



All Pikes Peak Writes
2021 Anthology of Winning Entries

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LOST PARADISE

Amber heaved the dusty box down from her closet shelf and read the writing scrawled across the cardboard in black marker: PHEBE'S PIANO BOOKS. A lump caught in her throat as she ran her fingertip gently across the name PHEBE. "Miss you, Mom."

She began rifling through the various piano books and stacks of sheet music until a tiny voice from the other room called, "MOMMMMYYY! I need a drink!" Amber rubbed her eyes and slid silently to the child's bedroom.

"Ethan, you already had a drink," Amber hissed. "Be quiet or you'll wake your sister!" The owner of the tiny voice was sprawled half-way out of bed with his head on the floor and feet on his pillow. He peered up at her with bright brown eyes and moaned, "But I'M THIRS--"

A wail from the room next door interrupted him.

“You woke Elaina up, Ethan!” Amber seethed. “Get some water and get back in bed.” She turned and trudged to the next bedroom where a wild-haired baby girl was whimpering and wobbling with arms outstretched over the crib. After extra sips of water, more goodnight kisses, and the proper placement of stuffed animal sentinels, the house was finally quiet once more.

“Hardly a moment to myself,” Amber grumbled as she returned to the box of books. She lifted out a beginner's piano book and froze when a page of sheet music underneath caught her eye. All the oxygen suddenly seemed sucked from her lungs. Across the top was the song's title: “Lost Paradise.” Amber's mind flew back to her mother's side, watching her long fingers gliding expertly across the keys. “Lost Paradise” was the song her mother always played after tucking her into bed. Throughout her childhood Amber had fallen asleep to her mother playing that song. Amber hugged the sheet to her chest.

She stumbled to the living room downstairs and set “Lost Paradise” on the piano's music rack. The notes blurred in her vision as she pictured her mother sitting at this very piano ten years ago. Tenderly, Amber caressed the piano's dark wood. When her mother had died, her father gave the piano and box of books to Amber – unable to cope with so many reminders of Phebe surrounding him.

It was assumed that Phebe had been a victim of homicide. Phebe was alone the evening she disappeared, and when her father had arrived later that night, he found the front room in shambles: toppled furniture, a shattered vase, broken picture frames, and smeared blood on the piano and floor – signs of her last struggle. The police and detectives searched for months, but no evidence of her or the attacker's whereabouts

ever surfaced, and she was eventually presumed dead.

Taking a deep breath, Amber laid her fingers on the keys and timidly attempted the first few notes of the song -- butchering them badly. She persevered through the first two lines – stabbing harsh cords and plunking discordant notes -- then buried her face in her hands as grief overcame her.

“I miss you so much, Mom,” Amber cried. “I feel as inadequate as my ability to play this song.” She rested her head against the piano and tears flowed freely down her cheeks onto the ebony. “I have no idea what I’m doing as a mom, and I feel like I’m falling apart. Why did it have to be you?”

There was a click as the front door unlocked. Amber quickly straightened and brushed her tears aside. The door swung open, and in stepped a clean-cut man dressed in a business suit.

“Hey, Amber. Sorry I wasn’t home to help get the kids to bed. Had some deadlines to meet.”

Amber nodded but didn’t turn to look at him.

He set down his briefcase and strode to her side. Putting his arm around her he whispered,
“You okay, Babe? I don’t think I’ve seen you play the piano since your mom passed away.”

“Eric, I’m a mess. I yelled at the kids numerous times today; the house is trashed; I

haven't checked on my sister in the hospital for days; I almost had a panic attack at the grocery store today; I'm failing every aspect of my life; and—"

He interrupted her by putting his hand over her mouth. "I don't want to hear you say that word again: failing. You're not *failing* at anything. This is a hard stage of life. Be kind to yourself."

She waved her hand as if to brush aside his words. "I found this tonight," she added and pointed to the sheet music before her. "It's the song my mom used to play. It... it brought back a lot of memories."

Another tear spilled down her face and Eric hugged her close. "I'm so proud of you for pursuing your goal to try piano again. It will probably help you process some of the grief you've been carrying for so long."

She nodded mutely, and Eric kissed her cheek.

In the following weeks, Amber continued practicing "Lost Paradise" during the kids' naps and after bedtime. Her progress was painstakingly slow, but with time, she mastered the song.

Amber's fingers now floated across the keys – her hands having memorized every motion perfectly. When she held the final note after playing the song flawlessly for the first time, a soft clicking and whirring noise started from inside the piano. The whole instrument began to vibrate. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the commotion ceased.

"What in the world? Did I break the piano?" Amber quickly stood, searching for any

signs of damage. A bluish glow emanated from the far end of the piano closest to the wall.

Stepping to the side of the piano, her jaw dropped. The entire side of the old upright piano had swung inward like an open door, revealing an abyss of swirling blue light.

Amber gingerly reached a hand towards the opening. A warm, tingling sensation traveled up her finger as it passed innocuously through her. Gazing into the mesmerizing glow, she attempted to touch it once more, this time up to her elbow. Again, the warm rush of energy flooded up her limb. Withdrawing her arm, she inspected her skin carefully and found no change.

Biting her lip, she ducked and slowly inched herself through the light, into the piano. Streaks of blue whizzed past, but beyond was total darkness. Every inch of her body felt alert and invigorated. A zap like a rubber-band snap struck her, and the blue streaks vanished. Before her lay a meadow of purple flowers with lush evergreens lining the perimeter. Complete euphoria surged through her. She would have been alarmed to suddenly be in such a foreign place, had it not been for the exquisite joy that enveloped her.

"Am I dreaming?" She took a wobbly step forward in the sunshine, disturbing some white butterflies that flitted lazily away. The only sounds to be heard were the cheery trills of birds. Plucking a flower from the earth, she inhaled its heavenly aroma.

"This feels too real to be dreaming." Turning to look behind her, she saw a piano identical to hers at home. It had the same side panel opening with blue swirling light.

Cautiously, she ducked and slid inside. Again, she was engulfed by the flood of revitalizing blue light. In moments, the glow faded, and she found herself standing in her living room beside her own piano, the side panel now shut fast.

Weeks passed, and she kept her piano portal a secret for fear that her husband would think she was delusional. Eric had already tried to convince her to seek psychiatric help and medication for her anxiety and depression, and disclosing this secret would only be further evidence that she had entirely lost her mind. But whenever she found an opportune moment-- during the kids' naps or after bedtime-- Amber would quietly play "Lost Paradise" and slip off to the other side of the piano.

After a while, however, she noticed something peculiar: time passed differently in the world beyond. Once, she spent what felt like only ten minutes collecting a bouquet of wildflowers, to find that two hours had passed at home. Her children were yelling for her when she returned, and the spectacular bouquet clutched in her hand had disappeared.

Another time, she wandered through the forest and found a bubbling stream with tiny pink fish twirling under the water. In wonder, she watched their enchanting performance for a few minutes before strolling back to the piano. Upon her return, she heard Eric calling her name in panic. "Amber! Where were you?! I searched the house and couldn't find you anywhere when I got home!"

"I, uhh, was outside in the yard enjoying some fresh air after the kids went to bed." "At 11:30 at night?!" he asked incredulously.

"It's 11:30 already? I... I must have lost track of time," she stammered.

He pulled her close and sighed. "I was so worried. You okay?"

She stepped back from him and stared at the floor, blinking back tears. Her piano paradise was the only place she felt any relief from the oppressive weight of depression that constantly overshadowed her. The joy and light she had felt at the stream just moments before were starkly contrasted with the darkness that consumed her here. Her mind was tormented by a continual barrage of self-criticism. A rising sense of self-loathing cankered her heart.

"I'm fine. Just tired. Let's get some rest." She shuffled past him up the stairs as silent tears dribbled down her cheeks.

More and more she found herself living for each moment in the breathtaking land beyond.

The weather was always fair, the plants always lush, and the exotic wildlife she encountered were always friendly and peaceful.

One evening while exploring a rocky hill there, a glimmer in the dirt caught her eye. She gasped and snatched it from the ground. It was her mother's watch.

Scanning the dirt for any other clues, she saw none. Amber scurried the rest of the way up the hill to get a better glimpse of her surroundings. About a quarter mile away in a clearing in the trees, something else seemed to be glinting in the sun.

Sprinting through the forest, her thoughts raced with possibilities.

Amber halted when she reached the clearing. A beautiful woman sat in a meadow of flowers, giggling as two monkeys braided her thick brown hair. Gleaming

in the sun was her golden hair clip.

"MOM!" Amber shrieked.

The monkeys fled and Phebe turned to look at her. A brilliant smile lit up her face and she stood with open arms. "Amber, darling!"

Amber crossed the distance between them at a dead run, nearly toppling her mother over as she threw her arms around her.

"Mommy," Amber choked, "you're alive!"

"Of course, I'm alive. Honey, what's wrong? I wondered if you'd ever find this place." Amber stepped back, shaking her head. "Everyone said you were dead. After your attack, the police, detectives... everyone."

"My... attack?" her mother asked in bewilderment.

"The shattered picture frames, the blood on the floor...." Amber's voice trailed off.

"I guess I did leave things in shambles." Phebe rubbed her hands together. "My hands have healed quite well though. I came home from a really horrific day at work - my boss he... well... And then my friends and your dad... I felt like I was failing everyone in my life, and I guess I just... snapped..."

Phebe was looking past Amber now, a faraway look in her eyes. "I felt trapped in the life I was living. The only place I could feel joy anymore was here. I had honestly started to believe that everyone would be better off without me."

Amber's eyes were wide. "So, you've just been here the whole time?"

"I guess it's probably been a few weeks since I was back. Sorry for any worry I

caused. I hated everything about myself so much that I ended up smashing the pictures in the front room in a rage, cutting my hands up badly and tripping on the broken frames. Not knowing what else to do, I played 'Lost Paradise' and came here for a few days."

"Ten years, Mom."

"What?"

Putting her hands on her mom's shoulders, she shook her. "YOU'VE BEEN GONE TENYEARS."

"How can that be?"

"You tell me!" Amber fumed.

"Your father... how is he? And your sister? And Eric?"

Amber kicked a stick next to her foot. "Heartbroken. Dad tried dating a couple times since you... left. But he never got over losing you. Jamie is in the hospital right now. She keeps having bad flare-ups with Crohn's disease, but I guess you weren't around when she was diagnosed... And did you know Eric and I have two kids now?"

"I'm a grandma?" Phebe beamed.

"A three-year-old boy, Ethan, and a one-year-old girl, Elaina. Do you have any idea how much of our lives you've missed? Like how many times I've held dad's hand and wept with him? Or how much I longed to have your help when I brought my babies home from the hospital? Or how all Jamie wanted was your hug when she came out of her last surgery? I can't believe you would just frolic around here the past

ten years while we've mourned and suffered and tried to move on. I can't believe you would willingly abandon your family." Amber's fists clenched.

"I had no idea, Amber."

"Yes, you did. You know time is different here. You even threw away your watch." Amber thrust the watch towards her.

"Oh, I wondered where that went."

"Mom, how could you? Even though I'm facing my own sort of hell out in the real world, I'm heading back to it right now because I'm an adult, and I don't just run away from my problems. I refuse to be like you."

"I'm so sorry, hon--"

Amber spun around and dashed back through the forest. Upon reaching her own living room, she stared breathlessly at the piano side panel, wondering if her mom would follow. It didn't reopen. "Just what I thought," Amber muttered. "I don't need you anyway." And she stomped upstairs to bed.

Sleep evaded her as she stewed over her conversation with her mother. Bleary-eyed and sleep deprived, she awoke in the morning to Elaina's wails. She staggered to Elaina's room and was met by a toothy grin with dimpled cheeks. "Mama! Hi!"

Amber burst into laughter. "Did you just say 'hi?' I've never heard you say that before!"

"Hi! Mama! Hi!"

Ethan toddled over, rubbing his eyes and smiling. "Hi 'Laina!"

Scooping up Elaina, Amber smothered her soft cheeks in kisses. "Hi, Elaina! Good job talking, sweetie!"

Ethan hugged his mom's leg and proudly declared, "Yeah, I was teachin' her yessurday tosay hi!"

"What a sweet brother you are," Amber cooed and patted his back.

As she cuddled her kiddos, her thoughts darkened remembering the encounter with her mom the night before. Gazing at the bright eyes of her little ones, she realized her mom deserved the chance to meet them and be part of their lives, no matter how much hurt she'd caused.

Throughout the day as she battled her own bleak thoughts, her heart softened thinking of the darkness her mom had fought too. Her dad had mentioned that Phebe struggled with depression, but beyond that she had mostly been oblivious to her mom's struggles.

She resolved to find her mom again that night. Eric was out of town, so it would be the perfect opportunity to spend some time with her.

Her mother was seated in the same clearing as before, gently stroking some bunnies. The fluff-balls scattered as Amber approached. Phebe sighed heavily as Amber sat down beside her.

"Amber, I'm so sorry for all the years I've missed. For all the times I wasn't there and should have been. You deserve so much better than me as a mother."

"No, Mom. That's the point. You're exactly what I need as a mother. That's why I was so angry. I need you because I love you. And I'll always need you, because I'll always love you. It breaks my heart that you thought for even a second that you were failing and that we wouldn't need you."

Phebe sniffled and patted her daughter on the knee. "I've missed you."

"You too, Mom. Will you come back with me? It'll be so fun for you to meet your grandkids. I don't want you to miss even one more moment of their lives."

Phebe gazed into Amber's eyes and stroked her daughter's golden hair. "I wish I could. It's been so long now... I fear that the others will be angry at me too. And what of this place? My mind is so different out there. I feel whole here. Who knows what kind of crazy, terrible person I'll be in the real world again."

A faint hint of smoke caught the wind.

"Wait, do you smell that, Mom?"

"Yeah, is it... smoke? Strange, I've never smelled that here before."

From over the hill, a thin wisp of smoke spiraled into the air.

"Mom, I think it's coming from the piano! Hurry, come with me!"

Burying her face in her hands, Phebe shook her head. "I can't."

Amber tugged at her mom's arm, but Phebe made no effort to move. With fear rising within her, Amber released her mother's arm and darted up the hill. Smoke was billowing from the portal opening in the piano. The normally blue streaks of light were tinged with red glowing sparks.

Stepping back into her own living room, she pulled her collar up over nose, coughing through the smoke. The piano was on fire. Blazes of orange gnawed at the curtains and rug as well.

"Ethan! Elaina!" Amber screamed. She could hear muffled shrieks from upstairs. Dodging flames, she sprinted up the steps two at a time, throwing open their doors and scooping up the panicked children. The flames were now licking the stair steps and walls. Fortunately, she kept an emergency escape window ladder in Ethan's closet. Frantically, she threw open a window and attached the ladder. Amidst the thickening smoke and howls of children, she swiftly carried down Elaina and then Ethan. With one under each arm, she jogged to the curb while the sound of sirens approached. The three of them clung to each other, coughing and sobbing, as they watched flames rise into the sky.

Anguish stabbed at Amber's heart as she saw through the front window that the piano was entirely buried in flames. "No! Mom!" Amber squeaked. It was enough to have lost her mother once, but to lose her twice....

Firefighters rushed forward, beginning to douse the flames. Suddenly Eric was by her side, clutching her tightly in his strong arms. "Oh, praise God, you're all okay!"

"Eric! You're home early from your trip! How did you know?"

"I had this nagging feeling all morning that I needed to be home tonight. I couldn't shake it, so I told my client we'd finish our final meeting virtually and I caught the quickest flight home. I'm so glad I listened to that prompting! How did the fire start?"

Amber furrowed her brow. "I don't know. The only thing I can think of is that I left a

scented candle burning on top of the piano..."

Ethan clung to her and whimpered, "All our stuff is burning up! What are we gonna do?!" He stared wide-eyed at the smoke and ash billowing upward.

She tenderly brushed at the tear stains on his cheeks. "It's so sad to watch, isn't it? We've lost a lot of things tonight." She embraced him tightly and kissed his forehead. "But the most important things we have are right here. We have each other. And that's what matters."

They spent the rest of that night in a hotel and returned two days later when the embers had cooled, and the smoke had cleared. Much of the house would have to be entirely rebuilt, but some of the basement and main level was salvageable. As Amber walked by the charred remains of the piano, a glimmer caught her eye in the ashes: a gold watch. Tears welled up in her eyes anew. Rubbing the soot off, she noticed words scratched on the back: "LOST NO MORE."

Though she had lost her mother, her piano, and her portal to paradise, she realized what was lost to her no more: time. Not one more moment would be lost searching for paradise elsewhere. She would find it here -- in her home, in her mind, and with those she loved.

THE FIFTH MARATHON

The man at the end of the bar wasn't talking, which wasn't unusual. But he also wasn't drinking, which was unusual. He had sat at the edge of the bar for the better part of an hour, and had not touched his double shot of whiskey, or his tall glass of water whose beads of sweat were slowly dripping onto the bar.

The bartender wasn't much of a talker if people didn't want to talk. But this man had barely moved, and so as the bartender began to wipe the counter clean, he turned towards the man.

"What are those tattoos on your arm for?" he asked the man.

"These?" said the man as if coming out from a stupor. "Oh, these," he looked down at his right arm that had four red rings tattooed around it, each a separate band, about half an inch thick, separated in space by another half inch. "These are for all the marathons I've run," he said, and finally took a small sip of water.

"Four marathons, that's quite an accomplishment."

The man shrugged, “My wife used to do them all the time. It wasn’t my thing, but after she died—” he trailed off and looked into the distance, as if he could still see his wife there running in front of him.

The bartender wanted to say something to comfort the man, but he had the feeling that the man was better left alone in his silence. He had been silent the entire time there already. If he wanted to talk, he could talk. “Sorry,” was all that the bartender said. And he refilled the man’s water though it didn’t need it.

The man stayed at the bar for another hour, but he wasn’t thinking about his wife. He was thinking about another woman that was running. Running from him. She had been more resourceful than any other person before, outsmarting him more than once. But he still had his job to do, and she, as his target, could not be allowed to escape. Standing from the bar, the man left money for his drink as well as a generous tip. Though the bar was scarcely populated, the bartender did not notice him leaving. And when he looked back to where the man had been sitting, he saw the whiskey still in the glass.

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You are the woman.

You are scared. No, you are more than scared; you are frightened and horrified, terrified, almost petrified, and yet you are also awake, alert, alive. You feel your heart beating within you. Your adrenaline is rushing, has been for hours, and you wonder when it will give. Because it cannot last forever, and neither can you. It will be either you or him that goes, and you know that he is much better than you. You try to ignore this fact, this kernel of knowledge that rots away at your brain. If he is better than you, he

will win. And you know that he is, but he has to have made mistakes before. He is not perfect. No one is. No one is, no one is, no one is. You keep repeating this to yourself as you look around the second-hand store.

You cannot see the man.

No one is perfect.

You think about your husband, the one who sent the man after you. You think of everything. You think of finding him with the mutilated body on the ground, blood everywhere. Of the other men in the room with him. You hear his voice telling you that this one is not the first. Not even the second, or the third, or the fourth, but by then you had stopped listening, and were screaming instead. You remember shrieking; you were going to go to the authorities, tell someone, tell everyone. Then he grabbed you and you heard him telling you that he never loved you; yours was a marriage of convenience. You were never supposed to see anything, know anything, and now you know too much, and you don't like it. And you wish that you could unsee, unthink, unhear, un-feel everything. You wish you could go back in time twenty years, and instead of breaking down and crying when he bent on one knee with the ring, you wish you could slap him, grab the ring and throw it as far away as possible.

As far away as possible.

You breathe in, and open your eyes, fearful. Had the man come while you were stuck in the not-so-distant past? No. And you know that you must get as far away as possible.

Get as far away as possible for no one is perfect.

You have already escaped him more than once, and you know that this annoys the man, and yet when you saw his face in that crowd last time, and he nodded to you, you almost thought you saw respect in his eyes. Then you were running. You have heard about people tracking phones so you dumped yours in a trash can on the street. Wouldn't help to call anyone anyway. No friends could help, and the authorities all played as puppets in your husband's hands. You had learned that quickly. Too quickly almost, that everyone you thought you could turn to, only turned you around to face your husband once more and then you were running. Always running.

Run and get as far away as possible for no one is perfect.

That is what you think as you go through the clothes in the second-hand store. You choose something you never would have worn in your previous life, pay for it quickly then run to a department store across the street. You change clothes in the bathroom stall, lean against the door and breathe. Your heart is still trying to escape from you. You wonder if you run too hard and too long, will it simply give out? You cannot let that happen, because despite all of the fear and terror, you wish to live. You want to live. You must live.

You must live to run as far away as possible, for no one is perfect and you must live.

∞ ∞ ∞

The man found the woman easily. It was his job after all. She had not seen him yet. He almost smiled when he saw that she had changed her clothes. Smarter than other people, he thought. Most of them didn't even know they were being hunted, and then they were just gone. But she wasn't as stupid as she looked. The man had

expected her to have no brains, simply be attached to her husband's arm as she followed him from party to party, and occasion to occasion. But she had proven to be wiser than all that had come before her.

The man followed the woman from a distance. He could kill her here, right on the street. He had done it once before. A knife straight through the ribs into the heart. All that that target had done was let out a breath and stumble down. By then the man had already slipped away in the crowd. But this street was wider, not as crowded, someone might see him, which was fine. But remember him, which was not. So, he waited.

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You see him. He is behind you, and at first you panic. You stop and cannot breathe, and you look around you as if some haven will open up amongst all the shops lining the street. You know it is futile. You feel in your pocket for the knife you have. You wish it was something more than a small blade. You wish it was a thousand and one elite troops surrounding you, or a thousand and one Blackhawk helicopters rushing in to save you, a thousand and one any things. Even a thousand and one little knives, because even the man couldn't block a thousand and one knives flying at him all at once.

After you remember to breathe, telling yourself not to panic, you pretend that you did not notice him. You keep to the streets; you round a corner, and then you begin to run. When he rounds the corner, you know that he will be coming after you. Your lungs are heaving; breaths come in gasps. You hear his feet behind you. People scream at you and you run into them, brush past them.

"Watch out!"

“What the fuck.”

“Dumb bitch.”

If only they knew; if only they knew they would be running too.

Your lungs are on fire; your arms pump and your feet hurt. You see a taxi, a free one, and think you have found your salvation. If only you can make it there. You put on a sudden burst of speed and hail the yellow blur.

“You look like you’re in a hurry—” the taxi driver begins.

“Drive,” you breathe out.

“Where to?”

“Anywh—ah!” You scream. The man is there opening the door and you grab the handle and begin to pull it shut. “Drive, drive, drive.”

The taxi driver, barely thinking, puts his foot to the gas and you pull away from the curb.

“What the fuck?” he screams.

The man is still holding onto the handle.

“Faster, faster,” you shriek as if the driver isn’t already accelerating. Your muscles tense up; you cannot breathe, and all you can see is the man.

“What the fuck,” the driver yells again, as the man is ripped away from the taxi. He couldn’t hold on. He’s down in the street; he has to be. “What the fuck,” the driver keeps shouting.

“My ex-husband,” you lie, feeling all the blood rushing around your body, quickly through your heart and all back out again. “I haven’t left the house in days, I thought—”

Whatever you thought doesn't matter because suddenly there is a loud bang and half the cab driver's head is gone. There is a hole in the driver's window and the glass has cracked. The car lurches sideways and you are thrown against the seat, the sound of your screams muffled as your head hits them. Another car scrapes along the side of the taxi as horns blare and then the cracked driver's window shatters open. The dead driver's body is pushed aside and the man is there, lowering himself into the car. He wasn't lying on the street, dead; he had jumped onto the roof of the cab. And he is right there in front of you.

The car slows as the dead man is pushed aside, and his foot no longer holds the pedal down. But then the man presses it down and you are going fast. Faster than before. You scream and hit out at him. With one hand, he grabs your arm. You try to break free as you feel bones on the verge of snapping. Tears are coming to your eyes. Not even of pain, but of fear and the end. If it was going to happen to you, you hadn't wanted it to be painful. Not like it must have been for that body downstairs, at the feet of your husband. Limbs twisted, fingers cracked and barely recognizable, bits of ear cut off. No, not like that, not like that.

You can feel your bones are about to break, and you are screaming. You cannot move because if you do, you will end up breaking the bones yourself. The man was better, just as you thought. Then you remember the knife, your one saving grace. You pull it from your pocket with your left hand and begin slashing wildly. You cannot even see. Your body is in the rushes of a sudden adrenaline and nothing makes sense except for stabbing again and again. You hear the man scream, and you can finally breathe, and move again. You pull back.

Your arm comes out of his grasp, but you can see the man turning towards you. You're off the main streets now, you don't even know where. There seems to be no one there but you, and no one would spare two glances at a yellow cab barreling down the street. Everyone has got places to be. At the speed you are going, no one will see the shattered driver's window or the body slumped in the seat.

The body. You feel a bit of bile rising in your throat as you think of it, but maybe the cab driver can still save you. As the man turns, you grab onto the cab driver and shove him over. His dead weight falls against the man, and as he is distracted, you hurl forward, something the man does not expect. He expects everyone to run, yet here you are challenging him. Your foot connects with his face, your hand grabs the wheel. You jerk it left, right, left, right. He still has a hold of it, and the body between you protects you for a moment. You know the man still has a gun and wonder how to disarm someone with a gun.

In the end, it doesn't matter because there is a honk and as the man turns to look out the windshield, you see the semi-truck coming towards you. You are on a one-way street, going the wrong way. The man tries to swerve, but you still have the wheel too and as he pulls left, you pull right, back towards the truck. The man screams, beats on your hand, and as you let go you also reach behind you. Before the truck hits, you unlatch the passenger door and tumble onto the ground.

You see the taxi being smashed by the truck; you see it spinning away, flipping up onto its side. It hits a mailbox. You wonder why you take that in, letters flying in the air instead of the screeching of metal on metal, the crumble of cement as the car slams

into it, upending again, and coming to rest upside down. It seems like the car has been compacted to half its size.

You breathe. There are terrible burns running up and down your arms and back. That's how you landed, down on your back, turning over once or twice, the grit of the road scraping your skin away. But you are still alive.

You watch the car. No one comes out.

The truck has stopped. The driver is opening the door. You stand, cradling your left arm to your chest. You have to move. You cannot be here when police arrive. They will take you in, and then your husband will know you are alive. You slip into an alley and look back one more time. You breathe again.

You have been running, for longer than you thought possible, to live. And you thought he had been better. But no one was perfect.

∞ ∞ ∞

You are in a hotel room now, sleeping. The bed is warm, the blankets soft. You have taken a shower, bathed your wounds. You felt normal again after bathing. The gashes along your arms were bad, but not deep and your left arm can still move though it is sore. You had wrapped yourself in nothing but a towel as you had laid down to sleep. Your clothes were ruined. Tomorrow you will go out and buy some more. Something nice, something you would normally wear. Then you will leave; your husband will never know where you are. You are safe.

In the night, your eyes crack open. The red light from the restaurant's sign across the small alley is bothering you. You start to get up to close the curtains and you freeze. Someone is sitting next to your bed in the darkness. And even though you cannot see

him, you know it is the man. You see the blood that soaked into his pant legs; you see his left arm bound in some sort of sheet. And you see the gun that is pointing at you, silencer screwed to the end.

Your breath comes in little gasps. No, no, no, no, no. This was not how it was supposed to end. No, no, no, no, no. You had been better; you had been better.

You begin to move, to reach towards the bedside table.

“Don’t move,” the man says. It is the first time you hear his voice besides the screaming. It sounds labored, and it is long before he speaks again. Every breath he takes is slow and halting, but the gun does not waver.

All you can see of his face, are his eyes, so white in the darkness, except for the black holes that are his pupils.

He breathes again, his chest moving so slowly that if his arm still wasn’t extended with the gun, you would think him dead.

You begin to breathe in time with him; it is so slow. And as you breathe with him, your heart calms. You begin to sit up again.

“Don’t—” he begins.

“I’m only sitting,” you say. And as you do, you keep your towel wrapped firmly around your body. You are still afraid; all the terror has returned. But you won’t run anymore. He watches you in the dark and you watch him. He does not talk. “Please—” you start to say, and he barks out quickly, “Don’t beg. It never works.”

You keep your mouth open and finish what you had begun. “Please, don’t let it be painful,” you say.

You see the man blink slowly, his eyes disappearing for a moment then reappearing in the dark. It is the first time you have noticed him blinking, ever. He seems to pause, his eyes looking down for a moment. Is he shocked by the request? "It won't be," he whispers. His eyes meet yours again.

There is a small pop.

You feel something tear into you, and something warm beginning to run over you. Into the towel, into the sheets. Your hand is curling tight, and then it is relaxing. You can hear your heart in your ears, beating, beating, beating. Slowing, slowing, slowing. You never screamed when your death hit you, only breathed out a last sigh. You are no longer afraid, and wonder why you even tried to run in the first place. For all along you knew he was better. And weren't you right in the end?

∞ ∞ ∞

The man walked slowly down a street. He had healed, save for a limp in his left leg. He was determined to train until his could get rid of that limp. Not that it would matter much. He had made enough money from the last job that he could disappear forever if he had wanted to. As he reached a small tattoo parlor sandwiched between the shops that lined the street, the man pushed the door open. A little bell rang.

The owner of the tattoo parlor looked up as the man entered, "Another marathon run?" he asked the man, smiling.

"Yes," said the man.

"How was it?" the owner asked, seeing the man's limp and thinking he must have been pretty sore.

“Harder than the others,” the man said.

“But you finished?”

“Oh yes,” said the man quietly. “I finished.”

When the man left the parlor that afternoon, five red rings encircled his right arm.

THE CAPEMAKER OF COMEUPPANCE ALLEY

Pearl frowned as her knotted fingers investigated the roll of shadowy black cloth.

Her hands understood fabric better than her eyes now. Time was when she could spot a dropped stitch across a room. No longer.

“Useless interns...” she muttered, hovering doggedly over unacceptable stitches. A few of the interns in the room rolled their eyes at each other, but no one dared say anything aloud.

Pearl was the Capemaker of Comeuppance Alley, and she ruled over the shop with a quiet rage. Not a single intern had been chosen to continue onto an apprenticeship in her shop since Pearl had turned eighty. That was four years ago.

There was gossip on campus now. About whom would take over when Pearl retired.

She sniffed. *I'm not going to retire. They'll come in — some dull, gray morning — and find me lying dead over the loom. That'd suit me fine. Malcontent will just have to find himself a replacement then. Otherwise, one bad stitch and he'll fall right out of the sky.*

“Master Capemaker?”

The voice wavered behind Pearl.

She turned grudgingly, putting one shaky hand on a worktable. Malcontent's new assistant. Pearl hated them. Chosen for their looks rather than their brains. Barely knowing what their new employer would require of them. *Why don't they wise up?*

“Malcontent would like to know— he, um—.” The handsome young man was quailing under Pearl's disdainful gaze. “Wh— what is the status of the Valkyrie cape?” he finally blurted.

“You may tell Malcontent that the Valkyrie is coming along as planned. It won't be completed any earlier. Malcontent will have to be *content* to wait.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, ma'am.” He bobbed his head, blonde waves of hair flopping over thickly lashed eyes. Pearl turned back to the black roll of fabric.

Underneath Pearl's irritation with the question lay a simmering pride in the answer.

The Valkyrie would be her finest cape. Dreamt, designed, and crafted for Malcontent's next dastardly escapade. His plan required a cape that offered both nimble maneuvering and high endurance for an extended over-water trip.

Malcontent could fly, yes — *blah, blah* — but Pearl's capes transformed his flight from that of a duck to that of a falcon. In this world of Talents, whether superhuman or vague, Pearl's Talent was knitting.

It didn't matter if she made socks or baby blankets or capes, the fabric made by Pearl was extraordinary. She *imbued* it with intelligence.

But the craft demanded excellence. The wrong weave, a stitch turned backward, a gauge too large or too small, and a magical cape would become a death sentence.

Malcontent trusted her to get it right.

This roll of black fabric now in her hands was made by an intern. *Whatever her name is*. Twelve feet of Malcontent's standard black. Two capes for regular villain use, nothing special, were supposed to be cut from this roll. *Supposed to be*.

"Who did this one?" she growled.

Whispers set off behind her back.

What did she say?

Who?

Huh?

Who made it?

Pearl sighed with irritation, tapped her foot.

She asked who did that roll!

Oh!

"It was Mindy, ma'am."

What a stupid name, thought Pearl.

Mindy approached, biting her lip and twiddling her thumbs.

Pearl turned to look at her, and gently pushed the roll with one hand along the table. Mindy's arms jerked forward and pulled back, unsure. *She thinks I want her to take it*, thought Pearl. Mindy's eyes darted between Pearl and the slowly moving roll, arms half-raised and waiting for a clear instruction. But Pearl kept pushing, pushing, pushing.

Until the roll toppled off the table and into the waiting garbage bin.

Pearl stared at the intern.

"I'll do better, ma'am," said Mindy.

Pearl nodded. "I'm leaving. Archie, make sure the daily quota is met. I don't care how long you're all here."

Archie, her foreman, nodded once.

She walked to the door, strapped on her beige trench coat, and walked out into the sunshine.

Malcontent's campus was bustling. This, his headquarters, boasted four blocks of buildings and roads and scurrying henchman. The main office was on the corner of Mayhem and Malice. R&D was over on Vindication Way. Logistics was on Retribution Boulevard. The event center (with free meeting rooms for up-and-coming young villains) was on Death Approaches Avenue. Costumes was wedged into Comeuppance Alley. The cape shop and the leotard shop. *Those fools*. Pearl nodded at Benji, the Master Leotardist. She snorted and fell slowly into her gray Buick. A faded plastic daisy bobbed and smiled on the dashboard.

Pearl flashed her badge at the guard booth and the gate creaked slowly open. On her way out, she passed the paint-peeled sign that read *The Real McCoy's, Fruit Packing Plant, est. 1977*.

The Buick trundled along.

Pearl loved driving ten miles an hour under the speed limit. It made people so mad. She was less likely to be a victim of road rage, now that she had a head of gray curls, but it was still fun to antagonize people. Her favorite bumper sticker said, "Yes, I *could* go slower."

The other bumper sticker said, "I Heart Shih Tzus."

Twenty minutes later, Pearl turned into the Wagging Tails Doggie Daycare parking lot.

A woman with bouncing black curls, and wearing pink scrubs covered in paw prints, opened the front door. She smiled. "Right on time, Miss Pearl! ShuShu has been waiting for you!"

"Thank you, Roberta. I need my ShuShu."

The lobby of the doggie daycare was painted an eye-watering lime green. Paw prints stenciled on the cement floor were scuffed and worn by the daily passing of both two-legged and four-legged creatures. The smell of everything-dog was not entirely masked by the vanilla candles burning on the coral pink reception desk. Potted plants on end tables were dotted here and there. And a giant plastic jug of milk bones waited by the door, next to a stainless-steel water dish that was always full and frequently boasted ice cubes.

It was secretly Pearl's most favorite place in the whole world.

Roberta followed Pearl down the kennel hallway, whose anticipation was reaching its climax. For this, the best moment of her day.

Picking up ShuShu from doggie daycare.

“ShuShu, baby, mommy’s coming!” called Pearl. Her voice sounded decades younger, even if it was still raspy.

A frantic, high-pitched yipping sounded in response. It was like glass shattering and falling to grind against a chalkboard, over and over in a maddening repetition. Roberta flinched but kept smiling. She did not want loyal Pearl to turn around and see her running in the other direction.

ShuShu was in Kennel 7. Her bark was much worse than her bite, as she was no bigger than a squirrel. Tiny, with fluffy cream and white fur, and with milky blue eyes that bugged out so far you nearly stooped to catch them before you realized they were firmly attached.

Like her owner, ShuShu was going blind and relied on her other senses.

Her whole tiny body wriggling, ShuShu pressed her face against the kennel door and whimpered.

“Look out, baby, I’m here. Back up, honey.”

Pearl opened the door at such a glacial pace that Roberta shifted her stance once or twice before leaning a hand against Kennel 6. The Labrador at the back seemed torn between hiding from ShuShu’s noise and getting attention from Roberta.

Pearl scooped ShuShu into her arms and nuzzled the dog’s face. Happiness radiated off the pair of them and Roberta chuckled as she handed ShuShu’s thin scrap of leash back to Pearl.

“Thank you, Roberta. And thank Melvin and Lola and Louise for me, too.”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

Pearl shuffled with ShuShu back to the Buick. She buckled the minuscule dog into a car seat she’d placed in the front passenger seat, and they made their slow way home. Pearl got to add another two tallies on her daily “got honked at” list, with a rare tally on the list titled “the driver flipped me off but looked remorseful when they saw how old I was.”

Dinnertime was as usual. Pearl steamed a quarter of a sweet potato and shredded two ounces of boiled chicken for ShuShu. For herself there was a deviled egg sandwich with lettuce, and a cup of hot tea.

No matter the weather, cold or hot, Pearl had to have a cup of steaming tea before bed. The hot liquid seemed to moisturize her body, helping her muscles and bones to move and bend.

Before bedtime, Pearl did yoga while ShuShu curled around her skinny wrists and sagging ankles.

Afterward, they both went to sleep in Pearl’s bed while frogs peeped music through her open window.

#

The next morning, Pearl dropped ShuShu back off at Wagging Tails with much face smushing and promises of swift return.

As she settled herself back into the Buick, Pearl felt her capemaker persona fall onto her shoulders. Her soft smile reversed itself and settled deep into the wrinkles

around her mouth and eyes. Thoughts of monthly quotas and knitting patterns and damn fool interns floated through her mind.

She sighed as the fruit basket on *The Real McCoy's* sign came into view.

Her thoughts drifted to the Valkyrie cape as she flashed her badge to the nameless guard at the booth. The cape was a thing of beauty. So darkly black that it hurt the eyes and baffled depth perception. Pearl's enhanced sense of touch was a gift for this project. She needn't use her eyes at all.

Plus, it gave her an excuse to tell the interns to bugger off.

But the color was nothing to the way the fabric *moved*. It did not flap and flail about, as all other capes did. If you looked closely, you could see the cape move *before* the wearer did.

As if the cape knew ahead of time what the wearer needed.

Like all capes, however, you had to be one hundred percent sure of its construction before you let someone fly off wearing one of them.

Malcontent would not get the Valkyrie until Pearl was sure it wouldn't kill him.

There was no love between Pearl and Malcontent. Only a grudging respect and mutual agreement on the best way to deal with the world.

For some reason, Pearl had never been good at making friends.

She assumed it was her general inability to respect anyone, but you never knew.

Pearl had been working for a wretched college theater department when she outed her Talent to society. In her late forties, long past the time when she found spirited college students fun and interesting, Pearl was on the verge of spontaneous combustion.

It was Romeo, of course.

He was the most loathsome student that Pearl had ever had the misfortune to fit for a costume. Unable to help herself, Pearl crafted a special cape for Act 1, Scene 5. And when Romeo raised his arms to croon "*Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright,*" the cape activated and launched Romeo through the roof of the theater.

Malcontent intercepted the police transporter as they were delivering Pearl to prison, after she lost her court case.

It was easy for him to spirit her away.

He did not show her his face, but she knew who he was. Of all the supervillains out there, Pearl did not hold Malcontent in complete contempt. His crimes were the usual ones. Bank and museum heists, kidnappings, criminal activity on the dark web. A murder here and there. But he didn't burn rainforests or eat endangered animals or give money to corrupt oil lobbyists.

Malcontent explained to her that he'd heard of what she could do. Then he'd handed her the cape he was wearing and asked her what she thought of it.

She told him she'd start on Monday.

And she'd been there ever since.

#

Two weeks later, Mindy was fired, and a new intern took her place.

And Malcontent was reaching the final stages of the heist which took place before the Valkyrie escapade.

"I heard it's going really well."

“Yeah, Boss should be getting some good grift on this one. Think we’ll see any of that?”

A snort. “Nah, not us. We’re the lowbies.”

Pearl had stopped caring a long time ago about what Malcontent did or why. She cared far more about her own small piece of the project and lived for design requirements that would stretch her imagination.

The Valkyrie cape was nearly ready.

Pearl had been working with the current prototype for a week now. It had passed every test she could throw at it, and none of the test flyers had crashed into the ocean, yet.

They had rescue boats waiting. Whiners.

She’d asked Malcontent for one final fitting before she put it through the last inspection. He would never come to her shop, however, so she boxed the cape and had an intern carry her sewing bag. At the main office she shooed the girl away, straightened her jacket, and walked up to Malcontent’s private quarters.

He stood there on a platform, surrounded by mirrors that showed him every angle, his body sheathed in the Master Leotardist’s black spandex. Malcontent was maybe ten years younger than Pearl herself.

She’d never asked.

He was reasonably fit. Enough to make her blush forty or so years ago at the first private fitting. Not anymore. His body was her living mannequin.

She opened the large black box slowly, as though she was revealing a sugary confection to her employer. Malcontent offered her the slightest lift in a corner of his mouth. It was all the compliment she'd receive from him.

The black box looked empty.

Pearl put a hand inside the box and grasped at shadows.

She pulled out a liquid darkness. Fabric flowed around her hands, and she turned her eyes away. Looking at the cape was sometimes disorienting enough to drop it, but she could at least *feel* the Valkyrie cape in her hands.

Malcontent turned his back to her and held his arms wide.

Pearl draped the cape over his shoulders. It melted onto his shoulders and hugged his upper back before flaring magnificently away from his hips and flowing to his feet.

It was *beautiful*.

At that moment, Pearl knew the cape was perfect. But procedures must be followed. She chuckled as she took final measurements and eyeballed the hemline, looked for stray ends of threads, and noted with glee how the black leotard looked gray against the blackest black of the cape. *Oh, that'll be fun to lord over Benji.* Malcontent turned this way and that, as Pearl directed.

At a coded knock, Malcontent jerked his head and called out for the person to enter.

His head assistant walked into the fitting room and gasped.

"Is that— that is the Valkyrie cape, correct?"

Malcontent nodded and turned a proud gaze onto Pearl, who ignored it.

“That’s all for now, sir,” she said, reaching up to pull the cape from his shoulders.

#

And, finally, it was the day before the Valkyrie escapade.

Pearl had dropped off ShuShu at Wagging Tails. She’d given the staff a stale box of gingersnap cookies, with her usual profusion of thanks. ShuShu had cried while Pearl walked away from her.

It wrenched Pearl’s heart open every time she cried.

Because of this, she arrived at work in a foul mood. Wishing that her life was simply staying at home with her dog and seeing no humans, ever.

A note was taped to the shop door. Malcontent had called an all-henchman meeting in the event center at 10 a.m. sharp *or else*.

Pearl was to bring the Valkyrie cape for a formal presentation in front of the entire odious group.

This gave her two hours for final touches and tests.

Pearl gathered her staff and interns together at 8:10 a.m.

“No one is to disturb me while I wrap up the Valkyrie. *No one*. Understood? This is the highest priority today. I don’t care if Malcontent sends one of his brainless assistants with a question or a request or a demand. Tell them I am dying of dysentery in the bathroom if you must. This must be perfect.”

Her staff nodded and almost ran from her presence.

Pearl hid herself and the Valkyrie away in the prototype workshop.

She spread the cape out on a table.

Electrical cables were attached, and the cape was shocked at different voltages. Tested to make sure Malcontent could not be electrocuted.

She attempted to light the cape on fire with a blowtorch. But the cape simply steamed a foul-smelling vapor and refused to hold a flame.

Water ran off the table, the cape dry.

Lasers refracted into harmless rainbows.

Bullets ricocheted around the room.

Finally, Pearl hung the cape on a hanger and ran her hands along its length. Searching for stray threads and rents in the fabric. Enjoying these last few minutes with the greatest creation of her career.

Raising an eyebrow, Pearl discovered a millimeter of blackest thread poking out from the hemline. She pulled out a silver pair of stork-shaped embroidery scissors from her sewing basket. The sharpest pair she owned.

She snipped the stray thread, tucked the scissors carefully into her pocket, and folded the cape carefully back into the black presentation box.

Pearl sighed.

The Valkyrie cape was officially — *finally* — done.

She checked her watch. It was time.

#

At 10 a.m. sharp, every single henchman was seated in the event center. They chatted to each other. Occasional laughter burst up here and there from the crowd.

Pearl sat alone, grim-faced and impatient, in the front row.

She checked her watch. 10:07 a.m.

The whispers began at the back of the room.

Where is Malcontent?

He said '10 a.m. or else,' har-har, guess he's in trouble now.

Pearl glanced around, annoyed.

Wait, did you hear? He got into some trouble on the way in this morning.

Yeah, I just heard! A car chase with the cops and he didn't want to lead them here.

Apparently, there was a lot of damage in town, real close to here.

Pearl's heart stumbled once. *Damage in town? Where, exactly?* A cold sensation worked its way around her heart. She turned her head, straining to hear the chatter spreading like wildfire through the room.

The patrol car rammed through a gas station! There was a huge explosion.

Phone screens lit up throughout the room. Pulling up social media feeds and breaking news alerts.

The gas station is totally gone and...

"A gas station," whispered Pearl. *There's a station next to Wagging Tails. Oh god.*

But she heard nothing else until, at 10:32 a.m., Malcontent bounded up on stage. He was smiling in triumph. There was a bloody gash over one eyebrow and his eyes were bright and shining.

His staff applauded and laughed.

“Well, well! Here we are!” Malcontent spread his arms wide. “A bit of a kerfuffle on the way in, my apologies. Our town may be short a gas station and a doggie daycare now, but life goes on!”

All the blood drained from Pearl’s face, and she swayed in her seat.

Everything felt cold, her pulse drummed in her ears, and her stomach roiled. *ShuShu! No, ShuShu!*

The staff was chattering again, pulling phones back out.

Yep, it's in the news now. The gas station and some place called Wagging Tails. Complete losses.

Pain tore through Pearl and she leaned over the black box, gasping for air. *ShuShu. Roberta. My only friends. Oh god, ShuShu!*

After several minutes of protracted agony, Pearl realized Malcontent had stopped speaking and was holding out an arm to her. His face looked puzzled.

He's calling me up to the stage now.

Pearl staggered to her feet. She gripped the box like a life raft.

A white-hot burning began deep in Pearl’s chest, expanding outward. *Fury. Hatred.*

Pearl smiled.

On stage, she opened the box and presented the cape to Malcontent.

The crowd *ooh'd* and *aah'd* as she knew they would.

But she felt nothing as Malcontent paraded her finest creation.

Malcontent ended the big reveal and handed the cape back to Pearl. Under cover of his charisma, she folded the cape back into the box and took out the silver embroidery scissors still in her pocket.

The crowd was laughing behind her, their attention still on Malcontent.

Gripping the scissors tightly, Pearl leaned into the shadowy box and slowly, deliberately, *gleefully*, she cut a ragged line in the cape.

Scissor-proof, the cape could never be.

“Goodbye, Malcontent,” she whispered, shutting the lid. “Enjoy your final flight.”

HARLAN'S HOLES

Harlan stared at the hole. Over the past week, it had grown from a tiny dot into something slightly larger than a quarter. More than once he'd gotten close to it, tried to look inside, then backed away for what he convinced himself was a lack of interest.

It was just a hole in the wall.

So what if it kept *growing*?

He first noticed the hole—a pinprick at the time—after a battle with one of those godawful cockroaches that came out every time the lights went out or the rain fell. He assumed it was nothing more than a bit of cockroach gut which had splattered across the wall when his size 12 steel-toed boot smacked the life out of it.

The following night, appreciatively cockroach free, Harlan took notice of the hole again, now the size of a pea. He let loose a grunt of feigned interest and turned his attention to his dinner. Five days and five dinners later—still roach free—the hole was spellbinding, like watching static and looking for patterns in the noise.

The room Harlan occupied in the basement of Mr. Applebee's home was nothing he wanted but all he needed. If anything, it kept people from dropping by. He certainly couldn't afford one of those pleasant apartments, the ones with a kitchen and bathroom, but then again, he didn't need much. A chair, a television, and a few books were all that Harlan really wanted. Dinner came from a can. Empty Gatorade bottles and cardboard boxes worked well for collecting waste, and there was a garden hose just outside the basement's little window for that occasional shower to wash away the smells.

What he didn't need was a growing hole in the wall. If it grew any larger, he'd have to talk to Mr. Applebee upstairs, a task made more uncomfortable by a nasty mole on the old man's face. Aside from dropping off the monthly rent, conversation was practically nonexistent. Harlan liked his privacy, assumed Mr. Applebee was the same, and as long as neither one of them intruded upon the other's life, everything would be fine.

He stared again at the hole. There were things that lived in walls—nasty things with horrible, gnashing teeth and blood-red eyes. At least, that's what the movies told him. Baring such evil, there was certainly something sinister behind the oddity, and the more he convinced himself it was nothing but a hole, the more his mind attempted to fill that void with nightmarish scenarios.

Harlan knelt down a few feet away. It really was less like a hole a more like a blemish, devoid of feature. It almost hurt to look at, like a blind spot in a featureless world.

He leaned closer and blinked.

The hole blinked back.

Surely that was his imagination. Holes don't grow and certainly don't blink. He backed up against a far wall and stared. As unnerving as it seemed, he wanted the hole to blink again, if only to let him know his mind hadn't been playing tricks.

He slowly took a step closer. The hole stared back—a single eyeball in a masonry face. With each step Harlan took, it seemed as if the eye followed him. That was insane. Eyeballs aren't in holes and holes don't blink, especially in the basement of an old man's home.

It was all bullshit.

Harlan relaxed and grabbed a blanket from the couch. He needed to get some sleep and forget about the thing in the wall that really—*unquestionably*—wasn't a thing in the wall.

#

Curled into a ball on the couch, Harlan dreamed of a koi pond. It stretched end to end in his basement with a breaker box floating in the air above. The box was rusted, its door ravaged by years of neglect. Written in red paint across it was the word "OUT." Below that, by some four feet, the water of the pond covered most of the stepping-stones.

Mr. Applebee's wavering and ancient voice floated through the basement. "Check the breaker for me, Harlan. I think one of them is tripped. Something's wrong around here."

Harlan looked at all the fish swimming. He took a deep breath, stepped onto a stone in front of him, then gasped as the stone shifted. He fell, smacking his hip against something hard. Wincing, he reached for what had tripped him up.

The stone was a skull, a hole about the size of a quarter punched through its forehead. The skull smiled its rictus grin as if to say, "That's what you get for stepping on my head."

Mr. Applebee called again. "C'mon, boy! Trip the damn breaker."

Harlan opened his eyes.

His basement room was dark save what little light peeked through the door to the kitchen at the top of the stairs. He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead, tentatively checked to see if the floor was no longer a koi pond, and went back to sleep.

#

"Do you have any Spackle?" Harlan sat at the dinner table in Mr. Applebee's kitchen, his leg bouncing nervously.

"You got a hole?" Mr. Applebee rolled his belly around in his hands before taking a seat.

"Had a hole. Now got two."

"Hmm."

Harlan stared at the old man, but the sight of the mole—with an inch-long gray hair sticking out of it—made his stomach uneasy. He supposed it was just a symptom of old age, but the man was not blind. Didn't the thing wave back at him when he looked in the mirror?

"Well?" Harlan asked. "Do you?"

“Where are the holes?”

“In the wall. Far side of the basement. They’re—” Harlan cut himself short. Did he really want to say they were growing? Why not tell him one of them blinked? He looked back at Mr. Applebee and tried again to avoid the mole.

“Ain’t got any.” Mr. Applebee cleared his throat. “Sorry.”

#

The second hole grew faster than the first. Within a day, it was nearly the same size.

Neither of them blinked, however.

#

The koi pond was no longer full of koi. The skull he’d stepped on in the last dream stared up at Harlan as he stood in the water. The breaker box with the red “OUT” across the door still hung over the middle of the pond. If dreams had meaning—and Harlan was never one to discount the vividness of the subconscious—then the breaker box must mean something relative to his life. Maybe it was asking him to trip his own fuse, force himself back into some semblance of life where electricity actually flowed through his synapses like other people, the happy people on the television. Was living in a basement with two holes in the wall that stared at him and eating out of a can *really* a way to live? Certainly the meager sum he coaxed from the government and a few odd jobs couldn’t sustain life past thirty. Could it?

The skull rolled over, the jaw left behind. Harlan reached down and picked it up. The hole in the top of the skull seemed like a third eye, staring at some far off place that he could only know if he were in the skull’s situation. It was a strange skull, almost

bleach white, more like a model from a biology classroom than the dingy yellow he expected to see.

He dropped the skull in the pond and looked up at the breaker box. For the first time, Harlan noticed the door standing ajar, inviting him to look inside. He tentatively took a step toward it. Another step, and he was within five feet of the box, almost close enough to reach out and swing the door open.

#

Harlan woke in a sweat. Light filtered in through the small window. On the wall, the second hole had grown to be the same size as the first.

Stretched below, shaped like a jagged smile, a crack had appeared.

#

“Look, I really need some Spackle. The holes have grown and I’m afraid critters might find a nest.”

Mr. Applebee turned from the counter, his fat following him in slow motion. He lowered rimless glasses and peered at Harlan.

“Grown?” Mr. Applebee grunted and waddled toward the table. “Holes don’t grow unless you make them.”

Harlan tapped his finger on the table. “I need Spackle.”

“You want to cover up the holes?”

“And the crack.”

“The *crack*? You didn’t tell me about a crack.” Mr. Applebee took a sip of coffee from a stained cup and set it back down. “Are you up to something down there?”

“No, I’m not.” Harlan unconsciously stared at the mole, the hair waving back and forth—a single blade of gray grass in a liver-spotted field. “Do you have anything to cover the holes?”

“Well, now, let me see.” Mr. Applebee took another sip. The hair fluttered.

“Forget it.”

#

The crack opened slightly from the previous night, while the two holes remained the same size. No matter which way Harlan looked at the wall, there was now a face in it. He still hadn’t seen the holes blink again, and almost convinced himself that the first time was his unfettered, can-fed imagination.

Without further thought, he picked up two socks and a pair of yellowed underwear from the floor and stuffed them in the holes. It wasn’t what he wanted, but it broke up the scene enough to make it look less like a face and more like two socks and dirty underwear in a wall.

He stretched out on the couch, sighed and closed his eyes, waiting to dream of koi and electrical things.

#

The koi nibbled at his ankles. Harlan kicked a few times, then gave up. They were koi—fat carp with annoying designs on their scales. How much damage could nibbling koi do?

The breaker box called to him again, and he obliged, pushing past the koi in the pond to get closer. He reached the door and swung it open. Just like he suspected—but more of a surprise than a relief—there were sixteen switches, eight on the right and

eight on the left. He looked at the numbers and tried to pair them up with the faded sticker on the back of the door.

On the sticker was a list of names. Were they indications of the room they controlled? There was no one else in the house except for Mr. Applebee. Harlan guessed someone had created the list long before he moved in. Then again, it was a dream and if the breaker box was supposed to represent something his subconscious wanted him to see, then it made more sense that nothing really made sense.

“Where’s my name?” He listened to his voice echo in his dream basement. It bounced off the walls and returned to him in vibrations that registered through his body. Talking was a bad idea.

He looked at the first three names: Marcus Whitney, Joyce Dublin, Douglas Homan. None of them were names he recognized. They were mysteries, just like the breaker box, the koi, and those damned holes in the wall.

Harlan wiped dirt off the list and read the rest of the left side. No familiar names. Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe this dream was nothing more than a twisted expression of misfired synapses.

Then again, this was the *third* time it happened.

He shrugged his dream shoulders, kicked a dream koi off his ankle, and read the right side. David Brady, Harlan Hutchings, Richard Chiz—

Harlan Hutchings?

Written in faded red ink was his name. Reading it, however, made more sense than reading the names of people he knew he’d never met or wanted to meet.

He noted the number next to his name and looked at the switch. Sure enough, the damn thing had been tripped.

Just as he reached up to turn it back on, a koi took a bite out of his foot.

#

“Did you read the rest of the list?” The wall’s voice sounded concrete, solid, and maybe a little dry.

Harlan couldn’t move. The socks and underwear were on the ground, and in place of the holes were two very distinct eyes. The crack had widened a little more and grew lips, albeit cracked.

“Well, did you?”

#

“Look, if you don’t have any Spackle, do you have some boards and nails?”

Mr. Applebee shifted his weight, jiggling the left breast. He coughed and took a sip from his cup. “You want to nail boards into the wall?”

“To close the holes.” Damn that mole. “And the crack.”

“Right. The crack.”

Harlan knew he would not listen. The man was an idiot with a huge, hairy mole.

“Well, now, let me see.” Mr. Applebee took another long sip. “Nope. Can’t say I do.”

“Fine.”

#

The face greeted Harlan as he stepped off the stairs. “How ya doing?”

“Not well.” Why was he talking to a wall? For that matter, why was the wall talking to him?

“Did you get the boards and nails?”

“No.”

“How about Spackle?”

“No.”

The wall seemed to let out a sigh of relief. “Are you ready to listen to me?”

“No.”

#

The next dream was more or less the same with one distinction: where there was a skull before that seemed to smile at him, there was now a head that *definitely* smiled back.

He stepped around the head without a body and waded toward the breaker box. He thought he felt the eyes follow him, and in his dream world, the head even licked its lips.

Harlan stopped and looked back. The head indeed watched him as its tongue glided across its top lip. Just above the eyebrows, right in the middle, was the same hole he'd seen when the head was a skull.

He turned from the head to the breaker box and swung open the rusty door. He ran through the list of names again, looking past his own. Number 4 belonged to Nancy Jensen, then Petra Miles—more names he didn't recognize. Right under the fifth name, however, was a faded group of letters. They were hastily scribbled unlike the others, the

ink lighter. It looked like someone had tried to rub it off. Harlan gave up reading the first name, but the last name he pieced together: *Applebee*.

The fat, mole-faced old coot upstairs had infiltrated his dream. Harlan looked at the corresponding switch. It had been tripped, just like his.

What the hell?

“So, flip it back.” A man’s voice echoed through the room, the four words resonating through Harlan’s body in waves.

He turned to the severed head. “What did you say?”

“Flip it back.”

Harlan looked back to the switch and reached for his own.

The head coughed as if to get Harlan’s attention. “So, you’re stupid, right?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, to reset a breaker, what to you have to do?”

“Turn it off, then back on.”

If the head could nod, Harlan imagined it would have done so. Instead, it stared back while running its tongue across its upper lip. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Oh,” said Harlan, and he took a step back from the breaker box.

#

“Ready now?”

Harlan sighed, sat on the couch and stared at the two holes and crack in the wall. It wanted to chat, and who was he to ignore the plea of broken masonry? He snickered. *If walls could talk, indeed.*

“Mr. Applebee isn’t right in the head.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Listen and don’t talk.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re the fifteenth person to live here, in the basement. He doesn’t charge much rent so he can lure the degenerates of the world, those who, themselves, aren’t exactly right in the head.”

“Thanks.”

“Not a problem. Just pointing out things you already know. How many koi did you count in your dreams?”

“Five.”

“There were thirteen. You’re not very observant.”

“And the severed head?”

“Number fourteen.”

“And me?”

“Number fifteen. You’re next on the list.”

“Next for what?”

“I think you know the answer to that question.”

Harlan sat back. A wall just told him he was in danger. The dreams he had must have been messages imparted by whatever was living in the wall and making it talk.

Why not? If the wall could talk, why couldn’t it also invade his dreams?

Weird stuff.

Harlan raised a finger as if to make a point, opened his mouth to relay that point, then simultaneously closed his mouth and put his finger down.

“You want to know what to do about it, right?” The wall looked as forlornly as a wall could.

“Sure.”

“Flip the circuit.

“Flip it?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s all?”

“Flip it off, then leave it off. What do you think the breaker box controls? If everyone was given the chance to see the breaker boxes that hang all over this world, there’d be a lot fewer people to see the breaker boxes that hang all over this world.”

Harlan nodded. “Fine.”

#

He slept. It wasn’t easy, and he tossed about on the couch until fatigue beat out fear and a mind racing with more questions for the wall. Despite the trouble getting to sleep, the koi pond, breaker box and severed head came to his dreams.

“So, are you going to do it?” The head licked its upper lip. If a severed head could bob up and down in anticipation, Harlan imagined that was exactly what it was doing.

“Settle down. I’ll do it.”

The head smiled. Harlan stepped over a few koi and walked to the breaker box. The door seemed more rusted, and he finally understood what the

word “OUT” scrawled in red letters really meant. It was a release, and the breaker box was nothing more than an ethereal life switch.

He swung the door open and looked for “Applebee”, or the rubbed-off semblance of it.

There it was.

Number 6.

On the right.

This was it, a chance to save himself from becoming the fifteenth victim, a side note in the pages of history, a severed head or a ghostly koi swimming aimlessly in a dream pond in the basement of a demented man’s home.

“Do it!” The head’s voice echoed through the room.

Harlan reached up...and stopped. A thought, a memory, crept up and bit into him. Why, in the first dream, did Mr. Applebee call out to him? Why did he ask to check the breaker box? Did he know something was wrong with him, that his life was somehow not right, and he needed Harlan’s help to get it started again?

The head growled. “Turn the thing off!”

There *had* to be a reason. His own switch was tripped—like his own life. He knew he couldn’t flip it off and on again to save himself, but what if Mr. Applebee was crying out for help? What if Harlan—given this gift by the ghosts and spirits and otherworldly fish and basement walls—now had the power to put back into place a life that was off?

“What are you waiting for?” The head’s voice was steely through the room.

“I’m not sure this is the right thing to do.”

“He’s a killer. Look at my forehead. Do you think I grew a third eye just for the hell of it? Do you think a talking severed head is *normal*?”

Harlan looked at the head again, surrounded by koi. They all seemed to look right at him, pining for justice. He felt like an executioner standing next to John Wayne Gacy, seeing all the faces in the crowd waiting for him to carry out the one thing they could not, the one thing of which they were incapable. And not because each of the faces in the crowd didn’t want to, but because they couldn’t legally carry out the sentence. Here, though, in the dream basement koi pond of Harlan’s mind, he could do what no one else had the power to do.

Harlan reached back to the breaker without looking and flipped the switch.

Number 2.

Right side.

Wrong switch.

THE END

YESTERDAY'S FOREST

You can hear it in the breeze.

*The way the dirt is lined with
memories. The hums birds have
unnaturally learned. There is
something more, something secret.
Something stolen.*

I lifted my fingers up, dripping with mud from the words I'd written. Words laced with such nonsense that if the elders knew I'd written them, I'd be known as the delusional one in my tribe.

I sighed in the after-rain air. Scribbles lined the trees, marking the notes I'd gathered from the changes I've been spotting. I rubbed my legs, I always did like how my mossy skin looked like feathers, as if I could sprout wings and fly off. But as I glanced at the distant moss path, as it began its nightly glow, I knew it was time to get home.

The path was silent and still, everyone was too busy preparing for the festival to take time for a stroll.

I came to the arched narrow leaf cottonwood trees and entered into the sound of the village.

Moss elders and moss greens were all rushing to get to their duties. Mosslings dashed past without a care, much to the scolding eyes of the elders. Mossfolk had unique mossy skin, strange noses, pointed ears, and vibrant eyes. Unlike most creatures, we walked on two feet and used our intellect to care for the forest and animals. The elders were distinguished by their rougher moss and arched backs, the mosslings by their small bodies and underdeveloped moss, and us moss greens by our healthy moss, luscious hair, and our energy the elders called our "youthful glow."

"Why, if it isn't the bottom-rock dweller," whistled a moss green with arched eyebrows and spiked autumn hair. His complexion wasn't like mine, it was smooth and bright, but his sneering eyes gave away that the handsome male wished he had

ditched with me. The trouble-maker classmate, Ceratodon, who'd only answer the professors if they called him Cern.

I nodded to him but he grabbed my arm and I sighed.

"Stega, I wonder where you disappear to everyday, when you think no soul is watching..." he grinned, tilting his head.

I leaned in close enough to smell the festival plumberry pies on his breath. "If I told you, Cern, I'd have to kill you."

"You say that with such a straight face that I can't tell if you're joking or not," he said, raising his eyebrows.

I turned to leave, but he snatched my wrist. His purple eyes leered as they noticed the mud. "You've been *writing*. Oh tortulas, that's forbidden!"

I ripped my hand out of his grasp, picking up my pace towards the crowd.

"Stega! Over here!" Mother called. "Here you are, you can sew the costumes for the entertainment portion of the show."

"Mother..." I objected.

“Stega is very good with her hands,” called Cern from a tree branch.

I shot him a glare, but he sucked in his lips innocently.

“Oh, perfect, your friend can help you,” Mother said.

A grinding of teeth was heard from my direction.

“Stop that,” Mother swacked me. “Get along, you're not a mossling anymore.”

I handed Cern some materials to sew and he took it with shining eyes. He was dying to tell her, to tell everyone...

“What's the catch?” I whispered, sewing a cape together.

“My silence is a difficult thing to buy...” Cern hummed. “But here's the deal-- you takeme to your secret base and I'll shut up.”

“Fine,” I agreed, thinking of how childish he was to call it a secret base.

He pricked his finger and green blood bubbled down. I snatched his hand, gently applying my stash of fairy tears to his finger. Immediately the wound healed and my eyes went up to his. His green mossy face was no longer the same color, it was

blazing red. I released his hand, getting back to my work in a hurry.

I gaped. My moss spiking with chill. What happened?

My hideout was scattered all over the place. Like a stampede had trampled it.

“Looks like the secret has been compromised,” Cern frowned. “Burns, I was really looking forward to it... What?” he said at the look of surprise on my face.

I shrugged, my eyes tracing the moonlight trail. I gestured for him to get down. “Do you--” I whispered as he got inches from my face. I flicked his nose. “Do you see that?” I huffed.

“Looks like fairy dust,” he observed. “Woah, she’s following it?” He slunk after me.

Glowing toadstools vibrated as we passed by. “Do you feel that?” I asked.

He nodded, shivering. “That’s strong magic.”

“Magic,” I repeated, bending down to feel the earth’s tremors. “No, not exactly. It’s metallic, it’s gears, it’s a whisper in the dark.”

His lips turned an anxious blue.

We paused at a wall of pine tree branches, I took a deep breath, pushing back the branches while Cern took his place at my side.

The branches opened to a clearing, our eyes following the rising mountain. Resting on a ledge was a large ribcage layered wooden building with a rusting roof. Very untraditional to the way Mossfolk made houses, which was with mud and stone. The thing was held up with a few supporting sticks, but one landslide could send it tumbling.

“What creature made this?” Cern breathed.

“Want to find out?” I slid him a glance and he nodded.

We slowly scaled the mountain, our feet not used to climbing surfaces this steep. We reached the first support stick and used it to hoist ourselves onto the landing.

“Woah,” we said together, craning our necks to gaze at the altitudinous building, creaking with the winds’ push. There was a sign hanging beside the door. I moved forward, but Cern grabbed my wrist.

“What?” I asked.

He smiled with no answer, his legs buckling.

I grinned.

“I’m not scared, it’s just that this building looks unstable. I don’t know if we should go in,” he said. “I’m worried for your safety.”

I put my small hand into his. “I’ll stay beside you the entire time. Besides, aren’t you curious?”

He tightened his grip around my hand and led us forward. “I know this language... I’ve seen it around in abandoned places...” he said. “Co... Col-or-ado.”

“Doesn’t that mean color?” I observed. “What does that word below it mean?”

“Not sure,” he scratched his head. “Well, let’s go in.”

The wood smelled moist as we entered, light pouring in from the long windows. It was a spacious dirty building full of tables. Cern observed the sharp axe-like tools while I picked up a rock on the table. It glimmered in the moonlight. Gems! Blue, pink, red, dancing through the dust. I showed Cern who traced his fingers over it, his face numb with shock. It had been centuries since we’d seen gems.

While he studied it, I went around to explore upstairs. I came to a room with a single table piled with stacks of paper and gems. I slid my hand across the table, dust jumping into the air. That was when my hand landed on something cold with a hide-like build. Blowing off the dust, I saw words I didn't understand so I called Cern up.

"It says 'diary,'" he told me, flipping open the pages. "It's a recording... of this man's life and inventions. Incredible..."

"What?" I leaned in.

"Look at these sketches of tunnel passages, devices to harvest gems, to use water for energy, this is nothing like Mossfolk have. This would change everything, we could explore more land, make work easier on our elders, and everyone would be wealthy," the gem fell out of Cern's hand and onto the floor.

"Wealth is a disease," came a hollow voice echoing around the walls.

Cern and I put up our fists, alert to any sound.

An old fairy dressed in tattered rags and a face of cracked dust came with a limp. "You should not have followed me here."

"You're the one who left your trail of dust behind," I told him. "You *wanted* us to

follow you.”

He sneered so quickly I almost didn't catch it. “Do you know the name of that race? The beast that ruled all and ruined all. They brought their death on themselves. Of course you wouldn't know, they have been erased from memories. The forest would burn if they were to return.”

“What is their name?” I demanded and his eyes darkened with ugly hatred.

“Humans,” he spat. “Long may they stay in the ground. Never will they rise.”

“That's not what you said,” I raised one eyebrow. “You said, ‘if they were to return,’ which means there is a chance they could come back.”

He bared his broken teeth, “Give me that diary. No creature shall remember this race, for the good of the forest.”

“Sounds to me like you just don't want our kind to succeed,” Cern pocketed the diary.

The fairy's face rose with color. “Give that back!” he shouted. “You want the sweets of the story? Well, here it is, the humans began to burn the forest, they turned on each other, they had become too knowledgeable and yet all too stupid. So they were wiped out.”

“By who?” Cern was catching on. “By the keepers of the forest? The fairies?”

“By themselves,” he snarled, but his tone was oddly higher.

“We aren’t humans,” I said. “So we will handle this information as carefully as possible.”

He glanced at us both, slowly inching forward, his wings dragging on the ground.

“Cern!” I shouted as the fairy pounced at him.

He moved with sneaky feet in time to dodge the creature.

I picked up a weapon from the floor. Raising it to his throat. “Who are you?”

His irises went opposite ways inside his eyeballs, “They call me The Forgotten. Collector of time’s lost memories. That’s right, I take everyone’s memories and... dispose of them. For the good of creature-kind.”

“What good do lost memories do for us? We have a right to know about the past!” I drove the blade closer. “My father is a nightwatcher, do not trifle with me.”

The Forgotten grabbed the blade with the inside of his knuckles. “Yes, but you are not your father. Your heart is much too mellow...” He pushed against the blade, my

grip shaking. Blood dripped down his hand, and in my moment of hesitance, he turned the blade on me and my wrist slit open.

Grunting with the pain, I tumbled backwards. Cern quickly wrapped his cloak around the gushing cut.

“No-- the diary!” I inhaled as the fairy snatched it away.

We chased after him, through the rooms and down the steps, over the tables, and all the way up onto the rooftop. The tin roof clanged as we dashed across it, the fairy holding the book towards the cascading cliffside.

“This information--” I insisted and he looked up at me. “Could solve our droughts, and create richer soil, it would supply enough food for all creatures. No fawn would go hungry, no winter would take thousands of lives. We could rise and become something better together.”

“Spoken like a true human,” he sighed, his expression puckering at the slip.

Cern grabbed his collar and rattled him. “What do you mean by that?”

The fairy held the diary by a single page that was slowly tearing.

“Well, now you know, and I can’t deny it. The Mossfolk were the last of the humans before the fairies bestowed their mercy and changed them into what they are. Removing their memories, erasing their faults, and it’s better this way,” he chanted.

“You mean...” my fists unrolled. “That we’re *humans*?”

“Were,” he corrected. “And I’m going to make sure that the human race will not resurface again.”

“How will you do that?” Cern snarled. “Even if you drop the diary, you can’t keep us silent.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, moss green,” the fairy smirked. “I may be too old to control the magic of erasing memories, but there are other ways.” His body paled until it exploded into fairy dust and swam upwards. Cern snatched the diary, before it could plummet below, while I held onto Cern to keep him from falling.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said.

Rumble! The earth shook, the tin roof creaking as small rocks crumbled down.

“Ava--” I gasped.

--Lanche," Cern echoed.

With a crack like thunder, the stampede of rocks began to fall.

We bolted back into the building and down the stairs, entire boulders ripping through the ceiling. Passing the tables of precious gems, I wanted to reach out and grab one, but there was no time. If we didn't hurry...

Smash! The front door was blocked with a boulder the size of half the building. I took Cern's hand and led him to the north window, but rafters from the ceiling fell in front. The entire west section was flooded with stone, our only hope now was the south balcony. We jumped over falling debris, our eyes hooked onto the doorway.

That was when he showed up again and we stumbled to a stop. The Forgotten leaned in the doorway, taunting us. He gave a grim bow of his head, "May the secret die with you."

I screamed as the wall came towards us-- we were going to die and no creature would know the truth.

A cold hand grabbed mine and pulled me down into the floor, a door shutting above us, right before we heard the deafening plunk of the wall falling.

I sucked in air mercilessly, my eyes adjusting to the dark. The rust of a ladder scraped my feet.

“We’re in a tunnel leading underground,” Cern whispered as we climbed down. His eyes fell on a metallic cart once we reached the bottom.

My heart pounded, calming with the drip of water. “We’re alive.”

“Until that idiot of a fairy finds us.”

I could hear The Forgotten clattering down the ladder. Doing some quick reading, Cern picked me up and put me in a steel cart. He began pushing the cart down a pathway, then hopped in. The wind bellowed in our ears, sharp turns almost sending the cart flying off into the abyss below. The cart began to rise up a hill and I looked wearily towards Cern.

We saw the drop at the top of the hill before it plunged down and our stomachs rose into our throats. We laughed insanely, the cart supporting unstoppable speed now, straight out through the cave, but oh no-- we had no way of stopping. We bolted into the open air, back into the forest, finally falling out onto the soft grass.

Cern gave one more chuckle before we swept ourselves up and rushed towards the village. We must have been gone for two moon falls because we could hear the

jitter of voices and the whistling of instruments. The festival had begun.

“He’s coming,” Cern called as we stepped onto the moss path and it lit up with the glow of the night.

We rushed into the village, pushing through the crowd to get onto the stage. “We made it--” I gasped, turning to Cern. He wasn’t behind me. I shot my eyes through the crowd. My grip tightened around the diary. “Cern?”

A sparkle of fairy dust hit the moonlight, and without thinking, I ran towards it. Into the shadows behind the stage. I could hear Cern breathing roughly, smell his blood as it trickled into the grass.

The Forgotten’s blade shimmered in the moonlight, he came into the light, his dagger at Cern’s throat. His body was cut up unnecessarily.

“Give me the diary,” The Forgotten said, his dagger driving closer to Cern’s throat. His eyes glimmered with enjoyment. “Or I’ll make his death, and yours, more bloody than it needs to be.”

I didn’t move. My hands trembled, but I hid them behind my back.

He rolled his eyes. “Or, if you’d like... you can tell the entire village-- and I can slit

each and everyone of their throats.”

“You wouldn’t,” I croaked.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep this secret safe,” his eyes flashed.

“How...” Cern coughed. “How about looking behind you.”

Smack! The Forgotten drowned in Mother’s fist as she came to our rescue. He got back up and came at her with his dagger.

“No you don’t,” Cern and I said together, pinning the fairy down.

The festivities quieted down as the Mossfolk’s leader stepped through the crowd towards us. She eloquently bent down, staring into the soul of the fairy. Without a word, she looked kindly towards me and held her hand out for the diary. I gave it to her and she read it thoroughly. She handed the diary back, gesturing me towards the stage with a nod of her head. Cern walked with me, both of us glancing back to see our leader casting the small fairy in her edging shadows.

The time for ignorance was over. Maybe humans were evil, maybe they were good, there was no telling what we would become, but we couldn’t ignore our history. With each step up the stairs, I knew revealing this secret would change our lives. We

used to be humans, now we are the Mossfolk. Soon, we would be something else altogether.

I wondered if we were making the right choice by telling them. We could be happy just the way we were... but... what were we? Slaves of forgotten memories? No, we had to move forward, break free from the lies we were living. Cern nodded to me, his blood splattering to the stage floor. We risked everything to get to this point. It was time to take back what was stolen.

“Mossfolk everywhere, there is a truth that has been stolen from us...”

SAYING GOODBYE

"Why are you here?" I ask myself as I stand in Garden of the Gods, needing a reminder of how I got to this moment.

This beautiful example of the wonders of nature is not my main destination but I knew it had to be a stop on my journey. It's dark now, but I know something wonderful is awaiting me once the sun rises. With about fifteen minutes until the sun begins creeping into view, I can't help but think of what brought me here.

My mind summons the clear memory of the day he first brought up the idea of visiting the Pikes Peak region, "I'm telling you we have to go."

"When?" I asked my boyfriend Charlie as we lay together on our couch back home in Ohio.

"As soon as possible," he smiled his dazzling smile that I could never refuse, his eyes full of excitement and love. "My parents and I went every summer growing up and it was always my favorite part of the year. I've been thinking we need a vacation anyway and I just know this is a place we need to experience together."

"Let's do it," I told him, my smile even bigger than his at that point.

We spent the next several months saving up and planning our trip to Colorado Springs. As we imagined all of the cool places we'd explore together, he'd tell me stories of the times he visited when he was younger, painting images in my mind with his words.

"You're going to love it all so much Elodie," he kissed me on the cheek after our plans were set and we officially bought our plane tickets.

If only I had known then that a short month later, the worst moment of my life would occur and he'd lose his life in a car accident. The fact that we had planned this entire trip had been pushed down in my mind, buried by funeral arrangements, packing up his things, and most of all, my overwhelming grief. For weeks I trudged through the minutes, praying for the sweet release of sleep. One day I dragged myself from bed and was sitting at his grave, not saying anything but needing to be near when my phone "chirped" with the notification from the airline about our flights. I immediately thought about canceling the trip, hopefully without any repercussions, when a light breeze picked up my hair and caressed my skin. Despite it being the craziest thought I've ever had, I knew it was a sign from him that I needed to go.

Up until the moment I stepped foot in the airport, I wasn't one hundred percent sure I could do this, but part of me knew that I needed to experience one of his favorite places in the world to begin healing. Logically, I knew I had my whole life to visit, but there was this pull inside my chest telling me it's something I needed to do now. Sitting here, waiting for the new day, I know it was the right thing to do. I look around at the dark shadows of the giant rocks and the mountains in the distance and think of the evening he told me about his last visit here.

"My parents and I got up before dawn," he told me in his deep voice, "I remember being a little asshole to them for making me get up so early."

He laughed and reached behind the couch to grab the old scrapbook his mom had brought over for us to flip through in preparation for the trip.

"I thought that it was pointless because we'd been there before and could it really be that different at the butt crack of dawn?"

"I'm guessing you were wrong?" I teased him as he flipped through the pages.

"You bet your cute butt I was wrong," he chuckled and pointed to a picture. "Watching the sun rise while being surrounded by so many beautiful and natural creations of Earth was a kind of peace I haven't truly felt since."

I gazed at the thirteen year old version of my Charlie, basking in the glow of early morning light. His young eyes were full of amazement and his soft smile is lit up in the honey glow of the morning. I looked up from the photo to my 30 year old Charlie and I could see the wonder never fully left his eyes. Every day he'd point out the small but

amazing things he appreciated about the world, whether it be the way the clouds form in the sky or how a worm squirms across the ground. He loved it all.

My plane landed in the Springs late yesterday afternoon. I picked up my rental car, arrived at my downtown hotel, and then crashed early so I could be here before sunrise. Driving this morning in an unfamiliar city in the complete dark caused my anxiety levels to grow. Remembering some of Charlie's last words got me through each mile.

"No matter what," he began unprompted during a commercial break the night before he died, "always remember that I think you are an amazing and beautiful human who can do anything."

"Where did that come from?" I asked, bewildered by the sudden sentiment.

"I was just thinking about how much I love you and felt like I needed to say it out loud."

We snuggled closer on the couch and I remember thinking at that moment, I had never been so happy and loved in my life and that I couldn't wait to marry this handsome man. As I drove this morning, it took everything in me to focus on his loving words and not on the pure horror that the next day would be the worst day of my life. His words echoed in my mind the whole way north on Interstate 25 and down Garden of the Gods road until I arrived at the park. As the sun is beginning to climb over the horizon in the eastern plains, his words bring me comfort once again.

I watch the rays of our planet's biggest star slowly start to reach out and touch the trees, clouds, and grass around me. It brings so much light and warmth to our lives.

Overwhelming calm takes hold of me as I begin to feel my own kind of peace in this moment.

For a brief second, guilt and anger take control but I push them down. There is a permanent empty space next to me where he belongs. I wish more than anything that we could be experiencing this together, but I know he wouldn't want me to dwell on the should haves and what ifs. Grief has its place. Grief has been my constant companion for the last month but I know right now I need to focus on healing. On beginning to truly say goodbye and embracing my life without him.

The sun rises higher and I sit in quiet contemplation, listening to the birds awaken and venture into the sky. Though it's early, a few other people are appreciating the park but they give me a wide berth. For the next half hour or so, I wipe all thoughts from my mind and simply observe and welcome the day. I try to be thankful. There's a lot to be thankful for but it's so hard to think about things like that when it feels like there's so much more to be angry about. It would be so easy to let my agony and despair conquer me.

Every time Charlie spoke of his travels to Colorado Springs, he would tell me his favorite part was when they would hike in North Cheyenne Cañon. "I don't really know how to explain it," he would always begin, "but there's just something about the place that felt like... home."

When I was on the plane, I decided hiking North Cheyenne Cañon would be my second stop so that I can begin saying goodbye properly. I fiddle with his pink opalescent rock that I've been keeping in my pocket.

"I don't remember which trip I found this on," he showed me the crystalline stone he always carried in his pocket, "but I do remember the moment I found it hiking up Mount Muscoco and marveled at the way it made me feel connected to everything around me. I probably should have left it behind but I just couldn't and I've made sure to carry it with me ever since."

He had it on him when he died. When we got his possessions back it was the first thing I saw. I couldn't bear to keep looking at it so I put it in a drawer with no plans to bring it back out anytime soon. When I began to re-think this trip, I decided bringing his lucky rock back to North Cheyenne Cañon would help me put him to rest in a way that burying him never could. I pull it out of my pocket, grab a sharpie from my purse, and write "Charlie Davis | 1989-2021" on it.

The sun is fully above the horizon now and I'm glad I got to witness such an amazing display. I know exactly what Charlie would have said. He would tell me that the deep oranges morphing into pink until finally reaching the clear blue of day remind us that if we take the time to look up, the sky becomes the world's canvas, a unique work of art. He would have loved every moment of this.

I spend the next hour or so walking through Garden of the Gods, appreciating the monolithic red stones which make up the park. More and more people begin descending to hike, explore, and admire the landmarks. I watch the families and couples on vacation together, and jealousy surges through me like a lightning bolt to my system. Do they know how lucky they are? It's not fair that I don't get to be here happy and smiling with my loved one like they are. I want to yell and scream at the heavens or

the universe to give him back to me. Charlie was everything good about this world and he didn't deserve to have his light snuffed out by a tragic accident.

I stop my thoughts in their tracks. It would be easy continuing to rage and scream in my own mind like I've been doing for the last month but if I don't calm down now, I'll never get through what I need to do. I would spiral and give up. Part of me wants to do exactly that but I know I have to be strong and push forward to the top of Mt. Muscoco.

I make my way back to the car and before I start down the road, I take slow and deep breaths to calm down. I count and count until I find temporary relief. It'll have to be enough to keep me going. The interstate awaits and in only twenty minutes I find myself at the entrance to North Cheyenne Cañon. As soon as I turn up the road leading to the park, I'm immediately faced with a change in landscape. Garden of the Gods had a very Southwestern feel with it's red rocks and cacti. I think I even saw a tumbleweed. Now I really feel like I'm entering the majestic Rocky Mountains.

I begin my journey through the park at the bottom, the walls of the canyon surrounding me, covered in pine trees and white stone. I slow the car, roll down the window, and hear a creek bubbling somewhere in the distance past the tree line. I continue up the road and am overwhelmed with the twists and turns as I climb higher to the trailhead. With how beautiful this place is, I can imagine it gets packed every day. As I reach my stopping point, I can tell it's a popular hike because there's only one parking spot left open. Lucky me.

I grab my water bottle and backpack and begin to climb. I did some research before I came so I know that this moderate out and back trail gains almost thirteen

hundred feet in elevation. I'm glad I brought my big water bottle and one of those little oxygen tanks in case of elevation sickness.

As I take my first several steps, it's easy to understand why people take to the trails to get away from the world and rest your mind. The peace and quiet is refreshing but also overwhelming when you're so used to being surrounded by people and noise. The past month or so without Charlie has been insufferably lonely despite being surrounded by well meaning but overbearing people. How lonely will I be when I get home from this trip and it's just me and the remnants of his life left in our apartment?

Instead of dwelling on how miserable I might be back in the real world I concentrate on the trail leading me to the top of a mountain. I hear birds cawing above my head and look to admire as they fly free and unburdened between the tall trees. I hear little creatures chittering among the trees but I can't see them. A few steps further, a yellow butterfly flits in front of my face and I follow it's flight with my eyes as it glides away.

Lyrics from a Wailin' Jennys song run through my mind, perfect for this moment. "I hear a bird chirping up in the sky, I'd like to be free like that, spread my wings so high... I feel the wind a-blowing, slowly changing time. I'd like to be that wind, I'd swirl and shape the sky."

I climb higher and higher, the heat of the summer day starts hitting me and I'm sweating from brow to back. I consciously take sips of water regularly so I don't get dehydrated. I hear the creek bubbling and before too long I'm walking right by it. I pause and reach my hand into the stream to cool myself down a little. The water is rushing

quickly through the woods and the trees provide some shade so I rest for a few moments. I close my eyes and absorb the feeling of being immersed in the natural world.

Some of Charlie's words come to mind and I understand completely where he was coming from. "When I was there, I felt at ease. No matter how bad things get or how scary things may seem, I just have to remember how it felt to be tucked away in the mountains and I would be immediately calm." There really is no better high than being immersed in the wild.

"I wish you were here, Charlie," I say to nothing and everything and continue forward.

For the rest of the hike I try to clear my mind and not let any thoughts penetrate my sense of calm. Feeling at ease is a luxury and I'm not quite ready to give it up. It is two miles to the top of the mountain and it takes me about an hour and a half to get to the lookout. My breath catches when I finally make it to the top, wonder and awe fill my whole body. It's probably cliché to say I'm standing on top of the world but there's just no other way to describe towering over the Centennial State from on top of a mountain like this. I wonder if I stand on my tippy toes and reach for the skies if my fingers will run through the puffy white clouds. The sun is halfway through its arc, shining its light and reassuring me that it's here to protect and guide me.

I walk to a nearby tree and run my palm over its sturdy trunk and give thanks to it and all the other trees for being my companions on the trail. I settle on the ground

beneath its canopy so I can accomplish the one thing I set out to do on this hike. I pull out my seed infused compostable paper and my favorite ballpoint pen and begin writing.

Dear Charlie,

Do you remember when we first started dating and you told me that all you want is a life of peace, calm, and wonder? I never thought I'd hear such a thing come from the lips of a twenty-something dude but there you were in complete seriousness. Over the last five years of our life, I often admired your calm sensibility and capacity to see and appreciate the amazing things this world had to share with us. I thought I'd have a lifetime of learning how to be that way with you.

Of course, life is a never-ending question of which day will be our last, but I never thought yours would come so soon. I wasn't ready to say goodbye. Instead of peace, calm, and wonder I was suddenly filled with turmoil, rage, and disinterest in engaging with the rest of the world. Grief is heavy handed and it hits me like a wrecking ball. There are so many what-if's and I'm so unbelievably angry that our life together amounts to a lot of unanswered questions about what could have been. I took our trip to Colorado Springs on my own in hopes that I would find some answers or at the very least, peace of mind, and while I'm not there yet, I'm beginning to see what that might feel like.

This morning I watched the sunrise at Garden of the Gods and hoped you were watching it with me and witnessing the artistry the universe wanted to share with me. Now, I'm sitting at the top of Mt. Muscoco and attempting to say goodbye. You were so right about how magnificent it is here and even though we couldn't truly share it, I'm

grateful I get to experience it because of you. There's so much that I'm grateful for because of you.

I think I can learn to be okay with the time we were lucky to have rather than being angry at everything that didn't get to happen. There's something I've been keeping to myself and have even been in a bit of denial about. A week after you died I took a test and it came back positive. I'm pregnant. I haven't told anyone because I wasn't ready to accept that it was real. I was, and still am, so angry at losing you and adding on that I'm going to have to raise our child without you devastates me on a whole new level. First steps, first words, a whole life that you'll never get to experience.

Part of me wants to be happy I still have some part of you with me forever. The other, larger part is terrified beyond words. If you were here you'd tell me everything will be okay and that I'm strong but... I've never felt weaker. You kept me brave. You kept me tough. How can I be what I need to be without you there to support me?

I know the answer. You told it to me often but it doesn't sound the same coming from me. You just keep going. You figure out a way to continue on through hardship and pain and you simply fight to make each day the best that it can be. My goal for the rest of my life is to live each day in honor of you. Your goodness and beauty will not be forgotten and I will make sure that both our child and I will emulate it as best we can.

I love you Charlie. More than anything. This is not a goodbye. This is a thank you for everything you did for me and everything you were. My life is better from having you in it and I cannot be any more grateful. Please know that our child will know everything

about you and our life together. I'm glad we talked about future baby names because our little Aiden or Willow will be so loved.

Thank you Charlie. I'll see you again someday.

Yours forever,

Elodie

I finish my letter and grab Charlie's lucky rock and dig a little hole. As the seeds take root, my words will go away but plants will grow and I will know that a piece of Charlie will be here forever.

"We're gonna be okay my baby," I place my hand on my stomach and admire the view for a little while longer before making the trip back down the mountain to begin my life anew.

A DYING DEMISE

Blame.

I've discovered that humans are great at finding someone or something to place blame upon. The Downfall was predictable enough, but few humans would truly want to admit that we brought about our own demise. Twenty years ago, I was born into a society made up of a band of survivors who had pulled through the Downfall. Each member was trained throughout their life to work in a job that would help rebuild the world. Assigned at birth, our future occupations determined our education. Mine was agriculture. While learning about the environment, I was taught about environmental horrors like climate change. It's something of the past, I was told, which is why I was bewildered to see the snow falling in the middle of May. My companion, Tomas, assured me that it was perfectly normal for this place, but I was

still in awe.

“This city is still standing,” Tomas croaked, leaning heavily against me as he limped. Our journey so far had been months of trekking through a deserted landscape, but now, standing before us was a single city that had not fallen. We would have a chance to find adequate shelter here. Tomas could rest and recover, and once he was better, I could tell him about a secret that I had been keeping for some time.

I soon discovered that the buildings in the cities I’d imagined were not nearly as tall, but when I mentioned this to Tomas he just laughed. “You should’ve seen the pictures of Denver, Skylar. Or New York City. Those buildings literally touch the sky. They’re called skyscrapers.”

“But... these touch the sky,” I said. Tomas laughed again. As embarrassed as I was, it was nice to hear him laugh. He’d hardly even smiled since his injury, so if my ignorance was his comedy then I would allow it. “So which city was this?” I asked, changing the subject.

Tomas blushed, undoubtedly ashamed that he didn’t know something about his place of study. “I’m not sure. But I’ll be able to figure it out,” he added quickly.

We hiked over large crevices that had formed in the asphalt. Spongy green plants and vines erupted like magma from between the cracks, coloring the once black roads with green, yellow, and brown streaks. Trees stood in the place of street lamps that vines had forced to the ground. They still laid there, eroding away. Tomas had once told me the world wasn’t completely covered in flora. It was strange to think about.

As we approached a large and slightly stocky building, Tomas said, "Let's check this one out." I narrowed my eyes to get a better look at it. Only six letters remained plastered on the front: P K P C N R.

"Yeah," I agreed, "let's check it out." The building was the only one on the block that appeared stable, and Tomas needed rest, so it was really our only option. Trudging down a cement pathway, we passed the remains of a small stone wall that had been reduced to rubble. Towards the center, we found a metal humanoid egg statue lying face up on the ground. He was missing both an arm and a leg, but a goofy smile filled with hope still remained chiseled on his face. I couldn't help but think that only a fool could be so hopeful while everything around them crumbled to the ground.

Upon arriving at the door, we found that it was jammed. Tomas produced his metal canteen and smashed through the glass. The shrill ring of metal to glass pierced the air and hung there for a long moment after the door was broken. Nothing came for us, though. There was nothing else here.

This place must have once been beautiful, I thought as we entered the building, *a long time ago*. The carpet covered the vast majority of the floor, but it was withered and the designs were faded. Chunks of the ceiling had fallen onto a concessions counter, leaving a gaping hole in the roof.

Walking on, we searched for an area that was less exposed. Luckily, we found a room that was in decent condition. For a moment, I took it all in before remembering the word for a room like this. *Auditorium*. It was easily the largest room I'd been in, and it amazed me. The beam of my flashlight could barely reach all the way across

the room to the stage.

“Take us to the stage,” Tomas demanded in a whisper. His breath was hot in my ear, and I feared that his fever had taken a turn for the worst. He desperately needed rest, so we hastily set up backstage and closed the curtains. Once my eyes adjusted to the dark, I decided that I didn’t like staring out at all the empty chairs. I wasn’t afraid that something was lurking in the dark; it was that I knew there was nothing there to even offer the possibility. Tomas and I were completely alone.

We spent the night there, snuggled under our sleeping bags to stay warm. In the morning, I changed Tomas’s bandage around his thigh, but the red streaks shooting up from his wound hinted at blood poisoning. We didn’t have the right supplies to stop it though, so I did the best I could to help him. In all honesty, Tomas’s injury was draining both of us. My secret weighed heavily on my heart, but he was in no condition to hear my confession. Both my impatience and his frustration grew, mixing into the worst concoction of restlessness. We got one day of rest before I decided to go out again to find medical supplies for him.

“Hey, while you’re at it, try to find me some information about this place,” Tomas told me before I left. I reluctantly agreed.

Wandering through the city, I explored every building in the area that hadn’t already collapsed. That’s when I found the old library. My search for medicine had been a bust, so maybe I could at least find something for Tomas to read. Bookshelves had toppled over into the aisles, and I could feel the soreness in my body as I climbed over the fallen shelves and scattered books.

“I should’ve rested another day,” I grumbled, but I didn’t mean it. I would do

anything for Tomas.

I glanced down at the book covers while climbing over them. Some were either singed and tattered, while others had been eaten away by moths. I kept an eye out for the moths, thinking that maybe Tomas and I weren't the only living creatures here. However, seeing another living being was too much to hope for. The only other lives that accompanied me were those preserved in the pages of the abandoned books that I crawled over.

After only a few more minutes of maneuvering through the building, I found the archives. Tomas was more curious about this place than I was, so I just grabbed whatever files I found first and hoped they were sufficient. I shoved them into my backpack and moved on. Taking a few more books, I smiled to myself imagining how overjoyed Tomas would be.

"Colorado Springs," Tomas told me when I had walked back onto the stage. He laid in his sleeping bag with a flashlight, pouring over the files I had brought him.

"What?" I asked, handing him a bag of dehydrated vegetables.

"We're in Colorado Springs," Tomas clarified. "It was the second most populated city here. Home of America's mountain."

"America's mountain?" I asked.

"Pikes Peak," Tomas said. "You know. The one we've seen every day for about a week."

"I don't know what's so special about it. It's just a big rock."

"You're cold."

“Like the weather here.”

“Colorado has 300 days of sunshine every year,” Tomas stated matter-of-factly.

I rolled my eyes and he laughed, then we fell silent. He went back to his research, so I stepped away to get into a change of clothes. My extra set wasn't exactly clean, but it was better than my hiking attire. When I returned, Tomas was sleeping. I didn't remember falling asleep too, but I was startled awake when he started coughing. His dinner came back up, and I dragged him away from the mess. He didn't sleep the rest of the night, and neither did I.

The next day wasn't any better. I stayed with him all day, tending to his wounds. I cleaned them out with water from my canteen before wrapping them again, not knowing what else to do. I could easily go look for more supplies, but the previous day proved that there was nothing left. I shouldn't have been surprised. Medicine was the most needed item during the start of the Downfall.

“Do you wish you never came with me?” Tomas asked, interrupting my thoughts. “You were trained for agriculture, not exploring.”

“I didn't want to at first,” I admitted, removing his glasses and brushing hair off of his forehead. “But you're a good partner.”

“I was until I cut my leg on a rock. Now I'm just a burden,” he sighed.

“You're not a burden. But you can be kind of stupid,” I teased.

“Thanks for that.”

“It's my pleasure.”

Silence followed for such a long time that I assumed Tomas had fallen asleep. “I want to know what meat tastes like,” he whispered, proving my assumption wrong.

“The people who lived here knew,” I said quietly.

“Probably. Colorado was known for cattle.”

I nodded. Many animals had died off years before the Downfall, and most of the others had died during it. Every other species was spread just as thin as humanity was. “What other animals lived here?” I pondered aloud.

“Oh... A lot of them.”

I frowned, disappointed that Tomas didn't have more to say on the subject. “Well what animal would you like to see most?”

Tomas was silent, his eyes wandering across the room while he considered the question. “A deer,” he decided at last. “I'd like to see a deer. What about you?”

I knew the answer immediately. “A butterfly.”

“That seems fitting. Your name sounds like you should be the one flying.”

I smiled and took his hand in mine. “Yeah. Sure.”

Tomas chuckled, then winced. He was quiet for a few more minutes. “Do you really not like the mountains?”

“I guess I don't really notice them,” I explained. “They're not that great.”

“We haven't watched any sunsets,” he murmured, fiddling with my braid, “and that's why you don't like them. I've heard that sunsets are nice with the mountains.”

“Tomorrow night,” I promised. “We'll watch the sunset tomorrow night.”

The next day came and went. Tomas didn't wake until noon. His breathing had become more rapid and he was extremely pale. Nothing he ate would stay in his stomach. His pain was obvious, but when afternoon came, he looked up at me. “The sunset?” he asked hopefully.

“Tomorrow,” I told him. He asked again the next night, and again I promised that he would see the sunset the next day. The night after that, he gave up. I could hardly get him to drink, and neither of us slept. I refused to leave his side, terrified that if I left he wouldn’t make it.

I was also starting to get sick frequently, but I knew it wasn’t Tomas’s fever spreading to me. I had to tell him. “Tomas,” I said, sitting next to him. “I haven’t been honest. I need to talk to you about something.”

Tomas looked up at me with expectant eyes, waiting patiently. His eyes were hazy and feverish. “I- Um... You...” I couldn’t bring myself to tell him my secret. At least, not tonight. “You need more rest,” I said instead, turning my face away from him.

“That’s not what you were going to tell me,” he pouted.

I managed a smile. “I’ll tell you tomorrow night,” I said, “when we watch the sunset.”

“You promise this time?”

“I promise. We’re seeing that sunset even if I have to carry you.”

We didn’t see the sunset the next night. I did. My secret remained heavy on my thoughts while I sat on the ceiling of the auditorium. Like a pin, the peaks pierced the sky, and it bled more colors than I could imagine. Tomas was right for wanting to see it. I wish that he had been able to witness it.

Blame. Humans are great at finding someone or something to place blame upon; and for Tomas’s death, I blame myself. I couldn’t save him. He still laid inside,

wrapped in the stage curtains to keep him warm although his body had gone cold. I didn't want him to freeze in the land of sunshine where it still snowed in summer. The auditorium was left in my path as I moved on to explore the rest of the deserted city. I learned everything that I could about the Springs, taking on Tomas's curiosity.

A month passed until I found a way to reconnect a radio system and contact my society, informing them of the city still standing. A team would be arriving in a few more months, so I would have to hold on until then. Occasionally, I passed by the auditorium, never daring to go closer than the rusted egg. I'd once pegged the egg for a fool. It didn't take me long to realize that I was as much of a fool as him. I was a lost soul so desperately hanging onto hope while I watched my world crumble between my fingers. Tomas was my lifeline, and I clung to the idea that we would both stay afloat. I was wrong. All he did was die. I was the one who had to live with him gone. I was the egg, supported by a wall that was no longer standing. Now I was left alone to pick up the pieces.

It was a hot afternoon on one of my visits to the auditorium. The sun was just setting when I spotted movement from the corner of my eye. Turning towards it, I froze. I found myself staring into another set of eyes. Like two hands extending out, long antlers branched from the creature's skull. The deer stood, watching me with its beady eyes as if it was staring into my soul. As if it knew all of my secrets. I could only stand there, speechless. The setting sun cast long shadows onto the rubble surrounding us, and once the light began to fade, the buck leapt away. I remained motionless as the sun fell around me. The full moon glimmered above my head when

I finally moved my hand to my stomach. "I hope it's a boy," I whispered to the sky, then turned and moved on. Tomas's adventure had ended, but mine was just beginning.

THE COST OF OLD DREAMS

Lily pulled herself out of bed barely able to keep her eyes open and went straight for the window. She opened the curtains letting the sunlight in. Outside, the Rocky Mountains looked as though they were reaching up in a never-ending attempt to touch space. She could never get over that view. Colorado Springs is definitely where she belonged. She would live on top of the mountains one day. Smiling, she walked into the dining room, her mind still on the mountains. She wanted to lie back in her bed and dream about her future house, but Mom and Adriana had called a family meeting, forcing her to be awake. Adriana, her twin sister, and Mom both sat at the table with their hands folded. That posture meant bad news. "What?" Lily struggled on her first word of the day. Her voice was always slow, but in the mornings attempting to speak was particularly frustrating. Both Mom and Adriana were dressed. Hopefully, that didn't mean another doctor appointment.

“Well,” Adriana attempted to speak, but Mom reached out and grabbed her hand.

“We’re going to go on a little trip today.” Mom got up and pulled out a chair for Lily to sit in. Lily gave her what she hoped was a skeptical look and sat in the chair.

“Where?” Lily asked. “The mountains?” Mom and Adriana shared a look, which only confirmed Lily’s suspicion that the news would be bad.

“Just out of town.” Adriana got up and pulled two waffles out of the toaster. Their scent hit Lily’s nose and suddenly the only thing she could focus on was the idea of eating them.

“Can I have some?” Mom and Adriana shared another look. Lily wanted to yell at them for doing that. She hated when they shared looks about her. Like they thought that her brain was slower than her voice. It wasn’t.

“Of course!” Adriana put on a cheery voice. “These ones are for you.” She dumped a pile of syrup on the waffles before sliding the plate over to Lily.

“So, Lily.” Mom focused her gaze on her. “Since you guys are nearing the end of your junior year, we were thinking that maybe we could start you two interning at places that you might want to work.”

“Do the U.S. Marines take interns?” Lily’s eyes widened. She hadn’t even thought about that. If she could start to become a U.S. Marine early, she’d have a better chance at moving through the ranks. Mom winced even before she finished asking the question.

“You don’t have to say the *U.S. Marines* every time you say it Lily.” Adriana had a pained expression on her face, the one she always got when Lily used unnecessary words. “Just the Marines is fine. Everyone knows what you’re talking about.”

“It’s re, uh, resp-sp-ectful.” Lily struggled on the longer word, but she held her sister’s gaze with confidence. It wasn’t right to disrespect the U.S. Marines, especially if she wanted to be one.

“Why don’t you go pack some clothes, Lily.” Mom cut the stare off between the two short, which was probably a good thing. It would only turn into a fight, and Lily didn’t like fights. She pointed down at her waffles to indicate that she would like to finish them first. “No let’s get you packed now.”

“Fine.” She got up and made her way back to her room. Originally, she had been scared of having her own room. Of course, she had only been ten back then. The first time her friend had come to visit, however, he convinced her that it wasn’t so scary not being with Adriana anymore. He had told her a lot of things, and he never made fun of her for her voice like the kids at school used to do. Adriana never believed her when she talked about him though. She always said that Lily was making up the friend, but he was real! And he still came to visit, just not quite as often.

Lily locked her door and began to get dressed. Mom didn’t like it when she locked the door, but Lily didn’t care.

Once she finished, she pulled on her yellow jean jacket, and reached to unlock the door to tell mom she was ready to go.

“Pssst.” A familiar voice from behind her made her stop. Winston, or Winnie as she called him, had come to visit again. She took up her usual spot facing the mirror and stared at herself in the reflection for a moment. The similarities between her and her sister were undeniable, yet her sister didn’t have to deal with any of the problems that she had to. She shook her head, taking herself out of those kinds of thoughts and

focused on the reflection. Under her bed Winston's glowing, yellow eyes appeared. Lily liked yellow. If Winston didn't have yellow eyes, she probably wouldn't have trusted him in the first place. He said that yellow eyes were the most common color on his planet. "How are you *Lils*?" Winston's voice came out in a raspy whisper. It was almost comforting after all these years. Lily turned her head around and looked under her bed, but as usual Winnie was only visible in the mirror.

"Good." Lily smiled. In the reflection under the bed Winnie's eyes contorted so that a shadowy half-moon covered the bottom half of his eyes in a smile.

"Where are you going?" Winnie asked. "Must be special if you have your *favorite* jacket."

"They won't tell me." Lily shrugged as Winnie's eyes widened. "It's ok." She gave him a thumbs up. Winnie seemed to get uncomfortable when Lily left the house. He had told her that he was afraid she wouldn't come back. Lily knew that fear well, especially after Dad had left with Miranda. Her heart began to race as she remembered waking up in the middle of the night to see him climbing into Miranda's car. That was the last time she had seen him, and he didn't even bother to say goodbye.

"They're not taking you away to a *special hospital*, are they?" Winston asked, taking Lily out of her memories from that night. She shook her head. They wouldn't do anything like that. "Well don't leave me too long. I want us to take that special trip soon."

"Yeah." Lily shifted her feet in the carpet, she wanted to avoid the subject of the trip. The thought of leaving Mom for more than a couple days was not one that she liked unless it was for the U.S. Marines. Winnie had assured her that she wouldn't even remember the trip, but it still didn't seem like a good idea.

“Lily.” Winnie’s voice turned stern. She didn’t like it when he did that. “They’re going to try and take you away from me. You can’t let them do that, ok?”

Lily nodded. She didn’t want to be taken anywhere. “I won’t let them take me.”

“That’s what they all say,” Winnie muttered.

“Huh?” Lily scrunched her eyebrows.

“Nothing.” Winnie shook his head. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” She bit her fingers. She knew he would ask again. He was going to ask if he could take her away. He said he needed a favor, but in return he would fix her speech problems.

“They’re going to try and take you away *today*.” Winnie’s eyes became more intense. “They don’t want you to be a space guar- uh, a Marine.”

“A *U.S.* Marine.” Lily corrected him without hesitating.

“Only for the next fifty years,” Winston mumbled.

“What?”

“A *U.S.* Marine.” Winnie closed his eyes as he corrected himself. “We have to go *today*, or you will never be a U.S. Marine.” Lily scrunched her nose. She could be a U.S. Marine without going, right? “Lily, you’re stronger than you think. You just have to let me show you. Don’t go with your family today, and I promise things will get better. You’ll even get to see the mountains when we go.”

“I-” Lily couldn’t figure out what her next words should be. “Bye,” she said after a moment, and pointed at the door.

“Yes.” Winnie’s eyes moved up and down like he was nodding. “Go say bye.” Lily tried to unlock the door, but it seemed to be stuck. With a great deal of force, she finally

twisted the metal knob to the unlocked position. She opened it and went to find Mom. She wanted to tell her what had just happened if she could find the words to do so.

“Mom.” Adriana’s voice came from inside Mom’s room. Lily paused before reaching the door to listen. “I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“What am I supposed to do?” The exasperation in Mom’s voice made Lily want to go check on her, but something told her to wait. “She wants to be a fricking Marine. I’m scared she’ll hurt herself.”

“She’s not going to be a Marine. She won’t pass the tests.” Adriana’s words echoed in Lily’s head. Tears burst from her eyes followed by loud sobs. She ran to her room and slammed the door shut behind her. She twisted the knob locking the door with ease and collapsed on her bed. Continuing to sob as the pounding began on her door.

“Lily, open this door!” Mom yelled. “I can explain.”

Lily didn’t need an explanation. She had heard them loud and clear. No matter how stupid they thought she was, she wasn’t deaf.

“I told you.” Winnie’s voice came from the mirror. Lily looked up and made eye contact with him. “Come with me.” He spoke softer than usual. In the reflection Lily saw something she had never seen before. Winnie seemed to be moving closer to the edge of the bed. She could see the outline of his head for the first time. It was strange and rectangular.

“Adriana, give me that key!” Mom’s voice came from outside the door, but Lily wasn’t paying it any attention. A fat hand, with short and stubby fingers appeared to reach out from under her bed, but when she looked at the floor in real life it wasn’t there.

Her gaze shifted back up to the mirror, and the hand began to crawl up the side of the bed towards her. The sound of something jiggling the lock made Lily jump.

“Do you want to come?” The mouth on Winnie’s face formed into a toothy smile.

“Why isn’t it working?” Mom called from the other side of the door as the doorknob began to shake violently.

“Lily, please come talk to me.” Adriana pleaded.

“Yes.” Lily ignored them and reached down towards the hand. To her surprise her hand collided with Winston’s and in a flash of white everything was gone.

Lily’s eyes opened to see the sky above her. It appeared to be the middle of the day, but everything seemed darker than usual like a cloud had covered the sun.

“Lily?” A voice called out. Lily had to touch her mouth to confirm that she wasn’t the one speaking because it sounded just like her! She sat up on the slab of concrete she had been lying on. It was her driveway. The stiffness in her back felt like she had been sleeping there for days. She looked up at the doorway of her house to see who had been calling her. Adriana stood right there. “Mom, I found Lily.” Adriana’s voice was slow just like hers. Did Adriana really think it was funny to mock her after what had just happened?

Lily’s face began to burn with rage. “That’s not funny!” She called back, but her voice wasn’t slow.

Mom appeared in the doorway. “What are you doing out there? Get inside! They’re about to sweep the streets!” Mom’s frantic voice made Lily feel like she needed to run.

“What?” Again, her voice was normal. “Uh, what are you talking about mom?” She tested out her new and improved voice. Winnie must have held up his end of the bargain.

“Oh no.” Mom’s gaze focused on something behind Lily before she grabbed Adriana and rushed inside. Lily whipped around to see what had frightened her mother. Behind her, instead of the towering Colorado Rocky Mountains, an orange desert stretched out into the horizon. The sight of it sent a sharp pang through Lily’s stomach.

Houses sprinkled the landscape, but they were miles apart from one another. She squinted. In the distance, a giant machine that resembled a mix between a school bus and some sort of cat, moved from house to house in seconds. A red light coming from what appeared to be its nose seemed to be scanning each residence. Terror shot through Lily’s spine. She began to back towards her door when something came running at her from the side. She turned her head to see Winston charging like a bull at her. His long, skinny, body bumbled awkwardly as he ran.

“It’s not walk day!” he yelled.

“What’s going on Winston?” Lily looked around at the strange, dark, desert world that surrounded her. It just couldn’t be Colorado Springs. “Where are we?”

“Do you like it?” Winston smiled. “You helped us with it.”

“What?” Lily took a step back.

“Oh yes.” Winston began to laugh. “Thanks to you, we figured out *exactly* when to come to Earth for our invasion. Too early and we’d be dealing with those giant reptiles.” Winston shuddered.

“Dinosaurs?” Lily asked.

“Too late and we’d be no better off than we were in our own time.” Again, Winston shuddered. “We decided to strike in your species’ formative years, but we soon learned how little time you guys have been in control here. Hence the time I spent with you to try and figure out just how evolved you guys were. You couldn’t be too smart, but you couldn’t be so stupid that you guys accidentally got yourselves killed either. Location was another issue, but the high elevation resembles home the most. And, of course, the mountains were an ideal place to hide our craft.” Winston put his hands on his hips and looked around like he was proud of himself. “Colorado really is the perfect location. Though I’m sorry the mountains are gone. They were interesting. We didn’t have anything like that back at home.”

“I don’t understand.” Lily took a step back.

Winston smiled, but it wasn’t a warm smile. Something sinister twinkled in his eyes. He grinned like a cat that had just found a mouse caught in a trap. “Exactly how we planned it. Now, instead of you filthy humans almost wiping us out, *you* guys are a part of *our* collection.”

The End.

TELL ME THE PROBLEM

Just like dust particles in a storm, Angela's mind remained in constant motion. A white Styrofoam cup sat on the table, half-empty with water reflecting the stillness of the room. She felt alone, which held an irony considering the building in which the room was in. The door opens in a precise yet sloppy manner. There came in the man she had grown familiar with.

“Sorry, are you sure you don’t want anything? It's past 3, and I’m aware you haven’t had anything all day,” said the man as he sat down diagonally from Angela.

“I’m fine, thank you,” replied Angela.

“I read on your file that you grew up here, but you weren't born here, right?”

“Yeah, I was born in Oregon, but we moved to Colorado Springs when I was 5.”

“Do you remember anything from Oregon?”

“Not really... I remember the way here,” said Angela, “My mom and dad were arguing about the way here, and we had to pull over on the highway.”

The room grew quiet, with the man trying to figure out what to say next. Once again, there was a calmness.

“How did you like growing up here?”

“It was fine. I enjoyed the scenery here. Nice places. Simple.”

“Anything happened here?”

“Not really,” Angela stiffened.

“I saw that your parents ended up getting divorced, when did that happen?”

“I was 15. The divorce proceedings didn't actually last that long. After she got a restraining order against him, I guess the court didn't need to consider my dad in the running for custody.”

The passiveness in Angela's voice seemed to surprise the man. He had seen many people experience traumatic pasts; however, she seemed to be indifferent to it.

“On my 10th birthday, my mom took us to the Garden of the Gods for the first time. Considering we had been living here for 5 years, it seemed weird. I was in awe, and so was James.”

“James, your younger brother?”

“Yeah.”

That question seemed to make Angela uncomfortable. The silence filled the room and unlike before it was no longer comforting.

“Do you think you can explain to me your parents split?”

“Sure. She got the restraining order against him after I had called the cops that one night. I had come back from school, and then we had gotten ready for dinner. I think we were gonna eat mac and cheese and then he came home. Then they got into an argument about dinner, I think. Then you know how it goes and I called in and they came in and yeah the rest is on the police report. Mom finally filed and that's it.”

“I think that's good. I'll be back. Do you need anything?”

“Nope.”

The man left the room again. “Was that too much? Was I too much?” thought Angela. She once again began to study the room. She studied the direction of the grain on the wood from the desk. She studied the way her flat nails tapped onto that desk and the callouses on her hand. The mirror on the wall showed her appearance, which she felt as though she hadn't seen in years. Her black hair was more disheveled than she thought it was, and her cheeks more red. After 5 minutes, at least from Angela's estimate as there was no clock in the room, the man came in. The slight moment the door was opened the chaos outside came in almost like a marching band rushing to start a song.

“Is it on?” asked Angela.

“What did you say?”

“Is it on the news?”

“Yeah, the news picked up pretty quickly,” said the man.

“What are they saying?”

“They mentioned a brief summary of what they think happened.”

“Oh ok. Did they mention who caused it?”

“No.”

Angela felt that it was unfair. How could they dictate what was right and wrong?
Who made it and who didn't.

“You know you didn't have to Angela.”

“Have to do what?”

“You know.”

“No, I actually don't, please tell me what I should and shouldn't do.”

“Angela, please, you are just making this harder for yourself, we've been at this
for a while.”

“No, you've been at this for a while. You're trying to fix something that can't be
fixed, and that's fine, but don't try to tell me what I do or can't. Maybe I have a valid
reason.”

“What was the reason?”

“That it was all lies. You didn't actually believe everything they said, right?”

Angela's voice raised.

“No, but I also don't think this just happened out of nowhere.”

“Exactly, I just explained it. I don't think I should go anywhere for expressing how I feel.”

“It isn't because you are expressing your feelings. Ok, how about we take another break.”

“No, I don't want that. I want you to help me.”

“I can't help you if you don't want to admit the truth.”

The man walked out of the room. The man felt frustrated.

“Seems as though the new detective can't get her to crack.” laughed a woman he recognized from when he was training.

“I guess not, Sarah. I guess not,” said the man.

He sat back down on his desk, turning up the volume of the small television in his cubicle. The highlighted papers on his desk, stained with coffee, moved with the force in which he sat down with.

“A family of four was found dead in their home. The suspect Angela Jones is under custody being investigated for this murder.”

As the reporter continued to talk on the television, the man seemed to daze off, hoping to get the answer his colleagues and him had been waiting for out of Angela.