

THE FOURTH

PART ONE

On April 13, 2023, 32 year old Miranda Green was found by her husband in a semiconscious state in her basement, and would later pass away in the hospital. During the autopsy it was found that; even though she was still breathing and responding to stimuli, Green was missing several vital organs, and several large chunks of her brain. There were no signs of incisions on her body, no sign of a struggle, her home was locked tight, no signs of breaking and entering, and her husband had a solid alibi. Found with Green in the basement were three armchairs, two large standing mirrors, and a standing rotary fan. Below the chair Green was situated in, was a large bucket of water, spilled across the ground, a broken water pipe adding to the mess, a wet snuffed out candle, and a small handmade children's bracelet. The same bracelet I had made her when we were 12.

Her husband, a large messy man of 6 foot 2, wept beside me when we stood at her service, and when they buried her beside our older sister. I kept silent, like my father for the rest of our family, his body buried somewhere else so that we could have peace. I was the first person Hunter had called when he found Miranda. I promptly yelled at him through the phone to call the ambulance before rushing over myself, and when I got there the police directed me to find them in the hospital. She was still conscious when I got to her, Hunter crying and holding her hand as she attempted to croak out words to us, her eyes wide in a desperate joy to see me beside her. Apparently she had ignored him for the most part, only perking up once I got close to her. The only words I could hear from her were my name, and that she had missed me. Before I could ask her what had happened, she fell into a heartless cardiac arrest, and died. I believe she was long dead before she got to the hospital.

After the funeral I drove back to her home with Hunter. The police tape that had wrapped around the house almost two weeks before was now gone, letting us walk freely through the cold empty home. He had been sleeping at my apartment for the past few days. At the sight of each picture, each possession that had once been used and held by Miranda, Hunter's lips would start to quiver again, and I had to fight back several urges to tell him to keep it together. The words of my father still echoed inside me, and I decided to defy him once again, and let the silent tears roll down my face as I waited patiently for Hunter to dry his. He works night shifts, normally being home by six but decided to do an extra few hours of overtime for a bit of extra money at the end of the month. Hunter wasn't even supposed to be there that night, the entire shift that eventually lasted 12 hours was taken by him in the last moment. I tried my best to lie to him, but I couldn't keep it inside me forever. As terrible as it is to say, if he were there that night,

she probably would still be here. Good thing I didn't need to say it, as it was the line he repeated to me since the day I met them at the hospital.

There was a big gap between her death and the service. The local police and coroner took about half a month to rule it as an “unconventional suicide,” and decided to leave out the part about how a woman with no heart, frontal lobe, and nervous system was able to stay alive for over 12 hours before her death. I needed to find out. I left Hunter in the bedroom alone and made my way into their basement, the door bordered with small yellow strips of police tape that still hung to the staples. Going in the opposite direction of me as I descended the stairs was a heavy of musk and wet carpet. The water had nowhere to evaporate to in a closed windowless basement, so it pooled a few inches off the ground, small patches of green moss or mold was starting to form where the water touched the arm chairs. The three sat facing away from each other, with two standing mirrors positioned on both sides of one specific chair, reflecting the seats of the other two. Behind the whole set up, part of it submerged in the murky water, was a tall standing rotary fan. Electrocutation wasn't the cause of death. If it was, then Hunter would have killed himself the moment he rushed in to find Miranda that morning.

I started to slip my shoes and socks off to step across the water, wanting to take a look at the scene from another angle, and to see the chair that she sat in when she died. The water was cold and slimy against my bare feet, coming up to my ankle as I made my way through the dark basement, the dim light that hung overhead and my cell phone guiding my way. I sat down on her chair and faced the two mirrors, perfectly angled to see the empty seats of the two other chairs beside me. The trick of the faded dark played tricks on my eyes as I thought for a moment I saw two figures sit beside me. Leaning back in the chair, again with a trick from the dying light and the angle of the mirrors, it looked as if it were two copies of me were reflected into the seats.

Along the walls were rows of neatly stacked and labeled boxes. Miranda, being the neat freak that she was, must have spent hours upon hours making sure the basement was organized in such a manner that she would never have to look for anything. I aimed the phone light on the nearest row and even noticed they were in alphabetical order. Maybe she had spent all day and all night organizing her home and took a break on the chair, only to suffer a stroke or a heart attack. That, however, still wouldn't explain the obvious missing organs. I let my phone light roll across the furthest corner of the room and saw set in the corner in a direct line from me, the empty crib.

“Haven't been able to clean up yet.” Hunter said from the bottom of the stairs where my shoes lay. There was still a small shake in his deep voice.

“You're gonna want to call plumbing” I thought I was funny, but all I got in return was a small through-the-nose-exhale laugh.

“You remember when you first met her?”

“8th grade, mistook her for Melissa.”

"It happened to me too, and I live with them"

We both laughed, childhood memories stifling awkward silence and releasing the tightness in our chests. I gazed again at the two mirrors. To the left, me, and to the right, a memory of something similar.

"8th grade...do you remember Brandon Hughes?"

"Do you mean; am I still traumatized by Brandon Hughes?"

I stood from the chair and turned to him.

"You're traumatized by everything. Do you remember what happened to him?"

"Yeah he had a fucking heart attack and died in the middle of class. We were like 9, I didn't know 9 year olds could get heart attacks."

I shrugged. "Do you remember what he said he did before he died?"

Hunter thought for a moment, his face slowly dropping even further than it had been the past two weeks, his mouth falling into a silent gape.

I feel bad for saying this since I'm an adult and he's a dead 9 year old kid, but Brandon Hughes was an idiot. The list of stunts, back talk, and ridiculous things he did around the schoolyard could go on forever, but let me just say that I didn't know any kids actually ate glue because it tasted good until I met Brandon. Still, he wasn't a bad kid. Brandon was the kind of child that couldn't stand to see any other child get bullied, and even though he was only half the size of some of the tougher kids, he fought like hell when it came to it. He, like Hunter, I, and several other kids, loved ghost stories. The only time he would ever sit still for anything is to listen to someone tell him something spooky, a local haunt, or a urban legend, and each time he would follow up with hyperactive list of specific questions. He had enjoyed them so much, that he started to be known around school as the junior myth-buster.

Lana Ramirez was supposedly the ghost of a little girl, who was killed by a creepy janitor in the boy's bathroom in our school's basement. If you were to go into one of the stalls with the lights off and chant her name 5 times, you would be able to see her walk by in her small pink shoes underneath the stall. If you were to open the door as she walked by, she would tear off your face and stuff it into her backpack, and your dead body would be found the next day, faceless and sitting on the toilet. Brandon Hughes, the day of hearing this, managed to drag 4 other kids, Hunter and I included, into the basement bathroom at the end of a school day. He smacked the light switch as we entered, and ushered us into the stall. As the other kids, mostly Hunter, cried, Brandon started to chant her name much more than 5 times, and when we suddenly heard the clacking of shoes on linoleum the bathroom fell quiet. That was until he kicked open the stall and jumped out, only to find the bathroom empty, but causing the four others to rush out in a panic. The sound was just the principle walking down the hall outside with her high heels.

I learned later from his brother that Brandon's sense of curiosity and love for horror came from his mother. She would read with them every single night Goosebumps, Scary Stories, and any other horror literature that was readily available from the school library. The family would hold horror movie nights, going through classics that weren't exactly suitable for someone their age. When she passed, Brandon remained mostly the same. His non stop on-the-go attitude never slowed down, but you could tell something hung to him underneath. More often he would just stare at nothing until one of us shouted his name just a bit louder, more often he would be the first to stop laughing, or the last to start. A few months after his mother passed, he would too.

What changed our lives the most as children was the internet. We were at that age where it was still way too new for parents to really know the dangers of letting their children freely surf the web, and it was the perfect time for kids our age to discover the world on early internet horror. Cheesy dumb chain mail stories, fake ghosts pictures, cursed websites and the like, everything Brandon could have ever dreamed of right in front of him. Hunter's family was the first to get a nice home computer, and almost every day after school the lot of us would gather up around it and take turns clicking on risky links just to read the latest spook. The newest hyper fixation for Brandon were the ritual games, all of which he wanted to attempt, starting with...

"First, find three chairs, and set them facing away from each other, but almost back to back. Make sure one is facing north. That's the one you're going to sit in...three thrones, three kings." I began. Hunter continued.

"Then, find two large mirrors...make sure the mirrors are reflecting the two other chairs that you aren't going to be sitting in."

"third, set up around 11 pm-"

"Fuck that's when I left for work"

"Did she...try the Three Kings?"

Brandon Hughes came to school the next day after attempting this challenge, the most quiet that he's probably ever been in his entire life. He sat two seats behind me, next to Hunter. In the middle of the class Brandon gripped the side of his desks and stared up into the sky, having a shouting conversation of gibberish with the porous ceiling of our classroom before suddenly slamming down on his desk, dead. I'm willing to bet that he was also missing organs.

"Miranda wouldn't-she-" Hunter stuttered, "From the internet?"

"Hunter...Listen to me very carefully, did she say anything or mention anything weird leading up to the night."

"No-no she uh, just about the baby but-"

"Baby? You mean...the baby?"

Hunter nodded, his eyes more sunken in than before.

"I thought it got better."

"You know Miranda, she's been..."

She's been different since they lost the baby. Even though Miranda was the middle child, being two years older than me, and two younger than Melissa, she was often the mom of the group. Her extra sense of responsibility for us filled the gaps in our lives that was left by my mother when she left. Our father, when he was functioning, served only the purpose of driving us around, which was then made obsolete when Miranda got her driver's license. She would be the one who woke us up in the mornings for school, patched up our clothes when they had holes in them. She was much more than she needed to be or should have been at such a young age. Despite this, she was never bitter at her lack of childhood. Never once did she use it as leverage for a guilt trip, never once did she complain about not being able to go out to parties instead of helping me do homework and house chores. Melissa did enough partying for the three of us, and when things got too bad, Miranda would be the one to pick her up at 3 in the morning. She became more protective of me when we lost Melissa.

I remember the dinner they invited me to, full of friends and Hunter's family when she announced that they were pregnant. They had been trying for so long. The glow that came from those two lit up the snowy ground that night as we walked back to our homes. Sunlight in the dark. For almost 3 months my nickname was "Unky Matt," helping them build up cribs and furniture, painting the walls of a previously empty room in their house. That room remained a sloppily painted baby blue fading into a milk white, paint buckets still sat in the corner, one half empty and one unopened. The details remained unknown to me, buried between shouting matches and passive aggressive comments. They both blamed themselves, but it was no one's fault. Sometimes things like these just...happen, and that's the hardest part to accept.

Hunter began to work more, sealing up that hole in his chest with whatever distraction he could. He told me that he thought, maybe he could come home one day and everything would go back to normal. It was only wishful thinking. Eventually that motivation turned into raising enough money to take Miranda on a nice vacation. My sister, on the other hand, let her emptiness grow. She quit her job at the local kindergarten, resigning herself to sitting in this armchair and staring at the clouds for 10 hours a day. I would step in and help them make rent every month, dropping by at least twice a week to make sure everything was clean, that she was eating. It was a twist for me, being the one to take care of her instead. She would only meet our questions with small forced smiles and mindless nods. During the night she would keep herself awake by staying online, her face lit up with the blue of her laptop screen, trying to lose herself in god-knows-what. Out of respect for her privacy, neither one of us ever checked what went on in that laptop.

Over the course of a couple years, with help from therapy, family, and time, Miranda began to function again. She began to move about the house more, picked back up on her poetry and writing, even light mentions of how much she missed teaching at our childhood

school. When her smile returned, it felt like someone finally opened up the blinds and let the sunlight back into their home. Ever still, we danced around, and avoided the topic the baby. Tears still fell, hearts still ached, but we worked hard, her “I won’t go without a fight” attitude resurfacing once again. Nothing could ever make her forget, but I could feel that she tried her damndest to move on. The small glimpses I saw of her before became full portraits once again. That was until...

“She uh...I thought it was a good way to let her cope...” Hunter began, “I thought maybe it could lead to us trying again for another kid. She watched a bunch of those “talking to spirits” videos lately, got real into it. You know me, I don’t believe in these things, I didn’t think she did either but...”

“Who did she try to talk to”

“First, It was your mom...then Melissa. Then she,” his voice got caught in his throat, “she wanted to talk to the baby.”

“She did the three kings more than once?”

“No-I don’t know, first it was just candles and crystals, she got one of those alphabet boards and I just-she was happy! Even if she heard nothing, or if it was subconsciously faked, she was happy. You don’t think...you don’t believe in that, do you?”

“No”

“Then why-”

“You tell me how my sister died”

Harmless attempts went further and further Hunter came home recently and found her cutting her hand with a steak knife. They had a small argument, and he should have immediately put her into psychiatric care, but he couldn’t. She was responsive again, she was happy again, when she wasn’t doing these rituals at night she was a fully functioning human being again. He had his wife back, and I had my sister back. All he did was bandage her up, beg her not to do it again, and took her word for it when she said okay. A few days later, that bandaged hand was gripping his as she died in the hospital.

“Whats the goal of the three kings?”

“What?”

“The fucking thing she did, what did she want? What’s the goal? What did Brandon fucking say it was?”

“I don’t know!”

“What was it?”

"I don't fucking-it was uh-it was to uh-fuck!" Hunter shouted, on the edge of a panic attack, "You could ask questions! You could ask questions and uh you should be able to see someone-or-something!"

"What did she ask? What did she see?" I furiously made my way back over to him, my legs splashing through the grimy basement water.

"I don't know! I wasn't there man! I wasn't there" He started to break down again, balling up against the basement stairs.

I stood over him, fists clenched, shaking, trying to calm myself down before I would say something I'd regret. Hunter looked up at me, teary eyes and quivering lip. I wish I could have expressed my feelings like he did.

"I love her too man. She's my wife. I'm sorry, I should have been there."

I slammed my fist into the wall beside his head before grabbing my shoes and leaving. On the way back to my apartment, I stopped at a red light, and cried. I should have been there too.

PART TWO

Brandon Hughes' father, Harold Hughes, was still alive, and living in the same home he did almost two decades ago. A small, brown, one story suburban home, two blocks away from the small town's only elementary school. I was over a few times after school, play fighting in the back yard with sticks we pretended were swords, or guns, or whatever we wanted them to be. I remember how kind Mrs. Hughes was before the cancer took her. The house was more or less

the same, the brown color had begun to fade and flake, windows weren't as clean as they used to be, one was covered up. As I approached, the old man who was repairing the garage door stopped to greet me, his eyes tired and voice slower than it once was.

"What can I do you for, stranger?"

"I'm uh- I know this is kinda out-of-the-blue but I was wondering if you had a moment to talk to me about Brandon,"

"You're Donny's kid aren't you?" He asked after a second of squinting at my face.
"Matthew."

"Yeah, I am"

"He dead?"

"...Yep"

"Good." He turned back to his garage door. "What did you wanna know about Brandon?"

"I'm sorry to ask about this but uh-"

"Cut the crap, just ask"

"Yes sir" He took me by surprise. "Do you know exactly how he died?"

"Yeah, damn kids and their internet. Stayed up all night in his room doing god knows what and had a heart attack the next day."

"Yeah that's what I heard. Do you know if he um..." even though I rehearsed the question in the car the entire drive over, it still wasn't any easier to ask. "Did he have all of his organs at the time of death?"

His father stopped working, gripping the pliers and screwdriver tight as he turned to look at me. He had stopped breathing as he scanned my face, trying to see if I was pulling some sort of cruel prank. I wasn't.

"Excuse me?"

"What did he do before he died?"

"What did you do?"

"I didn't...my sister."

"What did she see?"

"I don't know."

"Were you there?"

"no I wasn't."

He took a deep breath and dropped the tools, rubbing his temple in exhaustion. He knew, for years he just didn't know what to do or say about it until now. Two decades of self doubt and frustration came out in a single low grumbling breath.

"Your sister, is she..."

"Yeah"

"I'm so sorry, Matty, I am."

"Do you remember if he said anything, if he mentioned anything."

"He wanted to talk to his ma again...my god I thought it was witchcraft. I blocked off his room, I didn't want to see it again I- how does someone die like that, Matty? How-"

"Did he talk to her?"

"What?"

"Did it work?"

"Matty I..."

"Please, I need to know if it worked. I need to know how my sister died, she was all I had left."

It did work. That night around 4 Harold walked by his son's room on the way to the kitchen to get water. He stopped when he heard conversation coming from inside the bedroom, Brandon was talking to several people. He leaned against the wall to try and listen in. Brandon would ask a question, and everyone would answer, several voices overlapping each other like an all knowing chorus of calming cries and screams. He still couldn't hear the exact words, the sound muffled by the closed door. He thought that Brandon had found his way onto an online chat board and was spending the entire night playing games and talking to strangers. Two decades ago, we weren't aware of the dangers of letting a child freely surf the web. Stranger danger was supposed to be a more physical, real-life threat, not something hidden behind a screen. Harold was more annoyed that his son was awake for a school night than talking to a random group of adults. He was about to push open the door and confront Brandon when he suddenly heard her voice.

His wife's haunting hum stopped him, her tone vibrating through the air and shook his hand as it hovered above the door handle. He leaned closer in, hearing his son ask his mother about how she felt, telling her about school, about him. The ghost of her smile was visible through the small laughs and murmurs he could hear, and he desperately wanted to talk to her

again too. He pressed his ear against the warm door to try to hear more, but suddenly she went silent, cutting off mid sentence. Her voice now sounded like it was against the other side of the door, now void of emotional. As she spoke, each breath it drained the warmth from the wooden surface his face was against, his breath now visible as he stood there.

“Someone's listening.”

When he finally entered the room it was empty. Brandon sat there silently, two mirrors beside him, two chairs behind him, clutching a book his mother used to read to him. He didn't respond, and Harold didn't press further. The entire sight of the room and the voices from before frightened the old man. He sternly told his son to go to sleep, that he had school in the morning, and then left. Brandon died the next day, his room still unchanged.

Harold let me inside to look around, it was the first time since that day that he had opened the door. The window was covered up with a blanket, the light switch was crusted over and no longer worked, I had to navigate through the dust caked room with my phone light. His entire set up was still there, the chairs, the mirrors, even a bucket, once filled with water, sat where his feet must have touched the ground. From what I could find on the internet, Brandon did everything right. My phone light slowly scanned the walls, illuminating movie posters and action figures for the first time in a while, their details lost in a layer of cobwebs and gray. I tried my best to search the room and my mind for any sort of mistakes he could have made, anything that had resulted in his death, but there was only one. Harold had interrupted. But what about Miranda? What did she do different? The windows were blocked, the chairs and mirrors were set, everything looked exactly the same, and she didn't have anyone to interrupt her.

“Do you mind if I-”

“I don't want no part of this.”

“I need to know how she died.”

“You gonna ask her?”

“I gotta ask someone.”

“Why don't you do it at your own place?”

“I might get something wrong. Brandon did it right.”

Harold nodded slowly, knowing what it meant, and what he was responsible for. He took a long look around the room, his expression saying how much he wants to close it back up.

“If you can...can you tell them I'm sorry.”

“I'll try.”

“I’ll tell you what, I gotta go to work tonight, won’t be back till six. Garage door don’t close all the way, and if it does, a few hits to the box on the side gets it up far enough for someone to crawl under.”

PART THREE

My first action figure was a silver space robot that my mom had bought for me with her allowance money when we were 6. It had 20 points of articulation, light up eyes and chest, which no longer worked, and it was the only toy I had for years growing up. This was my treasured childhood toy, and it would be my anchor object for the ritual. At 10 pm I crawled underneath the cracked open garage to the Hughes family home, bringing with me a small backpack of supplies, hoping no neighbors saw me and would call the police. As expected, the

door leading to the main house was unlocked, and I immediately set to work on the two missing pieces of the ritual; filling the rusty water bucket from Brandon's room, and running an extension cord for the fan under the door to a working power outlet. With the pieces in place, I leaned against the door and fell asleep around midnight, and when my alarm pulled me back awake at 3:30 AM, it was time to start. I felt divided. Parts of me were skeptical, other parts were desperate for answers, but the one I chose to listen to was the part of me that wanted to live.

"Hello? Where are you?" Hunter's groggy voice asked through my phone.

"If I don't text you at 4:30 you call me immediately."

"What?"

I hung up, set the second alarm, and sat down in the chair. Bucket of water between my legs, space robot in one hand, and a candle in the other. The whirling fan behind me kicked up dust around the room as it rotated back and forth, and I tried not to breathe too much of it in. I began to count the seconds until the third minute came, then silence. My vision was locked straight ahead of me, the two mirrors reflecting unseen anticipation of the other two seats beside me. A stinging tension pierced the air, one person waiting for the other to start the conversation. I stayed silent, restraining myself not to look at the two side mirrors. Is there anyone else here?

"Am I here?"

Miranda's voice? No it was my mother's...or was it Melissa? Do I even remember my mother's voice? Wait-or was it my father's? Was Harold back? Was it a man? A woman? My voice was there too, right? Or was there even a voice? I started to panic in my seat, the grip on my robot and the candle tightened. Was I even afraid? My arms shook and I felt the sweat drip from my brow but my heart stayed steady and calm. Slowly I sank back into the armchair, keeping my eyes forward.

"Will you answer my questions?"

"Do I even want them answered?"

"Will I accept the answer I'm given?"

"Of course I will, why would I ask if I didn't want to know?"

"What do I want to know?"

"Is it worth knowing?"

"Could I have done more?"

"Everyone thinks they could have done more, but sometimes it is what it is, and I shouldn't feel guilty for that, right?"

"But if I was there that night, could I have stopped it?"

"Maybe, but what if I just made it worse?"

"Was it my fault?"

"Does she know I love her?"

"Why wouldn't she?"

"What did she do wrong?"

"Why did she do it in the first place?"

"Why do I want to know?"

"I thought she was getting better, what happened?"

"She needed answers, doesn't everyone want answers?"

"or, what if she wanted to speak to someone?"

"Who would she want to speak to?"

"Who would she want to see?"

"Do I have someone I want to see?"

"I want to see her, would she want to see me?"

"Can I see them too?"

"Would they want to see me?"

"What if he's there?"

"Do I want to see him?"

"Of course not, after all what has he ever done for us?"

"At one point he cared, didn't he?"

"Did he ever care at all?"

"Why do I miss him?"

"Why do I hate him?"

"I'm not here for him" I found my voice again, the small edges of the robot digging into my hands as I squeezed.

"Right, I'm here for her"

"But she's not here. Where is she?"

"Am I doing this correctly?"

"I am, I have to be, why else would I be asking questions?"

"Wait, but then why isn't she here?"

"Does she need to be here?"

"Do I need to be here?"

"Am I in the right place?"

"What if I'm doing this in the wrong place?"

"Where's the right place?"

"Did she do it in the wrong place?"

"Or was something wrong with the way she did it?"

"What could she have possibly done wrong?"

"She never does anything wrong, she follows instructions to a tee, what happened?"

"What if she forgot something?"

"What if she did it on purpose?"

"Why would she do it wrong on purpose?"

"What if she didn't know that it was wrong to do?"

"Have I done anything wrong?"

"I've done a lot of things wrong."

"Wait who said that?"

"Didn't I say that?"

"Wasn't it me?"

"I haven't done anything wrong, why would I say that?"

"Whats that noise?"

"Wait, where am I?"

"What am I doing?"

"Who am I?"

"What do you mean? I'm me, aren't I?"

"Who else would I be?"

"Why is it so loud?"

"Then who are you?"

"If you're not me than who are you?"

"If I'm me then what am I?"

"The mirror"

My chest tightened as I felt something squeeze around my lungs, my vision started to blur, only the periphery of my vision was clear, the reflections of the mirrors begging for attention. I dared not to look.

"I'm me, aren't I?"

"I'm sure I'm me. Are you sure you're you?"

A loud ringtone shook my body to consciousness, dropping the candle into the bucket and splashing a water onto the ground. My heart felt like it was shattering my ribs, trying to escape the cage that was my chest. I pulled my phone from my pocket, my alarm had been ringing for the last half hour, the notification vibrating while a phone call was coming through at the same time. I picked up the call, Hunter's confused voice shouting at me from the other side as my hearing faded in and out from a concussive ring. I murmured something to him about Brandon Hughes and then dropped my phone, vomiting my entire stomach into the bucket in front of me, causing it to overflow a disgusting mix of rusty dusted water and my last 3 meals. My body slipped from the chair and fell onto the carpeted ground, breathing in the dust and dirt from my impact.

PART FOUR

“Mr. Hughes says he doesn't want to see you again”

“We're almost 30, Hunter just call him Harold.”

I groaned as I pushed myself up in my hospital bed, my head still ringing from the night before. An IV tube was pushed deep into the back of my right hand, it stung when I tried to move it too much. Hunter ran his hand through his dark hair and scratched his beard, dark rings

deepened his already sunken eyes. He seemed different, more anxious, his leg shaking on the side with anticipation. The man who his entire life had so little to say looked like he was on the edge of exploding.

"So you just don't answer for 2 days and then you land yourself in the hospital?"

"Shut up."

"No, last I remember we're family too, Matt, you can't just-"

"I tried it."

"Tried? the Three Kings? Did it work?" he stood up from the hospital chair. "Was Miranda there?"

"I don't know-"

"You don't know like you didn't talk to her? Or you don't know like-"

"I don't know because apparently I have having a fucking seizure."

"oh..." the confidence in his voice was gone.

"What happened?"

"you called me and then I called you back 3 hours later like you wanted me to. I didn't know where you were at the time."

"Three hours?"

"I was a minute late I think- connection problems."

"No I was in the chair for like three minutes."

By the time the ambulance picked me up the sun was already breaking through the clouds of the horizon. Harold came home to two police cars and an emergency wagon speeding away from his home. Thank god he took the time later to report that I wasn't breaking and entering, and Hunter vouched to the cops for me that I wasn't on any drugs. I wish I was though, preferably painkillers and something to stop the droning ring in my ears. Hunter paced back and forth dramatically as he began to lecture me on the importance of family, and not doing things like this alone. I returned his pent up concern with weak nods and grunts, holding more vomit back as my brain took its time catching up with my forced movements. He would have been an amazing father.

I was always mean to hunter. Unable to deal with my emotions in a natural healthy way, I would always make fun of him for his size or his timidness. I was jealous, angry, didn't understand why the Green family was always together, singing songs and holding hands.

Hunter, being the bathroom rug that he is, just soaked all of it up and took it as fun. No matter what I said or did to him he just shook it off and said, "Ah, he didn't mean it." He is the best friend that I never asked for or deserved, and I knew eventually I would push it too far. I made a dumb choice and pulled the IV from my hand. A small stream of blood sprayed across the sheets, before I pressed the tape holding the IV in place down on my hand, sealing the hole. Hunter gagged at the sight.

"Did you take apart the chairs in the basement?" I croaked weakly, swinging my legs to the ground.

"What? Are you even listening to me?"

"Did you take apart her set up?"

"You son of a- I am so sick of your stupid tough guy attitude, how you don't fucking care about anything. You wanna try it again? Get yourself killed this time?"

"I have a better plan this time."

"What is this about?"

"What?"

"Why are you trying so hard to figure this out, man?"

Pure rage at his question shoved my brain back into focus. "You don't want to know how she died?"

"Of course I want to know how she died!"

"Then let me do this!"

"I don't want you to die either."

Miranda Green didn't deserve to die. Miranda Green deserved much better than the "unconventional suicide" they filed her under. As much as I wanted to say I was doing this to solve the mystery of her death, I had a much more selfish reason. I needed to talk to her one last time. I was never an emotional or patient person. Taking care of Miranda over the last couple years made me push back on a lot of things in my life as well. I missed out on a promotion, missed out on a chance to move to a bigger city, even lost my girl. I kept saying "family first," because it was the right thing to do, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. Though she never asked for it, and the thought must have never crossed her mind, I felt like I owed a gigantic debt to her for raising me. I did everything I could to help her move past her loss but she never could. Everyone heals differently, some don't heal at all, and I couldn't accept that. I was tired.

Miranda called me that night she did the ritual. I was at my breaking point before everything started to look like it was getting better once again. It was that one phone call that pushed me over the edge that I had settled into. All she wanted me to do was call her at 4 am to make sure she stopped before it went on too long. I told her no, that I was done, and that she needed to stop. There was no way to see her child, to see even the possibility of her child. I told her plain and simple, that her dead baby was dead, and that she needed to move on. I hung up on her and went back to sleep, and a few hours later Hunter called me. The questions she asked that night are lost to us, but one thing is for sure; her death is my fault, and if I have a chance to clear my conscience I needed to take it.

The hospital released me with a week's worth of pills and vitamins, and I fumbled around with them in my hands as I sat in the passenger seat, taking the first few dry. We didn't talk on the way back to the house, Hunter grumbled to himself as he drove, attempting to work up the courage to yell at me. He was furious, he had every right to be.

"If I do it in the basement where Miranda was, I think I can talk to her"

"What if you really did only have a seizure?"

"What?"

"What if she really just died? What if you just had a seizure and hallucinated?" The light turned red. Harry gripped the steering wheel and gritted his teeth. He didn't have the energy anymore for tears.

"Harry..."

"Maybe we should try and move on too, Matt. I can't do this, man, I'm tired"

"You don't believe it?"

"I just, I don't know anymore. I don't know if any of this is real, and if it is, I don't know of any of this is worth it. I used to come home every morning, and waiting for me in the kitchen would be a plate of warm pancakes. Miranda would wake up every morning at 5 and make me fresh pancakes, because the first few times she did it when I came home, I made her stop and go to bed. She would always make sure to make them before I got home so I wouldn't say anything and I would just sit and eat them, and she would come down the stairs and act surprised every single time. "Where did you get those?" She'd ask me. I got used to them, I didn't know I got so used to them until we lost the baby, and for a year I'd come home every day and I would just sit in the kitchen, and she would be in her arm chair, asleep or crying in the corner of the living room, and I would just listen to that for an hour before I carried her up to bed. For a bit, the pancakes came back, and Miranda came back, she'd ask me again every morning "Where did you get those?" I don't think she died knowing she was going to die, and don't you dare think that what happened to her doesn't haunt me every single damn morning I come home and sit alone in that kitchen. I'd give anything to hear her ask me that damn question again, or

even just to hear her cry in the living room again, because dammit it, it would mean that she'd at least still be there. But you're still here, aren't you, Matt?"

"I can't let her go like this."

"Matt-"

"I just need one more try-"

"No!"

"I just need to go in one more time! And you're going to be there! And you're gonna pull me out before I get too deep, like last time! Like Brandon-"

"We don't even know what killed Brandon!"

"What?"

"Brandon was a sick kid, he just had a heart attack."

"Yeah he had the heart attack-he was missing parts like Miranda"

"No, you added that part. I talked to Mr. Hughes while you were in the hospital, I asked him about Brandon. He wasn't missing anything, he had a stress induced heart attack, the doctor said he stayed awake for like four or five days straight and died of exhaustion."

"No but Harold said- he heard his wife, he-"

"both him and Brandon were mourning. Like we are"

"I don't understand, this doesn't make any sense, they didn't die the same way? But they both messed up the ritual-"

"How do you know Miranda messed up the ritual?"

The silence pulled the air from the car.

"Matt, how did you know she messed it up?"

"She called me that night, like I called you"

"You were supposed to pull her out? Its not your fault Matt, you called late and-"

"No, I uh...I didn't call at all"

"You fell asleep?"

"No. I told her that she was insane, and that I was done helping her. I said she would never see her baby."

"You said that?"

"Yeah"

"All you had to do was call her at 4 in the morning and she would have been alive, and you said all of that?"

"Yeah"

The car came to a rolling stop at a green light. The driver behind us honked and overtook us, the cars behind him following after. Hunter's fist collided with the side of my face, sending the rest of it smashing against the windshield with a loud crack. The windshield remained intact, which meant that startling noise must have been my bleeding nose.

"You had to just fucking call her? Was that too much for you to do? After all she's done for you?"

I kept my mouth shut as I saw his fist clench again. I needed him to hit me again. I needed to feel at least a portion of the pain Miranda must have been in that night of the ritual, the hurt she must have felt hearing her brother talk to her like that. Maybe it she didn't do the ritual wrong, maybe she didn't miss a step, she never does. She could have had two or three more measures set up to wake her and pull her out of the ritual. Maybe it was me crushing the hope of her ever seeing her lost child again that killed her.

"Let me try to find her, just one more time" I choked out, the taste of blood heavy in my mouth as the anticipation of his next punch lingered.

"..."

"Tell me you haven't cleaned out that basement yet."

"...."

"Hunter."

"I haven't"

PART FIVE

My alarm woke me at 3:00, bandaged nose and jaw still aching from hunter's punch earlier, and a second trip to the hospital. Hunter grumbled in his recliner a few feet from me, rubbing his eyes as he got up. We had both fallen asleep in the living room. His basement was already untouched and ready to go, even the murky water not yet drained from the cold

concrete floor. We made our way to the top of the stairs, a lit candle in my hand, and a cell phone in his. He was not to listen in, as soon as the door close he would go sit in the kitchen and keep an eye on the door, calling my phone this time only a half hour into the ritual. I would have to be fast this time, asking the correct questions and trying to find my sister before I got too far in. Hunter argued to do the ritual himself, but it had to be me. It was my mistake, and if something were to happen, it would be better if I was the one who died.

3:30, we went over the plan again before he walked over to the kitchen and sat down, a direct view across the room to the basement door. I nodded to him before I stepped inside, hesitant to close the door behind me. In another life there would have been a wife and child beside him, eating pancakes together every morning as a family, wondering how they got on the table. The grief and denial that once turned into curiosity and anger inside of me, was now only fear and regret. I looked at the robot figure in my hands, then at the man across from me.

“Hunter”

“...”

“I’ll see you in a bit, brother.”

My bare feet sloshed through the disgustingly grimy water as I made my way to Miranda’s chair. I counted down the seconds, sitting just a moment before the clock hit 3:33. The sick orange of the candle reflected across watery bottom of the room, mist and dust dancing through the air in a haunting glow. I kept my eyes straight, focusing in the far corner of the basement, but the anticipation was lost, replaced by a looming dread. I had done something wrong. I knew the feeling immediately, I had done something unspeakable, and I was afraid of what was to come. Like a child caught red-handed after breaking a window, the anxiety began to claw at my insides, my stomach turning and pushing vile and vomit up towards my mouth. The candle flickered and I regained my focus for just a second, running through hundreds of possibilities in my mind before I even took my next breath. Hunter and I had checked before we had started, everything was in place, everything was still set up correctly. What did we do wrong?

“Hush”

“Do not speak”

the mirrors whispered to me, their fear consuming mine. Whats going on?

“He’s here”

“The fourth”

My candle extinguished itself, the lights in my robot figure lit up a sick faded red-pink, the color running across the water and bathing the basement in nauseating shadows. My ears began to ring like before, but was severed by an almost silent scratch from the corner of the room. A finger dug into the wooden surface of the baby's crib, dragging along slowly to call my attention. With eagerness, multiple hands began to grip the side of the crib, pulling themselves out from the bed where the baby would have slept. Miranda had used unknowingly used 4 thrones. Four kings.

The figure began to rise from where the light of my figure couldn't touch, its slender body raising and hunching over along the ceiling. Bones cracked and splintered as it took a step out from the crib its foot sinking deep into the water as if it were bottomless. It began to sink into the water as it entered the light and came towards me, its grafted body sewn together from multiple desperate victims. Its chest heaved, rising and falling in several spots along its gaunt form, independent hearts beating from one another. Several arms and hands jutted from its body, some neatly attached by unholy thread and needle, some broken by the bone, punctured through unclaimed parts of its being. Its head was a stretched amalgamation of eyes and mouths, each one gasping for air and blinking for mercy.

The creature breathed constant pain and desire, each eye weeping as it was forced to move, each step unending torment. It waded waist high in the water as it came over to me, moving and positioning the two mirrors closer so that only I was reflected two times. The three kings. It kept its hands on the mirrors as two more set of arms snapped and ached their way to the ceiling reaching for the unbroken night sky, as a third set of arms pushed their way into the water, sinking into an unforgiving hell. The light of my robot figure never dimmed as it stood before me. The fourth king. Its neck snapped backwards, a slit running down both sides of its jaw down to its chest. It began to open inwards, an unending void of selfish want and harsh realizations.

"What is it that you desire?"

PART SIX

I left the basement, my action figure in my hand, and entered the kitchen of the green family. Melissa gave me a squinted smile as she sipped her third cup of coffee for the morning, her dark eyes struggling to stay awake against her hangover. I closed the basement door behind me and took a seat next to her.

"Heeeey"

"You good?"

"I'm the best I've ever been" She smiled, holding back a migraine.

"She's getting too old for this."

Hunter slid each of us an empty plate, and slammed a plastic bottle of syrup purposefully loud between us. Melissa met him with a death stare and flipped him off as he left. I opened my mouth to say something before my phone went off in my pocket, the loud ring tone making Melissa squeeze her eyes in pain. I picked it up and shuffled into the adjacent room, leaving her to nurse her coffee.

"Hello?"

"Hey Matt," My father's old voice broke through the morning air, my mother saying something to him in the background. "We're still meeting today for the hike and picnic, right?"

"I uh-"

"Oh and uh-mom says to tell Melissa to bring the right shoes this time, so she doesn't have to go barefoot down the mountain like last time."

"Yeah-yeah I got it."

"Great! Sorry we couldn't make it for breakfast, I'll see you later, alright?"

"...Alright"

"Matt, you okay?"

"I'm-"

"Unky Matt! Breakfast!"

A small child peaked from the corner of dining room table, her shout making Melissa groan in the background. My father must have heard, telling me he loved me before hanging up the phone. I let the dial tone ring in my ear as I looked at the child, her gold-brown eyes lighting up the room brighter than the sun through the windows. She mouthed the word "Breakfast" to me again before turning and running back into the dining room, her short brown hair a messy braid swinging behind her, no doubt the work of her Aunt. I followed her as she took her seat, and then kept going, pushing my way past Hunter as he lifted a stacked plate of pancakes into the air to avoid hitting me.

Stood facing away from me at the kitchen, busy at the stove, a spatula in one hand, and a bottle of homemade pancake mix in the other.

"Miranda."

"Hey dude, I'll be there in a sec." She didn't turn to look at me

"I..."

"I know, its technically your turn to do the pancakes, but yours suck so don't worry about it. Plus I wanted to let you sleep, you've been exhausted lately."

"Miranda, no I'm....I'm sorry"

She stopped. Her back still turned to me.

"I'm so so sorry, I should have been there, I shouldn't have said everything I did-"

"Matthew. Its okay. Don't make the same mistake I did. Let go, Matthew. I never had a moment of regret in my life. I never felt burdened being your sister. You grew up into an amazing man. Look at you...so strong. I'm not mad at you, I could never be mad at you. I know what I did was wrong, I know I shouldn't have gone so far. You might think its funny, someone like me telling you to let go. I didn't want to see my baby that night, Matthew. I wanted to make myself forget. I wanted to be me again. You just wanted your sister back. I didn't know he would be there that night, the things he offered. I shouldn't had asked for more."

She turned to smile at me, her dark hair speckled brown against the morning sun. She wasn't tired anymore, her vibrant smile radiating warmth and reassurance once again.

I missed her.

"Do you remember when you were six, mom wanted to throw you a little birthday party but dad refused? They had an argument, it escalated, so Melissa and I walked with you to the thrift store around the corner to get out of the house. Mom would sneak us quarters for our allowance every couple of days, and Melissa was saving up for a jacket she had on hold at the store, and I...I forgot what I was saving for. You cried as we walked there, even now you think everything is your fault. We saw the robot in the store window, Melissa and I had just enough to get it for you, so we did. Melissa didn't even hesitate, she said it was to get you to shut up and stop crying but I know she loves you too. You were so happy, it was your first birthday present. We had to open it immediately and throw away the packaging, so we could sneak it into the house without dad knowing. He found out though, he thought mom had taken some of his money to buy it for you, he didn't know it was some cheap knock off from a corner store. The next time the three of us left the house and came home, mom was gone and dad was in jail. You still think it was your fault. She chose to leave, and she chose never to come back."

"You never told me that money was from you two."

"We never needed to."

“I think part of me knew...”

“Is that why you never threw it away?”

I looked at the figure I was still gripping tightly in my hand, its eyes and chest lighting up dimly. I could hear the Hunter and their daughter sing loudly in the dining room, Melisa forcing herself to sing along with them. This is what I wanted. What was I willing to give? Miranda took me in her arms, her warmth instantly draining the anxiety from my chest. She let me go after a moment, then placed her hand on mine, unrolling my fingers around the figure.

“Don't let him take it from you, you have all you need”

She smiled one last time, taking it from me, and set it on the kitchen counter.

PART SEVEN (Optional?)

Hunter slammed himself against the locked door, the impact shaking the basement and snapping me back to consciousness. I dropped the candle into the water, as my body woke back up, my limbs still filled with static as I fell over in the dark water of the basement. With one

more slam he forced the door open, letting the light from the kitchen spill in. With his help I crawled over to the stairs, cold and numb from the night, the figure gone from my hands.