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The Secret Society of Fish-Gazers

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THE SECRET SOCIETY OF FISH-GAZERS

by

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B.A. May 2010, University of Virginia

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ABSTRACT

THE SECRET SOCIETY OF FISH-GAZERS

Hannah Woodlan
Old Dominion University, 2016
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This collection of stories focuses on characters who are lost in the sense that they know themselves only in terms of what has happened to them and who subconsciously see their lives in terms of fairy-tales. They wait for destiny to knock on their door, or think they have been forced into a destiny not of their choosing. Only when they free themselves of the notion that an outside force dictates their choices can they recast themselves as heroes of their own quests and enter the world.

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To my parents, for all of the stories I've ever heard, read, written and loved.

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The Foolish Woodsman

In Which A Girl Playing In The Woods Loses Her Ball In A Pond—In Which A Talking Frog Holds The Ball Hostage Until The Girl Promises To Listen To The Story of His Transformation From Alexander, Lowly Woodsman And Older Brother Of The Boy Who Found The Golden Goose, To Lowly Frog—In Which Alexander Poorly Explains That Life Is A Series Of Fairy Tales, And Then Proceeds To Demonstrate His Point

My life is a wet one.

I mean to elaborate, but you'll only be indulging me, because there is little else to characterize it. Little, that is, besides my bouts of thinking hard on what brought me here. At any rate, not much of what I have to say about my life is going to make sense to you, so I'll start simple.

"Living in a pond" is the sum total of my existence. If I seem blithely unaware of my hideousness, know that it is only because the frog in me does not have a human's concerns, and, as a man, I have no concern for the body that encases me. I'm caught between my halves most of the time, leaving my tongue, which has a mind of its own, to keep me alive.

I can only guess what you think of me. As a child I was fascinated by frogs, but your look of revulsion suggests that I am gross to you. I have no objective way of judging this for myself and I have no one to talk to about my grossness, or lack thereof. Either language was merely a detail that dropped by the wayside in the midst of all this complicated curse business, or my isolation from my fellow woodland creatures is deliberate.

Now that I say the choices out loud, it seems the latter is obviously the case. I am meant to feel as though I belong nowhere.

For centuries, I've huddled in this puddle. When I was human, I thought myself equal to kings: a genius, surrounded by fools, and meant to achieve a higher destiny than they. I was wrong. If I know nothing else, frog or human, I am lower than the biggest fool. You can't trick a curse, so you can be sure I'm not groveling for show. I truly believe that I am not even worthy of conversing with insects, though the matter is made slightly less complicated by the fact that I can't help eating any that wander near. It's as natural as breathing.

I'm explaining all of this because I must ask something of you and I know you want nothing to do with me. You came to the forest to play, and all you did was disturb the surface of my pond. It is not fair that you should suffer my conversation—not even a squirrel would deign to do so.

I swear to you that I will find your little lost ball. You can play and be happy once again. First, though, I need you to listen. Though you will deny it—though as yet you have no notion of the worthiness a frog-man might possess, and would sooner fling me against a wall than delve into its thorny definition—you are part of my story now, and you, too, are being tested. Neither of us can change this. I must impart my lesson in order to learn it, and you, despite your confusion, must listen, because you are the one who found me. That's how it works.

To begin, I am no prince. There is a version of me that is a frog and a prince, I'm sure—I mean that's the trope; I don't have proof. There was also a version of me that was a lowly woodsman and became a king. That one I saw with my own eyes. These versions then branch off into an infinite variety of "me"s, but the real me is just a woodsman in a frog's body. I never became a king myself, even if I helped that "me" get his happy ending. A story is real life only to

the characters within it. I concocted a fantasy wherein I became the king and my brother became deceased, but “we” were not us, if that makes sense. One can only create new realities, not recreate old ones. Somewhere, despite all of my machinations, my true brother is possibly alive and still a king. In the end, we were both concocted by another version of him anyway, from another reality. When I say “in the end,” I should say “in *an* end,” but it sounds clunky.

I can see your face growing stormy. Please believe that I don’t mean to confuse or bore you. For years my thoughts have sloshed around my froggy brain; the only way to truly filter them is to fit them to the story, so I’ll get started. I only thought it fair to warn you that, though there will be a beginning and an end, it may seem that the beginning belongs to one story, and the end to another. It’s possible that this is in fact the case.

There is one tenuous tether to follow: me. My name is Alexander. There are many characters like me, but, as it turns out, my fortunes are not linked with theirs. I will always be the cruel older brother to the simple-minded, dwarf-feeding, golden-geese-carrying commoner who became a prince. I knew him as Hugh, and I have my own version of Hugh, but for the sake of fairness, I must place this version within the tradition of myriad others of which I have become aware.

First, Version One: There are three brothers. The brother resembling myself is the oldest. The brother resembling my brother Hugh is the middle brother. There is a younger brother, resembling no one I have ever known or to whom I have been related, known only as “Simpleton.” This younger brother discovers the Golden Goose and becomes heir to the throne.

Presumably, this brother was entirely worthy of his princess: kind, and not just stupid. Presumably former-Hugh was just a little shit who wanted something he didn’t deserve, but not

the massive shit he had to become in my version in order to be worse than me. Of course, this was the version of Hugh that created me, so I think my assumptions are valid.

Then there is Version Two—which I might refer to as “Hugh’s Version” or perhaps “the princess’s version,” since Hugh’s trophy wife was the one who related it to me. This is the version that I myself lived. In this version there are two brothers. I am the oldest. Hugh is the youngest. Despite being an idiot, Hugh finds the Golden Goose and becomes heir to the throne. I am imprisoned and cursed into a frog’s form.

The Third Version is the story I created with the hopes of changing my own fate. There are two brothers. The brother resembling myself is the oldest. The brother resembling Hugh is the youngest. Because the younger brother is thoughtless and cruel, the older brother is able to outwit him to become heir to the throne.

Again, although I am certain that Hugh was an undeserving fool, he was perhaps not so wicked as he is in my version. I may be justifying myself. On the other hand, what sort of mind writes out the existence of an entire person: “our” youngest brother? I’ll admit I still don’t quite understand what parts of my version I’m actually responsible for—whether it sprung entirely from my own head or if the witch simply tailored a story to fit me, but I, at least, sought to relate the truth. Maybe Hugh’s curse was different than mine, but I must assume that he was either smarter than me about the whole business, or insane. I tend to believe the latter.

I am sure there are countless other versions I know nothing about. I have heard mere hints about the First Version, and it may very well be that the First Version is in fact the Fifth Version, or maybe there were once eighty brothers or perhaps we were goats or seven dwarves. All I know is what the witch has revealed to me, and what the witch reveals is for her own

purposes. I cannot hope to explain those purposes. I am not being obsequious when I say I can only hope to explain myself, and no one else.

My self-discovery began somewhere between the second and third versions, and so this is where I will begin. When I have relayed my story in its entirety, I will return your ball; however, you must then take me home with you. You have to promise now, before you even know what kind of man I am—that is how you will show how well you stick to your word. Whether I, too, demonstrate some strength of character has no bearing on your part in all of this. I have my story, and you have yours. We can help one another, but first, you must promise.

In Which Alexander Behaves Petulantly And Is Imprisoned—In Which The Princess Visits Alexander In His Cell—In Which The Princess Pontificates On Hugh's Virtues—In Which The Princess Explains That She Plans To Teach Alexander A Lesson, Even Though She's Not Exactly In Control Of The Situation—In Which A Soon-To-Be-Curse-Wielding Witch Lurks Ominously In The Background

I begin my story in another land, where I lived a human peasant's life and knew well the efficacy of magic. I blamed magic for elevating Hugh to a royal station of which he was eminently unworthy. Some—mainly the princess—would have that his “goodness” won the princess's favor, but this is a convoluted argument with no obvious cause and effect. The bare fact is: with what I could only guess was magical adhesive, important people of the community were stuck to a goose and humiliated, which made the princess laugh.

It was a goof. The story should have been as embarrassing to both Hugh and the princess as it was to her father, the king. Somehow the couple got it in their heads that their courtship was

an inspirational story for the ages. I mocked them to receptive audiences over many drunken nights, and the princess had me imprisoned for sullyng Hugh's name.

The princess was my first visitor. I haven't a clue how long I stayed in the dungeon before seeing another human being, but however much time had passed, by the end of it I hadn't the energy to feel shame for my appearance. Even if I'd had the energy, I wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

Besides, for all I knew she might be a figment of my imagination; she wouldn't have been the first hallucination I witnessed in my pathetic state. Why, at that very moment, a dark hole was forming in the shadowed corridor beyond the bars, yawning open in the air as if ready to consume both the princess and I. I welcomed what the hole seemed to threaten. I was more than willing to die if the princess's death was guaranteed to follow—in fact I was willing to die for much less than a guarantee.

The princess mumbled something to this hole, and then latched the cell-door behind her. The hole shimmered, grew as it drew closer, and finally sharpened into a hooded human shape, with angles so severe—elbows, shoulder-blades, the stooped neck's protruding base—as to resemble a cloaked vulture.

“Keep Alexander silent but alert,” the princess said to the hole-creature. The being turned the dark opening of its hood away and affected to ignore us. It's form grew and contracted as my eyes pulsed with the cant of my heartbeat. Though I could not speak, I tried. A tight, invisible grip on my vocal cords gave me the impression I was suffocating, and in shaking the feeling—inhalng and gasping for breath that ended up coming quite easily—I regained a modicum of alertness. I began to think the princess might not be an hallucination.

She stepped forth, aglow with the contrast of her pale blue dress and skin against the filthy background of my cell. Her hair gleamed like gold wire, and fell in waves that receded just where they might have lapped against the ground. As she began, she clasped her hands, and the scroll they held, between her breasts. Her wide, flat face dropped all expression, and she spoke dully, as if reciting poetry she didn't understand, in a language she didn't speak.

"Although I cannot do full justice to my simple husband or his story, I would see his legend spread: even across the roiling kingdom; even to your stoppered ears. These peasants," she sighed on cue, "Like you, they decry simplicity; they decry their future king. A year ago they had not the wits to recognize their own ignorance. Now, all upbraid my husband for gullibility and weakness, forgetting it was he who taught my father that peasants could be noble. They wonder how a golden goose begets a king. Children recently born into this flowering kingdom inherit their parents' suspicions. They whisper of what dark-arted collusion could lead an unknown woodsman's youngest son to claim a throne and princess that should prove beyond his grasp. He must be either sorcerer or pawn, they say.

"I say again, my husband is no puppet. Though even children doubt me, I will not be silent. I will clear away these false assumptions and make room for hearts to open.

"I admit my own account is biased. Perhaps, though, to exaggerate his goodness for the thankless mob is to counterweight their notions of conspiracy. With that in mind," the princess said, springing from her monologic reverie to unroll the parchment in her hand, "I demand nothing more than time from the people—every citizen will hear these words." She finally focused on me, as if only just realizing that I was present. "You are yet a citizen, though that is not my only reason for reframing these events." She held my gaze past the parchment. Long silence followed, no doubt leaving me a moment to think on what I'd done.

“With this old crone’s help, I aim to clarify the nature of the curse you will soon receive.” She tapped her chin in thought. “I guess I should name it a blessing. That is what your brother will think. He believes in simple formulas. That is what brought us together.” Her voice, so often breathy, distant, was almost silky now.

The crone’s chill shadow spilled through the bars, surrounding me at once. I shivered, and a wide, slow smile crossed the princess’s face. “This loving account cannot help but show that I would never take advantage of my husband. Whether they believe he is goodness incarnate or a mere fool, they will see that I am utterly taken in. After all, they are less concerned that he is simple, and more afraid that I am not,” she said, her smile widening. “But I need not convince you. You will relive it soon enough. I simply want to show you every moment you fell short. Otherwise you might misunderstand entirely.”

The princess was lost in her own plans, and clarifying nothing, but I gleaned much from her ramblings. She was not cursing me for my own good—she was justifying herself. She was as vengeful and bitter as I, and if she sought to teach me a lesson, chances were she’d be suffering a lesson of her own.

With this in mind, I kept an eye on the black-hole crone. Perhaps I only imagined cynical amusement emanating from the cloak. Whatever the princess had to say, though, the crone was my teacher—the arbitrary arbiter of good and evil. In the end, all is chaos, but whatever about the world is subjective is still subjected to the rule of magic.

Having been born cynical, I have always had some small understanding of how the world works. Magic is morality. “Good” and “evil” are relative, and these concepts encompass a great deal of gray area that, in order to maintain some small sense of order, the world must ignore. To some I might seem conniving, but above all I prefer to adapt. I try to manipulate this gray area to

my advantage as best I can; after all, no one can be completely good or evil. As long as the arc remains clean, the details don't really matter: I can be the sort of son who never thinks beyond the good of his own family, but because I am obedient to a father who thinks of the greater good, my actions can suggest otherwise.

As far as the world was concerned, as a human I was a generous woodsman. I cut down trees and distributed the wood amongst many needy families. My generosity was simply usurped by Hugh's magically-enhanced gestures of "goodness." None of those who benefited from my generosity were in the business of testing the "worthiness" of men, and sure, I've gone through my bouts of intense bitterness about the unfairness of this set-up, but consider this: neither I nor Hugh are truly good men, and neither of us received a truly happy ending. I must believe that his lesson is still being taught him, even as mine continues.

To get back to my point, curses are an odd thing; they are the other side of every blessing, and they tend to shift and change before you know which side you're on.

The princess cleared her throat, vibrating me from my thoughts. She resumed, in a grander mode, to paint Hugh's loving portrait in glowing strokes.

In Which The Princess Begins Her Story—In Which Hugh Behaves With Child-like Innocence That Often Verges On Stupidity—In Which Alexander Is Callous To An Obviously Lazy But Also Less-Fortunate Soul—In Which Alexander Is Injured Through At Least Some Fault Of His Own

In his early years, growing up in the dark forests of the north, Hugh often found himself without occupation. His mother swore she would chop off his clumsy fingers if he should attempt the delicate kitchen-work, and his brother Alexander declared that Hugh would end up

chopping off all their arms should he attempt to wield the woodsman's axe. Their father worried for the safety of his two sons and his wife's peace of mind, and so he sent Hugh to wander the forest paths in search of herbs, while the father and Alexander supplied the wood, and the mother remained home, and threw out whatever Hugh brought her. Though few herbs were to be found in the wintry north, Hugh was enthralled by the idyllic wood and its denizens, and happily spent his days away from his family.

Hugh reached manhood during the harshest winter anyone had seen for hundreds of years. Snow smothered the sparse woodland hovels, and black ice encrusted the bared-bone trees and their old father's skeleton alike. Wracked with pain, the patriarch was forced to retire his axe, leaving Alexander to venture out alone to find the trees they marked for kindling. While Alexander would have been content to warm only their own home for winter, his father insisted, 'You must always aid those in need.'

In the deepest freeze of the season, Alexander began his first and only solitary journey. He was falsely warmed by his pride, a hearty breakfast, and the promise of the savory meal bundled by his mother. The forest watched in deathly quiet as he clambered forth from safer lands, to enter the domain of feral magic. Not long into his journey, he heard a feeble shout and lifted his head. He turned his eyes against the driving snow to seek the speaker. Blinking, he saw some creature squatting in a snow drift piled high against a lightning-split trunk. Even in the frozen air, the creature smelled rank and musty, and Alexander sneered to find it was a dwarf. The dwarf begged, "Please, traveler, I'm hungry and thirsty; if I could have but a nibble of your pancake and a sip of your wine I might live to see tomorrow."

Without a thought towards common decency, Alexander kicked the dwarf from the path, and kicked snow after him. "If you could bother to make some effort, you are surrounded by

water. And what good will one bite of food do you? It will just delay the inevitable.” He did not glance behind him as he continued on his way. When he found a marked tree beside a creek, he straddled the frozen water and swung his axe. The icy banks gave way. The axe sliced his arm and, bleeding profusely from his well-deserved wound, he returned home in shame.

In Which the Princess Continues Her Story—In Which Hugh Demonstrates His Alleged Generosity—In Which Hugh Is Rewarded With The Golden Goose—In Which Hugh Has Trouble Determining The Monetary Value Of A Gold Bird (Which Seems Rather Gold-Colored Than Comprised Of The Actual Metal, And Which Has A Magical Stickiness That Is Also Difficult To Enumerate In Terms of Value)—In Which Hugh Finds Himself Attached To Three Greedy Maidens

The next morning, Hugh was at last awarded the opportunity to do something useful. He humbly accepted his mother’s indifferent meal. Where others might see insult in a pancake made of ash and a canteen of sour beer, Hugh was grateful for what he was given.

He ventured fearlessly into the familiar dark and boundless winter forest, where he came upon the very same dwarf. The dwarf again requested some small repast to stave off death, and although Hugh confessed his meal was all but inedible, he offered a half-portion to the dwarf. As soon as the dwarf touched the food, it became finer by far than any vittles Hugh’s mother could ever procure. Hugh and the dwarf drank and ate until the pale yellow day faded to gray. The dwarf clapped his hand on Hugh’s shoulder, and directed him to gaze upon the splintered tree behind them.

“Your good heart deserves a better turn than your ill-bred brother,” said the dwarf. “At the base of this very tree you’ll find your destiny.” He vanished then without a further word. By moonrise, the tangle of roots had split open beneath Hugh’s axe, and from within a warm glow rose. Astonished, Hugh extracted a golden goose. He did not question his good fortune. The dwarf had said it would be so, and the trusting Hugh believed. Rather than return home to his family with his true task yet unfinished, this good man continued down the path until he came upon an inn in which to pass the night. Perhaps here he might learn to what use to put the goose, which, though beautiful, would not warm his family’s hearth.

Trusting the dwarf had served him well. One might think that what the inn had in store for him would make him wary, but a suspicious nature in either case would have prevented his ultimate success, as you will see.

All eyes at the inn fastened on the glowing goose. Hugh asked the curious onlookers how best to handle his discovery; many offered to take his burden, including the innkeeper’s three daughters, who then offered him their beds in return. Of course, beds were no more useful than the bird for bringing his family aid, and so, when one facetious maid declared the goose a superb dowry for the princess, this solution seemed to Hugh the most wise. He retreated in satisfaction to his room and a deep sleep.

It wasn’t long before the innkeeper’s sultry daughters sought to snag a few prize feathers from his room. First the eldest daughter, then the middle and the youngest entered and attempted. They found themselves stuck fast, to each other as well as to the golden fowl. When Hugh awoke the next morning, he thought it would be rude to his host were he to question them. He assumed they would go on their way when they’d had their fill of touching the goose. In the meantime, he would continue along the path, leaving town to find the castle and the princess.

In Which The Princess Is Still Talking—In Which Hugh Does Not Connect The Dots, And So Cluelessly Attaches Himself To Several More People—In Which Hugh Accidentally Causes The Petulant Princess to Laugh—In Which The King Gives Hugh Three Tasks To Complete, Two Of Which Would Kill Any Normal Man And None Of Which Demonstrate Actual Value As A Human Being Or A Leader

With the sun halfway up the morning sky, Hugh hoisted the goose under one arm, and set along with the three would-be thieves trailing after. He was startled by their cries for help. When he tried to aid them, they skittered and avoided him. He had no choice but to shuffle onward with a noisy train of women.

Their weeping drew the attention of several farmers, who pulled and pulled at the ladies but found themselves stuck as well. Hugh had no idea why these people insisted on following and roaring at him. He did his best to ignore them and keep his task firmly in mind: to offer the goose as a dowry and thereby gain prestige and help for his suffering family.

Hearing the screams and calls for aid, which the so-called victims never thought to lace with warnings against getting stuck, a priest and priestess also approached Hugh's motley entourage, and were also gathered into the fold. Though utterly confused by the tenacity of his followers, Hugh strove to set an even pace for their sake. Sometimes he might chance to speed up, or stumble, or swerve, and the group behind him swung about like a weightless pendulum. They tumbled and fell, but he felt them not at all, so great was the magic of the goose. But for the noisiness of their passage, Hugh could have forgotten they were there entirely.

Now, Hugh had no idea what the true challenge for my hand in marriage would be. Without realizing that only the most absurd happenstance could strike the frown from the royal

face, he marched right up to the castle to offer his golden goose as a dowry. I laughed at the scene. No trick could have won me—only his innocence.

My father regretted his neglect in not adding more stipulations to the contest for my heart.

“You cannot possibly be serious. Stop giggling,” he growled at me. “I want my serious daughter back. Where’s your pride?”

Determined not to allow a true fool on the throne, my father demanded specific demonstrations of worthiness, and in so doing, he proved Hugh more deserving than I could ever have supposed. The tasks my father set him were impossible, and yet to the very end Hugh’s simple goodness bore him. He and the dwarf seem as linked by destiny as Hugh and I.

Hugh’s first task was this: “You must find someone who can drain every drop of wine in the castle.” My father cackled, but Hugh, my tow-headed, gentle peasant, gripped his chin in thought and answered almost serenely.

“I will find this man.”

Once he had gone, my father muttered, “I bet you’ll be serious if he dies, eh? Or if he gets a man killed?”

Anything he said only made me laugh harder.

Hugh returned to the forest, and explained to the thirsty dwarf what the king demanded. At the castle, the dwarf cast a weighing glance across the wine cellar’s contents and proceeded to drink every last drop. My father grew angry: not only had Hugh failed to die in attempting the task himself, but the dwarf had completely depleted the royal wine supply.

Next, the king demanded, in tones more querulous now than smug, “The throne room will be filled with bread, and every last crumb must be devoured by one man.” Perhaps he

thought the dwarf would be too full still to accomplish similar deeds twice, but when Hugh called again on his friend, the dwarf's hunger proved equal to his thirst, and quick work was made of the task. In these ways, Hugh and the dwarf helped themselves by also helping one another, with neither expecting anything in return at the time.

Finally, my apoplectic father said, "Find me, if you can, a ship capable of sailing on both water and land. How about that? That's something a fat dwarf won't get you."

Despite my father's words, Hugh sought the dwarf again. Who but a child enthralled by a strong parent or moral guide would trust that one person could accomplish everything? And yet Hugh has carried this quality of trust into his adulthood. Here is innocence that can save us all. The dwarf straightways led Hugh to a magic ship, docked field-side and floating flower-high. Though no sailor, my simple suitor flew on winds of love and longing, home to the castle and its astonished king. I greeted him with more laughter, and my kingly father finally gave his blessing, however resentfully.

My father's rule has kept the kingdom solid, it is true, but dark. It is limited by the cynical mind of its king. Soon, Hugh's rising influence will crumble the foundations, but that is no sad thing; just as the dwarf's magical ship escaped the sea to sail on the land, so the kingdom will unmoor to soar through an open sky—this does not mean we can never return to land. It simply means that we decide what our home will be.

In Which Alexander Reacts Silently To The Story He Has Been Told—In Which Alexander Is Both Cursed and Blessed, The Short- And Long-Term Effects To Be Determined—In Which Alexander Tells His Version Of The Same Story That Has Just Been Told

For the duration of the princess's tale, the deep, ax-given scar across my forearm throbbed as if to energize me with anger. The pain crawled into my throat, forming a furious knot, and the princess met my glare unapologetically. "Your scattered, violent life seems to demand cruelty, spurning kind words and gentle hands as the tools of women and weak men," she accused. "But whatever your family may think, the forest world is not the world of man. Survival is not a worthy pursuit. It is not enough. Whatever my husband's flaws, he does know that much."

If she had believed her own words, my bitterness wouldn't prickle so strongly—but I believed that she thought of herself as part of the mechanism that invented the concept of "pure goodness" in order to bestow it on the pathetic at will. I am well aware that all of the Hughs have probably suffered their own injustices, but I doubt the princess had considered any of this, and she certainly wasn't qualified to point out where I went "bad" in my own life. My mistakes were not my own to make—they were not only predetermined, but also predetermined to demonstrate my unworthiness so that Hugh might appear to be worthy.

So, never mind that I had to do something "wrong" in order for Hugh to have the chance to do something "right" in the first place. Never mind that if I was wicked and resentful by nature, then logically, punishment was pointless, and actually detrimental to a system that depended on relativistic notions of right and wrong to remain successful. Never mind all of that—not the least because I hadn't quite worked out my own logic on those points.

Magic plays favorites. The princess was clearly not aware that magic is always choosing new favorites. She also did not understand that a person is comprised of more facets than "good" and "evil."

As well, I suspected that she was not heavily invested in the rhetoric of curses and blessings. She simply wanted to inculcate the populace with the morality of stupidity; how better to gain complete control of the kingdom for herself than if everyone else were fools? They had been fools before Hugh's rise, but they had been angry fools. After all of this—if they finally accepted Hugh's simpleness as goodness and became inspired to see the good in everything—they might become more docile.

My thoughts began to elude me then.

At the bars lining my cell, the crone slavered and shifted from foot to foot, her cloak a swinging metronome. She slowed her motions, and I watched until my limbs grew loose and sleepy and my mind was no longer connected to them. The princess's words dispersed. The dungeon vanished, or I from it, and an ancient voice echoed down my ghostly ear canal. I was nowhere and I was nothing; nothing but the thrum of the crone's words.

"No good will come of relying on magic," the crone announced with a flame-crackle laugh. "For every dwarf planted to lead a simpleton to his happy ever after, there is a Rumpelstiltskin to steal the child begotten. For every well-meant spell that's sown: a curse to warp its growth—and at the end of every curse, a lesson. I don't have rules, but I do follow patterns."

I exposed neither confusion nor awareness, and did not press the witch to drop from grand statements into more thorough detail. If she was misleading me, she was doing so deliberately. After all, this guide was no fairy godmother. She was a child-eating trickster, and I had to be careful lest I incur more comeuppance; she'd spent her life entrenching fools in promises and spells.

All the forest-folk knew of witches, just as I knew that Hugh's magic dwarf was no better than the greedy Rumpelstiltskin, and Hugh no better than the princess who tricked her way out of Rumpelstiltskin's contract. Fairy tales created our understanding of the world—otherwise we had no contact with other lands beyond the forest. No one known to my kin or I had ever met a true witch, but we fiercely believed that they existed, and we just as fiercely believed that witches were as powerful and capricious as gods. Witches controlled life. They invented good and evil. People like the princess wielded this weapon of discernment without understanding what they were playing into. At the very least I knew I was playing into something.

The old witch went on to explain that, although I had been cursed into a spirit state, I was by no means helpless to influence the events I would witness. "I give you sight," the crone intoned. "And I give you a voice. I do this so that you might see yourself clearly and learn your truth, take you where it will. And I give you a warning: do not mistake this lesson for a second chance at the same story."

I perked up at the suggestion that the entire story might be changed for my benefit, but I should have known that this interpretation sprang to mind too easily. In my last moments as myself, the witch remarked that I should be grateful to avoid the fate of Cinderella's blinded relatives. Her ensuing laughter chased me from darkness into glaring light.

In Which Alexander Awakens As A Ball of Energy To Relive The Events of "The Golden Goose"—In Which Alexander Spies On A New Version of Hugh—In Which Alexander Plots To Steal This Other Hugh's Destiny—In Which Alexander Worries About The Witch's Intentions, Not That He Isn't Always Worrying About The Witch's Intentions; Witches Are Tricky, After All

In my first moments as a ball of energy, my world was a prism of light. I thought I was staring straight into the sun from under water.

Slowly, the shards melted together—the opacity burned away to a translucent blur, and finally there were shapes, made of thousands of vibrating parts, that coalesced and sharpened, but never quite stilled. Spindly tree trunks raced by me; rather, Hugh sped past them. I clung to him by some invisible tether that was about as comfortable as being led by the naval. I had popped into my new existence directly over his shoulder. Now I was along for the ride.

Truthfully, Hugh long ago became more beast than man. He took to wandering the forest, so we gave him over to nature and imagined—though mother and I didn't care, truthfully—that he was content. Father loved him, and I would not harm him deliberately, whatever signs I saw that his mind was off-kilter. I'm not certain he was mother's child. At times she drank, and struck him, calling him a changeling—I was barely six winters old when he was born, so I cannot speak as to whether he was simple before she turned against him, or if she had ever loved him.

Hovering above his shoulder, close to his ear, I saw at last what he was. By now I realize that this Hugh was not exactly the same as the one I grew up with—this was Hugh as I imagined him to be, but that does not mean my version of him is inaccurate.

This Hugh chased squirrels; tumbling into mud, he'd rise, laughing, bathed in filth, to catch and eat the squirming rodents raw. His hands caressed each surface he encountered: tail of a half-eaten squirrel, tree bark, dirt, water, clothes, his body. Groping down with laughing excitement, he had equal amazement for all. He tucked the squirrel tail into his waistband as if it sprouted from his rump. I watched until his behavior became unbearable. Mixed with my

revulsion was an acute sense of victory, though, as I envisioned the princess arguing the worthiness of this dirty boy.

Where the princess saw kindness, I have only seen madness barely contained, and then contained only by isolation and the physical deficits of his body. The princess invented a victim. Subconsciously, I created a villain. I suppose we were both wrong, but I maintain that my image is a little truer to life.

I assume now that my Hugh's demonstrations of stupidity were actually his attempts at mimicking innocence, since his character didn't come by the role of younger brother naturally. Attached as I was to this new Hugh, even without knowing that he wasn't my Hugh or that the concept of "goodness" had already been diluted, I quickly realized that the key to my own happy ending was not in playing the fool. I couldn't fake a fool's innocence, and convincing other characters of my goodness wasn't the point anyway. I was playing by the witch's rules. Whatever mysterious lessons the witch had to impart, I knew that being true to oneself could never be a bad thing. Anything less and I, the ball of energy, would be guilty of pretense. The witch would see right through me. My victory would come, not from learning idiotic lessons from my brother's story, but rather in skipping to the end of it, and winning the king's favor first, in some more clever way.

How this turn of events would benefit the witch I could only guess: her pleasure in magic seemed to come from being the only one who knew the rules. Though I gleaned that I was the princess's comeuppance for attempting to manipulate chaotic forces, I feared the witch's reasons for appearing to manipulate events to my benefit. My comeuppance ostensibly came and went with the slice of an axe, but my only takeaway there was in the petulance of dwarves. This time

around I aimed to avoid even that, and surely the witch was aware of my plans. Whatever the case, there was no more time to waste with Hugh. I could learn nothing from him.

In Which Alexander Guides And Manipulates The Other Version Of Himself—In Which This Other Version Shirks His Duties Because A Voice In His Head Tells Him To—In Which The Other Hugh Proves To Be A Right Bastard, And The Alexanders Conceive Of A Plan To Take Credit For The Hilarity That Will Enue

I came to rest above the shoulder of my former-self on the morning of his journey into the woods. I've come to think of him as "Alex"—a more diminutive form to reflect that he was not all me, precisely, though at the time I saw no reason to think of him as anything other than "Alexander." At first I only watched as Alex came upon the dwarf and insulted the rude creature. I needed to tread cautiously and only make necessary changes to the narrative; Hugh might never have been rewarded if there was no older brother to punish with the younger's success.

Alex's hand hovered over the slingshot in his pocket as he prepared to defend himself. I could feel his righteousness flame under the reminder that any person of skill could survive in the forest better than a beggar who attempts to hone nothing for himself. With the righteousness came a small spark of fear. The dwarf's actions were inexplicable in terms of survival; under the inexplicable rules of magic, however, the pushy dwarf made more sense. While I hadn't been sensitive enough to the dwarf's odd behavior the first time around, now I could generate more suspicion in Alex's mind.

“Why does this dwarf make his home here, if he cannot survive?” I asked Alex. “Why has this dwarf challenged you to go against your nature? He wanted you to deny him. He wants you to fail somehow.”

All day, a prickle crawled from Alex’s scalp to his toes and back again, as if there were eyes on him; as if the entire forest were waiting.

“You don’t like this,” I told him. “There is dangerous magic at work, here. Best you go home, and start fresh tomorrow. Or, better yet, let Hugh take your place and see how he fares. He is very comfortable in these lands. Another day without wood will not kill you, and certainly no harm will come to Hugh.”

At dusk, Alex shuffled homeward with an artificial injury. This pretense was his own—he could think of no other way to convince both of his parents that Hugh should be responsible for chopping wood unless as a last resort. Although the injury would have been to the arm, he had no way of knowing that; he suffered a minor limp instead, made all the more natural because the forest floor itself was sucking at his feet to make him stay. With my firm support in the guise of his conscience, he felt no guilt at the lie. So far, he was no worse than Hugh, dereliction-of-duty-wise and, arm unscathed, Alex slept contentedly.

When Hugh awoke to make his attempt, Alex also rose, to follow. I convinced Alex he would learn how to avoid the risk of magical reprisal by witnessing Hugh’s mistakes, but Alex was more concerned with proving that he was not paranoid or a coward.

The dwarf of course accepted Hugh’s in-edibles as proof of goodness—like children sharing mud-pies, they clung to gesture over reality. The judger was proven unworthy by his judgment. I told Alex that while he may not deserve any more than Hugh, he deserved no less. Hugh earned nothing and so valued nothing, I hinted. Of course he shared his food, but in the

long run, one cannot trick their way through life just because the powers that be will believe what they see. The brothers' situations could not be compared based on morality, and certainly not by a biased magic dwarf who understood the barest outlines of generosity and stinginess. Shortcuts hollow a person out. Alex should not be ashamed of focusing on survival.

Resentment set to simmer within Alex, I felt that I finally understood why I was there. I was to expose Hugh to justice and prevent the triumph of hypocrisy. If the witch meant to prevent my explicit victory, having never known victory I had no doubt I would still find satisfaction in nullifying Hugh's unfairly-advantaged disadvantage of idiocy.

The dwarf directed Hugh to chop at the fated tree's roots. "It will help you attain your greatest desire," he said and slipped away. The sweating, drooling, compliant Hugh chipped methodically until the task was done. The golden glow burned away his last thoughts toward familial duty, despite the so-called goodness of his heart.

Hied he to the nearest town, and lodging in the crassest inn, he made indiscriminate, lust-dulled eyes at the innkeeper's daughters, who in turn had eyes only for the goose. Hugh slept deeply that night; unbelievably deep. His breath grew quieter as each daughter entered. Once they stuck, only then did Hugh stir and, stumbling forth, fall upon them, assaulting them in turn as his bodily instincts directed him.

Though watching the scene made me sick, it's doubtful anyone would care what these women thieves suffered in that room. I was grateful that Alex did not witness Hugh's actions. The distinctions between right and wrong would become even less clear. However little Hugh's people respected him, no one could manfully argue that this forceful demonstration of his authority was unwarranted—in fact, the princess might have done better to drop all pretense that Hugh had a thought in his head at any point in his journey. Abstinent, flighty Hugh could have

been this virile, conquering Hugh, rampaging the countryside, punishing and claiming every wanton maiden and showing the world what a real man was.

In telling me Hugh's story in such detail, the princess granted me an accidental boon. Knowing where Hugh's path would lead and meander left Alex ample time to find the king before Hugh even realized that royalty existed outside fiction. All I had to do was convince Alex of what could happen before it happened.

In my mind I planted the barest thought concerning the gloomy princess—an elusive fragment to make Alex pause to reconstruct it and determine whether the image was a memory or dream. Perhaps the princess was Alex's invention, or remembered from one of those tales; but then the image was too clear for early memory, and unlike a dream, it refused to wilt away under the heat of Alex's focus.

Of course this was not one of Father's tales, and it was no dream. Prompted by the confusion I caused him, Alex sought company and information in the tavern. Hours into drink with the rowdy townsfolk, Alex reconciled false memory with facts and was momentarily unburdened. There was, in fact, a laugh-less princess to be won.

As the heavy drunks rested their heads on tables and benches, Alex closed his eyes as well, and slept. I hovered in the darkness above him, unable to do the same.

In Which Other-Hugh Humiliates Many People—In Which Other-Alex Convinces the Court That Other-Hugh Is A Simple-Minded Pawn, Which Isn't Far Off—In Which Other-Alex Wins The Princess And Other-Hugh Is Ripped Apart—In Which The Other Shoe Drops

Hugh awoke late the next morning to the violated sisters' sniffles, and roughly jerked the goose up, whipping the tail of sisters around to make a show of not acknowledging them. He pulled them down the stairs and out through the tavern, where drink-sodden men chuckled at the spectacle. Alex quickly detected the possibilities of the situation—he needed only a push to ignore the doubt that a princess would find this sort of thing hilarious, and another nudge to decide to manipulate the circumstances to his highest advantage.

At this point Alex was willing to accept as plain logic what I knew and offered now as prescience.

“The king probably doesn't realize that the princess's sense of humor might be puerile and easily won. The king might not discriminate against a lower class, but surely Hugh's success will only cause him trouble—you can save the king this trouble.”

Alex nodded slowly, as if thinking it through, so I pushed a little harder. “You owe it to the kingdom to beat out your brother. Face it, you could hardly comport yourself any less favorably than he. Faced with marrying his daughter to either of you, he will have to choose you.”

My biggest obstacle proved convincing Alex that Hugh's path would naturally lead him to the place I needed him to be. No argument could persuade Alex as to Hugh's predictability. Alex followed Hugh as two more individuals joined with Hugh's retinue, and then as far as the next town before he was convinced that Hugh could not help but learn the news. The princess was on everyone's lips—there was to be a final contest for her affections before her father married her off regardless.

Nevertheless, as Alex left his brother and raced the road ahead, he spread word of the developing spectacle, planting the suggestion in the minds of everyone he met that the princess would find Hugh hilarious.

At the castle Alex comported himself calmly. The king could hardly lift his head to look at the older brother, but he nodded along with Alex's explanation of the act that was yet to come, and gave him leave to introduce the spectacle when the time arrived, with the princess out of ear-shot. The king's gray face suggested more strongly than even my voice that absolutely anything but Hugh as a son-in-law was worth making the princess laugh.

"My brother has few joys in this life," Alex began, showing sorrow for his brother's situation. "To bring him some small spark of pleasure, I endowed him with a magical object." The audience rustles in surprise at Alex's generosity and concern.

"This object can give him anything his heart desires, so long as he maintains his child-like purity. Now before you get too concerned," Alex said, forestalling the murmur, "it's not real magic. I have never encountered real magic before and I would certainly never play around with it if I did. The point is, my brother believes it's magic. What I find most humorous about my little gambit is how easily the people around him give in to the force of that belief. He hasn't come across a single person who won't play along with him. Why, one time, he was carrying a shepherd's crook and ably herding the townsfolk along on their daily errands. They responded instinctively." The courtiers chuckle.

"So this time," Alex continued, "I urged him to think of the one desire he's been most afraid to think about, and wish for that. I hope that his joy will bring your princess joy."

The moment Hugh came into view, the princess laughed and clapped. As the court erupted in hilarity at the idiot's parade, the king warmly grasped Alex's shoulder, steering all

those assembled away from climax, and allowing Alex's story to seamlessly overtake the previous form.

Hugh's trail of abused prisoners gained freedom and fell upon him viciously. The golden fowl burst into flight and vanished into the glare of the sun. The princess gazed now at Alex, and I separated fully from him. His story made of him a different man I did not quite recognize. My motivations were not his. I had thought to rejoin my consciousness with his, but as you have to know by now, that was never the witch's intent.

*In Which Alexander Makes A Brief Foray Into The Story of "Beauty and the Beast" And Fails To Learn A Quick Lesson About Inner Beauty—In Which The Witch Provides A Dumbed Down Explanation Of The Universe And Alexander Still Doesn't Understand—In Which The Witch Turns Alexander Into A Frog—In Which The Witch Leaves Alexander Some Food For Thought But Does Not Clarify Anything That Has Happened Because What's The Point?
He's Not Really Listening*

The witch stepped from the shadows of the spirit plane and trapped me in her cloaken folds, jostling me away from Alex's happy ending. I emerged into blindness again, just above her shoulder, and eventually saw the same split tree. With fear I viewed the golden corpse sprawled at its base. Now that life had fled, the creature was jaundice yellow. A menagerie of animals, both living and dead, filled the clearing around it.

I tried to hover away, but her power kept me still. She gripped me then in her knotty hand, holding me to her nose and staring into my depths. She said nothing.

"Why have I not become part of my story again?" I asked pitifully.

“He is not you,” the witch scoffed. “He is a different man entirely. Did you desire the princess? To be joined with her in matrimony and rule her kingdom?” My silence was accepted as negation. “Then you and he are not the same,” she said, giving me a considering look. “You have gotten confused by recounting a story that is not yours. It’s not uncommon. The princess is lovely, of course. But perhaps by now you have learned to seek someone who is your equal, in mind if not station. If you will have me, I would say we are not so unequal, you and I. Together we could achieve much.”

I could not hide my recoil. Every internal reaction moved my entire being. “I just want to go home.”

If her expression shifted at all, it became slightly gleeful. “You are predictable. But then, that’s my fault. And here’s the crux.” She stood tall and broad, gathering herself. Her voice rose from a croak to clear, ringing tones. “You reject as unworthy in mind the prize you’ve ruined your brother’s life to claim; you reject as unworthy in beauty a second prize: myself. Now you must suffer a far more drastic rejection: you will be hideous to all who see you, and be utterly alone with your thoughts, until the day you can convince another to look beyond your faults to whatever redeeming quality exists within you.”

“But you took as a given that I would not want the princess,” I couldn’t help protesting. “You never gave me a real chance to accept her. And you’ve just said that I could never have had her anyway, and put barely any effort into courting me, so how is any of what you’ve said the truth? How is it fair?”

The heat of her gaze shot right through me, and I felt foolish before she even replied. “So now you believe that the world is fair? Do not play dumb. You cannot argue for the sake of rules you don’t believe in.” She gestured to the goose. “Once upon a time, this golden goose would be

whatever a worthy person needed it to be. ‘Worthiness’ is simply too relative and nebulous for the common man of this age to capture,” the witch said, poking the goose with her booted toe and meeting my eyeless gaze. “I stick with ‘goodness’ and it makes it a little easier. Man’s stupidity—“ She paused, as if caught on the phrase. “Man’s stupidity is not part of the plan, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it isn’t part of the plan.” She then sighed dramatically, as if exhausted by the obtuseness she might have read in my silence. “I guess the problem is in the idea of a “plan.” I’ve gained many bad habits from my creations, I’m afraid—but that, too, is part of what makes this so-called ‘life’ you live. My whims and your weaknesses.

“So, yes,” she replied to some silent question, or perhaps referring back to my lament. “Sometimes I become enamored of the idea that the twists and turns of a story can be seen from the very beginning; but this is a boring way to tell a story. Stories are far richer when the storyteller takes a step back, allowing people to trick themselves into believing that there is a plan. That’s where glorious chaos is born.” The witch flung her arms wide and tilted her face to the gray, wood-woven sky. Her face was smoother than I remembered, and her shape more rounded.

“But now I know there’s not a plan,” I pointed out. “You’ve told me.”

“I’ve told you to move away from the word ‘plan.’”

“But you keep using it.”

Her features dropped back into harsh, pointed shadows as she lowered her gaze to the bobbing ball of my energy. “It’s time to lose the golden goose symbolism for a bit, I think,” she said, ignoring me. She crooked a finger and a frog hopped to her feet. Never losing her grip on me, she lifted the frog in her palm. “My overall point is, when things get more interesting, I take it in another direction.

“Did you think Hugh was the youngest brother the first time around? Do you think the Hugh you created was the same one you knew as your youngest brother? No. I’ve got to say you were actually pretty close, but that was still just the Hugh you wanted to show. The “real” Hugh, or the Hugh you knew, was created by the last middle brother to wander into a curse. Maybe that middle brother was a version of Hugh—it doesn’t matter. I’m adaptable. You’ve gotta be, these days. The conflicting layers and versions definitely add a more complicated dimension than I’m used to, but I think there are audiences that will be receptive to either—or both, who knows? Sometimes variation deepens the experience. Makes it feel more real.”

“Makes what feel more real than what?” I asked in bewilderment, halting the tide of words so that I could backtrack to all the other questions I had. “What happens to Hugh now? What is the point of all of this?”

“More real than a cut-and-dried ending—this way it’s more in the vein of a history, where the truth is whatever we can reconstruct to make sense of all the lies, and everyone has their own idea of it anyway, no matter what.” Her expression darkened when she said, “Hugh almost always dies, if it makes you feel better—though it shouldn’t. My stories are perfect snapshots of plot. Everything before and after is very messy. You will still have plenty of chances to die foolishly.”

Without any change in expression, her fingers tightened around me and she shoved me down the throat of the frog. She unceremoniously tossed me into a pond I hadn’t noticed. “Welcome to your story. It’s what you wanted, after all. I call it ‘The Foolish Woodsman.’ What do you make of that?”

Which part of this story is “The Foolish Woodsman,” you might well ask. If I am the villain, and “The Foolish Woodsman” is me, the story would seem to be best closed by my punishment: as in, I am a frog, learning what it is to be despised. The end.

Yet that would end my story right where the witch officially welcomed me into it. Perhaps my foolishness lies in clinging to these stories at all. Or, perhaps none of them were my lessons, and the very act of telling these stories is my story—the story of a man who can tell all the stories in the world but learns a lesson from none of them, and can only pass these lessons onto others in the hopes they might do them the good it couldn’t do him. Perhaps it is all up to you now, to make what you will of them, and become queen of many more.

I’ll let you quietly sort it all out in your own time, but in the mean: you’ve made a promise—here is your ball, see? I was sitting on it the whole time.

In Which The Girl Can Finally Respond To The Frog’s Diatribe—In Which The Girl Succinctly Explains What The Frog’s Problem Is, If He Would Just Care To Listen—In Which The Girl Doesn’t Really Go Back On Her Word Because She Didn’t Give It To Begin With—In Which The Frog Is Once Again Left To His Own Sorry Devices—In Which A Lesson Still Isn’t Learned, But Hey, At Least There’s Hope For The Girl’s Generation

When the frog fell silent at long last, the girl snatched the ball right from under him, toppling him on his back and sending ripples across the pond.

“It seems pretty simple to me, now that you’ve stopped putting words into my mouth and talking yourself in circles,” the girl said, beginning a clipped, intelligent torrent of words against which she’d been biting her lip for half a day. “You’re so stuck on arguing that you’re not evil

and Hugh's not good: no one's all good or all bad. That's obvious. Just because there's an all-powerful force at work directing your life doesn't mean everything that's happened was inevitable. You are what you've done, but you're also everything you might do, which means all of these other 'you's are part of you, and you of them, but they are not you and you are not them." She sucked in a deep, exhausted breath.

"But that doesn't make sense," the frog protested after a very brief silence in which no digestion of words had time to take place.

The girl huffed. "It doesn't have to make sense to be true. All you need to know is that the witch was explaining how life is a series of actions in which a man demonstrates his worthiness or lack thereof, and you keep confusing yourself out of hearing her. The man you are is no longer the man you were. You have done too much for that to be the case. Life isn't lots of stories—it's all one long story. "

"Well, how do you feel about it? Being a character? Because, you are."

"We're all playing a role, of who we imagine ourselves to be," she said with a shrug. "But the world is how we see it. What's inside of me, looking out at that world at this moment and thinking and acting right now, is who am I. I can only define it later, and by then I am no longer that person.

"I think you're going through the motions like there's one big lesson and a happy ending where you know your place in the story and life's not frustrating and unfair anymore—because despite all of your so-called cynicism, you think this is how the witch designed the world to work—but at the same time you know it doesn't work that way. Why would you think her patterns work that way? All this self-exposure and exposition, and you don't even see what you've shown."

“How do I know you’re not the witch’s mouthpiece?”

The girl sighed and shook her head once. “I probably am,” she said, her voice flat and now thoroughly disinterested. “Judging from the fact that you’re also ignoring what I’m saying.” When she started to rise, and pocketed the ball, the frog realized where she was going—he didn’t realize the important parts of what she’d said, but he realized she was on the verge of leaving.

“But you have to take me home with you.”

“Apparently I don’t, seeing as I’m not. Let that be a lesson to you.” Fighting the urge to flounce off, the girl turned back. “Enjoy being a frog—and I don’t just mean that because you’re obviously going to be one for awhile. I think you have to genuinely enjoy being what you are. Find your true nature right now, and see where that takes you.”

Treasury of All Things

Alice lost both parents before she turned twenty-three, but the face she pictured when she was low and lonely was that of Esther Foley.

“You have such strength in you,” the old woman had told her once. As she often did after a long Sunday of meandering, she sat with Alice in the office at the antique store. Alice had wanted to respond, but ended up staring at Mrs. Foley in bewilderment. “Don’t gawk at me. I’m not speaking Latin here.”

Hope was a hollow word to Alice Blevins, but that was the only word to describe the feelings of fullness she got from her times with Esther. Her father’s dotting and her mother’s unobtrusive wisdom melded into to the background tarnish with the rest of the past. Esther’s optimism gleamed like a streak of polished silver. Even if the old widow came in only once a week and was somewhat of a looky-loo, Alice counted Esther as the one friend she’d made since childhood.

Esther knew the single antique store in Willoughby, North Carolina rarely put out new merchandise. Unless Alice happened upon a cheap local estate sale, there wasn’t much she could afford to add, and people didn’t stop by for conversation and lessons on history like they did when her mother ran the place. She parceled off her mother’s legacy piece by piece and played the part of caretaker; from day to day she didn’t do much more than pace the aisles of the store. A permanent mist of dust motes drifted through the lackluster lighting but Esther didn’t seem to notice or mind. Every Sunday she would move around the store like another dust mote, letting her hands trail over the furniture, tracing the grain of certain woods, inspecting price tags that were yellow and illegible from age.

Alice at least partially understood the widow's attachment to the store. The younger woman regarded it as a safe haven, if not a loop in time. Raised by her mother amid the aged, organized clutter, she felt that stepping over the store's threshold demanded a change in perspective.

"I think everyone deserves to live in the past towards the end," Esther said early last summer. "It's really the only time it's okay to live backwards." Her tone was always somewhat crotchety, but the gleam in her watery blue eyes belied her pose as a grumpy old lady.

Despite whatever Esther said, Alice wasn't a strong woman. When Alice's mother died, she immediately accepted that she would be alone forever. She didn't feel interest in developing relationships with other humans, and she didn't have so much as a cat for companionship; they were too needy and noisy. Her mother left her a black cat named Pebbles in addition to the store, but Pebbles died soon after his owner, and Alice had to admit she was relieved.

At anything other than complete silence, she would jolt awake in the night. The walls of her bedroom were covered in sound-muffling tapestries and quilts. She sealed her windows shut as soon as she moved in over the store, and installed wall-to-wall carpeting everywhere except the kitchen and bathroom. Still, the scrape of her feet over the carpet surface sometimes unnerved her, and when she was in the bathroom, the sounds of the street outside tensed her body like a coil. She frequently wore sound-canceling headphones throughout the day, the disconnected cord trailing behind her if it came loose from where she tucked it in her pocket. She sometimes thought that there would be peace in going deaf.

Alice saw Esther only once outside the context of the antique store, and the experience was a little disorienting. Despite the slow small-town pace, the world outside the shop seemed frenetic.

The old widow still drove herself around most of the time, but she was reaching an age, she said, where she was starting to distrust her brain. Some days she didn't feel up to operating a vehicle, so she would have someone—usually her housekeeper—drop her off on Main Street and come pick her up when she called. One of those Sundays, she couldn't get in touch with her ride. Clearly unused to being a burden, she protested when Alice offered to drive her; however, by the time they were in Alice's truck, Esther was clearly reconciled to the notion of a jaunt. She filled the thirty-minute ride up the mountain pointing out old haunts, and talking about the history of Willoughby's major families.

Esther gestured to one steep driveway and said, "That leads to my other house. Haven't been up there since my son died. With his father already gone I just couldn't bear it."

Alice didn't know what to say to her passenger's stark statements. Instead she leaned forward to peek up at the house, and glimpsed only the tip—a small, railed platform built around a chimney.

"I used to think it was amusing that someone would attach a widow's walk to a mountain home," the widow continued. "After everything though it just seemed like people were expecting me to throw myself from it, so I moved someplace more comfortable." Esther directed her a little farther along and had Alice drop her off in front of a plain one-story house, the first in a row of identical houses dotting the road leading back down the mountain and out of town.

She wondered at how many keepsakes Esther must have left behind to fit her storied life into the cottage. As the old woman toddled up her front walk, Alice imagined what it would feel

like, at the end of her years, to have the world close in on her, bit by bit, shaving away at her until she was left with the mere island of her body, longing for its final breath. She realized after she pulled away from the house that she was already familiar with that sense of claustrophobia.

With compassionate brusqueness, Esther was able to draw Alice into sharing her own understanding of the past. No one in Willoughby was unfamiliar with the Blevins' brush with tragedy, but the focus had always been on the other victim, and out of kindness the community seemed to willfully ignore Alice's involvement. By contrast, Esther told her to stop treating the events like the elephant in the room, as if Alice's past were the unacknowledged foundation for everything she did and every personal experience she undertook.

When Alice was young, all the kids in town knew that a monster lived in the woods. The adults were probably too frightened to talk about it, but according to the Sheriff's daughter—a tough little cherub named Wendy with blond pigtails down her back and a penchant for eavesdropping on her father—Willoughby had a higher than average statistic on missing children, most of them fair-haired.

Even if the adults never admitted to being scared of the monster, they did not allow their kids to go near the forest line unsupervised. Red-headed Alice, whose parents' house was fully surrounded by the forest at the very end of Marimy Lane, had to rely on indoor entertainment most of her days. As an adult she could still remember the thrill of fear she felt when she sat alone in her living room, watching the television early on Saturday mornings with the big casement windows open to the thready breeze and sounds of the dawn-dark forest. As disturbing as those quiet mornings were, her eeriest moments emanated from the small kitchen's unexpectedly large bay window. Tinted to reduce glare, it extended directly into the forest,

skimming two ancient oaks on either side. The window was like a movie screen from which she could easily imagine a monster tearing loose. The forest from that view always loomed darker and closer.

By the time she entered middle school, the hold the monster had on the imaginations of Alice and her peers slackened somewhat. She and Wendy were busy being nervous around boys and eighth graders when they both vanished from Alice's own yard in the summer after sixth grade. The sheriff's men and their dogs found a pink hair band looped on a tree branch a couple miles in, but they found no other trace of Wendy, and no sign whatsoever of Alice until she stumbled out of the woods three days later with no memory of what had happened.

The walk back, she remembered that. She remembered: the feel of her bare feet scraping over rocks and tree roots, her palms sanding the rough bark of a hundred different trees, the strange, light box look of the sky behind the foliage above. After falling out into a back road, her memories went dark again, with a blankness that encompassed several months. Her parents told her she was found miles from their home, and was checked into the hospital and then the psychiatric ward; they said the sheriff had spoken with her and determined that she could not help the police find Wendy or her kidnapper; they told her she must have gone into the woods after Wendy. Both her parents and the sheriff seemed determined to paint her as a brave young woman. The sheriff even apologized to her a few times for failing to apprehend the kidnapper, as if he should have done more to continue the search she allegedly started and nearly died for all those months before. As if his daughter's loss were more Alice's than his own.

Alice felt no connection to the actions they attributed to her. The news stories read like they were describing crime and heroism in some far-off land. She felt as if a page was missing from her book, and on the far side of the missing passage she was a different person: numb, and

timid. She reached inside herself and found no trace of whatever person she had been, and no explanation for why that person was gone.

The late sheriff was a pragmatic man who seemed to accept that his daughter was most likely dead. Public fervor over the kidnapping quieted down; leads were nonexistent, but no more Willoughby children went missing. A few years later a girl vanished out of Brickerville, but Willoughby residents treated the news with the same vague relief as they would a passing storm. Someone else would weather it now.

When Alice's father died not long after the family moved into town, her mother chose to sequester her in the family's antique store. The loss of her father surrounded her in a dead calm. To this day she couldn't recall whether she ever experienced a period of mourning. By high school, Alice was a reclusive teenager with little interest in making friends, distinguishing herself or breaking away from her mother, so after she graduated the shop became her life. She never considered applying for colleges or leaving Willoughby, and her mother never questioned her disinterest in starting a new life. By the time her mother died, Alice was inextricably linked to the antique shop, and knew she would be there to the end of her days. All the people she cared for were gone, and she didn't know herself without them.

The Sundays Alice quietly shared with Esther did more to make the shop her home than all the years preceding. She no longer felt like a forgotten relic. In a way, it was alarming to be dug up, but Esther was a bracing, open-aired force of nature. The old woman had undertaken several conversations with the store at large before finally dragging Alice's voice out of her.

"You have an old eye for curios" was the first thing the widow said. Later, Alice would tell her that even though she had no motivation to add to the store, she couldn't help giving into

the call of a unique object. Each item was very small, no larger than could be unobtrusively placed on the furniture. Alice would reveal that to move any of the things her mother had brought in was unthinkable. She couldn't explain why.

On that first day, though, Alice forced a smile in response to the old lady's compliment, and said nothing. In her experience, strangers found that kind of thing rude, but Esther continued talking, for a full hour, as if they were both in dialogue. Two weekends later, when Alice finally spoke she slid seamlessly into a forgettable conversation Esther set up for them. Alice had been feeling an overwhelming urge to give into the pull of Esther's friendliness, and the words leapt out of her at the most innocuous moment.

Over the following Sundays, Alice often felt like a child being teased by a batty aunt. Esther always treated her with affection, but she was merciless in digging beneath the younger woman's placid exterior.

"If you're trying to protect yourself, you're going about it the wrong way. There's a big jump from being completely naïve to turning yourself into veal." She twirled a big-knuckled finger at Alice, looking so comical and serious that Alice loved her in that moment. "Maybe you should think about investigating that mysterious gray area. Fear is just as bad as stupidity, in the end."

Their time as friends was deeper than it was long. Esther died the following year after a bout with pneumonia. Alice didn't know how to feel when Esther's lawyer sent someone to the shop to tell her that Esther had left her most of her belongings in her will. Her first reaction was a strong negative, but as Esther's lawyer told her over the phone, the woman had no one else. Although Alice thought she had already received the larger benefit from their friendship, Esther had apparently been determined to give more. The ache Alice felt now was equal parts sorrow

and joy at this final proof of the woman's regard, and she knew Esther had made the bequest with more than a monetary value in mind. Maybe it was foolish, but she hoped to find a final message from Esther somewhere in the leavings of the widow's life.

The Foley House was one of three homes on the side of Tartak Mountain, and the white stone mansion sat at the very end of the road. Alice entered the paved driveway at the top slowly, trying to take in the whole view, but almost clipped the side-view mirror of a shiny little car parked in the middle of the loop. She pulled her dingy pick-up off to the side and slid out.

The house was huge and elaborately decorated, but seemed almost two-dimensional against the forest surrounding it. Alice felt that she could easily be walking up to a false front on a movie set, but as she climbed the curving staircase to the second-story entrance, the mansion felt more solid and imposing, like a museum. Wind wrapped the peak of the mountain in silence. Alice heard neither birds nor the sounds of the road below, and a chill radiated from the building. Alice knocked just as the door opened wide. An older gentleman in a blue suit, no tie, stepped through.

"Ms. Blevins. Thank you for stopping by so early." Esther's solicitor held out a pudgy hand that enveloped hers; he directed her inside with the same hand held lightly on her back. "Do you have a vehicle that can carry much, or would you like to me to put you in touch with some people? I know the roads up here are a little nerve-wracking."

Alice glanced around the foyer as they entered, and saw an austere, empty interior. She spoke hesitantly. "I'm not sure yet. Honestly, I have no idea what Mrs. Foley could have left me. She never talked about having a collection or anything."

The solicitor pulled a wry look. “Ah, yes, more like collections, plural. I’m not certain that Esther herself was quite as avid as her husband. I think nowadays he might be called a hoarder.” The gentleman patted her shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll find some articles worth keeping, though. The Foleys had very good taste.”

With those words, the solicitor showed her to the study, where everything Esther had not given or donated elsewhere was gathered. To Alice it seemed as though the entire contents of the antique store were crowded into a space one third of the size, and in addition to the jumble on the floor, several animal heads decorated the high walls. Besides a deer and a buffalo, a very old-looking elephant head rested above the fireplace.

“Nobody has been quite sure what to make of that,” the man said. Alice realized he had caught her staring. As if just remembering something, the man threw up his hand and then dug into his pocket to pull out a folded, letter-sized envelope. “I didn’t want to just hand this over when we contacted you. I knew Esther very well, and she would’ve wanted something more personal. She left a final message for you here. I hope you find some closure.”

Alice took the envelope and stared at it. She felt like she was handling a corpse, and she stuffed the envelope in her bag, determined not to read it until she had somehow prepared herself.

Before he left he gave her his card, with the mover’s number on the back. Alice thanked him and followed him out, waiting until he pulled his shiny car from the driveway to go back inside. She tried to ignore the emptiness echoing through the rest of the house, and she started to better understand why Esther left this place.

Hours of thankless organizing passed before she found the pie safe tucked against the far wall. The furniture was eminently sellable—the quality wasn’t necessarily better, but most of the pieces were in better shape than the hodgepodge of items Alice’s mother collected over the years. There wasn’t much excitement to finding solid old furniture, though, and in keeping with her fascination with knick-knacks, the pie safe was a much more interesting find.

The Foleys had filled it with small sentimental objects, and Alice felt a growing measure of enthusiasm in settling in to inspect every item. She found a cigar box filled with foreign coins, a majority of them probably collected during Mr. Foley’s stint as a Marine on the German front during WWII. A box of patches on the next shelf contained insignias ranging from the Marine Corps to the Boy Scouts of America to the National Park Service. She put the box back on the shelf, seeing no need to divide up these particular possessions.

On the bottom shelf, Alice found a long leather case. When she tried to tug it out, it fell heavily to the floor, knocking the pie safe’s door open with a rattle. The rusty hinges of the case flapped uselessly. She touched the top, brushing away the dust to read the words “W.J. Jeffery & Company” embossed in the leather, before sliding the lid off. A huge, smooth metal barrel ran the length of the case. She slid a finger beneath it to gently lift it for inspection and saw that it was in fact comprised of two barrels, and a separate old wooden stock.

She recognized a good find immediately—anyone worth their salt in the antique business would know a valuable rifle when they saw one. When her mom ran the store, three or four had gone through. Old rifles always sold quickly. This one was bigger than any she’d ever seen; it was definitely designed for dangerous game.

“This is a big gun for a little lady,” the thick-waisted man said from behind the counter, cocking a curious eyebrow. “Planning a trip to Africa?” The two of them were the only ones in the gun shop that evening—as soon as she walked in, the owner reversed the open sign, rubbed his bald head and gave her a broad grin like she was an old friend he hadn’t seen in months. Called her “Vera’s girl.”

“Not that you don’t know what you’re doing,” he amended. He connected the separated pieces of the rifle and hefted it. Alice felt the need to explain, even though she hadn’t wanted to.

“I’m not planning on using it, I just want it restored in working order so it’ll sell quicker.”

The man gave her a look. “I recognize a woman who needs to shoot something.” A beat later he smiled like he was joking. “Truth is we’ve got a lot of women come in here and arm themselves lately. Granted most women go smaller than bigger. But I heard you ain’t typical.”

Alice wanted him to stop holding the rifle. He was just standing at the counter, talking to her, not doing anything useful, and meeting her eyes too intently. She didn’t want to hear about other people and their guns—she didn’t know why, but she was focused on the immediate future of that rifle. Because he wouldn’t stop looking at her expectantly, she finally repeated that she wasn’t going to use it.

“Seems like you might think on investing in a sidearm. If ain’t the human killers it’s the coyotes. I hear it’s been a little too dry for them this year. The coyotes I mean.” He set the gun down.

“You hear a lot,” Alice said ungraciously. She didn’t want to think about the real dangers of the forest; they made her own fears seem vague and imagined, and she itched to leave the bright store.

He seemed to think she was being funny. With a little chuckle he pulled the rifle apart and started putting it away. “It might take me a day or two, but no problems and I’ll get this beauty back to you.” He gave her a receipt and another smile tinged with familiarity. “Damn you’re quiet for a redhead. Your mother could talk up a storm.”

Alice hadn’t thought of herself as a daughter for years, and she wished he hadn’t said anything.

She kept the restored gun in her office at the antique store for the duration of the day she reclaimed it. The gun shop guy identified it as a W.J. Jeffery .600 Nitro Express rifle from 1902. Double trigger, twenty-four inch barrels, about fifteen pounds all told; it was mostly used in last-ditch efforts to stop a charging elephant dead. He assured her it was better than a repeater any day, then made another joke about her size relative to the massive rifle.

“It’ll blow your shoulder off, you try to use it. Try to avoid it ‘less you got a bear coming after you.”

His congeniality exhausted her. “I’ll try.”

Despite her apathetic response to the gun shop’s owner, he had impressed her with the gun’s history and purpose. It could kill anything. It was unstoppable.

She couldn’t bring herself to put it out in the store, and she had yet to cradle it and feel its full weight outside the case. Alice walked by it during the day, touched it, and felt safe from the noisy press of life around her. Esther’s letter leaned, unopened, against the rifle. The gun and the envelope carried the same promise—Alice hoped that by waiting to address the significance of both objects she was preparing herself for a real change. Alice thought to save it up for her most hopeless moment, trusting that she would recognize that moment for what it was before it passed

her by and left her emotionally immobilized forever. At the same time, she wondered honestly if she would ever read it, or what use the rifle would be against her intangible problems, beyond making her feel slightly safer from any physical danger the blank in her memory might be hiding.

The influx of new product brought in a slow trickle of customers both old and new, and because she frequently needed to answer questions, Alice couldn't put her headphones on and block out the sounds of the world. Everyone wanted to talk about Esther, and what kind of life she must have lived to accrue so many fascinating items. Unwilling to break up the accumulated belongings of either her mother or Esther, Alice took the step of tightening the store layout by reorganizing her mother's antiques into a smaller section, and moving Esther's belongings in on the other side of the store. A clear aisle demarcated the two sides, and customers ranged freely between both. She liked the symmetry.

As the day crawled by, the gun never left her thoughts; she envisioned it sitting in her office, still and undaunted, and tried to imagine carrying that kind of strength inside her. Alice had told the gun shop owner the truth: she couldn't imagine firing it, but she did keep one of the bullets in her pocket in the way of a promise that the gun would find a use. It was too unique and powerful to sit unused.

That evening, Alice packed the gun and its case into her truck and returned to the forest.

The drive down Marimy Lane was shorter than she remembered. A couple houses at the beginning of the road glowed in the darkness, but as the lane came to an end, no more homes showed signs of life. Moving down the end of the lane felt like driving into a tunnel. Trees had grown very close in to the house, making the clearing around it darker than ever. Beyond the

outline of the cabin and the glint of jagged glass, Alice could see little as she parked and eased out of her truck. A few of the windows were broken, and ivy had grown unchecked up into the shingles of the structure. The house probably wouldn't last much longer.

Standing before the front door, Alice felt a thrill of mixed fear and sadness so deep it choked her. She wondered if the kitchen's giant window remained intact.

An ostensibly random pile of rocks still covered the rock holding the spare key. The door wobbled as it swung in. Leaves lay scattered across the dark floor, but the forest had been kind to the aging cabin. Only the window by the front door had broken in all these years. The others, though covered in a fog of grime, were sound. She peeked in the kitchen, ducking back out when the bay window came into view. Her heartbeat against her breastbone reverberated through her entire body.

She went out to her truck to bring the gun inside. She wouldn't stay there, and she trusted her instincts on that decision because she had the gun with her. It wasn't a matter of fear. Logically there was nothing out of the ordinary to fear here, despite the memories the house brought back. It was a matter of taking action, and not giving herself enough time to lose the momentum she gained in coming. Once at her truck, she climbed into the cab, leaving the door open and the light on as she pulled out Esther's last missive. Her name was printed on the front in all capital letters; Alice knew that Esther had written that way since her hands started getting shaky, but she couldn't help feeling that the capital letters brought Esther and all of her personality back to life.

The letter was brief, and ended with nothing more than the widow's name. Alice thumbed the page, looking for a second sheet even though only a half a page of writing divided her name from Esther's. She wasn't sure what she expected, but she was left feeling that all of Esther's

wisdom, in both life and death, amounted to the idea that Alice should just pretend that nothing happened to her. Esther wanted her to ignore the blank spot in her memory. Alice realized she felt betrayed by the sheer redundancy; these, the widow's final words, were nothing new.

Alice sat behind the wheel with one leg dangling from the cab as she stared unseeingly at the letter. She finally burst out laughing. Esther was right, and she'd been right all along—Alice was the one being redundant, harping on something she couldn't change. Technically, the events around the kidnapping never happened for her. She never remembered a single image from that day, as hard as she used to try. She'd long since given up, but now realized she was still longing to have the black cloth ultimately dropped, and the scene revealed.

But maybe there was no stage behind the curtain. In all honesty, what proof did she have that she hadn't gone off into the woods, gotten lost, and terrified herself out of remembering three days of wandering around aimlessly? The adults never questioned the assumption that she'd been kidnapped, and so neither did she. She never thought to look beyond her angst over not remembering the awful things that might have happened in the woods. She never thought that losing her friend and father might be enough to change a person.

Now she forced herself to ask the question that would make her feel absolutely ridiculous. What if she had just gone outside, seen that Wendy was missing, and gotten lost looking for her friend in a landscape with which her parents had, out of fear, not allowed her any level of familiarity?

Anything could have happened on that day. Esther's point was that by now, exactly what happened shouldn't matter either way. The hard truth was that Alice lost two people she loved within months of each other. She thought the gap in her memory was a dark part of herself that she could never understand; for Esther it was as ominous as a crack in the sidewalk—a stroke of

bad luck—and as mysterious as grief. Alice had been an idiot. She laughed again, this time with less self-derision.

She left the letter in the driver's seat and the gun in the back of the cab when she went back into her parents' home to lock it up tight. She stood in the kitchen for what felt like the final time. For a moment, she could picture her younger self, reveling in the indefinable thrill of a child testing the limits of her fears. As Alice went now back out into the darkness, locking the front door behind her and sliding the key in her pocket with the bullet, she remembered suddenly that once upon a time, she would tiptoe to the open window in the living room and fearlessly thrust her arms into the emptiness outside, daring something to grab her.

The Translator

Bethany thought at first that the blot of darkness on the sidewalk was a bush—some lone outlier, product of a rogue landscaper. But there was no way the university would allow that kind of chaos to stand. She withheld final judgment. As she drew closer, the leafy jaggedness of the shadow smoothed out—perhaps a trashcan, then.

This stretch of Main Street was dark. A few street lamps struggled along the median, but the darkness pressed in from all sides, distancing her from the lights even as she passed below them on the cobblestone crosswalk.

When she stepped up to the opposite curb, she discerned hairy, mottled legs spoking from a mound of blankets. She couldn't help the gasp that popped out when, for an instant, she thought the legs might be dead. Her foot slid off the curb with a jolt. In the long moment that followed, she tried to calm down and keep her eyes absolutely still, a sobering method she'd perfected while drunk but which was equally applicable in a state of extreme exhaustion. She satisfied herself that the blankets piled against the former frozen yogurt shopfront were, in fact, rippling with the movement of a breathing human being, and not from the hallucinatory effects of nighttime.

A tuft of hair crowned the heap, but the face itself was tucked away. For all she knew, the hair was in no way connected to a face. For that matter, this pile could have simply sprouted hair and legs on its own. Either way, the lack of eye contact—her gratefulness that she didn't even have to attempt to avoid the blankness overlaying the humiliation and anger she expected to find in a homeless person's gaze—encouraged her to dig into her pockets. A quick inspection in the

flickering light from the median determined she had mostly pennies and nickels. She could never remember to exchange her coins for useful money at the bakery.

She took a couple steps to either side of the figure, circling while keeping a few feet between them, but she saw no cup or bowl for collecting change, and eventually crept close enough to set the coins by his feet with a clink. One leg shifted suddenly, dragging a foot through the coins with a metallic scrape; Bethany leapt back and kept still as a clearing throat gurgled out from the pile and into a stretch of words.

“The monkey will lie down with the ox, and the serpent shall give birth to the walrus.” The hair strands slithered back into the recesses of the blanket, and the legs folded and retracted as if into a shell. Embarrassed, Bethany started to shuffle off and hesitated, wondering if she should retrieve the coins. Wondering if she had insulted the hidden individual by offering them. The futility of either—giving the coins, taking them back—would leave a pit in her stomach. The only thing for it was to leave the scene entirely, and forget about it. She'd taken a half-step back when the blanket pile spoke again.

“I hopscotch with plants. Having no blooms myself I do not hop with evil plants.” The voice crackled in her ears like rain on a windshield, or a distorted voice on the radio. It sounded male, but she couldn't be sure.

“Well, good. They'd probably trip you up with their evil roots and vines, eh?”

The pile didn't respond, and even seemed to deflate slightly. Silence and stillness returned to the sidewalk. Bethany was left uneasy, wondering why she had spoken, hoping nobody heard her; nevertheless, her lighter pockets gave her a lighter step. Perhaps in speaking, he meant to thank her, or make an even exchange of charity.

Mott retracted his leg into the warmth. Although he waited for the nervous pedestrian to round the corner before he made his move, she never looked behind her. He rocked back on the plush pillow beneath his hips, and lunged forward to gain momentum enough to shift his whole weight, blankets and all, into a crouch on his feet. He lost a few blankets in the process, and hurried to gather them back around him to hide the luxuries he'd concealed cunningly within his cocoon. He wondered if sewing the blankets together into one thick, motley garment would ruin the haphazard effect he was going for, or if it might make the whole disguise easier in the long run.

Not that Mott would dare approach his thesis advisor with such a trivial detail, but he could well imagine what the man would say: the most authentic path would be the hardest one. Mott suspected that his advisor was more helpful to students who followed his every suggestion—but that's all they were, after all: suggestions. Mott wasn't about to kowtow to some prim academic's definition of "objective." If his advisor remained unconvinced of the experiment's validity by the end of it, Mott would simply choose a new advisor. Mott knew, somewhere out there, someone would see the value in his assertion that people become invisible as individuals when they became homeless. Sure, social workers might recognize them by name, but the average citizen could not see faces, or even color, when it came to people living on the street. They walked on different planes of existence.

His advisor's response boiled down to a callous "and so what?"

Mott aimed to demonstrate what would happen if a homeless person demanded notice—how society would shuffle them off so that it could go back to pretending the homeless were one homogenous, lifeless mass hovering on the periphery of real life: barely there, like ghosts. Society has created real ghosts, Mott explained; even in the face of this exciting claim, the

advisor's mouth was grim as it replied that Mott needed to create a detailed outline of his plans so that they could both see for themselves whether there was a connecting thread from the beginning of the experiment to the end.

Mott wouldn't let an unenthusiastic person be a deterrent; whatever Mott wrote, the advisor would find a way to argue against it. It was time for action.

Once Mott's pillow and the inner layer of his cocoon—the softest and cleanest of his blankets—were shoved into the pack he wore beneath the rest, he felt pretty pleased with himself. He wasn't too sore, and he had a great spot picked out. At first he'd suffered some competition, but he reached an agreement with “Bill From The Bridge” that not only gave Mott this prime spot for a third of the week, but also gave Mott access to Bill's rotation of prime spots. While Bill wasn't too lucid and probably didn't remember their verbal contract, one thing he had seemed pretty adamant about was the schedule he followed, and so far Mott had yet to run into Bill again.

His uphill trek across the row of parking lots behind the shop strip took more of a physical toll than anything. Only now did his daily application of dirt start to run, the sweat guiding it beneath the collar of his clean shirt, onto clean skin. Mott hobbled quicker for the last few yards, until finally he was over the hill, where the shops fell out of sight and his white hatchback sedan was waiting for him. With one last furtive glance around, he popped open the trunk and spun his disguise off his shoulders and into a big crate. He swung the hatch back down at double speed, but slowed it just before closing to push it shut with a soft click.

He waited until he was in the driver's seat, and five blocks away, before sighing with relief. Hopefully the paranoia would lessen with practice.

Thoughts of the homeless man stuck to Bethany's mind like gum. As shameful as it was to admit to herself, she couldn't bring herself to imagine vagrants as worthwhile human beings. Most of them seemed to be running on automatic—going by a script. Language, the thing that separated them from animals, turned into a parrot language, or a Pavlovian response to anyone who happened to pass by. The passionately insane—the preachers—had the same tendency to look straight through a person, already preparing to say the same thing to the next person, and the next.

Not so this man. He wasn't looking for something in the world around him. He seemed to be searching for himself down in those blankets—maybe struggling to define himself despite his limitations. When she went online to learn about the man's symptoms, she read about aphasia. Granted, she'd largely broken away from her addiction to self-diagnosis sometime in her third year as an undergraduate. The symptom-matching game was one no one could win, and certainly not a hypochondriac.

By now, though, she felt inured enough to take her findings with a grain of salt, and this time she wasn't looking up her symptoms, so it was fine. This man could have a brain lesion that scrambled what he said into a string of disconnected words he accidentally used in place of what he wanted to say. Bethany wouldn't believe that made them meaningless. No wonder his words had such a spiritual focus—the thing dividing him from animals had escaped his control. His attempts at recitation were his noble attempt at reasserting that control.

Swinging her threadbare jacket beside her, Bethany followed the same path home on Saturday. After closing up the bakery, she paralleled the edge of the campus and approached the

shop-front with butterflies in her stomach. The lump of blankets in front of the store was split open like a broken husk. The man was nowhere to be seen.

In the daytime, without the chill and the dark and the glow of the streetlamps hovering like stars at some indiscernible distance, the fact that she even remembered what the man said a few days before seemed silly. She never encountered the kooky individuals that seemed to populate others' riotous stories, and she never had stories to tell. Maybe this homeless man would have fallen flat as an anecdote.

Bethany went through her week in a haze, mechanically performing her baking tasks in the back. The sour yellow lights and the smell of uncooked dough churned her stomach. The emanations of this place were nothing like the warmth and happiness she had experienced as byproducts of her mother's kitchen. Maybe this recent nausea could be attributed to nostalgia. She could no longer encapsulate what had made her youth feel so magical, and she couldn't recreate her feelings, even on her visits home. Every day felt bland.

On her walk after work on Wednesday, Bethany's disgust at an obviously non-mystical homeless man urinating on the steps of a duplex prompted her to cross the street. Of course, there was no way to know whether it was the same homeless man, and she had to wonder whether she even deserved to see him again—then she had to wonder why she hoped to.

She scuffed her ankle and her rubber work shoes on a curb when a car took a right turn too fast and failed to notice her. She stumbled to the crooked metal trash can on the corner and propped herself up to lift a foot and examine the damage.

Someone coughed just below her and she started. A bony man sat cross-legged and hunched against the opposite side of trashcan. He was faced away from her, and muttering as people on the sidewalk breezed past him.

“I am thrown like a leaf, my mind wanders down forest roads, I vanish into shadow, I starve. My self moves from shell to shell, pouncing for a toe-grip.” She could barely make out words through the crackle overlaying his voice. The hair on her arms stood up. In the context of his life he probably made perfect sense, and the way he spoke was not the way a man would speak if his mind were mush—his words were careful. They seemed to speak to the wayward girl inside her, the one she missed so much these days.

He lurched to his feet, and made as if to turn and move in her direction; Bethany about-faced before making an effort to walk off calmly. Just because she wanted to listen didn’t mean she wanted to be a blip on his radar.

The man started to appear with more frequency, though Bethany only ever saw him during the early-morning and late-night rushes to and from classes. He had three main locations, and disappeared in between them. His clothes were always encrusted with filth, but something within him seemed to shine with a noble spark.

She mentioned him to one of her coworkers. Elle was doing graduate work in Chemistry, and she had a cynical view of Bethany’s strange experiences. “He sounds like another eccentric college dropout to me.”

When Bethany tried to convince her that there was something more to the man’s words than met the ear, Elle listened with a gravity-defying eyebrow. Bethany repeated his phrases to the best of her ability.

“There isn’t even a cohesive dogma there. This guy is just crazy,” Elle said.

“I kind of saw it as a bigger picture kind of view,” Bethany muttered, focusing on rolling the dough so that she wouldn’t seem too invested in the conversation. “Like maybe he’s telling

people to be content no matter what happens.” She knew Elle was looking at her with pity, and refused to meet her eyes.

“You know that sounds stupid,” Elle said. “Or else, that's what you want to hear. I mean, that very first thing he said to you—either he's a fallen angel or his parents made him go to church when he was a kid and it went to his head. Which is more likely?”

Bethany let out the breath she was holding, and the anger with it. It felt good to voice her doubts out loud, but Bethany had, in her desperation for guidance, forgotten that Elle was never serious about anything that didn't involve chemicals. Today her levity grated on Bethany, who always aspired to be a deeper thinker, even if it got her nowhere. The more Elle scoffed, the more Bethany realized that her coworker would never understand the connection she felt with his words. Elle couldn't hear his conviction. Why shouldn't something be considered meaningful just because it was only meaningful to one person in the whole wide world?

“If two frames were to conjugate, one producing mist and the other seagulls, we stone the mist,” the man said. When she passed him at the sandwich shop, he had gained two companions. Beside him, a sharp-featured, gaunt male sipped from a brown bag, and on the other side sat a diminutive dog tied to a rope attached to nothing. The sight of the group startled her into swerving and snagging one of her belt-loops on a bench. She stumbled to an abrupt halt.

She didn't know why the tableau impressed her as being so odd. Juxtaposed with the other homeless man as he was, the aphasic man seemed even more obviously different, but she still couldn't pinpoint why. Perhaps his beard wasn't as matted—but no; if she looked closely, it was caked with even more dirt than the other man's. Perhaps his hems were less frayed. Again no; threads dangled from the legs of his pants like a tapestry fringe.

Bethany hurried past, trying to commit his words to memory. What did he mean to say? Was the original meaning important, or was he chosen by some power to change the original words into some deeper truth?

Maybe seagulls represented the ugly reality that needed to be dealt with, and the mist stood for the nebulous hopes and dreams distracting people from reality. Perhaps the two frames could exist simultaneously for the most part, but should they clash, she must choose reality: she must force her vaporous dreams to disperse, lest they blind her to the diving, pooping seagulls.

“Hey, it’s your boyfriend,” Elle quipped, poking her head in the back as Bethany struggled with the pie special. Bethany rose out of curiosity.

The homeless man lingered in the entrance of the bakery, not yet inside but clearly intending to pass the threshold. Bethany steeled herself against the instinct to dash away and hide in the walk-in freezer. The world of the bakery and the world of the streets needed to remain separate, she felt, to maintain her sanity. She wouldn’t be able to see him the same way in the context of people who saw him as disgusting. Even now, in the day’s bright light he filled her with a sense of wrongness.

The door sensor dinged; the atmosphere of the entire bakery changed. A few of the customers warily watched him enter, and besides the trickle of soft music overhead, the only sound was that of his shuffling feet. “Excuse me, sir, can I help you?” the owner asked sharply.

“This mud is the food of all zebras, and zebras the food of the mud.”

“I think you must be mistaken,” the owner said. Her tone was cold, inarguable. The homeless man seemed lacking in his usual shield of imperturbability, and paused for a good long moment before continuing.

“The fly guides me to cow pies and moonshine; he takes me along to rivers of lightness restored with soulful jazz.”

“Sir, if you don’t leave, I’m going to have to call the police,” Bethany's boss said, moving from behind the counter and causing the bum to skitter back towards the door.

“A multitude is the woman who drinks God and the waterwheel of Time,” he said shakily. “The holes in the snail house face outward to the unstable seesaw.” His bulky coat caught a bottle of sauce on the table by the door, spilling it across the surface.

“That’s him,” Bethany confirmed in a whisper to Elle.

“Of all the stores in the city?”

The homeless man slowly drew out a chair at the table and sat down. He extended his arms across the table and made as if to lay his head down upon it.

“All right that’s it,” the owner growled, whirling towards the phone. The grubby hands of the man splayed open on the clean tabletop. The sauce covered one of his arms, and it was transferred from coat, to table, to forehead. The man brushed at his face and only succeeded in smearing it into his facial hair.

“The forming of postulates trumps the silent statue.” He struggled to wipe his sleeve against one of the curtains covering the front windows, but then vanished out the door as the phone left the cradle.

“Good vocabulary, though,” Elle admitted after he left. She seemed perturbed, and though Bethany knew their reactions were for different reasons, she felt some kinship with her coworker. They were both utterly confused.

As much as Elle’s earlier question had been for the sake of levity, it was a fair point. Why did he walk into her bakery? The man never even acknowledged her. Still, perhaps he sensed that

she was opening herself up to him. She turned his last phrase over and over in her mind. Perhaps he was encouraging her to take some kind of action. She had no clue what that action might be, and as she struggled to come up with one, her mind leapt back to his words of wisdom concerning seagulls, and she felt a little disoriented. Should she accept the world for what it was or not? Did acceptance imply action?

A fly tracked lazily around Bethany's head. When it landed close to her hand, she was frozen with indecision; in the end, she did not swat the insect.

On her walk home that evening, the streets were unusually empty, and the flickering yellow lights played tricks on her color perception. Everything seemed grayer. The cars on the street were black and white. She walked a little faster as a prickle climbed over her scalp and raised the baby-hairs lining her temples.

The silence surrounding her was punctuated only by her loud breathing as the walk turned uphill and her thoughts turned further towards the homeless man. He was a series of paradoxical ideas. Maybe she could get all of them down into some sort of outline—but she wasn't in school anymore. What was the point of writing an essay on the subject? Then again, maybe her tendency to close-read provided her with realizations that were beyond the reach of an ordinary thinking individual. Maybe that's why he was seeking her out. If not sent by some higher power, then perhaps he had appointed himself as a sort of translator for the cosmos; a translator who needed her to translate. After all, he seemed to be caught in a sort of catch-22: to be freed of the need for control, the need to analyze, one must lose all control—but then of course, no one would listen to one's wisdom concerning control. No one would follow a

homeless man's example, even if his message was as simple as believing and taking solace in reality.

Bethany barely noticed the ground beneath her feet as she continued to chug her way home. Stepping into the street, she vaguely acknowledged the four-way-stop sign that marked the last leg of her journey. Ghostly fingers tugged at the edge of her coat.

She whirled around, her breath caught in a bubble between her lungs and her throat, and almost dodged back when she recognized the spindly mass of mismatched clothing. His eyes held her fast: black holes in the shadows of dusk, they for once stared directly into hers. Dazedly, she noted his heat, and the wind that rose up behind her, the sandy scrape of tires, and the harsh blare of a horn as a car whipped around the corner. It took her a breathless moment to realize that he had prevented her from becoming inconveniently dead.

“This is how he nightmares: he eats up everything, rips everything within, digests, reattaches, glues the puzzle, creates his own picture. And the chicken is beside the sun and it is holy!” The man’s eyes slid away from her face.

All at once she became aware of his stench and he stumbled back to shuffle in another direction. Even as she trembled at the close call and became intensely aware of her own mortality, she couldn’t help but inspect her clothes for telltale traces of sauce. She tried to be circumspect about it. Then she stopped herself, disgusted.

When she arrived home she had to press her hands to her face to keep from crying from relief as the shakiness overtook her frame.

Of all the places he could have been during that moment of that particular night, he had been there to pull her from the path of an oncoming car. How could she be crazy for wanting to

believe that there was a divine presence in her life when people had been thinking it for eons? Wasn't that the point of going to church? What was wrong with her taking the whole thing more literally?

Her mind seemed designed to create disbelief. Maybe it was just a human defense mechanism. Animals had to kill or be killed. With humans, it was more like doubt or be doubted. Bethany ruminated over the homeless man's words, blanking her mind before she delved too deeply and triggered the defense. Some nascent belief was replacing her dissatisfaction. She didn't want to overwater it; she wanted it to bloom naturally. This had to be part of his message—to not try so hard to nail down specifics; the gist was enough. It was about the general feeling of having the gift of life.

As long as she kept her mind completely open to that feeling, maybe she would find the happiness she felt as a child—that light happiness, of experiencing the world for the first time, without the long-sighted focus on how it could get better or worse. She needed to believe everything and nothing. She must not break stride to stop and analyze.

Late on a Friday, Bethany saw the man stumble onto the university campus and pause by a pylon. A man in a brown suit approached him. She saw a smile crease the homeless man's face, and her breath caught. He was beautiful! He straightened, and his entire aspect changed. He was shining with nobility.

He shook the stranger's hand. She rejoiced that a normal person would be willing to greet him as an equal. The two drifted over to a large oak, and sat beneath it on a bench as the man in the suit pulled out a thick folder. There was a genuine conversation happening. A surge of jealousy welled up within Bethany before she quashed it. She didn't need him anymore—maybe

this professional-looking man did. Bethany continued watching the two as the homeless man took off his raggedy cap, exposing his hair. The dome was a shiny blond. Only the ends of the strands exposed by his cap were caked with filth.

She felt her heart skip a beat, and a gassy confusion washed over her. The feeling intensified into stomach cramps as he pulled off his raggedy overcoat, until she was hunched over on the sidewalk watching him strip of his outer layer of selfhood. Beneath the overcoat, a plain white t-shirt. A *clean* white t-shirt. And clean pale arms. From his filthy pack he pulled a pair of loafers, and as he patted his pants, a layer of dust lifted from the legs.

The lump in her stomach condensed into a rock pulled her down, and she had to sit, right there in the middle of the sidewalk. She could still see their heads over the wall bordering the campus. Both men were very animated. The homeless man was gesticulating forcefully, sharply, and looked fully lucid, even through her watering eyes.

For a deathly quiet moment, she couldn't breathe.

Then she inhaled deeply, and the rock shattered, bombarding her insides, scattering into her mind and destroying everything that wasn't nailed down. The men disappeared. Everything disappeared. And Bethany smiled at herself across a shiny new expanse of nothingness.

Images and thoughts flitted past her mind's eye faster than she could comprehend them. Every time she forced the dizzying images to pause, to slow, to reveal what they actually were, her mind roiled around this new information like the wake of a speed boat. Better to let the stream flow uninterrupted.

Gradually her optic nerves stopped vibrating so hard, and she was able to see again. The spontaneous blindness filtered away to reveal a world pleasantly full of chaos. Her busy thoughts

joined in with billions of other busy thoughts to construct the reality surrounding them all. She focused the strength of her inner life outward. She took her open mind and fashioned its contents into a massive tributary to keep the world spinning on its water wheel. She felt life flowing into her and then out of her, cleansed. She was every metaphor and every real thing.

The room was big and very bright. While most of the large windows that lined the hall had heavy curtains drawn across them, the activities area was fully lit. The windows were open—although still blocked by a crisscross of iron bars—giving a fine illusion of freedom.

Bethany settled at the checkers table, and showed no inclination to move on to any other game from the day she set foot in the psychiatric ward.

“Don’t you see what he was saying?” she asked the man who handed her a cup full of pills, as her opponent took three of her red pieces and triple-crowned himself. “He was saying we are all important.”

The attendant encouraged her with a forced smile before retreating and muttering an aside to his coworker. “I always thought the curious thing about checkers was that no piece was important.”

The second attendant went along with his companion’s attempt to sound philosophical.

“Chess could be a better analogy. Even a pawn could take down the king.”

“But they’re also called *pawns* and are used for bait.”

The second attendant raised his eyebrow at the first man, signaling he was done humoring the conversation. The first man looked a little leery, glancing at the stack of books sitting on the floor by Bethany’s chair.

“Is it good for her to let her read those?”

“Is it good for her to let her read anything?” the second attendant returned. He slowly leaned over to pick up the top tome without alerting her, then straightened to find her looking directly at him.

She didn’t even glance at which text he was holding. “This very self is the lord and king of all beings. As all the spokes are fastened to the hub and the rim of a wheel, so to one’s self are fastened all beings, all the gods, all the worlds, all the breath, and all these bodies.”

Without a word, the attendant set *The Upanisads* back down on top of the pile and indicated to the first man with a rolling gesture of his shoulders that they both stroll away. When they were out of earshot, all he muttered was “See the game last night?”

The story Mott Boyd told to the writer from the university paper was distinctly different from Bethany’s disjointed version of events. It appeared that Bethany had driven him almost as insane as he had her, although he came out on the other side with a thesis.

According to Mott, his project started off without a hitch. Maybe he hadn’t committed himself in the way his singularly-focused thesis professor would have liked, but after all, there was a very fine line between an overwhelmed graduate student and a homeless man in a sandwich board announcing the end of the world. The religious shtick took him close enough to the line; he didn’t want to live there.

Of all the bad luck, during his very first week roaming the streets, he snagged a disciple. He hadn’t wanted to be pigeonholed as a zealot hobo, but Boyd admitted he wasn’t good at playing crazy without a script. So he accidentally made total sense to one person with a mind too big and grasping for her own good.

Initially worried that he had leaned too heavily on the Biblical quotes, he started to throw in a few mutated phrases from Hindu texts. From what he gleaned during Bethany's sessions, she somehow managed to formulate a network of beliefs that encompassed every heathenish paradox he uttered. When Boyd realized that she had struck onto his schedule, he knew, firstly, that he was being too predictable for the purposes of his research, and also that he had left at least one variable unaccounted for. Maybe he hadn't been digressive enough. Maybe he hadn't said enough, or had been too portentous in his sporadic statements—he had never been portentous before, so it was an alien experience for him. He wracked his brain afterwards, tortured by the fact that he had failed so spectacularly in his experiment.

“I was just taking on the life of a homeless man. I didn't think anyone was listening,” Boyd said. He began sitting in on her psychiatric sessions, to which she agreed because she apparently liked the look of him; she seemed to look right through him, though.

He tried to explain the purpose of his project. “The idea was that homeless people were outliers of a social system: invisible. I was trying to blend in. I thought any reasonable person would assume I was not in my right mind and pass on by.” The paper he wrote on her atypical reaction was published swiftly.

Her coworker Elle, the only person paying attention to Bethany's behavior before the quick descent into harmless madness, proved a bit more acerbic in her opinion. “This Mott Boyd character is a moron. He just plucked bits of bunk from all over the spectrum and mixed it about. You can't do that to a depressed English major! They are addicted to reading between the lines.” Boyd's thesis professor was of the same effusively low opinion. “The fact that she—in passing mind you—noticed something was different about him is proof that Boyd failed to make his

research immersive; it remained at the observational level at best. As a student with an outside life, he of course would go home at night.”

The ‘of course’ was said in a tone that suggested the speaker thought there was no ‘course of’ to the matter. The professor spoke more passionately as he continued. “He never forced himself to live in the filth that those people experience daily. This project did not even touch on the true psyche of a homeless man in a homeless culture. And his choice of Bethany for his next attempt at a paper was just unfortunate.”

“More disturbing than anything, though,” the advisor added, his voice dropping lower, “is the illumination that these circumstances shed on Mott Boyd's inability to diagnose his own failures as an observer of society and individuals. Frankly, that poor girl is better off than he is.”

In his paper Mott delved only as far back as her collegiate experience in explaining Bethany's swift deterioration. She was overeducated, he concluded, and under-ambitious; she wasn't the first and she wouldn't be the last one who needed to be told what to want—to feel no call to do anything on this plane, and long for some higher power as a guide.

His deadline looming, the writer refrained from contacting anyone from her past to gain a sense of the person she was before graduation. The article instead ended on a brusque note. In the end, could it really be Mott's fault? Didn't it all just come down to natural selection?

Angels of Memory

Louise's mother ripped her from the sheets of their ancient sofa bed; they were through the dark house and stumbling across the lawn before she was fully awake. It was hot as day outside, and Louise closed her eyes against the light of the fire. Mr. Roy's house next door was half gone, its foundation crisping under the flames.

"Mr. Roy?" Louise rubbed at her face, and struggled a little against her mother's suffocating hold. Her mother wasn't saying anything. She spun in panicked circles and cried out for help as lights came on in the houses along the street. In the moment before the men from three doors down pulled her wobbly mother farther away from the fire, Louise thought she saw Mr. Roy. She thought he was okay. She twisted to look again, but it was the skeleton of the half-burned tree in his yard.

Before the two fire trucks pulled in front of the house and made everything seem so much bigger, and before the flames lapped at her house and set it alight, Louise thought Mr. Roy's home looked like a piece of paper quietly crumpling in on itself.

By the age of seven, Louise thought she knew more than she should.

She knew that she couldn't go to summer camp because her mother was irresponsible. Her mother was enthralled with the beauty of her low-paying job at the botanical center, and Louise knew the only reason they survived day to day, even before the hurricane, was because of her father's life insurance. She knew that money would probably be running very low after the hurricane repairs; and she knew she met the next-door neighbor three days after the hurricane because her mother didn't care enough to stay home with her.

Every day from the beginning of summer until the hurricane hit, her mother would give Louise a bowl of cereal and a sandwich, and leave her to sit on the crooked porch swing under the indifferent eye of Mrs. Blanche, the old woman across the street. Louise stayed on the porch all day, with a pile of books she used to be too young to understand, and a key to the house if she had to pee. This routine lent itself well to the days following the hurricane. Louise's house was virtually uninhabitable, and Mrs. Blanche was spending more time than usual outside, supervising her own repairs. The old woman frequently cast sharp glances over at the workmen Louise's mother had hired. With no homeowner to answer to about how they were passing their time, these men took many breaks.

Mrs. Blanche didn't think much of Louise's mother, and Louise's mother was the sort to blame the old woman's ill will on jealousy. Just this morning, Louise was told to ignore the woman's grumpiness, because that was just what happened when someone got old. Louise's mom said this like being young was all anyone could ask for—as if in the six months since Louise's father died, her mother had already forgotten how much she loved him. Maybe her mother didn't feel the loss of the water-damaged photos and his old clothes like Louise did, but Louise couldn't forget how much she had loved her father, and she couldn't help wanting a home again.

When her parents were together, they had three jobs between them, and Louise never would have been forced to live on the pullout bed in the living room because of the leaks and the moldering boxes of keepsakes in the bedrooms. Louise wouldn't have to watch her mom skip off to work this morning with a head full of birds and flowers distracting her from their wretched condition and ensuring nothing would be done about it.

For two days her mother had argued with repairmen and yard crews, deciding she and Louise could take care of the yard themselves even though for all of the neighbors except the hermit next door clearing the debris had been the first order of business. Now she had paid the repairmen whatever they wanted and left Louise to hold down the fort as men thumped and hammered and cursed around her as if she wasn't there.

Not many people noticed Louise. The wrecked tangle of magnolia trees that crowded in at the swing's corner of the house forced her to move forward if she wanted to see the sky. To actually catch a glimpse of Mrs. Blanche, Louise would have to stand by the stairs, and she never did that. Her footprints in the layer of dirt on the front porch were testament to her lack of movement from the swing.

Only the house next door remained as inactive as Louise. Neither she nor her mother had ever met the owner, but her dad had said he was a nice, if odd, old fellow who'd seen and done it all, not that he'd talk about it but you could tell. As old as he was, her dad said, Mr. Roy's eyes were far older than the rest of him. Louise remembered wondering how parts of a person's body could be different ages, and if all of her was the same age. Now she knew her dad was speaking metaphorically.

In the past two days, while the rest of the street bustled with homeowners and laborers, the lawn next door remained resolutely filthy. Louise hadn't seen the man so much as take a look at the damage to the outside of his house. That morning from the living room window she saw a curtain twitch, though, and so once outside she lay on her belly in the swing and peered through the latticed magnolias toward the side of his house.

A crash and laughter from the workmen around back startled her into looking away, and she was so secure in her invisibility that when she turned back to her contemplation of the neighbor's house it took her a good three seconds to realize there was a pair of eyes peering back at her through the leaves. She jolted up in the swing, scraping her leg against the gray-green wood.

"Hi there." The voice was deep and creaky. The shape of the man to whom the eyes belonged came into focus as he took a step back. He was tall and skinny with a mustache that hid most of his face.

"Hi," Louise said. She barely heard her own voice.

"Keeping an eye on things?" he asked. She shook her head slowly, wondering if he could see her well. "Might be easier to do that from out here."

Louise didn't do anything for a moment. Whenever she spoke to adults they always seemed to be waiting for her to do something silly or more adult than her years, and she wondered if he was just joking with her. But he was still standing there, waiting it seemed, so she slid down from the swing and edged toward the stairs. When she poked her head out from the tree covering, she saw him leaning around the side of the house to see what she was doing. The rest of his body followed his head as she trudged down to the yard and shyly kept her distance. Across the street there was no sign of Mrs. Blanche, and besides a man with a ladder who rattled by and nodded in acknowledgment, no one paid them any mind.

"There we go, the perfect vantage point for a guard." He nodded in satisfaction. He was a bald telephone pole of a man, dressed in a heavy brown suit and standing as if stuck to the ground. Somehow even from ten feet away he radiated kindness. He turned so that he was facing

the street like Louise, and crossed his arms. "Since we seem to be in the same business, what can you tell me about any shady types around here? Any gossip? Anything I've missed?"

She shook her head again. "Have you been away?"

His smile spread the hairs on his face so that the mustache seemed to be doing the smiling. "In a manner of speaking. I've been in my head a bit, but I'm sure you know all about the curse of a good imagination. You can get lost forever in your own mind. Terrifying, miserable and wonderful all at once."

Louise realized she was shaking her head again, although whenever she thought about her dad she felt lost that way; more than one teacher had half-jokingly asked her where her imagination was, and she hardly understood the question.

"Are you Mr. Roy?" She sat on the bottom step, prepared to get up if he didn't want to talk to her sitting down, but he folded his spindly legs and sat straight down in the dirt and leaves. He moved easier than Mrs. Blanche despite having an extra couple decades-worth of wrinkles.

"Of course. And you are Louise, your father's daughter."

She nodded this time. He had angled his position towards her, so she did the same. He didn't say anything else for what felt like a long time, so she thought she was supposed to ask him more questions.

"Why have you been imagining so hard?"

Mr. Roy tilted his head back and closed his eyes under the light of the noon sun.

"Because I am supposed to do the unfathomable. Do you know what that means?"

"I know what the word means."

“Well that’s terrifying in itself. You are young, everything is fathomable.” He hunched his skinny shoulders up to his ears and suddenly seemed much smaller. “But at my age, to change everything about myself, to go against everything I ever thought gave my existence a purpose, that is unfathomable.”

Louise wasn’t sure whether he was exaggerating the depth of the struggle, so she half-smiled, prepared to laugh if necessary. If he had thrown his arms up at the sky, she could’ve relaxed, but his jaw crooked to one side as if he were still deep in thought. Even so, the crinkling around his eyes made her suspect him.

“What do you have to do?”

“It’s me, if you can believe it, that’s supposed to save the world.” He gave a minimal shrug. “It’d take someone more angelic than I am to see the point. Why does God need humanity to be saved when he’s the one who inflicted them on themselves to begin with? Let it end or continue on as it always has.”

Louise said, “My dad told me everybody had to save the world or no one would,” but she wasn’t sure how seriously to take him. He sounded a bit like he was taking the opposite side of an argument just to argue.

“Your father was a very wise young man. I enjoyed our talks.” His tone of voice was softer. As if just thinking of something, Mr. Roy twisted his bald head around to study their two lawns with narrowed, deep-set eyes. “I can’t imagine he’d like the look of our yards. He’d say it was a death trap. Wouldn’t be able to sit still with all of this mess, would he?”

“No,” she agreed vehemently. She thought about her father’s weekly yard-work routine, remembered bringing him water, how he would push his sweatband up with the back of his hand to get a good look at her, and then nod as if satisfied with everything about her. Maybe he was

never thinking that specifically, but it felt that way, and Louise felt that way right now, for just a second.

“I can’t deny I more than know my way around a rake.” Mr. Roy looked a little sheepish and said, “But I always borrowed your dad’s. You know, I think between the two of us we can clear the yard out in no time.”

Louise wasn’t even sure they still had a rake, and then thought that her mother couldn’t be bothered to toss anything, and Louise’s father certainly wouldn’t have gotten rid of it. The shed in back was missing a few boards and a latch but there might still be stuff in there.

She stood up and saw no sign of Mrs. Blanche. A sudden giggle within gave her the impetus to dart around the side of the house and venture into her backyard. None of the workmen or their tools had scattered as far as the shed yet, and none of them paid attention to her. Her dusty shoes caked around the edges with mud and tree flotsam, she clambered up on the shed platform and tried to push at the pieces of door blocking the interior. The boards were leaning riotously in all directions, so she pulled one aside and scraped her way in.

The cobwebs draping from the roof within made her think of a canopy bed like the ones in houses that were turned into museums. She crouched down, banging her knee against a toolbox with a broken lock. Louise recognized it from when her father had done work on the backside of the house the summer before last. It was bronze and dingy and huge. Behind it, just inside the door to the right, were the rakes and brooms. The rakes were stopped up with leaf kabobs, and she dragged one forward, struggling as it snagged on the toolbox. The toolbox toppled over with a bang, spilling its contents.

Louise pushed the rake out through the gap in the door, but her gaze was locked on the watch that had fallen out with the rest of the tools. It was a little banged up and blackened, but it was definitely her father's old watch. The one he wore when she was really little and they went to church every Sunday and she would sit beside him rolling the big veins in his hand back and forth. She laid it over her wrist but didn't know how to put it on. It left a black line when she took it off to put it in her pocket.

By the time she lugged the rake around to the front of the house, Mrs. Blanche had reemerged into her lush, undamaged garden, and she quickly spotted Louise. Louise didn't see Mr. Roy anywhere.

"What on earth are you up to, child?" Mrs. Blanche called, shuffling up her front walk with a bewildered expression. In one hand she held a giant watering can, and in the other a cigarette. "Louise, that's no job for a little girl."

"The man next door wanted it." She let the rake fall with a rattle.

Mrs. Blanche's brow creased and she tossed her cigarette in the birdbath. "That man hasn't been out in years. And he's ancient. Are you sure it was him?"

"No, I guess not." But as she sat back down on the front step with the rake in front of her and began fiddling with the watch and wrapping it back around her wrist, a door slammed shut and she saw Mr. Roy coming back out of his house with a handful of leaf bags. Mrs. Blanche nodded a wary hello, and he nodded back. The old woman turned back to her garden and resituated a small gnome.

"Good, you found one. And what's that? That watch looks a little big for you."

Louise caught it as it slid off again; the tall man crouched down and deftly replaced the watch, fastening the ends tightly together with a twist-tie. He tapped the watch-face with a gnarled finger and looked a little perplexed. “Doesn’t seem to tell time, either.”

“I don’t need to tell the time.” She waited for him to say something else, but he didn’t immediately, so she thanked him and stood up with the rake. Mr. Roy continued to regard her with some curiosity, and then spoke again, still soft.

“Just know that’s not all you have left of him. There’s you, after all, and you’re the biggest reminder to the world that your father existed.”

Louise again didn’t fully understand him, but she swallowed against the knot in her throat.

She followed him around the yards as he raked, helping to bag up the leaves and answering any questions he posed. He seemed very curious about what she thought about the concepts of good and bad, and she’d never had a conversation with anyone who actually listened to her answers. Every now and then he would go on a little rant about the world at large, demonstrating passing knowledge of practically everything, but then he would focus back in on her, and care about all the things he acted like he didn’t care about when it came to humanity in general. Toward the end of the afternoon, as he worked back and forth across the two lawns like it was one big yard, and the workmen slowly packed up and started leaving for the day, she felt that she owed him more concern about his troubles.

“How would you save the world if you were going to?”

The rake came up with a thrum as he pulled it out of a patch of crabgrass. Then he leaned against the unsteady handle and gave her a considering look.

“Do you promise to believe me? Because it doesn’t seem like you believe much. I tell you things and you don’t even blink and you don’t ask many questions, and that only happens when someone believes everything or they believe nothing.”

“I’ll believe you,” she said, even though she thought she wouldn’t. And he didn’t look like he believed her either, but he smiled and let the rake drop as he gathered the ends of the last leaf-bag and knotted them.

“I would save the world by being selfless.” He smiled wryly. “Of course, that’s not how it was put to me. He said that every angel had within them a spark capable of relighting the dormant good in all of mankind. He told us we would always have the numbers we required to do the work that needed doing, and now I’m alone. I’m the only one left. Sounds like a rather large hint. I guess one exploding angel is enough.”

“Are you...do you mean people? People who are like angels?”

Now Mr. Roy wore a very broad smile and she knew, or she was fairly certain, that he was messing with her, or just no longer cared whether she believed him. The rest of what he said made so little sense she couldn’t process it. She latched onto definitions.

“I mean angels, Louise. I mean the beings he made before he made all of this. And when I say I can save the world by being selfless, that’s something I’m just kind of guessing. Or hoping, I guess would be the better word.”

He lined the leaf bags along the curb. “And I’m hoping that because I’ve got to believe that God has a reason for wanting us to sacrifice ourselves. He got so frustrated with us, like we just weren’t getting the point of it all, and I pray he didn’t give up on us. I would destroy myself for God any day. What more does he want?”

His desire for an answer felt real, but as he wasn't asking her, she decided he was speaking in metaphors. That idea made her a little more comfortable with the conversation. As he walked her up to her front porch, he spotted the small stack of books. He briefly flipped through the stack. "What age are you really?" At her confused look he shook his head. "Never mind. I'll make a young-un of you yet. Till next time." He waved a goodbye to Mrs. Blanche too, who only furrowed her brow again before going inside for the evening.

Louise's mother came home a little before dusk, and was talking on her cell phone as she climbed out of her old red hatchback. Her head stayed down, her shoulder crooked to hold the phone as she locked her car. She swept a lock of hair behind her ear, checked something under her shoe, and then briefly went out of sight as she headed down the driveway toward the paved walk along the front of the house. Louise gathered her small stack of books and unlocked the front door herself.

She didn't mention meeting Mr. Roy because she knew her mother wouldn't ask the right questions. Louise didn't want to wonder if he was crazy; all she knew or wanted to know was that he was kind, and he let her talk about her father.

Much later that night, as the fire came under control, smoke dowsed the street and allowed night to settle in once more. Louise thought she saw the shapes of many wings rise with the roiling clouds. She looked to her mother, whose eyes were like giant mirrors glimmering with the last embers of their home.

Her mom looked down at Louise and, for the first time since Louise's father died, picked her up. Louise felt like she was too big for this—like was sliding out of her mother's arms—so she held on tight. Her mother didn't try to put her down; she squeezed Louise tighter.

Red Light Green Light

Sometimes when Claudia Wall opened her eyes in the morning, she would imagine that she was married. She often found herself speaking to her bare room as if her words would linger and echo long enough for her husband to catch them. She tortured herself, wishing that she and this invisible man were living together on different planes of existence, always popping home for the five minutes the other one wasn't there, and never quite sure they had ever been married.

Back when the city was overpopulated and drowning in debt, the general idea of the Didymus System filled her with wonder. The oligarchic city government had won its bid to make Ginnungagap the first Didymus city twelve years before, and the whole thing was simultaneously exciting and too ridiculous for her to take seriously. Ginnungagap would be divided into two planes of existence. Half of the city population would be moved to an artificial plane known as the Overlay, where they would use the same city buildings and refurbished living quarters as those who remained on the original plane, but they and every object below a certain mass would shift into a "null space" every five minutes to make room for people and objects on the Origin. Of course there had been questions and protests at first, but Ginnungagap's situation was desperate, and most people of Claudia and her parents' acquaintance, along with a majority of the population, were in full support of the experiment.

Now all Claudia knew or cared about was that for every five minutes, five minutes of her life were stolen. Her brain never perceived any change, but an ache in her sternum always accompanied the stuttering passage of time. When she was at the office, her eyes strayed to the huge iron clock bolted to the front wall. The hands still wound around twice, and there were still

twelve numbers, but there should have been eight—there were eight full hours to a day. Most of those hours were spent at work, and instead of sleep, the employees vanished into null space.

Claudia never understood why the city wanted her to see the long hand flick away another piece of her life. It wasn't as if there had been an easy solution to running the same clocks on both planes. The Didymus scientists had to conduct a great many experiments before they triumphantly announced their solution—to craft the timepieces from the same iron used for the trains. Even in small amounts the special iron alloy could exist simultaneously in the Origin and Overlay planes, and was developed specifically for the trains. Personal vehicles were too heavy to restrict to a single plane, and some considered it a symbol of the claustrophobic lives they were leaving behind. Ultimately it was decided that cars would have no place in the new city.

The alloy allowed for the trains to run in continuous time. According to the leaders, who became simply “the Authority” after they abolished police enforcement without explanation, it wasn't healthy to obsess over the train. Anyone demonstrating undue admiration or curiosity was considered psychologically suspect. Claudia figured that because Didymus was meant to embody a national sense of progress and discovery, the Authority saw people's insistence on clinging to nostalgia and old ways of experiencing time as subversive. If the clocks were meant to acclimate people like her to this new experience of time, they failed.

When Claudia awoke at precisely five minutes after seven o'clock that morning, she lay still for a few moments. She slowly walked her hand out beside her, touched the cool sheets on the far side of the bed, and tried to ignore the chill beneath her own body—the sign that, wherever she had been in her “sleeping” hours, she hadn't been here, on this bed.

Claudia used to hear so many things at this hour: breathy sounds of traffic rushing past her parent's house, the sharp yelps of dogs confronting one another on their early morning walks, the house finches trilling, sleepy and sporadic, from the eaves outside her second-story window. Now she strained to hear anything to prove there was a world out there. Like cars, nature had no place in the Didymus system.

Her sheets weren't warm enough to burrow into and take in the morning bit by bit. She acknowledged the familiar feeling of emptiness above her diaphragm, and rolled out of bed. Claudia didn't need to check the clock again to know she had already wasted three minutes. She pulled on the pair of gray slacks hanging alone in her closet, and tugged a plain white shirt straight from the sack in which her laundry had been delivered. From the bagginess of the shirt she realized she had lost more weight, but the mirror showed that she didn't appear as delicate as she felt, so she tried to shake off her self-consciousness and ignore the emptiness of the room in the reflection.

At the front door, she stopped and stared at the apple on the tray where she always received her daily food delivery. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten fresh fruit, but the edges of her vision flickered, and it was fifteen past seven and she was already running behind. She needed to be in line for the train station by the time seven nineteen became seven twenty or she would miss her window. She folded the *State of the City* newsletter accompanying the food into her bag with her breakfast and left it by the door, next to the rolled up foam cushion she liked to use on the train. Claudia was in and out of the bathroom with a minute to spare, tossing her hairbrush aside after a cursory swipe down her lank brown hair. Once she gathered her things, she had to pause at the door, letting her body settle, willing her mind to be still and unthinking. Part of it still reacted in horror whenever she opened her front door.

Along the curve of the path outside, her neighbors ambled down through their matching concrete yards to line up. The rows of houses in the living sector radiated outward from the train station in concentric circles, and there was a schoolyard quality to the way the people were organized and ushered along. Sometimes people would converse in hushed tones, but in general they were like strangers to one another and the mornings proceeded in silence.

She descended her two-step stoop slowly, squinting as the gray-yellow light of the sun hit her over the identical roofs of the houses across the path. The clear sky was a dull blue. She slowly let her gaze drop, seeing not people but dashes in a line, as if the path were still a real street. The light spots in her eyes faded as she reached her place between two large middle-aged men, and then the edges of Claudia's vision flickered again and it was seven twenty-five. The line began to move.

It felt like she was on a guided tour through a ghost town. The white one-story houses on either side showed no signs of life. She focused on the back of the older man in front of her, trying to ignore the eerie vacuum of sound surrounding her.

The ground beneath her feet slanted up into the station, and a section of the train finally became visible to her through the arched gateway. The iron wall crept sluggishly along, stopping for no one, and stepping on was like leaping for a revolving door.

On either side of the windowless gray tube ran a line of iron seats separated into stalls. If she leaned forward she could see far enough in either direction that the view dwindled into points of light, and when she sat back into her alcove, the people around her were blocked. Though almost full, the train felt empty. Claudia remembered reading somewhere that the Authority designed the layout with the intent of emphasizing the breathing room the new system allowed.

She tugged the *State of the City* from her bag and couldn't help her quick intake of breath as she read the headline. There had been a total of seven bombings in the last two years, resulting in a handful of Origin deaths and minor property damage, but apparently the night before, the bomber had taken more extreme measures. The food distribution center was completely destroyed, this time on the Overlay plane—meaning the building itself was destroyed on both planes, but the Origins would be able to pick through the wreckage and find their packages of food unharmed. Overlays would be forced to subsist on the little amount of fresh food they imported and their emergency rations.

Before the rapid beating of her heart could overtake her entire body, Claudia was startled by the sudden, close voice of a fellow passenger.

“I have it on good authority that the whole thing is bullshit,” the woman said. “Well, not good authority. And maybe authority's a bad word to use.” Claudia looked up to see a pale woman in black shiver melodramatically at her own words. When Claudia met her eyes, the woman gave her an innocent smile that was offset by the manically curly white-blond hair she was attempting to wrangle with a hair-tie. When her hair was up, wispy fine hairs curled around her face in a halo.

“Don't you ever think that maybe this part is nonexistence, and wherever we go for those five minutes is the real world?” The sheen to the woman's eyes was the familiar, drugged-out glaze that every “catch-out” eventually wore. She had tucked an olive green knapsack under her seat, clearly stuffed to the brim, and a sure sign that she spent most of her day on the train. Claudia said nothing, but the woman nodded as if agreeing with her. “Yeah, that's a stupid idea. You can't just toss a whole population from existence without good reason. Assuming they haven't just left us here to rot because they're tired of the responsibility.” She flapped her hand

vaguely. “But I ask you, if someone was in charge, don’t you think they’d have thought things through a little better? I know overpopulation’s a thing, but do you know there hasn’t been a Red birth since the split?” The woman propped her elbows on her thighs and brought her ponytail around to nibble at the ends. “Bunch of Green babies, though. Don’t know how that’s fair. Don’t know why no one notices.”

Claudia knew enough about catch-outs to understand that “Greens” were the people on the Origin Plane, and “Reds” were from the Overlay. She recognized the color-coding as an us-and-them kind of thing, probably based around the fact that Origin planers started the day first, and had ten extra continuous waking minutes after Reds were shunted off into the ether for the night. Claudia didn’t feel martyred by little differences like that. What was ten extra minutes when both planes were still only living half-lives?

“Why—” Claudia’s unused voice stuck on the first word, but the catch-out didn’t seem to need much in the way of a response.

“It must be hard keeping it up in null space. I bet the Greens all get it in right at the very end. Those last ten minutes, woo, I bet it’s like an orgy.”

Her eyes were focused intently on Claudia, whose discomfort was edging into frustration—the catch-out’s talk of sex made her heart flutter unwillingly. For the twelve years since she had been separated from her father and the eleven years since she turned eighteen and her mother had left to join him in the Origin plane, Claudia had been living in an unrelenting stretch of solitude that, like Didymus, felt impossible to escape at this point.

“Can I just enjoy the ride please?” She knew she sounded petulant, but soon she would emerge back into step-wise time, having wasted these twenty minutes of continuous living on a madwoman who never had to get off the train.

“You a prude?”

“Just uninterested,” Claudia said. She was grateful for the flatness of her voice, but it didn’t make an impact on the pale woman.

“I’d do you.”

Claudia swallowed hard, trying not to get too upset. Catch-out nonsense was easy to ignore with the right mentality.

“The way I see it,” the woman continued, “the train’s the best place to get it on. No pesky nonexistence getting in the way. In fact, I bet somebody’s getting a good fucking on this train, right now.” She tilted her head as if her ears could already catch the faint grunting sounds. Claudia stopped herself from looking around, but the woman’s face split into a wide smile as if she’d won something. For a moment the stranger was silent, but then she found something else to say.

“They say the greens are on this same train, just in different cars. But have you ever seen another car? All I see is more of this car.” She leaned out, shading her eyes as she peered suspiciously down the train.

“Everybody knows they’re in different cars,” Claudia said, to head off more rambling.

“Then why doesn’t anyone try to visit them? Or the other way around?”

Claudia groped for a reply. “Well what—what would be the point?” But she knew that she was held back by the feeling that the delicate balance of existence in Ginnungagap depended on not crossing certain lines. The woman leaned back and gave her a disbelieving look.

“At any rate,” the catch-out said with a tone of finality, glancing away from Claudia, “you learn interesting things on the trains. I see them as our most important resource. I don’t think the Authority realizes exactly what they’ve given us here.”

“Scraps?”

For a moment the catch-out dropped her impish act and her eyes were sharp and dark. Then she lifted her shoulders in a slow shrug. “Well yeah, in some ways they’re throwing us a bone. But they were also forced to make these trains. Their technology isn’t on par with what Ginnungagap really needs. I don’t think they wanted something that could potentially link the planes in a way they couldn’t fully control. Or to let us know how to breach Didymus.”

Something in the woman’s choice of words made Claudia’s spine stiffen. This was the first time a catch-out spoke directly to her, but it wasn’t the first she’d heard about their conspiracy theory rhetoric. Considering the unsavory implications of becoming “addicted” to the trains and infected by the continuous-time bug, the catch-out movement should’ve been stamped out. But catch-outs were left unmolested, and no one talked about why.

“Hey, the name’s Hester, by the way,” the catch-out said. “You seem like a smart lady. What’s your name?”

Claudia had a feeling that Hester didn’t intend to ask her this question when she first sat down across from her, and she doubted Hester was the catch-out’s real name. “Karen,” she said. “Smart,” Hester said again as if simply repeating herself. “I like you.” Her long gaze following that unwanted statement was speculative. “And back to my original statement, it’s bullshit.” She nodded towards the *State of the City* bulletin. “Why would the bomber suddenly hit her home turf? It’s Authority propaganda—I bet they did it themselves.”

Claudia found herself glancing around quickly to see if anyone was taking note of their conversation, but the booth was private enough, maybe, that people were paying no attention. Then Hester’s words hit her and she slowly turned back to the catch-out.

“Her? The bomber is a woman?”

“Yes,” Hester said very deliberately. Claudia tried to remember what the article said without having to glance down at it; she was almost certain no pronouns were used.

“Are you trying to tell me you’re the mad bomber?”

“Please,” Hester said in an injured tone. “That’s so pejorative. I prefer angry bomber.”

Claudia didn’t know if she ignored the signal on purpose, but she realized that she’d missed her stop.

Hester seemed to be having a conversation with herself, which allowed Claudia some time to catch her mental balance. The idea that she was the bomber was having a hard time registering, especially with the catch-out acting as though she never said it.

“I told you I learn interesting things on the train. For instance, we have deduced—or induced, or somewhere in between—that there is in fact a third plane of existence.”

Claudia didn’t believe this. She shook her head to clear it.

“No really. There’s no prison here, but they can’t suppress criminal behavior forever. I don’t even understand why this absurd time management system is preventing crime as well as it is, but it won’t last. The simple fact is that if criminals had to be exported to outside prisons in places that live uninterruptedly, everyone would be committing crimes. So these people get blinked out of these existences and put into another existence; basically, null space, forever.”

“How could you possibly come to that conclusion?” Claudia demanded, trying to throw Hester off her incoherent track.

“I’m on here enough to notice when someone disappears and doesn’t come back.”

“Why do they let someone like you stay on?” Now that she missed her stop, she felt like something inside her had come unbound, freeing her voice.

Hester crossed her legs and arms and cocked her head to the side, clearly waiting for Claudia to come to the answer on her own. Claudia allowed herself to follow the morose, suspicious chain of her thoughts, and her conclusion made her very nervous.

“You’re a spy.”

“Karen,” Hester said with a delighted laugh, “you’re a marvel.” She reached out and touched her hand before Claudia knew what she was about. Claudia jerked back instinctively. “Oh don’t worry. You’re very careful with your words. I might go so far as to call you opaque.” She laughed again.

“To give you a fuller answer, the Authority lets us stay here because we are absolutely loyal to the Didymus system—as far as they know—and the train’s the only real hub for people to talk. We catch-outs prove ourselves by turning someone in. It’s basically a down-payment on a job. Reds like me are selling others out for the benefit of living continuously.” She leaned back, relaxing into her explanation. “Not that this is living. And not that there are other reds like me.” Hester interrupted herself with a savage grin.

“With each traitor we turn out, we get another chunk of time on the train. So far no one’s managed to break into the sleeping hours, but they all hope eventually to be living here every waking and sleeping minute.” Hester’s eyes grew a little unfocused there, and her expression edged towards rhapsody. “Just think. Sleep. Real sleep. And dreams.”

Claudia was almost pulled into Hester’s reverie, but forced herself out. “How do you even talk to the Authority? And how do they know you aren’t just lying for more time?”

“Every car has an emergency communication system. You push a button and they find you.” Hester then waved her hand dismissively. “As for knowing when someone’s lying, I know for a fact some catch-outs have lied, and I don’t see them after that. They deserve whatever they

get.” The bomber’s morality was quite ambiguous. “Anyway, it’s not necessary to lie. People around you are a lot unhappier than they seem. You’re not the only one.”

Claudia shifted uncomfortably on the cushion.

“Oh don’t pretend. After awhile, you start to recognize a certain look to people. Some just accept the way things are, but others are clearly on edge. Another catch-out would try to trick you into giving away revolutionary sentiments and turn you in for more time on the train.”

“Why do you get so much time if you’re not turning people in?” Claudia blurted out, knowing she was taking a risk in assuming that Hester didn’t maintain her cover by doing exactly what a good catch-out should. Hester’s lips tightened, even though she had to have expected Claudia to ask.

“Let’s just say I wasn’t so forward-thinking in the beginning. There have been people like me from the start, and I came by it naturally but unfortunately too late to save my father.” The flash of misery across the bomber’s face told Claudia all she needed to know. “But I put myself in a better position than I could have imagined to eventually take them down.”

“Why hurt innocent people?” She didn’t understand the catch-out at all. Obviously logic was not a bomber’s strong suit, but how could she differentiate between betraying her father and hurting other human beings? The bomber reached out again, taking her hand this time and not letting it go. Her eyes were serious and her tone implacable.

“Neither of us is living, Karen. You have your minutes and we have our hours here on the train, but we’re both trapped. And we will all be trapped, until we die.”

“So you’re freeing people?” Claudia asked incredulously. Hester looked at her with pity.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not so high-minded or irrational. But I think it’s high time we made the Authority as helpless as we are.”

“Do you think they care?” Claudia had fallen in to the question-and-response style and couldn’t pull herself out.

“I think that if this place implodes they’ll have no choice but to admit that the experiment has failed. Whether we all die in the process or not is incidental to me.”

As harmless as Hester seemed right now, and for all Claudia was bemused by her own ability to discuss Hester’s activities dispassionately, the bomber seemed to be speaking in much broader terms of casualties than any of her previous attacks warranted. Claudia started to get a really bad feeling. She realized she would need to steer the conversation if she wanted to take advantage of this serendipitous encounter. She tried to keep Hester talking.

“I still don’t understand how you’re getting to the Origin plane.”

“Well, let’s just say I know full well where the Greens are on this train, and a bomb on a Green would most certainly exist in that plane,” the bomber drawled. Claudia was horrified.

“You think we’re different,” Hester said after a long pause, her face twisting like she would look remorseful if that were a sentiment she understood. “But I’ve found that all it takes is a little push, and we realize we all have the same emptiness within us. And Claudia, I know where yours comes from.”

Claudia felt her veins frost over. “How—”

Hester ran right over her words. “I know that, more than other people, you wonder if there is a ghost living alongside you, just out of reach. I know you think this is a girlish fantasy, but I also know you’re wrong about that.”

Claudia’s chest squeezed painfully, and she couldn’t speak past the lump in her throat or the beating of her bones. Hester didn’t take her hands again, but perched on the edge of her seat so that she was closer to Claudia, and so that she could speak softly what she had to say next.

“The husband you don’t remember remembers you, Claudia. He sees you every day but can’t connect with you. I need your help to fix that. And maybe you’ll be able to see him again.”

Hester’s encouragement hit Claudia right in the empty spot inside. Her nerves felt electric. When she regained some sense of herself, she found that she was almost panting, and she was leaning into Hester the same way the catch-out leaned into her. Their hands were grasped together, as if finalizing a contract.

Claudia’s internal voice of reason made itself heard. “Why do you need my help? I’m nothing special.”

“You are. You are linked to the other plane in a way no one else is. Of course you know you and your husband should be together on one plane or the other, but when your father—yes, your father, initiated the separation of the planes, he made a copy of you.”

Hester’s words were like a smack in the face. Claudia felt disbelief wash over her.

“No, listen to me Claudia, because these are going to come hard and fast and you need to accept the facts. I sat across from you for a reason. Your father designed Didymus. He integrated you into the system, and he gave you a very specific function. He divided your soul in half to make a copy, and when the time is right, you can realign your soul and the two planes.”

Despite Hester’s knowledge of Claudia’s real name, the sudden shift in the bomber’s tone rang hollow and fantastical. After all of these years of misery, how could Claudia be arrogant or gullible enough to believe that she, specifically, was special and could change everything? Even in her imagination, she cut off these fantasies to avoid seeming naive. Claudia found it difficult to explain why Hester would choose a random person to knock off kilter with conspiracy theories. Of course, Claudia had always felt different—she felt the need to hide the fears and anxieties she felt every morning and after every time shift because no one else seemed to

demonstrate those feelings—and maybe Hester sensed that Claudia could be taken advantage of in that respect.

Claudia retreated into logic. Her father never gave any indication that he worked on the Didymus system, and he would never have forced her into a role like Hester was claiming. Claudia wanted to believe Hester's preposterous lies, but she just couldn't. The more Hester spoke, the clearer it became to Claudia that although Hester probably wasn't lying about being a spy for the Authority, her spying could have given her ample opportunity to learn about Claudia. Even if Claudia hadn't revealed anything about herself on the train, there must be other explanations for the element of truth in Hester's words.

Claudia spoke in a steady tone with her mind racing. "What do you want me to do?"

Hester gave her a measured look before glancing down at her watch. "The thing about my bombs in the past is they were partially decoys. I say partially because I have to admit they were a lot of fun to set off. But I didn't want the Authority to realize I'd gotten my hands on some much more dangerous material."

Claudia stared blankly. She didn't want to play Hester's guessing games anymore. "Some scraps of the train's iron alloy," Hester said sweetly. "Planted all along the train to reach both planes simultaneously. Should be pretty devastating, don't you think? Then we just sit back and wait for the world to set itself right."

Claudia quietly considered the bomber's words. She pictured the two planes fitting together in the exactly the wrong places, and she knew that, even if Hester were telling the truth, even if she were right about the planes reintegrating, in all likelihood the results would be horrific. Two people could not occupy the same space at the same time.

Hester was also quiet for a time. Then she straightened, and smoothly pulled her knapsack from under her seat to loop it over her shoulder.

“My time is up,” the bomber said. “Think very carefully about everything I’ve said. We’ll both be here tomorrow.”

“If I haven’t been fired,” Claudia said. Hester didn’t respond. She stepped to the side of the train, and as the door slid open and Hester left, Claudia confusedly noted that it was still daytime. She wondered where the catch-out went.

The silence of the train overwhelmed her for a moment. Then hesitantly, as if she hadn’t used her legs in days, she rose to her feet and looked around. She was the only one still on the train. Probably soon, though she no longer had any sense of what time it was, people would be embarking to head in the other direction. Claudia had only one option if she didn’t want to be fired.

She meandered down the aisle, letting her gaze drift along the cold iron walls, and imagining what view she might have if there were windows. When she found the small black box low on the wall, she crouched down and delicately touched the hinges, considering her motives and the possible consequences as she inspected it. She knew she was contradicting herself by distrusting Hester’s story and also believing her to be the bomber.

Claudia flipped the box open, revealing a well-worn black button. She pressed it with a pronounced click and returned to her seat, imagining she’d just earned a night of true sleep, or at least a continuous nothingness.

The Secret Society of Fish-Gazers

An Interdisciplinary Approach to College Enlightenment

I believe there are two kinds of people in the world. One kind finds excitement in everyday life: they delight in adventure, scale mountains, prank-call old high school teachers with an unselfconscious delivery of the lamest jokes imaginable, and they never let doubt get in the way of something they want.

And then there are people who like to stare at fish. And perhaps tap gently on the bowl. Or make faces at them. These are the people who'd rather think about the world in all of its possibilities than interact with it. Truthfully I wanted a cat, but it's a fish or nothing in the dorms. His name is Aristotle and he is sometimes unsatisfying. Maybe I put too much pressure on him to be my thoughtful muse. After all, he is a cannibal. And what would I need a muse for?

There are so many noises in this place it drives me crazy. Sometimes I get the urge to bang a broom on the ceiling in the way of senile hermits. If I'm not hearing the squeaky box-spring in the room above getting a little afternoon delight workout, it's the apparently orgasmic game the guys are watching next door, or the girls across the hall yelling down into the courtyard to have a chat at pre-dawn before they leave for whatever crazy sport requires exercise at five in the morning.

That's why fish are delightful. All shimmery and quiet. Aristotle hasn't done much since that day of carnage back in March when I thought it would be a good idea to get my healthy goldfish a healthy goldfish friend. I've decided I would also be upset if my bowl suddenly felt

half its size and I was forced to swim through my roommate's feces. He can't be blamed for my insensitivity.

On days I find myself staring at Aristotle while listening to rap, I realize it's about time to go somewhere and shake out the old appendages. Rap days are days when no other music is quite right—I get a pounding in my ears, like a drum-beat that can't be drowned out. Every inch of my body tingles with cabin fever.

Around 6 o'clock on Wednesday, just before fall break, I pull my orange-and-white striped socks up to my knees in a businesslike manner, throw on spandex shorts and the baggiest shirt I own, and stuff my bag full of every conceivable un-necessity I can think of. Slipping on some sunglasses over my weak eyes and leaving my messy brown hair in a bun, I trick Aristotle into leaping up at my finger, giggle, and turn off all the lights.

I dodge spatters of conversational tidbits that float from behind closed and open doors alike. “Why yes. Yes I do enjoy a good roast.” “I haven’t brushed my teeth in *three days* and you’re asking me if that stupid shirt goes with those stupid pants?Of course they don’t go together! Leave me alone!” “Horses are actually better than cheetahs in the long run because they—” “God *damn* diff EQ,” someone shouted, and then the bleary light of the outer world greets me as I shove the door open into sunset. I clutch my pack to my side and prepare to ignore the eyes of everyone in existence. I am immediately accosted.

“Cori, do you ever get any work done? Every time I see you you’re either lying down on your bed staring at the ceiling or wandering around outside like a vagabond.” Ozzy squints up at me from the lawn, his poof of blond hair haloed by the sunset. “The ceiling is more than a ceiling,” I say, as a group of guys in the center of the courtyard start to howl and make pigeon

noises to each other. Ozzy holds up his hand, and I all but fall backwards to lever him to his feet so we can leave the area. “Like my fishbowl is more than a fishbowl,” I continue. “Trust me, when I look at things, I see something else entirely.”

“Well, yes, insanity is good for something. Agreed. So, I’ll ask, why leave? In other words, what’s up, buddy? Where you off to?”

I dismiss his other remarks with a sniff. “I’m actually heading to the pet store. I don’t like to support Aristotle’s materialism, but if he dies out of spite because he didn’t get a big enough castle, I would be crushed.” I stop Ozzy long enough to grab both of his arms and say in a much more serious tone, “Crushed.”

He bats my hands away with a grin. “I get it, I get it.” He shakes his head. “Fish is so fuckin’ needy.”

After a pause I ask “Do you not have anything to do either?”

Ozzy bobbles his head noncommittally. “Not really. Roommate’s in, like always.” That means that he can’t smoke his bong, which he’s very proud of. He comes by the habit honestly; both of his parents are mythology-obsessed hippies, once given to “inhaling the vapors” and fancying themselves modern oracles. They were set up like the prophets of on-campus housing from day one, Ozzy said. First semester, all he could talk about was joining the secret society his parents had been part of, or started, or something, but I suppose after the novelty wears off you realize any secret society worth its salt is less likely to choose someone who gushes about them all the time.

“Clearly he’s using my well-honed method of room-mate sanitizing.”

“That is not a word,” Ozzy says, but he nods in avid agreement. I had a roommate in my first semester, but even in a shared room situation there are some expectations of privacy, if only

in those hours when the other person is out doing something. I'm not the most obnoxious roommate, but for some reason my constant loafing was a distraction, and she took her things and left without a word.

I hook my arm through Ozzy's as we stroll to the outdoor mall. My getup gets plenty of sweeping up-and-down stares and a few smiles, so I smile back, feeling light in the pleasant Wednesday weather. "Your eyes are looking spectacularly natural today," he says out of the blue, nudging me in the side with his elbow and throwing off the balance of our duo. I roll the aforementioned features of my freckled face.

"I told you, I don't normally wear make-up. I was going to a luncheon with my mom," I say, emphasizing occasion and offender. "She sets out to make me look like a girl and ends up with a raccoon-daughter. But it makes her happy."

"Your parents are insane. I just don't understand."

"Not everyone can have your parents."

He smiles widely. It's refreshing to see a guy who doesn't mind expressing how much he loves his mum and dad. My own are completely normal—equal parts proud and frustrated with my self-satisfaction and lack of ambition or direction—but Ozzy's standards are skewed, possibly also by the fact that my parents live in town and seem to lurk on campus waiting to spring out at me. How an art director for an advertising agency and a nurse practitioner find the time to stalk their daughter, I'd rather not know.

"Dude, speaking of, I'm finally taking a mythology class next semester. Got all my core stuff done. This one god, the god of wine and nature and all that stuff, he came out of his dad's thigh. His *thigh*. Sans-uterus. Crazy, man. And I know all about that shit. Bedtime stories since I was five. I was confused when I took family education. I think it'd be much more interesting to

sprout out of my dad's toe or something. It's time for another step in evolution." As always, Ozzy's rambling ends up somewhere unexpected.

"I don't think evolution will ever, ever jump to toe-births."

"I can dream, man. Asexual budding." This is an oddly attractive concept to me.

The woman behind the counter at the pet-shop holds us both under intense scrutiny as we wander amongst the fish-tanks. I don't know how you can be suspicious of someone in knee-high striped socks or be suspicious of someone who's Ozzy, but adults—of which I will not count myself one until I have passed the threshold into worrying about cholesterol—are odd creatures, and not much given to logic.

There are lots of terrific castles that I would be proud to bring home and present to Aristotle, but most wouldn't fit in my wee fish bowl, so I settle on a bright purple pointy tower that Ozzy says hurts his eyes. It's still large enough that I can't fit it into my stuffed bag. I'm not sure I did actually plan to go to the pet store.

"Can you carry it?" I ask, making my eyes as big as possible to eke out every bit of cuteness I can muster.

"You look deranged." And then he sweeps me up into his arms and strolls down the crowded street full of shops frequented by students. We get a few whistles. I tug my socks even higher, and he tells me not to squirm around so much. "Here's what I propose," he says suddenly stopping to unhook his arm from under my knees and swing me to my feet with a jolt. "We're going to sit under a tree. And make fun of people walking by. And thereby spread the love."

"Bitchiness turns into love? How does that work?"

"Well we make fun of them to their faces. Everyone needs to learn to laugh at themselves." A few minutes later I'm already antsy.

“Are we really just going to sit out here *forever*?” I feel his laugh before I hear it.

“No. Just wait till 8 o’clock. I have something really fun for us to do.”

“That’s not ever as comforting as you think. Ooh, Ozzy has a plan. I believe I would rather hide in this garbage heap until he passes.”

“You’re just dirty. That is not a widely held opinion of Oswald Waldo. Nosiree.” He takes my castle from me and sets it up on the ground. “You have such a lowly fish. He doesn’t even get a fortress, just a tower that clashes with his scales.”

The dining hall is crowded at dinner, but we manage to find a table. When 8 o’clock rolls around I find myself in front of Beidleman Library. It’s quite an impressive building, but it’s been under construction since our first year and only part of it is open to students.

“Wow. I’m aglow with excitement,” I say. Half the lights on campus have faulty timers, and the only streetlamp on is across the courtyard in front of the law library. It throws our long, thin shadows across the Beidleman doors. The building looks completely dark and dead.

“When have I ever led you astray? I know fun. This will be fun. Just don’t act like too much of a loser, you’ll embarrass me.”

“We’re at a *library*. What kind of loser are we talking about?”

“The cynical kind. Hup, in we go.” He catches me by the arm and drags me in. I’m confused when we veer away from the main section to go into the old stacks. That’s the part that’s been closed off for construction. The windows of the doors into the section are covered by dirty plastic. When we open the doors and slip in after a furtive glance-around by Ozzy, who is not nearly as sneaky as he thinks he is, all the lights are indeed off, and there’s only an eerie glow of from the emergency bulbs.

“You didn’t have to pretend to be my friend for two and a half semesters to carry out the perfect murder,” I say flatly. I cross my arms, but Ozzy leads me further. It’s quiet except for the natural rumbling of the building. I grip my castle like a club. And whip it back to hurl with deadly force when someone steps out from behind one of the bookshelves.

“Ozzy, dude! You came! And you brought a friend.”

The stranger is a guy, not quite as tall as Ozzy, with dark hair and dark eyes and mutton chops, no beard. “Nice socks,” he says with a smirk. Ozzy throws an arm around my shoulders.

“This is Cori. Cori, this is Harris.” I shift my castle out of the ready position and gravely take the proffered hand.

“I’m so glad Ozzy finally convinced you,” he says with a wide smile.

“He’s never said a—” I begin, before a thoroughly creepy female voice whispers “Ooh, virgin blood” from the darkness. Harris shakes his head and steps aside to let a willowy girl enter the group. She has thin, flat blond hair and a long black coat so fluffy it looks like a bathrobe.

“This is my sister, Ashley. And clearly she’s a vampire.” Ashley punches her brother in the arm and he makes a show of whimpering. I murmur something close to “nice to meet you” and manage to wait a few moments before whirling on Ozzy. “So why am I here?”

“Hide and seek!” Ozzy cries. In response, more than a few voices rise from out of the stacks around us in a howl. “Hiiide and seeek!”

Startled, I whip around to see at least a dozen people have entered this supposedly deserted section of the library. “Are these the library hobos?” I stage-whisper. “I’ve heard about them.”

“They don’t *live* here, Cori,” Ozzy says. “Obvi.”

“Obvi,” Harris and Ashley say in unison, with solemn nods.

“A cult then,” I deadpan.

“They just like freaking out newbs,” a deep voice from behind assures me. I turn around slowly to face the owner of that familiar voice.

“Gallagher,” I enunciate, narrowing my eyes to slits.

“Coriander,” he says pleasantly. Maybe it's the competition born of having such ridiculous names—a competition I win by dint of having one extra syllable and being named for an herb—but I've an inherent aversion to the guy living above me in the dorms. He seems to be there every time I turn around, and he's just so calm and unmovable. Like a big, boring rock. And unlike a big, exciting rock. He's at least six feet tall, probably more, and built like a wall. His hair is brown and curly, and always messy and he has eyes to match—I mean they're brown, not curly and messy. He's fairly attractive, but that makes me like him less. He strikes me as completely colorless, which automatically makes him a secretive nutjob. I'm amazed to see him in the same group of people as Ozzy; the last time that happened was the first-semester dorm party where I met them both.

“I see introductions are not in order here,” Ozzy says in the silence that rings after our gauntlet-throwing. Gallagher holds my gaze steadily until I look away.

“Okay, kids!” Harris cries. “Gather round, gather round.”

I'm engulfed by people streaming in from every direction. In all honesty there are probably fewer than twenty, but it feels like a herd of wildebeest, so forgive my exaggeration. I grip my bag tightly to my chest. It doesn't smell like alcohol in those close quarters, but I don't understand the effusion of excitement already vibrating from the group.

“I figure we all know the rules of hide and seek. But for Beidleman Hide & Seek™, we like to throw in a few...surprises,” Ashley says, a wicked grin growing.

“For the newbies,” Harris interjects, nodding toward myself and one or two others, “I find myself honor-bound to say that this game is a little weird.”

Chuckles abound. I wait for the punch line. Ashley provides it. “When a member of one team finds a member of another team, the seeker has the choice of tagging that person out, or...giving the hider a second chance. And how does the seeker give the hider a second chance?” Ashley beams. “Simply a gesture of affection. Maybe a wee little peck on the lips.”

By the way everyone else snickers, I guess that a peck on the lips is relative to each seeker. There is possibly no limit to second-chance shenanigans. I try to back my way through the crowd without being too obvious. Ozzy latches onto my wrist—he doesn't even have to glance around to catch me.

Now that the full details of the game have come out, I'm even more weirded out by the fact that Gallagher is here. Did he come here to trade kisses for resurrection? Did he get off on that power? Was I actually the crazy one for seeing Gallagher as a mentally unbalanced sorcerous figure of doom? Maybe. But I'm a stir-crazy hermit with a philosopher fish as my constant companion. I figure the crazy part as a given.

“Harris and I will be the leaders of our teams, which only matters because that means we get to do this.” The siblings face each other and each hold up one fist, with stony expressions signifying an event of monumental significance. Their game of rock paper scissors comes out with the girls on top—which meant the girls were seeking and the girls would be doling out the kisses.

I scrunch my nose. I might be okay with being *kissed*—for the novelty if for nothing else—but I will certainly not instigate. When it comes to the opposite sex, I'm five years old, and boys are gross.

“All right, gather in a circle, ladies, and close your eyes,” Harris says with a cackle before scampering off, with the other boys soon following and hooting as they go. How can the librarians not hear this? Weren't they trained to develop student-and-ninja-whisper-decibel hearing? I close my eyes along with the other girls as the guys shove past us.

“All right, girls. Don't get too generous, or this game will last forever,” Ashley says with a giggle once the noise dies. With one loud “Huzzah!” and a haphazard countdown from 10, the game is on.

Nine girls to find nine boys—I can easily finish up this game without having to seek. But Ozzy told me not to be a loser, and as much as I like to pretend that I'm not a party-pooper, I kind of am. I see college as little more than an excuse to become completely feral and unsocialized beyond the worried gaze of my parents. Normalcy is such a difficult pretense.

The dark seems to deepen and close in around my pinpoints of night-adjusted vision. I hear one or two shrieks—whether from guys or girls I can't tell—but beyond that, only the pitter patter of hunter and hunted echoes around the closed-off area of the library. Some strange spark of excitement alights inside me. My chest jerks up and down from the force of my heartbeat. If I run across a guy, will I kiss him? Maybe my libido has just needed a jump-start all this time. I'm a strange person, though, and I can't imagine that many of them would want to kiss me, asexual or not. I can see them screwing their eyes shut and puckering their lips like they've just eaten a Warhead. I certainly don't want to kiss that expression.

I walk in on one hider and one seeker in a passionate embrace right up against the books, with some Charles Dickens strewn about their feet like victims of a paper mâché explosion.

“Augh!” I cry inconspicuously, dropping my fish tower. They blink at me and then dive back in. “Augh!” I cry again. I stab the tower into my overstuffed bag and stumble around the corner in shock. Was “peck” just an outright pun? How does that even translate? Well, now I feel stupid. “Oh God,” I say, scrubbing at my eyes. I make it to the end of one row before doing a little jig as I shiver in disgust. I try to brush the love particles off of me, but feel like I haven’t completely succeeded. Well, if that’s what I could look forward to running into all over this library, no thank you.

Unfortunately for me, as soon as I decide that it should be so—that I will not participate in this game if I’m going to be part of a bad porn movie that Ozzy definitely should have warned me about knowing my cootie-fearing level of sexual maturity—I turn another corner and find Gallagher splayed out on the floor with his back resting against the shelf. Beside him is an open astronomy book, but he has his eyes closed and his head back.

“Thought you’d get some studying in? Nerd.”

He opens one eye, then both. “No one ever checks the astronomy section.”

“First, I question your logic. Also, you don’t *want* to be found?” I ask. Surely he wants all the kisses he can get. He doesn’t strike me as a ladies man. At all.

The corner of his mouth curved upward. “I’ve been coming to this thing since Harris was struck with the ‘inspiration,’” he says with air quotes. “After a few rounds you begin to feel a little silly, so I just win honestly.” He squints. “Although I wouldn’t mind a second chance from you.”

I scoff. “Unlikely. I was dragged along to this thing, and if I were to kiss anyone—” I break off, realizing how rude that thought would be to complete. Gallagher obviously doesn't give a rat's ass. I clear my throat, and before I know it I'm sitting down across from him, dropping my bag beside me with a thump.

The thing about Gallagher is that he's probably the nicest guy you'll never know. Even in my limited experience, I've seen that he doesn't do sarcasm, or veiled insults, or vicious humor. This also means he tends not to laugh at jokes that are made at his expense, which are my only kinds of jokes. I struggle to say something normal.

“So...how's life on the upper floors?” Lamest. Conversation-starter. Ever.

His steady gaze doesn't change at all, but he answers. “Good. Hotter, elevated.”

I nod as if that is all as I expected. He nods along with me. A good minute passes. I can no longer hear the pattering or squeals or thumps from the rest of the library. It's entirely too silent.

“How does the game usually end?” I asked, my voice dropping to a whisper.

“Um, I pop out after everyone's given up looking for me and I...win.” He doesn't sound certain.

“Okay, well, I'm starting to think there's a mass pile of pecking developing somewhere. Is there ever actually anyone still looking for you by the time you come out?”

He hesitates. “Not as such.” I shuffle along the row and poke my head out into the dim aisle. No one in sight. Then I hear—or rather, feel—a soft sound through the floor. It's rhythmic. It sounds very much like a drum. “What the hell.”

My body begins to flood again with the restless itch that chased me from my dorm room only hours ago. Gallagher grabs for my fingers. “No, really, I think it's better to stay hidden until it's all over and done with.”

“So you don't mind that you could have fallen asleep and been left here all night because no one's actually hiding or seeking? Besides, you've lost. Game over.”

I move forward with him scrabbling for my hand until he finally stops and yells “Okay, I kind of know what they're doing! You don't want to go down there. This is Harris's thing, all right?”

“Is it some kind of sex thing?” I demand, enraged at the thought of harmless Ozzy blindsiding me in such a disturbing way.

“It's not what you think,” he protests. “I mean, I don't take part in it, but it's still not what you think—I'm not just saying that.”

“Are the librarians in on it?” I can't wrap my head around the developing picture.

“They're in charge. I'm just kidding,” he says, raising his hands defensively when he sees my face about to explode. “Look, it's a sort of tradition. Harris is just the latest organizer—he joined some secret society in our first year.”

I suspend all thought, because it all seems to make perfect sense, at least in terms of Ozzy's involvement. My restless body leans towards the echoing beat, and then I'm moving, jogging, drawing closer. I reach the spiral iron stairs in the corner near the back emergency exit. The beat become clearer. I feel Gallagher behind me and glance back. Whatever his expression, all I can see is the glassy sheen of his eyes in the light filtering up the stairs. He sighs and nods, committing to trail behind me as I descend.

The archives are a mess. Stacks of books are strewn across the tile, and the dim light swirls with yellow dust. The ceiling down here hangs much lower than the floor above. Shelves are positioned willy nilly like they've been scattered there by a giant's hand. Or at least that's my first impression. Then I realize they stand in a loose circle; the light source and the drumming are coming from the center of the circle, as do a series of sharp, wet smacks. I approach in time with the drum. The beat seems to push my feet away from the floor, moving me forward.

I immediately spot Ozzy in a halo of light, cross-legged in front of the drum I've been hearing. Two girls sit at other points around the diameter, drumming their own erratic beats. Twelve drums total ring the space, like the hours of a clock. Only instead of hour, minute and second hands, there's a pile of naked bodies ringed with the undulating cilia of their outstretched limbs. Behind the pile, a giant metal saucer spiked with what seems like hundreds of sticks of smoking incense drapes a haze across former hide-and-seekers. I can't find the origin for the orange light that backlights the entire scene, so the players themselves seem to be flames.

I gape and orange air fills my mouth. "Ozzy, what the hell have you been keeping from me?" is all I can think to ask. I'm terrified. Or resentful. The former makes more sense, but the shiver that racks my body feels a lot more like eagerness than fear.

"Orgies used to be sacred ritual," Ozzy says—a half-reply at best—as he continues to bang on the drum. "Of course back then they'd use a real fire, but you've gotta change with the times and campus regulations. Take off your shirt! Stay awhile. This is all for you."

I can't immediately respond. I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I'm sorry, I don't really remember wishing for this over my birthday candles last month."

"Part of being a good friend is knowing what you want without asking," Ozzy says with a wink.

“Are you kidding me with this?” I ask, maybe stomping a little bit in the early stages of a tantrum.

“You know this whole creating a rhythm thing is really soothing, you should give it a try,” Gallagher says from behind his own drum. I didn't see him sit down in the circle. I consider dropping my bag on his head or impaling him with Aristotle's purple tower, but instead I sink into a crouch and drop my head between my knees to take a few breaths.

The energy I inhale is incredible.

“What I *meant*, Queen Drama, is that you're not here to participate—you're the recipient. The observer who changes what she's seeing. Drink it in. It's the perfect activity for you.” Ozzy beams, glassy-eyed, and quickens the rhythm. Moans from the pile intensify.

“What are you, a psychologist now? A mythological psychologist?”

But I'm drinking it in whether I want to or not. The air is thick, like water, and I can't keep it from filling my nose and mouth, but it's not like drowning. It's like my insides and the outside are in perfect balance. I hoist my socks and try to stand up straight.

“If it's for me, why haven't you invited me before? And why wasn't I even invited to this part? Why did I have to stumble onto it?”

“Did you? Or were you drawn?”

“I was following the noises,” I say, trying to convince myself. “But now, maybe...maybe I'll just leave.” It feels wrong to say that. I feel individual muscles in my face shift to a frown. My body's tingle turns into an enveloping warmth.

“You won't leave,” Gallagher says with certainty. I glare at the top of his head but my eyes glaze over and become unfocused.

“He's right. You're the next Student Body Oracle. Our Pythia. Your place is here.”

“Are you...are you talking about the goddamn school paper you've been trying to get me to join?” I demand, trying to maintain my hold of reality despite being high on sex haze.

“Never said it was a paper,” he says, shaking his head slow like a wagging finger. “I knew it was going to be you as soon as we met. My mom said it was the same when she met my dad—not that I'm saying it's my destiny to do you for the rest of our lives, and not that I'm saying I'm not down for that—”

“*Stop.*” Ozzy is changing before my very eyes. When did he become a gendered human being? We are both “its” as far as I'm concerned.

“The point is,” he continues, slowing and starting to pound loudly with the heels of both hands as the pile approaches a climax, “now that you're here, the generative energies can align. The school will have peace for three more years. No one will go mad from frustrated libido. No one will become exhausted or suicidal. No one's gonna get angry drunk, just happy drunk. You are the focus of our energies, and from you, the energy will bathe the campus in particles of light and joy.”

My cheek starts to ache from the severity of my one-eyed squint, and my mouth is getting dry from hanging open. My thoughts are about as substantial as a will-o-the-wisp—I chase them and they disappear. “Are you hearing yourself? This officially tips the scale—you are in-sane.”

The cry rising from the pile seems to spread out from low in my stomach. I double over, which at last draws Gallagher away from his drum. He catches me, but instead of merely arresting my collapse, he gives me a big hug.

“What are you—”

“I thought this was what we were doing. I couldn't remember.” He doesn't stop hugging me. The painful part of the ache goes away completely, like he's absorbed it into himself.

Suddenly everyone is screaming and hooting and someone even lets out a long opera note. My aversion to Gallagher's touch vanishes, as does my revulsion at the smell of sweat and sex and the flash of naked, wet skin. My eyes roll back into my head, and my bones melt.

After a moment of weightlessness, I feel myself being squeezed—no that's Gallagher, still trying to keep his grip on me. He wrestles our combined bulk to the floor and stretches out beside me. We stare into the dark ceiling. The revelers began to stream around us and away. The towering forms nearest my field of vision absently pull on clothes and stumble out like zombies, unaware of themselves or each other. The scents lingering on their bodies cluster overhead and diffuse over me like rain. With a thump somewhere above my head, Ozzy sets aside his drum. He slowly rolls to my other side. We three sigh at the same time. “So am I...still a virgin?” I ask after a long silence.

“What're you, stupid?” Ozzy murmurs.

I can't tell if that's a yes or no, but I'll guess yes. I have received energies into me—that much is certain—but am I allowed to generate them as well? I've never thought much of sex, and frankly the whole orgy business does not at all detract from my general impression that it's all a wet, anatomical mess; but whatever I've absorbed has come to settle low in my belly, prompting me to ask: “Do I...have to stay a virgin?” and it seems I'm no longer averse to the idea of participating in said energy-generating activities. What is observation without experience?

“I would also like to know the answer to that question,” Gallagher says. He sounds like he's dozing off.

“I'll fight you,” says Ozzy with a yawn. “Cori, you're the one with the answers now.”

“I'm the one with the answers.” I taste the words. “In that case, I'm afraid there are no answers.”

“As it should be,” Ozzy says.

“Well, how would I find answers?” I demand, worried that he so easily accepted my off-the-cuff remark. I prop myself up on one arm and peer down into his face. I mean to glare, but my irritation has emptied out of me, and there doesn't seem to be anything substantial left to grasp onto and rebuild it.

“For my parents, I think it was the drugs. You've never seemed to need them, though. I suppose whatever form of meditation comes naturally—that's your window into your inspiration. You will guide us from a place of peace.” His recitation drifts off with the hand he sleepily swept before him to emphasize his nonsense. Then he meets my gaze, and the thought comes to us at the same time.

“Oh, it's the fish,” we said.

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