Schedule 2

Pssst Ciro
Are you awake?
C'mon man wke up!

                                            Sorry, just woke up

You were supposed to be awake two hours ago

                                    That's why you help keep me on track.

That's why I plan three schedules

                                            Wait a third one?

You know,
the one where you're a total letdown.
Open your door
I'm outside

        Placing his phone down, Anderson rises up from his computer desk and shuts off the computer monitor. He runs his hands randomly through his greasy, black hair. Muscle memory helps him maneuver through the dim rooms with probably an unsurprising ten million objects littered about: screws, ambiguous machinery, dried paint chips, power tools, cuts of plywood, crumpled paper, and everything else in between. Weaving his way to the front door, he takes enough time admiring his finished works and criticizing the unfinished for his friend to start spamming the doorbell. He opens the door, "You two having fun?" He raises an eyebrow at his friend.

        "Yes, actually, I am." His friend shoots a smile and spams the doorbell even harder.

        "Okay, Jeff," Anderson tries to keep a straight face, "I don't want to see your doorbell babies."

        They both let out a wholehearted laugh, and Jeff steps into the house. Cautiously, and quite slowly, he attempts to navigate through the disarray as he follows Anderson. "Wow, you still need to clean this up."

        "Eh, It's fine. So we need to work on the game first, right?"

        "Yeah. Coding and working on the game for three, break for half, designing that one prop for three, break for half, then whatever else needs work."

        "I think I'll work on that one sculpture."

        "The cube thing?"

        "Mhm," Anderson turns the computer monitor back on and shakes the screen saver away with the mouse. Returned to the silence, Anderson begins to type away again at lines and lines and lines… of code as Jeff waits behind for his designated computer to boot up.

        Jeff spins around in his chair, "Hey, Ciro, have you looked into those stair things recently?"

        "You still remember those? Wow, that was awhile ago." His eyes stick to the lines of code.

        "Well, that one friend of mine who told you about them told me about finding, like" he motions his hands around in a circle, "some kind of blank clearing in the woods.

        Anderson glances toward the overgrown backyard outside his window.

        "He said it was as if all the color in that spot were sucked out and there were... I guess you could call them glitches—in the stuff in it. I dunno, it just sort of reminded me about the stair things."

"Did he go into the clearing?"

"Yeah. His friend he was with broke her leg. But I don't remember if he said it was because she just fell, or because of the clearing itself. But he seemed really bothered by it. I mean, to me, it seemed like he gleaned over some of the stuff that happened."

"Huh, remind me about it during our break." Anderson returns to his code but works slower now—some onlooker might think him lazy. He doesn't need reminding; The thought is stuck with him as he works through. Months ago, after Jeff's friend told him about encountering staircases in the forest, he looked online for confirmation. There were commenters who had sound explanations for them: old houses that deteriorated to leave the stairs. But it was always the few other stories which would get to his head. Cut off hands, people having aneurysms, other people going missing… it simply doesn't make sense. The stories sparked an idea for a magic trick he could add to his performance, but it was a pretty terrible one and didn't seem like anything interesting enough—well, not unlike many of his other stupid ideas.

"Remember that idea that was based off those stairs?"

Jeff spins back toward Anderson, "What about it?"

"You got me thinking, and I want to do something again with it."

"Well, did you think of something?"

"Of course not!" Anderson laughs, "We'll just push whatever's next to some other day and go from there."

"As usual. Well, programming's preeetty much done," Jeff checks his watch. "So what do you want for some late lunch?" He pulls two takeout boxes from his backpack, "Chinese or Mexican?"

"Huh?" On his monitor, Anderson scrolls through a list of search results for 'colorless clearing in the woods'. A play, various paintings of trees, books, books, books… Inconclusive.

"Okay. Good, cause I got hungry while waiting in my car." Jeff props himself out of his chair, throws out the Chinese take-out box, and with a strawberry Pop-Tart in hand, he sits on the corner of Anderson's desk. "Wow, are you really trying to look that up? You know, sometimes I think he makes up stories. I mean, some of the things he says just seem so bizarre. They can't all possibly be true," he says through his crummy Pop-Tart mouth.

"Who knows? But there were people online who seemed to confirm, at the very least, the stairs."

"Well, have you found anything about the clearing thing?" Jeff motions at the screen.

"Nope," Anderson pauses, "but you just gave me a great idea."

"Ah, great. You mean push more stuff back?"

"Exactly, and I've got the perfect way to do that."

"Yay. Maybe we should have used the third schedule," Jeff sighs.

From above, the sun sends thick god rays through gaps in the leaves to heat up Jeff's and Anderson's hairs. Near the start of the trail, both amble forward armed with backpacks containing notebooks and water bottles.

Turning to walk backwards, Jeff looks to the entrance behind Anderson, "If I know him well enough, then this should be the trail he usually takes."

"Shouldn't you have asked him?"

"Definitely not. Cause then he'd think I like hiking or something." Jeff whirls back around and continues walking, "We don't really get along as much. I mean, I still talk to him and stuff... He's half as awkward as you… maybe you two would get along."

"Says you. Eh, let's walk faster, it's going to get dark eventually."

In silence, the two trek along. Sometimes, Anderson would stop the both of them for a "few" moments to sketch whatever silly thing would catch his eye—what a hypocrite. Other times, the two would balance along logs, stand mock-heroically on rocks, or kick pebbles forward. Soon, the air falls cool as the sun strikes dusk.

Jeff motions to the sun descending out of sight behind the denser trees, "And now the night has fallen on the two people bound to go missing."

"I mean, logically, the clearing wouldn't be along the trail," Anderson quietly counters as he blindly pushes through underbrush.

"I heard that. Besides, we can just go back in the general direction we came from then follow the trail to its end like we were supposed to do. I think."

"How reassuring," Anderson says slowly as he comes to the obvious realization; he stops in his tracks, "This was a bad idea. We shouldn't have come here. We don't even have a flashlight!" Yet another stupid idea.

Jeff stares at Anderson a few moments. Anderson couldn't see his friend's expression from under the blanket of shadows, but the slow shift in his gaze motions a beacon: Look behind you. All around, casts are projected from a wavering, variable light. All but the beats of two hearts have vanished, and any semblance of motion could very well have been from corpses awaiting burial from within their coffins.

"Jeff," Anderson whispers, eyes glazed at the light. "Jeff!" Anderson calls again, but only the only response is the rapid pace of a heart. Grabbing his arm, Anderson drags the body in with him, "You are not going to just leave me, you bastard." Anderson knows of Jeff's anxiety, but maybe, even as the wonderfully amazing friend he is, he hadn't noticed it to this extent. *Dragging him around won't help anyone, but I'm scared,* "Jeff?"

Nearing the glow, Anderson could see it isn't a simple light. Television static churns and grinds the air, arcing and sparking with a reverberance that claws its path through ribs and bones to the heart. Through the rib, out out through flesh, through the rib, out through flesh… The trees' trunks have random sections displaced toward an invisible singularity, while their branches and leaves stretch and strain like veins pulled taught. Whispers grow out from the center, filling voids and deep recesses with several scratching harmonies. The colorless clearing found Anderson.

From within the pulses of light, a lonesome mass screams its way out at an Anderson curled into himself as dead skin hugs the bone—eyes closed, arms crossed. The mass flows with a slow grace but with a suffering as it proceeds to inch. From within the pulses of light and among the whispers, Anderson hears the strain of a crying voice, "What's happening to me? What happened to me?" Then with panic, "Please! Help me, someone! Someone help me!" Then with anger, "What happened? What happened? Help me!" Then wrath, "Help! Someone, help!" And then regression into screaming.

"Anderson Cironus!" the mass shrills out. With a sudden lash at at Anderson's clothes, he hangs limp and wrapped by the mass. The glow fades—save the low light from the mass. "You will

redo this! You will redo this, Anderson! And redo! And redo! And redo!" the mass tosses Anderson's ragdoll body back and forth.

"And redo!"

"And redo!"

"And redo!"

Peeling his sticky face and arms off his desk, Anderson stares, for what may very well have been hours, at the smudges, spots, and streaks on the matte-black screen of his computer monitor. A pulsing headache creeps its way into his head and behind his eyes—throbbing and pulsing, pushing and pulling, back and forth on his eyes. Stupidly ignoring the pain, he clicks on the screen and boots up the computer. With mechanical fingers, he clicks away at lines of code in cyclical motion—the perfect loop. Or the scratch on a vinyl record.

Right beside the keyboard, right in plain sight, Anderson's phone lights up with a text—one of the two light sources in the room. Stupid jerk, Anderson Cironus, ignores yet another probably important message—what a bastard. Three hours and two texts later, Anderson finally calls a goddamn pause on his stupid work and ideas. Yeah, a great and wonderfully amazing friend.

Last night was weird.
Hey, you awake?
Pssst! Hey Ciro, are you okay?

                                                                    Yeah, I just woke up.

That's understandable.

                                                                    How'd we even get home?

Well, I woke up on the ground and saw you were on the ground too
I thought I woke you up and we both found the trail again,
You dont remember? I dropped you off at your house?

                                                                    I don't know

Well, do you know how we fell asleep in the forest of all things?

                                                                    I don't know,
                                                            I don't think I want to tell you

What? Why not?

                                                    I just woke up and everything hurts riight now
                                                    I don't even think I can do anything right now.

Fine, but tell me some other day.
I think we should actually use schedule 3 for today
By the way
If you want I can get us some food

                                                    I'm fine, I still have some leftovers in the fridge

Hah, okay then
I'll leave you be.

Placing his phone down, Anderson rises up from his desk and—stops. The computer monitor shining in his face and his phone lit with one last text from Jeff, he contemplates about picking up the sharp screws on the floor, organizing the machinery which probably made for a tight

flow of movement, vacuuming the paint chips up, putting away the power tools, neatly stacking the plywood in some corner, throwing away the crumpled sheets of paper, or maybe even taking an Aspirin to whisk the fucking headache away—or, what about a task as easy as looking at a text message? But, lazy as he is, he takes a shower and returns to schedule one with a single thing on his mind:

"And redo…"
"And redo…"
"And redo…"
"And…"