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Crutches

James Preston Heil

Missouri State University, jh8s@MissouriState.edu

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CRUTCHES

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

James Heil

May 2022

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CRUTCHES

English

Missouri State University, May 2022

Master of Arts

James Heil

ABSTRACT

The following thesis is a collection of creative nonfiction essays, poems, and short stories. The overarching theme of this body of work is Millennial-aged adults grappling with a variety of traumas both personal and global; this dovetailing of personal grief alongside international grief is meant as an artistic expression of anxiety. In other words, the question posed here is: what does a young adult make of a world that is incessantly brutal? The answer is explored in both fictional and nonfictional ways, and no definitive conclusion is given. Rather, the events of the stories contained herein are representative of the constant tension between personal tragedy and tragic events transpiring in the world simultaneously, and the seeming inability to escape either.

KEYWORDS: tragedy, trauma, crutch, suicide, anxiety, depression, short story, fiction, essay, memoir, creative writing

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Approved:

Michael Czyniejewski, MFA, Thesis Committee Chair

Jennifer Murvin, MFA, Committee Member

Sara Burge, MFA, Committee Member

Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

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I dedicate this thesis to Patrick M. I still miss you, man.

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THE BURDEN OF MY YOUTH

Ahead, you will find a collection of stories. By story I do not mean that which is traditionally considered fiction, though there is fiction; across the myriad forms of poetry, creative nonfiction essays, and short stories I seek to share what amounts to a story of experience. It is not an experience, unfortunately, that only belongs to me. Rather, this is an attempt to elucidate the anxiety of a collapsing world, the burden of youth. But perhaps I come across, already, as a stuffy pontificator with an axe to grind. I apologize. My goals here are not agenda-driven, but reactive. As of writing this, I am twenty-five years old. Do you remember when you were twenty-five?

...

When I was four, 9/11 happened. I don't remember it at all. Starting in 2007 and carrying on until 2009 (though the tendrils of damage extended much further in time), the world experienced the Great Recession, or the collapse of the housing market bubble. Those years I was ages ten, eleven, twelve, and buying off-brand shoes was considered a luxury. In the fall of 2010, a thirteen-year-old boy, I began experiencing the first clear signs of depression, manifested in a failed suicide attempt. In May of 2011, all anyone was talking about was the killing of Osama Bin Laden, an event heralded by many as heroic, laudable, proof of the efficacy of the U.S. Military, a celebration of government-sanctioned violence. That same year I moved into a new house for the fifth time, and my dad was unemployed for roughly a year. I recall conversations about the family's finances, my dad telling us exactly how much money we had for groceries until Mom's next paycheck; we were expected to eat our food responsibly, a difficult charge for my younger brother and me, as we were in the throes of puberty, but the

restraint of our appetites was a condition of survival. December 2012, two days after my sixteenth birthday, in Newtown, Connecticut, a twenty-year old man named Adam Lanza shot and killed twenty-six people, twenty of whom were children ages six and seven. We know it now as the Sandy Hook Shooting, a tragedy that right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones claimed was faked. A little over a week later, on Christmas Eve, a boy from my school died driving home from a hunting trip. His name was Jake. Jake was not the only student who died during my four years of high school. In the summer of 2013, I had my first panic attack; alone in my room, I lurched in circles, hyperventilating, until I passed out and collapsed half on the floor, half on my bed. In August of 2014, the beginning of my senior year, Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a town roughly twenty-five minutes away from me, just across the border separating Illinois and Missouri. Three months later, Tamir Rice, a boy aged twelve, was shot and killed by a police officer for playing with a toy gun. A neighbor had called the police on a child. These are only a handful of the tragedies I carried with me when I graduated high school. At eighteen, the world was a place of brutality and misery, hopelessness and violence.

I have lived through countless more woes, both global and personal. I do not wish to conflate the two: I understand my personal experiences of grief are not universal. However, they sit among a timeline full of globalized panic: did we drop another bomb on Syria? Within a twenty-four-hour cycle (usually less), you can read about the newest world travesty, whether you get the angle from legacy networks (Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, etc.) or insane people like Alex Jones, or else your favorite celebrity probably tweeting something like, “Thoughts and prayers to the victims,” or blaming someone, anyone for the horror.

The world which we inhabit now is one of unchecked universal awareness, brought about by the advent of the internet and social media. Let me state here, too, that I don't intend this as a diatribe against the internet or modern technology (truthful though it may be). I am simply attempting to set the stage for you, to paint a landscape of the world as I know it, feel it, experience it. The words contained in this thesis are a reaction to this catastrophic world, a feeble method of trying to make sense, make meaning of a world shrouded in duplicity, death, and an inescapable heaviness. The weight of the world, in other words, resting squarely on my shoulders. This thesis is about, though at times obliquely, the decay of youth: how we are robbed of childhood, of safety. History is an inescapable tapestry, and, without choice or consent, we are born to be threaded into it. These are the threads of my terror and dismay, a threnody.

That disorienting experience, of course, is not specific to my generation. My parents had their terrors, and their parents before them, all the way back to, as a friend of mine puts it, "Ooga-Booga" days. Both World Wars felt like the end of the world, and the Cold War felt like the end of the world, and now the massive problem of the world's climate in turmoil feels like the end of the world. What is unique to the current world anxiety is the presence of the internet, the virtual reality that overshadows (and occasionally overrides) reality. On a more abstract, artistic level, Bo Burnham's 2021 Netflix special *Inside* hits at this idea with gusto; *Inside* is a quasi-comedy special in which Bo, by himself, spent the year 2020 writing and filming the special, and features an ironic bit in which he says, "The outside world, the non-digital world, is merely a theatrical space in which one stages and records content for the much more real, much more vital digital space."

In the literary space, this same sentiment is expressed in a conversation between Laura van den Berg and Emily St. John Mandel, two contemporary authors of dystopian novels, who

sat down to discuss, amongst other things, *why* there is such a modern boom in dystopian stories. Laura van der Berg explains, “There is so often the feeling our online existences have overtaken our lives and ballooned into something beyond our control. What would happen if that virtual world was eradicated? And what would show up, within us, in the face of all that open space?” (van der Berg and St. John Mandel).

If the virtual world of the internet has “ballooned into something beyond our control,” and I think it has, then what you’ll find in my stories is a desperate grasping for a new orientation of the world, an orientation that reinstates a sense of control in the chaotic miasma of existence.

...

The more general purpose of this introduction is a means to explicate what inspires my writing, primarily through analysis of stories. Before I could do that, though, I had to lead with the most common inspiration of life itself. The aging adage says, “Write what you know,” and if that’s the case, what I know is pain. So, prior to the texts that inspire me, let it be understood that suffering (both personal and global) inspires me first and foremost.

That established, I’d like to start by, at the permission of the poets, talking about music. I know, I know, *technically* music isn’t the same as, say, a published poem or a novel. Still, I’d be lying if I failed to acknowledge the way music has impacted the words I cobble together into stories.

The central theme of suffering youth at hand, I turn to a couple songs of maximum importance for me, starting with La Dispute’s “King Park,” a harrowing, sprawling narrative song from their album *Wildlife*. La Dispute doesn’t make music for people to dance to, or to find joy; they write tragedies in the medium of song. Sonically, their music is not strictly speaking metal, but is at the least metal-adjacent, a blend of heavy-hitting guitar riffs, loud bass and

drums, and the raw, spoken-word scream-shouting of Jordan Dreyer, who wrote “King Park.” The story of the song is, simplified, a poetic exploration of a real event that took place in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where Jordan and the band are from. The story follows a look at a twenty-year-old gang member who, trying to shoot a gang rival in a drive-by, accidentally shot an innocent kid. Following the incident, the killer hid inside a hotel room, where the police eventually caught up with him; within the room he still had the gun, and, in the end, decided to take his own life. This is all narrated by Dreyer acting as a sort of phantom, capable of moving through space and time, searching for a reason for this tragedy. But, as he says, “There cannot be a reason, not for death / Not like this, not like this,” (3:14-21). The suicide, though it happened in real life, is explored more thematically in the song near the end, and Dreyer pens it brilliantly:

I heard them trying to reason, get him to open the door / His uncle begging and pleading, half-collapsed to the floor / He preached of hope and forgiveness / Said, “There is always a chance to rectify what you’ve taken / Make your peace in the world.” / I thought to slip through the door, I could’ve entered the room / I felt the burden of murder, it shook the earth to the core / Felt like the world was collapsing / Then we heard him speak / “Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself? / Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself? / Can I ever be forgiven ‘cause I killed that kid? / It was an accident I swear it wasn’t meant for him! / And if I turn it on me, / If I even it out, / Can I still get in or will they send me to hell? / Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?” / I left the hotel behind / Don’t wanna know how it ends. (5:52-6:50).

Obviously, this song packs an emotional punch, one that I have returned to again and again over the years, both as a therapeutic exercise and as a model for storytelling. I have always entertained the belief that if I could tell a story as well as Jordan Dreyer does, a story so emotionally and beautifully conjured it could inspire the sort of authentic pathos found in “King Park,” then I would have written a truly good story. On a more literal level, though, you can find traces of this song in my work to follow; “Self-Portrait 1” ends with words I whimpered, defeated, in a therapy session, a sort of bleak reaction to my suffering, my own mild iteration of the desperate guilt in the line, “Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?” More generally, the themes of “the burden

of murder” lay throughout my work, and you’ll find the topic of suicide in my “Learning to Speak” and “The Painter” stories, to say nothing of its presence felt in my nonfiction essays “Don’t leave. Do a kickflip instead.” and “Self-Portrait 2.”

For the other song, I turn to Australian-native band Gang of Youths. In August 2017 (though I wouldn’t become aware of its existence until 2019), Gang of Youths dropped their third full-length album, *Go Farther in Lightness*. Those familiar with Milan Kundera’s work will know this is a less-than-vague reference to Kundera’s popular book, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Though the album doesn’t directly address the book, on a more thematic scale it is an attempt to wrestle with the question Kundera poses in his novel:

The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighted down by the man’s body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life’s most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness? (5).

One major thing, though, separates this work from Kundera’s, and that is the element of Christian faith.

Go Farther in Lightness is, in some ways, a jaded, doubting Christian wrestling through the seeming lightness (meaninglessness) of existence, but also the very real heart-pangs for something to make sense, for a higher power and/or purpose. Like many things that inspire me, this album deserves a much lengthier analysis. Suffice it to say, this is not an album (or band, really) that you would hear colloquially described as “Christian.” Rather, the singer-songwriter David Le’aupepe is closer to what some might call an “exvangelical,” a newer term used to refer to someone who grew up in a traditionally Pentecostal or evangelical Christian background who later turned either away from the faith completely, or into a new, decidedly-not-evangelical

understanding of Christianity. This turn from evangelical roots plays a part in my own story, as my dad was a youth pastor for over twenty years (recently he moved into a position as head pastor). My dad was ordained through the Pentecostal denomination known as the Assemblies of God, a denomination I shared myself until, a little over a year ago, I left the denomination and joined the Anglican tradition instead. What this album achieves, then, is a poetic expression of many of my own doubts and longings, which can be seen most concretely in my essay, “Car Problems,” a second-person style of narration I used to defamiliarize myself with a traumatic memory, and the way my faith complicates my understanding of the event.

It's hard to choose just one song from this album to highlight, but I'll focus briefly on “Persevere,” an autobiographical insight into Le'aupepe attending the funeral of his friends' child:

I never got to kiss your head, ah, Emme / And the call came the week I got divorced / I thought I had a real understanding then of loss / But I didn't know a thing 'til you were gone / And I'm tired of trying to find some sort of meaningful thing / In making sense of such unspeakable loss / But as I'm staring at your folks, the sweetest people I know / I get a glimpse of what it is to be strong / Just holding hands and sobbing with sunglasses on / 'Cause nothing tuned me in to absurdity as fast / As a gravestone with the name of a baby that has passed / I used to wanna be important, now I just wanna be alive / And without fear / You got to persevere (0:00-1:11).

The song goes on to include more direct conversations of Christian themes, but the above quote is adequate to see the influence it has on my own work, especially in my nonfiction essay, “Crutch.”

I decided to name this whole work “Crutches” because, as my mentor Mike pointed out to me, my essay “Crutch” is the most embodied example of the overarching narrative at play across my work. It is my own confession, like “Persevere,” where I am baffled by the absurdity of a grave, though in my case it is the grave of my friend Patrick, killed at twenty-two by a drunk driver. As the songs above have demonstrated, this is a thesis about trauma, about people my

age, Millennials if you need a label, trying to grapple with the joint pressures of personal trauma alongside the incessant news of global trauma; a personal world of grief overshadowed by a virtual world of real-but-tangibly-distant grief.

...

In many ways, this thesis is a rudimentary roadmap of my own mental health, and I must address that briefly. Writing about mental illness poses several challenges. First, and maybe most important, is the issue of universality versus specificity. In my experience, people with mental illness like reading about other people with mental illness because it offers a clear way out of the isolation we usually feel. But do I write to what is common, what is shared, so someone out there, whom I may never know, can feel a little less abandoned? Or do I write what is unique to my life, and hope others can see in my stories the traces of their own, and in a roundabout way offer solidarity?

Then we come to the next big hurdle, which is language itself. Writers far more talented than I have tried, over and over, to find a mold of words to accurately shape mental illness. There is, like most emotion, an inarticulate nature within our various struggles. Usually what helps us cover that gap of meaning is common experience; we can read approximations of how a good friend makes us feel, and anyone who's ever had a good friend can understand that approximation, no matter how lacking it might be in specificity. But mental illness is a less common experience, and sometimes the approximation only goes so far. My parents grapple with this, I think, in trying to understand my depression. No matter the language I give them for it, I think they're still unable to cover the gap in articulation.

What must also be contended with is the diversity included under the banner of mental illness. My poison is depression, sometimes anxiety, but I'm certainly not going to be good at

giving voice to, say, eating disorders, because I haven't wrestled that bear. On top of that is the fact everyone seems to write about pain first, joy second. When we sit down to write, what comes to the surface first, often, is the sting of unclosed wounds, or traumas half-heartedly (or not at all) processed. Writing is our therapy, which is why so many of my artist friends have suffered under the cruel lie that pain is the only good source of artistry. We've made mental illness a commodity to trade in an artist's market.

The point I'm driving at here is one of ambiguity: I'm not quite sure how to do this "right." There probably isn't a singular, correct way to write about mental illness and all the lacerations it bleeds into every part of life. Which, honestly, is infuriating. I want neat categories, I want scientific proofs, to give name and explanation to my depression. I want to formulaically do away with it, treating it like a doctor treats a patient; "Do this, or take this pill, for the next few weeks, and you'll be right as rain." I want to be right as rain.

I believe the upward climb toward that impossible goal does include, to a degree, writing about our illnesses. Honest writing about what haunts us helps destigmatize it, and often aids people by giving them a vocabulary for what they feel. This is largely how music functions for me. I've often had friends ask why I willingly seek out such sad music, and my answer is usually something along the lines of *because it says what I cannot, it gives me a community to suffer with instead of on my own*. My two brief song references above are adequate examples.

Walking through all the scary thoughts and feelings in my head measured out on paper is, to me, much like a museum tour, but in this case the artifacts and exhibits are abandoned parts of my heart, of my hurt, of long-dead relationships. The tour is free, but the cost of admission is a promise I ask you to make. Don't leave this museum and think of it as a museum of me, James,

but rather one among many museums that, together, make up the whole of me. We are all Smithsonians, a vast network of histories.

...

For the sake of space and time, let me shift now to texts more traditional. To understand my work, it's a simple enough maneuver to stories that, like mine, pivot around either youth in pain or otherwise people burdened by a psychological difficulty. What's interesting to me, at least in part, is twentieth-century stories that predate the internet – and therefore predate the incessant modern news cycle of global tragedy – but seem to grasp at the core of the anxieties in my stories. For two examples, we can look to Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner."

The former features the murder of a family, including an infant, by a complicated prison-escapee known as The Misfit. In broader strokes, given its narration by the grandma of the family, the story emphasizes the downfall of an older, more "sensible" worldview. The grandma recognizes nothing anymore, the world is no longer like the world she grew up in, and she seems desperate at every turn to make sense of it by reaching out to others for affirmation. When her children and grandchildren lack sympathy for her plight, she looks to a gas-station/restaurant owner for commonality, claiming him a good man for trusting some young men who stole gas from him. Later, her family's life in the balance, she attempts to reason with The Misfit, capitulating to him by appealing to his family heritage, claiming he comes from, "good people". In the case of the restaurant owner, they leave the interaction with no clarity or reason of why the world seems so hostile; why is implicit trust no longer feasible? They don't know. When she interacts with The Misfit, she gets an answer she doesn't expect: vengeance. The Misfit is led by a vindictiveness against the institution of justice, making claims that his penal punishment was

unmerited, that he's more the victim than the criminal, and now he seeks his own path. Though the violence of this story is carried out against young and old alike, we might take note of how The Misfit and his crew are characterized as being young or middle-aged; in other words, young people who have lost out on the beauty and joy of youth. Why should this younger gang be so ruthless? Because the world is ruthless to them. What room is there for goodness and propriety in a ruthless world? Increasingly little, O'Connor seems to be suggesting.

Meanwhile, "The Rocking-Horse Winner" puts all the psychological burden of the story on young Paul, a literal child, who can hear his house whispering to him, an incessant cry for more money. The story follows the greed of Paul's mother, whose debts and spending habits give the house its whispers. As a result, Paul discovers he can ride his rocking-horse until, magically, the name of the next horse-race winner will come to him. By strokes of this prescient "luck," as Paul calls it, he comes to bless his mother with five thousand pounds. But such a weighty sum is not enough for her, and the house's whispers to Paul become more fevered, leading eventually to Paul riding his rocking-horse to death. In the end, Paul's mother is left with a massive fortune and a dead son.

This is the psychological pressure of productivity, class-perception, and materialistic greed, all of which inspire a child to, in a manner of speaking, work himself to death. It is worth pointing out that his story was published in 1926, after World War I and amidst the growing global industrial complex. O'Connor's story was published in 1955, following World War II. It's no coincidence that the heart of both stories is a heart afflicted with reactive grief. Why is the world full of such unnecessary violence and evil? Isn't the world supposed to be bright and beautiful? So, then, we come to the crux of my work, of the work that inspires me: the death of

perception. The world of innocence and brilliance and success we were told to create and inherit was, in the end, a fabrication.

...

Since I was a young boy, a multitude of teachers and family members have attested to my “talent,” or “giftedness,” telling me of my innate ability and, there could be no doubt, my trajectory toward success. Of course, most of that was nonsense; I am no more important or gifted than the next person. But for many of my generation, we have been sold the lie of our own brilliance. It never mattered if it were true, all that mattered was giving us the hope to believe that we could be or do anything we wished.

As it turns out, this lie has come to haunt our days and nights. Like young Paul, the psychological whispers of my childhood suggest, “You will, you *must* be great,” without ever pausing to explain what, exactly, greatness means. Now I stagger beneath the weight of the whispers, trying this or that in an endless attempt to satiate the frenzied cries, only to realize that I am riding my own rocking-horse to death. The solution, after all, is not to satiate the whispers, but to escape them altogether. If an example is necessary, I can suggest how, at eighteen, I told my mom I had decided to attend a private Christian college instead of going to Georgia Tech to pursue an engineering degree; her reaction was one of dismay. I think, by her view, I was resigning myself to a continuation of the constant money problems of my adolescence. Had I become an engineer, I would have status, money, intellect. In other words, it would fulfill the mad whispers of the house. But instead, I took out a bunch of loans (and was blessed by a half-ride scholarship) and got a degree in... English. Yes, the epitome of degrees with which to disappoint your parents (except, maybe, Philosophy).

I say this a bit tongue-in-cheek, but my mom's anxiety was real. It has since smoothed out, and my mom is one of my biggest supporters, but it took some work to get here. And, lest you be inclined to be critical of my parents, I do think my mom's worry was warranted. I don't have kids, but I used to work with them, and I can understand the heavy heart-pangs that lead us to want the best for our children. With my dad a youth pastor and my mom a schoolteacher most of my life, both vocations small on money *and* social value, I don't count it against my mom for wanting me to be an engineer. She wanted me to transcend the limits of the world we had been living in, a dreary, fiscally uncomfortable world.

Returning to the work at hand, you need look no further than "Self-Portrait" 1 and 2, or "Window Phantoms" or "Fear as Haiku" or "Lost Letter of All Meaning" or "Crutch" or "The Painter" or "Learning to Speak" to find these themes at work. In a sense, this whole thesis is the anxious reaction to the still-lingering whispers: "You will, you *must*, be great."

...

I have only briefly hammered out some of my inspirations here. The truth is that a full exploration of my inspiration would take a thesis of its own. Though unimportant, I do take a little pride in trying to be well-versed in popular culture, and as such, over the years I have taken in a *lot* of stories through various means. I talked of books and songs/poems, but I have purposefully left out television and movies. They don't feel super appropriate to include, here, in terms of full analysis (in fact, there are a few writers who speak disdainfully of scriptwriting, or cinema as a story-telling medium, which saddens me). But television and film have inspired me as much as any book or poem or song has. For that reason, then, I wanted to briefly list some cinematic stories that have been of great inspiration to me, and which I mention because I think you could benefit from them too, if you'll trust me a little.

I must begin with the caveat that many of my favorite shows are, in fact, animated. I suppose I could call them cartoons, but such a word carries a distinction that many will write-off automatically because of its association with childishness. So, instead, I will just call them shows, shows that happen to be animated. Chief among my love is the show *Adventure Time*, which is a traditional cartoon, and it aired originally on Cartoon Network, so there's no escaping that it's, at least in part, for children. But the bigger truth is that *Adventure Time* is a really a vessel of exploring the conflict between the fun, light-hearted perception of childhood and the gritty reality of a broken world. Following the adventures of Finn the human and Jake the (magical) dog, our two heroes spend a lot of time just having fun. But as the show progresses into its later seasons, we see Finn age from twelve at the beginning of the show to seventeen by the series finale, and with it the show progresses through mature themes, including how to handle the death of a loved one, what it feels like to be abandoned by your parents, the hollowness of a world without order or reason, and the gravity of choice between what is good for the self and what is good for the community. Let it be understood: this is, by my estimation, less of a show for kids and more a show for adults *about* kids (though still chock-full of fun kid stuff, like Jake's now-internet-famous song about making bacon pancakes).

Next up is Netflix original *BoJack Horseman*. This is, bar none, my favorite show. With an unflinching look at the interconnectedness of power abuse, addiction, and mental illness, this show pulls no punches. The series follows titular character BoJack (a sentient, effectively-human horse actor, famous for an '80s sitcom) trying to find purpose *after* having achieved his "greatness." Whereas my work is a grappling with a failure to appease the mad house-whispers, *BoJack Horseman* is a grappling with the silence that follows, or perhaps the lingering echo of whispers. This show deserves so much of its own time and analysis, that I can only really scratch

the surface by saying it will make you look at the ugliness of humanity and make you a better, more thoughtful person for it. Also, it has some of the wittiest jokes and gags I've seen, outpacing many competing sit-coms in both its humor and emotional affectivity.

Finally, though by no means the end of the list, I turn to Hajime Isayama's manga-turned-anime *Attack on Titan*. It's more proper for me to say that this show is an aspiration more than inspiration. If I can write anything as good as *Attack on Titan*, I will have achieved the greatness I subconsciously pine for. What makes it great? Besides it being just, like, super fucking cool – sword-bearing warriors zip around with steam-pressured grappling hooks in order to cut down giant, human-eating monsters called Titans – it is the best example of Millennial anxiety I can imagine. Because much of the plot revolves around slowly unravelling mysteries and secrets, I won't talk about the plot. What I can say is that, if my generation struggles with perception of life-as-is versus life-as-should-be, this show embodies that struggle start to finish. Plus, many of the cast of the show start as children and end as adults, showing the trajectory of how serious trauma affects their development. In the final season, one of the main characters is a twelve-year-old girl named Gabi, who, at twelve, has killed an innumerable amount of people; the psychological damage it bears on her (and on the adults around her) is palpable. I was recently watching it with one of my best friends, Kendall, and we spent a good while trying to figure out if the show has an actual "villain." At points, viewers find themselves furious or exasperated by the choices of the characters, but the story is so grounded in an understanding of the questions of perception and loyalty that every character, even the vilest among them, feels justified in their actions; even if you can't condone it, you can understand the deep emotional and psychological inspirations that lead each character. I cannot recommend this show enough. Sadly, it will

probably remain ignored by larger society due to it being a) incredibly violent and gory (though not meaninglessly) and b) an anime.

...

I hope this tip of the iceberg serves as a roadmap for the rest of this thesis. In the coming stories, poems, and essays, you will find pieces of my heart: my fears, my loves, and all the complexity between. If theory and analysis is needed, then the theory of my work is an expression of longing; like the grandma in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” I’m looking for a world that makes sense again. I was promised a life of brilliance and beauty, and I have found one of horror and pain. And, like young Paul, amidst a search for a sensical world, I am harangued by the subconscious whispers of aspiration. Can I achieve greatness? And, if so, is it even worth it?

I suppose I’ll die trying to find out.

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SELF-PORTRAIT 1

I had this idea for an essay.

In it, I would tell you stories about my life, the really rough and strange moments, but then tell you a fabricated ending, an ending that goes exactly how I wish it would have in real life. In short, a bit of roleplaying, daydreaming, hallucinating, whatever word you wanna use for it. A little bit of time travel magic to fix up my past, take care of all those pesky regrets, shames, and otherwise unwarranted sufferings. I thought it would make for a good essay. It would be ugly and gorgeous, hilariously somber (or somberingly hilarious?), real and honest, but also imaginative. Alas, my dreams for that essay are lofty beyond my grasp.

By my estimation, most people follow their deepest desires. Whether they're cognizant of that or not doesn't matter. The point is: people create themselves into whatever will get them closer (or at least perceptively closer) to their deepest wants. But I'm just stating something that has been well-known for a long time: people show you who they really are when they show you what they really want.

Back to the essay idea.

My stories, the ones about my life. Like I said, I would give you false endings, the endings I wish had occurred. I would be showing you exactly what I want, and by extension – who I am. Because, really, I wanted to get intimate with my readers. And please, I know, intimate bears with it a certain historical baggage (the word sounds sexy, doesn't it? Whisper it: Intimate. Yeah, so, I get it. Stick with me here.) which gives it an air of, putting it politely, romance. But I'm not trying to romance you. No, what I mean here is Intimate in a familial sort of way. I know this doesn't account for everyone, but I would venture that most of us are better

known by our family members than nearly anyone else. They have seen you through a lifetime of arguments, and yet you still sit down at the table with them for dinner. No one bats an eye, no one gasps. That's intimacy; all those years of arguments, defeats, victories, loves, successes. Your family (and please apply "family" loosely here, family is flush with variance) has seen you through your best and worst moments.

In showing you my imagined happy endings, I thought I'd be showing you exactly who I am, because I want to be intimate in a soul-sharing way. It's one-sided, I'm not here expecting you to open up to me. In fact, you don't have to tell me anything, because you can't. Because this is an essay, a one-way communication. I wanna show you the man behind the curtain, the James I know, the real one.

Why do I want to be intimate?

Good question. Probably because for most of my life I've felt like I could never communicate who I am in the way I meant to. In shaping myself to achieve my deepest desire (to be loved) I forgot to consider if I had any conditions first. When you want to be loved, to feel loved, you'll flock to whomever or whatever gives you that satisfaction. No one told me I could have standards for myself (or I never listened). Now I'm twenty-five and starting to finally string together boundaries. But I'm afraid all the time. Afraid that all these lovely people, who give me so much care, will disappear.

By writing that imaginary essay I would be securing an indefinite security of intimacy. So long as the essay existed, there would be someone out there, perhaps confused, or worried, or buoyed up with a sense of belonging because they, too, are afraid of not being loved, and I would be known to them, they would know me by my false endings, the endings revealing my desires, and those desires revealing that I'm just an average man. Then, if (or when), everyone I love

turned tail, I could know there is someone out there in possession of an intimacy with me. There would be a long-surviving document of my personhood. Long story short: legacy, baby! I could pretend someone out there loves me. And since I wouldn't ever know for sure that some reader somewhere (maybe you) loves me, I could rest easy imagining they might as well exist.

None of that matters though because I didn't write that essay. I wrote this one. And in this essay, I realized that telling you all those pretend endings wouldn't give you an intimate picture of me. It can't. Sure, it would give you a handful of insights, suggestions you could make of what motivates me, what inhibits me, that I'm just as capable of being an ass as I am of being kind. But those are insights, things I think and feel *now*, at twenty-five. Ten years from now I will not be the same person I am today. The idea, my idea, that I could make something, a static record, communicate who I am is absurd. Impossible, really. Knowing a person in an intimate way requires two very important parts: time and presence. Your family knows you so well because they've done the time with you. You can't do the time with me. You can take a walk down memory lane with me, sure, and get an idea of what I'm like at twenty-five, but you're not going to be around for all the moments required to create intimacy. Joke's on me, my silly essay idea turned out to be as full of shit as I am.

Not all is lost. After realizing that imaginary essay was a dumb idea, I thought of a new essay idea. This new essay, the one you're reading currently, aims to be intimate in a different way. Okay, so I can't tell you fake stories about my life. Whatever. What I *can* tell you is one of the most honest things I've ever said about myself, something I said in therapy yesterday.

"The last five years of my life have been tough. Lots of bad shit happened in that span of time. But you know what I realized? I realized earlier today that I would consider the last five

years the happiest years of my life. How fucking sad is that? How fucking sad am I?" And then I cried.

BAD POETRY

It's an ache,
 like bones stiff in winter,
an understood pain
 without an inkling of why.

I need to say something,
 anything, to go
beyond that thick viscous veil,
 to find my gloried weight, my substance,
to define me.

But that puzzle of words
 is beyond me,
a blind man groping in a cold room,
 fingers numbed to unknowing;
I cannot discern the shape of my pieces.

I sense a trembling at the foundations
 of my sanity,
But the perceived dissipating
 into delirium

is a falsity.

I am here, still anchored
in Cartesian paradigms
of thinking and therefore-ing.

Something demands a breaking,

ought it be me?

but I cannot;

there is no iconoclastic
insurance for a broken heart.

Being,

this myriad ugly,
is bread to ashes on the tongue,
noise scraped against raw eardrums,
all-in-all: bad poetry.

LOST LETTER OF ALL MEANING

I stoop to the lowliest places,
seeking an answer to the question
of myself –
I come back weary and wanting.

I climb to the loftiest places,
seeking an answer to the question
of myself –
I come back sore and dizzy.

Then I sit on my ass,
eyes glazed unseeing,
empty of answers
and aching –

there it is, sitting in a letter
on the coffee table.

It's been here, at home,
the whole time.

WINDOW PHANTOMS

There's condensation
on the windows,
someone has scrawled
into it with a finger,
Jesus loves you, and
a separate finger
has replied,
Yes he dose.

Odd,

two beings embodied
in scattered vessels

(have their lives
intertwined elsewhere,
or only in windowpane
correspondence?)

find unification
of an idea
in common
window sweat.

The body, ostensibly,
is a temple,
but I've never visited
a building with a soul,
only places haunted
by Holy Ghost[s].
I'm unsure
a righteous poltergeist
haunts here, in my chest,
but I'm sure a soul
is hiding around the next corner.

But, anyhow,
two soulish temples
found each other
on a coffee shop window
in January,
and I'm leastways jealous –
my own
soul-temple connection
is still under construction.

FEAR AS HAIKU

Like the oncoming

of death, misery is back

to haunt each waking.

MULTITUDINOUS FLIES CONSUME NON-INTREPID MIND

Part I

Obscurities habitate,

possibly copulating,

numerous and egregious,

like flies –

an unwelcome blindness

of the consciousness.

Booze is a mock helper,

like violin chords plucked

inclining flies into orbit about

some arbitrary fixed point –

when the swimming visions cease

everything becomes dissonance again.

Am I mad?

Does the question beg the question

of my implied sanity?

I don't know. I don't think so.

This is the soothing in
to the jagged-tooth maw Malignance.

Rambling: failure,
Scratched records, cultural clout,
Southern humidity, desperation,
burning trees –

Ah
fuck
the flies.

Part II

The flies can stay,
today I don't care.
I need the words to quiet.
I'll sit with the deafening buzzing hum.

I'm not crazy, no, but
certainly sad.

Part III

Basement venue tunneled off

a busy street,
the ambient electric guitars
and traffic-music coagulate.

I'm here with her, but
the flies are here with me.

The whisper of their wing's millions
share the secret I always know
and fail to dispute:
flee, fucker, you don't belong.

To be clear, not: you don't belong *here*.
No, *you do not belong*.

Stomach acid sloshing around
my internal piping,
my lungs gasping useless,
everything is so loud in this basement.

I flee, retrace my way back to the street,
and I know she's still down there, listening.

The music is gone, but the flies

god the flies are so loud, screaming,

Not enough! Crazy! Insane!

You void soul!

I vomit.

Be silent,

you wretched insects.

Interlude:

everything is flies

Part IV

Little white oval,

choking it down the throat

every day – and weekly spilling

my guts to an expert on fly-infected brains.

It's less scary now.

Part V

I got myself:

a flyswatter.

SELF-PORTRAIT 2

Today is a good day to go away.

My friends are all occupied: work, a float trip, significant others, family vacations. I'm home alone, and outside the wind is swinging with the tree branches, the sky a blue-gray overcast suggestive of a coming storm. The living room is full of mute light, painting faint shadows on the walls and opaque hues across a blank TV screen, and my wrist is still broken; I took the cast off to write this. Music thrums from a soundbar, spills and concatenates echoes through the house, the old walls vibrate in mellow tandem, and Stella is asleep in her cat tree upstairs. All is peace here, now, and no one's beholden to anyone for anything.

So, today is a good day to go away, to slip off somewhere to be unfound, to quiet forever, to eclipse prematurely; an empty home means no witnesses. But I've lost the starving hunger for a death on credit.

I hope it storms. I'll watch it from the back porch, feel the heave of thunder, watch the slick silver drip from leaves, tuck my cold hands into my armpits. When it ceases, I will smile and retreat inside, patient to behold the next iteration of life's watering.

DON'T LEAVE. DO A KICKFLIP INSTEAD.

In 2016 I was 19 and I was an intern for a church near Chicago, it was a terrible job, but that summer I saw Levi the Poet in concert, with my friend Sophie, and Sophie had a small, old car that I can't recall the model or color of but on a day I had off we drove to the north side of Chicago to see Levi perform and it was weird and cool because the show was in the second floor of a bank, closed for the day, so there was just a piece of paper on the front door that said something like, "Levi show on second floor, come on in!" and so we walked in and I was nervous, and when we got upstairs it was a little foyer with chairs spread out in a semi-circle, maybe twenty, and it looked like what I think an AA meeting looks like, and there was a projector shooting *Moonrise Kingdom* onto a blank wall that all the chairs were facing, and Levi was at the back of the room at a little table and he had a Chemex and a gooseneck kettle and he was brewing coffee for anyone who wanted it, and I asked him why, and he said it gave him something to do and push his nervous energy into while he talked with fans, and I thought he was the coolest person I'd ever met and after the show he agreed to take a picture with me, styled like Jack and Rose in *Titanic*, so I stood up and spread my arms and he held on to my stomach from behind and I still have that picture, in fact I started doing it with anyone in bands that I saw live, if they were cool with it, and most of the time they were cool with it, so I have a bunch of weird *Titanic* pose pictures with band members and /

I should mention Levi's dad committed suicide in January of 2011, a few months after I tried committing suicide, but I haven't told my parents about that because my depression already is so hard for them, and because I was in eighth grade, I was thirteen, and how do you respond to

your adult son who is twenty-four when he says he tried to hang himself at thirteen and you never knew?

/ in the winter of 2018 Colby and I drove to Kansas City to see Levi perform a house show with the bands Listener and Red Sweater Lullaby, who were really just two dudes – Dan Smith and Kris Rochelle, respectively – and I found out it was Dan Smith’s house and so in the back of Dan’s house I sat on a piano bench and Colby stood behind me and Levi performed his poem “It’s All Worth Living For” which, as a song, is ten minutes long and it’s ten minutes of heart punches and ten minutes that I listened to and listen to when I want to die and it makes me cry every time because it makes me want to stay, and so I sat in Dan’s house and cried quietly to myself and no one really minded or even noticed, except maybe Levi, who met my bleary eyes with his own while he performed and I can’t write this without crying and, and, and, and I’m suck on and, trying to inculcate a “yes, and” inside me, inside my brain, a sort of anti-biotics for my brain bacteria that spits “go die” while Levi whispers, “please stay” and so I’m still staying and stay staying and stay saying and, and, and, and yes I still took a *Titanic*-pose picture with Levi, and Dan and Kris too, after the show and we were smiling and laughing because everyone started tickling each other and /

I wish Levi had his dad still and I wish I never had to remember that I tried to kill myself,
but

/ Colby and I listened to *Big Willie Style* on the drive home after the show, trying to stay awake and sticking our heads out the window into December air on the highway and yelling “GET JIGGY WITH IT!” over and over and, look, I stayed /

we can't make those wishes true and I can't wish your pain away and make it true but if you're on the fence about this whole living thing, then I'm asking you, *please stay*. Your life is not a foregone conclusion of despair.

CAR PROBLEMS

You don't have a car. Then grandpa dies, and you get his minivan. You're still not sure if that was a fair trade. You haven't spoken to her in years, but now she is back in town after being away in some program, and she wants to talk. You invite her over to watch soccer. She doesn't pay much attention and is more concerned with talking, while you try to watch the game. There's open flirting. When she leaves, you share a kiss. You're pretty sure you don't want to kiss her again.

A few days later you are driving around in grandpa's minivan with her. You spend hours talking. She has flirted with you and you have half-heartedly flirted back, but you think you've done something wrong, because her body and tone suggest enthusiasm about the prospect of more kissing. This, even in spite of the part of the conversation when she tells you her program helped straighten out her sexual pursuits. She was having a lot of sex, apparently, or coming brazenly close. She tells you she contracted an STD but is clean now. She learned a lot about herself in that program, apparently.

You are both from homes and a faith that condemns premarital sex as sin. You believe this, but it's complicated. You also believe in forgiveness, but only sometimes feel it. Like sex, it's complicated.

You have been driving around for several hours, so you decide to park. It's past midnight. You are tired, so you turn up the music a little and lean your chair back for comfort, to give your back and knees relief. This is a mistake. She reads this as a suggestion. She climbs on top of you, awkwardly, and begins to kiss you. You are confused, for several reasons, but mostly because you're not sure why this is happening. You like kissing, though, and so you commit to it.

You think she moves your hand to her chest. You can't remember, now, if it was coerced or willing. The situation escalates. You find yourself in the back of the van now, and you are the only one with any clothing left on, and it is only a little. She presses up against you, and you sit there, cold and limp, and she finally takes off the last of your clothing. She says, "I'm just going to take these off," and she looks at you with eyes that, you think, are asking for consent to do so. You can't remember if you did nothing, or if you nodded, but you definitely said nothing as she takes off your only remaining protection.

You tell her you've never had sex before. You think you don't want to, right now, but you don't say that out loud. She says it isn't a big deal. You have sex. After, she says, "See? You had sex! Not so bad, huh?" Saying this has made it worse, and you resist the imposing urge to tell her to shut up. You drive her back to her car, and she goes home satisfied. You go home and become numb.

She is married now, many years later. The minivan has been sold. You've had good sex by now, the kind that doesn't make you feel numb after. You also still believe it's a sin. You think you've forgiven her, but it still makes you numb when you think about it, so you're not fully convinced you have.

Didn't I tell you it's complicated?

LOVERS' SEARCH BEYOND A TIMELESS MERIDIAN

I ask her if she can find it –

Sky painted the candied colors,
that hot heat wind brushing
sweet impish cheeks, flushing the face
with dry summer fire,
sheen and glow of the hairs glinting
under the departing sun.

Sun,
that ship to night, moon guided by
fiery chariot to spill forth silver,
holy, haunted light,
the children dancing below studded
evening sky, stars swooning
in the orbs of untired, gorgeous eyes.

She cannot find it, she asks what I mean,

I point –

See? Before us the homely midwestern horizon,
we the progeny of stiff-backed and sandpaper-handed
laborers. Do you see? See the sunbaked earth
and the blood grass – dry red and sprawling –
the old tree hill, long since hewed down and

heaved heavy-breathed with brusque arms away,
away, the corpse of felled tree shorn, shaved,
whittled to the shape of great-gran's coffin -
life to death to ground to sky. See, my love?

Still, she gazes me with tired eye, she asks what I belabor.

Oh, my love –

This land of our mothers and fathers and all
preeminent and lovely neighbors, of first
peoples on this plain, whatever that was before
it is here, still, to be handled softly forward.

We will carry ourselves through this land
and bloom this yard with the hearth-warmth
of our children, and their children.

We shall labor in love.

Ah, she says, I can find it now.

THE INNOCENT OBJECT AS WITNESS

It's a hardcover
askew on the windowsill,
maroon and smooth,
staring with a blank face.

9 AM winter light
dapples on the weary figure,
corners and edges
worn and rounded.

Give me the peace
of an old book
set on the sill
in December.

CRUTCH

On March 10th, 2019, I was in London. It was roughly noon, London-time. I had spent my morning exploring the Tate Museum of Modern Art with my friend, Maleah, both of us in the city for a week on a university sponsored trip. London has free wi-fi – and by London, I do, in fact, mean the city of London as a whole. They have hotspots throughout, seemingly built onto the side of buildings, which provide free wi-fi; that wi-fi was how Maleah and I were going to get home. All week we used Google Maps to find nearby busses or trains or the underground to shuttle us back to our Airbnb. So as Maleah stood waiting for me to get a map route, I connected to the city wi-fi and received an Instagram direct message – received three hours after it was sent. It was from Kristi, my high school theatre director, who by then I defined as a friend. It was short, but also very very long, and I still haven't figured out the accordion range – compressed, expanded – of what it said:

“Patrick M----- died last night. He was on his motorcycle and got hit by a drunk driver. I just wanted to you to know and not find out on social media. Love you and be safe. [Ended with a purple umbrella emoji, rain pattering off the top.]”

...

At some point in the early 2000s, when I was anywhere from five to seven years old, I played a computer game in the daycare room of the local YMCA. It was based on the Disney film, *Atlantis*, and I loved the game not for the game, but for the idea of Atlantis. The submersion into deep sea, the hidden city – a place where no one, except me and the characters, could go. I realize now, looking back, it was a sort of crutch, an emotional escape. (Maybe that's why I ended up pursuing writing, which is really an extension of my love for reading. What you're

reading now might have been founded in a YMCA daycare room, like, seventeen or more years ago. A long, drawn-out need to escape into the depths of another world.)

I come to the Y once a week, I think. Dad plays basketball for an hour or two – I still don't really understand what an hour is, not really, but it's enough time that I get to play on the computer and have a snack. He always comes to get me when he's done, and he is sweaty and smells sort of bad, but also seems pretty happy. The happy fades as we drive home. It confuses me. But I guess my happy fades a little, too, because I want to play that computer game, where I can be a submarine and dive deeper than people can go.

Then one day my dad was late, much to the daycare staff's distress; I just understood it as more time to play my game. I think my mom ended up picking me up, much later than usual, and worried; I'm not sure on these details, though. I was told my dad tore his ACL while playing basketball and had to go to the hospital. He ended up getting surgery and was on crutches for a several weeks, and life was weird because we didn't go to the Y anymore. My dad didn't have basketball, and I didn't have my *Atlantis* game, and I think we started being unhappy.

...

The etymology of the word crutch is old, dating from Proto-Germanic times, when England wasn't England. With a few variations, it still retains its original meaning, more-or-less. Earlier on, in Proto-Germanic times, it meant a curved staff. By Old English times it was a bishop's crook. I imagine shepherds tending their flocks of livestock, later giving their crutches to the pastors so they could tend flocks of people. Later it adopted an additional meaning, a more modern one: a support, or a prop. A crutch holds up weaker, unstable things – people, buildings, hope.

I'm fascinated with the definition of crutch as a prop. Because a prop is also a symbol, an object we use in theatre to accentuate our words, or actions, or otherwise help the audience visualize the setting in a relatable "real" space. It's hard to communicate the familiarity of a couch with three metal chairs jammed together on a stage; it's better to use a real couch, because real people sit on couches in their living rooms, not on metal chairs shoved together. Patrick and I shared props several times on stage, the most memorable a cactus, which he used to stab me in the ass every performance. One night he was so successful I found a cactus thorn lodged in my right cheek the next morning.

Now I'm tangled up, thinking about crutches. It's a literal propping up, sure, but it's also a symbol, it stands for something else. When my dad tore his ACL, he and I both lost the crutches which propped up our fleeting happiness; he lost basketball, I lost a computer game – together we lost the embodied forms of play we craved. For weeks he hobbled around on two metal crutches, always ice-cold to the touch: one crutch for basketball, one crutch for Atlantis. I'm twenty-four now. Those crutches are somewhere in my parents' house, maybe my dad's closet. I take meds every day, antidepressants and another for anxiety. These are my own crutches. I don't know if I ever recovered my happiness after a torn ACL stole it from me, but then again... was it real, propped up on such a weak crutch?

...

Patrick's visitation was a few days after I got home from London. I drove from Springfield, Missouri, back to my hometown of Alton, Illinois. My best friend Colby came with me, my human crutch, meant to levee against the grief I was feeling, the grief I was trying to ignore. I was twenty-two; I think Patrick died at twenty-one, but maybe twenty-two? I feel shitty for not remembering. Patrick's was my first open-casket experience. I got in line, this queue for

sorrow, waiting to look him in the face a final time, to hug his mom and brother, shake the hand of his remarried father, whom I'd never met.

Kristi found me and gave me a hug, leaving a damp spot on my shirt. She was all wet-face and shaking voice, a state I would soon find myself in. I still remember the look, the way her eyes were magnified by globs of tears being constantly renewed, as she told me: "It's not Patrick, it's not... *him*. It's like a big, plastic doll of him. I just want you to be prepared." That's maybe the most haunting part of all this, the emphasized *him*: It's the body of Patrick, but the person, the soul, the memories, are gone and replaced with mortician parlor tricks. And I know this is how death works – the body is just the leftover shell, like the flakes you throw away after breaking garlic out of its little cocoon.

Colby, my human crutch, awkwardly shuffled along with me, quiet and observing. Mostly just there, which is what I needed most. I don't know that I'll ever experience something quite like Colby was experiencing then: this collection of people – grandparents, parents, children, siblings, friends – for whom he had no context, save me. In that funeral home we were the collected pieces of Pat's stained-glass life, a community of crutches: some propping up Pat, others propped up by Pat, like me. Colby was just a visitor gazing at the haphazard sections of his life, like watching the construction of scaffolding.

I suppose Pat and I played off each other, trading the crutch back and forth, like swapping the role of designated driver: one night he drinks, the other I do. But that was years ago, in high school, when we shared some of our stained-glass parts. After we graduated in 2015, Pat became an Army man. Some of his Army buddies were there, at the visitation, all stoic as they approached the not-Patrick body of Patrick, who was clothed in full military dress. They chanted some phrase, which I couldn't hear clearly, but I was witness to what it communicated: a

solidarity, a solemn acceptance of death that soldiers know. I respect it, but it also makes me sad; it seemed like they were forbidden, by themselves, from crying.

Pat spent some time in the Middle East, I honestly don't know where. Kristi told me he watched friends die, obliterated by IEDs. He started drinking often after that, too much, which makes his death all the more tragic. The night he died Patrick had been out swing-dancing. Stationed stateside, he picked up the hobby to replace drinking. He had a dance partner, a woman he was seeing, (I never learned her name. Patrick's love life is a different, equally complicated story) who was on the motorcycle with him that night. She was with him when he died. The accident left her with two broken legs.

I watched her, stared really, as I stood waiting in the line to face death. She spent most of the time sitting on a couch. In order to move she had to navigate two crutches with two broken legs. I think about how it's all so ironic, looking back. An unnamed dance partner with two broken legs, and two almost useless crutches, at a visitation for a burgeoning alcoholic killed by a drunk driver. Patrick was tripping the light fantastic in escape of alcoholism, but the bottle still managed to claim him.

...

Though incredibly hard to stomach, and the only book I've regretted reading, a line from Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* comes to mind: "Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted." It's a thought the protagonist has, near the end of the novel. It is the reality of a man void of crutches, an empty vessel of which there is nothing to prop up. I used to think along a similar line. I believed crutches were a tool of the weak, a pathetic way of coping. Probably a residual response of malice toward my dad's torn ACL, which robbed me of one of my favorite crutches. But I know better, now. Weakness isn't

using crutches; weakness is pretending crutches don't matter, that we can all do just fine in life on our own, that "love cannot be trusted."

...

Finally, my time in line came, and I stood next to the casket. Kristi was right – it wasn't *him*. Whatever the morticians did, they made him look plastic and ballooned, like the perpetually skinny Patrick I knew in life had somehow gained fifty pounds when he died. I began to weep, the Job kind of weeping, where I gnashed my teeth and tried not to throw up and couldn't talk. Patrick's dad and stepmom shook my hand, thanked me for coming. They had eerie smiles, probably trying to comfort but in the moment making me hate them. I hated them because they, like Pat's Army friends, could stand before the atrocity of this not-Patrick and still be in control. I could not. Pat's mom and brother sobbed and hugged me, which reoriented my world a bit, knowing they, too, lost control. The two of them, of all people, hurt the most, lost the most control. When Pat left for the Army, he promised his brother he'd always come back home. After the funeral, Pat's brother couldn't stop sleeping in the forever-empty bed: "He promised he'd come back home!"

The nature of crutches, much like stage props, hold up our reality. People hold up our realities, framing them with love and pain and help and harm, constituting the pieces of our stained-glass lives. But when death comes, our couches turn into three uncomfortable metal chairs, a makeshift, cold thing. We wonder when the couch will return.

He promised he'd come back home.

LEARNING TO SPEAK

Conversations At a Party

“Joe, is that you?” He turns around.

“Holy shit, Cameron Lostren? It’s so good to see you!” She grins and angles toward him, arms wide for a hug; he leans in with a hand for shaking. The two bumble one another, they chuckle, he backs up and clears his throat.

“Sorry, let me try that again. Cameron Lostren? It’s so good to see you!” Arms spread wide, both their faces hosting the grin that makes itself present in circumstances of rekindled friendship, they embrace. As they pull apart Cameron’s hand brushes his hip. If he noticed, he doesn’t let on.

“Okay, hug out of the way. What’s going on? I haven’t seen you since, like…” he pauses, one arm across his chest, the other bent upward as he strokes his mild beard. She thinks, too, both casting lines into foggy memories. Simultaneously they yank the same bit of data from their heads, speak over one another,

“Dan’s Christmas party, 2017!” That primordial grin appears, another iteration of a satisfied happiness.

“Jinx, you owe me a beer,” says Cam.

“Damn, beat me to it. Of course! What’s a party without beer?” He weaves through the throng of faces, foreign and familiar coalescing, giving polite Hey, man!s when some disconnected hand reaches through the crowd to tap his shoulder or back. She hasn’t made it farther than the entrance of the house, she stands at the base of the staircase, moves to stand on

the first step. She's got enough height now to see Joe disappearing into the kitchen, soon after he is returning with three cans in his hands. She laughs.

“Okay, I'm back, I didn't know what you like, so I brought options.”

“Why three? There's only you and me. You got a girl hiding somewhere around here?”

She winks, he looks down and heat blooms in his cheeks.

“Oh, ha, uhm... yeah, no, no girl hiding here tonight. I just grabbed three and left, didn't really think about it, it's stuffy in the kitchen. Dan is about to attempt his usual keg-stand.”

Indeed, more and more the little hallway running along the staircase where they stand is thinning. Cheers bellow from the kitchen. Joe shakes his head.

“Well, lucky for you, Joseph Martens, I don't have a preference.” She grabs one of the cans, pops the tab, takes a long drag. A small trickle of the cream-brown foam slips from the corner of her mouth. She wipes it away with her sleeve.

“That's good shit. So, Joe. What are you up to these days? I thought you'd have graduated by now.” Joe sets the extra beer on the step and pops his own can open. He doesn't take a sip.

“Well, yeah, I would have, but I dropped out. But it's not what you think!” He raises his hands in a half-hearted protest, perhaps an abashed defense. She takes another long sip of beer. “So, I did two years at NCU, in, uh, in Graphic Design. Came back here for the summer before junior year, got an internship at Nicki's dad's shop. A month or so in, they offered me a full time gig, benefits, salary, the whole nine yards. School felt pretty pointless at that point, so I dropped out and I've been working the last couple of years.” He takes a breath, takes a sip from his beer, anticipatory.

“Wow, that’s amazing Joe! I’m stoked for you, dude!” She proffers a fist bump, which he does not notice, his eyes gazing the details of his shoes, the stairs, looking anywhere but at her. She transforms the fist bump into a light punch on the shoulder. He looks up, deer caught in headlights.

“What? Really? Oh. I mean, yeah, it is! Thanks, I guess.” He shrugs. “What are you up to? I haven’t seen you in town in forever.” She nods.

“I’m still in school, out at Forrester. I should’ve graduated a year ago, but... I just can’t pick something to study. It all sounds dull or hard, and I aim for easy and fun. I finally had to pick something, so I settled with Literature. It’s pretty much just reading books and writing the occasional paper, I’m living the closest thing to a dream I can.” She smirks after the last remark. He doesn’t.

“Oh, I’m, uhm. I’m sorry, Cam. That sucks. You don’t seem particularly enthused about it, though.”

“I forgot, you actually care about me, ha. I’m... not doing great, Joe. It could be worse, definitely, but everything is pretty dreadful. Josie died last year. I gave up after that. At this point, if I don’t get my grades up, they’ll kick me out. And you know what? I don’t really give a fuck.” She chugs the rest of her beer and opens the second, retrieved from the step where Joe placed it. Joe frowns, stares into her face, discovers pools of suffering the color of her eyes. He is bewildered, too.

“I’m so sorry Cam. Please forgive me, but... who’s Josie? Did she go to school with us?”

“No, you wouldn’t know her, no one here does. We met at Forrester, we were close. She was hit by a drunk driver walking home one night.” A faint mist peppers her eyes, Joe looks away.

“Jesus, that’s terrible. I’m sorry.”

“Eh, whatever. It’s over, she’s gone. I don’t want to live in the misery.” She whispers, “But it seems to follow me everywhere.” She chugs the rest of her second drink, sits down on the steps, makes a request for a third drink, addressed to no one in particular.

“Cam, I think you should, maybe, stop drinking. You’re fairly drunk as is.” Her face is flush, her eyes unfocused, and when she attempts to stand she falls back clumsily to the stairs.

“O-Okay, I s-s’pose you have a point,” her words languid and wobbly, a sailor’s legs on dry land after a long trip abroad.

“Do you want me to drive you home?” He is sincere.

“Uhm, yeah, I guess, sure, yeah. I, I, I g-got a ride from Li-Lisa Bernet, she won’t mind, I’ll text her.” She pulls her phone from a pocket and mashes out a distorted explanation to Lisa while Joe collects the empty cans and pilgrimages into the kitchen. He returns, having said his proper farewells, and finds Cam swaying on the steps, her hand on the railing, humming something to herself. He takes her hand, and they hobble out to his car. He begins the journey to her childhood home, the home he knew well in high school.

Conversations In a Car

For a few minutes they don’t speak. Cam cracks the window, takes in small gulps of cold air.

“Do you want to listen to some music?” There is a nervousness in his throat, she doesn’t notice.

“Nooooo, Jooooe, I waaant a milkshake! Hahahaha.” Joe glances at her, a little worried, unsure of himself.

“We can get milkshakes tomorrow, if you want. But it’s late, you should really get some sleep Cam.”

“Fuck that, Joe. Sleep is dumb, dumb dumb dumb.” Her voice quiets unexpectedly, “I have nightmares, so many nightmares, all about Josie. I saw her, you know, af-after the car...” she trails into silence, she is crying in an empty way, tears flowing over a face of apathy, detachment. Joe pulls onto her street, parks in front of the old blue house.

“We’re here. I’m sorry it’s been so hard for you, Cam, really. I would’ve reached out if I had known. I think about you often.” She becomes hostile in an instant.

“What the fuck does that mean, Joe? You could have called me, texted me, written me, sent me a message on Facebook – anything!” She burps unwillingly. “And, and, and anyways, why do you care? You’ve been fine here, with your fancy job and friends, no money problems, no dead friends. After we graduated it was like I stopped existing to you! You stopped coming over, my mom asked me, like, five million times a day what happened to you. My fucking *mom* missed you, Joe! And what were you up to, huh? Fucking Jennie Paula, that’s what!” She slumps back into the seat, slouched, breathing hard, crying in a shuddering rhythm.

Joe is quiet, hands ten and two on the steering wheel, he stares at them unseeing. It is quiet for a while, the only sound the gasping of grieving Cam. He is stretching and condensing his thoughts, so many responses bubbling up, anger and sorrow and confession, amalgamating inside his mind. He settles for the reality that none of it will come out exactly right, he just does his best. His voice is unusually cold, slow, meticulous.

“Cam. To a degree, you’re right, and I’m sorry. I dropped out of your life without warning or explanation. I’m sure that stung worse than I can know. But I wasn’t fucking Jennie. We went on one date, it was terrible, but Dan couldn’t be convinced we didn’t hook up, so he

told everyone that. No, the truth... The truth is that a week or so after graduation, my aunt, Lauren, killed my uncle. My cousin Tommy found her in their bedroom, sitting on the bed, smiling, the gun in her lap. He said she was petting it like a cat, talking to it in that weird voice people use for children or animals. Apparently, she was completely unaware of anything else, never responded to anything Tommy said or did, so he called the police. She's in a psych ward in Pennsylvania now. At the time Tommy had just turned eighteen, had no where to go. At the funeral for my uncle, his brother – not my dad, another brother, Kenny – punched Tommy, said it was Tommy's fault his dad was dead. It took my dad and I and a few of my cousins to pull him off. Tommy tried to kill himself, got sent to a hospital for, like, six months. The whole summer before I left for NCU my family was in shambles. I didn't want to talk about it, couldn't talk about it, and I couldn't lie to you either. So... I just kinda disappeared. I thought about you all the time, still do, but after that summer I didn't think you'd ever forgive me. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. Tommy lives with me now, that's really why I left school. The job gives me enough money and insurance to take care of Tommy. He's getting better, has made tremendous progress the last few years, but he still has his days. That's the truth, all of it." Joe looks up sheepish, stomach a garble of nerves, ruinous and dismaying. Cam has fallen asleep.

"For fuck's sake." Joe sighs, unbelts, goes around the car to Cam's door and collects her tired body, an arm tucked under her knees, the other circumnavigating her back, trying not to let her head roll around too much. At the door he stands her up, she's mumbling like a bee's hum, and he holds her waist, so she doesn't fall. He knocks the door, unsure if anyone will be awake to answer. A light comes on, pouring from the small door window, Joe squints as Mrs. Lostren opens the door.

“Oh my god, is that you Joe? Cam? Cam?” She shakes her daughter’s shoulder, Cam remains unresponsive. Joe carefully hands Cam off, the two of them trying to keep Cam upright. Joe watches from the doorway as Mrs. Lostren gets Cam to lie down on the couch in the living room, covers her with a blanket and walks back to the door.

“Joe, do you want to come in? I haven’t seen you in so long, you look great.” He hesitates, decides he wants to talk, accepts the offer.

Conversations At a Kitchen Table

The kitchen hasn’t changed much, if at all, since Joe had last visited several years ago. The walls were plastered with a style print, black and white checkers with cartoonish cherries spread throughout. Joe had always thought it was nightmarish, at least distracting, but tonight he is grateful for the familiarity. He seats himself at the table, unsure what to do with his hands he crosses them.

“Can I get you anything Joe? Coffee, water, soda?” Joe glances the clock on the wall, it’s nearly midnight, coffee seems like a bad idea, but he wants it anyway.

“Yeah, some coffee would be great, thank you Mrs. Lostren.” She let out a small giggle.

“Joe, please, call me Sophie, we’re all adults here. Now, let me see if I remember. You like two sugars, no cream, right?” Joe smiles.

“Perfect memory. But these days I leave out the sugar, just black.”

“Very good, very good. Life lost its sweetness, eh?” She laughs as if she’s made a clever joke, grabs a mug from the cupboard, lifts the pot and fills the mug. Joe notices the coffee has already been made, is still hot in fact. She passes the mug to Joe, he sips carefully.

“Were you already up, Mrs. Los- sorry, Sophie? That coffee is fresh.”

“Still as keen as ever.” She sighed small. “Cam isn’t home very often, and when she is I can’t sleep until I know she’s home safe. Thank you, by the way – I wasn’t sure Lisa was going to bring her home. I’m getting older, anyhow. Most nights I can’t sleep too well, so I make coffee and read, or do a puzzle. Anything to distract my mind for a bit. I’m not sure you’ve heard of Josie –” Joe briefly cuts in,

“Yes, Cam told me she was a good friend from school. Terrible what happened to her.”

“What exactly did she tell you?”

“She said she was hit by a drunk driver while walking home one night.” Sophie shakes her head, the glint of watery eyes downcast.

“Oh dear, my poor girl.” She trembles a breath. “No, Josie took her own life – turned the car on in a closed garage, monoxide poisoning. Cam was the one who found her. The police were the only ones to give me a truthful report, Cam keeps coming up with different stories for her death, none of them accurate. I suppose she just can’t, or won’t, accept what Josie did.” Sophie now sat across from Joe, staring blankly into her own mug of coffee, lost somewhere in the past. Joe is quiet, thinking. He needs to check his phone, realizes his phone is not in his pocket.

“Shit, shit shit shit shit. Be right back Mrs. Lostren.” He hurries toward the front door, a dull panic vibrating at the back of his mind, in the pit of his stomach. Cam sits up, bleary and wild-haired, watching Joe frantic to leave.

“Joe? What’s wrong? Where are you going?” At least, she thought that’s what she said, it came out more of a, “Juh? Wharong? Wherygoing?” Joe didn’t understand her but threw out his answer, still plodding to the door.

“I left my phone in the car, I was supposed to call Tommy, I forgot.” The door shakes a little in its frame, Joe unintentionally slamming it behind him. He gets to the car and drops his

keys, his hands are shaking, he cannot think, he finally gets the door unlocked, retrieves his phone. Seven missed calls from Tommy. “Fuck!” He presses the return call button on his phone, his breathing is short, the line is ringing.

Conversations On the Phone

The line rings seven times before Tommy answers.

“Joe?” There is a sound of the haggard breathing when a man has been weeping.

“Tommy? Tommy, I’m so sorry. I drove an old friend home, her mom invited me in, I forgot to call, I’m so so sorry. Are you okay? You sound like you’ve been crying. Are you safe?” There is nothing but the sound of sniffles and modulated inhalings. “Tommy? You there?”

Tommy clears his throat. “Yeah, yeah, sorry. Uhm. I’m not really okay. I’m safe, at least in the sense that I’m not going to kill myself. But, uhm... I, I... I hurt myself. I just started punching myself in the face, I think I may have broken my nose.”

“Oh my god, I’m sorry Tommy. I’m glad you’re not suicidal. I’m getting in my car now, I’ll be home soon. Will you stay on the phone with me? Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“I’ll stay on the phone, I just don’t want to talk a whole lot. No, I think it’ll be okay. I’ll ask my doctor this week, I have an appointment.”

“Okay, okay good. Do you know why you had an episode? If you don’t want to talk about it now, we can wait. I just want to make sure we know for the future why it happened, so we can avoid it.” Joe’s phone has switched to the bluetooth, he’s belted, pulling out of the driveway. Cam comes running, stumbling barefoot down the driveway, shouting Joe’s name. She trips, skin on her hands and knees is swallowed by the pavement, she is crying now and bleeding, she holds her knees and rocks back and forth. Tommy is starting to respond, but Joe cuts him off.

“Shit, Tommy, I’ve got a crisis here I need to take care of real quick. Are you okay? Can you call my mom? You don’t have to tell her anything, just say I said to call her while you wait for me to get home.”

“Oh, right, right, okay. Uhm. Yeah. I can call your mom. Will you be home soon?” But Joe is now out of the car, Tommy hears the sound of the door closed, he is alone again, a weary voice spilling into the empty space of an abandoned car.

Conversations In a Bathroom

Joe picks up Cam gruffly, not bothering to ask, and heaves her back into the house, into the bathroom, Sophie is quick on their heels, taking up space in the small bathroom, everything is claustrophobic, cramped, Joe has set Cam on the toilet and turned on the bath. He stands to leave, but Sophie is blocking the way.

“Young man, what the hell is going on? Why is my daughter hurt? You abandoned her once, I won’t let you do it again. Now tell me what is going on.” Joe is panting from exertion, he stands with his hands on his hips, gasping. Cam has slowly climbed into the tub, fully clothed, lying with her head propped on the slant of the bath. She has stopped crying, is trying to shrink, be invisible, she doesn’t want to be in this fight, doesn’t want her mom to do this, Cam is an adult, isn’t she? She can address Joe on her own. But she is too slurred, too tired, with sharp stinging in the knees and hands. She cannot fend for herself and resigns to be the quiet observer. She hopes her mom is kind to Joe. Cam loves him, has loved him for many years, doesn’t care that he broke her heart. Joe begins to speak.

“I really don’t have time for this right now Mrs. Lostren. My cousin needs me, he just self-harmed, and I’m afraid he might take his own life. He’s tried before. I’ll come by tomorrow, I

promise, and I will explain everything. I tried to explain to Cam, but she fell asleep. Please, I'm begging you, let me go."

"Fine. You'd better return tomorrow. If you don't, I will hunt you down Joseph Martens."

"Yes ma'am, I totally understand." Sophie moves out of the doorway and Joe sprints outside, finds his car still idling in the driveway. When he gets in, the phone call with Tommy has ended. He pulls out of the driveway, unbelted, no time to care, and his tires lurch him speeding down the road to home. He attempts to call Tommy, but the line goes to voicemail after a solitary ring. Joe reasons with himself, Tommy must be on the phone with Mom, that's why he's not answering. He keeps driving, but he's got a millstone tied to his stomach, dragging his hope into depths of nothingness. He calls his mom, she answers after two rings.

"Joe, what's up? Everything okay?"

"Mom, did Tommy call you at all in the last thirty minutes?"

"No, why? Is he okay?"

"Shit. No, something happened, I'm not sure what, but he said he punched himself until his nose was broken. I was supposed to get home to take care of him sooner, but I had a crisis with Cam."

"Cameron Lostren? What were you doing with her? You two haven't spoken in years."

"She was at the party, long story, not important right now. Okay, I'm nearly home, I'm going to try to call Tommy again. Love you, bye." He ends the line before she can respond. Anxiety is upon him, a wide maw swallowing his heart, he fears the worst. Again, Tommy's phone transfers to voicemail after a single ring.

Conversations Indecipherable

Joe speeds up, he is now two blocks, one block from home, is turning onto his street. A car is coming toward him, he steers to the right side of the road. But a drunk Lisa Bernet is behind the wheel of that car, her eyes rolling, looking for an unmoving part of the world, she sees Joe's headlights and swerves to avoid him. She swerves the wrong direction, careens into the driver's side, his car flounders heavy into his neighbor's yard, lands upside down. Joe is thrown, ragdolled, suspended in the brief moments of anti-gravitation. He is likely concussed, probably some broken ribs, but he is frenzy, fury, kicks out the ruined windshield. Emerging from the holes punched out by his feet, he is cut, lacerations on the face, arms, legs, but he will not lose. Escape he finds, and he limps haphazard, screaming out Tommy's name. Lisa is unconscious, pushed back by the force of her airbags, the front of her car is accordion compressed, mass tangle of metal and faint smoke spreading into the dark of night. Joe's neighbor comes out, calls the police, tries to stop Joe in his tracks with a restrictive hug. Joe bites the man's arm,

"Fuck off, Sam, my cousin might be dead." Sam is too dazed to respond, he has not encountered the ferocity of Joe ever before. Joe makes it to his own yard, is nearing the porch, when Tommy comes out frightened, bearing a black eye and twisted nose, dried blood drawing a line down his shirt.

"Joe? Joe what the fuck happened? Why are you screaming my name?"

"I, I thought... I thought you might have tried to kill yourself. You didn't call my mom."

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry man, I fell asleep. What happened to you, you're all cut up and bleeding, here sit down." Tommy gently settles Joe on the steps of the porch, then notices the car wreck. A cop car has appeared, followed by an ambulance. Sam is talking with the cop, points at

Joe and Tommy, Tommy shouts for a medic, an EMT runs over. Tommy waves the woman off himself,

“No, no, I’m fine, *him*, he was in the accident.” The medic bends down and shines a light in Joe’s eyes.

“Can you tell me your name? Do you know where you are?” Joseph is silent, the world an unreality to him, people, colors, sounds, a mass blur. Tired, he thinks, I’m tired. A heavy head, one he is not sure belongs to him, attached but not connected to his body, droops slightly, the lids of his eyes – no a stranger’s eyes – shuttering closed. A shape, accompanied by a bright spot of what he believes is pure sunlight. The shape is buzzing, talking maybe. He thinks, Put out the sun, it’s going to make me blind! Poorly he tries to swat the shape and sun away, cannot get his arm to move. I cannot move, he thinks. I cannot move and the shape is blinding me with the sun, and another shape is touching some part of me, what is it called? Shoulder? No. Yes. I don’t know, who cares, I am being touched but I want to sleep.

Incapable of retaliating, Joe is placed on a gurney, loaded into the ambulance, now hurtles toward the hospital. Time is a meaningless word to him, as he slips toward the darkness of unconscious, he is pulled back into the harsh light of the ambulance, the great conflagration of shapes and colors and sounds, someone is holding his hand, it hurts. A shape is making a sound, the same sound, over and over, but he cannot decipher the language.

“Stay awake, Joe, you’ve gotta stay awake. Stay awake!” With every plea Tommy squeezes his hand, the EMT shines a light into his eyes. Soon, Joe thinks, soon they will be gone, all this opaque confusion, and I will sleep. After he’s prepped for surgery, they give him anesthetic, and he is finally allowed to sleep.

Conversations From a Hospital Bed

Joe wakes up, muddy-minded, his vision faintly blurred. He takes stock of his surroundings. It takes his brain longer than normal, but he processes that he's in a hospital bed, has an IV of some sort, is covered in bandages. Strange, he thinks, my right arm feels too heavy. A glance and he's aware now his arm is entombed in a cast. With his left hand he rubs his eyes, vision clearing, it is nighttime, the windows are dark. The room has a soft light on, and in a chair asleep, leaning against the bed, he discovers Cam. Curious. He had placed her in a tub just last night, right? Why am I in the hospital? What happened to me?

Several minutes of this internal discussion racquetballed around his skull, giving him a headache, he decides to stop, thinks maybe Cam will have the answers. The first attempt to utter her name his voice came splintered and screechy, a dilapidated door. The second attempt was clearer, but quiet, she would never rouse at a sound this low. A final panic-plan, he shakes his legs, jostling the bed frame upon which Cam has rested her arms, her head laid atop. Rumbling the bedframe works, Cam's head slips from its perch, she comes to groggy, squints. Rubs her eyes, notices the open eyes of Joe, smiles and offers a sad hug, a light squeezing of his legs.

“It's good to see you awake. How are you feeling?”

“What happened?” She leans in,

“What?” Joe grimaces, tries again, voice strained in projective effort,

“What... happened?” Cam understands now, asks a clarifier,

“Do you not remember?” He shakes his head, tries not to wince.

“Oh. You've been asleep for, like, a whole day. The night of the party you drove me home, I chased you and fell while you were trying to get back to Tommy. You took me inside, put me in the tub, talked to my mom, and left. You didn't belt yourself, plus speeding, and, uh..

Well, Lina Bertram, incredibly inebriated, hit the driver's side door, flipped your car. You were so worried Tommy had attempted suicide you kicked out your windshield and limped to the house. Tommy is fine, got his nose fixed up and some bandages, he'll be okay. He's mostly worried about you. Everyone's come to visit you – Tommy, your parents, Dan and the gang, Mom and I. I was the only one who wanted night shift tonight, so... here we are."

Joe sits in quietude, pondering, mentally gesticulating for a response. It takes several tries before he can mumble out a coherent response.

"Is Lisa okay?"

"Yeah, just has wicked whiplash. She'll be fine, got her license suspended though."

"Thank you. I'm sorry. I should've told you long ago about Tommy. I was... unjustly embarrassed, afraid you would be freaked out by the situation. I realize how wrong I was. I'm glad we met at the party, it's so nice to see you again. This may be on account of the meds, or a previously unknown reserve of confidence, but I need to tell you something I wanted to tell you a long time ago." He pauses, wanting to do this right, but awkward in the asking, "I would grab your hand, can you..." Cam smiles and reaches across his midriff, carefully, to hold his uncasted hand. She nods.

"Cameron Lostren, I love you." Cam loses her repose, collapsing, her face buried in the bandages covering his stomach, sobbing. Joe is frightened, thinks he's done something wrong, but he's also in pain.

"Cam, Cam, please, get off, you're hurting me. And getting my bandages all wet." Cam shoots up.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry Joe, I forgot, oh god.” She is crying still, body bent over the bed, her hand still clasping his, she wipes her eyes with the other hand. Joe has a face of concern, she laughs soft, smiles, apologizes.

“Joe, I love you too. And I’m sorry I was too afraid to tell you. I have to confess something as well. Josie wasn’t hit by a drunk driver, she... she killed herself.” Fresh tears cascade, waterfalling over the curves of her face, dripping down her nose, sliding onto her neck. Joe offers imperfect and sincere efforts of empathy, she soon slows the crying to an occasional drip.

And so, a few minutes later, she climbs up onto the bed, careful not to put pressure on anything broken or bandaged, lies beside Joe, makes her body conform to his gently. She kisses his cheek. They sleep.

**“INTERNAL MEMO: ERROR DETECTED IN C.O.L. BATCH 19. RECYCLE OR
TERMINATE.”**

We were all sitting in the living room, Mom and Dad watching the news, my sister and I on our phones following the updates on Twitter or Reddit. Outside, our subdivision sounded like chaos – screaming, mostly. We had lived so long in this bubble of wary thought, had watched the hand of the doomsday clock inch toward midnight; in my head, the death of mankind would be a twilight of humanity, a final curtain closing and impossible to see beyond. The future would remain forever in darkness and mystery, glittering in the void of what can never be known. In short, the predictive labor of science fiction and apocalypse films had passed from prophecy to reality.

Others, like my parents, saw it as a gracious dawn. This was God – or the Earth, or *something beyond* – vindicating nature for the crimes of millennia. Mom had a fond habit of saying, even before today, that humans had to suffer, to be held accountable for their crimes, before we could get on with the flourishing of people. Dad said it was realigning the scales of time, or something bullshit like that. My sister and I, well, I don't know if we saw eye to eye on any of it, but we shared the burden of knowing our death would arrive soon, indiscriminate and brutal.

If anyone is reading this, in whatever oblique world is left behind, you probably know what happened. You probably know how it started, too, who pushed the buttons and why. All I know now is that a barrage of nuclear warheads have started landing all over the world, targeting major cities mostly. The TV shows clips from yesterday when New York and Detroit became

desolate and barren lands resembling prehistoric craters. The nomenclature of the internet has decided to name these disasters Death Pits; in my humble opinion, a very stupid name.

Of course, there are millions of panicked people swarming for bunkers. I'm sure the Doomsday Preppers crowd is thrilled with twisted satisfaction, screaming, "See? We weren't crazy, we were *right!*" as they starve slowly in their silly bunkers or succumb to radioactivity and illness. Weird time to assert the ego, I think, but technically they were right.

We live a suburb not too far outside Chicago. No one knows when Chicago will go. Mom and Dad decided we ought to stay inside and wait for death; we have only a moderate sum of money – all those years of saving wasted – and it wouldn't be nearly enough to get us anywhere outside the blast, or into some exclusive bunker. Our death is coming, and so we face it in the luxury of modern comfort.

Tara, my sister, took the suggestion with complaint. By her views, at least we should be *trying* to save our lives, even if the haunted knowledge of imminent failure comes falling from the sky. I'm mostly in shock still, we all are, watching the collapse of the world in real time and knowing it comes for us, yet we know not when. Death approaches like a thief in the night.

I spent most of yesterday intermittently sobbing or going numb. I slept only by the grace of strong sleeping meds Dad uses for insomnia. Basically, anything in the house was free game now. Tara got out the whiskey and kept drinking from the bottle until she passed out. I woke this morning to the sound of her vomiting and groaning from our shared bathroom.

I didn't know what else to do, so I decided to write this little journal. I'm saving it on a hard drive which I will bury in the backyard and hope someone will find it. But, if not, at least I can die with something left of me to inherit the future world.

...

Mr. Steel finished reading the small document. Looking up at his small class of pupils, he asked, “Can anyone tell me what happened next to the Carther family?” A small child raised his hand.

“Yes, Arthur?”

“Well, uhm, the book says their neighbor – oh, what was his name?”

Another student spat out, “Michael Darson!”

“Yes, right, Michael Darson found Dennis digging a hole in the backyard, the one he was using to bury the hard drive, and Michael thought it was buried treasure or maybe some kind of bunker – no one really knows – but he shot Dennis in the spine, which made Dennis fall into the hole with the hard drive. We assume Dennis died shortly after, but his body and the earth seemed to protect the hard drive for discovery later,” Arthur trailed off.

“Okay, correct, very good Arthur, Michael Darson killed Dennis. Can anyone tell me what happened to the rest of the family? Sally?”

A small girl, barely three feet in height, spoke quietly from the back of the class.

“Michael Darson proceed to break into the house and shoot Tara and the parents. Within a few minutes of the killing spree, the nuclear warhead hit Chicago and destroyed everything in the area.”

Mr. Steel was nodding his head when a hand went up. It was Jimmy, the newest Creature of Love issued by the Ministry of Creation. “Do you have a question, Jimmy?”

When Jimmy spoke his voice had a palpable tremor, and it cracked several times. He had just started the Become Man stage of his development. “How... how do we know all that stuff, about Michael Darson? Wasn't everything but the hard drive wiped out?” The class grew tense,

and the other students flashed sideways glances at one another before diverting their eyes downward in shame. Mr. Steel's face took on a grim, unreadable hardness.

“Have you forgotten your training already, Jimmy? We do not question the methods of the Ministry of History. If you want to know how they do it, you'll just have to join the M.o.H. when you finish Foundations School.” Mr. Steel turned toward the board-screen to start the next lesson when Jimmy's voice settled on the class like dust.

“I can't join the M.o.H. My cellular programming is for the Division of Hard Labor. After Foundations, I will work the Agri-Eco Center for Food until I die. No one else will tell me. Please, Mr. Steel, I just want to know.”

“Jimmy,” Mr. Steel was still facing the board-screen, “I'm disappointed. Your foolish desire for information you do not need has cost us a future Hard Laborer. Oh well, I suppose this is a good practice opportunity for our Security Team trainees. Bryin, Grace, would you please escort Jimmy to the Moleculizer? Thank you. Now, class, on to Arithmetic.”

As Mr. Steel continued to lecture, Bryin and Grace – large, muscular students – forced Jimmy out of the classroom and toward the Moleculizer. Everyone pretended not to hear the trembling screams for forgiveness.

The gate to the Moleculizer chamber was manned by a tall, hairy man wearing the distinguished blue and orange colors of the Security Team uniform. He was staring at a palm-screen when the children approached. Looking up, the three children all noticed a distinct and frightening look in his eyes. Without a word, he pressed a button on his wrist-screen that opened the doors to the Moleculizer and walked to the edge of the platform. The kids followed slowly.

The Moleculizer was a massive ball of, essentially, contained nuclear fission. It was what powered all of The Compound of United Freedom. Whenever a person failed to maintain the

rules of the Compound assigned to them at birth, they were thrown to the Molecularizer. A type of “recycling,” as they called it, wherein even failed Creatures of Love could offer something to the Compound by recycling their matter. But before Byrin and Grace could jettison their prisoner, the guard turned and grabbed Jimmy and threw him over the edge of the platform.

“You two are Security Team trainees, right?” They both straightened their posture and looked proudly at the guard.

“Yessir,” they said in unison.

“Good, come watch. Your first Molecularization is something special to behold.” The children walked toward the edge with excitement and an indiscernible twinge of sadness. They had liked Jimmy. He had been such a nice boy. As they peeked over the railing, the guard suddenly shoved them over. His laughter echoed as the kids fell screaming to their death.

The guard locked the gate to the Molecularizer and headed toward the classroom. He stopped in the doorway and spoke to Mr. Steel.

“Jesus, Michael, you could’ve been a little neater.” The floor was littered with the dead bodies of the other students, and Michael stood over them with a gun in hand and a smile.

“True, but the Molecularizer is too clean. I wanted to see what it was like when my great-great-grandad did it.”

“Have any of the kids ever figured out you’re the descendant of Michael Darson?”

“Once I had a student break into the Ministry of History to find out. He approached me about it quietly after class, so I killed him when the other children left. But usually the training works well enough that students don’t ask for information they don’t need. Leave this mess for the Sanitation Team. Let’s get lunch.”

TRIAL BY FIRE

“Hey, Doc.” Joshua settled into the soft fabric of a green loveseat.

“How’s it going? Did you have an okay week?” Dr. Newthum quietly removed his glasses, wiped them with the edge of his shirt, and placed them back upon his sharp nose.

“Uhm, yeah, I guess. Toni is, well, Toni, but she seems to have a better grasp on things.”

“What do you mean? Better grasp on what?” Dr. Newthum’s hand was poised for notetaking.

Joshua ran both his hands through his hair, eyes widening while he let out an exhausted sigh. “I don’t know, I guess, I guess... I guess she’s, like, moving on? We’re both still sad, of course, but it feels like maybe she’s starting to let it go. She’s finally laughing again. Used to be I could make her laugh with hardly any effort. Until yesterday I hadn’t heard her laugh in, like, two months.”

“Two months? I thought the incident occurred,” Dr. Newthum looked at his notes, “twenty-five days ago.”

“Sheesh, you don’t miss a detail, do you? But yeah, if you say so, I guess it just feels like two months ago.” Josh shook his head.

“Grief and stress can have a strange impact on our understanding of time, especially without proper sleep. Have you been sleeping okay?”

“Yeah, I never really had a problem sleeping, it’s Toni who’s up all night. I suppose it doesn’t matter too much, though, ‘cause she sleeps during the day while I’m at work.”

“Does it upset you in any way, knowing she gets to sleep while you’re at work?”

Josh stared at the therapist. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“My apologies, Joshua, I didn’t mean anything by it. Sometimes, in situations where we are dealing with a heavy burden, we can unintentionally harbor anger at others who seem to have an easier time with the same burden. Think, say... the death of a cousin. For some it’s sad, but not too terrible, as they didn’t have a substantial relationship with their cousin for whatever reason. For others, though, it can be devastating. If you and a sibling lost the same cousin, but only one of you was upset by it, it may cause some tension between you, right?”

Josh was still for a minute. “Yeah, okay, I think I see what you mean. Like, like how sometimes I get really upset when I lose a game, but Toni doesn’t care at all? I hate that. Drives me up a wall.”

“That’s an interesting example, but yes. You get annoyed in those moments because you think everyone else should be as invested in the game as you. If she were as invested, it would probably make losing more palatable – because you would know the stakes were fair on both sides. But if she wins, and she doesn’t care, it feels like a kind of injustice.”

“Yes, exactly! Thank you! I could really use you around when we play games.”

“So, do you feel annoyed now? With the present circumstances?”

“A little maybe? I don’t know. I don’t think so. I think it’s more like I get annoyed that it’s all she wants to talk about. I get home from work and make dinner, and usually we catch up on the day while we cook, but now after I explain my day, all she talks about is the miscarriage. And she cries every time. Which, I love my wife, you know? I don’t want her to cry. I try my best to cheer her up, take her mind off it, or even talk about it if she refuses to change the subject. But I feel like I’m running out of patience. Is she ever going to move on? It’s sad, of course, but it’s not like we can’t try again.” Josh’s left leg bounced constantly as he spoke.

“Okay, first things first, yes, she will get over it, but it’s going to take time. However long she needs is however long she needs. I know that may be a frustrating answer, but to some extent you just have to wait. She needs to process it on her own terms. Have you made any headway in getting her to try therapy?”

“No. Every time I try, she immediately changes topics or gets angry. With everything being so tense and hard already, I usually give up.” Josh’s voice began to soften, and he spoke less audibly. Dr. Newthum strained to catch his last few words.

“Hmm. Alright. Well, try when you can if you think it will help. She could definitely benefit from working with someone. In the meantime, focus on you. How are *you* processing it?”

“I think I’m getting better. I mean, like I said, it’s sad, but I tend to view it as a terrible thing that no one could help. It’s no one’s fault, so there’s no point getting overly torn up about it. In any case, I have work, and that keeps my mind and hands busy. I think my grief was mostly the worst when it first happened, only because we had such high expectations. We tried to do everything right, we never thought it would happen to us, but then it did. The shock got me, I think, more than anything.”

“That’s good! At least you are making your own improvements, and that’s always a good place to start. My recommendation, or at least one recommendation, is to be honest with Toni. Tell her that you’ve moved on, or are at least ready to, and that you’ll be there for her until she’s also ready to move on. While you’re waiting, try something new with Toni. Perhaps part of her difficulty right now is that the pattern of her life is the same, so she’s got all this free time to think about what happened over and over. And of course she also had to deal with the physical discomfort of the event, not just the emotional. Getting her to get out of her routine and in a new

place doing something new could really help get her head in a clearer space. It wouldn't hurt to try."

"Oh, yeah, that's a good idea. But what new thing?" Josh's leg-bounce slowed to a less intense tempo.

"That's entirely up to you. Perhaps there's something the two of you used to do together earlier in your relationship that, for one reason or another, has fallen lower in your priorities?"

"Oh, yeah, easy: pottery. We met taking a pottery class in college, to satisfy our culture credit." Josh laughed at the memory.

Dr. Newthum smiled. "Looks like you've got a good plan."

...

"When can I take my blindfold off? Josh, where in the world are you taking me?" Toni was sitting in the passenger seat, arms folded, a mild frown tugging at the corners of her mouth.

At a stoplight, Josh glanced at his wife and smiled to himself. "Don't worry, babe, we're almost there." The light turned green, and Josh put his blinker on as they drove through the intersection. "Okay, we're about to turn into the place, you can take your blindfold off."

"Finally!" Toni threw off the makeshift blindfold – one of Josh's spare ties, peppered with coffee stains, found bunched up in the back seat of his car. Josh parked outside Trial by Fire, a local ceramics studio catering to beginners with little-to-no experience. "Wait, are we... Are we about to do pottery?" Toni looked at Josh, and he grinned at the shocked excitement on her face.

"Yeah! It was Dr. Newthum's idea."

"Oh. Your therapist. What, is he giving you dating tips now?" Toni crossed her arms again.

“No. Sorry, that’s not what I meant. I meant he suggested we try doing something new or fun, something we haven’t done in a while. Coming *here*, to do pottery, was my idea. Figured we could reminisce about Mr. Nelson’s class. Plus, this place is for beginners, so we can show up the local wine moms.”

A smile cracked Toni’s lips, and she unbelted herself. “I still don’t think much of Dr. Newthum, but hell yeah, let’s own some moms!” The two of them laughed for a few moments before stepping out of the car.

Contrary to their expectations, there were no wine moms in residence at Trial by Fire. In fact, there was no one there except an elderly man with wispy, bright-white curls tightly bunched along his hairline, though he was balding a little. He introduced himself as Jeffrey Conrad, and Josh bit back the urge to whisper, “More like Friar Conrad.” Whatever appearances suggested, Mr. Conrad was brilliant with clay; the shop was filled with rough wooden shelves (Mr. Conrad proudly claimed he installed all the shelves himself), and each shelf housed four or five ceramic items of immaculate quality.

After a quick tour, and many thanks from Mr. Conrad for their business, they found themselves in an open room with two worktables, a stack of boxes containing various clays, an industrial sink, and three pottery wheels. A small side room contained a bathroom and lockers to store personal items along with a row of dusty, clay-covered aprons. Apron-adorned, small cups of water at hand, the two set to work on their clay at the wheel. Mr. Conrad had intended to provide instruction, but Toni and Josh explained and demonstrated their experience on the wheel.

“Mr. Conrad, you should join us! Tell us how you came to own this beautiful little shop.” Toni requested this while intently focused on centering her clay. It took some effort, being a few years out of practice, but she managed it with elegance.

“Thank you, Mrs. Adicur –“

“Please, call me Toni,” she said.

“My apologies. Thank you, Toni, but I’m afraid today I need to do the more boring, logistical stuff. I’ve got some phone calls to make, and I’m still working out the details of an upcoming art show.”

“Oh, will you be showcasing some of your stuff?” Josh asked.

“No, no, I’m retired. There are some local kids who have a real love and knack for pottery, but they can’t afford to throw much, if at all. On Thursdays I close the shop and let them work here for free, in exchange for their company and youthful wisdom.” Mr. Conrad chuckled to himself. “Anyways, Jarrell, one of the older boys, he’s graduating high school soon. I’m trying to get him a spot at a show, maybe help him get a scholarship or something.”

Toni had stopped working the clay, pausingly enthralled by Mr. Conrad’s story. “Wow, that’s incredible. Well, I don’t want to keep you from working. Thank you for all you do, Mr. Conrad. It’s truly nice to meet you.” She smiled at the old gentleman, and he smiled back.

“You’re very welcome, Toni. I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if or when you’re ready to work with glazing and such, though you’ll have to wait for the clay to air dry before we can get it all squared away for the kiln. Holler if you need anything.” With a final bow and polite smile, Mr. Conrad left them alone.

“What a pleasant man he is!” Toni half-whispered.

Josh chuckled. “Yeah, he’s pretty rad. I like him. What are you going to make?” he said.

“I think I’m just going to make some cylinders, maybe some mugs? I don’t know. I need to get back into the groove before I settle on a big project idea.”

“Fair point. I think I’m going to make bowls. I never got good at bowls, too heavy, always collapsed under their own weight.”

“You make your walls too thick,” she said. Josh, eyes and hands affixed to the clay on the wheel, grunted in response.

A few hours passed. Josh threw a few bowls, all of which collapsed, and Toni threw a beautiful cylinder. None of their products would win an award, but it was good enough to refamiliarize them with the methodology of clay work. When Mr. Conrad returned, he was surprised by their efforts, and encouraged the couple to return. Toni assured him return visits would be happening, which made Mr. Conrad and Toni smile together.

...

Later that evening Toni and Josh had sex for the first time since the miscarriage. It was fun and sexy, two features their life had been lacking for some weeks, and they both encountered a sense of gratification in one another. Toni was sitting with her back against the headboard wearing a soft, yellow robe and sipping some wine. Josh was on his back, head propped up on his arm, the other arm busy flipping through streaming services.

“Josh?”

“Yeah baby, what’s up?”

“Do you think it’d be okay if I went back tomorrow? To Trial by Fire? I really loved being there today. And Mr. Conrad is such a lovely man.”

“I think it’d be fine. I’m sure Mr. Conrad would enjoy your company, and you’ve got the time. Better spent there working than at home doing nothing, right?”

“Hey now! I don’t do nothing! I keep this house very clean, and I keep your clothes folded and (mostly) stain free!”

Josh dropped the TV remote and sat up, casually hugging his knees while he turned to look at his wife, laughing. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I wasn’t implying that you do literally nothing. I just meant it might be helpful to get out of the house, get back into something you love doing. The house will be fine.” He gently motioned for her wine glass, she obliged, and after a quick sip he placed the glass on their nightstand. Josh leaned in for a kiss, and the sweetness slowly progressed into another entwining.

...

Weeks went by and Toni spent most days at the studio while Josh worked. She and Mr. Conrad seemed to click in a way Josh couldn’t understand, but he was happy; she was getting back to her old self. It seemed the miscarriage, though horrid, was a pain whose silhouette was daily losing its edge, blending more and more into the miasma of everyday disappointments.

One evening, post-coitus, Josh hazarded a sensitive question. “Hey, honey. I know we haven’t talked about it much, but the last few weeks you’ve been having me wear a condom, which I’m totally fine with. I figured it was because it was too much to try again. But I never officially asked, so, now I’m asking. Do you want to try again? Or do you want to keep using condoms?” Josh was sitting on the edge of the bed, facing away from his wife, leg bouncing rigorously, when he asked this question. There was considerable quiet before she answered. Her tone was calmer than he expected, as though there was no pain behind the words.

“There’s no need to try again. I’ve found what I needed. But I’m still not ready for all the physical aspects of pregnancy. I need more time before I can endure the risk of another miscarriage,” she said.

“I totally get that, no worries. Safe sex it is! But, uh, what do you mean by ‘I’ve found what I needed’?”

“Oh. I mostly meant that I was looking for something to give me a better sense of meaning. I was preparing to be a mom – that’s all I want – but I was forbidden, for some reason. Now, I’ve got pottery. It’s... like a baby, to an extent. It takes time and dedication, love and care, but also discipline and patience. I mean, I still *want* to be a mom someday. But I think I can wait a little longer. We’re young, we’ve got time. And, honestly, working in the studio is so much fun! I haven’t enjoyed something quite as much since we graduated.”

Josh nodded. “Okay, cool. Makes sense. I’m really glad you’ve found something so valuable in pottery. I haven’t been in a while; what are you working on?”

She gave Josh a sly look. “It’s a surprise! You’re not ready to see it yet!”

“*I’m* not ready to see it? I’m always ready, baby!”

She laughed and shook her head. “You know what I mean. It’s not done yet! What if you don’t like it?”

“I’m going to like it,” he said.

“I promise I’ll show it to you when I finish it. Here,” she offered her little finger, “I pinky promise!”

Grabbing hold of her pinky with his own, Josh put on a mask of ironic seriousness. “You better keep your promise, Miss. You know what happens if you break a pinky promise, right?”

“Oh, I didn’t know there were consequences. Please, sir, fill me in on the rules and regulations of a proper pinky promise.”

“Thank you for taking me seriously, ma’am. So many people forget the life-and-death severity of a pinky promise. Well, maybe not life-and-death. But, if you break your promise, I must break your pinky in return. It’s in the Code of Oaths, a book written by Mr. Pinky himself,

inventor of the pinky promise.” They tried to maintain their solemn acting, but the two soon broke into fits of giggles.

...

Another month passed, and the heat of June began its early assault. Heat simmered mirages from black asphalt and concrete, wardrobes flipped from light jackets and pants to shorts and tank tops, people arrived at work sticky with sweat. It was also time for Josh to see the final product of Toni’s countless hours in the studio.

“Okay, tonight after work, go home and change and then meet me at the studio,” Toni said to Josh, who was sitting at the kitchen table, bent over to tie his shoes.

“Anything specific you want me to wear? Casual nice, or nice nice?”

“What’s nice nice?”

“Like, a funeral, or a wedding, maybe a trip to the opera? Super formal. Like full suit.”

“Oh, nothing like that. Just some jeans and a nice shirt.”

He sat up. “Jeans? Can I wear shorts?”

“I, who is intimately familiar with your wardrobe, know for a fact you have no shorts that would, by any definition, fit under the category of ‘nice.’ So, no. No shorts,” she said.

“Okay, fair enough. I’m excited! You’ve worked so long at this, and it’s been so good for you, for us. Gotta go. Love you.” He planted a soft kiss on Toni’s cheek and started walking toward the door. Before he got all the way out, Toni pinched his butt and raced upstairs in laughter as he shook his head and closed the door behind him.

...

When Josh pulled into the parking lot, it was still sunny outside. No other car was in the lot, except Toni’s. When he reached the glass door, Toni let him in. She was dressed in a

comfortable sundress with a dusty apron over it. She smiled at Josh, and they embraced briefly before she turned around. “Untie my apron, will you?” she asked. Josh lightly tugged on a loose string and the knot fell apart. She untied the midriff knot and threw the bundled-up apron into a locker.

“Where’s Mr. Conrad?” Josh asked.

“I forgot to tell you! Tonight is the art show at the community center. Mr. Conrad is there with Jarrell and the other students. He said I could borrow the place for tonight.”

“Wow, really? I knew you two got along, but I didn’t realize you were so close,” Josh said.

“I guess you could say that. I would say more that we... understand each other. He really helped me work through some stuff.”

“Like what?” Josh couldn’t imagine what she and Mr. Conrad could have in common enough to work through some stuff together.

“Like... sacrifices. I wanted to be a mom so bad. But now I have all this,” she gestured around the work room, “and I can still be a mom. All because of a miscarriage and your therapist. Mr. Conrad helped me see all that. Did you know he used to be a magician? But enough chit-chat! Close your eyes.” Before Josh could answer, Toni grabbed his left hand and placed it over his eyes. “Perfect. Hold on to my elbow, we’re going to walk into the kiln room.” Guided by her arm, eyes covered, Josh was thrilled. His life didn’t house many surprises, but he’d been anticipating this for weeks. Toni stepped away from Josh to open the large front-loading kiln, the door opening with a mild hiss.

“You can open your eyes now,” she whispered. Josh opened his eyes. Before him was a kiln loaded with small sculptures of babies. Maybe two dozen in total, they lined the shelves of

the kiln in an obvious order of evolution: the first babe sculptures were crude at best, recognizable more by their proximity and similarity to the clearer sculptures than by any artistic merit; each baby was a little more refined than the previous iteration. There was one spot on the highest shelf, just to the right, with an empty space. Still in shock, Josh didn't notice that Toni had stepped much closer to him. He looked down to find her placing a baby sculpture in his hand. It was immaculate – with the exception of the orange-brown tint of its clay-colored skin, the baby was, at least to Josh's knowledge, completely anatomically correct. It was terrifying and awe-inspiring.

“See that empty space up there, at the top?” she asked.

Josh nodded dumbly, still too shocked to think of something to say.

“This is the last and best baby. I left the spot open for you, so you could put it there. Will you do that for me?”

“Uhm. Yeah, okay. This is... this is something,” Josh said. He stepped into the kiln. There was hardly enough space for him, but enough to maneuver around and put the final baby in its spot. He made every effort to avoid knocking over any of the babies. He placed the baby and turned just in time to find that Toni had closed the door of the kiln.

Josh tried to laugh, thinking it was a joke, but the sound came out more as a choke or gurgle. “Honey? Toni, baby? Nice joke, ha ha. Please let me out now.” He discovered there was no handle on the inside of the kiln, so he began to shove against the door with his body. “Toni? Toni?! This isn't funny anymore! Please, let me out! You're scaring me!”

Outside the locked kiln, Toni was standing with her arms crossed, crying. “I'm sorry,” she said, but too softly to be heard over Josh's shouting.

Mr. Conrad stepped into the kiln room at a measured pace, pausing to give Toni a small pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, dear. I know it’s hard. But now you will have a child who will never die. Isn’t that something? Before, Josh *and* your baby would have died. This way you suffer only the loss of a husband. And in return you have a beautiful, perfect child that will never leave your side, will never betray you. Sacrifice, my dear friend. Sacrifice is the price of love. We don’t have much time, however. We must disappear.”

Tears still alive and running down her face, Toni crossed her arms and allowed Mr. Conrad to guide her out of the room; he flipped off the lights as they passed through the doorway. The windowless room was dark, except for the soft glow of the kiln beginning to heat itself. There was a dull and erratic thumping pattern coming from the kiln as Josh failed to break down the door, relentlessly bashing his body into it, a venture made meaningless by the lack of space. Screaming erupted, cries of terror and confusion, as the final ceramic child came to life. At first, Josh’s screams were coherent phrases, words expressing deep hurt and exclamations. But as the baby began to feed for the first time, Josh’s screams lost coherence and language, and he was swallowed by the chaotic miasma of an esoteric crime.

...

Four days later, on a Thursday, after a 9-1-1 call from Jarrell, the police discovered the dead body of one Josh Adicur. He was found collapsed in a heap inside a kiln. Strangely, there were tiny bite marks all over his body, with some portions of his body missing flesh altogether, and he suffered severe burns. The coroner claimed he died of asphyxiation before the heat set in. An empty spot on a shelf was largely ignored, noted only by one detective. Every other space of

the kiln was full of clay babies, some grotesque and others more life-like, but for the one empty spot.

Detective Nathan Santos scoured the details of the case over and over, but no one knew what happened to Mr. Conrad and Toni Adicur. They just ceased to exist. No bank statements, no credit cards, no phone calls or digital messages, no known witnesses, nothing. Family members and friends were stunned and heartbroken. Detective Santos considered every angle, but there was no lead. Nothing but the absence of something.

THE PAINTER

He was too engrossed in his work to hear the first knock. The second, louder knock was scarcely acknowledged until it was joined by a voice.

“Mr. Dranfult? Please open up. This is the FBI,” the voice said.

The FBI? What could the FBI want with him? Best not to keep them waiting. He set his palette and brush down, rinsed his hands briefly in the sink, and cast a quick glance over his newest painting; it was coming along nicely. Trudging down the stairs, he opened the studio door to two men in full suits.

“Hi, uhm. I’m Collin. How can I help you?” the painter asked.

“Hello, Mr. Dranfult. I’m Agent Torrance and this is Agent Friedman,” Agent Friedman nodded at Collin. “We’re going to need you to come with us.”

“What? Why? Have I done something illegal?” Collin began to close the door without thinking. Catching himself, he reopened it to a greater fullness.

“No, we just have some questions concerning your mother,” Agent Torrance said.

“My mom? What about her? She died when I was born, I don’t know anything about her.”

The two agents looked at one another briefly. Then Agent Torrance turned back to Collin and answered, “We can’t give you any answers right now. You’ll have to trust us. We’ll explain more once we’re in more private settings. Please, come with us now, or we’ll be forced to bring you.” At this final comment, he unbuttoned and pulled aside his suit coat, revealing a holstered firearm.

Collin took a step back. “Woah, dude. Relax, no need to threaten me. I’ll go willingly, just give me a second to put up my paint supplies, I’m in the middle of a project.” He went to close the door when Agent Torrance’s hand struck the front of it.

“We can wait, but we’re coming inside.”

“What the fuck? Do you have a warrant?”

This seemed to dampen the agents’ spirit. “Not yet, but we will,” was all Agent Torrance said.

“Jesus, man, you guys should learn some better diplomacy. I’m not, like, hiding anything. You can come in, I guess, just... you know, you could ask first, demand second.” Collin shook his head and began walking up the stairs, calling back over his shoulder, “Close the door when you come in, please. And, preferably, don’t touch my shit.”

As he untied and hung up his paint-splattered apron and stored his materials, the agents moved about the room with a solemn presence, arms clasped behind their backs as they scoured the various canvases strewn across the loft-styled room. Agent Friedman paused before Collin’s work-in-progress.

“Mr. Dranfult, may I ask what this is you’re currently working on?” Agent Friedman asked.

“What?” He turned to see what the agent was looking at. “Oh, yeah, that. I don’t know yet. Obviously, it’s a face, but only half done.”

“Why does it look like it’s screaming?” the agent asked.

“Great question, wish I had a good answer. It’s just a tormented person, I think. It’s hard to describe my process. I just started with a basic facial structure and what you see just sort of.

Happened.” Collin shoved his hands into his pockets and withdrew his keys. “Anyways, I’m good to go.”

Collin followed the agents down the stairs, locking the door behind him. The agents instructed him to meet them at a local police station, where they had an interrogation room prepped for their private use. Agent Torrance flexed his concealed-carry again as a warning against Collin getting any funny ideas about trying to flee. Collin shook his head and pointed to his parking spot, about half-a-block down. “That’s my car. You can follow me. I’m trying to comply, so maybe chill the fuck out, yeah?” Returning his hands to his pockets, he started walking to his car.

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Once in the room, the agents seemed to relax a little. They offered Collin food and drink, though limited by a vending-machine menu, so he snacked on Cheez-Its and sipped from a bottle of water. Both agents removed and draped their suit coats over the backs of their hard metal chairs, rolled up their sleeves, and sat down.

Collin noticed Agent Friedman had a tattoo on his inner left forearm. “What’s that, Mr. Friedman?” nodding to the man’s arm as he spoke.

“None of your business,” was the curt response.

“Right, cool, still choosing the asshole angle, got it. Let’s get into it, then, so I can go back to painting.” Agent Friedman crossed his arms and Agent Torrance smiled at this statement.

Agent Torrance was the speaker, clearly, as he led with, “Tell us everything you know about your mom’s work.”

“What work? Dude, I’m telling you, I don’t know anything about my mom. Why are you even asking me? Go ask my dad, he married her.” Collin sighed and looked at the paint stains on

his hands. “Look, guys, as I said, my mom died when I was born. My dad *never* talked about her, made a point not to. It’s always been a beef between us, but he’s never budged my whole life.

Whatever my mom did before I was born is a total mystery to me.”

“Surely, though, you talked about your mom with your grandparents?” Agent Torrance said.

“I *tried*, yeah. But I’ve never met my mom’s parents, my dad wouldn’t let me. And, whatever their deal is, they never tried to communicate with me. Maybe they struck some kind of deal with my dad after mom died, maybe they didn’t like my dad, maybe they didn’t like me because they thought it was my fault she died. My dad seemed to take that last line of thinking. I’m telling you, sir, I don’t have a fucking clue about my mom. Whatever explanations you can come up with for *why* she was such a secret kept from me, I’ve probably thought of myself. A lifetime is a long time to think about your mom, especially when you’re the only kid you know without one.” Collin rubbed the mist from his eyes with a sleeve.

“What about your dad’s parents? They didn’t have anything to say?” Torrance said.

“All they said was that she would have loved me. You know, general bullshit people say to make a lonely kid feel better. When I was really little, I tried to ask them stuff about her, but they would always say I should ask my dad. So, I did. And my dad said it didn’t matter, she was dead, and I should just get over it like him.” Collin’s leg began tapping. He crossed his arms and looked into his lap, focusing on his breathing.

The agents shared a look between them. “Okay, Collin. I get this is tough. When’s the last you heard from your father?” Torrance asked.

“What?” He looked up, distracted. “Oh. Uhm. I think, probably a few months ago? I don’t know. He called to say happy birthday.”

“Did he sound unusual to you?”

“No, not really. His normal, cold self. All he said was, ‘Happy birthday. I hope it’s not too bad for you, going forward,’ and I just told him thanks and hung up. Why?”

Torrance clasped his hands on the table and stared at them for a moment, thinking. Friedman spoke instead. “Collin, your dad killed himself a week ago.”

Collin stopped tapping his foot and straightened up in his chair. “What did you say? He killed himself?”

Torrance refused to look up from his hands, but added, “Yes, Collin. Your father is dead.”

“But... why?! Did he leave a note? What happened?” Collin’s foot resumed tapping at a higher tempo.

“It’s... well, it’s complicated. Do you want to talk about it now, or wait a bit?” This came from Friedman.

“What the fuck do you care, asshole? You treat me like some villain, threaten me with violence and a warrant, and now you want to be considerate? Fuck you.” Collin’s nostrils flared and his eyes grew wet. “Fuck you!” he shouted, slamming his hands against the table, accidentally crushing the half-eaten bag of Cheez-Its and spewing crackers all over the table and floor. “Goddammit, Dad, goddammit!” He curled his head into his chest, bringing his arms up and over his face, pulling at his own hair. “Fucking stupid old man, stupid stupid old man,” he fell into fits of sobs with a continual mumble of curses against his dead father.

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Several minutes passed in a quiet punctuated with the muffled whimpers and shoulder-heaving of a crying man. Collin had his arms crossed on the edge of the table, his face pressed

into his sleeves. At some point Friedman left and returned with a box of tissues, which he slid across the table toward Collin; it gently collided with his arm and stopped. Collin looked up as Friedman settled back into his uncomfortable chair, crossing his arms again. They shared eye contact for a few moments before Friedman looked down at his arm.

“It’s the twin towers and a name. That’s what my tattoo is.” Friedman said this like he was trying to swallow syrup, and extended his arm for Collin to see. Sure enough, on his forearm were the towers of the World Trade Center silhouetted against a glorious New York City skyline. Below it was the name Gary Laister. “Gary was my cousin. He died that day.”

Collin slowly sat up, pulling a few tissues from the box to blow his nose and wipe down his face. “I’m sorry. That sucks. But why are you telling me?”

Friedman sighed. “I suppose to say I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what, exactly? I figured your asshole attitude just came with the job,” Collin said.

Friedman grunted and looked over at Torrance. “We should tell him, Lucas.”

“Tell me what?” Collin said.

Friedman and Lucas Torrance looked at one another for a long moment, Collin’s eyes flipping between them like a tennis match. Lucas eventually nodded and turned to Collin.

“Collin, you really don’t know anything about your mother? You’re unfamiliar with her paintings?”

“Wait, my mom was a painter?” Collin whispered. “Dad never told me.” His voiced hitched when he said dad and tears begin to round out his eyes again. He crushed his eyelids together, hoping to dispel any remaining tears. He didn’t want to keep crying, not here, not with

these two men watching. “No, I never knew she was a painter. Do you have any of her work? Can I see it?”

“We’re here *because* of the paintings, Collin. You may not... like what you see.” Lucas said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the paintings are, well. They’re pretty, uh, graphic and intense.”

“Graphic in what way? Like, gory? Sexual?” Collin said. “Please, just let me see them. I don’t know anything about her. Let me have this.”

“You can’t unsee these paintings, Collin. Are you sure?” Friedman asked.

“Yes! Yes. Please, just let me see them.”

Lucas left the room and returned with a manila folder. He placed the folder down in front of Collin and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and closing his eyes. Collin opened the folder and drew a hard breath. “What the fuck?” was all he could manage as a reaction. “Is this...” his voice faded before the question was asked, instead raising his eyes to Friedman, who looked back at him with stone eyes.

Lucas spoke quietly, “Look at the signed date.” Collin looked and saw, just below his mother’s signature, the signed date, August 13th, 1988. Lucas continued, “We had some art specialists look at them, and, as best as we can figure, the date is correct. Your mom painted that thirteen years before it happened.” In his hands Collin held a picture of a painting of the World Trade Center twin towers engulfed in smoke and fire. Cluttered around the edges of the painting were countless faces of men and women screaming in agony.

“Wait, fuck. Are you saying my mom... my mom knew 9/11 was gonna happen before it did? Was my mom a terrorist?” Collin kept rubbing his eyes, trying to smear the insanity of what he was looking at from his vision.

“That’s what we thought, too, when we found them. Your dad, he... well, he placed a call into 911 claiming a gunshot victim at his address. When the police arrived, the front door was left open. Inside they found the ladder to the attic pulled down, and in the attic was your father’s body. He shot himself amidst your mom’s paintings. He didn’t leave a proper letter, just a sticky note on the front of his shirt that said, ‘I’m sorry, Collin.’” Lucas paused, letting Collin adjust to the new information. Collin said nothing, just went on rubbing his eyes, so Lucas continued. “We ran any and all records we had on your mom, but the fact is that there was no proof she had any idea that this was some kind of... prophecy, if you will. To her, they were probably just intense expressions of art. Keep, uh... keep going. She predicted more than that.”

Collin continued leafing through the contents of the folder. There was a painting of the Haiti earthquake of 2010, with a date signed May 8th, 1986. The Sandy Hook shooting was a pile of children’s bodies in front of the elementary school, with a date signature of October 11th, 1991. One of the paintings was a dead black boy, with a white police officer wearing a vampire mask standing over the boy’s body. The bottoms of the boy’s shoes were visible, and a name was written along the bottoms, like Woody’s shoes in *Toy Story*. The name was Tamir Rice. The signed date was February 14th, 1992.

With each photo came a small, typed block of text written by some FBI analyzer pointing out the tragedy to which each painting corresponded. The final painting, however, had no text. It was a horrific thing to behold. Across the canvas were scenes of children. One section showed a group of five or six children eating the corpses of two adults, the children with tears in their eyes,

scraps of flesh and blood hanging from their mouths and mingling with their tears. Another scene depicted a group of toddlers wide-eyed and watching as middle-school-aged children stabbed one another with rusted knives and syringes. Another scene showed a ring of children collapsed to the floor, empty cups in their hands, arranged around a punch bowl with a muddy-colored liquid inside and a crudely made sign that simply said, "FREEDOM."

Collin looked at the two agents, mouth moving in silence, searching for words to cling to that could make sense of this terrible picture, but only emptiness came to his throat, and eventually he shut his mouth and simply pointed at the last, unlabeled painting. The signed date was December 17th, 1994. Three days before he was born.

Agent Torrance shook his head. "We don't know. That one doesn't seem to correspond to any specific event. We brought you in, hoping you might be able to explain it, but you're as shocked as we are. We've got some people dedicated to keeping an eye out for coming signs, but it's a nightmare job, not knowing what to look for except for one of the most terrifying things I've ever personally seen. We didn't find any more. All your mom's paintings account for events that transpired in the last twenty years, give or take a year. This could feasibly come true in the next decade. But it could just as easily never come true, or else come true several generations from now. We have no idea."

Collin closed the folder, no longer able to stomach the paintings. "So, what do I do now? Are you arresting me?"

"No, there's nothing to arrest you for. You didn't commit any crimes. We just had to do our homework, make sure there wasn't some hidden link between you and your mother. But you're cleared to go. You'll have to sign some paperwork saying you won't speak of this to

anyone, as it's classified information. Otherwise, you can just... go back to your everyday life, I suppose," Agent Torrance said.

Collin was too overwhelmed to say anything, mostly just nodding along with whatever Agent Torrance said. The agent placed a lengthy document before Collin and supplied a pen. Mindlessly, Collin initialed or signed wherever was requested, never bothering to read the thing.

...

Collin didn't even attempt to drive, opting instead to walk forty-five minutes across town to get to his studio, careless of how he would retrieve his car from the police station later. He let himself into the studio slowly, bearing a now hollow, apathetic spirit. Each step up to the loft space was palpable and stiff; he walked to the rhythm of his shoes banging against the wooden stairs, an automaton. He wasted no time getting his apron on and returned to work on his unfinished portrait of the screaming man. The final painting was an agonized, two-faced man, one half his father's face, the other his own. Behind the man stood a faceless woman driving a sharp, blood-stained paintbrush into his back. Collin titled it, "Everyday Life."