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Dear Me

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DEAR ME

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Hannah Patricia Farley

May 2018

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DEAR ME

English

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Arts

Hannah Patricia Farley

ABSTRACT

This collection of fiction includes short stories and a partial novella. A critical introduction provides background on the author's writing and a theoretical framework as it pertains to the fiction highlighted in this thesis. The works presented explore aspects of genre fiction including magical realism, absurdism, and the bildungsroman. The partial novella relies heavily on epistolary form, confessional style entries, and continuous stream of action. The main characters of the included works serve as focal points which address themes of family life, addiction, mental illness, minority languages, and voice.

KEYWORDS: short story, novella, magical realism, absurdist, epistolary, continuous stream of action, bildungsroman, language, voice

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Chairperson, Advisory Committee
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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Thank you to all of my family, friends, and mentors. Thank you for supporting me throughout my college career and for encouraging me. Thank you to everyone who helped with the workshops, languages, and feedback that made these pieces what they are. This has not been an easy experience, but for those of you who have loved me at my darkest, thank you.

I dedicate this thesis to me. You earned it, girl.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: DEAR ME

I never considered myself a genre writer before graduate school. Fantasy, sci-fi, and romance were all abundantly cliché in my opinion. I was determined to make myself out as a “serious” writer, delving into dark themes and realistic settings. To me, writing about real people and history seemed to be the only thing worthwhile. This proved to be more than constraining. I was limiting myself to a voice that was not my own in order to make, or at least to make what I perceived to be, good writing.

Everything I wrote felt stale. It was the same plotline, replayed over and over. I was just replacing characters and settings, typing out the same themes ad nauseam. I thought I was doing what good writers do. I thought I was writing what people wanted to hear. Then in graduate school, I became aware of my voice.

I didn't have to write what other people were writing, using overworked themes and plotlines. Why should I limit myself to the voice of those who came before me? Isn't the purpose of writing to be constantly in a state of change? If I continued with the path I had been unconsciously trained to use, my fiction would not represent the person I am now. Through workshops and mentors, I have been able to break out of the shell of borrowed voices into something that is truly my own.

John Gardner describes the different paths a writer can take when considering voice. These artistic choices range from point of view. Gardner says:

The choice of point of view will largely determine all other choices with regard to style—vulgar, colloquial, or formal diction, the length and characteristic speeds if sentences and so on. What the writer must consider, obviously, is the extent to which point of view, and all that follows from it, comments on the characters, actions and ideas. (76)

This interpretation of point of view helped me understand the imperative function of voice within fiction. By manipulating the ways in which characters interact through thoughts and words, I am able to facilitate my own writing voice.

Voice is enormously important to writers as individuals. I know when I'm reading a Margaret Atwood book just as I know when I'm reading Patrick Taylor book. Their voices are distinctive, and I want that for my own writing. This is perhaps why I chose such a casual, if not a slightly vulgar, voice for Jane's character in the partial novella. It reflects how people in my social circles and generation speak, and in turn was the appropriate tone for which I wanted the story to resonate.

Voice, and specifically points of view, differ in all of my stories. I wanted to experiment with shifting perspectives in order to challenge myself. "Evening News" is a story I battled with throughout writing this thesis. I submitted this to several workshops, and it is probably one of the most aggravating and heavily edited stories I have ever written. That being said, the point of view in this story was a challenging exercise in third person roaming omniscient. I tend toward using first person past, since that is the natural story telling form, but recently I have opened myself to try writing various forms of tense and psychic distance.

Moreover, "How to Become a Ho-Ho-Host This Holiday" uses a completely different voice: second person omniscient. The narrator switches between berating the husband in the story and celebrating/condemning the wife, while also filtering through the crowd at times. The voice also uses old-fashioned words and phrases to illicit a sense of antiquity about the narrator; this story is from a time gone by. By trying out these different voices and points of view, I believe I was able to grow as a writer.

Lucy Corin's story "Madman" takes a typical bildungsroman story and adds a layer of magic to an otherwise typical coming of age story. This story's addition of magical realism in such a subtle way really inspired the premise for my story, "Tommy Boy." Stories that delve into family matters are quintessential to me and my writing. By combining my understanding with interfamily dynamics and my new interest in magical realism, I was able to develop a world where the unreal melded with the familiar.

I feel like this piece in the collection exemplifies Gardner's idea of point of view. The character of Maddie is peripheral to her brother's coming of age ceremony. However, she is also developing and growing as a character in contrast to her mother and brother's mistakes. Maddie's voice is that of a child, but she moves the story along through more adult matters by the way in which she interprets her world.

Maddie's world becomes interrupted and unfamiliar to her as she and her brother are suddenly different people. *Heterocosmica* author, Lubomír Doležel describes this type of story, the bildungsroman, as such:

The epistemic base is perceived by Suleiman, who defines the Bildungsroman's story as "two parallel transformations undergone by the protagonist: first, a transformation from *ignorance* (of self) to *knowledge* (of self); second, a transformation from *passivity* to *action*." (127).

By understanding why her mother and brother act the ways they do, Maddie moves from the ignorance of childhood into a sort of limbo of knowledge; she cannot un-know what she has learned, but she is still too young to do anything with the information she has been given. I would argue that she does not fully complete the action stage in this narrative, but that role is taken by Tommy. When he receives his friend he has moved from the passivity of childhood to the activity of adulthood, at least in this world's view.

Corin's story ends with a double-entendre: did the father marry his madman (woman)? I wanted to emulate that same gut-punch of a feeling in my own story. To be honest, I still wonder if the ending what it needs to be. But I suppose that is the fluidity and fear of writing; is it ever truly finished?

As for magical realism, this was the first piece I wrote which felt like it fit comfortably in the genre. According to an article in *Twentieth Century Literature* by Scott Simpkins, magical realism is to realism as defamiliarization is to familiarization (Simpkins 141). By the addition of real life imaginary friends, I intended to invoke something familiar from childhood and juxtapose it with the realities of adulthood. How would a single mom handle seeing her ex in the form of her child's imagination? This was the intent behind the defamiliarization in my first story.

While my first piece focuses on the magical characteristics of fiction, my second piece relies heavily on absurdism. I have always been fascinated with stories with that lack any apparent purpose or meaning. The unexpected juxtaposition of images and the exposure of unfinished tangents seem to actively confuse and irritate readers, and I love it. Gardner notes that "the transformations [of a character in an absurdist world] reflect the workings of an absurd universe to which all human responses are inadequate," (Gardner 138). And I agree; it is impossible to react to an absurdist work of fiction.

Gardner writes a great deal on Donald Barthelme's approach to absurdist fiction. He writes of Barthelme's work "Characters struggle with problems that cannot be solved and wither accept their fate or struggle on," and "Reality is a place we cannot get to from here," (Gardner 138). This type of fiction has not direct message or grand metaphor, but didn't Oscar Wilde say that all art is useless?

In the story “Play,” Matias Svaline invokes striking images and scenes through a “how to” guide of children’s games. This story combines two of my favorite literary concepts: borrowed form and absurdism. By camouflaging the story as a book of children’s games, Svaline interprets scenarios of childhood games into something much darker.

The characters in this piece are unnamed and constantly changing in each scenario. They never grow or develop in the vignettes, but the imagery alone is satisfaction in itself. Each short line offers a different picture of one of Svaline’s game. None of them make sense, but then again none of them have to.

Further, Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor’s *Welcome to Night Vale* series creates an entire world of absurdism. Their world building and setting interpretation has provided me with plenty of guidance and inspiration for future absurdist stories. In addition, the format in which Fink and Cranor publish their works is a borrowed form. *Night Vale* updates and stories are written through a series of radio broadcast from the town.

This expedition of Fink and Cranor’s world began as a serialized fiction podcast. The absurdism begins almost at once, with the opening lines “A friendly desert community where the sun is hot, the moon is beautiful, and mysterious lights pass overhead while we all pretend to sleep. Welcome to Night Vale,” and ends with the proverb “Look to the north. Keep looking. There’s nothing coming from the south,” (Cranor and Fink). These line immediately caught my attention, and I have been an avid reader and listener of their work ever since. Their approach to absurdist fiction matches Gardner’s view of “All of these approaches to fiction—expressionist, surrealist,

absurdist, irrealist—produce interesting work if the writer is any good, however shaky the philosophical base,” (Gardner 141).

Borrowing from these examples of absurdism, the idea behind my second story, “How to Become a Ho-Ho-Host this Holiday,” was to create an early 1900s “how to” guide that was inexplicably shadowed by the content. Each vignette serves as a source of tension between the unidentified protagonists. Additionally, this piece was an exercise in second person. By choosing this particular borrowed form, the narrator is able to directly interact with the readers.

My last story, the partial novella, is something that I never thought I would write. I do not watch shows, read books, or play video games that engage in the topic of zombies. I honestly debated whether or not to put it in this thesis because of the juvenile stigma attached to the genre. I decided in the end to add it however, because this is one of the first stories where I really felt my voice coming through.

I decided to include this piece for a few reasons: first, it was pretty long before editing so it would boost my end page length; and second, I wanted to challenge myself with writing a long form piece. In the end, I did not make it to completion, but I am happy with the results: a (partial) novella. Gardner designates the novella as such: “The novella can be described only as a work shorter than a novel... and both longer and more episodic than a short story,” (Gardner 179). Jane’s journal entries, supplemented with Nate’s letters, supply the entirety of the work. Because of this, this piece represents something called stream of continuous action. This can be defined as “The stream of [continuous] action is complete and uninterrupted, from the initial situation,” (Gardner

180). There is no break in action in Jane's story. From start to finish she is describing the constant action around her. Gardner says of these "episodes":

But the continuous stream nevertheless has its progression of increasingly powerful climaxes, each, if we look closely, symbolic and ritualistic as well as intense on the level of pure action. The writer, in other words, has organized his continuous action as a group of scenes or scene-cluster segments, loosely, "episodes." (180).

I think in the end, this episodic form worked best to convey the action of both Jane and Nate in their separate situations.

Because of this story, I stopped relying on the sober tone of my previous pieces and wrote it the way my peers and I think and speak. When I would turn it into a workshop, I would apologize for all the swearing and insincerity. But looking back, I wish I could have been confident in the exploration of Jane's voice. This is what real people sound like, why should I apologize for that?

This piece means so much to me. The content and action are not important, but what the characters go through with regards to mental illness were written from a more personal place than any of the other pieces presented. Throughout college and graduate school I have suffered from depression and anxiety. I have been to some pretty low places, but with help from family, friends, and teachers, I was able to claw my way back to the top.

What Remy's character experiences toward the end of the novella fragment is something that I have gone through myself. I believed, like many people who take medication for their mental illnesses, that since I felt better I did not need my medicine anymore. I stopped taking it abruptly and paid dearly for it. I had discontinuation syndrome for months, and I still have side effects that resemble aspects of epilepsy.

It was traumatic, and writing his character helped me work out some of the residual feelings associated with that time in my life. Though Jane is the protagonist of this story, her thought and feelings of Remy's illness helped me evaluate myself with a degree of separation. The catharsis writing this long form story has given me helped me grow as a writer and as a person.

Borrowed form was a key aspect to this piece. Andy Weir's *The Martian* creates a similar composition with the marriage of survivalism and comedy. In writing this I told myself I do not have to be serious to be a good writer. And in a similar way, Weir's book contains humor, science, and survival, as the main character attempts to live on Mars after an accident which left him stranded.

The book switches between a journal kept by astronaut Mark Watney and a third person omniscient narrator following the actions of Watney's crewmates and ground control. The first version of this story included Nate's story in this third person form as he sought to find Jane during the end of the world. However, I think the epistolary nature of Nate's narrative was a more effective way to deliver his plotline. While I was unable to imitate Weir's style, I admire his ability to switch between narrative forms, but in the end I am always a sucker for a good letter.

Mikhail Bakhtin writes extensively on epistolary forms of fiction in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. He states "The epistolary form is a variety of *Ich-Erzählung*. Discourse here is double-voiced, and in most cases unidirectional. As such it functions as a compositional surrogate of the author's discourse which is absent," (Bakhtin 205). This quote exemplifies the voice of Jane. Since there is no other narrator other than her, she in turn is a direct reflection of my voice. Had this piece been written in

any other form, such as first person non-epistolary or third person limited, the central action and double voicing would be absent. In fact, it would be a different story completely.

In the same way, Nate's letters act as a different kind of voice entirely. Since there is no way Jane could ever read the letters, at least until they reunite, Nate's letters are basically acting as his own conversation with her. Bakhtin writes the following of this idea:

The epistolary form in and of itself does not predetermine the type of discourse. In general this form permits broad discursive possibilities, but it is best suited to... the reflective discourse of another. A characteristic feature of the letter is an acute awareness of the interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed. The letter, like a rejoinder in a dialogue is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other's possible reactions, the other's possible reply. (205)

He predicts Jane's reactions to his words, and possibilities of how she will read the letter in general. Since there is no way the letters will ever be sent, he is essentially developing a possible conversation based on what he knows about her. The conversation is not really happening since they are thousands of miles apart, but Nate's awareness of Jane's voice allows him to predict their interaction.

While this story never made it to completion, I am happy that I was able to work on it as long as I was in graduate school. I am also happy for the addition of a minority language in the piece. Remy and Julien are from a section of Louisiana which is predominately French Creole. I wanted to include a minority language because I am of the firm belief that minority languages should be saved.

My family is third generation Irish, and my parents and grandparents remember their family speaking Irish Gaelic for the first few decades they lived in the states. My parents' generation was the first to abandon the language, not intentionally, and now my

cousins, sisters, and I are trying to bring it back. It has been a slow process since there are not any native speakers we can practice with. But with perseverance, *táim cinnte go mbeidh muid ina chainteoirí iontach.*

Including a minority language took a great deal of time and research. I enlisted the help of several people, both native French speaker and advanced nonnative speakers, and together with the help of a French creole dictionary we were able to parse through enough of the language to build a basis for Remy and Julien's speech patterns. I think that my global influences, such as living in Europe as a child and having adopted sisters who are native Spanish speakers, have given me an expanded appreciation of language and persons of other cultures.

In conclusion, this thesis is a culmination of my best work from my graduate writing career. I believe firmly in the saying "you are your own worst critic," but this collection makes me proud to call myself a writer. I no longer feel embarrassed about my writing, and I know that criticism only helps build a story.

While all of these stories and novels I have read are great influences on my writing, I believe that I have created my own voice out of the nothingness where I began. I am a borrower of forms and language and time. But despite this, I am my own voice.

TOMMY BOY

Tommy's birthday was on Saturday and he still wouldn't tell me what his friend looked like. I mean, I was going to find out eventually so I didn't see why being withholding was doing him any good. It was really just making everyone else annoyed.

"You're gonna be so surprised when you see it," he shouted down from his room on Tuesday morning. I rolled my eyes at Toucan Sam on my Froot Loops box. Every twelve-going-on-thirteen-year-old I knew was acting this way. It was a little ridiculous. I wasn't going to be that immature when I got mine.

Molly S., my seventh-grade friend, told me all about what hers was going to be. Her birthday was the week after Tommy's so she'd been talking about it constantly at recess. Molly S. had a twin when she was born, but the baby died when they were only a few days old.

"Whenever I was sad or bored or anything, I would just pretend that Rachel was there with me," Molly S. told me at lunch. Molly R. said it was morbid, but I thought it was nice. Sometimes I wish I had a sister instead of a brother, even if she was only imaginary.

"I asked my mom, you know, so she wouldn't be like shocked or anything, and she said she'd be cool with it," she told us.

"Do you imagine her looking like you?" Molly R. asked.

"Yeah, but like a reflection. Like looking in the mirror."

"Bizarre," Molly R. said through a mouth full of chicken sandwich. "What did the school counselor say?"

“He said it would be okay if I ran it by my parents first. I mean it’s better that what most of the boys are thinking,” she said. My face turned red. Tommy told me what some of his friends wanted in an imaginary friend.

“Bizarre,” Molly R. repeated. I think it was one of her vocabulary words for language arts that week in Mrs. Diaz and Captain Kangaroo’s class.

“You are gonna be so surprised,” he repeated. He poured himself a bowl of cereal.

“Did Mom act like this before she got you?” I asked The Scream.

Mom’s imaginary friend looked at me with his deep empty eye holes.

“It was rhetorical,” I said. The Scream couldn’t talk.

Mom wanted to be an artist before she “got realistic” about her life, she says. She said she loved impressionism and expressionism, but most of the time she gave The Scream the stink eye. I think she resented him sometimes.

The bigger kids at school talked about their friends a lot, especially since it was all new to them. One of Tommy’s classmates said that his cousin in Ohio went to school with a boy who killed himself because his mom made him think of his grandma since she had just died. The boy couldn’t stand it and since there are no takebacks he jumped off the roof of the school. Tommy said his friend was full of it. I said he was being a skeptic.

I think there are worse things than that. All the Evangelical kids I know at school have to have Jesus or else they get in trouble. One boy, I think he goes to Central now, got kicked out of the congregation because his imaginary friend was Jane Austen’s head attached to a female bodybuilder’s bikinied bod. I’ve seen her in the frozen aisle at the Hannaford’s. Her bonnet matched her bikini. Talk about bizarre.

“Oh, man, you are not going to believe it,” Tommy said to The Scream and me.

“Can you at least tell me if it’s a boy or a girl?” I asked.

Tommy crushed a handful of cereal in his hand and sprinkled like confetti it over the remaining milky dregs in his bowl. He smirked.

“You’ll see.”

Mom decided to drive us to school that day. Well, technically we missed the bus so Mom had to drive us. Tommy asked if The Scream could babysit so we could stay home. Mom told him to get in the car. She was stressed out. She was usually stressed out, though, like most moms are now that I think about it.

“You guys cannot miss the bus again, understand? I cannot afford to be late this week.” She put a lot of emphasis on her cannots.

“Are we going to need a bigger car?” I asked.

“What?”

“Well, we’re gonna have six people in two years.”

“Friends aren’t people,” Tommy said from the front seat. He swiveled around in his chair to look at The Scream sitting next to me. “No offense.”

“I can’t deal with this right now, Maddie,” Mom said. Stressed out.

The Scream tried to put on his seat belt. His hand melted through the material slowly, over and over. He finally gave up and looked out the window. Empty sockets.

“Maybe one of you can ride in the trunk,” I whispered to him.

He shrugged, his hands pressed into the sides of his skull.

“He hasn’t told you anything about it?” Molly R. asked me after first period.

“No, and to make it worse, he’s acting like it’s going to be the greatest imaginary friend ever brought to life ever,” I said.

“Wait, he didn’t even tell your mom?” asked Molly S.

“No, should he?”

The Mollies looked at each other.

“Well, I told my parents because of the whole dead sister thing,” Molly S. said.

“Yeah, and my parents told me that it’s best if you run it by an adult first, just in case,” Molly R. said.

My stomach flipped. “Wait, in case what?”

Molly R. shrugged. “I don’t know. In case it’s stupid or, you know, dirty.”

“Because he’ll be stuck with it for the rest of his life,” Molly S. said.

I really hoped that Tommy had something better than Jane Austen or Jesus picked out.

“That’s why Mr. Campbell can’t bring his to work,” Molly R. whispered. “Too dirty.”

“I thought it was Hitler,” Molly S. said. “No wait, I think that’s my neighbor. Yeah, Campbell’s is a naked lady. For sure.”

“I’ll try to talk to him,” I said, worried more than ever. Sometimes it was really insightful to be friends with seventh graders. Sometimes it just made me feel barfy.

On Friday night Tommy had his thirteenth birthday party. No one ever had their thirteenth on the day of. It was more of a family day. Get-to-know-the-new-guy kind of a day.

Mom and I sat in the kitchen while Tommy and his friends played Xbox in the living room. I used to play with them, but since most of them had their imaginary friends now, they thought they were better than me. I told mom they were insufferable. She asked me how I knew that word.

I picked the sausage off of my pizza while mom picked up the destruction that the boys left over from their feeding frenzy. Benjie's friend, Quasimodo (the book version), loped into the kitchen. The other friends must have been picking on him. Kyle's Secret Service Agent and Lucas's Weathered Old Sailor were particularly cruel (but Tommy told me Kyle and Lucas were too).

"So have you put any thought into it?" Mom asked.

"Into what?" I was lining up a shot with a sausage ball to the trash can through Quasimodo's head.

"Your friend."

I missed the shot and the cat bolted for the greasy meat ball.

"Not really."

"Well, why don't you start thinking of ideas? Sketch something up." She used a lot of phrases like that. She was a high school art teacher. "You're going to be stuck with it forever." She threw a glance at The Scream who was slowly reaching out to pet the cat.

"Mom, can I ask you something?"

She pulled her grouchy eyes away from her friend.

“Why can’t The Scream talk?”

“I don’t know,” she said after a long moment. Her voice sounded froggy. She turned her back to me and began scrubbing the paper plates she had collected one by one. They melted under the soapy water, so I decided to leave her alone.

Mom woke me up super early to make brunch for Tommy. She said he would be too nervous for breakfast. She told me we had to be super supportive, no matter what. I asked if we were going to support him if he had a Jane Austin bodybuilder. She told me to finish mixing the eggs.

I was nervous, like I was expected to do something or perform for Tommy’s big day. Maybe his anxieties and anticipation was rubbing off on me. Mom and I sat on the couch downstairs waiting like it was Christmas morning. She had her camera ready. The lack of a Christmas tree felt made the room feel too big. The Scream sulked in the doorway to the kitchen. I thought he might be worried about the new friend coming, but his face always looked like that so it was hard to tell.

“They should be here around ten,” she said to no one. She looked up at the melty Dalí clock on the wall expectantly.

My stomach took turns grumbling and doing flips. I was excited, but if Tommy and the delivery guy didn’t get there soon I was going to start in on the brunch spread.

Tommy quietly appeared at the top of the stairs. He was dressed in the suit he wore to Grandpa and Sherlock Holmes’s funeral over the summer. It was already too small for him which was really apparent since he just wore white sock and no shoes. I could tell he was nervous, even from all the way from the couch.

Nobody said anything as Tommy gently made his way down the stairs.

When he reached the bottom, he cleared his throat, and looked at Mom for guidance.

“You can say something if you want,” she encouraged.

Tommy opened and closed his mouth a few times like he was going to say something; he kind of looked like when The Scream tried to talk to us.

I guess he decided against the speech. Instead, he went to wait at the front door.

Mom started taking pictures of Tommy’s back. I rolled my eyes. I was getting pretty good at it.

The doorbell rang and everyone jumped a little. Tommy answered it.

“And you must be the man of the hour,” said the burly delivery man in his gray uniform. He carried a clipboard and small handheld machine: the friend maker.

“Thomas Alexander Green?” he asked with a smile.

Tommy nodded. I almost laughed at the site of his eyeballs bulging out of his head.

“Okay, Thomas, I need you to sign here, showing that you understand that your Friend is non-refundable and that you understand that it may grow with you as you grow up. Good. Now think of your friend and—you don’t need to close your eyes—and I’m going to scan,” he drew out the word as he moved the device across Tommy’s head, “and there we go! Alright I’m going to activate your friend out here and you can answer the door in about a minute. I’ll get out of your hair.”

The house was silent for forever after Tommy closed the door. I looked at Mom. She was crying. But she cries at everything, so it wasn't that weird. Tommy looked like he might puke, though.

"Anytime you're ready, baby," Mom whispered, camera poised.

Tommy slowly opened the door.

"Tommy Boy!" yelled Tommy's father.

When I was little, Mom took me to the art museum in the city. Tommy was in kindergarten and she wanted to cheer me up since I couldn't go with him. The museum was having a special exhibit on impressionism. She read me each placard in a soft, musical voice.

"And here it says, 'Van Gogh spent a year in an asylum in Saint-Rémy de Provence and painted many of his most famous works there,' see baby, look at the irises."

If I reached out to touch, she would gently hold my hands to her chest to protect the art.

"Let's look at the brush strokes in this one. Oh, Madeline can you see them?" she whispered into my hair.

She picked apart every painting, going down to the smallest detail. I sat quietly in her arms. I'd never seen her this consumed by anything before. She didn't even glare at *The Scream* once.

"This artist must have been left handed," she said. She grabbed my hand and started painting the air. "Can you draw that line in the air? Good girl." Up and down up and down. We recreated the entire landscape.

She was so concentrated on the details. I thought she could see something hidden under the layers of paint, a secret code on the back of the canvas maybe. I think the art was talking to her. She was their interpreter.

Mom didn't come out of her room for the rest of the day. I could hear the TV through her closed door. She was watching *Grey's Anatomy* on full volume. She must not have like the surprise as much as Tommy.

I think Tommy was mad, but it was hard to tell. He and his dad went to go play catch in the park after Mom took to her bed. I told him his dad couldn't hold the ball. He told me to back off, except he used a different word.

The Scream and I turned on a movie in the living room. Mom usually didn't let me watch scary stuff, but since no one who could voice an objection was watching me I decided it was time to experiment with slasher films.

I ate the cold eggs and cantaloupe from our brunch, stretching out on my stomach in front of the TV. The Scream gave me a disapproving look as I wiped my eggy fingers on the carpet. He was a terrible babysitter. At first, The Scream tried to block the movie, but he eventually joined me on the carpet after the first victim lost an arm to a meat grinder.

Maybe Mom and Tommy would never talk again. I wondered if I should tell Molly S. about this. Maybe her mom wouldn't be as okay with seeing her dead kid as she said. It would probably be more traumatic than bizarre.

My father wasn't dead, but I'd never met him in my life so he was good as gone to me. He knew Tommy. He didn't know me. He never knew I existed. Mom called him

a bolter. When the going got tough, Mom said he would run in the opposite direction toward another skinny brunette.

But Mom didn't want us to despise him. She tried to make it seem like we were a whole family. She gave us each a picture of him to keep in our rooms. We didn't have his image anywhere else in the house. I kept mine in a shoebox with my baby teeth (I sussed out the truth about the tooth fairy early on) and birthday candles I kept. Dad was leaning against a truck and his friend, an exact copy of himself, mimicked him. I didn't even remember which was which.

Mom made sure we knew it wasn't our fault. She never said it to us directly. She painted her meaning on the walls of our bedrooms and folded it into the mountains of laundry and slipped it into our lunchboxes when we weren't looking. We were loved and we knew it.

"Why don't you talk?" I asked The Scream.

He slowly turned toward me, I think because he was into the movie and not because of his usual slowness. We were now watching a film about demons, apparently much more interesting to him than *The Attack at Blood Lake III: The Reckoning*.

He shrugged.

"Maybe if you knew how to read I could make you a Ouija board. Then we could talk."

He looked back at the TV sadly. Tommy said he knew how to read The Scream's body language, but I always felt like I knew what he was really feeling.

"Shouldn't you be comforting Mom or something?"

The Scream rolled onto his back and flopped his arms behind his head like I did when I got annoyed at Mom or Tommy. Drama queen.

Mom and Tommy didn't talk at dinner. Mom put a plate of spaghetti in front of both of us and went back upstairs. She didn't look at the three of us.

"She—she just doesn't get it," Tommy huffed. His face looked like he had a sunburn.

"Could it be me, son?" my father asked. His moves were exaggerated, and his voice hadn't seemed to land on a pitch yet. He sounded a little like Goofy.

I wasn't going to say anything.

"She'll understand," Tommy whispered to himself.

"Hey, honey, pass me the salt," my father said. His voice made my skin feel gross, like I walked through a spider web.

"It won't work," I said, looking down at my pasta. "You're not real."

Tommy told me something that night. He said he never even told Mom or his friends or anyone. He crept into my room that night. It was the farthest away from Mom's so we wouldn't be caught up past bed time. Tommy made his friend stay in his room.

"What is it?" I asked, sliding the bookmark Molly R. made me into my book. I hadn't gone to bed a minute before ten since our mandatory school night bedtime (9:45) had been implemented.

"I wanna tell you something," Tommy said. He stood far away from me, like he was a stranger. My stomach felt funny. I was really starting to dislike teenagers.

“I know why he left.”

“Who?” I asked, though I knew I knew the answer.

“Dad. I heard him and Mom fighting.”

“But how would you even remember, you were a baby, you—.” I couldn’t stop myself. My vision was getting watery.

“Maddie, hush. Mom’ll hear us.” He told me to stop crying. I told him I wasn’t.

“It was because of us. He didn’t want us. Mom and me and The Scream.”

“How would you—are you sure?” My lungs felt squished.

“I heard him say stuff, screaming stuff,” he whispered. “He said it was too much; a baby and supporting Mom’s art and The Scream always repeating him. I don’t know if I should even tell you the rest of it.”

“He talked?”

Tommy nodded. “Mom made him stop. Forever.”

His face was blotchy with red spots. He came to my bed and hugged me. “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” he said into my shoulder. I knew he wasn’t talking to me.

Later I had nightmares about men with hook hands chasing me and cutting my ears off.

A week later, Mom and Tommy still weren’t speaking. I was getting to know his friend, but sometimes it made my stomach hurt to look at him. He looked like the picture of Dad in Tommy’s room. Since his face was turned in the picture, Tommy’s friend was missing half of his moustache on one side. He looked like the Barbie doll that Tommy melted on Mom’s curling iron. *Bizarre.*

“Are you coming home today?” I asked Tommy on the bus. I had to lean over the seat and a half in front of me to reach him. He said we weren’t allowed to be seen together, for social reasons.

“No, I’m going to skip pebbles with Dad.” I could tell he was in a bad mood. Maybe that’s just what being thirteen was all about.

“Okay.” I slipped back into my seat. I didn’t tell him that I missed walking home with him, or that sitting in the living room while Mom cooked dinner wasn’t fun without someone to talk to, or that you can’t skip pebbles.

Tommy’s dad came and sat next to me.

“You know, Sweetheart,” he began, trying to place his hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Haha, okay, Honey,” he chuckled. “Your brother, my son,” he emphasized son, I rolled my eyes at the houses streaking past the window, “is going through a tough time.” The melty side of his face was almost touching me. I scooted closer to the window.

“You know, Darling, when I was Tommy Boy’s age—.”

“You’re only like a week old,” I reminded him. “Also, no one calls him that.”

“Haha, okay.” He smiled lopsidedly. I thought that maybe his bad side also affected his brain.

He tried to pat my knee, but his hand just passed through to the seat.

“I did,” he whispered.

He stood up and toddled back to Tommy. “See you at supper, Kiddo!”

I walked home from the bus stop and passed a group of kids and their pack of Jesuses. They were all trying to out-preach one another. They liked to play “He Who Prophesizes the Loudest is Truly the Son of God.” Skater Jesus was beating Basketball and Currently Being Crucified Jesus. Keegan Jacobowitz’s Moses was trying to get a word in, but was overpowered. It was all a little too much at the moment.

Mom was home early. I found her up in the guestroom, which she sometimes called “the studio.” She was covered in paint and charcoal. She hadn’t even changed out of her teacher clothes. I was afraid to interrupt her.

The Scream was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching her. She didn’t like to work in front of us. She said it threw her off. I wondered if she thought of The Scream as a someone, or just a parasite, just a parrot. The last time Mom and Tommy saw dad he was screaming at them. That’s what Mom’s friend copied.

“I know why he doesn’t talk.” It seemed so loud in that room that we all jumped.

“Maddie, Jesus, you scared me,” Mom said. She turned around on her stool.

“I know why he doesn’t talk anymore,” I said again.

There was a long time where no one said anything. Mom rubbed the paint between her fingers like it was cream. I went and sat on her lap like I did when I was little. She wrapped her warm, painty arms around me.

I saw The Scream tried to copy us. He wrapped his long hands around his body, his mouth still open but silent. His white eye sockets looked past us. I wondered what he was thinking.

“How did you make him stop?” I asked into her chest.

She took a big deep breath and tapped her forehead, leaving little marbles of paint under her hair.

“It didn’t.”

HOW TO BECOME A HO-HO-HOST THIS HOLIDAY

Preface

Whether you intend on hosting the smallest of parties or the most opulent of galas, one must know how to entertain. The job of host or hostess is official, bordering on sacred. Remembering proper etiquette and mannerisms at all times may seem daunting, but do not be discouraged. The payoff is immense: affirmation of your solipsistic existence within the confines of a dead-end marriage. This guide will provide you with the tips, tools, and guidance you may need to turn your get-together into a party that's reputation will outlive even the oldest of us.

For Wives

Know your place, now and during the party. You are the real head of this household. Your husband, with all his performances and mediocrity, has only gotten you so far and unless you do something you will spend the rest of your days in cold isolation in front of a fake marble countertop. Remind him who runs this ship. Demand he look at you and see what you are: divine. Do not go so far as killing him, but make your voice heard. This is the first step in being a good hostess. Since all of the cooking, cleaning, childbearing, crying, and constant disenfranchisement fall on your shoulders, make him know that you are stronger than he will ever be.

In addition, as a hostess make sure you plan all of the cooking beforehand so as to not feel rushed hours before the party. It's best to have the table set and dishes warming in the oven before guests arrive so that one might take their coats and make their acquaintance.

For Husbands

Make sure you stay out of the kitchen while your wife is making the holiday dinner. She may be strained with all of the cooking, but your “help” may only make things worse. Instead, ask if there are any last items she needs from the store or take the children on a drive to get them out of her hair for a stretch.

Remember that even though she has refused to look at you in weeks, you are still coauthors in a contract with God. Do for her what she would do unto you—save being silent and cold. A happy wife is a happy hostess, and a happy hostess is a happy host. You are nothing without her.

Dress

It is best to dress comfortably as well as with an air of dignity. Though we have come a long way from the gory animal pelts and rough-hewn frocks of humanity’s childhood, the holidays are a time of reflection and nostalgia. Maybe add a bit of fur to your lapel, or pin some meat in your hair. It will show your guests that you are an arbiter of Then and Now; a mediator of the Heregone. Above all else, it will remind them where they came from: clawing for their lives out of the womb of ignorance.

When time becomes a factor, as it usually does in these situations, a simple dress or suit will suffice. Fret more on the execution of the party than the execution of the animal you have chosen to wear.

Music

Make sure your records are without blemish and include a wide variety of dance, slow, and singalong tracks. Guests will become bored if dances and singalongs are not spread evenly throughout the evening. It is recommended that one use an older child as a

disk jockey. Give them a list of tracks in the order in which they should be played. Incentivize them by telling them they were chosen above all other children for this job, and supply them with generous helpings of meatballs and perhaps a little “special” punch. Repeat the phrase *divine right* over and over in their presence. Make them know they are a god amongst insects.

If you see any distressed faces in your crowd over song choice, there are options. First, one can simply change the song. If there is backlash from the switch, a small lie of “The record was scratched” never hurt anyone, though of course they do add up and eventually bar one from eternal salvation. Remember to tell the truth in the next situation. Perhaps a small sacrificial offering as indulgence will make up for your falsehoods.

However, there is always the option of watching that face in the crowd and seeing where it takes you. What does this song remind the neighbor woman of, you’ll ask yourself. Was this particular song playing on the radio the time her uncle reached across the expanse of the bench seat in the front of his Ford and gently placed his wrought iron hand on her knee and under the hem of her skirt for the rest of the trip to cut down an evergreen tree? Does your coworker’s face contort just so because this melody—instead of the desired intent of reminding one to show friends and neighbors good cheer—reminds him of the time he asked her for her hand and she only frowned down at him as he knelt in the slush of the Kriskringlemarket holding all the money he earned in the form of a rock? Does the young couple cast their gazes away from each other because if the baby had lived she would have been a Holly?

These face journeys are a most exciting form of entertainment. If you party seems dull, or you have run out of enough meatballs to entice the young disk jockey to change

tunes, letting such things play out as god intended is always a viable option. Music is the spice of life. Remember to use it as a seasoning to your party and not the main dish. Let your conversation and socializing be the meat.

Conversation

For those of us unpossessed by the demons of public nervousness, conversation can become almost second nature. Without thinking long and hard about what one might be saying and whom it may offend, it is easy to slip into a banter of gossip and useless chatter.

Gentlemen, while highlights of sporting events may seem interesting for a short time to those around you, play-by-play reenactments of sporting events may quickly fall onto the deaf ears of your listeners. Remember to engage them, as you are their host. Here are some quick and simple conversation starters for men that are sure to delight and entertain at any holiday party.

1. Your interest in a new book or publication—this topic has several benefits. It makes one look interested in worldly affairs and looks smart in front of the other men. In addition, it only calls your interest in reading into the spotlight; therefore, if the others haven't read it or are illiterate entirely, they do not feel poorly about themselves.
2. Family highlights—this can include disappointing children, ailing parents, and the growing resentment (and space between you both in your marital bed) of you and your wife. This may prompt the others to talk, giving you time to gaze off into the haze of cigar smoke for a moment and think.
3. Your current emotional state with regards to your wife's lack of interest—while at times it can seem like oversharing, using the guise of drunkenness and holiday grief is actually the best time to unload the emotional baggage you have been carrying around on your less than happy pleasure cruise of a life. Laugh it off in between song selections.
4. Ask if anyone can tell that you've been crying.

Ladies, your interests and conversations, while no less vigorous than the menfolk's, will definitely have a different tenor than your male counterparts. Consider the following when conversing in the kitchen between dinner courses.

1. Tell your friends about a new recipe you like—lie openly through your teeth. They will know what you really mean. You are unhappy.
2. Ask about the new spouse, job, or baby—there is bound to be one at a gathering like this. This will hide the fact that your face is now contorted with anger at your situation.
3. Bring up the plans for the next twenty nine years of the church group—this will let on that you are dissatisfied with your life; trapped in a subdivision, strangling behind your apron and pearls, knowing that one day you will kill yourself in the cold porcelain bathtub.
4. Tell the ladies about your intent in starting a new religion or world order where men are subservient. Write the plans down on a recipe card and distribute as a fun party game.

Food

Holidays are about sharing and receiving new recipes. If your function includes a potluck-type dinner, remember to remind guest to bring a hot dish, drink or dessert. Making something from the Old World or Motherland is always a crowd pleaser. Have guests bring their food item, a prayer for the old gods, and a piece of the ancestor they inherited it from. For instance, if one were to bring traditional Ukrainian paska, then it would also be customary—as well as polite—to offer Troian a blood sacrifice, carve a six petaled rose on one's chest, and of course bring a bit of Babusya's hair in a locket to dinner as well. Without these traditions we are nothing but animals writhing in the dirt.

In addition, be sure to balance out sweets with savory. Too many cookies may seem like a young child's dream, but parents may find annoyance in driving home early for a bellyache. Plenty of salted meats and vegetables help balance out a spread.

Dancing

Once your soiree is in full swing, don't be afraid to initiate dancing. Make sure that there is an adequate space for dancers, close to the music but far enough away from furniture that there will be no accidental bumps and bruises during each set.

Three types of dances that are always pleasing to large, rowdy crowds are the waltz, the two-step, and anything with a moderato tempo. By employing the strategies laid out in works such as *Don'ts for Dancers*, one will be able to navigate even the most difficult of moves with ease. A few points to remember are as follows:

1. Dress in comfortable, non-restrictive clothing—one wouldn't want a wardrobe malfunction in the middle of a dip. And in any case, more dancers die each year from choking on tight collars than slips or spills.
2. Remember to keep emergency repair equipment close by—for small tears and stains this is important. In addition ladies, if your partner begins dragging you to a secluded location to do with you what he will, safety pins are an excellent predator deterrent.
3. Proper footwear is imperative—make sure your shoes are securely fastened, ladies, that you might outrun any predatory dance partner.
4. If the dancing seems to be dying down, it is always acceptable to try ritualistic chanting—many prefer this to traditional forms of dance. Start by starting a small fire in the middle of the dancefloor. Then distribute any sort of hallucinogen (such as Peyote or the like). A sacrifice of a virginal girl, child, or unblemished animal is not necessary, but highly encouraged as it “sets the mood” of the dance. Go along with whatever happens.
5. If all else fails, have the children put on a performance about the holidays for the adult's entertainment.

Games

Make sure that there are plenty of games for both the children and adults to enjoy. If the weather permits, outdoor games are perfect for children to tire themselves out. Make sure little ones are bundled up and there is plenty of hot cocoa for them upon their return from their play worlds. Board games and discussing the injustices of life are best for ladies in the parlor and children in their rooms (while they still hold some

understanding of equality). Men are encouraged to smoke and play cards even though they wish they could play board games and drink coffee. You brought this upon yourselves, gentlemen now revel in the knowledge that you can't change the patterns established.

Closing Out the Night

Bring out the last of the food and start giving it out. Then have a child bring out the coats. Offer for people to stay longer this will usually have them mention the car ride and their tired children. When all have left, begin doing dishes. Wash and wash until your hands are raw from the scalding water. If your husband offers to help, do not answer him. Wait an hour. When he is asleep on the couch take the keys and drive away. Never look back, lest you turn into a pillar of salt.

EVENING NEWS

They sat together in the dated living room in a house on a street full of other houses with similar dated living rooms. Their television was on. So were all the others.

“Nothing but bad news,” said the man, the woman’s husband.

“Hmm,” said the woman, the man’s wife. “At least the weather is pleasant.” She moved her head to look out the window to her right, only to remember she closed them earlier. The glare made viewing uncomfortable. The stories on the television made her forgetful, she thought.

“Hmm,” the man remarked. He picked at a spot on his neck.

“Stay tuned for an important announcement after the close of tonight’s broadcast,” said the man on the television.

“I wonder what that’s all about,” said the woman. “Perhaps more news of the war?”

“Or maybe the bird flu,” said the man. “Or the refugees. The Authorities will let us know.”

“Nothing but bad news,” the woman repeated. Her voice was distant, her thoughts were distant.

They sat together in their dim living room on the fading couch under the fading wallpaper. The sun was setting, orange light bled through the floral curtains.

They had been like this for as long as they could remember. The living room and the couch and the television and the couple: inseparable and permanent. There was a

space between them for another, one degree of separation. One couch cushion of separation. Void.

“Did you hear that they’re closing all the schools? And universities?” the woman asks. She thought it would be polite to talk during the commercials so there wouldn’t be any dead air between she and her husband.

“Where?” He wanted to reciprocate. It was only polite.

“Everywhere. Apparently, it’s better if we just let the Authorities tell us what’s best. They’re converting a channel to a learning channel. All permitted information, that way rogue teachers won’t interfere.”

The man focused on the television. He wanted the news to return.

“I think it’s probably for the best, I mean,” she laughed, “I remember a teacher in high school who tried to tell us all about other cultures. Dangerous.”

The man was quiet.

“What do you think?” she asked. She smoothed the hem of her dress, afraid she overstepped.

“That seems about right, keeping it up to the Authorities. But I have no opinion.” He didn’t consider himself political. In fact, he believed talking of such matters was impolite. “Let’s change the subject, dear.” He said this without looking at her.

“Of course,” she said.

They did not talk for some time. They felt as if the couch was getting deeper.

“Protesting thugs and rebels have been shot in the capitol after defying Authorities,” the anchor announced. “Many displayed slogans and gestures considered

anti-authority and dangerous for the general public. The Authorities claim that they are safer dead.”

The woman couldn't take her eyes off the anchor. She thought she saw a tear in the corner of his eye. How unprofessional, she thought. How could he cry on camera? Perhaps he was filled with hatred for the protesters or he was feeling especially patriotic or he knew one personally. The woman thought about a girl she went to high school with who was publicly executed for a similar crime. They said she was safer off dead, too. She didn't know what was good for her. She thought too much. The entire school body heard about it on the morning announcements, right after the lunch menu and right before the birthdays. The woman didn't cry then. Neither did the morning announcement reader. He fumbled, but he did his job. They didn't feel the urge to cry. Maybe it was the studio lighting.

The man scratched at his neck. He wondered if he should get the spot looked at. If it was cancer, he could quit his job early. He planned to retire in two years; he was old enough. He wanted to be happy with his wife; no, comfortable. He wanted to do this, sit and watch and talk. No more work; maybe take a vacation or two. As long as the cancer didn't spread or kill him immediately and they stayed away from the warzones, they would be fine. It would all work out, he assured himself. Money didn't really matter to him. Health didn't really matter to him. The war didn't matter to him. He was still on the fence if his wife mattered enough to him. He scratched again. Cancer or not, the thing was annoying and he would see someone about it.

The man and the woman sat facing the television. Did they even turn it on today, or was it already on when they woke up?

“The Authorities have released some news on the war,” the news continued. “It continues, on our part strategically, as a stalemate.”

“Is that a chess term?” the woman asked. She played with the end of her skirt.

“Wouldn’t know,” the man grunted.

They sat, sinking into their couch, sinking into their contemplations.

The man thought about what it would be like to go to war. He was too young for the last one, he remembered. He was too old for this one. The man wonders what the soldiers do for fun. In the old movies he watched with his wife, the soldiers played cards. He wasn’t very good at cards. He wondered if they would have made fun of him if he lost every hand. He had a friend who was a soldier, or maybe he just read about it. He couldn’t remember. When was the last time he had seen any of his friends?

The woman wondered what would happen if she set the couch on fire. Would the color of the flames match the color of the sun on the walls through the curtains at sunset? Only something as bright and alive as a fire could do that. She wanted to capture that color. Her home living magazines recommended beiges and cremes with subtle accents in furniture color for a perfect feng shui. She didn’t know what that meant, but she followed the advice. Her lady’s group seemed to notice. When was she supposed to go to the next meeting again? Her thoughts roved back to the couch. Did it hurt to burn alive?

The living room grew darker. The sun set behind the rows of houses between their and the next street and the next street after that. The television drown out the light outside.

“What’s for dinner?” asked the man.

“What?”

“Dinner. Are we having it?”

The woman looked at the floor in front of them at the two empty frozen dinners, two empty cups. They both stared for a while, slack-jawed. They did not remember making the dinners or eating or drinking.

“Did we—?” she began.

“Must’ve,” the man said. He wasn’t one to question things when explanation eluded him. He turned up the volume on the television. He picked the spot on his neck again.

“The Authorities has declared a state of emergency in the following coastal areas,” the man on the television began.

“Good thing we live so far inland,” the man said.

“Someone should really do something about that,” the woman said.

“Best not to get involved.”

“Could a flood reach here?” the woman asked. She put her fingers around the hem of her dress and gripped the fabric.

“Hmm,” the man took a moment to think. “Isn’t there a river near here?”

“Is there? I don’t know.”

“I don’t remember.”

They sat in their living room on a couch that pressed back against their weight. Another round of commercials passed without a polite interjection.

The woman thinks about tidal waves. Could fish swim out of them or were they trapped along with debris and drowning bodies as the water pushed through a city? What would that even sound like, she wondered. Loud, of course. How far away did you have

to be to hear a wave smash through a city, she wondered. She wanted to do it safely, of course. The woman didn't want to leave her husband to watch the news alone at night. She pulled hard against the fabric of her skirt. The fibers strained.

The man thought about the river that he couldn't remember. Didn't his father take him and his brother to fish there? Did he even have a brother? Maybe it was a lake. He knew for sure that there was a boat and a cold wind and an earthy meaty smell. And a man, there was definitely another man there, who looked like him only different: older. That's what fathers do, the thought, look like their sons and take them to bodies of water to swim and kill animals.

Suddenly lights filled the window followed by a rumble. The television was washed out by headlights. Both sound and sight stopped and a car door slammed. The front door jiggled, then unlocked. A younger man, who looked like the man on the couch only cruder, walked in. He carried a large, heavy-looking bag.

The man and the woman stared at him, waiting for recognition to come. The son waited in the doorway, feeling like a stranger.

The man leaned over the empty space, toward his wife. He had to pull himself out of the deepness he had created in the couch. His eyes sought the safety of the television.

"Do we know him?" he whispered.

"I think," the woman began, "I think he's ours. Our son."

"Sounds about right," the man said, straightening up. "Hello, Son."

"Yes, hello, Dear," the woman said, not wanting to be rude.

"Hiya, Ma. Hi, Pops," the son said. He dropped his bag.

The man and woman relaxed a little. Good guessing on their part, they thought.

The son stepped over the empty dinner trays and cups and took his place between his parents. He could tell that something was not right, but it would be impolite to pry. He sat quietly to between them as they watched television.

“They’ve let us all out of the university,” the son said. “The Authorities say it’s obsolete now.” He didn’t take his eyes off the television.

“I heard something about that,” the woman said. “Were you telling me about that, Dear?” she asked her husband.

“Hmm,” he thought. “Yes, I think so.” He dug at the spot on his neck.

“So I suppose I’ve graduated now,” the son said.

“Oh how wonderful!” the woman said. She was watching the chyrons as they scrolled across the screen. “We should throw a party.”

“Yes, that’d be swell,” the man said.

They all sat on the couch, the pressure of their bodies nearly ripping through the faded fabric. They all felt heavier than usual.

The son didn’t care much for school. It wasn’t what he had expected. It bored him. He had hopes of meeting a girl and falling deep into his studies and perhaps even discovering something like the Authority sectioned scientist discovered a new chemical weapon. Instead he found there to be too many regulations and submission conditioning classes. He wanted something more.

“Maybe I’ll join the army,” the son said.

The man and woman did not answer. They could not remember what they are supposed to say and feel about their child going to war. The silence went on too long.

The son thought this to be bad-mannered.

The woman tried to remember having her son. When was it? He looked around twenty, but how could she forget it? She wondered if this happened often to older people. Was there any way she could break the cycle, she thought. The woman strained to think back to her earliest memory. She was a child. She was outside. There were dark storm clouds and a cool breeze and small drops of water falling from the sky. Her first rain storm in memory form. She remembered wandering away from her home, unafraid of the thunder and lightning permeating the air. Where were her own parents, she wondered now. She couldn't remember anyone recounting the story to her when she was older. She could have died. This thought scared her.

The man thought about the boat again and the man and the wind. What would it look like if he lined up the old man's face and his face and his son's face? Perhaps that's what time looks like, he thought; aging faces and their newer replacements. When was the last time he looked in the mirror? He ran his hands over his face and tried to map an image out from his touch. Nothing. He might as well have been blind. A black hole where a memory should be.

A commercial for diet pills flashed across the screen. The toned woman claimed that she only had to take one pill before she saw results.

"Have you been taking your pills, Dear?" the woman asked.

"What pills?" the man asked.

"Weren't you on something? Didn't a doctor give you something?"

Neither could remember.

"Didn't he give you something?" the man asked.

"Who?"

“I wonder if they let you in the army if you’re on pills,” the son wondered aloud.

They sat on a couch that is consuming them. The family fell silent.

“Resources are running scarce,” the newsman says. “The Authorities promise a proposed solution at the end of this broadcast, folks. Here to speculate with me is—.”

The son wonders what sorts of jobs he could get in the army. He could see himself as a pilot. His teachers used to show old newsreels of war planes dropping righteous fury on enemies. He could do it; detach himself from the emotions that come with taking out millions of lives at a time. He didn’t think of himself as cold, just capable. He would do his job. He would be a patriot. He would be a hero. That’s what the Authorities called the soldiers. He would apply tomorrow, the son told himself.

“As far as we know, there is no danger in watching television for more than forty hours a week. We believe this could replace current jobs fields, and these people would become ‘professional watchers’,” said the analyst on the television.

The woman hated that term. Rage washed over her. What did that even mean? Who was this person? She did not want this time to be spent watching something she considered pleasure to be turned into a job. She would never be able to relax now knowing that it was work. She started ripping the bottom of her skirt, unaware of the damage she was doing.

The man thought that was a job he could get behind. He wondered what it entailed. Would he have to take notes? He wasn’t good at that. He wouldn’t get hired if note taking was a criterion.

They all sat on the couch that was devouring them. The television seemed to grow louder without any provocation.

The son practiced his disassociation technique. He thought about the changes the Authority had made to school before finally closing it today. Philosophy classes were replaced with national law classes. Language classes were replaced with etiquette. Sciences became introductions to manual labor. He felt like he learned little, but it would be impolite to state this to his parents who generously paid for his education. He learned that much.

“Authority police have issued another statement on the protests: anyone with ties to these insurgents will be prosecuted,” the anchorman said.

“What happened?” the man asked.

“Pops, it was just on the news. Some losers tried to break into the Authority’s headquarters. They were dangerous. They were shot.”

“Did you know any of them?” the woman asked.

“Me? No, of course not,” the son said. He was taken aback that his mother would group him into the same category as them. He was joining the army after all. He was a patriot.

“Oh,” she said softly.

“Do you have many friends?” the man asked.

“What is wrong with you two? It’s like you don’t even know who I am.”

The man and woman looked across the boy, the once empty space, at each other. Did they know him?

“Viewers, if you are having difficulty remembering it may be because of the recent train derailment. The chemicals it was carrying have leached into the water supply. The Authorities assure us the effects are temporary.”

The son looked from parent to parent, horrified. Blood was running down his father's neck, pooling at his collar. His mother, eyes back on the screen, was ripping her skirt past her knees.

“What have they done to you?” he shouted.

The man and woman said nothing.

“Someone should do something,” the son exclaimed.

The woman ripped her skirt past her thighs. “Best not get involved, dear,” she said.

The son noted her blank expression. The man sucked blood off his fingers. The son turned back to the television, his face screwed up in a panicked expression.

“Someone should do something about this,” he said quietly.

He felt a sudden uncomfortable shift in the room. He was a stranger. They were strangers to each other. Three strangers turned their faces to the only familiar thing.

“Here is the official statement from the Authority: because of sudden and unforeseen resource depletion and over-population, one-eighth of the population will be eliminated to ensure the survival of the other seven-eighths of the population. Around thirty million have been chosen. If you or your family are chosen for execution, the Authority would like you to understand that you are a true patriot, and thank you for your cooperation. Representatives will be dispatched within the hour. In addition, I have been notified that this will be my last broadcast.”

“How do we know if it's us?” the son asked. He looked to his parents for validation. He received glassy eyed stares instead.

The woman was nearly naked now, having ripped her dress from bottom to top.

The man was wiping blood on the arm of the couch.

The son watched the window for headlights.

The representatives arrived a short while later. Two men with guns and a clipboard pushed through the clutter.

“Those two,” the man with the clipboard said, pointing at the woman and her son.

“Nothing but bad news,” she said.

“I’m joining the army tomorrow,” the son said.

The man without the clipboard shot each of them in the head. They slumped forward onto the floor. The men left.

“Wait, who are they?” the man called after them.

He sunk deeper into the couch.

FURTHER RESEARCH ON CASE 1018149-Z:

NOTES FROM THE ~~ATLANTA, GA.~~ (UNKNOWN, MT) FIELD OFFICE

September 30th (probably)

Well, apparently drinking isn't a "healthy coping mechanism" and Remy is making me keep a journal. He said he read an article once that said writing had something to do with enhancing mindfulness and communication skills. I'll stick to bottling things up until I die, thanks.

Since my forced vacation to this cabin, not a lot has happened. Remy and I work all day, eat in forced conversation, and go to bed pretending we're making a real difference in this project and not just keeping busy until we die. And since he's making me write this all down on the record, I fucking hate cabins now. I hate the north. I hate being cold. If we ever get back to any kind of normal I'm never moving a degree off the equator.

Also, if I'm being candid, I stole an expensive-looking bottle of scotch from the kitchen. Sorry, boss. I'm sure he knows since it's been like a bottle a day since we got here. Oh well!

I think I'm going to drink myself to sleep with an action movie on as company. It's all Remy has up here, well aside from maybe seven thousand Motown records. There's no consistency in this man's life. Anyway, the movies are a good time waster, and I really like the idea of other people being blown up and eaten instead of me. Call me a sadist or whatever. I really have given up on caring at this point.

I'm sure Remy's done some inventory on the booze situation, so I need to hide this bottle. Maybe I should edit these in case he reads them. How much autonomy does one have during the zombie apocalypse? I'll sleep on that one.

October 1st (most likely)

Sound of the day: Shhhh.

Remy came up for a visit last night, which was pretty brave of him given I hate every atom of his being.

In other news, I hid the bottle of scotch; in my stomach. I'm might still be drunk?

I'll write more later if my hands stop shaking, but right now I need to throw up and go to work. Yay science!

Dear Jane,

We're not dead. I guess that's a good place to start.

You'd probably have something witty to say like look at you, writing letters like a war bride. I miss you terribly. But I realized it's hard to stay awake and safe if I keep those kind of thoughts turning.

Updates on the kid: doctor says Iva is small for her age, but I swear to God, Jane, she said "dada" yesterday and if it hadn't been for the fact that I'm so damn tired all the time I would've hollered and danced all night long. Also, you owe me \$20 now. I told you I'd be first.

So we're doing well. We're staying at the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area in a refugee camp. They evacuated the cities and put us up in tent cities

so they could get a handle on the outbreak. The military provided tents, the parks service provided the land, and the post office has an official list of the missing, dead, or “other” going. I’m happy you’re just missing.

It’s been a pretty good system so far. Everyone helps out according to their ability. I’ve been working as a medic since I can’t really drive an ambulance anymore. So far so good: not a lot of zombies, but just in case there’s a small National Guard unit here with some big guns. We’ve made a pretty solid fence in the meantime.

I’ve been talking to some former mail carriers and they said that once they get a national registry up, they’ll be able to see if you are okay. Something went wrong with the internet and phone lines, I don’t really know, but the IT guys are saying it’ll be up again soon.

I’m trying to see if me and the kid can get a ride with some guardsmen out west. I keep thinking about our last phone call. I’m pretty sure you were saying you were in Montana. You were all broken up, and you know how bad my memory is.

I know you didn’t want to go with Dr. Robot or whatever it is you call him, but I’m sure you’re doing good work out there. I keep bragging to all our new neighbors. They love the baby, by the way. She’s a real performer, Jane. I think she’ll be a comedian when she grows up.

I’m about to start a shift at the “hospital” so I’ll finish this up. I don’t want to sound like a sap, but I can’t wait to see you again.

Yours,

Nate

October 2nd (maybe)

Positive aspiration of the day: Don't kill yourself.

I have the "day off," so this will be a longer entry. Come to think of it, I might be fired. I'll keep you updated, Journal.

I definitely did lose the closest thing I have to a human friend (I am not entirely convinced that Remy isn't a government robot formerly assigned to the CDC). I mean, he did ruin my life and take away everything I love, but he did it for the right reasons.

Jesus, do I already have Stockholm syndrome? It's only been like three weeks. I'll file that under "things to keep Jane up at night."

Moving on. Upon further review, here are some of the things I learned yesterday:

1. Remy does not understand (my) humor.
2. I definitely have a drinking problem.
3. It is really stupid to run away from home during the apocalypse.
4. I hate emotions.

First of all, I'm not used to being on a first-name basis with my former boss. It's bad enough that humanity is ending and all, but now I'm forced to be housemates with the guy I spent most of my time avoiding at department holiday parties. I wish our dinners could have been more of a comfortable silence instead of him trying to pry every little detail of my past out of me. Just let me eat my cold beans quietly, thanks.

When he came up to my room the other night I was admittedly a little hostile. Like I said, I'm still trying to get over the whole you-dragged-me-up-here-against-my-will thing. So the interaction went something along these lines:

"What do you want?" I asked. Bitch mode activated. I tried to lean on the door all tough-like, kind of how the cool girls do it in the movies. I can't imagine it look as nonchalant, because admittedly I was super drunk.

“Um, hi.” And so we were off to a great start. “I think it’s important to establish some social activities to keep us from losing focus,” he said. Imagine being trapped on a mountain alone with that encyclopedic tone.

He looked awful, too. Neither of us had the foresight to grab a razor on our way out of Atlanta. (Well now that I think about it, maybe that was a good thing.) His usually, perfectly manicured face was overgrown with salt-and-pepper hair. It looked like he tried to take some scissors to it. There were some uneven chunks of hair, which really helped him pull off the Mad Scientist look.

“You could say normal, human things like ‘Do you want to watch a movie?’ or something,” I said.

“Of course, sorry.” He started to walk away.

“Come on,” I said, “I just started *The Fugitive* if you want to join me.”

He perched on the edge of my bed like he was my stepdad about to give me “the talk.”

But then we just enjoyed the movie together. We chatted about nothing, the weather, the movie. I made sure to change the subject anytime feelings were about to be broached. It was mostly about working before everything went to shit.

“Oh, and remember the time the ceiling fell on out E.coli samples?” I asked at some point.

Remy smiled at that. “Yes, that was definitely one for the books.”

“Wow, when did you learn idioms,” I asked, laughing. “Was there a software update or something?”

He frowned. Damn it, Jane. “I know I can be pretty dry. I’m sorry I’m not a better source of company.”

So that’s pretty much when our conversation ended. When the movie was over, he said goodnight and left. I wonder if he had been drinking too. He seemed a little unsteady and more miserable than usual. Maybe he was a sad drunk. Hey, maybe this friendship could work out after all.

I felt bad for him, but I was (am) still so angry at him for everything he put me through that I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think he deserved it. Yet.

So that brings us to yesterday.

I would like to preface this whole thing with an apology. Remy, if you ever read this, I’m sorry. I know I’m an idiot some (most) of the time. Also, Remy, if you ever read this, I’ll fucking kill you.

Okay, now for my defense. All I did was try to lighten the mood, okay? As it turns out I was not drunk when I wrote the last entry, but in fact about to suffer from the worst hangover of my life. And, dear Journal, as you can probably tell, I’ve been drinking and making bad jokes since I got here to forget about how close I am to killing myself.

Anyway, I thought it was harmless.

We were working in the “lab,” trying to figure out how this stupid disease works. Oh, Journal, we’re like society’s last hope for a cure to the degenerative zombie plague that’s killed at least half of the world’s population. Maybe it’s killed everyone by now, who knows?

At this point we’re mostly trying to isolate the microbe(s?) responsible for the outbreak. Then we can worry about how to kill it. Without getting too science-y, it’s

going unbearably slow. The thing keeps mutating and once we isolate it there's another version. It's worse than all those Microsoft Windows updates, you know, back when society was a thing. But the thing is we can't throw the samples out because they're the only ones we have. So it's like having a computer running on Windows '95 and the worst version of Windows 10 at the same time.

And since there haven't been any major breakthroughs lately, we're both a little discouraged. And on edge. And ready to snap. We thought we'd be farther along in this isolation process and we're desperately low on lab supplies since everything is currently in use to hold our samples. Tensions are so high here, so that's why I was so surprised when Remy acted like a human the other night.

Remy was hunched bat-like over his microscope, pressing his eyes against the eyepiece so hard that I thought at first he may have fallen asleep on it. But he eventually looked up, eyes bloodshot. He'd probably been sitting there for hours at this point.

I was across the lab, okay, and when I say lab I mean the cleaner-than-usual kitchen in the basement of this cabin, whisking some agar (science Jell-O) over the stove for some new samples. The smell and the heat were making me nauseous, so I tried to take my mind off it. Thinking Remy might need a pick-me-up too, I tried to repair the foundation of what we started a few hours before.

“So, Remy. Anything new happening in your life?”

He grunted. So I thought it was going pretty well.

“Yeah, I don't have a whole lot going on, either. I heard about this new hot yoga studio down the street that I'm thinking about joining. Thoughts?”

Nothing.

“Well I was thinking we could carpool, or jog. But that all depends on the weather, I guess,” I babbled.

“Can you stop for a moment, please?” he asked quietly. He put his head in his hands.

“Oh, and there’s that new vegan bakery in the hipster district. How do you feel about gluten-free zucchini bread?”

“Jane.”

“And I thought we could check out that bar that plays live music. I’m really trying to get into the grunge scene again.”

“Jane, could you please—,” he said louder.

“I’ve heard the farmer’s market here is to die for,” I interjected.

He stood up, knocking over the microscope. I heard a serious sounding crack from the internal mechanism.

“Remy, I’m just kidding,” I said.

“Will you just shut up?” He was shouting.

“Come on, man,” I pouted. “You need to laugh a little.”

“No. Damn it, Jane this isn’t a joke,” he screamed. His voice was hoarse but deafening in the tight space.

He reached out to steady himself on the counter, but his hand landed on a stack of papers. His weight pushed them to the floor, and he barely saved himself from falling to the floor. The mountain of papers avalanched across the linoleum.

I covered my mouth with free hand, afraid that I might let out an ugly witch cackle at his accident. He totally noticed.

And that's when he lost his shit.

He started going on and on about how what we were doing was the only important thing now. He threw more things and shouted at nothing. At one point he dropped down on all fours and just screamed at the floor like a toddler having a temper tantrum. I guess he really needed to work some stuff out of his system.

When he regained some composure, he turned his attention back to me.

“Why can't you focus? You're going to have to deal with this as some point!”

And that's when I started to lose my shit.

Who the hell was he to tell me how to deal with my issues? He was the one who put me in this ugly situation. And honestly, I was in no state to start dealing with a potentially homicidal robot-man on the loose. It was ridiculous. So I started laughing.

“Stop it,” he said, finally done rampaging for the time being.

“Fuck you,” I screamed.

And that's when I punched my boss in the face.

I honestly don't even remember running up to him, but the next thing I knew he was on the ground and my knuckles were split. This scared us both a little. The room, which had been so explosively loud, went too quiet.

And can I just brag for a second? Because for me to take down a man who, a) seemed to be having some kind of psychotic episode; and, b) was at least a foot and then some taller than me. I must have some hidden superpowers or something.

Anyway, we were both in varying states of shock. Remy looked around the room like someone would step out of hiding and offer him some help. I felt something hot and burning rise inside me.

And that's when I threw up.

This may have been the most surprising part of the entire ordeal. I thought I was running on empty after my pre-work dry heaving session that morning. I managed to miss most of the papers on the floor, but my shoes and Remy's everything were not so lucky. So much for our sterile work environment.

I felt better, in a way. But now, looking down at the broken nerd I'd grounded, those feelings I buried started clawing their way out of my brain.

So you know how in your intro to psych class all you talk about for the first week is the fight or flight response? Well now I can say that I have a firsthand understanding of the entire process. You can't run away from your feelings, Journal, but you can sure as hell try.

And that's when I ran away from home.

Dear Jane,

She's definitely starting to talk. In fact, some nights it takes so long to put Iva down to bed because she's got to babble all about her day to me. It's pretty captivating.

I've gotten clearance from the higher ups here to start out west. They usually don't let civilians move around a whole lot (because they're trying to catalogue us all and it's more likely to get zombified outside of these camps) but since I have medical experience, they're giving me a pass. I'll be an aid to the military medic in a western moving convoy or something. Hopefully they'll let me switch convoys to head north eventually.

We've been having some weather here. A lot of flooding. But the sandbags are holding along the river. Everyone's just getting wet feet and bad attitudes in the park.

There's chatter around the camp that Chattanooga might be reopened soon. At least some of the suburban parts. Maybe we'll finally move to the burbs, your lifelong nightmare, Babe!

Some people saved their musical instruments so we're having a concert later today. I'm a little worried it'll bring some surprise guests. I'll let you know.

I've got to go. There's been a nasty flu outbreak so I've been working overtime. Don't worry, the kid stays "home" with one of the old ladies in the camp. I've thoroughly vetted her, before you start shitting bricks. Mrs. Flores is a very sweet lady, but not as sweet as—you know what, I'll let you finish that.

Yours,

Nate

October 2nd (cont.)

Sorry, Journal. I needed a break. A drink break. Well, just a drink.

The only reason I am able to write this right now is because I'm powering through a light depression and a heavy buzz. Just enough so that my hand stopped shaking. I guess I have a "problem."

Anyway, upon running into the Montanan wilderness during the apocalypse, I did have the foresight to grab one of the musty, yet still shockingly vibrant 1980s (?) ski coats from the closet on my way out. So upper body, toasty; feet, covered in barf. Not a

good idea when the world has ended and you're in a state that is constantly blizzarding. I don't want to mess around with trench foot while I'm at it.

Yet there I was, slipping, well, actually falling, down the wooded hill that the cabin sat on. I'm going to be honest here, that was my first ever experience with snow and I can tell you right now, Journal, I was not impressed. Why would Mother Nature create a natural minefield when we're perfectly capable of fucking ourselves up on our own? Okay, maybe I'm using hyperbole here, but I did trip a whole lot.

After my harrowing but short trip to the bottom of the ravine, I started walking south. Well, at least my best approximation. Driving up here, we didn't pass any towns that I noticed (but I was having a major meltdown so who's to say). So I think this lack of people, undead or otherwise, lead me into a false sense of security.

I was almost starting to like the walk. I probably needed the fresh air, and even though my shoes were actually frozen solid, the stillness was relieving. I thought about just screaming at the top of my lungs to see what would happen.

I followed a frozen creek bed to a clearing. The wind must have blown the snow away because the dusting made the dry grass that poked through the top crust look like frosted flakes. Walking across it was like walking on ice. I was wondering why Remy lived up on that stupid hill when there was a perfectly flat clearing right down here when I noticed the first building.

As it turns out there was a town nearby, and being an idiot, I decided to check it out. And I know Remy made me write you so I would stop drinking and screaming to deal with things, but I think I honestly fell so hard in the lab that I still wasn't thinking

straight. I think I'll eventually pour my feelings into you, but I'm happy with where I am for now. Not really. There's something wrong me.

Finally, I made it across the field, mostly by gingerly shuffling like an old lady trying to avoid breaking through the crust. When I got to the first building I realized this wasn't a town. All of the buildings were grey concrete and metal signage. This building was *Armory*. I could see *School*, *Grocer*, *Commons*, and *Barracks*. This was not a town. It was a compound, and erected in the middle of said compound was a very bad statue.

I mean this both aesthetically and morally. Right there in the middle of God-knows-where Montana was a statue of Asshole Hitler. That's who it most resembled, at least, besides a melted playdough approximation of a saluting shitbag.

You would think that all my time as a scientist and researcher would have given me the foresight to predict what would happen next. Let's tally up the evidence; we have a lone southern girl wandering the wildes of the foothills of the Rockies, where she finds a "town" presumably run by neo-nazis, there's an eerie lack of human activity, and there just happens to be a raging zombie virus that is turning people into killer corpses.

Cool.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised when I turned my back on the statue only to find a hoard of zombified fascists lumbering toward me. Seriously, Jane; what is your life?

This was the first time I'd seen any of them this close. The leader of this pack was still wearing his black trench coat with some tacky-ass medals and swastika armband. He was missing an eye and his skin looked like the gray goo we used to end up with in grade school when we tried to make "recycled" paper. This zombie, let's call him Nazi Joe,

seemed the most put together of the group. There were several others struggling to move at Nazi Joe's pace, presumably because they were all disemboweled.

At this point I pretty much resigned to being eaten alive. I mean, I saw it happen on the way up here (let's just say Missouri is one fucked-up place), and all my self-hatred made me think that maybe this was the best option at this point. I mean, I would definitely rather be torn to shreds by dead fascists than confront Remy after barfing all his booze on him. But reality got the better of me, and I decided that walking into a wall of hungry-hungry Hitlers wasn't the best option.

I turned to haul ass and wouldn't you know, school had just gotten out. That's right, Journal. A bunch of friggin zombified school children. I felt a pang of sympathy and sorrow for them. They were all in little brown uniforms with their braids and parts dishevelled. A couple were missing arms or hands, and one little boy whose lips and throat seemed to be ripped out was clinging tightly to a stuffed dog as if in rigor. I was just thinking that they would never get to grow up and be big fascists (which is honestly okay) when they charged.

Now, let me postulate for a second; I think that those little devils are so fast because either a) they aren't as decomposed as the adults because they died later; or b) this virus or what have you affects children differently. It's probably a combination, but in the meantime I was running for my life.

So I was running for my life. I sprinted out of the town center where the majority of the hoard was. My feet were ice blocks at this point. I guess there wasn't enough alcohol on them to keep them from freezing. Every bump and hidden under the snowy surface made me trip, and Nazi Joe and Wolfgang (as I've decided to call him) were

gaining on me. There was one building on the outskirts of the town that I could hide in, as long as I could outrun everyone.

It looked like a radio station. There was a little box of a station building with a homemade looking tower behind it. I channeled all my power into my frozen feet, hoping that I could push through the frostbite and make it to the tower. And then I immediately slipped and twisted my ankle. Great. This is literally the part in the movie when the female lead dies to further the male lead's passion and backstory. Fuck you, Remy. I'm not dying so you can be inspired.

I tried to stand, fell, and decided to crawl for my life to the radio station. Wolfgang was right behind me. He was so close I could hear the wet, gurgling noises coming from the gaping hole in his neck. I reached for the door, hoping there wasn't anyone on the other side. Wolfgang lunged for my shoe, and I bucked like a horse, sending his tiny body flying.

Listen, I love kids. But when they're trying to infect you with a killer zombie virus, you really need to lay down the law as a parental figure. I grew up in the South where they're really into corporal punishment, and when I got beat I only turned into a depressive alcoholic with unresolved anger issues, aka, *fine*.

Wolfgang seemed to be down for the count, but Nazi Joe was gaining on me. I hauled myself up and pushed my weight against the door. Thankfully it was open. Unthankfully, I fell into the room and smashed my face into the concrete floor. Perfect.

Dear Jane,

So that flu turned out to be mono, which makes sense since there has been quite a lot of end of the world gettin it on here. I was wondering why it had been mostly teenagers and younger people. But don't worry, I've been as celibate as a nun here. But now everyone under the age of 25 has a curfew, which sounds pretty harsh until you realize that there isn't enough medicine to support all these kids. We can only treat the most severe cases, so there's been a hell ton more whining here than usual.

Remember that concert I told you about? That went about as good as you'd think. We're under a temporary quiet order. We can still talk and such, but we can't raise our voices too much. I've been getting looks because of the kid. You wouldn't believe how loud that little voice can get when it's dead quiet here. So we're going to start turning it into a game. When daddy say "Shh" baby has to put her hands over her mouth. It's a work in progress.

Here's what I'll say about the concert. Mrs. Flores, God bless her, fought off three zombies with a broom handle before anyone with a training was aware of the situation. There were about twenty of them in total, but the guard fought them off. She's okay, but I admitted her to the hospital for exhaustion, but not before tellin her she can babysit forever in this family.

Also, you know I'm not quick to snap, but let me tell you about these idiot rednecks that are runnin amuck here. So you know that I'm about as country as the next rural Georgian around here, but the sons of bitches think they're right up there with the United States Army and National Guard. Love, I kid you not, these good 'ol boys have been shooting at anything that moves and one of them, who thank Jesus got court

martialed, hit an officer in the leg and put her in the hospital in serious condition. (She's okay, don't worry). We live under martial law here, so those boys are in the brig.

But all civies, minus the newly enlisted, have lost their guns, and frankly, I feel safer because of it. All of our tents were searched and everything. But I'm not worried. They had their chance and blew it, and there have already been fewer "accidental" weapons discharges since then. I've actually been sleeping pretty good now that they can't fire at squirrels at all hours.

Only a few more days until we move west. I tell the kid about you every night so she doesn't forget you. Iva tells me she can't wait to see her momma.

Yours,

Nate

I was stunned, sprawled on the ground, trying to remember what I was doing there in the first place. Working the switchboard? Maybe. Hiding from the Nazi running at me? Most likely. I kicked the door shut with my good foot. There wasn't any kind of lock mechanism on the inside, so I hobbled over to the desk and pushed a chair under the handle. I was safe for now.

My nose was bleeding and the neon pink and orange on Remy's jacket was becoming tie-dyed with red. Nazi Joe was scratching at the door, apparently his sick brain didn't remember how doorknobs worked. Good.

The light was fading, so much so that the cramped room was almost pitch black. I fumbled around the room, one sleeve pressed up to my nose. The light switch didn't work. I slid down the wall to the floor. Maybe I can just stay here forever, I thought. A

hermitage in a Nazi radio station seemed pretty relaxing at this point. Maybe I could detox here.

The scratching at the door seemed more desperate. Nazi Joe could probably smell all the blood pouring out of my face. I scanned the room, looking for anything that could get me out of this situation. There were a couple of hateful flags tacked to the foam walls, the radio console, and a dingy little window too small for escape. So super profesh, and I'm thinking about starting a podcast about healthy living.

Jokes aside, in the intense solitude I was suddenly in, all those buried thoughts started to bubble up. What the fuck was I doing? I put too much on the line by running away like a scared little kid. I was supposed to be doing something here, saving people. Remy was probably losing it over my escapade. If we lost him, I thought, then there would be no hope for anyone. Ever.

Not to belittle myself, but he's probably the smartest person on the planet and I'm driving him to madness because I don't know when to back off.

For a second I thought my eyes might be bleeding, too, only to realize I was crying (like I said, second smartest person here). The self-loathing that I joked about, the pain I pretended wasn't there, it all started to pour out. And I let it happen.

Journal, I've been leading you on. I'm falling apart. When Remy asked me to join him, I didn't know I had to drop everything. I have a partner and a baby girl and when Remy dragged me up here, I had to leave them behind. I guess I just thought that if I pretended they didn't exist, it would be easier. There you go, Remy. Your stupid idea worked. Is this opening up enough? Sorry for the emotions. I guarantee it won't happen again.

So, anyway, I was crying on the floor of a racist radio station thinking about Nate and Iva, trying to stop the bleeding and tears. I decided that it would be stupid to stop working. There were other people's Nates and Ivas out there that needed help just like mine did. How dickish would it be to disregard their lives because I'm feeling sad?

It sounded like more of the zombies had caught up with their leader. There was a scuffling noise and then a gunshot. Not gonna lie: I screamed a little. The soundproofing in the building was terrible at best and I felt the vibrations shake my bones. I scooted under the console, away from the door.

Great, I thought, now they have guns. Then there was the pounding on the door.

"Jane, open this goddamned door!"

Thank God for Cajuns.

I crawled over to the makeshift lock and let Remy in. He was clad in full tactical gear and looked like the nerdiest Navy SEAL. He slammed the door behind him and fell heavily into the chair, dropping his rifle by his feet.

"Are you okay? We're you cut or bitten?" he asked, panting.

"No, I'm fine. But I think my ankle is sprained."

I knew I looked a wreck. My eyes were swollen and my voice cracked. Not to mention, it looked like I killed a wild animal with my teeth and went to town.

There was a long moment where neither of us said anything. I felt like a child who had disappointed their parent. The silence was worse than if he had been screaming at me.

"Remy, I'm sorry," I said.

He wiped his face, which was surprisingly damp for the weather.

“I know,” he finally said. “It’s okay.”

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked.

“We need to leave now. It’s going to be dark in a few minutes.”

He helped me up and we shuffled out together.

I think this was the most scared I had been for myself in a while. My epiphany was fresh on my mind and I knew it was only a matter of time before something, whether it was animal or mutant corpse, came to devour us in the growing darkness.

It was a rough hike back. I winced every time I had to put weight on my ankle. The wind was fighting us hard too. Waking up the hill to the cabin felt like we were pushing a brick wall along with us. And Remy didn’t seem to surefooted going back, either. There were a couple of times where he leaned on me a more than I leaned on him. Maybe he was just tired from rescuing my ass.

Journal, we made it back without incident, and according to the clock on the wall here, it’s around 2 a.m., so I’m going to end this here. More tomorrow (today?).

October 4th (who’s to say)

Quote of the day: “Just do it.”—Shia LaBeouf

Remy and I took the day off yesterday. I think he said he wasn’t feeling well or something. I’ll check on him later. Meanwhile, I had to process some things. Mostly just sobbing uncontrollably. But I’m going to move past it and try to get some work today.

Also, I’m trying not to drink. I know, it’s probably the worst idea right this second, but I’m doing it for two reasons. One, I really need to start making headway in this case. If there isn’t a breakthrough soon, I’m worried one might never come. So I

need to give it my all. And two, the liquor cabinet is almost empty. Better to peeter out now than to quit cold turkey and risk dying.

Alright, I'm off to check on Remy and clean up the lab.

Dear Jane,

Baby's first Humvee ride! Honestly it's been pretty great getting out of that camp. I was getting stir crazy, and these long rides have an added benefit: naps. Iva's finally sleeping regularly because nothing puts a baby to sleep faster than a ride in a militarized truck. She loves these rides and her new favorite game is pointing out the window and talking to everything she sees. She's such a good time, and I think everyone's happy we came along.

We're in a convoy with everyone from the camp. After the concert incident, the commanding officer of our camp, Colonel Daily, decided to move us out of there. She said the hills and terrain made it hard to secure. So she's shipped us all out. I guess I didn't need to kiss ass to get out of here after all.

Since it's just me and the one other doctor who know medicine, we get to ride up front with the commander. It's pretty nice, but I'm not gonna lie, the few times the boy from Georgia Guard up top on the .50 cal machine gun has had to shoot at something has made me a little on edge. Behind us are three school busses, one filled with everyone from camp, and the other two are for anyone we find. There's a fuel truck, a "just in case" Jeep, and another Humvee behind us.

The good thing is that radios are working. So we're headed to a big camp they got set up in Nebraska or somewhere flat like that. I know I nearly failed high school, but

according to my recollection of geography that's a hell of a lot closer to you than where we started.

We stop every so often and I get called out for wellness checks. We look for people who are holed up and need help, do what we can, refuel, and leave. We set up camp at night, and pack up real early. Everyone's in a routine now and I think that helped some people's fears. Idle hands and whatnot.

Make us proud.

Yours,

Nate

October 5th (???)

Soundtrack to relax to: *City Jackhammers and Sirens*

OMG, Journal, guess who made a surprise appearance in the garden today? And by guest I mean undead skinhead, and by garden I mean barren forest. Nazi Joe! So in an effort to be positive, I've decided to look at this as more of an opportunity than a cause for alarm.

So far he seems to be the only zombie to find us, and other than that he's extremely stupid. I'm hypothesizing that he followed the blood and stink of Remy and me up here, but he can't seem to find a way in. But I'm honestly fine with that, as it is pretty cramped with just the two of us here.

I cleaned the lab yesterday and started setting up for more tests so that Remy and I can just jump right back in when we're ready. And now that Nazi Joe is here, we have a fresh supply of samples ready (if we can somehow safely catch him).

Okay, I'm going to take some notes on his movements and see if there's anything I can glean from some observable data. I'll let you know.

October 6th (possibly)

Fun fact: squirrels zig zag to escape predators, but if they're old, sick squirrels it doesn't really work.

It turns out zombie sitting is incredibly boring and disturbing at the same time. I got some data, mostly about how Nazi Joe ripped a squirrel apart (rest in pieces little buddy), but other than that he mostly walked around the property aimlessly. But I documented everything, so hopefully this will mend any fences I've obliterated.

You know how when you get really inspired to run a mile or clean out your closet or whatever, Journal? Well that's what I'm doing. Spring cleaning with my brain and liver, maybe not the best time to stop drinking, but it's happening. Right now I have a headache and gut ache and everything ache. It's only going to get worse, and I haven't been able to find Remy in a while to tell him. Maybe it's a good thing because I'd probably just yell at this point.

Ugh, is noon too early for bed?

October 7th (I'm really just making these up now)

I just found a bottle of nail polish in my purse. This is the happiest moment of my life.

October 7th (Cont.)

I JUST SPILLED THE WHOLE STUPID BOTTLE. Damn these shaky hands.

Oct 8th (I'm thinking of just making tallies on the wall for the aesthetic)

Artwork of the day: Jackson Pollock's *No. 5 1948* (because that's what I threw up this morning). I love being sober!

Y'all my southern is showing because I don't know a thing about snow. However, I woke up this morning and after making out with the toilet I noticed a scary looking wall of clouds coming toward us. It's been about two hours since then, and they're almost here. Does approaching snow smell like metallic panic? Because that's what I'm picking up.

In other news, Remy is really sick, but he didn't tell me? I brought him some food since it seemed like he hadn't left his room since we came back after my little performance. He was asleep so I didn't bother him. We'll just sweat it out together, whatever we have.

I'll check on him later. And monitor this storm, which I really hope we have enough generator power for. Must I do everything in this household?

October 8th (cont.)

Hey, remember that time I threatened to kill my boss if he ever read you, Journal? Well, I'm a hypocrite and a backstabbing bitch. I did a really bad thing. Normally I would just fill up a page with "AAAHHHH" in order to show the amount of anguish I am

currently experiencing, but I don't know when or where I would get another journal and I consider you my bosom buddy, Journal. But that's beside the point.

I did something bad. Like really, really bad. I'm seriously to the point where I think I should write in code. Wait...

October 8th (cont. cont.)

Yeah, you can rule me out as the Zodiac Killer. That shit is hard.

Back to the main event. When I went back to check on Remy, who didn't even touch the soup I slaved over the microwave for, was still knocked out. Now, normally if I was itching for a drink I would just bury myself in work or shake some pipes to make Remy think the cabin was haunted. But normally I'm not quitting cold turkey and wondering if my boss is turning into a zombie himself.

So what was the next best thing to do besides swap the Marvin Gaye albums with The Temptations sleeves? I took Remy's journal. What the fuck were you thinking, Jane?

Anyway, here's what I found in bullet points:

- Remy's coming down off some heavy psych meds, like we're talking *California Rocket Fuel* here; mirtazapine and venlafaxine and some other ones I can't remember. A couple of SSRI class.
- He's worried about his brother, Julius. (Perhaps the Lore to his Data? Sorry, not appropriate).
- He's worried about me.
- He's worried about literally everything. Geez, sorry I've been a terror.

Okay, breaking these down before I forget to write where my train of thought was off to. So I get the whole drug thing. A lot of people I worked with were on something. Really, it's the pressure. There are such high expectations on you all the time that it's suffocating. I get that Remy has an anxiety disorder or something. He's proven himself

thus far and with all eyes on him all the time? God, I can't even imagine what that must be like.

But this is worrying for several reasons. First, what those kinds of drugs do is build up in your system so that you have regular brain chemistry. But that means that when you stop them suddenly, which is what Remy kind of hinted at, you crash. Hard. His brain depends on those drugs for regularity and without them he's—well he's screwed. It's like quitting heroin. He might die, or at the very least he could have permanent neurological issues. So just for anyone on any kind of anything, make sure you save those pills up for the apocalypse.

The brother thing. I really don't know what to think. I mean, like I've said before, we weren't like best buds or anything before this happened. I had to leave people behind, for sure, but he never seemed concerned with any other family stuff. But now there's a brother—and oh, God—I forgot, he mentioned the brother had kids, too. Well, now we really have stuff to bond over, I guess.

He's worried about me. Well, welcome to the club, man. There were a couple of lines about "If I didn't take it away she would have drunk herself to death" and "I'm so thankful I caught up with her that night" and "I wish I could have saved them" yada yada. So that's nice; at least he cares.

And he's worried about everything else. For obvious reasons.

Okay. So I put the journal back and I don't (don't) think he noticed.

I'm really going to watch him. Work and headaches can wait. I need to see what kind of first aid stuff he has here. Man, I wish I paid more attention in that pharmacy class I took.

October 9th (or something similar)

You're on a beach somewhere nice and warm...

So I just experienced my first blizzard last night. It was just about as bad as it could have been, especially with everything that's been happening around here. There's noting five feet of snow can't fix, right? Yeah, that's just a guess since I can't actually see out the windows. Remy's upstairs, but it's freezing up there. I moved into the living room (because stairs suck and my ankle hurts so bad I've been taking them on all fours) and I'm going to start a fire to try to warm up this place.

October 9th (cont.)

Who knew fireplace had to be opened? (cough cough)

Anyway, I feel really really really guilty about the journal, but I'm glad I know what's up with Remy. I should have known something was up when he freaking blew up at me. I'm guessing by his meticulous schedule and the kinds of drugs he was on it's some kind of bipolar depression or OCD and anxiety. Or all of those. So I'm glad *that's* narrowed down. God, poor guy.

I really should have seen this coming. His hands have been shaking since we got here, wow I guess that was almost a month and a half ago. And when he tried to be my friend? What the fuck, huge red flag.

Oh! And Journal, you don't know this story, but I'm pretty sure Remy had a manic episode a few weeks ago. So the first day we got here everything was a mess. Remy and I were exhausted physically and emotionally. We had just driven cross country

(I think it was over fifty hours) to get out to the cabin and I know that all I wanted to do was cry and sleep and drink (yeah, that's when that bad habit started).

But the minute we walked through the door something seemed to snap. He started cleaning. Not like light dusting around The Supremes albums; he was ripping things apart. He tore up the entire living room to "get rid of all this grime." It was like watching human tornado destroy the place.

Our interaction went something like this (and mind you, I was blackout drunk by the end of this):

"What are you doing?" My throat hurt from choking for days on the lump that had lodged itself there. I was mad. I was infuriated.

"I'm just so embarrassed," he answered. He was pulling the cushions out of the couch.

I almost laughed, but the pain in my chest for Nate and Iva punched me back into reality. I'm surprised I was still breathing. "Of what?" I snarled.

"The mess. The mess." He motioned around him like there was an obvious pile of garbage that I missed. There wasn't.

That's about when I noticed the heavily stocked bar and started bingeing.

I shouted at him for about an hour. I don't really remember what either of us said to one another, apart for Remy yelling some shit back in French creole.

This was before I knew really anything about him, and I thought that I was the only one suffering. I didn't know about Julius and the kids. I didn't know about his illness.

“Take me back,” I said quietly. The screaming match had ended and I moved on to pleading.

He was taking all the pictures off the walls at this point. He didn’t answer.

“Dr. Soulie, take me back.”

“It’s Remy,” he said. Like this was the time for that.

I ignored him. “Please, Dr. Soulie, I can’t—.” I started toward the door. I knew I wasn’t going to leave him there alone, but I also knew he needed to know how serious I was about this whole situation. And I should point out, I left on this “trip” voluntarily. But I was also convinced that we were the only ones who could do anything about this whole apocalypse business. I’m probably over selling myself, but we are probably some of the only people qualified to fix this mess, and for a moment back in Georgia I felt called to go with him.

When I reached for the door, Remy temporarily snapped back to reality.

“No, no!” he yelled. He forced my hand out of the way and put himself between me and the door. I was afraid of him for a split second.

Then I remembered what a nerd he was and that I could probably knock him over if I sneezed in his direction. All courage returned.

“Dr. Soulie,” I started again, sliding my hand down the neck of the empty bottle of wine I was still clinging to.

“Jane, it’s Remy now. We have to establish—.”

“Normalcy, yeah I get that. Lemme just get my stuff outta the car,” I said, slurring.

“No, not now, I can’t, we can’t.” He mumbled some other things in quick succession.

I took this moment to swing the bottle at him. Now look, Journal, I know that if you were in my shoes and had to leave your significant other and little notebook behind that you would do the same thing. In my mind, the bottle was going to hit Remy, shatter like in the movies, and stun him leaving the doorway open for an escape for which I was definitely capable of operating a motor vehicle.

I was insanely drunk, so what actually happened instead of what I planned was this: the bottle shot out of my hand and hit the doorway, did not shatter, bounced off the doorframe, hit me square in the face, ricocheted off the bridge of my nose and fell heavily onto Remy’s foot. So exactly according to plan. We both reeled in pain and shock, and totally forgot about me escaping. I think this is the part where I blacked out, but I do remember that I woke up in the attic room with a hangover. The house was put back together when I finally made it back downstairs and Remy had started the “lab” work that has been the basis of our research ever since.

So long story short, he probably has bipolar disorder. I think the lack of sleep from of the drive and stress from the impossible task he set himself up to complete, no amount of medicine could have prevented the episode. Everything is falling apart so quickly.

Dear Jane,

We’re having some weather, and I wonder if you had it first. We’re in Tennessee, but I think we’ll make it to Missouri sometime this week. Like I said, or maybe didn’t I

can't recall, we're moving slow to pick up people who are needing help. It's so crazy not being able to look at the weather in advance. I'm starting to miss that dumb smartphone.

Iva says hi, literally. I can't even comprehend how fast she's shot up. I know you'll be so sad to learn that you missed all of this, so that's why I'm writing it down for you. I know we both don't like all that sappy stuff, I'll make it short.

Now here's something that I know will interest you. We've been given orders from the Pentagon (first of all can you believe that I've been drafted? second, they finally got all the communication through radio in order) to travel through southern Tennessee to look for people. There's a grid system that we're working out, and I guess we've been assigned to the crotch of the Bible belt.

So we were a little southwest of Memphis meeting with a bigger group that was better equipped for some of the sicker people we have (since there's not really any HIPAA laws anymore I can tell you that we've got a guy with cancer, two diabetics, and a little girl with the most severe sickle cell I've ever seen, poor thing) but they gave us the wrong address. There were two warehouse districts, one on the Northside of the town by the Mississippi River and one on the Southside by the train tracks.

Now all we were told was that we needed to meet this medical group near the warehouses, and all we had to guide us was a map that listed only the Northside buildings. I just wanna say right now that the kid was with Mrs. Flores on the bus and I was with the mobile unit. When we got to where we thought we were supposed to be, we realized it the wrong place for sure. Jane, this little town somehow managed to lock all their dead people up in the barbed wire fences around all those warehouses.

Tied up on one of those high fences was a sign that said "The townspeople of Steelville welcome you, but advise you stay away. Be kind, be safe, and love thy neighbor."

Taped to the gate were driver's licenses, school pictures, and family photos with the sick people circled and their names written down. I guess they hoped there'd be a cure or something. They didn't want to die. Jane, I don't want to pressure you or nothing, but get a move on. I don't know what you got cooking up there, but I hope you're making progress.

I don't know what, but that little act really gave me hope. All those people who knew they were sick decided to lock themselves up instead of running around and hurting everyone else. I swear, I almost cried at the thought of it (I did cry). You know I love the helpers of the world, and here was a whole bunch of them. They died, but they were still helpers in the end.

Anyway, just thought that might interest you. Your daughter's a marvel and you man's a cry-er. What more could you ask for?

Yours,

Nate

October 10th (;?)

Okay, I'm just going to jump right into this in case the zombies come back or I have to take my boss to the bathroom again (insert vomiting noises for both).

So I've been feeling a lot better. I get headaches in the mornings, but I think I wasn't dependent on alcohol long enough to really have full-blown withdrawal

symptoms, and considering all the shit that's happening right now that's really okay by me. But enough about myself.

I decided last night, in the second round of snow storms that Remy was going to freeze to death unless I brought him downstairs. So I went up to his room to see if he needed me to carry anything or whatever, since sometimes stopping SSRIs makes you super dizzy, and surprise—he has full blown discontinuation syndrome.

“But, Jane,” you might ask, Journal, “I thought you only took one semester of Intro to Pharmacology? And even then, you only passed because your term paper lauded the professor's research!” And you would be right. I learned exactly nothing from that class. But Remy is a genius and once he regained consciousness, he explained it to me.

Right, so I went into his room, and just as I predicted it was freezing. The room was clean, aside from the bed which look like it had been slept in. There was a horrible smell though, and I couldn't see Remy anywhere. I started to panic. I suddenly felt smaller and more alone than ever.

I circled the room, and found him. He was passed out on the floor. For a second I thought he might be dead. I've never buried a body and I certainly didn't want to try my hand at it today. I felt my stomach drop. What if he was sick with something else?

He was covered in vomit and lying face down, motionless. It looked like he had been there for a few hours. Why didn't I check on him sooner?

“Remy?” I asked. My voice was high and tight in my throat. I reached out to check his pulse, but hesitated, my fingers hovering over his neck.

He groaned, rolling over to where I was kneeling next to him. I felt the air return to my lungs. No grave digging for me.

“*Lamèd*,” he said.

“What?”

“Fuck!” he yelled.

“Oh.”

I didn’t really know what to do about that, so I just helped him into a sitting position. His eyes flicked back and forth like he was trying to focus on one spot while spinning wildly on a merry go round: vertigo.

“I’m sorry. I am not well.” His academic voice was fading and his accent was coming out in full force. It would have been adorable if he wasn’t also dying.

“I know, boss. It’s okay.” He had a fever, and reeked like he hadn’t bathed in days. He was still wearing the same clothes from the lab incident day. I went through his drawers and pulled some clean pajamas for him.

“We need to clean you up.” I brought a wash rag from the bathroom and started scrubbing him, full mom mode activated. If you had told me a few months ago that I would have to give Dr. Soulie a sponge bath, I probably would have filed a sexual harassment complaint.

“I should have tapered off,” he mumbled. I peeled off his soiled clothes.

“Do you think you can walk?” I asked after helping him re-dress. He was gripping the bed as if he was going to be bucked off it suddenly.

“I was scared.” He clearly wasn’t listening. His eyes followed an invisible track back and forth.

“Remy, it’s okay,” I said. “Come on, let’s go downstairs. I started a fire, if you couldn’t *smell*.”

I think he tried to smile, but it was mostly a grimace. He grabbed my arm and looked up at me like he needed to say something. He must have changed his mind, and forced himself to his feet. He stumbled around for a second and then had to sit back down. This was going to suck.

“Okay, let’s work together,” I said. He steadied himself and together we started toward the stairs.

It was slow going. I had him against the rail so he could hold on, but he seemed to have very little control over his motor functions. I would ease him down a step and then I’d put myself down the step, making sure not to put too much pressure on my ankle. Did I mention it took forever?

When we finally made it to the bottom, I half threw half collapsed with him on the sofa bed. For only a few stairs, we were both so winded that it took us a few minutes of panting before we could move.

At this point I was starting to wonder if my ankle was actually broken. I wish Nate was here. He’s a medic and has broken almost every bone in his body (sometimes I think on purpose), so he’d know what to do. He’d know what to do about both of us sad sacks laying on the bed.

“Jane,” Remy said after a while, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

He rolled over to face me. It looked like it really hurt him to do it. “No, I should have never asked you to come. This has been a complete failure.”

“Well, yeah, but we don’t have to be done yet.”

He didn't say anything for a long time. His eyes flicked back and forth. "I admire your optimism," he said flatly, and rolled back over.

I really felt bad for him, because I'm sure he was going through one of the hardest moments of his life, but at the same time "complete failure"? Um, rude. I definitely have some ideas about how to fix this.

I helped him get comfortable then went to start some dinner for us. I was thinking about how exhausting the next few days were going to be. I needed to take care of Remy, find time to work, and figure out a better way to brace my ankle (which was wrapped in a pillowcase and belt from a bathrobe for support).

And that's when the zombies showed up.

Dear Jane,

We're in Missouri, your baby girl took her first steps, and I think I've been promoted to a sergeant in the army.

We're one state closer to you, honey. I think we're going to be surveying mostly rural, western towns this time, and then shoot straight up to Nebraska. Then I'll try to get up with some caravan going to Montana. It'll all work out.

Now as for the kid, Jane she took three whole steps on her own during a meeting with the guard the other morning. She slipped out of my hands and walked toward the Colonel before falling on her butt. Everyone who saw it clapped and cheered, and she clapped back and laughed. It was one of the happiest moments we've had in a long while. We've all been a little down since the Steelville thing.

So I think I'm officially a sergeant in the army now. The Colonel told me I was conscripted and then we had an unofficial official ceremony where I took an oath and everything. It was real strange, and goes against my conscientious objector fundamentals. But I guess I don't have to shoot anyone, just patch 'em up.

Alright, well we're breaking down camp now, so I'm gonna sign off. Be kind, be safe, and love thy neighbor.

Yours,

Nate

Here's the thing, I don't need this drama. Remy's dying, there's a deadly plague going around, we're in a blizzard which will probably kill us, and I'm under a lot of pressure to take care of all of these things. The last thing I need is zombies, Nazi zombies at that, to be at my front door during a storm.

I was filling a pot with water for soup when I saw them from the little kitchen window. Nazi Joe, Wolfie, and a new zombie, who I've named Eva Zaum, were making their way up the hill. It looks like Nazi Joe went home to pick up his family and come back to torment me.

The snow was impeding their progress, but they seemed determined to get here. Earlier that day I went out to get firewood, and made several trips to and from the log pile. My scent was everywhere out there, and one of the things I noted while watching Nazi Joe was that he had a heightened sense of smell. It was almost like something took over certain parts of his brain and killed off others.

I hobbled back to living room.

“Remy, where’s your gun?”

“Why?”

“Um, because I’m fixin’ to shoot our friends out there?” I said pointing out the window. They were practically at the front door.

“Oh.” He shut his eyes and screwed his face up in concentration.

“Today would be nice,” I said. My voice shot up a few octaves. Wolfgang was on the front porch. He was only holding the disembodied head of the dog now. His jaw was at a gross angle, probably from where my foot made contact.

“I—I think it’s on the porch,” he said finally.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Wolfgang started scratching at the window with his free hand. I shut the blinds.

“So what should we do?” I whispered.

“Let me go out there, I’ll sacrifice myself.” He tried to sit up, but fell back immediately.

“And what the fuck would that accomplish?” I whisper-screamed.

I hopped over to the closet where I’d stolen that awful jacket. There were some coats and shoes, but nothing I could use as a weapon.

“Any ideas?” I asked. Remy was pretty much down for the count. I looked around the room. If I didn’t hurry, the whole family would be out there and there’s no way in hell I’d risk it for the gun.

Up on the mantle was my answer. I grabbed the great metal vase and made my way over to the window. Wolfgang was still scratching at the glass. Nazi Joe and Eva Zaum were nowhere in sight. Good?

I opened the door, and threw the vase as hard as I could at Wolfgang. Grey powder exploded everywhere and Wolfgang hit the ground.

“*Granpopá*,” Remy yelled. Oops, not a vase.

I didn’t have time to apologize. I grabbed the gun leaning by the door and threw it at Remy, who surprisingly didn’t catch it. I fell back into the cabin and kicked the door shut with my good foot.

We both sat in silence for a minute. I thought for sure I was going to have to console him for disturbing his grandfather’s ashes. Then Remy started laughing. It was contagious. We both howled like wild animals. We tried to shush each other a couple of times, but that seemed to be funnier than the initial cause. It was like we were drunk, and for a moment all that worry melted away.

“Oh, God. I might be sick,” he shouted.

“Shh, they’re still out there.” I couldn’t stop giggling.

“I can’t believe you threw him out like that,” he said once he caught his breath.

“I know,” I laughed, “I’m sorry!”

“Don’t be sorry. That sumbitch was a racist. Why do you think we’re so close to those fascists down the hill? This was his house.”

“Wait, but you’re black?”

“Yeah, my daddy wasn’t racist. Just his daddy.”

“Oh, um, that’s good.”

“When *Granpopá* hear he was marrying my momma, well he just packed up and move up here, and we never heard from him again.”

“Man, why don’t you let your accent out more around the office? This is the most human you’ve ever been.”

“*Pe to ladjel,*” he grumbled, with a smile I might add.

I locked everything up. The commotion with Wolfgang (or maybe the smell of ashes) seemed to scare them away. My ankle was killing me so I sat on the bed next to Remy. He was quiet again. The laughing must have sent him into another dizzy spell. He didn’t speak for the rest of the night.

I didn’t feel like getting up again. We’d be fine without dinner tonight. I got under the blankets next to Remy.

“I think we’re going to be okay,” I said. Saying it out loud helped I think. That giggly feeling was fading, but something else was taking its place in the hole in my chest. I think for the first time in a long time I was feeling hopeful.

“Yeah, we’re going to be okay.”

Dear Jane,

Missouri is a fucked-up place. You know I’m not one to swear too much, but damn is there some messed up people here. Remember those boys I told you about who got court martialed for actin a fool? Well that’s pretty much how the whole state has decided to act.

We were told to some little town down south to pick some people up, since it wouldn’t be too far out of our way. Well, when we first got there, there was a sign from the Klan welcoming us to their county. So if that’s not a red flag I don’t know what it. Also, wasn’t most of Missouri a Union state? It’s funny how quick people forget.

Anyway, we go into this town and we're supposed to meet everyone at the elementary school. When we got there, there was a pile of bodies on fire in the school yard. A real nice welcome if you ask me. Then, we heard gunshots. Some idiots had posted themselves on top of the building and were firing warning shots at us, at the army.

So anyway, we sent a guy out to go talk to them, and they ended up refusing our help. They thought we were looters or something, and they threatened to shoot us if we didn't leave. I don't know why they thought that. We're all in fatigues (that's right, you're married to a man in uniform now) and driving military vehicles.

The Colonel asked if anyone needed medical treatment and demanded a list of names of the people in the pile. They flat out refused, Jane. Then they started shooting at our vehicles. Thank God Iva has a babysitter, because this isn't a kid friendly workplace.

We ended up having to report them to the higher ups when we got back to camp. We'll let a more militarized group deal with them. We're just trying to take care of sick people, you know?

Anyway, the kid is wonderful. Her new pastime is pointing at things. I don't really know what that's about, but I support her in everything she does.

Yours,

Nate

October 11th (if I'm right about these dates, happy anniversary, Nate)

So today kind of sucked. Not that any day here hasn't not sucked. Ugh, whatever, since I'm now invested into pouring my feelings into you, Journal, get ready for an earful (page-full?).

First of all, when I woke up this morning, I was in agony. I unwrapped my foot and my toes were blue and my ankle was the size of a grapefruit. One hundred percent broken. I hadn't noticed the discoloration because of that makeshift brace I made, and the only reason I checked on it was because it hurt so goddamn bad.

I woke Remy up to show him. He pretty much fainted at the sight of it, but that might have something to do with the vertigo and discontinuation syndrome and not the swollen nasty foot. Something had to be done about it.

In what I imagined looked like something out of a horror movie, I made my way through the cabin on all fours. I checked under every sink and in every drawer for a first aid kit. Finally, after crawling up the stairs, past Remy's barf, and into his bathroom, I found a good-sized box filled with (mostly expired) drugs and bandages. After I pushed it down the stairs and slid after it on my bottom, I was able to go through it and pick out the important things.

I found a real ankle brace, like one of the metal ones they give you at the hospital (again, thanks for that experience, Nate) and a couple of bottles of ibuprofen that hadn't expired yet. I'm going to see if there's any way they can give either of us some relief.

So I tried to set my ankle. That ended in abject failure. I mostly screamed and maybe blacked out. I'm not entirely sure. I left the brace out for later, in case Remy miraculously gains his hand strength back.

That's the other thing. When I finally got Remy up and eating, I had to feed him like a baby. He couldn't hold on to things. He would hold the spoon and then suddenly he would jerk like he touched a live wire and the spoon would drop onto his lap. He said it was a side effect.

Then, I got back into our shared bed, because sleeping there together is easier when we're both this pathetic, and Remy wanted to talk. I would've brought the TV down if my leg wasn't fucking broken.

But I guess our little laugh session last night brought out the warm fuzzies in him, and suddenly he wants to be besties again. But I humored him, because listening to his stories was better than falling back into some of the darker thoughts I'm trying to sate.

I did learn one fun fact; the old Motown records up here are not his grandfather's. They're Remy's and Julian's, and both of them used to be in a Motown cover band. That's right, Journal, our little robot used to dress up in bell bottoms and sing second tenor. He said I'd never hear it, but there's still enough alcohol here for at least one more rager. I'll crack him, I'm sure of it.

But after a while Remy caught on to my mood. I told him it was our anniversary and that I was just missing Nate and Iva. And then I blubbered like a baby for twenty minutes in bed next to my boss. Real professional, Jane. He attempted to console me, but in moving closer to give me an awkward hug, he kicked me square in the ankle. So then I just cried even louder. It was a mess.

This time Remy went to the kitchen, managed to fill two glasses of water for us to take the painkillers with, only to spill them all over the bed upon reentry. So now I'm just complaining to you, Journal, while Remy snores next to me and I pray that my blanket dries before it freezes solid.

Alright, well I guess I'm going to sl~

HOLY SHIT THE DOORKNOB IS TURNING

Dear Jane,

Happy anniversary! I told Iva about how we met. She wasn't too impressed, but then again, you're the storyteller.

Iva's got the sniffles, but so do most of the kids around here. I've never been this cold in my life. Why do people live up here?

I think I'm getting transferred to a unit in Montana run by the air force. All the branches are sort of combined now, so I don't think it matters. I don't know where you are, but I'm sure I can find something out at their headquarters. I really hope that address is under Dr. Soulie's name.

We're having some weather, so we might be stuck here for a while. It turns out that it doesn't snow much in Missouri. It's just bitter and everything is iced over. We've moved onto the busses indefinitely. It's too cold for tents, so we're using them to line the windows on the busses.

We've sent some scouts out to look for a shelter big enough for all of us that has functioning facilities. There's about 250 people in our caravan now, and it's getting tough to house them all.

I'm going to miss hanging out with this unit. They've really been like family to us, and not to mention they've got us out of some tough situation. I really don't know what we would have done without them.

I can't believe you've stuck with me since high school. You're really something else, Jane.

Love you,

Nate

October 13th (I can finally confirm this date)

First, we are not dead. Sorry about not writing yesterday. (Not that you're sentient or anything.)

Second, I think I've been promoted to aunt?

To the best of my abilities, my limited high school Spanish/overall language, and powering through the tremendous pain I am in, here's what happened.

Last night as I was finishing up that last journal entry, there was this scratching at the door. At first I thought it was our idiot neighbors. I probably should have paid more attention, but we were being quiet and we had a gun. But then there was this faint clicking noise. Oh whatever, I thought, the undead skinheads don't know how to use door knobs, let alone keys.

Well, then, the door started to open.

I wrote what I thought would be my last (written) words. I'm not going to lie, I did scream at the top of my lungs a little bit as the door opened as much as the chain lock would allow. But then I got brave. I grabbed the gun. Remy was awake at this point and I think swearing (?) in Creole.

"What do I do? What do I do?" I screamed. Okay, so I got moderately brave.

"Let us in!" yelled a familiar voice.

"Julian?" Remy called.

"*Ti frèr?*" said the voice.

"Jane, let them in!" Remy sounded desperate, as though they wouldn't be safe until he could touch them.

I hopped to the door and let them in. Julian and his two kids ran in. I slammed the door behind them. We all stood in silence for a moment. Then the Soulie brothers went berserk. They yelled and sang and kissed and said a lot of stuff in Creole. Remy pulled Julian in close and whispered something to him.

Julian pulled away and put his hands on Remy's head. "*Bondjé béni twa.*"

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