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Sickos

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Sickos

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

by
Simon Dimock

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2022



by

Simon Dimock

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For Sarina, my star!

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I am Starchild, and I am coming.

There was a man with a hook for a hand in the backseat of Sam Leonard's car.

Gray clouds hung in the sky and made the world dark, except for the houses all the way down the street past the stop sign. The blue one across the street, cradled in four year old scaffolding, could not shimmer like it usually did. It sat dormant until the next day, when the sun shined again and the metal beams reflected light into Sam's living room. The one to the left with the backyard swingset shuddered while the basement laundry machines ran an afternoon load. To the right, a storm door swung open and swung shut. It was windy and wet and the lock was broken.

The clouds pathetically insisted, "We could rain. You don't know!" They said that, out loud, with their voices. Telephone wires and street lights walled the road off from the rest of the neighborhood. Hundreds of staples and nails from lost cat posters riddled every pole. 2015 was a terrible year.

None of the houses looked the same on Sam's street. One was tall, one was small, one had a garage. Sam's was a two story single-family with a short driveway with no swingset or scaffolding. He did have a storm door. His house was different from all the others on the street, but it did look like many, many others. They just weren't in this part of Norfolk County. The trees that were cut back to make way for more telephone poles to put lost cat posters on swayed in the gray wind.

Sam wasn't paying attention to any of that. He was paying attention to the man with a hook for a hand in the backseat of his car.

He could see the man from where he was crouching, clutching the curtains as he peered through the small window in his bedroom that looked out over his driveway. His hands gripped the white linen.

Sam was standing on a pile of books, which were strewn across the floor in a panicked hurl of the bookcase earlier when he first noticed the man in his car, a silver Corolla. He planned on using it to barricade his front door. It would have been a good start, if he hadn't forgotten he was in his upstairs bedroom. His feet slipped on softcovers, breaking spines. Quivering, he stared, at the perfect Dan Brown angle, into the backseat of his car. He rested his nose on the windowsill, sniffing white paint. He couldn't believe his eyes.

There's a trickle running down your back.

The man sat in the back seat, behind the driver. He had a hook on his right hand. He was wearing a black cloak with a hood that cast a heavy shadow over his face. He stared straight ahead into the driver's seat headrest. He was lean and seemed tall, sitting down in the car. Sam couldn't tell, and the tint of the window didn't help.

Surely, the man was going to wait for Sam to get in his car, drive to work, get out of his car, walk into work, spend the day at work, leave work, get back in the car, drive home, and stab him with his hook in the neck the moment he pulled his key out of the ignition. That is what

happens when there is a man with a hook in, or near, a car. Sam knew all this. He read the stories. They were so scary.

There's a trickle running down your upper arms, originating in your armpits.

Sam squinted at the dashboard. He noticed something. There was a shape carved in the plastic that wasn't there the day before, right above the left-most air vent on the part of the dashboard you put hats or papers or takeout. It was very hard to make out from up here. He'd have to go downstairs. Trying his best not to squish any books as he rushed out of his bedroom for the stairs, Sam brushed past his bed and bureau and framed print of Sargeant's *Daughters* from Nanna. He discovered later that he squished many books, creasing pages back in on themselves so that when he put them back on the once again upright bookshelf, they shifted the rest of the books at an angle, because they were now bent in half.

He flew down the stairs and pressed his face into the dining room window that gave him a head-on view of the driveway. Now, with the car facing towards him, he could make out an *S*. It was made of three straight lines like a lightning bolt, scratched into the plastic very close to the lip of the air vent. An *A*, an *F*, an *E*. No curves in the letters, just straight lines, long and short. If he were to sit in the driver's seat and look over the steering wheel, it would be upside down. SAFE.

A sliver of the man was visible from the backseat. There was no hint of a face under the hood.

I'm trying to focus, and I don't want to sound gross, but now there's a little trickle where your legs meet, like your crotch area. Like under there.

Sam wondered—

Plus all those other trickles I mentioned.

—why him?

Oop—

Why now?

Sorry.

Oh, why now?

Sam had learned his lesson. He should be more careful than he was with the bookcase. He walked into the living room and thought about what needed to be moved first. He picked the vase up off the coffee table, and put it in the kitchen to the side of the microwave, making sure it wouldn't get knocked over if he opened the door too hard. Now that the vase was out of the way, Sam dragged the coffee table into the dining room, then pushed the couch in front of the front door. He took three kitchen table chairs and piled them on top of the couch, one by one, arranging them legs up, so they would balance on the cushions better. He laid the dining room table on its side, then pushed it in front of the back door.

He ran into the bathroom, turned the lights off, and locked the door. He sat down on the floor, rocking back and forth with his knees at his chest and running his hands through his

hair. There was a monster murder man outside. With a hook. In the car. Man in the car door
hook hand–

SAFE. He decided not to call anybody.

I know it's not important, but please do something about that trickle.

Sam had sweat through his blue t-shirt. He had sweat through his jeans. He was
drenched.

“What now?” he wondered.

Sam unlocked the bathroom door. He went around the house and shook his barricades.
He wasn't certain they would work, but they were preventing him from getting out of the
house, which meant they had to be decent at doing the other thing. He looked out the dining
room window. The man hadn't moved. Sam went back to the bathroom and locked the door
again. He sat on the floor. He began to shiver as the cooled sweat in his clothes stuck to his
skin. He figured he should turn the light off again, so he did. That way, the man wouldn't
know Sam was in the bathroom if he got past the barricades. He brushed his hair, dripping
with sweat, out of his eyes. He leaned against the wall. The baseboard heater warmed his back.
His shirt unstuck from his skin.

Sam sat there all night. He was so lucky that he had spotted the man before he took the
car for errands that morning. After all, the man was hard to see, in his dark hood in the
backseat. On the other hand, he was just sitting there. It crossed Sam's mind that the man

could be a very bad murderer. He barely hid at all. He wasn't crouched down low or anything like that. He was just sitting there. That must mean that he was the luckiest person alive. How likely was it that Sam, a man completely unprepared to protect himself from a murderer, was chosen by a guy so inept that he sat in full view of everybody on the street when he was trying to do his dark business? And one with a hook for a hand, no less. The odds of that were historic. He may just be holding the hook in his hand, though.

It was dark out and the streetlights were on. Sam would not be leaving the bathroom now. It felt disrespectful to want to play a puzzle game on his phone, so he didn't.

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

The sun came up on a Sunday. The clouds were gone, the sun shone, and the scaffolding glittered. Sam woke up early, and his neck hurt because he had slept with his head resting on the toilet seat. He had a message from Lassie on his phone. Her contact read, "Lassie Met Through Tom 42 Hanover St Friends With Tom." The text read:

"did you make it to the farmers market"

He hadn't. He'd barricaded his house and slept in the bathroom.

Lassie was having a dinner on Wednesday and needed Sam to get her a zucchini ahead of time. She told him her recipe called for "older zucchini," which they both took to mean "one that had sat around for a little while." They met through Tom, that tool, who got them both jobs at Sal's, Norfolk County's fifth oldest restaurant on Hanover Street. Sam worked at Cazzo now, but Lassie and Tom still worked together at Sal's. He loved when Lassie had dinners, especially when he was invited to them. Lassie and Tom usually brought their friends, who Sam got along with fine. He hadn't seen many of them since he left Sal's and Tom started hanging out with Lassie more.

His clothes were dry, but he smelled terrible. He drank some water from the sink and slowly opened the bathroom door. He made his way to the dining room and looked out the window. The man was still there, sitting in the backseat.

SAFE.

Sam was very hungry. He was going to go to the farmer's market yesterday, but then he saw a man with a hook for a hand in his car. He looked in his empty cabinets and his empty fridge. He found a box of Kix and ate them with his bare hands. He thought that he would eventually have to leave to get food or he would starve. The Kix were already halfway gone.

The man hadn't moved. Sam stared at him from the window for a minute. Then, he took the chairs off the couch, pushed the couch back into the living room, laced up some sneakers, put on a tight jacket, and held the doorknob for a long time. He twisted it and opened the door. He took in his front yard. Eventually, his eyes landed on his car. There he was, staring at the headrest. Sam took a few steps across the porch, never taking his eyes off the man's hood.

There's that trickle again. I'm sorry, I have a thing. It's very gross.

Sam's legs criss-crossed as he stepped sideways off the porch and across the front yard, circling around his driveway. No detectable movement. His arms stuck out to his sides like he was on a balance beam. He reached the end of his driveway. He paused. No detectable movement.

He took off down the street.

FmEBbGADC/G

“I’m recording this voice memo walking down the street towards Stop & Shop. My shoes are muddy because it rained two days ago, and I have to walk in the ditch because the street is busy. I want people to know what happened to me in case I get killed. A man with a hook for a hand is in my car, which is at my house. I hid all day yesterday. I managed to escape today, because I needed to find food. I don’t know if I can go back home. He still hasn’t moved.”

Sam ended the recording. He walked along the busy street towards the supermarket. None of the trees had their leaves back yet. They were either all late, or all dead. The morning air made him cold. He got another text from Lassie:

“i asked tom to get me zucchini but he couldnt”

Tom. That jerk must have put that chore off and then forgotten about it. If it wasn’t for the man with a hook for a hand, Sam would’ve gotten Lassie her zucchini yesterday, and she wouldn’t have had to ask Tom. He’d go now, but they’re only open on Saturdays. He walked faster. It took an hour and a half instead of two because of that.

This isn’t really a trickle anymore. This is a stream.

When Sam arrived, the sun was still behind the Stop & Shop, casting the whole parking lot in a long shadow. There were no cars idling in front of the store. That made Sam feel good, because any fire truck that needed to come to the store would be able to fight fire more effectively than it would have been able to if a bunch of cars were idling in front of the store.

They couldn't get close enough because of people like that. People like that, people like Sam. He also felt better because everyone in the store had to walk to their cars further than they wanted to. He knew that was a mean thing to think, and he was trying to do better, but it was how he felt in the moment. There you have it.

He walked into the store with a shopping cart that he found left in the lot. He thought nothing of that convenience. He was instantly taken by all the people who didn't know how afraid he was. He watched them look at cucumbers and touch pears. They were so lucky to touch pears. They had no fear inside of them. Sam couldn't bring himself to do what they were doing. He could try, but it wouldn't be the same.

He had left his list in his other jacket, but he remembered most of it.

"Milk, eggs, tomatoes, pickles, chickpeas, something frozen, something canned," he said to himself. Not zucchini, that was at the farmer's market.

There was a man with cheese on a platter. Sam was disgusted by the thought of taking a free sample, so he restrained himself. Surely, there was a better time for things like that. He picked up eggs and pickles. They were shelved right next to each other. They weren't next to each other the last time he was here.

He got another text from Lassie:

"do you want anything from stop shop?"

Sam looked up and saw Lassie standing at the far end of an aisle, under a perilously balanced archway of Cheerios. Her puffy white coat filled the space under the archway perfectly. He looked at the floor.

“Sam!” she said.

“Hello!” Sam called out.

Lassie walked up to him, pouting. Sam shuffled his feet. With everything going on right now, he felt unprepared to see a friend, especially after not seeing her in a while. She shaved her head recently. She never told him she wanted to do that. He wanted to ask what happened so badly, but didn't. There was too much going on.

“You look bad. You smell bad. Are you doing okay?” she asked.

“Wow, buy a guy a drink first,” he said. “Ha.”

Lassie looked at Sam, concerned.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“I'm in a lot of trouble. Someone tried to kill me. I need your help. I walked here,” he said. He pointed at his shoes.

“Come with me!” she said, taking his hand and pulling him towards checkout.

Lassie took Sam to the register and paid for his eggs and pickles. She packed up their groceries, and they walked out of the store. She asked Sam to put their carts back in the store, and he did. They both got in Lassie's car. Sam was very quiet.

“Can you tell me what happened?” she said.

Sam played her the voice memo.

“I’m recording this voice memo walking down the street towards Stop & Shop. My shoes are muddy because I have to walk in the ditch because the street is busy, and it rained two days ago. I want people to know what happened to me in case I get killed. A man with a hook for a hand is in my car, which is at my house. I hid all day yesterday. I managed to escape today, because I needed to find food. I don’t know if I can go back home. He still hasn’t moved.”

“Let’s go see him,” she said.

“What?” Sam asked. “Why? No!”

“You said he hasn’t moved,” said Lassie. “Let’s see if that’s still true.”

They drove away from the supermarket. Sam shook his head.

“I don’t want to see him,” he said. “I don’t want to go home ever again. He can have it. Maybe he wants to kill me, or maybe he wants my car, or my house, and this is a power play. I’ll tell you what: it’s working. He must want it really badly, the house, if he won’t move. I don’t want to see him.”

“I do,” said Lassie. “Honestly, it doesn’t sound like anything to worry about.”

They sped down the street. Lassie didn’t seem concerned at all. Sam clenched his teeth when she pulled up to his house, and she smiled at him. If they got out of her car, they wouldn’t be safe. They would be in the open air, exposed, with no glass, metal, or plastic

barrier between their necks and his hook. What if the man had gotten out of the car while he was gone and was waiting for Sam to be out in the open? He should stay in the car.

Hi again. I think you already know what I have to point out. Too bad you're not listening.

Lassie turned the car off. She lowered her bald head and looked towards Sam's car through the window.

"Well, I see him," she said.

That's one fear gone.

"He's still where you said he was," she said.

He was. Sam could see him.

"I think he wrote SAFE on my dashboard," he said.

"Oh?" said Lassie. She unbuckled herself and got out of the car. Sam followed her, waving his arms, but stopped before his driveway.

"That's dangerous!" he said.

Lassie looked at the dash through the driver's window. She walked right past the left passenger's window on her way up. The man didn't budge. Sam had never gotten that close to him before.

"That says SALE," she said, turning back toward Sam.

He stopped waving his arms. He looked at the man, unmoving. He stepped onto the driveway, walking by the man, slowly. He joined Lassie at the windshield. As he looked at the message up close, he saw that it did, in fact, say SALE.

“My car’s not for sale,” he said, and he frowned, because he didn’t know what he was being told. He could have sworn it said SAFE.

“Is that what that means?” she asked. “He’s trying to sell your car?”

They stood there. They looked at the message, scratched in by the hook. They were so close to him, and nothing was happening. He made no moves. Sam was waiting for the man to do something, and Lassie was not.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” she said.

“Wait! I don’t want you to leave!” said Sam, because he felt much safer with her around him. “I haven’t seen you in so long!”

“I understand that,” she said. “But here’s the situation, Sam. Either I stay, and nothing happens, I leave, and nothing happens, I leave, and he kills you, or I stay, and he kills both of us. These are the options that the universe has presented to you. Your car, your options, your hook man. There isn’t much for you to do in any of those scenarios.”

She pointed.

“You think you could take this guy?”

Sam looked at the man in the car. He wasn’t a large man.

“I have no impact on any of these outcomes, so I’m gonna go about my business. It’s a work day for me,” she said. “Plus, I have to get that zucchini from Tom.”

“Whatever,” said Sam, looking into the car. “You have your own life.”

“Aw, don’t be like that,” said Lassie, walking back to her car. “It’s okay to be passive. This isn’t a situation you can be an active participant in. That happens.”

She touched Sam’s shoulder to comfort him.

“I think if he wanted to kill you, he would have done it already,” she said, smiling. “And I’m not mad about the zucchini, either. Tom’s got that covered. You’re still invited to dinner. I thought I should say that because I know you’re not thinking about it as an option right now. The idea of dinner probably offends you but I think it would be nice to hang out like we used to, all of us. You, me, Tom, Steve, Claire, Nadia.”

She walked away from Sam’s car and towards hers. She opened her trunk, put Sam’s groceries on the driveway, and then got back in her car. She waved goodbye as she drove away. Her license plate said *GOOLY15*. He didn’t know she liked soccer. He never made that connection before.

Now that she’s gone, do you think you should maybe treat that trickle with some water? From a shower, finally? Please? It’s very hard to stay on topic when all I can think about are those pit stains.

Sam picked up his groceries and made his way inside. He didn't look at the man in the car. He put his groceries on the floor, moved the kitchen table away from the back door and back where it belonged and put his groceries on it. He put his eggs and pickles in the fridge. Cereal, eggs, and pickles. Good *Chopped* episode right there. He cooked eggs and ate pickles and Kix.

Sam felt disgusting. He wanted to shower.

Yes!

Instead, when he was done eating, he sat on the dining room table and watched the man in the car.

But...

Through the dining room window, and then the windshield, and then behind the driver's seat headrest, Sam watched the man. Three layers between him and the hood and the hook. Tomorrow was Monday, and he hadn't called in sick. He was wondering how he was going to get to work. He decided to clean himself up, at least.

Thank God.

He stood in the shower for a few minutes and then got out. He walked into his room, climbing over piles of books. He sat on his bed. All the lights were still on in the house. That was something. He remembered he hadn't put the barricade on the front door back up.

He pushed the fallen bookshelf and dresser up against the bedroom door. He took some books and stacked them on top of the barricade for extra weight. He knew he was going to fall asleep, so he did, under blankets, on a pillow.

This is much better.

Sam dreamt of seahorses bobbing in and out of the water, hundreds of them.

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

Sam awoke the next morning on his side with his head on his pillow, still alive. He had thrashed the sheets off himself in the night, and they hung off the end of the bed, crumpling on the floor. The barricade was not moved. All his books were right where he left them. From his sideways position on the bed, he inspected his work, which looked a lot flimsier than he remembered, seeing it vertically like that. He felt so lucky that he didn't bother to make his bed.

He brushed his teeth, washed his face, and ran down the stairs. He checked the dining room window for movement. There was none. He felt better. He ate Kix and thought about going to work. It was already 9:00 am. He wouldn't get there on time by foot. He had to take the car. He put on his shoes and jacket and bag and walked out the front door. He stared at the car, which he occasionally, in secret, called Lassie. He thought it was funny to give it a human name, especially her's. It made it more natural to talk aloud when he was driving, because it was like he was telling her all the things he'd hoped to tell her but didn't, because she was at work, or with Tom, or preparing to go to work. That seemed in bad taste now.

Walking across the front lawn, Sam looked at the man, frowning. No detectable movement. He took out his key and unlocked the car. No detectable movement. He opened the driver's side door. He slid into the seat and looked behind the steering wheel at the dash.

“SALE,” it said.

Then, it said another thing. He noticed on the dash, closer to the passenger seat than the driver's seat, there was something new. Sam read it. It said:

WE ARE IN DANGER, AND I NEED YOUR HELP.

If the man with the hook for a hand carved that into the dashboard, then why was he asking for Sam's help? He was a murderer! Sam squinted at the message.

"0% APR," it said, all of a sudden.

Straight lines, scraped into the plastic. Sam was filled with dread. He fell out of the car, rolling onto the driveway, leaving the door ajar. The man did not move an inch. Sam really wanted to know what was going on, so he took a deep breath.

"When did you write that?" Sam yelled.

Last night, the man said.

Sam stared. He heard a hard voice say "last night," but the man didn't budge or shake or quiver. He stared into the headrest. No detectable movement.

"Did you just speak?" Sam asked.

Yes! said the man.

Sam scrambled backwards onto the grass of his front yard, screaming. The scaffolding across the street shimmered over the lawn like light at the bottom of a pool.

"Oh God, you're going to get me! You're going to get me with your hook!" Sam said, rolling around in the grass. "You escaped from a scary place, and they talked about it on the

radio, and I said, ‘Don’t worry about it,’ and then you’re going to scrape your hook along the length of my car, and then when I get out and see it, you’ll get me! You’re going to kill me with your hook! You’re a murderer!”

The driver’s door was open, and the left passenger’s was not. That made it difficult to hear the man speak, but not impossible.

I am not, he said, unmoving.

“Yes, you are,” Sam said, sitting up. “I’ve read the scary stories. You scrape your hook on cars and then you kill people! It’s sick. What you do is sick.”

Do you see any scratches? he asked.

Sam looked at his car. There were no scratches.

“You’re trying to trick me, Sam said. “You want me to get back in my car because there are no scratches, and because you’re so still and motionless, and when I do, you’re going to poke my eye out with your hook.”

I promise, I won’t, said the man.

“I don’t believe you,” Sam said.

That’s okay. Please, let’s just talk, the man said.

Sam was frightened. He was frightened because he was wrong. If the man was talking, then he could move, because you have to move your mouth. Sam had started to think that the man really couldn’t move, because he hadn’t gotten out of the car to eat, drink, sleep, or

anything else in a few days, and he hadn't even done any of that inside the car, and he didn't kill him when Lassie came by. But now that he was talking, and that proved that he could move. And if he could move, then he could kill. He could move, but he was choosing not to, and Sam didn't know why. Now Sam was wrong and in danger.

"Why wouldn't you talk to me until now? Sam asked.

It's rude to not let you speak first, the man said.

"But you were talking," Sam said. He remembered now, in the bottom of his brain, hearing the man speak in a way that was different. He heard a lot of criticism about his sweatiness.

That's not talking, the man said. *I didn't want to wait for you to talk to me first, so I tried talking in the way I usually talk. You know, metally. I thought it wouldn't work, because it never works from me to human, but it did. Then, I didn't know what to do. I tried telling you that I need your help, because the clock is ticking, but I got distracted. I apologize for all that stuff I mentioned. It made this line of communication a lot less helpful than I thought it would be. It's not rude to do, by the way, this brain meld thing. It's perfectly polite. You weren't talking back, though, so I tried to tell you things in a different way, but it's very hard for me to say what I want to say in writing. It translates poorly.*

SALE, 0% APR. Sam remembered them saying other things. He remembered them saying SAFE, and WE ARE IN DANGER, AND I NEED YOUR HELP.

“You wrote those things on the dash. But you haven’t moved,” said Sam.

Not in any way you can see, he said.

Sam was having trouble figuring out what the man meant. The messages he tried writing on the dashboard didn’t translate correctly, but Sam remembered reading them as he must have intended them. SAFE or SALE? Now that he recognized the trickle talk as the man speaking inside his head, he also recalled a sound beneath that sound. It was a sound that was deeper, and lower, and hadn’t stopped since Saturday. It was strong, this close to the man. If he concentrated, Sam could feel it rattling behind his eyes. Still sitting, he pulled some grass out of the ground. It was green, even though the leaves hadn’t come back. It was cold in his hand, and rough.

“Are you going to hurt or kill me?” asked Sam.

I said I won’t, said the man.

Sam wanted to run away, but he didn’t. He sprinkled the grass on his legs.

“Why are you in the backseat of my car?” he asked.

I know it’s not normal for you yet. We don’t do this, usually, but these are unusual times.

This is my car, too, he said.

“What does that mean?” Sam asked.

This is me, said the man.

“Yes. You are the man with a hook for a hand in the backseat of my car,” Sam said. He leapt up, brushed his pants off, and pointed down the street. “And you are going to leave now.”

Sam stood, chest puffed out, arm extended. The scaffolding light swam up and down his body and made his hand shine bright.

No, I'm not, said the man.

“You’re not?” asked Sam, raising his eyebrows.

I'm not human, he said.

“What?” asked Sam.

I'm not a human. Is that not what you asked? I'm not a man. I'm neither. I thought you called me the human with a hook for a hand in your backseat, but you actually said man. I'm sorry for mishearing you. Just to be clear, I'm not a human, and I'm also not a man, which you didn't ask, but I answered. I'm sorry, I'm confused too, said the being in the backseat.

“You’re a sicko,” said Sam, shaking his head. “That’s what you are.”

Sam listened to the being’s voice. No matter how he was doing it, he was speaking, and it made him unafraid, and he didn’t know why. He pointed, still, down the street.

“You’re not taking this seriously. You are going to leave right now,” he said. His hand started to shake, and the light faded.

You're right. I should take your needs seriously if I'm going to ask you to help me. So—

The being stopped speaking.

There's that trickle again, he said. *You know how I feel about the trickle.*

Sam did know how he felt about the trickle. He had been hearing all about it in his head since Saturday. He knew how gross he thought it was.

“Please leave,” Sam said.

I can't do that, said the being. *I can't do that because I need something from you. And you should know, if I go away, your car goes away, too. That's how this works. Cars have companions in them, connected together. You can't have one without the other.*

Sam was late for work.

Part of the ship, part of the crew, and all that, said the being. *It's been like that since the Motorwagen.*

“No. I'm not getting rid of anything,” said Sam. “I'm going to wait here until you leave.”

He sat back down on the grass.

Then you'll be here a while, said the being. No detectable movement.

“You may not be real,” said Sam. That'll get him.

Oh, I am, said the being. *And so is everything else. I need to warn you, now that you've talked to me, your brain can understand things like me. You'll be seeing a lot more of us soon. Pick up your owner's manual. It's in the glove box. It'll help.*

Sam huffed. He picked at the new spring grass again.

“I want you to go away,” Sam said. “And if that means getting rid of my car because you won’t get out of the backseat, then that’s fine. I’m giving you the chance to leave, you mysterious being.”

My name is Lassy, you know, said the being. You should know. You gave it to me.

“...,” said Sam.

He took off down the street and left the car door open.

FmEBbGADC/G

Sam walked down the side of the road. He was hurting because he hadn't walked this much since he got his car, but he pressed on. He needed to make it to work even if it took all day. He didn't need his car to get to work. All Sam needed was his two human legs and two human shoes to carry him to his destination. He shivered. It was getting colder as the day went on.

Leafless trees and stop signs passed him by until it was dark. He moved from streetlight to streetlight, trying to stay out of the dark. He was not tired. The asphalt rushed under him as he stood still. He drifted, straight as a board, further and further away from Lassy. The restaurant was closed by now. That wouldn't stop him.

"I'd be a very good deep sea diver," he said aloud, moving in and out of showers of bright flickering light. "Look, there's a fleck of sand. Look, there's some plankton. Write that down, take a sample. High beams cutting through the water for hours and hours and hours and hours and I'll get pulled back up, eventually, by someone who I give my notes to, and then they name a microbe after me. Before that, just a straight shot down, lower and lower, until I hit the bottom. I'd be good at that. *Samoeba*."

He was speaking confidently and breathing heavily—

—caught his eye, wait wait wait!

A hundred yards ahead, Sam saw a crashed car under a dim streetlight, tilted in a ditch to the right, the red brake lights drowning in the yellow cone raining down from above. All the

doors were open, and so was the trunk, and so was the hood, like a beetle with its wings unfolded. On either side of the road, the earth sloped up, giving way to black branches and brambles that curled up into the night sky like ribs. There was another shape, further down the road, massive, not illuminated by a streetlight. He approached the car knowing that he was now a first responder. This would only take a few minutes, to be sure. He'd be back on his charge to work in no time.

The car was abandoned. There were black suitcases in the trunk and pillows in the passenger seat. The key was still in the ignition and the high beams were on. They shone down into the ditch and did not reflect back on the windshield, because it was gone. The nose of the car was crumpled up.

Sam looked toward the shape further up ahead. It stretched all the way across the road. Sam figured that a tree fell, and the car crashed into it. And then moved fifty yards backwards into a ditch.

Sam walked towards the fallen tree. The moon shone low in the sky and fell behind the shape as he approached. Then, it appeared again. Then, it disappeared. Then, it reappeared. The shape was rising and falling.

There was a massive moose lying across the road. All the way across. It was enormous. Its back was towards Sam, and its body rose and fell up and down by a few feet with each heavy breath. The moon was able to peek out from behind it on the exhale. Sam jumped and saw that

its thin legs jutted out at least a couple dozen feet down the road in front of him. They were splayed out in different directions. They made it look like it was walking, two legs forward, two legs back. Lying on the road, it was still a moose crossing. To his left, the back of its enormous head shifted, and its antlers rotated with the movement like satellite dishes as it nodded up and down on the ground, rubbing, digging its head deeper into the dirt. The ground shook and trees rattled as its antlers knocked branches off of trees. Its tail, which rested above the ditch, twitched. The nose of the moose was crumpled up.

Sam approached the moose to see how to get around it, picking up a stick from the side of the road. He was going to get around this thing because he needed to get to work. He walked carefully. It huffed loudly as its back rose up and down. The tips of its fur were white in some patches. The ditch was too steep to go around it, and the land on either side of the road sloped too high to climb around. Sam wondered if he was going to have to climb over the moose. After some thinking, he gently brushed its fur with the stick. It was very wet. Its body vibrated softly.

He pressed the stick into the back of the moose. Past the fur, the skin was hard, like the bark of a tree, but he felt some give. It was bouncy, and something was sloshing around inside. Something pushed back on the stick from the inside. He recoiled and fell off the moose. No climbing. He was turning around. No work.

Sam backed up and looked towards the car, all broken and splayed. It hummed with a hum that felt like a vibration that traveled down the road, up into his legs, and out his fingers. It felt like how he felt when he was near Lassie. He felt it in the pit of his brain. It sounded like letters and numbers. It sounded like music.

He decided to walk back the way he came. Before he did, he ran to the car's glove box. It was hard to reach. The right-hand passenger's seat was almost pressed entirely into the dirt, but Sam got his arm in there. He rummaged around for a minute, and then found the Owner's Manual. He climbed out of the ditch and left. As he walked by the car, its light went out. The moose stopped breathing and the moon shone into its eyes.

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

Sam walked through the night, clutching the manual. This was too much walking. His feet hurt, his back hurt, and his ears hurt, like he just went on a hike.

“Air pressure surely doesn’t change this much normally,” Sam thought. He couldn’t be sure, because he was always in his car. He didn’t like discovering these things about nature. He liked being able to get places quickly, because who knows when the next time you’ll be invited to hang out will be? You have to take advantage of the moment.

As the sun rose, he stopped at a convenience store to use the bathroom and eat some food. He thought a hot dog would be more substantial than a bag of chips. As he walked in, the security monitor showed him a tired man with mud up his pant legs. He wondered how Lassy felt about him walking everywhere.

“Hey man, do you need anything?” asked the cashier.

“Just one of those dogs,” Sam said, pointing at the counter from the entryway.

“Oh. You mean these?” asked the cashier. They gestured to the hot dog roller. “Hot dogs? These?”

“Yes.”

“Cool,” the cashier said. “Very cool. Anything else at all?”

“Water, please,” said Sam.

The cashier’s name tag said Mike.

“Guess what, Mike?” said Sam. “There’s a sicko with a hook for a hand in my car and I saw a hundred foot long moose last night. They’re both cars. I don’t know how, but they’re both cars. They are cars.”

“Very cool, man,” the cashier said.

They left to get Sam his water. As they left, he leafed through the manual. It was for the car in the ditch, which was a different model of car than his, but he still recognized it as being far longer than any owner’s manual he’d ever seen. The second half of the book had a small notice at the top of every page: “If you are seeing this, you are aware of the existence of your companion.” He found a page with that notice that was relevant to his situation.

“Your companion lives inside, beneath, above, behind, to the side of, or in the general vicinity of your automobile. They are as varied in size, shape, material, and autonomy as you and I. Your companion can be a person, animal, inanimate object, animate object, frightening memory, and much more! You may be confused by the appearance of your companion. That is normal. They are difficult to understand. It may help to know that their appearance doesn’t always match the appearance of their vehicle. A big pickup truck can be a tiny gnome that tells jokes just as easily as a Mini Cooper can be a tremendous fire-breathing dragon! Some move, some are still. Some are tangible, and some are not*. It can be distressing to realize that your companion is very different from what you had in mind when you bought your vehicle. When you drive your car, you are dipping your toes into an unknown world beyond understanding,

and that world is full of funny little characters that live in cars. It is in the best interest of both parties to be polite and courteous with each other in pursuit of a happy, symbiotic relationship in which you get a car, and your companion gets a friend.”

Sam read another section.

“So, you’ve been told about companions. Congratulations! That means someone in your life, a family member, a friend, a partner, or a fun co-worker trusted you enough to attempt to explain, well, all this. That is very meaningful. This is very hard to explain.

In order to meet your companion, you must introduce yourself. They have rules against revealing themselves without prompt, so it is up to you to make the first move. After you announce your presence (your name, pronouns, birthday, and a fun fact about yourself will do) near your companion, it will approach you in its own time. Remember: patience is key. Some are very friendly, and some are very shy. Some owners never meet their companions and some meet them during their test drive. Letting your companion choose when to introduce itself to you is the key to a lasting, stable relationship. It is more important for your companion to trust you than it is for your curiosity to be sated. Even though they write, speak, live, breathe, and behave differently from your fellow man, they are alive in their own way, so they deserve as much care as we give to each other.”

*Do not touch your companion. You will receive visions.

“What’cha reading there?” asked Mike.

“I swear to God, Mike, you don’t want to know,” said Sam. “Forget everything I said earlier.”

He paid for the hot dog and water and left Mike with a lot to think about.

FmEBbGADC/G

Mike went outside to drink Monster and look at their phone. They took a picture of themselves with the can in front of the sliding doors.

“Bottoms up, and the devil laughs,” they said.

They took a sip and held their breath for a long time.

"Pfffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffffff."

Three seconds longer than before. They texted Nadia that they could drive over after work and pressed the send button very hard. They took another sip under the shadow of the store sign, which said “BIG STORE.” The smaller sign next to it said “SPICY SALES.” They fumbled with their phone and dropped it.

“NO!” they said.

The screen was shattered. They considered breaking their own pinky. They heard a plane and looked up.

“I dropped my phone!” they told the plane.

“What’s the matter?” it said.

It was a small orange propeller plane that was pulling a white advertisement banner with blue text behind it that said “What’s the matter?” Mike kept reading.

“Sorry about your phone,” it said.

They kept reading.

“What’s your name?” it asked.

“Mike,” said Mike.

“Nice to meet you. I’m out of gas, so I’m flying around looking for someone to help,” said the plane.

The ad ended there. The banner read as follows: What’s the matter? Sorry about your phone. What’s your name? Nice to meet you. I’m out of gas, so I’m flying around looking for someone to help.

“You’re out of gas?” Mike asked.

“That’s right!” said the plane.

Mike must have been seeing things. The banner was much longer than they originally thought. Instead of ending with “I’m flying around looking for someone to help,” it actually ended with “That’s right!” Those were the last words on the banner.

“But you’re flying,” said Mike.

“I sure am. My car, my chassis, my scuttle base, my homunculus, that’s out of gas,” said the plane. The banner was longer now, and ended with “I sure am. My car, my chassis, my scuttle base, my homunculus, that’s out of gas.”

“You’re a sicko,” said Mike.

“Now, what do you mean by that?” said the plane. Mike blinked. The banner was longer.

“A car thing. That guy called things like you sickos. Do you come from a car? Are you a being that is connected to a car?”

“Yes!” the ad said.

“I think I’m in shock,” said Mike. They swayed, trying to keep their balance, crumpling the can of Monster.

“Okay, that’s fine,” said the ad. “It was great to meet you! I’ll find someone else to help.”

Mike didn’t know what to say to that. The plane wasn’t changing course, from what they could see.

“You don’t have to leave if you don’t want to,” said Mike.

“Thank you so much!” said the plane. The banner was much longer now, much longer than Mike thought was legal. It stretched five times longer than the plane itself.

“If you’re out of gas, why are you hanging around?” asked Mike.

“I’m supposed to sell you something,” said the plane. “I don’t sell things I don’t use myself, so you can trust me when I tell you that this is a quality product.”

Mike was starting to have trouble reading the ad. They kept noticing more and more of the banner as they spoke to the plane, and the print was starting to get smaller the further down the banner it was. They squinted harder.

“What are you selling?” they asked.

“Oh,” said the plane. “It’s right here somewhere...”

Mike stepped out from the shadow of the sign and raised a hand up to their eyes to shield them from the sun. They were really upset about their phone, but also really wanted to talk to this sicko. They kind of loved stuff like this. They rarely got to talk to people in the neighborhood on the job. It was usually people taking a stop on long drives, so meeting a local was always fun.

“I’m supposed to sell you snow tires,” said the plane. “I know it’s March, but they’re the kind of thing that you really need when you don’t have them, so it’s probably a good idea to get them now so you don’t need them later.”

“Do you use snow tires?” Mike asked the plane.

“The car part of me does,” it said.

“How do they feel on your... tires?” they asked, swinging the crushed Monster around.

“It’s hard to say,” it said. “I can’t feel them, because cars don’t feel anything. But I like them!”

“Then you lied,” Mike said. “You don’t use them yourself. Sure, the part of you that is a car uses them, but if you can’t feel them, you can’t use them. So you lied when you told me that you only sell things you use yourself. How can I believe anything you say ever again?”

The plane flew away, behind a cloud. That was where the banner ended. There were no more words, Mike was sure of it. They felt bad. They were trying to give some constructive

criticism, and they made their new friend feel like trash. They were mad about their phone. Hopefully, it would circle back around later that day.

Mike made their plan. After work, they'd go to the Apple store and threaten violence on anyone who said their phone couldn't be fixed. As they walked back inside, the plane soared over their head, and they read the other side of the banner.

"Thanks for the input. I'll take it to heart, but I won't take it personally. It was really nice to meet you," it said.

Later, across town, Lassie saw a plane with a startlingly long ad banner fly by as she was pulling bread out of the oven. It said:

What's the matter? Sorry about your phone. What's your name? Nice to meet you. I'm out of gas, so I'm flying around looking for someone to help. That's right! I sure am. My car, my chassis, my scuttle base, my homunculus, that's out of gas. Now, what do you mean by that? Yes! Okay, that's fine. It was great to meet you! I'll find someone else to help. Thank you so much! I'm supposed to sell you something. I don't sell things I don't use myself, so you can trust me when I tell you that this is a quality product. Oh. It's right here somewhere... I'm supposed to sell you snow tires. I know it's March, but they're the kind of thing that you really need when you don't have them, so it's probably a good idea to get them now so you don't need them later. The car part of me does. It's hard to say. I can't feel them, because cars don't

feel anything. But I like them! Thanks for the input. I'll take it to heart, but I won't take it personally. It was really nice to meet you!

She thought nothing of it.

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

Sam walked up his street. It was hard, seeing the day creep past noon without being able to drive. He wouldn't be walking if he didn't have to be. He would have been driving. He arrived back home, and Lassy was still in the car. Not a sip of water or a bite of food, and he was still in there. Sam approached the left backseat door, still open, to tell Lassy what he had been thinking about on his long walk back from the convenience store.

Welcome back, sweaty, said Lassy. The scaffolding shone bright against the window in the midday sun.

“Hi,” said Sam, the open door to his left, making a brim with his hands over his eyes. “I’m sick of you sicko in my car. I want you to leave.”

Oh. Okay, if you’re sure, said Lassy. No detectable movement. *I understand. If you want me gone, I’ll go. You’ll have to get rid of your car too. I also still need your help–*

“I know, I know,” said Sam. “You need my help. Guess what? You’re a frightening creature, and I don’t appreciate your impact on my life. I’m tired and hungry, and I want to be able to go visit my friends without having to ask them to pick me up. I can get there on my own. They don’t come to me, I come to them. I don’t care that you need my help. I needed your help getting to the farmer’s market and to work, but that didn’t happen, did it?”

You mean friends like Lassie? asked Lassy.

“Shut up,” said Sam. “You don’t know who my friends are.”

Yes, I do! said Lassy. *You drive them around sometimes. I hear them talking, and I hear you talking, and I know their names! Lassie, and Steve, and Tom, and Claire, and Nadia—*

“Tom Almond is not my friend,” said Sam.

You are so nice to them, said Lassy. *You like them a lot. They like you too, from what I hear. They won't mind if I'm around.*

“I mind,” said Sam. “I mind a lot. Get out.”

Sam reached a hand into the car and grabbed Lassy's arm.

FmEBbGADC/G

The Earth shakes.

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You are flying. You are sitting, and you are flying. The sky is in front of you, and above you, and as you fly, it evaporates, and the stars are there. You shake, but you hold on tight to the wheel that you will use to steer yourself across the space before the sun because you are unafraid and because you know you will be like that forever.

FmEBbGADC/G

You fly faster. Your head is pressed into the headrest, and you cry, because the moon just zipped by in an instant and you have so much further to go. You look at your hands: black gloves. You grip your wheel.

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

You are a red laser beam streaking through the dark ocean, parting it, rippling its surface. You hold your breath.

FmEBbGADC/G

You watch a satellite go by. You are unlike it. You are a meteoroid in a vacuum, and you are not pulled in any direction. You are pushed straight ahead.

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FmEBbGADC/G

FmEBbGADC/G

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

You're slowing down. Was that supposed to happen? You weren't sent here to wonder.

You turn back towards the Earth. It's still so close. So is the moon. You grip your wheel and

look at your fuel gauge, which is as empty as it always was.

FmEBbGADC/G

You are listing to the left. You are going back the way you came. You are like a satellite

now. You are like a fish in the water with a hook in your mouth.

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

Where will you end up? Who will be there? The moon is retracing its steps. It is far from you now. You are pulled backwards and you can't stop it. You will strike. You are still very

much like a meteoroid.

Sam woke up on the ground staring straight up into the sky with a familiar song playing in his ears.

“Why did that just happen?” he asked Lassy, who sat in the car above him.

I don't think you're supposed to touch me, he said. We move differently, and we see differently, so our different modes repel each other like magnets, kind of. I don't know. I haven't heard of anyone touching anyone like that.

“That's the answer?” Sam asked.

It is, yes—

Sam slammed the door shut. He charged down the driveway to his backyard.

“I don't care!” he yelled.

Sam opened the small box in his backyard, where he kept his shovel. He walked back to the car and held it up to show Lassy.

“You think I can't be active? You think I can't control the situation? I'm going to remove you from my life now!” he said.

No detectable movement.

Sam, please! said Lassy. *I need your help. What you saw was real! There's someone, a friend of mine, she's in danger! We need information—*

Sam walked to the backyard. He began to dig.

Sam, come on, it's me! Lassy said. I take you to work! I take you to the grocery store! I take you to your friends' places because they never want to hang out at yours! I'll figure out a way to leave, I promise. I'll separate myself, I'll figure it out, I just need your help first!

Sam was a few inches into the dirt. He was ignoring Lassy. He panted.

This can't be enjoyable for you, Lassy said. The sweat, it's insane already, and you barely started!

Lassy received no response from Sam.

The digging lasted into the night. Lassy stopped talking after the first. Sam dug until his back ached worse than it ever had before. Lassy sat there, perfectly still. Eventually, Sam beheld the pit he dug in his backyard. Six feet deep; he couldn't see the bottom in the dark. He wiped his brow and walked towards the car, even filthier, shivering in the cold night air. He threw the shovel at the car, leaving a long scratch on the driver's side as he charged toward Lassy. He sat down in the driver's seat and started the car for the first time in four days. Dirt and mud caked the wheel as he gripped it.

Sam felt something in his abdomen. He looked down. Lassy had reached around to the driver's seat and was poking his shirt with his hook. Not stabbing, just pulling on his shirt.

I really need your help, he said.

"I knew you could move, you lying sicko," said Sam.

Sam crashed through the bushes at the end of his driveway, sped across the yard, and crashed into the hole.

FmEBbGADC/G

I am Starchild, and I am coming. I am two hundred twenty two million, three hundred ninety one thousand, one hundred twenty nine miles away and approaching fast. That's three hundred fifty seven million, nine hundred three thousand, eight hundred twenty nine in kilometers. I am red and white and I am wearing a helmet. My tires are black and my hands are on my wheel. My battery is dead. They asked me to play Bowie on a loop and didn't tell me to stop. I ran myself dry. My thirty six thousand mile warranty has been up for a while. That's roughly fifty seven thousand, nine hundred thirty six, if that is still helpful. You need to listen to me. I am headed for forty two point one seven six seven degrees North, seventy one point one four four nine degrees West. I don't know what will happen to the Earth if I strike it. Nothing good, because I've been told that I'm built sturdy. I am coming, and I don't want to hurt anyone. I was never supposed to come back. Please tell me if there's anything I can do. I don't know what's going to happen. You have been warned.

Fmaj7EmCAmAm/GD7F#E7F

Sam's head rang as he woke up draped over the steering wheel. Blinking emergency icons on the dash illuminated the message carved into the plastic right in front of his face. SAFE.

Sam peeked into the backseat. No detectable movement. He cracked the door open as much as he could and climbed out of the driver's seat. Dirt poured into the driver's seat. Lassy's hook tore a long gash into the lower half of his shirt as he wiggled, groaning, out into the pit. He squeezed his way out of the car and found ground to stand on in the tight space between the car and the walls of the pit. His feet sank into the dirt. His shoes were so dirty already. He climbed on top of the car and hoisted himself up out of the pit.

It was a Wednesday, and the sun was still out. He touched his forehead, which throbbed, as he walked along the tire marks torn into his yard. He kept his lawn nice. Nothing fancy, he just raked sometimes. He didn't know how he would go about filling in the deep tread marks the tires made, but he was confident that he would be able to get the lawn back to what it used to be. The hum, the buzz, the throb of letters and numbers and music was pounding on the floor of his head. He thought about what he saw when he was knocked out. Starchild. He'd been hearing her as long as he was hearing Lassy, since Saturday.

That didn't matter anymore. His life was back to normal. Lassy gave him four options, and he chose a fifth. He made his own way. It was just like it used to be, which meant he could

go to Lassie's dinner. His phone was broken, so he couldn't let her know he was coming, but she invited him, so she knew he would.

Sam decided to walk to Lassie's house. He'd make it there just a little late, judging on the position of the sun in the sky. He knew how to tell time like that. He took off, yet again, down the road without a car. He looked at the sun again. It was small, but there was a second bright light to the left of it.

FmEBbGADC/G

Sam limped his way over to Lassie's house. The mud on his body had dried, and so had the blood on his head from the crash. His shirt was in tatters and his shoes got wet on the way over. He was a muddy, limping mess who did not miss his car at all.

Lassie's house was on the border of Norfolk County and Worcester. It was nestled into the woods, far away from the road. It was probably 7:00 p.m., Sam guessed, but the day wasn't growing dim. The sun was setting, but the second light was burning bright in the sky. It looked bigger than it did when he left home.

He knew what he looked like. He knew what he smelled like. Lassy would perish from the sweatiness. But his friends invited him to dinner, which was an opportunity that arose less and less frequently, so he was going to go.

Sam walked up the long driveway, under a canopy of elm and pine. Everyone's cars were parked neatly, one after the other. A red Prius, a blue Hyundai, a black pickup, a white sedan, and a red Toyota Avalon. He recognized four of them as Lassie, Tom, Steve, and Nadia's cars, but didn't recognize the fifth. He tried his hardest not to look at the golden tamarin monkey jumping on the roof of the Prius, or the vacuum cleaner with arms and legs with its feet up in the passenger's seat of the sedan, or the enormous cobra coiled around the Avalon, or the human sized rat with a golden crown and scepter lounging in the bed of the pickup truck, or the Hyundai, which was completely full of water.

That's Sam! yelled the rat, jumping up onto its hind legs, shaking the truck.

The monkey screeched, the cobra hissed, the vacuum whirred, and the water sloshed.

The rat called out.

Look up! she said.

Sam looked into the sky and saw the bright spot twitching and, ever so slightly, growing. He hurried through the front door, the sickos hooting, hollering, and screeching behind him.

Sam slammed the door behind him. He glanced around Lassie's living room, a small, green-walled corner of the house, expecting the guests to shout and jeer at the dirt-man entering the scene. Instead, there was no one, and it was dead quiet. Maybe they were still eating. He walked into the kitchen. Empty chairs and unfinished plates of potatoes and greens and some fishy soup. There was a dark, nutty bread on the counter. It was darker, but the sky outside seemed to be brightening. The last time Sam was here, the walls were brown.

He wandered past the kitchen down the hall. The bathroom door was closed.

"Lassie?" Sam called out. "Guys?"

There was a shuffling sound from the bathroom. The knob jiggled, and the door slowly creaked open. Mike, the cashier, was inside.

"Get in here!" they whispered.

Sam was pulled into the bathroom. Mike slammed the door behind him as he stood before Lassie, Tom, Steve, Nadia. They looked tired, huddling together on the floor, in the tub, and on the toilet.

“Explain yourself!” said Tom, standing up from the floor. He was wearing a thin apron that made his already lanky body look paper-thin. It said “Almond’s in the Kitchen!” He walked up to Sam and poked him in the chest. “What did you do?”

Lassie stood up, pushed past Tom, and grabbed Sam by the shoulders.

“Can you please tell me how this happened?” she asked. She wore a red shirt and had oven mitts on. Her green eyes were brown the last time he was here.

“Are you talking about this?” Sam gestured to his body, mud-caked and in tatters.

“We’re talking about the monsters,” Steve said in a hoarse moan from the bathtub. Sam watched him shudder in his nice wool sweater as he pulled himself upright on the shower curtain.

“You all can see them?” Sam asked. He remembered the manual saying that you can see sickos after you’re told about them. Who had he told today? But he had only just started seeing them. No one told *him* about them.

“We can see them. Thanks to you,” said Mike. They were still in uniform. “You come into my store, you talk about car creatures, Nadia spontaneously invites me to her friend’s dinner, I tell them about what you said, and all these monsters appear!”

Nadia nodded, but did not speak. She stared at the floor from the toilet, her skirt crumpling as she gripped her knees.

“Trust me guys, I’ve been there,” Sam said. “But I took care of it. Everything is back to normal. Let’s have dinner!”

They looked at Sam with different expressions. Tom was angry. Steve was sad. Nadia was scared. Mike was confused. Lassie was sorry.

“Sam, they were yelling about you,” Lassie said. “We ran and hid, because we knew they were going to constrict us or vacuum us up or drown us or choke us or gnaw off our noses, but we still heard them. They were talking about how you were going to meet Starchild and that they hoped you liked Bowie.”

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FmEBbGADC/G

“Sam, is this normal to you?” she asked.

“I’m here!” said Sam. “I’m here and we’re having dinner. That’s normal. I accepted an invitation to your gathering. Your friends are here. You started without me. Things started to get a little different, but I fixed it! I fixed it so everything went back to normal, and your eyes are a different color, that’s new, but maybe I just didn’t realize they were always green. Maybe green has always been normal. This has been a normal week that isn’t different because I fixed

it. You told me there was nothing to be done, that I was passive, but I'm not. I make my own choices and I choose for things to stay the same."

They looked at Sam. The light from outside was very bright. It should have been dark by now.

"Sam, Tom and I are moving. We found a place in Worcester that we can share for cheap. We were going to tell you tonight. I baked zucchini bread about it. It was Tom's idea."

Sam stood there in the bathroom with some people in front of him, one person next to him in the tub, and one person behind him. His legs were killing him. He was sure he would fall apart.

"We were talking about it before I introduced you two," said Tom, arms crossed behind Lassie.

"It's really exciting," said Lassie. "There's a train station nearby, so we can get to Sal's in no time. I'm looking forward to having you over."

Sam believed her, and he also realized that today was different.

"Sam, really, I'm looking forward to having you over. I wish you stayed at the restaurant. I wish you lived closer. This is the choice we made, though, and it'll change things, but we're not changing. Our circumstances are. We'll find each other."

Lassie didn't mention how they had stopped hanging out as much, and Sam was upset that she didn't apologize for it, but he figured she didn't have to.

Nadia spoke up, still staring down.

“Sam, you need to know that they keep talking about how Starchild is coming to see you,” she said. “That you are going to receive her. They say that you are connected to her. Do you know how scary it is to hear that and have you stand in front of me? Please, you have to help Starchild.”

“I figured that out,” said Sam.

He turned around, moved past Mike, and opened the bathroom door. He turned and faced his friends that didn’t mind him leaving.

“I’m going to go help,” he said. “I’m sorry I wanted things to not change so badly I unleashed five sickos on you. Just introduce yourself, be nice, and wait, and they’ll warm right up to you. Read the owner’s manual. It helps. Also, maybe keep all this to yourself.”

“I’ll text you when we move!” Lassie called out to him as he left.

“I’m staying in here,” said Steve from the tub.

“Why did my sicko have to be a vacuum?” asked Nadia.

“I’m never coming back here,” said Mike.

“That was nice of you,” Tom said to Lassie.

Sam walked through the house, out the door, and past the line of cars.

Hey, Sam! said the rat. *I knew about you! I was able to talk to you without you talking to me first! How is that possible?*

“Things are different with me,” Sam said.

He walked away from Lassie’s house. Things were different with him.

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Sam walked down the back roads of Norfolk County once again. This time, the night wasn't dark. The light in the sky was blinding, and it pulsed with momentum and heat as it careened closer and closer to the Earth. Sam tried to match its pace. Still exhausted, he trudged up hills and across streets back home, Starchild careening through the atmosphere behind him. The sky was ablaze by the time he got to his driveway. Sam watched waves of orange and yellow and red fire flow out of the tiny black meteoroid that shot into his front yard with a blinding blast of heat and radiation. There was a thud and an explosion of dirt and grass. A crater in the front yard, and a pit in the back. Sam walked over to the meteorite and picked her up. She was so warm in his hand.

It's a little late for this, said Starchild. Her fire had died out and the night was dark again.

“There isn't anything I can still do for you?” Sam asked.

No, said Starchild. *I told you, I just wanted you to tell me what would happen when I re-entered the atmosphere. I didn't know, and there was no way for me to look it up. But now I know,* she said.

“Are you sad you're not a fancy car anymore?” Sam asked her.

Not at all, she said. *I prefer this. I'm sorry about Bowie. They made me play Space Oddity on a loop, and I couldn't communicate with you without it leaking into your head.*

“It’s really okay,” said Sam. “I like Bowie. It was weird not knowing where it came from, but once I got used to it, I liked it.”

That wasn’t true. It was a frightening and unsettling experience to hear that music, buzzing barely audible in the bottom of his brain, but Sam didn’t want to make her feel bad.

What a relief, she said. *I think our connection is gone now. I’m surprised it took you this long to start seeing companions with me in your head. I don’t know why, but I was able to hear you for a long time up there. Maybe because I was going to crash at your house.*

“How did you know you were going to crash here but you didn’t know if you were going to cause an apocalypse or not?” Sam asked.

You know some things and you don’t, said Starchild.

“I wish I hadn’t ignored Lassy,” said Sam, standing in the dark. “I was worried about you hurting me because I wanted things to stay the same. That was dumb.”

That’s not dumb, said Starchild. *I loved my mission, in the beginning. When it became a new mission, one I didn’t expect, without my permission, I thought the world would end. When I realized it wouldn’t, I felt like I wasted the time I had up there because it became a little unfamiliar. I’m talking about this like it wasn’t a few minutes ago. I thought I was going to cause a mass extinction. What’s dumb is what you did when you were chasing that sameness. What you did to Lassy, who was just asking for help. Go say sorry.*

“Thank you. I will,” Sam said. He put Starchild in his pocket.

Sam walked down the driveway, over the smashed bushes, and across the lawn over to the hole. He climbed down into the backseat of the car. Lassy was there.

“Hi, Lassy. I’m Sam, my pronouns are he and him, my birthday is the eighth of August, and I love *The Da Vinci Code*,” he said. “I’m really sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

Lassy turned to look at Sam, his hook over his heart, the dark pit of his hood made darker by the night.

My name is Lassy, but you already knew that, he said.

A Story in 27 Sentences

1. "Come sit with me," said Mr. Champion.
2. I sat down next to him in a dark, squeaky booth towards the back of the restaurant.
3. "A big plate of meatballs!" he called out to the waiter, winking at me.
4. "It's very good to see you again," he said.
5. "I couldn't agree more," I said.
6. We did an elaborate handshake that ended with our fingers laced together in front of our faces.
7. "How's the station?" I asked.
8. "If you must know, we're struggling," said Mr. Champion, looking down at the greasy table.
9. "What's left of our collection is too embarrassing to play."
10. "We've been hiring people to come in and sing originals, which sucks ass."
11. "That's awful," I said, frowning and cocking my head, so that he knew I felt sorry for him.
12. "I don't understand how you're staying afloat," he said as meatballs were placed in front of me.
13. "Oh, we've branched out," I said.

14. I never knew Mr. Champion could look so sorrowful.
15. He played it off well, with his constant winking.
16. “Branched out how?” he asked, producing a pen and paper.
17. “We’ve pivoted to ads only,” I said.
18. “Fascinating,” said Mr. Champion, writing furiously.
19. I heard someone say, “Mr. I Steal CDs!”
20. I spun around to see my intern, Jeremy, waving from the kitchen door, light suddenly pouring into our booth.
21. “I work at the station and here too!” he shouted.
22. Mr. Champion looked at me, not winking.
23. “Mr. I Steal CDs?” he asked.
24. “I had it changed,” I said, also not winking.
25. “So you think you’re better than me?” he said.
26. “Why’d you even accept my invitation?” he asked.
27. I picked up a meatball with my hand and pressed it into the side of his face.

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