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## The Neighborhood & Cat Eyes: Stories

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THE NEIGHBORHOOD & CAT EYES  
STORIES

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2013

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## ABSTRACT

*The Neighborhood & Cat Eyes: Stories* is a collection of short stories dealing with themes related to isolation, otherness in the modern world, and suburban dread. These two sets of stories deal with different variations on these themes.

In the “Cat Eyes” collection of stories, isolation becomes a more prominent thread. These four stories each center on a different individual afflicted with having cat eyes in place of normal human eyes. Through the lenses of childhood, adulthood, and someone not afflicted with the cat eye condition, otherness and isolation are explored. Each individual offers a unique glimpse into the lives of these people and how they exist in a world that seeks to other them, often times through force.

In “The Neighborhood” collection of stories, the idea of suburban dread comes into full-effect with the inclusion of corpses, skeletons, geysers, and medieval style siege parties. These five stories contrast against the very real lives of the individuals living through these situations. The different families affected by these issues come into contention with the unnamed rules of suburban living as well as their own personal torments made manifest through the oddities that surround them.

This collection is dedicated to any and everyone who has read or listened to me talk about these stories. Thank you again for indulging my weird ideas.

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**WHO INVITED THIS DWEEB?  
MAURICE ANDERSON, BORN MARCH 15<sup>TH</sup>, 1989**

As a thing to help me through some measure of the “childhood psychological scars,” my therapist kept asking me to write down as much as I can from my childhood. But that’s the big problem, isn’t it? The first few years of school felt like a weird kind of blurring sensation, as though I were on a train watching another one pass inches from the window. I don’t remember being conscious of myself until I was turning seven and my dad got me those huge square sunglasses that were too big for my face. They had been preparing for my puberty a few years in advance, waiting for the early spurts that cat-eyed kids were prone to. I didn’t know if they thought I was going to sprout fur or maybe lose my cat eyes but they wanted to be prepared for the eventuality. Every item of clothing they got then hung off of me unless secured with a belt or endless shoulder shrugs to keep my shirts from falling off.

Large square lenses were the only eyes I had to the world. Everyone was told I had a light sensitivity. Only a few looked as though they didn’t believe it right away. Those faces were always clear when the new school year started and I had to explain to teachers why I needed the glasses. They’d glance at the signed note from my parents after I told them and shrug. It got easier as I got older and at least no one in college seemed to care.

During my time in grade school my parents were convinced, my father especially, that if I was surrounded by normal people with their normal eyes then I would become more like that, both in mind and, for some reason, in my eyes. I don’t know what he based this off of outside of some strange hope he harbored from a magazine or another book about raising a cat-eyed child. I went to every single birthday party they could find out about, always asking the front desk at the



beginning of the year for a list of birthdays in my grade. I went to more birthday parties than I ever had ever been invited to in the first place. It was a small enough town that they could find the time to take me to every single one.

It was Alan Harrison's twelfth birthday party that was the worst for me. Everyone called him Andy for some reason that no one explained to me. He was that kid. The basketball kid, the basketball family. Everyone in his family played and they were all obscenely good at it. I hate saying it like this, but "star player" is the phrase commonly used with his family's name.

And of course I had to go. And of course I'm able to remember more of it in vivid detail the more I write it all down. The image and time are fairly clear—it's the mid-nineties and basketball is a thing. More than a thing than it ever had been because of Michael Jordan and Space Jam. So the theme of the birthday party for Alan "Andy" Harrison? Basketball. And what could I not play due to being short and stocky as all hell? Basketball. And what is the gift that I bring with me to this birthday party?

Not a basketball.

I'm not sure if my parents didn't remember what the kid liked or if this was their own descent into madness due trying to make my existence a little better, but that's not what I carried under my arm, wrapped in bright red and blue wrapping paper. They hadn't told me what they had picked up, only that I was going to a birthday party that weekend and this was the gift, already wrapped, I was supposed to give Andy Harrison.

"Who invited this dweeb?" Andy's brother said when he opened the door. His voice was like a nasally kazoo punching through me like an '80s film cliché. I had kept my sunglasses this far into middle school, to the point where people actually believed I had a light sensitivity issue.

His mom came to swoosh him away while simultaneously ushering me inside and tucking the gift under her arm. I could hear other moms talking and laughing as she disappeared down a hallway next to the stairs at the back of their entryway. Their house actually had an entryway with around twenty assorted dirt-coated sneakers and sandals piled up around a little shoe rack.

A noise from the other room let me know where the rest of the party was taking place. I walked slowly to take in the chandelier hanging above me in the entryway and the soft smell of citrus his mom likely sprayed to diffuse the funk of the sneakers. An adjacent living room contained the majority of the party kids crowded around a leather sofa. A framed article from the paper hung above their TV stand, the one about how the family name was synonymous with basketball. Small towns are still weird to me. Andy Harrison wore a little crown, because of course he was, and was on the verge of losing a game in NBA Jam. A small ticking from the in-game clock counting down the seconds was cut off by Andy tossing the controller to the side and ripping the game out of the SNES. He tossed it at the kid playing opposite him.

“You fucking cheater!” he yelled as the rest of the room reverberated with his words. “I invite you to my party and you cheat, you goddamn stupid cheater.” His voice was as nasally as his brother’s, maybe an octave higher. The gathered kids murmured and backed off from around the other player, some pale kid whose name I can’t remember, as he squirmed into the couch. Andy went up to him with the controller still in his hand, gripped around the gray plastic as though it were a rock and the other player’s head a biblical reference. He winced as Andy walked closer and raised the controller, ready for the strike. The Other Player opened his eyes and looked around for anyone else, if anyone would stop the birthday boy. Our eyes locked and he

pointed in my direction. The crowd turned toward me in such a way I could hear the sound effects, a discordant crank as necks ratchet around.

“Yeah? What the hell do *you* want?” Andy sneered at me. I shrugged my shoulders and scratched my elbow. He huffed and tossed the controller at the Other Player before throwing himself back onto the sofa. I walked slowly to join the outskirts of the group. The only noise for a while was a gold fan above us, the cords dangling and clinking together as it wobbled. The fan matched the rest of the décor, dark browns and gold on everything. Even the slim coffee table Andy rested his feet on had gold trim around the edge.

“Mom! I’m bored!” he yelled. She appeared from the other side of the room after a moment, her hands clasped together as though she were begging.

“It looks like one of your friends showed up late, honey. Don’t you want to see if he wants any cake or pizza before we start opening presents?” she asked, never breaking eye contact with Andy.

“What? Oh yeah.” He jumped off the couch and followed his mom out of the room. The rest of the group stood around, couched. The Other Player and I glanced at one another, pointed out from a crowd we weren’t a part of. Andy and his mom returned with a slice of pizza draped over a chunk of cake on the plate.

“Eat it quick—I want to get to the presents.” He handed it to me before adding, “And you better like that pizza. It’s from my dad’s restaurant.” He said it with a kind of pride that almost stripped some of that nasally tone from his voice. Almost.

“Now, Andy, let him eat in peace. What was your name again, sweetie?” his mom asked, putting her hand on my shoulder.

“Maurice,” I said. I hadn’t even begun eating.

“Maurice, would you be okay with eating while Andy opens his presents?” she asked. I wasn’t used to being asked.

I barely squeaked out a yes before Andy pumped his fist in the air.

“Alright!” He sprinted back into the other room as the crowd of boys walked in behind him. The Other Player and myself brought up the rear, Andy’s mom guiding me in before walking off back to the voices of other moms.

The dining room was closer to a hallway, just big enough for the long table and chairs and almost none for the rest of the people plastered against walls so they could get a better look as Andy went through his presents. Nearly fifteen of us squeezed into the room with nearly fifteen gifts stacked along the table. Some narrow, some large, others small but adorned with bows larger than the boxes beneath them. Mine sat at the far end, the last thing he’d unwrap. Most of the crowd gathered behind it and wondered what could be in each of the other boxes that they didn’t bring. It was like a tree with Andy sitting at the root on the far end and the majority of us clustered around the other, blooming out into the other room.

Basketball shorts, memorabilia, three VHS copies of *Space Jam*, a Dennis Rodman bobble head, and other odds and ends that filled the table as Andy tore his way through boxes and paper. My own gift had nearly been buried in his onslaught as it sat nestled under a stack of torn paper and a jersey with his name on it.

“Is that it?” he asked around the table and most nodded in agreement. Until the Other Player, the pale kid that stood near the back with me pushed his way forward and pulled my gift from its hiding spot.

“Here,” he said. “It’s his.” He pointed back to me. Andy shrugged and rolled his eyes and went into the gift with the same ferocity as the others. The metallic paper gave way to vulcanized rubber as my gift sat in front of Andy, the cardboard brace around it keeping it steady on the table.

“A football?” Andy sat back in his chair and pulled the little crown from his head. The rest of the party turned back to look at me. I stared at the Other Player, the betrayal from outcasts. He only looked back over to Andy who started pulling the football from its cardboard housing.

“Now, honey, you don’t want to start playing right after you’ve had your pizza, right?” Andy’s mom popped back into the room. She picked the crown from the floor and placed it back on his head.

“But it’s my birthday party, can’t I play with my birthday presents right now?” he said looking up at her with his eyes wide. She tilted her head and relented. Andy continued to rip through the cardboard until the football was out and made a motion for the rest of us to meet him outside.

We laced up our sneakers and sandals in the entryway, no one looking at me. I’d say the color from the world began to desaturate from the fear, but the cat eyes always made colors weird for me. I wasn’t color blind, but I had to be told the color of the gift wrap since the red and blue were mostly just gray. I looked back at the Other Player but he was already leaving. One of the moms I didn’t recognize poked her head in and asked what we were doing. Most of us shrugged but one kid said we were going to play.

“Well, be careful out there,” she said before turning back around.

I think in terms of square footage his backyard was bigger than my house, not completely surprising due to the half basketball court taking up a portion of it. A small field of green and gray. Andy tossed the football in his hands as he walked into it, the rest of the party coming up behind him. He pointed to half the kids without saying a word and they came over to him. Grass crunched beneath them as they walked to the far side. I could hear a few whispers as the late afternoon sun burned beneath my sunglasses. The world was a squint to me no matter how strong the lenses were, but I could still see the others on the far side lining up. The football shot into the air like a spring before beginning its descent. I'd seen enough from my dad watching TV to shuffle out of the way of the thing as it came down, as the kids of the other side came toward it. It hit the grass with a wet plunk and sat in front of the Other Player.

“Come on, you're supposed to catch it!” Andy shouted as he ran up. “Whatever, just line up and do it.” We obeyed. We lined up and we did it. The ball moved a foot before being dropped again.

Andy motioned toward me while looking at the kid holding the ball. The play began again, and I found myself holding the thing after it fell from the sky into my hands. My team had run somewhere else, to the other ends of the field, as Andy led a charge. I was off my feet, on the ground, slammed down and skidding along the grass as through we were on ice. The ball shot loose from my hands and into the air. No one tried to catch it. They just piled more onto the general area I was pinned down. What breath I had before was gone, knocked away like the ball somewhere else. I lay on my back while the rest of Andy's team got up and walked off. Nothing felt broken, maybe bent a little, but not snapped in half just yet. I was a human scuff mark on the

grass, laid out like a fallen satellite. Dirt clung to my pants, my hair, anywhere it found a foothold to cling.

Some of the kids grabbed at my shoulders, wiping their palms on me to make sure the dirt stayed where it was. They lined the ball up again. And again. And again. I tried falling before they came to me, diving out of the way at the last minute, throwing the ball to someone else. The Other Player threw the ball only to me. I'd gotten lucky through most of my life, I never once broke a bone but I've broken glasses many times. This was the first time it ever happened. They crunched under some kid's Converse, dented and shattered out like little bits of shrapnel. I breathed in the grass and dirt before trying to look up, my stomach pressed against the ground. Someone flipped me over as I covered my face. I peeked through my fingers. The Other Player would have been a silhouette if he wasn't so pale. He looked down between my fingers into the dark slits of my eyes and ran. Soon the rest of them were around me. They picked me up, held me by my arms as I struggled. Someone I couldn't see held my head up with one hand and opened my eye with another. They circled around me, peering into the yellow and black where a normal eye should have been. Andy only scoffed a little before whispering something to his team. I could have sworn that they hissed.

I went limp in their arms as they brought me back into the house. My feet dragged behind me, tracing patterns along the wooden floors. I felt like I would have been decent at ice skating if I had people like this to guide me along.

"Mom!" Andy shouted into the house. She appeared as if materializing from nothing just beyond the living room walls. Same pose, her hands cupped together inwardly across her stomach as though holding something back.

“Yes, dear?” she asked. Her eyes met the dirt stain held up by a couple of the other party guests. I kept my own eyes closed. “Oh my, what happened here?” She began to walk closer but Andy stepped in her way.

“We were playing. Look at all the dirt on his face, he kept falling into the grass and oinking. Right, guys?” He looked back at the small crowd. They nodded in unison, their own eyes never looking past his mom’s.

“Well then I think we need to get him washed up. Come here,” she extended her hand to me. I managed to get one arm away. A lightness overcame my arms as though the dirt had already been wiped away, that I would be gone from them as they continued to do whatever else it was kids like that did on birthdays.

“We can do it,” Andy interjected. He stepped between myself and his mother, and I would have cursed the little bastard if I had the air in my lungs to do so. And if I knew any other words besides “bastard” at the time. She looked me up and down and retracted her hand. She knew her son, knew what he would do to get his way. She flinched and looked back as though waiting to hear someone else call her from the other room.

“Alright, but be careful in there. Make sure you don’t use the guest towels.”

And like that I was gone again. Torn from potential liberation. Torn from living room to hallway to bathroom. Before I was even inside I could hear the sound of the tub running along with sneakers squeaking on the tile floor. Disinfectant and citrus hung in the air as a warm steam began to creep through the room.

“Just lay him down there,” I could hear Andy telling the two kids holding me from somewhere in the back. Somehow he’d fallen behind the charge to bring me to the tub. There



was a clink against the tile behind me just loud enough over the exhaust fan. I shouldn't have looked back, should have just kept my eyes forward so it could have gone through relatively easily. But I had to be curious and wonder what the sound was. And of course it was my glasses, what else could have made such a distinct metal-against-tile tink.

"You left these outside." Andy circled from around the couple of kids holding me to look me in the eyes. "Jeez, I can't believe they even let you in our school with those." He stuck out a finger to poke at my eyes. I turned away and he scratched at my cheek to bring me back around. The skin around my eye stretched as he propped it open with his fingers, another one reaching forward to poke. "Shit, are these things even real or are you just trying to be weird?"

"My cousin had them," another voice came from behind, smaller, wavering, but building up some confidence from the last time I heard it. The Other Player walked up next to Andy, quietly across the tile floor. "It's like a cat." The group started to chuckle as though they knew what people do with cats. A couple meows and yowls came out too.

"Hell, yes, it's like a cat, that's what we got him here for." He pointed over at the half full tub. "You see all that water in there? You wanna know what we're going to do with it?" I pulled my head away from him as best I could, like trying to pull myself out of a steel trap. He rolled his head on his shoulders and stepped back. "I want you to say it at least, jeez."

"You're going to throw me in," I mumbled back without looking up.

"What was that?" One of the kids that held me lifted my head up. Andy sat on the rim of the tub, with his legs over the edge and a hand to his ear. "I'm going to need you to speak up." At times now I wonder if this was actually my life or some kind of warped image that resulted from the dozens of action films I watched. It was these little moments that made me believe

maybe he didn't sit on the edge with his feet hanging over, that he didn't sound like some villain about to drown James Bond, that I didn't feel as bruised as I was, that someone was going to come in sooner than later like I remembered.

“You're going to put me in the tub,” I said, louder.

“That's right.” He stepped out of the way as the two kids lifted me by my armpits and slowly lowered me into the lukewarm water. No one bothered to take my shoes or anything off. It seeped in through the mesh in my sneakers, into my socks like walking through a hot puddle after rain. The rest was a splash down. Water filled up my eyes and nose and ears. I don't remember flailing all that much. Or maybe I did, I just remember water being everywhere the whole time. And I would think that I would remember more of it. A moment like this is kind of defining, isn't it? The biggest instance of childhood bullying in my life—it never got this bad when I got older. It should be like a concrete slab in my mind. Every moment etched out in stone and plastered along the inside of my skull as a constant reference and reminder of what happened and how it felt.

I actually did like swimming when I was a kid. There was a public pool not a mile from my house, one of those community-run things that had been around since the fifties. Greenish gray shingled roof at the entrance, white tile that gave way to concrete that gave way to something close to Olympic size where I could come close to swimming from one end to the other on a single breath when the chlorine smell wasn't too strong. I'd kick off from the shallow corner and jet myself as far forward as I could before my hands and feet took over the rest. The dark goggles kept the water from my eyes so I could juke and jive around legs and other swimmers. I came short by a few meters, then just a couple after long enough. I'd reach my hand

out, trying to scrape the far edge of the pool, the water distorting the world enough that my depth perception was off by just enough to make it look like I was only a couple of inches away. And I would have thought with all of that practice, with all of that time, I could have done something in the tub, could have socked someone in the mouth with my swimmer arms. But my hand swiped against the water worthlessly, fingers trailed at bubbles that shot out from my mouth as I needed more air. I gasped and lifted my head up from the bathtub as more hands laid themselves on me and pushed my back under. I could nearly make it to the other end of the pool with a good lung full of air. The tub gave me less.

“I still see some dirt,” I could hear someone yell as I forced my head back up. Only gasping for half a breath while choking the rest of the water back up. They kept my arms and legs down, keeping the splashing to a bare minimum. No one ever touched my head in the tub as though they knew that was a different kind of line. Miraculous when I think about it now, considering the eyes and middle school kids, they wouldn’t try to go all the way with it.

“Stop,” I yelled on my next jump for air. My shoulders gave way to another push and I was under again. Underwater always looked the same. Blurred light and a sound not unlike an echo from another room, as though someone were making glass harp music—from large, low resonating glasses filled with something thick and viscous, a bass wave emanating from crystal. But something higher, thinner in tone came through the water, a wine glass filled with clear water. Different hands were on my shoulders and pulled me out. I gasped again as the air and light met me.

“He could have drowned in there,” Andy’s mom screamed at the rest of the kids, namely the ones with wet shirts and pants. She picked me up from the tub and stood me up next to her as

she looked at her son. “And you, you’re grounded for a least a month. I don’t care that it’s your birthday. This is unacceptable.” She grabbed a towel from the rack on the wall and began to ruffle my hair with it, bright orange terry cloth smelling like citrus and soap. I couldn’t speak under the towel, just felt it flick the water away as I coughed up what had seeped in. “Go on, back to the living room, all of you while I call your parents,” she said, stopping for a moment. I couldn’t see it but I could hear her arms swooshing at the air, shooing them away. “Andy, you’re staying right there. I have half a mind to put you in that tub for what you did to this poor child.”

I could barely squeak out a thanks as she continued to dry me off and sigh.

“It’s okay. You’re out of it now. Hopefully your parents won’t be too mad.” She pushed me out into the hallway. “And you, look at this mess in here. The dirt, the water, all of that? That’s you cleaning that up right now. Go to the garage and get the mop.” Andy whined and stomped off. She sighed as she pulled the towel from my head and I looked her in the eyes. Her tired grin gave way to a thin, neutral line as her eyes looked for something else to focus on. “I’ll call them now, you just, you know, wait right here.” She left the bathroom. It was the first time I had a good view of the room I nearly died in. It was the first time, too, I heard nothing else in the house. No kids yelling or running or hitting each other with controllers, just a quiet voice in another room talking quickly. Andy’s crown lay saturated on the tile floor, ruined. She reappeared a few moments later.

“Your parents are on their way,” she said not looking at me. “Come on, I’ll let you out and you can wait on the porch.” I followed her back through the living room. The Other Player and the rest sat there, watching me, dangling their feet over sofas and chairs. Andy huffed and looked over at the Other Player who only shrugged his shoulders. She opened the door and let

me out. It was closed before I could turn around and say anything. I did want to thank her. It always felt disingenuous to tell someone they saved your life but it's not often true. Although I don't know how much she wanted to after she saw my eyes. She was old enough to remember the TV shows and news reports about how the cat-eyed kids were all homeless degenerates. Maybe she'd almost killed someone too.

I sat on the stoop and waited as moths clinked at the porch light. Cars blew breezes past the house, little bits of leaves disturbed by something massive rolling over them. It wasn't the last time I was going to wait on a porch for my parents. They wouldn't ask what happened. They always thought it better that I learned to deal with these things myself, to get better on my own since they wouldn't be there all the time. It was like they were normal parents then, concerned but distant enough to let me be independent. Maybe that's what they wanted me to be, lone and on the prowl and waiting on a porch for someone to help.

Music sounded behind me before my parents picked me up, and laughing and noises like running.

**UNAFFECTED**  
**BETH KING, BORN APRIL 4<sup>TH</sup>, 1989**

“Hey, remember that time Mom tried to poison me?” I asked as my cigarette butt flew out the window.

“Jesus, Beth,” my sister said. She only looked forward at the road while she drove, hands planted at nine and three on the wheel. A tense shrill came from her whenever she got nervous, like when we drove to see our mom in the hospital.

“What? No one saw me flick it,” I said. I'd counted five or six other cars on the road since we left for the hospital and just as many signs telling me how much we'd pay if the cops saw us dumping cigarette butts on the side of the road.

She didn't reply, only puffed up her cheeks and burst a long sigh. It's how she always was whenever we had to share a car. Annoyed, disgruntled, angry, whichever words work for someone who doesn't even consider her sister a part of her family. If I pulled my sunglasses down enough and stared at her, with my cat eyes, the little black slits expanding out to circles and the secondary lid blinking at her, she might just kick me out.

We sat for a while and listened to the wind slip through the cracks in her window, a prolonged hiss that sounded like a continually deflating balloon. I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of my shirt pocket while the road banged on around us. Frankie snatched it from me without looking. She crushed it and threw the remains in the back seat. It bounced from her overnight bag to the top of the cooler we kept for these trips. The third trip this month, sixth month since we knew about our mom's cancer.

“What the fuck, Frankie?” I said, looking back at her.

“You're not visiting Mom smelling like smoke again,” she said.

“She won't notice, not with that plastic thing up her nose. What is that thing anyway?” I asked. Frankie shuddered as she kept her eyes on the road. I pulled my phone out and began typing. There was a moment here, a quiet only intersected by the hissing wind, where we could have looked like normal sisters together if someone stared in through the windshield. I broke that moment. “Okay, so, a nasal cannula helps to supplement oxygen for patients. It's supposed to help in the healing process, which sounds kind of holistic to me, but alright. Hey, we can get a seven-foot one for like a buck if I bid right now.” Her Geo slowed and made its way toward the side of the road, bumping over the little indents, and stopped. I looked up from my phone while Frankie kept her hands on the wheel, her eyes straight ahead. The sun peered in through the front window, throwing a shadow over both of our faces from the visors. A tear dripped from her chin, and I looked back down, scrolling through the various listings for cannulas.

“Could you look at me?” Frankie asked through sniffles.

I looked up again at her face and the small wet line that came from one of her normal eyes. “You should turn the emergency-”

Her hand slapped the small button on the dash. The mechanical ticking filled the car. We sat for a moment before I opened my mouth. A car passed and stifled my words. Frankie found hers.

“Why do you do this?” she asked. I shrugged and went back to looking at my phone. Her hand came up again and ripped it from me, tossing it in the back with everything else. The dull bounce of silicone hitting hard plastic, bouncing like one of those rubber balls Frankie and Jane used to get when they were good in Kroger. I didn't get taken out of the house much; Mom

wouldn't let me leave most of the time. I asked her once if she was ashamed of me. She took a pair of sunglasses and placed them over my eyes before walking away. Mom never looked me in the eyes much.

The seat drew me in further. I sank between the cushions as she talked about something else. I needed a file because the dirt beneath my nails felt thicker than normal—a black line running along the top that could spill over if I flicked hard enough. I kept asking myself where it came from. A crescent of lead looked back at me. Frankie grabbed my shoulder, and I went tense against the back of the seat.

“Please, just listen to me,” Frankie said. She wiped the tear from her face and wiped it onto her leg. I nodded. “I only want to get to the hospital, alright? Can you sit there until then and just be normal?” I nodded as I stared through the windshield.

“Can I at least enjoy our car rides together?” I asked. She sighed and shifted the car into drive. We kicked up gravel and went back to the road.

I pulled myself through the top of the seat belt and tried to stretch into the back. My bones cracked from the car-ride stiffness.

“What are you doing?” Frankie said.

“I'm getting my phone. I need to check my email. I think I have a coupon for lunch later.”

My knee scraped against the center console as I climbed further into the back, my hand reaching for the little silicon pizza wrapped around my phone.

“No. Get back. Stop doing that.” She smacked her hand against my back in a rhythm to her words.

“I've almost got it though.”



“I don't care, just get back up here before they see you.”

My fingers wrapped around the phone as I hooked my legs under the glove box and pulled myself back to the front.

“What were you saying?”

The siren shook through the whole car. I dropped my phone in my lap and readjusted the seatbelt as though my making amends would have stopped us getting pulled over. Beth parked the car at the shoulder and pushed my knees away to get into her glove box.

The knock of metal against glass stiffened us both. Frankie jerked up with a large stack of old license tags and insurance papers. She waved the papers at the cop and his flashlight, and he motioned for her to roll down her window. It creaked the whole way and when it finally hit the bottom Frankie dropped her papers in her lap.

“Is there a problem, sir?” she asked. He stood there for a moment and readjusted his belt.

“License and registration, please.” Frankie handed him the stack of papers. He eyed them before handing them back. “Now, ah, what was I seeing going on in this car, ma'am?” He bent down and looked over at me as I fiddled with my sunglasses.

“I'm sorry, officer, it's just my sister. She was trying to get to the back seat to get her phone and wouldn't listen to me tell her to stop and she just goes and does whatever she wants and we're going to the hospital to see our mother and I don't want-”

“Ma'am, I'm going to need you to slow down a little,” he said, pulling a pen out from his pocket.

“I'm just trying to tell you everything, like the context since my sister is weird and I don't want us to be late, so you can stop writing that ticket, please.”

“It's Click-It-Or-Ticket, ma'am, I know it's not great but them's the breaks.”

“Even the driver gets in trouble,” I said and looked down at my emails.

“Beth, just stop it,” Frankie said.

“What was that?” The officer ripped the yellow paper from his pad and held it out for her.

“Nothing—just my sister—and why do you have to do this? It was a mistake, I don't need this right now.”

“Them's the breaks,” I said, flipping through coupon offers and sale fliers in my messages.

“Oh my god, Beth, stop it,” Frankie said.

“Ma'am, could you please take the ticket?”

“But you don't understand. I can't take the ticket. We're supposed to be at the hospital already,” Frankie said.

“I don't think our mom's going to give that much of a shit,” I said. “She might not even be conscious right now. Kind of like that time with me, her, and the detergent. You remember, right?”

“Ma'am, please.”

“I don't need this,” Frankie said. She grabbed the ticket from the cop's hand and crumpled it into a small yellow ball.

“Ma'am, I'm going to need you to settle down.”

“You could at least try to care,” Frankie yelled.

“Mom could have tried too,” I said.

“Ma'am, could you-”

“Could you just leave us alone?” Frankie yelled. The yellow wad of a ticket flew from her hand like a little rocket and glanced off the nose of the cop, landing just below his eye before falling down to the road below. He raised a hand to his face before putting his hand on his belt.

“Step out of the car, ma'am.”

“I am not stepping out of this car. Our mother is very sick and she could already be dead, and you and her are just keeping me from at least saying goodbye, and I've had enough of this.” Frankie pounded her fist into the steering wheel like a drum as her eyes shot between me and the cop. He started to pull something from his belt before Frankie threw off her seat belt. She looked back at me and huffed. She slammed the car door behind her and followed the cop back to his car. I couldn't hear what she said as I watched her through the rear view mirror, just her hands flailing and the handcuffs coming out.

“Hey, cop guy,” I said with half my body sticking out of the car window. He looked up as Frankie's head went into the back seat. “Are you taking her up to Kokomo?” He nodded. “Cool, we're heading there anyway. And I got this coupon for stir-fry. Can I bring her some lunch there?”

The cop was in his car before he answered.. I shuffled over to the driver's seat and started the car with the keys Frankie left. I idled for a moment before I dropped my head to the steering wheel.

“Oh god, I hope Frankie remembers Jane's number,” I said and hoped another cop later wouldn't ask to see my expired license. “Whatever.” I pulled back onto the road and watched the sun go down in the distance.

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I followed the highway for another half hour until I was back in town. I pulled off onto a side road and into more familiar landmarks. Trees that I could have kicked over when they were planted now blocked the last sliver of sun from the road. Jane did once after they planted a couple along the road. She pushed it until we could see the roots gasping for dirt. Mom thought I had done it, as though I wasn't the youngest of us three. As though my cat eyes made me more cat-like and drawn to trees. Frankie had my back that time, said Jane had kicked the tree over, but Mom wasn't in a believing mood for either of us. Jane got a bouncy ball later, and I just got a mouthful of white vinegar. It was, I remember thinking, an improvement over the cap full of detergent she put down next to my cereal bowl instead of a glass of milk the week prior.

I parked in the small lot of the brick-faced strip mall that lay parallel to the road. It was one of the only places our mom would take me, probably because she didn't know anyone else who shopped there. Half the places were emptied out, stretches of cardboard over their windows. There were still some phone numbers for places I thought about calling later, just to pass some time. The Chinese place Frankie and I had been to half a dozen times before buzzed with its neon "OPEN" sign. The brick pillar in front of the restaurant still had the wad of gum I had left there last month.

It was mostly empty. It was always mostly empty. Jane would come sometimes too when she could pull herself from our mom's bedside. She and Frankie would whisper in hissing tones about bills while I ate my way through my own weight in beef and broccoli.

"Why don't you just get an apartment here?" Jane asked once. "Or one of those extended stay things, I don't know what they're called." Frankie looked over at me. I shrugged.

“I don't know,” Frankie said. “I just don't know how we could right now with everything else. Have you heard anything back from Uncle Tim?”

“He's still going through Dad's things. He doesn't know how much we'll get from the estate sale.” Jane pushed her shrimp around in the brown sauce. “I think we have paperwork to fill out for that, too.”

“All of us?” Frankie asked.

“Probably.”

They kept their heads bowed into their food, the last vestiges of steam swirling its way to the lights above them.

“Do you need me to do anything?” I threw the line out to neither of them in particular. It wasn't even a question, just a statement to fill the air while they sat. Jane moved her head slightly, Frankie stayed still.

“No,” she said.

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I flipped through my crushed pack and tried to salvage at least one or two of the cigarettes Frankie destroyed. My legs dangled off the side of the concrete outcrop I had made my roost next to the police station with my bowl of beef and broccoli. The smell of salted vegetables and shrimp wafted from my bag as the stir-fry congealed in little plastic containers. Another group of cops walked by. They eyed me, my bags, and my struggle for whatever I could pull from the pack. The latter became fruitless—the pack held nothing but loose tobacco leaves and scraps of paper. I could have sucked on a filter for all the good it would do me.

“What are you doing? Why are you sitting there?” Jane asked with her normal exacerbated anger. I looked up at her as I dropped the rest of the cigarette chunks onto the ground next to me. She looked me in the eyes. Or maybe she did. She may have just been watching herself in the reflection of my sunglasses so she wouldn’t have to look me in the eyes. Her arms folded and toes tapped while she waited for me to respond. I just shrugged and told her that Frankie was inside waiting for her.

“And what’s all that?”

“Stir-fry,” I said, “In case you guys need some dinner.” A few street lamps began to buzz down the street as the rest lit up around us. A bleached white glow fizzed around her while she looked at the containers next to me.

“Yeah, fine, alright,” Jane said. She threw her head back as a sigh shot out from her lips. “Have you been in there at all? Told them about Mom?”

“They wouldn’t let me bring the stir-fry in,” I said. She slapped my bowl of food from my hands. Beef and congealed grease streaked out of the bowl onto the concrete, snail trails of vegetables left behind as they tumbled off. Carrots and broccoli stuck to the concrete below me. A glob of grease sank into the fabric of my shoe as ants already began to circle the spilled food. “Rude.”

“Oh my god, could you fuck off with the stir-fry?” Jane grabbed her head. “I walked all the way over here from the hospital and I have a nurse waiting to-” she trailed off and looked at the door of the precinct. “Do you still have Frankie’s keys?” I nodded and fished them from my pocket for her.

“Should I wait out here then?” I said.

“Finally being perceptive.” She didn't look at me as she walked up the stone stairs and disappeared behind the doors.

Flashes of conversation still made their way through the wooden doors as cops came and went. Not even whole sentences made it to where I sat, just words.

“...again she...”

“...every time any...”

“...like a fucking...”

Mostly quiet talk, mostly catching up. I didn't know if Jane had bailed Frankie out yet or if she attempted to get her out through pure persuasion. A kind of silence fell over them for a while. No one entered, no one left. I sat at my little perch and flipped through emails on my phone, scrolled past a block of unread messages to get to pictures of our mom and dad that Frankie sent me a few months ago. They had been cc'd with the funeral director. I pocketed my phone and reached back for my pack of cigarettes as if by instinct. But I found nothing there, only the remains of the crushed box that I couldn't salvage anything from. I sprinkled the loose tobacco on the mess of beef and broccoli below. Maybe some ants like menthol.

A scream came through the doors. Frankie and Jane ran from the precinct stairs toward Frankie's car that I had parked partly on the curb.

“No, this can't be happening, not yet, not yet,” Jane said, her hand covering her mouth. Frankie didn't say anything else. She looked at me sitting there, snatched the bags of stir-fry, and went to her car.

“Hey,” I began to say, hand in the air. I cut myself off and lowered my arm. My sisters drove off and I sat alone. I let out a small breath and hopped from my perch without thinking to

look down. I made contact with the grease and vegetables and beef that had been scattered below me, and my legs giving way. I slapped my palm against the concrete, the sting of the rough surface against skin came as I hit the sidewalk below. Chunks of the grease felt as though they had seeped through the fibers of my pants, staining them inside and out. I sat in the grease under the streetlamp, looked up and down the road to see if Jane or Frankie realized I had been sitting here the whole time, that I wasn't in the back of the car crushed up against the cooler and backpacks. Tires would scream off in the distance as she maneuvered the car back around, holding her arm out for me to grab onto like in an action film. We would speed off to the hospital, park the car under that ER awning, and block all the incoming ambulances because our emergency was so much greater. And our mom would be there, not quite gone, and we could all hold hands for once in any of our lives and say something. I would take the cannula off and she could breathe a little easier. Maybe she would say sorry this time and I would believe her.

A trail of ants was the only thing coming back for me. They marched in unison to the chunks of carrot and broccoli encircling me. I pushed my palms into the ground and felt that sting from the impact. Not quite bloodied but scratched like old, unpolished wood.

That soreness in my throat started, the one that came before my body wanted me to cry. But I couldn't cry easily. I'd never been able to despite all the times I wanted the tears to come. I never knew why my eyes teetered on that precipice when I could feel everything else within me trying to get the cry to come. I looked up at the low street lights and their yellow-white tint, the distance they held themselves from the ground but their light still shone so brightly on it. I always kept a distance from things, making sure my arm's length was as close as things could get. Whenever things were rough, whenever it got too hard to look I could pull away, let go and



dive off into anything, some distraction to keep myself unaffected. I'd known people who could cry easily, Jane and Frankie especially, but it just wouldn't come to me. Maybe it was the eyes. It felt as though I had been trying to swallow a smooth stone through a dry throat: it sat there waiting for just a bit of water to push it through, but it wouldn't come. It never did.

**GRINDING**  
**EUGENE BOIVAN, BORN SEPTEMBER 15<sup>TH</sup>. 1975**

“Christ, I'm running on fumes today,” I say. Cracking my neck, I push Danny forward to the meeting the foreman called. “They keep letting those late trains in. No one in town's getting much sleep.”

“I slept fine,” Danny says in front of me. I roll my eyes and keep bumping forward.

Damn near the whole plant shows up for the meeting. Foreman called it late, just before lunch. No one heard why he was doing it yet, only that he has some news to announce.

“You think he's gonna be talking about you?” Danny asks.

“Now, Danny, I'm a modest enough man to believe that I'll get what's coming to me soon enough. Andy and me were close for a while and I think Jones knows that he'd been training me to take over. Just sad he had to go so quick.” I sniffle a little and thumb the bottom of my nose for a bit of a dramatic effect. I think Danny sees me do it.

The mill wheels still turn—those things don't ever get a break. At least the lot of us have a whistle or a bell or something to look forward to at the end of the day, but those steel things never do.

“Thank you for joining me here and tearing yourselves away from the work that I know is just precious to you,” Foreman Jones jokes. He'd been a face here since before I ever arrived, before most people I knew came in. Jovial kind of guy, always liked getting a couple chuckles out when he could but kept that big face of his like stone. Guess he liked to keep us all on edge or something. Still though, no one had a bad word to say about a guy like Jones.

“Howdy.” The man next to Jones puts his hand up, not waving or anything, just holding his hand up as though expecting someone to throw something to him. Kind of a lanky guy, like he'd fall down if someone shut a door in front of him. Those sunglasses he's wearing though, ain't seen a guy wear anything like them in here before, not much of a reason to. “You can call me Eugene.”

All of us get our “hellos” and things out, not the first time we've seen a new guy up there and had to indulge a moment like this for Foreman Jones. It's the first time I've seen this many people for one of these. I can honestly say I don't know some of the people next to me.

“And for those of you who didn't know already,” Jones continues, “with Andy going the way he did, we still need someone to take over his responsibilities.”

Any hunger I had before then falls out from under me. My jaw soon follows all the way to the ground. But Danny turns his head back, all smiles and thumbs up like he's just found a lucky penny.

“Eugene here is going to be taking all that over, so you'll be seeing a lot more of him in the future. And that's all—everyone get back to what you love doing,” Jones finishes speaking his garbage. The joyless turd of a son of a bitch. The two of them stand there, chatting away like a couple of birds outside my window when I don't have my pistol. Danny looks over at the two of them as I walk off. The tip of my steel toe drags over some of the guard rails. I'm hoping I can spark something and take the mill down with me.

“Rick, where are you going?” Danny puts his hand on my shoulder like he's dropping a rock on it. He points, and I follow his finger up toward where that fat shit Jones is still talking to the new guy. A little slit of yellow shoots out as he pulls his sunglasses off. “See, look at that,

just like a cat's!" Danny looks back at me with that kid face of his as though he wants me to pin what he said on the fridge. It's not the first time I've seen one of those cattys in town, but goddamn if this one is taking my job.

"That's pretty neat, kid," I tell him with my fists clenched, "but I think I'm taking an early lunch today."

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I walk the two miles from the mill to the center of town. Marjorie's hotel and the little bar she has there is the only place near enough where I can thoroughly wet my whistle. The walk there is nothing but heat haze and a kind of anger I haven't felt since I was just a kid. We'd had cattys in town before, emphasis on the had. The last one I knew about, well, Danny's brother still has that eye of theirs in a jar somewhere.

I ding that silver bell every hotel has but don't get anywhere with it. I wander from the entryway to the little bar Marjorie has made up off to the side. She never locks the icebox behind the counter during the day—never has much of a reason to—but I was there enough to make her finally reconsider that. The cooler door doesn't budge, and I'm left watching myself in that mirror behind the bar. It's one of those nice ones that all those expensive liquor bottles no one drinks from get to sit in front of and look fancy. It makes me look all fancy too, like I'm someone that deserves those liquor bottles. Because I am.

"And what do you want?" Marjorie asks from behind. I don't need to look back to see that she has that scowl on—I can feel that from her foot on the back of the stool.

“Just something to get through the day,” I say. She sighs and makes her way around to the bar. The cooler clicks open and she slaps the bottle down in front of me. I empty most of the bottle before she speaks again, little beads of sweat dripping to the counter.

“You gonna pay for it this time?” she asks.

“Now how can I pay for anything in this place when I don't get what's owed to me?” I say. “Some catty son of a bitch walks in and expects me to just sit there and do nothing?” The glass bottom slams into the counter. I didn't even know I was doing it until it was done. I know I'm not much in terms of an angry man but I do suppose some things have a way of getting to me. And I guess they do get to Marjorie too.

“Now, Randal, you stop all that before I do something,” she says. I don't even notice her walking back around to my side of the bar.

“I've got all the right in the world to be angry. Imagine your mama gave this hotel and everything away to some nobody off the street instead of you before she died. What would you be feeling, huh?” I squeeze the bottle in my hand and stare hard at the wood grain of the bar. I can't count the number of bottles I've drunk there, but I know it's a hell of a lot more than that Eugene asshole ever would.

“I think you've had enough for today,” Marjorie says. She kicks the stool out from under me. The glass of the bottle shatters as it and myself hit the ground. I stew in what's left of my drink for a bit while she looks down at me.

“And what the hell did you go and do that for?” I ask.

Marjorie just shakes her head and walks off. She doesn't even bother to clean her bar while I slip on the wet floor and barely get myself back up.

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Everyone needs a good sitting down sometimes, doesn't matter where they are or what they're doing. So long as there's a place to rest then everything's peachy. I had a place like that, a little railing I would hoist myself up to when there wasn't much for me to watch as the grain sifted into the mill. It wasn't the most comfortable place—nothing much more than a metal rod—but it's a good enough perch when I need a minute.

“Look at this shit,” I say. “He's changing everything here. I can't even get a good sit anymore.” The rail's all but disappeared, now it's just this wall of rods that goes right up to my shoulders. I would climb the thing like a ladder but then half the plant would see me perch up there. They're even placed in all the wrong spots. Every time I try to rest my back against it, one of the rods feels like it's jutting right into the back of my neck.

“What was that?” Danny asks. Light bounces off the top of his hard hat, a little beam of it smacking me in the eyes as he turns my way. And he has that cord too, the neon one dangling from his ears and swings around his neck whenever he tries talking or moving or doing much of anything.

“Are those goggles now, too?” I yell back at him.

“What?”

“I said are those go-”

“I can't hear you, what are you talking about?” Danny pops one of the foam bullets from his ear and the other stays in place. I walk over to him and grab the hearing protection from his ear and throw the foam into the incoming grain. “Now what did you do that for?”

“Look at all of this,” I say, raising my hands up around me like I am trying to show off something nicer than this damn mill.

“I was wearing those,” Danny says. His eyes go over to the grain, the last bit of neon just disappearing behind a wave of brown and yellow.

“Just do what we've always been doing,” I tell him. He shrinks back down to the little console where he stands. Still, he hasn't been here long enough to know what it's like. Not being able to find a place to sit for too long makes a man all ornery. It can't be helped. I stretch my neck around and catch a glimpse of Jones walking into his office a couple floors up, dropping a couple bundles of rebar just outside it. And this little inkling of an idea shoots up from somewhere. “Hey, Danny, watch my spot for me,” I say without looking back at the kid.

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“Come on, Jones, level with me here.” I sit on one of those red leather chairs that's not actually leather. It's that weird kind of vinyl that they sand down until it feels like it could be leather but never sits just right. He has his little fan blowing in the corner, too. He had that back when he first hired me and the thing still looks like something my granddad threw away after they got AC in the house.

“What do you want me to level with?” He sits there with his hands folded over his stomach, reclining back like he doesn't have anything else major today. I don't know why that kind of pose always did something to me, like I'm not good enough to warrant him sitting up and looking me in the eye. He has to sit back and wait for me to make a fool of myself or something. But I know what I am and I've never been a fool.

“You know what I need to level with. I'm talking about me and Andy. We were like a couple kernels in a husk together.” I sit up forward in the chair. “I was that man's apprentice before, well, before whatever the hell happened.”

Jones responds with a hum and a sigh while his chair makes all these little popping and squeaking noises.

“That's nice, Rick, really, but he ever write any of that down? Put in a request somewhere for you to take over for him? I don't think I've got you clocked in for doing any kind of extra work.” That pleather stuff isn't all that strong since my nails could cut nearly straight through it while I sit there looking at Jones.

“We never wrote down nothing but everyone knew,” I say.

“Then I'm not everyone, am I?”

“Just ask Danny. He would tell you all about it.”

“I'm sure he would. Now, Rick, is there anything you need to do here besides ruin my chair like that?” Jones asks. My mind hits a blank brick wall while I sit there. I only think about how easy the whole thing is supposed to be, how I'd been a damned fool not to bring it up earlier when that catty showed up. I haven't even seen him since that first day, but I heard rumors all over the place about him showing up behind someone's back or just walking along all quiet with his goggles, making those cat eyes of his look bigger than they already are.

“I was thinking of filing a complaint, something real formal,” I say. Jones' eyebrow shoots up like a bottle rocket before falling back down. He sighs again and looks up at the ceiling.

“You can't file a complaint about me not promoting you,” he says.



“It ain't about that. It's about that new guy. What's his name, Eustace?”

“Eugene. And what has he done to make you file this complaint and how long is it going to take?” Jones reclines further back in his chair, arms dangling off to the side. I can see the sweat already forming under his arms, and I know I've got him.

“Well, you got him as the new safety guy, right? But you've seen him. How the hell is a catty supposed to be keeping us safe when he's got eyes like that, huh? How's he going to look out for me when I don't know if he can even see me proper?” I let myself recline back in the chair, prop my own arms on my chest. They fall off when I hear the door open behind me, a low moan of a creak that creeps down my back. Eugene steps in all smiles and sunshine, goggles dangling off his neck as he walks past right past me.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Eugene asks.

“Yeah, I figured I'd have to do this eventually, so I thought about getting it done with now.” Jones hits a button on his computer and all three of us wait while that ancient printer of his does its work. It screams out the last bit of paper, and Jones ducks under his desk to fidget around for it. He comes back up and sticks a piece of paper onto the wall beside him. “Eugene, could you read as many of these letters as you can? Just take your time with it.” Son of a bitch is giving the catty an eye exam right in front of me. I would be insulted if I wasn't a bit impressed he had the thing waiting for me before I came in.

I don't even see Eugene squint as he reads those letters off. I couldn't even do that on my last vision test when I was a kid. He finishes off the last line and looks back up at Jones. I have taken to trying to bury myself into the vinyl chair.

“Is that all?” Eugene smiles up at Jones like he's expecting a treat.

“That's all, thank you.” Jones takes the paper off the wall as Eugene exits the room.

“Now, what were you asking about with the eyes?”

I shoot up and damn near throw the chair back. I make my way to the door, not looking at Jones and giving him any kind of satisfaction. The cat-eyed bastard is already gone when I leave, not even an echo from going down the metal walkway. There's a hard and wet slap as I punch my palms and punch away something inside me. I don't even know what it is, but knocking the shit out of my hand feels better.

“Goddamn no good goddammit son of a shit kicking little goddamn,” I keep muttering to myself as I pace around the walkway. The noise of the mill drowns out anything I say. It keeps whirring away. That noise that fills up every crevice of the building, of nearly the entire town. Even when I leave for the night it stays around in the back of my head, something to keep the other moments from being too quiet. I can't remember the last time I had any kind of quiet. I don't know if anyone else has that as well, the constant gnashing of metal on grain, of whatever massive motor in there that keeps the whole thing moving. The wheels of it are exposed a little from where I pace, barely big enough for anything to get in but open enough. It's a cold kind of steel, rebar, rough all the way through since it ain't meant for people touching it all the time. I never really touched any in the past myself to know. It feels nice when I pick it up though. It tumbles through the air even better when I toss it. I freeze at the end of my throw to watch it tumble into that little slot. It sinks right in and creates the kind of noise that cracks bones. But the noise stops. Everything stops. Everyone just sees me standing there, looking like I'm trying to keep myself from falling over.

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Dirt sticks to my lips as my face meets the ground outside the motel bar. Marjorie stands in the doorway yelling something I can't quite hear yet.

“Come on, Marjie, I'm having a hell of a day,” I say, twisting myself up from the dirt.

“I don't give much of a damn what kind of day you're having,” she says and turns back into the light. “But you're not finishing that day in here.” The door slams and I'm left out here with my own spit caking over my lips and a streetlamp behind me buzzing like a bug zapper. I claw my way out of the dirt and meet the road and look across the street at this bundle of trash piled around a dumpster getting hit by the light of another streetlamp. There's a dozen or so shadows jumping all around it as the lamp flickers in and out like electricity just can't stay still inside it. Those shadows all jumble together into one human shaped form. Not really human, though. More catty.

“I see you there,” I say, making my way forward. “You're watching me back there, aren't you?” Those yellow dots blaze back there, two little beams boring their way into my eyes. They hop from perch to perch all over the trash heap, coming and going as the light above flashes. Gravel cracks beneath my boots as I drag myself closer to the pile, closer to the man hiding himself inside. “What's wrong? Don't want to look at me? Can't look a man in the face after you fire him, is that it?” I lick the dirt from my lips as I spit it to the pavement. “Come on, we're just talking out here.” I grab onto my shirt soaked through with the day's sweat as the shadows grow longer, more defined as a light comes up behind me.

“Rick? Is that you? What are you doing in the middle of the road?” Danny pokes his head out the side of his truck. He's still a good kid but he can't just stop in the street like that. I round

the side of his truck and jump into the passenger side. He's got the radio just low enough that I can't tell what's playing.

“You gonna drive now or what?” I say, looking out the windshield.

“Alright, I'll take you home then.” Danny puts the truck in gear and we're gone. Those two yellow eyes look out as we pass the trash pile.

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“Stop here,” I tell him. The car slows and I jump out before Danny turns the engine off and gets out himself. It's the old apartment building. That brick-faced one that nearly everyone in town's had some time in. Transient living.

“What are we doing here? You move again?” he asks. I look out at the mess in the bed and smack the sides.

“You have anything good back there?”

“I got plenty of stuff but what do you want?” I grab him by the shoulders and slam him into the side of the car.

“Just tell me if you have anything useful.” I don't shout, I'm not much of a shouting person, but there's a thing I've never noticed in his eyes before. I lick my lips and crack my neck around to see if anyone else is there.

“I don't know. I just have whatever.”

“Name me something, man. Anything.”

“I don't know. I got some of my tools and things. There's one of those red gas cans that don't have much gas in it. Some rope, I think. I got a backpack there. Maybe some water bottles or something, but what do you want?”

I let go and let him fall further into his truck, looking back at the apartment building behind me. It's this large grid of a brick building, sixteen windows on sixteen rooms, only one lit at the top corner. Everyone I know who lives there is out celebrating the weekend. So process of elimination tells me only one man is in that room right now.

“I just want to have a good time. Show the catty what this town’s supposed to be like,” I say. I point my finger to the lit window and pull its trigger while I make a little popping noise. “Now wait here for me and get some of things out. I ain't gonna be long.”

I'm bounding up stairs before I know what I'm doing. There's just an urge, a thing that isn't explainable somewhere within me, something that needs to be let out. The hallway on the top floor stretches out further than the others, the divide between the ceiling lights too long as these shadows drop between rooms. But I'm there at the far end already, at this corner room that I just know has him behind it. Light comes out from under the door and I can hear him walking around in there, walking with those sunglasses on but they don't hide what I know.

My boot hits the handle of the door and the whole mess splinters under it with a kind of crack I've only ever heard at the meat market. His room's bare. Nothing on the walls I can see from the doorway, but he's still there, hand over his face in bed like he wasn't expecting company.

“I'm here to talk,” I say. The wooden floor sings under my boots as I run over. I don't see those couple of bags near his bed before I trip over them and tumble straight into the side of his mattress. He jumps up and runs to the other side of the room. I swear he hisses at me. Regaining my sense, I look around the room for him. The catty's standing next to his dresser, and he has something in his hands that glimmers in the light. It's something narrow and sharp-looking. But I

charge anyway. There's blood in me that screams out riding along with whatever I could get my hands on earlier to drink. Alcohol is propellant, it's the gas that shoots me across the room with my head down and arms out.

Wood cracks again under my force. Wood splinters from the dresser jut out the sides of my arms like the beginning of wings. Something squeaks in the room, and I'm wondering if he keeps mice somewhere too. There's a tint to my vision and a plastic lens shatters under my hand while I get up from in front of the broken dresser. Only one body's here and it's mine. The red in my eyes finds the yellow in his on the far wall near the window. I say something but it's already evaporated in my trail as I run at him again. He dives to the side but I know the wall is going to catch me soon enough. I wait for wall to catch me, wait for it to make a crater with my whole body where I can snuggle up against the wall and lie down for a spell. But it doesn't happen and the window swallows me whole.

There's a hum to the night air out here, a whistle to it coupled with low engine hum. Sounds like a lullaby, so rhythmic and distant but so near.

**NO PAST  
JUDITH DEMERY, BORN AUGUST 14<sup>TH</sup>, 1945**

*Although I turned twenty the day before Woodstock began, it was only at that moment that my life, the life of Judy Demure, had truly begun. You see, it wasn't simply that I had ended up there. There were buses, trips, a thousand cars over a thousand miles that I had traveled endlessly in, and the suspicion that this was only another trip. What could have happened in a field over those few days? Why would anything significant happen in upstate New York that dragged me all the way from North Carolina to New York City to Los Angeles and then back to the East Coast again? It feels like myth-making, telling a legend again for the hundredth time. But there I was, in the back seat of the van that apparently belonged to Arlo Guthrie's best friend, singing along to something on the radio. I don't remember what it was exactly, it was just background noise for the trip by then. Turning through every radio station until we found something good to sing along to before arriving.*

*And then there was the feeling of the overcast sun on my face when I stepped out of the van after what amounted to three days on the road. I could see the rain clouds coming in already but it didn't matter. I was there among a crowd, anonymous at the time. Mostly. Everyone in the van knew who I was, half the state of North Carolina knew who I was after WFMY broadcast my tenth birthday. They didn't have anything in color yet, but everyone could still see the slit in my eyes where round pupils should have been. Most of the people in the van thought it was cool, didn't seem to mind too much about it. But then....*

Delete.

“Christ,” I say, erasing most of the page and lying back in my chair.

“What was that, Judy?” Sarah asks next to me. Her voice always letting me know I am stuck in this room for another forty-eight hours until the draft is done.

“Nothing, just typing up the beginning again.” I finish off a wine glass filled with mostly orange juice and look back at the screen. I’d have that blue glow all over me if it weren’t for the sun setting from one of the windows. All the shutters are open, all the curtain flung off onto the furthest hooks to which I could shove them. I need light in the office. My assistant asks if I am stuck again.

“Mostly no,” I tell her. She’s been with me ten years already, left some senile dentist in Greenwich to brush his own teeth. At the very least I didn’t need any of that yet. I told her already that the day I need a diaper is the day she pushes me out the window. Twenty-three stories up and a quick hello to the people walking down 58<sup>th</sup> Street should be enough of an ending.

“How much do you have left?” she asks.

“I have most of it done already, basically everything from standing side stage for Jimi’s national anthem to last week.” I met someone at a gallery opening a few months ago. He asked if I’d ever considered a memoir and told them I hadn’t. He left a card in my coat that was nearly dry cleaned before Sarah fished it out and called. It isn’t like I hadn’t been published before. I had poetry out there somewhere—I think City Lights threw something together before Altamont killed off most career hippies and the rest of us had to consider real jobs.

“But that’s, what, twenty more years for you to get through?” Her voice is clear enough, but her intention always has an edge to it. That’s why I want her here, to kick something into my bones that’s been missing for a couple of decades. I can feel my pupils narrowing down to slits



when the thought of the nineties creeps back up, a fifty-year-old woman trying to get back stage at a Pearl Jam concert when most of the people I knew were going into hiding.

“But it feels so cliché. Simple farm girl from outside Greensboro is the first reported case of a the cat-eyed genetic defect, gets her face on local television, and then hitches it to New York because it was closer than the West Coast.” I reach for the empty glass before looking at it and frowning. “It isn’t as though it hasn’t been told already.” I get up and walk to a fridge on the other side of the room. This room is kept sparse but my living apartment above me is a bit more furnished. Here it’s just the glass desk and black filing cabinets on either side that give me that super villain look, along with a lamp and fridge in the far corner. Black tile, white ceiling, open windows. Sometimes I stop and look at where I’m walking when I’m in here. I consider lab coats before filling my glass with more juice Sarah picked up from a farmer’s market up the road.

“You can make it interesting enough.” She wants to sound motivational but I hear boredom buried in there.

*I’d left early in the morning before the milk guy came through. I took some attention not to rattle the bottles that were left on the front porch lest our dog jump up at the noise. I didn’t have much to begin with, just a bag full of clothes and essentials. 1963 was a good enough year for everyone else but I had to find something else. That was the last time I...*

Delete.

I sigh. I sigh louder.

“What?” Sarah asks.

“Nothing.” I shrug my shoulders. I sit up more in my seat after thinking about what I must look like behind my desk. Sweatpants older than my assistant and a faded t-shirt. I am turning seventy and this is how I present myself. “Christ,” I say again and scratch my head.

“Still having trouble? Do you want to read it out loud for me?”

“God, no.” I answer too quickly.

Sarah goes silent for a while.

“Do I have to start from the beginning? No one cares about any of that—they just want the sordid details, they want Andy Warhol taking close-ups of my eyes, the six months I was secretly married to Marc Bolan before he died. What’s a skipped childhood mean to anyone, huh?” I say as I push myself away from my desk. I stand and look out the window at the Central Park Pond reflecting a mid-afternoon sun at nothing in particular. My glass is already empty.

“That’s what they want,” Sarah replies.

“Why do I have to care what they want? I’ve never cared. That’s been my thing.” The water ripples slightly, as though a rock had been thrown into the Pond. Or maybe a person.

“A six-figure advance typically means you have to care,” Sarah says. She goes quiet while I keep my focus out the window. They are little stick figures running around out there, as though they don’t have to care about consequences or about anyone watching them from afar. When would things catch up, when would they be caught?

“Well?” Sarah asks.

“Yes, write, book, money,” I say and go back to my desk.

*A sordid life isn’t where everything began. It was more modest at first, a nice home in a North Carolina suburb along with all the trappings and peculiarities that came with it. There*

*was a dog even. Although we only had him for a year, I still remember little Scamp blundering through the kitchen covered in mud and mother shrieking to clean him up before she got the garden hose. If it all sounds too idyllic, that's because it was. We never had a dog. Or a home. Not traditionally. It was one of those high-rises my mother and I lived in while father commuted to the city to make more money than we could ever dream of spending. How do you think I got on TV at such an early age? Was it these eyes? Of course not. We had the money to throw a party the whole building could attend.*

*But that didn't happen either, did it? No, none of that happened. Or maybe a portion of it did, some compilation of the above with some measure of truth buried deep beneath the text that you have to dig through like so much sand to find. Get your metal detectors and scoops because that's all you'll ever get from me...*

Delete.

I stand up and kick the chair back. It clatters against the wall like they are both made of hollow steel tubes, echoing off into the rest of the room.

“Still having trouble?” Sarah asks. I can feel a sense of a smirk but say nothing about it.

“It's dull. None of it matters,” I tell her.

“Why do you think that is?”

“You're an assistant, not a therapist,” *How many times did I have to remind her of that?* I can't keep track anymore. Maybe three or four.

“I know, but you're running into something that's making you not want to write about anything before Woodstock. What happened before that?”

“Are you reading off some prompt sheet or something? ‘Get yourself motivated to write in ten steps or less, .gifs included’ thing online?” I walk back over to the fridge. I love the fridge here, something new and stainless steel that doesn’t even hum no matter the amount of crap I shove inside. Glorious. I pour myself some more orange juice and stand by the window again. The figures have all since left, the reflection in the pond grows dimmer.

“You know what a .gif is?” Sarah says with only the slightest hint of sarcasm in her tone.

“I’m still not dead.” I am a sweatpants skeleton here, looking out the window like I’m contained in a bubble. My nails click against the glass. I always wonder who can see me when I put my hands against the glass.

“Found some inspiration?” she asks.

“Yeah, sure.” I keep typing away at the glass and watch for someone else to appear by the pond. Only long shadows from the surrounding buildings seem to take up residence. “You know I could have died then,” I say, not sure if Sarah could hear me.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” I walk over to the desk.

*It was the way that I blinked. I didn’t have eyelids. Not in the normal way. You know how it is with the cat eyes—you get those lids too and it looks as though you have a second eye coming in every time you blink. That’s what they told me about first, when I jumped into their van. They kept asking about my eyes like it was something else. The driver asked if he could touch them while still looking at the road. He hadn’t even looked at me when I first got in. But how could he not? I was standing there on the side of the highway, arm out with a sign and*

*thumb looking for whatever I could find. One of them asked if I had any family then, and I said I didn't. It wasn't a complete lie just yet, but close enough.*

*I don't remember any of their names from that first van—they just brought me up to New York, and I lost track of them all after I got into the subway for the first time. Imagine that. I hadn't seen much underground besides our basement and here I was, in a subterranean city just below the streets that whooshed past like I'd nearly been hit by a bus. I'd probably get hit by that bus for days since it just kept going until it halted with this horrible screech. We piled in, and that's the last time I saw any of them. I went to sit down and they were gone, moving down the line until I decided to get off at 57<sup>th</sup> Street and looked at Central Park for the first time.*

Delete.

I want to screech and do.

“What was that?” Sarah asks. I only huff in response. “Is it that hard?”

“When's the last time you wrote anything?” My mood is beginning to curdle.

“About a week ago while you were dictating.”

I scoff and get up from the desk, my flats a soft patter on the floor, but I need something harder. I need the persistent click of my heels on the tile like a metronome keeping me in time.

“I'm going upstairs.”

“What for?”

“Change of air for a minute, just to stretch.” I walk over to the door.

Sarah tells me no, reminds me of how I told her to keep me in the room until I got at least something on the page I could send out as proof of the publisher's investment. From the phone her voice is radio static going through the mountains, barely even a whisper of what it could be

from this side of the room. It crackles with a fuzz like I just put an album on. I wonder if that's why I want to keep her around.

"Fine." I go back to the desk. The window is only beginning to get that gold foil gleam to it that happens when light reflects off the pond in a certain way. It lasts maybe a few minutes a day, but it's like looking at a city on fire. "Did I ever tell you that when I first got here no one looked at me weird? I didn't even have my sunglasses then."

"No, you never did," Sarah said. "Maybe you should put that down somewhere."

*Everyone in the van going north wanted to touch them, to have me blink and feel the membrane slide across their dirt-stained fingers, to know what it felt like. I knew what it felt like, having those little particles stuck in there for days before I could wash them out properly. But no one on the subway wanted to touch them. I blinked. Over and over and yet not a one looked at me. Either the noise of the train moving along had made them deaf to outside noises or no one cared.*

*Everyone cared in Greensboro, like they could hear me blinking from a mile away. They told me to stop from across the street sometimes, said it was disgusting to hear it slide across my eye like that.*

Delete.

"It shouldn't just go like that, though," I say.

"Then how should it go?" Sarah asks.

"I don't know. Better." I walk away from the desk again. It's like ping-pong. My steps bounce me around the office until I sink into my chair. I could chain myself to it and would still find a way to walk off and do something else.

“What is better to you?”

“What kind of question is that?” I look over to where her voice comes from and shake my head. “Are you going through some kind of editorial manual now? Looking for ways to motivate the writer’s mind stuck in that dreaded ‘writer’s block’ stage of things? Put that away.” I pace in front of the window. That brief golden moment has passed and the last hues of sunset fall behind every other building on that side of Central Park. It’s different seeing it from here. I watched it enough where, on most clear nights, I could point out the exact spot orange met indigo to become the night. No one else could see it when I pointed it out. Even after I took pictures and circled it, they never saw. Maybe it was my eyes, they said.

Sarah doesn’t respond for a while.

“What’s better to you?” I ask her silence.

“Getting it done,” she replies.

*It wasn’t easy stepping out for the first time on my own, little red wagon trailing behind me in the middle of the night with all the possessions I’d accumulated. Mostly just a wooden doll and a change of clothes. Convenient since I went out in my pajamas. I thought that was what kids did, ran away from home to join the circus. The thought permeates through all sense of time. It’s a constant in childhood, and I did it too.*

*Or did I just sleep that night and dream that I did? Childhood is as nebulous as it is constant, and my memory is anything but photographic. Maybe I did on that night walk around the block with my red wagon piled low with things and imagined running off to meet one of the Ringling brothers. I didn’t know they had all died long before then or that they wouldn’t have their signature big-top tents the next year. But I had to go somewhere. I was on TV already, I*

*could get a gig anywhere I wanted. Who was to stop me? I would ask myself that same question seven years later when I first stuck my thumb out on the still gleaming I-85 and took it as far north as it would go. I could have brought that little red wagon with me up there, too. A nice little reminder of all the baggage I could drag along.*

Delete.

“I can do better,” I say

“How will you if you never do it?” Sarah says and clicks her tongue. She does that, clicks her tongue, whenever we both know I’m lying about something. She did it before when I showed some old photographs to Acquavella for an exhibit, before I tried making quinoa for the first time.

“I’m working on it, you understand that.” I pace again. I am always pacing. There should have been a trench in the tile from the constant pacing back and forth from desk to window to fridge and back. It’s a triangle I could measure out in degrees the length of my procrastination. Sarah doesn’t reply again for a while, but I keep pacing and churning words in my head.

“What don’t you want to write about?” she asks again, the hot prod of her words burning their way into my ears.

“The start of it all, my baby years! They’re boring, nothing happened that didn’t happen to anyone else. I was young and did things, things happened to me, I grew up and more things happened. But were they eventful? Of course not. I was a child.” I throw my hands up and my glass goes in the air with them. The glass shatters across the tile like a stock sound bite. Juice takes its path through the grout and further into the room.

“Should I call someone to come clean that up?” Sarah asks.



“No, it’s fine. I can get it.” I sweep the glass aside with my shoe and begin lapping the liquid up with half a roll of paper towels I grab from near the refrigerator. They soak into the heap and I leave them there. The one bit of orange left on the window as the indigo in the sky darkens to blue to black without my noticing.

“You never really mentioned your younger years to me before,” Sarah says.

“I do wonder why that is. It may have something to do with their utter irrelevance to my life now. They came and went, and I emerged from them with nary an issue in my head outside of what nearly everyone with the cat eyes has. And what of it?” I let the question hang in the air and wait for a response. Nothing comes. “Christ, and I don’t even have a broom in here to work with.”

“I asked if I should call someone,” Sarah chimes in. Her voice has more of a distance to it than I had noticed before, like it is coming from the other side of the street.

“And you won’t call anyone. I can deal with it tomorrow while you’re pressing me on other issues,” I snap back and walk to my desk again. “Maybe I can begin and dig back, oh so deep and see if I can extract something that looks like the memories of my fetal self. Would that be far enough back to talk about? Or earlier, perhaps my parents contemplating copulation in the back of my father’s Studebaker back when those bench seats were all the rage? Would that be something?”

Sarah doesn’t respond. High enough in this building and the noises below only come in through these silences. Few and far between as they are. I want to keep music on at all times, something to keep the silence from taking hold and the outside air from seeping into the room. Even the black tiles and white ceiling here echo any noise I make. Music bounces off them

awkwardly like a speaker being listened to through a tube but only on one ear. The only noise is my typing and my steps, something that should be constant. The echo makes it feel as such, one sentence being multiplied ten-fold when the noise zig-zags between wall and ceiling for a few moments while I wait for another couple of words to jump out. Twenty-five chapters are easy, just recounting my life from fame and infamy to relative obscurity and shunning to the grand re-entrance to the city and its art. It's a simple thing, charted like an upside down triangle, my life. One line leads to another and plays off itself. Permutations of what I should have done only seem obvious now while the mistakes of the past feel like a joke.

“Why don't you start with your parents?” Sarah asks before the silence begins to settle and the upper city noises seep.

“Why would I? Would the average reader care about them?” I question back.

“Potentially. You were the first reported cat-eyed infant. Someone may want to know what could have led to it.”

I sigh. There were pictures I had of them somewhere. It's past, long passed, and the edges of those photos have already given way to fuzz in my mind.

*If there's one thing I should confess at the beginning of this book it's that I don't have many pictures of my parents left. I could probably find some online or in microfilm back in Greensboro, but those don't feel real. They're not the Brownie shots my grandmother took of them before they went off to prom or the picture in the paper after I was born that the newsman let them keep. They're not the wedding pictures or vacation snapshots they took of one another. They're not the ones with dates and names scrawled on the back in blue ink and indecipherable loops that my mother couldn't even read toward the end. But there is one that's still clear to me,*

*the last one I knew about before they had me. It's the two of them, my father with his head next to my mother's inflated stomach, standing in a gazebo, flanked by blurred fields, in County Park. It's the only one that I can remember without having to look at it. Something in my father's eyes then, some measure of delight in their child they had yet to meet, as though it were the most excitement he'd ever felt in his life. But then there's the newspaper shot of me, and that delight slowed right down. It never showed in my mother, though. Hers was always stoic and straight, as though a moment of bad posture at the time would mean the communists won.*

*The rest include me in some capacity, usually riding a small toy or being cradled by my mother and swaddled in a yellow blanket from an aunt I don't remember meeting. That was one of the stories my mother would tell me, about getting the blanket in the mail with a note from my aunt nearly six months after I'd been born. By then I had been relegated to curious medical novelty and left at that. But then the other kids came a few years later.*

Delete.

"You stopped?" Sarah asks.

"I did."

"Did you keep this one?"

"I did not."

She sighs. "And why didn't you keep this one?"

"Because it isn't the story I want to tell. Simple as that. I don't want to write about this." I push myself away from my desk but stay seated. "I've written enough about my life, I've given them every triumph and failure from the sixties to now—is that not enough?" I feel like

screaming, but this room won't allow that, not with how it tosses my voice around now like an echo chamber.

“Judy, for fuck’s sake, just keep one thing. I don’t even care at this point if you don’t like it. Just send me something we can use to give them a draft. You only have another day and a half before they need it. Do you want to have to move again?” Her words are a bull I don’t want to prod but keep at it anyway.

“It’s my writing, it’s my life, it can go out however I want it to. And isn’t twenty-four chapters enough as it is? I’m giving them everything else. Why are you fixating on the preamble? It’s like an introduction—everyone skips it to get to what they want to read,” I say. The walls here are almost completely unadorned except the far one with the fridge and door. That only left the windows and another wall devoid of obstruction: the calm wall. Sarah and I worked on figuring out which color to paint it for weeks, splotches like bricks building up what we wanted to do with it. But we left it like that, like stained glass on the wall, after we couldn’t agree on which color went best. It was the first year she started helping me. I thought we would get along better then.

“So why don’t you get it out of the way too? You’re avoiding it, hiding it like it never mattered and yet here you are getting this frustrated over those first few years. I wonder why that is?” Sarah asks.

“I suppose you’ll keep wondering then. I’m done. Finished. My story starts where it mattered, and that’s it. No Greensboro, no road trip, no childhood, no shitty house, nothing.” I slap my hands on the glass desk, and it shakes with a small tremor. My laptop rocks slightly before it settles down and Sarah is quiet for a time.

“How long have we known each other?” she eventually asks. Her voice sizzles all electric as though broadcast from another room at high volume.

“About ten years,” I reply.

“And what do you know about me from those ten years?”

“Enough. Sarah Milligan, close to forty by now, married once, widow, been in and out of the city her whole life, likes halal carts late at night and walking through Times Square when it rains. Is that enough for a dating profile or did I miss anything?” I thumb my nose at nothing.

“But what do I know about you?” she asks.

“What don’t you know about me? You’re editing my memoir. There’s not a lot I can hide.”

“And yet here we are. You act like an open book but there’s still this aura of mystery you’ve been pushing through your entire life. Is it the cat eyes? Is that why you want to keep the past so mysterious and nebulous? So you don’t have to acknowledge the one thing that made you famous while other kids were being tossed in dumpsters? While you sponsored that show in the seventies about a couple of cat-eyed kids in the city, others were getting kicked out of their homes and shunned from every orphanage and foster care center in the country and yet you did, gee, let me think, fuck all?”

“Can you stop,” I mumble.

“And yet here you are, typing away on your shiny little laptop in your shiny little office and act as though there’s nothing to hide in your life. Well I’ve read it, and there’s so much you’ve buried under your art, your ‘generous’ philanthropy, your self-aggrandizing for buying that one kid’s tuition to NYU once in the nineties, and you tell me there’s nothing to hide? Good

god I could write another book about everything else. You would think that after all you've seen, after living through being the first of the cat-eyed you'd have some kind of other perspective but no. Same celebrity memoir, same posturing to nothing as the woman who clings to the past without ever trying to acknowledge it exists. Great job there, Judy Demure, real nice." Sarah huffs to punctuate her finishing.

"Are you quite finished?" I ask. She says she is. "Is that something you've been holding in for a while now?" She doesn't reply after that, only huffs again. "Okay, how about this?"

*I don't remember much from the very beginning. I doubt anyone does. Being born is remembered by everyone but the one being born. So I don't know what it was like on that warm August morning when I came out. I don't know what the doctor said, what the nurse said, how my parents reacted when they likely had to cart me away to further examine what was apparently wrong with my skull. And my eyes. I wonder if the nurse shrieked when I blinked at her the first time.*

*I only take the title as the first recorded case of the cat-eye phenomenon because no one else knows what may have happened before me. I doubt anyone would say, I don't think who may have witnessed it first hand before me is even alive today. And yet here I am. There's a picture, one of the few I have left of my parents, that made it into the newspaper. It's the three of us, the first picture we all had together. My parents' faces in twin confusion and me swaddled in hospital dressings. Maybe the swaddling so early is what did it, what set things forward for the rest of my life. Apparently babies need skin-to-skin contact to survive better, to form that essential bond after being birthed. But there were layers between us, tight and dense.*

*I was taken care of in our first house outside Greensboro, although that's more than most. At least I wasn't second is what they kept telling me, then maybe we wouldn't have gotten the attention from the local press. Then maybe Dad wouldn't have been seen in the paper, then he wouldn't have been recognized by that law firm in town that wanted to get more publicity, then he wouldn't have moved us into that apartment after I turned five. But maybe he was grateful for that. He could stay late, have an excuse to not come home and have to confront the yellow eyes that would glow in a dark room or my mom who just kept quiet the whole time.*

*She would only ever keep especially quiet around me. It was as though she'd thought the eyes came with some other cat perks like sensitive hearing. But she mostly whispered to me, cooed softly that she wished I was something else. One time I remember—this was after I'd attempted to run away with a little red wagon loaded with a few blankets and a change of shoes—she did speak up. It was the middle of the night after I turned back around from our neighbor's house to come back home. They were waiting there with that one lamp on, the one on a small table between their resting chairs. My dad was seated and my mom stood next to him as the light cast a shadow over their faces that made them look almost like me for a moment. It was before we moved to the apartment so Dad was actually home at night and not tip-toeing in at two in the morning. He sighed, and she just said in a very clear, plain voice that I should have stayed outside, that maybe the strays would adopt me.*

*Maybe it's a narrative we've all seen before. It feels like it's overly dramatic, like it's pulling at heart strings a bit too hard, relying too much on old cliches to be completely believable. And yet that's what I remember most from those years, before the road trip out west and back, before I became an entity in the world. That's what I had. It's what all of us had.*

I read it aloud as I type. Sarah keeps quiet for the whole few minutes as it comes from me in a spewed wave.

“Is that what you wanted?” I ask as I stand from the desk and walk to the window again. A warm air falls over my face as I creak the window open.

“That’s a start, yes. Thank you.” She does sound genuinely grateful for it. I shrug.

“It’s what you’re getting.” I begin to walk back over to the desk.

“Like I said, it’s a start. I can show this to the publisher as proof that it’s nearly done and we can start going through some revisions. I was thinking about chapter twelve again where you talk about Dali—maybe we can mix that up a bit with beginning production on the show. That was around the same time, yeah?”

“Yes it was,” I say. The charging cord unplugs as I pick the laptop up. My phone comes with me, hot from the hours Sarah and I have been talking.

“Perfect. We can work with that. Do you want to send me what you just typed and I can start adding notes to work with?” Sarah continues.

“Give me a minute,” I say. The laptop teeters on the edge of the window sill as I look at the last words I typed. I push. The light from the screen shimmers as it twirls through the air, spinning like an electric top. Twenty-three stories up and I can hear the crack it makes as it impacts the sidewalk below. Even on a busy street I manage to hit no one, although a crowd begins to gather around the crater.

“What was that noise?” Sarah asks. I turn the phone off and let it sail after my story.



## THE SCREW

A low morning rose over the back of Plumeria Cove. The sun peeked over the homes of the cul-de-sac, leaking light down the street and across bay windows. Not a bird, not a sprinkler disturbed the quiet air that swirled around the body impaled by a large screw plunged into the court at the end of the road. Many of the residents of the small neighborhood had begun their morning routines: brewing coffee, taking showers, letting dogs out into their backyards. The body impaled by the large screw was only a figure, so charred were the remains that no one would be able to tell who or what the person was. Traffic had already begun its slow trickle on the main road, but Plumeria Cove was typically slower to start most mornings. If a driver were to stop and pull into the little cul-de-sac, cut off their engine, and listen they might just hear the collective yawn that came from every house. A single drop of dew formed and dripped from an outstretched finger of the body impaled by the large screw. Despite its charred appearance, its skin was slicker than most blades of grass.

Colleen Baker began her day like any other, with a brisk jog around the cul-de-sac exactly four times. She had done the math at home one night—any more would be extraneous to her life and any less would be like doing nothing at all. Alan Baker was already awake when she arrived home, protein smoothie ready. They kissed lightly as Alan opened the newspaper.

A bump came from above like a baseball falling from the top of a dresser. The couple looked up, shrugged their shoulders, and continued with their morning. Colleen finished the smoothie while looking around their kitchen. The checkered tile floors and checkered back splash seemed like great ideas when they first moved in, but now they gave her a certain degree of unease, as though she lived in a carnival fun house. Her husband didn't share the sentiment,

secretly enjoying the color scheme as it reminded him of his old days in a ska band. When no one else was home, he would dust off the hidden trumpet in the study and see how much he could still play.

“Anything interesting on your jog today?” he asked without taking his eyes from the newspaper.

Colleen rinsed the glass, letting the water fill until it spilled over the side.

“Nothing in particular, same leaves and trees and traffic on the main road as always.” She hadn’t seen the person impaled by the screw, focusing instead on the leaves and the trees and the next steps in front of her.

Another bump from above and both their necks shot back to see what was be happening. A series of bumps followed down the stairs and their son appeared in the kitchen, out of breath and trembling.

“What is that?” he yelled

“What’s what, dear?” Colleen asked.

“Did you see it? There’s this screw outside and it’s huge, like bigger around than our mailbox. And there’s a body on it! I don’t know who it is or anything but it’s all black and stuff like that one time we went camping and my hot dog fell into the fire and it blistered and got all gross. Do you think it’s aliens? Or some kind of serial killer that comes to your house at night and abducts people and leaves them on giant screws in the middle of the street as his calling card?” their son said through terse breaths.

“Odd, didn’t you see that thing there, honey?” Alan asked.

“I know I would have seen something like that,” she said.

“Maybe our boy’s been up all night watching horror movies again.” She tilted her head toward her son with a raised eyebrow. He only threw his hands in the air and walked away, thuds carrying him up the stairs.

“Kid’s got a good imagination. Wonder if he’ll take after your mom and start writing,” Alan said.

“Oh, wouldn’t that be nice?” Colleen responded.

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“Pete, where are you?” Cheryl Frost asked from the front window as she pulled the black-out curtains to the side.

“I’m back here,” Pete Frost yelled from the kitchen. He came yawning into the dining room holding two mugs of coffee. “Did you hear the Picketts last night? I don’t know how Cindy puts up with Dennis driving around all night just to pick up oven mitts.”

“Shut up and look at this,” Cheryl said, taking a mug from her husband’s hand. He looked at it.

“And now what do you suppose that is?” Pete looked at her, but her eyes never left the body impaled by the large screw.

“I’m thinking it’s the Hendersons. I heard Kyle talking about how much he wants to decorate for Halloween this year after his cousin in Germany got into their local paper with the stuff in her yard.” Cheryl took a sip of coffee before looking over at Pete.

“It might be, but why isn’t it in their yard? They’re going to block half the cars trying to get out.” He kept looking out the window at the person impaled by the screw.

“Aren’t you considerate this morning?” Cheryl placed a hand on Pete’s shoulder before walking away. The curtains swished as she dropped them, covering Pete’s face before being pushed out of the way.

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For the first time in a long time, Henry Marshall was the first one in the house to wake up. His shadow fell over Cassandra as he stood in front of the window that morning. Her alarm buzzed but he didn’t seem to notice it.

“What are you doing up so early?” she asked as she slapped her phone off the nightstand.

“Don’t know,” he replied. His hands rested on the windowsill, face a few inches from the glass as he looked outside at the person impaled by the screw. “You should see this, though.”

Cassandra sighed and pulled herself up from the comfort and warmth of the bed. She stood next to her husband and saw what was in the middle of the cul-de-sac.

“Huh, early for Halloween, but whatever,” she said as she walked away from the window. “So what do you have going on today?”

“I’ve got a test to study for. That business management course I’ve been telling you about, the one that’s been kicking my ass all this semester.” Henry shook his head and began walking away from the window. “So, you know, the usual. How about you?”

“Another day I think about burning the building down but stop before I go through with it. The usual,” Cassandra said, poking her head out from inside the bathroom. The shower clicked on with a fizz of water, and the door closed slowly. Henry was left alone in the room. He looked over his shoulder as though trying to remember something important, something he

wanted to say or do but couldn't quite put his finger on. He shrugged and walked out of the bedroom.

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Kyle Henderson wasn't one for Halloween. He didn't know why he told everyone at the last dinner party about his German cousin. He thought it was simply an interesting anecdote, something to say in passing to move the conversation on to something else. And yet they kept prodding him about it, asking about his cousin, about how she got all those decorations from the States back to Germany. They came up to his door with ads for skeletons, bats, and other decorations he would store away in the garage where they would be left to decay until the season started. The view of his backyard was pristine that morning as it had always been. Not a weed or little chocolate bomb from their dachshund in sight.

"Honey," he shouted from the kitchen, "I think we need more creamer." The mug sat under his nose, bristles of mustache still dipped in foam. Celina didn't answer. "Honey," Kyle shouted again. The little country clock in the kitchen—with its red border and rooster background—ticked at louder intervals until resetting back at the top. Kyle only sat and waited for his wife to appear. He opened his mouth to shout again but stopped before grumbling and walking into the living room.

Celina stood by the living room window, looking out at the street.

"Honey?" Kyle's words shifted from a slight annoyance to curiosity midway through the last syllable. She didn't respond. Kyle stood beside her and looked out the window. "Ah."

"What do you think it is?" Celina asked.

"What does it look like?"

“I don’t know.”

Kyle shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the kitchen.

“Do you think the kids have seen it?” she asked. Kyle paused and looked back, asked if she had woken them up yet. She shook her head.

“Then they haven’t seen it yet.” He walked back and sat at their kitchen table. Almost as a response, a footsteps upstairs let him know that the kids could wake up on their own.

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“Do you think you could pick me up a couple more bowls? The ones coming out of the dishwasher are getting a little warped,” Cindy Pickett asked. She placed each bowl on the yellow kitchen table before her, watching them wobble on its surface. “They’re still good, though. We can always get some use out of them later when we have guests over. Although I think the Skinners are hosting soon.” She continued to wobble the bowls in front of her.

Dennis walked in from the living room and entered the kitchen. He nodded to his wife and walked to the front door. Dennis revved the car engine up, engaged reverse, and the tires squeaked slightly. But he didn’t leave the driveway, only pulled forward and parked again. Dennis Pickett walked back into the house and sat down on the nearest of their four mismatched couches.

“Dennis?” Cindy asked from the kitchen. “Are you back so soon?” She walked out to see him sitting there, arms and legs splayed out with his head looking at the popcorn ceiling. “Did you get the bowls?” She asked.

“Just give me a minute,” he said, exhaling hard through his nose. Cindy only cocked her head to the side and walked to the window next to her husband. The shadow of their single-story

house loomed long over the end of the cul-de-sac, blanketing the person impaled on the screw. She narrowed her eyes trying to find some fine detail on the figure but the blank remains of it proved elusive.

“That reminds me,” she said, “I haven’t been able to find the flat head screwdriver. Could you pick up one of those as well while you’re out?” She placed her hand on Dennis’ shoulder. He looked over at her and tapped her hand.

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do.” His bones popped as he stood up from the couch. Cindy watched the car start up again, reverse down the driveway, and just barely miss scraping the base of the screw.

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Alexander and Courtney Skinner backed their car out of the driveway and waited at the exit from Plumeria Cove. Traffic was a molasses trail stretching in both single-laned directions. They yawned nearly in unison. Alexander fiddled with the radio to break some of the silence in the car, flipping through channels until he found the news. Courtney adjusted the rear-view mirror and squinted at the form behind them.

“What the fuck,” she whispered. Alexander didn’t notice, only listened to reports of a gas leak a few towns over and a neighborhood being evacuated. Courtney turned her whole body around to see the screw in the middle of the cul-de-sac. “What the fuck,” she repeated, louder.

“What was that?” he asked as he bowed his head closer to the radio.

“Look back there,” she said to him, tapping his shoulders. He looked back, ear to ear with his wife as they looked down the cul-de-sac to the body impaled by the screw.

“That’s different,” he said before the radio caught his interest again. “You think it has anything to do with this? I know the government is always experimenting with hallucinogenic gases and stuff. Maybe the leak’s already here?” His eyes widened as he looked at Courtney.

“No, that...well.” She paused and brought her hand up to her chin. Her brow tightened and furrowed as though arguing with itself. “I mean, they would have told us if it had caught onto a breeze or something, right?”

Alexander shrugged before jerking his arm forward to point at the road. “Ooh, someone’s letting you in.”

Courtney waved at the van and turned onto the road out of the neighborhood.

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The basement door shut with a thud, the locks in place and the padlock applied. Bob Johnson wiped the sweat from his forehead and washed his hands in the kitchen sink. He looked over at his wife and three kids sitting at the dining table and smiled.

“Told you I’d be alright,” he said. Bob sat down with the rest of his family and led them in a prayer before starting in on breakfast. The dining room was like a restaurant full of strangers, silverware clanking, and jaws chewing but not a voice to be heard. They ate, and one by one they finished, dumping their plate and utensils into the sink before leaving. Only Clara Johnson was left in the room. It wasn’t yet her turn to do the dishes so she sat there and enjoyed the complete silence outside of the creaks above from the kids getting ready for school. Bob came in from the garage with his work clothes and gave her a weak thumbs up.



“Got to get the meat freezer all stocked up. Hopefully it lasts a bit longer this time. You want to come with?” he asked her. She agreed and got up from the table to grab a pair of work boots from the house’s entrance. Their kids were still upstairs as they opened the front door.

“Your father and I are heading out early. Make sure you catch the bus or else,” she said, the last few words coming out a little more serious than she thought they would.

The car doors closed in unison before the engine kicked on. The neighborhood knew the Johnsons for a couple things. Bob’s obsession with trimming the lawn every Saturday morning as the sun came up and the noise Clara’s truck made, the thing itself older than most of the homes in their cul-de-sac. She released the clutch and they began to roll down the driveway into the road. The brakes squealed as they looked over at the person impaled by the screw. Color drained from their faces as they eyed each other. Clara’s eyes went from the screw, to her husband, to their house. Bob sucked in his lips and motioned for her to keep going. Slowly the truck hit the road as they left the neighborhood behind.

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Shiro Ota paced up and down his entryway, leather shoes tapping against polished wood. He had attempted to back his car out of the garage that morning and was greeted by the person impaled by the screw. He’d already been to the Hendersons’ and his wife, Camile, was talking with the Frosts. He wasn’t sure who was trying to make him this late for work but he wanted a face to yell at, somewhere to place his anger even for a couple of minutes. The kids had already left for school so his expletives fell on his ears alone until Camile came back.

“Well?” he asked.

“They don’t know either. They said it was just there this morning when they got up,” Camile said. Shiro threw his hands in the air.

“Great, fuckin’ great, and I almost scraped the bumper against it this morning.” He pointed out the door and continued to pace.

“Can’t you just back around it? It won’t matter if you drive a bit on the grass this one time.” Camile tried to reassure him but he only rolled his head in response. “Come on now, you’re being childish.”

“It’s the principle of the whole thing. They can’t just leave their trash out there like that,” he said as he kicked the bottom stair. “And I’m late enough as it is. I might as well just call in sick or something. Shit.”

Camile shook her head and walked to the back of the house as Shiro pulled out his phone.

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Catherine Scott stood on her porch and pulled her robe tighter around herself. The body impaled by the screw, still charred by something unknown, stood in much the same way it had all morning. Only a breeze and the chimes of the mobile their daughter made in grade school reached her ears. All other sounds were on a kind of mute, as though she were listening through the wall to people in another room. The charred remains looked like nothing and no one she knew. She was close enough to tell it was a body, but far enough that it was hazy like a morning fog. Her husband tapped her on the shoulder.

“Your coffee’s getting cold,” Marcus Scott said. He glanced over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of the body impaled by the screw but his face showed so little interest that he walked

back without mentioning it yet. She shuffled in after, her slippers making a noise like sandpaper on polished rocks.

“Wonder what that’s all about? Probably the Picketts doing something weird again. They’re paranoid enough as it is,” Marcus said to his wife. She nodded and sat down at the kitchen table. In the six months since their daughter had gone off to college, they still had placed a plate at her spot on the table out of habit every morning. “What do you think?” Marcus asked.

She stared at the plate. It had been three months since they last heard from her, Marcus insisting that college was a busy time, that sometimes things tend to fall through the cracks whether they want them to or not. The mug of coffee felt as though it were sapping the heat from her hands.

“Cathy, I asked what you thought about it.” Marcus said.

Catherine looked at him and couldn’t find anything to say.

The sun set on Plumeria Cove that evening. Families ate dinner, discussed their days, and talked about plans for the upcoming weekend. They accepted the simplicity of their lives and lived through them as they would. Nothing changes in suburbia, only the world around it.

No one in the neighborhood could find anything else to say. They left for work, watched the body impaled by the screw, and went about their day. Catherine Scott walked to it that afternoon after Marcus left. She placed her hand on the charred remains. Nothing there that would indicate her daughter or anyone else. But the thought never left her.

## THE SKELETON

Cassandra Marshall pulled into her driveway slowly, making note of the skeleton on her front lawn. It lay across the lawn as though, in taking a break, some giant had simply reclined and lost its skin and organs. What remained was pristine, bleached white, and massive. Its head began at the path to their front door and ended with its toes just behind the line that divided their lawn and their neighbor's. The hand brake clicked like a popped joint, and the car shuddered in the driveway. Cassandra remained in the car. She grimaced at the skeleton. Of all the days for something to appear on their lawn it had to be the one in which she lost her job. She could already hear Henry bemoaning her, telling her that her office job was only sapping her soul away and that they should have just gone off back to adventuring around Europe like they did before college. But she needed the house and the sense of stability. A thick air hung around the front of their home, only the buzz of a street lamp and a tire squealing from the main road kept the cul-de-sac from total silence.

She walked over hastily placed cobblestones and the weeds that grew between them to the front door and stopped. The sounds of the road couldn't reach her. She went through her bag for the house keys and let them hover above the lock. Cassandra wanted to go back to the car, drive away, and simply not deal with the rest of the day. And yet she opened the door anyway.

"Welcome home, dear," Henry Marshall said with a half nod, eyes never leaving the TV opposite him. A plate balanced on his lap, the brown stains and few grains of rice all that remained of his dinner. He placed it on the coffee table, the table leg clicking against the tile floor.

“Hey,” Cassandra said, the slightest tinge of a tremble coming off the last letter as though she wished to draw it out but changed her mind at the last moment. “You’ve been home all day, right?”

“Of course. Nothing but homework for me while you grind away at some office job that you’ll get fired from when it’s convenient to your boss.” Henry stretched his arms over the back of their green pleather couch and let out a grunt.

“Well, one of us has to make money.” Their eyes held for a moment, then Cassandra shook hers loose. She put her bag on a hook by the door. It wobbled under the weight, and she pushed it against the wall as though putting extra pressure would keep it from falling again.

“How about you, how was, what, your third late night in a row?” Henry rose from the couch and cracked his neck, just loud enough to echo.

Cassandra stayed by the front door, not wanting to cross the line in the different tile patterns that divided the entrance from the living room. Her hand wandered up toward the pocket the pink slip sat in like a bear trap. She wanted to take it out and show him, endure the snapping of metal teeth, get the whole thing out. Henry would have a blast with it. He might even dance from his excitement. Then they would be able to drop everything and go backpacking again like he wanted. But they were older now, Cassandra felt it in her own bones.

“Have you seen the skeleton?” she said.

“The skeleton?”

“The one in the front yard. Is that something you were going to ask me about or?”

Cassandra let the question linger. “Did anyone come over to ask about it?” She sighed at the end of the question.

“No, but, like, I mean a skeleton? Just there, in the yard?” he asked. Cassandra nodded and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do we call the cops? Or what? What do we do here?”

“Don’t you want to see it?” Cassandra asked. She walked toward Henry but remained in the entryway, the line between tiles only a couple inches from her feet.

“I guess?” Henry paused and began to pace. His toe slapped the tile as it peeked from the hole in his sock. “Would that mean anything, though? Would that implicate us or something?”

Cassandra shrugged and said she didn’t know. Henry continued his slow pace up and down the space between the TV stand and the couch. She could feel the rhythm of his steps through the tiles, as though they were still as loose as when they first put them down together. She remembered picking the tile out, saying how perfectly it matched the ones in the entrance before coming home and seeing otherwise. Henry already had the old carpet thrown out. He told her they’d made due for a week on bare concrete. Cassandra made sure to click her shoes as loud as she could whenever she would walked by Henry.

“Do you want to join me?” she asked before opening the door and walking back outside.

Henry shuffled up behind her as he closed the door, the night air hitting them like a moistened brick. Street lamps had flickered on hours earlier, each with its own cloud of moths buzzing, harmonizing with the murmur of the lights. The heat of the day descended on the front yard after the sun went down, moisture piling up on untrimmed grass. It beaded and ran down the rough curves of the skull, pooling beneath the lacrimal that watched the neighbor’s yard next door. Henry placed his hand on the top of the skull as he looked out among the bones. Other homes had all but gone dark as the night began to drag.

“Why didn’t you mention how big it was?” he asked, fingers rapping along the bone.

Cassandra shrugged as she walked down among the left ribs. “I guess you have an actual excuse now not to mow.”

“The mower’s still broken,” Henry mumbled. He attempted to step through the ribs but stopped himself. “Christ, should we even be doing this? What if someone sees us?”

She sat on the femur and looked down the road. “No one’s come to ask us about it yet. I don’t think they even will.” Henry sat near the top of the ribcage. “What do you want to do about it?” Cassandra asked.

“I mean I don’t know. Is there anything we can do with it outside of selling tickets for kids to play on it?” Henry got up and started moving back toward the house.

“Where are you going?” Cassandra asked. She moved to the other femur, traced a path around the calcaneus to the tibia.

“I’m just going back in, I need to sleep on this or something,” Henry said. He shook his head as he made his way up the cobblestone path.

Cassandra stayed on the femur and reclined into the bone for a moment, the knee cap pushing against her back. The streetlamp stopped buzzing. The only noise she could hear was her own breath and the small clink of a moth bouncing off their front lights. She got up from among the bones and put her hands in her pockets. The pink slip scratched against her skin.

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The skeleton remained on the lawn. The Bakers pulled into their own driveway across the street. They paid no mind to the skeleton. It lay in the grass in a yard larger than any other yard in the neighborhood, on the bottom of the cul-de-sac’s circle. No bird perched on its ribs, no cat found a space to hide inside its pelvis. A caterpillar crawled across the frontal bone and stopped,

reached its head up into the humid night air, and resumed its crawl. The skeleton wanted someone to recline on it, maybe talk about life if it could talk.

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Henry was the first to rise the next morning. He opened the curtains to watch the skeleton take on a shade of green as yard clippings caked most of the feet bones. Their neighbor mowed without stopping to look at the skeleton. Henry closed the curtains and fell back into bed believing he was still alone in the house. Cassandra jostled awake and looked around the room. Henry sat up and watched her check the clock on the bedside table. He stood up from the bed and stretched as the floorboards beneath him squeaked and sighed under the pressure. Their room was the only completely finished one in the house. They promised each other that when they first moved in—that they would at least have somewhere nice to sleep while they worked on the rest. But he could never get the floorboards to sit right, no matter what he tried. He eventually took that side of the bed to ensure Cassandra would never call him out on his handiwork. And besides, he was always up after she left. She would never hear them anyway.

Henry was careful not to creak the floorboards again as he walked out of their room. The hallway leading to the stairs remained unpainted for the last three years. He ran his hand along the wall, the same few spots every morning, to see if the drywall felt ready to paint. Cassandra decided on a shade of blue years before but they never found the time to apply it. The buckets remained in the garage with bits of wood and spackling materials he'd picked up in case they ever got time.

The coffee had begun to drip when Cassandra entered the kitchen.



“Morning,” Henry said as he leaned against the counter. She made a noise as she dropped into a chair at their kitchen table, a seafoam green thing they had restored before moving in. It was before Henry kept insisting they should travel again and before they both found themselves in an office all day. At least he got out while he could, started taking some online classes so he could work overseas. “I thought you had another day at the grind?” Henry watched her back straighten and eyes bulge. She looked down at the table and swallowed. He wondered if she dreaded spending time with him or if she would notice he’d dropped out of his online courses weeks ago.

“Oh, yeah, work.” Cassandra drummed her fingers against the table. “I got an email, yeah, something about the servers being all weird today, so upper management gets the day off.” She finished and leaned back into the chair, the vinyl making a noise not unlike a croak. Henry smiled and looked at the coffee percolate.

He poured two mugs for them and sat down opposite Cassandra. They sipped their coffee and avoided eye contact until she spoke up again.

“What about you, anything to do today?”

Henry swished the coffee around in his mouth and looked up at the ceiling. Only half the popcorn he put up had taken and the rest stayed in scant patches that made him hunch over dinner when they ate at the table, as if waiting for more of it to peel off and rain down.

“Nothing much right now, just waiting to get some grades on mid-terms. You remember how that was.” Henry put the mug down and scratched the back of his neck. He hadn’t thought about classes for days, hadn’t been enrolled in them for months now. He couldn’t remember the

exact day he stopped or even why, only the red marks that showed up more and more on his online assignments before he stopped looking at them entirely.

“I see,” Cassandra said. “Well, once it’s done you’ll be able to get a better job this time, right?”

Henry wanted to slam his mug against the table, cause a distraction and run out the back door. Or maybe climb on the table himself and weep, asking for forgiveness as he bowed to his wife, and vowed to never act like such a devious bastard ever again. He would plead for her to just drop it all and go back to Europe where they could rent a little cottage somewhere without offices or online schools for the rest of their lives. Instead he nodded.

“Should we at least work on the front yard today?” Cassandra asked.

“The mower’s still broken,” Henry said.

“I mean the skeleton.”

Before Henry could answer, a knock crept from the front door like a reluctant spider. Cassandra and Henry looked at each other before getting up from the table. Catherine Scott waited outside their front door, clicking her nails together and looking down at their cobblestones. Henry put his hand on the door knob, and Cassandra grabbed his wrist. She shook her head as he turned the handle.

“What do you want me to do?” Henry asked. Cassandra looked at him and back at the door, wincing at another knock. Henry opened the door anyway.

“Well, good morning to you two,” Catherine Scott was not saccharine although her voice would inform otherwise. It entered Henry’s ears and left a kind of sugary residue that felt like molasses. She stood just outside the doorframe, shorter than either of them. She switched her

eyes between both of theirs, never focusing on one for more than a few moments. “Now, I’m not sure what you both were planning for Halloween but we’ve still got another six months until you need to worry about it.”

Henry had seen Catherine at other houses before, theirs maybe once or twice in the past. She was the HOA vice president and brought out a ruler to measure grass and had towed a few cars in the past for parking on the wrong side of the street. He could already feel the blood in his face boiling.

“Catherine, hi, how are you?” Cassandra put on a voice Henry only ever heard when she was at work. “We were just trying some things out the other day, you know how it is. That one just slipped our minds yesterday. We’ll get it out of the way soon, alright?” Cassandra stood and smiled while Henry pushed his shoulder against the door frame. He looked down at Catherine with one eyebrow raised.

“I’m just here to tell you that you should consider what you wish to do with your lawn ornamentation. Now I know you don’t take much pride in your own house but the rest of us do. I’ve sent an email to the rest of the HOA, so, you know.” Catherine clapped her hands twice before turning her back to them again to leave.

“Oh fuck off with that,” Henry said. He slammed the door before he could see Catherine’s reaction. Cassandra looked at him, eyes wide. He dropped his shoulders and went to lie on the couch.

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The skeleton bleached in the afternoon sun. Everything from the phalange to the talus had been covered in grass clippings, as though it were wearing green socks. Errant moisture floated

through the air, settling on the bones, keeping the grass in place on its feet. A small spider began to build a home beneath its slightly curved metacarpals. The skeleton enjoyed nature, wanted to be more of a part of it. This was its best option for now.

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Cassandra sat with her hands opening and closing on the steering wheel, not committing to holding it. She wore the same pants, never letting them touch the hamper for fear that Henry might do laundry in his free time. The pink slip would poke out ever so slightly, enough that he would see it, smooth it on the kitchen table, and wait for her to come home. He would yell about how he knew she hated working there, that she got fired on purpose so they could pack up their things and leave the neighborhood forever.

She backed out of the driveway and watched the skeleton in her rear view mirror fade until it was just a mass of white. Her left turn signal came on but she turned right, a habit that she couldn't forget. She corrected and turned left out of the cul-de-sac and drove down the street. There was an appendage to a full neighborhood, one that didn't have an entrance or a large brick sign that spelled out that people were entering somewhere exclusive. Only houses built together, following and adding onto the road, growing further and further back until they pushed against a dead end.

Cassandra stopped her car in a Target parking lot, pulled out the keys, and sat. She didn't move for a moment, only breathed in a mixture of vanilla and something called "black ice" that hung from her rear view mirror.

The pink slip crinkled like tissue paper in Cassandra's hand, didn't have the weight she thought it still would. If she blew, it would lift off and sail onto the dashboard. The sun would hit

it and burn the thing away or at least bleach it white like an old receipt. She crushed it in her fist and got out of the car. A breeze blew in and whipped her hair in front of her face. A styrofoam cup clinked in the wind, echoing around the parking lot like an out of tune bell.

Cassandra stuffed the pink slip into her pocket and went inside the store. Spring cleaning displays hung from the ceiling, bright and iridescent. She walked a slow lap and considered the things they wouldn't be able to afford soon. Neon storage containers, desk organizers, and one of those massive TVs they could mount on the wall. And if not anchored on the wall, they could prop it up on a new entertainment center. All of their movies and picture frames and bric-a-brac lined up along the shelves would give the whole thing a sense of being their own. She wanted it all. She wanted to load up the cart with whatever would fit and bring it back home. That would be the first step before fixing everything else, painting the walls, getting the ceiling re-popped, laying down new tiles. Even if they left to somewhere else they would always have a house to come back to, an anchor to steady them through whatever could happen.

Cassandra drummed her hand along the storage container and continued to walk through the store.

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The skeleton waited. No lawns needed to be mowed near it, save the one it lay on. It watched the cul-de-sac curve, the other homes all in a similar style. Like pigs' snouts the garages jutted from the houses, tongues rolling out to form the driveways. It could only see three in a line but they kept the same shades of dark red, blue, and gray to their facades. Even the grass had been cut to nearly the same length, all green with no islands of dirt. The skeleton didn't know what life was and wondered if that was it. A wasp nest began to form under a rib.

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Henry sat on the couch and opened his laptop. The cursor hovered over a link to their bank account but quickly moved to a forum he began frequenting after he quit his online classes. They talked about traveling, although most of them complained about their own lives and the inability to leave their houses. Henry tried to offer advice when he first came on, but realized soon after that he was likely the oldest person there by more years than he was willing to admit to himself.

“What are you working on?” Cassandra draped herself over the back of the couch as Henry clicked away on his laptop.

“Oh, you know, things for class, getting those last-minute assignments in, you know how it is.” He fumbled with the screen, angled it further down into the keyboard.

“Is it a group thing?”

“No, no, it’s just, you know, a study group. We’re all in this together so we may as well work together, that sort of thing.” Henry fidgeted. His fingers froze on the keyboard as he looked up at Cassandra. A small smile came upon his face as though he were caught stealing a piece of candy while he held more in his mouth. “And don’t you have work today?”

“I took a day off. Call it a mental health day.” Cassandra pushed herself up and walked around to the front of the couch. She plopped down next to Henry.

“Didn’t you have a day off yesterday? Are you finally getting tired of the grind?” he asked as he angled the laptop away from her eyes. The thread opened on the screen started with people asking how to make some side cash when they didn’t make enough to get through the month. Henry came more for ideas than to impart his advice.

Cassandra sighed and said she enjoyed having the day off, but she insisted she wanted to go back. Henry shrugged and kept his computer screen low. He opened his mouth to speak before a knock on the door stopped him. He looked at his wife, and her brow furrowed. They got up from the couch and walked to the door, expecting the Hendersons to come around to complain about the skeleton. The peephole showed a small image of three people standing by their front door. A woman in a long coat and a man carrying black camera bags stood with their backs against the porch railing while a second man rubbed his hands and looked straight into the peephole.

“Hello?” he said, drawing out the last syllable. Henry winced before opening the door.

“Yes, hello, is there something I can do for you?” Henry asked. The man handed him a card that reflected in the sunlight. A camera with wings and barbed wire encircling it. The man introduced the woman and the other man carrying the camera bags. He asked if they could borrow the skeleton for a while.

“I mean it ain’t going to be long or anything—we just wanted to ask if it was cool.” The man at their door kept rubbing his hands together.

Henry scratched the back of his neck and turned his head toward Cassandra. She stood behind the door and mouthed “I don’t know.”

“Yeah, sure, I guess it’s fine? Just don’t take too long or look at the neighbors,” Henry said. The man fist-pumped the air and said his thanks. Henry walked to the end of the cobblestone path and watched them set up. A tinge of desire shot through him, of being able to come and go wherever, to go somewhere else when he wanted. Cassandra stood in the front door with her arms folded. Henry threw his hands in the air and shook his head.

“How do you think they found us?” she asked. They went back inside and shut the door.

Henry shook his head again and fell back into the couch. It popped and wheezed like a broken squeaky toy. He opened his laptop back up and continued scrolling through the thread.

“Do you think this is going to be a thing now, people coming by for the skeleton?”

Cassandra asked as she walked to the back of the couch.

“Maybe? I don’t know, it’s not really hurting anyone so I guess they can use it. What else are we going to do with it?” Henry looked up at her. She asked if they could move it somewhere else, maybe bring it to the backyard. Henry told her he had been thinking of something to do with it, that he had ideas. He knew he didn’t have any, but it was better for him to make an attempt than admit he hadn’t done anything with his free time.

“But you haven’t said anything to me about it.” Cassandra stood over him while talking, her eyes pointed forward at a point Henry couldn’t see. “At least you don’t have to wake up every morning and look at Catherine fucking Scott judge you from her driveway while you wave awkwardly and the skull is just sitting there behind you so your eyes don’t have anywhere else to go but across the street where everyone else is doing the same.”

Henry got up from the couch. Cassandra didn’t move.

“How’s your class going?” she said.

Henry walked up the stairwell, passed two different shades of paint on the wall along it. Those two shades they couldn’t decide on and just let them sit there.

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The skeleton didn’t mind people taking pictures of it. It was the most attention it had gotten. A woman reclined against its rib, posed on the sternum. One of the men kicked the wasp



nest away from under its rib. The three people were all chased away by the swarm. The skeleton would laugh at their liveliness if it could.

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Cassandra pulled into their driveway earlier than normal. She sat in her blue hatchback for a moment with her eyes closed, fingers drumming along the bottom of the steering wheel. The radio was off, and the only sound coming in was from around the rest of the neighborhood. A fuzz of white noise rose and fell with her breathing, short breaths in and long breaths out like she learned in high school band. The messenger bag of memos, papers, file folders, mail, and mock-ups had been left behind at the beginning of the day while Henry still slept nestled against his side of the bed as though it were a cliff. She waited through several parking lots throughout the day, came up with excuses as to why she hadn't come back for her bag, why she had left it in the first place. The white noise gave way to a white tent wall that had been invisible to her despite it being right next to the driveway. A white enclosure large enough to house at least another two cars.

Cassandra stepped from her car and looked at the new object that assailed her lawn. The wind made it immaterial, just barely. The walls rippled and shook as she walked the perimeter. A laugh, nearly silenced from the constant rumble of the vinyl, crept out from under the walls. The entrance opened up to her, facing away from the street. She poked her head in as the wind flipped her hair across her eyes, and she tensed at the sight of what she thought was the skeleton.

"I'm sorry, we're closed for the day," a voice said from deeper inside the tent.

"Who is this? What are you?" Cassandra asked before pausing to place a hand against her head. "No, wait, never mind. What are you doing on my lawn?"

“Oh, hey, I didn’t think you had come back yet.” Henry walked forward from inside the tent. “Wait, hold on.” He went back and fiddled with wires on the ground. The white walls shone an orange glow as a circle of Christmas lights popped on around the top of the tent. Cartoon bats and cobwebs lined the walls along with a menagerie of black shadows covered in chalk dust that slightly resembled bones. A couple of other people inside the tent wore masks of different skull shapes and sizes. Others pushed the masks over their sweaty hair to get at cans and bottles better. They continued to laugh and talk as Henry walked over with black curtains hanging over his shoulders like massive, limp wings. He pushed the half skull from his face as he went to touch Cassandra’s shoulder.

“What is this, what’s going on?” she asked.

“It’s fine. It’s just something we put together.” Henry tossed his mask by the rest of the real skeleton.

“Why? What did you do? Who did this?” Cassandra’s eyes moved like a moth without a light, scanning faces and decorations. She recognized them all, the decorations from Halloweens past that they kept around despite their dollar-store quality. The Christmas lights that used to hang in the front windows when the molding was still there and the outlet still had wires attached to it.

“It’s just some people from my study group. I told them about our situation and a few of the local guys wanted to do something fun with it.” He looked back over his shoulder at raised bottles and waved.

“But this tent, the costumes, where did you get all of this? We can’t afford all of this.” Cassandra rubbed her hands as though she were washing them.

“Sure we can, I’m not bringing anything in right now but we’re thinking about selling tickets for this next time. We’ll make back twice as much in a day. Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t want this on the lawn,” she said, the words rushing past her teeth. Henry gave her a soft look as he put his hand on her arm.

“Oh, don’t be like that, we’re just having a bit of fun. Right, everyone?” Henry looked back at the gathered dozen, and they cheered before returning to themselves, unaware of anything outside of their bones.

“When did you come up with this?” Cassandra spoke after a pause.

“Last night, after I went upstairs. I don’t know, it just seemed like a cool idea, something to pass the time.” Henry shuffled and closed his mouth as though keeping another word from falling out.

Cassandra’s shoulders dropped and raised. She straightened her back and looked at Henry, past Henry at the skeleton, all of the people looking like skeletons. A hint of worry started to flutter away in her mind, caught on the breeze that came past the tent. She didn’t know how many people had come by to see the skeleton, but Henry looked close to exhausted with his costume on, with the other people behind him looking similar. The idea of doing this, of turning their lawn into a kind of attraction, a spectacle for anyone to see, tickled something inside her. She knew it wouldn’t be enough, it would never be enough to replace her own income, but with Henry nearly done with his classes, it could be enough to make them comfortable, if only for a little while. And it was their house, their skeleton.

“When did you want to start selling tickets?” she asked.

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The skeleton was patient. Even after the people had left and the lights had been turned off it was left alone in the tent with the plastic spiders and bats. They hung from the ceiling and the walls. But no one dared to touch the skeleton, no one wanted to add anything to it. They said it would detract from the experience if they hung cotton cobwebs between the tibia and fibula, that it would turn it into a sideshow. The skeleton paid them little attention but wouldn't have minded a bit of adornment. It would at least liven things up bit more.

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“It’s only a few more minutes before you too can experience the enigma of the skeleton,” Henry intoned in a voice not completely unlike Vincent Price. He danced about in his black curtain wings and mask, attempted to entertain the people waiting in the line that had begun to stretch beyond the borders of the tent. He felt as though this was his true calling, the ringmaster to some spectacle. If he and Cassandra were lucky, they could start their own circus with the skeleton. Cars lined around the entirety of the cul-de-sac, the only noise that could be heard over the small stereo playing creepy music in the tent was an almost constant beeping of horns and exhausts. Henry continued to prance, eyes went back and forth to check the line and how many people were going out of the tent. They were eyes that were unable to see the rest of the neighborhood looking on at their spectacle. Cassandra walked from the tent and pulled her skull mask off. Henry crept up next to her, always staying in character. He enjoyed it, the life of a ringmaster, of directing a crowd to see something strange. He imagined himself in striped shirts and suspenders, taking nickels from kids waiting to see bearded women and lizard men.

“Christ, why is it so hot in there?” she asked without seeing him and fanned herself with the mask.

“It’s as though it’s a portal to hell itself!” He gesticulated flames with his fingers. Cassandra let a small laugh escape. He hugged her, and she put an arm around him. Henry saw Catherine Scott, made eye contact with her from their house on the other side of the lawn. Her arms were folded. He sighed and looked away from where she stood. He patted Cassandra’s back and made his way to the line without saying anything else to his wife. “And remember to give your dollars to the skeleton holding the orange bucket ooooooooh.” Henry continued to dance about. He stopped when the sirens started. Three squad cars pulled into the neighborhood with their lights flashing and sirens whooping over the noise of the crowd. The cops parked in the middle of the street and made their way up to the tent. The line dispersed as the small crowd made their way back to their cars. Henry pulled his mask off and cupped his hands.

“Please don’t leave. We can get this sorted out.” But his voice only traveled so far. Henry’s skeleton friends from inside the tent ran off through the lawn for their own cars. Cassandra came behind him and held onto the orange bucket she had picked up from one of the running skeletons.

“I told you to get rid of it,” Catherine Scott said as she walked from her side of the lawn. “But no, you had to go make this big spectacle of your decorations and look at what I had to do.” She shook her head.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Henry shouted.

Catherine Scott shrugged. “What? HOA regulations clearly state that crowds are not allowed to gather on front lawns without proper permits and permission from the HOA. As I didn’t hear anything about this, I did what any law abiding citizen should do.” She walked off and left Cassandra and Henry to stand and watch as the cops slowly approached the tent.

“Well, we’ve got about fifty bucks here,” Cassandra jangled the bucket. Henry pulled his mask off and tossed it at the tent a few feet away. It bounced off the white tarp and landed in the grass facing down. Thoughts of a full traveling circus, of lizard men and bearded women evaporated from his thoughts. It moved instead back to the tent, to their own skeleton.

“I guess you’ll have to go back to the grind again, huh? So much for vacation time.” He dropped down and sat in the grass. The cops poked around the tent as Catherine Scott pointed them toward Henry and Cassandra. “And I thought all of this would work out.”

The cops’ questions came quick and terse, mostly about the skeleton and where they got it from. Henry told them it appeared on their lawn one night and Cassandra concurred. And the cops didn’t believe that. Henry knew cops never believed anything sincere.

Yellow police tape stretched across the white tent and along the perimeter of their home. Henry wanted to pull it all off and toss it over into the Scotts’ yard but Cassandra pulled him back to their front porch. She disappeared into the house and came back after a few moments as Henry steamed and tapped the wood porch he sat on. The pink wad of paper dropped into Henry’s lap as Cassandra sat down next to him. He read through it and his face went blank.

“It’s been two months since I dropped out of my online classes. I didn’t know how long I could go without saying anything,” Henry said. “Do you know how boring the house gets with nothing to do?” He paused and wanted to continue. He wanted to tell her about what they could do now, about how they could pack up now and run away to adventure like they had years before. But he couldn’t make the words come out, not a damn one.

“What are we going to do?” Henry said. Cassandra shrugged next to him. He knew all of their plans would evaporate like the rest of their savings and there wasn’t much either of them could do.

“Didn’t we used to have plans for our lives?” Cassandra said. Henry lay down on the porch, arms and legs outstretched. Cassandra slapped his leg. She slapped it again and again until she got tired of the leg and moved on to his chest and face. Henry’s face didn’t change the whole time. He let the short stings trace themselves across his cheeks. Cassandra got up and walked to the tent. He watched her enter and close the flaps behind her. Henry stood up, face flushed with short pain and ears ringing. He went in the tent and saw Cassandra sitting on one of the femurs. He shuffled over and she let him take a seat next to her. The backpacks and adventure spilled from his mind. He only wanted to sit on the skeleton and see what could happen with them together.

“I think we need to talk.” Henry said.

## THE GEYSER

The water in the middle of the ground already began to bubble as Dennis Pickett climbed down the basement stairs. He had only recently returned home from another series of errands, another series of items he had missed the last time shopping. His wife, Cindy, remained home. She had been the first one to mention a noise coming from the basement and had sent him out to buy her a new set of earplugs. Dennis thought it looked more like a crater than anything else. As though it were a new tub of ice cream, a single scoop from the middle had been removed while the rest remained. But inside the crater a pool of water had risen, slightly murky and warm to his touch. He withdrew his hand and wiped it on his green pant leg.

“Did you see it?” Cindy’s voice bounced down the stairs. He sat by the crater and watched the water, knee digging into the concrete from which it formed. A bubble popped on the surface, three more followed. Dennis would swear he felt as though the ground shook, that there was something under the basement. But he couldn’t swear, not with Cindy so close, she would make him drop another coin in the swear jar. A fountain appeared in the puddle before his eyes—maybe a couple of inches high—before it plopped back into the crater with a splash. The basement remained quiet, the tiny geyser barely registering as a noise in the cavern. The only other sound was Dennis himself scratching the stubble on his chin as he stood up and made slow progress up the stairs.

He looked back down at the boxes that had piled up from the two years since Ethan died. He knew it wasn’t what they should be doing and tried to convince Cindy to try something else. But she looked at him with her eyes like broken stars, and he relented every time.



“Well?” Cindy asked. She sat at the small yellow table in the middle of the kitchen. Despite the time of night the room was bright, with yellows bouncing off of each other from table to curtains to the to-do list pinned onto the fridge with a magnetic banana. Yellow daisies splashed along the tile floor, their design faded from more than a decade of use. But the counters had always maintained a sky blue hue. As much as Dennis had gone out in the middle of the night to fetch whatever object Cindy needed, he never had to leave to find a new counter. Even with the scorch marks by the range and that ringed stain that remained by the sink no matter how many times he scrubbed. He knew the counter would remain after the house was empty, had the feeling deep down in his gut. Dennis was sure that the counter would survive centuries. As he ascended from the basement steps, not closing the door behind him or responding to his wife, Dennis looked at nothing in particular.

“Dennis.” Cindy said his name as though she were reading it off a grocery list. He looked up at her and tried smiling. Turning her head to face him, she raised an eyebrow and Dennis’ face went back to neutral.

“It’s a hole, all right,” he said. “Or maybe a crater. I don’t know just yet.” He cracked his knuckles as his eyes wandered back around the kitchen. A slight pain came up from his knee, a nagging reminder that he shouldn’t have rested on it for so long.

“A crater?” Cindy asked. She pushed herself away from the table, the yellow legs of the yellow chair scratching against the yellow tile.

“It’s like a little basin down there,” Dennis responded. The warmth of the water still clung to one hand. A thought floated through his head of using the crater like a sink, shaving and rinsing his razor in the water, of gargling with it after brushing his teeth. The warmth on his face,

rushing around between his teeth. He could renovate the whole basement, maybe get rid of the boxes this time if Cindy let him. A sharp knock on the table brought him back to the kitchen.

“So, patch it up,” Cindy told him. She listed off materials: concrete and putty knives, a new shop vac to clean up the water, some knee pads. She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and began jotting down the shopping list before tearing a piece with the items and handing it to Dennis. He looked down at the words but couldn’t read them for a moment. The words moved, slipped past his view to the other side. He flipped it over and found an ad for light bulbs. “Get a move on, now. It’s late enough and the hardware store closes soon.”

Dennis nodded. He pocketed the list and pulled out his car keys after toying with a plastic star in his pants pocket. They barely had time to say bye when he was out the door, already in his car, already backing down the driveway and onto the street.

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Cindy sat at the yellow kitchen table and tapped her fingers, filling the room with a slow rhythm. She had told Dennis about the hole after he had gotten home from work. Not quite a rumble, something more than a gurgle had come from the basement while she stood outside the door of their Ethan’s old room, the one she hadn’t opened the door to in two years. A small noise had barely registered to her despite being below her feet. She had wanted to throw the door open, to look inside for the first time since he passed. Cindy could still feel the warmth of the room on her face since the last time she was there. The far window let in sunlight nearly all day so he would sleep under little glowing plastic stars all night. She remembered picking the box up at the store, the little yellow stars promising years of imaginative wonder for their baby. The aneurysm had stopped any of that from happening.

A noise had shot up from below, like the kitchen table splitting in half. Her hand retreated from the door knob and she turned around to investigate. The beginning of the geyser had only been a small divot in the concrete floor. One hundred and thirty-three cardboard boxes hovered close to it, and she was sure to count them all just in case. They were filled with different bed sets, curtains, toys, clothes, all of the things they bought to prepare for their son's life. Her mother told her it was too much, that one baby didn't need all those things. Cindy had known what her baby needed. She had always known. Until she didn't. She walked around the boxes and knelt down to study the hole closer. She heard a popping like lips smacking and a short burst of water sprayed her in the face.

Cindy stood up from the table and paced through her yellow kitchen, opening drawers and cabinets. She hunted for an object, some kind of thing that could alleviate what she had begun to feel when the crater first opened. One drawer revealed standard scissors, left-handed scissors despite no one in the house being left handed, safety scissors, three tape dispensers, and a spool of different ribbons. A spool of frayed twine that was there when they first moved into the house sat crushed at the back of the drawer. Cindy took the twine spool and examined the fibers. They retained a kind of whiteness. The end she held showed signs of aging, of yellowing slightly until it would look similar to the kitchen. She opened the door to the basement and planted herself at the top of the steps. The light behind her only made the darkness at the bottom denser. But she still heard something down there, something gurgling as though she pressed her ear to the bathroom door as Dennis' bath drained. Gurgling was the only noise she could hear. A small fountain of water emerged from the crater, shot up a few inches, and dropped back to the puddle below.

“Did you get bigger?” Cindy asked. Not as much to the crater as to herself, questioning what she had remembered from a few hours prior. She stood over the crater, spool of twine in hand, and began to unroll the twine. It shivered through the air as it made its descent into the crater, stopping and lying on top of the surface. The gurgling had ceased, only the sounds of Cindy breathing remained in the basement as she unspooled the twine into the little crater. The twine remained motionless, even after she was left holding the empty cardboard tube it had been wrapped around. The tube entered the water with a hollow plunk and floated back to the surface, bobbing among the twine. She crouched down next to the crater and dunked her hands into the water. The twine and tube sagged under her work as she pushed them further and further under the surface. Water sloshed over the sides of the crater, spilled out, and seeped around her knees. Her hands, warmed by the water, went deeper into the nasty little crater. They scraped the bottom and sides, feeling their way around for something to plug. Her finger brushed over a hole in the crater. She hunched her shoulders forward and began fitting the small cardboard tube and twine into the indent. Pushing herself deeper, Cindy felt the hole turn smooth with her twine and cardboard, her makeshift plug so Dennis would have a better time patching the thing up.

Cindy wiped her brow. Drops of water pooled on her eyebrows, indistinguishable from sweat, and dripped down her face. She stood from the crater and walked back up the basement stairs. A quiet was left behind as she closed the basement and resumed her spot at the kitchen table.

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Dennis woke up the next morning before Cindy. Her back was pressed against the wall, head only a few inches from the corner. Dennis remembered pushing their bed there months ago

after he hauled the new armoire up the stairs and into their room. It was be filled by the end of the week. More clothes and objects he left the house for in the middle of the evening took up the space as some new problem needed to be fixed by a trip to the hardware store. Or the electronics store. Or the pet shop that one time even though the last pet he had was when he was still with Ma and Pa. He pushed himself off the bed and opened one of the dressers that lined the room. His work pants were inside. They were olive green and bought from an army surplus shop when he was looking for shovels. He had come back that day with three shovels and the pants.

The sun filtered through their yellow kitchen curtains as Dennis looked out to the backyard. It barely held together through the ornaments they kept decorating it with like the ready-made herb gardens that failed and left plastic corpses behind to sit on the lawn for months. He made a note to do something about them later but knew he wouldn't. Dennis took his bags of cement and putty knives and went down the basement steps. The crater had grown overnight. Where it was once the size of a small sink, it had now expanded to that of a kiddie pool. Dennis walked along the crater's edge, looking to see where it could have grown. He pushed a stack of cardboard boxes further from the hole. They fit into another tower of boxes like a Tetris piece, but Dennis knew they wouldn't be able to stay there for long. Water rippled on the surface, and a small jet jumped up a foot before it fell back down. Dennis sighed at his single sack of cement and began to climb back up the stairs.

Cindy hasn't seen any of this, he was sure of that. Dennis began setting up breakfast, pulling out a pan from the stack of ceramic miracle pans they had stocked up on months ago. Only one was without scorch marks at this point but they kept them all. He told himself he could have use for a pan like that in the future. He cracked eggs and plopped them down with butter in

the sizzling pan. It popped and squeaked on the heat. A hint of cooked butter, like toasted nuts, met his nose as he shuffled the pan. The percolator dinged on the other side of the room. He couldn't remember the last time he had gotten up first, but he had been the one to make breakfast. Food had always been some measure of comfort when he made it for Cindy. She would barely eat anything when Ethan died, and the duty fell to him meal after meal.

“Good morning,” Dennis said. Cindy had entered the room yawning and stretching one arm behind her back. She didn't respond, only sat down and rested her forehead on the kitchen table. Dennis continued to cook, frying the eggs until a golden brown halo had begun to form on the edges. He clicked the range off and he lay the plated eggs next to his wife. The coffee came just after that, in matching mugs they had picked up during a vacation at Niagara Falls. Stacked together they completed a picture of a man in a barrel falling over the side, his excitement at the top and terror at the bottom. He bought the tickets to visit when they were discharged from the hospital and the mugs were the first in a series of mugs they would buy. Along with everything else. Dennis looked over at the calendar on the fridge. Only a week away from Ethan's birthday.

“Did you patch the floor?” Cindy asked. She hadn't moved her head from its spot.

“Just working on it.” Denis sat down opposite and drank his coffee. He'd always preferred the bottom mug. Cindy looked up and pulled the plate closer, cutting into the eggs and letting the yolk spill out. It almost matched the table around it, contrasted against the edges of the white plate. Another commemorative artifact Dennis had picked up at a garage sale, a whole set of china with the pope's face. Cindy refused to eat off of them until Dennis kept covering the awkward water colors with pastas and cakes. She would be nearly finished with the meal before the face was revealed and Dennis would laugh that little laugh he knew she hated, like a

wheezing cartoon cat. But then the wheezing laughter stopped, had become a routine they played out after the funeral. The plate, the food, the surprise, the cleaning. It was something to be accepted, had become another normal thing in their lives. Like the eggs and runny yolks, yolks that Cindy pushed through with the tine in her fork until it overflowed. Dennis looked away and out the window above the sink and into the backyard. No water accumulated there, no puddles formed even in the longest rainy nights. It had remained as it was through the various objects that piled up and whatever effort he made to clean them.

“Let me see,” Cindy said. She got up from the table and walked to the basement door. Dennis’ mug had stopped steaming, but there was still some warmth to be drunk from it. The curtains around the kitchen window already looked faded as though they had been there for years. He could remember putting them up a few months ago and yet here they were, the yellow beginning to pale at the edges. At the very least, the fabric matched the rest of the kitchen. Everything had become so faded. The curtains blended into the background to the point where he couldn’t tell cabinets from scribbles on the wall, as though it were all flat and flush against the surface. Two-dimensional containers for three-dimensional objects. He would need new paint brushes, maybe some rollers, a light green for the cabinets and maybe black counters. Or maybe the opposite? He strummed his fingers along the yellow table. He would need to get a new table too along with new tiles. Nothing could clash.

“Did you see this?” Cindy asked from the top of the basement steps. Dennis walked over and pushed his way between her and the door frame. He stopped at the second step to see the water lapping against the side of the concrete bag as it was beached at the bottom of the stairs. A

new tide was coming in. The concrete bag was the only other thing he could see from the stairs besides the boxes that were stacked close.

“I should go get us some rubber boots,” Dennis said. He and Cindy walked from the door frame. She returned to the kitchen table and the congealing egg yolk, he to the front door. He picked his keys up from a small tray and went out to the car.

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Cindy scraped the remains of breakfast into the sink, washed it down with the rest of Dennis’ coffee before flipping the disposal switch. She had wanted a house without one, without the noise of a thousand gnashing teeth every time they wanted to get rid of some garbage. But it was something to get used to. Everything was something to get used to. She always compared it to their first house, how the new one didn’t have a second floor but at least it had a basement; how the creaking of the tile floor gave it some character; how that one stain in the ceiling never seemed to disappear after all the times it was painted. They had painted everything when they first moved in, top to bottom. Cindy swore she could still smell that acrid paint scent lingering throughout every room. The smell was just another thing, the background of the house.

Cindy rubbed her face as she left the table. A few of the tiles creaked, as they would. Light came in through the windows in little beams. It highlighted the dust that still hung in the air despite all their efforts to clean it. Dust never settled, never caked surfaces or cluttered up the little vents on their TV. It only hung in the air, suspended by some unknown breeze they couldn’t feel. Cindy didn’t know what was wrong with their home, if it was the dust or something else. The creaking, the hollow noise that came from the sink, the fact that whenever they opened the closet at the end of the hallway it sounded like a far-off laugh.



Their own room was next to the laughing closet. The hallway narrowed toward the end, Cindy and Dennis would walk single file to their room when they hadn't fallen asleep on the couch. Then the second door, just a few meters away from theirs. She couldn't remember the last time she looked inside or if Dennis had locked it and gotten rid of the key like she asked. She placed her hand on the door knob to Ethan's room.

A rumble. Something that felt as though it were out of a film. Cindy stumbled back and braced herself against the wall. Tremors shook the house, pictures on the wall bobbed and swung. Her eyes widened as she sank down to the floor to better hold herself against the quakes. Noise of the rumbling had stopped, replaced by something Cindy couldn't quite figure out. She walked back to the kitchen and the basement door.

The basement stayed dark even after she flipped the light switch on and off multiple times. But the noise had been coming from there and continued. Louder, much closer to that roar she could hear at Niagara Falls. The light from the kitchen behind her illuminated enough. The bag of cement was buried under water now, likely a solid brick by the time they could haul it back up the steps. Water rippled out from the center of the room, although it had only reached the fourth step from the bottom.

Cindy closed the basement door and went through the drawers in the kitchen. She knew they should put labels on them to give an idea of what could be inside but they never got around to working with one of their three label makers. She found the drawer filled to bursting with flashlights. Pocket sized and metallic ones, black rubberized things that took the largest batteries they could buy, and the unused rechargeable ones pushed near the back. None of them worked.

They never worked. She nearly ripped the drawer out of its socket but steadied her hand. The rechargeable one would have to do. She plugged it into an outlet and waited.

The basement still kept the sound of a waterfall. She flicked the light switch on and off again to see if anything had changed or fixed itself. Steps creaked in a different way. Softer than before as though the wood had already begun to absorb the water that slowly rose up. The only guiding light spilled in from behind her, tracing little shadows along pock-marked walls and the rivulets of water running down the further she descended. She remembered the sound in a different way, the more she sat and listened on the steps just above the water. It was less Niagara and more like the fire hydrant that had burst years ago, before Dennis or the cul-de-sac. She was younger, a couple years older than Ethan had been, spinning in the water that rained down in the middle of spring, uncapped by ceiling or sky. She remembered dancing, ring around the rosie, the mud between her toes as she got closer to the hydrant. But the momentum ended. It had to end. Simplicity never lasted long. Someone came up with a wrench bigger than her and twisted it around until the geyser became a sprinkle then a trickle, and then a puddle with moist footprints scattered around the edges.

Cindy shot up when the water began to flood her shoes. She hadn't noticed how long she'd been sitting on the steps. She squelched in her wet shoes back up the stairs. The flashlight indicated it was still charging but Cindy needed to see what was happening in her basement. She pulled it from the wall and went back. It was how she remembered, a pillar of water shooting almost vertically. Rushing and white, coming back down as a rain that covered the basement. Before she could relive her childhood moment, the geyser subsided, tinkled down into a small fountain, and disappeared completely below the surface of the water. The rain continued

regardless, so much of the water stuck to the basement ceiling Cindy wasn't certain the room above would hold under the moisture.

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Dennis stepped behind Cindy and into the basement. He had the rubber boots, a small yellow sticker still affixed to their side. The sack of concrete served only as a stumbling block for him as he attempted to walk into the center of the room, the mouth of the geyser.

“Your boots are upstairs,” he said without looking at Cindy. She only shone the flashlight around the room as he explored. Only the ambient light from the kitchen stayed as Cindy left up the stairs. “Do we have any more flashlights?” he asked, wading farther and farther into the basement. No answer came. The water felt cool through the rubber boots but took on a warmth the closer he got to the center.

The crater was like an edge, a cliff formed into the floor. The toe of his boot felt the edge of the hole first, felt the falling away of the ground. He fell face first into the crater. He'd known that geysers were hot, that the water boiled and built up pressure that would launch sky-ward when hitting its peak. But now he could only close his eyes and attempt to pull himself from the water. What he thought had been the stairs was only the edge of the geyser's mouth. He splashed around, crawled and gasped for air and respite. Large swaths of cardboard filled his hands and nails as he flailed around. The torn box spewed its contents out as though it were a burst stomach. Photo frames with the stock family still inside, clothes Ethan never got to wear, wooden toys Cindy's parents gave them. The objects all went into the water like flotsam. The other boxes in the stacked tower came down as the base gave. Objects rained down in much the same way the water had previously—he scarcely had enough time to lift his head out before it

was knocked down again by a box filled with Halloween decorations. Plastic skulls and bats intermixed with the wooden toys as Dennis resurfaced.

The only thing he could hear was water sloshing around as a toy floated by and bounced off his legs. Cindy grabbed him by the arm and dragged him back to the stairs, flashlight between her teeth. She pulled him onto the nearest dry step and slapped his back as he gasped and coughed water from his lungs. His arms and face looked as though he'd gotten a sunburn, that special kind of red usually equated with lobsters and beets. He continued to cough as Cindy went back down into the water, filling her arms with the objects that floated around.

The rumble began again. Dennis hadn't felt it yet but a sensation of panic still shot up through him as though he were poked with a cattle prod. He scrambled down from the stairs, coughing up as much of the water as he could, and went to grab Cindy.

"Do you feel that?" he yelled as he waded to her.

"I can't just leave everything down here. Not now." She didn't even look at him, only continued to pick up more wooden toys before they could be ruined. He knew she needed her mementos, but not now.

"I don't like the sound of that rumble. We need to get out of here." Dennis tried to move Cindy toward the stairs but she refused and shook him away.

"It's happened before," she said, grabbing a photo frame that had fallen out of her arms. "It's just a geyser."

"Christ, then we need to get out of here." Dennis put his arms under Cindy's shoulders and dragged her back. The toys and frames and objects fell from her arms. She thrashed and

flailed, grabbing a floating planet toy and chucking it at Dennis' head. He only brought her further toward the stairs.

“Let me go.” She yelled and screamed and kicked. “I need to save something.” Her arms thrashed over the surface of the water.

“It's fine.” He rested on the stairs for a moment before a gurgling came from the center of the room. Dennis could barely make out the bubbles bursting on the surface and let out a huff. Cindy had gone mostly limp by then, shivering sometimes, before she shrugged his arms off. They both sat, looking at each other before she went up the stairs first. Dennis looked back out at the basement as the water grew louder. He closed the door just as the geyser burst again, sounding like a hurricane behind him. Cindy stood and braced herself against the kitchen table. Dennis remained with his back pressed against the door in case the water finally rose to the top and tried to burst through. He knew he couldn't keep it back but made the attempt anyway.

The rumble stopped, replaced by something that sounded to Dennis like a dozen garbage cans careening down a flight of stairs. He looked at Cindy and she stood up from the table. The noise was sharp, sudden, and had already dissipated. Only the sound of an incoming rain went through the house. Like waking up to a storm, still refusing to get out of bed to look out the window. They ran through the house. Dennis knew what the sound meant, he could see where the geyser would lead when he was in the basement, staring at the ceiling. It was only a ceiling there, but a floor somewhere else.

They stopped in the hallway, in front of the door neither of them had opened in two years. Dennis did once, when he had beat her home from work. He'd opened the door and walked in, watched dust trail off into the air, bounce off the yellow walls. One of the glowing

stars they put on the ceiling had fallen off, sat in the middle of the room where he nearly stepped on it. He balanced himself against the crib and the toy box to put the star back. It stayed for a moment before falling again into the carpet. Dust filled his fingerprints as he dropped the star into his pocket. He didn't think Cindy would notice the marks in the dust if she ever went in without him.

The desire to try again, to make the star finally stick this time, came over him like a warm wave and wouldn't get out of his head. He wanted to go back down to the basement to find a stepladder and try to put the star back up. To hold his hand against plastic against ceiling. It would work this time, he knew it would if all the other stars had stayed up during those two years. That would at least have been something, would have made his efforts worth something. Even if he had to come back again and put the star back onto the ceiling over and over.

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Cindy watched as Dennis unlocked the door but she could already hear it, the water breaking through the floor of Ethan's room. The carpet frayed and wood splintered and cracked from the pressure below. She didn't know how much longer the ceiling would last. Streams of water came into the hallway like a sprinkler. Cindy couldn't look anymore and ducked to the side and pressed her back against the wall and pressed her hands against her ears to keep herself from witnessing the room come apart.

"Just close the door," Cindy yelled. As if in response a small plastic star tumbled from the doorway. The pale green of it stood out among the dark carpet, not quite glowing. She picked up the star and wiped the water and ceiling dust from it. The little brown eyes that would have looked at this star every night and dream of them had gone. Only water would reach out and

touch these stars now. But at least she knew she had one left. She squeezed it in her palm, the sharp points pressing into her skin. Dennis sat down beside her and wept.

## THE DINNER PARTY

“I don’t want to fucking go,” Marcus Scott said, pulling at the lime-green tie around his neck. “You know there’s a reason we haven’t had to go to the Skinners’ for dinner in years.” No wind in Plumeria Cove that night rustled the leaves around them as the Scotts made their way to the Skinners’ house for their seasonal dinner party.

No wind, but the banner of arms of the oncoming militia still swayed.

“Let’s just be cordial. We can’t be one of the only couples not there,” she said, imagining the Skinners both casually mentioning their absence when she put on the Christmas party later in the year. Marcus had seen the humiliation first hand from other families before. Being called out in the middle of a yard sale for not bringing fresh fruit to a dinner party. It might as well have been sacrilegious.

Neither the Scotts nor any of the families noticed the oncoming battalion of troops marching up the road, long bows bouncing between the men as a large onager took up the middle of their formation.

“Fine,” he said. The couple stopped at the front door of the Skinners’ home, bottle of wine in a fuzzy bag Catherine found earlier that day.

“Oh, we’re so glad you could make it,” Alexander Skinner said, ushering them both inside.

The Skinners and Scotts exchanged their pleasantries before walking into the main sitting room with the other families. The Johnsons, the Bakers, the Otas, the Frosts, and the Hendersons sat on various chairs and sofas as they waited for the Scotts to arrive. The majority had drinks in their hands already, some chilled and others sweating, set up in a blockade against the only other



exit to the room. The Skinners waited to the side as Marcus and Catherine took their own positions, nestled between Bob Johnson and Cheryl Frost.

The names of the men in the battalion were typical variations on biblical names—at least six Johnathans marched along as they found the entrance to Plumeria Cove.

“And now that everyone is here,” Courtney Skinner began, “we can start with our festivities. Make sure everyone has a name tag—don’t worry, they’re not going to ruin any of your lovely outfits.” The Scotts stuck the stickers on and looked at each other. There weren’t enough chairs or couches to sit on, most of the men standing around as though they had some masculine obligation to uphold. Camile Ota rubbed the bottom of her glass on the arm of the velvet sofa she sat on, watching the fibers moisten, smear one way, and smear back again.

One of the many men named Johnathan outside took a swig from his waterskin as the rest of the battalion continued their slow march to the one house with the brightest lights in the neighborhood.

“What do you think this is?” Catherine Scott looked over at her husband.

“I don’t know if I want to know,” Marcus said, playing at the “Niles” sticker on his chest.

Courtney Skinner looked behind at her husband as he came out of the dining room across from the sitting room.

“Alright, everyone, it looks like we’re ready. Come along with me,” she said, holding her arms out as though presenting a game show. The crowd of couples stood up and walked out in unison, as if in a single-file elementary school line. They were met with a room clad in reds and golds. A deep mahogany table divided the room in two, with china stationed in lines, and folded note cards with the titles of various sitcoms between alternating pairs of plates. Light sprinkled in

gold from the chandelier as Alexander Skinner waited at the head of the table for the entire party to fit into the room.

“Now I don’t want anyone sitting down just yet. We’ve got a little game cooked up for tonight,” he said with a smile as if he’d been practicing the introduction for days. “I’m sure you all noticed the names on your stickers—they’re not the names you’re used to being called!” He laughed at nothing. “Well, those are characters in the seven different shows we have between some of these plates here.” With that, he picked one up and showed it to the fidgeting crowd. “Find the person that’s from that show, sit down with them, and enjoy an evening quite unlike any of the other dinner parties we’ve had before.” He held his arms out and waited for someone to clap or to react in some way.

Light murmurs came from the oncoming battalion as they began their approach to the only house in Plumeria Cove with so many of its lights lit, their beacon in a dark, windless night.

It felt to Marcus Scott as if time was dragging its wounded corpse onward. The other couples stumbled into each other and around the table as they attempted to find their seats for the night. Through shows like *The West Wing*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *The Nanny*, everyone eventually found their dining partners for the night. Marcus and Catherine exchanged glances from across the table. Many of the neighbors of Plumeria Cove had been aware of each other for some time, but they weren’t often forced together in circumstances such as a dinner party with a gimmick. Courtney Skinner was the first to stand up.

“Now, we’re all seated with our dinner partners for the evening. I do suppose it’s time to bring the first course out.” She smiled as the wrinkles near her eyes twitched, but the eyes themselves betrayed no sense of worry. To Courtney Skinner’s eyes, this was a party people

would talk about for years. She disappeared behind the kitchen door, noises of other voices barely coming through as the door swung behind her.

Alexander Skinner proudly displayed his sticker, one that read “Chandler Bing,” while sitting next to his partner for the evening. Colleen Baker found the “Phoebe Buffay” sticker on her blouse and realized she’d never seen an episode of *Friends* in her life.

“So, how are you enjoying the evening so far?” Alexander asked. Colleen Baker’s eyes shot over to her husband who sat in silence. She turned back and gave a small grin and a thumbs up. Alexander Skinner clapped his hands at that. “Good, I’m glad you’re all able to enjoy yourselves. I know it’s been a long year but I was hoping we could all come together as neighbors and spend a nice evening together. Wouldn’t you agree, dear?” He turned toward Courtney Skinner as she burst through the kitchen door, putting the smile back on her face.

“Yes, absolutely.” She clapped her hands together. The other families looked back and forth at one another, memories of the previous dinner party and its food poisoning wafting through their memory like a slow fire. “But I regret to inform you all that the soup will be delayed for a moment, troubles in the kitchen, you know how these things are.” She grabbed a large bottle of champagne, the paper moaning under her grip. “So we’re going to do this a little early. We were battling back and forth as to when we should propose our little toast here, but it looks like Alexander is winning this fight through sheer luck, isn’t that right, dear?” He jumped up from his seat, glass already in hand, jostling the table like an earthquake. The Hendersons glanced over at one another, empty stomachs tightening at the news. The other couples merely held onto whatever they could to keep their glasses from capsizing before them. Courtney Skinner popped the cork nearly out the window as she passed by each chair, loading the flutes.

The thud of cork on glass alerted the battalion on their front lawn, hidden by broken street lamps, readying themselves for a siege.

“And now for our toast to this evening,” Alexander Skinner had stood the entire time, glass out and full. “To our wonderful neighbors, to this wonderful evening, and to the hope of the future, that we may undo the unpleasantness of the past.”

The glass dining room window shattered from the first two arrows shot through. The battalion outside cheered before letting loose more arrows. Marcus Scott dove down to the tile floor and covered his head. He didn’t know if many other people did the same; he could only hear the glass shattering above him. The majority of the party around him had already begun to run from the room. They screamed, and he could hear Catherine among them as he dragged himself on the ground to the connecting entryway.

Marcus Scott was the last person to leave the dining room, helped up by Kyle Henderson. Everyone checked each other, looking for cuts from the glass or wounds from the arrows. The party had left the dining room unscathed.

Marcus looked back to see Alexander Skinner’s body on the dining room floor. An arrow jutted from his chest. A stain had begun to form beneath him, whether from the champagne or blood, he couldn’t tell. The rest of the party huddled in the entryway, heads craning as they watched for any other incoming projectiles. Marcus found Catherine and grabbed her hand as they looked at the potentially dead body of one of their hosts. He knew, deep down somewhere, that Alexander was dead, but didn’t want to make Courtney Skinner any more upset than she already was.

No other arrows came through for a moment. Glass and debris fell from the window frame, powdering the wood floor in front of it like sugar. Although the party stood in the entryway of the house, they could hear the faintest sounds of cheers emanating from the front lawn. None of them dared look through the front door's peephole out of a stern belief that another arrow would find its way through.

"It was a nice toast," Bob Johnson said to break some of the tension around them. Marcus nodded in agreement. Courtney Skinner stood in much the same way a newly planted tree does, some support on either side but just barely enough at the root to keep itself straight.

"I am sorry for the delay, ma'am." A man in a white chef coat opened the kitchen door, a single arrow embedded in the wood. "The soup is finally finished." He opened a delicate silver tureen, steam rising from the pale red liquid inside. "Should I serve or would you care to play the host?" he asked as he began to push nearby shattered glass from the table. Marcus wasn't quite sure if the Chef had noticed Alexander's body yet or not.

Courtney Skinner couldn't respond. She held her hands up to her mouth and her eyes stayed wide, stuck for a moment, unable to function as a person. The Chef stood in the dining room, waiting for a response before shrugging and beginning to serve. Pale red soup sloshed into all fourteen bowls on the table. Not a sound came from any of them as they watched the Chef work, the gentle lapping of liquid against ceramic bowls the only noise in or out of the house.

The small battalion had since calmed and begun to plan its next move.

"Now, is there anything else you need from me or shall I return to assist with the further courses?" the Chef asked. He held the tureen as he looked at the party huddled together in the entryway.

“If,” Marcus Scott began, a collective cracking of necks turned to face him, “you wouldn’t mind, could you maybe step outside and see maybe what the hell happened? I don’t mean to disturb your work but there’s an issue outside and I don’t think any of us can deal with it.” He gulped and looked the Chef in his eyes. The Chef’s face was blank for a moment, as though he had tasted something so indescribably awful his life had to be reevaluated.

“No trouble at all. You said the issue is right outside, correct?” the Chef said, pointing out the window. Marcus nodded before the Chef began to climb through the broken glass frame and out into the dark of the night. The party peeked their heads in through the doorway to see how the Chef fared. A sudden clinking of spoons against china startled the crowd back into their dinner party.

“What?” Celina Henderson asked, dipping her spoon into the soup, a cloud of steam popping out of it like a geyser. “We’ve been waiting hours for this, we’re at least going to enjoy it.” Her husband had already begun draining his bowl before she could finish her sentence. The rest of the party looked over at one another and back to Courtney Skinner. Hers was a momentary silence before the world popped back into place before her.

“Yes, absolutely, don’t let the soup go to waste. Now where were we before?” she moved her head around in concentric circles. She only raised her hands as if to say to them “yes, please, enjoy the soup for as long as we can” before finding her original seat with her back cast to the window.

Most of the dinner party sat down soon after. Colleen Baker pushed Alexander a bit to the side so she could resume her place at the table. Marcus and Catherine Scott looked at one another, Marcus’ eyes wide as though he couldn’t understand what had happened in the dining

room. Catherine shrugged and rejoined the party. The party matched with the Hendersons, slowly spooning up the tepid red liquid before it cooled further. The Hendersons themselves sat and waited for the rest of the party to catch up. They began striking up conversations to pass the time.

“Did I ever tell you about the soup we had at the Plaza Hotel last time we visited Kyle’s parents? My word, it was the most wonderful thing you’d eaten, so perfectly seasoned,” Celina Henderson said to no one in particular. She glanced over to Courtney Skinner before adding “But this was quite good, too, very much like a tomato.” Courtney didn’t know about the tomato taste of the soup just yet. She was still busying herself spooning out chunks of glass from her bowl.

The clinking of china and steel filled the room as the heat from the soup rapidly escaped through broken windows. Where once steam would encase the room in good tidings and a feeling of inner warmth, there was then only quiet slurping and a slowly chilling corpse.

“What was the game you wanted us to play?” Shiro Ota asked after an eternity of slow slurping. Courtney Skinner perked up from her chair, eyes alight, eager at the chance to play host again for their party.

“The game, yes, absolutely, we can start the game whenever you feel so inclined,” she began, hands clasped together, “But maybe we should wait for the next course. It does lend itself more to conversation than soup would. I don’t know what Alexander was thinking.” The rest of the room fell silent, a simultaneous setting of spoons against the rims of their bowls. Marcus Scott wanted to do something else with the room, to ask about how Courtney was doing and what they should be doing with Alexander. But a dinner party is a dinner party. He knew he couldn’t ruin their well-planned evening.

Courtney Skinner quietly exited the room, the kitchen door swinging behind her. She emerged a moment later cradling a large silver platter resplendent with tiny pieces of bread, each topped with a single chunk of cheese carved in a pattern. Everything from stars and triangles to little faces littered the tray as Courtney Skinner wiped a bit of debris from the table to place the tray down.

“Now, I want you all to think back to the characters you were given at the beginning of the night.” She looked around the room at the party patiently waiting for her instruction. “I want you to pick the shapes you would most associate with your characters.” She picked up a square for herself. “Vivian Banks may be a bit of a square, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t delicious.” She took a bite and smiled, the crunch of the toasted bread filling the room like wood cracking.

The others followed suit and grabbed whatever pieces they could after moments of deliberation and arguing with whoever sat near them. Courtney could see the party getting back to where it should have been, the voices swelling in their discussion of what was familiar. She walked around to the other side of the dining room and began pulling the thick red curtains closed over the broken window. But there was only so far conversation and alcohol could push them with a corpse in the room. The talking died down steadily before falling completely silent altogether.

Courtney Skinner tapped on a still intact ceramic bowl and asked the dinner party if they were finally ready for the second part of their games for the night. The resounding response from the dinner party was a look similar to what someone gives a dentist when asked about their flossing habits. She went over the rules regardless, about how they needed to begin acting as though they were a part of their specific shows, seeing who could act the characters out best.



Of course there was coughing, the awkward clearing of throats as the dinner party attempted the new game, spurred on by Courtney Skinner's eyes searching around the room for someone staying quiet for too long. Even her own partner in the game, Pete Frost, had begun to slip into a quiet spell as he tried to talk. She had been left alone by the sudden pin-cushion status of Alexander Skinner but paid not much mind to it. She only sat with her chin in her hand and looked at the watch on her wrist.

"Do you think we'll be able to pass the bill on time?" Shiro Ota tried his best Josiah Bartlet impression.

"I don't even know what this show is," Clara Johnson responded.

"Ah," he nodded. After a pause he added "That's a nice dress you're wearing tonight."

"Thanks." The pair looked around the room for their own spouses, seeing if anyone else was having a better time than they were.

Time dragged on and many of the other pairs began to resemble Shiro and Clara. They went into idle small talk and chatter before going further into nothing. Even through all of her efforts as a host, stepping over Alexander as she needed to run around the table, Courtney Skinner was unable to keep the party lively. Marcus Scott wanted to help again, felt something inside him stirring to at least move Alexander out of the way. But his partner for the night, Cheryl Frost putting on her best Fran Fine impression, wouldn't let him leave his seat.

There was a silence. Although the dining room had met many instances of quiet throughout the night, this one had a slight twinkle to it. A crunch as glass was crushed beneath the shoes of the Chef as he swung the red velvet curtains away from the window frame. He stepped back into the room with a short hop, dusting his sleeves of any lingering debris that had

accumulated in his time with the raid party. Even Alexander seemed to focus in on the Chef despite his closed eyes and lifeless status. Perhaps it was the escaping gas, perhaps the Chef simply had a magnetic presence, but Catherine Scott still swears that she saw Alexander move his head.

“Ladies and gentlemen, hello,” the Chef began, arms at his sides as though formally announcing his presence. “The party outside, as energetic as they are, would like a moment of your time. More specifically, they would prefer a moment of the lord of the manor’s time.” The Chef held out a hand and pointed it toward the spot where Alexander Skinner had stood to make his toast. “Or, rather, if the lady of the manor would prefer to hold court with the leader of the small battalion presently making camp outside, they would find that most agreeable.” The Chef bowed, his white hat staying perfectly straight. The rest of the party looked over to Courtney for her reaction, for her to say something. She only looked around the dining room at her guests, at eyes that waited expectantly for her to meet with the party outside.

“Are you absolutely certain,” she began, “that they want to meet with me? Could you just convince them to leave?” Her words came out in squeaks, shoulders and knees drawing in on themselves to take up as little space as possible. If she kept shrinking like this then maybe the Chef would no longer notice her, maybe the party itself would forget she was there and go back to sitting in silence. The party could still go on, they could finish their soup and wait for the Chef to bring out the rest of the courses. A host isn’t the most necessary thing.

“Oh, no, ma’am. I am certain they mean to speak with you.” The Chef bowed his head and crossed his hands in front of him as though regretting his words.

The rest of the party looked to Courtney Skinner, waiting for a response.

“Well, I mean, what would be so bad about going out there?” Marcus Scott broke the quiet of the room with a question. A piece of him regretted asking the question, but then the rest of him looked at his wife and at the arrow sticking out of the kitchen door.

But another voice broke out. Camile Ota echoed Marcus Scott’s sentiment. “If that’s what they want, then shouldn’t you at least go out and see?” Other members of the party began their agreements, vocalizing how important it is for a host to do what is necessary for the party. They drummed the table, clanged silverware and china together, created a chorus of rabble in support of what they wanted as though that were the same as actually supporting Courtney. A dinner party is only as good as its guests.

Courtney Skinner could only stammer out a few words before freezing in place. The crowd around her called for her to leave, to get out there and defend them from the siege party on the front lawn. The palms of her hands met the table with a sound like a hammer striking an anvil.

“Alright,” she said calmly, the instincts of a dinner host returning to her. “I will leave you for a moment to talk to the crowd outside. Please don’t worry, I will not be long.” She bowed her head slightly before walking over to the window. The Chef stood, smiled at Courtney Skinner, and raised the curtain away from the broken window. She stepped through the window frame and disappeared as quickly as the curtain fluttered back into place.

Not a single person in the party rushed to the window to see what was going to happen, to watch Courtney make her way across the yard to the waiting battalion and whatever might happen afterward. They did as they had for the majority of the evening: sat in their seats quietly, waiting for something else to happen.

“Now,” the Chef slapped his hands together, “I believe it’s time for me to return to the kitchen. As the hostess is away, we can no longer proceed with our meal until her return. I hope you understand.” He bowed deeply and returned to the kitchen.

“Should we at least ask for something else to drink?” Celina Henderson asked. Her bored hand ran circles around the rim of her glass. Some other guests mumbled in agreement before Bob Johnson stood up and began to make his way to the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Marcus Scott asked, standing up as well.

“I’m seeing if I can find the chef. We should at least have something to hold us over until Courtney gets back,” Bob Johnson said. His hand rested on the kitchen door before Marcus Scott began to fumble with the china cabinet behind his seat.

“Why disturb them when we have this here?” Marcus Scott pulled from beneath the cabinet a large bottle of wine and placed it on the table. “Someone hand me a knife real quick.” He promptly received one and proceeded to maneuver it around the top of the cork. After a moment of him working with the skill of a mediocre lock pick, the cork was pulled from the bottle, impaled by this knife that he held proudly in the air. “Look at that, old trick my dad taught me.”

“Yeah, your ‘dad’ taught you,” Catherine Scott said in a hushed tone to Clara Johnson sitting next to her. Marcus ignored his wife as he went around the table, pouring more wine into whichever glasses had yet to crack or break. He nearly tripped over Alexander Skinner trying to get to the last empty glass on the table.

“Sorry about that, Alex,” Marcus said as he sat next to Alex’s empty chair. Alcohol can only do so much on its own for a dinner party—the people need to respond in kind. And they did

for a while. As long as the bottle remained partly full, conversation flowed. Laughter and levity burst again through the room like tiny bubbles, the sounds of whatever was happening outside to Courtney Skinner soon forgotten. But bottles drain, glasses empty, and the conversations ground to a sudden halt as the dinner party was left with nothing to talk about. The red velvet curtains didn't move in the slightest in front of the window, but a cold air crept into the room like a fog. Even before the wine disappeared, the conversation began to chill as the climate shifted. Lips sealed, not for lack of wine but for lack of words.

“Jesus, why is it so cold in here now?” Bob Johnson asked. His wife Clara had already sidled up next to him for warmth, and other couples soon followed their lead. With the conversation on its dying legs, the sounds from the lawn slowly started to make their way through the curtains. Distant voices, hushed tones of something indecipherable from where everyone sat at the dining room table. Marcus Scott tried to keep a conversation going with Alan Baker—something so he wouldn't hear what was happening outside—but that died off. Many of the couples stopped to listen, straining their ears to hear.

“What did you do with our coats?” Shiro Ota asked, expecting one of the Skinners to respond. Camile Ota elbowed him slightly

Everyone at the table looked at everyone else, rubbing arms and shoulders and looking generally confused. Coleen Baker was the first to rise from her seat to being a search, and she said as such. The party only looked back at one another, a few loose comments being made before they could hear Coleen Baker yelling from the entryway. Most turned to look over at the window, for the sudden shriek to invite another couple of arrows through and ruin another wine glass or two. Only a slight rumble as figures moved and talked on the lawn.

“I can’t believe they’ve done this,” Coleen Baker said from the entryway. The rest of the party stood under the chandelier that hung above the front door and near a stairwell with a small crawlspace underneath. The space was veneered in a fine layer of dust, dirt, and more than its share of insect carcasses. But the refuse was accompanied by roughly a dozen large coats. Leather, pleather, faux fur, and genuine mink were piled one on top of the other in a senseless pile to the horror of the dinner party. They gasped, held their mouths in disgust. They asked how any host could treat their finest garments in such a fashion. Arms reached inside to grab what was theirs, to shake off the dust and dirt and grime and the insult that had been affronted to them on a night that was meant for revelry and delight. They donned their coats and jackets and returned to the dining room, their seating arrangement forgotten.

“I can’t believe they would just throw our coats under the stairs like that. It’s the rudest I’ve ever seen,” Pete Frost said as he still picked bits of dirt from his leather coat. “And just look at the cobwebs on Cheryl’s fur collar, I mean the nerve of all that.” He attempted to help his wife wipe the webs, but she waved his hands away. Everyone agreed, commented on how nice their coats were, how awful this misfortune. Alexander would have agreed if not for his current circumstances.

“And that fur collar—it just looks so real,” Celina Henderson said, rubbing her hand against the fur. Cheryl Frost was taken aback, pulled the coat closer to herself.

“Looks real? I’m afraid you’re mistaken.” Cheryl looked away. “My father hunted this fox himself, gave it to my mother for a Christmas gift before she gave it to me. Why on earth would I ever wear something fake?” She held her hands to her face in a mock shock, playing the offense for the dinner party audience.

From outside came a soft rumbling, as though a dozen boots were hitting the ground at the same time.

“But why would you wear the real thing when the faux exists?” Celina Henderson looked Cheryl up and down from across the table, brow furrowed. “Even if it was dead long before you got it, it’s still rather cruel to wear a corpse around your neck.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business?” Pete Frost said without looking up. He sat next to his wife, arms on the table and thumbs twiddling.

“Now wait just a minute there,” Kyle Henderson began to say. Before a full sentence could leave his lips, Celina Henderson threw one of the last filled wine glasses at the table. Marcus Scott watched the red wine sail through the air in near slow motion and splash over Cheryl Frost’s fur collar, staining the gray fur a deep red.

The Frosts immediately stood, both gasping. The wine dripped down the fur collar and onto the rest of Cheryl’s dress, the dining room table, and carpet. Pete Frost landed the first punch on Kyle Henderson. He lunged across to connect fist with face, knocking more glass and plates from the table.

Shouts and yells from an altercation on the lawn had begun, but no one from the dinner party heard any of what was happening. They were much too focused on the second punch thrown by Kyle Henderson in retaliation.

The room stopped and held its breath. Both men were on their feet, Pete Frost covered in debris from the table and Kyle Henderson with his back against a wall. Each clenched his fists but kept himself from raising them again, both with a look on their faces of uncertainty.

Outside, there were yells, crashing and fighting, and the distinctive sounds of metal on metal, of chants and cheers. The two men inside the dining room—the dinner guests, those who had been sitting around the table so cordially for so long—could finally in that moment disregard everything and let their fists do some talking.

“Body blow, beneath the ribs.” Kyle Henderson started the conversation.

“Clip the chin in retaliation, then go for the clavicle,” Pete Frost responded.

“Aim for the ear, miss slightly but swing the arm for full head contact.” Kyle Henderson made a rebuttal.

“Fake a left hook and box in his left ear.” Pete Frost attempted to end the conversation.

“Headbutt, a move he remembers from college.” Kyle Henderson attempted the same.

“Go for the eye poke, miss the mark, but gouge out a chunk of skin under the right eye.”

Pete Frost stopped playing around.

“Attempt a palm strike upward into the nose.” Kyle Henderson remembered that from a self-defense video. He didn’t remember that it could prove fatal.

Their wives and neighbors didn’t let them find out if it was fatal. Both men were forced to the ground and away from one another. Marcus Scott held Kyle Henderson down by his shoulders while Alan Baker took Pete Frost to the side. They flailed and kicked their legs out but only scuffed up the hardwood floor.

The noises outside had diminished as well. What was once uproarious barely left a flicker of a noise. Only huffing from the two men on the floor filled the rest of the room, quiet as a heartbeat pressed up against someone’s ear.



A roar from outside broke through the room like a tossed rock. The velvet curtains shifted as if to let the noise come into the room fully and for the first time that night the dinner party were able to see clearly the battalion on the front lawn. A dozen fires spread across the lawn, multiple tents in front of each one. Marcus Scott never remembered the Skinners' yard being that large nor the tents and bonfires lit on it. The battalion was vast—at least three or four dozen men could be seen from the window, lit only by their fires. A circle of men had formed near the window, the source of the noise they had heard earlier. All but Pete Frost and Kyle Henderson stood by the broken window frame to watch. Courtney Skinner stood in the middle of the circle, one foot on top of a body with his face down in the grass, parts of his head caved in. Courtney Skinner stood there, one arm raised into the air as the other wiped blood from her nose. Chants rose from the circle, confusing the dinner party. Not quite in a language they could understand, but the inflection in the voices was there. Triumph. Courtney joined their chants.

The dinner party stood at the window, watching as Courtney Skinner was raised by the men. She was brought above their shoulders in a cheer as though she had slain something great and terrible. They carried her, chanting all the time. From the lawn to the street to the entrance of Plumeria Cove and out to the main road. Some carried torches, others only cheered and carried their banner, but in all of this they were cheering for Courtney Skinner. Their tents, their fires, the man Courtney had been standing on were left on the lawn, discarded. It was as though they never needed those things in the first place, as though those items were a distraction from their evening.

Marcus Scott looked out over the grass from the broken window and wondered why he ever came to any of the dinner parties.

“Alright, I’m through with this,” Shiro Ota said. He threw his chair back and stomped down to the kitchen door at the far end of the room. The door creaked on its hinges and revealed  
Nothing.

The Chef that had served them earlier had gone. The kitchen itself was pristine, cleaned from top to bottom but in its own cleanliness revealed that not a single person had been there all night. A coldness hung around the room, the way rooms get when the warmth of people and activity slowly drains away. Pots and pans were in their places, the silver tureen was gone entirely. Noises that everyone in the dinner party would have sworn on their partners’ graves to have heard were missing. Cold and silence.

The dinner party stood in the doorway behind Shiro Ota. They mumbled, asking each other where the rest of the food was, about how late it was, about the hunger and the desire for something to at least tide them over until they returned back home. Everyone looked at everyone else, waited for someone to step into the kitchen first. No one ever did.

They filed out of the house, one couple after another, into the dark of the night. They left the dining room behind them. Alexander Skinner, the broken glass and china, the soup bowls stained red from congealing. Arrow marks on the walls were the only permanent indication anyone had been there that night. A splash of red wine and a few loose arrows were left for the next owners to deal with. The only noise that remained in the Skinners’ home was that of the velvet curtains. A wind rushed in and they flapped like someone pulling sheets from their bed. Slowly yet suddenly.

The Skinners’ front lawn smoldered with the death of the fires around it. Even the dead man Courtney Skinner had stood triumphantly on top of remained as well. The dinner party

disbanded, coats ruffling as they walked back to their own homes. No triumph of a night, only empty stomachs and a ruined coat.

## THE LIGHTS ON

There was a small family, the Johnsons, thoroughly ordinary and unremarkable except that they were the start to the disappearances. It was an average night, one in which the street lights flicker as they do, the clouds overhead move back and forth listlessly through the night obscuring a quarter moon when they feel like it. The normal sounds perked up everywhere, rustled leaves and branches, a rusted hinge squeaking, arguments from a couple of houses due to rebellious children or maybe some kind of unscrupulous spending, the usual that carries on the breeze. But the night grew tired and long, soon lights flicked off up and down the street like a Morse code signal stopping. An almost audible “good night” wafted through every open window, and the street fell quiet and dark. For the most part. It was only the Johnsons’ house that stood bright and loud in a kind of defiance to the rest of the street. If it hadn’t been for Marcus Scott from across the street, it would likely have gone unnoticed for days. He had been, as he said, heading down stairs for a nightcap when he noticed the neighbors’ house ablaze with light, every window pouring out a soft yellow haze. Checking the clock in the kitchen and looking back across the street, Marcus Scott put on his slippers, tied his robe just a little tighter, and quietly opened his front door. The wind was still mild but held enough sound to whisper past the chimes on the veranda. Marcus Scott hugged himself for warmth before heading across the empty street. He made his way through their front yard, up the steps, and stopped at their glass-paned door. The door itself cast little lines of shadow over Marcus as they lit up his surroundings. He looked back at his own home and could scarcely make it out. Gently, he knocked at the door. Met without so much as a creaking floorboard, he knocked again, this time slightly louder than before. Still, he was faced with a bright silence. Exhaling, he knocked again,

much louder. He peered in through the fenestrated door and saw nothing, only the light and a couple of standard front entrance items, not even dust swirling around from the AC. He continued to knock for a minute more before giving up. Whatever was wrong with them and their electricity-wasting ways, it could wait for the morning.

And the morning did come for the rest of the families on the street. Marcus Scott walked again across the road to meet his neighbors' door and marvel not only at the fact that the lights still appeared to be on, but that the door was also slightly ajar. Looking back at his house, much clearer in the day time, and up and down the street for anyone watching, he stepped inside. Marcus Scott called out for someone, anyone, to answer. Again, he was met only with the lights and silence, just as he had been the previous night. As to whether Marcus something-or-other is a bold man is not a point for contention, but he still decided that his best course of action was to continue further into the house. As to why he didn't simply leave and return with someone else, or perhaps phone the police is another point. But for the time being, he simply continued to walk through the Johnsons' seemingly empty home.

Since it was a Saturday he could expect some degree of sleeping in, maybe from their children now at the age where sleeping past noon on a weekend was normal, but Bob Johnson was a man who enjoyed the simpler things in life, like getting up right as the dawn peeked over the horizon to mow his lawn. This morning, however, was met with nothing more than silence from the Johnsons' house. And it continued throughout as Marcus Scott kept creeping throughout. The sitting room was empty, the kitchen devoid as well, dining room similarly evacuated. Not a soul on the first floor. His trek continued up the wooden steps that made not a single peep as he ascended. None of the doors could be seen from the entryway so the image of

every door on the second floor wide open was a bit more jarring than the emptiness that permeated the first. He walked slowly up and down the hallway, peering into each room, lamps still on from the previous night. The Johnsons' bed was still made, slippers resting below the foot. The kids' rooms, unkempt but appearing relatively untouched, sheets lying across the bed undisturbed. Marcus Scott began to make his way to the stairs when he believed he heard a small stirring from the bathroom at the opposite end of the hall. The lights above him still blazed. Was it a shuffling of feet? A drip of water? The shower curtain blowing in some invisible breeze? Had the whole family hid in their bathroom as a prank?

Nothing met him in the bathroom, only the light in the center of the ceiling. And the small sound, something that he couldn't quite place, made itself noticeable again, this time audible to the point where he could be sure he heard it. A slightly dirty mirror, the tinges of mildew on the bottom of the shower curtain, a towel shoved in a corner—nothing he observed could have made any sound and yet it still rang in his head. A last cry coming from something. And then the “POP” and a splash of darkness. Marcus Scott clutched his chest and backed himself into the wall with a grunt. His breath ragged under the sudden duress, he could only see from the light spilling in from the hallway. The darkened bathroom remained as it had been. He looked up to see a fading spark through the glass of the ceiling lamp.

Marcus Scott walked slowly from the bathroom, the dark patch behind him disappearing behind his profile before he turned to retreat down the steps. Only a single thought passed through his mind. Well, two thoughts, one fighting to push the other down. He thought about how odd the disappearing light was and how he should be getting home. There he could talk

things over with Catherine, and decide whether to tell someone else. But another thought kept creeping back into him: maybe the Johnsons had a basement.

Being a man who would feign courage on most occasions, Marcus Scott's latter thoughts won out over the body that kept propelling itself to the front door. As nagging as the thought was, it did have a bit of a point. He was sure he had seen a faint glow coming from the bottom of the house the previous night. As to what could be found there, he couldn't be sure. It had been years since he'd been in another person's basement.

Assuming the Johnsons' house was similar to his own, he made his way through the kitchen to a gray door just behind the stairs. He turned the doorknob and cracked the door open only slightly, turning his head to peer into the little sliver the door made for him. A light just above the landing of the steps was still on and showed no signs of burning out anytime soon. Creaking the door open just a few inches more, Marcus Scott stuck his whole head through the crack, getting a better view of the path downward. Slightly worn wood met him on the first few steps as he finally began his descent, his slippers kicking up dust from the edges of the steps the further he went down. A single light stuck out from the ceiling, this one caged in wire. A large, slightly distressed stake, driven into the center of the ground lay directly below it. Attached to the stake was a chain, one that could be used for hauling vehicles out of ditches. Marcus Scott walked to the stake and chain, the heft of it only as surprising as the marks embedded in it. Strange, he began to wonder, the Johnsons never mentioned owning a dog.

Marcus Scott emerged from the Johnsons' house as the first few cars of the morning rumbled past. A breeze caught the ends of his robe, and he smelled the Hendersons' breakfast from next door. He looked about again for any prying eyes as he made his way across the street.

“Honey,” Marcus Scott called out as he opened the front door.

“In a minute,” Catherine said from down the hall.

“I just wanted to ask,” he said, continuing down into the kitchen, “did you know that the Johnsons’ had a dog?”

“No, I can't say I knew about that. Why do you ask?” Her back turned to Marcus, the eggs sizzling in front of her.

“No real reason, just wondering.” Marcus sat down at the table, the hard wood jabbing into his already stiff back. He took a sip from one of the glasses of orange juice before him and waited while Catherine finished the eggs. After she put a plate in front of him, through a mouth of eggs and toast he asked: “By the way, do you think it's too early to call the police?”

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It was all anyone on the street could talk about for days afterward. The police had come and gone, the investigators had come and gone. The Johnsons’ extended family had come as well, some had gone, a few others stayed for a while. No one remained in the house for all that long, though, so the lights were finally turned off. It appeared as though they had all suddenly decided, like a capricious child would, to pack up everything in a little red wagon and run away from home.

The rumors began to spread, the accusations of gambling debts, of massive spending, of someone being blackmailed by someone else on that very street. Gossip beget gossip on top of even more and it all began swirling around, back and forth between the Marshalls and the Picketts and the Frosts and the Hendersons and the Bakers and the Otas all up and down the street before the prevailing thought about the Johnsons’ disappearance became a piling up of



family debts that caused them to disappear into the night. But, of course, it could all be considered the absolute truth or unfounded trash, no one could say for sure, except maybe the Picketts.

And the only thing Marcus Scott knew about the whole ordeal was his new-found sense of loss for seeing the house across the street blazing with lights every night. He missed the soft bleed of yellow light that would catch his eye whenever he passed by the front window—now there was nothing more than a great dark spot in his purview.

“You know, it's almost like they're out on vacation,” Marcus said to his wife on a particularly dark evening.

“Who?” she replied.

“The Johnsons. Just look at it over there—it's like nothing's changed since then, like they're going to just pop back into the driveway tomorrow morning.”

“Maybe. Or maybe you'll see one of them sneaking back into the house in the middle of the night to get some of their things back.”

“I thought all of that was sold off.” Marcus looked at Catherine sitting in the living room, thumbing through the newspaper.

“It's all still in there, last I heard from Cheryl Pickett.” She crossed her legs and placed the newspaper on her lap. “Apparently no one wants to spend all that long in the house. They just look around and want to leave as soon as possible. There wasn't enough time to go through everything there so they left it. Maybe they think the same thing you do.”

“Huh, maybe.” Marcus Scott looked back out the window at the dark blue windows catching reflections of his own lights. A small breeze picked up and rustled the leaves in both

houses' trees, and dust blew down the road and spun up like a tiny twister before settling back down.

The large clock on the other side of the room struck ten, Marcus looked back to Catherine yawning on the couch, folding the newspaper back up and tossing it onto the coffee table.

“Come on, maybe when you get up tomorrow Bob'll be outside mowing his lawn again,” she said, placing her hand on the base of Marcus Scott's neck.

“In a little bit,” he said with his stare still on the house across the street. “I haven't even read the paper yet. It's just been such a day,” he trailed off.

Catherine patted his back and kissed his cheek before making her way to their bedroom. Marcus remained at the window, squinting, looking to the Johnsons' windows, watching the lights from his house reflect and bounce off them. A new light flickered on on the other side of his house as he continued his vigil. A vacation did sound rather nice right now, he thought. At this time of the year they could go down south and escape a bit of the cold coming, maybe pay a surprise visit to their daughter in college. The house across the street glowed brighter still. A car passed them by, probably Dennis Pickett running out to get something he'd forgotten about in the day again. Marcus could never tell if it was the wind being blown out of the way or just the sound the tires made on the road, but that “whoosh” was a comfort in the night. It let him know there was still someone out there, even past midnight. Those golden windows were a different kind of comfort, almost a serenity in the glass reflected before him. Marcus Scott yawned as he turned around to go to bed.

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Colleen Baker was the first one to notice after a time. Or at least that's what Cheryl Frost said. No matter who discovered it, Marcus and Catherine Scott were gone that morning from their home. Colleen Baker had seen one lit window, the one belonging to their daughter, who had left for college months prior. Since the Scotts were the Johnsons' neighbors, she figured there had to be a reason that particular light was on along with so many of the others and walked across the street. A slightly chilly Thursday morning breeze cut through the small bits of leg poking out from beneath her robe. She knocked on the ajar door, and it creaked open only slightly with her knock. Colleen peeked her head in, called out for Catherine and Marcus. A silence and her own echoed words bounced back to her. The only sound was the leaves blowing down the road. That and a ting, a slight ting, but a ting nonetheless. Colleen looked about the front porch for the source of the ting to no avail. Believing the ting to be further in, she slid through the open crack in the door and cupped an ear to find its source. The entryway to the Scotts' home was much like her own, a small welcoming area, a hallway leading down to a kitchen in back, dining and sitting rooms flanking either side, and a staircase leading to a landing and another hallway. She had never seen their house this well-lit before. Although she had seen it inside once or twice, she could remember dimmed lights and deep mahogany everywhere. They did enjoy their dark wood, the Scotts. But now a golden light reflected off of the polished wood, illuminating every room brilliantly. Colleen Baker noticed the tinging growing dimmer the further into the Scotts' house she went. The crystal chandelier in the dining room burned like a pure glass of oil hanging upside down from the ceiling. Running her free fingers along the length of their dining table she recalled a dinner party some months ago—the second time she had ever been in their home—when Marcus started bringing out the more expensive bottles as the night

dragged on, long, like the zipper on her dress. He was sturdy in spite of the booze, much more so than Joe, although she couldn't seem to recall if Joe had even been there that night. She woke herself up from the idle thoughts in the doorway of the kitchen—the ting had all but stopped there. Taking a step back, she could hear it again barely over her own breathing. She traced her steps backward, through the dining room and into the entryway, the tinging growing louder with each passing step.

Colleen again found herself on the Scotts' front porch, sneering at the view of her own pathetic patio. The tinging continued like dimes bouncing off a pane of glass. It enveloped the porch, drowned out the wind that again began to blow. The sound of cars had all but ceased this far into the night, only the tinging remained. She could feel the bump in her chest resonate with it, syncing with its rhythm. But the tinging's pace jumped, taking on the sound of a rolling snare drum. Eyes alight, Colleen glanced around the porch, straining her ears to find anything that could be the source of the noise. Her ears were only filled with the tinging as it became more chaotic, the atonality building a knot in her stomach. As she pulled her hair away from her ears her eyes met with the porch light just above her. A small flurry of white wings gathered about the dome, bouncing off in a rhythm, one after another, smacking again and again and again and again.

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“It's a bit odd, don't you think?” Cheryl asked over the garden wall.

“Not all that odd when you think about it,” Dennis replied.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the way I look at it,” he began, adjusting his belt, “the Johnsons were likely having some issues, you know, probably something with money, you know how Bob was. So they probably owed someone something. And no one wants to get their house taken away from them like that. It's humiliating having all your neighbors staring at you while that goes on. So they got some things together and maybe their life savings and high-tailed it out of here in the middle of the night. And maybe the Scotts could have been in a similar situation and got a similar idea, you know what I mean?”

“But to go through all of that.”

“Now that's just me speculating. Who knows what can get in men's minds when there's something bad at their heels? Anyway, Cheryl, tell Pete I said 'hi.' I've got to be off to pick some things up for Cindy—you know how it is.” Dennis waved and got into his car just as the street lamps began to flicker on. Cheryl watched his car head down the road, leaves blowing in the wind behind him. She kicked some loose leaves beneath the bushes that bordered their yards before heading back inside. She closed the door behind her, and Pete called from the dining room.

“So, what did Dennis have to say?” he asked, peering out into the front yard from behind the curtains.

“Same thing as everyone else, just conspiracies, nothing solid or juicy enough to give a damn about.” Cheryl sighed and pulled out a chair from the dining table.

“Shame, he seems like he might know something about something. You've seen the way he's out all the time now, 'picking something up for Cindy.' You know he's got to be doing something else.”

“I know. He just kept going on about some kind of money thing they probably had. I mean it makes sense, but it just feels too boring. And the lights, why would someone running away from debt leave all the lights on?” Cheryl played with a place mat in front of her, spinning it around on the small wooden table. “Oh, and did you hear anything on the scanner?”

“Still nothing there. The police have roughly the same ideas as everyone else, so, again, it's like it was before they left, just goddamn boring everywhere,” Pete said. He backed off from the curtains, stretched, and pulled up a chair next to Cheryl. The couple sat for a time, neither looking at anything in particular. Pete raised his hand but quickly replaced it in his lap. A drumming from Cheryl's fingers on the table echoed through the small dining room as the couple turned to stare out their window. Night had begun to roll in, lights blinked and died across the neighborhood, lightning bugs floated by street lamps. Headlights from Dennis Pickett's station wagon flooded their window before turning into his own driveway. A metal creak, a metal slam, hurried footsteps, and a door quickly closing behind him. Cheryl and Pete continued looking out their window at the houses around them.

“What should we do for dinner?” Cheryl asked.

“I'm not too sure, I'm not feeling all that hungry just yet. What about you?”

“Same.”

“I'll see if we have any soup mix, maybe just something so we can heat it up whenever,” Pete said, getting up from his chair.

“That sounds fine.” Cheryl continued sitting, staring through the opaque curtains. The lights shone in from all though the neighborhood. They could sit there and bask in them all night if any of them stayed lit. Except for the Scotts', the big dark empty thing that just sat there across

the street now. She wondered if anyone called their daughter about what had happened—no one had been in the house since then. Cabinet doors creaked behind her. A thud rang through her ears before she turned back to see where it came from.

“Sorry. One of the cans fell out. I did find some tomato soup though. Should I start it up?” Pete said.

“If you want to, sure. Are there any crackers left?”

“Probably, let me check.” Pete's voice trailed off as he went deeper into the kitchen.

The Johnsons too, Cheryl knew someone had to have called their relatives, because their home bustled more than it had in months, although it never quite lit up like it did that last night. And the same thing with the Scotts', although their lights were usually a bit lower than most others. Over Pete rustling about in the kitchen, she heard the faint sounds of Cindy Pickett's voice. Cindy always sounded like her voice was dipped and fried in butter, even when yelling at Dennis about something. Maybe he picked up the wrong kind of oil again and her sinuses flared up. Or maybe he actually got it right this time and she was yelling with a kind of joy, Cheryl couldn't tell though the walls and Pete's endless search for crackers.

“Yeah, no crackers, just the soup,” Pete said from the doorway into the kitchen.

“That's alright. I'm fine with just the soup. Would you mind heating it up?” Cheryl asked, still looking out into the neighborhood.

“It's already on the stove.” Pete took his chair back next to her. “Do you want to eat by the scanner and listen in again tonight?”

“Maybe not tonight. I kind of just want to sit and watch the lights from here.” Cheryl sighed a deep breath while Pete raised his eyebrows at her.

“The lights?” he asked. Cheryl nodded and motioned with her head outside their window at everything turning on, turning off, flickering, growing dim, becoming shadow puppets, and twinkling along the street. Pete got up, took Cheryl's hand and squeezed it before heading back into the kitchen.

“When was the last time,” Cheryl wondered aloud, “that we had dinner in the actual dining room?”

“What was that?” Pete hollered from the kitchen.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself,” Cheryl said.

Pete returned with two white bowls and two silver spoons in his hands. He placed them on the table by their seats before returning to the kitchen. Cheryl inhaled the tomato steam rising from the bowl, and recalled golden Christmas lights hung around the room and Pete playing something on that toy glockenspiel she gave him. What was that tune?

She could see only white as Pete snickered behind her. Cheryl pulled the napkin from her head and placed it in her lap. He raised his eyebrows at her, grinning while dipping his spoon into the soup. Cheryl looked beyond her husband's grinning, back into the night and the lights flickering back and forth again. It's still only dinner time, she thought. How many of them are still walking around that much?

“Should I go and turn the scanner on? You know, just to have some background noise,” Pete said, putting his spoon aside.

“Hm?” Cheryl replied, still staring out the window.



“It just feels too quiet in here tonight.” Pete stared into his soup. The steam had all but disappeared, the soup cooling down more and more quickly as the night squeaked along. He could swear he could hear it congealing against the bowl.

“If you want,” Cheryl said. Her eyes kept at the widow, the brightness coming in though the curtains. It was so odd, she thought, how the light always seemed to come in through the curtains but never seemed to go back out again, as though it were trapped there. The Otas’ house across the street had lights flowing out freely, same thing with the Bakers’ a few door down from them. The Picketts’ next door seemed to positively glow, or maybe that was only a streetlamp in the way.

“I want to look outside for a moment,” she said, putting her spoon down and standing up from her chair. Pete stood up along with her.

“What?” he said. The question hung in the air for a moment, unsure where it was supposed to go.

“I just want to look outside for a second. I want to see something.” Cheryl made her way around the table and out the front door.

“Oh, okay,” Pete said, returning to his seat. “I’m going to turn the scanner on,” he said before standing back up.

Waning crescent, new moon coming soon. That one lamp near the top of the cul-de-sac flickered only slightly, as if it were blinking. Another breeze was coming through again tonight, leaves rustling around and blowing the bangs of Cheryl's hair from her face as she stepped onto the front porch. The lights were on up and down the street, they pulsed with the life inside them. Shadows cast upon the curtains, dinner scenes, kids running about, was that an argument in the

Hendersons' front window for everyone to see? But what would they see, at this time, when everyone else was down for dinner, not a soul on the streets? Even Dennis Pickett was safe inside now—he wouldn't go out that late most nights.

She heard a shattering, too muffled to be a window, maybe a plate? Cheryl looked over to the Picketts' house and listened for anything else, perhaps one of them yelling, perhaps one of their kids throwing a fit this time. Tertiary laughter from across the street wafted over but no sounds remained in the Pickett house next door. Something broken could mean something else altogether, thought Cheryl. She slid near the fence separating their lawns and waited for Dennis to make a hurried exit, scrambling to fix the plate or find its replacement. The grass has taken on a bit of moisture from the night air, and it seeped into her sandals as she crouched behind the fence, still waiting to hear anything at all. Not a footstep, not a yell, not a scream, not a thing. The gentle buzz from a street lamp was the only sound that met Cheryl by the fence. Picking herself up, she glanced back at the Picketts' home with all those lights shown off to the neighborhood.

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“Yeah, Cheryl and Pete would find another house like that, wouldn't they?” Camille said, looking out the back window at their children playing. The dining room still smelled of potatoes and eggs. She and Shiro had their hands deep in soiled dishes.

“But it's the Picketts. They're right there,” Shiro said while handing her another orange-stained glass.

“And Cheryl just has more shit to talk about. Did you know she saw the Hendersons yelling about something? Oh my god, just look at how noteworthy that is. I'm simply aching with

surprise.” Camille put the glass on the drying rack before walking over to the kitchen table. She pulled a chair out and sat down with her head in her hands. “Christ, it's like she can't stop with it. Everyone knows. She doesn't need to remind us every other week. And god, if she's always watching them then what about everyone else—what does she know about us?”

“What's there to know? We're relatively normal, at least compared to the Hendersons,” Shiro said. He continued scrubbing at the plates and putting them on the rack to rinse.

“Hold on. You're not rinsing them right,” Camille said, getting up from her chair and returning to the sink.

“What? I'm doing it like I normally do,” Shiro dipped the dishes in water and patted them lightly before they went to the rack.

“No, like this, you have to check for spots or they're just going to fester and get moldy,” Camille took a dishtowel and wiped down the plates further, showing Shiro before returning them to the rack.

“But that's so much effort for nothing. They don't look any cleaner,” he said.

“They're cleaner—you can run your hands across them and not feel a speck of anything on them,” Camille said. She demonstrated, running her fingers across the smooth plastic plate. Shiro nodded, dipped the plates in water, brushed off the excess water, and ran his palm down the plate, filling the kitchen with a soft squeak.

“Yep, spotless,” he said. The plate rattled the other dishes as he dropped it into the drying rack. Camille sighed and went back to the table, one side of her face resting in her hand.

“You know, I haven't heard anything from the Frosts in a bit, not since they discovered the Picketts' house,” Shiro said, turning his back on the dishes. “I haven't seen Pete at the store in a while. Maybe they've up and left too.”

“I doubt it. I heard one of their aunts or niece is coming or something like that,” Camille said. She tilted back in her chair, her eyes looking to the ceiling and her hair tumbling down behind the chair. “When did we get like this?”

“Get like what?”

“Like this,” she said, pulling herself back upright. “We talk more about the neighbors and what they're doing than we talk about our own days or what the kids are doing or anything, really.”

“Well, we've been married for about eight years now and it's a bit hard to find something new to talk about. We've kind of gone over everything already.”

“You know what I mean. Is there really nothing interesting about our days anymore that we're just as used to watching people out the window as we are on TV?”

“It's not really our fault. Overseeing a construction site is only really interesting when my job's at risk and the bank is—I don't know—do kids still bring piggy banks and open little savings accounts?”

“Maybe? I just deal with their parents and their wanting to mortgage something else to buy something, or mortgage one house to buy a bigger house. Some old couple wanted to buy that lot off Rosemont to start their own fucking vineyard. I couldn't even look at them they were so excited.”

“Oh yeah, didn't they only have about eight thousand dollars for it all?”

“Yeah, they told me their business plan was just 'make yuppie wine, get money' and that's it.”

“I forgot about that part,” Shiro chuckled.

“Yeah, and then their daughter came in the next day to get whatever money back that they put down. She was pissed that I even listened to them.”

“What else were you supposed to do, just shoo them off?”

“Right? That's what I told her and she left even angrier. I didn't even take anything from them. There's nothing to get mad at me for.” Camille paused and looked down at her hands folded in her lap, “God, that was nearly two years ago. I can't even remember a single thing happening last week. I think I talked to one other person besides Phil and Alice and even then Phil just asked if I wanted coffee.” She bent down and hugged her knees while mumbling “We need to go do something.”

“What?” Shiro asked.

“I said we need to go do something.”

“I know, but what could we do? I'm locked into this project for another month and the kids have even longer until their next break.”

“God, you don't have to be so blunt about it.”

“It's kind of hard not to be most of the time.” Shiro shuffled where he stood. Camille was still bent down into her legs.

“We could go visit my parents.”

“Shiro, no. Osaka's too far, and we can't afford it right now, not all of us.”

“Well, it doesn't have to be all of us.” He turned around to look at their tow kids playing in the backyard, their small dog jumping between them as they tossed a red ball.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Well, maybe we can drop them off with your parents for a bit, give everyone a vacation.”

“How is that a vacation for anyone but us?”

“It's more of a change of scenery for everyone, at the very least. Don't you think we should all get that?” Shiro walked over to his wife and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Maybe. We can talk about it later. I've got to get going in a few minutes.” Camille stood up, brushing Shiro's hands off her shoulders, and left the kitchen. Shiro stood by the kitchen table, watching her leave, listening to her jump up the steps.

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Various family members came and went, surveying each house for one reason or another. The Johnsons' relatives came because of the sheer shock and the relative closeness that branch of the family had with the others. The Scotts' daughter was the only person to visit their home, but she still had another year and a half left in college and decided her studies were more important. Cheryl Frost mentioned that she overheard the young woman say her mother would have wanted it that way. The Picketts only had a distant cousin on Dennis's side visit, namely to take stock of what the home contained and how the rest of the family was going to divide up the various collections and documents they kept. The visitations kept a relative consistency. All were typically accompanied by casseroles and condolences from the rest of the neighborhood before

everyone ended up back in their regular routine. There were, after all, a great deal of other lives to live and other houses to walk through without something as trifling as a neighbor disappearing to interfere.

The Frosts, however, were the only family where relatives had come before the call from police. An aunt of Pete's had come for one reason or another, possibly visiting friends in a town over and stopping by as a formality. She arrived relatively early, just as the morning was beginning for most, and knocked on their door. Waiting a moment to knock once again, she could see lights on through the tinted window in their front door. Although it was dim, she could still make out the lights in the doorway. Either they forgot about the light last night, she pondered, or they're hiding from me. She couldn't decide which would be more like her shrew of a nephew and his wife and was reaching the point of not caring regardless. She knocked again, took a step back from the house, yelled out Pete Frost's name, and waited. The only sound to meet her was the breeze and distant engine running. She shrugged before heading back to her car. She looked over at the neighbors' house and walked over with the idea that they might have a key to her nephew's home. The Marshalls answered their door promptly enough, meeting the aunt with a hospitality she'd missed from her relatives. She apologized for the disturbance at such early an hour and introduced herself. The Marshalls waved the apology away, saying it was nothing much, and introduced themselves in turn. She imposed on them a question, one odd to them considering how long they'd known the Frosts and their habits, but she asked without that knowledge.

“Might you have a spare key for my nephew's home?”

The Marshalls could only truthfully respond to her that they'd rarely seen much of the Frosts and that the couple preferred their privacy. They respected that even if Cheryl wasn't always as amicable. The aunt said she understood, explaining this was only the third time seeing them since the marriage, sighing regret into her sentences.

“Have you eaten at all?” Cassandra Marshall asked. “It’s still early and we were just getting down to breakfast.”

The aunt eyed the couple with a slight suspicion. She remembered no other neighbor or relative asking before and felt a tinge of hunger. The aunt waved the offer away, telling the couple she had already eaten and really must be on her way. The Marshalls shrugged, wished her well, and closed the door. The aunt still heard them mumbling on the other side of their door even as she walked away back to her car. And it was only then that she noticed the door to her nephew’s home had not only been unlocked, but slightly ajar.

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The pattern continued, for the most part, later and later into the year. Shiro Ota found the Bakers’ home lit up no more than a month after the Frosts’ disappearance. But it could have been longer—a stray dog had danced around him during a morning walk, eventually leading him to the door. After being brought to the door, Shiro lost track of the dog, and no one else knew about any strays on the street. Since the departure of the Frosts, the Hendersons had become the new center of street gossip, spreading theories and rumors about who would disappear next and who would likely be spared from the whole ordeal. But without the Frosts, there really wasn't anyone left to listen to Kyle Henderson's ramblings, even his wife Celina could only entertain him for so long. At least not until the Marshalls and all of their children went as well, noticed only by a



passing policeman who wondered from his cruiser why so many lights were on in the middle of the night.

“Why do you think he does it?” Shiro asked.

“Why do I think who does what?” Camille said, tracing a finger around the rim of her cup. The couple sat in the kitchen, the breeze blowing leaves into the windows outside, their hands and shirt fronts still damp from washing dishes.

“Kyle Henderson—all the things he had been saying about the Marshalls, where does he get all of that from?”

“I don't think he *gets* it from anywhere. He's just grasping straws out of his ass,” Camille said.

Shiro stood up to look out the back window, trying to count the leaves falling out of the tree. “But what do you think he's been saying about us?”

“To who? Celina? It's not as though there's anyone left to talk to.” Camille finished what remained in her cup before bringing it over to the sink. The couple stood next to each other in silence, watching the leaves pass by the window, carried by the wind off to another empty backyard.

“Even if there's nothing to really gossip about he still keeps going on and on about something, as if it's supposed to matter to anyone here now.” Shiro pushed himself away from the sink and returned to the table. Camille stayed by the sink, eyes locked to the leaves floating away. The wind carried it all by, as if everything had shriveled up and fallen off its tree. But some things couldn't go, the wind wouldn't pick them up, and they'd just accumulate in piles and

wait around for something else to kick them up. A little smile came across Camille's face as she watched the wind take the leaves away.

“How much has our power bill been for the past couple of months?” she asked, spinning around to face her husband.

“Not all that much. It's been going down since summer ended. Why?”

“And you said you wanted to go somewhere, maybe visit your parents, maybe drop the kids off with mine, right?” Camille walked out of the kitchen and into the front hallway, flicking on the lights before going into the living room to turn on some more. “I would like to do something fun.”

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“Holy shit, honey, come here, look, look look look,” Celina Henderson yelled from the living room. Kyle Henderson banged down frantically from the second floor, nearly falling over himself to sit next to his wife. “Look, the Otas’ place is lighting up like the fourth of July. It looks like they're the seventh to go.”

“Dang, yeah, I don't see any of the lights flipping off, they must be gone by now.”

“Should we call the cops now or wait until morning?”

“We can't be sure yet. We'll have to wait a bit longer to make sure. I don't want to have to explain things like we did with the Marshalls. Still though, going through the empty house like that. That was a thrill, like being a kid sneaking out your window at night.”

“That's twice you've brought that up,” Celina said, trailing off. The couple sat together to watch the house a little up the road blaze in the night, every window glowing with electricity. A

distant motor, or maybe the wind, strummed its noise across the lawn and into the Hendersons' house, falling on the couple's unlistening ears as they continued to watch for any signs of life.

“Do you see anything?” Kyle asked, pulling the slat of the blinds down just a bit more to get a better view.

“Nothing. Don't you have those binoculars somewhere?” Celina moved about to get a better viewing angle. “Dammit. And can you turn the lights off too when you're looking for them? The glare's making it too hard to see anything.”

The lights switched off behind her as she settled in to keep a watch on the house across the street. She heard creaking above her and a small victory cry from Kyle.

“I knew they were in the closet here,” he cried out from the stairs.

“Keep quiet. You're going to wake the neighborhood if you keep shouting like that.”

They both paused and looked at each other, the realization coming across their faces like a snail making its way down a wall.

“The Bakers are still there right?” Kyle asked. Celina got up from her perch and went to a small corner nook where a notepad rested. She began listing off names.

“The Bakers went a couple weeks ago, right before the Marshalls,” Celina said, the book falling into her lap with a dull thud.

“But then there's still the Scotts. They actually went on a vacation, didn't they?” Kyle's voice faltered at the last words.

“Johnson, Scott, Pickett, Frost, Baker, Marshall, and now Ota.” Celina's eyes didn't even look down at her notebook. “Honey, there's no one else.”

“But we don't know about the Otas. Shiro could be doing something with the lights. Maybe there's a weird fuse that he's trying to fix. You know how he gets.”

“I don't know.” Celina reached out and grabbed the binoculars from her husband's hands. “But, there isn't a shadow or a moving curtain to show anything otherwise.”

A silence descended over the couple, a silence so deep they couldn't hear anything else around them, not the wind, not the errant motors, not the click of the lights upstairs. It was a silence they hadn't been able to enjoy for a few months, with the constant calls and ravings with the Frosts over what could be going on and who was doing what to whom and whatnot.

“Should we just leave?” Kyle asked, shattering the silence like a pane of glass above them.

“Where could we go?”

“I don't know, anywhere, maybe just check into a hotel for a while.”

“Would a while be enough,” Celina didn't ask. It was only something for her to state.

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Kyle didn't know what to respond with, or whether he should even do so. The quiet came back, with the two avoiding looking at one another, plans turning over in their heads, speculation and questions neither knew how to answer.

“Do you at least want to get a suitcase out and start thinking?” Kyle asked.

“Why now?”

“Maybe if we start packing things we'll get an idea of where to go from what we'd want to bring.” Kyle threw the idea out like a steak in a tiger's den.

“Why would we even do that? How's it going to help?”

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“Because we can just leave now, lock the doors and drive off. It wouldn't be hard,” he insisted.

Celina buried her head in her hands and sighed. “I don't know,” was all she could say. Kyle slouched down in his chair a little further, still turning wheels in his head, coming up with something for them to do.

“Hey, wait,” Celina said, holding the binoculars up to her face. “I think I see something moving over there. Or maybe not, I don't know. Did the Otas have a cat?” Celina asked.

“Maybe? I've never heard them mention it,” Kyle answered.

“I'm seeing something, I don't know what. Maybe one of their kids had a pet hamster and it got out or something like that. Whatever it is, it's moving the curtains inside.”

“Or it could be the air conditioning kicking on. They likely couldn't have turned it off,” Kyle said.

“Yeah, there's that too. But I don't know, it just seems too sporadic to be the AC, like it's something wandering around and rubbing up against the curtains sometimes. Or maybe they're just all hiding out pulling a prank. You think Camille and Shiro would do that?”

“Camille maybe, if the kids wanted to do something like that,” Kyle answered.

“Oh god, yeah, that's probably what they're doing. Goddammit.” Celina put the binoculars down in her lap on top of her notebook. “And I could see better if you turned the lights off in here. I thought you did that already.”

Kyle didn't answer.

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