

I got my sister's call sometime on Tuesday night but didn't actually hear it for another three days. Sarah and I were in the middle of our latest feud, still at least a week away from the make-up brunch, so it was only natural that I'd ignore something so preemptive. She'd have done the same. But when the buzz of her incoming text woke me up before dawn on Saturday morning, I realized something was wrong.

Thirty-two unread messages, one from Sarah. "We're ready to go," was all the text said, which made no sense to me, so I went back and listened to her earlier message.

The recording said, "They found Dad's body, Alex." Something about the pace of the words. Was that excitement in her voice? "I'm going out there to make sure it's him. If it is, I'm going to carry out the instructions in his will."

I stared at my phone. My sister had just told me that, fourteen years after vanishing so completely from society, from civilization, from reality--from our lives--that he'd been declared legally dead, our father was back to do it all over again, and I didn't know what to feel. You expect emotions to happen as basic, reflexive responses, but sometimes they don't and it gets confusing. I sat there with numb hands and unfocused eyes while some remote part of my brain twisted itself into knots as it tried to regain perspective. The screen went black.

My first conscious instinct was to call our mother, but she was three years gone now, too. I had a strange thought then, that my sister and I were now orphans, even though we were both adults, and, I guess technically we'd been orphans since our mother died. Then I did feel something, a sudden and overwhelming sense of looming unreality as the shadows cast on the walls by the light of the screen began to jitter and swim about the room. Forcing my eyes to focus, I noticed that my hands were shaking. I made it to the toilet before nausea overtook me completely, and as I tried to wash the taste of bile out of my mouth, I sent my sister a reply to her text. "We need to talk. Today. In person."

The will. The document that became our father's legacy, the wall he left to keep Sarah isolated. Some growing part of me had believed that she was starting to let go, despite our recent setbacks, but there it was, from her own mouth. She still meant to go through with it.

I crawled back into bed still not sure what I felt about my father's second advent, but confident it must be there somewhere underneath my simmering anger at Sarah for wanting to drag more than his physical remains back through our lives.

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I was already three cups deep into the diner's strongest coffee when Sarah finally arrived. I'd been ignoring her calls and texts all morning, after only giving her a time and a place to meet. I knew she wanted to deflect, but I wasn't going to have an argument like this decided by which of us had faster fingers on a touch keyboard.

She climbed into the seat across the booth from me, spun the laminated menu around to face her, and asked, "What's up?" as if nothing was. I could feel her casually kicking at the air under the table as the high seat kept her from getting both heels on the ground.

Doing my best to not glare, I stuck to the script I'd been rehearsing in my head since waking up. "We're not doing this again," I said, keeping my tone definitive but not hostile.

"We didn't do it the first time, Alex," she said as her finger lingered on the pancake options. "We didn't have a body, remember?"

"No," I said, too loudly. Deep breath, then again: "You know what I mean, Sarah. All this bullshit about the pit--"

"Hole," she corrected without looking up.

"Whatever," I said, forcing my jaw to unclench. "It doesn't matter. I'm not going through that again. We had a funeral. You didn't show up. We're not going to have another one, and we're not going to haul a corpse up into the mountains to a place that doesn't even exist, either."

Sarah began scratching at the back of her left index finger with her right thumb--as telltale a sign of her anger as any red-faced tantrum--but when she spoke her voice wasn't any more raised than mine. "It's in his will, Alex. As the executor, I'm only doing what I have to. He wants his body to be thrown into Charlie's Hole, and I'm doing it with or without you."

"You say that as if you're doing me a favour," I said. "You know better, Sarah. Don't act like you were kept out before. We had an empty seat in the front row during the entire service. It was your decision to not show up just because you're the only one who still believed his stories. We waited seven years for him, for any sign that he was out there. The rest of us had to move on with our lives."

I could tell she wanted to say something, to throw that back in my face. "What life?" she could have asked. The gentle pressure of my phone in the pocket of my jacket, the thought of those unread texts like an itch. Instead, she shook her head. "They wouldn't tell me how he died."

"So what?" I asked.

Sarah looked at me with eyes wide and bright with the light of curiosity. Our father's eyes, the shine there the same as in my own when he would sit at the end of our beds to tell us stories about his adventures. I'd spent hours looking into mirrors trying to find a trace of it in my own reflection. I may be a father's son in body, but not soul. I got the height, but that spark, that curse, belonged to Sarah alone now. "He was wearing the same clothes as the day he disappeared," she said.

I shrugged. "Again, so what?"

"I've got the pictures right here." Sarah pulled out her phone, began poking at it. "They said he's missing all his back teeth, too--"

Putting a hand on her wrist, I told her, "Just stop, Sarah. That's not what this is about, don't you get it?"

"You don't even want to know where they found him?" she asked, still thumbing through her pictures.

I said, carefully enunciating each word, "It doesn't matter and I don't care. And neither should you."

"He didn't have his pendant," said Sarah, turning her phone toward me.

The screen showed a close-up of our father's head and upper torso. Red plaid-patterned jacket over a black shirt, its neckline stretched below the pale collarbone, teasing the top sutures in a line running down the middle of a bony chest. My eyes flicked up, over the neck tendons standing out like brittle cables, to the hollow cheeks and the rictus grin pulling away from cigarette-stained teeth. And the black eyes. Points of smooth onyx without the inner light. The man I knew, and a man I'd never seen before.

"It looks like he starved," I said, and felt the anger rising again as the shock wore off. I didn't want to see this. I didn't need to spoil what little positive memory I had of the man.

"Look," said Sarah. She swiped to the next picture, which showed our father alive and well, wearing the exact same clothes, with a genuine smile and eyes like beacons against the camera's flash. "Taking this picture was the last thing Dad did before he left. Document everything, that was the rule."

"Where did you get that?" There was something there, poking at the back of my mind. Without thinking, I found myself taking the phone from her to look back at the picture of his body. She was right about the pendant, a crude folk-art piece of hammered metal our mother had made for him. It was on prominent display in the before shot, as it always was. I couldn't recall ever seeing him without it hanging around his neck. But there was a blank space in the photo of his dead body, a void at the centre of the frame where the pendant should have been.

"That's the thing," said Sarah, excitement accelerating her words. "It was part of the will, sort of. When the body turned up, the lawyer gave me the key to a safe deposit box I didn't even know existed. All his old documents and research was in there. Stuff he never showed us."

I heard what she said, but all my attention stayed fixed to the two pictures. Then it clicked.

"When did they say he died?"

"About a month ago, at most," she said, bobbing her head at me. "And the autopsy, you can see that, but, like I said, they wouldn't tell me how he died. The will specifically said to not touch the body. They should have asked, but they didn't. If there wasn't a crime involved, why did they do

it? And why don't they know what he died from after going to all that trouble? That's the entire point of doing an autopsy in the first place. It doesn't make any sense."

It was there behind the surface level of neglect and the early signs of decay. The body lying on that cold metal table had seen hard times, but not a decade and a half's worth. Before and after, then I looked up at my sister.

"And why doesn't he look fourteen years older when he died?" Sarah wondered, completing my thought.

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"I know how you feel about this whole thing," Sarah told me. "I didn't expect you to go completely on faith."

She dropped her keys into a bowl as we entered her studio apartment, then turned to work the half-dozen locks into place behind us. A single long-necked lamp lit the room, its bulb aimed at the short entrance hall so I had to squint against the glare and point it away before my eyes could adjust. The place was worse than the last time I'd seen it. Thick blinds now blocked all sunlight trying to get in through the outside window and the sliding balcony door. Bumpy sound-insulating foam covered the walls and ceiling, giving the entire space an almost organic, inner-organ feeling in the pulsing movement of the yellow lamplight. Bookshelves packed with magazines, newspapers, and unorganized stacks of old paperbacks, their broken spines like white scars, formed an inner shell around a couch facing a pair of stubby CRT monitors.

Sarah slipped past me. "You can sit down," she said as she shoved a rat's nest of wires onto the floor with her foot, clearing a spot on the couch.

I sank into the plush upholstery and resisted a sneeze at the cloud of dust I'd sent into the air. Sarah twisted around to point the lamp at the ceiling, evening out the room's low light. I turned my head, trying to catch a movement in the corner of my eye, a darting shape in the reforming shadows, but missed whatever it was. "How can you live like this?" I asked.

"You do what you have to," she said.

Stopping myself from getting back into that argument, I said, "So, what do you have to show me?"

That put the gleam into her eyes. "You're never going to believe what was in that box," she said, and before I could make a guess she continued: "The actual tapes. From the Hole, from the first time, and others as well. Not transcripts, but the actual tapes."

She paused, expecting me to say something. Normally, I'd have shot her down right there and then, but I still had the pictures of our father running through my head. "What's on them?" I asked.

"Here," said Sarah, handing me a ring-bound notebook, its cover marred by a brown coffee stain that blurred out the hand-written title. I flipped it open and turned a few stiff pages, squinting at the tiny, chicken-scratch lettering that ran down one page and back up the next so I had to flip the book upside-down to keep reading.

"What's this?" I asked, seeing dates and measured columns that looked a lot like inventory markers. "Tools and soil? An inventory for someone's farm?"

"It's one of the original journals," said Sarah. "Hoagland's. I think he must have been left handed. Here." She flipped through the pages to a fresh yellow sticky note with "The Beginning" written on it in her blocky handwriting.

Lifting the page up to catch more of the light, I read, " 'June 17th, 1996. Found hole in the fence again this morning. Will sit watch tonight to catch the trespassers.' "

"You see?" Sarah pressed the eject button on the tape deck and removed the cassette inside.

"You want me to read this entire thing?" I flipped through more pages, read other sticky-note bookmarks. "Found it!" "Rumours?" "Life Savers."

"You can if you want," she said, taking another cassette out of her jacket pocket, its frayed masking-tape label reading "First Newspaper Interview." She shoved the new cassette into the tape deck and snapped it closed. "But you don't have to right now. I just wanted you to see it was actually there. That was in the box, and so was this." She pressed play.

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"I'm speaking to Charles R. Hoagland. Charles or Charlie?"

"Call me Charlie."

"Charlie, then. We're recording now."

"Could I get a copy of the tape when we're done, for my own archives?"

"No problem, and no point in wasting time. Tell me the story, from the beginning."

"You mean from when we first found the Hole?"

"Sure."

"That's a bit roundabout if you want to go from the beginning. I've had this property since mid-November, so less than a year now. I got it in the divorce. I'm not a local, so I guess I was the only one who didn't know about the Hole."

"You mentioned something about the the fence?"

"Right, that's how we first found out about it. We found the break in the fence at the eastern edge of the property, next to the access road. This was, what, seven or eight weeks ago now? Beginning of July."

"We?"

"Me and Bill. I hired him to help fix the place up. Friend of my nephew, lives a couple towns over. Anyway, we patch up this hole in the fence, continue about our business. Cleaning the junk and debris out of the main field, you know? You couldn't even walk through the tall grass without tripping over something, and we needed to be able to till the soil before I could start planting the herbs I brought up from the south. Hell of a job, but at least it's not so hot up here. Really, it was the only use I had for the property--"

"The fence, Charlie."

"Yeah. So, anyway, Bill fixes the fence, then the next week the hole is back. Same place as last time. Fix it again, and two days later it's back again. Well, that was enough of that. Someone was getting onto my property with a purpose, and, honestly, I was more interested in the why just then than the intent. Which I guess is the same thing? I mean that it didn't seem criminal, you know? How could it? There's nothing on the property but weeds, so I didn't think that was the reason. I had my trailer, of course, where me and my dog slept, but nobody had come there, or to the shack Bill stayed in when he was working. And nothing's missing from the barn where we kept the tools. So, I'm thinking there's someone real determined to get to something, but what, and why?"

"You didn't call the police?"

"Didn't see the point."

"They were trespassing on your private property."

"Big deal. Look, I'm not a commie by anyone's measure, but I like to give the benefit of the doubt there. In England, they have this concept called the 'freedom to roam.' Don't know if you've heard of it."

"I haven't."

"Well, what I mean is that for all I knew, it was just some kids taking a shortcut home, and why get the cops involved for that?"

"So what did you do about it?"

"I set a watch. A lookout. We put a couple of boards up against the fence and me and Bill took turns through the night waiting to see who would come to knock them down."

"Was it kids?"

"No, not kids. Not anyone I would have predicted. Bill woke me at around five in the morning, just after dawn. Called me on the walkie-talkie, said he'd heard a truck coming up the road, that it stopped near the hole in the fence. I ran over there in time to see three men rolling old tires out of a flatbed. One of them had bolt cutters, so they must have expected another patch job. Bill's looking nervous, like he's expecting a fight to break out. Clyde, my dog, is running around yapping his head off. The men see us and start talking at each other. I know just enough Spanish to recognize that was what they were speaking, but not so much that I could understand what they were saying. Eventually, one of them comes to the fence and calls out to us."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Good morning.' I said the same back, and we had a little conversation, the long and short of which is that they had no idea the property had a new owner. My ex got it from her father, I think, and never did anything with it, so there'd been nobody on the land for at least thirty years. I asked what they were doing, and they said they came to dump tires."

"They were dumping trash on your property?"

"That's the thing about it. Sure, our cleanup of the property had just started, but I'd walked the length of the place enough times, just looking around, seeing what it was, to know there wasn't a pile of old tires anywhere on it. Certainly not a decade's worth. See, these three were brothers, Mexicans who own the local junk yard, and they told me they came round at least once a week to throw out tires and anything else they know for sure they can't resell. More than a decade, even, because that's only as long as they'd been running the yard. Their father did the same thing when he was in charge of the place. According to them, a lot of the locals did."

"What happened next?"

"I asked where they were throwing the tires. They said they dropped them into the Hole, said it like that meant something. It didn't, not to me, so they offered to show me."

"Show you the Hole? On your property?"

"Well, yeah. You find out someone's been dumping tires for that long without there being any actual tires anywhere and you're not a little bit curious? I wanted to see what they were talking about. So I let them through the fence and they walked me maybe a hundred fifty yards in and tell me that's where the Hole is."

"What did you find?"

"Something that I'd already seen, so maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised. They showed me a circular stone wall, about waist high. A well, basically. That's what it looks like, what I thought it was. Maybe a bit bigger than average, but I'm no expert. The mouth was covered over

with a piece of rusty corrugated metal, which the brothers pushed away. Underneath the metal was a hole. The Hole."

"How big was it?"

"Later, we measured it out at nine feet, nine inches in diameter at the wall's inner edge. So, definitely big enough to throw all kinds of junk into. People were throwing fridges in there."

"Can you describe it in any more detail?"

"That morning, there wasn't much else to see. It's straight shaft into the earth. The stone walls go down maybe another twenty feet from ground level, after that it looks like packed clay until you can't see anymore. I dropped a rock and waited a full minute, never heard it hit the bottom. And the brothers tell me again that everyone throws their trash into the Hole, that they've been doing it for as long as any of them can remember, and it's never filled up. Of course, I'm wondering now how deep this thing really is. That was just the first morning. We came back later to check it out more."

"Did you notice anything strange about the Hole the first time you were there?"

"Besides how deep it was supposed to be? These guys were talking like was an actual bottomless pit, something out of a story. But, like I said, that morning it just looked like a hole in the ground. There was something, though. Clyde is usually glued to my heels, but he wouldn't go near the Hole. He sat at the edge of the tall grass--there's a clearing around the Hole, maybe ten feet in each direction. Clyde just sits there and whimpers. Wouldn't come any closer no matter how much I called. And Clyde is a full-grown mastiff, you know? The size of a small horse. I've seen him stand his ground against a black bear. He's never been afraid of anything, but he was afraid then. And in the Hole itself, there was no echo."

"No echo?"

"None at all. I yelled right into it, heard nothing. No sound. Something supposed to be that deep, you expect an echo, right?"

"What did you do next?"

"I thought I should figure out what was on my property. I used to be a deep-sea fisherman in a previous life, and I still had most of my gear stored with my tools. So I set up a line, spliced a small plumb bob onto the end to give it some weight, and dropped it into the middle of the Hole. We let down maybe a thousand feet of line into it that first time, didn't hit anything, didn't touch bottom. So I knew it was deep right away, but I was still dubious about the whole bottomless thing. Bill went into town and started asking around a bit, since the Mexicans told us other people used it as well."

"Did he find anyone else who knew about it?"



"Sure. All sorts. Just like they said, it seemed everyone was throwing things into it. And he came back with rumours, too. Stories about the Hole. But my first concern was about maybe there being water down there after all, because some of the local farmers said they'd dropped animals into it. Dead cows and hogs. A goat, I think someone said that. Goat or a sheep. Pets, too. I was worried about the water table."

"Did you call for an inspector?"

"I'm not exactly keen on having people poking around in my business, not officially, anyway. That's why I'm out here. And there was no need. There's an old fishing trick, used to time-release bait at a distance. I strung the end of my line through a roll of Life Savers--"

"The candy?"

"Yes. See, you drop that down, wait a while, and pull it back up. A line that deep, it'll be dry by the time you get it back to the surface. But Life Savers dissolve in water. I let the line out in the morning, worked all day, and came back for it after dinner. The Life Savers were completely intact. No water."

"What else did you hear about the Hole? The rumours."

"Mostly speculation about its age. As far as anyone knew, it had been around for as long as the previous generations could account for. At least the early 1900s. And I figured anything like that would attract stories like a magnet. All types of things, but nobody had an origin story. Nobody knew how it got there. I think the one story that stood out most was a local hunter who claimed he dropped his dead dog into the Hole, then a week later saw it again in the forest. Said he called out to the dog, but it ignored him and ran off, disappeared into the trees. Just stories, I thought. But I couldn't ignore that it was there. I didn't know how deep holes go, usually, and I sure didn't believe it was bottomless, but maybe I had something record-breaking. I had to know how deep it went. That first week I put three thousand feet of line, everything I had, in there without touching down."

"What did you do next?"

"The only thing I could do. I started ordering more line."

[4k words or so]

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Sarah stopped the tape after a handful of silent seconds. With a clunk, the machine began to whirr as it rewound the cassette. "Well?"

"I heard that story before you could walk." I used my elbows to push myself out of the hollow of missing and bent springs I'd sunk into while listening to the tape. "There's nothing new there."

"But it's the source," said Sarah. "That was Hoagland himself telling it, not a second- or third-hand account."

The tape deck clicked to a stop. "Doesn't make it anything more than a guy telling a story."

"To a reporter," said Sarah.

"To another voice on a tape," I said. "What's it supposed to mean? What does this have to do with Dad's body?"

"He wanted to go back there." Sarah's said the words with a soft reverence.

It wasn't as if I didn't know how much it meant to her, how the legacy of that short time on a strange man's property had shaped Sarah through our father. Sitting there with her, in her shrine of pawn-shop electronics and battered conspiracy manuscripts, in the tiny apartment she'd forced herself into after selling our family home to finance nearly a decade of fruitless searching, I felt her yearning like a physical force. I felt the danger in that conviction, too. I'd told myself that maybe all she needed was closure. I couldn't abandon skepticism completely, but I wanted to hear her out. "What else did you find in the box?"

Handing me a red VHS tape, Sarah said: "The actual trip into the Hole."

"You mean the times they lowered things in buckets?" I flipped the tape over to read the label. "First Expedition."

Sarah took the tape back from my open hands. "You remember the cat?" She snapped her fingers and called out, "Come here, Jimmy."

"Jimmy?" I asked. "Dad's cat? The one he took with him when he left?"

"See for yourself." Sarah patted her armrest. A moment after her hand fell back into her lap, the black shape I'd seen earlier appeared, pouncing from the darkest part of the shadow cast by a nearby bookshelf to land silently on the spot she'd tapped. He was bigger than I remembered, but there was no mistaking the slash of white, like a wound, across the black fur of the cat's belly. Or the way it watched us with the same knowing eyes that had creeped me out when I was a kid.

"Look," said Sarah, and she passed me a small stack of slightly-faded photographs. "These were in the box, along with the one I scanned." I shuffled through them. Each was a different

shot of our old garage, of the gear our father had packed, of the brown station waggon he'd left in. There was the picture Sarah showed me in the diner, and another, from a wider angle, of him smiling down at Jimmy, who stared back up at our father while clinging to his shirt with his claws.

"So he still had the cat," I said.

"Jimmy came back, too," she said. "He showed up when I got the key. Like he'd been waiting for me." She scratched the cat behind his ears. "And that makes Jimmy the oldest being in this room. Almost the oldest cat I've ever heard of--maybe he is, really, but we don't know when he was born. The average cat is lucky to see fifteen, and he's at least twice that by now."

"An old cat," I said. "Still doesn't make any of it true."

"That's not even the most interesting thing about him," said Sarah. She put the red VHS tape into the blinking VCR, then leaned forward to turn one of the monitors on. It came to life with a bright snap, the picture coming into focus a few seconds later as a low electronic hum filled the room. "Just watch."

The screen showed a fuzzy, moving darkness that soon opened up into a bright daytime scene as whoever had been standing in front of the camera stepped aside. A ragged strip of blue sky ran along the top of the frame, under that the deeper grey-blue of serrated mountains running across the far horizon. The figure took two more long strides back, bent down to look into the lens. Poor lighting and the video's blurry resolution obscured the finer details, but I saw the long, shaggy hair and greying beard and knew instantly that I was seeing Charles Hoagland for the first time.

"He actually does look a lot like Willie Nelson," said Sarah, recalling our father's favourite description of the man.

Hoagland mouthed something. "There's no sound on this tape," Sarah explained. Once he'd had his say, Hoagland threw a thumbs-up with a gloved hand, then straightened and moved out of sight.

And there it was, at the centre of the frame. The Hole. From this angle, it really did look like nothing more than an old, disused well surrounded by a patch of naked dirt. Hoagland had set the camera up high enough to see there was an opening behind the low stone wall, but not close enough to see inside it. Sarah leaned in, put a finger on above the mouth of the hole on the monitor. "You can see the lines they're letting down into it," she said, pointing at a series of vertical stripes descending from the top of the frame.

Someone wandered into view from the left. A younger man, taller than Hoagland, who took hesitant steps while he fumbled at the fasteners for a safety harness. Stopping near the Hole, he turned toward the camera to let Hoagland adjust and tighten the clips he couldn't reach himself. "Dad," I said.

"Yeah," said Sarah. "That's him."

Hoagland finished what he was doing and slapped him on the back. Turning toward the screen, our father showed the camera a broad, boyish grin along with his own gloved thumbs-up.

Our father stood at the edge of the Hole long enough for Hoagland to secure a hook to the metal ring on the back of the harness, then sat on the wall with his legs dangling over the inside. Even knowing he was still alive long after this had been recorded, my breath caught in my throat for a moment as our father pushed himself away from the wall, into open air. The video stuttered as thick tracking lines overtook the picture.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Just wait," said Sarah.

The picture resolved itself and our father was still there, now standing chest-deep in the Hole on what must have been a platform attached to the heavy winch line swaying almost imperceptibly around the middle of the frame. Hoagland reached over to hand our father something, then backed and out of the frame. A second later, our father bounced a dozen centimetres straight up before grabbing onto the line to steady himself. The descent began. He threw another thumbs-up as he sank below the lip of the wall, disappearing completely.

Sarah hit the fast-forward button on the VCR. The machine buzzed as it worked, but nothing moved on the screen besides the scrolling visual artefacts and a digital number counting the minutes as they passed. "You see now," she said. "He wasn't lying. He really did go down there."

I opened my mouth to argue the point, a part of my mind demanding that I set a down a marker of sanity, something to hold onto while the rest of the world kept spinning out of control. I shifted in my seat as my skin began to crawl, as my body demanded that I move, that I get out of this creepy little apartment where I couldn't tell the time of day and the shadows never stayed still. An intense sensation, something close to *deja vu* as I felt something soft on my knee, as I glanced down to see Jimmy looking back up at me. My body stiffened in place, responding to the slight cat as if he was a lead weight.

"Look," said Sarah.

I forced words out of a dry throat. "What is that?" I couldn't move my arm enough to point at the screen, where Hoagland vibrated at the edge of the hole, gazing down into it, at something coming up. "What's going on?"

"Look," said Sarah again. I could see her bent forward over the VCR, unblinking eyes catching the light of the monitor as she stared at the timer.

Jimmy leapt away and I sagged, gasping for air that shivered cold through gritted teeth. I tried again to say something but only coughed.

Sarah said, "Now." She hit play.

Sixty-seven minutes had passed on the tape. What happened next was not a part of any of the stories our father had told me.

Hoagland had his back to the camera as he bent double over the lip of the Hole's mouth. After a minute of frantic-looking pulling at something out of sight, he lurched upward and fell onto his back, dragging our father's limp body, still connected to the safety line by hook and harness, down with him. As Hoagland's chest rose and fell, taking in the heavy breaths of exhaustion, our father remained still, his head lolling back far enough that the camera caught the edge of his blank, open-eyed face. The man I recognized, the man I'd never seen, and now the cadaver I'd seen twice in one day.

"What's going on?" I asked again. "Is he--"

"I think so," Sarah interrupted. "Just watch."

His breath recovered, Hoagland began moving. He pulled his arm out from under our father, mercifully letting his back lie flat against the ground and hiding those vacant eyes from the camera. On his hands and knees, Hoagland put an ear to our father's chest, probed at his neck with thick fingers. When he appeared to find no signs of life, his action quickened. An attempt at CPR that went on for agonizing minutes during which I kept reminding myself that this was the past, that I existed then, too, as a baby back home that my father returned to.

But Hoagland didn't have that assurance. He sagged against the low wall of the Hole and buried his head in his hands while the camera kept recording, and I felt a little glad, for the first time, that there was no sound.

Then the limp body wasn't limp anymore, it was heaving upward with an all-encompassing surge of vitality. Rolling onto his knees, our father held himself up as he shook and expelled whatever he'd eaten that day, then he dropped onto his back and kept on shaking, mouth open, fists pounding the dirt at his sides.

"He's laughing," I said.

Sarah nodded. "That's not even the best part."

Hoagland laughed, too, and they shared that moment for so long I began to feel uncomfortable, like a voyeur. Finally, our father pushed himself up to sit next to Hoagland, who slapped at his knee and put an arm around the younger man's shoulders. He was saying something as he held his hands against his chest, and I noticed movement there, under his shirt. A small head popped up from beneath the collar. Black fur, pointed ears. Smiles from both men as our father

coaxed the cat out into the open. He held it up to the camera, exposing a belly just as black as the rest of the animal.

Jimmy hissed.

The screen went black as a heavy click announced the end of the tape.

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"I have mint, chai, some green stuff I haven't tried yet--sencha, I think it's called--and this nice loose-leaf breakfast blend I picked up last time I went downtown. Guy who owned the shop was a pretentious douchebag--actually comes out wearing a khaki kilt. I'm not joking. Khaki kilt and his ratty ginger beard, drones on and on about all these pictures of the Highlands he has on the wall. He must have brought up scones at least three times in the ten minutes I was there, pronounced it differently each time. I thought he was going to challenge me to a caber toss before I could get out of there, and I'm pretty sure he weighed less than I do. Anyway, the tea is good. I'm going with the breakfast tea. We're going to need the energy. You didn't eat anything at the diner, did you? Before I got there? All I've got to eat are some eggs. Should have gone shopping yesterday, but, you know. I could hard-boil a few for the trip, or we could pick something up on the way. Up to you. Actually, probably best if we grab something else. It's a long enough drive, and you don't want both of us trapped in the car with nothing but eggs in our systems. You still take milk in your tea? Fresh out of that, too, sorry. So, what'll it be? Alex?

"Alex?"

Sarah's shadow loomed and I looked up from the pile of camcorder tapes I'd been sorting through. Unlike the red "First Expedition" VHS, these smaller tapes only had dates pencilled onto their labels. No way to know what was on them without watching them all. "There's nothing else?"

"I don't know," said Sarah. "Those are what I got, and I've been busy. So, tea?"

When I asked if there were other recordings, Sarah handed me a pair of reusable shopping bags, one filled with the nameless camcorder tapes, the other with equally mysterious audio cassettes.

"Whatever has the most caffeine works for me," I said as I began a new stack for March 1997.

"Kettles on." Sarah mounted a bar stool she pulled out from under a pile of magazines as I'd already taken the only chair at the large dining table. I said nothing. For a while, the only sound was the clatter of plastic on plastic dulled by the soundproofing. "I almost didn't call you," she said as she ran her fingers along the table's rough wooden, tracing the mazes of shallow grooves from knot to knot the same way she had as a kid waiting for our father to come home for dinner. The table, an anniversary gift he'd made out of reclaimed wood, was too big for her apartment. We'd had to pull it up from the street with a rope and take out the balcony door to get it inside when Sarah refused to let the movers remove the legs so they could bring it in through

the elevator. It was the only piece of furniture Sarah kept after selling the house and the only flat surface in the apartment not covered in clutter.

"He was my dad, too." I pushed half the pile of unsorted tapes toward her.

She began picking through them. "I know, but you told me yourself you wanted to be left out. I honestly wasn't that sure how you'd react when you saw the tape. I'm not even that sure how I'm reacting. there's still something about this whole thing that I can't explain."

"You mean, besides our father dying and coming back to life?" I took the May 1997 tape Sarah passed to me and slid a pair of late 1996 tapes back to her in return. "When do you figure that happened, anyway? The latest I've found here is mid-August '97."

"The notebook says sometime in October," Sarah said. "But it's hard to read. I think there are missing pages."

The kettle sang. By the time Sarah carried the two mugs to the table, I'd finished the stacking. "This is the last one," I said, laying down a single tape at the end of the line. "September 4th, 1997."

"Here." Sarah set the mugs down but didn't sit. "I think that red VHS is a copy. It's the only one that you can play with a normal VCR." She gave Jimmy, sitting on the back of the couch, a lingering caress running from the top of the cat's head to the tip of his tail, as she passed. Jimmy hadn't stopped watching us--staring at me--since we'd got up. I avoided his eyes.

After some digging through another pile of vintage recording equipment, Sarah returned to the table with a stubby camcorder and an AC adaptor. I took some tentative sips of my tea as she set up. It did taste good, but probably wasn't going to do much for the void of hunger I could feel building in my stomach.

"I couldn't figure out any other way to play them," said Sarah. "Except in the camera itself, which was a pain in the ass to find." She pressed the power button and flipped open the small preview screen on the camcorder's side. "But I've already watched a few of them and I'm pretty sure there's nothing to see."

I picked up the September tape. "What's on them?"

"Nothing, really." Sarah opened her hand, so I dropped the tape onto her palm. "It looks like they were lowering a camera into the Hole, letting it down on a rope, but they weren't getting anything usable. It's just blank, black tape."

"Then why did dad keep them?" I moved my chair closer to hers so we could watch the screen together. "Why pay to preserve a bunch of blank tapes?"

With a shrug, Sarah set the tape in the camcorder. She had to click the door shut twice before the mechanism stuck. "To show you can't record down there, for some reason? Maybe that's why he had to go down himself."

After a few button presses, Sarah got the video playing. Shoulder to shoulder, we leaned in. A thumb dialled the volume nob all the way up, and we both held our breath.

"Okay, Bill, we're good to go." I recognized Hoagland's hoarse voice coming quiet and scratchy through the tiny speakers.

The screen showed slate-grey. Muffled crackles and pops as the scene spun down to a patch of brown. Footprints in mud, moving in and out of focus as the camera bobbed and swayed. Then it began to pan up. Another blur of grey.

"Pause," I said, and Sarah pressed the button.

"What is it?" she asked.

I looked at the image frozen on the screen. That was it, the Hole, a pool of darkness hovering at the bottom of the screen. "Just a hole in the ground," I said. A lifetime of stories, and that really was it.

"What else did you expect?" Sarah pressed play. The image slid down, stopped.

"Light," said a voice that could have been either of the men. A splash of illumination revealed the concave stone of the Hole's inner wall. "Check."

A few seconds of level swaying, a sharp jerk, and the stone began scrolling upward, the light tracking over slim joints between the fitted pieces. "Seems to be recording just fine," I said.

"Maybe." Sarah moved a finger to the fast-forward button. "I saw almost as much in the tapes I looked at, but it doesn't last."

"Stop." I pointed at the screen. "What's that?"

"It's just dirt." Sarah paused the tape again. "There should be maybe thirty seconds of that, then something happens to the tape."

I took the camcorder from her. She didn't resist. "Hoagland said the stone walls of the Hole went down about twenty feet and, after that, it's packed clay. Dad always said the same thing, right?"

Sarah shrugged. "Yes."

"Does that look like packed clay to you?" I asked, looking over the faded icons on the camcorder's controls. "Does this thing have a zoom?"



"I don't know what packed clay is supposed to look like," said Sarah. "And I don't think so. It's pretty old."

"Okay," I said, giving up on the search. "I don't know, either, but I don't think it looks like that. Not naturally."

Leaning in closer to the screen, Sarah frowned. "It's just a black wall. You think it's the wrong colour?"

"No," I said. "Maybe. But just look at what the camera sees. A black wall, sure. And the tape is old, and the quality likely wasn't great in the first place, but that 'packed clay' looks smoother than the man-made stone wall above it."

Her frown deepening, Sarah ran a thumb over the small screen, rubbing at a crescent-shaped scratch in the plastic. "Back it up," she said.

I did, reversing the tape to the edge of the stone wall before playing it again. "Where are the roots? I don't think there were any big trees that close to the well--it's supposed to be a field, right? But there should probably be something down there, poking through. Rocks? Worms? Plants? There's nothing."

"No rain, either," said Sarah. "It was definitely raining up top, but look at the light--it should be catching something, bouncing off the droplets? The camera's not that bad."

We continued watching as the light played over the wall of the Hole, our eyes alert for any defect. It became difficult to measure progress without any fixed points to track, but I thought the camcorder must be picking up speed. And then, as Sarah had predicted, the screen went black.

"So, what is that?" I wondered. "The light giving out, or the camera?"

"Probably the light," said Sarah. "Or else they're throwing away a new camera every time. Or maybe it's the tape itself. You can skip to the end, see if it records them taking it back out, but the ones I watched didn't."

I pressed the fast-forward button three times to get the fastest speed.

Sarah continued. "I think they were trying to get as deep as they could and left it going until they ran out of space on the tape."

We drank our cooling teas as the timer accelerated, the changing numbers the only sign that anything was happening at all. As it reached one hour, eight minutes, Sarah sputtered and put her mug down with a solid thunk, snapping my wandering attention away from thoughts of burgers and back into the moment.

Through a mouthful of tea, Sarah blurted, "What was that?"

"What was what?" I asked while I fumbled for the pause button.

"Back up," said Sarah while she wiped at wet lips with the back of her sleeve. "There, stop. That. What is that?"

She had her finger slightly left of the screen's centre, circling a section of black just as black as all the rest. "I don't see anything," I said, lifting the camcorder to my eye, getting as close as I could to the image. "It's all blank."

Sarah took the camcorder back, fiddled with the controls, backing it up another handful of seconds and playing the tape in stuttering slow-motion. "That, right there," she said, a slight tremor in her rising voice. "You don't see it?"

I said, "No."

Setting the camera down, Sarah slid off her stool. "Still too early," she said after consulting her phone. "And you're hungry, right? I'll go pick up a pizza. My treat. You stay here. Look through the other stuff. I'll be right back." She talked without looking at me and I let her go without responding.

Lucid as she'd been so far, I had more than two decades of experience with whatever demons she grappled with and hadn't yet worked out how to break the stalemate inside her head without making things worse. If she wanted some time alone, I could wait.

Rubbing at tired eyes, I listened to the rhythmic clank of Sarah working the locks back into place on her way out. When that faded, I checked my own phone. One missed call, thirty-one unread messages. I checked the call, which was from my boss. He picked up on the second ring and immediately requested I come in over the weekend to cover extra shifts. "Can't do it right now," I said. "Family emergency."

"Your sister?" he asked.

"No, she's fine." I turned and saw Jimmy still sitting in the same spot on the back of the couch. "My dad is dead. I mean, they found his body. Long story. You know how it is."

"Sorry to hear that, Alex," said the small, distant voice at my ear. "Alex? You still there?"

I locked eyes with Jimmy. Why did he always look at me like I was the strangest creature in the room and had to be watched? He never blinks. Do cats blink?

"What?" asked the small, distant voice. "I think they can. Are you okay, Alex?"

The realization I'd said that you loud jarred me back into the moment. I looked away from Jimmy. "We're dealing with some things. Shouldn't take too long. I'll keep you updated." I ended the call before it could get any worse. Zero missed calls, thirty-one unread messages. I put my phone back into my pocket.

"We haven't talked much, have we?" I sat down next to Jimmy. "I always got the impression that you didn't like me." The cat dodged away from my hand as I tried for a casual pet, hopping down from the couch and scrambling into the shadows under the kitchen table. "Suit yourself, you little prick, but you can't say I never tried."

When Sarah returned with the pizza and a large bottle of off-brand cola, I shoved her worn paperback edition of *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* back onto the shelf. Jimmy beat me to the door, leaning into my sister's leg while looking up at me in a way that would have seemed possessive if I hadn't repeatedly told myself that he was just an animal.

"Find anything else?" she asked as I carried the food to the table and she locked up.

"Like a cat that actually likes people?" The aroma of freshly baked dough and hot tomato sauce filled my nose, overriding the desire to say anything else.

We didn't speak for several more minutes while I ate and Sarah held a drooping slice up so Jimmy could nibble at the fringes of melted cheese. Eventually, she broke the silence. "I'm not fucking crazy, Alex." The statement was neither angry nor loud.

"I didn't say that," I replied.

"You think I'm seeing things again." She waved a hand toward the camcorder. "You think I'm going to flip out like I did last time, like I did when Mom died. You think I'll spend another ten years living in my own fantasy world while reality keeps on telling me I'm wrong for thinking Dad was still alive."

"That's not--"

Sarah cut me off almost casually. "How's what's-her-name, Leena, doing?" Soft words, gentle like a razor blade.

I shut the pizza box. "She's got nothing to do with this."

Sarah put her slice down on the lid of the pizza box. Jimmy took a step toward it, but Sarah pulled him onto her lap. "But she's got everything to do with me, with us. Because I didn't hear you disagreeing when *she* called me crazy, said it right to my face with your arm draped around her shoulders."

"She was just joking," I said, trying and failing to not think about the unread messages.

"Well, I'm not joking," said Sarah. "And I didn't come to you to prove some point, if that's what you think. This isn't about you and Mom being wrong and me being right the whole time. I came to you because you're my brother and you deserve to be a part of this. You deserve to know the truth just as much as I do. I won't beg or tell you what to do, so what comes next is your choice, but you have to know this is just the beginning and I'm not going to stop. I'll see it through to the end, like I said, with or without you."

"You're really going to try and find Charlie's Hole," I said, finally letting the thought crystalize.

"Yes," said Sarah.

I looked at Jimmy, who was still staring at me, and thought about our father's vacant eyes on the tape. "What kind of brother would I be if I let you run off into the dark all by yourself?"

Her eyes softened and for a moment I thought she might cry. "Good," she said. "Then you can come with me to pick up the ice."