There is a Beast

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THERE IS A BEAST

by

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Abstract

Coming in at about 48000 words, the short story collection, *There is a Beast*, offers a modern take on the Frankenstein tropes of man as monster and monster as man. Inspired by writers such as Aimee Bender, Haruki Murakami, and Helen Oyeyemi, the collection embraces the fantastical, the humorous and whimsical. Further influenced by writers like Stephen King and Kurt Vonnegut, the horrific and grotesque take centerstage. Specifically, *There is a Beast* focuses on the frailty and ferocity of mankind, with stories often invoking the views of a different species, such as aliens in “A Planet of Korbobians” and an all-knowing robot in “Tabula Rasa.” The collection also tackles the question of humanity’s destiny, as seen through the science-gone-wrong in “Formicidae,” the ache for purpose and grandeur in “Caulbearers,” and the end of mankind in “Water on Mars.” Several of these stories experiment with length, point of view, and voice, eschewing common categorizations of either literary or genre, instead striving to be both. Additionally, the characters themselves often toe the lines between nature, man, and machine as they search for understanding of themselves, their world, and their part in the greater universe. Through this revelatory process, the characters unlock some terrible mysteries about human nature, including hard truths about themselves. Thus, there is a beast in all these stories, sometimes several, and they look a lot like modern man.
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I’m afraid of a lot of things, this apocalypse: mutant rabbits, with icepick teeth; fire-spouting turtles and sentient, venomous vines. The longer this apocalypse lasts, the worse things seem to get. You never know what creature’s going to be strong enough to break into your house, sniff you out, and get you. So, it’s best to fear everything. Everything, with one exception.

I’m afraid of so many creatures, but the werewolf in my basement doesn't scare me.

Hank’s down there now, snarling, running into things, creating as loud a mess as possible. He’s chained up with just enough slack to have a shitting corner and an eating corner. There's even a ball to play with. I treat him well, all things considered.

We were friends, before he changed. We’d met at college a year ago, taken a Sociology 101 class together. We’d started a study group, helped each other with essays, hung out with each other outside of class. He introduced me to his friends and his terrier, Scruffy. We tried drunk painting together, sang bad karaoke. I thought he was going to be one of those lifetime confidantes, the kind you see in cheesy movies about facing the odds and getting through them.

My roommate often asked me why we weren’t dating—“He’s perfect for you, you know?”—but I could only shrug in response. Sometimes you can picture someone that way, and sometimes, you can’t. Besides, we’d already talked about it.

He’d gotten especially drunk at one of our painting classes, especially handsy, going so far as to grope my breast. I’d shrugged it off, tried to laugh about it, but ultimately told him to stop. He didn’t, and the poor woman running the event had to step in and ask him to leave. That night ended with him storming off, but not before flinging black paint on my canvas, completely destroying the sunset I’d painted.
The next morning, Hank apologized—“I guess I misread some signs.” I’d explained how I felt, or rather, didn’t, and we decided to stay just friends. One outburst wasn’t enough to break us. But that was the end of our painting classes, and our one-on-one outings turned into group affairs.

We were still friends after the apocalypse started, growing closer after seeing our loved ones turn into zombies, or vampires, or writhing intestines. He held me as my roommate, Destiny, succumbed to human-eating carrots, and I cradled him when Scruffy was sucked dry by a three foot long tick. Together, we tried to figure out what was happening, because it seemed like the world at large had dismantled. One day, things were as we knew it—running around on the quad, complaining about Ms. Burrell’s chemistry test. The next day, the universe turned on us.

I still don’t know what caused the apocalypse. Isn’t that true of most awful things? They seem good, and then suddenly, one tiny piece shifts, and everything loses its sheen—or more often, it turns out the glow was always artificial. We listened to the news, which suggested common fear points: terrorists, biowarfare, the hand of God. Experts couldn’t figure out how to fix it, because no one had expected the world to need fixing of such magnitude. We couldn’t prepare, we could only adapt, shocked time and time again with each passing day.

“It’s kind of romantic, don’t you think?” Hank asked me once, after a live, walking fire had consumed his roommate, Marty.

“Romantic?”

I’d laughed, sure he was joking, being ironic—an attempted kindness to ease the tension. And then, I’d started sobbing. Smoke filled my nostrils and spread through the air. Hank gripped my shoulder and said we’d be fine. At least Marty wasn’t suffering.
I was there when Hank got bit, helped him fight off his attacker. We’d been walking through the forest, trying to find berries or something to hunt, when the werewolf came out of the trees, its grey fur matted with shit and blood. It had howled; it pounced; it clawed; it ripped into Hank’s arm, nearly tore it away.

“Sarah!” Hank had cried out. I was the only one left, the only one who could save him.

"Sarah," Hank now growls from downstairs--but I ignore him. Werewolves can't speak. They’re not allowed.

We’d escaped the wolf, mostly because another creature—a bigger creature, dragon-like except for its wooly coat—had come out and joined the attack. I led Hank to the edge of the woods, his body weight heavy against me, and we made our way safely back to my dorm. We’d been hiding here since the apocalypse started: me, Hank, and both our roommates, before they’d died. Now, except for me, Hank, and the monsters, the campus was deserted.

“Oh no, oh no,” he’s said, once we were inside.

“It’s ok, it’s ok, you’re alive.”

“I don’t want to be one. I’ve seen the movies.” He refused to look at the wound, stared instead at the front door, which I’d locked, then secured with furniture. “I know what happens. What I’m becoming.”

“You’re Hank. It’s ok, we’ll figure this out.”

A few days passed, but the wound didn’t heal. His skin grew grey, and his forehead burned. I risked a run to the campus library to look up werewolf lore. On the way, not a single creature attacked me, but all the information I found was fictional.

When times were normal, I’d basically lived in the library. Hank, Destiny, Marty, some other classmates. Our study groups would quickly lose their study factor, devolving into games
of “Fuck, marry, kill: Author edition” or “Who can find the strangest book?” I had a habit for losing at both, finding authors that you wanted to fuck, marry, and kill simultaneously or books that were “Scary, but not surprising.”

As I placed the werewolf novels back, it was hard not to think of those games, even harder not to miss my friends, to wonder why they were dead and I was alive.

When I returned, Hank was sitting on my bed. “Where were you?” he asked. His face was even grayer, scrunched up in anger, or pain, or both.

“At the library.”

“Why the hell were you there?”

He’d been getting like this, volatile. “I’m trying to figure out what’s going on with you.”

“What’s going on with me?” He tried to sit up; he couldn’t. He fell back down, grabbed the pillow under his head and used it to cover his face.

Hank didn’t die. That much is obvious; if he were dead, he wouldn’t be locked up beneath the college. But he never seemed healthy again—he began to deteriorate in layers, first on the outside, then everywhere else.

And yet, the first time Hank transformed still came as a surprise. Maybe it shouldn’t have—hadn’t all the books warned me of this? His eyes had narrowed, he tried to grab me; I ran away, and I hid, waiting for him to come back to his senses. A few hours later, he suddenly snapped back, started apologizing for what he'd nearly done. I said it was ok, fucking said, “You weren’t yourself,” as if this side wasn't a part of him, as if he hadn't tried to--

“Sarah,” Hank growls again. He must be hungry. He can wait.

The second time, I didn't get away. The second time, he found me; he pounced.
“I'm sorry, Sarah,” Hank had said. "I'm sorry," he now growls from downstairs. All meaningless sounds, the howls of a dog, or less than a dog, gone rabid.

I can still smell his sweat, his acrid breath; I still feel his nails digging into my arms.

That first time—almost a month had passed since his bite. We’d been so afraid of a full moon, so afraid of what he’d be. But, the night passed, and he didn’t turn—too many clouds. Luck on our side.

He’d been happy. So damn happy. So utterly, fucking happy that he’d wanted to force that happiness on me.

"The world's ending," he'd said. "Why don't we, you know, make the best of it?"

“We’ve talked about this,” I said.

“We’re the only ones left.” He held me close, too tightly. “Romantic, right?”

“We’ve talked about this,” I repeated.

And then, the second time: “I’ve been patient, but it's just you and me here. I’m tired of waiting.”

I pushed him away, told him to stop. This time, he didn’t listen.

When he’d apologized—“I wasn’t thinking, it wasn’t my fault”—and I said, “You weren’t yourself”—why did I tell him that? Because he was lonely, because he was scared? I was, too. That was the price of staying alive.

It was hard accepting I’d be the last one left; it was even harder realizing what Hank had always been. Not because I wanted him to be a good guy. Not because I wanted him in any way. But because I really thought we’d survive this. All of us.

The others are gone, but I can still make it.
After Hank had attacked, I grabbed my shotgun, almost blasted him right there and then. Instead, I led him to the basement, and left him. If something breaks in, he'll be good bait.

See, it's unfortunate for Hank, really. Another month has come and gone, but the full moon hasn’t risen once since he was attacked. While it's always night, it's never the right kind of night, not for him. He’s been human this entire time.

I walk downstairs, dog food in hand. Hank looks up: he's pale, bony, and his hair's falling out. He looks so much unlike a werewolf, but both of us know the truth. He’s something much worse than that.

As I leave him chained down in the basement, he calls for me. He apologizes, again. He says he'll never try to hurt me, again.

"You won't," I agree, as I close the door and head back upstairs, leaving his wordless cries behind me.
After the episode with Defendant Jacobson, the Omnibot’s ability to decode right and wrong was no longer certain. But the bot was flawless in its proceedings, so how could it have failed? More importantly, why did the blame fall to The Judge for the Omnibot’s failure? Having spent so many years sitting in his uncomfortable chair listening to even less comfortable deliberations, he deserved to avoid this whole mess—the Omnibot was solely responsible for fixing society, not The Judge. …And yet, he was responsible for fixing the bot itself.

Could the bot be fixed, and if it couldn’t, what then?

As if hearing The Judge’s plea, The Prosecutor shook her head. Her eyes darted across the floor as if she were reading invisible ink. She was average in height, average in weight, average in everything except for her title. “So, where do we start?” she finally asked, pushing a set of glasses up her nose. “With what went wrong, or ideas for fixing it?” She raised her hands to her shoulders, then brushed them, like they were dirty. “I don’t know what went wrong or how to make it not wrong. But we won’t figure anything out if we just keep standing here.”

“Very true!” The Defense Attorney piped up, as he took a seat on one of the benches. He raised a hand to his hairless head, training a pensive gaze on the woman before him. He made no move to say anything more.

“Let’s go over the facts,” The Judge said instead. A flutter of pride flickered through his stomach, because at least he had responded. “I must admit, I tuned out the beginning of the Omnibot’s reading.” He mimicked the woman’s shrug. “After you’ve heard several hundred repetitions of the same verdict, it’s hard to pretend you don’t know what’s coming.”
He meant for his words to be lighthearted, and The Defense Attorney took them as such. The smaller man stifled a laugh but didn’t hide a smile, and The Judge jovially offered one of his own. How nice it was to be agreed with, especially in a matter like this, because what was of more importance than the Omnibot? Were there any matters outside of it?

_You’re not the only one who thinks the bot’s a bit long-winded. You’re just the only one willing to say so._

The Judge almost said something else, something about the bot’s lack of synonyms in pronouncing “Innocent,” which he could easily turn into a conversation regarding what Innocence was, and from there, a question of what “Not Innocent” meant. But any desire to continue speaking dissolved when he looked at The Prosecutor. She was frowning. At him. Judging him.

“Isn’t your entire job to listen?” she questioned. “Wasn’t that why you were Selected?”

The Judge glared at her. He tried to respond, but whatever words came to his head turned into nothingness just as quickly.

Was his whole job really so simple? So little as a set of ears?

It had been so long since The Judge had been needed. He no longer remembered what his official responsibilities were. At one point, his job must have had purpose and duties—apparently, cleaning up the bot’s failures was one of them—or else why would he have ever wanted to be The Judge? Why would he have been Selected?

“We’re not here to judge me,” The Judge replied. “We are here to find a solution! And if you wish to be a part of that solution, I suggest you inform us of the bot’s transgression.”

The Prosecutor furrowed her brows. She turned around. Her words came quickly and quietly.
“What was that?” questioned The Judge.

She turned back toward him, brows even tighter. “I said… I wasn’t listening, either.”

The Judge cracked a smile. Trumpets of victory sounded in his head, and he let out a tiny laugh. “Isn’t your whole job to listen?” The Judge questioned, not honestly knowing if that was her job (and still not sure if it was his own).

“I never win anymore,” she snapped. “What point is there in listening?”

“I never decide anymore,” The Judge spat back. “What point is there in—”

The Judge stopped mid-sentence, suddenly aware of a high, keening whine. He looked toward the tiny Defense Attorney, who was bouncing in his seat like a child who knew the answer to his teacher’s problem (The Judge had been alive two years before the integration of mind-beams, and he still remembered what a teacher was, even if he couldn’t remember his opinion of them).

“Yes, what is it?” he asked, unable to see the man as anything but a boy. Not because of his height or his high-pitched voice, but because of the energy in his bouncing, which The Judge knew could outlast his own.

“I was listening!” The Defense Attorney said, as he rose to his feet, walking toward the podium. There was something stronger in his walk than when he had paced. Not quite confidence, but something a notch higher than timidity.

“You were?” The Prosecutor said, her face conveying the same surprise that The Judge was trying to conceal.

“Oh, it’s great fun!” The Defense Attorney replied. “Trying to guess whether my client will be Not-Innocent or Innocent.” A tiny blush rose to his skin, and he continued, “Even though they’ve never not been Innocent, the chance at a Not-Innocent verdict is always exciting!”
“So what changed?” The Prosecutor queried. Her voice was even quicker than it had been before, trying to get at the point on schedule. Tradition demanded that the trio arrive at a verdict for their defendant before tomorrow. Caught, tried, and revitalized, all in a day.

That wouldn’t be possible if they could not fix the bot.

The bot’s speech always began the same, minus a pronoun, or a different representation of time. Most of his speech, in fact, was the same. The defendant’s name would alter, but it might as well not, because the bot could be talking about anyone:

“Today, I present before you a man accused! Through careful evaluation of his brain, I, Omnibot, will prove him Innocent!”

After guaranteeing the man, woman, or other’s innocence, the bot would read off a list of their crimes. Not alleged crimes, but ones that the accused themselves had confessed to. It was always easier this way, when the bot wouldn’t have to prove whether something had happened, only why it had happened.

“The bot’s statement was the same as usual,” The Defense Attorney said, as The Judge continued to play the words in his head. “He listed the crimes. First degree, I believe. Some words I hadn’t heard before.” The Defense Attorney shrugged, like the specifics didn’t matter (in the grand scheme of cases, they didn’t). “Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until I —” The Defense Attorney paused. He cleared his throat, his face growing redder. “Not until I pressed the Button to deliver the defendant’s Reading. That’s when the wording changed.”

The Judge remembered this part in a rapid blur. After the list of crimes, it was The Defense Attorney’s duty to press the Button. The Button, attached to the Omnibot’s head, would release a long, pulsing wire, and this wire, sentient, would climb up the defendant’s arm and
crawl through their ear, drilling a tiny hole in the eardrum through which the bot could enter their brain. Unpleasant, but far from unusual. The Judge had seen it thousands of times.

(A person’s first Reading was often unsettling—who wanted something foreign in their head?—but most of the population had committed some offense by their teens, sometimes earlier, and it was easy to grow accustomed to the wire as if it were an educational mind-blast or a medically-necessary Innocular.)

During this particular Reading, The Judge had been busy cleaning something beneath his nails. He wasn’t sure what it was or how it had gotten there, but getting rid of the gunk seemed far more important than listening to the proceeding. He knew what was going to happen; the bot had already told him. It would find a reason for why the man had committed his crimes. Then, it would declare the man Innocent and send him on his way to Revitalization, where he could overcome his past and learn to reenter society. Repeat offenders were a norm at Revitalization. Each time they went, it meant they were one step closer to never returning.

The Judge had sat in on too many proceedings to remember them all. Yet, he did remember them all, because they were always the same. Plays with different actors, but the lines and the plot never altered. So why had the bot changed course? Why had it stalled in giving a Reason for the man’s crimes? Why had it started to hum and shake, then grabbed the man on trial and flung him against a wall?

Why had it tried to —

“After the humming,” The Judge began, “that’s when the bot said something new. What was it?” The Judge looked at The Prosecutor, who was looking back down at the floor, tapping her feet impatiently against the panels.
The Defense Attorney smiled sheepishly. “A few things,” he began. “It said, ‘Innocent!’, like it always does. But then, it said ‘Innocent’ again.” The Defense Attorney lowered his voice. “That’s when its voice got sharp and it tried to… well, you know what it tried. And I think it was asking a question.” The Defense Attorney splayed his hands. “Innocent?”

“And after that?” The Prosecutor asked, abruptly looking up from her feet. “When it whispered to you, what did it say?”

The Defense Attorney bit his lip. His eyes pointed down, like he could now see whatever it was The Prosecutor had seen. The invisible writing.

“Guilty,” The Defense Attorney responded. “The bot pointed to my client, looked at me, and said guilty.” The Defense Attorney looked up at The Judge but didn’t make eye contact. “Have you ever heard that word before?”

The room grew as hushed as it had when the trio’s session first started. The Judge felt the other two staring through him, because yes, he had heard that word. Being older meant he had been exposed to a world where the bot had not yet been fully formed. Though The Judge had always lived in a world with the bot, he had known of the bot during its nascence, back when it had still said “Not guilty” instead of “Innocent.” But even back then, the “Not” had always come before “guilty.”

“It means ‘Not Innocent,’” The Judge translated. “And it’s… a very old term.”

“So why did it say it?” asked The Prosecutor.

The Defense Attorney turned toward The Prosecutor, and The Prosecutor turned toward The Judge, and The Defense Attorney figured The Judge was the person to stare at, and soon, the feeling of too many eyes was upon him again.
So, for the first time in his almost fifty years as Judge, The Judge took the decision upon himself.

“We’ll ask it.”

“What do you mean?” The Prosecutor questioned, looking very much like she knew what he meant.

The Judge smiled, already doubting his choice:

“We’ll give the bot a trial.”

#

The bot had never before sat in the defendant’s seat. There had never been need for its presence there, not when it was the one meant to defend, not be defended. Light from the ceiling bounced off its silver paneling, illuminating the half of its frame that couldn’t fit on the tiny chair. Of similar stature to a person, only bigger and legless, without a head, the bot resembled a medieval torso of armor, with wheels for feet. On top, thin, sharp limbs sprouted from its Button, like a tree—a weeping willow, if The Judge remembered correctly—giving the impression that the bot was weighted down—eager to leave, indisposed by its earlier episode, or the new seating arrangement, or something else entirely.

Likewise, The Judge was finding his new seat uncomfortable. He had never before sat behind the podium. He was used to his chair beside it, and even though it was too small for him, and far too worn, it was his, and that was where he belonged.

He could tell that his coworkers felt the same. The Prosecutor looked uneasy behind the big desk of the Prosecutor, which was normally put there for show while The Prosecutor sat with spectators (there were no spectators there now, of course, though they often filled the jury box,
which lay between the desk and the doors leading outside). The Defense Attorney looked similarly uncomfortable within his seat, which was actually the same seat he always used, just moved. It was no longer beside the podium, where the bot would normally be in reach. Instead, he’d placed it beside The Prosecutor’s own chair. It didn’t look quite right there.

The Judge didn’t remember much from the before-bot years, but he knew it mattered where a person sat; even if he couldn’t recall the specifics of where that was and how anyone should speak, he remembered enough to run a trial in some approximation of how it once was.

“Well, how do we do this?” The Defense Attorney questioned. He was fidgeting, and his voice was that early whine. This time, The Judge doubted it was from excitement. The man looked especially small behind the table.

The Judge was prepared for his question. “Why don’t we start by turning it on?”

The Defense Attorney’s eyes widened. He knew this part.Excelled at this part. Up until earlier today, when this action had triggered the bot’s rage, he’d been an expert at pressing the Button.

“Yes, let’s,” The Defense Attorney agreed, though he made no move toward the bot.

“If you will,” The Judge continued, signaling toward the defendant. The Defense Attorney still didn’t move, but The Judge made no motion to move himself.

“Oh, oh yes,” The Defense Attorney eventually said, as he rose from his seat and tiptoed toward the Omnibot. His movements were slow and even, like he was trying to figure out whether someone was following him. Soon, he reached the defendant’s chair and stood face to machine-face with his new client.

Surrounded by limbs, The Button sat atop the bot’s head, round and red. It was a sensor, which would only turn on for certain fingerprints. The Defense Attorney sucked in a breath,
thrust his hand forward, and pressed down. He waited a moment—the bot wouldn’t turn on until he removed his finger—and then pulled back his hand like he’d been shocked.

With a fizzling noise, the bot sprang to life. Machine parts whirred, and The Defense Attorney sprang back, obviously worried that he might be the bot’s newest target. The bot’s limbs sucked back inside its body, filling the empty cavity. Slowly, the whirring noise ceased, and the bot instead let out a tiny trill. It was the noise it always made upon being turned on; whatever had inspired its earlier rage was gone.

Demure and docile, the bot was no scarier than an androcritter. It hummed to itself, and The Judge tried not to stare, but it was impossible. How had this creature—this all-knowing, all-forgiving bot—attacked an innocent, possibly innocent man in this very courtroom, mere hours earlier?

What was different about today? What was different about the bot?

“Omnibot,” The Judge said, and the bot spun its mechanical head toward him. Tiny lights flickered where its eyes would be, and The Judge knew it was taking in his image, its files of his existence.

“The Judge,” greeted the bot. “Seating arrangements have altered. Please take appropriate measures.”

The bot grew quiet. It was waiting for The Judge to step down and return the bot’s seat, but The Judge didn’t move, couldn’t move.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” The Judge responded, “as you are the defendant today.”

The lights on the bot’s head blinked. “I am the defendant?” It paused. Its monotone colored with a slight heaviness: “What is my offense?”
The Judge frowned, unsure how to proceed. What was the bot’s offense? Attacking the defendant, surely. Saying that accursed word, “Guilty”, of course. But how could The Judge judge those actions when he couldn’t look inside the bot’s head and know its reasons?

Fortunately, before The Judge could say the wrong thing, The Prosecutor stood up. Her face was contorted into an expression The Judge had never seen before. It was similar to the judgmental face she had offered earlier, but more hostile, like she’d skipped past judgment and arrived at sentencing.

“Omnibot, all present know that you have a memory of all court proceedings. Are you claiming not to remember what you did this morning?” Her voice was firm, and her eyes were sharp. Whatever sentence she had decided upon was unfavorable.

The bot paused again. “Negative, Omnibot recalls all.” Its humming grew louder as it searched through its memory. “I do not understand,” it suddenly said, as the humming lightened, and its headlights flashed.

The Prosecutor narrowed her eyes. “You don’t understand? What is it you don’t understand?”

“DEFENDANT MEMORY banks were incomplete. There is no causality between defendant’s childhood and defendant’s crime.”

The Prosecutor winced at the bot’s shift in tone. She stepped forward. Her expression was still firm, but she looked less sure of herself, more akin to how she’d appeared when The Judge had suggested the trial. “As we’ve already said, Omnibot, you are the defendant. You did not have a childhood, and you said your memory is sufficiently functioning, leaving us to assume-

“Not Omnibot,” the bot responded. “Roger. Defendant memory banks were incomplete. There is NO CAUSALITY between defendant’s childhood and defendant’s crime.”
The Prosecutor turned toward The Judge. She stared blankly, and he returned the stare. Roger? Weren’t they discussing Defendant Jacobson? Roger sounded familiar, but The Judge had gone through a great many names in his day. And, if he were honest, he didn’t pay a great deal of attention to them. He racked his brain for a matching face, but he couldn’t find one; Roger could be anyone.

“Wasn’t that the man from this morning?” The Defense Attorney jumped out of hiding, his voice ricocheting off the walls like an accusation. He still stood several paces away from the bot, just far enough that its wires would be unable to reach him. “The one that the bot—“ he hesitated, seeming to remember the bot was there. “The reason that the bot is on trial,” he concluded, as he looked down at his shoes.

“Affirmative. Defendant Roger Jacobson. Defendant memory banks were INSUFF—“

“What does that mean?” The Judge interrupted. “Insufficient memory banks.” His face twisted. “Are you saying you couldn’t find a direct reason for why -“ He paused, tasting the name. “-why Defendant Roger committed his crime?”

“Affirmative,” the bot replied. It made a whirring noise, like it was overheating, before speaking once more: “Appropriate action was initiated.”

The Prosecutor flinched, then took a step back. She was nearly as far away as The Defense Attorney now, but not quite. The bot would still be able to reach her, just as easily as it could reach The Judge. He hadn’t quite considered that when the trial had started, but he couldn’t very well rise and find a new seat, not now that the trial was already in session.

“You smashed an Innocent man against the wall,” The Prosecutor said. “You tried to drill through his head with your wire.”

“Not Innocent,” the bot replied.
“Are you saying you are Not Innocent, or that Defendant Jacobson is —“

“Not Innocent.”

The Prosecutor scowled. “Of course he was Innocent. That’s the entire point of your existence, to find out the reasons for human actions and to prevent them from —“

“NOT INNOCENT.”

The words came out even harsher, but that was impossible. The bot had one setting for voice, which could waver based on how hot it was, or how long it had spoken. But it couldn’t sound angry. It couldn’t sound… dangerous. And yet, that’s how it had sounded since this morning.

“Omnibot, your —

“Suggestion.”

The Prosecutor’s scowl turned lighter. “Suggestion?”

“Affirmative. Omnibot will administer memory banks to human subject. Human subject will confirm Omnibot’s ruling.”

“What does that—” The Prosecutor shook her head, and her hands pressed down, as if trying to hold back her anger. Again, she looked toward The Judge. The confusion on her face was becoming too familiar, and he felt that same look forming on his own face.

Human Subject?

The Defense Attorney cleared his throat. The Judge jerked back; he had nearly forgotten the other man’s presence.

“I believe it’s suggesting that one of us takes its memories,” The Defense Attorney explained. “Sifts through them. Tries to understand its actions.” The Defense Attorney looked
toward the robot, but it was a sideways look, avoiding the eyes that the bot didn’t have. “Isn’t that correct, Omnibot?”

“Affirmative,” the bot responded, giving a tiny whir.

The Judge nearly fell out of his chair. Human Subject? Memories? What sort of proposal was this?

“That’s impossible,” The Judge stated, as he attempted to right himself. “We aren’t machines. How could we possibly take its memories?”

“Omnibot will administer memory Banks to human subject,” the bot repeated. “Human will become the receptor.”

The Judge blinked. He was about to say more, but suddenly, he understood — he suspected he had understood from the beginning, he just hadn’t believed the bot would suggest this. The human subject wouldn’t be “taking” the bot’s memories. The bot would be giving them—through the wire. Administering Jacobson’s memories directly into the subject’s head, directly into the person’s brain.

“…Oh,” was all The Judge could answer as the image crackled inside his mind. In his peripheral, he saw The Defense Attorney staring back at his feet, like he’d given the wrong answer in class (something that couldn’t happen anymore, but The Judge remembered how it had once been).

“Well, what do you think?” The Judge asked, turning to The Prosecutor.

One of her hands was curled beneath her chin, and her eyes were narrowed. “I’m not sure,” she replied, as she stared at the bot. “It would certainly be effective, if —” She didn’t finish her sentence, but The Judge understood.

*If the bot doesn’t try anything.*
“And you?” The Judge turned his attention to The Defense Attorney.

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“I think it’s a great idea!” The Defense Attorney shot a fist in the air. His lips curled upward, and the small man forgot his shoes, his nerves, entirely. The confidence only lasted a moment.

For the second time in his over fifty years in court, The Judge made a decision.

“Great,” he said. “Then you do it.”

The Defense Attorney fell back to Earth, literally, dropping from the tips of his toes to the soles. “Me?” His voice wasn’t quite a shriek, but the sound was close.

The Judge didn’t blame him. After seeing what the bot had done to Defendant Jacobson, The Judge was scared as well. That wasn’t the reason behind his decision, of course. At least, not the only reason.

“The bot is your client,” The Judge explained. “Who better than you to understand it?”

“My client?” The Defense Attorney responded. He shook his head. All of him shook.

“You’re The Judge. Shouldn’t you be the one to have his memories?”

“I’m meant to be impartial,” The Judge responded, almost certain that his claim was true.

“I’m also the authority in this courtroom—” second to the bot, of course “—and I’m telling you, you’re the best candidate.”

“He’s right,” The Prosecutor chimed in. “You need to know the facts as they are. The Judge and I are liable to interpret them.” She smiled at him, an unfriendly smile.
The Defense Attorney looked back and forth between The Prosecutor and The Judge, like an andro-rabbit caught between two andro-wolves. Finally, his eyes rested on the Omnibot, who stared back at him with its lights. His past, his identity — it knew him.

“Ok,” The Defense Attorney finally said. “If there are no other options —“

“There are none,” stated The Judge.

The Defense Attorney gulped. “Ok.” Trembling, he turned back toward the bot, who’d sat in silence through their discussion. “How exactly does this work, Omnibot?” His voice shook on every other syllable, making the words uneven and hard to decipher.

“Omnibot will now activate its information retriever. Negative. Information transmitter. Please step closer.”

The Defense Attorney did as instructed. The Judge sucked in a breath, and The Prosecutor took a step away from the scene. The Defense Attorney was suddenly stone.

“Initiating… initiating…”

The bot’s wire popped out of its head, a metallic coil with tiny, whirling blades all along its length. The Defense Attorney jumped. He might have been trying to run, but before he could even move a leg, the wire was coming for him. And then, it was puncturing his right ear canal. No worse than a needle, a q-tip, but sharp. The Defense Attorney’s face contorted like the wire was mixing around inside of him, but the rest of him stilled. He closed his eyes.

“Omnibot has successfully infiltrated human subject’s memory banks. Beginning transfer. Transferring… transferring…”

“How are you feeling?” The Prosecutor asked, still standing a distance away. Her hands were wrung together, but her face remained impassive. Observant.

“It…stings,” The Defense Attorney said.
“You’ve never had a wire?” The Judge asked. He’d never had one either, but he assumed that he was a rarity. An only.

“None of us have,” The Prosecutor responded. She blinked, as if she couldn’t see. “You do know that’s a requirement of our stations, don’t you?”

The Judge blinked back. “Of course.”

“Uck, I think, it’s —” The Defense Attorney jittered. His legs danced awkwardly in place. His arms followed suit, and he opened his eyes. His pupils were huge and stared at nothing.

“Did it work?” The Judge questioned, as The Defense Attorney stopped moving.

The Defense Attorney didn’t respond. His eyes were wide and round, his mouth opened in the same shape. And then, he screamed.

“Information transmitting,” the bot continued. Its wire swished, and then, a slushing noise.

“What is it? What’s happening?” The Judge questioned, but The Prosecutor couldn’t respond. The Defense Attorney continued his scream.

“Information transferred,” the bot abruptly said, and The Defense Attorney’s scream quieted. He fell to his knees, and the wire attached to his brain fell with him, still attached. He didn’t move.

“The Defense Attorney?” The Prosecutor asked, as she took a step closer, then immediately walked back. She looked up at the bot, but before she could speak, The Defense Attorney lifted his head.

His eyelids were drooping, and the skin beneath his eyes had taken on a grey, scaly shade. In the span of seconds, it seemed he had lost an equal number of years of sleep.
“The things people have done…” he said. “The things that have been done to people…”

The Prosecutor dropped her hand. She took another step back. She wouldn’t stop blinking.

“What happened?” she asked. “Were you harmed?”

“The things people have done,” The Defense Attorney repeated. “The things that have been done to people.”

“We’re not asking about that,” The Prosecutor said. “We’re asking if you’re—“

“The Defense Attorney is obviously fine,” The Judge intervened. He gestured to the other man, who was obviously not fine. But more importantly, the bot was still making a slushing noise. “The Defense Attorney, can you find an action that directly explains why —“

“Explains? Explains?” The word slipped through the man’s lips like broken glass.

“Explain why the crime was committed.”

The Judge tried not to flinch. “Yes,” he said. “Can you look through the memories that the bot has given you and —”

“Defendant Connors: beat two little girls with a hammer,” The Defense Attorney said. His voice was hollow, like he was reading a list. “Childhood Trauma. He was beaten with a hammer for stealing at 7 years old. Innocent. Defendant Riordy,” The Defense Attorney continued. “Saw Child A punch Child B. He intervened and mutilated Child A. Self defense. Was bullied as a child. Innocent. Defendant —“

The Prosecutor grimaced. “Exactly,” she said. “Anything like that to explain Defendant Jacobson’s —“

“—Curry: molested his brother. Was kidnapped two years prior, forced to perform oral sex on a stranger. Childhood Trauma. Innocent. Defendant Simmons—“
“Defense Attorney, we’re not asking about them,” The Judge’s voice was loud, but not loud enough. The Defense Attorney easily spoke over him.

“—set off a pipe bomb in crowd. Negligent parents. Raised by screens, watched too many broadcasts of explosions and chose to emulate. Innocent.”

The Judge looked at The Prosecutor, who was still backing away, using her hands to pull herself further past the stands and toward the door.

“Defendant Tiffan: put his son in a microwave. Was fed once a week in adolescence. Innocent.”


“Defendant Tiffan, second offense —“

“Stop,” The Judge said, but The Defense Attorney didn’t stop.

“— killed infant daughter. Drowned in pool. Was reacting to son’s death. Innocent.


The machine continued to make its swirling noise. The Judge stood up, but the Omnibot’s lights turned toward him.

“Innocent. Innocent. Innocent,” The Defense Attorney said, as the wire in his head lifted him skyward. He rose higher until he hovered before The Judge, above The Judge.

The Prosecutor made her escape, doors slamming behind her.

“Guilty,” The Defense Attorney said, and the bot hummed and whirred as it dug its wire farther into The Defense Attorney’s head, worming inside of his memories.
“Guilty,” the bot agreed, as it sliced through the human’s brain, its wire coming out through the other ear. The dead man slumped forward, supported midair by the murder instrument, but still, his lips moved; the Omnibot spoke.

CAULBEARERS

Anastasia was a self-christened Aquarius, which meant that, in terms of the calendar, she wasn’t really an Aquarius at all. But no arguments, be they logical or astrological, could coax her into reconsidering her chosen label; in her mind, being an Aquarius was an inalterable, inarguable part of her “essence”, no different from her blood type (B positive) or her hair color (dyed-black). Who cared that her outward personality was decidedly “un-Aquarius-esque”, or that her middle-of-March birthday technically rendered her a Pisces? To Anastasia, the traits which formed the epicenter of a “real” Aquarius—honesty, strength, and unpredictability—were what defined her horoscopic alignment. These traits lurked within her, bobbing beneath the surface. Once she learned to express them, everyone would come to recognize her for what she really was: not a fish, but a water-bearer. Not a Pisces, but something better.

Her parents had always called her their Miracle Child. Considered sterile by doctors, Mrs. Arlong never expected to have a child. And then, one day, Anastasia came along—large eyed, shrieking and crying; Anastasia knew she was destined for greatness, because why else would she have been born?

Perhaps that was why, on this rainy day in the middle of Aquarius-season, she had embarked on her journey to Madame Bovine. The decision was certainly “unpredictable,” both in the sense that Anastasia did not understand what compelled her to go, nor what the fortune teller would see fit to tell her. She only knew that Madame Bovine had a unique form of seeing, one which required nothing but fifty dollars, a customer, and the customer’s naked feet. This last requirement didn’t sit well in Anastasia’s stomach, but she wasn’t troubled enough by the question of “Why would she need those?” to turn back and abandon her reading. Not really. Not
yet, at least. Because an Aquarius was strong, and being strong was just a hair’s-breadth away from bravery.

Anastasia had come across Madame Bovine’s posting several weeks earlier in an online forum for palm-reading. The site was one of her favorites, and in between shifts (one ten minute break every two hours, one thirty minute break every five), she found herself enraptured by the posts about life lines and heart lines, the discussions about right hand versus left. But what most appealed to her were the scientific articles that sought to prove some connection between a palm and one’s life path. The fact that such articles existed seemed impossible, because science had long been the enemy of anything “supernatural,” from specters to karma to aliens. So for any study to indicate the possibility, no, the likelihood of such proof, seemed intrinsically supernatural itself. Certainly, a quick Google search revealed that the quantity of these studies was dwarfed by articles claiming the opposite. But none of these articles ever found their way to the site—or if they did, a moderator would quickly erase them—making it easy to acknowledge the possibility of (in the words of the site’s tagline) “the future being held in one’s hands.”

Madame Bovine’s ad had taken up an entire column on “Daily Palm Psalms,” and while reactions to her claim of foot-reading-psychicness had been mixed, the fervor of intrigue was inescapable. Everyone wanted to know about this woman and her abilities, if only to learn whether her services were worth the price. And for every non-believer, there was one person who believed that maybe it was true, that maybe foot-reading made just as much sense as palm-reading (which was now scientifically proven, after all). If all these agnostics were grouped together as worshippers, or, at least, potential worshippers, Madame Bovine had amassed quite a following.
“Dial these digits to have your digits read!” the ad had declared. “Fifty-dollar foot-readings throughout February.” Beneath the comic sans script, Madame Bovine had inserted a cartoonish drawing of a foot with stench lines. Each stench line branched into a word, seemingly leading the reader to the destinations of “Life,” “Love,” and “Happiness,” but what most appealed to Anastasia was the line at the very bottom:

“Special discounted rates for Aquarians.”

Immediately, Anastasia had called the number and booked an appointment. The woman on the other line—not Madame Bovine, simply a follower—had told her in detail about the month’s special offer. Her smile could be heard through the phone, as if it had extended itself through the wifi, snakelike, and wriggled its way into Anastasia’s ear.

“It’s a full dollar off every hour, up to two hours!” the follower proclaimed.

“A full dollar off? So you mean that it’s—”

“Yup! A full dollar off!”

Anastasia frowned, but her voice betrayed nothing as she flipped through her wallet.

“That’s not really a discounted rate...”

“Oh, but it is literally a discounted rate, ma’am!”

Anastasia pulled out her credit card. “Can you take my credit card information over the phone?”

“We can, ma’am, but we’ll need proof of your birthday for the discounted rate!”

“Why would you need to know my birthday?”

“To prove that you’re an—”

“Oh, yes, an Aquarius,” Anastasia responded. A flicker of irritation lit behind her eyes, but it was brief. She cleared her throat. “Why don’t I just prove that to you in person?”
“Do you mean you’ll be bringing your ID and payment to the reading, ma’am?”

“I’ll be bringing my proof, yes,” she answered.

“Great!” the smile-snake had replied. “We’ll see you next week on the 24th, 8 in the morning, for your special foot-reading with Madame Bovine! Make sure to wear flip flops!”

Anastasia pressed the “End Call” button and returned the cell phone to her purse. Red-faced, she clenched her nails into her hand, so tightly, that she left tiny marks in her palm—because the woman had asked for proof.

Aquariuses were independent. Unique. Anastasia was as well. But, traits weren’t the same as forms you could hand a person. They were something you’d have to see for yourself.

Pisces were fearful, not in tune with the world. Anastasia couldn’t be a Pisces.

It wasn’t the money that mattered. A difference of two dollars was not much of a difference at all (...except, perhaps, for someone who worked less than 40 hours a week at a pet store and needed to maintain her Palm Psalms subscription). It was the indignity of needing to prove herself to a woman who should have known better, a woman who should have understood that a person’s birthday was irrelevant to their horoscope. Was it really worth 49 dollars an hour to talk with this Madame Bovine if her secretary was this disrespectful, this uneducated?

Anastasia breathed in deeply. She closed her eyes. *I’ll come as myself, and Madame Bovine will know what I am. An Aquarius. I’ll be honest, and I’ll be strong. She’ll know my future, and she’ll show me the way.*

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As she waited outside the seer’s tent, the sky greyed, creating tiny droplets of rain. Anastasia flexed her toes, one at a time, hoping that Madame Bovine wasn’t the type of fortune teller who would cut off a piece of her and throw it into a cauldron. If such were the case,
Anastasia would try to make a run for it. But any attempt to flee would be greatly encumbered if she went from ten toes to nine. Still, losing a piece of herself would be worth it if the fortune teller could provide her a path, or even a glimpse into where she was headed. Numerous other psychics had promised her riches, romance, recognition; she knew that these things were her future, but she couldn’t understand why her future was approaching so sluggishly. Every day that she waited was another day trapped inside of an hour glass, watching as the sand fell atop her head, burying her further in the present.

   It was time to head forward. It was time to unstick.

   It was time for Madame Bovine’s reading.

   Anastasia breathed in deeply, but she wasn’t nervous; air was the element of an Aquarius, and for that reason, she savored oxygen. It always had a different smell, be it the dirt-and-leaves of a park or the slight acidity of the pet shop. And it always felt different, from warmth to frigidity, heaviness to lightness. Harshness, like the winds of a hurricane, or gentleness, like a fluttering whisper against her skin.

   As a baby, she’d been an adventurer. If a door was left open, she crawled through it, and more often than not, this led her outside. Soon, her parents had to put up baby doors to stop her from exploring, but it wasn’t enough. She’d crawl up to a window and try to open it, or crawl toward the cat door and scratch it, trying to break free. Anastasia was meant to be outdoors—more evidence of her air-based horoscope.

   As for rain… she tried to ignore it.

   She looked around for the snake-smile woman. She had spent hours rehearsing her “I’m sorry, I don’t have any ID, I’ll just pay the full amount,” but now that there was no one to say it to, she wasn’t sure what to do.
She examined the tent beside her. It was a fairly large tent, probably big enough for a family to sleep inside, with only minimal fear of waking up to feet in their faces. Anastasia smiled at the image, but the smile quickly slid away as she was struck with the knowledge of why she was here:

To get a reading. Of her feet. In order to predict her future.

The more she thought about it, the stranger it sounded. Not strange enough to make her leave, but strange enough to make her wonder how she had gotten here, how the countless hours of palm readings and astrological signs had all added together and led to the answer of Madame Bovine.

It was too late for her to question her choice; she had not paid yet, but she needed this reading, because she needed to know what step to take next. In a month, she would be turning 30. Still working in a pet store at minimum wage. Still without friends, or a family. She had the forum community, that was true, but she had never seen any of their faces. She knew their usernames, but not their first names. She couldn’t call them up to talk about her day or invite them over to dinner—and, if she were being honest, there were several of them that she wouldn’t want to invite over anyway.

She’d tried adopting a Shih Tzu from work—it bit her. She next tried a cat, a Ragdoll, who ran away. She’d tried flirting with the manager, Blaze, who let her leave early on Tuesdays (to take care of her mom, she claimed, though it was really to get home early enough to watch Matchmaker Medium); another manager found out, and it nearly cost them their jobs. She was saved when Blaze intervened—“You don’t understand, I’ve never been interested.”

Early Tuesdays ended immediately, as did any desire to flirt, or watch Matchmaker Medium.
Anastasia needed a path, one that didn’t lead from Aisle 2 to Aisle 3, then to the register, then back home to her bed, then back to her cycle: Aisle 2, Aisle 3... And she needed it soon, because she’d been promised a future of happiness. She deserved that future. She deserved it now.

With that thought as incentive, Anastasia lifted the tent flap, walked inside, and readied herself for Madame Bovine.

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The Spring sky peeked through the tent’s entranceway, illuminating a woven straw carpet cluttered with a half dozen books, a small, wooden table, and two purple pillows with golden trim. A tiny woman sat on one of the pillows, her elbows fixed on the table as she rubbed a piercingly black ball. She hummed from the back of her throat, her eyes revolving behind her closed eyelids like the wheels of a cassette tape:

_Ohmmmmmm. Ohmmmmmm_...

Anastasia took a step toward the woman, allowing the tent flap to fall behind her. Strands of sunlight billowed from the small space between cloth and outdoors, only to dim as the woman opened her eyes. This was the last thing Anastasia saw before the tent grew dark, casting the woman, the book pile, _everything_, in a shadow so complete that, momentarily, the black ball was rendered invisible. As Anastasia’s eyes adjusted to the darkness, the woman whistled, quiet yet shrill.

“Welcome, child,” she said. Her voice seemed to come from every direction. “You must be Anastasia.”

In the darkness, the smell of incense was overpowering, as if all of the air had been alchemized into something denser, something warmer. The tent-fabric had become the raw meat
color of muscle, giving the appearance that Anastasia had entered the insides of some giant beast. And the pile of books, previously innocuous, appeared lopsided and jagged, like the bones of a partially-digested animal. But the woman... she was the worst of it. Her goat-white curls had turned droopy and grey, and her chunky-clay face bloated outward from her skull, wrinkling over itself, creating the illusion that Madame Bovine had two layers of skin.

“Come forward, child,” a muffled voice—Madame Bovine’s voice—said. Her mouth barely moved, hidden beneath her bulbous nose. “It is time for your reading.”

Anastasia continued to stare at the woman, squinting as she tried to make out the rest of her features. She took a step forward, then another, and another. Outside, the drizzle turned to downpour.

“Come closer,” Madame Bovine urged, and like a fish on a line, Anastasia obeyed. As she approached the woman, more of her appearance grew visible, making the ugliness somehow less offensive, more otherworldly.

On the woman’s head sat a thorny crown furnished with dozens of thin ovals. But not quite ovals—some were larger, some were flatter, and the darkness had dulled their shine, but it was still easy to discern their dome-shape, which turned straight at one end. Smaller dots jutted from the ovals, creating the illusion of tiny holes, and as Madame Bovine smiled, Anastasia couldn’t help but notice the similarity between her teeth and the jewels.

Madame Bovine raised a hand to her crown. “Do you collect them?”

“What?”

“I said, do you collect them, child?”

“Oh, no,” Anastasia said. “I don’t.” She continued to stare at the crown.
“A shame, really. Different crystals have different powers. For sight, for cleansing. And these?” Madame Bovine pointed to the ones on her crown. She chuckled. “Well, they’re not all real, but they look nice, don’t they?”

The woman grinned, and Anastasia grinned back. “Very nice,” she agreed. “As befitting one of your gift.” She offered the seer a slight bow; the seer offered her one in return.

The woman’s lips were jumping, quirking into a smile, then sagging back toward a frown. “It seems we’ve gotten off track before getting on it!” Madame Bovine stated. “Tell me, Anastasia.” She clapped her hands. “Have you ever had a foot reading before?”

“No,” Anastasia admitted, “but I looked it up online some.” Emboldened, she continued, “You look at my foot and read its lines, like a hand. Then you look at the sole, any discolorations—"

“If you’re aware of the practice, then we can get started,” Madame Bovine interrupted. She reached forward, then withdrew her hand. “Except, of course, for the matter of your payment. Shirley tells me you’re an Aquarius?”


Madame Bovine narrowed her eyes, then opened them wide. “Do you have an ID on you?”

“Who doesn’t?” Anastasia responded, as she fumbled through her purse.

Though she’d been prepared to cloud the truth to snake-smile—Shirley—she now realized what the truth truly meant; she may not have an Aquarius birthday, but she still was one, and Madame Bovine would know.
Anastasia took out her license. She handed it to Madame Bovine, knowing the woman would understand that the plastic ID was hers, in spite of the name—“Annie Arlong”—and the photo’s brown eyes, which did not match her silver contacts.

Madame Bovine did not remark on any of these things. “It says that your birthday is March 15th.”

Anastasia almost slid off her pillow. “It does,” she admitted, “but, you surely know that’s irrelevant.” She didn’t say anything more, hoping that silence would relay everything else. But the silence wasn’t complete—outside, the rain beat on.

Madame Bovine returned her license, then quirked an eyebrow, effectively giving herself a mini-facelift. “So... not February?”


“Interesting,” Madame Bovine interrupted. She leaned forward, her fingers tapping together as her elbows lay against the table. “Tell me something, Anastasia.” She paused. “Are you really an Aquarius?”

“I am,” Anastasia replied.

“But you were born in March.”

“I was.”

Madame Bovine tapped her long nails against the table. Then, she chuckled, low and gravelly. “Well, you’re certainly stubborn like one,” she said. Her laughter trickled on.

Anastasia’s smile returned. She hadn’t realized stubbornness was part of an Aquarius, but yes, of course it was. She was about to thank the seer for pointing this out when Madame Bovine stopped laughing.
“...You know,” the foot reader began, “you don’t have to be an Aquarius to get the discount.”

Anastasia blinked. “But I am an Aquar-”

“There’s a special discount for Caulbearers as well.”

Within the tent, time stilled. The incense smell had grown even heavier, leaving Anastasia sleepy, but her mind churned as she tasted the word: “Caul... bearers?” Outside, the rain pounded against the tent, making the word sound even stranger.

Madame Bovine nodded. “Surely, child, you must know of the Caulbearers.”

Anastasia started to shake her head, but then stopped. Something in Madame Bovine’s eyes told her not to say no.

“Oh, yes,” Anastasia said with a nod. “Of course I’m one of these... caulbearers”

“I don’t often meet one who was born with the caul.” Madame Bovine’s eyes ran up and down Anastasia’s body—at least the part that was not obscured by the table. “Some consider it a curse, to be born with something so tight around your head.” Madame Bovine shivered, and Anastasia did, too. “But we with the sight know the truth—it’s merely a membrane, a mark of your mother’s love. It’s a gift, like bird droppings on a window. You are quite fortunate, dear.”

Anastasia blinked. “I am,” she agreed. She hesitated, then added, “I am?”

“Certainly. Those born with the caul are destined for great things in life. Their days are fated to be filled with happiness and fortune.”

Anastasia sat up straight. “Great things?”

Madame Bovine nodded. “Great things.”
Anastasia grinned. The other fortune tellers had said the same thing, that Anastasia was fated for greatness. This must be why. This must be how. *Caulbearers*, she thought, and she felt it was so.

Certainly, there was no reason to believe she had *not* entered the world with a caul (whatever that was—a membrane?—she still wasn’t sure). Like being an Aquarius, maybe it was something that a person just felt, something that only they could deem true or dishonest. After all, sometimes a three-leafed clover was really a four-leafed clover with a missing leaf.

As her mother had always said; as her father would later say—Anastasia was a miracle, and miracles were meant for a purpose.

“Yes, I’m a caulbearer,” Anastasia repeated. “And I am ready for my reading.” She lifted a foot toward the seer.

“Of course, of course,” Madame Bovine said, as she scurried toward the pile of books. Anastasia couldn’t see what she was doing, but soon, the seer returned with a kettle and a tiny cup. “First, I insist that you try some tea. The leaves allow me to focus my reading.”

Anastasia scrunched her lips. “Do you read them, too?”

Madame Bovine cocked her head. “But of course,” she said. “Of course.”

~~~

The tea was a bitter broth, thick and difficult to swallow. But Anastasia downed the entire cup, not even hesitating to wipe her mouth or to apologize for the slurping sound. She placed the cup back on the table, but not before wiping the rim to prevent any leaks.

Madame Bovine smiled, satisfied. She stared at the contents, but did not comment.

“We can discuss these leaves after your reading,” she began, “but first, if you will…” Madame Bovine breathed deeply, splaying her fingers. “Unveil your foot.”
Anastasia only hesitated a moment before lifting her left leg, positioning it on the table between the ball and the cup. Shirley had said to wear flip flops, but Anastasia wasn’t here for Shirley. She was here for Madame Bovine, who was gently, sacredly, unlacing her shoe, like birthday ribbon. She used the same movements to remove her sock, and soon, Anastasia’s foot was naked.

The air was cold on Anastasia’s bare skin. Madame Bovine ran her hands along Anastasia’s sole, gently, like she was holding a sculpture.

“You have a foot of Saturn,” Madame Bovine said. Her voice was spicy on the last word. “Moist, calloused, and scented with chips. A very fine foot, indeed.” She continued to trace along Anastasia’s skin, tickling slightly, and Anastasia bucked back.

Madame Bovine held on tighter, tracing a white line along Anastasia’s sole.

“This scar, dear,” she began. She continued rubbing. “Where did you get it?”

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As a little girl, back when Anastasia was Annie, she had often gone camping with her parents. It was their family form of reprieve from normal life—not that the Arlongs had any problems, of course, not since their Miracle Child. But, even perfect families needed some time away, so Mr. Arlong would pack the tent (“What feng shui is this, just pack it already,” Mrs. Arlong would say) and Mrs. Arlong would drive to the site (“Lost again?” Mr. Arlong would ask. “Let me drive, you don’t know where the hell you’re going”). They’d laugh and play games on the ride over.

(“Stop laughing at me,” Mrs. Arlong would say.)

(“Stop playing games. Your fucking mind games,” Mr. Arlong replied.)
On one such trip, when Annie was 8 or 9, she’d overheard her parents discussing dinner.

She’d been in the middle of setting up the fire pit—trying to set it up, she still wasn’t very good—when their voices reached her.

(“You forgot the damn food,” Mr. Arlong said.)

(“You were supposed to pack it,” Mrs. Arlong replied.)

(“You don’t need food, you’re fat enough, you’ll make it a year.”)

(“You don’t deserve to eat. I hope you starve.”)

Wanting to be helpful, she’d disappeared from camp. She could still hear their voices as she wandered off, so she went even farther, until they drifted away.

Her first idea was to find some berries; she passed by a bush with bright red ones and almost ate them, but then she remembered some berries were poisonous. So, her next idea was to find meat. Her parents had taken her fishing before. Once.

(“Is this your next great plan, boring me to death?”)

(“If only it were so easy, Jen.”)

She remembered the basics, though she hadn’t been good at it. None of them had caught a fish that day, and it would be especially hard, she now realized, without a line or a fishing net. But, she knew there were other ways to catch one. She’d seen them on her dad’s fishing shows:

(“You can’t sit around watching TV, you need a job.”)

(“Your job bitchin at me? They should pay you overtime.”)

they could set traps, even reach in with their bare hands and catch one. It was something she had to try.

There was a lake nearby, one the Arlongs sometimes canoed on.

(“You’re tipping the boat.”)
(“I’ll tip it. I’ll do it, Harry.”)

So Annie made her way down to the water, then bent down and stared at the murky blue. Colorful fish skimmed the surface, waving hello with their fins. Annie leaned forward, prepared to reach down. Hand in the water, then out, just like that. She leaned closer. Closer, still.

Until suddenly, she was too close—she hit the water with a frozen slaaaaap. The chill rang through her teeth, sliced through her belly. The air left her lungs as she kicked, as the too cold waves struck against her, compressing all sides. She tried to swim up. She tried again.

Her foot was lodged under, caught on something. She thrashed in the water, flapped her arms. A streak of red floated from her heel, then past her eyes. She tried not to breathe in, nothing left to breathe out.

And then, finally—when her lungs were filled with hot spores, when her head was bursting, her nose slowly filling with a cold, thick smell that was no smell at all—she dislodged her foot. She kicked up. She surfaced, and touched land with her arms, touched warmth.

She sputtered and tried to pull herself up, couldn’t, tried again, this time kicking. With a powerful heave, she made it back on land, crawled up higher, and gasped, and gasped.

A few hours had passed since Annie’s disappearance. The moment she stumbled back into camp, her parents noticed her absence

(“Where’s Annie?”)

(“You lost her? How the hell did you lose her?”)

(“She’s your fucking kid, too. How the fuck did you—“)

Annie was crying. Her parents turned toward her. They didn’t run over to embrace her. But, slowly, they moved.
“Annie, what happened?”

“Annie, what’s wrong?”

“Annie—“

“Annie—“

“Annie—“

Annie’s dress was torn and water-logged. She walked with a limp, unable to lift her left foot more than an inch above ground, and upon inspection, her parents saw that the heel was cut, and bruised, and bloody.

“What happened?” they asked again.

But Annie wouldn’t say. Annie couldn’t say; she was white, and shaking, and silent. Her parents turned toward each other, teeth bared, brows pointed.

“This is your fault. How the hell did you lose her?”

“My fault? Keep an eye on your daughter.”

“Our daughter. You can’t blame me for this—“

Annie walked to her parents’ tent. She crawled inside, pulled out their first aid kit, and bandaged her foot. Years later—when she was visiting her parents for the holidays, trying to ignore some discussion about the Christmas lighting, which involved her mother throwing a light, her father pretending to make a noose out of the links—she’d think back on that moment in the woods and wonder if she should have gotten stitches. She’d feel amazed that her foot hadn’t gotten infected—wasn’t that in itself a miracle?

But that night in the tent, she didn’t think these things. She focused on breathing, not on any sounds outside; not on the heat that threatened to split open her foot; not on the cold water around her, nor inside her.
“I cut it on a rock,” Anastasia explained, knowing that was all Madame Bovine would need, that she would be able to divine the rest on her own.

“I see,” the woman said. She stopped and took a long whiff of Anastasia’s heel. “You were outside when it happened, yes?”

Anastasia blinked. “Yes.” She was unsettled by the sniffing, but not enough to make this stop.

“And it was on something sharp?”

“Right again.” Anastasia was impressed by the seer’s insight, until an unsettling thought struck her—wasn’t the sharpness obvious?

“You lost something,” the woman next said. Anastasia jerked back her foot. The woman dropped it; it hit the table. The cup rattled, but did not fall.

“No, that’s wrong,” Anastasia said, refusing to meet the woman’s eyes.

Madame Bovine frowned—mouth twitching to smile, then drooping down. “Sorry, my dear. It’s a symptom of the caulbearers.” She gripped Anastasia’s ankle, rubbing it lightly. “The caul can hinder my reading. It’s why I offer the discount, as a way of apology.”

“Oh,” Anastasia said. She sniffed and smelled tea, blushing at her overreaction. “I didn't mean to kick you,” she added, as she relaxed her foot in the other’s hand.

Madame Bovine smiled—lips twitching, down, then up. “The memory,” she began, “it doesn’t have any particular significance to you, does it?”

Anastasia tensed. She could remember the rapid beating within her chest. She could smell the fishy river and feel the rock as it sliced into her, the blood as it drained out of her. She could even remember the heavy water pushing her down—and her parents’ voices, always there.
“No, it doesn’t,” Anastasia said.

“I assumed not,” Madame Bovine replied, as she petted Anastasia’s heel. She sniffed it, and then, she smiled. “Your foot is far more fragrant than the tea leaves,” she added. “It’s a sign of a vigorous life.”

“A vigorous life?”

“Quite vigorous, indeed.”

Anastasia smiled. Her eyelids drooped.

The woman cradled Anastasia’s heel. She ran her nose against the arch of her sole, breathing deeply. A finger ran against her big toe before poking inside the space between that toe and the one beside it.

“What are you —”

Madame Bovine held the foot close. She stared, and stared, and sniffed. And then, she brought the foot closer, toward her mouth. She opened her lips, and her tongue darted forward; it touched the skin, wet, and warm.

Anastasia jumped back and pulled her foot toward her. Her eyes snapped open, and she realized just how heavy her body felt.

“What—“ she started to say, but Madame Bovine grinned, and her voice was gone.

“My dear, I apologize,” the foot-seer said. “It’s the caul, you see. It’s meant to protect you, making it hard for me to deliver a reading!” She laughed, and her gums were red. “For some reason, it sees me as a threat.” She grabbed Anastasia’s leg—stronger than she should have been, Anastasia suddenly weak. “It won’t stop fighting me!”

Madame Bovine pulled Anastasia’s foot closer. Her mouth opened once more, and she bit down on the pinky nail; she pulled.
Anastasia kicked forward. The table quaked, and Madame Bovine fell backward, releasing the leg. With her hands, Anastasia crawled backwards, but she was so tired, so drained, so—

_Fighting the water the bubbles so tired head under water exhale inhale—_

Anastasia stood up, or tried to stand up, but her feet weren’t working. The room was shaking—dark.

“Terror!” Madame Bovine said, but her voice was light. “As befitting one of the caul.”

Anastasia backed up, crawling away.

“Are you leaving? Child, your reading!”

_Mom I almost drowned I almost died dad why are you fighting I almost died—_

Anastasia couldn’t find her footing; each step was slippery, uneven. She was little red riding hood, escaping the wolf. A young, frightened girl, running toward the lake. Falling in, headfirst, getting caught. Unable to breathe, so alone, so alone.

Her parents, calling her miracle. Meaning, a bandage. Meaning, too flimsy, unable to heal them.

“Stay, dear,” Madame Bovine said. “An extra discount for caulbearers—no money at all!” She pointed to the crown on her head, to the tiny, flat ovals. “Plenty of customers prefer to pay this way!”

Anastasia kept crawling. She rose to her knees, rose to her feet. Unsteadily, she _ran_.

“Some babies choke on their caul,” Madame Bovine called after her. “It’s meant to protect them!” She laughed, and laughed, and laughed, and Anastasia sprinted toward the exit on watery legs. She grabbed the tent flap; she _pulled_.

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With a final glance back, Anastasia’s stomach boiled. Now that the tent was open, now that the spring sky could shine through and highlight all within, the gems on Madame Bovine’s crown ceased being gems, because they were nails. Tiny, blue toenails.

Anastasia darted out of the opening, clambering onto her hands and knees, pushing herself erect, running full force on her liquid toes. The wind rushed past her, and for the second time in her life, she knew what it meant to suffocate. The air was too fast. The sky was too harsh. The sun was too bright. Everything—it all was too much.

She kept running. Wheezing. Her heart clenched, and her side cramped. Biting. She pressed down where it ached, pushed herself forward. The world was swimming, and she couldn’t breathe.

The woman’s voice rang in her head—A discounted rate! Your nails! Just your nails!—and then it was Dad’s voice, saying, Miracle, and then Mom’s voice, saying, Miracle, and both of them screaming, and her screaming with them.

Anastasia fell to the ground. She shook, and the rain continued to pour. It stung, and her lungs stung, too—like a fish, filling with air.

She looked around her. No Madame Bovine; the seer hadn’t followed. Only trees, and sky—like the woods. No Dad, no mom—just her. Her, and the terrible rain.

Finally, Anastasia allowed herself to breathe. She looked at her naked feet—the adrenaline had allowed her to run, but now, she felt the burn. Small cuts lined her right foot, intermingling with the long, white one on her left. None were as jagged, as likely to linger; she touched her old scar, and it hurt, it hurt.
Anastasia screamed, long and loud, trying to make up for all the piled on silence. But it wasn’t enough—not loud, not long enough. She screamed until the fogginess in her head made it hard to see, until her throat was raw and red.

What was she doing here? How had this happened?

What was she supposed to do now?

Anastasia shook. She grabbed her arms, pulled her legs close, and felt the water. For a terrible moment, she thought, *Madame Bovine will fix this*, and just like that, she stood back up.

Next time, she would not use a foot psychic. She would use someone credible, someone real. Someone who could look inside of her and find all the answers. Someone who would know whether she was a caulbearer, or an Aquarius. Someone who—

Someone—

Someone—

Her feet still hurt; her head was still swarming, but the shaking was leaving—and of course it was. She was an Aquarius, and they were brave. She was a caulbearer, and they were… they were—

She could go back. She knew she could. But she also knew that she couldn’t.

She could find a new psychic. A better psychic. One who—

*Stop it! Stop!*

Anastasia shook her head. She couldn’t do that. How many psychics had she seen? Even the good ones weren’t good, because what change had they brought? No steps forward, only back.

*What can I do?* she thought. *What next?* The rain continued to pour.

And there she was—a Pisces. Able to suffocate, unable to drown.
A PLANET OF KORBBIANS

When the aliens first arrived on Earth, they ordered the humans, “Don’t use that term.” To them, alien was a form of slander—it sounded too much like another word in their language. So the humans said, “Sure, we’ll call you whatever,” and began to say “extraterrestrials,” “universe neighbors,” and the creatures’ preferred name of “Korbobians.” The Korbobians were pleased by the humans’ obedience. So pleased, in fact, they switched off their celestial weapons, offering humanity one final chance to defend its existence.

The Korbobians had been observing the humans for centuries (an equivalent to days, on their planet), though they had only recently chosen to make themselves known. They’d descended from the sky in a blur of sounds and colors, and their entrance was so unexpected, so sudden, that entire networks stopped their programming; schools shut down, and governments, too.

_I could tell you what I was doing then, but I don’t think I’m supposed to tell you._

The humans found their new solar-neighbors perplexing. The aliens came in a variety of sizes and shapes, though they all claimed to be the same species. They came in seven different colors, from purple to orange to a brand new color, yet all claimed to be the same race. They did not have any visible genitals (they must be hidden, some humans attested) but they said they were each their own gender, each their own sex; at least, they assumed they were, because “gender” and "sex" were new concepts to them.

The Korbobians were just as confused by the humans, who barely ranged in height, or in shape, or in color. Stranger still, they all seemed obsessed with items beneath their clothing— things like mammary glands and some creature called Johnson. They noticed that the humans
had no shared holidays, no shared memories, no shared purpose, nor hopes, nor ideas. The Korbobians, who had long ago achieved perfect health; who had learned the mysteries of the stars and their origins, and decided to have only one holiday, the universal “Celebrate everything”—saw no reason for these differences, not in a creature that was so much the same.

However, there seemed one concrete way in which the humans were truly not all part of the same species, a way in which certain individuals were set apart, set higher. This difference went unacknowledged by humans, at best, and mocked at worst: only a handful of the humans knew magic.

For the Korbobians, telekinesis was a birthright. Even the youngest of their kind, which was not always the smallest, could look at a stalagmite spire, concentrate—Whoosh!—and make it spin in the air. On Earth, they could lift boulders, rude humans, even one another, as large as the Korbobians may be.

(The tallest Korbobian reached the nose of the Statue of Liberty, while the smallest was thin, could easily fit between two loaves of bread. They hovered in the air just the same.)

As gifted as the Korbobians were, telekinesis was the extent of their powers. They couldn’t close a curtain and make someone disappear; they couldn't cut someone in half without bodily injury. They didn't have hats, nor rabbits—but if they did, they certainly couldn't pull one out of the other. And guessing someone's card? Ridiculous. For all their power, Korbobians weren't mind readers. The stars had confirmed that mind reading was impossible—except in one instance, which the humans were unaware of, and perhaps unable to do.

And yet, a minority of humans possessed that power, and so many others. What other wonders could they teach?
In order to understand their celestial neighbors, the Korbobians ordered all the Earth's magicians to a summit. The governments of Earth obliged, mandating that any and all magic users set off to the alien ships (“Sorry,” they later corrected. “Korbobian ships, not alien”), where it would be the magicians’ duty to ensure the aliens' satisfaction. The fate of the Earth was in their magical fingers—because as good as the Korbobians seemed, they were still aliens, and the humans knew aliens could not be trusted for long.

Some of the magic users went willingly. Excited, even. Many gave speeches about their skills, their worth. They insisted they were the secret to saving humanity, that all those who had mocked them in grade school could "Suck it!" Still, some said they weren't up for the task of saving humanity. They fumbled with their cards or dropped their wands; they fixed their ties and wiped their sweat. They stared into cameras, eyes set large, very much like the too-large eyes of their disappearing rabbits.

“What are you asking us to do?” one of them asked on camera. He was part of a public press conference, one he had never wanted to attend. His shirt was dark with sweat, and his face was red from yelling. “This is bullshit. This is impossible, it’s unbelievable!” The next day, that magician went missing, starting a Twitter line of #savemagicians and #outofsite, all leading to a news article about his decapitated body.

Horrified, the Korbobians decided to act. They couldn't reduce the humans’ savagery, not yet, but they could reduce the number of those afflicted. Thus, for the co-species summit, only five magicians were chosen, at random, to represent all others. This way, fewer magic users would be subject to the non-magic users’ jealous attacks.

*In truth, another two dozen magicians would die, all at the hands of someone equally magical. Was it jealousy? Hatred? Boredom?*
On the day of the summit, the five magicians lined up outside the Korbobians’ chosen meeting place: Disney World. “The most magical place on Earth” had only seemed fitting to the aliens ("Korbobians, sorry, not aliens"), so employees had shut down the rides and banned customers for the day. Press was banned as well, though a few hid in plain sight, perhaps somewhat magical themselves. Their ability impressed the Korbobians so much, they allowed it.

One of the chosen magicians insisted on bringing its assistant, who dragged the magician's four briefcases behind them. *I remember them being very heavy, clunky even, which only makes sense. Dave had a habit of overpacking.*

The second brought its pet rabbit, which it promised was *different* from its hat rabbits, though it didn't clarify how.

*It really wasn’t.*

The third wore a suit of magical, rainbow scarves, and the fourth wore nothing at all.

"It proves I'm the real deal," the human insisted, and the Korbobians nodded, accepted the quirk.

The fifth magic user brought a "Magic for Dummies" book, which it tried to conceal, but constantly read. This magician shook and sweated, its eyes darting between the other magicians. It must be newer, the Korbobians assumed.

The Korbobians ushered the six humans into the theme park, and began to talk as they walked through the attractions. “You are obviously the most advanced of your kind,” one Korbobian said, as they passed an electric green rollercoaster. “We have come to speak with you about your powers. We wish to understand what separates you from your brethren.”
The first magician whispered behind its hand, attempting to inconspicuously ask its assistant, “What does brethren mean?” but before the intelligent assistant could reply, the Korbobians were speaking again.

“It is our desire to harmonize your planet, the same way we Korbobians have harmonized ours. And we wish to learn of your own skills to enhance our skills. In turn, we shall share our own gifts and offer you peace.”

Immediately, the first magician stepped forward, walking beside the Korbobian. "Thank you for this honor," it said. "And thank you all the more for recognizing our exceptional talents. How could anyone but we magicians be considered for the privilege of interstellar courting?"

To the human's right, the assistant coughed. It flipped its long hair and rolled its eyes.

“Pardon my assistant,” the first magician said. “To her despair, she is not… gifted.”

One of the Korbobians frowned at the assistant--it had learned this was a gesture of pity. The assistant didn’t appreciate the pity, but that was too bad. It was their hostess and couldn’t argue with them.

"It must be terrible for you,” the Korbobian said. “To come across a boulder and be unable to move it? What a terrible, terrible thing!”

“How often do I need to move one?” the assistant responded, and the first magician said “Hush,” and so I did.

The fifth magician was still reading its book, but at that moment, it looked up. "Will boulder-moving be part of this summit?” it asked. The book shook between its fingers.

"But of course,” one Korbobian answered. "We'll show our skills, and you'll show yours."

At that, the fifth magician grew paler. The third magician laughed, and the fourth magician rolled its eyes.
“Follow us now,” the same Korbobian said, or maybe it was a different one. For all their
differences, it was hard to tell, sometimes. “We’ll be conducting our meeting in here,” it said, as
it gestured to a large, grey building.

One of the Korbobians, a pinkish fellow, walked to the doors and threw them open—not
with its hands, but with its mind.

The humans stepped inside, and the Korbobians bowed, they literally bowed. But there
was no reason for them to be bowing in a place like this. So dark and musty. It was like throwing
a dance party in a library.

The room must have been used for conferences, because there was nothing inside except
a table and a large, cracked monitor. The walls were wallpapered beige and full of tears, sliding
down like a design. The magicians had expected ornateness. So had I. None of them had
expected… this.

"Cozy," the third magician said.

"Ghastly," the fourth replied.

The Korbobians took a seat—just one—at the head of the table. There were three of
them, and they each took a tiny portion of cushion. The humans all sat to the left or right, with
the first magician getting especially close, the fifth one staying nearest the door.

"We have been observing you for some time now," one Korbobian said, oblivious to the
humans’ disappointment. "And we wanted to start with a simple question: what is it that gives
you your powers? What is it that separates you from all others?"

The Korbobian leaned forward in its shared chair. So too did its fellow aliens
(“Korbobians, Christ!”), including the smallest one, who had to stand on the cushion. The
humans paused a moment, but only a moment, before the first rose. "I am simply exceptional," it said with a bow. "Born this way, and raised this way."

"An exceptional something," the assistant muttered.

The fourth magician laughed. The third rolled its eyes.

Expressionless, the fifth raised its book. "This," it responded, "is what helps my magic."

It flipped through the pages, winced as the paper cut its thumb. It put the book back on the table, sucked its injury.

The Korbobians' eyes glimmered. "Fascinating," one said. "So, are you saying that magic can be enhanced with read—"

"I want to go back to what you said," the second magician interrupted. Until then, it had been quiet. "Do you really believe that magic is what separates us from other humans? Our ability to move or not move things with our mind—that’s all that you see?"

"Of course not," the Korbobians responded. "We are very aware of your other skills. To flip a card before someone's face, and know its number? To make an object disappear?"

The second magician scrunched its face. It sighed. "You notice I don’t have these," it said, as it pointed to the assistant’s chest. The assistant furrowed her nose, like a rabbit. "And her hair’s longer. There’s other things too. Like, take that guy—" It pointed across from itself, to the first magician. "That guy is the fattest fuck I ever saw."

"Watch yourself, boy," the first magician said.

"And that’s another thing," said the second one. "See anything else about us at odds?" It flipped over its hands, then flipped them back so the palms touched the table. "Look at mine, then look at his."

"Watch yourself," the magician repeated. "We wouldn’t want to confuse our hosts."
“What, you afraid of them uninviting you? Once I tell them something about our minds they don’t know?” The second magician pushed back his chair, stood up, glared at Dave. “I’ve seen your act. I know who you are.”

Dave glared back, and I knew this was bad. I looked toward the Korbobians. “You have a lovely… home,” the assistant said, and the third magician laughed.

“Oh hon,” that magician said, “your attempts at diversion are about as clear as your tanline.”

One of the Korbobians stood. It raised its hands, all seven of them, and waved its fingers, forty-two in all. “If you are saying that some humans have more hands and fingers than others,” it began, “we do not object to this. We believe peace and harmony can still be found, regardless of limb count or size.”

“Oh, yeah,” the second magician said. “That's exactly what I was saying.” It looked at its hands, both of them, then at the first magician, whose fingers were smaller. “Nothing else about us is different. Fatty’s practically my twin.”

It laughed, and the fatty magician growled.

The startled Korbobian smiled. “Good. You are beginning to understand.”

The fourth magician laughed, held its smaller stomach.

The first magician glared. “Shove it, BEEP, where you shove everything else.”

The blood drained from my face. I turned back toward the Korbobians, who were adjusting their translators. Later, I’d learn that their machinery would beep at a new word, or an untranslatable one, such as BEEP.

“Our apologies, we do not understand,” the smallest Korbobian said. “What does it mean to be a—” It moved its lips, but couldn’t say the word.
“Oh, what does it mean?” the second magician asked. “It means that fatty won’t ever help you with interstellar peace. He’s a BEEP.” The second magician walked around the table, poked a thumb into his chest, eyed Dave. “Let me get the rest. You think I’m a BEEP?”

Again, the Korbobians adjusted their translators. Again, they didn’t understand the arguing. Weren’t all of these humans magicians? Wasn’t that what made them stand apart, not from each other, but the rest of their kind?

“I refuse to work with—“ the first human began, only for the fourth to stand up, slam down their fist.

“I do not want—“ the human began, and the Korbobians’ translators shifted to one of the new human languages—why so many? “I do not want to associate with this man,” it continued. “He is disgraceful. I abhor these sorts.”

“Speak English,” the first human said, and now, their assistant was on the table. But I knew I couldn’t distract them, not from this, the truth of who we humans were.

The Korbobians asked the humans to repeat themselves, as the Korbobians were still catching up to the conversation.

“Oh, you want me to repeat myself?” Dave asked, face flushing. “I called that fucker a—“

Again, the Korbobian translators beeped. This word held no meaning to them.

“My apologies,” one of the Korbobians said, as they rose from the table, looked around at their human guests. “We believed we could better understand your kind, as you are most like us. But, it would appear, you are not as near as we thought.”

It took out a box. A plain, grey box. In an instant, I knew we’d failed.
“I can move things!” the first human said, as they looked at their assistant, closed their eyes, concentrated.

“He can!” I agreed, but I knew it was futile. I jumped in the air, then fell back down.

“She’s jumping,” the fourth magician said.

“BEEP,” came Dave’s reply.

“We are no longer testing your telekinesis,” one Korbobian said. “That ability was never in question. What we were questioning was your ability to cooperate as a unit, to put aside differences for your fellow human. And it is clear to us that you can’t.”

“We won’t be abiding your species any longer,” the pinkish Korbobiran said. “Your entire planet has us perplexed. Your land is filled with creatures who eat one another. Humans that fight one another. The planet itself seems on the attack, and you attack it back. To what ends?”

The largest Korbobian pressed a small button on the box. The box began humming; the fifth magician ran through the door. But the rest of us stayed in place, unable to move, only able to wonder what would happen next.

“You once asked us what planet we’re from,” the Korbobian said. “We aren’t from any planet.”

“You’re… what?” the first and second humans asked simultaneously, and the Korbobians wondered if the human’s own translators had beeped, or if they were simply too human to understand.

“We are a planet,” the Korbobian said, as it lowered the box, grabbing the hands of the Korbobians nearest. “And if we can’t work with humankind as its own species, we will welcome it as part of our own.”
The humming grew louder, became a whirring. The humans looked at each other, faces drained. Dave and the second magician locked eyes, and their fear turned to anger, turned to punching and kicking as they jumped at each other.

“Guys,” the third magician said, “what do we—“

*I ran for the door*, and the third and fourth magicians followed. I opened it wide, prepared to run out. Saw the fifth magician in the distance, a tiny speck.

“Come on,” I said, “we have to—“

Suddenly the fifth magician stopped moving. It screamed. It started running again, only backwards, toward us. And as it grew closer, *I could clearly see why*, because behind it were dozens, hundreds of Korbobians, each holding hands, each levitating, coming toward us.

All the Korbobians, every single one—from the thinnest that could fit between two loaves of bread, to the one so tall, it could pat Lady Liberty’s shoulder—called to each other. The call was silent, but it vibrated, magnetic. It was their version of mind reading, the one way in which the universe allowed such a skill, and they were using it to crush us.

*I looked back toward the Korbobians in the room, only there weren’t three any more*. The pinkish one and tall one were fusing, the two arms melting together, creating a single, larger creature. The smallest one was nowhere at all, perhaps already part of the newer creature.

Another Korbobian—or was it several?—entered through the door; it grabbed the Korbobians in the center of the room, forming an even greater mass. The building shook, and now the Korbobians were coming from all sides, not just the door, but breaking through glass and wall. The building was filling, and *I ran back to the door*, but it was filled with Korbobians, all spilling through.
In came even more Korbobians, some furry and red, some shiny and green; some with pointy teeth, some dull, some toothless; some round, some flat, some triangular; some with what looked like breasts, others with nothing there; some that spoke high-pitched, others low, and some that spoke nothing at all.

All the Korbobians in all of everywhere were here, and now, they weren’t. Not exactly. They continued to hum, to reach out and pull each other in, to disappear into the mass that was them, and also not them, the mass that was them at the core, them only.

The Korbobians were melding, becoming one, while the humans stood there and watched. The mass grew, stretching outward, shoving the magicians and the assistant into all corners of the walls. And then, the Korbobians Assimilated. Becoming one. Becoming a planet, taking the humans with them. Not just in this room, but in the entire world, for the magicians had failed, and humanity with them.

As the magicians’ flesh and bones turned to air, as their minds stopped beating alone and turned into a singular note, the Korbobians translators let off one final beep, as if to speak for the humans, who no longer could.

* 

There are exceptions, of course. And even those exceptions won’t stay so for long.

Already, my memory’s fading. I can’t remember the sex of the third magician, or the race of the fourth magician. But I’m probably not supposed to remember those things.

I have to admit, I rather like it this way. Though I suppose I’m not supposed to say “I.” For the end of a species, this isn’t so bad. I’m still alive, after all. Just not quite the same.
I’m not sure everyone retains consciousness here. I can’t find Dave, or the other magicians. Or maybe I have and just didn’t recognize them, because wouldn’t that defeat the purpose, if I did?

Isn’t that right, everyone else? Haven’t we all become one and the same?

***
THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

It’s hard going home over break, especially when your father is the literal devil. To top it all off, Charon’s upped his fee—he won’t offer the “Son of Satan” discount anymore, since good old dad’s pissed at me. Again. Not sure what I’m supposed to do to avoid paying, except go for a nice refreshing dip in the River Styx. Charon doesn’t like when humans do this, but I’m only part human. Exceptions, you know?

I’m in the River, trying not to get pulled under by the wayward souls, when dad calls out to me: “Christ. That you, George?” His voice is low and rumbly, like he’s trying to be intimidating. I know it’s just indigestion; I have it, too.

“No, it’s some totally normal human not being pulled under by the ghosts,” I respond, trying not to look at him. No easy task, since he’s well over 8 feet and has several sets of horns. Not to mention the two giant wings, bison hooves, and massive—unfortunately, non-heritable—cock.

“Get out of there, George.”

“Can’t do.”

“George, we need to talk—“

“Sorry, swimming!”

I dive under, only for the ghosts to start pulling. For a minute, I don’t fight them. Then, dad grabs me, pulls me out. He’s holding me by the armpits, flying higher, way too high for the ghosts to reach.

“You’re a mess,” he says, as I gasp for air, but he doesn’t sound as angry as I expected. He’s looking at the suit I’m wearing—the dirty, soaked suit. Hadn’t been my intention to destroy
“Had me worried,” he adds, “when I got your letter for Dean’s List. Dean’s List.” He shakes his horned head.

“What, you didn’t have faith in me?”

“Not a question of faith.” He smirks. “Just wondering how you’d screw it all up.”

I cross my arms, trying to look indignant, which is a heck of a feat when you’re being flown through the air by an eight foot tall red guy. I want to say, “You know, most dads would be proud,” but I know he’d just laugh, say something about most dads not being the King of Hell, and there’s not much leeway there to argue.

I wasn’t going to come home this summer. Hell is literally the only place hotter than Tampa, so in the grand scheme of things, it would have made more sense to stay by the beach (couldn’t stay on campus, what-with-the-expulsion), soak up the sun, and die of skin cancer. Except I couldn’t really even do that, because then I’d end up here. For good.

Still, when dad sent me that email saying he wanted to make amends, I’d really believed him. Not for long, and not fully, but enough so that I’d hopped the first three headed dog to the Styx. I should have known he was lying—maybe I had, and it was the thought of mom that made me come. Me being here only makes it all worse; that’s the whole point, but I always come.

Dad drops me off at “home,” a giant castle in the middle of Hell. It’s made out of bones, because dad’s unimaginative, and it smells like cinder and animal crap. We walk through the front door, femurs and fibula, and pass giant, flaming bugs. Dead people stand inside, all tied to poles, each pole marked with a different verse: Leviticus 10:6 or Deuteronomy 22:8. Quran 83:29–32, something in Sanskrit. I don’t know what the different verses mean—but there’s a hell of a lot of them.

“Help us!” the damned souls beg. Joke’s on them: I’m suffering, too.
We keep walking, and there it is: Mom’s door, marked with a giant pentagram. The symbol doesn’t actually mean much in Hell, Dad just likes the aesthetic. Plus I think it’s toolish, so naturally, he puts it everywhere.

“Ready to see your mom?” he asks.

I nod. I’m never ready. But the door opens, and there she is.

Mom is a skeleton. Her eyes are prunes inside two black holes, and her head sprouts hair so thin and grey, it looks like webbing. Each of her fingers is bent, mid-typing, and her mouth is constantly open, hanging like she’s trying to speak.

“Hey mom,” I say, “I’m home.”

She doesn’t hear me. She stares straight ahead.

Dad coughs, then elbows my rib.

“You’re looking… nice,” I say.

She continues to stare past me. Dad blows out smoke. “Stick to script,” he says, “or it’s a permanent ban. No access to Hell, or her. Do you want that?”

Part of me wants to say yes. Instead, I shake my head no.

“Good. Tell your mom how school’s going.”

“Expelled,” I admit, wanting to get through the conversation as quickly as possible.

Mom’s still not looking at me. It helps.

“And your love-life? Girlfriends, boyfriends?”

“Lots of both. You two might have a few grandkids running around.”

Dad grins. “Done anything good for the community?”

I cough. “Decided to come here for a few days, didn’t I?”
Dad looks at mom, who’s still not looking at us. Just staring into space, like she always does.

I don’t know what mom did in life, only that it hadn’t been good—she’d wound up here, hadn’t she?—and I’ll never know, since our relationship doesn’t involve much talking. Today, I wish it did. I’d tell her I really had tried this time, that, yeah, I’d been expelled… but for one semester, I’d gotten all A’s. Cheated, sure, but what else could I do? I’d wanted to do well, for her. For once.

Lots of S/Os, because I’d wanted to find someone she’d be proud of. No community service, or good deeds, but that would be a stretch for most college kids. And on that topic, yeah, I could have visited more, but why? Visits with mom are a disaster; visits with dad are even worse—come on, he’s literally Satan. Besides, your relationship with your parents would be pretty f’d up, too, if your birth was meant to punish your mom.
From the day I was born, Papa Razzi followed me everywhere. There he was in the delivery room, camera in hand, grinning broadly as he ordered, “Smile!” He showed up again at my first birthday, sneaking in as a clown, disguising the lens of his Polaroid in a polka dot bow tie. Again and again he appeared, offering a Bandaid when I got my first cut; a pat on the shoulder when I had my first heartbreak; a dollar’s worth of quarters when I did my first load of laundry. Wherever I went, Papa Razzi went, too.

Papa Razzi wasn’t really my papa, but he served as one in more ways than he realized. There he was, critiquing me for every imperfection (That dress doesn’t go with that hairstyle, that shade of nail polish is so last year’s color) and telling me that no guy was good enough to date me (You? Him? Please). He gave me advice that I took to heart (No white after Labor Day, no snacks after midnight) and he served as a mentor. He served as a friend. He was a constant that I could always count on.

“Papa Razzi?” I asked him one day. “Will you be here forever?”
He smiled, just like he always told me to smile. “Of course not,” he answered calmly.
“You won’t?” I responded. “But…why would you ever leave?”
His smile widened, and he grabbed my shoulder. Gentle. “You just act real interesting,” he said, “and you won’t have to worry for a real long while.”

As always, I took his advice to heart. I started being interesting.

Cameras flashed as I went for joy rides, drinking behind the front seat. My face graced the covers of magazines, the glass windows of storefronts, as the media learned of my new pickpocketing habit—jewelry, cigarettes, gum. I dyed my hair, and then I shaved it, and then I
got a tattoo of the missing strands. I wore dresses that looked like shirts and I wore shirts that were barely bras.

Tabloids called me "troubled." Papa Razzi called me a star.

"Papa Razzi?" I asked a few months later. "Will you be here forever?"

He smiled, just like he’d smiled last time. "Of course not," he said again.

“But why?” I slurred the words, because part of me didn’t want to ask; part of me was too inebriated; part of me wished I had never.

Papa Razzi grabbed my shoulder, more firmly than he had before. "You keep being interesting," he said again, "and you won't have to worry for a real long while."

Before I could stop it, I was crying. The tears ran down my oily, unwashed skin, and trailed down my nearly-bare chest. They passed the track marks of my thighs before hitting my feet, my yellow, cracked toenails. Then, they fell to the concrete, sliding away, draining into a nearby gutter.

Papa Razzi smiled as I wiped at my tears.

Click Click.

He got it all on camera.
“Don’t forget to pick up the water, dear!” said Annabel, as her husband descended the stairs, his grey suit pressed and prim with the refined airs of higher wealth.

“I know, hun, I know,” he replied, as his shoes touched the wooden floor. He ran a hand across his scalp, his fingers snagging several threads of dark, fine hair.

“And the oxygen?” she continued. “We’re running low, dear. Your lips are blue.”

“I know, hun, I know,” he repeated, as he looked at his wife’s own lips. They were coated in bright red paste, but beneath the makeup, he knew they must resemble his own. Her eyes were blue, too, so very blue. And so wide and alarmed as she continued to question him.

“Did you remember to pay the blood bill?”

Her husband sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yes, hun, of course,” he assured her, racking his mind for the white piece of paper, and realizing he wasn’t sure whether or not he had sent it in. But it wasn’t due for another two months, at which time he could easily afford it. He was expecting a raise at work any day now, and the extra cash was sorely needed.

Desperately needed.

His wife smiled, finally assured that all their odds and ends had been taken care of. “I saw the loveliest dress online today,” she mused, her large eyes shiny, the result of paying an extra fee for wonder implants.

“I’m sure you did, hun,” Lee replied, as he walked across the room and pecked her cheek with a kiss. She lit up like a fluorescent bulb, and at the same time, the lights around them began to fade. She abruptly broke free of her husband and gazed above their heads, her eyelids fluttering as the ceiling shook.
“Are we late on the electricity bill?” she questioned, eyes lowering to meet her husbands’.

The room was filled with electrical chandeliers, all in pristine condition. They were far too expensive to simply stop working, and Lee had paid an extra fee to ensure their durability. But sometimes, things still broke, regardless of how much they cost. As the lighting returned to the bulbs, Lee decided not to worry about one faulty charge.

It’s not as if he could change anything. He couldn’t even call the Lighting Company to complain.

“No dear, of course not,” Lee replied, suddenly frustrated that he had skimped on the Communications bill, opting for a B package that limited him to a variety of yeses, noes, and pet names, which did not get him far in conversations. His wife had bought her own package, choosing to add several perks, such as emotionality and adjectives. But in turn, she’d had limited funding for her Independence Charge. Lee had paid his in full.

Annabel sighed, her nerves at ease. Few things bothered her, and those that could only did so ephemerally. “Be sure to pick up the water, dear,” she replied, her smile glowing, her communications chip suddenly stunting and repeating her earlier thought. This happened sometimes, and it was a nuisance. Especially when she didn’t want a thought repeated. But Annabel had not paid for any enhancements on her Intelligence nugget, so she could not expect a conversation without a few flaws. Quite literally, Lee realized, this was the price his wife paid for beauty.

Annabel had not wanted to spend her wages on good looks and sparkly eyes, but her friends had insisted she would need them. It was the only way to land a husband and gain respect, something that was very, very expensive, but came as an add-on to certain marriage
certificates. Lee’s own Beauty Implants paled in comparison to hers, but he’d had a leg up in looks from the start. His parents had rigged the genetic lottery to get him white, straight teeth, and he had continued to upgrade his better assets while completely ignoring his less-perfect traits.

“Can I buy the dress, dear?” Annabel suddenly questioned, interrupting Lee from his thoughts as he took his seat at their marble table. She stepped behind him, arms draped over his shoulders as if she were some splendid accoutrement to his attire.

“No, dear,” Lee replied, hoping his wife would not ask for a reason. There was a fee attached to B package explanations, and he did not want to spend money on excessive responses.

“Why, dear?” Annabel requested. Lee sighed, then shook his head.

“No, dear,” he repeated. Annabel huffed before retracting her arms. Dramatically, she waltzed back to the stove, all of her cares fading into air by the time she reached the burner.

Despite his agitation, Lee could not be too harsh on his wife. The poor dear had forgotten her foresight tuneup, and she could not understand the consequences of spending money they did not yet have. Luckily for her, she had a dependable husband—one you’d have trouble finding on any market—who was willing to call in the mechanic to give her brain a good sprucing. It would not be cheap, but it was necessary; soon the poor creature would be forgetting her other bills, other repairs, all due to an oversight on her foresight. And Lee would not allow that. Not after the thousands of dollars he had already invested to make her shine.

Annabel was a marvel. Her skin golden as Rapunzel’s locks, her dainty feet more graceful than any ballerina’s. Sometimes, Lee could see the woman he had met behind the
upgrades—a young, petite housewife with buck teeth and a skin condition—but more often than not, he was lost in the illusion that he had hired someone else to create.

It’s not as if Annabel minded. She did not have the proper feelings installed to care. But she knew that Lee loved her solely for her good looks, so she had to keep her appearance in tip-top shape. If Lee ever stopped paying for Love, she knew she’d be out on the streets! If she could even afford to live on the streets, that is. The mortgage there was at an all-time high.

“Lee, dear,” she began, as she flipped a slightly burnt and bitter pancake. “Would you ever throw me out on the streets?”

“Of course, dear,” Lee replied.

Annabel wrinkled her nose but did not press him. She took out a plate and set it beside the simmering pan, her feelings flitting to dust as she scooped his food onto the china. With nary a care, she sauntered to the refrigerator, grabbing a jug of milk and a container of strawberries.

In the old days, perhaps her husband would wait at the table reading a newspaper. Maybe they would have a conversation as she cooked. But instead, her husband sat in silence, facing forward, dutifully awaiting his meal as if there was nothing else in the world to wait for.

Not wanting to disappoint, Annabel opened the plastic box of strawberries and poured them onto his plate. She would have washed them, but they were low on water. She would have to remind Lee to pick up a basin.

“Here you are, dear,” Annabel stated, glowing as she deposited his dish on the table. He nodded, and Annabel walked towards a drawer, unveiling a silver set of utensils designed specifically for pancakes. She picked up this set and walked it towards Lee. He nodded again as she placed it before him.
“Is something wrong, dear?” she suddenly questioned, in a rare showing of her Empathy chip.

Her husband sighed before nodding his head. She waited patiently for Lee to continue, but both of them knew that he couldn’t elaborate. She smiled wanly at him before grabbing a glass, opening the jug of milk and pouring the liquid inside. Her husband stared blankly at his food.

“Do you want to travel?” she abruptly asked, causing Lee to cock his head. She could see the inner struggle between yes and no. He quickly settled on shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s a strange question, I know,” she replied. “It’s not one of the things I added to my Enjoyment premium. But, I don’t know dear, maybe I would enjoy it!” She carried the glass to her husband, setting it before him as she added, “Why dear, let’s try it!”

Lee nodded, and Annabel was suddenly sure that her husband wanted to smile. But he could not, and for this reason, she frowned heavily in his place. But the expression did not last long as another thought invaded her mind. While he was distracted with his meal, she thought it the perfect time to ask permission for a pricey upgrade.

“I’ve been thinking, dear,” she said, “About poor Mrs. Landgrabe over in 208. She died, dear. Killed herself. Her happiness stocks were at a paltry level.”

Lee nodded, as he’d already known about the old, angry neighbor who had chosen to live off the grid. Her hair had been natural, her smile natural - appallingly so. Lee had to wonder, not for the first time, if her death had been natural, too.

“Yes hun, of course hun,” he replied, though he had no intention of raising their rates. He had chosen a lifestyle that they could live with, and their happiness stocks were already well-above average. If his wife was unhappy about this... well, that didn’t make sense. With their premium, she literally could not be unhappy. He had spent too much for that to be possible.

Annabel grinned at her husband, her white, pearly teeth shining beneath her lips. She kissed him lightly on the forehead, then promptly forgot about their conversation. There was something else she had to say, something far more important.

“Don’t forget to pick up the water, dear!” Annabel shrieked, as her husband rose from the table and walked his plate to the sink.

“Yes, hun, of course,” he responded, causing a gleeful dance to shadow her eyes. She was radiant, as she was always radiant, but Lee was only beginning to notice. He turned to kiss her goodbye, this time on the mouth. She eagerly awaited this rare display of affection.

But before the two faces could meld into one, the lights resumed their flicker. On, then off. The couple stared skyward as the room lost its light. They made eye contact as the floor started tilting. They looked away as the windows shattered.

It all happened quicker than they could breathe. And then, they weren’t breathing. They could barely move. Something was wrong. Lee couldn’t tell what, for it all seemed wrong.

What’s happening? Lee wondered, as the world around him started to break. The walls quivered, the table was shrinking, and his darling wife was losing her glow. Lee did not have a high fear response, so for him, the moment was only perplexing, not at all frightening. But his wife had paid to feel fear, and it was smothering every inch of her being. Her eyes were so wide they might pop from their sockets, and then, they did pop, and she screamed, and Lee covered his ears. Or at least, he tried to cover his ears. But his hands were melting, fading, gone.
The two continued to stare, mouths open, as a terrible thought encroached Lee’s mind. It was an impossible, devastating thought.

He had turned in his paperwork, hadn’t he?

He rotated his gaze from the lights above, locking eyes with his wife’s empty sockets. In a quivering voice, she posed the question he couldn’t ask.

“Did you file the existence papers, Lee?”

A thunderous boom swirled above them, causing the lights to shatter, to break and bend. A vortex of nothingness sprang from each corner, spewing towards them with the rage of an inundated God. Annabel shrieked, and Lee drew himself towards her, but there was nothing for him to grasp. They floated beside each other, screaming and writhing until the sounds of their voices dove down to a whisper.

“Lee? It’s so dark, Lee,” Annabel said, her empty eye sockets growing larger, rounder, childlike.

Suddenly, her lips parted, her eyebrows scrunched, and her undead gaze latched onto Lee’s eyes as if they were the only thing she could see.

“Poor Mrs. Landgrabe over in 208,” she said. “Killed herself! Poor Mrs. Landgrabe...”

Lee tried to touch her, say something, anything, but he could only float at her side and watch her disintegrate. Until his own eyes were gone, and then, the rest of him. His wife, himself, the world he had built:

all disappeared, destroyed.

Worthless.
An historic warning to those considering the newest phase of Human Waste surgery:

If one were to examine the revolution thoroughly, they’d have to admit it began with stomas. Tiny holes in the belly expelling waste—not a pretty beginning, but an effective one. Who wouldn’t want an end to this quite-literal baggage, all the hassle, and possible spillage? That’s where we came in, and we weren’t queasy about it: the Human Waste Unit was the perfect solution.

Marketing the surgery proved difficult, until it didn’t (the same way that people cringed at the idea of bands around their bellies until seeing the before-and-after photos). Unfortunately, our own before-and-after photos weren’t as encouraging, not without the right story. But thanks to an up-and-coming starlet with IBS, Hollywood quickly provided our narrative.

“I got the procedure, and look at me!” she said, arms wrapped around her shoulders, reaching behind, touching her husband’s hands. “My hubby was a perfect fit, and now, we’re joined at the hip!” She giggled, and her husband laughed, too. “Well, not literally, but almost literally!”

From there, people began to research the surgery. We ensured it all sounded simple, enjoyable even—who didn’t desire connection like that, deep down? Weren’t we all looking for someone who wouldn’t leave us?

“We start by stitching up your original stoma,” our website explained, “and reconnecting it to your lover’s gastrointestinal track. Their intestines embrace your own, and the two fuse as one, allowing your Human Waste Unit to expel all unwanted waste.”
The wording was simple. Revolutionary. The biggest con of the 23rd century.

Our website banner was a hit: starlet and husband lying down beside each other, him cradling her, both eating as they watched TV. Of course, the photo was staged; they couldn’t both eat at once, or else risk a blockage. But we covered that caveat in the official warnings. And even if no one ever read those warnings, Legal assured us we’d covered our asses.

In fact, any instance of injury or sickness related to the surgery would fall on the consumer. The same way cigarettes caused cancer, but were never sued. The consumers knew the risks, endured them anyway, because we’d sold them on its reward. And yet, if I come outright and say it, it sounds ridiculous—have someone else shit for you. Really, we do owe a tremendous credit to Marketing. “We’re not filling the hole in your stomach,” went the slogan, surrounded by trumpet squeals, “but the loneliness in your heart.”

Cheesy, but not inaccurate, or at least accurate enough to make people stop, stare, and listen.

I don’t doubt that the first few people who got the procedure did it on a dare, or maybe they didn’t believe it was real. I remember one couple walked in, took one look at the pamphlet, set it down and asked, “You’re serious?” And yet, others were entranced, unable to believe that the solution to all their problems could be so simple.

“So this means we can’t split,” one boyfriend said, and he looked at his girlfriend, her eyebrows furled.

“It’s on you for sending dick picks to exes,” she said, arms crossed, legs crossed tighter. “Really, you owe me this.”

Marketing loved the suggestion, and surgery became the new way to show someone you loved them. As the bottom line stated clearly, “Future detachment is neither encouraged nor
advised.” Marketing put it more succinctly: *Human Waste Units are more binding than marriage, more eternal than life, more concrete than any promises.*

Of course, not all people could undergo the procedure. We flagged those couples who both had gastrointestinal problems, or the wrong blood type, or some myriad of other problems that left the couple sulking, then stomping away.

“See if you’re really the perfect fit,” Marketing urged, displaying its new logo (two bodies overlapped, forming half a heart). “Schedule a consultation today!”

Looking back, I can’t help but feel responsible for what happened next—if we had stopped with just the stoma surgery, maybe the revolution would have stayed a fad. But when the starlet started complaining about how difficult it was to urinate with the Unit, or sit with the Unit, or have sex with the Unit, Marketing urged us to seek new methods. They came to me seeking suggestions. I had plenty, and they loved all of them.

“Blinking—such a hassle! Get your Human Waste Unit to do it for you.”

“Peeing? How obscene! Make your Human Waste Unit do the dirty work.”

“Breathing. Who has time? Duh, your Human Waste Unit, that’s who!”

On and on my ideas continued, until nearly every bodily function was covered by a form of surgery. Some were more intense than others, requiring days in the hospital, rising costs, while others merely required a background check and blood comparison. Most people chose the former.

The website explanations for these surgeries weren’t always clear, not even to me, and *I* was the one inventing them. But medical jargon was saved for doctors; images were enough for consumers. Connecting one pair of intestines to someone else’s or hooking up a pair of lungs, all
explained by that photo of the couple lying together, half a heart. Absurdly simple. Simply absurd.

In truth, we drilled holes in the back of the buyer, directly between the least important parts of bone, and tied the innermost parts to the unit behind them, whose own insides were easily accessible through the belly button. For urination, we later made a second hole near the buyer’s first, between the second least important part of the spine—which really couldn’t even be considered important at all anymore, because who had use for walking?

New shoes were invented, allowing the partners to stand at equal heights. Then, their legs were strapped together, ensuring they'd always walk as one. Some people found this frivolous, a marketing scam, and they chose to cut off their legs instead. Make the Units walk for them, along with everything else. This way was simpler. It just made sense.

Baby carriers soon supported the heads, which is what the buyers became known as. They retained more than a head, for all practical purposes, but a head plus a torso was still mostly a head. Giving up their sex life was the final step, and it involved more steps, the ability to procreate, experience arousal. But it was all so messy, and the world was overpopulated already, and some people preferred a two for one deal. In it's own way, wasn’t it more arousing to have your partner experience sexual pleasure for you? Wasn’t that closeness the true meaning of intimacy?

Perhaps it’s important to mention that the next wave of Units weren’t all there consensually, and many weren’t there as lovers. They were paid for their services, because strangely, it was much harder to find someone willing to walk for you, blink for you, than someone willing to pass your feces. Or maybe it was the idea of the whole package—people
were more willing to do one thing for a person than everything. Many couples who had the Human Waste Unit procedure didn’t go for the other surgeries, but that’s not to say no one did.

“I had my eyelids removed, and you can, too!” the starlet enthused, bat\nging her new clear eyelids, fully mechanical, which attached through two wires to her husband’s own. When he blinked, she blinked, too, and he blinked quite a lot, her hair in his eyes, unable to move his head, now that it was perfectly aligned behind her own.

“Love is blind,” became the next slogan, “or make that, blinding. Schedule your consultation today!”

Again, we owe a terrific credit to marketing, and perhaps even more credit to our starlet, the unflinching convert.

After the commercial, more people scheduled. And after seeing those peoples’ results, there were even more surgeries, even more Units. It became stranger to not have the surgery, especially because, while there were dissenters, they didn’t all oppose the same issues. Some of them called the surgeries unnatural or inhumane or just plain lazy—and at first, the public listened. But then, the problematic holdouts starting adding their voice, and that voice overwhelmed the opposition before it.

They opposed interracial pairings, and gay ones, because should those people be allowed to be this *intimate*? It wasn’t natural, wasn’t normal. Should a female body be allowed to have a Human Waste Unit? Soon, Marketing ran with the message, accusing all opponents of believing the same thing, of being anti-bod mod on top of everything. To oppose the surgery was a form of systematic hatred.

I’m sure there are still some holdouts today, somewhere, but it’s best not to associate with those type of people.
Once the dissent died down, even more surgeries started. The starlet returned to the public eye, her torso in a baby harness, strapped to her husband’s chest (which, in a way, had become her chest, since it breathed for her, held her, was directly connected).

Holding two poles, which attached to his legs, she made the Unit walk for her, convinced it to wave.

“You can’t even tell where one of us ends and the other begins,” the starlet said. Or perhaps it was her husband speaking, because she was right—where did one end and the other start? What was truly left of either? What brave, new creature had they become?

The original photo began circulating, that of her and her husband in front of the TV, and look at how happy they seemed? Always smiling, like that’s all they could do. And maybe it was all they could do, because the starlet controlled the smile, and had she ever been this happy? The limelight on her, 24/7, as she made her husband walk, and shit, and blink, like some terrible extra skin, which had no will of its own, was merely organ, merely movement, completely hers.

For a time, it seemed like the fame was unending. It grew brighter and brighter as the starlit’s body fused into her husband’s. Until the anniversary of her surgery rounded the corner, and a terrible idea was suggested: why not create the original photo, the one that had revived her career? A new before and after, a brighter star.

The starlit agreed, and maybe her husband did, too. It was impossible to tell, so much hair in his face. He couldn’t swat it away, not when his wife’s eyes attached to his own like a pair of binoculars, not when she could easily control his hands. But in that way, he did consent, because his wife had consented. They were one and the same.

The photo, such terrible consequences.
It was an accident, really. Someone (or two someones, as it was a partially-surgery’d Human Waste Unit and head, not quite one) had forgotten the original photo had been staged, so they gave the starlet and her husband each a scone, fed him through her hair, and the starlet took a bite. And now, her husband also bit, his mouth one of the few things that still was his, although obscured by her head, her hair. And later that day, the food filled her intestine, then his, then the shared place where hers became his, and his became hers. A blockage created a pregnant bump between starlet and husband, broke them apart in a burst of shit and blood and screaming, both dead in their 30s, septic shock.

Marketing called it a “freak accident.” Tabloids called it “worse than divorce.”

My wife called it, “Such a shame,” or at least, that’s what I think she said. It was hard to hear her, strapped behind me, and her words came out as, “Shutchachame.”

My wife had never complained about the opening in my stomach, but oh, how unsightly it had seemed. Constantly at risk of leaking, on me, on her. A hole within me, a hole between us.

That’s why I’d come up with the surgery. We were together all the time already, both of us dependent upon the other. This was the logical next step, a true solution. An act of love beyond reproach.

Naturally, we got all the updates. I was at the front of development, the brain, the head, behind the original idea, so it only made sense to practice what we preached. Yet, it all became tiring rather quickly. She blinked excessively, which made me blink excessively, and it was so hard to hear her, so hard not to feel alone at night as I wrapped her arms around me.

We were becoming one person, Marketing said. The unspoken truth—in order for two people to be a single person, one of them had to go.
“I can’t see anything,” my wife said one day. “I don’t want to walk over there,” she said another (though at this point we’d had the eyelid surgery, and it came out, “I donwahntwalktere). And then came the entire issue of long-gone sexual intimacy—we had the intimacy but none of the sex. At least, we didn’t one way, because everything there was attached to hers.

“I’m tired of this,” (Imshierodis) she said once, right before the leg surgery, which would leave me completely dependent upon her own legs. This, in actuality, would mean I’d control her entirely, using two poles, just like the starlet. Our last surgery was right before she died, which would sway public opinion, create a long line of questioning: how had this whole thing started, how far would it go, why had we ever wanted connection this deep?

“Tired? What, of being in love?” I asked. It was cheesy, but it wasn’t inaccurate. I think she laughed, or at least made some noise, lips grazing my head, which would soon be ours.

A week before the starlet died, the surgeons came up with their final trick. Marketing performed its magic. Their words were simple, written in red, bold, italicized, all stamped across a chunk of brain, forming half a heart:

“Don’t think too much about it. Leave the thinking to your Human Waste Unit!”

People stared, and aww’d, and made up their minds to meld their minds, to take this last step. Again, the process was simple, far too simple to explain, which meant the truth of it was direly complex. My brain would attach to her brain, and hers would serve as a sort of battery for my own. We’d be completely, utterly inseparable—even more-so than we already were, and we were so close to becoming one already, there’d be nothing left between us.

The doctor asked if we agreed to the surgery. A bizarre question, since my wife no longer controlled her arms. When we signed our names, her muffled voice might have protested, or might have agreed. I don’t know what she said. It didn’t matter.
If I could go back, I would have listened. Tried to listen. With her arms, I would have pulled out the bands connecting my eyelids to hers, cut off my hair or even shaved part of the skin of my head, all a chance to let her speak. Because I don’t hear her anymore. I don’t remember what she looked like, or even her name—it’s like I’ve absorbed her, and now, she’s gone. And yes, maybe that was the point, because two people can’t add up to one, two people can only grow less.

I’m certain we must have photos, recordings, somewhere. But my wife was always the one good at organizing, and I can’t access her memories. Those memories should be mine now. My wife should be in here with me.

As I type this using my wife’s hands, I know that something must be wrong. We’re one shared brain, and yet, she’s missing. There’s so much of me, only me, inside.

Wife, if you’re still in here somewhere, please come back to me. I’m so desperately, desperately lonely.

And to anyone else reading this. Please, be warned. Stop at the stomas, or even before them. There’s so much worse than a hole in your stomach. There’s so much left that you could lose.
The morning of the zoo break began uneventfully. Most exhibits had been fed and watered, and in the centaurs’ case, given their rainbow assortment of pills. The unicorns were napping, the pegasi, too, and the sasquatch was attempting to groom itself. And yet, the zoo seemed uncharacteristically empty, for most of the staff members had flown to Atlantis. They were determined to bring back a kraken, and their combined expertise was needed to catch one. Only two keepers were left to care for the animals, two against nearly a hundred. An unwise decision, perhaps. But the public demanded its cryptids.

The more experienced of the two keepers, Horizon, stepped toward the front gate, looking at the gathering crowd. The zoo still had nearly an hour before opening, but the public always came early; they pushed and shoved, demanding to be first in line, to see the cryptids, take photos, make faces. They were creating a spectacle themselves, and every snap of their phones confirmed it.

Horizon snorted, crossing his arms. “Not open yet!” he told the crowd. A cap-wearing boy flicked him the finger, but no one else in the crowd acknowledged his words. Horizon shook his blond head and stepped away, turning to his coworker, Maribella; she’d been staring at the crowd as well, barely blinking, frozen in spot.

Maribella was short, dark-haired, small-mustached. She had a roundness that was holiday-like, and the pink of her cheeks could be from excitement, exhaustion, anything, really. Today, Horizon suspected it was from many things, since the work of a dozen staffers condensed into two could take a toll on anyone.

“Every day, the same thing,” Horizon said. “You’d think they’d get tired of this, huh?”
Maribella frowned, but she didn’t respond. Her lack of words served as disagreement. At least, that’s what Horizon suspected, but he’d never really understood his coworker—not in the half year she’d interned at Zuzu’s, nor the few weeks she’d been part of full staff. Certainly not in the awkward hour he’d taken her to lunch. Not on a date, not that he ever thought much on that hour, nor much on Maribella, who—

A loud shriek rolled over the zoo, shaking the trees, the ground, everything. Horizon recoiled, and Maribella’s frown tightened. The crowd, mostly adults, squealed and giggled, pointed and grinned. They all recognized the shriek: the banshee, grown bored. At least, that’s what the keepers said, and the public had no reason to doubt them.

The banshee was in the process of a painful molt, so Horizon knew there was no need to check on it. Its wailing would die down, eventually, because the wailing always died down. Eventually. But there was still plenty to do before the zoo could open, and the crowd was only growing more anxious. The gates pulsed against their weight. Their shouting grew louder, harsher, impatient.

*Animals,* Horizon thought, and the thought was far from original.

“You hit up the vamps, Maribella,” he said. “I’ll busy myself with the mermaids.” He wiped his already sweaty palms on his already sweaty shorts. “Sound good? You up for it, yeah?”

Maribella gave a thumbs up. Then, she started toward The Cave. She didn’t say goodbye or ok or anything else, and Horizon suspected this was an agreeable sort of silence. He had no way of knowing, so why not assume? Wasn’t that the way of understanding women, like her?
With that thought, he was on his way to The Pier, trying to ignore the banshee, who continued to shriek—its molt was caused by Zuzu’s lighting, the unfamiliar climate. Nothing could be done to help.

#

The sky was hot and blinding when Maribella reached The Cave; the moment she stepped inside, everything became somehow brighter, like the room contained an extra piece of sun. It was also warmer, but agreeably so, since Maribella’s shirt and shorts were thin. Everyone on staff wore the same material, as it was easy to overheat in the exhibits. But the cryptids preferred it this way, her boss had said. Even the yetis, constantly sleeping.

The vampires, one of the zoo’s most illustrious attractions, were housed behind several enforced panels of glass. They weren’t the grey-skinned, long fanged creatures of fairytales. Instead, tiny black bats hung from the ceiling, each held in place by an even tinier, adorable ankle bracelet. They could flutter in place, even screech out a greeting. But they couldn’t fly off; they’d never leave.

Oh, how Maribella loved the vampires! And how easy they were to see in the eternal light, because that was the way of the vampire, the truth behind why they avoided being seen in the day—they could only keep human form in utter darkness. Beneath the bright bulbs, they remained as bats, flapping their wings, swiping the glass. Unable to sleep, and unable to change, only able to hiss, and hiss, and hiss.

“Friends, how are you today?” Maribella asked, as she walked closer to the enclosure. She tapped the glass with a chipped red nail, and one of the vampires flew toward her, snapped at the air.
Maribella smiled. “Energetic today, hmm?” She loved that about her friends. If she could, she would stay here and talk to them for the rest of the day. She’d ask them about flying, drinking blood, their dreams.

She’d always dreamed of working at a zoo—Zuzu’s, specifically, which had been around several years, since she was a child. Back then, the exhibits had been more like a carnival sideshow. Step right up and see Big Foot! You’ll never believe it, the amazing centaurs! But as the zoo found more cryptids, bred more hybrids, it took on new life. New walls. New procedures.

One of those procedures was the no-darkness rule. Bats taking the shape of humans would be inhumane, had been inhumane, her supervisor said. He never explained why, and she never asked. People who asked questions tended not to stay here long. And Maribella intended to stay forever.

When she’d heard about the internship all those months earlier, her dreams turned attainable—and now, here she was, her dream made real. And here too were the bats, flying in place, happily hissing. Loving Zuzu’s.

#

Horizon hated the smell of chum. But he loved the company of mermaids. As he walked toward them, bucket in hand, he continued trying to ignore the banshee. Its exhibit was closer to The Pier than The Cave. Much louder. He could have told Maribella to work with the mermaids and chosen the bats for himself. But enduring the banshee’s wails was worth it, more than worth it, if only to hear the mermaids sing.

Already, he could hear them humming, and it hit his stomach, made it tight. He nearly threw himself forward, nearly ran toward The Pier, where a ten foot tall fence would keep him from jumping forward. Each new zookeeper was taught to resist the mermaids’ song, and the
fence kept all visitors from doing the same. Sure, some of them tried to climb it, some almost succeeded, but a keeper was always there to stop them.

As The Pier came into view, Horizon could clearly see the mermaids, red tails swishing, lips pursed as they warmed up their voices. There were three of them, all females, all inbred to the point of stupidity.

A week earlier, Zuzu’s sole merman had died unexpectedly. He’d become stuck on the bottom of the tank, his tail caught in the water filter. And mercreatures—poor, dumb things—were air-breathers, like whales, or dolphins. The merman had suffocated within minutes.

Horizon had been on shift when it happened. Nothing could be done to help.

Now, the mermaids were all alone. Except for Horizon, of course, and he had to assume that was enough—that he was more than enough. Especially for the one with silver eyes.

He never touched the mermaids, of course. That would be obscene. Except, of course, for the one who wanted it. Who batted her lashes and flapped her tail. The mermaids were half women, as much as they were half fish. And when they came up, gasping for air—how he loved to watch their heads fly backward. Tails sputtering. Mouths opened wide.

The silver-eyed one would tousle her hair and arch her back. He loved that most of all.

Today, she was sitting on a rock at the other end of the cage. Her long hair fell across her breasts, and she ran her fingers through the strands, watching the water fall down her arms. Horizon walked closer; she saw him and froze, then threw both arms into a dive. Quickly, she swam to his side of the fence, then flopped on land, and thrust her lips between the bars.

Horizon grinned. He reached into his feed-sack with one hand and reached for her hair with the other. The other two mermaids watched from across the water.
Horizon often tossed the other two mermaids their food, though he hand-fed Silver, sometimes, as he reached through the rings of the too tall fence. She’d grab his fingers, toy with them, yank them, like she wanted him to join them, needed him, craved him. Because yes, he was enough, even if some people didn’t seem to realize. Even if one woman in particular had too much going on at work and preferred the company of bats over humans.

The other staffers had their favorite attractions, sure, but they’d much prefer to talk to one another than to stay with the cryptids. The same was true of Horizon, because as much as he enjoyed the mermaids, they needed him far more than he needed them.

They were beautiful. Their voices, especially. Silver, especially. But they weren’t people, not at all. Maribella wasn’t a mermaid. Less fish. Less beautiful. But more human, and that was something.

#

Maribella finished feeding the vampires, having only the slightest trouble with one, a Nyctimene Stokyr, who tried to fly through the crack through which she dropped their breakfast. She thought that was sweet, that it wanted to see her, but she couldn’t allow it. She couldn’t break any rules.

“Goodbye, friends,” she called as she left, closing the door behind her. Again, the vampires hissed their gratitude, and it warmed her heart to know they loved her.

Once out, she made her way back to the front gate, where even more visitors had begun to assemble. The already pulsing chains were starting to bend, and the giggles and squeals crescendoed, becoming shouts.
Above even those shouts, the banshee wailed. It hated the light. Poor, sweet thing. But there was nothing to be done to help it—not at Zuzu’s, where the sun was brightest. Besides, the light was good for it, her supervisor said. Good for all of the cryptids.

Horizon soon joined Maribella. He was sweatier than he had been earlier, and he smelled of fish. “Vamps good?” he asked, not making eye contact.

Maribella nodded. She didn’t speak.

“No incidents? Anything at all?”

“One nipped at me.”

Horizon jumped, likely startled, because Maribella rarely talked around him. He grinned, and she regretted speaking, because his wasn’t a respectable grin. Horizon wasn’t a respectable man; that’s why she’d given him the one date, all those weeks earlier, and nothing since, and nothing to come.

Her interest in Horizon had been purely born of misunderstanding. He worked at the zoo, she’d be working there also, and he must love cryptids the same way, right? She’d quickly learned his own interests were opposite hers, that her love for the zoo’s creatures was only rivaled by his disinterest. He worked for his paycheck, for something stable. And—she suspected—for the mermaids.

The zoo’s sole merman had died under his care. Her supervisor called it a tragedy.

“You’ve gotta be more careful with them,” Horizon said. “What if one of them got out? One of them bit you?”

Maribella laughed. “They won’t,” she said. What silly beliefs and superstitions—the same beliefs that said they hated garlic and avoided crosses. Maribella wore one herself; they
didn’t mind. “What else is left?” she asked, changing the subject. As if voicing approval, the banshee screamed.

“Only the centaurs,” Horizon answered. The words came hesitantly, almost like he was trying not to say them. Maribella understood why—running the centaurs was always the hardest, requiring multiple staffers, too much time.

How were they to do it themselves?

She wished the others hadn’t all left that morning, though she’d understood their reasoning. Now that the zoo’s sole merman was dead, Zuzu’s needed a new exhibit, and a kraken could easily fill that role. But there were roles to be filled right now, and she couldn’t fill them alone. She certainly couldn’t fill them with Horizon—seniority meant nothing to cryptids.

“Ready to do this?” she asked.

“We’ll just leave them, run them later.”

“We need to now. Their legs need exercise. Those joints can’t be cooped up all day.”

“They’ll be fine. The others get back in—“

“We need to run them,” Maribella repeated.

Horizon crossed his arms. His grin was still there, still slimy. “Tell you what,” he said with a snort. “If you can get the latch open, you can run them.”

Maribella frowned. That wasn’t possible. The latch normally required a key and two staff members to open. The bolt was intentionally heavy, too much for one person. A failsafe against the centaurs lifting it themselves.

Horizon pulled out his master keyring—the keys that let him inside all the exhibits: the centaurs’, the wailing banshee’s, and, even sometimes, the poor, poor mermaids’.

“What do you say?” he asked.
Maribella didn’t answer; she grabbed the key.

#

The Mountain really wasn’t a mountain, only a long plain of grass ending in a tiny bump. It was enclosed by a large steel gate, 20 feet high, and the gate itself was kept locked by several large beams. One of these beams ran across a door, and Maribella pushed the key into the slot and turned. The door unlocked, and with a grunt she tried lifting the beam.

Her arms strained. The beam remained.

She repositioned herself, gripped even tighter. Pushed up, all her strength.

Nothing.

One of the centaurs stood nearby, watching. A male, as most of them were, with a dark torso and darker legs. His arms were bulbous, hard as stone. His hair grew in slants, neither side unshaven, unlike the other centaurs, whose marks stood out against the baldness.

The centaur galloped toward her. Its tail swished behind, and now that it was closer, Maribella was certain it had no mark. Most centaurs had one, a horseshoe shaped stab in the side of their head. A necessity, for their own good.

The centaurs were an anxious group. Constantly needing stress management, which could only be provided through surgery. If this one didn’t have a mark, it must be new, especially well-behaved. Perhaps inbred toward gentleness, like the mermaids.

Through the gap in the fence, the centaur reached forward. Instinctively, Maribella pulled back her hands. Then, she laughed. What was she thinking? The centaur was friendly. It wouldn’t hurt her.

She repositioned her hands on the latch. The centaur reached forward once more. Hands on her own hands as she lifted, raising the beam, higher, higher, until it clicked out of place.
Wasn’t that adorable? Maribella thought. The centaur was helping, almost as if it knew of Maribella’s love for it and all cryptids. Almost as if it knew she was here to help. Almost as if the centaurs loved her back, almost as if they knew how much she—

Crack! The panel swung up, smacking Maribella in the jaw.

Her teeth clanked together, and her head flew back.

She stumbled, trying not to fall.

The gate crashed open, and the centaurs were running.

They ran past her, legs kicking up dirt.

She fell over, fell beneath them.

Their legs trampled over her. Crushing.

Crushed.

#

On the opposite side of the zoo, Horizon had returned to the mermaids. There was nothing else to do while he waited. Nothing else he wanted, at least. Their song was especially loud today, nearly as loud as the banshee, or the screaming crowd. He stayed a distance away, remembered his training. He controlled the lock, not the other way.

Silver splashed near the surface, then tried to pull herself up shore. She fell back in the waves, created bubbles. But then, she resurfaced, threw back her hair. Horizon walked closer, hand on his keys.

He hadn’t been inside the exhibit since the merman. He was sure the other keepers had their ideas about what happened that day, and they were free to have those ideas. But his supervisor had warned him not to go inside again, not to have a repeat of last time. He wasn’t
sure what his supervisor believed had happened; nothing too bad, or he wouldn’t still have his job.

Silver spotted Horizon, froze again. And then, she dove down, started toward him. But instead of resurfacing, the bubbles continued. The other mermaids looked at the bubbles, looked at each other.

Horizon hadn’t liked the merman. But, he hadn’t tried to kill him. No matter what Maribella or the other keepers thought—it really had been an accident.

He’d been in the exhibit, hand-feeding Silver. The way that he did, sometimes. Fish in one hand, her hair in the other—her own hands wrapped tightly around his dick. It had been like training a dog, really. But instead of whistling and getting a dog to sit, he handed out a fish, and Silver did the rest. The other two mermaids would watch from afar, unmoving. Too dumb to do anything else.

Usually, the merman would sit there, too. Quiet, eyes barely open. But on that day, something changed. Instead of waiting off to the side, the merman swam over; he’d grabbed Horizon’s arm. He’d pulled him off of Silver, and Silver swam off. But, the merman didn’t let go, only held on tighter, started biting.

Horizon had grabbed him by the neck. It had been instinctive. An accident. He’d thrown the merman off him, into the middle of the water, the creature’s head smacking artificial land before it sank. Horizon watched the body fall, become dark and distorted, then float back up, chest facing the floor. And yet, its face wasn’t down, or even to the side, but tipped toward the sky, eyes wide open.
Horizon grabbed the merman, touched its face, then shook him as if shaking could fix the nothingness in its eyes. But the merman didn’t respond, just continued to stare, as the mermaids swam toward them. Silver screamed.

Quickly, Horizon grabbed the merman’s arm, dove underwater. The body was heavy, but he pulled it to the enclosure’s floor. He wasn’t sure what to do, his mind already shrieking, wanting to escape the cries above.

He hadn’t intended it. He really hadn’t. But, the water filter gurgled beside him. The merman’s tail spasmed, inched toward the opening. Still hearing the screaming, Horizon let go, gently pushing the merman toward it.

He popped back up. Silver still cried. She tried to dive down, but he grabbed her, threw her back.

The bubbles had started slow. And then, they’d boiled. Finally, they disappeared altogether, and Horizon left, filed his report.

Horizon had cracked the merman’s neck, and he had drowned, and Horizon hadn’t meant for any of it. But that’s not what he told his supervisor—he mentioned the drowning, and he mentioned the bubbles. The bubbles that boiled, like the bubbles were boiling now.

Silver was a good swimmer. A great one. There was no possibility that she was stuck, or too tired to swim. And yet, the bubbles continued. She didn’t resurface. The bubbles slowed, began popping.

Horizon moved closer. The banshee kept screaming. The other two mermaids hummed as Horizon stared through the gate.

He could unlock it. He could walk in.

The mermaid stayed under. Horizon’s chest tightened.
No one else was here. Not his supervisor, not even Maribella. Maybe he could reach forward, go inside—

He took out his keys, put one in the latch.

Thought of the merman. The minutes of bubbles.

Before he could decide, the banshee shrieked louder. Louder than thunder, or a cannon, or anything Horizon had ever heard. He turned toward its cage, and then, he saw it—the centaurs, running toward him. At him.

Horizon dropped his keys. He tried to run, but the centaurs were already upon him. The tallest one picked him up by his uniform and held him high. It threw him skyward, over the fence. With a gasp, he smacked the water on the other side. He bobbed back up and blinked away water. Saw Silver bobbing beside him.

“Silver,” he tried to say, but the water choked him, buried the word.

In an instant, her hand was in his hair; the other mermaids swam beside her. They grabbed him as well, one on each arm. And then, they pulled him down, so very far down. They stayed underwater as their own oxygen drained, as Horizon’s turned into small bubbles of fear, then into nothing. The mermaids did not resurface, nor did Horizon. The bubbles continued, until they stopped.

Keys in hand, the centaurs ran on.

The banshee continued to wail as the centaurs arrived, and they flipped through Horizon’s keys until they found one that fit. With a turn of the lock, the banshee was free. It rolled out of its cage, pulled at its skin.

The centaurs ran through the rest of the zoo, stopping at each exhibit and releasing the animals. They first helped the pegasi, whose wings were clipped, but they could still run, and did
run, and were free. The sasquatch was next, and it beat its chest as the centaurs reached for the lock. One lowered his hand, and the sasquatch sniffed. Its mouth curved up, and it let out a joyous shriek as the door flew open.

In this way, the centaurs freed the fairies, two dozen gnomes, a pair of bonded cherubs, even a witch’s familiar. Then, the centaur led their kinsmen to the zoo’s entrance, where the crowd had grown bigger, louder, impatient, eager to enter, ready to oooh and ahhhh and tap on glass and make a spectacle.

Seeing the creatures, some customers laughed.

*What trick is this? What has the zoo prepared for us now?* Even their whispers formed a wail. *Cryptids, outside of their cages!* But soon, they realized the creatures were not merely out of their cages—the creatures were no longer the zoo’s. They ran through the crowd, pushed their way through, never biting or scratching, but not caring who screamed or ran, or was unable to run. They escaped, and thus they were free, and they scattered the world. Disappeared in plain sight.

#

Perhaps the centaurs forgot the vampire bats, or maybe they feared their true vampire form, which was not that different from that of the humans. Whatever the reason, the bats remained in The Cave, flapping in place beneath the eternal light. When the other staffers returned, no kraken in tow, they made the room even brighter, even hotter—so hot that the vampires shrieked, withered to ash, but the keepers did nothing, turned up the light.
THERE IS A BEAST

Holly was missing, and that was bad, because the scouts would need to find her. The mountain seemed endless. Dark was nearing. The worst girls roared, and maybe some real lions were roaring, too. But Troop Leader promised the lions were fake—the Girl Scouts would never go somewhere so dangerous. They’d find Holly, and they’d get home safe, because the scouts were sisters, sister-strong.

Aster, Holly’s actual sibling, checked behind trees, in the bushes, the tents. She wasn’t nervous, only remorseful; Holly had said this would happen, and so it had. Her twin had warned her not to come on the trip, that it would be dangerous, a trip meant for real scouts. And now? Holly was the one in danger. All because Aster hadn’t stayed home.

Troop Leader blew her whistle, and Aster lined up with the remaining girls. There were ten, eleven if you counted Troop Leader. Twelve if you counted Holly, who even in absence, would certainly have insisted on being counted.

Troop Leader was tall and scarecrow-limbed. Gaunt-faced. She had straw-dry hair and skin covered in foundation, giving her a powdery glaze. The powder rose up to her eyebrows, her too-high hairline. She was a teenager pushing thirty.

“Listen guys,” Troop Leader said. “Buddy system. I want everyone to pair up right now.” She scanned from left to right, as if trying to size up who might know Holly’s location. “Holly’s fine. I’m sure she’s peeing, looking at flowers.” A violent shrug. “I don’t know what she does. But I don’t want anymore of you girls wandering off. I swear, if someone else—“
Before she could finish her sentence, one of the scouts threw back her head and roared. It started as a whisper, then grew louder, tumbled with stones, increased to thunder.

Aster jumped, and Troop Leader glared, and the rest of the scouts started laughing.

“Quit that noise,” Troop Leader said. “I already told you, there’s no lions here.”

The girl who’d roared—Tori Williams—glared right back. “Yeah, no Holly, either.”

At that, the few girls who’d continued laughing suddenly stopped. Holly’s absence became a physical sensation, running down Aster’s back.

“We’re going to find her, right?” Aster asked, but Troop Leader was scolding Tori, and none of the other girls were listening. Aster shivered, but she wasn’t just scared: she was cold.

As night neared, the mountain’s temperature dropped; the chances of finding a 13-year-old on the mountain dropped, too.

Holly was all alone. Without her sisters. Without their warmth.

* 

Earlier that week, Holly had been packing her backpack for the trip, still trying to convince Aster not to do the same. “What if we have to run?” she’d asked, as she threw in her sunscreen. “Are you really down for that?”

“I’m faster than you are,” Aster said. She meant it as a joke, and Holly must have taken it that way. She’d thrown her not-yet-packed hairbrush at Aster’s head—a little too hard, but that was forgivable. It left a mark, small and red.

“Well, yeah, but only because running’s gross. Guess that’s why it’s your thing.” Holly smiled, continued packing. “And what if you get hungry?” she said, as she tossed in a plastic baggy of jerky.

Holly didn’t eat jerky. She didn’t eat meat.
“I’ll wait to eat like everyone else.”

“Are you sure you can do that?” Holly asked. She pressed a finger to her nose, raised the tip. Aster didn’t respond; she couldn’t, because Holly was blonde and thin.

Aster was fat, oily-haired, and stretch-marked.

For several minutes, Holly continued to pack; continued to ask what Aster would do; continued to doubt her responses. “I’m going,” Aster finally said. “I’m going and you can’t stop me.”

Holly laughed. She zipped up her backpack. “This is an awful idea.”

“No it isn’t, I’m—“

“Not good at scouting. This trip is for real scouts, not people like you.” Holly walked closer, poked Aster’s side. “If you really want to go, there’s no talking you out of it. But, if you’re going, I’m gone.”

“Gone?”

Holly’s smile deepened. “Gone,” she’d repeated, and the word had been filled with more words, all translatable: *I’m not staying there if you’re there.*

*You spoil everything. You know that, right?*

*Yolanda, a tall girl with frizzy hair, was assigned as Aster’s buddy. Yolanda pouted, crossed her arms; she couldn’t have looked more disappointed.*

“Can I be with Samantha? Or Gale instead?”

Troop Leader said no, and Yolanda snarled. Troop Leader moved onto the other girls, and once she was gone, Tori walked closer, pinched Aster’s arm.

“Congrats, Yolanda,” she said, as Aster winced. “You caught yourself a whale.”
At that, Aster’s cheeks drained. She slapped Tori’s hand. “I’m no whale, I’m—“

“Even Holly says it.”

“No she doesn’t.”

Tori smirked. “Course she does.” She smiled, sharp enough to cut someone. “Must stink for your sister, can’t help who she’s related to.”

“Guys,” Yolanda said, trying to step between them. But the gesture was half-hearted, quarter-hearted.

“Sorry, sorry,” Tori said. Her smile grew even sharper. “Was related to. She’s probably dead by now, some lion’s—“

“Cut it out, Tori,” Yolanda said, and this time, her voice snapped harder.

“She’s off picking flowers,” Aster said. “We’re going to find her, you heard, she’s safe.”

Seeking those words again, Aster looked for Troop Leader. But Troop Leader was busy talking to a different girl. That girl seemed to be crying, likely scared of the lions. The roaring had stopped, but the fear remained.

“Oh, I don’t doubt we’ll find her in pieces.”

“Quit it, Tori,” Yolanda said.

“All I’m saying is, too bad she’s the one went missing. Whale here would feed a lion much better.”

Aster’s face turned red. It started hot, and tears slid down. She took a step back. And then, she ran. She pumped her legs, went as fast as she could, trying to ignore the guilt, Holly’s words:

*What if we have to run?*

*Are you really down for that?*
From behind her, she could hear Yolanda, though she couldn’t make out what she said.

Tori’s voice was louder, far too loud: “You ever seen blubber run?”

Aster kept running. She had to leave. She couldn’t be near Tori, not near those words—because Tori was right. Holly had always been the pretty one.

But Holly had never called her a whale.

Aster stopped running, leaned beside a tree. Through ragged breaths, she took a look at her surroundings. A couple of trees, each losing leaves. The remaining leaves brown, and dry, and crinkling.

Between these trees, the ground formed a long line leading forward. It was worn, covered in footprints. Some seemed newer, not that large. Aster lifted her foot—the size was the same.

Before she could step forward, something snagged Aster’s arm. She jumped, ready for teeth, prepared to fight or flee or scream. But there was no lion, only Yolanda.

Yolanda was red-faced, too. “You can’t rush off like that!” she said. She released Aster’s arm, tried catching her breath. “I’m your buddy and it’s on me if you get lost. Troop Leader will—” She stopped mid-sentence. Her face softened. “Are you ok?”

Aster touched her chest. She was shaking. “Do you really think there are lions here?”

“Do I—what?”

“Do you—“

Yolanda raised a hand. She shook her head. “There’s no lions, the others are just messing… They thought it was funny when Holly started.”

“…Started missing?”
Yolanda twitched her nose, like a rabbit. “Missing? No, when she started the roaring.” Aster tensed, and Yolanda took a step back. “She joked there might be some, said your reaction would…” Her voice trailed off. She looked away.

Aster stared at Yolanda. She stared hard. That was just like Holly, to take a joke too far. But it was forgivably, especially now.

“We should probably head back,” Yolanda said, still not looking at Aster. There was an obvious sense of guilt in her expression, but Aster couldn’t understand why. Yolanda had never roared. Yolanda barely even spoke to her.

Aster pulled out her flashlight and pointed it at the path, at the tiny footprints. “Not yet,” she said. “We could find her. We have to, it’s getting dark.”

“Find her? But Troop Leader said—“

Aster shook her head. “There are shoe prints. We have to go this way.” Aster continued forward.

At first, Yolanda didn’t move. But guilt was a great motivator; soon, Aster heard the sound of footsteps behind her.

From the campsite, a girl kept roaring. Aster shivered.

The mountain’s temperature fell, and fell.

*  

Aster’s fear of lions made sense. Holly’s fascination with them didn’t.

“Watch this one,” she’d often say, as she shoved her laptop beneath Aster’s nose, playing yet another video of lions hunting antelope, chasing zebras, grooming their young.

“Stop it,” Aster always responded, but Holly never stopped.
At first, Aster thought Holly was simply taking another joke too far. The lions scared Aster, so Holly showed her lions. But that day at the zoo, things were different. Holly hadn’t been trying to scare her.

They’d been ten, walking through the exhibits alone, passing by bears and beavers and birds. Then, they’d passed Holly’s favorite. Aster’s least favorite.

“Lions!” Holly had cried, as she ran forward, legs kicking behind her.

The enclosure was partially underground, and Holly stared down at the lazing lions. The exhibit was open to the public, but cut off by a railing, which Holly gripped tightly between her fingers.

“Aren’t they awesome?” Holly asked, and to Aster’s surprise, she wasn’t saying it meanly. She wasn’t joking.

Holly climbed up onto the railing, leaned forward.

“Do you think I could—” She continued to lean.

“Be careful,” Aster started to say, but Holly leaned even farther. Towards the lions, dozens of feet down below.

Forward.

Farther still. And then,

began to fall.

Aster reached forward, hand tight on her twin’s shirt. She yanked her sister, so hard, both girls tumbled back. They hit the concrete, and Aster’s arm scraped, and Holly cried out, “I wasn’t really—”

Later, it became, “I just wanted to see the cubs.”
And finally, when Aster told their parents what Holly had tried, and Holly was crying, locked up in her room, Aster heard her sister from the other side:

“You spoil everything, you know that, right?”

*

Aster wasn’t sure how long they kept walking. Time moved differently in silence. As if thinking the same thing, Yolanda spoke: “If Tori went missing, would you look for her?”

Aster nearly tripped. She shook her head. “I’d thank the lion that ate her.”

“Then why are you looking for Holly?” Yolanda asked. She sounded sincerely unsure.

No judgment or disgust in the question.

“Holly’s not like Tori. Holly’s my sister.”

“So’s Tori.”

“Not the same thing,” Aster replied.

“Ok, but if Tori actually was your sister, would you go looking? What’s the difference?”

Aster turned around. She pointed her flashlight at Yolanda’s face. “Why are you asking this? You know it’s weird, right?”

“ Weird?” Yolanda waved at the light in her eyes; Aster lowered her flashlight. “What’s weird is us walking through the mountain alone. What’s weird is that your sister walks off and you somehow feel bad about that.” Yolanda scowled, looked to the side. “Sorry, but your sister’s a jerk.”

Aster opened her mouth, prepared to defend Holly, to tell Yolanda all the ways in which she was wrong. But then, she truly saw Yolanda, face still turned away.

Yolanda’s frizzy hair earned her no friends.
Abruptly, the wind rustled. A shuffling noise. “What was that?” Aster asked, waving her flashlight.

“I don’t know.”

“Was it—“

In the distance, Aster saw something pink, something that didn’t look right on a mountain; cautiously, she walked forward, then reached down. It was a backpack—Holly’s color, Aster always got purple—covered in dirt, scraped up. Like it had fallen off her, ripped by a tree. Or been torn from her. By claws. Teeth. The plastic bag of jerky peeked out. Uneaten.

“You said there weren’t any lions,” Aster whispered.

Yolanda’s face went white. “There aren’t.”

Aster stared at the backpack. She shined the flashlight forward. Not far away, the path seemed to grow thinner, darker. She took a few steps closer. Yolanda followed, and soon, both girls could see the ledge before them. It blended into the darkness, almost invisible.

If there’s a lion, if it has my sister—

“She wouldn’t go down there for you,” Yolanda said, and for a moment, Aster paused. She was about to argue, or at least attempt it, but that’s when she heard it: a creature, roaring.

The roar wasn’t really a roar, not how Aster remembered from those videos. It was quieter, somehow sadder, with anything scary chipped away. And yet, both girls froze. The goosebumps returned, and now, they spread.

“I’m going back. I’m getting Troop Leader,” Yolanda said. She grabbed Aster’s arm, but Aster yanked free. Yolanda stepped backwards, then another step. Another step, before she was gone.
Aster continued to stare over the ledge. The roaring grew louder. Her body was ice. She couldn’t move forward, couldn't move back.

*What if you have to run?*

She tried to imagine Holly as the one standing here. Holly leaning down, crying out, Aster. But she could barely picture it, because Yolanda was right—Holly wouldn’t do this for her.

*Their parents didn’t know about the first zoo trip. The time before Holly had leaned too far. This first time, when it was almost Aster.

“Can you see them?” Holly asked.

Aster had been on the railing. Unafraid. Having no reason yet to fear lions. Loving them, longing, one of them.

She gripped the railing tightly, stared straight down. Holly walked behind her, and she was joking, only joking—she pushed.

Aster fumbled, nearly fell forward. Quickly, Aster righted herself, was completely fine.

But Holly had pushed her, and Holly had laughed.

Aster saw lions, so close beneath.

*The roar grew softer. Hushed. So quiet, it was almost a moan. Aster took a step closer, and the moan grew louder, and now the lion was calling—Aster. Aster.*

A lioness, the huntress, after her.

She thought of Holly—*What if you have to run?* Of Yolanda—*She wouldn’t go down there for you.* And then, she ran—faster, harder, wheezing. Eyes so red, trailing beneath the cold.
From behind her, she could still hear the lion crying out, roaring. But she refused to stop, refused to look back. Because if she did, she would see the truth of it. If she did, she’d belong to the lioness.
When the ants started building skyscrapers, we weren’t all that surprised. For eons they’d been crafting colonies beneath us, forging through dirt, rock, and everything else the earth could throw at them. But what was surprising were the messages, each written across one of the skyscrapers, formed from the bodies of ants killed mid-build:

“We’re taking over this shithold world, and those who oppose us won’t survive us.”

Yes, it was very surprising indeed, both that the ants had somehow learned English, and that they were prone to misspellings like some lesser hominoid. The buildings themselves were impressive, large and well-stacked, but the typo was so glaring, so ugly, that it was impossible to admire their construction skills. So, my lab partner and I did what was natural: we mocked the ants, stepped on them mercilessly, asking if they liked their “shithold” dirt, if they intended to make good on their threats or just lay there, dying.

For a while, the ants took our abuse in stride, biding their time. Planning their takeover, one man, then the next.

When the ants were ready, their attack was swift. It didn’t come all at once, but in separate battles—like when they jumped my lab partner, swarmed up his nose and down his throat, not caring that his retching constricted his throat, his nasal cavity, squishing them in the dozens, hundreds, until he moved no more; when they simultaneously swarmed the biotech and climbed through his ears, poked holes in his brain, left him drooling and twitching.

Both men died on the floor of our Recreation room. An arm’s length from each other, several feet from the exit.
I was the one who’d discovered their bodies. Crawling with ants, absolutely engulfed. It was a wonder they didn’t attack me, too. Hastily, I’d quarantined the area, locking the ants and the bodies inside. Then, through tiny vents, I’d unleashed a toxin so powerful that no one could enter the room—days later, and we still can’t enter. The bodies remain there, just visible through a plate of glass in the door, still covered in ants, awaiting their autopsies.

And yet, somehow, some ants escaped through the very vents that had unleashed the poison, entering other areas of the facility.

“I saw one in Food Storage,” said Dr. Bernies. “An absolute killer! A beast of an ant!”

“There were several in Lab A,” Dr. Sidro agreed. “I didn’t get a good look, but they’re there. Trust me. Stay clear.”

Our entire building went on high alert. I spread word of what happened to everyone, and being part of the same unit, they all took what I had to say seriously. Dozens of us took to our textbooks, our vials, trying to figure out how to stop the ants, how to find the enemy before they attacked again. But all it took was one of them to sneak in and destroy our research—walking across our papers with ink-wet feet, creating red lines, or digging inside our computers and eating the cords with straight, clean cuts.

We sealed up our walls, creating only the smallest (and highest) openings for air. I’d told everyone the ants came from my own lab, my lab partner’s research—“Of course,” they’d said, “unsurprising,”—and yet, my unit feared outsiders joining the fray. They readied themselves for more ants to enter.

It was the ants already inside that were the actual threat—didn’t my unit understand this? Normal ants couldn’t attack so viciously, so intelligently. Only my partner’s super ants could. But my coworkers believed a potential increase was the more dire concern, viewing all ants as
the same sort of species. The ants already here could be contained, they argued. Until they started multiplying.

It made no sense. We’d never given the super ants a queen, and yet, their numbers continued to grow. And lesser ants couldn’t be getting in through the openings for air, because they were closely monitored, heavily guarded. But researchers kept popping up dead.

First, Dr. Mahavi, who was found choked to death—the ants must have entered his throat as well—by none other than Dr. Bernies, who’d worked closely with the dead doctor on a paper for which only Dr. Mahavi had received any credit. Then Bernies himself was found dead, alone in a room except for Dr. Sidro. She’d accused Bernies of inappropriate workplace relations, saying it was “even more inappropriate” that he’d died like that from the ants, right in front of her, with no regard for her squeamishness.

As more of my coworkers continued to die, I sought solace in the one room where I could escape the insanity—the Revolution chamber, to which no one but I and my (now deceased) lab partner had a key. My colleagues didn’t think much of the room. In truth, they viewed my research as a matter of pride, not anything practical. But the teachers’ unit had recently gone defunct, thanks to the educational not-wombs, creating a surplus of funds for our own unit. Thus, my partner and I were given the go to proceed, and I did so gratefully.

After all, it would be a shame to lose the last homo sapiens.

When I’d first thought up the project, the others had teased me. “Soft spot for the past?” Dr. Mahavi had asked.

Dr. Bernies had laughed, adding, “Don’t you know our only way forward is, well, forward?” I’d had trouble defending the opposite.
Even my lab partner had been uncertain: “What do you expect to learn from a species that died out?” I couldn’t answer that, not directly, though I still argued for the project’s merit. Wasn’t there a saying, “Those who don’t learn from the past,” something something? Didn’t that mean we should learn?

Eventually, my lab partner conceded that my research proposal “might make for a semi-decent project.” Knowing I needed a second set of hands to keep my subjects in check, I took his hesitation as enthusiasm. And thus began our exhibit, “The Last Family.”

x

Entering the Revolution chamber, I walked over to the *homo sapien* family. As always, they were a bit leery of me, and I couldn’t blame them: behind glass walls, like animals of old in a zoo, the naked family huddled together, the whole group opposing me, daring me to try to break their hold. There were two adults, one of each gender, as well as a boy and a teenaged girl. Their skins ranged from pale to brown, each of them with a dark head of hair—straight for the females, curled for the males. None of their eyes looked quite the same.

“No tests, today,” I told the family, hoping that would assuage their concerns. But they only held each other tighter, perhaps fearing I was lying and would whip out a needle, or resenting me for not feeding them yet. For the *homo sapiens*, two days was a long time without food.

I hadn’t eaten in over two weeks, and I felt just fine.

Food wasn’t the only way in which the *homo sapiens* were spoiled. Though it wasn’t large, they had everything they could want within the enclosure: a watering hole, a sitting area,
each a wooden plank for sleeping. A garden, filled with rocks and sand. And yet, constantly, the *homo sapiens* complained, banging on the glass, crying or shivering. And even more frequently, they tried to escape—three times I’d found tiny slits in their glass, and three times, they’d stared blankly at me, feigning stupidity, as I scowled, then reinforced their home.

Shaking my head, I walked over to my computer, which contained records of the family’s progress. Quickly, I checked the device, every tiny crevice. Finding no ants—of course there were none, not in here—I turned it on.

The computer zapped to life, prompting me for login information. On a whim, I tried my partner’s initials as my username, then started guessing at passwords—password, password1, password2. None of these granted access, so I switched over to my own profile, then pulled up my research about the subjects. Lines flashed across the screen, signifying dozens of tests, hundreds of hours of theories and trials.

The Last Family’s log was long and complicated, detailing the lives of the original progenitors as well as the state of their current offspring. Of course, the current offspring were also the originals, and the parents were also the offspring. It would have been no good to continually breed two of a species together, as I’d wanted to preserve their line for study, not bastardize it—and the more times their singular DNA mixed, the less diverse, less formed, they would be.

Through a simple process of cloning, I could recreate these four indefinitely. Once one of the parents died, I would clone in its place an infant, and the parents’ own children would be pressed with raising their parents, until they died themselves, and were in turn reborn. It was a very natural process, once you admitted how odd it was, and I’d already done it dozens of times.
Again and again, the four found themselves back behind glass, with three people they sort of knew, and were bound to indefinitely.

Switching to my file titled “Notes,” I skimmed through my latest observations. Like all those proceeding, these notes detailed my attempt to make the *homo sapiens* evolve quicker, to be more like our current state of man, *homo magnifico*. Science said it couldn’t be done, so as a scientist, I felt compelled to prove it was possible. If evolution could take place over a lifetime as opposed to generations—imagine the lives we could lead. No more imperfections, no need to eat, nor bathe, nor sleep at all.

An even greater state of being.

As I continued skimming through my notes, in the margins, I spied a comment. Odd. I never inserted comments, I just free wrote all that I noticed. I wrinkled my nose and clicked on the extra link, which led to one word: Bullshit. Beside the word were the letters, LP. My lab partner, offering his opinion.

An icicle hit my chest. It spread through my arms, down to my belly. Because my partner had guessed my password, read my notes. Mocked them. Mocked *me*, as he’d always done.

I was in charge of this project, which he had eternally tried to undermine. And now, even in death, he still continued to challenge me. Besides monitoring my subjects, when he felt like it, or bathing and feeding them a time or two, what had he done for my project? I’d done everything since the very beginning. This had been my idea, my project, *mine*.

One of my subjects let out a hum—they were still hugging, still standing in the center of the glass cage. But the older female rocked them as the older male continued the sound. Both were watching me, the children’s faces hidden. Could they sense my anger? Did they wish to console me?
I’d found the family’s DNA in a history museum, back when I was ostensibly deciding whether to join the History Unit or the Researcher Unit. In truth, my heart belonged to research—the not-womb had crafted me so—but my Aptitude test had allowed me the option. While at the museum, I’d taken samples from various preserved bodies—one cryogenically frozen, another mummified—until the DNA was sufficiently cloneable. Of course, it was a bit deceitful to steal like that, especially when I’d had no intention of joining the Historians. But in stealing the DNA (and the backlogs of each individual), I’d be progressing science and thus helping my own unit, as every other scientist was bound to do.

As I switched to the the most recent log of my subjects’ vitals—spiking numbers concerning body fat, cholesterol levels, heart rate—*I need to lower my heart rate*—the family broke its circle. Perhaps they were intrigued by me, as they sometimes were, or perhaps they’d grown sweaty hugging. Even after months researching them, I still couldn’t understand their nature. Their pull toward one another, their lack of shame. This unit called “family,” which had preceded our own unit structures. The way they looked at me, like they knew something I didn’t.

My lab partner had called them “geniuses.” I thought the term was a stretch, since the creatures were literally lesser than us. Sure, we didn’t look very different, outside of them being shorter, smaller-eyed, and in some indefinable way uglier, but our abilities in science were so far beyond theirs, it was a wonder we’d ever evolved from them! And our abilities at language, unit structuring, conserving energy—everything we did made more sense. Certainly, I enjoyed watching the *homo sapiens*, but not the same way my lab partner did. His was a tenderness that verged on that awful word: inappropriate.

It had been my lab partner’s idea to introduce other creatures into their habitat. Why he’d done this, I couldn’t understand. In fact, he hadn’t consulted me before adding the first subject, a
tiny butterfly, which to his credit, they hadn’t harmed. But really, wasn’t that strange? An outsider had entered their home, and they’d allowed it, even seemed to enjoy it. Running behind it, flapping their arms like they could fly, too. Almost as if they cared for it, hoped it would stay with them.

“They evolve better together,” my lab partner had said. It was a few days before the ants attacked him, and I’d grown increasingly tired of comments like this: “They look so happy,” and “I think they like me!” as if the creatures had high enough brain function to understand happiness, or so little brain power as to like their captor.

I scoffed. “That’s not how evolution works.” And yet, he did have a point. This was the liveliest we’d ever seen the family. So uninhibited, barely aware that we were watching. Besides, I’d had to admit that, in some cases, that was exactly how evolution worked. Like the symbiosis of sea anemones and anemone fish, or ants and whistling thorns. The thorns offered shelter, and the ants defended the thorns from harm.

Or like on Darwin’s islands, where the birds and the tortoises grew together, alongside so many other creatures.

It was the finches that first inspired my research. Each cut off on their islands, developing different beaks and plumage to suit their needs. When fellow scientists questioned my research, I’d point to these finches, the various paths that each had taken.

“What pathways belong to humanity?” I’d question. “What other ways can we evolve, and when?”

In response, my lab partner had pointed out neanderthals, stating, “Not all variations are equal.” His words created a stalling point in my research, yes, but they didn’t stop me. I didn’t let him distract me, not then, and not now.
As if sensing my rage, the adult female walked over to the glass wall. She banged on it, said something unintelligible. I stood and walked over to the enclosure. Her eyes burned almost brightly enough to be called inquisitive, though I was certain she was solely hungry. This race of man ate much more than our own people, constantly depleting the Earth of its resources as if it were solely theirs to have. And they put their children’s needs first, not understanding that they could always have more children, like we do in the not-wombs. How careless their race had been!

No wonder our own race of *homo magnifico* had been split into units, each unit tasked with taking care of only themselves. And no wonder the scientists, specifically, ate so little, slept even less, loved even weaker, than any being prior.

“What is it, Blue?” I asked. I never called her this in front of the other scientists. But, the blue of her eyes was striking, as was the brown of Brown’s eyes, the green of Green’s. If the others heard me, they’d call me sentimental, which was not a word befitting a lab researcher, and was punishable in a thousand ways. Not that we could really punish anyone now, since we were locked inside, fearing the ants.

I still couldn’t understand how they’d escaped. I’d been certain to poison all the ones in the Recreation room, stomp on all the ants in this room.

Blue banged on the glass again, then rubbed her stomach, confirming my theory that she was hungry. She even pointed at the supply case, then rubbed her belly again for emphasis. I smiled at her, and—what a surprise!—Blue even smiled back! From behind her, the others were grinning as well, which they never did, though their files confirmed they had grinned in the past.

The historians were quite good at their jobs, anal to the point of uptightness. If we were finches, theirs would be a group with masterful record-keeping, a timeless love for reading, and
memories built to savor the smallest of facts. But alas, they weren’t finches, and they weren’t that different—though certain lesser—than even our own unit. Thus, they hadn’t all of the necessary skills for preserving history, though they did know the birth year, death date, and occupation of most of the samples in their museum.

Blue had been a musician, of sorts, and would likely have joined the artists unit. Brown had been a pediatrician, which we no longer needed, since everyone formed inside a not-womb and came out as near-adults. Green had been a teacher, which was also defunct, since we did our learning inside these not-wombs. And Grey, well Grey was a mystery. Her history was incomplete, merely saying “died young, worked on farm.”

Grey was the one I liked least of the four. Though young now, she looked old, spoke rarely, and often stared to the point of discomfort. My lab partner had called her his favorite, because she offered a challenge, being somehow even less comprehensible than the others. I’d never understood his interest in the unknown—science wasn’t meant to have those.

“I’ll get you something Blue,” I said, as I walked over to the supply case. Here, I had just enough protein pills to keep the family alive for another week, maybe two if I stopped feeding Grey. At that point, I’d have to let the rest die off, them bring them back via cloning once normal activities, including funding, restarted. But, I had no idea when that might be. Not with our lockdown, and the ants still at large.

I opened the case. I reached inside. I stood on my toes, trying to better access the pills. But instead of their smooth coating, something lightly tapped against my hand. I pulled away, reached in once more. Now, more tapping. I yanked back my hand.

Three tiny ants skittered across my palm. They looked no different from normal ants, only bigger, slightly blacker. Super ants. With a shriek, I closed the case. I shook my hand, but
the creatures held on tightly. Inhaling deeply, I blew out hard and sent the ants flying, losing sight of where they went.

“Dammit, where are they?” I asked, forgetting the *homo sapiens* couldn’t respond, that my lab partner was gone and couldn’t either. I ran to the computer, saved the notes I had just been viewing, then continued to scan the room.

Three ants couldn’t do much damage, not with so few. Not even super ants. But, how had they gotten in here? There were no windows, and the room was sealed off. We’d killed all the ants, we’d made sure of it. The moment they’d built their skyscrapers, my partner and I had stomped on them, crushed them soundly, grinding our heels into the enclosure’s dirt. And the *homo sapiens* had gripped their necks, their chests, cried out. But we’d had to do it, because who knew what the ants might try?

And yet, three of them were still alive. In this room. They’d survived a complete extermination. Impossible.

My stomach dropped. I walked back to the case. I opened it and reached back inside—this time, nothing. I checked the walls, the door, my computer. Finally, I turned toward the enclosure, the *homo sapiens*.

Blue was still at the glass, still banging. Green had joined her, pressing his lips against the glass, making faces. Beside him, Brown started jumping, honing and hawing, waving his arms like he had with the butterfly. And behind them, I could just make out Grey, sitting in the garden. What was she doing?

“Being incomprehensible,” my lab partner would say, and he’d mean it kindly, and I’d hate him for saying it.
The ants hadn’t been my idea. Like the butterfly, it was my partner who’d introduced them—just normal ants at the time, nothing special—taking specimens from our limited supplies, all for his amusement, no progress. The ants had been the last.

After the butterfly he’d introduced a fish, which couldn’t survive the climate, and was quickly eaten by the family. Then, a mosquito, which Green had swatted. He’d touched his neck, the place it bit, seemingly unaware of what he’d done. Next, my partner introduced the bunnies, which Blue and Brown adored. They petted them, cooed and rocked them. Grey seemed uninterested. Green, allergic.

I’d had no choice but to kill the last of these bunnies recently. I couldn’t chance it turning on us and relaying battle strategies to the ants. Because shortly after coming into contact with the family, the bunnies had started speaking. Not English, but a hodgepodge of other words—“Nande?” phrased as a question, and “Tengo hambre,” voiced as a need.

But the ants had been even stranger.

At first, the last family played with them, just as they had the bunnies. But they were too fragile, too small to pet. And like the mosquito, they died. Not wanting to be wasteful, I cloned more of their number, just as I had done with the homo sapiens, the bunnies, so many times.

The change didn’t come until the fifth cloning. It was like they started remembering, started—evolving.

In a way, this was exactly what I’d hoped to achieve with my original research, only with the homo sapiens themselves. Nothing about the ants’ DNA was altered, only cloned, and yet, they were entirely different. The ants should have been exactly the same, but they came out larger, blacker, bolder—as if their DNA had itself remembered something of their past and had tried to fortify itself for the next wave.
“I think we’re onto something,” I’d begrudgingly admitted, when the ants started building tiny huts. The huts were sturdy, made of sand and twigs, and it only took the ants an hour to build them. The *homo sapiens* watched in awe, as did my lab partner, as did I, as did the biotech, when my partner snuck him inside. But then came the skyscrapers, the threats, the typos. I could see the ants were upsetting my subjects—they were so much quieter, constantly with the ants.

Really, I had never intended my project to go in this direction, never intended to clone more than one creature. I’d been happy to try it when the results were promising, but now, there were too many variables, too much to account for. And really, it was the *homo sapiens* that mattered, not the ants, who seemed a mere glitch, an unexplainable occurrence.

My lab partner disagreed, and though he killed them with me, he did so sadly. Sentimentally.

A scientist like that didn’t deserve to be a scientist.

Even then I think he was conspiring with the biotech, trying to usurp me and take credit for my research as his own. Both of them meeting in the Recreation room, in secret, without me. Discussing other creatures to introduce, other ways to jeopardize my research. It’s possible they were fond of each other, which isn’t allowed. Everyone knows the only care you can show is platonic, so as not to jeopardize the unit. And certainly, not just the unit, but my research was jeopardized: because the ants had somehow survived my attempts to kill them.

They’d evolved in the strangest, most terrible ways.

Blue had stopped hitting the glass. Instead, she was screaming, pointing to herself and Brown. Brown also pointed, but to himself and Green. Green smacked the glass, with his hands, his head.
I walked past them, ignored the distraction. They tried to block her, but I could see: Grey remained in her corner, running her fingers through the dirt. And beside her—a tiny break in the glass. A sliver as long as a pinky, a long rock.

“Again?” I started to say, but then, I noticed something far worse than the break.

A super ant, crawling out of it. Several more of its kind, surrounding Grey, crawling through the dirt.

I shrieked. I tried to understand. But as always, Grey was unknowable.

“…You hid some?” I finally asked. “Why would you do that? Why would any of you—“

Blue was still screaming, Green was still hitting, and Brown had started to fling sand at the glass, my face. And finally, Grey looked toward me, smiling smugly.

In the dirt, three simple words:

*We’re taking over.*

Suddenly, the whole room was shaking. Grey stood back, and the ants in the dirt formed a ladder, rose to the ceiling, stacking the dirt, their own bodies, to form a battering ram. Hundreds of them, all hidden in the dirt—but not just the dirt. Crawling out of the *homo sapiens*, their ears, their buttocks, their belly buttons, every crevice or hole they could fill. And now, thousands, and now, even more.

Grey grabbed the battering ram, pushed it forward.

In an instant, the glass around her shattered. The *homo sapiens* whooped and laughed, banging their bellies. I shielded my eyes, felt glass slice my cheeks, ran to my desk and tried to hide. But the ants were everywhere, and the shards were, too, and my ears were ringing, and the laughter grew.
Cautiously, I peered over my desk. But as quickly as I stood, something grabbed my wrist. It was black, and writhing, and it crawled up my arm. And now, more of the same, on my legs, my chest.

Only my head remained unobscured, and I stared at my subjects, my smart, smart subjects, who were even less comprehensible than I had thought. And I glared at the ants, the cunning ants, which my partner should never have introduced; he deserved all that had happened, choked dead, so slowly.

The family stared back at me. Grey was still smiling, still near several ants, who continued to crawl around her, inside her. Their queen.

It was terrifying. It was disgusting. But even then, these thoughts were not at the forefront; my mind was still science, still planning. My unit couldn’t outlive this, not on its own.

But we could create a civilization that would.

This would be my next idea, my even better idea: our race of homo magnifico would end, yes, but thus would begin the race of homo perfecto. Taking on formicidae formidable, and ultimately overcoming them.

I could do it, I’d head the research. I’d save us.

Or, I would have. I would have tried. But before I could even type up the plans, without provocation or reason, without anything but her one, small hand—Grey pointed toward me, and the ants squeezed tight, and the world went black, with ants, with the end.

x
I don’t know how much time passed before I awoke to Grey, Blue, Green, and Brown. They stood behind the transparent wall, staring at me. Tapping the glass, making faces.

I’m not sure how much more time passed before I realized that I was the one inside the glass room. The *homo sapiens* were outside of it, monitoring me, adding other members of my unit to the enclosure.

Dr. Sidro, who seemed shocked by the ants, which she had previously claimed to see.

A younger scientist, new to the unit, who seemed almost joyful to be part of the newest experiment.

A fellow biologist who didn’t believe what was happening. Who loudly cried, “Impossible.”

It took even longer to realize that my subjects had teamed up with the ants to kill us, then recloned us, just as I’d done to them.

But even now, after however much time has passed—months, if not years, if not lifetimes—I don’t know what my subjects want. I don’t know how to get out. I can’t understand why they’ve done this to me.
WATER ON MARS

If there was an observer on Mars, they would probably be amazed that we have survived this long — Noam Chomsky

It's not going to do any good to land on Mars if we’re stupid — Ray Bradbury

The creature was large, grey, and scaly, and its body billowed before Sybil’s own. On top, it was blob-like with a thread of an outline, and that thread seemed to move as it glided forward. Sybil took a step back—tried to step back, but something was wrong with her legs. They were sludge-like, hard to move, and she had the strangest sensation that there were four of them.

The grey creature in front of her came closer, and Sybil noticed that its own legs were thick, sluglike. Each left a different sound—musical, yet grating—as they trailed across the land. The land itself was almost dirt, but dustier. Not the same color, and the water of Earth was nowhere in sight. Having grown used to its constant presence, this lack of water shocked Sybil nearly as much as the creature’s appearance.

The only thing more frightening, more shattering, was that she no longer saw her brother, either.

Sybil tried to shout, “What are you?” or “Where is he?” but the words wouldn’t come out. Couldn’t come out. She tried to open her mouth, but she didn’t feel lips. Her tongue and cheeks and teeth all gone—frozen into a solid mass.

The creature took another step forward, legs sliding behind, creating those same, strange sounds. But now, there were new sounds. Two words. Clear and crisp, yet soft as a whisper:

Don’t worry.
Sybil tried to turn around, to look for the source of the words. But the sound seemed to come from all directions. She looked back toward the creature, who continued to sway, whose motions corresponded with the next words: *I understand this is shocking.*

Stuck in place, unable to move her legs—or what once were her legs—or use her mouth—the space that had once been her mouth—Sybil stared at the creature. She listened to the strange noises made by its limbs, the noises that seemed to recombine, creating words. And as she stared, the creature moved even closer, so close that Sybil—if her arms weren’t frozen—would have been able to touch it.

The creature’s meaning was transferred as smoothly as if it had spoken:

*The Transference worked. I’m here to help you.*

~~~

Alirgahn’s name wasn’t really Alirgahn. Its name was different to each of its kind, as they each had their own notes, songs that only they could produce. But the syllables, Alh-air-gahn, were some of the most common. For convenience, Alirgahn chose to adopt them when introducing itself. Humans needed names, after all.

Alirgahn surveyed its surroundings. Water, and nothing but—Alirgahn knew the substance’s name, because it had done its research, extensively, combing through human magazines and audio broadcasts. Not all of its kind conducted research before their Transference, but Alirgahn understood the importance of knowledge. It had already failed once, and couldn’t again.

In the distance, amidst the span of blue, Alirgahn saw something floating. It then realized it was floating itself, body splayed across something grey and shining: a slab of metal. It was confused, but only a moment—although it had researched its destination of Earth, it had not
researched its target body. There was no way to research this part, since the body was always chosen at random. “Luck,” as the humans said.

Alirgahn looked at its new hands. Perhaps the body’s owner was a fisherman, or just enjoyed boating? Though long and slender, the fingers were calloused, chipped at the nails. The skin was tanned, red even, and tingled in a sensation unknown to Alirgahn’s kind.

Pain? Alirgahn had read about pain, which humans considered undesirable. If this was pain, Alirgahn understood their aversion. Its body pulsed and itched; it did not like pain at all.

As Alirgahn continued to survey its new body, the distant, floating creature thrashed, then cried out something harsh and indecipherable. Alirgahn looked back toward the creature: it was so far away, barely the size of Alirgahn’s new hand. And yet, Alirgahn was aware that the creature’s call was meant for itself. No one else—nothing else—was in sight.

Still, Alirgahn scanned its surroundings once more for land, or perhaps another human who might be able to provide assistance. Some device that could help. Anything at all.

It saw water, and nothing but.

From afar, the creature bobbed up and down, cried out again. And that’s when Alirgahn realized—the creature itself was human. Its skin was as tanned and red as Alirgahn’s own, and the sounds it made were words: English, one of the languages Alirgahn had studied, perfected. Still, the human was hard to hear, and its movements were far more frantic than Alirgahn expected. Was the human calling out its name, saying “hello?” And what was it doing in the water?

Humans didn’t live in the water. So why was this human greeting it here?

How strange, Alirgahn thought, as it lowered its feet toward the waves. Alirgahn’s research had shown that water wasn’t toxic; humans were 60 percent water, after all. As its new
feet slid in, Alirgahn found the sensation pleasing—warm, and almost slimy. Slowly, it started
kicking, inching the slab toward the human. It got closer and closer and closer, and the human’s
cried grew louder and louder.

Finally, Alirgahn was close enough for the sounds to form words, to understand the
human’s two-word plea: Help me.

~~~

Slowly, Sybil rose one of her legs. The grey creature cooed, then began to dance. It had
been doing this ever since offering its help, as if Sybil’s main concern was her inability to walk,
as opposed to her sudden new surroundings, and strange-feeling limbs.

Yes, keep going, the creature seemed to say, though Sybil still could not find the source of
the words. The creature didn’t appear to have a face, only the greyness, only the scales, and it
was those very things—the lack of anything but the greyness—that made Sybil’s heart churn.
But even those sensations didn’t feel normal—they didn’t come from her chest, but all over, as if
she’d suddenly sprouted multiple hearts, all running in fear.

The thought made her heartbeats quicken.

Just like that, the creature added, as Sybil finally lowered her leg. The appendage slid
musically, not unlike the earlier noise made by the creature itself, though Sybil’s had a slightly
deeper pitch. As it continued to hum, Sybil refused to look at her leg, because she had a feeling it
wouldn’t look how it should: instead of tan, it would be grey. Thick and amorphous, like the
creature’s own.

Besides, Sybil didn’t need to know what her new appendage looked like. She just needed
to know how to use it. Once she could walk again, she would run, and she’d find a way to leave
the creature and return to her search. She needed to go back to the water, to the specific spot
she’d been before all of this. She could still go there, still be safe. She’d been so close to finding him. So, so close.

But where was she now? This wasn’t Earth, wasn’t the water, and it was certainly nothing like anything she’d seen before. There was dirt in all directions, or something like dirt, and wasn’t that what Sybil had missed most? The pictures she’d seen from other Floaters, all dabbled in bits of deep brown dirt. Here, there was no water, no Floaters, in sight. Just the creature and the not-real dirt.

Sybil couldn’t stop herself from imagining: walking on the land, the shade of a tree. Flowers, even, a tiny animal—

She shook away the impossible hope.

*I can’t stay here. I need to find him.*

Sybil rose her leg again, and the sound abated. Simultaneously, the creature stopped moving. It stayed that way a moment, and something about its stance made Sybil uneasy, even though it made no move toward her, showed no anger.

Finally, the creature moved again, dropping its leg with a thud.

*You’re trying to run away,* said the creature. And then, a second thud. *Isn’t that so?*

Nothing about the creature’s features changed. And yet, Sybil’s fear returned. *No,* Sybil tried to say, but the word wouldn’t come out. Her lips remained frozen.

*Your motions,* the creature said, *convey your thoughts. My motions convey mine as well.*

The creature continued to move its legs. Thud-thud-thud. *This is our manner of speaking.*

Again, Sybil tried to open her mouth—the mouth she still couldn’t feel. She was growing more and more positive that it had melded into a solid mass, or even vanished.
You can try to run, but I’ll know, said the creature. And then, the sound of its limbs changed, somehow forlorn. Why would you want to leave? it asked, body moving slowly in place.

This time, Sybil didn’t try to open her mouth. A coldness rushed over her, replacing her fear with anger. Just moments ago, she’d spotted him, she’d been so close. And now, where was he? Where was Sybil herself?

I don’t even know where I am! Sybil tried to say, but the creature didn’t respond. Sybil thought the words again, this time moving her legs simultaneously. You haven’t told me anything! she added, trying not to look at her swaying legs, but now more sure than ever that they weren’t her legs.

When she finished moving, the creature took a step back. At first, Sybil thought it was leaving, but no—it was merely continuing their conversation. Those same low notes repeated as it scraped one leg against the dirt-like ground. Unable to stop herself, Sybil stared at that ground—so like Earth, the way she remembered.

Then, like before, the creature’s sounds suddenly reshaped into words. Muffled, yet clear:

Why don’t you let me explain what’s happened? the creature said. I understand this is difficult. I’m here to help you.

~~~

Alirgahn’s first Transference had been abysmal. Unsurprising, since it had been young and unprepared. Besides, its assigned planet had been filled with hungry, barely lingual shapeshifters. Even the most experienced of Alirgahn’s kind would have found trouble.

But Earth. This was supposed to be simple. Others had already landed, learned the planet’s languages and customs. And now, Alirgahn was tasked to save the planet.
It might as well start with one person.

As Alirgahn paddled closer, easing its new hands into the ocean—its feet had tired quickly—the human took on new characteristics. It was slender, tall, and hairy. Based on Alirgahn’s research, its face appeared male, or mostly male, but with so much of that face under water, it wasn’t easy to tell.

Alirgahn stopped to look at its own body. Feminine, dressed in a tattered shirt and denim. The reddened skin was growing more and more painful. It tried scratching the red away, but that only made it hurt worse. Parts of the skin were tearing.

“Help me!” the human cried out, distracting Alirgahn from its body. Confused, Alirgahn stared at the human. Didn’t it know Alirgahn planned to do just that?

“Yes, I heard you,” Alirgahn shouted back, though the words came out slurred. It wasn’t used to having lips or teeth, and as it talked, it slapped one of its feet against the metal. The humans would not understand—this was a habit it would need to break.

Alirgahn continued to paddle toward the human, taking its time, trying to see any other humans or land in the distance. But even now, all it saw was water. Water, and the flailing human.

“Are you playing a game there?” Alirgahn asked, still uncertain why the human was in the water, even more confused as to why he was asking for help. Alirgahn had heard of several human customs that took place at sea—surfing, jet skiing, fishing—but it didn’t quite understand them.

Perhaps its research hadn’t been thorough enough.

“You are asking for help?” Alirgahn said. “In what form shall I assist you?”
It paddled even closer, and the human kept flailing. Soon, his fingers were on Alirgahn’s raft.

The slab shifted. Alirgahn held on. It didn’t reach out toward the man, nor push him away.

“Is it my raft you want?” Alirgahn asked. “Certainly, I can offer it, though there isn’t much room for both of us. I don’t know how to…” It tasted the word, then said it: “swim. But, I am willing to learn.”

It was an honest comment, as it did not know how, nor did it fully understand what swimming was. But it knew that the opposite of swimming was sinking, and if Alirgahn sank to the ocean’s bottom, it wasn’t sure it would be able to get back to its slab.

The human didn’t seem to hear Alirgahn. He clambered on board, nearly tipping the slab and Alirgahn with it. He panted, water shaking from his hair, as Alirgahn watched him calmly.

Humans were a funny thing, shaken so easily by the smallest sensation. Obviously, this human did not like the feeling of water, the same way Alirgahn disliked “pain”—but what a powerful reaction to something so minimal! Alirgahn had scratched, while this creature had shrieked.

The human continued panting, trying to get in as much oxygen—that was what they breathed, yes—into his lungs, then expelling the substance, then panting again. Alirgahn realized it was doing the same thing itself, only slower, quieter. It had studied breathing and knew that it was an automatic action, but still, it was surprising to sense itself taking part, unconsciously. They didn’t have air like this back home.
“How can I help you?” Alirgahn asked, wondering whether all humans breathed this way. If so, how it could ever hope to find an opening to converse with them? Was it supposed to talk over the noise?

Finally, the human sat up, hair still dripping, his breathing slower, though still harsh enough to hear. Alirgahn’s own breathing slowed as well, mimicking the human’s.

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“Thanks,” the human said. He looked up, and Alirgahn saw two green eyes, a half triangle—a nose?—and what humans called a mouth. “Was trying to gut a fish, and my raft tipped over. Guess I was low on water. Head spinning, seeing things.” The human motioned with its fingers, tiny circles, though Alirgahn didn’t understand the gesture.

“You want water?” Alirgahn said. “Here, I’ve found you plenty!” It reached into the ocean, cupped a handful, and extended its hand toward the human. The human made a strange noise (through what-Alirgahn-believed-to-be its nose) similar to the noise made by Alirgahn’s kind when startled.

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“Thanks,” the human said, “but that’s a bit too much salt.” He made the noise again. “Sea water… you loopy, too?”

At the first words, Alirgahn paused. It could not understand. “No, I am Alirgahn,” it soon responded. “Are you this ‘Loopytoo’?”

The human showed its teeth in what must be a smile. “Sure, might as well call me that.” The human—Loopytoo—placed its legs beneath it, one on top of the other. “Alirgahn, huh? That’s something. But not like names mean much these days.”

“As opposed to what days?”

“Any other days, I guess. Before everything went shittacular, you know?”

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“Any other days, I guess. Before everything went shittacular, you know?”
Alirgahn didn’t respond. It had questions of its own—ones that this human might be able to answer—and it needed those answers immediately.

Alirgahn’s first mission hadn’t started much differently from this one. It had wound up in a strange place, one that didn’t match what it had expected, and found one of the planet’s denizens soon after. But that creature had run from it. Hid. And when Alirgahn found it, it had hissed, causing Alirgahn’s transfer-body to shrink, so tiny, that the mission was declared a hazard. Alirgahn was recused from its duties, respectfully, because who could fathom if its body had shrunken much smaller?

What would happen, then?

The people of Alirgahn’s planet rarely felt fear, but there were exceptions, such as when a planet’s salvation was especially difficult, or when a denizen unexpectedly started hissing. And yet, on Alirgahn’s last Transference, the shapeshifting creature with half-a-language had exhibited fear on a higher scale. Hence the running. Hence the hiss. The humans had a name for this feeling—terror—and Alirgahn couldn’t risk that happening again. It must approach this human cautiously so as not to cause it “terror.”

“Do you know where we are, Loopytoo?” it asked, attempting to sound calm, but still having trouble with its lips. “I see no dirt nor foliage.”

Loopytoo’s eyelids constricted. That noise again. “No, seriously, did you drink the salt water?” he asked. “You know where we are, just like everyone knows.”

“I do not,” Alirgahn replied with a slap of its leg. Loopytoo flinched, and Alirgahn stopped moving. Best to break its habit, but that would not be easy; for its species, movement while talking was a necessity, like the human’s breathing.
“You know,” Loopytoo began, “I haven’t seen another person in…” His voice faded, and he eyed Alirgahn quizzically.

“Are you antisocial? Do you dislike other humans?”

At that, Loopytoo shook his head, then laughed. It was a loud and unashamed sound. “Listen,” he said, “that’s funny and all, but why don’t you help me find my raft?” He moved to his knees, scanning the water. “I’ve tried the ‘travel in groups’ thing, and it never ends well.”

“Then how does it end?”

Loopytoo laughed again, and this time, it wasn’t as light. And this time, someone else responded. Shouted, its voice louder than Loopytoo’s laugh. Alirgahn and the human both turned toward the noise.

In the distance, another human. This one smaller, lying on its back as the waves pushed it farther and farther away.

“What the hell is that?” Loopytoo asked.

Alirgahn squinted. It didn’t know. All its research, and still, it was clueless.

~~~

So the creature in my body looks like you? Sybil thought. She moved her back leg simultaneously, creating a low-pitched noise. And it’s been sent to try and fix my planet?

Yes, the creature said, moving one of its appendages in response.

Why my body? Why not someone more important?

Anybody can be important.

Why now? Why not earlier?

Earlier? The creature stopped moving. Then, it continued swaying. What is earlier?
Sybil sighed, or tried to sigh, but it was a difficult sound to convey with her legs. All of this practice moving, relearning to walk, yet still, she couldn’t run—and she had to run, to leave, in order to find him.

*When was the last time your people studied mine?*

The creature hesitated, then moved. *Time?*

*Yes, time,* Sybil said in response. She moved her back legs, and for the briefest of moments, one rose too high. She saw it: Grey. Scaly. Horrible.

Again, the creature hesitated. Then, it tapped its legs: *We do not understand this concept.*

*How long has it been since you studied us?* Sybil repeated.

The creature didn’t move.

*Earth one hundred years ago isn’t the same as Earth now. How do you know your information’s current?*

*What has changed on your Earth?* the creature questioned. *The people are the same. The Earth is the same.*

Sybil stomped her foot. *What do you know about Earth?*

*What is there to know about Earth?*

*Why did you go to Earth?*

*We go to all planets to help them—*

*Help how?*

*We assess and assist—*

*Why now? Why not earlier?*

*We do not understand this concept of—*
Bullshit. You understand *time*. She continued swaying, stomped her leg. *Who doesn’t get time?*

For a flash, the creature’s scales seemed larger and thicker. Defensive. But then, they returned to their original size. Perhaps they had never changed. Perhaps none of this—

Out of desperation, Sybil had tried sea water, once, and she knew what it felt like to hallucinate. All of this, it could be explained that way, couldn’t it?

*That would mean he’s ok,* she thought. She made sure not to move her legs.

The creature moved its own legs, resuming its strange, undulating dance. *Your planet is small compared to some, large compared to others.* The creature walked backwards, as if it were thinking. *It is blue and green, water and land. It is a chaotic planet, and it needs our help. What else is there to know about Earth?*

*Water and land?* Sybil thought.

*Yes. Flora, fauna. The dominant species is humans.*

*Water and land?* Sybil repeated.

The creature hesitated, then twitched its leg. *Yes.*

*Water and land.*

*I already—human?*

Sybil tried laughing. She tried grabbing her belly, but she still couldn’t move her—no, she no longer *had* arms. Nor a stomach, for all she could tell. Everything felt warm and slimy, solid. Besides her not-legs, she felt no limbs, no organs. Nothing.

*What is that sound you’re making?*

*Laughter.*

*We’ve studied laughter. Does this mean you are amused?*
At that, Sybil laughed again. She wondered if the laughter sounded like “No.”

*I understand you’re distressed,* the creature said. *I’m here to—*

*The Earth hasn’t been land for some time. It’s all blue now. You used to stare out into the ocean, and—* She laughed again—*now everything’s lost in it. We thought we had time. Bullshit.*

*One day there was land; one day there wasn’t.*

The creature didn’t comment.

*Did you know I used to like the ocean? I wanted to live there one day, wanted to bring—* Sybil stopped moving, tried not to look down, but she still didn’t know where her eyes were, if she had eyes, nor how she could see if she didn’t have any—and there it was, that strange, tentacle-like limb again. She couldn’t blink it away. The limb was hers.

*No society is beyond our help,* the creature finally said. *It is our society’s goal to spread our knowledge, our peace, our—*

*Earth’s not Earth anymore. Earth’s gone. You’d know that if you knew anything about it.*

*You’re distressed, but I’m here to—*

*No!*

This time, Sybil moved two legs—tried to run off, though the creature blocked her—because she had to get back, had to find him, had to save him, a fight, he’d swam away—

The creature’s whole body seemed to wince, having heard her thoughts. The thoughts continued as Sybil thrashed in the creature’s arms, trying to escape, to find him, save him—

*Death?* the creature said, with a twitch. One of its legs grabbed Sybil, tightly. Sybil continued flailing and thought the word, over and over.
Its legs wrapped around Sybil, even tighter, until her limbs grew numb. The creature scraped its leg across the not-dirt. Sybil bristled at the next sounds, delivered more quietly than any prior:

_We do not understand this concept._

~~~

The human continued to cry out as Alirgahn kicked its legs. This human was smaller than Loopytoo, though it screamed just as loudly as he had screamed, and it barely moved, just continued to lie there.

“Don’t help this guy,” Loopytoo said.

“I helped you, Loopytoo, and I will help ‘this guy’.”

“Not while I’m here,” Loopytoo said. “I’ve seen this too many times—“

“That’s where I’m going,” Alirgahn said, “which means you’re going there, too.” Its face was slightly hot, and all the screaming was making its ears pound. More pain. It truly despised it.

Loopytoo shook his head, then said, “I’ll risk the water.” And in a flash, before Alirgahn could stop him, Loopytoo pushed himself back into the ocean.

His body hit the water with a splash, and his face popped back up, covered in hair.

“Loopytoo!” Alirgahn shouted.

“I’m fine,” Loopytoo responded. “Like I said, my raft’s around here, somewhere.”

“Loopytoo, I advise you to get back on our slab.”

“I’m not risking another person.”

“If you sink, you might not get back up.”
Loopytoo wrinkled his forehead. “Lay off the water, all right? Thanks again for picking me up, but maybe stop doing that, yeah?” With that, he dove under water, kicked his legs, and swam.

“Loopytoo?” Alirgahn said, but the human paid it no mind.

*Risk another person?* Alirgahn thought, as its foot rubbed against the metal.

Alirgahn continued to watch Loopytoo swim away. There were no rafts, no logs nor inflatables, in sight.

*I hope he doesn’t sink. What a terrible thing to try to rise again.*

With that thought, Alirgahn remembered the other human, who was also at risk of sinking. Alirgahn turned toward this human, who still lay on his back, his center dipping beneath the waves.

Even with Loopytoo’s warning, Alirgahn knew it must greet this human. And then, it must help him, learn from him, do good by him; that was its specie’s creed.

Quickly, Alirgahn approached the human, legs kicking against the waves. Soon, it was close enough to see details of his face—unlike Loopytoo, whose hair had been brown, this human’s hair was paler. Closer to the hair of Alirgahn’s transfer-body, which fell over its shoulders. This human was smaller than Loopytoo, too, much smaller, with tiny dots on his face. Alirgahn scanned the water, saw its reflection—did it have dots as well?

The human caught sight of Alirgahn. He tried to say something, but the two sounds together were incomprehensible. Was the human introducing himself? Asking for help? Perhaps commenting on the weather—a typical topic, according to Alirgahn’s research.
The human continued to speak, lips falling beneath the water’s surface, creating bubbles. What a funny thing, those bubbles were, but the human did not sense the humor. His eyes grew wide. He thrashed. His head dipped lower, and he began to fall.

Alirgahn paddled beside the human, tried to lift him up. “Grab my fingers,” it said, but the human grabbed Alirgahn instead, yanked down, pulling Alirgahn beside him.

The human’s face rose above the water’s surface. Eyes wild. Arms thrashing as he grabbed Alirgahn tighter.

“Help me,” the human sputtered, and Alirgahn tried to grab the metal. Its fingers slipped.

It tried to remember its training, its research—floating, CPR. *Humans are 60 percent water*—but instead, it thought back to the shapeshifter planet. The human’s eyes were the same as the creature’s—the creature that had hid, and then hissed. Alirgahn had only meant to help it.

The shapeshifter had looked worried. Frantic. And when a member of Alirgahn’s species grew worried, the best thing to do was to yank off a limb. So much stress in a limb. Alirgahn had grabbed the creature, and that’s when the creature had hissed, and that’s when Alirgahn started shrinking.

It knew not to do this to humans, not now that it had researched pain.

The sensation—terror—filled Alirgahn as the human grabbed its arms; Alirgahn fought back, tried not to go under, because how would it get back up? Would it be discharged from this mission, too? Already, it had not sufficiently helped Loopytoo, even though it had tried. But how could it? Human bodies didn’t live in water—Alirgahn had barely studied water.

“Help me,” the human gurgled once more, as his head dipped beneath the surface.

“I’m trying,” Alirgahn said, but in truth, it was trying not to sink with the human, trying not to fail again.
Bubbles replaced the human’s hair, and the human continued falling, falling. A sharp tug on Alirgahn’s midcenter, then its leg—the human, pulling it down.

Alirgahn frantically flailed its limbs. It tried to stay upright, but the human tugged harder, firmer. Alirgahn’s mouth opened, trying to apologize, but instead, it filled with water. It spit, tried to get rid of the slime, the wetness, but the water continued to flow; it entered its head, and Alirgahn blurred.

Was this sensation also part of pain?

The loss of color, the cold?

It had never felt a sensation like this—not the loss, nor the ice, nor the ache. But beneath everything else was the look in the eyes, the terror, as if something were waiting at the bottom of the water. Alirgahn would not find a way back up; it would sink, and it would cry out for help, but no one would be there to hear.

As the dead human fell to the ocean floor, arms clinging to Alirgahn, it finally understood: it couldn’t help anyone. It was too late. The humans could not be saved.
Wrinkles break out on Monica’s forehead the morning of her 17th birthday. She tries pressing the folds to make them smoother. She buys ointment, and she uses a roller, and she’s only prevented from using an iron because the metal’s too hot; she doesn’t want her skin suffering burns on top of the creasing.

When she’s 18, she sees a doctor. He says he can fill the spaces and make everything flat, but it’ll cost her. It’ll cost a lot.

She tells him to do it, and so he does.

When she’s 30, new wrinkles appear, this time on the sides of Monica’s eyes. Crows feet, and she thinks, *Old crow*. Mirrors become her enemy--she can't pass one without choking, terrified at the reflection staring back--and suddenly, new wrinkles have formed on her neck, bunching together like rolls of fat. She thinks the neck is a strange place for wrinkles, so she starts wearing turtlenecks during the summer. The fabric feels just as ugly. Her body begins to burn.

She returns to the doctor and asks him to fix her. He says it will cost her, and so it does.

Ten years go by without any incident. Monica’s skin remains smooth and soft. She starts to think the treatment has worked, until one morning, she wakes up unable to remember her loved ones’ faces. Unable to remember their names. She’s forgotten everyone from the past but her doctor, so she returns to his office, perplexed, and asks him what he’s done.

“I removed the wrinkles, all the wrinkles,” he answers, and Monica suddenly realizes that she knows nothing about this doctor, nothing about his treatment. “Some doctors offer temporary solutions,” he continues. “I offer something more permanent.”

He says "permanent" like it's some prestigious award. Monica doesn't remember being in the running. She doesn't remember asking the doctor to strip her of anything but the cracks in her
skin, but she can’t bring herself to care, because sadness causes frown lines. She can’t bring herself to worry, or the lines of her forehead might reappear.

And yet, vaguely, she remembers a husband. A daughter. A friend from work, a friend from her childhood. She remembers the doctor saying that his treatment would cost her, cost her dearly.

“I didn’t want this,” she says, but suddenly, she’s unsure.

She thinks of her past imperfect skin.

“You will never get another wrinkle,” the doctor says. “You will never age a day.” He points to his own face, which sags, and twists, and squirms. "Would you want to go back to this?"

At that, Monica almost smiles, but she doesn’t, because smiles could lead to dimples. Dimples could lead to wrinkles. Her inability to smile nearly makes her frown, but it doesn’t; she’s paid too much for perfect skin to consider marring it.

She tries to think back on her friends, her family, but their faces are growing grey. Even the wrinkles in her brain have been smoothed; she will never feel anything new, gain any memories. She will never wrinkle again.
When the first finger fell off Jane’s hand, she attributed the loss to old age. People lost plenty with time (their hearing, their temper, their minds) so why not a pinkie—and when her middle finger fell off soon after, Jane thought, well, why not two fingers? On the day that she lost her ring finger—the one with Olly’s diamond, pink and round—she began to think something was wrong. By then, the skin around her shoulder had loosened, and her arm dangled as if dislocated; the limb was steadily detaching itself from her body, taking the bone, the blood. Everything.

In her right hand, which was still intact, Jane grasped her phone and called her doctor. Not her medical doctor; her psychiatrist. Ring, ring, and then, a voice:

“Doctor Harraty’s office,” said a woman. “Please hold.”

“Wait!” Jane said. “It’s an emergency.”

“If you have an emergency, please call—“


The woman on the other line didn’t respond. For a moment, Jane wondered if she’d hung up, but before Jane could redial, the woman sighed. Her voice came out flat as she asked, “Which finger?”

Jane answered quickly, far too worried about her injuries to question the woman’s own question. “The pinkie. And then, the middle one. And most recently I lost my -“

“Multiples?”

Jane blinked. “Excuse me?”
“Your fingers. You’ve lost more than one?”


Papers shuffled on the other line, and Jane could imagine the woman—likely short, frizzy hair, a frown—looking for something, tearing her desk inside and out to find it. As the sound continued, tiny bubbles filled Jane’s stomach, popping like cysts. She rubbed her left index finger and thumb together. Finally, the shuffling sounds stopped, and the woman got back on the phone. “I’m scheduling you for a 3:50 appointment,” she said. “Can you get over here in 10 minutes?”

Jane looked at the clock—an old, dusty clock on an old, dusty wall—then looked at her left hand. If I can drive like this, Jane thought.

“Yes,” she answered. “Thanks for—“

Beep.

With her wobbly thumb, Jane hung up, too.

#

The ride to the doctor’s office was surprisingly easy. Feet were more important to driving than hands, and even though Jane’s ankles rolled in their sockets, she still maintained command of her toes. Her fingers, of course, were less helpful, and as she pulled into the parking lot, the loose thumb of her left hand slipped from the steering wheel. She nearly crashed into the large, grey building. Instead, she stuttered to a stop and walked up to the property; her stomach filled with more bubbles, and something clenched against her heart.

The waiting room of Doctor Harraty’s was large and dark. An unsettling room without posters or paintings. Haunted, Jane secretly thought, ever since what had happened to Olly—her
Olly—by the double doors. She’d been there that day, waiting for Olly to finish his appointment. She would never forget his face.

“Keep it together”, he’d said, and he’d laughed—laughed like it was the funniest joke, like it was something he’d never heard before, or heard too often. His face had been loose and grey, and his blue eyes had widened as his laughter grew.

Jane walked up to the receptionist desk. There, a small woman with frizzy hair—the one from the phone, most likely—told Jane not to worry about signing in, but to go directly to the patient room.

“Doctor Harraty’s waiting to see you,” she said.

Jane thanked her, then walked past. The woman’s eyes lingered on Jane’s left hand.

#

Doctor Harraty had hair like a snowstorm—white wisps scattered around his head with thinning grey debris. His eyes were packed tightly in his head, leaving almost no white, only pupil and iris. His smile was worst of all: two red lines, layered and flat.

“Hello, Jane,” he greeted, as Jane entered his office. “How can I help you today?” Before she could answer, he looked at her hand. “Ah, that’s happened, has it?”

“Doctor Harraty,” Jane began, “I don’t know what’s wrong, but I’m—“

Jane took a step forward, and her ankle rolled. Her foot slipped from under her with an icy Crack. She fell to the floor, thrusting her hands to soften the landing, but her left hand hit hard, hit with a Thwack, and her thumb flew off, straight at the doctor.

He caught the thumb like she’d thrown him a baseball, then placed it in his jacket pocket.

Jane looked at her hand, the hand that had nothing left but a pointer finger. Each of the knuckles was red and raw, and the joint that had attached to her thumb was bleeding tiny red
tears. She rose the hand to her mouth and sucked. The flesh stung, like she’d been punctured, and the popping in her stomach continued. Grew hot. *Boiled.*

“You really should bandage that,” Doctor Harraty said as he extended his hand, intent on helping her rise. With her right fingers, Jane pushed herself up. She stared at the doctor’s own hand, completely intact.

“Doctor, what’s happened to me?”

Doctor Harraty stroked his chin, using the same hand he’d extended. “Have you adhered to your treatment?”

“Of course.”

“How often?”

“Twice a night,” said Jane.

The doctor leaned closer—so close, in fact, that Jane could smell his sweat. Doctor Harraty smelled of expiration, like roadkill fried by the sun.

“Show me.”

Jane bent forward. She reached beneath her shirt, crawling her remaining fingers up her spine. She stopped midway up her back at a metal pole—a pole that created a tiny tent on the back of her clothing. The pole was affixed between two of her vertebrae, and it connected to a metal key, which she turned. Once, then twice.

“Oh, don’t do that,” Doctor Harraty said, but it was too late: Jane turned once more. The metal clicked and churned, and something cold blasted down Jane’s spine, then rushed through the rest of her body.

As always, the effect was immediate. First, Jane’s stomach relaxed. The bubbles didn’t pop, they simply flattened, filling her with ease. Then, her heart beat slowed. The clenching
stopped, and Jane felt light. She stood upright, then turned to Doctor Harraty. She smiled; he did not smile back.

“Twice a night,” Jane repeated. “I wind myself then go to bed.” As she spoke, her left arm sagged. She looked at her shoulder, where weblike threads of skin held the arm in place. She shrugged, and the arm sagged farther.

She looked at her hand—the unbroken right hand. All her fingers remained, but the pointer was crooked.

Doctor Harraty didn’t speak, not at first. When he found his voice, it was low and quiet: “How often do you really do this?”

Jane laughed. “Ok, you got me.” She shrugged again. “I don’t know.”

Doctor Harraty took a step back. His face had grown grayer and older. Sagging, just like Jane’s arm. “When I installed the key, I told you the consequences.”

“That you did,” Jane responded, and she laughed again. She didn’t know why. “Wind once for relief, twice for the hard days. No more.” She snorted. “And not too often.”

The doctor had been clear in his warning. Both times.

Doctor Harraty shook his head. “This treatment was meant to ease your emotions, not delete them. All of your emotions are bubbling under your skin, trying to force their way out.” He pointed to Jane’s mangled hand.

“I know,” Jane said. “I know.”

The doctor sighed. He leaned against the wall, and what he said next came out even quieter: “Did you do this on purpose?” He didn’t look at Jane as he said this, and Jane had to wonder if this was the first time he’d asked someone.
For a moment, Jane stopped laughing. For a moment, her heart beat faster, too fast—painfully. But then, it slowed, and the relief returned. She brought a hand to her mouth, because the laughter was about to come back, but she raised the wrong hand, the one fingered hand, and oh, wasn’t that funny?

Jane didn’t know if she’d wound herself too much intentionally. She didn’t know if, last year, Olly had done this to himself, either. If Doctor Harraty had said, “Wind once,” and once hadn’t been enough, because Olly had been the doctor’s first patient. The first to undergo his treatment.

Experimental. That’s what Doctor Harraty had called it, and that’s what Olly had told Jane the day he’d come home with a large metal pole in his back and asked her to help him wind it.

“Why do you need this?” Jane had asked, and Olly had gestured around them. At their home—broken, dirty furniture with no photos of children, friends, even dogs—at their age—new wrinkles on faces, under eyes, on hands—at their relationship—held together by the same weblike threads, what else? Her love?—and she’d understood, and she’d felt it, too.

Maybe that’s why, when she’d lost the first finger, she’d told herself, “That’s normal.” It was normal. Normal for her. Normal for Olly. Normal for a chance at normal, because without winding, the emotions came. But with winding, too much winding—what then?

Jane looked at her arm. The skin hung like melted cheese, and bone peeked through her muscle. It wasn’t painful, but oh, it hurt. Jane looked away, but that didn’t help—she could still hear the ripping. She still smelled the iron.
Jane’s stomach rolled, and her heart beat faster, and she reached for the metal pole inside her. The doctor stepped forward, tried to stop her, but she pushed him away—pushed with her good hand—and ran.

In the hallway, her heartbeat surged. Beads of sweat ran down her neck, down her back, then down her legs. Her face was hot, and her legs were cracking, and she remembered her husband, remembered it all.

She’d seen the same thing last year with Olly. Her Olly, coming out of the office. Olly, staring at her with rabid eyes, breathing heavily like he was burning, but laughing, unable to stop.

(Was Jane laughing? Yes, she was).

Her Olly, slowly becoming undone—first, an eye, a big blue eye, and then his teeth, and next, his knees. There was no reason to the order; no reason why it was happening that day and not earlier, when they’d had an argument—something about nothing, she couldn’t remember—or the day before when their bank account had frozen, or the day before that when he’d found a bump, a menacing bump, on the back of his left shoulder, felt the bubbles.

“Nurse!” Doctor Harraty shouted, as he had shouted last year. Shouted too late. Because whatever had caused Olly’s undoing the doctor had been unable to fix.

Maybe for you, it will help, he’d told Jane. Experimental. But the emotions—it helps.

Jane kept running, right past the nurse, straight toward the double doors where Olly—

Her Olly—

The spot where—

Olly’s body gone Olly gone My Olly
Jane grabbed the pole attached to her back, and she tried to yank it, dislodge it. It stayed. No other choice, she turned it again, then again, then again, until her left arm fell to the floor with a *Clunk*, until three of the fingers on her right hand fell beside it, until blood dripped down her back, down her legs, her feet, which gave way from under her, caused her to fall, caused her body to break and crumble, to pop, as every bit of her burst from the pressure, leaving nothing but a smear on the carpet, the sound of her laughter, until her throat bubbled over, and then, was silent.
THE CURE

It awakens to shadows and muffled voices, to cold hands holding it down as something sharp stabs against its skin.

*No veins... Like sludge... it’s tearing.*

The voices grow sharper, as does the pain in its arm as the hands continue to prod and poke. Its skin slides from its bones, dripping on the table like wax. Yet, it barely feels any pain. At least, not over the burn in its stomach.

*Try a finger,* says a voice, high-pitched and tense.

*No fingers left,* says another voice, this one low and angry.

*The other arm?*

Its left arm throbs, and the right one tenses. Quickly, its right arm grows as sore as the first, and its mouth opens into a scream. It is quiet and guttural, weak. Yet still, it frightens the doctors.

Those are the shadows: doctors. It doesn’t always know this, not at first, but the longer it’s been here, the more it remembers. Doctors: a chilling word that it dare not say, that it doesn’t think it *could* say, not with half a tongue and a rattling jaw.

*It’s awake!* the small doctor cries. She jumps backwards, and the large doctor slams against its torso to keep it in place. It fights back, but the doctor is heavy, and its own body cracks against the man’s weight. It doesn’t stop moving, it’s not sure it can, and the more it moves, the more it breaks.
Grab him! shouts the man, and the small doctor comes forward. She firmly places her hands on its wrists, pressing down until it hears a loud "click." It feels something metallic, and then, she steps back. The large doctor stands up, releasing it.

It tries to lurch forward, but its body is bound to the table. Immobile. As much as it struggles, it cannot reach her.

That should hold him, huffs the female doctor, as her associate nods approvingly. The female doctor scans its body. Now what to do about the sample...

Her eyes flick towards its own, and that’s when it notices, framing her face and dripping down towards her chin. Her hair is straight and oily and blonde—so very familiar, so very like—

Where is the preliminary site? the female doctor questions. She wears glasses. She is well-fed, but not heavy. If it could reach her arms, there’d be skin to spare. But it is bound and cannot reach anyone.

His ankle, says the male doctor. The right one... see these punctures?

The woman bends forward, and its ankle twitches. It can feel its legs, but it cannot move them.

His wife... begins the male doctor. The woman frowns, and the male shakes his head. He sighs, and it can tell that the doctor has a wife of his own, or had a wife, or someone else who mattered.

It’s not sure it remembers those words. It’s heard the doctors say them, but what do they mean? Someone who mattered. Something that mattered.

It needs to eat; that’s all that matters.

This should do it, the male doctor continues, and it feels more pressure at the base of its foot. The pressure slides up towards its stomach, then all the way to its skull. Its eyes swarm with
tears as they roll around in its head, attempting to dislodge themselves, to poke holes through its brain and—

And—

*I think he’s coming around*, one of the doctors says, but you cannot tell which—you cannot concentrate. The pressure, you might explode, *so heavy*—it only seems to be building, and you don’t think you’re breathing.

Breathing? *Breathing*. Were you—

It lies. Or rather, its memories do. Flashes of viscera intersecting with segments of time: a woman, braiding her yellow hair; a dead-woman, tripping over its own intestines; a woman raising her wrist, revealing teeth marks.

It no longer has a concept of past or future. It understands “now” as a long procession of finding, securing, and indulging in food. The doctors call this natural, a fault of going Not-Cured for so long. It isn’t at fault, it’s a victim, too.

“Lizard brain, that’s all you were,” the male doctor says. Or said, or will say. “We had to turn the rest back on, and voila, we did it! It’s like unlocking a reel you didn’t know was filming.”

It doesn’t understand the doctor’s words. Its returned memories offer no clarity, no order: the braiding, the tripping, the bite marks. The bite marks, the tripping, the braiding. Sometimes, a thin man prone on his back flashes by, eyes wide as he struggles against its weight. Or a boy in a tree, saying, “You can’t climb this. No! You can’t climb this. No, don’t climb this!” as it dug its nails into the bark. An older woman clutching her half-torn arm, limping away on her half-torn ankle. Pleading, “Don’t do this Jason. Jason, stop!” as it attacks her, yanks her leg.
“Four,” the male doctor tells the woman doctor. “That’s all our specimen seems to remember.”

And later, earlier:

“Fourteen unique victims,” the woman doctor says, as they finish clearing its stomach contents, a heap of undigested meat and hair. “Good for you!” she tells it, smiling. “One more, and you’d be ineligible.”

It doesn’t understand numbers. Numbers make even less sense than time. Why fourteen should be considered good while fifteen is bad. Why four have come back to memory while the rest remain hidden from its not-quite lizard brain, hidden from whatever other animal the doctors have found.

It does understand the concept of more. More tests, always more tests.

More food, always more.

You inch your hands down, balling your fingerless palms together to make them smaller, to make them slide out. But no matter how much you pull, you are trapped. There is no escape from this room, no escape from your body.

The blonde hair grows closer, and you remember seeing it on the floor, crawling towards you, grabbing your thigh.

His face... says the female doctor. She touches the skin beneath your eye, gently, like she’s approaching a wounded animal. She frowns, then turns her head to her companion, and eagerly, you take your chance.

Her mouth grows wide as your own clenches onto her hand, biting down so hard that several teeth embed themselves into her skin. She tugs but you refuse to release; she tastes
delicious, and you are so hungry. You’ve tasted brunettes, you’ve tasted redheads. And quite
often, you’ve enjoyed grey-haired elders. But blondes hold a sweet spot in your heart, in your
decaying entrails. Blondes are what gave you your appetite.

“Do you remember this photo?” the male doctor asks, or asked. In his hands is a framed
group of people, each smiling. It doesn’t know what’s going on in the photo. It remembers the
word balloons. Another word, present.

A thin man. A young, healthy boy. An older woman, all limbs intact.

A blonde woman. A man beside her.

There are others in the photo. They aren’t as bright.

“The people in this photo—who are they?” The doctor points to each person, lingers on
the man holding hands with the blonde.

You don’t respond. You don’t think you can.

The braiding; the tripping; the bite marks.

“Who are they?” he asks again, and another flash comes, so intense you begin to scream.

Lizzie crawling toward you. Lizzie snapping. You shouting her name, her bit-wrist
covered by bandage.

Tommy screaming, “What happened to mom—“

It’s these moments that are hardest. The moments when you recognize your brother, your
son, your mom. The moments you remember Lizzie. When you’re no longer trapped within your
lizard brain, but fully conscious of the world outside of it.

That’s when you have to go back. That’s when it’s too much, you have to go under.
You flee to the self that isn’t you, which only remembers segments of what you did. The self that isn’t a self, which feels none of the guilt for what it’s done.

*Sedate him!* the male doctor screeches, and now there are more doctors, all running towards you. Towards it. Metal slides into its body and cold blasts of Cure worm into its bloodstream. It hears screaming, rushing footsteps: the discordant chimes of the world breaking down. It doesn’t smile, nor scowl, nor blink. It simply continues to thrust its head forward and search for food, its expression erased except for the hunger.

A flash. The Cure, in your veins.

They said it would take time—you’d been sick for so long!—and that it was a miracle they could bring you back at all. But miracles were not meant to bite. Miracles were not meant to be broken.

Everything echoes as the Cure pulls you out, as it revives parts of you that have been dead for weeks. You hear fragments that you barely make sense of (*It doesn’t matter that he bit you, we’ll give you the Cure!*) followed by a high-pitched, erratic laughter.

Your vision blurs, but you see the blonde doctor smiling as darkness engulfs you, engulfs her, dissipates. You know she is hopeful, delirious, wrong. Her fear is gone, but it would serve her far better to hold onto that fear and cut off her hand.

Yes, they’ve found a cure. There will be no more zombies, that is true. But what they have instead is not fully human. Not undead, but no longer alive.

Yes, you are flesh and bone. You were dead and now you’re less-dead. You are not well, and you were not saved: you are simply, solely, Cured.
“I'm afraid the results are inconclusive,” the doctor says, as she sits across from Denise and Roger. The couple stares at her, mouths agape.

“Inconclusive? But…” Denise stutters, takes a breath. “This was a pregnancy test.”

The doctor sits back in her too-large chair. She runs her fingers against the desk like she's typing. “It's never happened before,” she admits. “But, here, let me show you, see for yourselves.”

The doctor grabs two large envelopes from her desk drawer, then places them on the table. She opens the first, pulls out a black and white scan, and passes it toward the couple. “This,” she begins, as she points to a tiny dot, mid-center, "was the scan we took five hours ago. And this —" She opens the next folder, pulls out a seemingly identical picture. "This was taken 50 minutes ago."

The couple stares at the photos, left to right, right to left. They fail to eye-spy the difference.

“And?” Roger finally questions. He's loosened his tie; a wad of crumpled paper towels lie in the tin beside him, each doused in forehead sweat.

“Look at the dot,” the doctor says, as she pushes harder in the center. “It's here in the first photo, but not the second.” She sits back in her chair, fingers coming together. She sighs, and the couple stiffens. "That dot, Mr. and Mrs. Ringdale, is your baby."

Tiny pins slide through the couples’ intestines. They look once more at the first photo, then the second, notice the distinct lack of dot in the newest scan. They look at each other, then back at the doctor, then back at the photos. Denise shakes; she closes her eyes.
"Are you saying... this was a miscarriage?" Denise can barely say the word. Not another one, it can't possibly be. Yet, isn't there all the likelihood of a fourth, after a third?

“No, Mrs. Ringdale,” the doctor says, quickly. “My apologies, this is such an unusual—" She clears her throat. “You see, at first I thought that might be the case, or that we missed the baby, needed a different angle. But I tried another scan, and another, and another. And I noticed something unique.” The doctor stands up, walks to Denise. She pulls her stethoscope away from her collarbones. "May I?"

Denise nods (she’d nod at anything, now—she’s skipped the other steps, headed straight to bartering). The doctor bends down, pushes the metal against Denise’s stomach. Denise is utterly silent as the doctor listens. After a few seconds, the doctor removes the metal and stands back up, resheathing the stethoscope around her neck.

"Uh huh,” the doctor finally says. "A loud, clear heartbeat. Just like the last time.” She walks back to her chair, sits down, then continues: “It happened before, five hours ago. And then, fifty minutes ago, it was gone."

Denise touches her stomach. "The heartbeat was gone?"

The doctor nods. "But when the dot returned, the sound came back with it. It happens every time. And your vitals, they change with the presence or absence of the dot. Each time, they—"

Denise shakes her head. “I don’t understand.”

Roger is pacing. Three steps one way, then a turn. The quickness is dizzying, to both him and the women.
“Roger, please stop,” Denise says. Her brown eyes are wet with worry, the heartache of too many past appointments still inside her. She turns to the doctor. “So, you're saying we're pregnant, the baby’s fine, he's just hiding?”

The doctor smiles, but it isn't a kind smile. It's the smile Denise’s friends have offered whenever she's said, “No, we haven't given up. Yes, we're still trying.”

“He's the best damn hider I've ever seen,” the doctor responds. "So good, I'm fairly certain he's gone entirely."

At that, Roger stops moving. "Gone?"

At the same time, Denise speaks: “Gone?”

The doctor points to the second photo, the one where the baby-dot should be, the one where the absence has suddenly become undeniably apparent. "Gone," she says again. “We don't know where. We don't know how. All we know is that when the dot is there, your baby's there. When the dot is gone...” She spreads her hands, drops the not-smile. "Well, when the dot is gone, the baby's gone, too.”

*

“She's a lunatic, that's what she is.”

“Dot's kind of a pretty name, don't you think?”

“We need a second opinion, a damn third opinion.”

“If it's a boy, Dotson, maybe?”

The Ringdales have just arrived home, and Roger has continued his pacing. His shirt is dark along the breast bone, even darker beneath both armpits. He’s starting to smell, and at
intervals, the smell is too much for Denise. She wonders if the sensitivity has to do with the disappearing speck in her belly, a type of sometimes—when the dot is there—pregnancy-induced reaction.

"Honey, why not relax, take a shower?"

"Exploratory surgery. What crock-shit is that?" Roger sweeps his brow, spreading sweat on the wooden floor. "I'm telling you, she's a lunatic."

"I know, hon," Denise answers, as she lifts a hand to cover her nose. But, truthfully, she disagrees. Truthfully, she loves the doctor.

This is the first time a doctor has confirmed their pregnancy, this far in. And, even with the strange addendum, the fact remains that the baby is there. Sometimes. But sometimes is more than never, and sometimes is something that Denise can work with. In spite of the doctor’s wording, a disappearing baby isn't the same as a baby gone.

She has other reasons for her belief. Though she hasn't told Roger, didn't believe it was possible, so few weeks in, Denise has felt the baby move. And at night, she dreams about the baby, talks to him, asks how long he’ll grow within her. Her child has shown her falling leaves, dyed red and orange. An Autumn baby, which seems far too early, but just the right time.

Just as Denise touches the skin of her nose, the nausea in her stomach stops. Confused, she touches her belly. She stiffens. "Roger," she says. "He’s doing something."

“And if she thinks for a second that we'd ever consider --"

"Roger," Denise says, as she massages her belly. "Come feel it."

Roger stops pacing. He freezes. Slowly, he begins to thaw. He walks over, extends his hand. He waits a minute, then says, “I don't feel anything.”
"I know hon, I --" Denise gags. The smell hits her again, harder this time, and she wretches, nearly throws up. At the same time, Roger smiles, his hand tightening slightly against her stomach.

"He's kicking," Roger says. "Our baby is -- isn't it too early for that?" All at once, he removes his hand. His face crumples. "It must be gas, or swelling, or something." He wipes his hand against his pants, turns his eyes toward the ground instead of his wife.

Denise shakes her head. She massages her stomach."It's our baby. Our baby's in there."

* *

The rest of Denise's pregnancy is uneventful, except for the sporadic nausea and sensitivity. But, really isn't that common in any pregnancy? And isn't the unusual pacing — the early kicking, the swollen ankles— couldn't that all be normal, too? They decide to see a different doctor, one who assures them that the disappearing dot is a matter of faulty photography. In most of this doctor's photos, the speck is there, growing and changing.

But, it's not always there. "Faulty photography," is the answer again. Otherwise, the absence goes unacknowledged, until Denise's stomach is the size of a basketball, the life within her no longer a mere speck, but a mango-sized child. No photo should be able to misplace it, and yet, several come back as nothing but darkness—the baby hiding so well, it can't be found.

"I don't understand it," their new doctor says. "We must be in need of a new machine."

"That must be it," Roger agrees. Denise touches her stomach, searches for kicking.
That same day, the doctor calls them back in and takes another photo. And this time, the baby is clear. So is the feeling of fullness in Denise's stomach, the sense of warmth, the tiny kicks.

On the day of Dot's birth — because Denise insisted, promised Roger he could name the next baby, because now they're hopeful there could be a next — the couple enter the hospital room. Denise lies down. Her contractions haven't been contractions, exactly. Several minutes of pain, then hours of relief. Back and forth, for most of the day.

The nurses check her cervix. They check it again. They look at her vitals, look at her patient history. It's early October, and that can't be right, because the baby is a full 4 months early.

And yet, everything about the baby seems fine. It's the right size, and it's moving. Its heartbeat is steady. Everything about Denise seems fine, too. Her vitals are stable. Her own heartbeat is strong.

“There must be a typo in your medical chart," the nurse says. She immediately covers her mouth. "I shouldn't have said that! But, there's really no else explaining it. This is the healthiest baby I've ever seen.”

The nurse checks Denise's cervix again. She calls the doctor. And just like that, they're ready to begin. The doctor stands in front of her — it' the same doctor who's helped them with Dot since the first doctor — and asks how she's feeling, doesn't wait for an answer.

The doctor says the baby's crowning. But just as quickly, he claims his nurse had made a mistake. Denise is unsure if it's standard for this to happen, simultaneously positive that it's not. The mistake happens again, shortly after, then a third time, causing the doctor to drop his
composure and scowl. But the fourth time, the head stays visible. The doctor tells her to push, reminds her to breathe.

Less than thirty minutes later, Dot enters the world. She's pink and hairless and crying. The nurse hands her to Denise, who holds her close, embracing the feeling of skin against skin, of a first child who is also their fourth child. Their here-baby, out in the world.

Roger walks beside her, strokes Dot's arm, caresses her cheek, and breathes in her hereness.

"She's beautiful," Roger says.

“She's ours,” Denise replies. She holds her baby up high and puts her head against Dot’s chest, listening to the steady beat.

As Denise stares at her new daughter—as she thinks of hair ribbons and soft toys, pink walls and pierced ears—she tries not to ruminate on Dots’ femaleness, how it comes as a surprise. The baby in Denise’s dreams was always a boy. She’d watched him running, kicking up leaves. They’d never asked the baby’s sex, there had been too much else to be concerned with, but Denise had always thought she’d known.

Too quickly, the nurse is asking for the baby back and checking her vitals again. Nothing is wrong with them, but the doctor needs to be sure, just in case the baby is actually premature. After much prodding, Denise hands her baby back; she takes Roger's hand in place. The nurses whisk the baby to another room, promising she'll return shortly.

That first hour of Dot's life is uneventful.

The next hour, Dot is kidnapped.

Denise is still in the hospital bed, Roger sitting beside her, still thinking of dolls and burgeoning tea parties. The nurse runs in, without warning, frantic.
“Where is she?” she questions.

“Who?” Roger asks. The nurse turns white, runs out of the room.

A wrinkle forms on Roger's forehead. "What was that all about?"

Denise touches her stomach. She's suddenly cold. “Can you open the door, Roger?” she asks.

Still confused, Roger obliges.

“She was in the crib. I put her in the crib,” they hear from outside. “She's not in the crib. Where is she?”

“We'll find her. Someone else must have picked her up, must have --"

“I turned around for a second, and she was gone."

At that word, Denise sits up. Gone. She throws her legs over the bed.

"Denise," Roger says, "What are you --"

"It's our baby. They can’t find our baby."

Two hours post-pregnancy, Denise is up and walking, dragging the IV behind her. She stops thinking of toys, thinks only of the word, on repeat: gone. Gone. Gone.

“Denise, you need to lie down, I'm sure it's not --"

Denise walks past him, out the door. She’s not sure where Dot is, nor where she should be. Where do they keep the healthy maybe-preemies? But something guides her down the hallway, then to the left, then to the right, another left.

(Later, Roger will claim there were signs leading to the NICU. If there were, Denise didn't see them.)

She rounds the corner, picks up her pace. Roger trails behind her, still calling her name.

They arrive at the glass walled NICU. Denise peers inside, searches for Dot.
Tiny babies fill every crib, each staring up at the sky and crying. Alone except for each other, their parents still in their own beds, or maybe at home. Some of the babies are hooked to machines, and others stare up at the ceiling, flexing their arms. So many are crying, but Denise barely hears them, her mind still blaring that one, awful word: Gone.

Roger touches her arm. She yanks it away. He touches again, then points with his other hand. And there, at the station farthest away, Denise spies new words, better words: Ringland, Dot. A tiny pink hand pokes above the crib. It’s like she's waving, saying hi. Denise can’t fully see her, but she can feel her again, a warmth in her stomach. A steady beat.

“I told you she was safe,” Roger says. Denise sighs, too relieved to argue. But a small part of her wants to argue, because doesn't he realize what nearly just happened? She looks toward him, but he doesn’t look back, eyes glued to their waving newborn. “She’s here,” Roger says, refusing to blink, cradling his arms.

Footsteps reach their ears, and Denise turns around, locks eyes with the frantic nurse. It’s the same one who’d said, “the chart must be wrong.” It’s the same one who can’t contain her honesty. She's white as a pillow, and she pushes past them, looks through the glass, drops the hunch in her shoulders.

"Thank God,” the nurse says quietly, hand on her chest as she releases a sigh.

* 

That afternoon, Denise and Roger drive home from the hospital, Dot in tow. Denise stares at her the entire ride over. And for the entire ride, Dot remains visible. Denise touches her arms, her face. She nuzzles her close.
Once they're home, Roger grabs the baby carrier. Denise follows and continues to stare. Roger is glowing, as if it’s him, not her, who's just given birth. Dot is cooing, crying, oblivious.

For the rest of that first day, nothing happens. Roger finishes setting up the crib (he pulls out the unicorn bedding instead of the robots), and Denise nurses Dot, feels the softness of her tiny hand, rocks her, breathes in her hair. They’re sitting in the living room, just the two of them, and the tv is off, and the light is off, too. And the fireplace is off, but Dot is so warm, and so loud, and so bright, and so there.

But, Denise is exhausted, she's just had a baby. The physical toll on her body leaves her dizzy. And once night falls, Roger is supporting her up the stairs. She doesn’t remember him grabbing her. She doesn’t remember him walking her here.

“Dot?” she manages to say.

“She’s here. Don’t worry, she’s here.”

“I need to be with her.” In spite of her weighted-blanket body, Denise turns around. She nearly stumbles backwards.

“She’s here,” Roger repeats, as he guides Denise’s hand toward the banister. Confused, she grabs it, then continues to walk, her mind still on Dot, on her baby’s heartbeat.

Once they reach their bedroom, Roger helps Denise into bed. She closes her eyes—she rests them, only resting—until she wakes with a start to darkness. Something grips her heart, and she looks toward the end of the room, toward the unicorn crib, barely visible.

She jumps out of bed; Roger rustles beside her. She peers inside the crib.

Dot is there.

*
The first incident of "I misplaced the baby" doesn't happen for another week. This time, it's Roger who was watching Dot, one of the few times Denise isn’t there.

She’d gone to the bathroom. She’d tried to go quick. Every moment away was a moment when something might happen. And in this case, she’s all too right—Roger runs into the room, eyes wild, his hair standing up like he’s been electrified.

“I can’t find her,” he tells Denise, who swallows her toothpaste, too cold to spit it out. She shakes off the feeling, looks at her husband.

“Where was she?”

“The crib. She was in the crib.”

The two run to their room. Denise gets there first. She looks over the railing. Dot isn’t there.

Denise scans the room, looks for any signs. She already knows that she won’t find any. Dot is far too young to be moving on her own. And besides, Dot’s disappeared before.

Roger laughs. “You know, I’m sure she’s crawled out. I’m sure she’s fine.” He wipes back his damp hair. “Where else could she go?”

Denise doesn’t answer. She runs out of the room. “Dot!” she calls. And then again, “Dot!”


“You don’t know that.”
“Just jitters, that’s all. It has to be.” His voice shakes. Whether from the stairs or nerves, Denise can’t tell.

“Dot!”

“I’m sure she’s fine.”

“Dot!”

“Denise, you have to calm—“

It happens quickly. It’s all in slow motion. She slaps him, slaps him hard.

Her hand stays mid-air; he raises his own to his face. “Denise,” he begins, “why did you—“

From the room beside them, something moves. And then, she hears it: crying. She’s already forgotten him. Already smiling. Already crying herself as she runs toward the kitchen.

She bursts through the doorway, looks around. Roger follows behind her, slowly. And there in the corner, crying, oblivious, Dot thrashes her arms, her tiny eyes squeezed shut.

Denise crouches down. She picks up her baby. She holds her close, and gently rocks her.

“How did she get here?” Roger questions. His hand’s still on his face. He lets it drop.

*  

They never discuss the slap. They don’t discuss how Dot went missing. Once or twice, Roger begins to talk about it. But just as quickly, he stops himself, turns to some other task, one with an answer.

*
Over the years, it happens again. Then again. The miraculous disappearing baby becomes the disappearing toddler, then child, then teen. Most times, it’s easy to pretend something else is happening, that they’ve simply misplaced her, or she’s in some other room. But other times, the truth is obvious. And yet, Roger insists on pretending.

“Gone,” Denise remembers.

“Here,” her husband insists.

When she’s four, they enroll Dot in kindergarten. Denise doesn’t want to send her. On the first day, she holds Dot’s hand and walks her to the building. She stops. The doors are glass, like the hospital doors.

Roger stands beside her, holding Dot’s other hand. “She has to go. All kids go.”

“But Dot isn’t like all kids.” She grips Dot’s hand tighter. Dot’s own hand remains limp.

Roger sighs. “All parents say that, you know? And it’s true, but that’s all the more reason to send her. You can’t baby her, can’t keep her confined. How’s that going to affect her when she’s 30, 40?”

Denise looks at Dot, at her tiny brown curls, her deep green eyes that resemble her father’s.

“I want to go, mommy,” Dot says with a smile. Slowly, Denise stops squeezing.

That afternoon, Denise almost feels calm. She hasn’t heard anything to make her worry, and it’s not like Dot disappears all the time. She’d be in her room one moment and outside the next, play in her playpen and suddenly be in the bathroom, sure. But, the instances aren’t as frequent as they could be. And Roger still insists they’re not disappearance.
He’s at work now, filing through papers, sending emails. Denise stopped working, though she hadn’t planned to. She’s stopped seeing her friends, rarely goes out, and when she does, it’s always with Dot beside her.

Just as she’s about to sit down and eat lunch, the phone rings. Her chest tightens. Before the principal starts talking, she knows what’s happened:

“We can’t find your child Ms. Ringdale,” the principal says. “We’ve been put on lockdown. You should come over.”

Immediately, Denise gets in her car. She calls Roger. Straight to voicemail. She’s halfway to the school when she gets another phone call, a shorter message:

“We’ve found her,” the principal says.

Dot had been playing on the swings with all the other children. The playground monitor must have missed her, the principal claims. Still, Denise finishes driving there, walks inside, and demands to take Dot home early.

When Roger returns from work, she tells him what happened. He calls up the school and threatens to sue—just like he’d wanted to sue the hospital, all those years earlier, for scaring his wife so badly.

“We can’t send her back,” Denise says, once he hangs up. She hugs her daughter, and Roger sighs. He walks toward them and opens his arms. He still smells of sweat, always of sweat.

Dot is crying, she might not even know what happened. She keeps asking why she had to come home.

Denise gags, but Roger ignores the noise. He hugs them tighter. “We’ll find her a different school,” he says.
The phone calls continue through the next several grades (“We’re sure she’s here, but can you help us check?” and “Do you know anyone who might try to… well, take her?”). They get so bad, so frequent, that once Dot turns eight, Denise decides to homeschool her. But this doesn't solve the problem entirely. Dot still has friends, still wants to see them. And those friends still want to see her. Often, it’s enough for Dot to have them come over, but soon, they start inviting her out.

At ten, Dot’s invited to her first sleepover. Denise doesn’t want to send her. But just like last time, Roger says she has to go. And just like last time, Dot responds, “I want to.”

Dot packs up an overnight bag, kisses her parents, and she’s out the door, driving away in a stranger’s car. But, she looks so happy to be there; Denise knows better than to feel happy herself.

As expected, the phone call comes later that night. Roger is getting ready for bed, while Denise is drinking coffee.

“What’s wrong?” Denise answers immediately, always certain something will be.

The friend’s mother laughs. It’s a splintery sound. “Oh, nothing. I’m sure it’s nothing. It’s just—“ The mother hesitates, laughs again. “The girls were playing hide and seek, and Dot seems to be a particularly good hider!”

The doctor's words come back to Denise, all those years earlier. “The best damn hider I’ve ever seen.”
She tells Roger what’s happened. He huffs. “I’m going to bed,” he says. He walks up the stairs, doesn’t tell her goodnight, simply closes the door, abandoning her.

Denise gets her purse. She finds her wallet. She doesn’t know what she needs or what will help her, but as she grabs her keys, she receives a text: a photo of Dot lying in her sleeping bag, surrounded by friends.

“All safe and sound!” texts the mother. Denise is torn between thanking her and swearing.

At twelve, Dot is completely her own person. She makes her own bed, mostly. She picks out her own clothes (overalls) and makes her own snacks (peanut butter sandwiches). But, even if she’s her own person, she’s still Denise’s person, in some way. So one night, Denise goes to check on her, watch her baby sleeping. But the covers are on the floor, the light is on. The room is empty. Dot isn’t there.

In a panic, Denise turns on all the lights in the house. She runs into every room. She wakes Roger, and he searches, too, perhaps too drowsy to tell her, “Nothing’s wrong.”

They find Dot an hour later as she returns from the bathroom.

“Wow, mom,” Dot says. “Can’t a girl pee around here?” She’s smiling, but it’s not a kind smile. The type of smile people give Denise when she says, “Early menopause. We didn’t know.”

Denise is too relieved to respond. She simply falls to her knees, sobbing, and hugs her daughter. Dot stares at her; she frowns. She hugs her mom back, but the hug is loose.

Denise walks Dot back to her room, stays outside the door. All too soon, Roger insists they head back to bed. He walks ahead of her, and she follows behind, face still turned toward her daughter’s door.
“We have to do something,” Denise says, as they enter their room.

“Do what?”

“About the disappearing. We have to do something.”

Roger falls into bed. “You can’t worry every time she’s out of your sight. Don’t you want her growing up independent? Capable?”

“I want her growing up safely,” Denise replies. She lies down beside him, far away.

Roger laughs. He shifts closer in bed and puts an arm around Denise’s shoulders. He smells of sweat again, like always, though he hadn’t smelled as strongly when Dot went missing.

“She’ll be safe. I promise you that. How could she not, with parents like us?”

Denise shrugs off his arm—or at least, she tries. It remains firmly around her shoulders. She doesn’t respond, because she doesn’t believe him. She doesn’t believe he believes himself.

*

The final disappearance wouldn’t have happened, shouldn’t have happened, if Denise had stopped it in time. It couldn’t have happened, why did it happen, if not for the stranger. An older boy.

Denise thinks “boy,” but she really means man. She can’t think man, because she doesn’t want to face the truth of her fear. A man could do far worse things than a boy, far worse things to a 17-year-old girl.

Dot had met the boy at a college frat party. She’d been touring colleges, had visited a local one that a few friends already attended. Denise had told her to come back by midnight, but Dot had wanted to escape for a while longer (Roger’s assumption, not the definitive reason). She
had wandered off into one of the fraternity houses, met the boy, and walked away with him. Her friends had called Denise, asked if she’d come home, because they were responsible friends, they couldn’t find her.

The police are called. Posters go up. Fliers pass out, and neighbors bring over meals. Dogs are used to search for her, can't find a trail, then suddenly find it, lose it entirely. Denise thinks of how Dot had once made her own sense of smell so strong, taken that strength, then returned it again.

Roger doesn’t smell like sweat, not while Dot’s missing. Though he’s constantly covered in it, head to toe.

Days go by, and then weeks. More information comes out, but none of it says anything. The boy hasn’t been found. Dot hasn't been found. Two years earlier, the boy had been convicted of assault, leaving his girlfriend with bruises, a fractured wrist.

One morning, Denise wakes up and flips over in bed. Roger is staring at her. He reaches out, then lets his hand drop. He pushes himself into a seating position.

He sighs. He doesn’t look at her. “Why did we let her go on that visit?”

Denise blinks. “I don’t know,” she says. Only, she does know, and Roger does, too. They let her go because they had to—the same reason they let her attend school, or go to sleepovers, or have her own room. They couldn’t keep her, they could only lose her. Could only sit here and wonder, where is she?

The words come out before Denise realizes she’s said them: “I think she's really gone this time.”

Roger looks at his hands. “You’re tired, delirious.”

“I think she's dead," Denise says, more bluntly.
At that, Roger doesn’t respond. He lies back down, turns to the side.

Denise touches her stomach. She doesn't know why. It's been 17 years since Dot was there. She doesn't know why she brings out photos, stares at them, hoping for Dot's return. But seeing anything related to Dot makes it seem like Dot will come back.

She knows this idea isn't really true. She tries to convince herself that it is, that keeping Dot close, in some way, means that Dot is still here. But as more time passes, as Roger grows colder, and the police call off their investigation — as she goes longer and longer without Dot's presence, she can no longer pretend. She can no longer try to deny it.

“We’ll find her,” Roger says. A few weeks later, Roger moves out. And the fliers come down, and the news stops reporting, and even the pictures are no longer enough.

Children go missing. And the parents grieve. Denise understands this, always knew it was possible. And yet, how does any parent’s child go missing?

How does a child stay missing?

All those years earlier, she’d accepted Dot’s tendency to disappear. It was a parent’s job to accept such things of a child. She couldn’t explain it, but she could support it. She could try to understand or at least prepare. Because a disappearing child isn’t the same as a gone child, except when it is, when she never returns.

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