

Spring 2022

The Barbed Wire Boy

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Recommended Citation

Brodie, Laurent Alexander, "The Barbed Wire Boy" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 108.
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The Barbed Wire Boy:

A Novel-in-Progress

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Languages & Literature

of Bard College

by

Laurent Brodie

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

Dedication

This project is dedicated to my mom, for being my most ferocious champion and supporter, and for never missing an opportunity to remind me that I am loved. Ik hou van jou, Mama, tot aan de maan en weer terug.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely thankful to the head of the Written Arts program and my SPROJ advisor, Dinaw Mengestu, for his continued support throughout the entire process of writing. Thank you, Prof. Mengestu, for always dispensing the best advice while remaining true to what I was trying to achieve; for galvanizing me to write every time I was stuck; and for noticing things I had done that I hadn't even thought about and encouraging me to pursue them further. I admire you enormously, I aspire to be a fiction-writer of your caliber, and I hope to have incorporated your influence in this project as much as possible.

I would also like to thank all of the Written Arts professors whose classes I have taken while at Bard: Mary Caponegro, Benjamin Hale, Wyatt Mason, Mona Simpson, and Masha Gessen. All of you have strongly influenced me and it is thanks to your guidance that I have substantially improved as a writer since I arrived on Bard campus as a freshman four years ago.

Additional thanks to my amazingly talented friend Sophia Slezak for taking time off her own senior project to provide me, free of charge, with beautiful illustrations of four major characters, none of which I will ever get tired of looking at; and to my twin sister Livia Brodie for taking one such illustration and making it into a fantastic book cover.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Femke Galle and Graham Brodie, for their unlimited supply of guidance, support, and love; my cats Jack and George, for their companionship; and my twin, again, for being my closest comrade and best friend from the first moment of our emergence onto this mortal coil.

LAURENT BRODIE



THE BARBED WIRE BOY

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(From the writings of Laszlo Kraken, shortly before the murders):

There is a child in the graveyard. It's been there for a long time and it never stops crying.

It lives at the perimeter of the woodland cemetery, in that area perpetually darkened by the canopy of trees, the area that always seems to be shrouded in fog, no matter the weather and no matter the season. That fog at the edge of the graveyard is there to keep the child cold.

Sometimes, visitors to the graveyard will see it. Whether they are the stragglers milling around after the funeral or kids there to desecrate the graves for a drunken laugh, or just the lonely bereaved visiting their family's graves, sometimes they will pause in what they're doing long enough to notice the huddled silhouette in the fog. And they will approach it and see what appears to be a bloody, sexless child, naked except for a grimy shroud, curled in a fetal position and quietly sobbing into the ground. Here, the visitor's tentative footsteps speed up. They do not know what is happening, only that there is a little boy or a little girl, lost and alone and seemingly in pain, covered with glistening gore. Instinctively, they will feel a need to help this child. They will approach and place a comforting hand on the child's shoulder.

They do not see the child's foot. They do not see the black crow watching from the tree branch above. They do not know why the child is here.

The child's dead body first entered the graveyard before 1940. The message on the grave, now illegible with decay, was probably the engraved remnants of a mother's wishes, something about the angels weeping for a child taken too soon, a platitude about innocence preserved, going back into the gentle arms of the Heavenly Father. But as we know, the child has not gone to Heaven. Since its death, the child has never left the graveyard, and its punishment continues night after night.

If the graveyard visitor had looked down at the grave under the child's body, they might have seen the curled and mangled horror that was once its foot. From the ankle down, the flesh is misshapen and twisted by the angry noose of roots wound around it, shackling the child to the ground. Hiding below in the bowels of the grave is something alive, something older than the graveyard itself, and its grip never weakens. The child has spent years trying to free itself, but with every tug, the knots tighten and dig in further until they reach the bone, causing the child constant pain. So the child sits there like the deformed afterbirth of the

graveyard, an embryonic bloody shape bound to the earth by an umbilical cord of roots.

All the while, the crow watches from the tree branches above. Unlike the child, whose sex has been rendered unidentifiable from putrefaction, the crow is unambiguously female. And every morning she flies down and perches on top of the child's hairless skull and pecks out both of its eyes. She flies back up and feeds the eyeballs to her children in her nest, and throughout the night, the child's eyes slowly-slowly grow back, so that its torment may continue forever.

You probably want to help the child. You might be wondering what a child could do in its short life to deserve such a fate, or who it was that decided the judgment. Unfortunately, there are some things that history has erased, and probably for our benefit.

But whatever sin the child committed, it stays in the fog, quietly enduring its punishment. And with each passing day, the hate in the child's heart grows more intense. Whatever innocence it ever had has now been polluted by pure, black hate. It feels nothing else anymore. It looks at the world around it, the faint outlines of the trees through the fog, and it makes its plans for the day when it will finally break free of its chain and destroy everything it sees.

And if it is you in the graveyard that day, if you are that unlucky visitor who sees a crying child and approaches it and tries to help, and you put your hand on its shoulder, the child will look up at you and smile.

You will have one moment to register the deep, hollow pits where its eyes should be.

And when that one moment is over, you try to back up, but you find yourself unable to tear your gaze away. You can feel yourself falling down and down into the darkness of those cavernous eyes, and the dark rises around you and fills up the sky, and the fall never ends, and you begin what will become a long, long scream.

The child is alone in the fog again. You are no longer there. You're trapped in a dimension of darkness, and the child will make you share all of its pain. Forever.

The first time Winifred saw the boy, she knew she was destined to be his mother.

His picture stood on the desk immediately adjacent to Winifred's in the office she had gotten used to sharing for the past three years. Like Winifred's, the desk was gray and mostly sparse, except for the single framed photograph. From early arrival at the office to departure, Winifred would steal glances at the photograph, and on the rare occasions when the other desk's occupant was out of the room, she would leave her desk to get a closer look.

The boy in the picture at the time of its taking was about five years old, though Winifred knew from conversation that he was now fourteen. The scene depicted a sunny autumn day, and the boy was wearing an anorak and corduroys and red sneakers that dangled above the grass as he was swept off his feet. It seemed to Winifred that all the light in the photograph was drawn toward his face, as if it were the center of the universe. That face was blond-haired and black-eyed and plastered with a grin so purely joyful that it infected Winifred's face every time she saw it.

Before she had started work at the facility, Winifred had seen many a little boy's face when she walked in the city streets or parks that made her want to clutch them in her hands, grip their cheeks, and study the delicate contours of their features for hours on end. But those faces were all just specimens, holding scientific fascination. Seeing this face was like seeing a sunset that made you forget every other sunset you had ever seen, like it was the first thing you saw after coming out of a dark cave.

She tried to ignore the person holding the boy mid-embrace, but could not keep her eyes from flickering intermittently in that direction. That face, though it was no less beautiful, was not so pleasurable for Winifred to look at, and the smile on that face was a direct antidote to the infectious effects of the other. This was usually the case with her fellow adults, who did not hold her interest or impress her nearly as much as their children did, but particularly so with this one. Not wanting to touch the photo for fear of knocking it over, she would hold her hand over that part of her vision and squint, trying to limit her view to just the five-year-old face that she loved so much. This forced her body into an awkward S-shape as she would totter slightly on her high heels, bending her knees to keep her face at eye level with the picture. That the simple act of looking at a photograph was so complicated made it slightly more difficult to get her fix, and

Winifred would still be unsatisfied when moments later, she had to return to her seat, and the other person in the picture would walk through the door, take her seat, and ask Winifred if she had observed anything unusual while she'd been gone.

////

At the end of a long, cold metal hallway was a locked door, framed with steel and engraved with the large numbers 1-0-1. The cold metal room behind the door was usually empty, but one day, as October was nearing its end, a woman sat on the floor inside, chained to the wall and listening to the screams through the walls.

////

The difference between the two women, Winifred thought, could perhaps be emblemized by their choices of clothing. Clementine never seemed to show any compulsion to dress nicely for the job. In two years, Winifred could count on one hand the times she had seen her coworker in a dress or a skirt. Mostly, Clementine wore raggedy jeans that exposed her bare knees, and wooly, oversized Christmas sweaters that always looked to Winifred as if they had been knitted in a hurry by a non-expert, with no thought to proportion or color scheme. Her frizzy brown hair was permanently unkempt and enormous in length and volume, cascading around the sides of her head and down her back like the entrance to a cave, in which her face lurked like some lonesome troglodytic creature. All of this made Clementine look scarecrow-like, a pile of rags come to life and crawled to freedom from the floor of a thrift store somewhere. Often, while they were working, Clementine would remove her shoes and socks and perch one foot on her chair, scribbling calculations on the denim covering her thigh.

Winifred's outfit, which usually took the form of unobtrusive black pants or skirts and a brown leather jacket, was motivated not so much by a belief in immaculate dress sense but by her discomfort in more casual clothing, combined with her fear of being fired for untidiness. Neither of those things was a concern for Clementine. She acted as if she had special dispensation to dress and act however she wanted while at work, and no doubt she did. Clementine wasn't like the other workers. She was younger than most of them, including Winifred, but everyone at the facility knew that her mind was a highly valued commodity. She oozed that specialness like a stench.

But every day, Winifred concealed her disgust and put on a smile, greeting Clementine with a “Good morning” and saying goodbye in the afternoon knowing she would get no response. This was what she had to do, to get to her son.

////

The woman in the cold metal room was thirty-four years old, had voluminous frizzy hair that tumbled past her shoulders, and was wearing ripped blue jeans and, somewhat more incongruously, an oversized woolen Christmas sweater. The sweater, which bore a knitted image of a happy reindeer, was one of several that she wore year-round, in cold weather and hot, as even the most oppressive warmth of summer had always felt chilly to her. Now the sweater was partially unraveled and sodden with blood, and she felt colder than she had ever been in her life. Her hair had been matted with gore and even ripped from the roots in places, exposing pale scalp. Her hands were distorted, the muscles constricting them into painful hook-fingered claws like broken umbrellas, with fingernails gnawed into asymmetrical keratin blades. She had no shoes or socks, and her right foot was attached to the adjacent wall with a chain, twisted at an extremely uncomfortable angle. The skin around her ankle was a ragged network of blood rings — after a while, the pain had been too much to keep struggling against the chain that held her.

A partition ran down the center of the woman's face. The left side of her face was recognizable as that of a woman, pretty if pale from blood loss, freckled and bejeweled with a single green eye that was now receiving chaotic brain signals, winking rapidly and arrhythmically like a sail flapping in the wind. On the right side, the lightly freckled skin turned to charred paper, blackened and blued and filled with holes exposing the remnants of putrefied muscle and sinew underneath. Gums had shrunk back from teeth, tissue from bones, and the eyeball into its socket to the point of invisibility. Already, the bodily fluids expunged from her right side had collected in a bath underneath her, what a pathologist might have referred to as a Cadaver Decomposition Island, drenching her clothes in their stink. Depending on which side of her face was under observation, she was either on the verge of death or far beyond it, hovering at the border of skeletonization after several weeks of rot.

The woman was shivering, but only partly from the cold. Mostly, her shivers were the involuntary response to the sickness that had been steadily climbing through her body and brain

over the past hour. At that time, the screams had not stopped but had only faded in volume as the living people in the immediate vicinity began to run out. Now, she was hearing the screams of the people down the hallway and to the left, or perhaps to the right. Soon, she would be hearing screams from upstairs.

Equally soon, she knew, her organs would begin to collapse in on themselves, overwhelmed by the creepers of blackness that were busy twining through her veins and corrupting her cells. Already, the effects were visible — the increasingly prevalent tics, wrenching her head sporadically from side to side, curling her lip, snapping her one remaining eye open and shut.

////

Sometimes, while they were working, Winifred would try to pry information from her coworker about the boy. This was made difficult by her perpetual uncertainty over how any question would sound outside her mind. All the stuff of unthinking, innocuous small talk — “How is Kevin doing? Is he still in eighth grade? What are his interests?” — seemed to radiate suspicion when one was asking with an ulterior motive. Winifred struggled with social interaction at the best of times, mainly because she actively avoided it, and so she had to carefully analyze each question in her mind, scanning for any hint of excessive eagerness or curiosity, before asking. She would ration herself, limiting her questions about Kevin to about three times a week to throw off the scent of being fixated on the subject, deliberately throwing in questions about things she had no interest in, like where her coworker had gone to college, what she had studied, whether she was still married.

Unfortunately for Winifred, Clementine was not the most loquacious coworker in the world. ‘He’s doing fine,’ would be the typical answer, the finality in the last syllable making it clear that no other information was forthcoming. Other answers would be similarly vague or monosyllabic: “No, just started ninth. Painting, mostly. Miskatonic, Class of ‘99. Biophysics. No.”

In the beginning, Winifred’s paranoia was such that she thought the bluntness was the result of suspicion, that despite her best efforts, Winifred had been asking too many questions and that the parental alarm bells were going off. But after the first few times she saw Clementine respond to a male coworker’s drinking invitation with a grunt or give the junior scientists short and curt instructions without looking at them, or pick her teeth when the director was addressing the

group, Winifred realized this was Clementine's natural state. She seemed even more intensely allergic to other people than Winifred was, and outside of the photograph, Winifred never saw her smile. Together, she thought, they made an oddball pair: one unused to asking questions but determined for information, and the other putting up a giant wall of ice between her and anyone else.

Over two years, through a slow and torturous process much like gradually squeezing water from a gravestone, Winifred managed to extract a great deal of information about Kevin. And over the years, her loathing for Clementine grew.

Only after seeing the boy did Winifred start believing in God. She didn't know if God was the kind they had taught her about in Catholic schools, the deity of Abrahamic tradition, and she suspected probably not — those Hieronymous Bosch paintings of Heaven and Hell were just too absurd to take seriously. But whether God went by Gaia or Jehovah, Brahman or the Tao, some kind of deterministic superconscious force existed that permeated the universe and had brought her and her son together. It was the only way she could explain the profound maternal instinct she felt. The way she saw it, this boy was the one that would have resided for nine months in her uterus, but for whatever reason, God had ordained that he emerge from Clementine's, or perhaps God's evil counterpart had played some form of trick and transported the zygote from one womb to another. Whatever the case, this did not negate the connection between them. For reasons Winifred could not entirely explain, she simply knew that this boy was her son, and she was his mother, with as much certainty as she knew her name.

But she also knew that the law would not be on her side on this one. So, Action Item One, recognizing the boy as her own, had been accomplished. Now, Action Item Two was doing something about it.

////

“Clementine Kraken,” the woman whispered. “Kevin Kraken. Clementine Kraken. Kevin Kraken. Clementine Kraken. Kevin Kraken. Clementine Kraken. Kevin Kraken. Clementine Kraken.”

Dimly, she remembered she was in the west wing. Her one hope was that the people in the east wing would manage to get out safely before the madness crossed over to them. She doubted it —

they had no way of knowing what was happening. They were probably all getting their coffee and finishing up their paperwork for the long weekend right now, with no idea of what was about to happen.

The woman strained at her chain. All she managed to do was inflict another savage welt down her ankle. This time, she could see tendons gleaming.

On the other side of the wall, a man was screaming: 'Marv! I know you can hear me! Marv? MARV!' Then the screams turned incoherent, competing for loudness with the sound of ripping flesh.

The woman had known the dying man. She had also known Marv.

She also knew that the thing the man had been desperately talking to was not Marv anymore.

The woman buried her head in her hands.

Inside her pounding skull, her brain was crumbling, like an orange rotting in fast-forward. The whirlpool in her head was building — a dark maelstrom ripping up neurons, shredding them in its swirling maw of chaos. It wouldn't be long before every memory, every last coherent thought she had left would devour itself alive. And in the process, each memory was replaced with another one, a memory transplanted from another, larger mind that was currently engulfing hers, and each memory contained an eternity of blackness and wind and screaming, the feeling of being locked not just in one room but in a room inside of an infinite series of larger rooms all sprouting into existence and eating each other, fighting to get out as the shadows crept from the walls to fill up her body and turn her inside out. And somewhere, in a shrinking bubble at the center of this encroaching labyrinth, this cascade of rooms eating rooms, she knew that there was the woman who was her, and the boy who was her son. She visualized herself standing next to the blond-haired child who she loved more than any living creature on earth, who in her visualization was five again, coming only up to her waist. She visualized the pair of them holding hands and looking out blankly from a cliff edge at the oncoming storm, and she darted through the fractal dark corridors in her mind with renewed determination, chasing after them.

In a minute, she knew she would forget both of their names and both of their faces. Still, she clung to them.

'Clementine Kraken,' she repeated to herself, desperately. 'Kevin Kraken. Clementine Kraken. Kevin Kraken.'

////

Winifred had often thought about how she and Kevin would be reunited, knowing that the biggest complication would be Kevin himself never having seen her before. She wondered for a time whether, upon making eye contact, Kevin would feel a reciprocal biological instinct toward her as she felt toward him, but decided to err on the side of caution and assume this probably wouldn't happen. As much as it pained her to acknowledge, the day that she released Kevin from Clementine's grasp, she knew that he would probably not be grateful for it. It would take time for him to learn better.

Certain things she knew would aid her: she knew what he looked like, or at least, she knew she would be able to recognize the taller, older version of the blond-haired boy in the photograph. She knew what school he attended. She knew that the school day ended at about 3:30 pm, which she figured out by marking when Clementine left to pick him up and calculating the driving distance between the school and the facility. She knew where Clementine lived, having at one point tailed her in her car.

Having acquired this information, she wasn't exactly sure what to do with it. It would be problematic for all sorts of reasons to try and get Kevin at pick-up time since that was the exact time when Clementine would also be there, but that was also the only time in the day that she knew he would be outside the school. Meeting him at his home during the weekend was out of the question since she knew from inquiries that Clementine never left her home on the weekends. Nor was she keen on breaking in at night when Clementine was sleeping — that would just produce scores of additional complications.

On the first night of October, an answer came into her life.

////

"Clementine Kraken. Clementine Kraken. Clementine Kraken. Clementine Kraken. Clementine..."

The woman stopped whispering it. She'd been saying it for the past half hour without really knowing why. To be honest, she couldn't remember what it meant anymore. Who the hell was Clementine Kraken? *What* the hell was Clementine Kraken?

The screams outside were starting to dwindle, and she frowned in dismay. It sounded like fun out there. But here she was, tied to a stupid wall with a stupid chain, unable to join in.

She yanked at the chain again. Her ankle met the familiar resistance and flopped to the floor. She lay there, chest rising and falling with quick, savage breaths.

Then she sat bolt upright and scooted backward on her butt until she hit the wall. She lifted her knee, gripped her ankle with both hands, and pulled as hard as she could.

A thread of black blood trickled down her foot and dripped off her heel. She ignored it.

////

Knowing what Clementine's apartment building looked like made Winifred's apartment building repel her even more. During the underground train ride home from work, she would stand no matter how tired she was, and hold the rail with a lace handkerchief between her glove and the metal just to double-insulate her hand. The people on the train with her were shabby shadows of people, crowding around her and making her feel like she only had a sliver of space in an awkward cage of joints and an airfield of floating disease. Her window was a dull window-dotted rectangular slab sliced into the light-polluted sky, and it made her eyes hurt to look at it. The building seemed to pulsate at her, and she could almost hear it breathing. Even the lobby made her feel depressed, with its lines of mailboxes and checkered blue-and-white floor, a crude facsimile of marble.

Most of all, she hated ascending the spiral stairway connecting the floors. There was an elevator, but there was no way that Winifred was going inside it. Even for the brief interval of time between the lobby and the fifth floor, she couldn't be in a 6-6 foot space. She lived on the fifth floor, and each day the walk reminded her of climbing up some cracked, white plaster dragon from its bulbous base up along its increasingly narrow spine, trying not to go too near the banister that she was convinced would splinter and send her plunging, or too near the wall that she was convinced would give her asbestos poisoning.

Eventually, she would make it to the top, let herself into her apartment, and spend the rest of the night reading and drinking a half-gallon of green tea before going to bed at 10:00. The nights never changed. But on the night of October 1st, she opened the door to her apartment and immediately noticed the open window. She dumped her keys on the kitchen counter and walked over to stick her head out. In the street five stories below, a plastic bag fluttered down the sidewalk past her window screen, which lay broken in the gutter. Even from above, she could see that someone seemed to have put their fist through it.

The copy of *The Old Curiosity Shop* that she had been reading, rather than being neatly placed on the coffee table with a bookmark, had been thrown carelessly across the room as if someone had read it and become disgusted with it. She checked in the refrigerator and found that the pasta she had made the previous night had been eaten. It took several more hours of increasing alarm and one anxiety attack before she found the card. It was on her pillow in her bedroom, and the message on it appeared to have been scrawled with a broken ink-dipped nail:

*to kevin's mother. i can help you save your son. meet me at 135 hansen street tomorrow at 11 pm
— CL*

Winifred read the card four times, her mind filling with suspicion. At the same time, however, as she clutched the card to her chest and allowed her breathing to slowly decelerate, she surprisingly found herself feeling an emotion that she had denied herself for a long time: hope.

////

The woman crawled across the floor, one hand against the wall and her leg dragging behind her. There was a look of animal-like determination on her face. Her teeth ground against each other, and her one remaining eye bulged out of her head, with nothing human left in it.

Behind her, the chain was lumped in a bloody pile on the floor, along with her severed foot.

The woman completed the final yard and beat her fist against the door. Her other hand spider-walked to the knob and wrenched at it.

The woman roared. She pushed herself back and slammed her shoulder into the metal. Outside, another woman, younger than her, let out a high-pitched shriek of pain, and she was filled with

an almost dizzying desire to find this lady, whoever she was, and throw her against the wall until nothing remained but a pulp. She didn't know why. Right now, she couldn't even understand the concept of *why*.

All she knew was that she was filled with the most intense hunger she had ever experienced. It was a hunger that wasn't isolated to her belly — it pervaded everything. Every fiber of her body was consumed with ferocious, desperate need, and she banged her fists on the door so hard that she didn't even register her knuckles splintering.

Then, amid this, she looked down.

Her ankle was spouting blood all over the floor. She stared at it and suddenly the crown of rotted flesh around the knob of bone looked very inviting.

She sat down and pulled her foot to her mouth, cracking several bones in the process without caring, and sank her teeth into her ankle.

////

The drive to the cabin from Winifred's apartment was around four hours. Gradually, the concrete-and-graffiti splatterings of urbanization began to dwindle like a receding hairline, leaving only hulking trees and the occasional crumpled gas station, endless sick-looking fields under a sick-looking gray sky. In this part of the country, everything and everyone was sick. Disease ran through the veins of the earth, and from an early age, illness was your closest friend.

Winifred did not like listening to music, so instead, she put on an audiobook of *Pedro Páramo*, mouthing along to the original Spanish. She had just reached the point where the main character started to drown on dry land when she spotted the dirt road slicing through a cavity between the trees, connecting the highway to somewhere deep in the belly of the forest. She flicked on her turn signal and began maneuvering, leaving the road behind. She grabbed for the handkerchief sitting in the seat beside her and unleashed another hacking torrent of bile into it, then put it neatly back in its place.

“That's disgusting,” said a voice from the backseat.

The woman glanced into the rear-view mirror to see two burning eyes looking out from the shadows of the backseat.

“You want to step on it, please?” said the passenger.

“Only five more miles to go,” said the woman.

Ten minutes later, the car trundled in front of the cabin, and Winifred wrenched the transmission into Park and shuttered the engine. She got out of the car and took a few unsteady steps toward the squat, listing wooden edifice to soothe the pins and needles in her legs. Behind her, the other figure in the car emerged from the backseat and arched his spine inward as he stretched. He pulled his backpack out of the car and slung it over his shoulders.

Inside, everything seemed as squat, shrunken, and crooked as the cabin itself, nothing taking up any more space than was purely ascetically necessary. There was a dwarven sofa with an ugly floral pattern, facing a bloated iron furnace in the corner of the room. A single window showed trees collaborating like cloaked conspirators in the distance. There was a stovetop with a utilitarian handful of pots and pans. A bookshelf about the height of Winifred’s waist sat in the other corner, exactly positioned to fit into the angle of the room, neither very large nor boasting many books, with the few additions on the shelves — *Ethan Frome*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory*, and a couple of others — standing out in the space like disjointed teeth. Winifred made a mental note to buy a bouquet to place on the bookshelf, and some children’s books, perhaps *Alice in Wonderland* or something similar.

The first thing that Winifred did upon hanging up her jacket was run to the bathroom — Winifred did not like gas station restrooms or gas station employees, and after four hours her bladder seemed ready to explode. While she relieved herself, CL stood in the middle of the room with his hands buried in his coat pockets and took stock of his surroundings. Eventually, Winifred returned and the pair went downstairs.

A door with a pane of frosted glass in the center opened to a ribcage of creaky wooden spines, badly lit by a single lightbulb hiding away in the rafters. Long, geometric shadows bathed everything in darkness.

Winifred did not like going down to the basement. On the way down, with CL following close enough behind her that it was hard to avoid his smell, or the unpleasant awareness of the height imbalance between them, Winifred felt enclosed on all sides. Distantly, a bad thought fluttered to the surface of her mind, of being locked in another dark, confined space long ago, yelling to be let out. She felt something clench at her heart, stopped, and put out a hand to steady herself, while behind her CL came to a halt and sighed with impatience. Winifred paused, blinked rapidly, breathed slowly — she refused to have an anxiety attack from walking down ten steps. That could wait until her guest was gone.

They reached a door with a placard attached to it. On it, Winifred had scribbled KEVIN'S ROOM and doodled some tanks and dinosaurs in the margins. CL gave her a withering glance. "Just trying to make him feel at home," she muttered, and then said, "How long should it take to install the code lock?"

"Not too long with the right equipment," said CL.

"It's only temporary, as he's adjusting," she hastened to add.

"I understand," said CL in a tone slightly too deadpan for Winifred's liking.

Winifred opened the door to a small room where she had cleared out some exercise equipment that had previously occupied the space and replaced it with a neatly made bed, a grassy carpet, and a Playstation. A pair of laundry machines vibrated and clattered in the corner while some clothes spun around inside. On the bed, neatly folded, were a pair of pajamas patterned with rocket ships. "Those will be too small for him," CL remarked. "My understanding is that the child is above five feet tall."

"I couldn't find any in a larger size with the same pattern," said Winifred.

"I think you're missing the point."

"No, I think you are," said Winifred, turning to glare at CL and immediately looking away. His face was one of those that were best confined to one's peripheral vision. "You will get your end of the deal," she said. "One hour with him, alone. After that, what I do with him is none of your concern. Remember?"

“Pardon me for overstepping,” CL said dryly. He nodded at a table. “Shall we begin?”

Winifred nodded blankly, studying the walls. “Do you think I should hang some posters up?”

“I thought you didn’t want my opinion.”

“I don’t, but tell me anyway.”

“I think he might prefer a window.”

“Well, obviously, that’s not an option.”

“Then I’m sure he will be delighted by the next best thing.” CL shrugged off his backpack, unzipped it, and pulled out a large scroll. He strode across the room and unfurled the paper across the table, revealing a large and elaborate blueprint of a building. “*Shall we begin?*” he repeated.

Winifred breathed in and out. She thought about the alliance she was about to make and whether she could trust this strange man — if that was the right term — sitting in front of her. And when her mind decided firmly that she couldn’t, she wondered whether she would recognize the right moment when he would no longer be useful to her. She put those thoughts to the back of her mind and joined him to sit at the table.

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The woman who had once been Clementine Kraken lay sprawled at the door of her cell.

She had kept chewing, enraptured by the glorious taste until finally, her teeth encountered a major artery. All the blood that was left in her spurted out like a fountain.

The woman had always had good eyesight. Now, as she watched the flow of blood with fascination, her vision became more and more unclear, lines blurring and colors colliding until she was seeing only a vague jet of crimson throbbing among the shadows and the lights. Then she could see nothing at all. And then she'd lost consciousness.

At approximately 2:30 pm on October 26th, 2009, in the back of Clementine’s mind, amid all the neurons grinding to a halt in her brain cells — at the moment between the last drop of blood

escaping and the final beat of her heart, a space of time so short it was barely even time — a trapdoor seemed to open, and whatever was left of the actual Clementine Kraken slipped through to the cold emptiness beyond, taking the ugly thing that had latched on with it. The light went out of her eyes, and the trapdoor closed, never to be opened again.

The woman sat back in a pool of blood, dead.

Part 1:

DECOMPOSITION

A general description of postmortem changes due to decomposition basically includes two stages of autolysis, and four stages of putrefaction... Autolysis consists of the fast and intense spontaneous self-destruction of tissues by the body enzymes present in the cells, without any bacterial interference. Once cells stop receiving nutrients and oxygen via blood circulation, they start anaerobic (without oxygen) "breathing"... The anaerobic respiration induces the accumulation of lactic acid in cell tissues that disrupts cell function. Enzymes then collapse the cell nucleus and cell breakdown (necrosis) occurs.

— "Decomposition," Encyclopedia.com

ONE

7:30 pm. October 26, 2009.

As Kevin Kraken awoke one evening from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into an orphan.

At 4 pm, his biggest problem had been that his mother hadn't picked him up from school yet.

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4:00 pm. October 26, 2009.

Kevin sat on the front steps of the school building, staring out into the street, with only the occasional excursion to pace up and down the sidewalk before sitting down again. His backpack was in his lap and he had been hugging it to himself to conserve warmth.

He had started to worry after the first ten minutes of waiting, but that was to be expected. It was a natural symptom of being the only kid in his class without a phone. Of course, his mother never arrived at 3 on the dot, and of course, he worried anyway, like a recurring scene in the daily marathon of anxiety. But now, an hour later, his mother's car was still nowhere in sight.

He had pulled his hood over his head and pulled out the two strings, reducing the opening in the front to a tiny, scrunched-up oval. He looked through the makeshift peephole at the view that he was used to watching, counting the pedestrians on the other side of the street. There was a chain-link fence on that side, beyond which was a large open field that Kevin sometimes saw the younger kids playing in. A few tires were haphazardly scattered about, and a rope swing. Beyond the field was another fence, this one topped with barbed wire, which prevented the children from falling down a sloping bank of garbage onto the shore of the river. At the farthest edge of the river was the Factory.

Technically, it was the Niflheim Facility, an old name borrowed from Scandinavian mythology, though who had given it that name and why was a mystery. But in the city, it was much more widely known as simply the Factory.

Kevin chose to assume that his mother was just more busy than usual over there. It seemed the likeliest explanation.

The razed green plateau beyond the fence was dotted with spindly black trees. October had stripped away the leaves, crumpling them up and scattering them over the ground like thousands of worthless red bills in a defunct currency, and now the trees were tormented, tentacular creatures who seemed to be almost in pain, still mourning the death of summer.

Tired of sitting, he got up and paced aimlessly down the steps. Right at that moment, a rust-colored car skidded around the corner at an alarming rate and stopped in front of the school building, parallel-parking between a Jeep and an open space. The engine spat and gurgled under the dented metal trapezoid of the hood.

Kevin watched as, without turning off the car, the woman in the front seat clumsily undid her seatbelt, reached across, opened the door, and grinned at him.

“Hey there, my young soldier!” said the woman, almost shouting. “Are you Kevin? Kevin Kraken?”

Kevin nodded warily.

“My name is Winifred,” said the woman, who seemed oddly breathless. “I’m a co-worker of your mommy’s, okay? She’s probably told you about me. Winifred Grantz? I work with your mommy on nuclear particles? I invited you round for Thanksgiving, but you couldn’t make it because you were sick? That’s me! You know me, right?”

“No,” said Kevin. “Sorry. I don’t remember.” He did remember Thanksgiving. His mother and he had sat inside and watched TV like every other Thanksgiving, and his mother had fielded invitations from family and friends with the usual excuse that Kevin had strep throat — Kevin didn’t ask her to do this, but she had done it every year for all his life, and he didn’t even know what he would do at one of these dinners. But she had said nothing, ever, about a coworker named Winifred.

“Oh,” said Winifred. “Well, I’m sure she mentioned me at some point, and you just forgot, okay? I don’t take it personally, I wouldn’t remember me either!” The woman wheezed with fake laughter and regained her composure. “Well, your mommy is super busy, ok? And she sent me to pick you up, and take you home from school, okay hon? So, you know, hop in!”

Kevin didn't respond but studied the car. It was of an antique model, not just rust-colored but rusty, the reflective gleam dulled by the years to nothingness. The dent between the headlights gave the impression of a furrowed brow over two enormous wire-framed eyes scowling at the horizon. The crumpled-in doors gave the impression of sunken cheeks, and in the back, the exhaust pipe spat out fumes that twisted into crystallized pollution in the autumn air. Kevin could just make out a thin, almost imperceptible silver crack snaking through the windshield. The remaining windows were rolled up and had a tint that he was certain was illegal. Winifred's smile twitched and squirmed at the edges and then began to leave her eyes. "Well, what are you waiting for?" she said.

"How do I know you're my mom's friend?" said Kevin.

Winifred's eyes went icy for exactly a second before she perked up. "Well, I have her phone number on my phone," she said, twisting around in her seat and throwing something blocky and black in Kevin's direction. He caught it and looked down at the ancient flip phone in his hands. On the screen, which glowed a slight egg-shell blue, he saw his mother's name, with her phone number underneath it. He looked up at the woman, who made a beckoning gesture that seemed more impatient than her smile let on. "Well? Does that satisfy you?" said Winifred. "Hey, I think it's good that you're being careful! Stranger danger, right? But now you know that I'm a friend of your mommy's! So...come on, let's have you get in the car now and take you home."

Kevin studied the woman's face. His immediate perception was that, though the woman was Caucasian, her actual skin color would more accurately be described as gray, like the color of an unwashed white T-shirt. The woman had smooth, dark hair flowing backward off her scalp, stopping just above her shoulders, and her eyes might have seemed dead except that they appeared to be on the verge of tears. After a few moments of eye contact, he glanced up at the sky. Looming over the spires of the Factory, as if to match the gray hue of Winifred's face, the sky was bruising, shadows collecting into the shape of an approaching rain cloud. Still, he preferred to get wet than be safe from the rain in Winifred's car. There was a twinge in his gut when he looked at Winifred, the same feeling he sometimes got when he was in an unfamiliar neighborhood or when he was alone at night and heard a strange sound down the corridor, and it was a feeling he had learned to trust.

He tossed the phone back into the car, and she failed to catch it, scrabbling underneath the car seat. “I think I’m gonna walk home,” he said, and she looked up like a spooked possum.

“What?” she said, and now her voice had lost its breathless, squeaky-toy tenor. “You don’t believe me? You saw your mom’s number just now! You think I’m just a stranger who happens to have your mom’s number?”

“I think my mom would be more comfortable with me walking,” said Kevin, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder.

“Your mom sent me! I told you!” said Winifred, with a note of panic in her voice. “And you can’t walk home! You don’t know the way. That’s why your mom has to drive you every afternoon at this precise time!”

It was true — Kevin did not know the way home, making him the only fourteen-year-old in his class still dependent on an adult with a driver’s license to take him home from school. He also knew it was a long walk. But he started moving. “Thank you for offering the ride,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets in a way that probably looked less nonchalant than he would have liked. And at that moment, Kevin heard another voice. This voice also emanated from the car, from the backseat behind the illegally-tinted windows, but at the same time seemed to come from somewhere impossibly deep in the earth, climbing and crawling up through many miles of tunnels, catacombs, and drainpipes, before emerging battered and only half-alive from cracked lips. It was a voice that irresistibly grabbed at the heckles on fourteen-year-old necks and stopped moving sneakers in their tracks and made October even colder than it was. This voice said: “*My fucking turn.*”

“Nonono,” Winifred began, contorting herself to look in the backseat just as the passenger door opened and a long, tall raincoat that appeared to have been extricated from a garbage heap stepped out. The raincoat had handless sleeves and a Panama hat, and when Kevin saw the face underneath the hat he screamed. The face smiled, or seemed to smile, and jumped forward, and Kevin felt a large hand close over his mouth and nose and seal them both shut. The smell of the hand and abrupt lack of oxygen were even more overwhelming than the face. Kevin felt another hand grab him by the back of his hoodie and before he had registered his situation enough to fight back, he was being dragged weightlessly across the sidewalk, while at the same time

another claw pressed into his lower back, seizing a handful of fabric, and shoved him forward into the car. His head slipped down between the backseat and the front and thunked on the floor. The hand was no longer over his mouth, but the smell was even more powerful. A weight got into the seat next to him, and the door slammed shut.

“CL, this violence is unnecessary,” Kevin heard Winifred saying, while the other voice said, “*Shut up and drive, bitch.*” From his upside-down, vision-restricted position, Kevin’s muscles finally obeyed his brain’s frantic signals, and one of his legs lashed out and met the bony surface of somebody’s lower jaw. There was a sound, and a sensation, like deadwood breaking, followed by a roar of anger and pain, and then one of the claws grabbed onto Kevin’s leg and forced it down with a stunning strength, and Kevin slipped entirely off the seat and fell into the gap, just as the car began to shift forward. Kevin internally begged for someone to have witnessed his abduction, but if anyone had, they did not stop the car from rolling away from the sidewalk and leaving the school behind.

“*We’re going on a road trip, Kevin,*” said the voice, and Kevin looked up and saw the terrible face looking down at him, that his sneaker had now left with a trickle of blood running down its translucent, pulsing throat. The origin of the blood trickle was wrapped in skin so old and lifeless that it was no longer like skin, bones, and joints just barely connecting the agglomeration of facial features: a concertina of yellow teeth bared in a rictus, a nose with almost no flesh left on it, and rheumy eyes that were the only thing marking this thing out as something alive. Kevin looked at the eyes and his insides melted away into cold nothingness. In those eyes, he saw not evil, but utter indifference. These were eyes that told him with a single glance of his total, cosmic irrelevance to the mind behind them — eyes that, as he looked into them, seemed to have injected him through the mere act of looking with an all-powerful soporific.

Kevin’s consciousness heaved to a harsh jolt and collapsed like a falling tree branch from underneath him. He had time to register one final realization — that the skeletal thing sitting next to him somehow knew his name — and with that thought embedded in his brain, he fell backward into a black hole.

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Winifred was not happy. When she had turned the corner and seen the thin fourteen-year-old standing in front of the school building, she had felt several thousand volts of love course through her, enough to make her briefly forget the threat of the ticking clock looming over her head, the culmination of events happening sooner than expected, that had led her to break the speed limit en route to the pick-up spot. It was the first time she had seen Kevin not in a photograph and he was, in some ways, clearly recognizable — verging on tall, blond hair slightly darkened with age — but in other ways, he was not as she had imagined him. There was something she was having a hard time putting her finger on as she spoke to him, like a reverse *déjà vu* in which she couldn't place the different thing, and it took her a moment before it hit her: this boy was not smiling. In all of her imaginings, Kevin's face had always automatically broken into the same broad smile that he wore in the photograph upon seeing her come down the road, the smile that released a flock of doves in her stomach. But this boy wore a confused frown on his still-boyish face, with its gentle spattering of acne on the left cheek and black eyes cautiously studying her, broadcasting the impression that this was someone who smiled on rare occasions and, even then, only out of polite nervousness.

Still, the lack of a smile did not ruin the picture. If anything, her sympathy was somewhat increased by seeing the downturn of his thin-lipped mouth, the well-worn worried lines on his forehead, and the way he stood, slightly hunched forward with his hands in his pockets as if stuck in the position from long hours of looking at his shoes. Perhaps it meant they had something in common, a similar weight on their shoulders. Perhaps that weight, in some telepathic sense, existed on her shoulders because it was on Kevin's — what was that line about how a mother was only ever as happy as her unhappiest child? Perhaps, she thought with a mix of anger and slight excitement, these were the tell-tale signs of abuse, that Clementine was a bad mother. In any case, there would be plenty of time to get to know Kevin and slowly extract that familiar smile from its hiding place.

But now, things were not off to a good start. The fantasy she had played in her head a thousand times, of her seducing the boy with her deep maternal warmth that she was sure came rolling off her, had failed. The more she had talked, the warier the boy had seemed of her. And now, the boy was struggling and grunting with terror in the back of her car, and the monster whose alliance she had reluctantly courted had *touched* him with its hideous claws and was giving her orders in

its raspy voice, and she was speeding down the road and internalizing what had just happened. In her peripheral vision, she had seen a man stopping in his tracks as he walked down the street, taking note of the child being bundled into the back of the car by some trenchcoat-wearing figure, and preparing the motions of pulling out his phone. Now the man was gone in her rearview mirror, but she felt it wouldn't long before the space there would be broken by the lights of a police car. Whatever joy at seeing Kevin she had felt a moment ago was replaced with the icy hand squeezing her innards with renewed force. Her eyes flitted toward the car window, and the Factory sitting squat in the distance. The clock until doomsday was still ticking, but now the minute hand had jumped forward in time. Kevin squirmed one final time in the back, and then went limp, apparently unconscious. "What did you do to him?" she said, her voice on the cusp of wailing.

"It's the shock," said CL impatiently.

Winifred made an unconscious promise to herself that she would make this creature regret frightening her child — though how exactly she would do that, she didn't know — and rounded the corner, instinctively flipping on her turn signal and checking her blind spot. "What the fuck are you doing!" screamed CL. "We just kidnapped a child! Step on it!"

"*What do you want me to do?*" Winifred screamed back. "Ignore the traffic laws?"

CL yelled something in return, both an affirmative answer to her question combined with general insults against her facial appearance, intellect, pathology, and barren womb, but Winifred barely heard it. There was a loud sound in her ears that was increasing in loudness, and she was beginning to feel a familiar sensation, as if those terrible claws of CL's had reached into her chest and closed around her heart, trying to pull her inside out, exerting a tug on her lungs which now had difficulty drawing in breath and stomach which now seemed uncomfortably close to her throat and bubbling with its contents, making her feel like she was about to throw up and hyperventilate at the same time. *No no no*, she begged, *not now*, but the anxiety attack had crept up on her and now swept her up in its crushing octopine embrace before she could stop it. Outside the car, streetlights were beginning to blur together as if to mimic the effect of rain on the windshield, except that the raindrops hadn't started to fall yet — the blurring was in her head, causing the road to bleed into the sky. Deep in her mind, the voice of a little girl trapped in a dark

room somewhere screamed to be let out, and this screaming was the noise that was growing louder in Winifred's ears, mixed in with a threnody of panic and screeching metal and cold wind.

As if in harmony with her heart-rate, her foot compressed the accelerator. The car began to move at a speed perhaps more to CL's liking, whizzing through a red light as Winifred barely noticed. In the backseat, CL was leaning down with his lipless mouth up against the fourteen-year-old's ear, rapidly whispering something, his thin bladed tongue snaking out from between his teeth. Winifred only caught a few words — "October 19th, 4:30 pm...the half-faced imp...the teratoma...your mother" — amid a fog that obscured everything else. She was gasping for air, embedded from her chest down in the Mariana trench, and in front of her, she seemed to see six hands holding the steering wheel, fading in and out of each other. With the bare-white angular knuckles and contorted fingers clutching the wheel tightly enough to snap it, the hands looked to her more like claws.

Winifred was still struggling for breath and CL was still whispering in Kevin's ear when she passed through another red light and a truck slammed into them.

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That morning, Kevin had woken not on the floor of some stranger's living room as an orphan, but in his bed at 7:30 am, with his phone playing the flute riff from Jethro Tull's "Locomotive Breath." His mother, so far as he knew, was still alive.

Kevin sat up in bed, switched off the alarm, and ran a hand over his face and through his hair and over his face again, pinching and massaging the bridge of his nose. He had not slept well last night, and the stirrings of a headache were threatening to bloom into a full-grown migraine in the back of his skull. His mother didn't wake him up anymore, with her earlier hours at the Factory, and in the absence of her telling him to get a move on, he would have liked to withdraw under the covers and get another three hours of sleep. Instead, he screwed his eyes shut and, with an effort like beating himself up, pulled himself out of bed and began to trudge to the bathroom.

When he was done showering and had dried himself off, he pulled on the jeans he had discarded on the floor the previous night and a dark hoodie. He looked out his bedroom window, which was just starting to become encrusted with frost, and tilted his head. Something about the light in

the sky was odd. From his vantage point, on the second floor looking toward the city, he could just see signs of urban sprawl sprouting in the distance, and even further on the horizon, the thorns of the Factory. It was a familiar sight, but the movement of the clouds above the skyline was not. The shadows and dim rising sunlight percolated and bubbled as he watched them. In a strange optical illusion, the clouds themselves bulged oddly in and out, looking to Kevin's eyes as if they were made of gray sackcloth and large creatures were squirming inside them. Kevin's skull throbbed and he winced and caressed his forehead. Perhaps there was some similar creature inside his head, writhing to escape. For a moment he half-expected as he touched his fingers to his scalp that he would feel subcutaneous fingers rising to push back.

He put on his socks and walked out onto the landing, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He was about to descend the stairs en route to the kitchen and the cupboard of cereal boxes when he paused and looked around. Something about his surroundings was different.

There were three rooms on the second floor of the Kraken apartment. There was his bedroom from which he had just emerged. Then there was his mother's room, which doubled as her office that Kevin was never allowed to enter — he had crossed the threshold only once when they first moved into the apartment, at which time he was eight, and had seen only an uncomfortable-looking bed, a window opening out onto the woods, and a desk piled with papers, with four computer monitors where he imagined his mother sitting, speed-reading information from four screens at once. An open folder on the desk displayed various photos — as Kevin neared the desk, he saw that the photos were of him, backed up against some gray wall he didn't recognize, wearing a Christmas sweater with a reindeer that he couldn't remember ever having worn. At this point, the eight-year-old had been struck with such a persistent dread that he had done what he was not supposed to, that he immediately backed out of the room, shut the door, and never told his mom for the next six years.

The addition of a bathroom and a closet brought the number of doors on the second landing to four. As Kevin looked around, his eyes passed over the obvious once or twice, the irregularity crawling through his brain in the slow manner of dreams where the idiosyncrasies, even in an apartment where Kevin had lived for almost half his life, did not fully register.

Then Kevin realized: there was a fifth door between his mother's room and the bathroom that had never been there before.

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The world was an inside-out haze. Residual effects of the previous panic attack curdled into a numb state of shock and tinnitus as Winifred lifted her head out of its folded position from under the steering wheel. She lifted a tremulous hand and dislodged some fragments of glass from her hair. She did not have to look in the mirror to know that her face was a mess of blood — she could taste it trickling into her mouth. The car was somewhere in the road bisecting the one they had just been speeding down, propelled a good twenty feet sideways by the truck and tilted on its side so that the truck and the car formed the shape of a crooked letter T.

Through the broken window that marred her peripheral vision, Winifred saw the truck door opening and the driver clambering out. Her first thought as she slowly unraveled herself from the blanket of shock, ludicrously, was the damage done to the car and whether insurance would pay for it. Could you accept insurance for car damage sustained in a high-speed escape with a kidnapped boy in the backseat? And then the last thought slammed into her with even greater force and velocity than the truck: *Kevin*.

Winifred twisted in her seat, almost passing out from the sudden wave of pain and nausea, then extricating herself from the looming unconsciousness like someone clawing to escape from quicksand. In the backseat, she dimly detected something moving, and something still. The movement clarified itself into the shape of CL, who was pulling himself off another shape underneath him, spitting blood. He fumbled around and picked up his Panama hat, restoring it to its position covering the exposed network of veins in his bald, translucent scalp. With his other hand, he reached up to remove something from his throat. The thing was a shard of glass buried up to the hilt, which became longer as he pulled it smoothly from his neck. The final length was about that of a baton by the time he tugged the last inch of blade free with a small smack of suction and a dangling string of blood still conjoining it to his wound. He tossed the shard uncaringly to the side and put his hand to the incision, only wincing slightly from the pain, and the blood which stained his fingers was neither dark nor red but had a strange luminous clarity like congealed phosphorescent water.

Winifred paid absolutely no attention to this. She was focused on the shape underneath CL, which had caused her heart to implode into a pinprick denser than a black hole. Kevin was lying eerily still, a cascade of dark blood spider-webbing out across his face from the point on his head which had collided with the window hard enough to crack both glass and skin. Between the lines of blood, his exposed skin was colorless. His entire body seemed to have shrunk, so that he now looked almost like a small child in the photo again, though still not smiling.

Winifred had seen a dead body before. She did not need to check Kevin's pulse.

TWO

February 9th, 2008.

The black car arrived in New Orleans at approximately 9 pm. It was an unusually hot night, which in Louisiana meant about as hot as during the rest of the year. The black car was the wrong kind of car to be driving in such heat and the woman driving the car, in her winter sweater, wasn't ideally dressed. But as she rolled up to her destination — a nineteenth-century husk of a building, crawling with ornate architectural flourishes and framed by the bulbous string lights strung like glowing teeth between the willow trees — Clementine Kraken felt that she had carried along the cold weather inside her.

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The aide was a young girl, about nineteen, and her mouth was fixed in a permanent chirpy smile when not in the process of interrogating Clementine — “So where ya from? Ooh, never been there, must be pretty cold! And it's your father you're visiting? Well, I'm sure he'll be very happy to see you! Do you come to visit often?” The aide, Clementine noticed, spoke in a rather thick Cajun accent, unusual for a member of the younger generation. Even Clementine had assumed a standard American dialect by the time she was the same age as this girl. She didn't like to think of her nineteenth year of life, but on visits like these, it was impossible.

She kept in her habit of answering every question monosyllabically, focusing on the paperwork in front of her. The aide seemed to sense that Clementine wasn't in a chatty mood, and dwindled into silence. When Clementine had signed everything she needed to, the aide guided her up a set of curved wooden stairs, past a series of tall stained-glass windows featuring saints and angels looking down on them. They ascended to the third floor of the building and walked down to an ebony door with the numbers 1-0-1 etched into it. The aide knocked — rather pointlessly, Clementine thought — and said “Honey? You've got a visitor.” Clementine steeled herself, and they walked through the door.

The man in the room had once been tall, but old age had bent him in half, so that he seemed deceptively small even as he sat hunched forward Nosferatu-like in his wheelchair, his hands habitually jutting forward and curling at the air. These hands were like broken umbrellas with

gray, liver-spotted skin stretched over them, the fingers hooked and muscular. They had been attached to a virtuoso pianist since the age of four and had experienced the brunt of it.

The man was eighty years old and had aged badly. His skull was draped with lank white hair that seemed to have already died in advance of the rest of him, and his face resembled not so much a face as a wrinkled tarp thrown over some misshapen cluster of nerves — the wrinkles spread out over his lipless mouth, his thin slope of a nose, and the cavernous, dark-ringed eye sockets in which his milky eyes rolled about and stared in different directions. He sat at the far end of the ill-lit room, tilted just enough that one of his eyes could stare out of the window. From his view, assuming he could see anything, he would have just been able to make out the street and Clementine's parked car through the leaves of the willow tree, which cast a dappled light over everything in the room.

“How much does he write these days?” Clementine asked.

If the girl was taken aback by Clementine's lack of emotion toward her father, she hid it well. “It's actually all he does,” she said. “He gets angry if we don't bring him more paper when he runs out. He just keeps scribbling on that notepad.” She gestured to the small table on the old man's side, where a fountain pen sat next to a notepad, which was itself barely visible under the sheaf of ink-splattered papers crammed from top to bottom with scribbles. Clementine pictured her father jotting down words without even looking at the notepad, driven by a need greater than the need to continue breathing, his left hand — not his dominant hand but the only part of his body where he retained any mobility — perpetually sore and bleeding from the exertion. “As a matter of fact,” the aide said, as if hearing her thoughts, “we have a collection of his writings right here.” She opened a drawer and pulled out a folder thick with papers, and handed it to Clementine, who briefly flipped through it. The scrawlings on the papers were indecipherable, lines swerving across the page and overlapping with each other, words and sentences blending to form some newly developed language that was more liquid than English.

“We haven't been able to make much sense of it,” the aide said with a nervous chuckle, “but it seems like they're stories of some kind.”

“It was his life's work,” Clementine said blandly. “Uncle Kraken's Compendium of Fairy Tales. He never stopped adding to it. Never got it published either. May I keep these?” Behind her, the

old man who had hitherto been immobile suddenly began squirming and snuffling, as if he had heard.

“I don’t know,” the aide said hesitantly and was about to add that Laszlo didn’t like it when his stories were taken away when Clementine fixed her with a cold green-eyed stare. In the aide’s mind, gears switched. “Sure,” she said. “If you like.”

There was an awkward pause, and then the aide said, “Well, I’ll give you two some privacy,” and left the room.

Clementine grabbed a chair and pulled it up to the old man. She sat down and crossed her legs neatly. “Hello Laszlo,” she said. The old man did not look at her, but she hoped that her deliberate refusal of the word ‘dad’ had pierced through. “Long time no see,” she said. “Don’t worry, I can assure you my visitations are not about to become a regular occasion. I came to give you some news.” She paused and then recited a sentence from memory. ““You can feel yourself,” she said, “falling down and down into the darkness of those cavernous eyes, and the dark rises around you and fills up the sky, and the fall never ends, and you begin what will become a long, long scream.””

One of Laszlo Kraken’s eyes stayed staring out the window while the other turned to look at her.

““The child is alone in the fog again,” Clementine continued. “You are no longer there. You’re trapped in a dimension of darkness, and the child will make you share all of its pain, forever.”

She smiled. “You remember that one, Laszlo? The Story of the Child in the Graveyard?” It was a rhetorical question — Laszlo Kraken had written hundreds of stories in his life, but she knew as well as he did that he remembered every single one of them. “That was the last story you ever wrote before your incident with Mom. I suppose you were probably hoping it would be the last story you ever had to write. I always wondered about the timing. Why that particular story at that particular time?”

Laszlo said nothing, predictably, and Clementine shrugged.

“In any case,” she said, “it stuck in my mind all this time, Laszlo. And I’ve been working on something over the last fourteen years. It’s a sort-of adaptation of your story. A 4D immersive

experience, if you will. And here's the best part, Laszlo, the part that I had a breakthrough with — *I can make it last forever*. Not just for a long time, not just so that it *feels* like forever. Actual, bonafide forever.”

The old man was breathing hard.

“I don't know how much of this you're understanding, Laszlo,” said Clementine. “I might be just talking to no one right now. But I suspect, and hope, that some part of you is registering this. You will, at any rate. I can bring back your brain from its current addled state, you see. I can make you young again. I think that's what you've earned, isn't it? You don't deserve to just sit here in this chair, shriveling away in your little bubble of dementia and pain while your mind smears off into nothingness. No. You really don't deserve that.”

Clementine stood up and weighed the folder of papers in her hands. “To be honest, Laszlo,” she said, “and I'm offering heartfelt criticism here, your stories kinda jumped the shark circa 1993. Maybe your post-paralysis writings have regained some of their former quality. I don't know — I'm not going to read them. No one will.”

The old man's pupil shrank to a laser point in the center of his milky eye. “See you later,” said Clementine, and walked out the room, leaving Laszlo Kraken, with his bulging eyes and frenziedly twitching fingers, behind her.

THREE

October 26, 2009.

Kevin stood staring at the door for about ten seconds and then turned around and headed for the stairs. Until he got some further clarification on whether or not he was dreaming, he was not going to investigate further. If there was one thing Kevin had internalized from a steady diet of both history and horror movies, it was that cowardice would keep him unharmed much longer than curiosity. Still, he descended the stairs slowly and sideways, crab-like, keeping the door in his periphery lest something come bursting out of it.

He was about halfway down the staircase when the second strange thing that morning, if it was morning and not just another nocturnal fantasy, happened — between one step and the next, without being able to fully explain it, he felt as if the staircase was twisting underneath him, but with his body still right-side up. The mysterious door on the landing seemed to rotate out of his peripheral vision, replaced by the light fixture on the ceiling above him, which was now to his side. By the time his foot hit the next step, he was on his way up the staircase. He stopped and looked around. The staircase was normal, and he hadn't heard any immense creaking of wood that might have accompanied its physically contorting itself, yet here he was, standing at the midpoint of the stairs with his foot on the step above him rather than the one behind him, as if the staircase itself had personally delivered him back to the second floor.

He turned around, forgetting about keeping an eye on the door, and descended the stairs two steps at a time. He reached the last step, put his foot out to touch the living room floor, and almost fell over as he found that it was not the living room floor, but the floor of the second landing.

Now, burning palm aside, he decided that he must be dreaming — he hoped it was a dream, although he realized with a dark feeling that given the lucidity of the world around him, insanity seemed more likely. If it was a dream, he wasn't even so sure anymore about the time placement — was this the night before the morning of October 26th, or was it the night of a later date? The last thing he remembered was going to bed on October 25th — but even as he thought this to himself, residual echoes came to him from the void, of somebody whispering something indecipherable in his ear, followed by a crash of screeching metal.

The door waited expectantly. Kevin looked at it, knowing full well that it was looking back at him. It wanted to be opened.

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4:10 pm. October 26, 2009.

CL was not happy. This was not in itself particularly unusual — his default state wasn't one of leaping for joy — but today and at this precise time, he was really not happy.

His neck still hurt from when the shard of glass had entered it, but for the moment, he had bigger things to worry about. When Winifred had laid her eyes on the dead kid, she had started wailing — a long, sustained, cacophonous scream that made CL want to tear some foam from the ruptured car seat underneath him and shove it in her mouth. Ignoring her for the moment and grimacing through the pain throughout his skeleton and the stars of blood bouncing around in his vision, he reached out grabbing for the door handle and elbowed the door open. He clambered out of the car, pulling Kevin behind him by the hood, unceremoniously dumped the corpse on the sidewalk, and stretched, filling his body with the cracking of bones. The onlookers who had congregated on CL's side immediately ran away screaming at the sight of his face. CL felt an impulse to cover himself up and brushed it temporarily to the side. He was now turning his attention to the boy on the street, who was lying on his back staring up at nothing, ashen-faced and with a string of blood pouring from his mouth and his hair, with a scattering of tiny pieces of glass all around him like flower petals at a funeral. Winifred opened her door and staggered out, still screaming and now also wrenching at her hair as if for additional dramatic effect.

“Are you alright?” said a voice, and CL turned to see the truck driver who had sent them careening onto the sidewalk, standing there with a concerned look on his face as he asked his bafflingly stupid question, a concerned look that now morphed into horror at seeing CL's face. It occurred to CL that the man probably assumed that he was looking at a devastating disfigurement from the crash. He produced as vicious a scowl as he could muster and the man backed away, wide-eyed and immobilized. CL allowed himself to feel a note of satisfaction that he had successfully turned whatever hint of pity had passed through the man's mind into terror.

“He’s dead, he’s dead, he’s dead,” Winifred kept saying in her shrill voice. CL turned, looked at Winifred, and for a moment marveled curiously at the intensity of the pain on her face. She was currently bent double, clawed hands reaching out as if to cradle the boy while simultaneously too contorted to touch him. For all of her annoying qualities, the woman seemed genuinely grief-stricken. It was a level of emotion that was beyond CL’s capacities.

“He’ll be fine,” CL said curtly. “Just help me move him.”

“*What do you mean, he’ll be fine?*” Winifred screamed. “*He’s dead! You killed him!*”

“I can see he’s dead,” CL said, noting the adjustment of blame in Winifred’s statement — *you killed him* — as if she had had nothing to do with the kidnapping plot up until that point. “That’s pretty unambiguous, isn’t it? I said he’ll be fine. You just have to help me move him somewhere where there’s less attention on us.”

Winifred’s look of shock and pain turned into one of mild confusion. CL looked around at the sudden sound of sirens. More onlookers had gathered at the far end of the street, standing at the opposite corner from the one where the truck and Winifred’s car had collided. CL was starting to get nervous. A crash meant paramedics and police were on their way, and if he and Winifred had been seen taking the boy, the police were probably already after them, which would expedite their arrival at the scene. Those police officers might have guns, with which they would get a little trigger-happy when they saw the skull-faced monster looking back at them.

CL, as a general rule, could not be seriously injured and would always heal quickly. But a sudden stream of bullets from an ensemble of handguns and AR-15s hitting him all at once would likely incapacitate him for just long enough that they would be able to get him into the back of an ambulance, restrained to a bed. He could probably escape with little difficulty, but it was a little too close to comfort, one inch away from being back in the custody of the State — and that thought sent shivers down CL’s desiccated vertebrae.

“Would you stop caterwauling and help me move him?” he yelled at Winifred. Behind CL, the truck driver took that moment to unpeel his feet from the road, run round to the side of his vehicle, and frantically climb back in. CL cocked his head, not turning around. He momentarily imagined the driver returning home, shaken by the experience, and years later regaling his

friends with the story of that *thing* he saw one day at the scene of the car wreck, a story his friends would relay to their friends and so on — an urban legend told by kids around the campfire, dissecting the legend of CL's appearance for delicious shivers, because long ago, one man had seen more than he had any right to see.

As the truck driver struggled to resuscitate the engine, CL spun around and strode over. He reached a long arm through the broken window and grabbed the driver by the collar and yanked him so hard that he fell with half his body out the window. "I know," CL said with a grin, "I'm not much to look at."

The driver started screaming and then screamed even louder as CL dug his teeth into the driver's neck, ripping and tearing flesh until, seconds later, the screams turned into guttural barks and finally fell silent. One or two onlookers from far away had a vantage point where they could see what was happening and they started screaming and running away, narrowly avoiding the two police cars that came around the corner at that moment. CL let go of the driver's blood-drenched collar and let him fall headfirst onto the road, not flinching at the sound of the neck snapping in half. He was limping back to the car faster now, rounding it and fumbling under the trunk for a latch. A cop had already emerged from one of the police cars and was yelling something at him, which he didn't hear as he opened the trunk.

Inside were three objects: a black briefcase and two burlap sacks, one of them empty and one of them tied at the front and containing something large, lumpy, and wriggling, with angry hissing, spitting sounds emerging from inside it. CL grabbed the latter and heaved it out of the trunk. As the cop walked down the road toward them, hand placed tentatively on his gun holster, CL strode forward past Winifred with the writhing sack and dumped it on the ground with a grunting effort and pulled something long and sharp from the deep recesses of his coat. With a slash, he undid the rope sealing the opening of the sack and stepped backward.

Something large and pale and squirming, with many mouths and no eyes, spilled out from the sack onto the tarmac.

A fraction of time passed during which the world seemed to regard the creature in the road, have it register, and briefly struggle to make sense of what they were seeing. Then the air was filled with screams. On either side of the car wreck, the crowd of onlookers ran away screaming and

the police officers immediately backed away behind their cars, unholstering their guns and yelling directives at each other. The thing on the tarmac was like a sack itself, limbness and bound in tight glistening skin the color of eggshells, and as it twisted around madly in the sunlight, it seemed to drink in the screams like a cat luxuriating in the sun, hissing and spitting with its many renewed vigor in response. Its mouths were all over its body, which twisted around too fast for anybody, had they been so inclined, to count them — they were snapping pockmarks in the flesh, each one a coaster-sized funnel of very small, sharp teeth descending in multiple concentric rows into the depths of one of its many throats. One of the mouths spat a stream of cloudy mucus into the road, where it started to give off steam. The thing might have been some wormlike being native to a deep subterranean cave, except that now, the rear end of the creature — which, lacking an anus or non-oral facial features as the creature did, might as well have been its front — raised itself off the sidewalk and bared its teeth directly at CL in a broad, devilish grin that immediately separated it from its troglodytic brethren in one respect: this grin unmistakably indicated intelligence.

But now, the grin vanished as soon as it had appeared, as if the creature had caught a whiff of CL. For his part, he simply stood staring down at it with his hands in his pockets, unmoved. His face, to the extent that CL's cadaverous features admitted facial expressions, appeared more repulsed and mildly irritated than frightened. He was still bleeding slightly from the incision in his neck, though the strange clear blood came out sluggish like tree sap.

Deep inside the creature, buried underneath pounds of boneless, glistening flesh, its brain perceived the clear blood — though how it did, with its lack of perceptive organs, is a mystery that not even Clementine Kraken could have solved — and it recoiled. A swift calculation, and then the creature turned away from CL in disgust. Elsewhere, it detected the minor spate of chaos that its arrival had created, the running and screaming of people for it to play with. Good humor restored, the creature began to rapidly squirm its way toward the source of the chaos, its many mouths folding outward and using its extended teeth to propel itself so that it traversed the road in seconds, leaving patches of glistening snail-slime where the abdomen that was its entire body had touched the ground. The police aimed and gunshots rent the air. The creature was barely affected by the bullets hitting its body, instead only seeming to grow more excited, its mouths making an orchestra of hissing and spitting that sounded more mechanical than organic. The first

cop that the creature fell upon let out a bellow of horror that turned into one of high-pitched agony as the many mouths put him through the equivalent of a living threshing machine.

Now that the State had been successfully distracted, CL returned his attention to the dead fourteen-year-old in the street. In the time he had been lying there, Kevin's hair had been subsumed by the expanding pool of blood from the dead truck driver, and the blood of the two corpses had mingled. CL briefly wondered whether this would pose a problem, then dismissed the idea. He retrieved the additional burlap sack from the trunk. "Help me put him in this," he said and tossed the sack to Winifred, who had lifted her downcast face in slight inquisitiveness when the worm thing had made its snapping, hissing way past her, but apparently did not find the sight upsetting enough for the creature to take interest in her, and had promptly returned her gaze to Kevin. She did not catch the sack and it fell over Kevin's face. CL exploded in frustration. "Sorry to interrupt your fucking reverie," he yelled, "but is it too much to ask for you to quit mourning long enough to *help me*?"

The effect of CL yelling at you, in his voice which was not a human voice, was enough to snap anybody on earth out of a trance. Winifred nodded distantly, knelt, and started lifting Kevin's body so she could pull the sack over his head. Working together, the two of them filled the sack with Kevin, and CL folded his legs inside it and tied the sack shut over his sneakers. Before they left, he returned once more to the trunk and grabbed the black briefcase. Then, they hoisted the sack up between them — "Does this kid eat cement on toast, or what," CL complained — and carried it in the opposite direction of the screams that were starting to multiply and grow louder in the distance.

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Kevin approached the door. He had an odd feeling in his toes as he did so, the same cold ache that he experienced when he imagined standing on the ledge of a tall building, as if he was developing frostbite in fast motion. In terms of appearance, the door differed from its neighbors in only one respect: the doorknob was a sharp-edged glass thing protruding from a ring of brass, a dodecahedron or some other shape beyond the easy recognizability of a cube, like something Kevin would expect to find in a much older building.

He closed his hand around the doorknob and immediately yanked it away. The surface was icy, the kind of scorching cold which erased the distinction between cold and high heat. The sensation in Kevin's palm was too sharp and clear for a dream, even as the hallway around him suddenly seemed more insubstantial than it had ten minutes ago when he had stumbled past the strange new door on his way to the bathroom. *Had the door been there then?* Kevin couldn't remember.

He pulled the sleeve of his hoodie over his hand, using it as a makeshift glove before he went to hold the doorknob again. Maybe, he thought, if the hallucination refused to let up until he had opened the door, then whatever lay on the other side of the door would be his passageway to freedom. He just hoped that, whatever form that passageway took, it wasn't something painful. He twisted the doorknob with some difficulty — there was a whining shriek of rust — and then the door was open.

Kevin looked down a staircase into darkness. The stone steps were uneven, jutting out at different angles and lengths, with no banisters. The walls and ceiling were cracked plaster, cross-hatched with scratches and dotted with little scattered traces of fading graffiti, spelling out unrecognizable squiggles and symbols. It seemed that Kevin had opened a door in his old oak-and-mahogany apartment building that led him into the bowels of a subway station. As he stared down, Kevin noticed that the narrowing of the stairway in his perspective was not just an optical illusion, but physical — the walls and the ceiling were converging, becoming so narrow that a thin boy like Kevin could only just pass through, and so low that he would have to duck his head. The dark beyond was impenetrable, so much that it hurt Kevin's eyes to look at it.

Kevin felt the stirrings of a panic attack as he realized the way that the dream had cruelly limited his options. If he went down the stairs, he thought, for all he knew he would be descending the steps forever, lost and fumbling forward in a vantablack night with no end in sight. On the other hand, if he stayed put, he could just as easily be sitting by the door forever, the dream refusing to let him leave until he ventured into the basement that shouldn't exist.

His mother had always told him that when he got lost, he should stay where he was so that somebody could find him. That, he supposed, was a rational solution that could easily translate

into his current situation. But Kevin wasn't feeling so rational right now, and his lizard brain was taking over. He was scared, and when he was scared, he wanted to move his feet.

Eventually, he dug a hand into his pocket and produced a quarter. He balanced the coin on his thumb and flipped in the air and caught it nimbly, slapping it down on his left hand with his right hand covering it. Slowly, he lifted his tremulous right hand and looked underneath. The coin said something, but in truth, Kevin had already made up his mind. The quarter existed more as a prop to support what, deep down, he felt was probably a bad decision.

“One,” Kevin said aloud, putting his hand on his chest and steadying his breath. “One. Two. Three. Five. Eight. Thirteen...” It was a technique that Clementine had taught him when he was a young child, reciting the Fibonacci sequence to ward off feelings of pain, fear, or anger. He counted out a few more digits until he felt that he was as calm as he would ever be.

Then he started down the steps.

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Harold Sigmund Spitzer was busy making himself some tea when he heard the sound of breaking glass. He switched off the kettle and wandered from the kitchen into the vestibule outside, where he saw that the stained glass panel in his front door was now lying in pieces on his doormat, and what looked like a severely disfigured hand had reached through the opening and was groping around. Harold had half-registered the idea that it might be a good idea to look around for a weapon when the hand found the doorknob and twisted, and an extremely strange duo came barreling through the door. In front was the character who had presumably broken the glass, tall and Panama-hatted with a long shabby raincoat that almost touched the floor and what appeared to be a hideous Halloween mask. Behind him was a middle-aged woman, and between them, a sack that looked suspiciously like it contained a human body. Both of the intruders were bedraggled and covered in blood, as was the sack.

Harold, lost for words, settled for “Who are you?” — a question that immediately struck him as being surreally dumb. The woman looked at him with a frantic look. “My son is dead!” she said, in a voice spasmodic with grief. “We need help, quickly!”

Harold didn't have time to wonder whether the boy was in the sack, or why they would need help if the boy was dead, or whether he should in fact go to get a weapon. He didn't have time because at the same moment that the woman begged him for help, the man in the mask dropped his end of the sack, sending it thumping unceremoniously to the floor and almost making the woman topple over with the unexpected weight. The man, not looking behind himself, charged toward Harold, and the mask contorted into a predatory sneer — *Oh my God*, Harold thought, *that's his face* — and then the man's teeth were around Harold's throat and buried an inch deep into the network of blood vessels under the skin. Harold screamed once, for half a second, and then the scream became a long, choking rasp, dwindling into the air as its progenitor sank to the floor with the skull-faced man on top of him.

The kettle sat in the kitchen, its water slowly cooling.

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Kevin descended the steps until the door he had entered from was just a thinning rectangle of light behind him and the narrowing walls hovered inches away from either side of his ribcage. Eventually, he was sunk into the darkness completely, so much so that he could not see the next step in front of him. All the same, in the idiosyncratic manner of dreams, he somehow knew where each step was before his foot made contact, as if he had walked down this staircase many times before and was operating under muscle memory. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light, and then realized that this wasn't that kind of darkness — this darkness was alive, not merely the bloodless absence of photons but a thing in itself that grew and self-replicated, pushing up against Kevin's eyeballs until they itched, as if the boy was not just walking between walls but embedded inside one.

He thought of turning around but was kept moving forward by the inexplicable yet certain suspicion that if he turned now, he would find himself walking up a greater distance than he had just walked down, up and up forever in search of the thin rectangle of light that would never appear, until he got to a point where he could oscillate on the stairway, up or down, and find himself traversing ever-greater distances, never to find an exit. Breathing hard, he reminded himself that even the most vivid hallucinations had to end somewhere (*even with death*, part of

him thought) and endlessly recited the Fibonacci sequence under his breath as he kept moving forward.

Theoretically, he couldn't help but think, if he did keep walking until he died, then his last thought would be that he was still walking with no end in sight. The next moment, he would simply stop thinking, never even noticing a transition between states. If your last thought was the looming fear that an eternity of walking downstairs awaited you — the realization of endless hours, days, years, decades stretching ahead of you, all imparted in a single moment of horror — and then your mind was expunged from existence, was that last thought equivalent to spending the eternity itself?

As the numbers in the Fibonacci sequence got larger and larger, Kevin had to spend more time mentally computing them, which did work slightly to calm him down. He had just reached the 50th digit (12,586,269,025) when the seemingly impossible happened: the darkness was broken. There was light up ahead, blurred at the edges but distinct from the solidity of the surrounding night, like traces of milk stirred into coffee. The light grew and grew, until, with a great fluttering of relief in his belly, Kevin realized he could start to see the steps in front of him. Practically sobbing, he hurled himself down the last few steps like a dehydrated man toward water, and then stopped dead.

Ahead of him, the narrow walls expanded like a funnel, not into a room but the outdoors. The ceiling and walls at a certain point seemed to have been ripped away by a gigantic hand, leaving a yawning opening like the gash in a side of a building. The walls continued for a little ways without a ceiling, dwindling in height until, on either side, they crumbled into a pile of bricks. Kevin gradually resumed descending the steps as they became less steep and finally gave way to a horizontal path.

The boy planted his sneakers on the path and walked out into a desert.

The world was a blank sand foil stretching for hundreds of miles in every direction. A bright, circular light hovered in the sky, sending blinding rays down below. The sky itself was no sky Kevin had ever seen — it was neither blue nor white but a pungent, murky yellow, the exact color and shade of a bladder infection, with sooty clouds blotting it like scabs. It was a sky like stained parchment or old skin and it swirled and clotted constantly at high speed as if agitated by

the movements of an enormous pestle. There was a tingling of electricity in the air, and the clouds gathered unpleasantly as if in confirmation of an oncoming storm. Kevin found, adding to his already intense confusion, that he did not feel hot as he should in a desert, but cold. It started as a mild chill, but with the return of his senses, it morphed into the savage, arctic bite of a bath filled with ice water. He shivered and hugged himself.

Kevin turned to his left to see a similar horizon, but this time, a few yards away, something was blocking it. It was an enormous barbed wire fence.

The fence was at least fifty feet high and impossibly wide, on either side disappearing over the dunes in the distance. Many, many horizontal rows of presumably electrified barbed wire, thick and bloody with rust, stretched like arteries between the massive concrete posts, which were set about ten feet from each other, each one leaning forward in a crooked L-shape like despondent congregants at a funeral. The fence was crowned with a bustling, corkscrewing snake of concertina wire designed to sever the fingers of even the most talented climbers. Kevin had a brief, mad vision of touching the fence and receiving an electric shock so powerful it would turn him into a cartoonish pile of black dust.

Set into the fence was a large mechanical door locked with an oxidized twist of chains, a door that was as tall as three men of Kevin's height standing on each other's shoulders. Through the gaps in the wire, Kevin noticed that the desert seemed somewhat unclear and blurry, darkening somewhat like the sun somehow couldn't penetrate the fence, as though the gaseous sky and burned land simply petered off beyond the gnarled wire.

Kevin saw that a small handful of vague figures were standing far away, near the fence, huddled together as if in conversation. No sooner had he noticed them than they seemed to see him, and began to walk toward him. As they came closer, their details became more distinct, and Kevin counted four of them, one in front and three walking close behind as an entourage.

The three in the back were mostly identical, except that the middle one was at least three feet shorter than the two book-ending it. They were thin, and willowy, and dressed in long, strangely iridescent black rags. They had long-fingered hands poking out of their black sleeves, which were clasped in front of them, each set of fingers clicking and tapping in constant motion. They had silvery skin and large, bulbous heads with strange shapes like subcutaneous spokes poking

out, their hideously deformed brains seemingly distorting the shapes of their skulls. The two on the right had long, dark hair, and the middle one was bald. But the most terrifying aspect of them were their faces — they had no eyes, mouth, noses, or ears, but instead had deep, siphon-like holes where these features should have been, as if they had been punched into their skin. The mouth-holes expanded and contracted vaguely, the air audibly sucked in and blown out.

As disturbing as the trio in the back were, however, Kevin wasn't paying too much attention to them. He was more preoccupied with the person in front, who was hobbling toward him at an alarming rate, even as she dragged one mangled foot behind her, her one eye fixed purposefully on him. He recognized the face even with the disfigurement that scarred half of it, the mouth and eyes and nostrils barely connected by the raggedy skin. He recognized the long, frizzy hair even as it tangled into a shock of long, blood-drenched whips. And though it was in tatters, he recognized the wooly sweater with the reindeer, one of the many sweaters he knew so well, had buried his face in during countless hugs, that he could recall their smell.

“Mom!” he screamed, summoning as much fear and confusion in the single syllable as he could. Clementine screamed something back at him, in a language long forgotten, and the trio behind her opened their mouth-holes in unison to let out a whispering stream of sound waves that reached across the desert and struck Kevin. He stumbled backward and fell, and then all he could see was the stormy yellow sky.

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“You didn't have to kill him!” Winifred protested as CL kicked the body to the side. “I had just asked him for help!”

“Oh really?” CL said, spinning on her. “And what help, exactly, did you imagine Fatso here could be able to offer us? Just in case you weren't complaining loud enough to distract me, you needed a helper? Or do you think his qualifications in necromancy are better than mine?” He reached down and grabbed the sack with Kevin in it.

“He's not that fat,” Winifred muttered, but CL was already dragging the sack into the living room, wheezing with the exertion. CL was only just starting to feel the impact of the crash, and every inch of him was coming alive with aches and pains. He put the sack down and angrily

kicked it in what he assumed was the boy's belly, shoving it forward with his boot. "*Don't do that!*" Winifred screamed, descending into another paroxysm of sobs behind him, and CL rolled his rheumy eyes impatiently.

Eventually, the sack was emptied and the dead boy was lying on Harold Sigmund Spitzer's rug. CL strode to a carved wooden *escritoire* nearby and swept aside the collection of small ceramic animals placed on it with his arm, sending them smashing to the floor. He dumped his briefcase on the desk and closed the curtains. "We have very little time," CL said. "They're probably putting together witnesses to track our path as we speak." He unclasped the briefcase and opened it. Inside were a number of curious objects, one of which CL immediately focused on — an elongated, menacing syringe that looked several decades old, the kind that could instill a deep dread even in those unafraid of needles. Winifred frowned as he pulled it out. "What are you doing?"

"Something that you should be able to watch without commentary," CL said brusquely.

CL then pulled up his own sleeve, exposing a scabrous, desiccated tree branch of a limb wrapped in near-translucent skin and ridged with visible veins. He produced a long, silky ribbon from the briefcase and wrapped it around his arm as a tourniquet. He selected the largest vein and inserted the needle. Wincing only slightly, he began filling the syringe with syrupy, perfectly clear blood.

Winifred watched all of this with revulsion. "You're injecting that in my *son*?"

"What was that thing we said about 'without commentary?'" CL said.

"What are the side effects of having your...your disgusting blood in him? Is he going to end up looking like *you*?"

"If he does, I'm sure you will love him just the same, him being your son and all," CL said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I hope that you're at least going to clean my son's arm before you stick that thing in," she said. "I don't want him to die again from tetanus."

“In one moment, if you don’t shut up,” CL said, his patience finally snapping, “I’m going to decide to just get what I need from your brat and then rip him limb from limb while you watch, and I can assure you, dying of tetanus will be the least of his fucking worries!”

Winifred backed away slightly, face blanched with horror. CL continued focusing on the needle.

Winifred began thinking very quickly. CL, she had long since realized, had probably never been the slightest bit interested in giving her Kevin after he had done with him, the same way she had never been interested in letting him do whatever it was he needed to do. He had never told her what exactly Kevin had that he wanted, only that he needed exactly one hour with him — for all Winifred knew, it was something that would leave the boy deeply traumatized. Maybe, she had thought, CL was some kind of creep who pursued children for his perverse thrills. And now, she took the latest threat as confirmation: as soon as CL had exhausted his use with Kevin, the boy would die again.

Winifred had spent many days planning for the moment when she no longer had any use for CL, and now that he was busy fumbling in his briefcase for some cotton wool to stem the wound, she realized that the moment was here. She had the syringe with his blood, enough to bring her boy back to life, and then they could flee together. But she had to act fast.

CL had just started carefully removing the syringe from his arm when Winifred lunged forward, grabbed the end of the tourniquet with one hand, grabbed the needle with the other, and ripped them both away with all her might. The tourniquet came off and the needle tore through skin as it emerged. CL yowled with pain and clutched his arm as clear blood immediately began to pour from the gash, not jetting like normal blood but seeping like tree-sap in fast motion. He turned on Winifred, eyes flashing with pure fury and hate, and smashed his forearm into her face. The woman went flying, landing badly on her arm and letting out a pained shriek. CL came over, clutching his arm and ready to disembowel her, but Winifred found something solid and rectangular under the sofa with a fumbling arm and threw it at him, realizing as it soared through the air that it was a TV remote. The remote hit CL in the nose and he took the blow without yelling, simply stopping and closing his eyes and opening them again as if he was struggling to compute what just happened. Then a gurgling snarl came from the deep nether regions of his stomach, filling the room with rage, and grabbed Winifred by the collar and pulled her up. She

saw his teeth approaching her neck and, calculating quickly, she did the opposite of leaning away, but surged forward and bit into CL's neck instead.

Since childhood, Winifred had cultivated very small, sharp teeth, and CL had thin skin. Her incisors punctured flesh as she bit with all her strength, and CL roared. Once more like tree sap, CL's blood tasted intensely sickly-sweet, so much so that her gag reflex went into overdrive and she almost passed out. Instead, she held on with her teeth. CL grabbed her head and pulled her away, yelling again as she pulled away bits of flesh in her mouth, and now it was Winifred's turn to scream as CL lunged for her throat and ripped away reams of muscle and sinew, gnawing down to the bone. In her mind, Winifred seemed to be sliding away from herself, down a diagonal slope into absolute blackness, as if she were toppling endlessly down a staircase into a deep, dark basement. The exact interval in which she passed from life into death was lost in the blur of shadows, and then the interval had passed and it was as if she had never been alive.

CL dropped the mangled, bloody corpse and panted, holding his arm tightly to stem the blood flow. He turned to look at Kevin, now panicking slightly — panic was not a familiar emotion to CL, and he didn't like the feeling. He knew that the police could arrive any moment and he would lack the strength from his injuries to run away. It wouldn't be long before the State had him. He also knew that he wasn't strong enough to carry Kevin away on his own and that he most likely wouldn't have the time to both wait for Kevin to come fully back to life and then do what he needed before the battering ram broke down the door.

CL felt a swelling explosion of rage and mentally counted to ten to calm himself.

He had no choice. He would have to leave Kevin and come back for him later. The first thing to do in the next few minutes, before he fled, was make him alive again.

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7:30. October 26th, 2009.

For a while, in the interplay of his dreams, Kevin was ten years old again.

That was the age that his mother had removed the nightlight from his bedroom, the same nightlight that had been with him all his life, a small thing shaped like a caterpillar that emanated

a comforting blue glow over everything. His mother had told him that it was ridiculous for a ten-year-old boy to still have a nightlight, and though the first night without it was quite a monstrous ordeal, as he lay there whimpering and sleep-deprived for hours amid a dark so dark it crushed down on him, nonetheless he had avoided complaining the next morning. Deep down, he had already been embarrassed by the nightlight for long enough that he agreed with his mother it was time to lose it. Even deeper down, years later, when the midnight anxiety was at its most intense and the line between sleep and wake was at its most unclear, part of fourteen-year-old Kevin still wished every sundown that he had the nightlight back.

But now he was ten, on the last night before the light was taken away.

He closed his eyes, and the glow of the nightlight reached through his eyelids, a vague blue gem lost somewhere in an expanse of darkness. Then, at some point, without a transition, the night-light was on the inside of his eyelids. Now, the same blue glow that lulled him to sleep every night was no longer soft or comforting, and it pulsed back and forth into nothingness, sporadically illuminating everything. He was hovering above the action, watching through the lens of an old Viewfinder as a series of disjointed and grainy images spiraled past at arrhythmic speed. A screaming mouth with no sound coming out, red blood streaking down blinding white linoleum, interspersed with bright bubbles of light and flashes of black that seared Kevin's eyes. He wanted to look away, but at the same time, he knew somehow that if he did, he would be sucked backward, away from the light, into the cavernous, freezing nothingness that waited to swallow up little ten-year-old boys like him forever.

He saw a man dancing through a corridor, growing another long, bony leg with each step until he was scuttling alongside the wall. He saw somebody's head explode, only not with gore or brains like in the movies he wasn't allowed to watch, but with a silent supernova of white sand of tinkling broken glass. He saw a skyline pulsing with green light, and he knew instantly, as a matter of fact, that he was seeing the afterglow of death. He didn't understand how he made the connection, but he did. That particular shade of green was the color of death, and everything was consumed by it.

Kevin? Can you hear me?

As he watched, he became aware that there was something behind him. Something alive, something hungry. He could feel its smile boring into him, cold fingers grazing against the back of his neck. It was every monster from every bedtime story his mother had ever told him, the one that had no shape or name and existed for the sole purpose of devouring small children. He kept his eyes fixed on the light until he thought they would be burned out of his sockets from the glare.

And then he saw his mother's face looming out of the light, half-rotted and staring up at him as her one remaining eye glazed over. He screamed and slipped away from the bubble of light, and he felt himself tumbling down the stairs, into an emptiness that deepened more than he thought possible —

KEVIN! a voice shouted, and the boy sputtered into consciousness like an old car engine revving abruptly to life. Large hands were shaking his shoulders.

For a moment, the world was a gray nebula fragmented by blinks, and as reality contracted and stitched itself together, numerous things began not making sense. His cheek was compressed not against his drool-sodden pillow, but a drool-sodden bit of rug. He was still wearing his clothes from the previous day, although the words “previous” and “day” were still quantum particles in his mind, dancing and uncertain. And the light pervading the room was not the crisp daylight of a Tuesday morning, but angry, the light of fire, which he now realized was entering through the living room window.

The voice, which he deduced belonged to the person shaking him, shouted his name again, and now he was annoyed by the repetitiveness of it. He tried to tell the voice to go away, but his lips were worms made of meat, and the sheer exertion of making vowels and consonants was too much for his head. His brain was still just the naked, newborn mass of sensitive flesh and chemicals that had not assumed its role of being a mind yet.

Kevin lifted his head, and pins and needles spidered across the pattern of the rug now imprinted in his cheek. Outside, there was the sound of something enormous burning. The rumble of fire eating away at metal and wood reverberated through the air.

No sooner had he registered all of this than he felt the magnetic pull of his exhaustion dragging him down again. He had never wanted anything as badly as he wanted to go to sleep at that moment.

And another part of him fought back, telling him that the moment he went to sleep, he would be back in that blackness. And there, the monster would eat him. But already, he felt himself slipping away, and the effort of hanging on was too much to even bother, and dark blots swam in front of his eyes as he tilted back into unconsciousness...

A hand slapped him across the face and Kevin snorted and woke up in an undignified fashion. He blinked away the groggy incomprehension from his eyes and stared up into the face of a man dressed all in black. People were all around, he realized, some in similar black suits and some dressed like paramedics. “Everything’s gonna be okay, Kevin,” the man was saying. “Everything’s gonna be okay.”

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The government agents — for now, Kevin realized this was what they were — led him to the ambulance parked outside the house. As he tottered on weak legs, Kevin had passed two body bags, one lying next to him on the rug where he had woken up, and one in the hallway by the front door, both haloed by large bloodstains. Kevin was draped in a shock blanket and still wasn’t entirely sure what was happening.

“What’s that sound?” he asked, but the question came out unintelligible. He looked to his left and saw something that made him stop moving, the sound of burning he had heard and the orange glow which now threw long shadows down the street.

Down the end of the street, framed by the lines of houses and lawns and cars on either side of Kevin that angled toward it in his perspective as if it was the center of everything, he could see the river, gleaming with traces of fire amidst the blackness. And beyond that was the Factory on the skyline, and it was on fire. The great chimneys burned with flames so hot that the sky around was tainted orange, where it wasn’t polluted by the great plume of dirty smoke spilling into the heavens.

It was a shade of sky that Kevin vaguely recognized, although he wasn’t sure where from.

This was the last thing he noticed before he toppled over, and the government agents barely saved his head from thumping against the sidewalk. At first, they thought he had fainted, but then one of them felt his skin and recoiled with a shock. For the second time that day, Kevin Kraken had died.

Unbeknownst to the agents, the sap-like blood of CL was still working its way through the boy's bloodstream. His current state of decomposition, as with the previous one, would not last very long. In the upcoming days, he would wish it had.

FOUR

2:30 pm. October 26th, 2009.

“I drew a line yesterday,” said the doctor with the goatee as they rolled the gurney down the hallway. “I just straight up said it: ‘Sarah, I am not coming to your poetry slam this week.’”

“Oh, shit,” whispered the doctor with the glasses, half in horror and half in admiration. “And how did she take it?”

“About how you would expect.”

“That bad, huh?”

“She just storms around the room, knocks everything over, gets all up in my face like, why don't you ever support me, if you can't respect my art you don't respect me, and then she starts crying, so now I feel like an asshole...”

At that moment, the gurney did a near backflip as the boy strapped to it lunged upward, snarling like a demon with his eyes rolling back in his skull. The boy was about nine, his curly brown hair matted with gore, his eyes protruding on either side of his face as they were forced apart by the bulbous, translucent membrane that took the place of his forehead, barely containing what looked like a wad of writhing black snakes inside. The boy, or the thing that looked like a boy, spun around, snapping at them with sharpened yellow teeth.

“I suppose,” grunted the doctor with the glasses, as they struggled to force the boy back in position, “that an interest in free-verse poetry could be construed as one of the red flags in dating—”

“Don't say that!” said the doctor with the goatee, whipping out a long black truncheon and using it to crunch the boy's head. The boy shriveled, and sank back against the moving gurney with a spiteful gurgle. “I genuinely want to make it work, you know? I love her. I just don't love her poetry, that's all. It's not like it's *terrible* poetry...”

“C'mon, it's free-verse”, said Dr. Glasses. “By definition, it is terrible poetry. It's fucking oxymoronic. I mean, poetry that doesn't rhyme?”

“Who says poetry has to rhyme?” said Dr. Goatee, frowning. “What are you, Mother Goose?”

“Okay, then anything is poetry! My grocery list is poetry. Look, everyone, its a poem, its deep, its beautiful, give me lots of money. Like, who cares about structure, or, like, assonance, or rhythm. Fuck that shit, I'm too deep for that...”

“Wait, what was the other one? The one beginning with A?”

“Assonance?”

Goatee snorted. “That can't be a real word.”

The boy opened his mouth and a dripping tentacle whipped out and fastened itself around Glasses wrist. Glasses batted it away and pulled a burlap sack over the boy's head and tightened it at the neck. The gurney kept rolling forward.

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The two doctors turned the corner and pushed the gurney through a door, into a dark room filled with the glittering eyes of computers.

“Helen's not here,” said Glasses, looking around in confusion.

“Probably getting her eightieth bag of Cheetos,” said Goatee. “As I was saying, I already made the mistake of going to her kid's talent show. I mean, rap was already a dying art, but little Tommy Schultz drove a fucking stake through it—”

“Hey, shut up for a second,” said Glasses, staring at the computer. “Look at this.”

Goatee went around to look in the direction of Glasses gaze, toward the symbol pulsing on the screen. Behind them, the little boy squirmed.

“Where the hell did that thing come from?” said Goatee.

Glasses leaned forward and tapped some keys. “It's not going away,” he said.

“Is it a virus or something?”

“Maybe. But its got our logo on it.” Glasses kept tapping. “Everything's frozen.”

“Maybe this is what happens when you look at porn at work here,” Goatee chuckled. Glasses did not laugh, and Goatee didn't really find it so funny himself.

Goatee looked around, while Glasses hammered the mouse with his fist, and threw it against the wall.

“They're all like that,” said Goatee. “Every one of them.”

Glasses looked around. It was true — each computer screen held the same crimson symbol at its center, a grinning skull pulsating like a strange, angry eye.

Glasses scuttled around, clicking frantically at all of them.

“Dammit!” he said.

The symbols flashed in unison, and underneath the twitching symbol, a line of numbers began to scroll past repeatedly.

“8, 1, 7...5...what?” Glasses said. Goatee was already scrambling through his mental repository of the codes they'd made him learn during his first week.

Then, through the confusion, a blissful ray of sunlight — the sweet realization that in times of fear, one could always simply call an expert.

“I'm texting Marv,” said Goatee, whipping out his phone. But just as his index finger approached the screen, a message appeared with a heart-attack *boop*.

GET OUT

Goatee saw the sender ID, and his gut twisted. Marv, wherever he was, seemed to have heard his name invoked.

Then, with a second *boop* that in his nervous state made him almost drop the phone:

NOQ

Goatee frowned. “Noq? he said. What the hell is—”

“I think he meant to write Now,” said Glasses.

Nearby, the boy made another rasping, guttural noise under his sack, like a bone dragging against a jagged stone xylophone. To Goatee, it sounded almost like a chuckle.

Then a drop of blood hit the screen of Goatee's phone.

The Q in the text message disappeared, replaced by a black blot that shivered against the sleek, luminous surface. Goatee shrieked and dropped the phone, which clattered on the floor, and an insane part of his brain instantly worried about whether he had cracked the screen. They both looked up.

A hundred crimson reflections gleamed as something black, something wet, slid across the ceiling — something that, as they saw it, changed its position with a serpentine twist and, scattering droplets of dark red slime, lashed a tendril across the room. The door of the office slammed shut, and the scientists were thrown into blackness, with only the glow of twelve glaring red skulls like an audience of demonic spectators, each hungry for blood, their crimson eyes growing in wattage until the office was suffused with a jack-o-lantern glow.

On the other side of the building, in the East Wing, the thing on the ceiling that had been waiting for them to look up now descended into the light, and the almost-smile contorted across its fractured, scaly face — a face they now saw bore a single, glimmering cat-shaped piercing in its left nostril.

“Simon?” said Glasses.

The creature's midsection snapped open like a book to reveal an expansive white belly, psoriatic with poisonous sores and covered with foot-long silver hairs which had folded in like a cocoon and were currently gripping what looked like a strangled, skinless fetus, trapped in a hideous repose of death like a contortionist in a casket.

There was a painfully loud slurping sound that rattled throughout Goatee and Glasses' bodies, like a kid sucking the last remnants of milkshake through a straw, and the dark shape in the cocoon came loose and dropped down, and the scientists both fell backward as it splattered on the floor in front of them. The face — or what was left of it — fell toward them. The body mass had been shrunk down to a skeletal crisp, but even without that, even without seeing the familiar purple-striped T-shirt or the Cheeto-stained fingers, they both knew exactly who it was.

Then the thing came down, and the ugly white belly flapped outward like a tarp. The last thing Goatee thought of before it slammed down over everything was a dim, ridiculous memory of him giggling in his bed, age five, as his mother swooped the blanket into the air so it fell on top of him.

Then he was lying spread-eagled on the floor, unable to see, unable to breathe. The thing's abdomen was pressing against his face, sealing his nostrils, clamping his lips shut, forcing his eyes shut. The smell was indescribable, but worse still was the texture — flaccid, coated with some hideous wetness, a combination of sweat, snail slime, and something like burning motor oil that seared his skin as it came in contact with him. It was impossible to move against the smothering, rippling blanket. He could feel his friend with the glasses crushed against him, dying the same way as him.

The scientist had never been good at holding his breath. It wasn't long before his lungs started protesting, then imploring for air. And then the acid burned and he let out a muffled scream as the thing began to digest him.

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After a while, the thing that had once been Simon began to peel itself off the floor again. It lifted itself into the darkness like a curtain, flaps folding shut over its prey.

The door sprung open.

A figure hobbled out.

The boy tore the bloody burlap sack off his head, revealing a lecherous grin. Then, tentacles sprouting from his skull like there was no tomorrow, the boy howled like a wolf, ripped off his clothes, and scuttled naked down the hallway, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

By the time he turned the corner, he wasn't even recognizable as a boy anymore.

FIVE

October 27th, 2009.

He was looking into a kaleidoscope of bleary white and blue stars, pulsing out at him and hitting him in the head. Every inch of his body was teeming with pins and needles.

Stay with me, Kevin, said a voice.

This must be what it feels like to be born, Kevin thought, dimly remembering a documentary from his fourth-grade sex-ed class showing how babies were extracted from the womb, when they were in the —

He was in a hospital.

The frenzy of light above him coalesced into a pockmarked white ceiling streaking past at breakneck speed, sporadically interrupted by a fluorescent strip blazing at him like the sun. And now a hundred shadowy masked faces congregated around him, yelling at each other, and the reason he couldn't feel any part of his body below his neck was that he was currently careening down a corridor onboard some contraption that these shadowy figures had strapped to him. His peripheral vision was in shambles, so he tried to move his eyes to the left, and a rainbow of agony lit up the inside of his skull with such intensity that he moaned aloud.

Somebody shoved a plastic thing over his mouth and nose, and suddenly the insides of his lungs were frosting over with some cold soporific chemical. *No,* said Kevin in his head, trying to squirm. *No. Please.*

Already he could feel himself returning to the dark.

What's going on? he tried to scream. *Where's my mom? Where's my—*

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Over the next two hours, Kevin was funneled down one hospital corridor after another in his rolling bed, passing by scores of scampering shadows exchanging shouted directives and patients in various states of injury and disfigurement. One man who looked about sixty stood out to him,

wailing and clutching his face, which appeared to have lost a section of skin and was still giving off wispy trails of smoke.

Eventually, Kevin's captors shuttled him into a room in which he would spend the next five hours. Murals of demented cartoon animals adorned the walls. Along with the abrupt awakening in an unknown house and the horrifying images rattling around in his brain, Kevin now suspected that these decorations were just the latest stage in the universe's concerted effort to drive him insane.

He shared the animal room with a group of other children whose parents had disappeared in whatever cataclysm had torn the city apart. As the hours slithered by, Kevin studied and mentally categorized his fellow juvenile prisoners, all dressed in identical surgical gowns. Of the younger children, who ranged from about three to six, some played blithely with the provided toys while others seemed to sense that something was wrong and couldn't stop crying or asking to see their parents. The older kids, who ranged from about eight to Kevin's age, mainly kept to themselves, standing around in the corners and resting their heads against the walls, only occasionally making furtive eye contact before looking away again.

Kevin took note of one girl in particular. She looked about his age, a little taller and thinner than him, and had a large bandage on her shoulder. She spent most of her time crouching in the corner, watching footage on the articulating screen of a little black camcorder she held, with large black headphones plugged in that she wore on her platinum-blond head. Her large dark eyes, like every other pair of eyes in the room, were ringed with red. But these eyes did not flit around the room, instead attaching themselves firmly to the camcorder screen with an intensity that reminded Kevin of when his mother used to bring her notes to the dinner table. She would read the notes as she ate, not noticing her son sitting across from her.

Over the hours, Kevin drifted across the room like a hesitant iceberg. Eventually, he stood near enough to the girl that he could make the final shift forward to stand in front of her, prompting her to look up from the screen at him and remove her headphones.

"Hi," he said in a voice that surprised him with its raspiness. He coughed. "I'm Kevin."

"I'm Saskia," the girl responded, hitting the sibilant tones hard.

“That’s a cool name,” he said. “What are you looking at on the screen?”

The girl pulled the camcorder close to her chest to shield it. “Just a documentary I’m making,” she said. “I’m a documentarian.”

Kevin didn’t know what to say in response to that, so he just said, “Oh.”

“I was near Niflheim when it exploded,” said Saskia. “I tried to film as much as I could, but the camera’s broken, so nothing was clear. Just a lot of fire and smoke. I’m looking for something usable, to show what happened.”

“To show what happened?” Kevin repeated, realizing with mild interest that she used the correct term — *Niflheim* — for the Factory, the name he had only ever heard from his mom and the men in suits who had been quizzing him, but never from somebody his age. “You mean the attack?”

She shook her head. “There was no attack. Something broke out.”

Kevin squatted to meet the girl at eye level. “Something broke out?” he said, lowering his voice to a whisper.

“I saw it running,” she said, so quietly that, even inches away, he had to strain to hear her. “I tried to point the camera at it, but it moved too fast. There must be something on here — anything.” The last comment wasn’t even directed at him, but instead at the camera, her voice quivering with frustration.

“What did you see moving?” said Kevin, whispering.

Saskia opened her mouth to say something else, but before she could, the door opened. A man walked into a room, ushered in by a person of unidentifiable gender in a hazmat suit, one of many whom Kevin had seen patrolling the hospital hallways. The man was tall and in his early forties with a scalp of thinning hair and large, twitchy eyebrows. He was wearing a crisp suit of an unpleasant shade, and Kevin could tell that he regretted having worn it to a hospital in the middle of a cataclysm — his body was tense as he appeared ready to dodge spurts of blood or vomit from any direction. The man approached Kevin, who realized that he had met the man before.

“Hello Kevin,” said the man in a voice as thin as his hair. He cleared his throat and one of his eyebrows twitched. “My name is Damian Ridley. I was your mother’s attorney.”

Kevin stood up straight. “I know.”

“Oh, good,” said Ridley. “That saves us the introductions.” He let out a nervous laugh that came out mostly as a burst of exhalation.

“What do you mean, you *were* my mom’s lawyer?” said Kevin. Ridley immediately stopped smiling, twisted his hands awkwardly, and studied the floor.

“Kevin, I’m sorry to tell you that your mother is dead,” he said eventually. “She was killed in a terrorist attack that also took the lives of all of her colleagues and destroyed Niflheim.”

Ridley may as well have told him that his mother had turned into a unicorn and galloped away. Kevin stared at him in total befuddlement and involuntarily grinned. “What?” he said.

Ridley rose his eyebrows at the reaction. “She’s dead,” he said. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Kevin?”

Reality tightened its grip on Kevin’s windpipe and pulled the smile from his face like a leaden weight. He nodded.

“So sorry for your loss,” said Ridley. “So, so sorry. Sorry, I’m not good at this.” He paused, as if expecting Kevin to offer words of encouragement. Kevin said nothing.

“That’s a nice mural,” said Ridley, pointing to a hideous grinning chipmunk who dominated half the adjacent wall and who appeared to be infected with a strain of carefree insanity. It looked like it was trying to eat the room with its bulging eyes.

He looked around and cleared his throat again, followed by a second eyebrow twitch. Kevin sensed that this was a nervous tic. “If you will follow me, Kevin,” he said, “we have much to discuss, in private.”

Kevin looked back at Saskia, meeting her gaze momentarily before her eyes darted away as if Kevin had just caught her staring. Later, it occurred to him that he should have asked to exchange phone numbers so they could resume the conversation, but at the time he just blinked

and said in a resigned tone, “Okay.” He followed the twitching, throat-clearing lawyer out of the room with the animals, looking back only once at the wide-eyed girl just in time to see her focus returning to whatever was playing on the camcorder screen.

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The hazmat-clad entity escorted Damian and Kevin to a private room and left them. Damian sat down, smoothed out his pants, and drummed a rhythm on his thighs. Kevin sat down across from the lawyer and braced for the predictable throat-clearing and eyebrow-twitching, wincing when it happened. He could already tell that he was going to find this very annoying.

Again, the throat-clearing, again the eyebrow-twitch. “Well, I’ll get right to it, Kevin,” said Damian, and Kevin dimly remembered that this was a pet hatred of his mother’s — in his mind, he heard her voice ranting, *If you feel the need to preface a statement saying you’ll get right to it, then you’re not getting right to it, are you? You’re stopping along the way to announce that you’re going to get right to it.*

“As your mother’s lawyer,” Damian said, “she confided in me on multiple occasions that in the event that anything happened to her, lacking any immediate family members, she would prefer for me to become your guardian. All of the documents and boring legal stuff to make it official will wait a little while, but suffice to say, henceforth you’ll be living with me. And we’ll also be leaving the city, Kevin. This is no longer a safe place to be. The immediate 100-mile perimeter outside Niflheim is in the process of being sealed off, but we already know that certain...contaminants have made it into the outer city, and there will likely be many more. So we’re going to live in Wackorimm. My family and I have a house there, and you’re coming to live with us. Are you following, Kevin?”

“If the 100-mile perimeter is going to be sealed off,” said Kevin, “and we’re within a hundred miles of the Factory right now, then how are we going to get out?”

The lawyer cleared his throat and twitched his eyebrow, and the blue-ringed pupil beneath the eyebrow zigzagged briefly to the door as if worried about somebody listening in. “The authorities know who your mother was, Kevin,” he said, almost whispering. “Certain alternative

arrangements have been made. Which brings me to my second point: we have to leave immediately. We can't waste any time."

Kevin was bemused. "Can't I go back home to pack some things?"

"That you may do," said Damian, "as we'll be passing by, but we can't stay for long. You'll have to pack only the bare essentials — a backpack full of clothes, toiletries, anything of sentimental value so long as it's small enough to carry in your hands. As if you were only leaving for the next two weeks. Anything beyond that, we'll buy once we're out of the city."

"And we're never coming back?" said Kevin, aghast.

"Maybe. Probably not for a long time, until we can figure out exactly what's going on..."

"What is going on? Nobody will fucking tell me!"

"No need for the foul language, Kevin. There was an attack on Niflheim, I'm sure you were told."

"What kind of attack?" Kevin said. "And what do you mean 'contaminants'? That girl in the room, Saskia, she said that something broke out of the Factory..."

"I'm sure a lot of specious rumors and fantastic thinking is going around," Damian interrupted with a look of agitation on his face, "but until the people in charge have relayed more information, we cannot possibly say that we know more than they do. The one thing that we do know is that we need to get out tonight."

Kevin remembered the room with animals on the walls, the crowd of crying children and the squatting girl with her intense stare and camcorder. "What about the people who don't have alternative arrangements?" he said. "Anyone whose mom wasn't important?"

Damian hesitated. "Well," he said, "they will be staying here. I'm sure the authorities have everything under control." He stood up. "Now, do you have any further questions, because we really need to get going."

Kevin thought, and an image bobbed up from some dark vault in his memory. It was an image of his mother's face, but with something terribly wrong with it, as if one half was pristine and the

other rotted away. The image had a vague sense of familiarity attached to it, as if it was something he had encountered recently, though he couldn't remember from where. He shivered. "What about my mom?" he said. "Where is she?"

Damian looked confused for a moment, and then a flicker of understanding passed over his face. His eyebrow twitched and he cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "unfortunately, your mother's body hasn't been recovered yet. There are many bodies which are buried under the rubble of the Factory. But nobody could have survived, Kevin." After a moment's thought, he added, "We can always have a funeral, if you would like, Kevin, once we get to Wackorimm." Damian bounced on his heels as if he needed to use the bathroom. "And I'm afraid that's all the conversation we have time for, Kevin. We need to leave now."

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From one of the rooftops, CL scaled a drainpipe silently and crept down the alleyway.

He made a strange and sinuous shape flitting through alleyways and behind walls, twitching from one end of the street to the other, and his coat swirled around him. He finally stopped at a damp brick wall overwhelmed with ivy and mold, and he paused to listen to the city. Horns and screams filled the air like mating calls, and running footsteps bludgeoned the sidewalks.

CL took off his hat for a moment, exposing his hairless scalp, and he looked up at the sky. From within deep pit-like eye sockets, rheumy eyes glared out at the world. Those eyes were the only thing preventing him from being mistaken for something long-dead and mummified. They burned with a severity that cut through the light pollution.

Not enough humans spent time looking at the sky, CL thought. And when they did, they had the entirely wrong biological reaction to it. People gazed up pleasantly into the emptiness above, smiling at the pretty stars, those many eyes in the dark burning without warmth and consuming without intelligence. Those stargazers never bothered to think about how little those stars cared for them, how the violent termination of all human existence would not faze those stars in the slightest. They never considered the gossamer-flimsiness of the boundary separating their lives from that infinite darkness — the boundary that, with one tweak, could send them hurtling into eternity or bring it crashing down on them, engulfing them forever, billions of screams

smothered in a nanosecond with silence. A truly rational human would feel not entrancement looking at those stars, but terror.

CL felt neither reaction, but as he looked up, his papery gray lips did pull back from his teeth in an almost-smile. He was not exactly human and he could meet the stare of that merciless sky. To him, that emptiness looked like home.

He put his hat back on and tore down the alley. Despite his old age, he moved alarmingly quickly, scampering over blockades, strewn planks and rope and hidden potholes with rat-like agility. Eventually, he stopped. He was peeking around the edge of an alleyway, and looking at a hospital.

For the first time in awhile, CL felt something. His insides curled with revulsion.

He did not like hospitals. He couldn't entirely explain why, but the thought of stepping inside a hospital ward was one of very few things that was almost unbearable for him. Perhaps it was the long history of unpleasant experiences he'd had in hospitals, or else he just missed the good old days when all humans could do for a bad infection was sit in fear for one long night punctuated with the vomiting of blood and ending with a sunrise they were too dead to enjoy.

He backed away into the shadows. He knew he couldn't go in there. Instead, he would wait. If there was one thing he was very good at, it was waiting.

////

That night as the inhabitants of the city struggled to resume sleep under the burning orange sky and with the sound of smashing glass and crumbling rubble still reverberating in the distance, the hospitals became tiny concentrations of activity. Each morgue filled up. Outside the hospital where Kevin Kraken was in the process of learning how his life was about to change, a refrigerator truck had parked for the purpose of accommodating the bodies that couldn't fit in the building. Within a short time, the refrigerator truck was half-full, masked hospital workers piling up body bags in the dim fluorescent lighting.

Inside one of the body bags, Winifred stirred.

She had been awake for a little while and was gradually regaining her ability to feel and move her extremities, gaining her bearings inside the bag that somebody had placed her in. As her sensations returned, her naked flesh felt the cold of the refrigerator truck. Compared to the cold she had just left behind, it seemed to her that her environment was warming.

She rolled her tongue along her teeth and tasted the unpleasant sickly-sweetness of the remnants of CL's blood in her mouth.

It would be a few hours, she estimated, before the gash in her neck had fully healed. She could feel the bone and flesh knitting itself together. She wasn't sure how she would get out of the truck once her capacity for movement had fully returned but was content to play dead until she figured it out. She sensed human beings milling about outside of the bag, making hushed conversation. Perhaps she would incapacitate one and help herself to their clothes.

And then, once she had managed that, Kevin was waiting for her. She knew that by now, the Powers-That-Be, the nebulous cabal with whom she associated the figurehead of Clementine Kraken, would have Kevin in their possession. And wherever they took him, she would follow. Such was a mother's love for her son.

Part 2:

DISLOCATION

dis·lo·cate / dis'lōkāt; 'dislō,kāt/

- v. [tr.] disturb the normal arrangement or position of (something, typically a joint in the body): *he dislocated his shoulder in training.*

! (often **be dislocated**) disturb the organization of; disrupt: *trade was dislocated by a famine.* ! (often **be dislocated**) move from its proper place or position: *the symbol is dislocated from its political context.*

— “Dislocate,” Encylopedia.com

SIX

A faraway planet in the distant future

The lights flashed on in a bedroom and a woman clapped her hands. “Up,” she said, smacking the sleeping form on the bed in front of her. “Rise and shine! We have to go to the laboratory now!”

A groan emanated from somewhere in the cocoon of blankets. “What time is it?” muttered the girl as she emerged.

“It’s 3AM. Come on, onward and upward.”

The girl turned over in bed with a disdainful growl and snort. The woman — whom the girl knew as Aunt Clementine — kicked her hard in the ribs, and the girl yelped with pain. “Alright, fine,” the niece spat, throwing the sheets off herself. “Jesus. Where are we going?”

“I have something very impressive to show you,” said Aunt Clementine, her face breaking into a smile of excitement like that of a child on Christmas morning. “I think you’re going to love it.”

The girl gave the woman a withering look. “This couldn’t wait until, like, a reasonable hour?”

“I’ve already waited your entire life.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll soon find out.”

////

Ten minutes later, the niece stood on the walkway. She had never stood here at such an early hour, and had not anticipated how cold it would be — the sonic bubble all around them kept her insides from freezing but could not totally protect her from the icy breath of outer space. The niece jammed her hands in her pockets and shivered.

Aunt Clementine appeared from behind her. “Don’t you love being out and about in the early morning!” she said, and she inhaled through her nose. “The air is so much crisper.”

“It’s manufactured oxygen,” the girl muttered. “It’s the same year-round.”

“Oh, humor me, why don’t you?”

The girl said nothing.

“Alright then, Little Miss Cranky,” Aunt Clementine pouted. “Wait ‘til you see what I’ve got to show you.” She took off down the walkway.

“Look, you know I don’t care about this stuff, right?” said the girl, dragging her feet as she followed.

Aunt Clementine turned around and stared her down, not smiling for the first time, and for a moment her face was made of wax. It was enough to make the girl step back a little.

Then the grin reappeared. “Of course you don’t, my dear girl,” she said. “You cynical youngsters. I tell you, when I was your age — how old are you now, five? Six?”

“Funny,” the girl deadpanned.

“Round about that age, I’m guessing. Anyway, I would have killed for some of the stuff we had here...”

////

The laboratory was a section of the complex that the girl had only entered once before, and only for a few minutes. Then, the room had been buzzing with activity, an electronic orchestra of machinery whirring as people in white coats zipped back and forth. Aunt Clementine was right — it was a room that many of her peers would have killed to spend just a moment inside, and yet the girl had remained unimpressed by it. Even without Aunt Clementine reminding her again and again what a great opportunity this was for a young lady like her, the conspiracy was transparent. This was why her parents had sent her to stay here. But the girl had no interest in her family’s work. Not that she had a moral problem with it — she just knew she would never be following in Aunt Clementine’s footsteps.

Now, the laboratory was empty. Aunt Clementine kept walking without pause.

“Well, we’re here,” said the girl. “What did you want me to see?”

Aunt Clementine put a finger to her lips. They were right up against a wall when Aunt Clementine reached out, still looking at the girl, and her hand disappeared behind part of the wall. The girl blinked. Until this moment, the handhold had been invisible, blending seamlessly into the rest of the smooth wall, but now Aunt Clementine's hand was clamping down on something and yanking down.

The wall opened, and a thin rectangle of darkness was revealed. "Follow me," Aunt Clementine said, disappearing into the doorway. The girl obeyed, only pausing to stare at the lever Aunt Clementine had pulled. It was one hell of an optical illusion — she couldn't believe she had missed it before, but now she couldn't unsee it.

Beyond the doorway, everything was shrouded in black. She could just see the back of Aunt Clementine's labcoat bobbing in the darkness ahead, and was momentarily panicked that if she lost sight of it, she would be lost forever in the shadows. She sped up. After only a few feet, Aunt Clementine stopped again, and opened a door.

They entered a small room. Unlike the rest of the complex, this room had cobblestone walls, and was lit only by a single lightbulb straggling from the ceiling. The girl turned in a circle, staring. It had been so long since she had seen walls made of anything other than sleek silver chrome, and the effect was disorienting.

In the center of the room was a small desk with a smooth onyx surface. Aunt Clementine stooped behind it and picked up an enormous cardboard box, straining with the weight and dumping it on the desk. An icy hand curled around the girl's gut and twisted hard.

"Curious yet?" Aunt Clementine said.

The girl shook her head, determined to keep up her bored appearance. And yet, something about the box was compelling, pulling her in. And at the same time, she wanted to back away. she ended up not moving, and Aunt Clementine had to grab her arm and drag her closer. The girl noticed that the top of the box had been partially cut open, and out of the gap poked a small metal cylinder, the end of which was a concave glass lens. It looked like the eyepiece of a microscope.

"What's your opinion of what we do here?" Aunt Clementine asked abruptly.

“It’s pretty cool,” the girl said. “I haven’t changed my mind though....”

“I’m aware of that,” said Aunt Clementine, batting the thought away with an annoyed look on her face. “I mean your moral opinion. You got any strong moral feelings about what we do? On either side?” The green eyes bored into the girl’s.

“I dunno,” the girl said. “I don’t really think about it.”

“No opinion?” said Aunt Clementine, sounding almost disappointed. “The most important ethical conversation of the 31st century, and your take on the matter is ‘I dunno’?”

Well, don’t flatter yourself, the girl thought to herself. Something she had noticed during her stay was that Aunt Clementine seemed to take an unhealthy delight in stoking controversy.

“You read me like a book,” said Aunt Clementine, and the girl jumped, for a moment thinking Aunt Clementine had read her thoughts. Aunt Clementine just smirked and waved a hand dismissively.

“I know you don’t want to follow me into this business,” said Aunt Clementine. “And that fills me with sadness. But I’ve accepted it. And I want you to know, I will support you whatever your dreams may be.” Aunt Clementine said all of this without smiling, staring intently at the girl. “What are your dreams, honey? If not a job in the company, what do you want to do?”

“Don’t know,” the girl admitted.

“No aspirations of any kind?”

“Not really.”

“So you’re just apathetic, then?”

“Whatever that means.”

“Well, I think you just proved my point.”

“What point?”

Aunt Clementine swiveled the box, and now the eyepiece was facing the girl. "Take a look," Aunt Clementine said.

The girl carefully examined Aunt Clementine, starting to feel slightly worried. Beads of sweat were dripping down the woman's forehead.

"Go on, don't be shy, look!" Aunt Clementine snapped.

The girl swallowed and lowered her eye to the eyepiece.

For a long moment, all she saw was darkness. "What am I supposed to be seeing?" she muttered.

And then an eye appeared, staring back at her.

The girl yelped and recoiled from the box. The woman laughed. "Don't be such a wimp," she said. "Actually look at it. It can't possibly hurt you."

The girl hesitantly crept back to the box and leaned in for another look.

The eye floated in a pool of darkness, blinking rapidly. At first, the girl had taken it for a human eye, but now she recognized that it couldn't be. The pupil was a vertical slit, dilated in the center of a lime-green sclera speckled with golden veins. The eyelids looked purple and infected, and blinked sideways. The eye was bright with emotion, but what emotion the girl couldn't tell.

"It's a new species of nithlidyte," Aunt Clementine carried on behind her, the grin audible in her voice. "Was found recently in the recent excavation of the planet's colder regions. We thought we had reaped every species from that tiny little world, but lo and behold, they found a way to surprise us. Keep watching."

As the girl stared through the eye-piece, the veins suddenly enlarged and one of them exploded, filling the cornea with golden blood. There was one final frenzied blink, and then the eye fell still and sank back into the darkness. "It just died," the girl said incredulously.

"Keep watching," Aunt Clementine said.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the eye reappeared, bright green and blinking.

"Holy crap," the girl breathed. "It died and then came back to life."

“Not quite,” said Aunt Clementine. “It died, and then gave birth to a new one.”

“What?” said the girl, lifting her eye.

“It lives its life in the amphibious larval stage,” said Aunt Clementine. “Rather like a tadpole, except it never grows up. Its entire lifespan is only ten seconds long. Then the brain fitszes and it dies in agony, but in the process, it reproduces asexually by releasing spores, and the luckiest spore goes through a gestation period lasting only a nanosecond, in defiance of every known law of biology, before turning into a new creature, and the whole pointless cycle repeats itself.” Aunt Clementine shook her head in admiration. “It’s unlike anything we’ve ever seen throughout the universe.”

“So — what’s the point, then?” the girl said.

“What?”

“How are you going to profit from this? What can you do with an organism that only lives ten seconds?”

Aunt Clementine’s smile increased. “That’s what I really wanted to show you. What if I told you that for just under the creature’s lifespan, you could inhabit their body?”

The girl said nothing. “Would you like to find out what that’s like?” the woman whispered.

“Do I have a choice?” the girl said.

Aunt Clementine grinned. “I think you should try it.”

The girl swallowed. She sat down on the desk and held out her arm, rolling up the sleeve of her hoodie. In a flash, Aunt Clementine slid the needle painlessly into the crook of her elbow, burying it up to the fat base in flesh. On the rim of the base, a tiny light clicked on. The woman lifted up a small remote with a single button. “Brace yourself, kid,” said Aunt Clementine, and just as the girl was opening her mouth to voice her second thoughts, her aunt’s thumb came down on the button, and...

Fear. A chaos of thought-that-is-barely-thought, swirling around in a wordless current of darkness, above it all fear, pure, unadulterated fear, seeping into every corner of consciousness,

mingling with the pain, married to it, the pain of a brain about to explode with panic, the agony of arteries swelling, the pain of miniature organs exploding, a mind empty of language or time or space or anything but fear, looking up through a tunnel of blackness into a monochromatic twisted world at the alien eye staring down, no longer able to breathe, vision blurring, head ringing...

Then it ended, and the girl screamed, over and over again, barely able to catch her breath. she was dimly aware of her aunt's arms coming around her, and a hand patting her on the back. "Don't ever — *ever* — do that to me again," the girl sobbed, tears streaming down her face.

"Alright, then," purred her aunt. "Really would have thought you had it in you."

"WELL, I DIDN'T!" the girl yelled. She wiped her nose on her sleeve, and went to rip the needle out of her arm.

"Ah-ah-ah, I wouldn't do that," said Aunt Clementine. "The spines are still in — you'll rip open your arm if you pull it out. It needs to be extracted carefully, by a professional."

"THEN PULL IT OUT!"

"In a moment," said her aunt, holding up a chastising finger. The girl frowned, and looked back and forth between her aunt and the needle. "It is pretty nifty technology, huh?" said her aunt, admiring the remote in her hand. "You live your whole life trapped in your own mind, but a new dawn of technology is coming. Now, we can see what it's like viewing the world from the mind of another. In the minds of *creatures*. Not a pleasant experience, I grant you, but there's an incredible market for those who are into that sort of thing. And those who are simply too curious not to try it."

"Yeah, great, pull the freaking needle out," the girl said.

"Why so impatient?" Aunt Clementine said, leaning in close to look in the girl's eyes. "Oh, I see. You're afraid. You're scared that as long as that needle is stuck in your arm, there's a chance I could press this little button again."

The girl stared at her. Clementine turned away from her, studying the remote with a wistful expression on her face.

“You know how long you were in there for?” Aunt Clementine mused. “Nine seconds and a *decisecond*. That’s a tenth of a second, if you know your Latin. Hey, can you imagine what would have happened if my thumb had slipped? Doesn’t bear thinking about. Then again...”

The woman turned the remote over and over in her hand, continuing in the same bland tone as if the girl wasn’t there. “There’s nothing stopping me from doing it again. Hey, this time we could aim for nine seconds and *two* deciseconds. Or nine seconds and nine deciseconds. Plus fifty milliseconds. That’s a twentieth of a second, by the way. Want to live on the wild side? Just a little tap is all it takes...”

The girl ripped the needle out her arm, shoved her aunt down and ran to the door.

And she stopped abruptly.

She stared at the door, her sweaty brow furrowing in confusion. Her hand groped frantically at the doorknob, and slipped away every time. She spun around and faced her aunt.

“How come I can’t open the door?” she said.

“Simple,” Aunt Clementine said. “Because you can’t remember how.”

“What?”

“One would have thought that the concept of opening a door is fairly simple to *grasp* —” The woman reached behind the girl, grabbed the doorknob and opened the door a crack, then slammed it shut again. “But apparently, even muscle memory can’t save you.”

“What are you talking about?” the girl cried, tears starting to flow again. She turned around and desperately tried to open the door, but her hands were like flopping, useless fish.

“On the walkway, I asked you how old you were,” her aunt said behind her. “Five? Six? You never did answer me.”

The girl stopped and stood very still. “Well?” said her aunt.

“I - I...” It didn’t make any sense, but there was no stopping the words that came out of her mouth. “I don’t know.”

“I think you’re probably six. Or maybe sixteen. Or twenty-five. Hell, maybe you’re thirty-seven. I guess anything is possible.”

“I don’t understand,” the girl sobbed, rooting through her mind for memories of a recent birthday party, a cake with candles, the issuing of a driver’s license. But nothing emerged.

“I think you might understand a little better if you look down at your arm,” said her aunt calmly.

The girl did. The wound in the crook of her elbow was gushing blood — bright golden blood.

“Oh, wait, I know,” said her aunt, clicking her fingers. “I know exactly how old you are. *One millisecond.*”

The girl shook her head, and clamped her hands over her ears. “No.”

“No? Then how about an easier question. What’s your name?”

“No!”

“How did we get from the walkway to the lab? What do your parents look like? What do *you* look like? What’s 2 + 2? How long have you been staying at the company? Why did you leave home? What year is it?”

“NO!” the girl screamed. “I was in the bedroom! I walked all the way here! It was at least an hour...”

“They’re memories. Everything in life is a memory for us sentient beings. Every moment that a normal person perceives occurs a *fraction of a fraction* of time after it actually happens, because it takes that long for the senses to register the moment. That event,” Clementine said, snapping her fingers, “didn’t happen just then when you saw and heard it, but an infinitesimal interval beforehand, long enough for the light to reach your eyes and the sound to reach your ears. That’s the idea behind the technology. All of those memories were planted in your mind at the exact moment of your death.” Her aunt whistled. “Funny how time freezes when your world gets turned upside-down, huh? Although in your case, time never started.”

The girl sank to her knees and wailed.

“This company is taking some pretty big leaps,” said her aunt. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for physical torture of people. It’s the backbone of the entire prison industry. God knows we’ve made tons of money off it. But people are getting bored of the usual methods — caging, involuntary strip-searches, electrocution. Our tastes tend more toward the psychological now. And *that’s* the miracle of technology that you saw tonight: not inhabiting another being’s mind, but filling that mind with nonsense and making it believe it. For example, this isn’t the 31st century, it’s 2008. I’m not your aunt, and we’re not on another planet right now. Although my name really is Clementine. Maybe I’ll make the next one my nephew — I’ve been going through the family members. Makes it more intimate, don’t you think?”

Clementine lifted the remote. “Now, you, my dear, are an innocent, which is regrettable,” she said. “But take solace in the fact that our little experiment we conducted today will be used on a lot of very awful people. You should be proud of your public service. It’s almost a shame you won’t even comprehend it in a moment. Presently, your real life will begin and what personality I’ve devised for you here will vanish. Don’t feel too bad, though. You didn’t have much anyway.”

“I didn’t want to join the company,” the girl rasped.

Clementine frowned. “What?”

Struggling to speak, the girl said: “You wanted me...to want...to follow in your footsteps. But I didn’t. You...didn’t plan that. So my personality...isn’t just something...you made up. Not completely. You made a mistake. And somebody...will find out.”

Clementine wasn’t grinning anymore, and the girl let out a choked laugh at the annoyed look on her face, as if the girl had pointed out something that she hadn’t thought of. That hadn’t been part of the memory implant. Somehow, the girl had added an event that hadn’t been part of the planned sequence.

“You have nine seconds left,” said Clementine. “Nice knowing you.”

And she pressed the button on the remote.

SEVEN

February 26th, 2010.

A television screen hung in the upper corner of the room and when Kevin looked at the screen he saw something that nobody else saw.

The diner was empty aside from Kevin, the girl sitting next to him in the florid booth bleeding foam from its crevasses, and a haggard waitress leaning against the wall with one eye fixed on the football game that was playing out on the TV. Kevin's eyes, which were wide and nervous even after several sleepless nights, were also occupied with the screen, but the football game only appeared to his eyes in sporadic bursts, like the occasional blinks of a second eyelid. Unfiltered by these hallucinatory intervals, he saw the Niflheim facility rising out of the horizon, dark and many-funneled and octopoid, against a urine-bleached sky. In the foreground was a street littered with trash, a burning car turned onto its side, and a lamppost leaning in a hooked shape that Kevin found vaguely familiar. Climbing up the lamppost was something with many long, translucent legs and many coils descending to the ground, piling on top and shifting over each other. In contrast to the obesity of its coils, the thing had a narrowing upper body tipped with its small, hairless orb of a head and a face that now turned toward the invisible camera with a face much like that of a human baby, except with one blue eye and one bright pink and a long tooth jutting from within a cleft palate. Underneath the scene, a news ticker scrolled by with current events transcribed in some ancient hieroglyphic lexicon.

The world shifted and the screen shifted back to the football game. The waitress had already lost interest and was leaning against the wall inserting a long finger in the corner of her mouth to nudge a tooth. Kevin scrunched his eyes shut and put out a hand even colder than the February weather, and he felt a warmer hand curl around it. He looked up at Saskia. She smiled at him, and despite the typical intensity of her stare that she could never quite shake, he felt his anxiety dissipate by just the smallest of degrees.

“Are you sure you don't want to order anything?” she asked. “Maybe some coffee?”

“I'm fine, thanks,” said Kevin.

“Ok,” said Saskia, and an unspoken question twitched in her open mouth for a moment — perhaps to ask for the umpteenth time if he was certain that he was sure if he wanted to do this, or if he had interpreted the message right, or if the third member of their party was even coming — before her lips closed. There would be little point in asking any of those questions again, both because she knew the answers, and because, Kevin suspected, she wanted to be here more than he did. Both teens were shivering, but there was more fear in Kevin’s shivers than in Saskia’s, and he noticed how her fingers kept spidering toward and then moving away from the camcorder sitting in the corner of the table.

A shape stumbled past the window and both Saskia and Kevin looked up. The shape tottered into view, through the greasy barcode made by the pre-dawn rain, and was cast into stark monochromatic light like a badly done Xerox as the figure plastered her colorless face and long-fingered palms against the glass, grinning beatifically at them. Kevin tightened his hand around Saskia’s hand at the same moment that she tightened hers in response. “That’s her,” said Kevin, the same moment that the woman outside yelled his name, mouthing exaggeratedly as if the glass was impermeable. Saskia extracted her hand from Kevin’s fist, grabbed the camcorder, and began fiddling with it. Kevin laid his elbows on the table and leaned in so far that his head kissed the wood. He massaged his forehead with his thumbs and tried his best to suppress the feeling of his stomach assuming the shape of a corkscrew.

The figure loped away, and minutes later, had entered through the front door of the diner. As the woman loped toward them, her skirt and leather jacket drenched while her hair still seemed impossibly smooth, Kevin noted that she was somehow even paler than he remembered. She walked with a strange gait that was somewhere between a limp and awkward dance in which only one of her legs was participating, at the same time that her arms twisted unpleasantly around her, as if the extended cognition that made ambulation possible had shattered into multiple minds pulling her body in different directions. It wasn’t until she got closer that Kevin noticed she had a wound — the edges not bloody but swollen around the deep groove segmenting her neck, like the lips of a second mouth sealed shut in grim reticence. All the same, the woman was unmistakable, a direct transposition of the face embedded in his memory.

Winifred stood at the booth, vertically crooked, and clasped her hand over her heart. “Hello there, little soldier,” she said to Kevin, and her eye drifted over to Saskia. She frowned. “Who is she and why is she filming?”

Kevin looked around. Saskia was indeed filming, having pulled her feet onto the booth seat with her knees against her chest and her camcorder to her eye. “I’m a documentarian,” explained Saskia.

“She’s my — uh — girlfriend?” Kevin said hesitantly, instinctively glancing at Saskia just to make sure he wasn’t off-base. Without removing her eye from the lens, Saskia placed a hand on Kevin’s and squeezed in affirmation.

“I see,” said Winifred. “Are there no more age-appropriate activities than dating girls that you could be getting up to, Kevin? One should cherish the time one gets to be a child, after all.”

I’m fifteen in four days, Kevin thought indignantly, but did not say.

“Well, Errol Morris, would you mind switching the camera off so I can properly reunite with my — with Kevin?” Winifred said to Saskia.

“I’m really much more aligned with the *cinéma vérité* tradition than Morris,” said Saskia.

“The camera stays on,” said Kevin. “That’s the condition.”

Winifred looked hesitant, but then her face broke back into a smile. “Very well, then,” she said, sliding into the booth. “I hope I make a good cinematic subject.” She smacked her lips. “WAITRESS!” she called out, so abruptly that Kevin jumped in his seat and Saskia nearly dropped the camera. The waitress, whose attention had until then been focused on an oversized bit of earwax she had extracted from her ear, also jumped, then adjusted her features into a polite smile and walked over. “What’ll it be?” she said, taking brief notice of Saskia and her camcorder.

“Do you have anything salty?” said Winifred in a quiet, desperate voice.

The waitress furrowed her eyebrows. “Salty?” she repeated.

“That’s what I said,” said Winifred. “I don’t want sweet — anything, *anything* but sweet! Nor do I want umami. Sour or bitterness would also suffice, but primarily, salt if you have it. The saltier the better.”

The waitress had a look on her face like she thought Winifred was either insane or making fun of her, but then she sighed. “Okay, well I guess we have an anchovy sandwich. Would that work?”

“Perfect!” said Winifred. “With extra salt, please.”

The waitress surveyed the trio: the woman who looked as if she had crawled from a graveyard, the girl intent with her camcorder, and the boy massaging his head as if something alien was about to burst out of it. Then she sighed and left for the kitchen.

Winifred turned her attention back to Kevin. “So, Kevin, my boy,” she said, and tears sprang on cue to her eyes. “I’m so — I can’t tell you how happy I am that you wanted to meet me. It gives me a chance to really explain everything and...to apologize for what happened last time we met.”

Kevin lifted his face from his palm and made unblinking eye contact.

“You have to understand, Kevin,” said Winifred, and seemed to mentally fumble for the words. “My, uh...my associate...who, I can’t stress enough, is no longer part of the equation, if that’s something you were worried about...he acted on impulse, and he did not tell me what he was going to do...and in the heat of the moment, I should have perhaps put up a bit more resistance, but I wasn’t entirely thinking straight, and when we got into that car crash...I don’t know exactly how much you remember, Kevin, but...”

“You tried to kidnap me,” said Kevin.

“It wasn’t my intention!” Winifred insisted. “My goal at the time was simply to persuade you to get in the car...”

“To take me where?” said Kevin.

“Well,” said Winifred, unfurling a hand toward the window as if grasping for the rain outside. Then the hand ducked underneath the booth table, rummaging around in her jacket pocket for a

moment and producing a half-empty plastic water bottle. The veins in her throat protruded as she cranked her head up to take a swig, and Kevin had a mental image of the second mouth in her neck opening up to release a gargling scream as the water came pouring out. Then Winifred put the water down, swallowed, and exhaled. “That’s exactly what I would like to talk to you about,” she said at last. “I’m sure that you have a lot of wrong ideas about me, Kevin...”

“They told me you were dead,” he said.

“Well, I suppose that’s as good a wrong idea to start with as any,” she said. “Or, I should say, a half-wrong idea. They told you I was dead because, strictly speaking, I was dead. At least for a little while. As a matter of fact, so were you.”

“That I know already,” said Kevin, and Saskia gave him an odd look. “When they found me at the house,” he explained to her, “I died for a little bit and then came back to life.”

“You mean your heart stopped?” said Saskia. “They had to restart it?”

“No,” he said. “They pronounced me dead.”

“Indeed,” said Winifred, “more than just your heart stopped. There was a complete cessation of vital functions — cardiovascular, respiratory, nervous, cerebral. But actually, Kevin, your demise on the sidewalk was only your second death of the afternoon. Given the typical finality of dying, your body did not expect to be resuscitated and had to go through a painful period of readjustment not unlike postpartum cramps. Your first death was in the car crash as I was driving from the school. It was my associate — again, no longer in the picture — who brought you back to life.”

“And you?” said Kevin. “He brought you to life?”

Winifred smacked her lips and grimaced. “Yes, but — not exactly on purpose. And my process wasn’t as successful as yours, hence some...side effects. Incidentally, where the heck is that anchovy sandwich?” Winifred looked over your shoulder and fingered the groove in her neck.

“You never answered Kevin’s question,” said Saskia. “Where were you taking him?”

“More to the point,” said Kevin, “where were you coming from? It was the Factory, wasn’t it? You were the only person working there who left. You know what happened. You knew it was going to happen before it did.”

Winifred winced. “Yes,” she said. “I did. But I wasn’t the only one. Your mom knew. But she was not able to leave, which is why she” — Winifred choked back a dramatic sob — “entrusted me with the job of getting you to safety. That’s all I was trying to do, Kevin. I was trying to get you to a safe place before the...outbreak got to you.”

“Then who was your *associate*?” said Kevin. “And what was the outbreak? What were those things that came out of the Factory? Why were they there in the first place? What even was your job?”

“All will be revealed, sweetheart,” said Winifred, lifting a tremulous hand. “Please be patient and allow me to explain. But before I do — I just need you to know that I only had your wellbeing on my mind, at all times. I need you to know that, Kevin. Do you understand?”

Kevin studied the woman sitting before him and then turned his face back to the TV. The football game had reverted again to the scene of a desolate city street, in the area within the Niflheim perimeter. It was a street that Kevin had walked down, he estimated, thousands of times — directly across from a small park, the trees trying to invade the sky with their bony tentacles. There was a sex shop whose massive picture window blazed with rainbow-spattled light, beside which a fenced-off garden held a dark shambles of twisted, rusty-toothed mechanical scrap. There was a red-brick building with Pride flags hanging from the windows, and the street that followed was framed by immense graffiti murals of bird-like cartoon gods flying on rockets and fighting demonic tentacled monsters, replete with comic-book sound effects.

But now the graffiti gods and monsters were *actually* fighting, come to life and beating each other to a pulp as blood spurted and blows produced genuine yowls of pain. And now the trees in the park had many-eyed howler monkeys in multicolored waistcoats, swinging from the branches and hollering, some of them holding struggling human shapes and feasting on them. And now the mechanical scrap had things slithering out, through gaps in the wire fence onto the sidewalk, leaving trails of slime behind them.

Kevin zeroed in on the wire fence as it glitched out and another from his mind took its place. For a half-second, Kevin saw another figure standing in the frame on the TV screen. His mother looked at him with her half-rotted face and smirked, and within the next second the football game was back.

Kevin felt vomit rise in his throat and he pushed it down as his eyes returned to Winifred. “I understand,” he said. “Now explain.”

EIGHT

October 27th — November 2nd, 2009.

Three months before Kevin and the woman who had attempted to abduct him spoke over a heavily-salted anchovy sandwich, he sat in the back of Damian Ridley's Mercedes-Benz as they made the trek to Wackorimm. The first stop was Kevin's apartment, where he shoved an armful of jeans, sweaters, and underpants and a copy of George Orwell's *1984* into a backpack, then ducked into the restroom to appease his now-seriously complaining bladder — he had started feeling uncomfortable about two hours ago when he was still in the animal room, but had not been inclined to go searching through the chaotic hallways for somewhere to relieve himself. He put on a winter jacket and hat and briefly hovered on the landing before heading into Clementine's office. He thought he might find some notebooks or papers with information in them, or the picture of himself in an unrecognizable sweater that he recalled from years before, only to find to his alarm that the room had been cleared out, absent even of Clementine's computers, as if it was ready for an open-house.

During the drive, they paused for Ridley to show hastily assembled papers to the soldiers who had appeared on the outskirts of the city, before driving uninterrupted through the night. The orange sky exchanged itself for a black one as all signs of urbanity gradually dwindled to a scattering of gas stations and strip malls, the odd blot of neon outside the bubble of existence formed by the Mercedes' tail-lights. Ridley inquired if Kevin wanted to listen to music, to which the boy expressed indifference and immediately regretted it when the lawyer switched on '70s disco music and began bobbing his head, clearing his throat on seemingly every other beat.

Three hours later, Ridley informed Kevin that they had arrived in Wackorimm. Kevin thought that they may as well have arrived on Mercury for all he could see in the darkness, and he was tired enough that he might have accepted that had Ridley said it. He could only see faint shapes, triangles and spheres of hedges looming out of the blackness as the car rolled by, and the occasional glow of a dimly lit suburban garage and lawn, jumpstarting a long sequence of memories in his head of his mother spitting venom about "*suburbanites*." Then another glowing building reared out of the distance. Kevin's stomach fell as he realized the car was moving in that direction.

“I thought you said you were taking me to your house!” he protested.

“I am,” said Ridley. “The doctors here just need to keep you in their care for a little while, Kevin, so they can perform some check-ups, okay?”

“No,” Kevin sobbed as he fell back in his seat. “Not another hospital.”

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Kevin lay on crinkly white paper dressed in only his underwear as the doctors examined his limbs, his abdomen, his chest, his throat, all the while bouncing medical jargon off each other at a dizzying speed. They took his temperature a thousand times, put a cold goo on his bare chest while they examined his heartbeat, weighed him, X-rayed him, tested his blood, tested his urine, and at one point, much to his mortification, performed a colonoscopy.

Every movement, every word spoken, was an impossible exertion that didn't seem worth undertaking. Every little request they made of him, from answering a basic question to shifting his position in bed, felt like torture that he half-suspected they were deliberately inflicting on him for fun. He lost count of how many times they asked him to rate his pain with a little cartoon face and he grew accustomed to automatically jabbing his thumb at the purple frowny-face representing 'Worst Pain Possible.' He did it before they even finished their sentences. Endlessly, doctors and various men in suits bombarded him with questions, which after a while he barely attempted to answer. Each conversation followed much the same lines:

“So, what grade are you in, Kevin?” (The opening icebreaker was the most fluctuating variable, and included everything from asking him what movies or music he liked to whether he had any pets).

“Ninth.”

“Ah, ninth. That's a good grade. I remember ninth. Do you enjoy school, Kevin?”

“Just get it the fuck over with.”

“Oh, ok. Well, if you don't mind, I'd just like to ask you some questions about what you remember. It's for the purposes of national security, you understand?”

“I know.”

“Ok. Do you remember where you were on the evening of October 26th?”

“Some guy’s house.”

“What were you doing there?”

“I don’t know. I woke up.”

“Do you remember what happened before you woke up?”

“I was asleep.”

“I mean, before you went to sleep.”

“I don’t know.”

“You have no memory of a woman named Winifred Grantz and her accomplice removing you from your school?”

“Vaguely. Can we do this another time?”

“I just need to know. Do you remember anything else from that day?”

“I woke up. I ate my breakfast. I went to school. It sucked. Then I was waiting for my mom to pick me up.”

“Was there anything else strange you noticed that day?”

“Nothing comes to mind...seriously, can we do this another —”

“Just to be absolutely clear, you can recall nothing from between 5 pm and 7 pm on October —”

“For fuck’s sake, *NO!*”

“Okay, okay. We can resume another time. So sorry for your loss, Kevin.”

“Wait,” said Kevin. “If you don’t mind, I have a few questions.”

The agent hesitated. “Ok,” he said, sitting back down. “What do you want to know?”

“I want to know what’s happening,” said Kevin. “I want to know everything you know.” And seeing the look on the agent’s face, he added, “Or, everything you can tell me.”

He gathered that from a car crash on the margins of the city, his abductors had absconded him to a local house. When the police had arrived, both Winifred Grantz and the owner of the house (a prize-winning gardener, he was told) were dead, having had their throats torn out so violently that they initially seemed to have been mauled by animals. The second kidnapper had disappeared, leading the police to believe that he was responsible for the killings.

Despite having been involved in a car crash, he was completely unscathed, without so much as a bruise. Amidst the stupor through which he now experienced life, this one detail struck him as odd. He could distinctly recall hitting his head very hard on something, hard enough to fill his skull with a pain so blinding that he not only remembered it — contrary to accepted wisdom that you never remembered pain — but it stood out as the only thing he clearly remembered. And yet, when he put his hand up to feel his head, he found that his hair was clean of blood and his scalp unbroken.

In fact, his seeming unscathed-ness was a persistent topic of conversation. From what he understood, the particular medical nature of his interrogators’ fascination with him had to do with the fact that when the police had picked him up, he had seemingly collapsed and died right there on the sidewalk, for no apparent reason. Unable to revive him, the police had pronounced him dead at the scene and placed him in a body bag. Then, en route to the morgue, he had suddenly caused everyone in the ambulance to jump when his body began thrashing and screaming incoherently from inside the body bag, terrified and very much alive. Kevin did not remember this at all, although he was told that one onlooker was so startled that she had a heart attack right there at the scene. The ambulance was redirected to the city hospital, which had at the same time received an influx of arrivals from this terrorist attack he had heard so much about, and by the time of his arrival he was wide-awake, miraculously unharmed but for a pulsing migraine, and without the slightest evident cause for either his death or subsequent revival.

As the days went on in Wackorimm Presbyterian, his doctors became increasingly frustrated by the lack of any apparent injuries or illness, as if they personally held a grudge against Kevin for not being so catastrophically unhealthy at fourteen that he could potentially die any moment.

The only injury of any kind that Kevin exhibited was some dressing holding some gauze to his arm, where the doctors found a small scar as if to indicate an injection site. What exactly Kevin had been injected with was a mystery, as his blood was free of any detectable drugs except for those which the doctors, who were ready to pull their hair out, had put in him.

At some point, Kevin started wondering why they even cared so much. He found his story of resurrection somewhat interesting, but mainly found himself wishing that after dropping dead on the sidewalk, he had just stayed dead, instead of being swept away to this hell. Briefly, he wondered if he had stayed dead and this *was* Hell, or at least the purgatorial channel en route to Hell. It explained the scramble inside his skull, shards of glass embedded in his memory with monstrous reflections and hazes of uncertainty between them. It explained why the colors and sounds hurt him, as if he was trapped inside a TV that was about to explode. It explained why everyone around him seemed hesitant and nervous. And it explained why he felt so cold — in Kevin's delirious logic, the frigidity somehow meant that his body was compensating right before he was plunged into the omnivoracious flames of damnation, burning at a heat so intense that they erased the line between heat and cold. Then, Kevin surmised, the real fun would begin.

Eventually, they learned to leave him alone, and he would sit in bed and watch TV. At first he watched the news, which despite reporting extensively on some form of outbreak or terrorist attack in the city said nothing about the nature of the outbreak or exactly why the city had to now be closed off. The camera showed no footage from within the city, only the skyline with the familiar burning sky. Eventually, becoming aware that nothing he watched was going to be very informative, Kevin switched from the news to game shows and let the spasmic stream of colors and goofy sound effects erode his brain, barely aware or interested in what the contestants were saying.

When he was thirsty, he would wait until his throat was completely parched before he summoned the will to ask for a glass of water. Periodically, he would urinate through a tube. At some point — presumably at the end of the day— it would be time for the nurses to turn off the lights, and he would lie awake, trying as hard as he could not to fall asleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he could feel the shadows moving closer. Then he would wake up the next morning, and watch some more TV, and drink some water, and piss it out again, and maybe eat something. Every day, the cycle repeated. Later, he would learn that he had been in the hospital for about a week. For

him, it was just a long slugs-trail smear of time, broken up by intervals of light in the room versus light only in the hallway.

To the extent that Kevin thought at all, he thought a lot about his reaction to the revelation of his mother's death. No tears, no screaming, no melodramatic *no-no-no-it-can't-be-true*. He had done nothing like that. His reaction had been to *grin*. He remembered it and wanted to curl up, claw his head, rip out his brain so he could destroy the memory. He wondered what Ridley must have been thinking, telling a fourteen-year-old boy that his mother had died in a horrible cataclysm and seeing him react with a big lunatic smile. It had been a reflexive motion — Ridley's face in awkwardly delivering the news had just been so glum and stupid-looking, and the news itself had seemed like such an impossible vicious joke that in the moment there had been no choice but to grin, his cheek muscles acting as a secondary mind before his primary mind had absorbed the news. It was the stage of denial, Kevin told himself, only now that he thought about it, it seemed strange that he had leapt from denial over anger and bargaining. He certainly felt depressed now, but there was no anger in him — except at the doctors who kept annoying him — and bargaining seemed too pointless to even attempt.

To stop himself from feeling bad about it, he tried to resurrect positive memories of his mother, to reassure himself that no part of him had been happy at her demise, that his grin was not born of joy but of disbelief. It was a surprisingly difficult task — his mother had not been abusive, but she had never been exactly warm either. She had never seemed that invested in going above the minimum requirements of parenting — dressing him, feeding him, sheltering him. He recalled days of his childhood when he had attempted to enlist his mother in make-believe games, forcing her to be the monster who chased him around in his epic improvised dramas, but by the time he had reached home base for the eighth time — the narrow area behind the petunia pots where they were protected by a force-field that made them invisible — his mom's evident boredom and lack of interest would be so palpable that it would infect him too and he would go back inside to watch TV, while his mom went upstairs to work on her experiments that she never let them see.

There was one exception however — she did excel at the dying-and-resurrection scenes. Something about it seemed to kindle her inner thespian, and she would relish every lurid physical detail of her various imaginary deaths. Every time Kevin would shoot her with his invisible laser gun, she would groan and hiss and contort her body in all sorts of ridiculous ways, raking her

claws through the air while Kevin fell about laughing. A few twitches later, she would be dead, her tongue sticking unceremoniously out of her mouth. And as he crept close, that's when her eyes would snap open and she would lunge out like a horror-movie zombie and grab him, pulling the laughing child into a tight hug as she attempted to bite and tickle him.

That was a happy memory of his mother, and reliving it made him feel worse. He realized he would never feel her arms around him again, and he cranked his face into a desperate attempt at weeping. Try as he might, however, no tears emerged.

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At the end of the week, once the doctors figured out that there was well and truly nothing wrong with him, they gave him back his clothes and an ambulance took him to Damian Ridley's house. For the first time, Kevin got a good look at Wackorimm. There was not a hint of cloudy fire or blood-orange in the sky. Instead, a milky film of fog dominated — *like a vulture's eye*, he thought, remembering a story his mother had read to him — with rays of bright winter sunlight slicing through and mottling the atmosphere. Over the roofs of the houses, the horizon was lumpy with mountains, mossy and dark, half-lost in a dreamy ocean of the same ubiquitous fog. The scenery was awe-inspiring in its way, but Kevin did not appreciate it. As he walked down into the parking lot encircling Wackorimm Presbyterian and surveyed his surroundings, he felt nothing but exhaustion and irritation. He focused on the suburban houses, each one different in size, bulk, and style — some older, composed of stone or pine timbers, some crawling with leaves, while others were spiky modern artworks replete with slabs of glass and concrete and angular lines of black wood — but all of them were alike in radiating wealth and ostentatious consumption like a stench. The fact that he, the prodigy of an extremely wealthy woman, was somewhat hypocritical in making this judgment did not alter his feelings. He took one look at the houses and fell head over heels in hate.

Ridley's mansion was no more appealing to him. It was a red-brick obscenity pretending to be a building, with an elongated single-windowed triangle of a roof that made it look vaguely like a church. Ridley's Mercedes-Benz rolled into place alongside a second one in the driveway, and a woman in a satiny blue dress and a boy who looked about twelve emerged from the stained-glass-paneled front door. Kevin stepped out of the car, hoisting his backpack on one

soldier, and grimly beheld his new home as the woman came toward him with her arms outstretched. “Kevin, this is my wife Melissa,” said Damian right as Melissa swept Kevin into a bone-crushing hug.

“Oh, Kevin, my dear,” she said. She gripped him by the shoulders and held him at an arms-distance, exposing him in full force to what Kevin suspected to be the first of many, many pitying smiles. “There is a rainbow in my heart, Kevin,” she said. “Rain for your terrible misfortune, but sunlight when I think of how you will be coming to live with us.”

“Uh, thank you,” said Kevin. Melissa let go of him and pushed the little boy forward. “This is our son Alton, Kevin.” The boy flashed a smile, resplendent with orthodontics, and extended a hand. “Nice to meet you, Kevin,” Alton said politely. Kevin shook his hand.

“I’m sure you’ve had a very tiring experience,” said Melissa. “And you must be hungry! Lucky for you, you’ll be filling your tummy with Mexican in just a few minutes.”

“Really, all I want to do is have a shower and sleep,” said Kevin politely.

“Oh, of course, soon enough, Kevin!” said Melissa. “But the food is on the stove as we speak. In the meantime, Alton will show you to your room.”

Ten minutes later, Kevin and Alton were on the second floor of the house, in the room that, as Melissa had explained, had previously been the domain of Alton’s older brother Rochester, who had vacated the premises to pursue a prestigious swimming scholarship at Miskatonic. Kevin dumped his backpack on the bed as Alton told him to wait and disappeared with a flourish from the room. Kevin just had time to sit down on the bed and run his hands through his hair, spidering his fingers against his scalp, when the boy returned with a massive box. Grinning, Alton dumped the box on the floor to reveal that it was filled to the brim with comic books.

“This is my collection,” said Alton. “I’ve got like three copies of each issue so you can borrow anything you like. Just remember to give it back, okay? And try to give it back within like a couple of weeks? And try not to crease the edges too much?”

Kevin nodded. “You really don’t have to do this,” he said.

“It’s the least I could do!” said Alton. “Each smile received from a spontaneous act of kindness brings us closer to Jesus. That’s what my Sunday school teacher says, and I’m first in the class.”

“I see,” said Kevin, monotone. Alton sat cross-legged on the floor.

“This is gonna be really fun, man!” he said. “You’re fourteen, right? Yeah, I turn thirteen in two and a half months. I’ve never been friends with somebody older than me. It makes me feel better, y’know, cause when they told me you were getting Rocky’s room, I was pretty bummed out, because I was hoping to get the room myself. But I guess it’s just part of God’s plan. I think we’re gonna be really good friends, bro!”

“Wow,” said Kevin. “Thanks, bro.”

“Yeah, no problem!” said Simon. “Hey, do you think you’ll get superpowers now?”

“What?”

“In comic books, when some kind of big nuclear explosion happens, the hero becomes radioactive and he gets miraculous powers.”

“I think the fact that I’m not dead is pretty miraculous,” said Kevin, pinching the bridge of his nose and compressing as hard as he could.

“Well yeah, no duh, but, like, have you tried to move anything with your mind yet? Or blow stuff up with energy blasts —”

Alton kept talking, and Kevin picked up one of the comic books, nodding occasionally to signal that he was still listening while he bent the comic book until the spine creased. “Uh, can you not do that, bro?” said Alton, noticing. “It’s just that this shit is kind of important to me, and I really try to keep them pristine...”

“Boys, dinner time!” called Melissa from downstairs.

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The kitchen was filled with smoke and the sharp, tangy aroma of Mexican food. Melissa was making tacos, and she flashed the second pitying smile of the night at him. “Do you want a soft tortilla or a hard one, Kevin?” she asked.

“I’ll just have water for now,” he said. Melissa nodded and continued stirring the guacamole. Damian, sitting at the table, put down the magazine he was reading. “C’mon, Kevin,” he said with an anxious chuckle. “You gotta eat something. You’ve had nothing to eat but hospital food this week.”

“I’m not hungry,” said Kevin, casting a glance at the lawyer, and something in his eyes made Ridley straighten up. “Alright, water it is,” Ridley said, with a twitch of the eyebrow and clearing of the throat.

Kevin looked away and studied the interior of the house. The living room was dominated by an enormous picture window overlooking the park, as well as the largest television set that Kevin had ever seen. The floorboards looked as if they had been polished, and the walls were stark yellow and lined with knick-knacks and ornaments from around the world.

Alton took a seat at the table, and Kevin took a seat next to him. Several plates of steaming Mexican food appeared in front of them as Melissa Ridley plonked them down and settled at the head of the table. She clinked a wine-glass with a fork and coughed for attention, then folded her hands together and bent her head over the food with her eyes closed. Damian and Alton followed suit. Kevin forced his gaze down on the table-cloth. “Dear Lord, we thank you for this food you have given to us,” said Melissa. “And we thank you for all your blessings. Of course, all of our thoughts are with Kevin and the unspeakable tragedy he has suffered, but we pray that all these woes will be solved one day in the divine plan that you, Lord, in your wisdom, have made for us. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Damian and Alton. Alton opened his eyes and glanced at Kevin, who was sitting straight with his arms by his sides. Alton looked annoyed for a moment, and then the facial expression passed. Damian sank his teeth into a taco and purred with delight. “Oh, Melissa,” he said, with his mouth full of guacamole. “You’ve really outdone yourself.”

They continued talking, with Alton jumping in and telling his parents about basketball practice. Throughout the conversation, Kevin remained silent. He took his napkin and pulled it apart into a million pieces, rolling the scraps of cotton between his fingers and forming cocoons in his palm.

He looked down at the comic book in his lap and wondered if Alton had been onto something, and if he concentrated hard enough, his newfound radioactive superpowers would activate and blow this table apart, incinerating the Ridleys and blasting spray of broken glass, flaming debris, and Mexican food out of the window and onto the heads of unsuspecting passersby below. For a moment, he could vividly imagine standing in the ruins, the charred Ridleys assuming postures of death around him as the flames coursed over his body, scorching his skin, forcing him to feel something.

Then, the ticker tape in his head had rolled around again. *You should feel ashamed*, he told himself. *They're just trying to help, and you're fantasizing about killing them. That makes you some kind of fucked-up sociopath. You should feel ashamed.*

“Would you like a chorizo, Kevin?” said Melissa. Two seconds passed before he registered the question. “No,” he said, then added, “no, thank you. May I go to the bathroom?”

“Certainly,” said Melissa. “It’s right down the hall, sweetie.”

Kevin got up, grabbed the comic book, and exited the noise and light of the living room. He shut himself in the bathroom, sat on the toilet seat, and put his head in his hands, and scrunched up his eyelids, trying to shed just one tear. It didn’t work.

“Urgrggrghrgrhr,” he said, letting the noise well up from his chest and out through his teeth. It felt good, so he did it again. In his peripheral vision, a glint appeared, and he looked around and noticed a shaving razor on the sink. He ignored it and began to read the comic. He read and read and lost track of the time. At some point, Damian knocked on the door and asked if he was okay, he said nothing. He focused his attention on the fight happening on the inked pages. The comic book was about a supervillain whose face had been split in half, with one side normal and the other side hideously rotted and disfigured. In the story, the supervillain caused a wave of destruction, setting fire to buildings and killing everyone in his path.

Kevin continued reading, and ignoring Damian outside, and every so often, his eye flickered to the razor on the sink.

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That night, Kevin fell asleep with the light still on and the oft-read copy of *1984* splayed open on his chest. He had just reached the part that had always disturbed him the most — for his mother, it was the scene where Winston was tortured with the rats, but for Kevin, it was the recurring dream that Winston had of his mother and sister. In the dream, Winston envisioned the pair descending into darkness on some form of platform, looking up at him, and he was somehow filled with the certain knowledge that this state of affairs was a sacrifice on their part for his sake, that they were below because he was above.

Kevin, at many points in his life, had experienced a similar dream and that night he had it again. In the dream, he was not in darkness but in a brightly-lit building that resembled a shopping mall, surrounded by faceless figures. Somehow, he had just learned that his mother was about to die, and that in fact, she was on her way to the lowest level of the mall where one of the figures would conduct the execution. Kevin also knew, though couldn't place how he knew, that her death was voluntary, and in some way, it was to save him. All the same, he fought to stop her. He could just make out her recognizable frizzy head of hair bobbing in the crowd as she boarded an escalator and began her descent. Kevin ran after her, pushing through the crowd of shadows, but by the time he made it to the front of the escalator, he could see that she was on the floor below and had begun descending another one in an endless stream of escalators leading in a spiral formation down to Hell. Kevin ran down one escalator after another, but the harder he tried to catch up, the more the shapeless beings got in his way and the more he slowed down and the more he fell behind, though somehow he always kept her in sight. He yelled out her name, but suddenly making any vocalization seemed an impossible effort. At some point he paused and watched her ride down yet another escalator and he thought that maybe he didn't want her to stop — that perhaps the only reason he was pursuing her was to assuage his guilt, but some part of him was deliberately not catching up.

And then Clementine looked back at him, and her face was half-rotted. Kevin awoke violently and the book fell off his chest.

He blinked and for half a second felt relief that the dream hadn't been real, right before reality caught up to him. He sank back into the mattress. The light of the lamp hurt his eyes and his bedsheets were a sweaty Gordian knot coiled around his bare legs. Through the window, he could see a crescent moon. Kevin covered his eyes with his palm and made the latest of a now-uncountable sequence of attempts to weep. His chest hitched in a sobbing motion and he groaned like a wounded animal, and this time he felt a dapple of moisture in his eyes, but it did not extend any farther.

Eventually, he sighed. He picked up the book and placed it on the bedside table on top of the comic book he had been reading. The front cover curled upward, a side effect of spreading it on its spine. Kevin didn't notice. He reached out, turned the light off, and spent the next several hours trying to get back to sleep. Right before he finally managed it, he had entered a somnambulatory state of neither sleep nor wake, suffocating in his bedsheets, and he thought that finally, at long last, he had entered Hell.

That'll teach me not to take the Lord's name in vain, he thought, and then he fell headfirst into sleep as if he had never been awake.

NINE

November 7th, 2009.

As Kevin was eating cereal his fourth morning in the Ridley household, Damian told him that his mother's memorial was scheduled for the 11th, and that they had to get him a suit. Kevin had told the lawyer multiple times that he didn't want a memorial and if there had to be one, he didn't want to go to it. "Okay," he said, and labeled another spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

Alton gave him a hesitant look, then turned his attention to his almond croissant. The younger boy had stopped making his tentative attempts at conversation, though had he kept at it, Kevin might not have made his ambivalence so obvious anymore. He had stopped feeling annoyed by Alton a while back. His irritation with the opulence of the house, the neighborhood, the cloyingness of the Ridleys and the sympathetic looks they kept shooting in his direction, had also subsided. In fact, he had stopped feeling much of anything. Before long, he had stopped trying to make the feeling come back.

No longer did he absorb every morning in his new home like a golf-ball hitting him in the throat, waking up in Rochester Ridley's bed and feeling the daily painful gear shift throughout his body back into the grim world he now found himself in. Instead, he woke up in the same state of non-feeling as when he went to bed the previous evening, uninterrupted only by the eternity of darkness that reabsorbed him every night when he slept. To the extent that he did feel, he felt dread at returning to that somnal prison. It was one reason why he had resigned himself to his new low-arousal default state, because it was preferable to the twisting cloud of guilt and fear pulsing in his chest as he chased his mother down the escalators over and over again.

Sometimes, the dream changed. The gist of the premise was identical but the details were variable. At one point, Kevin dreamed that he was on a boat drifting in an unidentifiable world, shrouded in the same sea of fog that had crept down from the Wackorimm mountains into his subconscious. In his dream, the fellow passengers on the boat had determined that Kevin had done something grievously wrong — they didn't tell him exactly what but he suspected they were correct — and as a human sacrifice to clear the fog that had cursed the ship, they tied weights to his limbs and threw him still alive into the water. As he sank into the brutalizing black coldness, watching bubbles flee his lungs and spiral above him, exploding glass planets in a

cloudy green sky, he could make out his mother swimming down toward him, drowning herself along with her son as she tried desperately to reach him. And though he wanted her to come to his rescue, he also wanted to tell her to swim up before she ran out of breath, leave him to the watery demise he deserved (*Nice self-pity*, sneered the voice in his head). And then he woke up hyperventilating and left his bed, lying on the floor to escape the sweaty net of blankets.

He had stopped reading George Orwell. He felt that it had a bad influence on him.

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November 8th, 2009.

That morning, Melissa told Kevin to shower and put his clothes in the laundry so they could go to the tailor's and buy him a suit. Kevin suspected there was an ulterior motive here — he had stopped showering since his arrival home from the hospital and was still wearing the same clothes he had been wearing the day of the Niflheim attack, and he was aware that his odor had probably taken a turn for the worse. Nonetheless, he obliged, standing in the shower for five minutes while staring blankly at his scrawny, dead-eyed reflection, then switching his jeans for a fresh pair and his hoodie for a red-and-green sweater.

The tailor was a mustachioed gentleman who was keen to express his theories about the Factory's explosion. "I don't buy this terrorist attack narrative for a second," he remarked as he wrapped the tape measure around Kevin's waist, oblivious to Melissa's wide-eyed signals to shut up. "They blew up that factory themselves. Have you heard the stories of what's happening inside the perimeter? They said there's creatures in the streets eating people. That's what they had in the Factory. The explosion wasn't the cause of the outbreak. They blew it up themselves to stop those *things* from getting out."

"Who's this *they*?" said Kevin.

The mustachioed man blinked at him. "They. The government. Same *they* that took my sister."

"Your sister?" said Kevin, intrigued.

"Yeah," said the man with a distant look in his eye, as if he was looking down a dark hallway. "When I was eight. Her face was rotting, so they took her away." Kevin was about to ask if he

could clarify what he meant by “her face was rotting,” when Melissa interjected and changed the subject.

The tailor provided Kevin with a star-patterned dress shirt and a \$500 dark-blue velvet suit. Kevin looked at himself in the mirror and was forced to admit begrudgingly that he looked pretty good. “Are you alright, Kevin?” Melissa kept asking as they left with the suit in the box. “You know, you can tell me, right? Did he rattle you? I know, conspiratorial lunatics like that shouldn’t be let out of their cages. They’re all gonna be crawling out of the woodwork now. Don’t listen to them, Kevin.”

Kevin said nothing.

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November 9th, 2009.

As the week went on, the tightness that clutched at Kevin’s chest when he ran after his mom through his nightmares began following him into the day. When he was folding his clothes and putting them into Rochester’s drawers the day after Melissa washed them, an invisible electromagnet hidden in the walls began to tug on his insides, pulling them against the interior of his chest and belly until his hands curled into fists and trembled. “One, one, two, three, five,” he began to count under his breath, continuing to fold shorts and shirts with renewed intensity, working almost mechanically until the surge of dread had sunk back into a compartmentalized dense core underneath the familiar feeling of nothing. But he knew it was still there, like some crawling submarine predator that, when lying still, could disguise itself as looking like the seabed.

As the day progressed, the shifts between nothingness and the other nightmare-feeling became an arrhythmic beat in the back of his mind. By the time he was sitting down for dinner with the Ridleys, trying to block out their conversation, the beat had almost assumed the contours of his inhalations and exhalations. With each inhale, the tension in his organs returned. With each exhale, he felt nothing again. At this point, he had simply abandoned the Fibonacci numbers, as even this tool which had served him throughout his life was no longer helping. He began to think that it would be preferable if he could just have one giant purgative panic attack — it would be

hell while it lasted, he knew, but preferable to this dull shifting whine that almost seemed to tease him with its indecision.

After dinner, he went to Alton's room and found him playing video games. Alton looked up briefly and started at the sight of the older boy standing in the doorway. For a moment, an edge of nervousness flickered over his twelve-year-old face, as if he thought that Kevin might be about to incinerate him with an energy blast or, more likely, ruin another one of his comic books.

"Um..." said Kevin, clearing a wall of bile in his throat — apparently, the mannerisms of Damian Ridley were rubbing off on him — and glancing at the screen of the game console, where Alton, without looking, was busy animating a pixelated elf as it danced around collecting coins in a multicolored maze. "I was wondering if I could...join you."

Alton blinked, and his eye momentarily flickered toward an open Bible on his desk. Then his face broke into a broad smile. "Of course you can, buddy!" he said. "Here, let me just start a new game."

Kevin sat down on the floor next to Alton and together, the boys set about collecting as many points as possible for the next two hours. During that time, Kevin tried his best to give more than monosyllabic responses to Alton's jabbering, at the same time focusing on the explosions of pixels on-screen that sparked out each time he collected a coin onscreen, reminding him, before he pushed the memory away, of a stream of popping bubbles from a dream of drowning. The magnetic pull on his insides never totally went away, but at some point, halfway through the gaming, it didn't feel quite so intense anymore. When Alton said at the end that it was probably time to go to bed, Kevin even found himself smiling. "Thanks for the game, man," he said before trudging back to his room. He wondered how he would distract himself now — *1984* was out of the question, so perhaps he would flick through one of the sports almanacs that Rochester kept in his room.

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November 10th, 2009.

That morning, when Kevin went downstairs to have breakfast, Damian Ridley told him about the new curfew. “From now on, it’s exclusively indoors after 10 pm, no exceptions,” Ridley explained. “Mayor Thomas announced this morning.”

“Why?” said Kevin.

“Certain concerns,” said a hesitant Ridley, eyebrow twitching like mad. “Having to do with the restricted zone around the city, and certain...breaches. Now, I want to make it clear, I think we’re perfectly safe. But everybody has to follow along with the precaution, or else nobody will, you understand, Kevin?”

Kevin nodded and wondered what Ridley was referring to when he spoke about “breaches,” and whether it had anything to do with people with rotting faces. “So it’s safe to go out during the day, but not during the night?”

“That seems to be the case,” said Ridley, returning to the papers he had sprawled in front of him on the dining room table.

“Why? Why is night less safe?”

“It’s just a precaution,” said Ridley. “We don’t know everything yet. Please, I really need to focus on what’s in front of me right now.”

Later that night, lying awake in bed after another bout of video games with Alton, Kevin thought about the room full of kids that he had left behind him at the city hospital, and the girl crouching with her camera, and whether they were still there now. The thought made him feel the same awful weight of self-loathing as when he first saw his mother descending an escalator in his dreams. Part of Kevin wondered if he wouldn’t be happier if his mother had not been important or had a wealthy lawyer, and he had been left there, in the perimeter with the monsters, just like everybody else. A larger part of Kevin acknowledged that he wished for nothing of the sort. Regardless of his personal feelings toward Damian Ridley and his opulent house and suburban town, he was actually very, very happy that these things existed to take him far away from the factory. And that fact pained him the more he looked directly at it.

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November 11th, 2009.

At the end of his first week in Wackorimm was the day of his mother's funeral. In the morning, Kevin took his time putting on his suit, making Melissa increasingly agitated that they were going to be late, and glowered at his reflection when he was finally dressed. Ten minutes later, he was sitting in the backseat next to Alton, pressing his forehead against the frigid glass.

They pulled up to the church, a jungle gym of red brick and sloping roofs so ivy-strangled that Kevin imagined some many-tendriled monster lay underneath the building, prepared to seize the entire edifice in its clutches and pull it under. As they got out of the car, Melissa, who had donned a somber dress with frills blooming out of the back like the carapace of a beetle, looked at her watch and grimaced. "Damn and crap," she said in a voice on the verge of tears. "Everybody else will have already arrived. They'll all see us walking in late." Kevin wondered what it indicated to be a son showing up late for his mother's funeral, and then decided he didn't care much. He knew his mother wouldn't have wanted a funeral anyway, let alone in a church. She would have wanted her body donated for experimentation, not burned or buried. From old age to decomposition, she had always said, was just one continuous biological process without punctuation or separation, and just as technology could alleviate the effects of the former, there was no inherent reason why it couldn't one day reverse the effects of the latter.

She turned to Alton and held him still, brushing some dust off his shoulders. "Now, don't you look very handsome!" she said with a hectic grin before swiveling round to face the church. "Alright, here we go. Damian, did you bring the playbill?"

"Got it right here," said Damian, fumbling with a sheaf of paper as they walked. "Let's see, first it's Abide By Me, then the first remarks from the priest, then Amazing Grace, then the second remarks from the priest, Guide Me Oh Thou Great Redeemer..." He stopped. Collectively, the Ridleys stopped walking and turned around to look at Kevin, who was standing very still by the car. His eyes were fixed on something far away and all thoughts of his mother had, for the first time in a week, abruptly left him.

Down the street, another car had parked, and a woman had gotten out with a girl close behind. The girl had switched her surgical gown for a slim, shadowy dress that made her look vaguely wraith-like, but Kevin had recognized the platinum-blond hair automatically and the camcorder

hanging from her hand like an extra appendage. And now, as she approached, he saw the spark of recognition in her eyes as she saw him.

TEN

September 14th, 2003.

At the age of eight, Saskia Yves-Draugn met the Devil.

The Devil took the form of her mother one September night, when Saskia was awoken from pleasant dreams by the sound of something very heavy falling to the floor. At this point in her life, her surname was not yet Yves-Draugn, but something else that she had left along with the rest of her toys in her old bedroom with the slanted ceiling and the wallpaper peeling off the walls.

She sat up in bed and pulled her quilt tightly over her knees. In the corner of the room, her spider-shaped nightlight cast the vague, faltering pinkish-red light that had subsumed her room every night for as long as she could remember, although now the eight squiggly legs seemed to cast longer shadows than she remembered, extending over the walls and ceiling from their glowing arachnoid epicenter. The peeling wallpaper was decorated with smiling, simplistically-drawn fish, whose smiles now seemed meaner and with a hint of jaggedness that suggested silhouetted teeth. Down the hall, outside the door that her mom had left ajar, from what the girl thought to be the kitchen, she could hear something rummaging around, causing glass to break, and the vocal gurgling of something alive.

Saskia wondered if her mom was awake, and if so, whether she would come running down the hallway to intercept whatever had come in their house. Immediately, as she thought this, she heard a voice.

The voice said her name — *Saskiaaaa* — and though now it was curdled into something low and atavistic, and also seemed bifurcated, as if it both came through the walls and also whispered directly in Saskia's ear, she could still recognize it as being the voice of her mother. "*Come to the kitchen,*" said her mother's voice, and then, almost as an afterthought, added in a parody of maternal sternness, "*right now, young lady.*"

Saskia lifted her quilt and lowered her feet onto the carpet. Clutching herself against the cold that bit through her nightie, she walked across the room past the ominous ichthyoid shapes on the walls, and poked her head out into the hallway. Ahead of her, she could see a pale electric light

emanating from the kitchen. Behind, in her peripheral vision, her reflection shimmered in the mirror at the other end of the hallway, as if momentarily two little girls in the house were listening to the noises of whatever had taken the shape of her mother dragging itself across the kitchen floor. Saskia slowly placed one bare foot in front of another and gradually left the hallway behind her.

In the kitchen, Saskia immediately determined the source of both the light and the loud crashing sound that had woken her up: the refrigerator, which was lying on its side with the door open and half of its contents spilled out, shattered, and dripping across the floor. Standing over the refrigerator, dressed in a long black robe, was her mother, but something was horribly wrong with her. Her naturally round, chubby frame had elongated itself, with straggling tree trunks for limbs propping up the bulbous orb of a torso, and a foot-long neck shooting off her shoulders with a comically small head at the end of it. The head, with round cheeks devoid of color and hair limp and glistening, turned toward the girl and stared at her with polished black stones for eyes and a small crescent mouth that unzipped to show tiny, vampiric teeth.

At that moment, three thoughts collided in Saskia's eight-year-old brain — that she should run away from this creature as fast as she could, that she should ask her mother what was going on and whether she needed help, and that she should have brought her camcorder, which her mother had given her two years prior as a sixth birthday present, to film this. The different directives of her brain bombarded her from multiple angles and immobilized her.

The thing that was her mother lifted a tree trunk leg and smashed it through the roof of the upturned refrigerator as it loped toward Saskia. It stood on all fours, its neck angling downward to bring the round stone-eyed face eye-level with the girl's, and released a gust of breath that almost made Saskia double over and expel the pasta that her normal mother had made her mere hours ago for dinner.

“Hungry, my dear?” said the thing that was her mother, lifting up a hooked talon at the end of a contorted mess of a hand and prodding the girl in the sternum. *“You want a midnight snack? Pancakes with lots of chocolate syrup and raspberry drizzle? And then we could watch a movie and have a girl's night...”*

Saskia was thinking fast. Her uncle Marv would know what to do about this. He worked at the factory in the city where, so the kids at school said, the government kept the people who turned into monsters. If she could get to the phone — but then, how would she dial her uncle’s number? Her mother had never allowed her to use the phone.

“Are you...really my mommy?” she eventually managed to whimper.

The thing that was her mom hissed. “*What kind of question is that?*” it demanded. “*Who else would I be?*” And for a moment, Saskia thought she saw passing over the emotionless pebble eyes, just a flash of hazel looking out from the center of two deep wells, staring at the girl and mirroring her fear. Then the eyes were stones again.

For the rest of her life, Saskia could only sporadically remember what had happened next. The most she knew was that she and the thing that was her mother had sat down together on the living room sofa and had a girl’s night, watching a movie that Saskia could never recall the name of. They had sat there, with the mother-thing pinning Saskia’s nightie to a cushion in case the girl tried to run away, until dawn began to creep through the blinds, at which point the front door suddenly blew off its hinges and the mother-thing began to shriek and lope away from the uniformed men who came through the door.

After that, there was the chaos of bureaucracy as Saskia was funneled through many sleepless nights, before finally finding a new home with her uncle Marv, who gave her his surname and never told her what had happened to her mother, but told her a lot of things about what had happened to her — that her mother had beaten her that night, leaving her with a lasting head injury, and that was why she had to be taken away.

Over the next six years, Saskia would wonder what had caused her mother to undergo her strange transformation, and whether she could have done anything to prevent or reverse it that night. Most of all, though, she would regret the fact that she had not had her camcorder with her so that she could film what had happened that night.

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6 pm. October 26th, 2009.

Saskia was gathering some footage by an abandoned train station the day that Niflheim fell. It was an exciting day for her because, clambering around through the slurry of garbage and debris, amidst the schizophrenic swirl of graffiti exploding over the concrete columns that surrounded her and uplifted the overarching elevated platform far above her head, she had found a particularly intriguing treasure. Sprawled on top of the fat concrete barrier between Track 2 and the trench full of discarded plastic water bottles, empty spray cans, and other miscellaneous trash that she stood over now was a full-body child's tiger costume, rumpled and filthy and with nobody inside it, like an old skin that some therianthrope creature had left behind long ago. Why it was there, Saskia had no idea, but she was already imagining possibilities — the leftovers of some long-forgotten trick-or-treater perhaps, lost under the train tracks, insides gradually eaten away by the shadows. Or maybe the child had been kidnapped and the abductors had left the costume behind, its former inhabitant taken far away to some dank place that, twenty years from now, would make an appearance in a true crime podcast. Whatever the explanation, it was an opportunity that Saskia wasn't going to let go to waste.

Crouching crab-like as she waded into the trench, Saskia produced her camcorder from her backpack and began to film the costume from multiple angles. Combined with the setting of the train station — which Saskia knew from perusing history textbooks was an urban investment designed to bring work into the city long before it was a city, leaving many workers shuttled into slums once the work was complete, and now decomposing in disuse like a beautiful dead husk emptying its rot into the earth — it was exactly the kind of *mise en scène* that Saskia tried to strike in her documentaries.

Or, at the very least, it was the preferable alternative to the kind of documentaries she really wanted to make, but couldn't. As much as Saskia enjoyed the haunted atmosphere of the many films she had made from her various excursions to abandoned and derelict parts of the city, deep down, her heart yearned to film some real *body horror*: mutations and contortions of the flesh, the human form (or animal form — she wasn't picky) twisting into shapes that it wasn't supposed to assume, eyes rolling over black, blood dripping from every frame. She had long thought of how she would film these anatomical blasphemies, the angles she would use, the techniques of light and shadow that she would employ. The trouble was, fourteen-year-old girls didn't have the easiest access to such material. So she paid close attention to reports and news

stories of monstrous happenings in the city, though it was invariably too far away, or else she got there too late. She had entertained the thought of visiting hospitals and asking to see recent arrivals, preferably straight out of car crashes, but then thought better of it — she didn't want to seem weird.

It wasn't her fault, she thought to herself. This obsessive desire to capture the stuff of her nightmares onscreen was just the emergent property of her psyche over which she had no control and for which she couldn't be blamed. There was an obvious through-line to certain events in her life, after all. And as a plus, it would be nice to have proof that those certain events had happened the way she remembered them.

She moved farther away and up close again, keeping the camera rolling between angles, as she tried to get a directorial grasp on the silence and the sadness and the *emptiness* of it. Just as she thought she had gotten a decent amount of footage to upload into her laptop, she heard the first siren. No sooner had she had the time to process this than the world rippled and she went flying.

The reverberations of the explosion coursed through the ground at the same time that Saskia fell down in a heap, plunging into a creek of garbage and banging her shoulder. For a moment, the earth buckled like a bedsheet being swept up and down, and the girl felt an urge to hang on. Just now, the sound of the boom had caught up to her ears, roiling in her eardrums.

Saskia looked up. Through the gaps in the elevated platform above, she saw that the darkening sky had a bolt of pink and orange shooting through it, and that fire was raining down. She sat up, wincing at the pain that throbbed in her shoulder and tailbone, and grabbed onto the concrete barrier to hoist herself to a standing position. She almost slipped and fell down again as she put her shoe on an empty bottle that slid out from underneath her. After righting herself, she looked down and noted that her camcorder had landed badly. She reached down, suppressing the surge of lightheadedness that nearly had her flat on the ground again, and picked it up. Her heart relocated itself to her stomach at the sight of the cracked lens. It was the same camcorder she had used since she was six and a replacement would not be cheap.

Then she started wondering what had caused the explosion. Past the jungle of weeds and trash that encircled the platform, she could see the fringes of civilization, where passersby on the street, many of whom had also fallen, gathering themselves and looking with horror to the

direction of the blast, which she realized was also the source of the ominous fiery light. Saskia tottered forward to where she could get a better vantage point, and the bottom of the elevated platform lifted itself out of her eyesight to reveal the burning factory.

Chaos fluttered and thrashed in her brain, but was already dissipating to make way for quick, methodical calculation.

Common sense told Saskia to get as far away as possible from the disaster, and the vicinity of flaming debris and radiation that it had probably created. She looked down at her camera and turned the lens upward, staring into the angry zigzag bisecting the deep black eye of the camera. It was a bad crack, but Saskia thought it could still work just enough to capture basic shapes, to suggest the gist of a scene. She was already imagining things — bodies crushed under rubble, bleeding limbs, shrieking skinless figures in the street — things she didn't want to imagine.

She thought of the stories she had always heard as a child, of the monsters they kept in Niflheim. She thought of her mother with her long limbs and stony eyes. She thought of all of the hours she had spent wondering where she had gone and all of the times in her life she had looked over to the factory on the skyline and wondered.

And so, as agents searched the city for the boy who, at that moment, was still in a dream-state recovering from his more-than-near death experience, and as everyone else in the city except for the firefighters and the men in hazmat suits ran away from the burning factory, the girl with the broken camera made a different decision and, for the second time in her life, walked toward disaster.

ELEVEN

November 11th, 2009.

After the funeral, Kevin found Saskia sitting on a bench outside the church, studying her camcorder, and approached her. “What are you doing here?” he said.

“Here at this funeral?” said Saskia. “Here on this bench? Here in the world?”

“I mean, here in Wackorimm,” he said. “How did you get out of the city?”

“I live in Wackorimm,” said Saskia, as if the answer was obvious. “What are you doing in Wackorimm?”

“Well,” said Kevin, “as of recently, I also live in Wackorimm.”

“Cool,” said Saskia. “So we both live in Wackorimm. Hence, here we are. Mystery solved.” She didn’t inject her tone with a great deal of sarcasm, but said it blankly, apparently preoccupied with the camcorder which, Kevin just now noticed, had an ugly crack across its lens.

“Can I sit down with you?” said Kevin.

“Free country,” said Saskia. Kevin sat down on the bench and looked at the crack in the camera.

“That’s a pretty bad crack,” he said.

“War wound,” said Saskia, “from the explosion. It’s alright. It films okay, it’s just that everything looks like you’re looking through a keyhole at somebody’s reflection in a funhouse mirror. All distorted and shadowy. But I think that will just be my new style.”

Kevin remembered she had made a similar complaint in the hospital, right before making the comment that had haunted him — *I saw it running*. He asked one of two questions that had engraved itself in his skull for the past two weeks. “When you said that you saw something running outside the hospital,” he said, “what did you see?”

Saskia shrugged. “I’m not sure that I saw anything, really,” she said. “Probably just some firefighter running that I mistook for...something else.”

Kevin sensed a hint of evasiveness, as if she wasn't telling the full truth. He decided he would pursue it further later and focus for now on sustaining the conversation. "And you're alright, apart from that?" said Kevin, pointing to the broken camera. "No other war wounds?"

"Well, my shoulder still hurts now and then, but excepting hurt shoulders, I'm fine," said Saskia. "My camera took the bulk of the suffering."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Kevin. "Can I ask...if you live in Wackorimm, what were you doing in the city?"

"I also live in the city," said Saskia. "Or at least, I used to. My uncle Marv worked for the Factory, so we had two houses. One in the city, one here. And now the city house is full of radiation, so we just live here."

Kevin's mind had just solved an equation. This girl was like him — some important familial connection had earned her a first-class ticket far away from the room with the animals on the walls, all the way to safety in Wackorimm. He wondered if, just as he had spent hours wondering what had happened to her, she had spent hours pondering his fate. "My mom used to work for the Factory too," he said. "And now...I live with my mom's lawyer."

"I gathered," said Saskia. "I remember him. He seems like a fun guy."

"Yeah," deadpanned Kevin. "Hysterical. A laugh a minute."

"I'm sorry about your mom," Saskia added.

"Thanks," said Kevin. Coming from this girl, for some reason, it was a message of condolence that he actually appreciated for once. "And your uncle? Is he..."

"Dead," said Saskia. "They never even found his body."

"Yeah," said Kevin quietly. "I know how that feels." They sat in silence for a few moments.

"My mom is also gone," said Saskia. "And my dad left long ago. That's why I live with my uncle. Well, now, I just live with my aunt."

"I'm sorry," said Kevin. "I also never knew my dad. Can I ask...how did she die?"

“You don’t have to preface every question with ‘can I ask,’” said Saskia. “It’s redundant. You’re already asking the question in the process of requesting permission to ask the question.”

“Right,” said Kevin, thinking that this sounded like something his mother would have told him.

“Sorry.”

“If you’re curious about something, just ask,” said Saskia. “I’ll tell you if I want to answer or not.”

“Ok,” said Kevin.

“I didn’t say my mom died,” said Saskia. “I said she was gone. She might be dead. I don’t know. The last I saw her...she sort of wasn’t really my mom anymore.” She paused, and then added in a hesitant tone, “That’s what I thought I saw outside Niflheim. Again, it was probably nothing, but I thought I saw something that...kinda looked like her.”

Kevin tried to conceal his startled reaction by adjusting his position nonchalantly and tip-tapping his fingers on his thighs, clearing his throat and feeling his eyebrow twitch (*Damian Ridley, get out of my fucking head*, he thought to himself). “Sorry if this question is weird,” he said slowly, “but...your mom the last time you saw her...was her face, like...rotting?”

“No,” said Saskia, looking up at him with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” said Kevin. “Nothing, forget it.”

“You mean, rotting like ‘did she have leprosy’ or something?”

“No, it’s alright, forget it,” said Kevin. “I just thought I’d ask.”

“I mean,” said Saskia, “her face was kinda...dead. But it wasn’t rotting.”

Kevin and Saskia made eye contact, and Kevin decided that he liked her eyes. They were large and deep-set, with pretty hazel irises encircling sharp pupils that could have been placed there with a jab of a nib pen. Those pupils bore into him in a way that was somehow both piercing and also unreadable, as if they were communicating some kind of intense emotion but without any clarity as to what the emotion was.

He wanted to ask her more about her mom, but a brief mental calculation of the possibility that he might upset her too much dissuaded him. Instead, he asked the other of the two questions that had been on his mind since leaving the hospital: “Do you know, um...what happened to the other kids at the hospital? In that room with the animals?”

Saskia didn't reply at first. She looked away and Kevin thought he saw a hint of a tear. “I don't know,” she said. “I hope they're okay.”

“Yeah,” said Kevin. “Me too.” With a flash of insight unlike any other that he had experienced with anybody else, Kevin saw the same weight of guilt and anxiety he had been carrying, replicated on Saskia's shoulders. At the same time that he felt a pang of empathy, he also felt strangely happy — the knowledge that the weight was evenly distributed with someone else, even if it meant they also had to suffer, made the weight seem a little bit less heavy. Saskia's eyes turned back to him and he thought he saw the same thoughts running through her mind.

An impulse ran through him like an electric current, to give this odd girl a tight hug, crushing her with his relief that she was alive, that she was here in Wackorimm, and that they were here sitting on this park bench together. He clenched his fists to dispel the idea. Immediately afterward, he heard a voice calling his name. He turned around and saw Melissa waving to him. “Well, I gotta go,” he said, standing up.

“Hold on,” said Saskia, lifting up her camcorder. “If you want...and you can say no...I've been thinking of making this new documentary. It's all about thanatology.”

“Thana-what?”

“The scholarly study of death,” she explained. “Anyway...would you be down to do an interview?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Sure. I mean, death, y'know, that's my favorite topic, after old movies.” The dry joke seemed to send a nervous look across Saskia's face, so he added quickly, “I mean, yes. Seriously, I'd love to.”

“Cool,” said Saskia. “I'd be filming the interview at my house, so you can come over whenever you like.”

“Absolutely,” said Kevin. A sudden flare of nerve, and he asked, “How about tonight? At around 11pm?”

Saskia frowned. “That would be after curfew.”

“Well...yeah,” said Kevin. “Do you want to?”

The teenagers mirrored each other’s smiles. “Sure,” said Saskia. “I can do 11 pm.”

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Kevin went to bed still wearing his suit and waited for the Ridley household to go to sleep. When the house was still and the only sound was the pipes buried deep in the walls quietly hissing, Kevin lifted himself from under his blanket and tied his shoes. He passed Alton’s room and briefly listened. The nasal twelve-year-old snores confirmed that his neighbor had not woken. The staircase, a hideous modern installment, had the advantage of not creaking as he made the journey downstairs, and in a few minutes he stood in the dining room, illuminated only by the luminous green digits on the kitchen stove telling him the time — 10:40 pm — and the odd wisps of moonlight that managed to penetrate the windows. One thing Kevin still hadn’t gotten used to was the absence of the pale brown light that indicated night-time in the city, the black sky bleached by light pollution so that night was never completely dark. In the vestibule connecting the living room to the front door, he grabbed the keys from the counter, pausing to look up at the suited, faceless shape of his reflection in the oval mirror on the wall.

Then he was outside. He paused only once, at the end of the driveway, feeling surprisingly nervous, though whether nervousness came from fear of being caught or fear of some actual “breach” coming to get him. He took a deep breath and the freshness of the post-curfew night air reminded his lungs how to breathe. He spread out his arms in a Jesus-on-the-cross pose and twirled around in the driveway, daring a police car to come hurtling around the corner, or for some deformed beast straight out of Niflheim’s deepest chambers to leap out, rippling sinews and muscles and claws stitching themselves together from the material of the night as the lunging monstrosity aimed itself at the boy with the intention of ripping and tearing. But neither the police nor any monsters appeared.

The nervous urge to run back inside partly gave way to exhilaration and the twin emotions swirled and conjoined in Kevin's chest to create a sensation that he found he quite liked. The night twitched with menace and enticement at the same time. He was shivering slightly from the cold, but he liked that feeling too. He looked up at the moon, a calmly luminescent disk half-wrapped up in the smoky tendrils of the surrounding smattering of clouds, as if they were moving in to envelop it entirely. Long-dead stars, the brightest eyes of unseen galaxies, speckled the fringes of the atmosphere.

Kevin began to move his feet again, slowly, enjoying the symmetry of his feet as he placed one directly in front of the other and lined them up between each step. Gradually, he sped up, sticking his hands in his pockets and taking a look at his surroundings. For the first time, he was able to survey Wackorimm at night. The suburban houses all around that curled Kevin's lips by day appealed to him more with their indoor lights off, their gravel and cobblestone driveways undisturbed, their contents quiet and secretive. They could have been the gravestones to an uninhabited civilization in which the sun had long since left the earth.

Saskia's house wasn't far, and she had told him the directions. It was 10:55 pm when he arrived at the cobblestone walkway in front of a house that, in the night, was all indistinct angular shapes clustered together, like something large and obscene and mechanical that, when somebody pressed a button, would come ratcheting and heaving to life, pumping some unknown product out of the front door that stuck out at the front of a rectangular entryway disconnected from the rest of the building. Kevin set his shoe on the grass, and hesitated — it occurred to him that Saskia and he hadn't established any form of code to signal that he was outside without waking up her aunt. But then he noticed the soft edges of something glowing on the other side of the house. Making his way slowly through the grass, being careful not to step on anything that he couldn't see, he encircled the house and saw that the source of the bulbous aura of light was a tent set up in the back garden, with a dim shape sitting inside it.

Kevin approached, stood outside the tent, and whispered, "Hello?"

"Enter," came Saskia's voice. Inside, she was sitting lotus-style on top of a sleeping bag with eyes closed, apparently meditating. Unlike Kevin, she was no longer dressed formally, having

exchanged her dress for black leggings and an emerald cardigan. She opened her eyes and fixed Kevin with her trademark intense stare and smile. “Take a seat, Kevin Kraken,” she said.

Kevin sat cross-legged and, before he had a chance to say anything, Saskia had turned on the camcorder and was pointing it at him.

“Please state your full name for the camera.”

“Kevin Katurian Kraken,” said Kevin.

“Seriously?” said Saskia. “Your mom must have had a thing for the letter K. And how old are you, Kevin Katurian Kraken?”

“I’m, like, fifteen.”

“You’re *like* fifteen? Are you fifteen or not?”

“I will be in like a hundred days.”

“So, you’re fourteen,” said Saskia. “When is your birthday?”

“March 1st, 1995.”

“You said earlier that you liked old movies,” she said. “What are some of your favorites?” Seeing Kevin’s confusion, she explained, “These are just ice-breakers to ease the subject of the documentary into questioning.”

“Ok,” said Kevin. “Well, I’m a big fan of black-and-white Japanese cinema. I’ll watch anything that Kurosawa did — *Seven Samurai* is the best movie I’ve ever seen. Aside from Kurosawa, *Kwaidan* is great too. I’ve been trying to make my way through *The Human Condition*, but I haven’t had time to start the third part of the trilogy yet. So far, it’s great, though.”

“What do you think it’s like to die?” said Saskia.

The abruptness of the question took Kevin aback. The first answer that came to his lips was simply *Horrible*, but he felt that he should give some more thought to it. So, after a moment, he responded, “I don’t think you would know you’re dying.”

“Care to elaborate?” said Saskia.

“Well, it’s like when you go to sleep, right? You never remember the exact moment you fell asleep. You know it happened, in hindsight, because you remember the moment you wake up, but at the time...you’re just lying in bed one minute, and the next it’s like you’ve always been asleep. So I guess death is like that — you just lose track of what’s happening and slip away, and then it’s like you’ve always been dead.”

“So just like going to sleep,” said Saskia, “except you don’t wake up.”

“Yeah,” said Kevin. *And also a lot more painful*, he thought to himself — although, then again, going to sleep wasn’t always exactly painless. For him, going to sleep wasn’t always exactly painless. For him, going to sleep was a routine torturous process of sweating, tossing and turning, wriggling in a hypnagogic death trap that culminated with nightmares of endless escalators. Kevin thought of all the times he had heard that some late senior citizen had just “gone to sleep,” and wondered how unpleasant the process had actually been.

To die, to sleep, said his mother’s voice. *To sleep, perchance to dream?* A hideous face wafted into Kevin’s head and he shoved it away.

“Are you okay?” said Saskia, noticing his grimacing.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” said Kevin.

“What would be your preferred method of death?” she said.

“Not of old age,” said Kevin. “I’d rather...get eaten by hyenas than die of old age.”

“Interesting,” said Saskia. “Most people would not make that choice.”

“They’re wrong,” said Kevin. “Anybody who says they want to die of old age just hasn’t realized how horrific it would be. They put you in some hospital bed” — (inwardly, he shivered at the thought of spending one’s last days in Wackorimm Presbyterian) — “and pump you full of drugs to soothe the pain, but all the drugs do is make the process longer. You just lie there and decay, quietly and out of sight. You can’t get up, can’t walk around, can’t do anything except lie there and wait for it to end. You wait, day after day after day, wondering which morning will be the

last. Those will be your last memories. And then, when you finally die, you don't know it's coming, don't know what's happening. And they take your body out of the bed and put another one there in its place. No...I'd rather anything than dying of old age."

For a moment, the words sat in the air, and then Saskia added "Maybe every hospital should keep some hyenas in the basement just for the old people who want that option, then."

Kevin snorted. "Yeah, maybe," he said. "Can't say I'm a huge fan of the hyena option either, though."

"Inert gas asphyxiation, maybe?" said Saskia. "Supposed to be very quick and painless."

"What's that?" Saskia told him what it was, and he nodded. "Yeah, that sounds good. That's the one good way to die."

"What do you think about suicide?"

If Kevin had been taken aback before, now his alarm must have been visible. "What, like —" he stammered. "Are you asking me if I'm thinking of killing myself?"

"No," said Saskia. "*Are* you thinking of killing yourself?"

"No!" he protested, a little too loudly. "I mean — not like, seriously or anything."

"I was more just asking about your thoughts in general on suicide," said Saskia.

"What do I think in general about suicide?" said Kevin. "I think it's tragic."

"Is that *all* you think about it?" Saskia hinted, removing her eye from the lens for one moment to fix Kevin with a raised eyebrow above one intense hazel eye, as if she was looking into him.

Kevin thought for a moment. "Well," he began, phrasing his words very carefully, "it is a tragedy. You know, that somebody would be in so much pain that they don't think their life is worth living anymore. I guess the idea of killing yourself in general, though — if, like, you're not depressed or anything, just because you've decided that you want to die — I guess it's a lot better than a lot of deaths. Because you're sort of deciding for yourself when and how you want

to go. It still might be painful, but you have control over it. I don't know if that makes any sense."

Saskia remained silent but appeared deep in introspection. Eventually, she turned off the camcorder and set it down. "Thanks, Kevin Katurian Kraken," she said. "You make for a very interesting subject."

"Is that all you want from me?" said Kevin.

"For now," said Saskia. "But can I confess something to you, Kevin?"

"Sure."

"I wasn't actually making a documentary about thanatology," she said. "At least, not before seeing you this morning."

Kevin couldn't think of what to say. In the end, he settled for, "Oh?"

"I wanted to see you again," said Saskia, "because I remember you from the hospital. And you've sort of been stuck in my head. The truth is...I've never finished a documentary. I keep filming things and editing, but I never make anything out of it. I'm just adding to this one, really long documentary that I've been making since I was eight. And this morning when I was talking to you, I started to think that maybe there's a way to finish that documentary, if it involves you."

The two teens sat cross-legged, each studying the other as if in fascination. The same electric current of impulse that Kevin had felt earlier on the bench was now running through him again — this time, to his surprise, it was directing his focus not to Saskia's large hazel eyes, but to her lips, telling him to lean in and kiss her. It was an alien sensation and one that Kevin didn't know what to do with, but as he was in the process of figuring it out, Saskia said "Do you want to play fortune-teller?"

"What?"

"Fortune-teller. It's an origami game where you say pick numbers and colors and I tell you whether you'll be married in the future, whether you'll be happy, stuff like that."

Kevin started laughing, a shrill cackle that prompted Saskia to shush him: “My aunt is still asleep!”

“Sorry,” Kevin said. “It’s just — has anyone ever told you that you have this habit of abruptly changing the subject?”

“No,” said Saskia. “Why? Is it weirding you out?”

“No, not at all,” said Kevin with a grin. “I think it’s kinda cool.”

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By the time an hour and a half had passed, Kevin had learned that in the future, he would be married to a famous supermodel, would himself be wealthy from some form of illegal activity, and would die happy and rich in his nineties (“Crime pays after all,” he observed). Near the end, the exhaustion had caught up to Kevin, and he thought that he should be getting home just in case one of the Riddleys had woken up in the time he had been gone. He and Saskia stood outside the tent in the garden and said their goodbyes.

“Thank you for the invitation,” said Kevin, and Saskia waved her hand to gesture that it was no problem. “No, really,” he said. “This has been the most fun I’ve had in a long time.” He hesitated, and admitted, “The truth is, since moving to Wackorimm...nights haven’t been very good for me.”

Saskia nodded in understanding. “Let me give you a word of advice,” she said. “Never believe anything your mind tells you about yourself after 9 pm.”

Kevin absorbed that. “Huh,” he said. “That’s really good advice.”

The teens regarded each other. “Can I give you a hug?” Kevin asked, and Saskia nodded assent. They leaned into the first real embrace that Kevin had experienced since the death of his mom, and he held on as tightly as he could, until Saskia indicated to him that she was having some trouble breathing. He let go and said, “Well. I’ll see you then.”

“Sure,” said Saskia. “We’ll probably be classmates once school starts up.”

“Yeah,” said Kevin with a smile. “I look forward to it.”

The hazel eyes made one last intense strobe as they looked into his. With a smirk, Saskia turned around. Kevin watched, nonplussed, as the girl grabbed onto a loop of ivy snaking around the rear of the house and expertly scaled the wall up to the open bedroom window. Having arrived at her destination, the girl threw a leg over the window room, waved to Kevin once more, and then retracted her other leg and ducked out of sight.

As Kevin left the garden, he could already feel the magnetic pull on his organs returning, and in his mind he forcefully told it to go away. Tonight, he refused to allow it. The current of impulse was running through him and he allowed it to subsume his whole body and electrocute the ball of somnal dread in his chest. So impulsive was he feeling that he did a little jig and almost fell flat on his ass when his foot made contact with an unseen ice patch. He managed to regain his balance and was grateful that Saskia hadn't seen him. Holding himself and shivering, he made his way home.

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As Kevin approached the Ridley household, he saw to his relief that the windows were still unlit. He yawned, ready to collapse into bed and fall asleep without the usual hassle, no matter what escalators awaited him. He slipped the key carefully into the lock of the front door, opened it, and closed it as quietly as he could behind him. The journey through the dining room, up the stairs, and onto the second landing was uneventful.

As he stood outside Rochester Ridley's room, he heard a noise from the adjacent bathroom. He turned around. The light in the bathroom was off and the door was open but he could have sworn he had heard the sound of bottles clattering as if somebody was moving around and knocking things over. "Alton?" he whispered.

There was no response, but as he listened closely, Kevin realized he could hear the sound of someone breathing. And now he was really listening, dispelling every other hint of a sound from his attention. It wasn't an auditory illusion. Someone was in the bathroom.

The boy's blood went cryogenic. He swiveled, walked into Rochester's room, and grabbed the first heavy object he could find — a fat hundred-page sports almanac lying splayed on the floor. He held the almanac over his shoulders, ready for Winifred or her leering Panama-hatted

companion to emerge with arms outstretched, and prepared to hit either one of them as painfully as he could over the head with the book. He got close enough to the bathroom door to move his head in.

Someone was curled up in a fetal position in the shower, collapsed shampoo bottles scattered around like the remnants of a shrine. The figure's breathing was ragged and hollow. The shape of the figure didn't immediately remind Kevin of either CL or Winifred. Tentatively, and with much self-doubt, he reached out and flicked the light on.

Something — blood mixed with adipoceric slime, the refuse of a bloating body collapsing in on itself and expelling its contents — was sprayed across the white tiles of the bathroom wall, and as if the sight had unlocked the rest of his senses, Kevin had no sooner seen it than the stench came roiling into his nostrils and instantaneously had him doubled over, dry heaving only once before his mouth nearly unhinged to unleash a torrent of vomit onto the floor. The red-and-black spray pointed downward like a jagged arrow to the person curled up in the shower, who could have been the victim of a lion attack, long since discarded in the desert and left in a state of advanced decay. The figure's face and torso visible through its ragged clothing were now almost completely devoid of skin, with the subcutaneous muscle reduced by decomposition to a shredded, papery mesh of dried viscera that looked to have been dragged up out of the earth from where it had been buried. In places, exposed bone gleamed, sores oozed with the same slime splattered on the wall, and flesh shifted and rippled as insectile life scuttled around, the last few late-partygoers feasting on what cadaveric material they hadn't already consumed. The figure was unmistakably dead — and yet its chest and shoulders hitched up and down with the loud breathing that Kevin had heard.

The figure wore a woolly shroud that, though it was ragged and damp with bodily fluids and in some places reduced to threads, was still recognizable as a Christmas sweater, adorned with the faded but legible image of a smiling reindeer. Below its sweater, the breathing corpse's blue jeans were torn at the knee — tears which had clearly been inflicted not by wear and tear as with the sweater, but as deliberate design by a machine in a sweatshop — exposing one knee that still had its skin, and one which was nothing more than a nub of bone. The side of the head that faced Kevin was bald, but from the other side, shocks of frizzy hair sprouted in clumps and straggled down the figure's side.

Kevin didn't need to see the other side of the figure's face to know who it was, but now she turned anyway and regarded him with a pristine green eye, and Kevin yelped. For the second time that night, the boy lost his balance and this time actually fell, his butt thumping painfully against the bathroom floor. He scrabbled backward, screaming and pointing at the intruder in the shower, all logic gone, all thoughts of the girl with the camcorder and her fortune-teller game and the Fibonacci sequence vanished from his brain, leaving nothing but the familiar nightmare-feeling now gone into overdrive and sucking him down into a sea of coiling black terror. He didn't even hear his own screaming as it brought on all of the lights on the second landing and summoned the running Ridley family to the bathroom, where they saw their suited house guest sitting in a pool of puke, pointing at something and hollering at the top of their lungs. Damian and Melissa immediately bent down and tried in vain to soothe the boy, while Alton stood at the margins, rubbing his eyes and staring in bafflement, but none of the trio could see what Kevin saw or smell what he smelt.

As for Clementine, she smiled, sat back, and gazed with love at her screaming son with one side of her face.

To be continued