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The University of Southern Mississippi

ANOTHER WORD FOR AUTUMN  
AND OTHER STORIES

by

Henry Burgard Shepard III

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

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ABSTRACT

ANOTHER WORD FOR AUTUMN

AND OTHER STORIES

by Henry Burgard Shepard III

May 2015

The subject, style, and form of these stories are different from one another. At first glance, there seems to be no obvious thematic connection throughout this collection, no binding thread that ties them together. However, what allows these stories to exist side by side is their focus. The characters in these stories are human, no matter what situation they find themselves in, be it strange, fantastic, or mundane, they strive to achieve their desires. Each story takes a different approach to create a succinct feeling, all parts working toward eliciting a certain emotion. In one story, a family is powerless in the face of a blackout and the primal fear of darkness that consumes them one at a time. In another, a Ska band plays the best gig of their lives, a night full of promise that ends in betrayal as the lead guitar tries to steal from the band, only to find years later that none of their problems or apparent successes mattered. A man who suffers from a sleep disorder that causes him to die instead of sleep is disillusioned with the girl he thinks he loves and a married couple must deal with their dead son's dog, who they have never met. The strangeness of life and fantasy are woven through most of these stories, but not as a driving force. That belongs to the people of the story, the attention is always on the characters, even if they are being buried in their car by leaves flowing in through the vents.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks goes out to the fiction professors, without whom I would not be here, writing this “acknowledgments” section. At crucial times in my career here, both have provided insight and encouragement to help me keep writing. Steven Barthelme, thank you especially for giving me a direction after my undergraduate time had run up. Your brutal honesty also kept me in check, kept me on the path of “failing better.” Andrew Milward, thanks for encouraging me to write what I wanted to write. Also, for the opportunity to serve the *Mississippi Review* as a part of the team. Craig Carey, thank you for allowing me to rope you into serving on my committee, especially given the sudden nature with which I asked.

And lastly, the University of Southern Mississippi deserves thanks for allowing me the opportunity to improve as a writer, a student, and a person.

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## INTRODUCTION

I stopped sleeping well in high school. The best nights were the blackout nights, when I opened my eyes and hours had passed without me feeling it. On those nights, I did not have to deal with all that time spent not sleeping. Night turned to day in one quick blink. I woke up feeling tired, but accomplished.

Those nights seldom happened and never happen anymore. The worst it got was a week during my freshmen year of undergraduate studies. Under eight hours over four days. There is a tipping point when the body does not get enough sleep, a switch inside the head flips after the third day. That is when the waking dreams start. Eyes open, but the brain shuts off for a minute or two and falls into a state of microsleep. It becomes difficult sussing out what has happened and what was dreamed. After one of these days, I wrote an email to one of my professors, to apologize for not coming to class as I believed I had slept through it. She wrote back confused. I attended class. She saw me take notes on the lecture. I checked my notebook, found scribbled lines across two and a half pages, the lines broken in random spots mimicking the spacing of actual words. Something strange had happened to me, but in that strange-state my body and mind had tried to recreate the norm.

The name of this thesis is “Another Word for Autumn and other stories,” but it could have just as easily been “and other dreams.” On the nights I cannot sleep, I find myself frustrated that I am not sleeping. It is lying still and resting and I cannot do that. For a while, I feel like a failed person, something strange trying to reenact what is considered normal. What I miss the most on those nights without sleep are the dreams I have. Dreams are wonderful and strange, anything can happen in a dream, yet there is still a sort of logic to them. When something too jarring or illogical for the dream

happens, it changes or we wake up, we miss a step and fall to the ground and “land” in our beds. This is the dream interrupted that wakes the sleeper. Fiction is like dreams, as John Gardner writes in *The Art of Fiction*:

We may observe, first, that if the effect of the dream is to be powerful, the dream must probably be vivid and continuous—*vivid* because if we are not quite clear about what it is that we’re dreaming, who and where the characters are, what it is they’re doing or trying to do and why, our emotions and judgments must be confused, dissipated or blocked; and *continuous* because a repeatedly interrupted flow of action must necessarily have less force than an action directly carried through from its beginning to its conclusion. (31)

The dream cannot be interrupted just as fiction cannot be interrupted. The effect on either is a loss of force, dreamer and reader alike are pulled back into reality through the reminder that what they are feeling, thinking, and judging does not actually exist. There is nothing more frustrating for a person who does not sleep than waking up in the middle of a dream; it feels like a broken promise. In the same way, the author has a promise to the reader, that the dream rendered through the fiction will be vivid and continuous, as Gardner describes. If a writer follows these two conditions, there should be little frustration, the reader stays engaged and “asleep” in their reading.

Looking back on my insomnia incident, it sounds like a moment out of a horror film where the protagonist is revealed to have been the murderer all along, he just did not know he was doing it. It is *The Number 23*, starring Jim Carrey, with an even weaker twist. I have had similar thoughts about moments in my life, that I had just lived an experience I had seen in some television show or movie. Not in that “My life is a

television show,” way, but in a way that helped me realize that on some base level, most forms of entertainment thrive on shared experience. We laugh at the comedian’s joke because it is exaggerated truth. We are shocked when the magician plays with our perception because magicians bend what we perceive as true through sleight of hand. I am sure mimes were appreciated at some point in history, and they pantomime activities that people did every day and that must have had value for their audience; why do it otherwise? Shared experience is the connection between entertainer and audience, so anything created with the intention to entertain needs to tap into common experience somehow, no matter how strange the premise is. Drawing on shared experience is part of rendering a dream or fiction; when the reader can nod his or her head to what is happening it is because he or she has lived it or known someone who has lived it. Then the dream of the fiction is accepted and they keep reading. Part of the vividness of fiction is drawing experience from the real world, from the common pool of moments and details that humans tend to share in one way or another.

I talk of fiction as entertainment. Some might say that this is a belittlement of the art form, but I would disagree. My aim in writing is to engage the reader’s attention, to kidnap them for the length of the piece, or to keep them asleep within the dream of fiction, to borrow Gardner’s metaphor. In the same way that cinema or television ensnares the viewer, I try to instill my pieces with enough tension, action, drama, suspense as appropriate to keep the reader reading. Whether they are affected by the piece or not depends on the content, but no effect can be rendered without first obtaining their attention and for that, I employ entertainment through interest. Henry James wrote of novels in *The Art of Fiction* saying, “The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting.”



Fiction needs to be interesting, to enthrall its reader to keep reading the piece, it must capture the imagination in some way. When fiction is vivid, continuous, and interesting, it works to transport the reader out of his or her world and into the world of fiction, a dream world.

How does one capture imagination or be interesting? It is an easy enough question to ask and an obvious problem to identify but the solution is something else entirely and really comes down to opinion. Some people like fantasy, others murder mysteries, and then there are those who prefer literary fiction, although from my experience working at a bookstore, this latter term is not as well known to those who do not study it. When I told one of my coworkers (a middle aged man with a daughter who has a developmental disorder; I learned this when he tried to set me up with her within minutes of meeting him) that I wrote fiction he asked what kind. I responded with literary fiction, he looked at me confused and said, “You know fiction can mean all sorts of things, like fantasy, sci-fi, mysteries,” and proceeded to name all the sections of the store that could technically fall under fiction. Picking my battles, I settled on fantasy and science fiction, an untruth more than a simplification, just to end the conversation. This was not the only time I had to settle in this type of conversation while working there. When people found out I was a master’s student in fiction writing, the conversations and my concessions increased. Literary fiction means nothing to those not engaged with it; the workers in bookstores do not differentiate between a Nicholas Sparks and a George Saunders (which is not technically true, Sparks has his own shelf).

How, then, does the writer of literary fiction engage the mind of those who believe fiction to include various forms, including the genre fiction adventures that exist primarily for entertainment? (I do not mean to knock these types of work, by the way.

There is a timeless appeal for the serialized adventure/thriller, as evident in the popularity of works like Sherlock Holmes). The answer lies in a sort of lighthearted trickery. Fool the reader of genre fiction to believe they are reading for entertainment, then hit them with the heavy stuff. All of this lies within the creation of a continuous and consistent dream, as John Gardner describes, “In great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things—sights, sounds, smells—as though they were real, we respond to fictional problems as though they were real: We sympathize, think, and judge” (31). When the dream is well rendered and maintained, the reader responds to the fictional happenings as though they were happening in real life. Humans have the power to sympathize with pretty much anything, given enough context. In my first semester of teaching, to help establish a community between my students (and because it was there), we named the pencil sharpener in the room. From then on, the students enjoyed “feeding” Jaws by sharpening pencils. While this is a weak example of the type of rendering one must do for fiction, it does not lessen the sentiment that one of the joys of reading is to grow to care about the characters one is reading about, that the problems these characters face matter and the world around them is as real as the world around the reader.

Gardner uses the “dream” talk in a straightforward analogy with the quality of the writing required to maintain a piece’s engageability, which is apt, but it should probably go further. To follow Gardner’s advice and Henry James’s insistence that the fiction “be interesting,” the topic of dreams is probably the best fit. Dreams are fascinating puzzles of things, not so much as a device within fiction but as a way of thinking about the creation of interesting fiction. Dreams are strange, and strange, when rendered well, is interesting. There is one dream I have on a consistent basis, when I do get to dream, that

involves a large hotel. Just the other night, I visited this hotel. The elevators that I normally take were broken. Instead, I take the stairs which overshadow the dining area, a five star restaurant. Halfway up the stairs, the steps are covered in small children with coloring books and empty Coke cans. At the top there is a man with a microphone calling out names, winners of an essay contest for Coke. He calls my name and I realize I have won, I am holding one of the coloring books and I can turn it in for a free can of Coke. I try to get as close as I can to the man with the microphone, but he ignores me and the last few steps between us are covered in buckets of coloring books. I have to step in the buckets to get to him. I look down as I crush these coloring books and when I look up again the man is gone. In his place are pallets full of Coke cans.

At this point, I just want to get to my room, so I make my way past the pallets toward a ledge area that leads to the hallways. There are no railings on the ledge and I could go over the edge quite easily. The ledge is covered in children and suitcases. I step around children and luggage, my progress is slow, there is not that much free space on the carpet and I have to climb over people's belongings to keep moving. Somehow, I unzip a pouch on someone's luggage. Jewelry and coins spill out, toward the edge where they threaten to tip over. I scramble, leaning over to scoop up this person's belongings as I feel a shadow hover over my hunched body. A woman, who I somehow know to be the owner of these belongings, starts yelling at me. I cannot make out her words and I feel myself slipping as I lean even farther to recover a golden ring and a quarter. I palm the jewelry and slip it back into the pouch, but the pouch will not zip and if I move my hand, the contents will spill again. The woman is laughing at me now and my balance is slipping even more as I am still hunched over. I manage to zip it, but the effort causes me to use more force than I should, and I fall off the edge. The world spins as I fall, I see a

red tablecloth, a candle centerpiece, and a smoked turkey that I know is overcooked before my body jolts and my eyes open. It is three a.m. I have been asleep fifteen minutes.

When talking about dreams, I default to speaking or writing in the present tense, even though dreams happen in the past. Really, one cannot speak of a dream that has not already happened. However, there is something interesting in that I think of dreams in this way, as if they are happening still in the moment of their retelling. My stories feature the present tense as well. Three out of five of this collection's stories are written in the present tense while one is purposefully written in a quasi-past tense to add a certain strangeness to the atmosphere of the piece with the events unfolding more or less immediately as they are narrated. One might say something of Gardner's insistence that the dream, and thus fiction, be continuous. The present tense allows for a certain immediacy in a story's action that can feel as though the events are happening as we read them. The story stretches on and forms as our eyes cross the words on the page. To be honest, the present tense has become something of a default mode for my writing. It is how the stories come out as I think of them in a literal way. The words I write answer my line of thought, "What happens next?" Any correlation to the nature of dreams is a happy accident, one that may work in certain situations, but by no means is a necessity for the rendering of fiction as a vivid and continuous dream.

When I wake from a dream, I do not try to make sense of it. I write it down, taking it apart, focusing on the oddness I felt and what seemed to create that feeling. The man hunched over, sitting on the top step with his microphone, calling out the names of children. It is a fragment of something complete and it might just find its way into one of my stories. Fiction should operate like a dream, not just in its construction, but in its

ability to elicit an emotional effect on the reader through strangeness, something that might not happen in our world, but described in specific enough detail that people could believe it happened in fiction (or a dream). It is like Gabriel Garcia Marquez explains in his interview in *The Paris Review*, “. . . if you say that there are elephants flying in the sky, people are not going to believe you. But if you say that there are four hundred and twenty-five elephants flying in the sky, people will probably believe you” (80). The reason we are fooled by dreams while we are in them is that they are rendered with such a specificity that we cannot tell them apart from real life while we are in them. We can be surprised when we find ourselves falling from the ledge, because we believe that moment to be real thanks to the vividness of the fall. And fiction should be the same way for the reader. While reading, they should leave their world behind and believe what they are reading is actually happening, due to the vivid, continuous, and interesting manner in which the story is rendered.

That is my goal for my fiction. Each one of my stories is a dream both in its vivid and continuous construction and in its strange, but specifically rendered, content. With each story, I focus each story’s conventional “parts” on producing a single effect, as Poe proposed, that is heightened by character actions or by the strangeness of the story’s world. “Fall” is the word suggested by the collection’s title and it is a lightly woven theme throughout, including this introduction, and my stories speak to all meanings of the word. In this introduction, I wrote about the vividness of a fall I experienced in a dream. In my stories, the “falls” are less literal. A husband and wife fall from grace as they deal with a grief that consumes and blinds them. A family falls apart one by one when darkness creeps over them. A man is surrounded by leaves, a literal representation of the

season, as he drives away from his failed marriage, a pathetic attempt at avoiding the descent into singleness. In this way, the stories are loosely connected.

These stories were also inspired through a few of the concepts I have learned from doing and teaching improv comedy. Like fiction, improv involves the creation of scenes, characters, and plots. Improv toys with the ideas of a vivid and continuous presentation of events, as the actors involved must pause for the audience to laugh. Without the audience, there is no purpose to performing the scene, so improv relies on its audience's engagement just as much as writing relies on the reader's and some of the same considerations must be made in how the scene is rendered. A problem one faces in improv is the creation of a character. Most scenes do not last longer than a couple of minutes, depending on the format, putting pressure on an actor to create a character within moments. For new practitioners, this can be paralyzing. Within my troupe, I have transitioned from newcomer to director and having gone through the paralyzing moments of being stuck in my thoughts instead of relying on reaction, I have developed an exercise loosely based on Kurt Vonnegut's "Basics of Creative Writing." The idea is for the actor to think of a single sentence beginning with "I" or "I am" as a driving force for becoming a character. Stemming from Vonnegut's advice that, "Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water" (Vonnegut). This "I" sentence serves as the character's prime motivation. From the mundane, "I am a single mother," to the bizarre "I desperately want to steal whatever my scene partner is wearing," these sentences are a basic start for becoming a distinct personality. For the single mother, her actions become centered on her child, she will care about whatever benefits her daughter and actively move toward getting her child what she wants. The actor's actions in a scene reflect the statement until they embody it, becoming that character. The thief employs distraction

and charm to distract his scene partner in an attempt to grab their coat from the rack.

While this is an oversimplification of what makes a person, for the improv character, it is the beginning of being.

To be able to produce a heightened effect in my fiction, I operated under a variation of this premise for character creation. I needed to know what effect to aim my story toward to give me an idea of how to get “into” the story. For this I used the same exercise, a single “I” sentence that could influence the direction of my language, word choice, and character motivations. For example, the opening piece for this collection, “Blackout” was written with “I am afraid of the dark” in mind. This piece is also the most straightforward in terms of construction as well as content. Written from a “we” perspective, the story is concerned about what happens to a family once the lights go out during a summer night. It is a supernatural nightmare where a family falls apart, filled with a strangeness that cannot quite be named that borders the line of the horror genre. Even stranger is the point of telling for the piece, a “we” past-tense, technically impossible when the ending to the piece is considered, adding to the strangeness as what has already happened cannot be told by those involved. It is a fast paced, suspenseful piece that takes full advantage of the format of a short short story, with the added gravity of death lingering in every moment that reflects the fear found in its sentence of origin.

Similarly, “Mad World Lullaby” was inspired by a night at a ska concert and the motivation for it comes from the sentence “I want to leave,” nothing against Ska. The music was just too loud for me, but my girlfriend’s sister’s then boyfriend, now husband was in the band and so I had to stay. The band in “Mad World Lullaby” falls apart due to the lead singer wanting to leave due to pregnancy and unlike the real world inspiration, their band has had no success. The minutia of band-life is really the focus here, the small

steps and annoying details that go into cooperating with other people to create art, the personalities that clash the more people you add and ska bands have a lot of people, typically. This story also features a time skip that nullifies, in essence, the problems of the moment as true motives are revealed and of course time manages to make even the biggest of troubles seem laughable with distance. This story is actually the most “normal” of the collection, as the strangeness comes from real world inspiration rather than the logic found in dreams. Musicians have some strange habits, heightened throughout the piece to border on weird, while still being (somewhat) believable.

The rest of the pieces are dreams and dreams throughout, the worlds of these stories operate on their own rules but still follow a strange sort of logic for the most part. “Dead Sleep” is another piece about a relationship falling apart, as are many of the stories in here, I have realized in hindsight. The creation of the piece was influenced by the sentence “I am tired,” a simple sentence I find myself thinking or saying at least once a day. And so I imagined a condition that prevents the afflicted from sleeping; instead they die every time they would normally sleep. When I explained this concept to a friend he questioned the religious implication of the condition, that the “dying” and coming back would call into question the concept of an afterlife, a topic too big for my short story, but it inspired me to add a religious mob who has painted the afflicted as zombies (which opened up some fun wordplay for their picket signs). The real driving force for this piece was the rendering of Mikhail as someone who has to literally revive every time he falls “asleep.” The steps involved are basically an exaggerated recapping of my morning routine after nights where I have not slept, including the physical tearing myself out of bed. That and “Dead Sleep” is probably the story the most playful with language, reflecting some of the fun I was having in writing it.



Keeping with the theme of death, the sentence for “Three Hearts” was “I am dead,” which resulted in imagining two parents who have lost their only son and are left with a dog they have never met. The parents fall out with one another as they fight over what to do with this dog, the dad wanting to keep it, the mom not being able to look at it without remembering why it is here. The sentence “I am dead” would cause grief and so grief is the driving force of the piece. Grief affects people in different ways and is not always understood, which is what I hoped to convey with their different reactions. I wanted to create a barrier between the characters of the piece, one so thick that even something as fantastic as a talking dog does not get through to them. The dog “talking” got a lot of flak from those who read it, but it is pivotal to the rendering of the language of grief and accurately demonstrates the misunderstanding between the two. The “object” of the conflict tries to sympathize with those it has troubled, only to be incapable of being understood.

Lastly, there is “Another Word for Autumn,” the titular piece, I suppose. A man drives in his car though he does not know where he is going or how long he intends to drive. One thing that may stick out in this piece is the leaves that fill his car by pouring through the air conditioning vent. There is no sentence for this piece, as I got into this story through other means. In the fall, my car’s air conditioning will sometimes spit out a few crushed leaves for a probably explainable reason that I have not bothered to have checked out. I took that happening and exaggerated it to bury the man who is running away from his relationship, which is threatening to fall. His fall, it seems, finds him in a different, representational way. The leaves wash over him and blind him, reflecting the reality of the situation, that he is not seeing where he is or where he is headed.

It may seem as though this “fall” theme was a constructed notion and this introduction might seem to reinforce that. As strange as it sounds, none of this was planned, and it was only when I arranged the pieces together that I noticed the pattern. Regardless, the stories stand together in this collection, bound in pages and now with a light theme explored here. No matter where you land once the story is over, I hope you enjoy the fall.

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## BLACKOUT

When the lights shut off, we didn't know we were being watched. We gathered as a family in the light of a few candles left over from Christmas. They smelled like pine as they burned. We joked about presents, even though it was June. Dad was restless. We were all tense, but his legs began to bounce after a while. He started looking solely out his peripheral vision.

Mom tried to console him. She handed him a present, invisible save to us in on the game. He let the present sit in his lap, bouncing. It was a crystal ashtray for his long afternoons spent puffing cigars on the back porch and each bounce made us nervous that the present would fall, that our gift would shatter on the cold tiled floor. We wanted him to be our dad again, not the man who got up after an hour without making a sound. He stared at the back door, more windows than wood, into nothing. The moon was not out this night.

We begged him to come back, to huddle under the blankets and tickle us with his beard, to tell us stories about his father, the construction worker who spoke Italian, or to wrestle us and gently crush us with his weight.

His hand grabbing the door handle was the loudest noise we had ever heard, it echoed throughout the house. Mom got up. She called out to him, begged him to stop, admitted he was scaring her and us, but he didn't turn, his hand remained around the long, curved handle. He stood like that for a while, enough time for us to grow bored, but Mom didn't stop pleading. When the door opened, she moved, tried to scoop him up, but her arms met nothing when she threw them forward. He was already gone. The door closed. We never saw him cross the threshold.

We cried out for Mom, but she stood at the door, her arms hugging her body, her eyes on the blackness just beyond the door. She searched for a sign of Dad out there in the void. Her gaze was steady. We asked her what she saw and she told us that she saw Dad. He was tending the beets in the garden. He had to chase away a rabbit with a shovel to stop it from stealing. It was a children's tale and we knew she was lying. We didn't have a garden. We knew Dad was gone, past the threshold. We still didn't know we were being watched.

We looked at each other, away from Mom, saying we didn't care what she did, only to sneak glances and squeeze our insides with hope that she would come back and hug us tight. She could shelter us in her songs, we could sing made up carols to match our made up presents. We pictured it as Mom became someone else. She stopped hugging herself, her arms at her side. She stood unnaturally straight and seemed taller than we remembered. Thinner too, like she was being pressed inside her own skin.

When her hand grabbed the handle to the door, it didn't make a sound and we question now whether or not she even moved to do it. The candles flickered as she opened the door and was gone, the door somehow closed when it was over.

We cried. Of course we cried. If we were stronger we would have stood up, dragged her back, but we were weak, or so we thought. The situation wasn't clear and we were misguided, in our fear, thinking that we could stop what was coming. That we were going to live past whatever this was.

We cried until the candlelight was low, but there were only so many tears in us. The room grew silent and we liked it, the stillness of everything.

When the oldest of us stood, we heard the whispers. He said he couldn't take it anymore and it was clear he had heard them for hours as the candles burned down. He

didn't apologize, and we were torn. We knew he was fighting, resisting what the whispers said and we loved him for lasting so long. At the same time we hated him for doing exactly that. Join them, we thought. Join Dad and Mom in the darkness, what do we care? You heard them and didn't tell us. You heard them while we couldn't and said nothing.

We didn't watch him, we don't know what happened. He was gone before the candles flickered out.

It was hard to count, but there were two of us left, we thought. We hugged each other to keep from counting, it was beginning to be hard to see, hard to tell where we ended. The whispers kept telling us to count. They were begging us to count in Mom's voice. Dad's was more demanding. We didn't count. We knew already because we could feel it. The pair of extra arms in the hug. Three sets of arms and only two bodies. The arms pulled toward the door, a subtle pull, like a promise. We hugged tighter and the extra arms grew even lighter. The whispers fainter, we had to lean toward them to hear now.

In the hug we saw Mom, Dad, and the oldest standing in the garden we didn't have. They munched on beets and rabbits, drooling and snarling like wolves. We saw men with shirts made from bones playing drums, but heard no music and that's when we felt the eyes painting our skin. So many eyes, not all of them paired.

The candles burned out. The darkness was thick, we couldn't feel the arms anymore. We swallowed it as it swallowed us. We heard doors open and close from every direction and knew it had come for us. Whatever it was that took our family was inside the house, whispering in their voices that we'd be with them soon. We understood that this was it, that we were outmatched, two children versus something unseen. Whatever it

was that's in the dark, the motion in the periphery of our eyes had been watching us and now it was here to feast.

Our arms grew apart, we were hugging nothing, so we closed our arms and hugged ourselves, not knowing if "we" was still appropriate.

## MAD WORLD LULLABY

The venue was much bigger than described and from behind the curtain, Jake could barely make out the fifteen people who had come out on a Tuesday night to hear them play. Black round tables sat off in the distance, so the front of the stage could be crowded if necessary, but the fifteen individuals sat with those tables, their faces showing no interest in forming any sort of crowd. That's good, that's okay, Jake thought, they won't form a mob either. Jake's phone buzzed in his pocket so he fished it out to see Jenny's face next to some words of encouragement. They had just found out they were pregnant that morning, before Jake drove 130 miles south for the gig. He sent back, "Go to bed, babe. Gotta sleep for two now" and looked back at the crowd. Five people walked through the black double doors at the far side of the room, bringing the total to twenty.

The place was called Stu's Brews and Stu had contacted them to play after hearing one of their open mic sets at the Lizard Lounge last month. He even said he'd pay, a cut from the cover charge. A standard arrangement between other bands and venues, but to SkaDoosh, it was a contract of gold.

Jake didn't tell the band about the money. When asked, he said it wasn't a paying gig. "This is a chance," was all he had said. "We could make something." In the back of his head, a plot hatched. He'd been with these guys for five years now without getting anywhere. It was time for him to cut and run, especially now with a baby on the way.

On the other side of the stage, huddled around two snares and a bass drum was Mickey, giving his new usual pep talk to the instruments, pacing back and forth with a drumstick under his arm like a cartoon general. He was three months sober now at 28. Replaced pregaming with small acts of nonsense to distract him. He didn't believe the speech he was giving, "it's nothing but a small thing, gents," and inside he was



swimming. His pits were wet from lack of ant-perspirant, one of a few mental slips as of late. He should be setting up the drums, not talking to them, but Jake saw no harm in it.

So Tom walked up instead. “Hey, man. Set up,” and this is all he said before retreating behind a speaker to retrieve his bass guitar, still in its case. Sharp metal clicks, latches undone, the top of the case slammed on the floor and the bass flew out, the strap landing around Tom’s shoulders. That was Tom. All fluid. At 22, he was the youngest of the band.

The horn guys, all three of them, arrived as Mickey finished setting up, two saxophones and a trombone. They also play in a local jazz band, one of those groups that restaurants hire for live evening music and existed somehow without a name. The flare of the band. Nothing new under the sun of ska, but worlds apart from the usual riffraff Stu’s Brews was used to. The crowd had gained a few more people, enough for someone to be able to call it a crowd.

“Everyone’s here,” Jake said. “Alright, good.”

“Time for sound check,” Stu’s voice said. He was beyond the curtain, across the floor in the sound booth, his voice traveling by speaker, low so the crowd couldn’t hear. Owner and sound guy, Stu was a regular renaissance man. “Let’s get lead vocals and guitar.”

“Keep the vocals low,” Jake said. He was the leader of the band, but not by choice. The singer as well and even less choice went into that. “Guitar up, vocals down.”

“Got you, start playing something,” Stu said.

So he strummed the same sound check song he had strummed for the past five years. “Check the mic,” Stu said.

“Alright, okay,” Jake said, not into the mic. He said the same thing into the mic, though. Followed by a “one, two, one, two,” for good measure.

“Drums next,” Stu said.

“I also do vocals,” Mickey said, “so turn that mic up.” He proceeded to slam the drums before the sound guy could respond. Loud and fast, but in rhythm.

“Got it. Bass next.”

Tom had parted the curtain a bit. He scanned the crowd, large enough that he didn't feel like counting, but didn't see who he wanted to see. He turned toward the door at the back of the room and watched it. The door opened, a swish of blue hair peeked through and Tom's breathing increased, but the body of a longhaired boy came after the swish and his breathing returned to normal.

“Tom,” Jake called out, “you there buddy?”

“I told you,” he said, “it's Thom now. With an 'h.'” This hadn't changed the pronunciation any.

“Right,” Jake said. “Sound check.”

“No vocals for me,” Thom said. He strummed a bass line, deep reverbs, lots of pop. The entire time watching the back door open and close.

“Check,” Stu said. “First horn?”

Loose Lester, trombonist, stood up to his mic, placing the bell of his horn right in front of it. He earned the name in a bar fight two years ago on account of not fighting back but not getting hit either. The guy was drunk and angry, a bad combination for anyone at one of their gigs and their upbeat music hadn't done much to better his attitude. Lester was also pretty easy going, but this was a side effect. No one knew his age, but they'd known him long enough that it didn't matter.

Lester forgot to tell the sound guy to pump up his mic for vocals and the horn being so close to the mic threatened to blow out the speakers leaving the sound guy with the sole option of turning the pickup down.

The two saxophonists shared a mic usually due to limitations, but Stu's Brews was packed with equipment so they each got their own. Twin saxophonists, the other hook for the band, Geoffrey and Johnny Jams, both 23, completed the set. Jams was not Johnny's last name. Neither was it Geoffrey's.

"You're on in five," Stu said. "Rock it out, guys."

Jake nodded. He would normally give a pep talk or something. Go team, ra-ra. Instead he popped in his ear plugs, a counter measure against the constant ringing he heard at all times. Wife's orders.

That morning, Jenny had woken him up with a kiss and tickle of his beard. A sign she had some sort of news. He had groaned and turned away from her, but the kisses and tickles persisted and so he had forced his eyes to part and greet the day.

"Hey, babe," he had said, "you look some sort of cheery."

"Jake," she said, "I'm pregnant."

"Shit, like, on purpose?" he had said. His grogginess was more powerful than his sense and he regretted saying it seconds after it was too late.

But she hadn't gotten mad. She nodded in response, her eyes tearing up. "You're going to be a father, idiot," she had said. Idiot was a pet name. She insisted on calling him that because of the way he chose to talk.

"Babe, that's great," he had said. They had been trying for three months and now it was a reality. Jake was trying to make it feel real.

"Hey, Jake?" Loose Lester said. "Something eating you?"

“Nothing, man,” Jake said. “Everything’s okay, alright. Happy.”

“Right. So what’s the set list?”

Jake smiled, but that was his reaction to everything. It was a drugged smile, but he was free of the stuff. Never touched it, he claimed. “‘Paper Train,’ first. I’ll announce the rest. No worries.”

Loose Lester passed the word down to the twins who passed it on to Thom who mumbled something affirmative while burning holes into the curtain. Through a split he could see the bobbing heads of the crowd, now at a level somewhere between “decent” and “large,” but he didn’t see the blue haired girl that he wanted to see.

“Listen up,” Jake said. “Sounds like there’s a few people out there. Let’s blow their minds.” One last time, he thought.

“What’s he saying?” Mickey called out, behind the drums.

“We need to play our best,” Johnny called back.

“What, like you and me?” Mickey said.

“No man, like the whole band,” Johnny said.

“Jake wants us to play? It’s too soon, curtain’s still up.”

“Just play your best,” Loose Lester yelled.

“Like right now?” Mickey called out.

“Guys,” Jake shouted. Four pairs of eyes meet his gaze (Thom still stared at the door, the irregular stream of people reduced to a leaky faucet). He hadn’t raised his voice before. Not even while singing. Jake looked away from them, back at his mic. The music cut off on the floor and the lights behind them started burning their backs with neon blues and greens. “See you at the break,” Jake said. The curtains parted and Jake cleared his throat. He called, “1, 2, 1 2, skiddie-do” and the band launched right into “Paper Train.”

The horns ripped through the air, announcing the oncoming train, followed by a building circular drum beat (Bumbum bum bum Bumbum bum bum). Add the bass line, and steam filled the air with low plucking hisses.

Jake was glad the guys had started playing, but their loyalty to the band also weighed on him. Jenny being pregnant meant changes. Already he was over a hundred miles away from her. They had moved two months ago to a place where he could get contract work building houses. But he still made the long trip down each weekend to practice with the band and to do gigs.

His guitar joined in and the horns let out another warning blast, the drum wheels in full spin as the train crashed through the venue. “Chugga-chugga,” Jake started to sing, not that anyone would be able to hear him.

Thom pried his eyes away from the door. She’d be here soon and he didn’t want to worry any more. The girl he’d been trying to impress was an art student at the state school. Her name started with something bizarre, “Mika” or something and her hair was blue when he first met her. The train swept through him, the drums starting to rattle as it sped off the tracks, the horns crying out as the whistle warped into something otherworldly and he began to thrash in the way he did, bouncing foot to foot like a rocking mental patient.

Mickey pounded the drums, no longer circular, but crashing in rhythm, systematic destruction. There was nothing happy about his beats, the anger and sadness of a train colliding with the ground stemming from the dark times he’d hitched back onto the wagon again. Each hit shook through him, pulled at him, reminded him. He kept his eyes closed during this song. He hated this song.

“Paper Train” was off from the rest of their set, that’s why Jake usually lead with it. It was their attention grabber, their art piece. Creating a train only to drive it off the rails. It made them cruel and he liked that, even if the rest didn’t understand it. It was a false promise to him. This is what we are, the train said, but they weren’t anything like the train. The train was the victim and they were its killers. The horns ripped through the sound again, the drums crashing, the bass thrashing, and Jake’s guitar bled chords warped through a distortion pedal.

The song ended and Jake felt like he should say something. “Thanks,” he said and nodded at the crowd. The applause was strong. He felt like he should add something so he said, “Alright.”

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In the green room between sets, Jake tried to gather his thoughts. The venue was packed now, college students and older folk alike. The applause at the close of their first half still pounded in the back of Jake’s head. Stu must have advertised the hell out of the show, promised free drinks to people or something. The cut from the cover charge clouded Jake’s mind as he waited for someone to show up in the green room.

Only no one came. The room, a small area with a couch along the back wall that took up the room’s width, didn’t feel green. A small bowl of trail mix sat on a coffee table in the center of the room next to an open ice chest with Great Value bottles of water. Another chest sat further off. That one was full of beer. Stu had made accommodations on Mickey’s request. He had made a lot of accommodations, it seemed.

Jake grabbed some trail mix and contemplated sitting on the couch, to trust his bandmates to come see him like he had asked before they left the stage. The break

wouldn't last forever and they weren't exactly accustomed to getting breaks so he was worried what they might get themselves into, especially with that many people out there.

After a minute of trail mix, Jake left the green room, into the somehow fresher air of the venue to look for his guys. He felt like a reaper. Then a creeper. But he scanned the room anyway, until a college-aged guy in a hockey jersey noticed him standing by the backstage door and half-shouted, half-slurred something in Jake's direction. Jake felt self-conscious as groups of eyes landed on him and mouths started moving more and more. People were talking about him.

He spotted Mickey huddled up on a stool by the bar, sitting cross legged, like meditation. "Mick," he called out, but Mickey didn't hear him or ignored him, Jake couldn't tell which. He snuck over to find Mickey's eyes were closed and he was humming beats. A drum he played with his mouth. "Mick, wake up," Jake said.

"Shhh," Mickey answered. He continued drumming with his mouth, throwing in some cymbal clashes by forcing air through his teeth. "It's all about balance," he said. "Hitting things just right, never too hard or soft. Balance keeps us even."

"That's some nice bullshit, there," Jake said. "Balance keeps us even. You hearing yourself? That's like water keeps us wet. Snap out of this."

"Lost my job this week, bro. Spinning out a bit here." He sounded completely composed. "Only thing I need now is to slip into something brown and bubbly." He paused. "Sarcasm, boss."

"Meditating literally at the bar though?"

"It's a concession, indulging the urge but not giving in."

"And the mouth drumming?"

"Man, you know drums fill me up."

Jake nodded. He did know that. “Well, hey man, seems like this is a good night for us.”

“Lots of people here,” Mickey said. “Shame we’re doing this pro bono.” He took a second to mouth-bash out a bridge beat.

Jake’s heart beat a little faster, a step behind Mickey’s mouth beats. “Yeah, but like, publicity is good.”

“Heard one of the bartenders said there’s a talent scout somewhere,” Mickey said with his eyes closed.

“A talent scout?” Jake said, “Like an agent?”

“I mean, even if it’s a rumor, this is our best crowd ever. Lots of gigs in the future, man.”

Jake’s phone buzzed in his pocket so he excused himself from Mickey, walked three steps away, and took it out. “How’s the gig going?” Jenny had texted. He shoved the phone back in his pocket only to take it out again and stare at the letters.

Thom’s voice broke between his thoughts and his phone from across the room, somehow sneaking between the pop music being piped in overhead and around him. Jake walked over to him, forgetting for the moment that the phone was in his hand, that his wife was sitting somewhere wondering about him, thinking about him, unaware of his intentions. She’d probably be pissed at him. But it was for the best. Right?

“Thom,” he called out, but Thom was on his own phone.

“What do you mean you can’t make it? You promised,” he said. “Well, what about the after party? Of course there’s going to be an after party, we’re a band. Look, just try to make it. Can’t you take a break, just this one night? I know your work is important or whatever, but this is important to me too. There’s like fifty people here.



Yeah, fifty.” The conversation’s rapid movement wore Jake out just listening. He didn’t think he was going to get through to Thom.

“Look,” Thom said, “Jake’s here. Jake? The singer. Of my band.” He sighed, a little too audibly. “I gotta go. Yes, I gotta. We’ll talk later.” He hung up and returned the phone to his pocket. “Women, right?”

“Yeah, like, they’re people,” Jake said. He never really had an idea of where he was with Thom.

“What’s up, second half starting?”

“Look, I’m trying to get my bearings here. There’s a talent scout . . . agent . . . person, here somewhere. Maybe. You’ve been scanning the crowd all night. See anyone who might look like that?”

“Not sure what one looks like, man,” Thom said. “Like, we talking a suit? I think I’ve seen a suit or two.”

“Just keep your eyes open, I guess. Let me know if you see someone business-looking.”

“Sure thing,” Thom said, but his phone chirped or beeped or sang something that Jake couldn’t hear. It must have happened though because Thom took his phone out again and read a message before sighing again. “Women, man.” He didn’t move to help with spotting the could-be suit and Jake wanted to give up. To just leave these people to their devices, be they phones or meditation or whatever the horn guys were up to.

What were the horn guys up to? Jake looked around, but he couldn’t find them. A talent agent could mean something good. More publicity, more shows, more money. Or just trouble. Some agents would charge groups for things like studio sessions with the promise of a payout, but then they’d take a huge cut from that payout too. Some just

charged money and ran, taking advantage of naive groups. Jake wanted to find out which type of agent was here, if the rumors were even true.

He went back to the green room, defeated, hoping trail mix and water could pick up his spirits for the next part of the show. He was contemplating leading off with their cover of “Mad World” when he opened the door to the green room and almost ran into Lester.

“Whoa there,” Lester said, as he stepped aside at the last second. “Got a reputation to uphold.”

“We were just about to go looking for you,” Johnny Jams said from the couch. His forehead glistened with sweat, but the rest of him looked refreshed. Geoffrey stood across the room, leaning against the wall. He nodded.

“What for?” Jake said.

“A woman in a suit approached us, man,” Johnny said. “Said something about a possible contract. Recording sessions. I think ‘album’ might have been tossed out.”

“A woman?” Jake asked. “She say something about being an agent?”

“That’s what it was!” Johnny said, “I couldn’t remember, yeah, she’s a talent agent, left her card.” He walked over to the table and picked up a white rectangle sitting next to the trail mix. “Didn’t want to lose it,” Johnny explained.

Jake took the card, letting the crisp edges dig into his fingers. *South City Talent, Susan Cartwright*. A number sat just below the name. “This is a real card,” Jake said.

“Hell yeah, Lester said. “Think it’s a legitimate operation?”

Geoffrey stepped up, “How could we find out?”

Jake’s heart beat faster again, Mickey’s mouth drumming popped into his head. He remembered he was holding his phone, the screen lit up when he looked at it as if on

cue. The small picture of Jenny sitting on a porch swing wearing a straw hat struck something in him. He had seen the picture countless times before, it always appeared when she called or texted, but the straw hat seemed to ruffle with the wind. He saw her swing toward him in his mind only to fall away again.

“Jake? Everything okay?”

“What? Yeah, everything’s good. More than good. Guys. Jenny’s pregnant.” He smiled as he said the words, before he even realized what he had said. They came so easy from his lips, throwing rocks through windows of an abandoned house. “I’m having a baby.”

“So like a dad. That’d make you a dad,” Lester said. “Righteous.”

“This night’s full of good things,” Johnny Jams laughed.

Geoffrey walked up to him and patted him on the shoulder, his face as blank as if Jake had just said today was Tuesday.

Stu appeared at the door, “Hey guys, just want to say, you guys are killing it. Keep it up. I hope you don’t mind, but I made a few calls, got some connections to the music scene, as it were. Some important people here, might be interested in you,” he said.

“Like her?” Jake handed over the card.

Stu eyed it for a second, “She’s already here?” he said. “Thought she’d stop by to say hi to me first.” He handed the card back. “No matter, just do what you guys do and I’m sure you’ll be fine. You’re back on in three, by the way.” He disappeared back into the bar chatter.

“Right, okay,” Jake said, “enough baby talk and business stuff. We got a show to finish.”

“Yeah, but now I’m nervous,” Johnny Jams said. “A talent agent watching our every move, judging us. Man, is this pressure? Is this what pressure feels like?”

“Let’s worry about that later,” Lester said. “Let’s just focus on sending this place off right. We should do something to keep this audience up though.”

““Mad World Lullaby?”” Jake asked, palming trail mix. “Mad World Lullaby” was their cover of Tears for Fears’ “Mad World,” redone in a major chord with a few bars of extra instrumentals thrown in that really didn’t fit the song. It was also one of the few songs Jake didn’t sing due to it being Lester’s favorite. Jake was scheming again. If the band lost the chance of an agent, they might feel defeated enough to let him go without too much of a fuss.

“Hey, that’d be great,” Lester said. “Let’s pep this place up.” The group moved to the stage and reclaimed their instruments. Jake got Stu to flash the house lights a few times to get Thom and Mickey back to their places on stage.

“What’s the plan, boss?” Mickey asked.

““Mad World Lullaby,”” Jake said, putting his ear plugs back in. The house lights dimmed again and the stage lighting warmed his back. “Hey folks,” he said into the mic. “How’s everybody?”

The audience cheered and clapped in response, the way that audiences tend to do at concerts.

“Sounds good,” he said. He looked over to his band mates and motioned to Lester who took a step up, his trombone resting on his shoulder.

“1, 2, 1-2 go!” Jake said and the long intro into Mad World Lullaby washed out over the crowd. Jake stepped back, strumming out the rhythm for the horns to fill in with melody. They played the song long, going through practically a full verse before putting

words into it. Lester belted away with his trombone, blasting each upbeat note. When it came time for him to sing, he snapped his horn down and grabbed the mic.

Only, his mic's pickup was down so no one could make out what he was singing. He kept at it, trying to yell over the drums, the guitar riffs, and the horns.

Jake stepped on his distortion pedal, letting his chords wash over each other. Building sound on top of sound.

Johnny Jams could tell something was off. Nothing felt right, but he couldn't pinpoint it with all the noise. SkaDoosh thrived on noise, he knew that, but this noise was different. It was noisier. His fingerings faltered a bit. Before long he was half a step behind his brother. The effect was jarring, notes slipping around notes, upbeat and downbeat both. Soon it was just beat without an up or down, just continuous.

Lester jumped over to Jake's mic to try to salvage the rest of the song, much to Jake's surprise, but Jake's mic was purposefully turned down. He didn't sing songs where the words mattered, so this song was crashing, but there wasn't anything artful about it. Jake smiled.

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Mike slammed the cymbals as the parting note of "Steam Boat, Dream Goat," the coda of their show. With that, their set was over, leaving Jake to send them off.

"Thanks, guys. Really. You were here. We were here. We were SkaDoosh. You were the people who came out on a Tuesday night."

Mickey collapsed backward from his stool, landing on his back. "Man, that was good," he said. "Like really, really good." After the catastrophe that was Mad World Lullaby, the guys had pulled out a decent show. Jake thought the damage had been done,

so he had backed off a bit with the sabotage. Although he did muck up a solo in Catamaran Pipes.

“You were off rhythm at the start of ‘Steam Boat,’ man,” Thom said, “but I agree the show was good.”

“What’s with us and vehicles?” Loose Lester asked. “Like every other song has a vehicle in it. I never noticed before.”

“They’re metaphors for life,” Johnny Jams said, “isn’t that right Jake? Life is like a vehicle for other stuff. Like dreams.”

“That’s bullshit,” Geoffrey said. “And what about the goats? Why would celestial star goats be on a steam boat in 1890?”

It was the regular post show conversation, everyone amped up from the energy of the sound, the nonsensical lyrics. He stood behind his mic, now inert and useless, letting the flow of conversation fall around him. He heard dull snaps and clicks of instrument cases flicking open, the soft thuds of horns and guitars landing in velvet lined horn-and-guitar shaped holes. Mickey dismantled his set, piece by piece, treating each item he had smashed vigorously just moments before as if it were made of the finest Venetian glass. It was the routine.

“Hey, guys, I need to tell you something,” Jake said, his guitar still strapped to him. “I mean, well, horn guys already know.”

“You haven’t told them yet?” Lester asked, grinning.

Mickey, his set all put away, stepped up, calm. All that balance talk seemed to work, somehow. Or maybe it was just all in his head.

Thom’s cellphone had nested by his ear as soon as the cymbals had stopped shaking. He had started out low, but now the argument was audible. “Mika”-whatever

with the blue hair wasn't going to be around for much longer, it seemed. Thom would be devastated. For about two weeks. Maybe.

"Hey, Thom," Mickey called out, "we got a regular ole post show powwow going on. Ditch the phone."

Thom shot Mickey a look that could burn through stage curtains, a look which Thom wore well it seemed, and hung up his phone. Mid conversation. "Happy?" he asked.

Mickey grunted.

"So yeah," Jake said. "Now I've got everyone's attention, finally. I just wanted to say tha—"

"Hey!" Stu called out, "SkaDoosh! You guys were awesome."

Jake wondered why he hadn't heard him coming. "Forget it," he said under his breath.

"Hey, thanks," Mickey called out. "We appreciate the opportunity or whatever."

"Yeah, I think you guys rocked it, man" Stu said.

"Did we?" Jake said.

"Hell yeah, guy," Stu said. "Yeah, Susan was impressed. She wants to talk to you guys, I'll go run and get her." He turned to leave, but hesitated. "Oh yeah, and we're still calculating your cut from the cover charge. Big hull though. Should be a pretty big check for you guys."

The silence that followed was heavy, heavier than a derailed train landing on an unsuspecting bar audience. "Thanks," Jake managed to say, but when he looked up, Stu was gone.

"This was a paying gig?" Thom asked. "Huh, is that what the horn guys knew?"

“Whoa, this place was packed. Our cut’s gonna be huge,” Mickey said. “Like more than we make in like three months. Or four. I mean, we don’t get paid often.”

The horn guys stared at Jake, their smiles fading. “So, when were you going to tell us about the money?” Geoffrey asked.

“Seems like something worth mentioning,” Johnny Jams added. “You know, to like, your band.”

Jake gulped. He had wanted to grab Stu off to the side, but after the commotion of talent agent talk and the wave of applause from the crowd, the first few moments of silence after Steam Boat, Dream Goat had numbed the inside of his skull and he couldn’t move. “Guys,” he said.

“It’s no big deal,” Thom said. “We’ll just split it the usual way.”

“Yeah, split it five ways,” Mickey said. “Sax-brothers count as one.”

“Now wait a second,” Johnny Jams started, “that can’t be fair. Is that fair, Geoff?”

“No,” Geoffrey said.

“What if it can’t be split evenly?” Thom said. “Not without math. Or like, an odd number of bills or something.”

“Guys,” Jake said.

“I think we’ll be able to figure it out,” Lester said. “Either way, it’ll be enough to party tonight, that’s for sure.”

“Keep the parties to yourself,” Mickey said, “my money is grounded. Has to stay home in my wallet.”

Thom’s phone made a noise and his head snapped down again, his thumbs clicking on a touchscreen. The others continued to trade thoughts, suggestions about what to do with the money, money they weren’t going to get.



“The money’s mine,” Jake said. They stopped trading thoughts.

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Johnny Jams said. “Is that fair, Geoff?”

“No,” Geoffrey said.

“We’re part of the band, too,” Lester said.

“No job, money’s tight. Could use a slice,” Mickey said.

“Look, I’m having a baby soon,” Jake said. Mickey’s eyes grew wide. Thom looked up from his phone. The horn guys already knew though, so they didn’t react. “I found out this morning. I was going to tell you guys tonight sometime, but like, we had to play and then the crowd was big or whatever. Kinda lost track.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you can’t keep the money,” Thom said. “Baby or no, we all earned that.”

“I have a proposition for you guys,” Jake said. “Tonight’s been weird. It’s been crazy. Hearing people cheer for us.” He paused. “There’s more of that out there, guys.” A group of smiles lit up the circle. “Just not for me.”

“What do you mean?” Mickey asked.

“I can’t keep this up, you guys know I drive down each weekend. If there’s more shows, that’s more time away from Jenny. From my future son or daughter or whatever.” He tried a pause again, to let that sink in.

“But you’re the band leader,” Thom said, interrupting the pause.

“I didn’t want to lead,” Jake said. “Never asked to. You guys pushed it on me.”

“Well someone had to lead,” Lester said. “And I mean, you play lead guitar. The word’s already there.”

“I can’t do it anymore. I’m quitting the band,” Jake said. That was it in his mind. The moment he had been waiting for. To let them know he was gone. Only he was

supposed to be 130 miles away when they found out. He didn't quite know why he was telling them in person. Respect to their history, he guessed.

Silence gripped the stage, save for Thom's texting. "That's messed up," he said not looking up. "Five years."

"Five years," Johnny Jams agreed.

"Five," Mike said.

Geoffrey stared.

Jake started shaking, each "five" hitting him in a different spot, each "five" an arrow shot from a different angle. "I'm sorry," he said.

"What does this have to do with the money, though?" Thom said. He put the phone in his pocket and stepped forward. "Baby and quitting aside, you can't steal from the band."

"Oh, right. I need this money right now. Babies are expensive. Contract work is slo—"

"Theft is wrong," Thom said.

"Look," Jake said, "that talent agent wants to get us in a studio and churn out a record. If you let me take the money from tonight, I'll help you guys out. One last time. And I won't want anything in return. Just the money from tonight. As like, an advance." He moved to put his guitar up, but Thom stepped in his way. "Hey, man, could you move a second?"

Thom didn't budge. Jake moved to step around him, but Thom readjusted, placing his body between Jake and his guitar case. The smug kid crossed his arms.

"Let me put my guitar up," Jake said. "Can I just set this thing down?"

“Too much of a burden for you?” Thom taunted. “I bet guitars are so much heavier than basses. After all, they come with loaded egos.”

A slew of oooo’s rolled out from the horn guys, washing over Jake with a simmer.

“Move,” Jake said.

In the realm of Thom’s possible comebacks, he settled for a classic. “Make me.”

Jake removed the guitar from his torso. It thudded as it hit the ground. He lunged at Thom, all arms and elbows, knocking him back. Thom shoved, more muscle than limbs, and quickly gained an upper hand or two. Jake flew back, toward the front of the stage, where he tangled with the stage curtain. The fabric blinded him and he scrambled to free his eyes just in time to see Thom’s fist. His head rolled back and his body followed offstage, where the venue floor collided with him.

“That’s enough,” Lester called out.

Thom stood over Jake. Breathing heavy. Shaking his hand out.

Jake’s head roared, but he opened his eyes all the same to meet the Thom’s.

Neither of them blinked.

“It’s just money,” Jake said. “And there’ll be more of it if you guys talk to that Susan woman.”

“It’s the band, man,” Thom said. “The band we started. You’re throwing it away.”

“You guys can still play. You don’t need me. Find someone else.”

“It wouldn’t be the same and you know it,” Lester said, not feeling all that loose. He stepped off the stage, stood next to Thom. The rest followed, save for Mickey, who stayed back.

“We were like, a family or something. I don’t know. This doesn’t seem like the way to end things, Jake,” Mickey said.

“You guys barely listened to me as it is,” Jake said. “All of this that’s coming out now, the emotions, whatever, is all bullshit just because I’m leaving.”

“What, like we took you for granted?” Johnny Jams said. “I mean, of course we did. That’s what family does.”

The throbbing in Jake’s head slowed some, but it was still hot. The floor was cool and he felt as though he might melt right through it, to anywhere else. “Guys,” he said, but he trailed off. He wasn’t in a position to argue much anymore, or well, hadn’t ever been, the moral high ground was never under his feet. He ended up on his back.

“Fine,” he said, “whatever.” He picked himself up and climbed the stage front, moving to his guitar. Not bothering with the case, he slung the retrieved guitar over his shoulder and headed toward the side door leading directly to the parking lot. He didn’t call out goodbye or look back. Just a beeline to the warm, heavy air of the summer night, an air so thick he felt like drowning.

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It was ten or so years before Jake saw anyone from SkaDoosh again. He was visiting his parents, who had never moved away from Westover, when he had a chance meeting with Mickey at the Lizard Lounge. As far as bars went, the lounge was what one might call dungy. Or grimy. But they served drinks and Jake’s parents brought the worst out of him.

He walked in and spotted Mickey on a stool by the bar. Without greeting or acknowledgement, he sat next to him.

Mickey glanced at him. “Hey Jake,” he said, like it was any other day.

“Mick,” Jake said. “You’re in a bar.”

“And you’re in Westover. These are strange times.”

Jake signaled the bartender, ordered a drink. “Well,” he said. “How are things?”

Mickey took a long swig from his drink, something dark and bubbly.

“That good, eh?” Jake said.

“It’s been an interesting life,” Mickey said. “I teach music at the high school now.”

Jake raised his eyebrows. “That’s great, man. You enjoy it?”

“It’s a living.” He took another long pull. Let out a short breath. “How’s the family?” he said after a pause.

Jake lowered his head. “Jenny left me a while ago.” He paused, thinking. “Yeah, I guess it’s been five or six years.”

“Tough,” Mickey said. “What about the kid?”

Jake winced. He hadn’t thought about the pregnancy for years. “It ended up being a miscarriage.”

Mickey whistled. “Explains the divorce, though.” They sat in silence. “Hey, where did you go that night?”

Jake had to think for a second. To remember what he was talking about. “You mean after Stu’s?”

“Don’t say that name, man,” Mickey growled. “That snake-eyed bastard.”

The bartender placed a napkin in front of Jake, followed by his drink. His hand fit around the glass, but he didn’t move it. He just wanted to feel the coolness of the glass for a while.

“You know he was just trying to sleep with that Susan chick?” Mickey said.

“They went to the same high school or something. He’d been pining for years.”

“Susan?”

“The talent agent woman, you know? It was all a crock, though. He orchestrated the entire night. Crowd and all.”

“Wow, man, that’s . . . rough.”

“No shit,” Mickey said. “So where’d you go?”

“I mean, I don’t even remember,” Jake admitted. “I guess home.”

“Yeah, it was a dumb question. I was curious, man. It ate at me for a while. Where does a guy who throws away relationships go?” His bottle was empty, but he raised it to his lips all the same, letting the last few drops fall. “Suppose it doesn’t matter now.”

“Suppose it doesn’t.” Jake tilted his head back and knocked back a shot. His eyes traveled down the wall on the trip back down. He saw three familiar faces mixed in a picture of a jazz band. The picture was signed by each of the members. He narrowed his eyes on the picture.

“Is that the horn guys?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Mickey said, “who knew they’d be the ones to strike it big?”

“What was their group’s name again?”

“Beats me,” Mickey said. They continued to drink in silence. Eventually, one of them left. The other left a while after that.

Jake didn’t hear from anyone again for a while. A few months later, he received a letter in the mail. In it was a brief note, barely legible, that said, “Thanks for conducting, here’s your share,” and a couple of twenties. It wasn’t signed and Jake hadn’t seen any of their handwriting in so long that it might as well have been written by a ghost.

He looked at the note again, hummed a few notes of Paper Trains. “Chugga-Chugga,” he sang low, placing the note back into the envelope.

## DEAD SLEEP

“Honestly, I think we should ship all the ‘Deaders’ off to another country,” the girl says. “Let them be somebody else’s problem.” She’s across the table from Mikhail and Michelle, who decided on hibachi for their three month anniversary. A new place called Knives, hibachi with a twist.

“Not in the food,” the host had said, “but in the experience of eating. We promote openness at our tables, we encourage you to meet the people you are eating with.” Three parties were situated around the “table,” Mikhail and Michelle, the loudmouth and her date, a man with large, red glasses, and another man dressed in scrubs, who came alone. One side of the table was empty, it still being early into the dinner rush. The table itself was more of a counter, a grill surface took up the inner portion and a marble counter the outer, so that the guests could cook their food while talking.

The host then provided everyone at the table with a list of conversation starters, for the couples to talk and cook their food at the same time. It hadn’t taken five minutes for the loudmouth to start rattling off various ways to rid America of the unwanted dead, a topic that wasn’t even on the list.

“I’m going to hit her,” Michelle says. Low enough so the loudmouth can’t hear. She presses down on a piece of steak she’s grilling. Mikhail places a shrimp kebab in front of him.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mikhail says. “She can’t ruin our night.” Mikhail suffers from a disorder called Dead Sleep Syndrome that causes him to die each time a normal person would sleep. It’s a degenerative condition that wears the brain away over time, but the condition itself presents no outward threat to others. Despite that, “Deaders” as

they're called, face prejudice for their affliction. A tenth of earth's population has it with more being found each day.

"It's not right," Michelle says/ "I mean, you're still a person."

"More or less. For now," he says. He smiles. "You never know when I'll get hankering for some brains."

"Stop it," Michelle says. "You've got a serious condition, Mik. I wouldn't joke about it."

"It's my condition, I'll do what I want with it." He scoops up a shrimp kebab and brings it to his mouth. "Brains," he groans. He bites into the kebab and gnaws on the stick, letting pieces of meat fall from his mouth.

Michelle stifles a laughs. "Goofball," she says.

"That isn't funny," the loudmouth says from across the table. "I wouldn't provoke them, you know how angry they get, and then boom, you're dead, I'm dead, hell probably the whole restaurant."

"That's not true," Mikhail says. "There's no evidence suggests that Deaders are a danger to anyone."

"What are you, some kind of Deader sympathizer? They're a blight on the world and a drain on resources. How many hospitals are full of people for a condition that can't be cured, while other treatable people are dying in the streets because they can't be admitted," the loudmouth says. Her date, a small man with glasses, shrinks in his seat.

Michelle shifts in her chair, poking at the piece of steak, now starting to char.

"Probably none," Mikhail says. "It's not like Deaders need constant medication. Look, can we go back to enjoying our meals? We'll trade you shrimp for sausage."

"Not until you apologize for your crass joke."



“Excuse me?” Mikhail says. “Why the hell should I apologize for a joke I said in private.”

“You said it loud enough for the whole table to hear.” The other two couples murmur in agreement. Mikhail had forgotten they were even there.

“It was kind of loud,” Michelle says.

“Well, I’ll keep it down, I guess,” Mikhail says. He scoops up the shrimp pieces into his napkin.

“People aren’t dying in the streets, right?” Michelle asks.

The man dressed in scrubs answers, “Of course not. If anything it’s the retirement homes that are filling up. The one I work for, SunnyVille, you know down Pinebrook, just reached capacity.” The man took his vegetable kebab off the grill. “Not with just old folks, either. It affects people differently, but from my experience, people of all ages are being checked in now. Their brains are rotted away. Can’t take care of themselves.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Mikhail says.

“Is that really happening?” the loudmouth asks. “It’s worse than I thought, we’ll be paying for these zombi—”

Mikhail slams his fist down on the marble. “I said let’s talk about something else.”

The table grows quiet, everyone looking at Mikhail. He eats without looking up, picking meat off the kebab with his teeth.

He smells smoke. “Your steak’s burning, Chelle.”

“Oh,” she says, and removes it from the grill.

Mikhail revives gasping, his haggard breaths echo the erratic beats of his heart. A white ceiling fan swings overhead. He counts the fan blades, with some effort of tracking each one, and finds one fewer than the fan in his room. The tingling sensation of his limbs hits hard this morning. Tiny fire ants with metal legs jab into the soft tissue of his muscles, each jab sharper than the last as his blood begins circulating. Mikhail tries to control his breath.

*Control your breath, control your body.* A mantra he adopted for dealing with his condition. He manages to lift his head. The walls are covered in portraits of guitars, warped in vibrant shades of blue and orange. Each painting is signed in the bottom right corner, not legible from the bed. Floral sheets and a thick comforter, two more clues that he is not in his apartment, cement Mikhail in place. What did I do last night? he thinks.

“Fuck,” Michelle says from across the room.

Mikhail can barely make her out. She sits in a red chair in the corner of the room, a chair he does not recognize. It is large, comically so. Red velvet seems to engulf her body. Girl and chair as one entity.

Where did that chair come from? he thinks.

After the hibachi place last night, neither of them felt like doing anything so they ended up at Michelle’s place. They’ve been dating three months but their relationship has progressed rather slow, due to Michelle’s religious upbringing. Last night was their first sleeping night together.

They had met in college, through mutual friends. She was the first girl who had taken a liking to Mikhail who didn’t shy away after he told her about his condition. She hadn’t seen him die before, though.

“I was hoping you were really dead,” she says. “But what are the chances, you know?” Her eyes, red and puffy, lock on to Mikhail’s, a fact he feels more than knows as the edges of the world dance, the pale skin and the red fabric of the chair shifting over one another.

Mikhail bites his tongue. Metaphorically. His jaw is still too heavy to move. His head pounds, more blood rushes through veins, but he needs a couple of minutes to let it all pass.

“I thought I could handle this, could handle you. . .”

“Dying?” The word rubs his raw throat from diaphragm to mouth. Mikhail realizes he is thirsty.

She nods her head, shakes it, and places it in her hands all in one motion. “But it’s more than the dying. Your brain’s rotting, Mik.”

“Chelle,” he croaks. He feels her name move through his tightened throat.

“It’s not right.” She whips her head from her hands.

Mikhail’s stiff body loosens only to tense up again. “Can’t. Help. It.”

“I think you need to leave,” she says. She tears her eyes away from him, fixing them on one of his shoes.

“But. Chelle.”

“Just go, Mikhail.”

Mikhail lifts himself up by his neck. The strain feels good, but he knows he’ll pay for it later. His legs heavy but solid, work their way to the edge of the bed where they drop to the floor, one thud after the other. “Could. Use. Help,” he says. He gestures his eyes toward the scattered clothes around the room.

She doesn't budge. She curls up even tighter, her forehead rests on her knees. She's wrapped a rosary around her hands. "Why did you have to be one of them?" she says, more to her shins than to him.

He wants to wince. He pulls himself off the bed by his neck, his legs barely hold the weight. He lumbers over to the bedpost to retrieve his pants and slip them on. Already, he is exhausted.

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Mikhail frequents a cafe in midtown, a place that survives somehow despite not having a name. It's an old brick building, possibly an old bank, that's been repurposed and refitted with retro furniture not fitting the age of the building. Green plastic seats that swivel, Formica tables, unframed records dot the walls. He does not come here for the atmosphere. The rush of the morning world makes him want to vomit. But coffee speeds up the revival process, and the coffee here passes for cheap.

"Mikhail," he hears as he stands in the entrance, willing his legs to move. He spots a friend, Barry, sitting at a window table.

Somehow Mikhail makes it to the unoccupied chair across from Barry, where he throws his one-hundred-fifty pounds down all at once, the hard plastic seat collecting him like a bucket.

"Rough morning, eh? What's the occasion?"

Mikhail groans.

"Want me to fetch you something? Adrenaline shot? Defibrillator?" Barry pauses. "Coffee?"

Mikhail gives him a look.

"Let's start with coffee," Barry says, rising from the table.

Mikhail turns away from the bustle of the shop, the hissing of nozzles and the sizzle of steam and looks out the window. A group of twenty or so protesters have gathered in the street just outside the cafe, members of various religions who somehow view the existence of reviving dead as a threat to their doctrine. Protests have been popping up in cities around the country. They call for government sanctions against those with the disorder, that they be identified and given reservations somewhere away from society. Mikhail had laughed when he found out, “Gladly, get me out of here.” Michelle had shot him a look. Her parents had been swept up in the movement.

Signs stick out over the heads of these twenty individuals, brightly colored letters reflecting the early sun. “Only Jesus Revives,” reads one in the hands of a man whose remaining hair is more white than silver. “Better Dead than a DeadHead” reads another. A young blonde girl, not even six, hesitates before the crowd, a small sign in her hands, “Death to the Undead.” She looks around and seems puzzled, but her mother drags her into the crowd and Mikhail feels worse. More people begin to show up, each with their own signs, some with flyers or pamphlets that Mikhail can’t make out from his seat in the cafe. They liken those with the disorder to Hollywood zombies, depict them as monstrous and raging just under the skin. A number of religious organizations went so far as to retroactively diagnose mass shooters and serial killers as “Deaders” to further their call for separation. None of their claims were backed by evidence.

“The rabble at it again?” Barry says, placing a Styrofoam cup on the table. It’s covered in brown and white swooshes that remind Mikhail of a brand of hot chocolate that his mother used to make him as a child. Before he heard his doctor say “Death-Sleep Syndrome,” to his parents when he was fourteen, a bit early for the condition to manifest, but not unheard of. “What’s eating you, man?” Barry says. “You’re not one to let these

guys get to you.” He lets a few coins fall to the table. Mikhail waits for the jingling to stop.

“Michelle kicked me out this morning,” he says. He grasps the coffee cup with both hands, his movement shaky, and manages to take a short sip.

“This morning? You dog.” Barry sips from his own Styrofoam cup and Mikhail wonders if coffee has the same effect on him. “Why?” He takes up a quarter in his hands and spins it on the table.

Mikhail shrugs, “I fell asleep?” He gulps his coffee now. The heat and pain are immediate. “It was her first time.”

“You dog!”

“No. Idiot. Seeing me. Like that.”

“Oh,” Barry says. “How’d she take it?”

Mikhail raises his right eyebrow. “Devout Catholic sleeps with guy who dies shortly after. You tell me.” The quarter spins across the table in circles.

“There’s some hypocrisy there.”

“She’s not on trial. I didn’t mean it that way.”

Barry winces. “Thought you two were closer than that. You’re Michelle and Mikhail.”

Mikhail shakes his head. “I know.” He takes another swig of coffee, letting the warm liquid fill his cheeks, just now regaining a bit of their color. The quarter wobbles, begins its descent with ringing clinks. “I honestly don’t know what to do.”

“Well it can’t end like this,” Barry says, “remember karaoke night at Mick Head’s?”

Mikhail does, but he does not acknowledge it.

“We signed you guys up for a duet, man. ‘Afternoon Delight.’ At midnight. It was a riot.” He’s all smiles.

They had been drinking that night, a lot, a celebration for surviving a particularly rough week (though every week is particularly rough) and they were both a bit too out of their skulls to decline being volunteered. Michelle had never heard the song before. Her face grew red mid-song when the subject matter dawned on her, which only led to more laughter from the table. But she had kept singing, glancing every so often to Mikhail with those big eyes, that drank him in, through the gentle red of her cheeks, through the soft forest of her freckles.

“I will not let this be the end of M&M,” Barry says. “Nuh-uh, no way.”

Mikhail’s heart beats faster. “What do you propose?” He cracks his neck to release some of its stiffness. The coin’s ringing echoes in his head, even though it has stopped. Sounds tend to get stuck in his head, a side effect of his brain reteaching itself to hear each morning.

“I’ll talk to Jules,” Barry says. Jules is Michelle’s best friend.

The Styrofoam cup is empty in Mikhail’s hands. He does not put it on the table, instead he eyes the quarter. “What’s going to happen now?”

Barry shrugs. “I’m not sure, man, this is uncharted territory. I mean, she’s accepting of Jules despite her proclivities.”

“She’s gay, that’s all. Not exactly as big as dying every so often.”

“Being gay is one thing, but Jules stays at a different girl’s house each night and you know it. They roomed together at one point, you know? Point is, the group can accept this too, man. Michelle especially. Since, you know, love or whatever.”

The protester parade continues to march past the coffee shop, the signs' slogans recycled after the first few people or so. A man in a priest's cassock has strapped a sign the size of his torso to his body. "God Hates ZZZombies."

Mikhail snatches up the quarter. "Somehow, I think this may be different," he says.

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A day and some change passes before Mikhail hears from anyone. A much larger protest unfolds, with marches on the Capitol. A million strong for separation. Mikhail has watched it unfold on the news, under blankets despite the dry air. A governor comes out as a sufferer of the disorder and calls others to join together to form some sort of organization for representation. The White House still hasn't released a statement concerning the disorder, deciding to ignore the fraction of the population altogether. It's not like we don't still have rights, Mikhail thinks. Just don't get found out.

He hasn't left the apartment or bathed since getting in from the cafe. When his phone rings, he picks up without seeing who's calling.

"We're going out tonight." It's Jules, he can tell by her voice. "And I mean you too."

"What's even open?" he says, "seems like everything's tearing itself apart."

"What are you talking about? Look, just be at the Spotted Dick around 8."

"Gay bar?"

"Pub themed night club. Union jacks on the walls. Ales. Fish and chips. The whole British shebang," she says and hangs up without saying goodbye. But that's Jules though. Her life is too fast for goodbyes. Or news, it seems, Mikhail thinks.



“It’s only called a Union Jack if it’s on a ship,” he says into the dead connection. He tosses the phone aside, but it slides off the couch and falls to the tile floor. Bits of glass shatter from underneath the screen. “Shit.”

It’s six now, so Mikhail showers and changes into something less sweatpants and sleeveless and more “going out.” He thinks looking nice is paramount for the success of whatever plan Jules might have hatched. The illusion that nothing has changed. He settles for a solid blue button up and khaki shorts, a mix between formal and casual, but he struggles with matching up the buttons. He abandons the shirt, considers not going, when he hears his phone vibrating on the hardwood floor in the other room.

He walks over to it and sees Barry’s broken face smiling between the cracks. He picks up the phone and watches more shards fall from the broken screen. He cuts his thumb as he answers it. “Go with the red polo and jeans,” Barry says and Mikhail pauses to wonder how long Barry has been psychic.

He sucks the blood from his thumb. “Will it work?” he asks.

“I’m a man of my word,” Barry says. “Just show up.” He hangs up.

Mikhail places the phone on the table and walks back to his closet to search for the magic red polo. He spots it in the corner, behind a graphic t-shirt advertising x-ray specs, a shirt Michelle hated.

What’s so magical about the red polo, he wonders, but he slips it off the coat hanger and slides it over his head. He goes to check how the shirt fits in the bathroom mirror, but he can’t get past the dark circles under his eyes. They’ve only grown darker and somewhere he knows that they won’t stop darkening until the skin starts to chip away due to the strain.

He saw a special on the discovery channel, he can't remember the title, but it had an exclamation in it, about what would happens to people with the condition over time. The skin dries out and cracks, especially around the eyes, and no amount of moisturizer can fix it. His brain will slow down at some point, the reviving process taxes it every time and sometime after that he'll stop moving. The protesters would paint him in blood and have him be a monster when the truth is closer to a coma patient, painted in his own drool.

He moves back to the other room, sits back on the couch wrapping one of the blankets around his bare legs, and watches another hour of news.

The phone buzzes on the table. Mikhail hears it, but he cannot move. The ceiling is blurry, his head throbs. He blinks and his eyelids are stiff. The blinks are long and his eyes roll back into his head, refusing to focus. The news has ended, replaced by another edition of America's favorite game show, although it seems as though the game changes week to week.

Mikhail throws his arm at the phone. The lumbering mass of flesh collides with the shattered screen, but he doesn't feel it. Somehow this answers the phone. He hears the loud chatter of the bar scene in the background, all laughter and outbursts. "Where the hell are you, man?" Barry says. "You're missing a hell of a night." The background noise lessens and it's clear Barry has stepped away from the group. "Michelle is here. She asked about you. Man, she still cares."

Mikhail moves his mouth to speak, but his lips won't form the words, his tongue slaps around his teeth. He manages a grunt.

“Oh, man, you fell asleep?” Barry says. “Dude, really?”

Mikhail grunts again.

“Shit,” Barry says, and by his volume Mikhail realizes he’s dropped the phone to his side. He hears Barry’s footsteps, hears him forcing his way across a dance floor, the music loud and blaring, but Mikhail can’t make out the words. It gets quiet again and then there’s giggling, the soft sound of lips meeting other lips. Barry clears his throat.

“What?” Jules says, her voice distant.

“We got a code black,” Barry says.

“Excuse me?”

“A sleeper agent, Jules, we got a situation.”

“Seriously? He couldn’t make it out? After all the hoop jumping I did to get Michelle out of her funk?”

“Hey, I’m sure he appreciates it, heck I know I do.” Glasses clink in the background. Mikhail tries to upright himself; he’s fallen partway over the right side of the couch.

“Look, I don’t like lying to people, it’s just not my thing. I don’t thrive on falsity,” Jules says. “You ever stop and think, maybe, Mik’s just too much trouble?”

The conversation silences and for a second Mikhail thinks his hearing’s gone, but it’s more likely that Barry realized he was still on the line and hung up. Mikhail lunges from the couch to the ground where he lands with a loud thud. His body tingles and he manages to roll himself back and forth. Movement helps blood circulation. After a few minutes of rolling, he’s able to move one of his arms. He picks up the phone and finds the call has not been dropped; he’s just been placed on hold.

His phone makes a beep and Michelle's broken face pops up on the screen. Mikhail has never figured out how to use the call waiting feature on his phone and the condition of both his phone and brain do not add any particular insight to this problem. He rubs his phone across the screen, but the screen goes black. He tries again, and again, but the phone's no longer buzzing. The screen refuses to light up. He throws it across the room.

Mikhail flips to his stomach and tries to push off the ground with his one working arm. He falls with a thud, and he grunts in pain. Pain is good, he thinks. He repeats the attempt, getting a bit further off the ground before falling again, this time the pain spreads over more of his body. He breathes in deep and exhales. The third attempt gets him on his knees through the use of his other arm. This is the fastest he has regained use of his extremities.

He tries to speak, to reason, but it's all mashed potatoes in his head. His stomach gurgles and he doesn't know if he's hungry or sick. Useless, he thinks, I am the definition.

A few minutes later he has worked his legs out from behind him, his arms brace against the floor. He pushes off the hardwood floor and takes a step. The step holds. He's upright.

The earlier dry air has turned cool, Mikhail's upper body shivers, his legs still numb. He throws them forward anyway, hoping that they catch his body. He reaches the door, turns the handle, and throws it open. The hallway is cooler than his apartment, a small gust blows past his legs, upward to his groin. Mikhail realizes he isn't wearing pants.

“Ohhh,” he hears as he turns to fix this. An elderly lady stands in the hall just outside his door. He doesn’t recognize her, but she’s staring at him. Her gaze is not on his shirt.

He tries to apologize to the woman and close the door, but all that comes out his mouth is a low-gurgle and his legs fail him as he turns. He falls to the floor. A dull pain floats to his head.

The woman’s eyes widen, she lets out a small gasp. She whispers, “Deader” and repeats it. She’s chanting by the time Mikhail has picked himself up again. He throws himself at the door and slams it shut, collapsing against it.

“Bitch,” he croaks. He returns to his closet, stumbling and dragging his body. Jeans. Shorts. Slacks. He settles on jeans. He can feel his heart in his chest, in his legs, in his thumbs. He breathes in deep, walks back into the other room and picks up his phone, the screen still shattered. The screen lights up now. Of course it does, he thinks. But there’s been no new message. He moves toward the door, opens it, the woman is still there, chanting. She points at him now, her shrunken eyes tightening, but he walks around her, into the elevator, down onto the street.

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The Spotted Dick is in the warehouse district, a building that isn’t anything for too long before it’s something else. A nondescript building, four or so grey brick walls with big high windows, all stained black on purpose. From the outside, Mikhail feels the pounding music in his shins. He normally brings earplugs to these kinds of places, blaming a birth defect that left him with sensitive ears, but he’s forgotten them. The headache is instant.

Barry is just outside the door, smoking.

“Those things will kill you,” Mikhail growls.

“Says one already dead.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.”

Barry smiles. Mikhail feels sick.

“Glad you’re here, man,” Barry says.

“So what’s the plan?”

Barry flicks the cigarette onto the ground and sighs. “Man, we’re getting older,” he says. “We’ve tried resisting it, buddy. You and me both. But aren’t you tired?”

Mikhail gives him a look.

“Yes, exactly, you’re tired. I’m tired. Michelle’s tired. Jules is the only one with energy and that’s because she’s addicted to poppers, uppers, and Zumba.”

“I’d always suspected Jules’ crippling Zumba addiction,” Mikhail says.

Barry shakes his head. “Shut up, man, I’m pontificating.”

“You’re stalling, asshat, get to the point.”

“Point is, there is no plan.”

“Now wait a min—”

“There is no plan, Mikhail. There’s people. There’s you and Michelle. M&M. This isn’t the grade school fucking playground. You don’t have cooties, you have Dead-Sleep Syndrome. So does like, one tenth of the population. It’s not that big of a deal, man.” Barry moves away, walks back inside with a quick step, nodding at the bouncer.

Mikhail wishes he smoked.

“Rough night?” the bouncer asks. He’s a big guy in a long sleeve shirt despite the warm night. The sleeves conform to his arms, muscled, solid. Tree branch arms on an oak tree of a man.

Mikhail nods, then winces, a sudden pain in his neck.

The bouncer pulls out a pill bottle from his back pocket. “I recognize that look,” he says, “someone just woke up.” He uncaps the bottle and shakes out a tablet, red and shiny, and Mikhail wonders why all pain medication is red. “Extra strength,” the bouncer adds, handing the pill over.

Mikhail takes the pill and forces it down and even though it shouldn’t taste like anything, a sweetness washes through him. He steps to move inside.

“Wait now,” the bouncer says, extending an arm. His hand is flat as sheetrock. “Ratio’s a bit skewed up in there, too many blokes,” he says. “I have to call them blokes here, can you believe that?”

“Look, it’s important I get in there,” Mikhail says, “there’s this gir—”

“And she’s one of like twenty, man, meanwhile there’s like fifty or so blokes. Either bring in some lasses or move your asses. Well, ass.”

“You just let my friend in, like, not even a minute ago.”

The bouncer shrugs. “Barry’s good people.”

Of course the bouncer knows Barry by name.

By now, a line has formed behind Mikhail and some loud mouthed “blokes” wonder aloud what the holdup is, not at all to themselves. Mikhail brings out his wallet, takes out a five and tries to slip it to the bouncer.

“Sorry, sonny,” the bouncer says. “American dollar’s a bit weak compared to the British pound.”

“Is that even true?” Mikhail asks.

The bouncer shrugs again while accepting an extra five. He steps aside and allows Mikhail to pass. Inside, the music shakes Mikhail’s body. His ears ring and he struggles

to focus and he can't believe there's this many people attracted to whatever a pub themed nightclub could offer. It's dark, too dark to make out any of the flags or paraphernalia, if there is any. He has to give the owners credit though, the bright spotlights flashing around are only red, blue, and white. Literally the least they could have done, but enough in Mikhail's mind to warrant the name.

Mikhail pushes his way through the jumping people forest, searching for the outer ring, where there are booths for sitting. Where he thinks Michelle and the others might be if they are together. Thinking of Michelle makes the girls around him morph into her, long haired silhouettes bouncing, their hair spreads, flying. He's surrounded by blonde birds, only visible in the interval bright whites. He ducks, swatting his arm out as a clump of hair falls toward him and his hand gets tangled, strands of hair catching on his wristwatch.

"Fucking ow," he thinks he hears, "what the hell?" and he struggles to free himself, but he can't see.

In the distance, he thinks he hears his name, but he doesn't look up in fear of being seen with his arm lodged in a stranger's hair. He feels a hand on his shoulder, shaking him and Michelle is over him. "Mikhail," she shouts. "I didn't know you were here."

He notices her noticing his predicament, but her face shows no reaction. Her hands swoop between the strands of hair and his watch, separating without pulling and he's free not long after.

"Let's not talk about it," she says.

"I haven't heard a word you've said," Mikhail shouts.

She pulls him by the sleeve of his red polo toward the outer ring.



The music is softer here. Not quiet, but softer. She leads him to an empty booth, used glasses of mixed drinks still on the table, their bottoms surrounded by wet rings. The table is a dark wood, but the surface is covered in postcards from the UK.

“The tables are tacky, I know,” Michelle says. “I feel very American in here.”

Mikhail laughs, “Yeah, no fear of losing my passport.”

She shrugs. Mikhail watches her shrug, her shoulders moving up and dropping, her head rises and falls. “So,” she says.

Mikhail’s been thinking of what to say to her, he’s been thinking ever since he stepped around the old woman in the hallway of his apartment. He wants to apologize but knows it won’t be enough, or that it won’t matter, or that she’ll be accepting of him no matter what. He’s trapped between the “ors” and he settles on just greeting her, complimenting how nice she looks, but when he opens his mouth he says, “We’ve only been dating four months.”

“I know,” Michelle says.

“I mean, how much can a person learn in four months?”

“A guy I grew up with became fluent in Chinese in four months. But he was living in Hong Kong at the time.” She pauses. “I don’t think that counts.”

“Chelle, I’m being serious.”

“I can tell.”

Mikhail sighs, “Look, maybe we just need some space.”

“Maybe,” Michelle says. “Ask me about my day.”

Mikhail shakes his head, but relents. “How was your day?”

“Interesting. Went to a protest.”

“Do you want to hurt me?” Mikhail says. “Like, we can skip the talk and break out knives if you want. Settle this in the streets.”

“Were you always this violent? Is that the dead in you talking?”

Mikhail takes his phone out of his pocket, looking for a distraction. He feels like he might catch on fire.

“What happened to your phone?” she asks. “You break it in a fit of rage?”

“Do you think I’m a monster?”

She shrugs again, but her head doesn’t bounce this time. Her eyes stop right at his skin tonight. The forest of freckles doesn’t do it for him. They’re just dots. Mutations of skin pigment. “I think you’re an idiot,” she says.

“I’m a freckle.”

Michelle’s face is blank, like she didn’t hear him. He no longer wishes to pursue this conversation. The music fades and another song picks up not soon after. People dance in the center, they move to the bar to drink, they sit down in the adjacent booths. Some leave. More enter. The night, despite the late hour, is far from over. Somewhere, Jules talks to a bartender, a challenge to get her phone number from some of the regular guys. Or at least this is what Mikhail invents as he watches her from the booth. He bounces his right leg.

“I’m getting out of here,” he says.

Michelle calls out to him as he stands.

“What?” he says, “have another joke for me?” He mimics her voice, “Where are you going, got a child to eat?” The little blonde girl from two days ago flashes through his head. He slams his hand on the table, palm open.

Michelle recoils from the sound, and Mikhail smiles at getting a reaction out of her. She lowers her head, studying the postcards.

Barry appears at Mikhail's side without making a sound. "How's everything over here?" he says. Michelle won't look up and Mikhail doesn't stop staring at her.

"I was just leaving," Mikhail says. "I think I'm done." But he doesn't move. "I think you guys won't see me again for a while," he adds. "If that's what's going to work best." He waits. "Is it?" He moves closer to Michelle's face, smells her perfume, some combination of lavender or vanilla, he can't tell. "Is that what's going to work?" he says, louder.

Michelle is a statue, her eyes fixated on a city shot of London at night, the Eye lit up.

Barry wedges himself between the two, "Hey, hey," he says. "Let's not draw attention to ourselves."

"I'm leaving," Mikhail says again. He steps away from Michelle, still watching. "Well?" he says.

"If that's what you want," Michelle says.

Mikhail walks away, the bouncer at his back. He feels the eyes of the people forest move toward him, illuminated in red and blue. The music moves through him, forces itself in through his ears. He'll remember this song for a couple of months. It'll crop up as he's falling asleep, when he's on the bus to work at the library. He doesn't hear the words, but the rhythm and the tune fester inside of him, they'll make him feel like he's forgotten something. He walks out the door of the club, into a night of open signs no longer lit.

## THREE HEARTS

James Greene opens the front door to his house. His wife, Claire, stands behind him. She's smaller than he's ever known her to be, her arms hugging the sides of her black dress as if she could break apart. An alarm sounds and James moves to pound the numbers into the keypad, remembering each digit, 0-5-2-3. His finger is slow to press each button, the alarm fades as quickly as it started. They are returning from burying their son.

"I don't want to go in there," Claire says.

James nods. He takes her hand and pulls her close, opening his arms to embrace her. "I can't promise you that it will be alright," he says into her light-brown curls, cut short so they stop at the middle of her neck. "Nothing about this is."

"Stepping through that door is admitting something I don't think I can handle." She pulls herself away from him to look him in his eyes, a soft blue. He looks tired in her eyes, but she doesn't look exactly rested in his.

He moves to put his arm around her. "It's time to go home."

She accepts his arm around her, allows him to gently guide her through the door. She'd be crying, she realizes, if she wasn't so tired.

The soft clicking of a dog's paws ring out in the big empty living room, not yet lit. The clicking pauses as James flips a switch, illuminating the room. A small dog stretches his leg in the doorway to the hall, his front legs thrown in front of him as if he is reaching for them. His tail wags slowly, swatting the air above him. His eyes are half open, half blinded by the sudden appearance of light, but he sees these two new people all the same and he's happy now that he isn't alone in this place with large empty rooms.

Claire looks at the dog. "I want him out," she says.

James nods, but he doesn't move. He knows it's not a serious request.

"I can't bear to look at him." She continues.

She's being dramatic. Emotional, even.

"Get him out of my sight."

The dog finishes stretching with a grunt and trots over to Claire. He's a trotter and prancer, this dog. He's pranced around the three short days he's been here. Their son had bought the dog his first year of college, or he found it on the side of the road. James can't remember and he knows asking Claire about it wouldn't produce positive results. But their son only brought the dog home once, later choosing to leave it with a friend or Jenny because it got carsick easy and with the commotion of the past few days, James hadn't actually had a chance to look at the dog, to see it. It is small, mostly white with one large black spot on its back. James wonders what kind of name a dog like this could have, but it doesn't have a collar.

The dog looks up at Claire, big eyes and floppy ears, his tail never stops wagging.

The dog barks hello.

Claire flinches. "I mean it," she says, recollecting herself. "It's not staying here."

James pulls his arm from around her and she walks off toward the back. The dog moves toward the backyard door. It's been hours and he needs to go out. He lets out a soft whine and stomps a foot on the mat.

James stares at him, his deceased son's dog.

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A week later at breakfast, Claire brings up Jenny again. Jenny was their son's girlfriend in college. She's a young thing, two years younger than their son was, but nice and sweet like a young college girl should be, in Claire's mind. She cared for their son.

At the funeral reception, Jenny had made a point of talking with Claire. Claire appreciated it, but noted that Jenny was dry eyed. Claire has mixed feelings about her. “She says she would be willing to take the dog,” she says over a cup of yogurt, the Greek kind with the real bits of fruit mixed in.

James grunts through his newspaper.

“I’m just saying, it’s a possibility.” Her spoon stabs at the yogurt, not quite scooping anything. “I mean she’s already familiar with it.”

The dog lies under the table, looking up through the glass surface as he has every morning since the funeral. He lets out a low growling sigh.

James puts the paper on the table and stands. He walks over to the pantry, where a large bag of dog food sits on its side on the floor. He takes a red plastic cup, the same kind in so many pictures of his son from college, and scoops a half a cup of the brown kibbles. He walks over to the corner of the kitchen nearest his seat at the table and pours the food into a small yellow bowl.

The dog perks his ears up and lifts his head slightly. James walks back to the pantry, placing the plastic cup next to the bag on the floor. The dog lifts himself from the cool floor under the table and creeps his way toward the bowl. He sniffs the food for a while and even licks a kibble or two before exhaling harshly and turning away.

Claire watches his every action with an invested dislike. “It won’t even eat,” she says.

“He’ll eat when he’s ready,” James says. He sits at the table again and reclaims the newspaper. His eyes scan over the words, but none of them stand out.

The dog walks to the backyard door again, but neither of them notice. He looks at this couple, newly broken, but doesn’t understand what he sees. He knows he misses

someone. Someone whose smell dances faintly through the air. He needs to go outside, though. He waits there a minute before lifting his right front leg and pushing it down, so that the mat moves across the floor just a bit. It makes a sound.

James lifts his head from the jumble of words, some half-hearted review of a new horror movie, to see the dog standing by the door. "Wasn't he an inside dog?" he says.

Claire doesn't look up from her yogurt. "I wouldn't know."

Or maybe she doesn't want to, James thinks. The dog notices James looking at him. He wags his tail and moves forward a little. He sees James stand up and walk over to backyard door, and dances out of the way, his hind legs bouncing softly as he circles around James. The door opens and the dog stares out at the paved porch and the small in-ground pool. He sniffs the outside air and raises his ears. As if he's searching. But he doesn't go out.

"Well, go on," James says. The dog doesn't look at him though. He continues to sniff, but he doesn't move toward the open door. "Go," James says.

The dog looks up at him, startled slightly by the force of the voice and he backs up slightly. He doesn't tilt his head to one side, like the dogs in the commercials and for some reason this irritates James. "Come on, you wanted to go out," James says.

"It can't understand you, dear," Claire says. "It's just an animal." But she doesn't believe the words she's just said.

"Will you shut up a moment," he says. It's not a question because he knows she won't. "You're confusing him every time you talk."

Claire throws her chair back, knocking back the shelf full of cookbooks. A few books fall to the floor with loud thuds, but she's storming across the living room toward

James, each foot stomps hard on the tiled floor. She doesn't look at him she passes him and he feels the rush of air pass him, angry.

James points out the door. The dog looks at his finger. He wags his tail, but doesn't move. "I think we'll have to teach him how to live here," James says to the empty room. He closes the door and the dog looks at him, not tilting his head.

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The dog develops a routine over the next few days, James, newly retired, notices. He spends his days sleeping, probably from the long stretches he'd be left alone. He came with two baskets, as if one hadn't been enough for him as small as he is. But it seems to work for him. He spends the day in the beige one in the living room, in between Claire's and James's chairs. At night, he follows James into the master bedroom, where he sleeps in the brown basket with a blue-bottomed cushion.

Right now, he's curled up in the living room, between the chairs. James is watching the evening news as Claire reads the book she borrowed from the library. She places the book in her lap to stretch her neck and the dog catches her eye.

"Well isn't it just the little prince?" Claire says. The dog looks up at her, lifting his head slightly. His ears fold back and he licks his lips. "And what do you want?" she says, "looking at me like that?"

Their son had brought the dog home when he first bought it. He was smaller then, and more energetic; he would have jumped up and run over to Claire because she made noises at him and she'd pet him and he'd try to lick her face or hand to her dismay. It was a game they'd play, a game he was good at, but he doesn't move now. Something in her tone makes him stay curled up. But he continues to watch, not putting his head down.

"Hmph," she says. "It must be getting old. All it does is sleep now."



“What else is there to do?” James says. “Let him sleep.”

The dog looks at James when he talks. His tail starts wagging, although he doesn't know why. It's been quiet the past few days. Hearing their voices makes him happy.

“Why do you defend him? It's just a stupid dog.”

James doesn't answer. Eventually, the commercials come on and he mutes the television. “I'm sorry that you don't like him here,” James says. “I know it must be hard seein—”

“Jenny would be happy to take it,” she says. “We've been emailing back and forth. She'd probably love to have it. Not hard to take care of, since it just sleeps all day.”

James doesn't respond with words. Instead, he stares at her.

“She's coming to town soon, too. It would be the perfect opportunity to hand it over.” She wants James to see this for the blessing that it is. To remove this reminder from their lives, to move on. She's worried about James. He hasn't left the house in a while. And he's been talking to himself more and more lately. She hasn't voiced this concern, though. She doesn't want to push James, though. Everyone needs their time to grieve.

“Well?” she says.

“Oh, am I allowed to talk now?” James says. “Or are you going to interrupt?”

Claire opens her book, reaching for a wine glass on the end table between them. She takes a large sip and swallows without giving the wine time to breathe in her mouth, the way she had learned during their honeymoon in Napa Valley. He has chosen to get angry instead of listen and so Claire disengages completely.

The news flashes back on, but the mute setting doesn't go off. James is staring at her. Daring her to not continue the conversation.

The dog lowers his head so that it rests on the edge of the basket.

“Look,” James says, “I realize he reminds you of—” but he can’t bring himself to finish his sentence. She’s looking in her book, but her eyes aren’t moving. The book is a shield. Or maybe he is projecting. Maybe he wishes he had a shield. He doesn’t know. “Point is, we’re keeping the dog.”

James looks at the dog, whose eyes are closed now without warning. His back raises with deep breaths.

“One day,” Claire says, her eyes still trained on the book. “One day you won’t be here. And I’ll take the dog for a ride. Somewhere far. And when I get back, the house will be empty. And we can move on.”

James turns off the TV and the dog’s eyes shoot open. He picks his head up as James stands. James knows she’s not serious. It’s not quite a joke, somewhere between the realm of want and wish. He wonders what the dog would think, if he could understand.

The dog looks at him, his neck craning up. Eventually, he lowers his head and James moves in front of Claire, who doesn’t look away from her book. He stands in front of her, watches her as she pretends to read despite never turning a page. Is he breathing heavily? He can’t tell or he doesn’t care. He wants to see into her mind or throw his thoughts into her head. So she’d hear him.

“I’m going to bed,” she says but doesn’t move. The dog jumps up, hearing “bed.” His tail wags as he trots over with bouncing legs to stand by James.

No one moves. Claire stares at her book, James watches Claire, and the dog swivels his head between both, his tail in constant motion.

James starts giving the dog a treat for going outside. “It’s how you train them,” he says to the empty room. “Give them a treat after they do something and they’ll do it again expecting the treat. Positive reinforcement. Works on humans too.” He used to explain so many things during his son’s visits. The work he did around the house, fixing things with his newfound time and sudden discovery of “How To” videos on YouTube. Now he can’t seem to stop himself, much to Claire’s distaste.

The dog has stopped lingering by the open door to the outside, now motivated by the promise of a treat. Even just the word “treat” promotes an obvious response in him. A lick of the lips and an increase in both tail wags and prancing. Excited little dances with his small pointed head facing up. The ritualistic prayers of a dog.

“The trick,” James says, standing by the door looking down at the dog, “is knowing when to stop giving the treat.” He pauses to allow for questions. The sign of a good listener. “Yes, you stop giving treats at a certain point. No one should get rewarded for doing what they are supposed to do.”

Claire walks in on him and grimaces, but passes through without glancing at either of them. He feels a bit foolish, and the dog takes off after her. She’s headed in the same direction as the treats.

He jumps on her backside, his unclipped nails forcefully landing on her bare legs.

She doesn’t cry out in pain, but in anger. “Get off,” she says, “Stop following me.” She swats at his legs but he moves them before she hits. He wags his tail and throws his front legs out in front of him, slamming them on the floor. He thinks she wants to play. “Why are you so needy?” she says. “I think I could handle you being here if you weren’t right behind me every second.”

The dog doesn't recognize any of her words and his arms are getting tired. He's used to someone dropping to all fours and slamming their hands on the ground. He'd mimic the noise and add a growl or two. But she doesn't seem to be interested in getting on all fours and he starts to forget why he's doing this. He drops to the floor, sitting like the sphinx, his tail lightly sweeping the floor.

"You're just an animal," she says.

James stands by the back door. "And you're in pain," he says.

She doesn't look at him, but he knows he's right even without seeing her face.

"Face it," he says, "he reminds you of our son. So much so, you can't stand him here."

"You think you're some sort of detective?" she says, walking over to him. "I've been saying that for weeks now, genius." Her face is inches away from his, the space between them filled by shared breaths. "And you," she says still talking to James, "talking to yourself every hour of the day, explaining every little concept you've read online from idiots just like you, trapped at home with nothing to do. Read a book, watch a movie. Go somewhere, anywhere, just to get out the house. Just stop talking to the dog like it's—it can't understand you, why can't you see that? It's a dumb animal not capable of . . . it can't. . ." She cries. "It's not the same," she manages to get out, but her face is elongated in sorrow. It looks painful, and James feels invisible, his insides prickle like a fire of metal toothpicks.

"I'm in pain too," he says after a while.

"What, you think I don't know this?" Her crying stops. "You think I've been wallowing around blind and deaf? You're driving yourself, and me, crazy with the jabbering you do, jabbering you never did before. If you explain one more goddamned

thing, I think I'd have to pull my hair out." Her voice is loud and fast. "And you think you can go around just telling me what I'm feeling? Like that's going to solve anything? Like you can explain away our pain just by naming it? What are you?"

James can't respond, he has no words left for her. The two stand there, staring at each other's faces, neither really seeing the other. Claire sees her son, staring back at her, older and with a fuller beard that needs to be dyed every so often to keep up an illusion of some shred of youth. James sees a mother without a child and soft eyes, so very soft, as if they will shatter if they look too hard. Neither of them say what they see.

"Guys," the dog says. "I have been listening for the past few days, listening to your words and noises. I am sorry."

The two look at the dog, together. One sees a playful energetic scamp full of love and happiness, a pair of blissful eyes staring back at her, wide. The other sees a connection to something lost, somehow vague but utterly specific in a way he can't begin to comprehend.

"I am sorry for anything I have done in this hard time," the dog says. "I cannot find him. I smell him everywhere and it makes me sad. When I dream, I dream of sleeping next to him, curled up at his side as his warm arms hold me, forcefully yet soft. He hand fed me, you know. Every day, he took time out of his schedule to sit with me and feed me out of his hand. I have never felt clos—"

"It won't stop barking," Claire says.

"I'll check the front door," James says, "maybe something's in the yard. He moves away from Claire, the kitchen, steps into the front room where he keeps a desk. He moves aside the curtains and stares out to the yard where he sees nothing. Well, he sees a young bradford tree that's still growing at an angle despite his efforts to right it with rope

and stakes as he had watched earlier that month on YouTube. He sees a brick mailbox, older than the house itself and grass that he should cut tomorrow, providing it doesn't rain. "Nothing out here," he says.

The dog stops barking and begins panting as he looks up at Claire.

"You thirsty?" she says.

He looks at her with those wide eyes and tongue outstretched.

She walks over to the cupboard, takes out a small cup spotted with multicolor dots. The only cup of its kind in the house. She fills the cup with water from the sink, running her hand through the stream to make sure it's cold. The dog stands up, licking his lips and watches her kneel to pour the water into a green dish. He watches her walk away, place the cup by the sink for washing later, before trotting over to the green dish. He sniffs the water, not that it has a scent, but he sniffs everything and so he sniffs the water. He cranes his neck down and begins to drink.

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James walks through the door to his house. He's been out, buying supplies that he needs to fix the washing machine, which just needs a new belt and few other replacements. He spent the morning watching just how to do it from someone in Germany who spoke English in garbled phrases. He closes the door and waits for the dog. He always runs to him when the door closes, to greet him and wag his tail. But there's no clicking of paws on the tiled floor and no soft footfalls of a dog running down the hallway. James panics. Claire's words echo in his head.

"One day," she had said.

He drops the bag of parts by the doormat and they land with multiple clinks, but he's already heading down the long hallway to the back of the house. He pokes his head

through the empty rooms, checking all the spots the dog likes to sleep. But he's not on the spare bed in the study, where he likes to curl up under the window in the slant of sunlight that somehow creeps in despite Claire's constant readjusting of the curtains.

He's not on the guest room bed either, where he likes to push the multitude of pillows that Claire insists on decorating with into a nest. With one pillow to put his nose under. James's heart beats faster. He walks to his own room, his and Claire's room, and looks at the empty basket in the corner. His eyes sweep over his bed too, just to make sure the dog wasn't feeling bold and decided to sleep on their bed. Claire would have hated that and so he is relieved that he isn't there.

James turns back down the long hallway. He pauses halfway down, by the closed door. The door that's been closed for weeks now. He had stopped noticing the door as he passed it but it's here now in front of him, like a dissipated fog. His son's room.

He turns the knob and pushes the door open. The dog couldn't be in here, he knows. He doesn't think Claire could open the door, not even to seal away the dog. And he's right. But he steps in anyway, into the threshold of his son's old room, untouched. He flips the light on, which doesn't do much but illuminate the dust, the mark of a room unchanged. Where does dust come from? he thinks. There's pictures of his son along the walls, pictures of him laughing, smiling. He's a boy, a small five year old in overalls, covered in a pile of leaves and he's the young man holding the science fair trophy in his arms like a Heisman. Short blonde hair turns to long black hair in the course of a couple of frames. But it will never fade, never turn grey and sit on a wrinkled head.

"Honey," Claire calls out from the front of the house.

"I'm here," he answers. He hears her footsteps down the hall. It feels like hours before she's standing behind him.

“Oh, here you ar—” she stops when she sees the open door and her husband beyond it.

“I was looking for the dog,” James says, his eyes wet. “I knew he wasn’t in here but I had to check.”

Claire backs away. Flashes of her son cross her eyes and she can’t handle it, but it isn’t her fault. James can’t blame her, he’s not mad at her for flinching. He steps out the room and closes the door in one motion before throwing his arms around her. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Numb, Claire stammers, “Jenny’s here. She and the dog are out back, playing.” She raises her arms to hold him back.

They stand together in the hall, within each other’s embrace for a minute before James comprehends what she says. “Well we shouldn’t keep her waiting,” he says. He takes her hand and she leads him outside.

Jenny is sitting in a black iron chair, the dog at her feet looking up. She’s petting him and talking to him as one would talk to a baby.

She looks up when she hears the door close. “Hello Mr. Greene,” she says. “Thought I was going to miss you for a second.”

“Hey Jenny,” he manages to say. He hasn’t ever talked to this girl and he doesn’t like the way she was talking to the dog. “Nice to see you.”

“Jenny’s been thinking about taking the dog,” Claire says. “We’ve been emailing.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned it,” James says. His voice is measured. He doesn’t like to show emotions in front of company. A trait of his father’s that he’s kept alive.



“Yeah, I thought I’d come see him,” Jenny says. “It’s been a while.” She turns to the dog, “And I’ve missed you so much, haven’t I? Who’s a good doggie? Who’s a good doggie?”

The dog wags his tail and pants, which makes him look like he’s smiling. “I know you!” he barks.

“An excited little fella,” Jenny says petting him.

There’s a silence. The only sound is the dog’s short, quick breaths, his tongue hanging out his mouth.

Jenny breaks the silence, “Yeah, I was just explaining to Mrs. Greene that I would love to take him with me—”

“You would be welcomed to take him,” Claire says. “We just don’t have the time to take care of a dog so young.”

Bullshit, thinks James, but he holds his tongue. If this is what she needs, she’ll have it. It will hurt him and he knows it, but he’s tired of the long conversations that end in speechlessness. “We have enjoyed having him for a while,” James manages to say.

“I was going to say,” Jenny says polite but clearly irritated, “that my apartment won’t allow pets. So I can’t.” She refuses to look at either of them. She thinks she is disappointing them, letting them down. “I can’t risk upsetting my landlord.”

James mouth is dry, he tries to exchange a glance with Claire, but she won’t look at him.

“Is it a matter of money?” she says. “We can pay for any pet deposits.”

“I’m sorry,” Jenny says, “but they just don’t allow pets like dogs or cats. College apartments and all.”

“What if you kept it secret?” Claire says. Her eyes widen, not overly so, but just enough for James to see. He remains silent. Not to suggest quiet triumph; he is shaken by how pathetic his wife’s attempts are. No enjoyment will result from this. This is not a victory.

“It’s just not possible,” Jenny says. She looks down at the dog who has stopped panting. He’s on lying on the ground, resting his head on the top of her foot. The silence returns for a while, as she sits and they stand around the table. “It’s nice seeing him,” she says. “I think I needed this. Needed to see him again.” She stands up slowly, turning to the door inside. “But I need to get going. Nice seeing you again.”

She vanishes through the door, letting herself out. She doesn’t realize what she’s done by refusing to take the dog, what her role is in a game that she can barely sense. It doesn’t stay with her, this feeling of almost being used to achieve a goal, and she continues to live her life.

But James and Claire stand at the table, stuck. James can’t bring himself to say anything and Claire is too defeated. The dog is asleep under the chair where Jenny sat. He dreams of her and of a boy that he can’t picture. He whimpers in his sleep.

“We could bring him to a shelter,” James finally offers. He wants to add a clause, to add the words, “if it’s truly necessary,” but he doesn’t. He knows that if he said those words, it would be necessary and so he keeps the words to himself, to bask in the warmth that he is willing to say those words as a sort of comfort.

Claire looks at him for the first time since she saw him in her son’s room and James realizes this will be another conversation ending in uncomfortable silence. She doesn’t look mad as when she has previously looked at him. There’s nothing in her eyes.

The dog returns that night from his evening adventures in the backyard with an expecting flurry of prancing legs and a head craned up to the heavens. The treat is all but assured in his mind. James has finally stopped offering the dog a treat for going outside. He closes the door behind the prancer and turns a key to lock it for the night.

“The sound of the lock clicking is the first sign that there will be no treat tonight,” James says. Claire sits in her chair, her head in a book. She looks up at James, her look incredulous, but she doesn’t say anything. She hasn’t said anything since Jenny left. Dinner in silence, just the sounds of forks scraping teeth.

“Then we move to the garage,” he says. He walks over to another door, the dog dancing behind him at a distance. James twists two knobs and two locks click into place. “He’s starting to realize that he won’t be getting a treat.”

The dog looks at him and licks his lips. “Treat,” he says.

“Now, now,” James says, “be patient.” The pair walk over to front door and James locks the third and final lock. He turns to the wall and flips the cover off the alarm system keypad. Soft green numbers light up to greet his gaze.

“You know,” James says, his hand hovering over the first number. 0. “If it’s too hard for you to handle looking at the dog,” he pauses to hit the second number. 5. “We should probably change this damn code.” He hits the third number. 2. “If it’s really the remembering that’s hard for you.” 3. The alarm beeps three times to notify that is armed. “After all, why would you want to be reminded of his birthday now?”

Claire is silent. She closes her book and places it on the table next to her. No wine tonight. She doesn’t breathe in deeply, she doesn’t sob softly.

When he was alive, the son had known that when his mom grew silent it was a sign of trouble. Of an argument over religious beliefs or of words half said out of anger

months ago. But Claire isn't about to argue now. She is simply silent. Her voice is quiet when she speaks. "We're going to lose him too," she says.

James stands by the alarm system mounted on the wall, but he feels the ground shift under him, pulling him closer to his wife.

"One day, he'll be gone just like. . ." She starts to cry.

James is by her side without realizing it. He collapses into her, pulling her to the floor where he can wrap his arms around her.

"It isn't fair," she says, "to have to lose again. We've done it once already when we shouldn't have."

The dog stands by the alarm. He has a gut feeling that he wouldn't like the truth of what is going on around him. He forgets he ever wanted a treat as he watches this couple, no, his family, pool on the floor as one mass. One mass of thousands of things he could never understand but instinctually responds to.

The dog walks over to Claire who is entangled in her husband's arms. He fights the urge to lick her face, nestled in the crook of James's neck, even though he could reach it so very easily. Instead, he walks over to her right knee and rests his head on it. He lets out a long sigh that drags on.

Claire pulls herself away from James to look at the dog as he finishes his sigh. "If he was here right now," she says, "he'd say 'Well. What do you want, Mr. Passive Aggressive?'"

James laughs, startled. For a second he thinks he hears his son's voice come out of Claire's mouth. "He had a way with humor," he says recollecting himself.

"Couldn't shut up to save his life though," Claire says. She grows cold after she says it. "I'm sorry," she says, "I wasn't thinking."

Despite the cold, she isn't sad. There's a brief moment where she thinks she's offended James somehow with her misguided words. She leans back into his chest waiting for what comes next, riding the rise and fall of his breath.

"That's something he'd do," James says after a while. "Remember when my mom died? He was just at that age where he didn't really know what to do around death."

"He never handled death well," Claire says. "But yeah, I remember."

"I forget what it was, the set-up, but at the reception, the same day we buried her, he hit me with one of those 'your mom' jokes without skipping a beat."

Claire laughs. "You're kidding."

"Dead serious," James says, "he didn't even realize it for a good ten seconds. The look on his face, I swear I won't forget it. Eyes wide, mouth sort of hanging open, like he wanted to take the words back but they wouldn't fit."

"What'd you do?"

"I laughed," James says. He shakes his head. "He caught me off guard and I laughed on the day of my mom's funeral. He had a knack for that."

"Making you laugh the same day of a funeral?" Claire says, but she knows that isn't what he meant.

He knows it too and doesn't answer, instead choosing to spend the moment enjoying her warmth. A new kind of silence fills the air, fresh and clean.

"I don't think he talked to me when my dad died," Claire says.

"He was a bit older then. A little less reckless, probably."

"Did he talk to anyone that day?" Claire asks.

James tries to remember but gets caught on the look on his son's face after realizing the joke. He doesn't want to move past that moment, in fear of losing it. "I don't think so," he says.

The dog is sleeping soundly now, his head slipping off Claire's knee. His neck is soft and warm on her skin. She catches his head and places it back on her knee. He stirs a bit, licks his lips and turns his head on its side.

"We should have honored his death with laughter," Claire says, staring at the dog. She doesn't know what she's saying.

James can't think of a response. He hugs her tighter.

The three of them stay like that, collapsed on the floor in a heap, each one relying on the other for support. James's back starts to ache dully. He'll have to move soon, but he doesn't. They want to stay there all night, each one of them, remembering the son.

"We could always laugh now," James says after a long while. "It isn't too late."

Claire lets out a snort. James thinks she's keen on the idea, but the snort continues into a snore. A long snore that grows louder as it drags on. It subsides into a short exhale, the ebb of an airy tide. He didn't realize how tired she was. How tired he is.

If he were alive and in this room, James would have turned to him and whispered, "And she complains about my snoring," and they would have laughed. But James would never have been on the floor, holding his wife as she slept if he were alive. And the dog wouldn't be resting his head on her knee either. And so the moment for humor fades with a twinge of sadness.

Claire begins to snore again, louder at the beginning than the last. It grows into a roar and ends abruptly with a louder cough. Claire wakes with a start, shaking out of James's arms.

She looks around confused.

“You fell asleep,” James says.

“Apparently.”

The dog, disturbed by the ruckus, lets out a low, deep groan. Agitation.

Claire laughs, slowly at first, but James joins in and so Claire laughs harder. They laugh for minutes, each one feeling great to hear joy from the other, neither remembering why they're laughing. Claire's laughter makes James laugh and his laughter makes Claire laugh harder. Claire falls out of James arms, onto the floor where she shakes and James beats the floor with his fist, trying to stop but not wanting to in earnest. The laughter builds and fills the spaces of the house that were so quiet just earlier today.

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The dog sits in his basket in the living room, recently elevated from the floor to an ottoman. “If he's going to act like a prince, he might as well have a throne,” Claire had said when she lifted the basket. He spends his mornings and afternoons here, watching over the living room between naps. The house has been still again lately, but he doesn't mind it. There's less energy in the air and less raised voices.

James is convinced he's trained the dog well. He no longer begs for treats when he comes in from the backyard. At night, he will follow James to each door, following the clicks of locks and the beeps of the alarm, but he doesn't expect anything anymore. The dog does it because James does it. When James sits down, the dog curls up in his basket on top the ottoman and goes to sleep.

But when James steps out of the room to take out his contacts or use the bathroom, Claire shuts her book and walks into the kitchen to the pantry to grab a treat.

The dog does not follow her, but waits patiently for her to bring it to him. She pets his head as she drops the treat into his basket and he licks his lips.

She sits down again and picks up her book, picking up where she left off. The dog looks at her, not tilting his head and looks down at the treat.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she says not looking up from her book. The dog bites into the treat, cracking it open and quickly chews it to bits. He finishes as James enters the room, not suspecting a thing.



## ANOTHER WORD FOR AUTUMN

Tommy doesn't know where he is or where he's going, but his knuckles are white from his stern grip on the wheel, both hands. A passing car flashes its high beams. Then another. Tommy switches on his headlights. When did it get so dark?

His phone buzzes in his pocket, which shines through his pants leg. The inside of the car lights up from the five-inch screen.

"Where are you?" Mel, his wife, writes.

They had been having a nice dinner about three hours ago when he stood up from the table and walked out on her. He got into his car and drove away. He's been driving ever since.

She'd been growing distant since she started at a new law firm. They had stopped sleeping together. First figuratively as she was too tired, then literally choosing to sleep on the couch since she had to head in early to work. The new firm was understaffed since they couldn't afford to pay anyone yet.

She left him little notes on the kitchen counter top, now granite after a large ordeal with several renovators. The notes started out simple and sweet, "I love my new counters," and "Have a good day, my Thinker." She called him that since college, since they had met and he introduced himself as a philosophy major, the name had just sort of stuck with her. Tommy saved each one of these notes, placing them in an envelope he kept on his home office desk. He had brought them to dinner that night.

He curses and tosses the phone to the passenger seat, where it bounces and lands on its face. He forgot to take the notes when he walked out. He turns up the AC,

somehow the night is as hot as the day and he realizes he's been sweating. The far passenger vent whirrs, clicks, and a few pieces of crushed leaves spill out onto the floor.

Lately the notes were informative fragments. They had become their main means of conversation around the apartment due to her long hours. "Home at ten tonight." "Record *Murder Files*." "Warm up lasagna for lunch." Tommy kept those too.

She used to laugh at his jokes, the little observations he made when they were having dinner, the waiter with the mismatched buttons in the black-tie bistro. He had a gift for timing, would point out a detail at the right time to make her laughter inappropriate. "I hate you," she'd say between breaths, when it was safe to laugh aloud.

She was the only girl he could get to laugh and he scooped her up, married her. Then she cheated on him, fucking the college kid in the apartment next door or one of her new partners at the law firm. He doesn't even know who. Tommy shakes his head. It's too trite, he thinks. Too neat. She cheated on me and I'm upset. I'm overreacting. Things could get better. I should turn around. He hadn't even confronted her.

Tonight, Tommy had planned to rekindle their relationship, to reconnect with her. He'd been reading a book, some bestseller with advice on getting what you want out of life. It said to take chances. He had brought the envelope with the notes, he planned on reading them to her, to remind her of what she used to feel, pull that back out to the surface somehow, since those feelings had to be there still, else why was she with him still?

He remembers running into Chad, one of the three guys who lived in the unit next door, coming back from the gym one afternoon. He remembered it at dinner too; it tends to pop into his head ever since it happened.

“Mr. Dewitt,” Chad had called out, he had insisted on calling him by his last name since they met, when the boys had moved in a year or so ago. “How’s it been going?”

Tommy had his key in the door, but hadn’t turned it yet, he removed himself from the door but left the key in. Chad hadn’t seemed nervous or anxious that morning. He was a good looking young man and his casual demeanor had a way of overpowering the conversation. The way he asked the question, so relaxed.

“Can’t complain,” Tommy said. He’d been coming in from the gym, his clothes still drying, and wanted nothing more but to hop in the shower. “Yourself?”

“Oh, you know. Been tired lately.” And then he said it, with a wink. “Sounds like you guys have been having fun in the mornings.” He paused after he said it, maybe as emphasis, maybe not. Tommy knows somewhere that his memory is not the moment, that his subconscious has a way of painting in small details. “Wakes me up, is all.”

“Right,” Tommy had said in that moment, “sorry, we’ll, uh, keep it down.” He turned the key, not looking, and opened the door with a “goodbye” and that had ended the conversation. Not even a minute long.

He was tipping me off, Tommy thinks. He knew. I should buy that kid a six pack. His phone buzzes again. And again. He reaches over for the phone, swiping his thumb across the screen by accident as he looks to see who’s calling.

“Thomas,” Mel says, her voice in his hand. “I thought it was funny when you didn’t come back to the table, but it’s been a couple of hours now. I had to pay for dinner, so thanks for that. Joke’s over, where are you?”

He wants to ask her. To get it out in the open. He looks at the phone, but not for too long before his eyes return to the road. He can’t forget that he’s driving.

“Did you laugh?” he asks and hangs up the phone. He stares, briefly, at the image of the two of them together at the beach, their honeymoon.

More leaves fall through the slants of the passenger side vent.

They had gone to the Bahamas. She had always wanted to and Tommy was happy enough just being with her. They tried snorkeling and he had gotten stung by something he didn't see. “Never go upright,” the guide had said, “you never know what's lurking on the seafloor,” but water had gotten into Tommy's goggles and he thought a second wouldn't hurt. Mel had laughed as she drug him back to the shore. Not at him, though. It was a kinder laugh, one that let him know that she cared about him even though he had goofed. A laugh that echoed in his mind, but one he couldn't remember without also remembering the sting in his foot. It itches now and he wishes he could scratch it through his shoe.

He throws the phone back to the passenger seat and it bounces, this time falling into the small pile of leaves on the floor.

What the hell's with these leaves, he thinks, before focusing back on the road, which is dark and empty now. There's something soothing about driving the interstate at night, he thinks. No harsh streetlights to break the darkness in the distance, just the soft glow of headlights reaching out, the faint light of a car dipping over a hill.

He shouldn't have brought the notes, or at least not in the long envelope that he did. He shouldn't have placed it on the table between the main course and the dessert, or hesitated when she asked, “What the hell is that?” She had paused and he could have filled the gap, explained, but he was startled by her force.

“Divorce papers?” Mel had asked. “So you know about him? Well I guess you saved me the trouble.”

The way her mind jumped straight to *that* hangs over Tommy’s head, it had been on her mind. How long, he wonders. When did it start?

The sound of crackling leaves shakes Tommy from the thought and he bangs the steering wheel with his fists.

The pile grows every few seconds as more of them crumble through the vent. He contemplates stopping, checking under the hood to see if someone has been raking leaves in his air intake or something. He doesn’t know a thing about cars, or what even an air intake looks like. Mel’s the one who’s good with cars.

Their first Christmas as a married couple, Mel and he decided to road trip to each other’s family homes, Mel’s for Christmas Eve and his for the day. 200 miles, not much of a trip, but they’d only had Mel’s old Celica from college to make the drive and it broke down about thirty minutes from any sort of gas station. Tommy had gotten out and popped the hood, like he thought he was supposed to do. He stared at the car guts, the metal workings of the car’s beating heart, which it might as well have been.

After five minutes of staring, he thought he might do something, touch a nozzle or turn a valve, only he didn’t see nozzles or valves here and everything seemed to shimmer with heat. Winds whipped around the car as other cars flew past. Mel walked up to the hood without his noticing. “What’s it look like?” she had said.

He jumped and mumbled some words he thought would fit, “Carburetor’s grinding the spark plugs real good in there.”

She laughed and playfully shoved him. “So. No experience with cars?”

“None,” he said. He watched her examine the car, he could see her thoughts ripple through what knowledge she had of cars, her eyes watering in the cold. “I think it’s just overheated,” she had said. She nodded at him, as if he had agreed.

“But it’s like 40 degrees out here.”

She shoved him again, “Gasoline burns, goof.” The car had cooled off and they had made it to his parents’ place in well enough time. The way she laughed then, was it in earnest? He can’t remember.

Tommy bangs his head against the headrest behind him, falling back from the memory into his body again. He passes a welcome sign for a town and decides he should probably stop driving soon. There’ll be a diner, somewhere for him to grab a cup of coffee. He spots a small place with a horse on its sign and pulls in. It’s late, but the horse sign says 24 hours and so he gets out of his car and walks to the door. It opens and he’s relieved, he didn’t realize how tired he is. A portly woman in a jean jacket one size too small for her seats him at a window booth and slaps a menu down in front of him.

“Oh, just coffee, thanks,” he says.

The portly woman grunts, moves toward the counter to make the coffee. Tommy’s alone in this place. There’s a jukebox in the corner, but the light’s not on. It’s quiet save for the coffee brewing and for a second Tommy forgets where he is. The sound is too soft for him to be sure he’s even alive. Panicked, he reaches for his phone in his pocket, but it’s not there. Must be in the car, he thinks.

The portly woman brings a cup of a coffee, a faint steam floats over the opening.

“Excuse me,” Tommy says, “do you know what time it is?”

She grunts again and points to a clock behind the counter before moving back behind the counter. It's 1:37 in the morning. Four hours, he's been driving for four hours.

Where am I? he thinks, and realizes that it'd be suspicious if he didn't know. He feels childish for a moment, adults tend to know where they are. He thinks back to the drive, but he can't remember any signs. He doesn't even know what interstate he's been on or if he's changed directions since he started driving.

"I hate to bother you," he says across the diner, "but I think I'm lost, where are we exactly?"

The woman looks at him, but makes no move to answer and Tommy realizes she's bug eyed, her eyes bulge a bit out of her head, a bit too far. "Westin," she finally says.

"Ah, yes," Tommy says, unsure but pleased to get a response. "Of course." He sips the coffee, letting warmth wake him up a bit, and thinks about Mel.

Where did it start to go wrong? In college she had fawned over him, his long, unwashed hair. The way he stared off into the distance whenever a thought struck him in a particular way. "My Thinker," she'd call him and he'd smile and tell her to stop, loving the attention. He was taken with the way her eyes caught the light, the way her dresses seemed to cling to the shape of her body. The way she laughed with her entire person, a full rich laugh too. Like singing.

"What's on your mind?" the portly woman asks.

Tommy's startled by the noise. He finds her standing at his booth. "Oh, uh, not much."

“Bullshit,” she says. She drags a stool from the bar and hoists herself up. “You’ve been in here, what, five minutes, and you’ve done nothing but stare. Either you love plastic seatbacks or you got something on your mind. So fess up.”

He eyes the portly woman. She has frizzled wavy hair that shoots out in weird directions and he suspects her teeth are false. “Relationship problems,” he says and he’s not sure why.

“Oh honey, I’ve heard them all. What flavor?”

“Cheating. Possibly.”

“I meant of pie, honey,” she says. “On the house. No good talking about relationship problems without pie.”

“Pecan,” he says.

“Good choice,” the portly woman says. She disappears behind the counter and comes back with two large slices of pecan pie.

Tommy’s stomach growls as the portly woman scoots the stool back and sits in the booth opposite him. She hands him a fork.

“So a cheater, huh? You or him?”

“Him? Oh, uh, sorry, I’m straight.”

The portly woman raises an eyebrow, “I apologize. So her, then?”

“Yeah, I think. I don’t know. I never confronted her.” He takes a bite of the pie.

“Oh god, this is delicious.”

“Real sugar,” the portly woman says. “Well have you tried talking to her?”

“I’m in a diner eating pie with a waitress at 2:00 am in the morning on a Wednesday night.”



“So you left.” She’s halfway done with her pie, talking between mouthfuls.

“Temporarily,” he says. “Maybe.”

“You going to talk to her?”

Tommy shoves a forkful of pie into his mouth to avoid answering. He savors each bite.

“That a no or a yes, honey?”

“It’s complicated,” he says.

“You either love her or you don’t,” she says, finishing her slice. “50/50 chance she feels the same.” The portly woman yawns, apparently done with their conversation.

“That’ll be a buck fifty for the coffee, whenever you’re ready.”

He pays and returns to his car, leaving half the pie slice behind and returns to his thoughts. 50/50? No, Mel didn’t love him anymore. That was certain. From here would be a messy divorce, expensive, and she had law knowledge on her side if she wanted to use it. He could just run. Can’t divorce someone who isn’t there, he thinks. The leaf pile spills onto the passenger seat. The constant clicking becomes white noise. Tommy finds it hard to breathe. I just won’t talk to her. She’ll cool off. Things can get back to normal.

If he turned around now, went back the way he came, it would take a few hours to drive home. Tommy’s eyes are dry and heavy. He couldn’t make it back tonight, but he could be there in the morning, for when she wakes up if he drove through the night, nonstop. He wishes he had eaten more of the pie.

But then what? She’d still want the divorce. It’d still be over. Going back isn’t some grand romantic gesture that’d fix things, he thinks. Probably nothing like that works.

The stream of leaves is constant now, with full unbroken leaves and tiny shreds alike piling over the side of the middle console into the back seat. He searches for his phone for a second before he feels the car swerve and gives up the search. He switches on the radio but all he finds is the soft crackling of static. He leaves it on.

They could be happy again, like the Bahamas, where Mel found seashells to put in her hair and giggled at Tommy's bandaged foot. Were we really that innocent? He can't remember now and he's wondering if he's romanticized their first moment of that so called marriage bliss. When did she stop laughing?

Leaves begin to blanket him, the stream much faster now. They cover him up to his midsection. The entire right side of the car is leaves, even the windshield. He hears the buzzing of his phone again and through the leaves he can barely make out a bit of light. A broken 2:42 also shines through and he knows it has to be Mel on the other end.

The leaves pile up and the phone buzzes and Tommy drives. To his left are leaves blocking the window and to his right are leaves filling the interior of his car. There's a gap in front of him, where the leaves haven't reached yet and so he drives on, following the glow of the streetlights overhead.

He drives until he can't hear the buzz, until he can't see where he's going, and even then he keeps driving, the leaves encasing him and still the broken dried fragments pour in through the passenger side vent. The ride is still smooth, the road is still there. Tommy figures as long as he's driving, he'll be fine. The buzzing doesn't stop and it feels like hours pass. The car's interior is filled with broken light, filtering through the leaves. Mel's face, semi-visible through the thin film of the leaves' skin.

How much longer will the road be there before it turns? he thinks. He wonders what would happen if he were to open a window, but the leaves have encased him on that side too and he doesn't trust that he would be able to find the right button. There's five or six on his left side and they all do something different, like move his seat and he doesn't want to risk that since he's comfortable.

Soon everything is dark, he can't even see leaves anymore; they're layering has covered the cracks. A voice crackles over the radio, or is it Mel's voice on his phone? He can't tell, but it sounds like encouragement to keep driving. He starts to see writing on the leaves in Mel's handwriting, "You can drive all night," "How far is it to the next state?" "My Thinker, you're free." He cries, the words wash away from the leaves and his vision goes black. The buzzing never stops although Tommy can no longer see the light. He pulls over the car, or thinks he does, and reaches through the leaves, the ragged edges poke his soft skin as he prods through the leaves, searching.