

Spring 2022

Big Picture

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Recommended Citation

Feero, Carson Lee, "Big Picture" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 143.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2022/143

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Big Picture

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

by
Carson Feero

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

Dedicated to Robin Jordan,
who always told us to call ourselves writers.

I.

I felt it in the pit of my stomach and then in the back of my head. A lightness. I obtained a large metal bowl from the kitchen and it clinked as I brought it back up the stairs. I reintroduced myself to the bed and found that I couldn't tell if the sheets were hot or cold. Lying on my stomach, I positioned my chin on the rim of the bowl and my arms stretched out beyond it, feebly pinching open a paperback. It was for a class. I couldn't focus on the words. My whole body started to shake. My teeth chattered. I vividly remember the meal I had eaten earlier that night because of the way it looked and smelled when it reappeared. Mom let me know what time it was. The plane would be leaving soon.

The sudden illness not only caused me to miss my flight, but the first day-and-a-half of the program. They didn't have to take me. I'd been absent for a lot. After a frantic back-and-forth, and a lot of uncertainty, it was determined that I could go. I would go. I packed in a daze, not sick anymore, not really. Instead, I was just exhausted, and in my zombie-like state I was put on a plane—my first flight alone. I was sixteen. It was all new to me. In a series of moments like still images I was waving goodbye to my parents, hoping they wouldn't embarrass me with excessive displays of affection, I was removing my shoes and my keys and my belt and placing them into bins, I was cramming a bag into the overhead compartment and punching it so that it would just fit, please.

In the air, I put my forehead to the window and looked out. It felt flimsier than I would have liked. I thought about how every flight that has ever crashed must have had a moment in which a beleaguered-looking flight attendant told a shaking passenger that everything would be okay. Still—I tried to let the view do what it could to soothe me. I tried to separate the fear of

flying from the thrill of flight. At first the views were of green rolling hills, but further west any tree cover at all gave way to something else, a flat dullness, a brownness, a grayness, and, finally, my little window was overwhelmed by churning clouds. I had always thought of where I was from as gray, and somehow everywhere else was idyllic. Greener pastures. Then again, I'd never really been anywhere. I had only come to view this as an issue once I was the last kid at home, and the world seemed, all at once, to become a place I had to navigate if I wanted to get to the people I cared about. In a way, then, this was a trial run.

My first surprise was the airport. The one back home was sedate, at least in its decor, so that it could have been relaxing if it weren't an airport. It felt a little bit like a hospital, except with a Sbarro. This one was different. A banner swaying over my head welcomed me with larger-than-life letters, the text superimposed over a landscape picture of orange mountains and the twisting Rio Grande. There were numbers on screens. Travelers. Planes. Flights per day. Tons of cargo. The concourse was an expansion on the place's larger-than-life attitude. Instead of restaurants, it was lined with booths, selling sunglasses and cowboy hats, jewelry, dream catchers, tourism brochures, hiking gear. Selling an image.

After this gauntlet, the space opened up into a round atrium with a skylight. In its center, built into the tile floor, there was a large image of a compass, with the four cardinal directions in turquoise arrows as large as me. The foot traffic worked a bit like a roundabout, and among the crowd was a blond baseball-capped head, the tallest person there, holding a battered cardboard sign above his head. This person was here for me. I made my way to him, going the wrong way through the roundabout, dodging oncoming people. I got to him, and from a look, I could tell that he could tell that I wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. I said it anyway.

“We’re waiting for one other person,” he said. “Same flight. Maybe you know each other.”

“I doubt it,” I said. “I don’t know anyone.”

The crowd continued to swirl and the guy held the sign higher.

“I’m David,” he said. “I’m a counselor. A Junior Counselor. You can call me that, if we’re in a formal situation.”

“What situation would that be?”

“Just a professional capacity, if you’re feeling courteous. Which apparently, you’re not.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to come off that way.”

Junior Counselor David seemed unbothered, and he shook the sign up and down so that it looked like it was being rocked by the waves of travelers. We didn’t talk much. He seemed preoccupied with scanning the crowd.

“So there’s another kid from my flight?”

“Yep.”

“I’m arriving late because I was sick. Why’s this other person late?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

The person we were waiting for turned out to be a girl with short curly hair and a serious demeanor named Jo. This seriousness seemed warranted when she explained that the reason she hadn’t been able to fly in on time was due to “severe weather.”

“How severe?” asked David.

“Tornado.”

She had stayed at home for an extra day to board up windows.

“I would have gotten out of there,” I told her.

“Didn’t have a choice.”

. Finally, we were loaded into a white van whose doors were plastered with sun-bleached letters. We idled in the parking lot as wave after wave of traffic moved around us. This was how I felt much of the time: like the only vehicle that wasn’t moving.

“This traffic’s killer,” said David. “You guys have your licenses?”

I said no. Jo said yes.

“Well, for both of you. Watch and learn.” He slammed on the horn and let it screech for ten seconds. He stopped. Nothing had changed. “Okay,” he said, “now I’m out of ideas.”

Eventually, we got out. David had nothing to do with it.

As the van rattled across the desert, I rested my face on the window and let it shake me, preferring to see the scenery in discomfort than to be uncomfortable without looking at anything at all. There were mesas in the distance. When we hit a large bump in the road, my face was pulled away from the window and then violently smacked back into it.

“You okay?” Jo asked me.

I nodded a yes. I noticed that she seemed comfortable in the confines of the van, her knee right foot bouncing to a piece of music that only she could hear, a compact book between her fingers, a portable reading lamp clamped onto the yellowing pages.

“Have you read it yet?”

“I can’t read in cars,” I said. I took a closer look: it was music. Sheet music. On the cover, which she made a point of showing me, there was a stern-looking man with flowing hair who I felt, I could safely assume, was German.

“You’re reading this?” I asked, trying to sound more amused than impressed, when I was equally both. “For fun?”

“No, it’s required. You haven’t done the required reading?”

“I don’t know where I put it,” I said. Really, I didn’t have it. “I forgot there was even a music class.”

“There’s every class.”

“I’m supposed to read this book like it’s a real book and hear the music in my head? Is that something they expect me to be able to do, just, automatically?”

“I can lend it to you when I’m done, if you want,” said Jo.

The van shook again.

“Sure. Thanks.”

The towers of rock that dotted the wide-open landscape began to multiply and close in on us. Soon, we were winding through thickly-forested mountain passes. As the van clipped another outcropping of tree roots and mossy stone, I began to wonder why the vehicle I now felt very much trapped in was wider than the road it was on. My concern was deepened by the concern in the eyes of Jo, who had just been through a natural disaster and was seemingly more worried about this, and although we didn’t speak to each other, we didn’t have to to understand the other.

“I don’t want you guys to feel bad that you’re late,” our driver said. “Academically, it’s not, like, something you should take that seriously.”

Something somewhere in the van’s machinery began to creak.

“Now, I like straggler duty. Did it last year, too. You know why I like it? It’s because you guys are real. They lump all the other students together, make them get to know each other all at once, it’s just too much. So I wanna get to know you guys, and I’m glad that I get to give you my own orientation. The real one is so dour. Warnings, warnings, warnings. This is your chance for something light. Although, I actually should give you some warnings.”

The words “something light” rang in my ears as the van’s suspension let out a squeaking sound, the whole vehicle lent towards a sheer cliff edge, and righted itself just as I was beginning to wonder whether the trees that stuck out from the mountainside were strong enough to catch two tons of metal.

“First, there’s a curfew, okay? It’s at ten o’clock.”

“That seems early,” Jo said. I had no experience with curfews.

“It’s not,” said David. “I’m supposed to tell you that it’s for your own good. There’s wildlife. Mountain lions. Coyotes. Other stuff that I’m probably forgetting. That curfew’s for a good reason. Plus, it gets you guys to leave us alone when we’re drinking. Ha! But no, I’m serious.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Oh! And speaking of wildlife,” and the face of Junior Counselor David twisted into a wry smile that I thought seemed inappropriate, “you’re gonna wanna look out for these things called camel spiders.”

“Camel spiders?”

I did not like spiders—ever since a childhood field trip when a wolf spider had appeared on my knee while I waded through a creek, its hairy legs touching my skin, its eight eyes seeming to stare into my soul. I had heard about the spiders in the west. How there were things like black widows that could kill you dead. I didn’t know a lot about them, but I had only packed long pants, mostly jeans, to keep these mysterious creatures from touching my knees.

“A camel spider is a big arachnid—not actually a real spider, more of a scorpion as far as I remember, which we also have—and it’ll eat your eyes. It’s big and yellow. Do not go to sleep

if you see one of these things in your room. Sleep is the ideal time for the spider to eat your eyes, because you will not see it coming.”

There was silence for a moment, and he began muttering a kind of checklist. “Alright. Curfew. Eye-spiders. Don’t forget to drink water. The altitude’s a bitch. See, your body’s not acclimated to it yet. You can even faint, which believe me, is inconvenient when you’re next to a cliff, which you will be, a lot. I think that’s the list.”

“Right,” I said.

“And, hey, I can’t get it for you right now,” said David, “but if you can lean forward...” He pointed to the passenger’s seat. “Just grab what’s in the bag..”

I thought hard about whether it was worth the risk. I was sure that as soon as I leant forward, that was the moment we would crash, and I would be at a disadvantage in my battle against physics. But I did—I stretched out, enduring the rocking of the van, and retrieved two big red water bottles with the school’s name on them. They were already full, and lukewarm.

“Get used to carrying those with you now,” he warned. “You should take them everywhere.” I gave one to Jo. I took a big gulp of the gross water, and as I did, the vehicle was buffeted again, soaking my face, neck, and shirt.

“I’m not even gonna try,” muttered Jo.

I stared out the window and watched the tall trees roll past. When the view made me too nervous, I just looked at David, watching the way he drove, which was usually with one hand on the wheel. I only saw him look concerned once, and I could have been mistaken. It may have been a kind of befuddlement, as he looked back the way we came, furrowed his brow, resting his forearm on the wheel, and then, regathering his confidence, continued forward.

When we finally bumped our way downhill for the final few yards and were released from our captivity in a freshly-paved looking parking lot surrounded by woods, Jo and I did our best to steady our sea legs, slow our rapid breathing, and take big gulps of the water bottles we had been gripping in terror. David got out after us, leaned against the side of the van, glanced up at the road, and then, in the opposite direction, to a much more official looking road with double white lines and an expensive-looking sheen to it.

“Ah,” he said. “That was a footpath.”

With how the day had gone so far, I half expected a helicopter to pick us up from here and fly us through a tornado. Instead, Junior Counselor David finished up something on his phone, gestured for us to follow him, and took us down a simple paved trail that cut a sharp line through the trees—so sharp, in fact, that some of the larger trunks that the path intersected had sheer chunks taken out of them, a third or a half of their width, and looked as if they had been cut by a laser, although there were no signs of heat, and each ringed layer was perfectly preserved inside.

Now we could see our destination scattered below us. The central part of campus was nestled in a large ring-shaped indentation, almost like a crater, that pressed into a mountaintop. In that area there was a neatness about everything: pristine fountains, orange brick pathways that meandered elegantly, modernist glass and metal cubes that reflected the surrounding cliffs and trees so well that they seem to be a part of them. However, this planned city in miniature fell apart the further out from its center it stretched as the landscape intruded further, some parts sloping suddenly down, and in others, huge rocky outcroppings breaking up the neatly planned patterns. At its extremes, the campus became a mess of different architectural styles, and natural

encroachment, and the buildings seemed older, mostly adobe, but also some in wood that looked like barns or old-timey saloons.

“Welp,” said David, with a cordial nod. “I’ve done my part.”

“But we don’t know where anything is,” I protested.

“Well, you *are* here to learn things.”

“Come on!”

“I have to do some housekeeping. There’s always something happening, whenever I leave.” He pointed in a direction—towards the sun—and said “Admissions is that way. You’re going to have to sign in.”

“That way?” I asked. Jo was already gone, off in the direction of “that way.”

“What exactly do you do here?” I asked David as he tried again to leave me.

“Ah, you couldn’t even begin to understand if I told you,” he said, in a tone that was hard to gauge, as he attempted to disappear down a side path.

“I’m following you,” I said, “until you give me better directions.”

He looked a little annoyed: “Okay. But for the record, I’m going in the exact opposite direction from the one you want.”

The path turned into a winding concrete staircase, built into a hill, with a discolored metal railing.

“That’s fine,” I said, “It’s all the same to me.”

“You should probably be in class,” he said.

“What class?”

“There are classes. Don’t you know anything? What are you even here for?”

I shrugged. “The experience, I guess.”

“Yeah, well, the experience sucks, so don’t let that get you down.”

“What class? Photography?”

“Depends on what group you’re in. There are groups. They’re lettered.”

“How do I find out what group I’m in?”

“You find out when you go to admissions and collect your nametag. At admissions, which is, again, not where I’m going.”

My hand made contact with something sticky on the railing. David watched me recoil, and I held my hand as far away as I could without detaching it from my body.

“Grab a leaf,” he said. There was a canopy just above us. “Not that one!” he warned as I reached for a broad yellow leaf with spots. “Those have got tiny spikes on them.”

I wiped my hand on my jeans. David grimaced.

“You’re gonna want to look out for things like that here. Nature’s more nature-y. Stickier.”

“Oh, are you from here?” I asked.

“No. I’m from New Jersey. I don’t even think I know anyone who’s actually from here.”

The terrain had flattened out and now we were at the opening of what looked like it could have been a boulevard on a studio backlot. This impression came, especially, from the fact that there was no else in sight.

“These are dorms,” he said, pointing out the adobe buildings we were passing. “You might be in one of these.”

“If you’re from New Jersey, how’d you end up here?”

“I could ask you the same thing. But if you want to know, I just work here. I go to the East Coast campus.” I could remember vaguely hearing of such a place. “I work here during summers because it pays better. And, again, it pays better because it sucks.”

“I like it so far,” I said.

“You’ve been here for five minutes. And you’re a lot more talkative than you were in the van.”

“Back there I thought I was going to die. And also, now, I need something from you.”

“Which is what?”

“How do I get to admissions, really? Where are the signs?” I was thinking of the college campuses I had already visited with my older siblings, which had seemed, almost, more visitable than they were livable. This place, in contrast, seemed built for no one.

“You’re not looking in the right place,” he said. He stopped. He pointed down. There were directions layered into the sidewalk in colored tiles, convoluted tangles of arrows that create the skeleton of a campus in miniature. This image was repeated, with slight variations, every two-hundred feet or so as the sidewalk continued in an upward incline towards a complex of metallic cubes. One arrow below me formed a sort of question mark that twisted and snaked back around from the other direction and it was that arrow that labeled itself *To Admissions*.

“There you go,” said David. “Enjoy.”

“Where are you going?” I asked. “I have to know before we split.”

“I’m going to the farm. I’ll check up on you at some point.”

As I followed the arrow, David disappeared down a staircase that went into a space under one of the dorms, a heavy green metal door booming shut behind him. This made his farm claim, I thought, rather doubtful. Up the road and to the right of a building that looked like a shipping

container, I descended by way of a concrete ramp into a maze. I circumnavigated a koi pond where wasps and dragonflies swept by my ears, stumbled upon the library, which was a near-windowless pyramid of cement, and crossed an unoccupied tennis court to reach my destination. Admissions turned out to be a high-ceilinged and dimly-lit brick building that stood strangely on its own, in the midst of a neatly-trimmed lawn that was sliced through by sidewalks coming from a dozen different directions.

Inside, a college-aged person seated behind thick stacks of papers gave me a nametag that identified me as a member of Group C.

“Where’s Group C now?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Check the app.”

“There’s an app?”

“The app can tell you things. Like your schedule.”

As I downloaded the app, I sat in a big puffy chair that smelled like cat hair. A little spinny thing spun on my phone. When it finished, I found that I was supposed to be in a class that was about halfway complete. The app included, gloriously, a map of campus, which was a lot less difficult to navigate than the real thing.

I arrived at an empty classroom with a piano in one corner and a chalkboard in the other. I double checked my schedule to make sure I was in the right place. I was. There were music terms on the chalkboard. I weighed my options. I could go out in search of my class. They had probably gone outside somewhere, as the weather was quite nice, but I was having trouble figuring out why a music class would abandon a piano. I decided to search. In the halls of the building, which were eerily empty, I heard some music being played somewhere echoing down the halls. I wondered if I was dreaming.

I stepped in and found Jo, playing a tune on the piano. I thought about interrupting and starting a conversation, but I decided not to, because the music was nice, as little as I knew about that stuff, and I didn't want to get on the wrong foot with the one of the two people on campus I actually knew. She stopped playing anyway.

"I see you're enjoying your class."

"I can't find my class," I said. "Looks like they abandoned ship when they heard I was coming."

"Understandable. My group is on a hike or something. And I don't have a chance at finding them. So, I figure, why bother?"

"Music's nice."

"It's Mozart. It's terrible."

I could feel that I was out of my depth here, so I made a vaguely agreeable face and sound.

"Any idea where they might be? My class, I mean?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't bother. This is your chance at freedom."

"It's weird," I said. "Everything's so empty right now."

"Enjoy it. And hey, before I forget."

She handed me the book she'd been reading earlier, and then started the piece over, playing it softly.

I didn't find the class, but I did find my room. It was back about where David had said it would be. The building seemed to be growing out of the ground, like an organic cube of mud and plant life. Inside, however, the tightly-patterned and dull-colored tile was surprisingly artificial, and as I crept down the hallway I felt more like I was in a locker room. Room 4 was mine.

This was when I met my roommate. When I swung open the door he appeared to be frozen in place, as if he were part of a tableau. He was dressed like a Hawaiian cowboy—a floral shirt, a wide-brimmed hat, sandals with socks. He looked surprised to see me. I froze, mirroring him, because I didn't know what else to do. I looked myself over to try to find the source of his alarm. Was I wearing clashing colors? Was my fly undone?

“Walk slowly into the room,” he said. I complied. I stuck my hands up. I had apparently walked into a Western, and I was unarmed. He laughed at me.

“Don't laugh,” I told him, “this was your idea!”

“Be careful. I'm trying to help you survive. Don't make any sudden movements.”

He pointed behind me, to the space between the doorframe and the ceiling. There was a stretch of cobweb with a speck in the center. “I think that's it. The one they told us about, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“There is a spider here that can eat your face,” he said. “You haven't heard?”

“Your face?” I asked out of one side of my mouth, still trying not to startle the dangerous overlord of our dorm room. “I thought they ate your eyes? While you sleep?”

“I don't know if I believe it. Just trying to be safe.” He relaxed now that I was fully within the threshold and stuck a hand in my face. I shook it. And then, it was as if the tension that had built up in his body during his period of motionlessness was not causing him to rocket around the room as he pointed to this, that, and this again, with renewed passion. He told me about his van, and the drive from Sacramento, and all the amenities he'd brought, and he hoped I'd like them.

“I like to think,” he said quickly, “that I'm undermining the system, by, like, stocking this place up.”

“Yeah. Shows them.”

I was in awe. Eventually, he remembered to tell me his name—Adrian. He took a poster from a bag on his bed and unrolled it against the wall and stuck it there with thumbtacks that he shook out of a small jar.

“I hate these,” he said, gesturing to the wall of posters he had put up, apparently over the course of only the past day or so. Many of them weren't posters, so much as signs.

EMERGENCY EYE WASH STATION, one read, depicting two streams of water jetting into a stick figure's face. *RECYCLING ONLY*, another read. The “poster” he had just put up was advertising a yard sale.

“You have a lot of these.”

“I'm clearing space in my collection,” he said as he revealed another tube of paper from the bag, “And that way, the next person who has the room will get posters for free.”

I asked him if the school wouldn't be clearing out the room once we were gone, and he pointed to the assortment of items on his desk and the shelf above it. “They didn't take any of these.”

A thin coating of cobwebs, a consistent feature of the room, proved how long the fake plants and candle and pack of cards had been there, along with a palpable coating of dust visible on the desk—made more visible, where it remained, by the places it had recently been brushed away. “This is already the room that time forgot.”

“Were those already here?” I asked, noticing a dozen or more board games separated into a few stacks on his shelf, most of them clearly old and well-used, but some with a sheen of newness and no dust.

“No, those are all mine.” He grinned.

Our room was actually a small complex, with two separate doorless bedrooms connected to a small shared space which contained only a table and some chairs. Adrian on a folding lawn chair he had brought. Venturing into my own room, I found that I had a bed that rose to a height just above my waist, shelves that were attached to the wall above the headrest, and my own desk. I began to unpack what little I had. Some books. My phone's unreliable charging cable. Sunglasses in a crushed plastic case.

Adrian poked his head in through my doorway at one point. I was unwrapping a hefty digital camera from the bunched-up sweater I'd packed it in.

"Don't have a case or whatever?"

"No," I said. "Didn't come with one. Hand-me-down."

"Is that your thing?"

"What?"

"Photography? Is it your thing?"

Photography was one of my things—one that I held dearer than I cared to admit. The program's photography class, the facilities and equipment it promised me access to, and the unfamiliar surroundings that I would undoubtedly be pointing said equipment at were all at the top of the list of reasons why I had come here.

"Have any to show me?" asked Adrian. "Pictures?"

"No," I lied. "Don't have many."

Later, I tried to read the music book, my fists balled up against my cheeks and my elbows jamming down into the mattress. A wave of heat emanated from the center of my forehead. I closed my eyes, let my head fall forward against the pages, thought about all the reading I could

have done over the weekend if I hadn't gotten sick, and imagined quarter notes and beamed eighth notes and other symbols I couldn't even name swimming in a bowl of my orange vomit.

It wasn't that I had no musical experience—it was, partly, that I had let my knowledge lapse so much that it was almost all gone, and, partly, that I had never taken music seriously to begin with. I had only spent more than ten minutes at a time with the trumpet when my weekly lessons came around, and my teacher watched as I embarrassed myself and wondered, sometimes aloud, if it wasn't finally time for him to throw me out the window. I wished, now, that he had.

This exemplified the bitter tone of my evening. I went with Adrian to the cafeteria. We sat, the two of us, in a spacious area with a view of the mountains through huge glass panels. In the night they were hard to make out. We watched the other kids, milling about, forming little groups. When I noticed that Adrian was watching me watch the people, I stopped. I watched him watch the people. He looked like he was having more fun than me. I took what food I thought I'd be able to stand—rice and some limp french fries, which I drenched in salt. Adrian had green beans and three apples. I visually reckoned with my food-pile. I took a breath. I couldn't do it. I excused myself to the bathroom.

I pissed. I washed my hands. I made eye contact with myself in the mirror, and I felt the day catch up to me. A boy came in and I tried to look like I hadn't been studying my reflection. I gave a slight nod. He used the urinal. I washed my hands again, trying to act natural. As I was leaving, my hand just touching the door, I heard a crash—a louder noise than should ever emerge from a bathroom. I turned. A pair of glasses slid along the entire length of the tile and stopped at my feet. Time also stopped. The boy at the urinal had collapsed to the floor. He wasn't moving. I had no idea what to do.

I picked up his glasses, which probably shouldn't have been my first priority. I had to adjust the way I was holding them as I went over to the boy and tried to shake him awake on the floor, so that they wouldn't poke him in the face. He wouldn't wake up. I burst into the hallway. There was only one person in sight—a girl in a hoodie, a high school sports team. I jogged up to her.

“This kid needs help,” I panted, probably wild-eyed. I pointed to the men's bathroom.

“Oh, no, I can't,” the girl said.

“No, yes,” I said. “I can't wake him up.”

“Shit.” Her face now matched how I felt. I dragged her in.

“Look, help me lift him,” I said, and I grabbed his legs, and she lifted his torso, and we carried him out into the hall. A female counselor who smelled like cigarettes was there, probably attracted by the sound of our argument.

“Alright, set him down here,” said the counselor, and we set the boy against a wall. I stuck the glasses back on his face, as if that would wake him. I stepped back, and took another step back, and almost fell against the opposite wall. Then I left.

Back at the table, Adrian seemed to be eating some kind of powder, though he didn't look ashamed of it. I gingerly returned to my seat, as if I was scared I would break it.

“You okay?” I told him what had happened.

He looked impressed: “Sounds like you handled it as well as you could.”

“I don't know. I, like froze, for a second.”

“A second's not that long.”

“It was weird. Awkward. It would have been more awkward if his dick was out, but still, it was weird.”

“Yeah,” said Adrian, finishing his powder, “that checks out.” Then, eyeing my plate, he asked: “Do you mind?”

“Oh. Go ahead. I don’t think I can eat. I don’t feel like I can do anything.”

He grabbed a fry, munched on it, and made a sour face.

“Dude.”

“What?”

“You put sugar on these.”

II.

I opened my eyes to the sound of yelling—screaming? Perhaps the sound of a lost and confused baby, toddling through campus. I lifted myself upright, cracking joints in my neck with each movement. The top of my head touched the shelf that was attached to the wall above me, but, not used to the specifics of the room yet, I continued to push my skull in that direction, pressing my hair down into my eyes and leaving me confused in the aftermath of my slow-motion head injury. The sounds from outside seemed stranger now. Less distinct, but somehow louder. Reaching for my glasses, as if they could help me hear more clearly, I felt like I was dreaming.

“What is that?” I asked the shape in front of me, which became my roommate. He was dressed.

“I think it’s an animal,” he said, partially climbing over me to peer out the window. The sky was black with a hint of red.

“Why are you up?” I asked.

“I get up early,” said Adrian. “Wanna get food?”

“Sure.” I was hungry, the scantness of my meal the previous night having caught up to me. I sat up.

“I see you prepared an outfit,” said Adrian.

I looked myself over. I had fallen asleep fully dressed.

“Huh,” I said.

On the walk to the cafeteria, we could see our breath. As I ate cereal out of a paper bowl, one that was rapidly becoming too soggy to maintain its structural integrity, I wondered about the boy from the previous night—what I'd done right, what I hadn't. Was he dead? Surely, if he was, I couldn't be held liable?

"What do you have today?" Adrian asked me. He was consuming a banana.

"Photo class," I said. I looked at the mountains, now well-lit, and imagined them in a frame. "Lit, maybe. Also, I think music, again..." My voice receded into my mouth.

"You're not a morning person," said Adrian.

"No."

"There's hikes in the mornings, if you need a reason to change that. They start... well, twenty minutes ago, now."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"This counselor dude."

"David?"

"That's the one."

Adrian balled up his banana peel and tossed it over my head, landing it in a trash can with a wet thud, and drawing glances from the half-dozen other morning people who ate or drank coffee quietly under the fluorescent lights.

"Where does the hike go?" I asked. Adrian gestured vaguely towards the mountain range.

"That way, I think," he said. "I'm not outdoorsy. But I think there's a nice view of the city, if you can get to the top of, well, wherever."

It seemed like a view to see. The poster that had brought me here had featured a mountaintop view that looked simultaneously cold and sun-drenched, with a city below, a city of

dull orange adobe. *Learn among the mountains of the west*, it had said. Recreating that picture with my own camera had been somewhere in the back of my mind as a goal for my week, and now that possibility was tangible. I made a mental note: *tomorrow morning, hike*.

“Speaking of activities,” said Adrian.

“Yeah?”

“I think I’m gonna organize a game for tonight. Get a bunch of people. You played *Werewolf*?”

“No,” I said.

“It’s like *Mafia*?”

“What kind of game is this?”

“Well, it’s gonna be good. Big community game.”

“Mmmm.”

“You interested?”

“I’ll consider it.”

The quiet was interrupted by a chattering two-dozen students who poured in from outside. Some had sunglasses, others wide-brimmed hats, others satchels, others water bottles clipped to their belts. Some had walking sticks.

“Short hike,” said Adrian.

“Yeah, that’s weird,” I said, noticing the female counselor who had been there to help the fainting boy. She had apparently been leading the group; she exuded authority, somehow, and she had the biggest water bottle.

“You know her?” I asked Adrian. He seemed to know everyone.

“Oh, yeah, that’s Katarina. I think she’s technically the most senior counselor. She’s got survivalist vibes.”

“She’s the one from last night. You know, helping that kid.”

“That makes sense.”

“I could probably ask her...”

“If he’s okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Will you?”

“I don’t know... I think I’m scared to find out.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” said Adrian. “Does that look like the face of someone who just buried a sixteen year old?”

It didn’t.

“Come on, just talk to her.”

I steeled myself. The crowd surrounding Katarina had somewhat dispersed, with some people leaving, and some getting their meals or drinks.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hey!” She seemed surprised to see me, but I could tell she knew who I was. “Thanks for doing what you did last night.”

“Uh, yeah... I feel bad that I left.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, we didn’t really need—well, you did what you could.”

“But he’s fine?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s fine. This is a lesson.”

“It is?”

“Drink lots of water. It’s the altitude, it gets to people. You have one of these?” She held up her water bottle. I told her I did.

“Good.”

“Hey,” I said, and it took real, conscious effort on my part to change conversational gears, “You lead the hikes?”

She made a face that looked like she was in pain. “Well, yeah. We had to cancel the one this morning. Actually, turn it around just as we were getting started.”

“Why?”

“We had a mountain lion sighting on one of the trails. We can’t really have people on the trails, you know, legally, if that’s the case. Comes from on high.”

“Is that what I heard?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the only reason I’m up so early. I heard some weird animal noises outside my window.”

She thought for a moment. “I don’t know. Could have been coyotes. There’s all sorts of animals. Did it sound like there was more than one?”

“I have no idea. This is all new to me. Look, is it dangerous?”

“What, coyotes, or mountain lions?”

“Um.”

“Coyotes are harmless. They’re everywhere, just think of them as really big rats. Mountain lions, in theory, yes—they do hunt people, sometimes. But really, no. It’s just a precaution. You stick to campus, you stick to groups, you’re fine.”

I was silent.

“No, really, it’s not very dangerous.”

“No, I just—is there still gonna be hiking?”

“Yeah, we’re gonna do it tomorrow, unless there’s another sighting. But really, there’s not going to be. Trust me. Cougars are cowards.”

I updated Adrian.

“How do we know this isn’t like the spiders?” He said. “This could be a prank.”

“Do you think they would do that?” I asked.

“Oh,” he shook his head, “I don’t care. Doesn’t bother me, they can have their fun. But it’s worth thinking about.”

I ended up falling asleep again, only waking in time for Photography. The classroom, like every room on campus, was not easy to find. It was behind one of a few doors at the end of a winding basement hallway whose walls were adorned with framed student works. The first part of the class was a lecture from a leather-jacketed old man with all the kids crowded around a table. Jo was there, and we exchanged a wave. We didn’t talk about theoretical matters—the composition of photographs, that sort of thing—but about how to work a camera that used film. That was fine. I didn’t know any of it.

We were given an assignment to take two-dozen photographs of campus in time for tomorrow’s class. For the second half of class, we were sent outside to get a head start on the assignment. As we were doing this, Jo and I ended up together again, and she showed me some of her pictures. They were good. Their subjects always seemed alive. I didn’t know how to do that.

After that, I was finally able to attend the music class. It was nice. Quiet. After my photo experience, I considered it a blessing to have a class I didn't care about. I pulled out the book with all the notes I could barely read and the teacher told me to put it away.

"I don't know why they told you guys to read that," she said. "It's ridiculous."

And I noticed, indeed, that no one else had their book out. Things got weird for me when I was asked to introduce myself. I did. I told them I had some minor musical experience. I did not like all the eyes looking at me. The time was taken up by a number of basic discussions of music theory, which I found helpful as well, even though it felt a little bit like we were being babied. There was strange philosophizing in there, too. We discussed the "whys" of music. After class, I stayed behind to apologize for my absence the previous day.

"It's fine. I assumed you just hadn't gotten here yet. If you hadn't told me, I wouldn't have known."

"Where did the class go, anyway?"

"We were outside. It was a nice day, it seemed like the thing to do."

Later, back in the room, I was looking over some photos I had taken of some morose-looking shrubbery, pinning them to a corkboard. Adrian entered, wearing a cowboy hat.

"They're taking us into town tomorrow," he announced. "Should be fun. I know you wanted to do the hike, but this might make up for it. It's definitely more my style."

"I wonder if it'll be like the airport," I said, peering out the window, "Like a museum for kids."

"Oh, I didn't see it. I drove."

"You have a car?"

"I have a van."

“We could take that,” and remembering yesterday’s ride, I added: “This place has an interesting approach to student transportation.”

“They won’t let us.”

“They won’t let us drive there on our own?”

“I think it’s some kind of legal thing. They’re responsible if we get lost.”

“Well, I think that’s dumb.”

“I agree,” said Adrian. “But buses have their charms.”

“They do?”

“It’s nostalgic.”

“Not to me. I wouldn’t know any of that,” I said. “I’m homeschooled.” This was true, and it was the subject of a medium amount of apprehension—regarding, first, how to bring this up in conversation, and possibly, whether it would make people think that there was something wrong with me. I saw Adrian’s face go through several interesting stages as he thought about this information.

“So, what, are you like…”

“It’s for actual reasons. It’s not so we can just do religious stuff.”

“Oh, thank God. I’m a Marxist. But don’t worry, I’m a Trotskyite. So I’m not going to kill you.”

“Sure, yeah, that makes sense.”

“I feel like this explains a lot about you,” said Adrian. This was exactly the kind of comment that made me want to blend in instead. “Do you like it?”

“It’s fine. It’s kind of just like having homework without ever going to school.”

“So your parents aren’t standing there with a chalkboard?”

“No.”

He leaned in closer to look at my pictures. “Nice,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Photo class went well?”

“It was okay.”

“Listen, we’re doing that game later. Nine o’clock.”

“Where?”

“This space. It’s called the Community Center. You wanna come?”

“Um.”

“Come on. Meeting people. Killing people. In a game.”

I went. The Community Building was small and square, on the outskirts of campus, surrounded by woods. You had to take a long path through those woods to get there, and the sunset through the trees looked ominous. On the outside, the building appeared modern, but on the inside it looked surprisingly rustic, like a log cabin, with a mounted buck’s head on the wall above a fireplace that was not in working order. Already, kids I had seen here and there were lifting folding chairs from a pile in the corner and arranging them in a circle in the center of the room. Adrian greeted each of them like old friends. There were people I knew, too, though I didn’t greet them. Jo was there. There was also the kid who’d fainted, and the girl who’d helped me carry him. The former didn’t seem to know who I was, but the latter did. We shared an ambiguous glance.

“How did you get these people to come here?” I asked Adrian, when I managed to pull him away from his goodwill tour.

“I talked to them,” he said.

When enough people had arrived, he seemed to reach into thin air and conjure a cardboard box whose contents rattled as it moved. The top of the box had an apparently homemade label that said *Werewolf*.

“Hey,” a voice said from behind me. I was surprised to see Junior Counselor David appear behind us. He greeted Adrian and asked him “How are you feeling?” Adrian said he felt fine.

“Oh, definitely! How have things been going for you?” After I shrugged, he asked, “You see any of those spiders?”

“I knew you were lying,” I said, lying. “Why are you even here?”—I tried to adjust my tone—“Aren’t we breaking curfew, technically?”

“No, curfew’s at ten,” said David. “And you’re allowed to stay out later if I’m here. Supervised activity. Plus, I really need to make sure you guys don’t kill each other or something. This game can get pretty brutal.”

“How do you know about this?” I asked. I had assumed that *Werewolf* was some concoction by Adrian because of the appearance of the box.

“Oh, no,” said David. “This is basically an heirloom.” He pointed to a set of shelves with various games, books, DVDs, and even VHS tapes, which leant against the wall, nestled into a gap in the fake wooden logs. “It’s been here for years. Community ownership. Last year? I killed it at this game. Watch out.”

When the circle had been filled with students, Adrian distributed to each of us an imperfect oval of fabric with various smiling faces sewn into them, along with a safety pin. Adrian had one of these patches himself, and he used the pin to attach to his massive hat the image of a smiling and thickly bearded old man.

“As you can now see from my patch,” Adrian announced to the group, “I am God. I’m going to guide you through the game. I am your referee and storyteller. Each of you also has an identity. Do not let anyone see the back part of your patch. This is a game of secret identities.” The front of my patch labeled me as a woman in a bonnet. The other side once I slipped it over said *VILLAGER* in letters of thickly-stitched green thread.

“This is a social deduction game,” said Adrian. “Most of you are villagers. Some of you are monsters. The job of the villagers is to find and kill the werewolves among you. The job of the werewolves is to kill all of the villagers. At night, you will close your eyes, and the werewolves will choose someone to kill. During the day, the villagers will attempt to identify the werewolves. Every day, you, the villagers, can vote to kill one person that you suspect of being a werewolf. Does this all seem clear?”

Some people nodded yes, some people looked less certain. Either way, we started. We were transported to a foggy village in Central or Eastern Europe where there were no leaves on the trees, and every cramped and angular home or shop was within sight of the cemetery. I sat in darkness while the monsters hunted for their target in the mist.

The first person to die during the night was David. He seemed to take it in stride, although, in the morning, when his murder was made known, and he said, “You guys are funny,” it was with a bit of a sneer. The group as a whole loved it, though. You could tell they got a kick out of the death of an authority figure, even if it was all imaginary.

Adrian announced that it was now time for us, the villagers, to discuss the evidence and decide on someone to kill with our pitchforked mob justice. “Try not to kill an innocent.”

There was a moment of tentativeness, an eyeing of everyone by everyone else. Adrian prodded us: “Go! Discuss! I’ll be back.” And he slipped out of the room. Discussion began as he

had requested. It was gentle, as gentle as it could be, nobody wanting to overstep in a context in which no one knew anyone else particularly well. The discussion was stuck in idle when Adrian reentered.

“You have to pick,” he told us. “I’m going to give you guys one minute. One. If you can’t vote to kill someone by then, I’m just going to kill two of you at random. Sorry, but I have to be harsh to keep the game moving.” The thrill of ultimate power seemed to be flowing through him.

The way the voting worked was that one person would propose a candidate, and then there was a vote, people raising their hands to indicate their consent to the murder—this was always the tensest part. This process would repeat several times, and by the end of the day, the person who had received the most votes during their turn in the spotlight would be the one who was killed in a horrible act of mob justice. That first day, we ended up killing one of our own. Perhaps the prodding had clouded our judgment.

The fog rolled in again and it was night. In the morning it was discovered, much to my surprise, that I had been murdered. Despite the pain of an early death, this meant that the next night I could gain the benefit, as someone not currently “in” the game, to keep my eyes open and witness the two villains pick their next target—to know my murderers. The two werewolves were the girl who had helped me the previous night, and Jo. This made me feel something—betrayal? However, Jo met my gaze, and mouthed a “sorry” which made me feel a bit better about being the second person on the list of “people to murder.” I figured it was all arbitrary.

To summarize the next imaginary week, which played out over the course of the next twenty-five minutes, each night there was some more killing on the part of the werewolves and during the day the pointing of fingers for misguided reasons. It became apparent that, to the

villagers, a lack of gumption in defending oneself and an excess of passion in defending oneself were both seen as equally suspicious. So, whenever anyone did anything, it incited anger, and nothing was accomplished by the villagers. Tragically, but inevitably, the monsters eventually reached parity with their human neighbors and it was realized only too late who they were. At that point nothing could be done and they smiled and admitted their identities with no shame. At the end of the week they voted to kill one villager with no pretense at all and the next night they killed the last of the innocents, and they won. This was the reason why it was important for villagers to use their time wisely: each day, telling concerned villager from malicious monster became both more urgently necessary and more difficult. We agreed to play again. Hopefully, this time, we'd play better. Everyone returned their identity patches to Adrian and he redistributed them in new ways. I was, again, a villager.

The first morning after the first body was found in a muddy ditch next to the inn, the villagers voted to kill Junior Counselor David.

He gave a speech. "Okay. I'm fine. But really, you guys are going to kill me only because of my position of power? Pathetic. Mob justice does not work."

He stood up on his chair, not out of desperation, but out of pride, and he seemed like he was going to continue defending himself, but the mix of laughter and bloodthirsty shouting that rose from the crowd as he spoke finally drowned out his voice and soon he was dead. When Jo died the next night, suspicion fell onto me. The first person to point their finger in my direction was Jo's partner from the last game, whose name I still didn't know. Her reasoning was that the two of them had killed me early on in the previous game, and that, therefore, I was probably taking my revenge. It was generally agreed upon by the mob that I had been too quiet, and that this meant I was up to something.

“I haven’t spoken because I haven’t had much to say,” I told them when I was given the chance to speak in my defense. “I don’t have any strong suspicions, and I’d hate to point the finger at someone innocent, like you’re doing to me now. I don’t know who’s guilty, but I know I’m not.”

I tried, I really did. I was killed anyway. When my innocence was revealed, there were some murmurs of sympathy from the circle, as well as some surprised and guilty looks. The game went on and this time the villagers purged the evil from their midst, though not without some difficulties along the way. It was agreed that we'd play a third game as a sort of tiebreaker between the villagers and monsters.

I was evil this time. We killed David. My teammate was a girl in a striped sweater that made her look like a bee. Being a monster narrowed and simplified my experience of the game. It felt good. Over the course of the first few days, I began to feel a strangeness, a sense that in my change of alignment I had begun to look different, and to sit differently. David stepped outside after we killed him again, justifiably frustrated, and I felt a little guilty for the part I had played in that.

The next night, my partner gestured that I should take the lead in the picking of the kill. I picked the boy who had fainted. The next morning when discussion began, people began to look in my direction. Someone again suggested that I was too quiet. I grimaced. A vote was about to be called to decide my fate and it seemed that it was going to go against me.

I figured that since I was evil, I should make the evil choice. I started with a level-voiced defense of my conduct that slowly rose into a near-yell. “This is not fair,” I said. “I’m sorry I’m too quiet! I’m not too good at this game, and I don’t really feel comfortable in bigger crowd

situations but I'm just freezing up and I have done anything wrong." I made myself look like I might cry.

It worked. I wasn't sure whether what I did was okay—but we won, the bee-striped girl and I. The werewolves destroyed the townsfolk. I reasoned that in the world of the game our victory would be short-lived, as the obliteration of an entire village would no doubt attract outside attention, and perhaps a military response. As we'd been playing for well over an hour, the game was concluded and general chatting began, this and that person saying "you almost got me" or "you bastard." Adrian was being congratulated for the success of the night, though he was passing on the credit to the still-absent David.

"Hey!" someone said. I swiveled around. It was the girl from the bathroom incident.

"Fuck you," she said.

"Nice to see you again."

"That was not cool."

"I'm sorry, but it's just a game," I replied, in a measured tone, not yet sure how much of an asshole I wanted to be, how much I wanted to gloat about the trick I had played.

"That was too far."

"Hey, it worked," I said. She left.

I left with Adrian, once many people had already gone home and he had recollected the tokens necessary to play the game. We found Junior Counselor David outside smelling like menthol.

"I heard rumors that someone was a dick?" And to Adrian: "Was it you?"

Pointing to me, Adrian said: "He played a dirty trick. 'Why are you guys so mean to me,' that kind of thing."

“I was going to do that,” said David, “if I was ever actually the werewolf. You want to save your potential sympathy until then. That’s the mistake I made this time. Really, I should have known better.”

Adrian gave him a pat on the shoulder, and he perked up again, and in a sardonic tone:

“And to think of all I’ve done for this community.”

“Are we going back?” I asked, getting a bit chilly.

“Oh,” said David, “We’re getting a ride.”

Katarina drove us back on a golf cart. While we wound down a sporadically-lit path, David recapped to her the events of the game. “That’s why I don’t play that game,” she said. “Or games like it. Creates strife. I prefer Jenga.”

In turn, Katarina and I told David about the incident with the fainting boy, and we discussed the situation with the mountain lion.

“We’re doing a hike tomorrow, right?” I asked.

“Looks like it,” said Katarina. “Nothing’s come up.”

They dropped us off and sped off into the night together, and when we were back at the dorm, Adrian asked if I wanted to go outside.

“Then,” I said, “we’d really be breaking curfew.”

“So you wanna do it?”

“Yeah, sure.”

We sat on a kind of stoop that overlooked a sloping path. In the moonlight the rocks looked Martian. I had my legs balled underneath me. My hands—a little whiter than normal in the cold—gripped the water bottle which I had come to understand as the key to my survival here.

“This is the first time I’ve been outside today,” Adrian said. “I mean, besides walking places. I mean, really being outside. It’s nice. The air tastes good.”

“What did you think about my strategy?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “it’s what the game’s about.”

“Thank you!” A little exasperation came out.

“But then again, you’ve got to wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“If you’d been a little more... restrained, maybe you’d feel better.”

“Feel better? Why should I feel bad? I don’t feel bad. I won. What makes you think I feel bad?”

He shrugged. It was silent for a bit. I could have said more, but I chose not to. I wondered if he was right. That train of thought was cut short when an uneven clicking sound startled us. It sounded like we were being approached by a living marionette. A skeletal boy with big hair appeared from beyond a row of trash bins. I knew him immediately.

“Hello,” he said. He was holding a beer, and he pointed to it. “You won’t tell on me, right?”

I shook my head to indicate “no.” Then I asked him: “How are you?”

“I’m fine. A-okay.”

“I don’t think I know your name.”

“Luke.”

“Nice to see you again,” I said.

He fell over.

“Where do you get something like that around here?” I asked, pointing to the can that had just fallen from his grip.

“Ah,” he said, “I’ll show you.” He mimed opening a fridge, and taking something from it. “You do that, but with a real fridge.”

“Neat,” said Adrian.

Luke gazed at the dark stretching out to the mountains. “Turning the conversation in a wildly new direction, did you know that mountain lions hunt people? These are what the rumors are warning about. They are the only animals in North America to actively hunt people. Or is it mammals?”

“The only ones to actively hunt mammals?” Adrian asked.

“The only one... shit. I lost my train of thought.”

“You going on the hike tomorrow?” I asked Luke.

“I want to. I don’t know if they’ll let us,” he said.

“I think they will. I talked to a counselor. Katarina. You know her, right?”

“Yeah, I do. She’s helped me with a lot. But I don’t have faith,” said the boy. “I do not have faith. In animals.”

“Well, maybe I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“You excited for going into town?” Adrian asked him.

“I said I’d go on a date but really, I just want to buy pottery.”

“People are dating here?” I asked.

“What kind of pottery?” Adrian asked.

“Yes, people are dating here. If you think about it, it’s perfect, because—”

“—Because you never have to see any of these people again?” This comment came from me. The guy agreed with me.

“Pottery,” said Adrian.

“Pottery,” said Luke.

Eventually, he disappeared along the path he’d come from.

“Well,” I said, “We made a new friend.”

“Actually, we probably did.” He must have sensed from my tone that I didn’t actually mean this. “If they talk to you for no reason, they’re your friend. That’s how I approach it.”

“I feel bad, though, that he doesn’t seem to know who I am.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s the guy I saved in the bathroom.”

“Huh.”

I felt energized, somehow. A buzz of emotions, good and bad. I felt the need to walk it all off. I wasn’t going to go anywhere crazy. In fact, I was going to backtrack. See things again. Pretty soon, I could feel the weather starting to seep into my socks. I was still on campus, but in a part that I had only seen when we passed through it on the golf cart, the path that wound through dark woods. It was occasionally illuminated by overhead lights that appeared in patches, so that there were some sections where I walked through total darkness. I felt generally good when I was in the light, and uneasy when I was in the dark, and these two mindsets would switch back and forth when the change occurred.

This was the edge of my known world. It was unnatural to not be able to see my own feet. I thought I heard a little rustling somewhere off to my right, where the wall of darkness and shiny green leaves and knotted dark brambles obscured my view. I stopped. I tried to listen for

further movement. There was a ringing in my ears; years of loud music were finally going to get me killed. My hands were in front of my face as if I were anticipating an impact. I swiveled left and right trying to see, hear, sense in some way, even though I had no sight, and could hear nothing. A movement—then another—and then I let myself relax just a bit. I entered the next patch of light, listening to the clicking and squishing of my steps on the pavement. When I was in the next dark area I had one hand outstretched to either side in a rush of paranoia, hoping to anticipate possible attacks from the flank. Somehow it wasn't the animals that had put me on edge, but the game. There were werewolves in the village and they looked just like us. The residual anxiety had tainted my walk. It took a second to clock where the noise came from next: not directly from the sides, but somewhere off forward and to the right, and not coming at me, not exactly.

I froze. A strange reflective lump of darkness bobbed into view a few dozen feet ahead of me in the next patch of light. I stood in the dark and this thing, this element of darkness, had made itself known in what looked like a spotlight. I leant forward, straining my eyes. Aspects of its body began to take shape. It had a head, a stumpy head that seemed to rotate within an unnaturally large range of motion. It had legs, thin ones. It had odd movements, like a wind-up toy. Its head flicked in one direction, then the other. It clucked. It was a chicken. A black chicken. I had never seen a chicken before, or at least, not since I was a kid at the petting zoo, memories so old that I could not quite tell if they were real. I mentally searched for information on the geographic range of the chicken. Are they Southwestern? I supposed they were kind of like roadrunners, which I had seen on the side of the highway as the bus moved. The bird looked at me.

I almost said something to it—instead, an animal leapt from the left side of the darkness, obliterated the chicken in a cloud of black feathers in a split-second, and disappeared with the screaming bird into the underbrush. It happened so fast that I shouldn't have been able to see anything, and yet in that moment, under the harsh light, I had seen clearly the outstretched front legs, the gaping maw, the sleek body with tan fur, and the tail, which was at the end, and consequently the last thing to disappear into the brambles. I should have run, but I didn't. This should not be mistaken for bravery. It was simple disbelief. I walked home. I was not killed.

I got back to the room and I slipped in. Everything was still—Adrian seemed to be asleep. A dim light was on in the small common room where he often hung out. I sat on a bean bag chair he had brought and looked up at the cobwebs on the ceiling. I felt as if what I had seen had been “for me” somehow. I searched for a broom and couldn't find one. I grabbed the chair from my room, stood on it next to the bean bag, and batted at the cobwebs with my hands.

III.

“It’s not supposed to be fun to play.” Adrian stabbed at his makeshift breakfast salad.

“It’s unfair on purpose. It’s got the most realistic economy in the history of gaming. You destroy everyone else for your benefit. You are a robber baron. Are you okay?”

I hadn’t been listening. I allowed my terrible coffee to exist within my mouth and on my tongue without being swallowed.

“I slept like shit,” I said. “What were you talking about?”

“*Monopoly*, dude. *Monopoly*. I hate playing it, though. I’m not crazy.”

As I had tried to get some sleep on my stiff mattress, it became apparent that I had two options. One was to not tell the truth. I had seen something. Something dangerous. This danger would affect people. This danger could cause death. The other option was to say nothing. This was a danger, too. This would mean that the hike would not be canceled again. I could go. But then again, the headline wrote itself. Something about gross negligence. The irony was that my indecision had taken the matter out of my hands.

Adrian narrowed his eyes at me:

“Your alarm woke me up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That was for the hike, right?”

“I guess I just slept through it, yeah.”

“You do look bad.”

“I feel bad.”

“Don’t feel too bad,” said Adrian. “We’ve got somewhere else to go today.”

Back at the room, I packed my things—including the camera, which I hoped to get some use out of. I left room in my bag for any trinkets I might find. Adrian prepared very little, stuffing his wallet into the pocket of his cargo shorts, and then giving a thumbs up.

“I wish I had a thermos,” I groaned. “For coffee.”

As students congregated in the parking lot, Adrian and I watched as a few counselors talked amongst themselves. They looked secretive. Katarina was there, but David was nowhere in sight, which we thought was odd. He always seemed to be a presence, wherever the action was. We crowded into a yellow school bus, and instead of taking the footpath, this time we took the path meant for vehicles, which quickly brought us to a gate which had to be pulled open by a team of counselors. We shook through mountain passes and back onto a familiar stretch of desert. There were no trees on the way there.

While people were loud, and the seats almost overflowing, the two of us sat mostly in silence, and I stared at little doodles in permanent marker along the edges of the windows. Then, a head appeared, poking up over the rest, a few rows ahead. It was that guy again—Luke.

“Hey!” he said.

I waved warily. Adrian smiled at him.

Then, Luke began, embarrassing to me but apparently not to himself, to climb out of his spot and over the people he was sitting with to get to us. It was hard to tell if those people were his friends, but either way, kids were turning to look at the commotion, and Adrian and I appeared to be its source. Not finding a seat at the back with us, he actually sat down in the aisle and began a conversation, as if he was not doing anything unusual.

“Hey,” he said again.

“Um, yeah, hey.” As I said this, my voice warbled as the vibrations of the bus ran through me.

“That was fun last night, with the game. And after.”

“Glad you liked it,” said Adrian.

“We should do stuff,” he said.

“What stuff?” I asked.

“Town stuff. Hanging out.”

I felt more confused than ever about whether he remembered what had happened between us on my first night.

“Sure,” I said, looking into his eyes, at first, searching for some casual recognition, and then, with increasing intensity. He looked a little confused, and I probably looked a little crazy. Katarina, who had been making her way through the shaking aisle, reached us at the back.

“Hey, you can’t sit on the floor,” she said. “Grab a real seat.”

“Just a sec,” said Luke, and to us, he said: “I’ll see you guys when we get off?” He agreed. I didn’t see another option. He returned to a seat further up the bus.

I looked at Adrian.

“He seems cool,” he said.

“Is friendly the same thing as cool?”

“It is if you’re cool. You have a fun walk last night?”

This began a silent game, in which, first, I looked at Katarina, still standing nearby—I thought, in flagrant violation of the spirit of the rules she’d just laid out—and tried to judge whether she was listening. Adrian looked at her, then at me, and shook his head. I made a face. He made a face. I gave up.

“How’d you know?” I said quietly.

“Woke up in the night, saw your boots were gone. How was it?”

“Fine.” I did not mention the apparition.

“Why do you do that?”

“I have restless legs. And the air tastes good, like you said.”

“Why’d you try to hide it?”

“Because, I don’t know. It makes me seem a little crazy.”

The slight hills flattened out completely and town, in all its glory, appeared somewhere off in the sun. We parked next to a park. By the time we made it out of the bus, Katarina was shoving a bottle of water into Luke’s hand as if this wasn’t the first time, a little exasperated.

“You gotta keep an eye on this guy,” she said to me.

“I always do,” I said. Then I looked him in the eyes again. Nothing. This was getting ridiculous.

“Where’s David?” Adrian asked her.

“Busy. Cleaning up some stuff at the farm.”

“Is there really a farm? I kind of thought he was joking.”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s sustainable, or something.”

“What’s he cleaning?”

“You can worry about that later. Look, you see that over there? Big historical landmark?”

She pointed a monument off in the midst of the foot traffic. It looked like a set of cannons.

“We’re meeting there in an hour. Be there. Until then, go do stuff.”

Adrian and I, with Luke in tow somehow, sipping tentatively on his bottle of Poland Springs, made our way towards a series of appealing-looking storefronts.

“You know what she was talking about?” Luke asked us, his tone like he was sharing a secret.

“What?” I asked.

“With David and the counselors. It’s just rumors. So, they’re saying a mountain lion broke into the chicken coop and killed a bunch of them. They think. Someone says that’s what someone thinks. So, the thing killed a bunch, and a bunch got out. Some of the counselors are back at campus rounding up all the chickens that lived. And doing a body count. Cleaning up the blood. It’s like, total secret conspiracy, government coverup.”

“I didn’t know there was a chicken coop,” I said.

“Neither did I,” said Adrian.

“Where do you even hear stuff like this?” I asked.

Luke shrugged. “I know a lot of people. You hear a lot of things. They’re trying to keep it quiet, it seems like, but it’s not working too well.”

We passed a trio of busking street musicians whose guitars had strings with ends that had not been clipped.

“So that’s where David is,” I mused. “Can’t wait to grill him later.”

“He’s cool,” said Adrian. “He came to the game. Seems like he likes us. Whatever he’s up to, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind talking about it.”

“I don’t know.” I thought back to his attempt to ditch me when we’d first arrived, his frustrated early exit from the game. “I think he likes to avoid us when he can. I almost want to say, well, that it always seems like he’s up to something. Why do you think they’re hiding that chicken thing, if it’s true? And Katarina hiding it?”

“Maybe,” Adrian said diplomatically as he stepped over an unfurled rug arrayed with turquoise jewelry, “they don’t want to cause a panic.”

“Well, nobody cares, really,” said Luke. “People are acting about the same.”

“I wish things weren’t so tight,” I complained. “I feel cooped up on campus.”

“Like a chicken,” added Adrian.

“We are literally off campus right now,” said Luke.

“I guess you’re right,” I said.

Up ahead, there was a store with ornate vases in its windows.

“This is me,” said Luke, pointing. After we declined to join him, we said polite goodbyes, and he disappeared inside.

“I’m still annoyed,” I said. “I’m the guy’s hero, and he doesn’t even know it. How’s that fair?”

“He hit his head, who knows what else he’s forgotten. Give him a break.”

“Hey, we nodded at each other before he fainted. That’s worth remembering. And it is weird, that that’s his thing. Pottery. Maybe that’s the head injury, too.”

“Well, where do you want to go? What’s your thing?” asked Adrian.

I was unprepared for the question. He was a planner. I expected him to assert his schedule onto me.

“Well, I need to take pictures. But we can do that anywhere.”

Adrian made a sweeping gesture with his arms. “Pick a direction, at least.”

I sat at a bus stop bench and thought this over.

“We could go wherever the bus is going,” said Adrian.

“Okay, you have a coin?” He pulled out a dime, to which I responded, “I don’t think dimes are really flippable, too small.”

He pulled out a half dollar.

“Of course you have a half dollar.” I took it. “Tails, we walk... that way.” I pointed towards the sun and an outdoor seating area in front of a cafe. “Heads, we go that way.” In the other direction there was a grassy area that looked like a park. I flipped the coin. It was heads, which, as it turned out, was what I wanted anyway. The park.

“See,” I said, “When you need to make a difficult choice, you flip a coin. But you’re allowed to change the result. It’s not binding. So, really, it’s not about determining what you’re going to do, it’s about finding out what you want to do.”

We headed towards the park-like area. It quickly became clear that our park was actually a graveyard. The sea of headstones had been obscured by a dip in the terrain, until we were close enough to see them all at once. It stretched towards a church made of dull orange clay with a tile roof and a bell tower. I gave Adrian a look to the effect of *Are you cool with unexpectedly confronting death on our stroll today?*

“After you,” he said.

“This should be good for photos,” I reasoned as I fished the compact camera I’d been given out of my bag, where it had been wedged between my huge water bottle and a volume of poetry.

“Do you know the difference between a graveyard and a cemetery?” Adrian asked me.

“Why would I know that?” I replied, snapping a photo of him framed against the church in the background.

“Was that good?”

“Won’t know ‘til I develop it later today.”

“Well, a graveyard is attached to a church. So, it’s like a backyard, but for graves. It’s another type of yard. Cemeteries have no church.”

“Mmmmm,” I said, not really listening.

“See, I’m educating you,” Adrian chuckled, “That’s why you’re supposed to be here. To learn. It’s about opening yourself up to new experiences. I feel that the range of things you’re here for is too narrow. You’re really just about the hiking and the photography.”

“I like hiking,” I said. “I like photography. And I’m learning those things.”

I almost stepped on a duck.

“Hey, I’ve got to bring this up again,” I said after I’d recovered my footing. “That David stuff is weirding me out. He’s just so weird. I don’t know if I actually know if I know him. I feel like I’ve just sort of existed near him.”

“That’s knowing,” said Adrian.

“I don’t know. It feels weird with him. Like I can never tell when he’s joking. It’s hard to tell if I’m in on the joke.”

“Maybe that’s why everyone killed him. So the joke would finally be on him instead of them. I think that’s why it annoyed him so much,” Adrian said.

“I wonder if chickens are code,” I said. I photographed the duck.

“What?”

“Chickens are code.”

“Oh, like for meth, or something? They’re rushing around doing drug stuff?”

“I don’t know. The counselors weird me out,” I said.

We came to a small artificial pond with cherry blossom trees on its edges and lily pads and a half dozen ducks in its center. Adrian sat at a stone bench under one of the trees.

“I don't think that's anyone's fault,” he said. “They just, well, they're old enough that they're not like us, but we're close enough together that they 'get' us.”

“So you don't think they hate us?”

“No.”

Getting restless, I stood on the stone bench and looked at the traffic on the road.

“Hey—” Adrian pointed to my left at a deer, a buck with huge antlers, that was wandering through the graveyard next to the fence that separated it from the street. I must have used up half of my roll of film in the next thirty seconds, trying to capture that thing.

Back at the cannons, we began to regroup. Katarina stood a ways away from us, leaning against a tree, halfheartedly trying to hide from us that she was smoking. While different groups huddled and made conversation about where they had been and the trinkets they'd bought, my roommate polished his sunglasses on the sleeves of his polo shirt.

“I like this place,” he said. “More than the campus.”

“I don't know.” I scanned the faces for Luke. “Everything feels kind of the same. The buildings are all the same color.”

“You're not looking at the details,” said Adrian, swiveling his head to look at each building individually. “It's culture, it's history. It's fun kitschy tourist stuff.”

“Maybe I'm more of a big picture type of person.”

“Is that a photography pun?”

I saw Jo, fiddling with her camera. “It wasn't intended as one, but it can be, if you want. I'll be back.”

“How’d it go?” I asked her.

“Went fine. Do you know to unjam this thing?”

We stared together into the guts of the camera.

“What did you do?”

“I changed the roll,” she said, “but I don’t think I did it right.”

“You used a whole roll?”

“This is my third. See, I have a theory that the best photographers are the ones who take the most pictures.”

“Well, I guess you’re the best.”

I saw Luke talking to Adrian, carrying something—a bubble-wrapped bundle.

“Look, I’ll see you in class,” I told Jo, “Good luck with that.”

As I approached Luke, he gave me a nod.

“Is that pottery?” I asked him. He nodded excitedly. “What is it about pottery that you like so much?”

“Will you show us?” asked Adrian.

It was a kind of urn, dark blue in color, and beautifully contoured.

“Well, it’s nice,” I said, “but I don’t know if I get why it’s the thing you had to go get...”

“I spent a whole lot of time talking to the owner of the place.”

“Why?”

“Well, are you an artist?”

I pondered this. “Are photographers artists?”

“Yes,” said Luke.

“Then, no, I’m not an artist. I am into photography. I am not a photographer. Maybe someday I will be.”

“I have no idea what you mean by that,” said Adrian.

I shrugged. “Don’t drop your thing,” I told Luke.

The ride back was quieter than the one there. I rested my face against the window. By the time we arrived on campus, everyone else was exhausted, but I felt jittery. On my way to my first class, which was about unpacking the poetry I’d been neglecting to read all week, I caught David hauling a large cardboard box across a road, and when I greeted him, he sort of flinched.

“How was the trip?” he asked me, recovering.

“It was good. What have you been doing today?”

“Well, apparently everyone already knows, which, you know, I’m sure means that you know that I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

“So, you’re allowed to lie to us about how dangerous the wildlife is, but you can’t tell us when it’s true?”

“What do you mean?” asked David.

“The spiders and stuff, man,” I said.

“Oh yeah, that makes me look pretty bad. I wouldn’t have done that if I had known that this was gonna happen. Context changes a lot of things.”

“So why’d you do it?”

“I was just trying to inject a little adventure into your lives.”

“Is cleaning chicken guts enough adventure for you?”

“Hey, for all you know, there could be anything in this box. And it’s not chicken guts.”

In Photography class, Jo and I worked together in the dark room. Each of my pictures had been taken with purpose. Her theory that quantity equalled quality—I hardly gave it a thought, until we got them developed. In my picture of Adrian in the graveyard, he was blinking. I liked Jo. But her talent relative to mine made me feel stuff. I stared at her pictures for a long time, under a deep red light.

When I got back to the room, I tried to close the door quietly, not in the mood to talk. But Adrian was there, like he always was, reading some book for one of his classes while sitting on the bean bag he'd brought with him.

“I talked to David,” he said.

“About what?”

“See if the hike thing was happening tomorrow.”

“What did he say?”

“Yeah, he said no.”

“That makes sense. I'm probably gonna do something anyway, though.” This was a decision I'd made on the walk back, while I stared at my shoes.

He looked puzzled. “What are you gonna do?”

“I'll probably just go up there on my own. Take a few pictures. I want to time it so I get the sunrise. Do you want to come?”

“What are you talking about, dude?”

“Like I said, I think I'll do it anyway.”

“I think that's a really bad idea.”

“I understand. It's reasonable to think that. But I'll be fine.”

“There's a whole bunch of reasons not to do that. What if you get lost?”

“I have a phone.”

“What about the mountain lion thing?”

“Didn’t care about me last time.”

“What?”

“Last night, I saw something. It. The mountain lion. Saw it kill a chicken. It was pretty close to me. Don’t know if it noticed me. If it did, it didn’t seem to care that I was there. I think it thinks I’m too powerful. Maybe to it, I seem like some kind of deity.”

“That really doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

“So you’re not coming?”

“No.”

The funny thing about sleep is that the more you need it, the less likely you are to get it. I knew that I would need a solid eight hours, because I’d be staying up until dawn the next night. I got half that.

IV.

The next day, our final full one, went by in a blur. Class. Class. Food. Class. In Photography we shared pictures, and I tuned it out. At dinner, Adrian made a last-ditch attempt to talk me out of my scheme:

“You know, one time, near my house, I was hiking and I found a leg. A deer leg.”

“Yeah?”

“And I was thinking, you know, what that would look like if it was a human leg.”

“Probably bigger. Thicker? Definitely with more toes. Look, you’re not gonna talk me out of this.”

“I know.”

I packed a bag. Water. A couple different cameras—the one from class, and the one I’d brought. A flashlight that would come in handy later. I strapped on some hiking boots that I was getting use out of for the first time. I left at three in the morning. Adrian was off in his own room, so I didn’t know whether he was asleep or not. If he was, he didn’t try to stop me. I slipped out and searched for a presence on the street. I didn’t see anyone. I made my way through campus: around the fountain, past all the classrooms, through the path where I had seen the monster—that last thing, I’ll admit, I did with some trepidation. And then, I was in uncharted territory, relying only on the too-bright light from my phone. The app showed me where to go. This was the moment I should have turned around. My phone was half dead. It hadn’t charged properly. I should have known that would happen. It kept blinding me when I turned it on. I

should have taken the time to massage all of the kinks out of the cord. I should have folded it under the phone in just the right way. But I hadn't. And I didn't turn around.

The map led me past an unusually colored blue barn-like building. It was unusually colored in the sense that when you see a barn, you expect it to be red, although I had no reason to call it a barn exactly. I only knew that it looked like one. I had my water bottle swinging by my side, my finger hooked through its loop thing. I had never been a big "water bottle guy." But now, I knew to take it seriously. I was prepared. I was a survivalist in my own mind.

Amidst the gentle sloshing sounds of the water I heard something else. Something that came from inside the blue building. Was I going to have another encounter with the mountain lion, if that was really what it was? Whatever monster was in there, I was compelled to find out, somehow, much like I was compelled by the mountain. I peered into the mouth of the building, where horrors awaited. The sounds continued. They sounded human, but less so, like the screaming coyotes that I had woken up to on my first morning, their voices too familiar for comfort. Was it breathing? Snoring? The sound was joined by a rhythmic thudding. I peeped inside.

The interior was dark. Only one light shone down, and it swung back and forth, illuminating different parts of the hay-strewn floor. This swinging was fueled by the rhythmic shaking of the whole building, which seemed quite flimsy now that the whole thing was in motion. There was a figure in the corner, just out of reach of the swinging light. At the greatest extent of its swinging, this figure was illuminated partially. It was vaguely human shaped but too bulky, and with the outlines of some kind of hairy coat illuminated from behind. The fur was almost red, though obscured by distance and lack of light. I saw this figure bending over, doing

something with its feet, and occasionally, kicking or stomping on something. A kind of cabinet? The feeling of familiarity only imbued the encounter with an additional sense of danger.

Then, a sound from behind me, the popping and scraping of wheels against gravel, jolted me back into action. I could glimpse, emerging from some trees, a set of bright lights. I knew they were probably headlights, although to me they looked like piercing eyes. Scrambling into a ditch, my hands sunk into a shallow stream of flowing water and the mixture of mud and rock that lay underneath. This was a part of some kind of plumbing system, but I didn't care. I had a range of feelings running through my head, and concern about the contents of the water was not among them.

Over the sound of the water-flow, I heard some kind of conversation taking place, or something like a conversation. The voices sounded familiar but warped somehow. This kind of experience will do that, make the familiar strange. I turned on my phone again, pressing my face as close to the screen as possible in the hopes that it would shield the light from the nearby figures. As I army-crawled with my damp elbows towards where the app said the trailhead was, I realized that, since I was using both of my hands to crawl, this meant that I didn't have my water bottle—I had dropped it somewhere. I contemplated leaving it behind. I could get away with it, couldn't I? Drop. Clatter. Glasses sliding across the tile. No. That was why.

Maybe I took this all too seriously. But as I eyed the grassy area I had come from and saw some kind of shape, a shape like a water bottle, I did something both serious and silly: I crawled on my hands and knees to avoid being seen back towards the shape in the grass. I reached out, preemptively flinching, as a doubt crossed my mind as to what the thing was, but it was indeed hard plastic—new, but slightly scraped up. When I touched it I saw a light. I hoped I wasn't going to be seen. I crushed myself against the ground, my face buried in the grass, and

after a few agonizing moments I couldn't help myself and I turned to see the vehicle disappearing into the night. I kept moving. I climbed upward.

There was a section of rocky uphill terrain where a bunch of trees had fallen, as if a huge hand had pressed down from the sky and flattened them all. I stopped to breathe. I sat down. This was about the moment when I realized that I was completely fucked. My phone was dead. The battery was old. This meant that I had no map. In a life-or-death scenario, it also meant that I was at a serious disadvantage. It wasn't like I had a flare gun. I wildly moved my hands around inside my bag and found the flashlight. I turned it on. I pointed it at the ground, which was cluttered with fallen branches. I pointed it inside my bag, as a way of taking inventory. I used it to trace the treeline, where a face was looking back at me. I dropped the light.

Hours passed in the next few seconds. I expected a monstrous cat, invisible to my feeble human eyes, to torpedo through the air and collide with my face at any moment. I prepared to be ripped to shreds. But it didn't come. I knelt down, with my gaze still fixed on the darkness, and with one hand, I grabbed the flashlight. A part of me thought that, since I wasn't dead, I had been mistaken about what I had seen. But I hadn't been. I pointed the light at the same spot. It was still there. Looking at me. A big cat face. I didn't want to make any sudden movements. That would kill me. But I couldn't do nothing, because that wouldn't feel right either. I opened up my mouth and stuck my flashlight in it, keeping it pointed at the animal. I leant down again to find one of the cameras in my bag. As I did, I had to crane my neck awkwardly to keep the light upright. I took a series of pictures. No flash necessary. I used up the roll of film. Then, I sat some more. The thing left silently. I spat out the light.

“Holy fucking shit,” I said involuntarily.

I had planned it so that I'd be able to see this view as the sun came up. My boots were soaked through and untied. I had initially tried to keep them tied but after enough tries I came to realize that the wet and fraying laces were never going to stay put and so I let them be. My legs ached. I felt simultaneously too hot and cold. The inside of my several layers were drenched with sweat, but any effort to remove any of these layers left me too cold. These physical discomforts became a part of me over the course of my journey. They became somehow eternal. Metaphysical. My tired brain came to understand, deeply, the rhythm of my sloppy and shambling steps.

And then, I was there. The well-worn rocky summit, the little buildings below, and soon, the sun. It illuminated the landscape, filled it in somehow. That land had always been tinted with hints of these colors, worlds of orange and red, but now they were brought to fuller maturity at the start of a new day. I got my camera. Took it out. Pointed it at the view below and made sure to include plenty of sky, and I took a picture. It was a good picture. Whatever desire had brought me to the top of the mountain, that had nourished me as I climbed—I felt I could now leave there if I wanted, or I could bring it with me on the way down. I considered flipping a coin to decide which to do, but I didn't have one. I began my descent.

The thing was, as I went back down, though the path was now illuminated, it seemed more obscure than ever. I had gotten turned around somewhere. The path downward seemed infinitely less obvious. I was genuinely, dangerously, lost. I was alone. No phone, no map. Every tree looks the same when you're tired. On the way up I had been there for the sights, the smells, everything. Now I just wanted to sleep. I was no longer worried about the animals. It was only inertia that allowed me to stumble my way back down the mountain.

I finally wound my way to some gravel path, with black trees to my left and the monumental face of a mountain to my right, and maybe this was a dream, or something like it. Like a half-awake nightmare where you're trying to solve some problem that, once you're awake, you can't put into words. David was right about a few things, and one of them is that the nature out there is more dangerous, more hostile. I stopped to wipe the sweat from my face, leaning against sheer rock. My lazy feet slid out from under me on the gravel underneath, and I ended up seated in a kind of curled-up position, like a dead bug. In front of me was a steep near-cliff, thickly forested. David. Why did that name come into my head again? Oh, yeah. He's that counselor dude. Focus. Take a drink. No water left. And then, I realized: this was the footpath David had driven us on, that first day. His mistake saved me. I followed the trail back.

It was sunny, and unambiguously daytime, when I actually returned to campus. It was the kind of early morning sunshine that touches you with cold. It was fairly empty on campus. I felt that if someone had seen me then, they would have thought that I had come from the woods, or that I was some kind of swamp monster, or that I had been raised by wolves. It was in this state that I returned home to the room. It was quiet. I let my boots slide off of my feet. I stripped the wet clothes off of me and simply applied myself to the bed area.

I awoke an indeterminate amount of time later to yelps. The yelps were vaguely human. I put on a shirt but no pants. I was in a state which has sometimes come to me since after grasping some small amount of sleep after a long and exhausting night, the feeling that daytime and sunlight are the real night. I went out into the shared space in a daze.

“You look pretty awful,” said Adrian.

“Mmmmmmm.” I said.

“Told you so.”

“Yeah, I know. You were right.”

“You, uh... find whatever you were looking for?”

“I don’t know. I think I found it but I got lost on the way back.”

Adrian gestured towards my soaking boots, by socks, also wet, one and the other together forming a sort of trail from the door towards the entrance to my room.

“I’ve been there,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. The key is the next morning, putting on pants.”

“Mmmm. Yeah. I have a headache.”

The noises that had awoken me drifted back into my brain.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Something weird.”

I headed from the door.

“Wait,” said Adrian. “Put on pants.”

Through the streets, if they could be called that, of campus, roamed the golf cart I had seen multiple times before, with the mounted and stuffed head of a deer on its front like the figurehead of a ship, and someone in a bulky red coat, massive fake beard, and large hat—someone who in the daylight, I recognized both as the figure I had seen in the barn the previous night and as Junior Counselor David. He was pretending to be Santa. In July. He was yelling “ho, ho, ho,” the whole thing. Katarina was also seated in the golf cart, dressed in green garb as one of Santa’s elves. As David recklessly piloted the golf cart through the streets, she was tossing, bordering on pitching, rolled up canvas bags with unknown contents at students

eagerly awaiting, some of them lining the sides of the streets, some of them leaning out of dorm room windows, some cheering, some laughing, some, like me, simply gawking, confused.

“Is this a dream?” I asked Adrian. “Is this death?”

When the duo saw me and Adrian, newly emerged from outside, our bags were pitched at us with a vigor I viewed as more than extreme. While Adrian caught his bag, I ducked and let it slap the wall behind me. With waves to us, the makeshift electric sleigh continued up the hill, continuing its racket.

“I was not expecting that,” said Adrian.

“I don’t understand what any of this has to do with Christmas.”

“You might be overthinking it,” said Adrian, holding up his bag, “We got gifts. I think they’re just, kind of, riffing on that theme.”

The pageantry did, in fact, oversell the contents of the bag. There was a pen in the bag. There was a thermos in the bag. There was a canteen in the bag—metal, which explained the weight. All these things and the bag itself were emblazoned with the logo of the school. Also in there was a framed group photo, which I wasn’t in. Jo wasn’t in it either.

“You must have took this on your first day,” I said to Adrian.

“Oh yeah, that sucked,” he said. He looked happy in the picture.

There was a goodbye event. Everybody was packed into the Community Building. The mounted deer’s head was missing from the wall. David still wore his Santa hat. He gave some pleasantries. After that, the floor was open, so to speak. Different people came up. Most I didn’t know, some I did. They were allowed to say anything. Mostly, they told stories. Gave goodbyes to their friends. I had a good story in mind, but I didn’t tell it. At the end, Luke went up. He told a story that sounded familiar.

“So I’d just like to know,” he said as he wrapped up, “who found me? So I can say thank you.”

I, sheepishly, raised my hand. I expected him to look surprised. He didn’t. After the formal part of this event, as people were waiting either for their parents to pick them up, or for the shuttle to the airport to be readied, we mingled in front of the fireplace. Luke and I talked about how funny it all was.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve had a concussion,” he told me, “like, the whole time.” David, oddly, didn’t seem to be around. Maybe he’d slipped out again. I greeted Katarina.

“That was pretty strange,” I said.

“It’s a sort of tradition,” she replied. “At the other campus, people do it right before winter break. I don’t know if I’m allowed to tell you what they pass out, though.”

“So where’s Santa?”

“Oh, he’s getting chewed out.”

I kind of laughed, and she said: “Seriously.”

“Wait, really?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s in big trouble. We weren’t supposed to do any of that. We kind of had to steal the keys to the golf cart last night.”

“Where do they keep those? Big blue building, looks like a barn?”

“How’d you know that?”

“Lucky guess. Will I be able to say goodbye to David, before I go?”

“I doubt it. I can send him a message, though.”

“Tell him he was right about literally everything.”

Adrian offered to drive me to the airport. I accepted. This was the first time I had been in his van, which seemed, as expected, out of place and time. The inside was clean, so much more clean than the vehicle of any other sixteen or seventeen year old. He had numerous hood ornaments and those things that hang from the mirror, he had a hammer and sickle and those fuzzy dice from Star Wars. We were off.

“Did I tell you what happened with David on the way here?” I asked him. As it turned out, I hadn’t, and so I explained the story of the path that turned out to be a footpath, and all the fear that came along with it.

“That’s a story,” said Adrian. “You should have told that at the thing.”

“Maybe. And hey, you’re a better driver than him, at least,” I said.

“That’s not saying much. I’m pretty sure he crashed that golf cart, like, multiple times. No, I really think he damaged it.”

“What’s funny is that the foot path is where I ended up when I was lost, and so, if the first thing hadn’t happened, I might’ve ended up lost a lot longer.”

“Or you could have been lost forever.”

“I wonder if they would’ve written me off as murdered by a cougar.”

“Who knows. That’s a story, too.”

“I don’t know if I’m gonna tell that one. It makes me look really stupid.”

When he dropped me off at the airport, we had a bit of an awkward moment.

“You’re coming, right?” I said, bag in my hand, and a pileup of traffic behind the van.

“No, man, I drove.”

“Right. No idea why I didn’t think of that.”

“Be in touch?” he asked.

“Yes, definitely.”

The airport was as busy as it had been the last time. At the gate, I ate a terrible bagel with the consistency of cardboard and tried to drown it all out with music. I had a book of poetry in one hand. I had only pretended to read it for a class, and then, once we cracked it open, I had vowed to read it for real. It spoke to me, as cliché as that sounds. I still have it.

I saw Jo, sitting on the other side of the concourse. I approached. I gave her the music book back.

“I forgot you had this,” she said.

“So did I.”

I asked her what flight she was on. This time, we’d be on different planes.

“You looking forward to going home?” I asked her.

“I don’t really know what I’m gonna find.”

“Right.”

We exchanged numbers.

Adrian drove back west at the same time I was flying west. Since there were no direct flights, I had a layover in Las Vegas. The place was filled with those sounds that slot machines make. On both flights, I ended up staring out the window obsessively. With enough time spent staring out the window, I started staring *at* the window—the way it was molded, the way it framed everything on the other side. It still looked flimsy to me. At home I didn’t end up being a photographer. I had seen enough stuff and something about it didn’t inspire me anymore. I kept the pictures, though. All of them. Many of them stayed undeveloped, rolled up in their little canisters until one day I unspooled them and stretched them out in front of a light. My favorite was the one where Adrian was blinking. I never did see him again. I kept up with campus news,

too, though as I'd predicted, I didn't apply there the next fall. I read that the mountain lion kept causing trouble, and they had to get some government people to catch it. They moved it somewhere more comfortable.