

## ABSTRACT

Two Weeks Notice: Stories

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A young doula runs out of fertility-granting tea. A devoted dog's owner isn't the leader he needs. A tollbooth operator works on the edge of heaven and yearns to see his son again. This thesis uses creative short fiction to consider the lives of three ordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances. Questions about family, loyalty, and purpose are explored through deeply imagined interiority and experience.

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TWO WEEKS NOTICE: STORIES

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## INTRODUCTION

My advisor has his fiction students chant important phrases into memory. One of these phrases is, “new emotional and intellectual territory.” A story ought to make the reader think or feel something unique, so that they emerge from the narrative with a fresh perspective. It is the author’s duty to put characters in interesting situations and have them make hard choices, grow emotionally, or experience something in a way that pushes the reader into this previously unexplored emotional or intellectual landscape. For my thesis, I wrote stories that attempted to enter this new territory through the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of characters.

Karen Russell’s *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* and Helen Oyeyemi’s *What is Not Yours is Not Yours* both freed me to write from the edges of my imagination. Both writers deal in otherworldly landscapes, magic objects, and breaks from reality, but they ground these in real, meaningful character development. The elderly vampire in Russell’s titular story is dealing with the estrangement of his vampire wife, and the temptation to return to drinking human blood. This story doesn’t just ride the awe of fantasy – it dives into the guilt, shame, and desire that the vampire feels when he reflects on his situation. These stories take place in amazing places, but they are really about the real people inhabiting them, their thoughts and reactions and choices. These stories made me realize that I was allowed to write about a tollbooth worker on the edge of the afterlife and still craft a serious narrative.

When I start writing, I choose whether or not to develop a premise based on if it is fruitful. I knew writing from a dog's perspective would be fun and challenging, but the situation itself doesn't post any interesting questions. In order to get into that new emotional and intellectual territory, I rethought the character of the dog's owner, and how his fickle human behavior contrasted with the dog's devoted love. "Ginger for Sickness" was born out of a response to a story prompt, as well as a desire to write about women and childbirth. The issues facing the protagonist were interesting, but they didn't feel personal enough. I added the figure of the sister so that the main character's choices had higher stakes. "Two Weeks Notice" was inspired by Kelly Link's "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose," a story about a man trapped in limbo, trying to remember his life. That, combined with singing the song "Highway to Hell" to annoy my mom, catalyzed the idea of a tollbooth worker with Earthly regrets.

A huge part of the writing process was developing my voice. I started reading poetry regularly for class this year, and I found that its concision and beauty inspired me to focus on the language in my work and write my best prose. It became part of my writing ritual to read poetry before I got started. Louise Glück and Tiana Clark can put strong feelings on the page with a remarkable economy of words, distilling the essential parts of the feelings with just the right words. Poetry by necessity must focus on the details and show them perfectly, without wasting space. In any of my descriptions of action or scenery, I'm thinking of the poet's approach to such things. I want to make sure that my descriptions are surprising and rich, so that they provide for the narrative and support the characters.

Refining the voice of the dog in “The Best Day of my Life” was particularly difficult. The dog had to be intelligent enough to tell the story, but if he were as smart as a human, it would have been a waste of the animal perspective. “The Infamous Bengal Ming” by Ramesh Parameswaran helped me to look at people through an animal’s eyes without sacrificing its beastly nature. “Unprotected” by Simon Rich showed me that humor and meaning don’t have to be mutually exclusive. The poem, “Golden Retrievals” by Mark Doty helped me imagine the radical depth of emotion a dog could experience firsthand.

Revising with my peers and my advisor shaped these stories into what they are now. Writing them down for the first time was the easy part. Editing, receiving critiques, and fine-tuning or drastically changing what was already on the page was far more difficult. Workshop let me hear which parts of my story were strongest, something I often struggled to discern in my own work. It also helped me develop my own instincts, because I had to learn to discern the difference between feedback I could use and feedback that wouldn’t be good for the story. Before I was regularly discussing my work with others, I often hesitated to try to sound writerly, out of fear it would come off as trying too hard. Through feedback, I learned that the parts where I was willing to be eloquent or sentimental were the parts that paid off. I stopped being afraid of sounding like a writer, so I embraced being a writer. Workshopping also taught me to treat nothing in my story as sacred. I learned to appreciate the story not for what it was at the present, but for what it could be, and I became willing to “kill my darlings.” Instead of babying the story, I had to let it grow and change in order to improve.

Another phrase we chant in my advisor's classes is, "the more specific, the more universal." The characters' actions, the details of their lives, should be esoteric. Everything from the kind of car they drive and how messy it is, to the way they react when the waiter gets their order wrong, should be specific to the character, and it is these details that give them life. This is achieved by deeply imagining their experience. It's an imaginative exercise, to don the character's mentality and go through a scene in order to figure out what they say, do, and think. This exercise has been one of the most difficult and time-consuming parts of the writing process, but it has been the most rewarding. Performing this exercise is the same as acknowledging that this character I've created is real, or at least, real in the context of the story. Giving the character a deeply imagined experience is the most I can do for them, and it is the best gift I can give the reader.

The most important thing I learned throughout this process was how to find the emotional and intellectual core of the story. Every one of my stories is asking a question about human experience, and the answer is the new emotional and intellectual territory. In order to get to that territory, I have to be able to show the reader the question, and give them enough experience so that they can answer it for themselves. A story about a man working a tollbooth for the undead is just be an appropriation of Charon, until it explores questions about holding on to the past. A story about a day in a dog's life can be silly and funny, but it doesn't mean anything until it puts him in direct conflict with the person he loves the most. It took plenty of revising to even find out what these questions were, and what I could ask with the narratives I had created.

As a writer, it is my duty to pose these questions, and let the "bulb of meaning flower in my reader's mind." Everything I put on the page is meant to give the reader the



tools he or she needs to contemplate questions of humanity, of difficult choices and loyalties and family. If I can give the reader a story deeply imagined enough that they can feel themselves embarking into the same territory as the characters, asking and contemplating those questions, than I have written a story worth reading. My ability to create premises and characters, to use my voice well, and to use critiques to revise has culminated in these three stories, the questions they pose, and the emotional and intellectual territory into which they embark.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Ginger for Sickness

It was a Tuesday in early November, and the doula's first house call was a last-minute booking from one of her more neurotic clients. The first snow had just happened that night, and Mary nearly slipped on the slick new layer on the woman's front porch. It was about time things started cooling off.

The woman threw the front door open and thrust her swollen belly into the winter morning. She was apparently unaffected by the wind storming into her house, too busy wailing at Mary to shut the door behind her.

"It's the heartburn, it's killing me!" Sandra moaned. She was a career woman who had waited until she had a four-bedroom house in a neighborhood with an HOA before she even thought of conceiving. The fickleness of her body with child had been driving her crazy.

"Have you been eating better?" Mary was still wrestling with her boots.

Sandra quieted. "Paul threw out the ice cream, said he was getting even fatter than me."

Mary wore green for clients like this, a dark forest-colored shawl and an olive sweater underneath. It was another one of her mother's tricks – dress to confront your client's illness. Blue for bleeding, orange for nausea, green for burning. The color confronts the symptoms.

And Sandra's symptoms were raging. Suspended in the air six inches above her head swirled a tangled mass of ruby snakes, glowing like neon. They hissed at Mary

when they saw her looking. A bad sign – peoples' spirits only minded psychic women when they were in a bad mood. The big one at the bottom looked to be the mother of those roiling above. She arched up and struck at Mary, fully extended, a few inches from the end of her nose.

Mary flinched, and then disguised it as a shiver. Her mother had been dead for five years, but she still felt herself being scolded when she showed fear. *Chin up, back straight*, she would say, biting the consonants if she was at the end of her rope, or the spirits were particularly nasty.

“Did you get the ginger tea I told you about?”

“I didn't like it. Too spicy.”

“Ginger is a spice.”

“Well, I'm Norwegian, I don't like spicy things.”

“They sell it candied. Covered in sugar. You might like that.”

Sandra scoffed and waved her hand, but the spirits above her dimmed at the mention, their writhing bodies jamming for just a second, a glitch in their movement.

Mary persevered. “You can get it in bulk at Cub Foods. Put a few pieces in hot water and let them sit. It's like a cider.”

Sandra fell back onto a leather couch in her living room. She leaned back and held her belly with one hand, sighing. “I'll tell Paul to pick some up.”

“But you've been drinking your special tea.”

“Oh god, Mary, that stuff works miracles! Anytime my lower back aches I put on the kettle. Tell me you have another miracle blend for when the baby comes.”

Mary crossed her legs, sitting on the couch directly across from her client. A picturesque blaze was burgeoning in the stone fireplace to her right. The living room ceiling was two-stories high, with massive wood beams crossing above. The wall behind her client was covered in big game heads, mounted to stare straight ahead. The spirits above their heads had been long dead, reduced to small translucent clouds. They were tinged a foreboding maroon, the color of dried blood. Mary took in the sight of the hunter's wife sitting below his angry dead victims. People have no consideration for omens anymore, she thought.

“Heartburn means a full head of hair, you know.”

“Really? I was born with blonde curls, but Paul was almost bald.”

“He’ll probably be like you, then.”

Sandra squealed and covered her ears. “Don’t say ‘he,’ I want it to be a surprise!”

Mary shrugged her shoulders. “I could be wrong.” She never was.

Sandra gave Mary an amiable side-hug as she tumbled out the door. Mary was only inside for an hour, but her car had already grown cold as the morning. She sat with her hands on the steering wheel and took inventory of her own spirits.

She kept them braided, usually, but today she let them lay loose, like mermaid hair along her shoulders and down her arms. They tickled the inside of her elbows with their soft, white tails, but when she remembered that she had four more appointments that evening, they curled up in anxiety, a bad perm.

*Visit by visit*, she sang her mother's mantra, twirling a lock of hair in her fingers and blasting the heater. Touching them used to feel invasive, like something touching the

inside of her belly button. But her mother broke that feeling early through immersion therapy.

Mary was checking her email and trying to decide what to do with her free afternoon when her phone rang. It was her husband.

Her spirits curled again. He never called when she was working.

She answered after the fourth ring. “Hey John,” she said, hoping it was just a problem with their eternally broken dishwasher.

“You’ve gotta come home.” He was nervous.

“I’m booked all day.”

“Mary, they’re destroying the wetlands.”

Her spirits turned a sickly grey. She fishtailed on the drive home.

John was sitting with his elbows on his knees in front of the television, grumbling. He was trying to rewind to the local news broadcast, but the buttons on the remote were fickle, and stuck when pressed, causing the broadcast to flash forward and backward at uncontrollable speeds when he overcorrected.

Eventually, he landed on the story, a bleach-blonde reporter relaying the news with relative neutrality. There was a picture of Mary’s local wetlands in the corner.

Mary felt herself souring. She’d spent the whole ride back thinking John had panicked, or that he was talking about any number of the other marshy areas in the state, but he was absolutely correct. The reporter’s voice muddled in her ears and she slumped back into the couch.

John turned the volume down. “They’re expanding the highway,” he said softly. “The city approved the area around the existing structure for construction. They’re adding exits and lanes and everything. They keep saying they hope the land area affected will be smaller than planned, but either way they’re pouring concrete right on your spot.”

“What about the BWSR?”

“They’re squared with all government regulations. Construction starts in the spring.”

“Are there protests?”

“It’s not a big enough land mass, and it’s pretty far out from the cities.” John’s mouth formed a thin line. “And they’ve already reached a compromise with the citizens group.”

Mary rubbed her temples, her spirits fraying. “You’re sure they’re going right over our spot.”

John nodded. “On the edge of the wildlife refuge, three exits before Maple Grove.”

Mary slapped the couch so hard her palm turned red. Her great grandmother had been foolish to plant the bulbs on public land. They called it a blessing from their ancestors that the highway had only gone over their crop; the old supports a mere few feet from where they grew. Now it seemed their luck had finally run out.

“Fuck,” she said. It was the first time she’d sworn since getting the news. It felt good. “Fucking fuck.”

“Yeah,” John said.

The two sat in silence as the TV continued in the background, showing commercials for car dealerships and Halloween pop-up shops.

“How long was it until the next harvest?”

“Eight months.”

“Eight months is a long time,” John said hopefully.

“I have eight months’ worth at most. That’s only if I don’t give it to any new clients.” Six births. She had six births left with the tea.

Mary looked at her husband, his forehead wrinkled and his hand covering his mouth, deep in thought. He was so supportive, so worried, it pissed her off. He still had his food blog. *She* was the one dealing with the end of her career, the last in a long line of doulas. *She* was going to have to drive all over town to avoid her mother’s spirits, saturated in all the parks where she’d made the tea over the years. When they realized what was happening, they’d go berserk.

It was almost a funny image, her husband’s cookbook coming out with her unable to attend the premiere party, due to her mother’s spirits punishing the daughter who had undone all her hard work.

“Can you replant them?” John finally asked.

“If I could, I would have done it years ago. My great grandma rooted them there.”

“What would you need to uproot them?”

Mary threw her arms into the air. “A fucking blood moon, a sacrifice, I don’t even know what else. I couldn’t even get half of the supplies by winter solstice, which would be the last chance to do something.”



John sighed and got up to let the dog in. He managed to towel the snow off of Ranger's front paws before the dog bounded up onto the couch with Mary, his spirits a tiny gold wheat field dancing along his back.

"You have some options," John offered.

Mary let Ranger wedge himself between the couch and her body, his golden trails settling onto her side. His joy was resilient and contagious, causing some of her grey spirits to turn a ghostly white, an almost hopeful pearlescent color.

They both knew exactly what he was about to suggest, but he said it anyway.

"You could call your sister."

"I'm not telling her. She'll be so goddamn smug."

"She's probably gonna find out anyway. Won't she sense you in distress or something?"

"Spirits don't have radio signals."

"Still."

He stooped over the back of the couch to pet their dog. John's spirits lit up just a bit, just like Mary's, as he stroked Ranger's back, his fingers combing through Ranger's ecstatic spirit without noticing the wonder he was touching. That's the funny thing about seeing things, Mary thought for the millionth time. It's not even that she was experiencing something other people weren't – she just paid attention. She couldn't push down those gut feelings and intuitions when they were made manifest right in front of her eyes.

Mary scrolled through her phone and found her sister's contact. She knew the home number was wrong – her sister had abandoned having a landline after she started touring – and she had a flicker of hope that the cell had since been changed, too.

Her sister picked up on the first ring.

A coffee shop, in retrospect, was probably not the best place to meet, Mary mused. It wasn't as bad as a restaurant, but it still offered Julia the opportunity to judge her sister when she got a large drink with eighteen pumps of syrup and a billion calories. She shook her head at Mary when her drink was called at the bar, eyeing the mountain of whipped cream as she stirred a minuscule pour of skim milk into her small cup of decaf.

Julia's spirits had been ballerina pink since Mary had been born. She'd often wondered if they were naturally that color, as her sister claimed, or if she had merely willed them to be so when she discovered her talent for dance. They were knotted neatly above her head in a solid sphere, glowing softly, bobbing in the air above her ballerina bun. Suddenly Mary's loose strands draped around her shoulders felt childish.

"I didn't think you had my number anymore," Julia said, tipping one shoulder up slyly. "You never call."

"I'm pretty busy. I have a lot of clients."

"I tour around the globe, and I still find time to text you happy birthday."

This is the part where John would remind Mary of their over/under bet on when Julia would mention how glamorous her life is.

"So," Julia began, "how are things with John?"

"They're good. His book is coming along well."

“I bet he’s cooking all the time now.”

“Not as much, actually. Mostly writing.” Mary took a long swig of her drink, padding silence. “How are things with Luke?”

“Great, actually. I’m going to be home more often than not from now on, since I’m weaning myself off of touring. We’re thinking about buying a place in Edina.”

Mary resisted rolling her eyes. Of course Julia and her accountant husband had picked the richest suburb. “That’ll be nice.”

“Yeah.”

Mary let things stall for a moment. She glanced up to check her sister’s spirits, but Julia shot her down with a glare.

“If you want to know how I’m feeling, just ask.”

“They’re kind of hard to ignore.”

“Normal people don’t get to walk around seeing each other’s innermost feelings, and they seem to be able to socialize just fine.”

“We’re not normal people, though.”

Julia shifted her weight. “I like to think I’m pretty normal,” she muttered, looking off into the distance.

Mary waited for the snarky comment, the finger pointing to the distance between her perfect sister and her homely self, but it never came. Maybe Julia had matured, or at least, moved from anger to denial.

“I mean, I’ve travelled a lot, and everyone I know is a world class athlete, but I’m not…”

“Not a freak like me and mom.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You were about to.”

Julia’s spirits tightened, the ball becoming even more compact.

“I’m sorry,” Mary said. “That was uncalled for. Look, I actually need to talk to you about something.”

Julia laughed, a cruel, short sound. “I knew it.”

Mary didn’t reply.

“You always need a favor,” Julia snapped. “Every single time you want to meet up, it’s because something’s wrong.”

“This is important.”

“Isn’t it always?”

“They’re gonna kill the crop.”

The angry tirade Julia had been preparing since their last meeting caught in her throat. “Seriously?”

“They’re expanding the highway over the marsh. Mom’s spot is gonna be dug up and have concrete poured over it.” Mary felt her voice wavering; it sucked to say it out loud. “I won’t be able to grow the root anymore. I’m going to have to stop making the tea. All of mom’s work is going to be destroyed.”

“How much do you have in stock?”

“Enough to last to July. If I skimp.”

Julia looked past Mary, through the window, into the parking lot. She pursed her lips, choosing her words carefully.

“Well,” she said. “Maybe this is a good thing.”

Mary's spirits blazed.

"That Old World magic, it's outdated," the words spilled out of Julia's mouth. "Look at fertility drugs. People can freeze embryos a dozen at a time. They do IVF and end up with triplets. I mean, you can buy ovulation trackers at the grocery store. We don't have to do this anymore."

"Unbelievable," Mary shook her head. "Of all people, you should care about what happens to mom's legacy. John was more supportive."

"Oh was he?" Julia's own spirits started writhing. "Tell me, have you even told him what happens when you give a woman that tea? Does he know you're giving away his babies?"

Mary scoffed. "What, you'd rather we could steal someone else's fertility? The women I help couldn't have babies if it wasn't for me. I have a client right now who's had two miscarriages, and she's scared shitless she's gonna lose this one. I'd give every drop of our family's blood, I'd let my own eggs wither and die before I'd let her lose this baby."

"The bulbs are a curse. The women in our family only kept growing them because they depended on them. They gave their whole lives to the bulbs, then they had to chug their own damn magic tea just to conceive, and when they had daughters, they pushed the same shit on them."

"Mom didn't push me into anything. I picked up the mantle when you ran away to dance school."

"I made a choice," Julia's spirits were black now, opaque and shuddering. "I made the choice that was right for me."

“Yeah, you did,” Mary scoffed. “You’re good at that, doing things for yourself. You were almost done training, and mom had to start from square one with me. I spent twelve hours a day with her cramming lessons in before summer solstice, and every day, when I came downstairs, she’d say, ‘you’re still here.’ Like I should have gone with you. She stopped giving a shit when you left.”

“Mary, she never gave a shit in the first place.”

Mary paused to compose herself. Her spirits had turned inky black, oily, leaving residue on the back of her chair.

“Making the tea is not a bad thing. What I am, what we are, is not a bad thing.”

“Mom’s work ruined her. It’s going to ruin you, too.” Julia’s voice was low and calm, and it sent a jolt through Mary’s spirits. “This is your chance to break free, Mary, to start a family with John-“

“What made you think I want to have kids?”

Julia opened her mouth to respond, but surprise held her tongue.

“You don’t know anything about me. You haven’t asked me about myself since John and I got married. I try to keep up with your life – I don’t call as often as I should, but I try. You could at least to pretend to be interested in mine, too.”

A stubborn silence fell over their table. Neither sister was about to leave, not without the satisfaction of winning. They maintained eye contact, consciously looking away from each other’s spirits.

When they were little, Mary used to ask Julia to describe her eye color to her, over and over again, as if it ever changed. She’d go into precise detail about the jagged navy around her pupils, the icy blue lines that cut through a summery ocean color as it

faded to the edge of her iris, the texture resembling coarse brushstrokes. Mary would return the favor, of course, but never with the level of eloquence her older sister could deliver. She should have known then that Julia was going to be an artist.

Turning away from the awkward impasse, Mary rummaged through her massive bag. She prayed John had texted something, anything about the wetlands, but when she finally fished her phone out of the abyss, she had no new notifications.

“Oh, wow,” Julia whispered.

Mary looked up, startled. Julia’s spirits had faded to a velvet grey, and the corners of her lips had turned up into a soft smile.

“It’s pască, isn’t it? No, it’s...” Julia leaned towards Mary and sniffed. “Nut rolls. Christ, Mary, why didn’t you say you brought food?”

Mary froze, arm deep in her bag. “I don’t have anything.”

“I don’t blame you if you’ve changed your mind about sharing. I had no idea you’d brought a peace offering.”

“Is this a joke or something? I swear there’s nothing in here.” Mary put her tote on the table and tilted it onto its side, the opening facing her sister. A couple of tubes of lip balm rolled out.

Julia hunched over, her chin nearly touching the table, and eyed the chasm of Mary’s tote intently. Cautiously, she put one hand in to investigate. She gripped something soft wrapped in plastic, pulled her hand back, and was disappointed to find a misshapen granola bar. Mary looked on from behind her bag, bewildered.

Julia sat up straight again and readjusted her posture, as if she could shake the odd feeling off. Her forehead was crinkled in confusion. “That’s so weird, your bag smells just like...” her spirits curled back into their tight ball, embarrassed. “Nevermind.”

Mary bit her lip, thinking. Julia cupped both hands around her drink, took a sip, and grimaced – neither of them had finished even half of their coffee, and it had gone cold.

“Look,” Against her will, Julia’s eyes flitted to Mary’s spirits. They had returned to their usual pearly white color and were no longer twitching. “I got you and John tickets for the show, first weekend in December. They’re not great seats, but they’re free.”

She turned to rummage in her cross body bag. “You don’t have to come,” she added quickly as she set the two tickets delicately on the table, “I’m just ensemble. The girl playing Clara is really good.” Julia made a small smile. “She’s my little protégé.”

Mary looked at the tickets, aware of precisely how far away her right hand was from them. She stared for a few moments before sliding them towards herself. The moment of decision, she knew, was gratuitous – she would never have refused the offer.

“I’ll call you after the show,” Mary said.

Julia nodded and rose from her seat. She stood at the edge of the table for a moment, as if she expected Mary to rise with her, but Mary remained seated, pretending to rearrange the contents of her bag.

Mary stayed in the coffee shop for a few minutes after Julia left. There was warm sunlight streaming in through the wide window behind her, and it hugged her like a blanket as she sat thinking. Julia had reacted to the imagined smell of baked goods with a vivacity Mary had only seen in friends and family of clients. These bloodhounds, without



fail, were women whose biological clocks were ticking thunderously and who obsessed over the client's pregnancy as if it were her own. It was always triggered by some sort of homemade concoction Mary provided, either in the form of the tea or a balm. But Mary was painfully aware that she didn't have any magic bulbs in her bag. She wouldn't ever again, not the raw roots. A tower of concrete would choke the next harvest before it had a chance to ripen.

Later, while searching for her keys, she found a sachet she had forgotten to give to her last client. It fit in the palm of her hand, a small pouch of gaudy fabric containing common potpourri mixed with a healthy amount of dried bulb.

Julia had never been alone on the outskirts of their family. She had the mythical figure of their father, the willowy man who Julia remembered only because her present figure so resembled his, and she was four when he finally got the guts to leave their mother. He'd had enough of her seeing every annoyance, every ounce of fear in response to her acknowledgement of that annoyance, and the deepening shame as she saw the fear grow in slower, bluer spirits above his head. Sometimes, her daughters would ask about him. *He was a weak man*, she said.

Last year, Julia brought the symbol of their father with her to Thanksgiving, a firmly superior glow in her every move. It was a mere few months after their mother had died, and Mary knew inviting her sister back into family functions would have her ghostly spirits burning all over town. Surely, Julia would recognize the olive branch as an assertion of independent will, proof that Mary acted under their mother purely out of individual choice. Instead, Julia self-importantly assumed that it was an admission of

wrong on their mother's part, a vindication of the half of the family that managed to break free from the witch's grasp. They would have had a blowout if John hadn't pulled her aside to stuff the turkey.

This year, Julia burst through Mary's front door with a store-bought pie and a tub of Cool Whip, all smiles and hugs, entirely prepared for an afternoon of niceties. Julia had no intention of acknowledging any of the events of last year, of course. She could tune her thoughts like a radio dial, switching from the ugly whispers of the past to a joyful frequency dedicated to their life's greatest hits. Mary envied that about her sister, especially this year. Six births.

They made it all the way to the grocery store for a last minute butter run before her insistence on happy reminiscing finally wore down Mary's patience.

"Oh my god, Fanta!" Julia squealed as they walked past the soft drinks. "Mare, remember when we were in Romania and we had the best Fanta of our lives?"

"I don't like Fanta."

"Yeah, but we were walking all day, and we couldn't find any water that wasn't sparkling, so mom got us two Fantas and we chugged them. It was amazing."

"I'm pretty sure that was Coke."

Mary checked Julia's spirits. They were whirring, working overtime to keep up the level of cheer Julia insisted upon. "It was bright orange – definitely Fanta."

"It was definitely Coke."

"No, it was Fanta."

"Jesus Christ, Julia, it was –"

A pregnant woman barreling towards them saved Julia from Mary's temper.

"Mary, hi!"

It was Georgia Mills, one of Mary's favorite clients. She had just entered the second trimester of her second pregnancy, and she regularly reminded Mary of how she could not have gotten through her first pregnancy without her. The result of that first pregnancy was trailing behind her, carrying a huge bag of off-brand cereal that folded over his head.

Frankie's birth had been Mary's first since her mother died. The day Georgia went into labor, her frantic husband called Mary and begged her to help him get his wife in the car. She had been to the hospital a week prior and had been told it wasn't time, and this time around she was going to sit in her Lay-Z-Boy and wait until they begged her to be admitted, thank you very much. It wasn't until they were in triage, when they heard the pop of water breaking, that she stopped insulting the hospital staff.

Mary felt herself entering her element when she sat behind Georgia in the hospital bed, massaging her lower back with almond oil. Doctors and nurses might not have always seen her as a professional, but she knew that her office was the labor and delivery room. She had been working in this woman's body for months through the tea, transferring her own fertility into the baby's wellbeing. Her hands were the final tools, the last instruments she used to help bring a baby into the world. Frankie was breeched and had to be turned from the outside, so Mary led Georgia through breaths as the doctor scooped the baby's body through her skin, rolling him slowly over her organs, inch by inch with short, painful breaks between. Georgia's spirits were a wreck.

Once during every birth, Mary was reminded why she never wanted to be in her client's place. She had no fear of the birth itself – the enormous belly hard as a rock, the smell of iron and sweat and her body filling the room, were vocational necessities. She still got exhilarated when she leaned over to see the baby crowning, the purple head emerging and making the eerie rotation to face up, features swollen. People talk about birth like it was a swift movement, Mary thought. There's no mention of the suspended connection, the way the baby must be pulled and pushed simultaneously for its body to fully emerge from its mothers. Nobody talks about the delivery of the afterbirth, the ruin that once was the mother's body. The way she looks like a bomb went off, but she's holding a baby, so fresh and new it seems otherworldly.

Nobody else can know they contributed directly, physically to that metamorphoses and creation. That's what the tea is for, Mary thought. That's what I'm for.

But other people could look at the baby and see the small features – crusted eyelashes, wrinkled hands. Mary saw the tiny bundle of spirits was slowly shifting into existence, like something far away coming into view. She couldn't focus on the human being in front of her, not when she had to memorize every feature of the spirits and report them back to her mother.

*Dark green? Not going to latch.*

*I could have told you they'd be huge – the mother ate so much dairy.*

*You didn't count strands? What did I even train you for?*

It was a focus on signs, on the hidden things inside people that her mother had instilled in her, through training and her childhood. Mary had learned to look at adult's

faces, listen to their words, with much difficulty. It was a habit she couldn't break with children, not one she was even motivated to change. How could she want a child when she knew it would grow up exactly like she did?

Mary looked at Frankie in the grocery store and saw every detail of that birth. He hopped and shimmied, causing the bag of cereal to fold over his arms. His mother's spirits formed a small mass with trailing ends, an octopus head pointed directly at him. His own spirits, a perfect one-eighth scale, pointed right back.

"Sister, huh? I would have never guessed," Georgia said sarcastically. "You two have the exact same face. She's not a doula too, is she?"

"I'm a ballerina, actually," Julia said.

"That's a shame. The world could use another one of you two, even with half the talent your sister has."

Julia's spirits soured to a pale green for just a moment, then quickly shifted to bright pink. "Who's this?"

She bent down to Frankie's level. He hid several feet behind his mother, gripping his cereal shield tighter. Mary remained standing. Frankie, like most children she interacted with, had an instinctual respect for her that came off as fear. Small children and intelligent animals could tell that she was privy to some information about them that they hadn't consciously given. It made them deliberate in their actions, conscious about her proximity to their movements. Their parents thought the shyness was cute.

But Frankie was curious about Julia. He shimmied forward cautiously, keeping his wide eyes locked on hers. She ignored his spirits entirely.

She held her hand out at arm's length. "I'm Julia. Nice to meet you."

Frankie took another step forward, almost within reaching distance of Julia's outstretched hand. His spirits shivered, still pointed towards his mother, and he skittered back to her, hiding his face behind her legs.

The women laughed and bid each other goodbye. Julia's spirits stayed hot pink until they walked in the front door of Mary's house, sighing in the warmth as they took off their heavy coats.

"Frankie seemed to like you," Mary said, righting the fingers in her gloves after she took them off.

"Yeah, he's a cute kid." She picked at the laces on her boots and sighed. "I always figured I'd be a crazy aunt one day. Doting on nieces and nephews, candy before bed, that kind of stuff. But I guess that's not in the cards." She looked at Mary for a second before embarrassment dawned on her. "I'm not trying to tell you to do anything different. Just..." She trailed off and went back to her laces, muttering.

The solution was obvious, but Mary knew better than to declare it. Whether Julia knew it or not, she could never admit that she wanted a child. When she ran away, she gave up her right to the tea, and she was too stubborn to ask for it. And now, Mary only had eight months, six magic births left. Besides, Julia had never shown any sign that it was something she regretted, something she might come to want, until recently. Then again, Mary hadn't thought to ask.

Mary hadn't seen her sister dance in years, and the familiar guilt of disinterest blossomed in her stomach as she and John settled into their balcony seats, wearing their coats in the cold auditorium. Her guilt was quickly assuaged when she found herself

fifteen minutes into *The Nutcracker* and bored out of her mind. She had never found the wall of sound coming from the orchestra appealing, and even the grace of the dancers managed to become routine in its regularity. By the entrance of the titular character, Mary's mind had retreated to her supply, reviewing recipes and reconfiguring ratios in order to stretch her remaining root. "Six births" flitted in and out of her mental narrative mournfully, almost mockingly.

The ballet had been washing over Mary like a dream until the *Waltz of the Snowflakes*. The spirits of the dancers had been virtually identical, so tight and bleached by the stage lights that they were little more than white dots floating above their heads. But when the snowflake ensemble came out, she immediately knew which one was Julia's. It was something about the way it reflected the light, it was somehow a little pearlier than the others. More regal, Mary thought.

She felt pride surge in her heart when Julia was one of two dancers to emerge from the circle for a solo. The creature on stage, with the limbs like reeds and grace unknown to gravity, was the same girl who'd asked Mary to lean on her back when she was stretched out on their bedroom floor, getting her splits down. She'd had Mary stationed at the CD player, pausing and rewinding at will as she practiced in their backyard, before she required wood floors and pointe shoes. Mary felt that some of this pride, their special history behind this performance, belonged just to the two of them.

Near the end of the dance, Clara flitted onstage. She and Julia were in the center of the circle together, much closer than they'd been. With each grand jeté they spent an eternity in suspension, alone together in the air. The closer they got, Mary noted, the more her sister's spirits seemed to distort, to spread and grow wings, even to reach out

toward her protégé. Clara's spirits, though largely unchanged, seemed to glance back towards Julia's. They were dancing too, in an unchoreographed, but still effortlessly beautiful display of the sort of reaching love a mother ought to have.

Mary and John took a walk along the river the day after the show. The overcast days of solid winter had come, and the water was only a little more grey than brown, but the wild grasses stood out proudly from the snow, which was mottled only by the tracks of deer and overzealous dogs. Ranger's spirits flared, standing on end all over. They almost seemed to emit light in contrast to their white surroundings.

They'd taken a spade with them and were checking the ground as they got closer to the bulbs, testing to see if it was frozen through. They were getting mixed results.

Mary held Ranger's leash while John dug a wide hole in the snow with his mitten. Five births, she repeated to herself.

"Not frozen yet," John said excitedly, still hunched over the ground. Ranger stuck his whole muzzle under John's butt and sniffed aggressively, causing him to tilt headfirst into the snow.

Mary laughed, and John did, too, even though his face was bright pink and wet where it'd met the ground. This, at least, would never change.

Before she headed off trail, John took Ranger from her. "You know," he said quietly, "You're a damn good doula."

Mary pursed her lips. "I know."

This was something John was never going to understand. Her ability to perform as a doula wasn't dependent on the tea. Her mother's training could have made a monkey



the most qualified doula in the state. Mary wouldn't stop being one, not as long as she lived. The tea wasn't her talent, but it was her hand. It was an extension of her person, in the same way that she read her clients' spirits. It was the only way she could ever, and would ever want, to give birth.

After five more births, she'd still be a doula. But she wouldn't have the reach. She couldn't give life anymore.

Mary treaded lightly along the rim of the marsh, a healthy distance away from the sparse grass indicating the water's edge. The highway stood in the snowy sky in front of her, and without trees between them to break sound, the whooshing of rush hour traffic skated smoothly toward her along the thin ice.

Mary stopped underneath one of the supports. It was one of the few accessible by land, so it was covered in crude graffiti, and a few old beer cans collaborated on the edge of the water. She stooped to dig under the snow banked against the support, immediately regretting that she hadn't brought gloves. Her hands grew pink and ached with cold by the time she found the ground beneath.

The wind snaked under the bottom of her coat and chilled her bones, but anticipation pushed Mary forward. She pulled a garden spade out of her coat pocket and started digging, leaning her whole weight against the handle at times. As she got closer gooseflesh bloomed on her arms, and her spirits buzzed.

At last, when John was probably beginning to worry, Mary felt a jolt run through her spade and up her arm. She reached into the hole and pulled out a dark purple bulb, emanating a sickly blue light. It was unripe – not even close – and it was dying out in the cold.

Mary dug up every single bulb, not because she expected to find a ripe one, but because she needed to be sure. She felt the bulbs almost screaming, vibrating in her hand as she pulled them out. It was too early, and they were trying to tell her. But she knew.

She looked at the sad batch, a small pile of psychically whimpering bulbs flickering in the shade underneath the highway. With some ceremony, she arranged the bulbs in as tight a pile as she could, knowing they'd be warmer together. She looked up and, turning to leave, heard a slight rustle in the vegetation.

A deer was standing not ten feet from her, ears up, staring directly at her. It was tensed to run, even leaning in for a bound, but it stood its ground. The allure of the bulb feast was somehow even greater than the threat of Mary, standing there with her garden spade and dog smell.

Mary walked away, aware of how clunky she was in comparison with the animal. It watched her leave, not moving for as long as she had eyes on it. It would feast on those bulbs, and in a few months, it would have twins. This would calm her mother's spirits, to know the last of the bulbs went to good use. It would calm Mary's, too.

The sight of the deer's spirits stayed in Mary's mind's eye. They were ballerina pink, and woven into a neat ball. The temptation of the sixth birth, of the last birth moved by her hand, flitted in and out of Mary's heart. No, five would be enough. The last of the root she would save for the snowflake.

Mary once asked her mother why she'd had a child. The answer was quick and frank – *so I could have a partner*. She then asked why she'd had another. The answer came just as fast – *so she could have one, too*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Best Day of my Life

This last week was so rainy, so sloppy, that Derek didn't let me in my yard hardly at all! I almost peed on the carpet twice! But today, I'm in my yard all day long! The rain has stirred up all sorts of amazing smells, made the dirt behind the trees plush and cool! I run to the place between the shed and the big corner pine, where the mulch is sparse. I lock my joints and lean on my front legs, feeling the mud squish up against the webs in my toes. The wetness sends sharp sparks to the tip of my tail.

I sniff. It is Black Gold. It is Universes of Microbes being thrust together by the weight of tree roots and the pull of gravity. It is Mosquito Eggs lain just this morning, the beginnings of larvae squirming inside shells bursting under my pads. I dig, and dirt flies up against my belly. The Animal shivers inside me. He pushes up against the base of my skull, and I pull harder, freeing bigger clods of earth, the hole almost large enough to submerge my head in darkness, and then I hear the words:

“Wanna goforaride?”

Do I want goforaride? Do I ever *not* want goforaride?! It is my favorite thing!

I scramble up the deck stairs to meet Honey. She holds the glass door open a crack and places her leg in the space, blocking me from coming inside. She looks at my mud-caked paws.

“Where's your hole, Wilson?”

I sit like a Good Boy and hang my head. My tail is still wagging hopefully.

Honey looks behind me and smiles. A blur of black and brown whizzes by.

The Puppies do not acknowledge me. They shove past me and jump up on Honey's leg, their only-slightly-less-dirty paws leaving streaks on her thigh. She moves aside to let them in. To let *them* in!

Not me. Her leg is back in the door opening before I can zip inside. "No Wilson," she croons. "Derek will take you for a walk later, okay?"

I let a small whine escape my jaws. Later means never, or maybe a thousand years from now. Later doesn't come!

Honey shuts the door and I watch through the glass. The Puppies lumber around like their bodies are too large for their brains to comprehend. They might even be bigger than me when they're full grown. Honey and Derek will spend whole evenings cooing about how big they're getting, holding them in their laps, letting them lay on the suede couch (like Bad Girls!).

They don't even know how to walk on leash. Honey wrestles Coco into a harness, buckling it around her fat midsection. As she goes to do the same with Lola, Coco runs into the office and finds a stack of paper. She picks up an important-looking rectangle in her mouth and checks to make sure Honey's back is still turned.

I bark, high and polite, and place my right foot on the glass. "Stop it!" Honey yells. She's mad. There's no love in her voice. I know pawing makes me a Bad Boy, but Coco is being a Very Bad Girl right now! And Lola is such an idiot; she's taking up all of Honey's attention, she is letting Coco make such a mess!

Eventually, Honey turns around to find Coco surrounded by spitty scraps of paper. She stands up and puts a hand on her hip. Her fist tenses around the leash in her

hand. Her eyes are like the groomer's. My tail bangs on the deck in excitement, a tribal drumming sound. Coco is going to get it now!

“Oh, Coco,” she sighs, pulling the wet paper from her mouth. She practically sings to the Puppy! At first I think she must not see the mess, but she stoops to pick up the pieces of the ruined rectangle gingerly, placing them back on the desk. Then she scratches Coco behind the ear. “No more mail.”

As soon as the Puppies are leashed, they buck and bite at their leads. When Honey pulls the leash taught to bring them towards the door to the garage, they drop onto their haunches. She drags them across the wood floor with some effort, one leash in each hand, their furry butts sliding smoothly.

My heart is bursting with injustice. No punishment, not even a scolding for such a Naughty Puppy! I bark once more, begging through the glass. Honey shoots me a dark look before she ushers the Puppies into the garage.

I run back down the deck, through my yard, to watch the goforaride back out of the driveway. The Puppies are sitting in the back seat, lurching as the car drives along on the street in front of the house, then turns onto the street that borders my yard. I follow, parallel with the fence. I run the length of my yard with the goforaride, watching Honey wave to me.

I stand still for a while, watching a few more goforarides speed along the street in front of me. This has been my life since Honey and Derek got the Puppies. They chew, and jump, and eat paper even though it tastes like Sad Acid, and they *still* get to goforaride, while I am left behind.

I should have known the Puppies would be trouble. At first, they were like my other toys, but better. They jumped and snapped when I did, and ran away when I chased them. But Derek yelled at me when I bit Lola's ear and it bled a little. I couldn't understand why he was mad at me. She had bitten my ears so many times, and with her little Puppy teeth like needles! I wasn't allowed to play with them very much after that. Only when Derek or Honey was around, and there were plenty of other toys to distract us.

I'm still Derek's favorite, though. He likes to go for a walk when he gets home, or even go for a run sometimes. He gets tired easily, but I think that's because he's old – I am no puppy, but he is almost five times older than I am! Still, I go for a run as far as he wants, and walk as patiently as I can when he slows down, gasping for breath.

When it was cold, he got me small Foot Prisons to wear on the ice. I *hated* them – they held my toes together tightly, and choked my legs where they tied! I wished my paws would just fall off! I would rather have gotten ice stuck in my webs than worn those things! But every time Derek put them on me, he pulled a Head Prison over his hair. I couldn't believe it, the first time I saw. He let the black wraith consume the whole top half of his head, even covering his ears! And it was tight, too – when he took it off after go for a run, his skin was red and was printed with bars from the cloth. Still, he did it every single time.

We would march through the ice and snow, him in his Head Prison and me in my Foot Prisons, Master and Dog, Derek and Good Boy. The Animal felt proud inside of me. I felt it sit down and look through my eyes with me, and it was calm. We were synchronized. Derek gave this to me almost every day.

But then it became warm. The ice and snow melted away. Derek and I would be free to move without choking our appendages. Then something happened to Honey. She didn't leave the house during the day like Derek did anymore. She didn't leave her room much, either. She smelled a little Sour and even Salty, like she was always on the verge of crying. She got bottles of smooth, small things to put in her mouth that made her smell just the tiniest bit Sterile. They averaged out her scents into something boring and only a little less hopeless. Worse, she didn't pet me nearly as much.

So on day, Derek came home with two Puppies. Sisters, one black, one brown. They had hardly any smell at all. Just little hints of Sleep and Soft Fur. Like a Really Good Nap in the sun.

A squirrel rushes out of the bushes on the other edge of my yard and dashes towards the big tree in the middle.

Every inch of sorrow is folded away. The Animal rips into the small accordion. He slides into my skin.

*I am a sleek line, tip of tail to center of nose, pointing at my prey. I move forward, effortlessly, silently across the slanted grass.*

*My prey stops. He crouches on a cracked root, near to the slope of the trunk. His body is saturated with adrenaline. His tail twitches. I am three bounds away from him.*

*My speed builds in my muscles, roiling.*

*We do not breathe.*

*I take one step more.*

*He leaps. I shoot forward. I do not feel the ground beneath me.*



*His limbs stretch out in four directions. Tiny claws find homes in the bark of the trunk.*

*He lands diagonally, his tail wild behind him, long and outstretched.*

*I lunge. I snap. I taste silver fur in my mouth.*

*I chase him around the trunk, launching myself from the earth over and over, but it is no use. No jump is as high as the first, and my prey ascends quickly, scurrying around the tall trunk and on top of the lowest branch.*

*He leans over to look down at me. I dare him to chatter. He is not brave. He vanishes into the foliage.*

I manage a few terrifying barks before the Shock Collar freezes my blood, making my veins ache. It was my last gift from Honey before the Puppies came.

I lean against a big root, where the dirt is cool under the canopy, and look up. When it was cold I could see through the maze of twigs and branches, into the sky that was covered with a soft gray light. Sometimes, when snow began to fall, I could hardly see their shapes until they were contrasted with the dark branches of the tree, growing bigger and bigger as they fell down on me, or into my open mouth. They tasted like Sharpness and Far-Away Oceans and Dirt, and only a little bit like Gasoline.

But the snow melted a million years ago. Now it is warm, and I feel hot in my body. The dirt grows warm beneath me as I pant. I wonder if Honey is petting the Puppies right now. I hear the squirrel chatter in the tree above me. Oh, today is truly the worst day of my life!

When I am old and the Puppies are my age, I will think back to this day, how it became the best day I ever had.

I know it is turning around when Honey brings the Puppies home. They slink into the backyard, take big gulps of water out of our dish, and collapse right onto the deck, not even bothering to go to my yard. They smell like Embarrassment and Latex, and I fill with joy as I realize – they have just gone to the Vet! Of course Honey didn't want me to come – I'm a Good Boy and do not need to be punished so harshly. Those puppies, though, they needed a good poking and prodding. They deserved to slip on the metal table and have long slices of metal jabbed *inside* of them. Maybe they have learned to be Good Girls now.

I see the shadow of the house grow long and hear the garage door open and shut, and I know that Derek is home. The Puppies, lazy oafs, stay limp on the deck as I trot past. Lola looks up at me with Servile eyes. The orbs are only distinct from her black fur by the way they glisten. She knows I have been through this. She is asking me how she will ever learn to trust Honey again. The Animal encourages me to be a good Alpha and hold her gaze for as long as she needs. She will be all right.

Derek greets me with a hearty rub. He goes back inside to change out of his clothes that smell like Dust and Carpet and Stale Breath. When he comes back, he is wearing his walking shoes. I bounce; I am so filled with excitement!

He recognizes my energy and gives me a grin. "Wilson?"

My joints lock. He is using my favorite voice, High and Full and Sparkling.

"Wilson, do you want..."

I prance in place. My breathing is so exuberant that the Shock Collar sends warning vibrations across my throat.

“Do you wanna,” Derek drags out the words. He smells so Bright that he eclipses the sun. “Goforawalk?”

Release! The Animal and I leap onto his chest simultaneously. A bolt of fear runs through my excitement, but Derek just laughs heartily.

I am sitting before Derek even commands me, and I can smell pride, the Amber Glow in his chest as he removes the Shock Collar and hooks on the leash. Even when I act like a Bad Boy, it is because I am such a Good Boy that I can hardly contain it. We understand this about each other. I guess that he has such an understanding with Honey, too, because he does not even greet her before we are out the door.

Derek opens the door for the goforaride and I bound inside, leash trailing behind me. The smell of Oil and Leather and Salty People Food fills my nostrils, and I am so happy that I hardly notice the lingering stench of Puke from when the Puppies came home. No, no thoughts of Puppies right now. There is nothing but me and Derek and whatever good smells we Good Boys desire. I Love Derek!

I am leaning my head out the window, so I know where we are going for a hundred years before we arrive. It's Layers of Marking Territory, the beautiful stench of Wet, Musky Fur before it is destined for a bath. It's a Pasture Tilled by Playing and Fighting, a Minefield of Lost Frisbees and Moldy Tennis Balls. We round the corner – I duck back inside the goforaride – and the wide expanse opens up to us. I breathe in and expel a round, celebratory howl. We are at the Dog Park!

I do not tug on the leash as we go inside the fence – it is a hot day, so it is very busy, and I would never embarrass Derek like some Bad Girls I could mention.

There are lots of other dogs here with their own Dereks and Honeys, and some little ones that smell like Sweat and Sunscreen. There are trees and long grasses at the edges of the gate, and the land slopes down to the pond on our right. For the most part, the field is wide and flat, so I can see very far how evenly everyone has spaced themselves. We have drawn the day's territories in barks and growls and markings, and the Derek and Honeys are following along very nicely. Some have brought ugly chairs and sit in packs near the entrance. I take a big whiff as I prance through the gate, and the fur on my sides prickles. These are established packs, not new friends made here, the best place in the world. They are complete, and they do not need me.

I trot by effortlessly – I do not need them either, because I have my Derek, and the dirty once-green ball in his hand.

It is Derek's second or third throw when the blessed mistake is made. We had been playing near the edge of the park, because all the good spots had been taken, and he had been throwing it short to avoid sending it into the pond (it was not because I cannot run fast enough to catch it – I am very fast). The ball, at the very end of its roll, teeters at the place where the land stops being just a slant and starts becoming a real hill. The tall untrodden grass is slowing the ball well enough. But just when it seems ready to stop, it moves just one more half rotation, and then a little more, and it is rolling down the hill just as fast as if it had just landed!

I am running down the hill, my strides lengthened by the decline of the ground, and I feel myself gaining speed easier than on flat land. I am exhilarated by the wind fluttering in my jowls, drying my gums and eyeballs, cooling my belly. Derek is walking clumsily behind me, struggling as grass thins out to dark dirt beneath his Foot Prisons. He yells, “come, Wilson!” Then says something short under his breath, and he uses the tone that Honey scolds him for.

The bottom of the hill dotted with faded trash and sprigs of grass, and a few hearty trees, their gnarled roots making swells in the dirt. It has not rained for almost a week, so the dirt is dry extending out for several leaps until it meets with the green edge of the pond. The ball has rolled just into the rim of the water, almost too thick with living sludge to be called that. I know that Derek does not like me to go in the pond here, but I will go fetch the ball for him without touching it.

It is past the middle of the day, but the sun still radiates over the hill in thin yellow light, brightest in the middle of the pond where there are no trees to turn it away. I trot forward and take the ball in my mouth, and the smell and taste of my pond engulfs my face. It is a Forest of Algae, Generations of Tadpoles and Fat Larvae swimming through more vegetation than liquid. It is Summer Trash, beer cans and greasy paper and Styrofoam from miles and miles away, blown by the wind to this sacred place.

And then I see him, the dog deep in the water, in the shady part of the pond. He could have been some massive, ancient debris, but for the vibrating waves emanating from his direction, his shuddering body the origin. He slowly draws his lips up like a curtain, revealing every long tooth and at least an inch of gums. His black head sticks proudly out of the water. His glistening choke chain sits on ruddy shoulders, round and

built, even with his short hair slicked to his body. His eyes are black, all pupils. His scent quickens my heartbeat.

His pond is only a little more beautiful than ugly, and it stinks with a veracity that demands my attention. The Animal calls me to submerge myself in it, feel it on every side. I feel him roiling in my flanks, urging me to propel myself into the water. But I know better – the dog in the water does not want me here. He will not tolerate me at the edge of his space like the dogs up the hill. His Animal is awake and supreme, not coiled away like mine. His paws, I know without seeing, are twice the size of mine, and his legs are built to bound faster than mine. He is as big as all of his space, and me trotting to its edge is just like trotting up to him and sniffing all over.

The ball is dripping in my mouth. I tense to shake, but I halt myself. Head bowed, never looking directly in his eyes, I step sideways away from the edge of the pond, one paw over the other. I do not look this dog in the eye because I do not want anything, no trouble, just to retrieve for Derek. I will bring the ball back to him, and he will praise me and love me.

I turn to see Derek, to wag at him and look at him with my unabashed Good Boy face, but he is not behind me. He is far away, at the other edge of my pond, with a Honey I have never seen before.

I would have smelled her earlier, had she not mixed in with the pond's smell so well. She smells like Sweat and Outside, like she has been in the sun all day. She leans on one leg, and she looks like a willow, with her long body and hair. She is wearing Leg Prisons even though it is hot outside, and they are ripped all up and down. The air around her is hazy and light.

“You’re not supposed to smoke here,” he says. The Man Smell coming from Derek is almost choking. Why does he always have to stink himself up around new Honeys? He’s ruining our gofetch.

She bears all her teeth. She is not in heat, but she is posturing like it. “Are you gonna tell on me?”

Her long arm drops, and I see it hanging out of her hand, dancing between her fingers. The stubby end glows ugly orange, and she taps it, dropping embers to the dirt. I can hardly believe my eyes, but I see it – she is holding a Fire Stick!

Derek puts his arm around this Honey’s waist. He smells and acts like he knows her, but that is impossible, because I have never seen her before. He takes the Fire Stick from her, puts it to his mouth, and breathes in deep. The smoke fills him, and his eyes close. My heart quickens. Derek is going to hurt himself!

Hazy Death is wafting off of the Stick towards Derek in white rivulets, but he is not running, not doing anything but standing with this dangerous Honey and waiting for them both to burn up! I must save Derek!

The ball falls from my mouth. I have only just completed a stride, pushing myself into a gallop, and the Animal is filling out my limbs when I hear the deep sloshing sound of the water shifting underneath the beast.

*I touch down from a stride, my front legs outstretched. He leaps with the whole front of his body, muzzle and chest, and his front teeth pierce the flesh of my ear.*

*He snaps his jaws again. He has hold over most of my neck. I jerk my head around and a snarl rips from my throat, but I am choking. His paws are heavy on my back. I try to leap forward, but they hold me like hands.*

*His bite clenches. His teeth break into the sinew around my spine. The force of his bite pushes me backward. My body contracts. My hind legs are pushed into the ground.*

*I am barking now, loud and bright. He whips his head side to side. The front of my body flails. He whips his head again. I feel my flesh tear away under the movement.*

*I find ground with my front paws. I push up with all four legs. His jaws dislodge. We leap. Our front legs collide with each other's chests. I lunge, mouth open. I bite his huge neck. It is bigger than my jaws can spread.*

*His leap is taller than mine. He pushes me to the ground again. His paws are on my side. His full weight pushes into me. I feel my ribs crack.*

*His mouth encapsulates my throat. I snarl and snap and jerk. He bites quickly, precisely between my counters.*

*I heave to whine surrender. He cuts the sound short with a massive bite. He holds.*

*His head jerks away, not up but sideways. The flesh around his face bulges as his choke chain is pulled tight. A taut wet leash connects him to the Honey.*

*She pulls him away along the edge of the pond. His locked legs drag in the dirt.*

*Derek falls to my level. He pulls my body into his lap.*

I am ashamed to still be wheezing defeat when Derek comes to me. He can hardly touch me, his hands hovering over me. He must be so embarrassed.



This is all my fault. I should not have brought Derek down the hill. I should have listened when he called after me. I ran down here, I led him to the evil Honey and this Animal-driven dog. The Puppies would not have done this. Derek's Honey would certainly not have done this. It is no wonder she does not love me as much as them.

My breath is fluttering in my throat, as though it cannot find its way down into my body. My head feels light. A breeze rustles through the leaves, and I feel that my coat is wet on my neck and face.

Derek lays one hand on the top of my head. His fingers edge onto my injured ear, and I wince when he involuntarily presses on the edge of the bite. He strokes the fur on my head tenderly, putting pressure on the spot between my eyes, just how I like it.

“It's gonna be okay Wilson,” his voice is shaking. “You're gonna be okay.”

I tilt to look for the Honey and her dog, but they are long gone – I can't see or smell them. I can't see or smell anything, actually, aside from the pond, the stench of the other dog wafting away in his absence. It's starting to smell wonderful again.

The bright spot in the middle of the pond is fading. There is nothing but me, the swarm of bugs gathering over the pond, and Derek. I realize that his voice is not angry – it is gentle and airy, even warmer than when he speaks to the Puppies at bedtime. There is an edge of intensity in his voice, something fiercer than when he talks to anyone else. Something special just for me.

I do not remember the last time that Derek and I sat together, not playing gofetch or goforarun, not monitoring the Puppies in the yard or watching Honey heave and yell. I know that Derek is important, that he is the alpha for everyone. I do not dare to wish that he would give his whole self to me, even for a moment.

Here we are, sitting in sweet quiet padded by the happy sounds of dogs and Dereks playing up the hill. I have shamed Derek, disobeyed his commands, and proven my Animal inferior. And still, he is here with me, and no one else, and it does not feel like he is leaving any time soon.

I close my eyes and press myself into Derek's lap. He cradles me, just like he did when I was a puppy.

"You're a Good Boy, Wilson," he croons endlessly.

No, Derek. You are.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Two Weeks Notice

If you picked someone at random and asked what did them in, there's a good chance they'd say it was a car accident. It's like telling people you're an accountant. They'll nod and smile approvingly, pleased for you that you have a decent job. A car accident, as far as young deaths go, isn't one of the worst. You could say it was cancer, or a shooting, but that just makes people sad. A car crash is quick, messy, and faultless, as long as you tell the story right. They can ask you if you're mad at the other guy, and you can shrug your shoulders. He's probably dead, too. Hell, maybe he's one of your bunkmates – it's not like you'd recognize him. You can joke about how much you hated that car, if you have a sense of humor.

You can only tell your story so many times, only wail at the always-black sky for so many nights before you realize you're not gonna get an answer. Sometimes it takes a few weeks, sometimes it takes a few years, but you'll stop getting on your knees to pray before you get in your bunk for the night. Eventually you'll learn to drift off to sleep without wondering if doing a half-ass job in purgatory is gonna get you home someday.

Fluorescent lights flicker on with the timer, buzzing to life. The bunk above mine sags with the weight of a new occupant. I stare at the hump a foot above my nose, watch it shift as its maker wakes. With a great groan from the bedframe, he leaps to the floor and freezes in his landing position.

Greg, of course, is waiting at the water cooler in the corner, sitting in one of the hard chairs with coarse purple upholstery. He beams at the kid, waiting for him to sashay over and offer a jaunty hello. When the kid doesn't move, Greg puts on his show.

He takes the six steps necessary to cross the room and slaps the kid on the back. "Didn't think the other side would be quite this glamorous, did you?" He chortles, an uncomfortably high and loud sound.

The kid's gaze moves horror-movie slow and settles on Greg's hand on his shoulder. He jumps into a defensive stance, hands formed into flat blades for karate-slicing.

"Now don't get too hasty," Greg steps back. "Me and my friends are gonna make you feel right at home. It can be a difficult transition, but the work's not too hard, and you get free refills!" He takes a paper cup from the dispenser on the water cooler and laughs again.

"Where am I?" The kid croaks. He's probably thirteen, his voice just beginning to crack. His proportions are wild and his head is far too big for his body, but he's cute. Had he lived a couple more years, those spidery arms of his might have filled out nicely. He's about six years older than my boy. I toy with the idea that he knew Charlie somehow, that they were at the same elementary school together for one year, but the sheer probability mocks me from the back of my mind. I table the idea.

"Paradise," Greg grins. I roll my eyes. Greg, the kid will soon find, is an asshole. "Or at least, the very edge," he gestures to the reinforced window on the door.

The concrete bunker is barely big enough for the two bunk beds, two chairs, and water cooler set clumsily against the wall, but the kid takes his sweet time crossing it,

moving slowly as a dog hunting a squirrel. He tracks Greg so steadily that he doesn't even see me and Maurice lying on our bottom bunks.

He opens the creaking door and leaned out into the darkness, as if to take a peek. Then, with a quick glance at his supposed captor, he bolts.

He looks around like he's never seen a turnpike before. An endless row of tollbooths stretches on in either direction from our bunk, red X's above each lane. He looks up and shields his eyes from the lights on top, straining to illuminate the highway in front for a hundred feet. He looks over the boom barriers into the velvet darkness beyond.

He swivels a few times, choosing a direction, then sprints to the left. Running parallel to the booths, he hollers for help, knocking on the windows of the identical bunkers that interrupt the line every four booths.

"Don't wear yourself out," Greg yells, voice tight like a spurned babysitter. We stand outside and watch him slow down, now a smudge in the distance, and plop down on the ground. Maurice still hasn't gotten out of bed.

None of us have any idea what day it is, but we have an analog clock on our bunk wall. We know the lights in our bunk come on at eight a.m., the lights above our lanes turn green at eight-thirty, and the horde approaches shortly after.

Stephanie from one bunker down walked him back right before our shifts started. The kid was sobbing, big gobs of snot smeared on his upper lip. She let go of his shoulder and turned away from me without the usual flirty comment. She might give me shit for this later. But she won't cross a line, won't make any comments about me being an

absent father – she’s way too soft around the edges to even think like that. Besides, I’m the best undead boyfriend she’s ever had, or at least, that’s what she tells me.

While he spent a couple of days laying in the fetal position on his bunk, Maurice and I peeked at his ID card, slotted on the wall with the other three. The picture looks like a school portrait, with a mottled blue background, just like the rest. The kid’s smile has fallen into a near-grimace, as if the photographer took too long. His name is Tyler Green.

A few mornings later we find Tyler standing at the door, using the edges of his ID to dig under his fingernails. Greg insists that he sits in with one of us in our booths so we can “show him the ropes.” Maurice is huge and hasn’t said a word since the kid got here, and Greg’s camp counselor façade isn’t hitting home with him, so when he knocks on the door to my booth, I swear under my breath.

There’s not much to entertain the eye in a booth. There’s a clock on the wall, a wooden stool, a laminate countertop, a big plastic tub underneath, and a monitor on the wall with a card swipe on the side. I slide my ID through the slot and am greeted with a pixelated WELCOME and tinny major chord. Black text stands barely illuminated against the grey screen and offers two options, CLOCK IN and CLOCK OUT. When Tyler clocks in for the first time, a little jingle emits through the speaker on the box. It’s the only time he’ll get one.

There’s just enough room for one person to stand next to whoever’s seated at the window. I give Tyler my stool. He takes off his grey hooded sweatshirt and folds it over, forming a cushion to sit on. He sits gingerly and grabs onto the sides of the seat with both hands, hunched over.

I heave an involuntary sigh.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing. You’re lucky.” I motion to the stool.

Tyler looks at me, saucer-eyed.

“You died in layers.”

He considers my long-sleeve t-shirt. It’s from my high school swim days, a state tournament shirt with plenty of my teammates’ names on the back, but not mine. I wouldn’t mind it so much if it didn’t have the school year printed across the chest, fifteen years out from the day I died. Here’s a good rule for the living and dead – never wear stuff that dates you. I think about making the joke to Tyler, but I decide against it.

“The lanes aren’t that big,” Tyler says, pointing to the worn white lines that stretch from between the booths into the darkness.

I shrug my shoulders. “More efficient use of space, I guess.”

He leans toward the front window and squints his eyes.

“When does traffic pick up?”

He better not be this eager all day. “A couple minutes.”

When I was a kid, my parents took us on a tour of Jewel Cave. We were one of four families that walked out of the overcast South Dakota day into roiling rock. As we descended into the body of the cave, we were met with particularly impressive features lit by warm yellow lights. We stopped in the first level room of the cave, and the tour guide told us to listen quietly for a few seconds. The soft rush of wind and traffic, the sound of my atmosphere, had disappeared. Beyond the weak breath of my fellow tourists was absolute silence. The tour guide told us to hold our breath and see how quiet it got. I shuffled to create noise with the pebbles below my feet, my ears desperate for something

to confirm I was still present. I was threatened with the sound of blood pumping through my veins. Seven hundred and twenty-four feet down, she said. Deepest cave in the Black Hills.

I've been here for about two years, I think. I've come to think of the quiet as a natural phenomenon. The towers' light grows soft at the edges of its reach, letting the concrete fade to black. I can look up into the beam and see the dust motes falling like snow, but I can't hear any wind to compel them. Standing here in the morning, I can't help but feel a bit like a frontiersman. I lean on the window and stare out the smudged window facing the highway, waiting out the last few minutes. I hold my breath, letting Tyler take in the brutal soundlessness.

The minute hand points due south, and just on time, we hear the faintest thunder in the distance. It's not a loud rumble, but it pricks at your ears when there's nothing else out there to make noise.

You can see them before they reach the edge of the light. Their bobbing heads average out to a rough sea of bodies, a slow-moving tidal wave without an undertow. There's an unearthly grey tone in their skin and clothes, as if the color had seeped out of them as they walked. The journey must be long, because they're always exhausted by the time they get here, shuffling at an undead pace.

Most of them are elderly, some are young adults, and a few children are sprinkled in with the back of the pack. Every child's face gives me a miniscule pang of anticipation. The odds that they knew my kid, of course, are astronomical. The odds that I know them too are even smaller. I didn't meet most of my son's friends, and those I did, I didn't pay much attention. If they look the right age, I'll whisper to them as they take the



Legos and old gum out of their pockets. “Charlie,” I mutter my son’s name under my breath like an incantation. “Charlie Crane.” Some of them engage me with a cocked head and an inquisitive look. The rest say nothing.

Still, I stretch my neck to get a good look at every small figure, praying my memory is good enough that I would recognize someone useful if I ever saw them. I would recognize my boy though, I tell myself. How could I not?

They sort themselves into lines for the booths without any prompting. Most of them have a blank, bored look on their face. A few are more lucid, nervous, slightly less grey than the rest. They’ll be the troublemakers.

I take inventory of Tyler before I open my window. He’s shrunken a bit on his stool, making himself smaller than the figures right outside.

“Sit up straight,” I say, summoning what I hope is an authoritative tone. “If you look scared, they’ll think it’s worth arguing.”

Tyler reluctantly complies.

“You ready?”

He doesn’t answer. Our first customer stands outside the window to our left.

“They just gotta empty their pockets,” I explain. The ghoul outside is a withered old lady, shivering despite the palpable humidity outside. “Mostly it’s wallets and spare change. Sometimes people get through with purses.”

I wave at the old lady through the glass and point at the info graphic on the glass pane to the left of the window. It shows a few bathroom door stick figures removing jewelry, holding up purses, and putting them in the bin below the glass. This lady, like

many patrons, is either too blind or too stupid to understand, so I pull the pockets of my jeans inside out. She meticulously places a few bobby pins in the bin.

“Then you chuck it in the bucket.” I open the bin’s inside door and throw the bobby pins into the plastic tub under the counter. “Punch the thumper and she gets through.”

I hit the big yellow button on the counter, but the pole blocking the lady from the afterlife stays down. She looks at me and gives me a big, denture-filled grin.

After miming every kind of grabbing motion I can think of, she gets the hint. Her teeth pop out of her mouth with a meaty sucking sound. I pinch the pieces between my thumb and forefinger.

She shuffles forward and an old man takes her place. After the first couple of customers, I give up explaining every action. Still, I feel his young eyes on me, and I try to shrug it off. The booth is supposed to be a place of morose boredom, not a puppet show. The sensation of being watched makes me overthink my movements, act a little more polite to customers. I accidentally smile and wave at a gentleman double my age as he departs, and he gives me a bewildered look.

I turn around to find him watching customers as they pass under the boom barrier. No lights face out into the place beyond, so you can only see the figures for about twenty feet before they vanish.

“Is there anything out there?” He asks, pointing at our latest customer as he disappears.

“Sometimes moths fly in. They’ll get stuck in the booth.”

“Do they die in here?”

“No, they always get out somehow.”

Tyler taps his fingers on the counter as I shuffle a few more people through the line. One old man is particularly interested in me and Tyler, peering at us through the glass and repeating something in a language we don't speak. He reaches into his white button-up shirt and pulls out a large gold cross on a chain. Tyler and I smile at each other.

“You must get a lot of those.”

“We get yarmulkes and prayer beads, too. Either they're all right or we're all fucked.”

He reaches in the bin and throws the cross in the bucket before looking back at me, eager for approval, and I feel sick to my stomach. I tell him I need the stool back and tell him to go visit Greg.

Maurice and I have seen plenty of bunkmates come and go, and as such, have developed an accidental fondness for each other. We treasure our alone time. While the newbies settle on the top bunks and get busy touching themselves, we thoroughly enjoy our bottom bunk solitude, punctuating long, healthy silences with the occasional uninteresting thought.

Tyler, unfortunately, developed an annoying habit of asking unimportant questions. He'll be manning his own booth soon, but instead of growing detached and solitary like other self-sufficient recruits, he felt compelled to insert himself into the sacred bottom bunk space.

“Where does the stuff in the bin go?”

“Dunno. It's empty in the morning and after break.”

He sits on the floor by the water cooler, playing with the edges of a paper cup half-full. He's still endlessly fascinated by his lack of desire for food and drink. I stop pretending to take a nap when Maurice comes in, his pleasing baritone booming off the walls.

"Take a look at this," He says. His big hands nearly swallow the object, and half of the colored stickers had peeled off, but it's unmistakable – a real-life Rubik's Cube.

He tosses it to me. I turned it over in my hands, marveling. Jealousy flutters in my chest when I imagine the hours upon hours of entertainment awaiting my friend.

"I never finished one," I say, throwing it back to him.

"Me either."

Tyler's head pops up. "Where did you get that?"

"Some kid in cargo pants. He had a shitload of junk shoved in those pockets, it took ten minutes to get 'im through."

"You mean you can take stuff from people?"

"S'where Greg got his rubber chicken," Maurice offers absentmindedly, beginning a love affair with his new toy.

I feel a slight pang of guilt for never explaining the only perk of the job to Tyler. Employees fill their bunks with all kinds of trash, depending on their style. One of Steph's roommates has papered their walls with receipts. One time one fell on us and we found it stuck to my bare ass. She laughed for a solid five minutes.

Greg has a collection of stupid and useless things he uses as props for speeches – the chicken is used in his sermon on crossing over, to the chagrin of everyone who has ever heard it. I wonder if he has built his ethics around the objects he finds, creating a

story of redemption and virtue that we can all attain to, that he clings to more and more every day he's here. Or maybe he's really so hopeful as to have believed from day one that we could somehow earn the right to quit and exit through the booths like a proper ghoul.

I don't take much. Just stubs of crayons, and even then, I'll only take a color I don't have. It's not like I use them, they're just a reminder of what I'm waiting for, what I hope I won't see for a while. If I'm perfectly honest with myself, I have a superstition that once I complete one of Charlie's beloved sixty-four packs, I'll see him. I have sixteen colors so far.

Tyler waltzes over and sits on the end of my bed, emboldened by our acknowledgement of his presence. "Is that where you got your diary?"

I choke on my own spit. "It's not a diary," I stumble. "It's a notebook."

Deep laughter booms off the walls, shaking the plastic covers of the fluorescent lights. I glare at Tyler and he shrinks.

Maurice wipes tears from his eyes, stupid grin still painted on his face. "You can take whatever you want, long as the moths don't see."

I wrangle the new subject. "Maurice has a crack theory that the moths are angels."

My buddy looks up, his face darkly serious. "It ain't no crack theory. That's how Dave got caught clocking in late. He stuck around until a whole swarm of 'em flew in his door. The next day, poof, he was gone." He leans back and flicks the edges of the cube, back and forth, making no progress. "I'm telling you, we sinners ain't safe 'til we on the other side of that boom barrier."

We speak about the other side like it's a national monument. It's important to us, sure, and we'd love to see it, but it's not like it'll happen in the foreseeable future. It's just far enough away, beyond pole that stays perfectly horizontal until some lucky liberated soul empties their pockets of worldly possessions. There's an invisible wall for us operators that cuts through the middle of the pole, making it impossible to wrap your hand around its circumference.

In the first week of Tyler having his own booth, he proves to be entirely incapable of taking care of difficult customers. Everyone else has already gone home, so I get stuck on babysitter duty, crammed in his booth to help him expedite his extra-long line. It's already twenty minutes after, so my bad cop performance is true to life.

One middle-aged woman is perfectly cordial until she sees the pole go vertical with its clunky mechanical rhythm. She shrinks into the man behind her in line. She buries her face in the front of his shirt as he stands stoically, a look of mild confusion on his face. "No, no, no" she wails over and over, more a disturbed mewling than actual words.

"Please, lady," Tyler urges, trying to be helpful. "Come on, lady."

We squeeze into the tiny space between booths and grab the lady's arms, wrenching them from their place buried between her torso and the man's.

On the count of three, we haul her across the barrier. I underestimate how much stronger I am than Tyler, and he holds on just a bit too long, flying towards the invisible wall with her. Except he doesn't crash into a hard surface; he flies right into the beyond with her.

She quiets the moment she hit the ground. She gets up from her knees, dusts them off, and turns around for a moment. She looks at the man behind her, whom she had been clinging to as if he were her husband just a few moments ago, without a hint of interest.

Tyler and I stand awkwardly in front of his boom, the last of his customers long gone. He reaches out to touch it. Fingertips inches from the white paint, I snap, "Stop."

I turn off the lights of our booths and wait. The moths that had collected on the edges of the glass leave in clumps, ascent to the lights above.

I move my hand over the boom bar and come up against a perfectly flat wall, invisible, a little cooler than the air around it. Tyler does the same, a fluid motion, only stopping when his arm is fully extended. He nearly falls over the boom, but he catches himself by grabbing my right elbow with his left hand. When he grabs me, the wall beneath my palm dissipates, sizzling away over a few seconds.

My mind flits a few yards to the left, to my bunkmates sitting bored on their beds right now. I realize that I could call their names and they would witness this historic moment with me, a group discovery. But there's something excitingly small in this moment, just Tyler and me. An intimacy in this darkness between booths, an actual, bona fide secret we are uncovering together. And there's the hint of a proud ache in my chest that I'm the only adult Tyler needs right now.

He hoists himself over the bar and lands on his feet, shaking with excitement. He reaches out his hand to my side and pulls me across.

Maurice finishes the Rubik's Cube faster than he meant to. I know because I hear his exasperated sigh, like a frustrated bear, and the toy hitting the wall and breaking into a handful of awkward half-cube pieces.

I look at the space underneath his bed. The colorful edges of puzzle toys peek out of the shadow. They're organized in little rows by type – tangle toys sit underneath his head, followed closely by a box of mixed puzzle pieces, half-dried Play-Doh, fast food toys, and a dozen other categories slinking towards the end of the bed, where a pile of crappy electronics sit. They've never worked here.

I look up from my notebook. "I'll keep an eye out for another one, if you want."

Maurice rolls over, causing the bed to creak and moan. "I have options." He selects another puzzle game from below and furrows his brow at the inferior activity.

We can both feel the masculine silence dissipating, making room for discussion. "You've been writing a lot lately," he finally says. He doesn't look up from his toy.

I lift my pencil from the page. "Just waiting for Stephanie to get back from group."

"Y'know, there's other stuff to do."

There'd be a defensive response forming in my brain right now if we hadn't already had this conversation a hundred times. Maurice wasn't a toy guy in life, anyone could tell from looking at him. He liked to build stuff, he once told me. Liked to make Adirondack chairs and play sets for kids. He'd been making miniature ones out of chopsticks when we were new here, keeping sharp. He did it for close to a year before he stopped and took up junk collecting. But he didn't have nightmares anymore, he told me. A docility settled over him, the intensity left his hands. It's like he turned into a customer.



He knows I still write because I toss and turn at night. It had been a while since he last brought it up, the idea of throwing the notebook out. Tyler's presence has awakened his high and mighty side. He's one to talk, a grown-ass man playing with toys, I could say. I have said that before. We could have that argument again, if I was willing, if I believed I could have the last word. But he's got new ammunition, something I haven't been able to justify for myself. He doesn't need to say it for me to know – being a good dad here doesn't make me a better dad on Earth.

A month before I died, Charlie's mom said she was considering taking him on a trip out West in July, to see her folks and camp in the Hills. She had to tell me because she wanted to road trip it, and they were bound to be gone long enough to skip one of my weekends. She was standing in the doorway of my shitty apartment, looking at Charlie, who had unceremoniously dumped his bag of toys onto the living room carpet. It was a big deal for her to be invited back, considering the last time she'd seen them was the night before she hopped out her window and into my pickup. She knew it'd break my heart to go a month without seeing Charlie, but the idea of me coming along was laughable. Neither of us wanted to spend more than twenty minutes in each other's presence, and her dad would greet me in the driveway with a shotgun.

I used to think about that moment a lot, the way Charlie's mom hadn't looked me in the eye since we split up, the way Charlie flitted carelessly between homes. It gave me plenty to wonder about – whether they made that trip, what her folks said about me after I died. How old Charlie would have been when he grew some awareness, or bitterness.

Whether Charlie would remember that day at all. This was my evening puzzle. I haven't tinkered with it since Tyler and I started going to the beach.

It's pitch black for a few hundred feet beyond the boom barriers. Jewel Cave-without-lights dark. The first time we walked, I held Tyler's hand the whole time, afraid if I let go I'd be whipped back to the booths by some unseen force, back to where I was supposed to be. There was a tingling sort of feeling I hadn't felt in a while, the sense that I was doing something wrong and that I was moment from being caught, but every step forward dumped another helping of adrenaline into my veins until I buzzed with anticipation.

After an indefinable amount of time, the concrete crumbles under our feet, earthquake lines filled with sand that become bigger and bigger until there's no hard surface anymore, just soft white dunes. The sand is illuminated slowly, and we look up to see that there are clouds. A spotless moon, smooth as an eggshell, peeks out of the haze as we trek farther.

We feel the air grow saturated with moisture, almost sticky. A salty tang reaches our nostrils, almost imagined at first, then indisputable. Tyler's hand breaks away from mine when we hear the sound of surf.

It's a steady decline down to the ocean, the sort that should have brush dappled along the ridges. It extends like the tollbooths, wide in both directions, curving inland at the place where it's too small to see. The humidity is cut by a soft sea breeze, rippling the sides of my t-shirt.

I look for evidence that anyone else is here. The tide hasn't come in yet, and the wet sand has some footprints along the edge of the water. I run out along them, but they

fade steadily. When they're nearly filled in I think they turn off into the surf, but I'm not sure.

I feel like an ungrateful tourist, because I find myself disappointed. As unexpected as this place is, the most important discovery to me is that when Tyler hit the other side of that boom, his mind stayed perfectly intact. He didn't achieve the same obliteration of purpose, the forward-driving peace that every customer gains when they pass through. It's not just a matter of getting over the boom. As Greg would put it, the peace of crossing over has to be earned the proper way, by unloading yourself of worldly concerns.

Greg would be so disappointed in me right now. If anything, I'm guiltier, more distraught than normal once I'm standing at the edge of the surf, letting the foam bubble on the tops of my feet. I'm disgusted to find myself disappointed that oblivion isn't thrust upon us right in this moment.

Tyler has already wrestled his shoes off – there's sand on his butt from when he fell in the process. He's shin-deep in the water, laughing and running, pausing to steady himself when waves roll in.

“This is frickin' awesome!” He yells. His eyes are bright with moonlight.

Every night is the same. Tyler plays in the waves, in the sand, with the joy of a child much younger than himself. I pick a direction and walk along the edge of the sea. The first time I did this, Tyler called out to me when I got too far away. From then on I walk until I can only barely see him, tugging at the end of my leash, before I start to head back.

Greg and Maurice come along now, along with Greg's group. Stephanie and Tyler are regular attendees of the powwow, but lately she's taken to sitting and walking with me instead of participating, at least, most of the time. I can't help but feel a little prideful.

We're sitting on the edge of the surf, letting it lick over our toes, our pants rolled up to stay dry. We've had to scoot back a couple of times as the tide chases us in.

She lights a cigarette with some difficulty, the lighter on its last leg. "People are wising up about those things," I say. "Big tobacco isn't so popular with the kids."

"Plenty of people still getting of lung cancer, though," she takes a long drag. "Dying with the cancer sticks in their pockets."

I silently pat myself on the back for participating in the conversation. I like it better when Steph talks at me, gives me her conspiracy theories about connected customers, her mental soap opera that gets more complicated every day.

"It's got to be school shootings," she nods, affirming her own statement. "That's the only way so many American kids are going down. It could be a disease, but they wouldn't have so much crap with them. I had a couple with backpacks today, if you'll believe it."

That piques my interest. I think about asking if they have any identifying papers, if she knows what state they're from, but I hold back. It's not that I have anything against having a real relationship here. Charlie's mom and I had a courthouse wedding fueled by hormones – we never really had much besides him after he was born. I can't imagine the conversation with Charlie, introducing him to daddy's girlfriend who is also dead and just so excited to meet him.

She leans her head on my shoulder and offers me a drag. Greg ends his little ceremony and the group disperses, a few jumping into the sea. Tyler halts his barrel into the surf to turn and smile at us.

“We talked about the importance of play,” he says. “You wanna come practice?”

Stephanie stands up and offers her hand to me. “I need someone to play chicken with.”

Maurice is meandering his way back towards us, finishing his solitary walk along the coast. He stops a ways away from us and gives me a look.

When we walk back, Tyler’s shoulders are slumped. “It’s just so *boring*,” he mutters.

His youth is so apparent in this moment. Boredom is the easy part. It’s the moment when you’ll be snapped out of it, the shock of your immortality, the distance between your past and your infinite present that makes you feel untethered. Some of us need to talk, some of us let go, but we all need the solid safety of eight hours in the booth.

The booth used to be my favorite place, because it was the only space that held any potential for change. The contrasting desires of fatherly selfishness and selflessness, of wanting to see Charlie now and wanting to see Charlie in sixty years was enough to keep me entertained for all that time. But the beach brought more than a literal expansion of my world. The prospect of quitting, of getting to oblivion, was only a matter of betraying my son. He had to stay alive to me because he was all I had, all I had ever considered worth living for. Now I have three people to betray, and two of them become more real to me every time we come here. The third lives only in my notebook, and I’ve been neglecting him for salty air and sand. I want to feel so guilty, feel like the deadbeat

father I'd always been accused of being, but the dirty truth is that I've never been happier.

One morning, I swipe my ID and am greeted with a chord I have never heard before. Three options appear on the screen: CLOCK IN, CLOCK OUT, and TENDER RESIGNATION.

I'm frozen long enough that the horde closes in before I make a decision. My body is icy hot with shock, and I'm numb to the idea of moving, even when an ornery-looking old man presses his forehead to the window, ready to get this whole crossing over thing done.

I'm staring blankly over the assembling lines when I glimpse the side of a heart-shaped face that jolts me to action. Adults cross between us, and I get only flashes of him as he nears the booth – red hair darker than it was, but that'd be expected. A blue eye shaded by long, delicate lashes. It's the shape of his widow's peak, stretching deep into his hairline that allows me to convince myself.

"Charlie!" I yell. The three options still waiting on the screen, I leave my booth and shove past my first customer. The crowd is still dense, unorganized, not entirely sorted into lanes.

"Charlie!"

But Tyler has gotten good at his job. The kid hands over a flip phone (did his mom get him that?) and steps through to the other side before I can get to him.

I keep shoving, cutting in the almost-formed line, until I'm standing right in front of Tyler's window, the boom to my right.

“Throw me over,” I say through his window. Tyler’s mouth is slightly agape. He doesn’t respond.

“That’s my boy,” I point to the child disappearing into the crowd. He’s got the wrong walk, I think. There’s not an ounce of joy in his step.

“You have to throw me over,” I continue to insist, anxiety blooming inside of me as the kid walks away. Mixed in my anticipation is a heavy prayer that it isn’t him.

Tyler steps out of his booth. He hops around the front of his booth and awkwardly slides past the line, joining me in the cramped space in front of the boom. The customers are confused, some shifting out of line to get a better look at the action. They don’t know how, but they know something’s wrong.

Tyler’s face is still panicked, but he stands tall, looking almost like a man. He grabs my arm and I thrust one leg over the booth, and leap with the other. Once I’m all the way through, he lets go.

The customers on the other side of the booths pay no mind. I scan, thinking I’ve lost the boy at first, my heart thumping in my stomach. The lights don’t project this way, and the figures around me are fading into shadow.

His red hair catches the edge of the light, and I propel myself toward it, until I am right behind him. I am unable to get too close, but I call to him.

“Hey!” I say as loud as I’m able. I find myself breathless. “Charlie!”

The child does not react, but he stops, a few feet in front of me his head cocked to the side. He could be reacting to his name, or just the desperation in my voice.

I want to reach out. I want to take the three or four steps forward that would put me within reaching distance of him. I want to touch his hair, his shoulder, even the hem of shirt. But I feel so much safer with this distance between us.

The sea of bodies parts behind us and rejoins just in front. For the first time since I died and found myself here, I feel truly afraid. I am horrified at the prospect of seeing the child's face.

I was sketching in my notebook when Tyler came out of the surf. He had just got comfortable enough to swim in his boxers, but he put his shorts on soon as he was out of the water. He sat next to me, lying back on his elbows, looking up at the moon. I preferred to look straight ahead at the horizon, to avoid the shape looming close above. I'd lost the long clock in me that kept calendars, and its big body's wax and wane reminded me that days passed faster than I remember. It was full that night, so bright he had to shield his eyes.

"Greg's not such a bad guy," Tyler said out of the blue.

"I bet he thinks he's a great guy."

"I'm serious," Tyler looked at me, leaning his head on his shoulder. "The other guys are all pretty nice, once you get to know them. Stephanie asks me about you sometimes." He dug his hand into the sand like a spade and lifted it, letting the excess run through his fingers until he had small mountains on his knuckles. "They asked me why you never come."

I tried to think of a way to explain their futility to Tyler. They all wanted a reason they were here. They talked and talked about their deaths, looking for something to



repent for. But that wasn't how it worked. You couldn't make up for anything. You just did your time.

I closed my notebook, my pen a conspicuous bulge near the spine. "I got sick of rehashing the past."

I remembered hours of sitting on the ground outside the booths, listening to Greg lead a group of lost souls in discovering their purpose in the afterlife. I was once a willing participant in the circle jerk of reminiscence. I wasn't so worried about Greg's twelve-step program, but I told stories about Charlie, about his love for his mom's stupid dog and soggy Fruity Pebbles, the way he begged to be pushed so high on the swing that the chain became slack. I told them every detail about his hair, his face, the way his ribs strained against his skin when he hunched over in the bath.

I got in trouble with Greg when he found out I was interrogating others, asking if they'd seen a boy like mine, today or ever. I'd spend the night visiting bunks before they turned down for bed, going farther and farther to reach new people, people I'd never see if I didn't run out of my booth the minute the red X's resumed.

That's when Greg gave me my notebook. Talking isn't good for some, he said. If I keep getting hung up on my son, if I keep refusing to talk about my death, I should try something else. He strongly encouraged me to take up journaling.

Greg must not have been clocking enough hours saving souls, because he'd been here almost as long as Maurice and me. "No point in airing your dirty laundry."

Tyler's eyes grew wide. "So you've never told anyone about your life?"

I leaned my head back and found myself staring at the moon. "Just Maurice."

The space between us seemed to grow. Maurice's name hung in the air, like I'd brought up an old girlfriend.

Tyler looked away sheepishly. "You can tell me, if you want."

I thought for a moment. The waves crashed twice. "Maybe someday."

He fell asleep on the sand, like always. I woke him when the moon stared straight down at us, just so he could meet its wide face.

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