I Was Born a Werewolf's Child

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts
by
John Timothy Patrick Thurgood

December 2014

Thesis Committee:
Professor Michael Jayme, Chairperson
Professor Susan Straight
Professor Charmaine Craig
The Thesis of John Timothy Patrick Thurgood is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
I cringe at the thought of what this thesis would look like without the help and guidance I received from the wonderful members of my thesis committee. And for that, I want to thank Michael Jayme, Susan Straight and Charmaine Craig. Without them, I would be only half the writer I am today.

I would also like to thank one of the best cohorts that any creative writing program could offer. You all have inspired and influenced my work more than you can imagine, and I look forward to seeing each of your books on the best sellers' list!

And to my parents, thank you. One day, I'll buy you everything you've ever wanted.
For Jen K
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Was Born a Werewolf’s Child</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever, Ever, Ever</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Kind Funerals for William Smitt</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Captain Frank Hardly</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raveled and Bound on County Road 303</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The False Documentaries of Daniel Peoples</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking the Economy of Elk</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Flagbearer’s Daughter</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I Was Born a Werewolf's Child

It took me three long years to discover that the isolated ammonium nitrate from a Kool Pac could blow the bottom out of an abandoned car. The discovery materialized in the form of an old Buick parked just off Cermak, West of Dvorak Park, in the neglected industrial corridor of Pilsen. Chemicals bonded. A flash of light burned a residual pattern onto my retinas. And the bottom of the car blew straight through to the ground.

I inspected afterward. The front half of the passenger seat had melted, along with the bottom of the glovebox, warping the vinyl until it looked like the gaping maw of a wax mutant. Cats must have made a nest out of the engine, because the inside smelled like piss and burnt hair.

At the time, I didn't know I had accomplished little more than a glorified science experiment. To me, I may as well have cured cancer, because by destroying that Buick I had completed my first successful project. Essentially, I had discovered my ability to do something great—with real effect—and, immediately, I saw the accomplishment as a burden. My dad had always said that possibility was an instigator, a real motherfucker; and I was looking at it in the form of a blown to shit Buick.

My dad had worked on cars all his life. He had owned a one-mechanic garage, habitually on the brink of closure, and I suppose, a part of me would have liked to think that I got a certain amount of satisfaction from ruining something so close to him. But I would be ignoring the more nuanced causes of idle destruction. I would also be ignoring the part of me that still clung to the idea that my dad had abandoned my mother and I for reasons
that were bigger than the three of us.

The night my dad had disappeared, I found a note on my pillowcase:

Dear Adon:

You have to forgive me. There are things you're going to discover about yourself that I could never explain. Soon you'll become a man and so much more, but remember, don't hurt yourself and don't hurt your mother. She means well. As for everyone else, you will be forgiven.

Forever, your father,

X

The next day, I shaved my head and burned my hair in the bathroom trashcan. Our bathroom had carpet for some reason, and the smell of burnt hair lingered for weeks. My mother, as saintly as she was, made me shampoo it. Twice. But those were confusing times, so she took me to Rainbow Cone afterward to get ice cream.

My mother would never let anyone eat in her car, so we sat on the hood of her Buick Skylark and watched cars pass on Western Avenue while I finished my cone. She sat patiently. She never ordered anything for herself. It was part of the strict order that propelled her through each day, a destructive kind of self-preservation that I always found boring, even then. Ice cream was a rare thing, so I tried to enjoy it, but with my mother sitting next to me, the joy I felt was stifled by her endless supply of restraint.

My mother used crutches. When I was younger, I had discovered I could steal them and throw them under the front porch in order to get out of school. It had worked twice, but my mom caught on. The third time, about an hour afterward, my mom came to my room,
and stood in the doorway. “Get your bookbag,” she had said. When I looked up from my
comics, she was leaning hard over her crutches. Fresh scrapes marked the knees of her
jeans. The front of her shirt was dirty. By that time in my development as a young person,
I had come to realize that while some people asked for pity, very few actually deserved it,
but seeing my mother stand there in the doorway glowing in dust particles caught in the
sunlight shining in from the frontroom, I finally understood that my mother would never
need anything she could just as easily provide for herself. On the day my mother took me
for ice cream, my father had been gone for exactly four days. I wasn't sure if my mom
thought he was coming back, but I knew that he wasn't, because she would never need
him to come back.

***

Smoke rolled from the windows of the Buick in an acidic plume the color of watered-
down tea and scaled the brick facade of the warehouse that lined the block. The street was
empty otherwise. Aside from the greasy spoon on the corner, there were only two other
buildings, and they looked as though they had been vacant for at least a decade. I had
isolated the ammonium nitrate in my garage. Not the most noble thing to do with a
chemistry set, but my attempts at curing the abominable and saving humanity didn't
amount to much. Plus, I was only sixteen. I stepped back to the dotted yellow line and
stared for a moment at my potential smoldering on the side of the road. Below the
passenger seat, a bed of embers continued to crackle and glow. My dad had once told me
that forward momentum was often a means in itself, which meant, if nothing else, I was
going to need more Kool Pacs.
Back at the Walgreen's on Roosevelt, there were twelve Kool Pacs left on the shelf. I grabbed the whole box, paid and started home.

“You forgot one.”

I looked back, over my shoulder. Kelly McKay was chasing me down the sidewalk. She had a Kool Pac in her hand, and tossed it into my box as she trotted to a stop.

“You didn't have to do that,” I told her.

Kelly belonged to an artist collective at our high school, which meant she hung around the art room with a bunch of assholes, pontificating about the state of society. No one liked them, especially the popular kids.

Kelly narrowed her eyes. “I know didn't have to, but I did.” Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. It was brown and wavy and didn't look all that clean. After a moment, she rolled her eyes. Then she smacked the box of Kool Pacs out of my hands. “Your move, A-Don.”

I didn't say anything and looked down at the neon blue packs strewn across the cement. Black vestiges of gum dotted the sidewalk.

“Looks like it's still your move.”

“Where's your posse?” I asked and bent down to pick up the packs.

“I killed'em. They were all geeks anyway.”

I stood and angled the box on my hip away from her, so she couldn't knock them out of my hand again.
Kelly noticed and sort of laughed. “What were you doing to that jalopy?”

“Killing it.” For a moment, I tried to make it seem like nothing, like I blew holes in the bottoms of Buicks all the time, but then I realized how stupid that seemed.

Kelly nodded. “No much of a kill. Looked like it was already wounded.”

“Maybe that's none of your business.” I grinned, nervously, hoping that it would mark the end of our shared moment. Then I started down the sidewalk toward my mom's house.

There were a few kids playing on the front steps of one of the duplexes. They had chalk and were drawing nonsense. Kelly chased after me. She grabbed my shoulder and skipped backwards.

“What's the problem?” She was thrilled, lording my discomfort over me. “Afraid? I won't tell. Promise.”

I stopped and looked her right in the nose. Later I would learn that Kelly had had a crush on me since middle school, but in that moment, all I could think about was how much trouble she was going to be and how much easier it would be to simply blow her up too.

***

When I was younger, I had often ridden with my dad while he picked up parts for his auto shop, and while on these trips, as if the silence had been too much for him to bear, he would launch into impromptu lectures on the human condition. Once, while at the stoplight at Damen and Fullerton, he had sighed into the steering wheel, his fists at ten-and-two, and he had said, “Son, don't ever sleep with a woman more than once.” He
looked out at the cars lined up ahead of us. Bicyclists zipped past occasionally. “There's just no reason to.”

I didn't know what he meant. I understood what he had said, but at the time, his train of thought leading up to that nugget of wisdom proved enigmatic. I was young; I had time before I would need to claim a position, one way or the other. But it made me think of Mom. I didn't understand what it meant to be married, but looking at my dad, staring off into traffic, I wondered if it was designed to pit one's loneliness against another's.

Back then, when my dad and I drove around the city together, it seemed aimless. After picking up car parts, we often found ourselves at the end of a cement pier in Rogers Park or at the doorstep of a Frank Lloyd Wright home, my dad smiling with a distant understanding. I never knew what he was thinking. I didn't know if he was avoiding going home to Mom or genuinely liked to spend time with me. I often thought it was because he needed someone to field his moral imperatives, and since I was at that formative age and didn't know any better, he must have supposed that I was the perfect sounding-board.

“Do you know why some people are smarter than others?” Dad had asked once. We were on the North Side, in a part I hadn't seen before. The streets curved around themselves. Fluffy trees blotted the sun.

Earlier that day, I had been watching Jeopardy. I loved that show even though I never knew the answers. “Because they know the answers,” I said.

My dad paused for a moment, his lower lip jutting forward in thought while the street
folded beneath the car ahead. “Not exactly,” he said. “It comes down to good choices.”

Dad pulled the car to the curb and stopped. We were at the edge of the neighborhood next to the university. The buildings tapered toward the sky, old and big, and I wondered what it felt like to know what was inside each one.

My dad unbuckled his seatbelt and said that he wanted to show me something. I followed him through campus. We passed statues and large directories with placards. Benches lined a courtyard with a delicate-looking tree in the center. He pointed to a group of students walking past.

“Why do you think they're here?”

“To get smart?”

“Do you think they'll get smart just by being here?”

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure what to say.

“Hearing a bunch of professors talk won't make you smart. Advice doesn't mean anything unless you know how to use it.”

Dad knelt and put his hand on my shoulder. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but he looked unsure of himself. I wanted to tell him that I understood what he was trying to tell me. I wanted to lie.

“Son, your subconscious is much smarter than you are. The sooner you realize that, the better it'll be for all of us.” He paused for a moment. “How much money do you have?”
I pulled two dollars and some change out of my pocket. He looked at the money and nodded.

“I want you to wait here,” he said. Then he walked back to his Plymouth Duster and drove away.

The exhaust settled over the asphalt in the street. Students passed on the sidewalk. It was midday. The sun had burned off the clouds, and I could feel the cool push of lake weather creeping through the tall buildings and tight courtyards of the university. I walked over to a directory near the entrance of one of the taller buildings. I tried to put together everything my dad had just told me—to be smart and believe in my subconscious. I didn't know where he was and when he was coming back. A group of students walked by. They giggled when they saw me. A girl in a purple sweater asked if I needed help, but I told her my dad would be right back. They probably thought I was the son of a professor, the son of someone who knew things and taught things. She didn't question me further, because she thought I'd be okay. I felt something like tears burning under my cheeks, but I wanted to be patient for Dad. He told me to wait, and he told me to make my own decisions. He wanted me to understand what he was telling me even though I didn't.

When I realized he wasn't coming back, I walked to the Purple Line. The longest I had ridden was from Chinatown to Jackson, but I was with Dad then. We were buying a pair of earrings for Mom. The ride from the university was much longer, and it gave me time to work my anger into a tiny knot in my chest. When I walked through the front door, Mom dropped her crutches and hugged me. She nearly fell over. I had to balance her on
her unsteady legs, but I was focused on Dad. He sat at the dining room table with bills spread out before him. He was busily looking over an unfolded letter, his thin reading glasses pushed high on his nose. When I stepped over to him, he looked down at me over the lenses, a tense glare in his eye, and he nodded, as if to vindicate my accomplishment. Before I could say anything, Mom started in with how worried sick she had been. She had called all around the neighborhood to see where I was. She thought someone had picked me up from the park to murder me and throw me into the river. I told her that no one ever did that, but she doubled-down and went on about a young boy she heard about a few years back who had been kidnapped and left for dead under a draw bridge in Little Village. I didn't tell her what Dad had done.

***

If my dad had had some kind of plan for me, I think I was too busy being angry and confused and disappointed to fully dislodge the logic behind it. I had spent years thinking about why he left home, and why he had done the things he did beforehand. I wondered if I had done something different, if I had simply understood, would he have stayed? I asked myself that question constantly.

Kelly told me not to think about it. I was lucky. I could have had a dad like hers—mean and present. Her dad lived in the plush recesses of a fabric recliner angled from the corner of their front room. He watched nothing but reality television about other old men doing outdoorsy activities.

“It's like watching someone wallow in self-effacing regret,” Kelly said, while peeing in
Trent Greenwood's parents' bathroom, the sound of her pee much more powerful than I had imagined.

I was beside her, searching through the medicine cabinet. I had discovered that if I went to parties and ransacked the parents' pharmaceuticals, I could sell diet pills and laxatives back to the rich kids at school from whom I had basically stolen it in the first place. It was a one-hundred percent profit. I only had to whip it all together into a powder or something they could smoke. And I could easily do that with my small lab in the garage.

“Fuck fathers,” I said as droll as possible, trying to sound sarcastic so Kelly wouldn't think I was simplifying my emotions to hate. I had shown her the letter that my dad had left, but I only let her marvel at its meaning. I didn't tell her all that I had gone through struggling to piece it together.

Kelly snickered. “He's just so pathetic. And my mom, letting him do the things he does.”

Her dad had once broken her mom's hand by smashing it with a wooden cooking spoon. In his defense, he had only hit her hand on accident. He was probably aiming for her face.

Kelly stood and yanked up her jeans. Her hips lacked shape. The denim slipped to her waist. She stepped toward me with a grin and kissed me on the cheek as she leaned in to wash her hands in the sink. We had been going together for almost a year, and we were growing to feel unusually comfortable around each other. Part of me wanted to discount those emotions. I didn't want to think that I was becoming attached to Kelly. She seemed much too interested in becoming a famous artist or something renown to be hampered by a long-term relationship with me.
“What if all dads just disappeared after awhile?” Kelly asked.

“Sounds shitty.”

“I suppose you're right.”

The Greenwoods had two different kinds of painkillers and a nearly-full canister of Viagra. I pocketed all three, not knowing what to do with the male enhancement drugs. I was still in the habit of looking at possibility as a burden that needed tending.

Kelly jumped up and sat on the counter next to the sink. I stepped between her knees, and she pulled at my hoodie, drawing me close. Her kiss tasted sour, like she had thrown up earlier, probably when she disappeared to smoke a cigarette in Trent's backyard. I ignored it. My breath couldn't have been much better. Nobody knew we were up there. The second floor of Trent's house had been declared off limits, but as soon as he got drunk enough, he had stopped caring.

We pulled out of the kiss and paused. Kelly bit her lip through a smile.

“We could make just your dad disappear,” I said.

“That sounds like magic.”

“It's science.” I raised one of the canisters of painkillers and shook it like a maraca.

Kelly laughed and shook her head. Then she leaned in to kiss me again. The sour taste of her breath now familiar.

***
At thirteen, after my dad had left for good, I started isolating myself in different ways. The Chicago Public Library had been a big help. I could spend hours wandering through the stacks without seeing a soul. At first, I had started going there after school to look through the maps. I tried to think of all the places my dad would have gone. There were islands in the middle of the ocean that looked like speed boats out of gas. There were parts of Europe that I couldn't pronounce, with mountains that seemed to fold over themselves. Then I started reading about those places: cities that were founded on revolution; villages built on murder and rampage; entire continents stymied by upheaval. I tried to picture my dad wielding a sword and fighting for freedom among the hoary warriors of these far off destinations. I tried to think of him saving the beleaguered from tyranny. I wanted him to be a hero somewhere.

But then he called and said that he was in Albuquerque.

His voice sounded different over the phone. It didn't carry like I remembered. All the wires between us culled its vigor. That first call wasn't very long. He just wanted to say hi and that he missed me. I missed him too, which was hard to say aloud without having to put the phone down. I held it together, though, not knowing when the next call would come. He said that Albuquerque was in the desert in New Mexico, and that it never snowed. There was a wolf that lived in his neighborhood. His neighbors wanted to shoot it because they had lost a few chickens. My dad said it was their fault for raising chickens where a wolf lived. In the middle of our conversation, I heard a voice in the background, a loud noise, and the connection broke.
He didn't call back for a long time. Throughout middle school and high school, we talked occasionally, mostly about the cities he had lived in and the cars he had been working on. The last time I talked to him, I asked him why he had gone. He told me that once I was older, I would understand. For the next couple of years, I waited for him to call back so I could ask him how long until I understood. Eventually, it became less about what I needed to know, and more about when exactly I would know it. Often as I walked home from school, I would stare down at the cracks in the sidewalk and wonder if the moment had passed without me knowing it. I worried that if I missed the moment I grew up, I might never grow up at all. I wanted my dad to call back, so I could ask him if that could happen, but he never did.

Then one day, he came home. My dad walked in through the front door and sat on the couch with only the clothes on his back. When my mom asked how he had gotten there, he said he had walked.

I was busy at work in the garage. The door opened on creaky hinges, and I ignored it. Empty Kool Pac packages and spent Sternos cluttered my workbench. A few broken beakers and faulty clasps lay behind the setup I was using to filter the new batch of ammonium nitrate.

“What are you doing to my garage?” my dad asked—the first thing he said to me.

I turned away from my workbench to see. He was dressed too warmly for the summer, like a person who wore his bed around with him.

I picked up a spent Sterno and threw it at him. It hit his gut and bounced to the floor
without much presentation.

“What's the big idea?” He was grinning, oddly, ready to lay on some keen advice about accepting the disappearance of one's father as a test of will.

“Like you would know.”

He reined in his smile. “Look...” He stepped closer. “Seriously, look at me.”

I met his eyes.

“I came out here to tell you—“ he paused “—that I've decided to stay.” A soft expression washed over him, and he nodded as if to assert his own accomplishment. Then he turned his attention to my workbench.

“Stay? Where?” I asked.

“Here...with your mom.”

I asked him if Mom knew about that. He didn't answer. He crouched to eye the stetson beaker I had set up with water and a graduated cylinder to act as a kind of double boiler. The gas from the cylinder was feeding through a tube into an angled gallon keg. It looked dubious at best, and I couldn't think of one reasonable lie as to why I would have such a contraption.

He glanced back at me over his shoulder. “What's this?”

“I'm isolating ammonium nitrate.”
He turned back to the cylinder to study the gas as it formed and curled toward the rubber stopper and tube at the top.

“I'm planning to blow up a friend's dad.”

My dad turned, slow and deliberate like he was steeling himself to defend the sanctity of fatherhood, as if all fathers carried an obligation to thwart any plan to upend their reign over the world. The pores around the bridge of his nose were mottled with thick blackheads. Everything about his appearance inspired sympathy. He was dirty and tired, and he smelled like compost. His eyes took focus, something shaky in the wiring behind them. He had been wandering the globe for the past seven years in search of sanity, and after proving its nothingness, he had decided to come back here to fuck with me.

“You think I'm a fool, don't you?” he asked.

“What does it matter?”

For the first time in seven years, I remembered what it felt like to be unconditionally afraid. Those times when I was younger and my dad was asking too much of me, I didn't quite understand from where that fear came. It wasn't based in bodily harm. It manifested itself in the inability to connect. My father was supposed to be a guiding figure in my life, and I couldn't see past his shaky eyes to the logic behind them. There was none.

“I think you should go,” I said.

Dusty light slanted in from the small window above my work bench. My dad didn't move, and he looked as though he had no intention of moving.
“Fine,” I said. “Then I'll go.”

I twisted off the propane tank and capped the keg. Most of the ammonium nitrate had been extracted by that time. Then, before turning to the door and leaving, I glanced back at my dad, now seemingly lost in thought, as if he were trying to remember the last time he had stood in that very spot.

If he could have drawn a map, marking every stop he had made, all the cow towns and city streets, I never would have been able to see those places for what they had meant to him. I had always imagined him finding easy work as a mechanic, helping out at gas stations along the way for a few days at a time, making enough money for food and gas, until he could stop at another shop. I don't know how old I was when I started piecing together a more realistic version of my dad to replace the hero I had seen him as when I was younger. My time in the library and my time in the garage had been measured by versions of my dad, none wholly accurate but all more real than the actual man.

***

Kelly's house was a few blocks over, closer to the Pink Line and Harrison Park. I lugged the keg of ammonium nitrate down the sidewalk toward their duplex, my shadow circling me under the streetlamps. When I got to her house, I crept over to the frontroom window, and peered in through a crack in the curtains. Her dad was lounging in his recliner, wearing a white undershirt. His green work pants were smudged at the knee, and the laces of his steel-toed boots were loose with tongues lolling. I couldn't remember if I had ever seen him any other way. Kelly had told me stories about him. The time he had
broken her mom's hand. The time he had thrown the remote into the television and broken it. The time he had yelled at her so loudly the neighbors called the cops. Looking at him through the curtains made those moments seem hyperbolic. He was so skinny it made his belly and his boots look absurd. The bones showed in his shoulders. There was nothing I could do to make his life any worse.

“Hey.”

I started and looked back over my shoulder. Kelly was stepping toward me from the back of the house, smiling. Her teeth shone in the shadow of her hooded sweatshirt.

“What are you doing back here?”

I looked down at the keg, then up through the curtain at her dad, sitting limp in his recliner. “I wanted to see if you wanted to blow something up.”

She laughed and glanced down at the keg. “Like what?” Then she glanced in at her dad. Her smile stiffened. “You weren't serious about disappearing my dad were you?”

If she knew that I was and that I was doing it for her, it wouldn't change the fact that her dad was already disappeared. “You think I'm crazy?”

Kelly laughed again. I laughed too, if only to prove that I wasn't.

***

We found the biggest abandoned car we could. A four-door LeSabre from the 70s. It sat across from the railyard, on Wood Street near 14th, where the sidewalks gave way to
grass-covered plots dotted with wild maples and sink holes.

The explosion lifted the rear of the car off the ground, shattering the rear windows and blowing open the trunk. It nearly cleaved the leaves from a few nearby maple trees—the branches too, for that matter—and it knocked the wind out of my lungs, like a Buick to the chest, hitting me hard enough to clip my feet from under me. We had put the keg under the gas tank, not thinking about it, and the result could have killed us. A plume of smoke billowed into the sky, big enough to be seen from The Loop. It unfurled like a message for all fathers to beware.

On my back, lying in the dewy grass, I took inventory of all my limbs. Then I glanced over at Kelly, splayed in the grass next to me. She was giggling uncontrollably, as only she would.

“My dad came home,” I said.

Kelly sat up. “What?” Her smile slipped to a simper and stilled. Stands of hair hung loose in her eyes, wild. I reached for a leaf that was tangled near her temple, and she leaned close. My dad was at home. I wasn't sure if he would stay. He didn't seem to belong with us. This city was filled with fathers, and yet, home to none. Her breath smelled like vanilla wafers. It mixed with the fumes of ammonium nitrate and gasoline, thickening the spit in my mouth. I wondered if she knew about the city, and how it was ours.

***

I walked with Kelly back to my mom's house. When we turned the block, I saw the
flashing lights from the corner. Two police cars were angled from the curb in front of my small yard. I turned to Kelly. She looked confused and a little worried. I told her that everything was fine, not knowing for sure but thinking back to my father's ultimate design. Had he planned all of this?

I told Kelly to wait there while I ran down to my house. When I reached my stoop, two police officers appeared from the side yard. They were escorting my dad toward one of the cruisers. His hands were cuffed behind his back.

“Where are you going?” I asked, stupidly, piecing together the past four years.

“Well,” Dad said, and looked off into the distance, like he had done when I was a kid. I still didn't know what he was looking for. “I guess I left some things unfinished.” The cops shoved him, moving him across the small patch of grass that constituted a yard.

“Remember, don't hurt your mother. She means well,” he added, and the officer guided his head as he eased into the backseat of the cruiser.

Kelly slowly padded up to the stoop, and climbed the steps to put her arm around me. The front door opened, and I turned to see my mom, standing hard over her crutches.

“They caught him doing things in the garage. Making things,” she said.

“Who caught him?”

My mom looked Kelly up and down, then she turned and walked back into the house, leaving the door open behind her as an invitation.
After Isaac's death, Gail convinced herself that she would have ended their relationship regardless. She had loved him once, that much was true. The time they shared living in an apartment in Berkeley had been especially happy: their trips together to the organic market; the one time walking back, when they each needed to pee so badly that they ran the entire five blocks home. All they could do to keep from laughing and peeing themselves was hold their hands over their mouths, their bags of kale and bulk split peas swinging wildly at their sides.

Of course there had been bad times, too. Like the night Isaac had been assaulted by a homeless man. After it happened, the policewoman looked at the small amount of blood forming at Isaac's ear, and only told them to be careful at night, before filling out a report and driving off. Isaac seemed so hopeless in that moment, bloody but grinning all the same because of the absurdity of the situation. He hadn't wanted to wait for the police, but Gail had insisted. She had panicked, and he had stayed for her sake, holding her. He had kissed her on the forehead. She liked him for that, but it was also what made him so hopeless. He never took action, waving circumstance aside—whole years—without considering his mistakes. It had always pained her to think that his life seemed to pile up behind him like a closet filled with old shoes, but she had never done anything to change him as a person, thinking that eventually something would break loose and mark the end. Boyfriends never lasted forever.

The night Isaac appeared on Gail's fire escape, he had been dead for five days. During
that time, she had been easing into the idea of spending her nights alone, partly grieving but also single.

Upon seeing Isaac, peering through her window, his powder-white face hopelessly grinning, Gail dropped a bowl of udon on her new pair of loafers and her favorite rug. She had been walking from her stove to her bed in the studio that was now hers, all to herself, to watch another episode of *Bad Nannies*. Stunned, she screamed and asked Isaac what he thought he was doing. He motioned for her to open the window. She flipped the latch and helped him climb over the sill. He fell over her cubby-shelves. She had lined them with a blanket to take on the look of a bay window. He landed in a mess on the floor, ruffling the blanket and spilling a stack of small storage containers filled with odd scraps of fabric and colored pencils. He looked up at her as if he were as astonished by the predicament as she.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came back for you.” Hope seemed to glint in his eye.

She glanced down at her once favorite rug and the noodles she had spilled all over it. She no longer felt hungry. The feeling was replaced by a sudden pang of anxiety. Isaac was dressed in a black sweatshirt and black jeans. They looked faded as if dusted with flour. His skin and hair had the same powdered appearance.

“You're haunting me?”

“No... Well, not exactly.”
“You shouldn’t—”

Isaac jumped to his feet, and clamped a hand over her mouth. The excitement of his intentions seemed to blend with the salty smell of his ghost sweat. Slowly, he removed his hand.

“Once you tell me to leave,” he said, “I'll be gone—for good.”

Gail didn't say anything. She thought about the risk he was taking by coming back from the dead. They stood close. Then Isaac moved to hold her. As soon as she gave in, she was reminded of how comforting he could be. Maybe she was wrong to think that he was wasting his life. If he was risking eternity to be with her, maybe it was worth overlooking a few unfavorable qualities. Even if he was now dead.

For the next couple of nights, Gail continued to isolate herself from her friends and family, but instead of power-watching internet television alone, she watched it with Isaac—punctuated by bouts of passionate sex. Now that Isaac was dead, it no longer seemed to matter that he lacked direction. And while she was at work, he had taken to watching cooking shows, the result of which he would present to her by candlelight each night. They would picnic on her favorite rug, which Isaac had cleaned, removing the noodle stain.

When the weekend came, Gail's mom called to ask if Gail was alright. She had heard from a friend, whose daughter worked with Gail, that Gail had been acting a little standoffish at work and hadn't been going out with her co-workers like she normally would have.
“I know, it's tragic about Isaac,” her mom said, “but it's been nearly two weeks. It's not healthy to avoid people. Besides, I thought you didn't really like him.”

“Mom! Show a little respect. The man is dead.”

“Man? He was a delivery boy.”

“A bike messenger, Mom. It's not such an easy job to get.”

“What? You have to do more than fill out an application?”

Gail didn't say anything. Isaac was sitting on her cubby-shelves, drawing feverishly in a sketchbook. He looked up and smiled wide, then turned back to his sketch.

“I want you to meet me for lunch.”

“I can't. I have plans.” Isaac had asked Gail to go to the movies with him. He wouldn't need to pay, he had said, because no one would be able to see him but her.

“Look, I'm going to be at the Fairmont Hotel at one, and I'd like it if you wore something pretty.”

Gail hung up, and Isaac flipped his sketchbook to show her a crude sketch of her mother as a gila monster rearing toward a huge banana. Her mom had a point, but Gail didn't want her to think she could fix Gail's life. It wasn't that simple.

There was nothing good playing at the movie theater, so Isaac decided that they should go to a museum in Golden Gate Park instead. She was a little disappointed, but Isaac's enthusiasm made her feel better. She liked that he was taking control of the moment. As
they walked through the park, Gail got the urge to grab Isaac's hand, but didn't because she thought it would look weird to be walking alone, clutching the open air at her side.

In the art museum, Isaac took advantage of the fact that no one could see or hear him by hollering and yodeling—a lot. And he seemed to be making it a point to touch every painting. It didn't help that Gail kept laughing at how ridiculous he looked. She chased after him trying not to draw too much attention.

When they reached the Abstract Expressionist room, Gail nearly tripped over her own feet. She caught her balance and turned on her heel. Then she hid around the corner.

Isaac found her while she was pretending to concentrate on the brushwork of a DeKooning. "What is it?" he asked.

"That couple in the next room."

Isaac peeked his head into the other room discreetly even thought it hardly mattered.

"I work with them," Gail said. "Jim and Hannah."

"Why don't you say, hello?"

Gail sighed. "I don't know—I'm at the art museum, alone. They'll probably think I'm depressed or something."

"But you're not alone. You're with me."

Gail forced a smile.
Isaac grinned wide. “Don't worry, I'll distract them. You make a run for it.”

He edged around the corner and ran up to the couple, hollering profanities and miming crude sex acts. Then he ripped Hannah's purse out of her hands and hurled it at the wall. The small leather bag made a loud pop and fell to the ground, sending its contents skittering across the waxed wooden floor.

Hannah shrieked hysterically, and Jim grabbed her, cutting at the air with his hands as if to protect her from the unknown.

Once Gail was out of their sight, she took off running. Then she waited for Isaac in the fourth floor lobby.

“Quick, like a bunny!” Isaac yelled as he burst into the lobby.

They descended the stairs, skipping around strangers along the way, and crashed through the doors to the crowded sidewalk outside. Then they dashed off toward the tea garden. When they were alone, they stopped and kissed. Gail could feel something stir inside her, and she wished that she didn't have to worry whether people could see her or not.

After that, they walked over to the buffalo paddock. As they walked through the park, they saw fewer and fewer people, and Gail took to holding Isaac's arm. She was wearing a faux fur jacket, which did little to cut the chill in the air. A faint din could be heard from the traffic on Oak Street. It carried over on the morning fog that had yet to burn off. The fog settled in the trees and bushy palms, and Gail tried to remember the last time she had seen the park look so magical.
When they reached the buffalo paddock, it was closed. The buffalo were standing near
the feeding area, each one chewing cud. A ten-foot-tall chain-link fence spanned the
paddock.

When Isaac started to climb it, Gail grabbed at his belt.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“What does it look like? I'm busting these fellas out.”

She watched him hook his legs over and scale down the other side.

A runner jogged past and said hello. Gail smiled and waved. Isaac smiled and waved too
from the other side of the fence. They watched the runner for a moment until he
disappeared around a bend, behind a stand of trees.

“What are you waiting for?” Isaac asked.

It had been years since Gail had done something like this, something for the adventure of
it. She had a good job in an office with people that she liked—for the most part. She
didn't need to take risks. She wasn't a kid any more. Life's rewards were no longer
measured solely in excitement. She had long-term goals. She had a ten-year plan.

Isaac smiled wide, and Gail worried that she might be forgetting what was important. She
slipped her foot into the grid of the fence and reached for a hold to pull herself up.

“Hey!” a voice yelled from behind her.

Gail hopped down and fell into the grass. She rose to her feet and brushed herself off. A
man in a small pickup hung his elbow out of the driver's side window. The door of the truck read: *PARKS & RECREATION*.

“Those animals'll kill you. You don't want to go in there.” Confused, the man furrowed his brow and paused.

Gail stood there a moment. She glanced over her shoulder, then as if registering the paddock for the first time, turned back to the man in the truck. He had a short beard and a earth-tone ball cap, and he was chewing on something that seemed more substantial then simply gum. A snack. He was driving through the park and snacking like a normal human person. For a short second, she wondered what she must look like to this man. Alone and wild-eyed. Her hair was probably a mess.

“When you're right, you're right,” Gail said to the man. Then without looking at Isaac, she started off toward Spreckels Lake.

The man in the truck eyed her, idling much longer than needed. Then he drove off ahead of her, the exhaust from his truck gliding over the patchwork asphalt like a dangerous breed of fog.

Isaac ran to pace Gail from the other side of the fence. “That was close,” he yelled up to her.

Gail ignored him.

“What's wrong? You're not giving up on these poor fellas are you?”

Gail stopped and turned. “You're dead, Isaac. You shouldn't be here.”
Isaac threw his hands in the air and smiled as if to prove he was still there.

“You should go,” Gail told him and took a step backward toward the lake.

“You don't mean that.” Isaac stood for a moment. Behind the chain-link fence of the paddock, he looked like a prisoner.

Gail turned and walked up the hill. She passed the lake and started down the sidewalk of Fell Street, trying not to think about why Isaac had come back from the dead and why he was being so nice to her. He had been nice when he was alive, but this was different. He was actually fun to be around.

Gail checked her phone. Her sister had sent her a text, asking if she was alright and if she was still going to lunch with Mom at one. It was twelve-thirty. There was still time to meet her. Gail sent a text in return, telling her that she was fine and that if Mom wanted to keep tabs, she could text Gail herself—and that yeah, she would still be going to lunch.

Her mother was halfway through a glass of white wine when Gail arrived. She stood to give Gail a hug. “You're filthy. Why is there mud all over your jeans?”

Gail looked down at herself. She hadn't noticed. “I was working in the garden.”

“You have a garden?”

“It's communal. The whole building pitches in.”

Her mother nodded, but she didn't seem convinced. She wore her hair short. It was starting to gray severely, and the skin around her cheeks looked thin. She lowered her
eyes to the menu. “They have an excellent cobb salad.”

Gail hated how confident her mother seemed around her. She never acted that way when her father was around or family friends, only her. It gave Gail the feeling that she needed to assert herself even more than usual, which was probably what her mother wanted and only annoyed Gail further.

“Your sister is worried about you. As well as your father and I.” Her mother leaned forward. “You know, if you need to see someone about this, we completely understand. It's nothing to be ashamed about.”

“I'm fine. Can we just order?”

After lunch, Gail accepted a ride home from her mom. She leased an E-Class Mercedes. The interior looked as though it had never been sat in before. While Gail ran her finger along the edge of her seat, cutting lightly into the soft leather with her nail, her mother continued to explain how Gail was free to do whatever she wanted. Her mother just didn't want Gail to make her out to be one of those mothers who always demanded too much. She just wanted Gail to be happy.

Her mom stopped at a red light at Post and Leavenworth, a few blocks from Gail's apartment. “Are you happy?”

“Mom, you're being ridiculous. You don't have to do this.”

“It's good that you're taking your time to get over Isaac. He was a nice young man. A little confused, but he meant well. It's just that I want you to talk to someone. A doctor.
It's important that you work through this before you move on to a different stage in your life—you know what I'm saying.” Her mom glanced over at Gail and nodded as if to prove that she knew that Gail indeed did know.

Gail thought about what would happen if she told a shrink that her boyfriend had come back from the dead. And that she had watched reality television with him. And gone to the art museum with him. And nearly broken into a wildlife preserve with him. And even had sex with him.

Her mom stopped the car in front of Gail's apartment.

Before Gail opened the car door, she turned to her mom. “Now isn't a good time.”

Her mother's thin skin lumped into a frown, and Gail scooted out of the car.

For the next couple of days, Gail called-in to work and ate only what was in her pantry, mostly oatmeal and rice. Food started to take on the taste of wax, and it seemed to sit in her gut like steel pellets. She no longer felt hungry, and she worried that maybe that meant she was dying. There were so many ways for people to die, and the body seemed endless in its capacity to create new ones.

She thought about Isaac and the day at the buffalo paddock. People like her didn't die by getting trampled by buffalo. It seemed wasteful to work as hard as she had, pulling herself from the struggling ranks of employment, only to throw it all away for something as childish as playing with wild buffalo. Teenagers died over things like that, not people like her. And yet she had nearly followed Isaac into the preserve. She worried that Isaac
would come back, if that really was him. But she also worried that he wouldn't—that he
would be gone forever, for good this time.

Once she had exhausted her appetite for reality television, she decided to go back to
work. It wasn't because she felt any better; she simply wanted to see real people interact
without the underlying expectation of spontaneity. And her first day back was exactly
that: an early meeting that she didn't need to attend and two afternoon meetings that she
didn't need to attend either.

When she returned to her apartment, she put some water on for tea and stared as the gas
flame curled toward the speckled bottom of her kettle. During her two days off, she had
made a ritual out of preparing the tea. It had become a reason to get out of bed. Now, it
just seemed like tea.

She heard rapping at her window. It was Isaac. He was grinning as usual.

Gail opened the window, and Isaac waved for her to join him on the fire escape. She
glanced over her shoulder at the flame, licking up the side of the kettle. Her water was
nearly ready. Then she hooked her leg over the sill and stepped out into the crisp air of
early evening.

Isaac led Gail to the roof. Then stepped onto the parapet. The cityscape behind him
seemed to roll into the hills of Noe Valley. He turned to look at her, his back to the tumble
of lights.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Gail asked.
“Why would I do that?”

“I don't know. I don't know why any of this is happening.”

Isaac walked the lip of the parapet like a tightrope. “I don't know either.”

“I thought you said you couldn't come back.”

“I wanted to show you something.” He stopped pacing and smiled. “But you have to stand with me up here. It's important.”

Hesitantly, Gail moved toward the parapet. Isaac lent a hand to help her onto the ledge. His powder-white skin looked cold and blue underneath.

“What's the matter?” Isaac asked, and he motioned with his hand for her to grab it.

As she reached, she noticed Isaac's face, a knot of concentration. Then she heard a faint whistle. It was the hiss of her tea kettle two floors down. Gail pulled back her hand, but it was too late. Isaac had her fingers gripped in his fist.

“Stop,” she cried.

“I love you.”

“No you don't. You're dead.”

Gail yanked hard. Then she pushed Isaac in the gut. He lost his grip and fell back, vanishing over the edge. When she looked down the side of the building, Isaac was gone.

This wasn't happening she thought. She was an adult. Things like this didn't happen to
people like her.

Gail rushed down the fire escape to her apartment. The tea kettle was hissing violently. She shut her window and latched it. Then she cut the gas. The hiss slowly waned to a calm boiling sound. Then she stepped over to her bed and crawled under the covers near the wall. A knot tightened in her throat, and she pulled her knees to her chest. The more she thought about how perfect her life was, the more she felt like crying into her pillow.

The next morning, she woke late for work. She couldn't afford to miss another day, so she dressed quickly, and rushed to catch the train.

After lunch, her manager stopped by her cubical and asked if she was feeling alright.

“Oh, I'm fine.”

Her manager was in her late thirties and dressed only in J. Crew. Gail had had multiple conversations where her manager explained why she ordered nearly the entire catalog every winter and summer, but Gail still didn't understand.

“I only ask because you've been walking around all day with your skirt on backwards.”

Gail glanced down at the zipper in her lap.

“And there's a run in your tights.”

Gail tried to fake a smile. “Thanks.”

“There's a client coming in at three. Maybe you should go down the street and buy a new pair.”
“Right.” Gail nodded and grabbed her purse. “I'll do that.”

Clouds hovered over the Financial District, threatening to rain. Everyone on the sidewalk wore coats and hats. Gail walked down to Macy's in Union Square. As she crossed Geary, she saw someone wearing a black sweatshirt in the crowd ahead of her. For a moment, she thought it was Isaac. She tried to push through to catch up to him, but after she squeezed past a large woman wielding a roller basket, she had lost him. She looked across the street and then in both directions, but the person in the black sweatshirt was gone.

Inside Macy's, Gail darted toward the hosiery section. She wanted to hurry, hoping that her manager would notice and take note of her initiative. As she walked by a rack of clothes, she tripped and nearly fell into a perfume display case. She turned back to see what she had stumbled over, but nothing was there. Then the clothing rack parted, and Isaac stuck out his head. He was grinning.

“What are you doing?” Gail asked.

Isaac stepped from the rack, and Gail picked up an expensive looking perfume bottle and threw it at him. He dodged it. The bottle clanged off a rack and slid across the tiled floor.

“I've come to rescue you.”

“Well, you can't. Go away.”

Gail waved her hand as if to shoo Isaac back to the beyond. Then she noticed that everyone in the department store was staring at her. The women at the make up counter
were paused in mid-application. The jewelry counter was similarly frozen. Gail looked back at Isaac and realized that it must seem like she was arguing with a clothing rack.

Embarrassed, she rushed out of the store and up the street. She returned to her office and fell into her seat in her cubical. She checked her email. Then she hit refresh and stared into the screen for a moment. Her inbox remained at zero.

“Were they out of tights?”

Gail looked up. Her manager was standing by her desk. Then Gail looked down at the run still in her tights.

“Oh, right. I guess I forgot.”

“Maybe you should just take the rest of the day off. Come back tomorrow when you have it together a little more.”

“I'm fine. I'll be okay.”

Her manager glanced around the office. Most of her co-workers were idling within ear-shot, trying to look busy but obviously watching Gail. Then her manager leaned into Gail's desk. “You know I'm not really asking you, right?”

Gail walked all the way up Post Street to her apartment. She didn't feel like waiting for the train. When she got home, she filled her tea kettle and turned the gas on high. The routine of her actions helped ease the residual anxiety left by the talk with her manager. She placed a cup on the counter and took a tea bag from the cabinet. Then she stared into the flame, thinking that if she could only wait for tea forever, nothing would ever go
wrong. She knew Isaac would come back and keep coming back until she figured out a way to make him stop. She never expected her dead boyfriend to ruin her life, but she never thought that anything could ruin her life besides herself. She could only hurl herself toward accomplishment until someone bestowed it upon her. Maybe Isaac would understand if she simply explained. If he loved her, he would understand. If he did love her.

As she thought this, Isaac knocked on her window. She opened it. Cool air rushed in from the overcast day outside. It filled her small studio, causing the flame on the stove to quiver. Isaac was grinning. It seemed sad and lopsided, like he had come to know something about Gail that he wasn't supposed to, that he knew that she was going to ask him to leave and never come back. She thought about where he would leave to, and what it would be like to go there forever. She feared what it must be like. The unknown. Isaac knew, and it showed in his lopsided grin. She could feel that he feared going there less than he feared going there without her.

“Why are you doing this?”

Isaac held out his hand.

Gail wanted to focus. She wanted to pretend. There were things in her future that seemed to loom with significance. She thought about all that her mother expected from her, all that the world demanded. Then she thought about what Isaac was asking from her, to be with him, forever. If boyfriends never lasted forever, then that would make him something different, something new. He hers and she his. The kettle began to hiss, and
she turned to look at the steam billowing from the spout. She had never liked the taste of tea. Isaac was asking her to take a risk, the difference between believing and pretending. She reached for Isaac's hand, and more than ever, she felt the pull of the unknown.
The first real girlfriend William ever had was Vevay, which could have counted as his first real mistake, too, because from the moment Vevay Hollander moved to our neighborhood, the rest of us knew to be afraid of her. She lived at the dead end of Negley Avenue in the biggest and most ornate house on the block. The house was haunted, and Johnny Yu's older brother had told us that the family who lived there before Vevay had hanged themselves off the back porch, the whole family strung up in a row. Occasionally at night, we would huddle behind the big oak tree at the edge of her property, hiding in the oversized roots. It was the closest we would dare after dark, and we would stare into their backyard for a glimpse of the family's tormented spirits, doomed for all eternity to swing under the punky timber of that old porch.

But we never saw anything.

An East Coast developer had built our subdivision in the 70s and laid claim to the back lot to raise his blossoming family. He was the one who had crafted that ridiculous house, sparing no expense. As kids, we wondered about the trick bookshelves and hidden passageways inside and the mischief for which they were designed. It was said that upon moving in, the man had four kids—two boys and two girls—and a wife, who was pregnant.

The boys were oldest and mean. They bullied the other kids on the block, as well as their younger sisters, and made them do despicable things in the woods behind their house. A remnant of their deviance seemed to hang in the smell of honeysuckle all along the creek.
We had always looked for the latent signs of their work, as if malice could be locked away in the bark of an oak tree or the muddy banks near the water. We imagined the rituals they performed: dancing around fires, reciting demonic phrases, marking the sisters with cryptic seals.

The youngest sister was said to have been murdered, and we knew the spot where it would have happened. There was a small clearing in the gully, down from the big house. Nothing grew there. The dirt was hard and cracked. Tiny fissures moved from the middle as if the ground was slowly widening. Johnny Yu's brother had said that it was widening for another sacrifice, and that it happened every twenty years. We figured he was lying. The cracks were probably caused by a sewage pipe, heating and drying the earth.

But still, others said that it was the baby girl, once born, who had been given to the earth, and that was why it was slowly opening again, because the soul of the child upon reaching it's twenty-first birthday would climb from the craggy dirt and take vengeance on all the callous boys in the neighborhood.

When Vevay Hollander moved into the house, she had been the youngest child to a sister and two older brothers. We couldn't say when most of those stories became common knowledge, but the arrival of Vevay and her family had solidified the fact that the house at the end of Negley Avenue was haunted and whoever lived there harbingered death.

That was why the moment we discovered Vevay Hollander to be pregnant, we knew the myth of our neighborhood had come true.

***
In the hospital, no one wanted to say what we already knew. We pushed our way through the big double-doors and into the emergency ward, where Ben Olin lay half-conscious in a gurney. Broken glass peppered the skin around his baby face. He was a year younger than the rest of us, and his slight frame and round cheeks pegged him as much younger. His hair was splayed, as if mussed by margarine, and his shirt had been cut away, revealing the skin around his bony ribs, squeezed and puffy.

A nurse stopped us. She said we weren't allowed in the ward if we weren't direct relatives, but we ignored her.


But Ben only mumbled in response. We couldn't tell if it was from the drugs in his IV or something more serious—a kind of misfortune worse than death.

Ben's mother was sitting next to his mobile bed. She shook her head. Her eyes were red and swollen. “William isn't here,” she told us, and we understood what that meant, the tragedy of it coming to weight as the nurse ushered us out of the ward and into the stuffy air of the waiting area.

Later, we learned that William had slid his Honda CRV into a telephone pole at sixty-plus miles per hour, shearing his brainstem in the process. All injuries were internal, which meant his head never left the rest of his body, but two days later, Sam Donner said William came to him in his dreams with his head cradled under his arm like a jackolantern. Debby Hohensinner said she saw him like that when she closed her eyes. So did Johnny Yu.
We skipped school for the rest of the week, drinking beer all day and listening to records in Debby Hohensenner's living room while her parents were at work. Light shone through the sheer curtains of the front windows, casting the sofas' huck upholstery and the shag carpet in a haze of dust particles and lethargy. We had manifested the worst with our preoccupation of the macabre, and we didn't know what to do.

Growing up with the stories about Vevay's house, death had always hung over our neighborhood. We couldn't walk outside without catching a glimpse of her Victorian gables and festooned architecture. Every eave and beveled edge, every shutter and picture window stuck in our minds as ruinous—omnipresent, had we thought in those terms, but our imaginations were too fleeting. Instead, the looming facade of that house seeped into our memories like the cool smell of creek water creeping in through the window after dark.

***

In the beginning, we hadn't known enough to be afraid. Not truly afraid. Our days in elementary school—and then on to middle—were endless and connected by one thing: we wanted to know what was at the center of our neighborhood; the meaning of all those stories; the truth behind Vevay's house.

Early on, even the smallest reconnaissance had sent us into the depths of introspection for weeks. The day that Johnny had managed to climb the big oak tree behind Vevay's house, we thought we had hit it big. He had tried to peer through one of the windows on the second floor, but edged too far out onto a branch. It collapsed under his weight and sent
him crashing to the ground, hitting nearly ever branch on the way down. When he came
to, we asked him what he saw.

“Our living room,” he said. Then a shiver ran through him, and he shook his head in a
kind of daze. “But it was really creepy.”

Around that same time, Debby sliced her leg open the length of her calf, crawling
through a hole in the back of the Hollanders’ decrepit tool shed. The wound barely bleed
at all.

And later that week, Sam used a hatchet that Debby had stolen from the shed to cut down
the tree that had almost killed Johnny, but the head of the hatchet slid loose and nearly
chopped Sam’s leg off.

We carried Sam down to his mother’s house and rang the doorbell before leaving him on
the front porch, a bloody mess.

“Where are you going?” Sam asked, holding back tears.

But we didn't answer, only ran home as fast as we could, because we knew if Sam's mom
saw us, she would call our parents and tell them what we had been up to, and it was
important that they not know that we had been snooping around the Hollanders' house. In
their eyes we had always doing more harm than good. And also, because talk at our
respective dinner tables had always paused when the Hollanders were mentioned: they
never came to neighborhood barbeques; they never rolled down their car windows to
wave; and they never seemed to smile. Even our parents—with their canned personalities
—could see that there was something not quite right about the Hollanders, and they wanted us, kids, to mind our own business when it came to the house at the end of the street.

If we forgot, we knew our parents would bend us over with switches to refresh our memories. But our memories be damned, we couldn't help ourselves. We couldn't help William, and neither could our parents.

***

William and Debby had seen Vevay through her window once. They had said she was sitting in her room, on the floor, alone, staring into the carpet.

“Conjuring spirits,” Debby had said later from the rusted swing set behind the Fairchilds' pole barn.

We hung out behind the pole barn in the summer because it was just up from the creek, and we could see down the gully to the clearing behind Vevay's house. Often, we sat for hours, waiting.

Johnny sat in the swing beside Debby, lightly rocking and studying the scab of dirt underneath his feet. Sam stood by the edge of the woods, ripping twigs from a fallen branch and throwing them at Ben, who kept telling him to stop—but in a nasally whimper that seemed to only make Sam want to throw more. We were in middle school at that time, still wishing for complexity, using terror for tender.

William was leaning with his back against the A-frame of the swing set, staring down the
gully with a glazed look in his eyes. “She was probably just lonely,” he said.

Sam laughed and threw a stick at William. “She was probably practicing her...” He paused to find the right word. “Incantations. You know, to kill you or turn you into a stink bug or something.”

“How would she kill me? You're the one who always picks on her at school.”

Ben, red in his boyish face, found a stick at the edge of the woods and hit Sam across the back of his legs.

Sam fell to the ground. “Ah! Why'd you do that for?”

“She's probably just under the control of that house,” Ben said. “We should save her.”

“There's no saving her,” Debby said. “She's evil.”

“I don't see what's so evil about her.” William said.

“That's exactly what she wants you to think.” Debby stood from the swing and walked to the edge of the woods and looked down to the clearing. A slash of light splayed across the dry and cracked dirt. All around it grew wild sumac and arrowhead; patches of dandelions dotted the rolling hillside. There were secrets down there, terrible secrets. “Don't let her fool you with that whole innocent routine. She is definitely evil.”

Unfortunately for Debby and unfortunately for us, we didn't yet understand what made people evil. At that time, we thought they simply were or were not.
We've often wondered if William would have been alright had it not been for Jeff Marcus.

On the second day of high school, Jeff Marcus gave Vevay Hollander a crown of dandelions, and changed the way we looked at her forever. We knew what those flowers meant—what we had been ignoring all through middle school—that the lanky figure with greasy hair and sloping shoulders was blossoming. She was becoming a woman, and Jeff Marcus saw it too. The only difference was that he had grown up on a different side of town, where opportunity was seen as more than a gift. It was seen as something to take, and he was trying to take Vevay from us.

The reality of the situation was that the transition between middle school and high school had been filled with surprises, the kind of social-political power moves that overturned popularity over night. There were three middle schools that fed into Harrison High School. The kids from Wesselman Middle, including us, were from the north. Country kids, really. The kids from Plaza Park Middle were from the East. Wealth. Mostly, sons and daughters of upper management or engineers from the smelting plant. Then there were the kids from McGary Middle. City kids. Jeff Marcus was from McGary, and we envied him for what we thought to be street-smarts.

During these early days of reordering we realized that we were going to need Vevay more than she would ever need us, because even at fourteen, it was clear that Vevay Hollander was going to be beautiful.

The day that Jeff Marcus surprised her with the crown of dandelions, Vevay had been reading a book in the dugout during lunch. When William heard about the gift, he spent
the rest of the day searching the halls between classes until he found Jeff Marcus at his locker after the second bell to seventh period. They were the only two in the North hall at the time, technically late for class, and without a word, on turning the corner, as if he had surprised himself with his own rage, William sprinted the length of the hall and tackled Jeff Marcus to the ground and proceeded to pummel his face until the shop teacher came to break up the fight.

Later, William told us that he didn't know what had come over him. Even as he told us, he seemed not to believe what he had done. “I couldn't stop myself,” he said and looked at the tops of his hands, bruised over the knuckles. William was normally a calm kid, rather introspective, and the only explanation we could come up with for the change in his behavior was the curse.

But at that time, we no longer want to believe it. Or more importantly, we didn't want anyone outside our neighborhood to think we believed it. So, we ignored it. The first real sign that William was doomed, and we turned away, bargaining our fears the same way we had given up on Santa Claus and the Toothfairy.

The treetops in our neighborhood didn't turn that year. They stayed green all Fall, until the first frost ripped them clean from the puny branches near the canopy. All Fall they looked like monks with bushy caps, calm and collected, brooding.

It was also the same year that William started inviting Vevay up to the pole barn to join us around a fire pit that we had built to hide the fact that we had discovered marijuana.

***
We didn't know the exact moment that William had fallen in love with Vevay, but we did know the moment that she had broken his heart, because Debby had been the one to actually do it when she accidentally broke the news that Vevay had gotten herself knocked up. We knew because Debby had told us exactly what happened afterward: that William turned red in the face; that he ran to get in his car; that Ben insisted that he come with him.

At that time, Vevay had been missing for three days. We attributed her disappearance to the bun in her oven, but we didn't know what to believe. Since pregnancy scares were becoming a common occurrence in high school, we thought Debby might have been lying, but two things convinced us. First, the way Debby had discovered Vevay was pregnant: Debby's mom had told her, who had heard it from Vevay's mom. The two of them had bonded haphazardly once Vevay had started to come out of her shell. And since Debby's mom had nothing to gain from spreading rumors, we were led to assume that Vevay's mom had told Debby's on purpose, because it was widely known that Debby's mom was pretty lousy at keeping secrets and would no doubt tell the whole neighborhood, which, we were led to believe, had been exactly what Vevay's mom had wanted in order to turn Vevay's predicament into a kind of life lesson, one that would—in Vevay's mom's mind—promote a sense of forthright self-awareness but, in actuality, only propagated the kind of passive aggressive parenting that had contributed to our belief that the Hollanders were so evil in the first place.

The second thing to convince us that Vevay was actually pregnant was that William must have already known, because why else would he have brought a gun?
We didn't find out about the gun until Sam tracked down William's Honda CRV at Liberty Pull-A-Part, the scrap yard where most of our town's totaled cars went to die a rusty death. In the police report, the officer on duty had listed the following contraband found in the vehicle: a bag of weed, one glass pipe, rolling papers, two roaches, one knife (kitchen, steak), one pair of scissors, one fifty-foot rope, one crowbar, one can opener (electric), one machete, and two miniature Louisville Sluggers. They had not found the Hi-Point 9mm that William had wrapped in bubble tape and stashed in the hold underneath the passenger seat floorboard. If they had thought to pull back the floor mat to reveal the rusted hole a little bigger than a fist, they might have found it.

No one could say why William had the gun. Like everything else packed into his clown-sized car, the gun could have found its way there unrelated to the trip across town that cost him his life. The gun had come from Johnny's uncle, who had been hounding Johnny for the week prior, saying that if he was going to be a lousy thief, it would better suit him to steal a gun that wasn't liable to misfire and blow off his hand. Johnny's uncle was known to have an arsenal of sorts in his basement.

When Ben told us that William and he had been heading toward Jeff Marcus's house, we thought that maybe the gun was meant for Jeff, that maybe William had stolen it from Johnny's uncle with the plan to drive over to Jeff Marcus's house a week later and shoot him—or a least give him a good scare—but Ben also told us that he was only guessing where they were going, because neither he nor William spoke a word during that short ride.
The day of the funeral, Vevay walking into the viewing parlor wearing a white sundress with a layer of sheer fabric that billowed out from the bust and over the slight curve of her belly. It became clear to us then just how pregnant she had been and how remarkable it was that we hadn't noticed. The ragged hem of her dress fell to just above her ankles, revealing the red Converse, faded and torn, that she had been wearing everyday since the summer before. Her blonde hair was bleached white, frizzy and shorn to the nape. The sockets of her eyes looked sunken, much deeper than usual, and a dark scab marred her left elbow. The beauty we had come to see in her seemed thin and unremarkable as she stepped up to the casket and tucked a folded piece of paper into the breast pocket of William's black suit jacket.

Johnny attempted to sneak a look at the piece of paper, but he said that William's face had kept him from reaching into the pocket. The mortician had had a hard time covering the bruises around William's jaw, and his neck wouldn't sit quite right. To cover it, the collar of his shirt had been pulled high, which gave the impression that William had passed in a sudden moment of befuddlement.

We had all wondered what Vevay had written on the note. We watched from across the room as she leaned over William, awkwardly angling her belly to lean in close or to possibly share a glimpse of the baby. Afterward, she stepped over to William's mom, whom had been shaking hands and accepting condolences beside a giant picture of William on a tri-fold next to the casket. Mrs. Smitt showed little sign of recognizing...
Vevay, let alone registering her ill condition. Given Mrs. Smitt's state, it was possible that she had blocked Vevay from her mind entirely, wishing to forget rather than forgive. Vevay hugged Mrs. Smitt, gripping her around the waist much longer than Mrs. Smitt seemed inclined to offer. Then she focused on the floor and started toward the side door of the funeral home. On her way, she saw us and lifted a hand to wave but stopped herself and looked away.

Sam followed her, but he said that he wasn't able to catch up to her, that she must have disappeared, because when he reached the parking lot, it was empty, save for a few drivers smoking cigarettes in the heat. When he returned to the viewing parlor to tell us, we stood there watching all the uncles and aunts and cousins, whom we hadn't previously met, walk up to Mrs. Smitt to give their best attempt at making sense of the senseless, and we wondered if it was possible that we had conjured that image of Vevay out of some need from our collective grief.

***

When death had been an imagined tragedy, it was easy to believe we owned some part of it, as if life were made more exciting by the fables of our past, a tradition of grief. It wasn't until the lines began to blur that we thought of ourselves differently. After William's death, the function of grief shifted. It was no longer ours. Instead, it seemed to trail behind us. We began to see it in the way we moved through the woods. The shadows in the leaves. The squirrels at a distance. Behind the pole barn, the fire seemed to lick up the weathered planks skyward and outward, the direction we were all headed.
The night after the funeral, we sat around the fire pit until the sunlight began to shine through the trees. Vevay was with Jeff Marcus somewhere. We knew because Johnny's brother had seen them leave the funeral home together. Jeff had been waiting for her in the parking lot in his Datsun sports coupe. We tried to imagine where they were now: speeding down a highway through Tennessee, maybe Mississippi on their way to New Orleans. Or maybe they went to Chicago. Or even New York. We imagined all of these cities crumbling upon their arrival—intricate systems of class and wealth and public transportation folding in on itself with the grief that accompanied Vevay wherever she went. There was a certain amount of comfort in visualizing the destruction of cities we had never visited. It was important that the curse survive us and that future civilizations crumble under the complexity of Vevay Hollander's curse. At least it seemed important as we sat around the fire in close silence, divining from embers, which, if we had shared a shred of altruism between us, we might have seen as the truest indication that we were actually grieving.

That was when two headlights pulled around the corner of the pole barn. The beams seemed faint in the mourning light, glinting in the dew of the grass. Vevay was the first to climb out of the Datsun. She was still wearing the white sundress. The flush in her cheeks made it seem as though she had recently had a good cry. Jeff Marcus opened his door and hooked an arm over the top, doing his best to look intimidating, but, by then, we had come to see him as Vevay's tool, just another boy caught in the wake of her curse.

Vevay took a few steps and stopped. “I just wanted to say,” she said and paused, cradling her belly, as slight as it was, with her hands. “It wasn't my fault.” The words had a nasty
cut to them, and she let her head drop to look at her feet, a habit she had when she felt uncomfortable. Her frizzy white hair fell forward and draped over her face. Then she glared up at us. “I'm just saying, because I never want to see any of you ever again.”

We were still sitting when she told us this, and Sam stood. We knew what he wanted to say, that everything was her fault, that we wished she had never moved to our neighborhood and that if we never saw her again, it would be a blessing.

But then Sam pulled the High Point 9mm from the waistband in the back of his jeans, and shot Jeff Marcus through the driver's side window.

The glass shattered. Jeff clutched his stomach. The pop of the pistol echoed over the trees, skittering a half-dozen crows. Then Jeff Marcus fell to the ground.

At the funeral, we hadn't talked about how we felt; we had only mocked our parents as they glided around the viewing parlor like bees, pollinating with aphorisms. “Grief hits us all differently.” “Anger is a natural stage.” “It's okay to be angry or even afraid.” “You can't control grief, only accept it.” We had heard them all before—read them from the internet. The only problem was that our grief was different. Our grief was ours, or at least it had been until we lost hold of it. When it was us against Vevay, it made sense. We could follow our fears straight to the source, but as we grew older, the root of our fears blurred and our original hold seemed merely incidental, because in that moment right after Sam shot Jeff Marcus, the meaning of our grief pooled into a dark lump of clothing beside the driver's side door of Jeff Marcus's Datsun sports coupe.

Sam stood silhouetted by the fire, his chest heaving with each breath. He had been out-
growing his t-shirts from the start of high school, but his black Nervous Eaters tee seemed especially tight. No one thought to ask him why he had done it, and maybe it was the shock of needing to ask that had taken us by surprise more than anything else.

Then Ben tackled Sam to the ground and knocked the gun out of his hand. They rolled into the fire. Ben's jacket lit up along the hem, and Debby pulled off her sweater to smother the flames that flapped in the dewy grass.

Johnny only watched, jostling from side to side and looking from Ben to Vevay and to the dark lump of clothing beside the Datsun.

That was when Vevay ran for the woods.

Sam stumbled to his feet. He picked up the High Point 9mm and tucked the gun in the waistband in the back of his jeans. He looked back at us, before starting after her. We should have called after him—told him to let her go—but the look in his eyes said not to. Besides, we didn't know what to tell him; we thought he had murdered Jeff Marcus, shot him dead. We wouldn't find out until later that Jeff would survive the gun shot and that the High Point 9mm had been loaded with rounds of paraffin.

***

Sam was the last to see Vevay Hollander. He told us that after he chased her through the woods, they stopped in a clearing somewhere past the far edge of the neighborhood. They were overlooking the creek from a steep embankment, and the silvered light reflecting off the water cast the brush and blowdown in sharp relief. While they had been running, Sam
said that it looked as though every branch and knot of thistle had been pulling at Vevay, kicking up the hem of her dress and curling around the soiled brightness of its sheer fabric. He had been gaining on her, and she looked over her shoulder, looked again. Then she slowed to a stop. When Sam told the story, he made it seem like she would have run forever had she not seen him following her, and maybe she would have.

“What's wrong with you people,” she said once she caught her breath.

Sam stepped close, but Vevay didn't flinch. She seemed too tired. Not just breathing heavily from running and being three-months pregnant, but from something else. There was something broken about her. The potential she had once had, the person we had all thought she would grow into seemed further away than ever.

Winded himself, Sam reminded Vevay that he had a gun and that she should be much more afraid than she seemed to be. Sam waved the High Point 9mm. “I could kill you,” he said.

“Not likely.” Vevay gathered the skirt of her dress and stood as if she were about to start off again. “Not with wax bullets,” she said and smiled faintly.

Sam turned and shot a tree. Bark splintered and fell. The recoil echoed the length of the creek, osculating like beta waves. Then Sam saw it. Where he had hit the tree, buried in the trunk, a glob of dark sapphire glinted.

We didn't know how Vevay had known about the wax bullets. It was possible that Vevay had been in on something that we were never meant to be a part of. For the first time, it
was clear that we were on the outside, looking in. Maybe William and Vevay were in
cahoots. They could have been using the gun to give Jeff Marcus a good scare. Maybe
rob him. Then use the money to run away together. They could have been doing anything.
Maybe they really were in love. Or maybe Vevay had been planning to rob them both all
along.

“I could still shoot you in the eye.”

“Don't you get it?” Vevay rushed Sam. She pushed him, and he fell on the ground. “Why
can't you just leave me alone? You people are crazy. You're a curse. You ruin everything.”
Her cheeks flushed. She looked as though she might start crying, but she stopped and
looked up the ridge.

Debby and Ben had started walking after them. Vevay must have heard their clumsy steps
through the brush. Vevay pushed Sam into the ground one last time, then started up the
steep hillside toward the edge of our neighborhood.

“Wait,” Sam called after her.

Vevay paused and looked back over her shoulder.

“What did you write on that letter?”

Vevay took two steps toward Sam, and leaned over him. “I told him I was sorry. I tried to
save him from you people, but I couldn't.” Then she turned and started back up the hill.

***
Johnny's brother said that Vevay had been shipped off to a school for pregnant teenagers, but at school, most rumors circled around an insane asylum upstate. There was even a kid we had never seen before who said Vevay had killed herself and her baby in a ritual sacrifice. We tried to stay out of the rumors. We didn't want people to know what had really happened that night.

A few days afterward, Sam saw Jeff Marcus standing at his locker talking animatedly to three other boys. The three boys were chuckling, and Jeff raised his shirt to show off his bruise from the wax bullet. When Sam walked by he caught Jeff's eye, and Jeff's smile stiffened. He lowered his shirt, and, forcing a short chuckle, he slapped his metal locker shut. Then he started off toward class in a hurry, leaving the three boys to look stupidly at one another.

We heard later that Jeff had made up a story about how he'd gotten the bruise. He had been telling people that he got it at the batting cages in Garvin Park. Everyone knew that those pitching machines were old and unreliable, and Jeff had made himself out to be a kind of tough guy for taking the pitch without falling to the ground. We never thought to challenge it, even though those pitching machines would probably break a rib.

That same year, Vevay's parents moved out of the house at the end of Negley Avenue, and for years, the house sat empty. Birds made nests in the window sills. Hornets overran the back porch with a colony of nests.

The summer after we graduated high school, before we all moved away to separate colleges, we decided to break into the old Hollander house. Sam broke the window out of
Vevay's old bedroom. We knew that she had moved into the basement after her brothers moved out of the house, so the room we broke into was a guest room for the last two years that the Hollanders lived there. We had never seen a house completely empty, and even years later, when each of us began to have our own lives and raise our own children in houses we had to fill on our own, no house would ever seem as starkly vacant as the Hollanders' house did on the day we walked through it and took inventory of the seldom smudge on the base boards or the lone chip in the paint near the corner of a room.

We walked downstairs to the last bedroom that Vevay had lived in before she disappeared. William had told us that she had moved down there to get away from her parents. He had also told us that she moved down there so she could sneak him in through the hopper window after her parents had gone to sleep. We wondered about the nights they had spent down there together. William never talked about it much, only saying that they mostly messed around, but once we got older, while laying in bed with our husbands and wives, thinking back about those times, we often pictured Vevay and William, laying in bed, sharing a cigarette or weed and talking about the future they were going to have together.

We stood in her room and scanned the walls. Johnny found some writing in the back corner of the closet. It said, “Derek and Blake were here.” They were Vevay's older brothers. Then below that it said, “So was Vevay.” And below that it said, “And William too.”
The Captain Frank Hardly

My final interview was on the Drink Your Morning Coffee with Morty show. It didn’t go well. Afterward, Heldaberger patted me on the back and told me it had just been the stress talking. He gripped my shoulder and turned to look at me through his round spectacles. The studio lights glared off his lenses, and his chubby cheeks were pushed into an awful grin. “Even though you aren’t going to Mars personally, once we make it there, everyone is going to owe that to you and your crew. This is a big moment. You should try to enjoy it.”

I wanted to believe him, and for a short while, I did.

From my apartment, I called my wife. She didn't answer, so I left a message explaining why I had been chosen to help save humanity. I called my daughter, too, but she didn’t answer either, so I left her a message saying that I was sorry I had missed her field hockey game and that she was wrong about me—I was going to be a hero.

By the time my crew and I were aboard the isolation capsule, I was thoroughly convinced that I was to be an important figure in history. It took only three months locked up with Ming, Davis, and the sprightly neurotic Herringer to come to my senses, and suspect that the Isolation Capsule Program was some form of punishment for not living up to the high standards projected onto the inductees of Space & Aeronautical.

I knew living in the capsule was going to be difficult. We were growing our own food, recycling our air and water, and running tests in the laboratories designed to simulate that of the real thing. Months of training had prepared us for this work. What we weren’t
prepared for, however—the one thing that the organization never mentioned and, in a way, kind of discouraged—were the absurd thoughts that continued to perpetuate and compound while in captivity, namely my inadequacies within the organization.

It needs to be said that S & A was the most visible department in the organization. When taxpayers asked where their billions of dollars were going, S & A was the department they were shown. That put a certain amount of stress on its inductees. And because Administration loved tangibles, this stress came in the form of salmon-colored card stock, typed up on a typewriter and notarized, waiting in each inductee’s locker, delivered each morning by some unnamed intern or low-rung administrative goon. When I was still new to the department, I had found them amusing, in the way that mysterious memos manifesting in the dark hours of the morning can be, but quickly the mystique wore off, and I fell into the practice of throwing them in the garbage without reading them.

Like every other pointless endeavor in the organization, the memos were established and directed by one of the higher-ups in Administration. They were promoted as a morale booster, but everyone knew it to be ingenuous code. Each card described the prior day’s activities and to what degree they were completed. You knew you were doing well if your card contained—aside from your activities—enthusiastic phrases such as: “Think taller out there, Skip!” or “Use the weight of your punch, Tiger!”

Needless to say, my memos lacked encouragement. In all my years as a cadet, lab tech, and finally an S & A inductee, I had yet to complete one conspicuous act. So then, no matter how I looked at my time in the organization, I was left with the same
unanswerable question: Why was I made captain?

“Of course you’re being punished,” Davis said as we carried sacks of fertilizer from the storage unit to Botanical. “You’re not only being punished, but they’re using you too.”

I did feel kind of used.

Davis stopped and turned to look at me. We were around the same age but he hadn’t put on as much weight. His hair hung wildly around his head like a straw hat, and he hadn’t shaved in a few days. “I’m serious. Where do you think they get all those statistics?”

“I’m not talking about statistics.”

“No, Cap’n. You know what I mean—Heldaberger and all his statistics. How long can a man survive on toe nails and rain water? How much blood can a man lose before passing out? You know the stuff.” Davis raised one hand and looked around at the white tube in which we were standing. “We’re rats, Cap’n. We’re fucking rats.”

Davis had joined S & A shortly after I had, and we were both B-listed within weeks of our enlistment. During section briefings and the bi-monthly pot lucks at Bellmont Parkway, we made up the unofficial C-list table, along with Grayson, a wooly beast of a man, who had been in the program since it was strictly Aeronautical—and Space exploration was just a twinkle in Grayson’s bloodshot eye. So, I knew Davis pretty well and felt I could trust him.

I glanced down the windowless tube; there were no windows anywhere in the capsule. The tube was clear, no one in sight. I leaned over to Davis. “You know what? I think
you’re on to something. Let’s just keep this between you and me, though. I don’t want word to get out that the captain is getting a big head. We don’t want to cause a ruckus—not yet anyway.”

Later, I went to Herringer and told her that Davis was losing it. She didn’t seem very surprised. She was gathering carrots for dinner out of the garden in F7, marveling at each one.

Her petite figure looked lost inside her uniform jumpsuit. She had tied an extra shoe lace around the waist, but that was the extent of her tailoring abilities. Her hair was tied back in a sober ponytail. Everything about her was precious and pristine. She was always cheerful and unwaveringly optimistic. I was jealous of her complacency and desperately wanted to prove it a guise.

“Why so glum today, Sarge?” I asked her.

“Who’s glum? I couldn’t be better.” The carrots grew in long troughs of dark, moist topsoil. She pulled out a carrot and brushed it off. She looked it over briefly, then chucked it in a basket on the floor. “So what if I am a little glum today?”

“Just kidding around. I only thought it strange, you not caring that Davis might be losing his marbles. He is an integral part of our mission, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just that it’s my daughter’s birthday today. She’s three.” She pulled out another carrot and brushed it clean. “I knew I was going to have to miss one, but I didn’t know it would come so quick.” She chucked the carrot in the basket. “You know how it
is, though, don’t you, Captain? How’s your daughter?”

I tried to think of what Gabby might be doing right then. Playing basketball? Riding ponies? What did young girls do outside of school? I tried to picture her, what kind of clothes she wore, the cut of her hair, but all I could see was the seven-year-old girl in the cereal aisle on the day that I had to explain that her dear old dad was a better man than the young cadet pictured on a box of Wheat’Os. She was wearing what now seemed like shame in her eyes.

“Oh, she’s doing just fine. She’s graduating high school this year.” I looked down at the top soil and drilled a finger into it. “I guess I’m going to miss it.”

As captain, I mostly mediated, which meant when no one needed me, I walked the long main tube, peeking into sections here and there, checking monitors and making adjustments simply for the sake of making adjustments. It wasn’t particularly what I had in mind when I dreamt of leading my very own mission to space or otherwise, and to put it simply, I felt underutilized. If I had known at eighteen that this would be the precipice of my career as an astronaut, I probably would have gone into the furniture business with my dad and brother. I could have been a general manager, pulling in $90,000 a year, banging hot saleswomen in my second-floor office, the one with the one-way mirror/window that overlooked the showroom.

My family cheered me on for following my dreams in becoming an astronaut. They never questioned it for a second, and neither did I, for that matter. How completely moronic that was. If I could travel back in time and visit the family of my younger self, I would
materialize at one of Aunt Greda’s family reunion pizza parties, and after blowing their minds with the discovery of time travel, I would harangue them with a diatribe so laden with foul language and inappropriate imagery, its true intent would be realized only by my younger self, after years of therapy, once the experience had expanded and contracted so much that it eventually resembled something of a teachable moment. Then I would dematerialize back to the present, where I would most likely be in an office that overlooked a showroom of bedroom and dinette sets.

But I don’t like to dwell on it.

On my walks, I often stopped by the storage unit where the extra Johnny-suits were kept. Since we weren’t actually in space, I didn’t know if the suits were standard issue or simulation, but they were the closest thing I was going to get to the real thing, so I often tried them on.

The desire to wear the suits would come slowly. While I made my rounds, my mind was left to idle, and eventually, I would find my thoughts drifting toward the white, motion restrictive suits that have become synonymous with space exploration. As my thoughts drifted, I would manage, as if by accident, to meander through the tubes until I was in the storage unit, threading my legs into the heaviest pajamas of my life. I usually forwent the helmet, because by the time I got that far in the convolution of suiting up, a feeling of degradation would set in so powerfully that I often just stood there, mindlessly taking inventory of all the gadgets and gizmos just inside the ion-free collar, the wires and conduits running along my shoulders and down my arms, and all the toggles and dials
stretching from my neck to my groin, the workings of which I would never need to know. Often I just stood there like a child, and hoped that no one would see me.

While on one of my excursions, I found Davis inside one of the storage units, which were basically large closets. He was kneeling on the ground with a soldering iron, messing with the wiring in the neck of one of the suits.

“What’cha doing there, Davesy?”

Without looking up, he said, “Just saving our lives, Cap’n.”

“Well, good work then. Keep it up.”

After seeing Davis, I went over to Ming in the G2 laboratory, and asked him why Davis might have a sudden interest in the extra Johnny-suits.

“What’s a Johnny-suit?”

“The space suits astronauts wear when they need to go outside the space station and make repairs.”

Ming made a humph noise with his nostrils. “I’ve never heard them called that.”

“Well, they are. It’s an old term, maybe from before your time. Whatever. So, can you think of any reason why Davis would have a sudden interest in the extra space suits that astronauts wear when they go outside to make repairs?”

“But we’re astronauts.”
“Yes, Ming, we are.”

“So, why wouldn’t you say ‘the suits that we wear when we go out to make repairs’?”

“Because, Ming, we’re not going out to make repairs, because we’re not in space.”

Ming didn’t say anything. He was mixing something in a pint-sized beaker over a Bunsen burner. The liquid was green and clear with black flakes swimming around inside. The mixture was beginning to steam.

“Just answer the question, Ming.”

“It really bothers you that we’re not in space, doesn’t it?”

I moved toe to toe with Ming. He didn’t budge. “You’re barely out of cadet training. How old are you? Nineteen?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Okay, Mr. Thirty-two. Well, I’m forty-seven and I’m your commanding officer, so when I ask you a simple question—like, Is there any reason why Davis would be dicking with the extra Johnny-suits—I want you to answer me, and not in the form of a question either. I want it in the form of an answer. One that I can understand. You got me?”

Ming stepped away and grabbed a pair of tongs and a wire strainer from a rack of tools on the wall. He used the tongs to pick up the beaker and poured it through the strainer into a ceramic mug with “World’s Greatest Dad” on the side. “He’s probably just bored, Sir. Would you like some tea?”
“Ming, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why are you even on this mission? You could have picked any mission you wanted. Why pick this one?”

“This was the first one they offered me. If I do this, they’ll send me home with a desk job, so I can be with my family.” He picked up his mug and blew on it. “Sir, can I ask you a question?”

I looked him in the eyes. He really was a nice kid, but he just wasn’t made of the dirt and spit it would take to make him a hero.

“No,” I told him and walked out of the laboratory.

I went back to the closet with Davis, stepped inside and closed the door. It was dark with the door closed, but there was a faint glow radiating from the tip of the soldering iron and the freshly soldered wires. The glow cast harsh shadows on Davis’s face. His eyes looked hollow, and his chapped lips looked rotten.

“Explain to me how you’re going to save our lives.”

“Now, don’t you think it’s strange that we’re in an isolation capsule, and we’ve chosen to lock ourselves in a closet?”

“Am I not the captain? Why won’t anyone answer my questions?”

“Think about it Cap’n: Why do you think we’re hiding? What are we hiding from? It’s
just you and me. We’re a dying breed, you know?”

“Don’t get cryptic on me, you bastard.”

“It’s instinctual. We’re being watched, and we can feel it. Don’t you feel that?”

“Yeah, maybe. Maybe I’m beginning to feel something.”

“Cap’n, if I may, can I be frank with you?”

“No.”

“Why did you take this mission?”

I looked around the dark closet. I wondered if they had the closet bugged. “I guess because they offered me captain. It’s what I’ve always wanted—besides the whole space thing.”

“Right, Cap’n. It was your dream. And now they’ve got you bottled up in it. They’ve contained your dream and they’re watching it; they’re watching you, to see how long it lasts.”

“All right. I’m out of here.” I slid open the door and stepped out of the closet. Before walking off, I turned and said, “And Davis, it smells like shit in here.”

Ignoring everything—my duties, rank, mission protocol—I went over to A1, where the emergency radio was kept, and I called my daughter’s cell phone.

After a ring, she sent me to voicemail: “This is Gabby, tell me, tell me. Unless this is you,
Dad. In that case, don’t tell me anything and stop calling… Beep.”

“Hey Gabby, it’s your dear old dad. Old answering message, huh? You should know I can’t call you. I’m kind of breaking protocol here. The mission’s integrity is compromised because of this, but I guess since you didn’t answer maybe that won’t matter so much.

“The mission is going well, I guess. Being in an isolation capsule isn’t too much different from living alone. I see you still don’t answer my calls. Ha. Maybe when I get out of here, we can try to work that out.

“But hey kiddo, I really just called to tell you again that you were wrong. I thought you were right. Even when I said you were wrong, I thought you were right. I never really thought I would make it to space. Some things you want so badly, they can never exist. I guess, I thought this mission would be my saving grace, a reason to quit without giving up. I don’t really know what I thought. God damn, Burgler. The bastards in Administration turned him against me. But all that doesn’t matter, because I’m doing what I’ve always wanted. This is my dream, Gabby. I’m Captain. Captain Frank Hardly of Space and Aeronautical, 57943, and I’ll be damned if that doesn’t mean something greater than space.”

I paused and stared into the headset. Then I hung it on the receiver. For a moment, I waited, hoping she would call back. I wasn’t sure if that was even possible. I thought about calling my wife, but I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to tell her that humanity was doomed from the beginning, but she had stopped humoring me a long time ago. I
waited for this revelation to pass. Then I felt a terrible rumble in my gut. A hollow feeling pushed upward from the bottom of my colon up to my chest. My neck tightened, and all the blood and tears in my body rushed to my face.

Then the isolation capsule exploded.

The rumble pushed me to the ground. On the way down, I knocked my head on the edge of a table. A wall of fire rushed through the main tube. It passed the A1 hatch, trailing brown smoke. The smoke bellowed through the doorway and filled the hatch. All around the isolation capsule sirens sounded, the ones nearest oscillating with the ones farthest away in a pattern that only intensified a sense of disorder so disorderly that it must have been planned by someone in Administration.

Through the din of disaster, I could hear the faint shrill of someone screaming. It was most likely Herringer, a sign that she was alright.

I reached for the console to pull myself up. The back of my head already had the makings of a welt. I used the butt end of the radio receiver to break open the plastic casing that covered the big, red “In Case of Emergency” button and smashed the button like a bug that I was somewhat afraid of.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a voice came on the other end.

“ICP, ICP, do you read?” It was Heldaberger.

“Copy, Burgler. What’s your twenty?”

“What’s your twenty? You’re being evacuated. Is anyone hurt on board?”
“I think so, Burgler. You better send the candy stripers.”

When I woke up, I was in the arms of a strapping young cadet. He laid me on a gurney, and an EMT strapped an oxygen mask on my face. All around me, cadets in gray jumpsuits and S & A inductees in orange jumpsuits were running to and fro. Smoke filled the corrugated roof of the airplane hangar where the capsule was held. There was a man-sized hole in the side of the hangar where some sort of projectile the size of a man had pierced the stainless steel.

Someone wheeled me outside to an ambulance. It was incredibly sunny. The sky looked white.

Heldaberger rode in the ambulance with me.

“Is everybody okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, everyone’s going to be alright.” He smiled and leaned over to look closely at my face. His glasses glared from the light coming in from the back windows. “Have you been crying?”

“I’ve been through a traumatic event, think you could cut me some slack, here?”

Heldaberger smiled—big this time. It was a face of his that I’ve rarely seen. “Davis lost his eyebrows.”

I strained my neck to look through the back windows. Smoke was still barreling from the capsule. “The mission’s blown.”
“The mission is definitely blown.”

I felt relieved and dropped my head back onto the gurney. “I did get my own ambulance, though.”

“You did,” Heldaberger said. “You sure did. Congratulations, Captain.”

For the rest of the ride, until I passed out again, I pictured the early days, before Gabby was born, when I worked at the furniture store with my dad and brother, and Jean waited tables at a 50’s-themed diner, and every night, after work, we came home and made dinner together in our starter apartment, where we picnicked in the dining room and camped in the den.
Enri woke in a barn. He felt a little stupid, because it was his father's barn and because a few weeks back Enri had said that he would never come back to that barn ever again. This would mark the fifth time waking there since he had said that, and just like those other times he couldn't remember how he had gotten there. The ringing in his ears and the residual hum along his spine and in the heaviness of his limbs suggested Dolbemazepan. He needed to stop copping music manipulators from Doueh at work. He was Doueh's boss, and it was one thing to show your kitchen staff that you were human, but it was another thing to show your saute cook that you belonged to the unhinged variety. He was also beginning to suspect that he was gaining a reputation in the food industry as a talentless hack whose last big restaurant was on the brink of failure. Word was circulating that he lacked the will and fortitude to properly treat his employees like worthless tchotchke, easily replaceable and only there to better his status as a Michelin-star restauranteur. At the very least, his dad couldn't see him like that.

Enri's dad was dead, which only seemed to add to his sense of failure, because by waking in the barn it was clear that not even death could handicap his father's ability to best him.

It smelled like onions in the barn, mostly because Enri hadn't showered since his shift had ended the night before, but also because his brother had used the barn to store onions for years. He rolled onto his back and stared at the dark timber of the a-frame roof. Hay poked him through his flannel jacket. Echos from the night before lingered somewhere behind his eyes. Visions of Cyn. Her snide grin. The brightness of her eyes. Her derriere.
Enri climbed down from the loft and stepped outside for a spliff. He preferred Viceroy's because they used better sativa, but he pulled a pack of Nat Shermans from his jacket pocket. He must have stolen them from Cyn. He lit a spliff, took a long pull and stared up at the sky. The easterly light caught in the bruised belly of a maroon ozone. Three harvest stars hung in the sky, each one more distant than the last. When he was a child, Enri's dad had told him that the stars connected galaxies, folding time like a piece of paper. His dad had a knack for simplifying ideas until the logic collapsed on itself. Enri idled in the long grass around the barn, the thick air bitter with the taste of nitrates and karrikkins kicked up from the tilled soil. Flat farmland stretched endlessly in each direction. At one time it all belonged to his dad, and looking at it then, he felt the same way as he did when he was a boy, walking the fields with his dad. He wanted to get to the city as fast as he could.

***

When Enri entered the kitchen, Lionel was prepping bechamel. Two pots of rabbit broth were working on the stove top. The weather was turning cold. Ramen chowder would be in high demand, or at least that was what Lionel seemed to be anticipating. He was a good Sous Chef.

“Eighty-six bad attitudes, Lionel, and fire an order of smiles. Things are about to get weird.” Enri patted Lionel on the shoulder and walked round the dessert station toward the dish room. “You're not going to believe where I woke up this morning.”

“We need Yukons, you fuck!” Lionel yelled as Enri turned the corner.

Lionel was a good man, but Enri had caught him sleeping nights in the breakroom. Enri
didn't care all that much, but the owner of the restaurant was third-generation Logan
Square and prided himself on being kind of a dick when it came to people in precarious
situations. Since Lionel sent most of his money to his family in Chihuahua, he often
found himself in some of the most precarious situations Enri had ever seen—his nights in
the breakroom being the least of them.

At a prep table in back, Cyn stood prepping onion jam. A lexan sat beside her cutting-
board, stacked with Spanish onions. Enri padded lightly toward her. Her hair was tucked
under a red bandana, and her chef’s coat already showed the missteps of her morning. A
dark stain covered her shoulder.

“Anything strange happen last night?”

“You tried to sleep with me.”

“Did we?”

Cyn glared at him. She used Japanese knives, not because she knew how to use them, but
because she favored affectation. Enri found it cloying. The knives were still pretty new,
so she would eventually learn how to use them or bludgeon the edges to shit. Maybe she
would buy German knives after that, like everyone else in the kitchen.

“What happened after?”

“I don't know, I woke up this morning and you were gone. Where'd you go?”

Enri sighed and glanced down at her onions, julienned finely. The smell was beginning to
make his eyes water. “You know, you chop like a German.”
Cyn glanced at her cutting-board, then back at Enri. She would never take him seriously, and he liked that about her. “Should I be offended?”

Enri grabbed a length of onion and bit it as if it were a french fry. Then he walked into the cooler to see if that morning's meat and egg order had come in. If Cyn didn't remember when he left the night before, they must have fallen asleep together at her place. He really needed to take better care of himself.

***

Enri had been putting Doueh on saute not because he was particularly good at it but because Doueh prided himself on being better than he actually was, which for most people would deter effort but in Doueh, inspired a subconscious motivation to prove himself right. Mostly Enri enjoyed watching the battle wage between ability and aspiration—and just how short Doueh often landed.

Enri passed two ramen chowder plates to the foodrunner. When he turned back, Doueh was staring into the broiler at a robin's egg frothing onto the spilltray. He looked like a lobotomized degenerate, an unfortunate ward. The kid had been drifting off more often lately. Enri heard from Cyn that Doueh had been on bad terms with his parents for the past few years. He was living with his girlfriend or his uncle, but Enri wasn't exactly clear how stable either of those situations were.

Enri picked up a greasy spatula and clapped him on the ear. Doueh snapped out of it and grabbed the broiling dish out of the salamander. He forgot to use a towel and dropped the dish on a stack of saute pans. He cradled his fingers against his chest. Then he turned to
Lionel laughed, loud enough to be heard from the dinning room. Then he shook his head and turned back to his station. Enri's dessert plater and pantry cook froze in place. They were anticipating a hellish outburst from Enri, because his reputation as a hard-ass chef demanded it. Cyn knew better than that. She shook her head, her eyes sallow from an unfortunately large nose. She wanted Enri to go easy on him. They had talked about the stereotype he was imbuing, and at the time Enri had agreed. But still, Enri felt obligated to set an example, so he threw the greasy spatula into a bus bin under the plating station and told Doueh to take it back to the dish tank.

“Quit filling my kitchen with the smell of amateurs.” Enri wiped the grease from his hands and tucked his towel into his apron strings. “Cyn, fire those sweet potato pies. Four pies all day!”

Enri turned to the foodrunner. She was a student at an acting school that Enri didn't care to commit to memory. He liked joking with her because she was young and doe-eyed, and hadn't struggled a day in her life. He shrugged, and she shrugged in return.

***

While the kitchen staff cleaned their stations, Enri sat at his desk in his closet-sized office. Order sheets lined his workspace in a sort of personalized disorder. He searched for a pen to mark the order sheets he needed for the next day.

Doueh stepped into the doorway and knocked on the jamb. “Can we talk, Chef?”
“Not right now. How's your station look?”

“It's clean. We're just waiting on Lionel to hose the floor.”

Enri doubled over to peer into a deep drawer for a pen. No luck. Then he picked up a stack of ordersheets and straightened them to seem preoccupied.

“So,” Doueh continued, “I'm in a bit of a pickle.”

Enri glanced up at Doueh. The kid was more shaken then usual. Then Enri looked back at the sheets. “Never use condiments as a comparison for your life. Shut the door; sit down.”

Doueh slumped into a folding chair. The chef's coats never seemed to fit him right. His shoulders were too bony for the larges, and his arms were too long for the mediums. He sighed and jammed his fists between his thighs. “Do you know any lawyers?”

Enri sighed. “What is it?”

“Well, I may have done this thing that I shouldn't have done, and a Detective Tillman may have called me about this thing I may have done.”

“What did he say?”

“I hung up.”

Enri leaned deep in his rickety desk chair. “I don't really know what to tell you.”

“Maybe you could write them a letter or something. Tell them I'm, you know, like a
productive, contributing member of society.”

“But it doesn't sound like you are.”

Doueh pulled his bandana from his head. “But I am.”

Enri studied Doueh's face. He had never been a good judge of the intentions of other people. As long as he cooked and didn't break dishes, he could stay in the kitchen and continue to pick up a check. Enri wasn't going to pretend he was his father. He was a chief. He was an asshole. He had a kitchen to run.

***

After the last orders had gone out and the kitchen had been cleaned, Enri walked down to O’Irish Pub with some of the servers and kitchen staff. He sat at the bar with Lionel, talking to the bartender. Codger was a shitty bartender, but the place was small and he owned it, so he could get away with guileless service. Most nights, he cued one of the televisions to news, only to complain about it.

“Codger, what do you think about living in the country?” Enri wanted to tell him that he had been waking up in a barn off County Road 303, but didn't know how to broach the topic without sounding needy.

“I live where I live. Best not to think otherwise. It'll kill you.”

Lionel laughed. He had a billowy guffaw, like it was in a different language. “It's your diet that's gonna kill you.”
Codger mostly ate chicken fingers and boiled potatoes. He often told Enri and Lionel this as a point of pride to spite the fact that they were cooks.

“I could live in the country,” Lionel said, and lifted his beer to his lips. He leaned into his glass more than he raised it off the bar, like a child learning to sip without spilling. “I want my own chickens. Could you imagine fresh eggs in the morning? Delicious.”

Enri tired to picture Lionel going out to the barn in the morning to harvest eggs for his family, his non-slip shoes clomping across the dewy grass and his chef's coat and checkered pants slipping into the shadow of the open barn door. Enri's dad had owned chickens when Enri was a kid, and he remembered the smell of his father frying those eggs in butter with bacon tips, his mom's notorious biscuits working. Even with all his schooling and experience, Enri could never get those flavors just right. He pictured Lionel's kids waking to those smells, and a shot of jealousy rose in Enri. He felt ashamed. Lionel carried a photo of his family in his wallet. Enri had seen it many times. They were sitting on large rocks next to a three-post fence on what appeared to be a small horse ranch, his youngest son holding a toy flute. Whoever took the photo was standing back too far, and his wife, daughter and two sons looked tired and distant. Enri never asked if Lionel had taken the picture, but he wanted to believe it was him, if only to believe that someone could hold a singular produce of his own creation.

Cyn sidled up to the bar next to Enri. Without her bandana, her hair frizzed out of control. She had tried to pull some of it back in a stubby ponytail, but it wasn't long enough and what remained curled over her eyes. She brushes it back and waved to get Codger's
attention. “I think Doueh's trying his hand at Vendela,” she said to Enri.

Vendela was the foodrunner from the restaurant. Cyn nodded to the far side of the bar, where Doueh and Vendela were dancing in front of the fireplace. They had pushed aside two tables to make more room.

Codger stepped over to Cyn, wiping his hands with a white towel. “Whatdya need?”

“Hey Codger,” Enri said before Cyn could order, “can you make sure those two always have drinks in there hands?”

Codger glanced over at the two dancing, and gave an understated nod.

“He might need this night to go well.”

“Why do you say that?” Cyn asked.

“Because he's probably going to jail.”

***

Enri took a long pull from one of the Nat Shermans he had stolen from Cyn and stared hard into the night sky. If one looked long enough into the bruised ozone, they had a chance of catching the misfire of a harvest star, wilting embers of a premature nova artificially imploding. That was probably how Enri's father had died. It was hard to think that something so beautiful was capable of causing so much devastation. His dad was a sonofabitch. Stubborn. And irreverent when it suited him. When his dad had told him how harvest stars connected the galaxies, he wasn't doing it for Enri's sake. He was doing
it for himself. He was showing Enri how to simplify life. Living was about clinging to the easy parts. Years passed before Enri had figured that out.

Pilsen was on the fall again. The storefront windows across the street from the pub were soaped-over. The artist lofts that had been converted to condos more than a century prior were starting to rent to actual artists again. Reservations at the restaurant were as strong as ever, but the neighborhood walk-ins were on the wane.

Cyn stepped out of the bar and patted her jacket pockets. “You wouldn't happen to know where those tiffs on my nightstand went would you?”

“I stole'em.”

Enri pulled the pack from his shirt pocket and popped a filter for Cyn. She didn't try for the whole pack, only accepting the spliff with a curt smile. Her eyes peered through a slight part in the mass of her curls. It was a wonder that she never caught her hair on fire when she smoked.

They stood there a moment, not talking. Enri wondered if Cyn thought they were dating, or if sleeping with people for fun was something she still enjoyed. When they fucked, she moved like she needed something, like she was reaching for something that didn't seem to include Enri. And when they were finished, she would stare into his eyes, and he would worry that there was nothing he could give her that she couldn't get from someone else.

“I've been waking up in a barn off County Road 303.” Enri took a long pull. Then he
flicked the butt into the street. “What do you think that means?”

Cyn glanced over at him and exhaled. She carried her scruples over her shoulder, like something she needed to drag through the woods awhile before it could be dressed and devoured. “Shit,” she said and glanced out toward the street.

Traffic on Halsted was mild. A bus passed, mostly empty.

“I'm not sure how I've been getting there.”

“You mean you woke up there this morning?”

Enri took out another spliff and let it rest between his lips before pulling out his lighter.

“You wanna see it?” With a flourish, he cupped the light close to his face. After a deep pull, he turned to Cyn with an honest smile. He wanted her to say yes.

***

Cyn's car smelled like sour tarts and setiva. Enri kicked a spot for his feet among the dirty towels and chef's coats stolen from work. She drove a hydro-electric, the kind they made before Iceland engineered the carbon-all alternator. Part of him wondered where she found such a relic. A relative had probably given it to her. Cyn had a knack for acquiring items that carried the emotional vestiges of a previous owner's devotion. It had probably been the baby of a dead uncle. After years of thoughtful tune-ups and waxes, Cyn had been systematically ruining everything that had been so preciously preserved. Once a luscious caramel, the color had started to oxidize and chip away to reveal the polycarbon frame, fraying in patches around the bumpers.
Enri tried to explain the significance of the barn to Cyn even though the more he tried, the further he felt from the meaning. It was his youth and his last connection to his father, but he hated to think he was pining for innocence lost. He was getting too old to worry about starting over. He needed something he could care about other than himself.

“Why don't you just tear it down?” Cyn asked.

“Because I own it.”

“Your brother owns it.”

“Well, technically I own it.”

“And that makes you feel good?”

Enri focused on the highway, then he reached for the GPS. The barn didn't have an address. He programmed the mapping system to find County Road 303. He zoomed out to see how close they were. The grid of county roads looked like a puzzle. There were no discernible landmarks. All the roads looked the same. He had no idea how he had managed to blunder his way to the barn each time he had woken there. It seemed impossible.

Once they cleared the city limits, the shoulders opened up and the grass embankments fell to a succession of farmland. At night, the dark fields looked ancient—endless in their potential. No matter how advanced things became, civilization would still need dirt. Clever tools regardless, they would have nothing without dirt.

After a long silence, Cyn asked about Doueh. She wanted to know if Enri thought he
would be okay.

“His folks'll help him,” Enri answered, not knowing if they would. Then he remembered that he had forgotten to pay his tab before he left the bar.

They turned onto a country road from the highway, and the number of lanes dropped to two, one in either direction. A small ditch lined the roadside, and again, the fields seemed to stretch to nothing, into darkness. When Cyn turned onto County Road 303, the GPS announced that they had reached their destination.

Unsure, Enri told her to keep going, that it was just up ahead.

But he knew that it wasn't. The ground was plotted differently. Drainage tubing hung in the fields. The tubing looked like steel trees with hoses for branches. They dotted the plots with their tendriled canopies for miles in each direction. Enri had no business being out there, and he suddenly wished that he hadn't suggested coming. It had seemed like an honest gesture at the time, but was beginning to seem manipulative. If there really was something pulling at him, something in his father's old barn, he wasn't going to convince himself of it by showing it to someone else. Even if she could see it.

Cyn smiled. If she could see the barn, maybe he would too.

A barn appeared in the distance. It wasn't his dad's, but Enri motioned to it anyway.

“That's the one,” he said.

“That one?” Cyn asked as if he had picked a celery stick from a tray of macaroons.

“Yeah. You don't like it?”
Cyn pulled her car to the side of the road. She clicked it off. “It looks like a dog lives in there.”

Enri pushed open his door and stepped out into the sharp air of an early morning autumn. The barn sat a hundred yards from the road, listing slightly to the left. Further down the road, a big whitewashed billboard declared that Congress created the dustbowl. Enri didn't know who was holding onto the land, but it seemed to be one of the last plots privately owned. He felt kindred to the idea of one person owning that barn, and even though it wasn't his, it was important that Cyn believe it could be.

Cyn slammed her door and walked around the car. Together they started toward the barn, trudging through the tilled soil. The cold dirt collapsed audibly under their feet with the precious give of frostbitten snow. The barn seemed to diminish in size as they approached, revealing itself to be an over-sized shack, a place to store tools or hide from the sun for a quick lunch. Enri took one last step and paused. It looked as though it had been a long time since it had been used for either. He turned to see if Cyn was still there, and as he did, she slipped her hand into his and focused on the barn.

“This isn't my barn.”

“That's lucky.”

And for a moment, before they turned back to the car, they stood quietly, uncertain about the space between them, staring at a tool shed that could have belonged to anyone.
The False Documentaries of Daniel Peoples

The pop and whirr of the camera as it ejected a tape and reloaded sounded to Sara like the mewl of something equally innocent and harrowing, a mechanized bird beset by science and the curious touch of her husband, which was possibly why she had disliked the tiny instrument from the moment Daniel had brought it home from the electronics store. The way he insisted upon learning everything about its video settings and attachments mirrored how he had fawned over their two children, Jerry and Margot. Of course it had bothered her then too, but for different reasons. Those first weeks after Margot, their oldest, had been born, he had insisted that Sara go out and enjoy herself with friends—or at least try. Sara knew he was only doing his best. On the seldom occasion that she had taken him up on his offer, after being away for a few hours, usually on the drive home, a terrible pang would force her foot over the accelerator, and a worry would build. She would see the image of Daniel and Margot suffocated under a heavy blanket or drowned in a puddle of spilt milk as if Daniel would have lost the ability to take care of himself given the added burden of keeping a child safe and content for three hours.

But he was a good father. He had read to them about magic and talking animals from picture books Sara had only vaguely heard of, and he had obsessively introduced them to music. It seemed as if he were molding their children into something that Sara wasn't a part of, which was intimidating in a way but also relieving, because it allowed her to fall into the archetype of the patient parent, the one they came to for forgiveness. Then one day, as if Daniel had come to terms with the limits of parenthood, he stopped babying their children and bought a hi8 handycam.
Sara accepted the change, thinking that now she would have more time to make a deeper connection with her son and daughter. She had wanted to teach Margot to sew, having picked it up herself around that age, and she thought it would be something they could share. But the day they sat down to go over minor stitch work, Margot had smacked on a piece of gum and told stories about her friend Casey, who lived next door.

“She's so manipulative,” Margot had said.

“Why don't you take your jacket off?”

Margot had taken to wearing a black leather jacket that fit too-big in the shoulders. Sara often thought it was to hide how small she was, but it only seemed to make her look more frail and innocent. It hurt Sara to think that her daughter had already begun to shield herself from the world around her.

Margot ignored her mother's request and went on about Casey. Apparently she had stolen a boy whom Margot had liked first. Sara couldn't keep up with all the boys they knew, and it was clear that Margot didn't care about learning to sew. It wasn't until Daniel walked into the room that Sara and Margot could find a common thread, teasing him about his new project as if it were a piece of toilet paper attached to the back of his shoe. It was easier to use Daniel as a foil, even though Sara knew it would most likely cause authority issues later. And it also worried her, because she wasn't sure how seriously Daniel had intended her to take his new hobby.

Daniel's first film had been nearly unwatchable. The entire seven-minutes was shot from Daniel's point of view, and more specifically, Daniel's point of view as a teenager. At least
that was what Daniel kept saying the night he premiered the film to the entire family.

They sat on the couch like a nuclear family from the Fifties, watching television for the very first time. The footage floated at first, through the woods near Pigeon Creek, stopping occasionally to study the bark of a tree or a bug on a leaf. Sara tried to think back to her days in Film Studies for a vocabulary to talk about the film, the images being representative of the struggle between man and nature, man and man, but really she could only see leaves covering the hillside of a gully and trees. She had walked through those woods many times looking for Jerry, their youngest, twelve; the sight of it on her own television conjured a feeling of worry that somehow seemed hollow. But she couldn't say that. She could only convey a vague sense of approval. Jerry watched intently with an unwavering admiration for his father. Margot, who was seventeen, had a much different reaction. She didn't say a word, but it was clear that she was discovering something new about her father, something she had likely seen in the boys she hung around. Sara knew and had known this feeling for some time, but it was sad to see the look in her daughter, especially directed toward her father. It was the look of a woman with the upper hand: Margot knew her dad was trying too hard for something that he would never achieve.

And even though, Daniel may not have been aiming for anything in particular, it was the look, the disapproval from his daughter, that struck a false cord with Sara.

Daniel didn't share his second film with the family. Sara had to cajole him into showing it to her, and even that felt insincere, because she had not really wanted to see it, but after watching him mope around the house in his beige bathrobe, she felt her obligation as a wife pull at her. They watched it in bed on the laptop. Daniel held the small computer
over his stomach, angling it toward Sara, away from himself as if he had seen enough.
Sara made it a point to endure the eight minutes with feigned interest; she had humored
Daniel in the bedroom for much longer at times. And she thought about all that Daniel
was capable of around the house. He kept everything working. He knew how to fix the
water heater. He could change her oil and repair most things on her car, and he never
grumbled about doing it. He was a conscientious husband, and she only thought it fair to
sit quietly, even though he was acting a little bit like a child.

The second film took place in the woods, same as the first. It floated awhile, scanning the
leafy blowdown, the faint sound of footsteps crunching in the background. Then it
crossed a small brook, and took focus on a lump of fabric the size of a tree stump. As the
camera approached, it became clear that it was Daniel wearing a faded trenchcoat. He
was crouched at the slope of a steep dirt embankment, rocking slightly, and he held his
arms before him as if he were warming his hands over a fire. The shot cut sharply, and
underneath his hands was a dead bird, laid on its back with its wings pinned to the dirt
with a few rocks. The shot cut to Daniel's face, his eyes closed, the sky above him
piercing the dark canopy. Then it cut to a flock of birds flying over an open field,
followed by a shot of Daniel walking down a gravel road alongside the Heissmans'
cornfield.

When the film ended, Daniel clapped the computer shut and sighed heavily.

“That was really interesting,” Sara said.

Daniel turned to her, and a smile worked its way up the side of his mouth. “Thank you.”
Sara leaned to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Who was holding the camera?”

“Jerry. He didn't tell you?”

Sara glanced down at the computer, then across the room at the handycam sitting on a chair next to their bathroom. “No, he didn't tell me. Should he have?”

Daniel set the laptop on the floor on his side of the bed and shifted under the covers to lie facing Sara. Then he scooted close and rested his head on her arm. “I could probably get someone else.”

“No. It's fine,” Sara said and immediately regretted it.

Daniel pretended to be asleep. Sara leaned to turn out the lamp on her nightstand, letting his head fall from her arm onto the bed. Daniel was snoring loudly when she turned back, his face pressed into the mattress. She wished that Jerry wouldn't get involved in the films. He might get the wrong idea about his dad. There was so much that he could misunderstand. And she didn't like the idea of him playing with dead animals.

The next three films mirrored the structure of the second: Daniel would find something in the woods, different each time, followed by an emotional release that somehow seemed unrelated to the first five minutes of the film. Daniel continued to wear the faded trenchcoat, which was similar to the type he had worn in high school. Sara knew it wasn't typical for someone who had played as many sports as he had, but she had liked that he was an odd athlete. He had never taken to jock culture, but instead hung to the fringes of a few communities, not identifying particularly with any. Daniel had tried to confess this
to Sara once, but he had made himself seem like a victim, which Sara had told him sounded ignorant. They had gotten into a fight, and afterward had avoided ever again seriously talked about his feelings of alienation as a white male growing up in Southern Indiana.

After the fifth film, Sara told Daniel that she thought they were getting better. She tried to sound enthusiastic. Daniel didn't seem to buy it. They were sitting in bed, under the covers, which had become the spot where Daniel presented each film as if he were a cat with a dead mouse.

“Well, they're all connected,” Daniel said, seemingly surprised that she hadn't noticed.

“Yeah, I see it. They seem similar. What do you mean by connected?”

Daniel looked down at his hands, confused and possibly disappointed. “They're parts of a series. Variations on a theme.” Then he sighed. “I guess I'm not doing it right.”

Sara clapped the computer shut and moved it to the floor next to Daniel, leaning over him to do so. Then she kissed him, pressing too hard on his chest, and he coughed. She laughed and let her body fall on his, concentrating on the rise and fall of his breath.

“I wish every night was like this,” Daniel said.

She realized that he was right, that they only laughed like that on nights when he showed her his films.

“Is that why you're making these movies?”
“They're not really movies.”

“Well, what are they?”

“I don't know—biographies maybe. Auto-biographies.”

Sara laughed, but caught herself.

“Yeah,” Daniel said, and put his arms around Sara. Then he kissed the top of her head.

Sara also wished they spent more nights just talking. Maybe if they did, Daniel wouldn't need to make these films—and for a moment Sara wondered if she had caused this.

The next day, when Sara got home from work, she saw Margot at the kitchen counter with her laptop for school. She was watching a video on YouTube, and as Sara stepped closer, she realized it was the video Daniel had showed her the night before.

“How was school?” Sara asked.

“Have you seen this?” Margot asked.

Sara wanted to say that she had, but worried that she would reveal to her daughter that she had misunderstood the video to be something private between her and Daniel.

“He's making a fool out of himself. I have friends at school you know—this isn't making things easier for me.”

“Your father is being creative. Give him some credit.”

“Why does he have to be creative where everyone can see him?”
Sara wondered the same thing. “Because he's your father.”

“You know he asked Casey to be in his next film.”

“From next door?”

“Yeah. She's been rubbing it in my face at school all day today.”

“When did he ask her?” Sara was beginning to feel self-conscious that her daughter knew more about her husband than she did.

“Yesterday.”

Sara paused for a moment longer than felt comfortable. Then she told Margot to make sure she did her homework before dinner, and she walked upstairs to splash water on her face. She stood in the bathroom that she shared with Daniel, and leaned close to the mirror. Beads of water clung to the small pores on her nose and the downy hair of her upper lip. After a moment, she turned and locked the door, then focused on the skin just under her eyes. It seemed the longer she stared at it the more swollen and red the skin appeared. Then as if slipping away from her, a tear rolled from her duct and trailed down the curve of her nose, catching at the edge of her mouth. The taste of salt. Then she rinsed her face again, and decided to draw herself a bath.

Maybe it was because she had felt pushed into defending Daniel or because the shock of seeing it on the internet was too much, but for the next couple of days, Sara padded the memory of crying in the bathroom with denial. She told herself that she had only lost control for a brief moment, caught in a series of misunderstandings. Everything was fine.
The only problem was that she needed to be more supportive.

Unfortunately, she couldn't help herself. Something about the idea of Daniel expressing himself artistically curdled her stomach and turned her mood sour. It wasn't that she didn't want him to be creative—and she surely wasn't jealous—it was mostly the idea that he was placing something so private in plain view, for everyone to see.

“Don't worry, honey,” Sara told Margot one day when she was dropping her off at school. “You're father will get over this movie business soon. I'll have a talk with him about it.”

Margot climbed out of the passenger seat and slung her book bag over her shoulder. Then she looked back at Sara. She was wearing her leather jacket as usual but had also taken to wearing a big pink bow in her hair. “I hope you do something. High school is hard enough as it is.”

Sara smiled at the idea of high school being a struggle, and Margot slammed the door shut. Immediately, Sara felt guilty for saying she would talk to Daniel about his movies. There wasn't much she could say that she hadn't already told him. As she thought about this, she caught Jerry in the rearview mirror, sitting in the backseat. She had forgotten he was back there. She was going to have to drop him off at his middle school before she went to work.

“How'ya doing back there, sweetie?”

“Mom, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, honey. What is it?”
“Do you and dad wear a condom when you go to sleep?”

Sara glanced in the rearview at her son. He was wearing a baseball cap pushed low, so she couldn't see his eyes. He was a shy kid, and she knew he was having a hard time making friends at school, which had turned into one of Daniel's arguments for letting him help out with the film. Daniel had said that it would be good for his self-esteem.

“Where did you hear that people wear condoms when they go to sleep?”

“Casey said that's how you have sex.”

She wanted to ask what made him think she and his dad were having sex. Instead, she asked, “Do you like Casey?”

“I don't want to have sex with her, if that's what you mean.”

Sara nodded and steered the car into the drop-off zone of Jerry's middle school. “Good,” she said, and put the car in park. Then she turned around in her seat. “Let me know if that hussy ever touches you. Will you do that?”

“Jeeze, Mom.” Jerry unbuckled his seatbelt.

“Jerry, I need you to tell me you will.”

“Okay, okay, I will. Can I go to school now?”

“Yes, you may.”

At work, Sara moved through her day, removing bedpans and inserting catheters, without
much thought of what she was actually doing. She was thinking about her son and Casey Donovan playing patty cake in the Donovans' tool shed, those mischievous hands of Casey's coercing the innocence from her baby boy. Sara could see why Margot had been so upset with Casey the day that Sara had tried to teach Margot to sew. Casey was a problem. Sara sat at the information desk filling out paper work for the patient in room 305. He had a lesion across his abdomen from a chainsaw accident, which had complicated in surgery do to his excess belly fat. The ANs had nicknamed him Frontbutt.

Gina set a stack of charts on the desk next to Sara. She was the Charge Nurse, Sara's second in command. “I saw your husband's video last night.”

“What are you doing on YouTube?”

“My son showed it to me. I didn't really know what it was at first.”

“Well, if you figure it out, let me know, because I have no idea what he's doing.”

Normally, Sara would have talked to Gina about how she felt about her husband making films that he intended to be biographical or variations of himself or whatever he thinks he's doing, but it was embarrassing for her to talk about it, because even though she considered herself to be well educated and in her opinion much smarter than her husband, she couldn't decide whether she should shrug off his pursuit or embrace it like a kind wife should. It was hard for her to justify being mean for spite's sake. If she was going to mock Daniel in front of her work friends, she wasn't going to do it until she was completely certain that the project that he was working on was indeed as ridiculous as it had seemed to her from the moment he had brought home that handycam.
On the drive home, Sara decided that she would confront Daniel about his films. If he couldn't explain why he was making them, then she would tell him that he was full of shit. He had made six films. If he couldn't form an explanation by then, it was hopeless to think that he ever would.

When she got home, she laid her purse on the kitchen counter. The refrigerator door was open, so she closed it. The hum from the cooling motor filled the house. Only when she wanted to be welcomed home after a long day at work would she find that no one was around, but she assumed that it only felt that way because she was mostly disappointed by her family when they were around, something that she would never admit to them—or anyone for that matter—but when she was alone—and especially during times like this—she would allow herself to despise her family's inability to intuit her needs.

Through the sliding glass doors, Sara caught a glimpse of Daniel walking across the back lawn. She stepped closer and followed his trajectory to Casey Donovan, slumped in the grass near the big oak tree that marked the property line with the Donovans'. She had been rallying for a privacy fence for years.

Daniel knelled beside Casey. They were staring at the ground with their backs to Sara. She wanted to open the door and call out to them just to shake them up a bit, but she couldn't think of anything funny to say and she didn't want to seem frumpy by opening the door to yell at them for no reason. That's something Daniel would do. He doesn't seem to think anything through—or at least that seemed to be the case more often than not. It was clearly the case right then, watching the two of them back there. It was a
wonder if he had simply told Casey to stare at the ground. He probably thought it would look moody and intellectual, which was the problem with most entertainment these days. They never followed through, only took an idea to a surreal level with no intention of flushing out the narrative or processing the human condition. Not that Sara really knew how to do that either.

As she let these thoughts collect and defuse, she watched Daniel lean back. He glances at Casey. Then Casey leaned forward, and before she knew it, Sara was out the door and running over to pull their seventeen-year-old neighbor girl off her husband.

That was when the screaming started. Sara didn't know where it was coming from at first, but she knew it was Jerry. The sound of his wailing was unmistakable. She remembered that he had been filming for Daniel, which meant he had seen the kiss, his dad and Casey. When Sara found him, Jerry was rolled into a ball with his left arm tucked tightly to his stomach. He was moaning with his face pressed into the grass. Sara tried to pick him up, but he was twelve. She hadn't been able to lift him since the day he had turned eight—more his decision than hers. When she reached for him, he unfolded a little and turned to look up at her. He was in shock, and the thought of him not knowing what was wrong sent a worry through her that over-shadowed her fear that he might have broken his neck. She thought about his coddled life and how this was probably the most traumatic event that had happened to him and how she was both sorry for it having happened but also for it not having happened sooner.

Sara helped Jerry to his feet, and the handycam fell to the ground. As it lay in the grass,
she thought about accidentally stepping on it. The way the gray plastic caught the light seemed to wink at her. But before she could, Daniel appeared to help them toward the house and away from the camera. Sara couldn't tell if he had done it on purpose to get her away, but she was certain that she would have killed it if he hadn't. She looked back to see if it was still there, and she realized that Margot had been standing back near the house the whole time, beside the chimney. She was stepping toward the camera to pick it up, but she was also looking over at Casey still sitting in the grass, her legs folded underneath her. There was a hole dug in the grass next to her, and Sara could see the ends of what looked like thick bones stacked inside. Casey was grinning at Margot, but Margot only looked annoyed. They had been up to something, and Sara wondered if it was possible that these two girls were out to make a fool out of Daniel on purpose. It was unfortunate, Sara thought, that he wouldn't need their help.

When Margot picked up the camera, she turned to Daniel, who was helping to guide Jerry in through the sliding backdoor. “Don't forget your camera, dad.” She said it with a lull of sarcasm.

Sara struggled to steady her voice. “You—everyone—in the car, right now. You too, Casey.”

Sara needed time to think. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she would have to do something before Casey's parents found out about the kiss. She didn't think it was illegal to kiss a seventeen-year-old girl, but it didn't look good and it was not something that she wanted to deal with. The car was silent on the drive to the emergency room.
Margo sat in the backseat between Casey and Daniel. She glared at Sara through the rearview mirror the whole ride. Jerry sat in the passenger seat, cradling his arm and gazing out with a vague look of despondence as the road folded beneath Sara's Mazda 6.

It took a full hour to fill out the paperwork and get Jerry in to see the doctor. Sara knew the doctor and most of the staff working that night, but didn't expect to get special treatment, which turned out to be the cast. As she guided Jerry to follow Dr. Taylor back to the ER she traded a glance with the doctor.

“Sara,” the doctor said too loudly, “are you joining us back her today?”

“This is my son.” Sara shoved her son forward. “Take good care of him,” she said and worried that it may have sounded like a threat, but then she gave the doctor a stern look and hoped that it would.

Dr. Taylor was a young man, just out of med school. This small hospital was only a stepping stone for him. “Oh, well then, you're welcome to follow us back.”

“No, that's fine.” Sara had already told Jerry that she wouldn't be allowed back in the ER and that he was going to have to be an adult and listen to everything the doctor said. She had lied hoping it would build character, but she had also lied because she was too afraid to leave Daniel in the waiting room with Casey and their daughter alone.

They sat in the emergency room a long time, but it wasn't until they were driving home that Sara began to forgive Daniel for being an idiot. Margot and Casey had left the hospital early. A friend of theirs came to pick them up. Sara knew it was a bad idea to let
them go, but it was easier then trying to punish them for wanting to leave. She and Daniel had gotten into a fight about it, which was part of the reason why she had let most of what had transpired over the past five hours settle in the back of her mind. She would bring it back up in time.

Sara parked the car in the garage and led Jerry into the house. He had chosen a pink cast, which made Sara wonder if her son was gay or just color blind. At the door to the laundry room, Jerry paused and looked back at the car. Daniel was still sitting in the back seat.

“Dad, are you coming in?” Jerry asked.

Daniel said something, but Sara couldn't hear.

Jerry listened for a moment, then he turned to Sara and shut the door behind him. “Dad's being weird again.”

“It's been a stressful day. Why don't you go upstairs and change, and I'll get dinner started.”

Jerry lowered his head and started toward the kitchen. Jerry had always looked up to Daniel. When he was little and Sara would try to read to him, he had always said that she wasn't doing it right and that he wanted his dad to do it. Daniel knew all the right voices, and to Jerry that was more important than motherly love. Sara couldn't hold it against him though. Daniel's charisma was what had bowled her over when they had started dating in college.

Sara changed her clothes and turned the oven on to pre-heat. They would be eating oven-
pizza and salad tonight. Then she walked out to the garage to see if Daniel had come in yet. He hadn't. He was still sitting in the backseat with the handycam in his lap.

“You'll have to come in sooner or later.”

Daniel turned to look at her. Then he turned back to the headrest in front of him. During their fight in the emergency room Daniel had thought it was a bad idea to let Margot go with Casey, and he wanted to go get her and bring her back, which he physically tried to do. Sara's only tactic was to latch onto his wrist and not let go. At one point, Daniel had yanked Sara out of her chair. She glared up at him from the floor, and it was clear that he had crossed a line. It was the most violent he had been toward her, and after it happened, he quietly returned to his seat and didn't speak for the rest of the time they were there. In the car, on the ride home, the only thing he said was “Interesting color” in response to Jerry's pink cast.

“Why are you doing this?” Sara asked, and leaned forward to place a hand on the camera in Daniel's lap. “These films—do you even know what you're doing?”

Daniel looked her in the eyes. Then she caught him glance at her breasts, and she regretted changing into a tank top. She should have picked something baggier and less revealing for this conversation.

“I'm sorry,” Daniel said. “I don't know.”

At any other moment, Sara would have taken this confession with some confidence, some heartfelt assurance, but she wasn't in the mood. Daniel was too old to be a dilettante. It
was no longer charming, or at least, Sara was past the age of accepting it—Daniel's ability to charm his way out of everything.

“She's our neighbor. We know her parents.”

Daniel didn't say anything.

“I don't want to have to talk to them,” Sara added.

Then as if this admission was a form of forgiveness, Daniel leaned forward to kiss her, but Sara pulled away and glared at him.

“'I'll take care of it,” he said.

Sara knew that he wouldn't, and if he even tried, he would only make matters worse. She watched his face for any sign of guilt. Seeing none, she pulled her hand away from the camera and scooted out of the backseat and went back inside, shutting the laundry room door behind her.

***

Casey had kissed him. She had leaned in with her young and opulent eyes, and kissed Daniel. After dinner, Daniel sat at the dinning room table with his laptop editing the footage from earlier that day. Sara had already gone to bed, telling him that he could sleep on the couch, and Casey had yet to come home. This would be his seventh production and possibly his last, and he felt a cumbersome amount of weight as he looked at each clip stacked like a totem in the file manager of his bootleg-copy of Final Cut Pro.
He began by piecing together the beginning of the film to introduce the scene. He focused in on a wide shot of the backyard: grass that needed care, a privacy fence with a few warped pickets, the oak tree cutting the shot in thirds. It showed Casey spearing the ground with a long shovel, using her weight to leverage hunks of soil into a pile. Then he cut to a shot of himself watching her from the stoop. He stepped closer, and the film cut sharply between angles and vintage footage of Daniel and his real sister when they were kids.

Over the mix, Daniel ran audio from his sister. She was saying, “In the beginning there was only one. They say he was the loneliest man to ever own a parakeet, but then one day he met a family. And they lived happily ever-forever.” Her voice echoed as Daniel stepped closer to Casey. Then the shot cut to his point of view and lifted over Casey’s shoulder to the bones grouped together in the shallow hole dug in the grass.

The scene was a recreation from his youth. The time his sister had buried their dog in the backyard, so she could dig up the decomposed body. He had found her as she dug up the body. The moment had been especially poignant for Daniel, because he had never been told that the dog had died. Their mother had told him that it ran away.

He ended the film with the kiss, shot in long lens with the background slightly out of focus. He spliced this with vintage shots of him and his sister running in a field together. They had gone fishing with their dad that day, out past Daylight, and the moment seemed fitting, given the warmth and forgiveness he had originally intended for the piece.

Once finished, he posted the video to his YouTube account. Then he stared at the screen.
for a moment, watching the number of views.

Zero.

Eventually, he scrolled the cursor over the post and clicked. The video played through, and he watched it again. Then again and again. At ten views, he started cuing the spindle just to watch the end. The kiss pained him, and he began pausing just before their lips met and re-cuing the spindle to a few seconds before, as they stared at the bones in the hole in the ground. They were kneeling with their heads close. Casey looked up and glanced toward Daniel. She shifted and relaxed. Then her eyes hardened. Daniel watched the screen as his initial response waned and the image of him on the screen turned to look up at Casey. There was something wrong with his expression. He didn’t like the way he looked—fiction.

Daniel paused the screen and froze for a moment. The floorboards behind him whined. He turned to find Jerry standing in the living room wearing his pajamas and his bathrobe. His cast hung at his side like a pink appendage unfamiliar to him. It was too big to fit in the sleeve of his robe, so he wore the robe draped over his right shoulder, which in the dim light gave him the troubled mystique of an unfortunately petite prize fighter.

“Why do you keep watching that?” Jerry asked.

Daniel glanced back at the laptop, then to Jerry. “I don't know. Sometimes you do things just to do them. You'll understand when you're older.”

“I think I understand.”
Daniel looked again at the laptop. The film was paused just before the kiss. Then he closed the window and slapped the laptop shut. “How’s your arm?”

“It itches like hell.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“Sorry.”

“Wanna get some ice cream?”

“Isn't it kind of late?”

“I'll get my robe.”

The only late-night ice cream shop was in a shopping center near the southern end of the main drag. It was also host to a laundromat, a taqueria and a coffee shop that sold beer. The empty parking lot of the unpopular mall sat behind the ice cream shop collecting weeds.

Daniel and Jerry stood side by side in sweatpants and bathrobes and stared up at the flavor choices under the white hum of fluorescent lighting. Once Daniel paid, he held the door for Jerry, and they strolled together into the muted night.

At the other end of the parking lot, in front of the coffee shop, there was a small group of teenagers huddled around the trunk of a Ford Taurus. Daniel saw a flash of pink swerve behind the car. He stopped and stared at the group. Then he took a bite of pistachio pecan.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”
“Did Margot tell you where she was going?”

“She doesn't tell me anything.”

Margot had been falling deeper and deeper into a tumble of vacant thought, and Daniel worried that it was mostly his fault. When he had been her age, he had been the same way, and he remembered how hard it was for him to come to terms with life after he had spent most of his high school career distancing himself from any chance at a normal trajectory. He wanted to tell her that once you dedicate yourself to being different, it's nearly impossible to feel like you belong. But he knew that Margot wouldn't listen, because he wouldn't have listened either.

The pink bow peeked through the windows in the backseat, and Daniel started toward the group of kids.

One of the boys saw him coming and asked, “What’s up, old man?”

Daniel thought he recognized the kid, but all the boys Margot ran around with looked the same.

“Margot?” Daniel called out.

“Whoa, there’s no Margot here. You must be high or something.”

Some of the other kids laughed. A girl he didn’t recognize said, “Nice robes.”

“Margot, I just want to talk to you. I saw your bow.”

The boy grinned at Daniel. He was pleased with himself, buoyed with confidence and his
cronies behind him. Daniel thought about shoving his ice cream in the boy’s face.

Casey stood from behind the car, wearing Margot’s big pink bow. It didn't sit right on her head, bobbing just above her ear.

Daniel inched back. “Casey, hey. You’re wearing Margot’s bow.”

Casey stepped around the car and shouldered through the group of kids to Daniel. She smiled and moved close, and Daniel felt a sudden chill. “What are you doing here?”

“Just getting some ice cream.” He pointed to Jerry, who was standing a few feet behind him. Jerry waved with his pink cast and took a bite of his cookies’n cream.

Daniel thought about telling her that he had finished editing the project they had worked on together, but thought better of it, unsure whether or not he wanted her to see it.

Casey smiled. She had small teeth. “That’s cute,” she said. Then she leaned in closer and licked Daniel’s pistachio pecan. The pale green dessert rolled up the tip of her tongue, and she swallowed audibly. “You should have gotten chocolate.”

Daniel paused. “Have you seen Margot?”

“Not since yesterday.” Casey leaned back against the car and pulled at the pockets of her jeans. The boy from before put his arm around her and smiled.

“Well if you see her...” Daniel gradually raised his voice. If Margot was hiding behind the car, he wanted her to hear. “Tell her I’m proud of her, and her mother and I love her very much.”
Casey cocked her head, and her smile stiffened. “Alright. I’ll make sure she gets the message.”

Daniel turned and guided Jerry back to the car. Inside, sitting behind the steering wheel, he looked down at his ice cream where Casey had licked it. Then he threw it out the window.

The next day, while Daniel was cooking curry and tofu for dinner, someone knocked at the front door. When he went to answer it, Steven Donovan punched Daniel in the nose hard enough to send the taste of enamel rushing to the back of his throat. His knees buckled, and he gripped the door handle for balance.

“If you ever touch my daughter again,” Steven said, “I’ll fucking kill you.”

Daniel tried to say something, but his mouth clotted with pain.

Steven pointed his finger at Daniel as if it were a gun, then turned and sort of skipped down the stoop and trotted across the lawn to his house next door.

Daniel glanced down at the splatter of blood blotting his palm. It didn’t look good. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn’t feel it, but that was probably normal after having someone punch it. Sara would need to take a look when she got home from work. She would know what to do.

***

When Sara got home, she put her purse on the kitchen counter, and made sure that the kids weren't in the room, before saying, “What in the hell is wrong with you?”
Daniel looked like he had gotten into a fight with a rake. The shallows of his eyes were bruising and he had bits of something stuffed up his nose, nearly saturated with blood, dark and glistening with snot.

“I got into a bit of a scuffle with Steven next door.”

“I see that. You’re lucky he didn’t kill you.”

“He offered.”

“He’s gonna have to get to you before I do. You want to know what Gina at work showed me on YouTube today?”

“I can probably guess.”

“Honey, she’s seventeen. You can't post stuff like that on the internet. I don’t think you can go to jail for kissing an underage girl, but it doesn’t look good. You want to know what I told Gina? I said you were exploring the truth of emotion as it arcs over time. I don’t even know what that means. It just came out of me, like I was a conduit for your unfounded psycho-babble. I don’t like this. I don’t like what this is doing.”

“It’s okay to be uncomfortable. It’s healthy.”

“Look at you. This is not healthy.”

Sara inspected the bridge of his nose. Daniel flinched.

“You’ll be fine.” Sara shook her head. “You might want to change those nostril plugs, though. They’re starting to look a little gross.” Sara grabbed her purse, and paused for a
moment to watch Daniel pull the plugs from his nose. In his palm they looked like the lungs of a small bird. Daniel smiled and tossed them in the trash. Sara rolled her eyes and started upstairs to change her clothes.

Margot didn't come home for dinner, and Sara left the dishes for Daniel to take care of, which he was all too eager to oblige. Jerry went up stairs, most likely to play video games or listen to Margot's records and rifle through her magazines, something that Margot had warned him against but that Sara didn't mind letting him do. Sara sat at her sewing machine in the living room. She wanted to put the finishing touches on a dress she was making for her Etsy store. It was a yellow sun dress with a floral pattern and faint overlay of beige polka-dots. She had sold a similar one for fifty dollars a week earlier. She was thinking that she might be able to raise her prices with this next one.

Sara popped the lever to raise the sewing arm, and she slid the fabric out to examine the seam. As she did, she noticed Daniel standing on the other side of the sofa.

“What do you think?” Sara asked, still annoyed with him and not doing much to hide it.

“A masterpiece.”

“Well, it might bring in a few bucks, anyway.” Sara turned her back to Daniel and continued to work on the dress.

She could hear Daniel fiddling with the books she had arranged on the coffee table.

“Did Margot say anything to you? What she might be doing tonight?”

“No. She's not really talking to me right now. She thinks I'm going too easy on you, and
honestly, maybe I am.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Our daughter hates you right now, and she hates me too, because I don't know what to do.” Sara turned to look at Daniel. “I just want to not think about it for a while. Can we just not think about it for a while?”

“I think Margot might be doing something drastic and irresponsible.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because, yesterday she told me she was going to do something drastic and irresponsible.”

“She's seventeen, Daniel. Of course she is going to do something drastic and irresponsible.”

“And you don't think we should stop her?”

Sara thought about everything it would take to stop her daughter from the things that she does, and then she thought about everything that she would never be able to do. Then she looked up a Daniel. He was holding a photograph book of Diane Arbus. He would never understand the limitations of anything.

“Fine. We'll save her.”

Sara quickly folded her dress and set it on the table next to her sewing machine. Then she went upstairs to Margot's bedroom. Jerry was sitting lotus on her bed. He was wearing
Margot's headphones, plugged into Margot's record player. He had made a nest out of her old copies of Rolling Stone and Vogue magazines. Sara walked over to the record player and pulled the plug on the headphones. “Green Door” by The Cramps came blaring through. She pulled back the needle, and the record screeched.

“Mom!” Jerry yelled. It was the first time he had seemed genuinely upset about anything. “What are you doing?”

“Where's your sister?”

“How should I know?”

Sara snatched the magazine he was holding out of his hand. “Tell me now, or I'm buying you nothing but spandex and lace for your school clothes. And you'll be eating kale chips until you move out for college.”

“Fine. Whatever. She's at Dogwood Beach. Their having a bonfire or something. Jeeze, what's wrong with you?”

“Your sister is ruining her life, and we need to make sure she has a ride home. Put on some normal clothes and meet me and your father down at the car.”

Jerry glanced down at his clothes. He was wearing his bathrobe over a white under shirt and soccer shorts.

On the car ride over, Sara allowed herself to roil in disappointment. Daniel sat in the backseat, Jerry in the passenger. They were both silent, and Sara seethed behind the wheel, slapping at her turn signal and hugging the turns as she powered through the
narrow highways of West Town. They passed nascent corn fields and thinning stands of trees. Sara had spent her fair share of late nights hanging out at Dogwood Beach when she was in high school. She had watched a boy drown once, but she knew that Margot was smarter than that. She had told her that story many times, hoping she would heed the importance of not being stupid, even though she would be surrounded by stupidity for the rest of her life.

Sara skidded to a stop at the turnaround that was once the parking lot to a bait shop. The rickety old building leaned hard in a state of slow decay. Indiana winters and teenage angst had warped the wood siding and smashed all the windows.

“Okay,” Sara said, “we grab Margot and go.”

Jerry was gripping the sides of his seat. “Why are we doing this?”

“Because—“ Sara paused for moment. “It's a school night.”

Sara unbuckled her seatbelt. She didn't wait for Jerry and Daniel to follow her. Mosquitoes and lightening bugs hung in the dense atmosphere of West Town. They hovered over acres of knee-high corn in every direction. The glow of a bonfire glimmered through the stand of trees behind the old bait shop, and Sara stepped up to the edge of the wood. Through the trees she could see Margot dancing around a fire with her friends. They weren't wearing any shoes, and their jeans were rolled up to their knees. Some of the boys weren't wearing shirts, and they looked wet as if they'd been swimming in the river. Margot's big pink bow was missing. Her hair was wet and stringy, and it flailed about as she danced, circling the fire. She was smiling and laughing. They were all
smiling and laughing as they danced around the fire.

Daniel stepped beside her. He followed her gaze toward Margot and the fire.

Jerry joined them in staring through the trees. “What are we doing?”

“We're saving your sister,” Sara answered, peering through the stand at her daughter, dancing on the beach, and she realized that neither she nor her daughter, or anyone else in the family, would ever forget this moment and that she would forever be remembered as the evil one.
Tracking the Economy of Elk

We've been tracking elk for the past month now. My brother, Benny, says that the reason we haven't seen any around is because the economy is gonna rip the world in two, and those of us who don't know any better are gonna get swallowed up in the hell fire of *naivety*. Benny thinks I'm too little to understand, but I'll show him. Dad too. I know more than they think, and I'll prove it, once the elk come back.

Our fort looks down on a wide bend in the creek just off the Hessmann property. We built it high so the hunters who pass through this part of the woods won't see it and spray it down with deer piss. They love that stuff.

We took wood from the housing development on the other side of the highway for the fort. Benny says it's okay if we steal from them, because they're part of the problem anyhow. From the deck, I have the best view of the shallow side of the bend. The grass from the Hessmann property slopes gradually down to the water between a break in the trees, and in the sun, it looks like a green tongue laid out for inspection. The grass is long and the blades fall over themselves and lap in the breeze pushing down the creek. Benny says that it's the perfect view for elk tracking. If any elk were gonna drink from this creek, they'd go thirsty for days just so they could *quench* themselves at our bend.

I sit up here most days and watch the water pass by below. My brother is off getting supplies. He says that the end is coming soon, and if we're going to fall into the bowels of hell, we're going to need some canned goods and plenty of bottled water. I believe him. I watch the creek, and I try to imagine the end. I see fire, and I see creatures with hell for
eyes. And it's like I can taste the ash and mustard of a fried ham sandwich cooked over the fiery pits of doom.

***

“This is Betsy,” Benny says before pulling himself onto the deck. Once up, he scans the fort with a heavy scowl, then looks at the book I'm reading. He's got one of the shoulders of his overalls undone, and he's not wearing an undershirt. His tan fades at his armpit. There's hair there now. “Why are my books up here?”

The girl climbs up to the deck and stands next to Benny. She smiles and looks pretty stupid. She's from the housing development across the highway. I can tell because her boots look fake, like they were made for a doll. Her t-shirt has a rip in the shoulder, but it looks new otherwise.

Benny grabs the book out of my hand. “You know I don't want these up here.” He winds the book like he's gonna hit me.

I don't flinch, because I know he only wants to get a rise out of me. Disappointed, he tosses the book back into my hands, but I fumble it and it hits my nose, making my eyes flush a little.

Benny smiles. “Well, don't cry about it.”

“I ain't. And those're Dad's books.”

“More reason to take them back down to the house.”
“So have Betsy do it.” I shoot Betsy a keen smile. Then I pick up my hatchet and string it over my shoulder before heading down the ladder. “I need to be alone,” I say without looking my brother in the eye because I know he'll say something mean otherwise.

***

Reverend Percy Reed says in *The Parsimony of Sin* that the meek will inherit the *monetary system* of the world and turn it into *fast food vouchers* and *porno*. Sometimes I think it's already happening. From the edge of the woods, I can see across the highway to the housing development on the other side. The land over there looks bald. I wonder if they know they've created a flood plain. They dug out the trees and leveled everything. They're planning to build a Gut Buster on the corner. There's a big sign there now that says *Coming Soon*.

Sometimes when I walk through the woods, I try to picture what I'll do when the elk return. I think about life before the housing development started construction. There were more animals then and less traffic on the highway. Dad seemed happier. And if I think about it hard enough, I can almost remember mom, even though Benny says I was too young to remember.

I take out my hatchet and pick a tree I think I can chop down. I find a skinny one growing at the bottom of a ridge. The bark looks thin and weak like it wasn't sure how to grow it yet. I take aim and get a few chops in before I hear footsteps crushing leaves down the glen. My dad comes over the ridge wearing a flannel hat, white t-shirt and jeans. He's carrying his chainsaw. When he sees me, his lips tighten, and I throw the hatchet in the
leaves beside the tree.

My dad glances at the small nicks in the bark. “Did you do that?” The chainsaw hangs at his side. The blade looks like the teeth of a dinosaur. “Well, whatever you're doing, stop it. You shouldn't be back here anyway.”

“We're tracking elk.”

“Elk?” Dad glares down at me like when we're working on the pickup together and I drop the flashlight. “Your brother back here too? Tell him I need to talk to him. He knows what he did.” Dad turns and starts toward the house, taking long steps up the hill and over the chicken wire fence to our property.

I look for my hatchet in the leaves. I took it from the garage. It was behind a stack of boxes underneath my dad's workbench. I'm not sure if my dad knows I have it. He wouldn't need it though. He had other tools. Better tools.

I glance down at the dull blade, rusted in spots. The handle is wood and painted red. Most of the paint is rubbed away and smudged with dirt and grease. I haven't used the hatchet for much, but I plan on it. Once the elk return, I might have to use it a lot.

***

Before we built the fort, Benny caught me following him. For a few nights in a row, Benny had been climbing out of our bedroom window to sneak over to the housing development. I followed him one night to see what he was doing. He ducked in the shadows between houses, peeking into windows occasionally. When he got to the
unfinished homes near the back of the development, he stepped through the framework, two-by-fours lined up like *cavalry*, staring up at the rafters, studying them, like I do the words in my dictionary, trying to figure out how to make their meaning mine.

The next night, when I was asleep, Benny jammed a pillow over my face. When he let up, he clasped his hand over my mouth and looked me dead in the eyes. “Don't think I won't murder you in your sleep,” he said. “And if I ever catch you following me around again, I'll make you wish you could murder yourself in your sleep.” He waited for a minute to let his words settle in the darkness between our beds. Then he said he wanted to show me something.

A pile of lumber lay in the dirt next to the half-finished framework of a new home. Benny looked at the house and down at the stack of wood. Then he said we had to build our own home. When I asked him why, he looked at me sideways and asked what difference that made. He waved a hand and said that these houses had ruined everything. They were the real reason mom had gone. Mom had left with the elk, and these houses were the cause.

Benny picked up four two-by-fours and hooked them in his arm, and motioned for me to do the same. I could only carry two. The grain cut into my arm. I was afraid Benny would scold me for being weak, but then, he nodded and started off into the dark.

We crossed wet grass and crept round houses toward the highway. We were quick. We knew how to be quiet. The woods had taught us that. There was a word in the dictionary called *elan vital*. I thought it meant to grow better—it had something to do with evolution and creation. The way I pictured it was that there were herds of animals and they each
had the chance to grow better. The smarter animals, the animals that used all their parts better—they were the animals that got to grow the best.

Benny turned a corner and stopped. I nearly ran into him.

From the shadow of a home, a girl stepped forward. She was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt with a witch on it. Her knees looked soft and doughy. It was Betsy, but I didn't know her then.

“Are you stealing that?”

“No,” Benny said.

“I'm not going to tell anybody, if that's what you're worried about.”

Benny paused for a moment and looked the girl up and down. Then he stepped toward her. She tried to step around him, but he boxed her in with the two-by-fours until her back was pushed against the dark brick wall.

“Then, yeah,” Benny said. “We are stealing these. And if you tell anyone, we'll kill you.”

Benny leaned close. I couldn't tell if he was going to hurt her. I hadn't really thought about what it meant when the strong survive: the others don't. I wanted to say something, but I didn't want to get yelled at later. I stood back, and tried to ignore what was happening. Through the yellow light of the street lamps, the stars seemed to pulse. They were still up there even though all the houses and their false light would soon take the sky away from them. I looked down at my feet. There was a toy pony pushed deep into the grass. The pink body of it lay sunken in the dirt, too low to get hit by a lawnmower. Its
big blue eyes stared at me like I needed to do something about it, like I needed to exercise the *vexations* from this side of the highway.

When I looked up, Benny was already on his way. His baggy overalls rustled as he walked. The girl didn't look scared. She scowled at me for a moment, waiting for me to trail after my brother. I hated her for thinking we would trust her, and if I'd have known Benny was going to start bringing her around, I would have done something different, tried to hurt her maybe. But in that moment, all I could do was stare back at her in a way that let her know she didn't belong.

***

I try to focus on the deer chili. Some nights Dad makes it better than others. I'm hungry, but I wait for Benny and Dad to sit at the table with me. They're in the front room. I can hear them talking. There is a loud crash. Something breaks. I hear Benny tell Dad to leave him alone. “You're afraid of them. I'm not afraid like you.” A clap. Another, low and thick. Then the floor shakes. “You're a coward!” Benny yells. Then the door slams, and silence fills the house.

Dad steps into the room. I stare into the chili and wait for him to take his seat at the table. He picks up Benny's bowl and pours some in his, then slides the rest over to me.

“Eat up.”

The bowl nearly flips, but settles. The meat inside looks no different than the beans. There's not much difference between the two. Sometimes, the big chunks taste a little like
pickles. Dad settles over his bowl with his elbows on the table and chews. I can't see his eyes. I don't think he wants to show me how mad he is. He likes to be mad in private.

Dad must have found out about the wood we were stealing. The sheriff must have told him. They drink in the backyard sometimes. I see them back there, sitting in lawn chairs, staring out at the trees like it's one big movie screen. Whenever I have to ask Dad about the water heater or something like that, I try to walk up slow. I want to hear what they're saying, but most times they're not saying anything. They're only staring at the woods, waiting for the action to build. Part of me wants to tell them it's all gonna be gone soon. The hell fire and damnation won't leave much behind. But I don't know how to say it. Dad only listens when I tell him what he wants to hear. Everything else I have to word toward his want.

***

The next morning, I walk out to the fort. Benny and that girl are sleeping up there. I find them curled together under an unzipped sleeping bag. I march over to my post where I watch for elk, trying to make as much noise as possible. They don't wake. Benny stretches a leg, and his foot slides out from under the sleeping bag. It's pale and boney, and the skin over his heel and ankle looks stretched, like his bones are out-growing the skin around them.

I glance over the side of the wooden deck. The ground below is tangled with roots and tufts of grass. There's never going to be any elk. The Reverend says that animals know the truth before the rest of us. He wrote a chapter about it. Hundreds of cranes dying
unexpectedly over Arkansas. Thousands of jellyfish washing up from the Gulf of Mexico. He says they're called omens, because animals have a thing called *heightened awareness*. The Reverend says that no one understands the economy better than animals. They don't see numbers. Instead, they smell fear. When Benny first told me about the elk, he said we shouldn't be afraid of those people on the other side of the highway. The elk would smell it on us and never come back.

I watch Benny and that girl. He is such a lair. He doesn't know anything.

“Wake up!” I yell and stomp toward them. I lean over their faces. “Elk! Elk! Get up. Elk!”

Benny leans on his elbow and winces. “What?” He glances down at Betsy who is stretching her arms above her head and smiling. What a *bimbo*.

“Don't you wanna see?” I point to the grassy embankment. “Elk.”

He focuses toward the bank on the other side of the creek. “I don't see anything.”

“That's 'cause there never was any.” I adjust the strap on my hatchet and shoot Benny a mean look. “They're all dead, you lying *shit*.” Then I march over toward the ladder and climb down.

***

“Where'd you get that?”

Dad doesn't look. He must have heard me walk in through the side door. It takes my eyes
a minute to adjust to the shade. The garage door is open, and the gravel drive looks like it's glowing.

I pull the strap to my hatchet tight over my shoulder. “I found it.”

“Well, I hope you found it in here. I don't want you finding things from the neighbors. We already have one thief in the family. We don't need two.”

He reaches for a pair of pliers, and pokes at a hunk of metal and wire on his workbench. It looks like a robo-brain, something to protect us from the underneath, but it's probably just a garbage disposal. Dad fixes things for people, but he can only fix small things.

“Benny's been sleeping in our tree fort.”

“Figures,” Dad says. “Tell him he's gonna get foot-rot if he doesn't change his socks.”

“He's been sleeping with some girl up there.”

Dad pauses and glances over his shoulder. I catch his eye and feel it cut through me. “Those girls from across the highway have parents, you know, and I've met some of them. I'd appreciate it if I didn't have to meet any more.”

I don't know how to respond, so I just stand for a moment and hope Dad understands what he is supposed to do. Benny can't bring Betsy over anymore. Dad should make him stop.

Dad looks back at me over his shoulder. “You need something?”

“No.”
Dad smiles. It lacks feeling like he doesn't understand what smiles are for. Then he turns back to his workbench and stabs at the motor with his pliers.

***

I wake, and it's dark. Cicadas wail outside. Over the din I hear voices. The screen over the window clicks. Something bangs loudly, and Benny appears. He disappears just as suddenly, and an empty duffle bag flies in and lands on the floor. Benny threads a leg over the sill and climbs into the room. I pretend to be asleep. He glances around the room. Then he turns to our dresser and rummages through the drawers.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

Benny stops and glances toward me. I sit up in bed.

“Nothing. Go back to sleep.”

Betsy leans her head in through the window.

“What's she doing here?”

Benny looks over his shoulder. He waves for Betsy to move out of sight. Then he shakes his head and looks at me.

“We're leaving. Don't tell Dad.” Benny turns to the dresser and finds what he's looking for. He stuffs it in his pocket. “Or tell Dad. What difference does it make? We'll be gone by morning.” Benny grabs a handful of clothes and jams them into the duffel bag. “Make sure the old man doesn't give you any shit about this. It has nothing to do with you. We've
gotta go, that's all.”

I get out of bed and walk to the window. I peek my head out. Betsy is crouched below, leaning against the house. She's wearing a black beanie.

Benny steps to the window and nudges me out of the way. He hooks one leg over the sill.

“We'll come back for you.”

In the light from the moon, I get a good look at his face. His cheek is bruised around one of his eyes and there is a cut over the bridge of his nose. Benny smiles. It's warm.

“Dad's getting worse,” I say.

“It doesn't hurt.”

“I'm sorry.” I try to return his smile. Then he leans out the window and hops to the ground. He and Besty run down the back lawn and disappear into the woods.

I walk over to the dresser. The drawers are open. Most of my clothes are unfolded and hanging. Benny's side of the dresser is empty except for a small tin for ear plugs. Benny had been saving to buy a car. The money inside the tin is gone.

***

The next morning, I walk out to the fort like always. I know the elk are gone for good, but I want to ignore it. I want to ignore what Dad did to Benny, even though I wanted him to. I thought it would put the fear in him, make him forget about Betsy. I thought Dad could try to fix this one thing for me. I don't know how to do it on my own. All I have is
this stupid hatchet. It's not even sharp. Benny and Betsy are probably following the creek down to the Ohio, trying to get away from this place. Maybe they'll follow that to the ocean. I try to picture the ocean, a coast of sand and waves, the sun shining all over, warm and friendly. Mulberry bushes and grass. And a thousand elk, chewing cud and standing in the wake.

I reach the fort, and I hope it's true. I hope Benny is tracking the elk all the way to the ocean. He'll come back for me once he finds them. That's why he left me behind. He needs me to keep watch over the bend.

I grab a rung to climb up the tree. We nailed two-by-fours into the trunk for a ladder. When I get to the top, Benny is laying on his back and staring up at the leaves and sky.

“I thought you'd be gone by now.”

“Well, I'm not.”

I walk over to my post and look down at the bend. No elk.

“What in the hell are you doing over there anyway?”

“I'm looking for elk.”

“Why?”

I glance down at the books that are still up here. The pages are starting to wrinkle from the dew each morning. I pick up one of the bigger ones and throw it at Benny. “I thought you were leaving.”
The book hits Benny in the shoulder, hard, and he sits up and chucks it back at me in one motion. I dodge it, easy.

“She didn't wanna go,” Benny says. Then he sighs. “Everyone's afraid. She's afraid of her parents.”

“You're not afraid?”

“Her parents are just stupid people. They’re afraid like Dad. They don't understand why they do what they do.” He shakes his head and lies back. “You wouldn't understand.”

“We need supplies.”

Benny shakes his head, staring up into the canopy. “Then go get them.”

I take a step toward him. “I don't want to.”

“Listen, I don't care what you do, but you should do it somewhere else.”

I try to step closer, but Benny leans up on an elbow and says, “Seriously, get the hell out of here.”

“I just want some help, that's all.”

Benny jumps to his feet and steps across the deck. “You want help? That's what you want? Help? Well you're not gonna get it.” The wooden planks creak under his weight. “Why don't you tell Dad you want help? Maybe he'll give it to you like he did me.” He pushes his face close to mine. Blood swirls on the inside of one of his eyeballs. It looks gummy.
I take a step back, and Benny steps closer.

“You know what?” Benny says and smiles in a way I've never seen him smile. “You should walk down to the creek and crawl inside and swim to the bottom and never come up. It's safer down there.”

I step back again. My heel dips over the edge, and I paddle the air to catch myself. I reach for a branch but the leaves rip free. I feel my back stiffen, and I tip. The ground looks far away, like I'll never see it again.

Benny grabs my arm and pulls me back from the edge. “If you want help, you should find those elk you've been looking for, because hellfire is nigh. Can you smell it?”

I tear my arm from his grip and adjust the strap of my hatchet. The air smells like trashfire and horses. “You're an idiot. I hate you,” I say, and cross the deck to the ladder and climb down.

***

I fall on the way down the ladder. A two-by-four yanks free. My foot slips. I hit the ground. A heavy weight lands on my chest. The canopy shakes and folds over itself in the breeze. Slits of light carve toward me. “Jack! Are you alright?” I don't answer my brother. I can't see him. The air funnels into my lungs. I stare into the light thought the leaves. A strong taste of honeydew sickle fills my mouth. I can't tell if I'm breathing right. My fingers feel funny. I thread them over the dry dirt and through the silt and blowdown. I reach for my hatchet, but the sleeve is empty.
On the ground near me, blood is smeared over the knuckle of a root. I stand. There is more farther down the path, small dots, one after another. The dots of blood collect at a fork and turn left at the creek, following the water. The path is raised a few feet from the stream and on the other side is a steep hill up to the Bennigan's property. I hear my brother's voice call after me. He sounds worried.

The blood leads to a large thicket, covering the trail like a big wall of dried thistle and ivy weed. I peer through and catch a glimpse of what might be my hatchet. I see the red handle, dirt smudged, laying in the middle of the path. I kneel and squeeze into the brush. I work my shoulders past the thick stalks. Stiff brambles catch on my shirt. My hands and knees sink into the wet muck under the thicket.

Once through, I stand. My hatchet lay in the path before a knuckled ridge. I move for it, but as I do, an elk comes over the hill and trots toward me. It circles itself and stops in front of my hatchet. I count six points on its antlers. The hair on its chest is puffy like cotton, except for a mare over its left leg. It's bleeding.

The elk looks down at the hatchet. Then it raises its head and kicks at the dirt.

“You're not supposed to be here,” I tell it.

It stares at me, eyes black and empty, twitching its nose like it remembers my smell, the scent of fear I've carried all along.

“Get out of here!”

The elk rears and circles the hatchet. Then it stares at me again.
“You've gotta go. You're not safe here.”

I take a step toward the elk. It swings its head low and snorts. I take another step, and the animal does it again and kicks at the ground.

“You're not supposed to come back. Don't you understand? It's not safe here. We're not safe.”

I get close enough to reach for my hatchet, and as I bend down to pick it up, the elk rears back on its hind legs, tall like a giant. Its large snout and antlers block the sun. I see the wound on its chest. The fur is cut away, and I know it's from me, the mark from my hatchet, where the flesh peeled back and the blade tore through to the bone.
The Flagbearer's Daughter

When the doctor and the priest guide the virgin up the stairs, I make it a point to look her in the eyes. I owe her that much, at the very least. She looks young, no older than sixteen. The pool of virgins gets younger and younger each year. I’m not sure if this is on the priest’s orders, but I wouldn’t be surprised. He was only promoted three summers ago, and it makes sense that he would try to distinguish himself from the priests of the past. I guess he thinks that the virgins are more potent at this younger age. Who’s to say? One thing I do know, though, is that if it doesn’t start raining soon, we’re all going to starve to death.

The virgin gives me a hollow stare. She has eyes like the burning blue at the center of a pyre, and even from where I’m standing as a flagbearer, I can see that she’s holding back tears. I hope she’s potent. It would be a shame for her to go through all this for nothing.

The priest and the doctor both turn to face the horde of villagers, and the virgin reluctantly does the same. I can see her slender shoulders through her sheer, white raiment and hood. She’s slouching a little, and her neck tightens when the priest raises his abarist and sends the crowd into a frenzy. They’re going crazy with cheers for renewal. From atop the sacred stone tower, I’m not able to see individual villagers among the horde, but I know that my sister is standing down there somewhere with her husband and her two sons and my daughter, Hou.

I hate that Hou has to see things like this, but there are parts of her life that I won’t be able to teach alone, and bearing the grief of sacrifice is only a short lesson toward the
future that awaits.

Two guards lead the virgin to the sacred stone and tie her wrists and ankles. The stone is angled for the sun, dividing the people from the gods. It represents the eternal path to salvation and the steps we as villagers have to take to transcend into the heavens. The virgin gets a direct path. That is, if she can prove herself worthy.

The first thing the priest does to begin the ceremony is summon the gods to come to the virgin’s aid. As he does this, he blindfolds her with a bandana soaked in jimson weed. A similar bandana is used by the elders to breach the path to the gods, but this particular bandana will catapult the virgin’s spirit into the next world, because compared to what the elders use, her bandana is about ten times as strong.

The priest turns to the crowd with a flourish, and the crowd whales. Then he motions to the drummers, and they pick up an unworldly pulse. He rattles his abarist and side steps in front of the virgin, crouching low and sneering. The white chalk and ash on his face start to run with sweat, and he begins a low rolling chant that sounds incredibly similar to a song I usually sing to Hou before bedtime.

As the drums pulse and the priest chants, the doctor comes forward and unsheathes a silver dagger that he had concealed in the sleeve of his cloak. He brandishes the weapon to the sun. Then he turns to the virgin and glides the blade from hipbone to hipbone. A splash of intestine falls to her feet.

***
The ceremony lasts until the sun falls over the hills in the west and the virgin succumbs to her destiny. When she finally passes, a silence rolls over the horde of villagers, and the breeze flattens. My flag goes still. The weight of my stanchion gives. And the guards move toward the virgin's remains to gather her in a vermillion cloth. They carry what is left to a preparatory chamber below the sacred stone.

Once the guards have gone, the priest and the doctor follow, and a low din moves through the horde of villagers as they turn and make their way home to their family huts just beyond the grounds. The breeze comes back to my flag, and I tighten my grip as the heavy weight of the brocade fabric cracks in the wind.

I hold my position and watch the villagers filter into the streets. One by one, oil torches and wax candles light the narrow paths and dirt avenues, and the village comes to life with a roil of glinting light. It would be an amazing sight, if it wasn't for the dank stench of bile and flesh wafting upward from the stone altar of the most important ritual of the year.

Gourd rinds and tender leaflets litter the trampled grass below. I'm glad I don't have to clean it up. As the last of the crowd dissipates, Yagg, the other flagbearer, eases from his post and starts toward the staircase behind the sacred stone. He is much older than I, and when he leaves, he avoids my eyes. It's hard to say whether he is avoiding me on purpose or avoiding a glance toward the blood and viscera left by the virgin. For a moment, I stare into the dark pool. The stars glow in its reflection. Cheers from the village carry over on the breeze. They're getting ready for the ceremonial feast, the last
big meal before the harvest, and I think about the seat that awaits me at my sister's hut. I think about Hou's innocent cheeks and glassy eyes. This will probably be the first sacrifice she remembers. She's getting old enough to understand what all this means.

This past year, when I took her to visit her mother's grave, Hou looked up at me with a flat expression, her eyes like pill bugs, and she told me that we had to save her mother. At the time, I didn't know what to say. Hou had never seen her mother. It was childbirth that had taken Cava. Hou was a gift from the gods, but they had taken Cava in exchange. It hurt to think of a reality where my Cava was safe and not be able to see it for myself, but Hou was the only reality I knew. And I wanted hers to be a reality where anything could be possible, for as long as that could be possible.

I rewarded her imagination with a wet kiss on the check. After the kiss, Hou wiped her cheek clean and pouted. She would lose her faith in possibility soon enough.

That same night, when I called her to dinner, she didn't come. I searched her room. Everything was in order. Her bed was made, and her dolls sat patiently on her rabbit fur cover. But she was gone—and with her, her lamb wool blanket and ginger root doll.

I ran down to my sister's hut in the Gully of the Jaguars, but Hou wasn't there. When I explained to Bah what had happened, she nearly fainted, and her husband and two sons set out to look for her. A well-renowned hunter and tracker, her husband didn't have a hard time finding Hou. She was in the graveyard, sleeping at the foot of her mother's stone, curled tightly in her blanket with her ginger root doll cradled under her chin. I carried her home and put her to bed. But when she woke the next morning, she had no
memory of what had happened. It must have been a dream that had pulled at her, because even with all my study and work at the temple, I could not place the magic at work in her path.

***

Below the sacred stone, I return my flag and stanchion to the proper chamber, and as I turn the corner to leave, I nearly run into the new priest. He pauses and stares down at me. He is still dressed in his ceremonial vestments even though they're splattered with offal. The chalk and ash on his face have begun to mix with the blood and sweat, and his cheeks look pocked and moribund. Behind him are the two guards who tied up the virgin. Their bare chests glimmer in the torchlight of the small corridor.

A shudder passes through me. I want to congratulate him on an excellent sacrifice—he did a stunning job—but my clumsy gestures only seem to convey a vague sense of approval.

After a short pause, the priest narrows his eyes and nods as if he understands. He has been under a lot of pressure lately from the village's upper echelon, and it's starting to show at the edge of his mannerisms, a rank patina of unrequited affirmation. After the priest nods, he and his entourage continue down the narrow corridor. I watch them pass and wonder why he hasn't changed out of his vestments. It seems ridiculous, but I shake it off and continue on my way to Bah's hut.

Cheers and merry howls carry down the narrow pathways between family huts. The sounds echo from the adobe walls around me as I hurry through the village. I catch
glimpses of families gathering tightly around their dinner tables, passing and piling the
last of this season's fruits and vegetables, and what little meat they've been able to cure in
salts since the herds moved north for summer.

I turn a corner and climb a small set of stairs, and from there, I spot a small shadow
sliding down the edge of the path. It pauses when it sees me. As I move closer, I realize
it's a small cat. It looks half-starved, and I catch only a glimpse of its lurid yellow eyes
before it scurries off in the other direction. I haven't seen a cat in moons. It runs down the
path and takes a corner toward the hillsides, and I wonder how the cat made it this far
into austerity season without winding up in a stew.

Hou is going to be ecstatic when I tell her about it later. She loves animals, and I'm sorry
she has to do without them for nearly half the year. I hurry through the village and take
the path down to the Gully of the Jaguars. Bah's hut is in a hollow near the spring that
runs dry for most the year. I have always told her that it's dangerous to live this far from
the village, but she apparently holds more confidence in her husband's ability to fend for
himself than I.

When I reach their hut, they've already sat down for supper around the long wooden table
that Saaf crafted himself from a single tree. Before I knock on the front door, I spy them
through the window. They are waiting patiently; even though, Saaf looks a little irritated.
He sits at the head of the table with his two sons next to him. Bah is sitting across from
him with Hou next to her and an open seat for me. Hou is staring into her empty plate,
while Bah and Saaf exchange glances that probably have more to do with me than the
actual ceremony of tonight's feast.

I want the feast to go well—for Hou's sake. Earlier in the day, she asked me why they used young girls for sacrifice. I gave her a non-answer that implied the gods were fickle. Then I changed the subject.

I don't want her worrying about such things. She is never going up to the tower, so she'll never have to know about it. I wonder how long I can protect her from questions she'll never be able to answer. It's hard to see her lean against curiosity like a crutch until it breaks. I don't think it will last much longer, and after that, her life will seem the most uncertain.

Hou jumps out of her seat when I enter, and she runs over to give me a huge hug around my knees. Sometimes, when she greets me, it's as if she thought I'd never come back. I pick her up and cradle her on my hip.

Bah stands and kisses me on the cheek. She looks beautiful as usual, and her skin looks radiant in the raiment she is wearing. It must be new, because I haven't seen that color of blue before. She must have dyed it herself. It reminds me of the virgin's eyes, bright and encompassing.

Saaf shakes my hand, and his sons do the same, mimicking their father's actions. They are nearing adulthood. They'll have to walk the righteous path to manhood soon, if they want to be hunters like their father.

Finally, we sit down to our small feast and welcome the dry season with full stomachs.
The old and weak of heart are the first to die. Within weeks, the cemetery is clouded in dust and dry soil tilled for burial. The frequency with which I’m needed as flagbearer rises as more and more families carry their dead to be buried. I follow with my flag and hope another doesn’t pass from over-exertion as the processions weave through the streets to the burial site. Most of the shops and vendors are closed and gone home in order to tend to their dead or dying. The only shop still doing business is the blacksmith. The time to stockpile weaponry is nigh.

I hear people talking during the processions. Each family believes in their patriarch, but they say that if worse comes to worst, they’ll be ready to fend off whatever may come until their huts are taken from under their lifeless feet.

Their legs are weak and their arms are tired, but they carry their dead with pride. It’s an honor in many ways to see the passing of time in the accumulation of ancestors. Gravestones dot the hillside in clear view of the sun, each one marking a villager on their way to the gods. Through the dust and sorrow I try to image how things should be, the sun pulling over the treeline to the east, blades of grass flickering in the wind like a current being sent from on high, a moment to be cherished. It would have been simply breath-taking had it not been for all the death and dying.

The family of the Brother Ox is the first to lose a child this year. Four of them carry the small hollowed log—a branch really—to the graveyard. Hou was born during this season, and when Cava crossed the threshold, she lay in our modest hut on a pile of straw and
woven fern fronds without a single morsel to eat or drop of wine to drink. It’s common for mothers to pass in the season before the harvest, but I still blame myself.

I follow the family of the Brother Ox through the streets with my flag and wonder if Hou is alright. I left her with Bah as usual, but Saaf was acting strange that morning. He didn’t acknowledge me when I came in with Hou. He only sat in the corner of their hut, slowly working the leather at the tip of one of his spears. His sons were sitting at his feet mimicking his actions with smaller spears that looked like toys. I'm not sure why. There wouldn't be anything to hunt until after the harvest.

When the family of the Brother Ox proceeds through the village and onto the grassy hillside, they are the first of the day. The hillside is empty and the sun is low on its crest. The pulse of the breeze cuts across wiry tufts of grass. As we walk closer to the Brother Ox plot, I look for Cava's grave, out of habit. Our plot can be seen from the main path, and I usually sing a short blessing to the gods as I pass each morning. But as we approach, I notice something huddled over Cava's grave, furry and lean. A paw stretches before it as if the animal passed in the midst of some kind of struggle. As I get closer, I see the cat from the night of the feast. But it's dead. In the dirt, just before its outstretched claw, there is a small hole. I have never seen anything like this. It looks as though the cat had been trying to dig up my wife's body. But to eat?

Momentarily distracted, I fail to notice a clump of dirt in the path and stumble with the weight of my flag into the procession before me, causing the youngest member of the family of the Brother Ox to lose grip and drop the hollow log with a thud and spill the
deceased onto the dirt path. The body tumbles from its raveling garment into a pile of
dismembered parts. The patriarch of the family slaps the youngest bearer. Then he
begrudgingly wraps the child's limbs as they were, and glowers at me as he returns the
deceased to the hollowed log and continues the procession.

But it's too late. We saw the work that had been done to the child. He had been offered to
the gods, but for reasons unknown to me, the sacrifice had been clandestine.

***

After the family of the Brother Ox, I follow seven more families to burial. Then I return
my flag and stanchion to a storage chamber under the sacred stone. Once in the temple
walls, I try to forget about the image of the Brother Ox child and the sight of the cat over
my wife's grave. One of the gravekeepers must have disposed of the cat, because that
initial sighting was the last I saw of it, which is for the best because I'd be lying to myself
if I said that that dead cat hadn't sent a primal shot of saliva to my gums. I have only
eaten bits of bread and water for weeks, and it's hard to justify that kind of hunger with
the horror of discovering a cat that died in the throes of eating my wife from her grave.

I leave through the east entrance, so as not to be seen by the other flagbearer or the preist,
and I pass into the shadow of another fading day. As I make my way through the village, I
pretend not to notice the suspicious glances from passing villagers. They see me up there,
during each service and sacrifice. Me with my flag, taking full responsibility for each
scream and tacit cry.

A man sits in the doorway of his home, wiping clean a big black pot. His arm is deep into
it, and when he glances up at me I see that one of his eyes is missing. The hollow socket
stares up at me bare, revealing the naked insides of his head. The flesh inside is tender
and disgusting, and it takes effort to turn away. I stumble up a set of stairs and start off
more urgently than before.

Hou is at Bah's, and I find her playing in the dry spring behind Bah's hut. She's kneeling
over a few of her dolls. She has one tied to a stone, while two others dance around it.

I ask her what she's doing, and she points to a doll standing off to the side with a stick in
its hand that has a small cut of cloth tied to it.

“That's you,” she says with a serious look on her face, and I realize what she's doing.

“What's that?” I point to six clumps of animal fur sitting neatly in the dirt.

“Those are the wolves,” Hou says. “They're going to save her.”

“But I thought all the wolves have left?”

Hou turns to me with her pill bug eyes. “They're always around. I see them all the time.”

“What do you mean?”

“They're my friends,” Hou says. Then she turns back to her dolls.

A human doll lays with the wolves, crawling on the ground alongside them. They're
creeping toward the scene on the temple.

Hou asks if I want to play, but I tell her we need to get going. I fear the walk to our hut
after dark might be best if avoided, but Hou jumps to her feet and pulls at the sleeve of my cloak. I don't know if she understands the effect this has on me, but it is undeniably forthcoming.

“I don't want to leave,” she says and frowns and crosses her legs. Then she begins to twist her arms together nervously and glances toward the tall golden grass on the other side of the spring.

I tell her we can stay, and she smiles proudly. She can finish playing while I go inside and talk with Bah.

Inside the hut, Bah is mending a bear hide in the corner. There are six little holes cut from the shoulder of the hide.

“I bet I know what happened there,” I say and point to the holes.

“She's fine. This is an old fur.”

I take a seat next to my sister. Her hut is small but comfortable. It looks much bigger than it is, because Bah keeps it very tidy. For a moment, we sit in silence while she mends the fur. When we were younger, my sister and I were never very close. My interests had always leaned toward the goings-on at the temple, and she had her friendships with the hunting families. It wasn't until we both had children that we started talking more. I owe that to her. After Cava died it was she who put food in Hou's belly, food that belonged to her sons.

I stare into the glossy black hair of the bear fur. “I think they're doing bad things up at the
temple."

“You shouldn't talk about the temple that way.” She focuses on her stitch work.

I'm not sure if Bah understands why I joined the temple, but she has always humored me and my decision.

“That new priest...” I pause for a moment before continuing. I don't know how much I can tell her. “He doesn't know what he's doing.”

Bah smiles. “You know who you sound like. The only difference is Saaf has his reasons. Your temple would never do anything to hurt you—with all you've done.”

I take her reassurance; even though, it's horribly ungrounded. On those mornings, when I pass Cava's grave, I see my plot next to hers. There is a certain amount of honor that comes with being buried in the graveyard, among your loved ones, your ancestors, or so I thought. Bah will be burned alive with Saaf's remains when the time comes, as is the hunting tradition, and their sons will carry a pouch around their necks filled with their parents' ashes until it is time for them to pass as well. For Hou, without a proper arrangement, a path is unclear.

“They came this morning for the boys,” Bah says. “They wanted to take them to the temple. I don't know why. Saaf had taken them out for a tour, so nothing came of it, but I didn't like these men. I didn't like their tone.”

“Nothing came of it. That's good.”

“They said they'd be back.”
They would certainly be back, and Bah would have to bend to the temple. If they want her sons, they would have them. But Saaf is strong. His will may mend what I cannot. Would that Hou be so lucky.

Hou steps into the doorway. The bright light of day casts her features in shadow, but I can see a smile across her face. “They're here,” she says. Then she turns from the doorway and dashes out of sight.

I turn to Bah. Her expression draws loose, and I see in her eyes a lucid terror. Maybe she does understand the precariously state of our fate. I can never tell whether she hides what she knows or knows nothing worth hiding.

Behind the hut, I expect a command of temple guards in the process of binding Hou to the back of a horse, but instead, Hou is timidly approaching a pack of emaciated coyotes. She lends her hand to the lead coyote, and the animal leans close to smell it. I step toward the pack. Their noses are losing color, from black to gray and some pink. Their hair is mangy and knotted in patches. Then I see their eyes. They are the same lurid yellow as the cat's from the graveyard.

I whisper to Hou, and she turns with a smile. Her hand is nearly touching the coyote. If the animal wanted to kill and devour her, there would be nothing I could do to stop it. Bah is standing behind me, but I fear to take my eyes from my daughter and walk closer.

The coyotes turn to me. All but the one closest to Hou. They look vicious and scared. The yellow in their eyes seem to burn from somewhere within. They bare their fangs and step closer with tense, prone shoulders and haunches. I reach for the knife I keep in the folds
of my cloak. It is a small weapon, but it is sharp. And there is nothing that I wouldn't do to protect my daughter. She is the last of me.

The one coyote smells Hou's hand, and it balks for a moment. Then it rears back and howls into the sky, a long trebleless note, and the other coyotes turn and join in the call. Then the one coyote runs around Hou and threads her legs to pick her up on its back.

“They're lost,” Hou says to me over her shoulder. “They need to find a way home.”

“Home?” I ask as if she were teaching me a new word.

Then the coyotes disappear into the woods with Hou riding in the lead.

***

I start off up the trail. I run the whole way. I run until my gums pulse with the taste of blood, and fear tightens the muscles in my back. I run, and my veins burn through my legs. My feet throb. If I can make it there in time, the guards will take care of the coyotes. Then I can explain. They'll understand. They know me. Everything will be fine.

But when I reach the temple all hope flushes white. Animals. They stand en masse over the grounds. Great herds of them. I have never seen anything like it. Odd families of animals that haven't returned to the village for many harvests. Giraffes tower over the smaller animals, their long necks smallest near the temple. Elephants dot the horde, like weathered tors in wheat grass. Their skin is pale, nearly translucent in the sun. The heavy smell of fertile earth thickens the spit in my mouth and goes sour. I know they're not here for me. They're here for Hou.
Figures circle the Sacred Stone at the top of the temple. The coyotes. They strike in me a fear that I remember from when I was a child and hated coming to witness the sacrifice. I remember standing here with my father and mother, not knowing what to do with my hands. It wasn't until much later when the importance of the ceremony dawned on me that I began to respect my sense of fear and hold on to it as a way of justifying my convictions.

Directly over the temple, a swirl of clouds begin to form. I step out onto the grounds among the beasts. The hyenas nip at my feet as I pad through the dry grass. Elk watch me with their wary eyes. The monkeys fidget in place and hoot to themselves. The animals part as I step toward the temple, and close behind me. The clouds over the temple roll over themselves and spread to a perfect circle over the Sacred Stone.

I take to the stairs. The stone of the temple is hard under foot, and the power that I once feared as a child comes back to me through the leather soles of my sandals. I must have stood at the top of these stones a hundred times, but never have I climbed to the top using these stairs. The clouds cast a dark shadow overhead, and a cool breeze surprises me. It cuts at my back, and sharpens my senses. An intense wave of stunted purpose comes over me. I'm no longer here to save my daughter. I can't save her. I think of Cava and everything I should have done for her. I think of the virgins who stood on these stones, each of them ready to give their lives without wholly understanding why.

A pair of bangle tigers bare their fangs and sneer at my back. They guide me to the top. A procession of animals follow behind the bangles.
Hou sits at the foot of the Sacred Stone. Her hair is wet with sweat and her raiment is soaked through. From behind the strings of her hair, she glares up at me. Two coyotes stand at attention near her side. Then I see it. In her eyes. She has the yellow flame burning within her. The look burns right through me. I had promised Cava that I would take care of her. She made me promise all through her pregnancy as if she knew what was coming. Everything.

The bangles step onto the top of the temple and circle me. A moose and a baboon follow and do the same. Soon I'm surrounded by fierce looking things, animals made to survive, and they look at me with their yellow eyes as if they know what I do not.

Finally, the clouds open up, and rain washes over us. The animals don't move. They hold their circle around me and my daughter and the Sacred Stone. My daughter stands and steps toward me. Large beads of rain pelt the stones around us.

As she gets closer, I ask, “What kind of magic is this?”

“This is no magic. Hand me your knife, Father.”

I do as she asks. The blade is small but sharp. I've never had to use it, but the temple requires that I carry one. Hou turns the blade in her hand. The rain dances over the clean metal. Then she grips the handle firmly and buries its tip in my heart.

Hou recites an incantation that sounds horribly similar to a song I usually sing to her before bed. Then I fall to my knees and bow my head, as my daughter welcomes the first rain of the season.