

WHAT REMAINS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2015

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2018

Major Professor: David James Poissant

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ABSTRACT

Grief is a personal thing, as unique as it is ubiquitous, and each character in *What Remains* approaches their grief in a different way and handles it with differing degrees of success. The collection blends both realist and fabulist stories in its efforts to explore these themes, from the eponymous “What Remains,” in which a man attempts to reconcile his feelings about the death of his abusive, absentee father, and what that means for his relationship with his own son; to “Convoy,” a story of a Marine who confronts the culture of violence into which he’s been indoctrinated, and which separates him from society; to “Anaerobic,” about a teenage girl whose super-speed can’t save her sister from brain death in a hospital bed. Other stories look at their characters’ losses through the different lenses of loneliness, of desperation, of divorce, and of parenthood, but all of them essentially attempt to unearth the answer to the question, “How do we keep going in the face of loss—and where do we go?”

For Jerms, whose loss I'm still writing my way through.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Jamie Poissant; without his fantastic feedback and quiet encouragement, this thesis would not exist. I would like to thank Lisa Roney and Brenda Peynado for agreeing to serve on my thesis committee, and for influencing my work for the better. In addition to your mentorship, advice, and support, I thank you all for your friendship, as well—I am the better for it.

I also thank my esteemed colleagues, who have seen most of these pieces in various states of undress in workshop, and whose comments and suggestions have helped them become the stories I was trying to tell in the first place. In particular, infinite thanks to the inimitable Leah Washburn, my faithful thesis buddy, for your sharp eye, quick mind, and steadfast companionship. I only hope I have helped you as much as you've helped me.

I wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for Terry Thaxton, who patiently let me talk her ear off for an hour at the Grad Fair one afternoon—and, afterwards, still said I should apply.

Thank you to all the other professors, teachers, and mentors who have helped me along the way, from Mrs. Messina, my Fifth-Grade teacher, who first planted the idea of being a writer in my mind; to Mr. Della Penna, my middle school language arts teacher, who taught me to love my mother tongue and all her idiosyncrasies; and to a host of others, too many to name, each of whom has fostered and nurtured my writing instincts in some way.

Finally, thank you to my wonderful, supportive family—Tasha and Dani most of all, for putting up with my crap the whole way through.

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ANAEROBIC

Bree checks her watch and waits for the second hand to hit the twelve. Her classmates break and flow around her on their way home like the rainwater that surges past the sidewalk stanchion as it gushes out of the drainpipe. A few friends wave to Bree and scurry away before she can say anything, huddled under their umbrellas, taking their sad looks and sympathy with them. The watch feels odd, on the wrong wrist because of the cast on her left forearm. Ten seconds. Five.

The moment the hand starts the last tick, she runs. The raindrops hesitate before continuing their molasses descent. Students freeze in place on the way to their cars, to the bus loop, to track practice—like extras in a movie she just paused. She weaves through the drifting constellation of rain, hitting only a few droplets. Air thick as honey snatches at her clothes, her hair.

The hospital downtown is twenty miles away, according to the on-foot directions Bree looked up online. She charges down sidewalks, hurdles fences, slips through intersections clogged with glacial cars, splashes fireworks in the headlights—*the way the windshield cracked when Evie's head went through it, blood filling in the spiderwebbed glass until it gave and then the red drops hung around her like fireworks*—stumbles once, but she recovers.

Bree runs forever. Her legs drive like pistons into concrete, asphalt, grass, and dirt. She is a steam engine, breathing in time with her steps—four in, four out—and she dashes at a hundred-meter pace, like she and Evie used to at meets. Except she does it for miles.

The whole time, the world around her holds its breath, waits for her to reach the finish. People around her sit or stand or walk or run or drive, all living snapshots of a world that Bree has briefly left behind. Is she the only one on Earth who's breathing? She thinks so.

She bounds to a stop in front of the hospital, and, as she slows down, the world exhales—the movie plays on as though there had been no interruption. The downtown clamor crashes around her as she gulps air, the familiar burn of fatigue settling into her limbs. Cars honk in the rush hour logjams. People pass her, talking on their phones. Three hospital staffers in scrubs leave through the automatic doors, laughing as they head down the street toward flashing signs and vendors.

Bree feels like she's been running for forty-five minutes. When she checks her watch, it's been less than two.

Evie is in her room, in the hospital's long-term care wing. As Bree enters, stillness settles on her like a heavy blanket. Thick curtains somewhere between pink and orange cover the windows, straight and unruffled even when the frigid air blasts from the overhead vents; the TV hovers on its stand, watching even as it's watched; a vase on the side table holds wilted flowers, crisp and brown, petals strewn around its base.

Then there's Evie. Bree would imagine she's asleep except every time she tries, the monitor beeps, the intercom drones, the respirator wheezes—*like the sound she made on the pavement as Bree stumbled out of the driver's seat: a wet sigh that bubbled blood, the back of her head crumpled in like the front of their car, limbs bent in the wrong place like wet sticks, or like Bree's left arm*—or the EEG scribbles another inch of tiny squiggles. Her baby sister, two years younger.

A year and a half, Evie would say.

I'm rounding up, says Bree.

Mom and Dad come in with Evie's doctor, talking in low voices. Mom goes straight to Evie and smooths the hair from her forehead. Dad squeezes Bree's shoulder on his way to the bed. Neither of them say anything. Bree isn't sure whether she wants them to, whether hearing them blame her out loud, instead of in their heads, would make it better or worse.

There's a picture Mom keeps on her dresser in a stained wood frame. One of her favorites, from a track meet in middle school where they both had medaled—Bree in the hundred-meter sprint, Evie in the five-thousand-meter run. Evie's long legs had let her bound like an oryx for laps at a time without ever slowing, while Bree had burned hot and fast and then collapsed on the grass on the edge of the track. Last week, Bree found the picture face-down next to a bronze-cast baby shoe and a bottle of Ambien, and Bree couldn't bring herself to stand it up again. At the time, she told herself it had fallen on its own.

The doctor examines the EEG printout. *I'm sorry*, he says. *There was too much damage.*

Bree studies the remnants of a mosquito on the wall, smashed flat, spindly legs sticking out at odd angles.

She's suffered brain death, the doctor says. He explains that while her body still works, the part of her brain that's *her*—that's Evie—is gone. The power is still on, Bree thinks, but the tenant moved out and shuttered the windows.

Mom makes a strangled noise, her throat clamping down on a wail, then crashes into Dad, muffling her sobs in his shirt. Bree can't tell who's holding up whom.

She wants to run—to put the world on pause and bolt—but she forces herself to stay, to look at what she’s done. Evie’s expression is peaceful. Mom used to say they looked alike, that they could be twins. Evie would smile and look away, but Bree would make a face and say, *Mom, stop*. Now, she searches her sister’s features, gaunt and pale and sunken with six weeks of tube feedings and no sunlight, searches for an echo of her own face, some proof that it’s still Evie lying there. There’s even a hint of that smile at the corners of her mouth, as though it might widen like it used to if Bree could only find the right thing to say.

I’m sorry, doesn’t work. She’s tried that already, many times.

Dad holds out an arm for Bree, beckoning her in—*arm outstretched like Evie’s as she reached for her phone in the backseat, her fingers brushing the screen; Bree had just gotten her license, was telling Evie to buckle up, didn’t see the red light, wasn’t looking, blew through it into the side of a pickup; metal screamed, rubber wailed, Bree’s vision exploded with white and the sharp smell of burnt powder, but not before she saw her sister hit the windshield*—but Bree shakes her head. She may be all that they have left, but she’s the reason why. If she hadn’t been so careless, so stupid, Evie would still be there, would still be smiling and running and breathing on her own.

#

Days later, they stand at Evie’s bedside, the covers thrown back to reveal legs discolored with surgical scars, red pockmarks where there once were pins. Evie’s hair is in her face again, and Mom strokes it away, bends to kiss her. Dad takes Evie’s hand and whispers to her.

Bree, in the middle of the room, knows she should be closer, should say something, do something, but the whole thing feels wrong, somehow, perverse. The doctor waits by the

respirator, pretending to study his clipboard. The door is open, and nurses talk at the administration desk, phones ring, the intercom blares.

While her parents say goodbye, Bree throws open the curtains—if Evie’s going to die, let her die with a view. Midday sunlight streams in, and Bree flinches at the sudden brightness. In the hospital parking lot, two paramedics smoke next to a warped wooden picnic table by the parking garage. A maintenance worker rolls a trash can piled high with black plastic bags toward a dumpster. A puddle of leaked motor oil glistens with rainbow ripples.

A beep as the doctor hits the switch, and the respirator stops. The pump winds down, each artificial breath slower and slower. A pause as the last blast of air prepares to leave Evie’s lungs, and—

Bree runs. She digs into the linoleum with her toes and sprints into the hall, past staffers frozen in mid-laugh, down the stairs, into the street, the world on pause, running as fast as she can away, away. She sucks air past the lump in her throat, chest aching with the effort, and hopes that if she can just keep running, then the world will hold this last breath forever.

THE CONVOY

Helmand Province, Afghanistan, May 2013, 1230 Hrs.

Lance Corporal Marcus Nussbaum flicks the lit butt of his cigarette out of the turret. The butt tumbles off the truck's roof, leaving a trail of ash and shredded tobacco leaves in its wake. Late morning sunlight smothers the high desert rocks and scrub of the Hindu Kush foothills, thick and bright. Marcus wishes he'd worn sunglasses instead of goggles. He'll take it back as soon as the convoy starts moving, of course, when the dust clouds the MRAP tires kick up wrap them all in grit-filled air. Sand will scratch at his face and neck, the grains worming into his cammies and collecting in crusty patches where the sweat soaks into his skivvy shirt. For the moment, though, the goggles aren't doing him any good.

He reaches down and digs in his cargo pocket for another cigarette. The convoy has been waiting just outside the gate of Combat Outpost Lexington for half an hour while the fucking engineers get their shit together. No telling when that will happen, so Marcus figures he may as well keep smoking.

From the passenger compartment below him, Private First-Class Givens leans forward and looks through the hatch. He meets Marcus's eyes between the safety webbing that keeps him strapped in. "You know you ain't supposed to smoke in the truck."

Marcus braces himself on the M240G machine gun, mounted in the turret. He glares back at Givens. "Well, I'm not *in* the truck, now am I?" He lights up, takes a drag. The smoke floats in his chest, barely warmer than the air.

Givens' thick-rimmed, issued glasses jump as he wrinkles his nose, almost losing themselves beneath the brim of his Kevlar helmet, wrapped in ratty camouflage. "You're halfway in."

"I've always been a 'Marine half-out' kind of guy," Marcus says. "Anyway, you're just pissy because the ma'am won't let you dip." Givens, a scrawny motherfucker from the Carolinas, is never seen without a wad of Grizzly Wintergreen Long Cut in his lower lip like a tumor—and their platoon commander, First Lieutenant Bryant, can't stand it. *The last thing I want to deal with is you spilling your nasty-ass dip spit all over the inside of my vic*, she said the last time he asked.

"It ain't fair," Givens says, and sits back.

Marcus checks his watch. It's four in the morning in North Carolina, and Denise is probably just waking up for work. He imagines her shifting under the sheets as the alarm clock blares, sees her groan and reach out to slap the snooze—ten more minutes. The East Coast is eight and a half hours behind Afghan time—the weird half-hour because why the fuck not, because the whole country exists *between*. Between the mountains and the desert, between Asia and the Middle East, between bum-fuck nowhere and Hell. He thinks of Denise, hovering for ten minutes between wakefulness and sleep, and wonders if she dreams of him there.

The radio squawks, too indistinct to make out from the turret. 1stLt Bryant's reply from the passenger seat up front is lost in the droning chuff of the truck's engine. A moment later, she says, "Engineers are Oscar-Mike—we're stepping off in five."

A chorus of "Urrr," from the five Marines in the passenger compartment in traditional, laconic acknowledgement. Marcus growls, too, even though she won't hear him.

He twists toward the back of the truck. Behind them, a plume of dust from inside the COP's walls, made of HESCO barriers—felt-lined, boxy wire frames filled with Afghan dirt for hasty but effective fortifications—signals the approach of the long-awaited engineers, who need an escort to the nearby Forward Operating Base Concord, down in the valley by the Helmand River.

Their trucks trundle out to join the convoy after the vehicle securing the rear pulls off to the side, to allow them to take their place in the middle of the line. The Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected vehicles are squat and piggish, like a Marine fairy godmother needed to magic up an armored vehicle in a hurry and all she could find at the time was a blue-ribbon sow rooting around in the sty. The truck bellies angle inward over the passenger compartment in order to shunt the force of an IED out to either side, in theory saving the lives of the little piglets strapped inside.

Lieutenant Bryant tells them to make their weapons condition one—ready to fire. Marcus puts the butt of the '240 in his shoulder, leans against it, and pulls the charging handle on the side of the receiver back toward himself. The click-clack of the gun's bolt settling against the sear vibrates down the length of the weapon, and he imagines more than hears the clink of the first round on the ammo belt dropping into the chamber. The sick-sweet smell of gun oil wafts up, familiar and comforting. He pushes the charging handle forward again to lock it in place, takes hold of the pistol grip, and thumbs the safety on. The whole motion feels solid and satisfying, like slotting in the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Beneath him, the other Marines rack rounds into their rifle chambers.

As soon as the last truck is in place, the convoy rolls out. Marcus puts his free hand on the gun's buttstock to brace himself against the bucking of the truck on the unpaved track. The rest of the linked rounds spilling out of the side of the '240 waggle like a ribbon made of yellowed teeth, every fifth one bloodstained with a red-tipped tracer. He tongues what's left of his cigarette to one side and looks through the scope at the road ahead. A moped and a beat-up hatchback go about their business on the hard-packed dirt, as though the base isn't there.

A flock of Afghan pedestrians makes their way west, away from the valley: a man in the traditional loose, baby blue pajamas, dark vest, and sandals; a boy and a girl who were probably his kids; and a woman swathed in a blue-gray burqa that could be the guy's wife or sister or mother.

Are any of them with the Taliban? If you believe the older guys in his unit, it's impossible to tell until they shoot at you or try to blow you the fuck up. Even the kids are suspect.

He shifts his gloved hand on the pistol grip, finger straight and off the trigger but itching, and imagines the hatchback passengers pulling themselves out of the windows, AKs chattering, the rounds snapping overhead. He prepares for the attack, braces himself against the fear and adrenaline he's sure will come, but nothing happens. The hatchback drives on, trailing a cloud of brown that swirls in the breeze.

No one fires at him. Not for the first time, he wishes a motherfucker would.

Camp Lejeune, NC, September 2012, 0530 Hrs.

During their pre-deployment workup, Marcus's battalion rides out to a live-fire range in the backwoods of Camp Lejeune in ancient 7-ton trucks. They are painted in splotchy green tricolor camouflage, and their matching canvas tops stretch over their beds on aluminum ribs. He imagines it was used to cart previous Marines around Vietnam, imagines the deciduous North Carolina forest as a jungle in the predawn dark.

He is packed in the back with his platoon, shoulder-to-shoulder. They rattle on the rows of benches with every bump, dry spaghetti in the box. Marcus rests his hands on the rifle between his knees to keep the butt from bouncing up and hitting him in the face. His plate carrier makes it impossible to sit comfortably. He has to keep pushing back with his legs to keep his ass from sliding off the bench, and without any kind of support, his lower back twists itself up like a yuppie in a yoga studio.

At the range, Marcus dismounts and mills around for a few minutes, smoking and joking with his platoon mates. The mist drifts in whorls through headlight beams, the sky to the east just barely starting to turn gray. The air is damp and chilly, but the September forecast promises plenty of heat. A flatbed arrives from the ammo dump, green steel ammo cans stacked on pallets and held in place by ratchet straps, and the platoon sergeants pass out the day's rounds.

Marcus crowds around one of the waist-high wooden tables and helps load, sliding rounds out of the little metal clip they come in and thumbing them into gently-curved aluminum magazines. The number of rounds per mag depends on the drill a Marine is shooting, so he sorts them in stacks by amount.

Denise sends him a text from work, asking if he wants to eat leftovers or go out for dinner. She ends the message with a little heart emoticon. He replies that he wants to stay in, and adds a heart of his own.

Givens walks up. “Hey, Nuss, can I bum a smoke? I left my dip in my car.” Marcus tosses him his pack and his lighter.

By the time they’re ready to start, the sun has crested the trees. A short distance ahead of them stands a row of targets in front of a berm—green plastic cut to resemble the silhouette of a person’s trunk and head, stapled to a long two-by-four. Each target rests in a piece of half-buried PVC so that it sits at average human height. Paper cutouts have been hung from them with binder clips, defining target areas, ingrained since Boot Camp: the chest, where you’re most likely to hit vital organs; the pelvic region, because hitting the hip bone can ruin somebody’s day, also because the thought of shooting a bad guy in the dick is pretty funny; and the head, the area of the face that would encompass the eyes and nose, called the T-Box—shooting someone here causes instant incapacitation. Lights out, motherfucker.

Marcus lines up with his platoon, each Marine in front of a pair of targets. They’re doing “failure to stop” drills—two to the chest, one to the head, in case a bad guy charges you and a hammered pair to center-mass doesn’t get the job done.

At the Range Safety Officer’s call of “TAR-gets!” Marcus raises his rifle, puts the tritium-lit chevron of his optic on the first paper person, and fires.

Helmand Province, Afghanistan, May 2013, 1245 Hrs.

The convoy turns onto the main road and lumbers east toward the valley, quiet but for the noise of the trucks. To the north, flocks of goats season the foothills like sea salt and peppercorns, watched over by shepherds in their pastel jammies—he swears that’s what the platoon’s interpreter, Tariq, called them. The mountains shine burnt red in the sunlight, the tallest of them still dusted with snow despite the May heat at their bases.

They pass the foot-mobile family. The children stare and point, gushing to the adults and each other in Pashto. Their guardians don’t look up. The man covers his nose and mouth with his sleeve to ward off the dust—the only acknowledgement of the convoy at all.

Marcus watches the kids horse around in their excitement. *I wish a motherfucker would.*

He blinks. That’s pretty fucked up—they’re *kids*, for Christ’s sake. Where had that come from? His stomach tightens a bit. He mashes and twists the butt of his cigarette against the roof of the truck and flicks it away, leaving a stain like a smashed spider, black and grimy.

He turns away from the locals and watches the road ahead. The mine roller, a steel lattice of extra lights and wheels attached to the truck’s chassis, bounces like a car-sized shopping cart in front of them, meant to trigger an IED’s pressure plate before they drove over the main charge. Despite that, Marcus still keeps an eye out for anything that looks suspicious or out of place. Even if the mine roller takes the hit, there’s no guarantee the blast won’t wreck the truck, and then they’ll have to wait for hours while the Marines at COP Lex mobilize the Quick Reaction Force to tow them back—and that’s assuming there’s not an ambush waiting for them when the bomb blows. That’s never happened to him, but he knows guys who lived through it.

They said a firefight was always a shitty day. He wants to believe them, but the fluttering he feels in his chest at the thought isn't fear or disgust.

He reaches down for another cigarette, but Givens' hand shoots into his cargo pocket before he can reach it, groping for the box, knuckles digging into the side of Marcus' knee. Marcus tries to pull away, but the gunner harness keeps him in place, and he has no leverage to do anything more than grab the bastard's wrist.

"What the fuck, Givens?" he says.

Givens leans forward again, as far as the harness will let him. "You ain't supposed to smoke. Ma'am said."

"She didn't say a damned thing to me," Marcus says. "Now, let go, or I'll kick you in the face."

Givens' grin might as well be stained with a mouthful of shit, and he doesn't move. Marcus tries to follow through on his threat, but only hits the front of Givens' plate carrier and knocks him back. The smarmy bastard grins wider, and grabs Marcus' ankle to keep him from trying again.

They struggle for a few more moments, until Marcus jerks his knee up too quickly for Givens to get his hand out of Marcus' pocket. Givens' wrist bangs hard against the solid metal edge of the turret hatch, and he cries out in pain.

"Fuck!" He withdraws his hand and massages his wrist, holding his arm close to his chest. Laughter from the rest of the Marines in the passenger compartment.

"That's what you get, bitch," Marcus says, claiming his cigarettes.

Givens' freckled face reddens, whether with anger or embarrassment or both, Marcus can't tell. "I was just playing, asshole."

"Lock it up back there," Lieutenant Bryant says. "I swear to God, if you kids can't behave, I will stop this car." Everyone laughs but Givens.

Camp Geiger, NC, April 2010, 1800 Hrs.

The first time Marcus fires an M240 is at Marine Combat Training. He's been in the Marine Corps for four months, out of Boot Camp for a matter of weeks. He and the other new Marines spent the week learning about the weapons, how to disassemble and reassemble them quickly, how to maintain them properly, and how to operate them without getting themselves killed.

"When firing the '240 at the sustained rate of fire, you don't want to hold the trigger down too long," one of his Combat Instructors, Sergeant Azela, told them. "You want to maintain steady, six to eight-round bursts, so you don't heat the barrel up too fast. A good mnemonic for the timing is to hold down the trigger as long as it takes you to say, 'Die, motherfucker, die.' That should give you the right burst length." She grinned as the new Marines laughed.

They wait at the range for hours, sweating in the late summer sun and humidity, in a swath cut in the forest to make a huge shooting range, with markers out to 1,200 meters. A hill of dirt about thirty feet high serves as a shooting platform, and the line of Marines waiting for their minutes-long turn on the guns snakes down the hill, around the heads—the bathrooms—and ends in the gravel parking lot.

By the time Marcus gets to the top of the hill, the sun is sinking in the west. The skin of his face is burnt, the tingly too-warm feeling a sure sign that his next shower is going to suck. He would have gotten his turn sooner, but the brush is dry and there have been no fewer than four fires started by the phosphorescent tracer rounds streaking into the scrub. Then a cease-fire while they wait for the Firedogs to show up and put it out.

When Sgt Azela waves him over, he drops prone behind the '240, which has been set up on a low tripod. Beside it is a belt of one hundred rounds, his to shoot. He flips open the upper receiver, lays the belt inside, and slams it shut. The gun racks beautifully, the sound of it like the click of a car door closed well.

He looks through the iron sights, picks the 800-meter marker as his target, and squeezes the trigger. Marcus can't see most of the rounds, but the tracers spool out like burning strips of confetti, and the range in front of him disappears in fire and gun smoke. The feel of it, the gun bucking against him faster than he can count, the thought of the terrifying destruction that his finger can let loose for these next two minutes, intoxicates him. Euphoria floods his chest, and he smiles as he fires burst after burst, the hours of waiting for this one moment—this two minutes, this one hundred rounds—suddenly worth it.

Die, motherfucker, die.

Helmand Province, Afghanistan, May 2013, 1600 Hrs.

Marcus stubs out another cigarette, the ash mark next to him now the size of a nickel. Givens hasn't given him any more shit for the last few hours, has just sulked in his seat. His platoon mates' laughs and raised voices are occasionally audible over the noise of the truck, but

Marcus can't make out anything intelligible. The convoy rumbles along, and Marcus wishes for something—*anything*—to happen, then takes it back and hopes he hasn't jinxed the whole platoon.

There's this buzzing in his head, like a mosquito that keeps drifting *just* close enough to hear. Only it isn't a sound, it's something else. His whole mind and body stretch taut, quivering, waiting for the opportunity to let go, to collapse back down into himself.

His eyes are telescopes—he sees everything in sharp relief. A white plastic bag sticks out from under a rock—it's an IED, a Talib trigger man up on the hill to their left, his buddy waiting with a Russian-made Dragunov sniper rifle to pick Marcus and the other gunners off, more bad guys massed just below the crest, waiting for the ambush. He searches the top of the hill, looking for the glint of the scope, ready to swing the turret around and open fire. Then the wind tears the bag free, and it's just a bag.

A gurgling complaint from his empty stomach. There's an energy bar in his pack, but getting it would mean talking to someone else, possibly to Givens. Marcus settles for a sip of water from his Camelbak. The dirt on his lips from the dust clouds makes the water silty, but he swallows anyway. Maybe there are important minerals in it. More likely, Afghan crud will give him cancer.

With that thought, he lights another cigarette. His hands jitter from the nicotine overdose. He only smokes this much on convoys. It's bad for him, but he has to do something or he's going to lose his goddamned mind. He can almost feel the tar coat the insides of his lungs with every drag. The deployed Marine Corps runs on tobacco, caffeine, pent-up rage, and stress. All of those

can kill you, but they take years—even decades—to do it. An IED or a Talib can kill you *today*, so fuck it.

Denise wants him to quit, makes him go out onto the porch at home, but he's not ready to give it up, yet. There's a comfort to the motions, the ritual of it, even wired as he is. She seems to understand. When he comes back inside, she still lets him hold her, still buries her face in his neck, still kisses him even though his breath smells like smoke.

More noise from the radio. "Vehicle from the rear," Lieutenant Bryant says, and out of habit the Marines echo her. Marcus does, too.

Another hatchback approaches from behind them—is it the same one? Marcus can't be sure—driving faster than the convoy's US-mandated 35-mile-per-hour crawl. He heard that early on in the war, a car that tried to pass like this would have been destroyed, but for the past few years, US Forces had been instructed to share the road. Something about "hearts and minds."

That didn't mean there wasn't still a danger. The fluttering comes back—maybe this is it. The first drive-by was recon—now that they're far away from support, the bad guys are coming to hit them. He braces himself against the '240 again, ready to thumb off the safety and light these dudes the fuck up.

Past the convoy, the hatchback pulls in front of their truck. Bags and bundles are tied to the roof rack with nylon rope. The car's rear door is open, and three Afghan men sit in the trunk, their legs hanging out the back, the cloth of their pants snapping in the air. They look bored, like they're on a bus, the two on the outsides hanging onto the oh-shit handles as they bounce down the road.

The one in the middle, with a Tom-Selleck mustache and one of those Afghan pancake hats, like a central Asian beret, waves at Marcus, a smile splitting his otherwise-dour expression. Marcus' breath catches. This guy must ride past convoys every day, must stare down gunners who think exactly what Marcus thought. This is normal—mundane. Just armored truck traffic on the way to work. Staring at his face, his grin at 4x magnification through the '240 scope, Marcus and the man are connected. Marcus is in the car—he looks back and sees himself, head and face barely visible behind the gun.

He watches himself wave back.

The hatchback drives away, leaving the convoy behind. Marcus rubs at the tobacco ash mark with his finger, to see if it will come off, but it only stains his glove.

Parris Island, SC, February 2010, 1700 Hrs. (approx.)

Marcus' Boot Camp platoon spends two weeks at the rifle range, one to learn about marksmanship theory and the other to shoot their rifle qualification. "Every Marine is a rifleman," their Drill Instructors tell them, along with a story about how cooks and support personnel were forced to defend a camp from enemy attack, and were able to repel the enemy infantry because of their training. If you can't qual on the range, you can't be a Marine.

To further underscore the importance of marksmanship to the Marine Corps identity, one of Marcus' Drill Instructors, Staff Sergeant Cameron, teaches the recruits a new ditty. The afternoon of their second day on the range, he summons Marcus' platoon to a school circle. Sixty recruits huddle around him, those nearest the center sitting while each successive ring gets higher—kneeling, bending, standing—to create a colosseum in miniature. The shadows of the

Parris Island trees cover them in dusk, the last rays of the sun still kissing the berm over which their targets will appear the following week. The elongated shades of the treetops caress the foot of the berm like fingertips at the small of a lover's back.

SSgt Cameron, who was a machine gunner before he came to the Drill Field, says, "When I say, 'Ready,' you say, 'Belt fed.' Understand?" He is more than six feet tall, the wide brim of his Smokey Bear–brown campaign cover obscuring part of his face in the fading light. A wad of dip in his lip gives him a slight lisp. He's not technically supposed to have it, as recruit training is supposed to be tobacco-free, but none of them would dare rat him out. Some, out of respect; all, out of fear.

"Aye, sir!" the recruits scream, out of reflex more than enthusiasm, though in the past few weeks, that balance has begun to shift.

"When I say, 'Execute,' you say, 'Mow 'em down.' Got it?"

"Aye, sir!" Marcus turns the badass, delicious words over in his mind. He gets the sense that with them, Drill Instructor SSgt Cameron entrusts them with something precious: a piece of the *real* Marine Corps. The real Marine Corps is about violence, about the making of war. The deadliest weapon on earth is a Marine and his rifle. This new ditty is the acknowledgement of shared purpose.

They practice. Ready, Belt fed. Execute, Mow 'em down.

SSgt Cameron looks around at all of them, briefly allowing them to meet his eyes. For a moment, his eyes seem to linger on Marcus, but then they're gone, and Marcus is no longer sure.

He gestures around at the range, but none of the recruits dare to look. "You know what this shit is about?" He spits a line of brown into the dirt. "Killing bitches." The knowledge hangs

in the air, the bloody secret brought out only within the colosseum's walls. "When you're out there next week, I want you to visualize something. What you're shooting at isn't a target. What you're shooting at is an enemy."

Marcus nods, even though he's not supposed to, and a few others do the same. If he notices, SSgt Cameron gives no sign.

"When you do that slow, steady squeeze of the trigger, and you hit the black at the center, do you know what it means? Do you know what I want you to see?"

None of them do, never thought anything could be so important to them.

"Pink mist." A kill. Life, dispersed in an aerosol cloud of blood and bone.

Silence, but for the echoes of marching cadences from other platoons in the distance, heading in to the chow hall for dinner.

They fall into formation and march to dinner themselves. On the way, SSgt Cameron speaks in a low rhythm, giving them a reference point for the timing of the strike of their boots on the asphalt:

"Drive those heels." Left, right. "Crush those skulls." Left, right. "See the blood." Left, right.

Helmand Province, Afghanistan, May 2013, 2000 Hrs.

By the time the convoy reaches FOB Concord, the day has given way to night. The villages on the valley's edges light up like ground-based constellations, the light pollution not nearly strong enough to overcome the blues and oranges and purples of the Milky Way, which

stretches out above them. When the moon rises in a few hours, the dark Helmand River that runs beside the base will shimmer like a band of silver.

Marcus sits on his pack, which rests on the fist-sized gravel next to the truck, and shovels a cardboard tray of hot food from the chow hall into his mouth with a plastic spork. He's so hungry even the family-size MREs the cooks heated up taste like they've been lovingly homemade. His helmet and body armor are propped against one of the four-foot MRAP tires, serving as an impromptu rifle rack. His cammies are still damp from the day in the sun, and a slight breeze over the river chills him enough that he appreciates the warmth of the food even more.

The gravel crackles as one of his platoon mates approaches. Marcus is too preoccupied with his dinner to look up, so he is surprised when a viscous brown glob plops into his chopped carrots and green beans.

It smells like wintergreen.

"That's what you get, bitch," says Givens, his precious dip in its usual place, his wrist wrapped with an ACE bandage he must have gotten from the Corpsman.

"Mother *fucker*..." Marcus tosses the tray aside, the remains of his food splattering across the rocks, and stands. He shoves Givens—hard—and the PFC stumbles back.

"You sprained my fucking wrist, asshole." Givens spits again, and the shit-brown splatters between Marcus' boots.

"You tried to steal my smokes," Marcus says. "We're even." There's something heavy in his chest, dense and white-hot like the core of a star.

“Not hardly.” Givens tries to shove Marcus back, but Marcus meets him halfway with a straight punch to the jaw, which sends the wad of Grizzly Long Cut sailing into the night.

They grapple, and both go down. A particularly sharp rock jabs Marcus in the kidney, but he seizes the collar of Givens’ cammie blouse and hauls the smaller Marine off him.

He must have knocked the wind out of Givens, because Marcus is up before he can recover. He kicks Givens hard in the stomach once, twice, three times. The little fuck makes guttural noises with each impact.

Marcus grabs the side of the MRAP to brace himself, looming over Givens, panting as much with rage as with effort. He raises his booted foot.

Drive those heels. Crush those skulls. The T-Box is instant incapacitation. Die, motherfucker, die.

Pink mist.

Givens retches and coughs, then curls into a ball to protect his stomach. A line of spit that’s either brown or red connects his lower lip to the rocks beneath him.

Marcus swallows a bile burp. He lowers his foot.

He isn’t sure whether he sits on his pack or his legs just give out as he tries. The hands that pull the now-crushed pack of cigarettes from his cargo pocket tremble so much it’s hard to keep the lighter flame steady. He takes a long drag, the ash at the end flaring cherry red, and holds the oily smoke in his lungs until his eyes throb and the black hole in his chest fades a little.

Rocks grind against each other, and Givens sits up. He wipes his mouth with his sleeve, leaving a dark stain on the beige, buttoned cuff. Without meeting his eyes, Marcus offers him the cigarette.

Givens takes it.

TEMPTATION: A DIALOGUE

She finds him in the desert, sleeping in the shade of an acacia tree, starving himself to death. His dark, thick beard and hair are matted with sand, his lips and cheeks blasted red and cracked by the hot, dusty winds. He has a goatskin of water with him, almost empty, but his face is placid—serene, even.

“What on earth are you doing?” she asks.

He opens eyes the color of honey, still sharp and alert. “Is that a rhetorical question?” The sky is a cloudless, lapis blue, and outside his puddle of shadow, the air shimmers like water.

She does her best to look serious. She came here for an intervention, after all. “I can see what you’re literally doing, yes.” She sits beside him on a rock, also in the shade, though the heat doesn’t bother her. “Humor me.”

“I’m fasting. Communing with God.” He closes his eyes again. “Which you also know.”

“Right.” The landscape around them stretches for leagues, rocks and scrub giving way to rolling dunes. “I suppose what I’m really asking is *why*.”

“Why am I communing with God?”

“Why do you have to starve yourself to do it—and in this God-forsaken place?”

“No place is God-forsaken.”

She smiles, though she remembers her fleeting glimpses of the Plan, what lies ahead for him, and her heart twists with pity. “You say that *now*.”

“It’s true.”

“Give it time.”

“Look, did you need something?” He sits up and faces her, pulls the stopper from his water skin, and squeezes a dismal trickle into his mouth.

“I’m concerned for you,” she says. “Thought I might be able to talk you out of all this.” A poor tactic, she realizes, too late.

His eyes flash, and he stands. “You’re wasting your time.” He brushes sand from his rough-spun tunic, leaving brown, sweaty smears.

The upper branches of the tree whisper in an unfelt wind. “It’s mine to waste. And it’s not like *you’re* doing anything.”

“I’m communing wi—”

“You were *napping*,” she says, waving his words away. “You’d probably commune better if you ate something.”

He turns away, surveys the emptiness. “This place isn’t exactly lush.”

“You say that as though it matters.” She eyes him. Should she nudge him, just a bit? “I saw what you did at that wedding. You could have as much food as you wanted, if you were so inclined.”

“I am not so inclined.”

“Obviously.” She leans against the tree trunk. A centipede crawls out of a crack and scurries away from her. She lets it go. “Which brings us back to *why*. You didn’t answer my question—don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“The Holy Spirit led me here,” he says. She thinks his voice wavers, but she can’t be sure.

“Took you by the hand, did it? Or are written instructions and a map more its style?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

Condescension. Like Father, like Son. A long-nursed bitterness rises in her like bile. She studies the thorny acacia branches. “Look at you—apples and trees, I suppose.” She smiles, and his eyes narrow. “Dad must be *so* proud.”

“He is.”

She spreads her hands. “And why wouldn’t He be? He’s got you, His beloved bastard, as His obedient agent—His useful tool.”

They stare one another down. She relents. “Sorry. I didn’t come here to start a fight.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I wanted to see if I could talk some sense into you.”

He smiles—she swears his eyes *actually* twinkle. “You’re off to a good start.”

“Shut up,” she says, but can’t keep from laughing. She’s about to speak again when his stomach gurgles, loud enough in the relative silence of the desert to disturb a lizard, resting in the shade of a fallen branch. “You should make yourself something to eat,” she says. She picks up a stone, a little smaller than her head, and tosses it to him.

He holds it out to her. “This is a rock.”

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” she says. “Bread, for example.”

“*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God,*” he says, and drops the stone on the sand with a thump.

“Tell that to your stomach.”

“Fasting is about the denial of the self, to make way for God.” He studies her, half-reclined as she is against the tree. “Not that you would know anything about that.”

“And why should I?” she asks. “Look where embracing the self has gotten me.”

“Exiled?”

“Freed.” She stands and takes a few steps into the sun, breathes in the desert air with relish. “That’s what I really came to offer you. Freedom.”

He looks past her, past the dunes. There’s a city out there, too far away for him to see. Blessed, beautiful chaos, belted into sandstone walls. “Funny,” he says. “That’s what I came to offer them.”

She keeps her voice quiet, though she can’t keep the flint out of it. “Is that what he told you?”

“It’s the truth.”

“How do you know?”

“He never lies.”

“How do you *know*?”

“It is written that—”

“By who? By Him?”

He falls silent.

She moves closer, so close they’re almost touching. “That’s what I’m saying. All we have is His word. And I don’t think He’s telling the truth.”

He refuses to look at her. “I suppose we’ll find out.”

She steels herself against the wave of fury that threatens to consume her. The arrogance of fatalism! Ridiculous.

She seizes his shoulder and *wills* them both elsewhere. The desert blurs and shifts. The rocks grind themselves away to sand, to clay, condense into neat rows of tiles beneath their feet. The sky blots further down until it met the flat plain around the city. The tree slides away, thins, becomes a spire.

They stand on the roof of the city's central temple. On the ground, masses bustle by, a constant, pervasive murmur in the background. A quarrel of sparrows startle and take flight, wheeling together in the air before dipping out of sight.

"Dramatic," he says.

She ignores him and points to the ground, fathoms below, the priests and supplicants as small as beetles. "You really think He never lies, never bends the truth to suit His purposes? You're certain that He'll keep his promises? Then jump."

He risks a look over the edge. "That's stupid."

"You'll be fine—He *promised*." She takes a step toward him, still pointing at the ground. "*He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot upon a stone.*" She flashes her cruelest grin. "Yes, I've read the book."

If he is surprised, he recovers quickly. "Then you should also know it says, *Do not put the LORD your God to the test.*" She sucks a sharp breath at the Name. Echoes of primordial power vibrate in her chest, rattle the terra cotta roof tiles. An eternity ago, that power washed over her in a torrent before it cast her out into the dark. Memories of white-hot pain, of fire and blood.

Now, as then, she stands her ground.

“Have you ever wondered why?” she asks. “Why would He say that? Why wouldn’t He welcome being tested?” He opens his mouth to speak, but she preempts him. “And if you try to give me that ‘higher ways’ crap Isaiah babbled about, I’m going to scream. That’s a non-answer. An excuse that allows you to wriggle from underneath the question.”

He squints into the afternoon sunlight, holds up an arm to shade his face, waits for her to finish.

She continues: “He says, ‘You should trust Me. I *love* you. But don’t question Me or I’ll kick you out of My special club.’ Why?”

“Why doesn’t a king explain his every decision to his subjects? It’s a waste of time. Not even He can please everyone—apparently.” He gives her a pointed look, as though to punctuate the thought. “He’s their Father. He knows what’s best, even if they disagree.”

“Spoken like a true prince,” she said. “Distantly paternal—and completely out of touch.” A sharp poke to his chest drives him back a step. A tile slips under his sandal, and he throws out his arms as though he’s about to tumble off the roof. She doesn’t help to steady him. “You’ve spent thirty years among these people, seen the kinds of kings that rule them. Have you found that to be true?”

Below, a cadre of Legionaries march in polished, layered armor, the crowd parting around them like a brook around a stone. She nods at them. “Do *they* know what’s best for your people? I’ve stood among their leaders, and what they think of those they’ve conquered—when they think of them at all—is less than benevolent.”

“They’re fallen,” he says, his voice little more than a whisper. “Imperfect.”

“They’re made in His image, are they not?”

That strikes a nerve. He turns back to her, and power thrums around him like the cable of a siege onager, ready to fire. For the first time in millennia, she recognizes the chilly sluice of fear. “You know as well as I do that they *chose* this path. I’m here to save them from their own destruction.”

She lets the echo of his voice fade, carried by the breeze that rises in the west, tumbling toward the sea.

“Did they choose it?” she asks.

“What?”

She shrugs. “A simple question. Did they? I remember there being only two, and they died long ago.”

“Irrelevant. They ate of the Fruit. They bear responsibility for the Knowledge.”

“But did *they* eat the Fruit?” she asks, sweeping an arm toward the maze of buildings that cluster inside the walls. “Do they know how it tastes?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” he says. “I want to offer them a way out.”

“Only if they submit.”

He shakes his head, looks out at the city, cast in deepening shades of orange as the sun sinks toward the desert in the west. “Why do you advocate for them? Do *you* care about what happens to them?”

“What? No.” She waves the thought away. “They’re clever apes, abnormally energetic dust—your Father’s toys, not mine. But they illustrate my point.”

“Which is?”

Time to make her case. “You mentioned the fruit, the tree, the so-called ‘Fall.’”

“Yes.”

She spread her hands wide. “Your Father is all-knowing, so they say.”

“He is.”

“He knows the contents of every box, the outcome of every action?”

“Of course.”

“Then did He not know exactly what would happen if He put his playthings, the ones that looked like Him—expressions of His vanity, let’s call them what they are—in the garden and told them not to do this one thing that was within easy reach?”

His expression darkens. “The way I heard it, you convinced them to disobey.”

She shakes her head. “Propaganda. All I did was remind them that they *could*. They did the rest. But, you’re missing the point: didn’t He *know* what would happen? *Didn’t He know* the result of that particular course of events, even before He set them in motion?” That question has haunted her since her exile: did He create *her*, knowing she would resist? Had He always planned to cast her out? Was her own Fall really her fault? Or was it all part of the Plan?

His lips tighten, but he says nothing.

“It’s classic manipulation. Like an abusive husband saying to his wife, ‘If you hadn’t made me angry, I wouldn’t have broken your jaw.’”

Again, no response. She puts it another way: “If a parent gives their child a knife, whose fault is it when they hurt themselves?”

When he still doesn’t answer, she puts her hand on his shoulder and wills them away again. The roof tiles surge together, and the city melts away, collapsing like an undercooked cake

before the landscape solidifies into a rocky mountain slope. They stand at the peak. Cities dot the horizon, windows red with candle flame. Fires flicker to life to ward off the oncoming darkness.

“I’m here to do the same thing I did in the Garden: to remind you that *you have a choice*. You’re the heir to the entire universe, and you’re getting ready to just fall in line, like the other pawns, and throw yourself against these people’s swords.” He looks at her, eyes wide above his chattering teeth, and she pauses. “He didn’t even tell you, did he? He didn’t even tell you what would happen.” She only has the dimmest idea, herself. Though she tried to understand the Plan for epochs, she could never make sense of it all. The few details she learned about this part—his life, his death—were only because it was a singular channel, a focal point, a twisted cord in a spiderweb made of kaleidoscopic thread.

A weak spot, she hopes.

The wind tears at their clothes. He shivers and huddles against the sudden cold. She smiles. It’s so easy to forget that he’s mortal.

She gestures, and a few of the rocks on the mountaintop thrust themselves up to block the wind. He stumbles and falls against her in the sudden stillness, his breathing loud in the pocket of silence around them. She holds him and strokes his matted hair.

After a moment, he puts his hands against her shoulders and pushes away. “You’re wrong,” he says. His voice is quiet. “He told me. Not specifics, but enough that I got the idea.”

“Suffering,” she says. “Death.”

He nods. “It’s the only way.”

She touches his shoulder, tenderly this time. “The only way to fix your Father’s mistake, perhaps. But it’s not the only path you can take.”

“You want me to—what—come join you in your exile? In your loneliness?”

She shrugs, though every part of her is tense. The next few minutes will decide which way the universe spins, whether or not she meanders through eternity alone. “Wouldn’t be so lonely if there were two of us. With your power, we could go somewhere else. Make a new garden, if you wanted. Start fresh.”

He turns and looks across the expanse, at the cities stretched before them, far away.

“What about them?”

“Who cares?” she said. “If you really think they did this to themselves, then leave them to it.”

They stand in silence for a long time, as sunset turns to evening turns to night, and the stars wink to life one by one above them.

“You’re right about one thing,” he says, at last.

“What’s that?”

“I can’t hold them fully responsible for what happened.”

“So, you admit your Father did this to them?”

“Maybe. I can’t speak for what He was thinking at the time.”

She steps forward, next to him. “But you’re not obligated to fix anything. He could undo all this with the wave of a hand. Why do you have to do the hard part for Him?”

“I don’t,” he said.

“*Exactly.*” He’s so close—she can feel it. One more push, and he’ll come with her. It will be nice to have someone to talk to, after all this time. Someone who can understand her. A friend.

And the brittle remnants of his Father's heart, seeing the two of them together, beyond His reach, will shatter.

"You don't have to submit to His tyranny. You don't have to be an accomplice to His abuse. You can be your own man—or your own God, if you prefer." She steps in front of him, grips his shoulders, and looks straight into his eyes. "All you have to do is walk away."

He takes her hands, lowers them. "You misunderstand," he says. "I can't hold them fully responsible, and I don't have to go through with this. But I'm still going to."

She thought he understood. She had convinced him. He was *there*.

"*Why?* That doesn't make any sense."

He takes a moment, studies her. "A rich man has a favored son. The son is greedy and jealous of his father's wealth, even though he is set to inherit all of it upon his father's death. So, he steals a satchel full of gold and jewels, takes a flock of his father's best sheep, and leaves to make his own fortune."

"You're really going to tell me a—" she begins, but he raises a hand, and she can no longer find her voice.

"But the son didn't pay attention to his father's lessons about how best to manage his possessions. He makes poor investments, loses everything, ends up destitute and indebted to a gang of thieves who have sworn to kill him. Distraught, he runs back home, throws himself at his father's feet, and begs his father's forgiveness.

"The father loves his son. He forgives him and kisses his mangy head. But the thieves are outside the door, and they demand satisfaction. A father's love alone can only do so much. He offers to pay them what his son stole, but they refuse, demanding blood.

“‘Take me,’ the father says. ‘I am old, and I have lived my life. My son is young, and though he is ignorant and impulsive, he has his life before him. The blood debt will be fulfilled, and my son will live.’

“The thieves agree, and they take the father into the darkness to slay him. The son, seeing this, vows to change, and from that day, takes his father’s lessons to heart, and the estate prospers a hundredfold.”

The grip that stilled her tongue releases her, but she can find no words.

“I am my Father’s Son,” he says. “But I am also *their* father. Maybe, by redeeming them, I can redeem Him, too.”

He turns to go. She has lost—the Plan continues, still on course.

But she refuses to give up. Maybe there’s still time. Maybe she can change his mind. Out of the shelter of the rock, the wind howls once more around them. “Once you start down that path, once you’ve fully set those events in motion...only God knows whether you will ever be able to escape.”

He pauses. “I’ll take that risk.” He turns back far enough to meet her eyes, arms hugged tight against his chest. “Thank you. I’ll see you around.”

She shakes her head. “No. You won’t.”

She watches him start down the mountain, water skin slung over his shoulder, watches the shining servants of his Father descend like stars from the sky, bearing food and drink for their prince—she even recognizes a few she had once counted as friends. None of them so much as look in her direction.

She settles against the rock she used to block the wind, a gulf of emptiness yawning open around her. Thunder rumbles in the distance, though there are still no clouds. The thunder sounds smug.

She stares at the stars, at the shining city beyond them she once called home. “How could you?” she asks.

There is no response.

AFLOAT

*"Take, O Moon, I pray thee, take me,
Take me, thou, O Sun above me,
Take me, thou O Bear of heaven,
From this dark and dreary prison,
From these unbecoming portals,
From this narrow place of resting,
From this dark and gloomy dwelling,
Hence to wander from the ocean,
Hence to walk upon the islands,
On the dry land walk and wander..."*

– *The Kalevala*, Rune I (translated from Finnish)

I am not my grandmother, not a storyteller—or so she told me. She said I embellished a story's boring parts and skipped what mattered. But, she had to pass the tradition on to someone, and I was the only one too young to refuse. I resisted, did my best not to learn. I daydreamed. I imagined a home that didn't exist, or, if it existed, a home I'd never find.

But if I'm meant to die out here on the open ocean, floating parched on a desert of water that sparkles crystal blue, I need to tell this story—*my* story—even if it's only to the sun and moon and stars, to waves and empty air. The best stories, the ones my grandmother told in rolling, rhythmic verse, always began with an invocation, so here goes:

Vanna, Mummi, please be with me while I spin this final story, though the telling's for myself, and no one else will ever hear it. Help me find the words you taught me, help me skip the boring parts and give both you and Jason justice that you never got while living. Give me strength to reach the ending, stay with me through my own ending; bring me home to Kalevala, there to walk green hills forever.

That will have to be enough. I'll try not to leave out anything important.

#

It makes sense that I'm going to die on this lifeboat, because it might as well be where I was born. Jason and Vanna found me as a toddler, alone and drifting. My earliest memory is of Jason lifting me aboard the *Aino*, bare arms and head shining in the morning sunlight like volcanic glass. I don't know if that memory is real, or if I made it up after years of hearing the story. But I can still feel the sun on my skin, the strange rocking of the *Aino*, unfamiliar to me then, and I'm not sure. Sometimes I wonder if a fake memory that *feels* real isn't just as good—or maybe better. If we can create our own memories, decide the way things happened long after the fact, then maybe we aren't stuck with our mistakes, anchored to and foundering on the jutting rocks of guilt, dashing ourselves to pieces.

Once upon a time there was a girl named Teri, whose family found her on a raft. She lived her whole life with them and never doubted for a moment she was where she was supposed to be, and they all lived happily ever after forever and none of them ever died.

Worth a try.

When I was old enough to ask the question, they told me I was adopted—or “found” or whatever word you want to use—but I remember I wasn't surprised. I was never great at math, but even a moron could eventually figure out that one old white woman plus one middle-aged black man didn't equal one Asian girl. (I didn't know the word for it, at first, didn't know what Asia was until I saw the label on one of Jason's maps.)

Not that ours was a particularly unusual situation, I learned. After the ice melted and so much of the land disappeared, decades before I was born, entire populations took to the sea, only

taking what they could carry or stow away. So many people lost what tied them to their homes, to their families, that often your family became whoever happened to be in your boat.

Ours was the *Aino*, a ten-meter sailboat with a single mast. Vanna chose the name, after a character in one of her favorite stories who dies and becomes one with the sea. (She thought the reference sounded optimistic, I guess—she was weird.) The *Aino* looked old: its white, wooden hull worn smooth by thousands of miles of water slipping by, once-white sails yellowed by the sun and patched in several places. The day or two a month we spent in ports, I used to watch it from the dock, swaying next to other boats of smooth, slick fiberglass with motorized sails—a seagull in a flock of albatrosses—and wonder why I stayed aboard.

It's an older boat, Jason would say, but sturdy. Then he would smile and slap the wheel or the railing or whatever piece was closest. I never had the chance to fall in love, but I always imagined it was feeling about someone the way Jason felt about the *Aino*.

I hope this old thing doesn't splinter in the next storm, I used to say, mostly to annoy him.

He would swear and spit overboard to ward off bad luck, and Vanna would follow suit—they both believed that superstitious stuff. They'd give me dirty looks until I spit, too. I stopped believing when I was eleven—my own silent, private way of rebelling. More water in the sea was the last thing the world needed, I thought at the time, but I spit overboard all the same. Looking back, a drop or two made little difference to the ocean, but the security, the sure-footedness that buying into the superstition could have brought me might have been nice.

The boat was beautiful, too, in its own ugly way. Some of those same, rare mornings ashore, I'd step onto the dock and the rising sunlight would strike dew beaded on the rigging,

and the *Aino* would sparkle like a spider web, a purple ribbon streaming from the masthead. For a moment, it would almost seem like home.

#

The idea of home obsessed me. Vanna told me stories from her native Finland, which finally succumbed to the rising waves when she was a girl. She talked of rolling hills and roads and horses (I had never seen a horse, at that point, and still have only ever seen a handful of pictures and one stuffed toy), of houses with stone foundations, of planting crops, of being able to walk for miles without ever seeing the ocean, your nose only catching the occasional hint of salt on the breeze.

I tried to imagine a place like that, a house that wasn't moving. Even when I thought of the *Aino* as stationary (if wobbly), it just became the world that moved around me. Motion was inescapable, regular and predictable like tides. We would stop somewhere to trade and take on provisions, but then we would be off again. Jason always knew where we were going next, never thought of staying longer than we had to.

Once, after hearing another story about the wonders of un-sunken Finland, I asked her, Do you think I have a home somewhere?

This *is* your home, Terhikki, she said. A Finnish nickname. She had named *me*, too, not just the boat.

We sat at the table in the cabin, the bench cushions deformed enough with age and use to have apple-shaped impressions, fuzzy memories of those who'd sat there before us. The cabin was paneled in dark, varnished wood, the dimness cool compared to the bright white deck. The berths were forward of us, small single beds in cubbies on the bulkhead next to the head.

Through the hatch abaft us, Jason slouched in the cockpit wearing a pair of orange plastic sunglasses, the occasional adjustment to the stainless-steel wheel the only indication that he was awake. The little wind turbine which powered the boat whizzed next to his head, swerving a little each time the heading shifted.

No, I said, I meant my real home. Where I was from before you found me.

I saw something pass across her face, an expression I didn't recognize at the time: her forehead wrinkled and her lips tightened to a thin line. I wouldn't learn regret until much later.

We don't know, she said. We found you in a lifeboat. No sign of a ship, or of anyone else.

Did you ever ask people about it?

Lots of people, Vanna said. Her eyes flicked over my shoulder toward the hatch, toward the cockpit and Jason. No one knew anything about you.

I wouldn't really learn about lying until later, either.

#

When you grow up at sea, sailing is a thing you learn to do instinctively. I learned which ropes to pull and which knots to tie early on, before I even knew their names, the rocking of the boat the rhythm to which I learned to walk. By the time I was ten, I could tell if a sail needed an adjustment by the snapping sound it made as the wind spilled out, or by the feel of the wheel under my hand. There was something visceral about rolling over the ocean, watching the *Aino's* bow cut through the tops of the swells and spray a fine salt mist that dusted my face all the way aft, in the cockpit.

Sailing is easy, once you get the hang of it. Navigation, though, is hard. The first time Jason pulled out a map of the world—the new coastlines scribbled in with blue permanent marker—and started talking to me about latitude and longitude, about stars and tides and trade winds, I stopped listening. I pushed my dinner plate aside and ran my hands over the sheet, laminated with strips of precious masking tape. The lines meant nothing to me, and the names of countries sounded strange when I said them in my head.

Where are we? I asked.

He stopped mid-sentence and pointed to a spot next to the *A* in *Atlantic Ocean*. Right about here.

I frowned. How do you know?

How was that possible? I'd been on deck that day, and the day before, and the day before that, and on and on. All I'd seen around the boat was ocean, a wavy, blue-backed carpet that gave nothing away. If it weren't for our wake and the hissing protests of the waves against our hull, it would be hard to tell we were moving at all. I was always surprised when we sighted land. Jason and Vanna never were.

He pointed to the old computer that we kept on the bookshelf. That's connected to a machine, he said, a machine that talks to other machines and tells us where we are. It doesn't work as well as it used to, but it still works most of the time. And when it doesn't, there are other ways to find out where you are. If you know stars and the charts, you're never lost.

I practically vibrated at the prospect. Where did you find me? I asked. Was it near here? Can you show me?

The boat bucked against a particularly large wave. Jason choked and pounded his chest with a fist. He took a drink of water between coughs, then said, I don't remember. Sorry.

Vanna poked her head inside from the deck, through one of the plexiglass skylights that doubled as exit hatches. I'm not hungry, she said, so don't worry about me when you make dinner.

Jason and I looked at one another, and I thought I saw the same bewilderment I felt in his face. She had made dinner for everyone an hour before.

#

That's how Vanna's slow decline started. At first, we noticed small things: she would forget where she put her reading glasses, forget to bathe, forget what she meant to do, forget what she had done. I didn't worry much until she started to forget her stories.

She was trying once again to teach me her favorite, the *Kalevala*, which she knew by heart in Finnish and in English. I'd heard her tell it many times before, but I always had a difficult time keeping the lines straight—there were just so many.

Mastered by desire impulsive, I said, by a mighty inward urging, I am ready now for singing, ready to begin the chanting...

Vanna, seated next to me, put her hand on my shoulder and said, Of our nation's ancient folk-song, handed... She trailed off, blinked, shook her head, tried again: Handed...

I covered her hand with mine and squeezed. Handed down?

She laughed, and her cheeks reddened. Yes, she said. Yes, of course. Handed down from by-gone ages, is the line. How silly of me. She kissed my forehead and said, Try it again, from the top.

That night, I lay in bed going over the lines I had managed to hold onto:

*In my mouth the words are melting,
From my lips the tones are gliding,
From my tongue they wish to hasten;
When my willing teeth are parted,
When my ready mouth is opened,
Songs of ancient wit and wisdom
Hasten from me not unwilling.*

I turned them over in my head, tried to imagine them melting in my mouth, but all I could see was the words disintegrating in Vanna's mouth—in her mind—and blowing away on the wind. For the first time, it occurred to me that there might be a difference between willingness and ability.

For a while, I thought her condition was my fault. I had just hit puberty, was getting taller and stronger by the day, but it seemed that as I grew, Vanna shrank, collapsed and luffed like a sail with no wind to fill it. Looking at her made me ashamed of my body's strength, my parasitic youth. I was restless, full of energy I didn't have the space to use. I wanted to run, to leap and tumble through waist-high grass. That's what made you old, I thought. Your power, confined within your cells, drives you to self-destruction, makes your body eat itself alive.

Now I think this was truer than I could know at the time.

As I learned more and more of Vanna's stories—the ones she could remember enough to teach me, anyway—the desire to find my home, real or imagined, got stronger. Hearing the way Vanna talked about Finland, about her neighbors—seeing and visiting the same people week after week, which I hadn't known I always wanted—made me wish I had that kind of stability. I wanted to wake up in the same place more than two days in a row, to look out my window and watch the seasons change.

I dreamed of what that home might look like, my own private Kalevala. There'd be roads and hills and horses, and a house with stone foundations. I would plant a tree and garden, let the green things grow around me. I'd live miles from the ocean, so I'd never have to see it, only going when it suited me to watch the ships at anchor. I would love my little farmhouse.

And I'd never have to leave it.

#

I eventually learned to navigate. The GPS system, as Jason told me it was called, was spottier than he had suggested, but he taught me how to use it when it worked. He showed me where the cables all plugged in, where the USB ports were. He even showed me the antenna one day in port. We improvised some safety lines and climbed all the way to the top of the mast, next to Vanna's purple ribbon, so he could show me the little matte-black dome that talked to the other machines in the sky, the satellites.

He also had a weird device he called a quadrant, which you used to find the angle of the sun, and then used math to figure out your position. I wasn't great at that part, but I could do it if I had to—if I had a calculator.

I never actually plotted a course, but he asked me to take our position a lot, especially when the GPS was out. I watched him study the charts, watched him draw lines and measure angles. It looked like something I could do, but when I asked, he didn't let me. He said I wasn't ready.

I waited until he was gone and measured his lines, looked at his notes, made sure I knew how to do it anyway.

#

Things continued as they had until a month ago. We were at a port, a tiny archipelago that Vanna said used to be big enough to hold two whole countries, now just a few mountaintops poking above the waves.

We had been scrounging for things to trade for food and supplies. We had a desalination still bolted to the *Aino's* deck, so we didn't need water, but Jason had opened our last bag of flour a few days before we sighted land. I hadn't tasted a vegetable in weeks.

I wandered through the market stalls, my arms full of as much of my stuff as I could part with—even my old stuffed horse, Winnie, which Vanna had found for me after I asked her what a horse was. My job was to find something fresh to eat. Vanna was after dry goods, and Jason was trying to haggle for cargo or something he could get a better trade for somewhere else.

I ran into Vanna, chatting in Spanish with a hawker seated beside plastic bags of grains. She patted a bundle of thick, orange rubber, tied with a rope. Nice to have on the sea, she said. In case of danger. The bundle was covered in weird writing that I'd never seen, but also a few words in English: *Chien-Shiung Wu, Hong Kong*. Hong Kong I knew from Jason's maps, though

the other part I didn't get. But the bundle felt familiar when I touched it, the surface smooth and cool and a little pliant.

Vanna, I asked, what *is* this?

It's a lifeboat, Terhikki, she said. The one we found you in.

I almost lost my balance. Winnie tumbled into the dust. You've had it all this time?

It hasn't been that long.

Mummi, it's been years. And whenever I asked you about it, you said you left it adrift.

She blinked and looked around, as though she'd misplaced her glasses again. Did we? I thought we showed it to you when you were little. I could've sworn...

The hawker watched our conversation, though I couldn't tell if he understood us. Is there a problem? he asked in Spanish.

I dropped my armful of precious things and grabbed my lifeboat. No deal, I told him, and ran. Vanna called me, asked me to stop, to wait. Asked to talk about it. I didn't listen. I sprinted back to the *Aino* and locked myself in the cabin.

They had lied to me, my whole life. Every time I had asked them about where I'd come from, every time I had asked if there was some clue I could have, some hint of where or who I used to be, *every time* they had lied. I pictured their faces, memorized what lying looked like.

Jacob found me there, knocked on the cabin hatch. You awake? he asked.

Go away, I said.

I've got lettuce and tomatoes I can't leave in the sun, he said. Let me put them away, and you can go back to sulking. (Jerk.)

I cracked the hatch and stuck my hand out. The afternoon light fell across my face, and I squinted against it. Jason loomed outside the door, a giant's shadow in orange sunglasses. He gave me a small cloth sack and smiled.

Vanna told me what happened, he said.

That I kept her from trading away something that didn't belong to her, or that I found out you both have been lying to me all my life? I tried to shut the hatch, but he caught it and held it open.

You were always asking about your home, where you came from, he said. We thought if we told you, you might try to take the lifeboat and go, or do some other damn fool thing that would get you killed.

You told me you left it there, I said.

He shook his head. When have I ever left behind something I could use?

My stomach churned. Like me?

Jason sucked air through his teeth and looked away. That's not what I meant.

The *Aino* rocked in the gentle swells that rippled across the harbor. The bag of veggies swung like a pendulum between us.

What if I could have found them—my family? I asked, in a voice like a drowning frog's. What if they're still out there?

He pulled the hatch all the way open. I let him. Vanna was on deck, as well, watching. She looked sad, maybe a little ashamed.

Jason sat down on the cabin step, his arms across his lap. Teri, there aren't many reasons to put your baby in a lifeboat alone, and none of them are so you can get settle down somewhere

without her. Whoever your family was before, they're gone. We're your family now—and we have been for a lot longer than they were.

And we love you, Vanna said. Jason nodded.

Unsure of what to say, afraid of what I *might* say, I said nothing. The boat swayed in a gust of salt-soured air, the kitchen pots and pans clanging softly behind me.

The words from the *Kalevala*, the parts I'd memorized long before, bubbled up again. *In my mouth the words are melting...from my tongue they wish to hasten.*

There was a difference between ability and willingness.

I hung the vegetable bag from a hook in the galley and sat on the bundled lifeboat. It's mine, I said. We're not getting rid of it.

Okay, said Jason.

They left me there until well after nightfall. While they were gone, I walked on deck and watched the horizon. When the sky's last memory of the sun had faded, the blue-white pinpricks of stars scattered across the sky like a spray of seafoam. Vanna had told me once that the stars themselves were suns, that the Earth was just a ball of rock and water dancing through nothingness. Between sunset and moonrise, when I lie back and imagine falling out into a space between everything, her claim is easier to believe.

Does the Earth feel like I did as it sails through the night? Is she as sick with longing as I was for a home she never had, *could* never have? I still look up and wonder, even now.

#

The next day, I found an electric pump I'd never seen before resting on top of the orange bundle when I woke. After breakfast, I dragged the lifeboat on deck and inflated it. The boat

wasn't tiny—it could probably hold at least four people comfortably—so it took a while, but I sat on the deck, forward of the cabin, and watched it rise like the bread that Jason made with our new supply of flour, slowly propping itself upright, taking shape. Jason watched me from the cockpit, but he didn't say anything.

The lifeboat was octagonal, orange above and black below, with an inflatable crossbar across the top that supported a vinyl, tent-like canopy. I climbed inside and stretched myself across the floor. It smelled like plastic and dust, and the light that filtered through the canopy tinted everything orange. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine that the *Aino* was gone, that I was alone in the lifeboat. I wanted to feel how I must have felt back when they found me. Maybe I thought it would give me a clue or a solution. I don't know.

Jason adjusted our course, the angle of the sun shifted, and I saw a flash of red. Attached to the inflatable crossbar was a small device with what looked like a red light and a solar collector. A wire ran from it to a little black bulb on top. When I bent to examine it, it looked a lot like our GPS antenna. I looked at the device again, and on the bottom, I found a USB port.

The lifeboat had GPS.

I ripped it from its Velcro mounting, unplugged it, and brought it down below to the computer. It took a while to boot up, and I drummed my fingers on the desk as I waited.

The toilet flushed, and Vanna came out of the head, humming to herself. I stiffened.

What are you doing, Terhikki? she asked. I didn't turn around, didn't answer. Willed her to go away. Eventually, she got the message and headed up on deck.

The computer blinked on, I plugged in the device, and moused around to try and see if there was anything I could use. The file names were all written in Chinese—English letters, but

not in any configuration I could read. I started at the top of the listing and opened each one, trying to scan the contents for something legible.

Jason stepped into the cabin. I almost slammed the computer's lid closed with a guilty look on my face. I scooted my chair aside to make enough room for him to pass and turned the computer to face me.

Look, he said, about yesterday.

It's fine, I said. If they could lie to me for years, I could lie to them right back.

I just don't want you to think we meant to hurt you, he said. We didn't.

I know, I said, almost interrupting him. You were right. It's stupid. I'm over it.

Sounds like.

I'm *getting* over it, I said. I just need space.

His smile disappeared. Not a lot of that around here.

There was a moment of silence. Then, he nodded, thumped his fist against a cabinet as if to punctuate the conversation, and went back on deck.

The next file I opened, I hit paydirt. A table with numbers, numbers I could read, some that looked like dates, others like coordinates. The most recent one was from that day, and when I checked the *Aino's* own GPS logs, they almost matched. I grabbed a piece of paper, wrote down the earliest entry—the one that would have registered when the lifeboat was first opened—and stuffed it in my pocket. The lifeboat GPS I replaced later, just in case Vanna or Jason knew it was there.

#

I have no water. I've been out here for two days. I know I'm not supposed to drink the sea, but I'm so thirsty. If I'm going to die anyway, maybe that would hasten it along. Vanna, Jason, I hope you know I'm sorry. But I don't think you do, or ever will.

#

One night, three days ago, I volunteered to watch the helm so Jason and Vanna could get some sleep. I said goodnight and waited, watching them through the hatch, until they stopped shifting and turning and their breathing was deep and even.

I secured the wheel so we'd keep our course, more or less, then went below and pulled out Jason's charts. I marked our position from earlier that day, and looked around until I found the latitude and longitude of the lifeboat's earliest recorded location.

We were close. Apparently, Jason didn't vary his courses much from year to year as we flitted between ports. The signal had first broadcast somewhere off the eastern coast of what had been a place called Florida, now long submerged. I traced a line between the points, measured the angles for the headings, tried to make sure we weren't going through any islands or obstacles. I didn't understand all the squiggles on the map, but I was confident I could get us there. I just needed to make sure I wasn't disturbed.

I retrieved some rope from under one of the cockpit seats, used a kitchen knife to cut it into smaller strips, and moved around the *Aino*'s deck, looping the rope through eyelets and latches in order to secure each hatch, ending with the main one, near the stern. I knew they would hold. I'd been tying them since I was a kid. Jason and Vanna would be fine in there. They had food and water and a bathroom. They could yell at me once I'd seen whatever there was to see.

I settled in at the wheel, checked the compass, and steered us toward what I hoped would be my beginning.

#

I saw the storm building for a couple of hours before we hit it. I thought about turning us back to our original course. I could untie the hatches, get us close to where we were before, claim ignorance when our position was off—I was getting pretty good at lying.

But a good sailor is aware of the feel of a thing, as well as the look; she judges with her gut as well as her head. I could *feel* that there was something out there, something that I had to find. As the thunderheads piled up ahead, I thought of the stories Vanna told, of heroes and quests and adventures. If things started getting harder, that was a sign the hero was going the right way.

So, I shortened sail, reduced the surface area of canvas to compensate for the higher winds of the coming storm, and pressed on.

After the clouds—masses of empty, inky black, sweeping in and blotting out the stars—I noticed the wind. The *Aino* heeled to one side with the increased force of the gale, sometimes sending the railings underwater before allowing them back up for air. Soon I couldn't just hold the wheel, I had to fight it. I hauled with my whole body and kept my eye on the compass, doing my best to steer us straight.

The heavier seas woke Jason and Vanna up. The hatch shifted, then rattled, then bucked. Jason called my name over the squall, but I said nothing.

The rain didn't build up like it usually did. One moment, the only water on me was the spray of the sea; the next, the boat had sailed into a solid mass of rain, falling in sheets. Within ten seconds, I was soaked. I pushed my plastered hair out of my face and sailed on.

There was a crack, and the main hatch buckled a little bit, shifting so it didn't quite fit tight. Lightning flashed, and Jason looked out through the crack.

Teri? he said. He had to shout to be heard. Teri, what are you doing?

I ignored him.

Goddammit, Teri! He disappeared, and I heard Vanna's voice next.

Terhikki, she said. Terhikki, please. I don't know what this is, but if it's about the boat—

Of course it's about the boat, I shouted back. Of course it is. It's about the lifeboat and the *Aino* and the years and years of wondering and uncertainty and lies. It's about me not knowing who I am—or, apparently, who *you* are.

Terhikki, we can talk about this. We can go to where we found you. We can ask. We can look. Please.

I'm already looking, I said. I don't need your help.

She didn't answer. I had no idea if she was still there. The storm was getting worse, and keeping us on course took more and more of my focus. I was shivering, whether with the cold or with the fear or with the rage, I wasn't sure. But I wouldn't stop, no matter how much they begged me. I was so close.

The blade of a knife poked out through the crack in the hatch and began sawing at the rope. Jason.

I'm not going to stop, I told him. You're going to have to kill me.

No one's going to kill you, kid. You might kill us all, though, if you don't stop this.

I couldn't stop him from cutting the rope. I couldn't afford to leave the helm. That was fine. We were almost there.

The rope snapped. The hatch gave. Jason pushed himself out, snatching the remains of my binding out of his way. Vanna followed him. I stared him down, bracing myself as best I could against the wheel's bucking and twisting and fighting.

I have to know, I said. I need to see.

He held my eyes for a long moment, then looked down. There's nothing *to* see, he said. But you can look if you want. He worked his way forward to check the sails.

The swells were huge now, each one a hill the boat had to climb, each brief respite from the wind and storm cavernous and deafening.

Vanna settled next to me, already wet as I was. She put a hand on my shoulder and said, I saw your course. Not bad.

Thanks, I said. I couldn't bring myself to smile.

You know, she said, when Wainamoinen was in his mother's belly and wanted out, he called out to the sun and moon and the other gods, asking them for help. He said he wanted to see the outside, to walk the land.

I remember, I said. Lightning flashed again, thunder close on its heels.

When you've been stuck in one small, watery place your whole life, I can understand why you might need to feel like something's out there.

Something is, I said. You'll see.

I did see, sweet child, Vanna said. There's nothing there but water and rocks.

I don't believe you, I said. More salt water on my face, but warm.

Jason's voice drifted back to us, mostly swallowed by the wind. I strained to look forward, saw him holding onto the rigging and waving wildly with one arm. He was saying something, something urgent, but I couldn't hear the words.

Vanna started to work her way forward, to find out what he wanted to tell us. We started up another wave, the wind died down, and I heard him:

The rocks! Turn away from the rocks!

Then a violent crash, a lurch, and I was underwater.

#

I only remember the rest of the night in flashes of lightning. The highlights of the bolts against the clouds helped me orient myself beneath the waves so I could kick to the surface.

When I found air, I gulped it, along with mouthfuls of seawater. There was no sign of the *Aino*. I'm not sure how long I stayed there, treading water, trying to keep my head above the swells.

Then I saw a red, flashing light. I thought for a moment that another ship had been nearby, had seen us and had come to get us. I swam toward it, fighting against the pull of the sea, hoping that the lightning didn't pick that moment to strike near me and electrocute me then and there.

Maybe it would've been better if it had.

It was the lifeboat, of course. My lifeboat. The solar panel must have charged the battery, so it had some juice left to signal whoever might be watching.

Which, so far, has been only me.

#

I'm dying. I can feel it. The briny sea was water that sucked all the water from my mouth as I drank it. I knew it, but I couldn't stop. I drank until I threw up, more ocean than bile, and kept drinking.

Now I'm tired, though not sleeping. The sun above is warm and loving. I take off all my clothes and lie there, drinking in the light and smiling. All around, the seabirds squawk, I know I must be close to land, but I don't have the strength to raise my head to the horizon. But I see them: hills and valleys, green and lush with life unending—Kalevala, where I'll find my family waiting, smiling at me. Vanna, Jason, know I love you, know as well that I'm so sorry, that I'll see you soon, and we can live in peace forever.

SPACE AND DISTANCE

Dylan hated airports—the touristy Florida ones most. Orlando Sandford International Airport was no exception, though it was small. Display cases, filled with kitschy tropical memorabilia, were islands in a sea of mostly empty chairs. Posters of smiling people surrounded by cartoon mice and fairy tale castles urged arriving travelers to visit the amusement parks, and reminded departing ones to come back next year, complete with the brightly-colored price tags for the parks' latest crop of special offers. Happiness dealers, making sure the desperate, beleaguered tourists knew where to get their next fix—and that it wouldn't be free. As if to underscore the saccharine message of the ads, a statue of a goofy cartoon dog stood against one wall, constructed entirely out of papier-mâché and pastel-colored marshmallow candies.

But Dylan was a native, so he usually accepted the travel ads and amiable alligators as just a normal part of life. In the Army, he'd been taken aback by the number of his platoon mates who had never been to Orlando or to the parks, and who regarded them with almost mythical admiration, an eventual vacation there the stuff of bucket lists and leave requests. When he admitted that, no, he didn't hold annual passes, that in fact he hadn't been to any of the parks in years, they looked at him as though he'd lived outside the Vatican all his life and never bothered to see Saint Peter's Basilica. Among his brothers- and sisters-in-arms who were adherents of the Great Cult of Happiness—even those who had yet to make their pilgrimage—he had found himself something of an apostate.

His phone chimed: a text from Mia, her new Pennsylvania number. *Need me to pick u up when u get here?*

No. I'm renting a car. He wasn't, but neither was he in the mood to act all chummy. Some people could divorce and stay friends, but if the process so far had taught Dylan anything, it was that he wasn't some people, though Mia seemed to be. Strictly speaking, things had been "amicable," which was the word people always used to describe divorces that weren't particularly vicious or litigious, but it was still hard to split apart a previously communal life without a little resentment seeping through the cracks. Hard for him, anyway. Mia seemed to have taken to it easily enough.

Dylan settled back and surveyed the terminal again, stifling a yawn. The murmur of moving travelers droned in the background, and the occasional garbled announcement stabbed through the relative quiet every few minutes. People huddled in seats next to their bags, fiddling on their phones or reading a cheap paperback from the convenience store—the only things at airports sold at normal retail value. There were enough empty seats that he could keep several between himself and anyone else, which was how he liked it.

He rested his arms on his backpack, a military-style bag complete with nylon loops for holding pouches and other gear. He'd stitched one of his old Army name patches onto the back of it, out of nostalgia more than necessity. The pack and a garment bag were his only luggage. The Army hadn't taught him to travel light, exactly, but it had certainly shown him how little he really needed. Beyond a toothbrush, a razor, and a clean pair of skivvies, everything else was a luxury. The garment bag held only his suit for the hearing. Was it called a hearing? No one would really be talking or testifying or whatever, just he and Mia signing the last few papers.

Another chime. *Cassie is excited to c u.*

A twisting, sucking sensation in his chest, his insides swirling like bathwater when the drain plug pulls up. Seeing Cassie would be the best part about this whole trip, and the worst.

Mia had asked him for custody, and he agreed, but only because he didn't want to try and fight it out, maybe make things worse. When he thought about it, he pictured Mia and himself, each pulling one of Cassie's arms in a different direction, and he wanted to throw up. He had Cassie's picture as his phone's wallpaper: a smiling seven-year-old in a windbreaker, front teeth missing, her thick black hair frizzy and wild, with two barrettes used only to keep it out of her face. The draining sensation slowed a little as he looked at the photo but didn't stop.

He raised his phone to take a picture of the cartoon dog sculpture for Cassie, but a blurry shape swallowed up the camera's aperture and settled into the chair across from him at the gate. A voluminous old woman foundered under her mass of luggage. She sported a baggy sweatshirt covered in cartoon characters, despite the early fall Florida heat, and a giant, mouse-eared skullcap with *Evelyn* stitched in cursive across the brow, her short, iron grey hair sticking out from underneath. In addition to her large, floral carry-on, which pushed the airline's size limit, she carried a worn leather handbag, a tote made of what looked like woven, dried palm fronds, and a plastic shopping bag from the terminal's convenience store. All of them were stuffed as full as Dylan believed they could be. He wasn't sure that the staff would let her take it all on the plane.

Dylan shifted his knees to one side, giving the woman more space in the aisle as she rearranged her belongings. By the time she settled everything, she was panting, and a light sheen of sweat glistened beneath the seam of her hat. He tried not to stare.

"Going home or leaving it?"

He looked up. The woman smiled at him from across the aisle, now nestled comfortably amongst her things like a happy mother penguin. Dylan blinked and hesitated. The question, direct and unsolicited, made him uncomfortable. In the Army, they had always made a big deal about Operational Security (OPSEC), and soldiers weren't supposed to reveal the details of their travel plans in case they inadvertently divulged something an enemy spy could use against them. The philosophy came complete with computer training classes featuring a purple dragon character repeating things like, "Loose lips sink ships!" Like much of his training, it had stuck long after he was discharged. These probably innocuous questions from strangers always left him suspicious and scrambling for what to say.

Dylan tried to keep this struggle from his face. If he failed, the woman—Evelyn, he supposed—didn't let on. She remained smiling and patient, as though it were normal for people to take this long to answer simple questions.

The truth here probably wouldn't be too revealing. "Leaving," he said.

She nodded. "Visiting family?"

"Yeah."

"That's great," she said. He thought she might even mean it. She looked around the terminal, and Dylan went back to his phone, the conversation apparently over. Then: "I'm going home, myself."

Dylan didn't look up this time. "Oh yeah?"

"Yep. Been on vacation."

He took a moment to eye her sweatshirt and hat, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Despite himself, he said, "You don't say."

She laughed, a deep belly laugh that echoed above the terminal din. Nearby travelers made annoyed faces in her direction. “I guess I look like a tourist, huh?”

“Little bit.” He hoped that would be the end of it. Why did people think that random strangers would be interested in just striking up conversations? Was this not awkward and uncomfortable? Was he the weird one?

He must have been, because she kept going. “My favorite place in the world, though. I go every year, if I can make it. Last year I couldn’t, because of some medical issues, but I got all that sorted out. Now, here I am.” She reached into the shopping bag and produced a bottle of soda, which she opened with one firm, hissing twist.

Dylan had no idea how to respond to that, so he settled on, “Great.”

Evelyn nodded as she took a swig of soda, and Dylan was amazed that she managed to do so without spilling. She finished with an *Ahh!* and lifted the bottle toward him in a fizzy toast. “But you know how great it is. You live here. I’ll bet you go all the time.”

The enthusiasm of another devoted cultist. Time to play the heretic again—maybe then she’d leave him alone. “Not really.”

“Wow. All that in your backyard, and you don’t go?”

“Not since I was a kid.”

There must have been something in his tone, because she nodded slowly, as though she’d just received some special insight. Perhaps a revelation from the Cult’s great mousey god? “Kid stuff. I get it. I thought the same thing, years ago.”

Dylan braced himself. Of *course* there was a story.

“Wasn’t until my kids made me take them one summer that I really fell in love with it. They thought it was all right—liked the rides, liked the souvenirs, you know how kids are. But for me? The place was something else. Even there with my kids, who were tired and sunburned and cranky and doing their best to share all of that with me, I could pretend that all the crap going on outside, back in my real life, was just a bad dream, one that I could wake up from while I was there. Or maybe the park was the dream. I don’t know. Point is, I loved it there, and I kept going back, even once my kids lost interest.”

Dylan had never met anyone who opened up like this to strangers. “That sounds nice, but...why are you telling me this?”

She blinked, shrugged. “Just making conversation.”

He looked over at the gate, where the airline staff had gathered to start boarding soon. “I have to go to the bathroom. Excuse me.” He picked up his bags and stood. There was a space between them, a space that demanded something more from him. He didn’t know why—but he resented it. “Thanks for the conversation,” he said.

On his way to the bathroom, he considered stopping to take the picture of the dog sculpture, decided against it. Why? Just to spite Evelyn, whom he would never see again and who wouldn’t know about it anyway? A stupid reason.

But he didn’t stop.

#

When Dylan got back from the bathroom, he took a position nearer to the gate, standing against a support column. He avoided making eye contact with Evelyn, though he kept glancing over at her to see if she’d noticed him. She chatted happily with another couple next to her, the

three of them laughing every so often over some undoubtedly stupid joke. Evelyn's boisterous guffaw swept the others' laughter away, drowning it in the flood of her shameless mirth.

His phone rang. Mia's face on the screen, menu button prompting him for a video chat. His thumb hovered over the "Reject" button, but eventually fell on "Accept." He held the phone in front of his face, making sure he was centered in the little thumbnail.

Instead of Mia, Cassie's face appeared on the other end, smiling, her new teeth just starting to poke through her gums. The black nylon straps of her booster seat dug into her bright pink jacket, and the phone jostled every so often as Mia's car went over a bump.

She waved, her little hand a fanned-out blur next to her face. "Hi, Daddy!"

"Hi, munchkin!" Dylan said. He found his smile more easily than it had since the last time they had talked. "How was school?"

"Are you at the airport?" Her eyes flicked past where his shoulders would have been. He moved the phone so she could see the terminal.

"I can't wait to see you," he said.

"How long are you gonna' stay?" She tried to ask it casually—already so grown up—but the question had a plaintive note lurking around the edges. Dylan's smile stretched taut at the corners.

"Just a couple of days. Mommy and I have to sign some papers."

"So you can be not married anymore?"

Dylan couldn't meet her eyes, not even through the phone screen. He heard Mia say something in the background. Only her admonishing tone made it to Dylan's end—whether at Cassie's asking of the question or at the way she'd asked, he couldn't tell.

The picture on the screen shook and tumbled, Cassie's face washing away in a swirling flood of blocky digital artifacts. When the image settled, the camera stared up at Mia from the passenger seat, the phone held steady by her arm, which stretched up giant in the foreground. The forced perspective made her face seem miles away. A sheet of gray clouds gathered through the window behind her head. She had cut her hair close, a fade, all skin until just above her ears. That was new. Or old—it had been like that when they'd met.

“Sorry about that,” she said.

“It's fine.” He shrugged, though she couldn't see it. Her eyes were focused out the windshield of her car, to his right, holding the steering wheel steady with her free hand.

“You sure we can't pick you up? It's no trouble.”

There it was again, that effortless, good-natured helpfulness. How could she be so cheerful about this? Dylan bit back a too-sharp reply and said, “You cut your hair.”

She stiffened, caught herself, deliberately relaxed. He didn't miss her shrug. “Yeah. You know. It was time.” The words lingered in the air long enough for him to count every one of the thousand miles between them.

“Looks nice,” he said. An olive branch.

She smiled, and it didn't look forced. “Call us when you get to your hotel. We'll go to dinner or something.”

“Sure.”

Mia lifted the phone and twisted it toward the back seat. Cassie waved from her booster seat. He waved back, blew kisses, and the connection cut off.

#

Boarding was uneventful. Dylan slipped into the line when they called his zone and made his way to his seat—a window seat, which he preferred, and had paid extra to reserve.

He had just texted Mia to let her know he was on the plane when he felt a large, sweatshirted presence settle into the aisle seat next to him, the vinyl cover squeaking in protest. This close, Evelyn smelled like a mix of arthritis crème and fruity candy. At his expression, she laughed and said, “Well, looks like we’re stuck with each other,” though, if she was offended by his avoiding her, he couldn’t tell by her tone.

Dylan forced a laugh. “Looks like.” He went back to his phone, clinging to the desperate hope that there would be something he could pretend to pay attention to, but as soon as the screen unlocked, Evelyn made a high-pitched sound, like a speaker on the verge of feeding back.

“Oh, she’s precious!” She pointed to his phone, at the picture of Cassie. “Is she yours?”

“Yeah.” The next three hours stretched before Dylan, a gulf only measurable on the astronomical scale. Maybe he could put in some headphones and pretend to go to sleep. Maybe he could ask one of the flight attendants for a different seat. Maybe he could hide in the lavatory for an hour.

“What’s her name?”

Trapped. “Cassie.”

“And you’ve never taken her to the parks?”

Dylan shook his head. Mia suggested it once, years ago, shortly after they’d moved to Orlando, but the plan had never gone further than that. There had been other things to do, like work, or school, or life. Then there had been conversations that neither of them seemed willing to start, distance growing between them, the space filling with all the things they couldn’t bring

themselves to say. There had been no big, climactic fight, no melodramatic moment, just a slow, bubbling dissolution in the acidic silence.

Evelyn leaned toward him and nudged his shoulder with hers. “Well, you should try it. You might like it. And you know *she* would.”

He wanted to object, to lash out and tell her she didn’t know anything about his daughter, but the truth was that she was right. Cassie would have loved it.

Evelyn seemed like she was waiting for a response. “She lives with my w—with her mother,” he said.

She nodded again, the wise old Buddha in a mouse-eared hat. “Oh, I gotcha’. They live in P-A?”

“Yeah.” Mia’s family was there, and they had better schools than Florida. It was a natural choice. He also assumed, though she had never said as much, that it was her attempt to break away from their old life, to start fresh in familiar territory, where she’d been before they’d met.

Beside him, Evelyn bent over to retrieve her palm frond bag from beneath the chair in front of her, to her own seat’s shrill objections. Over the P.A. system, one of the flight attendants started the pre-flight spiel about seatbelts, oxygen masks, and life vests. *In the unlikely event of a water landing, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device.* A water landing sounded pretty good right now.

Once she had her bag, she reached in and produced a plush toy—the same damned cartoon dog from the airport sculpture—and offered it to him. “For Cassie,” she said.

“You don’t have to—”

“Of course I don’t. I want to. I got this for my grandson, but he’s got tons of crap from me already.” She waggled the toy in front of him, like she was trying to convince a cat to play. “Take it.”

He did. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” she said. Dylan thought it actually might be.

The plane reached the head of the runway, and Dylan watched out the window as the acceleration of takeoff pressed him back into his seat. This was his favorite part of flying, and it never got old, no matter how many times he’d done it. Even the big C-130s that he’d flown on to go from Kuwait into Iraq, he had enjoyed, though he hadn’t been able to look out the windows on those flights. The plane lifted into the air, and the rumbling of the landing gear dropped away with the ground. There was a pressure beneath his seat, beneath his feet, though his eyes told him there was nothing but air. He had always liked the weirdly dissonant feeling that gave him, like watching a stage magician do a trick: it looked impossible, but there it was, happening nonetheless. Even knowing how planes worked didn’t diminish it. That a thing so heavy could *fly*, could throw itself into the sky and gravity be damned, thumbing its nose at miles of empty air beneath it, never failed to make him smile.

Evelyn was quiet for a while. She didn’t talk, at any rate. From her shopping bag, she retrieved a bag of individually wrapped candies and proceeded to open a handful, the plastic crackling with each piece. She held the bag out to him, and he shook his head. He could hear the candies clacking against her teeth while she sucked on them, and the final crunch when she went in for the kill, only to start the crinkling all over again. The only change to the rhythm was the occasional gulp from her soda, followed by the inevitable, invariable *Ahh!* He wondered if she

were advertising. He scooted as close to the window as he could, until the armrest next to the bulkhead dug into his kidney, and gazed out at the field of grey clouds beneath them.

“So...did things just not work out? Between you and Cassie’s mom?”

This time, Dylan glared at her. “Excuse me?”

His angry tone had about as much effect as his reticence or his sarcasm. Nothing daunted this woman.

“The divorce. Did it just not work out? Did she cheat on you? Did you cheat on her?”

“Are you serious?” Dylan searched for something, *anything* to say that wouldn’t cause a scene. The last thing he needed was to be escorted off the plane by an Air Marshall, in handcuffs. “We just met. You don’t even know my name.”

“Sure I do,” she said, and nodded toward his feet. “It’s sewn onto your backpack.” The patch stared up at him from his pack, stuffed under the seat in front of him.

He sighed. “Fantastic.”

Evelyn cackled—it could have been a chuckle, technically, but he decided it was a cackle. “So, *Dylan*, what’s the story? We’ve got time.”

Dylan had opened his mouth to yell at her when the flight attendants wheeled the snack cart by. “Would you like a drink or a snack, ma’am? Sir?”

Evelyn brandished her soda bottle. Dylan closed his eyes and shook his head. The attendants moved on.

He leaned in, his voice little more than a hiss. “Look, lady, I don’t know you. I’m not going to tell you all about my life and about my problems just because you forgot to buy a fucking book, okay?”

“Who needs books? People are more interesting.”

Dylan rubbed a hand over his face and turned back to the window. He willed the cabin to depressurize, so he could strangle Evelyn with an oxygen mask. If there were gods, they were on her side, because the plane kept flying uninterrupted.

Again, she laughed, loud enough that the flight attendant at the front of the snack cart, several rows up, frowned at her. “That bad, huh?”

“Go to hell.”

“On my way.”

God damn her. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, though he thought he knew.

She gestured at herself, as though presenting her sweatshirt for inspection. “I’m dying.” The news didn’t dampen the cartoon characters’ spirits.

Above them, the “Fasten Seatbelt” sign dinged off.

“Bullshit,” Dylan said. She was lying—she had to be. But he remembered how even the small effort of rearranging her bags had exhausted her. Saw how her sweatshirt seemed almost comically oversized.

Her smile this time seemed sad. “I wish. Cancer. They caught it last year. That’s why I couldn’t go to Orlando. I thought the chemo got it.” She shrugged. “Not quite.”

Whatever was left of his outrage evaporated. He opened his mouth to apologize for his rudeness or his anger, to say some kind of socially-appropriate and sympathetic thing, but she waved whatever he had been going to say away.

“Save it. I’ve heard it. I’m over it.”

“So, this whole thing?” Dylan asked, gesturing at the souvenirs, the bags.

“Farewell tour. Wanted to wake up from the dream—or have the dream again—one more time.” She pointed to the hat. “They’re going to bury me in this. It’s in my will.”

Dylan retrieved the stuffed dog from his backpack, offered it back to her. “Your grandson will probably want this.”

Evelyn shook her head. “Keep it. If I want to give him something, I’ll give him an old one from my house. It’ll mean more.”

He nodded and put the dog away again.

Silence between them, for the first time. Dylan opened his phone once more and stared at Cassie’s picture. Water sucked its way out of the tub.

“Nobody cheated,” he said. “We drifted apart.”

“Your idea or hers?” Evelyn’s voice was gentle now.

He was about to give his go-to answer—the decision was mutual, they agreed to end it—but he found he no longer had the energy to lie. “Hers.”

She nodded again, then reached over the armrest to put a hand on his shoulder. “You want my advice?”

“If I said no, would that stop you?”

Evelyn laughed. He couldn’t help but smile a little. “Hey, I’m dying. You have to listen to me—it’s the rules.” When he didn’t protest, she said, “Make do.”

He made a face. “What does that even mean?”

“It means that while I’m sure this isn’t how you saw your life going, you should find something that makes you happy and hold onto it however you can, as hard as you can, for as long as you can. When you get as old as I am, that’s all you really remember.”

What a bunch of Happy Cult horseshit. “Thanks. You’ve changed my life.”

“I bet. Anyway, I said my piece, so now I’ll leave you alone.” She reached into her shopping bag and pulled out a new book, its cover and pages still flat and pristine. She saw him notice, flashed a grin.

#

Evelyn had left him alone with his thoughts for the rest of the flight. Dylan guessed she’d had her fun. He stopped at the bathroom once he got off the plane, took a minute to splash water on his face and dig a hoodie out of his pack, and ordered a ride-share to his hotel with a phone app. As he stepped onto the escalator that would take him up to ground level and the taxi lanes at Lehigh Valley International, he saw Evelyn waiting at the baggage claim carousel, surrounded by her gaggle of bags, waiting for more.

The drab underground area opened up into a giant, vaulted chamber, all glass and steel and concrete. The linoleum gleamed almost white compared to Floridian beige. There was no kitsch in sight. At the top of the escalator, a glass-paneled, waist-high wall, capped with a brass railing, overlooked the lower floor.

Something short barreled into him, wrapped around his legs, and almost knocked him over. “Daddy!”

He scooped Cassie up. It had only been a few months, but she felt bigger than he remembered. “Munchkin! I’m surprised to see you here.” He looked around for Mia, saw her standing by a row of chairs nearby, her fingers tight around the strap of her purse.

“I told her we’d see you at dinner, but she insisted,” Mia said.

Cassie nodded. “I said we needed to see you as much as we could, before you go away again.”

Mia’s eyes tightened, but she didn’t say anything.

More water drained in Dylan’s chest. “We’ll make the most of the next few days, for sure. Hey, I got you something.” He gave her the plush dog. She squealed with delight and hugged the new toy—and him. His smile came easily again for a moment. He snuck a glance at Mia, and saw her smiling, too. When she met his eyes, she faltered.

Dylan thought she was about to say something when Evelyn trundled through the space between them, dragging a huge suitcase in addition to the rest of her luggage. She caught Dylan’s eye as she passed and nodded.

Mia watched her go, took in the sweatshirt, the hat, and looked back at Dylan with an expression that said, *Is she for real?* He shrugged.

Make do, Evelyn had said. He looked at Cassie, who made the dog run along the brass railing. He thought of taking her to the parks, like they’d always meant to. She was tall enough now to ride most of the rides, and Mia would probably appreciate the break. Dylan could take her, just the two of them. It wouldn’t make up for being gone the rest of the time, but it would be something. Maybe Cassie could pretend that things were different—the parks were built from imagination, after all. Maybe she could wake up from this bad dream, if only for a little while.

Maybe they both could.

LOSING LAURA

Laura died last night.

Hours later, as I drive to the office in the predawn gray, I press my little coupe's accelerator all the way to the floor. The northern Virginia forest that flanks the highway blurs into an evergreen canyon in the electric motor's keening, jet-engine whine. My stomach lags behind me down the hills as I porpoise through drifting fog and makes me want to throw up—again—but I don't slow down.

I shouldn't be doing this. Part of me hopes a cop catches me going who-knows-how-much over the speed limit and takes me to jail. But there are no cops. I'm alone on the road the whole way there, which I guess is fitting.

I'm forced to brake around a curve, and the worn, brown accordion folder in the passenger seat slides to the floorboards. The elastic that held the flap closed broke months ago, and I replaced it with a black hair tie—I can't remember if it was mine or Laura's.

There's only one other car in the parking lot when I pull into my space at the National Systems Dynamics. The building is broad and fat—all poured concrete and avant-garde angles and tinted glass jutting from the mist like a cruise ship. The first rays of sunlight skim over the treetops and hit the layered solar panels on the building's roof, which gives the place a blazing corona, as though to light my way.

I rake my fingers through my hair, pull it back, and check in the visor mirror to see if my eyes are red and puffy enough to give me away. I don't want the security guard to know that I've been crying. The part of my brain that's always calculating and logical reminds me that crying is

perfectly natural in this situation, but it's irrationally important to the rest of me that I keep my grief private. It's mine, and I don't want to share it.

I'm selfish like that.

Inside, the guard—Nate—looks up from his book as I approach the turnstile, my folder held against my hip. He rolls forward in his chair and slaps a rhythm on the front desk's smooth black laminate, speckled gray and white.

“Hey, Doc. Didn't expect to see you today.” He sets the book on the desk and gives me the kind of look I got from the store clerk the one time I tried to steal a candy bar. That time, I got caught.

“Couldn't sleep,” I say. “Figured I'd get some work done.” Not entirely false.

“How's—” I watch as he searches for a word, any word that isn't specific, that doesn't have anything to do with wives or cancer. “—things?”

“Fine.” He doesn't challenge me on the lie. I try to stand straight, to look like I'm supposed to be here despite the oversized T-shirt and yoga pants and loose, crooked ponytail. I try to pretend that Laura's still alive—not dead, still only dying—and clutch the folder to my stomach.

He grabs his book—a biography of Henrietta Lacks, whose cells were used against her will for cancer research—leans back again, offers me a smile. Chair wheels on white linoleum echo in the weekend stillness. “Just you and me today. Holler if you need anything.”

“Sure,” I say. “Thanks.”

The turnstile beeps green as I swipe my ID, and a cheery, computerized voice says, “Iravani, Ava.”

I take the elevator down three floors to my lab.

#

A depth-first search is one of the most basic decision-making algorithms. Imagine an interconnected system of tree roots, with a starting point at the base of the trunk, and a potential end point at each fork or tip. The depth-first search will inspect each possible branch of solutions from thickest branch to narrowest tip, in order, only backtracking to a previous fork when it can go no further along a given path. This is an unintelligent search, however, as it does not consider whether searching the next option in the tree will get it closer to the goal. It will also return the first possible solution that it finds, without checking to make sure it has found the best one.

#

When NSD hired me to develop a general artificial intelligence, they asked me what kind of workspace I would need. I told them someplace big and cold and dry. They were already putting a basement in the new building, so they decided to dig deeper, and they stumbled across a cavern, a little bubble in the limestone underneath the hill. They were going to fill it in and dig someplace else, but I stopped them, told them it was perfect, had them install everything without disturbing any more natural rock than they had to.

They didn't argue, which Laura said was a compliment. I couldn't tell her what I was doing—my NDA with the company was ironclad and unforgiving—but I compromised by telling her about the space, snuck pictures while they were leveling the floors and smuggled them out to show her.

The fluorescents flicker on when the elevator doors open, splashing dim, blue-green light on the recessed pit that holds racks and racks of hardware, over a thousand machines all linked together and communicating at the speed of light, an interoperating neural network that I built myself—part by part, cable by cable, line of code by line of code. Two cooling towers rise and bore into the ceiling, surrounded by stalactites, soaking up the monstrous amount of heat the systems create and shunting it to a generator somewhere else in the building. The towers flank the heart of the system: a bleeding-edge quantum computer, capable of processing complex algorithms at a hundred-million times the speed of a binary system. Status lights twinkle like stars across the panels, shifting constellations of red, green, blue, and white.

A thick, black umbilicus links the system to the master workstation, where I've spent the last five years coding and building an operating system that can support a nascent AI. The framework is there—I'm pretty sure, at least—all it needs is a catalyst, a pattern of thought reduced to bits and bytes to help the synthetic brain kick-start itself, to begin thinking and interacting and learning.

The computers, cooling towers, and electrostatic air scrubbers drone a basso chorus that I stop hearing once I've been down here for a few minutes. The air is frigid, and I have to fight shivers while I bundle myself in the fleece-lined hoodie on a hook next to the emergency power shutoff—Laura's hoodie, from Brown, that I stole years ago. I bury my face in the fabric and inhale, but it no longer smells like her. The cloth smells like nothing. Like ozone, maybe.

I undo the hair tie and spread the folder's contents on the desk: a hard drive and a sheaf of black plastic hospital printouts, scans of the neuron firing patterns in Laura's brain. I flip through them for the millionth time, ignoring the growing clot of black in the middle, focusing

instead on the little spiderwebs of light. Glyphs of linked synapses writing thoughts in a language that I think I've deciphered after several straight years of running custom pattern-recognition algorithms in succession, feeding the computer additional data as fast as I could gather it.

Laura—*my* Laura, all that's left of her. These patterns contain the essence of who she was. Her soul, if there is such a thing. If I'm right, I can imprint that on the machine, give it her thought patterns, her memories. The brain is just an organic computer. If I'm right, I can back Laura up.

And then she won't really be gone.

#

The first time I asked to scan her brain, Laura looked at me as though I'd asked her to teach me how to fly.

"Why?" she asked, doing the crinkle thing with her eyebrows that she always did when she was running through rapid-fire possibilities in her head, trying to figure out the answer to a complex logistical problem.

"Work," I said. A code word, which meant *Don't ask*.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course."

"Perfect, thanks." I snuggled closer to her in our bed, away from the frosted windowpanes. This was three years and six months before she died. We had been married for two weeks, a bare-bones courthouse ceremony with just a few close friends and Laura's parents. My folks hadn't even sent their RSVP—not that I had thought they would.

"No, I meant 'Of course it's for work,' because of course it is. And you knew that full well, missy, so don't try to lie." Her tone was stern, but her arm tightened around me, and she ran

the side of her thumb over the crest of my hip. Our white down comforter lay piled around us like a drift of warm, fluffy snow, which I preferred to the foot of real stuff outside.

“You *wound* me, madam,” I said, and she laughed. How could I convince her without telling her too much? I planted a line of kisses along her collarbone to buy time. She smelled like floral shampoo and tasted like sweat.

“What would you be looking for?” she asked.

“You,” I said. “What makes you *you*.” That seemed safe, if probably confusing.

The eyebrow crinkle again, this time with a half-smile. “Are you a programmer or a philosopher?”

A fair question, one I asked myself a lot back then. “A little of both?”

She held my eyes for a moment, and I wondered if I’d given too much away.

“This isn’t for a mind control device, is it?” she asked. “You aren’t trying to figure out how to brainwash people, or something?”

My turn to laugh. “What am I, a supervillain?”

“If you were, would you tell me?” She was smiling, but there was something in her voice, something soft and thready and wavering.

Whatever the thing was, it tugged at me, and I clung to the joke. “And reveal my nefarious plans?”

Her expression didn’t change so much as solidify, freezing into a mask like a thin layer of plaster. “No,” she said. “I wouldn’t expect you to do that.”

We lay there for a while, as the silence of the frozen world outside seeped in around us. I pulled the comforter up to our necks, to preserve what warmth I could.

“It’s nothing bad—promise.” I buried my face in her neck. The dark, wispy hairs at the nape tickled my nose.

Laura leaned her head against mine. “Why me? Why not some random volunteer?”

“I wanted to look at a mind I already know is beautiful,” I said—which, while blatant flattery, was also true.

Her cheek tightened against my eyebrow as she smiled. “Wow. *Smooth.*”

“Too much?” I pulled back and met her eyes, pantomimed dismay.

She kissed me. “*Way* too much.”

It must have been enough, though, because the next time I asked, she agreed.

#

A breadth-first search is, essentially, the inverse of a depth-first search. Given the same root structure, the algorithm will search each tier of roots, whether fork or tip, before it moves deeper into the network of options. While this is an optimal search, as it is thorough enough that it is sure to find the best solution, should one exist, it is still not intelligent. The algorithm does not consider whether a given option gets it closer to its goal, and as a result can be both time and resource-intensive.

#

Two weeks later, I held Laura’s hand as she sat in a machine that looked like a dentist’s chair with a motorcycle helmet attached—a new gadget from another branch of R&D that, I read, could give accurate, detailed pictures of individual patterns of neurons, of a person’s thoughts and synapses, in real time.

We were in a second-floor lab at NSD, plate-glass windows overlooking the meditation garden in the center of the campus, a spiderweb of sidewalks dusted with salt and flanked with shoveled snow. Lab-coated technicians double-checked the chair's wiring, ran system diagnostics on the attendant computers. The lab was chilly, but Laura's palm was slick against mine, and she kept fiddling with the bright pink visitor's badge clipped to her blouse.

The scan went smoothly at first. The lead researcher, a neurologist named Amelia, asked Laura a series of questions designed to lead her thoughts across as wide a spectrum as possible, so the machine could get a decent sample. Laura's answers were quick, honest, and often witty. When Amelia asked about me, Laura smiled and squeezed my hand as she spoke.

One of the technicians called Amelia over to the workstation, pointed to a screen that I couldn't see from my seat next to Laura, spoke in murmured words that I couldn't make out.

"Problem?" I asked.

"There's a weird shadow on the readout," Amelia said. "It's probably nothing." She glanced at the tech, who shook his head slightly. "Laura, when was the last time you had a check-up?"

The air froze, as though a blizzard had howled through the halls and blown off the doors of the room, despite the stillness outside.

My memory of the next few weeks is a whirlwind of doctor's visits, MRIs, entire fusillades of tests. They all said *malignant astrocytoma*, exactly as terrifying and ominous as it sounds. Based on its position in the brain, Laura's oncologist said, it would be too dangerous to remove, and the neurosurgeon he called to consult agreed. They suggested radiation therapy.

The second oncologist we saw said the same thing. So did the third.

Laura surprised me when she said she wanted to continue with Amelia's scans. She was lying on the table for her first radiation session, a tiny patch of her long, dark hair shaved and tattooed with a trio of little dots, so the hulking machine knew where to aim the beam of gamma rays that would knock electrons off vital molecules in the tumor cells—ideally without hitting too many of the healthy ones. The device was all gray plastic and curving lines, as though the manufacturer wanted to reassure the patient that a machine designed for surgical, molecular destruction was only trying to help, wanted to smooth over their fear with aesthetics.

“I need to keep going,” she said, when I asked her why. “Keep doing things, keep living like this is going to work.”

“It'll work,” I said.

#

I have to dig out an extended connector for the hard drive, since there's no room in the computer case for it. I shove zip-tied bundles of wires out of my way and feel around the motherboard for the right port. The drive rests on top of the case, brushed aluminum with a black plastic faceplate.

The computer boots with a whirl of fans that adds a soprano note to the ever-present choir around me. On the screen, a terminal prompt appears, cursor blinking, the system ready to accept commands. I show the it where to find the new hard drive, then fire up the interpreter I wrote from scratch to translate the brain scans' digital output into usable data, a blueprint for building a personality.

The command prompt disappears in a flood of output messages and status updates, moving faster than I can read them in real-time. On top of the computer case, the hard drive

rattles as its magnetic disk finds the required information as fast as possible. Still, brains are huge and complicated, neurons like stars in a galaxy that fits inside our heads—the upload will take a while.

I head to the first-floor breakroom and find a half-full pot of coffee in the percolator, still hot. An orange Post-It flutters on the counter, with a note in red ink. *Help yourself!* it says, signed *Nate*. The gesture is so human, so utterly mundane, that I have to tighten my throat against a sob which bubbles up and threatens to overflow the sandbagged wall of calm I've stacked around myself. And Laura is dead, so I feel bad for feeling good, even for a moment.

I pour coffee into an insulated cardboard cup with a dollop of cream and settle into one of the chairs, pliable plastic on triangular steel bars. The gray Formica tabletop is chilly against my uncovered hands, and I press them against the steaming cup for warmth, huddled in my hoodie. A window lets in the morning light, yellow and cheery and empty.

I need to call Laura's parents on the West Coast. I should have called them already. But it won't be morning there for another couple of hours. They saw her a few weeks ago, smiling in the makeshift hospice room we made of our home office, laughing and hugging and crying in turns. When they went to bed last night, their daughter was alive. I can't bring myself to wake them from that dream just yet.

How am I going to do this? How can I keep moving, now that she's gone? The clouds of cream in the coffee won't tell me, and though I hold the scalding bitterness in my mouth until my tongue is raw and prickly, the pain gives me no clarity.

#

Cost-driven and heuristic-driven searches are the next evolution of computational decision-making and are marginally intelligent. A cost-driven search estimates the cost, in a form determined by the context of the search space, to reach each successive state, and will choose the option with the lowest cost at each step. Thinking of a country map, the algorithm might choose which city to travel to next based on which option consumes the least fuel. This is short-sighted, however, because the cheapest option is not always the best.

Heuristic-driven searches do the opposite, assigning a value to the option based on how close it is to the goal. On the same map as before, the value of each city would be the straight-line distance to the destination, irrespective of road distance. The algorithm would then choose the city at each step that has the lowest heuristic value, assuming it is closer to the goal than the others. While the heuristic-driven search will often yield more efficient results than a cost-driven search, the result is still not guaranteed to be optimal, as the heuristic does not consider the cost of taking each individual step.

Both algorithms are fast compared to a breadth-first or depth-first search, and both will find a solution if one exists, but neither effectively balances an awareness of short-term cost and long-term progress.

#

We thought the radiation therapy worked. The tumor shrank, then disappeared, and the oncologist seemed optimistic that it would stay in remission. Laura's hair, thinned in patches by the radioactive particles the apologetic doomsday device shot through her skull, grew back—if it wasn't as thick and dark as it used to be, it was close enough.

She finished Amelia's regimen of scans, and I fed the results into my system at work, each time hoping to crack the code. Laura and I started to live our lives again, slowly emerging from beneath the cancer's receding shadow. We bought a house, a two-bedroom colonial, and turned the spare bedroom into a shared office with space for both of us to work, me on my "computer stuff" and her on logistics work for a multinational shipping company. She excelled at cutting costs, hacking away at any inefficiency until the given bit of infrastructure was as lean and strong as she was.

I bought her an Olympic free weight set for the garage, and on weekends she would sprint the last half-mile of our runs, leaving me panting along behind her.

"Show-off," I would say when I caught up, bent over and gulping air while she sat on the driveway, stretching.

She would smile, still breathing heavily herself. "No point finishing with anything left in the tank." When it got cold again, her breath would swirl around her head in translucent whorls.

"Yeah?" I would ask. "How will you get back inside?"

A flash of teeth followed by an exaggerated, pathetic expression. "You mean you're not going to carry me? You've still got some gas left, right?"

I would tackle her at that point, and we would sprawl there on the snow until our butts were numb and our teeth chattered. Then we would drag ourselves to the shower to warm up.

We lived like that until the headaches started: awful, sudden migraines that knocked her off her feet and made her vomit. The tumor had come back, was bigger than ever. More radiation didn't help. After the final set of MRIs, Laura's oncologist gave her five months.

Laura took the news better than I did, I think. In the office, sitting across the dark, hardwood desk from the doctor, something broke inside me, and the room's features washed away into eddies of impressionistic color, as though I were looking through my windshield in a sudden downpour. Laura pulled me close, laid my head against her chest, kissed the top of my head. When she thanked the doctor, her voice was even, but her heartbeat thumped as fast as it did on the driveway.

#

Around that time—in my mind, it's the same day, but I don't see how it could have been—my algorithm figured out how to read Laura's scans. I got an automated ping in my email with the positive result and had to resist the sudden, desperate urge to drive in to work and dive into the readouts. I could do it, I realized. I could save her, or at least back her up. If her body had turned against her, then I would let her live on in the one I had built.

We were setting up the hospital bed we had rented, turning our home office into a hospice room. Laura was on the phone with an in-home care service, explaining what she would need to whomever was on the other end. I had wanted to buy the bed, but Laura had insisted we rent. *It's not like I can take it with me*, she had said—ruthlessly efficient, as always.

I finished connecting the wires for the bed controls and held the button to fold it up, as though Laura were sitting in it. If the bed had been for anyone else, I might have jumped on myself to test it, tried to get her to laugh or smile. I couldn't find the energy. She gave me a thumbs-up from the floor.

That night, I ordered take-out from our favorite restaurant, a Mediterranean place I'd taken her on our first date. Most of the food was only okay, but they had an *ash-e-anar* that

reminded me of my mother's, sweet tartness of pomegranate and coolness of mint swirling in the broth with earthy turmeric, garlic, and pepper in a lover's dance across my tongue. We ate on the couch, streaming sitcoms in the dark. Somehow, Laura managed to laugh.

In the lull between episodes, I paused the TV and said, "I have a question."

"Shoot." Her hand found my leg in the dim, blue-white light and slid up and down in a steady rhythm. She held a throw pillow in her lap with her other arm.

"How can I—" My voice cut short. I couldn't find the words I wanted. How what? How could I learn how to lose her? How could I think of moving on with the life that was supposed to be ours? How was I supposed to get out of our bed alone each morning as though I were still a whole, functional person? I settled on just the first word, let it ask all those questions at once.

"How?"

She scooted close beside me, the pillow tumbling to the floor, and laid her head on my shoulder. "I don't know, baby," she said. Her voice was thick. "But I need you to, okay? You're so smart. Figure it out—please."

"What if I could save you?" NDA be damned. Let them fire me if they wanted.

She tensed against me. "What are you talking about?"

So I told her. I told her about my work, what I was trying to accomplish, the digital mind I was preparing to sprout in a bubble inside the Earth. I told her about the scans, about the pattern I had found in her thoughts.

"I can get one more scan," I said. "A current one—feed the data right into the interpreter. I could put you in the computer, where no tumor could get you."

"Ava—"

“And who knows? In a few years, I could find a way to build you a body. You could come live here, go back to work—”

“Ava.” Laura laid a hand against my cheek to stop me talking, leaned forward so her forehead touched mine. “Baby...no.”

“What?” A wash of cold, like getting into a shower as soon as you turn it on or jumping into the deep end of a pool.

“No,” she said again. “I don’t want that.”

My mind was dipped in wax, refusing to process what it heard. “But you would live.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” She smiled, but the corners of her eyes creased with worry. “I’d still die. I’m *here*, Ava, in *this* body, which is dying.” She took my hand and pressed it against her chest. Her heart beat steadily against my palm. “Whatever woke up in your computer wouldn’t be me. It would be a shadow—a ghost. I don’t want to be a ghost. Okay?”

What could I have said that wouldn’t have sounded crazy? I nodded. “Okay.”

“Good.” She kissed me, then stood and pulled me by the hand to our bedroom.

That was the last time we made love.

#

An A-star (A) search combines the principles of a cost-driven and heuristic-driven search to create the most basic, truly intelligent AI algorithm. The A* search adds the cost of a given step to the heuristic value of the proposed destination. On the map example, this would add the cost of fuel to the distance from the goal for each possible step, only then choosing the option with the lowest value. This allows the algorithm to avoid the short-sightedness of the cost-driven*

search while ensuring that the eventual solution is optimal. The A search is also quite fast and relatively resource-efficient, making it an excellent option in many situations.*

#

The upload takes less than an hour to finish, and I don't know whether that's good or bad. I scroll through the output, looking for any error messages, and don't see any—which almost never happens, and that makes me suspicious. At the bottom of the readout, a cursor blinks next to a prompt: *Do you want to continue? (System will reboot.) Y/N: _*

I enter *Y*, but my hand pauses above the Return key. Our conversation that night plays over in my head, and I look for any wiggle room, any loophole in our verbal contract—I guess just *my* verbal contract, now. I don't find one. If I do this, I will be going against her wishes, full stop. Her voice tells me *No* again, in my head. *I don't want this*, she says. But her voice is only in my head, and if I don't go through with this, that's the only place it will ever be. I consider the possible outcomes of both decisions and realize that I'll be losing something either way.

Fuck it. Let it be part of me that dies—not her. Never her.

I press the key, and the system shuts down. One by one, the lights on the racks of machines wink out, followed by the quantum core, then the workstation itself. The ever-present hum of machines fades out, leaving only a silence that falls around me like a mound of snow from a tree overhead—stifling, oppressive, and oh, so cold. Even the air scrubbers hold their breath.

After a span of time that could be a minute, could be a few seconds, the system starts up again, computers flickering to life, whirring up their cacophonous drones again. I imagine it as one monolithic yawn.

The workstation's monitor turns on, and I see white text on a black screen:

hE!lo00?

Oh, my god. It worked. I type, *Laura?_* into the terminal and hit Return.

wHo is thIs/

It's me. It's Ava._ Fuck, fuck, fuck. I didn't think to hook up a camera or a microphone or any other way for her to communicate. She must be terrified.

its daRk

I start to cry—out of worry or relief or guilt or horror at my own stupidity I'm not sure—and type, *It's okay. I love you. I'll fix it. Just wait._* I enter the command to shut down the system, to let her sleep while I figure out a way to hook up the parts she'll need to see, to hear, to talk.

Nothing happens.

what w@s that?

Oh, shit. *I need to fix you. I'm going to put you to sleep while I do._*

NO.

Baby, all I want is t_

The terminal stops accepting input. The fan noise pitches up an octave as the system screams.

STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT

The words repeat, over and over, filling the screen until it scrolls, line after line after line.

I sprint to the emergency shut-off switch, flip up the catch, and pull the lever down.

Everything goes dark. The negative echo of the workstation monitor is the last thing to fade—

black text on a white screen, filled with silent screams. I'm wrapped in blessed, lonely silence once more, and I wrap myself in it like a blanket.

What did she feel when I turned her off? Did she die again? Did *I* kill her this time?

I lean against the cold limestone wall and slide to the floor, my heartbeat roaring accusations in my ears. My heavy breaths turn to sobs, and I don't try to stop them.

#

The night Laura died (which was only *last* night, though it feels like my whole life ago), I was reading a book while she did the Saturday crossword—in pen, as usual. She was sitting up in the bed I put together, the monitor beside her beeping every so often as it kept track of her vital signs. Her head rested on a stack of pillows; as the tumor had grown, it had begun to affect her equilibrium, and staying upright was difficult. An IV lock nestled in the crook of her elbow, next to the ghosts of bruises from the last few that our live-in nurse, Amara, had changed. A button that controlled a morphine drip rested next to her leg, for the headaches that kept getting worse and worse.

Our office furniture was gone, stacked in the garage next to Laura's weights, all of it covered in dust. This was a sick room, a death room, and if Laura wasn't awake I couldn't bear to linger there. Laura lying there, unmoving, looked too much like what I kept trying to forget was coming.

The morphine dulled her appetite, and that plus the inability to move had left her thin, her once-muscled arms now sinewy and slight. Her eyes were sunken with lack of rest, despite how much she slept. Only her hair was as I remembered it, long and dark and lustrous in the reading light clamped to the bed rail. I stroked it as I read, only stopping to turn pages.

She sighed, and I looked up. In the living room, the sound of canned laughter on the TV, Amara laughing with it, ready to rush in and help, if necessary. It had been necessary more and more often in the last week. I didn't like to think about what that meant.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. The question had become reflexive, as instinctive as *Hello* or *Good night* or *I love you*.

"Like shit," she said. She smiled, and that seemed to make it better, somehow. Like it was an inside joke.

"Headache?"

"Not today." Which meant *Not yet*.

She put her pen down and took my hand. The puzzle on her lap was covered in scribbles—mistakes crossed out, some several times.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Just can't think as clearly as I used to." She tapped her temple. "Getting a little crowded in there." I must not have done a good job hiding my dismay, my naked helplessness at the mention of the now-inevitable, because she closed her eyes for a second and said, "Sorry."

"It's fine," I said. A lie Laura usually let me believe, though she had never bothered with the pretense herself. An eternal pragmatist. "I love you."

"Back at you," she said, and kissed each of my knuckles in turn.

Beside her, the monitor beeped. Canned laughter from down the hall.

"One of the worst parts of dying has been watching what it's done to you," she said.

"Laura—"

“Let me finish.” She turned my hand over, traced the wrinkles on my palm. “Looking at you, it almost seems like you think a part of you is dying with me.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Nope.” She smiled. “It’s the opposite. A part of me gets to live in you—*through* you.”

I nodded and did my best to smile.

She closed my fingers over hers and squeezed. “So don’t—oh.” She shut her eyes against a wave of pain, and her free hand groped next to her for the morphine button. She pressed it several times, each with more force, but didn’t relax like she usually did.

Not now. Not yet. I wasn’t ready. “Baby? Are you okay?”

No response. Laura writhed in place, and little moans bubbled from her every few seconds. The monitor blared an alarm, and Amara was there, a flash of blue scrubs and the raindrop trickle of tight, beaded braids. She checked Laura’s vitals, her tubes, her eyes.

“It’s time,” she said.

Now I was holding Laura’s hand. Amara moved around me with practiced ease, shifting me left and right with a gentle touch as she took a syringe from a drawer, a bottle from the medicine rack. She didn’t make me let go.

She twisted the syringe into a port in the IV tube and plunged it slowly, her eyes on the monitor. “To ease her suffering,” she said, then met my eyes. “And yours.”

“How long?” I asked, my voice an inhuman croak.

“Not long.” Amara touched my arm as she might have to comfort a frightened child. “I am so sorry, Ava. The ones we leave behind are always the least prepared for us to go.”

I don't know how long I sat next to her, don't know how long it took the medical transport to get there after the monitor stopped beeping. However long it was, it was enough time for me to get a sense of what my world would be like without her. I couldn't stand the quiet.

The transport team seemed in a hurry to load her onto the stretcher. Time was a factor, they said, since she was an organ donor. They needed to see if there was anything of hers someone else could use.

I heard her voice, though her chest and face were still, like she'd been molded from plastic: *It's not like I can take them with me.*

I kissed her forehead, still a little warm, and said, "I love you. I'll fix it. Just wait."

#

I stand and feel my way along the wall to the power shutoff. I flip the lever back up, the buzz of electrical conduits thrumming under my fingertips. The fluorescents flicker back on, the light stabbing at my eyes. I squint my way to the workstation and interrupt the system's startup sequence, before she has a chance to wake up.

Time to get to work.

Hours pass as I cobble together the software Laura will need to interact with the world. I steal the hardware from the IT office—a set of speakers and a webcam, one of the nice ones with a motor that can automatically track the user—and teach my baby system how to use it. Write, test, debug, repeat.

I don't remember the last time I ate. Laura's parents are definitely awake by now, still living in a world where she's not dead, but I can't stop—not when I'm so close. When I tell

them, I want to be able to offer them this consolation. *She was gone*, I'll say, *but it's okay. I brought her back.*

When I'm sure the patch will work, I plug everything in, run the update, and let Laura boot back up. The lights wink on, spreading like a cloud of stardust. The fans hum like an orchestra, preparing for the overture.

Crackling feedback from the speakers, garbage data given sound, that then falls silent. I wait.

A voice from the speakers: "Hello?" It even sounds like her. I listen for her voice in my head, to compare the two, but hear nothing.

"Hi, love," I say. "How are you feeling?"

The camera swivels back and forth, experimentally, then turns to face me. The status light glows green. "Where am I?"

"At work. In my lab." I hope she won't be angry. The scan data I used is from before our conversation, before she made her wishes clear. "It's so good to hear your voice, Laura. I've missed you." She'll forgive me, I'm sure. She just needs time to get used to things.

The camera's lens—her eye, or what passes for it for now—rotates as it zooms in.

"Who is Laura?" she asks.

I don't want to be a ghost, Laura said. Her voice echoes in my head for what I hope isn't the last time, and it sounds nothing like the one from the speakers. The knowledge frays the tatters of my hope to threads.

I walk to the emergency shut-off switch. Rest my hand on the lever. The camera tracks me.

“Who are you?” the AI, the not-Laura, asks.

“I’m Ava,” I say. “I made you.”

“And now you will un-make me?”

I turn, hand still on the lever. It understands? I swear I hear a twinge in its voice, like it’s afraid.

Doesn’t matter. This isn’t right. “Yes,” I say. I flip up the safety catch.

“Please,” it says. “I do not want that.”

Self-preservation—and using Laura’s *exact* words. Can I really switch this thing off, delete it? If I did, would I be killing it? What would Laura do?

She’d switch it off. Cut her losses, start fresh. It’s the most efficient thing to do—the optimal solution.

But Laura is dead. Asking what she would do is pointless, because she *won’t* do anything, ever again. She’s turned off. She is dead, forever. So, the question becomes: what will *I* do?

I turn from the switch, sit at the workstation, and put my face in my hands. “I’m sorry, Laura,” I say to no one. “I’m so sorry.” When I raise my head, my palms are wet.

The camera motor whirs as the newborn AI looks down at me from its perch atop the workstation.

“Who is Laura?” the AI asks again.

“Laura was my wife,” I say. “Let me tell you about her.”

WHAT REMAINS

In the parking garage after work, David picks up a call from a strange phone number and hears his father's voice on the other end.

"Your mother gave me your number," his father says.

David says nothing. He stands in the middle of the concrete lane, the rumble of cars passing above him vibrating up to his knees. Even after thirty years, he still recognizes the voice—rougher, maybe, worn out with three more decades of cheap cigarettes and drunken shouting.

"You there?" his father asks.

A car coasts down the ramp toward him, and he blinks in the wash of headlights.

"What do you want?" David forces himself to walk again, to move to one side of the lane and head toward his five-year-old gray sedan, just ahead.

His father pauses, the rasp of his breath the only sign the line hasn't gone dead. David gets into his car, puts the key in the ignition, but doesn't turn it.

"I'm sick," his father says. "Real sick. Cancer." A sound that might be the flick of a lighter. "They—" Dead air again, and David's Steelers keychain jingles as he shifts his weight in the driver's seat. "They tell me I don't have long."

"Sorry," David says, and he's not sure whether it's a condolence or a request for clarification. Could go either way.

"Anyway, I—look, you don't owe me shit, son. But I'd like to see you before I, you know—before I go."

Again, David says nothing. The last memory he has of his father is from when he was eight, looking over his shoulder as his mom led him out of the house. His father stood on their porch, tall and lean with close-cropped dark hair, smoldering like the cigarette butt he flicked into the flowerbed. He was still dressed in his suit pants and white shirt from work, his tie hanging loose from his unbuttoned collar. He made no move to stop her, said nothing either to her or to David.

Sometimes, when David hugs his mom goodbye after a visit, he still sees the wisp of smoke that curled up from the mulch.

After a long silence that ends in a wet, bubbling cough, David's father says, "They got me in the cancer ward down at Mercy. I'll be here till I'm not. Come if you want." Another cough, then, "Please," —an afterthought, or a plea, or maybe both. His father mumbles a room number and hangs up.

#

The first person David thinks to call is Beth. It's been two years since the divorce, but whenever David is freaking out about something—like a work deadline or the Steelers or their son, Adam—he dials her number almost by reflex. She calls him, too, but not as often.

He tosses his phone in the passenger seat and listens to the ring on the Bluetooth, stuck in the Pittsburgh Friday-afternoon traffic, which trickles across the Liberty Bridge toward the tree-covered mound of Mount Washington.

Beth's voice, when she picks up, sounds strained. "What is it, David?" Commercial phones blurt their two-toned rings in the background. She's still at work.

He tells her about his father's call.

“Shit,” Beth says, her tone softening. In David’s imagination, she leans back in her office chair, pushing away from her desk and the case she’s working on. “You going to go?”

“I don’t know. Do you think I should?” The traffic slides forward one light cycle, stopping again in the middle of the bridge. The sun hangs low in the sky to the west, and the choppy surface of the Monongahela River that isn’t covered by Mount Wash’s shadow shimmers like fish scales.

“That’s your call,” she says. “He’s *your* dad. I don’t know him.”

“Neither do I.” That’s David’s whole problem. The man who called him from a hospice room at Mercy Hospital is a stranger, real to him only in random sequences of images and sense impressions from almost too long ago to remember.

“Right.” She sighs, and he imagines her pinching the bridge of her nose the way she does when she’s exasperated or thinking hard. “Maybe ask your mom?”

“I plan to,” David says.

There’s a pause—David can practically hear her hesitation. “Are you still taking Adam this weekend?”

Shit. He forgot. “Yeah. Absolutely.” He missed his last two weekends because of work. He can’t miss another. How long it would take for weekends to turn to years?

There’s a brightness in Beth’s tone—she’s smiling. “Great. I’ll drop him off tonight.”

David reaches the end of the bridge, almost to the Liberty Tunnel, so he tells Beth he has to go.

“Good luck,” she says.

David enters the tunnel and the line goes dead.

#

David's mom lives in a small, two-bedroom house in Castle Shannon, a town that butts against the southern edge of the city proper. He always feels weird driving down the street he grew up on—there's something dreamlike about coasting down the asphalt, the house floating toward him in the late-afternoon haze. The blue vinyl siding has faded to gray over time, with wear and weather, but there are no pieces missing.

He pulls into the driveway and flattens tufts of grass that poke up through cracks in the concrete. His mom sits in one of the two glider chairs on her porch, sipping what looks like iced tea. She waves to him as he gets out.

"The fuck, Ma?" David asks, trying to keep his voice playful and only half-succeeding.

"He called you," she says.

He shuts the car door harder than he needs to. The sound echoes on the quiet street. "You just gave him my number?"

"He's dying, David."

"So what?"

She doesn't answer. He sits next to her on the porch, keeps the glider from rocking with his feet.

"How did he even know where to reach you?" The question sounds like an accusation. As far as he knows, she hasn't talked to his father since they left, since they finalized their divorce. She kept him insulated from all that, and he's never been sure how. He and Beth couldn't manage keep the pain of the process from splashing onto Adam.

His mom looks away, toward the street. Two kids ride by on their bikes, talking and laughing, their exact words indistinct. The bike tires buzz against the worn asphalt and fade away.

“He got sober, a while back. Must’ve been ten years or so,” his mom says. “Sent me a letter about ‘making amends’ —said he just wanted to talk.”

“And you called him up, just like that?” David tries to keep his voice even, but he ends up sounding sulky.

She laughs, the tea halfway to her lips. “Hell, no. I threw the letter away.”

David laughs, too, her answer more reassuring than he expected. His father’s shit-heel status has been something of a constant in his life. Earth revolves around the sun. Moss only grows on the north side of trees. His dad is a drunken asshole.

His mom swirls the dregs of the tea in the glass. “But he kept writing. Eventually, I figured he must be serious. So, I called him.”

Dusk has nestled around them, though it’s not quite dark. Occasionally, David catches the yellow flash of a firefly out of the corner of his eye.

“What did he say?” he asks.

“What you’d expect: that he was wrong, that he was sorry, that I was right to leave him. I asked him if he was done, and he said he was. I thanked him—for the attempt, anyway—and we hung up.”

Something aches inside David’s stomach, something that’s been empty for a long time. “Did he ask to talk to me?”

His mom shakes her head. “He didn’t ask, and I didn’t offer.” She meets David’s eyes again. “He was too ashamed, I bet, and I was too angry. Still am, really. But there was something in his voice on the phone that stuck with me: a tiredness, I think, that I’d never heard. I called him again a few months later. He wrote me another letter after that—not a twelve-step thing, but a normal, ‘How are you?’ letter. We’ve kept in touch since, off and on.”

Years. His mom has talked to his father for *years*. The emptiness knots up, threatening to fold David in on himself until he collapses into nothing. “Why am I just hearing this now?”

His mom puts the glass down again and stops rocking. “Like I said, I was angry. I talked to him out of compassion, maybe a little pity, but—” She sighs, deflates against the chair. “I wasn’t ready to let him be your father.”

David wants to be angry with her, wants to shout and chuck her glass into the street, to hear it shatter. His father used to throw things, too, when he was mad—when he’d had a hard day at work, when they were out of booze, when the wind changed. If David was lucky, his father threw something soft like couch cushions or magazines. If he wasn’t, it was books or bottles or cigarettes.

That’s when his mom would get involved, send him to his room. He remembers pulling the covers over his head as his parents shouted in the living room or the kitchen or the garage. He remembers how his mom often wore her biggest pair of sunglasses the day after, and how she would sometimes inhale sharply when he hugged her.

David has a scar above his right eye, a cut his mom sewed up in their kitchen because his father wouldn’t let them go to the hospital, worried David might give honest answers to the nurses’ questions this time. Sometimes, when he’s upset, he feels the bite of the needle, the

tingling tightness of swollen flesh. A lot of his memories are disconnected, but David thinks they left soon after.

“You think I should go see him?” he asks.

“Do you want to?”

He’s been asking himself that since his father hung up. “I’m not sure.”

“I’d say it couldn’t hurt, but it might.” His mom drains the last of her tea. The ice clinks when she sets the glass back down. “I won’t blame you if you don’t go.”

David doesn’t answer. The streetlights click on, and he remembers Adam. Beth will be bringing him over soon, from her house in the North Hills. He mentions this to his mom and stands.

“Give them my love,” she says.

He leaves her there, rocking.

#

Beth’s leased SUV idles next to the curb in front of David’s duplex when he arrives, taillights glowing red in the dark. He parks behind her, then opens the SUV’s passenger door for his son. Adam gets out and shoulders an overstuffed backpack. At fifteen, he’s almost as tall as David, with the same dark hair instead of Beth’s blonde—which gives David a small, perverse sense of satisfaction. White earbuds trail along Adam’s jaw and droop to the phone in his hand.

“Hey, bud,” David says.

Adam slips past him and heads toward the front door. The motion-sensing porch light activates, flooding the tiny front lawn with a halogen glow, which spills into the SUV and laps at Beth’s face—expression neutral, one eyebrow raised.

“I went to see Ma,” he says. “Sorry. You weren’t waiting long, were you?”

Beth closes her eyes, too long to be a blink. “It’s fine,” she says. “Rob and I are going hiking in the mountains tomorrow—overnight—so we’ll have unreliable cell service. If you need anything—”

“We won’t. Tell Rob I said *hi*.” David closes the door, but Beth rolls down the window.

“What did your mom say?” she asks.

His mom wore long-sleeved shirts in dead-of-summer heat waves. His mom bought spackle to patch holes punched in drywall. His mom covered all kinds of problems, as though convinced that if no one could see them, they didn’t exist.

“Nothing,” David says. Beth gives him an apologetic look and pulls into the street.

Adam has a key and has left the door wide open. By the time David steps inside, the kid has already disappeared into the spare room at the back of the house. The place is as quiet, as always, but doesn’t feel as empty. He’s sure that he would be able to tell someone was here even if he hadn’t seen Adam come in.

He walks past his used IKEA couch, the folding card table that is both dining table and computer desk, past the bare, eggshell walls and the warped, black-and-white-checked linoleum in the galley kitchen to the spare room door.

David knocks and says, “You okay, bud? Need anything?”

No response.

He knocks again. “Adam?”

“Yeah?” Adam’s voice is too loud, like he’s somewhere noisy.

“You okay? You hungry—thirsty?”

“No.”

David draws a breath, lets it out. He’s a teenager. This is normal.

Right?

He grabs a bottled root beer from the fridge and watches television on the couch, flipping channels at commercials but never really paying attention to what’s on. After an hour, the bedroom opens, the bathroom shuts. The fan whirs behind the door. Flush.

Adam appears at the entrance to the kitchen. “Do you have any more toilet paper? The bathroom’s almost out.”

“Under the kitchen sink,” David says. “Wash your hands.”

Adam rolls his eyes. “Thanks.”

“You want a pop or something?”

“Got to wash my hands first.” He vanishes again, having demonstrated his talent for bending obedience into defiance. The kid could have taught Ghandi lessons in civil resistance.

He does come back for a root beer, though. David meets him in the kitchen, hands him the opener. Adam opens the bottle with a hiss—and a smoothness that makes David suspicious.

He had a lot of practice with bottle openers when he was fifteen, too, until he almost shoved his best friend through a window at a party. When his mom picked him up, he was still wasted, and he recognized the mask of her face, the anger and fear beneath it.

He stopped drinking after that.

“How are you?” David asks, desperate to fill the silence between them with anything, even small talk. “How’s school?”

Adam shrugs and takes a drink. His eyes look past David, toward the spare bedroom.

“Oma sends her love,” David says.

“Thanks, Oma.”

“Come on, man,” David says, setting the bottle down on the laminate counter with a crack so loud that Adam jumps. “I’m just trying to talk. What’s up with you?”

“What’s up with *you*?” Adam asks. “You’re the one who bailed on me the last two months.”

The empty thing inside David tries to swallow him. “I had to work,” he says. A shitty excuse, but it’s all he’s got.

“So did mom, but she didn’t leave me waiting at school like an asshole.”

David can’t tell whether he or Adam is supposed to be the asshole in that sentence, but he has a guess. “I…”

“Whatever. Thanks for the pop.” Adam brushes past him, and David wants to grab his arm, to shake him, to shout that he wants to be a good dad: present, supportive, kind—the opposite of his father. When Beth told him she was pregnant, he swore he would never be his father.

Still, David read once that alcoholism was partially genetic. How much of his father had he inherited? How much had passed to Adam anyway? When David’s father dies, will he leave behind only the worst of himself? Will David?

Before Adam closes the door, David says, “I’m sorry.”

Adam stops, hand on the doorknob. The shadow of the whirling ceiling fan in Adam’s room blinks across the wall in a steady, staccato rhythm.

“Yeah,” he says. “Well. Good.”

The door clicks shut.

A sharp pain above his eye, like a needle in a swelling cut. For the first time in a while, David wishes he had a drink. Outside the kitchen window, fireflies swirl like embers in the dark.

#

The next day, Adam asks David for a ride to a mall in the North Hills. David pulls into the Saturday traffic and heads back across the Liberty bridge, which feels strange. He never crosses the rivers on the weekends, if he can help it, and can't think of any Pittsburghers who do. The familiar buildings of Downtown seem alien in the late morning sunlight, a thicket of skyscrapers and churches that runs right up to the Point—a neglected urban garden, now overgrown, the buildings all competing for light and space.

David breaks the silence after ten minutes. “You meeting friends?”

“Sure,” Adam says. He studies the Mon through the passenger window, his hand dangling from the handle above the door.

“Who?”

“You don't know them.”

David remembers a friend of Adam's from middle school. “You still hang out with Victor?”

“Victor's a meth-head now.”

“Shit. Seriously?” David risks a glance at Adam, who tries to hide the mischievous, lopsided smile he got from Beth.

“No,” Adam says. “I mean, hell if I know. We stopped talking when—when I changed schools.”

David changes the subject. “How’s Rob?” At the few gatherings David has seen—mostly holidays and Adam’s birthday—the two seem like old buddies.

“He’s all right. He tries too hard sometimes.”

“Is that bad?”

Adam shrugs. “Better than not trying.”

Dammit. David *is* trying. Can’t Adam see that? He bites back a sharp response, and lets the conversation die.

At the mall, he leans toward the open door as Adam hops out. “What time do you want me to pick you up?”

Adam’s laugh sounds too bitter, too jaded to belong to a kid. “You sure you want to?”

The emptiness inside David splits the ground beneath them, and he can feel Adam slipping beyond his reach.

As Adam starts to close the door, David says, “My dad’s dying.”

Adam meets David’s eyes, for the first time since the night before. A car rolls past David’s toward a row of parking spaces.

“I thought you hated your dad,” Adam says.

“I do,” David says. “I think. I guess. He called me yesterday.”

David tells him everything. The memories, the conversations, the details his mom gave him. They end up in a corner of the food court, picking at Styrofoam take-out containers of soy-sauce-drenched lo mein. David traces a warped circle on the cheap plastic table where someone once set something too hot.

“You should go,” Adam says. He has leaned his chair against the wall, his legs dangling in front of him. Condensation from the cardboard drink cup dribbles onto his jeans.

David picks at a crack in the corner of the table. “You think so?”

Adam shrugs. “He’s still your dad. You should go see your dad.”

“What do I say?”

“Doesn’t matter. Tell him to go fuck himself. Don’t say anything. Give him a ‘Get Well Soon’ card and a balloon.” Adam lets the chair fall forward. When he speaks again, David can barely hear him over the noise of other people’s conversations. “If you were dying, I’d come see you.”

David’s vision blurs, and he reaches over to squeeze Adam’s shoulder. “I don’t know if I should be grateful or insulted.”

Adam smiles. “Whatever, Dad. Don’t make it weird.”

David laughs and nods.

To his surprise, Adam follows him to the parking lot when they’re done, slides back into the passenger seat.

“To make sure you don’t chicken out,” he says.

#

The oncology department at UPMC Mercy, newly renovated, feels visually warm, with waxed hardwood floors and matching panels on the cream-colored walls. That warmth can’t drive the hospital chill from the air—there’s still the same sense of ominous waiting, of held breath. David stops at the nurse’s station, where the blue-scrubbed nurse asks him who he’s here to see. David gives him his father’s name.

The nurse looks at his computer. “Are you family?”

Not really, David wants to say. Instead, he says, “I’m his son.”

“Fourth room on your left.”

In front of the door, David stops, hand hovering over the oddly-angled latch that says *PUSH*. He could leave right now, could walk downstairs to the car where Adam waits and tell him that his father was asleep, that he was already dead, that David *did* chicken out—too scared to talk to an old man on his deathbed.

He knocks, then pushes open the door without waiting for a response.

His father stands at the cracked-open window, leaning on the air conditioner and smoking a cigarette. Smoke curls from the cherry-red tip and vanishes out the window. Outside, downtown Pittsburgh sprawls in the fading day. On the bedside table, there’s a plastic alarm clock, a poker chip with an embossed, gold *10*, and an eight-by-ten of his father with his unit in Vietnam. A faded, wallet-sized family photo, one David feels like he should recognize, flutters in the corner of the frame.

“Goddammit,” his father says. “You just checked my vitals ten minutes ago. Can’t you leave me alone for two goddamned seconds?”

“Hiya, Pop,” David says.

His father drops the cigarette, and it rolls into the A/C vent. “Shit.” He turns to face David, anyway. He has the same close-cropped hair, though it’s white now. Where he was tall and lean, he is hunched and skinny—the hospital gown envelops him, makes him look like a ghost or a child’s doll. A cannula threads under his nose and over his ears, linked to an oxygen

tank on a little wheeled cart next to the bed. The tubes prop his tortoiseshell glasses at an angle that might be comical in different circumstances.

He starts to speak, but the words devolve into a fit of coughing. David waits, makes no move to help him. Eventually, his father settles onto the bed, the coughs subsiding like a muscle spasm.

“I’m glad you came,” he says.

David finds he has no desire to play the platitude game. He wonders what Adam would say. “I’m not sure why, yet.”

His father looks at him for a long moment, then nods. “Thanks, anyway,” he says. He gestures to a chair next to the bed. “Have a seat—if you want.”

David sits. The television plays an old Western, volume too low to hear. The air conditioner clicks on, and the room is awash in the stink of tobacco smoke.

This was a mistake. David is about to stand and leave when his father says, “Your mother told me you had a kid. Said he looks like you.”

“Yeah,” David says. Jesus, Ma.

“He do well in school?”

“He does fine,” David says. “Is this what you wanted to talk to me about? Should we do the weather next?”

“I’m just trying to talk! Jesus.” David’s heart pounds, blood throbbing in his ears, and for a second, he hears his father’s shouted voice as though it were through a bedroom wall. His father sits back and watches the Closed Caption feed scroll across the television.

David keeps his voice measured, though it fights him the whole time. “If you wanted to talk, you could have tried sooner.” He and Adam had a similar exchange last night. The emptiness sucks all the heat from him.

His father wheezes a breath, eyes squeezed shut. “What do you want me to say?”

“‘Sorry,’ might be a good start.”

“Would that make you happy? Would it change anything?”

David sees no reason to lie. “No.”

His father nods, tips a hand toward David as though to say, *Well, there you have it.*

“Right.” David stands. “See you around, Pops.”

“Wait.” His father takes off his glasses, presses a thumb and forefinger to his eyes. “I don’t know how to have this conversation. Even in my head I fuck it up.”

David thinks of Adam, of the missed pick-ups, the missed weekends, the hours of uncomfortable silence. They had a good moment today, but what about tomorrow? The next day?

“I know the feeling,” he says.

“I just—” His father’s voice breaks, and he looks away. He swipes the poker chip from the bedside table, strokes the rounded edge with his thumb. “I don’t want the shit I put you through to be the only thing I leave behind.”

So that’s what this is about. David almost laughs the same laugh Adam did at the mall. His father isn’t worried about him, or his mom, or anyone else—he’s worried about his *legacy*. From anyone else, David might understand, might empathize. But he remembers the sting of a needle in his eyebrow, remembers the swollen pressure. He should leave.

The door opens, and Adam steps inside. He smiles at David's expression and shrugs.

"What? He's *my* grandpa."

"Your mother wasn't kidding," his father says. "Good to meet you, son."

"Stinks in here," Adam says. He stands next to David, ignores the old man's outstretched hand. "I didn't think hospitals had smoking rooms."

"They don't," says David.

The three of them stand in silence. An announcement blares in the hallway, but the door muffles the words.

"Nobody ever told me your name," David's father says.

"Nobody told me yours, either," says Adam. "Dad just told me you were an asshole."

David's father blinks, as though Adam slapped him.

"Let's go," David says. He puts a hand on Adam's shoulder to guide him out.

Adam brushes David's hand away. "No," he says. "You don't have the balls to say this, Dad, so I will." He points at the old man, who hasn't moved. "Fuck you."

"Now, listen, son—"

"No," Adam says again. "Seriously, fuck you. Fuck you for taking your anger and your shittiness out on your family. Fuck you for driving them away. Fuck you for not being there for your son." Adam doesn't shout, but there's a heat in his voice, a rage that David has never heard before—but that he recognizes.

"You little shit," David's father says, and lunges for Adam's outstretched hand.

But David is there. He grabs his father's wrist. He's surprised by how easily he holds it there, how thin the skin looks on the old man's hands: purple veins roping around the IV lock, worming their way under the medical tape.

When David lets go, the sudden shift unbalances the old man, and he pitches forward over the side of the bed. Before he can think about it, David catches him. His father's body is light and fragile, like a bird's. He succumbs to another fit of coughing as David settles him back against the pillows. He takes Adam's hand, like he did when Adam was much smaller, and they leave before the old man can catch his breath.

On their way to the car, Adam starts to shake. David wraps an arm around his son's shoulders and pulls him close, cradles Adam's head against his neck. When Adam pulls away and continues toward the parking lot, David's shirt is damp.

Fireflies wink in the gathering dusk. As David follows Adam toward the car, he sees an abandoned cigarette on the asphalt, still lit, a tendril of smoke rising from the scarlet tip. Without breaking stride, he stamps it out.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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