

KARL PFEIFFER

HALLOWTIDE



AN AUTHOR ORIGINAL EDITION

author's note

This PDF copy of my debut novel Hallowtide is for you, for free.

*All I ask is your time and--no matter what you thought of it--
perhaps a review on Amazon.*

*If you like it and would prefer something fancier,
there are digital and hard copies
for sale through amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com.*

Thank you. I hope you like it.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

HALLOWTIDE

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<http://www.HallowtideNovel.com>

Text set in the Garamond family

Manufactured in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

*when this story became most fully realized,
it was for Charissa*

Man is not fundamentally good. Almost half of him is a devil.
carl jung

*A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight,
and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.*
oscar wilde

PROLOGUE : *in god's eyes*

vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit

1.

*The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.*

PARADISE LOST *john milton*

2.

Falling between October 31st and November 2nd, All Hallows' Eve, All Saint's Day, and All Souls day are collectively known as the *Hallowtide*. The three days are set aside for remembrance of those who have died, providing an opportunity to pray that lost souls make it safely to that bright landscape of Heaven, to remember passed loved ones, and to reflect on one's own mortality and morality.

The set stands among traditions that span all of history and all of the world, recognizing in the face of falling winter and passing summer, of cold winds and failing crop,

that there is an other side,

that we will all arrive there in time,

that as life will spring again as the ground thaws, there will always be something more, both as near as a breath and as far as a memory long forgotten,

that lingers.

HALLOWTIDE

3.

She told me to write this.
This is me, writing down
what happened in
my
dreams.

4.

The darkness that follows the day is almost as good as this twilight moment. Halloween is the only night of the year where the glow lingers for one final encore, manifesting in the lights of Jack-o'-lanterns and the eyes of children.

It presents the happiness. Like in the winter, when a lost soul happens upon a log cabin in a snowy forest and feels all the wonder of the world in the simple glow of the windows, the yellow panels outlined softly on the untouched snow.

It presents the mystery. Like the will o' the wisp in a darkened cemetery, drifting between the headstones, beckoning to passersby. . . . Inviting.

Will you follow?

Viewed from the streets of the night, the warm glow of Halloween is only properly seen from the perspective of the outsider.

So see it.

See the children's faces and the glow of the pumpkins and streetlamps, which show the wonder that is so close, so near to reach. At the same nearness, if not closer, are the shadows. The evil is as much exiled as it is a part of the moment.

See the child lying curled beneath the covers, watching the shadows creep 'round the pulsing electric nightlight in the corner. Study the way the light plays across spindly tree branches along his wall. See the glow presenting the evil lurking in the shadows of the homes—darkness beside light. Recognize that the light hides the evil in the shadows. And know that those lurking forces are never seen behind the light; they are only made clear when the light is gone.

5.

"When these [recurring motif-filled stories] occur as modern variants... they should not be regarded merely as personal episodes, moods, or chance idiosyncrasies in people, but as fragments of the pleromatic process itself, which, broken up into individual events occurring in time, is an essential component or aspect of the divine drama."

carl jung

come to two insights, both of which are illustrated within Farid Ud-Din Attar's philosophical poem *The Conference of the Birds*. The first insight echoes the work of Aquinas, resting upon this idea that the divine cannot be expressed in words, and is instead described by what it is not, "via negativa," which is Latin for "negative way," forming this negative theology. The mystical layer, above the physical, is inherently unable to be described by words, which are a property of the physical world, inherently incomplete. Human beings are possessing physical bodies, which cannot handle this mystical layer, at least according to Attar, who says that "should you catch even a glimpse of Him you would lose your wits, and if you should see Him completely you would lose your self" (4).

Stemming from Attar now, and this assertion of via negativa, we come to this process of annihilation, in which both the physical body and the components of the self that are rooted in the physical, are broken. It should be interesting to note, as we begin to recognize the process of this annihilation, that as Attar first points out, it's in the witnessing of the godhead that would break one from their physical self. But in mystical tradition, it's the idea of breaking one's self from the physical that would then lead to god, in itself a paradoxical cycle. Buddhists, though non-theistic, provide one example of the process toward recognizing this state. It's not, in traditional Buddhism, the self that is annihilated, but one's perception of the self as singular, independent, unique, or carrying a soul. The self is only an extension of the world around it, and when boiled down is no different; we are all the same, made of the same stuff. There is nothing special about us any more than there is nothing special about the world around us. All is an illusion; and overcoming this illusion is peace. Stasis. Perfection in that everything is. If I might add, this is difficult to accept in present western culture, in which the self is held to supreme standards, with emphasis on independence and the interaction between individuals as foundational to society.

Considering the west then, this is not to be confused with the Christian Annihilationism, in which the damned are finally destroyed. This belief stems from the doctrine that the soul is not necessarily immortal, but that immortality is a gift provided for those who have attained salvation. The damned, on the other hand, will at some point be annihilated, contrasting the long-held view of Hell as being eternal torment. In a moment, according to the Annihilationists, the soul can be severed and then would cease.

Returning then to the Arabian view and the Mystical approach, this annihilation in a mystical sense is one of annihilating the self, the ego, that physical manifestation of soul that clouds our spiritual senses. you think it will be easy to arrive at a knowledge of spiritual things." He asks on page seven.

"It means no less than to die to everything." To rise to the next level of the universe, the ego must be shed, and it's from, for example, this section

7.

If she's right about this stuff, this connection between us all, hiding in the shadow,
then this isn't for you as much as it wasn't for me.

These are my thoughts. She told me to write this, to remember my dreams, to record them, to find myself. This is me searching for an I. To make sense of it all. And if you take these pages behind or beside your house, to where the alley runs and the concrete lies and the plastic trash bins sit and reek and wait, and you burn these pages when you're done reading, then so be it.

It's a mandala. In Jungian therapy, mandalas manifest the symbolism from within your dreams. In Buddhism, they're sketches done in sand and then wiped away. This represents impermanence. Everything will change and everything will be lost. Perhaps this is the only message we should learn from our dreams.

So take a lighter to the edge of these pages, and I'll take a lighter to the edges of my mind—

God's mandala then, pet projects, mortal

—and hope the wind blows hard and fast after the last word. The way the wind blows hard and fast at the end of the barrel of the Colt 1911 pistol. The way the wind blows hard and fast in the rush to fill an empty void.

Or, more likely, I'll only hope,

but it will be a hope in the way the wind blows hard on the edges of a thunderstorm, causing the clouds to curl and breathe, moving fast enough above the dust-soaked plains to kick the dirt into the air, where I can watch it swirl and manifest the invisible.

8.

The names and places have been changed to protect those involved.

127th Year

"It could have been worse

TRA

Two students dead, two in critical condition after Savage Halloween school shooting.

From Daily Herald news services

SAVAGE CREEK, New Hampshire -- There's a feel to the place that's something out of a horror movie. Not from the blood, not from the squad lights flashing in the parking lots, not from the tears in the crowd. But by the looks on the children's faces and the way their Halloween costumes pull in the wind.

Teenagers at Savage Creek High School described the situation as surreal. "It was so brief," Senior Alexis Macelfresh said. The gunman only shot a small handful of students in a hallway before being killed a few minutes later.

INSIDE

School reacts

■ Lake Zurich High toughens security plans

— Page 6

Warning signs

■ Almost certainly, there were warning signs

— Page 7

The suspected gunman entered the school from one of the north entrances that are normally locked and, with a bomb strapped to his chest, proceeded down the hallways until he found a group of students before firing into them. Two students were killed, one injured in the leg, and two are now in critical condition at the hospital. A teacher was also wounded in the leg.

Though what happened specifically has not been determined at the time of this writing, it seems that one of the students managed to intervene. No official word has been released, but a source close to the investigation shared with the Herald that a weapon was found in the hand of William Andrews, who is now in a coma.

Though the investigation will continue for a number of days yet, the police believe Andrews was not involved, but instead prevented what could have become an even greater tragedy.

Savage Creek School... tells the Herald that... school with a...

KARL PFEIFFER

God, am I lost in your eyes

HALLOWTIDE



HALLOWTIDE

HALLOWTIDE

PART ONE : *polyphony*

Dreaming men are haunted men.
stephen vincent benet

CHAPTER ONE **the face past his hands**

1.

"I love you," she whispered to him from the safety of the dark as he held her against his chest. He felt her words against his skin, alive in her breath. He felt them against his heart and in how his stomach fluttered. He felt them in the way the blood ran electric through his bones. He traced his fingers across her, pulled her closer, and pressed her into him, as if he did not trust his words, as if to send the signal back within her, that she might feel him and understand. She moved her head against him and in the darkness he could not see her face, but he thought he felt her smile.

2.

*When I wake up, the world is black and my first thought is that I am falling,
I wake this way again and again until
I first form thoughts, I form myself, I touch my body and remember,
Try not to remember,
try to push it away, turn again and again
to this black, and drift.*

First there was blackness and silence and the thick of the air about him.

Like a newborn, he was an idea alone, with no memory, no sense of self, no awareness other than the darkness. This darkness was not an absence of light. It was a thing itself, and it pressed against his open eye sockets and under his eyelids and into his nose and mouth and lungs with each breath until it met with a darkness already inside him, where there was only vast emptiness unseen by the light.

The blackness tasted like smoke.

Smoke.

He knew the word and the idea behind it and grunted. So there was something.

His anger tasted like smoke too, and it melded with the darkness in the air around him, giving, taking, Symbian, harmonizing, a chorus of breath before him the way lovers' breath entangles, the savior and the victim, CPR, in and out, an exchange, a conversation. He did not know where this anger came from but only that it was there, a kind of rage that seethed below his skin and pushed the idea of teardrops to his ducts. The smoke tasted harsher and hurt the inside of his throat.

At first he did not know hurt as any different than the feel of his fingertips against his skin, but when he bit his lip he tasted copper—

Copper. So there was that, too.

And with the copper came the pain and the blood and he realized he could control this.

He touched the ground. There was at first a softness, featureless, a stone surface. As he ran his fingers across it, the surface became rougher and the shards tore at his fingertips. These shards gave way to a crumbling: Dirt, soil, ancient leaves and twigs. Something wet and sticky. Sap, perhaps. They scratched at his fingers and his palms but he didn't mind.

He followed the twigs and branches and stones, moving his hands in a wide fashion, pushing and spreading, crawling forward. Hard, knotted wood here, vines and tangled weeds there, a root system leading to a trunk. His fingers followed this

weaving pattern as if they were doing the weaving, tracing backward from ends to beginnings, root work, build a tree from the ground up, grip tight and pull.

When his hands met a leg, he stopped.

Jeans, it felt like. Tight against skin. A kneecap, thigh. Hip bone and wider. With both hands, he traced them further up the body, along an arm and the torso, chest, breasts, the neck of her shirt and her throat. He moved more delicately as he went, as a strange kind of nostalgia fell over him: a questioning, a concern, a memory deeply buried like a pain untreated, an itch below the surface that you can only pound with your fists, hoping some tremor will shake it loose.

Her face, then. Smooth. Hot breath against his hands, her hair dangling, unkempt and knotted in places. He made a move to brush it behind her ear but stopped. He wasn't sure he should do that. He wasn't sure he should do any of this. General notions of personal space and comfort came back to him. Privacy clashed with objectification, a confusion resounding in his mind. His mind pushed him in one direction, away from her skin, away from her space, but then again in another direction, toward the belief that this was okay, that he should be able to touch her in the same way that he touched himself, that he should know how her body turned and changed and moved in the way he knew himself. As if he owned her? That wasn't right. As if he had power over her? Not quite. But closer.

He scooted away, afraid to stand, afraid of cracking his head on some ceiling or branch from above, afraid that there might be something there in the dark. Tired of exploration already. Confused.

Shit, he thought.

He gathered himself again, sitting cross-legged on the ground. He could back up until he hit a tree, until he found a more comfortable resting place, but in the dark he could move backward forever, across a clearing, an open space, forever skate between the trees into what? More nothingness? An unknown deeper and thicker than this? He almost laughed at the idea, but the idea scared him.

It was her face that he saw first in the gloom. Her curves had taken on a dull glow, highlighting those places near enough to grasp the light.

She was beautiful. And she was watching him.

Her eyes were direct, unflinching, either watching him without a care or a memory or an understanding in the same way he watched her, or watching him with an unseeing, as if she was staring into the dark without expecting to see anything back. He wasn't sure that there was a difference.

He was afraid to speak. He didn't want to break this silence. There was no sound. He'd built something fragile from the darkness and he was afraid that if he said

bello?

then the sound might resonate, send vibrations away that might shatter the world, snap twigs, fall through, the stones and ground giving way to a darkness again, as before, floating, embryonic, lost again. He was afraid the sound might shatter her

calm, her reverie. Scare her, snap her, break her.

The ground began to come into focus too, catching that same sourceless, dull, pre-dawn glow that highlighted the angles and edges around him.

No, he would not speak. He would wait and watch the world dissolve or construct or appear. His anger ebbed with his fear and he wasn't sure or concerned about where to draw his lines. He barely even breathed.

3.

Another place, at root the same. Here, their blood pounds so hard it rings in their ears and drums the inside of their skulls, and their breath comes quick and shallow, yes. Here, like that in-between place that Will remembers, is a fear, a confusion, an anger that runs below the surface, a bloodstream toxin that helplessness manifests, and with it a taste of that same smoky flavor on the air. But here, unlike the other place, the dark air smells of textbooks and worn carpeting and the stink of their sweat and fear, like the stink of the locker rooms at the other end of the building.

* * *

The first two men moved through the school quickly, little more than silhouettes against white windows. The light rushed to the glass, as if eager to watch but hesitant to enter. One of the two was stiff. His belt was thick and his badge shone. The other was loose, his legs scissoring as they slid into each hallway.

They came to the fallen, bearing down with their weapons upon the casualties. They screamed for the dead not to move. The dead complied. There was a sharp croak of handcuffs as the shotgun floated a slow circle in the air before settling, facing one end of the hall. The uniform took a knee, pointing the cold steel the other direction, watching for shadows that no longer flickered, reaching fingers for a neck.

I've got a pulse.

Two. Three pulses.

Five, possibly six, in need of medical attention in the westernmost wing. Two potential suspects.

The man with the uniform skated across the blood from student to student, pushing the weapon away, checking for pulses, his partner covering him. The distinction was unsettling. Nervous fingers on triggers while checking for signs of life.

The sounds of the hallway turned to hitches in their breathing, whispered curses, and the small wet sounds one officer made with his hands against a girl's neck.

Come on, he said. Get here, come on.

* * *

In the classrooms, the fabric of their Halloween costumes bled sweat against flesh, their backs against brick walls. Their muscles ached and cramped, but they stretched and rustled without complaint.

Some of the students nearly flinched at the sound of the shouts outside in the hallway, too real, too tangible. The echoes were louder than voices on normal days: Mister Davis yelling "no," the sound of his skin tearing open in the doorframe when the wood caught his arm, the sound of the gunshots. The voices now in the hallway, twenty slow minutes later, were like the voices of angels and turned the skin along their backs.

Commands echoed through doors with slams and knocks. Lights turned on, blinding white, throwing the world into such a hard reality. There's a comfort in an imagined space, safety in the darkness in which you can reimagine your world and build it as you like. Through squinted eyes, sights anew took a flickering, flashing clarity; from blurred forms, darkness next to the white blended from the overexposed surreal to what they once knew. In their minds, the switch was so sudden, a flash like the turning on of the lights, first normal before the darkness, and then the waiting.

Halloween costumes had become incarnate on their pale faces shining with tears and glimmers of hope. Waxy yellow skin and pallid flesh merged with masks meant to blend in with those demons of the Hallowtide, to provide safety. Sweat-slicked hair plastered foreheads behind plaster foreheads. On the air was that feeling, camaraderie born in the space between the light and the dark, where all that could be grasped were the smoky tendrils of something like fear.

Then the doors sprang open. Like ghosts, men with guns slipped inside, sliding against walls. The black weapons were trained on the students who peered back without concern, distant.

The students will be briefly patted down before being sent on their way. A search for weapons. The hallway is not to be strayed from. Men will be with guns.

The students can't be a distraction, okay?

Hands ran across solid bodies, biological systems pumping blood and emotion to consciousness and thought, real again, before slapping and sending the students on their way.

Those students removed first were closest to the bodies. Men with long guns and shiny pistols couldn't block the sight. Their faces and the floor alike were stained black with blood. The puddles glistened.

The sound of students' sudden realization materialized as tears. Someone throwing up beyond the bodies. Keep moving. Shouts. That lack of surety, whether they were talking to the students or the bodies. Another hacking cough further behind.

The hallways were sharp. The vivid texture of the brick stood out against the crumbling mortar that lined the walls in gray concrete. Posters hung as thin as razors from gummy tape. The windows shone. Men in black crouched rigid, gargoyles. Breathing and heart-beating sounds chased the students to the doors.

A man in black Velcro and body armor slapped the students on their backs when it was their time to exit the school. The feel of his hand left a tingling on the skin. The sun burned their eyes with sharp white reality.

They huddled again, against the outer, windowless wall of the auditorium. The sun was sharper than the melted haze it became in summer. The sky was that crisp autumn blue, while horizons suggested the wispy white clouds that follow the death of the trees, bringing stark November before frigid winter. Brown leaves littered grass the color of the final wavering note of an opera, carrying a melody before finally darkening, wilting.

Cops with weapons flickered about on the roof. Then there were words spoken, a rushing across the field, crispy leaves pressed into the crispy grass. The cold breeze on the edge of the air. With the cool was the faintest scent of burning, smoke from a fireplace not far away, lingering at the end of each breath, tickling the nose until exhales blew it away again.

Then onto the browning yellow school bus. The flashing lights of the emergency vehicles haphazardly parked through the student lot were dim against the late-afternoon sky. The bus smelled stale, the scent of too many children, too many times, passing through for too long. Packed into the bus, some students squeezed into seats while others stood or sat in the aisles.

The outside world held new fascination to the students. They gazed out the windows, the browning landscapes passing before their eyes. The sky stretched so far away, the puffy white clouds more distant than normal. The rich blue, graded from light blue to near-violet, encompassed the sky.

Pumpkins grinned from doorsteps as they passed through the neighborhoods. Once-fuzzy black webs dangled now from porch lights, wet, tangled from the rain. The air slid in the windows, tasting more now of the wet, dead flora than of the smoke.

Winding through happy neighborhoods, the students stopped at the nearby elementary school. Two squad cars and one unmarked sedan rested in the emergency lane. A smiling man in a suit ushered them inside. His eyes were strained.

Bright paintings littered hallway walls. Fluorescent lights cast a yellow glow across the watercolor work. No shadows here. No darkness. No dripping lights.

They filed into the cafeteria, sliding into too-small chairs around too-small tables. Brightly painted walls around brightly painted window panes filtered the now chilly-looking fall weather from the outside. A cop talked at the students, telling them that he needed to speak to those nearest the incident, that it wouldn't last long. He smiled at the kids reassuringly. A few smiled back.

4.

It had been hours. Days. Weeks. Months even. Time had no meaning here; that was quickly apparent. You could fall asleep and dream of universes and life and generation after generation and kings begetting kings and losing kingdoms and trading crowns. You could sit and watch the face of a beautiful woman who stares back into your eyes and you can lose yourself for what feels like lifetimes. Consumed with guilt, unexplainable, a sense of mystery like the sore against a lip that a tongue can't stop fondling, a sore that each day festers from the gnawing. And after waking, it's grown a skin but hasn't been forgotten, and there's something altogether satisfying about squeezing it between teeth and peeling it back like wet fabric from flesh.

He came back from his doze. Perhaps he'd slept. There were no dreams. There were no memories. There was still her face, watching him, and there was still that soreness, raw in the way that fingers against untouched skin singe like electricity; pain along nervous highways.

He did not know when the voices began, but eventually he noticed the sounds. When he awoke, there were whispers amongst the trees and the soft rustle of branches as if in a distant wind. At first there weren't words, only sibilants and breaths, the kind that tickled his ears and smoothed his skin. Memories of a romance.

When he finally began to make sense of the words, he'd forgotten his fear of voice, of tone, of breaking the silence, but he still didn't trust himself to speak. Like

a cry awakening him from a dream, he was afraid.

welcome.

That was the word for a while. There were variations thereof, different languages perhaps, different tongues and tones, all that made some sort of inner sense to him. Sometimes the breeze through the trees was only a breeze and sometimes it formed into words and eventually he strained so hard to hear them.

welcome.

He did not feel welcome.

welcome.

He did not ask who he—

who the voice was. It seemed fitting that the wind should have a voice and speak. He did not ask who he himself was, which seemed the more important question.

there's been no mistake,

it whispered next.

As if reading his thoughts, perhaps. Should he discover himself, should he remember, should he find something more concrete than the smoke, would it break again? Was this rebirth? Was this a reconstruction or reincarnation? Was this a conception?

something like that.

He'd risen to his feet almost before he knew it, searching for the voice. There must be a source, he thought now. He could feel no breeze but heard a voice. There must be a source, and there must be some kind of answer.

see

See?

witness, welcome.

He opened his mouth to speak, but in the formless way of expectation amidst repression, like choking back vomit over an open bowl. He made a hollow whimpering that only he could hear.

The voice grew silent. There was no breeze against his cheeks. There was no sound against the branches of the trees.

He reached a single hand forward into the night. Again, expectation amidst repression, his hand trembled. The air had a texture now. He expected to meet a face, a branch, the wet maw of an unseen beast with a mouth like his own, only larger. Such things existed, he was sure. Anything could exist here.

The anticipation made his fingers feel electric, and again the words formed in his throat, but thick.

He coughed and the sound came out harsh and he thought he could feel it

against his hand.

He wanted something to touch that wasn't his words or his fear, and so with something like a cough and a sob he asked, Hello?

And from the abyss, there was a voice that echoed,

hello.

Who are you? Where are you? The words hurt his throat, as if the utterance, for the first time, scratched against unused skin. But they felt good to say.

don't you see?

No.

then open your eyes.

Tell me who you are. I can see you if you tell me. He remembered the way he saw in the soft light as his fingers reached across the ground and against her cheeks. The forest around him rose from the shadows to the same dim light that lit the ground before him when he sat. He could see the outline of close tree trunks, he could see the spackled ground, and he waved his hand and watched his fingers move at his command. See? I can see. Just come into the light.

but you have to know yourself to see.

What?

There was a chattering of branches above him. He looked up and he saw the suggestion of their interlocking and it sounded like laughter.

i don't matter. you're all that matters here.

Me?

you.

Why?

no.

What?

There was only silence. Again the branches, the laughter.

Come into the light! His fragile shout crumbled to a hacking cough.

no.

Why not?

no.

Who are you?

who are you?

I don't know. He paused and studied his palms. I don't know.

who are you?

I don't know, he yelled again, and again he coughed. Who am I?

you're Will.

Will.

and you're a killer.

5.

The math teacher Stanley Davis sat in the hospital bed in front of the policeman. The scene was like a nightmare. A man dreaming with his eyes open, watching himself in a mirror. His leg burned beneath bandages. The room was too white. Too bright. Too starchy.

The policeman was a large man, round, thick around the waist. The chair seemed to disappear beneath him. A funhouse effect. The world warping.

We need to take your statement as soon as possible, he said. We know you're recovering right now. But the more we can find out about what happened, the easier this will be. The easier it will be to get back to normal.

Normal.

Tell us, Mister Davis. What exactly happened?

"He killed them," Davis said. "It was like Hell itself fell like a wave. I've never been in a war, but I think I can imagine one now."

6.

you killed them, Will.

I did?

yes.

Who?

classmates. friends. enemies. you're a motherfucker.

Black smoke clogged the air around him, lingering, formless, at the edge of the small ring of light where he stood. Within the smoke, he thought he could catch the barest of glimpses of trees intertwining into the distance, some kind of fractal pattern lost in an exponent. There were hundreds of them, shifting, moving, as magicians' hands, twiddling, touching, turning. The sight made him sick, as if the world were spinning, as if gravity had lost hold. He almost felt lighter on his feet, and the sensation made his head swim.

Is that why I'm here? he asked.

yes.

The smoke took form and danced in tendrils, as if becoming one with the spindly tree fingers. He couldn't tell where the branches began and where the whirls ended. This place wasn't real.

Am I in Hell, then?

It didn't feel like Hell.

does it feel like Hell?

The smoke twisted and took with it his head, encircling. When the voice came next, it was above him.

no?

Jesus, he cursed, and his head exchanged places with his stomach. The world was turning on a strange axis about his head. I'm going to be sick.

you were a student.

Will dropped to his knees and held tight to the ground, breathing in and out, pressing his eyes closed. If only he could get his bearings back—if only it wouldn't feel that the world was off its axis. If things could get normal again, he'd be okay.

in high school. you had a girlfriend. she was beautiful. you killed her too.

Will thought of the face he awoke to. He turned his head toward the tree where she sat and studied the touch of light against her profile. Was that her? Did he bring her to this place with him?

it was all very graphic. lots of blood. you didn't expect it would be so bad. you didn't expect it would go the way it did, but you didn't mind.

Where are you? Would you come out of the dark already?

Something twisted inside his stomach. He wasn't sure if it was nausea or frustration.

The voice was silent.

What? Where'd you go?

Still, nothing.

Hey! he said. The voice had gradually crawled into his head, intermixed with his thoughts, and installed itself. He'd accepted it almost before he processed the words. Now that the words had faded, he felt, in a way, hollow inside. It was a connection, perhaps his only connection here, and now it was missing.

Where are you? He was nearly shouting now as he blindly crawled to his feet again, thrashing his way into the smoke even as the ground seemed to tilt and drop beneath him, as if in a funhouse where the floor dipped and changed in the dark.

Please come back.

His assault on the smoke was the way one would run into a tangle of vines and twisted, jungle-like greenery, and he felt as absorbed, as knotted, as caught.

Please come back.

remember this, boy. without me, you have nothing.

Will gasped, as if the air had lightened around him, a pressure removed from his chest. He was not alone anymore. He wasn't alone. He was okay.

Please, come forward.

He could almost feel the thing smirk in the air next to him.

for a killer, you're awfully needy.

Will frowned.

and if i left? would you stand there thrashing about like an infant?

He felt like an infant.

i am everything to you. i am your connection, i am your vitality, i am your eyes and your voice and your mind. I am how you see and how you touch. I am the neurons between your mind and your skin. I am the brain before your soul. I am how you see the world and you will respect that. Or I will hurt you.

Then there were hands against his face, pressing, without stopping, sliding about his head and his hair and his neck, pulling tight, without tenderness, until it hurt, until the hold was fast, clutching, strangling, squeezing. Will's teeth cut against the insides of his cheeks and his throat pulsed.

Do you understand me?

Will tried to nod, tried to speak, to mutter even a syllable. He gurgled.

I carried you here on my back. I can make the smoke into tree branches and take away the light. I can show you pain, hold it before your eyes until you want to bleed, wishing you were still alive so that you could die.

Light exploded before Will's eyes, blending with his reality, white and purple galaxies against black. The mass had grown thick against his body, and his arms became heavy even as he tried to thrash.

as far as you're concerned,

i am God.

do you understand me?

The lights went off like fireworks and his lungs burned.

And then the presence was gone from his body. He fell to the ground again, squirming against the dirt and the sticks, pressing his shoulders into the growth, breathing air that stung like hailstones and tasted cold, like ice. Black and white specs rotated before his eyes; the dust, an urn released over a cliff, a handful dropped on a coffin. From between the blurry stars, from the blackness, a shape appeared, a human figure staring at Will with his head cocked to the side.

Will stopped thrashing, his fingers clinging deep within the earth.

The man before him crouched, and the dim glow spread to his face.

At once, Will felt a kind of repulsion wash across him, a fascination blended with disgust. He raised a hand toward the man's face.

It was Will's own. He could not remember who he was, what kind of life he led, who his parents were and how he grew up and why he was here, but in an instant he knew that this face was his own, that the small gleaming eyes were his, that the

sneer was his, that the power in his presence was his, and that he'd held this power before.

Give it back, Will said.

What do you see? he asked.

Will shuddered.

Tell me what you see.

I see myself.

Of course you do.

The man reached to Will's face again, and with a sure fist, pummeled the boy in the jaw. Once, twice, three times. A fourth. Each time with a surety that broke bones and vessels, that brought blood against skin and ground and a purple bruise to come crawling, without hesitation, like an insect that lived in the broken places.

Will cried out, screamed into the night, half from the pain that burst along his jaw, half from the slow registration, with the dawning that, yes, there was sense here.

WHY? he shrieked.

The man didn't answer, but Will didn't need him to.

When the man stopped, Will eventually opened burning, bleary eyes and looked into the dark again. The face looking back had a certain kind of familiarity, but in a forgotten way, different, he knew, from his own. Holding trembling fingers, Will gently prodded the bumps and raw spots along his jawline and forehead and brought the black around him as if it were protection.

In the same way that the man's fists brought with them a pain and a realization of nerve endings inside his meat, there was suddenly a memory in his mind where before there wasn't.

What? Will stopped, his hands before his face, his eyes looking upward and unfocused.

A young boy stood on a street corner peering out from behind one of his mother's legs.

His mother?

No face came to mind. No name. No other memory. Just a leg and a pair of faded blue jeans that his small fists clung to.

She was speaking to someone. This someone was looking at him, smiling, beginning to crouch down. This someone was another woman with dark hair, overweight, but with a pretty face behind narrow glasses. She was wearing a sweatshirt and lazy pants—

That's what his mom called them: lazy pants.

He covered his eyes. The two women laughed.

HALLOWTIDE

"Of course," his mother said. "If he can't see you, you can't see him, right?"

When his eyes focused again on the darkness around him and the two hands before his face, held in the way of the child in his mind's eye, he pressed them against his eyes and squeezed his lids shut. Starbursts filled his vision, supernova spectacles, shifting colored gasses like the northern lights, like clouds at sunset after sunset after

flickering white days, blue, orange, black, orange, blue.

He felt the whole of the universe behind his eyes, the cosmos stretching far past the nine planets in his solar system, the rings of rubble, the toxic gasses, the bonding of rock and fleck, and—

and there was the big man, the face past his hands, laughing.

CHAPTER TWO **the onset of the fall**

1.

Five years later.

"It wasn't me."

Will awoke shortly after four in the morning. His spoken words filled the mindless gap between dreams and waking as if on their own.

A gentle glow from distant streetlamps and a blue moon wandered at the edges of his window, filling the cracks between the frame and the blinds. The better part of the room was black space. He'd been dreaming, but of what, he wasn't sure.

Blackness was thick in the air around him, and he was hyperaware of his body. His skin felt heavy on his bones and his muscles strained to move his neck and arms. The breath in and out of his lungs and chest felt as harsh and thick as cigarette smoke.

Will nearly hadn't realized he'd spoken at all, but there was a quality about the room that suggested some kind of sound, as if the faint reverberations of the echo were still surrounding him, below the level his ears could detect, instead on the level of his skin.

Reaching for the bedside lamp reminded him of reaching for something concrete in a dreamspace, and suddenly there was memory,

a six year old on a street corner, not blind, but

it was a memory of blindness. It was strange, this sensation, remembering the color black. It was not an emptiness but a fullness, where should he remember only this black space, he's remembered everything there is to remember. There was a completeness to what otherwise should have been, should have felt to be, that which was forgotten.

The light was bright and stinging. Rubbing his eyes and blinking against the pain, he wished his room would have come into being in an instant, a more immediate reminder of reality and a safe place. But bright spots and a biting focus brought his room into view too slowly, as if manifesting from some other realm, or worse yet, like building a dream.

Thoughts of dreams had never made Will uncomfortable before this. He'd never felt nervous in the dark of his room when he'd woken up or finally gotten to bed in the middle of the night, even when he first moved into the apartment at the start of his final semester of college barely two months before. During the first week, between the heat and the downgrade in bedroom size, yes, there had been an eerie and claustrophobic feeling to the room, but it had never been an issue. He'd had no trouble squeezing a full bed, a small dresser, and a shelf into the corner with comfortable space around. His desk, television, and shelves were concentrated in the living room. Shared with two graduates, his last apartment afforded him a basement bedroom with almost too much space. He felt lost in that bedroom, but his sleep was never bothered. Feng Shui maybe, not enough possessions to fill out the edges or dangle from the ceiling, but his girlfriend said the mess of clothes did plenty for filling the extra room.

So why he was waking two months later, in the middle of the night, feeling as if he were buried alive, he couldn't say. It was the first weekend in October, and the air had taken a turn for the colder, the rainstorms turning over to snow in the early morning, the snow turning back over into puddles as the first light of the sun strained its way above ground before being swallowed again by clouds. He even slept with his window cracked, and the air leaking in was normally chilled by this hour.

The bed next to him was empty, and he'd been sprawled across it for the past

hour of his sleep, switching from pillow to pillow and side to side. His girlfriend, Jennifer Christianson, had left an hour before for work, slipping out of bed without disturbing Will. For a moment, Will wished that Jennifer was there with him, to mull it over with her, but as soon as the thought had crossed his mind, it was reversed. She'd likely have slept through it, and even if she had been disturbed by his waking and by the light, what would he have said? An unidentifiable blackness had been squeezing on him from the inside, a claustrophobic dream?

That had sounded right, a claustrophobic dream, but incomplete. He knew that there had been more to it, more story, more character, more—what? Memory? For now though, he settled on the fear, the enclosing motion of the dream, the feeling of dread as the walls slowly closed in with crushing and maddening persistence.

Absently, he played with his elbow, as if his arm alone could brace the motion. His hand moved to his forearm and touched the skin there as if it were tender and would hurt. It was sensitive, as if never touched before, but otherwise was like normal.

He thought about calling Jennifer, if not to vent his fears, to look for some sort of comfort in her voice. She was good at that. Not particularly good at handling situations without the details, but she'd be there for him in whatever capacity, even if she was on her way to the coffeeshop and distracted. They'd been together for four months, but had dated in high school. It didn't work then because, well, sometimes life gets in the way, and some situations are too much for a teenager to handle.

You killed them, Will. An echo.

He shuddered.

Memories of blindness. Maybe it was that as much as the echo,

you killed them,

that made him think of the shooting. Five years later and he still didn't remember the circumstances of it all. There was the hallway, his friends, Jennifer. There was blood and the way

Jonesy said, "Left that to the crusades,"

and then the shot and the sound and the blood. Then Jonesy's brother, dead within—

Then nothing until the hospital three days later.

After the shooting, Will had taken a year from school, finishing what was left for his diploma by online classes and testing out of the standard classes instead. He was only a few months behind and had always been a good student. During those following months, he'd found empty places in his memory, usually during stressful occasions. That year, Christmas was empty, as was New Years and the better part

of that first January. After that, his health was more sporadic; Occasionally he'd blank in the middle of the day, forgetting what he was doing, why he was there. He was sick a lot that year. His doctors told him it was because of the stress and emphasized to his parents and therapist to try to make this stress the priority. His psychiatrist said that he was still in a kind of mental shock, shell-shock, post-traumatic stress disorder. And to be honest, she had added, comas and head injuries are nasty, and there well could have been some brain damage in the area that forms short term memories. The key was to get his body stable, then work on his mind (though of course, she said, the two often go hand in hand, and must be worked upon together). By the time August rolled around, he had stayed healthy for the better part of the summer, his grades were strong enough to get him into the local university, and he was happy to never have to set foot inside another high school again. He was in his final semester of college now, set to graduate in the winter.

Was this dream, he wondered, some kind of post-traumatic flashback? Perhaps to a blackout period? He wondered what those moments were like, the mind of the amnesiac, the sloppy drunk. How long did the thoughts and situations linger in the mind? Just long enough to be processed? If that. His parents had told him that sometimes in these states he'd lie in bed, more catatonic than comatose, staring at the ceiling or the wall for hours. Was it that, during this time, no memories were formed because he did not process the moment at all? Because he was existing in some fog of darkness where faces formed from the gloom—the manifestations of a subconscious mind? Or were his senses reaching for something recognizable? In those moments, was he so far gone that even his body seemed to be forming from the ink, ebony spilled in reverse, forming as the waters peel back? Perhaps this sensation of his bed was real, perhaps it was designed, the stiff sheets below his hand a mental construct. His hand, was that even real? Was the bark of a tree any more concrete than the feel of reaching out and touching his bed?

This kind of debate was the kind his philosophy professor called a dead end. If, epistemologically speaking, we can't trust any of our sensations of reality, fearing that they are only subjective formula, what is the point of even philosophizing about the world outside of us if our experience of it is completely independent and unverifiable? Can we even trust that other people exist, that they're not mindless automatons? We have to, his professor said, else our experience of the world is irrelevant to our morals, our sciences, and any single thing we hold dear.

It's misery, Will decided, a Hell if you will, for the utterly selfish. Such loneliness.

These echoes from his past felt right to him, too, in the way that the entire

content of the dream seemed to be made of fear, as if fear was a building block of matter. (Even now the thought was beginning to sound ridiculous, in the way that dream-thoughts fade.)

It was this, more than the deep innate fear of the pressing unknown, that pushed Will to reach for his phone, to hold it tight in his hands as if it were some piece of Jennifer. The very reason he wanted to call though—these memories of a time forgotten—was also the very reason he didn't release the lock screen to press on her name. Jennifer had been with him at the shooting. She'd suffered much less physical trauma, but her experience after the matter was radically different. The shooting reignited within her the same darkness that had taken her mother from her family.

No, it wouldn't be good to bring Jennifer into this, to disturb her at the beginning of her day with worries about the past. It was a subject Will wasn't afraid to approach with her, but not like this, not cloaked in concern and confusion, with random memories resurfacing in dreams, if they were even that at all.

He'd discuss it with her tomorrow, maybe, but not this morning. Setting the phone on the nightstand next to the bed, he let his hand hover next to the lamp's switch. He didn't know what the darkness would bring.

He pressed the switch and the light blinked out. He'd gone five years in peace. He'd overcome the worst of the incident and moved on to a successful college career. With the approaching Halloween, the five year anniversary of the shooting, and a random dream that stirred old memories, he refused to lose everything he'd had and everything he'd regained.

He drew the covers to his chin and pressed his ear deep into the pillow, keeping his face toward the covered window where the sun was slowly coming awake. Even with the blinds drawn, the sun would soon become a problem, but it was better than facing the other direction, where the dark of the room and the inside of his eyelids was the same, where sleep and reality should reflect each other and blur together. He preferred the comfort of knowing that he could hold his hand in front of the window and see at least a suggestion of his silhouette before it.

2.

The nightmares started the week after her reunion with Will. Before that, they'd been recessive, hiding below the folds of repression. Oh, she'd gone through enough memories, relived the moments, cycled through it all time and time again in the twelve months that followed the shooting. Her problem wasn't acceptance; it was the sheer shock of the entire event and the lack of justice—no, of sensibility.

Human beings don't do these things. She was raised that way. Human beings shouldn't be capable of such violence, and if they were, it was far away, not in her hometown, not in her school, not in her presence.

Jennifer Christianson had been a naive child, sheltered. She knew this, but she was no stranger to the sadism of the cosmos. She struggled through her childhood with the same depression that had forced her mother to suicide when Jennifer was in the eighth grade. After finding his wife forever asleep on their bed after overdosing on medication, her father, Joseph, clung fast to his only daughter and his only connection left to his wife and a family. And so he kept Jennifer close through her early high school years and scrutinized Will intensely in the early months of their relationship. It came then as no surprise that Christianson packed the house after the shooting, removed Jennifer from the school district, and relocated to his hometown some two hundred miles north, in Maine, near his parents. The move and the shooting forced a denial deep in Jennifer, as Will saw it. This trauma, coupled with her fear of the same consuming depression that took her mother, drove her to try and put the event behind her as solidly as possible. But there were still undercurrents breaking through, sometimes weekly, as she continued to deal with the situation. She was better now than before though, and so was Will, and that was really all that mattered.

Her father was religious, even where her mother was not, and that's what he'd raised Jennifer to rely on after their family's collapse. Some husbands, after losing their wives, lose not only their grip on their lives as they know them, but to some extent their grasp on family structure and upbringing, with dinners becoming moratoriums, curfews undefined, strangers passing through. As the Bible answered questions for him, he kept his head from the bin and his feet on the ground. But even still, those three years following her mother's passing became a confusing time for Jennifer.

She needed her mother. How many times, when it came to boys and growing up and homework and--well, everything--had she wanted to reach out? How many mornings like this did she stop first at the cemetery and sit and talk, praying for a response or just an hour more?

Though she'd visit in rain showers or humid summer days alike, this October morning was crisp and carried the kind of sharpness in the air that made the edges of the leaves on the trees as delicate as razor blades. Like in summer, when the sun does its damndest to cheer a boiling black storm cloud but only winds up deepening the already sea-sick sky, the sun on this fall morning was a thing of fading hope, bringing out the silhouetted blacks and browns in the fading leaves while throwing a vibrant thrill of color through the highlights and clouds.

"It's not November yet, anyway," Jennifer said to the shiny gray stone before her. "It's still pretty out." In November there would be no leaves, shorter days, and endless nights. Nightmares, more like.

The nightmares. Yes, they'd resurfaced when she'd bumped into Will again. Worth it, she'd decided. It wasn't her first thought when she saw him a year ago, wandering the very cemetery she now sat within. She'd been in town for barely a month, making periodic visits to the cemetery where her mother now resided. They'd stayed for barely a month after the shooting before moving to Maine. There was no need to finish the semester, she'd not be back to that school, her father said. She had enough credits to graduate. Her diploma was mailed to her. After were part time jobs and living with her father and volunteering at church until she felt that she was ready to take a step into the chaos again. That was that. She didn't fight her father on his decisions, but she did miss her mother—or, her talks with her memories of her mother anyway—and she missed Will. It was almost cosmically fitting that barely a month after moving back to town for college, she'd met him again while reconnecting with her mom.

It happened in June. She'd moved early to get an apartment for the summer to give her enough time to settle in before diving into her first semester of schoolwork in four years, and the cemetery became a regular stop on her walks to the university. She'd be lying if she said that she didn't factor that into account while house hunting.

She didn't factor reconnecting with Will, though. They'd lost touch as he got engrossed in college. He was meeting new people, having life experiences, immersing himself in distractions. Anything to keep the demons away, as she saw it. It was fine, really. Jennifer was probably a constant reminder of the shooting anyway. So she didn't judge him for throwing himself at the college lifestyle—envied him a bit, to be quite honest. He probably had to let her go the same way she was forced to let go of him.

When she saw him wandering the headstones though, everything changed. When their eyes met, she knew as well as he did that none of those things mattered. They say relationships established through trauma don't survive, but there was a spark in their eyes, and five years collapsed into what felt like a month, and all they knew in that moment weren't the gunshots and screaming and blank places, but each other.

That's why she didn't say anything when the nightmares surfaced. She'd rather wake from nightmares in his arms than wake from blank pages alone.

Lately it had gotten worse though. They weren't just nightmares she dreamt anymore, but that she lived, and much as she tried, she couldn't hide that. The

moods had returned, crippling occasionally, rendering functioning almost impossible, be it school, work, or her relationship with Will. She shuddered at that.

"Sometimes I regret that I saw him here, you know?" Jennifer said, breaking the silence of the wet morning air for the second time. "I know, it's changed everything and helped me to break so many barriers." She trailed off, unsure, looking toward the cluster of trees where the ghost of Will still seemed to linger, four months later, catching her eye with a look of surprise mixed with a deep understanding, as if he'd been expecting her. Maybe he had.

"I feel like I'm hurting him, that I'm being too much for him, bringing him down. He doesn't deserve to go through all this."

She felt silly for bringing it up to her mom for what must have been the twentieth time and stopped talking again, an apology drying on her lips. Rubbing her head and brushing her hair behind her ears, she took a deep breath and let it out, trying to shake the feelings clawing inside her gut.

"Maybe that's it," she murmured, more to herself this time. Maybe it was the onset of the fall and the creeping knowledge that eventually they'd have to face everything that had happened to them: the season, the damned holiday, the memories. They'd been doing it in their own ways before this, but it was finally time, she thought. This dance with repression and shyness was eating her alive inside, manifesting in violent anxiety and manic depression. If she didn't handle this, it would kill her.

She didn't tell Will that she was going to the cemetery. She'd found a strength with Will these last few months and so didn't visit her mother as often. She called it a step forward. So mornings like these felt like a step backward, and she was ashamed to bring them to Will. He'd never seemed to fully understand what visiting her mother meant to her, and he worried about it bringing her down. Another part of the reason her visits had slackened.

There were tears in her eyes and she wiped them away, blinking at the lightning sky. She had to be careful with tears. They came too easily these days, and tears bothered other people.

"Sorry, mom. I don't mean to unload this on you every time I come by. I know I should visit more when I'm not struggling."

But that's what mothers are for.

She nodded, fingering the flowers at the base of the shiny marble, and studied her reflection. Often she'd look at the reflection like it was some kind of portal into another realm. "You always looked so much like her, you know," her dad said, first in those moments when he was desperately trying to find something left of his late wife, and then later when he'd come to terms with the memory and looked back on

her with, at worst, a nostalgic affection. She'd probably have been ready to go back to town a year sooner than she did, but, to be quite honest, she was worried about leaving her dad. Sometimes he looked so old. And sad.

So it was often that she'd stare into her own reflection on her mother's tombstone and imagine that it was her mother, younger, her age, looking back at her, going through life with her, growing as she grew, with her every day.

It was child's play, but the thought gave her comfort most mornings. On other mornings though, it gave her chills, and she was afraid to even glance at other stones for fear that the right trick of light would have her peering into a bright reflection, some

old and rotting face looking back, eyes large and lusting, masked, dark, waiting in the

hallway for her to come closer.

This was silly. Too often it came to this. No wonder Will didn't want her here. She got up from the grave, leaving her mother without a goodbye, to wander through the graveyard.

It didn't take long to shake the fear from her head. She'd been used to silly scares like this, used to pushing away thoughts she didn't like, echoes of events both real and imagined. Every time the creeps ran to her spine, she shivered them out and instead pondered the damp grass and gravel below her feet, the lightening purple sky and sunrise silhouetting the spindly black branches, and then the headstones themselves, standing serene and benign in the morning light.

Jennifer often walked the cemetery after visiting her mother. She usually left a fair chunk of time to sit with her mother in case her emotions surprised her, or in case the introspection ran deep, but most days she was done early and had time to learn the ins and out of the graveyard fairly well. In the northwest corner were the older stones. Though she lived in the New England area where many of the older cemeteries around the cities could have stones dating back to the early 1800s or earlier, this was a more modest and recent cemetery. The oldest stones were few from before the early twentieth century. They spread from that corner, tendrils of the older stones intermixing with the new, families reunited in plots with one another, before generally pushing the newer toward the southeast end opposite the old corner, where Jennifer now found herself.

There was one headstone in this area that she always tried to leave time to stop and speak with, though often she wished she wouldn't.

STANLEY DAVIS, the etched letters read on a modest, flat piece sitting next to a PATRICIA DAVIS, who, judging by her age, was likely Davis's mother. Stanley Davis was a teacher at Savage Creek High School for the three years she

and Will attended before the shooting.

She approached the stone and looked at it curiously in the morning light. His had no glossy marble polish, and there was no face looking back at her from below. She liked that, took comfort that he wasn't about to appear at any moment as some distant mirror of herself.

"Hey, Mister Davis."

She felt far less comfortable speaking to the math teacher she'd only had for one semester than she did speaking to her mother. Not necessarily because she was so much closer to her mom, but because of the circumstance of Davis's death and those curiosities she didn't care to reconsider. They were memories of a time better left forgotten.

Stanley died almost three days after the tragedy, on the evening of November 2nd, the night Will awoke from his coma. Talk of how he had died seemed everywhere after the shooting; some said stroke or heart failure or general afflictions of the age he was only starting to come into. Some argued that he had something to do with the shooting and had killed himself. Others said that it was the shock and trauma of the event that left him unable to cope, finally doing the deed. The one rumor that spread the fastest and farthest was that he'd died next to Will's bedside in the boy's hospital room.

What actually happened was that he'd died from a pulmonary embolism, a deep vein thrombosis, a blood clot that had spread from his leg to his lungs. He'd been shot in his classroom doorway, fell back inside, and tied a tourniquet with his belt. Later, beside Will's bed, as he beat on the boy's chest, shouting, the clot had shaken loose, killing him where he stood. Jennifer knew this because she had been there. She'd stood in the hallway, watching, confused and worried and stressed and trying not to

break,

the moment that Will awoke, gasping, tears in his eyes--the same moment that Stanley hit the floor, dead in minutes, his lips turning purple and his eyes turning empty.

Of course, she never entertained it in conversation (those few conversations she found herself in before the move) but rather left it unconfirmed. The circumstances of his death were too strange (what he had been doing out of his bed in his condition, cutting loose at the boy who'd saved the school—who woke up moments later—no one knew or understood). In light of the shooting, his name became a footnote, his death a number, his funeral quiet and private, where only a small handful of family members and close faculty friends were invited to attend. The article in the paper only cited a few funeral details and specifics of his life's

work and his love of teaching.

Meanwhile, the police department's case for the shooting was quickly closed. They had one gunman, dead. There was no solid motive, but the evidence was too clean and too tight to do any extra digging. Davis's timely death was too justifiable, even if he had been found next to Will's bed. The circumstances weren't suspect enough, despite community whispers toward something more sinister. There was nothing criminal about his death. Suspicions were only circumstantial. The police never bothered to follow up. And why should they? It was a blood clot in his lungs. There was no foul play there. Davis was a good man.

"How are you today, Mister Davis?"

Jennifer couldn't imagine much response from the man any more than she could imagine his spectacled smile and his insistence toward the saving power of mathematics. If there was life after death, he'd surely not be lingering in some dark cemetery on an October morning, but resting comfortably somewhere far from there, somewhere happier, somewhere with good to be done. This is the way she saw Stanley Davis, and she tried not to let herself be distracted by suspicions left long forgotten.

He was a teacher. He loved his students. If there was a dark shadow on his name and story, it was as acceptable as any dark shadow cast by any bright object, disregarded, overlooked, and smiled upon without judgment.

3.

Waking up was like coming alive, and the world came alive with him.

Each piece came to light in the way of the sun rising on a forest floor. Like a painting coming to life, first the low lights and shadows, the purple highlights on the dark sides of the trees and brush, and later the lighter touches, the whites and the yellows and the more fully realized colors of the leaves in the trees.

Human beings describe their gods in terms of artists. What art was this? Hatred and plotting and manipulation and lies through their teeth. Museums like concentration camps. Of course, that is one role of the artist, perhaps the only role, to present the sadness and the heartbreak and the hope that within, somewhere, there is some necessary good amongst the necessary evils.

The girl sat against the tree, still shrouded in shadow, but even still, Will could see that she was beautiful in a way utterly unlike himself and the big man, though she didn't speak.

The big man laughed from a few feet away. Will blinked and bit his lip.

The land around them was still dark, silhouetted against the coming dawn. The

sun, which seemed ready to finally breach the horizon, never came. The clouds wrapped the place where it should have risen and turned a deep crimson that melded with the purple and while, yes, it was beautiful, it was far away, and the warmth the sun promised stayed vacant, and the forest stayed dark.

Will shivered.

Enjoy that, the big man whispered.

Will didn't ask why.

* * *

Where are we?

I thought you'd never ask. The big man grinned and licked at his teeth, coming out of the shadows just long enough to be presented in a monochromatic mask, at once Will's own and yet someone else's entirely. We're in the underworld, the spirit world, the place where all little boys go when they die. We're in Halloween. We're in the fire behind the leer. We're in fear itself.

Will shuddered as a memory flickered across his mind, as if the thought was itself real and flapping about like a bat, casting a shadow on the inside of his eyelids.

It was Halloween when he died. That much he knew. He saw black masks and wispy strips and couldn't tell if it was memory or fantasy or reality, if they were spirits or demons or

classmates in costume. Brick walls and a white smoke that rolled like water in slow motion.

We're inside it, Will, for what you did.

He heard shots. They were loud and hurt his ears and he brought his hands up to the sides of his head

4.

and woke in a classroom.

Five years ago? High school? Bright fluorescent lights and fake wood-paneled abstract shapes framing a whiteboard with words scribbled in bad handwriting. His notebook. Hands on the sides of his head.

No. This wasn't high school. This was college. And like the universe exhaling, it came back to him in a rush. He knew where he was. Richardson Hall, the third room on the left after coming in the main double doors. His professor was at the

front of the class, sitting on the empty table with his leg propped up and a sticky note-filled book balanced open beside him.

Will lowered his hands. He'd come awake with his fists clenched against his temples and his elbows propped on his desk, so at worst he probably only looked frustrated, more likely stressed out, but not asleep. There were marks on his palms from his fingernails, and his fingers themselves were stiff when he tried to move them.

How long had he been out? Not long, he guessed. There were still twenty minutes left in the class and he'd been awake for a fair chunk already. It was stupid, falling asleep in a 400 level class in his final year of college. Freshman stuff, that. It would be one thing if it were after a weekend of bar-hopping and relaxing, staying up too late with Jennifer maybe. Last night he got a full sleep. Aside from the nightmare—which seemed to be recurring, if only he could remember the details—he slept until nine. Why he should be drifting in class now, he didn't know.

"Modern representations of Hell in film and literature, small groups for ten minutes, go." Dr. Pullman stood, picked up his book, and cast a brief glance at Will, a look that could have been shadowed with a hint of concern, annoyance, or passing indifference. Confrontation wasn't Pullman's thing. If you wanted to pay attention, you'd pass. If you didn't, you failed. Your decision.

"I guess I'll start," a girl with flat blonde hair said, two seats down from Will. He rubbed his eyes and turned to listen. "It says in our text anyway that we start with more of a feeling of Hell on Earth in the eighteen hundreds. In Gothic literature, elements of Hell started to come through in punishments on Earth instead of journeys to Hell."

"You'd think it almost would have been the other way around," a boy named Turner said.

"Why?"

"Life got better around the eighteenth century. The industrial revolution caught hold, travel and production skyrocketed, we hit various artistic stages. Life was way better. You'd think they'd find more of a hellish time on Earth earlier, during like the Medieval period." He shrugged.

"Culturally, it was because the Church's influence shifted. Discussion moved away from a spiritual world toward a more concrete world. If anything, it makes more sense. With the advent of science, people were more inclined to look at the world around them instead of dreaming."

"I don't think we've gotten to it yet in class," Turner said. "But as we get into the twentieth century, we get this huge advancement in psychology, and we start to get an even further metaphorical Hell."

The discussion was beginning to dissolve into a conversation between the girl and Turner, while Will and his other classmates sitting in the desks around them were happy to take a back seat and listen to them dissect the professor's question.

"Right, it becomes a Hell of the mind. World Wars I and II introduced the world to the utter heinousness of war and the massive amounts of destruction that it can leave on the world around it."

"Okay, so we start to get this first symbolic Hell, and then the Gothic Hell and all that," the girl put pen to paper to take some notes, though Pullman hadn't mentioned anything about writing their analysis down. "And then it starts to become part of the world again."

"Political."

"Oh yeah, we're in this totally political world right now. Hell is war, and the bad guy is whoever we don't like this week."

"Bush," a girl snickered next to Will. There were a few nods of agreement and an eye roll.

"Bush was defending our country from terrorists, sending a few down to get to know Hell personally," Turner said to the desktop before him.

"Bullshit, he's there for oil and everyone knows it. Following his father's footsteps."

"He brought Hell on Earth to two countries, for what? We haven't gotten Osama, and how about Saddam? Weapons of mass destruction, what—"

"Weapons of mass destruction?" Pullman was wandering from group to group and had finally made it to the far end of the classroom.

"Sorry," the girl said. "Got off track talking about how political Hell has become in our current age, how our images of Hell are of the political arena. Threats that the world will turn into a warzone if we don't do 'this' or 'that'. Moral political decisions."

"Good. Keep going on that."

"Well, our imagery is what's seen on the news. The shooting, the violence--right down to nine-eleven imagery, the fire-fighters with the blood and dirt on their faces."

"We live in this 'culture of violence.' That's the phrase they keep throwing around on the news and on the documentaries and stuff. We get that violence right in our hometowns. I mean, hell, school shootings right? Columbine. Savage Creek High just what? Five years ago?"

A chill ran the length of Will's spine despite the heat in the classroom, and his hands went rigid again.

"There's no mention of Hell anymore. We don't live in a religious society like

they did hundreds of years ago. We don't threaten Hell anymore, we only threaten *more* Hell."

"We talked about ideas of mental states too," the girl said. "What with the culture of war and the advances in clinical psychology, we have a better idea of how violence affects us. It shreds us apart. It goes back to the consequences of violence. Hell itself could be described metaphorically as a place after a death-like incident, or a violent incident. The kind of suffering you'd go through would be the same."

"Is there room for a spiritual Hell anymore in society, as itself, a place of suffering, presided over by a spiritual creature bent on destruction?" Pullman asked.

The students paused and exchanged looks with one another.

"Well, there's been an increase in the popularity of horror ideas like ghosts lately. 'Ghost hunting' is having a big pop culture boom right now. Movies. Most of us have seen the ghost hunter shows," an older student added from the back of the room.

"How does that apply to Hell?" Pullman asked.

"If it's like a modern spiritualist movement, it could open doors to ideas with scientific or technical merit toward the existence of an afterlife. Maybe not one of consequence. But if we start to have ghosts and stuff wandering around in the dark, Satan and his demons can't be all that far away, can they?"

"Stories of possession go hand in hand with that stuff."

"Yeah, like Ouija boards."

There were nods, but Will couldn't find it in himself to move along. It was like his skin wanted to crawl off. He didn't mind the talk of ghosts and Hell in pop culture and the media, but something about today was striking him as very wrong.

"But isn't that just another example of Hell appearing in our world? The appearance of ghosts and possession are just more Hell on Earth, wouldn't you say?" Pullman countered.

Slow nods about the group. Maybe this wrong feeling was due to the mention of his school and the shooting. Will had heard mention of it before, but maybe today, after the nightmares, with the anniversary approaching, it was different.

"Would something like what you're describing be accepted into popular culture, though?" Pullman asked. "True or not, is there too much standing against it in our society today?"

"I don't know," Turner said. "Some people sure seem to think that these things are real. Satan being real may not be such a far jump."

"If people believe something, you never know how far it could go. The power of the mind is crazy."

"So it's all in our heads?"

"Yeah. And our culture."

"Question to ponder maybe: If we eliminated violence from our society and culture in general, if we stopped all the wars and quashed teen violence, would we still have ideas of Hell? Or would that be the end of it?"

"You're asking if we could ever have peace?"

"It's like asking if we could ever go back to Paradise. If we speak of Hell, we have to wonder about Eden, right?"

"It's food for thought," Pullman said, turning away with a shrug.

Finally the shiver broke and ran the rest of the way down Will's back.

"Bush still sucks," the girl laughed.

Turner said, "As long as people have different opinions, we'll always have our various versions of Hell."

The girl smiled and shook her head.

"So long as we aren't mindless automatons, we'll always be threatened with Hell? With being wrong?"

Turner laughed. "We'll always have Hell so long as we don't lose our minds."

CHAPTER THREE **where there be dragons**

1.

Home is in the mind. I am here. I am here to suffer. Suffering is my home. This is the way that it is.

The world is pathetic. I don't even know why you'd want to be back there anyway.

Will shook his head, denying those voices within him. The man's voice outside of him.

I want to go home.

Victims and bullies. The whining and the fighting.

I don't know. I don't care. Stop it.

You sound like a victim now, the big man said.

I don't care.

A bully and a victim. That's the worst. The world is out to get you and you just can't strike back enough.

Will looked at him.

You want home, let's go home.

What? Will shrank back against the tree.

Now you don't want to go? Make up your mind, boy.

He shook his head. Not coming from you. It won't be home.

It'll be as homely as you want it.

Will kept his eyes narrowed and studied the man, doing his best to feel out the big man's intentions, but he was confused. He couldn't imagine a place different from this one, where he was now.

Smoke hung in the air, pungent, low-hanging like a fog. It wasn't specifically acrid smelling, the way smoke smells when a house burns. It wasn't that smell of chemicals and plastics melting, or the family memories and history worked into the carpet going up like the dust you shake off rugs when you beat them on clotheslines. It was almost sweet, musky, similar to incense but in high doses, and seemed to come from the ground itself. Will wished to choke on it. He could barely breathe, and it made him feel light-headed, cluttering his thoughts. He insisted on home but didn't even know what his home looked like, where it was, what kind of house he lived in. A house? The very idea seemed utterly alien to him. Though the word itself was in his head, and he searched the woods around him for some kind of symbol as to what the definition specifically meant to him, he had, at best, flickering ideas of structure and warmth and a separation from the outside world he now found himself in. Of course, then the big man challenged him and it all went wrong. Wrong like the way too much perfume smells wrong. It hurt his head.

I don't know.

Get up. We're going for a walk.

Will didn't know if he could get up but tried after a moment anyway. His legs were tired, the way he felt when he got out of bed after being sick for a week. His muscles ached. His lungs hurt, and when he tried to draw a deep breath, he only brought in more of the smoke and wound up coughing from his mouth and throat.

Hack it up all you want. You can still walk.

So he released the tree and took a feeble step. Will was surprised when his foot held his body's weight, and so he took another to be confident in his balance. The ground below him seemed as if it might move at any second, breaking into quicksand or muck that would grab and suck at his feet or, hell, in this fog, he could almost imagine taking a step and then falling into a void, some chasm where he would fall forever. With his next step he almost thought he would. He felt his foot go a bit too far, where the ground should have been, but now wasn't. A lingering depth.

And for a moment, he quivered on a strange precipice before the big man grabbed his arm with thick fingers and said, No. You're not hopeless enough for that yet.

When his foot touched down and struck ground again, at once the entire idea seemed silly. Stupid really. He wasn't in a game. The fog and smoke were playing tricks with his eyes and his mind. He'd been through . . . whatever he'd been through and awoken here, scrambled, confused, amnesic. It was no wonder this place felt like a dreamspace, like a place where, if he wanted, he might fly.

Go.

The flat voice brought Will away from his thoughts and back to the world around him. The fog could wrap his head in layers of white and gray, intermixing before his eyes, but that voice would still be there. That voice would not be lost. Even when the man whispered, it rang in Will's ears. It was the truest thing he knew.

Go.

So he went.

He didn't know where he was going. Home, perhaps. He didn't know which direction home was, and perhaps he didn't care. Perhaps it didn't even matter. Maybe it was only the echoes of the suggestion of this place being little more than a dreamscape. No—a nightmare.

Where are we going? Perhaps a part of him wasn't so resigned to being prodded in one direction.

You're the one leading the way.

So he led the way.

For a while, all he knew were trees of varying shades of blue and purple and gray, depending on the gaps in the smoke and the fog. The day shimmered and pulsed so that he had no idea of time. He wasn't sure it mattered the same way that he wasn't sure eating or sleeping seemed to matter. There was only awake and exhaustion and his body hurting and his body not hurting and these things came and went in the same way as the light. It pulsed on the horizon, with no sphere of the sun visible between the branches above his head, through the clouds, or where the sky met the farthest, wavering, warped edge of the forest.

Sometimes it became dark enough that the fog was nearly transparent and the trees all blended together into a stitching of grays in the distance, and sometimes it was light enough that all he could see were the white swirls. So Will walked with his hands before him, and if he hit a tree, so it happened, and if it hurt, so it went.

It was in the darkness that he began to work toward where it was that they were

going. He began to look for shapes between the trees, where the last of the light lingered in the flickering days (or minutes, he supposed, depending on how exhausted or tired he was at the time).

There were moments when the fog cleared as the light dipped, and before he lost his depth perception between the trees far off and the trees in his face, where only thickness differentiated the growths, he studied the distance, watching for a thinning of the trees or the suggestion of structures, but without success. It seemed that this forest went on forever.

The big man wasn't speaking either. For a while, Will worried he was no longer behind him, but he could still hear the man's footfalls behind his, and could still hear his heavy breathing.

Where was the sun? Where was their source of light? If it never went as dark as night, or as bright as day, where were they? He'd never been so long without seeing the sun. Even on an overcast day, it would glimmer behind the clouds, offering a simple circular cutout in the sky above, the clouds stripping its splendor. He seemed to remember his teachers once telling him that the sun was a star, but it was far closer than any other star he could see in the night sky. It was backwards then, this star. As it got closer, it seemed to take over the sky, and become the god of the day, while the others were pushed to corners of the night. This contradiction seemed glaring when he was a child, and it was to this contradiction that he latched now, though certainly he'd learned better in his years of school before his death.

His death.

So that's what this was.

I'm dead?

Some would say the feeling pain makes you alive.

So I'm alive?

Some would say that pain itself is the absence of all life.

I'm not in much pain.

Do you feel alive?

Will hesitated. Not really.

Maybe this was where the sun had melted back to mortality, with a brightness not enough to turn the sky from night to day, but not far enough to ever leave the night entirely. It was like how, in the farthest northern part of Alaska or Canada during summer, days would last nearly the full twenty-four hours, with the sun

barely rising and barely setting, hovering over the horizon. Here the sun seemed to waver, to bounce from brightness and then sink to darkness far quicker. Was time faster? Or was the earth wobbling on its axis as it rotated, giving the day—if you could call it that—only a wavering light?

The thought made him nearly seasick, and he nearly lost his balance.

It should slow down, he wanted to say, but he was worried about putting words to his fears and so did not speak.

Find the sun then, he decided.

Will shifted course toward the eastern horizon (or western? or no—somewhere in between the two), and started forward with all his energy, moving only to avoid the trees and make progress toward the faded star.

The horizon remained unchanged, but his stomach settled. Heading toward some kind of central point at least made him feel that the ground was shifting on a pivot, and that if he was on the point from which the world around him seemed to shift, then he might maintain some kind of balance if it leaned too far in one direction.

That was when he saw it, for the first time; the sun.

Finally, it breached the horizon. It was a white point haloed in yellow where the clouds met the earth. They must be getting closer to

(to what? The edge? Some end of the world? Where there be dragons?)

the sun itself. The world around them gradually fell dark again. The trees sank to purples and deep blues, and nearest to him and the ground, the silhouetted black. Odd, he thought, looking around. For a moment he was scared to take his eyes from the sun before him, but decided it wasn't going anywhere. So what if it was? He was going the right direction to find it again.

It took awhile for his eyes to adjust. First there was a red spot everywhere he looked, burned into his retinas, but even as the spot faded, his night vision failed to kick in. The brush and trees around him didn't take on the crisp detail that they would have in the early morning. The smoke around him did not glow yellow as it should have before a rising or setting sun.

Perhaps it was because this sun was smaller. This sun was broken down and defeated.

No. Now he wasn't sure if that was the case at all. But whatever the case, it was clear that the world was not responding to this light.

It was not the sun at all, as it turned out. Some time later, when the pinpoint of light in the distance grew to the size of a thumbnail, he realized that what he'd been

seeing was a light post, rising from the forest floor and lighting only the dark fog and a few black tree branches around it. There was little special about the design, nothing particularly gothic or exceptionally curvy, the way one might expect it to be, tangled amongst the branches around it. The light it put off was not particularly warm either, nor particularly inviting. In the dark, it had taken on a kind of sickly yellow hue that looked almost green against the purple light of the clouded sky further behind it.

At least it wasn't the edge of the earth.

You led us to a lamppost? the big man said and laughed. A lamppost? That's home to you? This is your heaven, vagabond? Or did you live in a children's story? Will you lead us to a lion next? Or more fitting, an ice queen?

Will felt tears brim at the bottom of his eyes, but he blinked them away. It could be good, he said. It could be a sign of civilization. Why would anyone put a lamp in the middle of a forest?

Why would you put a lamp here? The big man snickered. You brought us here.

Let's keep going then. Will put his head down and stared at the ground and started walking into the twilight again.

2.

Five years before.

Stanley Davis sat behind his desk with his feet up, watching his students finish their midterm exams. This was part of the job that he loved, watching his students recite how much they'd learned so far in the semester. You might crack that he was a sadist, that he enjoyed watching them suffer, but it was far from the case. He liked seeing them achieve. Perhaps his motives were selfish: that argument could be made. Davis taught from the heart, though. Math was his passion, but he never took it so far as to work in any applied sections of mathematics, nothing in the theoretical or scientific levels. He did math because he loved it, not because he loved to see what it produced. There was a kind of harmony in balancing equations, in writing a proof, in simplifying the work. It was making an order from chaos, and he liked that. He liked sharing that with high school students, especially the ones who probably needed the lesson the most.

Watching them test was watching them succeed. It was watching them break their world into pieces in order to see how it all fit together again, to find those hidden lines and hidden rules that operated beneath the numbers and letters and symbols. Granted, math itself was an extension of a kind of thinking, and the

schools had ingrained in these students this way of thinking: that math was a function of life, that it was balancing a checkbook, that it was the solution to an answer on a test, a solution to funding their public school, to nicer lockers and crisper textbooks and more modern classrooms. According to them, math was a means to an end, not a means of living.

This, of course, he knew and understood when he started teaching. He knew his entire life that there was something off about the school system. Growing up with a teacher for a mother let him see behind that curtain that had dangled so subtly through his elementary school years. It was when he reached middle school, high school, and most clearly college, that he began to see how the cogs worked behind that curtain, and he became aware that teachers were not just smiling faces and kind words, who pleased in their students' achievements. There was bickering and there was backstabbing and there was funding and cuts. There were disappointments and there were votes both favorable and unfavorable. It wasn't until his third year of college when he started to realize how disappointed he'd been in his education. He'd spent, at that point, sixteen years in the school system, and for what? He knew little about the world: how the job market worked, how networking was what got you ahead, how the job you wanted wasn't the job you wanted. It came as a shock when, at his first internship at a small publishing house in a city thirty miles from home in the summer before his senior year, he realized that his education didn't truly begin until he was gone from college. It didn't begin until he was gone from the world of academia, where the educational system taught that the world was the basics: math, geography, science, and English. These were the roots of knowledge, but not the roots of the workplace, of the systems that kept society rolling or, further still, that kept society advancing. The ideas and ideals had become confused when a basic academic foundation became tangled with a basic preparation for the real world. The two were nothing alike, and this shook him.

A year later, when he finished his undergraduate degree, the world loomed before him larger than ever, larger than when he had graduated high school, larger even than his middle school graduation, when his movement to high school seemed the most intimidating step of his life. That step had kept him awake for the two weeks leading up to classes that summer. This step gave him insomnia for a month.

Perhaps the most shocking part was the way the real world hit him, the chaos of it. No, chaos was the wrong word. It was just different. There was a different order and structure to it. Like he'd said, it was one that he'd been utterly unprepared for in terms of training, but also in terms of mental fitness.

His mother had died the following fall, while he had been trying to work his

way up through an accounting department in the same publishing company he'd interned with the year before. Though he'd interned in sales, his love and minor in mathematics caught the eye of the accounting department, and they took him in. Still, his life was making copies. It was his mother's passing that gave him his final push. More likely, he thought now, looking back on it all, it was his fear of the world that steered him back to college, to the structure he'd known his entire life. This time he had drive. As if his mother's spirit had been passed to him, he took inspiration to help mold the minds of the next generation.

Was it cliché and corny to put it that way? Yes. Undoubtedly. But it was how he felt. How many of his colleagues now had felt the same? How many of them worked in the system because they liked the structure that they'd grown up with? Was it all a mental block to avoid the chaos of fading away? Or of being another part of the masses? Another spoke in the American wheel?

No, he didn't much care for chaos. And no, after nine years of teaching, he didn't still think he was making much of a difference here, working outside of the other spokes in the other wheels that ran the country. He was as much a part of these children's continuing education in books and letters as his teachers were to him. He wasn't making a difference in the curriculum, helping students across the city or across the state. He had no knack or drive for administration. Administration was politics, and politics was the ultimate form of chaos—chaos trying to find structure, yes, and a good deal of structure in the last four thousand years (or so the books told him), but a trashman doesn't do his job without digging through someone's leftovers.

He smiled, glancing at the clock before looking back to his students' faces. They too were beginning to glance at the clock. Some looked vaguely panicked and flipped through the final pages of the test, making the mental calculations as to whether they would finish. Some looked almost peaceful, confident. One or two had already leaned back with their papers turned over, first eyeing Davis, then their classmates, then their hands, and then the clock as well.

It was funny. Davis was training these students to become trashmen. And although the very reason they were sitting in Calculus in their senior year, aiming for college and being in class at eight thirty, was to avoid such jobs as janitors and trashmen, he wanted them to be the trashmen. He wanted them to be what he could not be: those people who could reach into the chaos and find something of order, to find something in themselves that could then be translated outward, to everyone. If they could be the politicians and the administrators of change, if they could break away from academia enough to look around at each other (not that there was anything wrong with academia. Some of the noblest academic pursuits—

the arts, English, certain sciences, philosophy—all looked at each other as well as the self), if they could break away at all, they might realize something truly magnificent and then, being unafraid, take that next step into the world around them, to shine as he had not.

Davis frowned. Well, if not a shining star, perhaps a cloud, or even rain. Something with small influence. He wasn't good at metaphors. He was a math teacher for Christ's sake. If he could teach these students something about order and the underlying structure to the world, then he was happy. If he could give them the confidence to follow their passions and go out into the world in another five years, than he was happy. No need to do it yourself if you can teach them to fish.

"Ten minutes, kids. Ten minutes. If you're not as far as you like, no need to panic. The world won't hinge on this test." He received a few exasperated looks. But he had time. He still had the better part of a school year to work on them.

3.

When Will next looked up, he realized that the street lamp had indeed been a first sign of civilization, and he was shocked to see that, in the distance and birthed by trees, were a series of homes, their backyards open to the forest and their windows alight with a warm orange glow.

They look like Jack-o'-lanterns.

Once he'd realized this, Will couldn't see the houses in any other way. The light on the orange walls seemed to flicker, and it crossed his mind that the houses might have been on fire from the inside out, but he was afraid to ask and instead turned his attention back to the ground in front of him, where the branches—

They're burning on their insides, the big man whispered.

Stop it.

—where the branches and weeds would try to trip him up in the late evening light.

Did you do that?

No.

It's weird that they both lit when we alighted here.

Will shook his head, still refusing to look at the two small homes, but continued to walk toward the yards, aiming to cut between them.

The big man whispered to himself, his words coming in time with his steps. They're losing everything they worked so hard to build into a home. Memories, really. Wasn't it you who was thinking about the smell of their memories going up in flames? What was it you thought? Like burning dust from an old carpet, was it?

When they got to the backyard, where the trees thinned to form a rough natural

barrier between the two worlds, the smell of smoke and the shimmer of the flames became undeniable. Still, Will kept his eyes to the ground.

I wonder if they're trapped inside, asleep. Children in their bedrooms, perhaps. Could you imagine? If their exits were blocked and there was no escape? Burning alive? A bit like Hell I'd imagine, wouldn't you say?

Will stole a glance at the patio when he came upon the back wall of the house. Black metal furniture seemed to shift in the light. Little flinches. The kind a child might make while her mother bent for a splinter in her foot. You need to stop moving. It'll be fast. You'll barely feel it. To lie, to tell the truth. The pain would be there either way, but it's not really the pain, is it? It's how you expect it, think of it, how you let it seep within you. The big man's words. Not Will's thoughts.

From the kitchen window, the light from the flames turned the dead brown grass and leaves from their sepia tone to a full eruption of fall. In the windows, there was only black and orange. The smoke ran in tendrils from the roof, as if releasing souls from a body, essential, unsure, and confused. Should they cling to this place that they knew, the home itself that was now beginning to crumble into dust, or should they let go and rise into the night sky? There for a while, the smoke would be seen as first a brown fog, then barely a cloud in the sky that blocked the light of the stars, and then, gone, broken into so many little pieces that it would no longer be visible. Later, more houses would burn. Later, more would turn to dust, and in the breeze the dust would follow in much the same way. It was better that they rise. But as Will passed into the space between the two homes, he watched the smoke slip back inside in a quick, liquid motion.

It was the heat that brought Will to a full stop between the homes. There were windows on either side, and the flames had turned white against his skin. He would not look. He would not peer inside to see if a family suffered while burning alive, if they held each other while waiting for the end to come, if they were watching him.

Afraid to move, afraid to escape the heat, afraid to see
what he had done—

No. It wasn't his fault. This wasn't something he could control. It was a lie; this entire world, the burning homes, they were all lies brought about by the baiting of the man that followed behind him.

If Will put a stop to the man behind him, he'd put a stop to the fires around him. Too aware of the sweat standing out on his forehead and soaking his clothes, he turned and looked the way he'd come, toward the big man.

The face he saw when he turned wasn't the big man's, nor was it some blend of his own either, but rather the first face he saw when he awoke: Jennifer's. His breath caught as she in turn caught his eye, and the frustration that boiled in his gut

changed to something else: what, he didn't know. He wasn't sure of this feeling, if it was sympathy or deep-rooted confusion, if it was a sadness or a guilt.

Her forehead pushed upward as she raised her eyebrows ever so slightly. Her eyes were round and shone in the firelight, and her lips were pursed. It seemed as if she might want to ask a question, to speak, to say,

Why, Will? Why would you do anything like what you did? How could you?

You killed them all, Will.

I didn't.

On impulse, without reason or hesitation, he detected movement in the window on his left, and he turned his head and looked. Immediately he wished he hadn't, and he looked to the ground again, his eyes hot, the sight pressing against his mind the way the heat did on his skin. Inside, a dining room, connected to what was probably a living room, was engulfed in flames. Fire crawled along the walls, releasing framed photographs from their places and caressing the white space where they hung. The smoke swirled as they fell, seemingly studying the spaces, the broken places, the photographs. Will couldn't see what the pictures were, whether they were weddings or baby pictures or childhood memories or honeymoons. He supposed it didn't matter. They were all of those things. They were none of those things. It was destruction in its most essential form. There was once something there, and then it was gone, no longer there, replaced by a moment of pure emptiness, a space that even the smoke couldn't fill, a glowing framework, an image too slow to sink in, then destruction and tears, and later, nothing.

The movement that had drawn his eye wasn't the falling pictures though, but the shadow of a man standing against the window. The glass was already covered with grime and soot, but behind it there was still clarity enough to know that someone was standing against the glass, hands pressed flat before clawing at the grime before pressing flat again. The smoke had to be bad inside. It had to be too thick to breathe.

Soon he would fall, his muscles would weaken, his mind would empty, go blank. But now, in his desperation, it seemed he wanted a glimpse of the outside, the feel of the cold night air on the other side of the glass, and if he were lucky, aid.

I can help him. Will flinched at the thought, but with a sudden resolve he turned away from Jennifer.

Break the window, let the smoke out, give him an exit. He can be okay. He just needs an exit. He just needs space for the smoke to clear.

Will searched the area for a rock or a thick branch, but nothing presented itself.

He reached toward the window and pounded against the glass, slamming his fists when his palms made no effect. The glass burned beneath his skin and his flesh was scalded when he hit it over and over again. He turned his body for more power, hurling his right forearm against the glass, elbow before wrist before palm. Again. Again. With each impact the pain grew steadily worse, raw skin against hot glass. He tried to ignore it.

COME ON! he screamed, desperate for help. He turned to Jennifer, but Jennifer only looked back with sad eyes. The big man? Where was he? Will looked both left and right and finally saw him leaning against the house a few feet farther ahead. *Help me!*

I'm good, the big man said.

Please!

No, no, he said, picking at his fingers. You seem to be doing great over there. Keep it up.

Will turned back to the window and hit the glass one final time, screaming. The man on the other side of the glass, his screams exhausting the air and his voice, had finally crumpled against the pane and lay hunched, propped on the window Will was trying to break. His arm was burning, but Will left it against the glass anyway.

All your fault, too, the big man echoed.

Will clenched his teeth and turned to the big man, bearing down and moving at him before he knew what he was doing. He spoke curses under his breath but with no real coherency. There was barely a sound when he collided with the big man's body, knocking him against a drainpipe on the corner of the house and throwing punch after punch into the man's gut. Quickly, Will realized it was like trying to fight smoke—when one punch landed, the next found only air, as if, behind the folds of the big man's clothing, he were doing some kind of thin, strange dance to avoid each blow. Will imagined his smile and tried to hit harder.

The brawl ended abruptly when the big man grabbed Will's forearm, the one that had been pressed against the scalding glass, and dug his fingernails into the raw dark skin. An animal sound leapt from Will's gut before he could cut it off, and it rang into the night at the same moment as

the roof fell in on the house to their left. A handful of sparks burst forth and then the house was only walls, and houses with only walls seem silly and fragile and small. Smoke billowed for escape.

Will's body tightened up. He couldn't breathe. Tears welled from his eyes and he tried to bite off the end of the sound. Perhaps if he cut it off, the pain would follow, disappearing, leaving his vision and his brain so that he could know anything, anything but the white pain behind his eyes. Dear—

The big man released the boy's arm, wrenched himself free, and stood up.

Will's arm trembled uncontrollably. He grabbed at his wrist with his good hand only to recoil from his touch when the skin burst into pain again. Arm dangling. Helpless. No way to give himself any comfort. He felt his blood flowing and that almost hurt worse.

Still he heard the big man's whispers from above, as if the man were leaning toward his ear, speaking directly to his mind, and Will flinched from the sound.

Look at that, the big man said. The flames reach for the sky while the tears run for the ground.

4.

Two nights of this was getting ridiculous.

The shooting had never bothered his sleep until now. Why, five years later, was it finally getting to him, and in this manner?

Will woke up with the covers kicked off, sweat on his body, and the feel of his head swimming, claustrophobic almost, like he'd fallen asleep with thoughts left unsettled, and while he slept they spun and spun and spun. He pushed himself up on his arms and twisted, making sure that Jennifer was still next to him and settled. He couldn't hear her breathing but assumed that she was still sleeping. It was nearing six. She should be deep asleep at this hour.

Rolling out of bed, he landed softly on the floor, which made his head spin even worse. Swallowing hard, he pulled on a pair of pants and stepped into the adjacent bathroom. Quietly, he turned on the faucet and splashed water on his face, trying to get his thoughts under control and find a little comfort in the shock of the water. It didn't help much, but it was enough to get himself under control again, to the point that he didn't have to worry about being sick.

In the kitchen, he filled a glass of water, drank half of it, filled it the rest of the way, and then stepped outside onto the small front entry to watch the sun come up. His condo apartment was located on the lowermost floor of a three-story complex and opened up to a short stairwell that led to ground level before twisting about toward the second level. Out front, in the small alcove below the stairs, the landlord had installed two pegs from which an old wooden porch swing dangled. Will sat down on the swing. He hadn't grabbed his shoes, and the only nearby shirt was a long-sleeved sweatshirt which he supposed would do well enough. The morning air was sharp and cool and might bother him in time, but for now it was refreshing.

This morning he remembered more of the dream, more of the details. They were fuzzy, the kind of dream-world details that stand out without filling in the gaps. He remembered standing between the two burning houses, but he didn't remember how he got there. He supposed that they had walked through the forest, and that rang a bell but beyond that . . .

A lamppost? Ridiculous. But that too seemed familiar.

Other thoughts and memories flooded his head from the night before, but they didn't feel as recent. Was he learning to see these dreams better? Were they forming stronger mental pathways with each recurring dream? Were these even recurring dreams? They seemed to be adding together, each night continuing. It wasn't the exact same dream. That was much more in the direction of what Jennifer had been dealing with these last few years.

He wondered about the meaning of the dreams. His therapist was rather insistent about the meaning, about his ego suppressing his unconscious, but he'd only seen her a few times in the past month, and, because he was not dreaming often, most of their work was creative, representative. The work reminded him of school, of his classes, of searching for consistencies in theme and authorial intention, where the commentary of the work broke the bounds of the characters and turned to something else. It was difficult to put much stock in any kind of supernatural significance to the dream state though. He didn't believe in ghosts or spirits. And God? Well, Will thought, God—if there even was such a creature—didn't seem to care much about the earth.

You killed them.

That was his only indication that the dreams had anything to do with the shooting. Otherwise they were formless, without reason, fantastic abstractions probably brought on by his class on descent narratives this past—

The front doorknob next to him twisted, and then the door popped open. Will almost leapt from the swing, the motion violent enough to set it bouncing beneath him, his heart racing in time to match it, a mass forming in his throat.

Jennifer peered through the crack in the door before widening the gap and squeezing out. She didn't speak, but almost at once Will's breathing returned to normal, his heart rate soon following. She smiled a half-smile, a troubled one, but with a confidence underneath that he recognized as concern for him and not instead one of her moods.

Will didn't speak, either. The quiet that had fallen after the sucking sound of the door opening was too nice, and he didn't want to break it.

She sat down next to him on the porch bench and wrapped her arms around her knees. Will placed an arm around her, and her head found a spot between his

neck and shoulder. After a few minutes they started swaying back and forth, almost a part of the breeze that pushed through the leaves on the tree in the small front yard.

"So?" Jennifer said.

Will nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't."

He nodded again. "I've been having nightmares the last two nights."

"You don't have nightmares much."

"Yeah, not so much."

"Are they about the shooting?"

He liked that about her. She'd been through an incredible trauma, one that had shaken her life to its very core, as if she hadn't already had enough, and at such an important time in her life, too. Despite her trauma though, she wasn't afraid to talk about it. Talking, she used to say, was something that she refused to do for the first year afterward. If her dad was going to steal her away from any memory triggered by the place where they lived, then she too would avoid the memories at all costs. But then the dreams started. Memories like that can't be avoided for long.

"I think so, but I'm not sure."

"Why do you think so?" she asked.

Will sighed and didn't say anything for a moment. "Because I woke up the first morning feeling guilty. Like the shooting was my fault."

Jennifer shifted on his shoulder so that she was looking at his face. "Why?"

"I don't know. It was like a part of me had confessed something, had realized it, or finally been forced to realize it. I'm not really sure."

"You don't believe that, right? You don't believe you had anything to do with what happened?"

Will shook his head. "Of course not. I mean, well, mostly." As soon as the words were out, he regretted saying them.

"What does that mean, 'mostly'? How can you think any of that was your fault?"

"Nevermind."

"Oh don't you nevermind me." Her tone almost made him laugh.

"I can't . . ." He trailed off. "You know I don't hardly even remember the whole thing, but I can't help but feel guilty in a lot of ways. The fact that you even got hurt. If I'd have done something different." He swallowed. "Reacted sooner, kept you away."

"You can't change that, Will. You had no way of knowing."

"And . . ."

"And?"

"And, well. I mean, I killed a guy."

She got quiet and put her head back on his shoulder again. She grabbed ahold of his arm and held it tight in her fingers. "You did what you had to do. And you saved a lot of lives because of it."

Will nodded. He knew that. He'd struggled with that fact for years, but deep down, he'd known that what he did was right, and he took confidence in what he'd done. He'd talked to people, over and over again: his parents, a psychologist. He'd gotten his thoughts out and had a very good perspective on the matter. There shouldn't be anything repressed there

except memory.

There shouldn't be a guilt manifesting now, all these years later.

"I very likely wouldn't be here right now if you hadn't done what you'd done to save me that day."

He looked at Jennifer, but her face was away from his and her words had been muffled into his shirt. She'd said them slowly and quietly, as if confessing to him a secret. He understood it as petulance, knowing that he shouldn't be beating himself up over an issue from so long ago, that he had no reason to bring up again. So, Will bit his tongue. Because that had been it. That was why he never felt guilt about what had happened. Jennifer meant everything to him, even back then when a high school relationship was fragile and delicate and, whether recognized or not, darkened with the weight of an unknown future and inexperience. He saved her life by whatever means necessary. Anything else, he could handle.

To even say he felt guilty now felt like a strange betrayal.

"I know that," Will said. "For some reason, these dreams, they've put these thoughts in my mind, and I don't understand why. I've never had a problem with the guilt about it before, but now, now it feels like its consuming me."

She held his arm tighter but didn't speak. In the last few months, handling each other in various different ways, each knew as well as the other that often there wasn't anything to say, no clear advice other than sitting quietly, being there for one another.

After a few minutes, she spoke again. "What are the dreams about? Do you remember?"

"I'm in some kind of smoky forest. You're there, but barely. You don't participate. You only watch. There's another man there, a bigger man. Creepy. I haven't been able to get a handle on him, though I feel like I know him somehow."

"He's someone you know?"

"I'm not sure. His face, the first night, was—"

my own.

The thought shocked him. He hadn't remembered that until now.

Give it back.

"What about his face?" Jennifer asked, looking at Will again.

"It was long and thin, you know? Kind of skeletal. I mean, pretty much your traditional creepy-man face. Not exaggeratedly thin, with the pointy chin and wrinkles and stuff. He was no Mister Moundshroud." The name caught him off guard, fully unexpected.

"Mister who?"

Will blinked and looked out at the tree in the open space between buildings. Nearly orange, the color had begun to crawl from the tips of the leaves inward. There was the faint smell of smoke on the air, someone probably using a chimney or a ventilated stove in the distance, but it seemed as if, in the curling of the leaves, they were burning some inner fire that caught the wind and touched his nostrils beside the chill.

"When I was a kid," Will said, "I loved a cartoon movie called *The Halloween Tree*, based on a Bradbury book, I think. There was a kid in the movie who died, and the rest of his friends followed this old magical character, Moundshroud, into Halloween's past, learning about the holiday to save their friend."

Jennifer nodded.

"Anyway," he shook his head to tear himself from the memory, but something about it lingered. "Their guide, Moundshroud, he was old, skinny, with this bald head, skull-like, pointy chin. This guy in my dream, he was similar, but not quite the same. I think he had hair and his features weren't so exaggerated. Something about that rings a bell, though."

Halloween had always been a favorite holiday of his as a child. He had enjoyed dressing up as some hero from whatever television show or book he'd been interested in at the time. Something about the darker characters intrigued him. Batman, the black Spider-man, the pirates in *Treasure Island*. Halloween was always the biggest treat of the year, and not just for the candy and the staying up late, but for the excitement of being someone else, the creepy night, the Jack-o'-lanterns. There was something magical about Halloween, he thought. Ever since the shooting, though, the holiday lost its primary value at the end of October, and was instead replaced by distractions and anniversaries and memorial services. If he did celebrate, it was at college parties where he'd try to put everything from his mind. Some years he'd lost himself, not as a character in costume, maybe, but as someone else. He drank, probably too much—Halloween was always the holiday where people drank too much, like they were trying to make up for something, or

forget something about themselves. In his drunken state, the memories came easier, and so did his extroversion. He'd talk to everyone, he'd laugh at any joke he heard, he'd play every drinking game that he could, and he tried his damndest to ignore his friends exchanging glances and keeping that wary eye. Halloween stopped being fun his senior year.

He hadn't thought of the movie since well before the shooting.

"What about Mister Davis?" Jennifer asked, bringing Will back.

"What?"

"Mister Davis. It's not him in your dream, is it? He was a bigger man. Tall."

Will shook his head. Stanley Davis. The math teacher. "I'm not sure that seems right. Parts maybe, but I don't really get that vibe from him. Davis was always the nicest guy, talking about our futures and making the most of ourselves and stuff. He really cared, remember?"

Jennifer bit back memories.

"This guy in my dream, he's nasty. He provokes and he prods and he's mean. Cocky about the whole thing. Like he knows a lot more than I do. I guess he does," Will laughed. "Cause what do I know, right?"

Jennifer smiled with him but couldn't press much further past that.

"Stanley Davis," Will said. "What made you bring him up?"

Shrugging, Jennifer said, "I don't know. I saw his grave the other day in the cemetery. He was a big part of everything that happened. He was on my mind."

"You were at the cemetery?" Now it was Will's turn to pull away and look to her. "I didn't know that."

"I didn't want to bother you with it," she said, looking down.

"Bother me? How would it have been a bother? I'd even have gone with you."

"I know. I just didn't want to mention it."

Will stared hard at her eyes, willing her to meet his, to give him a better explanation, but she didn't.

"You're doing okay though, right? I mean, I remember last week and all."

She nodded. Last week was bad. But it was only a part of a downward trend. A month before, she'd holed herself up in his room for two days while Will tried to talk her into coming out, even just to eat something. She might have slept for a few hours at a time, and he might have dozed, but they were an exhausting two days. Eventually she came out, ashamed but rational again, and the relief Will had felt was infinite.

"But there's nothing you're holding back from me, right? I want to know what's going on up there at least, even if I can't help."

"You do help me, Will," she said, finally meeting his eyes and removing her

hand from his arm to touch his cheek, to play with the hair behind his ear and tickle him on the side of the neck where he was most ticklish. He cringed away with a smile but came back to her serious again. "You do help. I just felt like enough of a burden last week, I wanted to spend some time with my mom without you worrying."

He shook his head, still confused as to why that would be particularly worrisome. He was surprised she didn't spend as much time there as he even would have expected, to be honest. "Going and visiting your mom, that's not . . . bad for you, is it?" he asked. "It doesn't make you"—he hesitated—"dwell on anything more, does it?"

She shook her head. "It's a good thing, talking to Mom."

"You can go more often if you'd like. I don't want to hold you up from visiting if I am in some way."

She nodded, and her mouth turned down around the corners, the way it did when she was trying not to cry, but here her eyes were dry. "Thanks. I might."

"You don't have to keep anything from me that you don't want to," he said. "I always tell you that. I can handle this. I'm happy to handle this. It's hard, but I'm here for you, no matter what. I understand."

She took a deep breath and it shuddered on the way in while her mouth made that downward turn again.

"Okay?"

"Okay," she answered.

He tightened his grip on her shoulder and she leaned back in close again. Will rested his head on hers and together they studied the sky, lightening to the east. The birds were chirping down the street, but not the way that they did in the summer. It was starting to get too cold for them, and they were going other places. Still, some of the tougher ones remained, announcing the sunrise as time for chatter and good company.

Stanley Davis.

Will hadn't thought of Davis much in the past years. The entire Stanley Davis situation was still a mystery to him that no one would talk much about. Jennifer probably knew more about it than he did. Your boy just wakes up from a gunshot-induced three-day coma, and his math teacher dies on the floor next to his bed. No one is going to be particularly talkative about any of that.

"He was there. In the hallway. And then by my bedside when he should have been in resting. Healing. Why would he risk his life like that?"

"You're not thinking he was . . . involved somehow, are you?" she asked.

"I couldn't imagine he was. That doesn't even register in my mind, you know? I

mean, on paper, maybe. If the cops really wanted to look into it, they could have raised some questions, I'm sure, but I knew Davis for a year before I even had him for class, and, well—how well can you know anybody, I guess? But he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"I'm pretty sure he didn't care for the school system much."

"Oh, he definitely didn't care much for the system."

"But not enough to conspire on something like that."

"He was only there for us, for the students," Will said. "Yeah, if he was involved, it was in a weird way."

Jennifer didn't know what to say after that. She pressed her lips tight together and watched the leaves on the concrete. Their silence now reflected that silence of the past five years. Questions made waves, and the waves here could easily become violent, full of ice, and sharp, freezing cold; the kind of waves you didn't want coming back to you. So instead of talking, they held each other close and rocked as the breeze shuffled the leaves in the tree across the street.

5.

There are parts I can remember. Demands that I made. The jealousy that riddled my thoughts, the wrath, the way it all built up, threatened to spill loose. They didn't understand. I wanted them to, but none would listen.

Like animals without language, they ran and they barked and they screamed their dog screams.

See? You burn houses down and then *get* burned, and now it's the end of the world. *It hurts so bad, the skin, scalded, black. Please make it stop.* It's so pathetic. First you're a bully, then you expect sympathy and comfort and Aloe vera when you're the victim. It's fucking hypocrisy.

Will bit down and clenched the muscles in his temples. He wouldn't complain about the pain anymore. He wouldn't look at his arm or even think about the agony, especially with the big man seeming to coexist inside his skull, alongside every thought. The idea that the man was inside his head with him was incredibly disconcerting. There was no privacy, then. This place was foreign, alien, desolate. Though they might be walking toward "home" at the moment (wherever the hell that was, and whatever the hell that might wind up being), there was no home for Will, no safe place where he could go to outrun the pain and the confusion about where he was and why he was here. The thought that the big man was in his head with him made the world around him even more disconcerting. Already seeming to

reflect his inner landscape in seemingly random ways, the inside of his head became stretched on the landscape outside of himself too. What difference did it make if the man was inside or outside his head? Was Will himself no different? Did that make the external stimuli and the internal stimuli any different from each other?

The thought made his head hurt, and like the pain and thoughts of confusion, he decided it best to force this idea from his mind too. Better a quiet mind than a muddled one.

Will glanced at the big man from the corner of his eye. The man caught Will's look and twisted his head on his neck, widened his eyes, and shook his head in small motions.

Memories forced their way from the back of his mind, the look prompting some echo of high school, or friends, late night conversations that—

But then nothing, the way dreams fade in the morning, the way one scrambles at that blank—

at that blank space, the empty wall. Tear fingernails at the surface to peel the paint, find the paper. Death pasted atop adulthood like adulthood plastered across childhood. Damn the nostalgia that gripped him for more of the memories, for more glimpses of what seemed a comfortable childhood. The memories came in spurts, barely more than an anecdotal fact most of the time, if only a glimpse of a moment or conversation, but the feeling that rushed back seemed as if it could fill a fountain. He longed for home, his life,

whatever—the way a blind man longs for sight, or a starved man begs for a drink of water in a barren landscape. That thought brought with it a shudder the same way the flashback had, but this time—what, a premonition?

Stop. Stop these thoughts.

The longing for more memories persisted in the back of his mind, the way anxiety persists in your stomach, and without a thought, he twisted toward Jennifer.

Jennifer.

He had no memories of her, but he knew her. He knew the minute that he saw her against that tree in the forest that she was someone special to him, some facet of what he'd always known, maybe even loved. Like a memory incarnate, to see her could be enough to satiate him.

He moved, looking for her as she wandered in that foggy smoke that seemed to blend from the sky to the ground to the flames that coughed across lawns in the neighborhood. Where was she? Not far. She'd stayed with them thus far, probably off to the side maybe, on a sidewalk or—

The impact on the side of his head brought stars and tears to his eyes, and a part of

him wondered if he'd finally witnessed Jennifer, and if the shock of knowing, the shock of the memory, had truly stunned him in a way none of this dream world had—

A second time, a burst of white light faded before his eyes into shifting pixels as his vision changed to a tunnel, closing around the edges. His ears rang, and the pain in his head sang sad songs of freedom.

His arm, his burned arm. The one that he'd been trying to put from his mind. It was exploding, tearing, because it was in the big man's grip.

Stop it, for the love of God, let go! he wailed.

For the love of who?

Will threw his head back and tried to wrench his forearm from the man's grasp, but it was too firm, and the movement only served to twist the flesh further.

It was coming off, the skin on his arm was surely tearing below the grip, and he had no escape. His left arm trembled dangerously and his breath came in short bursts. The best he could do was cling to the ground, to try to fall, to find some comfort in the earth, fleeing, getting somewhere, anywhere.

You know better than to entertain thoughts like that here, Will. The big man released Will's arm. This is not a happy memory.

Will didn't care, didn't reflect on the man's words, only cradled his arm, studying the skin in the dim light of the foggy dawn. The skin had indeed torn, and blood ran down in small rivers toward his wrist, but many of the tears were where the skin was most burned. A clear fluid leaked amidst the blood where his body was already trying to heal the wound. Will had to clench his teeth, breathing through his nose in snorts past the dripping mucus. Get a grip on yourself.

I'm an idiot, the big man said, pacing in small circles. Now he's going to whine more.

Will held his breath. Tried counting.

I had to give him something to whine about, but all he does is whine. I'm a fucking idiot.

There came a point, a plateau, when Will realized there would be no getting better should he stay on the ground, concentrating on forcing the pain from his arm, which alone was like trying to wring water from a towel on the bottom of a swimming pool. The big man seemed to be having similar thoughts, his eyes starting to burn when he studied the boy, so Will decided it was probably best to get up. Upon rising, his head swam and the black corridors followed his vision again, but after a few moments subsided, Will found he could take in the street again.

They were in a neighborhood. The first two homes they'd seen were in a distant cul-de-sac that connected with the other homes after only a few blocks of a winding forest-lined street that struck Will as vaguely familiar, though the memory was one he was at the moment happy to leave in the dark, should it culminate in another punishment. The fire seemed to follow too, lapping at the edges of yards or along the shingles of a roof. Sometimes it was only in the front curtains of one of the rare homes along the street, eating forever upward and coughing smoke, but without spreading to the ceiling or along the walls of the home. The fires were little more than occasional spot fires, placed in a way that almost suggested they were there for show, to complete the feel of the place.

The fires on the edges of the lawns leaked enough smoke to complete a traditional fog-machine type effect, as if the neighborhood itself were the set of a bad Halloween television show or old B-movie. The look should have been comical almost, a caricature of the holiday, but the flames flickered close enough that Will could still feel their heat from the middle of the street, and his arm was still shouting about their well-staged threats.

It's Halloween, Will. Remember?

Will tried to think back, to find something to hold onto that would make the big man's words ring true, but stopped himself almost immediately.

Sure.

You thought there was something fitting about that, the day where the dead were closest to the earth. If the dead weren't going to come to you, you'd bring yourself (and many, many others) to them. Something along those lines? Ring any bells?

Actually, they did.

It's all right to explore the issue a bit more if you'd like.

Will eyed the man warily.

I won't grab your wrist. Promise. He held up two fingers, then a third, wiggled them, put the third down, and shrugged. Scout's honor. Really.

Threat of pain or not, it wasn't an area of his memory that Will wanted to return to, and so he started to walk again instead.

Rather head home? Fine, we'll see how lovely home is, then. I'm in no rush.

Look closer.

Will opened his eyes. He'd taken to walking down the street with them closed. He found that the more confident he was that he would continue along on asphalt, that his steps wouldn't falter, the less likely he was to stumble. Blind worked fine here, as he imagined deaf would as well. He wasn't sure you needed a body in this

place anyway, nor the senses that would accompany it.

Look deeper into the shadows, on the sidewalks. We're as much a part of them as we ever were. We are only harder to see, as, at the moment, they are too.

What? he asked.

There. The big man pointed to a child walking on the sidewalk perhaps twenty yards from their small group. The child was walking slowly, his head down, a black cloak of some cheap fabric covering his shoulders and dragging along the ground. The hem of the cloak was muddy and trampled and seemed to suggest use far beyond this one single night. It skated along the flames that crumbled the tips of the grass in the lawns but never caught nor singed. It only smoked, ever so slightly.

Will stopped moving. He did not know this boy but called to him. Hello! Half with excitement, half with curiosity. Who was this child in his dream world? He must either know him or . . . or he wasn't alone. The thought made his blood run cold. For some reason it frightened him. The boy continued to walk, slowly, one foot after another after—

You there, in the cloak.

Despite his slow wander, there was a hesitation in his step before the child continued again on his way.

HEY! This time Will bellowed and the boy stopped, turning to look at him. Will's heart pounded and his face flushed. Nerves fired in his arms, sending surges of electricity through his body, his only defense in the empty street.

What the—what the hell is that? It wasn't a question so much as an exclamation.

The boy's face was not one from Will's past, nor was it a memory. Where there would have been a surprised or even smiling young boy's face, here there was a darkened yellow face, hollow, pupil-less eyes staring, sightless, his mouth agape in the same manner. It was not a boy, of this Will was sure. To think such a face was attached to anything like a boy was a more terrifying thought than the sight of the face itself. The thing made a motion to the left, right, then back to the path that it was traveling.

What did you see, Will? Did you see the boy? The big man's voice had dropped the haughty, high tone that he'd kept for the better part of their journey, and now it sounded with genuine curiosity.

Like you didn't see it too, Will said, still watching the cloak shuffling away.

This is your party, boy. What did you see?

Will looked at the ground. It was a face. Twisted in shock, green and yellow, eyeless.

The big man laughed a high laugh that rang through the streets and echoed off

the fronts of the houses and sang with the animals in the distance. Did that scare you?

Narrowing his eyes, Will said nothing.

This frightened you?

I wasn't expecting it.

It's Halloween! The big man laughed again. Do you not remember Halloween? When children dress up in costumes to play pranks on each other and stuff their fat whining stomachs with sugar? Did it occur to you that his face was just a mask?

Red burned on Will's cheeks. It looked real.

As it had. Even with the memories of Halloweens past leaking into his mind--even with the shadows of more wandering children appearing from the murk on both sides of the street, even with the sound of giggles and shrieks and shouts joining on the air--there had been a quality to this face that had moved him. There was a terror in that face. An otherworldly, tangible feel to the yellow sockets that called, hollow.

What was he going on about? It was a fucking mask. It was a child. Memories were seeping into his mind, and he'd failed to recognize them was all, and again they'd fled to that black veil in the back of his mind. Perhaps the boy he saw was himself at some young age, a mask forgotten, surfacing in his dream world as some kind of memory alone.

Children, everywhere. The big man sneered. You wanted to go home, welcome home.

What?

'The desert of the real,' the big man mimicked. You've brought us back to reality, Will. Fine job.

Will looked about, confused and dazed. This was supposed to be the real world? This was supposed to be where he came from, where he was born, lived, and . . . died? This place was off, this place was utterly distant and unfamiliar. He did not grow up here. He never lived here.

This place was different. It felt as false as a lie, the way a blister growing on your heel in a swimming pool feels like you're only stepping on scrap, until you sit on the edge and study the way the blood drops into the water as the skin peels back.

I am not from here.

Better believe it.

Will looked for Jennifer, who was sitting on the sidewalk's edge. That was what home felt like. He didn't remember who she was. He barely remembered her name. But that was his home.

Glancing away quickly, he turned a hesitant eye to the big man, who was studying the streetside homes and wandering children.

This place isn't real.

No, the big man agreed, leading Will toward a driveway where a child was waddling up the front walk while his mother looked on. You're very right. The one we're in now is far more real. Can't you feel it?

Unsure of what he meant by this, Will only nodded and flexed his forearm. The pain shot into his mind again, and he felt his skin crawl with a fine fire, an adrenaline dump. The pain was real--that, he could feel. His frustration, too.

But these poor bastards don't understand that, the big man said, moving forward with long strides until he was walking alongside the child with his hand on the kid's shoulder. Together they approached the house, along the driveway and up the dark wooden front porch steps. Together they knocked on the door, and their knocks rang thrice, each at the exact same time so that the effect rendered a strange circus mirroring of each other.

Please get away from him, Will said, this time easily recognizing the child beneath the fluffy lizard costume that encased him.

The big man either didn't hear or, more likely, was ignoring him.

They understand the way this world crosses over to ours.

The door opened. A smiling woman with graying hair and a plain bathrobe handed out a small aluminum bowl filled with wrapped candy.

See? the big man said. They understand pain and they know fear.

As the child turned to run back to his mother, down the front steps, the big man's motion became entangled in the boy's costume, as if he were turning to keep up with the child, but didn't quite time it right. Where the purple and green turned, shadows darted, first up, then down, and the child hit the concrete, hard. The padded lizard spikes took the brunt of the damage, but a bare hand met the concrete and then fell deeper. The robed woman and the boy's mother came running, croons on their lips. The boy's hand trembled as he studied the gash in the light of the porch lamp, and Will was struck by a surge of recognition, his own hand still trembling at his side.

The big man ran his hand along the child's covered head and then returned to Will. Our world makes victims of the other. We bully. We communicate in fear and emotion on those levels only heard in a baby's wail in the night, the sound of a rape whistle, a wheeze of panic.

With his stomach turning in knots, Will matched the motion and moved away from the big man, back down the sidewalk. Why are we here?

A hand clamped down on Will's shoulder, spinning him face to face with the

big man. You're here to learn about this place we're in. You're here to have a realization.

With frustration running in his veins, Will bit his lip and raised his eyebrows, shaking his head back and forth. Realization?

This world is not in your head. This is not some dream state, but a form of reality you've only known in sweats and night terrors until now. That child, he said, pointing to where the mother wiped mucus from the child's face, who'd by then stopped his sobbing. That child is real. He's alive, but he cannot see us any more than you ever tried and failed to see ghosts flitting up and down the walks on the Halloweens of your boyhood.

Will swallowed.

We're in an underworld. We're spirits.

Stop it, Will said as he pushed the man's arm from his shoulder. Bullshit. You want to call a nightmare real, fine. But I want no part of that.

We're drawn to the raw here, to the violence of the concrete world. That child will be visited tonight. They will call it nightmares, they will call it the holiday's fault, they will call it too much stress after too long a day. Much of that may be true, but the monsters in his closet *will* be there, they *will* tickle that shredded palm of his, and

they will be us.

It wasn't so much his words that bothered Will now but the big man himself. His face, earlier drawn, thin, and pale, now looked too human. Lined and layered, the man's eyes were heavy and tired, and his voice didn't rise with the hiss that normally accompanied it.

You're lying.

You want to see where this place will take you? Do you not know where this will wind up?

Will turned and started to run.

You've known from the start where you're going!

Will tried not to look back, but the big man said,

I'll just see you in time.

CHAPTER FOUR **noble fathers**

1.

Five years ago.

The apartment was on fire.

Stanley Davis was sure of this. The smell was strong enough that it brought him out of a deep sleep, and he found himself wide awake in the middle of a pitch-black room, pulling his thoughts together as quickly as he could.

Meredith, his wife, was still next to him in bed, stirring because of his sudden motion in waking. She snaked an arm along the pillow and met his back instead of shoulder, realizing that he was sitting up in the dark.

"Stan? Babe?"

The smell had become overpowering. The stench made his eyes sting and

nostrils tickle. There was a smell with it like burning plastic, a chemical scent that made it different from what could have been the neighbors having a fire in their porch pit.

At four in the morning?

He threw the covers from his legs and swung them out of bed, flipping on the bedside light.

Meredith flinched and squinted her eyes past the light. "What is it?"

"Do you smell that?" Davis said. He was already scanning the room for a haze while trying to blink away the sleep goo that glazed his eyes. He didn't see any gray smoke near the ceiling that would indicate a nearby fire. Getting out of bed and moving about the room, he found that the smell wasn't strong near the window. The neighbor's house was dark, and the night breeze was crisp with the fresh damp smell of the pre-dawn.

"Smell what?"

Davis stopped. "You're serious? You can't smell that?"

"I don't—" She paused, sniffing deeply. "I don't think so."

"It smells like our house is on fire."

"What?"

"You can't smell that?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

Davis checked the door with the back of his hand. Cool. The doorknob. Also cool. The hallway was dark before turning to shadow when he opened the door, the light from the one bedside lamp trying to fill the angles. He followed the hallway to the kitchen, poking his head in the bathroom (which smelled like soap and a leftover summer air freshener that was going slightly stale) and the linen closet (old sheets and towels) before entering the living room.

This part of the house carried no trace of the scent that had been so powerful in the bedroom. In here was only the lingering odor of their casserole they'd cooked for dinner and below that, some maroon smell of Meredith's candles. There was no fire here.

They lived in a single-story ranch-style home with no basement. There was an attic that ran the length of the hallway and over their bedroom. Perhaps there'd been an electrical issue above the drywall and the smell was seeping down into the room. The explanation didn't seem irrational, and Davis made for the kitchen to grab a flashlight and a chair to venture up.

"Maybe you were dreaming it?" Meredith asked, leaning around the door at the end of the hallway, a ghost in her own right, just a shadow leaning against the light. Davis didn't care for the effect and flickered the flashlight in her direction. Her face

was lined with the impatience of a woman who only wanted to go back to bed, confused by her husband's antics.

"No. It was very clear."

"I don't smell it."

Davis looked down from the chair he was standing on. The attic door was already open, the ladder still folded in its place on the backside of the door. He eased the contraption down before hopping from the chair and walking back to the bedroom. "I'm sure it's still there. It was strong enough that it couldn't have faded so quickly."

Indeed though, the moment he stepped foot in the bedroom, he couldn't catch the burning smell that had filled his nose earlier. Davis walked from corner to corner, sniffing for a trace of the smoke, but without success. He moved back to the bed and smelled his sheets and pillow. Still no trace.

"I didn't dream it," he said, his voice taking a defensive tone he didn't intend. He didn't dream it. His mind was sharp when he awoke. The smell was not a lingering remnant of some dream—in fact, he couldn't even remember if he'd been dreaming at all, so why would he remember some random scent alone? He didn't usually dream in smells anyway.

There had been a smell. And it was gone now.

"Stan. I'm sorry, babe. I'm glad the house isn't burning down. So I'm going back to sleep."

He nodded. "Of course. Let me just check the attic first, and I'll be down in a minute."

She pulled the covers back and sat down, eyes already lowered, fading fast. "Just don't fall through the ceiling. I'll divorce you."

Smiling, he turned from the doorway back to the chair in the middle of the hall. The stairs up to the attic were perhaps the scariest part of the evening so far, creaking and leaning first to the right and then the left depending on the weight of each step, but soon enough he was into the small attic space, propped up on the wooden beams that surrounded the hole from which he'd just arisen.

The flashlight beam darted from wall to wall as if with a mind of its own, but even up here there was no cloudy murk nor singeing odor. There was a musty smell, sure. The smell of dust and insulation was thick, and the air was humid and warm, absorbing much of the house's heat throughout the day. The night had not cooled it much.

Crouching, Davis stepped from beam to beam, careful to avoid any patches of the pink insulation below his bare feet, praying against splinters. He should have slipped on a pair of tennis shoes before crawling around up here half naked at four

in the morning. Yes, he did think his house was on fire, and yes, that did demand a certain amount of hurry, but with every passing minute, the entire situation seemed more and more ridiculous. By now there would have been some kind of a sign of an escalating electrical disturbance, even had it been slowly festering in the ceiling.

He shined his light from the footing in front of him to the beams supporting the roof and then back again. There was a small cluster of wires—speaker wires, Ethernet cables, television lines—running along the east side of the attic, where they wired the living room on one end to the bedroom on the other. No smoke issued from their corner. They lay as quietly as his wife did below him.

But the attic was distinctly unsettling. Perhaps this was due to the need for constant light play to see both where he was going and to study the wiring system above, but even so, there was still far too much darkness in the small space. No matter where he shined the light next, the prior spot was immediately filled with the inky, pressing dark. It seemed almost to him that there was something extra to it, something shooing the light, filling the space faster than it should have been, creating an effect almost like shadows fleeing, circling.

Which of course was all utter bullshit. He'd be the first to tell you. It's just that normally he was up here during the daylight hours and normally there was a bit of sunlight coming through the small window on the wall directly across from him.

While Stanley crouched, another smell gradually appeared and began to drift toward him. This time, it was not the sulfuric chemical smell that had awoken him, but instead a kind of rot. He couldn't make out if the smell was of a fleshy rot—the way the disposal might smell when it started to back up after tossing leftovers into the sink, or the way a small animal or dead bird might smell if it had somehow worked its way inside and slowly starved to death—or if it was more of an earthy rot, a mold crawling below the insulation, perhaps near the shower to his right and below. They'd not had any problems with mold in the last seven years they'd lived in the house, but that was certainly no argument against it becoming a problem now.

Either way, dead sparrow or creeping decay, it wasn't an issue that was pressing enough to keep him in the attic any longer, barefooted and spooked.

Gradually then, he made his way out of the attic, staying low so as to protect his forehead from whacking himself a good one on one of the upper trusses. Perhaps it was this worry amidst the stuffy claustrophobia that had him gasping for air by the time he was back on the ladder and supremely happy to be back on the hardwood floor of the hallway again. He slammed closed the door above him, making sure to latch it firmly.

The smell seemed to have followed him, clinging to his skin and hair, and he

cursed himself for getting so close to it. If it were bad enough, he'd likely have to shower before climbing back to bed. Part of him wondered if it might be more worthwhile to stay awake for the final hour before the sun broke and his alarm went off, perhaps grading the set of tests he'd given out the day prior. Since trying to shake the smell and put his mind back in a state of ease after rushing to such high alert would be difficult, he figured the hour he'd lay awake would be much better suited to productivity than tossing and turning.

Lucky for him, the smell had seemed to dissipate again when he reached the doorway to the bedroom after returning the chair to its place in the kitchen. He'd try to sleep then. If the odor didn't demand a shower, he'd see if he couldn't get in a bit of extra rest.

Crawling into bed again, he slipped one arm below the pillows and wrapped the other around his wife's shoulders. He worried, but only for a moment, whether he'd only grown used to the stench that had attached itself to him, and that his wife would stir any moment at the noxious perfume he now wore, but he quickly pushed the thought from his mind, justifying that it had only followed the movement of the air as he'd escaped the attic, that it wasn't an issue. Certainly not an issue enough to keep him awake in the dark. It wasn't fear, only good sound logic. The way he preferred it. And within ten minutes, he was asleep once again.

2.

"I've been having dreams lately," Will said. The words were hard to say, and it was hard to admit that they might actually mean something, that they might actually have something tangible and practical to provide him. Maybe it was because he was reluctant to put stock in dreams, in nightmares, in echoes of a past he thought he was through with. More likely, he worried, it was because he didn't want to indulge the dreams, didn't want to spend any more time in their inner workings, in that place where pain was manifested in the world around him . . .

"Dreams?"

Her name was Carrie Jameson and she was Will's therapist. He'd been seeing her once a week for two months now, since the start of August. After the usual therapists and family counselors, he'd decided to try something new based on a recommendation, this time trying "Analytical Psychology," or "Jungian Analysis," which, as he found it, was meant to get in touch with his deeper subconscious mind and bring hidden qualities to light. It was a rectification of opposites, an exploration into disharmony, a search for balance. Will supposed he enjoyed it well enough. The sessions were fraught with lack of sure footing and new approaches

that at times felt damned childish, but Jameson said,

"Bear with me. Try something new. See what comes of it. This is a safe place,"

and although he never exactly looked forward to each new meeting, he discovered that by the end of each appointment, what he'd learned was, if not profound, at least on a deeper level of thinking than he found himself during the week.

His first three years of college had been explorations in distraction, in putting the past behind him and not worrying about it. His senior year, that first year after the shooting, he'd done enough "coming to terms" with what had happened. He'd dealt with the emotions. The adults in his life weren't particularly forthcoming with information about the events. They'd been generally afraid to talk about the entire situation with him. His classmates had been similar, but as with people of their age, they couldn't hide their primal fascination with the violence, and it hadn't been hard to find a discussion of the events, if that was what he'd wanted. Mostly they were rumors, with people more interested to finally hear Will's version of events, from the horse's mouth, if you will. With his memory, though, the conversations were usually short and awkward. Following high school was an experiment in emotional waves like tsunamis and bi-polar-like swings in mood over the course of a few weeks. He'd learned about how to put on a face for the world, and for his shrink.

He had a year of flashbacks and nightmares. No, he didn't dream much lately. He'd gotten over them. But in early college they'd been bad. Sleeping in a new place (a new dorm his first year, apartment with friends the next, a house before now, his single-bedroom apartment) disturbed his mind and brought to the surface the memories. Sometimes, if he walked down a hallway at the wrong time, when the sunlight slanted in the wrong way, and he saw a tall person walking toward him, he'd be consumed with a sudden anger, a rage at that person and everyone around him, that he did not understand. Other times it was something as normal as the sun on the surface of his skin that would bring about bursts of tears, usually in the middle of a crowd on the plaza of his school. But then things lightened. Not in the way that the sun breaks through the horizon in the morning, suddenly and clearly, but in the murk, where one day he opened his eyes and realized that things were brighter, and that he no longer thought of the shooting much: that he was living his life all right.

"Are you seeing anybody right now?" Jennifer asked him over dinner, one of their first dates after seeing each other again. The restaurant lighting was low, but the food wasn't so formal and fancy as to be awkward so soon. Even still, it felt as if they'd been dating for months.

"No," he said. "No, I haven't dated much since high school. Here and there, you know, there were a few girls, but I couldn't connect or commit."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I meant--are you seeing anyone as far as a therapist goes?"

Will blinked. "Oh. Not really. Things have been quiet lately."

Jennifer looked down at her plate and scraped a bite together.

"Are you?"

She put the fork in her mouth, chewed, shrugged. "I just started with someone new now that I'm back in town."

Will ground his molars together before realizing it made his temples flex. Jennifer looked ashamed, he thought. "I was thinking, though," he said, "that I might start seeing someone again, more casually. To make sure I'm not overlooking anything or fooling myself. Work through some stuff I haven't looked at yet. Maybe I'll discover something, you know," he looked up at her, "real."

Jennifer sat back and held his gaze, tapping on the table and looking thoughtful. "I know a woman you might want to try."

So he couldn't say that it was Jennifer, and being around her, that brought this out in him. It had taken a month to call and schedule an appointment, another few weeks to try each other out as they designed a schedule. If anything, Will thought, it seemed as if perhaps these sessions were themselves bringing the nightmares about. He'd relived the emotions again with Jennifer. He'd done more reflecting upon it than he had in so many years. Jennifer was far from over the incident, had been dealing with it intensively for the earlier four years, and still had a long way to go. The shooting had brought home a cosmic truth for Jennifer, a truth that challenged everything that she'd been raised to believe in and everything she'd hoped to gain in her future. Solitude led to depressive bouts and what could be best labeled a spiritual crisis that Will was happy to explore with her. In the past few months of the summer, he discovered that he was potentially the only person alive who could truly comfort her both philosophically and emotionally; he'd been there; he'd been through it all with her and had some idea of what she was going through. If he was okay, she could find it in herself to be safe in accepting it too. If he was hurting, she could feel better about her own pain, that it was okay to still grieve. Should he feel inner stirrings in handling these situations with her, he did his best to hide these fits of doubt and fear that at times grew crippling if he didn't force them—

if he didn't force them down again. But it was easier to do that when she needed him.

Their relationship was strong enough to withstand the tensions of their

respective depressions, but sometimes he worried he'd mess it up, or that one night would shatter everything: that in one of his rages he'd turn on her and break what was already too fragile and hollow. His fits were irrational, purely emotional, and he was all too aware of how one single well-worded sentence could undo everything.

He thought this therapy was helping. He felt more in touch with himself. But now these nightmares

And so he looked up at Carrie Jameson and he said, "I've been having these dreams." And she said, "Dreams?" And he said,

"Yes," and nodded. "Nightmares, really."

"Recurring?"

"No. No, they're sequential, but not recurring."

Jameson was an older woman, the kind of older woman who was in her fifties or sixties but had the wiry physique of someone in her late thirties. Her nature made her seem to possess both the patience of her age and the energy of someone half that. Her clothes were not as formal as so many other psychologists', but she maintained that level of professionalism and distance between Will and herself that made for a structured environment, a trusting one. Their work was to be done in safety, but not through bonding. Jameson often wore loose-fitting clothing, scarves about her neck, and sandals that she usually kicked off. Sometimes even jeans. Will was cautious about the different approach and worried that he had made a mistake, that Jameson might not make things much better when he was already in a fine place, or that worse, this experience would be a joke. The first day he visited, she uncovered a sand box in the middle of the room. Sand box. All right, more of a Zen garden. The walls were black wood and sanded smooth. Inside, the sand was white, and there was a rake along with a few different colored stones, but she didn't direct him toward those that day; instead she drew him toward a short bookshelf, the top of which was covered with a series of figurines, small warriors and people. A peaceful monk. A man with a sword. A pregnant woman.

"Pick one of these," she had told him that day.

He hadn't known what to pick. Unsure. There was a cloaked man. An old woman. He leaned toward a young boy sitting quietly and then pulled his hand away, looking to Jameson. "Must I?"

Jameson nodded. "What happens in these dreams? What are they about?"

Will looked around the room. He'd loved the room the moment he first set foot inside it. There was a fresh feel to it. Just inside the door were the couches upon which he was currently stretched out. She had an easy chair that she sat

slouched deep within, seeming both intensely focused on him and yet at leisure. Curtains shrouded the windows' edges, and her desk rested in the back end of the room, neat and orderly, suggesting that her real office was in these comfy chairs, in speaking with her patients. Between them was the coffee table whose black wooden top could be removed to reveal the Zen garden. Most days the top was off, and the inside varied from a sandbox interior strewn with different figurines from a child's session to the peaceful waves of a rough mandala. Jameson liked to leave the patterns and play-space the way it was when sessions were finished. Well, the positive sessions. When the top was placed on the table, it usually meant that she'd had to clean up, that there had been a mess. "We went deep," she would say, dismissing Will's look, and he'd just learned not to ask. Today the surface was covered and a pad of paper and a packet of colored pencils rested in a neat stack.

"Are we going to work on the mandala further today?" he asked.

Jameson shrugged. "We'll see. Right now I'm more interested in the dreams."

"Of course," Will said. The dreams. Where did he begin? The beginning was still so fuzzy, and he told her this.

"That's fine. You're not used to dreaming and so they're more difficult to remember. Tell me what you can."

Will swallowed. "The world was black and my first thought was that I was falling. But without space. So in many ways, it felt like I was floating." Swallowed again. "I'm trying to remember. There was a repetition, a—"

try not to remember, turn again and again

And he went from there, telling in choppy details as much as he could about the big man, Jennifer, their progress through the trees, the lamppost and the burning houses, and the neighborhood.

"Tell me more about the big man," she said.

Shrugging, he said, "What would you like to know?"

"Who is he? Do you know this man?"

"Moundshroud." The word was out almost before he had time to think about it. He used to apologize for spilling information in this way, unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, but she seemed to like it, and so he didn't mind when it happened as much now.

"Who?"

Will explained about the man's connection to the animated character in the Bradbury movie and his role in the story, heading off her question, anticipating the direction she might take. She often spoke of archetypes, and he knew a bit about metaphors as it applied to his English degree. It was mostly just a few details he recalled from high school. Joseph Campbell and the way Greek myths fell into

classical patterns.

"But," he went on, "he's not just this Moundshroud guy. I call him that because it fits with his role in the dream right now, but it's not who he is."

"Is there anyone else that he seems to remind you of?"

Yes.

"No," Will said, then recalled his conversation from yesterday morning with Jennifer. "I've at times been reminded of my math teacher, Stanley Davis. He was the one who died in my room when I woke up from the coma."

"Why do you think that is?"

"That he reminds me of Mister Davis? I don't really know. He's a very sinister character, this Moundshroud, a total dick. Antagonistic, prodding. Davis was one of the nicer teachers I've met. Really cared about us, our futures, where we were going in life. Wouldn't hurt a fly, that guy, especially if there was a chance for it to understand a bit of higher mathematics. To be blessed with a new way of seeing the world." Will laughed as his old teacher's words came back to him with ease. An unconscious pain stabbed in his gut and he stopped laughing, a sick feeling crawling where the pain had just been.

"You said he died next to your bed?"

Will nodded. "Nobody has ever told me much about that. I'm not sure anyone really wanted to look into it. We've talked about this before."

She nodded. "Yes, but it may likely have had a greater impact now than before. What similarities do you see with this big man and Mister Davis? Why would you associate them?"

"I really don't know." Will shifted position on the couch. "They're opposites on nearly every level. One is a bastard, the other super nice. One is with me in what Moundshroud describes as some kind of afterlife or spirit world, which is backwards, because while I was in a coma, Davis was alive, but when I woke up, he died. You could say we were never in the same place at the same time after the shooting."

"What makes you think that these dreams are inherently related to the shooting?"

"Guilt?"

Jameson looked up and cocked her head.

"He tells me that it's my fault. That I killed all those kids."

"Do you believe him?"

Will didn't say anything for a short time, shrugged his shoulders, and pretended he was thinking hard about the dream. "I do in the dream. Despite all I know here, I can't change that in the dream."

"That's because it's not a lucid dream; you're not bringing any conscious thoughts to the dream world." She tapped her pen against her teeth. "Why do you feel guilty?"

"Because he tells me it's my fault and I believe him. I trust him in the dream. He knows what's happening to me, even as I don't. It's hard not to believe him."

"What else does he tell you?"

Will watched the big man follow the child to the front door, with his hand on the child's shoulder. He watched them tangle and the boy fall to the ground, skidding across the concrete.

"He tells me that the spirits on the other side are drawn to violence, that the pain and emotion we feel are actually their presence, feeding off our own negative energies." The words sounded ridiculous.

"What about love? What about positive energies?"

Will shook his head. "He didn't say anything about that."

"We must consider this big man character as a voice of your unconscious, a voice that you'd like to trust. I think most of the time we'd like to trust our unconscious selves. That's why I'd imagine he's at least reminiscent of a kinder authority that you trusted and took comfort in. But he also represents a negative side: the shadow. He's going to hold traits in direct opposition to the other symbols in your life."

"Stanley is a symbol?"

"He's become a memory. How you remember him is a construction of your mind, and it's important to consider it as such. Though it's not as distinct as the visual experience in the dream."

Will nodded.

"You've been talking to me about much of your life these last few weeks. You feel they're generally positive? Everything is going well with Jennifer?"

Will nodded.

"Are you in love with her?"

He opened his mouth, but the question had taken him off guard. He'd only been with her for, what? Four months? That wasn't enough time to—they'd been through a lot, that was true, and, you know, he would do anything for her, but—

"Of course," he said.

"How do you feel about that? You hesitated."

Will nodded. "It's confusing. I'm not sure. We've been very intense and very distracted by helping each other. Of course I care about her more than anything. It's just that it's still so soon. And hard."

"The unconscious generally seeks to balance us. There is a pull of opposites.

You're aware of this love, of things going well. Love is a very positive thing, one that our unconscious will help us to find peace with, if we haven't already. Why aren't you at peace about loving her?"

His mouth opened. Will found himself unsure. He worried, as he'd thought on several occasions, that she might have been keeping him from fully expressing his feelings, from confronting much of those pent up emotions, but that wasn't her fault, and he was actually doing quite well. Perhaps it was—

"Guilt, Will."

He looked at Jameson.

"You said it yourself."

He frowned. "That was guilt about the shooting. I wouldn't say that's necessarily guilt about Jennifer."

"The two go hand in hand, don't they?"

Will nodded slowly.

"If not the shooting itself, is there a feeling about the shooting, or the incident, that you feel guilty about in relation to her?"

Frowning hard, Will tried to bite his response off, but damned if it came out too quickly. "Everything." The word came out like a sob and his breath hitched. He cleared his throat to cover it.

"Why?"

"I don't know! I can barely remember anything about what happened that day. The coma has left everything up here scrambled." He waved his hand around his head. "I should have been able to . . . Markus and Jonesy are dead. Stanley . . . I watched Jennifer get shot."

"You saved the lives of what could have been dozens of other students, Will. You know that. Jennifer is alive. You are a hero."

He ran a hand over the scar on the lower left side of his head, pressing his hair flat against it. "It feels like I didn't. It's damn near a memory."

"Is this from the nightmare? Did you dream this?"

He nodded, then stopped, hesitating. "Maybe? I don't remember, but . . ."

"You said yourself your memories were jarred. Of course you didn't do it. You watched him—what was his name?" She flipped her notebook open and brushed through a number of pages.

Will whispered in a voice almost too low to hear, "Clive Jenson."

She stopped rustling the pages. "Yes. Jenson."

Will took a deep breath.

"I can feel it, though."

"This guilt is key. This is where these dreams are stemming from and focusing

around. The shadow projects on different aspects of your conscious experience. The shadow is repressed, so you're bound to feel guilt about whatever it is that hides in there. It's through this guilt, and by understanding and accepting it, that you'll find a balance. There's obviously a violent element that you feel fixated on, drawn to, however deeply. There's a part of you that's dwelling on this, and it's trying to speak to you. My advice is to let it, in whatever way you can."

Will frowned but nodded.

"I'm going to suggest that you listen to this big man if you have the dream again. He's putting a voice to what you haven't before. Watch what he does. Try to remember the imagery."

"I can't help but feel," he said, "that I'm missing something. That this has to do with the shooting and there's something I can't remember, something that these dreams have got me feeling so goddamn guilty about."

"You're upset because you love your girlfriend, Will. Maybe you're afraid to. Maybe you don't want to. Perhaps it's because you're afraid to lose her again. But you can embrace that. With love comes loss; they're two sides of the same coin. You reject one, and you reject both. It's about coming to terms with that."

But Will still hung his head and took the tissue offered to him with reluctance.

"Look into the shooting, if that helps. I believe you're strong enough. You might find some resolution by delving into it in a way that you haven't before. We'll continue to talk about it, but if you should feel something, even if it's powerful, when you dig through this stuff, don't hold it in. Let it out."

"Okay." Will didn't want to look her in the eye.

"Also, I want you to start visiting once a week. And I want you to start writing these dreams down. Take the time. Go over them as thoroughly as you can and in as much detail as you can. It will help you to remember more about future dreams."

Will nodded.

"Also, if you have time, I'd suggest trying to put them down creatively."

"A picture?"

"If you'd like. You've always leaned toward the writing though. Put it as a story if you would rather. It'll coax out more symbolism from your unconscious. In the same way that working in the sand or doing the mandalas help to manifest that creative imagery, expressing the unconscious by trying to remember—and creating from that attempt at memory—may help you find more meaning. If you feel the need to make it up as you go, if you fill in pieces that you don't explicitly remember, that's fine. It's toward the same ends. It'll also surprise you with how much you may be able to recall from the first few nights, if you really try. Try not to be afraid. Face the emotions that come with it, put them into writing, and try to

do your best to synthesize them. Is that doable?"

Will nodded again.

"Good," she said.

3.

Will pulled his pickup into the driveway and gave Jennifer's hand a squeeze before opening his door and stepping out.

His parents' house was a modest two story with a tastefully overgrown lawn. Bushes and clumps of flowers crawled along the sides of stone paths up and around the edges of various fountains and cracking Victorian-era gargoyles and angels in their frozen harmony above birdbaths.

"I wouldn't bathe under those things," Jennifer said once when she first came to his house, shortly after they began dating.

"Maybe you already do," Will said with the sideways grin she loved to hate, even when they first met. She thought it made him look arrogant but couldn't deny that it also lit up his eyes and made the lines in his jaw stand out.

She glared at him. "Tasteful. Thanks."

He spread his hands to look innocent. "You're the religious one."

She looked at the sky and rolled her eyes. The motion could have been taken as an irreverent one, but Will knew she was making her commentary on him and not on, well, Him.

That summer, since reuniting after the shooting, Jennifer had taken to spending a fair amount of time in the garden, wandering the paths amidst the trees that separated their lawn from the neighbors'. The flagstone weaved toward the back of the house and ended at a wooden patio that was overshadowed by a pergola and framed by ivy and fat Christmas lights. The place had a magical feel, she confessed to Will when he asked her about it after following her out on a cool night in July. "The cherubs and gargoyles seem to fit in here. I understand better now. Dark things bothered me before. They still do. But now I feel like I understand them better."

Will had nodded but didn't fully understand what she meant, or the specifics as to what in her experience had prompted a new awareness of the darkness in her world. He was afraid to ask.

Soon enough, he quickly became used to Jennifer's time spent in the garden. He even found that he enjoyed keeping an eye on her from one of the windows in the side living room and breakfast nook. She seemed more at peace there, amidst the flowers and leaves, than anywhere else he'd known her. The cemetery had always

brought with it a feeling of unrest, of a frustration in her mannerisms just under the surface. Perhaps six feet under.

It was a feeling in the garden that she seemed to possess that most people hoped to find in cemeteries, he thought. Too often the feel of death and mortality would plague the minds of the wanderers, but with it was a hope for something magical, a place of reverence and an indication that there is something just beyond us, that each body might have some kind of insight into, some kind of esoteric information that has somehow manifested in the broad trees and neat rows of headstones. Perhaps there was a magic there. And it seemed to Will that Jennifer found that in his parents' garden.

He watched her walk into the front lawn the way she usually did, circling from the passenger side of his truck to the front corner, studying the way the plants clung to the base of the lamppost, touching the leaves like old friends.

"You'll be in after a few?" he asked.

She nodded.

In his mind, he saw her sitting on the floor next to her bed, reaching for the letter opener he held in his hand, her eyes distant and unfocused, clinging and grabbing with persistence but without strength.

Shaking the image away, he stepped onto the front porch and opened the door, watching her disappear around the bend of the house.

* * *

"I want to know more about the shooting," Will said.

His mother, Nancy Andrews, stiffened as she was standing at the sink, rinsing dishes. His father, David, continued to stir the sauce on the stove, but had looked at his wife from the corner of his eye to gauge her reaction. They shared a look that Will did not miss.

Will hadn't always been close with his parents. The closest they ever came as a family was during his senior year after the incident, and that was as much awkward as it was a safe environment--as he supposed it was with most families at that age. It was why he still got along just fine with them now: because in the end, his experience wasn't so different from anyone else's that he knew from high school. He had parents who cared, but he wanted to grow up.

He was an only child. His parents met five years after graduating college, in the period that Will was now becoming quite aware of, when high school friends were already starting to pair off with rings on their left hands. Their chemistry had been great, their relationship strong, and Will's father, David, had proposed only six

months after they first met. Will came along seven months later.

"We haven't talked about it enough yet?" his mother said, looking down at the running water without bothering to turn it off. His father shot her a look that she didn't catch, but Will knew that her retort wasn't loaded with any kind of frustration toward him. Instead, it was for having to rehash what was undoubtedly the hardest day of their lives. His mother had been so strong for him through it all. But she was exhausted of it and wanted no more.

They hadn't been ready for a son, though they were both secure enough in their relationship and their lives that Will was brought up in a solid household. The bills were paid. Will was spoiled on Christmases and never knew need of any kind until his second year of college. But he had to find his entertainment elsewhere. They didn't stick to family time like some of Will's friends in high school. His Fridays were focused on roaming the historic downtown area, meeting with friends in parks until the fall got too cold, and then it was cheap restaurants tailored to high school audiences, Wal-Mart pranks, movie marathons from theater to theater on one ticket, bowling nights. Sometimes it was pot where the end of the elementary school ball fields joined the public parks. Sometimes it was beer on which they paid a couple hundred percent mark-up from a college kid who knew how to make a quick buck. Once, Will watched as his more rambunctious friends decided to graffiti an electrical box on the corner of an alley and a main avenue side street.

Will never got involved with a bad crowd though. The Wal-Mart pranks were the kind that went around in email forwards. The pot had stung Will's throat and given him more light-headedness and an attack of vertigo than any mellowing buzz. Beer was less about the drunk than it was for the feeling that they were past high school and above their families: older than they were. And their graffiti was done artistically enough (credit completely to his painter-friend Adam) that it stayed untouched for three years following the indiscretion. His parents knew he was a good kid and tried not to worry much while he was gone. Good kid or not, deep inside, Will longed for more attention from them, to feel more involved, and as the summer progressed before his senior year, his rebellious nature grew more and more. He tried riskier things, caring less for the consequences. Who knew how far it would have gone if not for the shooting.

But then, it wasn't the shooting that turned him around. It was Jennifer.

"I'm not trying to rehash my feelings about it, Mom. I just feel like the picture has been incomplete."

"Nothing's changed. Didn't we talk about it enough that first year?" She bit down on the rest of her words and turned the faucet off slowly while his dad watched from the stove, patient. "I'm sorry, Sweetie."

"Of course," Will said. "I just thought it might be easier. You know, it's five years later and we haven't talked about it in some time. It's been coming up again lately with Carrie and I thought there might—I don't know, there might be things you hadn't wanted to share?"

He wasn't sure what kind of answer he was expecting or even hoping for. Were there details they didn't tell him, details that they'd been avoiding all this time? Was there something that they might say that would begin to make sense of these nightmares, that would validate that what had happened was in some way his fault? Even so, yes, he decided. He'd rather that. He'd rather some kind of sense come from this rather than nothing at all.

"You know what we know, Sweetheart," his mother said, turning the tap back on again. She looked as if she might say more, but she closed her mouth and ran the sponge across a silver mixing bowl.

His dad turned, leaned against the counter for a moment, and then moved to where Will was sitting in the breakfast nook. Jennifer was still outside, and Will kept his seat turned so he could remain facing his parents in the kitchen while also keeping an eye on her. Right now, she was sitting cross-legged on the garden bench alongside another birdbath, talking on the phone and running her fingers over the cracked faux-stone surface.

"You know the story, son." His dad came around the end of the table and seemed to be considering whether to lean on the chair or sit down. He chose the latter. "We were both wrapping up at work when we heard. Your mother was working at the school district building, so she had gotten word almost as soon as the high school was put on lockdown. She called me shortly after she heard the news. I was in the city and couldn't make it back for at least forty-five minutes. The rush hour traffic was just beginning to pick up on the highway, but I left the moment I heard."

At this point his mother was still scrubbing dishes in the sink, but with a slow motion that matched the effort of the stream of water that trailed from the tap.

"Your mother got to the school well before me and joined what was at first only a small crowd in the parking lot behind the police lines. The police had already sent a few guys into the school, but as far as we knew at that point, the situation was already over. It had happened rather quickly. The gunman went into the school, wandered the hallways."

These were details Will knew.

"There was a lockdown announced. But there were still you guys in the hallway working on what? A group project for geography or something?"

Will nodded.

There'd been five of them. Jennifer. Will. Adam. The twins, Markus and Jonesy. They'd always done well in that class and the teacher liked them, so when it came time to work on their midterm project, they asked if they could work in the hallway, where there was more floor space, less crowding, and where it was easier to talk uninterrupted.

"Most of the school had been closed up. It was toward the end of the day, but during the middle of class, and there weren't many students in the hall, save you guys. The call went out immediately when the shots were heard. It took only a few seconds for a nearby teacher to pick up the phone, for them to get the doors closed. But you guys were already, I mean, he was—"

"Stop it, David."

"We've been over this before."

"Exactly. There's no need to relive it."

Will watched his father. "Was there anything about the shooting itself, in what happened, that I don't know?"

"You still don't remember?"

"Barely bits and pieces."

"Thank God," his mother said, turning back to the two and crossing her arms.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," his father trailed off. The strangeness of his words lingered for a moment, but he tried to shake them off and force his way through. "As much as I know, there was a random arc of shots that hit the Burton twins first. One in the neck. The other took two to the chest. I think it was Markus . . . no, Jonesy?" He paused.

"Markus," Will said.

"Yes. Markus was hit in the neck and, like you, he was still alive when the police got there. He died upon reaching the hospital, right about the same time that you were slipping into a coma." Will's father coughed. "The teacher, Davis--he was in his doorway--he was shot in the leg. Made it back into the classroom. I guess he couldn't get any of you guys inside."

How different things might have been if he had.

"Adam went for cover around the edge of the hallway and was hit in the calf. Jennifer took the bullet." He trailed off and stole a glance at the side yard where she sat on the phone, now with her knees wrapped in one arm, her head propped against them, staring at the leaves of the tree that broke the space between their house and the next.

At the mention of Jennifer's name, his mother pushed away from the sink and walked around the outside of the kitchen, going up the stairs, not with an expected air of frustration, but quietly. The two watched her go. They understood why. It

had been this way for two to three years now. The first year was off and on emotionally. Tumultuous to be sure, but in the way that they had to figure out how to be a family--possibly for the first time ever. They had to be there for each other in a way that they had never known, an unconditional and selfless way that, while return was expected at some point, was by no means immediate or guaranteed. The fights that year had been incredible, hot-tempered and with so many tears. But they had drawn close. Then Will had left for college, and they'd become like a normal family again. They grew distant. The shooting became a dark spot in their history, despite the year it had finally given them as a family. They'd moved beyond it.

He turned back to his father. "Anyway."

"Right." His dad let his eyes linger at the base of the stairs before turning back to Will. He took a deep breath. "Jennifer took longer to respond. The bullet hit her neck and she went down, probably unconscious immediately. Then it was just you and him. They found you two in puddles of blood next to each other."

It had been years since they'd discussed the details, years since his father had probably let his mind settle on them, and the years made it new again. His father pressed a hand below his nose and rolled his eyes, blinking. "Sorry, son."

Will nodded. "It's alright, Dad. I'm still here. Good as new."

But there was a hollow part in the look the elder Andrews gave his son, something distant, as if he weren't looking at Will, or even had his mind in the memory, and Will wondered how deeply the problems might have started to run between his folks. The thought gave him a shiver that stopped in his throat.

"Keep going."

His father nodded. "You were shot in the head." His eyes refocused a couple thousand yards closer. "Shit." He coughed. "You were shot in the head. Lost a lot of blood when the cops finally got in. The gunman—"

"Clive Jenson."

"Fucker." His father didn't ever swear around Will growing up. That changed senior year, too. "Jenson was dead. You were barely alive. They started CPR as soon as there were enough cops. Looked like you had wrestled the gun from him. To be honest, you probably saved many more students in the school." His pride cleared his tears.

"Do you know anything about him? Jenson, I mean?"

"Not really. I think he had spent time in prison at some point. Religious nut. Apparently very hardcore. Was involved in some kind of a strange cult, I think. Probably right-wing fundamentalists, spinoffs from that president we had."

"Dad."

"Don't know what kind of father raises his child to be a killer of children."

"Dad," Will said it quieter this time.

"Sorry. The pieces, see? Anything connected to this, I just . . ." he trailed off again and made chopping gestures with his hands.

"There wasn't anything extra strange about him, though?"

"Extra? What do you mean? He shot up your school. Damn near killed you, Adam, and Jennifer."

"Did he have any connections here? Why Savage Creek?"

His father shrugged. "To be honest, I don't know. I learned enough from the cops after some interviews and discussions, but it was such a cut and dried case they really didn't have to do much digging. They had their smoking gun and a hand holding it."

My hand, Will thought.

"Wasn't even a trial to give us any background on the guy or learn any defense. I guess most shooters never expect to make it out alive."

Which further concerned Will about the entire situation. Columbine was two students who were bullied to the point that they took matters into their own hands. This was different. This was a man from a two hundred miles away, who wound up at their high school, who wound up shooting Will and his friends.

"You don't recognize his name at all?"

"No, son, I've told you this. He's a stranger to me." His father narrowed his eyes at Will. "What?"

Will shrugged and looked around the kitchen. "Just why me, you know?"

His father's expression softened again. "Who the fuck knows." He looked first to the ceiling above him, as if trying to see through the floor to know whether his wife had heard him. He probably thought Will was having a small existential moment, and this put him on Will's level, somewhere safe. Will didn't mind. "Sometimes bad stuff just happens. I think it's a question we each have to deal with in life. Sometimes it's the death of a parent . . . or son. Sometimes it's the death of a friend or a serious injury. Sometimes it's two planes crashing into two towers that rock a nation. No matter how much planning and purpose was behind what happened, something just as bad would have happened at some point anyway."

"Do you think so?"

Will's father bit his lip and took a sip of water from the glass in his hand. "Yeah." He swallowed. "Yeah, I do. My son was nearly killed in a school shooting. Our country and my son were attacked by fundamentalists, those posing for peace. No. We'll never know peace."

For a moment or two, Will didn't speak. He didn't know where to find his words. This was a kind of honesty he never expected of a parent. Sure, since high

school he'd come to the revelation, as most teens do, that their parents are not gods: that they are not inherently parental. They were kids being parents for the first time. The closer Will came to the possibility of his own kids in his own future, the more the realization took a more firm hold. It stunned Will further that his father had kept this pushed deep inside, hidden from Will through even a time when they had been most intensely honest with each other, where anything went, including many nights of tears and yelling. This kind of stark depression twisted in Will's stomach, an unquiet and raw creature shoved inside without expectation.

"I'm sorry, William. I shouldn't have been so blunt. I do think there's hope for the world. We're just at a very difficult—" But Will cut him off.

"No. You don't have to justify it. I don't blame you."

"Well don't take that the wrong way, though. It's not so cut and dried. I cut corners when I said that."

Will's parents had never been the church-going type. They were more of the Sunday gardening type than the sweaters and shiny shoes kind of parents. He wondered if his father believed in God, and if that had changed after the shooting. He wondered if his father had ever believed in God; whether his father believed that God was a good parent, watching out with a kind of plan, and had a tender hand in every disaster, softening the fall. After all, Will did make it through alive. They were difficult days immediately following the accident. Likely God was cursed many times by Will's bedside, and in the weeks that followed they lived in a godless anarchy, an emotional wasteland where they tried to maintain any semblance of comfort from pieces of charred home that lay around them.

Flickers again of a wasteland that Will had never seen before, yet inherently knew as from his nightmares. Ash rained from the sky and a yellow cloud in the distance rolled slowly toward them like an advancing fog.

"It's alright, Dad. I know it hasn't been easy for any of us. Good things come too."

His father only nodded.

Will had cause to believe that. His life had found rails again after the shooting. In many ways, yes, he was still trying to find those rails, but he'd known happiness again. Perhaps not to the point of countering the shooting, but he had hope. At times he felt glimmers of this structure, these rails, most intensely the day he first saw Jennifer again, in the cemetery. The memories he did have of the shooting came clashing together in a strange choreography, with an elation he'd not known since before. If there was a god in this equation for Will, he was neither leaning on him nor finding strength in his presence. Adam was the only one who had run to

safety. Jennifer had been lucky. It was a miracle she even survived. Perhaps God was watching out for Jennifer in a moment when he wasn't watching the Burton twins, Markus and Jonesy.

The cruelty in the thought made him shiver.

Will wasn't sure if he believed in a god, but he saw that miracle now when he studied Jennifer's beauty, when he looked into her eyes and understood that she was still there, looking back at him. And whether he'd put words to it before now or not, deep down he wanted to believe in a god looking out for her. Because he couldn't believe in a god that couldn't know of her and refrain from holding her tight and guiding her home, safely, with every step she took. If that made god cruel, then so be it.

Will looked outside and Jennifer saw him looking. They watched each other for a moment before she smiled a slow smile—the kind that reflected peace rather than reassurance, connection rather than greeting; the kind that emanated more from her eyes than the edges of her mouth—before she turned back to her call and spoke soundlessly into the mouthpiece.

Of course, there was Will too.

His parents believed that he was neither lucky nor in a place of safety. Will fought for and won his survival, and that was why he was here today. Not because of God, not because of luck, but because he took the safety of his classmates into his own hands. He made a sacrifice. Will wished he could know this, if at least believe it. He liked to think that it was something he'd done, but he could not remember.

There were only three people who could remember what happened in those seconds or minutes that Jennifer lay unconscious on the floor, while Adam scrambled down the hallway, while the students killed the lights and crammed against the old brick walls. Two were dead, and one was cursed with this amnesia escalating to a strange discontent. What happened in that time before the cops arrived to find four students and a gunman in puddles of blood on the floor? What had he done that was so polluted it was coming to the surface now like the sludge at the bottom of the reservoirs in the highest heat of the summertime? What was this part of him that hid in the murky depths? He felt like pieces of a mirror scattered across a shining floor, with edges like blades drawing bits of blood. If only he could look hard enough and nudge the pieces back into some kind of a whole, to then study and understand the face looking back.

4.

While Will sat inside, speaking with his father, Jennifer sat on the bench outside, speaking with hers. First, she prayed. She found it easier to pray in the Andrews' garden than anywhere else she'd ever known. She could not pray in the cemetery or in Savage Creek High. Those were places tinged with memories and despair, hope in an attritional sense that made her bitter, an attachment to the material rather than a place of reverence to God.

She knew the Andrews were not religious people. They were the kind of people who prided themselves on philosophy and science and didn't hold much place for any kind of spiritual root in religion. Jennifer understood this. She'd grown up with faith, holding fast at the time in her life when it failed for Will and his family and for many others not even going through trauma, and she understood her own reasons for faith nearly as well as she understood others' reasons for being without it. She liked being well-rounded. It's with acceptance that we forgive, that we become like God ourselves, she believed.

Though she tried and tried in the years following the shooting, she'd not yet found it in her heart to forgive Clive Jenson. That's what she had been praying about today before calling her dad, while she wandered through the garden along the side of the house, reflecting on the cherubs and the grotesques.

On the phone, she said: "I'm worried about Will. He hasn't been sleeping well. I'm not sure if it's because of that, but I haven't been sleeping well lately, either." She'd never outright said that she and Will had been sleeping together almost since they met, but would sometimes drop hints nonetheless, if just to keep things in a better clarity.

"You know I've been cautious about Will since you met up with him again. I'm worried he stirs up memories for you. And maybe you for him."

"I know that. I worry too. But you know as well as I do that we've had a good summer so far. I mean, we have our moments. But in between, things feel almost normal."

"As normal as they did when you were still at home?"

"It's bound to come up at different times. The anniversary is near."

"Is the anniversary affecting you too?"

Jennifer played with her hair absently, toying with the loose strands that strayed from behind her ear. "Maybe. I can't tell what's been the anniversary, what's been Will, and what's been my episodes."

"Have you had any bad ones since last weekend?"

"No. I've been okay."

"Anything close?"

"No, Dad. It's been a good week. Fragile maybe. I've had moments. But I've been fine."

"Even with the nightmares and sleeping badly?"

"They're only flashbacks. They come and go when talk of the shooting comes up. I'm getting enough sleep."

"You know sleep can have a big effect on your attacks."

"Dad, I didn't call for a lecture. I know what's going on with me."

On the other end of the line, Joseph Christianson was quiet, and she heard him composing his thoughts with a deep intake of breath. He was probably sitting on his recliner in the living room where he spent most of his time, with a Frank Peretti or Clive Cussler novel next to him and the newspaper spread on the ottoman, the lamp next to him casting a halo-like effect around his slowly balding head.

"I'm just looking out for you, Jenn. I was there even when you didn't know what was happening or how to handle it."

"And I love you for it. I'm doing good now. Better than being cooped up. It's good to be back here."

Christianson was silent.

"I shouldn't have brought up the nightmares."

"No. No," he said. "I'm glad you did. I want you to be honest with me. It's just tough."

She didn't speak for a couple moments, the silence falling awkward between them. "I talked to Mom the other day."

He didn't reply, as she expected, and so she continued. "I told her that you said hello."

"You sure miss her, don't you?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yeah."

"I wish she was still here for you."

"Me too."

More silence. She wondered what the Andrews were discussing inside. Judging by Will's father's expressions, it looked serious. His brow was furrowed and he blinked too much.

"I can't control your life anymore, Babe," Christianson said, and his voice sounded far away. "But if you want my advice, stay away from thinking about that shooting this time of year. You've got your studies to worry about. And bothering with memories during the same time of year just makes it all too real again."

If they had money, Jennifer would not have been surprised if he'd offered to take her on a vacation to the south every October, or maybe on a cruise. She knew

for a while he had even tried saving. But money was tight enough with what he'd managed to put away for her college fund, what with him having the only incoming paycheck.

"I'll do my best to stay busy."

"Not too busy."

"Busy enough."

"Good," he said.

In the interest of keeping the facade, she changed the subject to school banalities, classes and professors and upcoming midterms, but her mind wandered back to the other side of the kitchen glass, where Will caught her gaze and held it. There was pain in that look, of deep loss and a kind of inner turmoil she'd never fully understood but had no tools to dissect, the one that grew deeper with each night, that leaked into puffy purple spots below his eyes when he crawled from bed, that faded less and less thoroughly as the day went on. She knew he had questions but worried that those questions, if pursued deep enough, would be the very kind that wouldn't only unravel the life he sought to create for himself since the shooting, but her own fragile world too.

CHAPTER FIVE **some dark heaven**

1.

Fireflies surrounded the school. The school was a black mass. The black mass crept and melded and intertwined in a strange undulating harmony that seemed as if to pulse with an undercurrent like an emotion itself. Emotion itself descended on

the boy, his chin wobbling and his hand scalding, his world trembling and blurring before his eyes.

A woman was crying in the kitchen. Will knew this kitchen and this woman. She was standing at the table with her purse dangling from a limp arm and she was

staring at the back window. Sobs caught in her throat, and Will narrowed his eyes and reached out a small hand from a small space between two small worlds. She looked up, at the mirrored glass, and twisted around with a look of panic, sheer panic, that made her face animal and alien to the small boy—no, the teenage boy,

a phantasm,

an echo of the son she knew before the shooting took his—

No. It hadn't taken his life yet. She shouldn't think that way.

Yet. . . .

Will, lying in a puddle of blood, tears across his face, a sick grin hitching to his lips and threatening to fall to pieces the way the window had shattered from the bullet above them. The gun, pressed to Jenson's forehead. Jenson, wild eyes burning with the same kind of fires that burned

around the school like fireflies. He should catch them. He remembered the small hand that reached from one world to another, and he looked at his hands, and for a moment they looked small, like a child's.

The memory, then, had not been from a world he'd once known. No, not the second one. It had a sharpness to it, a feature that he knew, that defined this world around him now and all that he knew. It was his mother in the kitchen and she was crying for him. He had seen her. She was

here. If he wanted her to be.

It broke down. He tried to hold onto the pieces. His mother. He did not know her name, but he would always know her face. Why was she crying? Was he dead? It was certainly the direction that her thoughts were going.

Say he wasn't dead. What could be worse than death that would make his mother cry like that?

Because it was your fault, of course.

Will spun toward the whispering voice behind him, lashing out with his fingers hooked like claws, fingers that no longer resembled chubby child fingers, fingers that instead grew and stretched and glistened and caught in the folds of the dream fabric that made up the dreamspace and,

like a blood-crimson curtain falling,

a matador beckoning, a realization was

* * *

She stood there. The kitchen around her was warm with the lingering smells of the chicken she'd cooked the night before. The day had been cold, and she hadn't opened any windows before she'd left for work, so the smell remained. It melded with the apple-cinnamon air freshener in the living room, and there was a warmth in the smell that reminded her, each time she walked in the doorway in the late afternoons, how she'd built a family where there never should have been a family. These words stung her, but she didn't flinch at them any more than she flinched at the smell when she walked in the house or at the way the night pressed against the windows in the back of the breakfast nook when she flipped on the light.

These words stung Will deeper than they did her because he was hyperaware. He watched her standing there, thinking, worrying. She could not see him because he was not on the level of the world that she was normally familiar with.

A brown leather purse dangled from her limp right hand, spinning slow figure eights before it stopped altogether. She faced the window and stood before the tiled table, but she made no move to set her purse on top of the table, to put her keys beside it, to turn and remove her coat before rushing upstairs to collect the change of clothes for herself and her husband, to retrieve their insurance information from the desk in the office, to grab them some of the snacks in the cupboard instead of the hospital food. She wondered if this was what her son was experiencing: a blankness, an emptiness, a depth of confusion registered in the way her pupils dilated slowly and her gaze fixed in the distance.

She'd been with the police; Will knew this.

They had asked her questions.

"We want to know if your son's behavior had been erratic at all lately."

"Erratic?"

"Anything out of the ordinary?"

"No."

"Anything threatening or hostile in any way?"

"Of course not."

"Had he made any threats toward his classmates, friends, or the school in general?"

"He was a senior."

"Yes ma'am."

"He was tired of school. Didn't enjoy it. Wanted—wants— to be finished."

"But threats?"

"No."

"Any strange behavior? Moodiness? Mood swings? Depression? Anxiety?"

"No. He's always been a very peaceful boy. He had a girlfriend."

"So any involvement with this shooting would be very odd."

"Any involvement?" Her voice grew shrill. "What does that mean?"

"Ma'am, he was found with the gun in his hand. We have to explore every avenue."

She was standing in the kitchen now, staring out the back window. He was the son she had never wanted. This thought rang in Will's mind from ten feet—ten miles? ten years?—away. Maybe it was a stray thought, one she regretted the moment it passed through her mind.

She coughed. Her mouth fell slack, and a small bit of spittle wrapped against her bottom lip as she cleared her nose and breathed out.

Will had always known, though. Let's be honest. It hadn't been a secret that he was a surprise baby. It wasn't a secret that they would rather spend time together without him. It wasn't a secret that he held them up from the things that they'd rather have been doing, from the money they could have been spending, from the life they'd rather have led.

Each thought sang across Will's mind, memory after memory, with each detail floating to the surface of the kitchen the way each revelation had floated to the--

This was ridiculous.

This was not the case. His parents loved him. They—

"Mrs. Andrews, do you know if your son had any contact with a man named Clive Jenson within the last few weeks? Does that name ring any bells?"

"No, is that . . . is that the man who shot my child?"

"Ma'am, how about the state of Maine? Does that ring any bells? Any friends or relatives there?"

The thought had taken her by surprise and she'd hesitated, her mind going suddenly blank as to whom she might know in either state. She stuttered, "I, but I . . . There's no way that my son was involved."

"We have to cover our bases, ma'am. Maine?"

"A cousin. And his wife. A cousin of David's. I'm sorry. My husband, David's. And their family."

"Can I get a name, please?" He took out his notebook.

She looked at him with tears in her eyes. He let his notebook drop to his side and put a hand on her shoulder. It was a delicate touch. Awkward. The kind of

touch that comes from a man who didn't grow up touching people, who puts too much weight in the act. His fingers tingled and the corner of his mouth pushed in against his cheek as he gave a couple firm pats. "Look, this one's going to be pretty cut and dry. We've got the shooter. We've got witnesses. But we have to follow up that there wasn't something deeper here, to make sure that what we think happened is what really happened, and that these students will be safe."

She nodded and gave him the names of their friends and relatives in the two states.

Now the tears were streaming down her face, her nose and eyes letting out like floodgates, her purse falling to the floor as her fingers loosened and her body following in moments, without so much as a hand to break her fall, to catch a chair or tabletop. She just let herself drop.

Will stood in the corner of the room, watching her cry.

The kitchen around him sang. The highlights went severe and stung his eyes, and the edges of the shadows sharpened and lengthened and bled forth new twisting shadows that manifested hands along counter surfaces and the ruts between the tiles, working like arms swimming in a bog, like bodies heaving and pulling themselves

along broken jagged edges, black rock faces gritty with the dried fluids.

And then the big man was beside him, words leaving his mouth and entering Will's ear in a single breath, sighed the way a lover sighs in the darker nights, words barely words, stray emotion, only sounds of passions. The big man's sighs rang on the air, intertwined with the high whine and gurgle in Nancy's throat across the room.

She knows. I know. The cops don't know yet, but they're looking in the right direction. The only one here who refuses to believe it is the perpetrator.

Will looked at his mother's form, her back rising up and down in shudders, the way the cracks between each hardwood band twisted in the air and seemed to bleed fingers that reached.

They feed on the violence, remember. Like you. Like me now.

Will gritted his teeth.

Victims and bullies, Will. You were the victim, but you changed that. You made them the victims. A role reversal you found delectable. Was it as satisfying as you'd hoped? How did the power taste?

Will twisted from the big man's grasp, tangled in

not clothes, not

memories, but space, thin cloak-like cloth, surrounded by the folds of fabric,

pulling at the edges and searching for a way out, for the end of the space, where he'd run and make his escape, to get away from that house, from that memory, from that shade of his mother.

The blackness didn't stop, but persisted, inky around him. His fingers didn't stop feeling the folds in the fabric, which began to take on different properties, of cotton weavings with a rough feel, surfaces that tore at his fingers but without breaking skin.

Sparks danced before his eyes, sunspots, the stuff of eyes pressed tightly shut, but still he could hear the big man's voice from over his shoulder, as if the man were still standing there next to him, as if Will were only caught in the endless folds of the man's cloak.

Godlike, I'd imagine. To hold a life in your hands and then end it, to drop that spark and let it slowly burn out. I imagine it's not far from the feeling of creating a life. One cannot truly transcend until he's done both, if you ask me.

From sunspots to fireflies again. Chubby fingers reaching out,

feeling

Blue summertime evenings, thick with humidity rolling in off the coast to the east. The firefly lights flickered in the short grass before the forest edges, darting in and out and pulsing slowly. He tried to track them when he was young, to estimate the position the firefly might next be in when it appeared, and he wondered if, from each flash, the light he was seeing was cast from the same bug or one near it, a friend perhaps, someone close. He wondered, seeing two fireflies close to one another, if they might be lovers, and if, when they would fly, it would be so close that they'd become intertwined. He wondered if their light would shine continuously—when one pulsed off, the other on, and so on—until they disappeared into the tall grass.

These fireflies he saw, they all burned steady. If they flickered, it was like a throb in a dance, a stumble, the way the stars in the sky are spread, light years apart, blinking and sighing as the atmosphere above shifts and turns. There was no pulsing, no blinking, no extinguishing of these sparks.

Their flames danced on the end of thin wicks on thin candles in plastic trays, and the heads from behind were like spirit silhouettes, and the faces behind him were like skulls and Jack-o'-lanterns leering at him, many with wide eyes and yawning mouths, gaping soundlessly like fish pulled from deep oceans, awake to a new world as the light fell from their eyes and they thrashed.

So Will thrashed.

The crowd was tight around him. Most held candles, which broke the gloom only as far as each face, creating for him, while in the thick of it, a field of faces, grief-stricken, traumatized, with lips pinched and eyebrows narrowed and a hatred seething from their skin like sweat in the hot underworld night.

He could not tell who were students and who were black wraiths sniffing around the group, reaching from the cracks in the concrete and streaming to the hallway where it happened.

They're all here because of you, Will.

Will twisted and shoved through the mass of students. None moved beneath or between his flailing arms, and at once he felt as liquid and formless as the bleeding black shadows that pressed toward the teardrops and blood drops and wore their glee in the desperation of their reaching fingers. Will clawed the fingers of his own hands and slashed at the fireflies, but the fireflies wouldn't blink out.

* * *

The principal of Savage Creek High School, a man named Byron Garcia, stood before those gathered near the front entrance to the school that was still sealed with caution tape. Cops lingered around the edges and occasionally slipped in and out, holding various plastic bags, cameras, notebooks, and duffel bags. Most of the students were dressed in bulky coats pulled tight against the chill night air. Many were there with families, hopeful, thankful, but also with a fear lying beneath, bubbling to the surface in teardrops. Children in costumes hugged parents' legs so as to keep from becoming lost in the sea of faces, of cries, of flickering candle flames resembling peppered souls lining up before the gates of some dark heaven.

Adam Ries stood a few yards into the crowd, the look on his face panicked instead of tear-stricken, with a paranoia, a worry, like he was watching a different movie play out in front of him, the theater the same, the audience the same, but the colors blending, twisting in some way that only he could see or know.

"This is a dark time for our school—the darkest time we have ever known," Garcia said from the front of the group, a microphone hooked to a cheap sound system, two speakers on short poles facing the audience. "But I promise it will be the last. With the recent shootings in Colorado, in Arkansas, in California and in Florida, this is obviously not an isolated incident, but a contagion that's been a part of our society for decades, just now coming to light these last few years."

Adam scratched at his tussled hair and looked around for faces he recognized, someone that he knew here. A friend. But two of his friends were dead and two

more were in the hospital. The rest of the faces in the crowd looked strange, peering at him from hollow black eyes, grinning like the Jack-o'-lanterns lining the porches in the town. A few of the people in the crowd were students, coming out to show their support. Though many were clearly moved, shaken deeply, many were still looking to the distance, looking down at their feet and shifting while the short candle melted closer to the handle. It shocked him that there were students still unfazed by what had happened, who, though only classrooms and hallways away, didn't even hear the gunshots.

"2001 has been a painful year of realizations and acts of heinous violence. The world is sick; we learned this in September. Today we look to our children and fear for our future." He frowned after saying the words. "We are afraid for their future. We don't want to raise these children, this foundation of our future, in a place of pollution."

Stories about who was shot and who died and why meant only as much as those stories from states away, of the reports on the television of the Columbine High School massacre. They turned a nation's attention back to their sons and daughters, their children, finding a violence festering within their very offspring instead of in the political arena or the world abroad. Even now, a school shooting with two victims—

Maybe four. Will was still in a coma and no one had caught word yet of Jennifer's condition. They said Mister Davis was going to be all right.

Adam bit back a sob but the air still pushed from his nose. He cleared his throat.

Even now, a school shooting with only two deaths wouldn't register as much more than a sound byte on the national news. The invasion of Afghanistan began barely three weeks prior. The demons that plagued the United States were the kind with violent gods and a way of life far different than the kind the US had embraced. Acts like this shooting were glossed over with grim looks that betrayed less a concern for their children than a sadness that the world's demons were so consuming, that we see them reflected in the actions of those from even the farthest and quietest corners of America.

"We are to blame. The parents, the teachers, the ones who are supposed to be sculpting the new minds of the community. If we want peace in the future, it won't be attained through fighting with one another: it will be through and because of our children."

There was a smattering of soft applause, hands against pant legs. If this guy was going to keep going, it was likely to turn into a full political rally, Adam thought, inching slowly toward the front of the crowd. The school board elections weren't

until next November, but even that far out, this was an opportunity for mugging, for twisting a horror to gain public support. Likely he took his cues from Bush and Giuliani. Part of Adam hated the man for it, for turning the killing of his friends into a spectacle, into a political move. This other part of him was warmed by the community that surrounded the school now, the outpouring of support against those bent on destruction, those bent on ripping innocent lives from children. Fucking children. Was nothing sacred anymore?

"But tonight is not about blame. Tonight is about remembrance and finding the community and positivity that lie not so deeply within each of us."

Or was it just the smell of fresh blood that drew these people like animals? Vultures, flies to the slaughter. They hummed, murmured conversation from the fringes, uttered guttural prayers, sang hymns under their breath. It's violence that sculpts our world, that makes the history texts, that changes everything we once knew to something brand new. It's only painful because we resist that change so much. Yet deep down we know it. With every gang-related murder or drug overdose on the news, we watch, waiting for history to be made, for everything we know to change and to give us, what?

Peace?

Adam laughed and pushed one of the onlookers to the side.

The only kind of change we want is change for what we deem the "better," and the only kind of better we can see is what we deem "peace." If peace must be found over the bodies of his closest friends, he'd rather not ever see peace.

"September the eleventh taught us the importance of seeing past our differences and coming together as a family. I pray that this reminds us to recognize the darkness within our own lives and begin to not only recognize a society, but to start a re-construction process that will make our community ever stronger for our future and for the embodiment of that future: our children."

Adam limped to the edge of the crowd near the front. Like the students who sat in the first row of class, these were the ones drinking up everything the moment had to offer, fully in the grief of the circumstances of the day, their eyes shining with Garcia's light. A girl was flipping through a well-worn Bible at the edge of the steps, glancing from the pages to a scribbled piece of notebook paper and then back again.

"Hey Sarah," Adam said.

The girl looked up. Her eyebrows raised, crinkling her forehead, and her mouth turned down instead of up. "Oh my God, Adam, you shouldn't even be here right now. This must be horrible," she whispered, setting her book down and wrapping Adam in a stiff hug. "Are you all right?"

"I'm good."

She narrowed her eyes, and he added, "As good as I can be," and she nodded with sympathy before glancing back to Garcia.

"I'm about to go on when he finishes, but I want to be sure you're all right. This is so terrible. I can't believe it. How could something like this happen?"

Adam shook his head. He'd never really talked to Sarah outside of the occasional math or science class when they were partnered together or when he'd forgotten an assignment and needed details. She was at her church group more nights of the week than she was at home, while he was out wandering the edges of town trying to find someone who might buy him beer.

"And such timing, being on Halloween?" she said.

"Yeah, it's weird."

"It's fitting is what it is. Such a dark time. Celebrating things we should not be celebrating." She bit her lip and looked back toward a Jack-o'-lantern that was still aglow behind her. "I'm not preaching. I'm just saying. Like Garcia is saying. We invite dark things into our lives, and what do we get, right?"

Adam nodded again, but in his head, he was thinking about Will reaching for Jennifer's arm the moment he saw the gun and heard the first shot.

"Halloween used to be a kind of warning, a reminder about the darker side of death, of those things we don't like to think about but really need to. What better warning?"

Adam stared.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Oh my gosh. It's just so shitty, all of it." She covered her mouth and looked down after saying the swear word but kept talking. "I'm just trying to make some kind of sense of it all."

This Adam understood, and he opened his mouth to reassure her, but Garcia said, "So go home when this is over. Spend time with your families. And remember to tell those you love how you feel while you can. Thank you."

There was applause amidst murmurs and nods, and again the small patter of hands against pant legs and gloves.

"I'm now going to introduce Sarah Lott, the head of Savage Creek's Christian Coalition and active member of the youth ministry at the Church of Christ on Second Street, to say a few quick words, and after that our Civics teacher, Harley Tsongas, will speak more specifically to the incident. Then we'll let you guys get home. We know it's cold out."

"I've got to go. I'm sorry," Sarah said. "If you need anything, don't be afraid to call." Her words faded into the night between them while she turned and strode across the front entry steps. Garcia said a few words to her before she stepped to

the podium, likely something about keeping the words light and tasteful, before taking his place with a few of the other staff and public officials standing off to the other side. Adam recognized Mr. Tsongas, Sheriff Ozzy Mencia, and Mayor Blye, whose son, Dan, was standing at the back of the group, looking at the ground and only rarely glancing up at the crowd. Daniel Blye had been one of Adam's closer friends for the past seven years. They'd gone through the school system together. The only reason Dan wasn't in the hallway when the shooting took place was because Dan was in another social studies class at the same time, around the corner, safe.

Adam pushed his way along the front of the crowd of onlookers, trying not to catch the back of his leg against anyone else's, already walking on it too much as it was, while Sarah spoke:

"I know many of you might carry different faiths and belief systems, but I did want to take this opportunity to say a few brief words of prayer if you all would join me, regardless of religion, for the students in the hospital, the students who were lost, and the families involved tonight. If you will lower your heads."

Most of the audience did so out of respect, their flickering faces going dim, replaced by only the floating lights and black space.

Dan saw Adam approach and the sense of relief on his face nearly fell into tears. The two embraced. "You good, man?" Adam asked, and Dan only nodded. Mayor Blye looked over at the two boys, and Adam nodded back before the man turned away again.

"I can't listen to this," Adam said.

"Markus and Jonesy are dead," Dan said. His gaze still bored through the concrete steps, and though he was only wearing a thin jacket, he wasn't even shivering in the cold.

"Yeah."

"You could be dead right now."

"I'm not, Dan."

"Jennifer and Will are in the hospital. They're saying Will might not make it."

"Who's saying that? Where did you hear that?" Adam couldn't keep the frantic note from making his voice crack.

Dan only shook his head. "He's in a coma. He lost a lot of blood to his brain. They don't know how he'll be after he comes out of it. If there will be any damage, if there—"

"Dan. Stop it. They made it out alive. They'll keep fighting. They've still got a good shot."

"Markus and Jonesy didn't," Dan said, shaking his head while the tears rose to

his eyes and voice.

"They're gonna make it, god damnit."

Meanwhile, Will forced his way, stumbling, half-blind in the smoky heat and foggy black, to the front of the school, where the energy was concentrated. There was no movement, no motion amongst the audience watching or in the doorway of the school or across the stained concrete front steps. But the feeling of the place was like a seeping mess. It was like it was flowing from the eyes of everyone at the scene: that they were weeping black tears, hurling them at the school, at the speakers, at the memory of Clive Jenson and what happened. This blackness spread from the hallways of the school, out the edges of the doorframes, and along the cracks in the concrete floor.

Clive Jenson. Lying in a slow-spreading puddle of blood. Will in much the same. The two red puddles reaching for each other like lovers reunited, darting along each crusty crack in the tile until they flowed together. Jennifer's body lying behind them, her hair sticky and thick and mottled with the syrupy red, and her eyes forced closed, where behind them,

what?

Unconsciousness? Death? Did those eyes see anymore? Did they dream? Did they make sense of black spaces and try to recreate some happier moment, or did they stare sightlessly at eyelids while whatever made her essentially Jennifer was left here, in her body, barely alive, as the rest fled down the hallway, clinging to the walls so as not to leave bloody footprints behind, reaching toward the night sky--the night sky like

candles, held in a vigil outside of the high school, where prayers left lips and danced high, toward wherever that place is that souls go when they flee, wherever it is that listens to the good wishes of good people, wherever it is that damnation and salvation matter, where—

This was a vigil for Jennifer. The thought sizzled and

He watched two young men embrace, tears on their faces, wiped away in the dark, and he knew that they were friends, that they were once his friends too. He heard Sarah's words over the crowd and did not know if they were really her words, but she said,

"There is evil in the world. It is all around us. There are good souls in the midst of this, and they are fighting, and they are reaching toward something better, and if you can keep them safe, please, please do keep them safe."

"I shouldn't have come here. It's too fucking much," Dan said, the tears breaking past the edges of his eyes. He wiped them away the moment they spilled, as if to hide them.

"It's going to work out. The worst is over."

"You don't know that."

"But I have to believe it," Adam said.

Dan squeezed his eyes closed as hard as he could, balled his hands into fists, and sat down hard.

"I need to get out of here."

"And the one who caused this, who brought this about, punish him deeply, for such sins against such good people cannot go unpunished, and he needs to know the kind of justice that only you can bring for us, dear Lord, our God."

Will felt the shadows draw close, an anger building within, leaking out.

He saw Adam and Dan draw their shoulders toward their ears and glance around with narrow eyes. Could they feel him?

At once he recalled the big man turning with the boy in the costume, twisting, limbs entangled, stumbling,
fall.

Will turned,

"Then let's go," Adam said, and the three of them turned in unison and, stumbling at first—it was Dan who found his feet first—started to run. Adam followed, limping, and Will, somewhere in between, flickered alongside. Behind them the congregation looked up in unison and followed the boys

with their eyes

into the trees that wrapped closely around the building.

"You want to get out of here? Let's get the fuck out of here."

* * *

They used to run like this. On summer nights when the moon dangled full and fat and low in the sky, they'd pitch for beer, and when they were good and buzzed, they'd run until they didn't feel like running anymore, and the only things they felt were the pulsing in their heads and the impact of each shoe against the twigs along the ground and the drumming of the figures running beside them.

Back then it was different. Back then Will ran with them. He never led the way.

Usually that was Adam. But Will stayed close behind, happy to follow given the right push. Markus and Jonesy racing each other. Whatever girl was with them before she faded back to another group or another school.

So tonight they ran. Their legs pumped in the air and the sky was black and the trees seemed to appear before them like specters, and sometimes they ran their shoulders into saplings and spun and kept going until their eyes adjusted and they could see each manifest, as if in some kind of a dream world where the trees were only being created as fast as the boys could run, where if they wanted, they could be on a beach somewhere, they could be in a desert, they could be on the fucking moon--it didn't matter. They could be

running next to their dead friends,

they could hear their footsteps on the ground around them, breath pumping, arms heaving, striving for whatever was ahead, whatever was around the next corner,

whatever awaited, however far from town,

their homes,

anything they ever knew about the world around them.

Markus. Jonesy. Will. Jennifer.

If they ran

fast and far enough, maybe they would outrun the tear-jerking fact that it was only the two of them running.

They were frantic to escape, to find something new, to believe that if they should run

fast and far enough, they might just break through and find a tear and rip through to the stuff of dust, the stuff that burns deep in your chest before you cease to draw a breath because your lungs can't take the air, the stuff that freezes into supernova halos, the way their lives looked when they were young, the way their lives looked this morning, the way the light hit Jennifer's dirty blonde hair when she stepped into the sunlight, the way—

Should it matter if they got lost? That was the whole point.

Run until it was only you, when the only things that kept up were the only things that really mattered at all.

Will ran with them until his lungs stung and the pain seared across his abdomen and chest. He ran until the muscles in his legs threatened to snap, until his shoulders screamed out of agony from running into so many god damned trees, and he screamed, to remind himself that he was in pain, in some way still alive, in some way still running with them,

so that they might hear him.

Run until you breathe the dew, he thought. Run until you taste the smoke and cough it out again in the same motion. Run until that breath you take in is in the same motion as the breath you push out, until you don't ever stop breathing. Run until you grow gills, until your chest rips apart. Run until the smoke seeps from your pores and streaks from your eyes like ether tears. Run like your body is breaking away behind you in a blur of

everything you once knew.

Run until the grief across your face becomes indistinct from the laughter that takes you the way it takes a child after his first few steps.

Run until you can no longer catch your forward momentum, until you either take off from the ground and leave your body behind, or you crash into the thick dirt and brush with your shoulder and your forehead, and you lie there, your sobs filling in those empty spaces until your breath slowly returns.

Run until you realize you're running alone and it's only the sound of your best friend's tears that lead you back to his body, where you hold each other under the canopy of trees that could be on any corner of the globe, or farther, hidden from all witnesses--

but praying you're wrong.

Some mornings it took them until daybreak to find their way home. Sometimes they didn't find the edge of town until their hearts beat a staccato different than exertion, a staccato instead of an approaching anxiety. Sometimes when they came together after the run and held each other until their breath fell even again, their arms still shook at that crack of dawn, their veins still ran with the possibility that maybe they'd finally run so far and in so many circles that they'd lost it all.

It was times like these that brought the revelation that what it was they had found after losing everything was only a reminder that there was something left to be lost.

2.

When Will awoke, he became aware of where he was very quickly, but not quickly enough to stop his forward motion, the panicked pin-wheeling of his arms, or his hitching breath while his heart raced out of control.

He caught himself and held his body still. In the dim glow from the moon outside the window, he saw Jennifer lying on her side, watching him, her eyes wide

and alert. She held a soft hand against the stubble on his cheek and he wondered if it was her touch that had brought him from the nightmare.

"I'm sorry."

It was obvious he'd been thrashing for some time. She didn't have the look of someone who had recently come awake, still blinking back sleep. Her eyes were tight and inquisitive.

She held his gaze for a while, calming him with her steady presence and the stroke of her thumb.

"What did you dream of?" she asked.

Will's eyes unfocused and he looked through her, through the wall behind her, into a world dark, smoky, that flickered like the light cast by a candle. He shook his head. "I don't remember."

The images had been so vivid. His mother in tears in the kitchen. The purse hitting the floor. The principal at the front of the masses of people, gathered because of him—and others. His memory twisted their faces, and they glared in the firelight.

She must have known he was lying. The look in her eyes was worry.

Jennifer: her body lying behind the crowd, her hair sticky and thick and mottled with the syrupy red, her eyes forced closed, where behind them—

Tears came to his eyes the way weightless bodies rise into empty spaces, and before Jennifer could catch their shine, he moved his face to hers, and she caught the motion of his head with her hand and pressed him to her. When their lips met, he bit down, and held hers tight against his own while he filled his lungs with her breath.

When he released her, she pressed for more. He pushed her back into the mattress and the pillow, wrapping one arm beneath her, running the other along her neckline, the collar of her shirt, pulling and pressing with a gentle desperation. She clung tight to his back with her fingernails and there was a sharp pain and he thought he smelled smoke in the air around the bedroom before he moved his head to her neck and buried himself in her hair, his lips running against the skin as if to remember its texture so that he could better speak the words should she

fade away,
against tile floor.

He ran his tongue along her earlobe and whispered wordless breath into her ear and she gasped and her fingernails fixed and then he was only in the moment, outrunning memory,

finding in her a material reality he could sink his teeth into, that he could touch and squeeze and caress, taking every piece of her inside of him the way she took

him, so that maybe in that place of nightmares, of Hell and fire, he could bring something he knew to be even more real with him. He opened his mouth wide against her neck and bit, soft but firm. He felt the blood pulsing below the skin against his tongue, and he wondered if in some way the vampires of the Victorian age were in search of something similar: to create a memory in the act, something to cling to in sleep, when the world they longed for was behind a maple board and six feet of dirt.

When their clothes were gone, he pressed himself to her, his chest against hers, their legs wrapped to brace themselves together so that nothing could come between. She breathed his name and it became a mantra, a breath. Each gasp forced out his name, to follow the air, to fill her.

When he entered her, he squeezed his eyes closed, and she held his head against hers, and when the tears leaked from his eyes, he kissed her all the deeper and held her all the tighter, pretending he didn't notice when her forehead crinkled and her eyes widened as she realized—

When his hands found her hair and pulled, she gasped. When he ducked his head against the other side of her, where her neck met her shoulder, he found the scar where the bullet had skimmed, inches from ending her life.

He stopped, his fingertips hovering along the mottled tissue, her legs wrapped around his back. She met his gaze.

"I'm not leaving you, Will."

He shook his head, looking away.

"I'm still here."

He wrapped his other arm around her back and held her against him, his thumb remaining at the edge of the scar. He grinned through the pain, and when they were finished, wrapped together so seamlessly, he wondered if even now she was close enough to see the memories and nightmarish visions that plagued his sleep,

that if, upon waking, she might look into his eyes and

know what he did not know and that

then he might not be so alone.

But he knew that was not the case. That no matter how close he held her, his mind was still its own place, and she could not know, could not understand, could not become one with him. But he held her as hard and close and tight as possible and wondered anyway.

3.

When Will realized that he was running alone, when he looked to his left and right

and saw no fleeting shadowed shapes, when behind him there was no glimpse of the light from the gathering at the school, he finally came to a stop and collapsed.

It took minutes before his breath was under control again and didn't stir a coughing fit when it seared along his trachea, and it was minutes longer still before his heartbeat stopped threatening a coronary.

The forest around him was nearly pitch black. Costumes, carnivals, and kids were long behind him. If there was a spirit of Halloween that persisted beyond the reaches of community, in the dark forests and unknown wilds that wrapped civilization, he was it.

Will was alone, the entire tree-filled space around him empty except for himself and his unsteady breathing. The feeling was crushing.

Sounds of crickets and chirps and chitters and soft scrapes of leaves seemed to mimic a chorus of children's voices in the canopy and distance around him. In the darkness, he imagined he was back in the streets of his neighborhood again, blind, invisible, and in the air of the children's imaginations, in the echoes of the Halloween stories they grew up on and clung tightly to. He imagined he was in the possibility for mystery in the night,

in the hope,

in the hope that there might be something a touch more magical than a bit of candy and tired arms dragging fifteen-year-old pillowcases that never seemed to fall up past their saggy bottoms.

Was it true, what the big man had told him? That this world bled into the other? That the other could be influenced by this one, this world of pure creation and imagination? Was everything that he had witnessed that evening--the surge of memory and moments of clarity--somehow accurate?

If that were the case, then it was *he*, alone amongst the black shrubs, miles away from any kind of home he once knew, that was the magic the children imagined. *He* was that monster in the closet, the boogeyman, the feral animal in the deepest woods, barely glimpsed.

Will Andrews wasn't more than a memory in that world. He was seeping into the faded tile floors of the faded high school hallway, but in the same way that the shadows and footfalls of every other student every other day had seeped into the floor and walls: anonymously. He was an idea now: a death, a statistic, a faceless specter come to keep kids in line.

The fleshy part of his fist made a dull sound against the damp bark of the tree trunk when he struck it. The tree didn't flinch, move, or budge. The pain brought tears to his eyes. He pressed his knuckles against the bark, and the bark offered pain. He studied his fist, pushed fingers against the tender space on the side of his

hand, ground his teeth to fight the flares of pain that shot through his hand when he kneaded the seized muscle. He too pressed knuckles against flesh and offered pain. Skin, bark, the hard ground, the air if he stopped taking it in. Push it hard enough and it gives back.

This was what he knew, then: Pain was the truest thing about a world that seemed forever in flux around him, a mind of memories fleeting and constructed. It didn't matter what was pushing back. All he knew was this pain that strode into the center of his mind and took a firm hold. That and the raw emotion, the frustration that curled at his insides, that vented in his chest like a slow burn, that brought his fingers to the gash along his arm, brushing against the frayed flesh.

He might not be so alone.

The thought rang in his mind the moment he heard the footsteps in the brush to his left. He strained his eyes against the gloom, widening them before squinting, his vision roving constantly so that perhaps even from the corner of his eye he might catch a shape, an impression, a hint of who might be coming and from where.

Barely a silhouette, the figure stopped next to the trunk of the nearest tree and watched.

Will said:

Who's there?

To his right, the big man said, Only I, me, my, the individual in the first person, a voice, your guide. He snickered and Will looked back for the figure standing beside the tree and it seemed

she

was still there, but farther back now, dimmer, formless, more of an idea, he thought. But it seemed now that he could make out her hair falling to her shoulders and what seemed a feminine curve in her hip.

How was your run? Cathartic?

Will looked to the big man and frowned.

It's not easy, watching the victims of the perpetration, though many like you do it.

Like who?

Bullies. Once victims themselves, but converted. It's an easy switch to make.

I'm not a bully.

That's only because I'm here, Will.

Will raked at the skin on his arm, and the sensation made his breath catch. In the gloom, he smiled, wondering how good the big man's eyes were.

Some return to the scene of the crime because they need that power, to see the

results of their production, their destruction, to see the spawning of their creation, and they take strength in that. Creation is born from destruction. God is indeed a destroyer, the beast, the savior. He's lying if he says he's one over another.

God?

Yes?

You sound unsure, Will said, confused.

The big man grunted and then snickered. If I have to explain my sense of humor, it loses something.

Will looked at the ground, pushing his eyebrows together, but found no clarity. Meanwhile, the big man turned and squatted so that his silhouette grew small and indistinct from the distant horizon and the bases of the trees. After a few moments of his pupils pulsing, Will couldn't see the man anymore.

You talk too much, he said and kicked at the dirt on the ground.

You whine too much. The big man's voice came a few paces to Will's side.

Will bit his tongue.

So how did it feel to visit the vigil, boy? Did you feel powerful? Or did you feel ashamed?

Suddenly Will stood up, his hands balled into fists, but lacking a sense of direction. His knuckles were bloodless. His forearms throbbed. The blood rushed from his head and colored sparks spun across his vision.

Hit me, Will. We'll laugh about it later.

The tension ran from his forearms to his neck, then seeped into his head. Will twisted in place away from the big man, grinding his teeth and releasing a choked sound from his throat. He'd seen his home. He couldn't tell you his mother's name or the street he grew up on or how long he lived in that town or how many times he went sprinting through the forest with his friends, half-drunk and high on the possibility that there was something more outside of . . . what?

Everything he didn't know anymore.

He'd been running toward where he stood right now, as fast as he could, how many times?

You're a victim, Will. Sad as any I've ever known.

Of course he was a fucking victim. This wasn't a question.

Was killing those students at the school another sprint into the forest at high speed? Certainly that's where he wound up.

What was it that finally sent you over the edge that day? Was it something in the air? Was it Halloween?

Was it only to get ahead of them, to lose them too? When they got to the deeper parts of the forest, where the trees ran close together and moss crawled from

one fallen trunk to another, they still had each other. They'd known then that it was a relief, to have that company there to help find their way back. Their friends became their lifelines, both literally and figuratively. Here? Here was no lifeline.

The big man said, No. Let's not shirk blame. It was inside you.

This was his fault. This was all his fault. He might not remember, except for the prickled steel and the weight and the way it kicked in his hand and made his ears ring.

He might not remember, but he knew.

It's a shame, really. The real sin of it, that you hated your life so much that you couldn't stop at taking your own, but took how many others' with you? How many family members weren't at that vigil because they were home, unable to get up from the floor to function? How many lives did you shatter?

At least one, he thought, looking at his clenched fists. There was a sharp pain in his palms, and part of him hoped that his fingers had cut deep enough to draw blood.

The big man appeared behind Will and brought two fists down on the boy's shoulders. His back cracked and he sank to a knee.

You destroyed everything, and for what? A desperate plea to change something within you that was so broken? Pathetic.

Again, the fists. Again on the shoulder. The muscles seized and Will sank to both knees. Stop it. I get it.

Do you? Do you know this place? Do you understand why you are here?

Yes.

I don't think you do. Again, mottled bone on taut muscle, and this time Will screamed.

Atonement.

Another punch, lower now, on his ribcage. Another scream breaking along the limbs of unheeding trees. There was a reek on the air and in the haze. Will wondered if it was him.

Where is this place, boy? the big man said, delivering an uppercut to Will's kidney.

Will took the hit, falling to his side against the base of the tree, curling into the fetal position now the way he curled his nails into his palms barely seconds ago. Dear God, stop this.

Close, but no cigar.

This time Will understood the man's joke, but there was no hint of amusement below his cries.

Why are you hurting me? His words were barely more than the hard vowels of

his shrieks. With every bleat, he grew more ashamed. With every echo of his screams, he squeezed his eyes closed ever tighter and pretended that this was not him, this was not real, this was not his home now.

Tell me where you are and I will stop.

Will opened his eyes. Above him, the big man had grown reptilian, utterly inhuman. He was still little more than a shadow, but his presence was overwhelming. His mass blotted out any hint of the cloudy night sky beyond the tree tops. He was the black canvas to put fears to. His eyes did not glow the way he'd expect some hellish demon's would, but instead were a timeless black, eternal, dark the way the monsters were darker at the edges of his closet doors, a blackness forever impenetrable, the space between the stars on a clear night. Know,

he knew,

suddenly and at once, that this was no dream.

This is Hell.

The big man's head fell forward the way a bird of prey might dip for a better view, sockets wide and cockeyed. He retreated back a step, releasing Will, who fell to the ground, face pressed into the dirt, tears smearing with the twigs and the mud.

This is Hell. I'm in Hell. I killed them all. He wasn't saying it for the big man anymore. He no longer considered his sobs. His coughs and choked words echoed around him and returned like a chorus of hecklers. The mass at the vigil come back, masks in place, candles dripping blood-red wax against tree trunks, the flames lapping at bark and spreading, igniting the clearing with an inhuman glow. In Hell. William Andrews killed them all.

Adam and Dan were not fleeing with him. They were fleeing from him.

Sarah was praying he'd burn, that justice would be served.

Then served it would be.

I killed them.

Jennifer's figure was sharp against his imagined flames. It was hard to see her face, but he was sure she was waiting, watching, confirming his punishment.

I killed my friends.

PART TWO : *katabasis*

Imagination is the beginning of creation.

*You imagine what you desire,
you will what you imagine
& at last you create what you will.*

george bernard shaw

CHAPTER SIX **whispers of empty spaces**

1.

Jennifer dropped her car keys on the small table just inside the door of her studio apartment and stretched. It was that time of the semester where midterms were scattered throughout the month, which she supposed was preferable over slamming them all into a week, but even so, this time of year wasn't particularly conducive to her focus in the first place. October brought back too much. That indeed was evidenced by her latest breakdown two weeks before. She'd dealt with these types of breaks in the months following the shooting, living in Maine with her father. She'd inherited them from her mother. The depression didn't rear its head for Jennifer until after her mother's death, and it was only made worse after the shooting. But her father was strong. It was either that or be defeated,

overwhelmed, swallowed; he'd learned that after everything that went down with his wife, Genevieve. These attacks would come without warning and leave Jennifer's mood in shambles for days. Recovery became a chore in and of itself. She'd talked to therapists and tried different medications, some of which wouldn't kick in until after a few weeks, at just the time when she was ready to give up and try something new. But even then the results were inconsistent, and she still had problematic mood twists. Often the pills just left her numb. This she hated the worst. How much better was it, she wondered, to be angry to her core than to feel nothing at all? But eventually she'd found a balance that seemed to work well enough, and the attacks faded as the stress and memories drifted further into the past. She'd managed to live free from any of the emotional assaults for a year in Maine, enough time for her to decide it was safe to return to the Creek area, to try school again. To live her life. But the move brought it all back in a slow rush, and it had gotten bad.

Two weeks ago, Will had found her in her apartment, curled up on the floor in a blanket, staring at the carpet. He'd been out with some friends at a local bar, but she'd declined hanging out that night because she didn't feel well, and she wanted to rest up during the weekend to prepare for the next week's batch of tests and classes. But a few hours in, Will got a text message alluding to the fact that things might not be all well on her end, and he drove across town to her place.

"Jennifer?" he asked upon entering, shaking off the chill from outside along with his jacket, which he left on the floor just inside the door. She ran her hands through her dirty blonde hair again and again, first cradling it, then clutching at it, then raking her fingers through it. She didn't look up when Will opened the door.

Despite the cold from outside, Will's blood still ran with shivers. He hated these nights. The lapses that Will suffered were nothing next to Jennifer's breakdowns. He never understood what was happening in her mind. He never understood the irrational reactions or how to talk her down from them, how to find a glimmer of something to attach her to in order to draw her out of the emotional cloud that surrounded her. He never knew what she might have been about to do—to herself, to him. And calling to her was like calling across a gulf.

"What happened?" he said, dropping to her side and placing a hand on her shoulder.

She shrank from his grasp and ducked to the side.

"Talk to me, Babe. Tell me how you're doing."

Her answer was again to run shaky fingers through her hair.

Will licked his lips and thought about what to say. It went without saying that this wasn't a good sign, that she was rejecting his attention, his help, when he was

the only person near who could do anything to help her, or at least be some kind of comfort in a world suddenly turned violent. He didn't want to press the issue. He didn't want to demand question after question to penetrate a mind that was focused on what generally seemed to be handling a situation, whether real or imagined. And he'd never been around her like this. Similar instances, but never quite like this.

"You shouldn't be here," she whispered.

Will leaned in again and caught a glimpse of her face. Her eyes were focused on the floor in front of her. She was pale and sweaty, the kind of sweats that come from a deep nausea, as if her body was trying to force her demons out through her pores.

"Of course I need to be here. There's no place I'd rather be."

"You're lying."

He shook his head. "No. Being here, helping you, is where I want to be."

"I'm bringing you down. This isn't your problem. You should be with your friends."

"Fuck my friends. You need me."

She shook her head again, a rapid motion that seemed to replace the motion of her fingers. "I'm fine. I'll be fine. You should leave."

"Tough. I'm not."

Will looked around the apartment floor. An empty glass lay on the carpet next to her, half hidden by the blanket. A letter opener lay a few inches farther. Her laptop played a slow folk song from the bed, the sounds of a guitar drifting in fuzzy circles around a vocalist's words. Will frowned and quickly scanned the kitchen behind him. Dishes were beginning to gather in the sink. A few bags of fruit were pushed into the corner, and next to them were two bottles of wine, one of which was standing in the middle of the counter with the cork out.

"Have you had anything to drink tonight?"

She was still shaking her head.

"Jennifer."

There was no change.

"Jennifer, Babe, please. I need to know if you've had anything to drink."

The rest of their conversation seemed to progress in this manner. He'd ask a question. She wouldn't answer until he became insistent, and she would finally give in a few minutes later. "A glass or two," she said, waving her hand in the air near before holding tight against her hair again.

"Big glasses?"

No response.

"Jennifer. Was it a lot?"

She shrugged.

"Please. I'm just trying to figure out where you are right now is all. Please help me out."

A few moments later she reached forward toward the glass. The blanket fell from her legs, and Will saw that she wasn't wearing any pants. Thoughts of sex were far from his mind. He longed instead to curl up under the blanket with her. To hold her so close that her pain might seep to him, that they could share it together, battle it away with the combined force of two. Moments like this, when her pain breached, when it was clear the kind of soul-level, deep-seated grief she underwent on a sometimes daily basis broke out, a yawning depth was shown, and in seeing that they shared an intimacy he would never fully understand, but recognized.

Before him, she reached to the glass, fumbled it in front of her, and pointed to a spot about three quarters of the way up the side.

He forced a breath through his teeth. Normally, where Will wasn't averse to it, Jennifer tried to avoid drinking. It made her too emotional, she said. It was not a very happy place where she wound up after a few glasses. A glass of wine with dinner or while cooking was all she cared for.

Will thought, no shit she always wound up in a bad mood. It was always a bad mood that prompted her drinking. Which wasn't to say that she abused it as some kind of a crutch. It spoke more toward the impulsiveness that came with nights like this.

"What happened tonight? How'd this come about, hmm?" He reached forward for her again and put his hand on her shoulder. "Did something happen? Was it something I did? Or a conversation with your dad?"

Usually it was something that could be pointed to, but it wasn't a rare occasion for these types of nights to occur spontaneously, and more so lately. She said nothing.

"I'm here. Whatever it is, we'll get through this. We always do." He wished that was enough for her to realize that this wasn't necessary, that she could turn her focus to something else, him, herself. Something more positive. Something that didn't stink of a suffering so deep.

A half hour went by with more of the same, on and off moments of action, Will testing the waters to see if he might find the girl he'd fallen in love with inside again. Mostly they sat in silence, and he hoped that his hand on her back was enough. Then, for the first time since he'd gotten there, Jennifer looked to Will, through blurred and tear-rimmed eyes, and said, "Will. The door. Did you lock it when you came in? Tell me you locked it."

He looked behind him past the kitchen and shook his head. "No. No, I'm sorry. I'll go lock it."

But now her hands were at his arm, her fingernails pressing, drawing white lines against his skin. "Don't. No. Don't leave me here like this. Don't walk out that door," she begged. Her right hand pulsed on his arm, squeezing until the veins in his hand began to stand out. He didn't mind.

"I'm not leaving you. I'm getting up to lock the door."

"They're coming in. They'll be coming in. They're waiting for you to get up. They're listening."

"There's no one out there, Jennifer. You know there's no one out there. You cannot let this eat at you. I'll lock it, but there is no one waiting."

"It can happen again."

"It's not happening."

"It can happen."

"It's not."

"It happened once."

"And I will never let it happen again."

"So please don't leave."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Okay.

Okay.

They agreed through look alone.

"Let me get up to lock the door?"

She released her hands from his arm and clenched her fists tight before her, squeezing her lips together until the blood left them and the space turned white. She began to rock. Will ran to the door, twisted the deadbolt and the lock, both for good measure, before moving beside her again. But when he returned, he saw that her motion had moved to the letter opener that had lain by her side, and that she was pressing the dull blade against the inside of her thigh near her knee, where white scars already crisscrossed from years ago. The skin had turned an angry pink around the blade, but it hadn't broken. Will hadn't seen this from her before, and he bit the inside of his lip hard enough to draw blood, to taste copper on his tongue,

as if he'd become the blade and pressed
against the inside of her

leg and bit. Go no deeper. But the image persisted. Chewing.

"Jennifer," he said, clenching his fist and closing his eyes. "Jennifer, please, stop that."

But she either did not listen or ignored his words.

"Don't. It's not helping."

Jennifer pressed the opener harder, so Will reached for her hand. He grabbed at her wrist and turned her arm away from her leg while she resisted, twisting away with a cry of frustration. Grabbing the blade, he let go of her wrist to instead pry her fingers from the handle. It wasn't another minute before he'd gotten the opener from her and jammed it in his back pocket.

"There's no reason you need to do this. Let me help you," he pleaded. There were no words in a situation like this. There were no arguments to make. Emotions so extreme they moved beyond the rational, this physical place, those handfuls of letters.

There's only trying to get through, to have her look at him and see a glimmer of recognition, that clarity, that sigh of relief. To see through a veil, the darkest one, and recognize the confusion in its reality, to see again that place she knew. But he was afraid. That she'd go so deep and so often that the veils might reverse, the world becoming a lie and her only truth becoming empty space.

She turned from him, her hands empty again, but instead of regaining awareness, she pushed herself away from the carpet, her eyes flickering toward the window at the head of her bed, before getting up and moving toward the bathroom.

"Jenn, where are you going? Jenn?" But then she was at the bathroom, and the door was closing behind her. Will got up to follow, slowly. He put his hand on the doorknob to find it locked. "Jennifer? You okay?"

There was no answer from the other side of the door; only the faint rustle of movement, a person against a wall or the floor.

"Let me in. Come on now." He tried the door handle again.

But there was no further movement from inside, no sound of the lock releasing. He hated not having her in his sight. He hated not knowing what could be going on behind the door with her in this condition. "Jennifer, open this door." Pure fear dumped into his veins, and it brought his breath and mucus to his nose in a harsh exhale. "Just say something. Just talk to me. Tell me that you're okay in there."

Realistic or not, worst case scenarios flickered through his mind.

"Dear God," he groaned from the back of his throat. "Dear God, be with her right now." It wasn't a prayer in the most traditional sense, but it was as honest a call toward whatever divine figure watched over them as he'd ever called for.

"I'll kick this door in to make sure that you're safe, Jennifer. I don't care. You can open the door, or I'll break it down. But I need to make sure you're safe."

Finally there was movement and the door lock snickered. Will pushed the door open, and Jennifer pressed herself back into the corner between the bathtub and the floor.

"Thank you," he said.

Jennifer held his electric razor in her hand, a cheap trimmer that he kept at her place for when he stayed over, and tried to force herself deeper into the corner.

"No, Babe, give me that." Again, this time without waiting, he caught her wrist and pulled the razor from her hand. But almost immediately the hunger returned to her eyes, and she looked around the bathroom again, desperate for another sharp instrument. This look in her eyes resounded somewhere deep near the pit of his stomach, the part of his stomach that had been on edge for the last hour that he'd spent in the apartment trying to find something to cling to, some kind of safety and clarity in a situation that would end . . . how?

Just fine, he told himself. They always end up okay. She'll get a handle on it. She'll be okay.

But he'd never seen her quite like this.

She'll be fine.

Retreating like a scared animal, she climbed into the bathtub and closed the Plexiglas shower door. Will didn't say anything but moved to her side, pushing the door open again. She sat in the tub, now holding onto a pink plastic razor that she used for shaving her legs. She ran her thumb over the blade again and again in the same repeating motion as when she ran her hands through her hair. But razors these days are specifically designed to avoid being used violently, right? The most it was doing was slowly wearing the skin on the pad of her thumb away, raking the pink skin into raw white flecks.

"Stop this. Please. This isn't helping. I know you're running away. I know you think he's here. I know it feels like it's all happening again, and that it's irrational. It's not your fault. Your brain is scared. It happens. It's fine. But come back to me. I'll keep you from this. You can find comfort in me instead of distraction with this pain. It's not helping."

She kept her eyes forward, and her thumb continued its motion.

"Please, Jennifer. I can't watch you like this. If you care about me too, you'll stop. You'll make this work for me, too. You don't know what watching you like this does to me."

But still her thumb moved, perhaps a bit slower. No blood yet.

"Please."

She began to shake her head back and forth, slowly at first, and not in a way that seemed to be in response to his words, but it did seem that her thumb was

slowing.

"Give me the razor, Jennifer. You don't need that. It's not helping. Let me help." He was tired of repeating the words, but they were all he had, these pleas. He prayed that something would strike her, a moment of sense, a clarity in the fog.

Finally her thumb hesitated on the blades, pressing before letting off before pressing again.

"Good. That's good. Just give me the razor. We'll get through this. The pain is bad. The pain is not a good thing right now. I know you think it's helping, that it's bringing you something other than the hatred, but let me do that. Let me be your razor, your distraction."

Will watched her grip loosen on the razor, which was as much an indicator for him to grab it as it was for her to hand it over, and so he reached across the edge of the tub to take it from her. She let it go without resistance.

"Thank you, Jennifer. This is good."

But the distant look was still in her eyes. And moments later, she absently raised her hand to her mouth and bit down on the same pad of her thumb.

"Jennifer, please!" he shouted now, desperation in his voice. "This is ridiculous! You don't need this!" He reached for her hand and held it tight in his. What was he supposed to do? How was he to get through to her? If he—the one who lived through the shooting, her anchor and his—if he wasn't enough, what would bring her from whatever dark precipice this was? What was he supposed to *do*?

She reached forward with her free hand and twisted the shower knob until hot water sprayed across her face and his arm.

"Really? You're going to scald yourself now?" He ducked around the shower door, opening the other side to twist the knob back to lukewarm, raising his hand into the spray to test the temperature. When he decided it was tolerable, he reached back for her hand and urged her to take it from her mouth. The words tumbled now without thought, blindly, as he tried to convince her to see some sense amidst the pain and emotion and fear.

"Please, isn't it better to curl up with me? Isn't that better than this cutting? This hurting yourself? The pain distracts you; I get it. It focuses you. But let me do that. Let me be your distraction. I can do that. Curl up with me. We can watch something or just fall asleep. How is that worse than this? How is that a bad thing?"

In the same way that she released her hold on the razor, she allowed him to take her thumb from her teeth. Will brought her hand back to her side but didn't release his grip, instead holding her tight. He put his other hand on her knee. The corner of the shower, where the runner met the glass door, was digging into his

armpit, but he didn't care. The water sprayed across his arm and shoulder, drenching the top part of his shirt. Her hair hung dark around her face, but finally she looked at him, as if confused to see him there, and for a second, he let himself hope.

A few moments later, she put her head down again, but her hold stayed on his hand, and she made no movements toward the faucet or her teeth.

A few minutes after that, she raised her hand and pushed her hair back from her forehead, closing her eyes against the spray and breathing deeply before the tears came. The sobs were forced, as if from her shoulders, pushing from her body the same way that the sweat seemed to force the darkness from her body earlier, as if the demon traveled in the water and now fled from her mind through her face, mixing, pooling around her bare, white-scarred legs before swirling down the drain. Her sobs came quietly, but the sounds were loud in Will's head. She held tightly to his hand.

When the tears finally stopped and the dazed look fell back to her face, her mouth turning to a frown, he knew for sure that the attack had passed. Will turned the shower off. The faucet stopper dropped and the water gushed for the final time to clear the pipes in the same way that Jennifer had choked the final tears. Will wrapped her in a towel and led her back to bed, where he held her until the sun rose four hours later. The mood would remain, returning to whatever issue prompted it all, turning back to the guilt from which it had emerged, still dwelling on the pain, but this time without the blind and stubborn focus. The rest was frustrating, but the worst was past.

Neither Will nor Jennifer slept much in what remained of the dark hours before the October dawn. Will was exhausted, still wet, and shaky from the adrenaline in his body. But he wasn't going to sleep. Not until he knew that she was fully safe once again.

Somewhere around four thirty, Jennifer said, "I'm sorry for that."

Will responded by putting his mouth to her shoulder and pursing his lips.

"I don't . . ." She shook her head. "I don't know why you're here right now." The pain was still there. Her voice still sounded far away, with the same kind of reluctance that she had when she opened the bathroom door, but there was some reason below the surface that knew, that was aware the entire time, despite the rest of her being forced away, into these boiling clouds and rain showers. But the panic was gone. And this was okay.

Because I love you.

They hadn't said the words yet. He'd wanted to. Nights like tonight. And he wondered if she wanted to as well. But four months was so soon. And he didn't

want it to cause more harm than good. True or not.

"Because I care about you more than anything. More than myself."

She shook her head. "Please don't say that."

"But I do." And it was true. "That's why I'm happy to stay."

"You're lying. You shouldn't. It's too soon, and me, this—how could you care so much about this? This is broken. This is ugly. How could you . . ."

"You know as well as I do there's more to you than this."

"You're lying."

In the gentlest voice he could gather, he said against her skin, "Don't you dare tell me how I feel about you."

She shook her head, and the two fell into silence again.

After what could have been minutes, hours, or days, she said, "Thank you, Will."

But Jennifer didn't believe him. She was more torn, in fact. It wasn't that she was blind to the dedication that he carried for her, or the same dedication that she brought for him. The emotional connection that they shared was undeniable. But she couldn't believe him. How could he go through this with her? To voluntarily deal with this dark part of herself that she understood as little as he did, this irrational, bitchy, mean self? It was what evil had to feel like, to treat someone so selfishly. To disregard his feelings, to put him through Hell at her expense was cruel, uncalled for, and undeserved, no matter how much or how little he loved her.

It was this that she continued to fall back upon, that nearly inspired a few attacks of its own had she not put her foot down against the reasoning.

He was a great guy, Will. Wonderful. She couldn't—at least, not at the moment—see herself with anyone else. (Or, to be honest, see herself putting anyone else through what he'd gone through). But he couldn't be that great. Not great enough to deal with her for this long. Rationally speaking, it had to be a lie. Eventually he would fold.

How does she justify that? Balance a confusion of why he sticks around when he could do so much better, when he could find another girl that wouldn't put him through this kind of misery, despite the crushing implications of such a situation.

But even still, she knew that she loved him too, that she needed him, that this help was necessary, and it was good for her to have someone beside her in the night, someone who cared this much, even if it was Will, even if . . .

Well . . .

So, a few nights later, while he held her in bed, she whispered the words to him and he held her tighter, and in the same language of her hatred and her fear and her

anger, the same language that goes beyond words and exists in the spaces between skin and

letter openers and razor blades and
fingers and flesh,

he told her that he loved her too. That's when his nightmares started.

2.

"And what do you think about the situation?" Jameson asked.

"I really don't mind it," Will said. "Well. I mean, it sucks. It's horrible to watch her going through something like that, and it's horrible to feel helpless against it—even worse that I feel I've somehow contributed to bringing it about. But she's worth it. If she's going to go through it, I'd rather be there."

"But you worry that if you weren't there, perhaps Jennifer wouldn't have to go through it all."

Will nodded and sighed. "I don't like to think about that much. But, yeah."

Overcast afternoon sunlight fell through the windows and into Jameson's office, where Will was sitting for his once-weekly appointment with the therapist. The light had an effect on the place that dimmed its usual calming effect and instead flattened the room into a monochrome that worked against his mood. A lamp glowed pale atop her desk, and another shone next to the couch he was sitting on. Today they seemed to clash against the gray instead of warming it.

"You want to do what's best by her?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe it's best if you leave her."

The words fell against Will's chest before they fell against his ears. He shook his head back and forth as if unconscious of the motion. "Maybe I should."

"Could you, though? Even if you felt you should?"

Will's shaking his head turned more frantic when he met her eyes. "I just don't understand how such a good thing could cause such a problem. It has to work out in the end, right? That's how love works? You focus on what's good, and eventually it overcomes whatever problems come about with it."

"Unless it's not right."

"Our relationship?"

"Yes."

He seemed to consider the question before frowning. "I've dated a couple girls in my first years of college. They didn't last long. Some not much more than a night. Not that I'm proud of that. But Jennifer and I have been going for a few

months now and I, well. I don't see an end."

Jameson nodded.

"At least, not because of the relationship itself."

"And you said that you don't like to think about it? This situation with Jennifer? Leaving her?"

Will shook his head. "When she's bad, I'm there for her no matter the cost. When she's good, we don't focus on it."

"So, if you were to look at your dreams, how might this be showing up?"

Will bit his tongue and sat back in the couch, pulling his feet up under him to sit cross-legged. Propping his chin in his hand, he thought for a number of minutes before he finally spoke. "She's been there. Fuzzy, though. She hasn't done anything. The dreams seem to be about the shooting more than Jennifer."

"Was the shooting about Jennifer?"

He stammered. "How? It was random. The gunman had no connection to her or me. I've been starting to look into it."

"And how's that been going?"

"Slowly so far. School's been distracting."

"Of course."

"But certainly there wasn't any relation to me. Or Jennifer."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, yeah."

"I ask, not because there might be a connection, but because you might think there's a connection. Do you worry that it wasn't random?"

Images and sounds came back to him from his earlier conversation with his father. "It doesn't make much sense. Why me? You know? Why us, why our school, why were we there? Why was HE there?"

"Do you believe that everything happens for a purpose?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Seems a bit unrealistic these days to think there's something intelligent guiding us."

"God?"

"I guess, right? If everything happens for a purpose, then it would have to suggest a man on the mountaintop. I mean, science tells us the world falls apart by nature. If it went the other direction, I'd think that it would have to have something behind it, something apart from the universe."

"The Jungian approach studies the shadow. Perhaps there's a second half of the whole to the universe, one that's working, repressed perhaps, by our science, that manifests to push us in the right direction."

He paused, and Jameson let him think. "I didn't grow up in a very religious

household. I'd like to believe in God or some kind of force, but I'm not sure I can."

"Why's that?"

"Rationality. We're in a science age. We don't need God as much anymore, and he makes less and less sense." Again, Jameson let the silence stretch before Will felt forced to continue. "I mean, I think we still need a god-figure. Some would say we're living in a godless world and that's why we have such war and violence and, you know. School shootings. We've been discussing that in one of my classes. So I want a god. I envy the personal connection that Jennifer seems to have with him. She has a lot of faith. Enough for the both of us. And she tries to bring me in, but it's hard to embrace it, to commit to it, to"—he beckoned with his hand in small circular motions—"lose myself in it, to put my faith in it. I can't force that."

"I think you're not alone in that."

"I'm sure."

"So if you can't force yourself to believe in anything more than rationality, why is it so important that this makes sense? That you figure out why this shooting happened to you?"

"Because it's not over," Will said, on impulse, the words falling from his mouth before his brain could fully process what this meant. Jameson always seemed to enjoy when that happened.

"How is it not over?"

"The dreams."

"If it were over and you were over it, you wouldn't be having these dreams."

"Yes."

"So we have an incident that happened five years ago. It's ended. The man is dead. You're in a very different place now, about to start a new chapter of your life, find a job, settle down and have a family—maybe even with Jennifer—either way. Is this incident really unfinished, or are you not over it?"

"Some of both?" Will thought aloud. "Perhaps it's because I still don't remember what happened. It's unsettled. I can't trust that I've done the right thing."

"Where did this unsettlement come from? This worry that you did something wrong?"

"The dreams."

"Did it come to mind before the dreams?"

"No."

"Then it seems your unconscious mind is trying to tell you something. And it's this same unconscious place that we store repressed memories, those that don't stay well enough away with just suppression. Usually it's the more traumatic memories,

the ones that hurt. In this case, that makes sense."

"So I need to keep listening to these dreams?"

"Like I said last time, yes. But don't become too lost in them either. The unconscious seeks to balance us through timeless universal elements. Being often designed of repression and pain, it can be a scary and frightening place. It's a space where those things we don't want to recognize may lurk. If the waking world is one of order and design, the unconscious is one of chaos and disarray. So be careful. The answers are there, though."

"Should I keep looking into the shooting in, well, reality?"

"Absolutely. It could help to focus you on what the unconscious has to say. It might enable the right areas of your conscious mind to become more receptive."

Will nodded slowly while Jameson leaned forward for his file, pulling out the small stack of handwritten papers that he'd brought with him. For a few minutes, she flipped through the stack, skimming what he'd written. While she did so, Will gazed out the window at the setting sun, which had finally breached the bottom of the overcast sky and brightened the city and small loft office with a temporary, muted orange. He missed the summertime, when the light would last into the deep evening, when the lightning bugs would gather at the edges of the trees and bushes in his parents' backyard and the

forest near Savage Creek High, where he and Adam and Dan would gather between semesters.

The fireflies. The candles. The flickering wicks illuminating faces and their jeers and their anger, their taunts and—no,

this wouldn't be a good time to—

to remember? He was at a therapist's office. His shrink. What better place?

Not during daylight. This wasn't when he should be dreaming--
remembering

Not awake like this.

"Will?"

"Yes," he said, looking up at Jameson.

"You've written down your thoughts about these dreams you've been having?" she asked.

Will nodded. The sheets of paper in her hands were torn from one of the school notebooks that he'd started to keep by his bed. Most times the dreams would awaken him at odd hours of the morning, where falling back to sleep again had turned to an impossibility. Jameson had said that he should write down these dreams, to better remember them. So he had. Often in rough hand, with quick sentences, but it was a start. She called them a mandala of the written kind. An

illustration of his unconscious mind.

"You write these in the third person?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I write in first. Sometimes that feels right. But it's easier in third. They're not easy, these dreams. They sometimes don't even make sense to say that I'm the one in the dreams. It's just easier." He shrugged.

"Is it that you don't feel connected to this version of you in the dreams, or that you don't want to be?"

Will put his face in his hands and rubbed his closed eyelids. "I don't know. It just felt right."

Jameson decided not to push the issue. Not yet anyway. Instead, she switched to a different direction. "What about any kind of revelations? Have the dreams become clearer?"

Nodding, Will said, "Yes. I remember more when I wake up."

"Anything that resounds with you?"

I killed them. I killed them all.

Will shook his head no.

Jameson studied his face and then looked back to the pages. "It's all right if I read through these before our next meeting?"

"That's what I brought them for."

"Good. Thank you." Stacking the papers atop her folder, she closed her notepad and looked at Will. "I think that will end our session. Unless there's anything more you wanted to talk about this week?"

He shook his head again.

3.

Five years ago.

Stanley Davis woke up.

At first all he knew was black, and his first thought was that he was falling.

Second, he knew that he was not alone.

This was an echo of his dream—it must have been. But everything that came to him afterward was a jumble of the nonsensical. His orientation. The gravity. He'd been in bed, next to his wife, at ten o'clock. The couple had dinner and sat down to watch one of their primetime dramas while he graded papers. School began early in the mornings, so they usually got ready for bed with the nine o'clock news running in the background, murmurs of classroom food drives and armed robberies and school shootings—

dreams echoing murmurs.

He was sitting, then. In bed? No. The seat beneath him was a coarse and form-fitting fabric that was rough against his bare skin. He ran a hand across his legs, lap, chest, and up to his face. Coming awake from the fog was not nearly as sudden or fast as he would have expected or wanted. The steering wheel was smooth and hard in front of him. His elbow was propped on the armrest and cup holder.

So he was in his car, then.

The dark seemed to adjust as he ran his hands along the steering wheel, finding the stick shift with his right hand by instinct. He could now make out navy blue highlights across the wheel and the glass of the windshield in front of him. There was no key in the ignition, and it certainly wasn't in his pocket. He couldn't have gone far.

Davis popped open the driver's door and stepped into the night.

Icy air wrapped around his half-naked figure, and the smooth concrete below his foot was so chilled to the touch that it brought almost a burning sensation. He wondered, if it weren't for the cold air, whether he'd have believed for a moment that the ground was hot, like flat concrete coals, some Haitian Hell, a science fiction surface of the sun. The sensations weren't so different between hot and cold, two halves, together as one.

But he knew where he was now as sure as he knew that if he opened the car door any further, it would dent against the metal shelf next to him, and that the lines of boxes along the side of the wall would catch the light from the door window on the other side of the two-car garage. This was his home, and that was a relief. He had no idea how he'd gotten to the garage from his bedroom, what time it was, or why he'd been led here.

Been led, as if there were something guiding him by hand from his bed, slipping out of his sheets so as not to disturb his wife. The echo was not fading. Even as his eyes adjusted to the light, as he knew to expect the shelving to his right and Meredith's Civic in the bay to his left, there was still the presence that he awoke knowing: that someone was there in the garage with him. He fought the impulse to duck behind the edge of his car and hide from the sight of whoever was there in the cold concrete space with him.

Of course, this was ridiculous. There was no one in the garage. These were echoes of a dream that seemed all the more vivid by his lightness of sleep. This was the first instance he'd ever known of sleepwalking. He'd never sleep-walked in college, the one place where strange sleeping habits sometimes become public displays for the entertainment of roommates, suitemates, and floor-mates. He never even talked in his sleep.

Why he still felt this presence though, this idea of another, even after his eyes adjusted, was something else entirely. Or maybe not as much something else as he might like it to be.

Davis pushed open the door connecting the garage to the kitchen and slipped back into the quiet house. Tonight wasn't so different from the night a few days earlier when he'd awoken thinking that the house was on fire, the smell of smoke so thick on the air that he could taste it in the back of his mouth. Tonight the air in the house was odorless, the kitchen only emanating the smells of their noodle casserole for dinner.

He took his time through the house, allowing his eyes to adjust to the light from the outside in each room that he could, watching for misplaced shadows, moving figures, something that might point toward some kind of explanation of his mysterious walking and paranoia. The worry only made it worse. Of course. Like walking around an empty house searching for some figure or presence would add an extra level of security and comfort. Of course he was seeing shadows in every dim corner and finding concern about every dark end of the furniture and every room with limited light coming in the window.

It would be better if he just went back to bed, assuring himself that the three doors in and out of the small house were locked and secure.

Perhaps he'd better check, just to make sure.

No. He was being ridiculous. What he needed now was a good night's sleep, not unending paranoia. He didn't go and unlock all of the doors in the house while sleepwalking. That's crazy.

At least, that's what he thought until, from down the hall, only steps away from the master bedroom, he heard the click of a latch and a high-pitched sound from the front of the house.

Davis swore beneath his breath as his heart seized in his chest. Impossible.

Though moments before he was trying to convince himself to keep walking forward, now he had to convince himself not to, not to burst into the bedroom and slam the door behind him, not to retreat to safety. But a door was a problem. It shouldn't be open—or *opening*—at all.

Davis moved to the end of the hall, trying not to announce a hello to whomever might be sneaking inside, afraid that the sound might wake his wife, especially when it was likely only . . . only what? The wind? Every door should have been locked tight, as he made sure every night. Savage Creek was a small town with no real crime rate to be concerned about, but as with any bustling college environment, there was plenty to be concerned about, and it was better to be safe than sorry.

When he got to the living room, he saw that the back door to their slow-rotting porch was still secure, but he could feel a draft, cool air against his skin. The front door behind him was closed and locked as well. He didn't even need to check the latch, but could see from a few feet away that the deadbolt was twisted at a ninety degree angle the way it stopped every time he engaged the lock.

That left only the garage door that he'd just come through moments before into the kitchen. Davis took another ten steps until his bare feet met cool tile instead of the worn carpet, and saw that indeed, the garage door was standing open, breathing the metallic concrete air into the house.

Davis's blood ran cold and his breath stalled.

Had he left it open?

His mind killed the question as soon as it was posed. No. Of course not. He closed the door behind him. At this point he was awake and functioning, not still drifting through some sleepy place of memory and dreams and forgetfulness. But the open door would beg to differ.

So he was either dreaming or, well, dreaming. He was either so sleepy that he didn't realize he left the door standing wide open, or he was awake enough the entire time that this presence was more than a dream, which left him in a strange kind of in-between feeling of being outside of himself and his home. That this entire process, from car to garage to kitchen to garage again might just be some elaborate fantasy? That he was safe below the covers, the feel of his wife's naked thigh against his own?

This didn't feel right. He was awake, right? He could feel the nerve endings set in his fingertips. He could feel his breath burning in his chest and the soles of his feet straining against the cold tile, the goosebumps crawling across his flesh and the chills that racked his body. He didn't even realize he was shuddering like a leaf in the breeze until he took this assessment, but he felt equally as close to snapping and blowing away

the same way that he felt outside of himself, that his body and spirit might break, and one or the other or both might just up and drift.

He was here, in the kitchen. That was right. He did not doubt that. But this experience of the world was

different. It was wrong. His feelings, sensations, thoughts, at once his own, and obviously so, were too abnormal. Too different. What was this? Presences? Leaves? Drifting breezes.

It was bullshit was what it was.

Davis almost slammed the door, thought better of it, and let it slip into place, latching quietly.

Go to bed, Stanley. Re-glue the stem to tree branch, fight the coming winter. Go to sleep and wake up in the world you've always known. That starts now by ignoring the feeling that is gradually becoming less and less escapable—the feeling that there is a man in your house who followed you from the garage and is now watching you from inside the kitchen.

4.

God damn them,
damned.

Students passed where Will sat watching. He was on campus, sitting under the long awning between the library and the student center, where he was at least, in some part, sheltered from the stiff October breeze that ran through the buildings on campus. Vindication and violation were on his mind.

It shouldn't be obvious that he's on his college campus in northeastern America. He could be in the opposite corner, the mid-west, your town, your campus, your alma mater, your mind. This could be Savage Creek High, or wherever you went to school. The students are the same. Their day is the same. They attend classes in whatever major or focus they've decided to specialize in. Many think that they are unhappy, that school is tiresome, that their weekends are their relief, and if only they can finish their four years, they might find peace again. Or their futures are equally as stressful, equally as blank, equally as tiresome. Perhaps this is what Jameson, his psychologist, might identify as an overcorrection. College is supposed to be a place of hope, of future, or molding the self. That it should be otherwise was concerning but appropriate.

Just the same, Will felt outside of it all, separate. He had since the first day he'd wandered the campus alone, sneaking glances at the map he'd done his best to memorize while back in his dorm room. He'd been on campus once before, during freshman orientation, but having been shuffled along predesigned paths from building to building, the landscape had never actually sunk into his memory. Now, his stresses were differently founded, differently rooted. They were manifesting as something different and darker, some hybrid blend of imagination and fear, memory and, what? The supernatural?

The thought shuddered from his head with the next gust of wind.

He wasn't sleeping well. He had dark purple spots under his eyes, and the lids seemed to droop heavy over the open spaces. The lack of sleep turned his stomach, and so he didn't care to eat. He'd been waking with mild panic attacks and

countered their effects by turning on the television in his living room and watching old movies to keep his mind preoccupied with anything but the dreams and thoughts. He was irritable today. His skin crawled, and he fought the desire to lash out against the constant buffeting wind and the babble of the student traffic.

He studied the corner of campus. The trees were explosive shades of orange, and red vines crept about the side of the student center like blood falling, the world on its head. The sky was dark blue, with stretched gray clouds dragged from some place near the horizon to some place just above the slatted overhang above his head. Most students made their way between classes with their heads down against the wind, the chill of the air hinting of some winter storm in the distance, unseen perhaps.

Will imagined gunmen among them. How easy it would be to take them one by one, to take advantage of their exposure in routine, their security in a lack of imagination toward the unthinkable. Even here, he too could convince himself it was at best only imaginable. Unlikely, despite its ease. School shootings were rare, despite the bullet that went through his skin nearly seven miles from here, despite his dead friends. If he actually believed in lightning striking twice, he'd be in a ball where the brick met the concrete at the base of the library wall, wrapping shadows, trying to stay out of view of the roof atop the biology building. How long until the police came, he wondered? Until someone might disarm the man, sacrificing his body for the sake of others? There were a couple hundred people that passed through the underpass, toward the coffee shops, the restaurants, the bus hubs or ticket counters. How many would act?

Was there such darkness in possibility alone? The sun shone dimmer. The few Halloween decorations that hung near the entrance to the library did no more than leer at the memory

that blended

into the day of the shooting.

Will was sitting against the hallway wall, the bricks pressing against his back and his legs starting to go to sleep. He would have to move them soon. He snuck glances at Jennifer when she wasn't looking. They'd been casually dating for the last few months, but it hadn't gotten serious. They were both busy, she with church, he with—well, if it were up to him, they'd be a lot more serious than they were, but he was patient. Jennifer was writing notes in her notebook, and before them were spread a number of worksheets and outlines and notes that their teacher had printed for them. They'd just finished their unit on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and were beginning a unit focusing further east, toward Indian tradition. Their conversation had strayed.

Jonesy was complaining about the final paper for the Conrad unit, the deadline for which was two days past. "He's full of shit if he says there are tons of tropes and devices on every page. He might have held up a highlighted page, but I'm calling bullshit. I can't find one."

Will wasn't taking the new unit seriously yet. He'd have weeks yet to catch up before he'd have to test over it, and he was confident enough that he could turn out a paper when the time came.

His thoughts trailed off when he saw the quick movements Markus and Jonesy made, almost at once: the same motion, the same moment, twin-like to the last. It would have struck him as amusing if he had time, if for just a moment—

a snapshot of their brotherhood as twins, a momentary mirror before—

the sound of the gunshot split the air as Markus twisted and Jonesy's look of shock erased all of that.

"Markus?"

His word hung in the air the same way that Markus did before he sagged against the floor in a caricature of a position, his knees propped under him and his chin on the papers spread before him, as if he were stunned into a moment of worship or religious ecstasy.

Will lingered on the comparison as he watched the thinning numbers of students passing before him on campus. You walk onto campus with a bomb and wonder who scatters, who freezes, and who throws himself at you, wrestles whatever mechanism you hold in your hand. You wonder how it feels for the bullet to slice like a dull knife blade, tearing. You wonder if it will feel like enough at the end, that you did what you had to do, that you made a difference.

The image of the child tripping on the concrete outside the home on Halloween.

Buddhist philosophy insisted that there was no deeper inner self that persisted in uniqueness or immortality, that held no aspect of the divine, but instead reflected the changing nature of the world, the emptiness of all things. Jennifer disagreed in the silent way that she did when he approached the idea with her one night over homework. She smiled to herself while looking at the ground, through the ground, as if the gears really were turning, her thoughts organizing. Her faith told her differently, and she understood this in a deep and personal way. "Of course there is a soul," she said. "That's where love comes from."

Two weeks earlier, Jennifer had said, "And me, this—how could you care so much about this? This is broken. This is ugly. How could you . . ."

"You know as well as I do there's more to you than this."

"Love doesn't come from empathy shared from human being to human being? From an understanding, that we're all the same, that each should want happiness for the other as much as for himself? If we're equal," Will said, echoing the words from his class.

"I have a common atomic makeup with a tree," she laughed. "You don't see me kissing any." She touched Will's chin and brought her face near to his, and that was about where their conversation had stopped.

Will remembered the bomb on the man's chest. It looked like a movie. The world had turned to a lie, a play. These things did not happen, not to his friends. Even so, despite the lie, the blood-freezing panic held far more immediate reality.

Hold the weapon and feel its weight, the heaviness of steel and the bullets in the magazine, like a reminder of the firepower it takes to snuff out a life. The wind whipped at Will's face as if to beat him into memory or realization. Unseen hands, screaming faces,

the image of the trees flickering by as he sprinted, the sound of Adam and Daniel's breathing fast in his ears, the flicker of candles like fireflies that burned so hot that should he hold his hand above them, the heat would sear his flesh.

His hand. He didn't realize that he'd been holding it, outstretched, fingers cocked, in front of his body, until he came back from the memory, as if with the weight of a

1911 Colt .45 automatic
weapon.

They were all dead, every one of them. Some might have given him strange looks if they'd noticed. Some even that rush of fear, seeing this young man holding his hand before him, as if with a weapon, his face angry, no friends around that he might be joking with. Perhaps he was getting their attention across the plaza,

but he looked so angry, so irritated.

They were all dead. Skeletons walking into an abyss. Born to die, every one of us. To be so afraid of that void, the cosmic joke, comic, laugh.

Boom. Pull his index finger and cock back the hammer, blow away the smoke like dust, ash to ash, melt, flaky skin, blood and fluid turn to dirt and rainwater, give life to the plants. Born to die. To be so afraid of that—

It all comes down on him, the crossing of the two worlds, the realization that there might be spirits here, continuing on their way in whatever underworld
hell

they may wander, watching the living, longing, laughing, missing.

What was so valid about this place, so visceral? Was it in the manifestation, the taking of those concepts so high, so hard to grasp, and making them real? The love between two young people, that burning desire within the flesh,

the same desire that crisscrossed his arms and back, gave him shivers and chills, the frustration that made him want to

just shoot—

scream, he meant. The damned stress that none of it matters.

Homework, grades, passing college and getting a job to pay the rent and eat the food, just to push it off for a little while, to survive just a little bit longer, to stave off the inevitable, to live,

to feel that feeling crawling within your

loins, those places where the tickles shiver and

kill them, fuck them, live while you can.

Pull the hammer back, pull the trigger back, live when another dies, create, destroy. It's all the same. One comes from another. Live outside of time.

(He had no idea how long he sat like this, his arm before him. When he came to, he hoped it had only been a few moments, that he'd gone mostly unnoticed, his embarrassment breaking his frustrated meditation.)

It really doesn't matter. You create, you destroy, in the same instant. For one to exist, it must stop existing. He now was alive and dead at once. Traveling through Hell while here,

while here he sat, miming a weapon, miming godhood.

Pull the trigger.

Look at me. I am God for all it matters to you. The big man's voice and words. The face in the mirror, his own, grinning back at him in the blackness, leering.

He let his hand go slack and for a moment put it against his knee before bringing it back to the air in front of him, this time as if reaching. How many were gathered before him? A reversal of the vigil, a crowd of those passed, reaching in a moment, twist the world, turn, catch the curtain's edge,

But that was being ridiculous, of course. There was no crowd of spirits around him; there were only echoes

of comatose dreams or anniversary nightmares.

There were no whispers of

(empty spaces)

souls.

And that was that.

CHAPTER SEVEN **ad infinitum**

1.

So. This is Hell. Call it what you like. Place it where you like. This is mine. It's vast. And it's endless.

I watch the place, reflected in my

They'd been walking for what could have been days. Will didn't know there was a sun in this place—a real sun, not a streetlamp—until it pierced the horizon between the trees to their right, ascending with a glow so gradual that it wasn't until the sky had lightened enough for the clouds to burn along the edges that Will realized the dawn was breaking. It had only been hours then, only a night that they'd been walking.

I'm sitting against the hallway wall, the bricks pressing against my back and my legs starting to go to sleep. I will have to move them soon.

The forest around them was quiet in the way of a void. There were no sounds

of the birds in the trees or of insects in the distance. There was only a hum, not so much an electronic one—the constant hum of a refrigerator or your desktop computer—but the hum in the way that your ears hum against an empty space, the sound behind the waves in the conch shell, just past a place of echoed creation that suggests emptiness in a way eternal, ever stretching, a place where Will's emotions had not touched, had not thought to touch, a place less immediate than here. That was a place for creative power, of gods probably.

Its emptiness fell back on Will in a way that made him cold, despite the humidity of the place and the gusts of hot air that even in the forest struck him like bomb blasts.

His legs were itching in his already stiff jeans, and his feet hurt. They had long ago begun to blister where the fabric of his shoes was tight against the back of his heel and the sides of his big toes. They'd rubbed the skin away gradually enough that, while, yes, they were awfully bothersome right now, he dreaded stopping and starting again, when the pain would start anew, raw and delicate. The same went for his lower back and calves, which had begun to strain under the steady walking, footstep after footstep after godawful footstep, to where?

This could last days. Years. Months. Eternity. He supposed it already could have, and that it didn't matter. This was a place of emotion, not of time, and in worrying about the time, it only tightened the sensation within his chest, the sensation that, try as he might to take a deep breath and relax, only seemed to move and then linger in the middle part of his back, burrowing deep.

The big man had been silent the last few—

The big man had been silent. This, too, was as bothersome for Will as the burrowing in his back. It perpetuated the already infinite, like sitting in solitary confinement. There was no conversation to pass the time, to stimulate his mind.

There were only trees

passing in slow motion,

as if running too

goddamn

slow.

Look left, to smile at Dan, and laugh when you almost hit a tree. But it wasn't Dan; it was the big man, staring, silent, blank.

This was Hell then, to walk forever, until the flesh rubbed bare from his feet and his bones turned brittle to break, his body falling to follow until he dragged the meat from each bone, and all he could do was wriggle until he stopped, decomposing as he sank into the hard-packed soil below.

Where are we going? he asked.

Into the ground, the big man said.

* * *

He supposed it was his fault that got him in this mess anyway, what with the school shooting and these destructive tendencies, and the inability to find a strength in himself to overcome his shortcomings, his timidity. He didn't remember Dan, or Adam, but could remember them running through

slow motion footage,

memory,

the forest, together. Humoring perhaps, drunken. Could they stand him? Were they running from him? He laughed at the notion and then looked to the big man again to find him staring still, navigating the trees as if knowing where each was placed.

You done this before? Will asked.

Making it up as we go along.

Jennifer remained with them, and sometimes Will stared at her as long as he could without running into the trees. She stared back in much the same way as the big man, and for a while Will had avoided eye contact with her in general. The gaze said too much, and spoke to a part of him he didn't understand and didn't remember, that made the backs of his eyeballs burn.

Jennifer. Her name was Jennifer. But who was she?

She'd tuck her hair behind her ear, where it never quite stayed in place, coming from behind, swirling back around her face while she tried to write so that she was constantly pushing it back. She wore tight jeans and running shoes that matched her white hoodie sweatshirt. It wasn't so long before that it had been enough just to keep my shin against hers at the table next to me in English, at first barely, as if there were electricity in the denim against denim, a psychic connection, a sharing.

That it might be enough to find a connection with her again, he wished was so. Whoever she was, more than a name and a still image, lips alternating between being pursed in thought and drawing into a side smile, she was comfort, a safety that this place didn't provide. Still, he was afraid to speak with her, afraid of what the big man might do if he tried, afraid that she might break, scatter in the way that he first worried, when he first woke up in the dark, when

he'd built something fragile from the darkness, afraid that if he said

hello?

the sound might resonate, send vibrations that might shatter the world, snap twigs fall through, the stones and ground giving way to a darkness, as before,

floating, embryonic, lost again. He was afraid the sound might destroy her calm, her reverie. Scare her, shatter her, break her.

So still, he didn't speak.

* * *

Embers on the ends of broken branches beneath their feet glowed at the tips, the same color as the orange light that had come to the horizon around them, as if the insides of the trees bled the same light of the sun, trees within a tree branch, *ad infinitum*. Step on the kindling, break a dead kid's fever dream. The leaves were wet and slippery on the ground and so the fires did not spread. The air around the trees stank of sulfur. The muck that Will could see on the ground next to the few spot fires was green, and tinges of white surrounded the small puddles. For a while he'd tried not to breathe the stink of the place through his nose, so as not to gag on the flavor of the air, but long ago—a couple trees back—*ad infinitum*,

he'd given up, and now took the air through his nose with a hardened resolve. Conform to the environment. Go deep. Find some kind of harmony in this place, and you'll find peace within.

A dull mist wandered about the trunks and approached the group in the way of shy animals. When it did nuzzle against Will, growing thick around his legs and trailing along his forearms, his skin prickled and itched. The flesh around the burn on his arm grew angry and stung.

What is this? he said. But the big man ignored him.

He tried to keep his arms from the mist. Like trying to forget an itch, the mist persisted. Will couldn't tear his mind from the treetops above him, where the stuff mingled free against the leaves, popping and hissing. Small green gasps.

As Will was staring upward, the ground began to descend, and for a moment he felt stretched, broken backward, and he stumbled. The rock cut through soil like bone, tree roots exposed, and as it evened out a few miles later, the trees finally began to thin, staggering down the slope into the darkness of the dawn land, leaning backwards to resist the draw of whatever lay ahead.

Ahead. Beyond them, the land spread in eternal direction, an endless plain peppered with trees for the first few miles before those trees became a rarity that reached and screamed alone. The sky was purple in the west, the clouds above them like coals. In the empty space, warbling shrieks rang, limping along the air, meeting a human ear before,

nothing, a tree falling in a forest.

It wasn't until the ground had finally leveled out and the sun had breached the

clouds behind them, casting light on the land through the foliage, adding a flame to the coals above, that they finally made out the form a hundred yards in front of them, waiting, still and alone on the plain.

As they moved closer, it gradually became clearer. Spiked into the ground, a gray wooden cross rose some dozen feet into the air. A figure dangled from it, covered in torn and ragged brown cloth. Dark bones curled for hands. The shadowed face was hard to see against the flaming heavens.

Will looked to his left and saw nothing. To the right was only the continuation of the plain. They were alone in the field with it. Jennifer had finally turned her gaze from Will to the entity before them, and the big man was rocking back and forth, not in fear or reverence, but like a child on Christmas morning, excitement bubbling beneath the surface of his skin. This is good.

Oh?

Yes, he grinned. Well done. Will, this is your gatekeeper.

2.

I don't have to do this, Will pleaded, unhappy with the way his voice cracked on the vowels.

What do you mean you don't?

I mean, this is wrong. This is twisted. I'd rather walk.

It's not about what you want, the big man said. Besides, this is your fantasy. This is your sandbox.

Then let me go away. Make it go away. He gestured at the scarecrow ahead of them.

You don't get to make this go away, the big man said, turning to Will. The lines in his face seemed to scatter like cracks in glass when his mouth turned down and his eyes narrowed. You're suffering for your sins. This isn't Disneyland.

I don't remember whatever it is that you're talking about!

Do you remember Jennifer? the big man said, throwing one of his arms wide in her general direction. Dream girl? Angelic? Idyllic? Made your earth spin. He pin-wheeled a finger in the smoky air.

I—Will stuttered, sneaking a glance in Jennifer's direction. She was still staring at the scarecrow, ignoring the conversation between the two. Maybe. I don't know. I don't remember.

You don't remember? The big man pursed his lips tight and breathed deeply. She's the reason you're here.

The young man shook his head frantically, as if to clear some detail, shake the

dust, find a realization, clear up the situation with a sentence that begins with a laugh and a smile and a palm to the head. My God, you thought THAT was why I'm here? What news. What an obvious misunderstanding. Let me show you how you confused this all. We'll laugh about it together. This was good fun, yes? We can laugh about it together. We can laugh.

The big man wasn't laughing. He was glaring, the intensity of his gaze rooting Will where he stood. Will didn't want to believe this. He didn't want to find this man correct, to find that he was wrong, to be condemned, to walk.

Of course you've forgotten.

Why?

Hell's designed for punishment. Not atonement.

Will shook his head and looked at Jennifer, then at the cross. The scarecrow's cloaked hood was turned his way, and Will felt like a zoo animal. Worse. Alone. But watched. A smile teased unseen lips.

Hell's beckoning! Can't you taste it?

Stop.

He wants you.

You're full of shit.

The big man smacked his lips and hissed, his tongue between his teeth.

Tell me I'm wrong.

Will tried to remember. He tried to force some kind of a mental picture to light. Something that made sense. Something that wasn't Jennifer pursing her lips, something that wasn't Jonesy saying, "He's full of shit if he says there are tons of tropes and devices on every page." Something that wasn't Adam laughing from behind the group, texting on his cell phone, saying,

"Well look at you two lovebirds."

It was September and the evening air was chilly despite the hot day that had preceded it. Electricity built across the horizon in a swelling cloud bank, and lightning crackled across the sky as it slowly moved toward Savage Creek. The stadium was filled with an audience of family members, parents, and high school kids wearing windbreakers and letterman's jackets, not expecting the storm and hoping that it might miss them. It was a Friday night and the Ravens were playing their cross-town rivals, the Wildcats, for their fourth game of the season.

Earlier, when Dan and Will had hopped from Will's black pickup, Dan had said, "That's the smell of Heaven, friend." He sighed and took a deep breath of the ozone as though it were water. Dan had danced between the cars with a crooked style that breathed a confidence and carelessness that Will had always been envious

of. When they got to the stands, Adam stood and shouted from the student section.

"Ah, Billiam, Sweetheart," he said, putting his hands on Will's shoulders and kissing the air on both sides of his cheeks. Will turned away before making like he was punching Adam in the gut. Adam put Will's neck in a headlock and pretended to pound Will's face into his knee.

"Down in front, please!" an irritated parent shouted from somewhere behind them.

"Hate for him to miss the calisthenics," Dan muttered.

Will gasped at the toxic smell, choking on the slow rot flavor instead of the electric air at the stadium on the night—

"Well look at you two lovebirds," Adam said.

It was halftime. Adam was coming back from the concession stand with a flimsy plastic tray of nachos and a cola. Jennifer was next to Will, their legs touching in the crowded section, their backs pressed against the metal barrier. Will had intercepted Jennifer on her way up from the front row, where she'd been cheering with her friends.

"You're not leaving, are you?" he'd asked.

She shook her head, but again with the smile. "Wasn't ready for this front coming in. Don't have a jacket." She was wearing a black t-shirt that had a red raven embroidered across the front, and her hands were pressed into her pockets.

"No, here," Will said, already shrugging off his jacket. "Wear mine."

Jennifer protested, and the wind was cold on Will's arms, but he refused her objections. "I'm fine. You know. Tough guy." He grinned against Jennifer's frown.

"I feel bad."

"No! Just block the wind for me?"

At this, she laughed and stepped into the empty space where Adam had been standing five minutes before. Next to Will, Dan smiled but didn't speak.

I would never, Will said, forcing a shiver down his back where the hot air wrapped him, and his heart beat double to adjust for the change.

Well, the big man said, raising his eyebrows. You would. And you did.

Later, there was a second half. There was cheering and fight songs. There was Adam making every suggestive eye movement, hand motion, and joke he could volunteer to Will when he thought Jennifer wasn't looking. There was Will wishing

Adam would leave them be and Dan taking the hint after the third quarter, leading their clowning friend toward a different batch of acquaintances. There was a winner and a loser, and there was a scoreboard with numbers changing and growing. There was Jennifer leaning close to hear Will talking, and there was the smell of the conditioner in her hair, and there was her, handing him a piece of paper with her phone number written on it. There was Jennifer catching his hand before rejoining her friends and giving it a momentary squeeze that he thought about for the rest of the night, and after that he fell

against the ground, coughing at the new onslaught of ashen air and—

No. The big man had hit him in the stomach. He couldn't take a deep breath.

Don't you get it? he yelled. Don't you understand that remembering only makes this place worse? It only makes what you DID that much worse. You live here now. You deserve punishment. I can't even promise a hope of salvation because that would defeat the point.

Will pressed his face against the ground and breathed in the smell of the earth. The odor was sour, the way vegetables go sour when left in the fridge too long. He tried to exhale and found that he couldn't. His body refused to expel this place.

He looked up. The big man crouched above him, dark against the pre-dawn sky. Jennifer was above him, staring down at him with her eyebrows raised in a way that would be pitying if he felt like she cared. It was as if she'd given up on him. As if she hadn't even been there to begin with. Had she known him. Or this place.

Jennifer?

Beyond her was the southern sky. He twisted in the dirt and looked back at the rising slope, the trees on their march. The forest seemed dense and uninviting, as desolate a place as the plain, and as far from the glowing street lamps and duplex houses and nestled high schools as the sun in the sky behind it all. A memory of a town melting on the surface of the sun, the trees, the pumpkin shell, a glowing Jack-o'-lantern. What he once knew.

They were alone here.

He'd visited Colorado once, the summer after third grade. In the southern part of the state, between Colorado Springs and Pueblo, the plains stretched for what could have been decades in each direction. He'd been studying the Native American Indians the prior semester, the movements west and the new frontier. He imagined the Indians riding through these same plains, not even ranch land back then, but wild. Eternal, like windy Wyoming to the north. There were scattered settlements and forts, sure, but the only mode of transportation was horse-powered, slow, and lonely.

Was it intimidating, he wondered, to have the world stretching about you, no roads, no signs, no maps? There were only the stars and the setting sun, the scrub brush and the wild animals. Coyotes. Buffalo. Wolves probably. As a child, this notion terrified him. That you could become lost in this place, with not even the Rocky Mountains to guide you. So the mountains were west. So what?

Here, his mountains were east. His horizon was west. The sun moved too slow to matter.

Lose yourself. The sky is too large above. The world too hostile. There are only days on end. No cars, no company. Only confidence in what's come before, in yourself, in finding civilization.

Here? What came before? What civilization was he pursuing? What company was this? Broken memories like pottery shards in a twenty-first century dig. Suggested histories. Eternal atonement. Put my pieces in a museum,

mausoleum

moratorium

suspension of his bones, his parts, his mind, his self.

This is what it came to, then?

His lungs began to pump again, and he breathed the salty dust from the ground, and it dried on the inside of his mouth against the sores and gummy patches. He crunched it in his teeth as he pressed himself to his knees.

This is your home.

3.

First, there was the scarecrow. When Will looked up from the ground, he saw the thing, now down from the cross. In its face was stringy burlap. The strands of fabric were like twisted branches forming a charred bird's nest, wrapping around each other, trapping a blackness, masking a beast. It was not so much that the hood of the twisted burlap hid some entity in the depths, a face that would embody a person, a symbol of who or what it was, because it was not a thing. It was a space, a fabric. It was full in the way that an empty glass is full. It was a single entity the way the screams in the distance were a single entity.

Second, there was nothing. The noise around and inside Will had stopped completely, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose, a shiver building at the base of his skull. His fingers went numb.

Well, look at you two lovebirds.

A whine brought Will back to the borderland, and he saw the scene from above, looking down. An out-of-body experience, almost. Not that he was so sure he had a body to begin with. This was just the way that things were.

When he felt the pain, the nervous electric current, it was only then that he realized that his hands were impaled, that he was on the cross. His chest burned with a spreading heat. His breath came in flaring gasps, as if the air had alit in flame. It was easier if he took shallow gasps, but his sobs made that difficult. The spikes in his palms pulled at his flesh, forcing themselves against bone, dragging and ripping his limbs apart. As if acting on their own, his fingers reached toward the tip of the nail to squeeze, grip—something to alleviate the fire. His bones moved against the steel and contracted with a white flash, seizing violently. His feet burned and itched and he tried to press his weight onto them too, to alleviate the pain in his chest and hands and shoulders, but to no avail. The same pain was held in them, shifting from one end of a limb to another as he wriggled from side to side.

He arched his back against the white, shoving his feet into the wood, feeling each splinter impale his soles while the steel tore at his palms. His eyes streamed and burned, the skin stretching wide below his sockets. The gurgling in his throat and the burning in his chest continued their exodus from his body, fleeing in a plume of spit with the sound of a scream.

Will slammed his head back on the cross as he tried to push through the pain, only to exacerbate it further. His eyes danced with twirling black and white stars and blue-green nebulae.

Below him, the big man watched, crouched against the ground, his fists pressed against his face and his expression reflecting something of fascination, devastation, glee. Jennifer stood a few feet behind the big man, and she looked as if she were trying to fight against tears, to keep a straight face, to be a passive observer.

The scarecrow rose above the ground before the cross, levitating, its arms widespread as if in mimicry of the boy, and hung in the air before Will. Its clothing hung like strips of meat, and there were no legs that dangled below the folds of cloth.

Will's scream broke when the scarecrow's arms shot forward from their spread position, the thin black hands grabbing at Will's head.

The air in front of his eyes exploded.

The pain in his body was forced to a focal point behind his eyes. His mouth remained open, frozen, but emitted no sound.

The scarecrow whispered. Will could not hear his words, but he thought,

Well look at you two lovebirds.

4.

Will stood on the forested beach where he first met Jennifer.

He wore clean black jeans and a t-shirt. His hair hung wet and loose around the sides of his head. His shoes sank into the sand. The water on his right was the color of silver steel, reflecting the clouds above him, lining the underside of the sky. Raindrops fell around him, the sand a darker shade of brown and gray than it was on that summer day. The normally soft sound of the waves was hard and loud. Each wave lapping at the shore was an angry animal, clawing up the sand, ripping it apart, and smearing it back along the beach before the water faded back into itself again.

A dark figure wandered toward him from further up the coast.

As he watched it come closer, Will could tell that it was a girl, long hair wet but swaying through the air, her body thin beneath the wet clothes.

Jennifer.

His heart beat twice as quickly. She was okay; this was good. He'd made it out of this place. Was this—was he awake? Were they—

Will. Jennifer spoke from fifty yards away, her voice carrying through the rain. The sound was haunting and flat.

Jennifer?

She stopped twenty feet in front of him and said again, Will.

What—

She brought a finger to her lips and smiled behind it. She lowered her chin and watched him under her eyelashes. Her eyes were dark.

Pretty lousy time we're having, wandering around the gates of Hell. Her words were crisp and rose in inflection, uncaring, aloof.

Will didn't know what to say. His stomach sank and he shivered in the rain.

She turned and walked a slow circle around Will, never removing her eyes from his face. This is the Devil's land. Souls burn and bleed here, godless and hopeless.

Will felt like prey being circled. He wanted to reach out to Jennifer and stop her, to hold her close.

There is no God here but Satan. Her words took Will like a punch in his gut.

Jennifer?

We're so alone.

She angled her walk inward, toward Will.

God's abandoned us.

No, Jenn, this isn't what you believe, you—
Don't tell me what I believe! Her eyes widened in a sudden surge of emotion and her face tensed.

Will clenched his jaw and stared at her.

Jennifer continued her walk, now three feet from him. She reached out and touched Will's shoulder. He flinched.

God put you here to burn, Will.

Will's lip curled. Don't talk like that, Jennifer. It's not like you.

She slunk behind him, trailing her hand around his shoulder. But you believe it. You know it. No god who loves you would send you here. She ran her hands along the back of his shoulder blades and then above, to the front of his neck. The blood in Will's stomach froze and ran cold into his limbs when her hands touched his bare skin. Isn't that right?

A pressure built in Will's chest. This isn't you.

Isn't it? The way the world's been warped these last few hours for you, I didn't think anything would surprise you anymore. Especially since you're already—she flicked Will's temple—a little fucked up in the head.

A chill ran up the back of Will's neck and he felt something inside of him give. He clenched his fist. She continued pacing around his left side now, each step slow and deliberate, her hands working around his other shoulder. The places where she had touched him were beginning to sting in the wet drizzle.

Fine, Will said.

Fine, what? Jennifer's voice was silky next to his ear. Fine, "I don't care if you're acting like normal or not" fine? Or "you're right, God hates me" fine? Or even "let's get this shitstorm happening" fine?

Will glared at her from the corner of his eye. His mind rolled. You're not Jennifer.

Now standing in front of him, she looked deep into his eyes, her grin faltering, her eyes turning down at the corners.

Will? Of course it's me. Your one and only, right?

Will felt his rage run back to the pit of his stomach. Tears gathered behind his eyes.

Jennifer, stop. Is it really—

She reached to his shoulders again and pulled him into her embrace, her small form pressing into his. Will wrapped his arms around her, feeling her skin below the wet fabric of her shirt, smelling her hair, the coconut shampoo brought out in the wet mist.

It'll be okay, he thought.

Then she screamed and dug her fingers into his back, her mouth against his ear, ringing against his eardrum, the sound so loud it became physical and painful. Will pushed her off, struggled with her arms, fingers clawing at his shirt and skin as he stumbled to the wet sand, shoving it in clumps toward her as he tried to scramble away.

Back and forth, emotions clouded his mind. Rising to replace his comfort was the hollow sadness of loss and confusion. His stomach hurt. He wanted to scream. Stop it, he whimpered.

Jennifer grinned above him, her hair blowing back in the storm.

Stop. His words came out with a sob.

Stop it, she imitated.

Will gathered a deep breath. Jennifer! Please!

She grinned, and within that grin, memories, the way she shyly bit her lip when she smiled so big, within the motion, he—

Standing on her front porch, the light off, just her eyes shining in the darkness, their nervous smiles, his hand on her chin. Lowering his mouth to hers, Jennifer meeting him halfway without hesitation or restraint. The softness of her lips moving against his, the way his mouth caught on hers, it seemed to last a lifetime. Finally stepping back and looking into her eyes,
those eyes, black, shining, her—

Memories, rising,
smearing.

The first time he saw her,
he knew her

from his school. She was a year younger than him, a junior, but he'd seen her at various after-school programs: once-weekly honor society meetings and tutoring offered by Advanced Placement students for struggling freshmen. That had all been in passing, though, and indeed, she'd made an impression on him, but here it was different. Out of the context of the sea of people passing by day, where distractions were academic and sarcastic, to see her in the middle of summer break at the beach was altogether different.

They called this place a beach, and in the sense that there was sand and water, it was. But it was not like the rocky beaches to the east, or the Carolina vacation spots a long day's drive to the south. A river made its way from the hills to the west and trailed through the northern country that separated Savage Creek from the other big cities, in the same way it separated much of the smaller old farming

communities from two centuries before. When it hit the flatter lands, the river widened, and from spring to summer its banks filled and swelled into a trickling tree-filled oasis. Perhaps ten years ago the place was secluded and remained a place of secrecy for lovers, for teens escaping for a weekend of drinking, or for the local outdoorsy club of friends. But in the way of seclusion, word of mouth spread, and the beach became the popular summer hangout for college and high school kids alike.

Will sat below the branches of the trees along the edge of the ever-receding dark, sandy bank of the river, where the calm waters moved slowly by, the beach forming a small inlet that stretched far enough to allow larger numbers. He couldn't imagine what this place would be like over the weekend of the Fourth of July, where vacation calls to the working families and the bored students. The trees tangled thick on both ends of the beach, and thirty yards across the river they twisted, as if they were protecting something far more magical or far darker, as if from a child's fairy tale. Maybe it was the magic of the sunlight striking each cresting wave, the way fingertips might catch the light when brushing against an arm. The romance manifested in this place seemed to stem from childhood stories, untouched by reality.

That was likely why Will took a moment to place Jennifer when she walked into the clearing with two friends; she seemed to be a part of this place, as if it were hers, that she owned it—

No, owned wasn't the right word. It was a place of her own as much as the world was God's; it was a part of her, her a part of it, where ownership was as arbitrary as the bee nestled within the flower.

She wore a two-piece swimsuit under a pair of cutoff jeans, a towel over her shoulder, held in place by one hand, modestly covering her top, her other hand holding a fat, well-worn book that Will later noticed was a Bible. She brought a Bible to the beach the summer before her junior year of high school. This was Will before college, when Bibles and religion became the stuff of passing campus ministers on the quad who just wanted to "ask a few questions." The first time Will was stopped, it was unexpected. His face was warm, and he was unsure of how to proceed. As to whether he believed in God, he nodded yes, he supposed so.

"Do you believe in Heaven? Hell? Do you believe Jesus died for our sins.

What is sin?"

"Sin?" Will asked back. Bad karma? Doing the wrong thing? He'd never thought of it before now. Is it the product of action? The cause? Black gunk flowing through veins from forbidden fruit, passed from generation to generation,

a disease?

The minister hadn't spoken, so Will said, "Incarnate. Evil incarnate." Can a person be sin, then? A sinner? Sin itself? Evil? "Can a person be purely evil?"

"No," the minister says. "There is always hope. God's grace. You're only tempted as far as He will allow. You're never pushed beyond your limits. He sees to that."

"God allows evil?"

"Yes, in doses we can handle."

"But he punishes us for failure."

"It's always our choice. Like attending our ministries. I have more information if you'd like."

In college, ideologies became politics and petitions, calls to action and campaign stumping. Religion became a person wanting your time and attention, to sell you on a point rather than dissect it, a persuasion of a way. After the first, it didn't matter to Will or his friends if the smiling face and clipboard was a campus minister, PETA activist, or young Republican. They were all manikins, posing, selling. Religion turned to fashion. It was a whiter smile, brighter eyes, a sexy model who smiled off the back of a motorcycle in a commercial.

But Jennifer, that day on the beach, was passionate. She was a girl with a book, with eyes that turned up at the corners easily, with an optimism that even Will, overwhelmed shortly with senioritis, a textbook exhaustion, and an impulse to run, was inspired by. She was a girl who caught his look, more than once, and waved when he had barely built up the urge to look a second or third—

No, it was the third time. Adam wasn't there, but Will heard his taunts and laughter anyway. Go talk to her, bro. She's given you the in. It wouldn't even be awkward at this point. It's the pinnacle of summer. This place is Heaven, man. What can you lose?

Will tried to protest, but her hair was dirty blonde, and she pushed it behind her ear, and it fell across her forehead again, and she pushed her friend on the shoulder, and she laughed and glanced back at Will. Then he was walking toward her, and the sun was shining, and the edges of the leaves were green and made a collage of the sky. If only he could stay

here

forever,

through the afternoon and talk with her, and as the sun would set and the sky would bleed, it would match her suit, and in the way that she reflected the sky, he would realize,

what?

That she was everything?

But the images were blurring together, and each time he opened his eyes, the river matched the gray sky and the color of her skin, and the place forced itself into his mind.

A sick feeling rolled through Will's gut and the urge to cry ran through his head, a writhing wad of gas swirling through his stomach and throat, seeping out from his orifices.

Oh, God.

Her eyes were wild. She shouted, There is no God here. *There is no place for God here!*

Shut up!

She leapt toward him, sand flying from her feet where she landed. Look at my face and tell me if there's love here! Look into my eyes and tell me that GOD is watching over you right now! There is no fucking love here! Her eyes were pitch-black and rolled with the same inner turbulence he had seen in the scarecrow.

Will reached backwards, as if to gather some kind of power from the sand and the air around him, and hurled a scream into her face.

The wind gathered around her as she laughed. You know it's right. You know it's true.

Will scrambled in the wet sand, trying to push himself away. She crawled after him, swaying her head.

You feel that hate inside you? That emptiness? You can't get any further without it. Embrace it. It will be all you have left here. It will be your only comfort when the pain becomes so much you're left in a puddle of your own snot and shit, crying your eyes out and screaming for your mommy—

STOP IT.

Yes, let it build inside you while you add to it like limbs to a fire. Coax it to life.

A tear leaked down Will's face, though he didn't notice it. His skin felt like it was on fire, and his rage had bubbled through his pores. He tried to close his eyes against the sight of Jennifer, but they stung when closed. Even so, it was better than this delusion before him, this blasphemy.

She pried his eyes open and her hands scalded his face.

Jennifer, stop, stop! A sob escaped his lips, and the tears streamed down his face in torrents. Jennifer, no, no, I tried to keep this from you. Stay away! I don't want to see! You're not here, you're not here. Go away, go away. His babble ran together with his sobbing as he tried to keep a hold onto the crumbling wall between the life that he had known and the pain that was all he knew now.

What, Will? Don't you still love me?

Shut up!

Remember when we met, Will? Here on this beach? Will broke from her grasp and again forced his eyes closed against the burning of her hands, forced them closed until the pain was like needles and her nails were like pins and he had to open them again.

Now Jennifer was only wearing the two-piece red and black tropical swimsuit that he had seen her in when he had met her. Her breasts were round and her nipples hard against the cold. Gooseflesh stood out against her skin, and white blonde hairs bristled on the arms she held against his forehead. Her hair fell around her face and she smiled at him.

No.

But Will, I thought you loved this suit?

Stay *out*. Will's voice rang across the beach. Stay out of my head!

Do you remember, Will?

He screamed and thrashed from her grip. She reached forward again and secured her hands around his neck. He grabbed at her arm as she squeezed, his nails tearing into her skin. White flesh and red blood ran down her arm, across her shoulders, seeming to blend with the red and the black in her top, the fabric bleeding and blending before dripping into the dark sand and down Will's fingers, and she asked again,

Will! Do you remember?

Will's throat stung as his next scream tore at raw skin. Spit flew from his open mouth and mucus flew from his nose as he forced air in and out.

You shot me. You shot me dead.

For a moment, there was only silence between the two of them, and through Will's mind flickered images, memories, meaningless scenes without value,

a hallway, bricked walls and hand-drawn posters promoting

football games and twilights and stadium lights and

fight songs in the gym,

dinner at home with his parents, their quiet conversations,

their laughter,

blood flying

from his hands, he tore her arms off his neck. Screaming. It was the only thing he could do that made sense, that spoke toward what he knew in a mind overrun with emotion alone.

Jennifer threw her head back and laughed. When she looked back at Will, kneeling on the shore with fire in his eyes, his neck bulging with restrained hatred,

inky liquid spilled from her eyes like dark tears of glee. Her hair dangled like burlap. Her mouth gaped.

Abandon all hope, Will. Then she reached up and said, Boo! and tore her jaw from her face.

Torn in half, her creamy skin melted into flecks of blood and dangling flesh. Her laughter echoed from the hole of her throat, and her eyes sank into black. She reached behind her half-naked body, swimsuit splashes that covered her skin, and brought up the brown, brambly cloak of the scarecrow, wrapping herself in it. The wind whipped the burlap as it surrounded her, embracing her, limbs disappearing within the folds of fabric, turning ghost-like and fluid in the storm.

Will scrambled away, his breath coming as shallow screams in his torn throat, bleating like an animal near slaughter, flailing in the sand, trying to run and push himself away from

Jennifer,

the scarecrow, sobbing her name over and over again into the ground.

Jennifer, Jennifer, Jennifer.

Will burrowed his face into the hard pieces of sand, his voice and spit mingling with the dirt in his mouth. He couldn't see, his eyes squeezed against the debris but not the visions. He could still hear the laughter. It ran with the harmonic sound of her voice, a sound like crying,

singing,

laughing.

In his frantic scramble, the sand gave way to hard dirt and rocks that tore at his arms. With a roar, he brought his head up, opening his eyes against the particles of ash and dirt that tumbled below his lashes, and again took in the burning orange sky and the black clouds of Hell.

5.

For a moment, it felt like relief.

When Will looked up, Jennifer was the first person that he saw, and he scrambled from her again, through the dirt, smearing the black ash and hard pack deeper into his clothes and skin. The tears had dried on his face, but his eyes still burned and stung, trying to force tears all over again. After some twenty feet, he stopped, turning back with a wary eye toward Jennifer, as if she might still be following him, the laughter bubbling from her mouth like froth. But she was standing near the big man, her forehead crinkled and her lips tight and bloodless.

Interesting, the big man said, as if examining a specimen.

Like Jameson.

The name was unfamiliar in his mind.

Will caught his breath and stared at his hands, red and raw, holes in his skin hidden by blood spilling and drying down his palms and wrists, cutting tributaries across his forearms and blending fresh crimson with the brown scab on his left arm. The drying blood was a blend of black and brown from the dirt, and small particles and rocks like crumbs clung to the open flesh. His hands shook out of his control, the adrenaline and fear surging through his wrists, sobbing limbs. He tried to force them to stop quivering, to force his body back under his control, but his body relented the way the world around him relented. If this place was so much a part of him, in the way the big man kept saying, why couldn't he control it? Why wouldn't it respond?

He cursed and slapped a hand against the ground. The force of the impact went through the flesh, made as if to burst out the back of his hand, and shot up his arm with a strength powerful enough to throw him onto his side. His fresh curses became small whines and grunts. When the pain dulled again, he attempted to push himself to his feet with his elbows.

Now, though, his feet stung, their nail holes raw against the material of his shoes, and he fell back to the ground, tearing at his shoes with swollen hands, clenching his jaw each time his finger caught a shoelace, and the tendons in his palms went taut. Kicking his shoes off only brought a new agony to his feet, and standing, he soon realized, was not much better, the dirt now fresh against the wounds.

It was no achievement when he took a tentative, lurching step. New pain shot along his knees and groin, calling a sick sensation from the pit of his stomach.

It's like watching a newborn, the big man said.

Will cursed again, his voice low, focusing instead on each subsequent step.

A yearling, a fawn. An animal.

His words barely processed, but they registered somewhere deep and sounded right.

Walking on the outsides of his feet, Will managed to find a stumbling forward motion, and made his way past the scarecrow, at a crooked angle past Jennifer and the big man.

What did you see, Will?

Jennifer. On the beach. No, he wouldn't tell the man what he saw. He would deal with this one thing at a time. Right now was about moving forward. About dulling the pain with motion. Like running on a blister. He would not lose this focus, this concentration.

From behind, the big man knocked Will's leg from under him with a gentle shove to the back of his knee, and Will collapsed again into the ground, afraid to catch himself on his wounds.

Are you kidding me? Will exploded, scrambling at the big man.

Yearling? I spoke to soon. Worm.

He got a hand on the big man's jeans, but the fabric tore at the gouges when the man ripped his leg from the boy's grasp, and Will curled onto the ground in the fetal position, where the pain was less.

Fetus. The big man said, looking down. What did you see?

Will shook his head.

The big man crouched and grabbed Will's wrist. The boy tried to make a fist to protect himself, but his palm begged protest. The big man pressed his thumb against the wound, delicately at first.

What did you see?

Will screamed. It seemed explanation enough. The big man pressed harder.

I saw Jennifer.

More.

I saw Jennifer. On a beach. She was, he paused. The tears again. He hated them. They leaked from his eyes like the fresh blood from his hands, natural excretion, no longer tied to emotion so much as a kind of bodily necessity. As if it would help. She was—

He meant to say twisted, but instead said,
tortured.

This seemed to satisfy the big man, and he said, Get up. We're not going to lie here like this. We have progress to make.

Bullshit, Will said, wrenching his hand away, the motion bringing a fresh wave from his eyes, hot on his cheeks. We stay if I say we stay. This is as far as I go.

This is Hell, you think? The big man laughed. This is foreplay. He aimed an easy kick to Will's ribs. Will sucked in a breath.

Don't make me kick you again. I'll take that breath from your chest as if it were my own.

Will coughed but the sound was short. Pain shot through his ribcage.

The big man kicked him again, in the stomach this time, and then at Will's arms when he moved to protect himself.

I'm not a violent man, he said. Just motivated.

Will gasped at the air again. Hell suddenly turned a vacuum, an empty space. Okay, he said when he could get just enough breath in his lungs to force it across his voice box. Okay, I'm going.

Slowly unfolding himself, Will forced himself to his knees and again to his feet. Hurting to breathe, to cry, to move, he made a rocking effort to step forward.

It'll get easier, he lied.

The big man chuckled, but the sound was with less malice than before. There was a distant and hollow sound within.

6.

Will leaned on the bathroom doorframe and caught Jennifer's eye as she leaned over the sink and stroked at her eyelid with her makeup. She looked at his reflection in the mirror and smiled, looked down again in shyness, then looked back up, tossing her hair and leaning close.

He studied her as she worked and she pretended not to mind him. He watched the way she shifted, the way her eyebrows raised, and the way she faintly pursed her lips and held her chin to the side when she considered herself.

He considered more than her look, her eyes reflecting the mirror reflecting her. The self she wanted to see. He wondered if, in this moment, she was happy, and if she saw that happiness and reveled in it, worried over it, or moved the unraveled corners into a more delicate place. Was it so deep-seated that even this was the lie? He didn't want to think so. He wanted to believe the face in the mirror. He wanted to believe that if she could study this self, perfect, happy, at peace, she might know it, and in knowing it, might better fight toward it rather than away. This face in the mirror was not a face on some billboard or commercial that breaks young people's hearts by day. Not good enough. Not pretty enough. This face was her own. As she again turned her head down and looked from the upper edge of her eye, he saw what she wanted to be, what she pretended to be, what she brushed charcoal coloring along skin to try to be.

"That's your mirror look," Will said.

"What?" Jennifer said, turning.

"You do this look in the mirror when you're putting your makeup on. A little pose almost."

"No I don't!"

"Yes you do." He laughed. "I think we all do. Like . . . we've all got an idea of what we think looks good, and so it makes sense we do it in the mirror when we see ourselves. I think I just saw yours."

"You did not just see mine."

"Pretty sure—"

"I keep that on lock. You didn't see it. You'd know if you saw it. That wasn't

it."

Will wrinkled his forehead and shook his head. "Oh, I've seen some mirror faces in my day. That looked like a quality mirror face."

"Nope."

"You want to see my mirror face?"

"Yes."

"Okay, give me your makeup."

"Shut up!" Jennifer shoved his reaching hand and pushed him out of the bathroom. "No more peeking. A woman prepares herself in private! This witchcraft is not for prying boyfriend eyes." Pushing him out, she closed the door in his face, and Will laughed through the wood.

"Jennifer," he said her name in a funny voice, dragging out the vowels.

"Witch-crafting!" she hollered back.

Let me in, come on now. I'll kick this door in to make sure that you're safe. I don't care.

The memory, however momentary, brought with it a layer of tears that he blinked away just before the door knob clicked and she flung it wide, striking a ridiculous pose with her lips pursed to the side and her eyes wide and her arms spread toward the ceiling.

"This, Will. This is my mirror face."

He laughed out loud and was aware that it sounded false to his own ears, so he smiled to make up for it and said, "No, yeah, that's the one I saw!"

She threw her mascara at Will. It bounced off his chest and he tried to catch it. "I'll show you a mirror face!" He unscrewed the brush, and she fought at his arm for it, and they laughed.

I'll show you a face, he thought. Two faces. It will be my own and yours will be reflected in mine, and maybe you'll believe it more than the one in front of you, and maybe you'll know that it'll be okay.

CHAPTER EIGHT **ex machina**

1.

"The dreams are getting more vivid? You can remember them more clearly now?"

Will nodded. "Yeah. Yes, far more intense."

"This is good. It means you're more deeply interacting with your subconscious. You're paying attention."

Jameson held the stack of handwritten pages Will had produced during the earlier week, the dreams loosely and almost poetically scattered throughout the stack. "I'm sorry if those aren't legible or very coherent. I tried to brainstorm with them and loosen up. It seemed to work better that way."

"That's wonderful, actually. Loosening up and letting the memories come is not only good practice for focusing and remembering, but also letting the creative juices flow."

"Right. The mandala."

She nodded. "Tell me then, what stands out to you."

Jennifer, screaming. One row of teeth above clots and tangles.

"The scarecrow."

"Go on."

"He was a kind of gatekeeper figure. He was crucified. On the cross. Like Jesus. I got the impression that we had to stop. Pay the toll."

"It's interesting that you say that." Jameson sat back in her chair, shaking her foot and chewing on her pen. She was in a sweater and loose black pants today, and she seemed to move slower than normal. Tired, probably. Which was strange because, until now, even as an older woman, she'd been very quick in her motions, sure of herself, and confident. "Most descent narratives follow a kind of pattern. Jung originally proposed the idea of archetypes and consistent elements recurring in stories across cultures, right?"

Will shrugged.

"Campbell took the idea further. The Hero's Journey. In most heroic stories, the hero is aided by some kind of a divine aide on his way. Do you think that this scarecrow figure aids you?"

Narrowing his eyes in confusion, Will shook his head. "No. He was transitional. And—"

The wind whipped the burlap as it surrounded her, embracing her, limbs disappearing within the folds.

"—and disgusting. Vile."

"What about this big man? Moundshroud."

Moundshroud. Will cracked a smile at the name, but it faltered quickly. "He's not so divine."

"But a help. You're making this journey with him."

"Into *Hell*. He's helping me into *Hell*. That's not help. That's sadism."

"Do you believe in him?"

"Do I what?"

"Believe. That he's a real person. Guiding you into Hell."

"No."

"Sent from God?"

"This is a nightmare. It's not real."

"Is that what you believe?"

"Of course it's not real," Will said and leaned forward from the couch. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

2.

"I feel like I'm just waking up." Will yawned. It was six in the evening on a Saturday.

"Still haven't been sleeping well?" Jennifer asked, standing against the counter.

Will shook his head. He stirred spaghetti sauce on the stove in slow circles and stole glances at Jennifer when he thought that she wasn't looking. Before long he said, "I talked to Mrs. Davis today."

Jennifer said, "No."

Will nodded and continued to stir.

She bit at her lip. "What did she have to say? What did you ask her about?"

"Stanley."

It hadn't been an easy conversation. Will went at it mostly on impulse alone, first running a few errands before getting up the nerve to drive straight to her house. Meredith Davis lived in a small single-story home that seemed more like college housing than something a teacher might own. From the street where Will parked his truck, it appeared to be more garage than living space. The lawn was covered in browning leaves from the tree that leaned from the neighbor's lawn, covering the better part of the front lawn of the Davis's house. They were within two miles of the university, another four from the high school, and it wouldn't have been difficult for Meredith to find an apartment and rent this one out for a bit of extra income on the side. Did she stay here out of ease, he wondered, or nostalgia? His parents had never said it, but it seemed to him that had he died in the shooting, had he bled out any faster, they'd have packed up and moved within months. Perhaps picked a place in Maine somewhere to the north, like Jennifer, or even farther, restarting somewhere like the coast. He remembered his mother leaving the kitchen after the discussion came up about the shooting, the way it drew little white lines around her eyes and lips.

He knocked on the door, forcing those white lines from his mind, worried he'd witness them again in the moments to come. This felt like a shitty thing to do.

Meredith Davis answered the door after a few seconds, and Will was glad for not knocking a second time. She was a heavier woman, the kind of teacher who carried a kind of motherly way about her, the bit of weight in her face set into her smile and the way her eyebrows tilted toward her hairline. She wore a long skirt and a white button-up blouse with a sweater to match, but the years had changed her. Will barely remembered her from before, in high school. He only remembered the papers and the funerals and the various school functions throughout the following year. The once-motherly way about her changed as if in a day, growing into hard

lines and right angles and a frown that evened out the smile lines in her face. There was something beautiful about it now, Will thought. Something that had smoothed out between the two extremes, her skin now gentle,

blank.

Upon seeing Will there on her porch, her expression was at first curious, her eyes narrowed, but then froze into what seemed to be recognition. "How can I help you?" She asked.

"Mrs. Davis?"

"Yes."

"I'm Will Andrews. I was one of Stanley's—"

your late husband, er, Mister Davis's

"—students. I was involved in the shooting." This line seemed to dangle in the air between them. Of course it was as unnecessary as introducing himself. Her husband had died at his bedside.

"I wondered when you might come around."

"I'm sorry. I can come at another time."

She considered him. "Now is fine. Please come in." She held the door open to him, her expression still tight, but she tried to smile just the same, and Will respected that. He opened his mouth to restate that this didn't have to happen, but he knew it did. The ball was rolling, and she was trying. Worrying about it would make it worse anyway. If you're going to take the bandage off after it's sealed to the scab, it's better to rip it. Once, when he was a boy scout in early middle school, a piece of moleskin left on his foot had stuck to a blister's scab after a week of hiking. When he got home, he tore the thing off at once, as hard as he could. He watched a dime-sized circle of blood fill the hole in his heel and spill down to his toes. His mom turned for a napkin to catch the blood before it ran across the floor. Will just stared, waiting for the sting, but it never came.

"Can I make you some tea? Coffee?"

This wasn't real. This was a scene out of a movie.

"I'll have whatever you're having."

She paused at the cabinet door before pulling out two mugs and setting them on the counter. "Tea, then."

Will watched her move about the kitchen, preparing the tea bags in the mugs and heating the water. He searched for words that might approach the subject, but each sentence he settled upon felt forced and crass. And so, it wasn't until the tea kettle screamed, the water was poured, and Meredith had set the mugs on the tables, that they spoke.

Meredith said, "So."

Will nodded.

"I suppose I know what this is about."

Will nodded, but it was clear she wanted him to ask. "I want to know about Stanley. What he knew about the shooting, and why he was, you know. Why he was at my bedside."

She nodded and played with the mug before her. "I've thought for years about that very question. I've come to as many answers as times I've thought of it, each more ridiculous than the last, to the point that, well . . . they're not answers anymore, but empty hands waiting for straights.

"You know . . . but I kept telling myself I couldn't ignore it, either. You would come one day looking to talk to me. I always hoped it would be you on my doorstep with some flowers or a sympathy card and that would be it. You'd leave. You'd have had your closure. But it's too odd for that."

Will felt smaller. She could have said, "But you couldn't leave it be. You had to keep digging, keep clawing, keep striving toward what you already knew all along if you'd only bothered to remember what happened and didn't keep leaning on the crutch of your coma." Will saw a fogged dream image of the big man, Moundshroud, and he shivered so hard that he had to grab the mug in front of him and focus in on Meredith's words.

"So I'm not sure what I have to give you."

"I'm sorry," he said.

Meredith looked to her left and stared out the back window.

"You've thought about it," Will said, meeting her gaze when she looked back. "What have you considered? What else was there?"

"Stanley died at your bedside from a blood clot that broke loose and got caught in his lungs. They said the tourniquet was on for too long. They said it clotted too much. They didn't catch it. Why he exacerbated it, why he made it such a mission to get to your room, why he flipped. . . . That's what killed him. We can blame the gunshot, the guy, Jenson. But it was more than that. It was like God reached down and crushed the life out of him. Like it was his time."

"Was there anything else weird then, in the time before the shooting that would . . . I don't know, in some way account for his motivations?"

For a minute, there was silence. Meredith contemplated her tea. Will contemplated Meredith. She looked old, older than she had when she first opened the door. In the space between her curiosity and her concern, Will saw what she likely looked like most days. It was the same way that Jennifer looked on her good days, the way that she did when they hit their groove while dating in the last year, the way she did when she woke up next to him and her thoughts were far from the

memory, the pain, the loss, and the sometimes-daily struggle of trying to get past it all. Her students likely saw it much the same way, if they even recognized it. Mrs. Davis was Mrs. Davis, their next teacher, their fourth period or fourth grade teacher. Teachers don't have home lives, don't have families, don't fall victims to the outside world. In the way that it's strange to see a teacher outside of school, at the supermarket or restaurant, it was strange to think that they dealt with the same problems as their students. There was a divide the way there was a divide between parents and their children, the child looking to the parents as staples of reality, their only foundation, a truism in a narrow worldview, completely ignorant to the fact that they were not born to this, that they are not experts, that they wing it. To pull that back, through the wife of a man he'd only known superficially for about two months, felt like intimacy, a breaking of some innocent universal rule.

"Anything at all before the shooting?" he asked.

She nodded, aware all the while that the question still lingered between them. "There were things. Crazy things. Unrelated, of course. Maybe."

So this was the crux of it. Crazy things that were possibly related, possibly not. Questions without answers. Questions that might well not even be questions.

Will watched her watch her tea for a while before he spoke. "So the past few weeks, I've been having these dreams that I think are connected to the shooting." Meredith looked at him, truly meeting his gaze for the first time since they'd started to talk, and it was Will's turn to consider his mug. "They've been getting more and more severe as they go. It's been . . ." He stopped. "Somehow it's been connected to the shooting. I'm pretty sure of this, but I'm not really sure how."

She nodded for him to go on.

"They feel like memories but they're . . . supernatural? It's," he hesitated, his mouth open. "It's like I'm remembering, in sequence, a journey into Hell." His cheeks turned red. This was the first time he'd put words to it, to this woman he wanted to take him seriously, and now, this? Unloading a gut feeling and a nightmare?

"Are you alright?"

Will nodded. "I've been working through this for the past few years. Guess it's just repressed stuff. That's what my therapist tells me, anyway. I'm just no stranger to weird. And I don't understand anything about this. And I've got this, this guilt about it. But I don't remember the shooting. I barely remember waking up in the hospital, and all the commotion." He blinked and shook his head back and forth. "It was a bit of a blur. What I'm saying is that anything might help. I'm just looking into it, and the more I dig at it, the weirder it gets."

Meredith considered him before getting up from the table and crossing her

arms across her chest as if she were cold. "I feel the same way about it all. So I'm not sure if I will be much help to you."

"Anything."

Nodding, she continued. "A few weeks before the shooting, Stanley started having problems sleeping. And from that, he developed a strange paranoia."

"Was he having dreams, too?" Will leaned forward, excited.

"I'm sorry, I don't think so. We weren't, I mean, at the end, we weren't as close as I'd—" She stopped, put on what Will would have described as her "teacher face," and, looking at him, said, "No. He would have told me if he were having strange dreams."

Will sat back, unsure if what he was feeling was relief or frustration.

"But he was having strange night terrors. He'd wake up some nights after sleepwalking to his car. He stood at the back door one night for forty-five minutes, awake, watching the backyard. Twice, he woke me thinking that the house was on fire. I assumed it was a dream the first time, and after everything that had happened after, I thought that his sleep was definitely to blame. I never smelled the smoke, but he insisted it was there. He checked the entire house before finally going back to sleep."

"Wait," Will said. "He smelled smoke?"

"Yes."

Meanwhile, Jennifer had the same reaction, coming off the countertop suddenly. "He smelled smoke? More than once?"

With his arms crossed, Will nodded, his mouth pushed to the side, thinking. "Weird, right?"

Weird because just that morning, Will and Jennifer woke to the same situation.

It wasn't a flashback from a dream. Will wasn't still in his mind, standing between two houses or at the edge of the street while lawns burned around him. He wasn't running through a cloud of smoke.

Memories were batting at his face like an angry bird, but now wasn't the time. There was smoke in the bedroom, thick, dense, the reeking smell of plastic chemicals and bonfires. The lights were out, and he couldn't see any smoke in front of his window but, like Stanley five years before, he could smell it.

He leaned from bed and twisted the light switch on his lamp. The room was cast into shadow immediately, but there was no smoke to be seen lingering at the level of the ceiling. This struck Will as strange, but it only told him that the fire was in another room.

In the light of the lamp, Jennifer rolled onto her side and blinked, trying to work the bright spots from her eyes. "Will?"

"There's a fire. I need to find it."

Before her eyes had finished adjusting, he had pulled a pair of jeans on and was sticking his head in the walk-in closet and then across the room in their bathroom. It was strongest in the bedroom still. He touched the back of his hand to the doorknob. Cool. The back of the door. Also cool.

Grabbing the knob, he pushed the door open into the living room, flipping the light switch on the side of the wall. Two lamps lit up across the room, framing the television on both sides. There were no fires on the carpet or flickering lights from the kitchen. No smoke hanging low from the ceiling in this room either. The acrid smell was less in the living room, but he followed it to the kitchen, where it nearly dissipated completely.

Back in the bedroom, Jennifer had finished putting on yesterday's clothes and was moving toward the doorway with a panicked look on her face. "Should I grab anything. What do you need?"

Will narrowed his eyes. "I didn't think of that. Um . . ." He paused, his mind still on where the smoke was coming from. "I don't know. Here, grab a wall. It might be in the wiring and that's why we don't see anything yet. The living room and kitchen are clear. See if anywhere is hot."

Together they ran their hands across the bumpy white drywall in a swift circle around the room. When they'd made a circuit, Will pulled out the chair from his desk in the corner of the room and stood on it, running his fingertips along the ceiling.

"Nothing," he said when he'd finished an awkward, weaving path across the floor. Jennifer had taken to the bed and reported as much the same.

"Where is it coming from?" Jennifer asked, her nose wrinkled as she tried to follow it to one wall over another.

"Let's check the living room and kitchen too, in case the smell is traveling to a different room than the problem."

After they finished in the living room, the kitchen yielded equally few results. By the time they made it back to the bedroom, the smell had begun to fade from the air, replaced by the hint of sulfur, like a bad aftertaste.

"It's not any of your electronics, your television or DVD player or anything in the kitchen," Jennifer said.

Will shook his head. Other than the bedroom, it seemed to have no source.

"Is it the neighbors?"

The complex was designed so that each single apartment was stacked upon the

other, and backed to a townhome that housed two or three residents in two stories. The idea that one of their neighbors' apartments might have caught fire and spread to his own scared him. "God, I hope not."

He looked across the room at the clock and saw that it was just past four in the morning. He became suddenly hyperaware of the fact that the smell was receding at the thought of knocking on the neighboring apartments' doors.

"Better safe than sorry, right?" Jennifer said.

Will ran his fingers through his hair and let out a deep breath. "Shit, I don't know. The smell's already fading. It was probably something in passing."

From the look on her face, Will knew that this didn't satisfy her. With the possibility of his apartment burning down in the night while they slept, after ample warning, she likely wouldn't be able to let the possibility go. For that matter, he probably couldn't either.

"Let me put on a shirt."

The night air was cool on their skin as they stepped out the front door, and Will found himself wishing he'd thrown a pair of shoes on. The concrete was like ice. There was no hint of the sulfurous smell on the air outside, which smelled only remotely of chimney smoke and overwhelmingly of the dewy crisp scent of morning. A cricket was chirping from somewhere just off their porch, and the night seemed still and unbroken.

"They're gonna hate us after this."

"Better than letting the complex burn."

They skipped up the stairs to the apartment above his and rang the doorbell five or six times. With each ring, Will felt his stomach curl a bit tighter. "You know I hate this stuff."

"Dealing with strangers? Waking people up in the middle of the night? Being cautious?" Jennifer teased. "Get over it. You'll barely remember it when you wake up in a few hours."

It was the weekend, too. Will was hoping to finally sleep in for a few hours, to be lazy and get up sometime after ten. He and Jennifer had gone out the night before to a martini bar that was fancy and overpriced and crowded, but had been a great date, they'd agreed, and planned to return in a few weeks' time. Too exhausted for anything extra-curricular, Will fell asleep while Jennifer rested her head on his shoulder, watching an episode of one of her weekly shows that was on the DVR.

That had felt like days ago, Will now reflected. What with the dreams, the manic feeling that persisted below the chain of events he was slowly putting together, even as he ran from room to room and wall to wall, then waking to the

smell of his home burning down.

A light inside the living room blinked on through the front window, and with a cough, the door opened. A well-built shirtless college guy looked out on them, running his hand through buzzed hair. Will couldn't remember his name, if he'd ever learned it. Not being big into getting to know his neighbors or crashing house parties anymore, it wasn't likely that they'd even shared more than a few minutes' conversation at a time.

"You better not be Jehovah's Witnesses."

"Sorry? No, I'm Will, your neighbor downstairs." Starting with jokes is good, Will thought. "I feel like an ass for waking you up, but we were getting this really intense smell of smoke in our apartment downstairs. Like an electrical fire kind of smell. Anything like that up in your apartment?"

The built guy scowled and sniffed. "Haven't noticed anything. Sorry. And I don't smoke."

"No," Will said, shaking his head. "No, I didn't mean to imply that. It wasn't cigarettes. Just being cautious."

"Didn't want to wake up dead?" he said.

"Yeah, exactly. Well, you know, or you." Will stumbled. "But if you smell anything, let us know."

He nodded, groggy.

"Sorry we woke you up."

"It's cool, my man." He held out a fist and Will pounded, despite a look of confusion not far beneath his neighbor's tired eyes and understanding nod.

"See?" Jennifer said. "You didn't get murdered by an angry neighbor. What's the worst that would have happened?"

"No, you said it. What if he'd answered the door with a chainsaw?"

"Oh shut up," Jennifer laughed, and Will wrapped an arm around her, bringing her close. The confrontation had gone better than he'd thought, and the idea of his apartment burning down seemed more ridiculous with every minute.

"Some help from you up there, by the way. Were you gonna hide behind me the entire time? Looked like you were the one more worried about the chainsaw, Goofball."

"I was trying to hide so he wouldn't get scared off. I must look horrible right now. My hair is probably going seven ways from Sunday. I didn't want to upset the kid. Probably would never look at a girl the same after that."

"Turned the guy gay?"

"It happens. Dead of night, zombie women going door to door."

"Tragedy, that."

"To say the least. I was more concerned about his reaction to the witch on his doorstep than the rude neighbor bothering him over a mechanical issue."

"You are far from a witch, even at this hour. You know that, don't you?"

She laughed into his shoulder, and as they stepped off the last of the steps back onto his front porch, he brought her around to face him, arms around the small of her back.

"Really. Moonlight or no moon, four a.m. or out on the town, I don't think you'll ever understand how beautiful you are to me."

"Stop it," she said, putting a hand on his chest and smiling, looking away. "You lie too nice."

"Not lies."

She shook her head.

"Not lies," he echoed, pulling her head close and kissing her forehead before holding her in the chill morning air. Eventually she shivered, and he rubbed her arms and asked if she wanted to check with the other neighbors before turning back and waking up like fried chicken.

The townhouse that neighbored their apartment on the far side was dark and didn't respond to their repeated doorbell ringing. Either they weren't home, were passed out, or thought Will and Jennifer were only drunk pranksters. This didn't bother them much though because the townhome lined up with the living room and kitchen, which was farthest from the smell.

When they walked back into the bedroom, the stench was gone.

* * *

"That doesn't make any sense," Meredith said after Will told her what had happened.

Will shrugged. "Coincidence, maybe?"

"No." She shook her head. "Maybe in any other situation. But my husband does not die by the hand of God at the bedside of Savage Creek High's 'savior' who then happens to be suffering the exact same sleep problems five years later. That's not coincidence." Her voice had gotten high and her words tighter as she went. The word "savior" stung when she said it, but she didn't seem to notice. "Has anything else been happening to you? Paranoia? Sleepwalking? Strange connections to a place or person?"

Will shook his head. "I'm sorry, no. Just the nightmares and whatever effects they've had on me, but the fire was just this morning."

Meredith took a moment, looking to the side while leaning on the kitchen wall.

"You know, if I remember right, that's what started it."

"The burning smell?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm almost sure of it."

"What was with the paranoia?"

"It was like he felt watched. Wasn't himself. He woke me up getting out of bed early one morning. I thought he might need water, or need to go to the bathroom, and I fell back to sleep. Woke myself up an hour later, and he still hadn't come back from bed. I found him at the back door, watching the yard. Told me he was worried about intruders."

"Intruders?"

"I know, it sounds ridiculous. And even more ridiculous to try to make it fit with the shooting. I shouldn't have brought it up at all."

"No. I'm glad you have. But I have to ask, was there anything else? What became of that?"

3.

More than Meredith even knew. It was one thing to think of your husband as going slowly crazy from sleep problems. It was another thing to experience it yourself, and to find the feelings, while unsettling, decidedly, well, normal.

These feelings made sense to Stanley and, despite starting in the night, as if from his dreams, they were at their most severe when he was at school. Normally he either ate in the department commons or drove off campus to grab a quick bite of fast food, just far enough away that he wouldn't have to worry about the lunch rush of students trying to beat the end-of-lunch-bell. He had sixth hour off, and so he could afford a late return to the math offices. All that was waiting for him were stacks of tests and homework to be graded. But recently, two weeks before Halloween, he'd taken to the hallways, wandering, wondering if this might be what those flamboyant television psychics felt like: blindfolded, wandering through houses of haunted families and "feeling" for letters of names and miscellaneous details that might start to fit the activity. Davis was searching through various shades of emotional intensity, wading through waters polluted by his presence, like a fevered man searching for a hot spot in a pool of water.

Clear your mind, right?

These feelings had been with him since the night terrors, the journeys out of sleep, to the back door, the car, the bedroom window, the nervous panic attacks in his bed—

(the first time he woke up scared to death he was having a heart attack, going

the same way as his mother before him, years too soon. But the panic manifested with none of the common signs—at least, that's what Meredith had told him, over and over again while he tried to find a way to stop the shaking. He promised to schedule an appointment the following week, to which the doctor found nothing wrong and recommended that should it begin to occur more frequently, they might pursue a diagnosis for anxiety disorder, but not to worry, that these things happen)

—and so he found it strange that these feelings only intensified at school. Perhaps it was due to the stresses of his job and the idea that maybe after a night of restless sleep, strange panic attacks and terrors, going in to work for what sometimes amounted to ten or twelve hour days would of course bring about symptoms that were more of the same. If his students or co-workers ever found out that he was suffering these kinds of symptoms, they'd likely joke that they were surprised that they took this long to come about. He did, after all, work tirelessly at a job with minimal rewards.

This was an acceptable reason and, logically speaking, satisfied his sequential mind for a number of days—a week or two even—before the doubt started to creep around the edges again. In the same way that his paranoia began to manifest in the night,

("There's something outside the window, Meredith. I know it sounds ridiculous, and I know you think I'm just in some strange state of waking lucid dreaming, suspect to delusion, but it was in the house the other night, and I'm determined not to let it in again")

the paranoia began to set in while he was at school, and it made logical sense in his mind that directly conflicted with his feelings of stress. This was an easy time of year. Yes, he had a few midterm tests to grade, and he still had to prepare the occasional lecture, but at this point, with only eight weeks left in the semester, his problem students had either applied themselves or given up, and the rest of the class was coasting much smoother (until mid-year burnout anyway). He loved his job. It was not a chore.

But a few weeks ago, after what was actually a quiet night's sleep, upon entering the school, when he opened the double doors that led from the teacher's parking lot into the back corridor by the weight room and practice gym, he was immediately overwhelmed by a sense of wrongness, a dread that fell to the pit of his stomach.

It was this same sense of dread that filled his chest when he received word that his mother had died, that made it hard to breathe, that brought back the worry that maybe he, too, was about to collapse again, the blood first rushing to his head before draining with the world behind his eyes, the black speckles dancing before

tunneling, before his thoughts too drained away like water through desert cracks.

He'd fought this urge to pass out. He kept his head straight and his hand on the old brick wall.

The dread though, that was something different. It filled him with a sharpness that made him feel sick, as if his spirit strained in a place just beyond the edges of his physical body. Though he had no out of body experience per se, no moment of passing out while his inner self soared above his crumpled form, from this he came away from the moment with a kind of surety that he'd come into contact with something dark and ethereal, something different from the reality that he knew for thirty-five years.

Perhaps that was putting it too extremely, but it was the sensation he couldn't shake, even as he had made his way back to his office, steadying himself on the wall with his arm.

Sometimes lesser kinds of these attacks would occur in class during lecture, sometimes while he was walking to the parking lot, and sometimes only as he was sitting at his desk grading papers. It was walking the halls when it seemed most urgent, as if he were in some way on the right track, going in the right direction, and the sensation that he once connoted with feeling ill struck him instead as being pulled, as if from his body, yes, but with this strange existential feeling as well.

He chased this feeling through the halls over lunch, feeling along the walls the way you might feel when searching your brain for the name of an actor you saw in some bit part on a primetime show, where you might only catch a letter or two, and play with the sounds in your mouth before sneaking upon the answer only after forgetting the question.

This day was no different. The students were all in the cafeteria or the nearby hallways, lounging and eating their lunches (cramming from a textbook, perhaps, but he knew better than to hope for that). He kept to the back halls, first edging around the science sections before moving past the psychology and history departments, keeping to the same circular pattern he followed on most days.

Savage Creek High School had been built in the nineteen teens and had finally undergone a desperately needed renovation in the late nineties after the school system approved the budget hike that would be required. The hallways were now re-bricked with a heavier emphasis on glass paneling and an engineering-aesthetic in which the piping and wiring in the hallway ceilings were exposed. Davis had always found this look distasteful, the feel generally that it was incomplete, but,

being so near the ceiling, he found he didn't much notice it. In the corners of the hallway were dangling mirrors that moved in slow rotating patterns, catching the reflections of the students moving both ways in the passing periods along with the ambient glow of the lights behind the colored glass.

Just across the hallway from his classroom, before the bend of the Social Studies department, the feeling became so overpowering that he had to stop and sit on the floor, too afraid he would pass out, and too distracted to even bother staying out of sight from the classroom across the hallway, where inside a group of ten seniors took their lunch. Even crawling out of view into his classroom seemed like too much.

He didn't know how long it took for the students to notice him on the floor, staring at the interweaving, fire-proofed piping that ran along the ceiling. The stuff looked like rusting metal on the Titanic, growing fuzzy in the harsh sea water, which seemed a fitting parallel as his sense of balance had gone suddenly ship-like. Again, he was confronted with the feeling that he was being pulled from his body, the rocking motion the same as rocking a car from a snow drift, as if something were trying to shake him loose.

"Mister Davis?" asked a hesitant voice.

He blinked and tried to clear the stars from his eyes. Above him was a student with dark brown hair hanging loose across his forehead. A good face. Strong jaw and expressive eyebrows that reminded him at times of Jimmy Stewart. He looked concerned.

Stanley could at the moment only raise his eyebrows in response.

"Are you alright?"

The boy was from his morning calculus class. Will Andrews. He wasn't sure what was more concerning, that he'd had another surprising dizzy spell, or that the spell itself was severe enough to cause him to temporarily cease to recognize one of his own students.

"Yes," he nodded. That wasn't a bright idea, and his vision again swam in front of his face. For a moment, he was glad he hadn't eaten. "Just a bit dizzy."

Will crouched before him, and Stanley saw that Jennifer Christianson, a girl he'd had in class a year or two ago, had moved from the classroom to join Will, and that the others in their group had taken notice. He wished they wouldn't come out too. He'd rather avoid a spectacle.

"Can I get you anything?" Will asked in a soft voice.

Stanley said, "No. Thank you. I'm fine." But as he met Will's eyes, another spell took him, and for a moment, a shudder went through his body, and all he saw was black.

He didn't know how long he had been out when he came to again, but Will was still before him, his look having made the transition from concerned to nearly alarmed. Only a few seconds then, but in those few seconds he'd known

yellow, black, and dirty shades of gray

colors. Impressions. He knew shadows and confusion. He saw bright flashes that he took to be in the vein of the starbursts behind his eyelids, and he heard high pitched sounds he couldn't identify, electronic warbling, nails on a chalkboard.

And he knew blood.

Blood against the sooty yellow. It was this that stood out to him when he came back. In a moment, all of the other sensations seemed to fade: his dizziness, his concern at being weak in front of students when he was supposed to be strong, his moment of concern for—himself? All he knew was a red mist and the color that the sky turns when a summer thunderstorm rolls across the country and forces the sunlight to crawl along the earth.

* * *

"I remember that," Will said slowly, staring at a place somewhere far behind Meredith's head.

* * *

That had been the first time. Since then, Stanley took the corners slowly and probed at the sensation the way someone might probe the heat of a fire, moving a hand first from the cold air before into the light and the heat, as if to study how the light matched with the warmth, the cold to shadow. That was what began to convince him most that there was something physical happening to him, that his reaction was very much grounded in the world around him. There was a field around this place, one that brought a lightness to his head, a shortness to his breath, and a speed to his heart. And always at its worst just before his classroom door.

4.

"That was all she had to say?" Jennifer said.

Will nodded. By now their plates were empty, smeared only with red mist

sauce and a few noodles. He'd overcooked the asparagus and twig-like green

stems remained scattered on both their plates. Will was drinking a glass of wine and Jennifer opted for a glass of water.

"Well, obviously he was under some kind of medical condition. I mean, random dizzy spells and maybe some visual hallucinations? That's suggestive of something deeper."

"I don't know," Will said. "She said herself that it sounded as if there were things that he was not telling her. That these spells in some way were bothering him deeply, though doctors never found anything wrong with him in his blood work. A bit of high blood pressure, but his iron was fine. There was no reason for it."

Jennifer studied Will. "What do you make of it? Was it worth the trip?"

Will bit his lip and considered her question. "Yes." It felt like a lie. "No. I don't know. It's not so different from before, only there's more now. It feels like it should mean something. The most he ever told her was what? That it was odd to occur at school and not just at night?"

"Which means nothing."

"Or everything, and we just don't have enough details."

"That's ridiculous. Why would it have anything to do with you? Because it was at school?"

"Because it feels right."

"You're chasing this by feeling alone. How is this good?"

"Jameson would say that's good. Probe at feelings. Try to figure out why."

"Jameson . . ." Jennifer trailed off. "I would never tell you to disregard her advice; that's why you're going. But maybe chasing feelings isn't doing you any good."

He said, "If I can't follow Jameson's advice, what else do I do?"

"Let it go?" Jennifer walked across the kitchen to him and put her hand on his shoulder. He looked into her eyes and frowned.

"He wound up at my bedside. Dead."

Jennifer looked as if she wanted to speak, but didn't for a while, putting her head against his chest, letting it rest there. "Would you let it go for me?"

Will bit his lip and knew that were he to wait too long in answering her, that her confidence in him might falter, her faith might waver, and she might for a second doubt him. He couldn't have that. Her faith was too important. If she did not keep her faith in him, what would she have left? He'd watched her fight to gain independence in town after moving back. He watched her try to place herself as a strong individual beside and apart from her father. He watched her struggle with her faith after her god took both her mother and then her friends, very nearly her

boyfriend, and very nearly herself. He worried that in staying so close, she was growing with him the way a vine grows along a building, that should you take the building away . . .

He worried that it was selfish of him to think that, but worried further that it might be true.

He put his face against her hair and breathed deeply before putting his lips to the side of her head and holding them there. "I'd do anything for you, Jennifer."

5.

"Okay, so you're crucified. You black out. And you see Jennifer?"

Will nodded.

Jameson continued to read. "Why are you crucified?"

"I'm guilty."

"In your dream."

"Of course."

Jameson frowned at the pages. "Why are you guilty in your dream?"

"I killed them. All of them."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

Jameson frowned harder at the pages and pretended she was concentrating.

"And you had this vision. You saw Jennifer at the beach where you first met?"

Will nodded.

"Tell me about that."

"She was terrible. Angry. She was screaming. Screaming so loud." Will's gaze locked on the tabletop in front of him and he closed his mouth.

"What do you think this means?"

"I don't know."

"You're the only one who does, Will."

"Well, I don't."

6.

When Will left Meredith Davis's lonely house, he paused for a moment on the front sidewalk. The concrete was cracked and weedy clumps grew from the dirt between the gaps. The edges of the yard spilled over, and the dirt and patches of wild plants tried to blend the yard with the walkway. Will didn't want to, but he looked back at the doorway to the house and saw Meredith standing there,

HALLOWTIDE

watching him go, her lips pressed tight, trying to force a smile and failing.

CHAPTER NINE **lullabies**

1.

As he stood in front of the mirror brushing his teeth, Will gradually slowed the motion of his arm, dragging the bristles, moving them in slow circles, and studying the repeating reflections of his face in the eyes of the young man looking back at him.

It had gotten bad enough that when the paste ran out and his spit was barely frothy white, he considered putting on another blob and brushing them all over again. Or perhaps stepping in the shower. Even though he would need another one in the morning anyway to wash away the soot and the grime that clogged his mind and eyes.

It was Tuesday night. He had class tomorrow at one in the afternoon, so he could try to sleep in. He didn't expect to sleep much after the sun came up, though. He'd pushed going to bed back until two at this point and felt his eyes getting

heavy, as if they were sinking back into his skull.

Too many nights of eyes this heavy. Of waking too tired. He was irritable now, and he didn't like that. He tried to keep it at bay by eating well and exercising. Getting out of the house. Keeping his body primed and his blood pumping usually helped keep him in a good mood. He'd tried to bring Jennifer along to see if it might not help her too, but she wasn't as interested.

Still, the sleepiness remained. Still, he'd lie in bed for hours staring at the ceiling. If Jennifer was gone, he'd blast loud music on his headphones to keep him awake. Some nights he meditated himself into sleep, as Jameson had taught him to do, but lately this seemed to bring the two realities into a strange duplicity, where one world reflected the other, and he could feel the heat and smell the sulfur even as he felt the mattress and sheets below his legs. This frightened him enough that even though it might send him into a far more relaxed sleep than the rock music, he'd rather not do it at all.

Tonight he laid between the sheets, his window wide to let in the cold late-October air. He liked sleeping in the cold, but he also hoped that if he got it cold enough in his room, he might feel it in the dream, that it might give him some relief or keep him grounded just enough in the world he knew that the other might not bleed so richly.

The clock on his bed table cast a faint red light that didn't travel far, each number changing too slowly. Too many seconds in a minute. Time here, the more he resisted, seemed to blend into that place of his dreams, where time did not matter, where days were eternity, each step a lifetime.

"Adam?" he asked.

Around two forty-five, he drifted off, saw again those twinkling candlelight fireflies outside of the school, and came to again, tears in his eyes. Not from emotion, he told himself, but from his forced waking and the dryness from staring at the ceiling, trying not to blink.

He picked up his phone, scrolling through his contacts until he clicked on Adam's name to place a call. He didn't expect his old friend would answer, not at nearly three in the morning. He just meant to leave a message.

When Adam's voice came on the line, alert and quiet, but not without surprise, Will told him this, apologizing for waking him: "I just meant to leave a message."

"No, Will. It's good to—"

It was ten the next morning. The two old friends sat on one of the sloping fields on the northern edge of campus, which led to the distant row of fraternity and sorority houses that backed to the forest. It seemed that everywhere around here backed to

the forest. Trapped by ever-pressing trees, shadows, pathways that led to streetlamps and plains and crosses where—

"It's good to see you, Will."

Adam had told Will on the phone the night before that no, in fact, he stayed up most nights. He was working, for the few months that he stayed in Savage Creek before January, as a temporary barista at a coffeeshop in town, where he'd worked in high school. The hours there were irregular, sometimes requiring him in the mornings, sometimes through the night. He'd gone to California for college. About as far away as he could get from Savage Creek, from the shooting, from those old friends that now only seemed to serve as reminders. From what Will gathered, Adam had never been fond of college. Whether it was dissatisfaction with the system, an inherent desire against the rules, to be free, to do what he chose, or if it was instead because of some guilt or fear instilled by the shooting, Will never knew. Wondered, sometimes, if he would ever know. He'd managed to stay in, though apparently with shaky grades at times and an irregular fondness for parties that came and went. After graduation he found himself living with his parents before the Peace Corps looked to steal him even farther across the world. "Let's meet up tomorrow morning," he'd said. Get some coffee. Catch up before your classes.

Despite their friendship, everything had scattered after the shooting. Even though Will stayed in town, the two grew apart. That was the year that Will dropped the rest of the semester, finishing high school much through his own means, while Adam faced school by day. Maybe he wasn't wounded to the point of amnesia, of comas and bloodloss, but he saw his friends killed that day. It didn't matter where he was shot or how badly. He still limped sometimes when he walked, usually in the colder months, when the muscles would clench tight, the gait coming on almost as if it came with the anniversary each year of the shooting.

"It's better now," he said, smiling gently at Will. "It does start to fade with time. The way a lot of high school fades."

His demeanor had changed too, Will thought, looking at him now. He smiled easier, seemed not to be resisting the motion the way Jennifer often seemed to. But still, it wasn't with the jovial nature, the court jester, the energy he'd brought when he was still in high school, a class clown who irritated his teachers by the week. Now it was controlled, regulated even. He wore flip flops in the chill morning. When he walked, his limp was showing again, but he didn't grimace at it or seem to mind. His eyes were looking toward the eastern coast of Africa and January, toward the knowledge that this might be the last winter for some time that the limp would return. "You're such a hippy now," Will joked. He was a granola kind of guy now, that was clear. But he was clean. His hair, while blonde and shaggy, was neat. His

pants were white and loose and blew in the breeze. He wore a black fleece jacket and he sipped on a cup of tea.

Will worked his way through a tall cup of his own. Black coffee though, to match the rings around his eyes. Where Adam would have made a joke back in the day, he now considered Will seriously, wondering, but afraid to ask about the nature of Will's forced insomnia.

"Tell me how you've been," Will said.

"I've been fine. I'm glad you called. I've been meaning to," Adam said. "I know I've been back for a month or two, but it's been a bit busy."

Busy. Will nodded. He knew the word. Things had been "busy" since five years ago. Busy in the head. Busy dealing with the repercussions, the fallout, the way a social life seemed to work afterward. Too busy even for two friends who'd gone to college across the nation from each other, to make the time to sit down and catch up. "Me too. Hopefully finishing up this December. Then it's the real world."

Adam smiled at that. "Overrated."

"Says the traveler. Africa, is it?"

"Madagascar."

"Exotic."

"It will be a change of pace. I'm looking forward to seeing the world through different eyes. Different ideologies."

"How's that?"

"Well," Adam said. "You change your framework, step away from home, and the things that were once important are flipped on their heads. It's been eye-opening. Easy to resist, I think, as a culture. We don't like losing what's important. We lose that and what do we have left? It's like spitting on a grave." He thought seriously about the words, but didn't hesitate more than a moment after saying them. "Like tarnishing the sacred."

Will nodded. He supposed he understood. He'd taken a class or two that examined texts from around the world, and the issue was important.

"Look at death," Adam said, and Will shuddered, gripping his coffee tighter to blame the cool air. "Are you cold?" Adam asked, interrupting his thought.

"No, sorry. I'm good. Please continue."

Adam took a moment, again eyeing Will with that recent intensity that Will did not understand, felt intimidated by actually, but also in a small way, comforted by. There was security and confidence in that gaze. "Take death, for instance. In some cultures and religions, it's celebrated. It's a period to mourn, but death is a great thing. It's transcendence. It's a journey. One we all make in time, see. But we're totally afraid of it here. To the point that any celebration of this event is seen as

violent. Or frightening. The stuff of monsters and martyrs. It's things like that, these fundamental viewpoints, these things we've known our entire lives, that I want to reverse, to change, to explore."

"Many of these long-held beliefs are long held for a reason," Will wondered over the lid of his coffee.

"Not necessarily. The earth was seen as flat for a long time. Holding a belief over history doesn't make it right."

"All these people are wrong?"

"All *those* people are wrong?" Adam rebutted softly, changing his emphasis to focus on the other cultures he was speaking toward.

Will thought for a moment, drawing on English classes in the past. "Do you not believe in absolutes?"

"I don't know. We're a stubborn and arrogant culture, ignorant to many other belief systems that, for the past hundred years, have finally been leaking toward the west. I want to explore those. See through other eyes. Maybe in doing so, I'll see consistencies. Universals. Or maybe I'll find there aren't any."

"But. I mean—I respect your investigation—but no universals means lawlessness. Anarchy. No rules. How do you expect to punish people if they have their own truth?"

"Punish?"

"You take away the rules and madmen can roam free. Forever. Abolishing it as they like."

"Clive Jensen?" Adam said, almost to himself.

"Well, yeah."

Adam sat back on his feet, holding his legs close, rocking on the ground and looking at Will. He ran his fingers through his long blonde hair and then shook it loose again.

"Tell me how you are, Will. Are you moving on?"

* * *

"Tell me how you are, Will."

It was two days after Will awoke from the shooting. He still lay in the hospital. The first evening was groggy, and he wasn't entirely coherent. His mouth was dry, and he slipped in and out of sleep often, though they did their best to keep him awake. He was afraid back then, as he was afraid now, to go back to sleep, to drop away from his family and passing friends, to leave the world behind again. It was irrational. He didn't understand it. Of course coming out of a coma would have

such an effect; that was understandable. But it was such a deep-rooted fear. He'd held onto his mother's sleeve. "Don't let them take me again, Mom. Don't let them. I don't want to go back," he said. Nancy, confused, exchanged looks with her husband before humming her son to sleep—

motherly,

dissuading against those monsters in the shadows, recollections, carrion

lullabies

—her hands on his arm, wishing to stroke his head but afraid of the bullet's trail that ran below the hair and white bandage.

Later, Adam knocked on the door and walked quietly into the room, favoring his good leg, his look uncomfortable and strained. Normally bubbling with energy, he was obviously holding back, but not with intention. He still looked shocked, his eyes blank and open, relief on his face after seeing Will alert and awake again. Will's parents left the room to give their son privacy.

"I'm alright, man," Will said, smiling with cracked lips and trying to wiggle himself into a better seating position.

"Good. Good. That's really good."

"I saw Dan yesterday. Was good to see him."

Adam nodded.

"He said you're fighting with it."

"Hmm?" Adam looked up, blinking, as if removed from a daydream.

"What happened. Dan said you're fighting with it."

Adam sat for a few moments and considered Will. He drummed his fingers on his legs, looked about the room. Eventually he said, "I suppose so. Not every day that your friends get shot and some die."

For a moment, Will felt as if he'd gone too far. Said something inappropriate. Until he remembered that he was one of those who was shot. Nearly died. And that they were his friends too. "Is there anything I can do?"

Finally Adam laughed. "Fuck you!" He said. "You're the one in the hospital. I just needed some stitches."

"Well for whatever good I'm worth."

"You don't stress or strain yourself, friend. I'm alright over here."

Will nodded and put his head back. He wanted to apologize, but didn't know why. He didn't know what to say, but desperately wanted to fill this quiet space between the two of them. The weight of what was unsaid, the elephant in the room, the man with a gun in the hallway who shattered everything they thought they knew about the world.

"Jennifer alright?" Adam asked.

Will nodded, grateful for the conversation, but wary about Jennifer. "I'm not sure. She's been through a lot, too. It's brought up a lot of stuff from the past for her. She's been in and out of here, but she's distant, you know? There's a lot on her mind I guess. I mean, mine too. But I'm not really sure she knows how to deal with it all."

"None of us do."

"Yeah, well." Jennifer's was a lot worse, he worried. But he didn't think Adam knew much about her mother and the depression. She'd barely told even him, only alluded to it when the conversation came up, and while she couldn't keep her therapist visits quiet for long, she managed to keep them off the table.

"She's a tough girl," Adam said.

"We're all tough. We'll get by alright." Will winked.

Adam sighed. Again with the silence.

"I should—" he said before half-standing, faltering on his leg and leaning on the chair's arm, nearly tipping it over. He snorted laughter that caught in his throat. "I should go."

Will shook his head and the motion made him feel ill. "No, you don't need to go. Why?"

"You know, this whole thing, it's still heavy."

Will was already tired of blaming "this whole thing," but would do the same for months more, if not years.

"If there's anything I can do," Adam said. "Please let me know. I'll drop everything. You. Jennifer. You guys are my priority. One hundred percent. Any time you need me."

"Why? You don't have to—"

"Because I'm your friend. And that's what best friends do."

"Then stay. Just for a while."

"Not right now. I'm sorry. Not that. Not today. I'm sorry." He slapped the doorframe and hobbled out into the hallway.

"Adam!" Will shouted after his friend, but he was hoarse in the throat and the sound was scratchy and he wondered if Adam heard it at all.

* * *

"I'm fighting through," Will said. The autumn breeze blew his hair back from his forehead, and he suppressed another shiver. This one he cherished. The breeze was cold, and his skin prickled. He touched it softly. Smooth. Tender. Whole.

"Still?"

Will looked at his friend, suddenly angry. "Still?" That five years was too long? That he should be over it by now? "I wasn't the one who ran away down the hallway. I wasn't the one who bailed on all of us the moment he got the chance after I woke up. I needed you in that hospital," Will shouted. "And if I'm still paying for it now, you don't dare judge me for it. Don't you fucking dare."

The words had been inside for years now. The look on Adam's face made him immediately regret his outburst, but he held tight to the feeling that raced from his gut to his fingertips.

"I'm sorry for that."

"No," Adam said. "I'm sorry. You're right. I bailed on you when you needed it the most."

"You know, whatever. We all bailed back then. But you do not come back and make this my fault, my problem. Don't make this something I did, that I'm not over it yet."

"I wasn't."

"Sure."

Adam let his legs fall and cross, then slouched his body over them. "I don't want to argue with you. That's not why I wanted to catch up. I just wanted to see how you're doing."

Will swore to himself and took another drink of coffee, his hands shaking. "I know." He laughed. "Apparently not too good, huh?"

"I wouldn't say that. I mean, maybe. You could have closure up the ass for the shooting. But I left and you never really got closure on that."

Will considered him. "No. I suppose not. You did what you had to."

Adam shrugged. "Really though. You said you're still fighting through?"

"Jennifer and I are dating again."

Adam's face fell, but he couldn't hide his shock. "Wait, Jennifer and you. She came back?"

Will nodded. "She came back."

"Is she alright?" He hesitated. "I mean, better anyway?"

I'm not sure, Will said. She's been through a lot too. It's brought up a lot of stuff from the past for her. She's been in and out of here, but she's distant, you know? There's a lot on her mind and I guess . . . I mean, mine too.

"It's kicked up a lot of dirt, her being back here. For both of us."

"Wow," Adam said. "I was not expecting to hear that. That's . . . poetic."

"How's that?"

"Cyclical, you know? You guys started together. Met in summer. The leaves are now turning and falling. It'll be what? Five years from about two weeks from now? Fall turns to winter to summer again. It comes back. If there's anything I learned trying to run from all this shit, moving to the coast, making new friends, trying new things, it's that it always comes back."

Will swallowed hard, and the wind gusted around them, blowing their coats toward one horizon before turning again and whipping them the other way.

"Look at me, right? I'm back serving coffee at the same fucking coffee bar I worked at in high school. No matter how hard or fast I run, I can go halfway across the world and more, and I'll just end up right here."

"Does it always? Will it ever not?"

"Maybe. Maybe that's the absolute I want to believe in. That the roulette wheel will stop spinning. Maybe when you figure it out, life will suspend, you'll find your stasis, things will stop moving from the whole to the parts, where stuff doesn't break, where glass falls together instead of shattering."

"Sounds like a pipe dream."

"We live, we die. Some would have that we live and die again. Timeless. Break the cycle. That's how the Buddhists see it."

"Guess I've got to angle it so that when the wheel stops, I've bet on the red."

"Black, red. If the wheel stops, they should all look the same."

Isn't it when they're spinning that they all look the same? he wondered. But then, Will wasn't even sure he knew what that meant in the first place, wasn't sure that even Adam knew. But it was true. While Adam ran in circles around the world to get away from the shooting, Will was doing much the same in the same town where it all happened.

It's cyclical, you know?

He remembered his head spinning on the hospital bed, watching Adam leave, shouting his name with a raw throat,

remembered Hell, shouting her name with a raw throat.

It's cyclical you know? It all comes back.

His head swam for a moment, perhaps with memory, and he looked from the grass to the clouds and the sun across the sky. He took a drink and he swallowed and later he'd piss it out, and after class, he'd go home, he'd tell Jennifer he loved her, he'd say goodbye, goodnight. Tomorrow he'd wake up, tonight he'd—

tonight, he'd dream again of Hell.

And after class he'd—

"In the twentieth century," Pullman said, "we've witnessed the changing face of war. Now, I originally intended this class to be a study of twentieth century literature through the lens of war writing, which would have been a hell of a class in and of itself, but it was when I started to place these pieces into a larger context that I decided I wanted to paint this class in different colors, and leave the war section as just that: a unit. We'll spend the rest of the semester focusing on this manifestation of Hell in the real world, studying the modern perspectives on Hell. I'll supply a reading list of books you can choose from. Sorry that I didn't mention them on the syllabus specifically, but if you get online now you should . . ."

Will blinked,

asleep,

felt hot air on his face and came awake again.

"We're going to be looking into this different perspective on kinds of warfare, too. We've first got the Hell of trench warfare that came about during the first World War. It was here when we maintained, despite the utter chaos and destruction, a feeling of certainty. You were in one place. Your job was laid out. You spent every day in this foxhole, in this trench. Literally, you buried your brothers in the walls and the ground as added support because there's nowhere else you could have taken them. You couldn't peek your head up without it getting shot off by a sniper a hundred yards out on the other side of the line. Your nightmare was the length of a football field away, hunkered down like you. There were lines. There were enemies. There was a job to do. When the shells came in, buried bodies would tear open from the walls. You wouldn't know who was killed and who'd been dead for weeks. The wounded would scream, and it would sound as if the dead themselves had come back alive.

"Fast forward to Vietnam. Absolute confusion against the absolute certainty of the other war. Recall Tim O'Brien. 'The only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.' You don't know which way is up, down, right, wrong. We've gone and traded a world of battle lines for a world of confusion. Different cultures. The world is shrinking and we learn two things: one, that these other cultures deserve our respect, and two, that we might even be wrong.

"In the last fifty years, we've entered a world view in which, within the context of these displays of Hell on earth, we discover that: one, we may either be wrong, or two—and worse perhaps—that there is no right to begin with.

"Now bring on Nihilism. Bring on moral anarchy. Bring on warfare across the globe as cultures clash. Bring on lack of responsibility and lack of repercussions."

Pullman paused for a moment and surveyed the class. "That was the cliff notes version of the next few weeks, where we study these topics more closely. Final essay topics for considerations: Where do we stand now, at the start of the twenty-first century? What, in post-9/11 America, is our stance on this position? And will we ever realize such a thing as an absolute? Will we ever know, like before, absolute certainty? And can we truly? Without delusion?"

It was like Adam went and had lunch with Professor Pullman before class. The world shrank and swam before Will. Gathering his notebook and backpack, he got up and left the room, staring down at the floor, the eyes of the class watching his exit.

3.

She's a tough girl.

He'd go home, he'd tell Jennifer he loved her and—

It was seven thirty in the evening. Outside, darkness had fallen, and Jennifer sat on her bed in her cramped studio apartment, a textbook open before her and her head propped by her right fist, staring at the reflections of her room in the window, mirrored by the night.

She felt it moving inside and she did not want it there.

There was a romancing of this darkness, this mood. It grew as a frustration the way a shiver would grow along her spine, rising through her shoulders and then throughout her body. It started with homework—it always seemed to be the most asinine things, inconsequential, and here, today, it was the growing burden of her semester. She'd done two years of community college work back in Maine, and she'd been a good student before that in high school, but now the stresses of school with the stresses of outside life seemed to be growing, and not well, with each other.

It's just midterms, she said to herself in the apartment. But that wasn't good enough.

She could tell herself all she wanted that midterms were not everything. She could fail them all and still pass some of her classes. She could retake classes. Drop out of school even. She'd have to pay off her loans, now meaningless

(were they though? Will would have asked. Were they meaningless if you learned something? Grades are only important if you get the degree),

but they'd tell her that life still went on. It was all only as heavy as you wanted to make it. Class was class, school was school, tests were arbitrary at best. There's

no need to stress, there's no need to worry. But still the discomfort was there, and still it was growing.

She didn't want to do this.

That's what it boiled down to. Sure, she could put her head down and barrel through. Sure, the grades didn't *really* matter in the end. But she didn't want to do it. She didn't want to watch Will going down this stupid destructive path into a past that would yield

would only yield bad memories.

She didn't want any of it, but here it was. A boyfriend who cared too much, who, as much as he tried to help, only seemed to make it worse. And then to inspire it more so by going after this history—

But it was exactly what she wanted, too, and she knew that. She put herself in this position. She wanted a boyfriend. She loved him even. She wanted to come back to Savage Creek because Savage Creek never stopped being home. She wanted a college education and a chance at a normal life. At the American Dream. The white picket fence. Something calm, something easy.

But you know what, fuck that too. That's what put her here. Means to an end that turns to another means. Never satisfied. Here was college, mountains of papers and homework likely lasting long into the night, a boyfriend who made her worse than she was on her own. What was she doing?

That's what the mood became. First, an awareness; that reminder of her work, the tediousness of the text and the forty more pages she had to read before it was over with. Second, a burst of rage; throwing the book as hard as she could at the sink across the room, where it struck the front of the cupboard, leaving a white mark on the wood and falling on bent pages against the floor.

Third came the contradiction that fed the fuel. The satisfaction in the destruction with the guilt. The broken book, the dented cupboard. She liked her things neat. She didn't like seeing them like this.

But the burst of rage was so satisfying, and she liked it in that deep way.

So fourth, she clung to it. She held deep to that rage and wrapped her arms around her legs. Then it cycled and spiraled and ran deep. The lists of the problems, the frustrations, the way the weight of the world had twisted wrong, the way a limb twists wrong when you hit the ground after slipping, the way the bones spiral-fracture in their effort to right themselves, to fall evenly, to resist a fight. It was the effort in avoiding resistance that caused her to break. One part of her forced herself in one way, the other standing firm against it, and something deep—whatever that essential part of herself that was caught between the two stubborn halves—failed to recognize that giving in to one is the better form of self-

preservation.

It was this soul of hers, if that's what it was—that's what she was raised to believe, anyway. This soul was trapped in between. Desperate to escape, it strained to break her. Break this body. Break from a tiresome world where things only fell apart. She gets older. She dies. The book is dented and falls to the floor. It does not spring back to the door and back to her hand. Her mind will not settle.

Except with sleep, a rebirth. But not now.

She could reach out, but what was the point?

She could change this if she wanted. She could reach deep and flip that switch and say fuck off to the darkness, to the consuming mood. She could smile and pretend, and eventually it would become real. She supposed she knew that. But right now, what was real was the anger, the rage, toward herself, toward the world, toward anything right now, really. Everything was wrong. And right now that's what was real, that's what she could resist, that's what she wrapped herself within like a blanket on a cold night.

She hated herself for it. The spiral deepened. Why she had to love it. Why she had to destroy her relationships because of it. The ultimate form of selfishness. Her dad did not deserve it after all he had to deal with from her mother. Will did not deserve any of it. He was dealing with enough of his own stuff. And who was left anyway that had not abandoned her because of it in the last five years? Could she even name more than a small handful of acquaintances other than the occasional girl that she went out with for the occasional drink? What good were they? And how long until she drove them away too?

All for what? A shooting? Adam was doing fine. Going out and saving the world in his flip flops. Will was having these nightmares, but that was probably because of her, anyway. Why couldn't she get over it the way everyone else seemed to be doing? Why couldn't she get over it the way the world seemed to forget?

It was because she had it inside her all the while. She took the bullet in her throat and still held it like a souvenir. A symbol of love. Of destruction and creation. The bullet was her symbol. Frame it. Buy a necklace.

She should call Will. She knew that. She was getting deep and dark now.

It had been an hour. She was sitting on the floor and staring at the wall. Scratching at her knuckles with her fingernails until they bled. Not with any real intention to see the blood. She hadn't gotten to that morbid level of detachment where she became fascinated by the pain and the way her body could disintegrate.

She just wanted to wake up. Scratch just far enough below the surface that she'd find something in the pain, something that wasn't detachment and rage. She

could watch these three parts of her rage. The one that could give up. The one that refused to let up. Herself trapped between them, but uncaring which would win.

Scratching with nails down to the nubs, white skin streaking and then turning pink, and then small streaks of brown and red in the motion of her fingers.

Resist this one, Jennifer. She said to herself. There were tears. Memories of a mother forgotten. She could call her father, but she worried, didn't want to worry—

No. Not her father.

Hold back, Jennifer. Keep it at bay. Not tonight.

She wanted to reach for the alcohol. To blur these thoughts and settle into the haze of booze and rage, to let her mind spin and let go of that doubt and caring, to focus, to get lost, to feel better about this hatred.

Pray, he'd say. Her father. The friends of hers that she knew through her church up in Maine. Pray at times like these. God never gives you worse than you can handle.

Tell that to my mom, she said, wanted to say, never did say because she didn't want to start trouble,

yelled now, *Tell that to my mom!*

And the apartment echoed with her shouts. But she quieted herself. Didn't want the neighbors to call the police if they heard too much screaming. Didn't want their attention. A run to the hospital. Are you a danger to yourself?

They'd sent her there once. Kept her for five hours of observation until someone close could come and pick her up. Next to her a woman was screaming, crying, refusing attention but needing it desperately. She didn't want to live, that woman. And while Jennifer's depression had abated at the time, listening to her brought back the exhaustion and anxiety. When Will arrived, she sat in the corner and did not speak to him except to say, I hate this place. The walls were blinding white and stark, and flat, and so old and sanitized that they looked dirty,

that they reminded her of the shooting, the maze of the ER hallways, and this small room making her claustrophobic.

No, she wouldn't scream anymore. That voice of reason, the soul, trying not to twist too hard, urged a logic in the face of her rage. She worried when the rage would grow so as to quell that voice, what would happen to her then.

This is not the life of a loving god—
that a loving god

—would supply.

Why would we choose this? Why would we welcome this? If this is sin, what is there in—

No questions. Hold tight to the anger and

Just go to sleep, the voice whispered inside. It will be better tomorrow. You just need time and sleep.

But I have work to do. Schoolwork to eat at my time and emotions.

Melodramatic. It's just homework. No one else you know breaks down in tears because of midterms.

That made her dwell worse, hate this part of her, reach for something sharper than the nails on her fingers, nails in the walls, scratch deeper, fade with the flow, let go, intoxication.

No. Just go to sleep. Ditch school tomorrow. You will be better. Your professors will understand. You can turn it in late. If at all. Just go to sleep.

She curled up in bed, still dressed, with her contact lenses still in, and instead laid awake for an hour, staring out the window beside her headboard. Eventually sleep took her, forced her eyes closed, and eventually the soul deep inside rested, watching the warring halves fade away again with the night.

4.

"I want to try something new today," Jameson said as Will sat down. "I want you to manifest the symbolism from the dream in this waking world and see what happens."

"Okay?" Will said. He still felt irritable and on edge. Still just wanted a solid night's sleep. And he didn't feel particularly open to trying new things today, making a fool of himself in terms of childlike activity and creativity, but this was what he was paying for, so he agreed.

"There is this difference between the bodily and the mental, a lack of harmony at most times. You can think all you like. You can know all you like. But there is still the repression, the physical, the action. I want you to act out one of these symbols then, from your dream, to bring it into this waking world and study its meaning for you."

Will nodded slowly.

"Many people choose animals from their dreams. The wolf. They walk about the room being the wolf, feeling what makes the wolf essential. The meaning that

makes it a symbol is clearer as they try to see what its expression is like. As if to become the symbol. So I want you to pick a symbol from your dreams to act out."

"I'm sorry?"

"To act out. Like the wolf, for example. Anything from your dreams that you find symbolic or significant."

"But—" Will stuttered. "My dreams aren't like that. They don't feel like dreams with half-naked women on clouds and strange fantastic creatures and purple grass everywhere. This feels real. It's a forest, a plain, there's real people, and fire."

"What about one of the people in the dream? Moundshroud? Or the fire?"

Will shuddered at the idea of enacting the big man. The thought alone turned his stomach. "Fine, I'll do fire then."

He was in Hell, crawling deeper within it. Of course fire is a symbol. He wiggled himself on the couch and rocked his shoulders. Moved his fingers. "I'm fire. Okay? Good enough? Can we talk about what fire means now?"

Jameson frowned and Will hated the expression. It was like disappointing his grandmother. He hated to see that look on another's face. That he'd done something poorly.

"Get lost in it, Will. Here, stand up. Move about the room."

"This is ridiculous," he said, standing and wandering back behind the couch, to the rug surrounded by bookshelves and the main door. "I feel like I'm four."

"Stop with these roadblocks that make you think that other people care. It's just me in the room. I'm not looking down on you. You're the only one you need to get past. Be a kid again. Be the fire. Mimic the motions."

Will looked at his hand and again began rocking his shoulders in a weaving motion.

"Close your eyes," she said. So Will closed his eyes. "Picture a campfire. The way the flames snap and flicker, the way the heart of the fire seems to stay in place, rocking, the rest of it enacting. Go from there."

Will swayed back and forth, bringing his arms, first hesitant, toward the ceiling, snapping his wrists and then bringing them back down again. The motion felt like Tai Chi or Qigong, which Adam had tried to get Will to do in high school, but not more than twice.

"Lose yourself in it. Make it a dance. See where it goes."

Will tried to let himself over. To make his motions fluid, the way that the flames did. He dropped down to his knees and reached at everything around him, the motion becoming quicker, smoother, but thrashing. He tossed his head and dipped his body. He threw his fingers to the sides and then up, reaching as if toward the ceiling, as if to get out. Burn down to embers, he thought, and as his

energy drained, he looked at his hand, held before him, opening his eyes, watching the motion of his fingers bursting and reaching individually.

The motion was liquid, and he wondered what made it different than water. He further trained his eyes on the tendons and veins, the motion of the skin. He pictured his hand as fire, on fire, the flames enveloping his wrist. He tried to demonstrate the motion. He used his other hand to emphasize the flames on his skin, the two enacting together, one the smoke to the other's fire to the other's fuel.

He felt the tickling of the skin on his fingertips as they waved in the air. He felt his arm hairs stand on end as gooseflesh broke out across his arm. He felt the lapping of the flames, the orange and red tips, the white burning centers. He watched his skin turn white, flickering black at the edges, red, bubble, and burst, the inner liquid turning to flame even as it reached for the sky.

"Get out," he said. "Reach. Go away."

He wasn't sure where the words were coming from, but he said them anyway, sitting back on his rear end and throwing his legs before him, scrambling from his arm. Still his hands and fingers repeated the motions of the flames above him, taking the fire to his biceps and across his shoulders. He ran his hands through his hair and pushed it away so that it would stand on end. He opened his mouth to scream and felt his eyes burst into flame, white and yellow licking at his hairline.

He tore across the room, fighting at the flames, resisting their movements as he darted from the back of the couch to the front of the couch, from the bookshelves to the wall. "Please," he was begging, breathless, aflame. "Please."

Jameson was standing by now, letting it go a bit longer, to see what might transpire, before deciding it needed to end. His screams sounded terrible, and she didn't want to draw too much attention. The walls were not so thick. "Will!" She shouted to him, but it seemed he could not hear. "WILL!"

No avail.

She moved to him and put her hands on his shoulders but still his fingers danced, still he alternated between shouts and silent screams. She slapped him across the face, but the sting only seemed to draw his finger flames to the spot. She saw her bottle of water beside her desk and wondered if that would work. Grabbing the plastic bottle, twisting the top from it, she went to where Will now curled on the carpet and splashed a third of it on his face.

The cold sting of the water and the damp that ran from his skin first woke Will from his strange hypnosis before nearly putting him back into it again. The feel of the water running down the sides of his neck and the front of his face reminded him of the tickle of fingertips—

Jennifer, in bed, giggling and running her hands down his abdomen where he

was most ticklish,
 reminding him of the flames that
 lapped at his body's sweat, sucking him dry.

But Jameson's pale face, the wrinkles in her forehead and around her eyes, her expression of deep concern, brought him back to the moment. His fingers stopped, and he wiped the water from his eyes and through his hair.

"I'm sorry," he said.

It wasn't so much that I was the flames, Will later wrote for her, on a piece of paper she supplied while she read through his most recent dreams. Writing, she decided, might be easier than speaking through the event. It might be easier for him to study the symbolism without the discomfort of finding the words in front of her. Or it might cause him to focus deeply, so that he might again fall into the state, but she wanted to take that risk. It wasn't so much that I was the flame, but that I became engulfed in the flames. A man on fire. I wasn't the fire. I was consumed. Of course, I have to wonder about the difference. They say creation from destruction. They say symbiotic relationship. One needing the other. What happens when I'm gone, when all fuel is lost? Is the fire also gone? Can I be the fire without being the one burned by the fire at the same time?

"The concrete is easily perverted," she said. "The spiritual side is incredibly creative. We want to blend these two."

"I'd say the spiritual is the more perverted one right now," Will said.

"Then we need to study that difference. Why there's the opposition now, and why so extreme. What's desperately trying so hard to come through to you."

"Fine," Will said.

"You're still looking into the shooting?" she asked.

Will nodded, yes.

"Look harder."

5.

Tomorrow he'll wake and
 tonight he dreams of Hell.

The clock on his bedside table cast a faint red light that didn't travel far, each number changing too slowly. Too many seconds in a minute. Time here, the more he resisted, seemed to blend into that same place as he dreamt, where time did not matter, where days were eternity, each step a lifetime

he breathed deep, tasted the smoke and the fire

remembered with absolute certainty the way the sheets felt below his bare body, and knew with absolute confusion the rage that pushed at his chest, the hatred for this place, this smell, the tickle of the heat against his arms.

He thought back on Jennifer but the memory was too much.

He saw her, standing on the plain. For a moment, he saw the two-piece black and red swimsuit and the streaks of dried blood. She cried. She thought about picking up the phone but didn't call him.

He wished she was beside him

in bed, but—

she was there, walking next to him, not looking at him, but
pacing his torrid motion.

CHAPTER TEN **Moundshroud**

1.

*I am the flame and I'm the fuel. Burn me, consume me, devour,
but until they're all gone, I will not be extinguished.
The fuel needs me only in the sense that it is not fuel
until I burn.*

What finally tore Will's mind from the pain on the soles of his feet were the fists that his hands made, the way he could not tear them open without tremendous concentration, the way his fingernails had grown. They were now much longer, growing claw-like. They were like fingernails of drug addicts or guitar pickers. His first thought was that they would be good for hurting himself, or perhaps even for hurting the big man who walked a few yards beside him. His second thought was that they were disgusting. He reached up to his cheek and drew his nail along the

stubble, scratching hair and dirt until the exposed bare skin ran red.

The further they traveled, the harder the distance became to see. The horizon turned first orange and then brown and then shimmered the way mirages shimmered in the white from the sun, as if the dirt on the air had turned to gas and transformed from the heat.

The sight would have been breathtaking if he had breath to take. The air was so thick with the blowing dirt that for a while he tried to breathe through his nose before it filled with the crusty shit that grew hard after running. The air was so dry that he only differentiated between what was snot and what was blood when it ran down the front of his lips and he tasted the copper.

Will thrashed at his face, afraid to touch the skin, afraid for the electric connection of contact. His eyes had melted, as he'd known,
in a dream?

He wasn't sure. But in the blackness, he could feel the fluid dripping down his face. When he opened his eyelids, his pupils made like his fists and his eyes burned. Bright plains before him. Searing. His eyes weren't melted, but they throbbed; the big man had kicked him in the face. Hard. He felt the movement in his nose while the cartilage throbbed. The blood plugged his nostrils and dripped onto the ground, a black stream from his nose, ticking into a shallow puddle in the ash. He wiped at it with the back of his hand and winced when the skin touched skin. He could feel the stuff in the back of his throat.

He pushed himself to his knees and staggered to his feet. The holes in his soles throbbed, but the sharp pain of open wounds had been dulled with slow-growing scabs helped along by the caking ash and dirt. The pain bit to the bone and spread like purple and yellow with each step, the way a bruise spreads and aches.

He could not remember if he had dreamt or what he had dreamt about.

What do dreamers dream when they sleep?

Is this going to end? Will asked, his voice cracking as he spoke from his gut, dragging air over his throat to make the sound, and stared at the ground without expecting an answer.

Is it in your nature to be so pathetic?

Will thought about falling again, thought that at least he might find some kind of undeserved softness in the dusty ash, but the big man said, You don't sleep here. You're already asleep.

So I want to wake up.

That's what being dead is.

Will scratched at the scab that ran the length of his forearm, first pinching, then using the nail.

After that his nose felt fragile, and each time he touched it, the glasslike pieces tore at his skin, and the mucus ran and mixed with the blood like a damned alchemy. Red streams ran from his nostrils to his chin and gave him a vampiric look. The hollow dark eyes were skull-like, and if he looked human at all, it was in the barest nature, at his bones, his roots. That was something.

He marked time by focusing on the pain. First it was his feet. Later it was his broken nose. Later still it was the throbbing in his head that grew from a dull place behind his eyes to his temples and turned into shooting pains around the sides of his head. Then it was the pangs in his stomach, the hunger that nearly doubled him over. Later it was seeing Jennifer behind him and the flickers,

a football game, a letterman jacket, the way the green light fell through the trees.

Are you hungry? the big man asked.

Will mumbled to himself before making eye contact with the big man for just a moment—just long enough to see that the man wasn't so different from him. His face was probably clearer. There was something more human about it. He could see the pale skin below the grime, and there were crinkles where he'd been smiling?

Will nodded.

I just heard that Satan was having a little barbeque. Thought you might be interested.

In another life, the words might have struck him as funny. He might have laughed. But here he knew that the laughter would only hurt his throat, and turning up the corners of his lips would only crack the skin open.

The big man followed Will from the corner of his eye, most times not bothering to mark the boy's progress visually. He would know if the boy fell. He could hear his footsteps. The place was silent, as if the space was so large that the air swallowed the sounds from the distance, where the smoke drifted and the anvil clouds gathered, seeming only to roll outward but never come close. Will's feet, pushing through the dust, sounded dry and sharp against his ears in the open space, the way a noise may sound in an empty cavern, but never repeating,

no edges kicking the sound back.

There was only his breath, the soft crunch of the dirt like snow, the slow drone of the insects that seemed to multiply the further along they went. Good, the big man said. That meant they were moving forward.

2.

The police station was in the middle of Savage Creek, pushed into a small corner on the forested edge of the city park. The city park itself was located between the university campus and the historic old town, little more than a single street that, back in the day, served as markets for the farmers and a connection to the outside world through the post. A large stone chapel marked the center of the town, standing opposite the recently renovated city hall, which had taken the place of the much older historical landmark. The plans had been approved so long as they kept the general architectural feel of the original building, maintaining its historic integrity while adding on the more necessary and modern wings that included city offices and courthouses.

The police station on the other side of the city park seemed to stand apart from the heart of town the way a guardian might overlook some small medieval city. Designed and built in the early nineties, the architects were of the same local firm as the redesigned high school and had focused on much of the same styling, a heavy emphasis on glass ("government transparency!" the chief at the time had boomed). The similarity to his old high school struck Will as he walked from the parking lot to the front entrance, and the discomfort he already felt about that day's visit morphed into something darker still. He held his jaw tight against it.

He was here because he had to be. He finds answers, he finds peace.

He hadn't told Jennifer that he was going, not because he was keeping it a secret, but because it hadn't come up in conversation and he didn't want to force the subject. Already she was getting tired of his investigation into the past. He could already see the stresses, and wondered if this would be the last of it. If this might give him answer enough to put it aside, to sleep through the night again.

Before walking inside, he forced himself to lean against the corner of the wall and take a few deep breaths. He wasn't here to dwell on the negative. He was looking for answers.

Around him, the fall leaves drifted to the ground. The building really was quite beautiful. The broad skylights and high windows that lined half of the building allowed in the light of each season as it passed, and Will wondered what it would be like to work in a place that involved so much exposure to the outdoors, to watch each season as it changed, hour by hour. A part of him recoiled from the

idea. He walked inside the building, out of the bite of the October air.

He wished that the feeling would leave him when he went inside, but in fact it was worse. Though the

wind gusts, blowing the soot and ashen dirt,

the breeze had stopped, there was, inside, a vulnerability, a feeling of being watched; a mouse trapped in a cage, perhaps, cliché as it might have seemed. The welcome desk was right before him with a locked door beyond that, through which he saw a staircase twist to the second floor and dark blue carpeting leading in two directions to the different wings of the buildings. In the lobby, a few uncomfortable but modernly furnished chairs were in two rows with a small end table stacked with magazines. Two gentlemen dressed business casual sat in the seats, patiently tapping their shoes and speaking politely. A male receptionist in navy blue with a gold badge sat at the desk shuffling papers. All three of the men looked at Will when he walked inside. Only a woman wearing a gray button up shirt with a black belt and hoop earrings didn't bother to look up. Instead, she continued to check the email on her phone.

When Will made it to the front desk, the receptionist said, "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Will Andrews." He glanced to the side and lowered his voice. "I was one of the victims of the Savage Creek shooting in 2001, and I was wondering if I might be able to speak with someone about it."

The officer studied him for a few short moments, masking what seemed to Will as being some mix of confusion and sympathy. The man was young and wore dark-rimmed glasses and his hair short. The uniform was tight on his skinny frame, and his vest underneath the shirt was like seeing his ribs below his chest. The skeletal imagery moved something

again, deep within him.

blood dripping down his chin, eyes so sunken they could be the pits of skulls

"I'm not quite sure how you mean, Sir." His voice was quiet when he spoke, cop for sympathetic. Will was used to this. He'd been pulled over once barely four months after the shooting, and when the officer returned to Will's car after running his license for warrants, his voice had fallen the same way, and he let him off with a short warning.

"I've never looked into the details of what happened, but I thought that now was the time to do it."

The officer nodded once, studying Will, and then nodded twice more. He consulted a list of extensions and names and then picked up the phone, punching in a four-digit number. "Sarge, Tom at the desk. I've got Will Andrews down here,

looking to talk about Savage Creek." There was a pause and a few moments of silence before he nodded and hung up the phone. "He'll be down in a few minutes. If you'll take a seat."

Will moved into the waiting area and sat down at the end of the row facing the desk and the glass wall behind it, watching as the occasional street cop or suited detective walked past. Each time he saw movement around one corner, he flinched, in his mind seeing a man, disproportionate, in slacks and a button up, turn down the hallway before reaching behind him, pulling a weapon to his side.

Will couldn't remember Jensen's face. Of course, he'd seen it in the newspapers to follow, despite his parents trying to keep him from most of the coverage. He'd been curious for a while, naturally so, but after hearing the details from a few distant friends and reliving the nightmare (as much as he could remember) through the scripted expressive local news heads, he turned his back on hearing about it. He likened it to September eleventh. By about eight on the evening of the attacks, he'd gone to his bedroom, leaving his parents watching television, on the screen a picture of a well-dressed newswoman standing before a staging area where spotlights lit up the scene and rotating emergency lights played against the windows. The news had stopped earlier in the afternoon. After that, it was reliving the images, again and again, punctuated by questions, concerns, and a kind of deep-seated emotion that you could see through the anchor's eyes. If more was to come, it wasn't worth sitting through this to watch live. He could of course recall the image of Osama Bin Laden, turban-clad, his bearded face notably charming; the face of a grandfather or kindly homeless man.

This was the face of evil, the news declared days after the attack, pointing the public to words like Al-Qaida, to places like Afghanistan, places otherwise alien, foreign, far from the concerns of high school. But he could not picture the man, Clive Jensen, and did not care to picture him should he even try to force his mind in that direction. He'd known him for a

few seconds? Minutes?

moment, face to face, when Will had killed him,

a blank space,

killed them all

He saw in his mind an image of Jennifer; not of their first meeting or the hellish, blood-soaked image, but the sight of her when she woke that morning, curled against him, her hair forced in a few different directions and appearing golden in the sunlight, the way she squinted at him as she asked if he'd slept.

The nation had known Jensen from a newspaper photo. It was a photograph of a man sitting outside of a church, wearing a black V-neck sweater against a black

shirt. A smile. The face of evil. Whatever that looked like. Will wondered who had taken the photograph that the news had jumped on, who had been close to the man, and if they had known.

That was what he was here for, really. To learn about Jenson. And to learn why.

A man came around the corner, pushing the door open behind the desk and immediately looking across the lobby at Will. The officer at the front desk, Tom, turned in his swivel chair at the sound, saw the man looking at Will, and spoke something in a quiet voice. The sergeant nodded and called Will's name, beckoning him to follow with a turn of his head.

At the door, he allowed Will to step inside first. "I'm Sergeant Sam Preston, Will. I worked on the shooting." He offered his hand and Will took it.

"Nice to meet you."

They turned left after the door and walked down a short hallway, going up a set of stairs and deeper into the building before the sergeant scanned his ID and pulled open a door into a room full of cubicles. About half of the cubicles had various people sitting at the desks, typing up reports, paging through folders, making notes, talking with one another in quiet tones.

Will drew most of their gazes, some blank, some smiling, and Will wondered if any recognized him, if seeing his face after Preston's might set off a bell, a surge of memory, a newspaper clipping or old report,

that this was the kid that

burned

saved Savage Creek.

At Preston's desk, a few figurines protected his monitor (Will couldn't tell if they were just trinkets or if they were awards of some kind; gifts perhaps). Photographs of his family and a few men in uniform hung from a cabinet door. Newspaper articles were stuck on the walls behind the figurines. Various photos of high school-aged kids who seemed to be involved in police programs, an article about the crime rates, a few awards. Will was relieved to see nothing about the shooting.

Preston sat down and studied Will as he offered him the swivel chair from the desk on the other side of the cubicle. He carried a thick air about him that was one part cigarette smoke and another part cologne, and, despite being someone who came off as quiet, the rest was personality. He was a large man who had at one point carried a lot of muscle that had now turned to a thick build. He moved decisively though, knowing how to use his body, and Will wondered if the man had a military background. He seemed observant, and quietly so. Like Jennifer, Will thought. He hadn't said a word after their introduction on their walk through the

station, and Will couldn't help for a moment feeling like a criminal.

"So. You want to learn more about the shooting."

Will nodded. "It's been on my mind lately. I think enough time has gone by that I can deal with it. And I'd like to know the details. Get a more complete picture."

Preston nodded.

"If you have time of course," Will apologized. "I should have called ahead. You must be busy."

Preston nodded. "I am busy. Yes. But I don't mind."

"I'm not sure how much you might be able to tell me. But I wanted some details."

Preston narrowed his brow. "What specifically would you like to hear about?"

"The shooting itself."

"You know better than any of us about that, if I might say."

"Actually, I don't remember it."

He studied Will a moment further before turning to his desk and pulling a file from the top of a spread of papers, opening it and paging through it. Will remembered his sessions with Jameson, paging through his notes, the memories of his nightmares.

"Why are you crucified?"

"I'm sorry?" Will said.

"I said, that's right. You didn't remember back then. When we took your statement at the hospital. You had been in the coma."

The hospital room was drab and small and cramped. The walls were an aged off-white and the light was harsh. The plastic curtain that hung between his bed and the other patient's was yellowing at the bottom, and it turned Will's stomach. He wanted darkness, a light to rest his eyes, something more gentle, like firelight.

There was a newer hospital he'd been to in the city, some eighty miles away, but this one, on the northern end, was perfectly equipped to deal with gunshot wounds and comas, and instead of the dark blue walls with red accent stripes and faux wood paneling, large windows to the outside and cushioned benches for guests, he was left with this.

He shouldn't complain, he told himself. On the surface, he was as close as one could expect to happy. He'd been in a coma for three days, nearly dead from bloodloss, and the doctors had been worried that there might be brain damage from the lack of oxygen. They'd done good work. They'd saved his life. Was it so wrong to hope for nicer quarters? Just because they were old and hyper-sanitized?

But something was not settled in him. At the time, he likened it to stress. Of

course. The last thing he remembered was working on a Geography project in the hallway, and the next he knew he was coming to in a hospital bed, in the presence of a flurry of doctors and nurses shouting and calling for equipment. Two of his friends were dead. Two more shot. Stanley Davis was now dead. And Jennifer . . .

He'd cried when they told him what happened and the tears were salty and tasted strange on his tongue and their feel on his cheeks only brought more, from himself as well as his mother.

His father had broken down in the hallway after they'd seen him. He'd held tight to his wife, glad that the tears did not break before his son, and even more glad that his son was alive and well. He thanked God that afternoon and well into the next week.

But something was unsettled in him. The bedsheets were too scratchy. The pillows went flat. And when he awoke, his back was stiff and hard to move and his neck had been in one position for so long that he could feel a pounding inside of his skull. But in this discomfort, he felt something familiar. There was comfort, comfort in the way that anger is comfort when the stress breaks, the way it's comfortable to throw a glass at the wall and watch it shatter.

He was seven years old, home with his best friend at the time, Spenser. They had been playing tag through the house, a rough kind of tag where the other is only defeated when he's tackled to the ground and pinned. The Andrews' house had always been spacious, the furniture cushy but not new, and there were no special rooms that were off-limits to their child.

His mother had two crystal angel figurines, one on the windowsill above the sink in the kitchen, and the other with two wooden angels on the windowsill in the living room. Will had grown up around these figures for all of his life and did not know where they'd come from or what value they held to his mom, but only that they were beautiful if you held them to the light and watched the way the glass refracted at the edges and threw the light into the color spectrum. These were angels, he thought. Perhaps they did not move or think, but these were what they would look like should they manifest, should they break from their spiritual prisons and descend.

He didn't mean to knock it off, of course. No child does. Their intentions are careless at worst, and at most here a moment of energy. Rough-housing was quite rare for the only child. When the angel fell from the sill and shattered on the wooden coffee table beneath it, Will stopped moving.

For a few more seconds, Spenser continued his efforts to pin the other boy, but stopped, confused when he realized that Will was no longer in it.

The boy was fighting back tears.

This had been his mother's figurine, and it was beautiful. In the sound of it shattering, that sudden moment, altogether instant, a high noise, a whisper, and then what once was, was gone.

It wasn't a fear of his mother's anger, though he could expect that. It was in the moment of breaking that something registered deep within him, not in the way of recognition, but the way of one sound matching another, a registration.

The universe breaks. Things fall apart, not together. The angel fell into shards. The shards did not become an angel.

When his mother got home and he told her what happened, his voice quavered and his tears broke,

falling apart, not together.

And she smiled in the half-smile way of a mother, surprised but not upset. "Oh, that? It's alright, Honey. That's alright. I've got another. It wasn't all that important to me anyway. There's no need for tears."

There was comfort, but there was also the tension that you can't shake except through an embrace. The sound of the buzzing in the lights like insects trapped behind glass, the color of the curtain the brown of fat boiling on sulfur, the scratch of the sheets like sandpaper on burned skin.

These were extremes, things

breaking, not falling apart,

but in the quiet moments, between bothering his parents for a meal or taking a nap at home, there was quiet, and in the quiet, he could hear the whispers, if not the words, and the whispers were worse.

"Yes, I'm sorry about that. I wasn't well then."

Preston laughed for the first time. "I'd have hoped not. Remembering or otherwise, I remember being impressed you were able to discuss the matter with me at all."

So it was Preston that had come to him in the hospital. Will couldn't remember his face any more than the— than Clive Jenson's, but this made sense. This was why the corners of the man's lips were tense and his eyes so thin. It wasn't that he had worked on the case, but that he had led the interviews, he'd talked to the families. He had tried to piece together why Will could not remember, what had happened when it was just Jenson and Will, why a math teacher had died from such

a spontaneous medical condition by the boy's bedside the moment he'd awoken from his coma.

Discussing the matter was suddenly like speaking to Meredith Davis a few days before. There were holes in the story. There were answers to the questions Will was asking that only Will knew, but he was asking anyway.

"You still don't remember?"

Will shook his head.

"Have you started with the newspapers?"

Will nodded. "Of course. I kept up with the story in the weeks that followed, but as there wasn't a trial, there wasn't much in the way of details."

"There's only so much we can tell."

"What about matters of public record?"

The sergeant flipped through more of the pages in the file and rephrased. "I don't know how much there is to tell."

"What happened that day?"

Preston sighed and leveled his gaze at Will.

Since Columbine in 1999, there had been some twenty-three deaths from school shootings in the United States. Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, still ranks among the most notable, violent, and deadly of the shootings. Shortly thereafter, many schools across the nation installed mandatory guidelines to respond to such a situation. Savage Creek High School, though, nearly a year and a half after the massacre in Colorado, had not yet gone to the lengths that many inner-city schools had. Those schools were more immediately concerned with frequent acts of gang violence, which required security procedures, metal detectors, locker checks, and various other forms of enforcement. Some schools, in the wake of the Savage Creek shooting on Halloween of 2001, installed key-card readers on all exterior doors, forcing visitors to come through the office, first using a microphone and then signing in at the desk. Though their town was of decent size, catering to the college crowd and also new families looking for an urban setting uncontaminated by big city life, there had always been a feel of general peace and order, and so when the Columbine Massacre demanded national attention, the city watched along with the rest of the nation with horror; but the kind of horror that one feels watching a friend going through a radical illness, or mourning for the loss of a loved one. There's empathy, an understanding of heart-wrenching grief, and compassion. There's often recognition that changes need to be made, but their immediacy is often not recognized. After all, this was not them.

This was someone else. We wrap a security blanket about ourselves in the dark as protection, a lead vest against a maelstrom. This is not true horror because it is happening to someone else. This is why we buy the movie tickets for the horror films and we sit and we squirm, or we avoid them altogether.

Savage Creek High had never had a problem with excessive violence. Their students were far from having any kind of gang mentality, even with the ever-pressing influence of the outer cities and coastal movements. Their city had been expanding yearly, largely due to the growth that the university brought. There were no precautions.

And so on October 31, shortly after lunchtime, when Clive Jenson walked into the school in a poorly fitting, light blue, button-up shirt and baggy slacks, he was not given much of a second glance. This was not to say that there wasn't something about the man that demanded a second or third look. There was something vaguely hollow about him. He was a big man, tall, but with a narrow face, long nose, and pointed jaw. It was his eyes that would have drawn the most attention, striking a direct, if only implied, contrast with his more solid form. His shirt fit poorly around what seemed to be a sizeable midsection that tapered into equally poor-fitting slacks. Poorly fitting clothes were not uncommon in the public school system, and so his appearance, while oddly proportioned,

and those eyes, too dark,

were not entirely out of the ordinary. The manner with which he carried himself was comfortable and relaxed, and the only indication that something about his intention was amiss was in the way he gradually stiffened around each corner of the hallways he wandered, as if sensing a predator by smell. Though, in his favor, there were few people in the hallways at this hour of the day to give the man a second glance. The outer doors were usually locked during the school hours, but often went unchecked and were left propped open, and it was through the outer doors on the northwest end of the school that he entered.

Some of the classroom doors stood open to him, and he looked in as he passed, casually. Groups of students, rows of desks, and teachers lecturing before their children. In some, the students were piled in the back around laboratory tables wearing goggles that seemed as ill-fitting as

their fathers' suits.

He wasn't looking to begin his rampage in the classroom, though. He was, it seemed, in search of something or someone specific.

He turned the corner into that final hallway, the one where it happened. A teacher leaned in a doorway, keeping an eye on both the group of students working on their project in the hallway and also on the remaining students working on their

homework in his classroom.

The man—identified in the police reports as the math teacher Stanley Davis—provided a statement to the police that they were intending to follow up on in the later weeks as their investigation deepened, but he died before that could come up.

"At your bedside."

Will nodded, and he felt sick.

Stanley had described Jenson to the police as disconcerting. "Maybe it was because the memory has now blended— watching him come around that corner, watching him pull the gun. But there was something wrong about it."

There was something that was obviously quite agitating for Mister Davis as he filed the report. They speculated that it might have something to do with an inner guilt or concern over what had happened right in front of him. That he couldn't stop it, that the door slammed,

broke,

tearing skin, erupting in cries,

and that had been it.

There was something repulsive about him, Stanley had said.

"He killed them. It was like Hell itself fell like a wave. I've never been in war, but I think I can imagine one now."

"Warlike?" The officer asked.

The lights in the hospital room seemed jarring, and this, it struck Davis, was what bothered him, more so than the shooting. The way the light of the sun sears a migraine.

"Death. Of those you spend your time around. Those you care about. It was like the bullet, in the war movies, that comes so unexpectedly—or, maybe *too* expectedly. The way the characters might smile or share a moment that seems as if there isn't a war happening, that it might all be alright, that there might be peace, right? The false ending on the thriller movie. That happy ending before it all goes to shit and the girl is screaming and screaming. The way the bullet takes the young kid,

"the hopeful one, you know? The one that symbolizes the future—

"look at me. 'Symbolizes.' Talking like an English professor."

He was rambling and he knew it, but continued anyway.

"The way the bullet takes the young kid when you least expect it, when he least expects it, when his helmet is off. The sound will cut out. There's screaming, but

it's muted, and you, the moviegoer, feel sick to your stomach even though you saw it the moment before it happened, the way the war movie might for a moment stop feeling like a war movie, until you realize that it is still, and always has been, exactly right."

"Alright, so—"

But Stanley kept going. "Do you remember September the eleventh? The morning of? How crisp and blue the sky was? How endless it looked and how thick the air was, so that only a taste of it would fill your lungs and send the blood surging

"through your body? That was how it felt this morning."

"I was asleep." The officer looked ashamed.

"We all were."

"Did you," the officer asked, "see anything before or during the shooting?"

"I'd been sleeping."

"I'm sorry?"

"My classroom was right there. Right next to them."

"Yes."

"I watched him come right down the hallway. Right at me."

"Who?"

"The shooter. I watched those students get shot. I could—" Stanley cut himself off and gave the officer a wry look, distrusting in the most animated and innocent of ways, and the officer for a moment felt as if he were interviewing a drunk before recognizing the look as fear. You shut a person down, they fold inside themselves and want only to hold something outside of themselves. This flood of emotion, of conversation, was something altogether understood by the officer. "I happened to be standing in my doorway while my students were working on their in-class problems, when I saw the man walking down the hallway. Man. Agent of evil. You do not call a killer of children a man."

"Can you describe him for me?"

"A killer of children."

"Physically."

Stanley described the man as best he could remember. What continued to force its way into his mind instead of the color of the man's shirt or hair was the way that he had smiled at him, the confidence on his face, the look in his eye that spoke an utter security in what he was about to do. It would have been easy to call the man possessed, either later or during, for only something so evil could raise a weapon and stop the hearts of two—

(three? more? Stanley did not know at this point how many had been lost. He

knew Will was still alive. If barely. That was all he knew for sure)

—students. Or, if not, it was only ignorance of such horror that would bring such a spark to the man's eye. That Jenson somehow might not have known what was about to come in the few dozen steps he was about to take.

Stanley prayed to God that this terror was in fact a supernatural one, one from an elemental world, somewhere different than this one, from a place that might somehow more easily explain such destruction. So that way, in some fashion, it might make sense.

* * *

"So who was this guy?"

"Jenson?"

"Yes." The transition was smooth, which would have brought Will's breath a bit easier had that been the end of his concern. Instead, his heart quickened, and it didn't feel so different from

speaking to Jennifer that day on the beach

asking girls for their numbers in crowded bars and coffeeshops in his first few years of college, his friends in the corners, laughing and toasting and cat-calling across the room.

"As best we can tell, Jenson was some kind of—"

supernatural being

"—religious nut job. His friends described him as pleasant, always keeping to himself, sure, but passionate about his god and his spirituality. None of them expected what happened. But, this being the age we live in, it doesn't seem too strange, does it? Men fly planes into skyscrapers because their god is dissatisfied with us, and they are his soldiers."

* * *

On the final afternoon, Clive Jenson hit another boy in the cheek below his eye and went running down the hallway of the humid building to cry where no one would see.

At twelve, Clive Jenson was a skinny boy who was yet five years from the growth spurt that would shoot him anywhere from a few inches to a few feet above his classmates. He dressed well, had a gangly walk, and was easy to push to tears.

For two weeks in July, just before his seventh grade year, he attended a church day camp with a small number of his peers while his parents worked. Throughout

the year, he was homeschooled. His parents were both involved directly in the humanities, applying their doctoral work in sociology and human rights to a number of non-profit and international organizations. They were a relatively wealthy but humble family.

The camp was at the local church, and the laughing and playing children were corralled into the empty gymnasium and lower classrooms that were otherwise unused on weekdays in the summer. The interior of the church basement and gymnasium (a room barely half the size of any elementary school gymnasium, with hardwood floors and tables, where the basketball hoop at one end seemed out of place rather than a staple) was old, with walls made of white painted cinder blocks and decorated with various tapestries to give it a more homey feel that didn't quite get past the old furniture or stained tile flooring. There were tables in the rooms instead of desks, mostly spread with arts and crafts. It wasn't like public schooling at the time. Here, there were no posters, no educational banners or schedules written on the side of the chalkboard. The building had no air conditioning, and each day, the windows were shoved open with wooden dowels of various sizes, and box fans hummed hot air a few feet into the room, where even the fabricated breeze seemed to give up.

The instructors were college students who volunteered from the ministry, and the activity leaders were teenagers. Their schedule started at eight in the morning with a class on various Bible stories and arts and crafts to make the parables go down easier. After lunch, during the hottest part of the day, when the children were drowsiest, the activity leaders took them into the shady spots on the east side of the building and played various versions of tag or kickball. If the instructors were motivated, they would work with the activity leaders to incorporate some kind of meaningful lesson into the games. Most days they would not.

Throughout the two weeks, Jenson had been forced into a group of five other boys who had participated in the program one to three summers before. Jenson was new and was not familiar with these types of boys.

After the first day, Jenson approached his activity leader and said that he wasn't happy here. The activity leader asked him why, and Jenson said it was because he wasn't fond of being picked on.

"They call me retarded. I'm not retarded. Retardation is a mental disability. My cousin is disabled, and I'm not like him. They shouldn't make fun of me by making fun of him." He was a sharp kid, and his parents had obviously brought him up both sheltered and educated, but with a compassion and innocence that the other boys lacked on general principle.

His activity leader, Wesley, frowned and said that he would talk to the boys to

make sure it wouldn't happen again. "Until then," he said, "try not to take it personally, Bud. Oftentimes they throw those words around meaning something different, but without any real intent to hurt."

"But the words are hurtful. That's not what they mean."

Wesley could speak toward connotations of words, the way they change from group to group. He'd taken a class about linguistics for his sophomore year of college and could probably have talked theory with the kid for the better part of the afternoon—the kid would probably love it—but this wasn't the time, nor was it the place.

"And I'll remind them of that."

Jenson nodded severely.

"They like you though, Bud. No worries. You're having a great time, right?"

Jenson thought of the heat and the drab classrooms and playing tag during the hottest part of the day, and he shrugged before nodding.

On the seventh day, his activity leader pulled him aside when he saw that he was, instead of playing tag with the rest of the children, wandering slowly around the edges of the grass, on occasion getting tagged only as an excuse to take a seat and play with the weeds.

"Clive, my man. What's up? You don't seem very cheerful today."

Jenson shrugged.

"Tell me what's going on."

"The other guys. They're still making fun of me."

Wesley sat down on the grass and squinted at the boy on his right. Kid couldn't have picked a shadier spot? He felt the sweat spring from his back and press against his shirt. In the distance, the other children hooted and laughed, running in circles around each other and calling names of those still free to come and tag them, inching forward on the grass, closer to the action, to where they might be freed more easily.

"What are they doing now?"

"The same things. Sometimes they hurt me."

"How's that?"

"Like this morning," Jenson's voice wavered and tears sprang to his eyes. "I was walking to the classroom and one of them grabbed onto my shoulders really hard and tried to pick me up."

Wesley had seen this going around his group of boys. In the way of boys their age, they were trying to show off their strength by picking one another up, holding close to the other boys' arms, and heaving them into the air. Clive, as the smallest, was likely the easiest to be picked up. "You know they were just goofing around."

"But it hurt!" The words sprang like the tears on his cheeks. Wesley put his hand on the kid's back and patted him. The boy flinched.

"Did you tell them that it hurt you and that you didn't want them to do it anymore?"

"No."

"You've got to tell them first. If they don't know that you're not enjoying it the way that they are, they won't know to stop. If that doesn't work, you come to me straight away."

The boy nodded and dried his tears. "And they're still calling me names. Like Retard. And Crybaby."

Wesley sighed. He'd grown up no stranger to getting picked on by other students in school, and many far worse than the boys that Clive was dealing with at church camp, students who came from schools where that kind of language was common-place and had become meaningless and loosely thrown around. It was a different story entirely to be picked on by boys who actually intended to hurt, who looked on children with glasses and handed-down fashion sense with scorn that made them feel strong. This was not the case, Wesley knew. These boys were good kids. He'd talked to them, and they'd recognized how their words hurt, especially around people sensitive to the words' real meanings. But he found it difficult to tell the boys off for something that had no wicked intent, that they knew as meaningless. Become more aware, he could only encourage, and on the other end, well, toughen up. The world was going to be harsh if these names broke his skin. Wesley was still early in college and he knew this.

"I'll talk to them again, Clive. But you know that those are good kids. They don't intend to be mean. You know you're not a retard, or stupid, or a crybaby. You've got to be tough, you know? Believe in yourself. Sometimes that's all you've got."

He could see, though, that his words weren't getting through as deep as he'd like, and he could see the 'but' in the kid's scowl. Tell a victim to toughen up. Like that works. He felt like some stereotypical father. Not that he was sure that was a bad thing.

But for the next week, things seemed alright. Jenson played readily, though often on the outskirts of the group, never quite getting to the soccer ball or remaining unfrozen in tag for very long, but he seemed to be making the effort and enjoying himself. On the last day of camp, however, after Wesley thought that the issue was resolved, he saw the boy run down the hallway and around the corner in tears. As if summoned in answer to the falling sensation in Wesley's chest, a young boy with spiky black hair and an oversized basketball jersey ran up to him and said,

"Clive hit August in the face!"

(Later that day, Wesley would be discussing the matter with his fellow activity leaders and directors, and would agree with his co-leader that when he'd heard that Clive had responded physically, there was a part of him that celebrated. His co-leader, Mike, agreed, suppressing an amused smile. "I know! Half of me thought, 'Hey, that-a-way Clive!'" He stood up for himself.)

When Wesley found Clive, after directing Mike down the hall to assess the other side of the situation ("Of course this happens *four hours* before we're free of these kids," Mike muttered), he was sitting on the faded jade tiles next to the water fountain, his cheeks shining and red.

"Tell me what happened, bud. It's alright."

Again, with the name-calling. He'd been toughing it out all week, but finally he'd snapped. The group of them had been picking on one another, lingering for too long on Clive, pressing when they saw the weakness.

"And I hit him. I shouldn't have done it. I hurt him!"

"It's alright, Clive. I mean, it's bad that you resorted to that, that's against the rules and it's very serious—" He saw the tears well again and he quickly recovered— "but between you and me, you weren't wrong. Sometimes they just push you too far, and you have to push back."

The words felt wrong. Was a solid knock to the face an appropriate response for boys being boys? Maybe the shot itself wasn't so far from boys being boys either. But that's how it always started, wasn't it? He didn't know much of what to say to provide a religious perspective. This was church camp, after all, but while Wesley was an activity leader with enough church background to pad his interview, he wasn't here for that. He was here for summer work to put on scholarship applications and resumes. The most insightful story he might be able to share was the eye-for-an-eye law, and he wasn't sure that really applied anymore. College was a political minefield, where violence was so frowned upon that responding to even an act of war was still violence, was still bad. Ghandi was like the political role model for half his classmates.

What about Job? Unjust punishment and staying strong?

"It's still not alright."

"It's not. But you did what you had to."

Over the next hour, Wesley and Mike spoke to the individual children about what exactly happened and why, consulted with one another, and then brought the children into an empty classroom to discuss the matter together. When Wesley first saw August's face, tear-ridden like Clive's, he realized that at the moment of impact there was an understanding that thus far had not come from words. In the impact

that his fist made with the larger boy's face, Clive saw eye to eye with him. August had realized the severity of what had come before, and with that followed the tears. Over the course of those forty-five minutes in the room, with each child speaking in turn to how the others' actions made him feel, nearly every boy had reached the point of tears.

Wesley, after prompting each boy to speak and steering the conversation in one direction or another, eventually sat back with his knees before him on the teacher's table while the boys talked. In two hours, they'd say goodbye to these children for the summer, with high fives and see-you-next-years (likely lies). Wesley would probably never see these boys again. He had no idea where they might go, what they might do, whether they would remember this come-to-Jesus moment when they picked on other boys in the future, whether it would make matters worse.

There were tensions when they hugged it out, and it was a sour note to end on. He hoped that their eyes would dry by the time the parents arrived. With boys, they normally did. Sunshine and laughter goes a long way. And it was with this that he hoped. Too optimistically, perhaps, but he didn't feel wrong in doing so.

3.

"Jenson lived in town the last few months of his life. As far as we know, he didn't have a job, and he was living off the small amount of money that was left after his mother's death."

"His mother died?"

"Yes. It seems that it prompted the move. Before that, he lived in . . ." Preston checked the file and flipped a couple pages, and Will thought that it all felt off, like a movie

or like something was trying to break through

something like memory

"Maine. A small town in Maine."

"Do you think that might have something to do with the shooting?"

"His mother's death? It might. It certainly prompted him to move out of the state, down here. He didn't have a job, and we talked to his neighbors. We were very open with the media to see if there were any locals who might have something to provide in terms of his mental state, but no one came forward. It's a mystery to us still. Seems he was awfully reclusive."

"How did she die?"

"Cancer. Inoperable. Bone marrow. She suffered. Left behind only her kid.

Well, man. He was still living at home though. At what?" He flipped a few more pages. "Twenty-nine?"

Will imagined a man in the same small home he'd lived in since childhood, somehow content with the living situation. Did he want that? Or was he just leeching off his mother?

But he was a religious nut, right? Did that make him hypocritical or peaceful?

He shot up your school.

He stood in his living room. Will imagined the man in his childhood home.

Ravaged face, the red skin inflamed around his eyes where he'd been forcing back tears, a burning

plain,

pain

trying to break through

the face he was trying to hold, the faith with which he'd grown, the god who'd held him, a stained stack of plates, the framed craft store pictures, the way he saw the world and the way the world saw him, the discord struck,

two waves traveling along a plane

that shatter when they meet.

Will shook his head as if to clear it.

When it was over, Clive Jenson was left alone in a house he'd never known to be— not quiet, but empty.

It was filled with her things. Her clutter. Vases containing wilting flowers and plants that she'd not been here to take care of, that he'd not thought of in his worry, watering them maybe only a quarter as frequently as he should have. She talked about them in the easier moments, the same way that she talked about him. There was something to be said for taking care of living, breathing creatures of God.

They were plants, Mom, he said.

They lived and breathed. I didn't bring up a boy who knows nothing of biology.

He didn't care for living creatures of God. His experience had become the dying.

It's the same thing, Clive.

They're not putting anyone up for the death penalty who gets pregnant.

You're making a flaw in logic, son. Your terminology.

Semantics.

She repeated the word and he shook his head and she shook her head and after a few minutes of silence, he went back to staring out the window. He wanted to

press his point, but she was dying.

Now, as he cleared out her belongings, the house echoed his words back to him in the same way that she often echoed his. They were sometimes argumentative points, sometimes minimal encouragers, sometimes words she didn't realize that she was speaking because she was thinking about his words so severely. It was amazing, the way a room turns so—

hallowed

—hollow, so fast, when you remove a few framed photos from the walls, the mattress from the frame, the furniture from along the walls.

He broke some of her things. A lot of her things.

She had a picture of a pair of kittens in a basket in the living room. It was small and cliché and tacky and everything about his mother in a single image. He'd been in the house for so long that he hated it, and when it was broken in pieces (not just the glass in the frame, but the print, shredded) and thrown against the living room carpet, he found that he quite liked the effect, and despite finding the entire moment decidedly pitiful, he wanted to add to it.

She died, but she left so much of herself behind, still living, breathing, creatures of God.

Scripture and priests spoke of a just and fair god, a being who is good at all times by necessity. Any other god would be unfathomable, and against what believers put their faith in. So why would this all-powerful god let cancer ravage her body, let her last three months in the greatest misery,

wilting?

This was to be expected. The end comes for each of us. This was only too soon for him because he'd never left eighteen. He'd never taken the next step to fly the coop, to cut the cord. He didn't need to, he didn't want to. His mother was happy with him being there, and he was happy to be with her. He did not care for the interest of women, and had no taste for large crowds, parties, or the kind of friends he would frequent such places with. And so his hours were regular; he saw his friends once a week, and his bedtime was early.

Yes, sometimes his mother had encouraged him to go find a place of his own, but they'd discussed this and found his staying to be the best solution. His father died when Clive was in high school, and after that it was up to him to protect his mother.

Against a world that needed protecting from.

This was very wrong, that there was a world
that needed protecting from.

"He had a couple minor blemishes on his record. Sleeping in public places, though he wasn't homeless. Small infringements. Parking tickets. Started a fight once when drunk. Nothing malicious."

"Why Savage Creek High?"

"As best we can tell, it was random."

"Random. Me. My girlfriend. My best friends, who died. Because it was random? If we were two hallways away, this would never have happened. If he had picked a different school or a different day, this would never have happened."

"Will." The sergeant leaned forward and dropped the file on the desk beside him. "You can't play that game and you know it. You've been told before. You play the 'what if' game and that's what gets you killed. What happened, happened. We deal with it. If your parents had never met, you wouldn't be here, but you are here and that's the way things went and it's not worth getting crazy over."

Will looked over the man's head at the ceiling lights. Mirrors in crisscrossing fashion below fluorescent tubing. Above that, where the ceiling tiles should have been, was raw piping plastered in black spray that looked like rotting sea-tar, ocean mold on decaying ships, like his high school, like the shooting, like all he knew after

lying there, steel in his hand, still smoking. . . . He couldn't see it smoking, but knew it was, because he'd just fired, twice, and he could smell it.

The black tar was dripping and he was fading and the only thing he could think of was Jennifer's name but it sounded in his head the way

Jenson's mother's name sounded in her empty, broken bedroom,
broken the way that sobs break a name.

It was my fault.

You killed them, Will. You killed them all.

"You did a good thing that day. It was a terrible day and it should never have happened, but you made it. You saved the lives of all of the students in the school. As many as you could."

Will was glad that the man hadn't called him a hero.

"Don't play the 'what if' game."

But Will didn't come here for therapy. Not like this, anyway. And so he nodded and sat backward, looking at the cop again. "Of course."

But it seemed that Preston wasn't buying his reaction and said, "Judging by the way things turned out, I'm glad it wasn't anyone other than you."

What felt like a swallowed ice cube ran down Will's chest, and, for a moment, he found it difficult to take a deep breath. Were he not suddenly concerned with

the flood of emotions that seemed concentrated in his solar plexus, he would have seen the way the sergeant's jaw flexed.

"But nobody deserves that, Will."

"No, I know," Will said, recovering. "Sorry. Going back into it all brings it back. Emotions surprise me a bit." He'd leave it at that. He didn't want to be weak in front of this guy. Cop. Probably ex-military too. Will was five years out of high school, in decent shape, in touch with a lot of the emotions going on inside. He needed to be harder than this. Being overrun with these memories, these frustrations, it was immature.

"Of course. Why, if I might ask, do you want to go back at all?" Preston wondered.

Will shrugged. "Is there anyone I could talk to about him?"

Preston narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I think that might be inappropriate," he said quietly.

Going into a high school with a bomb strapped to your chest was inappropriate. His bringing the issue up again to people who might have been close with Jenson would be inappropriate if they were victims, surprised and hurt by his actions, but in that way they were kin to Will. If they were on Jenson's side, that would also make his inappropriate inquiries, well, appropriate. Now he was worried he played his hand too soon, and that any follow-up question would be seen as a way to worm into the man's life. Inappropriately.

So Will nodded. "What more can you tell me about him?"

"We never knew a whole lot, and as you know, without a trial, and the smoking gun right there in his hand—"

In my hand too, Will thought, and the look on the sergeant's face seemed to reflect the notion.

"—Well. You know what I mean. It was an open and shut case."

"Where was he living?"

The sergeant sighed and didn't meet Will's eyes, reaching again for the folder. "He was staying at Creekside."

Will knew the place. It was far enough from campus and down-trodden enough that the rent was dirt cheap. A few college kids shacked up there who weren't interested in being super close to the downtown area or to campus, but those were rare. More often it catered to patrons who were down-on-their-luck, needing a cheap place to stay. It was a cop hotspot, a scab on the corner of town where other scabby restaurants and bars were pushed.

"And if I were you, I wouldn't go checking it out. The turnover rate there is so high that anyone who even knew the guy in passing would have been gone within a

year. Management wouldn't even remember him by now. And by showing up and poking around, a good clean-cut college boy like you, you'd draw attention. And for nothing."

"I understand," Will said. But already he felt the draw of the place. Not in the way of answers about the man—the kind of answers he was here speaking to the police about, anyway—but the kind of answers, what?

That were metaphysical? That, were he in the same place as his shooter, he might understand the whys, or what prompted him, or better understand his emotional condition? It felt ridiculous to even consider. But still, he wanted to see the place.

"Don't know why he wound up there, either. All reports about him, he wasn't a bad guy. Had some money."

Wasn't a bad guy?

"His motive is the only piece missing. It's easy enough to blame the whole thing on fanaticism, especially with the time we were living in. *Are* living in. We wouldn't have lost our case in court had he made it. But it would have been interesting to hear from him."

"He never left any kind of note?"

"No. His room was empty. It was like the guy was a ghost. Gotten rid of all his belongings."

"He was from Maine?"

"Yes."

"What town?"

Again, the reservation, the disappointed stare, and Will knew he was pushing his luck. But this information wasn't hard to come by, and the man wasn't going to stonewall him.

When Preston told Will the town name, it didn't surprise him—even though perhaps it should have—to hear it was the same town Jennifer lived in for four years after the shooting.

4.

Despite his lack of surprise, his mouth still went dry, and a shiver ran the course of his spine. There was something fitting about the information, something satisfying in the way that almost felt as if it was the detail he'd come here to learn. Though, still, that wasn't quite it.

"He belonged to a church?"

"Will," and the look in the sergeant's eyes was pleading.

Don't say it was Jennifer's church.

"It's alright. I understand about tracking it down, about stepping where I shouldn't. But if he was a fanatic, he'd have roots in his congregation, right? At least in the direction of his religion."

Preston nodded slowly and then pushed himself from his chair. Will's heart sank, and a part of him wanted to match the motion, stand up, face growing pale, and shout at the man, demand the answers he was entitled to. There was no legality here to yank him around. This shit probably was in the papers if he wanted to wade through the bullshit instead of finding easy answers from someone who was supposed to be on his side.

But Preston said, "I need to smoke," and grabbed a pack from inside a desk drawer, leaving the folder behind.

Blinking in surprise, Will got up slowly and followed the man.

Around the first cube, another detective saw Preston passing and said, "Halftime?" before seeing Will trailing behind and stopping himself. "Sorry, didn't see you were working."

Preston looked back at Will, then his friend. "No, it's fine. Come on along."

The other detective accepted this, hopping up with his own pack and tagging along with the two. He must have assumed that Will was a friend. Will found this amusing, with echoes of his frustration lingering. Was this guy supposed to help shake Will? Tell him that Preston wasn't interested in keeping the conversation going?

They left the cubical room, went down a back staircase, and exited out a side entrance where a small picnic table sat on a concrete slab a few feet away. The parking lot wasn't far on this side, and a row of squad cars ran the far end of the lot. The closer side only held one cruiser.

"Joe," Preston said, lighting up a cigarette. "This is Will Andrews. Will, Detective Conrad."

Conrad nodded and said hello as he took the lighter from Preston.

"Will Andrews, Savage Creek High Will Andrews."

Conrad looked surprised, as if he'd swallowed something the wrong way, before focusing on lighting his cigarette, glad for the distraction. Will hated the look.

"Christ. You've grown up, kid."

Will was surprised by this. Even at five years out, he didn't think he looked much different from his senior year of high school. Maybe a bit more facial hair. An added hardness. Preston looked hard at Will's face, as if trying to prod his skin to find where it was harder and softer, to learn how a kid grows after a shooting in

which he nearly died while watching his friends killed around him.

"I worked on that case, you know. I was on the street back then. One of the first responders." That would account for why his face looked pale behind the blue smoke and shadows of the treetops. "Like seeing a goddamn dead man right now."

"Speaking of digging up dead men," Preston said. "Will's looking into the shooting."

"Are you?"

Will nodded and crossed his arms, feeling more solid that way, more adult around these two men. It was strange to hear the different way Preston talked around Conrad. He was looser about the shooting, irreverent even. He was hard. Not in any way Will was used to discussing it. Everything in the last five years was slow and quiet and didn't go much further than tears. If there was an outburst, a moment of solidarity below the tenderness, it was first reinforced by silence and later covered again. There was something refreshing about this.

"You shouldn't dig up bad men, boy. Men who do shit like that weren't much alive in the first place. They have a bad way of coming back, if you understand me."

Preston nodded.

"I'm hoping it will kill him," Will said.

Conrad nodded.

"Nobody ever learned anything good, digging at what was best forgotten," Preston said.

Will shook his head in frustration. "I have to."

Twisting his neck to blow smoke to the side, Conrad looked at Will curiously.

"He still doesn't remember," Preston said.

Conrad hummed a low note and let the smoke wander into the breeze, where it blew back into Will's face. It smelled like

burning leaves mingling with distant chimneys,
storm clouds, branches seared, coals from within.

"I want to remember." Will said.

"Guarantee you'll feel the same way about it even when you find out."

Will shook his head.

"It was still a bad thing. You're not going to find anything good in this. Nothing will make this better. A man came into your school and shot you, killed your friends, nearly killed your girlfriend, right? That's not going away."

Will blinked. The smell of charcoal was overwhelming. Their cigarettes were nearing the filters. Will understood why Preston agreed to Conrad's coming, wondering in fact whether he took the smoke break in hopes to catch the man's attention.

Preston pushed his cigarette into the ashtray and scanned his ID at the door, where a mechanical sound buzzed and the lock popped. He didn't say anything, but held the door open for Will. Conrad watched them until they disappeared up the stairs.

"What are you keeping me from?" Will asked. The question was loud in the stairwell.

"What do you think is underneath this, Will? What do you think you're going to find?"

The silence of earlier seemed heavenly, where now shrieks echoed from the distance in a greater multitude, their voices blending in strange harmony with the buzzing of the flies and the wheezes of the air, moving from one burning confine to another.

Those are the sounds of the newly dead, the big man said.

It was the miserable and terrible scream of a person at his last end. There was a hopeless ring to it, one that resounded in Will's heart. The voices had given up all hope.

How do you know? Will started to ask, whispering, before a cough cut out his words.

Because they still have a voice to scream with, the big man answered.

"I don't know." He didn't. Not the conscious part of him. When they got to the second floor and Preston opened the door to let Will through, he stopped and looked at the man. "My therapist told me to look into it. Not knowing seems to be torturing me."

Preston considered him, then walked onward, slower. "I'm not a therapist. Neither is Conrad. We've both seen shit we'd like to forget. Namely, what happened at Savage Creek. It's not something we want to hang on to."

But some part of Will was already hanging on to it.

"I'll leave it at that. I'll tell you what I can. But I hope you consider that."

Will didn't say anything, and they rounded the corner to his cubicle. Preston worked at his jaw when he sat down again. The motion looked like it took effort.

"Chase after the light. Do everything you can to find the joy, you know? The past is past, the dark is dark. Shed some light. I mean, you got a girlfriend or anyone, Will?"

Will nodded. "Jennifer."

Preston nodded and then blinked. "Jennifer Christianson?"

"Yes."

Preston opened his mouth and left it there. His surprise was well hidden, but Will was expecting it. He licked his lips. "Look," he said, taking the folder again from the desk. "He went to the Church of the Faithful Servant."

Will barely even processed the words the man had said because he couldn't take his eyes from the folder, recognition surging, his breath catching, the acrid smell like burning plastic growing again now, sourceless and like a memory.

Of course, he'd known this all along. It was obvious.

"Can I see that picture?"

Preston passed him the folder without speaking. Will could have asked anything he wanted now, and the man would probably have told him, but he'd found what he came for.

Moundshroud. The big man. The smiling face, the one from the newspapers, the one he'd not seen in four years. The one that replaced Osama's, the face of evil, his next-door neighbor, the church-goer who lived with his mother until she was eaten alive by the cancer.

Of course it was him. He'd known it all along, obvious, since the moment he saw him

self

when he opened his eyes to the nightmare. He hadn't accepted that it was the same person the way he hadn't accepted the memory, the same way he hadn't quite forgotten

Jennifer.

Everything stopped. What about Jennifer?

He hadn't gotten rid of the man. Shut up. In death. Shut up, shut up! Moundshroud was Jensen.

His world turned too bright. Will looked to

her, but the

white halo

around the light, where the black tar dripped

like blood from his arm

in the police station, the bullpen they called it, he remembered this from a movie he'd seen once. Or was it a thriller novel he read in middle school? He wondered if that was what they called it here,

in reality.

The sound warbled, and he realized that in the way he smelled the burning plastic, he heard their screams in the distance. The freshly dead. He was screaming too. Will remembered the police station and wished for it to return. His feet didn't hurt there. His arm didn't drip like black tar. His world didn't mark time by aching limbs and what bled next. He'd coughed up blood two limbs ago. How many drops ago? Each tick, sound against sand, how many seconds? He wasn't sure if his lungs were giving out from the air, or if his throat had gone so dry that it cracked. His intake of air, his rhythm, his connection with the outside world, was giving out. Keep a rhythm in your walking, then.

Jennifer. What was she doing but tagging along? That woebegone expression her only contribution. She was no help but a painful memory, an extra limb that served for what, exactly?

Let her be lost then, he muttered and ground his teeth until his gums bled. She's tough. She'll be fine. If I can work out the rhythm, if I can work out the rhythm, I'll be all right. I'll get through this.

His voice cracked like the scab on his arm. Fear was like a toxin in his body, and he flinched when it surged. Veins come alive again. Burn. Singe.

Wouldn't it be nice to just dip into some water? Relax a little bit? Just settle down and let it heal and soothe, to wet my mouth and throat and—

Two flies swirled from the haze, landing in a fresh current of blood running down his forearm.

Get off, flies. Get off me. Please, come on. Get off.

Will swatted at them with a sluggish hand. The insects rolled through the blood as he brushed at them, their large hairy bodies smearing before they tumbled toward the ash on the ground, unable to flap their tiny saturated wings. Will sympathized.

Before him, the eerie red hue that the smoke had taken on from the horizon was now fading, replaced with bruise-colored shadow. The air felt thicker around his head, some combination of smoke and humidity. The black pollutant seemed to stick to his skin until he was as black as the storm cloud above them. The air was sticky with the heat. It pressed into their skin like embers. Burning. Will couldn't tell when he was breathing and when he was holding his breath.

He ran his tongue over his lips. Crust. His tongue came unstuck with a stringy mucus devoid of saliva. He reached up to touch his tongue with a dirty hand and felt no wet slime on it. The texture was like a person's fingers after a hard day of work with an axe or sledgehammer; calloused and dry.

He tried to call spit to his mouth, but none came. Just a glass? Oasis? A cool

breeze would be okay. Would be sweet. Just a glass of water would be a godsend.

A growl escaped his throat before dying off, high and scratchy, a sob dry of tears and enthusiasm.

Another tree passed them in the smoke, an entire branch burning now, some black thing draped over another. An orange fissure exposing the glowing, molten interior, oozing melted ash.

The boy turned his head away, picking at the freely, slowly bleeding slice in his arm to distract himself from his fear. His eyes burned as they tried to shove tears to the surface, squeezing against only empty tear ducts.

I have to turn back, he pleaded. I have to turn back right now. I can't.

"Tell me, before I go," Will said. He was standing next to the chair where he'd been sitting a moment before. Preston was staring, and Will couldn't read his expression. Surprise? Concern? Confusion? "Was there any way that this could be my fault?"

Will's voice was scratchy and it hurt to talk. Preston's eyes were big.

"What?"

Will opened his mouth, and the cool of the office air felt good.

"What are you saying?"

Will shook his head. "Thank you. Thank you for helping me today. If I have any more questions, can I call you?"

Preston nodded but didn't think to pass along his card.

CHAPTER ELEVEN **madness**

1.

"Only secular moderns believe in Hell. Medieval Christians believed that Hell was indeed a place, but somewhere past us, a place that could only be brought about by imagination, within the brain space. But it's from the past century's events that we believe that Hell is actually here, incarnate."

Professor Pullman leaned against the table at the front of the class, speaking slowly. He put down a thin, brightly-colored textbook. "That was Falconer in chapter one, as I'm sure you all remember." He smiled, as if to himself, and crossed his arms.

"We've been bouncing around this issue while studying our different texts, and we're at this point in the unit between making this transition from the classical texts to the modern, and with the modern, modernist perceptions of Hell, which I know

some spoke toward in small group breakouts a couple classes back."

This was not right, Will thought. They'd discussed this already. Well, moved past it. Weren't they on the war chapter, finishing the semester? His head swam. He remembered Adam. Felt out of time,

too late,

no, *outside* of time.

He sat against the wall in the back of the classroom, pressing the back of his chair against the wall, as if he were trying to melt into it, become one with the cinder

Cinder. The word rang with a kind of elegance in the snake-like, slithery sound of the *c*. It was smooth, but followed hard, as if to draw some kind of parallel between the softness of the pieces that fell from the trees. His walking slowed enough that at one point he reached down to pick at the pieces that had blown across the dust and the dirt, and held them between his fingers, pressing so that the outer gray crumbled to where the insides burned

against his fingers.

blocks. Become one with the cinderblocks.

"If you read the chapter for class, you'll be ahead of the game on the discussion. But there was a transition in the twentieth century that brought Hell onto a different level for us, bringing it into the material world rather than a place of imagination or afterlife. This was, what?"

"The Holocaust?" someone in the front of the class asked.

"The Holocaust. The greatest evil we've seen in recent history. The attempted elimination of an entire culture of people. It was this, and the following world war, that accelerated the idea of Hell on earth into our modern thinking."

"But what about the rest of history?" another student in the front of the class asked. "History was violent, nasty. I mean, the Crusades? Why didn't that impact thinking? Even back then."

"A great question," Pullman said. "Any responses?"

The class was quiet for a few moments. Hesitant glances at the textbooks and notebooks before them. Another tentative hand. Another student. "Maybe it was more common to the time? It was accepted? Disease and violence and the struggle to survive were commonplace and so didn't seem as harsh?"

Pullman nodded. "Maybe."

"Maybe it's cultural? We think we're above the more primal cultures, the tribal, violent mentality, because we're Americans, we're free, and we talk it out instead of

fighting."

Another hand, quicker now. "Be careful with that. I took Post-Colonial Lit. last semester, and we studied that idea, that elitist Western idea that we're better than all other cultures. We fought to establish this country. We fought ourselves a hundred years later."

"But that's the running idea, though. That we're above it. That we've found the best way. And so we hit this cultural elitist status in the twentieth century."

"We were also a godless country."

Pullman said. "Keep going with that."

The student shifted. "Well, despite being founded on Calvinism and all that, 'in God we trust' and all, we were established right before this time of scientific revolution, the Industrial Revolution. And between that and equal rights and the shrinking of the world, we're starting to accept that there are other viewpoints, especially on those things we haven't proven, like religion. So we lost God."

A couple hands were in the air now, and Pullman had to be careful to walk the line between religious warfare and a successful class discussion. Will was reminded of high school

bullets in hallways and wires through chests and Adam, scrambling down the hallway. Fly like ravens.

where discussions of religion were downplayed because the school was public and didn't want to step on any parent's toes. The topic was too hot. Situations like this, really. Discussions as to the perpetuation of God. Evolution versus creationism. Science moving on.

"We haven't lost God. We've still got a strong concentration of religious belief in our country."

"There's still a good handful of devout believers. Even in the West, people ram planes into buildings—"

Images of smoke coughing from a building brought Will to images of smoke coughing from trees and dirt and lungs that ran raw as hot air scraped

"—but this idea of 'the West' is largely scientific, rejecting faith-based hypotheses. We're driven by technology, not by archaic rule systems. And I'm not saying whether they're wrong or not. I'm a believer myself. But that's the overall direction."

"Why is this?" Pullman asked, trying to keep it on the wheels.

"Fear?"

"Go on."

"Well, we said earlier that older cultures, lacking the safety tech that we have now, were more vulnerable, and so they found security in faith, in supernatural powers. Now we're a safer world, and the idea of protection from invisible unknown forces seems less needed or likely."

"And so then it's genuine mortal, material terrors that remind us that the world is still scary, that we might still need a god. So why, after the Holocaust, I wonder, did faith not make more of a reappearance?" Pullman asked. "And not objecting to the text, but within it. Why is there this idea then of Hell on earth instead of, again, a resurgence of faith-based work?"

"Because we can't believe that anymore? We can't put trust in what's not scientific?"

Pullman nodded, called on another.

"Because you can't get worse than what we saw. That was Hell on earth. World War I imagery, gas warfare, trench warfare, the Holocaust, bombs from the sky that destroy cities and everything we've designed to protect ourselves is used against us. Nazi death camps. The A bomb."

"And then Vietnam."

"Another part was that media was on the rise, right? We became more aware of the world, and so political and violent events became more known and frowned upon."

"Then you get counter-culture of the past fifty years. Total rejection of violence in all forms. Even the good fight is Hell on Earth."

Pullman nodded and looked over the classroom. Will wanted to scream.

"Are there any instances, do you think, where violence can be used for good?"

Some people shook their heads.

"Well, yeah. What if there are forces that won't negotiate? What if there are people so set in their ways that we would call them evil, that we have to go to war, that we have to eliminate them?"

"That assumes absolute evil."

"If you assume that there can be absolute evil, then you leave yourself open to misunderstanding."

"No one is the bad guy. Everyone believes that they're doing something for the right reason."

Will was thinking of the big man—Clive Jenson. Moundshroud. It was hard to call them one and the same, despite knowing deep down all along. Was he crazy? Walking into their school with a bomb strapped to his chest? He was a religious

man. He grew up that way. How could he—with a lifetime of moral beliefs discussed, or at least presented—fall so far that he didn't recognize the horror of what he was doing? Was the death of his mother so bad that he was emptied?

Was he so crazy that he was all who mattered? Pain was nothing. Others were nothing. There was only power? Control? If there was absolute evil, he was it. If there

The air had turned to yellow smog around them. It seemed that although the days turned slowly, the time of day changed by climate rather than sunlight. Right now the sun was low, but earlier it seemed to trace a drifting, random pattern, sometimes to high noon, sometimes nearing the horizon only to rise up again. It was like standing on an end of the earth, where the sun spun in small circles, only the world was wobbling, the way clay on a potter's wheel wobbles when it's about to break.

Gray smoke billowed and bloomed on the near horizon, stagnant and stretching across the plain like some earthbound manifestation of the storm building above. Fires chugged out smoke that came together with the storm like two caressing, writhing, sexing entities.

In the ash on the ground, partially burned and blurred, brittle white shells littered the place. Was this a floodplain once? Was there water here? Were these the remains? An antithesis that—

God. What Will wouldn't give to drown, to surround himself in water until his lungs stopped, satiated. To drown would be to orgasm, to be filled, to find completion.

"What about Hitler?"

The class was quiet again.

"Hitler believed in subordination and racism, the power of species. He tried to murder a culture. We return to the Holocaust. If that was Hell, then Hitler was Satan incarnate, the ultimate evil. Was World War II worth it? Or do we let it happen?"

"We leave much of Africa alone right now, where warring tribes and leaders try to wipe whole peoples out and do nothing about it. I mean, look at Darfur."

"We do. Is that okay? What's that quote? 'Real evil is when good men stand by and do nothing'? What if that action is violence?"

"The lesser of two evils."

Pullman said, "How do you combat Hell?"

After a few moments of quiet, someone said, "It's the problem of evil."

"Say more," Pullman said, looking at his watch and then back up again.

"Well, the problem of evil is that God is supposed to be both all-good and all-powerful. But there's evil in the world. So either God is not all-good, having the power to destroy it but allowing it anyway, or he's impotent, wanting to destroy it but incapable of doing so."

"How does that apply here?"

"Well, say there's evil. How do we defeat that? Is the power to defeat evil, evil itself? And what would that say about God? I mean, destroying evil is still destruction."

"Is destruction evil?"

"Destruction is an act of creation, right? It's about perspective."

"So is good and evil, I guess."

"And from there we get very post-modern. What we've done in a lot of ways, here," Pullman said, "is trace the direction of literary thought from the Holocaust onward. In sketchy terms. But we've considered Hell politically in the immediate repercussion of World War II, leading to other huge worldly political events, Vietnam, communism, and more recently the War on Terrorism. We've ended on this confusion of perception, the ambiguity within moral thought. Much of post-modernism, coming from this same century here, is awfully close to relativism. Where it doesn't matter, anything goes. Ethically, it's whatever you believe in, right? Much of literature studies that recently.

"The interesting elements now come from absolutes. Are there moral absolutes? Lines in the sand that cannot be crossed no matter what? Killing another human being? This grows infinitely more complex if we consider an afterlife. Is there an afterlife where we pay for our deeds? If so, are there moral guidelines? Who, then, is in control of them? Who dictates them? Who holds us accountable? Is it a sin to take someone's life? What if there is an afterlife? What weight does that put on our material lives then? Unless of course we're already paying for them in the material world, with Hell made manifest.

"These questions are indeed complex, and indeed challenge much of classical thought. And that's what we'll be exploring over the next few weeks—appropriately, as we go into the Halloween season," he smiled.

When Will got up to leave, he realized he'd been grinding his teeth so hard that his jaw throbbled.

2.

The first body resolved from the haze like a sleeping beast along the side of their

path, grinning about meeting them. It was black and curled. The skin was charred away from the smiling, yellow teeth. The eyes were melted and gone, the eye sockets staring toward the sky. One stripped leg lay extended behind the corpse, pointing toward the horizon and the pit. The skin and foot were missing. Brown bone prepared to rot with the rest of the body lying curled in the fetal position. Muscles and sinew still clung to their joints.

Will stood over the body for a few
minutes, hours, days

before he processed what it was that lay before him: a human body. Something about it seemed out of place, and Will wondered if it had dragged itself from the pit—or wherever they were headed beneath the cloud ahead—and had gotten this far. So close.

Close? The idea was strange to Will. How long had they been walking? How long had it been since the sharp pain had migrated from his feet to his windpipe, singeing his lungs with an inner flame? To think that this was close was to think that what waited was

too long and too much.

When Jennifer caught up to Will and Jenson, she saw the body, turned around slowly, and sat down hard.

Jenson spoke. His words were raspy, and Will could barely hear them. Every human being looks the same when they are burned. Black. White. Asian. Hispanic. Old. Male. Female. All but children. At root, when burned, the human creation is at its most basic. We're all equal in the oven.

He crouched next to the remains. Will sat down suddenly, as if the air had gone out of him, but his attention remained on the body in front of him.

When you're burned, your flesh hardens into crispy leather.

He reached to the carcass and tore the skin away from its hand.

And you can put its black flesh on your own hand like a glove. He pushed his hand into the corpse's. Turning to Will, he beckoned with a black finger and a grin. Hell's calling, Will. He wants you.

Will stared at the man with blank eyes. The big man stood and reached for Will.
Stop.

He continued toward Will, forcing the boy to get up and take a weak step backwards.

Cut that out!

Jenson turned his back on Will and threw the skin-glove into the dust, crouching again and then wrenching the skin from the corpse's head. He swiveled toward Will, sneering below the jagged edge of the face, his eyes bulbous behind

the torn eye sockets. The flesh was yellow where the skin had cracked.

Are you ready for this, Will?

Shut up. Seriously.

Do you wonder how soon it will be? When your flesh will burn? When this will be your face?

Shut the fuck up!

Jenson stalked toward Will, his charred mask dangling from his own dirty, sweaty skull. The man and the mask blended together nearly as one, a predator looking to feed.

Will stumbled backward, through the ash, his legs giving out, He looked up at the man.

This will be all you have left.

No.

Then you'll lose it, too. And what will you have then?

No, he repeated. No. no.

Jenson ran his finger along the side of Will's face, smearing flecks of black skin amongst the blood and ash.

All that you'll have left is that guilty, filthy mind of yours. Forever.

Then the big man slammed his fist into Will's jaw and screamed in his face. Chaotic rhapsody of terror, laughter, and tears, shredding a dry throat, harmonizing with Will's wails. Will went inside himself, curling up on the ground. Jenson stepped to the burned body and placed the heel of his shoe against the head, crushing the skull into shards. Skin and hair clung to the shoe when he removed his foot from the concavity. He flipped the flesh mask at Will.

Will glared.

Let's go.

Will dragged his limbs along the ground when he tried to rise, coating his hands in the ash as if it would cushion future falls, to bring the soft stuff with him. His fingers raked against the rock and shells below the dusty layer, and there was familiarity in the pain, familiarity the way he would press himself into his bed at night, reaching for unconsciousness, floating away, safety in release. Dig and stay and

sleep forever.

A shell stuck in the fleshy space between his first two fingers. But when he raised his hand, Will quickly realized it wasn't a shell; it was bone. They were all bones the way the ash was skin and land, a person. This place was as much a place as it was him, or whoever had been here before him. Shell, bone,

sea. He longed for water, for a breeze that might run along his arm like

her fingers,
longed for the sea, a space of memory.

REMEMBER.

And so they began to walk again. Will glanced too often at Jenson, perhaps to make sure his face was still human, perhaps to watch more carefully for tricks and turns. But Jenson did nothing, only matched Will stride for stride, as he always had. Jennifer stayed back and appeared to be studying the ground, as if for coming bodies and bones.

And come they did. More and more bodies appeared. Jagged gray rocks too, growing through the smoke, making their footing worse. Will's ankles grew more sore from weaving up and down the different rock faces, and his thigh muscles grimaced with pain whenever his foot would slip or grip or catch. With every sheer surface and jagged edge, the scabs threatened to reopen on the soles of his feet. Eventually they did.

Some of the bodies were draped over the rocks. Limbs of trees were shoved through others' flesh when they were burned, and now the limbs leaned until they touched the ground. They looked like large insects making their way across the rock. Insects. Should that be so strange? Should Will turn his back, would they move, strike, like a fire crawling to him to burn his flesh, to heal and burn again?

Oh, and be careful, Jenson said. No one really dies here. That's the trick of eternal damnation. You wish for it. We dread it in life and long for it in death, like we don't already have it. That death should be sweet relief, right? Cut your pain away. Long for death, long for more suffering. Check the box at the end of the sentence.

One skull on one body was an inky black. One eyeball was still in its socket; the white of the eye had grown hard and browned. The flesh lay tight around the socket but stretched to where the jawbone hung, swaying back and forth in the hot wind. Will looked close as he passed, and he thought he saw the pupil dilate.

Wait.

Will wanted to stop, to think about this. There was a realization here, something to be considered,

something about masks,

but then his foot slipped again and his sharp breath caught with a sharp pain in his throat. There was no sound.

The bodies became more common. The air reeked of rotting flesh. The smell was like liquid and burned Will's nose, so he took quick breaths through his mouth and drank the stuff like sludge.

3.

He held the steering wheel in his left hand, an energy drink in his right. The can was cold. He'd just bought it from the grocery store ten minutes ago, and already his hand was starting to go numb, the muscles seizing tight. There was something about the numbing cold that he found comforting. But past the numbing, there was something more, something painful, and this instilled in him a sense of fear like a

memory.

Jennifer sat in the passenger's seat and said, "Where are we going?"

Will said, "There's somewhere that I want to see."

"You've said that."

He nodded. "And I need you to be with me."

"This is about the shooting, isn't it?"

Will nodded.

"I thought I asked you to stop looking into that."

"It sounded more like a question as to whether I would stop . . . if you asked."

Jennifer raised an eyebrow.

"If you really, really need me to stop, I'll stop."

Jennifer sighed quietly, the kind of sigh that spoke to her exasperation without melodrama, a small betrayal of an inner frustration, and Will was suddenly afraid. Not of what lay ahead of him on the road, the apartment complex he wanted to look at, but what his future with Jennifer looked like should he keep pushing an issue that was finally nearing some answers. Instead of speaking, she turned and looked out the window.

Will held the steering wheel tighter, wanting to speak but not trusting himself. Yes, he was angry. Perhaps there was some leaking of the frustrations that were now bleeding through the dream world and into one far more concrete, but mostly he was pissed at Jennifer. He'd been with her for the last few months, he'd go through

gone through

Hell

to help her.

Four weeks ago, even. She'd break, he'd stay, as long as he had to, and never ask anything from her in return. It wasn't like that. Being with someone when their world breaks down is not a situation from which you expect anything in return. When you love someone, you do that.

But that she couldn't be there for him, now, when he needed it, was irritating.

He didn't even need her support. He was doing alright, he supposed. But to outright reject what he needed to do . . .

But he could not say this. So instead he gripped the wheel harder and took a drink from the can and tried to keep his eyes open. Each time he blinked, he fought the urge to keep his eyelids closed, that urge to drift and find sweet relief.

They drove around the main curving street, through the downtown, then north into the older area of town. He saw in Jennifer no curiosity, no watching the road ahead from the corner of her eye. She wanted nothing to do with this.

Creekside Apartments were a quarter of a mile ahead and, as befit them, sat beside a small and usually dry creek bed. Where historically the area had marked the start of town, now it stood as a point of no return. The lights had burnt out on the front sign, and if one somehow did not know of the apartments and their sleazy reputation by recognition alone, the old wooden sign could be dimly seen in the glow of the parking lot streetlamps. A few cars were parked in the lot. Drug addicts, a couple of guys down on their luck, college students who likely cared less about their schooling than they did about their living. Trash was littered about the parking lot and weeds were trimmed near the front office, as if to suggest that someone cared. In a college town, a bit of care might go a long way to distract prospective residents' eyes from the cracks in the floors, the way the doors didn't quite line up with the floors or ceilings, and why the windows needed bars. Will wondered if the place was so rundown even five years ago, when Jenson stayed here, and why it might have catered to a churchgoing man.

"What are we doing here?" Jennifer asked, and Will realized that when he stopped on the far end of the parking lot and put the truck in park, she'd come back around.

"I just need to see it."

"This place? Will?"

"Just stay in the truck, okay? I don't want you getting hurt here."

"You brought me here to stay in the truck?"

"Yes," Will said.

"Why?"

"Because I need you, okay?" he said. "Can you just respect that right now? I need to be here. I need to see this place, and I need you to be here for me in case it goes south." He forced open the driver's door, stepped outside, and then slammed it closed behind him, praying that Jennifer didn't open her door to follow him out.

Almost immediately, as the rain fell on his shoulders, the refreshing flavor of the air overrode the clogged scent of decay he'd expected, or

remembered. And he felt guilty that he'd scolded her. She didn't deserve that.

Frays like this scared him; cracks in their relationship that might bear their weight now, but what about later? What about a bad night—

No. Not even a bad night. Bad nights were irrational. Bad nights were something to be moved past. It was the sane days, the normal ones—it was when those started to break that the ship would go soon.

He pushed her from his head for the moment. He wasn't here for Jennifer; he was here about the shooting. And this was the place that Jenson had stayed before it all. This was where Jenson assembled the bomb. This was where he worked out his plan, had he designed one at all. The bomb didn't go off, after all. Somehow Will had gotten the weapon from the man and shot him, whether after or before being shot himself. Perhaps he was just there, pissed off, uncaring, so lost within himself and bent on destroying something, someone else's life, that it didn't matter who he came to first, who stopped him, how they stopped him. Maybe he had a thread of doubt, of discomfort, no real desire to go through with his plan, to kill everyone in the building, to bring the roof down upon their heads, to break concrete and stone, to crush.

Will jammed his hands in his pockets after pulling his jacket collar high around his neck, and he skulked around the outer sidewalk and planter edges, studying the outer window frames, their bars, the ratty off-white curtains that trapped even paler off-white light from escaping into the night.

This was where he stayed. For how long? Three or four months, the detective had said. Returning to this place, day by day. . . . This was where

Jenson sat, turning from creature of the night to day-breaker. He had no sleep schedule. He hung dark t-shirts over the windows and lied on the twin mattress that he brought with him from his mother's. He didn't bother to cover the walls. He tried to ignore the stuff that crawled across the floor when he wasn't paying attention, the way the walls shook, their thinness, the fights and the screams and the general sounds of

sin.

Living in this place too long would turn anyone, he thought. And he wondered about the effects it was having on him. He'd lost his sense of time. For the first few weeks, he didn't bother with any kind of set schedule for eating or sleeping. If he was out of food, he would see how long he could go without eating before he finally had to go to the store and buy a couple loaves of bread, a couple spreads, a small handful of vegetables or fruit. Ascetic, perhaps, but this was a study. It didn't matter where he was, what effect the place had on him; with his state of mind, it was reflecting only where he cared to be. This wasn't the Ritz. The Ritz would have

disgusted him. He went to a place of sadness, of confusion, of hatred toward his god and the world that his god had created, and he wanted his room to reflect his mind. He wasn't living

the life he had hoped, dreamt, or desired. Of course he would lose her at some point, he knew this. He had always known this. But the violence of her death, the pain she went through, their final conversations when she'd spoken to him about her doubts, about her concerns, about the things she would see when she dreamt—these scared him deepest.

God needed to suffer for this. God needed to understand this. He was not a human being. He did not understand material suffering. And in order for God to know this,

He would first need to know God.

So he stretched black cloth across the window and became timeless. He ate only when he needed and slept only when he felt like it, and in this way became needless. He passed hours in meditation, in ascetic self-deprivation. He became thin. His normally tall and stocky frame turned sharp around the edges, as did his mind. He could walk through his apartment in the dark and know where the walls stopped, where the air began, and where the boundary ceased to matter.

He read the Bible by light from the window when he pushed aside the corner of the curtain. If it was dark beyond the glass, he went back to meditation, and when he next came to, he would try again until the light ran out.

It was the children God cared most about. They were the innocent ones. They were children in the Garden before the fruit and the knowledge. Children knew not the difference between good and evil. They trusted, naive. The murder of the innocent would be understood, equal, to parallel the suffering of the undeserved. Eventually, when he went to the store, by cover of night because it was easier on his eyes, he bought and ate only apples.

Will shuddered at the thought and was afraid. The apples brought back charred memories, the taste of bitter dust.

He took a few steps deeper into the parking lot, but the dark seemed to grab him, shake him, dust of
worlds and bones and apples, burned

His foot faltered and he stumbled. Car headlights lit up the nearest building, throwing a bright, contrasting glow against the dull yellow security lights along the two sides of the building. Will hit his knees.

There were voices and shouts and slams and
screams.

And Will didn't know which were in his head and which were not.
He didn't need to be asleep now because they were memories like

The beach. Twigs, sharp against his feet as he hopped to get back into flip flops.
He was at the edge

He was at the edge, a borderland of

Voices were coming nearer. They sounded urgent, and he heard Jennifer say his name,

"Will, right?" And with her eyes she smiled and the beach seemed to crinkle at the corners and sigh with her. There was a breeze, and this too was her sigh, and he smiled with the side of his mouth in a look that spoke both surprise and satisfaction.

"Yes," he said. "Who are you?" His words weren't demanding but came from a place of shock.

She said her name, and Will knew fear in a moment, because this was high school. This, they said, was a lie: young love, first love, too soon. But he had seen the world move, felt unsteady on his feet, and leaned toward her to find a balance.

* * *

As more bodies appeared on the rocks, curled and burned, the hordes of flies became as thick as the smog and smoke around them. They hummed around Will and Jennifer and Jenson, as attracted to the fresh sweat and blood leaking from fresh bodies as they were to the decay.

Will slapped his face. They swarmed about his head, crawled on his lips and behind his ears. He swiped at them and scratched the skin until the blood rose to the surface and smeared. The flies landed on the wounds that covered his body and then stayed there, stuck in the blood.

He set his face forward and continued to walk. The veins stood out in his neck and head as he felt new, tiny flying forms landing on his body. He flinched and slapped at them as they took bites from his flesh. His head trembled and his arm shook with rage, irritation, and his ever-growing exhaustion.

The exposed skin dried and cracked beside his eyes and along the joints of his fingers. The cracks turned a bright white that contrasted with his mud-colored complexion. Below the caked dirt, his skin had already split open in valleys, peeling

away as the flesh stretched, as if in their motion they might force loose any last sweat from his pores.

Will tried to summon thoughts to distract him from the irritation of the flies and the throbbing pain beneath the surface. He could remember Jennifer's kiss, but not how good it felt,

"Will, right?" And with her eyes she smiled.

Look at these guys, Will, Jenson said. They're scorched. You can still smell them. They smell like adulterers. Maybe thieves. But look at you, kid. Barely a scratch, really.

His limbs quivered and threatened to drop. The insects hummed in varying pitches. His fingers picked at the long, running scab on his arm while he watched. His throat cracked.

The big man gave Will a thumbs up and a sneer.

Will drew back. It was easier to replace the pain with a hatred for the man. It directed it, channeled it, made it manageable. He never lost it. Even as he was pushed to the edge, he never got close enough to lose it. He carried some kind of distant thought in his head. It wasn't hope. It wasn't faith. At best, it was an awareness. As consumed as he was by the rage that ravished his body, he could always see what was happening to him. He could always still feel it. His sensation overruled escape in emotion. Constant awareness bred perpetual punishment, he expected, but he worried when that might expire,

when he'd lose that awareness and become the place itself instead. He wondered if it might fade as his body would, that when he was

smears across some stretch of rocks, when nerves still talked across stone faces in the ashen crust between two limbs, when his body screamed the way the thunder screamed from above, he'd become manifested as this place,

an essence of the Hellscape.

What scared him was that it sounded peaceful.

"Will?" Jennifer said, and he felt a cool sensation on his face, running from his hair to the back of his neck. It tickled and itched and he felt in the stream of water, not peace,

but, for a moment, confusion, before
feet, small moving feet.

A fly the size of a small animal dropped onto Will's forehead, and his sudden

movement to crush the bug pushed him off balance. He tried to catch himself as he slipped, but—

There was asphalt, and he felt it tear into his knee. Vertigo overcame in him a nauseous wave as he quickly tried to right his balance against a plane that felt at angle to what he'd known. For a moment, he knew what was coming.

His left hand slipped between two rocks, slicing his forearm open as if to twin his other arm. As he stood up, the blood gushed and the flies swarmed. They buzzed in black clouds above the other bodies and became thick in the air, sucking and biting.

Will swiped them away from his face, slapping the ones that crawled on his cheeks and forehead. Their prickly legs stabbed and poked him, uncaring and unheeding toward his raw, cracked skin and the ticklish places behind his ears. Some tried to work into his nose and over the new blood of his left arm.

One landed, flew off. Another landed. Landed. Landed. Crawled. They crawled across his arm, bogged down in the blood. And there was the pain, pulsing, pain, blood, pulsing pain.

He stumbled. His footsteps again impaired. The blinding cloud.

Stop it. The pain. Stop it.

A fly on his eyeball that fought his blink with small wings.

Under his shirt, Will thrashed against the small bodies smearing and taking bites of his skin in their rage. He ripped chunks of hair from his scalp. They *were* his hair, crawling deeper. He couldn't scratch deep enough.

On his chest. On his head. On his arm, his arm again, crawling and biting. When one bit his eyeball he screamed, and in the scream his voice hung on the air, the middle syllable of the words

FUCKING STOP

screeching again, and again, and

he reached behind him with his right arm and pulled out the gun

he did not know how he got it, but he knew that it was his own, the one he'd used to

He flicked the safety off and pointed it at his left arm where the army of black flies gathered, their hundreds of tiny legs

He pulled the trigger, and his arm exploded.

Jenson whipped his head around to look at Will and

Jennifer froze in place, her eyes widened in shock. Will had hit his knees in the

parking lot, thrashing his head and arms, tearing his nails across his skin as he screamed. The sound washed from the air in the rain almost as soon as it came. Still, the two ratty college kids who'd gotten out of their small Honda and wandered curiously nearer were for a moment taken aback, confused, concerned whether or not they should approach this disturbed young man.

Jennifer, seconds after the initial shock, ran toward Will, holding tightly to his arms to keep the nails from cutting and slashing, from ripping his hair out. What was this? she wondered. Some kind of seizure?

It was an easier thought than the truth: that this was memory, nightmare, while awake.

"Will," she repeated his name over and over. "Stay with me, babe. Come back to me."

Blood and bugs flew in all directions, splattering across Will's face. The flies split, their formation like a vaporous shockwave. The bone shattered, and blood washed across his entire lower arm, covering it in crimson. He saw the white, jagged edge. Blood spatter and bone pieces covered the rock below and ran with the ash. His tendons and skin stretched, holding his arm together. It tangled,

dangled at his elbow.

He couldn't

Holy shit, Will said.

dangled at his elbow.

I can't move my fingers.

Then the pain exploded into his head, and it was all he knew. The world swam in and out—

"There's no reason you need to do this. Let me help you," she pleaded. There are no words in a situation like this. There are no arguments to make. There's only trying to get through, to have him look at her and see a glimmer of recognition, that clarity, that sigh of relief.

—in and out of focus, and he staggered to the ground. White light was all around his head, and it mixed with the black and the gray and orange and red of the smoke around him. The acrid smell kept him alert, pushing his senses to their extreme. Each nerve, each severed end between the arm and the wrist, each bone and tendon in between, screamed and wailed.

His arm was on fire. White hot. Icy cold. The pain crept along his arm and into his chest, and he tried to run away from it, stretching his neck away from the

drizzling wound.

He was screaming too, but he couldn't feel the vibration or hear the sound.

He was going to die, right here, right now. Losing too much blood—not enough blood to go on. It was too much. He was going to die. It poured from his arm onto the ground, splattering, splattering in red, spray.

This was his end. This was it.

Jennifer slapped him in the face. The motion made her clench her teeth and tremble. She wasn't sure that the shaking was from her fear or from the deep discomfort in striking him. But after the motion, he went limp on the ground.

"Will?"

The rain fell harder, striking the asphalt like a hailstorm, the drops stinging against the back of her neck. Water ran down her forehead and plastered loose hairs to her face, and she shoved them from her eyes. The rain felt like tears.

By now there was a small group of people watching: the two huddled by their Honda, a number who'd come to their doors, one who was making his way across the parking lot, a few faces behind lit windows,

their black shades pulled back to see.

"Will, wake up, babe. Wake up, please." She rubbed his face, worked the water against his skin, against the stubble on his cheek, pushing the hair from his forehead. He started to move his head back and forth against the ground, slowly at first before growing more urgent, as if to deny what had just happened.

A black man in a big hoodie sweatshirt stood a few feet away and asked, "He alright?"

"I don't know," Jennifer said, at once nervous and pissed at Will for putting her in this situation, at this goddamned sleazy apartment complex, on her own, cold and soaking wet in the rain, with who knows what kind of people nearby, watching her. She didn't make eye contact with the man near her, unsure whether he meant to help or inflict harm.

There were too many people watching. She would be fine.

"Bad trip? Or has he got, like, epilepsy?"

Jennifer bit her cheek and rubbed Will's shoulders harder, tapping his face. "I don't know. He just flipped."

"Should I call the cops?"

She was sure someone already had, and that made her even more concerned. If they could just get out of here. Will seemed to be coming around. His eyelids flickered.

He finally opened his eyes before closing them again, hard, his breath speeding,

and he pushed himself from Jennifer, making small whining sounds in his throat.

"Will! It's alright! You're okay. I'm here."

At the sound of her voice, he scrambled a few feet further before stopping, lowering his head and pushing his forehead down, as if preparing to look at a bright source. He peeked out at her in the rain. What he saw was Jennifer, silhouetted against the distant orange security lighting, and a silhouetted man standing a few feet farther. He gasped, trying to take in air but feeling kicked in the gut. So it was night. He'd been out for a while, but his arm still burned and he could feel how his shirt was soaked to his skin in the blood, he could feel

he could feel his fingers. The pain was only in the cold on his skin, his shaking from the fear and the frigid cold of the water.

"Jennifer?" His words came out hesitant.

"Yes, Will. Me." She held her hand out in front of him, confused by her gesture but holding it anyway, an offering, something familiar perhaps.

"What happened?" But he knew. He'd shot his arm off with a handgun, and now he was awake again in the middle of a crummy parking lot. Creekside. He'd come here to learn about Jenson. But he wanted to hear her voice, to remind him that this wasn't some phantom of his girlfriend, some speechless memory to haunt him. He wanted her to keep talking.

"You're at Creekside. You took me here ten minutes ago. You passed out. You started flipping out. Are you alright?"

Will nodded and said yes.

The rain still stung and broke against the ground in small bursts. It felt like biting flies. But it was cold. It shocked his nerves to the core and he felt like screaming, but it was cold. And water. There was something refreshing in the water, and he lay back in it.

Jennifer, feeling it was alright to move closer, crawled to his side and put her hand on his chest. His shirt was soaked through, and he trembled in a way that matched her own, so that touching him felt like calm. Feeling her hand against his chest, he took a few deep breaths and felt her move against him, firmly but lightly. He ran his hand up her arm and touched her cheek, running his fingers along her hairline to push a few stray hairs behind her ear before returning to her cheek again. He was crying, but it looked like he was squinting against the rain. The black man turned away and wandered toward the curb. The two college kids had already gone inside. There were still black faces pressed to yellow glass, hands clutching curtains. Will saw bodies on rocks.

"Can we go?" he breathed.

"Yes," Jennifer said.

4.

The big man, Clive Jenson, crouched next to the huddled mass of flesh and blood writhing on the ground. Jennifer was behind him, floating, her face again blank, but strained. The man crouched in front of Will without moving. He made no effort to comfort the boy, to provide any kind of treatment for his arm or get him to settle. He simply squatted down on the ash, his jeans dark with sweat, dirt, mud, and blood, his shirt torn and hanging, his face blank, watching.

Again, the flies swarmed, now around Will's arm to an even greater degree. His breath came in fast gasps, his chest hitched, and his eyes rolled up into his head until finally his thrashing abated.

Jenson stood, thrust his hands to his sides, crouched to the ground again, and cried out. The sound lingered the way that Will's did, fleeing into the distance, as if in hopes of finding a solitary place altogether separate from this, were there such a place. Beyond the flies and the harsh sound of the big man's breathing, there was silence again on the plain, broken only intermittently by the distant sounds of thunder and wind and

far away screams.

And the big man wept.

CHAPTER TWELVE **shootings and ladders**

1.

When he opened his eyes, he for a moment remembered. The air shimmered gently over the textured ashen fields of the plain like soft spirits dancing without care.

Jennifer lay ten feet from him, and before he remembered where he was, before he remembered the rage curling and cursing through his brain, before the pain flared back into his mind, he saw her again.

Her head rested on the ashes. He saw fine dust particles swirl away from her mouth as she breathed. She was not in pain. She was not miserable. For whatever reason.

Would they marry one day? Would they have children together? He didn't have a mind for doubt. How wonderful it would be to stay with her forever. He wanted to keep her, to hold her and tell her it would be okay and that he was sorry, to

brush back her hair and tuck it behind her ear, to watch the strands whisper down, dangling in front of her eyes as she peered up at him beneath her lashes.

Behind her, the sun burned the clouds, flaring with heat, and in that moment he forgot the way they rolled back in on themselves, swirling, gathering darkness. For a moment, they were frozen in time and could have been blooming forward, opening, yawning, stretching with the dawn. He could have stayed here like this, with Jennifer, forever. But she was so far, and if only he could—

He forced his arm to her, but as hard as he stretched, he could not reach.

2.

This time, instead of sitting on the couch to speak to Jameson, Will stood near the window and played with the edge of the curtain, watching the cars crawl past during rush hour. University Avenue ran alongside one edge of the campus, then extended out to meet one of the interstate highways past the edge of the city, so it was usually one of the busier roads in town. Jameson's office was on the second story of a small set of doctors' offices, law firms, and family dentistry offices, tucked into the trees off the side of the road. Outside, the sun shone bright through the trees, the rainstorms of the night before having burned off in the early morning, leaving the city refreshed and chilled. The extra crispness in the air brought with it a flavor of winter but the look of summer, with a glow from the igniting trees that spoke of something in between, a flare, an explosion, the flash before the rolling thunder and the last dribble of smoke from the match.

"Would you like to take a seat, Will?" Jameson asked, standing beside her own chair in the middle of the room and looking curious.

"No. No thank you. I'd rather stand."

"Alright," Jameson said, not looking to pry yet. She remained standing beside her own chair as well. Their positioning brought a sense of immediacy to Will, of briefness and informality. He wasn't sure if this was as bad a feeling as it might have been a few weeks back. The memories were getting worse, and if he spent less time talking them over, the better. Still, it was uncomfortable, and so he said, "I'm sorry. The memories have been coming far more frequently now. They overlap into the daytime."

"How?"

Will played with the fabric of the curtain between his fingers. "Like I'm passing out when they're most intense. I'll black out as if I've just fallen asleep. That's when they overwhelm me. But otherwise it's just details, flickers, like remembering snippets from a dream the next morning."

"When did this start?"

"Gradually for the last few days. Weeks."

"Weeks?"

"It wasn't something that was significant enough to mention before this. I barely even recognized it."

"So you're not sitting down because of this?"

"I find if I'm less comfortable, I'm less likely to fall asleep. Or to have the flashbacks. Or whatever. This helps me keep my focus."

Jameson nodded and sat down. "Tell me more about these moments."

Will shrugged. "Well, I've been looking into the shooting more, like you asked."

"And how has that been?"

"I feel like you're right, that it's been helping me to remember more. About the dreams. I don't know. Maybe they're all linked." He told her about the police station, about what the detective said, the advice he was given, the trip with Jennifer to the hotel. His breakdown in the parking lot.

When he was finished, Jameson continued making notes for a moment before looking to him, back to her pad, and then to him again. "It's been a big couple days."

He nodded. They'd now been meeting more often than once a week. The flashbacks were getting more intense. The pursuit needed more structure. She'd bumped them to twice a week and thought about adding a third.

"Lots of revelations. Your tormentor in your dreams, your Moundshroud, he's Jensen."

"Yes," Will said. "I don't know how I missed it before. That's a face that should have stayed with me. That I thought *had* stayed with me."

"Obviously it has," Jameson said.

"But why would he be there? Why does it all seem to have some root in the real world?"

Jameson shook her head. "I'm not sure what you're asking me."

"It—" He stopped, looked about the room, and wandered to the back of the couch, placing his hands on the decorative blanket. "I don't know." He shrugged. "It feels real." He felt ridiculous for saying the words aloud and immediately wished he had taken them back, but Jameson seemed unfazed.

"Why real?"

"It's getting vivid. I've never had memories or dreams this vivid before."

"So what you're seeing is more vivid than your memories?"

"They are when I have them, when I'm dreaming, I guess. But after, they're just like my regular memories." He paused. "And I mean, just like them. If you were to

shred my arm with a rock and then fire a—" he mimed the motion, pointing his finger at his arm and pulling an imaginary trigger. The motion made him feel sick, and he tried to force the image away. "I would know what that felt like. It would be familiar. It's happened, see. You get shot in dreams and stuff sometimes, right? If it's an adventure maybe. You lose teeth, right? But that's different. You don't really feel it. This is, this is real."

"And they come back to you as vividly as reality as you know it now?"

"Well, yeah."

"Dreams are like that too, you know."

"My memories of them aren't. They feel real in the moment, but they're not. They're in snapshots. These are, these are stories. This happened."

"Will, you're making a journey inward, to the deepest part of yourself, to these memories and emotions that you've shoved away from the shooting itself, at a crucial point in your life. These forgotten moments could even still be paving who you are as you grow into an adult. It's important that you find and face them. And so, yes, this can be a very vivid and no less 'real' experience."

Will studied this idea for a while, running his hands back and forth over the rough parts of the blanket before picking at a hangnail next to his fingernail. It hurt. He didn't mind. But he was afraid the pain would drop him back into one of the flashbacks, and so he stopped.

"If you want to get more mystical about it," she said, "we can call it as real as the everyday world that we know. Jung spoke of the collective unconscious in very spiritual terms. He was very influenced by Eastern mysticism, where the journey inside one's self brought understanding of the world past it. This is also the focus of alchemy. You're finding what's most real outside by going deep inside."

"But it's not really Hell. I didn't die. I'm making all of this up."

"What is Hell? Is it another plane of consciousness that we access when we die? You nearly died. Perhaps you went there anyway."

"So you're saying this was actually a trip to Hell I'm remembering." Will sounded angry now. He wasn't sure why.

"Or," she said, "it's nothing more than a mental representation, a dream."

"You just said they were the same thing."

"They might be. We don't know."

"But Jung theorized this."

"Jung said that we each have a shadow, a place where we force our problems and shortcomings. We also, if we go deep enough, access the collective unconscious, the place where those big, vast, spiritual ideas come from, forcing their way through and manifesting. But while what we strive for is order, the

unconscious is disordered, the mirror of the structure, the opposite, and we can only know ourselves in the uniting of these opposites."

"Private Hells."

"Like branches from a tree."

"Clive Jenson, is he real then? Is that really him I'm remembering? Torturing me from past the grave?"

"Perhaps, spiritually. What lingers after death and where it goes, how souls interact, that we don't know."

"I wasn't dead. Can we access this spirit realm by still being alive?"

"Some would say yes. Mystics across traditions and cultures claim to have accessed different spiritual levels, sometimes communing with the dead, sometimes the divine."

Will grunted.

"That's the place of the modern day," she said. "Doubting experience we can't yet document by science. It's natural to find them ridiculous, especially when many—if not all—are."

"What do you believe?"

"I think you'd know that by now."

"You keep talking so cryptically."

"You're having nightmares. These nightmares are getting stronger. Based in the brain and much of the unconscious—which is at this point a widely accepted psychological theory—we can assume that indeed, these dreams could be random flashes, or they could be random memories infused with hidden emotions trying to escape. Or, if you want to go so deep, they might be interactions with another level, sometimes boldly symbolic, of consciousness and being. We take it as seriously as we dare."

Will chewed on the inside of his lip and felt another flashback edging at his focus like a shot of electricity through the same nerves that the pain ran through, and he held faster to the couch, training his mind on another question, but he couldn't think of one.

"The big man, Jenson, then," he said. "Could—if he was doing this—"

Jenson picked up Will's upper arm, above the elbow, and held it away from Will's body, letting what was left of his hand dangle by the bits of sinew, tendon, and skin that kept the two attached.

Will saw the arm, disembodied, floating without control.

That's not right, he thought as his stomach gave. His mind swam and he threw up. There was no food left in his stomach, so it was only strands of snot and bile

that dripped from his chin to his shirt.

Will swallowed hard and felt his throat grow thick. You're all right, he thought as he tried to quell the nausea. You're healthy, strong, and well right now. This is mental. He tried to swallow again, but the lump in his throat hadn't quieted. Jameson was looking at him with her eyebrows furrowed, and he wondered how long he had paused. He tried to speak. "Sorry. If he was doing this, Jenson, in my dreams—" His thoughts were fuzzy, and he tried hard to hold fast to them and not become lost. "If it was him, crossing over into this collective space, then was that his plan all along? Did he know he could do that? Is that why he came to the school to kill us?"

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked.

Will nodded. He'd gone pale. He could feel it in his face and was worried that it was a telltale sign to get the hell to a bathroom, but he tried to steady himself. Talking helped. "I'm fine. Sorry. The memories."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Will shook his head quickly, but that brought back a touch of dizziness. "Physically, it's hard. To switch back and forth." If he remembered more, the rage would come next, and it wouldn't only be physical adjustments he'd have to make.

"I understand," she said. She didn't. But he appreciated her effort.

Will made his way around the couch like a blind man with unsteady hands. "So. Jenson?"

She nodded. "It's more of the same as I said before. If it's your own unconscious memories and emotions, then no. He's a manifestation. He's a dream. If you believe in a kind of psychic current underneath all of us, and I suppose the world itself, then perhaps you two were there together. If he learned how to access it, then yes, maybe he knew something of it beforehand, and maybe it influenced his thinking."

"What? Is that likely?" Will asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Was the man who entered your school with a bomb—killing two of your best friends, your teacher, nearly your girlfriend, and putting you in a coma—actually a mystic who was on some spiritual purpose? Or was he just a terrible, deranged man who wanted to kill children?" She played with the cap of her pen. "I know what most of the world will tell you."

Will said, "His mom died a couple months before the shooting. He moved to town and lived in a shithole apartment for weeks on end before the shooting."

"You think perhaps he found God down there?"

"Didn't look like the kind of place God would reside."

"It might be the only place He spends His time," she said quietly, almost to herself.

Will thought of his class on descent narratives and the problem of evil.

"What are you guilty of, Will?" she asked, her gaze suddenly firm.

"Killing her. Killing them. All of them."

"What else?"

Will shook his head and then looked up at her, raising his hand as if holding a gun, his thumb in the air and his index finger narrowed. "Of pulling the trigger."

A memory pressed itself at him and he balked, froze, shut it down in his mind like he was slamming a steel door. As if in response, Hell came back at him with enough force to bring him to his knees, and then he was gone.

3.

Will looked between the big man, who held his arm, and his lifeless fingers, still coughing and gagging without saliva to draw in order to extinguish the taste. His brain told his hand to move and, by medium of pain, his arm told his head that there were no fingers to move. He could still feel them, though.

As if they'd only fallen asleep,

as if they weren't actually gone, separate, divorced.

The numbness was interrupted by white pain.

There is no god watching over you, Jenson said. This is your sacrifice.

The man let the arm drop, and when it hit the ground, out of control, it spasmed, a blast of pain shooting up Will's bicep, twisting into his neck and unraveling in his head. Will ground his feet into the ash and arched at the neck and wailed.

Jenson picked up the jagged rock that he had searched for while Will was out, and while Will moaned at the black, uncaring sky, Jenson brought the sharp edge down on the sinews and muscles holding his forearm to the rest.

Blood still poured from the wound, and the ash drank its fill before letting it puddle. Will's face was pale, a ghastly counterpoint to the ashen streaks, white skin and hollow eyes. His phantom arm quivered. His breathing came fast and strained. His head was light and dizzy, and thinking was an effort. He wheezed out every curse word he could and held fast to the contempt for this place, the big man, and himself—himself for his own failures, clumsiness, and choices that had led to this place, this damned place.

"What are you guilty of, Will?"

The thrusts at the slippery cords of tissue were redundant and annoying, and

Will writhed as he stared at Jennifer's sleeping body.

He hoped she was sleeping. She didn't speak to him—was barely a wraith. But he wanted her here with him. He didn't want her—

the sound of the rock gouging into the tendon, ash, and rock below.

He didn't want—

Thwock.

The sky above continued to darken, and the ash drifted down through the murk, shimmering fog, burned flesh from burned bodies, and he realized

Thwock. Electricity through an arm that did not exist.

He realized this was mild. This was nothing.

STOP BREAKING ME, he screamed.

Thwock. Severed meat.

JENNIFER! He screamed her name, but she didn't move.

4.

Jennifer

sat in the corner of the Starbucks just past the western edge of the campus, where the trees were thick and wide around. This was the oldest end of campus, nestled into the oldest end of town, blending the two histories of the township, one the farming settler community, the other the expanding college town. In the historic downtown area, the two melded with a kind of gentle harmony. Halloween was a week away, and October was making the first move toward winter. The trees seemed to shiver, echoing the chill of the night, just enough to snap the leaves at their stems and send them adrift with an easy grace on the light breeze.

Jennifer

watched these things from her window, one hand around the tall white coffee cup, waiting for Will's mother to show up and sit with her for a while. Her hand clenched tight to the cup and she took the top off, holding her other hand above the cup's opening to take in its warmth, as if to stave off the coming weeks. After the cold of the outside though, her hand grew stiff and thick from the heat, and she didn't care much for that either. The white mocha was warm and rich and went down smoothly, but she struggled to enjoy it the way she struggled to enjoy watching the leaves fall, the way she struggled to smile these days.

Will's mother walked in then, and Jennifer held up a hand and waved, offering a small smile from the corner edge of her mouth. Her eyes warmed. Nancy Andrews sat across from Jennifer, and Jennifer asked if she wanted anything to drink, but Nancy said no, thank you, that she was fine, and it struck something in Jennifer

that made her feel young, that this wasn't a meeting of friends, but of an adult and a child. This, of course, was not the case. Jennifer and Nancy had been getting along well the past few weeks. She had found the same comfort from Will's home as she had from Will, and Nancy had seemed to take to her quickly, as if there was something in Jennifer that her son had always lacked.

"How are you?" Nancy asked. And in the look she gave to Jennifer, the full attention, the concern, the way her eyebrows pressed into her forehead so lightly, Jennifer became undone within a moment, but did her best to press her helplessness back inside.

"I'm not good."

Nancy frowned.

"It's been getting bad again. Very bad."

It. The blackness, the pressing, the stuff of one world leaking into another, uncontrollable, irrational, the stuff of nightmares in the daylight, the weight on your shoulders that drags at the corners of your mouth and lives within the back molars, and that place behind your lungs where your neck and nose and chest all seem to connect and contract.

"My father warned me about it. He told me that coming back here would ignite it all over again." The way the world rips and will never repair. "I didn't believe him. Especially after I met Will again. He only grew more concerned. You know this."

Nancy nodded again. They'd had a few of these coffee lunches over the past few months, since the late summer.

"Of course he was seeing my mother in me. All over again. I didn't realize that then. I see it now. I don't know how he ever let me go in the first place."

"It's hard enough for a parent to let go of a child. Let alone after losing your wife, and then very nearly losing your daughter. Your father is a strong man to do it."

"He had to be, to be able to put up with my mom as long as he did."

"It's not 'putting up with' when it's one that you love so much."

Jennifer put the lid back on her cup. "I know that. I don't fully understand it. I mean, in some ways I do. I struggled with my mom for thirteen years. But it's different as a child of someone. You know, as a kid, you look at the world exactly as it's supposed to be. Your parents are your parents. You don't see them as struggling with a child for the first time. They're not supposed to be selfish, dealing with their own problems. Their world is supposed to revolve around you. I struggled to understand that for a long time with my mother. And never did. She was always missing. She was always fighting. It wasn't an abusive household

because my dad was so caring, but when she had a break . . ." Jennifer trailed off.

"You understand better now?"

"I understand how parenthood works, and how my dad had to keep it together, if just for me. But now, now there's Will. He's been there this year so far, and I don't know how or why he does it."

"Because he cares for you deeply."

"He has an option. I'm not his child. He can leave."

"He doesn't want to."

"No one should have to tolerate that."

"Every relationship and situation comes with unique struggles. Perhaps it's depression for some. Cancer for others. Some relationships are blissful for years before something happens. Miscarriages. Death. In-laws," she added with a tender smile.

Jennifer continued to stare at the table. "None this bad. This can't be worth it. It's not worth it to me. How is it worth it to him?"

"Your relationship with him isn't worth it?"

"No, I'm not worth it to myself." Her words were as bitter as the coffee grounds beneath the mocha in her cup, and they stung Nancy's ears to hear.

"Of course you're worth it."

Jennifer waved the words away. "Not important."

"But I suppose I understand," Nancy said slowly. "Slightly, I mean. It's easy to stay critical of ourselves. To see ourselves with darkly tinted glasses. To want for everything we aren't and don't have. We never understand why those who love us so deeply love us so deeply."

"I suppose."

"Will would go to the ends of the earth for you. To Hell and back!" She laughed. "As you would do for him."

"About that," Jennifer said, almost to herself.

"Oh?"

"Nevermind."

"Lay it on me. If it helps to find clarity, get it out there."

"You're my boyfriend's mother."

"I'm your friend. You can talk to me. Look, relationships come and go, I've seen that. You struggle. You try new people, you fall in and out of love. You try to narrow down what you want and what works. If you're having problems, I'm not going to run to Will or judge you."

"It's not that I'm not in love with him or don't think he's wonderful."

"Sure," Nancy said.

"He's amazing. I know he's the only guy that I've dated, really. I mean, there were a couple high school things that were nothing. But I can't see myself with anyone else."

"But?"

"But I'm really struggling to be there for him right now." A few of her words broke as she said the sentence. She made to squeeze her coffee cup but stopped, afraid the brittle paper would tear. "Shit," she said and dropped her hand on the table instead. Nancy watched as she grit her teeth and, in a fluid motion, seemed to shove everything back beneath the surface again, her eyes clearing save for the shine across the pale blue. "I'm sorry." Her words were controlled now. "He's going through his own stuff right now. Maybe worse than mine, in his own way. He can't sleep without the nightmares. They're breaking through into these lucid moments while he's awake."

Nancy couldn't hide her look of surprise and turned the subject onto Will for a moment. "Is he alright?"

"It's getting worse." Jennifer shrugged.

A dark look fell over Nancy, but she kept her eyes on Jennifer.

"He's pushing at something he forgot during the shooting. There's *no* good it will do to remember, but according to his therapist, it's something he needs to do. She's encouraging it. I guess his subconscious wants it out or something."

"Some things hidden are best to stay hidden."

Jennifer nodded. "Right?"

"There's good reason he can't remember the shooting. Some things are too violent, too dark, too damn graphic for the human mind. We're fragile creatures, really." Nancy looked to Jennifer and for a moment saw a look cross her eyes before it was gone again. She wondered what it had been.

"It's not Will's way to avoid it, though."

"He has to get to the bottom of it all."

They were quiet a moment, and Jennifer almost didn't speak, but Nancy said, "Go on, then." Jennifer shrugged and said, "I'm just worried is all. What if Will breaks down while I'm breaking down. Who's supposed to be there for him?"

"No 'what ifs."

Jennifer opened her mouth to say more but closed it again, studying the coffee shop. A generic mural was painted on the far wall with abstract animals and coffee aromas and fluttery inspirational quotes that resembled a children's book. The rest of the place was clean, and small towers were stacked in the center of the store, selling coffees and mugs and teapots. The tables glistened black and formulaic so that they blended in and almost disappeared completely. "Maybe I'm not strong

enough for him."

"Sweetheart, of course you're strong enough," Nancy said, and reached across the table to pat her hand, but Jennifer didn't seem convinced. "We surprise ourselves in what we would do for the people we love. Maybe all it will take is one of those 'what if' situations to arise so that you'll see you have nothing to worry about."

"Unless I do."

"I can't reason with that." For a while they were quiet before Nancy said,

* * *

It was Halloween evening. The sun had fallen two hours before, around five thirty, turning the naked trees charcoal against the embers of the day in the way that the hard flesh of the Jack-o'-lanterns turned black against the candlelight. The policeman had talked to Nancy Andrews at the hospital. Nancy had collapsed to the floor in tears. The officer had quickly moved next to her, dropping his notepad and pen on the ground in order to catch her. He didn't; he was too slow, her movement too unexpected, and he kicked himself for not recognizing it with the onset of her tears.

"Mrs. Andrews, are you alright?"

Do I look alright? she wanted to say. But her thoughts were not with the officer or her situation; they were deep inside herself, with her son, that part of him that still grew there within her, the part that had not been birthed with the child. In the way that many religions believe in the soul, the spirit of a person, their essence that is left to roam after they shed their material body, they believe there is something that lingers in a mother after the birth of a child. There's a bit leftover of the young spirit that could not fill the body, the stuff in the sound of the baby's cries, a bit that mingles with the mother's groans and screams so that the two become one as they become two.

Perhaps she'd been unprepared to have a child. Perhaps indeed, she'd been happy to stay as a couple with her husband, to not have to worry about the stresses of raising a child, the headaches that came with showing them the ways of a world that no one ever really knew or understood, least of which, she felt, herself. But having a child changed her. Nine months changed her on an internal level, deep enough that she recognized it instantly, changed instantly, but at the same time came to violent conflict over the entire situation; conflict that was addressed and pushed off and shushed away until this moment. Until he was taken from her, violently, for the first time, by a force greater than his mother's love.

"Is there someone I can call for you?" the officer asked. He was used to providing bad news, but not quite this kind of news.

"I'll be alright in a moment," she said, but could not stop the great gobs of tears that hitched from behind her nose, behind her throat, behind her breast.

While the children ran from house to house, doorbell chime to doorbell chime, the Andrews sat at their son's bedside. Beeps chimed like hours, minutes ticking.

He's lost a lot of blood, they said. He's in a coma, they said. We can't be sure of any brain damage until he wakes up.

When might that be?

Of course we can't know. But with the injuries sustained, it could be a matter of hours or days yet. His body has been shocked, and he's fighting to hang on. We'll do our best to support this fight.

These, our scientists, our physicians, the defenders of the physical world against the physical intrusions. The men who'd destroyed demons with labels and hypnosis and regressive discussion. They didn't know. They'd killed God and now knew nothing. The future was as fuzzy as a cloudy ball or the leaves left at the bottom of the mug. Throw the bones and see how they lie.

"Easy, David," she had said, knowing his mind was in the same state as hers in the way he clenched his fists after the doctor's words and let the tears flow out in the hallway. They passed their support back and forth to each other like a hot potato, in the way they passed their doubts and worries and concerns for the twenty-three years before this.

"I didn't ask for this. I didn't want a child growing inside me only to lose him as he touched adulthood, as he reached a level I'd understood better, a level of engagement fresh and exciting."

"Of course not. When you ask for greatness, you ask for grief."

"We're supposed to go first, God damn it. Don't you understand that? We're supposed to go first."

When she uncovered her eyes, she saw his face, pale, shadowed by a wrongness, a lack of reason. Will was swaddled under a white sheet. Wires and tubes connected him to humming machines and monitors. Here was another mother, a goddess mother, suckling her son into a new world, a blank world, a dreamspace.

At five in the morning, after the trick-or-treating kids had disappeared into their houses, as the dawn threatened to break, after the candlelight vigil and the exhaustion of nightmare-terrorized sleep, Nancy, her mind as bleary as her eyes,

demanded out.

She got up from the stiff-backed chair on the far side of the room, her husband coming to from a light doze at her motion, surprise in his eyes, flickering with a hope that the doctor might be walking in with news. But the doorway was blank, the hallway was dim, and his wife was walking for the door.

"Where are you going, honey?" he asked.

She did not answer, instead continuing in a slow, wraith-like motion toward the door. Was she sleepwalking? David wondered. Had she found some space between waking grief and sleeping that led her from the room the way a dream might?

"Nancy?"

But still, there was no answer. Taking a reluctant look at his son, David stepped from the room after his wife, following her down the corridor. He didn't want to go far in case Will should wake up. He didn't want his son to wake up to an empty room. He caught up with Nancy before the elevator and touched her shoulder. "Where are you going?"

She turned to him with an even expression, but one with a light behind her eyes. She wasn't sleepwalking. "Leaving."

"Where?"

"Away. Not here."

"What? You can't just leave."

"Can't I? God can just take our son, but I can't leave?"

"God? He hasn't. We've still got him."

"That's not our son. He's been replaced by a machine."

"He'll be our son when he wakes again."

"A vegetable? That will be our son still?"

"Yes." David said, and his eyes filled at the thought. "Yes."

"You give, you take away. You give, you give away. You leave."

David did not understand this logic. "Will needs you."

"Will isn't here anymore. I'm not here anymore."

"I need you."

She looked at him. Behind her, the elevator doors dinged open, a heartbeat, a moment, mechanical process, slow, on command, with a regularity and a rhythm. The doors closed again.

"Then come with me," she said.

"I can't leave our son. He could wake at any moment."

"This is Hell," she said. "I can't do this." The security in her eyes had left in favor of tears, and she looked ashamed of them, frustrated.

"If it were me, would you leave? This is when you must be strong. Come back

with me. Anything could happen yet."

"Look, sweetheart," she said. Her voice had changed. David's heart dropped. "I'll be back in a few. I just need some space. Some air. Some time to think. Okay? I'm sorry." She turned, pressed the elevator button again, and the doors sprang open. She stepped inside, pressed herself to the side of the elevator so that he could not fully see her face, and pressed the button for the doors to close.

She was strong. This was not a case of being strong or not. She was strong.

"Outside, snow was falling. I know, it sounds crazy. I'm not sure that it wasn't a dream because it was so strange. I mean, of course it was a dream. A strange, waking dream. We had no snow that night. It was Halloween, and though the days had grown crisp, there was no precipitation called for, and the temperature was only in the forties. Maybe I was only barely lucid, as David worried. He told me I'd held coherent conversation, as I remember, but what happened afterward was something else entirely."

Outside, the snow fell in halos around streetlamps and coated the ground with silence, as if Heaven burned white and brought with it more than just fire's end. She could not feel the cold on her skin, but inside she felt something burning, from that same place that echoed Will as it held to tension. Her back went tight and her arms curved at the elbows.

The snow was gray and clung to the streetlamps like masks.

Will lay on the ground, breathing heavily.

She knew this. He was upstairs in the hospital, of course. Lying, breathing heavily through a series of tubes. His head was spinning, and his arm was throbbing. His—wait.

Jennifer sat fifteen feet away, openly watching him, feeling only slightly calmer, but no less on edge. The big man was sitting cross-legged next to the boy, also watching. The sun was low, skating along the horizon as if scared to leave it.

The land around them was gray, covered in the ash, with more drifting from the sky above. The wind swirled the fine powder, and the smoke crept in to darken the land.

Will stared next to him, at his arm that once was. He looked at the spatter of browning flesh and blood that covered the ground, his shredded limb lying almost unrecognizable beyond, some nightmarish slug, washed up to die.

The big man kicked Will in the gut.

Will choked against his gag reflex, rolling over and pushing himself to his feet with a single usable arm. He stumbled, tumbling along. Blood loss. Light-headed. Stomach on edge. His steps were gaiting. He had no destination except his own damnation. His voice came in a moan with every breath. He was sick. His head throbbed. Blood loss. The world turned in slow revolving circles about his head. Eyes blinking. Everything about him loose and overlapping.

Beyond that place, his mother.

Will, four years old. On a tire swing at a preschool function. Too young to know better, how those swings spin and spin. Too young to know how the motion will go and go.

What Will remembers is looking up, the sky, the tire turning over itself in short snapshot motions, the chains. He might only remember this from what he knows now, having been on a swing again, later in life. Never tire swings. He never got on a tire swing again. What he remembers most vividly is the blur of faces above him when he passed out. How he wound up on the grass past the playground, he didn't know. There were students, some. But mostly adults, looking down on him and worrying. The feel of cool. Water poured or a rag put to his forehead. The spinning and the way the world started to blink.

Beyond that place, his mother.

Will, four years old. On a tire swing at a preschool function. She was sitting on the park bench with some of the other parents, feeling isolated. Kids were running about and playing, and though she had the motherly compass that kept Will in her periphery at all times, the other kids running about and playing, screaming, laughing, whining, distracted her. She didn't know this world. This was the world she was in, yes. This was what she did now. She took her child on playground field trips with his preschool class. She'd prefer to stay in with Will, read him stories, or work on his reading and writing. They'd been at it for the better part of the summer. But now he was demanding these field trips on a regular basis, wanting to join the other kids as they ran about and played.

She was speaking to one of the other mothers (who struck her as another outlier, as another who didn't quite understand this place of motherhood or what it entailed). As they talked, Nancy learned that, in fact, the other woman (Shannon, she'd said quietly) was on her third child (two boys, one girl. The girl—the youngest, thank God—would be a tomboy growing up, she said). It was just her quiet, keep-to-herself personality, then, -that remained. Nancy wondered if she would be this woman in five years, after two more children, before deciding that no, she did not want to be her. She wanted to keep Will close. She didn't want any other children getting in the way of that. What she had with her kid was special—which wasn't to say that having more kids isn't special, not in the least—what she was saying was that she didn't want to be a mother; she wanted to be Will's mother.

It was the sound that Shannon made and the way her eyes focused that brought Nancy's full attention back to Will. The sound that she made was full of uncertainty, like the statement, "this can't end well," like watching a boy pedal his bike across an icy drainage ditch.

Behind the women, Will was splayed inside the tire swing, his small four-year-old form spinning and spinning while the other kids pushed and laughed, his look one that seemed to run from glee to insecurity (hear the sound that Shannon made) to

discomfort, and in the way the blood drained, the words came to his mouth and spilt into the maelstrom.

"Stop!" the boy on the swing finally yelled. "Stop!"

Eventually hands were on the chains, and eventually they were slowing the motion, and eventually Will was getting off, but his stumble wasn't funny. It brought him to his knees, and Nancy's world almost faltered with him as his body fell wrong and his head twisted into the sand.

Nancy didn't know how she got to the boy. Obviously she'd leapt from the bench and covered the ground to the sand pit in a matter of seconds, but for all she could remember, she'd manifested next to the boy in an instant.

"Will? Will, Baby, are you okay?"

Will muttered words, something about spinning, and there was a giggle that was quickly swallowed.

"Get him some water," she said, and the calm in her own voice surprised her. Of course, this was just motion sickness and likely a good touch of dehydration. The day had been hot, and he'd been running. His face was now pale, but his hair was sweaty, and red still spotted his cheeks, giving him a sad, clownish look that

haunted her sleep later that night. She poured the bottle of water on his forehead and willed the world to stop swirling above his head.

The children had started to clamor, to gather around them, first the group at the tire swing, then, shortly after, the group from the rest of the swings. The laughter had died out to only a distant sound on the other end of the playground. "Oh, nothing to worry about here," the rotund little school supervisor beckoned with her hands. "Just got a bit too dizzy on the swing!" The high notes in her voice made Nancy dizzy.

"Mom?"

"I've got you, Sweetie. You'll be alright in a second."

After that, Will wanted to just sit beside her on the bench for the next hour that they were at the playground. She liked that okay.

Here, though, it should have been harmony, that the world would match his spinning head, but it didn't, and this angered him even more. The lack of food and water in his belly made the place hard, his head light. Blood loss.

No more.

The flies were fewer now, at least. The smoke deterred their swarms. But bugs and wasps and flies still crawled across Will, slithering in and out of his cracked skin, becoming bogged down and then staying there, hiding in the husk of his body, pulsing in and out in time, as if the currency of the place had changed from oxygen to insect.

Nancy was on her knees in the snow. It melted into her jeans, but she only noticed that it was soft, dry, and . . . warm? This is the stuff of dreams, she thought. Not the stuff of being inside dreams, but the stuff that dreams are made out of. Like brain mush and electricity raining from the sky, from this great heaven. Memories.

He was not her son. He was Will. She could not run from that fact. She could not avoid it.

"What can I do?" she'd yelled at David. "He needs me? How does he need me? How does he need me crying by his bedside and hating that I brought him into this life for both his sake and ours? How is that supposed to help his heart beat stronger and the

brain mush to turn electric again?

He would not disappear if she did, though. One situation follows another. You can't escape, except maybe

razorblades, pressed to the inside of her leg, her wrist.

She ran her thumb over the blade again and again, in the same repeating motion as she

slowly wore the skin on the pad of her thumb away, raking the pink skin into raw white flecks.

except maybe through suicide, but even then, who's to say that ends the situation?

The snow was getting cold like five a.m. asphalt and burned her knees, and she wanted to reach toward the clouds, tear the gentle muffled quiet of the pre-dawn, shred the memories, and breathe deeply that cold air of outer space, to be snapped back into something that made sense, something that felt like comfort, familiarity, safety.

Her son, alive and smiling again.

He was on his knees, screaming at the sky. And he needed

her as she needed him. You can't outrun a gunman with bombs strapped to his chest. You sit down. You bear it. You see what happens and you get past it, hand in hand with whomever you have left.

* * *

"And so I went back," she said. "I know it's not depression. I know it's not a cancer of the mind that you've struggled with for years and years at a time. But my son had been shot and nearly killed. When he woke up, he could possibly have been a vegetable. My life would have been spent paying for and taking care of a boy I didn't know any longer. I was at my wits' end. And I left. But I went back. How long I was gone, twenty minutes or two years, I didn't know, but you always come back from it. There's bottom. And then you always come back. I've come to believe this. I watched Will do it. I'll watch him do it again, because that's what life is. I've done it. Your father has done it probably more times than I'd ever even care to imagine. And damned if that stuff isn't genetic," she laughed. "You're going to make it through, Jennifer."

Jennifer nodded and said, "I know," and she smiled.

5.

Will sat on the corner of his mattress, brushing his teeth with an exaggerated slowness, staring at Jennifer from the edge of his eye, moving slow enough that the

motion was unusual, and when he caught Jennifer's eye, she giggled and threw a pillow at him. "Creep."

"I'm just brushing," he said through a mouthful of foam.

He was happy to still joke. She was happy to still smile. When they climbed into bed together and turned out the light, Will held her tight in his arms. "Are you okay?" he asked. Tears came to her eyes, and she thanked the dark before forcing them down again so that she could smile against his chest.

"You don't have to worry about me."

"I always worry about you."

She frowned.

"If you're not happy, I'm not happy." He squeezed her shoulder. "I'd rather you be happy than me."

She remembered the Creekside Apartment complex. She remembered asking him if he'd stop looking into the shooting for her. "That's stupid."

"That's not stupid! That's . . . that's standard. I can't have it any other way. I'd not want to should I have the option."

"Stupid," she said, and nuzzled against him. The pillows were soft, and the chill night air that slipped through the window bit Will's exposed left arm where it rested outside of the comforter. He ran his fingertips together and apart on her shoulder and felt the muscles contract in his forearm.

He stayed awake, waiting for her to shift or roll over one final time before her breathing would level out and she would finally sink into those folds of sleep he found envious and sweet.

She was in his nightmares, following them through Hell. If this was real, if he had tapped into the same place that dead Clive Jenson had tapped into upon expiring, and Jennifer was there too, why was she not suffering like he was, plagued by nightmares? A small voice answered from the back of his mind, and it said, "She's plagued by nightmares by day," and he exhaled a deep breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

When he spoke, it was slow and soft, the way one might come to ask an oracle in a trance to steal secrets from some underworld, like fire from the gods. "You're not having weird dreams, right?"

Jennifer said, "It's not real, Will."

Why couldn't this moment stay forever? He willed the red glow of the clock to shift slower, the room to fill with water like time made manifest, for the breeze to touch his cheek the way Jennifer would do before she kissed him, holding, lingering, building tension, the way he,

the way he waited for the memories.

Nightmares.

The girl trailed behind them thirty paces. If he'd not been with her, she'd not have been there in the hallway, he'd not have taken her with him to Hell, he'd not have pulled the trigger.

"The only thing that I still believe in is you."

"We will get through this, Will. The both of us. Together."

He nodded. She held him tighter. And it was long enough that neither knew who fell asleep first.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN **something beautiful**

1.

Five years ago.

Stanley Davis was not a church-going man. But there was something deep within, something from the same place that this torturous nighttime plague seemed to stem from, that forced him through the doors that Sunday morning. His wife had given him a strange look on his way out the door. He wondered if he should have made up a story about going to school for some tests he'd forgotten that he meant to grade that afternoon, perhaps couple that with running a few errands, but the complexity of the lie seemed a stretch, and, considering his wife knew what he was going through, perhaps it wouldn't seem too strange that he wanted to, for a morning this month, stop in for a bit of divine guidance.

He didn't know what church he might wind up at. He'd not grown up with any

one brand of faith that his parents had pushed him to subscribe to, and so each was the same as any other in his mind. He'd drive then, let the force inside guide his hands, if he was feeling so mystical

or reckless

and the first church he'd see, he'd park his car and go in for the service.

Walking into the church was difficult, but only for a moment. The building itself was a couple decades old. The brickwork that ran around the main part of the building was a faded red that seemed to be drawing color from the bushes that surrounded the place. Ivy grew on one side. The front entrance had been refinished within the last few years. Now, the entrance opened into a larger foyer with stained glass features on both sides before flowing into an elaborate front staircase surrounding a statue of Christ. A tree stood down the front lawn, older than the building itself, and cast a shadow over the place that was likely quite pleasant during the summertime. For a moment, he had a vision of children running about on the front lawn for their Sunday school or vacation Bible classes. The thought brought a smile to his face that he found both comforting and curious.

He'd never taken much of a liking to children. He preferred molding those minds more receptive, most needing, at that point in their lives when they were on such a precipice as high school. Though, of course, high school teens had no idea they were on such a precipice. Those in high school thought they'd established themselves. For the first time in their lives, they were thinking independently, and that's the biggest hurdle, right? He shook his head as if against the continuing dialogue. Too much to learn. Too many challenges to those fragile notions of self. The coming of age stories had only begun in the final months of high school. They lasted . . . well, the course of one's life, wasn't it? To find themselves at their truest? Despite the weight on independence that the West had placed, there was something sad in the lack of focus he'd seen time and again. Those students passing through college without realization, without focus, without passion. And it hurt him to witness. So he fought to show them. In Hinduism, many believed that the soul of a person did in fact exist, unlike their Buddhist neighbors, and that this soul was the same stuff as God. If people dug so deep as to find their truest selves, they'd dig deep enough to find God. Though he'd never known much in the way of religion, the idea warmed him. And, now, walking slowly up the arguably ostentatious steps, he wondered if that same idea was reflected in Christianity, here—what was this? He leaned and looked to the sign in the front, sheltered by the trunk of the tree—a Methodist church.

The front door was open, allowing a cool and circling breeze into the front

foyer before it was cut off by the main double doors resting closed (as if asking once more if he was sure he wanted to do this), and there he hesitated. His arms broke out in gooseflesh, and he blamed it on the cool wind. He thought about the night before, in the bedroom with his wife. What she had told him when she'd woken him. What it suggested and sounded like. Could he even cross this line? Whatever he was carrying with him, whatever dark force, how was it that it seemed to both propel him here but also stop him? This was a holy place. This was a place of hope and positivity, of turning inward, toward the future, toward others, finding a unity in goodwill. The darkness that kept him awake, checking the doors and staring out the windows, that was not of this place.

As if following a blast of the October air, he finally stumbled in. The weight on his shoulders that he expected to lift when he crossed the threshold, pushing open the double doors, did not lift.

Just past the entrance was a corridor that led into a dark room, which seemed to be a greeting area. To his right were two arched entranceways into the main sanctuary, from which a gentleman's voice was booming across a congregation. Davis looked to his left, where a basket held a stack of off-white pamphlets. There was a picture of the outside of the church and the date, October 28th. To his right, a woman was standing with her hands crossed, leaning into the sanctuary to watch and listen. At first she didn't hear the doors open when he came in, but it seemed that the breeze caught her ankle and she turned, eyebrows raised, with a smile. Davis, normally far more friendly, offered a hesitating smile back before ducking along the shadowed wall to the second archway, the back of the sanctuary, where he might slip in unnoticed.

The church was a large one, and the service was already well under way. A man dressed in a white robe with an orange cloth hanging around his neck gave the sermon at the front of the congregation. Stained glass walls lined both sides of the church, where two rows of pews ran to the back of the room. Despite the glass and the sunlight, the room was dim. The reverend was lit by a number of stage lights, moving about in front of a dangling crucifix of a man on a cross.

The spikes in his palms pulled at his flesh, forcing themselves against bone, dragging and ripping his limbs apart from afar. As if acting on their own, his fingers reached toward the tip of the nail to squeeze, grip—something to alleviate the fire. His bones moved against the steel and contracted with a white flash, seizing violently. His feet burned and itched, and he tried to press his weight onto them, too, to take more of the burning pain off his chest and hands and shoulders, but to no avail.

Davis blinked.

Ahead, the man in the robe said, "and so we enter into a tradition of sacrifice, days of honoring the dead. Sacrifice comes from a place archaic to us. Indeed, the term has stemmed from a place so far from our past that we often associate it now with those less civilized, with Pagan culture, to the basic primacy of humanity. But what were the roots of such practice?"

"The Bible contains a varied history of sacrifice. Genesis 3:21, Adam and Eve, upon their sin, became aware of their nakedness, and animals were sacrificed to cover this sin, as Romans 6:23 justifies; the punishment for sin is death. Abel offered sacrifices from his flocks. As did Noah. Hebrews 10:4: 'For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.'

"These only serve to cover up the sin, not destroy it. Offering sacrifices to God is not enough. Though this serves to foreshadow the final sacrifice, that of Christ. As an infinite creature, his sacrifice provided infinite forgiveness for all our sins."

Davis's head swam, and he blinked rapidly to clear his mind. Perhaps it was the dim light of the building and the vaulted ceilings that created a strange effect on a sleep-deprived mind, but just the same, the front of the church seemed to expand and stretch, speaking toward a yawning depth somewhere far beyond. He should have eaten something before going out.

"Christ not only overcame the need for sacrifice, but also the worry of death itself. All human beings can find salvation in Him, eternal life. But, until we are awakened, we are all dead inside. Death is terrible. Death is the punishment for sin. Death is damnation in the pit of Hell."

Before Davis, the heads of the parishioners nodded as if in time to a music that ran lower than the sound of the pastor's voice, a vibration, moving through the pews and below the floorboards. Davis wanted to deny it, that he was alien, separate from this place, an outsider looking in for reasons—

reasons he was, yes, of which he was unsure.

But he felt the thrum, the rhythm. He watched their heads sway in time as the words flowed across them, burning with something communal, an understanding. This was not a Baptist church, and they were far from the south, but the air held a feel about it of communal sway, of

hallelujah!

of voices nodding and heads sounding in agreement.

"To celebrate this death, or to revere it, or to try and force our way across a heathen veil designed by God for a reason, is to go against what Christ taught us, what Christ sacrificed for us, what our nature is as mortal human beings. Romans

6:23: 'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

"Amen," the congregation echoed, and Davis could not tell if it was in his mind or spoken aloud. The pastor nodded his head once, briskly.

It occurred to Will that he had not known night since the forest. How long that was he did not know.

He turned so that he might see behind him, from where he had come, but there was no rise of the ground into hills or mountains, no slope of trees that gently merged into the plain he now traveled. The wages of sin,

of murdering your classmates in cold blood, is
eternal life.

Is death.

The sky barked laughter, human groans. The bodies splayed on the rocks gurgled

Amen.

"I'm a sinner. I'm destined to die. You all are sinners. We all are destined to die, and it's only through worship, through the grace of God, that allows us to find this life. We beg forgiveness by day. We walk as best we can in His way and path, so that we may be so bright that when we die, we—"

Shine light from his eyes like pinprick beacons. Davis felt a presence, a pressure, boiling inside him, and his fists clenched against his palms. He did not know this feeling that overtook him. He did not know its source. He could not find connection between religious concerns and frustrations he'd had while growing up, for they were so few in number. He had never felt so impassioned toward a divinity or any kind of religious practice that wasn't the gentle coaxing of youthful minds.

What was this feeling? What was this latent emotion that pressed toward the under-edges of his skin and threatened to burst out of not only himself, but the masses congregated here? Their heads now nodded in the motion of the snake,

a pulse, a movement in harmony, as if the walls and grounds themselves were pulsing in time.

"I'm as human as we all are. I'm very aware of this fact. I grew up celebrating Halloween. Benignly, of course." The pastor smiled. "Never got into the tricks. Only the treats." And he patted his belly at the top of the stairs to draw a chuckle from the audience before pacing from one side to the other. The audience slowed and swayed from side to side to match his pace. "I've come to wonder about this holiday of late. Perhaps it's the time that we're living in, this violent year that we've

been so suddenly thrust into, that's forced us to reconsider what's important."

Will pressed his mind to his crime. He tried to remember the motion, the movement of the weapon, the kickback, the students that he'd dispatched, their faces, their crimes.

Davis remembered the big man, walking down the hallway, looking sideways at him while he stood in the doorway. This was strange, he thought, because the deeper he pressed at the image, the more dreamlike it felt, quavering, stuttering, before wobbling and shattering altogether.

"It's in our children. We recognize their vulnerability, their symbol of the future. Reflected in them, we see the sins of our past, and we hurt, worrying deeper than we do for our own demises, for our own coming defense of sin."

He would not call himself a prophet, no, nothing of the sort, in the weeks to follow. The pastor was a humble man, and he would not suggest that he'd been gifted with any kind of foresight, certainly no kind of soothsaying powers or witchcraft, though this was the season for such things, was it not? But if he were pressed, he might concede to a kind of brush with mysticism, or a momentary knowledge, a dip of the ladle in the collective well that spoke toward a wrongness he might easily have misunderstood as the coming season,

the darkness on the breeze,
the way the leaves fell from the trees,
straight, heavy.

"This is the kind of thing we must protect against. This coming darkness. Our own coming darkness. We protect against our own deaths in the same way that we protect ourselves against the coming Halloween. For our children. Of course, I welcome you all on this coming holiday to spread the word of Christ's love, of the true holiday sacrifice, to anyone who might hear. Children with mischief in mind."

Davis thought of William Andrews and again of the dream-image of the man walking down the hallway. And as the rhythm of the heads continued, the light in the room growing fainter, the feeling in his chest rose to the surface, and he clapped a hand on his mouth to keep back,

well, yes, perhaps vomit, but it was not nausea that he was worried about. He did not feel sick. He felt filled, with emotion, whatever this emotion was, whatever tore at his stomach and lungs, and he was worried that he might speak, that he might call out. He was not sure if the voice that would fall from his lips would be his, or another's, something that the congregation would want to hear, or not.

"We will not be offering a formal get-together this year. No service, though that

is something I think I'd like to see about next year, perhaps, or in years to follow, if there's support from you all." He waved his hand across the moving heads. Some nodded. "The youth group, I do believe, is putting together an alternative to the mischief-making evening, and that will be held at seven o'clock in the main hall. All are of course welcome, and furthermore, if you'd like to come and find a place of peace in what could prove to be a difficult evening for some, you're welcome. It is, after all, a day of—"

remembrance. He tried to remember. The images would not come. And this made him angry, as if willing the thoughts to his mind pressed against the space between his brain and his skull, as if through the friction of his bone, he might uncover a truth. We must remember.

"Christ sacrificed himself for us. We must remember this.

"The past is not a thing from behind us; it is as present as the present we know, the voice in your ear that you hear. It runs below us all, below our thoughts, below our very lives, influencing the way we think, the way we live, the lives we lead,"

the heads that sway,

"and it's our choice to recognize this history. Jesus lived two thousand years ago. He still lives. When we pray, we know Him today. When we fall into this history, we are made of the stuff of God, the stuff of His history. And it's best we remember this past.

"Bearing this in mind, we'll take our communion. We'll remember the sacrifice, that infinite and momentous moment, that final sacrifice that extends across time. We'll remember the last meal, where he said, 'This is my sacrifice, share in it with me.' As we shall." He paused and bowed his head before looking to the altar and removing the cloth from the bowls of bread and the pitchers of wine. Two other pastors seemed to materialize from the wings, each bringing a bowl as well. "Let's keep this in mind as we accept the communion today."

The first few rows stood and filed into the aisle to stand in line, accept the bread, dip it in the chalices, and move on again, chewing slowly and looking contemplative.

Davis realized he'd bit his lip hard enough that he tasted blood. He stayed firm in his seat, unsure of whether he was scared to partake in the tradition, whether it would be wrong of him, whether it would be looked down upon, whether—

No. He was just separate. This he knew. Wanted, for whatever reason, wished to deny, but knew. As the final rows rose around him, he joined them, but when they reached the aisle, he disappeared around the end of the pews and slipped from

the sanctuary.

2.

Will said that he could drive, would have preferred it, even. It would have kept him awake, and that was what he wanted most right now, to be as far from the nightmares as possible. This is what he told Jennifer, but she remembered the way that he dropped to the ground at Creekside, from wide awake to mumbling and thrashing in an instant. She remembered the way his gaze would go cloudy, when he'd lose himself in the distance, blinking a few moments later, his brow forcing sweat, the way he would wipe it from his upper lip like wiping a runny nose. The innocence and intensity she'd see in his eyes when he came to again.

In bed, that same intensity as when they moved together, when they came apart for long enough to catch each other's eyes, to re-enter in another way. That old adage, that the eyes are the window to the soul.

The first time he asked her out, there on the beach, she'd seen it in his eyes, even as he struggled to maintain eye contact, blinking away, staring at the river behind her as if it were an object of some holy fascination. It was this blend of his humanity, his shyness, and the purity in his gaze that did it,

that reflected in her own eyes, as hers did in his, the way that river might have as well, should it have grown still, the waters quiet.

"Let's go to your father's house," he said that morning when she came awake next to him. She touched the side of his face. The skin was soft, so she knew that he'd been awake for a while. When he'd start from the nightmares, cries choking his throat and tears straining, he'd be clammy and moody for a while before righting himself, as if learning again how to take confidence in the world around him.

Unfortunately, this had started to fade lately. His gaze was almost constantly wary, his jaw almost always set, his tone sharp with her even when she'd simply ask him a question. Then she'd watch the light come back to his eyes and the way his brow would fold, and he'd say, "God, I'm so sorry, Jenn," and he'd be alright again.

Still with the distant look.

This morning, though, there was hope in the look, an eagerness in his voice. He tried to sound the way he knew he used to before the nightmares: teasing. The spontaneous suggestions that they might go out that day, might go for a hike, might buy a picnic and share it somewhere in the woods together if it was warm enough. Those suggestions, intended to bring sparks to her day, that might catch something inside her, that same kindling she burned, now with his own glow, something altogether more pleasant, a fire inside that tickled like the feel of his fingertips

against the lower part of her belly, that made her squirm and press herself to him at the same time.

"Alright," she said, blinking her eyes and looking over him to the clock. "Alright, let's go to Maine."

He was in the passenger seat now, fighting to stay awake. She saw the way he sat cross-legged, the way he inched his knee a bit higher to let the blood back into his leg, as if the pins and needles and the discomfort of staying in one position for so long might keep him alert. But it wasn't working, and after an hour and a half of the drive, she watched his head jerk, twitch to the side, and knew in a moment that she would hear his gasp, or cry, or see the way his jaw might clench so hard she'd hear the teeth clap against each other.

* * *

When Will slowed, wandering to his left or nearly coming to a stop, the big man kicked and pushed him into movement again.

Don't—was all he could mutter. His voice was neither a whisper nor even a croak. Like the sound of splitting wood or tearing bone, his voice only pushed his words from his mouth until they dribbled to the ground.

The storm rolled above them, and the yellow light was now gray, filtered and shining dimly only on the horizon.

If you hadn't taken that first step to ask her out. If you hadn't seen her at the beach.

His legs buckled and trembled with each step.

Shithead.

He stumbled again. Caught himself. His eyes turned lazily to Jennifer behind him. She stepped through the ashen snowstorm like a beacon. Her clear face hovered ghostly in the fading light. Her tears ran from clear eyes and her lips moved as she watched the ground, her gaze rarely flickering up.

So perfect. Unscathed.

Will made a move to speak, but his thought stopped just beyond his lips, burbling only random consonants. Waves of heat rolled from the sky toward the three. Will felt it press against the slime sliding down his face, across his chest, and into his blistering arm where the flies and maggots nuzzled in like lovers in their marriage bed.

The big man nudged him in the back with his foot, the impression staying even after the foot had been removed for another blow.

The heat from the fires swirled thick like an open oven, baking. Embracing.

So hot. Too fucking hot. Skin burns white. Red fire.

Giant wasps hung close to the ground, where it was only slightly cooler than above. Will, too, let his body fall to the ground more frequently than not, letting his legs give out and his arm tear on the impact. It was worth the stabs of pain for what might have been barely a degree of temperature change. It was enough anyway, a reminder. There was a payoff, for a moment, worth it, reminding.

Against the ground. The heat of the ash stung in his skin. Nostrils overpowered by the ground, the stench: death and methane and shit. And then he was again yanked up, his stiff shirt in the hands of Jenson, to be propped up again on frail legs, shoved forward.

"Can't stand it," Will mumbled the words in his sleep, his face forced against the cold glass of the window next to him. Jennifer reached to touch him on the shoulder, to force him awake, but for a moment she—

"Hurt. Hurts too much," he said.

She hesitated, worrying that waking him might be worse. Like an infection, perhaps it was better to let it run its course, to get it out of his system. The longer he spent asleep, the closer he might get to what? Memory?

The thickest part of the thunderhead was still ahead, lingering above the final sheets of darkness. Movement littered the horizon. Clouds danced. The wasps let their lazy limbs drag through the sweat-drenched air and their fat rear-ends dangle, large, drooping. Droning on.

Spiral of decay, endless searching for endless searching for endless searching.

Will had already snapped. He waved his stump, and nausea ran from his stomach. What was left? But he still felt the festering. That growing creep, working the muscles, replacing oxygen, currency, running electricity from the brain to the cells via larvae.

He had no center. No beginning. No end. His life was a corridor of white walls intertwining. Something foreign stared down. Him and all his maze. Reminders of those gone before. React, react, react.

Lungs burning the way they do when you run for miles in the middle of winter, wearing the lining away.

He closed his lips to avoid mouthfuls of dead men. Black streams ran from his nose. At his most lucid, he sometimes took pity on himself, and his lips quivered, and hard blood sprang like tears. The edges of his eyes were hard, dried and crusty.

He cried black mascara tears, more blood and ash than water and salt. The lack of tears allowed him no satisfaction, no release. Blinking scraped and

his vision grew blurry. He wondered if in blinking enough, in wearing away his eyes, this place too might wear away. Endless black space, ash. Might he take a flame to his skin and

swirl the way the ash swirled?

Was that Heaven? he asked. But there were no words. Just a thick tongue moving against grit. Maybe Heaven wasn't so far. Heaven was a snowflake, a body consumed, ashen, carried on the breeze. He turned toward the nearest flaming tree to reach, but the big man twisted him and he stumbled forward, forgetting the idea in short order.

Worst is still yet to come, oh yes, the big man said.

Will moved toward his words. When directed to the big man, his thoughts were only a blur of profanities and whining.

The screams of damned men blurred with the wind, a thrashing echo in the storm.

Hate it. I do. Hate the whole thing.

Bodies swirled about his head. Hello, he said. But the word was fricative.

The skulls of men and women cut into his shins. The big man picked him up and dragged him forward, face first. He didn't even realize he'd fallen.

Jenson kicked him. Explosion of pain. Then he got up. And moved on.

Jennifer behind him. Beacon.

As the words came to mind, they were gone again. Out of his mind. Forgotten. Ignored. A pain easier left aside.

* * *

"Though I walk through the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me," Jennifer said in the car, not so much as a prayer to God, but as words that she hoped might register somewhere in Will's dream place, that he might hear them, find strength.

"Fear no evil," he croaked.

For a moment, her heart leapt out of both fear and hope. She'd not expected to hear him speak, but she was pleased to hear her words echoed.

"Shadow of death. Shadows. Death fears evil. Evil shadows fear death. Shadows walk the valley of death. I walk the valley of shadows. Death walks the valley. The deaths of shadows. The deaths of evil shadows. The death of I. The evil of I. The evil death of I. The death of evil I."

Looking from the road, her heart falling, she grabbed his shoulder, hard, and shook it. For a moment, he opened his eyes and looked to her hand and stared. She didn't realize how hard she was squeezing until she saw her knuckles white and the fabric of his shirt clenching. She lessened her grip and said, "Will?"

He put his hand on hers and held it there.

3.

Jennifer pulled into the driveway and put the truck in park, then killed the engine. Will took a breath, got out, and she followed. Together they walked up the front porch steps to the door. The house was a single story ranch-style with a long front porch that ran along the front of the house and stopped at the garage. There had always been something alien about this place. He remembered, looking at the swing, where he and Jennifer shared their second, more comfortable kiss. But the porch was different. Two hundred miles north. This wasn't the door where he dropped her off from their first date. This wasn't where they'd curled up together on weekend evenings to watch bad comedy movies and laugh. But in the same way, this was the place that still smelled of wet wood of trees that littered the yard, that mingled with the smell of her perfume, the smell of the old carpet and her mother's candles that her father still burned in the living room. This was memory. The place had a hyper-real feeling. There was a sense of reality here, the flavor of which he'd awoken to by morning for the past month, a place of migraine headaches and sunlight that breaks across your face when you step outside on a summer day, a stunning study in detail and pixels, the shadows harsh against the light, harsh in a way that the fine lines stood hard. This place, this porch, felt hard. Jennifer against his arm was solid, a sensation he'd longed for by night, when the days bled in between the moments that he'd open his eyes and touch her as she moved in the bed.

Will took a deep breath. His heart pounded in his chest. Tear off the scab.

"I have to run an errand or two," he said as she tried to force the key into the lock. Her father was a careful man and kept the door locked, even when he was at home.

"You have to run an errand? Here?"

Will nodded. He had no excuse lined up. Nothing he was willing to lie about.

"This isn't . . ." She trailed off. "Tell me this isn't about the shooting." Tears in her eyes. He hated to see that. Hated to see her upset, hated to see her making such a big deal of something relatively minor. He didn't nod, but wanted to.

"No," she said, and at first he thought she was denying him his errand before

he watched her face fall. "This was why you wanted to come up here in the first place? You didn't want to get away for a weekend, to bring me to my dad's. You wanted this—this whatever it is. Answers to your mystery."

Will opened his mouth to protest, kicked himself. He had nothing to say. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" Her jaw hung open. The key waited in the lock, forgotten. "I don't believe you."

"It won't be for long. It was an errand I thought I'd run while I was at it."

"Stop," she said.

He stopped. Wished he could feel her touch, sharp, against his arm. Days before the next . . . Wake up. "I could tell you, but I'd rather not."

"Good. Because I don't want you to."

From the other side of the door, there was the sound of the deadbolt scratching against the lock, and then the door broke open and Joseph Christianson looked out on the couple with a smile. "Hello," he said.

Will smiled at him, but Jennifer didn't break her gaze. Will looked back to her. "It will only be an hour or two. I'll be back by three o'clock. Latest."

Christianson frowned. Will held his hands out for the keys and felt again that he was asking for her permission, and he wondered if she would hand them over at all. He liked to think that if she held out, forced the keys into the pocket of her fleece jacket, that he might give in, might let this personal mystery pass, let it work itself out in his nightmares while he slept, interfering with Jennifer at most while she slept next to him.

"No."

"They're my keys, Jennifer."

"No. You're not going."

"You're not stopping me."

"Don't think I won't."

Will held his hand firm, flattening his palm. "Do you even understand what this means to me, Jennifer?" he asked. "This is my sanity. This is my life. This is everything. I find answers to this and I'll be alright again. I'll find some peace." He thought of the sleepless nights. "Maybe you'll find some peace too. Through me." That wasn't so selfish either, he thought. Emotion perpetuates itself in a household. You relax, your roommates and family will relax as well. You live with fear, tension, and frustration, and the very walls seem to thrum in your presence, pots and pans go unwashed, dishes break easier, as if their surfaces are slick with the same stuff of frustration. He resolves this, Jennifer might relax again, might find a peace within herself.

"Am I more important to you than this?" she asked, and he hated her for it.

"This isn't you versus my memories. This is about finding some kind of peace again. In me. In you. Between us." His voice was loud. Christianson moved away from the door and slowly pushed it closed. His face was pale, and Will felt bad for the man.

"You want peace, drop all this. We go back to September. We live our lives. You lived your life for five years perfectly fine without remembering this. You think you'll be happy after remembering? There's a reason you've forgotten. You ever think about that?"

"I'd rather know than not."

"You'd rather know than have me?"

"You're making those exclusive. They don't need to be. Don't put that on me."

"This is all my fault then?" Jennifer said, and her eyes still dangled tears against her lower lashes. He wanted to yell at them until they faded back behind her eyeballs.

"It's nobody's fault. But we're making it something that it's not. We're blowing this up for no reason."

Jennifer dropped the keys in his hand and turned to the door, pressing it open and walking into the living room. Behind her, Will stood, the keys warm from her hand against his palm. Warmth from the living room slithered from the crack in the door to where he stood, and he wanted, he wanted so badly to press the door open, to apologize and sit down on the couch, to hold her hand and promise to make it up to her by not ever addressing it again.

Yeah, and will the nightmares away.

He reached out, pulled the door closed tight, fought off a moment where tears of his own forced their way from behind his eyes at the thought of Jennifer's reaction when she heard the door latch, when she heard him start his pickup, pull out of the drive, and follow along another nerve-ending, another synapse toward spark, ignition, memory like

spark, ignition, the bark of the muzzle and the recoil against his hand, the laceration, the black space, the loss.

"I'm doing this for you," he said to the door. "It's all always been for you."

Walking into the church was difficult, but only for a moment. The building itself was a couple decades old. There was no brickwork, and siding lined the squat, large rectangular building. There was no lawn, barely a parking lot before a concrete approach to the door. The siding was stained with green near the concrete foundation, where the weeds and grass had crept in color along the fading paint. There was a small angled archway over the double front doors. The sign, jammed into the soft dirt between the closer wall and the parking lot, read *Church of the Faithful Servant*, with the word 'servant' in bold font beneath the first few arching words.

"Faithful servant," Will mumbled before pushing open the front door.

Inside, there was a short entryway where a closet stood without doors. A few light jackets dangled from their hangers. Frail carcasses.

He tried to suppress the memory. Couldn't it wait until this was over? But—

The bodies littered the ground and dangled from the trees. At one point, the big man walked to one of them, holding up his hand and pushing the body against the dusty wind. It flipped and twisted like clothing on a line, boneless, muscle-less, a stuffy guy,

effigy,

human scarecrow. In broken images, Will wondered who it was meant for. The land was enough to scare anyone away. What was the purpose of hanging a less-scary man from the scary tree? To dissuade the righteous? To amplify the place?

Scary man from the scary tree. Children's story, this was.

Bothersome, that it didn't bother him, the carcass. Bother—

The fabric of his shirt against his skin was bothersome. Each time it moved against his skin was like sandpaper on a sunburn.

To sleep would be nice. So nice. I hate this place.

It became his mantra.

I hate this place.

He found peace within his rage, distraction in the pain. Bite hard on the wooden stick, scream with your throat alone, sing—

and it will take you away from this place. He squeezed his fingers against his palm and sang.

He picked at the dangling flesh hanging at his elbow, stripping the crispy black from his arm in long strands, a hangnail growing to inches.

Hate this place.

He looked at the wound on his right arm and moved his left to pick the scab, to

make it bleed again, to find something fresh and unpolluted, if just for a moment. But then he remembered that his hand was gone and he

sang,
growled.

If I could just sleep, he said. Thought. Wasn't sure. Sleep.

Then the pain of the big man's boot hit his kidneys. His eyes widened in surprise. The new pain was refreshing, surging through his body in a way that the dull pain spoke toward but left empty. Keep reading, nerves. Keep talking, murmur your curses like lips under skin, nibble teeth, caress.

No giving up, Jenson said. Sandpaper against stucco. Sentences searing his throat, smashing the wind. Brittle ash. Will shot him a look from the corner of his eye and continued along.

Will's stomach cramped, and he winced. He bent over and staggered forward. Bowels clenched. Black, part gastric juice, mostly ash, down his pants. Shame engulfed his head with the smell. Nauseating, it would have been, had it not turned on the air and mixed with what he already knew.

He felt it against his thighs, and somewhere in the back of his mind hoped Jennifer didn't notice.

Night had been falling slowly,

wobbling, in fact, the earth on a potter's wheel, the sun skipping like pennies across the river Styx. But when the twilight did finally fall, it fell with the sky, and crashed to the ground with a bang, a flicker of lightning, and a whimper.

"I'm sorry," Will said, looking up from a crouch on the entrance of the church, sure that he'd been out for too long, that someone had to have come around, seen him on the floor, crippled, calling for his attention before calling for help. His face reddened before he noticed that no one was there to see him sniffing, forcing the mucus to the back of his hand, the tears into his eyes, the bile into his stomach again. He touched the seat of his pants and was relieved to find it dry.

He stood when he heard severe footsteps approaching, and knew that his voice had caught someone's attention, so he quickly got to his feet and coughed to clear his throat. From the corner ahead of him, beyond which the sanctuary awaited, more like a gym than a cathedral, with folding chairs forming neat, even rows, a woman appeared in a long skirt and sweater, her hair pulled back tight, with glasses at the bridge of her nose. Will instantly thought of a librarian and almost laughed.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I'd like to speak with someone."

She was quiet at first, not asking for his problem or what he might need help with. She studied him, up and down, with a look in her eyes as if she meant to place

him, and Will wondered if she was picking up on old memories of his face from the papers. It had not made much in the way of news that Jenson was from this part of the country, if even this town. Certainly he didn't think Jennifer knew, though likely that was in large part due to her father's sheltering. But it was likely the staff here was very aware.

"I'm not sure that would be good," the woman said.

"I'm sorry?"

"We're spread thin on resources this afternoon. And very busy after the morning's services." The place had an empty feel, arid and stale, as if it hadn't been used in some time. There was no inspirational message on the board outside. The door screamed when he opened it. He wondered if the place had been used for much more than the occasional addicts' anonymous meeting Wednesday nights, but shooed the condescension from his mind.

"It's important."

"Very important?"

"Life and death."

She looked at him down her nose. "Life and death?"

Will nodded.

"If it's life and death. We're sorry. We don't mean to be stuffy. Things just get tense. We're awfully small, you know. Understaffed. Overworked. Even in the service of God." She looked through the ceiling and frowned. "I best bite my tongue. If it wasn't difficult, it wouldn't be His work." And as if this was conclusion enough, she turned and Will followed.

The sanctuary echoed their footfalls as they went across to another short hallway, lined by drywall, carpeted. The walls here were lined with a fabric thick enough that it seemed that they too were carpeted, and Will for a moment had the sense of walking on the wall, sideways, angled in some kind of rotating funhouse, a spiral, that should the walls slope, should he turn, he might walk forever after himself.

Thinking like a crazy person. Have to stop.

She took him to an open door that revealed an office filled with books and stacks of papers. In the clutter, Will wondered how any organization might exist below the scattered pages. Behind the broad desk, riffling through a drawer, was a man in a black button up shirt and a black tie. There was no festive feel to his outfit, no look of a gentle pastor. When the man looked up, his brows moved from curious to surprised and held on severe.

"Jesus," he said. "Jesus. Sorry." He looked through the ceiling in the same way that the woman had. Will turned, but she'd disappeared into another one of the

rooms along the hallway. Will felt caged.

The man was young for church work, Will thought. His hair was still raven black and combed away from the side of his head with an even part. He smiled at his curse, and Will saw that he wore his smile the way he wore his tie. When Will didn't smile back, the man loosened both the smile and his tie and said, "Hello."

"I was wondering if I might be able to talk with you some? About one of your old parishioners."

The man narrowed his eyes. "One of our old members?"

"Indeed." Will moved forward. "I'm sorry, I'm Will Andrews."

"Will, I'm Reverend Michael." So he hadn't recognized Will. This was fine. Will had grown too used to it the past few weeks, diving into the case that had put his name and face on the first page of a paper no one ever hoped to see. "Have a seat, please."

Will sat. "This must be odd. But you see, I'm one of the victims of the Savage Creek shooting."

For a moment, Reverend Michael looked confused, but when realization dawned, his face fell, not in shock or sympathy, but with something dark. "Ah. Jenson."

Moundshroud.

"I'm not sure what I might be able to tell you."

"Anything, please," Will said. The Reverend considered him with the same look that Jameson and the police Detective had scrutinized him with, and he was growing tired of it. "Why would a church-going man try to blow up a school full of children?"

Michael shook his head and frowned. "I don't know. He wasn't a dark or distressing person in the years that I knew him."

"How long did you know him?"

"I'm a good ten years older than him. Watched him grow up with the church, actually. We didn't always used to be in this building. Used to be across town, back near Johnson's tobacco factory up north. Near the library?" Will looked at him blankly, and so he continued on. "Well, we went through the same youth program, and I went off to school for a couple years. When I came back, interested in work with the church, he'd gone to school as well, but stayed local. Went to a community college for a while. His attendance fell off. I'm sure he got busy. It happens. Never moved away from his mother. Might've wanted to, but he was always so attached. And then her health started to fail." He eyed Will and responded to an unprovoked question, as if he wasn't even talking to Will, but some idea of a man, a reporter from five years ago perhaps, concerned sheep. "I know, seems weird to us now."

But in older times it was standard. About the time you would've got married, you got to be working for your own piece of land, the money to support yourself, and with a patriarch gone, well the woman isn't able to support herself of course. And you find that by the time you can support yourself, you've got to support your mother as she ails, and then you inherit the home and, well, that's the way things go for generations, isn't it?"

Will picked at his left arm and stared at the man.

"Well, then his mother went from the cancer. Real bad. It's always another plague, be damned. God bless." He looked to the ceiling again. "Can't say for sure, but he stopped showing his face around here after that. Well, during that, actually. But I can understand. You spend your time with your family, you pray when you can. Probably praying enough as it was anyway, wouldn't you say?"

Will thought of his mother and father while he was in a coma and wondered if they'd done any praying for him, if in their desperation they'd broken whatever security they'd had in their loneliness and reached out to something of power. He wondered if it had worked.

"He didn't find any kind of security in his faith after her death?"

"Would you?"

"Wouldn't know."

The reverend sighed. "We take a more eastern approach here."

"That means what?"

"We have a heavy focus on practice and philosophical dialogue."

Will nodded in circles and raised his eyebrows.

"Eastern religions, in Hinduism and Buddhism, others I'm sure, there was a heavy emphasis on dialogue. It kept their teachings and philosophy modern and up to a high scrutiny. Here in the West, we're not encouraged to question our beliefs because damnation is the consequence of doubt. But we believe that God is deeper than doctrine, and if the saints and prophets have experienced Him, as mortal beings, then so too can we."

"You're mystics," Will said.

"We have a practice-heavy element and believe that through intensive prayer and focus, we can access something, at least some strand or element of the divine."

"You believe that you have touched the divine?"

"I believe so."

Will nodded slowly. "Okay."

"It's not as crazy as it might sound to you, son."

Will didn't like the man calling him son. It may well have been this doctrine, this belief in whatever new age metaphysics, that inspired a rampage and nearly

took Jennifer from him. Too many times now. "And do these metaphysics involve strapping a bomb to your chest and threatening mass murder?"

"Relax, son. We're not Muslims."

Will's eyes widened, but he quieted and bit down with his jaw.

"We believe that it's through the honing of our mental condition, our faith, that activates our process of rising above ourselves, beyond the material world we've been conditioned to believe is all that is out there. Often, when this level has been reached, there's a kind of disconnect from the world that most are witness to. These people are sleeping sheep. As are you. You awaken, and you realize these societal rules, these fears and desires, these conflicts that surround your life, have evaporated into God's love."

"God's love."

"Yes. You find love for all souls. You walk with God. You see the difference between this world, the next, how permeable the veil is, how we all carry God within each of us, ourselves."

"So assuming he didn't snap from the loss of his mother, could this justify his actions?"

"We're not a violent congregation."

"Could this—" Will paused, putting his finger on the stack of pages and books nearest to him on the desk, which threatened tipping and falling, not that Will cared much. "Could this be cause for his actions?"

The man's face darkened. "Our society puts too much weight on death, yes. You turn the light out on the physical, but there's still a soul that travels. There's a world beyond this. I'm sure many of the students would have been blessed to have more time to discover God's good graces, but they were allotted what they were allotted. Their time of judgment was upon them, whether that be by one man's hand or by God's. It is written."

"So if I shot you in the head right now, it was written. You'd go peacefully. Wouldn't fight."

"You're not . . . ?" the man asked.

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

Reverend Michael swallowed. "I'd like to think I would. It's not so easy, being put on the spot. It's the truest challenge of faith, to be asked to take the test, to make the journey."

"So you're not, what, awake?"

"No. But I strive."

"Was Jenson?"

"Not when I had last seen him. He'd come to be discouraged with the practice,

I think. He'd lived his whole life about it but, if you asked me, had never really committed. His faith was weak."

"Weak enough to snap? To take his rage out on children?"

"They are His most cherished. Though at that age, you do wonder if they've moved past their innocence these days. Especially in the morally corrupt society we live in today. I'm sorry," he said.

Will shook his head as if to mirror the man. And in his action there was an understanding, a disappointment, a condemnation of
and Will, for a moment—

The brilliant red of the sunset had drained from the black sky the way the blood emptied from Will's wretched body, replaced with swirling ash, driving wind, scalding air. Dead flesh and dead flesh.

Dead trees continued in their abysmal march past the trio, fleeing, branches burning from whatever greater storm fell ahead, bodies like victims in their splayed hands, wounded carried home from battle. The light of the fires that flickered in the distance warped the already hazy horizon.

Images without words flickered through Will's mind. He couldn't see or call to mind the feel of his mother's embrace, Jennifer's touch, the feel of her lips against his, the taste of water on a hot summer day, the way it caught his eye in the river, the sun reflected, a momentary burn, a glimpse of something higher. He could only remember the negative. He could only focus on his emotion and the pain of the moment. He couldn't be sure—and he no longer possessed the willpower to analyze for long—whether half the memories were even real or simply fabrication.

So long as he held on to those happy thoughts of the world behind him, he'd long for it, he'd stop his journey, he'd turn around or give up. Holding tight to the negative kept him walking, kept his feet moving in steady determination, and kept his head down and driving. Forward. Again and again. His anger kept him focused. And when he was focused, he made progress.

Jenson said something about Will's state and condition, scolding the boy about the animal he'd become. Somehow Will could still make out his nearly wordless whispers amid the cries and howls from the space before them.

The words were true.

No justification or defense rose in Will's mind.

He hated himself. He hated his thoughts and his actions, but could do nothing against them. He only wallowed. Thoughts of salvation from his damnation were a luxury he decided he would not entertain. There was no hope of that. All he cared to hope for was the sweet blackness of unconsciousness, the cool unfeeling of

sleep.

Will blinked awake again, saw the office, and for a moment didn't care wherever it was that he was. He only wanted to find that black space in between memory and waking consciousness again, so that he might for a moment drift into sleep and find peace once again.

beat of the world beat of life beat of the damned cooking in the river of fiery hate. I hate. I cook. I am damned.

The wind swirled. Will despaired.

"Can't be free. I can't hate this. Nothing to stop—" his words woke him up, and now the Reverend was at his side with a hand on his arm. To settle him from thrashing? To comfort him? To awaken him again? He wasn't sure, worried that he might be out of control.

The big man kicked Will and he stumbled forward, the pain sharp, prompting his muscles to seize. Again. His chest tightened and squeezed. With every kick from the toe of the big man's shoe, his rage grew. He found his breathing harder and harder to control. His arms shook.

Jenson mumbled something distant about a dead dog. Somehow made it relate to Will.

Kill you, the boy screeched at the man.

Jenson laughed.

"I'm sorry," Will said, and was ashamed to apologize again. He caught the look of concern on the crouching man. "This is what I get to deal with because of him." Michael frowned. Will continued, "It passes. Where were we?"

"I'm not sure it's best to continue."

"We continue if I damn well say so. I said I'm fine. I'm fine. Put some of your faith in that." The dark in Will's voice scared him, but not as much as the pressure he felt growing, the crawling sense along his brain of memory, of something important, a kind of disgust with himself, a repulsion inside when he thought of Jennifer.

"So." He cleared his throat, and the Reverend walked slowly to the other side of the desk again. "So, his actions were either enraged or impassioned." He struggled to regain the conversation again. To remember. "If impassioned, there'd have to be some kind of deeper, ethical, metaphysical reason, yes?"

"Well, yes."

"So he breaks through to this awakened state, enlightenment or whatever," Will said. Michael raised an eyebrow and nodded to himself. "And he realizes that he's got to go blow up a school. Or try to, right? Why?"

"We might not understand until we too are awake. It was his purpose, was that the case."

"His purpose was to make my life Hell."

"Only you can make your life Hell." Michael said the words with a look of disgust.

"What? You're—" He widened his eyes. "You're not suggesting that my being shot, my being put in a coma, my, whatever the fuck this is, PTSD, is all my fault."

Michael rubbed the back of his neck and wiped at some sweat on his forehead that may or may not have been there. "Of course that's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying that in our faith, we seek to separate ourselves from the external world, from these emotions. Your emotions are of the outside world and you are not. You are not your emotions, and so you do not need to be run by them."

Will waved the psychobabble away. "But that was his purpose, hypothetically."

"Perhaps. For himself. For you. For others. For God. We may never know. But should he have been awakened during, it was not with any evil intent. One does not intentionally do harm to others while awake."

"Well, he did some harm to me. He killed two of my friends."

"I know," Michael said, and Will could see now that the man looked genuinely sad. "I know. And I'm so sorry for that. I wish, I pray to God that there was something I could have done, could have seen, to prevent it. But we don't know, and the past is unchangeable behind us. We best just move on. Find love and happiness in the present moment."

"Do you even buy what you're selling at all? Are you kidding me?" The more the man seemed to snivel into his books, the more his tie seemed limp in the dull lamplight and his skin more pallid than toned. His smile faded, his charisma in a puddle somewhere near the floor, and Will wanted to rail the man. "You preach this stuff, but look at you. Look at what you've produced. You read of a massacre, of an attempted bombing, and you what? Shrugged? Pointed fingers? Found God in the present?" He was yelling now and was faintly aware that the woman who had shown him in had come to the door to watch the conflict.

Michael waved her away and stood. "It's time you leave."

"What? Push me away so that you can go back to ignoring the rest of the world in your trailer here on the edge of town? Cut off your feelings, the very feelings that make us human beings and—"

"I mean, do you even feel love anymore? Did Jenson cut himself so deeply with whatever razor his mother left him that he couldn't even feel love anymore? Is that why he wandered into a high school and—" He mimed pulling the trigger and

An inferno spread in his chest. His face worked as his mind focused.

His skin crawled along his crispy arm, sentient, alert now, separate from him, stretched as he clenched his fist, flexing the tattered muscles as they screamed out in pain, working against their fatigue.

A low hiss escaped his throat. Unable to weep, Will mewled, the sound insignificant for what was inside.

Broken, deteriorating with every attempt at control, Will found a satisfying clarity as he flexed his body with his rage. Bringing his mind and body together, finally, again. He smiled and his cheeks split behind his eyes. It felt good.

He'd only been out for a second, but it had been just long enough for Michael to get his feet under him and say,

"The same razor that was left to you when you lost your friends?"

Will glared and flexed.

"Please, go."

Will stood from the chair and left, resisting the urge to fling the papers and books from the top of the desk.

"Will, if I might."

"Oh, what now, priest?" He said. The words hurt. He saw that.

"For whatever it's worth, I think he snapped. I think he lost it. I think he warped everything he'd learned, our gospels of love, of overcoming suffering. He surrounded himself in the worst of the pain, and he lashed out at those who were the closest to those he hated. And that was you. And I'm sorry that you had to go through that. I'm so sorry."

Will felt his rage melt to something in his chest, but he fought to hold onto it. The rage was safe. He turned and walked from the office, down the carpeted, spiraling hallway.

a picture of Jesus at his feet. Above his head, a light burned.

His footfalls echoed in the sanctuary,

and a moment later, the door slammed open and fell closed, and he was gone.

5.

He didn't fall asleep on the drive home. He worried that should he cling to the rage

he'd felt at the church, that he might begin too seamlessly to blend between one world and the next, and so he took a good fifteen minutes to calm down in the car.

He turned on the radio, tried to find a station that wasn't angry, where the guitars didn't bleed like the fingers that played them, a station that wasn't melodic either, that culled

that called

for him to sleep, lulling, soothing, a lullaby.

He needed something cheerful. He found a pop station. Electronic beats and voice synthesizers. Chick pop. He didn't care. It wasn't his music, but it took something out of him and replaced it with something he might find manageable.

He worried about the drive home, whether three hours would fall, whether he would swerve off the road, remembering Hell only to greet it again, end it all.

This was not to mention his other, greater worry.

He'd seen Jennifer, for just a moment.

Though the memories flooded back sequentially, from the flood came the flavor of the water across the land, a surge before the tide ran out and the wave came,

and he knew that it was going to be bad.

The drive home was safe. Fall Out Boy and Gwen Stefani were God's angels, sent to keep the young from Hell and ditches by the side of the road. Say Amen.

He stopped the truck in the driveway and fought against a relapse of desolate plains and long shadows. Breathing fast, he forced oxygen to his brain and slapped his face, hard. The pain almost took him back, and to resist the fall, he pushed himself from the cab of the Ranger and stumbled to the concrete.

She's going to think I'm drunk, he thought.

He went to the front door, knocking twice before pushing it open and entering. As he remembered, the living room smelled of dark fruited candles, and a fire whispered in the fireplace. Christianson sat in his armchair with a Cussler novel that had a wreckage of a ship on the cover, and for a moment Will thought he'd fallen into another memory, a cherished one, of a time before shootings and bomb threats and nightmares of Hellish underworlds. He wished for that to be so. Heaven in the breeze that carried the ashes of dead men? He thought not, but maybe, here in this living room, warmth from a fire instead of black bubbled flesh, he could find happiness. Slow the film reel, study the picture, warm your hands over a frozen frame

flame. Or not, he thought.

He blinked. "Mr. Christianson, hello."

Christianson looked above his glasses and smiled, tired. "Will. She's in her room."

"Thank you." He turned toward the hallway before looking back. "I'm sorry. About all this."

Jennifer's father nodded slowly. "I understand." Will took a few steps before Christianson called him back once more. "Be careful with that one, Will. Hold her soft."

Will bit back a curse as he turned, not at Christianson, but toward, well, whatever operator was behind all of this, whoever had arranged for this shooting, his flashbacks, and what seemed only a finite amount of delicacy between the two lovers.

He knocked on the door to her bedroom and then eased it open. She was inside, curled in her bed, staring at him as he came in. The sight of her, curled up on the bed, brought back happier times,

"Cuddlebug," he called her, pushing against her as she curled tight within the blanket and comforter, peering out at him from the space between her mess of slept-in hair and the cocoon around her. "You're stealing all the blankets. I'm freezing over here," Will said, and he chattered his teeth as if to make a point, but she only stared at him with big half-hidden eyes that crinkled where her smile pushed the skin up around her temples.

He remembered her another time, curled beneath the blanket, the fabric hiding the letter opener that she pressed to the inside of her thigh.

The sight of her almost brought on something he couldn't hold back. He thought it was tears. Memory manifest. He wondered when the black would take him, and if he might get the words out in time.

"Jennifer. I'm so sorry."

She looked scared now. Not at his words—she had expected as much—but at the torment across his face. Instead of sitting up, she burrowed deeper against the wall, her twin bed seeming too small for her to disappear within.

"Jennifer. I can't stay. I need to let you stay here. I'm, I'm—I can't rightly explain it, but you can't be here for this part, you can't see this."

See what, he wasn't sure, only that he knew the flavor on the air, the memory coming.

Maybe it wasn't that he was scared she would see this, but was more scared as to what the memory might do, overriding, or how he might feel after waking from

what he'd seen, to her gaze, her tears, her grief, over this, his actions, his crimes, his goddamned memory.

"Jennifer, you need to stay here."

"No," she said. "No, I'm not leaving you, Will."

"You have to," he said. It was a revelation long in coming.

"I'm not leaving you while you struggle through this, Will. I'll take your keys again!" He was crying now too, afraid. Will put his hands on his keys as if to make sure that they were there.

"You can't be around this. You can't deal with us both. I'm bringing you down. And I can't stop it. It will come one way or the other."

"We can stop it, Will. We can focus on something else, we can ignore it. Shove it back under. It doesn't need to be faced. You've been fine!" Pleading.

"I will not bring you down with me, Jennifer," he snapped, and in his words was the memory, was the desolate plain, the long shadows, and so he went for the door, as if to beat the vision from his head.

"Will!" she shouted and flung the blanket from atop her, moving to the door, but he was already racing down the hall, bumping into the walls. He accidentally knocked a picture of Jennifer from senior year of high school, the glass cracking.

Christianson had stood, dropping his book on the floor. "What is this?" he shouted. But Will ignored him. He needed to get away. Now. Before it all—

He was out the door, down the porch steps. Jennifer was screaming his name.

"You can't leave me like this!"

And Will, muttering over and over, his mantra,
remembering,

"It was all for you, it was all for you."

And then the memory was on him, and he pulled at the truck handle. It melted in his grasp, and he repeated,

It was all for you, it was all for you,

but the words came out as breath from broken lungs, and the words were forgotten almost—

His legs burned. The muscles had seized up, and so his steps were shallow. No blood was left in his body. He was pale. He could feel no pulse. Nauseous and dizzy. His hand, a skeletal, torn claw, pulsed, flexed, released. Then flexed again.

The hot winds blew. Trees burned. He wanted it, the rain, but knew better than to expect relief. The clouds over their heads now were almost as black as sackcloth. The rain, when it fell, fell hot and scalded their foreheads. The first drop touched Will's head and burned a streak of crimson down his neck. He didn't move. More

followed, drop by drop, becoming like needles slamming into his side, over and over. He ducked his head against it.

Jenson walked behind Will, struggling to stay upright. Jennifer lingered still further behind. Her mouth moved nonstop, though what she said, if she were speaking at all, Will could not hear over the rain and the wind,.

Thunder barked overhead, a deep ringing sound that harmonized with the rushing of the wind.

Will stopped and stared up into the rolling pitch and inky black. It was beautiful. The clouds churned and spat, vomiting small rocks and pebbles from above. Dry hailstones from the maelstrom.

Will's face had three purple and oozing welts where the skin had split apart on the bruises.

Jennifer slowly reached the halted party.

The big man slapped Will across the face.

Keep walking. You think this is the end? His scratchy voice rang high in a sound more machine than human.

Will's head curled downward, and he stared the big man in the eye. I'm done here.

Jenson's eyes widened. You are done when I say you are. The journey is not complete.

It is for me.

Jenson reached behind his back and took out the handgun, the metal glistening in the rain.

Will looked to the sky again, repeating desperation, hope still. He held his mouth wide open to taste the rain, to be refreshed by the feel of the liquid. But it touched like the stinging of bees, and no water slid down his throat.

Jenson slammed the butt of the gun into Will's cheekbone, snapping it. Will went down and met the sloshing, burnt

skin. It sucked at his hand as he tried to push himself up.

Bits of flung,

falling rock burned like comets on their way to the plain. Smoke rose all around them.

Get up. Get off the ground and face this. He did this to you. Put you here. Take him. Remove him. Remove the pain, embrace control.

Will pushed himself to his knees, unbalanced because of his missing left arm. He waved his stringy stump around as he got to his feet. His cheek was purple and red and had split open, bones and muscle revealed below.

Will rushed forward and shoved himself into Jenson's gut. Though the big man

braced himself for the hit, his feet slipped, and the two went down together. Will flung his calloused fist into the man's face. His muscles screamed in pain
pleasure

as he brought his arm back. The big man brought the gun to Will's back as he laid on top of him, flaying open his skin. Reaching up, he got under Will's face, lifting the boy off. Will clawed at the arm that held him and the face below that.

Jenson threw Will back into the slick. Pain exploded in Will's shoulder where he'd landed. The open wounds on his body stung in the liquid that boiled around him like a pot of water.

Lightning snapped from above, igniting the ground with flame that burned despite the damp.

The boy picked himself up again and ran toward the big man, flexing his arm at the elbow and pushing it deep into Jenson's gut. He grunted and bent over. Will grabbed the gun and Jenson's hand and twisted them toward the sky.

They were eye to eye.

What are you going to do? *What are you going to do?*

I'm going to kill you, Will cried.

I'm already dead.

Doesn't matter. Won't have to deal with you anymore. Leave you here where you belong.

And where are you going? Where do you think is so special for you to go when I'm gone?

There isn't any place for me anymore.

Because you are indescribably evil.

Something inside Will ignited the way the ground burst into flame where the lightning struck. He knew it was true. But still he launched himself at the man to wrench the gun from his wrist, bringing the metal against the skin. Jenson cried out, but managed to say,

You are the reason they built this place. This is a place of evil, for sinners, where there will be no rest, no refreshment from the pain. When you burn, you burn for eternity. Tears ran from Jenson's eyes, running together with the boiling water.

Twenty yards off, Jennifer hit her knees.

Will screamed into Jenson's face. *I'm going to burn for eternity? Then so be it! SO BE IT. I'LL TAKE YOU WITH ME!*

Then take me with you! Do it! Take the gun and kill me right now. Put the barrel to my forehead and I'll watch you burn. I'll watch your burning body next to me, and we'll laugh together!

FUCK YOU!

Jenson watched the fire build in Will's eyes. He felt the pain constrict as tears ran from his own. He'd pushed Will far. He needed to push him farther. The boy didn't have much left.

Tell Satan I said hello.

It was all he needed. Will screamed and turned the slimy black gun in his hand, held it to the big man's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

The big man's head exploded before him. His forehead yawned in a mass of brain and bone. The bullet blew the back of his skull into the air around them, brightening it with mist before being sucked into the storm and away again. His body dropped to the ground where it was immediately covered with ash and slime, no longer a conscious body to fight, to stay above the surface. A piece of the land struck his wet shirt and it began to burn. The wind blew the bloody mist back into Will's face.

Jennifer's eyes widened in horror, and she cried out behind him,
REMEMBER.

Will looked at her and in a moment saw

He was on the ground, his hand still holding fast to the handle of the truck. Jennifer's eyes widened and she cried out to him, but he didn't hear what it was. Maybe it was his name. He liked when she said his name.

Will looked at her and in a moment saw

The hallway of the school. The smell of gunpowder and smoke was in the air. Markus and Jonesy were dead on the ground, slouched back in nearly the same way. They died as brothers, were together in death, and he wondered what that was like, if there was comfort where they were, in each other, and whether he might have that comfort too, with Jennifer, in just a moment.

He was holding the gun, and the metal was hot and slimy in his hand because of his sweat. Tears ran down his face. His vision was going spotty, and the tears were warm

Hot like the brimstone from above,

He raised the gun and pointed it at Jennifer.

I LOVE YOU, WILL, she screamed.

His hand flexed.

You have to remember, Will.

No.

Remember! Please, God, remember!
He remembered.

"Please don't go, Will," she said, and there were tears in her eyes to match the tears in his. "Please don't leave me right now. Will!"

He raised
remembered
He raised his hand,
pointing at her. His index finger narrowed, his thumb in the air. He pulled the trigger.

He pulled the trigger.

He pulled the trigger.

The school hallway twisted, swam in a direction to the left. Gravity seemed to change, the floor reaching for him, clinging, screaming, wanting him. He let himself fall. His vision was spotty, his mind was falling,
swimming.

The bullet took her in the neck and blood burst and she dropped, and instead of where she stood, there was a black space.

"Jennifer," he said. Tears, tears of anger, of hatred, of frustration and pain. All he knew was the pain, and it was consuming. Jensen looked—

and the final bullet took Jennifer in the throat. The skin opened and her blood flew. She fell back onto the mud, eyes wide with pain. Will stood with his arm outstretched, the smoke from the blast drifting into the sky despite the rain.

Lightning flashed, a constant violent display, and in the flashes of white light, as she clung to the final strands of her life, he saw her again. For a moment, he remembered,

Her lips moved despite the voice that would not come. Her eyes were closed, and he thought she was praying, but his thoughts were fading.

Will watched her die, half-submerged among the bodies of rapists and killers, thieves and liars, brimstone slamming into the ground.

Her voice echoed inside his head and he reached for her.

Memories, a flickering parade of images. Meaningless, but beautiful.

Will scrambled for the pickup truck, wrenching the door open and falling inside. Jennifer crouched next to the corner of the garage and reached for him. "Please, please don't leave me, Will."

He'd killed her. He remembered now.

She's still alive. She's there.

He'd shot her. He'd pulled the trigger. The bullet had taken her. Instead of him, instead of Jenson, he'd killed her. How was he supposed to live with this? With himself? How was he supposed to open his eyes to hers in the morning,

"Cuddlebug," he called her, curled tight within the blanket and comforter and peering out at him from the space between her mess of slept-in hair and the cocoon around her.

A sinking sensation fell in the pit of his stomach. A fear. A regret. A sadness. In moments, he turned it to hate. He raised the gun to the sky and said,

I choose damnation.

He put the gun to his mouth and pulled the trigger.

No bullet. No spark. No death overtook him. No relief from the pain.

He pulled the trigger again and again and screamed. The sound was hard and jagged. No water left, he forced bile from his eyes as the thunder matched his scream and the earth opened around him.

Bodies rose to the surface and they too screamed, writhing and grabbing at his legs, cursing him. They clung to his body and dragged him down into the slush. He reached for Jennifer, slapped at the liquid, grabbed tight to her hand, squeezed, crawled against the bodies that grabbed at his head and shoulders, and he slapped his hand onto her shoulder as he finally went under.

Remember.

She grabbed his shoulder, hard, and shook it. For a moment, he opened his eyes and looked to her hand and stared. She didn't realize how hard she was squeezing until she saw her knuckles white and the fabric of his shirt clenching. She lessened her grip and said, "Will?"

He put his hand on hers and held it there,

and he squeezed it tight, his knuckles white from bloodloss, but claw-like and somehow strong. The fabric of her shirt clenched. He held it there.

He joined them.

As his voice ran out and he could scream no longer, his mouth dropping into

the sludge, he joined the bodies and was united with them, blood and blackened flesh filling his mouth and his nostrils, covering his eyeballs and then finally his head, until he was completely submerged, disappearing beneath the surface, his hand hard on hers, fighting against the slick.

He twisted the key and the motor roared to life and he threw the transmission into reverse and twisted from the driveway and down the street. He refused to look at Jennifer in the mirror, to see her tears, to blur his own.

He stopped a mile down the road, two turns from her neighborhood, along a desolate stretch of trees, where the shadows stretched long before the setting sun, and he cried until he was worried he'd dry out and fall back to that place forever.

PART THREE : *catharsis*

*I thought my fire was out,
and stirred the ashes...*

*I burnt my fingers.
antonio machado*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN **the persistence of nightmares**

1.

Will stopped the car in front of Meredith Davis's single story ranch house and pulled the emergency brake, hard, leaving his hand there, clenched on the plastic, as if to force his stress into the car, so that the frame might ground him the way it grounds the black jumper cable when starting a dead car. There was no grounding here. His anger and frustration surged, his heart beat fast, and the sweat on his brow seemed to have made a home in his pores.

He'd made the drive safely. He'd had a few moments when he thought he had lost himself, when he thought he'd fallen back into the pit again, holding tightly to Jennifer's hand, tightly enough that he felt the skin break beneath his fingernails,

that maybe her skin would merge with his bones, that they could become one, that he might not have done what he remembered he did.

That was likely what had saved him, his distress over leaving Jennifer stranded at her father's. Though the transition between memory and nightmare and reality seemed lubed, as though he might be able to shift from one to the next as seamlessly as switching gears in his truck, it was his focus on this Jennifer, the one still alive, that kept him alert.

Why Meredith's house? He wasn't himself quite sure of that, but he knew the moment he hit town and pulled from the highway that it was going to be his first stop. He didn't care about what time it was, though it was nearing ten in the evening. He wasn't sure she'd even be up, but that wasn't important. This wasn't a social call. This wasn't "I'll have what you're having."

He got out of the truck, slammed the door, and, with the momentum of his motion, stumbled. He felt like

he couldn't get up, like a hot, sticky force was pressing down on him, pushing him against the slimy and jagged floor. He opened his eyes and groaned. Colors twinkled into view before his eyes focused. So he wasn't blind. His head swam as he tried to decipher between what was blurred reality and what wasn't there at all.

Like moving a mountain, so was moving his head, and he looked around, seeing little more than brown smoke that drifted in and out of his field of view, shifting as if dancing with the flickering of distant flames, carrying their image as if to tease him with foreshadowing. The air around him was dirty orange. With every breath, his lungs blackened with charcoal and ash. Soon the air would not fill his chest, the oxygen would be gone, if it wasn't already, and he wondered—

Well, thoughts were far from his mind. He trembled. Beyond the pain and his muscular exhaustion, he trembled with the same hatred that pulled the trigger, doing the deed in the land above.

Through his fog, he

REMEMBER

remembered, if just for a moment, Jennifer's dying words. His hand, pressed so hard into hers that it had fixed there, making it difficult to differentiate her blood from his.

He moved forward, pushing himself toward his destination, straining at the body beside him. Will cared not which direction he moved in this—what seemed to be a limitless hallway. He knew, deep down, he'd end up where he needed to go regardless.

It was only when the gravity seemed to twist somewhere near his right ear,

accompanied by the sensation that whatever fluid was left in his head shifted, that the earth itself was pitching on soft foundation, that he realized he was on his feet and walking. The tunneled hallway was widening as he went, though he couldn't make out the distant walls. It took him hours to drift from one side to the other. He staggered back and forth across the ground, trying to avoid the small fires that licked at the air and ejaculated wispy trails of black smoke. Jennifer was like an anchor, keeping him firm as he swayed, as he pulled her along after him.

Sometimes he looked up, half expecting to see stars glittering in the heavens above, confusing the heat for summertime, trying to keep some grip on . . .

On a shallow level, it pleased him to look up and see only the dark and gray smoke that hung above him, masking those imaginary stars, pulsing with fire and heat,

a fire and heat of crushed rock, boiling the universe to its fundamental parts, exploding it. No

stars here.

Wet, slithering creatures made slimy sounds around him from the shadows. Their stench grew with each step that Will took.

He deserved this. He should walk forever. There should be no relief.

And so he continued forward, amidst the slime and jagged rocks. There was something like bile on the walls around him, dripping, yellow and black, rancid and deadly—ancient fluids of those who passed this way before.

Will's arm brushed against his shirt and came away black and wet. His shoulders were stiff and hurt to move. The heavy fabric pressed against him, squeezing his body so that he couldn't move. It was heavy. Too heavy. He pried his hand from Jennifer's and twisted his shirt on his elbow before grabbing at the neck to pull it over his head. His hair and skin stuck to it, tearing strands from his head and dark flesh from his back. His arm burst into pain when the fabric crossed over the jagged edges of skin and bone. But it was off.

A flash of white light. His head spinning.

Nothing changed. His body was still slick with sweat and blood, dirt and grease. He was thin, and the skin of his stomach had bulged out and turned green, along with his neck and jaw. His veins ran with red streaks like highlights, bright flashes across highways where the arteries no longer pumped so much as sucked, desperate for sustenance.

You killed her.

Gusts of fire and burning wind shot through the tunnel. To prevent his skin from bubbling, cooking in the heat, Will twisted, a slow motion thrashing. The sound of sobbing echoed in waves, whether from the pit of Will's chest or from

some other soul—or both—he didn't know or care. His arm trembled. He was jumpy, scared to move in any way that would make his arm burst into any further pain.

Hate it.

Put a bullet through her fucking neck.

He stalked down the tunnel, a new bout of rage overtaking him, overriding his fear. He smacked his arm against his chest as he walked, the pain in his head making him swim.

Crank the volume on his world. The beat keeps him walking and the shredding guitars keep him writhing and the screaming vocals remind him. The music was his hate, overriding, harmonizing the pain, forcing him forward.

He staggered. Head reeling.

Reeling.

Arm. And the

And the pain.

Sometimes he thought he could smell Jennifer's perfume below the harsh, reeking stench of the world around him. And every time that he caught a whiff, his mind was filled again with the sound of the shots. His mouth opened and closed.

You never loved her.

Will didn't know what was memory, what was thought, what was whispered to him.

You forgot how to love.

Will gritted his teeth, smacked his arm.

You killed her.

His vision spun, his head rocking back on his neck, his mouth gagging on the air, trying not to breathe.

It felt good too. It feels good now.

He agreed. He knew. Turn off the voices? But they only melded with the hurt. Little people whispering around his body, their words like his blood.

It was all he knew.

Remember why you're here.

He slammed his fists into the rock and cried.

Remember.

He slammed his fists onto the door and bit down on his cries, pounding against the wood. He thought of splinters in flesh, that if he broke the door down with bare hands, bleeding, raw, he'd feel at home.

Meredith Davis opened the door wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Her hair was still

done up and her makeup in place. Her night had not wound down yet, and while she might have been slowly preparing to go to bed, she had not yet gone. Will didn't think twice about this. Instead he said,

"Tell me about what else happened to Stanley."

"I'm sorry, this is highly inappropriate." She looked frightened at his insistence, but quickly replaced her fear with anger, a frustration at this (no longer young) man. No longer a victim; he now was a nuisance, a demanding figure with all the recklessness of the teenage self that was trashed on Halloween five years before.

Bullshit. Like that matters anymore. Appropriate. Inappropriate. Will shook his head, forcing the correct words to his mouth. "No. You need to tell me, right now, what happened to your husband before the shooting."

"I need to do nothing." She went to close the door, so Will put his shoulder forward, surprised with what little strength it took to spring the door back toward the woman. It was like she wasn't even trying. Continuing the motion, he forced himself into the house and the small living room that the front door opened into.

"Tough. I'm not leaving until the truth comes out."

"Then you'd better take the couch because we're going to be here all night."

Will blinked.

"Because there's nothing more to tell!" she shouted.

"Bullshit."

Her eyes widened against her narrowing forehead, and she slammed the door. "How dare you. How dare you break into my home at ten in the evening demanding to be told these things that you know nothing—" she held up a finger to draw emphasis to the word. "*Nothing* about. I don't care who you are, I don't care what heroic thing you did, I don't care what connection you had that killed my husband by your bedside. I deserve peace just as much as you."

But the persistence of his nightmares did little to dissuade Will. His anger was hot, and he wasn't interested in stifling the flames. That only brought back the pain, memories of Jennifer, the oncoming deflation that would cripple him. "You give me peace on this matter, you get peace on your own."

"What makes you think I haven't found peace?"

Will looked about the room, finding a picture of Stanley Davis over the mantle of a small, dirty fireplace. Four photographs were assembled there with a few candlesticks. In one, the couple stood on rocky bluffs, holding each other and crouching, smiling for the camera with frozen laughter. In another, black and white, they were celebrating their wedding day. Will grabbed the one nearest to him and threw it at the wall. The frame burst into four parts, like one of those wooden puzzles that fall to pieces when one stick is pulled. In a similar way, when the frame

burst, Meredith fell to the ground, her legs crossing and her face falling into her hands. The frame had left a hole in the drywall where the corner had punctured it. He felt the wind leaving his sails but did his best to hold tight, looking down at her, letting the message lie like the broken glass and the photograph.

"This is wrong," she said through tears.

You're weak, he thought. He wasn't sure that this voice in his head was his, or if it was only an echo of the underworld, emanating in the way voices echoed about the tunnel, the way her smell drifted from her corpse at his side. The big man speaking, reminding.

"Tell me what happened. You have no right to keep this from me."

She looked at him, eyes shiny in the light from the lamp, wondering what he might break next, what he might say, what darkness might seep.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

Will crouched, leaning on one knee, and looked her in the eye. He was silhouetted against the lamp in the corner, behind the television. "What happened to you? Before the shooting?" His voice was quiet, but not soft.

"Fine," she said. "Fine. It was a few nights before Halloween when he woke me."

2.

It might have been Sunday night, or a day or two into the week. Because the shooting was on a Wednesday; this Meredith remembered for sure. She knew it wasn't the night before the shooting, because the sense of dread that had followed this incident had caused concern for a number of days before it all manifested at school.

"When I first heard about the shooting—not from Stanley, because word traveled faster through the schools than it did from couple to couple, can you imagine that? When I first heard of the shooting, I wondered if it was Stanley who'd done it. Terrible of me, I know. Fucking terrible, but it was there. It was the thought I'd had. To think it was one of the last thoughts I had of him while he was still alive . . ."

When Meredith woke up, the first move she made was to look at the clock on her bedside, to see if her husband's movement made sense with the time, that he might be waking early for school after another sleepless night. She was dismayed to see that it was only two fifteen.

Next to her in bed, Stanley was sitting up, his back rigid, as if he was suddenly

alert from a sound in the house. It was the way he'd been coming awake for the last few weeks, and she'd grown, well, at least as used to it as she could be.

"Stanley?" She put a hand on his shoulder.

He turned to her slowly, with a peaceful look on his face that seemed borderline . . . how might she call it? Hungry? Mischievous? Whatever it was, it was so far from Stanley's normal expression that she at once felt the chills throughout her body, as if the cold blood was forcing the adrenaline to her limbs. She moved toward the light, but Davis said, "No," and she froze mid-motion.

Looking at her, as if the sound of his own voice startled him awake, his face contorted, screwed itself up, and he tried to speak, to force the words.

"You have to tell him," he said.

"I'm sorry?"

He'd never been like this. Normally, his nightly expeditions had forced him to the living room or the attic, forced him to investigate a strange smell, perhaps, or address some deep paranoia that couldn't allow him to sleep, checking the doors, making sure no one could get in. It seemed in some way that tonight was a culmination of what came before; his expeditions from bed had only grown stranger, but she'd attributed them to sleepwalking. Whatever had gotten into him, this paranoia, this concern for their home (maybe it was students at school making threats about vandalizing his home at night? Or breaking in to steal his stuff? She was sure things like that weren't especially out of the ordinary), it was likely keeping him awake, forcing his sleep patterns to fall strangely, so that he was not resting as much as he might need to while he was asleep. Then dreams blended with reality, his worries with dreams, and his strange concerns turned to sleepwalking. This then was expected, that he'd start to sleep-talk to her now.

"You have to tell him." His words were forced, coughed out, like they were trapped somewhere deep and he needed to expel them.

"Tell who what?" she said, and now was not so sure she wanted to turn on the lamp, afraid that the light might suddenly break his spell. Was this his subconscious telling her something quite directly? That might account for his strange behavior? They said that, right? That dreams were representations of the subconscious, right?

"There will be death."

"Stop it."

He moved from the bed with slow and deliberate motions, as if he were not in control of his body, as if he were using it for the first time in his life. He pushed a foot to the floor, hard enough to go through it, and the sound made her jump. She readjusted and ran a hand over her face. He put his other foot down, more gently this time, and forced himself to stand, his shoulders skewed, at funny angles to his

neck, his head tilted, achieving a crooked balance.

"Stanley."

"Yes."

"Stop. Stop this."

"Yes." He moved toward the window, and the walk forced a nervous giggle from his lips. It was like he was imitating some kind of bad, B-rated horror movie, like he was a zombie or Frankenstein's monster, stumbling across the room to get her to laugh. But the attempt was in vain, because she didn't believe he was in his mind at the moment, that the part of him that she knew so intimately and loved so deeply was still asleep, in a way, beside her in the bed. This man that moved toward the window, now lifting the gauzy curtain and peering out, was something altogether different. This was some more essential or foundational part of her husband he'd been keeping from her, whether for her own peace of mind or protection or otherwise. This was his secret, manifested, and now that it was before her, she didn't know what to do with it. There will be death?

"So much death." His words were whispers and cut an edge in the dark room.

Meredith cleared her head. "Where?"

"At the school." Each syllable hit a different octave, ringing in a strange kind of rising and sinking rhythm. His vowels rang hard and his sibilants were too smooth.

"Why?"

"He's going to kill them. Tell Stanley, he's going to kill them."

"Who?"

"Stanley. Tell Stanley."

If her stomach could have gone any lower, it would have. She felt ill. Deciding suddenly that she didn't want to hear any more of this, secret or not, nightmare or not, she wanted it finished. She turned to the bedside lamp and snapped the switch, casting the room in an orange glow that erupted like a blast against her eyes. Stanley, who'd been peering out the window, shrank against the light, first falling along the wall and then darting to the bedside, as if it hurt his entire body to be exposed to the glare. He made small crooning sounds against the bed and grabbed for the sheets, yanking them from the mattress to bury himself within them. The sheets slid from Meredith, and though she was wearing pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, she felt naked and exposed. She moved to turn the lamp off again, but was unsure now whether it was a good idea. Hesitating, she left it on.

"Babe?"

There was no response from the side of the bed, only a deep breathing against fabric and a tittering she thought was like a gentle laughter.

"Wake up!" she shrieked at him, pulling the sheets from his grip. He clung to

them, putting up a fight.

"Do not fight me on this."

"Dear God, please, wake up," she cried.

He laughed again.

"So much death," he said. "You have to tell him." The words were now punctuated by gasps, gasps that hinted at desperation, sickness, time running out, the effort of the dream breaking and fading around him.

Accelerating the process, she pulled hard again on the sheets, and in wrestling them, fell to the floor beside her husband, placing her hands on his shoulders while he tried to pull them across his face. "Do not look at me. Do not look at me," he said all the while, reaching for a shirt that wasn't there, clawing at the pants he wore.

"You are my husband. You are Stanley, God damn it!" There were tears now, along with the sweat of the exertion, the two blending together as she wrestled with him. He caught her on the cheek as he scrambled for the blanket across the bed. The blow temporarily stunned her. He'd never hit her before.

When the shock had bled out, the anger moved to replace it. She flung him to the floor, slapping him in the face. "Wake up, wake up, wake up!" The words hung long in the air the way that her hand print lingered on his face.

He stopped moving below her and came awake, shocked, blinking rapidly in the light, his eyes again forced to adjust, as if waking for the first time, as if his eyes had never opened once through the ordeal. "Meredith?" Fear was in his voice now, not the electric changing syllables with the sickness lying beneath.

"Stanley?"

"What happened?"

She grabbed him around the neck and pulled him close to her, at once comforted by his presence, by the fact that his body was now his own again, not the product of a nightmare. All remnants of the dream had been suppressed, and the man that was left was the man she'd always loved.

"Don't ever do that again."

"Do what?"

"What aren't you telling me? What have all these God damned nights been about?"

"I don't know." He wished he could say more, to look into his wife's eyes and reassure her, but he was afraid that he couldn't. Not to mention, he was still confused about how he'd wound up on the floor. He must have been sleepwalking again, he thought.

"Not good enough," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"You tell me right now what it's all been about. You tell me what's with the paranoia, the checking of the doors and windows, the sleepwalking. What's gotten so lodged in your head that you can't sleep? That you're now blending dreams with the real with this constant worry, talking of death at your school. What's happening?"

He blinked. This was coming at him fast, and he did not have time to think up a convenient answer to her questions. This was how she wanted it. The light was on his face and his skin still stung. It was time to speak, speak those thoughts from his brain, to let loose, to tell the truth. "I don't know. They just started a few weeks back. With nightmares and the smells, and then there was concern—" How could he tell her about what he'd seen, what he believed, what he felt? Was now the time to do such things? Confirm everything? That maybe he was indeed crazy, delusional, hallucinating at times? Maybe it was a tumor pressing upon some part of his brain. Maybe there was no reason not to talk about it, not to fess all. But how would he even begin?

"Concern about what? Is it your school? You said something about school."

"I've not been feeling well at school lately, no. There's been something about the place: a bad air. I don't like it." This was the truth, but they were hollow words. "What I've felt isn't the kind of thing that I can explain."

"Are you okay?"

He shook his head, now wondering. "No. No, it seems not."

"Is your job alright? Are you concerned about cutbacks? It's too soon to worry about scheduling and placement for next year."

He'd been shaking his head back and forth so much that he thought it might break off, fall to the floor, and roll against the wall, where it might stop and watch from afar, separate again, to see what unfolded. "Everything is fine. I have nothing I should be worried about."

"Stop trying to protect me. I can handle this. Tell me the truth." She shook him again.

"There's no more truth to tell. These bizarre experiences, this house. It's like it's haunted. It's like I'm haunted. That's the most worry I can share with you. That's the most that is tangible. The rest is up here." He tapped his temple, hard.

Meredith pushed him away and shook her head. Obviously there was something more to what he'd said while sleepwalking. Obviously there was something about the death he spoke of. But she wasn't about to let on that she knew that much, to give him a chance to make the word work and find a way out, to make whatever it was easier on her for whatever reason. Why couldn't he trust

her?

"Fine," she said. "Let's just go back to sleep then." She stood and began to collect the mess of the bedsheets on the floor.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't want to go to bed angry, babe. What happened tonight?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I am. You are. Talk to me some."

"I can't," she said. "I can't talk to you about this if you won't talk to me about it. Why even bother? Why be there for me if I can't be there for you?"

"That's not fair—"

"Not fair? We're in a *marriage* together! We share with each other. We trust each other. We confide. How is that not fair?"

Davis took a deep breath and bent to help her pick up the blanket, then spread it back across their bed. Finally he said, "It's because I can't even explain it to myself. Or maybe don't want to."

"Try."

"It really is like a haunting. Like in a horror movie. Only it feels like it's only happening to me. And it's gone far past knocks and creeks and bangs and . . ." He made a face and wiggled his hands.

"What do I do with that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know what to do with it. I'm sorry this thing I'm going through doesn't make any sense to you either. Thanks."

"Your sarcasm isn't helping."

"I'm sorry. That's the best that I have for you."

"You said there would be death. Or is death. Would be. I don't know. At the school."

Davis blinked and sat down on the bed slowly. They liked to sleep with the window open, and he suddenly realized that he was cold. "I did?"

"Does that make sense to you? Death? At the school? A student or co-worker? Is someone struggling with something and you're not recognizing your worry over it?"

He shook his head back and forth. "No, there've been no deaths or illnesses within the last few weeks."

Meredith sat down beside him and pursed her lips. Should she tell him more of what she'd heard? She wasn't sure that would be good. Dreaming Stanley had said to tell him, yes, and she'd told him about the death, but it didn't help; no bells rang. How would clarifying it make it any easier? These were ridiculous questions, she knew. But if it would only make matters worse to hear from a meaningless

nightmare, then she'd rather not tell him at all.

"And I left it at that."

Will paced back and forth in the living room, quelling his anger enough so as not to tread on the shattered glass or damage the picture and frame any further. But he was still upset. "That's it?"

"I'm not sure what more you want me to tell you."

"He knew something. He died at my bedside. All this weird shit was happening to him. Stuff that isn't so different from what I've been going through these last few weeks, in exactly the same way as him."

"I don't have the answers you're looking for."

"He did."

"Did he? Or is that just what you're telling yourself to try to find some answers? Because I've been there. I lay awake for the rest of that night trying to figure it out, as I'm sure he did. And if you think he had it all figured out because he died at your bedside, then I'd say you're—at *best*—grasping at loose straws."

Will stopped his pacing and looked down at her. "It's the only thing that promises more answers. Everything else is a dead end."

"If he had answers, he took them to the grave. You're all that's left, Will. You're still alive, you were there, so you answer it."

"I'm trying," he said.

"Try harder."

"Why the fuck do you think I'm here?" he yelled, and she flinched at the sound. In that small motion, he stopped altogether, the sound of his voice turning back at him. She deserved none of this, and his frustration turned inward. Of course she was right. Of course she didn't have the answers. She was still trying to pick up the pieces of a life she had never expected to go this way, to clean up after a man she loved, after he, on one tragic day, disappeared. Will was silent and Meredith only looked at the floor. Eventually she stood and started to pick up the broken glass and bits of white drywall from the carpet. She stopped when she picked up the photograph, staring at it.

Will muttered silent curses to himself. When had he become like this? He'd always been a good kid, respectful of adults. He certainly would never kick one, especially when they're down. And over what? This? He opened his mouth to apologize, but another voice inside of him overrode the motion and he bit down. No. She'd given him no answers. He'd not fall before her and beg her forgiveness. He'd done no wrong coming here. It was her who was, without any reason, putting the brakes on his search to find what happened.

"Anyway," she said. "It was that night that stayed in my head when I heard about the shooting. It was that night that went unspoken between us afterward, when I tried to talk him through what happened."

"Yes," Will said, and couldn't contain the almost gleeful excitement in his voice. "What about after the shooting? What happened then?"

Meredith glared at him. "Nothing. You think he gave me all that we were looking for after the shooting? That all the pieces came together and I forgot to mention that?"

Will's excitement turned sour.

"He was as bad as ever. Torn up. Shredded over what happened. Would barely talk to me. Or the cops. Then two days later, he gets up to visit your room and winds up dead. For what? Because of what? It was like God just reached in, like the whole thing was because of him, like Stanley was supposed to die that day, didn't, and then had his switch flipped there in the hospital. Traded you for him." She looked at him, and instead of tears, Will saw something else in the depths of her eyes. She brandished the photograph at him. "If there's anything I know about what happened before and after the shooting, it's that you're here and he's not. And the deeper you push at trying to understand this 'bigger picture,' or whatever the fuck this mystery is that you're trying to solve, and the more you try to add meaning to this, it's only going to point to the fact that my husband is dead, and somehow it's because of you."

Will thought of the memories, the flickering light of the fire against the smoke in the broad cavern.

"So here's an idea. You get out of my house. And you never ask me about this again."

Will wanted to grab the rest of the pictures and fling them at the wall, to shatter them too, but that wouldn't solve anything. His frustration had turned inward. She was right. Visiting her today had only reaffirmed one thing: that it was his fault. He'd killed Jennifer; the bullet took her in the throat in the hallway of the school, the gun had kicked back in his hand as if to catch the life as it exchanged places with the bullet, and the acrid smell of the discharge filled the air. And now he knew that he'd killed Davis too. A good man, married, more life ahead of him. He didn't know how, but it was quite obvious, wasn't it? The deeper into this he delved, the more he discovered that it was deserved, this trip into Hell, the pain and suffering. The pieces fit.

So instead of trashing the rest of her house and the memories that Meredith had of her late husband, Will said, "I'm sorry," and meant it, and walked from the living room to the front door, disappearing into the night.

3.

The match tip flared in the dark, first a splutter, almost a denial, then an ignition, catching the air around it and turning it all to light, throwing itself against the surface of Will's skin, his fingertips, his face. He felt the heat. He watched the fire travel slowly down the match stick, burning out halfway, the smoke trailing up toward the ceiling in the dim light from the moon outside.

He was sitting on his bed in his apartment. Barely knew how he'd gotten there, only that he was still alive.

Well, still awake.

Well, still here, in this world that he'd shot Jennifer.

Well.

God damn it all, he swore. There was no up anymore. How to differentiate one world from the other. Here was the one in flames, there was the one that wasn't.

He struck another match, turned upside down,
felt

flames licking, spot fires and coals, the way the cavern scalded his skin.

He was sitting in his apartment, on his bed. Barely knew how he got there. He was burning incense matches that Jennifer had bought at a gas station somewhere between Maine and Savage Creek. The aroma dissipated in the room, but the more matches he burned, the thicker became the

scent of her.

He pressed his face to her hair when he was at his most bold. Sometimes his arm crept with flame, and he watched its motion before beating it to the ground, putting the fire out when the pain got to be too much. Even that was a study. This was memory. This was pressing his head between the lion's jaws and breathing that aroma of

It was her scent. This smoky, heavy, musky odor. It was what her room smelled like when he first met her. Overwhelming and powerful and distinctly her own.

Now it overwhelmed his nose in his own room. Burning one after the next. Thick. Too thick. It made his head swim. Again, the world turned on its head.

He did not know which was one world, which was the next, where in one his head swam and his fingertips burned, where in the other

Ow. He shook the match. It had burned past the midpoint where normally it would burn itself out, and now it licked at his fingers. He dropped it to his bedsheets. The lower parts of the matches held the heat, burning like cigarettes to the butts, forcing into the sky what was left of her.

This smooth motion between Hell and his bedroom kindled the flames inside, and here, after the ride home, after Meredith's house, he found he could hold again to and he breathed deeply.

One match still burning, the room still dark. He dropped it to the sheets. His comforter caught first, and the fire moved across it in the way of a gentle wave skimming across the

beaches, the river, dipping its toes, laughing.

The playful way the light danced

across the ceilings and the walls, across his knees and jeans.

Shit! Shit, fuck! he cursed. The words made him laugh more than any expression of surprise or frustration. They felt instinctual.

He leapt from the bed.

He had at first enjoyed the movement of the flames against his jeans, his skin, if only for a moment. But the heat grew fast. It burned, scalded, then it turned his legs crisp.

He did not know what was on fire in one world and what was on fire in the other. This frustrated him. This blurring. Nagging voices in the back of his mind told him that this was bad. His things. His apartment. His life. They were all going up in flames. Nothing would remain but black char, rubble, and dust.

Get out. That's all he knew.

In both worlds. One being forgotten, the other, clear. But the same.

Get out.

He beat at his legs and arms, rolling on the carpet, brushing off unseen, palpable flames.

On the floor, he watched the fire taking his posters and walls before running across the ceiling. It was beautiful and gentle, this movement of the flames. Frantic. Quick. But beautiful. He longed for it to slow, for each snap to linger. He remembered, at Jameson's office, the motion of his wrist, his fingers. Snapping like the fire. He made the motion now, standing, rising from the dark.

It was getting so bright now, so clear, so easy to see,

his books, textbooks, his desk, computer, bed.

He stood and danced with the fire, ducking back from the heat and wincing, all in the same motion. It didn't feel wrong to move away and then closer. It reminded him of the first few weeks with Jennifer. The motions they made as they dated, toward each other, away. That urge to kiss each other, lean in, lean away, hands on a chest,

not yet.

Her tapping a finger to her lips and nodding.

When the flames became so hot that the sweat clung to his forehead, resistant, he knew it was time to go. He knew that he needed to get out. To burn alive in his memories was one thing;

here, something else.

Was it?

Perhaps not, but he wasn't ready yet.

He closed the door behind him and sat out on the lawn. The sweat turned to tears. His eyes leaked from the smoke and the heat and the loss. This

she

this was who he was, what he owned, what he'd gathered to define himself.

As if he owned her? That wasn't right. As if he had power over her? Also, not

Some of Jennifer burned in there too. Her leftover clothes. Toothbrush and makeup and shampoo that she'd kept in his bathroom. They'd only been dating for so many months, but it was so fast, so easy, and she was over so often, why not move together, move a bit of one to the other, succumb to the rhythm of living?

Burning now.

Sorry, Jenn, he said. Neighbors were coming from their apartments now. Shouts and curses. Video being taken. Someone had to call the fire department. The smoke alarms in his apartment began their slow wails, and in the distance, the slow wails of fire trucks matched, each calling to the other. He thought again of Jennifer in Maine and said,

Jenn.

There was wind and smoke on the breeze. He coughed before getting up to his walk across the dewy

trying to stay in shadows, away from his neighbors. He got into his truck, slammed the door, put his foot to the floor, twisted the key, and the engine roared.

Hell is not a place of death, his teacher had said. The memories of the discussion and lecture in the classroom swam with the memories of the hellscape, and he tried to shut them out. Hell in Western literature isn't a place for human beings at all. It was designed for the destruction of Lucifer, a crater in the landscape, grown over.

The focus required to continue the drive to his parents' house was damn near impossible, and he'd be lying to say that he didn't doze off a few times, swerving from one side of the road to the other.

Find calm, he knew. He needed to find that calm to boil down the bridge between one world and the next. If he was calm, he'd be able to recover more easily; he'd be less likely to overcorrect,

to wind up on a sidewalk or worse. He took back-roads that were darker, that made him more drowsy, but it was worth it to avoid the police, citizens walking about the streets at night, unsuspecting storefronts. Even so, he'd slip. He'd slip, not in the way that one might doze at the wheel, but in the way that one might become lost in thought, realizing a quarter, a half, a full mile down the road that they did not remember the twists of their path, the other cars, the distance between them, who might have changed lanes, the traffic lights. It was like this that a memory would first overtake him, and he'd become lost in the details—no, fighting the details—rather than nodding off at the wheel, or drifting, losing control. That was what he feared most, behind the wheel or not: losing control.

Acidic rainwater runs from the tunnels near the surface, while brimstone rains from the sky above. Fiery walls of sludge slide down in painful and beautiful torrents. The network of tunnels is intricate, curving, twisting. Shadowy forms stalk. Demons suffering. An ant farm in the third dimension, mindless, intricate, built on instinctual labor alone.

So at first it was not an issue. His focus and concentration returned him to the road time and again, wondering where the black night might have gone, thankful that he was still in his lane and still alive. It was only after one of these reveries, seeing taillights in his mirror, that he felt the cold surge of adrenaline through his veins and stayed alert for the next mile or so.

It was not so much that he would only need to calm himself, either. He dwelt too intensely on the anger he'd built up—anger at Meredith, at Stanley, at the vague nature of this entire mystery. But mostly it was anger at himself, for the actions he'd been forced to do, for the actions he remembered, for Meredith's words that, indeed, should he dig any deeper, the answers could only point in one direction: down.

The alternative was to relax and remember what had just happened: that he left Jennifer in Maine. Whether or not that was the right call.

No. Best to embrace this, to learn the answers on his own, rather than bring the one person he cared the most about down with him, into the flames, with tears. No. At her father's was best. But still, he hated himself for the decision, for the abruptness of it. Really, there was no other way. She would have talked him out of it. Leaving her stranded was not an option she would have taken to with a smile and an understanding nod.

So what was left? For him to smile at the sky and find some sort of peace in the way his world had been breaking to pieces? That was bullshit, he thought. He'd shot his girlfriend in the hallway of the school with the intention to kill her. He'd gone to Hell in order to be punished for it (and God only knew what else, what more he still had to remember, for obviously this was not the worst of it, or else the pieces would have all fallen together by now). He'd been damned over it. There's no acceptance there. And the atrocities still yet to come in the pit? He dreamt to remember, but now refused to think or dwell on them, because they hurt too deeply, and yet . . .

This is not a place of death, his professor said. It's a place of obsession.

Wake up, see the trees in the high-beam headlights and swerve hard on the wheel, to the right, because somewhere deep down, there was a part of him that was conscious, that recognized what had happened, which still knew which way was up. And when he was back on the road again, he pulled to the side and slammed on the brakes, ignoring the clutch so that the truck engine sputtered to a stop and sat with a groan, barely on one side of the solid white line. There were no cars in either direction. The road was smooth where he'd crossed the yellow line, and just as smooth after he'd crossed the white, hurtling toward the trees. Some part of the universe, then—

no—

some part of himself was awake and watching out for his own safety. Some part of him wanted to keep himself alive. Some part of him said that, no, this wasn't the end; this wasn't a culmination of a lifetime. There was still something to come. He wondered if this was how he would end, if, while burning alive, he'd fall into the pit and call it good.

Should he say a prayer, should he have a hope, it would be that Jennifer might come to the same kind of understanding. Not so that he could be less alone in whatever place he'd finally arrived at, but so that she might be less alone and hurting in that place he'd come to leave.

The thought hurt, and he bit down on it the way he'd bite down on his lip to hold back tears. There was pain that flared, traveling short of his head, behind his eyes, and he was reminded

that this isn't a place of death; it's a place
 of pain and torture, confusion, hate. Paradox. Juxtaposition. Death is a goal, a
 hope, a dream, a fantasy, a place where the evils of mankind meet the evils befallen
 of Heaven.

Hell, then. Loneliness, without Jennifer. A corpse attached at the hand, where
 their juices ran together to be as one, so that she was an extra limb of his. What he
 knew was that Jennifer was gone, but he refused to accept this. This was better,
 that he had something in the way of

memory.

Here,

this was paradox, running in circles, shedding tears that burn,

Escher walks his Mobius strip, and Beethoven plays the same first four notes of
 Fur Elise without end.

It was better this way.

5.

He didn't remember parking his truck, twisting the key, opening the door, or
 stepping out onto the concrete, but he did remember the feel of the jagged surface
 beneath his hands as he fell. For a moment he felt the cold, pressing against his
 skin, soothing like a sudden slap, a realization that this place was different, that this
 place was safe, that he could return here and think, but then

his cheek tore open, and the small stones crawled inside, and there was hot pain
 and warm red liquid and he left again.

But it didn't seem that he'd gone anywhere, only that a gust of wind had shifted,
 carrying that decay and acidic flavor, the taste of her perfume, and the heat that
 came in waves. That it had forced sweat from behind his hair

into this world, perhaps? For what sweat did he have left? It seemed to come
 and go.

In that world, there were small sounds that his body forced out, as if to alleviate
 the pressure, the psyche, to cool the flesh through the pores, releasing liquid to
 stave off, what?

Boiling inside our skin, drying away, skin flaking, blowing away in white pieces
 that weren't so different from the ashen pieces that Will now rubbed between his
 fingers, until he wasn't sure where the ash ended and his fingertips began.

Sometimes he moved at a crawl. Sometimes he reached out and dragged himself
 along with his one usable arm, moving along with Jennifer as if a strange mirror lay

between them, as if with each movement he made, she made an identical motion, dragging herself beside him.

Remember.

Sometimes he would stop. Stop walking, stop crawling, trying to think. Sit and think. Surprisingly, none of the shadowy sentries slid forward to attack or brutalize him. They let him sit, but only for a time.

Hell was like that. It wasn't a place of strictly physical brutality. The intense violence would sometimes cease, and the prisoners would be given time for the other extreme: thought. It was the time when they beat themselves up in their heads. Voices whispered in their ears, reminding them of every pleasure they had ever taken in their crimes. Their atrocities. The whispers kept the chatter, asking questions about what they had done and who they were.

I'm a killer, Will said. I've killed her. And he looked at the girl next to him. Torn shirt the color of dirt and ash, hair now black and gray with bloody highlights.

Will was at the door, surprised to find himself fumbling with the keys, slowly moving them from his pocket to his hands. He remembered the outside of Jennifer's father's home and how she held his keys from him, asking for promises he could not

promise,
remember.

He slid the key into the lock, looking to the front windows to see if he'd been heard, though by now his parents were in bed at the back of the house, far from the living

room.

And then the door was open, and he fell in, trying to muffle the sound of his tears.

And he closed the door behind him, and when he crawled along the floor, he was cautious not to disturb the front rug. He did not want to upset his parents. He'd upset them enough. He pushed at the rug, barely able to see it in the light, but pushing anyway, straightening, twisting, again and again

while in Hell he pushed Jennifer's hair back over her ear again and again and the blood flaked dry from his fingers, and

it never fell quite right, but eventually it stuck and held, and he remembered how in the real world, it would never actually stay.

He opened the basement door. The handle sprang from his grasp, and the door sprang back on its hinges, and the sound was hard against his ears.

Somewhere else, they bled.

And at the top of the stairs, he looked down. He only saw black. The stairs were splintery wood painted white and littered with the glitter from Christmas trees over the years, dragged from below and pushed into the living room, into the light, reminding

before being pushed down again. Resurrection, precipitation. He watched the blackness alternate between rising and falling and rising again—a black sludge reaching toward the sky,

stalagmite action, reaching up. There were only stalagmites here, as if a reminder that he had to avoid

But sometimes, in the stairs, he heard the dripping and watched the black tar fall to the steps. He was not sure how he could see these things, but he knew that they were happening just as he knew that these dreams were memories, that this place was as real as the hands

hand

that dragged him,

the memory of Jennifer, of the bullet taking her in the throat, of his finger on the trigger and the recoil that snapped back through his arm—

alternate: another place, another time.

At the top of the stairs, he looked down. Like a pit. You go south, you go deep, you confront whatever took you there in the first place, and you figure out why.

If there was an answer, he'd find it there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN **the way a noose clenches**

1.

David Andrews walked down the front hall in only a pair of slacks and black socks. He hadn't yet thrown on an undershirt, and his hair was still wet from his shower. He tried to stifle a yawn, wishing his tiredness had washed down the drain along with the hot water. After skating across the final space of hardwood floor, his socks slipping on the smooth surface, he straightened the edge of the front rug with his toe, then moved across it to unlock the door, frowning when he noticed the lock was already unbolted. He had locked up before going to bed the night before, hadn't he? It would seem an oddity that he wouldn't, as it had become a routine, and there was nothing in the night before that would have been out of the ordinary to suggest that he'd forgotten it. He and Nancy had watched a couple episodes of their shows on DVR, enjoying some homemade Chinese food: fried rice and Kung

Pow chicken. But there had been no loving, nothing resembling their wilder nights, which still happened on an infrequent basis.

His answer came when he saw that Will's pickup was parked in the driveway, at a skewed angle, as if his son had been in a hurry to get home, not taking his time to back in as he normally did. Seeing the truck like that brought an immediate feeling of concern to his stomach. His chest grew tingly and his breathing quickened. Why had Will driven to the house in the middle of the night?

In his concern, he left the newspaper at the bottom of the porch steps and closed the door, walking back through the hallway that ran beside the front sitting room, the dining area, and the kitchen, branching out behind the garage to the living room and sleeping areas. The master bedroom was at the end of the hallway, and he'd had to walk past Will's room in order to come to the kitchen and start the pot of coffee before going to pick up the newspaper. They normally kept Will's door shut, so the possibility of his son being home had not even occurred to him.

Andrews knocked gently, too gently to wake the sleeping young man, but gentle enough to give Will a warning before he pushed the door open. Inside, Will's bed was against the far wall, the sheets tucked firmly about the sides, the pillows fluffed, and an embroidered pillow placed at the center. The fan was still. The pictures were lined along both walls, and the window was firmly closed. The room had not been touched since the last time Nancy had been in to clean.

Where, then, was Will?

Andrews opened the door to the bathroom, which was in the same state of untouched cleanliness. He went to the master bedroom, peering in at the disheveled bed that Nancy had vacated a few minutes earlier. The shower ran from the attached bathroom, and he could see her motion on the other side of the frosted glass through the mirror. "Nancy?" he said, but she didn't hear him over the sound of the water and the bathroom fan. "Nancy?" he asked again as he entered the bathroom.

"Yes?"

"Did Will say anything about stopping in last night?" Last night had been a Sunday, and he knew that Will had gone to Maine with Jennifer in order to visit her father for the afternoon and evening. It was likely he would have spent the night there, as they often did, if his classes weren't too important. Normally the Andrews shared their Sunday dinners together; perhaps he'd stopped in to grab some leftovers, or to crash on his way back? But that seemed odd, because his apartment was only another twenty minutes further across town. Maybe he came back so late that he was sleepy enough to not worry about the last twenty minutes? Seemed silly. Especially now that he was missing, and without Jennifer. If he had the energy

to drop her off, why didn't he just stay with her? Had they had a fight? Bad enough that Will had come home, too upset to stay alone? God, he hoped not.

"No," Nancy said. "Just that he was going with Jenn to Maine for the day." She soaped her face. "Why do you ask?"

"His truck is in the drive."

Nancy turned to the glass, popped it open against the frame, and leaned her head out, squinting so as to keep the soap from her eyes.

"It's what?"

"In the drive."

Nancy shook her head slowly. "I don't know why that would be. He in his room? Do you think he's alright?"

Andrews shook his head. "He's not in his room."

"Huh."

"Not in the living room or sitting room, either."

"Then . . ." Nancy closed her eyes. "In the garage? His truck? Did he sleep in his truck?"

It seemed a strange idea to Andrews, but he hadn't looked inside the cab when he was outside. "I'll go check the two," and he turned to leave the bathroom. Behind him, his wife closed the door, rinsed her face and shut off the water, pulling for a towel a moment later.

Andrews checked the garage first, but the space was empty. Thinking of the truck out front, he peered in the windows of their two vehicles, but there was no curled form of his son in either, and no response to his echoing calls. He left the garage and returned to the hallway, walking down to the front door again before stepping outside into the sharp October air. Today was Monday morning. Halloween was Tuesday. The air would go from cold to colder as November fell, and he couldn't say he was looking forward to it.

His socks stuck to the concrete. He shivered. Inside Will's truck, there was only the black leather wearing at the seams, a small amount of trash that ran across the console, and, stored behind the seats, some tools, cables, and two jump seats.

Where was his boy?

Opening the door to the house, he realized that the only place left to check would be the basement, though finding Will down there would be even stranger than finding him in his truck. Their basement was filled with layer upon layer of old cardboard boxes, concealing organized keepsakes from both his and Nancy's time in college, Will's memorabilia from growing up, his art projects and tests from grade school, toys saved for Will's future children, and old dishes that they would pass to Will when he found a place of his own—in fact, they probably should give

those to him now, considering he was living on his own in that apartment of his. Andrews brushed the thought away.

As he opened the door, which creaked for the first foot before catching on the better oil and drifting the rest of the way, his wife appeared in a robe at the end of the hallway and met him at the top of the stairs. He flipped the light on.

"Not in the garage or his truck?"

Andrews shook his head no. At the base of the stairs was a large white freezer where they kept their extra vegetables and meat and frozen pizzas that weren't immediately for use. Often, Andrews joked it was their store for the apocalypse. The basement hooked around the base of the stairs, under the main part of the house. The stairs groaned under their feet, and there was no way to keep their approach subtle should their son be sleeping. At this point, their concern outweighed their worry of waking him, so they didn't much mind the noise.

They came around the side of the stairs. Sleeping bags and stuff-sacks hung from a bar Andrews had installed next to the freezer. None had been touched. The stack of cardboard boxes began here and lined the walls around to the other end of the space. Nancy flipped on the lower light, and the rest of the basement alit in the harsh glow of the naked bulb. There was no sign of Will in the open space, but some of the boxes had been knocked askew, suggesting that someone had been here recently, as his parents were usually quite careful with their keepsakes.

As they followed the maze further, they heard what first sounded like whispers, every so often punctuated by a high sound, like a voice cracking, or two voices in conversation. Andrews couldn't keep a shiver from running the length of his back.

"Will?" he said aloud, his voice breaking whatever eerie stillness had settled amongst the boxes.

"You down here, Sweetheart?" Nancy asked.

The voices stopped as if in response to their calls, and more chills ran along Andrews' limbs.

When they turned the final corner, half expecting to find both Will and Jennifer, or two strangers, they instead came upon their son, alone, lying curled on the concrete amongst Andrews' tool benches, his cheek dark red—almost black in the shadow. He was tucked in the fetal position, his arms splayed as if hugging the ground. He'd started the muttering again, both whispers and guttural sounds coming from his throat.

"Oh, Will!" his mother said, and pushed Andrews to the side in order to get around him to where Will lay on the floor. "Will, are you alright?" She knelt beside him and placed her hands on his shoulders, smoothing his shirt to try and wake him, but the motion did nothing to stir him.

"Will? Wake up, baby." Her voice was calm. Motherly instincts taking over. She sounded so sure of herself in order to help her child. Andrews, on the other hand, was thinking about the shooting again. He couldn't help it. Seeing Will bloodied and lying on the floor, in a strange place, in pain; the memories came in flashbacks, and hard, so that he had to take to his knee in order to maintain some control on his own memories.

Nancy was shaking her son's shoulder now, gradually more violent to wake him. "Will?" she repeated.

But he would not wake. His face was glistening with sweat, and when Nancy put her hand to his head, she withdrew it almost immediately, as if she'd touched a hot stovetop.

"He's got a hell of a fever," she said.

"Let's get him upstairs." Andrews stepped over his boy, then placed his hands below the armpits and knees, heaving, muscles straining from his neck and chest. He managed to get a grip on him—Nancy wasn't entirely sure how he did it; her husband was strong, but not incredibly fit, and Will was a grown boy. But he did it, and he walked awkwardly between the cardboard boxes, bringing Will from the darkness to the light above.

* * *

After getting him to his room, placing him on the bed, and taking his temperature, the phone rang. When Andrews came back to the room, he beckoned his wife into the hallway and said, "Will's apartment burned down early this morning. That was the fire department."

"What?"

Andrews nodded. "They don't know what caused it yet, though they're looking into it. They wanted to make sure that he was alright and that we knew about it."

"My God. Do you . . . You don't think?"

"That he had anything to do with it? I don't know," Andrews replied. "He's in some kind of state right now. I couldn't say one way or the other if he had a hand in it. But I'm struggling to believe that it's just . . . coincidence."

"Obviously he's sick, but that's probably why he came back last night."

Andrews nodded and held his wife's shoulders as she turned into him.

"What's wrong with our son?" she said through tears.

Andrews shook his head and rubbed his hand across her back. "I don't know, Nancy. But it's gonna be alright. I'll tell you that."

2.

There's this quote from the film Fight Club in which Brad Pitt, after burning the shape of his lips into the back of Edward Norton's hand with lye, says that it is only after we have lost everything that we are free to do anything. If you Google this quote, the second search result is the Wikipedia definition of Nihilism.

What is this place? I don't recognize it anymore.

Will woke, lying in a bed. Greasy light poured in the window, and he wondered how long he might have lain there, unable to move, before the stuff filled the floor and ran over the edges of the mattress and across his face and body until it smothered him fast and tight, the way a noose clenches at a neck when it does its dance with spinal columns and gravity. He wondered how many criminals, hanged on the gallows, didn't stop at the rope, but kept on falling, far, fast, until they hit solid earth and then

woke from their falls, wondering how long they might have lain there, unable to move, before the brimstone blended with bilge water and took them, the way the noose took their neck.

He did not know anymore what was the bilge stuff of Hell and what was the bilge stuff of the world he awoke into as the light shifted from one to the other. Awakening in one was to suffer in the knowledge of the other. Jennifer was dead,

by his hand,

at his hand,

beside him. He could not see her now; all he could see were bed covers and the way the wrinkles in them moved like snakes as he thrashed. He didn't realize he was moving until he noticed their motion.

Then there was the stinging burn of a whip-crack across Will's back, spitting his skin, and he could feel her in the way his arm threatened to fall loose from its socket. Bile dried on his back, sticky, mixed with the gaseous stuff that sloshed inside him. The humidity stung in his open wounds as he dragged himself along the rocky floor. Each time his knee scraped against the rock, his skin burned, filleting open, juice seeping out from green cavities. The friction rubbed the flesh away the way it rubbed the denim away before that. The stuff we wear. Eventually, he ceased to notice it, the way one might not notice the way grass is ripped apart by a couple lounging in summertime, shredding blades by the light of sinking suns.

"Will?" his mother asked, rubbing his shoulder. She saw his motion and thought he might be awake, or at least in a fever dream that he would do better to

awake from.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. The sunlight striking her face burned, and so he closed them again. Not just for the pain, but for what he saw. He saw a woman who was pushing into her fifties, with hair graying at her temples, the brown beginning to pale to a lighter non-color. Her clothes could have been any clothes the way that she could have been any woman.

But she birthed you, a voice said,
and Will said, Why does that matter, anyway?

Sometimes he looked up and saw the forms of the demons as they crouched and snaked through the tunnels. They had no wings. Wings were just hope that there might still be something above them, the way the lungs in Will's chest were only hope that he might find air again soon. Some had jagged wing arms stretching from their backs, the membranes burnt away. Their bodies were hardened and disproportionate, every bone ridged and firm. They danced mostly in shadows and did their damage by reaching into the light to commit their slow torture. Their heads were likewise bony, but formed in a beastly manner, like skulls, with the eyes hollowed and gaping, blackness on the insides. The bone narrowed in a smooth, tubular shape to create a snout-like appearance with a disfigured growth on the bottom and sides. If Will had been thinking clearer, he would have associated their look with the look of a gas mask.

The beasts slinked about and moved like shadows, sliding along the walls, knowing every curve and ridge, having flowed about these walls for millennia.

At home, he watched them peer from the doorway to his room, hands wrapping about the edges of the door frame, leaving a smoking black stink after they'd gone. Sometimes he thought that they were under the covers with him, that their motions contorted with the curves of the sheets, hidden until his feet slipped against one of their bodies, and he could sense the slip of a hard edge into his skin,

fresh skin, regenerated again, soft, innocent, uncalled and whole. It hurt more this way. He wondered if there was some purpose to earth, to children, to the rosy way skin turned when the blood ran along the surface. He wondered if there was an experience here, worse than what he knew deep down, in memory, in this hellish place where sensation became too intense, overriding everything he'd known, where he lost himself.

At home, he eventually realized that he was in his bedroom. The bedroom he remembered

REMEMBER, a voice screamed at him in response to the word, an echo as if from some cavernous place deep within himself, a hollow like the hollow inside his ribcage, where his breath bloomed, noxious and thick

He remembered

waking, seventeen years old. It was his first day back from the hospital. He'd slept in his bed the night before. The room around him was finally familiar, not the bleach white walls and the starchy plastic and fabrics. His room. He'd been gone for how long now? One week? Two? Bland November sunlight was coming through his window, and outside, the trees had shed their leaves, the last few clinging against winter, either too stupid to fall and embrace the change, or dead already and only stuck to the limbs. He felt heavy, pressed into his bed. Since awakening from the coma, regaining the ability to walk was one thing; thinking clearly was another, and he would be damned if he still didn't

remember

waking from the coma, feeling like he was in a dream, the memories shifting and fuzzy and like lies. He'd seen Stanley Davis and thought that he was in school still, that perhaps he'd dozed off in class and woken up, staring at the white-washed cinderblock walls, fluorescent lighting—but lying back, on the floor? Had he passed out? Lost consciousness? He could not

remember,

and even upon waking in the world with which he was familiar, it still seemed that he was only dreaming, that his sleep state was carrying on. He worried about this until he got up, walked slowly across the room, out the door, into the hallway, and across, into the bathroom, where he turned on the shower and the water fell over him. There, he'd start to think that, indeed, perhaps this was actually happening, that in the water falling down his face and naked arms and chest, that this might be real. But then the warmth overtook him and he felt himself go fuzzy again, and drift, and then again, he wondered.

It was as if he were purged of thought. Two weeks after waking, he was still empty inside, full of soft stuff like the fluff in a teddy bear, like some of the ones other students brought him while he was out. Girls bringing him one with a high school jersey, small, as a kind of token, a symbol of the place he'd saved. He never really understood that, and he looked at them while in the hospital with a curious confusion. Seeing the first one, more had come until there was a small stack of about a dozen, some larger, likely due to various friends' senses of humor.

He was the hero. He saved the school.

Later, he'd find himself standing in the bathroom, shifting from waking states

to dozing states, and he'd wonder how long he'd been standing there under the water. Sometimes the water went cold and he'd stay there, shivering, his skin slowly turning blue, watching, as if from far away, his body's natural reaction to the cold, enjoying the sensation, enjoying the gooseflesh and the way his skin seemed to tighten and, as if to match his awareness of this strange glee, his muscles relaxed. In a moment, he felt as refreshed as if he'd fallen into a pool on a scalding summer's day. And it was in these moments, of coming out of the haze, whatever stuff from the dream-world he'd been in for three days still lingering, that he'd find himself empty, calm, a part of the world and water around him, listening to the breeze on the air should he be outside, or the way that the cool air from the hallway slipped inside the bathroom and pushed at the shower curtain and crept up his legs.

And so a strange effect was created.

Will woke up in the room he knew from high school, the room he'd cleared out after two years in college. He'd stripped the walls of the various sports posters he'd had scattered about, Red Sox posters and pictures of his friends and a bulletin board with layers of his school history tacked on with push-pins dating back to late grade school. On one wall were pictures arranged loosely, chronicling his growth from elementary student to collegiate, a maternal version of his bulletin board. The walls were repainted a number of different shades of blue, and where normally his twin bed used to be shoved below the window, a desk across from it, now a queen-sized bed filled the room alongside a nightstand that lacked a lamp. A fan turned slowly above him. He wondered if his fever put off so much heat that the air rose and spun against the blades.

It was strange, this effect, because what he remembered from this room were the weeks that followed the shooting, when he learned to function again, to be a student, to stay focused. The peace he'd felt was at times a tool to aid his concentration, bringing him back to school in a way that made his teachers not only happy to give him extra help for the time he'd missed, but also to see him excel. Often it proved distracting, and he'd find his mind wandering to those things more important than whatever was happening in the classroom. Sometimes he'd stand in the class, leaving his bag on the floor and notebook on the desk, and wander out into the hallway, the students' stares following him.

Now, the pain he felt seemed ironic; the way his body seemed to be stretching in two different directions, his stomach in one, his spine in another, those symmetrical organs ripping apart while his head forced itself into the mattress, as if there might be safety in burrowing deeper into the earth. This haze that he now

woke with smelt of smoke and tasted like smog,

and not of the cold water of the shower that brought with it a refreshment that stopped all thought and sense of self. He longed for that now, and it was this longing that made his misery all the worse, hot sweat breaking across his brow, the sheets stifling, and the light of the window like a heat lamp, pressing.

4.

When Carrie Jameson arrived at the house, she knocked on the door instead of ringing the bell, and when Nancy Andrews opened the door, Jameson noticed first the puffiness of her eyes, as if many tears had been shed earlier but the stress had now forced them back, sealing the tear ducts. When Nancy smiled, the motion seemed forced yet hopeful, and it was seeing that kind of desperate motion, subtle as it was, that made Jameson's heart sink in her chest.

"Doctor Jameson," Nancy said. "Thank you so much for coming. We're so sorry to have to call you out to the house like this, and on a day when you had other appointments, too."

Jameson shook her head. "Emergencies are not impositions. I'm happy to try and help."

Nancy nodded and beckoned her inside. The woman was wearing a loose shirt that she'd gotten in some South American country on one of her mission trips. It was belted loosely at her waist, and she wore jeans beneath it. Nancy wondered if Jameson was cold, if she had come so quickly that she'd forgotten to grab a coat, or whether she found the deep chill of the season pleasant, but didn't entertain the worry for long. "Can we get you anything? Tea or coffee?"

Jameson said that she'd love some tea and walked slowly through the living room, the dining area, and into the kitchen, taking in the stone of the dining nook, the way the inside blended with the outside, as if the garden was working its way into the house. She smiled, nodding to herself as if approving. In the kitchen, Nancy's motions were flustered and quick, and she almost spilled the water twice as she tried to pour it into the mugs from the kettle. Placing the kettle back down on the stove, Nancy took three deep breaths, then picked the kettle up again and finished pouring. She turned to Jameson, beginning to ask if she'd like honey or sugar, but cut herself off. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Is green tea fine? It's all we have in the house, and I didn't even think to ask." Jameson gave her a reassuring nod, took the tea straight, and the women walked down the hall toward the dining area, where only a few short weeks ago, Will sat talking to his father about the shooting.

Andrews had been in the garage when Jameson showed up, fiddling with garden equipment to keep his mind distracted. There had been only so much that they could do for Will after bringing him up the stairs and into his old bedroom. They tried to wake him up in order to find out what had happened, how he was doing, and if he might need anything, but at best, Will had only come awake a few times and for a few moments, looking about the room as if from an alien perspective, as if he were separate from this world, this place, this home he'd once known for most of his young life. Nancy had come down the hall quite visibly upset after he had woken up, looked at her, and then turned away with his eyes closed, giving himself over once again to the strange rhythmic motions he made beneath the blankets. After debating whether or not to take him straight to the hospital, the Andrews decided to wait, not to take him just yet, but instead to call his therapist and see what she might suggest. The phone call had been brief, with Jameson insisting on cancelling her appointments and coming straight away, which only seemed to make matters worse for Nancy, knowing that the woman had the greatest position for insight on Will's condition (except perhaps for Jennifer, she thought), and that her urgency and concern could not be good.

They tried to raise Jennifer on the phone after speaking to Jameson. Since she had seen him last, they thought she might have an idea of what set off this strange state. But her cell phone only went straight to voicemail.

Nancy had wandered about the kitchen, first getting Will a cold water bottle and some crackers before also bringing him a Ginger Ale, should he wake up with an upset stomach from the stress and the fever, wanting something more soothing than ice water. The provisions remained where she left them on the nightstand.

Andrews appeared around the corner of the kitchen when the women sat in their chairs, and leaned on the edge of the wall where he might listen in. Nancy noticed him there, despite his soft steps, and said, "Carrie—Doctor Jameson—this is my husband, David."

"Of course," Jameson said. "How are you, David?"

Andrews shrugged. "Worried."

Jameson nodded gently.

"Very worried," Nancy said. "Anything that you might be able to do to help, we'd be grateful. We haven't ever seen anything quite like this before. We've seen him sick from the chicken pox, and that strep that he got so much as a little boy. Even after the accident, though, we didn't see this."

This time Jameson didn't nod, but instead fell back on her habit as a therapist and looked slightly upward at Nancy, right in her eyes. "Okay, first tell me what happened this morning."

As Nancy relayed what happened—their search about the house for Will, his condition when they found him, and his condition since then—Andrews moved into the kitchen for a glass of water, then drifted into the living room, looking out at the front lawn, still listening.

"Anything to add to that, David?" Jameson asked when Nancy was finished, but he only shook his head at the glass in front of him.

"And do you mind if I might take a look at him?" Jameson asked.

Nancy bit back a scowl, hoping for a fast answer, a quick reassurance that, yes, her son would be alright, that this was just something he's been working through and happened to bring home, but instead she nodded. "Oh, yes. Of course."

And so the two went down the hallway to the open door of Will's room. Heat seemed to creep from the room, for some reason hotter than the rest of the house, even the back of the family room, which also faced the rising sun. Will lay halfway beneath the covers, sprawled out and making slow motions with his hands, running them first over his face and then back through his hair, pulling at the roots, then repeating the action. His eyes were closed, and his mouth moved as if he were reading silently to himself.

Jameson moved into the room and rolled her shoulders, as if physically forcing herself to adjust to the heat. She sat on the edge of the bed and said Will's name a few times, then shook his foot. There was no response from the boy when she placed her hands against his while he ran them again through his hair. His breath was fast and shallow in his chest, and in a way it sounded like sobs. When she reached to his neck to check his pulse, Will finally did react, lashing out at her hand, as if the motion she'd made was not to check his physical health, but to attack him.

His eyes opened wide, squeezed shut, and then peeked again. He forced himself back against the pillows and, in his surprise, seemed to find some kind of lucidity, despite his eyes making rapid motions about the room, blinking often.

"How are you, Will?" Jameson asked.

He didn't say anything

Behind Jameson, his mom came into the room, pressing forward. "Will? Will, are you alright?"

Her boy looked at her, then quickly down to the mattress, as if he were ashamed, and proceeded to stare a hole into it.

"It's alright," Jameson said. "Let me just try to talk to him a little."

Nancy backed into the hallway, disappeared for a moment, and then returned with her husband, both of them peering around the edge of the door. It seemed that Will either didn't notice them or was trying not to.

"Tell me what happened? What brought this on?" Jameson asked quietly.

Will took a few more breaths, then, with a dry voice that came out in a cracked and scraping way that made his mother cringe, said, "It's just gotten worse."

Jameson nodded. "The nightmares, they're coming more frequently now while awake, like they had started to do when we last spoke?"

Will nodded slowly, and Jameson half expected his neck to creak with the motion.

"Are they coming as memories, but without the nightmares first?"

"No." He looked back at her as he shook his head, tried hard to restrain a gasp, bit down on his jaw, and put his head down, breathing harder.

"The nightmares are blending back and forth with reality?"

"Yes."

Jameson looked to the doorway at Will's parents. "Has he ever had any history with diagnosed narcolepsy, concentration problems, or sleeping problems?" She'd already known about his sleeping habits; they'd discussed the details of his past in depth when he'd first started having the nightmares, but she wanted a refresher on his habits while awake.

"No," Andrews said, looking at his wife. They frowned with their eyebrows, as if pressing for some kind of answer that might save their son, hoping that perhaps in some distant memory he'd had some issue, and if they could just remember, they might be able to make him well again.

"What are you remembering?"

"It was my fault."

"Why?"

"I killed her."

"Who?"

"Jennifer."

Will's mother made a small sound near the doorway, but Jameson made no move to acknowledge her, thinking instead about beckoning the parents from the doorway, but quickly realizing that might be inappropriate, that it might break the moment. They were, at worst, only a bother. Will was still communicating, and that was good.

"In the nightmares."

"No. Yes." Will forced himself into his pillow. "I remember shooting her. In the hallway. At school. On Halloween. And in Hell."

Jameson opened her mouth, but then closed it in a frown. "Why did you shoot her?"

"Because I am indescribably evil." His voice, when he said the words, was as pale as his fevered face.

"Why did you shoot her, Will?"

"I don't remember. What reason could there be?"

"It's in there."

Will made a fist and pointed his index finger at Jameson, keeping his head pressed into the pillow, turning his body slowly in the sheets. But he didn't say anything.

"I know that you are not a bad person. I know that you would never in a million years shoot Jennifer without a good reason. You are not evil. You have to know this and understand it."

"No good reason," Will said.

"You have to recognize that this experience is not because you are a bad person. You are a good person. This is a necessary journey for you. There is still a lot that you have to remember, and for that, you have to go deeper. But you are not there to be punished."

I'm there to remember, he said. Exactly, she said.

"Protect yourself as best you can. But it's not over yet. You have to go deeper if you want to break from this."

Will let out a small cry into his pillow and rolled onto his back, placing his hands over his chest and breathing through gritted teeth. His eyes were clenched shut, and Jameson wondered what he saw when they were open, if this room and world was in some way worse than whatever he saw behind his eyelids. She wondered how this could be.

"I shot her."

Maybe, Jameson thought. "This is within you. Try to find peace. Accept the situation. Allow it to come without judgment."

Will laughed, harsh, loud. And then he went slack, and that was it. Jameson put her hand on his shoulder and shook him and repeated his name, but he did not respond. His breathing had not evened into the slow rhythm of a person sleeping, but remained a fitful sound.

"What's going on?" Nancy demanded from the doorway.

Jameson rose to her feet and moved toward the door. "Come, let's discuss it."

She told them as much as she was comfortable sharing. There were issues of doctor-client privilege, and Will was officially an adult, so he was treated as such. She knew that there were many sensitive issues that they had discussed in their meetings, many times even about Will's relationship with his parents. And so she did not want to be completely forthcoming. But there was much that they did need to know. He was their child after all, and he was their responsibility at the moment.

"He's having nightmares of a journey through Hell that have been progressively

growing worse over the last few weeks."

"Why have they been getting worse?" Nancy asked.

"Probably because I've encouraged that he embrace them."

Nancy played with the edge of the couch, running the fabric against her nails. "I don't understand."

"It seems that these nightmares are similar to memories that are breaking through, as far as we've established, from his coma after the shooting. It would seem that there are elements from these memories, or nightmares, that directly correspond to the shooting."

"Is that why he was asking me about it a few weeks back?" Andrews asked, his voice low but not harsh.

"Yes."

"But that was so long ago," Nancy said, and remembered her reaction from the day Will brought it up, the way she stood at the sink and tried to flush her frustration down the disposal with the gunk from their cooking tools, the way she had to run from the room, else the emotion would crawl from that darker cave and consume her. That snake unraveling about her heart, flexing tired jaws and threatening to consume her again, to drag her into an October storm on a Halloween night, where the flakes rained like ash from Heaven. When it would all be so much easier if she could just forget her son. She did not want to forget her son. She did not want to lose him. Now he was in his room, incoherent and suffering the same comatose nightmares he suffered five years ago? At this shrink's hand?

"It was. But there are indicators in the dream that suggest that there are very deep-running and unresolved issues about the shooting that were not addressed immediately afterward. Not for lack of trying. The office that had him ran a very good program when they got him, and he'd had wonderful treatment before me."

"So what's the problem?"

"We don't know what happened during the coma. In many ways, comas are still medical mysteries. The body switches off the mind while it focuses on healing itself."

In his room, Will shut off his mind and focused on
continuing crawling the path.

"But we do know that Will had memory loss from the incident. He does not remember what happened in the hallway. Possibly because of the head trauma, blood loss, and subsequent coma. But it equally could have been that the event was

so terrible for him, at such a young age, that he blocked it out entirely. Now it would seem that whatever he has shoved so deep into his subconscious wants out and is manifesting in his dreams."

"He's dreaming about the shooting, so you turned him to this?"

"Nancy," Andrews said, his fingers clinging to her leg.

"In Jungian therapy, we believe that dreams are closely interconnected with the subconscious and the unconscious mind. If there are elements from both of these emerging, there's an imbalance between the self and the shadow of the self, and this imbalance needs rectification."

"I'd say you've overcorrected, doctor."

Jameson kept her voice steady and patient. "These issues run very deep, and they're painful to discover. But he won't be able to find that balance so long as he does not know what lies on the other side. Should he stop now, if he even could turn off the memories, whatever is trying to come through would only seem like chaos, which is still an imbalance."

"What if it actually is chaos? On the other side? What if he's already remembering it?"

"He's experiencing representations. He's not remembering an actual journey through Hell." Jameson thought she'd best leave the collective unconscious out of it, the idea of universal mythic elements coming through, the idea of something common between all souls in a dark place where the stuff of imagination is leaked.

"He said he shot Jennifer?" Nancy said.

"Yes." She looked out the window at the drooping green plants, still holding their color despite the onset of fall. A bird bath rested among them, empty, a salty white film growing along the inside. "This could mean two things. Either he has seen another representation, another symbol of something deeper, that his brain is still trying to uncover, and killing Jennifer is only a symbol for this. Perhaps he's worried about hurting her. Perhaps he's worried that he did not do enough to protect her during the shooting. Perhaps it's even a more present issue manifesting itself. How has Jennifer been lately, do you know?"

"She's been struggling," Nancy said. "I got coffee with her a few days back. She's putting on a strong face, but she's dealing with some difficult emotional issues."

Jameson played her tongue along her front teeth.

"She needs a lot of support from Will, but it's growing more difficult for her to justify her own needs against his, especially with both of them growing to such extremes."

Jameson didn't like the compromising situation that Nancy spoke toward. "That

might be part of it, certainly. It's very difficult to discern present problems from past problems. In the same way that the past is constantly influencing our present, our present problems are always getting in the way of our working through the issues of the past. And in this situation, Jennifer aside, there are absolutely still issues manifesting from the shooting that tells me that there's still a connection beyond Jennifer alone."

"You said this could mean two things?"

"He's either worried about killing or hurting Jennifer, or he actually did shoot her, and the memory that surfaced was in fact genuine."

Nancy smiled. "Well then there's only one option, because the second is not possible. Will would not shoot Jennifer. You said yourself that he wouldn't in a million years shoot Jennifer."

"I said without a good reason he wouldn't."

"And what would be a good reason?"

"If there was one, it's likely still in his unconscious, and he needs to remember it before he can start to work through it."

"That's if your theory is correct."

"Well, yes."

"So there's a third option."

"Oh?"

"The other option is that you are wrong. That these dreams are not memories, that this process is not helping him, and that he needs physical and mental treatment from a medical expert immediately."

Jameson shook her head. "That's not going to help. He's having a physical reaction to a mental torture, the same way that when you wake from a nightmare you're covered in a sweat, your heart pounds, and your breathing is fast. Will is going through a kind of post-traumatic version of that. The cause of this torture is somewhere within himself. The only way he can defeat that is by confronting it head on, as he's doing. And hopefully—likely— it will be resolved very soon."

"Soon?"

"He's approaching rock bottom. I don't want to go too deeply, but there seems to be a classical defining structure to the experience he's having. Whether it's due to his schooling or because of the collective unconscious, as Jung theorized, he seems to be moving through a traditional process, a Hero's Journey, if we adapt to Campbell's terms. But in this process, the self becomes most fully realized at rock bottom. It also weighs heavily on Eastern philosophies, which Campbell and Jung both studied. His mind may well be taking him through a very structured process to reach this knowledge."

"You want him to hit rock bottom before he reaches this memory? Whatever his subconscious wants him to know?"

"I think that might be where this is pointing, yes."

"And if you're wrong?"

"I don't think that's—"

"You don't think?"

"There's much psychological and philosophical material to reflect this. Many far smarter than me support these kinds of theories."

"Worst case scenario," Nancy said. "My son hits rock bottom and doesn't realize anything. He's back to comatose, or he's torn himself to pieces, falls into a depression too deep to return from, is crippled by this, requiring years more of treatment. You think this is a good idea?"

"You brought me here for my opinion. I've been working with your son for weeks. He trusts me deeply. I'm a professional. If you think that your maternal judgment is more fitting than my professional one, so be it. I'm only doing my job. I would encourage you to be patient, to be there for your son, and to wait this one out."

Nancy looked at her husband, whose lips were white and his jaw dimpled near his ear. "We could wait and see if he gets any worse," he said.

She stopped rubbing her fingernail against the couch when the scratching sound became annoying.

"He's not in any real danger at the moment. His fever is only around a hundred and two. He hasn't tried to hurt himself."

"Fine," Nancy said to her husband, refusing to look at Jameson. "Fine. But if this goes south, and I mean, the *moment* it goes south, I'm taking my son to the hospital myself. I don't care if you or this woman are on board or not. I'm not losing my son again."

5.

When the hellfire burned brightest, the light moving through the tunnel and setting the air ablaze, Will could see the bodies dangling from the ceiling, melting. Timeless rope strangled timeless bodies, their heads broken, thrown back. Black ooze had poured from their carcasses, spreading across the floor and up the walls next to them like a moss or some kind of exaggerated cloak, spreading in a slow motion spatter, like a glass shattering.

Uncoil, innards, and crawl.

Their faces were torn open in moans.

Will heard their gurgles if he came close enough to the entrails, and sometimes he had to drag his body through them. He tried to breathe, but his throat was parched and raw, and the air didn't seem to help much anyway. His lungs trembled when he called them to open, and the harsh air spread through his arteries the way it spread down the back of his nose and against his throat. Even when he held his breath for minutes at a time, the fire continued to burn, no less diminished.

It was like staring into a pot of boiling water and feeling the way the air turns skin to liquid, trying to make the space between the same. A dance of death. A harmony. A marriage of Heaven and Hell, the uniting of opposites. The sweat that falls from his nose and the way the air puddles in his lungs.

If, for a moment, he forgot the barrage of constant mental and physical anguish, he might've considered the smell the worst part of the journey. It was completely overwhelming. Rot. Burning flesh. Shit. Sulfur above all else. The stench made Will's brain swim as he crawled along the scalding rock floor. His stomach was on edge from the pain and exhaustion, and the reek made him feel even queasier. The sensation ran from his stomach to his head, where his vision swam, and he often thought of himself as on a boat in the sea, rocking. But where the rocking would ebb and sway again, he kept turning, spinning, overboard, underwater, rising again; a constant motion like the arms of a clock, turning, swinging, dipping, dripping. The smell and the motion turned his stomach into a tight knot, squeezing and clenching, expelling, vomiting. He hacked. Rot and excrement flooded his nostrils and he felt upside down. His body was bailing, jumping ship, pressing his insides out, as if for a moment expunged. He'd find a peace against the air, away from the turmoil within.

Jennifer.

Next to him, her body had thickened at the joints, her skin turning colors below her clothes turning colors, both tearing and birthing something anew so that Will wondered who would fall apart first and

why it was her who got to leave and not him,

and then he remembered shooting her

again, and he was glad that she was gone, and when his stomach made a slow rolling motion and something gushed from somewhere within his groin, he nodded.

The screams were almost as bad as the smells. They came from everywhere. There was no night or day in this place, no point or place to get a moment's silence. For millennia, Hell drank to the dregs these souls, and the sounds boiled over, their vapors, auditory waves, energy rising and falling in the way of the mist,

feel it on your face,
press your skin to the bursting surface.

Once, he thought he heard Jennifer singing, a voice on the tide of the screams, bouncing from wall to wall, against the rock where he dragged her corpse.

Is she here? he asked.

The singing overtook all other sounds, as if in response to his question. It glistened on the air as if tangible. It danced with its own agency, not victim to the acoustics of the flames or screams. If just for its freedom, it reminded

reminded Will of where he'd come from, what he'd done. He wished it would stop. He wished to God it would stop.

A whip crack branched out of the heavy shadows and opened another screaming mouth on his green back, the lips of his skin peeling back to the muscle. He screamed too. Joined her voice. Tickling his mind. It was happy. It was intimidating. It was putting him down. She was laughing at him for being on his knees with his blood everywhere about him while she was, where? Far away.

His screams fell to sobs, black ejections drizzling across his skull.

But he kept going. Every vein and vessel in his body felt like it had been ruptured, flowing into his skin, into the world around him. There was more of him beyond his flesh than there was inside of it. Turn inward, open your mouth to swallow your tail and open your mouth to swallow your tail.

Just as one knows when a sprained finger isn't right, twisted at an angle away from the body and bent, one knows the world isn't right when the body is broken. When we stare into a mirror and yank out a tooth, the roots smeared with blood and pieces of gum, we squirm when we know that we are broken. The world squirms and, seething, moves with us, sways, breaks along the seams where our vision lies and bursts into black and white spots that speak to some vastness beyond us.

Will fingered at the cracks and tried to shred them, to find that black where he might float. He dropped Jennifer's wrist and, without wiping her decay away, pressed his fingers against the cave wall and heaved his body and felt each snap and studied their angles and felt the pain twist, as if with each motion, his neck might snap, the world might waver, and he might

wake up? Remember? Float. Search deeper for the tide, join their voices, and drift.

He was a present broken the day after Christmas. God's gift sacrificed. He hurt.

Then he reached for Jennifer's hand again, and his fingers wouldn't squeeze right, so he twisted them into claws that finally clenched, and he ground the bone

into her flesh and bent at the wrist and elbow and moved along again.

Each dragging step was like a day. His hand moved through the air, shimmering in the heat and the steam, dropping back to the earth hardly more than inches beyond where it had been. The muscles tightened as his legs pushed his body forward. Open wounds on his side rubbed against the ground. Feet rolled on a cushion of fluid. His upper arm muscles seized again, and he couldn't push himself further. So he set down his elbow and pushed with his shoulders. Reach back, grab Jennifer's hand, twist them into claws that finally clench and grind into bone and flesh, and bend at the wrist and elbow and move along again.

Where his stomach had been green before, now it turned black. The veins in his neck and shoulders sometimes screamed red, sometimes black. The puckered flesh on his face flaked off, crispy around the sores, peeling away in layers of who he once was. Hair thick with dirt, grime, sweat, blood, bile, and ash, tangled in knots and torn in places.

Though markedly slow, his progress was constant.

Thoughts ran in loops, but constant.

He sometimes forgot what he was being punished for, and he raged, oblivious, toward the sky and the ground about what? And why?

Then he paused, thought, his hand deep within Jennifer's, of the way he had shot her.

She was beautiful, wasn't she? She was love, that one.

Then the sound of the whip cracked, and the finger of the demon stalking in the shadows brought forth the scene again. Scalding rain on his face. The look of her eyes.

6.

It would be better if she did it outside, she thought.

She'd kept to her room after Will had left. Her father had tried so hard. To get her to come out. To get her to speak to him. To get her to drive back to the Creek with him. To get her to at least eat something. He opened the door once, but she just laid there in bed, staring at the wall next to her, blankly. He left the door open after that and sat down in the hallway. He stayed there for hours at a time. At first he spoke, saying things like,

"We can get through this, baby. It's a physical condition. We can try new

treatments. We can talk to more people. We can open pathways that will allow you to finally feel some peace. For the past month, you've been in a culture of this, of memory, of despair, and we can get you out of it."

Jennifer didn't say anything. She just lay still.

"We'll get through the next few days—you'll be better again, you'll surface again—and then we'll take our next steps."

Because this was how it went. There were the bad nights. The catatonia, the switch, the staring, like forcing yourself to sleep when every part of your body fights to stay awake. You're not tired. You're sick. You lay in bed and you want more than anything to drift, to leave, to crawl away to a corner and watch the hands spin until something picks you up, takes you from yourself, and delivers you to a rocky beach on the side of a river, with sunlight flickering through the tree branches.

This was not about Will. This was not about being left alone. This was about the darkness. The way that it crept inside and held, the seductress. It felt good. To hold tightly to the anger, considering the injury through persistence.

The pain worked the same way, and she'd have gone in that direction, scraping and cutting and trying desperately to, in the way of the asceticism, press herself out, to find in the pain the cracks,

where vision lies, where the black and white spaces burst, hold fast, float.

Suicide as mystical practice. She almost laughed at the morbidity.

Tear away the physical; become emotion. Would it carry over? Was it really only short circuits and the lack of chemicals and catatonia induced by crisis and this clinging to the emotion, this crutch?

Or would there be peace? Would she tear away from this rotting body and find an escape from this foundation in the material, in the painful?

She cried silently to herself at the thoughts.

Her religion spoke against it, this was true. Suicide was murder, treasonous. God gave you the gift of life. He only gives it once. You spend your life serving Him. He deals you challenges that can only be overcome by using the grace He supplied to you the moment you were born.

Her mother committed suicide when Jennifer was thirteen.

Her father wrestled with the loss for months afterward.

In the fall of her senior year, two of her best friends were killed. Her boyfriend shot her in the neck and she nearly died. Will fell into a coma after being shot in the head and also nearly died. Her father uprooted her from the life she knew, and she spent the next five years pushing tragedy deeper and deeper into the folds of her memory, as if that was a space where they might stay, quietly, like a small and

slowly smoothing bump under the rug. Then, when she thought it was safe, she returned, and there was Will. Salvation. Damnation. And the fall.

She'd done nothing wrong. She'd lived piously, innocently. Perhaps she was not as chaste as the faith demanded, nor as strict, but she came from a place of purity. A place that sought to constantly find balance in the chaos that her mother presented her with; her original sin, passed along by generations, consuming. When she was not embracing the black places in the recesses of her mind, she was at peace.

It was not a peace in the way of hope, but a peace underlying a tragedy, the way a woman walking a wreckage lays her hand on the cold concrete of memorial stones and says that she forgives.

This was the way she felt now, walking through the back door and into the backyard.

Her father had hidden the razors and the sharper objects from her room. He knew how it worked. He'd lived with her mother for fifteen years. He'd experienced more nights of it than Will had, and far worse. He knew what it was to love a broken woman as she was being consumed. He knew what it was like to watch the knife blade run lines on white skin, to watch her place her head in the lion's mouth and hold her hands free.

Was it so sacrilegious? To think that this was a place to walk with God even though it put her through Hell? Her peace was laced with sadness, her blackness too thick to breathe in. If, on the other side, she had no god, she would feel abandoned, but how different would that be? To be empty, rather than filled with such hatred, would be peaceful.

To float, still, blank, forever.

Her father may have hidden the sharp objects from her room and bathroom, but he'd left the kitchen untended. He thought that she would be alright. That he would notice if she came from her room and stepped over his legs. That her motion would wake him so he could watch to see where she went, what she might do.

But after a few hours, the night moved deeper into the morning, and around three thirty or four, she moved from her bed, a dark shadow in a darker room, and stepped past him in the hall. There was enough light that she could see him, and for a moment she worried.

This worry was hard, because there was a shift, a switch flipped, that turned the hatred inward to a frustration with everything and everyone and mostly for herself, so that nothing anyone could say would be a sufficient answer to her dilemma. The

possibility of snapping out of it seemed forever away now. She could put on the smile, could relax and find a flavor of normalcy, but it would not truly work. Inside she would be like this. All the time.

Her father did not deserve this.

Shit, she sobbed inside.

To lose his wife, to nearly lose his daughter, and then to actually lose her. It would devastate him, knowing that Jennifer thought her life was a series of obstacles unfounded, too severe, a product from a god who wasn't there, didn't care, or whose plan was too far out,

who thought it easier to roll the dice, sit back, and let it happen—let wives fall to depression and bi-polar disorder, let gunmen stroll hallways, let daughters wander into backyards and find sweet release in watching their veins bleed out and their spirits flee upward.

She could see him

finding her.

Would he cry? Would he break down? Or would he stand above her, turning, walking blankly to the phone to call the police. Tell them that his daughter, too, had passed, and that this house was now empty of all he had known and loved. That if he still held to God, then perhaps he'd find communion in the crucifix above the fireplace, in contemplating the punishment.

Her hatred ran too deep to cry tears for herself, except for when the anger broke like a fever and her sobs came as a response to the overwhelming feeling of the world standing against her, where the only light she held was, what? In peace like a calm lake reflecting the fog? In Will, the way he held her close and told her that it would be alright? The way he was still there after she cut deep and cried and cursed at him in the longer hours of the morning? Now he was gone too, and damned if she couldn't even help him. He now needed it as badly as she needed him. She'd failed Will, she'd failed her father, and she'd failed herself.

But if there was something she believed in, it was this, she thought as she opened the utensil drawer, pulling slowly so that the wheels made no sound. And when she took the steak knife from next to the forks, there was barely a scrape of metal against metal. If there was something she believed in, it was something past what she knew. If there was God, then there was more. We are human beings, meant to love, meant to overcome animal instincts. We are spiritual beings trapped in the physical.

And indeed, she was trapped. She was a spirit seeking sweet release. And when her father passed too, they would find each other. She, her mother, and him. Beyond the biology, beyond the imbalances and chemical cocktails, they'd find a

connection that ran deeper, without the plague of the physical. They'd find a connection in its purest form.

Her father would have to tough it out until then. She hoped that he would understand.

See him, she thought.

She saw him sitting in his rocking chair next to the fire on the winter nights that stretched. She saw him by day working at his job, designing small electrical appliances and trinkets that fit together to operate. Whatever project it might be this month, whether a concept design for a Men's razor or a new blender, the parts fit together in the same way, in a series of sketches, using the same mathematical calculations. Perhaps he might find peace in the steady nature of measurements and sureties, of numbers without emotion, where no imbalances brought about the tearing apart of those you love most dearly.

In the afternoons he'd go to the church. He'd be quiet and remain disconnected, though that connection with someone was what he'd long for the most; someone that he could be comforted by, and in turn comfort, without that fear of emotional rejection, of irrational behavior, of something that cannot be fixed.

How could that be of God?

So he'll sit back, and he'll quietly study his Bible, and he'll take his notes, and the instructor might ask him what he thinks, and in as few words as possible without being rude or incomplete, he'll give his thoughts, and five or six heads in the circle will nod along, and some might make an extra note, and then they'll go back around the discussion. The pastor might prompt him for more, but he'll know. He'll know the pain in his eyes that threatens to spill at any moment. He'll see it build and then ebb and then flow again, find himself happy just knowing that Christianson is here, with his Bible in hand, searching for something that might give comfort.

Perhaps in something spiritual he might find the give and take that he needs to find and cultivate strength, but his motions will be mechanical, comfortable in the way that a morning routine is comfortable, in the way stirring a dinner of spaghetti sauce—

sauce he cooked for his daughter, sometimes twice a week, because he was no great cook, sauce that he made two times too much of without ever thinking to reduce the ingredients

—is comfortable.

He'll end his night early after reading beside the fire, and he'll go to bed in the

empty queen after walking down the empty hallway, past hollow pictures, and he'll never turn the light on in the short dark space because it's better that way.

Jennifer didn't know if her imaginings were of the future or whether they were what the last few months had looked like. Perhaps he went through the motions because he still hoped. But were she to go, she was not sure what he would hope for.

She regretted the decision. Outside, the wind was sharp and the sky was clear and it seemed as if space had settled on the backyard. The air was thin and her breath was short and it stung in her chest. Her bare feet froze in the dew as she moved toward the trees that marked the loose line of separation between the forest and community playground.

But she was not in a place to worry about others. Tears had streaked her face, but she knew that feeling sorry for her father was a way of feeling sorry for herself, of hating herself for the decision that she'd come to, the pain that it brought her—a kind of a sharp escape that would be most fully realized momentarily, an apotheosis in the blade. It reinforced her decision.

The tree trunk was cold against the back of her shirt. The dew soaked into her jeans. Her bare feet ran chills up her legs and across her spine, and her hairs stood on end, and gooseflesh spread like a second skin. She wondered if it was her spirit bristling to escape. She liked the thought.

There was a moon behind the treetops, and she wondered what it might be like to see the earth from the moon, covered in the reflected light of the sun, to see both the sun and the night of the earth at the same time. She knew that she need only study the way the light played against the blade in her fingers, against her skin.

It would be less messy out here, she thought. The ground would suck up the stuff, and she'd blend her fading essence with the cold air and falling leaves. The culmination of the fall. She studied the way the leaves shifted below her body when she moved, and she wondered what their color might be in the light of the sun when it rose, and whether her blood would match the color of the leaves that surrounded her on the grass. She wondered if, as they faded, they'd fade to brown together.

Her skin and the knife and the night were cold. Her tears and her blood were hot,

and as she began the motions, hesitating at first before,

with a hitch, a sob, whispers to herself and to those she loved, more tears—so many tears,

one finally overtook the other.

7.

The first time the demon came to him, Will barely noticed. Until a scabby finger ran its way up his back and around his neck. Despite his nerves screaming at their ends, a shiver cursed down his spine.

Plunging its fingers into the skin at Will's shoulders, the beast threw Will onto his back and lowered its head. Will first tried to look into the pits of its skull, to witness an eyeball, a hint of life, something beyond a robotic torturer. Its tongue dragged like ragged sandpaper across Will's torn chest, and it looked him in the eye. Sockets widening, it hissed and cackled.

Will cracked his head on the rock when the demon began to work its phallus. Laughter bubbled from his mouth at the sight of the thing. The organ was unwieldy and wicked, jagged and gigantic. The boy didn't understand where the laughter came from—perhaps some reflex memory from high school, where such things were at the peak of hilarity, and the sight of such a creature manhandling himself would have forced tears to his eyes if he had tears left to cry. But more likely the boy had snapped, and in his gales of laughter was the sound of his fear bubbling to the surface of his throat, spilling over like the stuff dripping from the demon's member.

When the demon drove into Will, the boy screamed and somehow, from somewhere,
remembered.

Will leaned into the doorway, staring at her as she stepped backward, deeper into her house. I've already told you, she said. My dad is out of town.

The house was dark; the only light spilled from the reading lamp next to the rocking chair in the far corner of the living room. Jennifer turned up the fire in the fireplace. Will couldn't decipher whether her smile was nervous or wicked. When she took him in her arms, he decided it was probably a bit of both.

Touching the gentle curve of her cheek, Will lowered his mouth to hers, barely brushing her lips. She sighed and her breath was hot. The air around them, once cool, tingled.

They eased onto the couch together and giggled as they tried to maneuver in the cramped space. She sucked at his earlobe and he kissed her nose.

The demon jammed one claw into Will's cheek, tearing the flesh from his mouth

while pumping his body against Will, pounding his other fist against Will's testicles. Will screamed,

she moaned. Her flesh was soft just above her jeans, and he ran his finger along the top and just inside. Will could have been content caressing her like that, forever and ever, there on the couch, but then she kissed the top of his head, and he was back at her mouth and moving against her.

Will beat at the demon with his one flailing arm while the demon slammed him against the ground. He felt like a puppet, consumed, driven, overwhelmed. All he knew was emotion. Fear, pain, hatred, sadness, memory, his

heart raced when she pulled down his pants, revealing him in the flickering light from the fire. Fear and longing twisted through his veins and his muscles contracted. She touched her mouth to his skin.

The demon thrashed when he thrust, and Will felt pain deep within him. The demon jammed his fingers into Will's sliced midsection and laughed when he licked Will's dripping stump of an arm.

Jennifer bit off a cry when Will entered her. She squeezed her fingertips into his shoulders and he wrapped her in his arms. She kissed his mouth. He kissed her neck. She pulled him closer.

A shudder coursed through Will's body and he heaved,

forcing the bile from his stomach to his throat, feeling it dribble from his mouth. The demon still drooled inside him, pulsing and crushing and breaking and snapping.

They lay wrapped together, and Jennifer touched his arms and told him that she loved him.

The demon laughed and cackled and wailed in Will's ear and smeared his black gunk across the boy's face.

I love you, the demon croaked against the side of Will's face.

Jennifer smiled and pressed her forehead to his.

Then the demon was gone, and Will was empty and tattered.

Blood pressed at his eyeballs, and the boy wailed.

8.

He was lucid when he woke up, and before his eyes were fully open, he knew. There was darkness in the room, and the soft glow from the lamp his parents had put on the floor near the door cast shadows from the bed along the far wall, a strange light, as if the room had twisted and broken. The lamp lying on the ground where it shouldn't be. Too bright against carpet. Too dim everywhere else.

Where was his phone? Not on the nightstand next to him, not in his pocket. He twisted about in the bed with urgency. He'd been crying, but only noticed when the mucus caught the air as he breathed through his nose. He tried to sniff it back, but that only brought more tears, and he found his phone deep under the covers when the first sob struck.

He had one bar of battery left and two bars of cell service. It was good enough.

Jennifer was first on his speed dial, and he held down the button until the tone cut out and the signal rang,

and rang, again, and over again, until her voice came on the line, soft, easy, breathy in the way that he'd immediately found as intimate as his touching her flesh under the edges of her shirt.

He would have sighed a breath of relief right there, wiping at his tears and forcing a normal voice through the phone, except that he'd been expecting this. The phone had rung too many times and he'd expected her words—

hello

—the way her voice played softly on the exhale.

I'm really very sorry I couldn't be here.

He hung up, held the button down again until the tone cut out and the sound of the ringing came to his ear.

Hello, the soft way her voice played on the exhale, I'm really very sorry.

He hung up, held the button down a third time until the tone cut out.

He didn't remember if it had gone through to her voicemail a third time or if Christianson had answered it and, in an empty voice clogged with tears, said, "Will, I really—"

and Will screamed, "No!" and flung the phone into the wall across from the edge of the bed, where it lodged in the drywall next to the lamp.

Nancy peeked inside the door, her eyes squinting against the light. She'd obviously been sleeping just outside. "Will?" she said, on her feet now, running toward her son, who was thrashing on the bed, rearing his head back as if to force

his face into the pillow or headboard. "WILL!" she screamed and grabbed the back of his shoulder to stop him, and in an instant the boy turned to her, tears streaking down his face and snot at the edge of his nose, and wailed into her face. The sound sent Nancy Andrews backward, past the end of the bed, where she fell to the ground, catching herself and crawling.

"GET OUT," he shrieked, and his voice struck the syllables, full and healthy, serving a counterpoint to the minced noises he made in the Hell down below. Terrified, Nancy fled the room,

and Will twisted in his bed, bringing his face into the headboard.

There was a snapping sound, the kind that wood and bone make together,

and his head slammed into the ground of the cavern. The transition was as smooth as closing his eyes. The heat came against his face and neck, and he felt his tears press first into his skin before being wrenched back into the open air.

Jennifer's body was next to him, where he knew it would be, and with one good arm, he rolled her to her side, shoved whatever was left of his body against whatever was left of hers, and held her close. Her smell filled his nose and her hair fell against his face. Her cheekbones were hard against the wounds on his face, and instead of crying tears, he forced a small cry from his mouth that fell down the cavern and called the other screaming voices to a reticence.

HALLOWTIDE

Stop. Please.

I must stop here. If not, it will break me.

I'm so fucking sorry. Forgive me.

HALLOWTIDE

CHAPTER SIXTEEN **emptyreal fires**

1.

"There was screaming," she'd told him.

Five years ago.

Halloween night. Stanley was in a room on the nursing floor of the hospital, in and out of consciousness, doped up on a number of different painkillers. Driving him toward sleep, that place so filled with monsters and strange smells and hauntings. Medicated now, the hallucinations came clearer. He did not know what to trust. What was delusion, what was hallucination, what was the real world and what was not. The police had waited outside his door until the doctors finally convinced

them that he would not be in a place to give a statement until midday tomorrow. They could wait, but of course they would be wasting their time.

The bullet had been removed by surgery; the damage it had done internally was fixed for the time being. He was scheduled for another surgery the following week, but had to stabilize before this was possible.

At around two in the morning, Stanley began to make small wailing sounds from his bed. Meredith had been half asleep on the small cushioned bench beside the window, but her sleep had been restless. Her mind burned with concerns, questions. She was glad that her husband was alright, that it was only his leg. He was alive. But then those ripples of memory—of the past month, the dreams, her imagination—those five minutes in the hallway. The gunshots. The screams. Her mind forced itself to that moment, to wonder what it was like,

and that voice.

So much death.

Where?

At the school.

So when he made those small sounds, she knew what it probably was, but she was undeniably worried about what it was going to be.

"Stan? Stanley? Baby, what—" Her thoughts fell as barely parts of words, syllabic fragments and incomplete sentence structures. In a moment, she was next to her husband, and his hand was freezing to the touch, and her breath was hot in her chest, as if she'd run a mile in the winter. "You alright?"

He blinked and turned toward her in the dim room. "What?"

"You," she said. "You were. Sorry, you were making sounds. I worried—"

"Meredith," he said. "I'm okay. I didn't mean to startle you."

Except for the motion of his eyes from one side to the other, as if tracking the flickering motions of birds she could not see around the ceiling's edges, he seemed remarkably calm. She supposed that he was only sleeping. Or flashing back. Or—well, not having the strange attacks again.

Meredith kissed him on the head and moved back to the bench, pushing her pillow back up against the arm rest and wrapping the stiff hospital blanket about herself.

Stanley watched her curl back up, watched her try to sleep, watched the way her eyelids fell across her eyes without providing any sense of comfort or rest. She opened them. Blinked. Looked at him and about the room. Closed them again. Sleep was far from her. He felt sad.

Turning his head to the side, he looked back at the black figure that stood on

the other side of the glass window. He could only see its outline through the slats in the blinds, but he knew what it was. He knew someone was there because of the small motions it made, back and forth, swaying in the bright hallway.

How long it stood there, he did not know. He'd been watching it. He'd lost track of time. Meredith coming to his side roused him, but when she returned to her bench, the clock hands fell again and pointed down.

Something inside him had broken. He did not know what or how. It wasn't his leg, though that put up a fair fight. The screaming nerves, the screaming students.

He should have known. He'd seen it all along. He'd felt it in the hallway as if it were happening right before him, a skip in the record, two worlds overlapping, the future and his lunchtime wandering. Right there. Will. Jennifer. The Jonesy boys. Adam. He'd watched them go. He'd screamed to help. His arm, crushed in the door as he reached.

The way he reached now for something, someone, loss.

But what was there to reach for? What could he do now? He'd failed. He'd failed his students, his children. He'd misread the signs, he'd misunderstood. And now, there was nothing but hospital walls and beeping machines and surgeries and the dried tears on his cheeks.

And the thing in the hallway.

Why was it still here? The moment was over. He'd lost them.

Thoughts circling, he sighed, drifted, came in and out of the room again.

When he next awoke, the thing stood next to the bed, looking down at him. It was very dark. There were no features to this person, but an emotion emanated from the figure, and he tried to understand

what in him was fear of this person (it wasn't Meredith; she was still on the bench. He peeked at her without making much sound and saw her eyes closed), what in him was a building of emotion, renewed of urgency and concern, and what in him was this knowledge, this persistence.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The dark figure cocked his head to the side.

"TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT." An explosion, a buried stress, and with it,

He woke up.

The lamp beside the bed was on and Meredith was standing beside him,

looking down. Her lips were pressed to the side so that her cheek was scrunched up below her left eye, which itself seemed to be holding in a tear.

For a moment, he knew, in the way that

he remembered

when

Will opened his eyes, and for a moment remembered. The air shimmered gently over the textured ashen fields of the plain like soft spirits dancing without care.

Behind her, the sun burned, clouds hot, flared; and in that moment he forgot the way they rolled back in on themselves, turning within and gathering, dark.

He forced his left arm to her, but as hard as he stretched, he could not reach.

For a moment, Davis knew it all.

He remembered how deeply he loved his wife,

and the love he felt for his students,

and the way that, through both, the world was breaking.

Where his wife stood, he knew the shadow opposite her, standing in the same way

(that he will)

that she stood—the answer he wanted incarnate. His dream pulled from the corners of his mind and in coming to reality seemed to pull, with threads like gristle.

He knew. Almost. For a moment, he knew it all.

He got there too late.

And he held to the edges, even as the image of his wife started to break down, as she moved and shifted against the background, and the light caught the angles of folding walls and furniture so that

the harder he tried to remember, the more he seemed to
scream

and the more Meredith bent to him and stroked his head, and in the motion brought him back to a place where his head did not swim, where his stomach settled and veins lessened the pressure in his neck, where the memories of the dream faded, the way

the way that *déjà vu* sounds ridiculous after a moment, a story that obviously

was not
real,
the way that a dream fades,
the way threads pull apart as a cloth shreds.

Later, in the dark, Meredith lay in the bed beside him. She heard his breath form words in an empty mouth.

How do I save him?

She almost moved to touch him, to quiet him, to put a stop to this even after it should have ended for good, with the bullets and blood and a dead man in a hallway wearing a bomb.

How do I make him remember? I wasn't there. I didn't see it.

Each sentence the length of a breath. Breathing words like air. Releasing questions.

How do I save him?

How, how. Fast gasps of air. Meredith touched his arm.

An explosion, a buried stress. HOW DO I REMEMBER?

2.

Still progress. Despite the pacing, still progress. There's comfort there, even if Will is too far gone to recognize it.

His eyes were closed, trying to protect themselves against the scalding steam. His shoulder rested on the ground and his arm reached out, pulling him along inch by inch. His blistered feet throbbed and scraped at the rock. Jennifer beside him. Pull yourself, her, then heave. Again.

Black, now. His body had dried out, sacrificing its flatulent, gaseous decay for the cheesy, pulpy black stuff that was now his flesh. Slowly mummifying, the boy's bones peered out from his back, his arms, his face.

When his fingertips finally touched something—something that wasn't skin, bone, or calcified rock—he opened his eyes, the lids scraping against dry eyeballs, and he saw, out of focus, a blurred black shape. It was spherical, and pieces of it flaked away as his finger prodded at it. It was an apple, blackened and charred. As unconscious as a newborn bringing its thumb to its mouth, Will pushed the fruit to his maw, desperate for nourishment, for something, anything. His mind focused only on the need.

The skin of the fruit touched the skin in his mouth and he relaxed his jaw, pressing it against the floor to close it. But the fruit, juicy and rich and real and flavorful and lovely, broke into an ashen powder that tasted instead of sulfur and slow rot. Will gagged, pushing the apple away from him. From the bite dripped blood-red, blackened bits of rotted seeds and skin. He tried to blow the bits of the apple dust from his mouth with the last of his gathered breath, but little came out.

To come so close . . .

He wanted to grind his teeth and slam his fist against the ground. But he couldn't find the strength to bite down, and his flesh barely slapped against the rock.

Eventually the apple dust became like the rest of him and settled. The way his mouth dried and his tongue dragged like his limbs, the way they just moved along.

The demons bobbed in the light. They didn't laugh about the apple anymore. They'd seen it before. They'd see it again.

What Will was doing here, he couldn't remember

The fire that burned was not one of love or memory. Above, below, sun shining, rock walls, he did not remember until he woke, seeing a different sun, touching that surface again, and even then it felt no different. He'd lost everything.

But still her voice whispered, unheeded, unheard, to remember.

The further he went, the more apples he brushed with his hand and crushed with his chest. He smeared them into the ground as he went. Sometimes he'd forget and, seeing another, try to eat it. And when the ash fell to his tongue, again the rage came, again the blank

Light of orange flames danced across his face. Litter in lamplight.

The heat was worse now. Like he was swimming in the air, not so much forcing his way through a cloud or steam. Sustenance only in space, without nourishment. Lungs give up. Motions numb. Mind a rhythm. Become closer to the center. A burn patient in a mental ward. A thought in a sea of malcontent. A puppy run over by a car. Indistinguishable. Melting snowflakes. No longer special. If ever.

But he continued onward.

Apples all around him now. Sometimes jarring him into the walls and readjusting

his path. His head rested on apple cores with hard edges. This time when he reached, his hand fell on a rocky ledge, the best grip he'd gotten since the start of his crawl.

The sounds were louder. His ears rang with the screeching, the howls. Flames didn't light his black face. Instead, they only offered contrast to the world around him. The air itself was burning. Skin crackled and smoldered.

The muscles in his arm gave their last a while ago,
returning, giving their last again. Whip lashes on his back that felt no different. Still, he pushed himself to the edge and peered into the pit.

It was huge. A cavern of such immense proportions that the other side could hardly be seen, the way a lake looks small on a map and in actuality seems an ocean; words are no justice. The way the landscape above stretched until seeming to curve away with the bend of the earth, until it faded as the light and color ran out. Flames snaked high from pits below. Rocks burst from the ground, pointing above at the sky, as if even they were trying to escape. The walls were jagged with needle-like projections. He could make out forms below him trying to climb against the walls, tearing at their bodies, cutting their arms and torsos to ribbons in an attempt to—

No. No, what appeared as escape was no such thing. Far worse, Will witnessed as they mutilated themselves. A hatred so strong. Still the demons whipped and burned and raped them as they worked themselves over upon the walls and rocks, as if some significance or insight could be gained from the pain of it, working against the walls until they snapped, until their motion stopped and they fell backward and

Will remembered the demon coming to him, and he hoped,
and he strained, for a release. That he, too, when torn,
might break and shudder and expunge
something that might run along the edge of the air and drift, free.

He'd let go of Jennifer's hand a few feet back, amongst the apples. He hadn't even noticed until now that his hand was no longer with hers, that she'd torn apart and away and that he no longer clung to her body.

Drift.

He pulled himself to the edge and pushed his body beyond the drop.

Will slid down the side of the cavern, limp. He only seized when he remembered that he'd left

her,
but even then he wasn't sure

and seized again when the first of his limbs snagged on the spears. He caught, twisted, and ripped from spear to spear as his body snagged on the rocks and broke free over and over again. He landed in one of the deeper pits, filled with fire and molten rock, and he screamed. His throat finally sliced open from the sound, snapping chords.

His arms and legs and ribs were broken. His body torn apart. His skin hung off his busted bones and his body was bruised, disfigured, no longer human so much as stuff. Non-specific. Shifting. Patterns only repeating and interchanging.

His voice wavered and cracked, bearing upon the air, mingling with the other cries, begging for the end to come, for the sweet mercy of death, of blackness, of nothing.

But there was no release, only undoing.

3.

"If you want to get to the bottom of this," Jameson said. "You have to see it through."

This is what she said, sitting at his bedside, in one of his lucid moments when he came to, blinking, watching the shapes that crawled across the walls, that seemed as if to burst from his chest and leak from his eyes and make their way about the world like newborns finding their feet and

a vision of blades of grass and a burning star in the sky.

His mother took Jameson from the room with a hard look about her mouth, and in the hallway, she whispered harsh words at the therapist, and the therapist replied with gentle words that only made Nancy angrier.

4.

These infrequent lucid moments ceased when they got him to the hospital.

The process was not an easy one, nor was the decision before it. But it was Will throwing his phone at his mother that finally did it.

"My son is sick," Nancy said. The anger in her voice was fed by a place inside that was deeply afraid, a place fed by memory, the way that Will's

deep, angry place

was fed by memory as well.

"You are not making him better. You are making him worse. And he needs medical attention."

Whether he needed medical or mental attention, she did not know, did not care. His fever had maintained a consistent level at one hundred two degrees. But he wouldn't eat or drink water, and his dehydration was increasing. Those rare moments he did wake—

"You should have given him water, not told him to keep confounding these fantasies," Nancy said in the hallway.

—he did not seem to expect water, nor really understand what his mother or father or therapist wanted him to do with it. In an almost masochistic way, he denied it, or would only drink a few swallows before pressing his head into the pillow again, face down, and hard enough that his parents worried he might suffocate himself, though Jameson repeatedly reassured them that this was not likely, as the body would relax and he would pass out before any real damage was done. They only needed to wait for him to go limp before rolling him on his side again.

But aside from dehydration and a fever likely maintained by the lack of fluids and food, it was not a physical ailment that had brought this about, and they worried that bringing him to the hospital would be little help. His condition was mental. This was what Jameson told Nancy a number of times, but he was unconscious more and more often.

"It's not just his fever," Nancy thought, and her mind was distracted with memories
of the coma.

Five years ago, she stood in the middle of a hallway in a hospital, her feet fixed to the floor

like roots in the ground, a family tree reversed,
descending,
the limbs of sperm, of sons,

unable to step another foot, to turn the corner into the room with the plastic shower curtain hanging from the metal rods that wrapped around the plastic bedsheets and her son—his body a lie on the sheets, the way a body lies after an undertaker has had his way,

like *déjà vu* fading
and threads unraveling.

If this was reassurance—a lie on a hospital bed—she couldn't face it; she couldn't walk into that room to recognize the reality of it, to take that chance, to know that her son, half-naked, childlike, stripped bare of all he'd grown into, had

been taken for granted. (Not in the way of ignorance, but in the way that one day folds into the next, and your son, he makes you proud every day he's alive, but still you yell at him, and still you find it easier to sit on the couch with a glass of wine and lose yourself.)

That was the realization, the memory of eighteen years expanding at once in your chest, the flesh bursting like tears and rushing for the exits; it was guilt, it was regret, it was the way that losing someone makes you miss the future and so corrodes the past. There were happy memories there, so many happy memories, and if she stayed put in this hallway, right now, they'd stay there, safely, the way that her photographs stayed in her photo albums. And it would be well. Her son was not on a hospital bed. He'd not just been shot. He'd not just saved the lives of all his schoolmates. He was somewhere else,

not here, but somewhere else, still alive, still walking around.

It was better that way,

the way that they left each other by day,

or even more so, by night,

when in their separate rooms they clung to individual worries and individual hopes and their separate dreams.

It was better that way, to believe that he was somewhere else instead of here.

"Mrs. Andrews?" the nurse asked, leaning from the door to Will's room. Her husband turned and saw his wife there in the hallway, and he went to her and he held her tight and he didn't speak because he understood.

* * *

David Andrews sat at the breakfast nook, his hands clasped on the table before him, and moved very little. He did not share his wife's panic about what was happening to his boy, but he shared her guilt. How many weeks ago was it that he sat at this table and opened that door? Would they be here now if he hadn't? Would it be worse?

He knew his son. He knew the way his son's mind worked and the way that he tried to deal with things. He remembered his boy, age four, sitting up in bed, alert despite it being nine o'clock in the evening, reading over his arm, tracing the words he did not know with his eyes like tracing fingers against skin, trying to find what it was that registered with them in his father's brain, trying to find that spark of recognition that allowed him to fill the spaces of the story, to create characters where before there were none, that allowed the mystery to structure around one

unknown event, to circle about it until you discovered that, yes,

indeed, it was the man who had died who was the perpetrator; he'd been alive the whole time, living in solitude, wearing the costume to keep up some guise or to keep off those meddling kids.

It seemed like it always came back to that: meddling kids and lies and resurrection.

What was to believe here, now? That Will was conscious of this pursuit? That he was still conscious and had gotten lost? Or only seemed to? Or was this some disorder in which he had become lost in the labyrinths of his own consciousness, of his own mind, of whatever place of defense he'd built in the five years after the shooting? Whatever this was, it was they, his parents, who were at fault. They'd led him to this. If there was something unresolved, if there was something backward, if there was a place of quicksand in his mind that caught him now, years later, they'd missed it. And that was their job as parents: to protect their child, to save him from those monsters under the bed and in the closet, even the kind with bombs strapped across their chests, clutching handheld weapons.

He knew that Nancy knew this as well. He knew that she was reacting as she was because this was her fault and she wanted to stop it before it got worse, but

what if Jameson was right? he wondered. That it had to get worse before it got better.

He prided himself on seeing as many sides of a situation as he could, but here he was torn by indecision, by a lack of information that seemed to resound in a paralyzing confusion. His son was suffering, and he didn't know what to do.

"We're going to the hospital." Nancy came into the kitchen and looked at her husband.

"Is that what's best?"

Outside, it was night. The clock on the wall behind his wife said it was after nine o'clock. In three hours it would be Halloween, five years since the shooter had walked through the halls of the school and changed everything.

Changed what? He thought.

What was his son's life to be anyway? We all live to die. We all deal with our struggles. We all fight against problems and make mistakes and try to build a life. What would have been better? To keep his son in that hallway,

with Jennifer, with her hair falling in front of her face and her pushing it behind her ear where it would not stay. Writing in her notebook their thoughts from the discussion,

moments before the shooter rounded the corner. Happy. Without concern in the world. Frozen. A snapshot would be all. In an album. And they had seven of those, on the bookshelf in the living room, resting where they'd last left them, untouched in three years or more. Maybe even since the shooting.

"Yes, that's what's best, David!" she was shouting now. "He hasn't been awake in five hours. He'd barely been conscious when he did wake before that. He hasn't eaten or had anything to drink in two days. He needs help."

Andrews wondered how long it had been since his wife had last slept, or since she'd had something to eat, and he wondered if the blue lines around her eyes might fade if she could rest.

"Alright," he said. He didn't know if his agreeing was to help his son more, or his wife.

5.

When you burn to death, it's not the fire that kills you. You die from either blood loss or severe dehydration, whichever comes first. As your skin crackles, burning to its foundations and roots, your blood drains, boiling away. All the liquid in your body sizzles, vaporizing. Fire is only the catalyst.

In Hell, having already lost your blood, drained of vital fluid, and with no end or reason to die, you only burn. Join the flames. Lick and dance and pray for release like a puff of smoke, heaven in ashen wandering.

6.

The most beautiful sound a person can produce is a scream. If, indeed, emotions are what connect us, what demonstrate this place beyond, the stuff I hold in my hands by day,

by night,

then the scream is the realization, the manifestation, the enactment, creation.

A spirit pushed to the surface, come alive.

Will, broken.

He was on fire. His skin melted, solidified, and cracked. Never completely turning to ash, it only kept burning.

He roared. He did not scream. His screams had torn his throat, and the regenerating fluid that gurgled in the tissue evaporated with each fiery breath and bellow of pain.

Reaching forward with his fingers, the nails broken backward, he gripped rock with the bones that stuck through his skin.

With every dragging motion forward, a decade passed, perhaps a century.

The moisture boiled from below his skin and through his face. The fire would crawl, burn his eyes. Bursts of starlight would fill his vision, followed by an overwhelming blackness, and he'd be blind for a time, only to await the next flash.

An hour or two lifetimes later, he found he could make out the flickering shadows of the flames again. The process was so gradual he did not even realize that he was regaining his sight until the motion of his arm resulted in an abrupt change in his vision. Years passed, the eyeballs melted again, puss-yellow, streaming down his face like tears, turning the world black again. His burning cycled time like days, his body in flames like a season, the autumn bringing fire, the spring the phoenix. Pray for shoots of green, feathers in the flames.

His flesh felt cold, the heat so extreme, like ice pressed against his skin, the sensation turning to white, colors in his mind instead of pain.

His bones were broken. Pieces of his ribs lay behind him on the ground. The single arm with which he used to drag himself,

was broken in two places. His skull was cracked, and he was missing his right leg from the knee down, where it had simply snapped off from the fall.

Remarkable?

His lung was punctured. His heart no longer beat. His clothes had burned away a long time ago.

He could have given up so easily, found rhythm in the slow roasting, the seasonal turn, to watch the way the stars fall and rise again and how the moon and sun trace different paths in the sky,

in movement alone,

through whiplash cycles, punishments grown stagnant and meaningless.

The fire still seemed to hiss the words, though:

Remember.

You have to see it through.

In the fire were other bodies, lying still and smoldering too. They curled, their arms twisting toward the sky as if praying for salvation, waiting, surviving.

Age bubbles like laughter. Pleasure in the pain. Smile with the others. It was easier to look at the others, to watch them suffer too.

It was moving forward. His rhythm.

Remember.

Remember Jennifer taking the bullet to her throat. Crimson flying amidst brimstone and dust.

Rage, the pain bleeding away with the flames.

And then, finally, he reached an edge. It was a slope, leading upward. The flames burned behind him and his skin still smoldered,

puff smoke into the sky, curl with edges aflame.

Will reached, grabbed the rock with sharp, chiseled bone. He used the pain to drive himself forward. Where there was no muscle, the pain seemed to flow from his arms into the rock, his anger, contracting his body, the rock, and

forward, again.

Sometimes he would lie on the slope and remember her face.

How she smiled. That strand of dirty blonde hair. Air. Fill his lungs and breathe deeply. He killed her.

Their love, those eyes, her compassion. And he killed her.

Again and again in this

sleeping,

waking

nightmare

dreamspace,

he killed her. And his biceps contracted, and his tendons flexed, and the gun recoiled and flashed as the bullet took her in the throat. The tears drained from her eyes. The persistence of her prayers.

Share communion and dine in pain, motion, abhorrence.

The slope was long and exhausting, and many times he decided he would not make it. When he slid five feet downward, those five feet took their

century toll and the further whittling of bone and spirit, but each grew back, in its own kind of stunted, bastardized way.

Sometimes he didn't notice the change when his body slid from the shelf, stones and bones wheeling him down the slope. Keep crawling, indifferently, blankly.

Sometimes the demons would sneak around to his front and tease him from their shadows. Between their whispered words encouraging memories, some slapped their limbs against the rocks above him, the pebbles and boulders tumbling down across his broken body, sometimes crushing him, other times making him lose his grip, a few feet down again,

century toll, further whittling of bone and spirit, but each growing back in its own kind of stunted, bastardized way.

Century tolls.

"He doesn't need medical attention." Jameson knew the words were poor the moment she said them.

"Have you seen him? He'll be dead within days if we leave him like this. I will not neglect my boy."

"He has to be close now. He has to work through this. And I'm convinced that when he does, he will be the better for it. And you will be glad he did. Even if you never understand it."

"I'm ending this."

"Let it last just a little longer. Through tomorrow night."

"Halloween?"

"Yes. There's something to this. It's coming around. A cycle."

"And my son will emerge a butterfly in November. This is bullshit. This is hippie psychobabble bullshit. And I will not lose my son to it. If he has to go through this, let him do it in a hospital."

"They'll recommend psychiatric care."

"Then we'll take him to psychiatric care."

"Give him a chance!"

"A chance to die? This is not your decision. End of story."

Jameson opened her mouth to speak, but Nancy repeated, "End of story."

The top of the slope was a jagged edge that stuck out beyond the top of the slanted incline. It was an impossibility, but it did not discourage him. He only moved forward. He tried to jam his body in a crevice to lever himself above the pit's edge, tried to crawl above it, tried to swing up to it, each half-hearted attempt as grueling—

fuck

—as grueling as the last.

FUCK, he cursed. Images in his mind, horrific, vulgar, the stuff of

He roared again, and the sound of wind flared through tatters around his spine. He was not sure if the sound or the idea came from him or the space he'd left open behind him. He could not have made it over the ledge with thoughts of Jennifer in his mind

the single most painful element thus far

only thoughts of killing her.

When he was past the ledge, he didn't feel anything at all.

Out of the cavern now, the fires and the tunnel behind him. The cave ended as a series of melting pieces of rock sitting in swamps, interrupted by dead, burned trees and stalagmites. The path sank into the sludge, but he moved forward anyway. His body dipped into the sticky ink. The sludge clung to his skin and chin and entered him through his mouth, nose, and eye sockets.

Immersed in black. Hardly different from the pit. The blackness slowly burned his eyes, the time like air, like sludge, the eternity of it pressing against his arms.

Sometimes it slid off. Often it would burn off. There were several spot fires atop the sludge, eating at it. The sludge burned hot as oil, and when it burned on Will's flesh it was

only white.

When he moved, his body was lost behind him, so that he was not sure what was left,

not even sure it was his arm doing the dragging anymore.

There was the smell of death and rot and those things you feel in the pit of your belly when you're ashamed.

Black trees rose through the toxicity, reaching skyward, not in desperation to be rid of the place, not here. The trees grew in a way that seemed as essential as any tree he'd ever seen. Not straining, not drooping toward the bog, but in a horizontal manner that stretched in an intertwining way across the air before him, creating what was like a net, beautiful when he could see it.

The air was smoke, some parts fog, others steam. It billowed across the land, obscuring the space before him, fifty feet in the distance. No matter. White blank page to smoky gray, manifesting the world from the stasis,

nothing to come but more of the same. Keep it simple. Let the child into the ebony, smear across the page and spill the reservoir and watch the branches scatter and creep.

His motion sometimes raised skeletons. Black poured from their eye sockets like tears, brain, skull, color outside the lines, new rules, the way gravity seemed to stop. Sometimes they moved, touching his face with the same exaggerated slowness that complemented Will's own movements.

The bodies meant nothing to Will.

Eventually he came to an obstruction. Hot steel, rigid, protruding from the ground in front of him. Will twisted his neck, slowly, letting the weight of his skull loll his head back so that he might look upward. It was a street sign from America. The yellow of it was slimy and gray, a sick color. In fading black letters were the words:

NO OUTLET.

Will didn't read the words; in fact, he hardly processed what the object was. Moving around the sign, he continued ever onward.

But within a few dozen yards,
years, whatever,
he came across another sickly gray-yellow

DEAD END

Again, forward. Pushing himself, across more signs cropping across the landscape, burning cigarettes on the ashtray of the world, your child's arms. Failed nuclear weapons across the desert.

They all read ominously. Prophesized of ends and slow speed limits. Warned caution of zones ahead that should not be entered. One way, backward, forward, stasis,

go whichever way that you like.

There are things worth watching for farther ahead. Be wary of your steps and mind the gap.

In every language were stop and caution signs. They were ugly, metallicly erected, leaning and twisted, some clustered, some spread. Continue the path of the orchard or the damned.

Laughter
echoed now from behind him.

Dissolve. Dissolve all of this. Fall to pieces amongst pieces and find peace. Play on words intended, but

how it goes, so it goes, it goes

Watch the slug on the hot asphalt on a summer day, take the glass, let the sun bake the trail of mucus.

Dissolve. Dissolve all of this. And fall.

Getting him into the car was the difficult part. First they tried to wake the boy. Slapping his face while shaking his shoulders wouldn't work. It was when he smiled after the first slap that Andrews' blood ran cold and Jameson shook her head with pursed lips, as if in some manner reminding them that she'd told them so. Though if Andrews caught the motion at all, he did not understand it. They threw a glass of cold water on his face, and Will leaned his head back and opened his mouth. Andrews thought it looked like relief and Nancy thought it looked like a scream, but he was not awake, still.

So Andrews wrapped one of his boy's arms around his shoulders and took his weight, Jameson taking the other arm despite protests from Nancy (but she was strong for being such a slender older woman), and between the two, they managed

to get him from the room, down the hallway, and to the front door, where the car was running, pushing hot air through the vents to keep out the night.

There was comedy in the sight, a kind of *Weekend at Bernie's* or slapstick feel about their act. Except that it was their son, and he would not wake up, and those were tears, weren't they, on his cheeks?

At the hospital, they told the front desk that there was an unconscious young man in their car. First they brought a wheelchair and tried to awaken him, to no effect, so instead they fetched a stretcher, taking vitals on the spot.

The Andrews explained what had happened, and would have introduced Jameson, except that she was gone.

She'd said she would follow the Andrews to the hospital and meet them there, and Nancy had rolled her eyes and said, "Why bother," and now they didn't see her.

"Fix him," she said of her son, and they said they would do their best.

Now there were beeping machines and a regular nurse to check on his stats. There were the same hospital benches with flat cushions and the same feeling of worry: that he wouldn't wake up, that he'd stay this way forever, that after how long? three weeks, a month, two months? they'd have to wise up to the idea that he was not coming back,

that this flesh was all that was left,

and it was not their son, despite the possibility that his cheeks might lift, his eyes might raise, a smile might tug at the corners of his mouth, and he might say "Mom, Dad."

But what he would become, they worried,

was a lung on a machine, food in a tube, and a catheter. Build a human being and forget the spark, strike kindling beside his bed, again, again, and light the sheets on fire. Find his spirit in the flames.

"Now what?"

"We've got him stable on fluids, and the fever should come down shortly. If it doesn't, we can get him a sponge bath or some ice packs to help lower the temperature." Doctor James Larson was a bulky man with a childlike, round face and a mop of messy hair. He spoke with a kind of offhand flippancy and focus that comforted most patients and their families, that kept situations very simple and direct and to the point. "Treating the fever and the dehydration was our first concern. He did have some irregular heartbeats and breathing, but those should settle down now."

"Good, thank God."

"But we're not completely sure where these lapses in consciousness are coming from yet. We expect it may have something to do with the coma he was in . . ." Larson checked his charts—a motion that struck Nancy and her husband as

too unreal, a motion that made them feel as if they were inside a movie or television show,

being watched, fake,

their crisis initiated by an actor who feigned sleep, cared for by a doctor with a degree in acting from an ivy league school.

But Nancy spoke before the doc resumed,

"2001, yes. The shooting."

"Right," Larson said. "The shooting. See, the brain is fickle, if I might say so, and the past trauma very likely has a hand in this. Seems the brain swelled due to the fever and triggered this coma."

Nancy flinched at the word, and Doctor Larson pushed the corners of his lips out and nodded. "Comas are the body's way of preserving itself, of quieting the excess brain function while it heals. He's got solid brain activity. Once the fever comes down, he should come out of it. We're going to give him some time for the fluids to take effect, and that should stabilize his condition enough to where he should wake up when he's ready. "

"If that doesn't work?"

"I'm quite sure it will. This is only a reaction to extreme stress and fatigue, a lot like how sleep is a body's escape to recover and regenerate."

"But if it doesn't?"

"Ma'am, we're confident in this approach. It's best for you to not worry yourself over worst-case scenarios."

"But this is serious."

"Mrs. Andrews, we can consider other options should it become more serious."

"And how this happened?"

"Yes, we discussed symptoms when you came in. Did he seem sick?"

Andrews stepped in and said, "When we found him, he was feverish. We don't know about any symptoms leading up to that. But afterward he didn't have much appetite, in and out of sleep."

"Okay. And you spoke to the earlier doctor about his therapist?"

"Yes."

"And where is she now? Might I be able to talk to her?"

"We don't know."

The doctor frowned. "Is there any way that we can contact her? Do you have her phone number?"

"I—I don't know," Nancy sputtered, looking surprised.

"You called her from your cell this morning, sweetheart," Andrews said. Nancy brought out her cell phone and told the doctor Jameson's office number. The doctor thanked her, and as he moved to contact the therapist, he said, "Be patient. This takes time. But he's in stable condition and there's no reason to indicate that he will worsen. Give it two or three hours and we'll see. Meanwhile, I'll talk to his therapist and see if we can't establish some form of treatment to start when he wakes up."

* * *

"They've got him in surgery right now."

That was the first thing David Andrews said to his wife when she got to the hospital after the shooting. She'd been trying to raise him on his cellphone, but no phone signal could get in or out of the concrete building set in the center of town. She knew this, but panicked anyway. Not in the way that she was worried about her husband's phone being dead the moment she needed him to answer most, but because of the ideas that came with it, ideas of

the unknown,

the hospital building acting as a mesh cage.

Faraday cages, they called them.

What if he should be trapped, stuck there forever?

She could not get there fast enough.

When she did arrive, she burst through the front doors of the Emergency entrance, going straight for the desk, being pulled along as if a force was drawing her deeper into the twisting, stark hallways hidden behind the set of swishing double doors. She didn't notice David calling her name as he approached from across the waiting area until he had her by the arm.

The desk worker looked on in the kind of knowing confusion of someone who has seen too many family members following the silent calls of their loved ones.

Nancy regained herself the moment she looked at her husband. She'd arrived. Behind him, she saw Jennifer's father, his face white and strained, as if he'd taken to holding back his skin at the base of his skull. Though she'd never met them, Markus and Jonesy's parents were there in the corner. Their father was sobbing, and his wife was holding him as she sat, staring at the floor. A few nurses took them away in what seemed like seconds later.

"David?" she asked.

"They've got him in surgery now," he said.

"David?" she said again.

"He's going to be alright," he said.

Soundless mouthing.

Jennifer's father put his head in his hands.

On occasion, Will would pass into sweet unconsciousness,

the movement in the way that the bog lapped at his eyes, so that he didn't know when he was gone and when he was only floating, blind, separate, removed. Where earlier he prayed for this, for sweet relief, now it passed only as an emptiness, the way the fog passed about the bases of the trees. Memories of Jennifer, holding the gun to her throat, killing her over and over again. These were not peaceful nightmares. This was not a peaceful place.

The rain poured, and he crouched and held her head to him by her collar, and he held the gun to her temple and fired and fired and fired and

then he would wake up, laughter exploding uncontrollably from his mouth, the bog dribbling down his chin. He wanted to sob and beat the ground, but his arm only pushed through the muck. Something that wasn't tension, but felt like it, pushed against him, backward, through his bones, until the pain sought to suppress it. Together, the two danced their dance along his spine and down his limbs and he

begged for comfort from the
pain. Nightmares. Release.

Call scalpels to slice narrow slivers of meat from thighs and neck.

She smiled.

And then she died.

And that was all he knew. That, and his pain.

She kept him going

and laughing

and loving

and calling for scalpels and laughter and a muscle to twist, forcing emotion

the way a glass shatters,

ringing screams.

Two hours. Three. The clock on the wall didn't move, but the hours seemed to pass anyway.

Nancy alternated between her son's bedside, stroking his hand and saying encouraging words softly under her breath, and the bench near the window. The doctors had told her not to try to wake him while he took in the fluids, that he'd wake in his own time, so she sat beside him and watched his eyes. Andrews sat in

the chair with his legs crossed, running his hand along the stubble that had grown on his face, and thought about whether his son would wake, and whether he would be the son he'd known for the twenty-three years before this, and then decided that wondering was absurd.

You never step in the same stream twice, they said.

Of course he wouldn't be the same.

Jameson appeared in the doorway after a few hours. Her hair wasn't pulled back the way it normally was, but rather was hanging down around her head, a few strands floating loose at the edges. But her eyes were clear and sharp, and though they met with Nancy's for a moment, there was no tension between the two.

After four hours, the doctor came in. Andrews could not remember the doctor's name. The doctor said, "I know it's been some time, but there's nothing to worry about yet. He was obviously very ill when he came in, but we've got him stable now. His fever has dropped to one hundred and his heart rate has settled. I expect we should see some activity soon."

When they checked his brain activity at six hours, they saw that he was hovering at a place just before REM sleep, in the low range of the BETA waves. "What does that mean?" Nancy asked.

"It means he's in a deep trance-like state." Jameson said. The doctor nodded. "This is a place that's attained by many Buddhist monks, or similar mystical practitioners, who practice deep meditation."

"What does that mean?"

"It means he may be conscious of it. It's not a coma. He's propelled himself to this place. Because of whatever he was dealing with on the surface, he's now pushed himself into a kind of sleep-like trance."

"A sleep-like trance that you pushed him to with all this nonsense about digging into past trauma?" Nancy tried to cut the anxiety from her words but failed.

Jameson said yes.

Nancy blinked. Andrews said, "Is this still what you expected?"

Jameson said, "I don't know."

Nancy said, "What do you mean you don't know?"

"He's either dealing with this on the deepest level he can . . ."

"Or?"

"Or he's losing everything."

Normally attention is called to the destination. Over and over. Whether it be a next job, a paycheck, the next lay or weekend, or the death that ends it all. There's no destination here. There's only accepting the eternal, the perpetual.

Find peace in the way the bog turns and shifts like tides by day. Put your face to it

and breathe.

This was not supposed to be the end.

The signs around him stuck from the sludge at hard angles, several knocked over as if by some great blast that shattered them from their jagged bases, bases that Will dragged his body over, melding rusty metal with rotten meat. Will moved toward whatever epicenter fell before him.

Or he's losing everything.

He would have bit down if he'd had a jaw left to clench. His mouth hung open, and his limbs settled in the sludge.

A world gray. A world black. A word dirty yellow with the occasional flame.

The place grew quiet

now. It was eerie. The screams of the pit were as far away as the beeps of the machine that measured his heart rate—distant pings that clapped like missiles, the sound of electricity connecting ground to sky.

The place grew quiet now. It was eerie. Jameson had taken a seat on the floor, cross-legged, and closed her eyes. Nancy refused to leave her son's bedside. At the eighth hour, the doctors looked concerned and talked to Jameson in the hallway more frequently and for longer stretches of time.

His face reflected the color of the warning signs. The trees leaned the opposite direction of the signs, as if bowing.

Here, we stop thinking. Our lungs stopped long ago.

The fires turn to a slow gyration, a dance like the ones that now quiet spines.

Swim in black, breathe deep the bog, work your lungs again,

turn inside out,

stretch,

reach with fingers along boughs of trees, and when you

breathe back the bog, make it dance in slow gyrations

along your spine.

Ebony drift

and drift.

HALLOWTIDE

Now stop. We go no further.

And then there is silence. Will drifts beneath the surface without moving. Stasis. Swimming in black. The few skeletal bodies he'd encountered on his way are now far behind, moving slowly. Here the air and the trees and the fires have grown still and quiet. The flames lengthen in the calm. There is only the slow ticking of the liquid from the ends of the tree branches, exchanging places with the bog.

Then, one black leg like electric lightning,
crackling black,

I break the stasis, a single figure picking my way through the trees toward the boy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN **apotheosis**

1.

I know these things. There is God. There is suffering. If God suffers too, and he is all powerful, then he's suffering by his own hand. This was what the big man told Will while he stretched on the ground

in the bog,

with his arm dangling in pieces on the rocks.

thwock.

the rock and the screams and his voice

black legs wading through the swamp

I know these things. There is God. There is suffering. And we suffer by our own hands.

thwock.

The rock and the screams and my voice

2.

Will, I say.

He's resurfaced by the time I get to him, and he looks at me. And he sees the smoke wrap about me, in an unloving way, as if meaning to hold me close, but in the kind of indifferent way that my motions do not disturb its movement. We exist in the same place at once. It does not stir when I step. I am the smoke; the smoke is me.

Black feet sink into black tar, but when they lift again, they do so with no sound, an art practiced for two thousand years. Longer—millennia. He sees the axe murderer at the requiem, the stain on your Persian rug, he tastes the bite of Jack in your coke.

To Will, my presence is loud. Around me, the air hums with a tension, the way power lines quiver, the way your hand shakes before performance, before creation, manifesting power, the world around me within fingertips.

Call upon sparks.

My control is tempered. My body, this meat, scarred, cracked, and bleeding. Trickle of blood run like tears, and I don't blink.

I bend where Will lies, thin muscles taut, inked red, and reach below the surface, pausing for a moment before retrieving a shiny black apple. (See these sparks?) I rest my forearms upon my knees. When I bite, mud flies from my lips, and the sound is like breaking bones.

I chew. I finish my mouthful.

His eyes are open and

in him, I see myself, and my heart for a moment is filled before there is nothing.

Why are you here? I ask.

You don't know?

Part of me knows. But she's far away.

Will nods.

Why?

Because I killed them.

I touch him then, on the forehead, and pain courses from my hand through his body, channeling the electricity, the energy of the trees like frozen lightning, snapshots draining, unchanged, into the boy on the ground.

He screams. I hear it in my mind, through my forehead, and the pain courses from my hand through my body.

When I stop, his screaming ceases and he looks at me.

I killed her, Will says.

We do that.

Will nods.

Will is blank. He's as empty inside as the body he drags.

But really, I say. You came from that direction. I indicate the screams. Why?

I suffer because I deserve it.

You are this place. This place is you. As you are to me.

Will shakes his head.

Look around you.

He shakes his head again, staring into the bog.

Close your eyes and look around you.

Will closes his eyes and turns inside himself. The bones in his leg are bent at a hard angle at the knee and stick from the tar like the broken road signs behind him. His hand is permanently curled, sharp digits whittled, tree branches reaching, electrified, the energy of the snapshot trees within his hand the same way that it runs circuits within mine. The smoke on the air, in his lungs. He breathes deep the tar and sinks, and in the sinking, rises, drifts.

Have you forgotten?

Remember.

Blasted planes and Halloween. The big man. The school. The bullet taking Jennifer in her throat.

Why are you here?

She's up above. And I am down here.

We do not know which way is up and which way is down. Will is floating face down while staring at me and the trees and the smoke, but we agree on this.

You've seen the trees. You've seen this place. You've lighted fires with your mind. Stand up. Turn yourself to flame.

Will looks at himself and the bog. He wonders how he's supposed to stand when he has barely a leg left, barely an arm. He wonders still how he's speaking.

How you're seeing, I say.

And so Will stands up. I can see through him. He's bones and smoke, and when he lights himself on fire, it's in a fluid motion, a torch burning—emptyreal fires.

I take another bite of my apple and sit on the top of the bog, cross-legged. My skin is black and runs with red rivers. Will sits across from me, and we stay this way: he, aflame, I, ashen.

Who are you?

We sit and study each other. Will has lost himself. He no longer remembers his

name except in the recognition that it is directed at him. You could call to him and the trees would turn to look.

Sometimes he would pass the flame to me by hand and I'd alight, and after some time he'd flicker out, his arms and head glowing like hot coals. Once, he looked down at his arms and laughed, and so I tell him to make it rain.

He shakes his head and says no.

Why not?

I'm here to burn.

So burn, I say.

And again, he turns to flames, and the fire burns whiter and hotter, and the coals start to crumble because his fire burns so hot, but he scowls because he does not feel the fire beyond the nerves that sing and relay the crackle and tickle and the plasma dance. There is pain, but the pain does not feel

so different.

So rain, I say.

Will stares at the sky and instead hears:

Remember.

And maybe that's what he needs. Because here there is white heat and flame, and a step above there is rain, and he wants to be here, so I tell him to remember, and he says

I cannot.

What you are left is the fact of it. You killed them. And her.

He nods.

Did you want to kill them?

He says, I must have.

You don't remember?

No.

It might be better that you remember that instead.

Why are you here? There must be reason.

Echoes return to me, and I look above to make the sky rain, and the only way I can is to make it bleed, and when it rains, it comes down like hailstones and brimstone, and Will says, This is not rain,

and I frown. My sparks only burn.

Something below me seethes.

Tell me about Jennifer, I say.

Will looks up and says

It's five years ago. It's now. It's in the hospital after the shooting. Jennifer made a nurse put her in a wheelchair and move her to Will's room. Her neck is heavily bandaged and her eyes are sunken into her face so that they look like sockets on a skull. She is exhausted, and the nurse says,

This is a bad idea,

but she insists, and her father says that it is alright, and so now she is rolling down the hallway toward Will's room.

Will's father rested with his head against the windowsill, beneath which was the bench that he was trying to sleep on. But his eyes were open and he was studying the ceiling and Jennifer saw his lips moving. She didn't know if he was actually praying or if she only hoped that he was.

Hello Jennifer, he said when she came in. At first it was as if Will had said the words, their voices were so similar, and for a moment her heart skipped a beat, excitement rushed to her chest, before she realized that it was only his father by the window.

I can give you some privacy, he said, and smiled a tired smile that matched Jennifer's own. He walked past her to the doorway, giving her upper arm a gentle squeeze.

She rolled herself over to the bed. The nurse walked out of the room and tried to make a big deal about it, but Jennifer took no notice. Will was there on the bed. His head was wrapped in a bandage that was white and crisp, the same color as his sheets and nearly the same color as his face. His forehead was clenched as if in concentration. He did not look peaceful, and this bothered her.

Will, she said, taking his hand. I hear that people in comas sometimes hear when people are speaking to them,

the same way as in dreams sometimes.

If you're in a place just deep enough to pay attention,
you might hear,

and remember us up here, she laughed.

But the laughter hurt. She touched the bandage on her neck and said,

The whole thing feels like a nightmare, and one that's fading. I hope it fades away completely in the next few days. That would be a little blessing from God, if you ask me. I hope—

She bit back tears and pressed her lips down. Dammit, I hope when you wake up, you don't remember it at all. Don't blame yourself, Will. Don't hurt inside. You

did the right thing.

Because I'm here, Will. She held his hand tighter and moved her fingers between his. Because I'm here.

And I love you.

The words felt uncomfortable in her mouth. After only a few months of dating, they'd yet to say the words, yet to really believe them, anyway. But she wanted to say them now. On some level they sounded right. Even if you shot me, and she laughed again. How twisted is that?

She wasn't sure, but when she left, she thought that his forehead had softened, if just by a little.

Remember, Will.

Tell me instead, he says.

I don't know what happened.

You don't?

I'm down here. I see very little now.

But you have power?

Yes.

So make me remember.

I sit back. I look at the boy. I see his pain and his tears, the ones he left along the ground behind him in getting here. Those I can see. Those I know. I know because they're my tears and it's my pain and I haven't had a mirror in so long. The water has been so cloudy and it turned so inky so long ago.

So make me remember.

I said, Stanley Davis.

I'll show you a face, he thought. Two faces. It will be my own, and yours will be reflected in mine, and maybe you'll believe it more than the one in front of you.

And maybe you'll know

When Jennifer wheeled herself out of the room, she saw a man walking down the hallway. His walk was strange, forced, as if each step cost him his breath, or his strength, so that he seemed unwell, not even himself, the way that zombies in undead horror flicks seem not quite human.

It surprised her, then, when she saw that it was Mister Davis. He looked like an old man. His limp pronounced. Exaggerated. She remembered him taking the bullet. His cries.

Mister Davis? she asked,

and he stared at her. The intensity of his gaze hurt her eyes, and he collapsed to one knee, his other leg sticking out at a strange angle.

Jennifer, he said. Jennifer, please. There were tears in his eyes, and she felt tears spring to her own at the image.

I'll show you a face, he thought. Two faces.

He stood in his doorway, hands behind his back, balanced on the frame. He listened to the chatter of the group of students just down the hall. He listened to the growing laughter inside his own classroom on his other side and said, "Quiet down, guys. Let's keep our focus." His voice came out strange, and he suddenly felt ill. The color drained from his face, from the world. The hallway stood on end like a guitar string strung too tight.

Religious beliefs are kind of a clusterfuck, A student's voice said from the hallway behind him. Stanley pretended he didn't hear. It started with Hinduism, but then Buddhism exploded.

Davis put his hand to his stomach.

Are you alright, Mister Davis? one student asked. And he looked at her with that same

Half-forced, half-amused look

before turning back to the hallway.

When Jenson turned the corner, he smiled,

and something inside Davis twisted and squirmed, and he tried to bite back a bubble of fear. That culmination of everything that had kept him awake for the past month, that was reflected in this man's smile. Whoever he was,

he was what Davis had been waiting for.

Davis smiled back, not because he wanted to, but because the sneer that crept to his face, the surprise, it pulled at the muscles in his cheeks, and the big man for a moment seemed content with the smile and did not recognize

the rot

that boiled within the math teacher.

Then the big man pulled the weapon and Stanley's stomach fell.

Students in the classroom screamed the moment they heard the sound, like canon fire in the hallway—unexpected and echoing destruction, the way the planes screamed two months ago before the soft sound of metal entering metal and the plumes of orange and smoke before showers, unexpected and echoing destruction;

destruction the way your mother's temper snaps when she's had enough and screams your name, the way a chain breaks. The students at tables nearest the door threw themselves backward when they heard the sound. They were too far to see Markus's blood splatter across the frame. For a moment, Davis stood blankly at the door, processing what happened.

Was that . . . ?

He realized that he needed to take action, but wondered why his limbs wouldn't quite move.

When he turned his head, he saw Adam disappear around the corner, leaving red streaks on the floor, saw Will throw his arms across Jennifer and watched Jennifer clawing at his back before reaching to drag herself away. *Get in the classroom*, Davis yelled at the students, but the moment the words had joined the maelstrom, another gunshot took the frame near his face, and another still took his leg,

and for a moment there was nothing, only impact. His leg gave out and he fell inside toward the classroom, pushing out a moment later, reaching for the students, to take the man with the gun, to help,

then pain erupted within his body, coinciding with white flares and a high-pitched sound and sparks flickering at the edges of his vision, and as he reached a hand toward Will, another bullet shot off the floor three feet in front of him.

His students were screaming, but they were—

With a cry, a student hit the door behind him, forcing it closed on his arm, breaking the skin in one place but not the bone. Davis shouted, No! as the door caught him, wrenched his arm back inside, and the room was plunged into darkness.

No. Once he'd said the word, it was easy to keep saying it. Students screamed at each other to shut up, prompting more screams to stop, but all Davis could say was no and wait for the gunshots that told him he'd lost another

Jennifer, you have to tell me what happened. We have to tell Will. We have to tell Will. The words that fell from his mouth then fell from his mouth now—repetitions. We have to help Will.

I don't know that I can do that.

You must.

Reliving that, Mister Davis, I—

Jennifer. Tell me what happened.

She feared that it might break her, that it might take her and shred her, to see it. She was already seeing it:

Will holding the gun, unsteady; the tears; the way half of his face had turned red

and lines cut through the corners of his eyes.

Tell me what happened. You won't ever have to tell it again.

Jennifer, her forehead lined like cracks in shattered glass; the wound on her neck, the hole in the window, cracks splaying out, liquefying, leaking from her eyes. Her mouth turned down before opening. Her breath hitched.

Tell me what happened.

Davis walked into Will's room as Mr. and Mrs. Andrews came back down the hallway, both with coffees in hand. Who was that? they said, concern springing to their faces again, echoes of strange men in hallways where their boy was supposed to be safe.

It's our math teacher, Mister Davis, Jennifer said, trying to twist her chair about so that she could see what Davis was doing in the room. After a moment, she gave up and stood, holding on to the IV rack. She saw the nurse come down the hall at a brisk walk but ignored her and leaned in the door.

Excuse us, said Andrews, taking the initiative. Can we help you?

Davis looked at Andrews first and then his wife, staring at her for a moment before turning back to Andrews. I met you once, he said, in a voice that sounded hollow and forced. At the back-to-school night earlier this semester. I'm Will's math teacher.

Stanley Davis, right? Andrews said.

He nodded slowly, confused, stressed.

I'm sorry, Andrews said. We're not sure he's well enough for visitors.

Might I? Davis said, as if to entertain their worries. For just a moment. I'm not in much condition myself. He laughed and then seemed frightened by drawing attention to his own condition, making to hide the leg and the pain and the limp and the blood that was seeping through the bandage. I was in the shooting too, he said. I was just down from your boy and I, and—

If I might just have a moment?

Uncertain and hesitating, Andrews said, If you'd like. Nancy shot him a look, and he worried that he should have not offered, but he was there, and not so different from Will. Only awake.

Only for a brief time. He's very sick.

Thank you, Davis said.

We'll be waiting just outside then, Andrews said. And meant it. He kept the blinds at half slats so that he could linger at the window and watch.

Outside, Jennifer was still in the hallway with the nurse standing behind her wheelchair. Andrews noticed the girl and went to her while Nancy went directly to

the window, straining to hear what Davis might be saying to her boy through the open door.

Andrews caught the look on Jennifer's face before he asked the question, but he asked it anyway. You're familiar with Davis, right? He's your teacher?

Jennifer said, Yes, he was. That she had him last semester for Advanced Algebra.

Does he seem . . . Andrews trailed off and looked back at the room, then to Jennifer, with his hand leveled. He turned it from side to side.

Jennifer nodded and bit her lip. Grief, maybe, she said.

A headache was starting to form behind her temples, and she thought it was better to go back to her room. To call this over. To leave it behind. But he said he'd save—He said they'd save him.

Andrews turned back to the room and leaned in next to his wife at the window, at first worried about being too obvious about their watchful concern for their son, then not caring at all. Of course they should be watchful over their son, who was just nearly killed in a school shooting.

Inside, Davis was standing over the bed without moving. He was not crouching or holding the boy's hand. He'd not pulled up a chair. He was not praying or speaking to the boy. He was just standing there, looking at him.

They couldn't tell if Davis was speaking to Will or just standing there and, checking his watch, Andrews wondered when would be appropriate to usher the man out. He moved to the door and listened but could barely detect murmurs, the higher notes and vowels that caught on the air and carried to the door. Leaning in, he tried to catch a bit of what the man might be saying. The words were so close that if only he might lean a little further, he might just be able to make them

Remember, Will.

And Will is not sure whether the words had come from the skinny, blackened man that sat before him, or whether the words had come from someplace deeper, someplace beyond. He moved to speak,

or whatever it was that passed for speech here,

but instead he heard the words again and he moved, the world shifting, the black tar crawling and turning, and it started with

A night. Darkened windows in the apartment, now spray-painted black where the blackout curtains had been failing, allowing too much of too little light in at the edges. There was an odor about the place; of old sweat, unwashed bodies, the air that turns thick and stagnant amongst itself, dropping heavy about the floor where

old clothes and papers would have been scattered had Jenson had papers or clothes to scatter. Even his food supply had eventually dwindled to only the trashcan and sink. One plate, on which he'd built his sandwiches or cut his fruit, sat in the basin, bare now for a number of days, and with a thickening stain where the juice had hardened and taken

rot—

no, root. Where the juice had taken root.

A bit like the room, really.

He lay on his bed, arms splayed, however he'd landed when he'd fallen, made to shut out the world, the black, and drifted almost the moment he'd touched the mattress, so that it was as if he'd sunk through, fell, and found a world below.

Will woke, said, Wait, this feels like

twisting in his bed, bringing his face into the backboard—

a snapping sound, the kind that wood and bone make together,

and his head slammed into the ground of the cavern.

The transition was as smooth as closing his eyes.

In this world he created, he rebuilt his room and moved about in it as an invisible entity. Then he moved through other rooms in the complex, where there were people fighting, or watching television, or sleeping in some half-stoned haze, at this hour of the morning, most of them were sleeping, and he killed them. It was easy, see?

He placed his hand on their chests and pulled them from their bodies. There were tendrils of black that threaded about his hand and tried to fight him, there were faces that pressed through the base of the skin, and there was screaming, but he turned the sound off and shoved deeper and pulled harder, and when the soul unraveled inside, he released and drifted and became the apartment around the freshly dead.

(Here, now, in this one, the coroner would later decide it was a drug overdose, a mixture of chemicals, though the chemicals in his system seemed rather low to cause such a violent reaction—at least, this was how it went in Jenson's mind.

He didn't stay long enough to watch, he didn't leave the room, he never walked to see, to know, to learn.)

He became the laminate tiles and the stained drywall and the cracking window frame and the wind that beat at it, and the dead soul, unstrung and sticky and slapping about on the floor, was lost, confused, a fetus, red, dripping and flinging

about the room. There was spectral stuff that spattered about Jenson but he enjoyed the feeling. He wondered aloud if the thing on the floor would ever realize the constructed nature of this place, transcend it, find another, of his own creation, or something deeper that ran throughout

Something deeper still.

The thought worried him in a way that turned the walls slanting inward against the fetus creature. The lights dimmed and forced a small crooning sound from the dead man.

How much was by design, how much established by what we make of it, what was made for us, what was real, what was overcome, and where was it that the righteous and the damned fell when they passed?

He, living, fled from the body and built cities, crippled cities that stank of smog from wood that was rotting inside out and seemed to pulse and hum in time to the insects that moved about within.

Where was God amongst this? What city had he built? Earth? Heaven? Hell? Was God so perverse that he built his people out of the same rotting wood and crippled stone that cancer devoured like cockroaches, and broke his walls to dispose toothpicks within, creating places still below that? Was the journey inside a journey to break down atoms, to find their splintery bones? And what then?

Twist yourself about on them until your blood becomes the stuff of every next generation?

Atheism,

better to think a god crawls underground than to think he's watching and delighted,

or saddened

impotent.

Atheism,

be buried and let the worms consume you and break down the flesh to form the soil to form the trees of tomorrow, to form the fuel for the sun as the sun once fueled us.

Program his children with rot,

call him Job. Call us all Job.

Satan challenged man's faith in God. So God challenged man's faith in God.

Suffer submissive man.

Send Christ to suffer for sins of God, to understand His work,

yet still there's rot.

Overcome. Test. If He did not love her the way that I loved her, he thinks... We put it in His face. Find our Job, send Job to Hell.

Will opened his eyes, looked at me,

Jenson looked at me,
said, Yet still there's rot.

When he came awake in his bed, he did not know what hour it was, what day it was, and he felt ill to his stomach. Yet still there's rot. And he remembered his mother's faith,

his mother's face on her bed,
pallid and pulled tight and the way her voice wheezed when she tried to speak to him, and he yelled and he screamed because he did not understand why.

Jenson turned to the side, retched, but he had nothing left in his belly to reject, and all that heaved from his throat was

rot.

There is no framework. There is only what we create, there is only what's been created, and today he would find God, if there was a God;

if there wasn't,

he wouldn't be here to know.

It's better to die anyway,

to open eyes to the constructed,

to overcome.

He was saving the students.

But first, he would need to build a bomb and buy the gun.

Will lit himself on fire and tried to focus on the pain, to understand that same suffering, to feel the rot, and as he did so he saw Jennifer, the bullet taking her in the neck, saw his own hand holding the gun and knew that if there was rot, it was within.

This idea, upon death, facing death, facing the vastness of infinity in every direction. Be it nothing. Or everything. It's both. There's an emptiness in eternity, fear in forever. A stress of losing everything that you've ever known, all you've ever thought. Fall into the vastness, the abyss. Stark, cosmic horror. Nihilism and utter meaning. Fill your soul to the point that it overflows, and in the stuff, you look through and see only nothing.

Why should he even care?

We cling so tightly to this life. We hold it so desperately. We search for

anything to light up the infinity of dark. Were it light, we search for a darkness. Something to break the stasis, something to stop our hurtling. Fly as fast as you can. It's only nothing. You don't move even in the slightest. Your breath catches; you try to breathe in the infinite, but it clogs at your lungs and you splutter.

Walking skeletons. We're all going to die. Every one of us. Now, later. Young, old. Painfully or subtly.

He took a deep breath. Felt his lungs stiffen against immobile ribs and a weight in his chest.

Let it out.

He breathed out a cosmos, supernova spectacles and exploding suns. Then he reached and opened the door and walked into

October 31, shortly after lunchtime. Clive Jenson walked into

the school in a light blue, button-up shirt and baggy slacks without being given much of a second glance. His shirt fit poorly around the bomb that he had strapped to his chest. He wasn't sure if it would go off when he wanted it to, or if it might go off on accident at any point, or if it was a bomb at all, if his ratios might have been off, if when he pressed the button, at most a puff of baking powder would cough into the air, and he'd laugh and laugh,

and maybe the students would laugh with him,

press the stem of the flower on your chest and squirt water,

smile wide,

and then he'd press the button that he knows will work,

call sparks

to gunpowder and kill

sparks of life and shred the physical with a bullet.

His eyes, though dark, were not entirely out of the ordinary. The manner with which he carried himself was comfortable and relaxed, and the only indication that something about his intention was amiss was in the way he gradually stiffened around each hallway corner, as if sensing a predator by smell.

Some of the classroom doors stood open to him, and he looked in as he casually passed. Groups of students, rows of desks, teachers lecturing before their children. He wasn't looking to begin his rampage in the classroom, though. He was, it seemed, in search of something—or someone—specific.

The call for the lockdown didn't go out until it was nearly all over.

Please? Will said.

And I did not know what he wanted, but I heard the voice too and I listened.

Will sat next to Jennifer in the hallway. She scribbled notes in her notebook over two textbooks open on the floor in front of them. A small piece of poster board lay beyond that, where one of the twins, Markus, was coloring in their title. It was a geography project where they had to study another culture, paraphrase their religious beliefs, climate, how their economy worked, what their education systems and forms of government were like, and put it together into a brief presentation for the class.

"Religious beliefs are kind of a clusterfuck," Adam said from against the far wall, paging through a printout from the internet. "It started with Hinduism, but then Buddhism exploded."

Jonesy laughed and pushed out his belly, putting his palms up on his knees in a symbol of the Buddha, and then pretended like he had exploded. Markus scowled at his brother's sense of humor and went back to work on the title. Adam said, "Ironic. Apparently dialogue was important in their culture and they'd have public debates. You know, instead of open warfare and all."

"Left that to the crusades," Jonesy said.

Jennifer frowned and Will shrugged.

A few of them glanced up when the big man rounded the corner but paid him no attention.

Meanwhile, Jenson took his time to pull the weapon from behind his back, his shirt tail coming out with the metal, and with the first shot he took Markus in the neck. Markus's eyes went wide, his body straightening from the hit, and he turned his head toward the source of the sound to see what had happened. The motion forced blood down his front, and he patted his shirt up to his neck, as if following a trail of clues to his throat. He looked surprised, then clenched his eyes tight when the pain hit. He pressed his hands against the wound, and his face drained of color. His brother reached toward him, stunned, and took two in his chest. They burst like small explosions, and he fell into his brother, dead within—

Adam, seeing what had happened, grabbed a hold of the back of Will's shirt to drag his friend away, but Will was too heavy and his weight was already going toward Jennifer.

The gunman saw this, and seeing the barrel now being directed toward him, Adam let go of Will and threw himself down the hallway, sliding on the polished floor, the first bullet missing him and burying itself in the brick wall further down, the second landing deep within his calf. He cursed loudly as he scrambled around the bend in the hallway, too afraid to shout his friends' names, to call and see if

they were alright. He only had to listen to the three shots that followed, the ringing of his ears, the muffled sounds of doors slamming and screams coming from the classrooms, to know.

He pushed himself toward the nearest door, pounding on it until he saw eyes peek over the glass, scoping out the scene, catching a glimpse of his bleeding leg. For a moment the door cracked open, only to be slammed shut in front of his face and then wrenched open again. Hands reached out, grabbing his shirt, accompanied by more screams and pleading voices telling them to hurry the fuck up or that they'd all be dead, and then the door slammed again and the hallway was—

Will blocked Jennifer with his body and tried to push her backward, but their limbs were tangled and she said no, knowing where the next bullet would fall, knowing that it was Will who would go first instead of her, and she tried to scream at her boyfriend, but no sound came out.

"Stop," the gunman said, leveling his pistol at the two.

Will threw his arms to the sides, giving himself up to the man while trying to seem bigger, as if with his arms he could catch bullets, save Jennifer.

The gunman tore open his shirt, and on his chest some metal contraption gleamed with silver and small wires that ran from small sacks strapped to black belts. There was something twisted about the sight, inhuman, as if what stood before them was a robot cyborg of some kind, that this was not the reality that they knew. Their friends were dead. Jennifer refused to look at Jonesy or Markus, was afraid to look at the shooter or grab hold of Will, and so she bit down on her lip until it bled, praying, her voice gushing from her mouth the way vomit might, involuntarily and instinctually, as if to be rid of an evil.

"Stop!" the man yelled and fired a shot into the ceiling, but neither Will nor Jennifer was moving. Will looked at the gun and then the bomb and then the grin that wrapped around the man's face—a grin that seemed alive in the way it trembled—and the way his skin leaked across his forehead and around his eyes, gritting in anger or hatred or sick glee, and Will's mind swam.

The world trembled. The light in the hallway seemed to flex and—

Stanley Davis fought to see over the edge of the window. Shouts were hurtled at him to stay down, and he shouted back at his students to please be quiet, please just be silent.

And from the edge, where the glass warped and twisted as it met the blue metal frame, he could see

the spray and flow of black blood, could see Will with arms spread wide, shaking, fists tight, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched in front of Jennifer, whose dirty blonde hair was splayed and

beautiful in the light of the low October sun that seemed to ride the sky near the horizon all day,

golden light through golden trees of hair, and Will, trying as hard as he could to contain the light, to keep it from the cracks, to not betray the secret he held in his hands,

and Davis cried out inside.

Open the door, run at the man, save him. But his leg was useless, his approach clumsy. A good way to get killed. Inside, some force behind his heart and stomach seemed to slide down to his leg and seize, the muscles pressing forward. He almost lost control of himself, not in fear but in

letting go,

in the way the muscles in his back unwrapped from the bone and pulled like levers and gadget wires and his body turned in the direction that the wires met on the cyborg body in front of him.

Save them. Save them. Help him. Help save him.

The gun barked and screamed and then

the air broke under the hiss of electricity, the beep that signaled an oncoming announcement, the panicked, confused voice of the office worker:

"Students, we are in a lockdown situation. Please close and lock your doors, turn off your lights, and

wait."

"So help me God," the big man said and tittered. "I will press this button and blow you, me, and this school to bits if you so much as move a muscle toward me." His voice was loud over the intercom static, and it was as if the air were breaking into different sounds and falling to the ground in red.

Will couldn't speak if he wanted to. What would he say? "Okay?" And try to reason with the man?

The big man's eyes were wide, and there was a glare within them that struck Will as raving. This was a lunatic, a madman released, who didn't care about their lives;

there was nothing sacred to this man. Trivia. Their lives. His relationship. How much he cared for Jennifer. Struck meaningless. And in this Will was terrified.

His heart surged and tears sprang to his eyes and the word he did say was,

Jennifer?

He said it as a question but meant it as a statement. A statement of recognition, or time that was left, of everything that had come before and would have come afterward, a statement like a dream of their future, where marriage and children—normally seemed a frightening joke and a dream of a high school mind romanced by notions of naivety in the way the world works—now was a reflection of the way the world could have worked, the way Heaven could have been. He saw it in the way that Jennifer prayed from a place that bypassed her mind, that came from deeper within, the place of tears and laughter, and he hoped to God, or whoever was

above, that there was a
 heaven, and what he could only
 imagine
 would be waiting there, fulfilled, where in this life it was not.
 He clenched his arms tight.

Jenson laughed; he had to. Something inside had snapped and he needed to roll with it. From the place of Jennifer's words and Will's determination, he laughed and pointed the weapon at Will, danced close and held it to his forehead with his finger pressed to the trigger, just taut enough so that he believed that he would actually do it,

but not enough to end it all, not yet.

He grabbed Will by the collar of his shirt and threw him to the ground, and Jennifer fell with him before Jenson kicked her away, his foot landing in the fleshy part of her chest, her words for a moment turning to exclamations, and

he lowered the gun, pointing it at Will again. The boy moved as if to duck from the bullet, dodging and weaving and thrashing on the floor.

No acceptance here, no peace with death. Are we so afraid? It happens to us all. If I hold a gun to your face and fire, call it over. This won't hurt a bit.

Jenson then reached for Will's chest, pressed hard, his thumb catching the boy in the lower throat. Will coughed, thrashed.

He pulled the trigger. Will swung his arm and Jennifer screamed. The gun barked, irony, counterpoint to the sounds the boy made in his throat. Will's hand took the gun, knocked it upward so that the bullet lodged above his ear

His head erupted in pain and slammed back down against the floor, and everything seemed to burst

At the sound of the shot, when Will broke against the ground and the red flickered against the wall in a smooth and fluid motion, like a slap, Davis's leg caught under him and he went down on the floor of the classroom with a guttural cry that matched to Jennifer's

sweet music. Fuzzy. Will, despite the pain coming in pulses, reached toward Jennifer on his right, trying to make sense of the thickness of the air between them and why everything was

"Take this," the big man said, pushing the gun into Will's hand.

What? Will wondered. He's giving me the gun?

There was a logic here, he knew. And he was missing it, the way that he was missing the dream the moment he woke up, the way that the threads wrenched apart, and whatever was holding them together before was lost in the cracks. This was lost

and he begged for it to hold on.

"Look at me," the big man said, and grabbed Will's chin hard in his palm, looking Will in the face. He held up a small device with a red button on top and Will thought,

I know that.

"This is what you do. You either shoot her, your girlfriend, yes? Your crush? Whatever. You either shoot her, or I press this button, kill her, you, me, and the entire school in an instant, in a blink of your eye. Sweet release."

Will said, No.

"You shoot her, or everyone in this school dies."

Will careened.

"And don't even think about shooting me first. My thumb is faster than your trigger finger."

The weight of the weapon was like lead in Will's hand. He pointed it upward, toward the ceiling, and squeezed off a shot. The big man stomped on Will's free arm, then crouched down toward him again. "Do it. Shoot her."

Will looked to his right, where Jennifer was sprawled on the ground, tears on her cheeks, her hand over her mouth and nose, wiping away the liquid and the sounds from her mouth. She shook her head but said, "Do it, Will."

No, Will thought. Let him blow us both up. At least it will not be by my hand.

But the big man ran his fingers along the crack in Will's hairline, and Will screamed

and pointed the weapon at Jennifer and the big man said, Yes.

What if God were in a situation to save the lives of all the students by taking just one? What would He do? Would either solution be considered condemnable? Would there be any other way out? Omnipotent, they said,

potency, sweet smells, gunpowder and copper.

The big man said, Yes.

Will leveled the gun through the fog, the smoky yellow haze that was filling the hallway, where the shadows had lengthened. He felt the big man beside him, a heat against his skin—hot breath and a touch of rot.

He reached for Jennifer down the hall, felt for heat, a moistness, like the humidity of the tropics, like her breath on his neck.

He could barely see her as he squinted through the haze. Her hair dangled, damp with sweat, tears falling from her face. a hand clamped over her mouth, eyebrows turned up, forehead creased. Will— she said,

and he said, "I'm so sorry,"

and she nodded twice, quickly,

and he squeezed, and the gun bucked in his hand, and

there was a red mist, and there were Jennifer's eyes, staring at him as if to apologize.

There was the laughter of the big man, bursting with force from his lips the same way the blood had burst from Jennifer's throat, and

there was Will, swinging the weapon at the man and squeezing again and again, but only one shot went off and only one shot took the man in the face and turned the sound of his laughter—and, underneath, the sound of his anguish, his tears, the memory of his mother—and turned them red and pulpy and spattered them across the wall.

Black burst from the man like a fountain and flowed along the walls with limbs that throbbed and crawled, and from them, arms reached for the man and pulled and dragged and,

from the black and the blood and the tears, pulled at the body and wrapped long fingers and fell through skin and

there was Will, trying to crawl toward Jennifer. He did not want to recognize what he had done, to place his hands on the tears and will the blood to stop, to ignore the—

but he could not help his motion toward this girl that he loved.

And he moved his arm forward along the tile and he pulled, his legs growing weaker, synapses tiring, pushing, stretching to touch even just a shoe or her leg, to tell her, before she left, before he left, that he was there, that he was sorry, that he did not

His fingers brushed denim and the smoke grew thick and dark and black and he felt hands on his body and he held tight to her leg until that, too, gave, like the air seeped out, and he fell.

3.

Davis had fallen by Will's bedside in the course of his whispered conversation. It had been five minutes, the long kind of minutes, the kind where each set of seconds seems to stretch by and hold fast. Should they go and take him? Andrews and Nancy wondered. But he seemed passionate, intent to tell Will something.

Whatever that was, Andrews could not hear, though he strained.

Should we get him? he asked his wife.

She hesitated and pursed her lips before nodding.

Davis looked up as they entered the room, and fear scratched across his face.

Mister Davis, we're sorry, but we're—

His words were cut off when Davis sprang to the bed and screamed in Will's face and took hold of his shoulders and shook him, hard, his words

cutting through:

Dear God, please, just listen, just bear me! Will, please!

Stanley looked up at the dark figure that only he could see, standing on the other side of Will's bed, watching him with empty eyes, devoid of expression. A rage and anger seethed about the silhouette. *Is this enough? I can't do any more, God damn you!*

Stanley thrashed and tore at Will, at his shirt, his skin, pounding on his chest before hands grabbed his back, hands he thought were from some other world, black hands pulling him. The shadowed man on the other side of Will's bed, reaching, inviting.

A fingernail caught the skin of Will's right arm, tearing a line, red against white.

The feeling echoes into the pit and Will says, But—

And his arm grows back from the empty socket, fades, grows again in a twisting, changing space, and he remembers fires in homes and burns against glass and scratching at the wound and the flies, and he remembers holding onto the leg of her jeans and mouthing her name against blackness and

He gasped awake in bed.

Stanley fell. Andrews nearly caught him since his arms were already around the man, but he was not expecting the motion.

Stanley gasped, sucking air, his mouth turning slowly purple.

His eyes closed.

Andrews felt for a breath on his hand and pushed for a pulse before screaming, *Get a doctor in here, right now!*

Jennifer twisted from the doorway, hands clutching her chair, and wheeled herself back against the wall with one push, her muscles seizing and her throat searing.

Not again.

And then they noticed that Will's eyes were open, blinking slowly at them, awake from a three-day sleep, confused at the commotion, unsure of the action, trying to speak.

"Will?" they said, and for a moment they were torn between the man, broken at their feet, and the boy who'd reawakened in his bed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN **when the wheel stops**

1.

Rain. When it came, it was like the lightning split, cracked down the center and ran from the cloud, cut lines in the smog and bled them. It started first in a downpour, sudden and torrential, moving from scalding rain and hail to a steady trickle, in the same kind of movement as Will's realization that

that it might not have been as he thought.

In the rain, the trees rejoice, seemingly straightening, creaking. The fire that consumed Will's body goes out and the charcoal runs in streams that mix with the red and ride on the surface of the drying tar. Will sees me grow transparent and fuzzy at the edges, a glass forming between us, running with the water, keeping me from the refreshment and pushing him farther away, one fading, the other in refracting light, cast at angles, obscured.

Will calls for the rain to slow but it doesn't.

Eventually he looks at himself, the way some part of him sits within the tatters that hang around him. He looks at the arm that ends at the bicep, his other an arm with ropes for muscles, pulled taut, into knots, into what was more a functioning rake.

He drags each piece of this place closer, consuming it, shoving it away again. It's the same process

above,

and above that?

Well. Another day.

Your food, collected, masticated, excreted,

the rain reabsorbs into the sky—the ground turning it first invisible before offering it, in spirit—before it grows too heavy and falls again.

Will holds the rake before him and feels the rain and turns his flesh to fire and watches it dance and sputter in the downpour. He watches the steam cough from the flame as the flame resists and fights and struggles to stay alight.

Eventually he falls backward and lands again in the bog, the surface of which has grown another skin, a layer of clear water from the sky, that blends the tendrils of tar as they rise and dilute, and Will moves in the water and flaps his arms and watches the ripples spread from his body to lap at the trees.

From the rain, there is steam where it strikes the surface of this place, and the air fills thick with white that turns pale yellow from the smog and the smoke, and it too fills the space between us, and we can no longer see each other.

But in the way that Will drifted below the surface when he first came, the way he drifts below the surface now, we do not need to

see.

He reaches, the way he reached before, and from the hand, the rake, rises the trees,

and when he holds his breath, the months and the weeks pass, and from his fingers burst slow motion seeds and green leaves that

remind him of the way the bullets took Markus and Jonesy in their chests, blooming, coughing seedlings and pollen and re-fertilizing the walls and the side of your friend's jeans.

Push a baby's head from your body

and burst from the water's surface

the way you burst from a dream in the middle of the night,

a scream caught in your throat, as if that was the place

where words are formed,
 that mark the barrier between dream and reality,
 and if they should spill through, they
 might
 stand on their own, unremembered, without context,
 alien.

Will presses his fingertips to the surface of the water before his face and plays with the way his fingers break

into the air, ebbing like light kisses from the lips of a lover,

Jennifer, taking the bullet to the throat. The bullet, not from his gun, nor really his hand. He watches it take her without rage, but with sadness, and with that sadness he looks to me and asks if that would keep him here, and I say,

It's what keeps me here,

and he sees that the waters around him are like teardrops, and he drifts in them as I drift in the blackness and try not to see,

to close my eyes.

He brings his fingertips below the water and above the surface and tries to discern when they are touching the air. Truly, there is a naked feeling in his motions. When it's the water that is still left on his fingers, cooling his hand and calling to the humidity in the air,

only then does he feel the air in the way that what was there a moment before now is not.

There's beauty in that, he says. Peace.

I nod, and if I try to smile, it's at the corners of my mouth and he does not believe it. Does not see. Does not know the rage and that frustration that still brew, that will call the lightning back to the air when he's gone, that will call for tears that resist falling, that will bring back the thicker smoke that embraces the place where I sit, and I'll wander again.

He calls the rain down from above in torrents, and it might be because he's remembering, or it might be because he wants to feel it, or maybe that's just the same thing.

He feels the electricity run along his skin, and it charges his chest the way it did when he first saw Jennifer, when his heart fluttered, when he wanted a kiss but did not know how to ask her for it.

This is a dream? he asks.

It's the surface of the water, I say.

Will I forget this?

I told him that I did not know. Already I am fading from him. Do you want to remember?

I'm not sure that I do, he says. And he finally sheds the hard mirrored look I saw under the surface when he arrived, and I see the boy beneath, confused and young. Aged an eternity.

You'll know it when you're ready. That's the way of these things. When you're prepared to know a love of such depth, you'll know this place. You'll be ready to cross one abyss to reach another. It's already been written.

Will nods but looks frightened.

That's the way that they come. Two sides of the same coin. The light of the sun and the dark of the night.

Will nods again.

Will touches his hand to the water and feels the shock and the spark and the unraveling in his chest again, the way it unraveled when he first saw Jennifer.

He falls back and watches the sky and strains to see stars, but all he sees are slow-floating, white ashes and sparks.

After some time, he says, in a voice far off now,

Stanley? Was that you?

And for a moment I think he's blurred, confused, until I understand his question.

Everything with Stanley? Was that you?

To all the questions, I reply,

Yes.

Some time later, he says, in barely a whisper, to keep an eye on him. To write. Later, Gator. I don't know what he means by this, but I smile.

Will pushed his head back below the surface, and along his body, the tattered pieces broke from himself and dissolved into the still water.

He opened his lungs to breathe, and he took the water in, and though it burned, he held it. Vision spotty.

I hold my knees tighter and watch him fade beneath the surface, the tar spilling from his body and thickening the water so that, if I should touch the surface, it

would cling to my skin, and should I hold my finger before letting go, it would become the stuff of dirt and the water between it. Fingertips nibble, reaching,
 asking me kindly for my forgiveness, my blessings, my sympathy.

I wonder if that might be all it would take.

If you go high enough, I say to Will. He hears my voice while sinking, but in the way that he heard Stanley Davis's voice deep in his chest, a voice from a dream, remembered years later. . . . Do you know those dreams? Form the synapses by morning light, forget by noon, and then, eight years, ten years later, you retrace old electric moments, blow the dust from them, and ignite a place that was dark for so long.

If you go high enough, find her, take her in you, and
 he does not hear the rest of my words, but I hear him say,
 She,

and I strain to hear the rest, and I follow him down, and I see the way the world bursts from his eyes, and I hear,

Dear God, please, just listen, just bear me! Will, please!

and I strain to hear him, Will, as the light gets loud and breaks and there are shouts and screams and the sound of another man rising, falling, moving away,
 and Will says, she already did.

And I let go,
 or something snaps.

It feels the same.

And then the light is too bright, and when I close my eyes, it feels better to be in the dark, but that might be because of the rain, its stinging tips
 but rain still, falling across my arms and flesh.

2.

When Will awoke, his room was empty. He heard a woman in the hallway, but he could not tell if she was laughing or crying. That felt right.

There was a window in the wall to his left, but no light entered, and he remembered

black spray paint on basement apartment windows at ground level,
 and he remembered black tar pieces rising to the surface of the still water and naked fingers reaching up.

He looked at his naked wrists and saw pale skin. He ran the finger of his left

hand along the skin, where blue veins lay beneath the surface, barely visible, where the white scar snaked, where the delicate brown hairs faded as they ran closer to the back of his hand. He ran his fingernail, too long, across the surface and it left a white line and he felt fragile,

that with a misstep he might twist, and it might all unravel, cells pulling apart with small water bursts like flowers and gunfire. It was an interesting feeling, this idea that things fall apart. There was something about it that appealed to him, that seemed fitting, that seemed

well. That's how they were built. That's how it was. Supposed to be. What it was.

His lips were dry and he saw that his arm was hooked into metal and plastic lines. He reached and took the needle from the vein and he looked at it, the way the tip bled to give sustenance, and with his finger, he touched the clear liquid and felt it on the surface of his skin and watched it fill the spaces between the ridges in his fingerprint until the tension brought it to stop.

He ran the needle along his inner forearm beside the scar until it broke the skin. He pressed harder near his elbow, and the white scratch nearer to his wrist took a few moments before the skin pulled apart, bringing blood to the surface. Further along, the blood rushed immediately and spilled down his arm, and he held it up and watched it drip on the white starchy sheets, watched each drop collect to run into one stronger river, into the air and to the cloth again, where it was absorbed.

He did not notice the pain, only that it registered as a sensation the same way that the faintest of breezes from the vent above his head registered on his arms.

He realized that he was drifting, not in the way that would force him again to unconsciousness or comas or nightmares, or in the way that some people might drift at the sight of their blood, but in the way that here, finally, there was peace.

3.

"Do you think it was real?" Jameson asked him, sitting at his bedside, while his parents went to the cafeteria to buy some cheap sandwiches. They hadn't eaten in seven hours. They'd been too busy staying close to their son and delighting in the way his temperature had dropped, the way his heart rate evened out (from what was at first an alarming rhythm, 55 beats per minute, until Will had showed them that he was fine, that this was normal, and that it stayed strong. "He's a very healthy young man," one of the doctors remarked, unabashedly surprised). Finally he convinced them to go get some food, to be good to themselves, and to give him a chance to speak with his therapist in private.

"Anything you want to say to her, you can say to us, Will," his mother said.

And Will said, "Of course, but I'd prefer to keep it as it has been for the last few months. If just to wrap some things up in my head. There's a lot you don't know about, and I'd hate to concern you."

"Concern us? What do you think the last few days were?"

"And you've been very accommodating. I'm fine now. There's nothing to worry about. But some of the things you might hear, you won't understand the context of, and they could draw more concern that I wouldn't want to bother you with."

"Will you tell us later?"

"If I can."

His parents had frowned, nodded, and gathered themselves before leaving the room.

Now, Will considered Jameson's question and did not know how to respond. His journey over the past few days, five years, eternity, was not real in many ways but was very consequentially real in others. There were implications from this he'd not yet worked out, felt no stress or pressure to work out, except that

something else lodged deep within him, of which he was also unsure, having not worked through that either,

but it was this feeling deep inside that was also written below the folds in Jameson's forehead, had been written in the folds of his parents' faces as well, in the way that their smiles only reached their eyes when they were thinking of how he'd returned to them, but not when they wondered if everything would yet be okay and resolved.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"I'm not sure it would be best coming from me."

And he knew, he knew what it was, but did not want to worry about it yet, as she did not either. The waves of emotion coming off her were warm in the effort she was making to hide her grief, and he knew.

He played his finger across the bandage on his arm, pressing on the cut, to feel the sharp stab of pain seep into his brain, to find sweet distraction in his ultimate failure, to hold his fist tight, to press deep and hard enough that the red would bloom.

Jameson took his arm and said, "There is no need for that."

He nodded, knowing that this was true, but missing it just the same.

4.

"Would you like something to eat?" they'd asked, but he refused, told them it was

fine, that he'd rather just go to bed, get what would hopefully be a full night's sleep.

They hugged him tight, as if letting him go, back to his bed, his old room, and a lonely night of sleeping, might plunge him back into another coma, or whatever it was, and that this time it would be for good.

He stood in the doorway, studied the empty walls, the way the light struck them from the lamp that sat down below. He felt alone. He held no bag of clothes, no toiletries. His parents had left a few necessary items in the bathroom across the hall, and he'd already brushed his teeth.

He sat on the side of his bed and looked outside at the dark tree line that surrounded his parents' backyard. The moon had not yet risen, but it would be full that night. He wanted to wait and watch it form itself between the trees, casting its gentle glow across the clouds and naked tree branches, suggesting its presence before actually appearing. But in the way that his mind tugged at the skin above his eyes, he felt her fingertips along his back and knew that he should sleep instead.

He slid the pillows down and pulled the covers back to the foot of the bed. Cracking the window, he let the cool air slither in and creep about the floor before it ran up the sides of the sheets and touched at his bare legs. The cold felt good, and even when it raised gooseflesh and chased the blood from the surface of his skin, he found a joy in the numbing and freezing of his body. Not in a masochistic way, but in the way of the sweet peace of the slowing of his muscles and molecules, the stasis. It was cold in the way that the fire was hot, each serving to counterbalance the eternity of the other. When he breathed, he liked to see his breath on the air, and when he slept,

when he slept, he finally dreamt of nothing but a black sea and calm.

When he awoke again five hours later, the room had grown frigid and he was curled on his side, his left arm grasping at someone that was not there. When he became fully conscious, he realized that this time it was not a nightmare that he was fighting to remember,

but a dream,

one that started five years ago and ended when he left her at her father's house.

Jennifer's voice came from somewhere nearby, and when he turned, his muscles clenching, working against the hard air, he saw her sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed in the moonlight.

What was that line from the Batman movie you liked? she asked.

Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight? he said.

She smiled and said, Yes, that was the one, and she laughed.

A bit creepy, to reference that, he said, and his smile came as naturally as it always did when they teased each other, often with the black of night around them, holding each other close in the bed, when it was only their murmurs and their laughter and the way that their skin moved against one another's when they breathed and giggled and pushed at each other.

This place is peaceful, Will, she said, looking about her.

Anywhere is peaceful so long as you make it so, he said.

Her face brightened and she said, Yes, that's exactly right.

I miss you, Jennifer.

I'm right here, she said.

Will reached out to touch her and she pushed his hand away, slowly, toward the bedsheets. Not like this, she said. Like this,

and she got up and went to the window, stepped outside in a motion he neither noticed nor understood but managed to mirror precisely as he followed her. There, they walked over the back flagstone porch and through the winding path that took them around the various garden planters his parents had installed. If they followed the path far enough, they would come to the birdbath where Jennifer sat and spoke to her father the day they visited his parents' house—on the day that started all of this.

I'm sorry, Jennifer, he said.

I forgave you a long time ago.

But that was before all this. He gestured with his hand at the house, his motion taking in the last month, the emotions, the frustrations, the obsessive pursuit of that truth he'd buried so deep within, past that place of memory and into the place of tangled branches and violent Stygian streams.

Still counts, she said, and smiled at him from the corner of her eye.

Again, he turned to her and reached for her bare shoulder, her arm, to play his fingers across her skin and pull her close against him, to hold her there.

Not like that, she said.

Aware of the ache in his gut, that place of electricity and power from which his limbs spread like the tree branches and the fire on his fingers, he momentarily remembered,

as with a sense of *déjà vu*,

and she said, Yes, like that.

And she held her hands to the sky, and from her fingers rose snowflakes.

Will watched the gentle way they drifted to the sky, catching one draft to the

next so that they seemed to roll upward, the way that water rolled down from one rock surface to the next. Then he sat on the ground beside her, for she was sitting now too, and looking around them, he watched more snowflakes crawl from the cracks in the flagstone beneath their bodies, from behind flower petals drooping, now bleeding white crystal that rose upward, so that it was as if they were dangling from the ceiling and straining not to fall.

It's alright to let go, she said.

So he did. For a moment he suspended his longing, he let himself drift, he moved his wrist to follow the motion of the snowflakes,

and he fell, a slow motion fall, crystalline, his limbs solid, rigid in the cold, his breath pluming in front of him, and he drifted.

The next morning, when he awoke, there was snow across the ground. Barely a first snow, it was only a light dusting that covered the browning grass, the drooping petals, the leafless trees, and the dark leaves. It did not last past two in the afternoon when the sun came out and cast its first spark—

sparkles across the surface before turning the snow to water and drawing the invisible spirits back above again.

5.

"Will, we have something that we need to tell you," Nancy said at the kitchen table that afternoon when he joined them for a late lunch. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and it was clear that she was hurting—had been, in fact, the entire weekend—in a way that was not solely due to Will's rollercoaster past few days.

He placed his hands against his legs and said, "Yes?"

"Baby," she said, that coddling way of a mother wishing her son was a toddler again, without care or concern, where object permanence was the worst loss a child would know. "Jennifer's dead."

Will licked his lips and leveled his eyes at his mother and said, "I know." Indeed, he had known. From the moment he sat down in the bog in Hell, lit himself on fire, woke up and called her to receive no answer. But to hear it brought a surge of emotion, liquid rising from his chest to the back of his throat and from the top of his head to his eyes, and he let his tears flow, but he did not sob, and his breath did not hitch. He let that thing within unfold and consume him.

"We're so sorry."

"How did it happen?" In the same way, a part of him knew the answer and didn't want to hear it, but he needed to know and asked anyway.

"Looks like it just got to be too much."

He nodded and took a napkin to wipe at his nose, but did not blot his eyes. The guilt he felt, creeping behind the grief, made use of his lungs and heart as obstacles to hide behind. He let it creep. He let it skate around the edges of his mind and memories. He let it speak to the way he yelled at her, the yelling and the scrambling for his truck, the ultimatum, the fight before Jenson's church, his desire for answers pressing against the few threads he was holding her by. The voice boiled from within, shouting, demanding to know why it should be he who was the only thing standing between her and the blade, wanting to believe it wasn't his fault, that it couldn't be entirely. But that voice was so easily overwhelmed and shut down in favor of the guilt, the way his organs clenched, and he looked down and the tears flowed deeper still, the memories blending with the shooting, Hell and the hallway, taking her life.

You gave her five extra years.

Extra years of the depression firing up, crippling her, emotionally ravaging her. She had a condition. Would that have not been the case anyway?

It gave her something to hold tight to.

If it wasn't that, it would have been something else.

He bit his lip and tried to take a breath, but the sobs were hitching now. He put his hands on his knees and crossed his legs on the chair and tried again to take a breath, but still the sobs came. His mom moved around the table to hold him, unable to fight back her own tears. To see her son in this kind of pain was as bad as seeing him on the hospital bed, but now she could be there, in some way, and do something, provide some bit of comfort, yes? He did not feel her hands on his shoulders. He did not move to hold her back.

Light himself on fire.

He reached deep, into that place he'd been, and thumbed the hammer, flipped the trigger, pressed two wires together, felt the flames on his skin, and was lost in their sweet warmth.

He knew it was a distraction, to pull the hood up and the wool over his eyes, to turn within and hide himself from the outside world, the painful one with thoughts electric and persistent, where the shadows were there, on the floor, unless the light shifted, where they did not move about on their own, the way they might duck from his eyes the moment he looked to them, to toy with him from the darkness and bring with whip cracks memories at the opportune moments. This place was concrete, this place before his eyes right now, and without Jennifer, memories surged through his mind

that really didn't matter. Life and death. Places we go in our minds, where

revenge plays against gods we've never met and will never know or understand until we

unravel.

He went to his room and prayed for snow, slammed his fists into the comforter,

not so much in anger, but

so that the dust would rise in the afternoon sunlight, so that he might reach for her, to watch the snow

fall upward. He wanted to throw himself into the headboard, to feel the rage fill him again and to

fall, to that place where Jennifer had been, by his hand.

Wasn't she there now? he shushed the voice.

The hate was comfort enough.

But eventually it would lead to that emptiness, the self-hatred so consuming.

This was not his fault, he told himself, sitting on his bed and trying to find his breath in the lungs that so wanted to burn

under the tar, to fill, to stop bothering with breath completely.

He'd hold his breath when he awoke in the mornings.

He lived back at his parents' house because he didn't have an apartment anymore. He thought about taking over Jennifer's lease, but that seemed remote and, after a while, irrational. He was fine with staying at his folks' place. They went to work, trusting that he would be fine. He sat in the backyard and played with the cold air and watched the breeze shuffle the leaves and the sun rise and fall and the heat rise and level and the evening as it took the sky.

He'd hold his breath when he awoke, and pray against the sudden sick feeling in his stomach that accompanied the first trickles of memory before the flood,

and then he'd reach and touch the pillow beside him and watch the light come up, and the sheets would be tucked and the pillow flat in the way it fades, but without indent.

Then he'd breathe in, and the waters would rush against that open place inside that the flood tried to but just could not fill.

* * *

This happens. This was genetic. And biological. And he helped her as best he could until he couldn't even help himself, and that was how it went. This was not about

defenses and explanations. It was what happened. Jennifer had a condition. Everything fell apart at once.

This was more or less what he expected Joseph Christianson to tell him. What the voice inside was likely telling both of them.

He drove to Maine a week after Halloween. It was after the funeral, which had been rain-soaked and dusted with snow that melted almost as soon as it touched the ground. It was cold and the wind blew and Will wore only a black, button-up shirt. Eventually, as the winter progressed, perhaps he'd readjust, and he'd bundle himself against the cold. But now, it was nice. He did not mind the bite, the gnawing. He did not tense up or adjust to it physically, and eventually his body fell into harmony with his thinking.

It was still soon enough after, though. The guilt and frustration that he let run their course still relished the bite of the snow and the sleet against his skin, the small red marks that were drawn on his bare wrists. That was okay, he thought. It would pass.

That had been yesterday. He spoke briefly with Christianson at the funeral, asking if he might come by the house tomorrow. Christianson said that would be fine, that he'd like that. There was something refreshing now, being back at the house and quiet in his mind. There was solitude here. An emptiness that, while hollow and painful and weakening at a core level, was still peaceful next to the memories

of wrenching open the truck door, flashback upon flashback, holding his index finger, narrowed at Jennifer, feeling the recoil of the gun.

Here it was gentle. The front that had moved through during the funeral was going north and seemed to follow Will and Christianson on their respective journeys back to Maine.

When Will knocked, Christianson answered, and his look upon seeing Will was of a man torn. Will didn't know what to expect. At the funeral, Christianson was too grief-stricken to let out any other emotion when Will spoke with him. Now, now it could have been terror, frustration, a hatred turned against Will, despair, images of possible thoughts about giving up himself written in the lines around his eyes, in the red of his skin. But when he opened the door, it wasn't any of these, though they were all there, in their own ways. He just looked tired. His eyes hung. He'd not shaved in the past week, and his voice was gruff and deep, but loving. "Hello, Will."

"Hello Mister Christianson."

The man opened the door to Will and allowed him inside. Will looked about. The crucifix still hung over the fireplace, which flickered gently in the corner,

turned to the lowest setting so that only the fake coals glowed purple in the gas. He didn't ask Christianson about Jennifer. He was afraid to even look around. He didn't know the details about what had happened. How she did it. He didn't need to know. Didn't need to throw pictures and yell at Jennifer's father to get answers. He was okay with not knowing. This, too, brought its own kind of pain. That he should be at peace with it now, only after she was dead. That he could have left it all alone before this.

He remembered the day's light against the night and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," Will said. But the moment the words were out, Christianson held up a hand, as if to strike, but held it steady.

"No. Will, please. I've known these things for twenty five years. It's nobody's fault. It's not yours, her mother's, mine, or God's. It wasn't her fault. We are given the hands we are given and we play them the way we play them. One chance. We learn as best we can."

Will nodded. Christianson sat down. Will followed suit.

"She had a beautiful soul. I saw it so many times. I saw what she went through. If God does not take her into Himself at the end of her time here because she did what she had to do, then that's not a god I want to believe in anyway."

Will thought about that. He thought about the man he met where the bog came to a stasis. He thought about the tranquility he felt upon sleeping, the flood upon waking.

Christianson's tears leaked so easily from his eyes and down his nose, into his whiskers. He was a man who'd made crying his art and found a home within it, unashamed. The two men in the living room were men who knew the pain of the world and who'd passed the point of denial, of shame, of pushing back. Let the tears flow, let the pain ebb, and those moments that fell out, drifting, that was where the peace lay.

"After all this," Will said quietly, "you still believe?"

"I have to," Christianson said.

Will nodded.

"If I don't, all that will be left is this, around me. This pain that only loss and chemicals and the desire to hurt ourselves yields. We know love. We know each other in this life. But what makes it worth it is what we know on a level so far beyond this place."

"That other place, it's peace," Will said.

Christianson just cried.

"I think it's here that we know love," Will said softly, as if to himself. "We now get the chance to fight through for that peace, that calm. And the other side, it's

only perverted by what we remember of this world. What we take from it."

"She had a beautiful soul," her father said again.

"It's when we tear the world apart that we get to see this stuff."

Christianson shook his head but didn't speak again.

Will bit the inside of his lip and chewed on the skin before stopping, sitting back, and leaning into the couch in silence. He and Christianson sat this way for some time. Hours, perhaps. Minutes. Days. They supposed it didn't matter.

Later, Christianson asked if Will would like some dinner. Will said yes. And in the empty house, Will set the table and Christianson stirred the sauce. There was a rhythm in their grief and they rode with it, one gently rowing, the other guiding. Soon they'd hit open water, they decided without speaking. Perhaps it was there that they'd find Jennifer, in a boat of her own, lying back in the sun with a smile.

* * *

But where before he'd learned peace in the emptiness, now there was only loss—this hole unfilled.

"You can only fill it with so much," Will told Jameson in her office a few days later. It was a sunny November afternoon. Outside, the wind was kicking up the dusty leaves that Halloween had left about the streets from ten days before. She'd been waiting for this since the moment he'd woken in the hospital. To discover what had happened, what changes had come to this boy she'd worked with. She tried to maintain her distance, to keep the separation from her voice that would betray the client-patient relationship, to not turn this to something of fascination, of mystery, of a personal journey she'd never seen before.

"It's been five years. I'm weeks away from graduating college and nothing has changed. I still love her as deeply and intensely as the first day I met her, and more than any girl in between. I'd go to Hell and back for her. Because of her. And I did."

She nodded. "Tell me about this emptiness you found, the peace in it."

"Something finally broke something inside, and I let myself go. Self loathing—it's a security blanket; it limits your responsibility. You can hate everything about yourself and be safe from actually taking action to change it. It becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. Anyway, I shoved it away, I pulled up the anchor, pushed off, and said 'fuck it,' you know? And with that I snapped, I gave in. I let the tar fill my lungs and stopped trying to move forward, to get somewhere. I didn't care if I died—again—or was shredded or mauled or what have you. I stopped. And there was peace there. There was finally peace."

Jameson flipped through the final handwritten pages that he'd written in the past few days, sitting at home, recounting what he could remember, however spotty, of the experience.

"Do you expect to find peace filling this hole?"

"No."

"Why?"

"That was from self-hatred, when something broke. This, this seems outside of me. This is something beyond me, that was filling, that is now empty."

"Are there other things, do you think, outside of you, that could fill it?"

Will cocked his head. He was sitting on the couch, cross-legged, with his shoes on the floor because he was more comfortable that way. He let his palms rest on his thighs, and though his cross-legged posture was not full, or even half lotus, it struck her as decidedly mystical, and she tried not to dwell on his image for fear that she'd be suddenly overwhelmed that everything this young man had gone through would put her experience and aims to help utterly below him. That in his quest, his search for answers, to come to her would be like asking a—

well, it would be like asking a newborn for advice, and this,

as she reflected further, also seemed quite fitting—

a birth, reversal—

and when she came out of her reverie, Will was smiling at her, and she felt the keen impression that, though obviously he could not, he'd read her mind and was sharing his amusement at her insight.

He cocked his head. "I'm finding it's very hard to understand what it is that's truly absolute."

"How so?"

"What's real?" he wondered aloud. "What part of this experience was real and what was in my head?"

Unsure if he was looking for an answer from her, she said, "Well, we've discussed how there's some ambiguity in that."

"Yes," he said, nodding his head in one motion. "That there's a collective below the self, something even deeper."

"Many cultures theorize something like that."

"So how much is created? How much is able to be drawn? And not drawn in the way of being drawn on a piece of paper, but drawn in the way of pulling something from the depths, to bring forth something from your mind and apply it to the world where we live."

"I don't know, Will." She was disappointed that she had no answer for him, but did not feel that she was supposed to have such an answer.

"Neither do I. I went to a place where my deepest passions became real around me. You could make even the same argument for this place, where we are now, that it's from the imagination of someone far greater, with a security of thought to keep that shadow there on the ground, and you and me in our places here, without breaking loose," he wiggled on the couch, making himself crooked, appearing as if he were only a small motion away from taking flight into the air. For a moment she wondered if he actually might.

"But how much is so fragile? How much is real, or in my mind?" His voice was steady and inquisitive, and everything Jameson knew about her past clients dealing with loss and confusion was reversed here. She found in him a tranquil depth that seemed to breathe the very mystery of that collective, of the darkness of what she'd learned from near-death-experience case studies, the perfect endless black and the peace.

"She was mine, and I was hers. And this damned place got in the way." With his words, he fingered the fabric on the couch next to him and pointed to his temple. "But she still has to be out there." And now, for the first time, she saw the fear and the desperation in his eyes and voice.

"Why?"

"She is all I have to believe in. And if she's not here anymore, then I have to believe that she's somewhere else."

"I hate to ask, if to play devil's advocate . . ." A moment before, she'd thought he was strong enough for her to ask, but then the fear registered and suddenly she wasn't so sure, but asked anyway. "What if she's not? What if, after death, none of us are, and that's just the way that it is?"

"I have to believe," Will said, "that there are some kind of absolutes out there, and that what I feel for Jennifer, and she for me, was one of them. Maybe it didn't hold for her this time around, but I have to believe she's still there. That there's justice out there. That I'll find her again."

He took a deep breath and looked outside at the tree swaying in a gust of wind that blew past the window. With his second breath, the gust lessened and the clatter faded. Jameson turned her attention back to Will and re-gathered her thoughts. "If Jennifer is still out there, and there's something real, then your experience was real. Hell, and those demons, and that man you spoke with, Satan?"

Will shrugged and brushed the question away as if it didn't matter.

"That would mean there was something to that."

"Yes."

"That would mean that Jenson, in your dream, may have actually been Jenson, the shooter, from school. Continuing this torture into the afterlife. How would that

work? Is there no justice?"

"I don't know," Will said. "We create our own justice, that much I can see, whether it's deserved or not. Whether there's an absolute underneath that, that Jenson atoned for what he did, or whether he suffered enough here," Will tapped again at the couch, "in this life . . . of that I have to have faith."

He looked directly at Jameson and then raised his fingers in front of his face, pressing the tips together. "Even in this place, they're hard to find, these absolutes." When he released, the friction on his skin turned the flesh on the pads of his fingers to flame, and each flame coughed a touch of black smoke before sinking into the boy again.

Jameson gasped.

"Even in this place, I have to believe that what Jennifer and I had was absolute."

That night he went back to his apartment, truly alone for the first time since he'd come awake in the hospital, with no passing cars or faces or parents in the room beside his. The walls were black and charred. The front door was darkened and it would not close the entire way. Yellow tape crossed before it that read *Keep Out, Do Not Trespass*, and he remembered angled signs from black muck. He pushed the tape out of the way, stepping into the apartment. The way that these complexes had been designed, the fire had not escaped to spread to the units above or adjacent. Fire walls were designed to resist the flames. It was only Will and Will's things that burned in the fire. The neighbors had been smoked out for a few days, but when it had settled, they'd slowly begun to trickle back in, back to what was known, what was theirs, what they held to.

Will stepped across carpet that in some places was black, in others damp and soggy beneath his shoes. His boots were soon stained. He'd become used to the soot and the

crime

grime. An eternity. Old friends, the skin he wore for so long. Like possessing someone anew, he'd turned to another body, alien, cleaner, smoother, more delicate, but whole.

He stopped at his television, which had fallen to the floor, and tapped at the melted plastic with his foot. Books from his shelves were scattered about where the shelves had tipped and spilled. Though many of the covers were melted and had turned funny colors, pages blooming out with water damage and from the heat, they were still whole inside. Hundreds of pages took a while to burn. A couple hundred books even longer still. The words stayed written.

Place the edge of a flame to these pages and let them burn . . .

The old apartment reeked of shiny burned black, of firewood and cinders and a dank smell of melted plastic. Musty now, too. Mildewed carpet.

He sat on the floor of his room. Here, the source of the fire, soggy and picked over. Broken beams littered the floor. Nails and splinters and black charcoal everywhere.

He sat with his back rigid and his hands placed on his legs, and he fell.

"And if," he'd told Jameson before leaving a few hours ago, "there is such an absolute, I have to bring her back. I have to find her."

He tasted the smoggy yellow in the black soot around him, but this time he felt feathers in his throat and the black tar in his lungs, and he breathed it deep. The world split along electric seams, and he heard their voices, where songs became screams became songs again, where clouds filled swollen arms, and he drifted along empyreal streams.

"Unless there's nothing but what we create."

He reached into the dark, his breathing steady and deep. He found the place easily enough. He'd been there for so long. It was like finding his way home.

He stretched his fingers, calling her name and listening to the echo. Marko! he shouted, imagining her laughing voice replying, Polo! He'd shout her name and call out to her until his voice would find her chest and catch the way it caught in her hair when he said her name as he held her before sleep.

"I'll find her."

He stayed in this darkness for hours. He rode the sea in a boat all his own. He paddled with one good arm, the other useless by his side. He could not feel its pain, but he could feel the expanse of the sea. He felt the depth below, the crater that the water should fill, the way he paddled over air and searched for the flood again, not in memories, not in the flickers of home and high school and Hell and Heaven and the way she pushed that hair back behind her ear

(and peeked out from the edge of the blanket with round brown eyes that crinkled when she smiled),

but to fill it with something else, a flood of, not peace, not memories,

but a sea, of that gentle water, the color of dirty blonde hair and black and red bathing suits and his letterman jacket in the twilight of the fall.

Stop. Fall forward again.

Feel his face on the ash, the stale wet floor, cold before
warmth surrounds him, a birth reversal.

Reach with stiff fingers. He put his hand into the black, reaching, straining, the
muscles and the veins and the tendons standing out in his hand. He felt the cold air
of the empty lake below him and he thrashed for her heat,

Before, from the shadows, came a touch,
a moment of manifestation, of precipitation,
the fog enclosing his skin, and there,

a finger against his.

"Jennifer?"

Anywhere is peaceful so long as you make it so, he said to her.

He strained for more, for a grip on that finger, her hand, one naked wrist, that he
might hold tight, might dig his fingers in and pull her beside him, back to where
the—

But she slipped. He strained, kept straining, but then,
then there was nothing.

HALLOWTIDE

POSTSCRIPT: **aporia**

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This is a follow-up treatment summary for William Andrews, age 28, to accompany this collection. Will dropped this work by my office last week, almost six years after he quit our sessions and left Savage Creek. I did not see him come or go. But my secretary placed it on my desk after it had appeared on hers. "I don't know," she said. "I used the bathroom for a couple moments and when I came back, it was here."

I hope he is well.

The first time I met Will Andrews, I thought he was a pleasant boy. Quiet, perhaps. Thoughtful. Reflective. He had a rebellious streak, which came up later in our conversations, and seems to have been there since at least early high school, coming to light and fading away at different periods in his development to adulthood. Will seems to embody an inner struggle that I wanted to focus on before the dreams started to manifest themselves and take our full attention. From what I've read, it seems that Will's childhood, while not problematic, was not the kind of childhood he longed for as he grew up. Wanting more attention from his parents but not receiving it, it seems that he turned to outside sources to get what he craved. This, in turn, shows up in his relationships with his friends and with Jennifer Christianson (his girlfriend at the time).

His attachment to her (which prompted my later query of whether or not he really felt attached to Jennifer), may have stemmed from his need to love and be loved in return, and he may have found that within Jennifer instead of a compatible match. This desire for a romantic, idealized childhood also seems to reveal itself in his aspirations, which seemed to revolve around wanting to work with children in a school setting. It was school where he found companionship, positive reinforcement, and a giving-and-taking dynamic that wasn't as he wanted at home. This deep longing comes at odds with what happened, then, on Halloween of 2001, during the shooting, when his home and place of safety was violated and changed forever. This discord, I'd be willing to suggest, seemingly continued to plague him through college and likely, if not addressed, would continue into his future as a teacher should he try to work in the school system. It was my intention to focus on this aspect, to

explore this betrayal with Will at length, to recognize the shadow, how it hurt him, to accept it, and see how his life might balance out in terms of his passions once again.

Will stayed in college for another two months to finish his degree but did not stay for the graduation ceremony that December. He had already moved into his car by the time that his fellow classmates had taken to the stage. We never saw him again after that. His parents heard from him frequently. He did well to keep in touch with them. Though his mother, Nancy, never really regained any kind of trust in me or my work, her husband, David, did make a few appointments to see me after his son moved away from them.

Things were different after that in the same way that they were different after the shooting. There was a hollowness where before there had seemed a fullness. Though the Andrews themselves, as a couple, had to re-establish what was once a very serious chemistry, their son had finally come between them in the way that children do, and what they discovered after almost losing their son, twice, was what all parents discover of their children once they have gone one way or another. And it was after only a few sessions that David felt much better about the entire thing, and I supplied him with a number of tools to help his wife through it, since she'd been affected by it all far worse, yet still she refused to see me.

I don't think it's any serious violation, after a work such as this, to say any of this. After all, this is a work of fiction. I say that in that there are no distinct lines here between what is true and what is not true, and fittingly so. As Will assembled his writings that he wrote for me, it's obvious that he rewrote them a number of times, and (it seems) with a voice more and more external to his own. This voice became, for me, one of the most compelling features of his compendium.

During our final meeting, Will told me that he wasn't satisfied with what he'd written, that the memories were all there, this he knew, but that they came at strange times and in phases, disconnected (not that he'd "ever believed there was much connection between them to begin with—trying to remember an eternity. The earth only coughs up so many bones at a time. Supernovas long dead across the galaxy only come to us as the speed of light allows, and as our eyes are open from generation to generation to see them"). It would be a while yet, if ever, before he remembered the entire thing—which

was to say, enough of the journey to form a narrative. I told him that no matter how long it took, I would read it, even if I was seventy on my death bed.

Will's writings at the time were scattered and poetic. He'd done some work the semester before in a creative writing English class and was playing now with free-writing and brain-dumps. This in turn organized into a strange poetic, one that seemed to rely heavily on double meaning, reading between the lines, and putting an emphasis on what was unsaid. This manuscript you now read has been heavily refined, but with much of the same remaining. What's illustrated, though mostly in prose, seems still to focus on discrepancies, the balance between this dream world and the waking world, the spiritual and the physical, and seems almost to explore that space between the two, in what is unsaid or cannot be said. This version is much different, and I believe it stems from an attempt he took very seriously on my advice to fictionalize the story, to fill in his own blanks and to draw still more. This allowed a more rational study of the metaphor and symbols within the dreams, helping him to extrapolate those symbols, study their meaning, and continue to illustrate even more of his own from this same unconscious space.

In any mystical tradition, East or West, there is a recurring motif of not only shedding the physical to reach a place beyond the "seventy-thousand veils," but also of one overcoming the ego to most truly discover the self. Mysticism focuses on two aspects: that of the external and that of the internal, each reflecting the other. In some traditions, this is represented in the process of alchemy, of distilling a substance until it reaches its most pure form. Internally, the alchemist overcomes the self, the ego, to find an inner essence. It's in the fictionalized nature of this text that speaks toward the higher truth it seeks to be sharing.

Indeed, if we consider this mystical interpretation, it follows that there exists a higher plane or consciousness above that which we experience by day. We live on a physical plane and we try, some harder than others, to access a spiritual plane. Language and the words that we use are of this physical plane of existence, and we're trying to apply them to a larger sphere that they cannot fully (if at all) encompass. And so, in the way of any good fiction and truest work, we can only use this language and these experiences to point toward a higher truth, a truth where the lies of reality are trivial.

Will pointed out in one of our sessions that in our scientific society, we

seem to be plagued by war and violence and materialism, that we need a "god figure." This, of course, would seem to suggest that the god figure we need would balance this violence, and would place science on the level of God, as a kind of modern dualist religion. More likely, I wonder, if God has indeed sent his more renegade, violent, emotional half (embodied in the figure Will encountered) to a hell place to atone, understand, and resist recognition, then perhaps it's this science Will mentions, this entropic nature of the universe to fall apart after its creation, that may in fact be the manifestation or projection of this shadow half of God in our material world.

Do I think that this story is real? Ultimately this seems to me a tale of possession (or, to pluralize for accuracy, possessions) in the Jungian sense. You dig deep enough into yourself, you begin to reach something cosmic, something where the universal is reflected in one's deepest core. This is what Jung called the Collective Unconscious. This is what Hindus call *atman*, and what is made of the stuff of the divinity, *Brahman*. Buddhists call it the *Alaya vijñāna*, the base consciousness (though I don't mean to mischaracterize; they believe that this consciousness is ultimately as limited and as non-universal as any other mortal element of the world. But the similarity is there). This is a story about diving deep, about realizing this universal nature and how this universal nature in turn possesses an individual. What is real in our own lives is as real or unreal as this story. To dissect one is to dissect the other.

And, should you try, then, to make that dissection, as I've tried these past few years, I suggest diving deep, and without regret.

Carrie Jameson
March 14, 2012

If you'd like to read more about the underlying thinking in this book, you absolutely must read:

Answer to Job by Carl Jung

Hell in Contemporary Literature by Rachel Falconer

The Hero With a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell.

And if you're further inclined:

Paradise Lost by John Milton

Inferno by Dante Alighieri

The Conference of the Birds by Farid ud-din Attar

The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND HEARTFELT THANKS

to Meggin Lewis, Amy Greene, Mandy Rose, Yvonne Ballard, Danielle Dellinger, Sean and Kelly Bakersky, my parents Linda and Paul Pfeiffer, AJ Street, Ryan Gibbons, Deputy Sam Roth, Madeline Novey, Caitlyn Metzger, Travis Nakata, David Bonomo, Kelly Nienberg. Also, to everyone who has guided my writing career, from workshops to professors to family. To my friends who have put up with this sometimes seemingly unattainable dream, and especially the insecurities that come with it. To anyone I've neglected and forgotten. And finally to those wonderful supporters online.

You all saw something in me, and that means everything.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KARL PFEIFFER is a novelist, journalist, lecturer, and paranormal investigator. He has worked with numerous ghost hunting teams across Colorado and investigated across the world. He won the first season of the pilot reality series *Ghost Hunters Academy* and went on to work with the *Ghost Hunters International* team on the same network. Since then he's lead the weekend ghost hunts at the Stanley Hotel and lectured across America. He writes for the *TAPS Paramagazine* and contributes to the *Paranormal Pop Culture Blog*. *Hallowtide* is his first novel.

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More about this book can be found at www.HallowtideNovel.com