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# Chapter 1

When I woke up this morning, I noticed something odd. Actually, "noticed" is a strong word; something was decidedly different about the feeling of this morning, but I couldn't nominate any particular aspect of my surroundings to blame for this. This was only the vague impression I got in the seconds following my waking, so I crawled out of my bed and walked downstairs to go eat my usual breakfast. I never made my bed because I'd always go back to sleep in it anyways. What's the point of such a futile habit? I promised myself in that moment, as I did at the same time every day, that I'd never waste my time doing such a stupid thing.

As I reached the end of the staircase, entering the hallway leading to my kitchen, the sense of unusuality grew stronger and began intermingling with an air of unease. Strange feelings are never a good sign for somebody just trying to get through their routines. But I am brave, so I continued. At a glance, everything appeared normal, but the strangeness of the situation was undeniable for some reason, strangely enough. I opened my pantry door and scrounged around looking for my Honey Nut Cheerios. Well, no, just regular Cheerios. Some bastard had already bought all the Honey Nut Cheerios before I had gotten to the store, only leaving me the boring regular kind. Fuck that guy. Whatever, it's fine. I poured my Cheerios into a bowl and prepared myself for the most exciting part of my morning cereal: the milk. Regular cereal by itself was bland, there was no excitement! Milk is the quintessence of a spectacular breakfast; cereal without milk is for sad, sad people, and who the hell doesn't eat cereal for breakfast?

The answer to the rhetorical question I just posed was, startlingly, myself. You see, the moment I opened the door to my refrigerator, I was met with a heartbreaking discovery, paramount to any other problem I could possibly have. There was no milk in the fridge. The magical essence, the ingredient which could make breakfast an unforgettable event, completely absent. It was like the blood of my cereal was sucked dry like juice from a child's juice pouch, only to be subsequently discarded due to its newfound uselessness. I felt a tear roll down my cheek. It continued to roll in accordance with gravity, finally detaching itself at my chin and falling into the cereal bowl, only adding insult to injury. This would not do. I had to figure out how this had happened. I could never forget to buy milk! My grocery list is a living document, never neglected, and I follow it to the best of my abilities. I couldn't have run out either; I buy three gallons at a time, and I just went shopping about four days ago. Something sinister was at play here, something beyond my knowledge. I looked around the kitchen, still in disbelief, until I found a newspaper I had placed on the counter. Typically, I don't read such things, but some kid presumably was paid to leave this tome of societal detritus at my doorstep, and I don't want to help it ruin the environment by throwing it away. The words that were visible from the folded paper were oddly blotched with ink, which was not my doing. I was able to make out some of it.

"Blank, resident of Bushville... 21st anniversary... took everything..."

Blank? Who the hell is that? What did he take? Could it have been my milk? That had to be it, what else could've happened? Was he the same asshole who bought all the Honey Nut Cheerios? He must be. I had to take my curiosities online.

## Chapter 2

I ran back up to my room and hastily logged onto my computer. My username was "superlewis223," and I'm not going to tell you my password. I opened my browser and typed "WHO THE HELL IS THIS GUY" into Google. In my anger, I failed to realize that this search query would probably lead to nothing useful at all, since Google cannot read my thoughts (as far as I know). After my mood calmed down a bit, I logged onto Facebook and searched for a profile with the name Blank. Luckily, Blank is not a very common name for a person, and there were few profiles with such a name. Their faces all displayed a certain type of despondency, typical of people with strange names. Except for one. One profile had no associated picture, the only such profile. How suspicious. This must be the person I'm looking for.

After surveying his profile a bit, I deduced several key details. For one, he posted every day at precisely 5:00 AM the exact same message which simply read "Good Morning Everyone." Was this some sort of mind game? Surely it was. He must be extremely calculated. That brings me to my second discovery: this man was of monumental intellect. He frequently posted about highly advanced mathematical equations and logical conundrums. This could be an issue, as math was one of my biggest fears. And fear was also one of my biggest fears. This scared me. I had to get my revenge on Blank as swiftly as possible. I scanned through the pertinent data of his posts in order to triangulate the exact position of his house. To simplify, I looked at the home address he had put in his bio.

Bushville, where Blank lived, was a few towns over; it was about a 6 hour drive. In the overall distress of this morning, I had completely forgotten to eat any breakfast at all, and the tear-contaminated cereal was absolutely a no-go. My stomach began to notify me of my oversight, and so I stopped to get some breakfast at a gas station. This particular gas station had been here for at least 15 years, but I can't remember a single time that the floor near the front entrance was stain-free. True to tradition, as soon as I walked through the all-knowing automatic doors, I stepped into a small puddle of what I assumed was orange juice, making my shoes sticky for the remainder of my visit. Utterly fascinating. Now, I would have gotten some milk at the gas station to quench my thirst, but they only had the shitty kind, like whole milk and almond milk. If it isn't 2%, then it might as well be piss. Given that I still could not get any milk, I decided to grab a Lunchable from the shelf. I did not pay for it, but even as I walked through the orange juice puddle again, with my eyes locked onto the cashier's eyes, his locked onto mine, he did not make any move towards me. We were in some sort of agreement, though we had never exchanged a word, that I could take whatever I wanted from this gas station without paying. I liked this guy. In my mind, I pictured him as a very successful and wealthy gentleman who owned

a private jet and a luxurious mansion. This was in spite of the fact that he worked at a gas station.

I was walking towards my vehicle when my phone emitted a small vibration. It was a text from an unknown number which read:

"Back of walmart on spruce avenue at 12:00 pm today go there please"

What? Who sent me this? I don't know about any Spruce Avenue in this town, and trust me, I know every road. Did Blank do this? This is the exact kind of trickery he would use on me. Whoever did it, I couldn't act upon their wish even if I wanted to. It was only 10:00 AM, and I did not know where this Walmart was. I took a screenshot of the text to preserve it and put my phone back in my pocket.

As I was driving to Blank's house, I eventually did stumble upon a road called Spruce Avenue, in a little town called Brayfield. This avenue did indeed have a Walmart, and this Walmart did indeed have a back. However, it was still only about 11:00 AM, so I couldn't go there yet. Instead, I decided to explore this small town to see if I could find anything useful. Looking in all directions from there, all I could see was the Walmart, a small computer parts store, a McDonald's, and an apartment building. There was probably more to this town than that, but in my eyes, this was the entire world to the inhabitants of Brayfield. I tried to imagine what that would be like, only ever seeing 4 buildings for your whole life. What a depressing thought. I already did not like this town.

I decided to check out the Walmart first. From the outside, it looked quite similar to a Walmart. As I entered the building, I noticed that the interior also bore quite a heavy resemblance. It wasn't a very large Walmart; I was almost able to see the entire width of the store from the front door. This place had the usual wide selection of products that you would expect from a supermarket, including basic forms of weaponry. I decided to purchase a small pocket knife. I hoped that this purchase would prove unnecessary. I went to the snack aisle to grab something small when I noticed a small caterpillar wriggling across the floor. It was beautiful, its green and yellow exoskeleton shining under the fluorescent ceiling lights. I still crushed it under my shoe, because it was just a bug. My appetite had faded after that.

After leaving the Walmart, I decided to go look at the computer parts store. It was called Ted's Ware, and across the front of the building a small banner was hung which read "MASSIVE SALE! 30% OFF EVERYTHING!!!" Despite this flashy display, the inside of the store looked pretty much empty, and the lights were completely off. I decided to walk in anyways, and was immediately greeted by the smell of mold. This store hadn't been open for years. I looked for a light switch, finding one behind the front desk. With this enhanced vision, I could now see clearly that most of the shelves were empty, with the items that remained looking antiquated, covered in dust. Still, I wanted to see if there was anything I cared about. Most of the stuff on the shelves were just outdated keyboards, mice, and other miscellaneous internal parts. However, there was a small software section, with a couple CDs remaining. I picked up a particularly unprofessional looking disk, noticing that somebody had scrawled "family photos" on its reflective surface in red marker. Feeling intrigued, I put this in my pocket and left the store.

Finally, I decided to venture across the street to the apartment building, ignoring the adjacent McDonalds (I've seen plenty of tragedies in my time). The apartment building lobby immediately relaxed my mood as I walked in, with its smooth beige walls, soft burgundy carpet floors, and generic smooth jazz quietly playing over an overhead speaker. This room had been designed by a highly trained professional to achieve the most serene environment possible, and there was no doubt to that. The front desk currently had no employee attending it, but there was a small piece of paper left there which read "Back soon!" I did not feel like waiting for this employee to return, soon as it may be, because I had no reason to speak to any employee at this facility. At this point, I decided I would knock on the door of the first apartment I saw and ask the person within some questions. I walked up the stairs to the first floor, and proceeded down the first hallway I saw. I could see the doors of at least a dozen apartments from here, but true to my goal, I approached the first door on the left and began to knock. Initially, I had no results, but after about 10 seconds I heard a stirring within the room and stopped knocking. Footsteps began to grow closer until the doorknob twisted counter-clockwise and the door opened towards me.

"What do you want?" the man inside asked with a tinge of confusion.

"I just wanted to ask you a few questions about your experience here in Brayfield." I explained.

"Sorry, I'm not interested."

The man began to shut his door, but I quickly lodged my foot between the door and the doorframe, causing no small amount of pain.

"I don't think you understand. I'm not a solicitor or debt collector or anything like that, I just want to know more about your perplexing little town."

"Fine, if you say so. What do you want me to tell you?"

"Tell me about your life here! What do you do every day?"

"Well, I work at that Walmart down the street right now, though I'm off today. I used to work at that old tech store next to it, but they had to close their doors."

"And why is that?"

"I don't know man, don't ask me. I have better things to do."

The man shut his door once more, but too quickly for me to try and stop him. I was quite frustrated at this moment, but I did not yell or knock on his door again, as that certainly wouldn't convince him to tell me more. I checked my watch and saw something quite concerning. It was 12:03 PM. I should have been behind that Walmart 3 minutes ago.

## Chapter 3

I started running. I ran as fast as my legs would allow me to. I practically dived down the hotel stairs, out the door, and across the street, almost getting hit by a car. I was moving faster than a very fast object, too fast to think of metaphors. Already exhausted, I started briskly jogging to the back of the Walmart, it now being 12:04 PM. I reached the farthermost edge of the eastern wall and peered around the corner, silently panicking over the consequences of being late. It was mostly empty, save for a dumpster and a few cardboard boxes. However, upon positioning my gaze a bit higher, something else was brought to my attention.

A woman was standing there, her back facing me. She was abnormally tall, at least a foot higher than I was. Her hair was dark brown and quite curly, though it looked slightly unkempt, and she had taupe skin reminiscent of wet sand. She was wearing an off-white sweater paired with fingerless gloves that were almost ripped to shreds and a long denim skirt that had at least a dozen pockets sewn onto it. All of them looked full. Suddenly, I coughed. This made her flinch and quickly turn around, putting up her fists for a moment before settling her eyes on my face and calming down. It was almost like she recognized me. She dropped the lit cigarette from the corner of her mouth and let it fall to the ground, crushing it with her boot.

"You're late," she muttered. Her voice sounded husky, yet delicate at the same time. I felt my knees shake under me.

"I- sorry, I was just- I was over there doing-"

"You don't have to explain it. We have matters to attend to," she interrupted. She pulled out a small notebook from one of her pockets and flipped to one of the pages. "Your name is Lewis, correct?"

"Uh, yes," I muttered. Where did she get that information from? I'm certainly not one for social media. "What have you brought me here for?" I asked her, trying to make eye contact, though her eyes darted away whenever they met my own.

"Do you happen to know a man named Blank?"

"Um, yes, I think so. Unfortunately. I think he took something from me. What do you know about him?"

"It's a very long story. I do not like what he and his friends have been doing for the past several years. I intend to find him and do... something."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but I believed her. Blank was surely a man who got himself into plenty of dubious schemes. I wondered if we would take down Blank as a team, working together to get the ultimate revenge on him. Keeping this in mind, I reached out my hand towards the woman for a handshake. She recoiled almost instantly, taking a few steps back.

"Hold on, I don't trust you yet," she explained in almost a whisper. She retrieved a box cutter from one of her skirt's back pockets and sheepishly handed it over to me. I noticed the messy, flaking black nail polish that adorned her hands.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked, bewildered and a bit concerned.

"Cut yourself," she demanded, "so I know you bleed red."

I hesitated. Of course I bled red, I didn't need to prove that! But she would still be unsure, and how else could I prove that my blood was indeed red without using the box cutter? This was a bit much to be doing for a person I didn't even know, but to be honest, I could use any kind of help I could get. I looked down at my fingers, quietly apologizing for what I was about to do. I made a small incision on the tip of my index finger, just enough so that a few drops of red blood would seep from the wound.

"Great!" she exclaimed, with considerably more energy than she had before that moment. She began pacing around and giving an awkward smile that she tried her best to suppress, unsuccessfully. I couldn't help but smile too, regardless of the pain she had just caused me. She saw this and jumped to give me a hug, catching me by surprise.

"It's been so long since I've had a real friend," she said, head over my shoulder. I couldn't remember the last time I had felt this way. She would probably say the same. Suddenly, she pulled away, as if she had just realized how spontaneous her actions were.

"Sorry... it's just been so long since I've-"

"It's fine, really, truly, it is fine," I rebutted. She was looking down at the concrete now. I tried to lighten the mood a bit. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Isobel," she murmured.

"What a lovely name. Isobel." I was telling the truth. If I could name myself, I would choose a name like that. She began to smile again, not trying to hide it this time. Her phone began to ring. She pulled it out of one of her pockets (one I hadn't even noticed!) and answered it, looking away from me with her phone up to her ear. It was a one-sided discussion with someone whose voice I could not hear, Isobel only jutting in with the occasional "mhm" or "yep." After about 30 seconds, she hung up the phone.

"Who was that?" I inquired, trying my best to not seem like I was listening as closely as I could the whole time.

"That was, uh, an old friend. I'm not sure why he still calls me."

"What was he talking about?"

"I don't know. He talks too fast for me to listen."

"Huh. Well, we should get going."

I started walking back the way I came, expecting her to follow me, but instead she grabbed my arm and pulled me over to a structure I hadn't noticed in the trees behind the Walmart. It looked to be a dilapidated shed from the outside, but as Isobel used a key to open the door, I noticed that the inside had been repurposed to act as a makeshift living space. Directly forward from me was an old computer with a CRT monitor on a small wooden table, with what looked to be a plastic lawn chair sitting in front of it. To my left was a mini fridge next to a microwave, and to my right was a mattress laid directly on the floor, with a blanket and torn-up pillow on top of it. There were some drawers in the

corner, which I assumed contained clothes. The floor was littered with plenty of stray objects: papers with scribbled writing on them, a sewing machine, crushed cans, wires with seemingly no purpose. Standing in this room felt like being inside someone's brain, in a way that made me feel slightly uncomfortable.

"This is where I've been staying for the past couple of months. Sorry if it's a mess," Isobel explained. She was wrong. This was a great room, one of the best rooms I had ever seen. I'd love to live in a room like this.

I sat down on the mattress and took in my surroundings. Isobel pushed the chair to the side and logged onto the computer, apparently not wanting to sit down at that moment. She opened a browser which had an icon I didn't recognize, and typed a URL into the address bar, referencing a torn-up piece of paper on her desk. She pressed enter, and the page began to load. It felt like hours spent waiting for this page to show itself, but it was probably more like 2 minutes. She gestured for me to come view the screen, so I stood up and approached the CRT's glow. Looking closer, I realized what the purpose of this venture was. Here was an entire page of information about Blank. His birthday, his phone number, his job, his height, everything.

"How the hell did you find all this?" I asked. I was never particularly bad at using computers, but this was far beyond my comprehension.

"You just have to look until you find it," she responded. This explained nothing, but I was content with this answer.

"So, how much of this is actually useful?"

"This is." Isobel pointed to a section of the screen that read out the model and color of Blank's car. Apparently, he drove a yellow 2007 Ford Fiesta. I could definitely believe that.

"I still don't get it," I mumbled.

"If you see a car that looks like this, it's him. Especially if it's following us. He likes to watch," she replied, sounding gravely serious. Blank was truly a mastermind of these tricks. My hatred of him could be put onto a graph and identified as exponential growth. Isobel stood there for a few moments, looking blankly at a random portion of the wall, before turning off the computer and walking out the door. I began to follow behind her, but not before picking up one of the scattered papers off the floor. All that was written on it was, "i am not sure about anything." I put it back where I found it, assuming it was important for some reason.

We crossed the road to reach the apartment building's lot where she had parked her car; apparently, this was where she worked. Now I knew why there was no front desk employee. She unlocked her car and dragged a backpack out from under the passenger seat. When I asked, she refused to tell me what was inside, only speaking cryptically about a "useful device." She did, however, explain to me something else that we needed to do.

"There's a room in that apartment building that someone abandoned in the middle of the night. All of their stuff is still there. Wanna go check it out?"

Damn right I did. Exploration was a core facet of my personality. If there was an area of which I was unfamiliar, and I was presented with the opportunity to become

familiar with such an area, then what else could I do than take this opportunity to familiarize myself? If I didn't know the world around me, was it even real? Probably not.

We walked into the apartment building, my psyche once again soothed by its masterfully professional interior. I expected Isobel to go behind the desk to get the key or something like that, but instead, she just pulled it out of yet another pocket. Truly mind-bending. We took the elevator since the room was on the third floor. The walls were full of graffiti, and there were eclectic symbols and text no matter where you looked. I noticed one part in particular that simply read "SPOCK" alongside a crude depiction of an odd-looking planet. I wondered if the people who made this art were still alive today. Did that matter? Their art was still here, so they might as well be living through it.

The elevator dropped us off and we sauntered over to room 313. Isobel didn't even have to use the key to open the door, since it was already slightly ajar. As soon as we entered the room, the smell of rotten milk filled the air. I felt a pang of sadness as I imagined what greatness the milk could have been, only for it to be wasted in such a disgusting way. The lights were off, and the window blinds were all closed, so the room was pitch black. I could hear a quiet speaker somewhere in the room playing classical music. Fumbling for the light switch, I touched some sort of wet stain on the wall. I recoiled immediately, almost falling onto Isobel who was disassembling a vent. Noticing this, I looked down and asked her why she was disassembling a vent.

"There's definitely something in here. Why wouldn't there be? Think about movies. People love putting shit in vents!"

I couldn't disagree. Of all the movies I had seen involving vents, nine times out of ten there would be something within that vent, usually of much importance to the person who finds it. I waited eagerly to see the contents of the vent.

"I found something!" Isobel shouted, holding a singular strand of hair between her fingers.

"Isobel, I think that was there because people just lose hairs sometimes," I said, somewhat disappointed.

"No, no, this hair was placed purposefully. Its usage was artful and done with much thought," Isobel replied, rotating the hair in her fingers. "Though, I agree with you in that I don't think the hair is the important part. Rather, its existence is what you're supposed to pay attention to."

I had no idea what Isobel was talking about, but I nodded thoughtfully. Afterward, I turned back around to try and find the light switch, disregarding the dubious liquid of which I was now cognizant. I found what I assumed was the light switch, but after flipping it up and down a few times, nothing happened. Due to the lack of power in this room, this switch went from the provider of light to a mere fidget toy. I felt pity for the mechanism. Walking forward with my hands extended, I found another wall. At this point, I realized that I had a phone and that my phone had a flashlight, so I proceeded with this information in mind.

My sight now illuminated, I noticed writing on the wall in black ink reading, "TO JANITOR I AM SORRY. FORGIVE Me." There was also a cup of milk on the ground,

though it did not look like a liquid. How terrible. However, directly beside the milk was what appeared to be a phone, lying face down on the ground. Picking it up, I expected it to be long dead, but it was somehow still at a 4% charge. Better yet, there was no PIN. Careful not to agitate the wound on my finger with the shattered glass screen, I opened the phone and looked at what it had to offer. Within the photo gallery, there were dozens upon dozens, hundreds even, if not thousands of photos of ducks at a lake. Scattered throughout these photos were ecstatic selfies depicting the man who apparently owned this phone and who most likely lived here. He seemed to be a happy man at some point, but clearly, something unusual had taken place here. I noticed that the last photo of ducks was taken 6 months ago. The only photo in the gallery after that, taken 13 days ago, was of a handful of assorted pills. It all came together in my mind. Here was a perfectly happy, healthy man, somehow driven by life's strange whims to fall into a terrible habit. I thought of my father. That was what happened to him, I believed. My mother had told me as much. He hadn't been in my life for as long as I could remember.

Isobel noticed me begin to freeze up and came over to check on me. She saw one of the selfies the man took and apparently recognized him.

"Oh, I know this guy. He used to always just walk around in the lobby, looking at random walls. It wasn't a blank stare, though; I think he saw something. It was kind of scary."

That does sound concerning. I decided that I had seen enough here, and Isobel did not object. We headed out of the apartment, leaving the door ajar for any potential adventurers who may have come after us, and exited the building out the front door. I got into my car, Isobel in the passenger seat, having placed her backpack underneath her, and I began to drive.

# Chapter 4

I had been driving for about an hour, and I could feel myself growing more irritable. I was never the type of person to find driving therapeutic. No, navigating these arbitrarily placed paths from one place to another was one of my least favorite things to do. Allocating all of my attention to the most boring task in the world. I highly anticipated a scientific breakthrough that would allow for the development of teleportation technology. This was an unrealistic dream, but I didn't care. I reached a 4-way intersection, the most puzzling and agonizing invention ever produced by mankind. However, I was far from any form of civilization, so I did not have to obey the law. I just barreled through like it was nothing. Isobel audibly winced.

"That's dangerous, you know..."

I did not care for this regard towards road regulations, but I respected Isobel's perspective nonetheless. That is to say, I did not want to make her upset. Suddenly, the small screen behind my steering wheel lit up, and a beeping noise played. My car was critically low on gas. The dashboard may as well have just said "fuck you." There were probably no gas stations out here for miles upon miles. This old car, coated in rust and scratches, would probably only last another 5 minutes, if that. I had to stop somewhere. Spotting an opening in the thick layer of trees, I pulled into a parking lot. There was only one other car here, and it was still on, with the driver side door wide open. The building I had parked in front of turned out to be a hospital, one that looked like it hadn't seen a patient in years. At this moment, I wanted to scream. Taking this course of action would be very alarming, so I decided to just scream in my mind. It was hardly as satisfying as the real thing.

"Why did we stop?"

"I forgot to get gas."

"Well, shit. I guess we could look in there..."

As we approached the front doors, Isobel retrieved a kitchen knife from one of her pockets. It was much more intimidating than the box cutter she had handed to me earlier. Somehow, this moment was inspiring to me. I grabbed my own knife from my back pocket, holding it by my side in a similar fashion. From the entrance, nine doors were visible: four on each side, and one directly ahead of us. The ground was littered with plastic waste and dirt, and bugs crawled around freely. Four of the nine doors had been boarded up, leaving only the right wall and the far door. We decided to try each door from front to back.

Door number one. This door was locked, and we could not enter the room. None of the doors had any windows, so I couldn't even see what was inside. However, I heard a faint noise from within the room that sounded like a strange machine, whirring and perhaps hammering something. It evoked a certain feeling within my mind, but it wasn't immediately

clear, and I didn't particularly feel the urge to search further. Unlocking the answer to things like this required too much effort.

Door number two. Unlike the previous room, the door to this one was not locked. Still, it took a bit of effort to open. Upon my success, I was greeted by a plethora of colorful toys and learning materials. Clearly, this room was for kids. It was odd to think that there was a time when this room could have been fully occupied by children, entranced by the endless world surrounding them. The thought overwhelmed me for a moment. How is it that the world just continues like that? Standing near the left side of the room, the sound from the first room was more audible.

Door number three. This room was particularly strange because it had no obvious purpose to me. There were various bottles of medication, medical tools, and an assortment of objects like pillows and bedsheets, but there was no cohesive reason for it all to be there. In fact, some of the objects in the room were completely unidentifiable. There were posters on the walls written in languages that I did not understand or recognize. Standing in this room gave me an indescribable feeling, like an emotion that does not exist. The sound from the first room was almost inaudible, but it still had an undeniable presence. I was eager to leave this room.

Door number four. This room was completely empty. Strangely, despite the hospital being abandoned, I did not get the sense that this room had once been populated; rather, I felt that it had been empty for a long time, waiting for someone to give it a purpose, to fill it with items and decorations. I had no reason to think that way, but it's how I thought. The sound from the first room was no longer audible. I saw Isobel stand in the corner opposite to me and take out a bottle of pills from one of her pockets.

"What's that?" I asked. She didn't seem like a sick person to me, but you'd never guess with a lot of people.

"It's medicine. I take it so I can be healthy." For some reason, she sounded even more monotone. She opened the bottle and took about three pills, still holding the knife precariously between the bottle and her thumb.

"Is something wrong, Isobel? If you're worried about Blank, then don't be. We could totally kick his ass together."

"No, no, that's for later. I'm worried about this building that we're in right now. It smells terrible, and I don't like the way that door at the end of the hallway looks. There's a dead deer behind that door. Its antlers were taken off."

"What? Isobel, I think you're nice, but you say some weird things." Isobel smiled for a split second, returning to her usual neutral expression before I could even stop speaking. "There's not going to be anything bad behind that door. It'll just be some more hospital beds or something like that."

"Okay, Lewis. That door is bad, but if you wanna open it, I'll come with you."

I approached the door, Isobel sheepishly standing a few feet behind me. This door was notably different from all the other doors in the building. While those doors were made of wood, this door was metallic and shiny. It had a small window that would have provided a view of the room, were it not for the piece of black construction paper

haphazardly taped on. I pressed my ear against the door. There was no sound apart from the buzzing of the lights, but the smell of rotten eggs overwhelmed me. I flew back from the door, struggling to compose myself. Slowly, I put my hand on the door handle, each finger hesitating to wrap around the metal surface. It was wet. I didn't want to admit it, but Isobel had a point. This place was bad news. My hand, and by extension the handle, rotated with the most gut-wrenching slowness imaginable. The door broke the silence with an absurdly loud creak that reminded me of cicadas. Not wanting to deal with this unknown horror for much longer, I decided to rip off the bandaid and just yank the door open. Two knives collided with the ground.

"Oh, shit. That's a corpse," I thought aloud. I waited for a response from Isobel, but looking over, she was just standing there, motionless. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth was slightly agape. Looking back at the corpse, I tried to make sense of what had happened here. This man's body was facing the ceiling, with his arms and legs sprawled as if he were floating in a pool. In his right hand, there was a bottle of assorted pills that looked mostly empty, and in his left hand, there was a knife. The wrist opposite held a gash of no small significance. Cautiously, I walked towards the corpse to identify the face. To my mild surprise, I learned that this was the same man who had abandoned his apartment earlier. I looked back at Isobel.

"Why did I- I didn't- This... shouldn't have. Happened? Fuck. I'm so sorry." She balled her right hand into a fist and smacked herself in the forehead with enough force to create a loud noise. Deeply concerned, I put a hand on her shoulder.

"What's wrong with you, Isobel? Don't feel bad about something you didn't do."

"I don't know what's wrong with me, Lewis. But there are plenty of things that it might be. Also, don't say this wasn't my fault! I knew him, I saw him everyday, I might have even talked to him once or twice-"

"Isobel. This man went down a path that you had no way of stopping. Maybe you could have kept him around a little longer, but this was where he was headed. He seemed to have been a bit pathetic anyways, I mean, what else makes you do this? I don't want you to hate yourself over something you played no part in."

"Well, maybe I should have played a part. Would've had someone to talk to, at least. From your assumptions, he was quite the interesting man."

"The past is the past, Isobel. You can't change it, and it's always there."

"Plenty of things change all the time."

Isobel sat down and put her head in her hands. She didn't seem to be crying, but the spirit was definitely there. Fully on autopilot, I sat down next to her and put my arm around her. Even more surprisingly, her arm soon found itself around me. We sat there for a while, without words or many sounds at all. I could almost hear my own eyelashes. After what felt like forever, Isobel pulled out a pen and started writing on the floor. Letters were formed, and they almost began to form words, but the "words" would end every time they got close.

"What are those? Are they words? I don't understand them."

"I'm following the path of the floor, and speech is being revealed. Maybe it doesn't objectively mean anything, but it means something to me. It's comforting to listen to the world."

Soon, letters coated the floor around Isobel. Most of it was unreadable, but I could make out some words like "the" and "fish." The lines still felt significant to me. After a little while, she stopped, putting the pen back into its pocket.

"Did it end there?"

"It never ends. It always has more to say. I just listen for as long as I need to. I feel a bit better now."

"Good. I care about you a lot, Isobel."

Isobel said nothing in response, but she made a noise that sounded happy. I smiled, glad that I was able to improve her mood just a little bit. Suddenly, I remembered our situation.

"We should probably leave. It smells like death in here."

"Aren't you all out of gas? How are we gonna fix that? And don't you dare say anything about stealing this poor man's car."

"No. We're just gonna siphon some gas. But I, uh... Don't have a gas siphon."

Isobel looked around the room. Her eyes lit up when she saw a power cable plugged into an outlet, long separated from the machine it had been powering. She yanked it out of the wall and held it out in front of me.

"We could cut off the ends of this and use it as a tube!"

"Exactly what I was thinking." It was not, in fact, what I was thinking, but I wanted Isobel to think that I was on the same page as her.

Isobel picked up her knife and used it to chop off the ends of the cable, careful not to electrocute herself. Noticing this, I picked up my knife too, because I'd hate to lose it. We walked outside, and with some tinkering and a bit of gasoline in my mouth, we got enough fuel into my car to last the rest of the drive. Isobel and I got into our seats.

"You know, that place was awful. We should never go anywhere like that again," Isobel said, head against the car door.

"It's okay. We got what we needed in there, and made it out just fine."

"Just fine... I don't think I'll forget about that. The body."

"I understand."

I started driving, not particularly bothered by the activity.

## Chapter 5

It had been about 20 minutes since we left that hospital. Isobel was smoking out the car window. The cigarette box she held in her other hand had a strange symbol scrawled onto it in black ink.

"What does that symbol mean?" I asked.

"I saw it in a dream. It was sewn into one of their wallets. I drew it onto this box first thing after waking up."

"Who do you mean when you say 'their'?"

"The people who are with Blank. Fucking freaks, all of them."

Although I admittedly was not familiar with any of Blank's companions, I could not help but agree. To me, he was the personification of badness, a total destructive force. Nothing is worse. Anyone who might call him a friend is not somebody I would trust. I was interested in the symbol. Is it a logo? Are they a group? It didn't really matter. Clearly, these were bad people who deserved consequences. As I was pondering this, a tiny black bug crawled up onto my steering wheel. Not even registering its presence, I crushed it with my thumb. Isobel yelped loudly as it happened.

"What's wrong, Isobel?"

"What do you mean what's wrong?! You killed him!"

"What? Who did I kill?"

"That bug on your wheel! He was there, and then you crushed him! You killed him!"

"I didn't mean to, I didn't mean to! It was only an insect, please, calm down!"

Isobel firmly put her hand on my shoulder.

"Life is something that you aren't allowed to take away. That's what makes you a bad person. Please don't be bad."

"Okay, I won't do that again. But I think you need to understand that it was only a bug. I don't think it's as serious. They don't matter as much."

"Everything that lives alongside us is beautiful. You have to see that, it's always there. It's not your call. Some things aren't as pretty as others and that's okay. No killing."

"Okay, okay, no killing."

I started to think about this. I imagined being a small bug, helpless and ugly. I'd hate to be a small bug. I'd continue to think about this for a while. Lost in thought, I failed to notice a deer attempting to cross the road, shuffling awkwardly in the middle of the pavement in the most annoyingly pitiful way possible. I swerved away from it at the last second and thankfully managed to stop my car before hitting any trees. Isobel urgently opened her door to check on the deer, being careful not to make too much noise. I rolled down the window and watched worriedly from inside the car, not wanting to alarm it myself. Isobel looked over her shoulder at me.

"It's missing a part of its antler!" she yelled in a loud whisper.

Indeed it was. In the immediate vicinity, the missing piece was nowhere to be found. The deer seemed to be searching for it too, turning its head in every direction. A few seconds later, it ran back into the woods. Isobel started to chase it for a second before the futility set in. She sighed and walked back to get into the car, stopping when she noticed something about my tire.

"Uh, Lewis? I think your wheel died."

I got out of the car and looked at the tire she was pointing at and sure enough, it was flat. Under it was the missing piece of the deer's antler. I wanted to scream at this, but I felt that if I did, Isobel might run into the woods just like that deer. I pulled out my phone and thought really hard about there being an auto repair store close by in the hopes that that would make it true. Fortunately, after consulting with Google, I discovered that the closest place to get a new tire was about a quarter of a mile away. This was fine. However, Isobel and I would have to push the car all the way there, because I don't have tow truck money.

"We can get a new tire not too far from here. But we have to push my car there."

"God damn it... Okay. It's fine. It's fine."

We both rolled up our sleeves and started pushing the car. Isobel did most of the work with how tall she was. I pushed too, though. I never realized how awful it is to push a heavy object. This must be what Sisyphus feels like. I decided to start a conversation to avoid boredom.

"So, what do you think his house is like?"

"Oh, I know plenty about his house. I've done my research. Still, I don't know what I'll do when we get there."

"It's pretty simple. All we have to do is beat the shit out of him."

"Yeah, but that's easier said than done. He has connections. Too many connections."

"Well, that's news to me. What is he gonna do, call for reinforcements?"

"No, no. I don't know. There's still something that feels wrong about it. Even though he's so, so, so terrible, he's still a human."

"To me, he hardly fits the definition. He's more like... I don't know. Just evil."

"I thought you'd know more about him than you seem to know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I... shouldn't tell you. Maybe later."

"Uh, okay."

After about 10 minutes, we made it to a small set of buildings, one of them being the auto repair store we were looking for. We sat down for a minute on a nearby bench. Isobel pulled out an ancient-looking flip phone from her pocket. As she opened it, I noticed that the screen was cracked, making it almost unreadable. She looked down at it with a smile on her face.

"Hi Edith! Sorry I haven't talked to you all day, I've been really busy."

"..."

"I'm feeling a little weird today. Lots of things are happening. Lots of people. How about you?"

"..."

"That's good to hear. I'm about to go into a place with a bunch of people I don't know. What should I do?"

"..."

"Well, obviously I'm going to be very careful, but I was thinking more like how should I act so as to not come off as a weirdo?"

"..."

"You're right, I don't have to do much. I guess you've noticed my new friend, then. I like him, he's nice."

"..."

"I'm glad you trust him too. Listen, I look like shit right now, and before being in plain sight of some people I don't know, I'd like to not look like shit. What are you thinking?"

"..."

"Oh yeah, I probably do still have that. Thanks for reminding me."

"..."

"Sorry I keep forgetting about that. I promise I'll fix you up soon."

"..."

"You're too kind to me. Well, I should probably be going. Talk to you later, honey. Bye bye!"

"..."

Gently, she closed the flip phone and placed it back in her pocket. It was one of the higher up ones, not very close to the ground.

"Who were you talking to on the phone?"

"Her name is Edith. I take her everywhere I go. She had a bad injury lately."

"Sorry about that. You and her seem to have a good relationship."

"She's the best."

Suddenly remembering whatever Edith reminded her about, Isobel reached into one of her pockets (I swear there's more every time I look) and took out a black lipstick.

Without even looking at herself, she put it on with relative ease.

"Do I look okay?"

"You look great, Isobel. The lipstick is nice... Is it weird to wonder how it would look on me?"

"Um... no! Not at all! I could put some on you if you'd wanna try it!"

Isobel put one hand on my leg and leaned over so that her face was very close to mine. Her gray eyes surveyed my lips almost robotically, scanning back and forth. Her breath smelled like vanilla.

"I- um, it's- I- what- I think I'm good for now! Thanks!"

I scooted a comfortable distance away from Isobel as politely as I could. I didn't push her hand off my leg.

"Oh, sorry... Guess we should go in. I'll let you talk. Hopefully you know about tires and stuff."

We walked in and were immediately greeted by the overbearing stench of oil and gasoline. A small radio at the front of the store played classical music. I felt my thoughts drifting backwards, but I brought myself back to the present moment. The walls were covered in various vehicle parts, including tires. Looking at them, I realized that they were all different shapes and sizes, and that I had no clue which one I needed. I did not, in fact, know about tires and stuff. I would have to ask the guy at the front about this. I strolled over to him and put my arms on the counter, avoiding the scattered stacks of paperwork strewn across it. Isobel was pretending to look at tires to avoid having to follow me.

"Hey. What can I do for you?"

"Uh, yeah, I need a new tire for my car, because there was a deer in the road and its antler fell off and punctured my old tire so it doesn't work anymore."

The clerk looked at me like I had just told him something very confusing, which, to be fair, I did, but I still did not appreciate his demeanor. He looked around a little bit before leaning in closer.

"Okay... What kind of car do you have?"

"I, uh, don't really know exactly, it's some Honda car from like 2003, my mom used to drive it. It's blue, if that changes anything."

He sighed before looking out the window and spotting my car on the side of the road. He surveyed it for a second before turning back to me, still looking disappointed in my lack of vehicular knowledge.

"Looks to me like a Honda Civic. And it's a 2004, not 2003."

The number 2004 was not a good number, and by extension not a good year. I lamented that my car was of this year.

"We probably have something in the back that'll fit that thing. Let me check."

The clerk turned around and began to open a door that I had only just now noticed. Or, at least he thought that he would be opening the door, because it was actually locked. He mumbled angrily and pulled out a key from his pocket before hastily jamming it into the doorknob, allowing the door to be opened. He quickly shuffled in and closed the door behind him, almost slamming it but catching himself at the last second. Movement and aggravated speech could be heard from beyond the threshold. Isobel had begun sitting on the floor with her legs crossed, having previously inched closer to me while I was distracted. She grinned awkwardly when I looked down at her. After about 5 minutes, I heard the door open again. I turned around and saw a different person walk out. He was a little bigger than the other guy was, and he had no hair except for the goatee hiding his chin. His glasses sat firmly on his nose, complimenting his dull expression. I wondered for a second if this was actually the same guy as before, having undergone some kind of drastic metamorphosis in that room. About a second later, I remembered that things like that are not possible, and stopped wondering. I avoided eye contact with this new man. His eyes

were sharp with annoyance, all pointed towards me. He lifted up his arms, causing me to flinch, and succinctly dropped a tire on the counter.

"This'll work. Need any help putting it on?"

"Prob-"

"Um, actually, I, uh. Know how to do. That." Isobel looked like she could crumble at any second just from the exertion required to speak. "Do you have tools in your car, Lewis?" she asked, looking up at me and talking much less carefully.

"Uh, I think so."

"Who is that?" inquired the man behind the counter. I had known this man for less than two minutes, but I had already grown to hate him.

"She's my friend. Don't worry about things that don't affect you."

I paid for the tire and quickly walked out of the store with Isobel before the man was able to think of more irritating bullshit to say. Instinctively, I extended my hand out to Isobel's general position, not expecting her to actually take hold of it. It was a tight grip. She made an odd sound as we exited the building, sort of like the squeak of a small animal.

"Why did you make a noise?"

"I'm just excited! It's been so long since I've had a new human friend, especially one that I can actually look at and touch... Sorry, I sound like a weirdo."

"No, no, I understand."

I couldn't think of the last time I had made a new friend, either. Surely my coworkers with their vapid "interests" and annoying quirks didn't count. In fact, that was the first time I had thought of my job all day. I was very thankful that it was a Saturday, because if I had gone on this adventure during the work week, my boss would surely not be very accommodating. I actually kind of hated him and wished that he would die. He liked to yell at people far too much for my liking, and in general his impact on the workplace was not positive. My boss, however, was not the person at work who I hated the most. That honor, or dishonor, was bestowed upon a man, or ghoul, by the name of Kevin. I cannot stand to see that self-obsessed, hatred-filled, arrogant fuck. Every time I see that douchebag hit his vape without even having the decency to walk out the door about two feet from where he stands, I have visions of inverting the concavity of his face with my fist, and I wouldn't say I'm a very violent person. His mere presence serves only to stain the already miserably low mood of the workplace, and I'm sure that all of my coworkers would agree. He used to call me a faggot all the time because I'd put my hair into a ponytail, but my boss eventually told him off for that, in a rare showcase of humanity from him. I hated work.

At this point, Isobel had presumably noticed me staring off into some distant void of thought, and started working on replacing the tire. Thankfully, my mother had kept the tools that came with the car in the trunk, and I had never bothered to take them out of there, simply pushing them to the back to fit the various items I stored in there. I saw Isobel pull out a cardboard box full of packing peanuts and place it on the ground. Who knows where that came from (besides from me, if I thought about it enough). Apparently, I was missing something, because she looked around for a second confusedly.

"What's wrong?"

"You're missing the wheel wedges. Y'know, the things that keep your car from rolling away."

I thought about what we could possibly do. We could go back into the store and make another purchase, but I thought if I saw the face of that man behind the counter again, I might've just lost it. We would have to use something else as a substitute. I walked around the side of the store, looking for anything durable that could fit under there. There were two dumpsters on the side that were filled with scraps of metal and car parts that were presumably dysfunctional. Near the back, there was a stray line of construction tape on the ground and a sizable pile of bricks nearby. Perfect. I took two bricks over to my car and placed them on each side of the flat tire. Isobel gave me a thumbs-up to indicate that this was in fact the correct thing to do, and I sat back down to wait for her to finish. She grabbed the metallic X-looking thing and began to use it on the wheel in ways that I did not fully understand, which made me mildly uncomfortable. I decided to go take a look at the other buildings nearby. One that particularly caught my eye was an old electronics store. I had already seen one of these today, but this one seemed to actually still be in service. It sported the name "ANDY'S PC PALACE" in all caps on a banner plastered above its main entrance. The idea of a palace dedicated to computer technology intrigued me, and so I entered the building.

The overhead speakers were playing some old techno song from Germany or Russia probably composed by a guy who died from unnatural causes. The building had a smell which was exactly what you would expect from a small tech store about 10 years out of date, except with a slight tinge of cigarette smoke. Not too surprising, considering the widespread usage of such devices. To me, cigarettes were kind of gross, but I didn't care too much. Not enough to stop myself from admiring Isobel when I saw her smoke one. I wondered how she was doing with the tire. I could never be able to do something like that. Too many steps to remember. Suddenly, an unfamiliar voice called out to me.

"Good evenin'. Need anything?"

"Uh, no, thanks. I presume you are Andy?"

"Nah. I never met the guy. I'm not even sure he's a real person."

"Oh. Well, sorry."

The young man nodded and returned back to his little corner of the store. I didn't dislike him; he seemed nice enough. I decided to explore a little bit. There were tons of CRT monitors and beige keyboards, and about a million different types of wires that I'd never know the purpose of. What really caught my eye was this little shelf with about 5 or 6 flip phones, looking pristine as ever. I was reminded of Edith, and I wondered if maybe Isobel could get her repaired here. I decided to go tell Isobel about it. As I walked back over to my car, Isobel was just finishing up work. Convenient timing. She barely looked tired putting the tools back into my trunk. The tire looked good as new, probably because the tire itself was, in fact, new.

"It should be working now, Lewis."

"Thank you so much! You're pretty good at that. Hey, there's this little electronics store right down the street, and they said they do repairs. You could get Edith fixed up."

"No, I can't do that. I'd prefer to fix Edith myself. It'll be fun. Still, I would very much like to check out that store."

With that, we walked together back to Andy's, Isobel's hands making a repetitive motion that suggested excitement. As soon as we entered, Isobel seemed to be filled with pure amazement. She looked in every direction and appeared as if she had to stop herself from crying out in glee.

"Do you really like tech stuff that much?"

"It's different, Lewis. Every time I'm in a place like this, there's a certain energy I can feel, one I am very familiar with. I can feel it in other places sometimes, but it's always more magnified in these places. I guess she finds it easier to speak through massive outlets like this."

"She? You mean Edith?"

"No, it's somebody else. A much larger force, and one I've known a little longer. I guess you could say we all form a triangle."

I wasn't entirely sure what Isobel was talking about, but she seemed extremely happy, so I was happy for her. She was practically shaking with joy. Trying to calm herself, she sat down on the floor near the CRT monitors, leaning against the wall.

"Is she alright?" said the man working there, who was the only employee I had seen so far.

"I think she's doing pretty good." He seemed extremely confused, but not really upset about it.

Isobel sat there with her eyes closed for about twenty minutes, seemingly crossing her arms but upon closer inspection actually holding some intangible thing close to her. Eventually, she remembered our goal for the day and got back up, but not before quietly (yet clearly audibly) proclaiming "I love you," presumably to the "energy" surrounding her. She walked out the door without saying a word. I followed suit, leaving the singular employee baffled.

As we got in my car, I began to feel the effects of only eating breakfast (a subpar breakfast without milk, at that) before embarking on a drive peppered with viewings of a corpse and manual pushing of the car. That is to say, I was exhausted. As I yawned loudly, Isobel noticed this exhaustion.

"Hey, if you're tired, I can drive. Only if that's okay with you, of course."

"Yeah, I'm tired. I guess it would be better to have you drive. Just don't touch the temperature dial, okay?"

"Hehe, okay."

I did not know she could laugh. It was a small laugh, the kind that a shy person lets out only when necessary, yet it warmed my heart. I don't know exactly what it was that made me trust Isobel so much. I even let her, almost a stranger, drive my car, which I don't usually allow even to people I'm close to. Whatever it was, I drifted to sleep in the passenger seat hoping that our experiences that day would blossom into a long-lasting friendship.

## Chapter 6

A huge field, with nothing but a large house to smooth the divide between the green of grass and the blue of sky. It was about noon, and the sun was particularly hot, so I had no choice but to seek shelter within the house. I looked into the front windows to see if anyone was home. Nobody. In fact, there wasn't even any furniture, suggesting that this place had never been lived in at all. I grabbed the doorknob to check if the door was locked, which it was not, allowing me free entry into the house. I wanted badly to sit down somewhere, but there were no chairs, and the floor did not look comfortable at all. Most of the house was rough, concrete floors and bare wooden walls. The only lighting was the sunlight pouring through the windows, which proved to be more than adequate. It almost felt as though the sun itself wanted to come down and touch Earth, but of course, it could never do such a thing, and instead it sent down as much of its heat and light as it could. I was glad to have shelter. I spent the next few minutes opening doors, seeing what they led to. There were so many, probably dozens, though they all lead to the same sight: a rectangular patch of concrete, boxed in by four walls of wood and capped by an equisized piece of concrete. Some of the rooms had windows. I repeated this process for probably ten minutes before I had seen all there was to see in the house. I was tired of all the walking, and so I decided to just pick a room and lay on the floor, however uncomfortable that may be.

As I expected, as soon I lay myself upon the concrete I was met with a most unfortunate rigidness, leading to a premonition of back pain to come. Still, it was better than standing. I did not close my eyes. I don't know how I knew, but it was not safe to do so here. The task of keeping my eyelids up was hard, considering the cool air around me and the near complete darkness of the room (there was no window), but the need to was dire, and so I combatted these forces. Suddenly, a sound broke through the silent house, the silent air, the silent wind, the silent world. A single fly had somehow found itself within this room, and it was approaching my face. As it swerved around my head, oscillating in and out of my vision, the instinct of my eyes forced me to blink. The fly flew away, its sound disappearing as did my view of it. I had closed my eyes. A deep feeling of regret and fear grew within me, as if my heart had been encased in stone and dropped into the ocean. Something bad was going to happen. Or was I wrong? The house was still, and there continued to be no sound of any kind. Maybe the gut feeling I had was just that: a feeling.

My train of thought continued in this direction until it derailed once the cool asylum of the house began to morph back into the engulfing heat of the field. Until the heat began to exceed that of the field and entered the realm of Death Valley, exceeding that, going up and up until my sweat seemed to evaporate before it could even roll down my skin. I took off my hoodie, my shirt, eventually most of my clothes, but it changed nothing. I had

to get out of this house. I ran to the door leading back into the main room, except there was no door. Just more wood. That was when I noticed the wood starting to turn black in places, flaking off the wall, crumbling from the heat. An invisible fire seemed to ravage the house, and by extension, me. I searched desperately for a way outside, a crack in the wall, a big enough gap for me to crawl through, anything, but there was nothing. Just more wood. Maybe I deserved this. After all, I had closed my eyes. I knew what to do, and yet something stupid made me fail at my task. It was all my fault. I was going to die in this burning room and I was the only one to blame.

"Hey, are you okay? You're as pale as a ghost."

"Huh?! Where- oh, I'm... yes, I'm alright."

"You sure? You were just flailing around in your sleep."

"Yes, yes, it's fine. This kind of thing happens sometimes."

Calling it a "kind of thing" severely downplays the sensation of waking up face down on the floor with a bloody nose, but I had no better way of phrasing it. At least it doesn't happen too often.

"Oh. Well, I'm really glad you're okay."

I felt a lot safer now, knowing I was in my car and not in some mental manifestation of Hell. Isobel looked perfectly comfortable driving, despite how much she had to lean forwards even after adjusting the driver's seat. As I looked outside, it was evident that some time had passed. That is why, as a child, sleeping was initially a scary experience for me, even before my mind knew anything of nightmares. The passage of time in my absence was an imperceivable, unfathomable horror, and my childish brain knew of nothing more frightening. Of course, I have grown past this stage of my life, but the root of that fear has persisted. Time has passed me by for my whole life, not even stopping for a handshake or to glance into my eyes so I know it can see me. I turned 26 in January (which at this point was seven whole months ago!), but I have lived my whole life feeling like a kid, stunned by the enormity of it all.

"I was hungry, so I stopped by Sonic. I didn't know what you'd want, so I just got you a grilled cheese. Sorry if you're lactose intolerant or something."

Fuck yes. A grilled cheese. Cheese is created via the aging of milk, which is probably why it is just as incredible. And if we're going down that road, I think that yogurt should also be mentioned and appraised just as highly. Anyways, I was now in possession of a grilled cheese. Searching through the paper bag awkwardly positioned between our seats, I found the mass of tin foil containing my meal, a shining harbinger of inner greatness. Within a few moments, I found the foil to be empty, and my stomach full. Perfection had been achieved, and I had fully indulged in it.

Observing the small digital clock adorning my dashboard, the time was 4:37 P.M., meaning that I had slept for about two hours, and that we would probably arrive at Blank's house in another two hours. It was at this point that the reality of my total lack of planning or strategic knowledge began to set in. Today I had met an odd stranger, given her my complete trust, and set off on a wild adventure to my greatest enemy's front door, all without even considering the possibility that he may not be too happy about my

presence. I felt like a badass this morning, but now, I just felt kind of scared. I understood what Isobel meant when she said she didn't know what to do. This realization set forth a subsequent realization which countered the former, resulting in much confusion, which my thoughts tend to create. I realized that this onsetting despair was exactly what Blank would want me to feel in this situation; he would want me to be confused and scared. Therefore, I could not allow myself to feel such emotions. Unfortunately, feelings do not work that way, no matter how much some professor of psychology or sociology or behavioral science would like to convince you otherwise by talking your ear off on a stage surrounded by people who don't actually hear what he's saying and only let the words go through their heads like cars go through a tunnel. My brain puts me through whatever feeling my surroundings and inner thoughts dictate, for better or for worse (usually for worse). The thoughts that lead to these feelings create more thoughts that lead to more feelings, culminating in absurdly lengthy ruminations about the nature of my thoughts, a particularly bad habit of mine which I have just caught myself indulging in.

Speaking of cars going through tunnels, I watched as Isobel maneuvered my car under a damp, moss covered bridge made of stone, which looked ready to collapse at any second. Fortunately, the second that this bridge would collapse was not one of the few seconds we spent under it, nor was it any of the seconds that I observed its presence. Past the threshold of that bridge, my peripheral view shifted from solely trees to a sizable collection of buildings. A small sign said "Welcome to Thorngood!" This town looked small, though not nearly as small as Brayfield.

"We actually don't have to go through this town, but we were close by and there's something I'd like to do here," Isobel explained, her eyes still transfixed on the road.

"What's that?" I was genuinely curious. I wanted to know more about Isobel; she was one of the most interesting people I've ever met.

"Well, you heard me talking to Edith earlier, bless her heart. It's been so difficult trying to find a replacement screen for her, considering her age, but there's a really neat shop in this town that purportedly has it, according to their old-ass website. Pretty cheap too, considering I'm probably the only person on Earth who's looking for one, though that's probably also why it's been hard to find. I could've bought another identical model and transplanted the screen from that, since these days it's much easier to find the whole phone rather than just its screen, but that just felt wrong. What would I do with the new one after I rip off its face? What a violent waste of such beauty. So, I'm going to try and pick up that screen right now. Shouldn't take too long."

"That sounds like a plan."

I admired how dedicated Isobel was to her companion, however unconventional it may be. In fact, most feelings I had towards Isobel could be described as admirable. For me, that's just how it is with most women. It has always been hard for me to discern between attraction and envy, for reasons that I have never quite understood. My mom would always be suspicious when I brought a girl home, leading me to have to explain our relationship in

terms of friendship and nothing else, because that's all that it was. I always related to them more.

The car slowed to a stop, positioning us in front of a place that as indicated by a large banner was titled "Thorngood Cyberpalace." The concept of a Cyberpalace was intriguing to me. Who would hold such a throne and claim the silicon treasures within? Isobel and I got out of the car and walked towards the large building, our hands finding each other in a way that this time I almost did not notice.

As I opened the door, I found myself surrounded by every type of electronic imaginable: mice, keyboards, widescreen monitors, boxy CRT screens, new and old phones and their parts, computer towers, printers, headphones, laptops, assorted cords and wires, webcams, microphones, routers, weird scraps. In a way, it was kind of mesmerizing. I spent a few minutes just looking at all the random wonders they had here, and Isobel seemed to be doing the same. A familiar smile spread across her face, and her free hand was having a very hard time deciding what to do. Her excitement could hardly be contained, though I could tell she was making a great effort.

Walking through the expansive halls of the store, I found myself having to step over or sometimes duck under wires and other hardware jutting out into the walking space. While the building was quite big, I would not consider it spacious. The way the store was set up, there was a long hall filled to the brim with items, opening up into a wider rectangular area with more specific items on the left and right and the checkout counter in the middle facing us. It was probably the most simultaneously cozy and flammable building I had ever entered. If there was a dial going between these two things, it would move so quickly that it would appear to be touching both ends at once.

Eventually, we reached the area with the more specific items, at which point our hands parted. Isobel and I scanned through them, finding many interesting and somewhat impressive tidbits, but there was no sign of a new face yet. We progressed through our respective shelves opposite from one another, Isobel at a slightly slower pace due to her utter enthrallment in these sorts of things.

"Hey, I think I found it!"

Indeed, Isobel was holding a medium-sized white envelope encased in bubble wrap with a small label adhered to the front indicating the model this screen was for. "Samsung SGH-X200," it read. I had no way of knowing that this was correct, but surely Isobel knows what her beloved needs.

"Great! So that means you can fix her?"

Isobel just looked at me with wide eyes for a moment. Initially, I thought I had unknowingly said something rude, as I often do, but just as suddenly as her face shifted she put her arms around me with enough force to almost knock me down.

"You're the first person to... to get what... to understand and respect our relationship." Her voice sounded more lively than usual.

I did not understand what would bring one to disrespect Isobel and Edith's bond. Clearly, even if I could not perceive it, there was something special which brought the two together, as shown by Isobel's dedication to fixing Edith. Isobel's fond descriptions of

Edith proved to me that their relationship was just as valuable as those between two humans, even if I technically did not have the capacity to understand how their relationship worked. This puzzled me to no end until I remembered just how cruel other humans can be sometimes. I tried to imagine how someone like Kevin might respond to the knowledge of Isobel and Edith, before subsequently trying to forget that anybody like that could possibly exist; it saddened me beyond words. It would have almost been enough to make me cry, were it not for the disconnect between my emotions and my expressions. I've had that disconnect my entire life. I've noticed it in Isobel, too. In that way, we are alike, despite our other striking differences.

I soon put my arms around Isobel with just as much compassion as she had given to me. I didn't care about any onlookers perceiving our exchange oddly; in this moment, I only wanted to comfort Isobel as much as I possibly could. I'm not sure how long we stayed there, but we did stop eventually, despite my mind calling into question the very possibility of ever letting go. After our moment of bonding, we went up to the counter to let Isobel pay for Edith's new screen. The cost was surprisingly low, and in pleasant contrast with our experience at the car shop, the man who had rung us up was quite nice; I think his name was Thomas or something like that. We left the store after only spending about 20 minutes there, though our embrace felt like it should have been centuries.

Upon reaching my car, Isobel carefully placed the envelope amidst the random garbage in my trunk, and I reclaimed the driver's seat. We just sat there for a moment. I watched two birds fight over a tiny piece of a french fry, which was mildly amusing. One of them eventually won the battle and flew away with its prize, leaving the other bird to peck at the ground for the crumbs left behind. Eventually, Isobel broke the pause in words.

"Why do you... understand as much as you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just... don't get how you're so nice no matter what. You're the most understanding person I've met in a long time."

"It's because rude people piss me off. I try my hardest to not be that way. Sometimes I fail, though, and I'm rude without realizing it. I don't understand the way most people act."

"Me neither. That's why I don't really interact with people all that often. And when I do, I never know what to say. At best they think I'm mean, and at worst they think I'm a freak."

"Don't let people like that get to you. It kind of fuels them, you know? They aren't worth your time."

"I know, I know. It's just... I wish I had people that I could relate to, that I could talk to. People who aren't some random strangers online who I could never know the intentions of. Finally meeting you has shown me that people like that exist."

"I'm glad I could fulfill that role for you. I'm not really used to having friends either. No matter how well I socialize, people just seem to slip away from me. I'm not really all that bothered, though. I'm fine with solitude. You're nice, though. I feel like you're more like me than most people I've ever met."

"I hope that's true. I really like you, and I hope we can spend more time together."

Even though we didn't really discuss anything that may resemble a plan, I felt better about our journey going forward. If anything, I knew that Isobel and I would be a great team for taking on any task. As I started my car and began to drive out of Thorngood, I saw that the opposite side of the sign we passed earlier read "Come back soon!" I knew this would probably never happen, but the thought wasn't bad. I'd love to be able to come back to moments like this, where everything in the world is coming together to create something beautiful, where all the opposing currents of nature calm down just long enough for me to experience a moment of pure happiness. I think that when our journey comes to an end, I'll look back at moments like these and smile.

## Chapter 7

More driving, more nothing. I had no idea how long I'd been on this road for. It seemed endless. I checked the time. 7:40 P.M. That made sense; the sky was a dark blue, not quite the pitch darkness of night but without the powerful rays of the sun. Still, I wasn't sure where those in-between hours went. I glanced over at Isobel: she gazed into the surrounding trees and the now more common buildings that passed us by, not looking particularly interested in anything, but having her eyes open nonetheless. She turned to look forward. For a second I wondered if she was bothered by the lack of a sun visor; I had to take that out some years ago when it began to constantly drop from its resting point and make a terrible creaking noise as it swung dangling downwards from its old hinges (which still remain there as a reminder). But this was obviously not the case, since there were no bright lights to block out.

"So, what are we gonna do?"

"What?"

"I mean, what are we gonna do when we get to his house? Because so far, all you've talked about was beating him up, and I don't even know where I'm supposed to begin. None of it makes any sense. We don't have anything."

"We can try to think about that as we get there."

"Lewis, we've been on the road for at least 6 hours, and all we've done is drive a little bit, get out, and get back in. Nothing is happening! This is a loop we are in! How do we get past?!"

I thought for a moment. I thought about the fact that I really hadn't thought about any of this. I tried to think of a plan, but the truth is I am not a very assertive person, and dealing with conflict is something I almost always explicitly avoid.

"I think we can, um. Break in, and deal with him, somehow."

"I know this. We've known this. How are we going to do that? Neither of us are skilled in combat or anything like that, so I want to know how you think we're going to do that."

"Listen, he's old, right? He's probably dying already."

"But he isn't dead. I know things about him that you seem somehow unaware of. I want to know... who do you think he is?"

"Listen, all I know is that he's a criminal, and that he's out there in the world taking things. I have good reason to believe he has stolen what is rightfully mine. This morning, there was no milk in my fridge. I have never forgotten to buy milk, not once in my life. He had to have stolen it."

"Okay. He stole your milk. I will not even consider deliberating on whether or not this is possible. It doesn't matter. He has done more than this. Much more. I hate to talk about these things, but I don't see how else to get my point across."

Isobel sighed and put her face in one of her hands. This continued for a few seconds, maybe half a minute, before she suddenly clasped her hands together and proceeded to roll down the window. She took out another cigarette and lit it with a lighter adorned with several Lisa Frank stickers.

"Okay. Okay. I don't know where to begin with this story. I don't tell it very often. It's long and confusing and unpleasant. I guess it can begin when I left my parents' home the day after my 18th birthday. I decided I was through with everything I had seen in my hometown, so I just got in my car and went as far as I could possibly go. I only packed a single backpack, since I didn't particularly care for many of my physical possessions. I took as many clothes as I could fit, all the money I had saved at my shitty job, and my phone. To be honest, I didn't really expect my plan to work, but I guess it did. By midnight, I was too tired to drive, and so I just pulled into some parking lot and slept in my car. For a few days I did this, just driving and getting gas when I needed to. Eventually, I ended up in a little town in Wisconsin where I liked the look of things enough to stay for a while. It was so much colder than it was back in Arizona, so I ended up having to buy a lot of new clothes. The thrift store employees knew me well, haha."

She paused, then took a long drag of her cigarette.

"It was nice. I worked in a library and I was able to rent a little cabin in the trees. The smallest kind of life you could imagine. But something began soon after. I had a particularly troubling dream about a year later. I remember there was a man I did not know inside of my house. I recognized his face; he had appeared in several of my dreams before. This was the first time he spoke. He said to me, 'Be careful around those with the wrong blood. There are people you cannot trust.' I woke up immediately. I began to view my surroundings in an entirely new context. I started noticing these green stains everywhere I went, which almost looked deliberately placed. To put it lightly, I started to freak out. I began to isolate myself more and more until one night, I just left. Got in my car and started driving again. The whole world felt hostile to me and I wanted to escape. But there was nowhere for me to go. I had the worst hallucinations of my life. Everything was blood, green, horrible. My memories aren't as clear here, but I know that I never really stayed in one place. Virginia, Delaware, California, Washington, even Ontario at one point. Life was fleeting, and I was running through all that I had. Slowly but surely, I disconnected from the outside world. This is where he entered. The internet was his medium. Nowhere was a safe place. It felt like he extended a terrible hand out from cyberspace to strangle me. Sometimes it still feels that way, but I've been gaining confidence. I have a solid place to live now, and things that I care about. His grip on me is loosening. But we still need to do this. For the good of everything. That's all I'll say for now."

My grip on the steering wheel had enough force to kill something. How could something like this happen? How could a person have the capability to act this way?

"Isobel, I... That's terrible. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Really, it's okay. I'm fine. More than fine. Great, actually. Better than ever. Perfect. A-oh-fucking-kay. Stop the car."

I pulled over pretty much immediately into a convenient clearing on the side of the road. I looked over at Isobel; she was trembling badly.

"I thought I was okay. I thought I could be brave. Guess not... I hate this."

Instinctively, I reached out to Isobel, to hold her hand, to hug her, something like that, but she drew back in a way that made me feel even worse. She got out of her side of the car, and beckoned me to follow her.

"Sorry, I... I just can't handle the closeness like that, right now. Please don't take it in an insulting way. Please. I like you."

"It's okay, Isobel! I don't hate you, or anything like that! I understand!"

"You don't, but that's okay. I'm going to go get something. Stay here."

She walked towards the trees, face to the ground. I wanted to follow her, but I didn't want to make her any more upset than she already was. I just kind of looked around at the clearing. I had no idea why it was here until I saw the 4 large rectangular imprints, indicating a building was once here. It reminded me of what happened to my childhood home. Until I was about 15 years old, me and my mom lived in this quaint little house on a street lined by what had to be dozens of houses of an identical make. Every wall in our house was filled from floor to ceiling with trinkets and memorabilia that my mother loved to collect. From the outside it would seem like hoarding, but from what I knew, every last object had a meaning to her. It was beautiful. Our house was nice; maybe it was a bit small, but we didn't really need more. One day, I woke up to discover a huge pile of boxes in the living room. I saw, for the first time in my life, that the walls were completely empty. My mom told me that she had landed a new job in an accounting firm, but we would have to move for her to work there. I was something close to devastated, but at the same time, I was proud that my mother was advancing in the world, so I didn't complain a single bit to her. Still, my mom, with her magical insight, knew that I was deeply upset, and reassured me that everything would be okay, that "Everything is going to be the exact same as it was." She definitely tried to make this true. The wall decorations were entirely there within a week of us making the move, and more steadily trickled in to fill the more spacious walls of our new house. But of course, with me turning 16 in this wholly new location, then 17, and then 18, she couldn't have been further from the truth. Still, life continued, as it tends to do. Fast forward to my 21st birthday. I am in community college, and my roommate insists on me having a beer they had saved exactly for this occasion.

Begrudgingly, I obliged, and took part in the strange societal pastime of making oneself stupid. And so I was newly dumb. After a couple hours of dicking around in the parking lot, my roommate and I decided to take a walk to my childhood home, something which I had been meaning to do for quite a while. It was only about an hour on foot, so we began our trek, cooler of more alcohol held by my roommate's drunken hand. As we passed more landmarks, the old ice cream parlor, the playground where I scraped both my knees after falling from the slide, the library where I grew rapt in dozens upon dozens of books, I grew more and more anxious, more and more eager to see for the first time in years the place I knew as my origin. My legs were just beginning to almost give out when we started to reach the street occupied by my home and its many twins. I got so excited that I

started running, yearning to burst through the door and find those lovely rooms the exact same way they used to be. However, this could not happen. At some point between us moving and now, every single house on that street had been demolished. There was nothing there, not even trees, not even grass. It was just dirt. My childhood was dirt.

"Hey, Lewis."

I looked up. Isobel stood in front of me with a huge stick, probably about half her height in length. She wielded it like a baseball bat.

"Go get some rocks."

"What? What are we doing? Why do you have a stick?"

"I'll teach you about this. But first, you have to go get some rocks."

I was completely bewildered as to the purpose of this endeavor, but I had no reason not to oblige. Looking downwards, a few were at my feet, but I was hesitant to classify them as "rocks;" on my personal mineral sizing scale, from pebble to rock to stone, they were somewhere in-between pebble and rock, but too close to pebble for me to comfortably present them to Isobel. So, I walked towards the trees in search of minerals closer to rock, but not too close to stone. After a small amount of searching, I came across 4 rocks, sufficiently above pebble size and below stone, and took 3 of them, leaving the largest one out of fear it may be just a smidgen too close to stone. It was a bit awkward to bring them to Isobel, as they were quite hefty and unwieldy, but I managed not to drop any.

"Great. Those will serve you well."

"Can I put these down? They're heavy."

"Yes, yes, go ahead, put them down next to you. I'll tell you what this is about. Back when I was in Virginia, during a brief period of lucidity and relative cognitive normalcy, I met someone interesting. He was an older man, probably in his late sixties or early seventies, and he worked at a car dealership. He didn't sell cars though, he was just a janitor or something. Anyways, somehow, him and I grew kind of close and we started having tea at his place in the evenings. His house wasn't very big, but his backyard was huge. We would often go out there and do this thing where we'd have someone hold a stick and the other throw rocks. The stick-haver has to try and hit the rocks back toward the rock-thrower with the stick. If the stick breaks, the rock-thrower wins, but if all the rocks make it back to the rock-thrower, the stick-haver wins. He called this game of ours "lithomancy," but I'm not entirely sure what that word means."

"I think I read about that once. I believe it was some medieval religious practice. Nothing like what you're describing, though."

"Huh. That's odd. He was always kind of an esoteric guy. His living room basically doubled as a library with all the bookshelves he had. He was a wise old man. He died unexpectedly one day, from a heart attack or something like that, and of course that set me back into mental collapse. But now, looking back at it, it's just sad."

She looked down at her stick, seemingly examining its structure. It was almost perfectly straight, and it had 2 small twigs extruding from it, one near the top and one closer to the middle.

"Well, I've explained enough. Go ahead and pick up your first rock."

I looked down at my trio of rocks. I decided to start with the smallest, most pebble-like rock, as I didn't really have any sort of competitive spirit in me at the moment. I just wanted to go along with what Isobel was doing so she would feel better. I threw it firmly towards the stick, in what was probably my first display of athleticism since the 8th grade. Isobel reacted quickly, and the stick stood strong against the rock, knocking it back to my feet. I put it away from the other rocks in order to differentiate them.

"Nice. One point for me."

"Wait, there's points?"

"No, that was more, like, a figurative thing to say. Lithomancy doesn't have points."

"Oh, okay."

A few seconds passed, and Isobel kind of vaguely gestured towards my 2 rocks to continue, so I picked up another and threw it in the same way towards her stick. I won't lie and say it isn't embarrassing to admit that despite how spent I was by throwing a measly 2 rocks, the stick showed no sign of snapping and again returned the rock to its starting point.

"I seem to be winning."

"Heh, I'm not too surprised. Physical recreation was never really my thing."

"Eh, I'm not sure this game is entirely physical strength. A lot of it moreso relies on the durability of the stick you choose or the heft of the rocks you choose. It's in Gaia's hands."

"I guess you're right. Maybe this last one will do the trick."

I picked up my last rock and threw it just a little harder than the last two, using most of my remaining arm strength. This time, the outcome was different; the rock resisted the force of the stick, and the stick snapped in two, leaving the rock and half of the stick and Isobel's feet.

"See. You can never tell how these things are gonna go. I feel a lot better now, even having lost. It's a way to get energies out of your system, especially bad energies."

"Yeah, I get that. I'm glad you feel better now, Isobel."

"Thank you, Lewis. Really, truly, thank you. You've done nothing but show me unwavering friendship this entire day, and it makes me happier than you could ever imagine. I'm so, so, so glad that you're my friend. We can hug now, if you want."

We did as she said, and, with an unspoken yet fully understood level of compassion and warmth, embraced right there on the side of the road. I don't think I've ever felt so immediately close to a person in my life. Isobel was different; I felt she and I were actually similar, something which I almost never observe. I felt so lucky to have a friend as true as her. It felt as though this moment lasted forever, and I wished it could, but eventually, Isobel gently drew away from me with one arm still around me and began to speak.

"Well, we should probably get going now. So we can absolutely fucking decimate this guy. I think I've devised a simple plan that can get us through this. I, knowing much more about him, somehow, will keep in contact with you via your phone while you're in his house, and tip you off on where to go and what to do. Does that sound good?"

"Yes, that sounds fine, though I'm a bit nervous about going in there alone. I understand though. I wouldn't want to face him either. But something's still gnawing at me. Why do you keep implying some kind of connection between me and him? What does that mean? You're being strangely coy about it, and I kind of just want you to tell me."

"Lewis. You're sure you want me to tell you? Like, absolutely, 100% sure? Right now?"

"Yes, please, tell me now! The more you act like it's some horrible truth, the more I want to know! Come on, it can't be that bad!"

Isobel sighed deeply and made a face that I can only describe as anguished.

"Lewis... I don't know how to tell you this without just saying it. Leopold is your dad."

"Leopold? Who's Leopold?"

"Leopold... the guy we've both been talking about this whole time?"

"Oh, yeah, Leopold. Sorry, forgot. And he's my..."

"Your dad. Sorry."

I kind of just stood there, not knowing how the world could possibly go on. I felt like everything was just going to stop here and fall apart. Every cell that made up my body wanted to separate. Every atom that made up those cells wanted to fission. Every quark that made up those atoms wanted to split. Everything was a stupid, stupid joke, and I was a stupid punchline waiting to get used up and dissolved into the echoes of nothingness. Fuck this. Fuck everything. Fuck me. If it's the last thing I do, I will burn that old fuck to the ground.

## Chapter 8

Finally, after the eternity of the road, we reached the houses. They were all identical and arranged in a huge, sickening grid of streets branching out from the center, like a colony of wasps. It was almost hypnotic, going by the same building over and over again, of course with the occasional lawn ornament or American flag. As I peered through the passenger side window, I began to imagine seeing little blue flames, flickering amidst the mailboxes and fake grass. This was not a good place to be. I was struggling to remember the number of Leopold's house. 3527? 3474? 4347? 3437? 3774? It doesn't matter. We'll find him eventually.

Something I've always found fascinating is the capability of the human mind for self-spifification, particularly its attempts at vastation through strategic ecmnesia and the deliberate rasure of perceived delenda it finds inimical to our overall salubriousness. Of course, this hygeian praxis appears possibly boethetic at first, but upon its exercitation, it reveals itself to be little more than balderdash and hogwash. In fact, these luctations against reality mostly serve to misorient and pericilitate the mind into dereism, which leads me to question and almost entirely vitiate the benevolence of the mind. From my experiences, I believe the mind simply sneers at the soul, coining gleeks and gauds to transform itself into a sottisier of sorts, but the explanation could also lie with the historical quettaconsciousness and its associated traumas. But not to lapse into neology.

"Hey, Lewis? I think this is it. We're here." Isobel's eyes were wide.

So, here was the castle. Portentously wide, 2 stories tall. A pitch black sky hung overhead, much more early darkness in August than usual. Perhaps even the Sun could not bear to shine over this lodge of sorrow. I nodded at Isobel wordlessly and stepped out of the car. She was clutching Edith by her heart. Leopold's yellow car stood out against the muted environment like a light in the dark. Not a good light. As I walked up to the house, I dragged my hand along the engraved numbers on the mailbox. 3437. This was it. My phone rang. I picked it up.

"It's Isobel. Like I said, I can't go in there. But I can help you. Go around the perimeter and see if you can find a way in."

I stood in front of the house and looked at my options. There was an unusually large quantity of windows, so some of them had to be unlocked. My first order of business, though, was to try the front door, even though I didn't really think it would work. You never know unless you try.

"Lewis, I don't think the door is gonna- well I guess it is unlocked, okay, wow."

I opened the door. Instinctively I closed my eyes out of fear, but after regaining my senses, I peered inwards. It was a mess. I could hardly even see the floor through all the

garbage strewn about the house, and the furniture looked older than me. There were no lights on.

"Well, I guess there's nothing left for you to do but go inside. Good luck."

Standing at the threshold, it felt like there was an invisible forcefield separating the interior of the house from the outside world. Of course, this was not the case, and I could walk in at any moment, but my body seemed to almost have a physical reaction to the environment. Every part of me rejected this. Still, I had to do this, so against my better judgment, I stepped into the intramural landfill and closed the door behind me as quietly as I could. By now, I was pretty much fully freaking out, but doing a decent job of acting confident. The truth is that I was so, so scared. More scared than I've ever been in my life. I was in the house of my father, who I haven't seen in over 20 years, who by all accounts I thought was dead, who apparently has been tormenting Isobel for years. It was terrifying. But somehow overpowering the abject fear in my mind was the illimitably passionate hate that I had for Leopold. What good has he done for anyone? Why does he think he can just live life being who he is? Why don't I remember him? There were a lot of conflicting emotions in my head about him, but the overall message was clear: this man cannot continue doing this.

I had just regained my confidence and started moving to explore more of the house when I heard a loud bang behind me. Obviously startled, I turned, and felt my confidence disintegrate when I saw that the door had fallen clean off its hinges, revealing a solid wall in its place.

## Chapter 9

Hell. This is Hell. I am in Hell right now, making up for all the wrongs I've ever committed. Or maybe a dream. This is a dream. None of this is happening. I am going to wake up soon. No. No, no, no. This is happening. It's right in front of me, happening right now. The door is gone. I can't leave. Something is stirring within me. It is ancient, forgotten for a good reason. I push it down for now.

Further examining the smoothness where the entrance once was, I confirmed what seemed impossible; there was no more doorway. Just more wall, flanking the fallen door. I made sure to check the windows, too. Pure nothingness. Not blackness, just nothing. I'm not even sure how to explain that. There is no way out. Actually, "out" no longer exists. For me, currently, only this house exists. I can only go deeper. Leopold wants me to go deeper? Fuck it, I will.

It took almost all my remaining bravery to push forward, and it certainly took all my remaining strength to push through all the garbage strewn about, but eventually, I made it to the staircase. But I couldn't use it. No, it was too tall. I couldn't even see the end of it. Who knows what's up there? Just looking towards the end of it gave me an immense feeling of vertigo. I had to go some other way. Unfortunately, the only other path I saw was one which led downwards, into the basement, or whatever dark depths may exist under such a title. But I had no choice. At a time like this, I'd say something like "I can't just run away," even if the circumstances physically allowed for it. So, I began my descent.

I had avoided the upward stairs because of their sheer height, but it felt like there were just as many steps in the opposite direction. I was walking for what had to be at least 10 minutes. Maybe I could just let myself fall, tumble down the stairs and wait until I hit the bottom. I would definitely die, but maybe in a place such as this, that isn't the worst outcome. I probably would've decided against it, but fate had other plans. I didn't even see anything on the stairs, but somehow, I tripped and fell. Miraculously, I ended up in a strange hallway, entirely made of wood from top to bottom. There was no sight of the staircase in any direction. Whoever designed this house must have had no respect whatsoever for the work of Euclid. With no other option, I walked forward. The hallway was completely barren, with no furniture, doors, fixtures, or even lights to break up the endless barrage of wood. Still, I could somehow just make out the area in front of me. The one noticeable thing about the wood is that it looked burned in certain spots. I did not like that. The only sound I could hear was the constant creaking of wood, mostly from my own footsteps, but partially from other, unknown sources. It was almost driving me mad. Strangely, I could've sworn I heard a girl call out my name. Maybe I had finally begun going crazy. No, there it was again. There was definitely a girl calling out to me, repeatedly. I knew who she was, but I didn't. I knew that I knew her, but I didn't know who she was. Her

calling became more frequent. And louder. Soon, it was even louder than the creaking of the wood. Everything felt weird for a moment. What?

"Lewis, come on, wake up! It's like 7:30, you're gonna be late!"

Lewis rose from his bed, definitely tired, but terrified at the prospect of losing time. He scrambled to climb down the ladder of his loft bed in a dramatic manner such that Sierra rolled her eyes, a gesture which he didn't really understand yet. Thankfully, Mom had gone to the store and got some of those cinnamon Pop-Tarts; Lewis thought the strawberry ones tasted bad, but he didn't want to tell her. He ate breakfast quickly so he could brush his teeth and go back to his room to put on the clothes Mom picked out the night before. He kept trying to button up the little shirt that she had chosen, but his long hair kept getting in the way. He had to keep pushing it aside, only for it to come swooping back down at his hands. Sierra saw this and walked over to him, making sure to crouch so they could face each other.

"You've been struggling a lot with that hair of yours, haven't you? It's gotten so long," Sierra said with a slight smirk on her face, looking almost proud of her little brother.

"I like my hair. But it's annoying. My hair gets in the way. I don't like it." Lewis pouted when he said this, and all the while he was still fruitlessly fiddling with the buttons.

"I think I have something that can help with that," replied Sierra before undoing the pink hair tie which held back her sprawling dirty blond hair. Lewis noticed that in this state they looked strikingly similar to each other. Sierra extended her hand to give it to Lewis, nodding jovially when he took it.

"What is this? How do you use this?" asked Lewis. Sierra looked a bit embarrassed having not considered that a 4-year-old boy wouldn't know how to tie his hair back. She paused for a moment before putting it on Lewis' hair for him, not really bothering to show him how it's done. In general, this was how life seemed to Lewis. One was expected to know how to do things, but nobody wanted to actually demonstrate the methods through which said things were done. Honestly, I never really changed my mind about that.

Finally able to coordinate himself, Lewis finished putting on his clothes and grabbed his backpack before following Sierra, already thoroughly prepared, out to the living room. Although his father had departed long before Lewis even awoke, they both cheerfully said goodbye to their mother before departing themselves for school. Is that my mother? I don't really recognize her.

The walk to school was nothing out of the ordinary. Lewis didn't really like walking all the way to school. He thought that in a world already so advanced, in which he could see on the TV fantastical visions of superior technology, that somebody should just go ahead and make some sort of teleporter or really fast vehicle that everyone could use. Of course, Lewis was too young to fully distinguish reality from imagination, and this played a large role in these musings, but he really did think that the world ought to be much better than it was. He also had this strange habit of trying to only step once on each tile of the sidewalk, despite the fact that it was almost impossible given how short he was. At best, he could reduce the number of steps per tile to 2 or 3 steps, and maybe bring it down to 1 if he was willing to jump or move unnaturally. But in his mind, that kind of behavior made

the habit not really matter. It had to be natural. Even Lewis didn't really know why he had this habit. He just knew it was important to him. While caught up practically looking straight down to ensure a minimal ratio of steps to tiles, Lewis failed to notice the entangling weeds and shrubbery emerging from the ground just to the right of him, a lapse of attention he often fell victim to for the exact same reason every time. His arm ended up getting caught on a branch and before he had any time to react, he had been sent abruptly tumbling towards the ground. However, the ground was not where he stopped. Lewis kept going. That is not what is supposed to happen.

The fall onto the cold, wooden floor was one of the most painful experiences of my life. I might have even gotten some splinters in my face. Add this to the fact that I had absolutely no idea what was going on. Where was I just now? A dream? I'm not tired, so why would I have been asleep? I know for certain that it wasn't real. Or maybe it was? I've never remembered that before, but it was definitely a memory. It still just didn't feel right. Whatever. Nothing here makes sense. Trying to figure shit out is pretty much useless. I decided to just keep moving forward until I found something else.

Pretty much immediately, I noticed something new. A lot of somethings, I guess. While previously the walls of this ligneous hallway were entirely barren, following my plummet they were populated extensively by a variety of paintings. Photographs? Paintings of photographs, or, more accurately, snapshots of real life. Every single painting seemed to represent a memory that I had, including memories that I didn't really recognize, but that I knew existed, somewhere deeper than my thoughts. I found it very frustrating that my mind would not allow me to access certain memories, but perhaps there was a valid reason for this, my mind being the cradle of my intelligence and my whatness, after all. I continued to walk. The hallway began to split into branching paths, in ways that didn't really make sense. I just picked at random and continued pushing forward. No matter where I went, there were more and more paintings adorning the wall, reminding me of something that I once did or saw or felt, or, more and more often, reminding me that I really had no idea what was even inside of my own brain. The paintings also seemed to be getting larger as I progressed. I started recognizing them less and less.

After what felt like hours of just walking, picking random paths, more walking, looking at the strange paintings of old houses, landscapes, playgrounds, schools, hospitals, roads, alleyways, people, clouds, I reached for the first time a dead end. In front of me was a painting which spanned almost the entire width and height of the wall. Actually, it feels generous to call it a painting, as it was an entirely white canvas. Though in a strange way, it seemed to be glowing. As if there was some sort of light behind it, or inside of it. For some reason, I extended my hand to touch the painting. I was more than a bit surprised to see my fingers go through the canvas and disappear into it. I kept going. My hand went through. Then my arm. My shoulder. I looked back at the dim hallway one last time before fully submerging myself into the milky void, replacing everything in all directions with a blinding whiteness.

## Chapter 10

And, following white, there was the world. Or, more precisely, a street. Lewis wasn't sure how long he had been running; it seemed less like he had been propelling himself forward and more like the world had been sliding past him, like watching the street from the passenger side window. He couldn't feel his legs, or really anything at all. His undeveloped motor skills made him keep almost tripping, but somehow, just from the fear, from his desire to go as far as he could, he kept running. He wasn't really paying attention to his surroundings, but now he was in one of those neighborhoods filled with duplicated houses, this seemingly endless street lined with clones. One of these clones had a lady sitting in a rocking chair out front, and I'm realizing only now that her name was Margaret. When she saw Lewis, this small 5-year-old boy, running deliriously down her street of Xeroxed homes, her immediate thought was probably something like, "He'll hurt himself if I don't stop him here!" So she did just that by waving for his attention, which was luckily caught after a moment of confused hesitation. She introduced herself by name, which was of course Margaret (Of course.), but Lewis could only get out one syllable: Ma. Picture Lewis hyperventilating on this kind lady's porch, only able to say "Ma... ma... ma..." The implication of that doesn't really need to be explained. After trying to calm him down for a moment, the nice lady opened her front door and urged him inside. Upon walking in, Lewis found himself surrounded by all sorts of trinkets and antiques covering every surface of the house. He was overwhelmed, but it helped to lead his mind somewhere else. Ma took Lewis' hand and led him to a bedroom, where he immediately crawled onto the bed and fell asleep.

Lewis woke up the next morning, still quite disoriented. He made his way to the living room and sat down on the couch to watch the TV. Much to his vexation, the channel was not currently on cartoons, and Lewis did not know yet how to use the remote. I think he thought the TV was just magic or something. Currently on was the news, which Lewis passively gazed upon, not really caring. There was a news anchor, and they were saying some stuff about the world or some people. This was all the news was to Lewis. Eventually, they cut to some footage of a burnt down house. Lewis knew this house. Two black-and-white images faded into view. One was his sister Sierra, and the other was his mother. Suddenly, they showed a picture of his dad looking really serious in front of a wall. The whole time, the anchor was saying words like "arson" and "custody," which Lewis did not know the meaning of. The whole thing was deeply unsettling to him, and he could feel himself beginning to shake when Ma walked in with a plate of pancakes and a glass of milk. Seeing what was on TV, she quickly set down the food and changed the channel to some cartoons. This made Lewis happy. He began to eat his pancakes with noticeable fervor, eager to loosen hunger's current grip on him. He took a sip of his milk, only to be

astonished by just how good it was. Said sip turned into an extended tipping of the glass until all of the milk was gone, much to Ma's amusement. For the first time in his life, Lewis felt that he had discovered something that he actually enjoyed, a genuine interest that he cared about. He promptly went to the kitchen to find the milk and pour himself another glass.

I never liked eating in public. I mean, I don't hate it. I just prefer not to. Still, I found myself here, in this diner. It's a nice diner, all things considered. The table me and mom were sitting at was kind of sticky. So was the ground. Maybe this whole diner was sticky. That's part of why I don't like eating in places like this. The environment is uncontrolled. A lot of times, I've seen a place and wanted to change it to my liking. But I can't do that, of course. Maybe when I'm older. I had some pancakes in front of me, those were pretty good. Especially with the syrup. And especially with milk. God, I love milk so much. I think the only thing I love more than milk is my mom, and it's close! Even still, with two things I love dearly sitting close to me, I couldn't really describe the overall experience as "good." It just wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to be doing. I wished I was at home so I could read. Maybe I could've brought a book to the diner, something like that collection of Shakespeare plays we had, but mom would've probably told me off. I guess it makes sense. Stuff like this was for us to bond. But I felt sufficiently bonded with her already. Oh well. At least there weren't too many other people around us.

A man walked into the diner. The top of his head was without hair, but the sides were left to grow scraggly wisps falling all the way down to his shoulders. The bottom half of his face was masked by a writhing mass of beard, a real bird nest on a human face. What he was wearing was less "clothes" and more so a loose collection of fabrics and scraps. He shambled for the counter with an uneven gait, and his face portrayed an emotion that I didn't know existed. For some reason, as soon as I saw this man walk into the diner, I wanted to cry. I couldn't bear to look at him. I think I knew him somehow, but I didn't want to. I hid under the table. I was shaking so much I could hardly breathe. Mom didn't know what was wrong with me, she didn't know why I was so scared, and truthfully neither did I, but she just put her arm around me under the table, she held me close to her, she told me it was ok. I was crying, I was a mess, but her being there for me almost made me forget about everything in an instant. In that moment, I think she was the only thing in the entire world.

A small spiral can only go inwards for a short while before it collapses in on itself. There just isn't enough room on the paper. As it increases in size, it can travel inwards further, but still not too far. Of course, if you begin inwards and move outwards, this is no longer an issue, but several other problems arise concerning circularity and evenness. Other symbols don't have these problems, such as a squiggle or an arbitrary polygon, but there is simply something more interesting about a spiral. It's like a fractal in that if assembled perfectly you could theoretically zoom in forever, but of course it's impossible to do that on paper. Still, the thought of that impossibility alone is what makes it enticing, the fruitless attempt after attempt to go inwards forever and ever and ever.

"Lewis? I'd like you to solve this next one."

Oh. Right, I was in math class. It had only been what, 10 minutes, and I was already completely zoned out. I looked up at the whiteboard, my eyes struggling to focus on the writing. There was something there, an equation, something I knew I understood. Or could understand, potentially. I wasn't thinking right. I couldn't bring what I knew into focus. I could see my teacher glaring at me expectantly, and around me I could feel a dozen pairs of eyes staring me down. This didn't help. I stood up to walk closer to the board. It almost became something to me, almost shifted into a set of numbers and operators that I could parse into some sort of solution. But only almost. I started mumbling something, anything. Just to make them all think I had even an inkling of knowledge. Mrs. Morris' mouth was moving, telling me something, probably providing a hint, a way out, but I couldn't hear. I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't think of anything. I couldn't do anything. I started tearing up. What's wrong with me? It's just math, I'm pretty good at math! I thought I was good at math. What else do I not know I'm terrible at? Does everyone but me know that I can't do anything? I couldn't bear to stand up there in front of class with only my useless thoughts. I turned wordlessly to walk out the door, leaving it open as I left the classroom. I kept walking until I reached some room, a room with computers. I had probably been here before, but I didn't remember it. There are too many rooms in this school. I pulled out my phone to text my mom, my hands still shaking.

"Hey momh hi mom is itg ok if Can you coemfe Comeo opick meu p fsigrom form the oslcvholt The sdchoool???? Himom im Not efeloing verry goodg rightrn ow imm sscacred idm im i mi im im im immm im pelase psaelase plesae please i do ntwa nt tobe here righnbrtn now"

"Lewis, honey, what's wrong? I'll be there soon. Please try and calm down. I love you."

"i lobve you toom om"

What the fuck am I good for? What can I do? I guess I'm well read, but what good does that do for me or anyone else? Who cares about that? Who cares about me? Fuck, I shouldn't think like that. I need to calm down. I put my backpack on the ground and sat in one of the chairs. I remembered I had something in my pocket, so I pulled it out. A CD with writing in red marker, "family photos." After booting up the computer in front of me, which took ages, I put it in the flimsy little disk drive. The subsequent whirring and clicking breaking the silence of the room felt deafening. About 30 seconds later, I was able to access the contents of the disk. It was a singular folder just titled "New folder," and there were 3 photos inside. The first photo was of Sierra. I didn't look at the dates on these photos, but I'd assume she was about 14 or 15 in this one. She had on a t-shirt for some band I've never heard of. I'm sure if she was here now she'd tell me all about it. The second photo was of me. I couldn't have been any older than 4 years old. My hair was down almost to my ankles, and tangled just about everywhere. My shirt had a monster truck on it, which I'm sure I was immensely proud of at the time. I wasn't smiling. The last photo was of my parents. Leopold and Magnolia, the two high school sweethearts that promised to stick together no matter what. If only they hadn't. If only he thought about anyone apart from himself. I couldn't bear to look at this shit. All of the despair bubbling up from

my childhood, all of the unresolved rage building up within me, all of that had to come out of me somehow. So, I screamed, screamed without restraint, a sound nearly unrecognizable as human, and punched a hole straight through the monitor. There were tears in my eyes again, dripping onto and mixing into the blood running down my left hand.

My phone rang. I picked it up.

"Lewis, it's Isobel. Are you okay? You're acting weird in there. What's going on?"

"What? Wait... How did... Um, yes, I'm. Okay."

"You don't sound okay."

"Well, of course I'm not okay, but I'm doing my best, alright?"

"Okay, okay. I was just worried about you. Pacing around, talking to yourself."

"That's, uh. Yeah, I do that all the time, yup. Helps me think."

"Oh, well alright. Just stay safe in there, okay? Be careful."

"I will. Thanks, Isobel."

Isobel hung up. I looked around; I wasn't in that awful wooden maze anymore. I was in front of the stairs. They looked a whole lot shorter now. So, swallowing my fear, my sadness, my common sense, I climbed them. Once I reached the top, I was met with a single door at the end of a hallway, already slightly ajar. Subconsciously, I was already holding my breath. I walked into the room. It was shockingly huge, almost cavernous.

"Hey, asshole. I guess you finally decided to pay your old man a visit."

It felt as though my heart had not only stopped, but that it may never start again. The voice had not come from in front of me, but instead from above me. Looking up, I saw what evil had really been in this house the whole time. Here was Leopold, wicked and old, towering over me, as if he were some Laestrygonian warrior ready to consume me.

"Why did you even come all this way? What are you planning on doing, exactly? Killing me? Come on, Lewis, we both know you're too much of a pussy to ever do that. That's how you've been your whole life. Too pussy to stand up for yourself, to say what's on your mind, to make a change in your own life. What's the point of all this if you're just a scared little boy with no sense of purpose?"

"No, that's not true, I-"

"Shut the fuck up. You don't have anything to say. When was the last time you talked to me? Over 20 years ago? You're just as stupid now as you were then. And you'll always be stupid. You're worthless. You don't have any fucking friends. What's that, you made a friend today? A super duper good friend that you'll trust forever and ever? News flash shithead, she doesn't give a fuck about you. All she wants is to get rid of me. She's using you. Once this is all over, she'll go back to her little cabin in the woods and never think about you ever again. And then you'll be back to square one. 26-years old with no friends and nothing to hold onto in life. Why don't you just kill yourself? Maybe you shouldn't. It wouldn't really change anything. Nobody would notice. You'll probably just get old, mentally still a crybaby, and die once you run out of money from that hopeless job of yours. No tears will fall. You'll just be another name in the paper, if that."

"I hate you!" I screamed at him. I couldn't say anything against him. Maybe he was right. I didn't know better than he did.

"I know you do, pal. I hate you, too. I've hated you since the day you were born. Sierra, too. I just wish you could've gone out with her. I wanted you to die instead of Magnolia. But sometimes we make mistakes. Hell, I'm looking at my biggest mistake right now. I tried my damn best to make sure you never got to breathe again, but of course, you had to weasel your way out of that one. You aren't supposed to be alive."

I realized something. If Leopold tried to kill me once and failed, why should I listen to him? Why should I listen to the guy who couldn't do something as simple as killing a little kid? Why should I listen to a self-absorbed freak who despite his own words is even more hopeless than me? Why should I care about anything he had to say? I was wrong. He doesn't know any better than I do. He doesn't know anything at all.

"Yeah, but I am alive. I'm standing right here in front of you. Who's fault is that?"

"It's your fault that you-"

"Shut the fuck up! You keep trying to convince me that I'm stupid, that I'm worthless, that I'm just a kid. Maybe you're right about some of it. Maybe I do have a dead end job. Maybe I do have no friends. Maybe I am scared. But why should that mean I have to answer to you, some senile man with anger issues who spent half his life in prison? I lived 21 years without even thinking of you, and I was perfectly fine with it. You mean nothing to me! I'm done dealing with your shit!"

As I realized that Leopold held no real power over me, the room began to shift. It grew smaller and smaller, and so did Leopold. He didn't say anything, but as he shrunk, I noticed his furious gaze grow more and more afraid, his eyes darting, his lip trembling. Just as I had been mere moments ago, Leopold was now no more than a terrified, defenseless boy. By now, the room was a normal size, but Leopold was no longer in my sight. I looked around. In the corner, slumped in a chair I hadn't noticed before, was the man himself, leaking from his head. A gun laid on the floor beneath his dangling right arm. As it turns out, he had killed himself before I even arrived. I cannot neatly describe how I felt seeing that, so here are some words: shocked, concerned, relieved, overjoyed, disturbed, confused, hopeful, vindicated, scared, and finally, calm.

I left the room and shut the door behind me. Somebody else can deal with that. After a day like this, I felt like letting my hair down, so I took out my hair tie and let it all come crashing around my shoulders. I looked at the hair tie for a moment, pink and worn from years of use, and put it gently into my pocket. I walked down the stairs, straight out of the house and onto the front lawn. Isobel was leaning against the side of my car, her foot tapping anxiously with her hands on her face. When she realized I was standing in front of her, she ran up and hugged me so tight that I was slightly winded.

"Lewis! Are you okay?! What happened?!"

"Isobel, I'm going to be honest with you. I don't know. I really do not know what happened in there."

"Oh? Well, did you find Leopold?"

"Yeah, I did. He was dead."

Isobel didn't say anything for a while. I wanted to know what she thought about the whole thing, but her face was pretty much unreadable.

"Well. That's something. Ok. I guess we... don't have anything left to do now, right?"

"No, we don't. We can go now. I'd like nothing more than to never see this house again."

Isobel decided she would drive, since she felt bad for me. I didn't tell her anything about what I saw, but somehow, just from the way she carried herself, I felt that she somehow knew. I felt that Isobel somehow knew what it was like to be me. I know I had just said I wanted nothing more than to never see the house again, but really, I wanted nothing more than to be by her side.

"Hey, can we stop by the grocery store? I haven't had any milk all day."

"Sure. It's your life, haha."

# Final

from the bottom of my soul  
and the top of my head  
nothing will ever last  
if it is there real or unreal  
made of ichor or nothing at all  
cracks however small they are  
build up to something greater  
and no power is more great than "the end"  
still i rot in stupid hope  
and think about a forever that can't exist

maybe with some time  
forever can be now  
and our lives can go on  
as if frozen and unchanging  
stuck smiling even when i dont mean it

anything is perfect for the right eyes to see  
stay close to me, my favorite catastrophe  
Isobel Moss, 9th grade poetry contest

