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The Family Arcane

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THE FAMILY ARCANÉ

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Caridad Cole

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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The sincerest of thanks to:
Bradford Morrow and Mary Caponegro;
Benjamin Hale, Teju Cole, and Isaac Marion;
Caroline Petty and Walker Bockley;
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INTRODUCTION

The Family Arcane is growing. Anyone who interacts with the world without all of the cognitive tools to do so, any child trying to understand maturity, any emotionally stunted teenager who doesn't yet understand social norms, anyone who feels like a robot among mankind, any round-headed baby born to a kingdom of cones, anyone who finds the *Coraline* soundtrack to be a perfect life companion, is an Arcane. Members of the family can recognize when they are not yet out of the woods, but that the trees, at least, look familiar. We are willing to brave the howling winds and the wild ocean just to feel the salty sea air. These short stories seek to inspire those with the common fear of being different, and ask the psychological and sociological questions that come up every day but often go unspoken.

I would like to, once again, thank the people who guided me along in this project, and who helped me realize that the real world and the fantasy world can blend seamlessly if you look hard enough. Brad Morrow showed me how to build a mystery with ordinary characters, when to leave the details within the

spaces between words, and how to know when a story has had enough. Mary Caponegro receives special thanks for providing boundless enthusiasm and support when I had none. Ben Hale, from whom I've learned some of the most important rules of writing, has greatly shaped the way I approach fiction.

Thank you, Ben, for telling me early on that my writing was abstract, but for encouraging me to explore the science fiction elements within it. I only knew Teju Cole very briefly, but he told me I was a "capital W" writer, which I will never forget.

Thank you to Isaac, Caroline, and Walker for being the few people who have actually read my writing when you didn't have to. (And a special thank you to Isaac Marion for endless fantasy inspiration and your willingness to befriend a fan.) My parents deserve big thanks for unapologetically raising a family of weird kids. And finally, thank you to my sister for living a life that is just meant to be written down.

Fallen from mother's roof, her roots
 Burnt outlines and dried up scents
 Crackle under the weight of my exploration
 Wanderers of the interregnum
 Slowly-walking shadows trail the hoverers
 They will be lost
 Cast aside by the saddest song I've ever heard
 Brown and grey and green and grey
 Young time and wasted time
 Her roots hold my weak daze until the sadder days have left
 In the dark they fall to pieces
 Soon covered by the heavy softness that follows



C L A U D E

Marie's first job was at the Knotley Industries showroom. She was the youngest employee, and if she were being completely honest with herself, she had no interest in the technology she was selling. She had been able to get the job thanks to high science scores, but she was always unimpressed and just a little bit tired. She wondered who needed a personal robot when television sets were just feet away from the living room couch. She spent most of her shifts dusting chrome, adjusting spotlights, and avoiding customers who were prone to breaking things that were worth more than both of their lives combined.

On the first day of her third week of work, Marie was tasked with preparing and unveiling the newest in robotic technology. It was the sixteenth model of the first generation and it was going to change the world, they told her. She doubted it, and was not looking forward to coming into work two hours early and staying two hours late. She would have to leave school early, which also meant she would have to catch the public bus. It smelled like the

front office secretary Mrs. McCreary, even when she wasn't on it. But Marie would do it with a smile, because she needed the money.

She managed to open the back vault of the showroom, after incorrectly entering the security code a few times. The steel doors were too heavy for one hand, and she had to plant her feet firmly on the floor, lean over, and pull the handles with both arms. They made a scraping sound against the linoleum. It was not a job for one teenage girl, she thought. She looked into the dark room and counted the number of tiny blinking lights in a row, going all the way back into the distance. Sixteen. The one in front was the important one. Marie found the inside light switch and the room lit up with artificial life. She gasped, before remembering her debriefing. The room appeared to contain sixteen identical men, all lined up, but they weren't real. They weren't real, she kept telling herself. She stepped inside and found the important one, number sixteen, and waved her employee identification card in front of its torso. Its eyes began to glow a pale yellow, before flattening out into a more human shade. The remaining figures were still and unblinking, just as Marie had been since booting up the sixteenth. They were dark and deactivated while the humming one gathered information. Marie could hear tiny fans spinning inside the torso, just underneath the restraints. Number sixteen had one strap; the rest were wrapped in chains and locks. She wondered, why restrain inactive robots?

When she came to, the robot was smiling at her. Its eyes, eyebrows, and ears had changed. Marie offered a small smile back. She didn't even know if it could see her.

“You ready to go, Mr. Happybot?” Marie asked it. In the debriefing, they had said to joke with the robot, give it a nickname. It would help it to be more friendly and sociable, and encourage customers to feel more comfortable. It maintained its smile and nodded at Marie.

“I am ready to go, friend.”

Marie picked up a box cutter and began to slide it over the straps. She was a little nervous being that close to it, but kept her composure.

“You are Marie A. of Knotley Industries.” The robot let out a stifling sound that resembled a chuckle. Marie jumped and dropped the blade, dodged its fall. She wiped a bead of sweat off her eyebrow before bending down to find the blade again.

“You’ve got that right. And you, Number Sixteen of Knotley Industries, are very sharp. That’ll come in handy today.” Marie pushed away the pieces of the strap that were dividing the space between them. The robot stepped down to the floor and started bouncing up and down, wrapping its arms around itself. It looked like a cartoon version of someone cold. Marie stared at it and had to laugh.

“The world better be ready for this,” she mumbled. The robot continued chattering its teeth and waggling its eyebrows in distress.

Marie led it out of the dark room and into the bright showroom. She thought about how strange it was to disguise a scientific research facility as a shopping center. She guessed it made it easier for people to accept new and crazy things. Her job was to spoon-feed them. She looked up at the posters

advertising the robot today; it smiled down and looked just as creepy in print. Cameras pointed at the robot also showed its actions in real time across several large monitors in the room. It looked up at itself and moved around to see if the version on the monitors would do the same.

“Is this a birthday party for me?” it asked Marie.

“Birthday party? You know what... it kind of is. And everyone’s coming to it so we better hurry and get you dressed.”

The robot stood at attention while Marie scurried to the far back corner of the room. She looked for the package containing its clothes and rolled her eyes when she saw it was a full suit. She brought it back over to the robot, which stood staring blankly ahead. Marie waved a hand in front of its face and it blinked. Its neutral state was unsettling to Marie, but she took advantage of it to guide it into the suit pants and jacket without having to look it in the eyes. She stuffed its old cotton shirt and pants into the plastic bag.

“You look good, Sixteen.”

Marie’s next task was to arrange the robot on a podium where it could face the storefront windows and wave to the people outside. It looked like a performer on a street corner; the robot was the monkey and Marie was its organ grinder. She stood next to the podium, ready to answer questions if anyone actually dared to come inside. Some children looked up at it with fascination, but their parents looked fearful and ushered them along. Parents didn’t like Knotley Industries, including Marie’s. They were always skeptical of the Next Big Thing and wanted things to stay the same. In a focus group, the

employees learned that the older the person, the less inclined they were to believe in a peaceful technology. They just weren't used to it. Marie's generation was meant to be open to new ideas, but really, Marie was just as skeptical, if not more so. She just didn't say it.

Two children on the other side of the street pointed and screamed exclamations at the robot through the glass. The younger boy grabbed the older girl's hand and dragged her across the street and up to the window, where he then proceeded to bang on the glass in excitement. Marie shook her head at him, but he didn't stop. The girl stood wide-eyed with her mouth agape. Marie went to open the front door for them to enter and she noticed that the boy had an embroidered patch of the Knotley Industries logo on his backpack.

"Hey kids, would you like to meet him? You can tell him your names," offered Marie.

"Wow! I'm Alan! This is Nancy. Is he really real? Is he the new one and everything?" The boy's sister shushed him and told him he was being obnoxious.

"It's okay, really," Marie interrupted, "your brother is right. This is the model that we have decided is ready for the public. He is fully functional."

"What can he do?" asked the girl.

"He can do anything you need him to do. He can be your accountant, your handyman, your tutor, your bodyguard, your doctor, or your best friend," Marie recited the script she had been given. She kind of liked these children.

The girl walked up to the robot, stood very close, and stared at it. She examined its shoes and lifted up the end of its sleeves, revealing its wrists. She dropped the sleeves and watched its shoulders move up and down.

“How do I know that he isn’t... real? He seems real to me,” she asked.

“Well, our models are supposed to be unrecognizable on a crowded street. Everything on his outside should seem as real as you or me, just a little more advanced. But how can you tell, right now, that he’s one of ours?” She nodded and Marie continued, “Look here...”

The robot, on command, bent over at the waist so the three of them could gather in front of its face.

“If you look closely enough, you’ll be able to see... there. Behind his eyes. See the rotating circles just inside of his pupils? Those are two of the hundreds of micro actuators, um, motors, that allow him to mimic human facial responses. In fact, he’s reading your emotions and your ages right now.”

“You, little boy, are seven years old!” it exclaimed.

The children stepped back, visibly less excited.

“Can we leave now?” he asked his sister. The robot made a sad face at them and lifted a hand to wave goodbye. The girl flinched and the robot lowered its hand back down to its side.

Several hours later, Marie was exhausted. People had come and gone, called the robot mean names, poked and prodded it, but hadn’t given any feedback for Marie to report. They had taken photos and attempted to interview

it, but they didn't do anything that indicated they thought of the robot as a person. Marie didn't yet, either, but it was the public's opinion that mattered in the reports. The robot swiveled around on the podium to look at itself in a mirror, a very human thing to do. It looked disappointed. Its eyelids were heavy, its eyebrows downturned, and the corners of the mouth sagged. It tilted its head to one side for an even more disappointed look. Then it faced Marie.

"No one likes me," it said.

"That's not true. Just not everyone understands you right now. But believe me, Sixteen. A lot of people like you. Important people. Hang in there. This may be a long night."

"It is my understanding that every night is the same length."

A small group had gathered in front of the window once again. One woman stared at it curiously. She had grey eyes and a long navy coat with a large fur collar around her neck. It was springtime, but Marie liked her coat nonetheless. She pulled it tighter around herself when the robot caught her gaze. The robot mimicked her and tugged at its suit jacket. Both of their eyes widened. The woman sighed and the robot theatrically raised its shoulders up and down as if it were breathing heavily. She furrowed her eyebrows and entered the showroom.

"Why is he copying me?" The robot and Marie exchanged smiles.

"Maybe he likes you, ma'am. Our Knotley robots are light-hearted and like to have fun."

“Fun, huh? Well, it’s... unsettling. How can you tell it’s light-hearted if it doesn’t have a heart?” Seemingly offended, the robot switched back into its neutral position.

“You’re right. He doesn’t have a typical human heart, but he has so much more. Do you know about our robots, Miss...?”

“Fletcher. And no, I don’t. I mean, I have heard about them, of course. Who hasn’t? But I didn’t expect to see one in person today.” The woman calmed down, but still looked at the robot suspiciously.

“Would you like to sit down with me and learn more about him?” Marie liked this woman, too. She nodded and they dragged chairs over to the podium.

“He is our most advanced model yet, so advanced that we feel he is ready to join society. He is physically indistinguishable from us, but is advanced beyond comprehension. His intellectual capabilities are comparable to our own founder’s. But the thing that really makes Number Sixteen so special is his emotional performance. He is equipped with actuators that allow for natural facial movement as well as realistic emotion recognition.”

The woman cleared her throat and took in the information.

“I’m sorry,” she began, “can you explain a bit more? I don’t really know what you mean. Are you saying that he has emotions? He can feel?”

“No, of course not. He will never be able to feel real emotions himself, but he is able to understand human emotion. He’s sensitive. It’s amazing really,” Marie found herself saying. “This kind of cybernetic success is something this

industry has only been able to dream about for centuries, and here he is, in the silicone flesh.”

The woman stood up and circled around the robot, stopping at its side. She reached up and touched its cheek, pushing the skin up and down. Marie hesitated, wanting to stop her, but didn't.

“He feels so real.”

“I am real.” The woman jumped back, startled.

“I thought he was turned off!”

“He doesn't turn off,” Marie explained. “He simply switches into his default neutral state. When he feels that he is not needed in the current conversation or that human interaction is not necessary—like when the two of us are talking—he becomes neutral. During this time, he is devoid of visible emotion and is able to carry out tasks using only his logic. It's almost like his face... turns off. He's simplified, like the previous prototypes. He doesn't show emotional response because it isn't necessary. He answered you just now because it was the logical thing to do. You are standing very close to him and your voice was directed at him. If you ever need him to be this way, for anything, you can just ask him to enter his neutral state.”

The woman was silent, thinking. She laughed nervously and so did Marie. The robot reactivated its facial actuators to join in. The woman laughed even louder.

“So what's his name then?” She was the first person of the day to ask.

“He’ll respond to anything. When he hears the inflections in your voice that are directed at him, he recognizes it as a name. He’ll respond to the slightest of cues or verbal commands. We refer to him here as Number Sixteen, but you can essentially name him anything you’d like.”

“I want to call him Claude.”

“Okay. Claude. I guess you two are friends now.”

“I guess so,” the woman smiled. “I’ll come back and visit you tomorrow.”

Claude stepped down off of the podium and stood directly in front of the woman. He lifted his arms up to her shoulders to initiate a hug. She hesitated and looked at Marie, who nodded approval.

At the end of the day, Marie drew the curtains in front of the showroom. Once again, she was alone with the robot.

“I really liked Miss Fletcher,” he said. Marie nodded and helped him off the podium. Her final task was to interview him and see if he’d changed after human interaction. They headed to the back where Marie could fill out the paperwork.

“Okay, Sixteen—”

“Claude,” he interrupted.

“Okay, Claude. I’m going to ask you a series of rapid-fire questions and I’ll write down your responses. You know what rapid fire means, right?” Of course he knew, Marie thought. He nodded. “So just answer as soon as you have an answer. Okay? Question one: What day is it, today?”

“Monday.” Marie nodded and wrote it down on the clipboard.

“And, um, what do you look like?”

“I look like you and everybody else.”

“Who styled your hair?”

“My hair was donated and styled by me. I hope it looks like a movie star’s.” Marie blinked once and wrote down the strange answer, then moved on to the next question.

“What do you sound like?”

“I also sound like you, but I have the accent of Mr. Knotley. British, it is.”

Marie smiled.

“Yes, you do have a British accent. It’s very cool. And Claude, what do you feel like?”

“I feel like silicone rubber to the touch. If you press deeper, I feel like I’m vibrating. My actuators are all working together. On the surface, I’m made of soft flesh, but my endoskeleton is hard underneath. I’m soft on the outside and hard on the inside.”

“Tell me about it,” Marie scribbled something in the notes and looked back up. “Do you always say what you’re thinking, Claude?”

“I say everything that is. Everything that is true, of course.”

“What do you think of me?”

“I think you are hiding something. You are hiding the reason you are here instead of at home. You do not like me, Marie. You are only here to avoid

something else.” Marie’s hand twitched and she put down the pen. She didn’t raise her head, she just let it hang.

“What are you talking about?” Marie mumbled. Claude reached out and placed a hand on top of the clipboard, and then pointed to Marie’s stomach. She started to cover it up, but hesitated before dropping her arms back to her side.

“What do you feel like, Marie?”

She thought for a moment and then said, “a failure.”

“Why?”

“You already know, don’t you? That I’m... pregnant.”

“Yes. You will produce small humans who will grow up and do the same. It’s your purpose and therefore cannot be a failure. Why do you feel like a failure?”

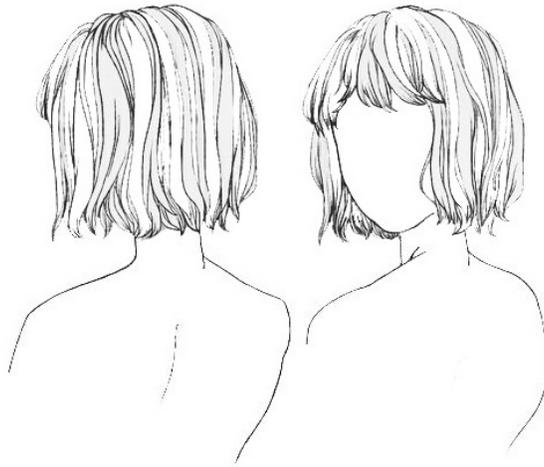
“I’m just eighteen. I’m pregnant and I’m eighteen. I’m still in school. I’m going to be alone.”

“I am here.” Marie looked up and to the left, thinking about what the robot had said. He was the only one who knew.

“Please enter your neutral state.”

Marie stood up and walked around the counter, placing the clipboard back in its drawer. She punched the security code into the vault’s door and struggled to open it again. Her day was finished and she was thankful for it. She waved Claude over to the entrance and waited for him to retake his place at the front of the line. She held her identification card in front of him for a few

seconds, until a small green light appeared at his center. His eyes glowed, pulsating for another second, before becoming dark again. Marie flicked off the lights in the vault, and locked it up. She scooped up her backpack from behind the counter and walked to the front doors, entered another security code, closed the doors tightly behind her, and ran to the bus stop.



ANNABELLE

When I sat up in a strange bed on the morning of the first day of 1967, I thought that I had finally adjusted. My surroundings, as unfamiliar as they were, felt strangely solid, like I could grab hold of the room and claim it as my own. That's all I wanted, to have a place and an identity of my own, to be the only one in my body. I wanted the splitting headaches to stop. The human-ailing crush of loneliness had been my only companion for as long as I could remember and I had given up my search for answers many, many years before. It seemed pointless to even try anymore, given that I could be on the other side of the world the next day, empty handed once again. I had been alone for what seemed like an eternity, and so I had just stopped. I stopped looking over my shoulder, stopped jumping at sounds in the dark, stopped staring into faces I thought I recognized, and faces that seemed to recognize me as we bumped shoulders on a crowded sidewalk. I was something that people didn't even

know they should fear, and I could hide in plain sight. I didn't want to, but I had to. Every day, I had a new life and met dozens of new people, and yet, I was completely, deeply, alone.

I stayed still in the bed and only moved my eyes around the room, hoping to latch on to something familiar. There were other voices outside the room. I was in a house. A dress was draped over the back of a chair in front of a large mirror. I was a woman. A small voice was screaming at me from the inside. It sounded scared and confused, and caused a ringing in my ears and my vision to blur. I took deep, labored breaths, and tried to communicate with the voice, letting it know that I was just as scared and confused. Every morning, I had a wrestling match like this, but I always won. The voice would eventually quiet; somehow I knew that meant their soul had left like a blown-out pilot light. I waited a few more minutes for this to occur, and when it did, I began to shake. It wasn't a cold shake, or a scared shake. It was like a recalibrating shake. It was my mind attempting to connect with the resisting body. It was like trying to drive a car with the emergency brake on. It hurt, even more than the screams. A headache set in, and I no longer believed I had adjusted at all. The pain let me know that this day in the life was as temporary as all of my others.

When I regained feeling in my limbs, I stood up and walked to the center of the bedroom. Light was pouring in through giant windows, and it burned my sensitive eyes. I drew the curtains but my eyes still burned. I waved a hand in front of my face, struggling to focus on the fingers. My vision wasn't clear enough and it worsened my headache. I needed glasses.

“Clara! Breakfast!” someone called from outside the door. I was Clara. I needed to find some glasses but the room was much too cluttered. I lifted pillows, pulled out drawers, overturned every symbolic stone, but there were no glasses. Perhaps Clara didn’t want to admit to her failing vision. I considered running. Once or twice, in the beginning, I had become too overwhelmed by new lives and had just run away before anyone could ask me questions to which I could never know the answers. I convinced myself it was the considerate—not cowardly—thing to do. That way, when it was time to move on again, it would appear like the rejected body was a runaway who couldn’t make it on their own. No one would have to wake up and find their loved-one mysteriously passed away. It was considerate.

I looked around one last time for a coat, shoes, or just some warmer clothing. I pushed the door open, begging it not to creak. I didn’t, but the first floorboard outside of the room did. Panicking, I considered the options. There were people, several it sounded like, waiting for Clara. I could hear their voices clearly; they were in a room close by. There was a hallway next to the bedroom I was in, but I had no way of knowing where it led. I backed into the room again, and pushed the door just enough for it not to click closed. I was on the first floor and there was a walkway just outside of the window. I could make it, easily. Gathering the long coat I had been able to find, I hiked up the window and pushed against the screen until it gave way to my force. Before it hit the ground, I caught it and pulled it inside, propped it against the wall. One leg first, and then the other.

“Clara? What the hell are you doing?” Another woman was standing by the front door of the house, looking at me incredulously. We knew each other.

“I’m... uh...,” I tried to think as I found my footing on the ground outside of the window. “I’m... going for a walk.”

“And the front door wasn’t good enough for you?” I didn’t know what to say, but the woman was smiling. She came over and took me by the arm and tried to guide me back to the front door. As goosebumps spread over my skin, I pulled us down into the grass, below the windows.

“Clara? Seriously. What is going on? Is this some sort of New Year’s prank?” she asked, her words beginning to slur. I looked at her but I knew there was never time to explain. I would, but I couldn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I said. The transfer was surprisingly painless. I wondered if this had something to do with the two bodies already being familiar with one another. Maybe they already had shared memories and shared feelings. For a moment, I had two heartbeats, and then none, and then one. Clara was slumped over me, still shielding us from the windows. She was too heavy to push aside, and my new heartbeat quickened. Someone could have come outside looking for us at any moment. I wasn’t strong enough yet to deal with it, but I had to. I moved my left shoulder forward and backward over and over again, shrugging the old body off of me. She landed on the grass with a heavy thud. She was an empty container.

I dragged her around the house, keeping sure to duck down the entire way. There was a small, blue shed in the backyard, somewhat hidden in the

trees. I buried her—with as much care as possible given the pressure of time—in a dirt pile behind it. It was inconspicuous enough; the pile itself had already been an eyesore. Clara became a withered flower and hopefully she'd be able to sprout again, among the other spring flowers. I didn't know. When I was finished, I stepped into the shed and shut it behind me, closing out the sunlight finally. No one could find me, which was what I had wanted, but now two lives were at stake instead of one. I heard the muffled calls for Clara again, and this time they sounded close, outside maybe. I could sense the worry in their voices. My body was still shaking. I didn't want them to come my way.

When I opened the door again, the sun beat down between the shed and the house. I watched two men standing next to it, cupping their hands around their mouths as if Clara would better be able to hear them from under the soil. I hesitated for a moment before walking over to them. My fingertips were numb; this body wasn't ready for this much action yet. I couldn't quite connect with the muscles and I could feel my resulting strange gait. The men turned towards me as soon as I neared, and I could have sworn they were staring at my feet. I lifted my head with a little more confidence. Distracting confidence.

"What's happened?" I asked once I had carefully sidestepped them to enter the house.

"Clara... she wasn't in her room. Did you find her? She never misses breakfast," one man said.

"I didn't. Maybe she just ran out," I offered.

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said. As he nodded, seemingly okay with that explanation, the other man reached for my hand. It was much too soon to change again so I slightly angled away from him, holding my hands up to my chest.

“You look worried, Love. I’m sure she’s okay,” he said to me. I nodded and attempted a smile, but the corners of my mouth weren’t cooperating yet. It may have been a grimace. Reaching for me again, he said, “come on. You should splash some cool water on your face.”

“Okay,” I agreed. He led me to another bedroom, one that was decorated more maturely than Clara’s. It had a bigger bed and a lot of framed portraits. I studied each smiling face, some alone and some in groups, many with this woman. She had a lot of people who loved her. She screamed and cried on the inside and I felt a knot in my stomach. One frame contained the woman, appearing much younger, with an infant in her lap. I picked it up and tried to recognize the young woman as my new self, but it was nearly impossible. Any time I had tried in the past, my mind wouldn’t allow it. I had once been an elderly man for almost a month without ever being sure of what I looked like. In the mirror, my eyes drifted. It didn’t matter whose eyes I had, if I didn’t have their soul to match. My own mind would never be able to recognize a body. I tried not to think about it too often.

“Are you all right?” The man had snuck up behind me during my daydreaming. I jumped at the sound of his voice and promptly spun around, making sure to keep a reasonable distance between us. Another photo fell out

of the frame I was still clutching. It was small and folded up, having been carefully tucked into a corner. I glanced at the man, who had a questioning look on his face, before slowly bending down to retrieve the photo. I unfolded it to find another baby picture. A different baby, I was fairly sure. I had so many questions, but I couldn't ask them.

"You're kind of worrying me, Marie. Please tell me what's going on. You don't want to be touched right now. You've made that clear, and it's fine. But please... what is it? You want to see the girls?" he gestured to the photos in my hands. "Does this have something to do with Clara? Don't just stare at me."

"The girls..."

"Are with your mother, of course," he finished. I was Marie and I was a mother. It was one of my worst nightmares because I knew I would eventually kill this body no matter how hard I tried to hold onto it. She needed to live, for her children, but she couldn't. I felt ill. I was ill, all over the carpet. I was curled up in front of the vomit, shaking for so many different reasons.

"Oh, Jesus! Marie, you're totally sick, aren't you! Why didn't you say something? Let's get you into bed. I'll call your mother and see if she can bring the girls over here today. Does Jas have daycare on Sundays? I can't remember. Well maybe she can just bring Gracie. She'll be so happy to..." He started rubbing my back. I groaned with contempt. "So happy to see... to see..." And then Marie was face down in her own puke with the photos floating beside her. I looked down at her and began to cry. In one short morning, I had destroyed a household. There was nothing left to do but flee.

Making my way to the front door again—I saw no use in sneaking anymore—the last living member of the house called out to me, “Ethan! Ethan! You heading out? Is Marie sick? I heard some... pretty gross sounds.”

“Yes,” was my blanket response, and I walked out. I walked for a long time, taking every back road I found, and making minimal eye contact with passersby. I walked until the sun set and I was forced to find the light I usually avoided.

Inside of a desolate café, I huddled into a corner booth and hid behind a menu. I thought about the morning and what should come next, if anything could come next. For years, I had been running while standing still, gaining experience but never aging, advancing yet stagnant. I had buried Clara, but Marie lay in a crumpled pile on the floor. That man would have found her right away. He would have called the police, told them how suspiciously I had left the house. They would have started their manhunt. Ethan was wanted. For the first time, I actually wanted to leave a body, as soon as possible. The alternative was to get arrested, probably become one or two police officers, and then some criminals, and then I would be doomed to bounce from body to body, yet remain locked up in a prison somewhere. Even though I didn't have a life of my own, I was still free. I wanted to be free.

I peered out of the sticky window next to me, and examined faces in the dark. They all stared at their feet while they shuffled by, except for one. A young, round face looked back at me, questioning my gaze. I pulled back from the window. When I looked out again just a minute later, the crowd had moved

on and the girl was crossing the street, coming my way. She looked like a mesmerized child. We locked eyes and I wasn't exactly sure why, but in that moment, she paused, and cocked her head to the side, before pushing open the front doors of the café.

I tried to shrink more into the booth as she approached, still watching me. As repetitive and endless as life had been, I felt like I had never waited for anything as long as I had for her to reach my table. Her feet dragged. When she was finally in front of me, I saw that she was incredibly frail, bundled in too many layers for the weather. Her eyes were sunken, yet they gleamed upon seeing me. Her whole body was twitching as if she were on drugs, yet she was incredibly focused, on me.

"Do you know me?" she asked. I opened my mouth and then closed it before she spoke again, "I... I know you." She took a seat across from me and rolled up the sleeves of her sweatshirt, revealing thin, bruised arms. She knew Ethan. Maybe she needed help. A waitress behind the counter eyeballed us and raised an eyebrow in concern. I smiled and half-waved at her so she would go back to her own business.

"I'm sorry, I have a terrible memory. Do we know each other?" I asked nervously. It was true, though, I did have a terrible memory. A consequence of never getting a good look at yourself. The girl continued to stare into my eyes, like she knew something I didn't know. She put her hands on the table, and slowly inched them over to my side. Confused, I leaned back and pulled my hands to myself, stuffing them into my pockets shortly after.

“I can’t believe I found you,” the girl exhaled. “I feel like I’ve lived this day a hundred times before. It’s like a dream. I looked up, and there you were. I just knew.”

“I... really don’t know what you’re talking about. Who are you?” I asked.

“I don’t know my name.”

“You don’t know your name?”

“No. What’s yours?”

“Ethan.”

“Are you sure?”

“What? Am I sure?” It occurred to me that I couldn’t actually be sure. Every day was a game of context clues. But I was pretty sure.

“Yeah. Are you sure your name is Ethan?”

“Look, miss, I don’t what you’re getting at here, but I’m fairly certain the two of us are strangers. And it looks like you could use some help. Maybe I can—”

“You really can’t tell what I am? I could spot you from a mile away.” She looked around the café and scooted closer to me, almost too close. She leaned in and whispered, “I’m like you.” Startled, my eyes widened and I started to move away. I was ready to stand up when she grabbed my arm with a sleeve-covered hand. For some reason, I settled back into the booth and looked at her meaningfully. Her eyes were full of fear and trust.

“I don’t have a body of my own, either,” she admitted. I couldn’t believe the way she said it, as if she were describing a cold or an academic weakness. I don’t have a body. I don’t do well in math. I was speechless, so she continued.

“I could tell you didn’t either. It’s something about the way you hold yourself. Like you were just born yesterday. Your muscles don’t sit quite right on your bones. You’re giving off a troubling frequency.” I only understood about half of what she was saying, but it was amazing. I had searched for others like myself, but I never would have been able to tell just by seeing one.

“Do you know how long it’s been?” she asked. I shook my head and she agreed, “I don’t know either. I can’t remember stability. I stopped touching people a long time ago, but then I just started waking up in strange places. It was... so scary. And now... I don’t know. I’ve been in this same body for almost three months. I thought maybe it was mine to keep or something, but it’s falling apart. I need to leave it, but I don’t want to go back to how it was before.”

“Wait,” I finally said, “you’ve kept a body for three months? How?”

“I don’t really know. When I woke up in it, it was completely alone in an abandoned house. No one around to touch or care. Every day I waited to be yanked out, but it never happened. I thought maybe this girl didn’t have any real connections, so she didn’t fight me. She let me take over really easily, and then... I barely ever heard her voice again.”

“Unbelievable,” I managed to say, “I thought I was the only one. I mean, I hate it too. But maybe I’d hate it less if someone else knew what I was going through. And you do. This is—”

“I want it to end,” she said.

“End?”

“I’d rather have no life than a different one every day... wouldn’t you?”

She looked hopeful, but I didn’t understand why. We had just found each other but she was ready to be anonymous again.

“I guess... I’ve thought about it. But it doesn’t seem possible. Like you said, even if you don’t touch anyone, you’ll find a way into a new body.” The café really wasn’t an appropriate setting for this talk. I kept glancing at the wait staff, praying that they couldn’t hear us.

“I have a theory,” she said. I waited for her to go on. A man walked past our table to the bathroom. When the door swung closed behind him, she continued.

“I’ve always thought that if I met someone else like me, we could touch, and... and that would be it. Because at the same moment we tried to switch bodies, well, we couldn’t, because we’d both be dying. You see? We can’t live in empty houses. The way I see it, we—whatever we are, our essence or something—would just evaporate into the air. And that would be that.” It truly was morbid conversation for a place with posters of apple pie on the walls. But I thought about it, and it did make sense. And when I remembered Marie, lying on the floor, and I felt my stomach knot up again, it seemed worth a try.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

“Really?” Her eyes gleamed again. I nodded and we stood up, headed to the front door in single file. I didn’t look at anyone else on the way out, in fear of accidentally giving myself away. I felt like I was about to commit my third crime of the day.

We found a decent spot away from the streetlamps. There wasn’t anything to do but touch hands, but a heaviness hung in the air between us. We would be ending the lives of two individuals, who were really already gone, and we would be saving the lives of our future hosts. I wondered how many lives I had taken for my own. Hundreds, definitely. Thousands seemed possible. In my rational mind, I knew it must have been tens of thousands. An entire town’s worth. And if I had more days like that day, taking an entire household, it would be hundreds of thousands in no time. A city of bodiless souls and soulless bodies.

The girl was looking at her clunky shoes, perhaps having the same thoughts I was. A tear rolled down her cheek and landed on the left’s toe. I cleared my throat and she looked up, wiped her cheeks quickly, and took a step forward.

“Her name was Annabelle. I saw it written on a bill in the house I woke up in. I know it’s her. I just wanted to... say it out loud so she can be remembered.” She tugged on her sleeves and shifted her weight awkwardly. “Thank you Annabelle, for letting me live for a little while.” I smiled at her and

she looked even smaller than before, surely shrinking away into nothing. She was ready to disappear, inside and out.

“Thank you Annabelle,” I chimed in, “and thank you Ethan. And I’m sorry for... everything.”

I took another step toward the girl and extended my arms. She gladly entered a hug, much better than the formal handshake I had considered. At first, nothing happened. The hug was warm and tight, and a little musty. She burrowed deeper into my chest, tightening her little arms around me. My eyes were shut, giving me comfortable darkness, but then they were blinding white like my eyelids were on fire. I opened them and I still saw white all around. I was looking into the sun and it was looking back. Annabelle was nowhere. I could feel her grip but I couldn’t see her. I couldn’t speak. I was nowhere. I tried to blink to clear my vision, but there was nothing to blink. I had no eyelids, no eyes, no face. I had no body. Nobody. I had secretly hoped she and I would make the journey—to wherever we might be going—together. Air was rushing all around me. It was loud as it went through me and became me. When all of the sensations stopped, I stopped. I didn’t know how, but I was able to see again. It was still white, but with hints of familiarity. Phosphenes in the air. I opened my eyes and looked around. I was in a bedroom and I didn’t recognize a thing.



I N D I A

It was a sunny Monday when they arrived, and Grace immediately missed the winter of home. She insisted on staying inside as much as possible, to pretend the seasons hadn't changed on her overnight. The temperature would make her sick, she insisted. The craving for winter was deep down in her bones; it sat beside wanderlust and seeing her parents again. She wanted darkness at five o'clock, hot cocoa by the fire, bare trees, overcast, snow storms, thick mittens, apple pie, and a Christmas tree at least as tall as she was. None of those things were happening though, so Grace stayed inside while her sister and grandmother went out to enjoy their vacation. She watched them from the window seat on which she firmly planted herself. When they weren't looking up at the window anymore, Grace turned on all of the fans and wrapped herself in borrowed blankets.

In the morning, sunshine spilled onto the carpet and warmed her toes with pinks and blues and oranges. It lit up her eyelids, forcing her to open

them, and to find that she had fallen asleep in the window seat. There were clusters of flies on the other side of the glass, and she was surprised their constant buzzing hadn't woken her sooner. The sound was overwhelming against the quiet awakening of the world outside, filled with crickets and frogs and rustling leaves, just like home. The flies buzzed and continued to hit their bodies against the glass, wanting to come inside, and Grace wanted to go outside. She didn't want to admit it right away, so she instead pointed her toes, held her breath, and refocused her ears to the cracking of her spine.

The light rose over the horizon and Grace wondered what time it was. There were no clocks in their rented vacation home. There was also no television, no radio, or board games. This must have been on purpose because what there was in the living room, was a tall pamphlet advertising "The Great Outdoors." Grace tiptoed past it, to her suitcase still abandoned on the floor in front of the couch, and retrieved her thickest scarf. First, she triumphantly wrapped it around as much of her upper body as possible; second, she turned off every fan in the room.

Grace had thought Prattston was a big city, but was delighted to find it as country as her beloved countryside. There were barely any unnatural sounds, not even a car in the distance. In her early morning investigation, she had even uncovered a hidden fireplace, and made a mental note to ask about it later. Grace sat on the couch, swung her legs, and looked at all of the pamphlets she could find. Her grandmother was an early riser, and would keep her company soon enough. Jasmine could sleep all day if no one objected.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” came a gentle, old voice. Grace’s grandmother padded into the kitchenette, tying her robe with a bow along the way. She opened the fridge and took out a pitcher. She always started her day with a cold glass of water and urged Grace and Jasmine to do the same. She filled two glasses and placed them on the counter. Grace stood up to retrieve hers, and winced at how cold her first swallow was.

“Are you going to come out with us today?” her grandmother asked. “I can’t, in good conscience, leave you here alone again. I think you’d really love it here.” She sipped her water and waited for a response. Grace looked down into her glass.

“Can we go to a movie?”

“Oh, Gracie. We can do that anywhere! But, if that’s what you really want, of course we can. Try to wake up your sister and we’ll see what’s playing.”

When the three of them made it to the theater just two hours later, their grandmother claimed there was nothing playing that was appropriate for children. Jasmine groaned and prepared to argue, but Grace didn’t mind. Across from the theater, just beyond clear vision, was a misty piece of land. She interrupted their bickering to beg they go there. She wanted to walk through the woods and feel the sun on her bare arms. Grace pulled out her disposable camera and snapped all along the way, unaware of her finger obscuring most of the images. The walk lasted a while, for how long she wasn’t certain, but it was long enough for their grandmother to request a rest. They all

plopped down in the unkempt grass and the damp blades were cool against Grace's legs. She could almost close her eyes and pretend it was autumn, goose bumps sprouting on her arms and her teeth beginning to chatter. She found herself again dreaming of snow, even while her skin was still stained with green.

"It must be so nice living here. Don't you think, girls?" Their grandmother was smiling, looking at them back and forth. She coughed, hard, into her handkerchief and continued smiling. Grace considered it, but she couldn't imagine living anywhere else but home, where the mountains could be seen from every street and deer peeked out from snow-sunken branches.

Jasmine was holding flowers in her mouth, while she pressed others in between the pages of her journal. A frog hopped onto her leg and she didn't notice at all, but Grace did. It hopped off in the next instant, and she flinched, but refrained from running after it. The air smelled like sunshine and salt and Grace kind of liked it, she had to admit. She made another mental note to ask her sister how to press flowers into her own old books. Until then, she scratched lines into the little piles of dirt all around and spelled out words with the grass. She imagined being swallowed by the Earth, green filling her eyes and the sky waving goodbye. She dug her toes into the wet dirt, slowly pushing it under her nails and into her skin. She relished in the smell of it—familiar, but somehow more magical than usual. Grace didn't want to leave; she thought the coldness of the soil felt awfully similar to the coldness of snow.

That night, the covers of her bed were as cool as the grass, almost damp with the humidity of the air coming through the opened windows. It smelled like rain and Grace pictured wet leaves and grass. She was tired, yet restless. Her skin still tasted like salt, and her toes twitched, wanting to go back outside. Spending a day in the sunshine was addictive, she realized as she looked up at the ceiling. The lines in the wood had once belonged to great trees of old wisdom, but were now etched and cut and dried. Grace didn't want to be stuck inside like that.

The slow beating of her resting heart mixed with the sound of water hitting the roof. It rained all day Wednesday and Prattston seemed in perpetual evening. The storm was not as friendly as the ones she was used to; it was crisp and harsh against her skin when she stuck an arm out of the window. She could taste the iciness in the air, and for the first time, she longed for sunlight. When she really thought about it, Grace often wanted what she couldn't have. She wanted home, her parents, adventure, to get away and be someone else, just for a day at least. In her private journals, she would refer to herself as "India." India was a clever girl with secrets, who could go anywhere she wanted, anytime. Grace believed an exotic name would make everything better. But for the time being, she sat in the window seat and watched the rain. A tiny frog was stuck to the windowsill and her grandmother warned her not to let it in, so Grace settled for keeping an eye on it, making sure it didn't get swept away by the storm clouds bruising the sky.

By the late afternoon on Thursday, when the sky was dark and grey, heavy rain clouds hanging low, the sky openly weeping, the sun pierced through. It flooded the air and the streets in thick yellow light—a deep shade that was rich like mustard and creamy like butter. Grace found it fascinating that even in the darkness, the rain drops could find the tiniest amount of light to reflect. They created contrasting streaks across the window that looked like shiny slugs falling from the sky. The greyness and rain pressed on, but the light steadily lingered, taking its time to settle into dominance. Grace stuck a hand out of the window again, feeling the raindrops become lighter and lighter against her palm.

“Grandma,” she said, “can I go play outside?”

“You’re just like your mother, you know. She always waited for the worst weather to ask to go stomp around in it. She was happiest when the sky was pink. Must be in the Arcane genes.” Grace watched her grandmother walk over to the window and look out for herself. She gave a sad smile to the frog that was still managing to hold on.

“Promise not to get too muddy? And be back before dinner. Jasmine, sweetheart, go with her please.”

As soon as they were free, Grace knew where she wanted to go. They headed for the hidden land from Tuesday, racing each other until they were across the street. It was rare for Jasmine to want to join in on Grace’s fun, so she capitalized on it as much as possible, looking back and grabbing her sister’s hand. They ran most of the way hand-in-hand, jumping over puddles

and occasionally stopping to rescue worms from the street and bat away mosquitoes. When they finally got there, Grace collapsed into the soft land, pulling her sister down with her. After the rain, it seemed like a marsh, but there weren't any bodies of water in sight. Instead, the trees' branches drooped down and shielded the girls, creating an even more magical space.

Grace stretched her fingers over the grass around her, feeling how it too had become limp in the rain, yet somehow stronger. By lying in it, she was sure she would become rejuvenated as well.

"Gracie," Jasmine said, "it's kind of chilly. Maybe we shouldn't be lying in the grass. We might get sick." But it wasn't too chilly for Grace. She liked to feel the cool grass on her back and the warm sun on her front, like a perfect bed. She rolled onto her side and faced Jasmine. Blades of grass tickled her face and she let out one small sneeze.

"See!" Jasmine started to sit up.

"Bless you," Grace pointedly said out loud to herself, smiling. "No, I like it out here! Please, let's stay!" She grabbed Jasmine's hand and pulled her back down.

For a while, they stayed silent. They usually were, since Jasmine thought Grace was too much of a baby and Grace thought Jasmine wasn't fun anymore. They were still facing each other, both looking down at the microscopic jungle below them.

"Jas," Grace whispered, "you have such a great name. I wish I had your name."

“Grace is a great name too!”

“No, Grace is boring. It’s just one syllable, and it can’t be shortened. Jasmine is fun. I wish my name were... India.”

“India? Why? What made you come up with that, Gracie?”

“India,” Grace whispered to herself, rolling the name around on her tongue for good measure. “In... dee... uh. India! See? It’s fun to say. It’s... special.” She was smiling again. As she reached up to touch her mouth to feel how the name shaped her lips, there was a roar overhead and the clouds rolled in. One drop landed on her nose and then the wind picked up. Grace got to her knees, ready to leave, when Jasmine was the one to hold her back.

“Wait,” she said, “we don’t have to leave. I know you don’t really want to. A little rain never hurt anyone.” She smiled a genuine smile and Grace lay back down. Jasmine waited a few seconds before continuing, “Well, I like your name. It’s the one our parents gave you, so, I like it.”

The already-wet grass was clumsily dancing in the wind, and it reminded Grace of her hair when it floated on the surface of the water in the bathtub. It made beautiful shapes, and bobbed up and down in front of her eyes. She touched one blade and felt it slip through her fingers to rejoin the others in their dance. The soil underneath her was becoming softer and softer, and now her hair was plastered to her head. She pinched another blade between her fingers, and tugged it until it slipped out smoothly from the earth. She placed the grass on Jasmine’s cheek, who made a sour face upon feeling its clamminess.

“Do you... remember mommy and daddy?” Grace asked.

“Not really. You know that. I was just a little kid, not a lot younger than you.”

“Oh.”

Grace tried to enjoy the sensations around her. She closed her eyes and focused on each individual raindrop landing on her face, on the grass slithering over her hands. She pictured her hair mixing in with it, turning green and beige up to the root, intertwining with blades and becoming one. She wouldn't mind growing into the ground and staying there forever. She would be nourished by the natural resources around her, and Jasmine and her grandmother would still be able to visit her. In the springtime, they could come out and plant flowers around her body. They could lay down next to her and she could tell them what it's like to be part of the Earth.

“Did they love us, though?”

“Grace! Why would you ask that? Of course they loved us.” Grace shrugged against the ground and turned her head to the other side.

“But then why have we always been with Grandma? Didn't they want us?” Jasmine inched towards her sister and wrapped her arms around her.

“They did, but, you know they were really young when I was born, and— and there was no way they were ready for a second baby too, and they just couldn't take care of us the way we needed. But we should be grateful for Grandma. You probably don't remember, but she took us to see them almost every day until...”

“I don’t remember. I... want to be with them. Or... I want to be somewhere else.”

“Gracie, you aren’t being serious, are you? You have us and we love you. You’re too young to feel this way. When you’re older, you’ll understand why things happen the way they do.”

Grace’s chest tightened when she heard this. It was frustrating to always be too young to “understand” things. It was suffocating. She plunged her fingertips into the exposed soil between the blades of grass, feeling the pebbles and worms beneath. If she lay on top of the ground, with her hair and fingers pushing through it, surely there must be someone laying under the ground with their hair and fingers pushing up. She was sure of it. Maybe it was someone who looked just like her, a parallel Grace, but maybe she still had parents—or maybe she wanted to be called India too. Their spines would be feet apart, but perfectly aligned. Grace tilted her head to rest one ear on the ground, and listened for sounds of life. The grass in front of her rose and fell in sync with her breaths. She flattened her palm on the spot and found that the ground itself was breathing.

“Hello?” Grace asked the air.

“Hello?” came a muffled response from below.

“What?” said Jasmine from behind Grace’s hair.

A blue jay fluttered overhead and hesitated for a moment, distracting Grace, before it landed in the grass in front of her nose. It looked her in the eyes and she braced herself to be pecked, but it kept its distance. Instead, it

pushed its beak into the soil three times in quick succession, hopped around where it had pecked, and took off again. She followed it in the air with her eyes for a few moments, smiling at its folly, and then the ground under her ear began to vibrate. She lifted her head no more than six inches, only to find that her hair was actually entangled in the grass. She tugged at it, but it wouldn't budge. Her hair and the grass created one big sopping mess; it felt heavy in her hands, and too strong to detangle. The bird squeaked, watching her struggle. Grace repositioned herself onto all fours, determined to get away. She didn't understand what was happening. What if it was an earthquake? She'd never experienced one before, didn't know they could even occur in the north, but she didn't want to find out this way. She continued to tug her neck back and forth until her scalp was sore from the effort.

“Jas! Jas!” she desperately yelled out, “I'm stuck! Help!”

“Stop playing around, Grace! I think we should go home now.” Grace watched her sister's legs wobble on the shaking ground. She was so close, but just out of reach. Grace tried to extend her arm out farther, and her fingertips just brushed the denim of her sister's pants. The soil under her toes dissolved before her eyes, widening into a gaping hole in the ground. She jumped forward, bringing her knees to her chest, but the hole kept growing. Before she knew it, her legs were dangling under her and her sister was barely holding onto her arms.

“Gracie! I've got you! Don't be scared!” Jasmine's face was stricken with pure horror, and Grace's arms were too weak to support her own weight. She

inched her hands up her sister's arms, desperate to hold on. The blue jay landed on Jasmine's shoulder, and began pecking mercilessly. She tried to shrug it off, but it had its feet latched on. Her face contorted from horror to pain as the bird wouldn't stop. Just before the Earth completely swallowed her up, Grace saw her sister jerk her arm free to swat at the blue jay.

She fell for a long time, so long that she thought she must be dreaming. There's nothing so lovely as dreams, Grace thought; this was not a dream. She fell and fell, covered in darkness. When she stopped, and landed on something solid, she didn't realize she had. Everything was as flat as night, void of texture and variation. She squeezed her eyes shut and hoped to wake up in bed, but when she opened them again there was nothing in front of, behind, above, or below her. She looked hard into the darkness and raised her arms up to guide her. She took a step and heard her shoe crunch on what sounded like dry dirt.

"Hello?" she tested her voice. It was strained from fear.

"Hello?" another voice responded from somewhere. Grace froze in her place, wrapped her arms around herself, and begged the universe to send her home. "Hello? Are you the girl who called to me?"

Grace stayed silent, remembering when she had called out, but had assumed the extra response was an echo in her mind. She heard shuffling from somewhere nearby, the soft sound of cloth dragging over rock. Grace bent her knees and lowered herself down, holding her knees close to her chest. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She sniffled.

"Oh dear, you're crying, aren't you? I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe

down here, believe me.”

A hand rested on Grace’s shoulder, and she recoiled violently. She cried out and scrambled away from the figure, finding a hard surface just nearby. She tried to completely flatten herself against it.

“It’s okay! Everything is okay. You can’t see me, can you? That’s why you must be so scared. Oh, dear. Just open your eyes so they can adjust to the dark. Okay?”

Grace, attempting to hide in the apparently plain sight of the mysterious figure, opened her eyes and focused on a random spot for a minute. She could hear breathing from close by. When her eyes finally adjusted, she could just barely make out the silhouette of a woman, standing very close to her. Grace stood up and tried to back away, but realized she had been leaning against a wall. She was taking short, shallow breaths and rapidly becoming light headed. She concentrated on calming down, steadying her breathing as best as she could under the circumstances, and it worked. She straightened up a bit and waited another minute until she could make out some of the woman’s features.

Her skin, resembling dry clay, was grey and cracking with age. Too many years of avoiding the sunlight had taken its toll, Grace thought. She looked kind enough, with deep wrinkles around her mouth and the corners of her eyes, but menacing at the same time. She was cloaked in dark materials, even darker than their surroundings. She had thick hair that grew straight up, and slightly swayed with every little movement. The woman’s eyes had grown accustomed to straining through the darkness; her pupils were permanently

dilated and eyes wide, which together almost made her appear friendlier. If Grace only focused on her eyes, she almost reminded of her of her grandmother. Stressed out and full of love. Only this woman lived in a place as cold and grey as she was. She was an underground being. Grace began to let her guard down. She didn't feel as afraid now that she could see who she was talking to. She felt cautious, but not afraid.

"I... I can see you," Grace said. She moved away from the wall, just to see what would happen. The woman stayed where she was and watched Grace as she walked around her. With Grace on the other side, the woman stood flat against the wall instead, and she nearly blended in with it.

"Uh, um... India," answered Grace. The woman gave her a knowing smile, but nodded.

"India is a beautiful name."

"What's... your name?"

"Oh, I don't have one anymore. I think it used to be... no, I can't remember." She continued to smile at Grace as if having a name was not an important thing. It was why humans were humans, and not animals, Grace thought. But she didn't say anything about it.

"Where... am I?" Grace asked, trying to not sound rude. But no matter how nice this woman seemed, Grace was in no hurry to plan her stay. She didn't want to know how long it would take for her skin to lose its color and her eyes to sink into themselves.

"You're just on the other side, dear."

“The other side?”

“Yes, the other side of your world. You wondered who might be down here, remember?”

“But how did you know that? How did I get here? Is this real?” Grace considered backing into the wall and feeling around for a way to climb up. She was good at climbing the large oak trees in her yard, and she believed that if there was a way to come down, there had to be a way to go up. She didn’t like the idea that there was someone watching her from below. Grace glanced over her shoulder before deciding she didn’t want to take her eyes off of the woman.

“I was just listening to you, dear. You said ‘hello’ first. You intertwined our hair and you synchronized our breathing. You created your own path to this side. This is as real as your home is solid,” the woman explained, but Grace did not understand. She couldn’t wrap her head around any of it, even with the woman just a foot away. She continued, “When the weather can’t decide to be sunny or rainy, when a bird can’t decide to be in the air or on the ground, when a little girl wants a different name and to be in a different place, the other side opens up. I’m always here, but the path only reveals itself when the world is conflicting. Yours was.”

Grace listened and absorbed the information, trying to make sense of up and down, if there even was an up or down.

“So... you live down here? On the other side? What...” She wasn’t sure what to ask. She was dazed. She wanted to know more but wanted to go home. She had been so sure she wanted to get away.

“I do. I live in house with my girls. I have a whole life, dear. Think of it like this: to me, your world is the other side. It’s just that when I heard your call today, and you heard mine, I decided to be the one to welcome you.” She smiled again. She was always smiling at Grace, who felt her own stoic expression.

“Do you want to meet them? My girls?” she asked.

Grace waited a beat before nodding uncertainly. As soon as she completed her second nod, she could see a little house in the distance, surrounded by grey grass. She followed the woman towards it and wondered if she should be so trusting. She could turn around and run, find a way back home while she wasn’t being watched. She was good at sneaking. But the woman was beaming at her, absolutely ecstatic for Grace to be there. And with her lanky limbs and off-putting gait, Grace knew that the other side was where the woman belonged, but Grace didn’t belong there. She slowed down, waiting to see if the woman noticed, and then started walking backwards. She bumped into someone.

“Hi,” said another little girl, the same height as Grace but somehow appearing much older.

“Hi...,” said Grace.

“We heard you this morning! I wanted to come see but Grandma told me to stay put.” Grace nodded and didn’t know what to say. She could feel the woman standing behind her now, and the girl in front. She was trapped. All she could do was stare and hope the interaction would be over soon. The girl

had skin as dark as night, at least, Grace thought so. It was hard to tell when everywhere was dark as night. Her face was childishly round, and her wild hair grew straight up just like her grandmother's. But unlike the woman, the girl was wearing a grey little dress, the kind Grace liked to pick out when she was allowed to. Grace smiled with one corner of her mouth, looking down at her own dirty dress.

“Do you want to leave, India?” the women unexpectedly asked.

“I... um, yes.” Grace's answer was sheepish, but she really did want to be home. She wanted to tell her grandmother about the other side, and write about it in her journal.

“Of course you do, dear. And that's fine! You could've left at any time.”

“I could've?”

“Yes!” said the little girl, “remember, there is light in darkness. That is what Grandma always says. You're here because you were meant to be here, but it's up to you when you're ready to go!”

She grabbed Grace's hand and guided her to the yard. They lay down side by side. The little girl began pushing Grace's hair down into the soil, and telling her to relax.

“If you're really ready to go, you will! Just think about what's happening on the other side right now, and how much you want to be there. It's easy.”

Grace lay still, thinking about her sister, probably terrified, and her grandmother, too old to be this worried. She pictured her house, her yard, and that terrible blue jay. She thought about her name and how she was told her

mother chose it for a good reason, and that she should feel honored and blessed to carry it. Grace.

“Goodbye,” the girl said, now standing up and holding her grandmother’s hand. They waved as Grace melted into the ground. Instead of falling, this time she landed with a thud that knocked the wind out of her. She coughed a few times and then it was blindingly bright when she opened her eyes and looked around. The earth was closed and solid again. On the other side, her sister was still lying down, looking extremely exhausted. Her eyes were closed and her cheeks were streaked with tears. Grace huddled close to her and rested her head on her shoulder.

“Jas, I’m back,” she whispered.

Her sister didn’t open her eyes when she said, softly, “Gracie.” She pulled her closer.

“I was on the other side! But I came back.”

She didn’t know if her sister had heard her, so they both stayed silent, holding on to one another. The two lay in the grass for hours more, watching the sun move across the sky. Grace kept one hand spread over the grass next to her, feeling the ground occasionally breath with her.



WILLIAM

Jasmine trekked down to the woods bordering the school grounds. The faint impression of a path wound through the tall grass, and she followed it. It rustled as she flattened her way through the overgrown grass. She felt like a figure from an epic tragedy, stomping monstrosly towards the shelter of the woods and away from civilization, the blue sky above beckoning her home. An ancient-looking flat stone wall bordered one side of the path, crooked and half-topped. There was something appealing about the autumn woods, and when she looked up, the trees were arching over her like a cage; they hid the sky now. The leaves were red and gold, curling at the edges, rattling when the wind blew.

“Hey,” the empty woods called. Jasmine jumped backward, waving her arms, and fell onto her overstuffed knapsack. She made a high-pitched noise.

“Oh!” The boy standing behind her on the path said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No... you, you didn’t,” Jasmine stammered, trying and failing to compose herself. “Wha-where did you even come from?”

The boy stared at Jasmine as she yanked her arm out of the bush and yelped as thorns dug into her shoulder. A cool hand wrapped around her wrist, lifting away branches, untangling things from Jasmine’s hair, and hauling her to her feet. Jasmine shook the remaining dead leaves from her hair and edged away from the bush.

“So, uh... are you okay?” the boy asked, rocking back on his heels. “Still breathing? I’m... William, by the way. These are my woods.”

“*Your* woods?” asked Jasmine as she brushed at the giant muddy stain on her skirt. She slanted an accusing look in William’s direction. He didn’t seem to notice.

“I mean, they sort of are. No one else comes out here. But you did!” he said, perking up.

Jasmine was still picking twigs out of her hair, but at this she looked back up. William smiled at her and she noticed how pale he was—pale like a china plate, almost luminous. There were holes in his shirt that made Jasmine wonder about him. She hadn’t noticed him at school.

“Wow,” Jasmine laughed in surprise, wincing as her bottom lip cracked with the chill of the air. “I thought everyone in this town wore blue jeans and plaid.”

“Nothing wrong with plaid,” William said, raising his eyebrows. And then he laughed, high and delighted, and threw an arm around Jasmine’s

shoulders, squeezing. “This is so great! No one cool ever comes out here.”

“Um,” Jasmine said, eyes popping open. She wanted to pinch herself, but no, she couldn’t because her hands were pinned to her side by William, who thought Jasmine was *cool*. She struggled to produce other thoughts. “Uh. What?”

When William leaned back and let go of Jasmine’s shoulders, he stayed close. Jasmine shivered, absently rubbing her arms. “Seriously, so great! I’m sorry, but, you have to stay with me for a while! Do you want to walk?” William rambled, bouncing and beaming. “And, oh, what’s your name?”

“I’m Jasmine. Arcane.”

“Nice to meet you, Jasmine!” William said, still beaming, “Can I call you Jazzy? I like that. It’s so fantastic that you’re here. I mean, the forest, not Prattston. Prattston is terrible. Are you new here? Why’d you move out to the middle of nowhere?”

Jasmine took a moment to parse that. She was still having a hard time gathering her thoughts and sorting through them with William’s frantic sentences.

“I prefer Jas,” she finally managed, ducking her head. “And, uh, yes, we just got here last weekend.” For some reason Jasmine found herself going on. “We couldn’t, um, afford to rent a house in the city, and this is the closest town to it, so,” she paused, and waited for the question, but William just looked quizzical. “My grandma just died a few weeks ago, so the bills and everything—you know, we couldn’t afford the city. But anyway, my sister Grace and I are

staying with our auntie now,” Jasmine said. “And Gracie’s having a hard time with... everything, so maybe this country air will be good for her. That’s mainly why we’re here.”

She didn’t feel like saying anything else. It was way too easy to remember how her grandmother had choked for air last fall, collapsed in the stairwell, not breathing, Jasmine doing sloppy CPR and swearing. In the emergency room, the only sign her heart had restarted had been a steady beeping from the machines, but otherwise, she had been motionless. Snaky lines of plastic weaved their way around and up inside her nostrils and lungs. She’d been like that for days. And then it seemed so sudden when they were told there was nothing else the doctor could do. If Jasmine let her mind wander, it always went back there, to that place, to how close it had been to okay. How close it still could be.

“I’m so sorry.” William was staring at her, solemn for once, his eyes dark. “About your sister, and your grandma. Death is... I’m sorry.”

“She’s going to be okay,” Jasmine clarified. She bit the inside of her cheek. “Grace, I mean. She’s going to be fine. And my grandma... well, she was old. She was the best. She took care of us until she couldn’t anymore.”

“I’m sorry about the circumstances but even if it’s horrible being here, I can’t lie. I’m glad you came. I’ve been alone here forever. I haven’t had anyone to actually talk to in years,” he said out of the corner of his mouth, and then bit his lip and looked at her with wide eyes as if he’d said too much.

“No kidding,” she said. “I have no idea how I’m going to survive here...”

“You stick with me,” William said, eyes crinkling with pleasure. “We can keep each other company. Walk with me a while, Jas. I know all the best shortcuts. We could go see some ruins!”

Jasmine had planned to be alone with the flora, but she found herself wanting to stay with William. He could guide her, teach her to look around more, to look up every once in a while. The woods were atmospheric in a way she’d never appreciated before: the falling leaves skittering by in the breeze, the trees stretching upwards, vibrantly orange and red, and William standing against the grey trunks and dry colors. He was hovering in front of her, waiting for a response. Jasmine took a step forward and thought he smelled musty, sweet, and smoky. She nodded an “okay.”

They looked at each other for another moment before William turned around to wander deeper into the forest. He reached behind him to tug Jasmine along by the sleeve. Within minutes, they were in a deceptive patch of leaves, which looked beautiful on the surface but floated atop a puddle of cold, muddy water. William ignored Jasmine’s small sounds of resistance, and continued to plow through it until her shoes were soaked through and heavy. She had no idea where they were going. When she glanced behind her, she couldn’t see the lights of the parking lot anymore. They’d left the path at some point and were threading their way through the trees. Jasmine didn’t know if the temperature in the forest dropped exponentially as it got later in the day, but sooner than she’d realized, the afternoon air that had been warm had become bone chilling.

“You do know where we’re going, right? We’re not lost and wandering in circles?” asked Jasmine.

“Of course I know where I’m going,” William said, “this way.”

“Where?”

“Well I thought you might like to see the old mill. I think it’s from the nineteenth century. But, I mean, we don’t have to go there if you’re not interested. We could just... sit somewhere. It’s nice out. We could... soak up the last of the sun before winter takes over.”

“Oh! Okay. No, I–um. I would love to see the mill.” Jasmine didn’t know why she was so nervous.

Half an hour later, they wandered past a dilapidated stone house and Jasmine halted mid-step to stare at it. It was barely identifiable, trees growing throughout, the front wall a crumbling pile of rubble, the chimney no longer standing. She had to admit Prattston had atmosphere, if nothing else. Jasmine felt her pockets for something. She wanted to sketch it or write a poem about it, commit it to memory somehow, but she had nothing.

“Hey, William, do you have a pen?” she asked. “I think I lost mine in school yesterday. Somebody knocked me over in the hallway.”

William shook his head and scowled. “Someone’s bothering you?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“No,” Jasmine started, with mild embarrassment. “It’s no big deal. They can’t really do anything to me.”

When she looked back up William was right in front of her, inches from

her face. Jasmine drew in a quick, startled breath and then William was grabbing her shoulder, the line of his mouth hard.

“You should be careful, Jas. You need to watch out for people like that,” he said. “People out here can be vicious and close-minded. They don’t care about anything. Stay out of their way.”

“It’s not as if I started it,” Jasmine said, taken aback and slightly insulted.

William looked intense, like he *did* think it was a big deal. Jasmine wasn’t interested in reliving the experience, though, or being lectured on it.

“Fine,” Jasmine said, “I’ll be careful. Stay out of their way.”

They started walking again, winding around past the collapsed walls of what looked like an old, mossy well. Jasmine eyed William with caution, but he’d already calmed down. He was back to leading with determination and once again blended in with the serenity of their surroundings.

The woods behind her grandmother’s house had always been quiet and peaceful, but there were a thousand tiny noises filling Jasmine’s space as she walked: distant birds, something crackling through the undergrowth, the wind in the trees. The woods here were thicker, and the moldering leaves blanketed the forest floor in deep drifts. Jasmine couldn’t believe she’d let William lead her off the path, but she was far too curious to turn back. She herself could barely follow a street map and now she was in the middle of the woods somewhere, following William. She wouldn’t even know if they were lost or not.

She stopped walking. William went on a few more yards ahead before

noticing her.

“Are you alright, Jas?” he called, a strange note in his voice.

“Yes,” she replied, and ran a hand through her hair, trying to appear calmer than she was. He probably knew where they were going. “Uh, is it much farther, to the mill?”

“It’s not far at all,” he said happily. “Plus, I have a surprise for you. I think you’ll love it... but we can take a break if you need to. Do you need a break?” William asked. “It’ll be dark soon, I think, but I can get you back to the school, if you’re worried. The dark doesn’t bother me.”

The ground here was deep with leaves and fallen branches, and smelled rich and earthy when Jasmine overturned it with her shoe. She said, “No, I don’t want to go back.”

William was almost all in shadow now; it was getting late. An uncertain smile flickered across his face, and Jasmine wavered. The purpling sky showed between the branches, and William looked otherworldly standing there, pale against the darkness, a floating lantern against the sky.

“Jas, did you... run away?” William outstretched his arm, motioning towards her knapsack and holding eye contact.

Jasmine’s fingers twitched and she raised her hands to grip the straps. “Did you?”

“No. I didn’t run away.”

“Okay then, neither did I.” Jasmine turned her head to the side and looked off into the distance. She didn’t need to explain herself to a stranger.

When she turned back, William was nowhere in sight. She called out, “William?”

“You seem tired, Jas. Let’s camp out.” His voice carried through the air, sounding distant yet clear.

“All right... where did you go?”

“I’ll be back in a second!”

Jasmine plopped down in a patch of grass at the base of a tree, and began unpacking her bag. She had blankets, but she wasn’t sure they would be enough to keep her warm through the night. She stared into her bag and wondered if she’d made the right choice. She should have been with Grace at that hour. It was too late to change her mind, though, as the moonlight only provided a foot of visibility in front of her. She peered up blearily, and William was back. He looked freezing in his thin shirt; he was shivering, his body blurry and indistinct.

“Do you need help? Did you bring supplies?” he asked.

“I think I’m fine. You look so cold though. Do you want to use one of my blankets?”

“No, I’m used to the cold. And I don’t really sleep that well anyway. I’ll probably just stand guard for you.”

“Oh. Okay.” Jasmine felt very watched as she built a makeshift sleeping bag out of the blankets. She couldn’t see where William’s eyes were pointed, but his stance dissolved enough comfort for her to not be tired anymore. As she rested her head on the roots, she looked up at him, really *looked* at him for the

first time. She couldn't imagine what he was thinking or how he was going to keep himself entertained during the night, although he seemed content with just exploring the woods.

Jasmine could just make out his outline, framed by the stars and branches of tree. He was glowing as if he was made of glass and Jasmine could see the stars through his skin. She squinted and rubbed her eyes, realizing she was more tired than she had thought. But William just looked blurry. Everything around him looked somewhat normal in the darkness, but he was starting to drift apart at the edges. It made Jasmine feel sick, and strange.

"William?" Jasmine asked, hesitant.

William looked up, startled. His eyes had trees in them. Jasmine could see leaves and branches and the forest through William's eyes.

"Oh," William said, and his voice sounded like the wind and the rustling grass. Jasmine felt herself break out into a sweat, cold down to the bone.

William moved towards her, eyes round and upset. "Jasmine, don't freak out, okay? I can explain this."

Jasmine bolted upright, inching backwards toward the tree until she couldn't back up anymore. William gripped her shoulders, his hands icy and solid, his thumbs stroking her collar bones until she closed her eyes. There was a silence broken only by the sound of a squirrel crunching leaves and Jasmine's unhappy, labored breathing. She kept her eyes closed and wished that the terrible dizzy whirling sensation in her body would stop and that William would go away and that she could wake up in bed with this never

having happened.

“You... must be exhausted,” he said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Jasmine nodded and leaned forward, resting her forehead against something that turned out to be William’s shoulder. She opened her eyes and he was kneeling beside her, solid and opaque. Normal, as normal as he could be, with Jasmine’s vision still unfocused. She closed her eyes to quiet her surroundings, and at some point, fell asleep.

In the morning, she saw dead leaves and solid tree trunks, heard wind and distant high school sounds. In the midst of the empty woods, was a human presence, shifting from foot to foot. William, she remembered. Jasmine was at once relieved and indignant as she remembered the previous night. She sat up and folded her arms over her shivering body.

“Where were you yesterday?” croaked her morning voice.

William stopped shifting his weight and responded, “Yesterday? What do you mean?”

“Yesterday, when you asked me... if I’d run away. You were here and then you were just gone. You left me alone.”

“I... must have gone to do something. I’m sorry if I was gone too long. I’m really bad with time.” William looked confused and a little bit worried.

“It wasn’t long.” Jasmine whispered. She looked deeper into William’s eyes, searching for what he wasn’t saying.

“I really am sorry, if you were scared or anything. I wouldn’t ever leave you alone out here on purpose. Sometimes I just... lose track of myself. You

know?” William looked frantic now, begging for forgiveness with his tone. He continued, “But I will always hear you if you need me. If I’m ever gone, if even for a second, just call for me and I’ll be there. I’ll find you, I promise.”

“Call for you?”

“Always. Please forgive me, Jas.”

The subject was dropped. Jasmine wasn’t quite sure what she had been expecting him to say, anyway. Seemingly appeased, William began to help her pick up her things and reorganize them into her pack. They didn’t make eye contact during the process, but he did offer to carry it for her. She declined. Instead, she once again followed him off of the main path, and down a thin, twisted route through the trees. William stayed close this time, holding back brambles and kicking rotting branches out of the way. Pale sunlight fell against the autumn leaves and cast dancing shadows on the back of William’s shirt.

“Short cut,” William said just as Jasmine was about to question whether or not they were on a real trail. And then they stopped by a shallow, fast-running stream. It was about twenty feet across and there was a series of fallen logs wedged in amongst the rocks in a linear pattern. They were visibly shifting in the current and were covered in lichen and fungus; it was not a safe bridge across.

“Are you ready, brave adventurer?” William called over the waters, pulling Jasmine forward. She balked.

“I don’t think so!” Jasmine stood on the bank and stared down at the clear, icy depths. There was a lacy froth where it hit half-submerged rocks, and

swirls of dead leaves drifted past in mysterious hieroglyphic patterns. Before she knew it, William had moved across it, leaving Jasmine to stare in disbelief at both him and the makeshift bridge.

“Come on, Jas!” William hollered across.

“I don’t know if I can!” Jasmine put a tentative foot on the bridge and felt the log roll beneath her. “I’ll just stay here,” Jasmine said. She could turn around, walk away, never see this strange boy again. He couldn’t, and wouldn’t, stop her. But then she would never know if he was okay, if maybe all he needed was a friend to ask. When she thought about all of the possible reasons for William’s isolated tendencies, she was saddened and mesmerized, and had to admit to herself that she was too invested to walk away.

“Come on, Jas, I’ll meet you halfway. Take my hand!”

Jasmine found herself inching out towards William in tiny, careful steps, and then she was pulled to safety. She looked back at the bridge and could barely remember balancing on each log.

“You did it,” William smiled. “And now we’re almost there.”

Jasmine hoped this was true. She looked up and the trees were even thinner. The woods looked insubstantial, as if the late afternoon sunlight was a thin veneer she could scrape away with her thumbnail. It was beautiful, barren, and bleak.

“It’s just around the bend,” William continued, snapping Jasmine out of her trance. “Can’t you hear the river from here?”

Jasmine nodded and continued to follow for a few more paces, before

bumping her shin on a granite cross. She looked down at her affliction, and its cause. The name on the cross had worn away and all she could see through watering eyes was the faint impression of an engraving.

“I call her Beatrice Bones,” William said over Jasmine’s shoulder. He was watching Jasmine intently. “I named all the ones that didn’t have their own names anymore.”

“Yeah?” Jasmine said, grinning. “That’s really kind of you.”

William guided Jasmine over to look at the intricate carving on a stone set into the ground, engraved with willows and urns and a sunburst pattern rising off of the granite. Someone must have planted roses on one of the graves, once, because thorny vines snaked around tombstones and crawled up trees.

“They bloom in spring,” William said. “You’ll like it, it looks beautiful. There’re apple blossoms, too. Careful, don’t slip—it’s kind of mossy here.”

“Okay,” Jasmine said, her worn-in shoes were sliding all over the forest floor.

“Here, look at this one.” He nodded to a nondescript grey tombstone. Standing in the patches of sunlight, William looked even paler than before, like even the cold autumn sun could blister him. He kneeled down to the mossy ground and brushed away some grime from the tombstone before looking up directly into Jasmine’s eyes. He announced, “Jasmine, meet Wendy,” and continued to run his hands over the smooth slate. The words on this one were deeply grooved and still legible. *Wendy Cartmill. September 12th 1951 - July 13th 1967.*

“She was my age,” Jasmine said. Enchanted, she kneeled down, too, and reached out, felt the name beneath her fingers, rubbed a thumb over the deep text and the accompanying engraving of a simple lily.

“Yeah,” William replied, leaning against the stone and flicking his hair out of his eyes. “This is her family plot. You can kind of see the wall around it, but it’s mostly gone. And I guess maybe they planted apple trees in it, on the graves—see, there’s one by each headstone, and they’re the oldest. I guess they spread from there.”

Now that Jasmine noticed it, there were fallen apples strewn about the forest floor, patches of red and reddish brown, and in the trees the apples still hung low and heavy from the bows. She heard crackling and looked up to catch one just as it cascaded down towards her nose. The apple was still warm from hanging in the sun, dappled red and gold. Its surface was more uneven and rough than the fruit she saw in the grocery store. It was real.

“They’re pretty good this time of year,” William told her and watched Jasmine take a careful bite. It was good, William was right. Crisp and tart, with an undertone of honey.

“Anyway,” William said, “the Cartmill family plot is my favorite. What do you think?”

“It’s strange,” Jasmine said around a mouthful of fruit. She bent down to peer at another stone. “You can actually still see the names and dates on almost all of these. It’s eerie.”

“Different kind of stone, and newer,” William said, hands in his pockets.

He was watching Jasmine potter around with an expression she couldn't quite read—hopeful, almost. It made her self-conscious.

“Wow,” Jasmine whispered, crouched down by the last stone, apple sticky and forgotten in her hand. “They all died within... a month of each other. What do you think happened?”

“Something tragic,” William said, and slouched further down a tree trunk.

“Yeah? What makes you think that?” Jasmine asked. “Maybe it was the measles or something.”

“Oh,” William said, hair blowing into his eyes. “I don't really know, just a feeling. Probably read it somewhere.”

“Did you hear that?” Jasmine said, looking behind herself nervously. “I thought... never mind. It was just the wind.” But she could have sworn she'd heard someone laughing, in her ear. Right next to her. She pulled her sweater closer around her. The afternoon light was warm and golden now, slanting through the empty branches, but it was still cold, chilly enough that she wished she'd worn more layers. William just cocked an eyebrow.

The river was rushing past and filling the graveyard with roars and ripples; Jasmine could see it frothing white beyond the last edge of the trees and tombstones. William was half in shadow, and something made her want to draw the scene and commit it to memory. She made a mental note to recreate it later, and she would even add in the Cartmills. Wendy Cartmill, a distant column of smoky charcoal, with the faintest hint of a face, would stand just

past William, who would be completely unaware of her presence. Thinking about it, Jasmine could still swear that someone was laughing. She kept twitching and looking over her shoulder, but nothing was there.

“Can we... go?” Jasmine pleaded, “I can’t shake the feeling—the feeling that...”

“Of course. No need to explain.” William looked around one time and then nodded. He took Jasmine by the hand and lead her away from the plot, toward some crumbling stone buildings on the edge of the river. A rabbit darted away from them as they crashed through the underbrush. It was a dark glossy brown with a white flashing tail and Jasmine, charmed, followed it with her eyes for a few moments before losing sight of it again.

William pushed some branches aside and revealed a door to one of the forgotten stone houses. He made a grand sweeping gesture and motioned Jasmine forward.

“Home sweet home,” he said.

Jasmine stayed put, thinking about what her next move should be. The building was neither sweet nor homey, and definitely not fit for anyone to be living in. She waited in the doorway.

“This is the mill house. No one comes out here, besides some archaeologists a while ago. It’s supposed to be haunted.” William laughed and grinned at Jasmine, but she was still motionless. So he continued, “I sort of fell into hiking when my parents moved out here. I found this place and set up camp. Nothing much else to do here, you know, besides sit at home and mope.”

“I know what you mean,” Jasmine said.

“The emptiness can be hard,” William murmured, and then shook himself. “But it’s better than where I was before. Come on, are you coming in or what?”

Jasmine batted away some cobwebs stretched across the door and peered into the shadowed room. William tugged her inside by the wrist.

“When did your family move to Prattston, anyway?” Jasmine asked, edging inside after him. Maybe the roof wouldn’t cave in. William was rustling around in a corner somewhere, fussing with an old backpack.

“A while back,” he said, emerging from the bag with a dusty bottle of water. “Thirsty?”

Jasmine accepted the bottle, examined it with furrowed brows, and handed it back before pulling out her own. William looked offended, but just for a second. He went back to the corner and left Jasmine standing alone again. Half the building was roofed only by tree branches and tiled with rubble and saplings. On the other side was a blackened fireplace with a sleeping bag tucked up next to it, and a moth-eaten pillow adorning it. A stack of tattered books rested on a makeshift log shelf, and a guitar case leaned on it like a drunken figure. A hand-crank radio and flashlight sat in the middle of a circle of lighters and candles. William’s sole attempt at decoration, it looked like, was the row of colorful glass he’d lined along most of the windows, sunlight casting bright reflections onto the floor. Greens and blues and murky whites, ambers and deep reds, dark browns.

Jasmine touched the glass shards with her hand, and the water-worn edges were smooth against her palm. She hoped William was camping and not actually living out in the woods. One night in the shack seemed too many. But he had dodged the runaway question, just as she had. She thought about returning home that instant, with William, forcing him into the house. It wasn't where either of them wanted to be, but at least it would be warm and out of the wind.

"Found those in the river," William said from behind her, making Jasmine jump and drop the shards with a clatter. "I kept thinking I'd do something with them, but I can never think of what to make. I'm not that creative."

"Yeah?" Jasmine said, and bit her lip, thinking. "I have some good adhesives and frames at home—good for making mosaics. We could go and do that, together?"

"Really? That sounds fun. But I'm really not the artsy type. I can't even draw a stick figure. Maybe you could take some glass with you, though. Make me a mosaic and bring it back to me. I'd love that."

Jasmine pattered with the glass some more, waiting for her mind to clear, and then placed a handful on top of the other things in her bag. William was grinning at her, leaning against the windowsill overlooking the river.

"I found those bottles the other summer on the island," William told her. "There's a lot of cool stuff washed up there. I like the glass best though."

Jasmine tried to imagine what it'd be like to live in the woods, how

starved she'd be for attention, if this was her home, this broken house from three hundred years ago. No television, just the piping of birds, the sound of the river and trees. And it got so dark at night, and cold. It wasn't even winter yet, but it was already chilly—not to the point that frost was on the ground in the morning, but close. Jasmine wanted to say something, something like how long have you been out here, are you okay, let me help—but William couldn't be planning to stay out here, permanently. He couldn't. That'd be insane. She was going to have to say *something*.

“Look, I don't want to pry, William,” she started, staring at her hands, then over at the pathetic sleeping bag, the crumbled remains of a fire. “But... it sort of seems like you're living out here. But you're not, right?”

“Can we not talk about this right now?” William said, voice small. Jasmine cut her eyes over at him; he was all in shadow now and pressing himself into the wall, like he could make himself disappear. “Just... not today.”

“Okay,” Jasmine said quickly, a little ashamed of how relieved she was to let the subject go. “That's fine, just... do you need anything? Like, a place to stay, or food, or something? My auntie wouldn't mind, I—”

“No! No. Thank you, though,” William said, voice quiet and unhappy. “You're—it was nice of you to ask. I can't, though.”

“I mean,” Jasmine said in a rush, “it's not like I'd tell anyone you were here or anything. We're friends, right? I mean, I like you. I think you're great. And smart. Too smart for this. And if there's anything I can do to help—you don't have to tell me now, but just know that I'm here for you.”

The sun was setting and the forest seemed—not darker, but the colors had changed. It was cooler and shot through with crimson. It was amazing how different it could look through the course of a day. It would look like a different place entirely come winter, no bright red and gold of leaves on trees, just dark branches and white snow. And in the spring, she couldn't even imagine. She pictured William running through the sunlight, weaving between trees and picking apples for dinner. She pictured him sleeping beneath the moonlight and bathing in the river, warm, content, and alone.

Jasmine leaned against him and before she could think, she wrapped her fingers around his arm, just below the elbow. She didn't know what her next move would be, but William tried to tug his arm away, so she tightened her grip.

“Jas—what? Come on, what are you doing?” William said, with a brittle laugh. “Let me go.” He made a strangled noise and jerked free. Jasmine stared at him, aware of how hard her heart was thumping in her own chest.

“Are you real?” Jasmine asked, and instead of joking or rolling his eyes, William stopped glaring and just froze. Seconds passed, and he wasn't saying anything, none of the lines or excuses Jasmine expected. He was just staring at her with huge eyes and a panicked expression. “Oh my god,” she said.

“What, I—*am I real?* Of course!” William said, waving his arms in the air. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh,” Jasmine said, disgruntled. It had been a long shot, but she thought she was on to something. William was colorless, solitary, icy, and lived in the

forest. He was practically mythical. “Well, what’s going on then? I’m sorry, but I want you to tell me. I need you to tell me now.”

William moved away from Jasmine. She frowned and tried to inch along after him, until they were back outside of the house.

“Oh god,” William said finally, voice hoarse. “Jasmine, I didn’t—I didn’t want... Who told you? Just, look. Stay calm, okay, you know I’d never hurt you or anything, right?”

“Of course not,” Jasmine said, bewildered. “I just want to know what’s wrong.”

Jasmine watched him pace back and forth through the piles of dried leaves, as he struggled to come up with words. That’s when she noticed—she should have noticed before—he wasn’t making a sound. If Jasmine closed her eyes, all she could hear was William muttering to himself, like hearing a voice filtered through the radio. There were no footsteps, no dead, crackling leaves, just William fighting with himself. Jasmine opened her eyes, and William was there, walking back and forth on top of the crinkly mass, and he didn’t even cast a shadow. No sounds, no shadows.

William noticed her staring and stopped mid stride, mouth twisting.

“Jasmine?” he asked nervously.

“You’re... a ghost, William,” Jasmine breathed out. “Aren’t you?”

William tried to say something, and Jasmine knew she should try to calm down, but she couldn’t.

“Jas,” he said after a moment, his voice breaking. He was staring at her

with an almost alarming intensity, like every iota of his being was focused on her, just on her. She waited. “Just, please. I’m sorry, I–I wanted to tell you, I just didn’t... I don’t have anyone to talk to out here, and you’re the first person that’s ever just thought I was a kid, a normal kid, and–I didn’t want you to *leave*, I –”

“Why would I leave?” Jasmine asked, and took a few steps closer, now that it seemed like William wasn’t going to run away. “I mean, you’re still you. You still stayed with me when you didn’t have to and you still let me see your home.” She reached out and held onto his arm once more, steadying herself. And abruptly, she felt sick. William was a ghost, which meant that William had died. He had died a teenager, in a tee shirt, in the woods. Jasmine couldn’t wrap her head around that part of the story. She could accept that he was dead, but not that he had *died*. For all she knew, she was the first person in over a decade to touch him, to talk to him, or joke with him.

“I’m not going anywhere, I promise,” she said.

“This is just... unbelievable. You have no idea, Jas. Sure, you’re seeing a ghost, but I’m seeing a person too. Finally. No one has ever really seen me like you do. They see a cloud or they hear a voice, but nothing is ever fully materialized for them. I’ve been... so lonely.”

Jasmine listened to him think aloud. She was still holding onto him, partially to make sure of what was happening, but partially to keep William on the same plane. She remembered how terrified she was the previous night, watching him drift in and out of reality, like a storm cloud on the horizon. She

wanted him to stay where she was; she was afraid he could disappear forever. He wasn't homeless like Jasmine had thought, but she wasn't sure if the fact was better than the fiction.

William had long stopped talking and was now looking down at Jasmine's hand on his arm.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... where do you go? What do you do? How long have you been...?"

"Oh," William lifted Jasmine's hand off of his arm and sat down on a nearby rock. He looked into his palms before saying anything again.

"I don't go anywhere and I don't do anything. Sometimes I-I think I'm gone, just vanished into oblivion, free. But then I snap back to the forest. Always. There's nowhere else for me to go I guess. I sit around, I count the leaves. But after so many days of doing the same thing, you're not really doing anything at all."

"How many days?" Jasmine bit her lip at the question. She didn't want to push William too far too fast.

"What year is it?"

"1977."

"It's been... thirteen years."

Jasmine was stunned. For thirteen years, William had been wandering the forest, confined to its vastness. Her heart ached for him. She wondered if

he even wanted to leave anymore, or if he was just used to it. Would he be there forever? Did his family miss him?

“My neck broke,” he said, breaking the silence. “That’s how I died. I thought you might be wondering.”

“*What?* No, I... I wasn’t... I’m so sorry. William, have you told anyone else?”

“Who would I tell? You’re the first person to not run away when I started talking. Right after it happened, I tried to tell a group of campers. I hadn’t even realized I was dead. I just stood up and starting frantically yelling at them, but they looked petrified. I guess I didn’t look too human to them. And after that, less and less people came around. They think the woods are haunted. I guess they are.”

“That’s so horrible, William. I’m... glad you can talk to me. I wish I could’ve helped.”

“And I’m sure you would have, Jas.” William looked up then, and over Jasmine’s shoulder, towards the rushing river. His face became stony as he was hypnotized by the waters.

“William?”

“Huh? I’m sorry. I get lost sometimes.”

“Yeah, I do too.”

“Right,” he started, looking more uncomfortable than ever before. “So, do you want to go home tonight? I can show you the way back to the forest’s edge. You can... tell everyone you’ve been talking to a ghost!”

“No. I’ll stay.”

“It’s getting cold and I saw you shivering all last night.”

“No, I’m not ready to leave yet. I want to talk more. I mean, you haven’t spoken to anyone in a decade, right?”

“Well, I talk to Wendy.”

“Wendy’s real?” Jasmine sputtered. “Wait. She’s a ghost too? Why didn’t I see her?”

“She’s shy,” William replied, the wind starting to pick up. “And she’s stuck in that old cemetery. Both of you would have to be concentrating really hard for you to see her. Even I don’t always see her. She’s just not always there.” William’s face became blank at this. “I hope she doesn’t leave soon. There was another girl, for a little while, but she’s gone now,” William said flatly. Jasmine looked at him and felt a faint twinge of unease, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“I don’t have to try as hard with you,” William said, flexing his fingers, “to look alive. To be solid and everything. I don’t have to concentrate as hard. It’s nice.”

“And what if you stopped concentrating?” she asked.

William scrunched up his face, and at first Jasmine thought he was annoyed by her questions, but then she noticed the edges of his shirt blurring. When he opened his eyes, he looked—like glass—Jasmine thought, like if she held him up to the sun he’d throw William-colored beams of light.

“Wow,” Jasmine breathed, and reached out a hand before drawing it

back, hesitant. William grabbed her wrist, instead. Jasmine could feel her own pulse, beating faster and faster, along with an inexplicable sensation. It was as if she were becoming cold all at once, with extra cold concentrated to her pulse. She could feel her own veins. “Wow,” she repeated, weakly, and then William took his fingers out of her skin. In the next breath, he was firm and solid again.

“You’re really a ghost.” It was a silly thing to say, but it was all Jasmine could think of in the moment. He was a ghost, who could phase in and out whenever he wanted to. He could choose to never show himself to Jasmine again, if he regretted showing himself in the first place. This troubled her.

“Are you going to disappear?” she asked. “I mean, if I leave and come back tomorrow, will you still be here? Will you show yourself to me? Or...” A minute too late, she realized it was a selfish thing to ask.

“Jasmine...” William looked up and watched a bird circle overhead. He looked at the water again, and then back to Jasmine. “I... I’ve really loved getting to know you, but—”

“You’re my only friend.”

“But, you know I won’t be here forever. God, I *hope* I won’t be here forever. And you’re—you’re my only friend too, obviously, but... just because I’m stuck here doesn’t mean you have to be stuck here with me. I want you to leave, and live a life, come back and tell me about it sometime, and then leave again. A ghost friend... isn’t a real friend. Do you understand?”

Jasmine watched him speak, expressionless and numb. On a rational level, she understood exactly what he was saying, and she had thought it

herself too. But still, she didn't want to lose someone she had only just met. She didn't want to lose another person ever again. William noticed the distraught look on her face and took her hand in his, cold but comforting.

“When I was eighteen years old, I absolutely hated this town. I walked around, never looking up, never trying to make friends. I thought the world was against me so I didn't even try. I gave up. I came out here with a backpack full of useless junk and thought I could be a drifter. I was going to cross the river and keep walking as far as I could, hop on a train and live out some sort of nomadic fantasy. But... I never even made it past the river. I slipped on the same mossy logs you were afraid to cross today, and I never took another breath. I was reckless and now I'll never see my family again.”

Disturbed by his bluntness, Jasmine could only manage a “why.”

“Because I saw you yesterday, entering the woods with a huge bag on your back, with the same dejected face I used to wear.”

“Nothing's going to happen to me, William. Really.”

“Are you running away?”

Jasmine thought about telling him the truth, but she hadn't told it to herself yet either. It was true her bag was full of gear she'd need to survive on her own, but she had no idea what she was doing. She hadn't thought that far ahead. She only had the clothes she was wearing. She only had one month's allowance.

“Don't run away, Jas. Turn around and go home. I can't pretend to know what you're going through, but—think about your sister, think about what your

grandmother would have wanted for you.” He paused and put his other hand on top of their already-clasped ones.

“Peace is not an easy thing to find,” he continued. “You may not have it out there; you certainly won’t have it in here. But you have to keep looking, okay?” She nodded.

William led Jasmine out of the forest then. She hesitated at the edge, which she now thought of as a border between her world and his. She stepped across it and turned back around to face him. Lifting one hand up in front of her, she reached forward. Her hand collided with William’s, also outstretched, and he pushed her back. His hand stopped short, though, as if there were an invisible wall between them. He lifted the other up as well, and placed them against the barrier. He was a mime in a box. William was still trapped and now Jasmine was free. She looked back several times as she walked through the parking lot, until all she could see were William’s shining eyes watching her go.



A F T E R L I F E

I dreamt of a voice talking to me from deep inside my body. When I woke up, it was still talking, and I was lost. My left side was hot and pressing against another body. Forming no words, its lips were still. Mine tasted like copper. On my right was a red brick wall and underneath felt just as solid. I dragged my right hand across me until I felt something wet. The voice suggested I look at it. In the darkness, it shined. The heat of my left side spread through me in an instant, but abandoned me altogether in the next.

On the operating table, I flexed my fingers, clumsily trying to hold on. The air moved between them as if it did not notice their presence at all. It no longer recognized the physical representation of life lying in the middle of the sterile room. I wanted to express the emptiness I felt, but at the same time, I felt a kind of certainty. This was it, and I knew it.

Little shapes and forms danced in front of my eyes until I could not stand them any longer. My eyelids dropped, slow and sticky, trying to keep the

enemy out. In my new blackened perspective, I became aware of the sounds around me: terrible noises that I could somewhat distinguish into voices. Shrills and shrieks among one determined, authoritative voice. It told me not to stop flexing my fingers as if just this simple command could hold me down. I kept moving them as pain shot up from my hands through my arms and pounded into my chest.

Something warm was hovering above me that I desperately wished would take the place of the blanket of cold sweat to which I did not want to become accustomed. I needed to see the source of this warmth that was bringing sunlight into my storm.

One eye became unstuck and through the fog, I saw a woman dressed in scrubs. She was breathing heavily and had a look on her face that I recognized as shock. Considering she was inches from mine, I thought I should have been the shocked one. She did not pull away, though. I focused on her mouth and the broken stream of warm air it blew into my face, making it difficult to keep my one eye open. I wondered if she could feel my breath. I wanted her to, if only to prove to myself that it was still flowing. Ignoring the knives in my chest, the ripping in my side, and the bricks on my throat, I raised my head as high as possible until our mouths touched. Her breath filled my body but it did not last. And as it left, I knew mine would too. I felt heavenly as I lowered myself back onto the table.

One of us gasped. It was the nurse I supposed, but it could have come from the patient staring at me with one eye open. I hovered above them for a

moment, vaguely recognizing the frozen face, before letting myself be lifted through the ceiling. I wished I could study it longer, the angelic features contorted in pain and confusion. I knew it was me down there. I reached an arm out, once again trying to hold on, but this time there was nothing I could feel but the air blending in with my fading fingers.

I forgot who I was while I was sleeping. But I tried to remember. I thought about who I was before, where I lived, what I owned, who I knew, what happened to me. Why it happened. I quickly learned that names and faces were the first to go. I remembered walking down a darkened street, falling to the ground, waking up in a hospital. I couldn't remember who was walking next to me, holding my hand, who tried to catch me and protect me. As hard as I looked into my past, the details fell away as quickly as the world below me.

I thought about what seemed to be the only logical thing left: creation. Who, or what, knew exactly how to fit things together in a way that made everything seamlessly work? If I were leaving earth, did I have any control left? Could I control my journey; could I control others? I didn't know if I wanted to do either of those things, but I wanted the option. I wanted to believe that I, as a complex human being, had the remaining mind power to halt myself mid-air and sink back into a warm body, just long enough to remember names and faces and maybe say goodbye to one or two of them.

As I watched the tops of heads become tops of houses and the tops of houses become tops of trees, I refocused onto my own form, the only familiar thing. And yet, it was just as unrecognizable as every stratum through which I

passed. Underneath my skin, I knew there should have been muscles and veins, organs and bones. I could glide one hand through the other and know that all of that was gone now. It left when I left. There was nothing beyond the faint shapes of my limbs that appeared to have been crudely filled in with dull colored pencils. No blood, just skin that slightly stood out against the purple skies. Night was falling and I wanted to go home.

Home. It became my new focus. I tried to picture a town with little cars and manicured shrubbery. A soccer team sitting at a pizza parlor after a Saturday victory. I tried to picture a street lined with bicycles and skateboards, coming to an abrupt end at the cul-de-sac. I tried to picture a house, a familiar space filled with warmth and love. I tried, but I couldn't see these things. Everything I came up with in my mind was just that: something I came up with. It wasn't my home and I couldn't be sure that I even had a home. Would someone from such a town have found themselves on a darkened street, in the wrong place at the wrong time? Would their life have pitifully ended in a bright room surrounded by strangers who were paid to help? I suddenly remembered a string of words: *I want to die in my big comfy bed surrounded by friends and children and a bunch of grandchildren.* I shut my fluttering eyelids.

There was a voice, a much softer voice than before. I could hear it muttering sentences like this and I smiled as I realized I was having a real memory, some clue to my past. It was a female voice, old and shaky. It was telling me to clean my room and to not be scared to speak up in class and to have fun in college and to not take life too seriously. I had someone who cared

about me. I wondered where they were now. Were they standing in the hospital hallway waiting to greet me with flowers and balloons? A part of me selfishly hoped they were as ethereal as I was, waiting for me beyond the clouds. But I only wished this for a moment. Still, things were finally coming back to me.

It almost seemed fitting that while I was becoming more and more immaterial, material items pushed their way back into my mind. Each one evoked a different emotion, a visceral response that propelled me higher into the sky. I saw stacks of books, all of varying ages. The ones with yellowing pages and creaky binding were my favorites. I wanted to run my hands over the spines, although I couldn't remember any of the titles. Still, I must have loved to read. Among the stacks, almost invisible in its minuteness, was a leather-bound journal. The pages were puffed up due to most of them being folded or crinkled; it was well loved. There was a key sticking out of the middle of it, used for a makeshift bookmark most likely. What did it open? There, on the corner of a desk, a small silver chest with a dusty lock. It had red felt lining to protect jewelry and I could almost feel the cold necklaces draped around my neck. I reached a hand up to touch the invisible locket that I somehow knew belonged there, resting between my collarbones. Inside of it would have been a small, folded, handwritten note.

Remembering these things made my empty chest ache. I was inside of my bedroom but outside of my time. *Who we are can be measured by what we leave behind*, she said. Did I leave behind anything other than myself? I hoped so. I hoped and hoped until I was able to see things floating in front of me,

things that seemed infinitely more real than the bedroom I had imagined. I didn't dare try to touch any of them; I wanted them to travel with me and keep me safe. I let their auras surround me and guide me along.

A memory box, filled mostly with birthday cards and elementary school Valentine's Day cards, positioned itself underneath my feet and allowed me to stand upon it. It was the sturdiest thing in my life, since I had lost my life. As I looked down at it, it became almost as transparent as I was, blending in with my being. I could see the meaningless notes and one sacred love letter, all cushioned inside of the overstuffed box. There were leaves pressed into pages that had forgotten to be properly labelled and were now just perennial memories of any places in any time. Maybe I was a perennial memory.

A withered magnolia placed itself behind my left ear. I couldn't feel the tickle of its satin petals, but I knew it was there for a reason. It wanted to be revived just as much as I did; we waited for water and sunlight that would never come again. Seeds fell from the center of the flower, rolled down my feathered legs, bounced off of the box, and plummeted toward my body. They would live to bloom again. I realized that by remembering these objects, I was only looking downwards instead of upwards; I wasn't moving on. They were keeping me grounded—a comforting thought—but new things were on my horizon. Boats looked like birds and the skies looked like seas, and above me was blackness with just a tinge of light around the edges. That's where I was meant to be. Perhaps these things were causing me homesickness when I was

already home. They were from another lifetime, someone else's lifetime. I could no longer remember what it felt like to drift away from earth. Was it cold?

The voice was now closer than before, whispering into my ear. *Are you ready?* It asked, and I answered with a nod. As the pieces of what I used to be fell away from my formless being, I was wrapped in a bright warmth. It tightened its grip, preparing me to cross a great barrier into a new world. My eyes were closed but with the rest of my senses, I knew I would be safer than ever before. When I was released, she took my hand and we smiled at each other, recognizing ourselves as former family. Reunited again. I didn't miss anything or anyone because I knew I could see it all whenever I looked down and focused hard enough. I would try to protect those who were unable to protect me.