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Senior Projects Fall 2022

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Fall 2022

## birdwork

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**birdwork**

**Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature & The Division of Multidisciplinary Studies  
of Bard College**

**by  
Masha Kurbatova**

**Annandale-on-Hudson, New York**

**December 2022**



*For Vera.*

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### **death of the clown**

The clown's death came unexpected. Just hours ago, we partied. Oaks and birches and maples surrounded us, heaving green and breathing water. The Farm lay where the trees cleared, with eight rows like scars in the soil, all twisted with weeds and vegetables. Our bonfire rose five feet tall upon rocks. Fifteen of us gathered around, merry on the last night of summer. Our bellies drooped heavy with potato stew and our heads were warm with drink. I sat cross-legged in the dirt, exhausted from dancing. My face glowed orange under flames. My pinky lay mere inches from Devon's. I was happy.

There were two clowns. August had colorful clothes and played the lute. Whitman wore black and white and sang. After music, they did the egg gag. It wasn't funny. None of their acts were. But that night, we others laughed at them anyway, celebration and alcohol untying our internal knots. The five loggers were the loudest, shrieking and wiping away tears. They were leaving the woods the next day because their season was over; their goodwill was particularly potent.

Whitman was the sophisticated clown. He performed bossy, showing August how to do things right – in this case, crack eggs. August was sloppy. He messed up in ridiculous ways – in this case, broke plates instead. Baba Sonya, who sat watching on a log, would normally object to wasting dishes like this. But when the loggers left, there would be fewer to feed. So, she let the clowns have their fun.

My insides spun like warm laundry. Love for all these people crashed into bitter impermanence. We – Michael, Devon, and I – were ten weeks into a three-month mission. Soon, our time too would end. We three would be back in The City, and would never see the clowns, or the loggers, or the farmers, or Baba Sonya and her granddaughter Marina ever again. I doubted I'd ever see the woods again, either, and why fall in love with people and places I had to leave?

My eyes slid left to catch Devon's silhouette. He wore a suit and tie now, even amongst trees. I still remembered him as a teenager in all-black, with triple-pierced earlobes and bangs down to the cheekbones. He since let the piercings close, and kept cropped, short hair. He looked like any other programmer for FutureTech. Only presence of the past: a faint tattoo on his exposed wrist, a stick-and-poke of MERMAID MEATGRINDER's logo. How we once moshed to that band.

Devon stood to haul more firewood. Men, I realized, are most attractive when they carry heavy things. Doesn't matter what, or where. Marina's wide eyes followed him. To me, she was a baby deer. Now that I've seen live ones and not just City holograms, their resemblance to Marina was complete: big forehead softly tapering to a pointed chin, long and thin limbs splayed every way, black eyes curving with long lashes. She squatted at her grandmother's – Baba Sonya's – feet, transfixed by Devon feeding chopped tree trunks to the flames. I recognized that look: I wore the same vulnerability around him years ago. But I was twenty-six that night, no longer adolescent, and refused to be so scared an animal in anyone's presence.

A slow, steady beeping, like an annoying, artificial heart: it came from my pocket, then Devon's. We both took out our hologram trackers.

"What's that sound?" Marina asked, pleading eyes on Devon.

"The holograms must be close." Devon looked at me. "They've never been close. Our trackers have never caught them before."

"What should we do?" I asked. Anxiety rippled cold through my drunk, warm body. Devon and I were on-call that night. We weren't supposed to drink, or be distracted.

"Barbara said if the beeps are a second apart, that means the holograms are a mile away," Devon reasoned.

I counted the seconds: “These are five apart. So, the holograms are five miles away? Should we go look for them?”

The government paid us to track rogue holograms, those glitches that escaped into the forest. For weeks, Michael and Devon and I waited, and watched for their activity, studying our trackers and monitors. After weeks of static, I was biding time until I’d return to The City. I stopped thinking we’d actually find them.

“Do *you* think we should look for them?” Devon asked, his gaze level on me. “You’re the bird expert here.”

“I’m not an expert. I pull pigeons out of office buildings. I’ve extracted baby owls once. And these aren’t real birds! They’re just holograms.”

“But they’re made to act like real birds, right? And they’re learning new things all the time.”

“Yeah.”

“Both Michael and I think that’s why they escaped in the first place, right? The holograms think they’re real now, and that they belong in the woods. So that’s why I’m asking you: what would we do if these were real birds?”

My brain was slow and stupid, soaked with wine. I tried remembering those old animal control jobs: what *did* we do about real birds? Marina, still on the ground, stared up at me like a scared child.

“Well,” I began, “Barbara said one of the holograms was an owl. If it is actually becoming more and more like a real owl, its hearing would be too good, and we have no chance of sneaking up on it. We’d better wait for it to take the bait and land in the trap.”

“Take the bait. Okay.” Devon nodded. “You should tell Michael though.”

Michael still sat at the table, now strewn with half-empty jars of blackcurrant wine. Noel, one of the loggers, was beside him. They were far from the fire, two blue men chatting quietly.

Every party at The Farm, Michael did this, perching far off from the crowd, attaching himself to one person, and spending all night in some corner, discussing something serious. Interrupting them felt like breaking into sacred space, but still, I approached. I held out my tracker.

“The holograms are here,” I told them. “Well, kind of. Like five miles away.”

Michael rubbed his beard. A month into our mission, he’d given up shaving.

Concerned, he asked: “Should we go look for them?”

“I told Devon we should wait for it to land in the trap. It’s probably the owl, if it’s moving around at night. It would hear us coming,” I replied.

“I’m still not so sure the trap will work.”

I was annoyed. For weeks, Michael and Devon were locked in fraternal brawls of intellect, convincing each other that this or that theory about the holograms was right, and as soon as we all agreed on something, one of them would throw in a corollary, an exception, a counterargument they now considered correct. All week prior, both insisted we didn’t need to roam so far when we tracked, that the holograms would take the bait – rats in cages with invisible walls, trapped inside by electric currents, hammered onto trees. The holograms were projections from teeny hovering drones the size of a fingernail; flying into these cages would shut off the image, and leave only the drone inside, neutralized. At least, that was how Devon explained it.

“Michael, look: I don’t know as much about holograms as you or Devon,” I said, growing angry under Noel’s amused gaze, “But you two said the traps would work last week. What’s changed since?”

“You’re right, we did say that. I’m just worried if the holograms get away, and we never register them on the tracker again. But if both you and Devon agree...” He put up two open palms, defeated.

Noel squinted at me. “Michael was just telling me about that massive pigeon infestation you dealt with in The City. That’s impressive stuff. You don’t kill the birds, do you?”

“No, no. I could never kill a living thing. Except for rats. And roaches. But the pigeons, we release them over The City wall, back out into the wilderness.”

Noel asked, “Are the pigeons able to survive in the wilderness? After they spend their whole life in The City?”

“I’ve never thought about it.” I was uncomfortable under Noel’s purple-wrinkled eyes. I changed the subject: “You two should come watch the clowns. They’re doing the egg thing.”

“Honestly, I’m scared of clowns,” said Michael. I laughed. He didn’t.

“Are you, really?” I asked.

“Coulrophobia. I get sweaty and I feel like I’ll pass out. I heard once that human brains are good at detecting lies, and it scares them when people are being dishonest. Many clowns aren’t happy people, but they pretend to be. And on some primal level, we know they’re pretending, and it’s scary.”

Michael looked earnest, even grave. I choked back a laugh: “I’d argue those guys are happy, though. No need to fear.”

Michael shook his head. The pits of his shirt already pooled with perspiration.

Back at the bonfire, I saw Devon in the dirt by Marina. Her knee atop his. I sat beside Baba Sonya on the log, and tried not to listen as he whispered to Marina.

What if Devon was being too calm about the holograms? What if Michael was right, and we'd lose track of them forever? No point in looking though, I supposed, if we really did have an owl on our hands.

The clowns went on. Whitman was in his gorgeous, crisp pantsuit, the collar spreading daisy-like around his neck; he'd kept that costume pristine after years in the wilderness. One black-paint eyebrow curled like a comma on his temple, and his feet were tucked into delicate, heeled shoes. August wore puffy, rainbow-splattered, ill-fitting pantaloons. His shoes slapped around, too big. The general thematic outline, as I understood it, was the same for every skit. August was always the butt, and Whitman was the dainty foot kicking it. August did things wrong, but won out in the end, by accident outsmarting the other clown each time.

I wasn't jealous of Marina. I wasn't. In The City, I'd spent the past four years comfortably, worrying for no one but my friends and my roommates and my grandmother; romance was a fantasy long dispelled. Still, the old familiar ache tugged at my insides as Marina's fingers slid over Devon's.

The beeps came faster from my pocket. Three seconds apart. Three miles was how far away the traps lay. Perhaps my plan would work. But then, two seconds apart. One. I held the bee-buzzing tracker in my hand. By the fire, Marina's head on Devon's shoulder. Devon reached for his tracker, but gently, so her head would not roll off. The beeps were so close they made a single tone.

A bird from above. An owl, with talons stretched forward; that was how toddlers asked for things, just blindly grabbing. It dove down. Claws on white-painted flesh. Pristine cloth stained red. Screams, maybe from August, maybe from Marina, maybe me. Whitman swatted at the bird tearing into his face.

I couldn't understand. Certainly, the owl was a hologram; how was it drawing blood?

August tried to help. I reassured him of this days later, when his mind failed to produce any recollection of the incident. I saw him, August, hitting the owl with his fat fists in comically oversized gloves. He tried, he really did, to save Whitman. But the hooks had plunged in too deep.

When Whitman crumpled, soil staining his collar, he was still fighting. And then, he wasn't. I last saw the owl with a meaty chunk dangling from its beak. Its hollow gaze landed coolly on me. Then, the hologram spread into silent flight. Minutes passed, and the beeps slowed. Five seconds between them.

We had two weeks left before the vans could come back for us from The City. No one had told us the holograms turned violent.





**in the city**

I left The Farm with Michael and Devon. We swatted tree branches and watched for sudden divots in the ground, clawing through the night from The Farm to Base Camp. My companions were not strong. Still, better two weaklings beside me than no one at all. Foolishly, I had ceased to fear the forest some time back. Now, the original, reptilian horror returned, my every organ strained and humming, alert and shaking. The tracker in my pocket had fallen silent, and somehow, that was worse.

Base Camp was three cabins arranged in a “U.” It was a mile from The Farm, on the back side of a tree-studded slope. The radio transceiver was in the middle cabin, in Michael’s room. Only he could operate it.

“Sorry for the mess,” said Michael, holding open the door to his bedroom. We tip-toed over scattered socks and protein bar wrappers. On his desk sat the transceiver, a black box studded with buttons and knobs – our only connection to The City.

“Barbara, this is Base Camp. Over.” Michael spoke slow and clear into the microphone. No reply.

He tried again: “Barbara, this is Base Camp. Over.”

A crackle from the box, then: “Base Camp, this is Barbara. Stand by. Over.”

Then: “Base Camp, this is Barbara. Go ahead. Over.”

A two-way radio etiquette guide was taped to the transceiver, the first suggestion being: THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK. Michael paused. He watched moonlit tree shadows dance on the wall. Devon and I breathed on his neck.

Here was the issue: Barbara worked for the government, and as contracted employees, we three did too. The government frowned upon illegal forest settlements, which The Farm certainly was.

How could we report the death of a non-taxpaying runaway without getting everyone else still there in trouble?

Michael said into the microphone: “Barbara, there’s been an issue with the holograms. We have reason to suspect they’re dangerous. Over.”

“Base camp, please explain. Over.”

I glanced at the etiquette guide. Of the Four Golden Rules of Radio Communication, CLARITY and SIMPLICITY came first.

“Barbara, one of the holograms killed someone tonight. Over.”

“Base camp, please explain. I still don’t understand. Over.”

“Barbara, we’re not safe! A person has died. We need to leave. Over.”

“Base camp, who was it? Over.”

SECURITY was the third Golden Rule of Radio Communication. Ours wasn’t a private frequency. One had to be vigilant of the information passed on.

“Barbara, it was a civilian. Not one of us though. We’re not sure of the victim’s identity. Over.”

“Base Camp, can you also clarify how a hologram killed someone? It is only projected and reflected light. Over.”

Michael and I looked to Devon. Back in The City, he had been employed by FutureTech’s hologram department. The potential of holograms for corporeality was his particular, even fanatical, even conspiratorial, interest. The simplest of conversations with him could devolve into monologues of obscene length, lectures whose details were lost on me, as I suspected they would be on Barbara. But, the fourth Golden Rule of Radio Communication was BREVITY.

Michael passed the microphone to Devon, who said, “Barbara, this is Devon from Base Camp. To keep it brief, if photons in the hologram are dense enough, they can become material. Over.”

Barbara's voice came out strained. She wanted us to be liars. "Base Camp, why would a hologram kill someone? Even if it was material. These are educational tools. They're not programmed to be violent. Over."

Now Michael and Devon looked at me. I had a sloppy hypothesis for Whitman's death, based on a few owl encounters on animal control jobs. I hoped Barbara understood the significance of me talking: with two computer-crazy men, I seldom got to speak on technical matters.

The microphone was in my hands: "Barbara, as I understand it, the AI in these holograms is programmed so they mimic real birds as much as possible. They learn more and more each day, and that's how they become lifelike. And, I think, the holograms that have escaped The City so far think they're real birds who belong in the woods. They're out here, and probably gathering more data than ever before on what a real bird ought to act like. This one is an owl, and there have been cases of owls attacking people before. Over." There go all the Golden Rules.

I didn't add my most outlandish theory: the owl had attacked because it saw Whitman crack eggs. A hologram's glitch powered by artificial animal instincts, and the owl wanted to defend its young from the clown's deft hands.

"Base camp, stand by. Over," said Barbara.

The frequency fell silent.

"Michael," I said, "Next time she comes on, you have to ask her to let us go home ASAP. She's gonna try to negotiate something, just watch."

We were vulnerable then. Hypnosis only works on those susceptible. Barbara trapped people on their bad days, and could convince them to do anything – just like she caught me three months ago, back in The City. Were I in a better mood then, I wouldn't be in the woods come

summer's end. But that was the day a boy got bit by a rat, a very bad day. I would have believed anyone who came offering an escape.

We sat on our hands – Michael in his chair, Devon and I on the floor – waiting for Barbara to tune in again. Meanwhile, I told my story of the day I met her; they needed to know her tactics. Her hypnosis couldn't work again.

That day in The City began sleepless. My roommates had fought all night. Mi threatened to divorce Don because her dog ate his pipe. Theirs was a court battle with no lawyer, just me and the hairy big mutt as tired and silent witnesses, him chewing kibble and me sipping grainy coffee, waiting for them to finish yelling so Don could drive us three humans to work. This fight, I knew, would last through the day: my roommates were also my colleagues.

Don's case came first. His appetite for marijuana was ravenous, yet he lacked the tools and skills to properly consume it. He carved pipes from our produce, usually carrots and apples, fumigating our apartment with his smoke, which Mi claimed was corrosive to the dog's lungs. He, in return, cited stress: a fast-paced job, a city that never stopped screaming, and a wife that didn't either. He needed weed, as bad as Mi needed the dog.

Bibby was once a stray, trapped by the pound as a puppy and put to work. They taught him to sniff for rats. Really, he shared our profession in animal control. Mi adopted him. He came with us to work sometimes. Usually though, he was on pest control duty for the apartment.

At home, Bibby was a menace. The dog left fine brown hairs on every surface, and drooled in thick webs on our legs. When left alone, he whined, uninterrupted for hours. The neighbors hated him, and us by extension. Mi argued that Bibby brought value. Don disagreed. He was allergic to dogs too.

The night before, Don smoked more than usual. Our sparse furniture blurred under his fog. He left an apple pipe on the counter. Bibby jumped up and ate the fruit and all its ash. Then, he started throwing up. Mi said the events were connected. Don said she was bonkers and the dog never behaved right and got sick for attention. I just finished spraying down the last wet remnants of Bibby's vomit from our floors.

"I'm really gonna do it this time, Don. I'm filing for divorce."

"Okay. Bring me those papers! I'll have my pen ready!"

They would never divorce. The joint income was too sweet, and the apartment too well-located, and neither could break their lease. In The City, space was scarce, and you squeezed in where you could, with whomever you could.

In my lap, Bibby's brown head still smelled horrible. I scratched his ear. I felt bad for him. A baby once abandoned, now forced to work. He was, quite frankly, not cute, and only little lapdogs of the rich had a shot at luxury. There was hardly room for humans in The City, even less for big dogs who didn't sniff for peanut allergies or scare intruders. Thus Bibby, like the rest of us, had to earn his keep.

Don and Mi caught their breath. I slid into the pause: "We should get going, guys."

It was a hot and bright May day then, with sunlight swallowed by concrete, then radiated out from walls and roads. Cars inched along, horns and drivers crying out. The sidewalks were stampeded by hundreds of naked legs carrying sweaty faces. My mood was foul; I handled heat poorly.

We went in the van. Don drove, and I was sandwiched between the couple. Our feeble air-conditioning sputtered, breathing in hotness, expelling lukewarmness. My forehead cried sweat into my eyes. Mi's elbows poked my ribs. Don's thighs spread dough-like into mine.

Traffic crawled slow. We watched through the windshield as a giraffe hologram crossed the street, its long legs unhurried on the crosswalk. Impatient pedestrians walked through it. When I was a kid, the holograms were crude, and rippled when things passed through them. Not anymore; the giraffe's image didn't falter as humans' heads brushed through its belly. They also once had only birds, species local to the woods beyond city walls. Now, they had the fauna of other continents, from places few of us could ever really visit.

In the van, no one talked. It grew hotter with swallowed anger. I flipped on the radio news. That's when I learned about the boy. A mother and her six-year-old waited for the train, then a moment of neglect on the mother's part – perhaps eyes rubbed with exhaustion, a wistful look at a handsome stranger, even just a gaze unfocused – the boy wriggled free from her hand. He squatted, a curious creature inspecting the ground. The mother grunted, *get up, the floor is dirty, take my hand*. She made no move to pick him up. Something scurried by the boy, small and furry, unseen up high by grown-up eyes. He'd never seen live rats before. He thought it was a hologram. His chubby hands reached forth – the kids get such delight from watching their own bodies pass through the holograms – but this rat attacked, real teeth on the boy's real cheeks.

The rat infestation was at its worst in ten years. The animal control budget was slashed nonetheless. FutureTech got subsidies for the holograms, and the money had to come from somewhere. At least we had hyper-realistic crocodiles in the subways, I guess.

Mi worked in the animal control office; Don and I worked in the street. We dropped her off, then went underground, to the subway station, where heat condensed and stunk and seeped into my scalp and every open crevice. Fewer people down there than on the sidewalk, at least. One was a custodian.

“There's not enough poison in The City to kill all the rats,” he said.

“I’m sorry?”

“You heard me. Y’all can try, but it won’t work. They’ll come back stronger.” The custodian was a neon sun in that dim station. His vest screamed orange. He stood skeptical, watching Don and I work. We hid black boxes of poison in strategic places: lethal Easter eggs, one under the bench, one beside the trash can.

“We’re just doing our job,” said Don. “Government told us to put down rat traps, and that’s what we’re doing.”

“Bah!” The custodian spat. “They’re all in a tizzy because that boy got bit. Once the reporters leave, who cares! They won’t really do anything. What y’all really should do is sterilize them. I saw an article, right? They put this ointment in the traps instead of poison, and the rats eat it, and they can’t have babies. Isn’t that smart? That’s what the other cities are doing. We’re behind.”

“Yep. Once the budget gets approved, we’ll ask for rat birth control,” I said, saluting the man.

We left the subway station with its steamy garbage air whooshing and swirling with every passing train. Our van was stalled by the station entrance, the engine still purring. I leaned against its door, and Don’s sweaty fingers landed on my shoulder. He squeezed.

“Hey, you doing okay?” He asked.

“Yeah, yeah.”

My eyes puffed like plums. I craved sleep. I wished the smell of dog would leave my hands. I wished we hadn’t spent all morning trapping rats. I’d been proud of my track record: seven years on the job and no animal harmed. The custodian was right: had the government commissioned us earlier and let us use alternative methods, we wouldn’t be killing. The rats just wanted privacy and peace. But there were too many, and they spilled out into the dim subway light, where everyone watches everyone, and bad behavior is punished. Nothing a rat can do will ever be



considered good. According to most, they must die. Of course it was a matter of time before they collided with people, and someone got bit.

Other – non-rat – animals, we brought to the wall. It surrounded The City’s parameter, with a chute made special for us: down went racoons and squirrels and opossums, back into the wilderness they came from. Even forty years ago, this separation didn’t exist. Grandmother told me people could leave their cities then. People lived in enclaves between forests and cities, in sprawling tumor-like developments that were neither urban nor wild. It was bad; only decoupling could save our precious little green. World governments signed The City Mandate. People had to condense, quickly, into nearest urban centers. Few had permission to leave: only certain jobs, like loggers, cycled through the woods.

Don drove us back to the animal control office. It occupied a corner of the second floor of a thirty-floor building, and sat atop a dog shelter. Sounds and smells drifted up through the vents. The dogs were loud that day, whining under heat. The fluorescent lights buzzed, flickering atop potted plastic plants. Mi was our receptionist, with a phone cradled between her head and shoulder.

“Mi,” I asked, “Is the air conditioner really not working in here?”

“I called the repair people. They’re booked through next week.”

Don came stomping after me. “Hi, baby,” he cooed at Mi.

Mi frowned. “Don’t fucking ‘baby’ me. I’m gonna file for divorce, Don. I’m so serious. You could’ve killed Bibby.”

The routine began again, like a never-ending game of tennis, ball smacked back and forth with grunts. Our only other employee, Melvin, listened, amused, neglecting his paperwork to swivel his head back and forth, watching the verbal ball bounce side to side. Sleeplessness dragged

down my eyelids; I wished for privacy, bad, somewhere I could look at no one, and never be looked at.

Behind Mi's reception desk was our office's sole private room. But before I could dip inside, Mi called my name. "There's someone here for you."

And thus, I met Barbara. She wore a gray wool suit that day.

"Aren't you hot?" I blurted out.

Her magenta-smearred lips smirked. "It is a bit toasty, isn't it?"

She sat on one of two plastic chairs in our informal waiting area. She patted the empty seat beside her.

"Are you..." Her finger trailed a printed list of names, landing on my name. The paper bore City government letterhead.

"Yeah, that's me." I replied. "What's this list? Am I in trouble?"

"No, no." She dropped the paper in her lap. Her ankles crossed primly. "You have an impressive track record in this department. That pigeon infestation you dealt with last year – that was really something."

Indeed, it had been in the news. "Oh, it was nothing."

Barbara continued, "I work for the City government, just like you."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a liaison between the mayor's office and FutureTech."

"FutureTech? Like the programmers for the holograms?"

"Holograms are one of their offered services, yes." Barbara smiled again. It was unsettling.

She continued: "How would you like to double your salary? I have a job offer for you."

"I don't know anything about holograms."

“You don’t need to. We are interested in your animal behavior expertise.”

“I wouldn’t call it that. I bring animals out of apartment buildings into the woods.”

“Yes, the woods.” Again, damn smile. “Are you interested in going beyond City limits?”

“Are you recruiting me for logging?”

“No. But this job would house you in the same Base Camp loggers use. This is further than most civilians can ever dream of going.”

“I can’t say I ever really dreamed of going to the forest,” I said, wiping perspiration from my nose. Barbara focused on me, cat-like.

“It is much cooler in the forest,” she said. “The trees provide shade, and there’s no concrete to absorb heat.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. But isn’t it dangerous out there?”

“It’s no more dangerous than The City. Much fewer people.”

Don remained by Mi’s desk, elbows spread over its surface. His face was inches from hers, and the couple whispered, angry. Then Mi smashed a stapler to punctuate a point.

“No, Don! You’re such a fucking idiot!”

“Are they always like this?” Barbara asked, disapproval crinkled between her eyebrows.

“Yeah. I live with them too, so I don’t really get a break.”

Barbara studied the couple’s feverish whispering.

“There are several cabins at the Base Camp,” she told me. “You’d have your own room, and your own space.”

“For how long?”

“The project is scheduled for three months.”

“And what is the job, exactly? It’s more animal control stuff, just beyond The City?”

“In essence.”

Not necessarily a lie, but not the whole truth either. Barbara had been right: it was indeed cooler in the woods, with fewer people, and I did have my own room in the cabin. The pay wasn't double my animal control salary, though, at most 50% more. But the real lie came after I confessed my discomfort with killing rats. I should have known: Barbara's government office had a reputation to protect. Of course she told me the woods would be free of violence. If I stayed back in The City, my next years would be consumed with subway rat-trapping, that's what she said. Maybe I wouldn't have agreed if I could think straight, and my brain wasn't stewing under the heat.

And so, as we huddled over the radio transceiver, in Michael's bedroom, at Base Camp, in the forest beyond City walls, and Barbara's voice sputtered out from the frequency static, I wasn't even a little bit surprised at her words: “Base Camp, I must ask you to extend your mission. You will be in the woods another three months, or as long as it takes to properly complete the mission. Over.”

**kimmy's cone ice**

No one told us to pack warm clothes. We thought we'd be in the woods for only a summer. Then autumn crept in like rot. Dead leaves smothered the forest floor. Rains seeped into old wood, pooled atop grass, flushed the river banks full. Heat didn't dispel fast; the days were still bright and the sun glared merciless at our skin. Nights were an issue: when the sun stole away, the forest breathed icy, and we shivered in our sleep, hiding under t-shirts and thin blankets.

The farmers gave us only one space heater. Autumn began their season of selfishness. Baba Sonya and Marina, the farmers – Bo and Nathaniel and Sharon – and August, the remaining clown, had to worry about making it through winter themselves. They couldn't squander supplies on me, Michael and Devon. And anyway, after Whitman died, trust seemed to have broken between our groups, as if we brought the hologram down on the clown. We left one hologram tracker permanently at The Farm, for their safety, but it was feeble compensation for a life lost.

Barbara had reassured us three: the cabins were well-stocked, enough cans and bottles for many more months. It was embarrassing, how quickly she had convinced me to stay longer. Her offer was sweet: a pay increase. I could rent my own apartment later. I talked myself into it; I could survive in the forest a bit longer.

Michael was convinced the same way. In The City, he lived with his mother. Many people did; it made little sense to leave guaranteed housing. Something was off between them, though. Michael wanted out. Extra pay was seductive.

Devon, I learned, did have his own apartment. His position back at FutureTech had been more prestigious than Michael's, with a chunkier salary. He could already afford solo renting. He had his own reason for staying, though. Marina.

I felt so fucking stupid. I've seen him do the exact same thing years ago: fall fast and hard for a pretty woman. I understood the appeal: Marina was beautiful, sweet, and heiress to Baba Sonya's blackcurrant grove. I just thought, stupidly in retrospect, that Devon and I both landing in the woods after years apart was no coincidence. I thought it was a second chance.

Blackcurrants were an illegal crop; they carried fungus that threatened the logging industry's trees. Unauthorized agriculture of any kind was illegal, really, but Baba Sonya's was profitable in black market trade. She sold her berries illicitly to government officials as a health elixir. Sometimes they traded for gadgets: Baba Sonya had a pressure canner now, to seal her jams tighter and for longer. She even got a CD player for Marina.

I'd seen her and Devon crowd that ancient device, both bobbing slowly to one of her two albums, old pop music with the vapid kind of canned electronic beat Devon once claimed to hate.

I remembered him and I in those pretentious days, as adolescents working at Kimmy's Cone Ice. The store owner had been a turkey-jerky man, dried meat made more dry, named not Kimmy, and his establishment was beige and barren, lit by dusty sunlight and fluorescence, decorated with only the red-scrawled menu of twenty-two snowcone flavors. One table inside, white plastic square on a metal leg. We weren't allowed to give customers extra forks, or extra napkins. I think the owner would fine people if they breathed too much inside. Few people passed through. Even the store owner was seldom around.

Devon and I dressed the same then: sweeping black pants jangling with chains, black-smearred eyes, teeny black shirts with skulls that clung tight to the torso. Half our Kimmy's money was converted into fishnet gloves and chain necklaces and ponderous leather boots. On weekends, we went to D-Growth to dance.

As a venue, D-Growth was disgusting. Doors opened, wafting out sweat smells and vapors of stale beer. The venue was squashed under an unnamed concrete building with rows of little windows, just slices in its stony face, the glass gleaming black against the night. D-Growth's exterior was poorly kept, one flickering streetlight losing the fight with darkness, and grime coated its brick walls. Lined around the block were dozens of cross-armed, glowering freaks, with hair shaved in ornate patterns, noses and lips and earlobes gleaming with metal, bodies bound in leather and mesh.

That was where MERMAID MEATGRINDER performed, when my favorite singer Slimey still was a part of the band. This was after she launched the first holograms, but before she married that tech billionaire; a golden era of her most experimental electronic music. When we danced to it, I felt only love. I realize now it was because of her talent. Then I thought it was because Devon thrashed beside me. Honestly, I'd convinced myself I'd marry him.

That was the issue in my adolescence: I didn't know how love really worked in our world. Feelings were wet, unpredictable, and dissolved easily, like mist scattered when you breathed too hard. I couldn't grab them and keep them safe in my fist. Yet I'd read old books, and that was what people did long ago - based their partnerships and marriages off amorphous, vague proclamations of romantic love. Not anymore, for one had to think of shared apartments, joint taxes, rents, commutes. The City government reported the stats every year: divorce rates plummeted lower than ever, 2% of all marriages, and even then, only the wealthy, who had spare, separate apartments to lick their wounds in. The rest of us had nowhere to go, and had to choose our permanent roommates wisely. Feelings alone were a poor metric.

Devon dated another then: she worked with us at Kimmy's, was a head taller than us both, wore a thick-roped ponytail and no eyeliner and smelled always like flowers, and she later got him that

first gig at FutureTech. That was my first abrasive lesson: love is a practical matter. I'd long since stopped scoping for romance.

One silly soap bubble of hope floated up again in the woods; Devon and I laughed sometimes, reminisced on the old days, teased about how old we'd gotten since. But the bubble popped whenever I saw him and Marina dance around that CD player, swishing their hips and laughing deliriously. We were free in the woods to love whoever, however, for whatever reason; even under those circumstances, it would never be Devon and I.





**potato pipe**

The evenings Devon wasn't on-duty, he left Base Camp and snuck back to The Farm to spend time with Marina. Most evenings, it was just Michael and I, huddling into ourselves inside the communal kitchen of one cabin. We perched on kitchen stools, our bowls long emptied of canned beans, our feet wrapped in multiple socks, and we talked.

Our conversations took on a compulsive quality. Four months outside The City, and dread had seeped in. It was so silent, always. The golden trees rustled all at once under wind, a collective inhale, then stopped. Birds – real ones (no beeps from the trackers) – trilled sometimes, and foxes screamed, and insects grouped into their intense choirs, but later, when the plants and the animals slept, my stomach churned, mistrusting the quiet. My brain craved stimulation. There was no internet out here, no cell signal, and no television; electricity was pumped through for only utilitarian purposes. I had realized: before the woods, I'd never spent a day without encountering a screen. Now, I had only the hologram tracker's dull analog screen, which, save for a few nervous days, remained silent. Often, I felt like clawing my skin off in the stillness. Michael, I sensed, felt the same way. He needed to talk as much as me.

Our preferred topics diverged. I spoke of the past, my life in The City. He spoke of the present, but spoke only in pleasant terms. As much time as Devon spent with Marina, Michael spent with August. After his partner-in-clowning's death, August stopped wearing the costume, the makeup. Michael stopped being terrified of him. They actually had much in common, and Michael often recounted their conversations in our own nighttime tête-à-têtes.

One October night, Michael and I were again on-call. We sat in the kitchen, our hologram trackers before us on the countertop. We had stopped going out in the woods to look for the holograms; they would have to come here, where we had home territory advantage. Devon was

gone that night. I worried about him; the walk through the underbrush to The Farm and back left him vulnerable. We hadn't seen the holograms again, but still. I was glad to focus on Michael's rambling instead, a retelling of that day's visit with August.

Michael explained to me the problem: the clowns had been overeducated. They'd studied semiotics. A glut of meaning thus tied together every action, spiderweb-like, to a larger network of symbolism and definition too complex for anyone but scholars and the clowns themselves to untie. Perhaps the rest of us had just been too dumb to laugh.

"You know, after he explained it to me, it was actually pretty funny," said Michael. "I wish I'd gotten to see their acts in-person."

"Don't blame yourself. You would've peed your pants if you saw their makeup."

"You're right." He shook his head. "It's unfortunate. There was a wonderful person there this whole time, but my mind couldn't get past the image he wore."

Then came a lull. Michael stared at his hands, shuffling stray crumbs on the countertop. My insides itched. If we were quiet too long, he'd suggest we go to sleep, and I was much too anxious that night to be left alone.

"Michael, what were you like as a teenager?"

He didn't look at me. I insisted we go to the past, and he didn't like it there.

"Honestly, I was a nerd. I was really into computers. All my friends were. That, and model trains. But, you know, FutureTech wouldn't have hired me if I didn't know all the stuff I taught myself. It worked out in the end."

"Devon was also really into computers back then. I mean, duh, look at him now."

"Did you know him then?"

“Yeah. We met a long time ago. He was the only other kid I saw wearing black eyeliner, with the piercings and fishnet gloves and the long bangs. The whole bit. We actually hung out a good amount back then.”

“Wow.” Michael chuckled. The chuckle turned into a chortle, then snorting and slapping the counter and throwing his head back with no sound coming out. He wiped a tear, even.

“What?” I asked. “What’s funny about that?”

“Just, Devon as a little goth boy. I can’t even imagine it. He’s so straight-edge now. He’s like every other tech bro I’ve ever encountered at FutureTech.”

“Did you two ever run into each other at FutureTech?”

“No, never. It’s a massive corporation. There’s so many employees.” Michael sniffed back the last of his laughter. “And you were a little goth too, huh?”

“Yeah. Is that also hard to imagine?”

Michael appraised my face. “No. I can see it. You have that former-goth defiance in your face, still.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Nothing. I’m just saying things now.”

Michael stood up. He opened the drawers, the cabinets, and ran his hand inside them.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“To be honest with you, I’m getting really sick of just beans. I wonder if there’s any other snacks hidden away in this cabin somewhere. When the loggers stayed here, they brought a bunch of stuff from The City. Maybe they left something behind.”

I helped him look; anything sounded better than beans. Nothing. The cupboards held only dust. Michael stood on the countertop to swipe the top of cabinets. His boots printed white dust on the laminated countertop. He then exclaimed, a baggie rustling in his hands.

“Yay, snacks! Stashed just for us.” I applauded.

“It’s not quite snacks.”

Michael jumped off the counter. He held a Ziploc bag with a tiny nugget of weed.

“No way!” I snatched it.

“We don’t have anything for it.”

“Don’t even worry about that.”

The farmers had left us a final crate of donations: jars of pickles, dried blackcurrants, a few onions and potatoes. We had been stretching out these fresher supplies, supplementing our tin-can diet with a rare pickle or baked potato. Our new find, I figured, was worth the splurge.

One cabinet held our single screwdriver, the only repair tool in all the cabins. With it, I chiseled into the potato, like I’d seen my roommate Don do. I was a good learner: the pipe looked perfect.

“Shall we go outside?” I asked Michael. He looked nervous.

“Aw, come on.” I grabbed the hologram tracker. “We’ll be okay. If this starts beeping, we can run back inside. We’ll keep the floodlights on. We’ll be right by the door. Safe and sound.”

And so we sat in the cold grass, our bottoms slowly soaking. The night sky was flecked with stars; we never saw so many in The City. We’d found matches, and smoke curled up from the potato and our mouths, white trickles rising high until they disappeared. An herbal smell lingered on my fingers. The crickets kept us company, singing sweetly. It felt like the time for confessions.

“Michael, I used to have the biggest crush on Devon, back in the day.”

“Yeah, I figured.” His eyelids sat lower than before.

“I don’t anymore, though.”

“You look like you’re going to vomit when he goes to spend time with Marina.”

“No, no. They’re cute together. I’m not a hater.”

“Okay.”

Michael leaned back on his elbows, legs spread long and comfortable before him. His face, normally tight as a drum skin, relaxed. I never thought he was unattractive. But also, to consciously think the opposite would be stupid. I was beyond crushes. I refused to get swept up in anyone.

So, as Michael unwound, settled into his skin, I fixated on a tree far away. Floodlights from our cabin illuminated an intricate patchwork of bark. I would look at the tree, and not at Michael.

My lips dried with cold. A loose flake of skin half-peeled away, with a pinprick of blood underneath. I bit, trying to tear off the whole thing. Michael sighed, content, and by accident, we locked eyes, with me still biting my lip. Oops.

Then came two sounds, both alarming. One, a rustling from behind the tree, something large and stomping fast. Two, the tracker beeped. The beeps came slow, faster, fast.

Michael scrambled up. He grabbed my hand. I was yanked to my feet.

“Devon!” I exclaimed. He crashed through the tree’s lower branches, face confused and knotted under the floodlights’ glare.

“Watch out!” Michael pointed up. It was the owl, swooping down with talons outstretched.

I don’t know what happened next. Michael pulled me inside the cabin, I guess. Devon made it safe inside too. My memory picks up only in the early hours of that morning, after we’d

barricaded ourselves inside, when Michael and Devon were still barking at each other from opposite corners of the kitchen like dogs on too-short chains.

“Why weren’t you two prepared?” asked Devon. “We had an actual chance to catch the hologram, finally, and you two were slacking on the job. Unbelievable.” He’d made some version of this argument ten times over the past hour.

“Devon, I’ll say it again, you can’t blame us when you’re out here risking your life for no reason to go on your little dates at The Farm.”

“Sorry, should I be back here with you two, squandering our precious fresh food to *smoke* out of?”

“That’s not fair. You get to have fun still, and we don’t?”

“Not when you’re on-call, no. Unlike you two, I actually am trying to get this job done. I take my shifts seriously.”

“Guys, it doesn’t matter,” I interjected. “We’re all at fault, okay? I think we need to figure out a more effective way to work moving forward.”

Devon leaned back on the countertop, arms an X, shaking his head. “More effective way? Okay, then we need to set up the traps again *and* keep using the trackers. We need to cover all our bases.”

I sighed. My insides whimpered. We’d stopped setting up traps. I didn’t realize before that the rats inside were actually in danger of being eaten. It seemed cruel, to subject something to the same fate we feared, and since only I’d been dealing with the traps before, my reluctance combined with the others’ negligence meant the traps remained empty. But Devon was right. They were our best bet. Michael was grim; he too knew Devon was right, and also feared straying far from Base Camp.

“We can figure out trap-checking shifts tomorrow,” said Devon, angry with sleeplessness. “Or, I guess, just later today. I’m going to sleep.”

He walked off, to his room.

“He’s being unfair,” Michael told me.

“He has a point, though. I’m starting to worry they won’t ever let us leave here.”

“They can’t do that.”

I shrugged. “Either way, it’s better if we have the holograms trapped. We could leave faster, and no one else would get hurt.”

“I guess so.” Michael yawned. “I’m going to sleep, too. Good night.”

“Good night, Michael.”

My room was dark but I didn’t fear stumbling; nothing lay on the floor because, unlike Michael, I kept my belongings tidy. Our hygiene products were the old, dried, crusted tubes and bottles that we’d found beside the canned supplies. The bar soaps were stale with age, and the shampoos had separated into two liquids, one oily, the other lumpy. It broke my heart how unclean I always felt, but still, the containers were lined neatly upon my desk, presentable to anyone walking in.

We also rotated through the space heater. It was Devon’s turn that night. Autumn night air seeped into my room unchallenged, and I dreaded removing my jacket, my jeans. I’d be curling into myself like a millipede all night, hands squished under knees, thighs pressed to the stomach, warming myself on my own body heat. Devon and Michael let me keep the hologram tracker overnight. They said the owl left as soon as we ducked inside. Still, childlike fear rippled through me, and with no curtains and no blinds to block out the outside, I imagined owlish silhouettes



gliding right by the window, and the window panes suddenly seemed much too thin to keep anything out. I grasped the tracker like a teddy bear, comforted only by its silence.

This had been childhood: uncomfortable nights rolling from hip to hip, bored then terrified then bored again, my room's objects morphing into shapes and the shapes then shifting. When I was very little, I shared sleep with my mother, closing my eyes and burrowing into her. After she left, Grandmother let me sleep alone, in my own bed – a great privilege. This too was great luck – the room in the cabin, my own space. Few could afford such privacy. Barbara had kept her promise here. Yet, that night, I wished, very badly, that I wasn't alone.

I slept poorly. I thought of Slimey. She lived in these same woods once.

I remember even now that article she wrote long ago, recently re-published as a career retrospective. I'd read it days before I left The City. Once a journalist, she was commissioned to write about the loggers. She went by her government name then, before the Slimey stage persona developed. A simple civilian granted access to the wilderness, just like me. She had one mission, and left with another.

She wrote about the loggers, yes, but much of the article was dedicated to the birds. She was obsessed. We saw little other than pigeons in The City; in the woods, there were real woodpeckers with blood-red crests, fat bobblehead chickadees teasing each other, cardinals stained scarlet and chirping like smoke detectors. They bobbed between endless green, between the trees' lush crowns, between branches reaching their delicate fingers towards each other. Golden sunlight painted everything holy. To leave was unbearable. She knew she'd never see it all again, not in real life. To think, we lived in this same place, yet she emerged from it an electronic artist, and I a nervous wreck.

At least I was now cautious with my heart; she sold hers to that tech billionaire just a few years ago. Great for her career: the electronic music had gotten too radical by then, as did her involvement with MERMAID MEATGRINDER, with all those little bands and their anti-Big Music sentiments. She was about to lose her contract for the holograms. Then he took over funding. FutureTech proved a better partnership: they could supply the Artificial Intelligence and the manpower to take her work to the next level. They got divorced, her and the billionaire, not long before I left for the woods.

When I did sleep, Slimey danced on the backs of my eyelids. She was glowing green, like fireflies. She was crying.

**invasion of privacy**

I woke up sneezing from sunlight. It was a hot morning. I wanted to say Barbara lied that it would be cooler in the forest, but I suspected Barbara didn't know it would be like this. In The City, I seldom noticed weather, jumping between air-conditioned buildings and hiding from rain in the subway. Too-hot days, you stayed inside. Still, this time of year, too-hot days don't usually come. I'd wear jackets, weighed down deliciously by their heaviness, reluctant to remove them when entering our heated office. When Michael and I left the cabin in our summer clothes, walking through a brown world of dead leaves and rotten grasses, we'd exited normal time for something weird and uncomfortable.

Michael, Devon, and I had decided to check and restock traps in the day. The owls would sleep then. Barbara told us the other holograms were hawks. Real hawks haunted the dawn and the dusk. Middle-of-the-day, only songbirds – real ones – would be out, so we hoped. We'd travel in pairs, tracker in hand, with the remaining person locked safely in their cabin.

Devon now brought Marina over. Michael and I thought it a great risk, them traveling from The Farm with no tracker, but, Devon insisted they'd be fine, walking together and in the middle of the day. I thought it was passive-aggressive. Michael did too.

They sat on kitchen stools, Devon and Marina, knees interlocked, staring into each other and whispering, like mutual hypnosis.

“We're heading out!” Michael called to them.

Marina's sweet stare tore away, towards us.

“Good luck,” she said. “Please be careful out there.”

The problem: what was careful? Sneaking softly through the woods, never crunching or stomping or speaking, hoping to ambush whatever the traps caught? Or doing the opposite, walking cacophonous to scare off attackers? I settled on the second.

The furthest traps were in a six-mile radius from the cabin; the trackers couldn't reach further, and we'd have no way of knowing if something landed without coming closer. We shuffled through leaves, kicking them forth like yellow showers. We threw sticks. We banged on tree trunks. In The City, we stiffened ourselves. We angled bodies through revolving doors, and sucked everything in when strangers surrounded us on the subway. Here, flesh moved uninterrupted. Back home, eyes stared straight ahead, or kept to the ground. In the woods, we looked at everything, and the lichens and mosses and bugs and branches didn't think us rude for it. I'd seen all these things separate, like pictures of moss made up of pixels summoned from a machine for a school project, and here they all were, bleeding into each other, green and dirt-smelling and soft under fingers. Honestly, much less impressive in real life, smaller and duller than what the screens showed us.

In the woods, Michael danced. One leg thrust behind the other, and he spun backwards. It was silly, but not bad. His arms curved like tree branches. They swished with the wind. I laughed – no, I giggled. Oh no.

He sashayed forth, gliding through leaves, each slide of his foot crunching wonderfully. He threw a leg back, prepared to spin again. Then, he fell. He thrashed like a bug on its back that couldn't get up.

“Michael, haha, that's a bit much,” I said, “You should get up.”

He fought the air, clawing up, pulling invisible webs from his face. His face was a pained animal's.

“Help, help, help,” he whimpered, one hand reaching for his calf.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah! I don’t know. It hurts!”

My knees pressed into the soil. He yanked up one pant leg: four drops of blood slid down his calf. His fingers reached for the wound.

“Don’t do that!” I said.

“There’s something lodged in there.” His eyelids pressed closed.

I looked closer, and he was right: in each deep puncture was a hook. They gleamed small and sharp, the size of a fingernail.

“Can you sit up?” I asked.

“No!” He wriggled, his arms pressed close to him. “It’s like there’s little strings tying me together.”

Branches cracked fast; someone was approaching. Breath left my body. There was a man with a thick beard like fur, with eyes stained purple, holding a gun longer than my leg. His teeth bared like a cornered opossum's.

“Noel?” Michael asked, squinting up.

I hadn’t recognized him. We’d met Noel months ago, one of the loggers. He looked less feral then.

Noel dropped to the ground, throwing his gun. His frantic hands danced over Michael.

“I’m so sorry. This has never happened before. The trap was supposed to be calibrated so humans don’t trigger it.”

He reached for a nearby tree. A white square was attached to the trunk, some minimalist gadget Michael and I failed to notice. It pried open, the lid hinging away to reveal buttons. Noel typed a code, and the hooks released from Michael's leg. The invisible strings loosened, and he sat up.

"What is the trap for?" I asked.

"Anything that lands in it," Noel replied. I didn't like the hunger in his gaze. "I was hoping for something impressive – maybe a bear. They pay a lot for bears."

"Who pays a lot?"

"FutureTech."

"Why do they pay for bears?" Michael asked, wincing as he bent his injured leg.

Noel was confused. "To make the holograms. Didn't you work for them?"

"What do you mean, make the holograms?"

"I don't know how it works. It's just that logging season ends in the fall, and I still have to make money, and FutureTech pays well. That's all I know. None of the technical stuff."

"Can you put down your gun?" I asked. "It's making me nervous."

"Sorry." He threw it down. "It's just tranquilizer in here. I shoot them and they're knocked out for a while, enough for the FutureTech people to come and grab them."

"What do they do with them?" Michael asked.

"You'd know better than me. They scan them or something, to get the holograms looking right."

Michael looked nauseous. His pants were stained copper with still-flowing blood

"Where are you staying?" I asked Noel. "Do you have a medical kit?"

"It's just me. I'm camped out about a mile from here."

"You said FutureTech comes by to pick up the animals? Do they drive back to The City?"

“Yeah, but they won’t be here for about two weeks.”

“We need to do something about these wounds sooner than that. We need to get Michael back to The City.”

“We can call Barbara,” Michael offered, eyes closed, still on the ground.

“I’m really sorry,” Noel said as I helped Michael to his feet. One arm went over my shoulder as he stumbled gingerly on the bleeding leg.

“Can you help me walk him to Base Camp?” I asked Noel.

He shook his head. “I have to keep moving. I need to meet my quota, or I won’t get paid. There’s so many of us hunters out in the woods, and the bigger animals are already running low. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Michael said. “I can do it. I can walk that far.”

Noel apologized again and again. He typed a new code into the trap, its hooks sliding back into the square, awaiting the next victim. With another apology, Noel picked up his gun, and slunk away, beyond the hill.

Michael hobbled, slamming down the uninjured leg, and only tip-toeing with the other. My thin cardigan was his tourniquet, tied above the knee. The air was warm enough, and I didn’t need it for myself.

“We’re close,” I assured him. “We really didn’t even walk that far.” We were three miles off.

Michael winced as I guided him over a fallen tree: he hopped over with the good leg, putting his weight into my side.

“I didn’t know they used real animals to make the holograms,” he said.

“But it’s like Noel said: you work for them. How did you not know?”

“I just fix the bugs in the actual holograms. I’m basically customer support.”

“I wonder if Devon knows.”

I thought of the City wall, where Don and I drove to drop off our captured animals. Sometimes there'd be a carcass stinking by the chute, usually small things, a racoon or possum. Sometimes they were big: a deer, or a bear. We always assumed this was the work of less humane animal control officers. Some of those deer also had rusted pinprick-wounds on their legs. We just never thought much of it.

“Michael, do you think the animals die when they make the holograms?”

“Why are you asking?” his eyes swelled with fear. “Am I losing that much blood?”

“No, no. I'm just thinking. Noel said they scan them. What would that mean?”

“I don't know. I don't work in that department.” He grimaced. “Well, actually, there was this 3D scanning technology we pioneered a while back. They only used it on inanimate objects, though, so they could be uploaded in their entirety to the FutureTech cloud.”

“What happened to the objects afterwards?”

“Honestly, they got destroyed. The scanning was really intense. It had to peel apart all the internal layers to get an accurate rendering.”

“So if you put an animal in there—”

“It would probably die.”

He shook his head. What was there to be done about it now?

We walked the three miles back as a conjoined creature, with Michael's arm pressing into my shoulders so heavily, it became my own extra limb.

Back at the cabin, I explained to Devon what happened, with Marina listening scared from his lap. Michael staggered into his room, plopping by the radio transceiver. Devon and I joined him.

“Barbara, this is Base Camp. Over.”



This time, she responded promptly. “Base Camp, this is Barbara. Is there an issue? Over.”

“Barbara, I’m injured badly. I need to go back to The City, soon. Over.”

The negotiation was terse and tense. This time, we refused to bargain.

An agreement was reached: Barbara would drive down herself, to see the hubbub at Base Camp. She would assess the situation, bring additional medical supplies, and we’d decide, together, what to do. Devon walked Marina back to The Farm: Barbara couldn’t know anything about her, or the remaining others.

We sat in the kitchen, awaiting the sound of tires. Michael’s leg ceased bleeding, but he kept it propped.

“Devon,” he asked, “You really didn’t know about FutureTech killing the animals? I thought you were in programming. Your department always seemed like you knew everything about how the holograms worked.”

Devon shook his head. “I saw strings of numbers every day. Not the holograms themselves, not even the images.”

A light beaming through our window, bright and unnatural: Barbara’s headlights. She frowned as she left the car, wearing her same wool pantsuit, the whole of her gray and displeased. Spotting us, her smile stretched, maroon and artificial.

“Why, you all look wonderful!” she beamed like a fluorescent light. Our sleepless, hairy faces stared back blank. She continued, “I have some extra supplies. Come help me carry these.”

In her car’s trunk were boxes, cardboard containers heaving with fresh fruit, chips and candies in bulk, a shiny first aid kit. In the kitchen, we tore into them, like vicious racoons on a trash pile, our mouths dripping with juice, our fingers stained with chocolate, our clothes dusted orange with artificial cheese. Barbara watched over, satisfied. She’d also applied ointment and clean

bandages to Michael's leg. Our bellies groaned with the sudden influx of rich food, and it was only after they'd swollen full, and we leaned back satisfied on the kitchen stools that Barbara began speaking.

"So, I've heard there's been an injury. The injury has been addressed, and will, no doubt, heal soon. I see no reason to forfeit your mission."

"Barbara, no offense, but you're not a doctor," I said, stifling a burp. "Yes, his leg is bandaged, but those wounds were so deep, down to the bone. What if it gets infected? What if he gets sepsis? People die from that."

"I'll leave this whole bottle of antiseptic ointment here. He needs a few days off the leg, and he'll be fine. No sepsis."

Michael joined in: "Barbara, it's more than that. It's not safe out here."

She joined her fingers into a steeple. "It's important work you're doing out here. The City government really appreciates you all taking this risk for the greater good."

"We shouldn't be the ones out here," Devon gruffed. "We have an animal control officer, and two programmers. We're not equipped to do this."

"You're plenty equipped," she said. "You all have particular qualifications that made you well-suited for the job."

She paused. She smiled. "And, also: I brought you all something special too," Barbara said. From one of the bags, she brought out a bottle of vodka, glistening icy under kitchen lights.

Silently, Devon retrieved our mugs, which were metal and dinged with use. Suspicion in his face confirmed my own. I too did not trust her.

The drink was all chemicals. Baba Sonya's blackcurrant wine, which we'd sipped all summer, was incomparable: tangy and sweet, exploding and sour. What we had now was just poison.

Barbara drank with us. Her cheeks flushed. We sat at the kitchen table, and her arms were flat on its surface, as if bracing herself. We three stopped at one drink; she kept going. Her colorless eyes locked onto mine.

“So, you haven’t even told me what it’s been like for you out here.”

“We have,” said Devon. “We’ve called you on the transceiver, multiple times.”

“But you haven’t told me what it’s *really* like.”

“Well, there’s traps in the woods we have to refill,” I began. “And we go refill them with live bait, in hopes the owl holograms come.”

“Live bait?” Barbara’s eyebrows rose.

“Yep. We put rats in there. You wanna see where we keep them?”

“Yes.”

She stood, wobbling on her kitten heels. Devon and Michael stayed sitting. I led her to the Rat Room.

There had been an extra bedroom, once occupied by the loggers, now housing a massive cage. There were few rats inside: we felt bad enough having to keep them there, and figured we could at least offer them expansive space.

Barbara pressed her front half to the cage. She said, “I used to have pet rats as a little girl.”

“Really? Why?”

“They’re cute, aren’t they? Did you have animals when you were younger?”

“Yeah, a cat. To catch rats.”

Perhaps she did not hear – she was occupied, poking a neatly rounded nail between the bars, wriggling it in one rat’s face. I imagined her as a little girl. Certainly, they must’ve been rich to keep rodents around, just for being cute.

“It’s a shame you all use them as bait,” she mused. “They’re quite intelligent animals.”

“Barbara, we have no choice. You literally gave us an ultimatum that we had to catch the holograms. This is the only route we can think of.”

“I do understand, believe me. It’s just a shame. I’m an animal lover, you know.”

“Then how could you work for a company that kills them for profit?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Barbara. Don’t be coy.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

I rolled my eyes. I explained to her what we learned from Noel.

Genuinely, I couldn’t tell – was Barbara that good an actress? Her mouth made a pink “o,” her eyebrows crossed together with concern. When I finished, she said, “That’s horrible. You have to understand, I work on the government side of things, though we do certainly communicate often with FutureTech. Still, there’s certain details that get left out.”

She turned back to the cage. “I would really like to hold one.”

She did: a gray-brown creature rested in her cupped palms, its worm-like tail sliding between her fingers. She looked at it with such tenderness. I still couldn’t tell if she was lying about what she knew.

“Barbara,” I asked, “Can we please go home? Like, soon?”

“We’ve all had a bit to drink tonight. I’m not sure it’s the best time now to discuss the terms of your contract, and how soon you plan to break it. We can offer you a greater pay raise if that will make your stay more comfortable, but it’s better if we discuss tomorrow.”

I walked back into the kitchen, my top and bottom molars locked into each other.

“Where’s Barbara?” asked Michael.

“Rat Room. Cuddling with them.”

“Are you serious?”

“She wants to discuss going back to The City tomorrow.”

“Because she drank?” Devon asked, slamming one palm on the table. “Come *on!* I knew it.”

We really had no choice. By morning, we could decide: to leave or to go.

I nursed a secret fear: we’d wake up, and her car would be gone, her radio frequency forever silent, us stuck here through the winter. If anyone felt the same, they didn’t say. We retreated once again to our separate rooms, to what I knew would be a sleepless night for me.

That fear didn’t leave. I lay in bed, and drummed on my stomach, mind looping. Then, Michael stood in my doorway. He balanced on the good foot. His too-big woolen socks pooled at the ankles.

“Hey,” I said, blanket drawn to my chin.

“Hey. It’s really cold.”

“Yep. Good thing it’s my turn with the space heater. Everyone else – sucks to suck, I guess.”

The device purred by my feet – a warm, mechanical cat. It was old, and shook as it exhaled dust-smelling heat.

“You can’t make an exception in the rotation?” Michael asked. “For a poor, injured soul?”

“Nope. How’s heat gonna help?”

In the night, he was magical. The room’s blueness stained him. He looked very delicate, and very sad, leaning on my doorframe with swollen eyes, as if shaken by a nightmare and unable to sleep again.

My invitation: a lifted corner of the blanket. He accepted, limping forward. When his knees touched my bed’s corner, I held up one hand like a stop sign.

“Wait, before you get in, can you rub the grime off your feet?” I asked. I demonstrated, rubbing my own socks together

“Do you think I’m that dirty?” he asked.

“No. I do the same thing for myself.” It was my nightly ritual, lest stray crumbs and flecks of dirt stain what little pristineness I had.

He sat on the far edge of my rigid mattress. He winced at the lifted injured foot. I felt bad, but then I watched dust cloud off the sock, twinkling in moonlight.

And then his whole side pressed soft into mine, his breath a new and foreign guest in my usual stillness. He shifted and the mattress moved; he twisted and the blanket yanked left. But I was warm at night at last, all of me, and drowsiness seeped in. My cheek against his shoulder, and I was a cat relaxed, an animal at peace. Then, a scream outside my window.

Anxiety comes with weird satisfaction. There is bitter pleasure in “I told you so” after it all goes wrong just as you’d imagined. Nightly, I’d imagined movement in the windowpane’s corner, right where I couldn’t see, our enemy swooping and stalking. And there it was, as I’d predicted, the owl, flying off, its light feathers stained scarlet. Was it rippling, a reverberating glitch? Who killed the original, real owl whose image this one copied? Noel? Who wrote its code and fixed its bugs?

Michael and I scrambled from my room, bursting forth into the swirling night. On the grass, Barbara had fallen. The owl had come from behind. Her nose was in the soil. A chunk of her scalp was clawed clean off. Trapped under her cooling hand was the rat, trying to shake off her palm. She’d taken it outside. The owl took the bait.

Devon stood weary in the cabin's doorway. Michael told him to grab the tracker. Meanwhile, the body. Was she dead? Neither of us wanted to flip her over. Michael pressed a hand to her back. It did not rise, and did not fall.

Devon came out, crouched by us, holding the silent tracker.

"How did the owl come unnoticed?" Michael asked. He looked at Devon: "Did you hear any beeping?"

"No, but I was in my room. The tracker was in the kitchen."

"We weren't in the kitchen either," I said. "But it's loud. We should have heard it."

Devon inspected the device. Its screen, normally dull, was now lifeless. He pressed buttons, and thwacked it on his palm. Nothing. Off came the back panel, sliding away easily as a TV remote's. And, just as with a mysteriously nonfunctioning remote, no batteries. They had been taken out.

"We can't stay here," I said. "We have to go. Tonight."

Michael nodded. "Her van's still here. I'm sure her car keys are around."

"When we get back to the city, we have to tell people," I said. "Clearly, no one's safe from these holograms, not even government employees."

Michael agreed: "We'll go public. We'll go on the news or something."

Our meager belongings were packed with haste. I crumpled old t-shirts into my backpack. Everything else, I didn't want with me. Better it all stayed there for the next people, anyway.

The unpleasant task of finding car keys fell on Michael. He patted Barbara's pockets. Inside her woolen gray suit, on the stomach side. He closed his eyes as he reached under her.

Devon sat unmoving in the kitchen. He still held the tracker, eyes on it, but not really looking.

"Devon, we gotta go," I said. "Are you packed?"

“I’m going to stay.” He smiled, but only with his mouth. “I’m going back to The Farm.”

“Are you sure?” Blood wooshed like waves in my skull. I couldn’t quite think. Maybe he was making a dumb decision. I couldn’t tell; everything human and logical within me had evaporated.

“There’s not much left for me back in The City,” he sighed.

“There’s not much here either. It’s dangerous. It’s only going to get colder.”

“Marina is here. That’s enough for me. You two should go though, right now. Actually, wait. Let me give you something.” He retreated to his room, bringing back a keychain, a slip of fake leather with MERMAID MEATGRINDER carved into it. It must’ve been eight years old, at least.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the key to my apartment. It’s really spacious. All amenities in the building. Two bedrooms. You two should be able to afford it now, especially if you split rent.” He smiled, and this time, his whole face lifted.





**home sweet home**

The City apartment had been Devon's, but barely. The fridge had been empty when we arrived. The bed had been made, its tight corners tucked under. He had few belongings: a closet of ten collared shirts, pants folded into flat rectangles, computers with cords wrapped into infinity signs. He had one couch of black faux leather that stuck to bare skin and exhaled when one sat; this couch we kept, along with a set of silverware for two, a low-legged coffee table, and a laundry basket. The other things we tossed. New mattress, new bedsheets, new books tucked on the shelf.

Michael didn't want to decorate, not yet. He was scared: the apartment was too big, too good. It would get snatched away, somehow. Why decorate?

I had the same fear. That's why I wanted stuff, pretty paintings on every wall, thick quilted blankets draped on every seat, crocheted pillowcases, soft-woven sweaters on the coat hangers – things to weigh us down. But I wanted Michael to help me choose. He refused, and I feared his silent resentment at an apartment painted by another. So, our home was gutted of Devon, but not yet filled with us.

We stocked our separate corners. Michael captured the pantry; neither of us ever had one before – a whole closet just for food! He stuffed it with jars of olives swirling in brine, with colorful boxes of sugary cereal, with fish drowned in fine oils. I heard him shuffle into the kitchen some nights, then climb back into bed with crumbs caught on his beard. We'd been back a month, and still, he didn't shave.

The bathroom was my private delight. Sometimes, I opened the cabinet below the sink and just stared. They were lovely, the bottles and sachets and bars of herbal soaps wrapped in waxed paper, their scents of rose and jasmine and cinnamon wafting heavy. I took three showers a day

after we returned. I scrubbed, hard, forcing the flower scents into my pores. My skin dried and cracked from heat and friction. I then slathered it with oily gobs of coconut lotion. From the bathroom, I emerged shiny and sweet-stinking.

We seldom left the apartment. Michael had become paranoid. He couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched. It started with the dove.

There was a ledge attached to the window, remnants of an old flower box. In Devon's absence, a nest appeared. The babies left, but mama bird stayed. I tried hard to convince Michael the dove was real. There were its white-streaked droppings. There were the shed, curled feathers. When it left during the day, I scattered seeds it later swallowed. It wasn't a hologram. Michael didn't believe me. He thought the City government sent it to spy on us.

When we returned from the forest, we'd been paid handsomely, atop our earned salaries. The catch was silence on Barbara's death. No one was to know that holograms could kill.

"And how can they make sure we're not telling anyone if they aren't spying?" Michael asked.

He stonewalled counterarguments. He was afraid. With our payoff, we wouldn't have to work again for years. So, we seldom left the house.

What to do in the apartment, with swathes of free time we hadn't had since babyhood? We occupied ourselves. He got his model trains. The set was vintage, from decades ago when children could still imagine what a train was. It looped a figure eight over the living room floor, behind the couch – I'd compress into the furniture, and little wheels whirred maddeningly behind me, with the clink of their metal on the plastic tracks, the buzz when the train inevitably fell off track, useless on its side, its wheels still spinning. But I didn't complain, not even when the train set remained on the floor overnight, days on end.

He wouldn't talk to me about what happened. Only in sleep did he cry. Devon's apartment had two bedrooms; we shared one. We had tried sleeping apart at first, but couldn't. So, every night, I felt him shift on the mattress, then watched his eyeballs dart side to side under his eyelids. His fingers clawed phantoms before his face; his voice was mewling and scared and stuck behind his lips. The first few times it happened, I shook him awake. He'd roll silent to the other side. I later learned to sleep through it.

He wouldn't let me care for him, either. He insisted on cooking. He shrank from touch. My restless fingers twitched: I needed something warm and living to pour myself into. So came the guinea pigs.

The guinea pigs were rescues, the abandoned playthings of a wealthy child. One, Ruth, had eyes like the capers from Michael's jar. Her nose twitched side to side. An adorable tuft sat toupee-like atop her face. Then there was Sylvia, a dashing critter, elegant even, white fur with a black spot that was almost heart-shaped. These two fat, toothy things in glass tanks – they broke my heart. I needed them. I took them home without asking Michael – I didn't think there would be an issue.

Michael awoke that day at 2 pm. In a crumpled t-shirt, he stood rubbing his red eyes. Sleep-confused, he was watching me build the cage in our spare bedroom. The pigs, chewing cut carrots, hopped free on the carpeted floor.

“What are those?” he asked.

“Ruth and Sylvia! Don't worry, I won't keep them in the cage. They'll be free-roaming in this bedroom.”

Michael frowned. His foot twitched. I worried suddenly that he would kick them

“You know, I don't really like rodents,” he mumbled. “Especially, considering-”

“No, but those were rats,” I argued. “And I read an article – guinea pigs aren’t really considered rodents anymore. Scientifically.”

Michael sighed. His mouth stretched tense.

“Look, we’ll keep the bedroom door closed,” I offered. “It’s like they’re not even here.”

“We’ll hear them scratching on the other side.”

“They’re not cats.”

“They’ll smell.”

“They won’t. I promise. I’ll keep it clean.”

“How will we feed them?”

“Pellets and vegetables? Duh? It’s not like we can’t afford it.”

Michael crossed his arms. His lips twitched, with words chewed and swallowed.

“Michael, is this really about the guinea pigs?”

“What else would it be about?”

I wanted, badly, to talk about the deaths. We had left the woods quickly, with no time to process Barbara’s death. We hadn’t mentioned it since. But he shook his head, and shuffled from the room. The fridge door unsealed with a pop.

I’d warn him up to the guinea pigs. One evening, he was out for groceries, and I sat with our one white blanket draped over my lap, with one guinea pig sinking into the crater my crossed legs formed. When Michael returned, I beamed at him, proud and innocent:

“Look! It’s Sylvia!”

“On the white blanket? There’s going to be hairs everywhere.”

“Michael, since when have you cared about mess?”

Those words slid scissor-sharp from my throat, but satisfying: our stuff no longer obeyed the original clean lines of demarcation, or rather, Michael's didn't. Though he bought few new things, they spread like leaves, evenly upon the forest floor, as if he didn't understand how cabinets worked.

That night, I kept my eyes closed tight in bed, even after Michael's side shifted and he rose, and even after he returned, swallowing silent sobs. I let one eye slice open: his back was to me, and with one long shirt sleeve, he wiped his nose. Back on the mattress, he rolled to his side, stretching much of the blanket his way. The skin of my left side was exposed, but I let him pull.

The next day, when I sat on the floor, my back pressed to the couch, the guinea pigs brushing up against my legs, my eyes focused on nothing, he came sulking into the living room, dropping to his knees like a little boy, poking at the train and doing nothing when it toppled to its side. A tapping at the window, and he sprung to his feet. The dove stared through glass.

"It's watching us." He pulled the curtains closed. "They're watching us."

"That's a real dove, Michael. I literally promise you, okay? I worked with those back in the day. The holograms look real, but you can still tell."

"My mother sent me a video the other day of my nephew. He was playing by one of those alligator holograms in the subway. All I could think about was it chomping his head off."

"That's not gonna happen anymore. We're safe now."

"*We* might be safe, but we're not out in the world like everyone else is. If the bird holograms thought they were real, who's to say the alligator won't suddenly think it is, too?"

He was worked up, pacing back and forth, hands mashing into each other. I scooted the guinea pigs with one palm towards me, fearing he'd step on one.

Michael looked at me, eyelids drooping like a stray dog anticipating another kick: “We have to tell someone. People don’t know that they can become dangerous.”

“We signed that contract. We legally can’t tell people. Oh no, Ruth, don’t eat that!”

The apartment was well-maintained, with no holes or cracks in the walls, nowhere for cockroaches to scurry out of; yet, one bug still appeared, wiggling its antennae from the carpeted floor. Ruth had inched toward it with hungry snuffles. Michael’s disgusted nostrils curled like commas. He’d left his unlaced sneakers in a circle of dust by the carpet; I grabbed one shoe to slam it on the cockroach.

The shoe sat on my hand like a sweaty glove. I lifted it, and the cockroach was still upright on the floor, whiskers cheerful and vertical. Did I imagine it flickering?

“It’s a hologram,” Michael stated. “It’s a hologram. There’s a hologram in here.”

He stumbled backward. His head hit the wall, loud. He slid to the ground, hands hooked onto his ears. He hit the windowsill on his descent. I lunged towards him, pulling his hands away to check for blood. There was none. His eyes wrinkled shut. I stroked his arm. The cockroach was gone.

“Michael, Michael, it’s okay.” The insect didn’t flicker. I was sure of that now. “Cockroaches are like that. They’re impossible to kill. You’ve never slammed one and then it gets right back up again?”

He nodded, eyes still closed.

“Right,” I continued. “It’s just a cockroach. All it means is we should get some roach killer spray.”

“Remember when you used to be so against killing animals?”

I said nothing. Then, I was crying. Snot flowed in twin slimy rivers. My back pressed to the wall. Michael's hand landed on my knee, warm and moist. My head was on the soft divot of his shoulder. We stayed like that for hours, liquid pouring from our faces, our flesh and bones pressed into each other. A sad feeling settled, but not uncomfortable, just like a too-heavy blanket: we were the only two in The City to know what we knew. At least now, we confirmed – we had each other.

We slept in a pretzel that night, skin-to-skin. I awoke softened, sweetened, lighter, as if something sick had been bled out of me. They said humans need physical touch, or we wilt like unwatered flowers. And so I was a plant stalk standing straight again.

We went outside, together. We squinted under the sun. Cars wooshed, and the air spun as they passed. We now lived in an older, historic part of The City, in the expensive sector only a FutureTech salary could allow Devon to have had. There were private schools surrounding our building, and children in crisp pressed skirts and loafers walked past with an adult authority, their gaits already business-like. It was loud – clanging wheels on loose manhole covers, men in suits yelling into Bluetooth headsets, the hiss and release of millions of valves and nostrils – but we could bear it.

We even got coffee. We sat at a little round outdoor table woven like wicker baskets and drank too-expensive espresso from white cups the size of thimbles. What a waste of money; who cares. We watched fancy dames stroll with fine woolen winter coats, their dogs scrambling behind the ladies' heels. The pups in this part of town wore clothes, vests with fluffed collars and plaid jackets. They were pampered and pure-bred, some to deformity. The ones with squashed faces huffed and snorted with lolling tongues. I couldn't look at those long.



Michael held my hand over the white tablecloth. He joked about something stupid; I giggled. I felt like I'd swallowed the sun.

We ran home, laughing on the bottom floor of our apartment building, right by the stairs.

"Ooh, let's get the mail," Michael said, smiling and giddy. We hadn't yet crossed this threshold into joint domestic life; even getting the mail seemed an adventure now. Mail came into hundreds of slots on our building's lowest floor, with one wall occupied by these teeny golden boxes. The building was recognizably historic because of these mail slots; few people sent or received print mail anymore, save for birthday cards and love letters of the creepily devoted.

"Who would send us mail?" I asked.

"I don't know. Let's find out."

The apartment key opened the mailbox too. Michael reached in.

"See?" He held a thin white envelope. "Someone's thinking of us."

"Who's it from?"

Michael flipped over the envelope. He looked at me with nervous eyes.

"Who?" I asked.

"It's from the government."

"It's probably about tax stuff or something. Or about the name change on the contract for the apartment," I said. My heart pumped in my throat.

Michael unsealed it with one finger. He looked at it only briefly before shoving the paper my way.

"What did I say?" He closed his eyes and rocked on his heels. "They've been listening to us."

I couldn't read much of the letter before fear blurred my eyes. The gist: a stern reminder. We better not even be thinking about telling anyone what happened. A reminder of our contract, of

the money we had received, of the consequences if we transgressed. Michael started running up the stairs.

“Michael, wait. Let’s take the elevator, at least.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” He whispered, but loud. “That dove *is* a hologram. That cockroach too, probably. They’ve been listening to our conversations. Remember how I said yesterday we need to tell people?”

“Maybe this letter’s fake. Maybe it’s some kind of prank. Why would the government send us a paper letter?”

Michael’s hands tore at his hair. He turned, and ran up the stairs again. I had no choice but to follow.

Michael didn’t speak to me for three days. I don’t know why. He wasn’t mad. He’d smile at me over breakfast, and when he first woke up. He cooked for me, still. But most hours, he retracted into himself like a snail, sulked on the couch, or lay on his side on the floor, running two fingers over his toy train tracks. Maybe he feared saying the wrong thing, something incriminating.

I put a plastic owl on the window’s outdoor ledge. It scared away the dove. I made sure the owl turned outwards, so we couldn’t see its face. I sprayed roach killer along the very faint cracks in the kitchen’s walls.

We didn’t listen to the news. We didn’t watch TV. We didn’t visit, and no one visited us. This was what every couple I knew did – locked themselves away and rotted. We weren’t like Don and Mi, not yet at least, I tried telling myself; but then Michael looked so maliciously at the guinea pigs, and he was perhaps a few weeks away from yelling at them, like Don with that poor dog. Honestly, I too was weeks away from taking a broom and a dustpan to the model train set.

**tea time with mother**

The one time Michael begrudgingly agreed to leave the apartment was at his mother's invitation. We visited her and her twin sister. Two messy copies of one woman: both could generously be called pear-shaped, though more realistically, they were squashes. Their mouths were too full of teeth. They lived in the same apartment Michael had grown up in, which wasn't much different from my old home with Grandmother: the walls were a soft green, the floors were wiry and carpeted, the rooms were rectangular and tight and opened into each other.

In the kitchen, a white tablecloth was stretched strategically so the stained bits hung down away from view, and atop it sat an electric kettle and a bowl of buttery hard cookies. We sat around, sipped tea, and cracked teeth against the cookies.

I was angry. Michael didn't speak still, and didn't brief me ahead of time on what I could expect from this visit. I didn't ask, but an explanation was anticipated, right?

Both women watched me drink; two twin sets of goopy eyelashes blinked syncopated. They were curious, like children spying on a squirrel digging through the trash.

"So how did you and Michael meet?" his mother asked.

"We met through work," I explained, straining with a polite smile. "We both were assigned on a mission by the government in the woods."

"Oh, yes," his aunt nodded. "How exciting. Michael won't tell us anything about the trip."

"Yes, we signed a contract," I explained. "We legally aren't allowed to."

Auntie rolled her eyes, smiling like a smug cat. "What's out there that's *so secret*? Are us city folks not allowed to know about the trees and the rocks?"

"Stop it, you." Michael's mother swatted her sister's arm. Then her own feline-like attention shifted to her son; she batted her eyes, her chin resting on balled fists. She reached for his hair

with her claws, scratching severely. “Aw, I remember when you used to tell me *everything*. Look at you, keeping secrets.”

She nodded my way. “I guess others know your little secrets now.”

Auntie asked: “Are you two getting married?”

Mother added: “Are you having kids?”

“Mom. Please.” These were Michael’s first words all evening.

“We just have guinea pigs right now, and they’re a handful,” I said with – I hoped – conviviality. “I don’t think we’re quite ready to handle children yet.”

“Guinea pigs are quite childish animals, aren’t they?” his aunt asked. *Your nephew plays with toy trains!*

His mother frowned. “Michael doesn’t like rodents. I remember how scared he was when we had that mice infestation–”

“Oh yes!” his aunt exclaimed, chortling, “He was so little then, he hid in the cupboard! We couldn’t find him for hours.”

“You know, though, he got over it,” his mother continued. “He was a brave boy. We were scared for a while though that he’d never find anyone to date. He was scared of talking to pretty–”

“Oh yes,” his aunt nodded. “I remember, they’d come over that little group of boys, all of his friends, and they’d tinker with their little computers. You’d hear them laughing late into the evening.”

“And those model trains,” Mother nodded. “They would build tracks and watch them for hours. You know, he was so happy with his buddies, I was scared he’d never want to leave them, or

grow up. He was never that happy with us.” She shot a meaningful, pouty-lipped glance to her sister.

Auntie wiggled her eyebrows at me: “He doesn’t look that happy now, either.”

Michael was catatonic, flushed scarlet, silent and focused on the loose flecks of tea floating in his cup.

“Excuse me,” I said rising – I feared – too quickly from the table. “I need to use the restroom.”

The apartment smelled floral, sweet and heavy. The scent was pleasant on first arrival, but now sat thick in my nostrils. I feared choking. In the sarcophagus-tight space of the bathroom, the smell condensed into a cloud. One couldn’t escape. Sound carried too: the two women's giggles seeped through the wall. No privacy here, either.

I returned with wet hands, not bothering to wipe them. I wanted to leave.

In the kitchen, Michael was finally defiant: “Mom, I can’t tell you! They’re listening to us.”

“Who’s listening?”

“Our bosses. FutureTech. The government.”

“Well, of course they are. They’re listening to everybody.”

I looked at her. She stared back defiantly.

She continued, “Have you two not been listening to the news?”

“We’ve taken a bit of a break,” Michael admitted.

“There was that whistleblower guy,” she said. Looking to her sister: “What was his name?”

Auntie waved her hand, dismissing the matter, “Just some old employee from FutureTech. He got fired and then went on the news telling everyone how the holograms collect people’s data.”

“What kind of data?” Michael asked.

“Oh, anything they can get on you. These holograms are so realistic now, and people can’t help but stare. And all the while you’re looking, they take your appearance into account – like how much your clothes are worth and all that – and they track your eye movement, your conversations, everything.”

“And all the holograms do that?” Michael asked.

“Sure do.”

The holograms still soaring rogue in the woods, perhaps coming close to The Farm: they too were collecting data on everything they saw? The people there could not hide for long then.

Auntie slurped tea, staring at Michael over the teacup’s rim: “Mikey, you work for FutureTech, no? You didn’t already know this?”

Michael shook his head. “I do the low-level bug fixes. I’m basically customer support. They don’t tell me anything. Are people not freaked out about this?”

His mother shrugged. “I was, but what can we do? The holograms are already everywhere. They already know what they know.”

Auntie said, “I’m not bothered. The holograms are cute. And I’ve got nothing to hide anyway.”

We left soon after. The subway ride home, Michael was silent. The walk to the apartment, swerving around speeding children in school-insignia blazers, stepping over low-legged lapdogs, he remained silent. Up the stairs, not a word.

I realized too: Michael might break up with me, and probably for the best. If all that tied us together were the woods, why stay together in The City? Perhaps it’d be healthier for him to be around someone who didn’t understand. For me, too.

**the circus left, the clowns remain**

Michael finally spoke: “We should go out to eat tonight.”

“Really? Where?”

“It doesn’t have to be fancy. We could go to the diner, even.”

Smart thinking on his part: take me somewhere public to break up so I wouldn’t make a scene. But I already decided I’d be generous and gracious about it. I’d let him keep the apartment. I’d move back in with Don and Mi – I didn’t want to, but with whatever money I had left, I could at least get noise-canceling headphones. The guinea pigs would come with me. I’d even still be around if he needed a shoulder to cry on.

In the evening, I prepared. I let myself sob quietly in the locked bathroom for five minutes, then rose from the toilet seat to splash cold water on my face. It didn’t matter; I’d gotten my insides tangled, lied to myself about romance as reality. Love was a practical matter. We didn’t have to stay together like other people did. We could both afford singleness.

The diner was a few blocks down. The portions were cheap and generous. Someone once told me they kept it cold to keep out roaches. Really, what could a diner’s sputtering air-conditioner do?

Inside, Michael sat hunched across from me, only the barest sliver of his bottom attached to the booth. His legs were taut, bent ready to run. He mashed his hands together, and looked down, studying the locking and grinding flesh, with seriousness pouring from between his eyes and dripping off his nose like sweat. I wished he’d get it over with.

The menus were laminated, wobbling when you held them. The tiled floor reeked of disinfectant. Stray crumbs lingered on the plastic finish of our table. It was early evening, the sky like a bruised plum, gentle sunlight rippling through the diner’s windows. Few patrons eating:

one cigarette-smelling mother with curved sunglasses like dragonfly eyes, with a toddler bouncing on her lap.

Michael ordered eggs. I asked for just toast and coffee.

“Is coffee a good idea this late in the day?” he asked as the waitress walked away. “And is just toast gonna be enough for you?” Was he always so patronizingly paternal?

“Yeah.”

He said nothing else. He was stalling.

A large group came through the door: two parents with a gaggle of whooping children swirling their feet. The adults’ forearms were weighed down with plastic bags and wrapped parcels. A balloon dragged behind one kid’s wrist. It was a birthday party, and the entertainer arrived last.

“Uh oh. Michael, don’t look behind you.”

“Why?”

“It’s your worst enemy.”

Such horror twisted Michael’s face; I quickly clarified – “There’s a bunch of kids on a birthday trip. They have a clown with them.”

“Oh,” Michael looked down at his hands again. “Thanks for warning me.”

The group lumbered to an open booth, following the exhausted waitress. The clown with them was no artist, I thought, not the way Whitman and August had been. His costume was of cheap cloth, his walk was unintentionally clumsy, his makeup peeled around the mouth. The clowns we once knew were pretentious, but they took their craft seriously.

“‘The circus left; the clowns remain.’ My aunt used to say that all the time,” Michael said. “It’s an idiom, like you’re being ridiculous and out of place.”



“Interesting. That’s kind of what happened to August and Whitman, right?” I asked, with immediate regret pinching inside. He would talk too long and stray from the matter at hand.

“Yeah, remember that story Whitman told us?” Michael said with a sad smile.

I did. Decades ago, their circus caravan had broken down. Even then, they were Luddites; the whole troupe lacked computers and cell phones. No way to call for help, and they were right outside their destination city. In their long journey through the open belly of the then-called United States, the City Mandate was enacted, but they had no way of knowing. Everyone else left to get help; the clowns stayed behind. Those who left were sucked into City life: the gates went up, and they couldn’t leave.

I thought sometimes of Whitman and August in their uncertain weeks, alone together in the forest, facing their new, uncertain reality. Were they enough for each other then? Though I suppose in friendship, one does not itch so strongly to answer that question as one does in romance.

They had waited patiently. When no one returned, they searched the woods and found an old woman who grew blackcurrants with her granddaughter. They met three farmers who refused to leave their land when the government officials came through. They together established a new plot of land, hidden behind a tree-studded slope, producing enough crops to stay out of view, and remain private. No one was in love, but everyone was alive.

“Michael, do you miss the woods?” I asked.

“No.”

“Not even a little? I feel like I’ve never been able to move so freely like I did there.”

Michael was uncomfortable. He shifted weight, thigh to thigh. Right, right – *they were listening to us.*

“I guess The City is a bit more stifling,” he said quietly.

“You know, it doesn’t have to be like that. Or, at least, we can make it better for ourselves. If you want the apartment—”

Michael was on his knee. I thought of how grimy those diner floors must’ve been. I thought of his leg, now healed from the hunter’s trap, still scarred four times, a dot-dot-dot-dot, like the end of a sentence started then unfinished. I hoped it didn’t hurt being pressed to the ground like that. I thought of how heavy his body was on mine when we walked back to Base Camp then, when he leaned everything into me, when his weight became my own.

The proposal came unexpected. My hands were clamshelled between his.

“Uh.” I looked up to lock eyes with the clown. He was glaring. He was watching.

The waitress came by with our food. Michael’s eggs steamed and my toast slid around on its too-big plate. She had to step over Michael’s bent back leg; there was little space between the booths. She did not notice us; she had a job to do. Behind us, the toddler stood on his mother’s lap. He tore a waffle into chunks, then threw those chunks on the ground.

Michael’s expectant gaze bit into me. I really didn’t understand. Why marry? The apartment was already secured.

Whoever told me about air-conditioning deterring roaches lied – there was one scurrying right by! It came dangerously close to Michael. I saw it flicker. This time, I was sure it did.