

The Thirteenth Labor And Other Stories

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## The Thirteenth Labor

Having missed the early train, William crouched in the moist trackside foliage criticizing himself for being late to his own suicide. *The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity.* He kicked at some clumps of dead leaves, the heel of his sneaker leaving a small furrow in the early spring earth. He had set three alarms, but he spent most of the night drafting a suicide-note poem, which he inevitably scrapped because, like most of his work, it was just okay. It didn't really capture the emotional reality of the situation in an interesting way. It was just more of the same, tired, suicide rhetoric, which he felt was just too melodramatic to endure as a worthwhile artistic artifact.

In addition to feeling guilty about being late, he now felt like a dick for criticizing the language of most suicide notes. He checked the time on his phone. It's not like those people were looking to craft some grand artistic gesture in their final moments, they were just leaving behind an explanation. An apology, maybe. Why they had to do it. Because he was running late this morning, he only had time to scribble down "peace" on a yellow post-it note, before taking off for the remote train crossing deep in the nowhere of upstate New York. He regretted writing anything. Peace could be misread as some sort of flippant goodbye. They would gather at his funeral, all the people who felt bad for him, his parents, or themselves, and think that he hadn't even taken his own suicide seriously. He fingered the keys in his pocket; perhaps he should just come back tomorrow.

He thought about Yeats's line from "The Second Coming," again. His haphazard execution so far would most certainly indicate a lack of conviction on his part, but the fact that he was here to end his life was certainly intense. He was neither the best nor the worst. Just a guy in his early twenties who didn't want to live anymore. He heard a train horn in the distance.

Might as well get it over with, he thought. His legs felt fine, but he stood to stretch them for a moment anyway, limbering up to make sure that when he leapt, it would count for something.

Athleticism was something he could always count on. His teammates in high school hadn't called him Hercules for nothing. It got a little more embarrassing when they printed it on the cover of ESPN the Magazine and then featured him on Sports Center. He crouched back down into the brush and checked his emails to pass the time. Some person named O'Brien from the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle wanted an interview. Wanted to know why William had thrown it all away for poetry. Deleted. Jesus, couldn't they just leave me alone for one day, he complained to himself. To be fair, he countered, if you'd been on time you wouldn't have checked your email in the first place. The trees around the train tracks shifted in a gentle breeze and he saw a squirrel chase another around a tree before stopping to unearth the acorns it stored last winter. It stopped and stared at William, cheeks stuffed, eyes concerned. You have nothing to fear from me, little dude, the young man thought at the immobilized rodent. It was not reassured. William maintained eye contact, wondering what it was like to be compelled by simple fears, to have complicated thought replaced by a constant internal scream that swelled or diminished with every alert glance into the forest.

William turned his hazel eyes towards the tracks, his expression resigned. He opened up the note application on his phone and typed, "My final thoughts concerned the internal voices of squirrels."

The warning bells on the nearby crossing began to peal as the train approached. Cars hardly used this road anymore, so the train crossing gates were a bit rotten and the paint was beyond faded. He'd make less of a scene here. The last thing William wanted was to interrupt the Monday commute and become a topic of conversation on Twitter. He knew, however, that

within ten minutes of being dead, or someone finding his body, the media (probably led by O'Brien) would descend on his house, the police would enclose the remote crossing with thin, yellow tape, and some random acquaintance would organize a candlelight vigil on Facebook to mourn the passing of yet another depressed college graduate. What happened to the days when a man could kill himself in peace? Dammit, he really should have written a different note.

He saw it now, the freight train hurtling down the tracks, diesel engine ferrying goods, maybe food, to one of the bigger upstate cities, probably Syracuse, its horn a sound that seemed to say, *hurry up please, it's time*. Yes, T.S. Elliot, yes it was. William emptied his pockets and dropped his phone onto the wet leaves at his feet. As the hulking steel sped towards the crossing, William stepped out of his hiding spot and sprinted towards the tracks, hoping the driver wouldn't see him. And as the train collided with his face, William was at peace. With his eyes closed, he let his thoughts wander. His mind became a tourist, like the ones you see shuffling around the colonial graveyards in Boston. Some images passed quickly: the second grade teacher who exposed him to Yeats, his first football coach, his first kiss, his last interview with ESPN announcing his decision to forgo collegiate athletics and pursue creative writing. Other memories, like his father's heart attack following that interview, lingered a bit longer.

He remembered his father's face behind the reporter, contorting with disbelief, shock, and physical pain triggered by what he described as "his son knifing him in the back" and his subsequent refusal to attend graduation four years later. William's father said, "Why celebrate a future he's already thrown away?" He remembered his mother's decision to save her husband a seat anyway. He recalled the blue, woven, cloth purse, his mother's favorite, lying on the white chair. In a crowd of four thousand people the space seemed almost intentional, like the blue

purse was a monument to lost fathers. After receiving his diploma, William returned to his seat next to Margo who said, “I didn’t see your father when I was up there.”

“Did you see the blue purse?” he asked, “that was him.”

“I was seriously hoping to meet him. I saw your mother. She didn’t look happy to see me” she said.

“Maybe it’s because you’re curb-stomping my heart tomorrow.”

“It’s a mutual breakup.”

“Totally mutual.”

“Please don’t start now.”

“Just saying, I could move to Seattle. There’s a great poetry scene and several MFA programs...”

She looked at him. He turned back towards the stage.

“Worth a shot,” he smiled, “speaking of which, is throwing our hats a thing? I bet I could hit the statue of George Eastman from here.”

They hugged in the parking lot of this apartment complex the next morning, the turgid Genesee River trudging slowly in the background. As he and his mother pulled away, he saw her weeping in the front seat of her car.

“Will?” his mom asked softly as they started the two hour journey home.

“No, Mom,” he interrupted, “No I’m not.”

Ten months and he still wasn’t. But he would be soon, he thought, he would be soon. *Hurry up please, it’s time.* He pictured Eliot pointing at a wrist-watch and tapping his foot. Perhaps he needed to remember more things? He saw a bathtub and a little yellow duck floating above his own cubby legs... Jesus, this was going to take forever. Wait. Was he already dead?

Had he, the professed atheist, been entirely wrong about God? An image of himself standing, eyes closed, in front of all the dead, the heavenly host, and some omnipotent cone of light, played in his mind, making him feel like a complete asshole.

His crisis of faith dissolved under the piercing horn of a diesel locomotive. Trees, still winter bare but waiting to bud, raced past on either side. He struggled to move; the train's momentum placed considerable force on his body. Eventually, he was able to move his head enough to grasp the reality of the situation. Instead of splattering into little bits, William's unharmed body was pinned to the front of the train. His suicide had become a day trip to Syracuse.

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By the time he reached the old train crossing, retrieved his belongings, and sunk into the front seat of his '96 Buick Regal (Custom), it was late afternoon. He sank into the aged leather and sat there, staring out the windshield. Eventually, he felt himself slide his key into the ignition. He drove in a slow, straight line down the road, which ran from the wooded crossing passed hilly farmland not yet plowed for spring, until it curved gently towards the main road back to town. Failing to notice the gentle curve, William guided his forest-green Buick into a shallow ditch.

An hour later he pulled into his driveway and then walked into his front door. He took off his shoes, placed the keys into a small bowl which rested on an entryway table, and made his way into the kitchen, where he stood, gripping the back of a wooden chair.

"Where've you been?" William saw his father reclined on a leather chair in the adjacent TV room, watching footage from an old football game; a small bowl of popcorn was balanced on his rounded stomach.

“It’s me,” William responded. The normalcy of his own voice startled him.

“Oh,” his dad said.

“I put your rejection letter on the table,” his father added, flicking a few pieces of popcorn into his mouth. William glanced down and saw a white envelope from the University of Washington. It was unopened.

Washington was the last MFA program (of nine) to send him a reply. It was a respected program, so getting in was certainly a reach for him. Until a few days ago, he was desperately hoping to get in, not only for the prospect of Margo and Seattle, but also because he had been rejected by the other eight schools. On Facebook, he joked about how UW was his only hope. He was looking for reassurance. Instead, he got comments like: “I really hope you have a chance!” and “I’m sure you’ll get in, but if you don’t you can always write poems for fun ☺.” Still, he held out hope.

That evaporated when Margo texted him the picture. She was with her new boyfriend (the way they stood, bodies pressed together with intimate familiarity, suggested as much) in front of the Space Needle. The message read, “We hope to see you in Seattle :p.” The boyfriend was giving a thumbs up, his smile seemed cheerful and genuine, but eyes said, “Just fyi, I’m going to make dirty hipster love with your ex later this evening.”

So if he got in, he’d have to move to Seattle and see Margo with this new guy. If he didn’t get in, he’d have to face the jeers of his father and the complete validation of his poetic mediocrity. After staring at the picture for several minutes, William put the phone down, turned to his laptop and googled: relatively painless ways to kill yourself.

Well, they were right about the train being painless, he thought. He giggled a bit as he opened the envelope. Rejection, just as his dad predicted. William balled it up and threw it in the

trash. He felt nothing. Not hurt, devastated, nor relieved. There was simply no room in his brain for anything other than profound disbelief and a bit of hysteria.

On the television, a younger version of himself danced and weaved with a football in his hand. State Championship, junior year. William remembered the play, he ran for twenty-yards before getting taken down hard by three to four massive guys. One took out his legs, another hit him up in the helmet region, and still another speared him in the lower back. Brutal to watch on television, even years later. The crowd gasped and the announcer classified it as a “surefire season ender.” Then everyone cheered in surprise when William popped up and jogged back to the offensive huddle.

“You were a tough kid,” his dad said, “A born athletic freak. And you threw it away. It’s beyond me.”

Turning, William headed upstairs towards his room. The noise from the TV crowd followed, chanting “Hercules! Hercules!”

For the moment, he pushed his father, Margo, poetry, graduate school, and suicide out of his mind, and replaced it with a singular purpose: he needed to find out just how tough he was.

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“Well... shit,” he said, from inside the coffin.

Over three weeks had passed since the train, which William labeled Labor 1 in the spreadsheet he used to keep track of his various self-experiments, and he had nearly run out of ideas. Burying himself alive was his seventh scheduled test. And because he hadn’t considered the physical impossibility of shoveling whilst inside a coffin, it was most assuredly a colossal waste of time. He pushed open the lid to reveal the late-winter moon high overhead, framed perfectly by the

walls of dirt on either side of the casket. Next to him lay the body of some guy named O'Brien who died in 1873.

O'Brien was just a series of bones kept loosely organized by his late-nineteenth century suit decayed beyond tatters. Literally, the fragments shored O'Brien against his ruin, William thought, amused. He noticed that O'Brien's skull had tipped over, its hollow spaces now pointed in his direction. He considered O'Brien for a moment and then turned back to the moon.

Then he said, "You have lovely eyes, O'Brien, did you know that?"

"But you didn't drive an hour from Rochester for flattery, did you? No. I thought as much."

William wasn't quite sure why he felt compelled to converse with a corpse (especially compliment it), but he supposed people did it every day when they visited the cemetery, so it wasn't necessarily odd. Proximity wise, he admitted, it was strange. But he hardly spoke to actual people anymore. Really spoken to them, at least. He toyed with the decision to tell his mother about the train but decided there was no easy way to tell a parent you were suicidal, never mind the fact that he was potentially invincible.

O'Brien's jaw bone dropped.

"I know," William said to him, "I could hardly believe it myself, but the evidence is pretty staggering."

Of course then she'd ask how he knew he was invincible and he'd have to show her the "Hercules Experiment" data, where he classified different types of deaths into various "Labors" and tested them. They didn't really parallel the actual Labors of Hercules, but his nickname didn't fully coincide with his power either. The point was, showing his mom that spreadsheet was a bad idea. She'd see that he had hung himself with a belt, broke a knife while stabbing

himself in the leg, licked a downed power line during a windstorm, failed to drown himself in the bathtub, drank a gallon of bleach to wash down an entire bottle of Tylenol, and chased a rabid raccoon into the woods and bit it.

“That last one was a bit off the cuff, I admit, but disease is difficult to force on yourself in a sterilized world...”

William paused for a moment.

“Not sure I believe myself there, but that line sounded pretty good.”

No, he could never show anyone the spreadsheet. People were terrified of specificity. Not all people but most, certainly parents, he thought.

“That’s why I never really told them the truth. But I’m going to tell you, O’Brien, because you asked so nicely.”

O’Brien was still.

“Poetry wasn’t just something I enjoyed; I could have played sports and wrote poetry at the same time. I read this book once, a few years back, and there was a quote from Wallace Stevens that said, ‘Poetry is an effort of a dissatisfied man to find satisfaction through words.’ But how could I tell my parents that I was dissatisfied with life in high-school, when it was still very much the life they had built for me? I needed poetry to tell them for me.”

“But even after five years of throwing myself completely at the craft, I still can’t do it. I cannot fully implicate myself on the page. No moral complicity. No sensation. I do not have the talent to express my dissatisfaction and so it merely leaks onto the page in half-gestures and obfuscations.”

“I’m a coward, O’Brien, and poetry was meant for the brave. That’s all talent really is, skill fortified by bravery.”

*I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

The voice of Eliot, which William had admittedly never heard, seemed louder than his own, and it filled the coffin space, deflecting off the dirt and towards the dark expanse above. William realigned O'Brien's jaw and faced the skull outwards. They lay side by side, and watched the night together.

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Apparently, he was also incredibly strong. He'd taken a job at a nearby farm when April came around and the intrigue of his invincibility wore off. He hoped it would change things, the invincibility, not the farm job, but eventually the acidic drip of his father's disappointment and Margo's insistence on sharing her happiness with him at every possible moment wore away any residual enthusiasm he had for life. His dad was being a dick, certainly, but Margo was just trying to keep him in her life. That was the bargain, after all, that they'd be friends. So he just kind of took it, because he didn't want to lose her completely. His mom noticed the growing melancholy and suggested that he get a job, figuring it might help to take his mind off things. So now he had a bull by the horns and the bull was unappreciative.

The farmer had told him to get the prized bull inside before the storm got much worse, but it was being an obstinate thunder cock about the whole situation. He thought it was an appropriate insult given the bull's role as a breeder and the unseasonably early sonic booms created by the lighting striking a full half-mile away. At first, he tried luring it into the barn with food. No response. Then he tried talking to it in a soothing tone, even going so far as to recite a poem he had penned that morning. The bull was unmoved and it just gazed at him with glass black eyes. *To keep a drowsy emperor awake.* Frustrated, William slapped the bull in the haunch,

which retaliated by charging him, who countered by grabbing the horns and planting his legs in the softening earth.

“I should have led with Yeats.” William said to the bull as they grappled, unmoving, in the rain. The bull was clearly confused, William could see as much in its eyes as it strained to push him back. Well, he conceded, he would be confused if he were a prize winning Hereford bull that weighed over a ton and suddenly found his considerable strength arrested by a human being weighing less than two hundred pounds. It was a confusing time for them both.

“Okay, buddy, I’m going to let go and you are not going to charge me. Deal?”

He let go and the bull just kind of looked at him.

“Good, now let’s just head inside...”

The bull charged, which took William by surprise because he thought the two of them had made an empathetic connection. Momentum forced William into the barn wall, the bull pinning him there. The bull backed off after a moment and William slid against the outer barn wall to his feet. He crossed his arms.

“You done?” he said, “are you satisfied with your hyper-masculine display of dominance?”

The bull slammed into the wall again.

“Seriously, its 2013, that sort of behavior isn’t really acceptable.”

The bull didn’t appreciate his attempt at levity, it seemed, because it charged again. This time, William grabbed the bull’s horns and pushed back. The rain was coming down hard and the lightning flashed closer by the minute. William pushed the bull back into the center of the pen, through the mud. He didn’t want to hurt it, so he swung himself into a position where he could pick it up. It let out a terrified moo as he hoisted it over his shoulders.

“Well, this is what you get for being an asshole.” William yelled over the thunder.

He turned and marched into the barn, careful to avoid hitting the bull’s head on any of the low-hanging lights. The bull’s pen was at the far end of the barn, isolated so it wouldn’t become too agitated in the presence of the cows, who stared as he walked by.

“There you go, big guy, sorry for embarrassing you in front of the ladies,” William said as he situated the flustered bovine in the pen. He gave the bull some feed, which perked him up considerably, and left the barn. After he closed the door, he turned and saw a young woman around his age standing at the edge of the pen, clothes soaked, jaw clenched, eyes wide. It took him a second to figure out she was staring at him. He trotted over to her, working out what he could possibly say to normalize the situation. Before he could speak, lightning struck a tree in the field next to the barn maybe twenty yards from where they were standing. The sight was awesome, in the truest sense of the word, and the sound hit with the force of a cannon. Or it should have, he could almost see ripples in his skin where the sound waves were brushed harmlessly aside. Cross sound off the list. She gasped-screamed and covered her ears as she jumped into the air. He grabbed her gently by the elbow, hoping to guide her to the barn.

“You lifted it over your head. Don’t touch me. Don’t...,” she yelled pulling away and running towards the barn. It was loud enough so that he looked over at the farmhouse, about a hundred yards away, and half expected his boss to come running out with a gun. When he didn’t, William started towards the barn. He owed her some type of explanation. In the center of the holding pen in front of the barn, where he had grappled with the bull earlier, he noticed every hair on his head was standing up. He didn’t have time to brace himself, so when the lightning struck his back it propelled him face down into the mud. The bolt itself deflected and struck the metal fence of the pen.

“Uh... Are you okay?” he heard the girl yell from the barn door.

He gave her a thumbs up as the muck sucked around his body. Rising, he walked into the barn, water dripping to the wooden floor, wet earth caked to his face.

“William.”

“Cindy.”

Silence. They stood and stared at various fixtures in the barn for several minutes.

Thunder rumbled overhead.

“So, lightning totally sucks,” he said.

“It’s the worst,” she agreed.

The cows chewed behind them and stared ahead with blank expressions.

“You lifted a 2,000 pound bull and carried it all the way to the end of the barn.” she said.

“I work out a lot...and never skip leg day,” he joked.

“And the lightning?”

“I work on by back.”

“To deflect *lightning*?”

“I gave up... gluten.”

She stared at him and a half smile played on her mouth. Her eyes were blue.

“Gluten.”

“Yep. So, I should go,” he said.

“When your mother told me you were working on a farm, I almost didn’t believe her.”

He was inching slowly towards the door, not comfortable where this was heading. She knew where he lived. She brushed passed him and blocked his way.

“Oh, you’re not getting out of this, William Cross. You’re not going to ignore me like you did my email.”

“Email?”

“I wanted to interview you about your decision to go forgo athletics... but now I have so many interesting questions. And you’re going to answer them.”

“Wait... Is your last name O’Brien?”

“So you remember ignoring my email?”

“I’m not answering any of your questions.”

“Oh, I think you will.”

“There is literally no motivation for me to do so.”

“I took a picture of you carrying our horned friend over there.”

She held up her phone. *Things fall apart*, he thought, why were they always falling apart?

“Fine. Hand me your phone and I’ll give you my number...”

“Nice try. Meet me in Rochester tomorrow morning for breakfast.”

“Gee, that’s specific.”

“I’ll email you the address...I wouldn’t ignore it this time. See you tomorrow, Hercules.”

She opened the door and walked off towards the farmhouse. He watched her lean body fade into the gloom as thunder grumbled in the distance.

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He stared dejectedly into his “Rise and Shine Breakfast Special,” the sausage links and eggs arranged like a happy face. He had met Margo in this diner, a birthday brunch for a mutual friend. *She lay beside me in the dawn*. Ezra Pound popped into his mind at the oddest times, he thought. Cindy didn’t seem concerned; she and his food shared the same stupid grin, he

observed. If it weren't for the blackmail and her refusal to reimburse him for gas, he would have found her very cute. She took her coffee black and her eggs over-medium. He wasn't sure what this said about her character.

"Thanks for meeting me here, William." She said as she reached into her purse, producing a pen and small notepad.

He pierced the yolk of one of his eggs with a hard jab.

"Right," Cindy continued, scribbling something onto the paper, "Fair enough. So, let's start off by discussing a few simple questions. Why did you give up on a promising athletic career to pursue poetry?"

"It appealed to me," he said.

"Care to elaborate?"

"Fine," he looked from side to side and leaned closer, "I did it for the money."

He slid back into his side of the booth and ate another mouthful of sausage. She put her pen down.

"Look, I'd appreciate it if you took this more seriously..."

"My breakfast is, or was, a smiley-face. Serious really isn't my thing."

"I just want to know the truth, okay? A lot of people do. You owe the world an explanation."

"No one cares about a decision I made over five years ago."

"You're father might disagree."

Cindy was starting to get on his nerves. His father hated him, thought he was a coward and a quitter. But that was better than the alternative. How could he tell his parents that his life had felt empty and boring? Not an emptiness brought on by a lack of love or opportunity, but a

void excavated by lower middle-class expectations, a dogma that demanded he be more successful and amass more material wealth than the generations that had come before him, that he should settle down with a wife, that he should have children who would grow up to become whatever they wanted because he had sacrificed his personal desires and goals to allow them the stability to fail, that he should grow old with his wife watching his children bask in the excitement of the world.

That was what he thought life was as an eighteen-year-old. He thought that choosing to play football, basketball, or baseball, things he found mildly enjoyable but not incredibly exciting, would be resigning himself to a fate he didn't want. So he chose the exact opposite track, something he loved and found challenging, hoping that train would take him someplace beyond a white, picket fence. But in college, he discovered that his linear perception of life as school → college → job → marriage → kids → retirement → death → reincarnation-into-something-more-interesting was incredibly flawed. Margo showed him that.

Margo chipped away at that supreme fiction whenever she'd pretend to meow like a cat, when she texted him at three in the morning to kill a spider in her apartment, when she wished she could stuff her entire life into a backpack and just fly around from place to place, when she took him to a park and imbued a rusted bridge with startling beauty simply by crossing it in a pink sun-dress, when she complained about his feet being as cold as death, when she named a giant teddy-bear he gave her for Valentine's day "General Rough-Rider Whiskers," when she forgave him for pinning his senior depression on her, when she asked him if he was in love with her or just the idea of her, when she danced and leapt on stage, when she told him not to follow her west, when she pressed her face to his, when he saw her weeping in her car as he and his mom pulled slowly away.

Such scope and possibility within the parameters of one relationship. But without her, the sweeping horizons of life transformed back into a railroad, which his mediocre talent collapsed into a tunnel, which his father filled with spiteful bricks.

“When I got your email I was about to jump in front of a train. Because any happiness I managed to accumulate in college had completely dissolved. My mediocrity as a poet prevented me from really pursuing a dedicated study of the craft. I had to wake up every day to my father refusing to look at me from behind the wall of a newspaper. To my mother casting worried stares every time I opened another rejection letter from an MFA program. I had to see my ex-girlfriend post pictures of herself with some hipster asshole in Seattle. So I wanted to die. That’s all I wanted. But I couldn’t even have that. I’ve tried or hoped to die twelve different times, including the bull and lightning yesterday. When I saw the hair stand up on my skin during that storm, I held out hope for just a second that my body would finally let me go. But it didn’t. And maybe it never will. So, to paraphrase Yeats, I have resigned my part in this casual comedy: a comic façade over a dark and bitter center.”

He turned back to his meal and started picking at the hash-brown nose at the center of the plate. The waitress came over to check on them.

“Doing okay, here? Can I get you anything else?”

“Some ketchup would be great. And the check please, when you get the chance,” he smiled at her.

The waitress looked at Cindy, “Are you okay, miss?”

Cindy had one hand over her mouth, eyes welling.

“Oh, she’s fine,” he said, “I just accidentally spoiled the ending of Harry Potter for her. Totally my fault.”

He looked at Cindy, who wiped her face and smiled up at the waitress.

“Shouldn’t have waited so long to read them.”

The waitress shrugged and departed.

“Well, I feel like a heartless bitch now,” Cindy said when the woman left.

“You are a journalist,” he chided, “but seriously, don’t worry about it. You didn’t know. Plus, you’re the first living person I’ve said all that to. It’s nice to tell someone.”

“Have you tried, you know, talking to someone more professional? Wait... did you say first living person?”

“Long story. Anyway, pretty sure the therapist would need therapy after talking to me.”

“Yeah, I might make an appointment for myself,” she said.

Then she grabbed his hand, “But, it will get better, okay? It always does.”

He shook his head and smiled sadly, “*Life is very long.*”

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At Cindy’s insistence, he started reaching out to some of his old friends. Most had moved away, but a few of his good friends from college, Hunter and Dan, were still around. He was surprised to see how mad they were at him for not visiting sooner. That they missed him. It was really nice. He drove up to Rochester more often on weekends. Cindy and he became good friends (even after he tried unsuccessfully to set her up with Hunter). Eventually, he even helped her write and print his story, albeit a highly fictionalized account, which made his father resent him just a little less. He stopped talking to Margo and unsubscribed from her notifications on Facebook so he wouldn’t see her pictures on his newsfeed. He began to think that maybe Cindy had been right, that everything would get better.

One Friday night in mid-July, he, Cindy, Hunter, and Dan sat in an English-style pub sharing some drinks and complaining about the work week. While alcohol didn't affect him, to his dismay, he still enjoyed the taste of a good beer and the company.

"If you want to know what medical school is like, buy a cactus, drop your pants and then jump on it ass first," Hunter said after swallowing a large gulp of beer.

"Thanks for that lovely image, Hunter, I can't imagine why you're single," Cindy said.

"First of all, rude," Hunter said, "second, I do all right and I don't even have to go to the gym all the time like these two-asshats."

He pointed a thumb at Dan and William.

"I go to the gym because I like being in shape," Dan said.

"I'm in shape... I could totally take you," Hunter said sarcastically.

"You're welcome to try," Dan smiled.

"Eh, I couldn't hit a black guy," Hunter said.

"Racist! I believe that's a punch" Dan said.

"God dammit! Have I used up my racist joke quota for the week?"

"That was number five, bro. But we'll just say it was number four, because one of them was a Jewish joke aimed at yourself."

"You are both kind and merciful."

"It helps to surround myself with good people," Dan laughed.

"Hunter's not too bad either," Cindy quipped.

"And fuck you too," Hunter said laughing.

William raised his glass.

"To good people," he said.

They all joined in the toast. As they drank, the door to the pub opened. William's back was to the door, but when he put his glass down both Dan and Hunter were staring at whomever had walked in. Hunter looked angry, Dan concerned. Cindy leaned across the table and turned towards the door, her eyebrows shot up. He had only introduced the three of them about two months ago, so who could they know in common? Cindy slid back into her chair. They were all looking at him now.

“What? Who is it?” William asked.

“William, don't turn around,” Dan said.

Hunter got up from the table and marched towards the entrance like he was on some sort of warpath.

“Seriously, what the hell is going on? Please don't tell me it's that scout from the Bills again...”

“William,” Cindy said, “don't.”

Then, he knew who it was. When he stood, he felt like he was on the bottom of the ocean with the entire world pressing down on him.

“It will be okay, man, we're here.” Dan's voice sounded far away. Somewhere near the surface.

William turned. Margo stood at the door with her boyfriend, Hunter was pointing at the door, clearly telling them to leave. They noticed him staring and stopped mid-sentence. Hunter, dropped his hands and walked back to his seat. Margo and hipster man followed. She had cut her hair short and it looked great.

“Hey, Willie,” she said smiling.

“Why are you here?” he said.

“Visiting the city and some friends that are still in town. Showing this guy around,” she poked her companion.

The hipster stuck his hand out, “Hey, I’m Margo’s boyfriend, Roger. I’ve heard a lot about you Willie...”

“I prefer William,” he said, cutting him off, but responding to his handshake nonetheless.

“Oh, my bad, man, she always refers to you as Willie...”

“It’s William,” he repeated. He released the hand and sat back down in his chair.

“Please, join us,” he continued, “Despite my friends’ concern for my well-being, I do not find your presence emotionally wrenching in the least.”

Roger glanced at Margo, who glared at William, who took a swig of beer.

“Can I talk to you in private for a moment, Willie?”

“William. And there’s no need, Rodger knows I’m just joking around. Just a bit of dark humor. C’mon, I have to make the guy a bit uncomfortable, right? But it’s all in good fun.”

“Yeah, man, no worries,” Rodger said. The Seattleite snagged a couple of chairs and pulled them up to the table.

Hunter gazed into his beer. Dan checked his phone. And Cindy tapped William’s leg under the table. They discovered, since meeting, that he could still feel very soft stimuli, so this was her equivalent of letting him know that she was here for him. She reached across the table.

“Hi, I’m Cindy,” she said to Margo, who smiled and returned the gesture.

“Margo.”

Cindy repeated the ceremony with Rodger. William desperately wished his body would just let the alcohol take over, just this once.

“Are you two...?” Margo asked referring to him.

“No, we’re just friends,” Cindy smiled.

“Ah, okay. I love your earrings, by the way.”

“Thanks so much, they were my mother’s.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up something painful.”

“What do you mean? Oh, no. My mother just didn’t want them anymore. She’s fine.”

“Oh, good. I was totally afraid I had just brought up something a traumatic.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be awkward?” William laughed.

Silence.

“Time for another drink,” Hunter said, “Dan want to help me carry? I owe you and Will a beer.”

Dan nodded and they headed to the bar.

“So,” Rodger said, “she tells me you’re a poet too.”

“You’ve started writing poetry?” William said to Margo, lifting an eyebrow.

“Sorry, I meant I am a poet. Actually just got my MFA from UW.”

“Good school.”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry you didn’t get in.”

“Me too.”

“I think you really would have loved Seattle. It’s a great city, especially for writers.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

He felt the tap on his leg again. Cindy leaned closer to him, trying to insert herself as a comforting presence. It wasn’t working. Without looking, he felt Margo’s almond eyes boring into him.

“Well, they have great PhD programs too. Not everyone is talented enough to make it as a poet, whatever that means, but we still need critics and scholars. Probably a safer career path too.”

Multiple taps on his leg.

“Rodger, stop talking,” Margo said, “I’m clearly making you uncomfortable, William, so we’ll go.”

“Well, it’s what you do best.”

“That isn’t fair,” Margo said upset.

“I know,” William yelled, “I know it isn’t fair. You were just chasing your dreams and you didn’t want me to follow you in case it all went wrong and I got stuck. You didn’t want me to resent you for getting in the way of what I wanted to do in life. I get it. But it still doesn’t suck any less. Because *you* were all I wanted in life and it felt like I wasn’t as important to you as you were to me. And then I had to go home to my dad. To rejection letters. To texts of you and this guy looking so happy. That’s what the last year has been for me. And I can’t even blame you for it.”

The other pub patrons gawked as he stood and walked out. He pushed the heavy oak door straight off its hinges as he passed into the night.

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*The worst are filled with passionate intensity.* He walked along the concrete sidewalk past the brick bars and nightclubs. All the buildings here were made of brick here, it seemed, a discomfoting uniformity that was somewhat mitigated by the dark, but not entirely. The people of the brick buildings strode past him, on their way to relax, get lucky, or just enjoy themselves. Purposefully, he walked in the opposite direction. He really needed to get his shit together. All

his natural gifts, his friends, parents that loved him... or parent, at least, and he had the nerve to hurt this badly. He knew he shouldn't invalidate his own feelings, but he was tired of hurting.

Tired of being pressed to the front of a train heading to Syracuse.

Then he heard sirens; an orange glow filled the night sky in the near distance. He found himself moving towards it like a beacon, if only to forget his own disaster for a moment. When he arrived at the scene, flames were slithering up the sides of the brick and emergency crews were trying to keep gaping residents and neighbors away, while firefighters leveled hapless blasts of water at the inferno. It looked like blaze was working its way up—the top floor looked untouched. While William observed the building, he thought he noticed a light flicker in one of the top apartments.

“Hey!” he called to one of the nearby firefighters, “did you get everyone out of the building?”

There was a large crowd and his question went unanswered. The light flickered again. He pushed his way passed the onlookers and straight to the police line. He repeated his question to the cop.

“Yeah, kid, don't worry, they got them all out. Trust me.”

“You're absolutely sure?”

“Listen, kid, they went from room to room and got 'em out. Only one woman wasn't accounted for, but it's because she wasn't home.”

“Wasn't home?”

“They checked the apartment. Ain't no one home.”

“Was that room on the top floor by any chance?”

“Uh, yeah, why?”

William pointed at the window, where light was streamed through, illuminating tendrils of smoke as they rose into the sky.

“Must be a shitty circuit or something? No one is in there, they would have seen her.”

“Not if she were hiding.”

“Who’d do that in the middle of a fire?”

“Someone who didn’t want to be saved,” William whispered.

The cop radioed that there might still be someone in the building. A firefighter jogged over and told the cop there was nothing they could do, couldn’t risk a rescue with the structural damage to the building. Several news vans were broadcasting nearby. Soon, William heard them reporting on the tragedy. That the fire would claim at least one life. For some reason, this assertion made him angry. It wasn’t the immutability of her fate, it was more of the physical reality that she could, in fact, die. That wasn’t fair. If he had to live his shitty life, he was going to make sure she had to live hers. Having made his decision, he leapt over the plastic police barricade. He ran towards the front entrance, knocking firefighters aside the way he used to knock over defenders. He heard the crowd behind him gasp and a woman scream. Then he was in the building.

Beautiful, he thought. He stood in the small lobby of the building, flaming plaster chunks falling about him like hell-snow. The sight was something no other person could stop and consider, there was no imminent danger for him here. He reached out and cupped a burning piece of banister, smiling as the orange tongue crackled and swayed in his hand. Margo danced beautifully too. Maybe one day, he’d be able to divorce her image from a begrudging sense of loss. He smothered the flaming debris in his hand. Not today.

The apartment complex was in rough shape, but he had no idea how much time that gave him. He hurried up the wooden stairs. Four stories, not too much trouble, he thought, though he was vaguely aware that fire was nibbling at one of his pant legs. Dammit. These were his favorite jeans.

“This woman better have, like, seven grandkids,” he muttered as he bounded up the groaning steps up to the fourth floor.

A solid wall of heavy smoke made it difficult to see down the hallway. He ducked down and saw a slender foot protruding from a doorway three apartments down from his current position at the end of the hallway. She must have passed out from the smoke. Of course, she'd be unconscious. Great. He moved to her, scooped her up, and then ducked into her apartment, kicking the door shut behind him. The bedroom was relatively smoke free. He closed the bedroom door and stuffed a blanket underneath the crack so the smoke wouldn't trickle in. He opened a window. A blast of smoke hit him in the face. He closed the window and turned to check on his victim. The victim. She definitely was too young for grandchildren, he noticed. Around his age? Porcelain skin, natural blonde, petite, high cheekbones, full lips...

“Would you not check out the unconscious chick and figure a way to get her out of here?” he said to himself.

The room was sparse, decorated with only a few photographs. Her bookshelf was overstuffed. Lots of poetry collections, mostly Post-Modern and contemporary stuff, which was great, but it lacked in the Modernism department, however. Many volumes lay on the floor, including the collected poems of T.S. Eliot. He picked it up. A purple post-it note was stuck after the final lines of *The Waste Land*. It read, “Okay, but a bit dramatic.” Well, she was an idiot, he decided, looking at her still form. That wasn't moving... She wasn't breathing.

Hunter had taught him CPR in college but, that was on a practice dummy. And it was also before he'd knew he could swing a one-ton over his shoulders like a backpack. His strength, he had discovered, was proportional to how much force he needed at any given moment, so all he needed to do was guess the right amount of force to get her breathing... without splintering her ribs into her heart and lungs. No problem. He leaned over her and, pinching her nose, passed air from his lip to hers. Her eyes shot open and she coughed right into his face.

"A bit forward aren't we?" her accent was unmistakably English. What the hell was she doing in Rochester?

"You weren't breathing," he said.

"Thanks. Now, if you could leave me alone so I could burn to death, that'd be lovely, thanks."

"I'm not leaving...", his phone vibrated in his pocket, "hold on, I gotta take this really quick...don't move."

It was Cindy. He rose from the bed and went to the window.

"Hey, can I call you back? I'm in the middle of something."

The building lurched slightly.

"The news is reporting that you just ran into that burning apartment building."

"Oh no! There's a fire? I hope everyone is okay..."

"You idiot."

"How do they know it's me?"

"You dropped your wallet."

His hand flew to his back pocket. Empty. Shit.

"Something the matter?" the English girl said sarcastically.

He glared at her.

“Do the guys and Margo know?” he said into the phone.

“We’re outside.”

The building shifted under him again. He didn’t have much time.

“See you in a bit then. Bye.”

He hung up and turned to miss English. But as he moved to speak his phone went off again.

“Well aren’t you the popular one,” she said.

It was his dad.

“One second,” he said to her.

“Hey, dad, this really isn’t a good time...”

“This is all my fault... I was just so hurt that you never trusted me. That you never felt that you could tell me you didn’t want to play... I never wanted...”

Will hung up.

“You’re coming with me,” he said to the young woman.

“I most certainly am not.”

She crossed her arms, defiant.

“I’m William.”

“Amelia. Now get out and let me die, please.”

“Listen, I know what you’re going through...”

She sprang from the bed and slapped him across the face.

“Don’t you dare presume how I feel. I’ve nothing to live for. Nothing, you understand?”

“I jumped in front of a train back in March.”

She didn't expect that.

"A train? Why? Wait...How are you still alive?"

"The how is easy: I'm kind of invincible and/or immortal."

"Is that why I feel like I slapped a brick wall?"

"Probably."

The building groaned below them and tilted. She slipped to the ground and burst into tears.

"How do... you..." she cried.

He knelt next to her.

"I'm still trying to figure that out. It's hard to hope when you feel like you're moving under a mile of water. You don't dare swim up because any movement makes you feel like your insides are going to implode. But maybe small gestures, just a few at a time, will get us back to the surface. Maybe we just need to find some fragments to shore against our ruin."

He wasn't sure where that had come from. He wasn't even sure if he believed it. But maybe that's what it took to survive, standing by our own bullshit so others didn't feel so alone. She rose and hugged him.

"That was incredibly stupid," she said sniffing into his chest, "especially the Elliot bit."

"You're welcome. And I'd love to talk about your terrible taste in poetry over coffee sometime."

"Are you seriously asking me out?"

"Just trying to give myself something to look forward to."

"Fine. But only because I feel bad for you."

"I'll take it. Now let's get the fuck out of here."

Grabbing a blanket from off of her bed, he walked into her bathroom and soaked it under the tub with what limited water pressure remained.

“I’m going to wrap you in this,” he said holding the blanket, “any objections?”

“Wait, just let me grab something,” she said, walking over to one side of her bed.

She produced a small, worn, teddy-bear. It wore a little t-shirt that read “Oxford University.” She held it to her chest.

“What’s his name?” he asked.

“Teddy,” she said.

“It gets better, right?” she then asked quietly.

The building started moving around them, so he answered by wrapping her in the dripping blanket and tucking her small frame under his right arm. Despite her muffled cries, he began to run. Football coaches had always been surprised to see the 5’11” William simply bowl over people when he ran with the ball. When other small players asked him what his secret was, he would shrug and joke that doors were not designed to stop a battering ram.

The bedroom door flew off its hinges as he stiff armed it with his left hand. He felt Amelia curl up under his arm. He wasn’t going to let this fire take her. She was going live and they were going to have coffee. The apartment door exploded as he thundered into the now engulfed hall, as his football coach used to say, he was running angry. Rage drove him towards the stairwell, through the flames that he could not feel. Amelia hugged the steaming blanket more tightly around her. Every step, every gesture, was a vengeful affirmation of life. He swatted flaming debris out of his way. The building tilted and crumbled around them. Bits of plaster abandoned the walls and several sections of banister soon followed. The stairs ended at the second floor landing. He leapt to the bottom, crushing the collapsed steps under his feet.

The first floor began falling into the lobby, so he held her near his waistline with both hands and used his back to shield her as he sprinted towards the front entrance. He saw a cluster of firefighters through the inferno. Bricks fell about his head, he wasn't going to make it, he thought, as he approached the door. But, then again, he grinned, he didn't need to.

He cocked his left arm back and used his right to hold her in place. Using his vast strength, he threw her through the charred portal towards the group of firefighters, hoping they'd catch her or, at least, break her momentum. He stood ten feet from the door. Heat lifted pieces of ignited wallpaper and wood; they twirled and spun around him, the faces of his father, his mother, Margo, Cindy, Hunter, Dan, O'Brien, the poets whose voices constantly filled his waking moments. He wept steam for all of them. The building groaned in structural agony, flames cackled with gluttonous avarice, and as the firmament collapsed around him, he wanted to live.

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The bricks, wood, iron, and charred bits of other things the fire couldn't totally destroy, cradled him, as water from the fire hoses dripped through cracks onto his body. He knew he'd have to get up soon, claw his way out of the debris to let them know he was okay. His world would change utterly, but eh, that was fine. The old world sucked anyway. *A terrible beauty is born.*

He started shifting the ruins around him, tossing aside large sections of concrete and brick. Soon all that lay between him and the world was the western wall of the building, which had remained mostly intact. Bricks tumbled in clicks and clacks as he lifted. He heard someone yell. Then others. A chorus of voices that became louder with every inch of wall he lifted over his head. He walked forwards until the debris thinned around his feet, then he crouched and

tossed the wall onto the ruins behind. In doing so, he found himself surrounded by a swirl of dust, smoke, and vapor. As it dissipated, the crowd appeared— *petals on a wet, black bough*. He smiled. What a figure he must have presented: a body of muscle, emerging from the mist, dripping and naked. He saw Amelia being treated by medics, very much alive, his thirteenth labor completed. Darkness gradually replaced the natural light of the dying fire. And, as everything faded to black, a chorus of clapping hands and cheering voices resounded in the night, roaring to honor the failed poet, the disappointment, the suicidal son of Zeus.

## Father Becomes Electric

Gordon sipped coffee in the waning darkness of pre-dawn Buffalo and determined that his troubles began when he took the job at the Human Recycling Plant. He sat on the bed where his daughter slept. Or used to sleep. Rows of horse figurines and princess dolls stood neatly arranged on wooden shelves, waiting to be taken down. They hadn't moved in six years. He hadn't bothered to turn on the light, but he still knew they were all staring at him. They stared every morning. For the first year, Gordon felt like each painted face was leveling some sort of plastic accusation against him, as if their immobility was somehow his fault. After a while they lost their perceived sentience as their connection to Jenny's imagination faded and died. She had outgrown them *in absentia* and Gordon would probably have to get rid of them all when she came back. He finished his coffee and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

In the bathroom he lathered his face and neck with shaving cream. His straight razor said "World's Best Dad" on the handle. Karen had given it to him for his second father's day, back when he still owned the hardware store and they were happy. To this day Gordon didn't know why she left. Not exactly. She stuck with him through late nights of watching him sum numbers on a laptop and seeing the columns representing stability and peace-of-mind diminish with each passing month. That sort of thing could really take a toll, but she never really complained. Worried, yes, but never complained. But closing the store was the right thing to do. She yelled at him when she saw the "Going Out of Business Sale!" signs in the windows. He had to explain that not telling her was meant to lessen the emotional blow. She said that the decision wasn't just up to him. He said that they couldn't afford to let the business drag them into debt or eat any further into their savings. She said they should have at least tried to fight for it. He told her that they shouldn't fight in front of Jenny. She told him he could sleep on the couch. He later

apologized to her but also told her to think of this as an opportunity. They could open up any type of business they liked. Karen had always wanted to run a café. He agreed they should go for it. Gordon decided to look for some temporary jobs to help them finance their new venture. He told Karen that the more assets they had, the more likely they were to get a favorable small business loan. And that's when he found it, an opening at the new Human Recycling Plant.

Initially, Karen objected to his decision to take the job. It paid very well and had great benefits, but many questioned the idea of dropping former loved ones down a chute to be converted into electricity. She was afraid that she and Jenny would be harassed. Gordon assured her that the job was only temporary, that after a year or so they could get a great loan and launch the café. A year later the economy tanked and banks stopped lending. Another year, Gordon said, and they'd have to give them a loan. During that year, a law was proposed requiring all dead bodies in the greater Buffalo area to be recycled on the grounds of saving money and space. People began protesting outside the plant. Karen became distant. Jenny turned four. When that year ended, Karen asked about the café. He told her that the state was going to raise his pay during the protests, so it would make sense to quit after they subsided. A few more months of waiting, that was all. When the law passed a few months later, the protests intensified.

"Things are getting bad out there, Gordon. Please, you need to quit," Karen said one night while watching the local news in the den next to the kitchen.

"You know I can't quit. The money is too good. Plus, I'm sure those religious wackos will calm down soon; they won't protest forever," he said. He walked into the room drying his favorite mug with a dishtowel.

"What about right now? Hm? Use your eyes! They are burning cars and making death threats and you're worried about money. Think of our daughter," she said.

Jenny was taking her princesses on grand adventures and galloping her horses down the hallway in pursuit of invisible beasts fleeing from the kingdom's judgment. He smiled.

"I am. Come on, why do you think I took this job in the first place? I want her to go to college and get the hell out of here. We need money for that."

"You say that like our café wouldn't make any."

"What? I'm not saying that..."

"It's what you're thinking. You've always thought that."

"What the hell? That's not true at all. Don't get me wrong, it'll be difficult and with the economy the way it is..." he began.

"And there it is," she exclaimed slamming the remote on the couch and crossing her arms.

"What do you mean by that?" he said.

"Nothing."

"Why don't you actually tell me what's wrong for once instead of pouting?"

"You're such an asshole sometimes" she said.

"How am I an asshole? I'm just asking *you* what is wrong. I get that you're upset about the café, but it's not my fault the banks..."

Karen sprung up from the couch and stood to face him.

"Stop. Just stop. I don't want to hear more of your excuses for not living." She attempted to walk away but he grabbed her by the elbow and turned her around to face him.

"Hey! Everything I've done has been for you and Jenny. Sorry things haven't been perfect, but I'm doing the best I can," he said, his voice rising with every word.

She shook free and hissed at him, "All you are is a button pusher."

They stood in silence for a moment, both refusing to back down. Jenny had run into the room just a few moments prior, a horse in each hand. She climbed up onto the couch and was making the horses gallop up its back like it was the spine of a mountain. Then she suddenly stopped and stared out the window. Putting the horses down, she slid off the couch and walked over to her parents.

“Mommy. Daddy. There’s a man out there.”

The next moment was filled with glass. Karen scooped up Jenny; Gordon pushed the pair of them out of the hallway towards the bedrooms. He then ran outside, only to see the taillights of a pickup truck retreating down the driveway and towards the road. Returning inside, he saw the brick resting at the foot of the television stand. News stories of the Buffalo Recycling Riots played across the screen as Gordon brushed aside the broken glass and picked up the brick. Attached was a note written in hastily applied black Sharpie which read: “The Dead Will Rise Again.”

He dropped the paper and walked down the hall to check on Karen and Jenny. At the door of his bedroom he stood and watched Karen throwing as many of her possessions as she could into several large suitcases, scattering his own in the process.

“I’m sorry. You were right,” he said.

She zipped the suitcases and said nothing as she brushed past him, making her way into Jenny’s room. Soon Gordon watched as his wife and his now weeping daughter were making their way down the hall and out the front door carrying their cases towards Karen’s car. He hurried after them.

“You’re going to your mother’s, I assume?” he said, “Yeah, that’s probably for the best. I’ll take care of all the repairs and deal with the police... I’ll give my two-weeks tomorrow and give you a call when everything is safe, alright?”

Jenny looked up at her mother who merely shoved the suitcases inside the trunk of the car in response.

“Okay, then. Kiddo, give daddy a hug because you won’t seeing him for a little while.”

Still shaking and crying, Jenny plodded over and gave him a hug.

“Keep my horses safe, daddy.”

“You betcha. They’ll be waiting for you when you get back.”

“When’s that?”

Karen gently pulled Jenny away and strapped her into her car-seat. She moved to shut the door, but Gordon placed himself in its path. By the light of the car he saw himself reflected in his wife’s eyes.

“When’s that, daddy?” Jenny repeated.

“Soon, Jenny,” he stated, “I’ll see you soon.”

“Say goodbye to your father, Jenny,” Karen said.

“Bye, Daddy!” Jenny replied.

Gordon moved away from the door, allowing Karen to close it.

“Goodbye, Gordon,” Karen said. She stepped in the car.

Gordon watched them drive away before heading back inside to call the police. As he waited, he tried cleaning up the mess Karen had made while packing. On the floor of his bedroom, between an unframed family portrait and one of his grey work jumpsuits, was the “World’s Best Dad” razor he had never used.

Six years later, Gordon scraped the black stubble from his skin with a practiced touch. When finished, he brushed his teeth and headed to his bedroom. He opened his closet and pulled one of the grey jumpsuits down from a hanger. The protests had subsided shortly after the brick incident due to some amendments to the bill. Because of this, and the fact that he couldn't find another job, Gordon decided against giving his notice. He would need the money for when his family returned, and when they did, he would quit that same day. Until then he would get up every morning at 5am and go convert the dearly departed into electricity. After all, he was doing the best he could. And they would understand.

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Buffalo is a grey city, especially in the winter where the snow stamped the land in white, only to be ploughed, salted, and sanded into grey capitulation. Even during a snowstorm, the white only seemed to accentuate the general greyness of the place. Gordon appreciated this. Having grown up in rural Alaska, he thought that the Buffalo grey was a mark of civilization, humanity's imposition of order on a chaotic world.

The drive to work was slow. Fresh snow had fallen the night before and crews were still working to clear it before the morning rush. Gordon turned on the radio and listened for the weather. Brief periods of sun were expected this morning before an Arctic front moved in from the north, dragging grey clouds and potentially record-lows with it. The sun could mean trouble, Gordon thought, as he weaved his pickup towards the plant at the outskirts of Buffalo. The recycling plant itself was grey: a concrete box with a steel front door. Granted, this was the building visible from the surface. Most of the plant was sunk deep underground to help compensate for the enormity of the Machine.

He pulled into the parking lot, parking in his usual space under the sign. City council members held an online contest to name the plant when it first opened, hoping that involving the community would make the whole idea of processing corpses to make electricity more palatable. They intended people to suggest names and for other users to vote on their favorites. After two weeks, the winner was “The Soylent-Green-is-People Power Plant.” Unamused, the council suspended the contest and instead named it The Back to Basics Recycling Center, much to the outrage of the internet.

Ten minutes early. Gordon decided to clock in anyway and get started on his morning inspection. His lone co-worker, Benny, would probably be late because his mother hated driving in the snow. Benny was a good kid, but he was a bit slow, so the inspection would probably run more smoothly without him. Though, Gordon admitted, he disliked being around the Machine by himself for extended periods. Unlike Jenny’s dolls, in almost nine years of working here Gordon had never quite shaken the feeling that the Machine was actually watching him, a captured beast watching its keeper through the bars. He decided to take the stairs down to the processing floor. Walking down the steel staircase took time but it helped compensate for the nine hours of sitting he endured daily. As the stairs curled down four stories, the standard incandescent lights illuminating the path grew dimmer, the air initially grew stagnate, then stirred as whispers from the cooling vents diffused upwards, forever locked in an attempt to bear the bouquet of human corpses and alien chemicals to the surface above, and forever failing.

In fact, the technology appeared so rapidly that many thought it had been given to humanity by visitors from another planet. That story never quite held up, though the company who patented the technology still refused to release its research to the general public. Gordon never believed any of that stuff himself, but he did agree that even after almost a decade, the

Machine still seemed an otherworldly wonder. Or horror. A monolithic tower of obsidian-colored carbon nano-composite (or so he read in the operations manual), sheer on all sides save for several ridges cut for the cooling fans, the Machine stood, the visitor in the room. Like the building itself, most of the mechanisms and hardware that attached the Machine to the grid remained unseen, hidden in portals carved into the concrete. The only way to see inside the Machine was to peer into its mouth. Gordon felt compelled to look after Karen had taken Jenny. He hoped to see a writhing mass of tendons and sinew, something horrifying and alive, a justifiable excuse to return his grey jumpsuits and walk away forever. Instead, he saw green light and tubes that rushed unknown chemicals and human matter to secret meeting places just out of view, where they would combine in a shedding of sparks. The waste product was a black sludge they sucked out of the Machine's storage tank once every other month. The process was efficient and sustainable. And safe. Why hadn't Karen and Jenny come back yet? Well, when they did, the intricacies of the Machine wouldn't matter anymore. In his spare time, Gordon had been coming up with clever names for café menu items. He especially liked the "Chicken Gordon Bleu Sandwich" and the "Take Kare" series of healthy menu options. Karen will laugh at that, he chuckled.

Reaching the end of the stairs, Gordon walked over to his station, a repurposed parking attendant booth, to deposit his lunch and grab his clipboard. He filled out the heading on the sheet, before reaching into his booth and flipping a setting from Automatic-Slow to Manual. The Machine hissed and the whole room shuttered around him. Body-release-safety engaged, chute doors operational, good. Body-release-safety disengaged. Conveyor belt control speed, checked and ready. He walked over to Benny's station: Processor 3, shield, nano-dicers, and micro-grinders; Processor 2, shield, fine-slicers, and macro-grinders; Processor 1, shield and precision

cleavers... check. Gordon almost walked away without checking the shield vacuums. He pressed the button and the shields on each processor came down, halting the conveyor belt as they each created air tight seal; hearing the vacuum, he shut them off. Before returning to his station, Gordon paused at the Machine itself to check the level of the waste tank. It was unnecessary, he knew, they had emptied it just a few weeks ago, but he liked to think he was good at his job, doing his best at every opportunity.

There was only one last thing to do, but he'd save that for Benny, who he heard descending on the elevator. Gordon checked his watch. Fifteen minutes late, today.

"Roads must be worse than I thought," Gordon said. Emerald light flashed from inside the Machine and the building shuttered again.

"I wasn't talking to you."

The cooling vents came on and the Machine quieted, humming to its own electric resonance.

Captain America lunchbox in hand, Benny stepped from the elevator, ducking carefully to avoid hitting his head. He was a massive young-man, a thing of muscle bound to a 6'7" frame. Gordon's junior by about eighteen years, Benny had apparently spent his entire life in Buffalo. He barely passed every grade, his mother told Gordon once, and he did so mostly because of his indomitable cheer and gentle disposition. In fact, Benny was something of a local legend. He was a football star in high-school, but turned down scholarships to college powerhouses like the University of Alabama because, as he told Gordon one day, he thought his spot should go to someone like his friend Deon, who played nearly every position on the team and still received good grades. Following Benny's advice, the University of Colorado took a chance and offered

Deon a scholarship. Six years later, Deon was an impact player on the Buffalo Bills, all thanks to Benny.

He was so loved that the city council asked him to take an open position at Back to Basics to help stop the protests. It certainly helped. In fact, Gordon mused, Benny was the primary reason why he was still here. Gordon's previous co-worker had quit a few weeks before Karen and Jenny left. So, the morning after the brick sailed through Gordon's window, Benny showed up at work for his first day. He gave Gordon a big hug that lifted him off the ground, telling him that he was excited to work with him. At lunch that day, Gordon found himself telling Benny all about his family. When he finished, Benny lay a single massive hand on Gordon's shoulder and told him that his family would come back. For now, the big man said with a quiet smile, you can let me be your family if you want. And Gordon had.

"Morning, Mr. Gordon," Benny said.

"Just Gordon's fine," Gordon replied.

Benny nodded with a crooked grin, "Someday I'll remember that. Sorry, Gordon."

The big man paused, then added quietly, "Did your family come back yet?"

"No. Not yet."

Benny wrapped Gordon in his massive arms, "Maybe later today, huh?"

"Yeah, big guy, maybe today."

Benny released him and the two men walked over to Gordon's station. Captain America was placed next to the brown paper bag filled with Tupperware. Gordon grabbed a small wireless radio, switched it on, and handed it to Benny.

"Go ahead and call it in, buddy."

“Oh, sure, delivery day. Okay,” he paused for a moment raising the radio to his lips, before turning back to Gordon and asking, “I forgot, is there something I have to say exactly?”

“Naw, just tell them were ready.”

“Cool.”

Benny grinned and pressed the talk button on the radio, “We’re all ready down here, guys.”

He released the button and the two men waited for a reply.

“Mornin,’ fellas,” a woman on the other end said, “the system says the shipment should be there any second. We’re expectin’ some strain on the grid later today when the cold sets in, so expect another shipment sometime... aw, hell... uh...sorry about that, fellas, dropped my paper! It says here 3pm sharp. Looks like they also want one of ya to stay late in case they need to increase the output. Got all that?”

Benny looked at Gordon for confirmation. Gordon nodded, noting the extra delivery on his clipboard. It’s not like he had anything to do, so staying late would be no problem.

“Yes, ma’am,” Benny said.

“Oh I’m still very much a ‘miss.’ And also single, in case you were wonderin’...”

“Ah, okay, miss. You have a real nice day, ma’am!”

Gordon chuckled and took the radio from Benny. He placed it back in its charging port and turned down the volume a little so the young man next to him wouldn’t here the audible sigh coming from the woman at the other end. An alarm sounded and a red light on the side of the delivery chute flashed. Benny gave Gordon a thumbs up and trotted over to his station by the Machine. Gordon sighed and made himself comfortable in his grey little booth. Above him,

bodies collided with the walls of the chute with dull fleshy thuds. The Machine whirred and hissed as Gordon pressed the button, and released the first body of the day.

\*

In his training manual, the illustrated, multi-racial spokeswoman for the state informed Gordon in a series of enlightening graphics that about one hundred and sixty people died per week in the Buffalo region. That was about twenty-three people per day, her speech bubble explained. In yet another graphic, she outlined the major bullet points of the law that mandated the recycling of all human dead unless special religious exceptions applied. She noted on the final page that the state expected about 80% of the dead to be recycled. That day, Gordon did the math and knew that meant about eighteen bodies would be arriving per shipment if the numbers held up. And generally they had over the last nine years. For the past six, he and Benny devised a system where they processed half the shipment before lunch and half after lunch. Not only had that helped to break up the monotony of watching corpses being ground slowly into a fine paste before being sucked greedily up by the machine, but the nine-body-lunch rhythm also appeared to minimize the amount of black sludge produced per body. It was all about those little details, Gordon knew.

At about 10:00am, Benny and Gordon took lunch in a small room adjacent to the elevator. In addition to the single plastic table and a few plastic chairs, there was a television, a microwave, and a sink. An awkward nook in one corner of the room seemed to suggest that a refrigerator was lost somewhere between planning and execution. Gordon munched on his tuna fish sandwich while Benny wolfed down several protein bars followed by an entire chicken breast. They turned the television to the news.

“Those people...” Benny said, mouth agape.

Gordon looked up and saw multiple cars flipped over, crushed, banged up, and even one or two on fire. The reporter said that the carnage had just happened and that it was, very likely, one of the worst traffic accidents in recent history. Black ice was suspected.

“Don’t worry. The media always makes look a lot worse than it actually is. I’m sure most of those people are fine...” Gordon said.

Several people appeared on the screen, clutching wounds, blood slow seeping through finger gaps, their lurching bodies struggling to support their collective weight as they stumbled against and with each other through the snowy median. The camera panned to a woman in a torn turquoise ski coat as she leaned against the wreckage of her car. It stayed with her a moment, until her eyes began to close; they cut to commercial.

Benny looked to Gordon, who blinked hard and took a bite from his sandwich.

“Looks bad,” he said, chewing, “but don’t worry, Benny, the news only shows the worst case scenarios. I’m telling yah. They don’t show people getting stiches, they don’t show the firefighters, or the EMTs– that sort of thing isn’t interesting– so instead they show the bleeding, the fire, the victims.”

Gordon pointed at the screen, indicting the newscast with his remaining sandwich.

“It’s irresponsible if you ask me. I never let my daughter watch that sort of thing. I mean, imagine if that woman was your sister or mom or something. She could just be unconscious for all we know. But say you were at lunch...”

“We are at lunch, Gordon”

“Well, of course, but say you weren’t you but you were still at lunch like you are now, and that woman in the coat was your sister. You’d see her on the screen and think the worst. That

she was never coming back. But that's not necessarily the case. Most people involved with these sorts of things come back."

Gordon was standing. The last bits of his sandwich crushed in his left hand. He hadn't gotten that animated in a long time. Striding over to the television, Gordon switched it off with a violent press of the flat power button. Say what you want about the advances of modern televisions but those old TVs had more satisfying buttons, Gordon thought. Benny was staring straight at him when he turned around.

"Not all of them," the big man whispered.

Gordon couldn't stand to see Benny in a funk. It was unnerving. Like watching the sun suddenly get dimmer in the absence of clouds. Depositing the crushed remnants of his sandwich in the trash, Gordon rinsed his hands in the break room sink and moved to sit next his giant colleague. He draped his arm around Benny's shoulders, putting considerable strain on his shoulder in the process.

"Son, it's okay. You know what? They are probably sending one of those new state-of-the-art mass casualty ambulances. Remember when the woman on the radio... or whoever it was that day, told us that the state was purchasing one of our old delivery rigs? Remember that?"

Benny looked confused, "Yeah... kind of. Was that the day everything fell out of the supply closet?"

It wasn't. But it was close enough.

"Mm-hmm. Great memory, buddy. That same exact day. Well, they bought that old delivery rig and turned into some kind of big fancy ambulances to use in this exact situation. Completely automatic. No driver. Just like our trucks. It just whisks the patients to the hospitals while EMTs work on people in the back. They say it will save a ton of lives."

“How can there be no driver?”

“Well, I’m no expert,” Gordon admitted, “but I think they use the same software that brings our shipments here but instead of here the rig goes to hospitals.”

“Oh, okay. I think I understand that,” Benny seemed to perk up a bit, “So those people on television are all going to get help in that big ambulance. Well, that’s good. Thanks, Gordon.”

He gave Gordon a seated hug. Gordon hugged him right back.

“Just doing my job, kiddo.”

\*

Work went smoothly after lunch, as always. In reality, the Machine could probably run on automatic forever. But Gordon liked to think that on days like today, when he had to stay late and potentially adjust the electricity output on the fly, he was vital, that the Machine depended on him for survival instead of the other way around. Perhaps that’s why he always felt uneasy around it, he thought, pushing the button to release the next body. He stared at the Machine as Benny pulled the levers for Processors 1 and 3. It pulsed green and exhaled heat with a hiss. While it was recycling, the building vibrated slightly and there was a sound like the distant grinding of teeth. It stared back at him as if to say without me you’d be nothing.

Gordon shook his head and looked at his tally of processed bodies. Including the old Asian man currently being cleaved into large pieces by Processor 1 and whatever the meat shreds being ground into paste in Processor 3 used to be, they had recycled about thirteen bodies so far. He checked his watch 12:20pm. Perfect, right on schedule. On the current manual setting, it took about twelve minutes for a body to go through each processor. Despite his unease concerning the Machine, he did marvel at its operation. Not at how fast or slow it could process bodies. No. All machines had speeds and settings. He was stuck by something else. It was difficult to articulate.

Benny perhaps explained it best when he said that the blades on Processor 1 looked like they were dancing. Gordon looked up at the blades darting and swirling in Processor 1, they were allowing the dead to make one last contribution to society. 12:24pm. Shields up, body thirteen moved to Processor 2 and body twelve moved into the Machine, which hummed and glowed. Twelve minutes until the next body drop, Gordon noted.

It was a conscious contribution too. Organisms who died millions of years ago didn't say to themselves, hey guys, let's decompose in such a way so as to later power a bus. No, Gordon thought, our dead know what is coming. When they die, their physical form would be recycled into pure energy. And black sludge. But mostly pure energy, used by their loved ones to cook meals and fend off the creeping terror of the dark. Even that black sludge was being used in roads, helping dreamers, the desperate, and those who pictured a world of color, get the hell out of Buffalo. The dead were caring for those who stayed behind and for those who wanted to leave. A literal afterlife for a pragmatic 21<sup>st</sup> century. He thought it was beautiful. Maybe he continue working here part time when they came back. The Machine hissed and Gordon sighed. He pressed the button.

Shrieking alarms sounded almost immediately and the Machine bellowed. Gordon had never heard that sound before. He looked over to see Benny on his knees with his hands over his ears. Ducking out of his booth, he ran over to his massive friend; the sound was tremendous and Benny had felt the brunt of it. The conveyor belt had stopped. The shields for Processors 1 and 3 remained down.

“You all right?” Gordon shouted over the alarms.

Benny, hands still over his ears, looked up at Gordon, eyes wide.

“ARE YOU OKAY, GORDON? MY EARS HURT REALLY BAD. WHAT WAS THAT?” Benny’s shout was almost loud enough to knock Gordon back a step.

Gordon helped the big man to his feet and ushered him over to the break room. Once inside, he shut the door to blunt the shrill noise reverberating throughout the main processing floor. Lowering Benny’s hands from off his ears, Gordon saw a little bit of blood on each of the man’s palms and winced. He motioned for Benny to stay there and get cleaned up, and soon he was back out in the noise. The only solution he could think of was to shut the Processor/conveyor belt system off. Reaching into his booth, he flipped the appropriate switches. Processor 1, however, would not shut down. It just hummed there in incomplete standby, cleavers and moving parts dangling awkwardly in suspended time. That was new. The alarms stopped at least, though several lights were flashing above Processor 1. Must be where the problem is, he thought. He walked to the utility closet near the base of the stairs and grabbed a pair of gloves, shutting the doors quickly so the remaining contents would not come tumbling out. No need to add to the disaster. Whatever this was, it probably wasn’t a serious issue, Gordon determined. Alarms, after all, were sensationalist by definition.

A quick peak at the processor and they’d be back on schedule. He jogged over to Benny’s station and hit the emergency shield release. With a puff of air, they rose. Gordon gagged. The vacuums hadn’t had the chance filter the smell; the process halted well before that step. There was no extra cloth on his jumpsuit to place over his nose, so he slid one of the work gloves over his right hand and held the other up to his mouth. Oh man, he was going to have to get up there, he thought, staring not only at the hanging blades but the corpse as well. Body fourteen was barely processed. Processor 1 was meant to break the body down into big pieces by cutting along the all the major joints of the body and, of course severing the head. Hips, shoulders, knees,

elbows, ankles, wrists, head. That was the order. It didn't really take much time for the Processor to physically cut through each joint, but it did take a minute or so to line up each cut so as to be exact. Ten and a half minutes to chop and one and a half minutes to vent the odor and rogue bodily fluids. Body fourteen hadn't even gotten to minute one.

It was an older white woman. Her right leg was almost severed at the hip but otherwise she was intact. She had shriveled, sunken, old person, new corpse skin, which Gordon always imagined felt like the binding of an expensive notebook for serious writers. Reaching out with his non-gloved hand, allowing his finger to brush over an inch of skin, Gordon found himself disappointed to discover that it felt only like lifeless flesh. Then he noticed her nearly-severed hip joint was, in fact, a state-of-the-art hip replacement. Dammit. The Processor blades could cut through almost anything that could crop up in the human body: bones, steel plates, standard titanium ball joints, anything but this one brand of super-hip. They might even be made by the same company, he thought, seeing the word "Titan" engraved into one of the hanging cleavers. Frankly, he thought, shifting his gaze into the heart of the processor, it didn't matter much. What did matter, was that this woman shouldn't have been allowed on the delivery truck. Lady must have had some serious means to be able to afford to have this placed into her body, Gordon thought, running his gloved finger over the smooth material of the hip, tracing the company name – "Tit" was all it said; the "an" and the metal on which it was etched had been chipped off.

Gordon had a hunch. Moving away from the body, he trotted up to his station and moved the conveyor belt backwards a few feet. After returning the belt to its dormant state, Gordon returned to the processor and lifted himself onto the belt. One by one, he carefully took each bladed appendage and pushed them up into the main body of the processor, returning them to their starting positions with a sharp click. As he suspected, a few of them wouldn't budge. How

it happened he had no idea, but the shard of super-hip had managed to lodge itself into the mobility mechanisms. Thanks to the alarm lights, he could even see it.

“What’s going on, Gordon?” Benny said as he made his way to Gordon from the break room. Still loud, Gordon thought, but my giant seems to be recovering.

“Something that wasn’t supposed to get recycled got chipped and now a part of it’s stuck in here pretty good. Just going to grab it and everything will be fine.” Gordon replied, pulling at the chipped piece of super-hip. But as he pulled, the processor started to shudder and work.

Benny launched himself over the belt and into Gordon, sending them both to the floor on the opposite side. They both looked back and saw the shield descend and the cleavers resume their dance for a brief moment before jerking to a halt once again. The Machine let out its deafening bellow, but this time the men were able to protect their ears. Luckily, the shrill alarms remained silent. They just sat there for a moment in the quiet that followed.

Gordon looked at Benny, “Jesus, kid, thanks for that. I mean, I’m sure I would have been alright, but that was... I mean, what you did was...”

“You’re welcome, Gordon.” Benny smiled and stood, extending his hand and pulling the older man to his feet. An audible and prolonged beep sounded from Gordon’s booth.

“Radio,” is all Gordon said. Benny nodded.

They made their way to the booth and Gordon switched the radio to speaker mode so Benny could hear.

“Go ahead, Base,” said Gordon.

“Hiya, there fellas,” the young woman seemed to have recovered from Benny’s naïve rejection earlier in the day, “listen, we’re in a bit of a pickle. Those cold temps are comin’ in soon and we noticed your output decreased...”

“Yeah, about that,” Gordon interrupted, “Some jerk over on your end loaded a body with a Titan hip replacement onto the truck.”

“You’re kiddin’?”

“Nope. A piece of it’s in Processor 1 as we speak.”

“...”

“And before you ask, yes, Processor 1 is non-functioning.”

“... Well shit.”

Gordon raised his eyebrows and Benny giggled softly.

“Sorry, couldn’t hear you. Could you repeat that?” Gordon said smiling.

“I said ‘well shit.’ What are ya’, ten? Now, the grid is gonna get strained real soon. So, can you find some kinda way to get things workin’?”

Before he could say ‘no,’ the supply closet fell open and its various contents tumbled out into a heap upon the grey concrete floor. Among them, Gordon noticed, was a fire axe. He considered the axe, then looked to Benny, who looked to the axe, looked back at Gordon, and then looked confused.

“Yes, ma’am,” Gordon said into the radio, “I think we have found what you might call a technical workaround.”

\*

By 2:40pm both Gordon and Benny were drenched in sweat and in the coagulated juices of former people. The Machine seemed satisfied, the green glow even seemed a bit brighter since they started hacking at the bodies manually. Benny had done most of the actual chopping, while Gordon ran back and forth between the stations, flipping the controls and ensuring the human paste was the right consistency before the Machine gobbled it up. Benny was surprisingly okay

with the whole process. Gordon thought he might have to give the big lad a lecture on social responsibility, but it didn't come to that.

“It's okay, Gordon. They're dead and can't feel it. You heard what the radio lady said about people losing power. I have to do this.”

What a kid. Gordon was proud of him.

“I'm proud of you, kiddo,” he said.

They sat in the break room, Gordon leaning against the sink counter and Benny sat hunched over a table. The man looked wasted, Gordon thought. After just one body, moving his own arms felt like swinging a lead oar underwater. Four bodies in a row... whew. Not even when he was younger. Maybe with a sharper axe.

“You're going to sleep well tonight. That was one hell of a workout.”

Benny said nothing. Poor kid must be out. Gordon wasn't sure how they were going to get through the next delivery. Maybe he could poke out the shrapnel from Processor 1 with the axe? He had consulted the operations manual when Benny was chopping up body sixteen. Under the “Mechanical Failure Section,” it stated:

*Foreign objects impeding the operating mechanics of the processor must be removed with extreme caution. Power cannot be cut to the device without risking catastrophic failure of machinery (see magnetic core feedback). Reversing vacuum suction presents the most viable course of action for operators lacking specialized tools (see vacuum operations). Contact regional company representative for emergency maintenance requests.*

He tried the vacuum thing. Nothing. Titan wouldn't be able to send a rep until they okayed it with the state who had to okay it with the company that made the Machine who would also have

to send their own representative to ensure the technician from Titan didn't try to steal information about the Machine which would prompt the state to send their own rep to make sure the contracts were upheld by both parties. Then the city would send someone to feel included in the proceedings. Estimated time of request fulfillment? Seven business days.

His hulking friend wouldn't be able to get through another eighteen bodies, even if he helped, Gordon knew. He'd have to call Base and tell them they just couldn't do it. They'd understand. I mean, it wasn't Gordon and Benny's fault the processor broke. They even tried being proactive. There was only so much they could do. They were just doing the best they could.

Delivery alarm went off. Benny sat up at once, alert but distant, like he'd been woken from a nightmare. Gordon gave him a thumbs up. Checking his watch, Gordon saw the time and thought it odd the shipment would arrive early, what with automated drivers being, well, what they were. Operations probably pushed up the delivery time-table slightly. Ten-minute difference. He rubbed his temples, leaving a bit of semi-dried something behind. He was definitely overreacting.

Benny hulked out of the room, dragging the axe. Had he had that the entire time? Gordon followed, trying to keep pace.

"Hey, listen, we're not going to be able to keep this going. I mean, you seem half-dead yourself."

"I'm good, Gordon." Benny said.

"You, sure? I was going to radio in and tell them we couldn't..."

"Naw, that's okay. I'm good for now."

Benny hoisted the axe on his shoulder and gave a little smile. Gordon's heart swelled. This kid was just the best. He'd convince Karen to let Benny eat for free at the café. Maybe even dedicate a menu item to him. "Benny's Burger." Gordon liked the sound of that. It would be massive and somehow good for your heart, he thought.

"Alright, just let me know when you want to stop. Wouldn't want you hurt yourself."

Benny nodded and took his place near the conveyor belt just after Processor 1. Gordon pressed the button. The corpse was still fully clothed! Gordon stopped the belt in front of Benny.

"C'mon, we're working our butts off down here and the pickers at Base can't even manage to strip the bodies?" he said.

"They're doing the best they can, Gordon." Benny said.

"No excuse... I guess we'll strip him. Torn jeans, a raggedy coat, hiking boots... jeez, the guy must have loved the outdoors."

The body belonged to a man his age. Always sad to see. Covered in bruises and left side of his chest partially collapsed. His skin was cold but the color...

"He's dead, right?" Benny said.

"Definitely. But, you're right, it hasn't been long. Sad. Go ahead when you're ready. Want me to hold them down like I did last round?"

Benny nodded

"Great, give me a sec." Gordon took the pile of clothes and piled them next to the super-hip they managed to extract from body thirteen earlier. Cutting around it was, unpleasant. That's probably why he was so tired, Gordon thought, it took twice as many cuts to separate the body from that thing.

“I’ll look for something in the closet to sharpen that axe after we do this one. Maybe even use the Titan hip from body thirteen. Might make this easier.”

Gordon positioned himself to steady the body so Benny could work on the hips. When ready, he gave Benny the go-ahead nod. The big man readied himself, before swinging the axe down with all of his considerable strength on the left hip joint.

Blood erupted from the opening as the left leg detached. The grey jumpsuits, the concrete floor, the axe handle, the whole world was speckled red. Gordon, stumbled over to the supply closet and groped around for some rags to wipe his face. While there he grabbed two pairs of safety glasses and a couple of cleaning masks. The masks would soak through pretty quick, but they were better than nothing. Once both of them had cleaned up a bit and donned their new apparel, they continued with the evisceration. By the time Gordon moved the body and initiated Processor 2, they were soaked.

He grabbed the super-hip and motioned for the axe. Benny, panting, complied. There was nothing to say. Gordon wiped the axe-head with a rag. That whole experience had been unpleasant, Gordon thought, as he rubbed the edge of the now mostly blood free axe head against the chipped portion of the super-hip. It was crude, but it seemed to work. Time to move the body to Processor 3 and drop the next one. He returned the axe to his friend, who admired its renewed edge.

“Wow, you did a great job Gordon, thanks.”

“Let’s hope it helps. At least the next body will be nice and dry.”

It wasn’t.

“Something’s really wrong. This isn’t right.” Benny mumbled through his blood-caked mask.

“You’re telling me. Base should’ve mentioned they were sending fresh bodies over...”

“No. I mean. This... these bodies aren’t supposed to be here.” Benny exclaimed.

“But, they’re dead...” Gordon said.

“I know. But...they’re not the right type of dead.”

“Benny, we’ve seen fresh ones before...”

“I don’t remember those times all that well, but I would remember feeling this way.

Something’s wrong.”

Benny wasn’t making any sense. He was agitated from all the exertion, Gordon thought, as he stepped through the sticky blood puddle forming around their feet. The glow from the Machine was definitely brighter, he was sure of it. Chemicals must be reacting with the blood. He performed his lever and switch ritual, dropping the next body and moving everything along.

As he threw the lever for Processor 3, he heard Benny cry out, “She moved! She moved! She’s alive!”

The Machine shuddered. Gordon wheeled and saw Benny lifting the body off the belt.

“Benny, calm down. That’s imposs...,” he cut himself off when he walked over and saw that in Benny’s arms was a woman in a torn turquoise ski coat.

“She’s alive, I saw her move a little.” Benny said.

No. It couldn’t be the same woman. That was hours ago. Her eyes closed as she fell against her car. That woman would be in the hospital surrounded by her family.

“She can’t be alive, Benny. She came out of the chute. I mean, I could understand how you might get confused. I’ve read about how gas can sometimes...”

“I SAW HER MOVE,” Benny roared, “I CAN FEEL HER BREATHING.”

“No, son. You’re just tired and confusing this woman with the woman you saw on the news earlier.” Gordon said. A delicate, but firm hand was needed here.

Benny’s face scrunched up, trying to remember the news from earlier. After a moment he shook his head, turned, and gently lay the woman in a clean spot on the floor.

“I don’t really remember much about that. All I know is that this person’s not going on that belt.”

He assumed a protective stance with the axe and Gordon backed up a few feet.

“Easy, there kiddo, this isn’t my fault. I’m on your side. You’re just confused. Only one type of truck can make a delivery. Those are all run by Base. Base would not send us live people. You know that.”

“Why is she still warm?”

The radio beep sounded.

“Fellas’! Not sure what you’re doin’ down there, but keep it up! Niagra is havin’ problems so you guys are pretty much powering most of Buffalo by yourselves. That shipment I mentioned earlier today is gonna get there in about thirty minutes. Lost the signal earlier, but sent it a priority reroute code once we got back online. Sorry about that. Keep workin’ hard boys!”

Gordon was at the radio almost instantly, “Base... do you know if one of the new mass casualty ambulances was used earlier today in that huge accident?”

“Yeah, I saw it on the news. Why?”

He almost dropped the radio. Staring hard at the chute opening, Gordon set the conveyor belt to slow, and pressed the button. A man with a blue EMT uniform fell onto the belt. Benny grabbed him and lay him down next to the woman. The man let out a light moan.

“Listen to me. You sent the ambulance here and it dropped the patients and EMTs into the chute.”

“How...?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m staring at an unconscious EMT right now. Send some goddamn help immediately.” Gordon pressed his button and held it down. Body after body dropped down.

“Benny! Get them off the belt.” Gordon yelled.

The big man worked quickly and soon about fourteen people were lying on the ground. Falling four stories down the chute had rendered most of them either unconscious or beyond help. The woman with the turquoise ski coat was barely hanging on. Eight of the fourteen were dead. The radio sounded.

“Fellas’? Niagra’s almost completely failed. Most of the Buffalo area is gonna’ go dark in about twenty minutes. We’re on backup generators here. It’s gettin’ real cold with the sun going down. Negative twenty without wind-chill. Around 500,000 people aren’t gonna’ have heat when Niagra goes down. Try to fix whatever’s wrong and get Back to Basics working at 100% output when the bodies get there. We’re askin’ for more bodies from downstate sites...”

Gordon switched of the radio, watching Benny carry some of the more stable live victims into the elevator. Good. It would take him a while to run up the stairs, unload the bodies, and come back. The Machine issued a long hiss that transitioned into what sounded like a growl. Just the vibrations mixing with the heat ejection, but it sounded impatient. Urgent even. As if it knew what had to be done.

I can’t let all those people lose power, Gordon thought, as he moved towards the eight corpses lying motionless on the ground. He picked one up, knees and back aching, and managed to load it onto the belt. A young EMT, her neck probably broke in the fall. Tragic. But she would

have been glad to know her body would still be saving people. He quickly stripped her down. Grabbing the axe, he raised it above his head, only to have it ripped from his hands.

“She isn’t dead, Gordon.”

“Benny, her neck is broken and those people out there are going to lose power.”

“You can’t recycle her, Gordon.”

“Yes, I can. She is dead. Period. So give me the axe and let me do my job.”

“No, Gordon.”

“Stop saying my name and please, give it to me. She’s dead! Look, feel her pulse.”

“People haven’t said goodbye to her yet, Gordon.”

“So? She can’t hear them.”

“It’s not for her. It’s for them. They have to understand that she isn’t coming back, Gordon.”

“Stop saying my name! I know she isn’t coming back...”

“People aren’t really dead to us until we say goodbye, Gordon.”

“Goodbyes don’t mean anything. They aren’t permanent. It’s just a word to say ‘I’m leaving’ not ‘I’m never coming back.’ I say goodbye all the time!”

Benny dropped the axe and grabbed Gordon by the shoulders, stooping down to make direct eye contact.

“Sometimes you leave people or people leave you. And you know at those moments, deep down, you’re never going to see them again. That’s why you need goodbyes, because that feeling isn’t enough to help you move on. You’ll ignore it, push it down deep so it gets recycled into something you hope not to recognize. But you always do. No matter how many times you

push that button, Gordon, that feeling will be there, and you'll remember that they're gone forever, every time you turn on a light."

Benny wrapped the man in a large hug, before turning, scooping up the woman in the turquoise coat, and ascending up the elevator. The delivery alarm sounded. The Machine pulsed silently, waiting.

"Goodbye."

Gordon moved to his booth and set everything to "full-auto fast" with a delay of five minutes. He unzipped his jumpsuit, removed his socks, and underwear. He took off his watch, now caked with blood and set it on his stool. He restored full power to Processor 1, which sent the alarms sounding. Benny will have heard that, Gordon thought. In the manual, it said restoring full power and employing an automatic setting would reset the processor, but that the shields would descend and lock instantly. They wouldn't ascend until the processor completed a full recycling cycle. Hips, shoulders, knees, elbows, ankles, wrists, head.

Benny's feet were pounding on the stairs above. Gordon climbed on the belt. The shard was still there, "an" etched on the miracle metal he knew nothing about. He pulled it out and tossed it to the floor. The alarms went off and the shields came down. Limited air now. He lay down. The cleavers that had been impeded by the piece of super-hip snapped up into place. Reset complete.

He imagined all the people in Buffalo wrapped in blankets their lights flickering as Niagra failed. Maybe Karen and Jenny were among them. Karen, Jenny, and some other guy, maybe. Didn't matter. He wasn't going to let them freeze. Any of them. The woman on the radio, the wounded accident victims, Benny's mom, whose beautiful son was now charging from the end of the stairs right towards the axe. Emerald light danced around him and Gordon could feel

the Machine shudder. Benny had the axe and was swinging as hard as he could against the shielding.

A short time from now, Gordon thought, he would be mass without form, getting sucked into the green light and being channeled through tubes to parts unknown, where foreign chemicals would embrace him, making him electric. He would course through the grid and dissipate over distance, giving himself little by little to everyone along the way. Even if he couldn't get to all of them, he hoped they'd understand. He was just doing the best he could.

## The Cul-de-Sac at the Edge of the Woods

The road was hard to find, but not for us. It wound up a slight hill, past the broken gate of a suburbia that never was, lined with cleared plots of land and uncompleted houses in various states of construction, all of which were meant to house families like mine, like hers, before the project stalled, the hammers went silent, and the surrounding woods began its creeping reclamation. The road ended in a cul-de-sac at the edge of the woods.

It was a perfect concrete circle, connecting the only three completed houses of the neighborhood. In summer I spent hours as a boy running my hands over the flat yet textured surface, and sprinting the hard circumference chasing after her, sweat tumbling from the tips of our noses, the beads cutting through the thermal wisps of energy radiating from the grey surface beneath our feet. The New England autumn left castoff color for us to lie in. We'd take our fathers' rakes and drag them across the cul-de-sac, gathering leaves into piles for us to jump in, caring little for the hardness of the concrete. Winter brought snow, but the plough-drivers of the nearby town never could seem to find the place. So we were left with a bounded expanse of white, undisturbed by traffic and unbroken by the irregularities of nature. In spring we lay in the center of the circle letting warmth seep into our backs and through our bodies as our fingertips barely touched. I stared at her dark-orange strands of hair in those moments, with the creaking figures of the bordering trees looming just beyond sight, and never wanted to leave the concrete confines of the cul-de-sac.

And so year after year we followed this pattern of the seasons in various incarnations. We changed and grew in circles. Raking leaves eventually became a mutually disliked chore, the plough finally found our street, our spring awakenings at the center of the neighborhood evolved from reflective silence to thoughtful discussions about the woods, about what happened to our

only mutual neighbor on that Halloween night in 1997, until finally it became a forum for complaining about our math homework, with each grade increasing the time-spent-complaining to the time-spent-actuallydoingthework ratio. Our summer exertions were at one point reclassified from play to exercise. Chasing her became chasing after her became running behind. We changed, but the cul-de-sac endured—sitting circular, waiting for us to come home from school, from college. And we always did. Until she stepped into the woods and refused to let me follow.

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My parents hadn't asked for details when they bought a house on the cul-de-sac. They knew the basic facts of the listing, sure: three-bedrooms, two-and-a-half bathrooms, two-car garage, finished basement, attic, medium front yard, smaller back yard, twenty-minute drive to the closest town, quiet, family-friendly, gated community, surrounded by one of the last great swaths of New England woods. Cheap. Perfect for young couples. It was so perfect they told their old-college friends, later Kara's parents, to join them. They hadn't asked for details either.

On move-in day, movers drove to the cul-de-sac with U-hauls filled floor to roof with the American Dream starter kit: coffee-maker, microwave, color television— appliances and supplies sporting iconic names like Maytag, Sears, KitchenAid, John Deere, and RCA. The young couples followed close behind in Ford automobiles. They discussed layouts, the orientation of physical objects in suburban space. Visions of fridges stocked with Coca-Cola and Budweiser, of pot-roasts and New Year's Eve Parties, dominated their thoughts. They conceived the ideas of

Kara and me, their future children, and how we would grow together, in a gated neighborhood of arterial roads ending in cul-de-sacs, surrounded by the woods.

So on that day they chose not to see the half-finished, un-paved side roads ending abruptly at the trunks of ancient trees. They ignored the random piles of warped construction lumber left to rot in the wet New England Spring. Wrapped in the comfort of their future euphoria, they even ignored the police tape fluttering around the bare foundation of an unfinished fourth house on the cul-de-sac.

They were soon joined in the neighborhood by Mr. Reed, a young writer and beneficiary of a modest trust-fund. My parents tried to welcome him with a homemade an apple pie delivered to his front door. He answered, said a curt thank you and shut the door. Kara's parents received a similar response with their chocolate cupcakes. Yet, the young couples were not deflated, there would be other opportunities for creating welcoming baked goods. For people just like them.

But after a month, they started to notice the details. The lack of construction and forestry equipment, for sale signs, men and women in hard hats pointing weathered fingers at blue prints spread over the hood of a pickup truck; instead of these things, there was stillness, isolation, and woods that closed in around them. Calls to the realtor revealed stories of missing workers and a lawsuit by the union against the developers from Boston. Backlogs of the local newspapers mentioned the disappearances— that three of the seven missing men had been found in a nearby town, that they were subsequently deported for not having the proper documentation, that the police searched the thousand acres of surrounding woods for the remaining four and found nothing, that the land was then sold to the highest bidder, who then sold two of the houses

cheaply and gave the third to his son. The woods he gave to the state, which passed laws protecting it from further development.

There would be no new neighbors, just three houses in a cul-de-sac at the edge of the woods. Here the young couples stayed, held in place by mortgages and a joint business venture in the nearby town. They decided to make the best of it. As the years passed, as the twisted wrought-iron gates of the almost-suburb rusted and bent, as saplings and other verdant life reclaimed the unfinished roads and the foundation of the fourth house, as the siding on their perfect suburban houses faded and their driveways cracked, as Kara and I grew together in our isolated little world, our parents held onto their slice of the American Dream. The cul-de-sac was all they had. The woods looked on, as the young people fabricated a world for themselves on the very border of its own.

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Our fathers would put us to sleep by walking around the cul-de-sac. They would wrap us in warm jackets with furry hoods, slide us into front facing carriers, and walk round and round. But it would only work if I could see her. So Kara's dad walked backwards around the cul-de-sac and my dad followed, facing him. They were old friends and they took the opportunity to talk about their business, their wives, how all four of them had met in college, how lucky they had been to each buy a house in this area before the developers cancelled the project, and the anti-socialness of Mr. Reed. They also talked in hushed tones about the woods and the odd stories they heard from the locals in the nearby town.

They circled and talked while my stubby baby limbs apparently flapped and jerked, trying to reach Kara. She smiled and gurgled at my consternation, remaining quite still as my little body chased her around the cul-de-sac. As my father explained to me later, Kara would always fall asleep first. And I would follow. That seemed to always be the case. She was even older by a day, mostly because my mother was in labor for twice as long as Kara's mother. I was being a gentleman, my mom teased later, letting the lady go first.

We were winter babies, Capricorns at the edge of Sagittarius. My earliest memory involved snow. More specifically, I remember tumbling into a snow bank when I was around five years old. Kara told me she remembered giggling when that happened. When I pressed her on the issue, she smiled and admitted to have given me a slight push.

Winters after that were mostly dominated by school, though over the holidays we'd make adjacent snow angels and stargaze with our parents in the cul-de-sac. Sometimes we'd have friends over, but our houses were so far removed from the town proper that few parents felt like driving their children to visit. The exception would be for joint birthday parties our parents would orchestrate on our behalf. Kara's mother made intricate cakes with piped pictures of our favorite things. When our interests diverged, she got creative, sometimes with horrendous results: such as the infamous dinohorse cake of 1997.

But those moments were rare, because it was difficult to tell where Kara stopped and I began. We'd have sleepovers and build castles from pillows, blankets, and whatever wasn't deemed a choking hazard. When dragons attacked, we drew our paper towel rolls, donned our lampshade helmets, and met the beasts together. We almost always won and we almost always lived, together. She wouldn't have it any other way.

Once, during a particularly vicious assault, I lost my pillow shield and so Kara jumped in front of a jet of fire to save me from certain death. To emphasize her sacrifice, she closed her eyes and issued a long groan that transitioned into throaty death noises. I stood just a few feet away, my paper towel roll clutched in a limp arm, lampshade helm askew, eyes wet and face flushed. She'd never looked dead before. When she heard my sniffles, she sat up and regarded me with an even, grey-blue stare.

“You're not supposed to die, Kara,” I said.

“You dropped your shield,” she said.

I shook my head and allowed my lampshade to tumble to my bare feet; its cloth frame hit the ground with a light thud and the noise was followed by a few faint raps of trailing tears.

“But now I'm all alone.”

“Remember me,” was all she said, before turning and leaving me broken at the foot of our pillow topped battlements.

After that we stopped playing castles for a while and stuck to tea-parties. Though for a while it remained quite tense. We sat at the plastic table, day-in and day-out, sipping our non-existent tea out of purple princess tea-cups, and allowed our stuffed companions, Red Bear and Chippy, to dominate the conversation.

But even her death wouldn't dampen our spirits for too long. Soon we were back to our indoor, winter adventures, slaying monsters and dragons, throwing the other a shield when in trouble, making sure we both emerged alive, as snow fell on the cul-de-sac outside.

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We were never allowed to play in the woods as children. In winter, we never entertained the notion anyway, because of the cold and the foreboding stances of the trees. But during the warmer months, especially summer and fall, the prospect tempted us, especially as we grew older. After a field trip to a replica pilgrim settlement one autumn, I wanted to use sticks from the woods to build a fort in our yard. I just imagined how awesome it would be to have real fortress from which to launch our campaigns against the forces of darkness. My mother found the note I scribbled a few minutes after I snuck out the back door: *buy, buy, Mom, gone to the woods for busyness porpoises*. She caught me a few feet from the tree line. Her arms wrapped around my torso and spun me back towards the house, as her eyes scanned between the trees.

“WHAT HAVE WE TOLD YOU, CRANE?” She said, once inside. It was the first time my mother had ever been truly angry with me. I’d also never seen her scared before. That scared me, so I cried. She took me in her arms and squeezed me tight. Later that evening, she sat me down with a cup of hot chocolate and told me why I was never to enter the woods.

There were three houses on our cul-de-sac: Kara’s, mine, and Mr. Reed’s. It was going to be a part of a larger development, a whole arterial network of house-lined roads ending in cul-de-sacs, the perfect place to raise a family. The developers from Boston managed to build three houses, so the story goes, but when a crew went to clear the way for the second phase of the project, several of them disappeared. An exhaustive search of the woods turned up nothing. The union representing the men sued the developers and shut the project down. The developers returned to Boston, defeated. One however, refused to believe that the workers had vanished. A few months after selling the houses in the neighborhood, the developer swerved into the pre-dawn cul-de-sac in her Cadillac, and, clutching a bottle of scotch in one hand and the union contract in the other, started screaming at the vanished workers to finish the job they started, to

stop being such lazy assholes, and to give her money back. My mother, alarmed by the noise, got out of bed and ran down stairs to see what was happening. She opened the front door. In the little light creeping up from over the horizon, my mother saw the developer stumble towards the woods, yelling and cursing. When she reached them, the woman smashed her bottle against an ancient oak tree. Drops of expensive liquor ran down the trunk and the woman slumped down, exhausted.

My mother moved to help her but then stopped halfway down our front lawn. The wind had picked up and the trees swayed in its wake. To my mother, however, it looked like the trees were pressing around the woman, enveloping her. Then my mother saw the bull. The creature lumbered into the grey light from the cover of the trees until it stood just behind the woman. The bull turned its great head and looked at my mother, swept its gaze toward Mr. Reed's house, then, without a sound, it lowered its head and, using its massive horns, it scooped the drunken woman onto its back. As it turned and retreated into the woods, my mother looked over and saw Mr. Reed on his front steps. He met her look after a moment, nodded, and then retreated into his house.

My mother called the police but didn't mention the bull. When they investigated the police found nothing. No sign of the woman anywhere in the woods. They officially called off the investigation several months later. The disappearances made potential buyers uneasy, so the state bought the land cheap and declared it protected wilderness. The stories were strange. But all parties involved wanted to keep the strangeness vague. Vague was digestible.

My eight-year-old self told Kara what I remembered from the story the next day, though most of it I didn't understand. We were in her bedroom, lying on our stomachs, doing second grade homework on the floor.

“Kara, you gotta promise you won’t go in the woods,” I said.

Her brow furrowed and she looked away for several moments.

“But, Crane, I like it there,” she said eventually.

“I’m telling.”

She grabbed my arm, “No no no. Please. I just like being by myself in there. But only sometimes.”

“It’s scary and dangerous. Don’t ever go in there again. Not ever.”

“That’s not fair.”

“There are snakes and things, okay?”

“I’m always safe there.”

“Nuh uh. If you’re not gonna promise, then next time I’m going with you to make sure.”

“The woods isn’t your place, Crane,” she whispered.

“What?”

She pushed herself up to her knees. Her light steel-blue eyes motioned for me to do the same. I rearranged myself to her specifications and knelt facing her. She grabbed my shoulders and brought her face close.

“Okay. I promise to not go in there again. But, if I ever do go in there, don’t try to save me.” She slid her head down to rest on my shoulder. I wanted to protest, but it died in the face of such childlike solemnity.

“Okay,” I said.

She hugged me close and in that moment we were a pair of almost people: eight year olds thinking beyond themselves, sealing binding pacts over sheets of single column arithmetic.

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Occasionally, random cars drove up our road, looped around the cul-de-sac, and left when they decided there was nothing to see. When they did, they'd pass my house first, then Mr. Reed's, then Kara's. I often wondered what drew them here. The neighborhood road was a side-road off a side-road. Two degrees of separation between the cul-de-sac and civilization. Most likely they had heard the stories about the workers and the developer and wanted to place themselves in the proximity of mystery. Certain people felt compelled to seek out hidden possibility in the world, as if the potential presence of the fantastic somehow relieved the tedium of their lives. Mr. Reed was certainly one of them.

Mr. Reed would sit on his front porch and just stare for hours at the trees, his jet hair slicked back and tucked behind his ears where it resolved into mild curls just above his sharp jawline. His eyes were blue, but not steel-blue like Kara's. Whenever he looked at me, I felt like I was standing isolated on a piece of sea ice drifting slowly away into the sea. From what I remember of him, he was distant, but kind to Kara and me. In us he saw potential. Our parents were past hope, they were too much of the world, but Kara and I were fresh pieces of lined paper. Sometimes we sat with him on his porch in the summertime. He spoke sparingly. When he did articulate his thoughts, his voice possessed a quiet power, a fire behind a glass door.

"Write your own stories, children," he said to us once as he stared at a cluster of black oaks across the cul-de-sac near the ruined foundation of the fourth house, "do not let your parents write them for you."

Kara and I loved listening to him speak. When words left his lips, I sometimes looked over to see Kara's eyes wide, lip corners hinting upwards. I felt an unpleasant twitch between my

lungs at these moments, but the nuances of a seven-year-old's physiology were beyond my comprehension, so I let them pass without much thought.

I became obsessed with his accent. His father was American, but his mother was English and Mr. Reed had spent much of his life in England. I spent hours practicing in front of mirror, whispering his words like incantations, hoping they'd grant me some small modicum of Mr. Reed's gravitas. I first tried the accent on Kara when we were seven. We lay in the middle of the cul-de-sac after school in early autumn. We let the sun-infused pavement warm us as we listened to the wind shiver the leaves of the trees in the nearby woods, leaves on the cusp of their autumnal explosion of color. They matched Kara's hair, which I found both funny and hauntingly gorgeous as a child.

We lay there, eyes closed, shoulders touching. I looked to her, saw the pale skin over her high cheekbones and small pointed nose reflect the gentle sunlight, and said, in my best imitation of Mr. Reed, "I wish this could be forever."

Kara laughed without opening her eyes, "You're funny, Crane."

I turned back to the sun and shut my eyes, pretending that the warmth in my face was external.

But that embarrassment didn't dampen my enthusiasm for the accent. I even asked Mr. Reed for lessons one afternoon.

"Now what would possess you to ever desire that, child?" he said, scribbling notes into a small leather notebook. I knew the notes were unrelated to my question.

"Well, Mr. Reed, your voice is really cool and it makes Kara smile so I want to talk like that to make Kara smile too."

He lifted his pen from the paper at that, though he continued looking down. After a moment, he rose and walked into his house. My eyes teared and I dragged my feet as I walked down the steps of his front porch and towards his driveway.

“Child. Crane, wait.” Mr. Reed was behind me suddenly, holding a book and a cassette tape. He knelt down and extended the items towards me.

“Take these. The book is beyond you at this point, but the tape has recordings of different regional accents from England which you can listen to and practice. Ask your mother for help if working a tape deck is problematic.”

I took them in my hands unsure of what he meant.

“They will help you speak like me,” he added, perhaps sensing that his diction was too elevated for a boy of seven.

“Thanks, Mr. Reed!” I said.

“Crane?” My mother called from my front porch. She looked over and saw me standing in Mr. Reed’s driveway. Her expression was difficult to read.

As he stood, Mr. Reed pushed a lock of his hair back behind his ear, then said, “Do not use those for her; use them for yourself. Else when she leaves you, you’ll have nothing left, and you’ll chase her memory forever.”

He nodded to my mother and returned to his vigil on the porch.

“Mommy, look what Mr. Reed gave me!” I shouted as I ran-jumped back to my house.

“What did he give you?” she said, her tone of distrust lost on me.

I pressed the items into her arms and she considered them.

“*The Actor’s Guide to Accents*,” she read, “and the audio companion. Honey, is that what you want to do when you grow up? Be an actor?”

“Yes, mama,” I said, “That’s what I want to be.”

My mother looked past me for a moment, toward the figure of Mr. Reed on his porch, then she smiled at me, “Well then, that was...very nice of Mr. Reed. We’ll have to write him a thank you note.”

She hugged me, “I would be very proud to have an actor in the family.”

I imagined myself speaking with Mr. Reed’s voice as Kara and I lay in the cul-de-sac, awe playing on her lips, and her eyes filled with me. That was my dream. *Do not use those for her*, Mr. Reed had said, but the words lacked an appropriate translation for my seven-year-old self.

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I sat on the front porch as a light snow fell and pinned my book of accents between my crossed forearms and chest. The paperback cover creased hard lines into my skin through my favorite long sleeve shirt: white drama masks on black fabric. Each mask had one eye pointed towards the woods and the other pressed into the faded cover of the book. White flakes slowly dusted the center of the cul-de-sac. She draped my father’s warm coat around my shoulders and sat next to me before I even registered her presence.

It was an early snow, the first of the year on the first of December. That November existed in someone else’s memory. There was Halloween, then there was the snow. I clutched the book more tightly. I wanted the words to burrow inside me, to nest in my throat. I needed them to replace the sounds I lost when Mr. Reed passed through the cul-de-sac as he exited the world.

As Kara and I grew, Mr. Reed's vigils became more solitary. He hardly spoke to us anymore when we came to sit on his porch. I tried impressing him by demonstrating my progress in replicating his accent, but he remained unmoved. Once, in the summer preceding third grade, I debuted an Irish accent while Kara and I sat on either side of Mr. Reed as he stared at the woods and scribbled in his notebook. Kara was very impressed and she told me how pretty the accent was. I thanked her but, said that it wasn't as pretty as she was. She giggled and, though color danced upon my face, I felt brave in that moment. But when I looked up, I saw Mr. Reed staring down at me.

"It's time you left, children," he said. He hardly sat on the porch after that.

Later that summer, as Kara and I raced our bicycles around the cul-de-sac, we saw Mr. Reed emerge from the woods. Our mothers sat nearby in Kara's front lawn, reclined and comfortable in aluminum frame lawn chairs; they drank fresh pressed lemonade from disposable plastic cups. Kara saw him first, she stopped so suddenly I swerved to avoid crashing into her back tire.

The sheer normalcy of his person served to highlight the profundity of the situation. His black hair glistened in the sun, sweat circles diffused outwards from his armpits. Quite simply, he looked like a man who had walked a good distance in the middle of summer. Like a man who had walked through acres of forest. A casual summer stroll through the woods. His simple act of emerging from the tree-line fractured the boundaries of my world. Kara's too, judging from her expression.

My mother stood as suddenly as Mr. Reed came into view. With every shuffling step he took across the asphalt circle towards his house, Mr. Reed chipped away at the mythos of the woods. With every step, the woods were rendered mortal.

Kara's mother took no notice of this, it seemed, and so after a few moments of silence she called out to Mr. Reed and offered him a drink, trying to salvage a moment of neighborly courtesy. But by that point he had reached the end of the cul-de-sac and would not turn back. He was beyond lemonade. He returned to his house.

I asked questions after that.

"Why are Kara and I not allowed in the woods, Mom?" I said.

"Because, it's not safe." She said.

"But Mr. Reed came out okay." I said.

"Mr. Reed is a grown-up." She said.

"I'm nearly nine!" I said.

"That is not the same thing." She said.

Mr. Reed continued his treks into the woods. Kara and I watched him, awed by his daring, and his actions only fueled our curiosity and complicated our questions.

"Why are the woods unsafe, Dad?" Kara asked one night while both families were gathered for a neighborhood barbeque.

"That is an interesting question, honey, why don't you ask your mother?" he said as he flipped burgers over a propane flame. Kara asked her mother.

"Well, Kar-Bear, there are snakes and tics in there."

"What are tics?" I asked.

"Tiny little bugs that try to bite you, Crane. They are hard to see and their bites can make you sick."

"Oohh," Kara and I said together.

The tic menace satiated our curiosity for the remainder of the summer. By September, Mr. Reed did seem sick. His jaw seemed wired shut, his eyebrows always pulled together, seething. The small notebook he carried was replaced by a small flask, which eventually became a small bottle. His skin paled and he stopped shaving. On the way to school one morning, Kara pointed out the window of the car at the still figure of Mr. Reed sleeping against the base of an oak tree. I needed to know why. So I asked my father, who was driving.

“Well, son... You see... Sometimes...,” he said, “Crane, Mr. Reed was sleeping there because he is sick.” He finished.

“Was he bit by a tic?” Kara said.

“Or a bunch of them?” I added.

“No.” he said.

“Can we give him medicine to make him feel better?” I said.

“No.” he said.

“Why?”

“He’s not that kind of sick.”

Kara nodded as if understanding.

“I don’t get it.” I said.

“He’s sad.” Kara said.

“Yes... well, kind of, Kara,” my father said, “it’s a grownup type of sad. Sometimes, when something very important to you is taken away, it leaves a... hole of sorts behind. That hole can sometimes grow and grow until nothing can fill you up.”

“What’s that like?” I said.

“Imagine walking round and round the cul-de-sac with Kara. Now, imagine that she’s gone but you still have to keep walking around the cul-de-sac without her. That’s kind of what it feels like.”

Kara nodded, but I started crying with my mouth open, little lacrimal streams that pooled and plummeted off the ridgelines of my cheeks. Then I grabbed her and hugged her close, telling her that I wouldn’t let her go anywhere. My father bought us hot chocolate to absolve his guilt.

We stopped asking questions about Mr. Reed after that. Then, one night in the middle of October, I woke up to him screaming. I ran to my window and opened it. Cold air pressed into my body as I leaned to hear what he was saying. The houses’ porch lights cast him as a featureless silhouette. He was yelling at the woods.

I heard glass shatter. My front door opened and I saw my mother below me as she walked quickly down the front lawn and across the cul-de-sac. She seemed to grab him and pull him towards our yard. When they got to our yard, he collapsed and she knelt down next to him. She let him weep into her the crook of her elbow. I did not hear much from my window, but I managed to catch the phrase, “I’m so sorry, Joshua.” My father and Kara’s parents joined her a few minutes later, and they all worked to carry the wracked form of Joshua Reed back into his house. I shut the window once they disappeared inside.

Mr. Reed looked better after that night. There was a distance to him still, but he was clean shaven and wearing a change in clothes. Our parents told Kara and me not to talk to him. That he needed time. I imagined him slowly trying to fill in the hole he had inside him. While I didn’t quite get most of what he said from my night listening through the window, I had the impression that a school bus could have passed through Mr. Reed and he wouldn’t have felt a thing.

The night before Halloween I decided to walk around the cul-de-sac alone. I needed to feel what her absence would be like. So, I walked. Before I finished one lap, her door opened and she bounded across the grass and pavement in her green fall jacket, red hair bouncing behind her. Kara and I finished the lap together. From the edge of his steps, Mr. Reed stared at us. As we passed near his house I saw him smile. He waved to us and we waved back.

We expected a return to the status quo. Summer days spent staring into the woods, mimicking accents, maybe even learning to write stories, preoccupied my thoughts even more than trick-or-treating in town. Mr. Reed was back. To prove it to our parents, Kara and I decided to make Mr. Reed's house the first stop on Halloween. As our parents readied themselves in costumes bearing the likeness of their favorite Greek myths, Kara and I snuck out into the cul-de-sac. Kara had begun to like horses around this time, so she insisted on being a centaur. I wanted to be a dinosaur, but my parents bribed me with pie to dress as Odysseus. So Kara the centaur and I, the wanderer, marched towards Mr. Reed's house. At least, we tried to. We walked a few steps before Kara mentioned the odd smell.

When fire erupted from Mr. Reed's house, we were too transfixed to run. One moment there was a house, the next there was orange and heat. We saw movement. Mr. Reed opened his front door and emerged onto his burning porch, he proceeded down the stairs, and crossed his lawn, walking calmly towards the woods. Fire devoured his clothing and flesh as he passed through the cul-de-sac. Pieces of him flaked off and drifted into the air with the heat. His left arm was almost entirely blackened, speckled with bits of exposed unburned-bone. And still somehow he walked. He passed us crackling, but otherwise in silence. We watched him advance towards the tree line. But a strong wind began to blow from the woods, battering him back. I knew he wasn't going to make it. The flames around him intensified with the wind; pieces of Mr. Reed

floated off as ash. He stopped moving and stood there, burning. After a moment he fell forward and landed just short of the cul-de-sac's edge, a pile of brittle, blackened bones and cinders. The wind died. Weakened by fire fractures, Mr. Reed's house groaned and splintered, slowly falling into itself under an orange light. When the mind encounters the incomprehensible, the body becomes rooted, all energy diverted to the mind in an effort to make sense of the world. Kara must have understood something I didn't, because as I stood there in slack-jawed silence she ran forward in her little centaur costume towards the ash pile that was Mr. Reed. I heard our parents running towards us screaming, but I fixated on Kara as she scooped up a pile of smoldering dust from the cul-de-sac and tossed it into the trees.

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In the house with no roof, a hatchet rested on a coffee cup. Following Mr. Reed's suicide, I spent a lot of time in the half-built houses that lined the road leading to the cul-de-sac. My parents sat me down in the weeks following that Halloween and tried to answer my questions. I only had two: why did Mr. Reed try to enter the woods and why did Mr. Reed kill himself? They answered the first by saying the woods was an odd place, something old and not quite of the world but also deeply connected to it. Given what I had seen and the stories I had heard, it made sense. The disappearing construction workers, the bull, and the wind pushing Mr. Reed away, they all contributed to the fantasy of the woods I had constructed in my mind since I was a child. Of course doubts surfaced along the way, but after the fire I dismissed any notion of normalcy surrounding the wooden formations creeping along the borders of my home.

The cul-de-sac and ruined structures soothed anchored me to the real world, and I felt they were always hiding things for me to find. When I explored ruined, half-finished houses, where weeds and saplings were busy reclaiming the piles of perfectly cut timber, now warped from time spent exposed to the New England seasons, I discovered them, like the hatchet on the coffee cup. Initially, I figured them to be unutilized building supplies, and perhaps they were. Perhaps the hatchet, unrusty stainless steel wrapped at the base in a grip of old, unyielding rubber, was just an unwanted tool. Some worker, face bronzed and weathered from working in the sun, old for twenty-seven, may have forgotten it on the day the union terminated the contract with the developers. Or maybe the hatchet belonged to a fellow worker, a hatchet on loan, so he left it behind figuring it would be picked up. But the coffee cup placed in the center of the exposed top floor, the hatchet resting across its mouth, parallel to the sagging particleboard, seemed too deliberate. I was meant to find it. Why would someone even have a hatchet at a building site? The question became a sort of mantra; the words subdued my budding sense of isolation. Sometimes, when I woke to heavy winds and nightmares of Mr. Reed fading from orange to ash, I took the hatchet from under my bed and knew the cul-de-sac kept me safe.

I wasn't sure how the cul-de-sac placed the objects and I didn't care. They were gifts, tools that placed me in opposition to the woods. Toolbelts, construction helmets, watches, marbles, jump ropes, rings, coins from the 1800s, a musket ball, arrow heads- these objects would just appear in the ruined houses, in my coat pockets as I tiptoed around unfilled foundations. I hoarded the objects in the crumbling concrete basement of an unfinished home at the end of the street. My collection was the one thing I didn't share with Kara, or my parents for that matter. They weren't meant to see it.

Kara only joined me in exploring our unrealized suburbia when it brushed the borders of the woods. Where branches poked through frameless windows and prickier vines wound up protruding four-by-fours. She never admitted to finding anything, but I sometimes saw her slip acorns and unshaped rocks into her pockets. One day, she wore a necklace to school on which hung the figurine of a bull. When I pressed her, she said it was a gift and refused to elaborate further.

Despite my collection and escapades with Kara, nothing felt the same after Reed. My parents never answered my second question about why Reed had done it. My dad always looked away and my mom would bite her lip as if to let me know that the explanation was something I just could not understand. When puberty struck and I began feeling an energy that hovered just below my ribs and around my pelvis. I tried to exercise it, but it was un-expellable. I ran and ran around the cul-de-sac until my lungs wheezed and feet blistered. After one such run I collapsed on my front yard and lay there, until Kara jogged up and poked me, asking me if I was okay and making jokes at my endurance. She was wearing running shorts and a sports bra, something I'd seen her wear all summer. But this time, as she stood over me smiling, sweat plastering stray red locks to her forehead, she looked electric. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with her, but I felt like kissing and pressing my body to hers in some rhythmic configuration should somehow be involved.

“Hey, Kara, what's that over there?” I said, pointing towards nothing.

When she turned to look, I sprang up and ran towards my house, my first erection pointing like a dousing rod to safety. My dad came down the stairs and saw me slumped against the front door, penis at attention under my red shorts. We made eye contact and both turned a bit red, but then he said that it was time for “the talk.” We spent the afternoon in my room talking

about reproduction, hormones, my changing body, my cracking voice, and how my sexual attraction towards Kara was completely normal. Then we talked about love. The type of love I had only witnessed but had never experienced. I asked my father what it was like.

“Well, I suppose it’s different for everyone. Now, I’m not great with words. Always been more of a math guy. But, I guess it’s waking up everyday knowing you’re not alone. That rock bottom is your partner’s arms. Life can never beat me as long as your mom’s around.”

Mom had apparently been listening, because she opened the door with a huge smile on her face and watery eyes. She walked over to the bed, pulled my father to his feet, and scarred me for life by kissing him for a good twenty seconds straight.

But as I sat there in horror, it occurred to me that this was the answer to my second question about Mr. Reed. How he stared into the woods, how he told me not to use the book of accents to impress Kara, how he sometimes spoke as if he were deep under the earth, all of those things displayed just how lonely Mr. Reed was and why Kara and I could do nothing to make him feel better. He needed someone to love, but had no one. He fell because no one was there to help prop him up. It made perfect sense to me then and I had to tell Kara.

In the years after Mr. Reed’s death, Kara had been similarly troubled by what she had seen. And felt. The barely discernable scars on her hands connected her to that night in a way I couldn’t fathom. In the first summer after it happened, I sometimes would hear her screaming from my open bedroom window. After she started wearing that bull necklace, she told me, her nightmares diminished. She took comfort in the natural world. While I accumulated my artifacts, she planted a garden in her front yard. I found it funny, in spring-time, when I saw her red hair bobbing and weaving among the rows of brightly colored flowers; it looked like she had just sprung from the earth herself.

She was in her garden when I told her about Reed. How he definitely died because there was no one there to love him.

“There’s no way he would have torched himself if he had someone.”

Kara didn’t respond and continued to plant a tiger lily, placing the plant into the scooped-out earth before filling the hole in with rich topsoil. As she made a little dirt ring around the plant, apparently to hold in water like a damn, I grew concerned that she had no idea what I was talking about. I could feel parts of me tingling in nervous anticipation of having to explain sex to Kara.

“Since you haven’t had the talk with your parents yet, sex is…”

“Eww, Crane, I know what sex is. My parents talked to me after I got my period last year.”

“Period?”

“I don’t agree with you about love,” she said, filling the little earthen basin around the plant with water.

“It has to be why he did it. Nothing else makes sense.”

“Oh I agree, but it’s *because* he loved someone that he did it.”

“That makes no sense. Did you ever see Mr. Reed with someone? He was always alone.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s because he loved someone once and then they, like, left or something.”

“When you love someone, obviously you don’t leave them.”

“That’s totally not true. Loving someone means that one day you lose that person. Then all you have left is… nothing. No thanks.”

She looked at her hands and then touched the bull pendant resting just above her breast bone. We knelt in her garden, watching the water around the lily sink slowly into the earth.

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I kept Mr. Reed's book of accents by my bed and practiced every night, mastering the different voices of England. The non-regional "RP," Cockney, Midlands, the various dialects of the North, all of them were orchestrated by my flexing throat and contracting tongue, but each made me feel like a different man; sometimes I forgot what my own voice sounded like. I always ended my sessions by saying Kara's name. Repeating it over and over, deciding which accent made it sound prettiest. I remembered what Mr. Reed said to me, about using the voices for me and not for her. But every time I said her name with the voices of those other men, I knew I couldn't honor his wishes.

I kept my feelings to myself, though, knowing Kara's position on love. But I thought that if I just kept spending time with her, if I could find the perfect voice, she'd come around. That's how I spent most of my high-school years, acting on the stage and growing closer to Kara. Acting led me to interrogate the true emotional motivations of those around me. I was a dramatic teenager, sure, but something about studying characters and parsing out prerogatives forced me to dwell on whether people cared as much as they said they did. Did driving me to school and putting food on the table really mean that my parents would *die* for me? It felt like a stretch, though I conceded that short of placing myself in life threatening situations on a regular basis my parents could only demonstrate their love and affection through the mundane tasks of life. When I became a senior, I finally figured out that the unremarkable actions of my parents had

essentially kept me alive since birth. Following this epiphany, I noticed my characters became less aloof onstage, more willing to display vulnerability; the director of the theatre department even cast me as the lead in the school's production of *Hamlet*.

Aside from my parents I still doubted people. After all, it was a person who stopped loving Mr. Reed and allowed him to smolder in solitude. But people didn't matter, because I had Kara. We laughed over cups of coffee, teased each other over poor fashion choices, and ruminated about *The Matrix* or *Lord of the Rings* through the night until sounds of life filtered through the windows from the woods outside. People always asked us if we were dating and of course we both laughed and said "no." By "no," we really meant, "not yet." Daily, I entertained the possibility that one day I might hold her in my arms in the stillness of the nighttime cul-de-sac. Pressing bodies together under the stars. As clichéd as it was, my attraction wasn't driven by familiarity or mere proximity. Kara was my other half; it seemed inevitable that we would collide like magnet tips of opposing polarity. It was a reasonable assumption, I mean, she never dated anyone else. She was absolutely gorgeous, so plenty of guys asked her out, but she just never felt like dating. I took that as a signal that she was somehow saving herself for her perfect compliment. For me.

I just needed the right opportunity, so when I saw posters plastered over the school walls depicting two suave seniors in modest dress, holding each other at forearms length, their smiles serene and sober, their eyes saying "We're going to totally bang later," I new prom would be perfect. Neither of us were enthused by school dances or functions, save theatrical productions; my first scene of every show began with me flitting a glance into the audience for Kara. She was always there, smiling in her seat. But other than that, they had no appeal.

Our parents sat us down before Homecoming senior year and tried to explain how school dances were fun and a rite of passage for high-schoolers. When I asked them if they had a good time at their respective Homecoming dances, each of them stared blankly for a few moments, cocking their heads to the side in an attempt to let the buried memories take a gravity-assisted tumble to the forefront of their minds. My dad mumbled something about a mascot and an uneven ladder, but none of them could really state for certain that Homecoming defined their lives in a meaningful way. The Prom posters, however, appealed to me. It wasn't the unintentional sexual tension or the other visuals, it was the phrase: "Tonight Never Dies!" It was a stupid play on the James Bond title *Tomorrow Never Dies* (of course the Class of 2007 would have a James Bond themed prom), but it reminded me that a future with Kara wasn't just going to happen, I needed to make it happen. And I needed to make it happened before we went to college.

I asked her on the day I got accepted into my dream school. When I ran over to her house on that cold, April afternoon, I held in my hand an acceptance letter to Boston University. It was a few hours away but there was a train stop only about fifty-minutes from the cul-de-sac so getting home would be easy. I skipped and hummed "Ode to Joy" as I knocked on Kara's front door. She would have gotten her letter today too. Kara and I together in Boston. It wasn't home, but we'd be together, lovers in a foreign part of Massachusetts. Both the letter and me asking her to prom will cheer her up, I thought. With graduation approaching she had become more distant: staring off into the woods, asking me to repeat things during conversations, twirling the pasta on her plate in a twirl far too big to fit into her mouth. Small things. But, if Mr. Reed taught me anything, it is that love can save anyone.

She also had a letter in her hand when she opened the door, but it didn't say Boston College.

"Paul Smith's College of Arts and Sciences? Is this an April Fools joke?" The sound of my own forced laughter betrayed the fact that even I didn't believe that.

"I want to study forestry," she said.

I took the letter from her hand and said, "But, it's not even in this state."

"It is six hours from Boston, driving."

"But I love you."

It just came out. A knee-jerk reaction to the potential disintegration of destiny. She loved me. And when you love someone, they stay with you. They don't run to study forests.

"Don't say that. You don't. And if you do, stop," she yelled. She pushed me towards the door. I was too dumbfounded to do anything else but stumble towards the portal. Seeing the cul-de-sac, I whirled on her in righteous anger.

"We grew up together. Told each other our most intimate secrets. And you mean to tell me that after all the times we lay in the center of that pavement," I pointed towards the cul-de-sac, "you feel nothing?"

"I didn't say I felt nothing. I said I didn't love you."

"Same thing."

She just shook her head, "it's for your own good."

"No it isn't."

"I'm not going with you."

She shut the door and left me standing there. I went to prom with the girl who played Ophelia and spent most of the summer helping my dad at his shop in town and practicing voices

from a new book of accents. On the day my mom drove me to Boston for college, I took the hatchet out from under my bed and stuffed it into my bag, before walking out to meet her in the car. As we circled around the cul-de-sac, Kara emerged from her garden and waved, her smile tentative. I watched her for a moment, then I faced forward and didn't wave back. I wasn't taking her with me.

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I never fully grew into college. Theatre, while more professional, created the same haven for me as it always had, yet Kara's absence fostered an unease. There was something missing and I was failing to acquire an adequate substitution. Being cast as Ahab in a contemporary stage adaptation of *Moby Dick*, reinforced my suspicion that I was gravitating towards characters who were similarly discontent. I enjoyed my roles, the other members of the cast, and my classes, but I always relished opportunities to return to the cul-de-sac. It gave me shape and comfort, whereas in Boston I felt like water spilled on a flat surface. I still couldn't bring myself to talk to her, the swelling caused by the sting of her rejection had not subsided. It took more than a few months for the tenderness to subside.

But it did, and we eventually texted her over that first summer, which she spent working for the forestry service in Colorado.

"Hey. Is CO nice?"

"Yeah. Air here is thin. Park is more crowded than I'd like."

"Sorry."

"Me too."

We didn't spend much time together in the years that followed. She was too busy with her trees and I with Boston. I texted her a lot, but the cadences were friendly without the feeling of familiarity. I found myself on one side of a widening chasm that I created but no longer desired. Despite the lovers and friends that kept me from tumbling over the edge, I came to the decision that I needed Kara in my life. Fantasies of her and her spouse living in the cul-de-sac across from me and mine played repeatedly in my head. She may not have loved me, but that didn't curb my hope that we'd grow old together.

After graduation, both of us moved back to the cul-de-sac. Our respective parents offered to pay us for watching the houses while the four of them took a half-year vacation to Tuscany. When they left, I invited Kara over for dinner, hoping to catch up and celebrate our educational milestone. When she knocked on the door, I almost didn't recognize her. Physically, she had grown into her body a bit more, but it was the lack of dynamism in her eyes and smile that gave me pause.

Making sure I gave her plenty of sauce, just the way she liked it, I set the plate of spaghetti in front of her, poured her a cup of merlot, assumed my seat, and waited for her to say something.

"I always did enjoy the sauce," she said after thirty minutes.

"Some things never change, huh?" I smiled but my comment struck a nerve. After dinner she thanked me and said goodbye, retreating across the cul-de-sac. That summer we had more dinners and our conversation improved.

"So you enjoyed being Ahab?"

"I did, yeah. It was emotionally exhausting, but it was worth hearing the crowd's reaction."

“It would have been nice to see.”

“The applause just didn’t sound right without you there, to be honest!”

We laughed and talked into the night. We conducted our own dramatic readings of Shakespearean plays in the center of the cul-de-sac. We swapped stories and illustrated for each other, moments of vulnerability. It really was “we” again. Status quo antebellum. Time had been rolled back to the age before the fire, though the some of the decaying, blackened wood was still visible beneath the waste-high grass and assortment of invasive vines that had overtaken the ruined structure.

It lasted into the fall. We raked leaves on the afternoon before Halloween. The late-autumnal sun reflected off her hair the way it used to when we were children. I could not remember being happier.

“I wish life could be this happy and simple forever,” I said, grinning at her.

“You’d miss acting, eventually. You love applause too much,” she teased back.

“Naw,” I said, “as long as you’re here, my friend, I don’t need anything else.”

She looked down at her leaf pile and said nothing. We raked in silence for the remainder of the afternoon. As the days crept towards December, Kara withdrew. I caught glances of her staring into the woods, the way Mr. Reed had before the fire. When I confronted her, she said she was in no danger. I believed her.

Two weeks before our parents’ were due home, I was in my garage looking for spare batteries for the television remote when I saw her, frame wrapped in a thin white dress, walk from her front door and stand next to the woods. I pushed the automatic opener on the garage door and waited, chuckling, wondering why she was wearing a garment so thin on such a cold New England evening. When the bottom of the door rose above my eye line, I noticed she was

facing me. Then, wooden masses and gnarled branches pressed in around her, lifting her up into the nearly treeless canopy, and spiriting her away.

“Kara,” I shouted, and I kept shouting it. Louder and louder as I grabbed a hiking backpack from the garage, a bottle of water from the fridge, and the hatchet from under my bed. The woods took her. I slammed the front door to my house and ran across the cul-de-sac. Spittle and hoarse syllables spilling from my lips, I crashed into the woods as a cold wind rocked the trees around me.

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I reached for her, but felt instead the prone husks of browned-out leaves lying frost-flecked on cold stone. I opened my eyes towards the space she should have been and saw only my hand in the woods under a dull winter sun.

I sat up quickly and looked around, sweeping my head back and forth, getting my bearings and shaking off sleep sluggishness. My neck tensed up right where it met my skull. I grunted and pretended that I was the type of man who could shake off a debilitating cramp the way others removed food debris from their shirts. But I wasn't. So, I succumbed to my injury and sunk back towards the ground rubbing the ailing muscle in concentric circles.

“Well, Crane, now you know what happens when you doze off on a rock,” I said.

After I pursued Kara into the woods, I crashed around in the dark for what seemed like hours. My voice ripped raw from shouting, calling her back. I stumbled into this clearing; the open air smelled vaguely metallic, the way the threat of snow often does. Exhaustion tugged me towards the earth, so I trudged up the small hill at the center of the clearing and sat amongst a

collection of half-buried stones under a small ash tree. The rocks swaddled me in warmth, just as the cul-de-sac had on those early days of spring so long ago. I sank onto the rough surface and fell asleep.

Recalling my poor sleeping decisions rendered the pain no less intense. Avoiding as much movement in my neck as possible, I turned my entire body in an effort to locate something that could help. I manage to glimpse the hiking backpack. It was at the bottom of the hill, resting against a stump. Must have knocked it down the hill while I slept. Dad always kept some painkillers in there, so I knew what I needed to do. I ignored the agony shooting down my neck and stood. Or tried to. My neck pain had concealed the fact that my right leg was asleep, so standing transitioned into tumbling down the hill and colliding stomach first with a stump at the bottom.

Everything in my lungs exited in a torrent. Through my gasps for air, I could almost hear Kara's laughter, her string of alto exhalations peppered by the occasional mini-snort. Always my ideal audience. The image of her lying next to me, of my hand reaching to seize her dissipating silhouette, floated momentarily to the forefront of my thoughts before slipping underneath the waves of pain that crashed through my entire body. It was a beautiful image though, reminding me just how important she was, and why I needed to get up and find her.

The bag had Ibuprofen in one of its many pockets. I select four and wash them down with the water bottle I grabbed from the fridge. One bottle of water and my hatchet, those were the only things I added to the bag. Besides the small bottle of Ibuprofen, the bag contained a half-eaten granola bar and a single match. I was poorly prepared for winter in the woods; it was surprising I woke up at all, actually, given the cold. Eating the granola bar was impossible; it felt like biting into a metal ingot and my teeth glanced off the surface with a click. I took a swig of

water and wait for the drugs to massage my knotted neck. The trees around the clearing dripped twisted in the breeze under a dull, early sun. Moisture made their bark appear black. My mouth ran dry, so I drank more, gripping the bottle tighter with every strange crick sounding from the woods. She's here, alone and the woods probably didn't want me to find her. The woods could mess with your mind, I knew that much from what happened to Mr. Reed. I had to be vigilant. The trees were closer than I thought; they loomed mere yards from my current position by the stump, their ice-coated branches reflecting little light. Their ranks stretched forever in all directions around the clearing. The trees were legion. I was an actor in slim-fit jeans.

And my only weapon was not in the bag. I frantically swiped around the fabric pouch only to see that the hatchet lay a few feet from the tree line. Trap. Must have been. I feigned ignorance for a moment, casting a concerned look into the bag and really selling it by turning the pack upside down. Then I lunged towards the hatchet when I thought the woods would least expect it. I landed a bit short, so I combat crawled a few feet, fully expecting some shambling tree horror to stumble from the woods and impale me. Grabbing my anti-woods talisman, I pushed myself off the ground and arranged myself into what I knew would pass as a convincing violent pose on a stage: knees bent slightly, chest puffed out, head remained up and alert, brow furrowed, jaw clenched, and lips contorted for heightened ferocity. I was in character then, the great hero persona questing to save his love from oblivion. My dearest friend from oblivion. It didn't matter. Without her, I was just a man awkwardly holding sharp objects in the woods.

My eyes darted between the spaces in the trees. A gentle breeze blew cold through the clearing, conducting a chorus of soft creaks. Hollows in old oaks seem to scan me as the trunks moved and I knew I couldn't stay here. I hurriedly packed what little I had and positioned the bag onto my back. She needed me. I would find her. Dead leaves skittered along the rocks

embedded in the hill behind me. I felt compelled to move, but I had no idea where to begin. Just as I was about to select a random direction, I saw them standing at the far side of the clearing— a woman in a burgundy dress riding a bull. Every muscle in my body seemed to tense at the same moment. There was nothing more terrifying than seeing characters from your parent’s stories appear before you. I stared at them. They stared back. The winter sun rose higher over us, melting the remaining licks of frost which clung to tufts of exposed dirt and leaves hidden in the shadow of the stump beside me. Bull and rider turned and entered the woods. I followed at a distance; creeping towards the trees, my footfalls patted softly against the hard winter dirt.

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It was, perhaps, the most boring rescue of all time. As a light snow fell, I plodded along through the patches of white and leaves, tailing the bull and his rider. There was no alternative really. Interpreting broken branches or divining meaning from impressions in the mud was not within my skillset. Even if I possessed some sort of tracking ability I still had no idea where Kara’s trail was. It crossed my mind that returning to the cul-de-sac and finding her point of entry into the woods was an option. But I realized, as I peered into the endless expanse of bark and earthen colors around me, that I couldn’t distinguish one direction from another. Cold air settled on my shoulders like a frozen cloak as I determined that I had no idea where the cul-de-sac even was.

And then the bull was gone. I scrambled forward in a panic. He did not reappear. Neither did the woman riding him. I scanned the ground for signs of their passing. There were no footprints. I halted next to a huge collection of boulders, remnants of glaciers retreating into the north as the earth warmed. Though here, in this place, I wouldn’t have been surprised if the

colossal stones had been placed there by the trees when they got bored of stealing people. I could see nothing past the thicker rows of barky sentinels around the rock pile. I was completely lost.

“Dammit,” I said, maybe louder than was wise, “great going, Crane, way to lose yourself. Never going to find her now.”

“Your kingdom for a guide, eh, child?”

An impossible voice in an impossible place; Mr. Reed sat behind me on a boulder about as tall as I was. He was holding a copy of *Richard III* and balancing a saucer and teacup on his folded right knee. Life never really prepared me to speak to a dead man, so I stood there, jaw clenched, shaking my head. He looked like the Mr. Reed I chose to remember. Not the wrathful drunk, but the musing young man with cold, but clear blue eyes, scribbling clipped wisdom into his notebook.

But this wasn't the same man. This Mr. Reed seemed content, relaxed. He smiled at me.

“Well, I'll just get this out there. You're dead. But I'm guessing that doesn't mean much here,” I said.

“When Kara through my ashes in the woods, they gave me what I wanted.”

“Why did you do it, Mr. Reed?”

“Joshua, please. And you know why.”

“I want to hear it from you,” I said, “This entire thing is your fault.”

“I will admit to some degree of culpability. However, you were the one who fell in love with her, Crane.”

“Yeah, fuck me for developing feelings for the girl I spent most of my natural life with.”

Mr. Reed took a sip of tea. I hadn't considered just how angry I was with him. For the nightmares. For aligning Kara against love. For the blackened ruins in the heart of the cul-de-sac.

“I’m hardly blaming you for it. It did seem rather...inevitable,” he took another sip of tea, “However, the question is whether you can surrender your feelings.”

“Well, you may not have noticed, being dead and all, but I have. She made it perfectly clear that she didn’t love me. Was I pissed? Sure. But I got over it.”

“Then why are you here, Crane?”

“She is still my other half. And I cannot imagine life without her in it.”

“A quintessential definition of love, no?”

“I have a feeling you are about to make a point.”

“My fiancé had a miscarriage.”

I hadn’t expected that. The tea cup on Mr. Reed’s knee did not rattle on the saucer, his voice remained even and detached.

He continued, “Guilt prevented her from telling me. Nonsense, of course, the guilt, but trauma often reminds us that life is often a stream of tragic nonsense. She told my best mate and that brought them together, and left me alone. I wished them the best and moved across the ocean. What broke me, Crane, was the letter. It wasn’t the apologies, or the picture of the baby, or the expressions of love, it contained. It was the fact they named their child Joshua.”

I had no response. If he were living, I’d say I was sorry, that everything would eventually be okay, some clichéd line about time, etc. But he was dead and telling me this story as if it were the plot summary of a play he’d seen long ago. I couldn’t waste time feeling for a dead guy; I wanted him to get to the point.

“You did it because they took your future?”

“I did it because I was nothing without them. At least, that is what I convinced myself.”

“It isn’t like that with Kara,” I said.

“Judging from your earlier comment, I must beg to differ.”

He leaned forward smile gone, the air smelled of frost licking the tips of pointed leaves.

“Kara is in a clearing just past these rocks. When you see her, you will be faced with a choice: diminish Kara’s importance to your life or do not, and waste away as I did.”

“I refuse to believe that is the only option.”

“Maybe her words will sway you more than mine.”

His skin was greying. I saw minute, desiccated fragments crack and tumble onto the rocks below. The cup of tea had disappeared; the copy of *Richard III* blackened under an unseen heat. Mr. Reed was turning to ash in front me, again. Guilt pangs pricked sixteenth notes across my ribs. It was the first time I had seen and spoke to the man since childhood, and I spent our interaction essentially interrogating him and being defensive.

“It’s alright, child,” Mr. Reed was smiling again though his skin bore furrows like cracks in a gray desert, “Tomorrow, I will be renewed again. And hopefully be presented with more lively reading material.”

I still blamed him for driving a psychological divide between Kara and me. Some sliver of me always would. Yet, he shaped the trajectory of my life with his cursory presence. The cacophony of claps that resounded each time I took a bow on stage was really owed to this man, who gifted me a worn book and cassette tape when I was a child crying in a driveway.

“Oi, Joshua,” I said, in my best Cockney, “I luv it, I do, actin’. Makes me ‘appy, see. Wouldn’t ‘ave known that wifout you. Sorry we didn’t more time, mate. Fanks for all you’ voices.”

Mr. Reed nodded, his smile toothless, ice-irises thawed. Then a light breeze whistled over the rocks and dispersed him in a puff of soft grey powder.

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She was in the clearing, just as Reed said she'd be, kneeling on a slab of circular stone. The dress she wore almost seemed fashioned from the snow that blanketed the small expanse. As I stepped past the trees towards her, the white powder began drifting upward, little flakes floating past my face into the sky, sometimes finding their way into my nose or into small openings in my coat. Reverse weather would have seemed more remarkable if I hadn't just spoken to a dead man who had, once again, collapsed to ashes before my eyes. But the white crystals did cast Kara as an unearthly creature. A denizen of the woods. I gripped my hatchet tighter. Whatever trick the woods was playing, I'd stop it and she would come back to the cul-de-sac with me.

I stepped onto the rock and the air became surprisingly warm. The snow did not trespass the borders of the stone, but continued its flight as I knelt next to Kara on the rock. She didn't acknowledge me, so we sat there in silence while I thought of what to say.

"Kara..."

"You promised me," she interrupted, "when we were children, you promised to never follow me here."

"I wasn't a very smart kid. I mean, I pretty much had to copy your math homework most of the time..."

"You always have a way out."

"I just don't see how you could hold me to that promise given how much you mean to me and the danger you are clearly in."

"What am I to you, Crane?"

Her eyes reflected the floating flakes and were bluer than they had been; I felt colder. How could she even ask that question? We slayed monsters with pillow swords. We lay in the cul-de-sac in spring and giggled at the shapes of passing clouds. We held meetings in secret blanket forts, held each other during teenage devastations, broke each other's hearts, and taped them back together. We drifted apart, but the current always drew us back to the cul-de-sac.

"You're my other half," I said, "Maybe not in a romantic sense anymore, that's fine, I've accepted that. But I need you in the world. Move to LA if you want. Move to freaking Nepal, just come back with me. I need to know you're in the world."

"Is this not the world?"

"Open your eyes! It's snowing up for fuck's sake. We're not supposed to be here. This isn't reality. Reality is microwaves and books, raking leaves and complaining about math homework. That's what life is."

She stood. For a moment I thought she would float away into the sky with the white flakes. But the gossamer dress was still, subject to the gravity of the moment. She touched my shoulder and the stone beneath us morphed into verdant growth— knee high grass with waxy blades that rippled and twisted in a light breeze under a warm sun. The woods was no longer a gnarled collection of trees, but an explosion of growth and life, primeval and unbent by the soles of leather boots. I felt embraced. Then she removed her hand and I was once again kneeling on stone circle staring at a wall of ascending snow.

"Why can't I see that?"

She gestured to the clearing around her. I rose as the rock beneath my feet quivered. The remaining snow lifted from the ground to reveal that it wasn't rock at all; the entire clearing was a cul-de-sac.

“It’s what makes you happy.”

“Happiness is a slab of concrete.”

“It’s a metaphor, Crane.”

“That my life is a barren circle without you in it?” I smiled.

She laughed and shook her head. Curly, red tangles cascaded down her cheeks and, for a moment, we were children again, standing in the space between our homes in early spring, after all the snow had melted.

“Smooth,” she said, pushing the hair from her face.

I knew she was never coming back. We inhabited the same physical space, but she was far from me. I supposed that was the way it had to be.

“I’ll wait for you.”

“Don’t.”

We sat in silence for a moment.

“What do I tell your parents?” I said.

“I left a note for them.”

“Good, I was really not looking forward to that conversation.”

“What would you have said?”

“That you had to be alone for a while.”

She smiled and we embraced. *That your daughter would prefer living in an alternate reality in a primordial forest than here with us* was what I wanted to say. Technically accurate, but purposefully hurtful. She was ripping a hole in my life, sure. There would be a Kara shaped singularity at the center of my universe forever. But I was pretty sure those types of things were what held universes together in the first place.

I imagined us back in the cul-de-sac, in Boston, in LA, Dublin, getting grey and weathering the world, her mind always in a place of unchecked nature while her body was stuck with me. She'd grow to resent me. And that was a more devastating prospect than knowing she was walking in the sun through fields of swaying grass.

I'd keep my promise, for a while, maybe I'd move to New York, do some commercial and TV work, marry, have kids, and eventually move them back here, to the cul-de-sac. Then I would wait and hope that one day she'd get bored and come back. On that day, she would emerge from the woods and we would lay on our tired backs, absorbing the warmth of the cul-de-sac, until the seasons changed again.