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EVERYDAY MONSTERS: STORIES

by

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M.A. Coastal Carolina University, 2013

B.A. Coastal Carolina University, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree for Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2017

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ABSTRACT

These seven short stories explore characters either at war with themselves or living in a delusion, unaware that their skewed sense of self projects a subjective version of the universe. When one operates in a world that doesn't quite exist, their real world is destined to crumble, and, for many of these characters, the challenge is understanding the mirage's existence before it's too late. By slightly bending the parameters of reality as well as inviting these characters and conflicts into absurdity, *Everyday Monsters* offers wholly unique commentary on familiar struggles, including marriage, occupation, grief, destiny, and societal expectations.

To J. - The monsters will go away, and I'll always be here to fight them with you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the entire UCF Creative Writing MFA program. Things haven't been great since I've moved, but the cohort and faculty serve as daily reminders that I made the right decision in coming here.

Specifically, thank you, Terry Thaxton: the heart, soul, backbone, and clenched fists of the program. Keep changing lives. Please. The world needs you.

Thank you, Jamie Poissant. Although it took you several stories to understand what the hell I'm trying to do, I can't thank you enough for believing in me. My writing needed the kick in the butt you gave it, and there's no way to repay that.

To Lisa Roney and your three loveable cats, meow, meow, meow, meow, meow, meow. Translation: thanks for everything.

Nikki: you helped me through the second-lowest point I've ever sunk into over the summer and Fall 2016. Then, you continued to put up with crabby "thesis-mode" Brian. You're amazingly amazing.

To my family, all of whom I hope to avoid showing my fiction to until I'm dead. Thanks for your support from afar.

Finally, to my past and present students, from CCU to UCF: thank you.

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FOR LINDA

When I won the lottery, I wanted to be the man Linda deserved. So, I gave her a wedding.

The ceremony was ocean-front on a cool, barely windy September afternoon—exactly what Linda wished wouldn't happen. She complained about the sand and the guests and her hair, while I looked out to the Atlantic. The waves crashed against a neighboring rocky groin, making that *wush* sound people fall asleep to.

"I thought you'd love this," I said. "This is supposed to be beautiful. Like you."

I peeled her curled bangs from her face as she gave me that smile of hers, one that could melt popsicles in winter. I couldn't have been more in love. Who wouldn't have been? She was so beautiful. Smart and funny and kind too, but so beautiful.

"Isn't it bad luck to see me now?" she asked, her blushing cheek resting against my palm. She gestured to her froufrou dress. Her skirt had more layers than our wedding cake.

"You're worried about luck? I just hit the fucking jackpot."

The ceremony was fine, although the sand felt like spider-bites on the back of my neck, and Linda read her vows while holding her wild bangs in one hand, her flapping camel-colored stationary in her other.

During the reception, the DJ played "She's a Rainbow" by The Rolling Stones—the song that I thought played the first time we danced. From what I remembered, we were at the Irish Mist, a pub built with orange, white, and green bricks with black metal bars jailing the windows.

The song crinkled through torn speakers on a lifeless Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday night, and we spun until we were more dizzy than drunk.

At the wedding, I took her hands and spun her as I had in my memories, the frilly hem of her dress blooming at her feet.

“I like that song,” she said once the track faded. The photographer stepped in and snapped a photo of her, the flash so bright it swallowed her for a split second.

“That’s why I played it.”

We went up to our Penthouse suite to finally consummate the thing. She told me she loved me.

“I’d hope so,” I said.

#

After our honeymoon, we began planning the rest of our lives. So, I bought her my dream home.

I asked her where she wanted to live, and she suggested some stupid suburban cookie-cutter in Nowhere, Delaware so she could be near her sister Kathy. She had Leukemia. White versus red blood cells. A cellular race war.

I laughed at Linda’s modesty, told her to think like a bajillionaire. My jackpot was the third-largest lump-sum in the history of the lottery-playing galaxy, and she wanted to live on a cul-de-sac in fucking Delaware? We were living in South Carolina. Why move north when we could move farther south?

Instead, I left our Charleston rental and bought a twelve-bedroom behemoth in Melbourne, Florida. The house was an old Spanish colonial with all-new everything, an updated pool house, and a patio you could play full-court basketball on. The patio overlooked the backyard and, behind that, the dunes and the orange waves of every sunrise—shit I knew she'd get used to.

“But what about Kathy?” she asked when I showed her the Bill of Sale. She looked out our old kitchen window for one of the last times. Then, she tilted her head toward the peeling linoleum floor, probably taking in how gross the design was—an aged, butterscotch-colored pattern of circles and squares. “She needs us.”

Even with her cry-face splattered on, Linda was a ten.

“Have you looked at my bank account lately?” I replied, dropping to my knees and holding her hand, trying to look into her hanging face. “I’ll fly you up there as often as you’d like. Privately.”

She raised her chin just enough for me to look into her eyes.

“I’ll help with her treatment too. Send the bills my way.”

“Really?”

“Is bird shit white?” I rose, and caged her in my arms. “Anything for you, babe.”

“It’s not always white, you know.”

She smiled. I popsicled. We moved.

She flew to Delaware weekly while I stayed home and read the *Orlando Sentinel* and *New York Times*, wondering when the hell America would get its shit together. Linda gave me updates on Kathy, her words attached to stacks of stapled paperwork. Over time, I found keeping track of things a bit overwhelming, so I hired someone to file everything, tell me what I owed, and tell me when I owed it.

Whenever Linda returned, she was either happy or sad, no shades in between. In a way, her happiness bothered me. While I'm sure Kathy had good weeks, her death was inevitable. I was simply postponing it. Didn't Linda see that? These thoughts kept me up at night. I wanted to remind her, though it wasn't my place to tell her how to grieve.

"Is everything all right?" I asked once.

"I should ask you the same thing." She kissed me on the cheek. "You don't look well. Tired? Sick?"

I didn't answer her. Instead, I went to the bathroom and turned on the lights. The mirrors backed up her claim. I didn't look well. She could do much better.

In addition to the main mirror behind the sink, the vanity had a mirror on each side, both facing inward and creating the illusion of infinity. I looked into one, past my worn, ugly mug to count all the worn, ugly mugs I could make out. Each one looked smaller and more distorted than the next.

#

Linda was a ten and deserved a ten. So, I bought a new chin.

I didn't have a defective chin, nor one of those flabby doubles designated for chubby people. Rather, I didn't quite have a chin, as if my head were on top of an ice cream cone. Linda deserved a better chin.

Post augmentation and a week-plus of bruising later, and I looked like I was chiseled by the finest sculptor to ever sculpt. The doctor used bone from my pelvis to fill out the jawline, and I never looked so good.

"What the hell did you do?" Linda asked when she returned home from an extended stay with Kathy. A taxi's exhaust pattered away as another helper closed the front door behind her.

"What do you think?"

"What did you do?"

She dropped her luggage and approached with soft steps.

"I want to be the man of your dreams."

"You look..." she paused. She looked at me with a face I had never seen before, as if, right then and there, she understood how lucky she was to have a guy who'd obviously do anything to make her happy.

"You look...presidential?" She turned my head from side to side, examining me as if I were her patient. "We'll go with that. I could see your face on currency."

"Is that what you want?"

"I want you."

She kissed my chin, and I felt it in my hips.

She stepped back and her eyes widened. She had to be impressed. Why wouldn't she have been? She reclaimed her luggage and walked to the kitchen where our chef was dicing garlic for the damn-fine dinner Linda and I would feast on later.

"Do you want the latest bill?" she asked before turning back around.

"Leave it on my desk," I answered. "Someone will take care of it."

"Do you think there's more we can do?"

I walked toward her. The garlic smelled more potent with every thwack of the knife.

"What are you talking about?"

"For, like, research? Funding?"

The chef asked us if we'd like a glass of water, and we both declined.

"A donation?" I grabbed her shoulders and kissed her on her forehead before giving her a hug, feeling her soft chest compress against mine. "Linda. My money won't cure cancer."

I let go and her face was inanimate, plastic. She turned and continued down the hall until her footsteps whispered away, swallowed whole when the chef switched on the ventilation fan. My toes were cold on the ceramic, stone-shaped tiles.

#

Linda was upset. I couldn't help but feel responsible, and I sure as hell didn't want to lose her respect. So, I ran for President.

She didn't think it was a great idea, but I had the money to self-fund a campaign, and I knew what needed fixing. Any idiot with a pulse and a working B.S. detector knew all that triggered out country's spiral down the shit-clogged john, especially our healthcare. Kathy's bills were outrageous.

"Wouldn't you want to be married to the President?" I asked.

"I want to be married to you."

"But, wouldn't you rather be married to the President?"

She stopped nagging and left to go to her sister's for a while, which worked out. I needed to get to work.

My campaign slogan was "Let's Fix This Fucker." Many complained about the language, so I said my slogan louder. I spat with every fricative. I said my slogan as if it mattered more than a voter's next meal. Even Linda told me I should consider a change, said I was being too raw. But she wasn't a politician, so I forgave her.

For many others, however, the brashness caught on. The slogan was slathered onto t-shirts, billboards, and small cardboard signs stabbed into lawns across twenty-four states, more once I bought my way onto other state primary ballots. The slogan even garnered significant coverage from the major news outlets. In an interview with CNN, Jake Tapper called me ridiculous, asked me where I got the nerve to think I could "fix" our country (even had the gall to use finger quotes). I gave him a finger of my own and walked off set, my microphone popping as I unclipped it from my shirt and spiked it on his desk. Smug bastard.

I was nowhere near the top of the polls, but seeing a segment of lower and middle class America decorating their lawns with my name in the reddest reds, whitest whites, and bluest blues made me want to flap my arms and soar like a bald eagle. My rallies grew larger and larger, and I was feeling it, feeding off their energy like the front-man in a rock band. I'd enunciate with my fist, slamming it into my reddening palm until my point was made. During a rally in Gainesville, I moved from my palm to my podium, thwapping that shit so hard it crumbled into a broken genuflect. Easily, I won that crowd over. I was a rock star.

Then, from out of nowhere, Linda called. Her tears stifled her words, but I knew that Kathy had passed. I had to be home for Linda when she returned from the funeral, so I stopped campaigning, my momentum fizzling like flat soda. Who knew what could have been had Kathy held on a bit longer.

When Linda returned, I took her in my arms. I didn't want to let go, but she broke my grasp.

"You should've been there," she said, her pointer finger catching tears under her eye. "She's your family, too."

"I know," I said. "And I wish you could've been with me. Voters love happy couples."

"Do you even care about Kathy?"

"I kept her alive, didn't I?"

Linda was tough to track down for the next few weeks. I had to listen for the sobs lingering through the behemoth's hallways, the echoes playing tricks. Occasionally, I found her

in the bathroom where she sat on the vanity between the mirrors—an infinite number of her, and not one of them looked happy to see me.

#

I knew Linda was upset with me. She deserved something special. So, I bought The Rolling Stones.

She didn't quite understand the gesture, so I told her she'd have to wait to find out. She smiled, though she hid her teeth.

At sunrise on a Friday, my employees mowed the backyard as I tested out a fresh patio set: resin wicker couches with olefin cushions along with a new fire pit. I sucked down a Cohiba Behike as the sun melted over the Atlantic, wishing Linda enjoyed the view I gave her.

After the grass was cut, the roadies unpacked a tractor trailer and constructed a stage large enough for Keith, Ronnie, and Charlie to set up shop and for Mick Jagger to strut his shit back and forth as only Mick Jagger could.

Later that morning, I ran into Mick while he was eating a turkey sandwich, his face coarse like a dry sponge. I asked him to play “She’s a Rainbow” for our private concert.

“You’re that bloke who ran for president, aren’t you?” he asked, bread and meat muffling his inquisition.

“Can you play it?”

Mick laughed before saying they hadn't played the song live since Athens in 1998. I bought The Stones to play "She's a Fucking Rainbow" for Linda, so I paid him and the band five million more dollars to add it to the set.

"You're a cartoon character," Mick said. "I hope you know that."

I wasn't a moron. I knew that was a bit absurd, but Mick didn't understand. I did it all for Linda. Anyone who could have done the same would have.

"Will you play it or not?"

He said he'd talk to the band and add it to the set list.

"Great sandwich by the way," Mick said. "What's the chef's name? Thank her for me, will ya?"

I was never good with names, so I nodded and then asked if the orchestral accompaniment was necessary to play the song. He shook his head, took a bite of his sandwich, and said no, but that it would sound banging with said accompaniment. I paid the Orlando Philharmonic two million dollars to have their twenty-two-piece string ensemble practice the song.

When Sunday came, Linda and I watched as our private concert sent electric riffs slicing through the neighborhood. Mick swiveled his seventy-six-year-old hips like the world was his hula hoop. We watched from the patio, the fire pit toasty on my legs but nowhere else. I knew my neighbors would have wanted to see, perhaps sneak through my shrubbery to catch a glimpse

of the ageing band. This night was for Linda though, so I gave my employees flashlights to ensure no one snuck a peak.

Mick finally strapped the acoustic across his chest and Chuck, the group's long-time keyboardist, jangled those seven opening notes on the piano. I stood and grabbed Linda's hand, though she tugged back, resisted. Eventually, she gave in and I twirled her round and round. Linda halted the twirling and creased her face as if she never heard the song and didn't give a shit about The Rolling Fucking Stones playing in our backyard.

"They're our favorite," I said.

"You played this at our wedding, but how are they our favorite?"

"Don't you remember the Irish Mist?"

"What's the Irish Mist?"

She released herself from my grasp and went back inside, slamming the sliding door so hard it didn't latch and reopened a crack. I didn't know what to do, so I kept watching the concert—cost me millions, might as well. As the evening progressed, Mick's strut grew more and more awkward. He flailed his arms with each step as if trying to stay afloat.

Once the show was over, I learned we hadn't danced at the Irish Mist. My memory remembered wrong. "She's A Rainbow" wasn't our song. That was someone else whose name, for the life of me, I'll never remember.

#

I'd proven that I didn't deserve Linda. So, I bought her a new husband.

His name was Ty, and he was built like a Chevy Big-Block—a ten and a fucking half. I found him on Craigslist shortly after I posted a Want-Ad which read: I’VE BEEN AN AWFUL HUSBAND TO A WIFE WHO’S ANYTHING BUT AWFUL. SHE DESERVES THE BEST, AND THAT’S WHOM I’LL PAY: THE BEST. FIFTY MILLION DOLLARS. I attached a photo of Linda when her hair was jet black and shoulder-length, the ends bobbing up like thousands of hooks.

Ty seemed like a decent guy. He managed a grocery store in Cocoa with a solid international foods aisle. He jumped on the offer. Anyone willing to change his entire life to make Linda happy had to be a decent guy.

I hid behind my perfectly-manicured hedges as Ty knocked on the door with the divorce papers in hand. I knew I risked coming off as cruel, but she needed to hear it from him. That way, he could show his strength, his control, his willingness to love her like I did.

An employee answered the door, turned back and shouted, and Linda took his place. When she cried, I came out and explained that I had been awful. I knew I wasn’t a good husband. I knew I wasn’t the husband she deserved.

To that point, I had seen her happy, emotionless, unabashed, and sad. This time, with her eyelids pulling her forehead down, her lips curled into one another, and her chest pumping and puffing up, breathing in and out like these breaths were her last, she was angry. No doubt about it.

“You don’t tell me who or what I deserve.”

“But he’s a good guy,” I said. “I mean, look at his arms. He’s got pythons the size of submarines.”

She slapped me. Then, she slapped me again. Harder than I knew anyone could be slapped. So hard, my hip began to ache. I felt my face, worried that my chin had dislodged into deformity, but, by then, the transplanted pelvis bone no longer resembled the pelvis. It was all jaw, stronger than ever.

She climbed into her sedan and ripped a tight turn out the driveway. Ty and I stood, the afternoon humidity gluing us to the sizzling concrete. I invited Ty in for dinner, though he said he had to get back to his store and figure out payroll.

“Please?” I asked him. “We *both* lost Linda today.”

“You lost her on your own,” Ty said. “You’re a fucking monster.”

He wasn’t actually going to marry her, he said. Rather, he wanted to help her get out of a situation so toxic that her husband would sell her online. He would’ve given her the money and told her to run.

I should have known better. You just can’t trust Craigslist anymore.

I decided not to punch him, and let him leave. Had I known the name of his grocery store, he’d be out of a job by the end of the week.

The behemoth felt empty. I removed my shoes and went to the kitchen, the contours of the stone-shaped tiles throwing me a bit off-balance. I opened the freezer and reached for a blue raspberry popsicle, walked up to my office to grab my laptop, and went out on the patio as the sky purpled. Before I knew it, the only thing in my mouth was a stick.

The sliding glass door opened behind me and my chef asked, “Are you hungry?”

I said no and sent her home, though quickly stood up and turned around.

“Wait,” I said. “What’s your name again?”

“Patricia,” she said through a sigh.

“Patricia,” I said. “You can leave if you want.”

She nodded and headed back in before turning to me and saying, “You should have seen it coming, sir.”

She left, though the sliding door didn’t close all the way. She hadn’t even known us a year. What did she know about our marriage?

I sank into an olefin cushion and opened a folder of wedding photos on my laptop. Scrolling through, the roll featured so many pictures with Linda and her bridesmaids’ hairdos being carried off in the sand-filled wind, others with she and I cutting our cake or dancing or posing.

I stopped on the photo taken after we had spun, the one in which the flash had separated us. I hadn’t noticed this before, but the photographer had captured the most beautiful version of Linda I had ever seen. Indoors. Hair perfect. Not posing. Spontaneous smile. Without me.

Closing the laptop, I sat outside as the purple blackened. Unlike the sunrise, the full moon didn’t spill colors. Rather, its reflection, though contorted by the *wushing* tide, sat whole in the dark ocean, round and white like a lucky lottery ball.

KAYFABE

Gill Grimshaw stood at a streaky locker-room mirror: glossy black tights with a purple stripe down each leg; stomach and chest as close to cut as they'd ever been; electrical tape wound tight around his arms, exaggerating his biceps—all of it conflicted with his gnarly facial hair and brown anybody-eyes, darkened pigment suspended under each like little black hammocks.

In his hand was the mask. No design or artwork. Just black lycra. His trainer, Dylan Dangerous, said the mask would compensate for Gill's small frame, transform him into a superhero for the dozens of fans in attendance. He took a breath as he pulled it over his face, waving *bye-bye* to Gill—shy, unpopular, insignificant Gill—and *hello* to the area's next hero. Hailing from the shadows of Schenectady: Phantom.

The power chord of his entrance music crackled through the Sportatorium's aged speakers, and Phantom burst from behind the curtain—a black shower curtain with a slit cut down the middle. All nine rows of the crowd cheered while those who spent the extra dollar to sit ringside gave Phantom high-fives and pats on the back.

He slid under the bottom rope and into the ring where he stared at his much larger opponent: “Jacked” Jaxon Jones. Though in any other circumstance, Jones would eat Phantom for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, this was Upstate Pro Wrestling, and this was scripted to be Phantom's night.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

Phantom dropped eighty-something jaws with a somersaulting spot-fest blended with chain-wrestling and brawling—fists swinging hard but landing lightly, each punch accompanied by a large stomp to exaggerate the force. Phantom ended the bout by ascending the ropes and leaping onto Jackson with an elbow drop that had more hang-time than the lead in a kung-fu film. The referee raised Phantom’s hand in victory, and the fans gave him the biggest pop of the night. As the spotlights toasted the wrestling ring, Phantom stood with his fists raised in the air. Gill’s insides tingled so much that his skin could rupture.

At the end of the show, he left the locker room with the mask on, and was approached by a boy in a baseball cap pleading for an autograph. He signed the boy’s program *Gill Grimshaw* as if he was signing his rent check. The boy complained and rightfully so, for Gill had broken kayfabe which, according to Dylan, was the biggest no-no in pro wrestling. When the mask was on, Gill was Phantom, not Gill. “If a kid met Santa at the mall,” Dylan once said, “that kid met Santa, not Bob or Ted or Frank. Santa.”

Gill rectified his mistake, and the boy received the signature he really wanted.

#

The overhanging bell jingled as Gill entered Bolten’s Hardware for his shift. Marv, the owner, sat as he always sat: behind the counter, face hidden by the freshly stamped serif of the day’s *Schenectady Gazette*, thick cigar smoke wafting from behind the thin paper.

“You’re late,” Marv said.

Gill glanced at the wall clock. “I’m early.”

Marv lowered the paper. His face looked rough, his wrinkles like withered waterways. He pointed toward Gill's post. "She needs your expertise."

Gill turned, though he couldn't see through the shelves of nail-filled cubbies. Marv brought the paper back to his face.

"She got here before you," Marv continued, cigar smoke swaying with each word. "You're late."

Though Gill had been working at Bolten's for over six years, he knew that seniority was never an excuse for Marv. Bolten's was in the business of home repair, the rebuilding of a customer's life. All Marv cared about was providing the best-damn service to Upstate New York, something that never had a set schedule.

Gill went to the breakroom and grabbed his red company vest, his name embroidered on the left breast in a whirly white font. Then, he headed toward his post: the key cutter. An antiquated, manually-operated Martinburg Model 0450. 110 volts. 1/4 horsepower. Fourteen and a half cycles per second. Gill reveled in the precision and care it took to carve access into a hunk of brass, opening literal doors to allow people to find the figurative ones. Gill felt somewhat important behind the Martinburg and—considering Phantom's successful debut the night before—always knew that cutting keys would open doors for him as well, although who would've thought that door led to professional wrestling.

#

Almost a year prior, Gill had carved a key for Dylan, the most massive man Gill had ever met: arms bigger than Gill's waist, neck wider than Gill's head, chest as large as a television set. His dark hair was spiked and reeked of chemicals, while a tattooed sleeve of bones piled up his left arm. Dylan needed an additional key for the Sportatorium, an ancient gymnasium tucked behind a karate dojo off State Street. During small-talk, he discussed his small wrestling promotion where he was head-trainer, promoter, owner, and operator. He was also the promotion's champion and most hated heel, called himself Dylan Dangerous: the "Most Dangerous Man on Earth." Gill caught most of Dylan's spiel, but, at the time, crafting the consummate key was much more important.

"We have a show tonight," Dylan said, his voice as large as his muscles. "You should stop in."

The cutter faded off and Gill blew on his creation, ran his fingers along the hot ridges, and blew on it again.

"Just check us out," Dylan continued. He slapped a ticket on the plastic countertop—an index card with *Free Admission* sloppily scripted with a Sharpie. "You'll love it."

Gill rang him up for his beautiful key as well as the RocLok Hide-a-Key model 5725217—2.25 cubic inches of concealment, a fine way to protect a fine key—and Dylan left.

Turned out the Sportatorium was on Gill's route to work, though he had never noticed it. Most people paid more attention to the strip mall out front with the dojo and quarter laundry mat and a New York style pizza joint that served more grease than pizza.

Upon entering—which required extra oomph to push open the heavy steel and glass door—he observed too many hardware iniquities: exposed electrical, protruding nails, loose hand-railings, chipped molding, faded paint and missing state-mandated smoke detectors, not to mention the slanted wrestling ring with uneven ropes and missing ceiling tiles above a turnbuckle. The air tickled his throat, potent with scents of burnt mozzarella and wilted hotdogs.

Then, he took his seat.

The lights dimmed and the crowd went nuts and the announcer announced and strobes flashed and the crowd went nuts and the slams erupted and the chairs cracked and the crowd went nuts and the cheaters cheated and the baby-faces baby-faced and the crowd went nuts.

When Dylan came out for the night's main event, dressed in ripped jean shorts and a black, spandex-looking tank, anger was as palpable as the kitchen's odors. The *boos* boomed in Gill's chest as Dylan walked slowly down the aisle, stopping and squatting down to meet a blonde-haired boy at eye level who was giving Dylan a thumbs-down. Dylan's eyes widened, swallowing the kid's enthusiasm and leaving him stiff like a punching bag, before grabbing the kid's upside-down fist and thumb and turning it 180 degrees, his thumb now pointed upward. Dylan slid into the ring and smiled, basking in the crowd's collective hatred.

While Dylan was a large man in the hardware store, *that* Dylan was an everyday person—someone with a job, neighbors, bills, and errands. Yet, with an outfit donned and boots strapped, Dylan metamorphosed into something much more. The crowd hated every ounce of him, yet they didn't actually hate Dylan. Rather, they loved hating him. They were emotionally invested in him. He was a part of their lives, more so than a guy who crafted spare keys.

Gill examined himself—five-foot-eight, buck fifty-five, an oversized noodle—but had to try.

#

Gill saw his customer waiting when he slipped behind the counter.

“You the key guy?” she asked. Her freckles looked familiar, as did the frizzy reddish hair veiling her ears. “You do keys, or what?”

“I’m Gill,” he said, scratching the back of his scalp.

“I need a copy of my house key,” she said, dropping the key onto the counter. “How long will it take?”

Gill looked at the key and back to her.

“Carrie, right?”

Her face creased as if she had bitten into a lemon. “Who’s asking?”

“I’m—”

“Gill Grimshaw,” she interrupted. “Hi, Gill.”

She remembered him? No one ever remembered him. Though his name *was* on his vest. Either way, Gill smiled.

“It’s been years,” he said.

“It certainly has,” she replied and glanced at her watch. “How long will the key take?”

“As long as I feel like taking.” He turned to hide the victory dance in his head, excited to be even slightly smug.

Eventually, her mouth curled into a smile. “Is that so?”

Her key remained on the counter as their conversation drowned out the ticking secondhand behind him. How didn’t Gill blow it? He was never able to approach women before, let alone talk with them. What was different this time?

“I’m a professional wrestler now,” Gill immediately regretted blurting, considering Carrie was neither under thirteen years old nor a male—the two typical demographics.

“What’s your get-up?” she asked amongst a titter. “What do they call you?”

“Phantom.”

“Phantom, huh?” She rested her elbows on the counter and her chin in her hands. “How about you make that key for me and then tell me all about this Phantom for as long as you’d like.” She backed away while Gill fidgeted for her key.

“Give me,” Gill swallowed, “give me two minutes.”

He reached under the counter and grabbed his thick safety goggles. He snapped them on, and she giggled as he motioned for her to step back. He placed her key in the left vice, tightening it slowly, and, after lowering the fence, did the same with a blank. The fence needed to be raised before he turned on the blade and, methodically, he tilted the blank toward the rotating blade and maneuvered it along, burrs pelting his goggles like tiny comets. The carving sounded like a

nickel in a garbage disposal—ambient music to Gill. He removed the key and placed it in the brush, then smoothed it out with his fingers, blowing on it upon completion.

Gill placed the warm key in her palm and asked, “What do you want to know about Phantom?”

She dropped her chin a bit and placed the spare key back in Gill’s hand.

“You don’t know how to read women, do you?”

She laughed before taking Gill’s keyless hand and, with a pen fetched from her purse, branded his arm with her address.

“I’m free until six,” she said.

“That’s early, isn’t it?”

“That’s when I’m free until.”

She turned and left without looking back.

Where had he learned to flirt? To be so confident? Rather than answering these questions, he went back to mental reruns of his debut match, enjoying every move, every bump, and everybody giving him the approbation he always wanted.

#

Over the next few months, Phantom grew beyond the Sportatorium. Aside from climbing the UPW card, his matches often ran on *Saturday Night Slobber-Knocker*—a late-night public access show ranging from Plattsburg to Plattekill, from Rochester to much of New England. He

even endorsed an Albany car dealership owned by the father of a die-hard mark, and was interviewed for several wrestling sites buzzing with rumors of two growing Northeast circuits wanting to bring him in for workouts. He out-autographed the rest of the locker room, Phantom's signature becoming more natural than ever. Phantom loved it.

Gill was drained, the black hammocks darker and deeper than ever. But, between Bolten's and Phantom's success, he was making money and paying rent on time; however, when February's rent was due, he signed the check *Phantom*.

Gill hated having to sign as Phantom, leaving the locker room as Phantom. He wanted people to love Gill, wanted people to know that he was their true hero.

"I wanna be legit," Gill finally told Dylan, the loud bumps of the rookie jobbers echoing throughout the building.

Dylan laughed. "You can't be." He yelled encouraging curses to the group in the ring. "Everyone in that locker room would kill for what you have, mask or not. You should be grateful."

"I can do it. You know I have the talent."

Dylan stepped back and sized him up. "You're a scrawny little shit, and no one wants to see a scrawny little shit unless he wears a mask and flies."

Phantom was in the duffel bag, so nothing hid Gill's drooped face.

"Fans connect with the big brutes they wish they could be," Dylan continued, raising his voice to combat the noise, "or the superhero they can never be. Gill is neither. Phantom is.

You're in it for them." He gestured toward the empty blue folding chairs lined in jagged rows. Dylan patted Gill on the back and walked away. "Oh yeah," he turned back to Gill, "Phantom's getting the belt next Friday. Give the fans what they want, ya know?"

Gill lifted his head. "You're giving me the title?"

"Think of some spots," Dylan said. "We'll work on them next week. There may be some scouts there too, so let's make them happy they came."

Gill sped home after training and called Carrie to tell her the news.

"Get here now," she said. "We don't have much time to celebrate."

"Why not?"

"Just hurry."

"What's going—"

Click.

She always acted strange or in a rush, though Gill had grown used to that and quickly arrived at her place. She answered her apartment door in a salmon-colored men's button-up, the top buttons unbuttoned. The flat's entrance was dim, and empty shelves where trinkets and picture frames ought to be lined the hallway. She shoved Gill against the wall where the corner of a shelf dug into his back.

“Let’s talk about—” was all Gill could get out before being interrupted by Carrie’s lips. They tasted like dated cigarettes, but Gill didn’t think she smoked. He pushed her face away and held onto her cheeks, gazing into her green eyes. “Let’s chat for a bit.”

“No time to chat,” she replied, her hands venturing down his body. “Did you bring him?”

Him.

Gill couldn’t move as Carrie snatched his keys from his pocket. He watched her run down the stairs and go through the gym bag in the backseat. She pulled out the mask, locked the car, and skipped back, closing the door behind her. She tugged his shirt and pulled him into her bedroom where she gave him the mask, the lycra slipper in his hands.

Eventually, he put on the mask and his periphery was eliminated, directing his focus solely to Carrie who smiled while unbuttoning the rest of her shirt. This was only Carrie’s second time seeing Phantom, for his shows were almost always on her “busy” nights. He had been suspicious of something, but he wasn’t sure of what. The one thing he was sure of was that having suspicions must have meant he had true feelings—perhaps an unavoidable problem with real romance.

“What are you gonna do?” Carrie asked, twirling her shirt like a lasso, letting it fling and drape over his shoulder. Normally, by this point, she would have taken control: pushed him onto the bed, unzipped his pants, tell him all the things she was going to do, and ask how badly he wanted those things done to him. This time was different. She looked at him as if awe-struck, a smile not out obligation but out of wonder—a look he had seen hundreds of times. She looked like a fan.

Through the mask's eye holes, she looked smaller. Whenever Gill was Phantom, everybody looked smaller. Not because he was arrogant, but rather, if he was going to win the fans over, he needed to be something they could only dream to be. From the shadows of Schenectady, ladies and gentlemen, your hero: Phantom.

Phantom was rougher than Gill could have ever been. He slammed Carrie around the room and in the bed and twisted her into inventive sexual submissions until she tapped out, quicker and louder than ever. Phantom was asked to come back for a rematch the next day.

#

Gill arrived to work anxious to recalibrate the Martinburg, its alignment a tad off the previous night resulting in crooked keys. At the front counter, he was stopped by the smoke, partly because the heavy cloud infiltrated his lungs, partly because attached to the smoke were the words: "You have a new toy to play with."

Marv's face was hidden by the latest Gazette. The front page had a color photo of an unidentifiable house somewhere behind layers of fire, its oranges and reds vibrant even on the cheap newsprint. The headline read "One Lost, Two Injured in Front Street Flames." That was on the other side of town by the banks of the Mohawk River, though Gill probably could've smelled the smoke had he been out on his stoop.

"Ordered it this morning. Overnight delivery from Utica. We'll learn how to use it tomorrow."

Without looking from the Gazette, Marv turned the computer monitor toward Gill and it creaked like its position had never been altered before. In the monitor's glow was the WILCO Jet

4400. Digital cutter. Laser measurement. Seven copies per minute. Press a button. Insert key. Press another button or two. Listen for the clink clink clink in the aluminum tray.

Gill's face tightened, eyebrows nearly touching, lips clenching into each other as if in a vice. He leaned closer to Marv and asked, "What's wrong with the Martinburg?"

"What's wrong with the forty-four hundred?" Marv said. "The Martinburg belongs in the world's most boring museum."

A circular saw whirled on from the back room and sliced—what sounded like—some yellow pine, the buzz piercing through the empty shop.

"We'll learn tomorrow," Marv continued. He lowered the Gazette and bit down on his Dutchmaster. Gill's lips unclenched into a simper, and he walked back to the Martinburg where he recalibrated it for the eighteen keys he crafted that day, the process more languid with every key, with every single nook, until it was time to leave.

#

In twenty-four hours, Gill would be the champ.

He wore the mask during training to get a feel for wrestling a man Dylan's size without his peripheral vision, though sight was the least of his concerns. Dylan slammed hard. Punched hard. Kicked hard. Chopped hard. Even with proper technique, the mat refused to absorb much of the blow. "Get used to it," he reminded Phantom, his words accompanied by globs of saliva. The mask hid Phantom's grinding teeth.

When it came Phantom's turn to try some moves, he was uncontrollably stiff, delivering strong-style fists and kicks to Dylan's chest and stomach and face and he couldn't stop. He wouldn't stop. No one could stop him. He Irish-whipped Dylan into the ropes and, as Dylan sling-shot back, Phantom nailed a kick-combo followed by his signature leaping calf kick that blasted Dylan's nose, which gushed more blood than Phantom had ever seen. Some jobbers came to his aid with cloths and gauze pads, and all Dylan could do was smile through the crimson. He wiped his face with his arm, providing blood to his already macabre tattoo.

"Save some of that shit for tomorrow night," Dylan said, the words so red they stained the ring's eggshell-colored canvas.

#

Phantom drove home.

When checking Gill's answering machine, Phantom heard Carrie's voice, softer than usual, saying she'd be at the show, but—and Phantom deleted the message. He'd see her the following evening. Then, Phantom changed into Gill's pajamas, lay in Gill's bed, rested his head on Gill's pillow, tucked himself under Gill's comforter, and had Gill's dreams.

He woke and put on gym shorts and a tight t-shirt and went on Gill's daily run. The Schenectady sky was overcast. It was garbage day. Over-filled cans lined the sidewalks. Nothing smelled worse than Schenectady on garbage day.

Cars slowed down and drivers looked puzzled. Fellow runners stopped running. The homeless laughed and coughed and laughed some more. Prep school boys and girls lined by

gender cheered him on. Two boys shouted “Phantom!” and he stopped, turned around, and felt the lycra on his face. He turned back and sprinted to Gill’s home where he took a shower and washed away the sweat and stink all over his body, water and suds soaking into the mask and barely dampening the hair and skin underneath.

Afterward, he put on jeans and a white shirt and drove to work where he was greeted with wide eyes and ajar mouths. Marv demanded he take off the mask, but Phantom refused. He was sent home when he wouldn’t comply, though he saw Gill’s replacement. The WILCO, the 4400, fresh out of the box and basking in celestial sunshine behind the counter.

Phantom decided to go to the Sportatorium rather than back to Gill’s. It was only early afternoon so the door was locked, but Phantom decided to wait outside on the pile of rocks next to the door until Dylan arrived.

“Why didn’t you let yourself in?” Dylan asked. He pointed to the rocks where Phantom had been sitting. One must have been the RocLok Hide-a-Key, model number 5725217, doing exactly what it was made to do.

#

The audience was berserk, the Sportatorium seemingly shaking off its foundation. Phantom peeked through the slit of the curtain and tried to locate the scouts Dylan had mentioned. He did spot the back of Carrie’s head a few rows from the ring. She sat next to a large man with curly black back hair sticking out from the collar of his salmon shirt.

“You ready?” Dylan asked, slapping Phantom on the back a bit harder than he expected.

“What kind of question is that?” he replied. He replayed the spots in his head, visualizing the strap draped over his shoulder, his arm raised in victory. Gill would have loved this.

The emcee riled the fans up before the guitar jolted through the Sportatorium. Phantom stepped out uncharacteristically slow, purposeful, but, for the first time, nervous. He looked to Carrie whose green eyes focused on her own fidgety hands. The man next to her was a slob—shirt unbuttoned and terrain on his belly that would clog the best electric razor on the market. Phantom knew that shirt.

He pointed at Carrie and, with his hooked finger, summoned her to the guardrail. Some fans looked disappointed that the invitation wasn’t for them, but they continued cheering and even patted Carrie on her back as she walked to the front row. Her hair hung over her eyes, and he simultaneously wanted to stroke it over her ear and pull even more of it in front of her guilty face.

“Glad you two could make it,” he said.

“You shouldn’t be doing this right now.”

Phantom could taste the menthol from her breath.

She was right. His thoughts, this conversation, he was on the verge of breaking kayfabe, although the crowd had no clue what the interaction was about. Phantom had many fans. Now more than ever, Carrie was simply one of them.

Phantom’s music faded as the second verse was about to begin. The man in the fishy shirt stood up, then raised his chin, then inched a bit higher as if to levitate.

Phantom turned his back to her and climbed into the ring, though he really wanted to turn around and see whether Carrie was frozen in place, looking on as if she lost something she treasured, or if he'd see nothing but her backside, himself something she'd neither regret nor remember. But Phantom couldn't have been lost in woes. Phantom had a title fight.

Thick thuds of a drum solo signaled the arrival of Dylan Dangerous. He ran through the curtain right into the ring. He stood taller than Phantom and shoved the belt in his face. Suddenly, Phantom struck him. And struck again. And struck again. Angry. Stiff. Strong-style forearms to Dylan's face reopened his nose. The referee tried pulling Phantom off, but he refused and kept pounding Dylan until he was backed up against the turnbuckle and fell to his rear, at which Phantom began kicking his face and stomping his chest, Dylan's big body bouncing with every blow.

He finally backed away as Gill felt himself from behind the mask. Gill never knew he was capable of such violence, nor the rush of unleashing it. Every strike was for a trainer or boss telling him no, or a girlfriend who was never a girlfriend. A lifetime of being treated like a nobody culminated in so much blood and a nose so dislodged that the only thing holding it to Dylan's face was skin.

The place was rocking, hundreds of eyes reflecting the spotlights.

Dylan pushed the referee out of the way and leveled Gill with a forearm to the face. When he got back to his feet, Dylan leveled him again, picked him up, whipped him into the ropes, and bashed him in the face with the tattooed elbow. Dylan went for the pin and winked at Gill.

Showtime.

They each got their share of blows, each took small and large bumps, Gill the biggest when Dylan lifted him above his head and tossed him over the top rope onto the cold concrete floor and fans erupted with a collective “Oh my God” which turned into boos when Dylan flexed and taunted the fans before stepping out to brawl in the crowd where Gill landed a few jabs but Dylan, as only Dylan could do, chopped the hell out of Gill’s bare chest, each crack deafening and branding bold, red hand-prints onto his flesh. Dylan forced him back to the ring, but not before mocking a large woman wearing a neon green muumuu sitting in the front row, and he climbed the ropes and leapt off and smacked into the canvas—an impact that made the ref jump in the air—leaving a bloody face imprint as Gill dodged the big blow. Gill ascended the ropes to the top turnbuckle and soared higher than ever before crashing down and drilling his elbow deep into Dylan’s chest. The maneuver only managed a two-count, and the crowd booed the ref’s sluggish counting so Gill argued with him until a rising Dylan charged. Gill averted the gore but the ref did not, causing the decibel level to tip the local Richter Scale before Gill landed his kick-combo that would have earned the pin-fall victory if the referee hadn’t been knocked “out cold.”

Gill stood and saw nothing but the glare of the lights, so he climbed to the second turnbuckle to see beyond the blur and into the admiration. None of the cheers were for him. They were chanting for Phantom. Phantom. Phantom. Not Gill.

Phantom was no longer necessary, no longer deserved the praise. This was Gill’s night.

Gill reached back and pulled Phantom’s face off, and there he was: Gill Grimshaw. Standing on the corner. Arms raised. Mask in hand. Gnarly facial hair. Black hammocks.

Anybody eyes. The key cutter. His chest expanded and contracted and expanded and contracted; his breath was all he could hear. Fans sat silent. Children looked on with gaped mouths. Eventually, the silence morphed into boos.

I'm in it for them, Gill thought.

A tug at his trunks pulled him down. Stumbling off the turnbuckle, Gill turned around and Dylan stiffed him with a closed fist. His knuckles burrowed through Gill's scalp and skull and dented his brain, his neurons rattling back and forth along with his consciousness. That was not a professional wrestling punch—no stomp necessary.

"You blew it," Dylan yelled, his face coated in drying blood. "You blew it, you scrawny little shit!"

Gill, in and out of his own head, saw a blurred Dylan head to the locker room, followed by the referee, and the crowd, including the scouts wherever they were, including Carrie, who'd probably gone home to gaze at her trinkets and picture frames and whatever else she displayed with her back-haired shirt-sharer.

He propped himself on wobbly elbows and baked in the spotlight. With all the other lights shut off, a dark nothingness surrounded him and the ring. Gill tried hard to think about anything to make sure he could still think, and all that popped into his head was the WILCO Jet 4400—how brainless one needed to be to operate the machine, how many more keys he'd be able to carve during his shift the following afternoon—until the spotlight shut off and Gill became part of the nothing.

HARNESS

The uncle decides to jerry-rig a leash for Walter, his hamster, using fishing line and the rubber band bracelet his niece wove for him a month before her death. The bands are now withered and weak, perhaps because the sun feels larger in the South, singeing bands like dynamite fuses until they snap. Also, the colors have dulled—even the once vibrant teal, his niece’s favorite.

“Teal is my favorite, too,” he remembers saying as she sat on her bedroom floor, fashioning what she called a fishtail bracelet with her rubber band loom. Using a long plastic hook like a dental tool, she pulled teal on top of black on top of gold on top of teal.

“I thought I was your favorite,” his niece said, her voice like cotton.

Walter was originally her hamster, a gift from her mother intended to teach responsibility. When she was alive, Walter’s belly was always full of pellets, his water bottle topped off, and his plastic cage never lined with soggy, smelly wood shavings. She even gave him a small squirrel stuffed with beans whom she named Peanut. As she would always say, “Everyone needs a friend.”

Walter became the uncle’s only friend. So many variables were at work when his niece drowned, yet everyone except for Walter chose to blame him: the uncle, the babysitter. Did they forget how much he loved her? How much she loved him? Blame the world. Blame God. Blame the inground pool. But don’t blame him.

The uncle decided to snag Walter and abscond south to an unkempt, unairconditioned studio furnished with a stiff green couch where the uncle sits and watches Walter, whose cage rests on the dirty, cream-colored carpet where a television set should be. Walter usually sleeps under unchanged wood chips during the day, and emerges at night to run and run and run on his wheel, pedaling so fast his little hamster legs look tangled. The unoiled wheel squeaks like rusty playground equipment, so Walter is often placed into a plastic orange ball in which he can navigate the studio. If his niece were alive, she would enjoy watching Walter bump into the refrigerator or the faded baby blue walls in the bathroom, giggling so hard she would forget to breathe.

Today, Walter has run out of pellets and has been knocking his orange globe into the front door, as if asking to be let outside. The uncle would love to buy him more food, though the little money he had would be better suited for his own diet. He is being responsible, for Walter couldn't live if the uncle were to starve and die. Don't blame him. Blame the economy. The job market. Anything.

But that shouldn't stop Walter from getting some fresh air, so forging the leash seems appropriate. The uncle wishes his niece could join them on the walk, for she'd get a real kick out of how silly it would be. Why did her mother insist on an inground pool? Hopefully, his niece is watching with all the new friends she has certainly made above the clouds.

The uncle plucks the fishtailed rubber, part of him expecting to produce music. The thought of using the bracelet tightens around his ribs, but, when wrapped around Walter's chubby, furry frame (a difficult task in itself, Walter being a bit squirmy) the bracelet is loose

enough to prevent Walter from suffocating yet tight enough to serve as the perfect harness. The uncle loops the fishing line around the rubber several times, and they head outside.

Not even six steps from his apartment door, the uncle sweats from everywhere his body allows. Walter, unaccustomed to actual freedom, takes a few steps down the sidewalk, wiggles his snout, and takes a few more, the process repeating. The uncle tries to lead Walter along and sees his neighbors talking behind cupped hands. Words pile into his throat that beg to be yelled, but he doesn't yell. Let them judge. Somewhere in the sky or perhaps right there with him, his niece is drowning in giggles.

In the adjacent grass, two squirrels play tag around the apartment complex's decorative spruces, their chirps bouncing across the parking lot's cracked pavement. The uncle feels a tug on the leash that pulls the line tight, as if Walter wants to join the squirrels, until the pull fades and the fishing line droops to the ground. Walter and the bracelet scuttle away.

The uncle steps forward to snatch Walter, but retracts his reach and allows the sweat to paste him to the sidewalk. He hates losing his friend, but can't be responsible for obstructing Walter's choice: a life without plastic balls, wheels, and cages. He wants to give life, not take it away.

Of course, he's disappointed. He wants to blame the squirrels for clearly egging Walter on with their playful chirps that sound like jokes. Yet, had the uncle nabbed Peanut before leaving, maybe Peanut's fabric-softened pelt and bean-filled belly would've convinced Walter to stay. "Everyone needs a friend," his niece had said. Now, Walter has two.

The uncle feels a small squeeze on his hand. He can't see his niece, but knows it's her. It could only be her. So, he squeezes back as they watch their friend Walter run and stop and wiggle and run through the sunlit grass to his new friends—wrapped in teal, black, and gold rubber that will weaken, snap, and fall off somewhere in the universe where the colors will continue to dull until they are finally dead.

X-5000

Stuck on a stubborn Windsor knot, Doug nearly planted his argyles in a warm pile of mustard-colored cat vomit on the living room hardwood. Oscar looked proud of his mess. His posture was royal—a cat destined to be carved in Egyptian stone—as he sat on the edge of the rug, trading glances between the adjacent regurgitated breakfast and Doug.

Doug nudged Oscar away with his foot, though Oscar came back more curious than ever. He sniffed his handy work as if forgetting the round, mushy pebbles were quasi-digested.

“Don’t do it,” Doug said. He nudged Oscar again, though not as lightly. The cat came back and sniffed some more, his tail flopping like a dying trout.

Doug had grown to despise Oscar, his wife’s cat. The kind of cat who’d paw at Doug’s belly as if kneading dough until inching so damn close to Doug’s damn face that Oreo-colored fur-balls tickled his tonsils. The kind of cat whose routine involved vomiting, eating said vomit, and vomiting the vomit. Doug didn’t hate all cats. Just Oscar. Just his wife’s cat.

“Don’t,” Doug said, his tone somewhere between polite and agitated. He nudged Oscar away again, though the cat still wouldn’t take the hint. He nudged and nudged and nudged, then wound back and, in an insentient moment, failed to control the velocity of his kick. The pop of a cat neck measuring the living room’s acoustics.

Doug stared at what was once Oscar, and sweat trickled down his forehead, between his hazel eyes to the tip of his nose where drops held like those from melting icicles before plummeting into the tattered fabric of his living room rug. His rug. Not his wife’s. The rug went

with neither her whiskey maple (or as Doug called it: brown) hardwood floors nor her imported cappuccino end tables. The whole living room was hers: the floor, the tables, a leather sectional too stiff to leave any grooves, and various pieces of metal art strewn along the walls that could have come from a junk yard. But the rug was his: a neglected shade of green like a weather-beaten lawn. The rug may have thrown off the Feng Shui, but he viewed it as a symbol of their relationship, had been for all eleven years of it. His wife never saw it that way. “We should get a new one,” she would always say. “We’re not in college anymore.”

How could he think about the rug with Oscar carcassing on the floor? Clearly, this was an accident of inconceivable consequence. Or perhaps a long-awaited subconscious desire. His wife would suspect conspiracy and intent. Six years of circumstantial evidence built quite the case against him, so Doug dithered about their suburban home, searching for the appropriate lie. Usually, the search was a cinch, though most fibs simply belied basic sentiments: where they’d eat, where they’d vacation, where they’d shop. He lied so she could have the life she wanted. That’s love, although Doug suspected that to be a lie too.

Doug moved from the living room, through the dining room, and to the kitchen where, on the granite top of the island, his wife’s pretentious fruit bowl usurped all attention, its hand-sculpted chromed steel wrapped like a wobbly dreidel around four ripe granny-smiths. He didn’t understand the apparatus, annoyed that he could see strips of his warped reflection in its stupid, over-polished shine. Fruit bowls weren’t meant to be chic and shiny. They were meant to hold fruit.

Doug grabbed all-purpose cleaner and paper towels from under the sink and went back to the crime scene. He dropped to his knees, the rug's fabric scratchy through his trousers. Using the paper towel roll, he pushed Oscar away from the mess, the lifeless body gliding along the floor like a Swiffer. He gathered most of the vomit in a single sheet, ripped off another and, with a couple squirts of cleaner and some elbow grease, wiped it clean. Simple as that.

Though the mess was gone, the dead cat remained. His wife was away at some team-building exercise for work and wouldn't return until the weekend, which meant Doug had either two or three days to figure something out. Bury him? Throw him in the road and blame a neighborhood hoodlum driving a car he didn't buy to and from a house he wasn't paying for? Stick him in the freezer? The latter sounded right, though what about her mint chocolate cookie crunch ice cream? No cat and no dessert would have made things much worse for him. He was running late for work, so he decided to leave him until he returned home. Doug turned off the thermostat; with the winter air blanketing the house, the corpse could go nine hours without reeking.

He laced his shiny black shoes, grabbed his shiny black briefcase, snagged an apple, shut the blinds, and left, leaving the cul-de-sac and the Deerfield Landing development behind. He tried to shake Oscar off his mind. Body crumpled on the floor. Green, lifeless eyes left open in the dark.

#

The routine began: coffee at the downstairs café aptly named “Café”, two pumps of caramel, half and half until the drink paled; cram the elevator, shoulder to shoulder, assortment

of caffeinated eye-openers exhausting various aromas; *ding* at the fourth floor, an arsenal of arbitrary pleasantries until the excursion through cubicle city ceased at Doug's six-by-six coop on the far corner—technically a corner office.

Going on eight years, Doug worked with Troy's Planning and Zoning Department, though he neither planned nor zoned. Rather, he handled professional building permits. Approved some. Denied most. The work was stale, though *stale* was an inevitable progression in professional life—not necessarily a permanent one, but one nonetheless. For the time being, he was reluctantly complacent, complacency trumping reluctance.

Doug's cubicle had as much personality as a cubicle offered: a dated desktop computer; a pile of permit requests that Doug didn't want to consider; and the page-a-day calendar his wife gifted him for Christmas. This year's theme was "Vocabulary," which Doug suspected was her way of criticizing his lexicon. She worked in Research Administration and Finance at the polytechnic university and boasted an academia-inspired vernacular.

"It doesn't take an erudite to work in Research Administration," Doug once said.

"Erudite?" she replied. "Some calendar, isn't it?"

Her jokes often felt less like jokes and more like castigation, to which he'd respond with a conflicted smile. He was never good at reading her.

He set his apple down and tore a page to reveal the day's word: *Proprioception*. Noun. Perception of movement and spatial orientation governed by physiological receptors, such as muscles, tendons, and joints.

He sat in his chair long enough to turn on his desktop dinosaur when, as if on cue, Karen poked her head in, her wavy, dark-cherry hair swaying behind her face. She wore a tight blue get-up with black leggings and heels that could be heard from miles away. Her posture looked calculated: the placement of her hand on her hip, the slight arch of her back, the bend of her left knee through the slit of her skirt.

Work, no matter how dull, was his retreat from his wife-centric home, and Karen's presence gave him good reason to enjoy the job. Although he would never cheat, he couldn't help but treasure how Karen said "Hey, Doug," and the effortless transition her merlot-colored lips made from the words to her smile.

"Morning, Karen."

He couldn't help but like her. He liked her because she liked him. She would laugh. She would touch Doug's shoulder. Harmlessly coquettish—much like the early stages of love, when he and his wife would cuddle on the couch and watch bad movies and tell bad jokes. The stages where even the fumbles were endearing, wrong words somehow right. The stages he missed. Doug convinced himself that, at some point, all marriages deflate.

"Are you going to tell me what's on the agenda today," Karen said, "or would you rather blow this joint and catch a flick?"

"Can't we do both?" Doug said with a smirk. "We have a meeting at noon-ish."

"Noon-ish?"

"Technical jargon."

“The Lofts?”

Doug grimaced at the thought. Though there was a housing need brought about by the university’s rise in the national rankings, Doug wanted the deal for The Lofts to crumble, for ground to remain unbroken. Not only did the apartment complex’s renderings present an eleven-story modern eye sore, but, planted at the bottom of the Congress Street hill—the main artery into downtown Troy—the proposed project would obstruct the postcard view of the steeples and snow-covered rooftops, the bricks and brownstone and the forgotten labor that built the Collar City, the west bank of the Hudson River subtly marking city limits in the background. The view had been the highlight of his morning commute for over eight years, his rationale for agreeing to live in Deerfield Landing—his wife wanting to “settle down” in a more “appropriate” location. Beyond his rug, he didn’t have much of anything. He wasn’t ready to lose his view, too.

“What else would we be meeting about?” Doug responded.

“Lunch?”

“And dip into petty cash? No, they won’t feed us.”

“Just us?”

When Karen first started, she shadowed Doug, maintaining eye contact, asking questions, and, whenever she had an “ah-ha” moment, doing this adorable thing where she’d bob her head as dimples dug into her cheeks. She was genuinely interested in what he had to say, but eventually he sensed her feelings turn into desire. Again, he’d never pursue. He wasn’t a cheater,

though he feared he may have been leading Karen on. However, he chose not to confront Karen on the subject. He wanted to feel significant, as if he actually mattered to someone.

“Well?” she continued. “What do you say?”

He dragged his finger along the corner of the calendar.

“See you at noon-ish.”

He rubbed one hand against the back of his neck and clinked the other against his desk, his wedding band lacking rhythm.

She smiled and walked away. Doug bit into his apple and listened to every clack of her pumps until they hushed.

#

Doug entered the house, switched on the lights, and noticed a flyer that must have been slipped under the door. On pink cardstock, a comic font announced that on Saturday, R & J Distributors and Cleaning Services would be offering free carpet cleanings to the neighborhood. The flyer featured a cartoonish portrait of a slick-haired, sunglasses-wearing man—thumbs up and a smile that curled all the way to his ears.

He marched down the hallway and, when he saw Oscar, his insides clamped around his spine. He forgot about Oscar’s open eyes.

Doug kicked off his shoes and placed the flyer on the end table by the landline where they hoarded junk mail until either he or his wife decided it had been junk long enough. His breath was still visible, the living room’s dangling LEDs the only source of heat. He flipped on

the thermostat before tip-toeing toward Oscar, as if the cat could zombify and claw Doug's brain from his skull. He dropped to all fours and brought his face close to Oscar's, noticing caked vomit in his mane as well as the emptied bladder pooled around him, soaking into his pelt and the surrounding hardwood, smelling like a rotten lime. Had Oscar been alive, he'd have begun his ascent to Doug's shoulders and perch himself like a whiny parrot. He'd wail and purr and wouldn't quit until his feline filibuster yielded the appropriate attention. Now, covered in vomit, soaked in urine, Oscar wasn't Oscar.

"We need to get you cleaned," Doug said.

Doug walked past Oscar and through the master bedroom to the master bathroom and drew a warm bath. He still wasn't sure what to do with the body. There was most likely still time before decomposition, and his wife wouldn't want him buried without her being there. The garage didn't feel right; who knew what sort of scavengers would smell a delicious meal. But wouldn't the scavengers be hibernating? Were there even scavengers near suburbia? It was best not to take the chance.

He squeezed his body wash and the potent blue gel fused with the running water, generating bubbles on top of bubbles. Doug was always tasked with bathing Oscar, even though cats clean themselves.

"With their tongues?" his wife would ask with squinted eyes. "What if I licked you up and down? Would you quit showering?"

"No," he'd reply. "But it could save our relationship."

He sensed that she didn't always find him funny, though he was never certain.

In typical Doug fashion, he would appease his wife by closing the bathroom door and splashing around like a cranky child, making it sound as if Oscar wouldn't be bathed without a fight. "Come on, you bastard!" Doug would yell through gritted teeth while Oscar spectated, his dry head tilted to his left as if he knew Doug was a bit bonkers. "Just! Stay! Still!"

About a month prior, the door pushed open and his wife stumbled in. She rose and, unable to control her laughter, jumped into bed. He wasn't sure whether he had been caught in his deception or punked by hers. No matter the case, he continued his duties.

This time, he turned the water off and went back to the living room. The air was still cold enough for him to see his breath. He lifted a heavier Oscar, his stiffened, blood-clotted muscles rendering him an artifact. His legs and paws could snap off with a crunch that Doug imagined would sound like Velcro. Drop him on the ground, and he'd shatter. Even his fur felt fake, matted.

Oscar sank into the tub while Doug hoped for something biblical—Oscar leaping back to life, "Halleluiahs Chorus" in stereo, an unknowing wife coming home to cuddle with her kitty. He shook the hope out of his head, lathered a washcloth, and scrubbed every inch of Oscar's pelt.

There was no denying how strange this was, like some psycho's post-slaughter ritual. He glared through the bubbles at Oscar whose green eyes remained open. Even though nothing worked behind the eyes, Doug somehow knew that Oscar enjoyed the pampering. This was the closest they had ever been. He swore he felt the vibrations of Oscar's baritone purr in his underwater grip.

The landline rang, though Doug's hands were too wet and busy to answer. He figured it would be his wife. While they didn't talk much when either was out of town, common courtesy called for the occasional check-in. His wife, however, was independent, more independent than the other women he had met before sophomore year at college. He respected her for that, yet her independence solidified Doug's impression that their marriage was never about finding compromise. On second thought, he knew his wife wasn't calling. Should he have called her? No. Absolutely not. Not until he knew what he would say.

The answering machine caught the call on the third ring. Doug listened to the joint message he and his wife recorded less than a year before. She had told him not to join in. He promised, but then snuck up behind her and broke that promise. They laughed and laughed and could barely finish telling callers to leave their brief messages after the beep. Their giggles were interrupted by said beep, and then Karen's voice requested some information on The Lofts the following afternoon. The static in her voice buzzed around the house like an intrusive bug begging to be squashed.

He drained the water and wrapped Oscar in a towel, drying him with massage-like care. When dry enough, Doug placed Oscar in the plaid pet bed next to the sectional before cleaning the mess, shoveling a spoonful of mint chocolate cookie crunch in his mouth, and burrowing under the covers, the house finally warm enough to be comfortable.

#

Friday's shift winded down and Doug stepped into the poorly-lit break room, drawn in by the rumbling hum of the soda machine. He uncrinkled a single and fed it to the machine, which bellowed out his root beer.

"Hey, Doug."

He turned and met Karen, her black pencil skirt cocooned around her waist. Her heels clopped toward him, and the plastic front of the soda machine collapsed against his back. She had a manila folder that cracked when she dropped in onto the folding table. She sat down and patted the plastic chair next to her.

"For me?" Doug said, pointing to the folder. "You're so thoughtful."

"Tell me something I don't know." She rested her chin on her fingertips and shot that merlot smile straight at Doug. "Like, why The Lofts hasn't been green-lighted yet. You always take more time with these things. Help me understand where the hold-up is."

She opened the folder and a glossy computer-generated rendering lay on top of the pile of paperwork. This particular rendering captured the sidewalk in front of the proposed lobby entrance, its plum-colored awning drooping above a half-dozen faceless residents.

Doug explained that, while the project had the community's commercial support, the city would be required to design a new intersection to ameliorate traffic concerns the complex's access street would create—all things Karen heard during the previous day's meeting. The repetition ticked Doug off a tad, though Karen never understood anything until it was explained by Doug.

“But, isn’t the city on board?” she asked.

“More or less,” he said, “but we can’t give them the go just yet.”

Technically, everything Doug said was true. He was the one tasked with the permit’s approval. Troy would certainly make the investment into the intersection considering the return to the local economy. Now, he was stalling, working harder to find more complications than the work needed to approve the project. He knew he was being a bit selfish, though he couldn’t have been the only one who appreciated his city’s hilltop aesthetics.

He pushed his chair out and it *thwomped* across the breakroom floor.

“Wait,” Karen said, grabbing Doug’s elbow. “Where are you going?”

Her grip grew tighter and pressed the itchy polyester deeper into Doug’s skin. He wriggled his arm away.

“It’s the weekend,” he said.

“Plans with the wife?”

“She’s out of town.” Doug wished he hadn’t said that, for he knew how Karen would read into the sentence. He took a deep breath and went for the door, but she stood in front of him. “That’s not what I meant.”

The day’s word: *Enjoin*. Verb. To give instructions to or direct somebody to do something with authority. Smack-dab on the calendar. All the way in his cubicle.

Part of Doug urged him to act. He missed those times when his heart beat a smidge faster, those forgotten sensations blossoming in his blood. The first time he felt those feelings was when his then future wife had him backed into the corner of his dorm room. He could still feel the rough texture of his rug scratching the soles of his bare feet.

The last time he felt them was also with his wife.

Then, Karen rose to her toes and kissed Doug's cheek. But it wasn't quite a kiss—too much slobber, as if she were drowning and his cheek was an oxygen tank. Only his wife knew how to kiss him.

"Sorry," she said. "I couldn't help it."

"Please," Doug said, side-stepping away. "I'm married."

She shifted her hips and arched her back, the posture exaggerated just enough to look ridiculous. "Doesn't take a genius to know you like me."

The soda machine's hum warbled, as if the power was cranked up a notch.

"I need to go home."

"Stay."

"I need to feed Oscar."

He envisioned arriving home and being swallowed by the thick stench of decay, thousands of bugs and maggots gorging on an Oscar-sized buffet. Oscar had been dead for almost forty hours by then.

She creased her face. “Oscar?”

“Alicia would kill me if I forgot.”

Her pose loosened.

“Since when does she have a name?”

He headed to the exit, snatching The Lofts folder along the way. At the door, he turned back and apologized, though he wasn’t sure he needed to. Karen’s eyes seared him. He welcomed the harsh tingle, which felt better than Karen’s touch.

Doug went to his cubicle and grabbed his coat, noticing the browning apple core at the top of his trash bin. Then, he darted out and down the elevator to his car and drove home quicker than usual, forgetting to look in his rear-view mirror at the cityscape from the crest of the Congress Street hill.

He unlocked the front door and walked into the living room where, surprisingly, Oscar looked peaceful. Limbs loosened. Eyes closed. There was a stench, though it wasn’t overbearing. More like ignored take-out.

He leaned into his bedroom and tossed the folder on his bed before turning on the thermostat. Then, he crouched to lift Oscar, whose slackened muscles swayed as Doug walked to the sectional, sat, and laid Oscar on his lap. Compared to the previous evening, Oscar looked and felt like he had once been alive.

The last time Doug willingly held Oscar on his lap was the day Alicia returned from the Humane Society. Doug had no idea what would walk in with her. She kept saying “Kitty” while

he thought “Puppy,” though thoughts remain thoughts unless tethered to voice. When she returned, he was disappointed to meet Oscar. They had been together for five years by then—two of which as husband and wife—and she didn’t even know him. Doug held onto that silent thought as she designed the living room and pick out the fruit bowl.

Was Oscar the catalyst for Alicia’s take-over? Was this why Doug hated the cat so much? Must be, for he couldn’t deny that when Oscar first curled on his lap—eyes closes, kitty lips smacking like he had drank apple juice, Doug’s fingers scrunching Oscar’s cookie-colored mane—he envisioned Oscar in a calendar filled with 364 other cute kitties.

Doug nestled into the sectional and curled Oscar into as restful a position as possible. He ran his hands along the grain of his hide. The fur was still rough, but the smooth motion down and back and down and back swooshed a ditty that tugged Doug’s head down and lulled him to sleep.

#

Doug jolted off the couch when the doorbell chimed the following morning, his living room like the top of a bell tower. Oscar face-planted onto the hardwood and his body slinkied over his broken neck. “Sorry,” Doug whispered.

“Hello?” A male’s voice said. “I heard you. No need to hide.”

“Give me a minute,” Doug shouted, a bit louder than necessary.

The voice mumbled something and began to whistle.

Doug lifted Oscar and took a whiff, flinching immediately. The smell was so pungent it lumped in his throat.

He set Oscar in the pet bed and brought it into his own bedroom, setting him on the bed next to The Lofts' manila folder. He rushed down the hall to the front door, but bounded back through the living room and into the kitchen and past the fruit bowl to snag some air freshener. After running a lap around the island and through the living room with his finger heavy on the nozzle, he dropped the can and grabbed an apple, hoping the tart could commandeer Oscar's taste. He ran through the mist of falling freshener and back to the front door, breathing in and out, in and out, until he turned the cold knob and let the morning inside.

On the porch was a small man wearing a brown suede jacket over a white v-neck, black hair slicked back, and large-framed sunglasses covering his eyes. Doug shouldn't have answered the door.

"You're the guy on the flyer," Doug said with a hand over his face, trying to block as much of the sun as possible.

"The one and only."

"Can I—" Doug coughed. "Can I help you?"

He bit into the apple.

"Perhaps," the man said with too much enthusiasm for a Saturday morning. "But, by helping me, you'll be helping yourself. So you're right and you're wrong." He laughed and snorted a little.

His name was Solomon, and he was with R & J Distributors and Cleaning Services. He was there to demonstrate his product free of charge to not only generate word of mouth, but to handle all of Doug's future carpet-cleaning woes with his state-of-the-art cleaning-colossus he called the Model X-5000.

"May I come in and show you what you've been missing?" Solomon asked.

Doug glanced toward his bedroom, but sensed himself acting suspicious and refocused on Solomon.

"Honestly," Solomon said, "this will only take a little of your time." Solomon had a salesman's smile, his teeth a shade too white.

"I have hardwood floors," Doug said as he rubbed the side of his face, the cruel morning glare grilling his cheeks. "I appreciate your time, though."

He started closing the door, but Solomon stopped it with his left shoe—a beaten tennis shoe that must have spent its life preventing doors from closing.

"Phew!" Solomon waved his hand in front of his nose. "What stinks?"

"I left some meat out overnight," Doug responded, a bit startled that he could conjure such a lie with ease. He took another bite.

"Your bedroom's wood, too?"

"They're carpeted, but I'd rather you not clean those."

“Ah.” Solomon removed his shades and wiped the lenses on his shirt. His eyes were a blue that looked almost silver. “We all have our secrets, don’t we?”

If Doug let him in, Solomon may or may not have discovered Oscar. If he didn’t let him in, there was no telling what Solomon would do. Press the neighbors. Make a phone call. Who knows? He was aware of his own paranoia, but a cat-carcass lounging in the bedroom provided sufficient justification to worry.

“I do have a living room rug,” Doug said. “It’s not much, but you could give it a shot.”

Solomon was through the threshold before Doug finished speaking. He led the way through the hall as if giving Doug a tour of his own house.

“What a nice home you have here,” he said, sniffing and wrinkling his nose—a gesture which amped Doug’s worry. Solomon continued moseying about before dropping to one knee and running his fingers along the rug. He looked to Doug and said, “I’ll have her looking better than you ever thought she could.”

Doug scooted out of Solomon’s way as he headed back outside, watching him through the blinds as he rummaged through the back of his burgundy van. The van had an airbrushed caricature painted on the driver’s side. The image matched the one on top of the junk mail pile, and both captured Solomon’s elastic face so well they looked like photographs.

Solomon came back, lugging a big brown box with a plastic handle on top, and set it next to the rug. The mechanism was in pieces, but it was gorgeous. The base looked chrome, the sunlight reflecting as it poured in through the windows. Doug walked over and poked his fingers

through the blinds, peering outside before twisting the blinds shut. As Solomon pieced the X-5000 together, he explained the specs: 12 amp motor, multiple rotational speeds, wider path, an arsenal of thinner hoses and scrubbing brushes. It cleaned with steam, Solomon explained. It sprayed hot water and cleaning solution on the surface and would scrub and suck the hell out of anything it touched, not to mention the heat of the unit would dry the area quickly.

“Do you have a standard-issue, everyday vacuum?” Solomon asked.

Doug chuckled, nodded, and took another bite.

“Grab it for me,” Solomon said. “We’ll go over it first to get the surface crud off. And take this and fill it with water, will ya?”

Doug set the apple on the end table next to Solomon’s flyer, and did as he was enjoined to do, filling the compartment with tap water and retrieving the vacuum cleaner from the closet by the bedroom. The back of Oscar’s head and his candy corn shaped ears were somewhat visible through the cracked door, and Doug hoped Solomon hadn’t noticed. He unwound the cord and fidgeted when plugging it in, his proprioception arranging his body in an attempt to block Oscar. Solomon went to work, vacuuming back and forth across the rug while Doug listened to particles pelt the plastic chamber.

The rug wasn’t very large and looked like a high school track with too many lanes. Clean or dirty, Alicia hated it, but at one point she hadn’t. He’d bought it at a consignment shop to cover one of many mysterious stains in his dorm. She stood next to him as he laid the rug down and placed her arms around his shoulders. She kissed the right spot on the back of his neck and, as he turned around, she forced him into a corner. He wasn’t so submissive then and took

control, lifting her before dropping to his knees and laying her on the rug. It was scratchy and uncomfortable. They both knew it. But even so, they stared into each other's eyes. In control, pinning Alicia's wrists to the fabric, her hair fanning around her head like a lustrous hazel halo, he fell in love.

Solomon turned off the vacuum, and it appeared nothing had been accomplished, although the dirt in the chamber proved otherwise.

"Surprised he could sleep through that," Solomon said, pointing through Doug to the open bedroom door and Oscar.

"He's deaf," Doug replied. No hesitation. No nonsensical utterance to buy time. He never quite realized how natural dishonesty had become. He turned around and said: "Ain't that right, Oscar?"

"Must be a pain in the ass," Solomon said.

"He's family," Doug responded, his tone as firm as his stance.

Solomon's face looked as if to offer an apology, whereas Doug's said it better not happen again.

"Hopefully," Solomon went on, "he can sleep through this son-bitch." He unwound the cord and plugged the X-5000 into the same socket. Once he flipped the switch, the living room light flickered and the behemoth bellowed. The Earth shook as he re-vacuumed, the X-5000 swallowing the fabric's soul. Doug chomped away on the fruit and watched the dirt swirl like a scuzzy cyclone in the transparent holding unit.

“You really need a heavier-duty air freshener,” Solomon shouted over the machine. He pinched his nose to charade the suggestion.

The faint ring of the landline was barely audible over the X-5000, the flickering red light on the receiver indicating that Doug wasn’t hearing things. He raised his voice to ask Solomon to stop for a moment, and the machine’s whirr fell into a whimper. Now, the ring rang louder than ever. He knew it was Alicia.

“Give me a few minutes,” Doug said as he set the apple back on the coaster and lifted the phone.

“Don’t expect me to wait too long,” Solomon said. “I’m having too much fun.”

“Right.”

Doug brought the phone into the bedroom and looked to Solomon as he closed the door, who clearly wanted to see what was inside. He should have expected her to call at some point to tell him when she’d be home, yet his heart thumped against his ribs. Could she sense things weren’t alright? What if she wanted to speak with Oscar? How would she feel about a stranger in their house? What about Karen? He wished he had some time to prep because big lies took too long to invent—not as easy as rotten meat or a deaf cat. Would lying even help, or was his hole too deep?

He closed his eyes, took a breath, and pressed SEND.

“Hi, honey.”

“Took a lot of rings there,” Alicia said, though many other sounds were coming from her end—dozens of voices collectively sounding like a mumble. “Were you still sleeping? Jealous.”

“I’m awake.”

“I’m at the airport. Got through security. No weapons on me, at least none they could find.”

Doug listened to a high-pitched beep on Alicia’s end, perhaps one of those carts lugging travelers to their gates. Solomon whistled on the other side of the door.

“Is everything alright, Doug?”

The whistling morphed into humming. Doug couldn’t recognize the melody, though it sounded like it could have been an ad jingle.

“Why are you breathing heavy?” she continued. “Should I be worried?”

She should have been worried. Doug had messed up. Yet, Alicia was worried about him, and that made him feel better.

“It’s this thing at work,” Doug said.

“What thing?”

“This project. The Lofts. I’ve told you about it. I don’t like it. But it’s inevitable. But I don’t like it.”

“Why don’t you like it?”

Solomon's tune grew louder, as if he were standing at the cracks of the door, pumping his jingle into the room. Being this close to Oscar, the stench worsened.

"I don't want to look at it every day."

He sat on the bed and opened the folder, the glossy renderings smooth against his fingertip.

"You say that about everything."

She listed several projects—office spaces, the remodeling of the River Street bar scene, the sidewalk replacement at the Christian church in the historical district (it's in the historical district, Doug had thought, and the shoddy condition is part of that history)—and reminded him that these were no-brainers that, when first posed to him, he chose to refuse.

Oscar's odor clogged up the room.

"I bet you still have that stack on your desk, don't you?" she asked. "What for? Those aren't even large projects. Sometimes, I think you're allergic to change."

She was right, or at least Doug thought she was right. He took the job because he loved his hometown, yet seeing things naturally evolve made him uneasy. He was stuck in nostalgia, and wasn't sure how to break free.

"Can we talk about it tonight?" Doug asked. "Maybe we can rent a movie, too?"

She laughed.

“Only if it’s a bad one.” she said. “We haven’t done that in a while. I should be home in five or six hours. I got here a bit too early. But I’ll let you go. I’m going to grab a bite.”

Solomon’s humming stopped, though footsteps pattered back and forth, the sound subtle, then heavy, and back again. He said “Pee-Yew,” while Doug swallowed a large gulp of Oscar and coughed.

“Are you alright?” Alicia asked.

“Oscar’s dead,” Doug said, lowering his voice to almost a whisper. “He’s gone.”

A muffled voice could be heard from Alicia’s end, perhaps through a PA system.

“I’m sorry,” he continued. “We’ll talk about that too. I love you.”

“I love you,” she said through a snivel.

They hung up, and Doug didn’t even have a moment before Solomon began knocking.

“Can we finish?” he asked. “I have other houses to hit.”

Doug opened the door just enough so he could slide out and closed it behind him. He apologized, and Solomon acknowledged him with a nod. He restarted the vacuum, going over the spots he had previously done as if more dirt had collected during the five-minute phone call.

“Now,” Solomon said, cracking his knuckles. “Here’s the fun part.”

He flipped a switch and the roar rose as if the X-5000 revved an engine. The water gurgled as the transparent compartment showed the synthesis of water and turquoise cleaning solution while steam seeped from underneath the machine, sizzling like an overfilled iron. As

Solomon inched it forward, the X-5000 revealed a rug Doug had never seen before—a luscious forest green, as if Solomon were painting. Giving it new life. Giving it the chance it deserved.

The color looked nice with the flooring, though the room could have looked even better with matching throw pillows and a blanket strung along the sectional. He knew nothing about interior design, but he knew it could work. And as far as the kitchen went, they could have placed their fruit in a bowl instead of a sculpture, though maybe she should have that. The fruit bowl would always be stupid, but Alicia wouldn't settle for a plain-old one.

No matter the future of the bowl, the house was theirs. Not hers. Nor his. No need for him to always capitulate, to always remain silent. When he didn't, when he wasn't, they fell in love and stayed in love long enough to purchase a house and record charming outgoing messages.

Doug set the phone back in the receiver and grabbed his apple, teeth marks already turning slightly brown. He took one last bite, went to the kitchen, and tossed it in the trash.

With his left hand plugging his nose, Solomon finished in seven minutes and started dismantling the beast. He handed the water tank to Doug. The water looked like coffee.

"I can't believe your kitty slept through that," Solomon said. "Deaf or not, you might want to check on him."

They laughed, but Doug stopped laughing before Solomon, who looked spooked. Still, he reached into his pocket and retrieved a business card with his pointer and middle fingers and handed it to Doug, sights toward Oscar before meeting Doug's face.

“If you want me to take care of that bedroom sometime,” he said, poking at the card in Doug’s hand, “let me know.”

Solomon breathed in and exhaled with his entire face. He looked to the door and then to Doug.

“I can’t believe this is the same rug,” Doug said. “How is this possible?”

Solomon faked a laugh. “Even the most embedded grime can be exorcised.”

Solomon tilted his head and slowly extended his hand. Doug shook it.

“Tell your friends, neighbors, co-workers, whomever,” Solomon continued. His eyes shifted off Doug, trying to glance through the bedroom door. Doug patted Solomon on the back and kept his arm around him to escort him out.

Doug had some work to do. He needed to unload an army of air fresheners, light the smelliest of candles, turn on fans, and open windows. He also needed to put Oscar in the garage until Alicia returned. She’d be pissed when he told her what happened, obviously. But why couldn’t they work it out? Why wouldn’t she forgive him? Why wouldn’t they be fine?

Afterwards, he would have to drive down Congress Street and take in the view before venturing to the hardware store to purchase enough plywood to build Oscar a suitable casket. Alicia would never allow Oscar to simply be thrown in the dirt. Finally, he needed swing by the grocery store for more apples as well as more mint chocolate cookie crunch. She’d need extra for proper grieving. That was love, and he knew it.

FELLOW CITIZENS

We had a superhero, but we no longer do.

Before he came, our city was poisoned: bodies with oozing wounds frequently found simmering in the sun; shattered shop windows; vaults opened by fidgety tellers with warm pistols caressing their scalps. By autumn, arsons and car-jackings and suicides were white noise. Why our city? None of us knew.

When winter hit, he finally came. Those of us enjoying our half-priced early-bird specials at Cadaro's Bistro on 48th had a front-row seat as a fiery ball fell from the powdered sky and hit the pavement, the heat from the divot melting nearby snow. We looked through the thin glass, around and between the backward bubble lettering emblazoned on the restaurant window. No one knew what to do, until Rolan Cadaro—the Bistro's proprietor—put on his fuzzy, knee-length pea-coat and slinked toward the door. We followed.

We approached, timid, the slow crunch of ice and snow under our boots echoing down adjacent streets. Then, we noticed him, curled as if the crater were a womb. When the flames died, he stood and met our probing eyes.

"Who are you?" we asked.

He stood tall with his black hair slicked back, his posture and leotards emphasizing prodigious physicality as if his muscles' muscles had muscles. With his chin held high, he oscillated, projecting zero visible confusion—the antithesis of our expression.

"Who are you?" we asked again.

“I exist only to protect my fellow citizens.”

We had no idea what he meant, but we would learn.

He caught and jailed the ominous by the dozens.

He burst into burning buildings, most notably the arson-job at 80 West Luxury Apartments where he saved the 41 of us—including 17 children—living above the eleventh floor as well as three cats, eight dogs, and a guinea pig. Three hours later, he demanded a confession from the culprit and, of course, he got one.

He dislodged those of us trapped in the horrific nine-car pile-up on the Green Street Bridge, ripping through steel frames and thick plastic deathtraps.

He caught a jumper leaping from the Metro Plaza Tower and used super-human rhetoric to argue—without fallacy—that suicide was not the answer.

He even protected us when an EF-4 tornado—the biggest one our city, county, and state had ever seen—terrorized our suburban outskirts. He flew fleet circles around the thick, dark funnel until its winds unwound, went limp, and, along with the city’s scraps, spilled to the ground.

He was always at the right place at the right time, or the wrong place depending on how you looked at it.

We threw a parade for our superhero that started at the Courthouse on Madison and snaked along every downtown street until ending at the gates of Broad Street Park where Mayor

Brighton presented him with the metaphorical “Key to the City.” We gave him a license to go wherever, do whatever, and do it whenever. Essentially, he was a god.

Like any great superhero (or at least how we imagined them) he remained humble. In every interview for the papers or broadcast news or morning shows, he always said: “I exist only to protect my fellow citizens.” Every time. We made t-shirts. Bumper stickers. Posters. The line became part of our nomenclature.

When he wasn’t saving us, or being interviewed about saving us, we had no idea how or where he spent his time. We hoped he stayed around, perhaps donning slacks and collared shirts, somehow contributing to our community off the clock. We looked for the muscles to expose his disguise, for no outfit imaginable could have hidden those. Our efforts were ineffective.

He continued his service and, eventually, eliminated worry—at least from everyday uncertainties. We emptied the part of our heads that makes us frightened to walk down dark alleys, the part that makes us look both ways before we cross the street, the part that makes us lock our doors and close our windows and set our alarms and keep our guns within an arm’s reach from our beds and protect our valuables in heavy safes with carefully concocted combinations.

Things were good, until they became bad.

Firefighters waited anxiously for the alarm’s clamor to no avail.

Police officers sat around. The only work required was to jail the jailbirds the superhero dropped off and file the appropriate paperwork.

EMTs and Memorial Hospital employees saw a barren ER. Sure, people got sick—the superhero couldn't cure—but, in a world of uncertainties, accidents happen.

Not anymore.

Local entertainers also had their gripes. Why pay \$38.50 to see Magnificent Maxine perform illusions at the Stage Left Theatre on Main and 32nd, or hand cash over to Tomzo the Silly Clown for a birthday party, when there was a superhero who unhinged jaws without hidden compartments and sleight of hand, when there's a superhero who volunteered his time to visit schools and hospital wings and birthday parties and inflate two-dozen balloon animals in a single breath and show off his other powers for *oohs* and *aahs* and more admiration than we ever dreamed possible? Some of us felt irrelevant. Our children no longer wanted to grow up to be like us. They wanted to be like him.

He was everywhere. On the evening news on any network, we'd be sure to hear: "I exist only to protect my fellow citizens." Those of us in the local media grew exhausted. Day and night, reporters wrote copy and transcribed sound bites and edited film, and, when one fell asleep, their new alarm clock was a phone call from a suit who, through inevitable yawning, said, "You know what to do."

Let's not forget those in construction. The superhero clobbered through walls and windows to get where he needed to get and, when zooming from the clouds, he'd crash with such force that he'd crack the ground, chunks of concrete or cobblestone crumbling at his feet. Construction crews labored night and day to fix these damages, some swinging sledgehammers and axes, or operating big, mechanical monsters while others wore bright orange vests and held

whistles between their chapped lips and stop signs in their calloused hands, holding up lines of honking cars driven by those of us tardy for work and other obligations.

With fewer criminals and the corresponding financial penalties, as well as more rebuilding projects, Mayor Brighton proposed a sizable yet necessary tax increase to cover the difference. With empty hospitals, bills sky-rocketed for those requiring treatment. People and businesses and jobs left our city. The local economy tanked.

But who were we to judge? We had every reason to be discouraged, but, at the same time, we had zero reasons. We were the safest city in the world. Our children and loved ones were protected. Isn't that what mattered? Perhaps it should have been, but we couldn't help the way we felt.

Then, it happened.

Uninvited apocalyptic skies birthed fire and meteors that tore our city apart, plunging into skyscrapers and toppling them like toy blocks. Thousands upon thousands of us were buried underneath tons of hot rubble. Thick flames roared through our roads and alleys, turning those exposed to ash. Why our city? Once again, no one knew. Those of us who survived were spared by God. The actual God.

And where was our hero?

Sure, he put up a fight. He dove into several flaming balls with such force that they burst before reaching us. He threw haymakers at others and sent them soaring. He did what he could

do. No one, not even a superhero, could've stopped everything. Still, he only saved *some* of us. Not all of us. We may have been irrational, but, still, we chose to speak.

"Where were you when we needed you?"

"If you're so super, why couldn't you save us all?"

"If you sense danger, why didn't you have us evacuate?"

"It's your fault our home was destroyed."

"It's your fault our lives are ruined."

His response: "I exist only to protect my fellow citizens."

"You call that protection?"

"Why didn't you protect everyone?"

"Fellow citizen? You call yourself a citizen?"

His response: nothing. He didn't speak. He couldn't. If he spoke, we knew what he would have said, and we knew that, no matter how super he was, we would've come out on top. Together, we can achieve anything.

And we have. We're not done yet, but many buildings are up and operational. Our hospital is busier than ever. Our police officers keep our streets as clean as humanly possible, while firefighters receive the appreciation they deserve. And wouldn't you know it, our population has grown. People from everywhere came to help us rebuild, and many of those people have stayed. Joined. We are stronger than ever—not only out of the circumstances, but

because we have returned to normalcy. We lock our doors and keep tabs on our loved ones. We worry again, and we are grateful for it.

So, where is the superhero now? Honestly, we're not sure. He may have left, but some of us believe he hasn't. Some of us believe he finally traded in his leotards for ironed slacks and starched shirts large enough to hide his physique. Most importantly, some of us believe he is even stronger. Strong as any resident of our wonderful metropolis. Strong as the fellow citizen he always claimed to be.

TRADITIONS

Rex meets a woman who isn't his wife. Her name is Olivia—a name he loves, though he can't decide which syllable he loves most. Her lips and mouth taste like spring water—unlike his wife's, whose taste can only be described as *mouth*.

#

Kourtney's date tastes like the fast-food cheeseburger he must have scarfed down on the way over. She ignores the grease, and continues to taste while her fingers crawl along the creases of his chest. He grabs her wrists and pins her to the wall, arm over her head, jostling the oil painting of a cherry blossom hung behind her as he presses his flesh against hers. His body is hard—nothing like her husband's, whose gut juts out a bit too much.

#

Evan can't sleep. With Dad out of town and Mom having a slumber party down the hall, no one sang him his lullaby.

Instead of dreaming, Evan worries about the monsters lurking in the dark of his room, baiting him to come out from under his plaid comforter. He clenches his teddy to his chest, pajamas clinging to his sweaty skin. If he can reach the nightlight, he'll be safe because the monsters are afraid of the glow. But the light is all the way by the door. He knows he'll be safe on his bed, though he also knows he won't dream until the monsters go away.

#

Rex enters the hotel bathroom and unfurls his condom, tossing it into the black, bag-less garbage can. He grabs a washcloth and wipes Olivia off of him. He throws her a fresh towel.

“Thanks.” She wipes herself and tosses it back, Rex adding it to the used, wet towels piled next to the toilet.

“Hungry?” Rex asks. He walks to the nightstand and thumbs through the glossy room-service menu.

“Lay with me.”

Rex apologizes with his face, forgetting that Olivia isn’t his wife, who would have already moved on to her next necessity. Right now, he guesses, his wife is either thinking about food or lighting a cigarette.

Rex joins Olivia on the bed, and she places her head on his chest, her hand on his belly. His head tilts toward the window where, outside, the city plays a symphony of chaos: horns, cars, whistles, music, life. The noise eases Rex to sleep while his slow, rhythmic heartbeat serenades Olivia.

#

Kourtney lights up a Parliament, the bright ember sizzling with every pull.

“Can’t I finish, too?” her date asks, sweat beading down his face like tears.

“You can go in the toilet,” she says, smoke rising from her mouth.

His skin reddens, and then he enters the bathroom, spikes the condom into the garbage can, puts on his clothes, and leaves.

Kourtney takes long, saliva-soaked drags from her cigarette, dampening the recessed filter. She flicks the ash into an empty coffee mug that her husband brought home from one of his out-of-town conferences. She looks to her left at the permanent husband-shaped depression in the memory-foam. He would always sleep with his back to her. She wonders which direction he's facing tonight.

Once she hears the car grumble out of the neighborhood, Kourtney doesn't need help falling asleep. All she needs is the familiar silence.

#

Evan decides enough is enough. Once he hears screams from Mom's sleepover and footsteps down the hallway, he remembers how Dad taught him to be brave. He needs to stop the monsters. For Mom. For Dad.

Slowly, he pulls the comforter from his six-year-old face. He's outnumbered, hundreds of tiny eyes strewn like fireflies. Snarls linger in the dark.

With one hand, he grips his teddy, both black-button eyes digging into his pajamas. With the other hand, he grabs his pillows and, hanging off the side of his bed, sets them on the floor, parting the mass of tiny beasts. He connects the two ends to construct a bridge long enough for him to reach the nightlight. Only then can he make his monsters go away before saving Mom from hers.

“Don’t look down,” he tells himself. His feet sink into the fluffy bridge as he loosens his grip from the bed. Monsters growl at his feet, but he ignores them and focuses on his slow, tip-toed steps, his sight never leaving the unilluminated light.

Once he arrives, he squats and presses the switch. The dull glow reveals the plastic spaceship encasing the bulb—a white spaceship with three red fins blasting across an orange moon, leaving behind a trail of colorful stars.

When he turns, the eyes are gone. No more growls. He reaches for the knob to his bedroom door, though he no longer hears Mom cry from down the hall. The night finally feels like night.

But, after he walks back across the bridge—picking up pillows as he passes—and nestles underneath his comforter, he still can’t dream. No one is there to sing to him, and even the bravest act could not replace his lullaby.

#

The sun rises and sets like it always does.

#

When the garage door roars open, Evan bolts from his Legos and waits. His toes pogo until the side door opens and he can jump into Dad’s arms, his curly blonde hair nuzzling Dad’s smiling face. Dad kisses Evan’s cheek and tells him how much he missed him. Evan runs back down the hallway yelling “Mom! Mom!” She comes around the corner and Evan runs into her arms.

“How was your trip?” she asks, bending down to kiss Evan’s other cheek.

“Same as always,” he responds, pulling a water bottle from his bag. “Here?”

“Same.”

Evan opens his mouth as he smiles, waiting for Mom and Dad to kiss like they always do, though his parents are looking everywhere except into each other’s eyes.

#

They know Evan wants them to embrace. So, Kourtney kisses her husband, and Rex kisses his wife.

As they part, Kourtney is drawn to Rex’s belly, which stretches the fabric of his tucked button-up.

Rex unscrews his bottle of spring water and takes a sip, the liquid crisp as it slides down his throat. He sets the bottle on the counter, grabs his rolling suitcase, and walks past Kourtney, the plastic wheels on the hardwood echoing through their home.

#

Evan has billions of questions for Dad who, as always, answers every one.

“Were there bridges?”

“Quite a few, kiddo.”

“Did you go over any?”

Dad pulls Evan in for a hug.

“You have to go over one, eventually.”

As questions turn into yawns, Evan knows it’s bedtime, and he knows he’ll fall asleep monster-free—probably before Mom and Dad even finish his bedtime song.

#

Rex snugs the comforter around Evan. Then, he begins “Golden Slumbers”—the bedtime tradition. As always, Kourtney watches, her slender frame in the doorway. As always, she joins in after the first verse, her rasp a welcome substitute for Paul McCartney’s snarl. As always, Rex and Kourtney sound beautiful together. This hasn’t changed since they first sang to Kourtney’s babied belly nearly seven years prior—one month before they sang their wedding vows.

Evan falls asleep smiling. Kourtney and Rex know that nothing makes their son happier than his lullaby. That’s how traditions become traditions: when happiness depends on them.

Kourtney leaves and Rex follows, making sure he powers on the spaceship nightlight before closing the bedroom door.

#

In their bedroom, the radiator rattles, sounding like marbles dropping down vents. Kourtney sits on her side of the bed and removes her earrings, dropping them onto the wooden nightstand. One clanks against the ash-filled mug.

Rex leaves the bathroom with his face scrunched, passes the crooked painting, and walks to his side of the bed, where he peels the blue jeans from his legs. He lies down with his back to Kourtney, settling into his spot in the memory foam.

“Next time, Kourtney,” Rex says, her first syllable scratching the back of his mouth, “the least you could do is change the garbage.”

“What for?” she replies.

She lies down with her back to Rex. From above, their bodies must look like a bottomless vase.

“Good night,” Rex says. The words bounce off his wall and scrape the side of his face before reaching her.

“Good night.”

THE MINUTES THAT MATTER

The schlub is reeling and Fritz knows it, each bead of sweat dribble down his face like a koozie-less beer can at The Crown's Kabana Club. He's desperate for an out, perhaps one of his nobody kids drowning in one of The Crown's eight sparkling pools, or a Kobe-induced heart attack courtesy of The Crown Chophouse. He needs an out, or else he's toast.

When the schlub walked in this morning with his plain-Jane wife and kids—an entrance most likely preceded by a family meeting, the schlub's orders to say “NO NO NO” to the “sleazy salesperson” until given the free tickets to the Family Kingdom Amusement Park the kids had been bitching about all week—the rest of the Sales Squad marked Fritz for dead.

“That's a fucking bullet for ya,” said Sami, an under-performing Squad Leader on the cusp of not hitting quota, even though he works every single day. He nudged Fritz with his gangly arm. “A fucking RPG straight to your face.”

The family's tour profile rationalized Sami's projection: fifty-one thousand annual household income and a combined credit score not even equaling a respectable SAT mark. But no one's impossible to sell—even people who couldn't afford it. Didn't Sami read the eighty-four page manual?

When Fritz started at The Crown seven years ago, he wasn't sure how timeshare worked. How does one sell time? He, like most, thought time was free, an innate part of existence. “We're not selling the monotonous minutes that tick tock away on our Rolexes,” said Jay, head sales manager of the Myrtle Beach location, during orientation. “We're selling the minutes that matter. The minutes we sell become memories, and whoever said we can't put a price on

memories has never stayed at Crown Resorts. As a Sales Representative, you show the world how to make memories. You are the foundation of The Crown. Without you, we'd inevitably crumble."

Now, Fritz is wired to sell. He's approaching timeshare immortality: 1000 New Owners. An inhuman closing rate. He wants to achieve this for his father who, up until his suicide almost eight years ago, taught Fritz that work is life, work is life (he always said it twice). Work provides purpose, and what good are friends and relationships if you don't have purpose? If it weren't for his father's guidance, he wouldn't have 996 New Owners.

And this schlub and his wife don't yet realize they're 997.

Jay moseys into the empty seat next to Fritz and smiles at the schlub's wife, whose poker face is much stronger than her husband's. Jay's big-boned body may look intimidating to customers, but he's a teddy bear—cracking jokes and making sure the potential owners are the most important people in the universe. To the Sales Squad, however, he's a grizzly. Just this morning, his diatribe tore into the Squad. Yesterday's numbers weren't good: an embarrassing twelve out of sixty-nine tours. He bashed and bashed his fist into his palm so hard that many Squad members checked if their own hands had reddened. He wasn't talking to Fritz, though. Fritz made up a quarter of that 17% with a rare three for three day, including a Week 26 seven-sleeper—a wrap-around connector on the North corner of Tower One. Fifteenth story. The view vacationers vacation to see. The deal dealers dream of dealing.

The tirade may have worked, for the third wave of tours is halfway through and whispers behind heavy glass doors have the Squad at 68% for the day, one of which was Fritz's 8:30—done deal in ninety-four minutes.

Jay tells the schlub how “this unit was just made available” and now this bullet of a couple looks more and more like a BB with every passing second. They attempt to hold hands, but slip in each other's sweat.

“I can't afford that,” the schlub says, pointing to the original price Fritz had written.

“Well, what can you afford?” Fritz asks.

“Way less.”

“How much less?”

“Way.”

“A number?”

“Half.”

“Half isn't a number, but here's the number you're looking for.”

Fritz etches it in big blue digits over his original penciled-pitch and smiles a handsome smile. His face is meant to sell: youthful innocence in his brown eyes and smooth skin, but a smile so charming it deserves commission. His father worked in sales too, though neither his smile nor looks ever matched Fritz's. Whenever Fritz is in front of a mirror, he wonders whether he's looking into Mom's eyes.

Now, with the price the schlub said he could pay without saying it and a smile locked in, there is nowhere for the schlub to go. He must either lie or purchase a Value Week in a locked-off two-bedroom deluxe ocean-view with a full kitchen and a bathtub stocked with enough jets to forget how much moolah this model tub adds to the monthly maintenance fees.

As the schlub and his wife talk among themselves, Fritz leans back and looks to Table Fifteen. Sami's table. Sami's squirming, trying to squeeze a sale out of the frizzy-haired woman across from him, half-inflated balloons strung on the back of her chair. Fritz can't see the woman's face, but, because The Crown doesn't tour single men (they don't vacation often enough), knows she's a she. He also knows she earns at least sixty thousand annually. He also knows that if he were in Sami's seat, she'd be a New Owner.

Thirty-two minutes later, Fritz walks his couple across the foyer to the game room where their kids are glued to an episode of whatever's on the television. A large safe has fallen onto a lanky cat's head, and, with the safe's combination plugged in, the cat is found inside, eyes spiraling red while yellow birds fly around a throbbing lump on his head.

Like a family would, Fritz and company strut south through Celebrity Corridor, a brightly-lit chandeliered hallway lined with hundreds of autographed photos of celebrity endorsers, the lights reflecting off the glass frames. They pass the windows overlooking the pool deck and Kabana Club as Fritz signals a thumbs-up to what's-her-face working behind the Tour Desk, who stands up and applauds, starting a chain reaction as they enter the Lobby area. Now, every employee—from strategically-positioned sales reps to the on-duty Concierge at her post by the elevators to the dapper Reservation Specialists behind their marbled Front Desk—applauds

the schlub, his wife, and his kids as Fritz leads them to the doors. The “New Owners” briefcase swings at the schlub’s side—exactly how Fritz saw him enter: 997.

Fritz waves at their backs as the automatic door whooshes open and the family vanishes into the humidity. Across the street is the Family Kingdom, from where—even with wild, honking Ocean Boulevard traffic—laughter barely sneaks into the Lobby before the doors close and the applause thrashes it.

He turns to find Sami. Not clapping. Arms crossed. Mouth clenched. Head shaking. Frizzy-less. Fritz forms a gun with his fingers. Aims right at Sami’s forehead. Pulls the trigger. Bang.

#

From the parking lot the next morning, Fritz notices that The Crown Resorts insignia, scrawled in a bold, blue serif on the North side of Tower One, requires immediate maintenance: the “N” tilts a tad outward. How could the finest insignia along the Grand Strand become such an eyesore? Gino, the head of maintenance, must be notified. People say Gino has leathery skin and always wears paint-splattered white jeans. Fritz assumes he’s crossed paths with Gino, though, outside of the Sales Squad, he doesn’t know many in The Crown Family.

When Fritz enters the Lobby, the lights feel dimmed. The Chophouse—on the side opposite the Front Desk—is always dark in the morning, but the rest of the Lobby should feel like the parting clouds of Heaven.

People with nametags offer pleasantries. Fritz acknowledges their existence. A wave here. Nod there. Occasionally, he's pressed for a silly handshake and he's never sure if it involves some sort of half-hug. When he guesses wrong, people laugh. According to the Manual, *Crown Resorts is a fun, exciting work atmosphere where laughter and smiles are as everyday as our endless amenities*. Considering it may break protocol to not partake in the enjoyment, Fritz takes a breath and forces out a few "ha's" before walking away.

Potential owners are already here, a dozen or so couples nestling into the cotton-blend couches of the Owners Lounge or filling plastic cups with fresh, hand-squeezed orange juice before the First Wave begins. At the Tour Desk, an aesthetically displeasing bucket a brighter orange than the juice rests atop the counter. Above the bucket, a ceiling tile has a dampened corner. Fritz spots the Tour Desk Manager—Terry, as her nametag indicates—sitting behind the desk and not giving a soaring crap about the adjacent atrocity.

"New Owners shouldn't see this."

"There's a small leak," she says, her desk chair whining as she rotates it. "Tiny." She shows him how tiny with her fingers.

"Where's Gino?"

She shrugs her shoulders and says, "Fixing something?"

"New Owners shouldn't see this."

He shuffles down the foyer to the Sales Floor, the sunlight bursting through the tall windows, the pools shimmering. New Owners don't become owners at resorts resorting to buckets.

He passes a pool-boy-looking teen and tells him to tell Gino to fix the leak. He reaches the Sales Floor and, with his master key card, opens the double doors, takes a seat, and waits for the rest of the cohort to arrive.

During the morning sales meeting, Jay congratulates Fritz and the Squad on yesterday's 71% triumph, a number he claims must be some kind of a record.

"But we need consistency," he says, pacing back and forth. "There's no reason we can't hit this number every single day. Let's face facts here: we make dreams come true. So let me ask this simple question: how does it feel to have such power?" He leans in and looks to Sami, repeating the question with his eyes. He continues pacing. "Many say that God is the only one with such power. That God is the only one capable of weaving dreams into realities. Those many, I'm afraid, have never seen one of our twenty-six properties across this great nation. They have never experienced Crown Resorts. They have never had a true Myrtle Beach vacation. My dear friends, y'all are the only ones who can make fifty-five dreams come true today." He stops in the center of the floor, between Tables Ten and Eleven. He pushes a perky balloon out of his face. "Yes, it's true, not all fifty-five tours will bite. We can chalk those up as ones who can't be saved. Who will not be saved." He spreads his arms. "Salvation to the dreamers who are sick and tired of dreaming. Glory be to The Crown!"

The cohort Halleluiahs as Fritz watches on, his fists clenching into themselves. Why do they need this rhetoric for motivation? Just get out there and sell. That's what they're paid an 8% base-commission to do.

His father would've celebrated Fritz's disappointment.

Six hours, two buffeted meals, and two pencil-pitches for two qualifying couples later, Fritz has two more sales, though only one New Owner. 998. Two more to go.

The other was a Vacation Occupancy: two weeks of try-before-you-buy with an abbreviated tour requirement—the mirage of timeshare sales. He'll get \$75 for the effort, but that's nothing compared to the minimum \$1,640 he'd have earned if they bought. They'll be back in a year for the V.O., but, to Fritz, they're already dead.

Financially, this isn't an issue, considering Fritz supports only himself. He has no reason to spend money. All of it piles into his savings, though he has nothing to save for yet.

His father supported three at one point, though only when Fritz was a toddler. He was too young to remember Mom, only knew her second-hand through his father. He would describe her as “without purpose” and “blind to the sacrifices he made for his family.” In his mind, she “abandoned” them and chose to be selfish rather than be a mother. After making these accusations, his father's eyes would sag and he would snuffle before his face returned to its iron-clad positioning, rogue tears often dropping to his starched, button-up work shirt.

Fritz clocks-out and dilly-dallies down Celebrity Corridor. His favorite autographed photo was of Lionel Richie's, who proclaims his "Endless Love" for Crown Resorts—at least for the Vegas location.

A fickle bulb in a chandelier catches Fritz's attention and he bumps shoulders with a young woman who smells like chlorine. He recognizes the frizzy hair: Sami's missed sale. Now, her hair is damp and her light-brown curls are more tousled. She has a towel in her hand, but she's dripping wet.

"You trying to kill me or what?" she asks, exaggerating her frustration with an overly-pouty crossing of her arms. "I do declare this downright disrespectful."

She says the last bit in an accent thicker than any Southerner Fritz is used to, a Northeasterner adding too much twang for an accurate impression. Other than in older, over-acted movies, no one talks like that. As a kid, Fritz watched black-and-white movies when his father was either working or ironing his work clothes. This was his access to the world beyond responsibility.

"Could you dry off, please?"

"Are you the towel police?" She finally scrunches the towel around her hair.

"You can't enter the resort without drying off from the beach, pool, or other local attractions." He takes a breath. "The rule is clearly marked at every entrance."

She stares at Fritz. At the end of the corridor, a door barges open, and a large man with an unbuttoned shirt pulls a red cooler. Eventually, she laughs.

“What?” Fritz asks, scratching his scalp.

“That, my dear,” she leans toward Fritz’s chest, “Fritz. Cool name. That, my dear Fritz, is some funny shit.”

“What’s so funny?”

She wipes the towel down each of her arms before wrapping it around her waist.

“Lighten up, will ya?” She places her wet hand on Fritz’s shoulders, the saturation seeping through the Oxford’s stiff fabric. An unfamiliar sensation warms him like being wrapped in a fresh burrito hand-crafted by the experts at Los Crown Cantina. Fritz wants to smile, though his face molds into something unfamiliar, his mouth pulling in awkward directions.

She laughs again.

“You’re an odd one, Fritzzy.”

She turns and heads to the Lobby. He walks in her direction, though is struck when he passes to the bucket-less Tour Desk. A new, non-stained ceiling tile is expertly installed. He smiles before heading to the exit.

#

The next day, Fritz’s first tour is a whiff—a bullet the moment it began. The screaming kids and the declaration that the fresh, hand-squeezed orange juice was neither fresh nor hand-squeezed were one thing, but, when the elevator broke and they had to haul eleven stories up the cold, concrete stairwell to get to the model unit, Fritz readied for an inevitable defeat. He made a

valiant effort at a Week Seven double. In the end, he couldn't even squeeze a V.O. out of those misers. Their loss, Fritz tells himself until he feels convinced.

He blames it on Gino. Why hasn't the insignia been fixed? This morning, it looked even worse. New Owners don't become owners at resorts with names falling from the sky. How can The Crown Family grow when the maintenance staff might as well be pushing mops at a single-star inland roacher? Doesn't anybody love The Crown as much as Fritz?

In the cafeteria (the Chophouse dining room prior to its 4:00pm dinner-service), Fritz shovels down his employee lunch: goopy shells and cheese on the side of two charred frankfurters. He doesn't like his frankfurters burnt, but that's how The Crown cooks them. He eventually learned that the more ketchup he douses them with, the less charred meat skin he tastes.

"Tough break," Sami says, setting his tray across from Fritz. His plate has the exact same proportions of shells and cheese and frankfurters, as if each came off an assembly line.

"That First Wave was brutal," he continues. "A fucking war zone. Bullets flying everywhere."

Sami charades the firing of a squirmy machine gun.

"But," he continues, leaning closer into the table, "the clips have been emptied. And now we strike. KA-BOOM!"

He smacks the table with the onomatopoeia.

"We're paid to sell," Fritz says, prodding at his shells with a plastic spork.

“You’re the golden boy wonder of this hell hole,” Sami says. “How do you sell so much? Do you go home and work on your pitch?”

So what if The Crown-approved *Everyone Wants Everything* 312 page hard-covered gem and the Manual are on his nightstand? Persuasion is art. The artistry is programmed into the salesperson’s biological circuitry. Without the literature, they can’t be artists.

His starched collar irritates his neck, so he scratches.

“We’re paid to sell,” Fritz repeats.

“Not everyone is going to buy,” Sami continues. “Especially here. Tuesday was a fucking miracle. Have you seen this place lately? It’s falling apart.”

Fritz couldn’t help but think of the insignia and yesterday’s leaky ceiling and the dim lights and the fickle bulb. Troubling, yes, but not warranting such hyperbole.

“Maybe if you sold more,” Fritz says, “you wouldn’t complain so much.”

“Well...duh. My wife works, sure, but this gig is what supports us. My daughter has to eat somehow.”

“I didn’t know you were married.”

“For now,” Sami says. “I feel like I’m more married to Jay and this damn place.”

The Lobby lights flicker for a few seconds before resuming the appropriate wattage. Then, applause begins out of sight, most likely at the Tour Desk, and soon all employees are

clapping as a couple—in their 30s, maybe—exits the resort, the wife carrying the New Owners briefcase.

At the Front Desk, the frizzy-haired woman waits behind the velvet rope strung up on polished bronze posts. She wears Capri pants and a purple tank top. Sami turns to follow Fritz's eyes.

“She's a tough one,” Sami says through a sigh. “One tough V.O.”

V.O.? This means two things: she has toured The Crown before, and V.O.'s may not be as dead to him as he thinks.

“She's in sales too,” Sami continues. “Account Management. Knew the game too well.”

How does she vacation and still earn sixty grand plus? How can she leave work for that long? Is she on the clock? If a client calls, does she need to respond? Or, is her phone off?

Fritz can't recall ever taking a vacation growing up. As The Crown taught him, single fathers don't vacation. If he had taken one, it would've been with Mom before she left, though his father often explicated her absence by claiming she was on “permanent vacation.”

The thought of Mom as part of The Crown Family of Owners makes Fritz happy and sad all at once.

“Go talk to her.”

“I can't. I need to get back to work.”

“There's more to life than work, my friend.”

She sneezes and, from this distance, sounds like a squeaky dog toy.

“I need to sell. I’ll miss the next Wave.”

“If you like her, you need to sell her on you.”

He isn’t sure if he likes her because what does liking someone feel like? Nonetheless, he felt something yesterday. There’s only one way to find out. *Everybody Wants Everything*’s first principle: *a salesperson’s first objective is to sell himself to the client*. Show the client that you’re trustworthy. Show the client compassion. Show the client that her needs are important, and that you can help fulfill her needs.

Fritz pushes his chair out, smudging the white restaurant floor. “Tell Gino about this for me, will you?” he asks, pointing to the ground before he hustles over to her and taps her on the shoulder.

“You again,” she says and turns away. “Here to apologize for tackling me yesterday?”

Her face is stoic, though a tad exaggerated. So, she’s lively. She faked an accent yesterday, so she has a sense of humor. She cussed yesterday. She’s a bit of a rule breaker. She’s casual. Social. Logical enough to vacation here.

Let’s sell.

“I know this line can be a pain in the ass. Reminds me of the bank, actually.”

He fidgets with the velvet rope.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” Fritz asks.

“Well,” she playfully cocks her hip, “I came down to request maintenance.”

“What trouble are you causing up there? Don’t be breaking anything. Comes out of my paycheck.”

A customer raises her voice to a Reservation Specialist, expressing contempt about the wi-fi not being free. Only Owners get free wi-fi. Guests pay \$12.99 a night.

“Well, I hope you earn enough to cover cabinets and dishes. Mount must’ve broke or something. Whole fucking thing fell right off the wall. Plates and mugs broke on the floor. I was trying to sleep in, you know.”

Hard to believe she had nothing to do with it, but Fritz can’t allow that to affect his face.

“I’ll have someone phone maintenance. It will be fixed as soon as possible. What room?”

“1402. Oh lordy Lord.” The accent returns, and she places the back of her hand against her forehead. “Whatever would I be able to do without having met such a fine gentleman as yourself?”

Fritz laughs a real laugh from his guts. She’s a damsel in distress, like many of the black-and-white tropes he grew up with. He knows this.

“And your name?” Fritz asks.

“Tabatha.” She extends her hand. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir.”

“Ma’am.” His accent didn’t feel that great, the unnecessary guttural causing great friction against his throat. “The pleasure is all mine.”

Fritz grabs her dainty hand. Tabatha fans her face with her other.

“Truth be told though,” Fritz says, “I’m not really a Southern gentleman.” He sinks his head into his shoulders and looks up at Tabatha, who laughs. “The accent is fake. Crazy, right?”

She laughs and puts her hands on her hips. “This changes everything. I’m not sure how to handle this.”

“Why don’t I make it up to you? Kabana Club tomorrow for lunch?”

“Checking out tomorrow morning.”

“Tonight it is. Six-thirty?”

“As friends? I’m married, so no funny business.”

How could she have toured on her own? Married guests must tour as a couple. Why didn’t someone figure this out? With every programmed bone in Fritz’s body, he wants to call her out on her deception, yet, simultaneously, when was the last time he enjoyed himself without trying to make money?

“Six-thirty it is,” he says. Then, he gives her his best smile.

“Bet that closes some deals for you, huh?”

Fritz turns and walks back to the sales floor. He knows he missed his chance at a Second Wave tour, but doesn’t mind waiting for the Third. His father would’ve lectured him: fraternizing with Tabatha may have cost him money. Friends and relationships are distractions. His father’s eternal words scald him like a bath of boiling water. Work is life, work is life.

If work is life, why aren't you here?

In the Corridor, the chandelier hangs lower than yesterday and pendulums back and forth, forcing Owners and guests to walk along the wall to avoid its swing. As Fritz maneuvers, around, he focuses on the bulb he noticed yesterday. Back and forth. Back and forth. It's no longer fickle. It's just off.

#

After closing 999, Fritz forgets that 1000 is right around the corner, until Jay tells him to get some rest to hit that goal tomorrow. He's focused on Tabatha who he finds fixed to a bar stool at the Kabana Club, which is moated by the laziest of lazy rivers. From behind the glass door, he admires her beauty. A real beauty. Not to say he's attracted to her, but he can't deny her looks. Not all done up like celebrities, nor perfect like those featured on the inserts of The Crown's promotional artillery. Actual beauty. She should be on those inserts, printed on glossy paper in front of the Kabana Club wearing large-framed shades and holding a halved coconut with a bright crazy-straw twirling out, caption reading: NEVER SHY AWAY FROM FUN!

But, why is she here? How is she here? All rule-breaking and vacation time aside, why wouldn't she want her husband to join? Is she "abandoning" him?

Fritz steps outside, the ungreased door joint announcing his arrival. Tabatha looks and immediately hops from the stool and passes Fritz, tugging at his arm like children to their parents.

"Where are we going?"

“Not here.”

She pulls him through the Corridor, the chandelier once again properly affixed to the ceiling. Gino is a miracle worker.

She halts at a photo of Jay Z and Beyoncé. The photo is from their South Beach resort and spa.

“None of them have been here, huh?” she asks.

He doesn’t have time to confirm this as she’s off again, Fritz’s feet trying to stay in step as they head out the side entrance at the North tower. She points across the street to the Family Kingdom: Myrtle Beach’s only seaside amusement park. It wasn’t always the only park. Eleven blocks north once housed the Myrtle Beach Pavilion. In 2006, it was demolished, so people had no other choice.

“Come on,” she says, pulling on Fritz’s arm, his feet a tad reluctant.

“Why not the Kabana?” He’s been comfortable at the resort for nearly a decade, and wasn’t interested in someplace new.

“Why not there?” She continues pointing.

“I’ve never been there.”

Tabatha stops pulling.

“Bullshit.”

“Bullshit-less.”

She giggles.

“How the hell do you sell people on staying across the street if you haven’t even been?”

Strong point. His only selling points on the park are the reduced rate for Owners as well as how Family Kingdom is *the real king in family fun* and how *amazing it is to have such immeasurable pleasure a mere hop, skip, and jump away*. Yet, he’s been successful without going. Maybe he could have hit 1000 years ago, a possibility his father would have used against him.

“We have a script.”

She releases a single *ha*. “You’re a lot cooler when you’re not a salesman.”

Fritz struggles to process this notion. He is a salesman. All communication is a mode of sales, though not all have a base commission.

“Okay,” Fritz says. “Lead the way.”

At night, the park is lit up, every inch of the place is blinking or blaring something orange or red or green or yellow or blue. Dings ding and whistles blow. Whirling rides swirl laughter and screams of either joy or fright. This must be what fun is like, though Fritz can’t tell if it’s comforting or harassing.

“Where to?” Fritz asks. His eyes catch those of an oversized panda noosed against a candy-striped wall. The panda, along with numerous other stuffed species, has a smile splattered on its face.

“This is your field trip.”

“We can just walk.”

The mini bumper cars catch his attention. Each car is shaped as an ovaled animal—brown bunnies, black kitties, and white mice all playing chicken with one another. Collision after collision, the thuds orchestrated by smiling, laughing, happy children sends Fritz into delirium. He must’ve gone to a place like this as a child. All kids do. Was there ever a time when his father would’ve allowed it? Would Mom? If the memory exists, it must be with Mom.

He closes his eyes and invents a memory instead. In it, he and Mom and their identical faces arrive home, both with powdered sugar from afternoon funnel cakes clinging to their lips. Her smile, even with the residue, is so beautiful. His father greets them but is scalded with anger, like he pressed his hot iron against his face. He scolds them for spending his hard-earned money on something as pointless as bumper cars and funnel cake, slapping the sugar off Mom’s lips. Then, Mom runs away. She runs and runs and runs until she falls off an unseen ledge and falls so far down that the bottom becomes the top, and she reappears falling from the sky. She lands on a marshmallow cloud and drifts away until she’s a dot among the stars.

A man with a headset microphone wagers an inflatable orca that he can guess Fritz’s weight within three pounds.

“Is everything all right?” Tabatha asks. She puts her hand on Fritz’s shoulder. He doesn’t know how Tabatha knows he is upset. Emotions are internal and, according to his father, shouldn’t be externalized.

Fritz isn’t trained in catharsis. There isn’t a Manual for how to let someone into his life. Does she even want to see it? Of course she does, or else she wouldn’t have asked what’s wrong.

“How did you get the V.O.?” he asks. “By yourself? Without your husband? Doesn’t your maiden name show on your credit report?”

“I kept my maiden name.”

“Why?”

“What’s it matter?”

The man doubles the wager to two orcas, says he could also guess Fritz’s birth month within two months.

“And how do you get to take vacation? I mean, being in sales and all.”

“You don’t vacation?”

“Never.”

She asks if Fritz sees the irony in the situation, he selling vacations without ever having taken one himself. He never considered that. The reason he’s at The Crown is because they were the first to offer him a job after his father killed himself. Like Mom, the resort has been his attempt at a “permanent vacation.” But his father haunts him, his lessons present in every sale and every fail.

But, Mom haunts him too. Not a single picture of her existed as Fritz grew up. The only evidence of her Fritz ever found was a note in his father’s office that simply read: GOODBYE.

“You know,” Tabatha says, “there’s more to life than your job.”

She swivels to avoid two children running on either side of her, both wielding large sticks wrapped in cotton candy.

He thinks of Sami, how he never knew Sami had a daughter. She probably has a gorgeous laugh too, both on and off bumper cars. The kind of laugh that makes Sami proud to work at a place he apparently doesn't like. He has more than work. Tabatha has more than work. Fritz only has work.

"Why don't you vacation with your husband? Why leave him home?"

She laughs subtly.

"I didn't *leave* him home, Fritz. Sometimes, we do our own thing."

"You're definitely going back, right? You're not abandoning him?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

Down a bit from the bumper cars is a log flume ride that flumes around an abandoned-looking waterwheel. One log cackles up a hill as it's pulled by the lift chain. The four passengers repeatedly say "Here we go" and "Oh no." When the log reaches the top, riders scream—even before they take the plunge toward the bottom, the splash large like the ocean waves on the other side of The Crown.

"I'm sorry," Fritz says. "I didn't mean anything by that. But, I need to leave."

"No, you don't."

"I need to hit 1000 tomorrow."

“Did I say something? Why does that even matter?”

Fritz doesn’t know whether it matters or not, whether or not his father raised him on good advice. When he hits 1000, maybe the haunting will end. Or, maybe it will grow stronger, his father pointing out that the goal should’ve been achieved a while back.

Either way, Fritz leaves her while the orca man mocks his exit. His fast feet heave him through crowds slothing through the asphalt walkways—people of all ages lollygagging the way vacationers do. Taking their time. Savoring these moments. He reaches the exit and winds down two side streets to the employee parking lot.

As he unlocks his Mazda, he looks back to The Crown. On Tower One, the insignia looks even more off-hinge. From its new angle, the backlighting from the “N” projects higher along the building. Instead of outlining the letters in pleasing contemporary fashion, the lighting projects an aqua blob, a spotlight spotlighting nothing.

#

Fritz will get 1000 today. He’s never been so ready. He’s so ready he’s angry, his clinching fists bruising his palms. He doesn’t care about running four minutes late to the morning sales meeting. He cares neither about the insignia’s tilt, nor the scattered bits of concrete on the pavement below it, nor the return of the orange bucket to the Tour Desk, nor the chandelier—once again—improperly strung. The only thing that matters is 1000.

With the master key card, he opens the heavy double-doors leading into the sales floor where everyone is already listening to Jay, who stops his spiel. All twenty-two tables are set

properly. Four chairs, two on either side. Two balloons strung where the wives or single females or effeminate partners will sit (diagonally from a male sales rep, or across from a female). The coffee machine putters. *We don't need coffee*, Fritz wants to say to it. The thrill of the sale is enough to keep them amped. And if one of them needs caffeine, they aren't born to sell.

The entire Squad looks to Fritz as the heavy doors shut behind him.

“Glad you could join us,” Jay says. He wears a Hawaiian shirt with faded reds and greens, palm trees curved like a crescent moon with coconuts hanging between the lime leaves, a cartoonishly Hawai’ian woman playing a ukulele patterned every six or so inches. Even for a big guy, the shirt is too big for him.

“Is today the day?” Jay asks before Fritz sits.

Fritz just wants to make the damn sale..

“Take a seat, Fritzzy. We don’t have time to spare.”

He sits at an empty table, the grunt of the sliding chair legs filling the moment of silence.

“Where was I?” Jay asks.

“Stress,” who cares shouts out.

“Right. Stress. I was getting all science on you.”

They chuckle, some louder than others.

“Stress kills. You know that, right? When we’re stressed, we’re doing some pretty hefty damage. It creates a shit-load of this stuff called cortisol.” He makes a gesture as if he’s holding

a large amount of something. “When there’s a shit-load of it, it kills our immune systems. Sixty percent of all human illness can be caused by stress. Ten percent of strokes? Stress. Heart disease? Heart attack? Stress.”

Every time he says “stress,” he smacks a table.

“Three out of four doctor visits,” he continues, “are because of stress-related issues. Look this stuff up if you don’t believe me.”

How much is work-related stress? The question pops into Fritz’s head, which he finds strange. Work doesn’t stress him out.

“Also, you know that the divorce rate in America is almost fifty percent? Fifty percent! You’re probably better off duking it out with a Great White than tying the knot, am I right?”

They chuckle. Fritz doesn’t.

“But why does any of this matter to us?” He pauses, a temporary statue with his shoulders shrugged. “I’ll tell you. Did you also know that vacations alleviate stress? Did you know that a study found vacations as contributors to higher positivity, lower blood pressure, and lower depression? Hell, vacations even contribute to a tighter tummy. Shit. About time I took one, huh?”

Jay slaps his belly and the chuckles return. What’s so funny about that? Fritz looks down his own body, his belly indistinguishable underneath his tucked, perfectly-pressed red shirt. Even if he could see it, he’s unsure how it compares to his younger stomach.

“Guess what else? Couples who vacation, you guessed it, are more likely to stay together. We’re not selling timeshares here.”

Jay stops pacing as the central air kicks on, quickly chilling the room with its hum.

“We. Save. Lives.”

Fritz notices a deep, verbose groan most likely coming from outside.

“I’ll say it again. We. Save. Lives. Let that sink in for a moment.”

Fritz thinks about 997. The schlub and his wife. Shaking their signatures onto the contract. Budgets now tighter. Less food in their fridge. More stress.

“Everyone gives credit to fire fighters, police officers, and doctors. Isn’t it time we get our due?”

The Squad nods along. They nudge each other. They feel what Jay wants them to feel.

Fritz can’t. All Fritz can do is think about his father. About when the coroner pronounced him expired. How the police and fire fighters commented on the bathroom reeking like an oiled pork chop cooked on a radiator. Tub water displaced and over-flowing. His body charred in the tub. Plugged-in iron between his submerged legs. The same iron that gurgled as it pressed his work shirts and slacks so violently that the fabric was too frightened to wrinkle. Six to seven days a week. Fifty-two weeks a year. Twenty-eight years of his own life. Seventeen years of Fritz’s. Work can kill.

Fritz can no longer listen to this asinine speech. He doesn't save lives. He doesn't make dreams come true. Fritz pushes his chair out. He must speak up. He has no idea what words will spill from his mouth, but something must spill.

The rest of the Squad stands, applauds, and begins to exit. It's 8:30 and time for the First Wave. Fritz remains standing, an obstruction in the middle of the Sales Floor, the Squad filtering around him to head to the Tour Desk.

Sami stays seated while Jay towers over him, as if pressing Sami into the chair with his cold stare. Eventually, Jay goes to his office while Sami remains.

"Aren't you going out for First Wave?" Fritz asks.

"Not hitting quota," he says without looking at me. "Sitting out today."

"By choice?"

He looks to me, and his face reveals his answer.

The groan outside grows deeper.

Doesn't Jay know Sami has a daughter? A wife? People depend on him. People to save money for. Meals to have. Vacations to take. While Sami shouldn't work a job he hates, he shouldn't risk losing the important people in his life.

Fritz imagines Sami's wife exiting Sami's world, though not by packing up and skipping town. In Fritz's mind, Sami's wife leaves the same way Fritz's father left. With her husband always working and uncultivated love, maybe the only option left is to abandon Sami and his daughter.

He goes to Jay's office, though his glass door is closed. Fritz knocks and Jay looks up, his cell phone attached to his face. He lifts his other arm and points to the watch. 8:32. Then, he uses his hands to shoo Fritz away. Fritz turns the door's knob, but it's locked.

Glass shatters outside the Sales Floor.

Fritz turns to Sami and says, "Don't worry." He places his hand on Sami's shoulder before exiting.

In the Corridor, Snooki's framed photo is in pieces. The photo is, like Jay Z and Beyoncé's, from South Beach. So is Debbie Harry's. And LeBron James'. Dolly Parton: Gatlinburg. Sting: Los Angeles. Burt Reynolds: Branson.

Fritz marches to the Tour Desk, the leak now a steady stream. Terry hands him information for his couple: Michael and Blake Eckert. Traveling from Trenton, New Jersey. Fifty-four thousand annually. They are sitting on the couch, taking small sips of their orange juice.

Not number 1000.

Every potential Owner at The Crown must be greeted with your best smile, a firm handshake, and a "Welcome home."

"How's the juice?" Fritz says.

They look dumbfounded. Fritz points, his hand shaking. The stream patters against the bucket.

"The juice. The juice. How's the juice?"

“It’s...okay,” one of them says.

Fritz heads out of the area and through the Chophouse into the resort’s main kitchen. He barges past line chefs. No orange peels in the trash cans. No hand-peelers on any of the counters. No juicer to be found. Another groan from outside, this one the biggest and deepest.

He arrives at the fridge and opens the door, the vents piping in air so cold he could see it. No cartons. No pitchers. No juice. Then, he heads to the walk-in freezer. Boxes upon boxes of frozen hotdogs, other meats, and fruit. Just below the bags of frozen fruit is a crate filled with cans. He picks one up and shivers, the can seemingly frozen to his skin. He wipes off the frost, and the orange and green label indicate that the juice is from concentrate.

How can they lie to customers, and potential owners? What else do they lie about? How long has Fritz been selling false promises and false luxuries?

As he blusters back through the kitchen and past the Tour Desk and past Michael and Blake and past the pools to tell Jay that enough is enough, the outside groans deeper and steady until a snap and another snap and another. Now, nothing. Now, clattering on the pavement coming from the North end. Now, the largest thud thwacks so loud and heavy the entire Crown sways. Screams rise from both in front and behind him.

A mass of people jog up from behind, almost taking Fritz out. He follows the mob through the Corridor where the walls shake and more celebrities drop and shatter. A ceiling tile falls and crumbles on someone’s wicker hat, knocking him down.

Everyone exits out the North end, the outside thick with dust. The mob gathers around the downed insignia—much larger on the ground than it ever felt high up on the tower—which is piled on the pavement like junk. The “N” is folded under the rest of the tattered sign. Beneath and around the marquee are a scaffold’s planks and braces as well as painted concrete chunks of the exterior wall.

The dust continues to dissipate and the crowd rumbles as legs twitch from under the fold in the sign. The legs are cloaked in white jeans stained in various paints and blood—a denim palette. Gino’s jeans, assuming the descriptions have been true. Fritz wishes he could see his leathered face, although, based on the sign’s flattened positioning on the pavement, his face is most likely gone.

Concrete spills down the side of Tower One. More panic. Fritz runs, but thinks of Tabatha. She’s checking out today, but check-out isn’t for a couple of hours. Did she leave early? Is she part of the mob? Will she get back to her husband?

Fritz runs opposite the wave of people and passes Sami, thankful that he has escaped. Fritz runs back through the building, pulling a fire alarm along the way. He paddles against the flesh current into the Tour Desk and Lobby area when he feels moisture creeping into his shoes. At the Tour Desk, the ceiling purges water. The orange bucket buoys by Fritz’s feet.

The stairwell is colder, grayer, and tighter. Lights and exit signs flicker. The squawks above him are deep, and the echoed pucker of frantic flip flops tumble down during the alarm’s paced respites. He climbs the stairs three by three, three lunges per flight, two flights and nine breaths per floor, fourteen floors.

In the hallway, people pound against the elevator doors, some trying to pry them open with their umbrellas and canes and fingers. Some sit on the ground as if they're luggage needed to be carried out. Others hang on their door frames, shouting various commands at whomever is inside listening.

At 1402, a two-bedroom standard oceanview with full kitchen, queen-sized beds, and a jet-less bathtub, Fritz places his hand on the knob and feels ease rustle through him. Even as the door won't open, he isn't bothered. He knocks. He pounds. He yells. He isn't bothered. He knows what is on the other side of this door, and knows that no matter his fate, he'll have done something other than work. Something important

Fritz reaches for his back pocket and fetches his wallet. He shuffles through myriad plastic and retrieves the master key card, holds it over the sensor, *ding*.

"Tabatha?" he shouts, closing the door behind him. In the kitchen, all of the cabinets have spilled onto the floor, leaking shards of the recently replaced ceramic dinnerware. The living room sprinkler system showers the bright, beachy furniture and soaks the plush carpeting. Fritz walks out onto the balcony and looks over the railing. Slabs of other balconies pile up in the lazy river, while others have crushed the tiki-hut tops of the Kabana Club. Out on the ocean, the water is as brown as always, the murky tide gliding in and out.

"Fritz?"

He turns to find Tabatha: wearing pajamas; eyes wide; hair drenched from the sprinkler; and visible terror. He and Tabatha will escape. She will call her husband and let him know that she's alright and heading home. Fritz will take her to Myrtle Beach International. The drive will

be quiet and joke-free, but each will express their gratitude to one another before Tabatha enters the airport and is lost among thousands of other travelers.

Maybe he will see her again, maybe even meet her husband someday. Fritz has saved enough money for five-dozen vacations waiting to be spent, so why not? He can enjoy the immeasurable amount of time he has left, and he will try to do just that. No idea how, but he's going to try.

Before he goes on trying, however, he will help Sami. No one deserves to have a family end. Fritz never wants to have that in common with anybody.

But, before he does any of this, he needs to save the day.

"Ma'am." Fritz chokes on his exaggerated, cinematic accent. He tips an invisible hat and smiles that handsome smile of his. He reaches for her. "Let's get you out of here."

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