

Cabin in the Woods 2014-2015

The Anthology II

Writers' Retreat

Table of Contents

Spring 2014.....	3
It's Pronounced Rapé	4
The Spiritual Abomination of Bare Male Asses	11
Cupid's Harpoon	15
The Holiday Hitman	23
The Final Report	26
Fall 2014	37
Anything Goes	38
Excerpt from Untitled YA Project	46
U of D	59
Spring 2015.....	64
Untitled	65
Home of the Flat Tire.....	67
The Ter Bears Help a Friend.....	71
Wynifred	81
Never Send a Terrorist to Do a Mafioso's Job	93
Fall 2015	106
Ethan	107
The Case of the Stolen Tips	123
Tim.....	134
Finding Tim	141

SPRING 2014

The Rules:

1. Stories must be a prequel or sequel to a previous entry.

The Stories:

It's Pronounced Rapé by Jean Thrift;

The Spiritual Abomination of Bare Male Asses by Michelle Anzavino;

Cupid's Harpoon by Sam Segal;

The Holiday Hitman by Shannon MacDonald; and

The Final Report by Heather Frizzell.

It's Pronounced Rapé

A Sequel to "A Hike with Romance" by Sam Segal

The appointment was at 3:00pm. Within a few short hours, this would all be behind him, Derek comforted himself, steering through the gray December streets.

He was handling the situation with impeccable decorum, in his own humble opinion. He had recited his "of course it's your decision" lines with barely a grimace when they met for stilted coffee last week. He would foot the bill for the procedure with courteous generosity, hold Kate's hand in the waiting room, offer to drive her home afterward, and then, God willing, never have to see her or think about this again. Just another occupational hazard of being popular with the ladies. He continued to be skeptical that it was really his at all. He'd already made a quiet inquiry with his lawyer about his rights to a paternity test, just in case Kate backed out at the last minute.

He pulled into the clinic parking lot at 2:55pm sharp. He ducked into the waiting room, didn't spot Kate there, and decided to wait for her out in the small front lobby. He could think of few things more depressing than the waiting room crowd in an abortion clinic two weeks before Christmas.

He had zoned out for a few minutes, messing with his phone, when he realized it was two minutes past, and still no sign of Kate. He dialed her up, trying to suppress the little wave of rising panic in his chest as ring after ring sounded until her voicemail picked up. He hung up in frustration without leaving a message, then instantly regretted it. He decided to text instead: "Waiting in lobby. U almost here?"

He began pacing the small space, in what he realized, given the circumstances, was an ironic imitation of an expecting father outside the delivery room. Where the hell

was she? Why wouldn't she answer her phone? Maybe she was just running late, and he was freaking out for no reason. He resolved to wait until 3:15pm, and if she still hadn't shown, he'd drive over to her apartment and see if he could find her.

Ten minutes and two more unanswered calls later, he slammed into the car, furious, and spun out of the parking lot. That bitch! This was beyond belief. He hadn't been to Kate's apartment since dropping her off after camping two months ago, but he remembered the building and sped through the city on autopilot, muttering obscenities under his breath all the way.

At her building, he was immediately buzzed up without inquiry, as though he had been expected. For a brief second, he wondered if he was supposed to pick her up and had forgotten all about it. No, he was positive she'd said she would meet him at the clinic. And that wouldn't explain the silence from her phone either.

Three floors up, her door was flung open on the second knock. Derek had already opened his mouth to demand an explanation, but snapped it shut when he saw who had come to the door. He was just opening it again to ask if he had the right apartment number, when the man extended his hand and said in a smooth voice, "Derek, I presume? Donald Rapé. Please come in."

Derek returned the handshake in limp confusion. The man's hand was strangely cold. He crossed the threshold with faltering steps. "Is Kate here?"

"She's resting right now. I'm afraid she was feeling a bit nauseous earlier." He gave Derek a knowing wink. "If you could just wait, she should be able to see you in a

moment. Can I get you a drink?" He crossed to the kitchen bar and began pouring a neat whiskey without waiting for an answer.

Derek was at an utter loss with the situation and with this mysterious stranger. He seemed to know who Derek was and that Kate was supposed to meet him earlier. Did he know everything? Derek measured him up out of the corner of his eye: a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair, dressed in an immaculate gray suit. He appeared to be just a little older than Derek (and better dressed) – but in all general aspects, Derek noted, they looked quite similar.

"So, how do you know Kate?" Derek ventured, resigning himself to a chair in the living room. Donald handed him a glass and took a seat on the couch opposite, crossing his legs at the ankle. He smiled at the question.

"Kate and I . . . we've been together quite some time, Derek."

Derek coughed on his whiskey. "She never mentioned you," he blurted.

"Yes, well, in fact, we've been together all along. Perhaps you were too blinded by your own charms and your little game of 'camp the tramp' to notice much about Kate's life." In unsettling contrast with the nasty turn his words had taken, Donald's voice remained even and pleasant.

Derek startled at the mention of "camp the tramp." How could Donald know about that? He only ever used that phrase around his buddies.

"I didn't know she was with anybody," he could only repeat lamely. It was dawning on him how true what Donald said was—he really didn't know much about Kate. Did this guy live here with her? He'd been sure she lived alone, but now he couldn't even remember why he thought so. He had never spent time in the apartment. So

Kate had been cheating on this guy? Or did they have an open relationship or something? She did seem a little bohemian. He recalled that she was an artist of some kind, and in the course of their tryst he'd been surprised to discover that she didn't shave under the arms.

There was a faint smell in the apartment of something bad, like garbage, but worse. He was feeling a mounting sense of unspecified danger and was on the verge of standing up and saying he had to leave, when Kate materialized in the kitchen doorway, looking wan. She held a phone out. "It's for you, Don. A client." Derek hadn't heard a phone ring.

Donald crossed the room and took the phone. "Thank you, dear. I'll be in the other room if you need anything." He glanced back at Derek. "A pleasure."

Kate shuffled forward and lowered herself onto the vacated sofa. She didn't look at Derek and seemed almost to be in a trance. Even at a time like this, he couldn't help but notice that she wasn't wearing a bra. Her formerly modest breasts, now heavy and pushing at the fabric of her blouse, seemed almost menacing to him now in their unapologetic bulk. He could hear the murmur of Donald's voice from elsewhere in the apartment. He thought he made out the phrase "Michaelangelesque monumentality."

"What does Don do?" he asked, feeling a stupid compulsion to begin with small talk.

"He's an art dealer."

He decided to just get to the point. "Where were you earlier? I waited for you. I called you."

Kate sighed and continued staring into the distance. "I'm sorry, Derek. There's been a mistake. The baby isn't yours. It's Don's."

“What are you talking about? So, you don’t want to go through with it? You couldn’t have called to tell me that a little earlier?”

“It’s not your baby,” she repeated. “I’m sorry. I made a mistake. But it’s not your concern anymore.” She seemed to be waiting for him to leave.

“But…” He wanted to ask, “How do you know it’s not mine?” But the answer was obvious. Because he himself had told her that by his doctor’s assessment, he’d been shooting blanks since he was twenty. But how had it not occurred to her sooner that Don might be the father? Nothing made any sense. He felt the beginnings of a headache coming on. Instead he asked, “So what I am supposed to do now, just pretend none of this ever happened?”

She finally swiveled to meet his gaze. Her eyes looked they belonged on a dead fish. “Derek, we don’t even know each other. You never called me again after that camping trip. I made a mistake about the pregnancy, and I’m sorry for any stress it caused you. Now this is the end of your part in the story.”

Alone in his apartment that night, Derek fell into a troubled sleep. During one dream, he was back at the campsite with Kate, and then he was running through the forest at night. He stumbled over something and fell. When he picked himself up, he realized he was standing in an old graveyard. He looked down at the stone he had tripped over and, with an icicle of dread piercing his stomach, made out the engraved word “RAPE.” Just then, a terrible, cadaverous smell invaded his senses, and a cold hand clapped down on his shoulder. He jolted awake screaming.

The next morning, he tried to call Kate, but her phone number seemed to have been disconnected. It never rang or went to voicemail. He didn't have an email address or any other way to contact her. He even tried Facebook, remembering that she had sent him a friend request, but he couldn't find her account again. He had no idea where she worked, or for that matter, if she even had a job. Finally, desperate, he drove to her apartment building again. He could see lights on in the third floor windows, but he buzzed and buzzed with no answer.

That Saturday, he reached a new low. When again there was no answer at her apartment, he parked a few spaces down the street and settled in to watch. She would have to come or go some time, and he would be there when she did. He waited all morning and part of the afternoon. Finally, around 2:00pm, Kate emerged from the building entrance and headed off in the opposite direction. Derek stumbled out of the car and tore down the sidewalk after her. He didn't even bother to call out her name, fearing she would run. When he caught up, he seized her arm and didn't let go.

“Kate, I have to talk to you!”

Against his expectation, she didn't struggle or protest. She simply stopped and stood limp in his grasp, staring at him. Her eyes were so blank it was like she didn't even recognize him.

“I remembered something,” he rushed on, “from the night we went camping. When you heard a noise outside, and I chased that shadow through the woods, I ended up in an old graveyard. And I tripped over this gravestone with the word ‘Rape’ on it. Then I heard you scream, and when I got back to the site, you were freaking out crying, and you

said it was inside the tent. What happened inside the tent while I was gone? Tell me what happened!”

Kate’s voice was a monotone. “Nothing happened that night, Derek. Maybe I just had a bad dream. Maybe we both did.”

“But his name is fucking Rape! Donald ‘Rape’! You never said a word about him before now, and Rape was written on that fucking tombstone! Kate, please, listen to me, there is something really wrong going on here.”

Kate reached up slowly and pried his hand off her arm. Her fingers felt bone cold and unnaturally strong. “Goodbye, Derek.” She started to walk away, then paused, turned back and leaned in close. As she spoke, he was blasted by the foul, rotting odor of her breath. “And it’s pronounced ‘Rapé’, asshole.”

The Spiritual Abomination of Bare Male Asses
A sequel to "The Black Ticket Club" by Jean Thrift

The device worked like this: A tower of heavy textbooks liberated from European History would sit precariously balanced in the front hall. Inevitably they'd be knocked over by the morning wave of Beaufort High's brightest students trying to make their way to their lockers. The vibration of the tower collapse would then set off the delicate sensor in the old-fashioned cuckoo clock, and as its little Dutch occupants emerged to chime *Frere Jacques* they'd hit a stationary can of Coca-Cola, sending it rolling down a ramp constructed of music stands from the band room. The can would pass through a waiting set of bike pedals, generously donated by an unsuspecting faculty member's daily mode of transportation, and the momentum of the struck pedals would turn the bike chain, dispelling the dozens of toothpicks stuck between its interlocked links. The toothpicks would fall onto one half of a scale below, and as the last splinter fell into place the scale would tip and its other end, weighed down with a few pieces of candy corn, would rise, knocking into an elaborate latticework of dominoes. The dominoes would tip in succession at a rabbit's pace, ultimately ending a few yards away at the mouth of a mousetrap. Once the last little brick was knocked into the trigger of the trap, it would snap shut so violently that the match attached to the arm would strike against fine-grade sandpaper (intended to smooth a handsome napkin holder in shop class but repurposed here as an igniter) hard enough to light it. Then the lit match, communing with a nest of charity drive pledge forms and Honor Roll announcements, would start a fire small enough to leave the hallway structurally sound but large enough to set off the sprinkler system, effectively cancelling that morning's schedule.

And so for the second time that week Margaret was in sopping wet clothes in the middle of the day. She was just an innocent bystander of the mayhem, dragged into school early by Evelyn to forcibly attend a “Christettes” Bible study. Evelyn was distracted, lecturing Margaret on what the Gospel had to say about the homosexual agenda, and didn’t see the stack of *Peasants to Parliament: A Simulacrum of Europe’s Defining Moments* in her way. Her bloated stomach knocked into the pillar of books, setting off the Rube Goldberg device as predicted. The two paused to watch it go off along with a handful of other early birds, unknowingly waiting around to get showered with a mildewy spray of water. As soon as the tinder caught the flame, everyone started screaming and running for the exits, trying to escape the danger of perishing in the inferno and the even bigger danger of having their hair ruined before first period.

Spitting out some of the foul fluid onto the front steps, Margaret slowed to a walk, the peril well behind her. She was sick and tired of falling victim to these ridiculous pranks, but she secretly had to admit that the Michelangelesque monumentality of this one was admirable.

From the sidewalk, an unfamiliar voice called her name. “Margaret!” The tone was equal parts alarmed and amused, and when she looked to see who had called to her she wasn’t as surprised to see the boy from the graveyard and the nurse’s office as she should’ve been. The first thing she noticed was his bone dry exterior. The second thing she noticed was that he knew her name although she’d never personally given it to him.

He approached her with the casual gait of an old friend. “Why are you all wet?”

Evelyn snapped in her stead. “Because some hooligan set off the fire alarms. Who wants to know?”

“Just a concerned party,” he replied. “Margaret, do you mind calling off the hounds?”

Evelyn looked properly offended and stormed off to commiserate with the Christettes, leaving Margaret to fend for her own immortal soul against the heathen. So much for being a good Christian.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think we actually know each other,” Margaret said to him.

“I’m David,” he said. He slipped his black bomber jacket off and draped it over her damp shoulders.

The heat and weight of the leather felt like having an arm around her. She didn’t dislike it, but it did feel odd.

He pulled the collar tight around her milky neck. “Now that we’ve been formally introduced, I need you to do me a favor.”

Margaret stood still, listening for her instructions.

The high keening of sirens forced Mysterious David to speak ever so slightly louder. “I need you to forget you saw me this morning.” An obnoxiously loud horn rumbled across the parking lot as the fire engine turned in from the street, trying to swing its bulk through the narrow entrance. With another apologetic smile, he slunk away around the side of the school building and out of sight.

The firemen ordered gawking bystanders away from the entrance, and Margaret joined in the stream of students and faculty heading toward the lot where students trying to park their cars sat jammed and immobile in the confusion. The autumn chill continued seeping into her jeans. In an effort to warm herself, she slipped her arms fully into the coat, two sizes too big for her petite frame and two sizes too small for Evelyn to have any

use of it. The unzipped pockets invited her hands inside to get toasty. Her fingers toyed with the shredded edges of a tissue, the ridged case of a Zippo lighter, a skinny pen, loose change jingling as she balled her hands into fists.

The tickle of a thin rivulet of snot ran from her nose to her lip, and she pulled her hand free to wipe it away, spilling the pockets' contents onto the grass. Students shuffled past, jostling the assorted rubbish and traipsing over Mysterious David's belongings. Margaret bent down to collect them all again, scooping up a joint and a black business card.

A dark shadow cloaked her in its length. "Miss, you need to come with me."

Margaret hastily ferreted the contraband back into the coat pocket. "I was out here the whole time," she said through a fringe of damp hair.

The official stuck his hand in after hers and she shrieked, jumping away but unable to dislodge his intruding grope. When he withdrew his fingers, they clutched the black card.

Cupid's Harpoon

A Sequel to "The Sea Monster" by Jean Thrift

The Watsons' island home was big, but not big enough. How could one building hope to hold the volume of destiny within its sea-spray darkened exterior? It had been five months since Bill had asked me to move in with him at his parents' summer home, and things were *okay*. Just okay. Bill went out each morning on his boat to harvest mussels; his job while he was "between-jobs." He would spend four or five hours out on the water before bringing his haul over to the Bennington Island Inn to be served fresh for dinner. It paid the utilities.

I had worked as a waitress at the Inn for the rest of the summer, but, now that the tourists had left, the place was never busy. I didn't have seniority over the biddies who were classmates of Mr. and Mrs. Watson, so I was let go. The manager, a kindly man in his late 60s, told me I could come back next May.

Without a job, I quickly found that there just wasn't much to do on Bennington Island. Bill did his best; we went out to the movies at least twice a week. He would take me out for dinner, him in a faded green sweatshirt with the smell of the ocean on it, me in a plain cotton blouse the color of fog. They knew us by name at the Casco Bay Tavern.

The only break was the weekend trip to West Virginia for Stephanie's "commitment ceremony." We finally got to meet her "female companion" (Mari's term, not mine), Kirsten. They looked really happy together, though I was disappointed that I didn't get to be her bridesmaid; for that I'll blame the conservative-leanings of the rest of the state's populace. Mari and Carl were there too, though Mari complained constantly at our table that Stephanie had one-upped her by holding the commitment ceremony only a

few months before her wedding. “I announced first, Iris. That means something,” she’d said to me. I had just nodded, not wanting to antagonize either of my best friends (or the twin sister of my suddenly-live-in boyfriend).

What was I thinking when I agreed to move in with him? A weekend trip had turned into half a year of... this. I looked around at the dark paneling, faded family photos of Mari and Bill’s relatives I had last met when I was twelve, and a horde of Afghans draped over everything. This was it, wasn’t it?

The phone rang.

I took my time getting over to it; nothing on Bennington Island required rushing.

A gravely whisper, more hiss than anything, greeted me. “My invitation remains open,” the voice said. “Stay here with me, at the bottom of the sssssssea!”

I hung up the receiver quickly, the memory of that first night rushing back. “The kids must be getting bored again,” I said, trying to convince the fish mounted on the wall next to the phone. That voice was still not a kid’s.

“Iris! Iris!” Bill bellowed from the entryway, just coming in from the dock. I came out of the kitchen, wine-glass in hand. “Hi, babe,” he said, kissing me on the cheek. His chin was rough and he smelled strongly of salt water. “Starting a little early, aren’t we?” he said, indicating the glass. The wine was still mostly full, though I wasn’t about to volunteer that it was my second.

“How was your day?” I asked him.

“Fine,” he said, hanging up his heavy coat on a well-worn peg. “You?”

“Fine,” I said, sipping the wine.

“Good,” he said, smiling slightly. “Movie tonight?”

“Sure,” I said. “What’s playing?”

“Well,” he said, feigning deep thought, “there’s the re-boot, the sequel, the prequel, and the sequel of the re-boot.”

“Oh yay…” I groaned, and we both laughed.

“I’m sorry,” Bill said, “I know it can be kind of boring around here.”

“You know what?” I told him, “That’s okay. We chose this.” I paused. “Didn’t we?”

“That is the question,” he laughed. “I still think the Sea Monster chose this for us.”

“Oh, that reminds me, those kids started prank calling again.”

“’Tis the season,” Bill said. “Hey, speaking of Sea Monsters, how about instead of the movie we go out on the boat tonight.”

I hadn’t been out on the water with Bill for weeks. “That could be fun,” I said. “You don’t get sick of it?”

He grinned, “The Sea is my life.”

“Do you have another of those heavy coats?” I asked, fingering the damp windbreaker hanging on the hook.

“Don’t worry,” Bill said, pulling me in close, “I’ll keep you warm.”

The dock rocked under our feet as the waves rolled in and out. As Bill readied the fishing boat, checking the motor and lowering the sail, I stood on the dock and thought about all the times we had been out here in our childhood. Mari, Stephanie, and I had

come out to the Watson's island home frequently every summer. We would sit on the edge of the dock, sunning ourselves and kicking our feet in the cold Atlantic water while Mr. and Mrs. Watson prepped the small craft for our day's journey. Bill would be swarming everywhere, trying to help but mostly getting in the way. It was not above him to try pushing us into the water once his parents had gotten tired of him and shooed him off of boat.

The dock and boat were the same, but everything else had changed. Tonight was cold and windy with a misty drizzle threatening to turn into a shower. Bill, no longer the small pest he once was, was pulling hard on the rope anchoring the boat in place. I stepped onboard to help him.

"Sorry about that," I said, "I got lost in thought there." We heaved together and brought the heavy metal slab up, freeing us partly from our mooring. Bill started untying us from the dock.

"It's ok, happens to me too," he said. "You were so cute in that pink bikini."

"Shame I can't say the same about you," I teased him.

He looked up at me, the injury shallow in his eyes, "Aww, I think I would've looked good in it." We both laughed as he pushed us off from the dock and into the dark and turbulent water.

We made sure to stay within sight of the bright lights of the dock. The dark water swirled in our wake, churning into luminescent whiteness that trailed behind us in a wide V. When we had reached a good distance, Bill cut the engine and came into the small cabin where I was sitting.

“You think the rain is going to get any harder?” I asked.

“Naw,” Bill assured me, “it’s supposed to blow out to sea soon.”

“Good,” I said, “now let’s get down to business.” I pulled him down onto the thin mattress made hard and crusty from an eternity at sea.

“This was fun,” I said, still lying snuggled in Bill’s arms.

“Yeah,” he said, “much better than a movie.”

“Much,” I agreed.

I sat up, “Should we head back?”

“Can’t we just stay out here forever?”

“If only,” I said, getting up and pulling my clothes back on.

I stepped outside while Bill got dressed and was immediately lost in milky grey darkness. The ship’s light blurred everything beyond recognition. We had gotten caught in a fog bank. “Crap,” I said out loud.

Just then, a jolt of movement caught my eye. I turned quickly and caught the edge of something disappearing over the top of the boat’s cabin.

“Oh wow,” Bill said, stepping out of the cabin. “This isn’t good.”

“No, it isn’t,” I agreed, still staring at the top of the cabin.

“What are you looking at?” Bill asked

“Thought I saw something, but it was probably just the fog.”

“Yeah,” Bill agreed, “let’s turn out the light and look for the dock.”

He flicked a switch and everything was cast into swirling darkness.

“I don’t see it,” I said.

“Me either,” Bill concurred. “I’ll have to use the GPS.” I could see him punching away at a lit screen near the wheel. “We might’ve drifted out towards Reef Point. Shouldn’t take us long to get back.”

I kept watching for any additional signs of movement in the darkness while Bill corrected our course. Suddenly, a bell began tolling loudly nearby. “Must be the bell buoy,” Bill called. “We’re getting closer.”

“Why did it just start ringing?” I asked, looking out in the direction where the noise was coming from.

“That’s a good question,” Bill said, “either the swell just got bigger or it was the Sea Monster.” We both laughed, but not so heartily this time.

As Bill began to give the engine more gas, the boat pitched violently to the left, throwing him into the clear wall of the wheelhouse and me against the edge rail. I was face-to-face with the sea, and it loomed up at me like a hungry beast. I scrambled back, grabbing onto the rope for support.

“Are you okay!?” Bill shouted, grabbing the wheel and righting the listing craft.

“Yeah,” I shouted back, “what was that?”

Bill’s voice had a hint of hysteria in it. “I don’t know!”

I reached out to pull myself up, but, instead of the solid metal of the rail, my hand wrapped around something wet and rough, almost scaly. I looked up and saw a dark shape looming over me. I screamed.

“Iris!” Bill shouted, rushing out of the little booth and stopping dead in front of the shape, “what the fuck?”

“The ssssssssea,” the thing hissed, and I felt a wet paw grab my arm.

“No!” I screamed and pushed the thing away from me. I heard a long scrape of metal as Bill lifted some unseen object and a dull thud as it connected with the thing. It reared back, making a gurgling noise as it lunged for Bill. I let out a solid kick that hit the thing with a wet smack, sending it backwards another step. This gave Bill the time he needed to swing his weapon again, hitting the thing and forcing it to the back edge of the boat. The thing hissed and spluttered as Bill closed in and, with a final swing, launched the thing back into the sea. In the darkness, I could just make out the dark form flipping over the edge of the boat, a long dark bit trailing behind. A tail?

“Iris!” Bill screamed.

“I’m here,” I called to him, and we hugged in the darkness.

“What was...” he was cut off by a sickening jerk as the rotor caught on something, jerking the boat violently.

“The light!” I shouted.

Bill ran back to the little booth and flicked on the ship’s light. The fog was beginning to blow out to sea, and I could easily see sappy green-tinged prints on the deck in the shape of a triangle with three large protrusions where toes might have been. I ran to the back of the ship and saw that the white swirling wake had turned a dark shade of red. I gaped at the horrific sight.

“Iris, come here,” Bill called. I went to him in the booth. “What was it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, “but I think we got it.”

He smiled weakly. “There’re the lights from the dock.” He pointed towards a series of twinkling beacons in the distance.

Once we were docked, Bill and I checked the boat for any other sign of what the thing was. The ocean had erased any marks on the engine and rotor, and even the prints on the deck were fading into oblivion.

This would've been our "close encounter with the Sea Monster" story, had the news not broken the next day that the Stenson's oldest son Jessie, a high school senior and notorious prankster, had taken their family's boat out the night before and not returned. They would eventually find the boat, but never the boy. Bill and I resolved to keep our "close encounter" story to ourselves, despite the fact that the boat was found well over two miles south of our position that night.

The Holiday Hitman

A Sequel to "The Party Line" by Heather Frizzell

"I know what I want to be for Halloween!" her twelve year old son exclaimed, running into the kitchen at full tilt.

"Slow down, Benny," she said, smiling over her shoulder as she rinsed off the plate she'd been cleaning in the sink. Her husband always gave her grief for hand washing dishes when they had a perfectly good machine to do that for her, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She wondered if maybe she just missed the simpler times of her childhood.

Benny skidded to a stop, sliding across the linoleum on socked feet and grinning at her.

"So, what did you decide on?" she asked, setting the plate in the drying rack and picking up a glass.

"The Holiday Hitman!" Benny said excitedly.

The glass slipped from Skye's soapy hands and shattered in the sink.

The Holiday Hitman had been a legend in the town of Portsdowne, New Hampshire for nearly the last fifteen years. When Skye was sixteen and spending her energy on things like the excitement of the family's first telephone and the voices of those who called, young kids began to go missing. For nearly two years parents lived in fear as children would be found tied to cinderblocks and drowned in the river. It was always the day before a holiday.

Eventually he'd been caught, and the image of a wide, red haired man with one unfocused eye and a limp became well known throughout the town. Skye remembered watching his trial with bated breath, to see what would be said and what fate he would face. He was known as the Holiday Hitman in the media, but to Skye, he'd always be Jared, the

vietnam vet who just wanted to save children from the pain of living.

After he was sentenced to death, the parents of the town finally seemed to be able to breathe a sigh of relief. There was a few months of quiet, where none of the nasty business was brought up, and Skye wondered if he'd been all but forgotten, until she was walking across Swelter Bridge one warm summer day and saw a couple of children playing in the river.

"I'm gonna set you free!" the little boy said to the girl, who, Skye could see when she paused and peered over the railing, being careful of her pregnant belly, was pretending to drown.

The Holiday Hitman eventually became the town's own personal boogeyman used to scare children into being good. Like a more terrifying version of Santa Claus.

"Careful," parents would tell their kids. "Or the Holiday Hitman will come get you."

Skye hated that.

"Are you okay?" Benny asked, concerned at the sound of the breaking glass.

Skye was pulled abruptly from her reverie and looked at her son. "Yes, it just slipped.

Stay back, I don't want you to cut yourself."

"Okay. But anyway, mom, don't you think it'll be perfect?" Benny asked, going over to the fridge and rifling through it for a snack." I even have the red hair, and it's long like his and everything."

Skye looked at him abruptly, barely managing not to slice her fingers on a glass shard as she realized, that, yes, he did look very much like him. How stupid. She needed to be more careful.

How had she not noticed? Or had she noticed? Had she liked the fact?

"Mom?" Benny straightened a bit and peered at her from over the refrigerator door.

"Oh. Yes. Though, that reminds me, you really should get your hair cut--"

"Not until I do my costume at least," Benny said.

Not for the first time, Skye wondered what Jared would think about his little boy. She wondered if he would have wanted him to be set free, just like the others.

The Final Report

Sequel to "Sarah" by Shannon MacDonald

THIRD JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF NEW JERSEY

INVESTIGATIONS SECTION

USE OF DEADLY FORCE SAO REVIEW

Decedent: Sarah Jennings, White/Female

DOB: 8/23/1992

USE OF DEADLY FORCE BY LAW ENFORCEMENT:

Oakbrook Falls Police Officers James "Jimmy" Benson and Robert "Rob" Shepherd

Date of Occurrence: October 13, 2013

Place of Occurrence: Oakbrook Falls Police Department, 248 Main Street, Oakbrook Falls, NJ

Investigators Assigned: Chief Investigator Carmen Hernandez, Investigator Jonathan Kowalski

Date Assigned: December 16, 2013

CASE BACKGROUND:

On October 13, 2013, the decedent, Sarah Jennings, was reported missing by friends who had last seen her two nights earlier. Brothers Ian and Gary Anderson, 21 and 19, respectively, and friend Melanie Foster, 19, arrived at the Oakbrook Falls Police Department to report the disappearance. Officers Benson and Shepherd were assigned to the case. Based on information obtained by the officers, Foster and the Anderson brothers

were determined persons of interest and questioned separately. Approximately five hours later, the missing decedent reportedly appeared in the station lobby, where she acted aggressively and prompted officers Benson and Shepherd to use deadly force. Miss Jennings was shot twelve times, five by Benson and seven by Shepherd, and died on the scene.

When local law enforcement officers use deadly force or attempt to use deadly force in the prosecutorial jurisdiction of New Jersey's Third Judicial Circuit, a review of the incident is conducted at the direction of State Attorney Richard Boone. On December 16, 2013, myself and Mr. Kowalski were appointed by State Attorney Boone to determine whether the killing of Miss Jennings was justified by Officers Benson and Shepherd.

After a five month investigation, there are still many unanswered questions about this case and the series of events that led up to the shooting. We have compiled as much evidence as we can, but at the moment, the investigation remains unresolved. In light of what recently befell Officers Benson and Shepherd, however, we are forced to suspend our efforts in favor of more fruitful endeavors. This report remains the most comprehensive account of the events of October 11-13th in the town of Oakbrook Falls.

Carmen Hernandez

Chief Investigator

April 18, 2014

1. Sarah Jennings's Autopsy Report

For the full findings of Medical Examiner Joyce Summerhill, please see Attachment [REDACTED]. Admittedly, according to Summerhill, the cause of death was “painfully obvious.” Miss Jennings was shot three times in the extremities (left arm twice and right leg once), five in the upper torso, and finally, no less than three times in the head. Our initial question was also obvious: why so many bullets expelled on an unarmed girl, reported to weigh only one hundred and thirty pounds? Ballistics show Benson and Shepherd fired in similar patterns, in the aforementioned order. The proximity between them and the decedent decreases dramatically between rounds: the shots to the extremities were made at a distance of thirty feet, while the head-shots were within point-blank range. The accounts of witnesses indicate mere seconds passed between the beginning and end of the shooting.

Additionally, there is the question of the angle of three of the torso shots. Entry wounds indicate Miss Jennings was shot in the back with these bullets, although both officers and witnesses claim she only came at them in a forward motion. Examiner Summerhill states in order to be shot at such an angle, Miss Jennings would have to have been “some kind of contortionist.” What accounts for this anomaly has yet to be determined.

2. Interviews Conducted

For audio recordings of the interviews with Ian Anderson, Gary Anderson, and Melanie Foster prior to the incident in question, please see Case File [REDACTED]. This section contains the relevant transcripts of interviews conducted by Investigators Hernandez and

Kowalski of Officers Benson and Shepherd, the two witnesses in the station lobby, Officer Adrian Bautista and receptionist Holly Moses.

INTERVIEW A: JAMES BENSON

Date conducted: December 22nd, 2013.

Interview conducted by: Jonathan Kowalski

Kowalski: "Can you describe who was in the lobby at the time of the shooting and the positions they were in?"

Benson: "Of course. Rob and I come out of the interrogation room. We're side by side. Bautista is with us, he came and got us. Sarah's just standing there, in the middle of the lobby, nobody near her. Holly's behind the reception desk."

Kowalski: "Then what happens?"

Benson: "The lights go nuts. Blinding. I can't see a [expletive] thing."

Kowalski: "Then how did you know Sarah was going to attack you, if you couldn't see?"

Benson: "The screams."

Kowalski: "Who was screaming?"

Benson: "Holly, for sure. I think Bautista too, but he'd never say so. Kid's too proud, you know? Oh, and I think me. Maybe me too. I just know she isn't right anymore. None of this is right."

Kowalski: "Can you define 'right' for me?"

Benson: "You didn't see her eyes."

Kowalski: "I thought you couldn't see because the lights were too blinding."

Benson: “That was before the lights. I saw those eyes. I think she was a demon.”

(Note: There has been no evidence of the lights in the Oakbrook Falls Police Station malfunctioning on the night of October 13th, 2013. Also, the medical examiner’s report found nothing abnormal about Miss Jennings’s eyes at the time of death.)

INTERVIEW B: ROBERT SHEPHERD

Date conducted: December 26th, 2013.

Interview conducted by: Carmen Hernandez

Hernandez: “And she definitely smiled?”

Shepherd: “It wasn’t just a smile. She knew exactly what she was doing.”

Hernandez: “Which was?”

Shepherd: “To bring about the new reign.”

Hernandez: “Pardon?”

Shepherd: “Look, I don’t want any trouble. I’m two years from retirement, tops. But I can’t lie to you, young lady. Her face told me everything I ever needed to know. There’s more out there than you and me can understand. She saw it. She understood.”

[Pause.]

Hernandez: “...So the kids’ stories, about the alien abduction. You... believe that?”

Shepherd: “Hell no. No no no. You don’t get it. Those kids don’t know their ass from a hole in the ground. Sarah *understood*.”

Hernandez: “I’m sorry, Rob. I’m still not following.”

Shepherd: [Sigh.] “Look at it this way. You ever see an ant on the sidewalk?”

Hernandez: “Of course.”

Shepherd: “It’s like that. That ant just keeps on keeping on, right to its anthill, bringing in the food. Back and forth, back and forth. Till someone’s huge shoe comes down on them, blotting out the sun, and annihilates them. BAM. Gone. That’s us.”

Hernandez: “The ant or the shoe?”

Shepherd: [Prolonged laughter] “To be young! The ant. Of course we’re the ant.”

Hernandez: “And that’s... why you shot Sarah Jennings?”

Shepherd: “She wasn’t a girl anymore. She was the shoe.”

INTERVIEW C: ADRIAN BAUTISTA

Date conducted: January 2, 2014

Conducted by: Carmen Hernandez

Hernandez: “I have to admit, there’s some weird discrepancies in this case. I hope you can shed some light on them, Adrian.”

Bautista: “I’m not sure how much help I can be. I really didn’t see or do anything.”

Hernandez: “Let’s start with Sarah Jennings. When did she come into the station?”

Bautista: [pause] “I wouldn’t put it that way.”

Hernandez: “What way?”

Bautista: “She didn’t walk in or anything. I just happened to look up from what I was doing and she was standing there, all... Like that.”

Hernandez: “Like what?”

Bautista: “Messed up, man. Mud, sticks in her hair... Blood? I think it was blood. I should’ve called an ambulance, but I wasn’t thinking. I dunno, it was a weird night. If I knew what Rob and Jimmy were gonna do...”

Hernandez: “You would have tried to intervene?”

Bautista: “No, man. I would’ve shot too. She was like a wild animal. Leapt up into the air, did this crazy, like... [Expletive], man. I shouldn’t be saying this. But she needed to be put down.”

Hernandez: “About what time did the lights go haywire?”

Bautista: “What?”

Hernandez: “The lights? Did they flash or go brighter or anything like that?”

Bautista: “Nuh uh. No way. I just walked out and she charged right at Jimmy and Rob. Like she had her sights set on them and only them. I dunno, man. I never saw anybody move that fast. Still gives me the creeps, to tell you the truth.”

INTERVIEW D: HOLLY MOSES

(At the time of this report, the audio interview of receptionist Holly Moses remains corrupted and unable to be transcribed.)

3. Evidence Gathered

The following video was found on Sarah Jennings’ cellular phone, recovered by Joseph Miller of 297 Silver Creek Road, Oakbrook Falls, in the woods behind his house on February 8, 2014. This location is consistent with the accounts of Melanie Foster and Ian and Gary Anderson given on October 13, 2013, where they purportedly ran out of gas.

[The frame is jerky, but clearly shows four figures: Sarah Jennings, Ian and Gary Anderson, and Melanie Foster, with a backdrop of woods.]

Sarah: "I don't know, you guys..."

Gary: "C'mon, Sarah, don't be a pussy."

Sarah: "This is private property. We shouldn't be trespassing."

Ian: "Then why are you filming this?"

Sarah: "To show I'm not going willingly when we're arrested."

Gary: "Please. I just mooned some asshole. If we're not arrested for that, we're in the clear."

Melanie, offscreen: "Did you hear that?"

Ian: "Hear what?"

Melanie: "Gary, don't [expletive] with me. I'm not falling for it again, okay?"

Gary: "Uh, I'm right here. I wasn't doing anything."

Melanie: [pause] "Oh."

[Muffled miscellaneous talking.]

Ian: "[Expletive], I could have sworn there was a house around here somewhere."

Sarah: "We should just call your dad."

Ian: "No, no. I got this. We'll just find the house, get a ride into town, and the garage will tow the car. It's no big deal."

Gary: "We're not getting any signal out here, anyway."

Melanie: "Gary, *stop*."

Gary: "What did I do now?"

Melanie: "Stop whispering in my ear."

Gary: “Mel, I’m way the [expletive] over here. How can I do that? What am I, a ventriloquist?”

Sarah: “Guys.”

[The screen goes white.]

Gary: “What is that?”

[Female screams. Sounds of running.]

Gary: “Get out! Get out!”

[Sound of tripping. The camera jerks, falling to the ground. Sarah is on her hands and knees. Ian Anderson stands in front of her. Behind them, there is an unidentifiable figure silhouetted by light.]

Sarah: “Ian! What are you doing?”

Ian: “I’m sorry. They were asking for you. I couldn’t stop it. I’m sorry.”

[Sarah screams.]

[The recording ends.]

4. Conclusion

Many troubling questions remain about this case. While the purpose of this report was to discover whether Officers Benson and Shepherd were at fault for their fatal shooting of Sarah Jennings, their respective fates render much of this investigation fruitless. Both were put on psychiatric leave after certain incidents, unrelated but happening in rapid succession, occurred on February 28 and March 2 (See Case File

[Redacted]). On March 11, 2014, they both disappeared from St. Cecilia's Psychiatric Hospital and are currently unaccounted for.

After the discovery of Miss Jennings' cell phone footage, a move was made to arrest Ian Anderson for involvement in her disappearance. However, Mr. Anderson was last seen on his college campus on February 3, citing a need for a "beer run" and then never returning. His brother Gary has not been in contact with him, either.

In conclusion, we find that Officers Benson and Shepherd are cleared of any wrongdoing in the death of Sarah Jennings. Reviewing the evidence, witness testimony, and accounts of the officers themselves, they acted in self-defense against a force that, frankly, we the investigators find difficult to quantify and hope never to encounter firsthand. We hope to never be the ant on the sidewalk, experiencing that cosmic shoe appearing out of the abyss to squash us flat. There are no wolves in the woods. Bright lights can, do, and will happen. Where they come from is anyone's guess. Why they come is worse. God help us all.



FALL 2014

The Rules:

1. No rules.

The Stories:

Anything Goes by Sam Segal;

Excerpt from Untitled YA Project by Jean Thrift; and

U of D by Shannon MacDonald.

Cover Art by Jennie Fountain

Anything Goes

“Cass! Cass!” Roger screamed, rushing into the living room. “It’s incredible! You won’t believe it!”

Cassandra rolled her eyes and looked up from her book. “Won’t believe what?”

Roger held up his hand, and light began flickering and dancing between his fingers. “This!”

Cassandra set her book down. “That’s a neat trick,” she said. “Didn’t know you got into magic.”

“It’s not a trick,” Roger said, his voice full of awe. “The rules are off.” The light grew brighter and flashed down his arm, launching out and striking the wall where it burst in a colorful shockwave. “Try it!”

Cassandra narrowed her eyes.

“Come on!” Roger implored her, tugging on her arm.

Cassandra was unmoved; Roger had pulled this kind of prank before. “You’re just pulling my leg.”

“I’m not!” Roger yelled with good humor. “Come on, just try it once. Please!”

“Fine,” Cassandra said. She held out her hand and light did, indeed, begin to spin outwards from her hands. Her face dropped in horror and the light faded away. “What the hell is this?”

“I don’t know,” Roger shouted, bouncing up and down. “I don’t think I’m dreaming. It’s just... we can do anything!”

“That’s hardly ‘anything,’” Cassandra remarked.

Roger smirked and jumped into the air. Instead of falling back onto the carpet, he soared and smacked his head on the ceiling. “Ow,” he said, rubbing his head.

“Anything.”

Cassandra’s mind raced with the possibilities. She stuck out her lips and puffed lightly. Instead of her normal colorless, flavorless, and flossed-fresh breath, pink and blue butterflies flew out of her mouth. She coughed on the tickle of their wings as they rose to join Roger high on the ceiling.

“I want to fly, too!” Cassandra said, and suddenly everything in their little one-story bungalow began drifting upwards, untethered from gravity. “This is incredible,” she said, holding her glasses onto her face lest they float up and away. She glided up to embrace Roger for support. The couch floated towards them, and she kicked it away. It floated weightlessly away on its new trajectory.

Roger looked over Cassandra’s shoulder, and white beams shot out of his eyes, cutting a hot liquefying path straight through their floating bookcase, a copy of Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, the wall of their home, and the grass beyond. “X-ray vision,” he boomed with infinite power.

“More like laser vision,” Cassandra corrected. “I wonder if,” she drifted off, focusing her mind. Suddenly, everything in the room: the furniture, Cassandra’s books, Roger’s video games, the planted fern, and Roger and Cassandra themselves crashed into the ceiling at high speed.

“Ow,” Roger complained, “what did you do?”

“Reversed gravity,” she said nonchalantly.

Roger laughed, rubbing at his side where the bookcase had struck him and feeling it swelling. “Wait a second...” he said, focusing on the tender area. “There, pain’s gone!”

“What’s that sound?” Cassandra asked, and Roger also heard ongoing tinkling and smacking from outside the house. They walked along the ceiling and looked down through the skylight. Outside, they could see dark shapes falling away from them, shrinking into the sky below.

Roger’s laughter died in his throat. “How much gravity did you reverse?”

“I don’t know,” Cassandra said with a worried expression, “all of it?”

“Fix it!” Roger yelled. “Wait, I got it,” he said, holding out his arms and letting dark energy swirl around them.

“Showoff,” Cassandra managed to say as they suddenly found themselves falling up the 10 feet into their carpeted flooring. Cassandra had just enough time to throw up a blazing white force field before the couch crashed down on top of her. It struck the field, splitting the frame, and bounced, landing in the corner near an overturned lamp. The air was thick with dust and debris. She recognized the ice cubes from her tea and then realized there was a menagerie of broken glass all around her: their crystal wedding glassware! She felt a hot pulsing from her arm and noted a large chunk of wine stem sticking out of it. She cringed, willed the pain away completely and instantly, and pulled the glass out. She held her hand to the wound and the bleeding stopped.

“Roger!” she shouted, “Roger!” She had to find him in the rubble, but her vision had become blurry; her glasses were gone. She focused on her eyes and saw a red flash as her vision cleared and she could see Roger outlined in brilliant red behind the shattered

remains of their bookcase. She leapt ten feet over the ruins of their home to get to him. He was wide-eyed and chuckling with a large splinter of wood jutting from his chest. Blood was flowing freely out and around it.

“I guess death doesn’t apply anymore, either!” He shouted wildly as she drew near. He grabbed the piece of wood and it melted into a brown sticky goo. “Pudding!” The chocolate dessert sloughed down into his wound and comingled with his vital fluids.

“You idiot,” Cassandra said. Then the crashing began. First a loud bang, then ten, then thousands all at once. They rushed to the window and saw all of the cars, outdoor furniture, wood, leaves, rocks, sand, and soil in their neighborhood plummeting back to Earth. “Is that...” Roger began, pointing at a dark shape falling quickly into view.

Cassandra zoomed her vision to 100x magnification on the shape falling towards their neighbor’s house. “Yep, that’s Carl.”

Carl collided with his lawn with the sort of sickening red splat one would expect of a person who had just experienced a sudden unassisted drop from near-orbit.

“Oh my Us!” Roger shouted, “Carl’s dead!”

“I see what you did there,” Cassandra smirked, “but we are not Gods.”

“Wanna bet?” Roger asked, and suddenly there was Carl, standing bewildered on his lawn on top of his own splattered meat pile.

“Oh yeah,” Cassandra taunted, wiggling her nose like the famous TV witch of yore. “Well I just saved everyone on Earth.”

“Did you?” Roger asked.

“Yep.”

“I’ll see about that.” Roger’s eyes clouded over and a great wariness came over his face. “Wow that took awhile, but I froze time to check. There are at least fourteen people currently standing over what’s left of their bodies, so I guess you’re right.”

“You only made it to fourteen!?” Cassandra gaped. “You never had any patience.” She waved her hand at him, and suddenly Roger looked a little older. “There, now you have infinite patience.”

“Thank you for that,” he said ruefully, “but I always thought *you* could use a better sense of humor.” He blinked and, when he opened his eyes, she could see the exhaustion in them. “That should do it,” he said, pressing his finger into her chest.

“Do what?” she asked, a little wary.

“Make you funny enough. I just watched every comedy and stand-up act ever recorded.” He tapped his finger on his chin. “I put you just between Dana Carvey and Martin Short. That ought to be funny enough.”

“Funny enough for what?” Cassandra fumed.

“Me,” Roger stated simply. “Since we’re fixing each other and all.”

“I didn’t fix you, I *helped* you!” Cassandra yelled, blasting the letters H E L P E D out of the wall behind them. The L flew across the street and struck Carl, sweeping out his legs and knocking him down into his own gore.

Roger watched and laughed. “Not bad.”

“Oh Us,” Cassandra moaned, “You made me into a slapstick machine.”

“No,” Roger shot back, “I *helped* you.”

“Oh you’re gonna get it now,” she said, winding her fist cartoonishly in the air.

Roger laughed and shot from side to side at lightning speed as Cassandra's arm extended outward at an impossible range, missing Roger, going straight through the wall, across the street, and slugging Carl right in the back as he attempted to stand, causing him to face-plant into his spleen.

Roger laughed again. "Poor Carl. You should really go easy on him."

Cassandra's eyes lit up, and Roger was suddenly trapped in a large steel cage submerged in a glass tank full of water and a snapping shark. Bubbles spewed from his mouth and red and brown liquid floated away from the wound in his chest. A second later, slits appeared in his throat and Cassandra could hear his voice clearly in her mind, though his lips were not moving. "Very funny," he said.

"I thought this was how you wanted me," she retorted.

Roger folded his arms.

Cassandra was puzzled. "Aren't you going to zap me with your laser eyes or turn the shark into a sexy mermaid or put me in an identical cage next to yours?" But he just stared back at her. "What do you want from me?" She implored him.

He stared back. She pled on, speaking aloud to her trapped husband behind the layers of glass, water, shark, and cage. "I try to be fun, but sometimes I just want to sit on the couch and read, okay?" She sighed. "I'm sorry I did that to you." She kicked the glass and it bent inwards, melting from view and dumping the water, shark, cage, and Roger on the ruins of their living room floor. The water rushed outwards, sweeping aside the torn pages, broken glass, splintered wood, and torn cushions. The shark, finding itself unexpectedly out of its element, flopped on the ground next to the cage.

“I do want you to be more patient, but not if I have to force it on you.” She reached for him through the bars, grabbed his shoulders, and hugged him as close as she could. She could feel the tension removed from his body as she lowered his patience to more or less the same level it had always been.

“I’m sorry too,” he said. “Look out for that shark,” he added as a thrashing fin came near to taking her out. They shifted to the far side of the cage and he continued. “I know sometimes I’m a bit much to handle, but I married all of you,” he smiled, “even the boring parts that want to sit on the couch and read sometimes.” He kissed her through the bars and did his best to restore her level of humor to maybe just a little more than her baseline.

“I think we need some rules,” Cassandra offered, surveying the carnage of their home and the world beyond; Carl was sitting on his gory lawn and pivoting wildly, searching undoubtedly for the next thing that would strike him down.

“A world without rules *is* chaos,” Roger agreed. “First rule: no changing people.”

“Agreed,” Cassandra smiled. “Second rule. Nobody should have powers like this,” she added, conjuring a chocolate-covered strawberry and popping it into her mouth, “no matter how much fun they can be.”

They nodded solemnly, clasped hands, raised them up, and attempted to restore time and physics to roughly what they were before the evening had begun (he was a graphic artist and she an English professor, so neither had a firm grasp on the subject and their estimations were a little off). They then focused on themselves and were surrounded by brilliant white light which slowly faded to nothing, leaving them standing together, separated only by the bars of the steel cage.

Cassandra tapped the dull metal with her hand, but nothing happened. “We probably should’ve removed the cage and shark and reset some things before powering away our powers,” she mused. Then she felt a rush of pain and blood from her arm where she had suffered the glass-wound. “Probably should’ve healed up too. I forgot since I had turned off the pain.”

“Me too,” Roger croaked, his hands pinned to his chest where the blood continued to flow freely from the hole in his chest, washing out the last of the chocolate pudding. He fell face-first into the bars and slid to the ground, in shock and, within seconds, very much dead.

Excerpt from Untitled YA Project

The first and only time Iris visited Jim's childhood home was a rainy day in October, while the entire house was being packed up by a moving company crew. Jim had forgotten something for wrestling practice and asked if she minded swinging by his house after the route, before they went back to school.

On the drive over, he explained that his mother was moving out to his grandparent's horse farm in the western part of the state, and he would be staying behind in an apartment to finish his senior year of high school. His parents had divorced over the summer, and he had just turned eighteen the month before and no longer required a guardian. No mention was made of where his dad was now. Iris didn't pry.

When they pulled into the driveway, the rain was pounding down in sheets. Jim scrambled out with their only umbrella, and Iris assumed she would just wait in the car, but he came around and opened her door, umbrella hovering over in silent expectation.

The house was very large, elegant, and already almost empty. The moving company workers were mostly packaging up large statues and paintings, a surprising amount of which appeared to depict greyhounds. Elongated stone carvings and reproductions of spindly-legged dogs greeted her in every room.

Jim left Iris to make small talk with his mother in the kitchen while he ran upstairs to grab his stuff. His mother was extremely beautiful, freckled with dark red hair, seemed scattered and smelled of cigarette smoke. She told Iris that Jim's new apartment was in a very secure building with a doorman, as if in answer to some unspoken parenting accusation. When Iris commented on the artwork, she said they owned real greyhounds,

too, but didn't say where they were—Iris imagined maybe with the father, or already packed off to the horse farm.

When Jim came back downstairs, he and his mother started arguing about something in hushed tones. It seemed to concern the movers going through things in his bedroom. Feeling awkward, Iris wandered away to give them some privacy. In the den, two women on the moving crew were packing up what looked like wedding portraits and albums. Iris saw them exchange looks over a large framed photo of the bride and groom, and the older woman shook her head. In the glimpse she caught of the photo, the groom also appeared very handsome. The newlyweds looked so happy together. Why couldn't they make it work?

Since then, Iris had neglected to mention to anyone in her family that Jim didn't actually live with his mom anymore. She had a hunch it wouldn't go over well.

Jim's favorite stop on the route was Ms. Zanotti, because she liked for him to hang out on the couch for a smoke. Her living room was small and warm and always felt the coziest on a rainy day, with her two cats curled on the squishy sofa and her tiny TV pattering away in the corner. She thought for some reason that Iris was Jim's girlfriend, and she held on to this notion with a firm grip, no matter how many times Iris gently corrected her. After the first few weeks, Jim told Iris to just chill and go along with it. "What difference does it make?" he shrugged. "Let the old bag think whatever she wants to think." Once she woke with a start to realize that she'd dozed off on the sofa during *Judge Judy*. One of the cats had climbed into her lap to get in on the snoozing.

Iris's favorite stop was Mrs. Turner, a very elderly retired anthropologist who lived on Poinsett Highway. They had special instructions to let themselves in through her back porch entrance and deliver right to her overstuffed velvet recliner, where she was always waiting and smiling, watching her little TV set. It was an old house with large rooms and dark hardwood floors. Iris liked the feel of the living room. Three cages full of tropical birds were also always waiting—large and small, all in beautiful colors. Some of the birds would greet Iris and Jim with an enthusiastic “Hello!” Mrs. Turner was very, very old. Iris wondered who would take care of the birds when she was gone.

For her Geography project this semester, Iris had chosen to research North Sentinel Island. She was fascinated by the idea of a primitive, impenetrable civilization, still shrouded in mystery from the world, with only a handful of sightings and interactions to guess from. Iris wanted to believe that the hostile Sentinelese were protecting some secret inside their forest—something very ancient, and very special. As a child, her favorite book had been *The Little Island*. She made her father read it over and over at bedtime. At the end of the book, the kitten catches a fish who tells him a secret: that all land is one land under the sea. Each of us is a part of the world, and a world of our own.

During one particularly mind-numbing Algebra lesson, she slipped into a daydream that she was visiting North Sentinel Island. She was in a small boat approaching the beach, and the islanders were standing on the sand. They held spears and bows, but she didn't feel afraid. When the boat pulled up ashore, one of the men offered his hand to help her out, the pale inside of his palm turned up like a flag of peace.

She was led up the beach and into the forest, where a dark, narrow path wound through the trees. A child from the island walked up alongside her, smiling up into her face. Iris smiled back. As she walked, she already knew what she would find at the end of the path. She knew it down in her bones, but she couldn't have articulated it, had someone asked. A large shadow loomed up before her, darker even than the darkness of the forest. As she squinted ahead, it wasn't just large, it was enormous. It was something built of stones—or was it . . . something alive? She felt a rush of familiarity and excitement, breaking into a run. She had waited to see this all her life.

Eventually the day came when only the sounds of the birds and the television greeted them at the house on Poinsett Highway. Mrs. Turner was seated in her recliner as usual, eyes closed. She had never been asleep before when they arrived. They called her name until finally Iris reached out and pressed the back of her hand. It felt cool and still as a stone. Iris stepped back outside and vomited on the porch while Jim called 9-1-1.

In the days following, Iris became obsessively concerned over what fate had befallen Mrs. Turner's pet birds. She hadn't spared them a thought in the whirlwind of police activity immediately after their discovery of the body. She didn't remember them at all until the next day, when she drove to the house in a senseless panic after school, wondering if the birds had simply been left there, forgotten. But when she peered through the sliding glass doors into the living room, she saw empty shadows where the cages had stood.

The Meals on Wheels route coordinator would tell her only that a nephew who lived out in Nevada had registered Mrs. Turner for the deliveries; they wouldn't share his

contact information. A call to the police station was equally dismissive and fruitless. Finally, on a hunch, Iris tried the local humane society, where a chipper employee immediately volunteered the information that yes, three cages of tropical birds had been dropped off earlier in the week, and were being held at the shelter pending possible claim by relatives of the deceased.

The shelter was only too happy to facilitate her adoption of the birds, once it became clear enough that they wouldn't be wanted by the nephew in Nevada. Iris's aunt and uncle didn't want birds in the house—too noisy, too much mess. So they were kept in Jim's apartment, until Iris and her mother had their own home.

She often let herself into the apartment to feed the birds, whenever Jim was away on weekends or breaks. She didn't always know in advance—once in a while, he just disappeared for one night or several. She knew to go over and feed the birds if she hadn't heard back from him by the early evening.

It was during one of these times that she was overwhelmed by a feeling of melancholy, wandering through the apartment by herself at dusk. She contemplated the Oriental rug with its two telltale urine stains from the greyhounds she had never met. One of his mother's statues had made its way to the apartment, too, standing guard over the living room like a specter of the missing dogs. Being surrounded by reminders of people and dogs who were no longer there seemed for a moment unbearably sad. Suddenly one of the birds called out her name, making her jump in surprise. None of the birds had ever said "Iris" before. Jim must have been teaching it when he was here alone.

Amy was the Ashbys' daughter, a year older than Skye, a senior. She had long silky blond hair that reached her waist and listened to her Doors records so loudly Skye could often hear it across the street.

"No," she said, all her polished grace dying with her surprise. "This is Skye."

"My mistake," said the stranger. "You sound just like her. I'll call back."

Skye hung up and watched the phone ring again. Once it halted, she glanced out the window above the sink, trying to catch a glimpse of the Ashbys' house. She could only see the shingles, but she wondered what Amy and the man could be talking about. He did not sound like a high school boy. He sounded older, sophisticated. Handsome, even. Of course he would be calling for Amy and not Skye.

Sometimes, on the party line, someone would try to make a call and find a conversation already in progress in one of the other houses. Skye's mother had told her to apologize and hang up quickly if that happened. It was just polite. But Skye wondered what would happen if no one knew someone else had picked up.

She wondered, and then she frowned, and slunk from the kitchen to do her homework.

That autumn, the children began to go missing from Portsdowne, New Hampshire. In a town so quiet and small, at first it was a trifle. Kids wandered off playing and almost always turned up at the country store, trying to buy cotton candy with the ten cents in their pocket.

But little Kyle Stokes did not turn up at the country store. He did not turn up at Swelter Lake or its surrounding campgrounds. He did not even turn up at Uncle Pete's Drive-In. He did turn up, the day before Halloween, in Swelter Creek, under the covered bridge. Weighed down by a cinderblock tied to his ankle, the news report said. He had almost slipped free of the rope, and that was when a pedestrian had spotted the small white hand just below the surface, as if he was waving. Skye's mother cried over dinner, and she had not seen her mother do that since her brother Benny had been drafted to Vietnam.

Kyle Stokes was the first. The day before Thanksgiving, Melody Ludman was found in the same fashion, a waterlogged daisy chain tangled in her hair. Christmas Eve, another girl. The cinderblock punched right through the ice, they said.

Portsmouth went from a quaint, moderately friendly town to a bastion of secrecy and paranoia. Parents no longer let their children wander. Teachers vigilantly counted the numbers of their classes on the playground. Warnings were issued. The FBI came to town, ate pie at Plain Jane's Diner, and left without doing a damn thing, so it seemed. And yet, on February 13th, just as Skye lamented her lack of any sweetheart for Valentine's Day, they found another body under the bridge.

Skye had no stake in the Drowned Child cases. She preferred not to dwell on terrible things. She did, however, have a stake in the party line. At school, she followed Amy Ashby, but never saw her meet up with anyone from UNH or one of the teachers at Portsmouth High. But every so often the stranger called, and Skye picked up first, and he thought she was Amy.

Each time, Skye was honest. No, this was not Amy, this is Skye. And he apologized, and even chuckled a bit when he repeated the mistake again and again. His laugh, like the rest of his voice, was velvety and warm. Skye never asked for his name, but invented herself: Henry LeMont. He had dark hair, blue eyes, a thunderbird. He was a professor of English – or Philosophy – at Dartmouth, and for whatever reason, had fallen head over heels for seventeen-year-old Amy. Perhaps they were planning to run away together to a love commune. Skye had heard about such things, although her father had threatened to get out the belt if she spoke about the goddamned hippies in his presence.

Once, when the not knowing became too great, Skye picked up again once she knew Amy and Henry were speaking. Their conversation was brief, but telling: they were setting up a time to meet late at night. Skye could hardly contain her gasp, and so put the phone down again before she could find out where. She felt guilty, but only a little.

To her credit, Amy did not appear to be swept up in a passionate, clandestine romance. She glowed as she always had, the way pretty girls do, but she ducked into the girls' bathroom often to dab powder on her under eye circles and smoke several cigarettes before returning to class. She lost weight, which made her hips jut out through the fabric of her broom skirts. Maybe the secret affair was eating her alive. Skye felt sorry for her. But also, secretly, she thought that if she had love of that kind from a man she would not take it for granted. Amy was a wasteful sort of girl, Skye's mother had said once. Skye wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but decided she could see it.

In April, the phone rang. Of course Skye picked up, hoping for another taste of Henry LeMont. He hadn't called in a month. But it was not Henry. A gruff but careful voice asked for Mr. or Mrs. Holliday. He was from the U.S. Army and he had some bad news. And Skye understood why she always beat her parents to answering the telephone.

After Benny's funeral, Skye did not think she would use the phone anymore. There had been too many calls of sympathy, and answering became painful and draining. But a few days before Easter, the phone rang, and Skye, home alone with a cup of tea growing cold beside her, picked up.

"Amy?" asked Henry LeMont.

And Skye, without hesitating, said, "Yes, it's me."

"Tonight," he said. "Midnight. Swelter Bridge."

His voice could melt inside her mouth like chocolate. Skye felt a warmth spreading across her chest. She leaned forward in her seat, summoning whatever force fueled Amy's allure. She bat her eyelashes at the refrigerator and licked her lips. "I'll be there."

"Good girl. See you soon." He hung up without a goodbye.

Skye replaced the phone in its cradle, hugged it for a moment, and drank her lukewarm tea.

Skye could get to Swelter Bridge easily; it was only a mile up the road, and the main traffic artery of Portsdowne, linking the residential area to downtown. They had wanted

to close the bridge when the murders began, but doing so would strand most of the town's population, and Portsdowne had no money to build an alternate route. So the bridge and the road remained open.

She had never snuck out of the house before. She was excruciatingly obedient. She got good grades. She did not have many friends, and outside school they never called. She had loved Benny and honestly believed he would come home unscathed, given the magical protection given to all big brothers. In a world where bullets and shrapnel could turn him inside out within seconds, Skye no longer cared to play it safe. She wanted to meet Henry LeMont. She hoped he could look at her the same way he must look at Amy.

She left out the window and climbed down the tree that scraped her roof during thunder storms. She wore her best dress, using less than stellar foresight, and so was disheveled and bleeding from the knee by the time she reached the ground. But she had been practicing her makeup and ironed her hair, so she hoped that would offset a small tumble from a tree. It was cold and the wind whooshed past her ears as she walked, but her heart pounded with excitement and kept her warm.

Midnight approached and so did Swelter Bridge. In daylight it stood in picturesque majesty, painted a deep pine green. So long after dark it loomed like a fortress, barely visible in the darkness, surrounded by the rushing sound of water. When she exhaled she could see her breath.

"I'm here," she called, trying to retain the sophistication of her telephone tone. But instead she warbled. She sounded young and scared.

A shadow departed from the others, man-shaped and tall. He approached, and Skye waited. He was difficult to see, but just his silhouette did not look like a Henry LeMont. He was wide, and his hair long. But his voice was the same, and she knew she had the right one. “You’re not Amy,” he said, although he did not sound disappointed.

“No,” she said. “I’m Skye.”

He laughed, and the warmth filled her again. “I wondered when you might try this, Skye. Amy said you’ve been following her.”

She gaped. She thought she’d been careful. She almost apologized, but realized she was not sorry. “I want to know what you do together.”

His arm wrapped around her waist, very suddenly. “I was counting on that, too.”

The little girl was scared, but Skye brushed her hair and put her to bed, the way her mother used to do for her. The girl ceased weeping and slept, and did not wake up. Henry – although she was to call him Jared – put something in her after-dinner tea.

“Why?” Skye asked, when she discovered what he had done, the bottle shaking in her hand.

“We’re setting them free,” he said. He had a limp; he had been to Vietnam himself. “They’re too precious for this world. You must know how it is.”

Skye did. Benny’s death still tore at her like a razor blade in her chest if she breathed too deeply. If every child must grow up to feel this way, maybe Jared was right.

“Amy’s helped me so much. The first one was sloppy. We’ve been perfecting it. I don’t want them to suffer, do you? You’ll help me, won’t you? Amy doesn’t understand sometimes, I fear.”

“I understand,” Skye said, sitting in the basement folding chair. She had been given something here, something beautiful and terrible, and she wanted him to know she appreciated it. “I’m not Amy.”

He came closer, and took a strand of hair in his fingers. “You’re not, no. You’re deeper. It was pure luck to find you. Pure, glorious luck.”

Jared did not look much like Henry LeMont; the long hair was red and one eye didn’t focus very well, but he was still the handsomest man who had ever come to Portsdowne, in her opinion. And his voice. And his voice.

Still shivering, she kissed him.

Skye stumbled back at dawn. Her parents grounded her, but she did not care.

The day before Easter, they found the little girl under the covered bridge. The news did not say so, but Skye knew the knots tied to the cinderblock were the very strongest. Benny had been a boy scout and taught her all about them.

Skye did not see Amy Ashby until school following Easter break. She was white as a piece of paper. Her hair was not brushed. She came right up to Skye in the hallway, eyes full of accusation. Skye smiled and tried to sidestep her, but Amy caught her arm.

“Tell me you didn’t,” she said. There was more desperation to her tone than anger. But Skye knew; there was jealousy all over her face. It oozed from her pores, and Skye felt proud.

“Don’t worry,” she said, in her most saccharine Amy-tone, “we can share him.”

Amy lashed out and slapped her across the face. Skye stumbled, shocked more than pained. “You’re a fool,” she spat, and walked away.

Hand cupping her cheek, Skye watched her retreat and laughed. “Fine. We don’t need you, anyway. He likes me better.”

He did, as a matter of fact. The loss of Amy was regretful, but no obstacle that couldn’t be overcome. Skye was all too eager to pick up the slack. She rekindled her love for answering the telephone, although they still pretended he was looking for Amy, so as not to arouse any suspicion. Skye’s mother rarely left the bedroom anyway, and her father remained at work longer and longer each day. Summer approached, and there were so many holidays to prepare for. Independence Day, for example. Barbecues. Fireworks. Family time.

Skye traded one family for another, and did not look back.

U of D

This was technically a kidnapping. Well, for all intents and purposes it *was* a kidnapping, he guessed. After all, he'd been pulled off the sidewalk as he was walking back to his dorm in the dark, and stuffed into a trunk of a sedan which was now speeding somewhere unknown.

Topher shifted slightly, trying to get more comfortable. At almost six feet, he had had to curl up into a near fetal position in the small trunk, and his left leg was starting to fall asleep due to a lack of circulation. His glasses had fallen off his face, but it was too dark to see anyway, so he didn't bother trying to find them yet. His bag was still slung over his shoulder, and the sharp corner of his Intro to Lit Theory and Crit textbook was digging into his back. It was a surprisingly good metaphor for his feelings on that class. A constant, somewhat painful irritant.

His second year at college had begun a few weeks ago and he was already bored. He'd taken on a minor in Japanese to fill up his time, but he'd learned the year before that majoring in English when your real interest lay in creative writing really could leave you wanting academically. It didn't help that he'd already read a lot of the books that were being assigned in his lit courses. At least an abduction was something new.

Now and then he could hear the perpetrators from the inside of the car talking, and laughing. He couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, it was just muffled noises, which was probably what they must have heard when he'd tried banging on the top of the trunk and yelling for them to let him out. There were at least three of them.

And now they were singing the Macarena.

It was good he wasn't claustrophobic. Someone who would be in the throws of a full

on panic attack before they had gotten him to their destination. He'd lost track of time, but if he had to guess he would say it was probably an hour before he could hear some hooting from the car, which stopped so suddenly he slid roughly into the back of the trunk. Topher grimaced as his book stabbed him, but groped around blindly in the dark until he managed to locate his glasses. The car bounced around a bit as the gorillas who'd grabbed him piled out of it, still hooting and hollering. Discreet.

The trunk was popped open abruptly and standing over him were three burly guys wearing black ski masks who gave Topher an immediate flashback to the football players who'd kicked his ass in high school.

"Let's go, Fogerty!" one said as the two others reached in and hauled Topher bodily from the car. They set him on his feet and he shook out his leg.

"Congrats, man! You did it!" The gorillas pulled off their masks and were grinning. The one who had spoken was blonde, with his hair cropped close to his head. The other two had darker hair.

Topher slid on his glasses and a crowd of about sixty guys with greek letters on their jackets came into focus. They had apparently driven to a beach and there was a bonfire going full force. The frat boys cheered as several other guys were also being pulled out of trunks of other nearby cars. He wasn't overly surprised. He'd caught a glimpse of a jacket before the trunk had been slammed.

"Come on, man, get excited! You're part of Kappa Sigma now!" one said, clapping him on the back so hard, he almost lost his balance because of his numb leg.

"Yeah, I'm not Fogerty," Topher said. They'd called him that when they'd tossed him in the trunk, but he really hadn't had an opportunity to set them straight before they'd shut it.

The boys around him, probably only a year or two older than he was, looked at each other in confusion, then back at Topher, who shrugged. "You should really check you've got the right guy before you abduct him.

"Oh, *fuck*," the blond guy said, now that he got a good look at Topher's face.

"Yeah. You guys might want to reevaluate the kidnapping tradition." The feeling was finally returning to his leg, and he twisted, cracking his entire spine in a move that both hurt and felt amazing at the same time.

"I'm so sorry, you really look like him from the back." It seemed like the blond was the one in charge, because after he spoke he nodded at the other two, who scampered off to a group standing near the bonfire.

"I've been told I've got one of those heads," Topher said dryly. "So, am I in then?"

"...What?"

"Kappa Sigma. Am I in?" Topher replied. "I'm here now. And you *did* kidnap me. Seems like the least you can do."

"Uh. I'm not really --" The blond was cut off as a guy with dark brown hair close to the color of Topher's own jogged up to them.

"Hey there," he said, offering his hand. "I'm Gregg Bradley, president of Kappa Sigma. I just heard what happened, I'm so sorry about this." Gregg shot a look at blondie, who stared down at his shoes.

Topher shook his hand. "Mr. President." It was hard to tell if that was sarcasm. "Topher Young. Not Fogerty. I was just asking if this meant I get to join."

He wasn't even really that interested in joining a frat. He hadn't pledged Freshman year or this year. Most of them seemed like beer guzzling jocks, at least based on what he was

seeing on the beach. But at this point he was just interested to see if he could talk his way into it. It was like a challenge. And he really did need something else to fill his time.

School wasn't going to be enough, that much was clear.

As an apology, the frat let him stay for the initiation party. Every time he saw Gregg Wilson, he referred to him as "Mr. President," which his ego really seemed to like.

Topher wasn't much of a drinker. He'd been known in high school to throw the most epic parties, which were really just a reason to let kids from school trash his stepfather's house - one had ended in someone driving a car into their pool - but he almost always went though them sober. This was partly because he honestly found it more interesting to watch everyone else disintegrate into drunken idiocy, and partly because people were much easier to manipulate once they were there.

By the end of the party, they'd initiated him.



SPRING 2015

The Rules:

1. Stories must contain a flat tire;
2. Stories must contain a cruel experiment; and
3. Stories could contain a town where something's up.

The Stories:

Untitled by Michelle Anzavino;

Home of the Flat Tire by Jean Thrift;

The Ter Bears Help a Friend by Sam Segal;

Wynifred by Shannon MacDonald; and

Never Send a Terrorist to Do a Mafioso's Job by Heather Frizzell.

Cover Art by Jennie Fountain

Untitled

Every Cat was Stuck in a Tree.

In the entire town of Fussy Corners, 26 blocks by 5, proud maples housed hissing felines;
bleached birches, panicked kittens.

Every cat was crying.

Their mewls mingled with chirping birds and fire engine sirens, a springtime serenade to
the newly bloomed, the recently thawed, the soon-to-be-repaired.

Maddie Meyers, 4 pink barrettes in her hair and 72 polka dots on her skirt, planted herself
beneath the fanned branches of an old evergreen, staring up at Ladysmith Black
Meowbazo.

Her cat was black.

On other blocks, under other trees, other little girls with other barrettes called to other
cats with other (less interesting) names, like Cinnamon and Oreo and Snickers.

The Fussy Corners Volunteer Fire Department had 13 members, but today they were
down by one – Jack Brady had gotten stuck on his way to the station with a flat tire after
hitting a pothole scheduled for repair that very afternoon.

Two trucks arrived, one driver, five ladder crew in each. All the men, whether salt-and-
pepper or buff-and-tan, seemed astounded at the sight of so many kitty cats up in the
trees, perched and choral like whiskered songbirds.

Every cat was stuck in a tree, at varying heights.

When their rubber boots hit the ground, several cats flinched at the bass thump.

The firefighters took a minute to talk strategy; with only two ladders, they'd have to get
creative to finish the job in the six hours before nightfall. They agreed that the trucks

would be used for the cats stuck higher, and the younger guys in the company would climb the trees where the cats were within arm's reach.

The sight of the twelve men in action stopped some little girls' crying. Maddie hadn't shed a tear. She kept staring at her cat, paying no mind to the red suspenders and yellow hat behind her, asking her to move to the side so he could grab the trunk of the evergreen. As if the house were really on fire, Maddie's mother came running outside screaming for her. "Maddie! What are you doing?"

Maddie shrugged and didn't look down. "I just wanted to see what would happen."

"You stop it this instant or you'll be sent to bed without supper!"

Maddie jerked her shoulders and stamped her feet, but then, with a blink of her eyes, every cat fell out of a tree.

Some yowled, some hissed, some clawed desperately to gain purchase on the bark on the way down. But they all fell just the same from their varying heights, twelve feet or twenty, to the ground.

Every cat landed on all fours.

Home of the Flat Tire

It was known as a tourist town, but in fact its one and only claim to fame was the Moosehead Doughnut Shoppe, established 1938. And it was true that the doughnuts were incredible. The flavors were nothing out of the ordinary: glazed, jelly, cinnamon, the usual suspects. But each and every taste experience was somehow truly extraordinary. The Shoppe's signature lopsided chocolate doughnut, "The Flat Tire," had acquired such fame of its own that the town's welcome sign had advertised "Home of the Flat Tire" since 1979. The Moosehead's walls boasted framed photos of President Eisenhower, Bing Crosby and other illustrious customers enjoying Flat Tires.

The Moosehead had never expanded beyond the original 400-square-foot location. They made the same amount of doughnuts each morning, opened for business at 6:00am, and when the doughnuts ran out, they closed for the day. The mysterious owner appeared either oblivious or just indifferent to the pulls of consumer demand and increased profit potential.

Even the darkest, most miserably cold winter mornings saw a small line of huddled customers filing out the glass door. And in the summers, at the height of tourist season, by 5:50am the mob of customers pressed to the windows evoked a zombie apocalypse. It was claimed that people had slept overnight in their cars before, just to be first in line for a Flat Tire.

When Debra and Shelby returned to the bed and breakfast early Saturday morning bearing the paper Moosehead box, Gretyl felt a strange stir of excitement that seemed out of proportion to the prospect of eating doughnuts. But there *was* something rare and

special about these doughnuts. They had decided to eat them in Gretyl and Stephanie's room, fearing that openly parading the doughnuts into the B&B dining room might be a bit rude. There was another, unspoken fear, which was that then they might feel obligated to share them with other people.

Shelby set the box down with care on the bed where Gretyl and Stephanie were seated cross-legged in pajamas. As she lifted the lid, they leaned forward in anticipation as though she was opening the lid of a treasure chest. The gleaming rows of doughnuts seemed to glow almost like jewels as Gretyl scanned and identified each variety, until—

“Where's the Flat Tires?” Stephanie blurted.

Debra and Shelby exchanged a look. There was an odd, uncomfortable silence, which was finally broken by Debra. “It turns out they only allow . . . one Flat Tire per customer.”

Gretyl and Stephanie blinked, disoriented. This was unanticipated. “So . . . you guys didn't save one for us?”

More silence. “We . . . didn't think of it?” Shelby volunteered lamely.

“Stephanie, we can go back ourselves and get Flat Tires,” Gretyl pacified. “Just let me pull on some jeans.”

“You won't make it in time,” Shelby whispered, “The line is way too long.”

“Then we'll go back tomorrow.”

Shelby wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. “They're closed on Sundays.” The group left town tomorrow. That was it. Any hope of a Flat Tire had vanished.

“What is this, some kind of cruel experiment?” Stephanie demanded.

Debra snorted, annoyed. “Look, we waited in line at 6:00am to get doughnuts for you guys, okay? I don’t see the pajama squad making any noble sacrifices around here. Those Flat Tires were our destiny.”

“I’ll give you a flat tire,” Stephanie grumbled through a mouthful of doughnut.

The box of assorted doughnuts that morning had been astoundingly delicious. But Gretyl couldn’t get the Flat Tire out of her mind all day. She drifted aimlessly through the motions of lunching and antiquing, all the while wondering, what did it taste like? What was it that made people so frantic for them? Every tire she saw was a reminder. Car tires. Bike tires. Tire swings in backyards and playgrounds. She felt irrational anger bordering on hatred toward Debra and Shelby for not saving them one. What was the point of even coming to this stupid town if she wasn’t going to have a Flat Tire? Why did she even agree to go on this stupid girls’ B&B weekend? She might just as well have stayed home, binge-watched HBO Go while eating doughnuts in bed, and been just as happy and a hundred bucks richer. She was never getting sucked into one of these again.

Stephanie, meanwhile, seemed to have recovered her spirits quite nicely since the hostility of the morning.

When they had finally retired to their room for the night, Stephanie locked the door behind them and whispered, “I have a secret.” She pulled a small object wrapped in wax paper from her purse and brought it over to Gretyl’s bed. “I bought it this morning.”

To Gretyl’s astonishment, she slowly unwrapped a single, precious Flat Tire, with the restrained excitement of Charlie Bucket unwrapping a Wonka Bar. “Where did you get that?” Gretyl gasped.

“Remember when I had to run back to the B&B to get my allergy medication? I was really going to meet a Flat Tire scalper. I found him online this morning. He only scalps one a day, and I got to him in time. He met me behind the auto shop for the exchange.”

Gretyl stared at her in awe. “You bought this off a doughnut scalper and waited the entire day to share it with me?”

“Of course.”

Stephanie divided the misshapen doughnut and handed half to Gretyl with as much reverence as a priest presiding over communion. Moving in sync, they each raised a piece to their mouth and bit into the Flat Tire.

The Ter Bears Help a Friend

It was a bright and sunny morning in Ter-Bear Town as Wemdee Bear emerged from his home. Ter-Bear Town was small, consisting of just a ring of small houses circling a small grassy square with a well. Each house was unique to its resident's occupation, and Wemdee Bear's was the largest.

Like all Ter-Bears, Wemdee Bear was a short-furred creature that walked upright on his two fuzzy feet. He had two fluffy ears and two fluffy hands. Each Ter-Bear was a different color with a shorter patch of fur on their belly. In the center of each patch was a symbol, their magic button. Wemdee Bear was white with an expanding cloud symbol on his belly.

On a beautiful morning like this, Wemdee Bear knew that everyone in Ter-Bear Town would be out and about. "Good Morning, Ter Bears!" he shouted.

Pipee Bear waved an orange hand as she walked by carrying a heavy load of shiny silver cylinders. They were tucked tightly against her furry belly with a matching cylinder symbol.

Wemdee Bear smiled at her. "Busy as always, Pipee Bear?"

"Oh yes," said Pipee Bear. "It's a beautiful morning and I thought I would get to work early." Pipee Bear was the hardest worker of them all.

Wemdee Bear saw his next-door neighbor, Shoee Bear, sitting on his front step trying to tie two large knots in his oversized shoes. He walked over to his neighbor and asked, "Can I help you with your shoes, Shoee Bear?"

"Oh yes please," answered Shoee Bear.

And so Wemdee Bear sat down next to Shoee Bear and said, "Since the rest of us Ter Bears don't wear shoes on our fuzzy feet, you will have to show me how."

"I'd be happy to," said Shoee Bear with a smile, and he held out the thick white laces and showed Wemdee Bear just how to tie them. Together they tied Shoee Bears shoes in no time.

"Thank you!" said Shoee Bear. "Things are always easier when you have a friend to help you," he said as he stood up and then walked across the square.

Wemdee Bear smiled after him and noticed the yellow-colored Chemee Bear picking large yellow flowers in the grassy area near the well.

"What are you doing, Chemee Bear?" he asked, walking over.

"Picking flowers, of course," answered Chemee Bear.

"Do you need my help?"

"Oh please," said Chemee Bear. "I need four more yellow flowers."

"I can help you with that," said Wemdee Bear, and together they picked the four largest brightest yellow flowers they could find for Chemee Bear.

"Thank you," said Chemee Bear as he headed back to the laboratory in his home. "Now I can finish making my magic powder!" Chemee Bear was the smartest of them all.

"You're welcome," said Wemdee Bear, smiling at him as he went.

On the other side of the square, Wemdee Bear could see the lime green Vestee Bear strutting around in a shiny new padded green vest.

"What a nice vest you have," said Wemdee Bear.

"Why thank you," said Vestee Bear. He was the best dressed of any of the Ter Bears, though he was also the only one who wore any clothes at all (except for Shoee Bear's shoes, of course).

Wemdee Bear smiled after the confident Vestee Bear and then noticed the bright blue legs of Caree Bear sticking out from under his bright blue car in his garage-shaped home.

"What are you working on?" asked Wemdee Bear.

Caree Bear's voice came up from under the machine. "Why, I'm changing the oil of my car, of course."

"Do you need any help?" asked Wemdee Bear.

"Oh yes please," answered Caree Bear. "Could you please hand me my wrench?"

Wemdee Bear looked down and saw Caree Bear's bright blue toolbox lying on the floor. He reached in and pulled out a shiny silver wrench, putting it in Caree Bear's outstretched hand.

"Thank you," said Caree Bear from under his car.

"You're welcome," said Wemdee Bear.

Wemdee Bear smiled as he wandered on. He then saw the empty runway next to Planee Bear's hangar-shaped home. He looked into the sky, but there was no sign of Planee Bear or his plane anywhere. "Where is Planee Bear?" he wondered aloud.

"Oh dear," said Vestee Bear, wandering by. "Last night I was stitching together my new vest when I heard a commotion at Planee Bear's house. It was dark out and I was scared, so I didn't go outside to look."

"Oh no," said Wemdee Bear. "You don't think it was mean Mr. NSA, do you?"

"Oh dear!" said Chemee Bear, stepping out of his house with yellow-tinged goggles on his head. "If it *was* mean Mr. NSA, then we have to help Planee Bear."

"We sure do!" said Pipee Bear, walking out of her workshop twisting the cap onto one of her shiny metal cylinders.

"Let's take my car to mean Mr. NSA's house!" said Caree Bear, coming out from under his car.

"Yay!" said the Ter Bears in unison, and they climbed into Caree-Bear's car.

And so the Ter Bears drove to mean Mr. NSA's house, a large granite structure with a mean-looking eagle carved into the doorway. The Ter Bears were quite small compared to mean Mr. NSA, and so they had to stack on top of each others' shoulders just to reach the doorbell.

After a brief moment, a small panel opened in the door far above the Ter Bears' heads, and mean Mr. NSA stuck his long pointed nose out and looked down on them.

"What do you Ter Bears want?" asked mean Mr. NSA.

"Do you know what happened to Planee Bear?" Wemdee Bear asked him.

Mean Mr. NSA crinkled up his long nose. "Oh, your friend is a very important guest of mine, and you can't have him back."

"Please, Mr. NSA," said Pipee Bear, "let us have our friend back."

"Never!" scoffed mean Mr. NSA. "I need him and his plane for my experiments, and I can keep him for as long as I want." He laughed. "I don't even need a reason or permission. I don't answer to anyone." And then mean Mr. NSA pulled his head back into his big stone house and shut the panel. The Ter Bears could hear a loud lock click into place.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Shoee Bear.

"I know!" said Caree Bear, "We can use my car to get into mean Mr. NSA's house."

"Yay!" shouted the Ter Bears.

Caree Bear got back into his car and began to move it towards mean Mr. NSA's door, but it stopped short. He poked his head out the window. "Oh no!" he said, "My car has a flat tire."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" asked Wemdee Bear.

"Let's push it together!" said Chemee Bear. He was the smartest.

And so the Ter Bears all pushed Caree Bear's car until it was just touching mean Mr. NSA's heavy stone door.

"Okay, now everyone stand back," said Caree Bear.

And so they all stepped away, and Caree Bear pressed the magic car-shaped button on his belly and a bright blue light shot out of his car. The noise was deafening. As the light faded, they could see that Caree Bear's car was now crumpled and folded up like tissue paper. But, magically, mean Mr. NSA's door now had a small hole just big enough for the Ter Bears to get inside. As they made their way in, Caree Bear told them that he would stay with his car, and that, when they came back with Planee Bear, they could push it home together.

Inside mean Mr. NSA's house, the floor was a smooth polished tile that was cold on the Ter Bear's feet. They all shivered. All of them, that is, except for Shoee Bear.

"What's wrong?" asked Shoee Bear.

"It's the floor," said Pipee Bear. "It's too cold for us to walk on."

"I can help!" said Shoee Bear. "Stay back." And, after walking forward several steps, Shoee bear pressed the magic shoe-shaped button on his chest and his shoes began to turn an even brighter shade of red. Soon they were too bright to even look at, and a red light shot out all along the cold stone ground, warming it. The Ter Bears cheered, as they could now walk comfortably on the tile.

"I'll have to stay behind," said Shoee Bear, rubbing his magic shoes. "My feet are too warm to walk, but I will wait here for them to cool down."

"Thank you, Shoee Bear," said the remaining Ter Bears. And so they headed deeper into mean Mr. NSA's house to rescue Planee Bear.

As the Ter Bears passed a large kitchen door, they caught sight of a rat almost as large as they were. Mean Mr. NSA mustn't do his dishes every night or eat all his vegetables, thought Wemdee Bear. The Ter Bears tried to sneak past the doorway, but the rat saw them and ran at them. It looked mean and not nice.

Vesty Bear stepped forward. "I can help with my magic vest!" As the rat ran right up to him, Vesty Bear pressed the magic vest-shaped button on his chest and a bright green light flashed out from his padded green vest in all directions. The noise was deafening. When the light faded, the Ter Bears could see that the rat was now sleeping instead of running at them. They could also see that Vesty Bear's vest was now tattered, flattened, and frayed, when before it had been shiny, padded, and new.

"I can't go any further with my vest in so many pieces," said Vesty Bear. "Save Planee Bear and then come back for me." The Ter Bears thanked Vesty Bear and proceeded down the long hallway.

As the Ter Bears walked down the long hallway, it soon became too dark for them to see. "What will we do?" asked Chemee Bear.

"I can help!" said Pipee Bear, holding out one of her magic metal cylinders. With a gentle toss, the cylinder rolled away into the darkness. After a few seconds, Pipee Bear pressed her magic cylinder-shaped button and a bright orange light lit up the hallway. The sound was deafening. As the light faded, the Ter Bears could see tiny glowing orange pellets scattered along the hallway. It was now bright enough for them to see.

"Thank you, Pipee Bear!" said Wemdee Bear.

"It's always good to help a friend," said Pipee Bear, "but now I have to pick up these pellets, so you two go ahead and save Planee Bear."

Now it was only Wemdee Bear and Chemee Bear. There was only two of them, so they were scared. But they were also brave, so they continued to creep down the hallway. At the end of the hallway, they came to a large open door through which they could hear strange sounds, like someone playing in a rain puddle.

Wemdee Bear was scared, but he poked his head around the doorway to look in. He saw Planee Bear's plane sitting on a tall table with strange wires coming out of it. He also saw that mean Mr. NSA had tied Planee Bear to a chair and had a piece of cloth covering his face. Mean Mr. NSA was standing over Planee Bear and splashing him with water. Wemdee Bear could tell that it was not fun or nice.

"What should we do?" asked Wemdee Bear, and Chemee Bear thought really hard. He was the smartest.

"I know," he said, holding out his magic test tube. He held it up in the direction of mean Mr. NSA and pressed his magic test-tubed shaped button. As he did, the stopper

popped off the magic test tube and a bright yellow gas began to spread out and upward toward mean Mr. NSA. As the gas reached his long pointed nose, mean Mr. NSA stood straight up and coughed. And then he coughed again. Soon he couldn't stop coughing as his eyes teared up and became red. Planee Bear and his plane were forgotten.

"Yay!" said Wemdee Bear. "You go save Planee Bear and I will save his plane."

As Chemee Bear untied Planee Bear and took the damp cloth off his face, Wemdee Bear stared up at the high table with Planee Bear's plane on top of it.

"How am I going to get up there?" thought Wemdee Bear. "Of course," he said, remembering his own magic expanding cloud button. He pressed it, and a bright white light shot out in all directions, the biggest and brightest of them all. The noise was deafening. As the light faded, Wemdee Bear could see that the legs of the table had disappeared and now Planee Bear's plane was lying on the ground. White fluffy specks began to fall around Wemdee Bear, and he took the strange wires off of Planee Bear's plane as fast as he could. Chemee Bear and Planee Bear came running over just as mean Mr. NSA stopped coughing.

"Stop, you Ter Bears!" shouted mean Mr. NSA. "Get away from my drone!"

"That's not your drone," said Planee Bear. "It's my plane!"

After the three Ter Bears climbed into the plane, Planee Bear started the engine and they took off with a roar.

But, just as they flew into the hallway, Planee Bear's plane did a smooth turn and headed back straight toward mean Mr. NSA, who was holding a large box with a pair of joysticks and many buttons.

Mean Mr. NSA laughed at them. "I control this drone now. With it I will be able to spy on everyone, Ter Bears and all!"

"But why, mean Mr. NSA?" asked Wemdee Bear.

"Because I can!" shouted mean Mr. NSA.

"What will we do?" asked Chemee Bear.

"I can help!" said Planee Bear, and he pressed the magic plane-shaped button on his belly. A bright purple light shot out, but it quickly faded.

"What did that do?" asked Chemee Bear.

"Now we can fly the plane wherever we want!" said Planee Bear, and he turned the plane back around, away from mean Mr. NSA.

"Curse you, Ter Bears!" shouted mean Mr. NSA. "One of these days, I will get you!"

As they flew low into the hallway, Pipee Bear, holding an armful of metal bits, jumped into the plane. As they passed the kitchen door, Vesty Bear hopped in as well, holding together his ruined vest as best as he could. As they approached the front door, the Ter Bears reached down and together lifted Shoee Bear into the plane.

Planee Bear guided his plane straight through the small hole in the front door and out into the bright daylight. He was the most accurate of them all.

"What will we do about Caree Bear's car?" said Shoee Bear.

"We will get out and help him push it back to Ter-Bear Town," said Wemdee Bear.

"I'll help!" said Chemee Bear, holding his empty test tube.

"And me too," said Pipee Bear, holding her metal bits.

"Me too," said Vesty Bear, clutching the torn fragments of his vest.

"And don't forget me," said Shoe Bear, hopping out in his overly-warmed shoes.

"Thank you all," said Caree Bear as they began to push the crumpled car back towards Ter-Bear Town.

"Yes, thank you," said Planee Bear as he took off again in his plane. "You saved me and my plane from mean Mr. NSA and his cruel experiments."

"You're welcome," said Wemdee Bear with a smile. "It's always nice to help a friend."

Wynifred

"It's definitely broken," Alferic said from his position crouched next to the wagon's wheel. His younger sister stood to the side, holding the reins of the family's horse, Harris. They'd uncoupled him when the left rear wheel had made a concerning cracking noise, and now the horse was enjoying an unexpected snack break, occasionally dipping his head and nibbling at the grass just off the dirt road.

"What do we do?" Wynifred asked, pushing her curly dark hair out of her face, only to have it blow back into her eyes as the wind picked up.

"I might be able to mend it enough to get us home," Alferic said to his sister, standing and going around to the back of the wagon to look for some tools.

The sun was still high in the sky, but the air didn't feel much warmer for it. It was growing colder, and this was to be their last trip to the city before winter fell and the trip became too harrowing. Now that he was seventeen, their parents trusted him to not only make the trips on his own, but this time they'd even let him take Wynifred with him, though that was in no small part due to a lot of begging on her end.

They'd done well in the city; his father, Edgar Quall, had gained a reputation as a fine blacksmith, and they had sold out of armor and weaponry by their second day at market. They were still at least a day from home, their wagon laden with the food and sundries their parents had requested.

"Do you need help?" Wynifred asked. She was twelve, and though Edgar had begun to teach her a bit of the blacksmithing trade, she probably wouldn't be of much assistance here, with four wooden spokes that looked almost sawed through.

"No, you hang onto Harris, Wynn timer," Alferic replied as he came back around the

wagon, holding a rolled up leather tool pouch and smiling at her. "You need to wake up."

The girl frowned at her brother as the horse snorted lightly, almost sounding nervous. "What?"

Alferic's back was to her as he knelt in the road and unrolled the tools. "Get up, girl, get up."

Quite suddenly, the wrinkled, leathery face of an old woman was in her field of vision, so close their noses were practically touching. Wynnie's arm flew out, pushing the old woman back. "What are you *doing*?" she demanded crossly, sitting up straighter in her chair.

"Did it work?" the old woman asked, bushy white eyebrows raising. "What did you see?" She took Wynnie's chin in her hand and looked into her eyes, as if searching for a glimpse of the vision she'd just had.

"The same thing I always see," Wynnie said, batting her hand away and sliding out of the chair, forcing the hunched old woman to take a step back as she stood up. She adjusted her leather vest. "The day my brother died. A ten year old, useless memory."

The old woman tutted disapprovingly. She turned and slowly walked to the fire, cane clicking on the stone floor.

As soon as her back was to her, Wynnie clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking. This always left her unsettled, no matter how many times she'd tried it. She walked to the window of the house, looking out into the dark night, lit only by the firelight and candles from other homes. After a moment, feeling sufficiently calm once more, she turned her focus back on the old woman. "Why did you wake me, Vera? You never do that."

"The City Blades," Vera said, placing a kettle on to boil. "They are on high alert. Searching homes."

"What?" Wynn timer exclaimed, immediately yanking closed the shutters and stepping away from the window. "And you only just now thought to mention it?"

"Relax girl, you're safe within these walls, you know that."

Wynn timer scoffed, picking up her sheathed short swords from where they were leaning against the chair and retying one to each side of her belt. "I can't stay in these walls forever."

Vera's house was a tiny two room affair. The kitchen and living room bled into each other, and Wynn timer could stand in the center of it and almost touch any of the walls with a sword. She'd never seen the woman's bedroom, but she imagined it wasn't much larger.

"Nor would I want you to," Vera replied with a wry smile. Her expression turned serious as she hobbled her way back to the sitting chair Wynn timer had been in to begin with. She eased herself into it. "His death clouds all of your memories, you know. These attempts will never work if you can't see past the pain."

"Not very potent magic then, is it?" Wynn timer said, grabbing her rucksack and hoisting it over her shoulder.

The woman pointed her cane at her. "Such things only work if you let them, Wynifred."

"So you always say," Wynn timer replied.

"Listen to me, Wynifred Quall," Vera said sternly. "I will not waste my time on this anymore. I take no pleasure watching you cruelly experiment upon yourself."

"What do you have to complain about?" Wynnie said, reaching into her coin purse and clunking down a gold coin on Vera's table. "I pay you for your services, don't I?"

"You will never locate the information you seek if you remain fixated on one memory," Vera said. Despite all her protests, Wynnie noticed the old woman had no problem picking up the gold coin and dropping it down the front of her blouse. "Do you really want this to work?"

"Would I waste my time and money if I didn't?"

"Then you must go to Kriki," Vera said. "It is a small village to the north. A five day journey on horseback. It is said that there is a mage there who can help focus the mind. He may be able to help."

"And, once again," Wynnie said. "You've waited until now to mention this?" The woman was fond of keeping secrets. Wynnie had a feeling she just liked having big reveals.

"The journey is dangerous," Vera advised. "Through the mountains. And then, of course, there are the rumors."

"Get on with it old woman," Wynnie said, rolling her eyes and tugging on her cloak.

"Many have tried to make this journey," Vera paused, possibly for dramatic effect. "Most have failed, never seen again."

"Sounds like most every other job posting I've seen." There was always some perilous journey that folks wanted you to undertake for a sum that probably wasn't even worth it in the long run. But a girl had to eat.

The kettle began to whistle and Vera stood, hobbling back over to the fire to

remove it. "Some tea before you go?"

Wynnie shook her head. "I've already stayed too long."

"Good luck, Winifred."

Wynnie took one last look around the small home, ensuring she had everything before slipping quietly out of the house and into the night. As the door closed behind her it disappeared, blending into the wall smoothly as if it had never even been there. If asked, Wynnie would say that those who relied on magic were just people unable to take care of themselves in the ways that mattered, but the truth of the matter was she was a bit jealous of those with the innate talent for it.

She pulled up her hood and tried to make her way out of the city as quickly as inconspicuously as possible.

The city of Stapol wasn't all that large, and Vera, fortunately, lived near the outskirts of it. Wynnie only came to Stapol when she needed to see the mage, due to an unfortunate misunderstanding that had sketches of her up all over the city bearing the words, "Wanted: 10,000 Coin Reward." The City Blades - the dark-blue cloaked guards of the city - would love to get their hands on her.

It was looking like she was going to make it out of the city without any incidents. Right until she turned the corner and came face to face with six City Blades. How they'd managed to be so quiet in so much armor was beyond her.

"Halt!"

Wynnie cursed under her breath. She ignored the command, pivoted on her heel and broke into a run, heading back the way she had just come. On a wall next to the Blades was a poster of her, so she wasn't about to try and talk her way out of this one.

“Come back here!”

Wynnie took a sharp right onto another side street, cursing again as she heard more shouts go up and the alarms start go - bells ringing a loud steady chime. There was a clanging behind her that indicated at least some of the six were giving chase. Hopefully their armor would slow them down. She turned another corner, trying to lose them in the back allies of the city, boots splashing through puddles of water from the day’s earlier rains.

She pushed herself faster, until the sounds of the guards giving chase faded and disappeared. The tall stone city wall was to her left, but with the alarm raised she hadn’t quite worked out how she was going to get out. She skidded to an abrupt stop when an arrow struck the ground near her feet.

“Halt!” Wynnie looked up and saw four archers on the rooftops above her, two on either side of the street. She turned to try and duck down another alley, but found the way blocked by three City Blades.

The one in the middle looked the most impressive, deep blue cloak billowing behind him as he marched purposefully toward her. He was the only one not wearing a helmet, and he was probably a good ten years older than she was, blonde, and wearing an almost bored expression. “Come along then. Enough of this nonsense.”

Wynnie’s hand was resting on the hilt of one of her swords, though she didn’t draw it, still keenly aware of the archers. She could... probably take three Blades, if she didn’t have to worry about a ranged assault as well.

“What is this about?” she asked, deliberately pitching her voice lower than it’s usual register. She was tall for a woman, and more muscular than most females as well.

With her cloak on and her hood up, she was sometimes able to pass as a man, which she'd found to be a useful tactic.

“As if you didn't know,” the blonde man replied, stopping out of range of her sword, should she attempt to pull it. “Let's not play games.” The other two Blades went around to each side of her also remaining out of range.

There was a shout, then several loud clatters, and the three City Blades on the ground and Wynnie all looked up to see the four archers were suddenly rolling off the slanted roofs they stood on, appearing to be asleep.

“He's using magic!” the Blade to her left yelled, reaching for his sword. Not one to let a lucky opportunity pass her by, Wynnie drew one shortsword and lunged for him. Her weapon bounced off his armor, but hit him with enough force that he let out a curse and wasn't able to draw his weapon.

The other two Blades pulled their weapons, one wielding a broadsword and the blonde a large two handed sword. Wynnie took a step back drawing her second sword.

“We aren't here to fight you,” the blonde said, shaking his head at the other two Blades, warning them not to attack.

“Could have fooled me,” Wynnie replied.

“Drop your weapons and come with us,” he tried again.

“I'm leaving this city tonight,” Wynnie said.

“We can't let you do that.”

“I wasn't asking for your permission.” Wynnie went for him first. He was wielding a two handed sword, she could have an advantage if she got in close enough to ruin his range. Unfortunately he was faster than she expected, considering all his armor

and heavy sword. He twisted away from her and swung his weapon just enough to force her away. It was like he was playing with her, not trying to kill her. Her hood fell down as she jumped back and her ponytail of dark curly hair fell from its confines and down her back.

The three City Blades all appeared confused. “Who--” the blonde began, but was cut off as the ground began to shake. Wynnie almost lost her footing as the earth around her shot up into the air, spanning the entire street and touching the buildings on both sides in wall that separated her from all three of the Blades.

She blinked at the new wall, bewildered.

“Come on!”

Wynnie whirled around, swords at the ready, staring warily at a thin figure standing in the street, face masked by the hood of a brown cloak. The person dusted off his hands then waved her over. “Hurry! That won’t last long. I can get us past the wall.”

Generally she wasn’t what one might call a team player, particularly with magic users. Unfortunately she could hear the shouts of the blonde behind the dirt wall calling out their position, and more bells began to ring.

Wynnie sheathed one of her swords. “Can you keep up?”

“I’m fast,” the cloaked figure said with a nod. “If we get to the section of the wall by Goldfyll Street we’ll be safe.”

“Then let’s move.” They sprinted down the streets, watching shutters get slammed closed as they went, Stapol’s citizens wanting nothing to do with whatever commotion was going on outside.

At the corner of the last street before Goldfyll, Wynnie stopped abruptly,

throwing her arm out to prevent the mage from continuing any further.

“What are you doing?” he asked, breathing heavily.

“City Blades,” she hissed, nodding at him to peer around the corner she’d stopped them at. They were lucky the guards had been making so much noise she’d noticed them before they’d tried running right past them. There were at least ten on the march.

He peered around the corner and cursed under his breath. “It’s okay. We can run for it. We just need to hit the wall.”

“Not a chance. They’ll corner us, trap us, and arrest me,” Wynnie said. “Maybe even you for helping me.”

“Trust me,” the mage said, not even looking at her. “We just need to get to the wall.”

From further behind them Wynnie thought she could hear the clink of armor as another garrison of City Blades seemed to be running closer to their position.

She didn’t have a lot of options. She looked ahead of them. The wall was close. They might be able to make it. Wynnie still wasn’t sure how they’d be able to get over it, but in the end, trying was probably better than standing around here waiting to get caught.

“All right. But if I get arrested, it’s your ass I’ll be after,” Wynnie finally relented.

“Just don’t let me get killed on the way and we’ll both be fine.”

“...I find this plan worrisome,” Wynnie said, sheathing her second sword in preparation for an all out run. “All right. Stay next to me.”

“On three?” the mage asked.

“Just go,” Wynn timerplied, taking hold of his arm and making a break for it.

“Halt!” Shouts went up as they appeared in front of the ten Blades and kept going, making a dash for the wall.

“They saw us,” the mage said, voice squeaking and suddenly making her wonder if this person had done her own trick and managed to make Wynn timer think she was a man.

“No shit! Go!” Wynn timer exclaimed, dragging the mage down the street. The wall was just a short distance ahead, but there was no exit to be seen and the bells on the walls were still ringing - they knew they were coming.

As they approached, Wynn timer could see archers on the wall draw back longbows and aim at them both. “Halt or we’ll shoot!” was the warning shout.

They didn’t halt. Two archers loosed arrows at her and she dove to the ground, luckily low enough that they sailed over her. Two others shot at her and she rolled to the side, arrows landing the ground she’d been laying on. She pushed herself up, catching up to the mage maybe twenty feet from the wall.

“What in the hell is your plan?” she asked as they rushed a dead end, ten guards behind them and four archers re-notching above.

The mage didn’t answer, suddenly starting to chant words that Wynn timer didn’t understand and grabbing her arm right as she was starting to slow down to avoid crashing face first into a stone wall. The mage’s grip was tighter than expected and tugged her along, refusing to let her slow down.

“What are you doing!” Wynn timer said, trying to pull away and stop her momentum, but she wasn’t fast enough and they went headlong... through the wall. Still

mid stop, Wynnie stumbled and fell, taking the mage down with her. They both were headed face first into the grass, but the mage let go, which allowed Wynnie to roll about as ungracefully as one could, ass over head, before landing in a sitting position on the ground. "I'm going to kill you," she panted.

"We're out aren't we?" the mage replied with a groan as he pushed himself to his feet. His hood had finally fallen down, revealing a young boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen, with curly brown hair framing his face. "Let's go, before they realize we're on the other side and start shooting."

It was a fair point. Wynnie got to her feet and the two of them made quickly for the nearby woods in the cover of night, the clamouring of the city in an uproar still echoing behind them. Once they were far enough away to afford slowing their pace to a walk, the boy spoke up.

"I'm Duncan."

Wynnie looked over at him. "Look, I appreciate the help, kid, but you should get back before they realize what you did."

Duncan snorted, adjusting the rucksack on his shoulders. "I was leaving anyhow."

"On your own?" Wynnie asked doubtfully. The kid might be a decent mage, but being a decent mage meant about as much as being a decent swordsman. You might not die immediately.

"Well, originally. But now I'm thinking I should go with you," Duncan said, as if this plan made all the sense in the world.

"No," Wynnie replied immediately. "Sorry, I am not a babysitter."

“I’m sixteen, you don’t have to babysit me,” Duncan said crossly.

“That’s what you think,” Wynnie said. “But where I’m going you’ll just end up killed.”

“Where are you going?”

“Somewhere you’ll end up killed,” Wynnie replied.

“Aren’t you clever.” Duncan nearly tripped over a downed tree. Wynnie reached out and steadied him on reflex. “Look,” Duncan continued. “It’s obvious you need magical help. You’d have been arrested at best if I hadn’t helped you out.”

“I had that under control,” Wynnie lied.

“Of course. You’re a sellsword, aren’t you?” Duncan stopped walking and pulled off his pack, letting it thunk to the ground. Wynnie paused as well, turning to watch him with a bit of curiosity.

“What makes you say that?” she asked.

“I’ve seen the wanted posters of you in town,” Duncan replied absently, digging through his bag which, if Wynnie had to say so, was grossly overpacked. “Ah! Here.” He pulled out a coin purse and tossed it to her. “I’ll pay you to be my bodyguard.”

“What?” Wynnie said, perplexed. She opened the coin purse and stared at a *lot* of gold. “Where did you get this much coin?”

“Do we have a deal?” Duncan asked, closing his rucksack and shouldering it, and completely ignoring her question. “You be my bodyguard, I’ll be your mage?”

Wynnie glanced from the coin purse, to the boy, then back to the purse again. “Trial basis. I’ll give you a week. If we don’t get along, we go our separate ways.” Duncan grinned at her. “Great. So where are we going?”

Never Send a Terrorist to Do a Mafioso's Job

Vinnie knew from the beginning that this was a terrible idea, but once the Boss got something in his head, you could never argue with him. Now he was trapped in a shitty small town with Ali the Terrorist, waiting for a tire change on the van that had a bomb in it. He paced the parking lot, chain-smoking and waiting for the FBI or the CIA or Homeland Security or Claire Danes to sweep in and arrest them both.

Ali the Terrorist was altogether more zen, which might have been religious fervor or just his disposition, it was difficult to tell. He was at least six inches shorter than Vinnie, with a slight frame – Middle Eastern dudes tended to be built that way, at least in Vinnie's experience with the ones he met manning convenience store counters – and a close-cropped beard. He was also maddeningly calm *all the time*, which had shattered Vinnie's expectations of the Al-Qaeda-ISIS type pretty fast. Those guys seemed to be loud-mouthed chanters and beheading fools. He wasn't sure where the Boss had even procured Ali the Terrorist, and he knew better than to ask. Vinnie was just on guard dog duty: let the guy do his work in the safe house, transport the goods to the location, make sure the boom boom went off without any bumps.

Except there had been so many bumps they'd blown out a tire on a shitty back road, and Vinnie might have flunked high school chemistry, but he was pretty sure that with all the shimmying and shuddering, it was a miracle they hadn't both been blown to high heaven. Which heaven, his version or Ali's, was up for debate.

Then came the tow to the nearest glimmer of civilization, a speck on the map called Village Cove, whose main stretch included a mechanic, a titty bar called Fallopian Flamingos, and a diner named Bob's House. The tire change was supposed to take an

hour tops. While Vinnie did not want to remove his eyes from the mechanics for fear they'd somehow sniff out the explosives like dogs, it was suggested they take in the sights and enjoy the fresh spring air.

Which brought Vinnie and Ali the Terrorist to this very spot at this very moment, Vinnie sucking on his nicotine and pacing, Ali by his side, as undisturbed as a moss-covered stone.

“So,” Ali said in his lightly accented English. “Lunch?”

Vinnie removed the cigarette from his mouth and stared. He was frantically attempting to determine whether he should phone the Boss and inform him of the hiccup, or simply flee the country now, before the bomb squad was called in. He'd always wanted to see his family's homeland of Sicily. Maybe he could get a job at a vineyard or something and leave behind this life of crime and deceit. “Uhhh.”

“Come,” said Ali. “There is nothing we can do here but increase our blood pressures.”

“What? You wanna go to Fallopian Flamingos?” Vinnie asked.

“No no no, establishments of that sort are not halal,” said Ali, reminding Vinnie there was a reason he was called Ali the Terrorist. The guy had a ton of bizarre habits, including abrupt and lengthy prayer times, a distrust of unidentified meat products – “You Americans put bacon in *everything*” – a refusal to wear silk, get near dogs, look a lady in the eye, the list went on. So of course he did not want to go to the titty bar, though Vinnie found this strange, considering once he had observed a DVD among Ali's possessions labeled *Rasheed's Massive Jihad*. He had, out of morbid curiosity, popped it back into the TV and was shocked to learn it was not an Islamist manifesto, but a

militant-themed porno. (Not so shocked, however, not to jerk himself to climax before Ali returned from his supply run.)

Long story short, they went to Bob's.

They made an odd couple crossing the barren parking lot, reflected back to them in the diner's sheer glass façade: Vinnie in his cream-colored suit, open-collared shirt, and slicked back hair; Ali dressed, frankly, like a nerdy computer engineer, sweater vest, bow tie and all. Maybe that's what he'd been back in Egypt or Pakistan or wherever he was from, before – well, Vinnie wasn't sure how one decided to devote himself to destroying the American infidels and cashing in on the seventy-two virgins. It probably wasn't as easy as Vinnie's decision to join the family business, since his other option had been to continue working as a Domino's delivery boy. Although, despite his apparent goal, Ali was perfectly fine with taking an infidel's money for a terrorism-for-hire side gig.

The bell on the door jingled when Vinnie pushed it open, they were seated by a waitress who was probably fifty but didn't look a day over seventy. Vinnie ordered coffee and wished he could smoke indoors. Ali sat across from him, poised as always, and ordered water.

Once the waitress left, Vinnie glared at his companion. "How can you be so calm?"

Ali waved a dismissive hand in his direction, not looking up from the laminated menu. "The situation is beyond us. It is all in Allah's hands now."

It was the first time Vinnie had heard Ali the Terrorist invoke a deity, and he had to admit he understood the sentiment. He heard the same from his ailing mother, who he still took to church every Sunday. *You have to learn to trust in God, Vincenzo. He's the only one with all the answers.* He'd tried to do the same, even wore a crucifix around his

neck to remind him, but he'd never quite learned the trick of total faith. He wasn't sure that even if God *could* be here right now he'd know what to do with their predicament. They couldn't very well take the bomb with them to ensure its safety; it was roughly the size of the duffel bag it was stuffed in and heavy as fuck. Not to mention he didn't want to be the one swinging the damn thing around, even though Ali assured him it would not be likely to explode without a proper detonation device, which was currently in his boss's possession. The whole thing was the Boss's cruel experiment, a plan to rid the family of a rival capo and pin it on the towel heads of Ali's ilk. The threat would be neutralized, Ali's people got to bask in the spotlight, everyone won.

Vinnie snorted and scrubbed a nervous hand down his face. "Easy for you to say. You don't care what happens to you, do ya?"

He was pretty sure that was par for the terrorist's course, but he'd never called Ali on it before. He found the idea completely foreign, considering he was in his own line of work precisely because he cared about what happened to him, perhaps too much. Which was why assignments like this gave him fucking agita.

Ali adjusted his wire-rim glasses, ignoring the question. "There is quite a lot of meat on this menu, did you see this?"

Vinnie hadn't spent any time looking at the menu; he was too busy trying to angle his head at a degree that would allow him to see the mechanic's garage out the window.

Flippantly, he said, "What, is it not halal?"

"I do not know. It doesn't say."

This was enough to prompt Vinnie to actually read the words in front of him. Ali was right. The items had names like *Bob's Famous Meat Stew* and *Mama Connie's Stir Fry*

and even *Cousin Emmit's Hearty Burger*, but there was no description of what meat product any of them were. Ali frowned intensely at this, but Vinnie shrugged.

“Look, here’s a lesson in American cuisine. Burgers? Cow. Stew? Probably still cow. Stir fry, chicken or some shit, I dunno.”

“Hmm,” Ali said.

“Okay, we’re out in the boondocks. These hillbillies probably never even seen a Muslim before,” Vinnie said, too loudly, right as their waitress returned with their drinks.

“There something I can help you with?” she asked, her tone so saccharine she’d obviously heard him. Her smile looked like it hurt.

Vinnie tried not to wince. “My friend here’s just got some, uh, *dietary restrictions*.” That was the term his girlfriend used instead of explaining gluten gave her explosive diarrhea for days.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” gushed the waitress, turning to Ali. “What is it you need?”

“No pork,” Ali said, predictably not meeting the woman’s eyes. Vinnie glanced at the nametag pinned to her sagging boobs. *Bernadette*.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, we’re actually out of pork products right now,” Bernadette said. “No sausage and bacon for us.”

Vinnie nodded to Ali, as if coddling a child. “See, there ya go. I’ll have the burger.”

Ali did not appear comforted. He pursed his lips and hmm’d a bit more, before finally settling on the stir fry and a side salad. Bernadette stayed frozen the whole time, watching them with glittery blue eyes framed with lashes so heavily mascaraed they looked like dead flies. She collected the menus, pivoted on her fat ankle, and vanished into the back room.

“Happy now?” Vinnie asked and slurped at his coffee. It was typical; the whole operation could be compromised at any moment and what had soured Ali’s mood was an American diner menu.

Ali said nothing, and instead cleaned his glasses with a dab of water and his shirttail. Vinnie drank his coffee, wished he’d asked for cream and sugar, and tried to will away the beginning of a headache. After a minute, Ali offered, “They do not seem to get much business, this place.”

Vinnie looked around. They were, in fact, the only ones in sight. There were no other patrons, and now that Bernadette had disappeared into the kitchen, no staff either. The parking lot was empty, and now that he thought about it, aside from the garage mechanic, he’d seen no other residents. There was a desolation to Village Cove in general that he’d missed, being as panicked as he was.

He shook his head to clear it and grunted. “They’re probably all at the titty bar. You’re missing out, you and your...” He couldn’t think of a good word for it. “Kinks.”

“Kinks?” Ali raised his eyebrows. “What are these kinks?”

Vinnie snorted. He usually got the distinct impression Ali could run circles around him intellectually, but there were a few times Vinnie had the upper hand, being the native speaker of English. “Yeah, you know. How you get your rocks off. Some people go watch naked girls. Some tie each other up and spank it with paddles. You do your praying thing and think you can’t look at women, whatever. I ain’t judging.”

Except he was judging; of course he was judging. How could he not? He’d now spent months babysitting a guy who’d probably danced a fucking jig the day the Twin Towers came down, blah blah blah, America on its knees, whatever. And Vinnie, well, he was no

saint, he knew – he'd laundered money and busted kneecaps and even popped a guy or two in his short tenure in the business. Some could also look at him and say he was an enemy of the state. But he had his reasons, and the fuckers who suffered at his hand deserved it. Whatever Ali the Terrorist and his brothers did to get themselves through the day, it was more fucked up than that Vinnie did to get through his. That was one fact he could sleep well knowing.

Ali's eyes had narrowed, dark unreadable pools behind thin lenses that unnerved Vinnie for the first time since they'd met. Ali's slight build and affable demeanor usually made it easy to forget that he was the same guy who had poured over schematics for weeks and deftly constructed something that was meant to leave a charred hole in the earth where Capo Vitale's steak house was currently standing.

"Americans," Ali said quietly, "your fatal flaw is that you think you are superior to everyone else. But we are not so different, you and I, Mr. Puglisi. Do not forget Sicily was once an Islamic state many centuries ago. Your ancestors and mine are perhaps one and the same. Excuse me, I need to use the rest room."

Ali stood and made his exit quickly, leaving Vinnie with an immutable sense of rage and indignation. "That's not true," he shouted after his charge. "You fucking made that up, you *moolenyam*."

But Ali was already gone, and Vinnie had nothing to do but stew about it. Fuck the Boss for his whole hare-brained scheme, and fuck this holier-than-thou freedom-hating asshole.

Vinnie seethed and muttered to himself for a good ten minutes before he realized Ali had not returned. For another minute he hoped Ali had had a heart attack on the shitter.

Finally, because Bernadette had apparently forgotten her only customers, he got up to check on him.

The men's room was at the end of a wood-paneled hallway. Inside, it was sterile and still.

"Ali?" Vinnie asked. No answer. "C'mon, man, stop fucking around, we got a job to finish."

He sighed and leaned down, looking under the stall doors. No feet. The room was completely empty. He began to sweat. Son of a bitch. He'd probably gone AWOL, decided to cut out the middle man and take out some random civilians on his own. Vinnie's pulse skyrocketed. Never mind the FBI, his own boss was sure to kill him for a fuck up of this magnitude. He needed to recover Ali, wherever he'd gone, and fast.

That's when he noticed the blood. Just a smudge of it, on the floor in front of the urinal. He nudged at it with his polished shoe. Fresh. He reached into the waistband of his pants and pulled out his piece. "What the fuck?" He stared around him, as if the very walls might be ready to attack. "Ali? ALI?"

He dashed into the hall, peering into doorways and wondering what he could possibly say to the waitress if she found him in this state. *I think my friend the terrorist might have been kidnapped from your bathroom, can you call 911?* No, he was going to have to solve this on his own.

He darted back up the hallway, sticking his nose into the women's room, a supply closet, and a back alley exit to no avail. Then he found a separate entrance to the kitchen and charged in. He'd have to appeal to the cook, but he was getting desperate. "Okay, nobody panic, but I'm looking for my friend and I wondered if you—"

That was as far as he got, because there, lying on a slab, was Ali. He was unconscious, a trickle of blood at his temple. Above him stood someone massive in a butcher's apron and a blow torch mask. He wore blood-stained rubber gloves and a nametag that said *Bob*. Raised above his head was a cleaver roughly the size of his mask, which he was mid-swing in bringing down upon Ali's prone, delicate neck.

Vinnie screamed like a little girl. The next thing he knew, he was pointing and firing his gun, one two threefourFIVESIXSEVEN. He caught the motherfucker square in the torso for at least three of them and he finally dropped the cleaver, which clattered to the floor. Bob went down on his knees and much too slowly keeled over. Vinnie was still screaming, clutching his piece in both hands and pissing himself. He didn't stop – screaming or pissing – until Bernadette burst in, screeching, “No no *no*, we were finally gonna get some pork!”

She brandished a frying pan and made a swipe at Vinnie. He dodged and grabbed the woman's pan-wielding wrist, twisting until it broke with far more effort than he would expected to overcome an old bat. She continued shrieking like a banshee, going for his eyes with her talon-like fake nails, and Vinnie finally remembered he was still holding a gun. He shoved the muzzle under her chin and fired. Her dead weight fell on him and he had to shimmy out from under her before she too fell to the floor.

Vinnie stood, breathing heavily, for what felt like hours. Something had shifted, something fundamental in the world, and he had not been prepared for it and would probably never recover. His head didn't quite feel connected to his body, and even the reassuring metal in his hand didn't seem real.

Then Ali groaned lightly, and Vinnie remembered that this was, in fact, real life.

Vinnie stumbled over Bernadette's body, slipped in her blood, but reached the slab and grabbed Ali by his lapels, shaking him violently. "Ali, Ali, you gotta wake up, man, this place is *fucked*."

Ali opened his eyes, said something in his native language, then, in sluggish English: "What happened?"

"I'm not totally sure, but what it was, it ain't fucking halal." Vinnie pulled Ali into a sitting position and helped him stand. "Can you walk? We gotta get out of here."

Ali took a hobbling step and winced. "I must have twisted my ankle."

"Fuck, okay." Vinnie put an arm under his shoulder and hoisted him up.

That was when Ali got a good look at the bodies of Bob and Bernadette. "I think it was her, I turned and saw her hair before she hit me." He stared at Bob's attire with as much disgust as Vinnie felt. "You saved my life. Thank you."

"Yeah, well, don't thank me till we're outta this lunatic asylum." Together, they made their way out of the back exit of the diner. Vinnie hoped against hope the tire was changed by now, that the mechanic wouldn't ask questions. *My friend, he's got low blood sugar, it was just a dizzy spell. By the way, did you know your diner is run by FUCKING CANNIBALS?*

Luckily or unluckily, Vinnie did not need to give that prepared speech to anyone, either. As soon as they reached the parking lot, town was no longer deserted. People streamed from storefronts, shuttered houses, even parked cars, and they chanted – nothing Vinnie could recognize. Vinnie had only attended one mass in Latin, many years ago, and even that wasn't quite what these people were speaking. He had a feeling Ali

couldn't understand them either, which gave him a small ounce of comfort. But not much, considering the townsfolk were pointing at Vinnie and Ali, and advancing upon them, although at a strangely lazy pace. Ali, eyes wide, began to mutter in Arabic, and Vinnie had witnessed him praying enough times to know what it was.

Vinnie made an about-face and pulled them away from the street, toward the woods that hugged the opposite end of the parking lot. "Ali, man, we gotta go faster than this. They're coming for us and I ain't got a lot of bullets left."

Ali stopped praying and gave Vinnie a solemn look. "Perhaps what we need is a distraction."

He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a metal button fused to a circuit with a bunch of wires.

"What the hell is that?" Vinnie demanded.

Ali smiled. "We would call this a dead man's switch. Activate, press down, detonation upon release."

Vinnie stared at the device, then at Ali. His boss was under the impression he had the only detonator, and the fact that he had been outsmarted by a terrorist caused an inexplicable laughing fit to well up his throat. He cackled hard, although the sound didn't travel far over the din of the surround-sound chanting. "You had this the whole time, you motherfucker?"

"Just in case," Ali said. He gave a weak, one-armed shrug.

"All right," Vinnie said, glancing over his shoulder. They had just broken the tree line, and the townsfolk were now passing the mechanic's garage and pooling into the parking lot after them. "All right, do it."

Ali flicked a tiny lever on the side of the device with his thumb, then hesitated. “Are you sure you do not want to do the honors, my friend?”

Vinnie did not know what to say. None of this was supposed to be his concern. It had been the Boss’s brainchild, the Boss’s big fuck you to those who had wronged the family. But it had all spiraled out of control, and it was all fucked. Even if they got out of this alive, the Boss would never believe his version of events, even with Ali to back him up. Maybe it was time to duck and run, stop going along with the bullshit, to take charge for once in his own life – especially since it might be about to end. “Okay. What do I do?”

Ali offered it to him. “Press down and release. That is why even a dead man can do it.”

“Yeah well, no offense, but I ain’t wanting to enter Paradise quite yet,” Vinnie said. He took a deep, shaky breath and grabbed the detonator from Ali, squeezing it hard in his fist.

Ali laughed. “To be frank, my friend, I do not wish to enter it yet, either.”

Vinnie let out an incredulous laugh. His grip was so tight around the detonator his hand was already aching. “Good man. You’re all right, Ali.”

The chanting was getting closer. They were breathing heavy, slowed to a near-crawl by the uneven and unfamiliar terrain. Branches whipped toward their faces, and tangled underbrush threatened to trip them both.

“You are as well, Mr. Puglisi,” Ali said.

Vinnie liked to think his tone was genuine. His palm tingled from where the button pressed into his skin. He drew in a deep breath, feeling the crucifix around his neck catching on a chest hair. He closed his eyes, opened his fist, and prayed.



FALL 2015

The Rules (2/3 apply):

1. Stories could contain parallel lives;
2. Stories could contain being locked out; and
3. Stories could involve looking for Tim.

The Stories:

Ethan by Fallon Masterson;

The Case of the Stolen Tips by Sam Segal;

Tim by Jean Thrift; and

Finding Tim by Shannon MacDonald.

Cover Art by Jennie Fountain

Ethan

“Thank you for your generous gift.”

This would have been one way to respond.

“Thank you for your generous gift, but we simply can’t accept it.”

Better. Closer to the truth.

“I don’t want to live in your house.”

There we go.

Instead, Kharly had simply said, “Okay.” Now she and Ethan’s lives were packed in white pods, shipped in anonymous trucks. The movers assured her the pods would arrive before Kharly and her husband did. Their new lives would be waiting in New Hampshire, waiting to begin. Kharly liked the symbolism of the pods, which she thought resembled giant refrigeration units. She’d packed her work desk, clothes, paintings from friends, and with each item thought: “Here’s your life on ice. Here’s your life on hold.”

She hadn’t told Ethan this. No matter how many times he called it “their” new home, it was of course *his* old home. His childhood home. His parents’ generous wedding gift.

Now she watched Ethan drive their Subaru, the backseat filled with the jewelry and computers too precious to travel by pod, her husband’s blond hair rendered nearly white by the sun streaming through the window, and thought, “He seems happy.”

She fiddled with a knob on the radio. She could feel Ethan’s glance, however obscured by his aviators.

“You’re not going to find anything,” he said.

“You know I love AM crazies. There’s gotta be some talkshow nuts.” She peered out the windshield, pointing at the mountainside. They had left the interstate nearly an hour ago.

Through the changing leaves, the peaks of shielded, wooden cabins poked into the sky.

“Anyone who lives like this calls into talkshows. I just know it.”

“You’re going to live like this.”

“I might call into talkshows then. I’ll make friends with the morning host.”

Ethan gave her his thin-lipped smile. He had two versions. One was shy, boyish – it meant she was playing a good role; the entertainer. The one who made him laugh, with fluttering, exaggerated eyes and wild, tossed hair. Then there was thin-lipped and polite. It meant she was possibly going too far, possibly on the verge of hurt feelings. She decided to re-calibrate.

Kharly unhooked her seatbelt and leaned over to kiss his cheek. She rubbed his thigh.

“I’m so happy we’re doing this,” she said. She smiled at his profile, putting everything she could into it. “I’m beaming you my love right now.”

“I can feel it,” he said. She was rewarded with a thigh squeeze of her own and she melted back into her own seat, satisfied for the moment.

“I’m beaming you my love right now just like the aliens beamed up our pods and took all of our belongings away,” she said.

“That’s probably what happened.”

“Where do you think our stuff is right now?”

“I don’t know. It should be there.”

A dead end. “No,” she begged. “Please don’t be literal. Where do you think our stuff is?”

This time there was no mistaking the skewed glance. “You *are* asking the MBMA.”

A red light clicked on the dashboard at Kharly's unbuckled seat. She flushed. The MBMA. Not her finest moment, yet here it was, stuffed in the Outback with them, somewhere between the cardboard boxes and gear shift.

"You're the most... *interesting*... man alive," she said. She flashed him a grin with lots of teeth, making her eyes big.

"The MIMA?" he suggested. The shy smile was back.

"Totally the MIMA."

"I think the aliens took our pods to other us-es."

"Other us-es? Like bizarro Kharly and Ethan?"

"Yes," he said. "We're..." He turned down the radio, which had devolved from commercials into static noise. "Living parallel lives in a parallel universe."

It was the most excited Kharly felt in 200 miles. "What do we do? Am I a wildly respected, charming, famous photographer with a slamming bod? Please tell me I am."

"You are."

"Good. Bizarro Kharly shouldn't have to be an asshole stuck working in e-commerce."

"Your name's not Kharly."

"It ISN'T?" When Kharly got excited, she was prone to yelling and she could feel herself being lost in the throes of the game.

"You're Olivia. I'm Tim."

Kharly felt very much in love.

The pods weren't there.

Ethan had called the moving company while Kharly stared at the house. She tried to decide if it was menacing or cute. The A-frame cabin, if used for a temporary stay, like a winter retreat, could seem quaint. For a home, it was something else. A porch with missing rails jutted out from the second level, and an opal-shaped window just above gave the house the appearance of a Cyclops, with jagged wooden teeth. She pictured the house at nighttime, a single light glowing out of the opal window.

Involuntarily, her stomach squeezed.

Then Ethan appeared by her side, taking her hand. It would be okay. The pods were delayed two days in weather. Didn't she remember that storm they'd cut through, back by Cincinnati? Everything would be fine. They should go inside.

Kharly had agreed, taking one final look at the window. The eye of the pyramid, all-seeing, knowing exactly what she was thinking.

Inside, the house was more or less what Kharly remembered. His parents had painted the wood paneled walls surrounding the den and dining room white prior to move in – dark wood panels reminded her of her grandmother and her suffocating, Irish home – but the carpets and kitchen were still dated from an unsuccessful 1980s remodel. Her new in-laws had also, she was relieved to discover, boxed the contents of their cabinets and drawers.

Then they had stacked the boxes in the center of the living room.

“I guess we have something to do tonight,” Kharly sighed. “Should we go through these or just put them in the basement?” She'd never understood the hoarder mentality. Why couldn't people just get rid of things? Did they have to box them up? Save them,

reexamine them, make them her problem? When she and Ethan packed up the Ann Arbor apartment, he'd called her packing technique "slash and burn." Kharly liked to discard.

Ethan was the practical one who convinced her that if they left all their dishes and kitchenware in a box in the alley, they would simply have to buy more.

Still, carting around stuff, the collective stuff, made Kharly feel nervous. And here were Ethan's parents, packaging god knows what that hadn't been used in god knows how many years.

Ethan squatted next to a box labeled, "Ethan BR," and sliced the packing tape open with the edge of the car key. Kharly watched the tendons and lean muscles of his forearms jump as he picked up the box, setting it on a higher pile so it was eye level. She felt a rush of affection.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and lowered her lips to his wrist, little light kisses. Then she turned her head toward the open box and quickly stood up.

"What IS that?"

"Oh..." Ethan's voice lowered.

Out of the open box, he pulled a doll. The doll's head was hard plastic, his face painted in a strange, mouth half-open expression. The blue eyes were angelic, at odds with the sneered lips. He wore a tattered blue sailor's outfit, one leg longer than the other, like it may have been homemade. His hair sat askew atop his head, a straw wig that hadn't been glued quite straight. Kharly guessed he was about two feet tall.

Ethan held the doll at arm's length for a moment, his mouth twisted. He looked, Kharly realized, *worried*. But suddenly, just as fast as the worry appeared, he seemed to evaporate. Ethan embraced the doll.

Kharly stared at her husband, 6'2", bearded, manly, cradling a child's toy and tried to allow an appropriate amount of time to pass. The idea was, if possible, to avoid more thin-lipped polite smiles.

"Are you going to introduce me?" she finally asked.

"Of course." Ethan turned the doll around, so the two were facing. Kharly felt oddly formal, like strangers meeting on an agreed upon courtship, not newlyweds standing in their new home. "This is Ethan."

"The doll is Ethan?"

"I took this guy everywhere. Drove my parents crazy." He tucked mini-Ethan under an arm and dug into the box. "Look."

Ethan pulled out a doll-sized pair of blue jeans and tiny jersey. "We'd even dress alike."

Kharly raised an eyebrow. "You'd dress like a weird, anarchist sailor?"

"Haha. This was my Halloween costume in, like, I dunno, the third grade? Ethan and I went trick-or-treating together."

Kharly peered into the open box. A dozen or so multi-colored doll outfits were neatly contained within. A framed photograph caught her eye: Ethan and Ethan, sure enough, on Halloween night. Human Ethan was red-cheeked, exuberant. Even now, Kharly couldn't help but notice her husband seemed to have a different energy. She smiled.

"Oh baby," she said. "I'll never call you the MBMA again. Look at you. You're such a weirdo. You even had the same *Village of the Damned* haircuts!"

"Hey. My mom gave me that haircut."

"You are such a freak. I had no idea what a sick twist I married. I mean it, I am totally smitten."

Ethan pulled Kharly into his arms. Ethan the doll stayed crushed between them. *This is what it's supposed to be like*, she thought. Even if she had a doll's face pressed into her sternum, she would take it.

She felt safe enough to try. "It's like we're a little family of three," she whispered.

Ethan made a clicking noise. The spot on her lower back where his hands had been rubbing warm went cold. He placed mini-Ethan under his arm, stepped away.

"I'll order us a pizza."

Ethan's parents had left the big furniture for the two of them. "Keep it or sell it," they'd said. Kharly had wanted to gut it all, of course, and still planned to – but for the time being, she was glad they still had the oak dining room table (overly formal, ugly), and living room and bedroom sets. They wouldn't have to sleep on the air mattress in the car and they didn't have to sit cross-legged, eating pizza off their laps.

Ethan had set a place at the table for the doll. Kharly took this as a sign of good humor. He was trying to be her playmate again. She hadn't pushed too hard. Dinner was normal, and now her husband showered, and this would be her life.

Kharly listened outside the bathroom for a moment, then leaned against the door, sliding until she sat. She wondered what her new shower would feel like. She wondered what Ethan thought about when he showered. So many questions. Her own showers were long, excessively so, and her thoughts usually ran vivid and clear -- she brainstormed and schemed, built plans. Ethan told her she was responding to the sensory deprivation. She hated the science of the explanation, but secretly agreed. As soon as she left the fogged

up mirrors of the bathroom, she grew distracted, her mind unclear. The plans unraveling in wisps.

She stood up again, restless, and wandered into the kitchen.

Mini-Ethan still sat at the table.

“Creep,” she said. She picked him up and wandered back down the hallway, opening the bathroom door before she was fully aware of her plan.

The bathroom needed a desperate remodel. The shower door was sliding, hard plastic and opaque, and she’d been very quiet entering the room. She felt sure Ethan didn’t know she was in there.

Slowly, she climbed on to the bathroom counter, careful not to slip in her socked feet.

She lowered herself into a gargoyle crouch, mini-Ethan in her arms, extended straight in front of her.

She waited. The shower turned off. Kharly readied herself.

The shower door slid open.

“BOO!” Kharly yelled.

“Oh, hi Ethan,” her husband said. He patted the doll. Then kissed Kharly on the forehead.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and left the room.

Kharly watched him leave, perched and puzzled.

The next morning, Kharly and Ethan unpacked the car. They debated over the contents of the boxes left in the living room. They took trips down memory lane with Ethan’s high school yearbook. Kharly was touched by the expression, love, and warmth in the handwritten note of Ethan’s high school girlfriend.

“Are you sure you want to read this?” Ethan had said, hiding the yearbook behind his back at first.

But Kharly had persisted. She knew reading the note wouldn’t make her jealous. Instead it would make her feel powerful, claimed. Someone once loved fiercely by someone else had chosen her instead. Kharly knew that was the sort of currency you built a life on. She felt like a great cosmic force, who’d comet-ed into Ethan’s life.

“Poor Samantha,” she sighed, after finishing the yearbook note. “She loved you so much.”

Ethan smiled, shy and boyish.

But now there was nothing to do. They were both tired of searching through boxes.

And the pods still hadn’t arrived.

That night they ordered Thai for dinner. The moving company wasn’t answering Ethan’s voicemails and Kharly knew he was placating her by ordering her favorite food. He was laying out paper plates they’d picked up at a dollar store when Kharly wondered if maybe mini-Ethan should join them for dinner.

She whisked out of the room then stomped back in, holding mini-Ethan proudly.

Kharly raised the pitch of her voice and moved the doll’s plastic head back and forth, jerking him by the skewed yellow hair. “*Hi, I’m Ethan. I’m looking for Tim. Is he here?*”

“Haha,” Ethan said. He heaped a scoop of papaya salad on his plate.

“*I love you, Tim.*”

Ethan straightened, crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. “That’s not what Ethan sounds like.”

Kharly wobbled the doll's arms. *"It is my voice! You just don't remember. I've missed you, Tim."*

"Come on. Let it go."

"Don't you wanna play? I heard you don't know how. I heard you're VERY serious."

Ethan stared at his plate. Kharly noticed the tension setting in his jaw. She hoped it could be fixed. She stepped forward, reaching out the doll's arms.

"I love you so much, Tim. Be my friend again, Tim."

The doll's hand grazed Ethan's cheek.

Suddenly, Ethan snatched the doll. "That's NOT. HIS. VOICE."

Kharly's heart pounded. Her husband was inches from her and his mouth jutted open, angry, his skin a reddened hue. His eyes set in an emotion she'd never seen.

"Ethan..." She stammered. "I'm sorry."

"Who's Ethan?" he said. He sat down at the table. He picked up his fork. He stared at her.

"I'm Tim."

Kharly quietly filled her plate.

Maybe Kharly wasn't entirely surprised when Ethan brought the doll into the bedroom that night. They hadn't been silent, exactly, since dinner, but conversation was limited to just beyond the threshold that neither could accuse the other of ignoring them, without it starting a fight. They were both, Kharly decided, playing their parts.

Ethan tucked the doll between them, pulling the flannel covers to just above the collar of the navy suit. He turned off the bedside lamp.

Kharly propped herself up on an elbow, trying levity. “Hey there sailor.” She let her eyes adjust to the light, then ruffled the doll’s hair.

In the dark, she could see the faint outline of her husband’s hand, holding the doll by the elbow. The doll waved.

An olive branch, Kharly decided.

“I’m sorry about before,” she said.

The doll jangled his arms back and forth.

“This is so stupid. Why do we ever fight? Have you noticed we only fight over stupid stuff?”

The doll’s head jerked. Kharly wasn’t sure of the direction, but she thought it may have been affirmation. She sighed in relief.

“This must be why people used those... Have you ever seen them? Those big, rubbery therapy puppets from the 60s? Shrinks would make people roleplay with them to get at stuff they couldn’t say as themselves.”

Bridging over the doll, she kissed her husband then laid back down on her pillow. An unease was rising in her body, blood starting to race like electrical pulses, but she tried to ignore it.

“What type of lucky lady am I to be in bed with two such rakish fellows?”

“A whore,” a low voice growled.

“Hey!” There was a little anger behind it, but also – she couldn’t deny it – amusement.

She allowed herself a small laugh and reached over the doll, poking Ethan in the rib.

“An attention whore.”

Kharly frowned. “Don’t be mean. I thought we were being nice.”

“I am being nice,” said the voice, halted and low, from the darkness.

“So this is your Ethan voice?”

She strained to see her husband’s lips, but failed, as he responded in the same deep growl,

“This is my voice.”

She wished she could see his expression. She wished she could see how much of this was game.

“I don’t like it,” she said.

“Don’t you want a family, Olivia?” The doll’s eyes, blue and ice, stared through her. “I can be your son.”

“Ugh, turn on the light, Ethan,” she said. The initial amusement had passed and Kharly could feel the anger winning out.

“But I wanna play,” the voice growled. “I wanna play your son.”

Kharly sighed, loud. A part of her blamed herself. The stress of it all, the move, the changes, her stupid parlor tricks, jumping out at him in the bathroom like a goddamned child. And her husband had taken all of it. Taken her here, to start a life. For her. *If I’m going to do this*, he’d said, *that’s the place I could do it. That’s the place I could try.*

She held on to this, tried to remember his words, and focused on them until she was sure she could respond without sarcasm. Beside her, Ethan breathed steadily, vibrant and alert. He was waiting, she could tell, to see what she’d do.

“I want a baby,” she whispered. She let in the vulnerability, the pleading she usually kept out.

“Kharly wants a baby,” Ethan responded. Kharly was relieved to hear his normal voice. The relief lasted only a moment.

“You just want a thing that will love you because it doesn’t know any better. It doesn’t have any choice.”

Adrenaline coursing and shaking, Kharly stumbled and kicked to get out of the heavy sheets. “Asshole,” she hissed.

She paced the second floor in the dark, unsure where to go, unsure still where even the light switches were. At the end of hall, moonlight streamed through the opal window. Finally tired and drained, she shuffled toward the window, sat on the floor, and stared through the eye of the house and into the night sky. Toward dawn, she began to rock, slow and purposeful.

Kharly didn’t know when she fell asleep. She woke up in a sweat, the sun baking through the window above in strong, autumnal afternoon beams. She turned and a muscle pulled in her neck, strained. The house was quiet. Her back cracked when she stood up. She opened the sliding door and went on to the patio. The Subaru was parked below. She stepped back into the house and wandered down the hall. The bedroom door was open, but the room vacant.

“Ethan?” she called out. Had he really left the bedroom and walked right by her, sleeping in the hall like that, and not even roused her to apologize? At the very least bring a pillow?

“Ethan?” she called again. Without art, without rugs, without furniture, the hallway landing stretched before her, long and alien. Kharly realized she felt scared in her own home and laughed a little, trying to build up comfort.

“Tim?” she tried. Maybe he was downstairs. Or moving boxes into the basement, A pocket where he couldn’t hear her.

But the downstairs was still. Kharly stood in the living room, hands on hips, flummoxed. Maybe he took a walk, she reasoned. It wouldn’t be unlike him. Ethan was notorious for taking walks unannounced. It was a habit that, when on vacation, left Kharly especially hurt. She’d woken the morning after their honeymoon to find her husband’s side of the beachside hotel bed empty. He’d told her later he wanted to explore the playa before it was too crowded.

“I want to do that,” she’d pouted.

“I wanted to let you sleep,” he’d smiled.

She knew he just liked the alone time. He wanted to unwind without her.

Where was Ethan unwinding now?

She took her cellphone out of her purse – she’d forgotten to charge it but still had a few bars – and called his phone. It went straight to voicemail.

Kharly paced the living room then went back upstairs. She checked the bedroom again and confirmed that, at the very least, Ethan’s shoes were gone. And then she looked at the doll on the bed.

His head was angled toward the door, facing her. Kharly didn’t know how she could have missed it, missed the sneer, the first time.

Grabbing the doll by the foot, Kharly left the room, went down the stairs, and out the front door.

“Let’s see what comes home first, Ethan,” she said. “Our furniture or my husband.” She propped Ethan up, so he stood against the top step, standing vigil. Then she faced the mountains, sat on the steps, and decided to wait, too.

By the time the sun cast long shadows across the graveled driveway, Kharly had banished the doll to the corner of the front porch. She made him face the wall. All of this was his fault.

“Ethan would never talk to me like that,” she chastised him. In fact, had she ever actually seen her husband’s lips move? Kharly wondered which reality she could live with more. She was getting cold. Maybe she’d go for a drive. Her and mini-Ethan. In the Subaru. When she turned around, however, the doll was gone.

“Ethan?” Kharly spun around. Had her husband snuck up on her, somehow? Grabbed the doll, rounded the corner and fled?

“Ethan!” she shouted.

Then she silenced herself.

A great dread filled her.

She realized she couldn’t call her husband’s name anymore because she feared which voice would respond.

Kharly quickly crossed the porch, pushing against the front door. It was locked.

“Unbelievable,” she said. She pounded on the heavy front door.

He must have come home, grabbed the doll, and went inside. And now he’d locked her out. How had she missed it? Kharly’s hands started shaking.

Hugging her arms tight against her, Kharly hopped down the porch steps and stepped backwards, looking at the house. A light glowed upstairs, through the opal window. The all-seeing eye. The uneven porch railing teeth below. She wished it could tell her what it had seen today.

She circled the house, hoping for an open window, an open backdoor, but everything was locked. No other lights were on in the house.

Kharly faced the front of the house again. A tall ice cooler stood to the left of the house. If she climbed it, Kharly reasoned, she should be able to get to the second floor porch and try the patio door. She was sure it was unlocked. And if it wasn't, she'd break it.

She had her hands on the rails, half rotted, and had just begun to pull herself up, feeling the rails buckle with her weight. A cold fear filled her, cold plastic, cold skin, seizing her from below.

Here's to you, she thought. The most boring man alive.

The Case of the Stolen Tips

Sam sipped heartily from his mug of sugary coffee, enjoying the rare luxurious treat.

"Best... case... ever," he purred contentedly, staring up into space.

Shannon narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you watching the counter?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, perking up and making a show of staring at the long line of customers being served by the trio of busy baristas.

"Good," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Wouldn't want you getting lost in the free coffee." She sipped from her own mug. "No one overtly suspicious has come through the door yet. She couldn't give you any description?"

"None," Sam said, closing his eyes to savor the rich flavors of nutmeg and cream in the hand-ground dark coffee.

Shannon elbowed him back into alertness. "Well maybe you should go ask her."

"Ow. Fine. About time I had another cup anyway," he said with a wink, flipping over his empty mug. He got up from their small table at the back of the cafe and meandered amiably into line.

Shannon sighed. This was not the best use of their time, but not every case could be a big one. Most, in fact, were relatively small and modestly-paying, but they had to do something to keep the lights on in their apartment/office. Sam's zoo income and Walter's parents' contribution could only go so far. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, realizing that she actually needed this job more than Sam did, even though he had been

the one to jump (literally) when he read the email from the aggrieved barista that wanted to hire them.

Someone was apparently stealing the tips from the jar at the Jungle Cafe: one of the shiny new coffee and pastry places in the posh Back Bay neighborhood of Boston. It was one of those shops where the words "organic" and "artisanal" were splashed around with the reckless zeal of "Good Job" stickers in a pre-school. This should be an easy one. And, hey, the coffee *was* good.

Several coffee-less minutes later, Sam was at the front of the line and facing their client: a woman with a butterfly tattoo crawling up her neck, two eye-brow rings, and a skull-shaped piercing in her nose. She was wearing the standard uniform of the cafe: a solid dark shirt and matching jeans. Her short jet-black hair drooped a little in front of her dark-ringed eyes.

To show he was paying attention to her case, Sam tapped his empty mug against the still-full ceramic tip jar on the counter. Unfortunately, he did so with a little too much force, and he heard a jarring clank, realizing with horror that he had put a large crack in the mug. He hastily put it down, hoping the client wouldn't see the damage.

"So, Maria," he said, "looks like all's well so far."

"Yeah," she said, a tad hostile. Maybe she *had* seen the damage.

"So, uh," he continued, tapping his fingers on the rim of his mug.

"You want another coffee?" she asked. "And maybe a new mug?"

"What? Oh, yeah," he said, embarrassed. "But I also came up to see if you could remember anything, even, like, the tiniest detail, that might help us figure out who's been stealing your tips."

Her eyebrows descended. "Not so loud," she hissed. "I don't want Tim and Natalie to know I hired you guys."

Sam gave her what he thought was his most apologetic smile. "Sorry," he stage-whispered. And then, so loud that the other baristas couldn't help but hear him: "One coffee, please!"

She gave him a sour smile. "Coming right up. Please have a seat, and I'll be *right over*." She finished by pointing meaningfully at the detectives' table.

"Thanks!" he said, leaving his cracked mug and returning to the table with a self-satisfied grin. That went better than he thought.

Shannon, meanwhile, continued to watch the front door, looking for someone who looked like they might grab the tip jar or its contents and run. Once in awhile, because she couldn't help herself, she checked on her bumbling partner as he worked his way to the front of the line. She couldn't hear what was said once he got there, but the smug look on his face when he came back made her curious.

"So," she asked him, "what did you learn?"

Sam sat down and tented his fingers. "One minute, my dear, and we shall see."

She shrugged, what else could she do, and waited. No one of interest continued to stream in. It was just an endless tide of buttoned-down shirts, blouses, and ties. No one that looked like they needed an extra \$20 or whatever was in the tip jar.

"One coffee," Maria said, appearing at their table holding a mug of steaming coffee. She set the foamy beverage down in front of Sam and then squatted down so they were eye-to-eye. "Okay," she whispered, "what do you want to know?"

Fearing her partner would ask about something ridiculous, like the meaning of life, Shannon spoke up first. "Do you have any idea at all, *any memory*, that might help us identify the thief?"

"Hmm," Maria pondered, "well, the tips have been stolen every day for the past week. And it always happens right before we close at 5. Whenever we go to split the jar, it's empty." She stood up and clutched her arm. "I know it's not a lot of money, but it's not fair."

"Well," Sam said, sipping his fresh mug, "Don't worry. You called the right detectives!"

"What makes you sure your co-workers aren't stealing the money?" Shannon asked.

Maria's head jerked almost imperceptibly. "Umm, Tim and Natalie? I don't think they're doing it. I've worked with them both since we opened six months ago. We're the first and original crew of the restaurant. We look out for each other."

Sam apparently decided this was the right time to drop whatever tact he may have had. "At least until one of them has a drug habit they need to keep up!" he exclaimed.

Maria's face blanched. "I don't think that's it. They're too straight-edge."

Shannon interjected before things got any worse. "We'll talk to them." She shot a look of warning at her partner before adding: "*Discretely*."

"Okay," Maria said with obvious reservations. She then turned and walked back to the counter.

Once she was gone, Sam said brightly: "Okay, I'll talk to Natalie, you can talk to Tim!"

"What's gotten into you?" Shannon asked. But Sam just smiled enigmatically and twitched as he stood and tottered over to the counter, leaving the now-empty mug in his wake. "Caffeine's gotten into him," she said darkly, to herself. "Wait, does he even drink coffee?"

Back at the counter, Sam bypassed the line and went straight for Natalie, a small blonde woman with long hair tied into a ponytail. "Hi," he said.

"Hello," she answered. "You'll have to wait in line like everyone else."

"Oh, yeah," he sputtered. "Of course," He turned and lurched his way to the back of the still-lengthy line, his head swimming a little. Once at the back, he shifted from foot to foot while each customer was served in turn. Eventually, he was called over by the young man: Tim. Tim was a head taller than Sam with glasses, an unruly head of strawberry blonde hair, and a dense tangle of facial hair to match.

"Sorry," Sam said, "I'm waiting for Natalie. You're supposed to talk to Shannon."

"What?" Tim asked, his brow furrowing. "I can take your order."

"Okay..." Sam mused, trying to think fast but finding his mind racing in meaningless circles. He was at a loss for what to do next, so he did what he was told:

"One coffee, please!"

"Petit, moyen, or grand?" Tim asked.

This was new; Maria hadn't spoken in code when he ordered earlier. "Moyin!" he declared.

"Léger or noir?"

Okay, round two: "Legger."

The barista's expression remained impassive. "Crème?"

Sweat was starting to bead on Sam's forehead, which felt weirdly warm and cold at the same time. "Yes?"

Tim remained stone-faced. "Sucre?"

Sam hesitated, worried he was failing the test. "No..." he trailed off.

"Name?"

For the first time, he was confident in his answer. "Sam." He proceeded to nod happily to himself until the register rang up a bill of \$4.50. "Oh, Maria's taking care of that!" he said.

When Tim turned to his fellow barista, she shook her head and laughed. "I don't think so, buddy. This mug's on you."

Dismayed, Sam handed over his last crumpled five-dollar bill and went to wait at the end of the counter for his mystery drink.

A couple of minutes later, the blonde, Natalie, walked over with a fresh mug and called his name. Despite the fact that it made his stomach queasy, he swooped in; now was his chance. He leaned in over the counter, not yet taking the steaming mug.

"Natalie, can I talk to you?"

"About what?" the young woman asked.

"Shhh," he said, "It's a secret. Meet me at my table."

She looked concerned. "Okay..."

He led her back to the detectives' watch-post, but all that remained were their empty mugs. "Now where did Shannon get off to?" he asked the empty armchairs. "Oh well," he said, turning on Natalie, "I guess we can talk in private." Her look of concern deepened.

Shannon had been eyeing the clock, which was marching inexorably towards 5:00 p.m. with no break in the case. She watched as Sam took his time speaking with Tim, hoping he wasn't ordering another coffee.

If the culprit wasn't a customer or an opportunistic passerby, then it must be one of the employees. After taking Sam's order, she saw Tim grab the tip jar and head through a doorway at the back of the cafe which lead down a hallway. Where was he going? She followed.

She hurried to the hallway and got there just in time to see a door at the back shut. It was marked "Private." To emphasize the point, she heard a loud click. She hustled to the end and tried the handle, but it was locked. She went back into the cafe and waved down Maria, who was wiping tables.

"Do you have the key?" Shannon asked her. "Tim just went into the back with the tip jar."

Maria's eyes narrowed. "Did he?" She practically ran down the hallway and stuck her key in the door, sliding the lock free and throwing it open in one fluid motion.

Sam poured the last of the coffee down his throat, his mug now shaking uncontrollably in his hand. "So that's what's been happening to the tips!"

"Yes," Natalie said, her cheeks red. "I had no idea Maria would hire a detective. That's so..."

"Weird?" finished Sam. Natalie laughed nervously.

"Even worse," he continued. "She hired two of them!"

"Oh?" Natalie asked, looking around. "Where is the other one?"

Sam was wondering this as well, and he turned in a quick circle to scan the room, making his stomach lurch. "Woah, I feel weird," he groaned as the taste of ground beans, sugar, and cream began to rise in his throat.

"Okay," Natalie said, "First things first, let's get you to a bathroom." She gave him a shoulder and helped him down the small hallway at the back of the restaurant.

"Ah hah!" Maria shouted as the back door flew open to reveal Tim counting the contents of the tip jar on a metal table.

Tim looked up, alarmed. "Maria, uh, hi."

"And what do you think you're doing?" she asked.

The tall man looked helpless; a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Separating the tips?"

Shannon noted that he was splitting the money into three piles, all of which looked about equal. "What's going on here?" she asked.

"I'll tell you what's going on here," Maria shouted, marching up to Tim and sticking her finger in his face. "This piece of shit is stealing my tip money!"

"That's not it, Maria!" he said defensively. "We... just... couldn't let you have it."

"We!?" Maria crowed, spit flying from her curled lips and striking Tim in the face. "Natalie's in on it, too?"

"We care about you, Maria," he said softly. "You can't keep hurting yourself."

Shannon thought hard, squinting at Maria. "Wait, what's going on here?"

"I'll tell you what's going on!" Sam shouted triumphantly from behind her. She turned to see her partner colored an interesting shade of green and using the smaller Natalie as a crutch. "I was right!" he exclaimed. "Sort of! But backwards!" He lurched forwards. "*She's* been using the tip money to buy drugs!" he said, pointing at Maria.

Shannon turned in time to see Maria scoop the pile of dollars and cents into her arms and make a dash for the back door of the cafe. She then felt a rush of air beside her as Sam charged by. He then grabbed Maria around the waist, and the pair hit the tile floor with a raucous cacophony as dollars and cents went flying to all corners of the room. Maria cursed and tried to push Sam off of her. Shannon watched in horror as Maria's hands pushed on his gut which produced a sickening heave as her partner threw up the contents of his caffeine misadventure all over the young barista's chest. Shannon's heart sank as she came to the painful realization that, if Sam was right, they probably weren't going to get paid for this one.

Once everyone was up and more or less toweled off, Tim explained what was going on. He and Natalie had seen Maria buying drugs after work with her share of their tip money. They had agreed to keep the money in the back and divvy it up at the end of

the week, when they would walk Maria to the T so she couldn't stop and buy from her dealer in Copley Square.

When Tim was done, he blushed. "In retrospect, it might not have been the best plan." He shrugged sadly, turning to Maria. "But it was the best we could come up with and maybe spare your feelings."

Natalie chimed in. "We did it because we care about you, Maria."

Maria, whose shirt now looked and smelled like it was covered in organic, artisanal vomit, did not look satisfied with their explanation. "First of all," she bellowed, "what I buy is none of your business. Second, you were hiding my money from me. What gives you the right?" Tears welled in her eyes. "I thought we were friends."

"We were going to give you the money," Tim said morosely. "We just didn't expect you to go to these lengths," he gestured towards the detectives, "over a couple of bucks."

Sam, meanwhile, was looking more like his normal color. He had even somehow managed to avoid getting a single drop of his own mess on himself. Of course, Shannon thought. He was like an idiot savant at avoiding the repercussions of his own disasters.

At this particular moment, however, he was looking to Shannon pitifully for guidance. She was pretty sure they were thinking the same thing: how do we get out of this awkward no-win situation?

Shannon thought she had the answer, because, unlike her partner, she knew when to cut her losses. She clapped her hands together and announced to the feuding baristas: "Well, that looks like our cue." She jerked her thumb towards the exit. "We'll just be on our way. It's been, uh," she grimaced, "nice meeting you guys."

She then gave her sickened partner a shoulder to lean on as they left the cafe.

Outside, the detectives walked together through the long shadows of the early evening towards the T station that would take them back to their humble Allston apartment/office.

"Well, that was a waste of time," Shannon said ruefully. "At least we learned something though, *right?*" she prodded her partner, who was still clutching his gut and shambling at half-speed. He looked over at her with a confused expression.

She was incredulous. "Did you not learn *anything* from what just happened?"

He looked somehow more confused. "That I like coffee?"

"I hate you," she said, defeated.

Tim

Carol had two lives, and she alternated between them. Tim was very important in both lives. But in one, Tim was her husband. In the other, Tim was her son.

She knew she must have many other lives, and often wondered about them. But she experienced only the two. No one else she knew had ever mentioned also experiencing more than one. But Carol wondered.

Her two lives had started out very similar, nearly identical, and then diverged more and more as the years passed. There was a time, when she was very young, when she thought one of the lives must be what people referred to as a “dream.” But if there was ever a time when she thought she knew which life was real and which was the dream, at the age of fifty, she had long since lost any track of this. So far as she could tell, both lives seemed very much real.

It seemed to everyone who knew her that Carol slept a great deal. To Carol, it seemed that she never slept at all. Every time she fell asleep, she immediately awoke in her other life. And so the cycle would repeat. Lately, though, the switching was happening more often. It wasn't just when she went to sleep and when she woke up. It was unpredictable. And this was what had her worried.

* * *

Her son, who she secretly thought of as Tim Jr., was twenty-four now and had never lived away from home. After high school, he had earned an associate's degree from the local community college, then found a part-time job nearby, working at a call center for PC support. He had been there almost four years and seemed to have no further ambition. She had started charging him rent a while back, hoping to encourage him to find a better

job and maybe even his own place, but he was happy to stay on and “help out with the mortgage” as he referred to it.

She thought he was interested in women, but other than a few generic pinups in his room during the teen years, she had nothing to really go on. He had never dated anyone that she was aware, and became flustered and sullen if she brought up the subject. He’d had a few friends during school, but they seemed to have dropped away. He was very good at playing video games. Last summer while they were cleaning out the garage, he had discovered a box of his father’s old clothes and started wearing them. Carol wanted to ask him not to, but she didn’t say anything.

At first she had convinced herself that it was just a phase, that her son was no different from the countless other adult children living with their parents, the epidemic that the media seemed to love expounding upon. But as the years passed, she was forced, bit-by-bit, to admit that Tim wasn’t like the rest of the “boomerang generation” that she saw case studies of all around her. He wasn’t the “Between Things,” trudging back home after college or a layoff. He wasn’t the “Just Wanna Have Fun,” mooching off of Mom while blowing his wages on partying with friends and expensive vacations. And he wasn’t the “Saving for Their Own Home,” squatting in her basement with a girlfriend who was busy planning reception seating and baby names. So far as she could tell, Tim had no other significant human connections or future plans at all.

She just couldn’t bring herself to tell him he had to leave. They had always been very close. She saw now, when it felt too late, that she had been a weak parent. Instead of forcing him out into the painful process of finding his place in the world, she had let him burrow deeper and deeper into the comfortable hiding place she had created here.

* * *

In her other life, Carol had no children, but she was still married, to Tim Sr., as she secretly thought of him. Without children, their life together had become a little lonely during the middle stretch, but in recent years, their social circle had begun knitting itself back together. With the exception of a few fertility treatments here and there, most of their friends no longer had small children in the house. Some of the largest families still had a youngest child in high school, but any actual attempts at parenting were long over. These silent left-behind teenagers slipped in and out of doors, clutching birth control pills and cases of beer, unobtrusive as housecats.

The other weekend, when they were rounding up old clothes for a donation trip to Goodwill, Tim pulled a navy sweater with a yellow stripe down one side from the back of a drawer. “I forgot all about this! This is a great sweater.” He immediately pulled it on and spun around like a model. “What do you think? Still fits pretty good, huh?”

Something about the sweater gave Carol a cold, familiar feeling. “I don’t really like it,” she snapped.

Tim rolled his eyes and wore it for the rest of the day.

* * *

She still cleaned Tim’s bedroom. She knew it was a bad habit, but she couldn’t seem to break it. It just got so messy otherwise, and she didn’t feel like she could really order him to clean it up, now that he was paying rent. Not that she had made him do it when he didn’t pay rent, either. The situation had just gone on too long to fix anymore.

She was dusting and straightening up his desk one day when she came across his birth certificate, buried under a stack of junk papers. She shook her head and rolled her

eyes up at the ceiling. That boy. She took the birth certificate to her office to store away safely, but when she tried to open the file cabinet drawer labeled “Family,” she found it was locked.

That was strange. She never locked the file cabinet. “Tim!” she shouted. “Did you lock this drawer?”

“What?” he called from the living room, over the sounds of a game.

“Come in here for a minute!”

The game noises stopped, and she heard the trudge of his footsteps down the hall. He poked his head in the door. “What is it?”

“Did you lock this drawer?”

“No.”

“Well, someone locked it!”

Tim shrugged. Carol began rummaging through the brick-a-brack in her top desk drawer. “I have no idea where that key is. I can’t remember ever using it.” She slammed the drawer shut. “We’re just going to have to break the lock. Can you get the wrench from the garage?”

“Don’t open it,” Tim said suddenly.

Carol looked up at him. “What do you mean? Why not?”

“Just, the key will turn up. Then you’ll have a broken file cabinet for no reason. Just wait.”

“Where’s it going to turn up?”

“I’ll look, okay? Just, I have to get back to this game. I’ll look later.”

* * *

She was down in the basement one afternoon, searching for the spare box fan, when a forgotten carton at the bottom of a stack caught her eye. The labeling on the side, scribbled in her own handwriting, was “Tim Toys/Clothes.”

What toys? She wasn't in that life right now. Was she?

Consumed by curiosity and an odd sense of dread, she dismantled the tower of boxes, ripping at the peeling tape with her fingernails when she finally reached the bottom carton. The cardboard lids folded open to reveal a tiny blue suit, carefully folded, that might have been worn to a wedding or a first Eucharist. Below this was an equally small pair of corduroy overalls with the name “Tim” embroidered on the bib. Beyond this, more clothes, and at the bottom, a layer of toys that might have been treasured as especially meaningful: a carved wooden rattle, a worn baseball, a stuffed dog with one button eye missing.

“Any luck?”

Carol jumped at the sound of her husband's voice. She whirled around to find him halfway down the stairs, peering at her through the gloom. When she didn't say anything, he prompted, “Did you find the fan?”

She snatched the stuffed dog and held it up for him to see. “Did this belong to you?” For some reason, her heart was pounding in her throat.

Tim shrugged. “I guess?”

* * *

They were finishing breakfast when her son asked, out of the blue, “What happened when Dad left?”

Carol looked at him sharply. “What do you bring that up for?”

Tim looked into his mug of coffee. “I dunno, I was just thinking about it. Why did he leave?”

Carol let out her breath in a tight sigh. “Oh, Tim, come on, you know that whole story.”

“No, I don’t know. Why did he leave?”

“You know, it was after . . . all that,” she trailed off, vague. When had he left, exactly? And what was the reason? Of course she knew . . . why couldn’t she remember it right now? A feeling of unease trickled down her spine.

“That sweater,” she said, changing the subject. “Where did you get that sweater?”

Tim glanced down at the navy sweater he was wearing and shrugged. “It was in the box of dad’s stuff.”

* * *

As she was washing up after dinner, her husband stopped in the kitchen doorway and asked, “Where’s Tim?”

She shut off the faucet. “What did you say?”

He continued down the hallway, calling back, “Just looking for Tim. I thought he was in there with you.”

Carol moved to follow him. “Who are you talking about? Wait a second!” She turned the corner into the living room and found her son, wearing the navy sweater and playing one of his video games. “Where’s my husband?” she asked, shrill. “He was just here!”

He didn’t take his eyes off the screen. “I’m right here. I’m your husband. I’m Tim.”

“You’re my *son!*” Carol shrieked.

Tim paused the game and finally turned to look at her. “What are you talking about? You don’t have a son. We’ve never had a son.”

Finding Tim

Tim was trying to find himself.

He stood in the middle of his flat, spinning slowly and taking it all in. The sofa was made of black leather, a bit too long for the space under the window, but shoved there none the less. The TV was kind of small as far as TV's went these days, a flatscreen mounted to the maroon wall across from the couch. It was the only thing on the walls at all, save for a yellow post it that said "Place art here" in a scrunched scrawl that always required a some deciphering from third parties.

There were dirty dishes stacked in the kitchen and an empty beer bottle still sitting on the table. The bedroom was in a similar state, clothing lying in two piles on the floor. He thought perhaps one was clean and the other dirty.

He turned when there was a knock on the door.

Should he open it?

"Tim?" a female called. "Are you in there?"

Imogen.

He went over to the door and pulled it open, revealing his younger sister. "Hullo, Imogen," he said with a tight smile, though he couldn't help the surprise on his face when he saw how she was smartly she was dressed. She was in pressed grey pantsuit, dirty blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of her neck.

Similarly, she took one look at him and said, "What's all this, then?" waving a hand to indicate she was referring to Tim's outfit, or perhaps even Tim as a whole.

"What?" he asked, before realizing what she must have meant.

"You're all... put together," Imogen said. "You're in trousers, you've got a *tie* on and -

did you brush your hair?"

"Ah," Tim replied, running a hand through his dark brown and, yes, brushed, hair. "Just thought I'd give it a try."

He glanced nervously down at the floor. Below Imogen was a reflection of her, as if there was a second, upside down Imogen dangling from her feet. "Oi!" she was yelling at his closed door, hair all mussed as if she'd slept on it, and wearing ripped jeans and a t-shirt. *That* was the Imogen he was used to. "Tim, you wanker, where the hell are you?" The reflection of his door stayed shut.

"Tim? Are you listening?" the Imogen in front of him asked, oblivious to the one below them banging on Tim's door.

He looked up, blinking at her, trying to play back the last fifteen seconds and hear what she said before remembering life unfortunately wasn't like online streaming. "Sorry," he said. "Must have faded out there for a minute."

"Obviously," Imogen tutted, picking a piece of lint from her suit jacket. "I said you should try this more often. You look nice."

Tim gave another tight smile and thanked her.

"I dropped by to see if you wanted to go get lunch," Imogen said. "I tried to ring you but you didn't pick up."

"I can't find my mobile," Tim said, thinking that he must have taken it with him. Or perhaps it was buried under piles of uncleaned dishes and laundry. His eyes slid down to the floor again, watching his Imogen trying the doorknob, then kicking at the door - did she do this every time he wasn't home? - before turning and storming off. Uh oh.

The Imogen in front of him was staring at him expectantly. His Imogen was walking

away.

“You should go!” Tim said to Imogen.

She frowned at him, one hand moving to rest on her hip. “Pardon me?”

“I, uh. I can’t go to lunch right now,” he said. “So go. Go on then, shoo.” His Imogen was nearly down the hall - if this one left right now maybe they’d reconnect.

“Shoo?” Imogen said, tone suddenly low and somehow more dangerous. She still wasn’t moving. In fact her other hand had now gone to her hip. He’d seen his Imogen do this before. Double hands on hips was never a good sign. Next would be a tapping foot and if he kept it up he ran the risk of a swift kick in the bollocks.

“Sorry, Imogen, I have to find myself!” he said, stepping back and shutting the door in her face. Well. Hopefully that would be a problem for Tim, not for him.

As long as Tim could remember, he’d been able to see himself. As a child, it was rather fun, looking down at the floor, and instead of seeing solid ground, seeing a mirror image of the room he was in, and finding an upsidedown and slightly more disheveled version of himself looking back. They’d been friendly back then, before they’d begun to grow up, and Tim realized that his other self was a bit self-destructive around the same time that his other self realized that Tim was a bit boring.

This was not the first time other Tim had wandered off, which always left Tim in a bit of a lurch. It was much harder to concentrate on his usual routine - a cup of coffee in the morning, reading the paper on the Tube ride to work, running the numbers for the small antique shop he worked at, then coming home and ordering some takeaway to eat while watching television before going to bed - when a part of you was missing.

He always came back though. Usually stumbling in after god knows what debauchery, waking up Tim as he tripped over his own shoes (which wouldn't happen if he'd just cleaned up his room once in a while) and falling into bed, reconnecting them.

But this time that hadn't happened. It had been almost a week and other Tim remained stubbornly absent.

Tim decided it was time to take matters into his own hands. Unfortunately he wasn't quite sure how to go about doing so. First he tried jumping up and down, hoping he'd somehow fall through the floor to the other side. All that did was make Ms. Jenkins smack the ceiling of her flat with a broom handle. He tried sitting on the floor and meditating, but kept getting distracted by thoughts of what shenanigans other Tim was getting up to. He tried digging in Kensington Gardens, hoping he'd just pop through to the other side, but in the end all that did was force him into a bit more exercise than he was used to when he had to run from the police.

Defeated, he'd gone to the pub with Imogen and let her convince him that getting "right pissed" would pull him out of whatever funk he was in.

When he'd woken up in the morning, he was in his bed, but the colors were all wrong. Instead of a cream comforter, it was blue. Instead of beige walls, they were grey. For a moment he thought it was his hangover playing tricks on him, but then remembered he'd seen this colour scheme before, but only in the reflection in his floor.

He'd done it. He was going to find himself.

Once he'd located the only pair of slacks, button up shirt, and tie that other Tim seemed to own, he was ready to start looking for clues. Unfortunately, that was when Imogen had arrived.

He waited at the door, listening to her turn and stalk away, heels clicking on the floor. He hoped she'd catch up to her other self - the last thing he needed was to try and reconnect both himself *and* Imogen.

When he was sure she was gone, Tim leaned against the door and pondered where other Tim could be.

He'd straightened and begun to pace, thinking about pubs and restaurants and starting to worry that maybe he's just up and left the country. As it was something that he would *never* do, it was probably the exact kind of thing that other Tim *would* do.

There was a rattling at the door and muffled cursing from outside, and Tim wondered for a moment if Imogen was back, before remembering this Imogen did not seem to be the type to curse and try to break into his flat. That was, apparently, his Imogen. He really should talk to her about that.

Whoever it was was trying the doorknob again, but didn't seem to be succeeding. Tim set down the beer and walked over to the door, hesitating. After hearing another bout of swearing, he opened the door and looked down at himself, who was kneeling on the floor, face red and eyes bloodshot, apparently trying to pick his own lock with a safety pin. He blinked up at Tim, confused, and slurred, "What are *you* doing here?"

"I came looking for you," Tim replied, reaching down to haul himself to his feet and dragging him into the flat before anyone could see them both.

"Nobody asked you to," drunk Tim said, swaying on his feet as Tim held him steady.

"Of course no one asked me to," Tim said as he shut the door. "You've been missing for a week, I was--" He abruptly cut himself off and instead focused on dragging the man into the living room and depositing him on the sofa.

“What?” drunk Tim asked as he slid down the leather until he was only staying somewhat upright by leaning on his elbow. “What were you?”

“Nothing,” Tim said, going to the kitchen to get him a glass of water. “Inconvenienced.”

“Inconvenienced!” other Tim replied with a laugh that turned into a burp. “Don’t be a wanker.”

Tim came back over and handed other Tim the water. “Don’t be so uncouth.”

“I’ll be whatever I want to be, thank you,” drunk Tim replied, though he did push himself up just enough to take the glass of water and sip from it.

“Yes, well,” Tim said, clearing his throat. “Care to explain where you’ve been these past several days?”

“Casino,” drunk Tim replied. “I was on a lucky streak.”

Tim frowned and took a seat next to him. “And you couldn’t have waited for me to come along?”

“For a week? Please,” drunk Tim replied. Then he hiccupped.

“Okay, maybe not a week,” Tim conceded. “But we could have gone for a day. Done things in moderation.”

“Moderation is boring, just like you,” drunk Tim sneered. Then he hiccupped again.

“No need to be rude,” Tim said, though his feelings were a bit hurt. “And I’m not *that* boring. I can have fun. You just never give me a chance. You’re always have too much fun for the both of us. Someone needs to be responsible, or you’d never even go to work.”

Drunk Tim blinked at him. “I might,” he said obstinately. When Tim raised a doubtful eyebrow, drunk Tim relented. “Maybe I wouldn’t.”

“So there you have it,” Tim said. “It looks like we need each other.”

“Maybe,” other Tim muttered.

Tim paused, wondering if he should tell other Tim the truth. “Truth of the matter is, I came here because I missed you. It’s... I don’t like it when I look at the floor and only see floor.” The both looked down simultaneously, frowning.

“Our carpet is the ugliest shade of green I’ve ever seen,” Tim said.

Drunk Tim added, “It’s the colour of vomit. Has it always looked that way?”

“I have no bloody idea,” Tim admitted, and then started laughing at the silliness of such a thing.

Drunk Tim couldn’t seem to help but start laughing too. Eventually drunk Tim was able to catch his breath. “How’d you even get here? I didn’t know we could do that.”

“I’m not really certain,” Tim said. “I got very drunk with Imogen last night and woke up here in the morning.”

“*You* got pissed?” other Tim said. “Wait, *Imogen* got pissed?”

“I told you I’m not that boring,” Tim replied, expression a little smug, because Ha! It was true. “And on my side, Imogen’s not so put together as she is here.”

“Hm,” other Tim said thoughtfully. “So you got pissed and showed up here. So for you to go back... you’ll have to get very drunk!”

This was said at the same time as Tim announced his own conclusion. “You’ll have to get very sober!”

“Wait, what?” they said in unison.

That was when Tim realized there was a good chance he’d be stuck on this side forever.