. She fumbled out her keys and opened the door. All the floors were hard wood and gleamed with a dark, rich luster. The main rooms were covered in wood paneling and all the lighting and windows had a rich, almost organic feel to them. The moving van pulled up and the movers started unpacking their meager belongings.

Bill followed JoAnne into the house at a more sedate pace. “You’re going to love it here Jo,” he called out to her as she roamed the house.

“I already do. This place is perfect,” she called back as she moved from room to room. That part she meant. “I can’t wait to meet the neighbors.” Those words sounded hollow even to her ears. She was actually dreading to meet the neighbors. She was afraid they would be housewives. Joanne had a very specific notion of housewives and she wanted nothing to do with them.

As JoAnne expected, the neighbors only waited a few days to come snooping around. She was puttering about the kitchen, putting away cookware and pots when the doorbell chimed. She pulled herself together and left the open boxes in the middle of the kitchen floor. She peeked out the little side window beside the large oak door and saw three women standing on her front porch, each carrying some kind of baking dish covered in foil. She pulled the door open and tried to look inviting.

The women were all smiles as they babbled together, “Oh, you must be Mrs. Peters. We brought you some home warming gifts.” JoAnne tilted her head at the stilted phrase, but none of her visitors seemed to notice as they pushed their way past her and into the house. JoAnne was taken by surprise and stared at them as they clucked at each other over her unpacked boxes and half set-up house. She felt a stab of embarrassment that quickly passed into anger. She shut the door a little harder than she intended. The women hushed in surprise. She plastered a smile on her face and let out a small apologetic “oops.”

“Oh, dear, are you unpacking all of this alone?” asked one woman with long blonde hair and striking blue eyes. She was wearing a long red plaid skirt with a matching red button-down shirt. Her hair was pulled back into a high pony-tail with a long red ribbon. She looked almost like she could fit into the 50’s ideal of the perfect housewife. JoAnne looked down at her own wardrobe of ripped blue jeans and an oversized flannel shirt and felt outclassed.

The women were staring at her. "I'm sorry, I just wasn't expecting company. I've been trying to unpack while Bill is at work." She schooled her temper. These women were harmless, despite their housewife-ness. Seriously, "Mrs. Peters?" "Oh, dear?"

JoAnne stifled a giggle. "Thank you so much for coming over. You really didn't have to Mrs. . .?"

"I'm Betty," the 50s woman told her. "This is Patty," she pointed at a woman in blue, "and this is Laura." She gestured to a woman wearing a powder pink suit.

"I'm JoAnne, but you can call me Jo." She took the baking dish from Betty's hands and brought it into the kitchen.

"Well, JoAnne, we're so happy to have you join our little neighborhood. I can see you aren't really ready for guests though." Betty gestured to the mess in the kitchen.

JoAnne steeled herself against the annoyance and just smiled. "Yes, well, we lived in an apartment for two years before moving here. Most of these boxes are from our old house and I haven't seen a lot of it in some time."

"I know how it is." Patty chimed in sympathetically. "When Steve and I moved here, I spent two weeks unpacking." She almost looked sad. "Did Bill get a job in town? Is that why you moved here?"

"Yeah, he's working at the power plant. It's a great job and a real step up for us." She said as she made room on the counter for each of the women's dishes.

"Oh." Patty sounded a little sad. "It's a shame really." Before Patty could say anything more, Betty shot her a pointed look and she stopped talking. JoAnne opened her mouth to ask exactly *what* was a shame, but Betty jumped in.

"Patty and Steve live next door to you on the left." Betty said, reclaiming control of the conversation. "Laura and Josh live on your right and I live across the street. My husband, Paul, works at the power plant with Bill." Her tone was matter of fact and her smile never left her face. The combination unnerved JoAnne.

"Well, I'm glad to meet people. I wasn't sure if this was one of those neighborhoods where people talked to each other." The women grated on her nerves and small talk wasn't unpacking the boxes.

"Of course we talk. What else would we do while our husbands are working?" Betty's smile looked so plastered on, JoAnne thought her face might crack.

"Oh, I was going to look for a job." JoAnne said.

Betty was smiling, but her voice was acid. "Why ever would you want to do that?"

Startled, JoAnne searched the woman's smiling face. "Because I like to work. I can't stand the thought of being idle all day."

"It won't be good to start working just to quit when you start having children." Patty said, fear cracking her voice as she glanced at Betty.

"Oh, Bill and I don't want children, so that shouldn't be a problem." She ground her teeth and half hoped they'd press the issue.

The women took in a collective gasp. "No children?" Betty sounded shocked. *Yep, here we go.* "But that's what you're here for."

JoAnne opened her mouth, then closed it. Time to practice some of that restraint that she'd heard of. "Yes, well. I have a lot of unpacking to do. Thank you for stopping by."

JoAnne started walking towards the women, herding them out of the kitchen and back towards the front door. They hesitated for a moment, as though they were going to stay and fight with her about it.

“How could you not want children? I can’t imagine that Bill would let you get away with that.” Betty said her smile faltering.

“You don’t know my husband, and you don’t know me.” She said in clipped angry tones. “And if the choice to have kids is something your husbands ‘let you get away with,’ then I’m *really* sorry for you.” The other women reacted as though her words were blows. They flinched and rushed toward the door. Betty held her ground for a moment longer then retreated after them.

“You’ll change your mind.” Laura said meekly as they passed out of the door and into the front lawn.

“Not likely.” JoAnne said with a scowl as she slammed the door behind them. She slumped into a chair in the living room, all motivation to unpack gone. She waited there for Bill to come home hours later.

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He came in and passed right by her on his way to the kitchen. She watched him go by in silence, and didn’t bother to say anything until she heard him scrounging for food.

“Casserole’s on the counter.” She called in to him.

“Thanks.” He said passively, and she heard him pulling out dishes. She got up and went into the kitchen to talk to him.

“I met the neighborhood housewives today.” She sounded deflated.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Bill seemed preoccupied with microwaving his dinner.

“They brought up children within two minutes of being here. Why are people always like that?” she huffed.

Bill mumbled to himself and watched the microwave time count down. He did not respond.

“I got upset. But they were being really rude.” She crossed over to the counter and spooned some of the casserole onto a plate for herself.

The microwave dinged and Bill pulled his food out. He walked past her into the living room.

“Bill? Are you even listening to me?” She stopped getting food and looked at him sitting on the couch in front of the empty T.V. stand.

“Oh, I’m glad you are making friends,” he said in a distracted tone.

“Friends? I said they were rude, and they got all ‘oh no’ and ‘why not’ when I mentioned we didn’t want children. I wouldn’t call them friends.” She pantomimed fainting as she mimicked the women’s reactions.

Bill just nodded and kept eating.

“Bill?” She went to his side and touched his arm.

He stared up at her with a blank expression on his face. “Children sound fine. Whatever you want honey.” He smiled wanly.

“What?” She felt a mixture of fear and anger creep into her. “What is wrong with you? We decided together we don’t want children. Are you feeling okay?” She pressed the back of her hand against his forehead.

"I'm supposed to go see a doctor tomorrow." Bill said. It was as though he was trying to pull the correct response out of his head.

"Good. You're kind of scaring me." She finished dishing up her plate of food and sat beside Bill to eat her dinner in silence.

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The next morning, JoAnne decided she was going to attempt to talk to the neighbors again, but on her terms. She waited about an hour after Bill had left to go to Patty's house. She knocked on the front door of the little blue house, and waited. The door opened wide to Patty's smiling face. The woman looked more confident than she had the day before.

"Hi, JoAnne, do you need something?" Though Patty was smiling, she filled the doorway and made no move to invite JoAnne inside.

"I just wanted to come by and apologize for the way I acted yesterday." She said, standing awkwardly on the front porch.

"As well you should." Patty said, matter-of-factly. JoAnne just looked at her, not sure what else to say. Patty continued, "Betty is right, you know. Children are our real purpose here. We should all be more like Betty. She's the best." Her voice sounded flat and lifeless and her smile looked like wax.

"Okay. Well, that isn't what I was apologizing for. Anyway, I'll see you later." JoAnne started backing away from the woman.

"Goodbye, then." Patty, still smiling, shut the door in her face.

Patty's reception left her feeling drained, but she was determined to talk to all of the women today. She walked over to Laura's house and knocked on the door. There was no answer. She rang the doorbell, but there was still no response. She tried to look into the windows, but the curtains blocked any view of the inside. She sighed.

JoAnne peered at the house across the street where Betty lived. She took a deep breath and steeled herself to talk to the woman. JoAnne walked purposefully to the door and knocked. There was no response, and she rang the doorbell. She waited a respectable amount of time and turned to leave, relief flooding her. She had tried, but no one was home. A soft click drew her attention and she whirled to see the front door swing inward on its hinges. There was no one in the doorway, but JoAnne could hear something deep in the house.

"Betty?" she asked tentatively. There was no response. She walked into the house and called a little louder, "Betty, it's JoAnne. From across the street?" She was met with silence broken only by a soft wet sound coming from the back of the house. She slowly moved into the house, shutting the door behind her. The sound remained faint, but she could tell it was coming from the bedroom. As she drew closer, she thought it sounded like someone drinking out of a straw. The bedroom door was cracked, but JoAnne couldn't see anything through the gap.

"Betty?" she kept her voice soft. Again, there was no response. JoAnne started to push the door open, but heard a loud thud from inside the room, and the sucking sound stopped. She paused for a moment and then heard a low moan. JoAnne suddenly had a moment of sheer panic. What was she doing inside someone else's home, wandering into their bedroom? She turned on her heel and ran down the hallway towards the front door. As she was passing out of the door into the bright morning light, she heard another loud thud and the door slammed behind her. She paused just a moment outside, wondering what was going on, and

if she should contact someone. She shook herself mentally and decided it wasn't any of her business. She walked briskly back to her own house and locked the door behind her.

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The phone rang twice and her mother's voice greeted her on the other line. "Hello?"

"Hi, mom. How are you?" She said, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"Jo? Are you all right? How was the move?" The concern in her mother's voice was apparent. JoAnne felt bad about worrying her mother, and decided to keep the conversation light.

She sucked in a deep breath to settle her nerves and smiled as she spoke to make her voice sound lighter, "Everything's fine. I'm still trying to get things unpacked. Bill has been to work a couple of days already and he loves it." That was better.

"Well, that's great. I'm glad you called."

JoAnne's smile felt more genuine. "I miss your voice. How are the dogs getting along?"

"Oh, your little Buster has taken a liking to Roxy. You should see them playing." She laughed her infectious laugh.

"Look mom, I was thinking about coming down next weekend to pick him up. I should have the house settled by then, and I wouldn't mind seeing you."

"Oh sure, that sounds great. I guess you can afford the gas money now." Her mother was always the pragmatist.

"Yes. We can afford a lot of things now. It's a big load off my mind." JoAnne didn't like talking about her financial situation with her mother, but at least now the conversation could be positive.

"How do you like the neighborhood?"

"I hate the neighbors. I wanted to talk to you about it, but it can wait for my visit." She attempted to make the statement sound light, but her mother knew her too well.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it now?" Concern crept back into her voice. The line crackled and hissed over her mother's words.

"Some of them came over yesterday. They immediately started talking about children. It was uncomfortable." The line crackled again.

"Where are you? The connection sounds horrible." Her mother's voice was choppy.

"Just in the living room. Anyway, I went to go try to talk to them this morning. One of them seemed nice yesterday and was completely cold to me today. The other ones weren't home. Then, when I was just about to come back to the house, the door swung open..." There was a loud popping sound over the line and then nothing. JoAnne looked at the cell phone for a moment and tried to redial her mother's number. There was a busy tone and then the line cut out again. The bars on her cell phone shrank down to nothing and she cursed and tossed it on the table. She spent the rest of the day unpacking, deliberately not worrying about her neighbors.

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Bill came home late that night and had to reheat leftovers. He didn't say anything to her at all while eating.

"Bill, I'm going to pick up Buster from Mom's house next weekend," she told him as they were brushing their teeth and getting ready for bed.

"You can't," he said simply.

"Why not?" She was immediately deflated. She didn't realize how much she was looking forward to seeing her mom.

"The Dicksons have invited us over for dinner that Saturday night." His tone was flat and lifeless.

She stared hard at him, but he seemed to think that was the end of it. As she got into bed she asked, "What did the doctor say?"

"Doctor?" Bill's disoriented word made JoAnne cringe.

"You said you weren't feeling well and were going to see the doctor today." She reminded him.

"Oh. He said I need a sleep machine," he said as he turned out the light and rolled over.

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The next few days were much like the last. She spent the morning unpacking, and the afternoon cooking dinner. Bill came home and said little, if anything. Some delivery men came the next day with a large device that they installed in the bedroom. There were hoses and a mask that Bill was supposed to wear while sleeping. Some of the hoses seemed to lead to nothing, and JoAnne wondered what he was supposed to do with it. Bill came home late that night and she was already in bed when he came in. The following nights were the same.

One particularly sunny afternoon she spent taking in the sun on the front lawn. She noticed that there were never any cars passing and her neighbors did not seem to be home. She was certain they didn't work, at least after the comments they made to her. So what were they doing all day? She had visions of them gossiping with each other over the hedges, but that was clearly not the case. Maybe they just called each other and talked on the phone all day. JoAnne looked down at her own cell phone. The bars were still completely gone.

She sighed and got up from the lawn chair she had been lounging in and decided to try one more time to talk to Betty before leaving it up to the weekend. She knocked and rang the doorbell but there was no response. She waited, wondering if the door would pop open again. It did not. She tried the handle, just in case it was unlocked, but it was shut tight.

JoAnne felt a little foolish standing outside her neighbor's house. All the windows seemed to have thick drapes. She walked around to the side of the house, wondering if Betty might be in the back yard. As she approached the back of the house, she heard muffled thumping and a sickening sloshing sound coming from somewhere in the back of the house. She looked at the window she was beside and realized that it was the same bedroom she had nearly entered the day before. She pressed her face against the window and peered inside. She could see what looked like the outline of a bed with a figure laid out on it. It might have been Betty, but she couldn't tell through the curtains. Cords or cables surrounded the bed, and seemed to be going directly into the figure. With each thump, the cables pulsed which was followed by a slosh and a wet slurping sound. *Thump. Slush. Slurp. Thump. Slush. Slurp.* The sounds made JoAnne's stomach lurch. She ran from the window and back to her house without looking back.

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That night, Bill came home before she went to bed. She sat with him while he ate dinner, but they didn't talk. The distance that had grown between them was killing JoAnne.

"You know, I was thinking. With this house and the job, we should really consider having kids." Bill's voice broke into the silence as they were going to bed.

JoAnne felt as though her stomach had dropped out of her feet and her heart had leapt into her throat. "You what?"

"You know. I'm making good money, the schools here are good. We could even hire someone to help you out around the house." His words did not sound loving or happy, simply matter of fact.

"I don't..." her words left her. She was so shocked that she didn't know where to start. They had agreed wholeheartedly that children were not for them. He had been acting so strange lately. She was chalking it up to his not feeling well, but this?

"You don't have to thank me. I have been thinking on it some time now, and I think we're ready." His smile looked sick and plastered on his face.

JoAnne's heart was pounding. She crawled into bed next to him and pulled the covers up to her chin. She attempted to start the conversation again, but Bill just patted her hand and ignored her. She watched him pull his sleep mask over his face and roll over. She felt sick and couldn't sleep.

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When Bill left the next morning, JoAnne was up and drinking coffee. The thought of her husband's strange behavior was driving her insane. She wasn't sure what was going on, but she didn't care much for what this place seemed to be doing to him. In fact, she wasn't sure she liked what it was doing to her. She felt a bit like a basket case. She didn't know if she was imagining the strange things going on at the Dicksons' house. She didn't know if she was over sensitive to Bill's sudden cold and logical personality. She didn't know what was wrong with her phone either and she wanted to call her mom.

She decided to leave that day to go to her mother's. She packed a small overnight bag and left a note for Bill on the coffee table. She jumped into her car and started it up. The car sputtered to life for a few seconds, and then immediately fell dead. She tried it again, but it just clicked and refused to start. "Shit!" JoAnne sat behind the steering wheel for a few moments before bursting into tears.

She slowly got out of the car and started towards the house. She couldn't face another day alone in the house just for Bill to come home late and ignore her, or worse, talk to her in that emotionless tone. She wondered if the neighbors were watching her. She felt as if their eyes were on her and it forced her into action. She started walking away from the house, determined to go anywhere else.

She walked as far as the end of the neighborhood before she made up her mind that she would go to Bill's work, tell him how she was feeling, get his car and go to her mom's.

The walk took her the better part of an hour, and she was tired when she finally arrived at the power plant. It wasn't like any power plant she had ever seen before. There was no fencing around the place, just a wide, green hedge. She passed through on a foot path and went to the front of the building. The whole place seemed to be made of hard wood and dark oak. Even the glass panels had an organic look to them. As she approached the building, she felt warmth emanating from the walls along with a pulse, as though it were

alive. She pushed the ridiculous thought out of her mind and entered the building. The wooden floors were a deep red and shined with a luster that was glowing. The hallway was empty except for one reception desk. There was no one there, but a door to the left indicated "employees only." She walked behind the desk and pushed through the door.

On the other side was a sight both wonderful and horrifying. The building's organic exterior was only a pale mimic of the lustrous interior. The gleaming wooden floors and walls throbbed as though breathing. She could see men in either red or white suits wandering about carrying large wet looking parcels from one area of the large cavernous room to another. Hoses and tubes with red and blue liquid flowing through them snaked about the chamber in a confusing maze. The hoses led in and out of large receptacles placed at intervals throughout the room, and lead out through the walls in various places. As she stood gawking, three men in white approached her.

"I'm sorry, I'm looking for my husband, Bill." She said to them as they surrounded her.

They didn't respond. Instead they grabbed her and started to carry her off into the maze of tubes and receptacles. "Bill!" She screamed and struggled against her captors.

"This area is for employees only. Foreign bodies must be removed." One of the men said in a monotone.

"I'm sorry, please put me down. I'll leave." She was crying now, hysteria set in. She struggled feebly against the strong men.

"Foreign bodies must be analyzed and eliminated. Please wait here." They set her down on top of one of the receptacles and walked away. She tried to jump down and run out, but the hoses around the receptacle wrapped around her feet and hands, pinning her there.

"Help! Please, somebody help me!" She cried out, but no one seemed to notice.

Small needles pricked her palm and she felt something ooze underneath her skin. She yelled and cried out. Several men walked past her carrying various loads, but they were completely indifferent to her. She felt herself growing weaker and eventually gave up calling for help.

After an indeterminable amount of time a man in white approached her. It was Bill. He was here to remove her. He needed to keep the system clean.

"Foreign body, you seem to be in the wrong area. Please follow me and I will escort you to your proper location." JoAnne's muscles moved automatically, which was just fine, just the way it should be. She followed Bill out of the room.

She knew where she was supposed to be. She was a reproductive organ. The reproductive organs had no reason to be in the heart. How silly of her. Bill led her to his car and slowly drove her home. Neither of them spoke. When they arrived at their house JoAnne stepped out of the car and went to the front door. Patty was standing at her front door, watching. JoAnne waved, and Patty waved back.

JoAnne vaguely wished she could talk to Betty. Betty, after all, was the best, but she'd be busy at the moment. She'd be reproducing. That's *why* she was the best. JoAnne shrugged. She'd see Betty later.

She went up to the bedroom and she saw a new device had been delivered for her. She lay down on the bed and attached the tubes into the needle holes left in her hands. Somewhere downstairs, her phone rang, but JoAnne was far too busy for gossip.

Residents

Someone's breath tickled Russ' cheek. Warm air and a faint odor of sweat and perfume nudged him from sleep, his eyes flickering. He slid an arm across the tangled sheets, felt a pillow and searched in the darkness for a warm body.

He was alone. Russ forced his eyes open. The room was dim, lit only by slashes of sunlight that outlined the dark shade covering the window. He glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Nearly three o'clock in the afternoon. Just enough time to shower and get going.

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Russ scanned the neighborhoods of Skyview Acres as he drove to work. At least a third of the houses he passed were little more than skeletons — wood frames with plastic sheeting that flapped in the wind like loose skin. Most of the finished models still had *For Sale* and *Open House* signs in front of them. The wife would have hated this place, he thought. He pictured Simona tossing buckets of neon-colored paint at the beige-, tan- or gray-sided homes. He came to a stop sign and found himself staring at a swing set on somebody's front lawn. People with kids must have lived there, unless it was a prop to make the house more enticing to home buyers. He pulled away slowly, watching the vacant swings sway in the rearview mirror.

Ex-wife, he corrected himself. *Ex-wife*.

Russ checked his watch. He'd made three wrong turns just trying to get out of his tangled new subdivision. He was running late. Each day's drive to the university seemed to take him on a different route. He remembered the realtor describing the winding streets and unpredictable lanes between blocks as a good thing. "You don't get that boxed-in feeling that comes with a grid system," she'd said. Russ had nodded, looked at the clock on the realtor's desk; and wondered if Simona would show up or if he'd have to look through the brochures alone again.

Russ passed house after house, each so similar to the last that he wondered if he was simply circling the same block over and over again. A street ahead was closed off by construction barriers, though there was no crew evident. He turned left, half-sure he was back where he started in his own neighborhood. Then he saw the sign for Route 11 and checked his watch again.



Russ wheeled a bucket and mop into the first classroom on his route, whistling softly. The fall semester would begin in three weeks. Then he'd have a crew of two or three working under him. He'd have people to talk to, even if they were minimum-wage clock-watchers. Assuming, of course, he hadn't been fired for his own repeated tardiness.

As he moved to the front of the room, an intricate design drawn on the blackboard caught his eye. He flicked the switch for more light, and saw that a third of the board was covered by a tangle of different-colored curves and lines, some radiating from a central point, others emerging where two or more chalk lines crossed. At first it seemed that the image was just a random drawing, but as Russ stared, he could tell the strokes had been marked carefully, deliberately, with a steady hand. It was as if someone had tried to illustrate an explosion or a bursting firecracker.

Russ turned away from the blackboard just in time to see someone enter. For a second they stared at each other, and Russ thought how odd it was that neither of them was startled.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were cleaning in here," the woman said. She was dressed in a gray sweatshirt bearing the university logo; and a pair of faded khakis. Her hair was the color of black tea, cut straight and short. Looking at her face made Russ feel as if he'd been kissed. He wondered what kissing her would feel like. She dropped a pile of papers onto a desk and negotiated them into a tight stack. "I thought I could use the space. My office is kind of cramped."

"It's okay," Russ said. "I can come back later." At the edge of his vision, he could see the swoops and streaks on the blackboard. "I was just looking at that," he said, gesturing toward the image. "It's... beautiful." Russ hadn't realized that was true until he actually said it.

"It is, isn't it?" She responded.

Russ could smell floral perfume as she walked toward the blackboard. She traced a finger in the air, following a red curve that doubled back on itself.

"What... what is it exactly?" He adjusted the collar of his shirt.

"Oh..." She seemed to have forgotten he was there. "It's a diagram. A collision of subatomic particles."

"Yeah?" he said, stepping closer. "They're protons, electrons, that kind of thing? So what makes them collide?"

She frowned. "Quarks, positrons, ions.... They collide because we use a huge, expensive machine to make them collide."

Russ made a face that suggested he didn't quite believe her. "Why do that? Just to see what happens?"

"Actually, it's to see what *happened*. To see what happened at the beginning of everything."



That night, Russ walked the streets of his new neighborhood, drunk, imagining that the stars overhead were positrons, quarks, neutrinos, all the minuscule bits of matter and energy that Professor McKay — Diane — had described. Slamming them together, she had said, was a way to recreate the conditions of the Big Bang, the universal birthday. Like looking backward in time.

After walking down a particularly dark street — the streetlights there had not yet been wired — Russ recognized the melodic chatter of voices. He walked toward the sound, turning down a lane between houses. He heard feet scraping on driveway gravel. The clink of ice cubes in glasses. An occasional burst of laughter. The lane emptied onto a block of houses that all seemed finished. Across the street he saw silhouettes, people moving across a lawn. An arm, a head, a back, each shape visible for a few moments as someone passed across the light-colored siding of a house.

Russ thought about what he would say, that he'd been living there for a couple of weeks and had yet to meet anyone. He'd make a joke of it, and they'd laugh and invite him onto the patio for a drink. *We're neighbors, after all, they'd say. And here's Joe, and there's Bob and Betty, and that's Dave. He lives down the street....* Russ was practically in the yard when the noise ceased. He stepped between a few lawn chairs, turned in a circle and almost tripped over a rake that had been left in the grass. The yard was empty. The house was dark and quiet. There was a picnic table, a single empty glass laying on its side, dry. He stumbled and kicked a pile of empty beer bottles. He put a hand on the charcoal grill that stood near the table. It was cold.

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Russ put down his hammer. The last touches on the deck he was building would have to wait. He stood, stretched, leaned on the railing and looked out over the yard. Diane would arrive soon. He'd found her in the classroom every night last week and chatted her up with all the charm he could muster. He'd elicited details of her solitary, lonely struggle with formulas and geometry that he couldn't understand. The collision diagram hung over them as they talked, like a guiding star. And then she had accepted, much to his surprise, a casual invitation to grab a beer at the pub. There had been a short, intense kiss in the parking lot, and then an awkward goodbye.

Now they were going out for a proper dinner. Out on a Saturday night — the first night out since he'd moved to the neighborhood. Russ turned his back on the yard, walked toward the back door and stopped himself. He couldn't leave his tools outside. They'd been his father's.

His hammer was gone.

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Russ could tell by the chalk dust on the forearm of Diane's fitted sweater that she'd come directly from the university. To his relief, she'd had no trouble finding the house. "Your directions were excellent," she said as she passed over the threshold. She dropped onto his couch as if she was in her own living room.

"I'm kind of surprised," he said. "I can't seem to get in or out of this place without getting lost. I think I've driven up and down every street."

"Oh, it feels good to sit in a comfortable room," she sighed. "I need a better chair in my office. My driver's seat lost its spring a hundred miles ago."

He sat on the edge of the couch to face her. "I see you brought our favorite flower."

"What? Oh, God." She fluttered the pieces of paper in her hand. Russ could see the collision diagram on top, its multi-colored swirls and traces annotated with Diane's crabbed handwriting. "I meant to leave them in the car. I didn't even realize I was still holding them."

"You know," Russ said, "I was thinking about that the other day. Can't you just, you know, re-do whatever experiment it came from?"

"Ha!" She covered her mouth for moment. "Sorry. No, I can't. I'd need a particle accelerator. It's... a huge machine, miles of underground tunnels, equipment that fills a whole building. The university doesn't have one. They started to build one years ago, but it was never finished."

"How come?"

She leaned toward him conspiratorially. "That's where things get interesting. These things are so expensive to build, and, with all that money changing hands, some people tried to skim some of it. Dr. Wyveski, the guy who came up with this data, was involved. He ran off. The whole project was a fiasco and funding was withdrawn. They sold off the land to some developer, I think."

"Wow. I had no idea there was so much scandal in the academic world."

"I know! But here's my theory." She picked up the diagram. "The tunnels were there, a lot of the equipment was there. I think Wyveski managed to get things up and running before everything went sour. Which is where he came up with this screwed-up diagram. If I could just figure out which line represents what.... I'm sorry, Russ. You're not interested in all this nonsense."

"No, no. The drawing caught my eye.... I guess I kind of like it. Maybe I've been staring at it too long on the blackboard."

"I know I have." Diane laid the piece of paper with the image face down on the coffee table. "Can you believe it? I heard Wyveski joined some cult in India. Maybe the diagram drove him nuts."

• • • • •

Russ opened his eyes. Diane had turned over in her sleep. The moonlight coming through the window gave her skin a glassy sheen. He let his eyes linger on the slope of her collarbone, the rise and fall of her throat as she breathed, her nipples half-covered by the sheet. She'd told him, once, about some book she'd read, about a man who came "unstuck" in time. Russ felt that way now. It seemed the only explanation, the only way that the electric thrill of their conversation at dinner, the exquisite tension of the ride home, the awkward choreography of their lovemaking, could be followed by this moment of stillness.

He slipped out of bed. Diane murmured in her sleep. "They're all around us," she said, and rolled onto her stomach. Probably dreaming about atoms, Russ decided.

Downstairs, he took a pitcher of water from the refrigerator and poured some into a paper cup. As he raised it to his lips, he heard Diane scream.

He found her sitting on the side of the bed, wrapped in the blanket, her hands shaking as they clutched at a pillow. She looked up as he shot into the room. "I'm okay," she said. "Sorry I scared you."

"Scared me?" he asked. "Sounded like something scared you."

"I guess I was dreaming," she said, rubbing her eyes. "I was lying in bed and I looked out the window and saw... I thought I saw someone there. People."

“People?”

“It was their eyes. Staring. I mean... I was half awake, it seemed so real.”

Russ strode to the window and looked into the moonlit yard. “Sometimes I think neighborhood kids or somebody is screwing with me,” he said. “Making noise. Taking things. They’d need a ladder to get to this window, though.”

“I’m sure it was just my imagination.” She shifted, relaxing a bit, adjusting the blanket so it wasn’t wrapped quite so tight. “Listen, Russ, since we’re both awake...” she patted the mattress next to her. “Come here. I think we need to talk about a few things.”

“Oh,” he answered. “Uh-oh.”

• • • • •

Time really is moving faster now, Russ thought, as he watched Diane pace the living room, gathering her purse, her bottle of water, her keys and her stack of papers. Moments slipped from his grasp as if they were greased. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to hold onto them or let this experience fly past as quickly as possible.

“I’m really sorry, Russ. I don’t want to hurt your feelings or anything....” She paused in mid-stride, adjusted a sock and smoothed her pant leg over it. “It’s just, I’m busy with work. It’s better we keep this as a one-time thing. For now. I mean, let’s face it, we’re so different....”

“Because you’re a scientist and I’m just a janitor? I do have a college education, you know. ‘Facilities maintenance’ wasn’t my goal in life. Things just happened.”

She looked hurt. “I don’t mean anything like that. I guess I just wasn’t expecting so much to happen so quickly. I like you, but....”

“You need some space. Sure, I get it. Well, maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s better.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh, do you need directions to get out?”

“No,” she said, her keys jingling as she shouldered her purse. “It’s easy. Those streets you said were blocked off seem to be open now.”

• • • • •

Russ didn’t go to work that afternoon. Instead, he downed the last of the beers in his fridge, and went walking. He passed yard after yard, some lacking grass, others strewn with soccer balls, tricycles and garden hoses. All still and silent. “Where is everybody?” he shouted, feeling a tang of stomach acid back up in his throat. He stomped up to someone’s backyard gate and pushed until it opened. He lurched toward the house in a drunken, bowlegged stagger and saw an open window with blue-gray curtains fluttering in the breeze. He heard voices inside. “Who’s home?” he muttered, dropping an empty bottle in the grass. “Somebody’s home. Somebody be home. Your neighbor’s here.” He came to the backdoor of the house and steadied himself against the frame. He raised a hand to knock, but then let it fall. He turned the doorknob, pulled the screen door open and stepped inside.

It was his own house.

• • • • •

When the phone rang, Russ felt like he was falling. He flailed his arms, felt for the side of the couch and turned to plant his feet on the floor. His hand knocked the telephone off the coffee table just as he managed to force his eyes open.

“Russ...” The static behind the woman’s voice sounded almost musical.

“Simona... Diane? Is that you? Your voice is...” He shifted the phone to his other ear. “I can hardly hear you. What’s the matter?”

“I put... I put the pieces together. I just...”

“The what?” His throat was dry. “You just what?”

“They’re doing something to... everything is wrong... time, space....”

“Diane, where are you?”

“The sky is...” There was absolute silence for a few seconds, and then a dial tone.

Russ stood. He started to dial Diane’s cell number, misdialed, reset the phone and punched the numbers again. Halfway through, the rest of the number evaporated from his memory. “Three,” he whispered. “No, two. Three, two... Shit!”

A loud, synthesized ring startled him. It was his doorbell. He hadn’t heard it ring since he tested it on the day he moved in.

It rang again.

Russ walked toward the door, not sure why he was trying to be as silent as possible. He was two strides away when he saw the mail slot open and something slip through it and flutter to the carpet. He blinked and glanced to the front window, but the blinds were closed.

“What the hell?” he swore. He yanked the front door open and pushed past the screen. Diane’s car wasn’t out there like he half-expected. He went across the porch and down the steps. No one was there. No one was around at all.

Russ turned back toward the house and saw her. Diane was slumped against the vinyl siding to the side of the porch. He ran to her, hands shaking. When he knelt by her he saw his hammer lodged in the side of her head, a dark, syrupy mass dripping down her ear and cheek.

He backed away, turning around before he had to double over. Beer-scented vomit stung his lips.

He slipped and bashed his knee on one of the decorative rocks that lined the path to the porch, but he didn’t feel it. His leg buckling, he staggered away, desperate for help. A thunderous din greeted him. The noise was everywhere. Applause, the stamping of feet, whistling, shouts of joy and whoops of excitement. But there was no one to be seen. He spun around and rubbed tears from his eyes. He felt someone slap his back, felt someone pinch his cheek. He was pushed forward, turned, shoved, but he could see no one.

Russ ran. He could hear individual voices among the crowd, distant yet strangely intimate. He pushed against whatever forces acted on him. The sounds seemed to follow. “Almost there,” a thick male voice called out. “Very close now,” a child whispered. “A little further.”

He felt like he was running downhill no matter where he turned. The space around him blurred. Window panes, screen doors, vinyl siding, chain-link fences all flew past him. His lungs burned, his legs ached; and in his head a pattern formed. A map of streets, avenues,

intersections, of Skyview Acres. An image of lines and curves the he now realized was an exact match of the drawing he'd seen on the blackboard weeks before. He felt the pattern of lines and curves burning, branding themselves onto him.

Russ stopped. By car or foot, he'd traversed every street, lane and avenue in Skyview Acres. There seemed no point to going any further. The sky seemed to be gone, turned stark white.

"It's not a map," he suddenly realized.

"It's a key." As he spoke, he saw forms moving toward him, gliding down the crooked streets. The forms came closer, and Russ thought they were like clouds. Thick, dark swarms of humming, spinning particles. Drifting in and out of each cloud were the residents of Skyview Acres. Russ saw a basketball-sized globe of shadows that covered part of a dress and a disfigured woman's face. Another contained child-sized hands that opened and closed like flowers. A large one veiled a man's torso. It extended a dark pseudo-pod toward Russ. At its tip were inhumanly long fingers.

He knelt, shivering, too weak to scream.

"At last. You. Have the. Pattern. Inside you. Can see us. Now." The voice came from all around him. He didn't turn to look.

"Yes."

"We. Have been. All around. You."

Russ closed his eyes.

"Never be. Alone. Again. Welcome."

The shapes converged and stretched Russ through space and time. He could feel each part of his body grasped and manipulated. Something was passed over his head. Before he became blind he glimpsed a huge, bright room where rows of faces hung in the air, shivering. Mouths twitched and eyes blinked, as if an unseen puppeteer practiced manipulating their delicate mechanisms. The images whispered to each other. "Fallen." "Risen." "Fallen."

His feet stood somewhere in the future, his legs straining against something heavy. He felt his right arm pulled backward into the past. Parts of other bodies brushed past him, sent here and there, before and after, like drone bees.

Thoughts from somewhere else sprung into his mind. *No one must know.* The particle collision, the pattern it produced, it had unlocked a door that had kept Russ' tiny and forgotten alcove in the universe safe. But now the door was open. The residents of a larger house had noticed, and they were coming to renovate. Russ and his neighbors were the tools, the swarms were the workers. When the job was done, things more terrible and beautiful would arrive. It was hard for Russ to think of words to describe them. Clockwork angels, black suns, ancient children, a god machine.

And then he felt his fingers, some days or weeks in the past, being forced around something hard and smooth and familiar. The handle of a hammer.

Pilgrim

The sickness rode in on the crest of a venomous hangover. Travel always played havoc with Tom Chelton's guts: the combination of stress, shifting timetables, and international palates all conspired to turn the delicate workings of the precariously balanced sack of fluids and electrochemical functions he called his body awry. But paired with the hangover after a night of *birra piccolo* and cheap red wine, it felt like the Devil had moved into his brain and his bowels and was playing a drum solo on every one of his organs.

All part of the business, though, Tom told himself. When you want to throw a party, you've got to come party with the locals. Figure out a sense of what people enjoy. Get the lay of the land with the locals, get loaded with the locals, climb strange buildings with the locals, and fall down where the locals fall down. Maybe excoriate a cop while he helped you out of the pool of your own sick and pointed you back to your hotel.

It was a bad way to live, Tom knew, but he didn't give a shit. Why else would he keep doing it? People paid him to throw parties in their honor and to take their pictures at those parties.

Dad was a beat cop; mom was a teacher. Nothing unusual. No abuse, no family substance problems. Just a big, empty hole inside himself that he tried to fill with good food and booze. He was part of the generation that grew up being patted on the back just for trying and it rankled him. If everyone was a winner just for showing up, where was the motivation? That's what kept him going and made him love his job — he was good at throwing parties, and since everyone liked to feel good about themselves, well, that's a great place to make a buck.

So it was that well booze and energy drinks had fueled Tom Chelton for three days while he waited on the civil service to approve his application for what the law classified as an outdoor event. He had paid the filing fee and paid the *bustarella*, and all that remained was to pick up the permit on Friday afternoon. He and the clerk, a friend of a friend, even sat down to share a bottle of wine afterward, to celebrate doing business.

What was in that wine? Was it the salami? Maybe the olives had skunked.

Back in New York, Jimmy had said, "No one will go to Cagliari. It's too far away and it's too weird. Anyplace where they eat octopus is too fucking weird."

Jimmy didn't know a damned thing. Maybe Cagliari wasn't a destination location, like so many of Tom's other parties had been. For Americans, at least. They wanted Paris, Rome, and places their friends and parents recognized and admired. The Europeans, they just wanted a good time.

Tom's guts roared and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. Saw stars. Might have blacked out. Shook off a chill. Looked at the floor. Blood. Blood and vomit and shit. Vomit on the floor was nothing new, but the shit was a new low. And all that blood.... That certainly hadn't happened ever before.

The Devil hammered away inside him.

• • • • •

"The land where you want to host your party — it's government land." Not what Tom wanted to hear.

"I know that," Tom replied. "That's why I filed for a government permit."

Beppo pursed his lips. "Not like that. Not just government land. It's army land."

"What, they want to make sure I'm not training a rival army there?"

"It's protected. UNESCO or a disaster site or something they won't say. It's classified."

"But I filed the paperwork, Beppo."

"I know."

"So am I going to get my money back?"

"Think of it as an investment."

"An investment in what?"

"Your safety."

"Come on, Beppo, you and I are better than that. You're threatening me?"

"I promise you, I'm not threatening you. I don't know the answer. I think something very bad happened there and the army hasn't figured it out yet."

"So they want to protect people from whatever it is?"

"Maybe. Or maybe they want to find out how to use it."

Tom wanted to conjure a cocksure reply, but the possibilities behind Beppo's words held him silent for a time.

• • • • •

He couldn't find his passport. Time and money were running out for Tom Chelton to return to the United States and present his findings to his investors.

It was a good arrangement. He took cash from the US and converted it into local currencies wherever he went to throw his parties. The money went toward accommodation, expenses, application fees, deposits, supplies, bribes, and other sundry concerns. Then, whatever he charged as an event fee went back into his company accounts and from there paid dividends to the investors who made it all happen.

Where did the money come from? Who cared. Not his worry. On the books it was all legitimate, and his operation filed all of its proper taxes. Tom had no trouble sleeping at night.

But now all of that was about to fall apart. No passport meant no plane trip, no way to collect wire funds, no way to move on to the next place or make it back home. If things went really badly, it meant no way to even prove he was who he said he was if he lost his hotel key, or if he needed to claim his citizenship at the American embassy. Maybe he could show them his New York driver's license, but that would be the move of a desperate man. "Here, this expired document from another country says everything's going to be fine. Are we good?"

No, we aren't. Without a passport, we're definitely not good.

• • • • •

Fever pressed down on Tom Chelton as he lay unable to move, the sickness clouding his mind and weighing down his limbs. A foreign presence churned through his veins, racking him with pain, weeping foulness across his flesh as it cracked open that dried into a sallow crust. The doctor in residence at the hotel thought it was shingles at first, but its virulence was unlike anything he had ever seen.

On the fortieth day of his invalidity, the hotel evicted him. His credit card had been extended twice, and the bank refused an additional extension. Tom had missed his airplane flight back to the States and booking a new one was going to cost \$1700 — \$1700 he didn't have and his credit card bank wouldn't lend him. His clothes had been unwashed since his sickness and even his toiletries had run out.

Swaddled in a filthy robe the hotel had no interest in retrieving, Tom Chelton rode in Beppo's Lancia, delirious with pain, not knowing entirely where he was or his destination. The pain caused him to black out, he lost count how many times. Beppo helped him up the stairs, sweat beading on his round head, and then returned to his desk at the ministry, leaving Tom screaming when the pain became too much to bear.

In the humid cool, Tom screamed himself hoarse.

• • • • •

The archives turned up a microfiche.

Even the bonds of friendship couldn't save Tom Chelton, and Beppo had simply thrown up his hands three weeks into his new houseguest's residency. "Too much for a man to bear," Beppo said as he pushed Tom out into the avenue, pressing a handful of crumpled euro notes into the afflicted man's encrusted claw.

Tom had taken up residence behind the English school, where he could occasionally beg for a meal's worth of money. The tourists were more generous with their money than Tom had thought they might be. At this point, he was little more than an apparition, a scabrous corpse wrapped in a pus-stained sheet, yellow where the excrescence was fresh and brown where it had dried and become filth. Suffering from exposure, dehydration, malnourishment, and the carbuncular rot that had consumed him, the man who had once been Tom Chelton barked in gibberish: half English, half Italian, and all madness, dire warnings against the world that had turned against him.

So long as he didn't menace any patrons and silenced his screams, Tom Chelton could still use the library.

The microfiche.

Almost 150 years ago, the agora south of the city had served as the site of a gala marking a celebration of Sennacherib's ascension. Organized by an English theosophist, the soiree had been planned for 13 nights. The microfiche contained an archive of hundreds of daguerreotyped photographs — promiscuous pagan attire that contrasted greatly with the society photos of women in high-necked Victorian dresses and the sober, Beau Brummell-inspired gentlemen's styles of the day.

This is a trove, Tom thought to himself. When he had his money back and could throw his party, he would hang silk screens to create an open labyrinth around the festivities and project these images onto the screens, creating the illusion that his party and that of Sennacherib's coronation were co-located in time, that his guests were simultaneously at his 21st-century party and the one from the late 19th century.

It sounded like something came undone at the gala, though. It ran for only three of the planned 13 nights, and on the fourth night, the entire fairground had vanished without a trace. The bandshell that had stood on the hill was gone, and the massive effigy of the Assyrian king that had been the centerpiece of the agora was likewise missing. The small village erected to support the various functions of the party — housing for the staff, laundry, canteens — likewise had left no remnant.

Accounts of the time yielded only two possibilities: divine wrath and scandal. The priests and pious had claimed that the revelers and the whole site had been swept away, a sign of God's indignation over pagan licentiousness. A leprous refugee from the sanatorium had said that the ground had swallowed them whole, and that he had watched the whole thing happen from his garret, where had been confined because of pox. A more practical perspective traveled among the local elites that the party's hosts had simply spent more money than they had, and packed up the whole production and stolen away into the night, leaving bills unpaid and partygoers stranded.

But where were the partygoers' accounts? Who had been at the event, what had they seen, and what did they have to say on the sudden disappearance of the festival?

Tom Chelton thought he might know where they were.

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In his few remaining lucid moments, it all sat strangely in Tom Chelton's mind.

On the one hand, what a load of superstitious nonsense. Some kind of Roanoke Colony party that picked up a hitchhiker with a hook for a hand and, holy shit, the caller's in the house with the Jersey Devil saying "Candy Man" three times in Bloody Mary's bathroom!

On the other hand, look at the body of evidence. The vanished gala. The governmental no-trespassing dictate, backed by military presence. This dreadful sickness that had overtaken him after he applied for the permit. Maybe the last was a coincidence, but maybe not. Police don't believe in coincidences, and maybe the thought of dad was trying to tell him something. Let it go, man. There'll be other places, other times, other parties.

The whole thing was beyond absurd. And equally absurd, why did he care? At this point, it would be easier, cheaper, and less devastating to his liver if he just pulled up stakes. No, in fact, he hadn't even hammered in any stakes. Just let it go. Scrape together some money. Call someone back home. Home. Get home. Get out of this necrotic prison.

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South. Where the ground had swallowed those people.

The amphitheater stood erect from the ground on a parched plain like a jawbone plunged into the soil. A cool salt breeze whispered Tom Chelton's foulness from him as he limped toward the ruin. This place had stood abandoned for more than a thousand years, if the pieces of library history still recognizable in Tom's mind were true. Early men had made their lives here, but then something had given them cause to leave. Or perhaps the ground had swallowed them, too.

Behind the amphitheater, a shelf of rock overhung a landing that depended above the sea. In other lives, he would have shunned such a place, for the wisdom whispered among helots said that these were the byways to the Underworld, the wastes of Tartarus. In other lives.... Memories Tom knew were not his seeped into his mind, mixing with his own thoughts like water pulled from an underground spring by a wondrous mechanism to mix with the cool draughts of the fountain. These were the remnants of departed minds, he knew, the thoughts of *xenoi*. Lemures.

Quietly, Tom crept across the scarp and peered over the edge, leaving a streak where the fresh discharge caught by his shroud swept the rock. A massive gap in the stone yawned purple-black in the night, the entryway to an unknown depth. Two cairns of stone marked either side of the opening — marking the mouth of the cavern as something men had once known. Was it a part of the amphitheater? Some long-forgotten chamber where the actors or singers had dressed or even a natural passage to the stage above?

Tom Chelton took a step forward, the husk of his body obedient but his mind now remarkably clear and in fearful rebellion. If an army had declared the region unsafe, what did he possibly think he could solve here? If men more capable than him, men in their prime and not broken by the perfidy of disease, had turned away from this place, what possible good could it do him to plumb these depths?

A narrow path descended into the earth beneath the amphitheater, a treacherous staircase with almost a hundred switchbacks, plunging some three thousand steps into the guts of the Underworld. The dwindling daylight threw a feeble light into the shaft, but something down there glinted.

Cold sweat trickled from Tom's brow, and his limbs quivered with the crippling frailty of the illness that had ruined his body. They were down there, he knew. The people whom the world had swallowed.

• • • • •

The ground shifted.

Above, the throng of mortals reveling — drinking, dancing, laughing, grinding, making love — remained oblivious. The semiconscious node lurched into motion, generating orogenies incalculable on the scale of man's perception. The Wheel of Melqart, pressing apart the surface of the world so that men might make cities now spun in reverse, pulling the components of the world together so that the inexorable will of the divine mechanism would remain hidden and sovereign.

The ground opened.

At first, a drunken couple staggered into the fissure. Then the crevice spread, sundered by the invisible will of a divine mechanism, charged with the function of protecting this isolated node of its intellect that it had guarded since the time of the Phoenicians or the

Nuraghi before them. It pulled another dozen partygoers into its maw, and then another hundred. Their screams drowned in the darkness of the prison beneath the world. Another hundred tumbled into the crevice, borne away on a galley with Hermes at the bow, carrying the lost to Tartarus. The gears ground, the mechanism plying its sentient cause, at one with its engineered desires, plucking from the face of the world the men and women of the surface into its timeless furnace, churning them into fuel for the One.

Sennacherib, his giant likeness, followed, broken with an ease astounding for such a great quantity of stone, swept from the face of the world like cinders brushed from a forge. His unblinking eyes looked out over the village that supported the dying revel and watched as its building and servants, its own *mothones* pulled down by the great axle that rotated beneath their world, a machine-slave to an inexorable god.

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Tom Chelton slipped, the open sores on his feet betraying him. He tumbled down a thousand stairs, each step a year in the millennium for which this temple had remained hidden. It was a freedom of agony for him, a new pain that clouded the misery to which his own body had subjected him for the past six months.

At the landing of the stairs, some three thousand steps inside this aperture of the world, he saw the ruined remains of so many other men. And beyond those bones, behind the smooth stone that seemed to part like a curtain, he saw the infinite machinery of a sentience beyond that of men. The world was not a planet, not a satellite or a heavenly body in a great and ordered cosmos. It was a piece, a cog, a carefully selected implement constructed by the dream of a machine. Designed by an intellect not suspended in frame of skin and bone, the world was a tool, an operant, a drone among millions of other pieces scattered across a network of infinite space.

Or so the machine told him as it plunged him into a matrix of stone dust, bringing his *corpus alienum* into the liquid construct that sustained this temple in this part of the world — one of a thousand thousand — and kept it secret. His ordeal was over. In a warm, fluid moment, he was home.

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Soldiers from the Italian army replaced the cordons surrounding the ruin. Had they known of the terrestrial realignment that had happened only hours ago, perhaps they would have... what? The question was moot, as the secret machine anchored invisibly beneath the world continued to perform its millennial task. Not a trace remained of the people who had danced their ultimate dance here, under the eyes of the stars, under the scrutiny of the divine protocol. Not a bone could be found of the lost god-king, or of the prophet who had rejoined his avatar. A filthy tatter blew across the fulvous ground.

A discarded passport.

Stories Uncle Don Told Me

It might be morbid, but I have to admit, I'm curious who's going to show up at Uncle Don's funeral.

Uncle Don's pretty old to have a nephew my age. He's in his 70s, I'm only 24. My grandparents had him and my father almost 15 years apart (interspersed with a bunch of others, but my dad and Uncle Don are the ones that everybody thinks of when they say "the Clannan kids"). When I was born, Don was almost 50. That messes with my mind even now. When I was in grade school, he was retiring. He was an "old person." When you're a kid, it's hard to grasp that adults ever had a life, ever *did* anything beyond what they do every day that you see them.

And yet, every time I talked to Don, I learned something new. I didn't learn that he'd been married or had been in the Army until I was 12. Once I interviewed him for a history project and I found out that, at one point, he spoke six languages (until the dementia set in, he could still get by in German and French, but had lost the others).

One of the things I learned about Don pretty early on—I was about 11 at the time—was that he loved weird stories. The first one he told me was this one:

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White folks wince when they say "black" or "colored" when they're talking about a person, but the black folks have their own legends and their own weird stories. What kind depends on where you are, but when I was about your father's age, and I was living in Mississippi with my wife, I had a colored friend. Now, remember this was about the same time that the schools were first getting integrated and the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, and I lived in *Mississippi*. I got some letters for being friendly with Marlon, let me tell you, but those cowards could go hang for all I cared.

Anyway, Marlon and I went walking one night. His wife was pregnant and we had to get her some ice cream or something. Women get funny when they're with child, you know. We looked across the street and we saw a man we'd never seen before. He was hunched over and wore a big hat and a long shirt, and his skin looked wrong. There was enough light to see he was colored, but his skin was pasty and pale, almost yellow.

Now, I didn't know what that might mean, and I was all set to yell to him or wave, but Marlon grabbed my hand. "Don't, Don," he said. "That's a *yorka*." Of course, I didn't know what a *yorka* was, and I raised up my hand anyway.

That man in the hat walked across the street to us, and Marlon started cursing under his breath. He said, "Don, don't say a word to it. Keep walking with me, don't say a word. If you ever trust me, trust me now."

Well, I didn't know why, but when a friend asks you something important, you know it. So I didn't say a word, and Marlon and me and the man—the *yorka*—kept walking along the sidewalk. And every so often I'd look up and see Marlon, and he'd look over at me, and he was just scared to death. He had his wedding ring in his hand, off his finger, and he was squeezing it tight. And I started to get scared, too, because Marlon wasn't a fearful man.

We kept walking and soon we saw the corner store around the next bend, and saw a few teenagers—white kids—on the corner smoking cigarettes and acting tough. And they saw Marlon and me and asked, "What are you two"—and he called us something I won't repeat—"doing out here?" And we didn't even acknowledge him, because we were too busy looking around for the *yorka*. But it was long gone, probably going off to find someone else who'd walk with it.

A *yorka*'s like a ghost, you see. It used to be a man—or a woman, I guess—but all that's left now is something pale and dead and lost. Marlon never told me what would have happened if we'd spoken to it, and I never dared ask him, either.

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That was the kind of story he liked to tell. I asked my father about the *yorka* story the day after Don first told it to me. I guess I thought Don made it up, made up the whole thing, just to scare or entertain me. He told me that he didn't know anything about ghosts, but he did know that Don had lived in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement and did have a black friend named Marlon, and that Marlon's daughter Lisa was born not long before Don moved up north. That was the last time I ever doubted one of Don's weird stories.

When I was in middle school, I went on a big-time military kick. I learned all the military jargon, the names and classifications of military weapons, where the US has forces deployed, and so on. I harangued Don to death about it, because my father never served in the Army. He answered my questions honestly and good-naturedly a lot longer than I would have in his situation, but the answers he gave started getting vague. That winter, the power went out during a family Christmas party. My parents and some other relations lit some candles and played cards. My uncle hates card games, so he and I sat by the fire and talked. Of course, I started asking questions about his Army experiences, and finally I asked why he never gave details. He leaned forward and told me this:

Honestly, Mike, I'm having trouble remembering what I'm allowed to tell you and what I'm not. Some of the things I saw and did, I had to promise I'd never talk about, but it's been too long and I don't remember everything that's supposed to be a secret. I guess I can tell you about this one thing that happened during boot, though.

I did boot camp not far from where your Auntie Leila lives now, and I *hated* it. You know I don't mind getting up and running and so on, but there wasn't much to do when you weren't training except sleep and read and play cards. Anyway, one night four friends and I—I remember one fellow's name was Pete, but we all called him Pie, and another was Chuck,

but darned if I remember the other two—we got a weekend pass and we went into town. We thought we'd see a movie or something, but then Pie got the bright idea to go to a girlie show. Wasn't my idea, but Pie was pretty insistent, so we all went and watched the girls dance.

Well, those girls were nothing special. A girl who gets up and dances for drunk soldiers only does it because she's got no other skills to pay her rent. I'm not saying she's wrong for doing it, just that it takes sort of a boring person to do it and a boring person to watch it. There was one girl that even I had to sit up and watch, though. She had her own bit where she danced by herself, and her name was Sadie. She was thin—not like your sister where you can see her ribs but slender like a snake. She was pale and pretty, and she had these big blue eyes you could see from the back row. And Pie just leaned closer and closer and tried to wave her over, and she just ignored him and sat in fellows' laps and blew in their ears and so on. And all the time, Pie's nudging me and the other guys and saying, "Do you see her? Ain't she beautiful?" We all thought she was, but he was really going nuts.

After a while, Sadie left the stage and the boring girls came back on, and I told Pie it was time we were going. The other boys agreed, but Pie said he wanted to go back and talk to Sadie. We all told him not to be an idiot; probably lots of guys tried that and they were all turned away, but he insisted, so we all waited for him out by the car.

We waited there for almost an hour, and Chuck was all ready to go in and drag him out, when the door opened and out steps Pie. It was just after midnight, which wasn't so late for us, but Pie looked like he'd been up for a week. He looked sick, and when we talked to him, he took an extra few seconds to answer anything we asked. I knew he wasn't well, so we RTB'd and turned him over to the infirmary.

Next day, we found out he'd been sent home on a Section 8. He never answered our letters or our calls.

Chuck and I went back to that club to find that Sadie, but when she performed that night, it was different. She wasn't so pretty, her eyes were brown and she'd even put on a little weight. She looked normal and boring, like any of those other girls.

I think something rode on that girl that night, like a ghost or a demon. Maybe she asked it to help her, to make her less boring, or maybe it just landed on her and used her. Anyway, that's not the weirdest thing that happened to me in the Army, but at least I know I can tell you that story and Uncle Sam won't come looking for you.

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Don and I didn't talk often when I was in college. I got a scholarship and wound up several hundred miles from home. We talked occasionally, but I was in college, I had a new set of friends, and I didn't have much to do with family during that time. The weekend before my 21st birthday, he called me. I was living in an apartment with two other guys, and I remember I was crashed out on the couch in the middle of the afternoon—nursing an absolutely awful hangover—when my phone rang. When I answered, it was Don. "I'm out in the parking lot," he said. "Come on, let's go have lunch."

It turned out he was just in town visiting a buddy and decided to drop by. That's what he said, anyway. Looking back now, I think he had at least two other reasons for coming into town. One, of course, was to see me and straighten my neglectful ass out. We sat there at lunch and he laid it all down for me—how much my parents missed me, how little time we all had in the grand scheme of things. He didn't want me to feel guilty, though. Like I said, he had another reason to be in town, but I didn't put the pieces together until much later.

I called my parents that night, I bought a train ticket home, and we all went out for dinner on my birthday. I didn't touch a drop of alcohol that night. Don and I got talking about drinking, and that's when I found out he'd been a recovering alcoholic for 10 years. I asked him what had put him on the wagon, thinking maybe my father had found out and helped him straighten out. Of course it wasn't that simple:

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You know why they call booze "spirits?" Yeah, me neither. But about 10 years ago, something happened that got me thinking. I was visiting a friend of mine up near where you go to school. Same guy I was visiting when I came over to see you, actually.

Anyhow, I drove out there and I was already drunk when I left. The thing about real alkies, we start drinking early, and we learn how to function while we're drunk. I've never once been stopped for DUI, and that drive wasn't any different. I pulled into my friend's driveway—Anthony's his name—and when I got out, I near fell over from the heat and from the drink. Anthony came off his porch and helped me to a chair, and all the while he's saying, "Shit, Don, I told you to lay off," like it's easy to quit or something. I sat down in the shade and drank some iced tea with him, and then he showed me around his house. He had just bought it, see, that's why I was visiting.

Well, it was a nice enough place, but pretty much normal, except for the basement. The basement had a dirt floor, and I'd never seen that before, so I asked Anthony. He told me the previous owner had torn up the concrete there and had planned on doing something with the space—laying new concrete, hard wood, he didn't know—but had died of a stroke one night and hadn't left any kin. So now Anthony wasn't sure what to do.

That basement, Mike, was weird. I mean, I was still drunk when I walked downstairs, but the minute my feet touched the floor I sobered up. I'd been drinking all day, but as soon I stepped off that last stair onto that dirt floor, I was cold sober and scared half to death.

There was something in that basement, and I don't mean it was rats or big spiders or anything like that. There was something down there, and I couldn't see or hear it but I knew it just the same. Now, Anthony, he didn't even blink. He's walking around, saying "maybe hardwood, maybe a pool table," and I'm just nodding my head like an idiot.

We went upstairs, and his wife Jenny was waiting in the kitchen. My eyes met hers, and she *knew*, just like I did, that there was something down there. We both nodded to each other, I think, but we both knew we couldn't say anything, because what do you say? Bright summer afternoon, sunlight streaming in the kitchen window, yellow doggie sacked on the floor, iced tea in the pitcher? What could you say?

That's why you don't see *yorkas* or weird stuff like that by day, Mike. They know to keep to their basements and their street corners and their holes and their darkness. But now I knew where they hid.

I tried to talk to Anthony about it that night, but he wasn't hearing it. He thought I was still drunk. We never talked about that basement again, but his wife sure remembered what happened, because she gave me that house.

That's why I was out there last week, Mike. To see you, sure, but also to attend Anthony's funeral and see to his house. He died of a stroke, just like the previous owner, and just like the previous owner, he didn't have any kids to leave the house to. But Jenny, who's doing fine, all things considered, didn't want to put the house on the market, so she wrote me a letter and asked me if I'd take it.



Don didn't live in that house, and he didn't sublet it. I stayed in the same town after I graduated from college, and Don dropped by every couple of months. I knew that he visited that house when he was in town, I just didn't know why. I could always tell if he'd gone there before he came to see me, though, because when he did, he was always tired. Drained, I guess, is a better way to put it. He looked like he'd had the worst day of his life every time he went to that house. I tried to ask him about it once or twice, but I never knew how to bring it up. People don't really have the words to talk about weird stuff, not in any kind of concrete sense. So for just over three years, Don and I talked about my job, my life, my friends, and the parts of his past that I already knew about. It was strange, talking to him without learning anything new.

And then two months ago, he had a stroke.

He called me from the hospital. He'd been leaving the house to come visit me when it happened. It was fairly minor, as strokes go, and by the time I got to the hospital he was out of danger. He slept the whole time I was there, and then my parents and a couple of my brothers arrived and took over. They took him back to their house two weeks later, to recuperate. I was intending to visit next month, when work slows down a little for me.

And then Mom called last night. She told me Don had been asking after me, and she sounded a little exasperated. I asked her what was wrong.

"Oh, it's your uncle," she said. "He's just obsessive. He asks the same damn questions every couple of minutes. The last couple of days it's been about that house he owns up by you. He wants you to check on it. Do you know where the house is?"

I said I did, and that I'd go out that afternoon. I knew I had to do it soon, but I also knew I needed to go while it was still light.

So I drive out to that little house, on the outside of town. I let myself in with Don's key, and immediately I feel 10 years older. Sunlight streams in the front window, but the house still seems dark. The light's here, but it doesn't seem to *matter* somehow.

I just start walking. It's like water running downhill. I'm not surprised when I stop by the basement door. The light above the basement stairs doesn't work, but there's a flashlight hanging on the doorknob. The stairs creak as though they're trying to splinter but can't quite shake themselves free of their nails. When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I smell something powdery and choking—mortar, or concrete.

The basement has multiple rooms. I can see several doors, at least two of them padlocked. Each room has a cross hung on it, and each door has a small glass pane.

I walk to the first door and shine my flashlight in the window, and stumble back with a yell. I see eyes, red, bloodshot eyes. I look more carefully and I see a whole face. It looks pale, yellowed, like a black man's might if he lost his blood.

What strikes me most about the *yorka* is his teeth. They're four times as long as they should be. It grins at me through the pane, glad to have someone to acknowledge it. I move on to the next door.

I shine my light in, and across the room I see a woman sitting on a chair. She looks up, and her blond hair seems to shine in the faint light. She has blue eyes, and they brim with tears as she rises and holds out her hands, pleading with me to open the door. I reach down for the padlock, and I find that the door is not only locked, but welded shut around the edges.

I tear my eyes away, and I walk to the door at the end of the hall. I put my hand on the doorknob, and stop.

My right hand starts tingling. I try to take a step back and stumble a bit.

I take my hand away, but the tingling doesn't change. I feel my lips go slack on the right side of my face.

I back up. I can't run, but I can limp pretty fast. I stumble up the stairs and out of the house. By the time I get to my car, the tingling has stopped. By the time I get to the hospital, my lips feel normal again. The doctors tell me that my symptoms are, in fact, indicative of a stroke, but they can't find any evidence of one. Probably I just overexerted myself or something.

I call Don and tell him everything's in place at the house. He tells me I need to come see him so he can transfer the deed to my name. He says I have to finish covering the dirt floor. I nod.

I didn't look in all of the doors, and I know at least a few of them were empty.

He's got other chores for me, I'm sure.

Ouroboros

A gust of wind from the ocean disturbed the sand at Jan's feet, brushing away a complex geometric pattern that someone had scratched there. Judging from the wet sand under her fingernails, she had made those symbols herself, in her sleep. She was aware that she knew what those symbols meant, but she didn't want to remember, so she let the knowledge sink away.

Jan started to make her way back to the sidewalk. If she was lucky, she could still get some day-old buns at the café where Judah Street ended at Ocean Beach. Then she heard the popcorn pop of tiny bones breaking. A brown and turquoise snake was writhing in the sand at Jan's feet. It had swallowed its own tail to almost halfway up its body and was struggling to swallow more with so much force that it was breaking its own spine.

Jan smelled a wet underground cave smell and heard an awful noise: screaming and sobbing and crunching. Jan backed away, pounding her fists against the side of her head until the pain recalled her to the present. The voice stopped, the terrible noise stopped, and the air smelled like wet sand rotting seaweed again. The tiny snake had stopped moving.

Jan bent, retrieved her backpack, and made her way back up the beach. Today was Thursday, and it could take a while to get to the Mission. She needed to be quick about breakfast if she wanted to be on time.

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The MUNI was hard for Jan. It was too many people packed too close together. Today promised to be worse than most. Jan had been feeling uneasy since this morning's encounter on the beach and didn't want to be put off the train for screaming or beating her head against the window if something reminded her of things she'd tried hard to forget.

Jan paid for her ticket with a handful of grimy coins and moved through the train, head down, careful to avoid eye contact. She found a seat and shoved herself into it. The people on either side shrank away from her, but Jan didn't react. She kept her backpack in her lap, eyes fixed firmly on the floor of the streetcar, and hummed to herself as softly as she could.

The first thing Jan saw was a pair of boots. They were remarkably filthy, caked in clumpy yellow mud and leaving oozing clods in every footprint. The owner of the boots

paused in front of Jan, then took the directly seat across from her. Something about the color of the boots made Jan anxious.

Jan's anxiety heightened as the ride continued. The boots stayed across from her, waiting. Jan couldn't just hum anymore. She ground her teeth to keep from screaming out loud. Her hands found each other on the far side of her backpack and gripped so hard that her fingers turned red and white.

"Forget it, forget it, forget it," Jan muttered to herself. The man besides her shifted his weight in his seat, edging away.

One of the filthy feet tapped impatiently. The movement surprised her, and she looked up into the face of the man sitting across from her. She didn't recognize him — his features wouldn't resolve into sense, no matter how hard she looked — but they were familiar. It was a man, and Jan had known him. Jan could make out the bloody stains around his mouth. She could see that he was smiling, though, and when he lifted his arms to reveal the bloody, torn stumps at the ends of his wrists, Jan could see that, too.

Jan jumped to her feet, screaming. Suddenly everyone was staring at her. All of their mouths were bloody. All of them were smiling. When someone grabbed her to put her off the train, Jan could see the missing fingers, broken bones poking through the ragged flesh.

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The next thing Jan knew, she was standing on the sidewalk. The MUNI was long gone. Jan knew that she had lost time again, and took a moment to check her belongings before following the tracks on foot. Once someone had stolen her backpack while she stood there, senseless, and it had taken her months to find a new one.

Her unease didn't abate, but at least she had more breathing room. On the sidewalks, Jan could just cross the street when someone gave her a look she didn't like, or when she saw a pigeon's grooming suddenly turn into a vicious self-attack, sharp beak drawing blood. She wasn't trapped in a metal box, shoulder to shoulder with people she didn't know.

Jan still wasn't feeling well, though, and had to walk slowly. At one point, she paused by a storefront to catch her breath, chest aching. Inside, she saw a butcher cutting beef and chatting with a woman in a floral hijab. The butcher nicked himself and jerked his hand away. Jan watched him stare at the bead of blood, face unreadable. Then she watched him place the bleeding finger in his mouth, slowly, reverently, eyes wide with horror.

Jan hurried away, curling her hands until her nails dug into her palms.

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By the time Jan arrived at the church, Simon — a sober young man with wild, curly dark hair, and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up — had already given up on running the meeting in an orderly manner. Even with the violent cases filtered out, the homeless were far from a receptive audience, and most of them were there for the free food, not therapy. Simon was making his usual rounds, checking in with Jan's fellow street people in small groups. He made his way towards Jan almost as soon as he spotted her.

"Hey, Jan. How's it going?"

"It's been a bad day," Jan replied. She avoided looking at Simon as she spread cream cheese on her bagel. "I got kicked off the MUNI."

"What happened?"

“I saw a man with no hands on the MUNI. I had to walk the rest of the way here, and I saw pigeons killing themselves on the sidewalk. I saw a snake eating its own tail. I saw a butcher drink his own blood, and like it. Nobody else noticed, but I saw.”

“You know you’re safe here, right?” Simon said, leaning forward so that Jan felt his presence without him touching her. “Nothing bad will happen to you here, I promise.”

Jan smiled thinly and nodded. She knew she wasn’t safe — not here or anywhere else — but she didn’t want to remember why. She knew Simon wouldn’t understand, in any case.

“I found a copy of your book,” Simon said casually.

Jan froze.

“One of your books, anyway: The Principles of Linguistic Anthropology, by Janet Cohen. I don’t think I would have understood any of your more advanced works, but I’m really enjoying this one.”

Jan backed away slowly, letting her bagel drop to the floor.

“That’s your name, isn’t it?” Simon continued. “Janet Cohen, PhD, Berkeley School of Anthropology.” Always the cautious therapist, he didn’t follow Jan with his body, but he continued to follow her with his eyes, so that she knew he was still with her.

“How do you know that?”

Simon shrugged. “You’ve always looked familiar to me, and it bothered me. I tried to figure out where I remembered you from, and—”

Jan surged forward — crushing her abandoned bagel — and grabbed Simon’s hands. They were attracting attention — other members of the therapy group standing around and staring — but she didn’t care. She looked into Simon’s eyes and said, “Don’t. Don’t remember. It’s not safe.”

Simon let Jan hold his hands. His fingers were warm and solid under hers. “I know, Jan. But maybe you don’t have to be afraid. Maybe you can be safe. You are a brilliant scholar, and if you’d let me get you to a psychiatrist you could have that back. There’s medicine that could help with your anxiety and help you not see the things that bother you.”

Jan squeezed harder. She saw Simon wince, trying to hide it. “Don’t read my book, Simon. Please don’t do that.”

Something broke inside of Jan and memories tumbled across her conscious mind. A cave. A young man lying on the stone floor and chewing on his hands, blood and bone on the floor around him. A croaking voice speaking in the darkness, saying:

“The workings of the God-Machine are vast and cold. What has risen may fall, what has fallen may rise.”

“What was that?” Simon asked.

Jan realized that her mouth had spoken the words in her memory without her permission. She repeated them helplessly. “What has risen may fall, what has fallen may rise.”

Simon looked at her quizzically

Jan ran.

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When Janet was conscious again, she was back on Ocean Beach, sitting on the dunes with her ragged coat tucked around her. It was almost dark. The setting sun stained the fog the color of dry blood. Her heartbeat was loud, but steady, and her mind was oddly clear.

“Hello, Professor Cohen” said a familiar voice from behind her.

Janet didn’t bother to turn. She waited while the speaker came closer and shuffled to an awkward seat besides her. She saw dark curly hair out of the corner of her left eye and knew who it was. She didn’t need to turn to see the handsome young face, the chocolate brown eyes, or the chewed-up stumps of wrists to know who he was.

“Why are you still here?” she asked.

“Why are you here, Professor Cohen? ‘Jan’ has been surviving the streets for seven years, but this is the first time that the setting sun has seen hide or hair of Janet Cohen in a long time.”

“I’ve been hiding.”

“And what brought you out of hiding, Professor Cohen?”

Janet turned to face him now. Thomas Last stared back at her. He was just as she remembered him, only now he was alive, or seemed to be. Janet noted that this time, Thomas was kind enough to hide his bloody stumps in the pockets of his denim jacket.

“It’s come for me, hasn’t it?” Janet asked, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

Thomas laughed in her face. “Still ascribing human motivations to the inhuman, Professor Cohen? Don’t you remember anything?”

And suddenly, excruciatingly, Janet did.

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Somewhere behind her Janet could hear the sound of splintering bones and sobbing. That would be Thomas, her grad student, trying to resist the ouroboros’s compulsion and failing. Janet could feel it herself, but when it threatened to overpower her she bit down harder on the bit of ginger root soaked in brandy. Part of her wondered why Thomas’s charm had failed, but there was no time for that now. The hermit was speaking, and Janet needed to commit everything he said to memory.

Long years of darkness had erased most of the man’s ethnicity. And yet, he stared right into the light of Janet’s flashlight and did not blink. His clothes were rags. Most of the fingers on his left hand and the two middle fingers of his right were gone, evidence that he was not completely immune to the bizarre compulsion that hung in the air of this cavern. Unlike Thomas, the hermit seemed able to indulge the ouroboros’s compulsion in a leisurely fashion, consuming himself bit by bit rather than all at once.

“You want to know about the ouroboros,” he said. His English was perfect and unaccented.

“I want to know how it can be defeated.”

“The old man chuckled. “Can you defeat the hurricane? Can you defeat the earthquake?”

Janet fought not to roll her eyes. “We can defeat epidemics and build homes that withstand earthquakes and hurricanes. Please, spare me the philosophy and tell me how to stop the ouroboros.”

“You have come far and sacrificed much, Dr. Cohen, so I will give you what you ask for. I don’t think you will thank me for it, though.” The old man took a deep breath, and the next thing he said sounded as though he were reciting something he had learned elsewhere. “The workings of the God-Machine are vast and cold. What has risen may fall, what has fallen may rise.”

When the hermit continued, it was in his own voice again. “The ouroboros is the principle of resurrection, a small part of how the God-Machine renews itself eternally. When the ouroboros draws near to our layer of the world, those whose sensitivity outpaces their resolve may be influenced to imitate its base qualities.” Thomas cried out. He might have been begging for help.

“Can it be stopped?”

“The ouroboros cannot be stopped, but the conjunction can be delayed, or ended prematurely. If you are willing to listen, I can teach you this can be achieved.” He gestured with one ruined hand to the floor in front of him.

Janet sat and listened intently, memorizing every arcane process the old man described.

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“I’m sorry,” Janet whispered, swinging her backpack around to her front and rifling through it.

“What are you going to do now?” Thomas asked.

“I’m going to make a phone call. Then I’m going to finish this. The ouroboros is returning; a second conjunction. I’m going to do the same thing I did before and send it away.”

“And what good will that really do? Can you stop the ouroboros? Can you master the God-Machine? Can you make the world into someplace that gives a damn about the human vermin that infest it?”

“I can make the world a little better for a little while. You used to agree with sentiments like that.” Janet looked for Thomas, but he had vanished while she looked for a quarter. There wasn’t even a depression in the sand to mark where he had sat. Janet shrugged and left the beach, looking for a phone.

Janet listened to the ring tone, not sure if she wanted Simon to pick up or not. She was ready to leave a voicemail, when a sleepy voice said, “Hello? Who is this?”

“I’m sorry to bother you so late. This is Janet Cohen.”

Somewhere in the background on Simon’s end, Janet could hear a female voice telling Simon to either go back to bed or take the phone to the living room. Janet smiled.

“How did you find out who I am?” Janet asked.

“Remember, I said that you seemed familiar. My first year at Berkeley must have been your last year, before...” Simon changed tactics. “Where are you? Are you safe?”

“No. In fact, I’ll probably be dead by dawn.”

“Janet, why don’t you go somewhere safe? I know a woman who works at the shelter on-”

Janet interrupted him. “I’ll be dead by dawn, Simon. There’s nothing you or anyone else can do about it. I wanted to say thank you. I wanted to say...” Janet hesitated, but spoke again before Simon could cut in. “The police will call you to identify my body; I’ll make sure of it. If you want to understand, there will be clues. If you follow them... that will be your choice.”

Simon started to say something else, but Janet didn't give him the chance. She hung up the phone and turned back towards the beach. There was no more delaying it. It was time.

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The document box was exactly where Janet remembered burying it, seven years ago, before her first confrontation with the ouroboros. It was up in the dunes, about thirty feet south of the Irving Street entrance. The San Francisco fog was thick tonight, so that even with the other indigents wrapped in their blankets and the young people smoking pot and having sex in the dune grass, Janet was alone. Janet had to dig with her hands. Her fingers were bleeding when she finally pulled the metal box out of the wet sand.

Janet sat back on her haunches and opened the box. It smelled like dust, mud, blood, and spices. Her memories washed over her: the things she had done to scrape together the lore the box represented, the cave in Bolivia, the last time she had faced the ouroboros on this beach and tried to end the conjunction prematurely.

Janet wondered how long she had before the conjunction began. It would be this night, certainly. She wondered if she could find somewhere to drug herself into oblivion and try to wait it out. She considered throwing the box back into its hole; then, she heard the screams.

The compulsion hit her, driving all thoughts of hiding out of her head. Janet bit down on her cheek and chewed at the flesh. The blood that filled her mouth was sublime. It tasted like life and death and rebirth. Janet knew that she would consume herself if she could. At the same time, her hands tore through the box, finally finding a sealed Tupperware. She scooped the contents into her mouth and chewed desperately. The taste of ginger and brandy overwhelmed the taste of blood and transcendence as the compulsion receded.

Now it felt as though she had chewed through her own cheek. The people around her had no protection. Some of them either resisted the compulsion, or weren't the sort of people who were receptive to it. Others screamed and sobbed and struggled as their own hungry teeth found their own flesh.

Janet lurched down the beach, chewing furiously on her desiccated ginger root to release its virtue. When her feet slapped on the hard sand near the waterline she fell to her knees and began to draw in the sand. She made circles and triangles and scribbled calculations that she only half remembered and had never understood. Her bleeding fingers left dark stains in the furrows. Janet spoke the strange syllables she had memorized. Nothing changed. The people on the beach continued to scream and struggle, the rising tide came closer, and the ouroboros did not recede.

Janet remembered the old man in his cave: "that which defends you from the influence of the invisible worlds also renders you blind and dumb. To effect the immaterial, you must allow it to affect you."

Janet spit out the ginger. Janet fought the compulsion, keeping her jaws tight and her fingers buried in the sand. Her raced with the effort of holding the ouroboros at bay, her jaw ached and her left arm had gone numb.

"Leave us alone," Janet gasped. "Let us have our world in peace."

Janet felt something give way inside her. She felt movement — the vast, slow shift of gears huge enough to blot out the sun. The compulsion vanished as suddenly as it had come. Janet knew that the conjunction was over.

A moment later, Janet fell into the sand, suddenly too weak to hold up her own weight. With great effort, Janet rolled herself onto her back. The fog had cleared and the moon was huge and pale in the sky. Janet stared at it for as long as she could. It was the best rest she had enjoyed in as long as she could remember, even with the pain in her chest and jaw, and the worrying numbness of her arms and legs. Finally there wasn't anything to be afraid of anymore.

Janet fumbled one numb hand into her pocket and found the tiny piece of cardstock she'd put there earlier. She closed her fist around it, hauled her arm up onto her chest, and let it fall there. She continued to look up at the moon for as long as she could.

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"That's her," Simon said. "Her name is Janet Cohen. She's been living on the streets. I run a therapy group in the Mission; she's been a regular for about six months... What happened to her face?"

"Looks like she bit it," the coroner replied. "She probably had a seizure or something." She pulled the sheet back over Janet's face, still and calm despite the messy wound on her cheek.

"Why did you call me?" Simon asked.

The coroner pointed to a metal tray next to Janet's gurney. There was a crumpled piece of cardstock — one of Simon's cards, printed with his name, agency, and work cell number.

"It took me about fifteen minutes to pry her hand open. Could you sign this?" She passed Simon a clipboard. Simon signed on all the dotted lines without bothering to read it.

"What's that?" Simon asked, gesturing to the metal box at the foot of Janet's gurney.

The coroner shrugged. "That? It's some crap we found with her. No one's had the time to go through it, with all the crazy shit going on tonight. Did you know that some bums over in Bayview got ahold of some bad acid and tried to eat their own fucking hands — would you believe it? I guess it's better than trying to eat other people."

Simon stared at the metal box, not responding.

"Like in Florida, you know? Zombies? Anyway, shit like that happened all over last night. I'll be at it all day."

Simon blinked. "Can I have that?"

"Has she got any next of kin you know about?"

"No, but she had some friends at the therapy group. There are some people she would have wanted her things to go to."

The coroner shrugged. "Go ahead."

Simon took the box, still not sure what he was going to do with it, and left the morgue, walking out into the gray light of morning.

M.R.E.

Been bad since I been back. Nothing's right anymore. It's like I went over, did my time, got stuck in three consecutive tours of duty, and while I was festering in some desert crap-nest everything went off the rails. I like to think that maybe somewhere the Real Me is living the life he was meant to live. Wife didn't cheat on him; didn't default on the mortgage. Maybe the Real Me has good dreams instead of bad ones, the dreams of the just instead of the nightmares of the guilty.

Reality, though; it just don't work like that.

I go to sleep every night, and just as I'm falling asleep I see the faces at my window: the Iraqi boy with the paper hat; the old woman, all her teeth gone to rot; Sergeant Adams; Jake Kowalski. Sometimes they come in my room, sit on my chest, and steal my breath.

I wake up every morning remembering bad dreams. But it's not the war dreams that bother me. It's the dreams of the big red barn. Tall under the full moon. Windows like eyes. Big door like a big mouth.

I know where that barn is.

• • • • •

Meals-Ready-to-Eat: MREs. Different shit in different rations, and "shit" is the operative word. Sloppy Joes look like runny diarrhea. The vegetable lasagna looks like runny diarrhea. The chili macaroni stuff, well, that looks like runny diarrhea given over to grubs and maggots.

I do like the Cajun rice and sausage, though. Thank God for small favors.

• • • • •

They say it's probably PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Not that I get much help for it. For all the rah-rah-go-troops fanfare, the VA says they just don't have the money. Plus, it's not like I got a leg blown off at the knee or anything. Not like Gomez.

Today I decided I'm going to tell somebody else besides the shrink.

Fuck it. I'll tell Gomez. Yeah, he'll laugh at me. Probably punch me in the shoulder, call me a pussy or something, and I'll ask him what the word for "pussy" is in Mexican, and he'll tell me to shut the fuck up because he grew up in Wichita and not Tijuana.

I'll tell Gomez.

• • • • •

The FRH's, Flameless Ration Heater, heats up the MREs. Fill it with water, and the shit heats up. Sometimes you put the FRH into a sleeve and stick the MRE over top it. I've seen some where you just hold the heater underneath it, and I've heard tell of others where you just drop the whole MRE into the bag. I guess it's got magnesium or something in it that makes the heat. Bastards get pretty hot. They gotta be to cook through all that runny diarrhea.

• • • • •

I thought it was off the rails before but that wasn't true. No, now it's really, definitely, undeniably off the rails. Gone south. Off the reservation. AWOL, FUBAR, SNAFU.

Tried calling Gomez, but he wasn't picking up. It was late, figured he could be asleep. So I went to his house, this little ramshackle roach motel just outside town. See, we're brothers, in the way that we both got shot at together and shot the enemy together, and so that means he trusts me enough for me to have a key. So I went in.

Jesus Christ, Lord Almighty, it isn't a dream. *It isn't a dream.* There they were. Sitting on Gomez' chest: Kowalski; the Iraqi boy; some goddamn pirate CD and DVD merchant out of Baghdad who I hadn't even remembered until now. They were sitting on his chest, had his mouth open, and were pulling the breath out of his throat in threaded tufts like it was yarn or fog or something, working it with their dead fingers. Gomez' eyes were open, pupils gone to tiny pinholes. I made a sound and banged my knee on a side-table. A lamp crashed to the ground. The things, whatever they were, hissed at me and fled through the window. The closed window. Clean through the glass.

Gomez woke up. And we talked into morning.

He's been seeing them since he came back, too. And he's been dreaming of the big red barn. The barn down off Mill Street.

I told him we better call the other boys. Been too long, I said. You come back from a bad place and a bad situation, and sometimes you push everything about that awfulness to the margins, even the few things that were good. Like your brothers.

Shouldn't have let it go that long. Gomez agreed.

Before we called Danny Boy and Maynard, Gomez said something, something that still gives me chills.

He said, "I guess demons follow you home."

• • • • •

MREs, we call them all kinds of other things: MRE Antoinette; MRE Osmond (or "Donnie and MRE"); Meal, Ready to Excrete; or Morsels, Regurgitated and Eviscerated. Some say they're "three lies for the price of one"—it ain't a meal, it ain't ready, and you damn sure can't eat it. I knew a guy who called the package of hot dogs the "fingers of death," since they looked like... well, gross gray fingers, like the fingers that tried to pull the living breath or soul or whatever out of Gomez' open mouth.

A lot of MREs come with these too-sweet candies. Call ‘em “charms,” in the way that they’re bad luck charms, not good luck charms. You don’t eat them because they’re bad luck. Story says you eat them, and you’re not coming back unless it’s on a stretcher or carried on a blood-slick tarp.

I always ate them, though. Like I was spitting in fate’s eye.

• • • • •

The barn looked hungry. Like a tall red giant, or the face of one at least, all hollow-eyed and open-mouthed. Nobody lived here anymore, and the farmhouse just up the driveway looks like it’s about to fold in on itself, deflating like a blown tire. But the barn? The barn seems like it has a new coat of paint. Wood doesn’t have a bit of rot. In the moonlight, you can see the windows are clean and clear.

And as Maynard points out, you can see faces through the glass, watching us come. Their faces. The *dead* faces.

I have to tell Danny Boy to relax, to wait, or he’s going to just start shooting up the place with that AR-15 of his. Maynard echoes the sentiment, and actually puts his hand on the weapon and has Danny Boy calm down a bit. That was always their deal; Danny on the cusp of crazy, crazier than a shit-house spider, and Maynard with the calm voice, the crass joke, the softening presence behind those wire-rim spectacles.

Gomez says he’s going in. He’s got his old M1 Garand—his grandfather’s weapon, he says—and he marches right up to that barn. Well, I don’t know that he marches, exactly: that fake leg of his is rough stuff, barely fits his stump thanks to the efficiency of the good ol’ VA. But he limps with purpose and throws open the door.

And it’s dark inside.

Even with the flashlights on, it seems like the barn swallows the light. I see movement up in the hay rafters, but pointing the light up there earns me a glimpse of nothing. Maynard calls out, says he sees something down here, something “lookin’ at him,” but when we all throw our beams in that direction, we see it’s just a deer skull and antler rack hanging on the wall. We laugh. It feels good to laugh. It doesn’t last long.

‘Cause that’s when they swoop down, hungry.

At first I think it’s just a few of them. The little Iraqi boy darts in front of me but I can’t get a shot because Danny Boy is backing up and he’s in my FOF, my field of fire. I see the old woman toward the door with a wooden cart, and with powerful arms she closes the door.

The flashlights start to flicker, wink out. One by one. Mine goes first.

I feel feet kick me in the chest. Hands pull my wrists taut, leaving me spread on the floor like Jesus on the cross. My revolver’s gone, and I don’t even know where.

Before his light goes out, I see Maynard’s down, too. I see Kowalski perched on his chest like a big vulture, drawing out his breath. Behind them I see a bunch of shapes getting closer. I see Private Keens. I see that merc motherfucker, Bobby Utrecht. I see two little girls. They’re not dead like they were in Baghdad. Not blown to pieces. Not shot. Not bloody. But they’re dead, all right. Dead hands reaching.

Then his light goes out.

I feel my breath leaving me, tugged away in great vomited ropes.

My cheeks go cold.

My hands are numb.

Every sound is a bad echo, incomplete and distant.

But I hear one thing.

I hear Gomez yell out: "MREs!"

And there's a little thought in me that wants to laugh and say, yep, shit, we *are* Meals, Ready to Eat, aren't we? Morsels soon Regurgitated and damn sure Eviscerated.

Then, though, I realize: Gomez means something else entirely.

• • • • •

You can make a bomb out of an MRE, you know that? Not a big bomb. Not like the bombs you find strapped to lunatics or underneath the Humvees.

But it's a bomb nevertheless.

The FRH, the heater, gives off hydrogen.

You can capture that. Blow it to hell. Make a bang. Make some shrapnel.

Gomez was always good with the MRE, the Meals Ready to Explode.

• • • • •

Don't know how many he made. Lots of white flashes and hot shrapnel stinging my cheek.

Lots of dead faces illuminated in flash-bangs.

My revolver is back in my hand, and the blood is coming back to my fingers, toes and lips.

The demons follow us home. The AR-15 barked fire. The Redhawk in my hand spit bullets. It was war, all over again. The dead, dying once more.

Things are different. Don't know that they're better. But they're different.

The man sitting in front of us is wearing a very nice suit. He has a ream of papers, and he wants us to sign every last one of them.

Gomez isn't hot on the idea, even though this deal would benefit him most of all; what with his leg and everything. But they want to pay us, too. And pay us *well*.

Danny Boy, he's ready to go. Batshit as ever; made crazier because Maynard's still in the hospital, still in the coma. They say he might never come out. They took his breath, and I guess they took too much. More than we lost, anyway. He was always a little guy, maybe that's what it was. Poor bastard. We visit him every Tuesday.

Me, I just want to sign off because it gives credence to everything. You go to war and you see things with your brothers, and at first it's good because you saw that shit *together*. It's hard to deny when your brothers have been there, too. But over time, you wonder. Mass hysteria and shared delusions make quick work of your unity of vision. You all think you saw one thing, but you wonder if maybe that doesn't matter. Could be that it wasn't real no matter how many eyes laid sight on the bloodshed or the horror or those calm weird moments out in the desert where you see a wind kick up some sand and maybe, *just maybe* you see a face in that sand.

Could be that you all go to a red barn and blow the unmerciful shit out of it, thinking you're killing some demons that are real, but maybe you're just killing demons out of your own head; your own shared, crazy head.

But then a man in a nice suit comes along and he says he's with a company called Barthes Prosthetics, and that he knows what we did. He knows what we *killed*. Of course, he says we can't talk about it with anyone but him and his "people," but that means our shared delusion is either not a delusion at all, or is at least big enough so that we don't feel so alone in our madness. Either way's fine.

Then he goes on to tell us he's willing to pay us handsomely to do more of what we just did. And that he can patch up the new scars on my face, and that he can give Gomez a better fake leg—one that fits, this time, one with some high-end technology stored away in the joint.

Yeah, it means going back to war. It means being a soldier in another man's army.

But at this point, what else do I have? What else can we do but do what we do best? MREs.

Men, Ready to Enlist.

Eggs

Annunciation

“My son is dead, Mr. Carpenter,” she replied calmly, almost casually, as she regarded Joseph from across her desk. He detected just the faintest trace of her Italian accent.

“Uh, ah, I’m sorry, I didn’t . . .” Joseph hoped he wasn’t visibly sweating. He should have known about her son. And now, after making it to this second interview, his hopes of landing the job might be wrecked by a clumsy faux pas.

“Be at ease,” she sighed, as if reading his mind. “Publicly, my husband is who’s credited with the success of Deva International. But my son was the one who pointed the way. My husband used to get throat infections, bouts of laryngitis . . . he smoked too much. He once lost his voice for months on end, but it returned on the day my Marco was born. And that’s how I knew he would be an extraordinary person.”

“I imagine there are no ‘ordinary’ people in your family, Ms. Singe.”

She smiled a Mona Lisa smile. “Gabriella, please, Joseph.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “Our meeting will be brief; I’m on a plane back to India later today. Have you ever been?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Warm rain, monkeys on the rooftops, the cacophony of wedding parties at all hours of the night . . . all the dreadful, miraculous things I would have missed if I hadn’t fallen for a man from India. Are you married, Joseph? Have you children?”

“One wife,” he answered, “no kids. Yet.” Joseph realized then that he liked Gabriella Singe, liked her warmth, her confidence. She seemed like someone with whom he could share secrets. He had an urge to tell about his and Mara’s ordeal trying to conceive, and the tearful decision that it was time to stop the hormone injections and the ovary calendars and the scheduled sex.

“I’m sorry, Joseph,” she said, again seeming to reply to his thoughts and not his words. “I’m wasting the little time we have by getting off the subject. You know, of course, about the product line we’re introducing in your country.”

He nodded. “Black Butterfly Gourmet Tea already has a good reputation here in the States, among the few who know of it.” He’d unconsciously lapsed into a segment of the

presentation he'd given to her underling at the first interview. "I think there's an excellent chance for boosting your share among a target market —"

"That's what I want to speak of," she interrupted. "Our reputation. You see, it's in jeopardy. There is a . . . a story going around, a rumor. A, what-you-call-it — urban legend."

"Yes . . . I think I came across that. But it's not a big deal. I wouldn't worry. If you take me on, I can come up with a PR and marketing plan that will —"

"I see I haven't been clear," she interjected again. "The reason for this meeting —the announcement I wanted to make — I'm ruining it by not being clear." She stood, extended a hand. "You're the one we want, Joseph, the one we've chosen. We expect great things of you."

• • • • •

When he recounted the story to Mara that evening, over Chinese takeout and Black Butterfly's Mangalam Blend #7, her reaction was so muted that he was certain he'd failed to capture the drama. "It was like a dream," he said to her. "I was trying to convince her to hire me, and she'd already decided." He passed her a carton of fried rice; she took it but didn't scoop any onto her plate. "Anyway, I've already got a ton of work to do."

She smiled. But her eyes weren't in it.

"It's about insects," he continued. "There are these stories floating around, see. About the tea. That it's not really made from tea leaves, but ground-up insect parts. One version claims it's full of tiny insect eggs, and the eggs hatch inside you and —"

"Joseph —"

"I know, I'm sorry. It's gross and stupid, really. Trivial. The thing to do is let it die a natural death, not feed the flames with denials and counterclaims. But, you know, they're not paying me to do nothing." He slurped up a forkful of lo mein. "I figure I'll try to find out how the whole story got started. Could be interesting . . ."

"Joseph—" She slumped in her chair.

"I know. You love the tea, you drink it every day, and you hate bugs. You don't want to be thinking about bugs every time you drink it. I promise, I won't go on and on, I just wanted to —"

"Joseph, I'm pregnant." She smiled again, weakly.

Nativity

It has not been a good day, Joseph told himself as he rode a creaking elevator toward the top of an apartment building that smelled like cabbage. He yawned. He'd spent most of the previous night lying wide awake, eventually switching on a lamp and staring at Mara as she twitched in her sleep. About three months into it, and she was clearly showing. An intimate relation had begun within her body, and he was excluded by biology. It wasn't fair that he was left out of this, the event he'd been waiting for all these years.

Finally, he'd fallen asleep, only to be plagued with a bizarre dream. Black shapes falling from the night sky, and burrowing into the ground. An ant colony that lived beneath his skin, its foragers coming and going through his ears and eyes. They walked across his forearm and left trails that looked like the lines on a map. A humming sound that rose and fell like music. When he woke, it seemed for a minute or so as if he could still hear the music, or rather feel it, like vibrations traveling up his arm and into the core of his body. Then his mind cleared, and he realized he was lying with his hand on Mara's abdomen.

After his morning shower, he'd found Mara sitting at the kitchen table with two cups of White Bliss Blend #3 and a large knife laid out before her.

"I was going to cut us some cantaloupe," she told him. "But I'm so tired."

"It's okay." He kissed her on the forehead, picked up the knife. "I'll just take the tea and grab a bagel on my way to the office."

"Joseph . . ." Her tone made him lay the knife in the sink and walk back to face her. "Joseph," she said. "Are you sure we're doing the right thing?"

"Honey . . ." He sat across the table from her.

"I mean, I know you've got this job now, but can we really afford a baby? I mean, daycare's expensive and if I can't go back to work, how will we . . ." She bit her bottom lip.

He leaned forward, took her hands and rubbed them. "Babe, come on. I thought we put this argument behind us. Remember how hard we tried, and nothing? This is like a miracle."

"I guess . . . I suppose I got used to the idea that I would never be pregnant. To be honest it . . . it scares me . . . I mean, you know my sister almost bled to death."

"Whoa, Mara, whoa. That's not going to happen to you, and you know it. That was a high-risk pregnancy, and you know her doctor warned her against a live birth. I know you feel a little freaked, but it's just nerves . . ." He gave her fingers a final squeeze, then released them.

"Nerves and bones and fingers and toes," she said. "And eyes. Somebody else's. Growing inside my body." She placed her hands on her belly, just beginning to show beneath her shirt. "I don't know if I like it. I'm sick all the time and tired, and . . . it's not too late to change our minds —"

"No," he said. "No way. We're not doing that." He immediately regretted his harsh tone. "I'll call that doctor," he added, in a near-whisper. "The specialist on the company's HMO. They said we get unlimited visits. We'll see about getting you something for the nausea, okay? It'll be all right."

The elevator doors shook open, interrupting Joseph's recollections and reminding him why he was here.

He stepped out and made his way down a dingy hallway, checking the door numbers. He hoped this meeting would be more useful than the three hours he'd just wasted on the phone with that entomologist from the University — Casper? Yes, Frank Casper, PhD. Joseph had hoped to gather expert opinions on the impossibility of insect eggs hatching inside the human stomach. Instead, Casper refused to rule it out and then wandered from the point. "The bot fly, for example," he'd said, "is a well-known horse parasite; its eggs hatch in the horse's stomach. And of course the tapeworm, though not an insect, leaves eggs that when ingested by animals — humans included — hatch and thrive in the gastrointestinal track." At least Casper agreed to test some samples of tea for insect parts. Perhaps the packages could be labeled with some sort of authoritative statement that they contained tea leaves and only tea leaves. He'd talk to the design team tomorrow about a mockup, and at the same time they could get those weird Indian astrology symbols off the labels.

He found apartment 25-D. The door was half-open. Joseph knocked on the door frame. "Hello? Ms. Ball? Myrna Ball?" There was some kind of shuffling noise inside. "I'm Joseph Carpenter. Mel Gold, you know, the guy who runs the urban legends website? He said you'd agreed . . ."

At first he could hear nothing but the rattling of an old refrigerator, and the traffic noise outside. Then he realized someone was talking. "Come in," the voice repeated, wearily. "Come in." He entered. Myrna was seated on a cot; there wasn't much else in the tiny room.

"I, uh, wanted to thank you for seeing me," Joseph told her, taking the seat she indicated, a metal folding chair. She gestured with her left arm, and Joseph saw that her right arm ended at the elbow, where the purple T-shirt she wore was pinned closed. As he sat, he realized she was young, no more than 20, though her haggard face had made her seem older at first.

"You work for Black Butterfly, huh?" she asked. She awkwardly slipped her left hand into the right-side pocket of her jeans, took out a cigarette from her pocket. The cigarette slipped from her fingers and landed on the floor between her feet. She ignored it, saying, "Sorry I couldn't talk to you on the phone, but they shut off my cell last week."

"I don't know how much Mr. Gold told you, but we've been seeing these rumors about, you know, the bug thing. And, uh . . ." He was having trouble not thinking about the cigarette on the floor. "Anyway, Mr. Gold — he said he first heard about it in that post you made. And since you were an intern at, the, uh, our company last year, I thought that was significant, and, well . . ." He glanced at the cigarette. Was he supposed to pick it up?"

"Mmm hmm." She brushed some stray bangs from her eyes. Joseph could see now that they weren't just tired, they were glazed over. *Medicated*, he thought. "I wasn't going to see you, at first," she was saying. "But I can't sleep, and, well, you can't fight the stars."

"The stars? You mean, like astrology?"

"I mean the stars. They came from the stars . . ."

"I don't . . . what do you mean?" He'd balanced a notebook on his lap, but wasn't sure what to write.

"At night, I could hear them. They'd *hatched* in me. They were humming, and after awhile the humming sounded like words." She shook her head — more accurately, her neck twitched and threw her head briefly to the side. "That's when they told me. They've been waiting a long time to be reborn. This was supposed to be their planet, see, but they were betrayed . . . they made me draw a map on my arm."

"A . . . a what?" He closed the notebook.

"I had to get rid of them. Now I regret it, of course."

Joseph was standing now.

"Wait," she said. She bent over, and Joseph had the idea that she was reaching for the cigarette. Instead, she reached beneath the cot and retrieved a cylindrical bundle wrapped in newspaper. "No one can stop it, Mr. Carpenter. It's foretold. I regret what I did." She placed the bundle on her lap. It was perhaps two feet long. "I saved it. Take it to them, as my gift." She began to scratch at the tape that held the wrapping together.

He walked backward to the door, one leg bumping against chair, tipping it over. "Thank you for your time," he told her. "We — I don't think I have any more questions. If I do, I'll . . ." He was fumbling behind him for the doorknob. She jumped to her feet, gripping the bundle in her left hand.

"Wait," she said. "Tell them to take me back! Tell them!" She reached for him, but with her truncated arm. By the time she recovered her balance he was out the door.



"I'm not . . . what is it you're asking me?" Joseph glanced around the brightly lit waiting room. Several clusters of people were within earshot, but they seemed too wrapped up in their own tragedies to be eavesdropping.

"Mr. Carpenter," the doctor answered, her voice not as hushed as it had been a few moments ago. "Your wife's going to be fine. A miscarriage at this stage of the game is upsetting, but it's not usually a health threat to the mother. Some bed rest and she'll be back on her feet. But when we examined her . . . we found, well . . . what I'm asking is, did she really want this baby?"

"What? Of course she did! What are you talking about?" He wanted to sit back down in the squared-off hospital chair and rest his head in his hands.

"When some women don't want to be pregnant," the ER doc was saying, "there are things they try. And your wife shows certain signs, bruising, torn tissue —"

"My wife woke me up at four A.M., screaming in pain," he interrupted. "There was blood gushing from between her legs. Blood and something that looked like black jelly. She was crying so loudly the 911 operator could barely hear me. And I don't have anything else to say to you. I'd like to go and see her now."



It was nearly noon when Joseph returned home, weakly mumbling the list of items Mara had asked him to bring back. Her voice had been so weak and hoarse, as if she were talking from the far end of some long, long tunnel. He shuffled into the kitchen, made himself a cup of tea, drank it while leaning against the counter. Then he steeled himself and approached the bedroom.

The event had been so sudden, so chaotic, that visual memories came only in brief flashes. A torrent of the blood on the bed, looking black in the dim light of the bedside lamp. A mass of some mucous-like effluence spread across the carpet, like syrup dotted with rounded, glistening lumps. Mara had crawled through some of it, moaning, and then collapsed in the hallway while he was fumbling for the phone. He'd helped her to the couch, the paramedics were pounding on the door. . . .

He walked into the room. The bed had been made, the bedcovers were as pristine as the day they'd been purchased. The carpet was spotless, impeccable. He walked gingerly to the far side of the bed. There were no stains anywhere, no bloody handprints or trail of gore, not a fleck of discolor. No evidence that matched his horrific memories.

He sat at the small computer desk near the window. How was this possible? None of the neighbors had a key. Had he called someone in his panic, then forgotten? Or maybe a neighbor heard the commotion and called Mara's family.

He rubbed his eyes. He stretched, yawned. His left foot connected with something under the desk, something solid but yielding, like semi-ripe fruit. He held his foot against it, wondering if he should nap before returning to the hospital. After a minute, he felt warmth through the toe of his shoe. Warmth and a faint vibration. He bent to look beneath the desk. When his fingers touched the thing's smooth surface, it seemed to quiver.

Joseph sat on the bed. He held a dark object about the size and volume of a large chicken egg, but oval rather than truly egg-shaped. It was black, smooth like polished

glass, and as he slowly rocked it he could feel there was fluid inside that shifted as it moved. The thing seemed to be getting warmer as he held it. Its dark surface looked firm, but it deformed like thick rubber when he pressed his thumb against it.

He had an urge to smash the thing beneath his heel, or hurl it from the window, but he also had an urge to hide it, secure it, protect it at all costs. He might have heeded the first instinct in those early moments, before the thing's beauty and symmetry entranced him. But then he had to put it aside to answer the phone, which was how he found out that Mara was dead.

Flight

Joseph spent the morning deleting messages from his email inbox. It felt like the first time since Mara's suicide that he had time to himself, free of well-wishers and sad-eyed visitors. He lingered over the last message in the folder: a jargon-laden dispatch from Dr. Casper, saying the tea samples were free of insect parts but seemed contaminated with "an unknown fungus" possibly related to "ergot." Then he shut down the computer.

With the monitor's light gone, the bedroom was lit only by faint sunlight that found its way through the heavy window shades and curtains. He walked to the bed, coaxed the blankets aside. The egg was the size of a football now. He cradled it. He leaned close enough to see faintly visible shadows, areas of blacker black, drifting slowly beneath the egg's dark surface. As he watched, he became aware of a change inside the egg. Something pushed its way from the depths of the thing and then, in an instant, became clearly visible.

It was an eye.

The eye was large, as wide as Joseph's fist, taking up nearly the width of the egg, but otherwise structured like an ordinary, human eye, with a dark pupil surrounded by a lighter iris. Joseph could even make out the folds of a soft eyelid, the lashes clearly visible. Then the eye receded, its lid closing, the swirling liquids swallowing it up. No colors had been evident — the egg's translucent shell yielded only shades of gray — but the shape, the proportions, gave Joseph a shudder of familiarity. It had been, without a doubt, Mara's eye.

The doorbell rang.

Gabriella was dressed casually, and for a moment Joseph didn't recognize her. "Joseph," she said to him, "I'm so sorry it took this long for me to hear of what happened." He stepped aside as she entered. She slipped off her jacket and handed it to him. "Ah, I think I smell our Red Harmony Blend Number Six," she continued. "Always my choice in times of stress. I hope it's helping you."

He draped her jacket across a wall hook, turned to see her rummaging through her purse. "I . . . Thank you for coming, but I . . ."

"Instead of tea, I thought we might try this," she said, showing him a smallish wine bottle. "You'll find it quite soothing." She stepped toward him.

"Thank you, I'm not much for . . . I'm not . . ." He squinted. There was no liquid in the bottle, just a jagged shape at the bottom. It seemed to be moving. It seemed to have small legs.

"Oh, Mr. Carpenter," she sighed, working open the cork. "Such a disappointment." Her words seemed out of sync with the movement of her lips. "Our oracles were so sure that you and your wife would bring forth the miracle we've been trying so hard to engender." She dropped the cork on the floor. "But none of the eggs we retrieved from

here were viable. Not one.” The shape in the bottle had clambered up to the neck, and was squeezing itself out the top. “Ah, well, at least our US product line is ready to launch. Material success must count for something, yes?”

Joseph backed away. The shape that crouched on top of the wine bottle was unfolding an array of stingers, pincers and spikes. “We’ll use this prototype to work out what went wrong with you, from the inside out,” she said. “Try to get away if you like, this one is very fast and already has your scent.”

Joseph could not take his eyes off the thing. It launched itself from the bottle, landing at his feet in the time it took him to blink. It was making clicks and whirrs, and dripping bitter-smelling fluid. Joseph took a step backward. Then he heard the bottle crash. Gabriella was on the floor; she pushed herself upright and Joseph saw a black shape wrapped tight around her neck. She clawed at it, gasping, red-faced.

A high-pitched whine flooded the room. The insect-thing on the floor backed away from Joseph, then shattered to dust.

Joseph had to press his hands to his ears. When the noise cycled off, he saw Gabriella lying on her back, moaning, blood running from her nostrils. Something slithered away from her, a worm-like shape three feet long and thicker than a garden hose. It was segmented, black, glistening. A trio of antennae extended from one end, thin as piano wire and almost as long as its body. Gabriella moaned softly. Joseph felt his legs weakening; he knelt. The worm-thing turned toward him, whipping its antennae, then raised a third of its length off the ground. It shivered. Joseph could see, now, a trail of broken black eggshell in the hallway.

The creature reared into the air like a cobra, its blind head waving slowly. And then, with the sound of metal scraping on metal, a pair of appendages unfolded from either side of the thing’s tubular body. The wings were wide and smooth, and they shone like black mirrors. Their edges were as fine and cruel as razors. They unfurled until their spread was greater than the width of a man’s shoulders.

Joseph tried, but could not speak. At the two outside corners of the wings, near the uppermost tips, were bulges that ripped open and became bright, wet, vividly human eyes. Eyes as big as saucers, but human, with hazel irises just like Mara’s, and delicate lashes and wrinkled eyelids. The eyes widened, blinked at the same time, one at the far tip of each wing, and they stared at him.

He heard humming in the back of his ears. “I understand,” he said, rising. “They will seek you out to destroy you. We have to leave. A place has been prepared . . .” A rattle of breath escaped from Gabriella’s unconscious form. Joseph went into the kitchen to find a knife.

Delivery Boy in Blue

Sweat stained his uniform, and the dust covered floors turned his black shoes grey as he made his way through the abandoned clothing store. The particle board blocking the entrance had been pried open by hand, judging by the small amount of blood on the sides of the board when Officer Owen Marsh arrived on the scene. He had a suspicion on who he would find inside, but with no backup available he had his pistol in his right hand, his flashlight in his left.

As dirty as the place was it helped Owen in his search. A path of staggered footprints stood out from the filth, giving him a clear path to the corner of the store. With his flashlight he could barely make out the form of a man in his 50s sitting next to a military backpack and several plastic bags. His clothes were a patchwork of crude stitches and worn patches and he wore several t-shirts one over the other.

Owen recognized the man and relaxed a bit. “Buzz? Is that you?”

The man jumped up to his feet staggering back and forth as he stood uneasily. His eyes had trouble adjusting to Owen’s flashlight. “Who? Who is there? What’s you doing here?”

Owen lowered his gun but did not holster it. He shifted the light so that it still illuminated the area, but wasn’t blinding Buzz.

“It’s me, Buzz. Officer Marsh? You remember me?”

“Sure...sure, I remember you. Bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit, soda not coffee, you always get hash browns but you give them to any of the guys waiting outside when you get breakfast.”

“That’s right.” Owen had heard about Buzz from other officers on the force. He was a professor at a local university who never recovered from a car accident in the 80s. “Do you know why I’m here, Buzz?”

“I don’t know why. Store just closed. It’ll reopen at 9AM sharp!” Buzz started fiddling his fingers together nervously. Owen could see his fingers stained red with blood.

“Well, Buzz, I’m here because the liquor store owner three blocks from here is convinced that you made off with a six pack and a box of candy bars. Would you know anything about that?”

Buzz tensed up as his eyes focused on Owen’s. Owen felt his fingers tighten on his pistol nervously in response.

“Wasn’t me. Guy lies! He always eats one candy bar after lunch, another after dinner and takes one home to his wife. Besides, need supplies!”

“There’s footage, Buzz. It’s you clear as day walking off with it.” Owen’s mouth went dry and he tensed up, trying to anticipate how Buzz would move.

Buzz threw an old Styrofoam container in Owen’s direction as he backed away. “Need the food! Can’t go outside anymore. There’s a shark in the water, a snake in the grass, a dragon in the jungle! People go inside but never walk outside again like fish in a bowl or cattle at a zoo. No one is who they say they are anymore.” The box had opened up, spilling rancid meat on the floor.

“Buzz, let’s us just go outside—“

“No, don’t want to. Just want to curl up and sleep here for the night, then I’m gone before morning.”

“Sorry, Buzz, that’s not how this works. Turn around and put your hands on your head.”

Buzz gave an exasperated sigh and slowly turned around, daintily posing his hands above his head. Owen holstered his pistol so he could pull a pair of metal handcuffs out from his belt. As Owen pulled one of his hands behind his back and placed the cuff on it, Buzz elbowed him in the chest, knocking the air out of him. Owen managed to keep standing, but Buzz ran off towards the entrance of the store, the old rubber soles of his shoes squeaking against the floor.

The body blow had stunned Owen, but he was younger, healthier, and stronger than Buzz. He tackled him hard to the ground, placing his weight on top of him for more leverage. Gripping Buzz’s shoulders felt strange to Owen. His shoulders felt hard like clumps of clay, and not flesh. He wrenched Buzz’s hands behind him. The old man screamed at the top of his lungs. “They’re not real. None of you are real! You are puppets missing *your meat*. Like puppets on display.”

“Fuck! Calm down,” muttered Owen as he slapped a cuff on Buzz’s wrist. *Bad night*, he thought. He wondered whether he’d be able to make detective this year. They didn’t have to do shit like this.

• • • • •

“Attention 336, this is Dispatch.”

Owen picked up his car radio and thanked God that Buzz had stopped screaming in the back seat. “This is Officer Marsh, go ahead.”

“Do you still have that suspect who robbed the liquor store?”

“Yes. Ten minutes out from county.”

“New orders. Suspect is to be taken to Post 76 on 102nd.”

Owen raised his eyebrow. “Can I ask why?”

“The lock-up is reporting they are overwhelmed with processing inmates so you are to take your suspect to Post 76.”

Owen eyed Buzz’s information on his laptop. He brought it up shortly after locking Buzz in the back of his car. “Dispatch, it says here he’s escaped from that station once before, wouldn’t it be more prudent to take him downtown?”

There was a short silence on his radio before dispatch answered. “Negative, 336, please transport the prisoner as requested.”

“Roger that, should take me twenty minutes or so. 336 out.”

When they arrived at Post 76 he saw there was only one other cruiser in the parking lot. It was a white stone building with blue tiles arranged as an arc around the entrance with “Indianapolis Metro Police Post 76” on the front. The building was not a large one, and yet he had transferred more than a dozen prisoners to the place personally.

The lights in the station hall seemed dim to Owen. The fluorescent lights were on and most of the windows were covered, and yet the hall still did not seem bright enough. Owen could feel the air conditioning hitting him full force the moment he walked in as well, sending shivers down his spine. He was rarely at this station and chalked it up to his unfamiliarity with the place as he moved Buzz into the booking area.

As Owen marched Buzz into the booking area of the station he saw Lt. Diana Garrett watching the room intently, her head moving back and forth at regular intervals to make sure officers were working hard. She had black glossy hair and wore a plain brown business suit with two small pins on her lapel, an American flag and a small IMPD badge. Owen noticed other officers moving around her or following her instructions intently. Owen knew she was with Internal Affairs, but beyond that he could not think of why she would be here. Owen seated Buzz down gently in a chair at the booking desk as he nodded at the officer in charge. The officer nodded back and handed him a clipboard full of paperwork for him to fill out. Buzz seemed to be eyeing the area around him as if searching for a way out.

Looking up from his clipboard Owen read the name tag on the officer in charge of admissions. He was a fat man in his early 30s and his face seemed oily, a soft sheen appearing in the lights. “Shadeland? Your family named after the street?” Owen joked.

The sergeant looked at him and gave him a smile and a nod before going back to working on paperwork. Owen noticed that the form appeared to be heavily scribbled on with no rhyme to it at all. “Trying to look busy?” The sergeant again lifted his head and gave him a smile.

Before he could ask any further questions, Buzz tipped backwards in the chair, his wrists straining against the handcuffs. He kicked his feet wildly and the chair splintered underneath him. Owen was at his side trying to hold him down while other officers moved to assist him. They worked as a team to hold Buzz firmly to the ground despite his wild behavior.

“I know this place! She’s the one with the teeth! She’s the one with the bite!” Buzz screamed loudly. “She carves them to pieces! *I’ve seen her eat!*”

“Buzz! Calm down!” Owen stood away as two officers picked up Buzz and carried him down the hall. He did not recognize their faces and the guards roughly dragged Buzz past a pair of locked doors. “Hey, where are you taking him?”

“To the isolation unit. He needs to calm down before processing can continue.” Owen jumped. He had not noticed Diana behind him.

“I thought he had calmed down,” began Owen. The last thing he wanted was to take heat from Internal Affairs over a suspect claiming police brutality. “He was non-responsive in the car and when he was in the chair I thought he—”

Diana cut him off before he could continue. “You followed procedure. I understand this was a rough night for you.” She smiled and Owen felt strangely at ease. “There appears to be nothing wrong with how you handled that situation.”

Owen tried to restrain himself but still let out a sigh of relief. “Really?” If he got a disciplinary from IA, he could kiss detective goodbye, at least for a while.

Lt. Garrett held the door for him as he rose to his feet. "I'll have one of the sergeants handle the paperwork personally on this one. Feel free to take the night off."

One question stuck in Owen's mind. "Who were those officers? I've never seen them before."

"They work out of this branch," she said coldly. "Now, you look tired. How about you go home while we handle everything here?"

"Really? But I've already started the paperwork and I was the arresting officer. I can stick around to finish."

"Yes, you could. You could also take the night off and go home." Her eyes met his and she smiled.

"I could take the night off." Owen smiled back at her, not wanting to argue it further. "Thank you, Lieutenant." He looked at the pair of doors Buzz had been dragged through and he felt something gnawing at his gut. Something seemed off.

• • • • •

Every time he tried to talk to someone it felt like doors being slammed in his face.

He had never encountered this much resistance from his own department before. The next morning when Marsh woke up he checked his department issued laptop for more information. He wanted to follow up on Buzz to see if he had a court date or if he was released, but according to the official records no one matching Buzz's description had been arrested in the first place.

As much as people liked to joke that the IMPD was terrible at record keeping, he knew better. Even if Buzz had been let go from the precinct five minutes after being processed, there would still be paperwork showing he was there. If he had been sent to prison there would be transfer forms, incarceration forms, legal forms drawn up for when he would be sentenced. None of these papers existed or even had seemed to exist.

His laptop had a direct connection to the IMPD's archives and he found nothing on Buzz or even on Post 76. Other prisoners seemed to be missing as well. Isaiah Lopez, a sometime drug-runner and general scumbag, was no longer in the system. Walsh May, a 19-year-old prostitute who sold himself to older men, also missing completely. The fat woman who said she had fucked Owen's father but still managed to make him laugh was also missing. Their complete criminal histories along with their driver's licenses and home addresses no longer existed. All he could remember was their names.

When Owen brought his questions to his supervisor, he was promised answers. Then his supervisor went on medical leave to deal with "a sudden illness in the family." He tried to contact Lt. Garrett but her office refused to even contact him back. Every response he received across the department seemed the same; "Don't worry about it."

Owen stared at the building after parking his parked police cruiser. A week ago it was open, and yet tonight it was just quiet. The parking lot was empty and there were no lights on in the building. It was late in the evening but for a place that regularly received prisoners and suspects, it should still have been open.

He sat there in his cruiser, thinking. *If this is a cover-up, he thought, this would make me.* Sure, the other officers would hate him, but maybe he could parlay it into a promotion? Maybe even a book deal or something? This was the kind of things Oscar-winning movies were made of, because this was not just a couple of clerical errors. This was...Owen wasn't sure. *It's something, though. Some kind of conspiracy.*

Owen had worn his uniform in case he had to make it seem like he was there on business. He left his car and walked up to the front door and gave it a solid tug. He was surprised to find it opened easily. The door was unlocked, but the lights were off.

The precinct was hot and had a thick musty odor. Boxes piled on desks and monitors were unplugged from their computers. An entire police station without officers, no staff, no signs of any work going on. Closing a station, even temporarily, would have meant memos being sent out, officers being transferred or even layoffs making headlines throughout the city.

Turning on his flashlight, Owen walked through the building with his hand on his pistol. His first impulse was to follow the hallway he had last seen Buzz dragged down. The security light mounted on the wall had not turned on and as he passed through the metal doors the floor appeared rougher than in the main room. The floor was a dingy brown color as if it was scrubbed repeatedly and there were faint scratches in the floor. *Drag marks?*

As he pushed the door open his nostrils filled with a foul odor. The hallway smelled of rotten meat and shit. The smell triggered memories of his academy days when they were first introduced to a decomposing body. Owen drew his pistol and a shiver crept down his back.

The hallway led to a large room full of clothing racks full of police uniforms. He could not count how many officers could be clothed by what was arranged before him, but it all seemed new, never worn. A table next to the east wall had numerous badges arrayed on it with matching name tags. Aaron Gaines. Brian Baxton. Carter Smith. Samuel Shadeland.

As he rounded the corner of the room he saw door was propped open. Walking silently he had his pistol centered in his field of vision. As he peered around the corner into the room he saw a figure slumped over in a chair. He flipped the light switch, and saw what was left of a man tied down tightly. A leather strap was fastened across his lips but his eyes were wide open. Owen felt his stomach lurch when he saw that the man's intestines had been carved out and his arms sewn to his sides with strange, looping stitches. A thin stream of bloody drool clung to the man's mouth as his terrified expression seemed to cry out to Owen.

A low voice spoke from behind him. "I thought I had told you to go home."

Owen tried to turn but someone crashed into him, knocking him down to the floor. Rising to a kneeling position he trained his pistol on the corner of the room to see a familiar-looking figure standing there. She was chewing on her fingernail and Owen could see the faint trickle of fresh blood flowing down her hand. Her hair was missing, revealing a veiny scalp with bulging purple veins crossing the top.

"Officer Marsh, wasn't it? Don't take it personally, but I'm not that great with names these days. Not when I meet so many people."

"Lt. Garrett? What's going on with this place?"

"This place? It was designed to not be important to you, to not stand out from the others. What made you question this place?"

"People are missing and this place seemed fake. No one acted like they gave a damn about anything. People scribbling on paper."

"Interesting," Lt. Garrett mused as she stared at him. "Good to know for next time."

Marsh backed up, hoping the doorway was directly behind him. "Next time?"

Garrett nodded. "This doesn't change. Well, not to me. I'm in for the long haul. Been here for ten years. That's a lot. Most of us get transferred up pretty quickly."

Marsh hit the wall. The doorway was to his left. "Transferred? Like promoted?"

Garrett moved right and positioned herself between Marsh and the door. “Maybe. Never know if it’s going to be better. But honestly this place is such a clusterfuck that I don’t know if I’ll ever get moved up.”

“This place?” Marsh looked around helplessly, the dead man in the chair, the uniforms in the next room, the sterile hallways and the humming lights. “This place? This little—“

“This place.” Garrett leaned in. “This building. This precinct. This department. This city. This state. This *planet*.”

“What?” Marsh was having trouble catching his breath.

“It makes no difference to me, is all I mean,” said Garrett in a whisper. Her smile seemed to stretch from ear to ear and jagged teeth resembling bent nails stretched over her gum line. Her face was less human now and more monstrous, like a piranha’s face stretched across a human skull.

Owen fired. He had forgotten he was still holding his pistol, but he squeezed the trigger. Garrett moved faster than was possible, dropping low just as the shot went off, the bullet grazing her shoulder. She grabbed Marsh and threw him out of the room effortlessly. When he regained his footing, he saw her spinning his pistol in her hand like a toy gun. She broke the gun into fragments of plastic and metal, and dropped them to the floor.

She pounced but he managed to duck out of the way. Her impact cracked the drywall and dazed her. He managed to pull out his taser and fired its prongs into her side, the electricity of the device crackling in the air. She shook a bit but ripped the prongs from her side with a hiss.

Owen slid his baton from his belt and walked backwards defensively. She had a gunshot wound to her shoulder and been hit with a stun gun, and all it had done was irritate her. Her smile was gone and her face contorted with animal like rage. She lunged for Owen but he managed to slam his baton into her face. She staggered backwards, and Owen didn’t think to question. He ran.

His throat felt tight and his head was pounding as he fled. As he slammed through the double doors he saw light reflecting off several objects that seemed to glitter in the dark. It was only when the lights turned on did he realize that the objects were badges. Six police officers stood in the room, motionless, waiting, their faces stuck in overenthusiastic smiles.

“What—“ Owen only got the word out before he lost his breath, but they snapped to attention and lurched forward. Owen tried to force his way through the crowd but their bodies seemed heavy and resilient, his baton bouncing off their heads ineffectively.

He felt hands grab hold of his skin, roughly. He could see the horror in their eyes. Tiny stitch marks next to their mouths, soft tears welled up in the corners of their eyes. As Owen flailed he tore open one man’s shirt revealing a massive gash with putrid stuffing feathering out the sides. Owen screamed but no one answered him back.

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Post 18 was bustling with activity, which seemed strange to Sgt. Harris. It had only recently been reopened after a fire gutted one of the other small posts in the city. It had been open for three months, but everything still seemed brand new.

“Let’s go,” he ordered the teenager and moved him along the hallway by the shoulder. The kid was a suspect in a series of muggings that took place near the Canals. The kid had spit on him and left him with some nasty scratch marks on his wrist, but now he cooperated as he was seated at the front desk.

The officer working the desk handed him a clipboard without Harris even asking. “Thank you,” muttered Sgt. Harris as he read the man’s name tag. “Wow. Buzz. Really?”

The officer gave him a faint smile then went back to filling out his paperwork intently. “You can leave him here, our new Lieutenant can fill out the rest of the paperwork for you.”

“What?” Sgt. Harris cocked an eyebrow at him. “Since when does that happen?”

The officer kept smiling at him politely. Sgt. Harris noticed he had a bad case of razor burn underneath his chin, as if he scraped himself while shaving in a hurry. “It’s perfectly all right, sir. Just leave him here and he will be seen to.”

“Sir?” Harris shook his head. “Look, man, I’ve got no time for this tonight. I’m running late for my kid’s recital—“

A woman’s voice interrupted him from behind. “Then by all means, sergeant. Feel free to take the night off.”

Sgt. Harris turned to face her and saw the Internal Affairs pin on her lapel. “Are you sure? I’ve never had this happen to me in five years. I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“No trouble.” She smiled sweetly as she nodded to the officer standing to her left. Sgt. Harris recognized his face almost immediately. “Owen? Owen Marsh? Hey, man, what are you doing here?”

Owen let out a faint smile as he helped the teenager to his feet. “Yes, I am,” he muttered quietly then turned sharply and led the kid towards a set of doors at the end of the precinct hall.

Sgt. Harris shrugged as he checked his cell phone for the time. “If everything is all right then I guess I’ll go.”

“Everything is all right,” said Garrett. She watched as Harris left, and then turned to the officer to her right. “You are going to need a new face, I think,” she said.

“Yes, I am,” muttered the thing with Marsh’s face. It was all he could say, of course, but it still made Garrett happy when it actually applied.

Concession

“Is it that bad?” There wasn’t any sag in Devon’s face. She was shy of thirty. Bright-eyed, and still touches of a smile in her good-morning grimace.

Kawalski looked up. The sun at six AM was just high enough over the buildings to blind her for a moment. She scowled, an expression easily read on her slightly sagging forty-something face. “Haven’t seen it yet. Radio said that Myers was the first on scene, he almost always is at scenes like this. I hate that.” She didn’t explain much more. “It’ll be grisly, honey. I hope you’re ready for that.” The shorter, older woman shuffled down the alley, leaving Devon to trail behind her like an abandoned puppy.

“Hey, it’s Grandma Moses.” A uniform laughed, a few others laughed with him, and Kawalski spun on the officer.

“Devon.” She barked, bringing both Devon and the officer to a sort of tense attention. The snickering stopped. “This is Officer Myers. This is his beat. You’ll see a lot of him.”

Devon’s nose wrinkled and her lip twitched as she looked the officer over. Myers was taller than he looked, his shoulders hunched forward. Devon did okay, she kept up ‘with the boys.’ No way she could keep up with Myers. His bulk fought to escape the uniform he wore. The hems of his short sleeve shirt were raw, the muscle of his arm pulled the hem to its limit. He didn’t so much as look at Devon as assess her, looking at her from eyes to toes. He took in and judged every inch of her. He didn’t follow the look with anything crude or smooth. He just studied. Her jaw tensed and she hesitated, resisted stepping backward. When she looked to her side, Kawalski was just as tense. Myers’ eyes were missing something. His eyes just didn’t shine like everyone else’s.

“You’re really gonna hate this one, Kawalski. Twenty the new girl throws up on her shoes.”

“Woman.”

Myers blinked.

“I’m over 18. I’m over 21. I’m not a girl. And I’ll take your twenty.”

Kawalski rolled her eyes, took Devon by the elbow and guided her to the scene while Myers and his buddy snickered.

The body, what was left of it, was strewn across the alley. Hunks of meat lay scattered from one end to the other. A flank of something rested on top of a dumpster, red and black

and coagulating. The entire place smelled like sweet rot and gas. Devon smacked her hand up over her nose. Kawalski looked her way. “Be glad it’s outdoors, honey.”

“Who could do this?”

A young tech, maybe 32 and fresh out of medical school stood up. His blue plastic jumpsuit was smeared with blood, his face covered in a mask. “What. Maybe a couple of ‘whos.’ This, though? This is a mess.”

Kawalski, unmoved, put her hands in her coat pockets. “Detective Cathrine Devon, that’s Kevin Callahan. He’s new. Don’t worry, he won’t be this energetic for long.”

Kevin didn’t seem to mind the comment, and went on enthusiastically. “The amount of force needed to pull an arm from a socket, like this? I mean, this isn’t the act of a lone lunatic. Because that’s what everyone wants it to be, some sort of Jack the Ripper thing. This, though? This must have been a small team of lunatics. But it’s weirder than that. All this, erm, meat? It’s covered in saliva. Probably human saliva.”

Devon grimaced. “Could a group of people even produce that much saliva?”

Kevin shook his head. “Not this amount, no.”

“Drugs.” Kawalski said unceremoniously. “It’s just drugs. Probably they gutted the guy and spread him around like this to send a message. I’ve had this hump in and out of the system so many times, that’s how this’ll turn out.” She turned to Devon. “Stick around, take any report you can from Kevin here, then meet me for lunch. I’ve got something I need to take care of.” Before Devon could answer, the older detective walked off. “Hope you’ve got a solid stomach. It’ll be a working lunch.”

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“Don’t you mind when they call you names?”

Kawalski didn’t look up from her salad. She picked around the sprouts and fancier greens, searching for the last of the grilled chicken chunks. “Call me what?”

“The slurs?” Devon looked from her burger to Kawalski’s salad and back, pushing a fry out of the ketchup.

“Look, honey, you got into this business because...why? You wanted to be the good guy, right? Or at least the authority. But the thing you have to understand is, there are other forces at work here. There’s an authority way above our heads, and maybe the line between the good guys and everyone else isn’t as thick as you want when you sign up.” She sighed and turned over a leaf, finding something that might have been a crouton or a piece of over grilled chicken. She forked it and dipped it in a dollop of dressing on the rim of the plate. “You get caught up fighting every little annoyance, every tiny injustice, you’re going to spend all your energy too fast. You won’t have any reserves left when the big stuff happens. And the big stuff is going to happen.”

“You’re saying I should just shut up and accept that kind of bullshit?”

Kawalski put the fork down and pursed her lips before speaking. “What I’m saying is, with the powers-that-be the way they are? We’re lucky, you and I, to be here at all. Spend your time bailing water, not rocking the boat.”

Devon frowned and put her burger down, wiping her hands off on a paper napkin. It went quiet for a while, and the sounds of other people clicking forks against plates and ice in glasses filled the air with enough familiarity that the quiet never turned to tension.

“You have that notebook I asked you about?” Kawalski broke through that tension with a grand gesture of her fork.

“I, yeah. I’m not sure exactly what I’m supposed to be writing down,” she admitted like she would admit stealing cookies from the jar.

Kawalksi gestured for Devon to hand the notebook over. She tisked when Devon did and the notebook was empty. The older detective set down the notebook and clasped her hands in her lap. “Tell me, honestly, what do you think about Marcy in Media Relations.”

“Honestly? She gives me the creeps.” Devon studied her fries.

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. It just feels like she’s watching me even when I’m not yet in her office. She seems to know more things than she should be capable of hearing on the grapevine. She’s just too ‘in touch’ somehow.”

Kawalksi nodded. “Agreed. That’s what you should be writing down. ‘M. of Media Relations knows more than she should.’”

“Huh.” Devon took up her notebook and wrote down the note as instructed. “You get a chance to look over the report I brought from Crime Tech, or did you want to wait until we were done eating?”

“Makes no difference to me.” Kawalski reached for the manila folder and pulled it her way, turning it around to take a look. “I got you something. Call it a tradition. I want you to promise you’ll wear it.”

Devon blinked. “What?”

“I’m religious. You don’t have to be, but it will make me feel a whole lot better if I know someone is looking out for my partner. I do this. It’s probably against some policy, but I’ve never lost a partner yet, so you’ll oblige me.” She produced from a pocket a small jewelry box which she set on the table. She did it without looking up from the folder and the glossy pictures of a mutilated body.

Devon opened the box and took out a small silver medal on a chain.

“That’s the Queen of Heaven.” Kawalski said, pointing her fork at the box. “She’ll look out for you when I can’t.”

Devon turned a little red, then closed the box and slid it into her pocket. “Uh. Thanks.”

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N. in maintenance had his hand in lye this morning. Seemed fine later.

“Are we sure this is the same guy?” Kawalski asked as she and Devon stepped into the pay-by-the-week hotel room.

An officer — Marsh — held back reporters. “Count your blessings, Devon.” Kawalski said with a shake of her head. “You’re not still on the beat seeing things like this. Their lives are about to get real ugly.”

“I guess, when Marsh saw the scene, he called us in case it was related.” She choked on the word ‘related,’ turning to cough and gag as the stench from the room washed over her.

“I told you last time you’d be glad it was outdoors.” No smugness in Kawlski’s voice, it was matter of fact. As with everything else she said. She took a little plastic sample

vial of scented oil. She turned it over on her finger and smeared some oil under her nose. “You’ll want to pick up something like this,” Kawalski said, not offering the vial over.

Myers was there, as Kawalski predicted, though he didn’t come over to make his report. Rather, he lurked in the kitchen. Devon felt his eyes on her the entire time.

“According to the ID in the wallet, this is Isaiah Lopez.”

“We know him?”

“Yeah. Two-time loser who just hooked up with the mob. Since then, he’s gotten real slippery, and those lawyers are keeping him from his third strike. We couldn’t get a hand on him.” Kawalski made notes as she explained.

Like the previous body, it had been reduced to chunks of meat, though thanks to Kevin’s help at the last scene, Devon had a better idea of what piece was what. Identifiable human body parts didn’t make the mess any more pleasant.

“I just don’t understand.” Callahan leaned on a wall next to the bed. “The strength needed to pull this body apart. You see this in the country with thresher accidents. Not murder. It’s impossible.” He snapped a glove off and ran this clean hand through his hair. It wasn’t exactly crime-scene etiquette, but no one called him on it. “Just as much fluid as last time. There’s human saliva everywhere. The limbs, the fingers, the chest, all over the mirror and the desk. It’s disgusting. It can’t happen like this.” He said, and looked up at Devon. “It isn’t possible. It’s super—”

Kawalski cut him off, stepping up beside him and hushing him. She was gentle, they way a great aunt might be, and it didn’t suit her cool exterior. “That’s all right, son. This is a lot. You shouldn’t have caught this one. You step outside with me, you can give me your report when you’re ready. Let’s not say anything that’ll embarrass us, what do you think?”

This now left Devon standing in the middle of an abattoir with Myers staring at her from the kitchenette.

“You first on scene?”

He grunted an answer.

“Anything special you noticed?”

“Drugs, like Kawalski said. It’s been photographed, bagged and taken to the station.”

She looked at him, her brows forming an angry furrow. “Uniforms took drugs from the scene before any detectives got here? Since when?”

“Since we got a memo from the Chief saying that was what we’re doing from now on. Relax, everything is on the up and up. Guy like me doesn’t need to snort coke to have a good time.”

They met eyes, and the intensity in his dull stare made her stomach sink. “I don’t want to see your idea of a good time, Myers.” He just laughed.

• • • • •

“ID came in on your bodies, Kawalski.” A different detective, one of the night shift that Devon couldn’t identify by face yet waved some printouts in front of his face.

Kawalski didn’t stop sipping from her coffee cup, motioning with her free hand to Devon’s desk. The detective, without looking at her, dropped the paper in front of Devon and headed off.

Devon rubbed her forehead and flipped through the stack.

“Bad men, huh?”

Devon sighed and nodded. “Drug runners, both of them. How did you know? Have you seen this before?”

Kawalski sat at her desk across from Devon’s and shrugged. “I’ve seen things like it, that’s all. You’ll see more. Don’t get worked up. You didn’t find Jack the Ripper.”

“Yeah but this?” She motioned to the closed file. “This isn’t Jack the Ripper. It’s like Big Foot got into drug trafficking and then lost his mind.”

Kawalski shrugged. “That’s probably it.”

“The actual truth doesn’t matter to you?” Devon sat back in her chair and regarded the older detective.

“Me? Sure. The Chief Detective? That’s another matter.” Kawalski pointed to Devon’s neck. “You forgot your medal. You should wear it tomorrow.”

• • • • •

T. wife is strange. 20 yrs younger, way out of his league and not after money. He stops blinking when she's around.

Devon considered the coffee maker, shook her head and opened a cabinet door to rifle through for the tea bags. It was late enough that the coffee had been sitting around. It smelled bitter and burnt.

“Hey.”

She turned fast, and found Myers standing just a little too close behind her. Devon gasped and Myers smiled. He didn’t look down her blouse, but he could have, he was standing that close.

“You still working on that case with the bodies?” When he walked closer, he passed through her personal space. Her gun felt heavier in its holster.

“I am. Yeah. We’re waiting for some anomalous DNA from the scene to be straightened out. But it looks like Kawalski is right. It’s a drug thing gone way out of hand. You’ve got a nose for that, huh? Maybe you should put in an application with Vice.”

He shrugged, picking up the coffee pot and sniffed it, his lips curled back and he turned his face away, setting the offending pot down. “No better up here with the detectives, I see.” He looked up, pinning her with a look that was as fierce as it was dull and lifeless. “You wanna follow her lead on this. Okay? You want to just go ahead and trust her judgment on this. I know when people first get their gold shield, they get all excited. I’ve seen it before. No reason to get yourself worked up over nothing.”

She stepped away from him, both brows up now and gripped the counter behind her. “You have a funny way of making a big deal out of a supposed ‘nothing.’ You know you’re no good with people, Myers?”

“Don’t much care for them. That’s why I joined the force.” He flicked hair out of his eyes and grinned at her, all teeth, as he walked off. There wasn’t any desire in his eyes. Whatever he wanted from her, it wasn’t sex.

“Shithead,” Devon said once she figured he was out of earshot.

• • • • •

S.H. in Arson doesn't eat. Or at least, never seen it.

Kevin Callahan passed Devon in the hall to the lunch room. His movements were stiff and slow, like his limbs were too heavy.

When they met eyes, his were red and sunken and he licked at dry lips when he greeted her.

“You look like hell, man.”

“Late nights.” He laughed, and there was something wheezy in his voice. “Up late nights. New girlfriend, man, she’s going to eat me alive.” He laughed again, wheezed, and shuffled off without explaining himself further.

From that point, Devon made a point to avoid the crime tech.

• • • • •

B.G. avoids eye contact and flinches like a battered child. He’s 43. This started on Tuesday.

“The bedspread is wrong.”

Kawalski who had been scowling at her computer screen, pulled her glasses down and looked across her desk to her partner. “Say again?”

“The bedspread,” Devon explained, holding up pictures. “These pictures, supposed to be bricks of cocaine from our last crime scene? They’re sitting on the wrong bed spread. Plus this mirror in the background here? It’s reflecting a different hotel sign. I mean, Christ. It’s like they’re trying to be obvious about it.” She slapped the pictures down and stood up. She moved her hands in the air in front of her, unsure where to put them.

Over Devon’s shoulder, the chief of detectives looked out of his office. He made eye contact with Kawalski who sighed and nodded. The older detective stood up. “Hey. I need some more coffee. You need to come with me.”

It was stern enough that Devon only nodded and fell into step. A dozen eyes followed the two of them out of the room.

When the break room door closed behind them, Devon cursed under her breath and Kawalski found a folding chair to settle into. She kind of groaned while she sat, a pretty common sound in a body prematurely aged. “You got proof beyond a bedspread that your fellow officers are falsifying evidence?”

Devon shook her head. “No. I mean, I wasn’t building a case.”

“Then maybe you don’t want to testify in the middle of the precinct, huh?” Kawalski pointed a finger at the younger woman. Devon’s shoulders dropped and she leaned back on the counter. This time, she didn’t grab ahold of its edge.

“I’m hearing you. I lost my cool. I get that. But what are we supposed to do about it?”

“Nothing.”

Devon started to sputter and Kawalski cut her off by having a hand at her. She then folded that hand with the other in her lap.

“You got such a light caseload of murders that you have the time to investigate cops behaving strangely? You transfer to Internal and not mention it to me? Or are you supposed to be catching murderers?”

Devon threw her hands up. “How am I supposed to catch murderers if people in this building are working against me! Everyone, even you, wants this to be a drug thing.”

Kawalski sighed, the chair under her squeaked as she shifted her weight back. “And you don’t think it’s a drug thing.”

“No. I don’t.”

“And if it isn’t, what is it? What could it possibly be? What should you be doing?”

“I guess, I guess I better figure out what it is instead.”

Kawalski stood up with the same grunt as when she sat. “You follow the leads you have, just don’t expect them to go anywhere. You’re rocking the boat, honey, not bailing.” She looked Devon over, looked at the younger woman’s neck. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth in response to Devon’s bare throat, but didn’t say anything else about it.

• • • • •

N. has full conversations with no one when she thinks she’s alone in the locker room.

Devon dropped her head into her hands. She’d scoured the records room at the station, brought back piles of folders, pictures, and files. They spread across the floor of her apartment, and when she groaned in frustration, it startled the cat.

The cat, in her shock, fell off the dresser.

“You’re a rookie cat. I’m a rookie detective. How are we supposed to sort this out?” She got up, scooped the cat out from behind the dresser where it had gotten lodged, and set it back down on the dresser top. “I wish Kawalski were here. And would actually talk to me about this.” The cat had nothing helpful to add, as she was too busy cleaning her paw.

“In the movies, this is where I’d have an epiphany and everything would fall into place. Dramatic music. All that stuff.” She sighed, pulling her eyes from the documents all over her floor and petted the cat. “I want to be better at this.” Petted or not, the cat lost interest in Devon and began to play with an open jewelry box.

“Two weeks between these bodies. Then going back forty years, there are clusters of these things. Closed files, unsolved. Just sort of laid to rest.” She started to pace, talking to the cat. Talking to herself had proved useless. “Intouchable bad guys. Cops up to something. Gore bodies covered in saliva. This isn’t *Law & Order*. This is *Super*—” She stopped, hearing Kevin’s voice in her head. “Is that what he was going to say? Blame the whole thing on ghosts and demons?”

The cat had no answer, just a silver chain in its mouth. Her phone rang, Kawalski on the other end ordering her to a crime scene.

• • • • •

McM avoids mirrors and gold jewelry.

“Why do they even call us down to these things if they don’t want the cases solved?” Devon had the questions on her lips, only to discover that her partner was not waiting at the gate she’d been instructed to go to. Just past industrial fencing, a body had been found between some low rent warehouses that currently sat empty.

There were no other cars, squad or personal. She heard no sounds of people moving and investigating or at least hanging around a potential crime scene. No tape up marketing the crime scene. She looked in the direction of the warehouses. She looked at the gate. She looked back at her car, and then squared her shoulders, heading to where the body was supposed to be.

Instead, she found Myers. It appeared to be him anyway. It wore his uniform, ripped at the sleeves and from the knee down. It had hair all over, though the face was mostly his. The eyes were the same, though they weren't as dull and without shine as she was used to. Now, they were alert and alive. They fixed on Devon, and all of the sudden the Myers monster was charging her.

A set up.

She pulled her gun from the holster and started unloading it as Myers ran at her, purely on muscle memory, just like all those hours at the range. Full magazine. Center mass. He barely slowed.

“Told you to wear that damn medal!” Kawalski shouted, drawing Devon’s attention her way, and tossed something to the younger detective. She caught it, an old fashioned sheriff’s badge in a wallet, its shine cleaner than tin. Devon had only a second to think about it before Myers would be on her. She threw up her arms defensively, holding the badge. The Myers monster howled and shrank back. It sniffed at her twice, and then ran off in another direction. It was only as he passed that she realized it was covered in blood. Maybe she *had* hurt him?

“What... what is he?”

“We don’t know.” There was no guile in the older detective. Maybe there was never any, but now, Devon was sure she was getting the truth.

“And you just let him do this?” There was a body. Ten pieces, maybe more, strewn all over the space between the buildings, chunks of flesh sticking to the walls that had been pitched in the savagery of the attack. Devon realized that Myers hadn’t been bleeding from his wounds, just covered in blood.

“He only goes after bad guys we can’t put away. He’s very picky. And it’s better to keep him close, to keep an eye on him this way than let him run wild. He’s not a bad cop.”

Devon’s head swam, and she backed up until her back hit a dumpster, she sat down in front of it. Kawalski followed. “Are there others like him? On the force?”

“Exactly like him? No.” She looked up at the sky — or maybe the rooftops. She looked like she was watching for something.

Devon looked down at the silver badge in one hand, the gun in the other. “But you’re not a bad cop. You’re not crooked. How do you live with this? How do you keep on doing what you do?”

Kawalski sighed with a noticeable rattle in her chest. “The Powers that Be got a lot to answer for in this city, honey. Some of us, we count on faith to get us through or lean on science to explain away the shadows. I know that if you try to fight them, head on, they’ll destroy you, make you vanish.”

“Vanish?”

“You remember Officer Marsh?”

Devon thought desperately. A memory flickered at the back of her mind — crime scene, maybe? A staircase? Nothing. “No.”

Kawalski shook her head. “Exactly. If you work within their system they’ll make concessions. They’ll hand you real monsters to take down. Table scraps, maybe, but that’s what living in a world full of evil is all about when you’re a righteous woman.”

“How many of your partners eat their gun after hearing all this?”

“A few,” Kawalski admitted. “But you aren’t one of them.”

Devon shook her head. “No. I guess I’m not.”

The older detective offered a hand down, and helped Devon back up to her feet. They opted for coffee over drinks. Devon switched to salads at lunch. On Monday, Devon started a second notebook, a secret one.

Officer M in Traffic, too strong for his own good.

L in PR, afraid of tire iron.

O’s voice doesn’t carry over the phone line.

M in Vice, tattoo on his wrist he tries to hide.

KM in Mayor’s office, meets Vs late at night in parking garage.

Detective T eats only raw meat, thinks I don’t notice.

K, caught him licking blood off his fingers at crime scene.

M on the patrol not safe once a quarter.

No record of officer named Marsh.

Diamonds

Does anybody ever really read these things?

Steven looked at what's he'd written on the form, and then pushed his chair back. It was definitely time to quit for the night. He looked around his office and saw paper covering every square foot. Patient reports, session write-ups, insurance forms, consent forms, medical waivers, dispensation forms....

No one reads it all.

Steven stood up and left. He left his pen uncapped in the middle of the paper. He left his coffee mug, still half full, on his desk. He did not plan on returning that night, nor the next day. He did not plan on returning until Monday, even though he would have to come in three hours early in order to finish this week's paperwork before a new crop appeared. On Monday, Steven would curse himself for doing that. When he left his office that night, though, he wasn't thinking about Monday. He was thinking about diamonds.

• • • • •

“We’re collecting diamonds on a beach. That’s all we’re doing.”

The bartender refilled Steven’s drink. He didn’t have to ask where Steven worked. He was used to employees from Warren Whalen Asylum coming in here to get drunk. “Say again?”

“Diamonds. Imagine you’re on a deserted island and you keep finding diamonds on the beach. They’re worthless to you, right?”

The bartender nodded absently and glanced around the place. Slow night.

“You can’t eat ‘em. There’s no way to sell them because you’re deserted. On an island. So why pick them up?”

“In case you get rescued, I guess.”

Steven knocked back his drink and slammed down the glass. “Right! Just in case. *Just in case*. Motherfucker.” He motioned to the bartender for another shot, but the bartender pretended not to see. “Just in case the patient ever improves. Just in case the funding comes through. Just in case the north wing ever gets fixed. Meanwhile, we’ve got computer systems that are 10 years out of date. We’ve got new technology that nobody’s been trained on using, because there’s no budget for CE.”

“CE?”

“Continuing education.”

“Right.” The bartender again ignored Steven’s motion toward the glass. This guy, the bartender reasoned, had probably had enough, but better to let him figure that out.

“So what was I — diamonds. Right. But we’re making all these reports, wasting whole forests of paper, collecting diamonds on a beach. *Just in case* a boat shows up and picks us up, we’ll be rich. But is that *likely*? No.”

“So what should you do instead?”

Steven cocked his head. “On the island? Fuck, I don’t know.” He picked up his glass and shook it at the bartender.

“Think you’ve had about enough, man.”

• • • •

Monday morning, Steven arrived at the asylum at five in the morning. He had a nine o’clock meeting, but all his paperwork had to be done first. He told himself he’d leave early, but some part of him knew that he’d likely be stuck here until at least six that night.

He stood by the elevator and watched the floor numbers light up. The elevators here still used the old plastic-paneled indicators, rather than LEDs. Steven got in the elevator in the parking garage level, and turned his key. Without the key, the elevator would only go to the first floor, the main entrance. Steven’s office was on the fourth floor. The elevator stopped at the first floor, people got on, nodded to Steven, and got off on the second floor.

“Take the goddamn stairs,” he muttered as the doors closed. The elevator whirred to life...and then sputtered and stopped. The lights went out, and Steven heard a loud, metallic *thud* from above him.

The elevator slipped a few inches. “Shit,” he whispered. He felt his heart start to race. He groped out in front of him for the emergency button, but then the elevator lurched to life again. It stopped on the third floor, and Steven hurried out. He took the stairs up to his office and called maintenance.

The guy from maintenance told him to fill out a request form and have it delivered downstairs.

• • • •

“I think we should cut down on paperwork,” said Steven. The meeting was abnormally long that week. Everybody had a lot of business to go over, the minutes from last week were exhaustive and tedious, and the other people there sat behind four-inch stacks of paper.

“Amen,” said someone at the other end of the table. It might have been Tracy, the SLP. Steven hadn’t been looking.

“No, really.” He took a sip of tea and looked at Mr. Tamber, the representative from the hospital’s bureaucracy. “What could we do to cut back a little?”

Mr. Tamber pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “You’ve got a suggestion?”

That was my suggestion, jackass, Steven thought. “Well, how about cutting out the forms for these meetings, for a start? They just get filed without getting read, right?”

Tamber shook his head. “Sue looks those over to make up the minutes for the meeting.” He glanced at Sue, who nodded half-heartedly.

"OK, well, what about the session reports? Could we maybe merge them with the SOAPs and the insurance write-ups, just so folks like Tracy and Dawn aren't filling out three different forms with the same information?" Tracy and Dawn perked up.

"But those forms all go different places," said Tamber. "Different people need to see them."

"Right," said Steven, frustrated. "But they all say basically the same thing, so why not make *one* form, fill it out *once*, and make *three* copies?"

Tamber narrowed his eyes and made a note. "I'll pass it along to the management."

In other words, get fucked, thought Steven. "Thanks."

• • • • •

"Thanks for what you did today," said Tracy, leaning into Steven's office. It was almost six-thirty. Steven was considering ordering a pizza; the paperwork was taking him longer than he'd thought.

"You know nothing's going to come of it."

Tracy smiled. "I know. But it was a nice thought." She glanced at the papers on Steven's desk. "You actually going to stay and finish that?"

"I have to. Most of this is from last week. If I let this go I'll be well and truly fucked by Thursday. I can't touch paperwork on Wednesdays, I've got patients back-to-back all day."

Tracy came into the room and sat down in the spare chair. "I know the feeling. That's what Tuesdays are like for me." She glanced at the top of Steven's in box. "You're not going to send this out, are you?" She held up the form he'd started on Friday. It still said *Does anybody really read these things?*

Steven smirked. "Ah, screw it. I don't think anybody ever *does* read them." He stretched. "You working late tonight? Want to split a pizza?"

Tracy stood up. "No, thanks. I've got one more SOAP to do and then I'm going home." A crack of thunder sounded in the distance. "Shit. I hope I rolled up my windows."

Steven didn't respond. He was reading his next form. The ones from the insurance companies were always the worst.

It was eight forty-five when Steven left that night. His wrist hurt so badly from writing reports that he could barely sign out at the front desk. He took the stairs down to the garage. The air had the smell of old oil and new rain, and when Steven pulled his car out of the garage, there were deep puddles on the road. *Must've missed the worst of it*, he thought.

Steven passed four accidents on the way home. The worst of them had snarled traffic for five miles back up the highway, and by the time Steven passed the site, there was nothing but broken glass and sand on the road. The flares were burning out and the cops were just standing there looking shocked. *Must've been bad*, Steven mused, and drove on, glad to be out of the gridlock.

He got home to find a form in the mail from the American Psychological Association. It was time to pay his dues again. He tore the form in half and opened a fresh bottle of scotch.

• • • • •

The next morning, he knew something was wrong even before stepping out of the staircase. The mood at Warren Whalen was somber and silent. Dawn, tears running down her face, caught him as he poured himself a cup of coffee. Tracy had died in a car accident last night. She'd skidded off the road into a tree and been killed instantly.

Steven took his coffee to his office and locked the door. He sat down at his desk and stared at the photos of his family, his cat, his ex-wife. It took him an hour to realize that the accident he'd driven past last night was about the right time and place, and that the dark stains on the road were probably the last he'd see of Tracy.

Steven spent the morning in his office with the door shut, trying to clean the place up. He hated his response to death, because he wound up counseling people through death so often. He knew the probable responses, and he knew that his cleaning instinct was just a way for him to feel active while exerting some control over his environment. He hated that, because it made him feel that, because he understood it, it was not a valid response to the death of a friend.

Tamber called a meeting for the next morning. Steven spent the afternoon seeing as many patients as he could, since he had a feeling the meeting would go all day. That meant that his patients made little progress, since they were out of their routine. Some of them were supposed to have therapy with Tracy that day, as well, and Steven had to explain to them why they wouldn't see Tracy again.

• • • • •

One of them was a teenaged girl named Angie. Angie insisted that Tracy had been murdered. Angie was paranoid and probably schizophrenic, but her parents didn't believe in drugs and so hadn't allowed her to get the proper treatment. She'd ended up here after ramming a letter opener through her little brother's cheek and puncturing his sinus. Now she was pacing around the room, talking about Tracy.

"They killed her, they killed her," she said.

"Who do you think killed her?" Steven was going through the motions. It was like filling out a form, just one more bit of paperwork. Without drugs, Angie was never going to improve to the point that this kind of therapy would help her, but he had to keep seeing her anyway. Just one more diamond from the beach.

"The people upstairs."

"There aren't any people upstairs," said Steven. "The fifth floor has been closed for a year, now, and that's the top floor."

"Nuh-uh." Steven hated that whine she used. "The sixth floor's still there. I know they said they took it off, but it's still there. It's *five* plus *one* so if you push the 'five' button and then the 'one' button, you'll get there."

"Angie, there are only five floors here, and the fifth one is empty." Angie started knocking her knuckles together, and Steven decided to change the topic before she became incoherent. "OK, OK. Who do you think is up there?" In the past, Angie had talked about ghosts and aliens. Steven was expecting something similarly strange.

"The offices," she said. "The administration."

Steven looked up from his notebook. "You mean the hospital administration? That's in a separate building." *Lucky fucks.*

Angie shook her head so vigorously her glasses fell off. "No, no, no. The administration for *us*. And for *you*."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Angie sat down and looked straight at Steven. Steven felt himself start to sweat, though at the time he didn't know why. "You're inside our heads," she said. "You, Tracy, Dawn and everybody who works here. You're inside our heads."

"You mean, like, you're imagining us?"

"No, no, no. I mean, it's like, you've *come* into our heads. You pushed your way in, and now you're in here, and it's like a maze. And the only what you can get out is to go back the way you came, and that's like quitting here, or come out the other side, and then you'd be in here with us."

"I *am* in here with you," Steven said before he could stop himself. Angie didn't seem to realize what he meant.

"No, I mean, you'd be like me. Like us. Stuck here answering questions. And those are the only ways to get out." She paused and pursed her lips. "I guess you could die, too, like Tracy, but I don't know if that counts."

"Angie—"

"That's what all the forms are for."

Steven put down his pen. "Excuse me?"

"The forms! You all fill them out, right? All those notes and forms and things? You write everything down?"

"Yes, we have to. We have to keep track—"

"I know." Angie's voice grew quiet and conspiratorial. "You have to keep track, because it keeps your place in the maze. When somebody quits or dies, someone else comes in to replace them. And they have to use the forms to figure out where the old person was, or else they'd have to start all over."

Steven looked down as his notes. "So, who's upstairs again?"

"I told you," she said. "The administration. The people in charge." She glanced up at the ceiling, and then looked back down at Steven and mouthed *they can hear us now*.

On any other day, Steven would have found that funny.

• • • • •

The next day, Steven went to the meeting and listened to Tamber drone on about how tragic it was, but that they had to keep seeing patients and don't forget to do your reports. Also, did anyone have time to help sort through Tracy's forms so that, when they did hire a new SLP, she could get up to speed quickly? *Find her place in the maze, you mean?* Steven thought, and almost said it out loud, but caught himself.

He left that meeting feeling angry. He was so angry that he forgot that he hadn't turned in the maintenance form and got on the elevator anyway. It ground to a halt again as it was descending, and Steven heard the *thud* from above him. Instead of being frightened this time, though, he just sat down.

Diamonds on the beach, he thought. *Tracy dies, and we're still collecting those fucking diamonds*. He wondered if Tracy had family. He thought he remembered her saying something about a brother in the Navy, but that might have been Dawn who said that. He had heard talk around the office of a memorial service this weekend, but hadn't heard any firm plans.

Bet the "administration" up on the sixth floor would know, he thought and let out a choked laugh. He stood up and walked to the panel, and moved to press the red emergency

button. He stopped, smirked, and press “5.” Nothing happened...but did something move, slightly, on top of the elevator?

Of course not, Steven thought, and just to prove it, he pressed “1.”

The elevator sprang to life, and started carrying him up. The floor indicator showed 3...then 4...then 5...and then a crude, hand-drawn numeral 6 appeared, the light a slightly redder shade than the others.

The doors opened. Steven stepped out. The ceiling was very low, here; it brushed the top of his head as he walked. “Hello?”

A door opened somewhere down the hall. “Who’s there?” The voice was thin, high-pitched, but Steven couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman.

“My name is Steven Young. I’m a clinical psychologist. I work downstairs.” Steven walked forward, past doors that seemed too narrow. The light here was dim and reddish.

“Yes, we know you, Steven. But what are you doing up here?”

“Well,” Steven stopped. What *was* he doing? “I was in the elevator—“

“Oh, hell.” The voice sounded disgusted. “It’s not Wednesday already, is it?” A door opened and Steven heard footsteps.

“Yes, it’s Wednesday. What’s that’s got to do with anything?”

“Tracy died Monday night?”

Steven took a step back. “Who the hell are you?” He looked behind him. The indicator light above the elevator door said that it was on the fourth floor.

“And you had your last session with Angie yesterday?”

“My last—“

A shadow filled the hallway. Something was walking toward him, something too tall for the corridor. “I’m sorry about all this. It’s usually much smoother, but I just can’t seem to get caught up this week.”

• • • • •

“This will be your office,” said Tamber, pushing the door open. “Sorry about all the boxes. We’ve been trying to go through Dr. Young’s papers and figure out the status off all his patients, but with both him and Tracy...you know, in the same week and all...”

“I can’t even imagine,” said the new psychologist. She looked around the room and sniffed. “Is it me, or does it...sort of stink in here?”

Tamber walked into the room and looked around the desk. He held up a coffee mug. “Oh, my God. I’m sorry about this. This is what’s doing it. Looks like this has been here since last week.” He opened the window. “You should probably let it air out a bit in here.”

“No, that’s all right. I need to get started if I want to see any patients this week.”

Tamber left the office and the new psychologist closed the door. She sat down at the desk and pulled the top paper from the box. It was a session report, but the words at the top of the page read *Does anyone ever really read these things?*

Of course we do, she thought. She noticed that Dr. Young hadn’t signed it, so she added her signature to the bottom, and then dropped it into a box labeled “Sixth floor.” The files in the box would probably just wind up being stuck in storage after she was through

with them, but they'd be kept for a period of years, just in case. The word "diamonds" popped into her head, but she wasn't sure why.

A knock at the door, and then a pretty blond woman stuck her head in. "Hi. I'm Dawn, the OT. You're Dr. Manning, right?"

She stood up and went to shake Dawn's hand. "Yep. Call me Angela."

"Angela. OK." Dawn looked at the office and shook her head. "Wow."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just weird, still."

"What? Oh, you mean the guy who used to work in here? Dr. Young?" Angela lowered her voice. "I heard they found him in the elevator."

"Yeah." Dawn swallowed hard. She'd been the one who had found him. "He chewed his own wrists open."

"Is he still here?"

Dawn nodded. "For now. They're transferring him next week. Nobody here can treat him. He still knows everybody, so it's too weird for us to try and work with him." She rolled her eyes. "You wouldn't *believe* how many forms we had to fill out to convince them."

"Them?"

"Oh, you know. The higher-ups." Dawn backed up a bit. The office still smelled funny. "There's donuts in the kitchen, by the way. Good meeting you."

"You, too." Angela sat back down at the desk. She had a few more forms to fill out for the higher-ups, herself.

Just A Bite

I swallowed a bite of my Portobello burger and looked at Allyson. “What do you mean Lance is acting weird?”

“I mean he’s being *weird*, Vinny. He’s not acting like himself.” She propped her chin on her hand as she leaned on the table. Her hair was just long enough to fall over her eyes as she pushed around the hummus with a slice of pita bread. She wasn’t normally big on vegetarian food, but this place was one of the best vegetarian restaurants outside of Chicago, and I ate here whenever I had the spare cash. Allyson had texted me “WANT A BITE?” which meant she wanted to talk. If she wants to talk, I get to choose the place. Those were the rules.

I washed down another bite with a zero calorie soda. “Look, Ally, he just got back from a three month trip to Thailand, studying rainforest fauna in....”

“... Khao Sok National Park.” She rolled her eyes and pushed her hair out of her face; both were a shade of dark brown that she thought was boring, but I thought was rich and eye-catching. “Yes, Vinny, I do know *that* much about my own boyfriend, thanks.”

I snorted and continued. “I’m just pointing out that he’s been in a foreign country for months, probably working 12-hour days in insane heat. That’s bound to mess anybody up for a while.”

She gave up on the pita. “And I get that, too. I do. But I expected after a few months he’d be more... I don’t know.” She suddenly frowned and her eyes glittered as she glared at me. “You’re going to mock me.”

“What? What you’re talking about?”

“Promise you won’t make fun of me.”

“I don’t even know what I’m...”

“Promise me, Vincent.”

Oh shit. She’s using the Mom Voice, full names and all. She only did that when she was pissed off at me or Lance about something. I put my hands up in mock surrender. “Okay, okay, I promise.”

Her expression softened again. “I just... expected he would be more... affectionate, you know? Especially after three *months*.”

I felt a chide about her needing love and affection rising up, but her hard glare and the forcibly extracted promise stopped me. And as I thought about it, it *was* a little weird. Before he left, Lance and Allyson were inseparable. They would go everywhere together, and more than once I got really uncomfortable as their displays of affection went past PG-rated and started to drift into R. I figured Ally would be too sore to walk after Lance got back, instead of sitting here and pretending to eat at my favorite restaurant.

“Okay,” I said, “that is weird. I don’t think he’s said more than two words to me since he got back, either.”

She nodded. “Do you think he’s sick or something?”

I chuckled. “You’re the biologist, not me. I just study pottery from dead people. Once he dies, I’ll let you know.”

She threw a slice of pita at me. Luckily, it wasn’t one with hummus on it. “Not funny, Vinny.”

I dug out my phone to check the time. “Look, I have to spend a couple of hours categorizing the pottery shards from the trip. You give Lance a call, and we’ll get together tonight to see a movie or something. I’m sure we’ll find out what’s going on then.”

She nodded, but she didn’t look convinced. I took her plate over to the counter with mine, and tried not to hope that Lance and Allyson were through.

• • • •

I set the tray of pottery shards next to the others and adjusted my disposable face mask before making some notes in my cheap spiral-bound notebook. I had spent several hours documenting the new arrivals, trying to find which pieces fit together. When I got to the lab at the field museum, the trays of fragments were just lying all over the dented and scarred wooden tables, with others still packed away in various shipping crates from Thailand. So I was the schmuck left to clean them up and document them for later study. It was hard, tedious work, but I kind of enjoyed it. I could just listen to the music on my phone and zone out a bit. It was like putting a massive puzzle together: some deduction and reason, but a lot of instinctive leaps to figure out which pieces went together. I seemed to have a knack for it.

I set the tray aside and checked the manifest for the next crate. It looked like I got through all of them but one, a smaller crate carrying an urn within it. I looked around the lab, but I couldn’t find anything matching its description. Pulling the earbuds out of my ears and sliding the mask off my face, I opened the lab door and called for the other anthropology student working the shift with me. “Hey, Simone, I’m missing a small crate. Have you seen it?”

She looked over from the computer where she was transcribing data from the dig notebooks. “The silver urn? Yeah, I think the pros catalogued that themselves.”

“What’s so special about it?”

She spun the chair around to look at me directly, probably relishing the chance to get away from the tedious data entry. “It apparently relates a story from the Ramakien, Thailand’s version of the Ramayana. Something about the Demon King Thotsakan and his plans to become the all-powerful Emperor of the Three Worlds.”

“Sounds like a fun guy.”

She smirked and adjusted her glasses. “Well, he was the bad guy in the stories. What I find fascinating is that he had ten faces and twenty arms. Personally, I think it’s a symbol

referencing a group of men, not just one, like this was a plan transcribed for the collective Thotsakan or something.”

I was about to make some witty comment about ten men all at once when my phone buzzed. It had a text message from Allyson: LANCE CANCELLED. NOT SURE WHAT 2 DO. CALL ME?

I tossed the mask and my apron onto the lab table. “Got to head out, Simone. Hope you enjoy the urn.”

She sighed and turned back to her data. “Yeah, I’ll probably get to see it when it goes on display,” she muttered as I walked out.

• • • • •

Lance coughed and squirmed on the threadbare couch while Allyson paced back and forth. After my call back, she decided to head over to Lance’s apartment and confront him. She figured she’d get more out of him if I tagged along, even though I really had no interest in watching the two of them get domestic. I settled into the worn chair that we scavenged from a trash heap last year and watched the two of them.

Allyson dodged around a heavy floor lamp and completed another circuit as Lance watched her. His eyes were sunken and dark, his skin was ashen, and I think he was even bonier than normal. He usually looked like an skinny emo kid with spiky black hair, but now he was practically skeletal. “I told you, Ally, I’m just a little sick. I don’t get why you’re so upset.”

“It’s not just you being sick,” she said as she spun on her heel and stormed back across the room. “You haven’t called or texted since you got back. I’ve had to initiate every contact. I didn’t even *know* you were sick until today! What if something bad happened to you?”

He coughed again. “I’ve just been busy.”

“Busy doing what? You haven’t been to class all week, either. You’ve been stuck in here doing god knows what.”

I looked away, trying to find something to focus on besides the fight between the two of them. I saw that Lance was living in true bachelor style, with pizza boxes lying all over the room and dishes piled up in the sink in the small kitchenette off to the side. It even looked like there was some mold growing on one of the plates. I’m no neat freak, but Lance never struck me as the messy type. I always figured he’d be more like Allyson: meticulous and obsessive. I guess opposites attract.

Lance’s raised voice brought my attention back. “You’re not my mother. Just leave me alone, and let me do what I have to do.”

Allyson had stopped her pacing at this, and now crossed her arms, his face a mask of repressed fury. “And what the hell *is* that, exactly?”

“Leave me *alone*!”

He moved so fast that I didn’t even realize what happened until I saw him grab her arm. He bit her hard on the hand before shoving her across the room. I was frozen, baffled by watching someone just *bite* another person like that. It was so primal and feral that I couldn’t even process it as real. As I stood there he moved towards me, repeating “leave me alone, leave me alone.” I wanted to follow that advice and run out of the apartment, leaving him behind.

Leaving her behind.

I stood my ground and put my hands out in a gesture of peace. "Look man, something's wrong with you. We can get you to a doctor, and they'll...."

He took a swing at me, but I was watching for it, and barely managed to duck in time. Once his fist was over my head, I reached up and grabbed his arm, trying to drag him to the floor. I have a good fifty pounds on Lance and easily three times as much muscle, but it was like trying to move a building.

"Leave me alone! Leave me...."

The thud was sickening, a wet crack. Lance slumped into my arms, and I saw Allyson holding the floor lamp. She was trembling from head to toe, but I couldn't tell if it was from fear, anger, or just adrenaline.

"Help me," I told her. "We need to get him to the hospital right away."

Her eyes were wide as she looked at the blood on her hand. It glistened in the light of the lamp which, by some miracle, was still lit. "I... I...."

"Allyson!" I snapped, trying to get her to focus. "You have to help me."

She shook her head and slid under his arm, and together we walked him down to my car. Today certainly was not going the way I hoped it would.

• • • • •

"The doctors say he's going to be okay." Allyson was standing in the waiting room of the hospital while I sat in a plastic chair that did everything possible to be uncomfortable. Her hand was wrapped in a bandage, but it doesn't seem to bother her as she fiddled with her phone, only half-looking at me. Behind her was a sign that said "Please do not use cell phones in this area."

"Good," I muttered. When she didn't say anything, I tried to wave a hand in front of her face. "What about you?"

She slid her finger up the screen of her phone a few times, like flicking away invisible bugs, before turning to show it to me. "One of the residents is an old friend of mine from high school. She got me a copy of his records."

I glanced at the thick scientific jargon and my brain promptly shut down. "I don't speak medical doctor. Can you put this into English for me?"

She frowned and took the phone back. "Something's wrong with his blood work. A foreign substance of some kind."

It had been a long night. I used that as my excuse to myself for why I was getting irritable. "And how was I supposed to tell that from a bunch of medical technobabble?"

"Well, I figured the bit at the end which said UNKNOWN SUBSTANCE might have tipped you off."

I sighed and stood up. "Foiled by basic reading comprehension. So you think Lance picked something up in Thailand?"

She put her hands in her pockets, along with her phone. "It seems that way. It would have to be something rare, though. I'm going to test a blood sample at the parasitology lab on the other side of campus."

“Wait, there’s a parasitology lab?” I paused for a moment, and added, “And you can get a sample of his blood? How in the hell can you manage all that?”

Her smile was wide, but not wide enough to reach her eyes. “There’s so much you don’t know about me, Vinny.”

I shook my head. “Fine, keep your secrets.”

She turned to look towards the door leading out. “If you wanted to learn more, you could come with me.”

“What can I do to help?” I asked purely as a formality – I already knew I was going to help her.

She looked around the empty waiting room before lowering her voice. “I need someone to act as lookout.”

• • • • •

Allyson slid her backpack off, and pulled out a thin plastic card which dangled from a clip. She slid the card through the slot, and the light turned green. The thud of the door’s bolts opening sounded like a gunshot in the darkened hallway.

“When I mentioned your secrets, Ally, I didn’t anticipate ‘master thief’ being one of them.”

She waved me inside with the plastic card, holding the backpack in her other hand. “I’m doing a parasitology study for a semester as part of my biology degree. No big deal.”

I stepped inside the dark laboratory and gently closed the door behind me while she looked for the lights. “I had no idea you were doing a parasitology study.” Behold, for my grasp of the obvious is mighty.

“Yeah, well, I had to do something with my free time while Lance was overseas. Cover your eyes.”

I managed to put my hand over my eyes just as she stabbed a button and the fluorescents in the ceiling bloomed with intensely bright light. It took me a second to adjust before I could open my eyes and look around. This lab was completely the opposite of the anthropology lab. Where my lab was full of old, dingy furniture, this one had new, polished chrome tables. Instead of dirt and debris, everything was clean and sterile. Even the equipment was carefully placed and arranged, compared to the relative chaos I was used to in my coursework. I gave an appreciative whistle. “Nice place.”

Allyson walked over to one of the machines. “It needs to be. There are strict safety guidelines to avoid any of the specimens escaping into the populace.”

I grabbed one of the tall metal chairs sitting next to a workstation, and swung it around so I could watch her as she worked. “So if we’re not breaking in here, why did you need a lookout?”

She pulled a white box out of her backpack. From where I sat I could make out the label “Biohazard.” “Well, technically I’m not supposed to be bringing in outside samples for study.” She started making slides.

“Technically?”

“Okay, I’m absolutely not supposed to be doing it.”

“And should I assume you technically shouldn’t have Lance’s blood, either?”

She didn’t look up from the slides she was preparing. “Let’s just say that the donor didn’t complain, and leave it at that.”

I threw my hands up in mock exasperation. “Great. Now I’m an accessory to the crime. Just wait until the papers get a hold of this. Maybe they’ll call us ‘blood thieves.’ Oh! Or maybe we’ll be vampires!”

“Shut up,” she muttered, and leaned over to look into the microscope.

“You don’t want to be a vampire?”

“That’s the opposite of shutting up. I need to concentrate.”

So I shut up. For the next couple of hours, I played games on my phone while she examined things and took notes. Once in a while I would get up and look out of the lab door to make sure no one was coming, but the hallway was empty and silent.

Finally, after I stretched and wondered if we could get pizza delivered to our break-in, Allyson called me over. “Some here and look at this.”

I walked over to look where she was pointing. On the screen next to the microscope she had a picture of some blood cells. “Looks like blood to me.”

“Look at these dark spots here,” she indicated. I leaned a little closer, and noticed that there were a number of small dark spots in between the blood cells. “That’s what made me think this might be some kind of parasite originally – they’re a little too mobile for a plain-old germ.”

“And you saw this on Lance’s chart?”

She ignored me. “The problem was that I couldn’t figure out what kind of parasite it was. I didn’t recognize it, so I’ve been looking through the computer to see if I can find something similar.”

She started typing on a nearby keyboard, and the image of the blood cells disappeared. “So have you figured out what kind of parasite it is?”

“I was looking through all of the symptoms, but nothing was matching up. I couldn’t go through every parasite known to man, so I tried to narrow the search, and focused only on parasites known to exist in tropical rainforests.”

It was clear that I was going to be the Watson in this relationship, so I crossed my arms and leaned against the spotless lab table. “And you found it.”

“Yes, but only by accident.” Her fingers stopped dancing on the keyboard, and another image showed up on the screen. The cells looked a little different, but the black spots were identical.

“That looks about right,” I said.

“That’s *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, a fungus that spreads through a very specific species of ant. The spore infects the ant and takes it over, forcing it to find a particular kind of leaf in a particular temperature range so that the spore can spread.”

I looked from the screen to her, but she had turned away and started walking towards the door. “What happens to the ant?”

She stood at the door, and put her bandaged hand on the smooth metal. “It dies,” she whispered.

I started to walk over to her, to comfort her about Lance, and then some pieces in my brain suddenly fit together. “That’s your blood, isn’t it?”

She looked at me then, and I could see the tears shining in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Vinny. I’m so, so sorry.”

I looked back at the screen, and then at her. “But you know the answer now, right? We can tell the doctors, find a cure.”

She stared at me, her eyes dripping as she spoke. “The ant carries out very specific instructions, but an ant can only do so much. If the spore infects the ant, though, it can be directed to bite something. Or someone.”

“Like Lance.” I felt the shards of pottery moving around in my head again, and I didn’t like how they were fitting together.

She leaned on the handle of the door, as if needing strength. “But why him?” she asked, more to herself than to me. “There were dozens of people on that dig.”

“Random chance. Luck. Lance was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

She shook her head. “This fungus doesn’t deal in random chance. Any ant that doesn’t fit its exact needs just gets a little sick, or isn’t affected at all. No, Lance was bitten – *chosen* – for a reason.”

I shook my head, dizzy from the implications. “A fungus can’t... how can that be?”

“Lance came back, and tried to keep it from us. At first, I thought it was because he didn’t want me to get sick. But I was just another ant, just one step closer to the right leaf.”

I stepped towards her now. “Ally, you’re scaring me. Let’s just... let’s just go.”

Her hand reached down, and pushed the switch beside the door that read LOCK. I heard the gunshot bolts crack again. “The fungus needs you. You can get access to the silver urn in the museum.”

“The... what? Ally, open the door, you’re not making sense.”

She stepped closer to me. Tears still dripped from her eyes, but her face was cold, stern. “The silver urn must be recovered. The instructions must be fulfilled. You needed to be isolated so that you can perform this task.”

“Isolated? For... for a fungus?”

She was now right in front of me. “You will be part of something greater. Something so intricate, so much more complex than we’ve ever realized.” She scratched at her bandaged hand absently, as if from a stray thought.

I wanted to run, but that would mean leaving her behind. “Allyson, I’d really like to go now.”

She leaned over to me. Her lips were inches from mine. “Not until we’ve had a bite.”

Go Back

I hate my memory. Not because it's bad, but because it's too good. Every night, I dream that Kat's here with me. We talk. We laugh. And then I wake up and remember the cop's face when he told me about the accident. I remember seeing my wife for the last time ever.

It's been three months, and I still wake up crying two days out of three.

I go to check the mail, same as every morning. Two bills, one in Kat's name. A letter from Kat's paper, addressed to me. I open that one as soon as I get back to the apartment.

Ms. Cartwright,

I'm sorry to inform you that the newspaper's legal team has blocked my attempt to categorize Kat's accident as happening when she was driving as part of an assignment for us. I thought I had something with her being a sole contractor to the paper, but it's not good enough. She's a freelancer, so I'm afraid there won't be any benefits payable.

I'm sorry. I really am. I'll see if I can't find another way, but you have to know that I don't have much hope left at this point. I'll let you know if I can find something.

Stay safe, Jennifer.

Daniel Monroe

Editor

I light a cigarette. Danny's a good man. Sure, he relies on letters when normal people would trust a phone call or an email, but he's just such a stand-up guy that I accept it. No benefits means I'm going to need a job soon, but I don't want to think about that just yet.

Instead, I turn the TV on for some company and start looking through one of Kat's albums. This one's from six years ago. Even on our honeymoon, she didn't stop taking pictures. She had a unique view on the world, always thinking about composition and color and light. She was damn good at it, too. I smile, remembering the first—and only—night we tried eating in. Her talents didn't extend to cooking.

I spend a good twenty minutes looking at pictures and remembering the good times. Then something happens. The light shifts. The TV jumps to the middle of a noisy show. And the album's ruined.

One second, I was looking at the photographs. The next, something's scratched the eyes out of every picture in the album. Except mine. Two words, writ large and in my own handwriting, stare out from the page.

GO BACK.

Oh fuck. Not again.

I've been having blackouts. Not the sort of thing you admit, unless you can afford a doctor's visit. They only happen when I'm alone and sitting down; not when I'm in public or driving. Judging by the TV guide, I was out for a couple of hours. I don't know what happens during the blackouts, but it's not the first time I've found weird stuff in my handwriting. I didn't want to throw the other stuff away, so I have a shoebox full of schizophrenic ramblings about the secret order of the world on top of my closet. I've never scratched the eyes out of photographs before. I shiver. The hell am I doing, writing myself notes?

GO BACK.

That's the only thing I've written this time. It's in the middle of our honeymoon pictures. Malvern Cove, a small fishing town on the Maine coast. Kat said it was a place her family used to go on vacation. I've only been the once. Maybe I should go back...

What am I thinking? Why am I willing to listen to something scrawled when I was in a fugue state? What the fuck is wrong with me? And yet, *something* about the whole thing feels right.

I call my sister. She's out, but I leave her a message asking her to keep an eye on the apartment. Then, I pack some clothes and spend too long getting the directions working on my smartphone. That done, I pack the car and start driving.

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After a seven hour drive, I pull in to the parking lot of the Overlook Motel in Malvern Cove. It's been a long time since I've driven for that long. Scared I'd black out. The woman handling check-in looks vacant, like she's only facing me because she's got to. When she asks my name I still say *Mrs Cartwright*, having not yet broken the habit. I'm not sure I want to. I'm probably keeping her from a portable TV set somewhere in the office. Only a couple of other cars in the parking lot. It's off-season, I guess.

Not yet tired, I head into town, looking for a place to eat. Every block brings back memories. We stopped for coffee on that corner and got talking to the owner, who used to be a wedding photographer. I pass a beachfront place that, judging by the signs, still sells damn fine cotton candy. I was shocked at the time that any small town could be so accepting of Kat and me, to the point that I didn't feel weird telling people that we were on honeymoon. Everyone we met was so damn friendly. In the end, I settle for a hamburger at Lou's Diner. I need some comfort food; I still don't know what I'm doing, but a chunk of carbs and protein will help center me. Malvern Cove might be famous for its fish, but that's something I can get to later.

Lou looks the same as he did the first time we walked through that door: a big guy, his badly-shaved head not really hiding that he's going gray. His apron serves double-duty as guide to the day's specials. He doesn't recognize me, but I expected that. He smiles, but something's off about it. Like the humor's lost somewhere between his mouth and eyes. I'm probably just tired from the drive.

The burger's as good as I remember. I don't know what it is, but the whole thing just tastes so much better than anything I've had back in Boston. Sure enough, my concerns melt away. I leave a generous tip before slipping out to my car for a smoke. By the time I get back to the motel I'm ready to sleep. For the first time in three months, I don't dream.



When I wake, I'm hungry again. I've skipped breakfast for as long as I can remember, but I've got a hankering for a stack of pancakes, and the taste of ash in the back of my throat. I head to Lou's again for breakfast. Again, his eyes look vacant when he's taking my order. When he refreshes my coffee I could swear I saw a bloody tear welling in one of his eyes, but he's gone before I can remark on it. Something's odd. But maybe Lou's sick and doesn't want anyone to comment. I don't want to overstep.

Full of pancakes and coffee, I realize that I've left my cellphone in the motel. Shit. Still, it won't take fifteen minutes to rush back and grab it. When I get in, there's another car in the parking lot, a dark sedan. It wasn't there when I went out for breakfast, so they must just have got in.

Whoever they are, they're in the room next door to mine, and they're *loud*. I can hear two women arguing about something with no regard for the paper-thin walls in this place. Something's weirdly familiar about it, but I couldn't say what. I grab my phone and slam the door on the way out. The argument doesn't skip a beat.

I'm only a little annoyed by the time I get to Malvern Cove's main street. Some cotton-candy helps, though the man who serves it has hands shaking like a junkie needing a hit. When I hand over the cash, his smile has a greedy edge to it. Strange. I shake my head, and go for a coffee. Helen White's coffee shop is where I remember it. She opened up as a side business when trade for the town photographer dropped off. The walls have hundreds of pictures, photographs of smiling couples and beautiful, vibrant colors.

“Can I help you?” Helen's not changed from how I remember her, her long black hair still immaculate, just beginning to lighten at the sides.

“Just a black coffee, please.” I don't want to seem too familiar. She probably doesn't remember me.

“No problem. Take a seat and I'll bring it over.” She turns away and starts making the coffee while I find a seat. Looking around, I'm the only one here. This town really is quiet. I take the chance to watch the people walking past out the window. Lots of people moving with a real sense of purpose, hardly anyone looking around or talking to anyone else. That strikes me as odd for a place this friendly.

Helen brings the coffee over. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

“You might,” I say. “I came here on honeymoon, about six years ago.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Did I shoot your wedding?”

I smile. “No, my wife's— was a photographer. She talked your ear off for most of the afternoon.”

“Now I remember. Katherine, right? And you're... Jenny?”

“Jennifer, yeah.” I gesture for her to sit, and she joins me at the table.”

“You're here on your own. Katherine off taking pictures?”

“No.” I swallow. “A drunk-driver hit her car head-on. Both of them... died at the scene.”

“I'm sorry.”

Helen nods at the right time, and knows when to sympathize and when to ask questions. It's clear that she remembers both of us, not just Kat. I don't know why, but I open up to her. In the end, she had this weird expression on her face, like she was waiting for something.

Everyone here's got something strange going on. While the town's still just as accepting as it was, everyone here's acting just a bit weird. If it were only one or two people, I'd write it off, but it's everyone I've met so far.

I spend the afternoon looking around the various boats, at the same time calmed by the sea air and the sleepy-feeling town, and freaked out by the strange quirks I'd noticed in the people. Had they been this strange when Kat and I were here on honeymoon, and we'd just been too happy to notice? Or was this some new thing, a reaction to strangers in a town that normally doesn't see anyone from further away than Milbridge? I was last here six years ago, I honestly can't remember the details of what people are like. Avoiding them helps me write it all off as a side effect of grief and tiredness.

• • • • •

I head back to the motel to change before dinner. Just as I turn the door-handle, the door of the room next to mine—the room of the arguing couple—swings open. The sedan is still in the parking lot, but I can't hear voices.

What could go wrong?

I knock on the other room's door. "Hello?"

No answer. I knock again, and then stick my head around the door. Nobody's there. The bathroom door is open, and it's clear nobody's here. Up next to the wall is a large cassette player, with the speakers pointed at the adjoining wall. On the bed—not slept in—is a large file. I shouldn't, but I take a couple of steps into the room and look at the file. Two words on the cover.

JENNIFER CARTWRIGHT

What the hell is this file? Before I can pick it up, I hear a loud 'CLICK' as a timer switch starts the tape. I can hear both voices clearly.

"Some days it feels like I'm the only one who does anything for either of us." Kat's voice is clear.

I mouth along with the next words. My words. "I've told you—"

"Talking about it isn't the same as doing it." Kat shouts from the tape.

"That's easy for you to say."

"Look, if you can't be bothered to try, just say so."

I turn the tape off. I know this whole argument off by heart. A couple of days before she died, we argued. Kat wanted me to get a real job, something other than bussing tables or data entry. After one too many bosses who made my life a living hell, I had no desire to get anything permanent. We'd fought for what felt like hours, and I'd played that fight back in my mind a hundred times since.

And now it's on a tape in the room next to mine, in a motel nobody knows I'm at.

What the hell is going on here?

I take the file from the bed and return to my room. I lock the door and slip the chain across. Something tells me that I shouldn't be reading this file.

SCENE: DINER

JENNIFER CARTWRIGHT is looking for something to eat having come to town. We want to reassure her, and ensure that she eats something local to settle her nerves. She'll only speak to LOU, other patrons can talk among themselves.

GIVE CARTWRIGHT TIME TO SETTLE BEFORE STARTING.

LOU: [looks up from newspaper behind bar] WHAT'LL IT BE?

CARTWRIGHT: ONE OF YOUR SPECIAL BURGERS, AND A COFFEE.

LOU: YOU GOT IT, HON. [Prepares burger]

My hands shake. That's what we both said when I first arrived. Every word's perfect, down to the contraction. I turn to another page.

HELEN WHITE's coffee shop is decorated with photographs of couples and vivid landscapes. Refer to set dressing notes #151 through #223 for exact placement.

JENNIFER CARTWRIGHT enters, slightly perturbed. We want to calm her down and give her a chance to unburden herself. The two women are the only people in the building.

HELEN: CAN I HELP YOU?

CARTWRIGHT: JUST A BLACK COFFEE, PLEASE.

HELEN: NO PROBLEM. TAKE A SEAT AND I'LL BRING IT OVER.

CARTWRIGHT: [sits, tossing her jacket over the back of her chair.]

HELEN: [prepares coffee and brings it to CARTWRIGHT] DO I KNOW YOU FROM SOMEWHERE?

CARTWRIGHT: YOU MIGHT. I CAME HERE ON HONEYMOON, ABOUT SIX YEARS AGO.

HELEN: [cocks eyebrow] DID I SHOOT YOUR WEDDING?

CARTWRIGHT: [Smiles] NO, MY WIFE'S— WAS A PHOTOGRAPHER. SHE TALKED YOUR EAR OFF FOR MOST OF THE AFTERNOON.

HELEN: NOW I REMEMBER. KATHERINE, RIGHT? AND YOU'RE... JENNY?

CARTWRIGHT: JENNIFER, YEAH.

HELEN: YOU'RE HERE ON YOUR OWN. KATHERINE OFF TAKING PICTURES?

Shit.

Oh shit.

I flip ahead. It's a full script of everything that's happened since I arrived in Malvern Cove, and everything that will happen for the rest of the night. It's got me having dinner at the Sailor's Rest, where we had our first real dinner of our honeymoon, then coming back to the motel to sleep. I'm interrupted by the argument a couple of times, and drive off after a bad night's sleep in the morning.

I'm looking at what's called a "Prep Breakdown," which says that the town will be taken down once I return to the motel tonight. That I have to see. I bury the file in the

bottom of my case, and lock that in the trunk of my car. Then, I go for dinner. I've got a reservation at the Sailor's Rest, apparently.

Dinner's a subdued affair. I don't really feel like talking to anyone, and the people around me don't seem like they want to talk to me. I can feel the tension in the air, like they want the whole thing to be over and done. The food's fantastic, but all I can think about is how much I want a cigarette. The lighter's a weight in my pocket. I finish and pay, skipping dessert. My sweet tooth is not in residence tonight.

I take the car back to the motel and change into dark clothes. I pack everything else and get ready to leave once I know what's going on. I get the feeling that I won't sleep much tonight. I give them a couple of hours to begin, flicking through television channels without really watching them. I smoke half a pack with nerves. It's almost one when I slip out, pressing my hand against the door so it closes with a very faint click. The sound of the recorded argument drowns even that out.

Something's obviously not right as I walk into town. I stick to doorways and alleyways, holding to the shadows. Even then, I fear that something's going to notice me. I'm lucky—at least, I guess I'm lucky. I duck down the side of Lou's Diner to watch and wait. I see groups of pale figures huddling together around trash-can fires. Creeping forward, I try to get a closer look at one of them.

One of the creatures crawls past, on all fours. It's worse than I first thought. I heave, but nothing comes out. Steeling myself, I go for another look. The thing has skin so white as to be transparent in the moonlight, wrapped in thick black straps of what looks like leather. It's head has large eyes, segmented like an insect's. Two more eye-like things sit on its forehead. It doesn't have a nose, just two slits between the lower eyes. The fingers and toes end in sharp black claws, and when it opens its mouth, I can see inch-long black fangs. It looks in my direction and I freeze, but its head turns and it moves away.

I creep forwards, towards a group of them. The group looks like they're talking—at least, their mouths are moving and strange clicking noises come out. It's a weird, tonal clicking that reverberates in a strange part of my brain, like an insect love songs. I see another group passing something among them. It takes a while for me to make my way over to them. When I do, I can see what looks like a pipe made out of a soda can. One of them crumbles a faintly glowing blue rock into one end and holds it over the fire until it starts burning. The creatures take turns inhaling the resulting smoke. A creature loses a small piece of the rock. I reach out and snatch it up before it can notice.

Crawling back into the shadows, I start to realize that I'm nowhere near as scared as I should be. I don't know why. I should be freaking the fuck out, and I'm not. The whole thing feels more like a weird mystery, with the blue rock and the file. I swipe into my phone's camera and take a couple of pictures of the creatures. I want to remember this.

I'm close to Helen White's coffee shop, so I go for a look. It's got no photographs on the wall, not even any marks on the walls where they should be. Out back, I can see a rack of clothes—all clothes that I've seen people wearing. Hooked on to each is a wig. In horror, I lift one: the long, black hair of Helen White. Underneath is a mask of Helen's face. It feels like latex rubber to my fingers, but it looked so lifelike when I spoke with Helen earlier. I take another photo.

Something sounds over the weird clicking noises. An engine. I creep back to the road, and duck behind some boxes. It's the same sedan I saw parked at the motel. The car stops, and the door opens. A figure gets out. I recognize her. *No, no, no.*

It's Kat.

It's fucking Kat.

I don't know what's going on. I grip the boxes so I don't fall over.

I'm struck dumb. Which is probably for the best. She's got a cellphone to her ear. I strain to hear what she's saying. It's her. She's speaking in her voice, not the clicking.

"No. No, I know the script's missing. One of the crawlers probably burned it."

She points at a group of the pale creatures and clicks at them. "They're not exactly great workers. Just want to get high on the blue instead of doing any work. No, it's mostly done. It'll be on the containers by morning."

Kat cradles the phone between shoulder and ear, scratching at a strange black lump on her left arm. "We'll have the motel cleaned out by noon tomorrow. Just need to wait for her to wake up.

"Look, don't worry. The memory graft is complete. She gets closure, and we've eliminated a witness. The timetable is back on track."

Hearing that, whatever's kept me calm runs out. I keep it together enough to creep away from the working creatures, and then run for the car.

• • • • •

I don't come to my senses until I'm an hour down the road, Malvern Cove just a memory in the rear-view mirror. I'm lucky to find another motel. This one at least looks well-used, which is a damn sight better. When I check in, the guy behind the counter gives me a weird look.

"Come far?" He's got a far-away look in his eyes, but breathing in I catch the whiff of marijuana. I resist the urge to ask for a hit.

"Malvern Cove. Just a couple of days."

"Malvern Cove in the middle of the night? What's to see there?"

"I... had more to see than I thought," I say.

He frowns. "I doubt that."

"What do you mean?"

I get a weird look at that question. "Place is abandoned, after the fire."

"What fire?"

"Malvern Cove? Bad winter took out a lot of the fishing boats, then one night the whole place went up. The only people who survived moved away."

Something in his tone sets me on edge. "When did that happen?"

"2002? Maybe 2003? A long while ago, anyway." He hands me the key.

"Thanks." It feels like ice-water is running down my spine. Our honeymoon was in 2006.

I head over to my room. No weird arguments, no crawling bug-people things. Just people and cars and flashing neon. I put a cigarette between my lips, and when I reach for the lighter, I feel the lump of blue rock in my pocket. I have proof. I take the file from my bag, and start reading at the beginning. I finish the cigarette and blink. Looking down, I see notes in my handwriting all over the file. I blacked out again. Part of me dreads reading what I've written in the missing time. By the clock on my cellphone, I've lost almost five hours. My eyes are heavy; I need sleep. I flip the file closed.

On the front cover, I see something that I didn't expect: a note to myself. Like everything else, it's written in my handwriting.

Jennifer,

I am the you who saw the cogs. I am the you who wanted to know more. I am not the you who found the clues, who avoided the cog-warden's trap. They wanted to strip me from you, substitute fake memories of coming to terms with grief.

They failed.

The cog-wardens know when I come to the fore. This is why I had you act. I know you want the truth. With truth comes pain. With truth comes freedom.

The honeymoon you remember is fake. I am the you who remembers what really happened. You will remember this event.

The blue is important. Your memory may tell you I am not real. The blue is a link to your memory. Keep it with you. You may need it.

In any other situation, I'd be freaking the fuck out. But having run from a town that doesn't exist where my dead ex-wife talked about giving me a memory graft? I'm glad someone is on my side. Even if that someone is a part of myself.

I slip the file back into my bag, and fall into a dreamless sleep.

The Upstairs Tenant

Dinner is a family-sized beef and onion pie, out of the freezer, into the oven, onto a plate, bit of ketchup. Ben has to take a plate from the stack by the sink, scrape off the detritus of week-old food the best he can. He finds the effort irksome, but just to eat it from the foil tray? Ben considers that sort of behavior a sign that he is letting himself go.

Clearing a couple of shirts and a pizza box off the sofa, Ben settles down in front of *Top Gear*. It's a repeat, but it doesn't matter. It's like a comforting blanket. It's the one where James May's getting the Bugatti Veyron to go at its top speed, only May's getting to the part about how they got the car through the wind tunnel and suddenly there's the *thud thud thud* through the ceiling again and he can't hear a thing because it won't stop.

Ben considers himself to be a patient sort of a guy. But this is too much. Every night for a week? Too much. It's driving him mad. He slips on his sneakers and, leaving the door of his flat unlocked, goes upstairs by the lift.

Ben hasn't been upstairs before, in the whole five years he's lived here. Even he can see that the ninth floor corridor hasn't been cleaned for a long time. He wonders if he ever saw anyone going to the ninth floor. He had, until recently, thought that no one lived there. It takes him a moment to get his bearings — did he turn left or right into the lift? He concludes that if his own room is 813, upstairs must logically be 913. The fluorescent tubes aren't all working; the ones that are working buzz and click and flicker. The corridor smells of piss in the way the stairwells and lifts don't. He doesn't remember walking quite so far along the corridor to get to his own flat.

Some of the doors hang open. Ben stops outside 909 and peers in. It's empty. No furniture, just the light from a rain-drenched summer evening filtering through the dust. A smell of mold.

And here's 913. Ben pauses, his knuckles hovering over the door. Then he hears the noise, the bang, bang, bang, and he knocks, four time, sharply. The noise stops with his first knock. No one comes to the door. Ben lifts his hand to try again, and thinks better of it.

By the time he gets downstairs to his flat again his show is over. He watches it on iPlayer.

• • • • •

Ben's morning ritual often involves waiting for the lift. He calls it. It comes up. Except today, for the first time he can remember, it's on the way down. It opens, and Ben walks in past the raw-boned woman in sunglasses standing there. She's attractive — not pretty — too raw-boned, too severe, lips red and defined, blush like knives. She is wearing a silky blouse in fake leopard skin, her hair blonde and short at the back and sculpted like a young Princess Di. She is all corners and elbows. She smells of hard-edged perfume and cigarettes.

Ben takes his place behind her and all eight floors down, he does not take his eyes off the nape of her neck, the shape of her behind tight in black nylon, calves in patent stiletto heels, and he prays that the Lynx is working this morning, and he suddenly becomes aware that he has an erection, and folds his hands awkwardly over his crotch and prays even harder that she does not turn around.

The chime goes off. The door opens. She steps out. Ben counts to three, and then follows her. He can't see her.

He feels a little ill. Dallying a little under the artificial light of the foyer, he looks for the name in the little window next to the button for 913. It's been scribbled out with biro. He can't read what's underneath.

• • • • •

On the bus to work, Ben gets a text from Leah asking how he is. He does not reply.

She'd be feeling guilty. Quite rightly. The last text Ben got from her wasn't meant for him, had evidently been sent to him accidentally. It had read:

Finding it hard to deal with Ben right now. He creeps me out a bit, if I'm honest.

Like she just put his name in the "to" field without thinking, like you sometimes do if you're careless with texts about people, something Ben has done himself from time to time and considers to be God's way of telling you that you should never send texts about people on your contacts list to third parties, because it's such an easy mistake to make.

Ben still doesn't know to whom Leah meant to send the text. He cut her off instantly afterwards. No more calls, no more nights out when she is there. He'd been meaning to ask her out before it happened; now seeing her name on his screen makes him depressed, edgy. Maybe it *had*, he has mused, been meant for him. Maybe it was an indirect way of getting rid of him and making it look like an accident.

You know who your friends are, he thinks.

• • • • •

Ben knows for a fact that his team leader hates him. It's the way she never stands closer than about six feet away, the way she talks really loudly when she's telling him off for something and keeps saying his name like it's a swearword. He's just put down a call. He doesn't realize she's standing behind him until she speaks.

"Ben?" Just the slightest edge of danger in her intonation. He clenches his buttocks and turns around on the swivel chair.

"Hi, Helen."

"Your handling time's up again, Ben."

"Oh."

“Do you know why that’s a bad thing, Ben?”

“Yes.”

“Why is it a bad thing, Ben?”

“I know why—“

“*Why* is it a bad thing, Ben?”

Ben clenches his fists. “Because it messes up the team’s stats and we don’t get our monthly bonus.”

“That’s right, Ben. So. Do you have any idea why your handling time’s up, Ben?”

“I had a lot of... difficult cases.”

“You had a lot of difficult cases, Ben?” She cocks her head to one side.

“Yes. That’s right.”

“Everyone else seems to handle their difficult cases in the average time, Ben.”

“Look. I had that one customer. On... Tuesday. He was on for an hour and a half.”

“How am I supposed to approve of that, Ben?”

“I got his line fixed.”

“It’s not your job to get his line fixed, Ben. It’s your job to get them off the bloody line happy in Usual Handling Time so you can answer more calls. Ben.”

“But—“

“Turn around and take some calls, Ben. You’re just screwing up the team’s stats even more sitting there arguing with me.”

“That’s not—“

“Calls, Ben.” She turns on her heel and walks off.

He gets back to answering calls.

• • • • •

He gets in the lift and turns to press the button. The woman is there, glamorous, sunglasses. Lipstick as bright as it was this morning.

“What floor?” He stammers.

“Ninth.” She has an Essex accent. Estuary vowels. She is standing very close to him. No one stands this close to Ben. He can see down her cleavage. He realizes that he is staring.

He presses the buttons for the eighth and the ninth.

She smiles. Her teeth are very white. She looks like a blond version of the woman from the Duran Duran album. In her heels, she’s a full four inches taller than him.

He licks his lips. He wonders if he is sweating.

She starts to look for something in her handbag. As the lift stops for his floor and he walks out past her, she lifts her hand out of the bag and brushes his face. He turns. The door closes on her, smiling at him with those white, even teeth.

He bites the inside of his cheek so hard he can feel the blood seeping around inside his mouth, the salt and sweat and rare-steak meat of it. A strange sort of fluttering fills his stomach.

His phone chimes, and he snaps out of it. It’s another text from Leah. He deletes it without reading it.

Dinner tonight is frozen pizza, and ketchup, and a can of lager. The thumping on the ceiling begins sooner than usual, and continues, with short intervals of silence, well into the night.

Come midnight, as Ben lies in bed, the dull hammering noise still above him, he is sure he can hear moans and screams. He gets out of bed and goes to the bathroom, and kneeling on the bathroom floor, he masturbates, imagining bringing her down and tearing off her clothes, and her screaming, and held down and struggling, imagining his hands on her throat, and she's screaming no, except it's not no, not really, she wants him to, of course she does. As he ejaculates, he hears a final thud, a final scream, and then the noises stop.

He wipes the linoleum with a bit of toilet tissue, not paying any notice to the slightly lighter patch of floor he leaves behind. Then he goes to bed and sleeps, and dreams about her, seeing her body one piece at a time, hands, breasts, mouth, hips, and never once her eyes. In the dream she still wears sunglasses.

• • • • •

He arrives at the lift early the next morning, and does not press the button to call it until the indicator light shows that it has reached the ninth floor. She is there, skirt tight, blouse shiny and showing an edge of bra, lips glossy and red and sharply defined.

“Morning,” he stammers.

She nods and smiles. They travel wordlessly to the ground, facing the door. Ben looks up at her profile and wonders if, around the edge of those big retro sunglasses, he can't see a discolouration, a flowering of purple and grey under heavy eye shadow and thick mascara. He wonders what's happening in the room upstairs, wonders what happens to her, and his breathing becomes ragged.

He looks up and the door is open, and the lift is on the ground floor. He didn't see her leave.

• • • • •

“What are you doing, Ben? You've been on Call Work for ten minutes.”

Helen is standing next to him. He hates the way she sneaks up on him like that.

“Working on a call, Helen.”

“Not for ten minutes you're not.”

“It's a complicated case.”

“Most people can do it.”

Ben sits in silence for a moment, staring into the middle distance.

“I've got a degree,” he says.

“What?”

He takes off the headset and looks right at Helen. “I've got a degree. In History. BA. 2:1 Honours.”

“So what?”

“I don't have to do this.”

“You what?”

He stands up.

“Sit back down there and take some calls, Ben.”

“No.” He straightens his back for the first time he can remember. “I’ve got a degree.”

“What, you think this is *beneath* you? *You* think *this* is beneath you?” She starts to laugh. “I resign.”

She stops laughing like someone flipped a switch. “Sit right down there or you’re out on your ear.”

“You can’t fire me.”

“Watch me.”

Ben is gathering up courage. “You can’t fire me, because I already quit.”

“What?”

“I quit.” He says it really loudly this time, so half the floor can hear him. “I don’t have to do this. I have a degree.”

“You stupid, fat, foul-smelling little twat. You think you’ll get another job?”

He begins to falter. Then he walks past Helen, as if to bump her shoulder, except that she avoids him with a grimace of disgust on her face, and walks over to the edge of the shop floor.

In the front car park of the call center, Ben stumbles, and the butterflies in his stomach become more aggressive. He throws up. Wiping his face with the back of his hand, he collects himself and heads for the bus stop, still not sure what he has done, or why.

• • • • •

The lift is out of order.

Ben buries his face in both hands, and shrugs, and stops at the door for a good minute before steeling himself to the stairs.

He is wheezing a little before he gets to the third floor, and it’s when he stops to catch his breath that he becomes aware that there are footsteps clattering on the steps above of him. He looks up and there she is, a heel, a flash of tight skirt, one flight above, and he thinks, *how did she get ahead of me?*

He starts to walk faster, but she stays ahead of him, just out of plain sight. He forgets his difficulty, the sweat, fixating on the need to get a glimpse of that backside, those calves. At the stairwell by the entrance to the seventh floor, he stops, mechanically picks up a piece of fabric on the step in front of him. It’s a scarf, a woman’s scarf or something like it, a flimsy thing, silk, with a floral print. He’s pretty sure it’s not *hers*. Or that he didn’t see her wearing it. The cogs turn.

He passes his own floor, goes on up all the way to the very top, to the ninth, follows the corridor round to 913.

The door is ajar. Ben knocks gently on the door. “Hello?”

The door swings open a little, silently. Ben peeks round the corner. The main lounge, just like his, is empty. No furniture, just the carpet.

No one visible. “Hi? I found this? I wondered if—?” He holds the scarf up, as if to show someone.

No answer.

“Hello?”

The door at the side of the room is ajar; Ben notices for the first time light streaming from the crack. He steps towards the door, reaches for the handle, says, "Hello?" once more. And then the sound starts from behind the door, a repetitive, creaking, grinding, hammering sort of sound, like some sort of machine, and over the sound, moans and at regular intervals, high-pitched screams.

Ben stands, shaking, open-mouthed, hand hovering over the door handle, and then his courage breaks. Dropping the scarf, he backs up a few steps from the door, and then turns and runs headlong, not looking back. In the corridor he turns and runs the wrong way, finding himself at the far end, the dead end. He stops and collects himself. He hears a click behind him.

It's a full half hour before Ben can bring himself to stop cowering on the floor at the far end and stand up and walk back along the corridor, which he does slowly, each step an effort. He passes room 913 with his back against the opposite wall. The door is shut. The noises have stopped.

By the time he has called out for a balti to be delivered and has sat down in front of more *Top Gear* repeats, the noise from upstairs has started again. The screams are worse than ever.

• • • • •

Ben dreams that he is on a fishing trip with his Dad, down the Estuary, like the ones they used to have when his Dad was alive, and they're both holding rods and standing on the sands, and Dad is saying, "The thing is, the fish don't go straight for the bait, right. They swim around it. You have to be patient. They might bite eventually, but they'll think about it first. They might even know. But they'll still bite."

And then his Dad is not there and he is not on the beach, he is standing in the empty room upstairs with the woman from 913 and she is not wearing her sunglasses and she has a black eye under her harsh heavy eye shadow and he cannot see the color of her eyes, only that she looks more like the 1980s than anything he has seen since the 1980s and he puts down the rod and she takes a step back, and he feels hungry and hateful and violent, the lust and the fear and the anger and the frustration rising from his stomach, through his chest, and he screams and rushes for her and bears her to the floor and pushes up her skirt and he is naked now and he does to her everything he always wanted to do, and when he wakes up, his shorts and his duvet cover are damp and sticky.

He is breathing heavily, and faintly horrified, and faintly excited.

He looks around in the dark.

"Ben."

A woman's voice. He jumps, turns the bedside lamp on.

No one is in the room.

Only the silk scarf, lying across the rucked-up duvet.

• • • • •

In the morning Ben rings his stepmother.

"Hi? Joyce?"

"Who's that?"

"It's Ben."

“Oh.” Ben hears a sigh, a pause at the end of the line.

“Listen, you know how after the funeral you said I should come visit, well. I’m sort of at a loose end. Can I come over and stay for a few nights?”

A long silence.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea, Ben.”

“Oh.”

Another silence.

“Ben?”

“Joyce?”

“I’m going to be honest with you. After your father died, I decided that the best thing I could do was to move on. Close that chapter of my life.”

“Sorry?”

“It’s not personal, Ben. We just want to... move on.”

“But you’re all—“

“Not even that, Ben.”

“Joyce, please.”

“Goodbye, Ben.”

“Joyce—“

“Please don’t try to call me again.”

She hangs up before he can plead further.

• • • • •

Ben hasn’t gone out for six days now. The freezer is empty. The last time he rang out for curry he couldn’t bring himself to get up to answer the door, and he doesn’t like Chinese. Leah has stopped texting him.

And the pounding has continued, every night.

He has begun to fester inside as well as out. It’s *her* fault. *She* did this.

He tries to order a pizza. When Domino’s picks up he cannot bring himself to say anything. It’s *her* fault.

Loneliness can do things to a man, it can make him less than he thought he was, loneliness and frustration and misery. This is not his fault. He has never been given a fair shake, he thinks. He is not supported, he thinks. He was not given the start that others had, he thinks.

He kicks on his sneakers over odd, holed socks and pulls on a football shirt from the stack of unwashed clothes that teeters precariously in one corner of his bedroom, and he leaves his flat unlocked and heads for the lift.

913.

The door is ajar again. Ben opens it, ready to give the owner a piece of his mind.

The main room is empty still, save this time for a figure standing by the window, silhouetted by the summer evening sun. He walks up, resolved to scream at her and to blame her for every misfortune that he has ever faced — he places himself between the window and her — and he looks at her hard.

Ben is looking at a shop-window mannequin, an old one, its surface chipped, its features — *her* features, hard, slightly damaged, sculpted hair in expressionist peaks, harsh mannequin eye shadow over empty mannequin eyes, glossy, chipped mannequin lips.

He yells in confusion and fury and shoves her, and she falls over, and her legs rock on the stand, and her torso falls off and rolls one way, her left arm the other. Her head rolls across the room and stops a few feet from the door.

Ben stands for a moment, staring at the pieces of her, unmistakable in fiberglass, lying there on the stained carpet, the head still rocking slightly where it has come to rest. He takes a few halting steps toward the head. He is mesmerized by that head — that blank, hard expression, with all the promise it had in the lift, and it draws him forward, the fish gradually, circling the hook, biting down hard.

The noises start again, the screaming and the machine noises. Ben jumps, looks up. He is too confused now to be afraid. He takes two steps, as if in a dream, to the door, and opens it. For a moment, he is dazzled by the light. His vision begins to adjust. He is standing on a rusty metal floor. He is at the entrance to some sort of vast machine or factory, all crunching gears and steaming cables and loudspeakers that pulse with the sounds of agony. A corridor extends through the machine, for miles, into the light, into forever, beyond the edge of the tower block and the edge of the city and maybe the edge of the world. Along one side, Ben sees shop-window dummies, hundreds of them, some without arms or heads, all chipped, all old. Along the other, higher up, a row upon of people, naked, filthy, suspended from the ceiling by what look like riveted metal clamps that cover their heads, cables or tubes invading, violating their bodies. As Ben stares, fascinated, appalled, going a little mad, cables attached to the devices periodically spark and pulse and the bodies twitch, in unison.

Ben hears a click and a whirr and a grinding of gears in a different tone. The row of figures begins to move, pulled along some sort of rail, swaying slightly, stopping about five feet away. Ben looks up, above his head. He sees another clamp, empty. Squinting, he makes out tubes and needles.

Another click. Squealing gears. A figure in the queue quite near to him, obese and very male, begins to lower to the floor. A hiss. Something releases. Ben, coming to his senses, tears his gaze away. He breaks and runs.

He gets a couple of feet outside the door and into Room 913, and feels a split-second of relief before a hand has his leg and he is borne down and dragged back, clawing at the threshold, trying to grab handfuls of carpet, pulled back like a fish caught hopelessly on the hook of a determined angler. The angler is hulking and heavy and so very male, and stinks of piss and sweat and engine oil, is made of pistons and of burning flesh. As Ben is dragged by his feet into the room and into the light and into the clamor of the machine, he can feel the figure's paws on his back, on the weight on his legs. And Ben screams, and beats on the floor and cries that it's not fair, it's not fair as he is pulled to his feet by rough, filthy hands, and he feels the tugging on the waistband of his trousers and his shirt being torn off and the darkness closes around his head and something is pushed into his mouth, into his eyeballs, through his eardrums, deep into his brain. As as he is raised, twitching, and he feels the tearing pressure of something hard and warm being pushed into his arse, back and forth, he somehow knows that this is only the prelude to other violations, and deep inside, as his body refuses to lose consciousness no matter how hard he wishes it, he begins to think that maybe in some small way it is his fault after all.

Grind

Two men sat in cheap plastic chairs on the front porch of a decaying two-story house, its yellow paint peeling and its curtainless windows seeming to stare out at the city with blank eyes. Neither wore shirts. The day was hot, even with a rusty fan blowing air over pale bare skin. One wore a sweat-stained John Deere hat — its brim curled in so far the edges nearly touched — along with faded and worn jeans, and had bare feet. The other had brown hair cropped in a classic mullet, his jeans nearly a twin to those of his friend. In place of bare feet dangled a pair of dirty flip-flops, a “Budweiser” logo just visible beneath the grime.

They drank from white cans with the word “BEER” printed on the sides in stark black letters, and smoked filterless cigarettes.

“The way I figure it,” said the man in the hat. “We’re victims of the boojie-wah. Them bastards took all the jobs and gave ‘em to the beaners and chinks. I had me a professor that told us the rich was always trying to fuck the proliterate. You with me, Roy?”

“I hear you, Carl,” said Roy.

Carl had once spent three months in the local community college and had been much taken with the works of Karl Marx. Six beers in he’d forget and call the father of communism Richard Marx. Still, Roy figured he had a point. The city had seen better times.

Weston could have been any medium-sized, Midwestern town. City streets became cornfields no more than a five minute drive from the center of town. Empty factories brooded within spitting distance of the fields, silent and abandoned. The poorer sections of the city had become even uglier and more desperate in the wake of departed businesses.

“Ain’t enough we sweat and bleed in their factories to make them fat bastards rich, they gotta go and take our jobs. Fuckin’ boojie-wah.”

“Yep,” said Roy.

Silence descended over them, passing by in slow, fat minutes as the men drank beer, smoked and sweated. The quiet was disturbed by a passing car. It was shiny black and nearly screamed wealth, even if you couldn’t see the BMW logo embedded front and back. Vanity plates read “Watson” and the car almost seemed to sneer at the men as it rolled along.

“Motherfucker,” said Carl. Narrowed eyes followed the car as it turned down a side street. “That’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout right there. Goddamned petite boojie-wah. Petite means small. Small asshole. I bet he’s got a small pecker, too. Who the fuck drives that foreign piece of shit around here?”

“Maurice Watson,” said Roy.

“Is that a nigger name? I ain’t never heard of no white boy named Maurice. You telling me we got a rich nigger living here?”

“Bought the Baker place last year.”

“The fuck you say! What happened to Baker?”

“Moved, I guess.”

“How come I ain’t seen *Maurice* around before?”

Roy shrugged.

“Well fuck me. You seen him?”

“Yep. Old boy keeps to hisself. Barely seen him outside at all.”

“Is that a fact? Where’s he get money for a car like that?”

Roy shrugged again. Carl took a large swill of beer, swallowed, then spat into the dying grass. He lit up a new smoke and leaned back in his chair, eyes still looking in the direction the car had gone.

“Old, huh,” said Carl. “Goddamned nigger, too. I reckon we should go and welcome Maurice to the neighborhood. You hear me, Roy?”

Roy shifted uncomfortably. “I dunno, Carl. He ain’t hurtin’ nothin’.”

“Fuck that. You and me so poor we gotta drink this piss, while a goddamned nigger rides around in a Beamer? I’m thinking we should go redistribute some wealth, personal like. You with me?”

Roy squinted at his beer can, thinking.

“Well?”

“All right, Carl,” he said slowly. “But we don’t gotta hurt him. And we wear masks. They ain’t got no beer in jail.”

Carl belched by way of reply.

• • • • •

Maurice Watson woke in the dark. He didn’t open his eyes or move a muscle. His breathing remained the same slow in-and-out of the sleeping. Slowly, cautiously, he reached under his pillow and grasped the handle of his weapon. A quiet shuffle reached his ears from the right of his bed. He pushed a button and the weapon thrummed softly in his hand. His heart began to pound in his chest. Another shuffle. Without opening his eyes or sitting up, he swept his hand out from under the pillow and aimed it at the sound. A bolt of blue lightning split the darkness, followed by a scream and the thump of a body hitting the wooden floor.

He sat up and snapped on the lamp sitting on his bedside table. A man in a black ski mask, dressed in shabby jeans and a threadbare plaid shirt was lying on the floor beside his bed. Dirty work boots made a staccato rhythm as they tapped against the floor and hands clad in even more filthy work gloves were curled tightly at his sides.

“You just made the biggest mistake of your shitty life, pal,” said Maurice as he reached for his cell. His heart was thumping harder than ever. It beat in his ears, pain shooting from his chest down his left arm.

Too late he heard another softer shuffle from behind him. He had just begun to turn when something hard connected with his skull. For just a second, the pain in his head vied for dominance with the pain in his chest, then all went black.

• • • • •

“Quit it, for fuck’s sake. Tie that any tighter and he’ll smother.”

“Fuckin’ jig tazed me. Fuck him.”

“*I’ll* taze you if you don’t cut it out.”

Two voices drifted down into the darkness. Maurice tried to take a deep breath and found something was stuffed in his mouth. He blinked open his eyes. He was sitting on a wooden chair in his kitchen, bound hand and foot with a sock stuffed in his mouth and secured with duct tape. Two men stood in front of him. One was the man he’d seen earlier, the other was dressed nearly exactly the same, though in place of the plaid was a faded black long-sleeved shirt. Eyes surrounded by white skin stared at him through the holes in the ski masks. A shotgun leaned against his refrigerator, within easy reach of either man.

“He’s wakin’ up, Roy,” said plaid shirt.

“Don’t use my name,” said Roy. “Are you retarded? Fuck you, Carl.”

“So you gonna use my name now,” said Carl. “Fuck you, too.”

Roy closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Carl looked at him, then at Maurice.

“You got a nice car, jig,” he said. “We wanna know where you got the money for that kinda car.”

Maurice felt his heart begin to pick up pace again. He stared stonily at the two intruders.

“This is what’s gonna happen,” said Carl. “I’m gonna take that sock out of your mouth and you’re gonna tell us where you keep your stash. I’m guessing you make money by selling drugs. Ain’t that how most niggers get money? You tell us where it is and nobody got to get hurt.”

Carl leered at him, displaying brown teeth.

“You don’t wanna make no noise, either, else my buddy gonna taze you like you did me. Get me, *boy*?”

Maurice looked at Roy, who was holding up the weapon. His heart began to pound harder in his chest.

“I don’t know how this thing works,” said Roy. “It’s got more buttons than my remote. Ain’t never heard of no M-jol-neer *Mini*. I’m thinkin’ I can fry you by pulling this trigger. You nod if you understand.”

Maurice nodded.

• • • • •

Roy watched as Carl pulled the sock out of the old black man’s mouth. His kinky white hair was plastered flat against the left side of his scalp with glistening blood. Roy’s hands twitched slightly at the sight of the blood. He hadn’t meant to hit the old bastard

quite so hard, but he'd been surprised when Carl had gone down. He'd cracked the old guy's skull with the shotgun butt before he'd really even thought about it.

The old man sucked in air when the sock was removed. His face seemed pale somehow for a black guy. Sweat was trickling down his brow. Roy pointed the tazer at the man, just in case, but he didn't make a sound. He just looked at them, sitting there in his rumpled tan pajamas. It was slightly disconcerting.

"Where's the shit?" said Carl.

"I don't have any drugs."

"Bullshit! How'd you pay for that Beamer? My buddy here ain't barely seen you leave the house."

"I'm retired. It's from my pension."

Carl slapped him in the face. Hard. The blow snapped Maurice's head back.

"The fuck was that for?" asked Roy. He gave the other man a push. Carl pushed back.

"Fuckin' jig is lying to us."

Roy rubbed his empty hand against his temple. "Just talk. Don't hit."

"What're you? A nigger lover?" He leaned back toward Maurice. "Where's. Your. Stash?" he said, biting off the words.

"I don't have any drugs."

Carl snarled and shoved the sock back in Maurice's mouth. He added new duct tape, winding it around the man's head for good measure.

"Let's toss the place," he said.

"OK," said Roy. "You do that. I'll watch him."

• • • • •

Roy could hear Carl ransacking the house. The screech of drawers being pulled open, the thump-clatter of contents dumped unceremoniously on the floor. The slamming of doors, the tinkling of glass.

"You find anything," he called.

"Nope. Gonna look in the basement."

He heard another door open and Carl's boots clumping as they descended the stairs to the basement, then silence. The silence continued for what seemed a very long time.

"You find something?" he called.

"Come down here."

"I gotta watch him!"

"Fuck that! Get your ass down here!"

Roy stared at Maurice, frowning.

"Don't you move, you hear?"

The old man nodded. Roy tucked the tazer in his belt, grabbed the shotgun and stalked away toward the basement steps.

As soon as he was out of sight, Maurice began to struggle. He pulled against the rope tying him to the chair, straining for an inch of give. His heart began to pulse in his ears. He tried rocking the chair back and forth and had reached the tipping point when his entire

chest seemed to seize up. Pain arced down his left arm. Maurice tried to scream, but the gag muffled it. Black dots appeared in his vision. His heart pumped spasmodically for another second, then quit. The black dots grew in size and the last thing Maurice Watson saw was the kitchen floor rushing up at him as he toppled over.

• • • • •

Roy stomped down the basement steps. *Dumbass better found something worth all this bullshit.* Carl was standing stock still in the center of the room. The entire basement was empty, the brick walls and cement floor revealed in the stark light of a single bare light bulb hanging down from the ceiling. A single darkened doorway led further into the basement. Was something moving in front of the moron? He stepped off the last stair and around Carl for a better look.

It was a gear.

Or at least part of a gear. It was enormous. Only the very top of the thing protruded above the floor, and that part was at least six feet across. It rose a good three feet in the air from where it appeared to have just grown from the cement. As he watched, dumbfounded, the thing rotated slowly, giving a faint squeaking noise as it turned.

“What the fuck?”

“I got no idea,” said Carl. He’d pulled up his mask and was staring at the thing with the dumbest expression Roy had ever seen on his face. That was quite an achievement in itself.

The gear continued to turn. They stared at it. Minutes ticked by unnoticed. Eventually, Roy shook himself and edged around the thing toward the other door in the basement. He reached in, fumbled around for a light switch, found it and flicked it on. Another bare bulb illuminated rows of metal drums, nearly filling the room. A dolly leaned against one of them. Roy peered closer at the drums. Each one had “Motor Oil” printed on the side. He frowned. A few of the drums seemed to have been broached. He tapped one of the opened drums and it made a hollow sound.

“It just keeps turning. What does it mean?” Carl’s voice was quiet. Roy snapped off the light.

“I don’t care. Let’s get out of here. Old man’s got nothing.”

“But...”

“Stuff your but’s, let’s go.”

He edged around the slowly turning gear and toward the steps. When he saw Carl wasn’t moving, he grabbed the idiot by the sleeve and tugged at him.

“Let’s go,” he said again.

“Yeah,” said Carl, slowly. He backed away from the gear and up the steps, watching it the entire time like it was a rabid dog threatening to bite him.

• • • • •

As soon as they reentered the kitchen they saw the old man lying on the floor, still tied to the chair. His eyes were open and he wasn’t moving.

“Shit,” said Roy.

Carl’s eyes bulged. He still hadn’t pulled his mask back down, and his pale face shone in the kitchen light.

“Did you kill him?” he almost whined.

“No I didn’t kill him, you fucking retard!”

Roy bent over the body and, gingerly, put his ear next to the old man’s mouth. He heard nothing.

“Shit.”

“Ooooh,” moaned Carl. “He’s dead! They’ll think we killed him. Fuck me!” He started to gag.

“Don’t you dare puke!” Roy grabbed Carl and pushed him toward the kitchen door. “Go!”

Carl went, still gagging as he pushed open the door and staggered outside. Roy followed him, looking back at the dead man on the floor. He cursed under his breath and pulled the door shut.

In the basement, the gear continued to turn.

• • • • •

Carl had trouble getting to sleep that night and when sleep did find him it was filled with the sound of the gear turning. At first it squeaked, just as it had done when he found it, but before long it began to make an unhealthy grinding noise. The cement floor seemed to shudder each time it completed a rotation. The faintest whiff of overheated machinery rose up out of the hole in the floor. For some reason the smell filled him with terror and he awoke in a cold sweat, pale morning light shining on the tangled sheets wrapped around his body.

Groaning, he got out of bed and tottered to the fridge. He opened it up, fished around and pulled out a beer. The sound of the grinding gear seemed to follow him from his dream and he turned on the TV to drown it out.

He popped the beer open and sat down on his sagging couch. For some reason the damn thing was on the news channel. Some chick was talking about a tsunami that had appeared without warning and drowned a bunch of Japs. He flipped the channel. Another breaking news story was yammering on about a hurricane threatening to hit the east coast. The man on the TV seemed baffled as to where the storm had come from. Carl swigged beer and flipped the channel again. Even the damn sports channel was talking about a potential disaster in the making. A Jew with a worried look on his face was talking about the San Andreas Fault. Small earthquakes were disrupting games all across the west coast.

Someone knocked on his door. Carl froze and dropped his beer. It was the cops! They’d already found the dead man. He started to shake as the knock came a second time, louder. He was just wondering if he could escape out the back when Roy’s voice yelled through the door.

“Open up, Carl.”

He almost giggled in relief, but caught himself. Snatching up the beer from the floor, he went to the door and opened it. Roy stood outside, his hair a sweaty mess. He looked tired, like he’d also slept poorly. Grunting, he pushed his way inside and sprawled on the couch.

“I need a beer,” he said.

Carl fetched him a beer and sunk down next to his friend. Roy chugged half the beer and burped. The TV was still talking about pending disasters all around the world.

“You wanna turn this shit?”

“Don’t seem to matter. Same on every channel,” said Carl. Roy grunted.

“I had weird dreams last night.”

“Me too.”

Carl went back to flipping through channels.

“Dreamed about that damn gear.”

He stopped flipping. His hand began to shake.

“Fucker was making this grinding noise. Scared the shit out of me.”

Carl stared at him. Roy looked back.

“What?”

• • • • •

They’d been watching the dead man’s house for at least half an hour. Roy couldn’t see any police tape on the door or any cops in the area. It made him nervous.

“I don’t see nothin’,” said Carl. “Let’s go in.”

“Old man lived alone. Nobody like to know he’s dead,” said Roy. “I still don’t like it.”

“Shit or get off the pot, Roy. We just gonna stand here all day tugging our peckers?”

“All right.”

The two men skirted the front yard, scooting along to the back where they’d broken in last night. Nothing was changed. The kitchen door in the back was still slightly ajar from where Carl had busted the lock with a crowbar. They went inside.

The first thing Roy noticed when he stepped inside was the scent of burning oil and overtaxed machinery. He swallowed noisily. It wasn’t right. How was what he dreamt actually happening? Carl noticed something different.

“Where’s the dead coon?”

Roy looked down. The floor was shining like someone had just polished it and the chair they’d tied to old man to was tucked neatly under a table, with nary a scratch or extraneous piece of duct tape to be seen. He swallowed again.

“I don’t like this.”

“No shit,” said Carl. “You sure he was dead? Maybe he was just playin’ possum.”

“He was dead.”

“Huh. Who moves a dead spook and don’t call the cops?”

“I dunno,” said Roy. He forced himself to stop staring at the chair. “We can check it out later. Let’s see the gear.”

Roy and Carl walked with exaggerated stealth through the house to the basement stairs. Carl didn’t seem to notice whoever had cleaned up the body had also straightened up the house, but Roy didn’t see any reason to tell him. All evidence of last night’s break-in, excepting the back door, had been tidied up. If this was a set-up, it was a damn strange one. Carl flicked on the basement light and they creped down the stairs. With each step the smell of burning oil got stronger and stronger. At one point Roy was sure he felt the stairs tremble beneath his feet, like something (he refused to even think the word “gear”) had slipped.

And there it stood. The gear was still turning, but jerkily. Foul smelling clouds of black smoke leaked out from between the spokes. It grinded and groaned and this time Roy was sure he felt the floor shake.

“Fuck me,” said Carl. He was still moving toward the gear, with a curious stiff-legged gait. “It can’t be real.” He reached out a hand to touch it.

“No!”

Roy screamed the word and lurched to grab Carl, but it was too late. The fool had placed a single hand on the gear. Carl’s hand sizzled as bare flesh connected with overheated metal. A smell like seared pork mingled with the scent of burning oil. The gear gave an almighty lurch as Carl screamed. Roy fell backward as the room shook, the stairs tripping him to send him sprawling on his ass. Carl was also knocked to the ground, but his hand remained fused to the gear and it began to pull him in.

As he watched, horrified, the gear seemed to *eat* Carl. The cement floor opened up and swallowed him as the gear pulled him down. Carl gave one last scream, then a spray of blood shot out of hole, covering the gear in gore. Almost immediately, the shaking stopped, the floor closed. The gear began to move smoothly again, only making that same small squeaking noise it had when he first saw it.

“Well now. That’s a hell of a way to oil a gear,” said a voice from behind him.

Blue lightning split the air, and Roy fell, his vision going white with pain.

• • • • •

Roy awoke to find himself sitting in a very familiar chair in the dead man’s kitchen. His arms were bound behind his back with what felt like handcuffs and his feet were shackled together. The smell of burning oil was replaced with that of brewing coffee.

“Sorry about zapping you like that. And the cuffs. I thought you might be a little wild around the eyes after what just happened. Couldn’t have you running off on me.”

Roy craned his neck to look around. A tall, white man in a black suit, with black shoes and black sunglasses was approaching him. His black hair was parted down the right side and he was carrying two coffee mugs. He paused to set the coffee down on the table, then pulled out a chair and sat down in front of Roy.

“Now then, Roy. If I uncuff you, will you promise to behave? We have to have a word.” He smiled a gleaming white smile at the bound man.

“Yessir,” said Roy. Then, not meaning to, he blurted, “You a cop?”

The man was already reaching into a pocket. He pulled out some keys and set about freeing Roy.

“Not me, son. I like my doughnuts, true enough, but I don’t ride the old black-and-white.”

The cuffs and shackles came free and Roy rubbed absently at his wrists. The man sat back down and picked up his coffee.

“Here’s what I think, Roy. I think you are an inbred, redneck shithead. If you were from the country, I’d call you an ignorant, redneck, hillbilly shithead and suspect you preferred to fuck your sister while you drank Budweiser and watched NASCAR. But, I *don’t* think you’re dumb. Like the man said, country don’t mean dumb. *Are* you dumb, Roy? Your friend looked to be about as dumb as a box of hammers. Killing himself on that gear might be the most useful thing he did in his entire life. You tell me.”

“Nossir, I ain’t dumb.”

“That’s what I thought. We know you didn’t kill Sergeant Watson. Autopsy said it was a heart attack. Hell, that’s why he was put out to pasture in the first place. Bad ticker.”

The man tapped his own heart for emphasis.

“But now we have a problem. You might have noticed that fucking gear needs nearly constant supervision. It starts to grind and the world goes to hell, and that’s a fact. You see the news today, Roy? Tsunami in Japan, hurricane in the gulf, fucking San Andreas threatening to dump California into the sea. You think that’s a coincidence? Think again. Like I said, I don’t think you’re dumb, Roy.”

He took a drink of his coffee.

“How come you didn’t oil it?” asked Roy.

“That is a good goddamn question, Roy. I knew you had something going on up there. I can’t see it. Do you believe that? Most people can’t see it. I don’t even know why your dumb ass can see it or why Watson could see it. Hard to oil a thing you can’t see. We’ve tried. It just doesn’t work. We need someone who can interact with the damn thing to keep it running.”

“What’s it do?”

“I have no idea. I told you what happens when it starts to grind? That’s all we know. Oiled gear, happy world. Grinding gear, shit goes to hell. Ain’t that a kick in the head?” He leaned toward Roy, conspiratorially. “Blood works just as well as oil. You saw that, am I right? It makes my teeth itch, Roy. I try not to think about it.”

Roy picked up his coffee in shaking hands, trying not to pour it down his shirt.

“You gonna feed me to it?”

The man laughed. Coffee slushed around in his cup with his merriment, threatening to spill over the sides.

“No, Roy, we aren’t going to feed you to it. That’d be a waste of resources. You know how long it usually takes to find someone that can see the damn thing? No, Roy, we’re going to make you a deal.”

He set down his mug and looked at Roy seriously.

“I know you’re out of work. Times are tough, am I right? Well, you just got handed a job with lifelong security. You stay here, you oil the gear. We’ll pay you — well too — and send you all the oil you could want. The only downside is the hours. That gear needs oiled on what you might call an irregular basis. You can leave the house, but never for more than an hour.”

Roy set down his own mug.

“What if I say no?”

“Well, I’d be sadly disappointed, and we’d have to find someone else who can see that fucking gear. Also, you’d be dead. Them’s the breaks.”

“Well, OK then.”

The man beamed at him and stood up.

“That’s the spirit, Roy. You should get your first check in a couple days.”

He stood up and headed to the back door. One hand on the knob, he turned to look back.

“It should go without saying that this isn’t something the neighbors need to know about. Am I clear, son?”

Roy nodded.

The man turned his head and listened. “Now I think you have some work to do. I’ll let myself out.”

Roy listened. The gear was beginning to grind

About the Authors

Justin Achilli is an award-nominated game designer, having worked on tabletop games, card games, board games, and video games. His credits include developing **Vampire: The Masquerade** and **Vampire: The Requiem**, design for the **World of Darkness MMO**, lead multiplayer design for *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, design direction for multiple Facebook games, and lead social systems design for an unannounced Ubisoft project.

Dave Brookshaw has graduated from telling other people about his games to writing them, but old habits die hard. A former Archaeologist, he lives in the South West of England with his wife and maintains a cover identity as a Reporting Manager for a telecommunications company. He's contributed many books for the World of Darkness, especially **Mage: The Awakening**. He should probably stop putting altered memories and / or time travel into everything.

Rick Chillot is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in several magazines, books, and websites. For White Wolf he's written about ghouls, priests, Frankenstein, ghosts, and the God-Machine, which predates the iPhone by several years.

Sarah Dyer is an aspiring creative thinker, intermediate cat wrangler, and novice writer. She lives and works in Cleveland, Ohio, and is constantly on the lookout for something new and exciting to learn. Though this is her first published work, she hopes to bring more to the literary and gaming tables in the future.

David A Hill Jr is a game designer, writer, hack, editor, developer, and publisher that hates writing biographical pieces about himself. His degree is in theoretical physics. He feels this makes him qualified to write science fiction. He runs Machine Age Productions with his wife, where they make games that are sometimes fun, usually thought-provoking, and always awesome. He would likely describe himself as a egomaniacal jerk with socialist tendencies. Observant as he is, he's probably right. On the other hand, bios allow him to speak in the third person, which is a definite guilty pleasure of his. You can find his games at <http://www.machineageproductions.com/>.

Wood Ingham is a writer, editor, illustrator and performance poet. He is married, with three kids. He likes olives. At the time of writing, he is Artist in Residence at Swansea University. facebook.com/howarddavidingham

John D. Kennedy, a writer from Indianapolis, Indiana, graduated from Purdue University in 2007 with degrees in English and History. He spends his time writing and rescuing canines on the Eastside of Indy. His writings include work in the RPG industry as well as comics.

Danielle Lauzon is a burgeoning freelance writer living in Dallas with her dog, two cats, and fiance. She has a Master's Degree in Animal Nutrition and works as a lab technician by day. At all other times she is an avid gamer, and enjoys all things sci-fi and fantasy. Her favorite media genre is horror, and is totally stoked to be writing for the World of Darkness game lines.

Matthew McFarland is an Ennie-award winning game author and developer. His work has appeared in almost all of the World of Darkness games (both the old and new iterations), and he developed the revised Dark Ages line of games. In addition to working as a speech-language pathologist in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, he and his wife, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, own and operate Play Attention Games, Inc. Their first roleplaying game, **curse the darkness**, was released in August of 2012. <http://playattentiongames.com>.

If life experience is truly the best classroom for writing, **John Newman** has had plenty of instructors. Past occupations include work as a cook, piercer and bouncer. He's traveled extensively throughout the U.S., and made the occasional foray into Canada, Mexico and the Bahamas. John currently resides in Cleveland, OH, with his wife Yvonne and their two yappy dogs.

By day, **Mark L. S. Stone** is a middle school science teacher. He lives in Oakland, CA, with his wife and a bearded dragon named Jabberwock. His RPG work has appeared previously in the Night Horrors: the Unbidden and Mage: the Awakening Chronicler's Guide. If you like what you read here, more of Mark's fiction has been found online at the Dunestee Audio Fiction Magazine. He also blogs about fiction, roleplaying, art, and geek life at burningzeppelinexperience.blogspot.com.

Eddy Webb (with a "y," thank you) is an award-winning writer and game designer. Hired on with CCP in late 2007, he has worked on a variety of role-playing games, including acting as Lead Developer for **Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition**. Today he designs content for the upcoming World of Darkness MMO. He lives a sitcom life with his wife, his roommate, a supervillain cat, and an affably stupid pug. He can be found on the Internet at eddyfate.com.

Chuck Wendig is a novelist, screenwriter, and game designer. He's the author of DOUBLE DEAD, BLACKBIRDS, and DINOCALYPSE NOW, and is co-writer of the short film PANDEMIC, the film HiM, and the Emmy-nominated digital narrative COLLAPSUS. He lives in Pennsylvania with wife, taco terrier, and tiny human.

Stew Wilson was born in Hull, in the UK, and spent the first eighteen years of his life trying to escape. He's made it as far as Edinburgh, where he works as a writer, game designer, system administrator, and computational demonologist. He lives with his wife, their cat, and almost enough whisky. He's written for the World of Darkness, **Werewolf: The Forsaken, Hunter: The Vigil, Geist: The Sin-Eaters, Æternal Legends, Maschine Zeit**, and **BLACK SEVEN**, and is currently the line developer for **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**.

Filamena Young is a professional writer, working as both a freelance and independently published game writer for more than five years. She's written and character designed for award winning games, including *Shelter in Place*, winner of the 2011 Judge's Spotlight ENnie. She is a co-founder and contributor to *GamingasWomen.com*, an award winning blog that features women's voices in the analog gaming world. Her credits include *Vampire the Requiem*, *Shadowrun*, *Dragon Age*, and the *Mistborn* RPG game lines as well as numerous fiction anthologies. Currently, she's co-owner of Machine Age Productions. There, she publishes major releases such as *Farewell to Fear*, many free games and games for young gamers like *Flatpack: Fix the Future!*

Eric Zawadzki is a fantasy novelist and game designer. He is the co-author of *Kingmaker* and *Lesson of the Fire*. He lives in the frozen utopia of Minneapolis, Minnesota with his filk rocker wife, their newborn son William Blake, and cats named Luke and Leia. For more about his writing, check out www.fourmoonspress.com.

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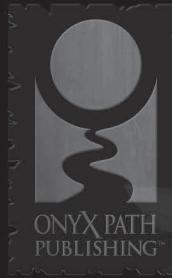
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