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## Painting the Smokestack

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# Painting the Smokestack

Part One of a Novel

by Ian McElfresh

Senior Project Submitted to the  
Division of Written Arts of Bard College

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## Acknowledgments

To my parents, my brother, and my friends, a loving thank you is well deserved. In every way, I would not be here today, graduating from college, were it not for you all. Regarding this project specifically, it is my advisor Joseph O'Neill who gets my dedication. His endless encouragement in our meetings has made this story one I am proud of, because though I doubted and struggled, he showed me that I ought to have confidence in myself, that what I'd written wasn't a story about nothing, that I'm a good writer. I now believe in his belief in me, and this I will keep for all my future writings.

One morning, try brushing your teeth with headphones on; it sounds kind of like the percussion of heavy rain against a metal roof, but more grating. When the spring showers come, I like to see the shiny beads on branch-tips, and even more when winter is just starting, and these droplets freeze. I find hope in the early February sprouts that bloom orange flowers, and despair when a late snow kills them. We'd still call it a waterfall even if it were completely frozen, though when only some of it is, the white ice mimics froth. I woke up on the day this ice had completely melted, and got out of bed to get ready for class.

This weekend would be better. I decided this after finishing class that morning. It was Friday, in the afternoon, a spring day. There were touches of green of buds of leaves, waiting for the temperature to rise just enough to sprout. The effect this made was strange, for all winter the muddy grey-brown trees that constituted every periphery in my school gave the place a sickening atmosphere in their leaflessness. I was walking down from north campus; the territory was essentially a north-southward facing rectangle. I thought about the strangeness as I walked. All winter long I saw this sleeping bark, but now, with just a little green, the connotation of the brown was so much brighter. It was as though the addition of this green somehow passed a threshold, or that each tree was a failed light bulb that just found its necessary coil.

It wasn't that I needed this weekend to be good, I simply had the drive for it. I was ready to give myself again to the entropy of the college party, and had the energy to cope with all the shit that could come from it. I took a phone out of my

pocket and asked my friend Guy what he was up to, by text. This was my third year into college, and I passed a row of bushes that would soon be covered in a very saturated-yellow flower. This path I walked went down the entire length of campus, parallel to a main road. It connected many of the far-between buildings that would otherwise seem isolated in the woods. Before me was one of the stretches of just trees. A little off-path were small hills with bare rocks showing. The sky was made opaque in spots by thin biscotti clouds. Ahead, the sidewalk achieved a vanishing point past a large tree, curving gently out of view. The lack of leaves' fullness on the branches made the sight only the skeleton of a pretty scene.

Once I'd rounded the bend, the woods opened to a field of dead grass, which sloped up steeply at the end to the dining hall. Around, other structures could be seen; this was the center of campus, where the densest collection of buildings was congregated. Only a few people were about, made vague by distance. Next to the field was a rubble parking lot filled with cars. The road was empty, and I crossed it and made my way onto the field. The earth was still hard from coldness, and there were tables on the top of the hill, with no one sitting on them. I made it up there, and headed toward the double doors of the dining hall entrance. Before going in, I looked back toward the trees I'd walked over from; their brown was without life. Maybe I was wrong about the green thing. Maybe I was just excited for spring. I went inside, gave the woman who swipes the ID cards for meals my ID card to be swiped, and went in to get food.

The air here was filled with the sounds of motion. Many people flowed in and out the cafeteria. The place was set up buffet style. Once inside, I grabbed a plate

from the front and made my rounds. The room was small, and though this might've deceived one as to the actual number of people here, there were a lot of people here. Half were standing in line for something, and the others walked about with various amounts of food and drink in hand. I walked about until I found a friend by the chicken.

"Hey," I said at him. He heard me,

"Hey, Will!" he said, "What's good?" We each extended a free hand (to shake).

"Usual stuff," I said, "How has your week been?"

We kept pace with the moving line, "It's been fine, you know. Glad it's over."

He got to the self-serve counter and tonged some chicken.

"Yeah same." My turn; I took two drumsticks. I followed him to the salad bar.

"I'm excited for the weekend," I said.

"Yeah."

I paused. I didn't want to seem like I was inviting myself, but, "You know of anything going on?"

He laughed a little in a way that kind of offended me. "I'll let you know if I'm throwing anything in my suite." He thought I wanted to know if *he* was hosting a party this weekend.

"Thanks."

"Oh, Will," he said, friendly again, "You're in that lit class with Alice, right?"

I said that I was.

"You see her in class today?"

“No, she wasn’t there,” I said. Normally we’d walk to lunch together; this was the first time she’d been absent.

“Huh. Well I’ll see ya,” he said, and left. He was James, Alice’s boyfriend.

I put together a salad of mixed greens, cucumber, and dry mushrooms, with a vinaigrette dressing. To get a drink, I passed through the heat-cloud of the conveyer belt toaster oven, and took a plastic cup from a stack near the soda fountain. Many people stood around here, talking with one another, but I filled my cup with water and got a fork, knife, napkins, two, and left.

I walked out and past the sitting area walled in brick with a navy blue diamond-pattern rug, and square windows looking out to another hill that led to academic buildings. James and his group would be sitting there, and I didn’t want to join them today. Every time I did, it was out of obligation to Alice. There was another sitting area, down a wide hallway, with white walls and bigger windows, overlooking the grass field. I preferred the brick, but did not like the passive standoffishness sitting there would convey to the group, were I to sit apart from them.

Regardless, eating somewhere else would be an adventure. I went past the familiar entry-frames, and to the other room. The ceiling was higher, with a row of supporting columns coming down in a central line. The ambient conversation-noise seemed the same to me, but looking out, all of the people were different. To not be the timid man at the threshold of his neighbor’s house, I walked in. After some searching, I settled on an empty table. To be standing in a room full of sitters sets a

timer on the length of time one has before appearing out of place. Nearly three quarters into the semester, and this was Alice's first absence from class.

My table shared a booth with a table of three before it. Walking over to sit, I saw the two facing my way. One was a girl with short red-orange hair and a very distinct nose ring, down the middle. The one next to her was a guy, thin and lanky, with sleek black hair. The third was a girl, though she was facing away. The girl with the nose ring was leaning in, grin-mouthed and excited to speak.

"Last weekend, Liam and I were drunk at a party."

I sat down and looked around some more. I recognized surprisingly few people. Down at the back end of the room was a bronze bust of probably some donor or dedicatee. I heard this girl behind me say 'bored,' and I thought about Alice. Surely, if James had to ask me about her, something must be up. However, my interaction with Alice was fairly limited to the classroom-lunch setting. I wasn't sure if I really knew her at all. Discouraged, I wanted to dismiss it; missing a class was really no big deal, but still some anxious feeling stuck with me. Even though I had no justification for insight, this was, at its very base, something *different*, and changes in patterns are always important to note. I sent her a simple, 'You ok?' message with my phone.

"And we broke into the dining hall's kitchen."

Despite facing away from Nose-ring Girl, being separated by only the booth cushion situated our heads mere feet from one another, and this made hearing everything she said rather easy.

"Bullshit," said the dark haired boy, "how'd you get in?"



“Ok,” said Nose-ring, “we didn’t exactly break in, but you know that door in back, the one at the loading bay?”

I did, and the others gave affirmative sounds. The dining hall had student entrances on the north and south sides. On the western side of the building was the loading bay, which had a ramp made of concrete with a rectangular space for a big rig to pull in and unload. Next to the ramp were the dumpsters, and many green trashcans for compost. The door was up the ramp, under an awning.

“I swear,” she said, “the door just opened when Liam turned it, and we were in, middle of the night.”

“What did you take?” Said the girl whose face I hadn’t seen.

“Oh just wait,” Nose-ring said, “the story gets better.” My chicken was dry.

“All of the lights were off inside, except the exit signs. Immediately we came across cartons of fruit and bread, but Liam said that this wasn’t good enough. He was drunk and wanted a whole one of those cakes they put out. He said that he knew where the fridge was, said you could see it from the omelet line. We went in a little further and found rows of stovetops all on, and set to low,”

“They just left the stoves *on*?” the other girl said, “like all night?”

“I guess so, yeah,” Nose-ring said, “It was pretty weird, and at that point, I started getting nervous. I felt like we’d get caught if we stayed any longer. I told Liam, but he just told me to go back and grab what I wanted while he went and got the cake. I still wasn’t having it, but sure enough, Liam went off into the dark kitchen without me, crouched down, stranding me behind. So, you know, because I couldn’t just leave him, I went back to where we’d entered, grabbed a few bunches of

bananas, and some bread, and waited. After a while, I was too anxious to stay, and I went looking for him. I made it to the room with the burners, and there was Liam. He'd gotten the cake alright," Nose-ring laughed a little, and, with difficulty, said, "but the whole thing was exploded all over the floor, he fucking dropped it on his way back!"

"Oh my god," said the faceless girl. She, too, *could* have a nose ring.

Dark-hair said something like "Fucking Liam," nostalgically.

"And it got everywhere?" Faceless girl now sounded very invested.

Nose-ring really upped her inflections. "Boston. Cream. Cake." This got everyone laughing, "Everywhere, Everywhere!"

After the brief fit, "How on earth did you deal with that mess?" Faceless girl asked, sounding cheery.

I moved onto eating my salad, with half my glass of water left.

"Well," Nose-ring said, "seeing that cake all over wasn't at all funny the first time, I completely freaked out. We knew we had to clean it up. The whole point of being there was to get away with something, something small, you know? This wouldn't be the case if the workers came back in the morning to cake all over the kitchen. It would be obvious *somebody* had been in.

We searched for paper towels, something disposable we could use to clean this mess up. For the life of us, we found nothing. It was the strangest thing! No paper towels? Napkins? In a kitchen?!"

"Yeah, what?" Faceless Girl said. "This and the burners, what a turned around place."

“It’s like you guys actually went to, like, a parallel universe, or something,” Dark Hair said.

It did seem strange, but maybe we all just didn’t understand it, or weren’t trying to. Maybe (or maybe not) just beneath this obscurity, was sound reasoning, a functional system. At least they weren’t wasting paper. I took another drink of water.

“It sure felt like it,” Nose-ring said. “Liam must have seen some kind of horrified look on my face, even in the dark, because I *was* starting to feel faint, and he said that I should go outside with my food to be a lookout while he figured out how to deal with it. So I went back again, and left where we’d entered, and went down the hill a little to that round bench thing where some people park their bikes. I put the bananas and bread down, behind one of the bikes, of course, and sat down and waited.

“Before long, I saw the light of a van coming down the street. It had the logo of the food service company on its side. I remember the only thing I could think of then was ‘please don’t turn in,’ ‘please don’t turn in.’ Of course, go figure, it turns in and heads right up to the loading ramp. I immediately got up, pulled out my phone, and walked away and left the food there. I texted Liam to get the fuck out, I didn’t want to call, in case his talking back to me would get him heard. I walked down the tree line, then turned into the field and hid in the trees and bushes, but I still had a good view into the dining hall. The lights were on, they must also leave those on overnight.”

I looked over through the big glass windows and out into the field. There, on the left, was the edge of the tree line, and I pictured a silhouetted Nose-ring among the trunks, crouched perhaps, with the occasional light of her phone flickering on and off, like Morse, to check the time or text Liam more warnings.

“I mean, it felt like forever, but eventually, Liam popped out of one of the side doors of the kitchen, and steadily walked down the hall. He was obviously trying to play it cool. As soon as he made it through the double doors though,” both student entrances on either side had double doors, “he just took off like you wouldn’t believe.” There was chuckling. “I let him make his way down a bit before calling him, and waving him over with my phone. He was carrying a rag and had his pea coat on, zipped up. When he got close, I could see his bare chest through the top of the zipper. It became clear that the stained, cake-caked rag he was holding *was* his shirt.”

“Hah!” Not Nose-ring said, “That’s so absurd!”

“Fucking Liam, man,” Dark-hair said.

Nose-ring laughed. “Turns out, he hadn’t gotten any of my texts. He said that right as he was about to leave, after he cleaned up the cake, he was right at the door, when he heard the van pull up, and the people getting out to walk in. He said he bolted off as quietly as he could, and tried a bunch of other doors until one worked, thank god.”

“Did you ever get the food?”

I took my last bite of salad. “Yeah,” Nose-ring said, “we went back to the party for a while, and then got it. I’m sitting with a weeks worth of bananas right now.”

The story had ended, and the three went back into conversation resonant with the rest of the room. I picked up my plate, killed the last of the water, and went to clear the dishes. I got a good look, inconspicuously I think, at the other girl's face. She did have a nose ring, but the kind that's through only one nostril, not down the middle like Nose-ring's.

I stepped into a little clearing room, and put my dishes through a small window where they were quickly pulled back by one of the kitchen workers. I could only see their plastic-gloved hands, as this window was at most two feet in height, and started at waist level. I walked back to my table to collect my backpack. On the way, I looked to the left, away from everyone, to see the various doors Liam must have tried. Which one turned out to be unlocked, and what was the kitchen really like inside? I realized that I didn't know at all what Liam looked like, but from the story I just heard, I felt I had some sense of him, like in my head there was some sort of figure that had no discernable features, but was still Liam, and couldn't be mistaken for any other person I could make up.

I looked around once more, and left. I made the assumption that no one here was Liam, considering he'd probably be sitting with Nose-ring and the other two. I left the dining hall. My dorm was up on the northern side of campus. I started through the field, but then felt the ambrosial buzz of someone having texted me back. It was Guy, he said he was in the shop.

I changed course, moving leftward to loop around the dining hall to go further down the main road. Before this, though, I encountered the round bench thing. The exterior was concrete, and it was situated against an uphill slant, tucked

into the tree line. The concrete formed a semi cylinder, a few feet high, with a wooden shelf-style bench lining the inside. A few bikes were chained to the bars fastening the wood to the concrete. It seemed a great place to be unnoticed. I crossed the street, and followed the sidewalk down again. What Guy meant was that he was in the school's workshop. He was a sculptor, and liked best to use wood and metal. The workshop was in the studio arts building, and from what I understood, was well stocked with all kinds of fun power tools.

I kept a good pace, and there were many dead leaves around. It's funny, I had always thought, growing up in a hot place where there were no seasons, that the leaves that fell in the fall somehow went away by the spring. Now, after having been through a few real winters, I got how that was an absurd expectation. I'd been taught seasons by reference to what each had that the others did not. There was never any mention of spillover. By the end of spring, many of the colored flowers go away. By the end of the summer, much of the green goes away too. After winter, all the white snow melts, but the leaves from fall never disappear. They're always there, covered by the snow, ignored under the flowers, overshadowed by the rampant green, until eventually replaced again.

A hope formed to hear back from Alice, a wish, almost. Today was such that it was cold in the shade, but having walked an unobstructed stretch of sidewalk, I felt almost hot from the sun. I passed a chapel, professor housing, and a few administrative cottages before coming up to the art building. It was particularly unremarkable, almost rundown-looking. There was, however, a collection of matte-grey pipe vents and industrial fans coming out of one side that looked like a friendly

metal man helping to hold up the storm drain, and the part of the roof that jutted out. This whole apparatus fed into the woodshop, and must have served as some kind of ventilation system.

I entered the building through a central door, and went down the appropriate hallways. At the end of my path was a square cul-de-sac, with an entranceway to the woodshop on the left, and the metal shop on the right. Both had, instead of doors, those hanging plastic noodle strips covering the entry frames. Guy would probably be in the woodshop, so I went left, through that membrane. There was a satisfaction in parting the heavy rubber and pushing past its resistance. There were few passageways that operated differently from the jerk effort of the conventional door.

The woodshop was a large, rectangular room with a flat hardwood table in the middle. All of the fixed power tools lined the walls. There was a shelf for raw materials, and a desk where a monitor theoretically kept an eye on the equipment. Guy was here, power-sawing a piece of plywood into some shape. He had on a dust mask and goggles, with a blue and white bandana wrapped around his head. He was pretty tall and built, so it had never been hard to recognize him by profile. In between cuts, I approached him. There was one other person here, also masked, who was sanding individual pieces that looked as though they'd come together to form a rudimentary chair.

I slapped Guy on the shoulder.

"Yo dude," he said, seeing me. We clapped hands into a handshake. The gesture made a loud popping sound.

“Nice one,” I said, regarding the sound.

“Yeah, it was,” Guy said. He removed his mask. “Want to see what I’ve been working on?”

I said of course, and he abandoned what he was cutting to lead me to the monitor’s desk. Guy was the space monitor here. On the desk were a few papers, tools, and an almost complete small rectangular box, two sides missing, with something rest inside it. Guy’s mouth moved, but I couldn’t hear the words, the ambient power sander was too loud.

“Huh?” I half yelled.

“I said this took me all day to make.” Guy pulled a crude wooden pipe out of the box. It was sanded well, but not lacquered with a finish. Guy, while not having the lightest touch, had a craftsman’s intuition. Though raw, the pipe looked complete, and had a power about it because of this duality. Instead of being perfect, it showed that it had been *made*, not assembled or pre-cut. Every etch and plane was a moment, and this contrasted heavily with the factory faux-wood of the desk behind. This gave the pipe a sense of worth. Most other’s work like this would come off as looking too rough or unfinished. Guy’s piece very intelligently suggested ‘pipe,’ much like an impressionist painting. I laughed. Of course Guy would make a fucking pipe.

“Is this for a class?” I said.

“You bet, buddy!” Guy’s voice was playful. “Best thing is, after I show it to the class I’ll just, *have* a pipe.”

“Word.” I didn’t smoke, but Guy did.



"I might actually smoke out of it before class, to prove that it actually works, you know?" There was much sarcasm there.

"What kind of smoking we talking about?" I asked with obvious intention. Guy brought his thumb and index finger to his mouth, and scrunched his face.

"God damn it Guy," I said. Smoking out of a class project, what a thing.

"Of course, if you'd also like to partake.."

I waved him off. Guy knew I didn't smoke; his offerings were a courtesy, a warm and friendly 'hey, come break the law with me!' This school didn't really crack down on weed, but I still found it funny.

"Fine, fine," Guy said, "but one day."

I laughed, because normally people pay to do this. "One day, maybe. What's the rest of today look like for you?"

"I'm stuck here for another few hours, but after that, I guess I'll just head to dinner. You want to meet me there?"

"Ah sorry," I said, "I just ate lunch. I don't think I can do an early dinner, but I am looking to do some drinking tonight."

"There we go!" Guy raised a fist, as though having accomplished something. He was always insisting that I drink more. "I have a good bit of whiskey left and some beer, I think." He thought for a moment. "Or maybe not. I'll tell you what," he laid his hand out like a map, "after I eat, I'll go on a beer run, and then by the time I'm back you should done eating too, yeah?"

"I'll head over when I'm done," I said. "What's happening tonight?"

“Oh don’t you worry.” Guy let his hand fall on my back, but with force. “You’ll be well taken care of, my friend.” This probably meant we were going to get drunk, and then wander around looking for a party. This was ok. Guy and I in the past have found ourselves in pretty absurd circumstances with this method. It worked.

“Let’s just make sure we have a good night.” I really meant it, like a forward prophecy, and outstretched a hand. Guy smacked it into another handshake. “Hit me up when you are good to chill,” I said.

“Will do man,” Guy said, and put his mask back on. I left and didn’t really know what to do for the next few hours. I could go home, and be alone, or maybe head to the campus center on the off chance of running into someone. Calling or texting was no good; Guy was that go-to person of mine. Today didn’t feel like a day for circumstantial success to happen, it was crisp and thin out. People are around when there’s more of a weight in the air, something reassuring, like hope. I walked to the campus center. If I was to go back to my room, I might as well take the long way.

It wasn’t far, and once there, I went in. There was a small café, and tables and benches by windows. Everything was visible, which made it easy to see that there was nothing for me today. In every public space, there were regulars. I didn’t come here very much, but could recognize a smattering of people who were almost always here when I did. The others were groups I didn’t know at all, photography or psychology majors, maybe. For every class I chose to take, there must have existed someone with the inverse of that schedule. Whole academic majors were like this, to

the point where if I didn't know someone in the department, I'd almost certainly be isolated from that entire group. I left the campus center, and continued south.

It bothered me seeing groups happily chatting all the time. Would people just plan their entire day around not being alone, or was this just the illusion? Laughter is more noticeable than the quiet of solitude, and I didn't like to think that I found myself alone more than not. Equally aggravating was the idea of wanting to be with people just to not be alone, though.

There was a path that led into the trees, and I took it. Sure, there were people I could join, but always, it felt like I wasn't needed. I was expendable, unessential; it's hard to be in a room of friends who are all better friends with one another than with oneself. It was better here, inside the woods than next to them on the sidewalk. Everything was so still, and the forest floor was messy with fallen trees and stick shrubs and branches. The canopy stretched too high to see if there were any spring buds here. I heard that there was a forest before this one that had been completely logged for export. These trees replaced it, and because they grew together at the same time, the saplings had to change to be tall and thin in order to compete with one another for sunlight. Every fourth or fifth tree hugging the path had a blue circle nailed into it, marking the trail I walked. Soon, it would bend up and go northward, toward my dorm. I'd come out right by it. I supposed what I really wanted was to find someone who I never had the chance to meet yet. There was a rustle in the underbrush, and I saw that it was squirrels about. The sounds were acute and I tried to spot the sources quickly, as a kind of game. Aside from this, things were quiet.

Because the trees here were young, there stood many, but their trunk were thin, and left a lot of empty space too.

The amount of air that could be felt here, with the squirrel's sounds inside it, made apparent how big a silence this place actually had. Should someone fuss through the contents of a box in a warehouse, the noise that is made, by scale, would never travel all the way around such a room. It would be dissolved, and by failing to bounce off the walls, would only give the contrast necessary for one to come to terms with how much volume was present. This is the silence of bigness. It kind of reminded me of loneliness. It would be enough to hear back from Alice. I really only wanted to feel important to someone, to know that my attention was *wanted*, not tolerated.

Should a crate fall, explode on the warehouse floor, the sound would tear the silence, and this would make apparent just how big the sound-maker was. I heard a crack, and I could feel it too. Squirrels don't break branches. When I turned, I saw a white shape running, away from me by the sound of it, tearing the forest floor. The gradation of the trees and the angle of the slope made the thing look like it wasn't moving at all, just running in place on four legs and then it was gone, and quiet.

I listened until the hairs stopped rising. I looked around to see how far into the trail I was, and figured it would be best to finish it instead of heading back. As I walked again, I no longer noticed the trees. My gaze was to the ground, looking inward as my ears became my eyes. Every sound was a threat. Whatever I saw must have been as heavy, or heavier than I was. I remembered a tail. Every sound

quicken my pace, but I never ran. It is a well-known truth that running is provocation for chasing.

I didn't think much until I found myself back in my room, on my bed. It took a while to come down. I'd expected a bear, but bears here just aren't white like that. Some skunks can be, but they aren't big, and they waddle. I didn't know what to think, so I just sat with the feeling of helplessness. The feeling that was, I assumed, that of the hunted. Back home, it was the mountain lion who stood on every peak and around every bend, like a myth. This animal was rarely seen, but there were always stories. Having never seen one, I knew all too well the pathetic scale by which any person could be sized up against such a predator. I didn't know what I saw, but I felt I knew that it occupied a similar scale to me as the mountain lion would. Something I wouldn't stand a chance fighting back against.

I was still on my bed, backpack on. I took the bag off, and eventually went for my computer. I played games and watched videos until I realized how hungry I was, and that it was dark outside. I didn't want to go, but I'd gotten to the point of questioning just how big of a deal all of this was. I didn't have enough information, and the fact was, I hadn't been attacked. Still, I felt scared. I put on a jacket, and gloves and a scarf to be sure, and left.

It was cold out, and I was glad for the scarf and gloves, because I didn't have the strength to resist it. Facing the cold requires a mental effort, and I was a bit scattered. The path from the woods was right there as I passed. The darkness made it look like a hole, and I didn't look at it anymore, for fear that I might see something.

Just being close to it gave me some paranoid feeling, and I walked a little fast, and a little faster in between the lamplights.

I walked the main sidewalk toward the dining hall again, only the darkness warped shapes and, with the tree's canopy, made the path look a tunnel at times. While there was the occasional building and passing car, there was no escape from the woods. This school was contained in it, unlike most other manicured campuses. It was wild at night. I couldn't see past the thick yellow light of the streetlamps, which made me feel like I was being watched, by the dark and whatever hid under it. Only watched, though. I passed the bushes that would turn yellow. They had many small branches that created a fuzzier shadow, like a veil to something that was hiding. Whatever I saw in the woods had run away from me.

I didn't have enough information. This fear that was forming, I had nothing to cure it with. Ahead stood the dining hall, stoic on top of the hill, and light came from square windows. This gave the impression of the sturdiness of a stronghold. I made it up the hill, and walked through the double doors. Mags was working the counter. I went up and gave her my card.

"Hey honey, how you doing today?" Her face was old enough for wrinkles, and her hair enough for gray, but her eyes were very kind and alert with a younger energy. I liked her. She slid my card through the tiny black machine.

"It seems like we are going to get spring in any time now," I said.

She gave my card back to me. "Oh yes, I can feel it. Any day now and.." she spread her hands and widened her eyes. Boom.

I gave her a laugh. "I can't wait."

She gave a wink. "It's about time we had some life back on this campus."

Good one. "See you Mags," I said, heading in with a wave.

"Bye dear," she said after me.

I grabbed a plate. This would be a hamburger and pizza meal. At the pizza station, a huge food worker stood behind the counter kneading a crust. He looked very intimidating, but I have heard that sometimes he'd make little pastries or bread knots, and would give them to the students who talk to him. All of the plastic cups were gone, so I got a paper one, and ran into a girl at the soda machine. She was Paige, part of James' table.

"Hi," I said. We were both waiting for the water nozzle, another person ahead of us in line for it.

"Hey, Will," she said. The water was open and she went for it.

"How's it going?" I asked.

Her cup was full. "You coming to sit?" She said.

"Yeah," I said, beginning to fill mine.

Once it was done, Paige asked, "Ready?"

"Yeah, let me grab some napkins." On the way out, I made the quick detour then followed Paige to the table.

She went and sat next to Tim. They were together. I put my plate down across from them at one end of the table. Next to me was Mike, who was next to June. On the other end of the table, across from them, sat James. I took a seat and patted Mike on the shoulder as a hello. He was talking to June and James. He had a

soft leather jacket on that he liked to wear even when inside. He had a cigarette behind an ear too.

“Yeah I think I’m going to take it easy this weekend,” Mike said.

“Makes sense after last weekend,” June said, laughing.

Paige had gone in just for water; where she sat, there was a nearly finished plate, crumpled napkins, and a bowl with a small bit of milk at the bottom. The rest of the table was like this too, with some entropic spills, and napkins half-dampened to clean them (mostly) up.

“Hah! Yeah come on, you are the best blackout drunk, man,” said James.

Tim looked to Paige. “I’m going to go make some tea.”

“What, I was just in there,” Paige said, with playful challenge.

“I had to finish my cereal,” he said back, and picked up the spoon in the bowl and smacked it repeatedly on the milk left at the bottom, “Ce-re-al.”

“You are a child.” Paige pawed his face and Tim went for one of her fingers.

“No! No,” she said, as if to an animal, “you go get your tea, you poop-head.” I waved to Tim as he got up and grabbed his cup.

“Hey, Will,” He had a warm smile, with his mouth and eyes.

“Yeah and I’m still feeling that hangover,” Mike said.

Once Tim had left, I said, “Hey Paige, how’s it going?” She was looking toward the conversation of the other three.

“I’m fine, you know, same old.” She nodded with a seriousness, then went back to the other conversation. I turned to it too. Paige laughed at a joke neither of us had heard, but everyone was laughing. I tried to take advantage of the pause.



“Oh, there was this one time,” I said.

“Oh!” June was louder, “*That* was the night some guy brought a full pineapple to the party and,”

“Oh God,” Mike said, covering his face. I just started eating my food.

“we found you passed out with half of that thing gone. You cradled it like a kid with its favorite stuffed toy.”

Mike pushed June on the shoulder a bit, “Come on now.”

“You never had a teddy bear as a kid?” she said to him. My burger was dry, but the pizza was pretty good, crunchy crust and jalapenos.

“Nope, I’m a toy car kind of guy.” Tim was back, and he put his cup of tea down on the table, then sat.

“Welcome back,” I said.

“Still are?” June said to Mike. “When *I* was a kid, I had this bear named Hackey-Sack. My aunt made him for me when I was born and she put beads in his stomach instead of stuffing.”

“Thank you sir,” Tim said, and he wrapped an arm around Paige, who leaned into it.

“That’s why I named him that, because of the sound when he fell, so I liked to throw him up and catch him a lot. God, I can’t remember what happened to him, but I really loved that bear.” Everyone was listening.

“Yeah, I was real broke up too when I woke up without that pineapple,” Mike said.

June actually pushed him, and through a laugh, she said, “Mike, I’m serious.”

Tim and Paige were talking discreetly, some of their own business. James couldn't look more content. I finished my food.

"At least I can account for half of it, though," Mike said.

I figured that what I wanted was a girlfriend, and at this point in the conversation, I wasn't hungry for seconds. I consolidated my things and got up.

"See you guys," I said, loud enough.

"Bye Will," Tim said, with a nostalgia I didn't feel was justified by my lack of contribution to the group tonight. I started to walk away.

"God I freaking hate you!" June said, to Mike, presumably.

I made it out and put my dishes through that clearing window, then headed out the doors to the hill. I sent Guy an 'On my way.' In the dark, that hiding-bench was even more inconspicuous. It looked smaller. I crossed the street to the sidewalk, and headed northward.

Guy's dorm was right next to mine. The doors were always locked, but there was usually a smoker outside with a key. I saw something about a tree and stopped. The trunk was lined up in front of one of the street lamps across the street, and the light shined out, silhouetting the branches. But it was strange; the branches against the light revealed circular lines, diminishing in size the closer to the light's source. These made the tree, without leaves, seem like a spider's web. It was treacherous-looking, especially without the spider. What would something like that look like? I didn't like to look, not here, with an empty tree and darkness everywhere else. This imagination held a story. An empty thing asks wherever went that which had once filled it.

I started walking again. There's nothing about a spider that is human-like, relatable. That is why it is scary. Would a larger one reveal even more frightful lines? I looked at the sky, but from under the lamp-glare, it looked black. Everything the yellow light touched, tree bark and leaves mostly, was tinted antique. Yeah, it probably would. I made it to Guy's place and did find a smoker who let me in. There was a purr of laundry machines, but things were otherwise quiet. Guy's room was on the second floor, down a symmetrical hallway. I tried the doorknob and it responded.

"There he is," Guy said. He was cross-legged on his bed with a game controller in his hands, looking at a screen across the room set on top a dresser. An open beer was on the bed frame. On the radiator, in a line, were all the empty cans of the night so far. Guy was playing a war game, first-person-shooter. I went and sat down next to him on the bed.

"Ready to drink?" he said.

"Oh yeah, let me get in on this?"

"Word, I'll back out of the lobby. There should be a controller on that desk somewhere, and grab yourself a beer, of course." At his feet was an opened thirty-rack. I found the controller and then took a can and sat back down. I took off my extraneous clothing. We set up the game split-screen, so we could both play at once on the same monitor. We started up a queue to find other players, for our team and then the opponents, all of them strangers.

"Gotta drink after every death."

“Oh you know it.” I popped my can open and took a preliminary sip. It was awful, but easy to drink. We found a lobby and loaded into a map.

“How about this,” I said. The game started and I immediately had my character huck a grenade, “Whenever one of us gets a kill the *other* person has to drink.”

“Ooohh!” Guy said. “Yeah! That’s an excellent idea. You’re on buddy.”

“Drink, then.” I had gotten a kill.

“Ah shit.” Guy had died too, and took two mouthfuls before respawning. I got the one that had killed him.

“Sorry kid, but take another.” I heard a ‘fucking,’ mumbled.

Pretty soon though, Guy said, “Triple kill baby! Drink up!” I died in the process of drinking, and had to take a fourth. We sat like this for a while, downing beer in an otherwise static room. Someone listening in may have found it funny, hearing us say ‘drink, drink, drink,’ over the sound of gunfire. In between games, I said, “So what’s our plan?” I’d deflated back until my head was crooked up against the wall. We’d gone through a good amount by now, and I was definitely feeling it. I’d been dying more in the game.

“Don’t worry, there’s probably plenty going on tonight. We have so much time dude. How about we play a few more games, and then go north and make our way down from there?”

“Fine,” I said, leaning back up and taking the controller into my hands. Our empties lined up all the way across the heater, so we had stacked the subsequent

ones on top of these, pyramid-style. "But only a few more, I'm pretty sure I'm getting pretty drunk already."

"All according to plan, my small friend," Guy said, and smacked me on the shoulder. A competitiveness sparked.

"Oh I'm not out, big guy," I said.

"That's more like it!" Guy got ready with a new beer, controller still in hand. That game, I did alright, but in the next I drove Guy into the ground, with twenty kills and only five deaths on my part. Guy had let out a mostly sarcastic groan afterwards.

"That was brutal man, truly brutal," he said, hands in his hair, holding the head up.

I laughed, a little too hard. "You think you can be ready to go now?" His eyes were pretty glazed.

"Definitely, dude. I don't think I could handle another one of those rounds."

"Alright!" I said, "Come on, let's go then." Guy had dead weighted on the bed, I kicked at the boots he had on, hanging over the edge.

"Yeah. I know, I know. Alright." He swung up, mused his face his hands, and got up. We turned everything off and left after getting on coats and gloves and such things. The building was just one big rectangular box from the outside. We took a path that cut through a small bunch of trees and I didn't trip because I knew where the loose flat stone was, even with heavy steps. Guy didn't trip either. We came out on the other side to a pair of dorms in a field, and passed them. The field was more

of a clearing, with an island of trees in the middle and the softly dead grass made no sound being stepped on. It was neither frozen nor completely dry.

The stars were out, so much so that the clouds in space could be seen. Carbonated as I was, I had no mind for them. This clearing was rolled with small hills. Music could be heard when we'd reached the central grove.

"That has to be Estate," Guy said.

"You want to check it out?"

"Yeah, we can find people who know what else is happening, if anything."

"Alright."

As we went, the building came into view. It stood up a big slope from the field, and was old and stone and had an outside staircase that led up to a porch. There were people there, and the smoke they blew was very apparent. There was a powerful outside light, and things stood beneath it cast strong shadows; through the windows one could see the standard color flashes of a school-run party. The talking sounded louder than the music, until someone would open the door to go back inside. It was like the buzz at the dining hall, but more reckless. The hiss of a can being opened is smooth and calm, but the party sound is as though this can had been shaken first. People like to shake themselves up for the weekend, so that when somebody else cracks the aluminum, the pressure inside foams and sprays to force its way out. It's messy, but much more fun to watch. Anything could happen.

At the bottom of the steps, the people on the porch looked tall, and all of their faces were obscured by the light behind them. I wouldn't be able to recognize

anyone until I climbed up too. Those grouped in circles cast an especially strange shadow.

We walked up the stairs and I wondered if anyone would say hi to me. I felt I was the one who went up to people first usually. Everyone here would get to see me before I would see them. Some talked loudly. A glass bottle was dropped. The door was opened and the air became thick with music. Through the glare I could see that inside, the dancing people all looked the same and overlapped one another like agitated oil.

The door closed again, and from all the voices, I thought I recognized one. I turned to Guy and held out a fist.

“Meet up in a bit?”

“You bet,” he said, and matched my gesture and we hit knuckles. He broke off and went straight for the door. I shuffled around the groups of people, and found no one I knew. I went inside, and everyone was dancing.

I walked around the periphery of the dance floor. The colored lights were on the walls and ceiling, moving, and catching people’s heads. On the far side of the room was a DJ, and the music was bumpy and electronic. When there was a strong enough downbeat, everyone would drop a little at the same time. Rather, those who could keep time did. The others, probably drunk, were delayed and this made a liquid-like impression.

I walked into the crowd; at first, everyone appeared to be dancing in their own small groups, save for the couples dancing together. Closer to the front, by the DJ, the crowd was more of one group, all facing forward and jumping and pushing

one another. I stayed here for a little, and focused on getting pushed around without falling. I still had my coat and scarf and gloves on, and soon I felt very hot. I took it as an excuse to leave to find a place to put it all. I pushed through people as seamlessly as I could. Somebody stepped on my foot, hard. There was a large back room opposite the DJ, and the door to it was closed, with light coming through the cracks. I went there, and here was where all the coats and pocket books were, piled on a few tables, with many other tables and stacks of chairs coagulated together throughout the room. Alex was here, with Mehal and someone I did not know. They were leaning on a table, looking into space with EVENT STAFF lanyards around their necks. I waved to break the spell, and they looked up at me.

“Coat duty?” I said.

“Yep.” I was too old for this party if the only people I knew were the ones supervising it. I was feeling embarrassed at being drunk here.

“Nice, well I’m going to get back in there.” I said.

“Enjoy,” Alex said. Mehal already was spacing out again.

Back at the party, I gave dancing a try, just bobbing around, trying to feel the music. But even when drunk, I just wasn’t enjoying myself. Even in a completely dark room, I felt the presence of everyone here. What could I possibly have to say to them, dancing to this music? A part of my optimism had soured, and I wanted to find Guy and leave. I found it pointless looking for him on the dance floor. There was another room leading further into Estate where people could socialize inside. Guy was there, talking with someone. I got a vague feeling that she was an art student by the way I didn’t know her, and Guy did.



There were many people here with them, and I walked around while Guy chatted. I gave hellos to some people, but found no talking-friends. After a full pass, I went up to Guy and the girl. I did not want to run out of time. It was still early enough to find another party, but I wanted to act now and not linger. Pretty soon I would start to sober up. It was like being stalled at a stoplight, watching the tank drain.

Neither of them seemed to mind my being there. I gave Guy a small hello as the girl was still talking. She stopped and questioned at me.

“Hello, I’m Will.” I held out a hand. She gave a strong handshake.

“Matilda,” she said. I nodded a nice to meet you and then she continued to Guy, “But yeah, he had me on double shifts this past week, the other guy quit out of nowhere. I’ll probably have to do it again until he finds another hand.”

“Ah, that’s a bummer,” Guy said, and then through a sigh, “I suppose a little extra money isn’t the worst though, I almost wish I could work a little more myself.”

“I mean,” Matilda said, “I’m sure Wen would have no problem with you in the metal shop if you want to take some shifts.”

“Well, I don’t really know my way around all the tools there too well.”

“I could show you, no problem. It’s all easier than you’d think.” Matilda spoke with candor, but everyone at a party did.

“I’ll have to think about it some more. I don’t want to get myself into too much,” Guy said.

“Fair,” Matilda said. “I’ll see you Monday though, right? I can show you around the shop then?”

“Yeah!” Guy pointed to her. “I’ll be in the woodshop, I can swing by after my shift is over.” Matilda looked over her shoulder to the other people around the room. She seemed in the same situation as me, like by talking with us, she was running out of time to do so with other people. She was seeming more ready to leave, “Oh, you know anything else going on tonight?” Guy said, “Will and I don’t really know what was going on so we came here.”

Matilda made a choice, “Actually, I’m about to head to one now. You guys are welcome to join me if you want.”

“What brought you here then?” I asked. These school-run parties are very secondarily favored to parties in dorms, the ones without supervision.

“I live upstairs,” she said, “it’s nice to come down and see people here before heading out.”

“Word,” Guy said. He looked at me. “I think we’ll definitely tag along.” I nodded to confirm, “Where are we headed,” he asked.

Matilda didn’t look around or over her shoulder again as we headed to the door to leave, “Just down a bit to the village, in a suite.” Suite parties were great because they had a living room. We walked past the dance floor, left a room full of people, and none of them would know it.

But just down the steps, “Ah shit,” I said.

“What is it?” Guy said.

“I left my coat inside, be right back.” I was up the stairs before an answer, and back to the dance and the coatroom, guarded by Alex and Mehal, and someone else. They were talking now, cheery and laughing, and I got my things and went. Mehal

saw me, but didn't say anything. I almost ran into someone on my way out, and then down the stairs again. Guy and Matilda were there, still talking. On seeing me, they did not stop, and started walking again, like a conveyor belt returned to after a lunch break. We were on a set track.

"Yeah, because I work there so much, I get first dibs on the scrap each week," Matilda said.

"Nice, yeah most of the wood scraps are pretty unusable. You can't really melt that down." Matilda chuckled, I couldn't tell if she was sober or not, "But what kinds of stuff do you make in there?" Guy asked.

We were passing the patch of trees, and I looked into it and the darkness looked back. But I wasn't alone, so I knew there must be nothing there. I didn't really have any ground to join in on the conversation. Matilda and Guy were hitting it off, it didn't feel right budging into something like that. It would feel selfish.

"Once, I made a full-steel skateboard."

"No way, did it work?"

"Of course not, it was a complete disaster. It was way too heavy, and the wheels, actually I don't even want to talk about those." Guy laughed at this.

We walked under the stars, and there was so much *space*, open air. I was a little behind the other two. They kept talking but I stopped listening, and then every step felt longer as we made our way through the dead grass. Matilda did not slip on the flat stone once we'd entered the shortcut through the trees, she seesawed a little but did not fall. Passing my dorm, and then Guy's, there was enough in the way to

make my view of the sky above smaller. Once our path became lit with street lamps, I could see even less.

We were headed up to the spider tree. It stood with a monolithic presence; the light behind it was opaque with yellow, but not warm. I'd passed it many times before, but now it could not have been more noticeable. Guy and Matilda did not see it as they talked, and we continued down and the successive lamps showed the same web patterns on other branches, but these were not as complete. Each one, after losing the perfect angle of light, went back to wood from silk, and the illusion would end. The dark wood was really only dark wood. Still, couldn't there be something there, in the darkness, nobody walking in the light could see?

We turned onto a path that stemmed from this main one. Here were lined, on a down slope and curvy way, a cluster of dorms labeled in ascending number from one to ten. This was the village. Matilda took us past the first few buildings. There was foot traffic, various sized groups walking about. They were surprisingly quiet, the people speaking little or softly as they went to wherever they were headed. By each door, there were loiterers, smoking and being louder. Still, their exultations did not travel far, and imposing over them was the faint bass of music playing through walls from inside. I had an idea that we were headed to, yes, the only building here I knew. Matilda was taking us to James' suite. In each dorm, there were four suites, two on each floor, but I knew it would be James.' Circumstance was too cruel for anything else. I did and did not want to leave. The rhetoric of walking here magnetized me to the two I was with, and at least compelled me to go inside. I didn't like showing up to a friend's party by proxy of a third member. I hadn't been invited,

and was probably unwanted. Music came from inside, and the front door was propped open by one of those pawn-looking cigarette disposals. There was no group outside here. If there wasn't a crowd inside, I'd leave. But maybe tonight would be different.

"Here we are," Matilda said.

"After you," Guy held the door open for her. I was in third, and this door was a big window framed in red beams, and in the middle out of frosted glass was the number eight. Up to the second floor, and the suite door was locked. Matilda was the one to bang on it. I could hear voices even through the music coming out, and then approaching footsteps; low sounding. James opened the door. Behind him was the dark landscape of a room filled with people.

"Matilda! Hey glad you made it," he said, and reached out to hug her. He looked over her shoulder at us, and seeing me, gave another empty smile. This was apparent because only his mouth moved, and then his eyes wrinkled a little, maybe with reluctance. For that moment, he was in his head, and yet, as he pulled back from Matilda,

"Guy, Will, as always." Sequentially, he held out a hand to us for the hand-lock back-pat combo. After this, we headed in.

The door closing almost resealed the atmosphere, dark and loud, back into this room. By my feet were many discarded shoes and coats, and I contributed to this pile. There would be some coats in James' room, but I did not want to ask. I entered the group. The crew was all here from dinner, Paige with Tim, June next to a very drunk Mike. Most people carried cups and there was a table in the middle of

the room. Few danced, and this was the living room of the suite, with couches, a sink, stove, and refrigerator. There were plenty of chairs to sit on and counters to lean on. I joined Tim and Paige, who were with two others I didn't know; a guy, hands in jeans' pockets and clean-shaven, and another guy, blonde, with a scruffy short beard. I gave a little wave to the group.

"Will, hello!" Paige hugged me. She withdrew and there was tequila in the air. "How are you doing?" She staggered, and grabbed the fabric of my shirt at the shoulder for support.

"I see you are doing just fine," I said.

She gave me a 'you know' point of the finger/wry smirk. "You, though, don't seem *fine* enough to me. Come, come." The hand on the shoulder became an arm around the back and Paige looked back to the group, more to Tim. "We are going to take shots come take shots with us." He looked at me and I looked back and he shrugged and I shrugged. The other two I did not see for the rest of the night.

Paige took me to the center table, on which was a much too large, and much too empty jug of tequila. There was still an inch or two at the bottom, but it was worrisome should this have been unopened earlier today. Three shot glasses were filled and I was given one. Tim refused his.

"Come on," Paige said, handing it again. He just shook his head; it was kind of funny. Paige set the glass down and said 'one second' with a finger pointed up. Miraculously, she reached into the crowd and pulled June right out.

"Hey there sexy," June said to Paige, as a drunk person, and then she saw me, "Oh hey, Will." I raised my glass to her as a hello, and smiled. Paige gave June a glass.

“Take this with us,” Paige said.

“Oh, okay,” June said, with an intentionally plastic smile in a way that made it seem like she was having fun by not questioning the order.

“Let’s go,” We clicked glasses, and I drank the stuff.

Paige and June had scrunched faces for a moment, and Paige waved her hands in front of her face as one might when about to sneeze. I genuinely laughed, and after it passed for them, so did they, with an air of camaraderie, as though we’d just gotten through something, together.

After this, Paige straightened and said, “Okay, I’m going to go outside for a cigarette.” She grabbed Tim “Come,” she said to him, and off they went. Tim waved and then was gone. In this room full of people, June made it seem as though we were the only ones left in it. She curtsied awkwardly before bowing back into the crowd. I looked around, was this fun? What should I be trying to accomplish here?

Near me, a boy and a girl were looking very intensely at one another. That? Well sure, I did really want *that*. There is magic in kissing a stranger, and there is envy in seeing the happiness of it on other people. If I could see just the consequences of the morning after for everyone, then maybe these hook ups wouldn’t be so admirable. I’d be drunk, and so would she. Kissing’s easy. We’d go someplace, and either my dick wouldn’t work, or the vapor on each breath, and the glaze in the eyes would make any contact dangerously impersonal. Sex needs to be personal, otherwise there can be a lapse in accountability, and that’s where things go bad. Just because something is not that difficult, everyone thinks they can do it.

I'd have to find someone I knew already, then; try to have a fun conversation tonight and make a real connection. In this room, though, the group sizes looked conspicuously even. I felt like the only one alone here, and how effective can one soldier be against the vigilant turned backs of a social circle. I wanted to find Guy, and soon did. He was still talking with Matilda, off in the periphery leaning against a wall. They'd both found red cups, and I wondered what was in them, if I was somehow the only one tricked into drinking that unwanted liquor.

Again, I couldn't interrupt them, so I considered leaving alone. It would be inconsequential. I walked toward the door out and saw the thin strip of light come from out the bottom. I didn't want to leave just yet. To do so would be abandoning my hope to have fun tonight, which seemed worse than enduring here and trying again. I'd need to give the room at least one full pass through, and then I could leave. Also, Alice. I hadn't thought to look for her; she could be here.

I went back into the people with a just-arrived attitude. Moving through, I tried to recognize each face more thoroughly. I neared the back of the room, wanting to go see who was on the couch, when there was a yell, and I became blocked by someone getting down in front of me. It was Mike, soon followed by June, they were doing push ups. A small counting-chant started, and quickly ended, for they didn't make it for very long. When Mike got up, I put a hand on his shoulder to make myself known.

"Ah, Will, my man!" He slung an arm over my shoulder. "My man my man, my man," he said, and took a second. "How are you on this fine night we have here?"

"Oh, I'm just fine," I said.



“Oh that’s great, a good thing to hear. Cause as for me,” another second, “I am so very drunkey drunk, if you catch my drift.” He began laughing, full breathed and hearty. It lasted a good while, and I couldn’t resist smiling along. June had gotten up and joined in, catching the contagious happiness too.

“I’m very glad to see you are having a great time.” I said to him.

“No, *you* are having a great time!” he said, pointing at me then looking at June as if to be congratulated on his joke. He got me! And then another round of laughter, mostly from him. I put my hands up, as I’d just been got.

“Keep enjoying the night my friend,” I said to Mike, with a good pat on the shoulder. “Oh, have you seen Alice at all tonight?”

“Alice?”

“Yeah, Alice.” I’d raised my voice to a half-yell.

“I haven’t seen her.”

“Oh okay,” I said. He grabbed my shoulder one last time.

“You know, she’s with James,” He said.

“Wait, she’s with James?”

“She’s *with* James!”

“I know!” I brushed him off. “Have a good night man.” I got away from him.

Alice was probably not here, and I headed to leave again, and saw a figure ahead of me, familiar, also heading toward the door. I got the feeling that I had to see who this was, so I pushed through the crowd less subtly to find, at the door, Matilda tying her second shoe and stepping out with a flash of light and then resealed dark. I peeked

back at where I'd seen Guy before, and there he was, now with a small group. I could go talk to him. I approached, and went in for a handshake once he'd seen me.

"Hey dude, how you feeling?" I said. He understood my meaning,

"I'm chillin here." He saw me. "You looking to leave?" he said.

"Yeah, I am," I said.

"Gotcha, let me finish this and we'll go." He held up the solo cup.

"Word."

As he sipped away, I saw a group of three girls by the bathroom. They all wore revealing clothing of the same magnitude, and this uniformity made them all unremarkable. Should everyone be going for the same look, how would I be able to tell even who I'd want to talk to? One of the girls tentatively knocked at the door and then leaned in to put an ear against it, retreating to talk to the other two. They looked a little worried. Over on the couch, someone was passed out, the person next to them messing with the computer that was playing the music. All of the curtains were down. Some dull string lights gave the walls a faint blue, and for just a moment the shadows cast looked ghoulish on the smiling faces and flirtatious gestures. The song playing was cut off, and a new one started; the bump in every step shifted accordingly.

"Alright dude," I heard Guy say. I nodded, and we made our way out. He put his cup down on the sink counter, next to a few others like it. We passed the three girls, still rapping on the bathroom door, and no one else was leaving but us. I found my things in the pile by the front, put them on, quickly, and we left.

Even in the hallway the air was more breathable, like stepping out of a steamy bathroom. The door closed and sealed the noise back inside and the silence was heavy on my ears. Guy and I made it down the stairs and out the front. The door was still propped by the pawn-bin, and Paige and Tim were with a collection of others, all smoking something, or taking turns. It couldn't be avoided.

"Hey Will," it was Tim, "you heading out?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said.

He held something lit out to me. "Want a hit?"

I shook my head; I didn't want another excuse to stay. Not much was happening here. Paige, cigarette in mouth, looked particularly jaded. She was staring off at the ground at an angle. Tim held the thing out to Guy. I only wanted to leave. Guy rocked, and walked over to Tim, took the thing and puffed on it, then handed it back.

"Thanks man." Guy gave Tim a casual salute. "Well, see you." Tim looked a little confused. When Guy caught back up to me, I waved and turned. That image of Tim holding that cigarette, it smoldering. A safe distance away, I laughed a little.

"What is it?" Guy asked.

"Nothing," I said. We kept walking down the row, other parties were still going on. We must not have been at James' for that long.

"Want to try another one of these?" Guy asked. There were similar smoking circles and propped doors ahead of us. In fact, almost identical, as all of the buildings were of the same style.

"I think I'm done with parties for tonight," I said.

“You want to call it a night then?”

I sighed; Guy was the only one I would actually sigh in front of.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t want to call it yet.” I said. It was frustrating. I’d carbonated myself for the night, and leaving that party, I still had all the pressure, and I wanted it gone.

“Videogames in my room?” Guy asked.

“No,” I said, “I still want to *do* something, you know? I want to. Oh I don’t know.” We walked with quiet for a little, and I sank further. We weren’t going anywhere really, though once we hit the main road, we continued down it, further from our dorms. I was afraid I’d made things somber for Guy too. The darkness of the trees around us was thick, and made the world a string of tight corridors, where all that existed was what the light touched.

“You know what, Will,” he said.

“What.”

“We are going to make our own fun tonight.” Guy changed course, crossing the empty street with energy. I followed.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked.

“We are going to break into a building tonight.”

Oh. Guy had asked me this before. He gets climbey when he’s drunk. I had refused because I didn’t want to get caught, but now that didn’t seem to matter so much.

“Ok, I’m interested.”

“Really?” Guy slowed down to look at me. “Yeah!” With a quick punch to the sky, he said, “There we go, Will; I’m telling you, we are going to make tonight a true adventure.”

“Lead the way,” I said. It didn’t take long to see we were heading somewhat in the direction of the dining hall. “I was laughing earlier because I think Tim was trying to get us to stick around with whatever he was offering. But you just took a puff and left all the same.”

“Hah, oh shit.” Guy laughed. “I didn’t realize. Didn’t you say you were leaving though?”

“Yeah.”

The pavement of the road had a vague reflectiveness to the light of the streetlamps. Everything was so still, and our steps had a coarse sound as we went along.

“So you were hitting it off pretty well with Matilda back there.”

“I guess, yeah,” Guy said. We passed the dining hall and went up the hill to a row of classrooms and administrative buildings. They were all not very tall, brick or stone, the tallest no more than four stories high. I realized I was not as sober as I thought, and smelled tequila again. I stopped to re-orient myself.

“What’s up?”

“I think that tequila shot just caught up to me,” I said.

“You did shots?” Guy sounded surprised.

“Hah,” I said, “yeah, I’m a complete party fiend.” We started along again. “But Matilda, you aren’t interested?”

“No, not really,” Guy said, “I mean, she *is* really cool, but I work right next to her, you know? And I don’t want to start a whole thing.” Apart from every building having it’s own dim porch-light, there wasn’t a lot illuminating this part of campus. Guy was ahead a little, looking for something. It was quiet and a low breeze could be heard, up in the trees. On the ground, the air felt still to me.

“It was good you got to talk to her then, at least,” I said, and had to speed up a little to catch up to Guy.

“Yeah it was,” he said, “I actually think she’ll show me how to use the metal shop, and then I can get some extra shifts.”

“Nice,” I said.

“Yeah, a little extra cash would be really nice, and you know what metal shop means?”

“What.”

“Sword-making, baby!”

“Oh boy.”

We rounded the next building, the last in the row, and alongside it, away from any light, was a city-style fire escape crisscrossing up the building. It was daunting.

“Oh, I don’t know about this, Guy,” I said. I was afraid of heights.

“Come on Will, its not that bad.”

“Well sure, but you know how I am with climbing.” Being four stories up on that was higher than I wanted to think about. Each individual platform was connected by a vertical ladder.

“Here, come look.” We walked around into the darkness, to where this face of the building was in front of us, “I picked this one just for you, and I haven’t been up it myself either.”

“I don’t know man.” The realness of everything before me destroyed any romantic ideals of adventure. I didn’t want to hurt myself on top of everything else tonight.

“No no no, look.” Guy put a hand on both my shoulders. I didn’t want to look him in the eye, “First, fire escapes are *made* to be climbed on.” Fair. “And see here,” he pointed an arm next to my head, and I looked up and followed it to the second floor, where the fire escape led to a window. Each floor there was a window, “There, you just have to go up one floor to start.”

“To start?” It sounded like a trap to me.

“Well, we can try that first window, and if it’s locked, you can head back down if you want.” One floor wasn’t too bad. It was two ladders I’d have to climb. I could do one floor.

I sighed for him to hear, “Fine, I think I can do one floor.” I got a smack on the shoulder.

“Will, hearing you say that has already made this a worthwhile night; you won’t regret it, I promise.” We went down, under the thing, and looking up was sobering. Each iron rung, with its curved imperfections, looked sharp.

“You want to go first or me?” Guy asked.

“Definitely you.”

“Alright then.” Guy pressed ahead with no hesitation, climbing fast. He was on the first platform before I could even think to brace myself.

“Come on Will, you got this.” I waved him off.

“Okay,” a few deep breaths, and I grabbed the highest rung I could. The iron was cold, and so dense it was comforting. Any kid who has played in a park has learned to climb a ladder. I worked from muscle memory, and as mechanically as possible, lifted myself into the vertical domain. I reached the first platform quickly, as Guy did, but I dared not stand on it yet. I lifted myself onto it sitting.

“One more, you are doing great,” Guy gave me another reassuring pat. I nodded in agreement and looked around to acquaint myself with being five or so feet above the ground. Guy shot up the second ladder, and it was then my turn again.

The worst part was that the platform was grated, so looking down, I saw more of the ground than the metal I was on. I made an effort to stand, but a strong feeling urged me to stop. Guy was watching from the opening in the next platform up. I had made it to a half crouch, needing to clutch the structural beams constantly. My legs felt weak.

“Hey, doing great. Look, up here. Hey, up here.” I shook my head, but did what Guy asked. He was lying down, feet hanging off the back end of the grate. “Look, it’s not that much further, see,” he let one of his arms down through the gap where the ladder went up. It came almost halfway down, and I could grab it.

I let one hand go from the frame and took his hand. He helped pull me up to fully standing, and I didn’t feel much better, but I put both hands on the next ladder and focused only on that. I climbed this one much more slowly, trying to focus on



only the ladder. But I was facing the lit sidewalk in front of the building, and the fuzzy ground objects descended slowly, and the sky filled more of the space in between rungs. I felt tense and liquid, with none of the benefits of either, and each rung went by, like slow film frames.

“Okay, okay.” I’d made my head and torso past the opening, “Help me up.” Guy got up to crouching, and held out a hand. I grabbed it, the motion was sharp and unattractive. He pulled me up, but I dared not stand, the ground was so far away.

“Is that window unlocked?” I asked. Guy went over and tried it, and then again with effort, and it did budge. He’d opened it a finger’s length and grinned. “Oh thank god,” I said.

“We did it buddy,” now able to grab the bottom of the frame, Guy had no trouble opening the window to crawl-through height.

“Hey,” he said, looking inside, “There’s a desk right here, keep watch so I can figure a good way in without knocking anything over. This might get tricky.” I looked around, and the height gave the landscape a scenic quality, as I could just barely see over the trees at the bottom of the hill. I looked and listened toward the lit pathway just ahead, and nothing moved, and the breeze was all I could hear. From this height, I could feel it, a light, soft thing.

“I don’t see anyone,” I said.

“Alright, keep looking, I’m going in. I think I see a good way through.” The sky was a very dark blue, separating itself from the tree line. It is never truly black at night.

Directly above, some stars could be seen, though there was still glare from the light below. I bet the sky tonight would be beautiful if I was further from this human light, off in the trees, or even on top of this roof. Guy's infiltration of the room created all kinds of muffled sliding and stepping sounds. Time had made sitting here comfortable enough, the urgency in my mind was dulling down. There was something new about being up off the ground, something beautiful. I felt glad that I made this climb because I knew I would never find myself in a place like this, never stumble onto this fire escape. No, I had to put myself here, pull myself up.

A ways off, down the hill and through the trees, I could see pieces of the road that would lead to the dining hall. Under the light of the street lamps, I saw movement, a group of people. They went as a pack, together closely and clearly drunk and talking, but none of their sounds reached me. It seemed a world away, them moving along, then obscured by the silhouette of a trunk, or branch, only to reemerge on the other side moments later. Soon, they reached the edge of the building and then I wasn't able to see them anymore.

"Will!" Guy was loudly whispering. I looked through the window to see barely Guy's face and arms, gesturing me inside, as a ghost might invite one into darkness, for the inside of that room was even darker than it was out here. I crawled to the window, and with weak arms now too, understood that this fatigue was caused by anything that supported my weight up here, not just my legs. I put my head through the window, and there was indeed a lot of stuff on this desk in front of me. Some shapes were more recognizable than others; a computer monitor, picture frame, books, folders, a keyboard.

“Ok Will, I have a path through this for you, so just follow what I say.” Guy was standing just past the desk.

“Gotcha.”

“Ok, first get yourself as much through as you can without stepping on the desk.” I was able to, with my size, wedge myself in an uncomfortable squat within the sill. The frame was also metal, and cold. “Nice, now put a foot here,” Guy put a hand on the intended free space. I did what he said. “Now a hand here, and here.” He was leading me over the monitor. I put both hands over it, and then it was home free. I half-jumped, pressing on my hands to vault my legs past the desk and then to the ground. I took a deep breath, and it felt great not being outside. The air was still and warmer here. I was the same height up, but the ground was no longer see-through, and the walls around me guaranteed no accidental fall.

“Not so bad?” Guy asked.

“Not so bad,” I said, and fist bumped him. In this dark office, everything looked mysterious and interesting. Nothing fully revealed itself, so my imagination took a fair share of the work. I remembered, my first time on this campus, how big everything seemed, because beyond every bend could be anything. Even though I’d been in this building during the daytime, taking the fire escape to climb in gave me that same attractive notion that this place was unknown to me.

“Ready to explore?” Guy said.

“You bet.” We went to the door, it was locked by deadbolt, but since we were on the inside, we could unlock it from here. We went through.

“Remember, we have to leave back this way and lock this door again, and no flashlights or else we’ll get seen,” Guy said.

“Yeah, got it, lets go,” I said. Guy closed the door behind us. We were in a main room, at the center of which was a wooden staircase going up and down in a cube-spiral. Lining the walls was a ring of doors, except for two hallways that happened across one another under the same sized doorframes. The stairs had a thick railing with a rough carved look. The inactive light bulbs on the ceiling looked only like inconsistencies in the otherwise smooth surface.

Humans find it marvelous when an underwater city is found, and it is the act of exploring it that is the most magical. In reality, those involved still only travel through rooms, or hallways, things that they would experience every day anyway. It is the fact that it is underwater, then; few have been inside a building underwater. To me, the darkness was thick like water, and Guy and I had discovered a ruin of sorts, a place few have been.

“It must be cool, being a custodian,” I said.

“What?” Guy asked. We were walking around this floor.

“They have all the keys, and they get to see this every night.”

“The hours aren’t very good,” Guy said. “And they don’t climb in through the windows like we did; there’s the fun, right?”

“Yeah maybe.” I pictured a scuba diver locking up an underwater building. It kind of seemed like just a pain in the ass. “Hey, I need help talking through something.”

“Sure, what is it?” We’d moved through into one of the hallways. It jutted out, a rectangular thing, with doors on either side, and a small window at the end.

“Why are parties fun?” I said. Guy started trying doors on the right, and I followed next to him.

“I don’t understand, what do you mean?” Guy said. The first door was locked, and we moved onto the next.

“Just, after tonight,” I said; the second one was locked too. “I don’t really get it.” Guy moved onto the third door, “I mean, I would argue that getting drunk can be fun, but; well back at that second party for instance...” Guy tried the knob. It turned and the door opened. “Nice,” I said.

“Continue,” said Guy, and we stepped inside.

“Back at that second party everyone seemed to stick to the groups they had come with, you know? Like, I’m beginning to fail to see why I even bother going to parties anymore. What’s the goal, what is there for me?”

This office had shelves filled with books, and trinkets in the space left along the fronts of the shelves. I got close to see these things, but as a museum, nothing was to be touched or moved. There was no computer monitor, and all that was on the desk was a lamp, a picture frame, and a mesh cup for pens and such. Guy was looking out the window.

“Well, first, both those were pretty shit parties,” Guy said. “If we hadn’t run into Matilda, I’d have probably felt like you do now about it.” I caught something on the bookshelf, and leaned in closely to it. It was a glass paperweight, with some kind of intricate bug preserved inside.

“Why’d she leave?” I asked.

“I don’t really know,” Guy said, “She probably was also not feeling the party I guess.”

“Want to move on?” I said.

“Sure.”

We left and closed the door behind us. On the way out, I saw on it a cut out comic strip of a kid and his stuffed animal; or was it a real tiger? Back in the hall, the rest of the rooms were locked, so we went across to the other hallway on the other side. This one had another door at the end, instead of a window, one different from the rest. I’d never seen it before.

“Where does that go?” I asked, pointing.

“To the next building over,” Guy said, “You want to see if the theater is unlocked?”

“What, a theater? I didn’t know there was a theater here.”

“Yeah, there’s a mini movie theater, with a huge screen, and the seats; well, let’s just go check it out.”

“Sweet.”

This door at the end of the hall was smoother and darker than the rest, and had a pull handle instead of a knob. Guy pulled and it swung right open. I saw that there was no latch bolt, so it couldn’t be locked. We went into this other building, and it had a completely different feel. Here, there was no wood showing and all the walls were white, the floor a fake mineral tile. It was strange how I recognized it as

white in complete darkness. Every other color looked gray. The doors were also white; it was all newer and less worn. I didn't like it as much. Guy led the way.

"Okay, granted, those were not the best parties, but roll with this please, my faith needs restoring," I said, "What's so good about them?"

Guy led me down some stairs, to must be the first floor, but could have just as easily passed for a basement. There were no windows, and it seemed even darker, despite all the white surfaces. The ceiling either had pipes hanging down, or was too high to see the top of, and the hallways here had a labyrinth's logic. There were many dark dead ends.

"Okay fine," Guy said, still moving forward confidently, "if I had to sum it all up, I suppose it's that parties are filled with opportunity; you could run into friends, meet new people, or really hit it off with someone and take them home. It's exciting." In front of us now was a wall with two doors burrowed in a few feet. Guy went and tried one of them, and like magic, it was unlocked. The latch was heavy, and made a loud brass click. We'd picked the right night for coming here. "Oh baby," Guy said, and hovered the door open enough for me, and I went inside. He closed the door quietly, and then flipped a switch, and the lights came on.

"Hey, whoah. What are you doing?" I said, all of sudden urgent.

"This is a theater, they're made without windows."

"True," I said, and walked out into open view of the place. The screen was well taller than me, and wider than at least twice my height. There were only eight or so rows of seats, ascending at a nice slant, and each seat was lined with a deep red-velvet looking fabric. "Man, this place is awesome," I said. The first thing was to

feel the fabric; it was a little more abrasive than velvet, but still nice and soft to rub a hand over. Next to the screen, off to the side, was a podium with a computer on top.

“Yeah, there’s a CD player up there, too.” I looked up, and at the top was an unlit inlet. I walked up the side row staircase, and saw that this nook held a desk, chair, and every media-playing device one would ever need. Right there, on the ceiling, was the projector, too.

“Why hasn’t every movie I’ve ever seen been here?” I said. “Seriously Guy, we have to watch a movie here sometime.” He had sat down on the right side of the room, in one of the front rows at a random seat. He was leaning back, with his elbows stretched out, and his feet placed rudely on the row in front of him. I took a seat on the top leftmost spot; this was the tradition in my family regarding the best seat for watching movies. “This place is such a gem,” I said, another relic, an empty movie theater with the lights on, and no movie playing. We sat in silence for a bit, and it was pleasant and I didn’t want to get up. “So here is my question to you then,” I saw only the back of Guy’s head. He was so still he could have been sleeping.

“Yeah, I’m listening,” he said.

“All that stuff you said, why can’t that happen any day; why are parties the best place for opportunity like that?”

“Well, you can’t be drunk every day of the week,” he said.

“Drinking aside,” I said.

“But drinking is the whole point, Will. It’s way easier making decisions drunk, everyone’s less nervous.”

“Everyone’s also less accountable.”



“Also good,” Guy said.

“What? That’s like saying, then, that it’s easier making decisions, because you aren’t really making them anymore.”

“That’s not true. Your actions just carry less weight.”

“Less weight?”

“Sure.” Guy took his legs off the set in front of him, and craned his neck back so he was looking up at the ceiling, hands still holding the back of his head, “Say you tell someone you liked them, and they reject you. The next day, you could just apologize for being drunk, and it would all be less severe. And hey, they might be more likely to say ‘fuck it’ and give you a shot and say yes, too.”

“That just sounds a bit slimy to me.” I got out of my seat and lay on the carpet in between rows.

“Why?” Guy asked, a little muffled now that I was surrounded by seats. The ceiling was a nice row of smooth wood beams, a color that absorbed light well.

“Well, if someone were to say yes to me, I’d want it to be something they really meant, something they wouldn’t forget having said or come to regret.”

“Will, I know very well that that’s what you want, but you have to understand that people are afraid to say yes to anything. Someone who would want to say yes to you might even reject you still because they are afraid. And they’d come to regret *that*. Now, if you were both at a party and feeling courageous...The whole vibe becomes that anything *should* happen, you get me?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, “but it really doesn’t sit right with me. All these things you are saying sound great and all, were it not for the fact that drinking is a

temporary thing. Tell me, how many good party hook ups have you had?" I thought about the girls standing outside the bathroom, and whoever was (probably) throwing up inside.

"Not too many." Guy said.

"Not so many," I said, "We've both been there, and I'm sad to say that I just can't believe in a place where any conversation, or hook up, or run in, is meaningless as soon as one sobers up. Everyone has to wake up and come back down to reality in the morning."

"That's the thing, Will," Guy said. "You think everyone wants a shitty hook up? Or a conversation that gets them no closer to someone the next day? Of course not, but until something genuine happens to them, most people lower their standards for some cheap fun, something to fill that gap. If you want to have fun at parties Will, you gotta lower your standards." I heard him get up. "Where are you?"

"I'm here." I raised a hand out above the back of the row next to me, and I waved vaguely to the front of the room. I heard him climbing the stairs until he came into view, stood right at my feet.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Ever lie down in a theater before?" I said.

"No," he said.

"Help me up?" I put a hand out, and he grabbed it and pulled. Like a pendulum, I was hoisted up.

"You want to move on?" Guy said.

"Sure."

We walked down to the screen, and it was confusing, because it felt like I'd just finished a movie. Down the exit hall, and out the heavy latch door, Guy waited for me to leave before switching the lights off.

Back in the white maze, "Where to next?" Guy asked.

"I think I'm satisfied with this adventure," I said.

"You want to leave?" he said.

"Yeah I think so, I'm anxious for the climbing down."

"Alright," he said, "You know you can just use the front door to get out and I can just close the window and lock the room myself."

"No, I want to do it."

"Want to head back up another way? I think it'll work if we go down here."

He pointed down another dark passageway.

"Yeah, that sounds good to me."

We went this new way, and soon reached a different staircase. We took this up to the third floor, where all the doors were matte, with windows in the center, and there were, in the hallway, chemical safety showers. I looked through into one room and saw the traditional black countertops, backless stools, and cleaned laboratory glassware. We went down to the end, and the floor was made of many identical, single colored tiles, as one might see in a bathroom. I guessed that they were green.

We rounded a corner and at the end I saw the same kind of latch-less door. Our footsteps here made hollow echo sounds, and the hall was lined with windows facing out front. I could see even further past the trees, to the lights of the campus

center. I looked down, and right in front of this building was a single lamp. I saw the full orb of light it produced, how far the sphere went before being cut off by the dark. It wasn't a gradual transition. We reached the end and I was the one to swing the door open. We were back to the place with the old wood and carved staircase. The steps down creaked, and this creaking sent light agitations through the feet. We found our original office, and once inside, Guy locked the door and I went to open the window.

"I'll go first," I said, and pushed up the heavy sill.

"You sure?" Guy said.

"Yeah, I'll need your help getting past this without hitting anything over though, so just watch out for me?" I lifted myself onto the desk, and grabbed the windowsill. "Just tell me if I'm about to hit something." Carefully, I lifted my feet over the big stuff, and then wedged myself back through the window in a half crouch, and kind of oozed onto the grate. Stepping out two floors up was definitely worse than starting on the ground. I felt that weakness in my legs again, an urge to not be up here.

Soon, Guy made it out; once again, his speed was impressive. Then, we were both standing on this grate, and I could feel the soft breeze again; nothing seemed to have changed while we were gone. The metal was still cold, and the wind still going slowly. It rocked the dark canopies and would have been frightful had I not known it was just the tree branches swaying.

"So how about it Will," Guy said, "Let's go to the roof?"

"Oh no, definitely not."

“Ah, Will! But you did so well already! Climbing up this will be exactly as easy as it was getting to here.” I had to grab onto one of the bars in order to look up and down at the metal column I was stuck in the middle of. I did want to climb up it.

“Okay, I’ll try,” I said.

“Yes! Alright, I’ll be here the whole way.”

“Yeah, I know, just go please,” I said. I wasn’t too excited, feeling like I’d just signed into a contract I couldn’t take back. Once again, Guy made it up to the next platform in record time.

“Just don’t think about it, come on!” Guy said, lying down and looking through the ladder port, as he’d before. I grabbed the ladder, and as soon as I pulled myself up a rung, everything stopped. My legs and arms, they were talking, saying that I had no business here, and that it just wasn’t worth it.

And how was that incorrect? How could it be? I didn’t have wings, and I was not small enough or had a shell so that a fall wouldn’t hurt me. I was a human, with two legs, to walk the *ground* with. I had no business here; it wasn’t worth it. I stepped down, back to the platform below me.

“No no no, Will don’t do this man, you were doing fine!”

“I’m sorry Guy, but I can’t tonight.”

“Why not? Will, you have to get over this fear of yours.”

“It’s just not worth it.”

“Not worth what?” Had somebody passed by, they would have heard and eventually spotted two guys bickering on a fire escape. “Even if you do fall, which

you won't, you'd only fall a few feet to the platform below you. There's *no* danger whatsoever."

He, however, did not understand how I felt, or the logic I had inside my head that compelled me back. Sure, he may have been right, but it just wasn't worth it, and his words could not break this fact.

"I've made up my mind, Guy," I said, and it was regretful, "please don't push it any more, I'm not happy about it either."

"Damn it," Guy said, more to himself, and then to me, "Well, I still want to head up there."

"That's fine," I said, "I'm okay with staying here and waiting."

His tone softened, "Alright." He looked up, and then got up to a crouch, and, back down to me one more time. "I won't take long, just a couple of minutes."

"Don't worry, it's nice here," I said.

"Be back soon," Guy grabbed the next ladder.

"See ya." I looked out, and sat down. I heard Guy's climbing until I didn't. Once again, there was that something nice and different about being up here. I figured it could be that I was in the air, because from the ground it would always feel like the air was above me. Now though, I was surrounded on all four sides, and this brought a serenity.

I heard talking, and it came gradually. No words were clear, but voices sent a certain resonance, a pitch, and this I heard. It grew louder and soon two people, both girls, came into view on the lit path right there, in front of this building. There wasn't much light, but I could see them clearly enough. I strained to make myself as still

and quiet as the iron supporting me, and it was then that I could hear what they were saying.

“Did you see Carla back there?” one said.

“Hah, yeah, she’ll have a headache tomorrow!” the other said.

“Oh god, I can already feel it, I need some water. You want to come to my room, drink water, watch something?”

“Hell yeah! There’s another thing happening tomorrow. I don’t want to be hung-over for that. Ooh, let’s go to my room first, I have microwave noodles.”

“This is why we are friends.” The two laughed.

At some point one of them looked off into my direction, and I swear we’d looked into each other’s eyes. But she didn’t give any sign of having seen me, and soon, they’d moved on, out of sight, and then sound. I recalled how little I could see outside of the lamplight myself on a dark night, and figured there was no way she’d seen me. I looked behind me, and saw the dark expanse of trees. No longer did I feel estranged from these, because now I was part of the darkness too. I was inside it, chameleon plastered against this fire escape. I imagined the world, expansive, the shadows widening my imagination of what was there. The darkness held so much at night, and now it was what the light touched that was small. This is what being the thing in the shadows, the thing looking in, must be like.

I heard sounds above me, and looked to see Guy coming back down. I looked out, over the trees, as far as I could see, holding onto what was there. Very soon, I’d climb down, and this would be over. Guy stepped onto my platform.

“Yo,” he said.

“Were the stars any clearer up there?” I asked.

Guy looked up, “Yeah, a little.”

We climbed back down, each rung more a reassurance, but taking the last step down onto the ground; it was an ordinary feeling.

“Let’s go,” I said. We went back around to the front of the building, into the light of the streetlamp, and made our way in the direction of home. The row of buildings looked so small, how could they contain all we’d explored? We walked by the dining hall, with windows looking into the brick eating room. Passing them, there was a metal ladder to the dining hall roof, fixed in concrete. A steel box covered most of the rungs, with hinges on one side and a padlock on the other. Guy could probably still reach the top. “Ever been up there?” I said.

Guy looked at it. “I tried once, but I was by myself. You’d need a lift from someone to make it over that box.” He turned to me. “Want to try it?”

“Another time, but sure,” I said. We went down the hill and across the field. Here, the sky looked big again. There was no set path and we walked a lazy line across until we reached the street. From here, there was a good vantage of the tree line, with the main sidewalk just inside, the lamps giving it away. The trees were so tall, and I couldn’t see through to where they ended. It was strange how these giants, all this living *stuff*, could be so damn quiet. “About what you said earlier,” I said.

“About you getting over heights?” said Guy. We crossed the street, and went up the familiar sidewalk.

“Well, I do want to get over that, but no, about parties and lowering my standards.”



“Oh, right,” he said, “if that was too blunt...”

“No, don’t worry. I want to agree with you,” I said. Our walking was syncopated, and I was the one taking more steps. There were still people about, heading in both directions. It was getting late, parties must have been wrapping up. “But it all just sounds sad to me. Yeah, the weekend *can* be fun, but when it has to be,” We were in a perpetual cycle of leaving the light of one lamppost and entering the light of another. “I just don’t get why it all feels like an escape, like what’s wrong with all this on a normal day?” I waved my hands around, to everything between the ground and sky.

“Yeah, I hear you,” Guy said. A group of people was approaching us, and he waited for them to pass by. “I guess it might just be easier to suffer through a week and then let loose on the weekend.”

“True.” We walked a while longer, by the trees. The trunks with light on them had thick, cracked bark. Something odd registered in my periphery, and I stopped to look. Across the street, in a small patch of grass was the figure of a deer. It was dark, and took a second to verify, but yes, without a doubt.

“Hey look, a deer,” I said, pointing.

“Bunch of them,” Guy said. I then saw four more, even darker shades. One of these darker shapes looked like it might have antlers, big ones, but these could have been imagined.

“Cool,” I said. We kept walking.

“I saw something in the woods today,” I said.

“You were in the woods?”

“Yeah, right after I saw you in the shop, I didn’t want to walk straight back to my dorm so I went the long way through the trails.”

“Ah, what did you see?” Guy said. Under the light, I could only see immediate tree trunks. In between these was blackness.

“I’m not really sure,” I said. Off a ways, the light of our collection of dorms could be seen, and we approached the spider tree.

“Hold on a second and take a look at this,” I said. We’d reached the tree and I positioned Guy at the right angle and pointed to the branches. “Doesn’t that look like a spider’s web?”

“Yeah. I’ve never noticed that before, it’s kind of creepy,” he said.

“Yeah.” We went again and were getting close to Guy’s building. “Anyway I was walking and then this really big white thing jumped out from behind somewhere and ran off. It scared the hell out of me.”

“Huh,” Guy said. We’d reached one of the doors and stopped. “Maybe someone’s dog got loose? People do have big dogs here.”

“I hadn’t thought about that, you may be right,” I said. A dog. It still felt strange, but the whole thing was strange. “Well,” I said, breaking off toward my dorm, “goodnight, catch you later.”

Guy, with a wave: “Yep, see you Will, night.”

I walked over to my dorm and heard the door closing behind me, and then the silence of night. Getting closer, I felt only more sullen. The porch light was just a single bulb that gave a yellow, ugly tone. I took out my key to get in. It’s been said that the most memorable part of any experience is the last, most recent part of it.

This is because the end is younger, the freshest thing to access. I knew what that part would be tonight. *I'll unlock the door, and go to sleep in my room, alone*, I thought. It was right then, in that moment, I understood that I wouldn't hesitate choosing to have someone to sleep next to over nothing at all. Just that, company to share the night, made every consequence seem worth it. Yes, that was the honorable hope, to want for one night, after so many alone, just someone there sharing my space with me. I let myself sigh loudly, it wouldn't be heard. I looked out, toward the path that went into the trees. Because I knew there was much I could not see, I felt afraid.

I looked away, unlocked the door, and stepped inside my dorm. I went down the hall to my room, and had to unlock that too, and went inside. I got a water bottle, filled it up in the communal kitchen sink, and drank it all. I got my toothbrush and went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, peed, and resigned back to my room. I took my clothes off, turned the light off, and lay down in my bed. Each year, I'd been in a different dorm, and each one had different ceilings. This being the second semester in this room, I was well used to looking at the rough spackle-shapes of this wall above me.

I stayed up, not wanting it all to be over, but after some time, something in the air could be felt. It was the increasing realization that whatever I was waiting for would not occur, that every square inch of space decided one by one, as if clocking out for the night, that nothing more would happen here until the morning. It was this that made the knock so surprising.

At first, it seemed to be only my tired imagination, but the more time passed, the more I believed it to have happened. It had been a timid gesture, not quite sure if it was meant to be heard, but a first-time salesman must knock for the assurance that at least he had tried. Such was the sound on my door. I got out of bed and went to open it. There, leaning against the back hallway, was Alice.

She was in a regressed posture, rubbing at her eyes with one arm, with the other across her stomach, holding the ribs. She looked tired, concave, pointed down. She saw me, and without speaking had a clear look of apologetic unease. She wasn't sure if it was okay that she was here.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey," she said back, and stopped herself from saying anything further.

"Here, come in." I stepped back and opened my door for her. Her face showed relief, and she nodded and came inside. I had some Christmas lights strung up, and I turned these on, to keep the light low, and gestured to the bed as a place for Alice to sit.

"Thanks," she said, and sat down. I grabbed a pair of pants and a shirt randomly from the floor and put them on, then sat down next to her. Clearly, something was very wrong, but what was I to say?

"James has been looking for you," was what I said.

Alice laughed sadly, "Oh don't worry, I know. I don't want to see James right now."

"Oh," I said, was he the issue? "Well, whatever it is that's wrong, I'm here however you need."

“Thank you Will, really.” She looked at me, into my eyes and I saw there was so much back behind hers. But it was scary; I saw something there, a condition past a certain point. “That’s why I came here,” she said, looking down at her hands; she was playing with them in her lap. “James, he would just. He would just comfort me a little and then try to sleep with me.”

“Oh,” I said. I couldn’t hold back the disapproval.

She laughed again, “Yeah,” but was staring off with unfocused eyes.

“Well if you want to talk about whatever is wrong” -she looked up- “or not,” I said quickly, “anything is fine really.”

She thought for a second. “No, it’s okay, I need to say it.” Her eyes grew active again. “It’s just that,” but I could also see her resolve breaking, the hard lines in her face softening as she strained to keep them, “My, oh god,” she cried, heavy tears immediately coming. I reached out and pulled her in, it was all that was to be done. She buried herself into the fabric on my chest. I didn’t shush her, didn’t say it was okay; I just sat there, and held her, and she cried.

I woke up the next morning curled at the end of my bed. Alice was curled on the other end, sleeping. I was glad to not have a headache from the drinking the night before. Alice had worn herself out to sleep, and I’d passed out soon after. I didn’t want to dwell here, so I got up quietly, stripped down to my boxers, grabbed a towel, a clean change of clothes, a toothbrush too, and went to go shower. Under the hot water, I worked through the despicable pride I felt, despicable because a friend had come to me in pain, and a part of me felt happy for it. I’d asked for someone to spend the night with, but what I got was not what was intended. It was a jinn’s trick.

It could've been that I was happy to feel useful. Alice had chosen me to come to. I actually meant something to her, and this meant a whole lot to me. It didn't really matter how I felt though. The steam was good to breathe, and I turned the faucet off and stepped out of the shower. I always enjoyed the moment the million pitter-patters stopped, all at once. I dried off, brushed my teeth, and got dressed. I was towel-massaging the last of my hair as I walked back to my room. In the hallway, there was no activity.

Alice was sitting upright when I walked in, still heavy-looking. She looked at me, then the towel.

"You heading out?" she asked.

"Not necessarily," I said. "The plan had gotten only so far as showering."

"Can I stay here for a little?"

"Yes of course," I said, "stay as long as you need."

"Alone?" She asked this tentatively. "I'm not ready to be found by people yet."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Actually yesterday in class we were assigned to write another story, so you know. I'll just go work on that." There was a nice little coffee shop in a neighboring town I'd go to on the campus shuttle. I went and gathered from my desk a notebook and my computer, and put these in my backpack. "Also," I said, "there is a spare towel if you want to shower, and I have tea and there is the mug; the kitchen has a microwave." I pointed all these things out to her.

"Thanks, Will," she said, giving a real smile that brought a little energy back to her face. This was the Alice I knew. Backpack packed, I slung the thing over a shoulder and got my phone and wallet and a sweatshirt, and went to leave.

“See ya; do let me know if there’s anything you need while I’m out,” I said.

“Bye.”

I left the building and saw the path into the trees. It looked nothing like it did at night, but I still felt uneasy. There was a stop for the shuttle right up the way from my dorm, by the spider tree. I could see both from afar. The tree looked soft and unimposing. I went up to it, and saw there were a considerable amount of leaves that had come out. The buds still bunched looked loose, beginning to unravel now. Right by the concrete slab of the bus stop, sprouting up were little stems with bright orange petals. Spring was finally here. With new knowledge, I looked around, and yes, leaves on every tree could be seen in various abundances. It was undeniable.

Eventually, the shuttle arrived, and screeched to a stop in its usual way. I got on and picked one of the many free seats. I sat and watched out the window as the bus got going again. What if someone Alice knew had died? The shuttle made its way through campus quickly, and I saw yellow bushes not quite fully bloomed yet. There was something off about them and I couldn’t identify what it was. It could have been the tint of these windows, or that I’d just grown used to the bareness of winter. It really wasn’t my place to guess what had happened to her.

The shuttle made two more stops, one at the base of the hill by the dining hall, and again by the edge of campus. An uncounted number got on, and off, and soon I was travelling on a larger road, better paved, but still only one lane each way. The landscape went and went until we reached town, the trees replaced with one-to-two story houses and shops. I looked at the sky and it was mostly clouds today, a uniform-grey kind. We waited our turn at a central stoplight, and then the bus

turned, heading down a side street until halting appropriately by the sidewalk. The door opened, and I walked off with a few others. The coffee shop was close, and soon I rang bells by opening the door to go inside. I liked this place because of its easy feeling. There were a lot of wooden tables and chairs of mismatched make and color, some couches, too. Many of these places to sit were taken today. I went to the counter and ordered a cup of coffee and a ham and cheese croissant, paid the barista, who was probably my age, and went to find a table. He'd asked me if I wanted the croissant heated, and I said that would be nice.

I found a nice small table in a back corner by a window. It had two chairs; one would be for me, the other for my bag and sweatshirt. I sat and took out the notebook and a pen. I drew in the margins of the next free page until my order was called. Another reason I liked this place was they used real mugs if you asked for one. Many places didn't do that anymore. The croissant came on a small plate. I got a napkin and sat down. While eating, I checked for emails on my phone. The head of campus security had sent something to all the undergrads titled 'Ecologists excited, but nobody else is, really.'

He'd written that there'd been multiple sightings of a large white Canadian wolf in the woods surrounding campus. He said that a wolf hadn't been spotted this far south in some fifty years at least. 'Students are cautioned against walking the trails at night, and even during the day, should go in groups, delivering goods to grandma or not.' While only one had been seen, the message stressed that wolves were pack animals, so it wasn't unlikely for there to be more around.

A wolf.



That was what I had to have run into. I felt again a place for anxious thought, a tightening. What was one doing down here? It wasn't uncommon knowledge that humans, particularly farmers, hated wolves. People had either shot or scared away all of them from here long ago. This one would probably end up dead too. Until then, however, it would exist on every trail for me, and there, in the darkness at night. I didn't want to be afraid of these things, of going into the trees, just as I didn't want to stop climbing that fire escape. I really liked the woods, and how much smaller would my world get were I to avoid them from now on? I had no way to dismiss this, no dog missing or softer explanation to deny that really, *really*, there was something out there. I didn't like it, this fear.

I drank my coffee and finished eating the pastry. Outside, I could see that it was raining. This cheered me up a little; I loved the rain. Yes, so far, I'd been acting fearfully. It was easier to just climb down and not brave the roof. It would be easier to just not go into the woods from now on. But this would mean my world would only extend two floors up and out to what the light touched at night. Even not so high up on that fire escape, I'd felt the great amount that was contained in these places.

By the time I'd finished my coffee, I hadn't written a word. What was worth taking a risk for? Every time a choice is made *not* to do something, one is sure to lose whatever was to be gained; yet the risk of doing anything is never zero. What is better then, a chance for something to go wrong, or a guarantee that nothing will go right? Drinking to escape the weight of this decision did not feel right either. It was frustrating seeing so many others do this, as if to say that being ruled by hesitation

was how one *ought* to be, until a few in. I felt dissatisfied, unhappy with how things were going. Something was definitely wrong, but was the fault in me, or in everyone else? It seemed an absurd question, but I could think of no other to replace it.

My unconscious drawing had completely filled the page, and left no room for words at all. I had to pee, and this was the worst part of coffee shops. There'd always come that time when one didn't want to pack everything and take it into the bathroom as much as not wanting to leave it all out to be taken. Feeling this way brought the same frustrations to me. Could I not even take a piss without being worried? Maybe I didn't trust people enough. I looked around the room, a test, then.

Closest to me was an old couple fondly talking with one another. There was a group of high schoolers, one with a bright orange sweatshirt on. A few parents corralled each other's kids together. The children were running and jumping to best break the fence the adults had made for them. The barista delivered food to a table, and someone walked from the counter with a mug just like mine, and sat down alone with a computer. There were many other loners here, sitting with screens or books. This is a test for all of you, I said from inside myself. I closed my notebook and rest the pen on top of it.

I got up to go to the bathroom. I needed to learn that some fears were meaningless. I was sick of these hesitations; this test would be the easiest to pass. Nothing happening meant success, the answer had already been given to everyone. I wanted a way in, proof to undermine my doubt. I stepped into the bathroom, locked the door, and urinated. I washed my hands, dried them, and left. When I got out, I looked over to the table, and my notebook wasn't there.

I went quickly to the table. All that was left were the mug, plate, and my sweatshirt on the chair. I was mostly surprised at first. Remarkable. I looked around the room, and the scene looked no different; orange sweatshirt, old couple, kids. The folks nearest me were still talking, the old man facing me. I went up to them.

“Excuse me,” I said, and the man looked up, the woman turned also. “I think my things have just been stolen, I was sitting right over here,” I gestured over to the table, “and I was wondering if you might have seen whoever did this?”

“Oh, that’s terrible,” the man said, “I’m afraid I didn’t see anything, as I was so invested talking with my wife here.” The woman laughed and shooed her husband, the two reaching out, taking the other’s hand in their own. The man chuckled whimsically.

“That’s okay,” I said, “Thank you.” The man nodded to me sympathetically. I couldn’t help but take a look under their table. The man didn’t like that. His wife had turned, but he gave me a grim stare, as though I was the criminal here. I just had to smile again and move on. If he hadn’t seen anything, then it was doubtful if anyone else had. I did a pass of the room, to no success. Having no other reason to be here, I busied my dishes, and left with my sweatshirt.

Being in the rain, I could feel how much lighter things were without my bag. It was different than choosing to leave one’s house without one. Going to the coffee shop, I had expected to carry my backpack both in and out. It was the lightness relative to this expectation that felt liberating. Everything around me was filled with motion now, and I was energized by each instance of cold, each raindrop that had

fallen a mile or more. Walking in this was better without the weight of a backpack, without worry of breaking electronics or ruining paper pages.

I headed to the shuttle stop, and around there were puddles forming. Colors in grey light and with wetness look different than under a blue sky. Some colors become muted, but others saturate and grow more vivid. I reached the street, a small river was running down it by the curb. I passed a woman who was hunched with an umbrella, hurrying along. This was a world transformed, and all she looked at was the ground.

I made it to the stop and decided not to stand under a ledge. My hair and clothes were beginning to soak through, but I didn't feel cold. This whole thing was more laughable than anything else, except for the notebook. Why had that been taken? I'd left it on the table; it wasn't in my backpack. The backpack was understandable, but there's nothing valuable in a half-filled journal. Most of what I wrote was scattered nonsense that would make sense only to me.

There was a small tree coming out from an empty square in the concrete sidewalk. There was also a bench, but it was wet now. Other people arrived to wait with me, and I watched droplets form and fall on the tree branches. The few leaves stirred, and this was pleasant too. Soon, the shuttle turned the corner and stopped. The door opened and a few got out and then I stepped on and sat in the first row behind the driver. We made it to campus, the now wet-blurry landscape going by, the green of leaves a little greener. The shuttle stopped once, and then went on toward the dining hall.

I was having trouble, why the notebook? I could only think that it was something meant to hurt me, and this made me angry, because it meant someone had intended me harm. I didn't care that I didn't have my things anymore. What mattered was that it's less effort to not take something. Someone had to go out of their own way to steal a book with no worth.

Through many shuttle trips, I'd developed an intuition of how long it usually was to get from one stop to the other. This is why it felt weird when the shuttle stopped again; it was too soon. I looked down to the front windshield of the bus. Past the moving window wipers was a fallen tree in the middle of the road. The driver's head popped out from behind his seat. He was an older, hearty looking guy. He was looking at me.

"I guess this'll be the stop then."

I got up and was the first to leave. The driver and I exchanged nods. The shuttle was the only car on the road, and individual drops of rain could be seen bisecting the cone of its headlight. This tree that had fallen rest perpendicular across both lanes of the street. On one end was the wooden beam of a power line that had gone down with it, messily splayed, half-ways on the sidewalk and some into the road too. The black chord lay there cut, the tip of it frayed. It stretched and coiled and looked organic; should there be anything to resemble a snake, this would be it, not for the physical resemblance, but rather for the simple reason of there being that frayed tip. Much like a snake, it was the head that carried something lethal. Here was a thing that could *kill* me.

At all times, even when not facing the chord, I knew exactly where it was. I accordingly examined this tree. All of the branches that had hit the ground were shattered, but some of the larger ones hadn't broken off completely, so the topside was still held up a few feet. By the base, I didn't see any upturned roots, nor was the trunk split. I crossed the street, and saw it to be narrowed down to a small tip, like a plastic straw wrapper pinched at the end. I worked my way over the fallen power line pole, and found the other cut portion of the wire. It hung menacingly from a height I could reach if I jumped. I avoided it and looked for the tree stump. In the area where it should have been, there were only tightly woven roots from the surrounding trees. It was weird; this tree in the road was alive, with green leaves on the branches. Up above, the treetops took the rain like statues, it wasn't very windy either.

The shuttle was still here, and its imposing stillness made me feel like the vehicle, or whoever was still inside, was watching me. I couldn't see in because of the reflective windshield, and couldn't hold my stare against a half ton thing, so I left, walking north toward my dorm. My clothes were completely soaked through by this point. I passed the dining hall and couldn't see in well enough to tell if the building had power or not. The street lamps wouldn't try to turn on until sundown.

I came up on the yellow bushes, and there definitely was something off about them. I crossed over to get a better look. The flowers; they were yellow on the outside, but looking into the cup of one, I saw a deep, saturated purple. This was in every flower. I remembered these being just yellow when they bloomed, it was what stood them out so much to me. This new color was nice though, and if the profile

from a distance wasn't as powerful, each individual flower was prettier for it. I let myself have another moment before crossing back and moving on.

Walking, I saw no one. The trees around were only half wet, the dark sides facing all the same way. Water poured down my face. I didn't wipe it away. It was kind of cool, as these grooves on my face channeled the water like rocky canyons did rivers. I reached spider-tree, and the road bent. Looking down it I saw a while away a construction team working on another fallen tree. The little people and big machines were huddled around it, like a doctor and the nurses, but the sounds made were more destructive. There was definitely a wood chipper, and I saw one of those tall moveable cranes. It was raised, and someone was on the platform tending to another damaged power line. My dorm would definitely have no electricity.

I went there anyway, there was nowhere else for me to be really. The door was propped; someone had wedged a dustbin in it. Alice wasn't there when I got to my room. The hallway was dark, as there were no windows. My room had one window facing away from any good source of light, and was only a little brighter. I tried the light switch to be sure, and nothing happened. On my desk was a mug half filled with tea. I touched the ceramic and found it to be a little warm. The spare towel hadn't moved, and I used it to dry my hair. I put new clothes on and hung the wet ones on my bed frame. I sat, and the walls held me, uncompromising as a crawl space. What was I to do now? The silence would have been crushing were it not for the faint patter of rain. I lay down, and my mind made great obstacles until, like an engine, I burnt out and fell asleep.

There was once a giant man who cut down trees from East to West. A logger by trade, he and his giant blue ox hauled his treasure amassed across the country. It took them many years, but this giant had a heart much stronger than a man's heart, and logging was not strenuous work for him. One swing and half an acre would fall, another swing and all the branches of a tree would be hewn, leaving a nice log for selling. Once the giant reached the coast, he started building his steamboat. No more green on the horizon, it was time to take on the blue frontier, sell the wood in exotic lands far away.

This boat, it was built bigger than any had seen. It stood more than sixty floors high and had a rubber engine that could handle the pressure. Of all things that defined it, it was the smokestack that defined it best<sup>1</sup>. Nobody knew how high it went, the fog of distance would obscure it before any top could be seen. It's been said that the smoke that came up from that smokestack made up the star clouds of the Milky Way, the ones that can be seen on an especially clear night.

To build it, the giant sought the help of the people of the coast, and many came and were happy for the work. Men set nails thick as railway spikes with large mallets, and lacquered the hull to set it to be waterproof. The giant hired two ambitious friends to paint the smokestack, and gave them ropes and pulleys, paint and brushes. "The greatest ship is nothing without a proper smokestack," the giant said to them, "It must be darker than the smoke it produces, so that it can be seen at

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<sup>1</sup> This story has been inspired from the folk story: Esther Shephard, "Paul Bunyan on the Colombia," in "Fantastic Worlds Myths, Tales, and Stories," ed. Eric S. Rabkin, (Oxford University Press, 1979).



all times on the horizon, even against the blackness of night, because it will be blacker still.”

The two friends were happy to take on such an important task. They set to work at once, painting with brushes as big as they could carry, constructing scaffolding higher and higher as their progress furthered. After a year of hard work, however, they'd gone high enough to where it took too long to climb up and then back down to get any work done in a day.

“What if we could live up there?” one said to the other, “Then we could have all of each day to work, just as it had been at the start.” The smokestack was made of an inner layer of iron, and then lined fifty feet in a light and strong cement of the giant's invention. The other friend, knowing this, said to the first that they could carve into the mortar a staircase, spiraling up the pillar's face, with rooms for them to sleep in, and that they would fill it all in once they'd finished on the way back down. This plan was agreed on, but the friends did not know how long they would be. They were both married, so each asked his wife if she would come live up there. The two women agreed, and the day following, the four of them began to carry supplies up to the highest point of scaffolding the friends had built. They made three trips, and each took a day; one was for food and water, the next for the paintbrushes, chisels, and ropes and pulleys, with spare wood to burn for fire, and the last trip was just for the paint. For each, all four took as much as they could carry, and it was very hard work. The first friend, as he would tell his son, and grandson after him, would never forget looking out from the deck of the ship just before heading up for that

third, final time. He saw the hills, so clearly outlined and empty of trees, covered by endless stumps that extended out forever.

The two couples made good progress together; each would alternate carving the staircase out of the concrete, and painting the tower's face. When it would take longer than an afternoon to climb up to the next point of progress, the four of them would carry all of their things up and carve out another set of rooms, and a place for their fire. They grew strong, and the higher they went, the lighter things felt and soon, they didn't have to eat or drink much food at all to subsist. The smokestack was painted up to the clouds when one couple bore a son. Not long after, the other two had a daughter. Progress was slowed until the children learned to walk, but it was a good place for it, because in the clouds, they could hold out their buckets and water would fill them. The parents also figured out how to catch birds with nets woven from spare rope. These things sustained them, and any extra meat would be smoked, and the children grew to be strong and hard working, like their parents.

The children helped out in their little ways, and made many games for one another and carved their own secret rooms. On clear days, they would peek over the edge downward and see the general colors of the world below. On cloudy ones, they would find in the white and grey, shapes of what they thought a tree or an animal or a steamboat looked like. At night, after their parents finished working and lit the fire, the kids would listen to stories of the boat and what the feeling of grass and dirt was, and then everyone would look at the stars, which their parents said were so much clearer from being up so high. While the world was full of things on the ground, they were told, up above, there was just as much to see.

The daughter loved looking up at the stars, she saw the world she'd been told of. The son, however, only saw the grey face of the unpainted smokestack, continuing up, the top still out of sight. Once, he was heavily scolded for suggesting that no one from the ground would even be able to tell if they'd finished the painting, that they could return to the ground. The two fathers were proud men, and wouldn't dare go down without completing their task.

When the kids reached adulthood, the tower had been painted up to where the stars were clear in the sky, even with the sun up. Progress was slowing; their parents were getting old. The son and daughter married, and soon had a child of their own, a boy. This boy played as his parents had, and carved his secret rooms and looked down to see what he could make of the world below. He, too, sat beside the fire every night to hear his parents and grandparents tell the stories about what it was like at the base, and the rolling hills, cut clean of trees with only the stumps remaining. He learned what trees were, and animals and grass and dirt, and these things filled his imagination like the stars did the sky. He would look up, and find the hope of finishing, though the top could still not be seen.

It wasn't long when of the grandfathers died. His family carved him a small mausoleum in the concrete, and then filled in the entrance. They moved their camp, and told warm stories of him. The other grandparents soon followed, and for each, the same ritual was performed, and then there was only the boy and his parents. They worked, and the father realized that once he and his wife were gone, his son would be alone with no one to paint with. It didn't seem right to leave this job to one person, up so high with just the concrete and the stars.

One night, the father, as he'd done as a kid, carved a secret room and stole a can of paint. He hid this can away, sealing the entrance off. Soon, he and his wife grew old too, and the two of them watched their son, who came to work harder than they and their parents before them, continue to wind up the pillar's face. The smokestack was painted up to where the sun could be seen always when the family ran out of paint.

The father did his best to pretend to be upset, but his wife figured out what he'd done, and she smiled inside herself and played along. She loved him, and decided that having a purpose wasn't enough, without this love.

"You have to go back to the ground," the parents told their son. To be honorable, he was to go to the giant, and ask him for more paint. They knew he would never return. The son wanted his parents to come with him, but they said that they were too old, and wouldn't make the journey. The night before he was to leave, the son lit the fire, and again listened to his parents tell him of all the stories they had heard from their parents. They told of the steamboat and whispered to him the giant's name. They spoke the image of the hills cleared of trees with only stumps left, and the feeling of dirt and grass, which they'd never felt. The parents warned their son that it all gets heavier the further down one gets. In the morning, as best as morning could be discerned, they gave him food and water for the trip. He got the net for catching birds, and the bucket for catching water, at the clouds, he was told. He also was given the little wood that was left, for fire at night.

The son said goodbye, all packed up, and left going down the staircase, spiraling so far downward. Walking this was much easier than going up. It was like

the rush after such a long build up, but the journey for the boy was more treacherous than he'd expected. He passed the hidden paint can, and then the sealed up tombs. He made fire in old campsites, and found the hidden rooms he'd carved years ago. This journey aged him and strengthened his legs. He walked down to where the birds flew, and caught these, as he'd been told, and smoked whatever was left. He walked in the clouds, and filled his bucket, and saw hidden rooms that he hadn't built.

He passed the clouds, and saw the ground clearly for the first time, how parts of it were higher or lower, jagged or smooth. Further down, he saw that big patches of color were made of many smaller things. A little further, and he saw the steamboat. It sat right at the edge of a big section of blue. By the time he'd reached the scaffolding, he'd seen so many colors and foreign shapes, but now, sounds other than the wind could be heard. He heard voices other than his parents,' and saw one figure, larger than the rest, among the others. The last of the path was crossed, the bottom before him. The man stepped onto the deck of the steamboat, other people working around him. He looked out over the rail, as his grandfather had done, but something wasn't right. He did not see a rolling hill with many cut stumps. All that was before him was green, endless green. It took him a while, but the man guessed right that these were trees, and, oh my, the trees were just so *big*.