

ANTENNA

Gray waited for the elevator in a swarm of flies. Something stunk. He leaned over the trashcan next to the elevator, and a raccoon, eye rotted with maggots, stared back at him from a bed of discarded food. It had one mischievous canine tooth just like his dog Worm.

"Sorry," Gray said.

His throat burned. He was getting sick, and whenever he got sick he worried about his dog. Worm was a full-time job, and he didn't trust anyone else to do it. He fished out some cherry lozenges from the grocery bag he carried, the ones that tasted like candy, and popped one in his mouth.

The elevator came and he got on and got off on the sixth. His neighbor Emma was coming down the hallway. She stopped before he passed her, looked at his bag of medicine, and her cheeks tightened into a labored smile.

"It got you too, huh?" she asked. Her eyes were bagged, shot red. She sniffed and cleared her throat. A stick with a plastic skull on it pinned her hair back.

"Could be worse," he said. "Gonna walk Worm then get drunk on cough syrup."

"I have plans too," she said. "Got a date with my bathtub and some chamomile."

She turned and started to walk away, then turned back. A look of concern crossed her face. "How've you been sleeping?" she asked.

"Fine, I guess." he said, shrugging. "Why?"

She broke eye contact and frowned. "Couple rough nights with this cold. Just... let me know if you have any weird dreams, will you?"

"Sure," he said, puzzled. Then, he added, "I'm working from home if you need anything."

"Okay," she said, breaking away towards the elevator and waving over her shoulder. "Get well."

He got inside his apartment and Worm came up, butt wagging, to greet him. Gray scratched his ears and snagged the leash and treat bag from the counter. Long walk tonight, while he had the energy. He took Worm back down. Light was bleeding from the sky, and everything was pale with fog, and his throat hurt.

There wasn't anyone in the dog park, a patch of weedy dirt with a fence and a few dying birch trees—Worm didn't get along with other dogs—so Gray went in and cut him loose. Immediately, Worm's tail flicked, and he went after something on the ground. It wasn't entirely visible in the low light, but it looked like an animal carcass.

"Leave it," Gray said firmly, walking towards the dog. Worm didn't listen. His nose was down and his tail was wagging. "Worm, leave it," Gray said again, flustered. As he got closer he saw that the animal was an opossum, and that Worm was eating furiously from a wound in its side. "Worm!" He shouted, and he jogged over and kneed Worm off of the carcass, making him yelp. "Sorry buddy," he said, and then reached out to snatch Worm's collar as he dove back at the opossum. He guided the dog away and gave him the "down" command, and he listened, finally.

Gray wrapped a doggy bag over his hand and picked up the dead marsupial by the tail. Dark fluid drizzled from a fist-sized wound in its side. It did not look like how

blood was supposed to look, too viscous, and the animal was shockingly light. Gray stared at it, dumbfounded as to what could've caused such a wound, and then opened the trash can with his foot and threw it away.

His stomach clenched as he looked back and saw that Worm's snout and face were stained black. The little monster's tongue lolled happily, having slurped up the bits it could reach. Gray took the water fountain hose and sprayed his snout clean while he danced around in the water. "Let's go," he said, striding to the gate.

They were about an hour into the walk when he started to get nauseous. If he continued their usual loop through the park, a rocky, somewhat demanding trail following a winding creek, it would be forty minutes back to his place. He looked west, outside the bounds of the park. There was a direct path to his building, though one he didn't like taking. It was a path of desire beaten through a government easement, on which was built an antenna array, a new construction, and the kind that sometimes attracted lunatics who protested outside the premises that they were being infected by 5G or government vaccines or whatever else. Gray didn't believe any of that, but there were no lights and no cell reception, and sometimes there was a guard who would chase you off.

The antenna array was operational, a vertical track of red lights flashing along its length. Caution signs warned the fence that surrounded the building at the antenna's base. A thin path ran alongside the fence. There were no streetlights here, so Gray navigated using the flashlight on his phone. Worm bobbed in front of him, the brush parting around him and then bending back into the trail.

Suddenly Worm sat back on his haunches and started growling. Gray waited cautiously. "Worm," he said, not knowing what he was asking the dog to do. Something in the brush cracked. Movement. Someone lurched into the trail and Worm went nuts, barking and pulling the leash taut, snapping at the figure. Gray, suddenly flushed with adrenaline, whipped the light around ready to fight. It was an older man, dressed in office-worker's business casual from the neck down, but wearing what appeared to be a crude metal cap on his head.

The man planted himself in the center of the trail and held an arm in front of his face to ward off the light. "You shouldn't be here," he said. Though Worm was snapping at him furiously, the man didn't seem to notice or wasn't bothered.

"Fuck off," Gray said. "Get out of the trail." It took all of his strength to keep Worm reigned in without dropping his phone.

Upon hearing Gray speak, the man dropped his arm so that Gray could see him frown. "You're sick," he said, as if he were catching Gray in a lie.

"What?"

"I can hear it in your voice. You're sick."

"So what." Gray made a show of rolling his eyes.

"Ignorance," the man rasped, shaking his head. "Don't know when you have a visitor." He was being preposterously smug for someone who had clearly lost his mind.

"Get out of the trail," Gray said. He tried to be intimidating, but he was sick and frustrated and there was no way that he was convincing.

"I'm trying to help you," the man said, still stubbornly blocking the path. He stabbed a finger at Gray's

stomach. "They're putting things in us. The antenna's putting things in through our dreams."

"I don't dream," Gray said. Worm had calmed down and was now trying to lick the man's knees.

The man looked dejected. His focus seemed to wane, and he started trembling and stepped out of the trail to stand in the brush. "I need to get inside and turn it off."

"I think you should go home," said Gray.

"It's too late for that," the man said mournfully. Then, after a moment, he seemed to be reanimated by his purpose, and he slunk off through the bushes towards the fence.

Gray watched the man go, relieved, and acutely aware of how much he was sweating. It was fully night now. There was a stone forming in his stomach. Sweat glued his shirt to his back. He got Worm home and put out his food and then took all the medicine he had. He collapsed on the couch, and it wasn't long before he started to feel better. He turned on a nature doc about insects and watched for an hour or so, then drifted asleep with Worm curled at his feet.

He woke up feeling fresher than he had the morning before, though his throat was still scratchy and he was wretched with old sweat. Maybe he would get off easily. He took more medicine to be sure. He showered and then called in and told his boss he'd work from home.

Worm in tow, he walked across the street to get coffee, a workday ritual. He liked it black, but today, the acidity was not sitting well, and he tossed it on his way home. West over the horizon, the antenna stabbed into the sky, its droning red lights perhaps beaming dreams into the minds of an unsuspecting populace. Gray smiled and thanked

the agency behind the antenna, likely a shadowy cabal of the nation's elite, seated around a large darkly lit table in the belly of some sinister government compound, for sparing him from their sinister dreams.

Before he started working, he tidied up a little, picking things up, throwing some laundry in, bagging up some trash. Worm came running to the door, spinning in circles by the bagged up garbage. When Gray had first adopted him, he had the habit of taking the trash out with them and dropping it off when they started their walk, until one day when Worm found a dead, maggot-bearing rat, and ate it within a second, resulting in a very expensive vet trip.

Worm whined as Gray left him behind. He hauled the two bags down the hallway and around the corner to the grubby room containing the trash chute. It smelled even worse than usual, a trace of something dizzyingly sweet mingled in the redolence of decaying food. Trash was mounded up in the corner where residents too lazy to use the chute had thrown it.

As Gray maneuvered the bags to one shoulder so he could use his other arm to open the chute, his foot sank into something, making an audible crunch, and he moaned in disgust and tossed the bags down. The thing he'd stepped on was a cloudy, plastic-looking shell. It had crumbled when he stepped on it and it was difficult to discern what shape it had been in. While he tried to puzzle out the thing's origin, he noticed that in several places, rotten food had been taken from the trash and arranged into small conical piles. A ring of moisture marked his trouser where his leg had passed through. He moaned again, disgusted, and tossed the bags in.

He was about to take lunch when Emma texted him and asked if he could come over.

His gut tightened. Something must be seriously wrong. She wasn't really a friend; they mostly said hi to each other in the hallway in passing, and he couldn't ever recall her asking him for something. He strode downstairs and knocked on her door. Almost a minute passed before the handle turned and she pulled it open and her face, horribly sunken and streaked with blown snot, poked into the gap. She smiled thinly, then turned away and shuffled inside, leaving the door open.

"Hey. How ya doing?", he asked, nervously. It was obvious she wasn't doing well.

She lowered herself gingerly onto the couch. A trash can had been dragged next to her and was spattered with vomit, much of it having missed and hit the floor. Used tissues, let to fall wherever, dotted the area. She shrugged and smiled again.

"Have you been to a doctor?" he asked.

"Ya. They said it would pass."

"I see." He eyed the trashcan and the vomit grimly.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Not bad."

"You have the dreams yet?" she asked.

Gray furrowed his brow. "What dreams?"

"The dreams that come with the sickness."

"You can't get dreams from a cold, Ellie."

She seemed to balk at Gray labeling the sickness a cold, but didn't say anything to dispute him. "I'm not the only one who's had the dreams," she said. She pulled her knees up to her chest and made herself small. "They're bad, Gray." She shook her head. "I've never..." she trailed off. Her mouth began to form words but she seemed unable to follow through.

"It's okay, I believe you."

She bristled. "I don't need you to believe me. Just—" she shook her head again. "—consider yourself lucky, is what I'm saying."

"Okay, I will," he said.

He pulled a stool from the kitchen bar and sat facing her. She watched him. Her apartment didn't get a lot of light. The living area was profuse with houseplants; a shelf of herbs occluding the window, several ivies and succulents living in baskets hanging from the ceiling. The furniture was all antique wood, ornate and often chipped. Charcoal artwork spotted the wall sporadically. The place felt like some kind of overgrown swamp tomb.

"So," he said, "What's up? You wanted to show me something, right?"

"Yeah," she smiled. A cat leapt up on the couch and arched its back into her hand as she stroked it. "Sorry, Ruby," she said, as she lifted the cat up and moved it aside. "Look," she said to him. She leaned forward and picked up a small box from among the tissues and trash on the coffee table. It was a jewelry box, made of dark cherry wood and shut with a bronze clasp, another antique: the kind of box you would use to store something very valuable.

He took it from her. She smiled and watched him eagerly. He undid the clasp and lifted it open. The inside

was lined with luxurious white velvet, except, instead of a large jeweled ring or a golden watch, the velvet cradled an ugly, misshapen stone. Small hairlike fibers protruded from its surface at irregular intervals, and a ring of dark fluid had seeped into the box's lining.