

# Quiltism: I Swear It's Not a Cult

By Sherman Tommy

A note from the Narrator:

Despite my distaste for lies (owing to a terribly tragic event involving volleyball, childhood friends, and a fib about rules), I am most assuredly a liar, and all of this is clearly a work of fiction. I have, after all, never learned to drive a car. All characters within are of a fabricated nature and clearly not based on real events with names changed. Please avoid any attempts to sue or prosecute me for theoretical crimes (I have barely a dollar to my name, as it is). The music, however, is always true.

## ***Chapter 1: Small Breaks***

You and I shouldn't be here, creeping through empty lives and dark bedrooms, even if we do make for a dashing pair of burglars. Despite what I've heard in the dark, the dead don't tell stories, especially not about quilts. There shouldn't be any reason for us to lurk in a lonely, ghost-filled house.

Not that I believe in ghosts. Belief and I were never close-knit friends. But if you could maybe keep an eye out for anything skittering in the night, that'd be much appreciated.

The house is filled with summer's fire, warring against the cold outside despite the lack of living occupants in need of warmth. Sweat runs down the angles of my face, rivulets trailing along my spine. I wish you could experience it, if only so I wasn't alone in this miserable heat.

You know, for a time, it scared me that I needed you. That I needed anyone. But I'm getting a better grasp of all the things in between and that helps in ways that only you would know. Hopefully, we can make it through this too.

At least through this smell, if nothing else. If the owner of this place wasn't already gone, I'd kill him for filling every nook and cranny with citrus cleaning solution. That unique pungent odour that wafts off tart lemons is delightful, but anything in excess is unbearable. Except maybe pizza, its savoury red delight spreading across the tongue, searing impatient mouths.

Did you know that despite the association, tomatoes aren't from Italy, or even Europe? Like me, they originated here in North America. Their use in Italian cuisine only goes back a few centuries and—sorry. Can't get distracted. Please don't bring up pizza when I'm trying to stay focused.

Though, to be fair, you should know by now that seemingly inane facts are my love language. Threading in words about history and science are the equivalent of a dog wagging its tail, my way of showing I'm friendly and want to be helpful when I don't otherwise know how to communicate. I do try and fill the yarn with meaning, but it isn't always easy.

Throughout the house, the wooden panels are pristine without a speck of dust. He must have gone through countless bottles of floor cleaner for the scent to still be soaked into every crevice after a week. Better than finding the place a wretched pile of filth. The thought of my socks sticking to liquor-stained floors puts a grimace on my face and a taut cord through my back.

Paper-thin curtains block the glass separating the two of us from the gorgeous world outside. Gentle flakes falling from a thick, cotton quilt in the sky. The night painted by countless festival lights. Streets carpeted from the past week's endless white snowfall, beautiful in its relentless persistence. The colours of the night's song are decidedly moody, mysterious, yet also mundane.

But outer appearances rarely reveal the truth of things. Instead of out there, we're stuck in the black, looking for dirty secrets. I would blame this whole mess on you, but it still might be a good idea, so I'll continue to take credit for it until it all goes horribly awry. Please be prepared to suffer my look of stern disapproval if things go south (as they often do when living so far north).

We both know I've made a lot of mistakes in life, so we can share the burden at least this once, right? I do admit, burglarizing a dead man's house is not my brightest

move. I'd never do this if you weren't always patiently listening to my hare-brained ideas and schemes. Never a word against a single one, not that you've ever spoken back.

The tiny pocket light shines across the room, my eyes straining to spot something of value in the thin beam of colour springing forth. Shadows flee from the bright shaft to show a small patch of a bare shelf or wooden dresser, running back in as it drifts away.

I hate shadows. They're stumbling drunks that don't walk right. As a kid, I'd stand in the sunlight and stare down at my own, sewn to my feet and dancing at the wrong rhythm. His legs and arms would twist and warp, stretching in strange ways. The night is alive with those drunks, flailing about and smothering you. You need light to beat them back, to gain any room to breathe.

The small light in hand was given to me years ago by a friend. Not you, of course. You not physically being here puts a damper on any such presents. Our relationship has always been one of sharing words and drowning in thoughts.

The flashlight is useful to have around, not to mention its metal exterior is blue, which is patently superior to other colours. There'd been a brief thought of buying a proper flashlight before I came here but buying things like that before breaking and entering makes me feel guilty. How strange, the lines we set up in our heads. Burglary is perfectly fine, but the thought of preparing for the crime makes me uncomfortable.

I brought the simple facemask I used throughout the recent pandemic as a disguise but discarded it after my glasses started fogging up. Probably for the best that I didn't buy a ski mask. That's basically a sign saying 'arrest me,' not to mention wearing my glasses with a ski mask would look ridiculous and awkward.

While pondering whether visually impaired robbers wear their glasses over masks or just hope their aim is alright, my foot strikes a red steel box poking out from under the bed. It scrapes across the wood panels and my voice explodes out, "Gyaa! Fuck! You...Fucking! Fuck!" My light falls, the beam slowly rolling its way across the floor, cutting through the feet of shadows that can't mind their own business. Swears spew forth endlessly as I grab my foot, desperate to massage the pain away.

Why the hell did I take my shoes off? Who takes their shoes off when breaking into someone's home? What kind of God-awful excuse of a burglar am I? When I came in, I couldn't bear to track snow and dirt across the newly cleaned floors.

I let myself fall back onto the bed. My hands continuously rub the area around my throbbing toes. The smallest two jammed into the corner of the box; they pulse steadily with shocks of agony, blood rushing to repair damage making my entire foot hot. I should go, run away, leave. But I can't. This is the first real thing I've brought myself to do in months, aside from scant excursions with friends to hide the state I'm in from them.

There's a need to complete this that infuses every piece of marrow in my body. Have you ever experienced that? A dreadful need for something that rips control from your muscles, your nerves, and your mind itself. That forces you forward because behind is nothing but swelling black waves. They'll swallow you into bitterness if you don't placate your body's demands. I need to see this through one way or another. I can't stop at every stupid stumbling block, not again.

The bed has no sheets, just a couple pillows and a blanket (not a quilt, unfortunately). A ring of wood with sinew woven into a web within it hangs on the wall above the mattress, small feathers and beads dangling from its bottom. A dreamcatcher. Despite the name, they don't actually catch bad dreams like many think.

Tribes out east believe in Spider Woman, a protective being of great power who loves children. But she can't be everywhere, so they made the charms to draw her attention to young kids, letting her reach across the great distances and keep them safe. A good sixty years back, a bunch of tribes started sharing elements from their culture, exchanging practices to better connect and understand each other. And like that, dreamcatchers spread throughout North America among the indigenous folk.

Did the former owner of the house want it to keep away nightmares or was he looking for protection? Either way, it failed. He's dead.

A few deep breaths while held by the mattress, then back to cursing out boxes, metal things, and dark rooms. A shower will probably be needed after all this. The floors being clean doesn't mean the bed is too, not to mention the stains my pants gained outside.

The smallest toe throbs with a dull pain that radiates out, incessant and infuriating with its demand for attention. Probably not fractured but wouldn't be the first time I broke a bone in a stupid manner. *Eight years old. Pushing myself up from the floor when my hand slides out from under me. My pinky decides it enjoys staying where it is. My bones crackle in disagreement; my vocal cords are indignant.* People don't realize how dangerous sitting up can be.

Pulling myself up, I reach down to grab the still working flashlight. The red box peeks at me from under the bed. The urge to kick it fills my leg, even if that's royally stupid; instead, it's yanked out as angrily as a limping idiot can manage. I obviously can't blame myself for what happened, and an inanimate object is easy to mutter expletives at since they never talk back.

A key sits in my pocket, specks of blood in its grooves that I couldn't clean, though I hadn't tried all that hard given my discomfort over the whole thing. The start of this giant stupid mess.

As my light runs across the lockbox, however, there's no padlock. It has a latch, including a hole where one could go, but nothing binding it closed. Maybe it's for something held within?

I pause before opening the container. Eating away at me for the past several days is a deep hunger for what's held inside this box. Only the contents can possibly satisfy it. A vague sense of what I expect to find: money, drugs, or maybe a couple rocks of enriched uranium if my life is secretly a spy thriller.

I did not expect to find porn, VHS tapes and DVD cases covered in images of men and women, all in various states of bondage. The old guy clearly had a specific kink.

The tapes leave me morbidly curious; I haven't seen one in over a decade, and I honestly want to know if they still work. How long do you think VHS tapes last?

The anger over my sore toes is replaced by anger over the thought that this entire mess is some screwed up attempt to get someone to destroy his stash of smut. But the look on the man's face won't leave my mind and the key still sits unused. After eyeballing the VHS tapes a couple times, the case is closed back up. I don't slide it back under the bed though. I am here after all, so may as well dump it in the bin outside when leaving.

If I had a nickel for every time porn had a strange impact on my life in the last week, I'd have three nickels. Which isn't a lot, but it's odd it happened three times.

Hopping down and shining the light under the bed reveals no ghosts, assassins, or secret agent platypuses lurking below. Nor are there any hidden safes beyond the one of an explicit variety I've already stumbled into.

The rest of the room is bare of any sense of personhood. A small table by the bed holds a lamp. A TV and DVD player sit on a plain desk, though no VCR for the tapes. Did he keep them for nostalgia? There's a small shelf containing several regular DVD films and series with some CD's off to the side. A clothing dresser with an old clunky stereo atop it. His room is fresh with the façade of "newly moved-in college student." Like it hasn't had the time to be filled with the joys of a living human, yet he's been here for years from what I know.

Given the mystery that was dumped in my lap, I really wanted there to be more here. Maybe a big ominous painting with a vault hidden behind it, or some posters hiding secret tunnels. I still don't fully know what he wanted, if I'm supposed to be here, or if this was meant as someone else's final gift. Brain damage clouded his words too much.

There's only the basement left to search. The things I found elsewhere were probably irrelevant. The place isn't particularly large, though with the current housing market it's probably still way too expensive even as a rental. At this point, if I don't find a shrine to an ancient evil down there, this entire mess feels like it'll all be for nothing. Like his life.

He made decent money, but there's no sign of life here, no sign of elegance or crassness, barring some hidden pornography to pass the time. He lives alone, goes to work, then plays cards with friends.

His old, busted computer, sitting in another room, still needs a scan through, assuming I can crack the password. Doubt he played anything on it other than old clicker games about mines and numbers. Not sure why he has a stash of porn when the internet is readily available, but old people are weird sometimes. A fact that concerns me, given my own age steadily rising. When is it that people will start associating my own weirdness with age, rather than a simple part of my charm?

Do you think I'm charming? What even is charming? Would it be charming if I—

My chest stops moving and I click off the light as a silhouette runs by the curtains. Prickles leap across my skin with every hair standing on end. Shapes float about in the darkness, glowing afterimages from photoreceptors. Minutes tick by as I anticipate the sound of the back door opening.

Why didn't I lock it after I came in? I'm going to get robbed while robbing someone else. Counter-robbed? Chain-robbed? Reverse-burgled? Not sure what to call it, but I'm sure going to feel stupid during it. Or dead.

This place will be the death of me. I'm sure of it, an eerie sensation I've gotten a few times before when I've woken in a panic to screaming voices calling my name. A prickling that leads me to check every lock and window in the house. Haven't died on any of those occasions, so it's likely just the racing heart sending my mind into a frenzy of worry. There are no ghosts. I saw nothing in the hallway earlier. This place isn't haunted.

The dark shape was probably a bird. Or maybe my finger slipped in front of the light as I waved it about the room seeking something to be mad at. Was the shadow on the inside or the outside?

I take several deep breaths as the light flicks back on in my hand. Stop asking questions. I'm an excellent thief. I could do this for a living. Back to work. Should I call this work? Never mind.

With nothing else but the dresser in sight, I turn into a rummaging goblin, glancing over my shoulder every few seconds to stare at the window. Fairly basic clothing in a fairly basic order, though I'm irked by the socks being on the bottom. Given how easily shoes and socks get wet in the winter, it only makes sense to keep them at the top so you can readily grab a new pair after shovelling driveways.

As I close the sock drawer and pull open the next, the stereo turns on, clicking as servos and gears spin, sliding CD's around. My light whirls about the room, expecting a mysterious man sitting ominously in a chair with a remote. But the room is empty. The light finds its way back to the stereo as sound splashes forth.

Trembling strings and a shuddering voice drift out of the speakers and deep within, racing across my face and bouncing into my ears. Dreaming notes, soft and gentle, back and forth in a dance. Quiet demands for loud cries, in four by ten counts.

Drumming across my skin with rising tension that grips my wrists and neck: to grasp at something that isn't there, to speak lyrics I don't know.

Two souls in the wrong form and age, black liquid sweeping out to drown us both, even as I hold you up. Choking down hopes that you'll make it through. To survive what I could never.

Tomorrows waiting to bloom in the dark.

A trail of keys softly releases me, and I let go of a quivering breath that was held too long, the other thirty-nine gasps all missing. I hit the stop button before anything else can play.

These old machines do this sometimes, turn on randomly. Happened all the time at my house growing up, especially after one of my mom's drunken parties. Probably scheduled to play at a certain time. I wipe at my cheeks.

Stepping away, my hands go to my knees. I stay like this, crouched over in the dark, my light shining off at a random bed leg. When my breath comes steady, I stand and eject the disc tray. A quick phone picture of the CD to get the band's name, the image of a golden palm reaching out, and I've stolen my first bit of information, my first theft. Closing it back up, I move to do the same to the drawer when my light hits something tucked in the back corner, partially buried in shirts: a gorgeous brown leather photo album.

Still no keyhole, but it's something different at least. Opening it displays numerous pictures of a girl, her age increasing into adulthood as the book goes on. All the pictures are from a distance and, in some, it's hard to tell which of the people is supposed to be her. It doesn't look like she or any of the others are aware they're being photographed, which is a little unsettling.

Taking a few out reveals a date on the back with a phone number and address. Do you think it was when they were taken? And maybe a contact of some sort, given the numbers occasionally change along with the dates.

Dark hair, maybe dark eyes too. Hard to make out given the distances. The last photo is a few years old, from right before the pandemic hit.

Given the dates, she's probably in her late twenties or early thirties. The newest photo has a couple different addresses crossed out.

Presumably he hadn't managed to get any more recent pictures. She had to be the woman he spoke of, Blair; I know far too much about her despite never having seen her image before now. There weren't any in the rest of the house.

Pulling my small notepad out of my sweater, because that's clearly the most important thing to bring rather than a larger flashlight, I scribble down the most recent address and phone number before putting everything back where it was. No clue what was so important to a dying man, but it doesn't look like it's here. She'll be the next lead if nothing else turns up.

I collapse onto the corner of the bed, my back hunching over. Deep breaths in and out. These past few days have been...so much. So much everything. A thankful return to emotion and life even with panic woven through so much of the week. I don't know what I expected to find here, or what I wanted to find here. I wish you could tell me, show me some piece somewhere that I'm missing, a part that only you would know. I'm falling backwards again. I do appreciate your company, at least. Sticking it out with me all this time.

The minutes roll by, each one ticking closer to dawn when I'll need to scurry away from the light. A cockroach no longer safe to do its dirty business through the house. I finally get up. We keep going till the end, right? Wherever it all leads.

I run through the words the man was mumbling. So many thanks along with random moans about the house breathing. Carrying the lockbox out of the room with a slight limp, I see a vent in the wall near the floor and pause.

A duct is far-fetched. I stop and set down the box anyway before kneeling. Up close with the light shining across them, the screws are all hanging half-out.

It's easy to pull the whole thing off, revealing a black briefcase jammed inside. I strolled by this vent several times earlier and my anger rises back up. I could have avoided stubbing my toes.

The case has a lock, which my bloody key fits perfectly. Seems futile in use, though, given how easy it would be to pry open with pliers or a rock. There's a tiny worry that I'll simply find more porn, but it opens to reveal wads and wads of twenty-dollar bills along with a sheet of paper. Scrawled on it are three words: I'm so sorry.

How many twenties do you think a suitcase holds? A hundred thousand dollars worth? More? I'm not sure what to do about it, though I do have some sneaking suspicions for what he intended it towards. The guy hadn't been entirely clear between his ramblings, but brain damage will do that.

I pick up and drop several of the rolls repeatedly. It's fine to simply take it for myself, right? Just a small amount? The guy is dead, and the key is mine. I've been through a lot this week, and honestly, it'll go towards making my life a fair bit better. I stare at the note and its nine letters so long my eyes begin to dry.

My fist squeezes around the words, crinkling the paper into a mess. My face is as hot as my throbbing foot, blood rushing to the surface. A tremor through my ribs and then I carefully start unfolding it, working to flatten the new creases.

I drop the bills, my flashlight held in my mouth as I work to close it all back up and put it away. I need time. Time to think. Time to decide.

As I place the vent covering on, it falls back off. Several more attempts to keep it steady lead to the realization that the screws are so worn and loose that it's quite possibly the dumbest place to hide things. A simple nudge as someone walks past and it

would fall open, screaming its secrets to the world as it clatters to the ground. That thought sends me back into a fit over my toe and how long it took us to find the spot.

I stand, the vent loosely in place and the red steel case in my arms. I'll have to hope no one else goes digging through the house before I have a chance to come back with a decision.

I'll leave the porn box by the front door before checking the basement. Lugging it around down there when any number of spooky ghosts can be lurking about is a bad idea. Halfway to the door, my body goes rigid at the sound of jingling keys. The lock clicks open, and the knob starts turning.

Like an animal staring down a car, my muscles all tighten and clench. Each pulls itself a million different ways until everything is tangled in knots and movement stops. The door swings open.

A lean guy in a ski mask steps in, a pistol in hand. A suppressor sits on the end, though it still makes a fair amount of noise as three flashes go off, killing the shadows that drew too close. Impacts, then my body slowly crumples like a deflated balloon. Old action films always showed people flying backwards, but there isn't enough force for that.

No pain. Is that normal? All I can think as I fall to the ground, holes in my chest and stomach, is that this is probably one of the cooler ways to go.

At least until the contents I'm carrying collide with the ground, spilling porn DVDs across the floor. This is most assuredly not how I ever imagined dying, lying in a pool of my own blood with assorted pornographic films displayed around me like a dirty halo.

The man's feet make a steady rhythm across the floor. Circling past, he heads towards the vent. Staring into his green eyes, the thought that he'd probably look cool with sunglasses paired with his mask crosses my mind, but those don't really mesh with lurking about at night. I consider curling up, becoming small and unnoticeable since that saved my life in the past, but it doesn't matter.

Gut wounds can be slow and excruciating, but survivable with modern medicine so long as the wound doesn't go all the way through to one of the arteries near the spine. Chest wounds are less survivable without help, at least from my limited understanding of things, but then I'd never managed to become an actual doctor so who knows. No pain, is that normal? Is it from how sudden it all is?

A failed writer getting shot. Would make more sense to be face down in a pool at sunset. Makes for a better allusion to good works of art, but I hate sad endings. Never bother going through a story with them. Sorry for failing on that front, I'd hoped at least in this, I might be different.

Not sure how long it'll be until shock sets in and things become too severe to save me. The urge to give up is tempting, though it's nothing new. It's so much easier to stop struggling. Not that I actually want to die, despite what I tell myself in darker moments. I don't want to go; I just don't always feel strong enough to stay.

Some say that your life flashes before your eyes when you die. How strange, because the memories of my life have always been right here, washing over me every moment in bitterness. Guess that makes a certain amount of sense, given my circumstances.

It was always you and me against the world. Will you stay?



We both know how I got here after all. Through the most insignificant of things: art and emotions and need and a quilt. I'm so sorry I couldn't show you something better. But everything was always leading to this, wasn't it? Is there some other answer that only you know?

## Chapter 2: Small Costs

...fretless runs through trembling memories  
to bind missing time together again,  
once the hurt is over call me back...to glass homes  
and watchful steel strings; seconds taxed  
through clear and rough cords,  
black dogs flee these ghostly things...while soft guitars  
play stone walls to recall when life acts  
so never forget what's needed  
please remember the last track...

A month before ever stepping foot in that house, I toss and turn, opening my eyes to a large tan cat. He sits tall on a pile of biochemistry books, staring from the open closet, the night wrapped around us. Regal, with tufted ears perked up. What do you think is going through his head? Probably plotting violence, given it's a cat. But they always have the softest beans on their paws, so they're easily forgiven their plans.

"What are you looking at?" I ask. He doesn't respond. They never respond. "Someone sick, wicked, and hideous I suppose." Its ears twitch, the little tufts dancing about. It's so hard to push air out of my lungs for sound. "I know, I deserve to be deep underground, scribbling notes, where no one will ever find me." Still no words. "Sorry, but I can't be bothered. Please go away." Its eyes never leave as sleep finally takes me.

In the daylight, the cat is long gone. I wake in bed unable to move. It isn't sleep paralysis, at least not anymore. That passed when I was a child.

Unlike the horror stories from others, mine was never unsettling. No pressure from imaginary demons pushing down on me. I'd simply come to in the morning, the sun's fingers dancing across my eyelids, and realize my body still needed time to wake up.

With patience it eventually would, so I'd wait and ponder over useless kid things. Namely whether my mom would be up or if she was still passed out drunk, meaning I'd have to get my own breakfast together (usually a raw pack of ramen with the powdered seasoning sprinkled over).

Sleep issues of various kinds are common in kids since their brains are still developing. I saw ghosts as a child. Not actual ghosts. Those probably don't exist. Hopefully don't exist. But as you drift off or wake up suddenly, you'll occasionally experience minor hallucinations; it's why most ghost sightings and alien abductions all tend to happen at night while drifting to and from the realm of sleep. Most hallucinate the sensation of falling, though I can't count myself among those.

Mine were always visual and auditory, the sight and sounds of people; seeing a nosy cat is a first. The vision half mostly stopped upon hitting my teen years. Mostly. Possibly due to the nifty purchase of a nightlight so my mom wouldn't have to deal with my screams at sundown. But that was left in the trash after hitting twenty, worry over what people might think of a grown adult still afraid of things lurking in the dark.

One of the last episodes during childhood occurred while visiting family. *He sits on a dresser, back to the corner, knees gripped tight against his chest. Jeans and a white shirt as his black hair hangs long. He keeps shaking with tears. What kind of*

*Indian cries? I toss and turn in the basement bed, working to ignore him. Why can't he cry out of sight like I was taught to do?*

Lying here, I'm not dead, at least not physically. What has me trapped is a pile of blankets. Weighted blankets are supposed to be good for you, but I don't think anyone expected this many to be pinning someone down.

It would be nice, I think, if we were to just lie here forever until finally flickering and fading away. Two stars, winking out in the night. But if we tried, I suppose I'd simply fall back to sleep.

I detest that thought. Sleep means dreams of towering skylines that stretch across the globe, filled with cybernetic police and corporations. Endless forests as deep as oceans, brimming with unseen magics. Fingers intertwined in soft languages of love. Things I can't have that I still somehow long for at night, despite longing being gone from every other moment.

What I really want is to not have thoughts. To have my head be empty of everything, a void of cognizance since emotion is all gone.

For someone to steal away my memories with three strings and leave me with nothing but a new chance.

Stark, pale light splatters through milky curtains across bare walls. The room is so white.

*The world is white. I'm five years old, the house quiet with sleep even though morning has come. Why is no one awake at first light? Why is no one awake to see the world vanishing?*

*Clouds have fallen, a fog thicker than any I've ever seen sitting beyond the window. I rush out the front door, my eyes and mouth wide open. Dew splashes across my bare ankles as blades of green grass whip at them. The towering pine on our lawn has become a faint shadow. How can a tree disappear? How can a world disappear? Will I vanish if I step out further, unable to find my way back to safety?*

*I reach out but can't grab hold of the white. It's so thick, but it doesn't pool in my hand. It vanishes, nothing more than a chill flowing across my arms and face.*

*Is something else there in the haze? A silhouette stirs through the white, a faint blackness shifting across the lawn. Something swirling through the mists in the vast emptiness. Panic swells inside.*

*I stumble backwards, my heel striking the cement stoop in front of our door. My hands are thrown back to catch myself, scraping across the rough texture as I land. Scrambling into the house, I lock the door with stinging palms as my heart pounds away. I stare out the window at a lawn I can't see. A click goes out, something in the doorknob jittering. Is something trying to get in?*

What a strange thing to fear. A colour that vanishes when you reach for it. So much senseless panic over nothingness.

*'Death sounds nice.'*

Don't mind that, it's just the depression talking.

You might say to me, "But depression can't speak, it's not a real person."

And I would say, "Stop talking to me, strange voice in my head. I haven't gone crazy enough to start hearing things." Except the ghosts. I'm not crazy though. Probably. Hopefully.

As the imaginary audience to all my troubles, your job is to sit there and take in my narcissism, not poke holes in my metaphors or personifications.

Having said that, saying depression talks isn't inaccurate. It just uses your own voice. Weird thing that, when you start telling yourself all the logical reasons why suicide is the only option. It's you, but it feels like someone else.

I haven't made any plans, unlike before. I'll be fine. Probably. Hopefully. Just need to wait it out, but it's hard when it all blends together. When every day drifts into the next in a big messy pile of strewn clothes and blankets. Everything is so heavy.

*'You can't even enjoy anything. What's the point?'*

My hand slides achingly slow towards my cellphone. One o'clock in the afternoon; I'd slept for six hours. One new text. "Hey buddy, just checking if you wanted to join us for a movie. Always happy to have you!" Jake.

There are older messages I haven't gotten around to responding to. A text would appear. I'd put it off for a bit, then forget about it for a little too long. A day would pass. I'd look at it again. Then I'd get anxious about responding so late and put it off longer and longer. Then it would be a week, or two weeks and it would still sit there, waiting for a reply. Just waiting. And that was all before the depression got fully underway.

The sunlight is warm, but the cold winter outside seeps through the window, keeping everything chilly enough that lying under a blanket should be pleasant.

People always think depression is just a bad bout of sadness. It can be if you define 'bad' as 'terrifyingly horrendous.' That was the way of things when I was younger, immense pressure, frustration, and sadness leaving me curled into a ball, silently crying at night. Silently, because too much noise was dangerous around certain people. It was overwhelming hopelessness wrapped around me in a vice. Telling me I was worthless; garbage to be thrown out.

In my twenties, I found depression could also be an ocean of molasses. Sticking to everything around and pulling it in until I'm left with nothing but the overpowering taste of numb apathy. Dark, bitter, and relentless in its depth. Even if you somehow make it out the other side, it clings to you with its filth. Ruins your patched up clothes. One wrong step sends you sliding back into the deep.

I can't be bothered with life like this. It took several years for it to fade the first time. It wasn't as complete back then. This time, there isn't much of anything, not even sadness. I don't cry, I can't. Joy, sorrow, and everything else have all taken a vacation from my life. Everything except anxiety; the concern of bothering other people. And the stray thoughts calmly explaining why this is the only ending.

Emotional blunting is a bundle of contradictions. My heart hurts, even though it doesn't exist anymore. I want nothing more than to cry for the loss of all the things I used to feel, but my mind is an empty nighttime desert, without light, warmth, or water. There's no anger over it, no sadness over it, just nothing. Echoes of misery and discomfort bounce around in the void left by my emotions.

It's been over a month now, though it was slowly building even before that. Replaying every mistake across the back of my eyelids, thinking of choices that could have led elsewhere. My life was spent waiting for who I wanted to be to show up. I waited so long that I became this mess instead. Mould surviving on the ambient moisture of my old soul.

*'It's too late to change, why keep trying?'*

Two hours languishing here before I gather enough effort to drag my body to my computer. Games and other objects are neatly piled into towers strewn about. A diorama city of junk. It's supposed to be where I work, but that dropped off as my

depression began so I've been whittling through my savings. Is it a fuse? Will I kill myself when it's all gone?

There's a week left on the current project, but the effort to do anything has been dead for a while. Like me. Working from home as a writer for a small gaming company is nice, but it isn't what I'd wanted to do with my life. It had, however, managed to pick me back up and give me some small sense of direction after I failed to get into med school.

With my MCAT occurring two days after my mother's funeral, and still two years left on my degree at the time, there wasn't much in the way of hope for my chances, given how deep the depression was when she left one final time.

I still tried to apply after I got the degree. My scores were decent, but my grades dropped too far to really be in the running. My spot, if I could even call it that, was taken by someone who either hadn't faced tragedy, or knew how to cope when they had.

I have no delusions that my life is the worst ever lived. Millions of kids have suffered far more terrible abuses than me and still found a way to head forward while I fell apart. And so, a piece of paper saying I graduated from university sits on a shelf under a pile of books, worthless to my current endeavors.

Do you care about any of this? I always wonder. I know you're just imaginary, but what is it that you enjoy? Are you here for the exciting, weird bits? Are my day-to-day problems boring to you? You've been with me so long, yet I hardly know you. You always get so silent and tight-lipped at these questions. Here I am, spilling my guts, but you won't do the same.

My brother will be home from work soon. Grabbing groceries before I completely sink back into misery is a good idea. Most of my time now is spent wasting away at my computer browsing through music and daydreaming about a better path I could've taken. I tried watching porn the other day.

Stop looking at me like that, with those judging eyes and your mouth agape. It's a normal thing people do. And yes, it was agape. It means open wide, though it used to mean friendly affection. Sort of. Two different words converging on the same spelling. Language can be weird like that. Always changing when you're not looking.

Regardless, it went poorly. The porn watching, not the English language. Although that went poorly too, for reasons that are too long to explain and which I'm too tired to try and get through.

I don't have desire of any kind. Aside from music, everything else has stopped. Song after song is shuffled about. I know I'm trying to lighten the mood with humor. It's a bad habit, even when I can't laugh, but it really is horrifying, this numbness. Or it would be if I could be horrified.

Music is the only thing that summons emotion, but even that's a ghost of what it once was. An echo. I listen and get the faintest sight of what used to be. A photocopied memory of a few notes telling me what I'm supposed to be feeling. Feelings paid for by the kilowatt, like the old scientist's signals from the void.

I should get up, go shopping. Stand up. It'll be easy. *'You don't exist. You've never existed. You're a shadow mimicking whatever will make people like you, but always slightly off. None of your smiles or emotions have ever been real and you've finally realized it, that's why you can't feel anything. So just...stop.'*

The music turns on.

...ancient cranks and metal keys explode in two thousand old, red petals for the people of the horse, abandoned by their grace in the month of July...*winning the war cost his own country peace*...nine on ten with ghost love saving round table knights, since then I'll guide your heart's fights...*oh how the king's story changed from mouth to mouth and hand to hand*...steady guitars and steady hearts dance through mid song tempo shifts of love as warzones, but hopelessly wracked by chances...*no one cares about the namesake's life, only his death*...

A century ago, an archduke was assassinated, gunned down alongside his wife, and entire continents went to war. That's all most know of him. He only became the heir to the throne because his cousin, the crown prince, committed suicide after a terrible childhood. The man who killed the archduke wasn't even originally part of the plot, having been relaxing at a café when the couple conveniently drove by without guards due to some miscommunication. If you like animals, you might hate the heir because he killed over a hundred thousand in trophy hunts. But he loved deeply. He married his wife despite it being a threat to his claims on the throne since she wasn't royalty. He suffered not a word against her. He adored his children; he begged his wife to live for their sons and daughter while bleeding out. With all those people dead, was the impact he had on the world good or bad? And does that make him a good or bad person?

Sorry. You probably don't care much for history, let alone someone who died so long ago. What does he matter anyway? I ramble on about the stupidest things. I always do.

Three hours pass over the course of a few whispered lyrics. My brother arrives home on time, slipping away into his room. The stirrings of old embers are snuffed out as I pull myself away to get ready.

I fiddle with the knob on the shower. A millimeter too far and it's scalding hot, a millimeter the other way and it's too cold. Too cold. I like the cold, but there's a limit to that.

*Eleven years old. Shivering away in the shower. Stepping under the frigid water for seconds, my chest locking up when it hits my hair and face. A shock shooting through my entire body. Quickly stepping away and lathering up with soap and shampoo. Two pots of boiled water sit nearby since we thankfully still have electricity. Filled with enough cold water that they won't be scalding. There isn't enough to completely rinse the soap and shampoo off, so they need to be used sparingly. So, it's back under the icy cold in short bursts to try and get as much off as possible, then the hot water to heat back up and avoid hypothermia. If the pots are used too fast, I'll be left shivering under a blanket to try and warm back up in the cold house, so it's important that enough heat is saved for the end.*

My mom used to take vacations from us growing up. A week at first when we were kids, then a couple weeks until it was several months at a time. Sometimes she wouldn't tell us she was leaving. We'd come home to a locked house. If we forgot our keys, we'd be stuck outside until we realized she wasn't returning and finally called the landlord to unlock the door for us.

When the city dropped below negative forty degrees one winter, she took off, too annoyed at the frigid world. But she hadn't been paying the heating bill for the last few months, so it went off a week after she left. The hot water was tied to it, so we were left with icy showers until she finally returned and set a new bill up under my brother's name.

Didn't stop me from loving the cold, but it did stop me from loving cold showers. I don't care what health benefits some jock online tells me it gives, when you have no choice in the matter, you come to hate it all.

I throw on whatever clothes happen to be clean, then stare at my closet. I do wish that cat was real. Not just to get the chance to play with its ghostly paws and squishy beans. It'd just be nice if it was some friendly ghost signalling that something else is coming. Something to shake me from this dead end.

I finally head off to the grocery store a few blocks away, leaving behind my haunted bedroom. Runners protect my feet rather than winter boots. Too much of a hassle to put on. It isn't an issue if you grew up in the north. So long as you pay attention to where you're stepping and keep your balance it's fine.

I slap my pockets, checking for my keys and wallet as I greet the bright northern day.

The air sends chills up my arms and a shock down my spine once I take a deep breath. That burst of electricity is supposed to be excitement and joy, but there's nothing beyond the physical. I blow out as hard as I can, making a mockery of a fire-breathing dragon, fog forming into a cone in front of me that fades after a second.

It's all out of habit. Everything is out of habit at this point. I'm a photocopy too; a memory of a person trying to recall how to mimic what I used to be.

On sunny days like this there are the tiniest ice crystals floating in the air that you can't see but will prickle against your skin as you push through. Tiny, graceful knives that don't cut.

Winter is normally special, the cold lighting my insides on fire. Step out, take a deep breath, and ice is pulled into my chest. Shivering through me until it finally sinks deep into my bones and marrow. It ignites it all in a blaze that sets me running.

One moment, it's a regular day covered in white sand, and then I'm suddenly bursting with energy and the need to go somewhere, do something, be somebody. Like thinking water puts out grease fires. You expect the water to cool and end things, for the cold to freeze you away into nothing. But instead, the water spreads it out, exploding it into a far greater mess of heat and light and energy. Cold brings me to life. Brought me to life.

It was sweetness. Leaves replaced by big wads of white cotton candy. Evergreen trees turned into massive cookies with their edges slathered in icing. The crunch of hard candy underfoot wraps itself like a scarf around your head. I look forward to it every year. Far better than the unbearable heat of summer, my dislike of which is only lessened by the comforting smell of cooking wood and campfire friendships. But it's all tasteless right now. It was a dream I've since woken from.

Stark white annoyance interspersed by muddy brown streets. Too many people lazing about in noisy cars. Screeching baby crows scrabbling for life in towering pines.

The magic has gone away, even though the discs still spin.

*As I head to the store, I slip on a patch of ice and my head goes under the wheel of a passing car. Dead instantly.* I take a step further away from the road before continuing.

I was young when I first imagined my own demise. Four years old, back before the depression really sunk in. Running down the basement staircase, images from a tv show popped into mind of someone falling, dying as their skull cracked open on steps. The same image popped in, except with me in place.

My mother was never one to be bothered by violence in shows, so death wasn't really a strange concept. Given her religious beliefs, she also wasn't too bothered by talking about what happens when you die. The soul leaving the body and flying off to fluffy cloud heaven. That's what I imagined that first time. The sight of my body bleeding on the stairs, myself leaving and floating above it, calmly staring down at my own corpse.

Those first several times, it was just curiosity. A young mind puzzled by something difficult. I didn't fully get all my mother's talk about souls and heaven and death right away and needed to try and visualise it for myself. Somewhere along the way, I finally got it, but the images kept coming.

Moping along the side of the road, I keep looking up and down the street to see if it's clear to cross early. I hate crosswalks, seeing all the cars sit there patiently waiting. Having to hold people up while I scurry about.

Even if I can't manage actual anger, I can still bring forth deep-seated annoyance that depression has stolen every emotion from me except anxious worry over others' thoughts. What a prick.

I used to need music back when I first started shopping by myself as a teen. I'd carry an old disc player to block out the sounds. I would've used a blindfold if I thought I could manage it. Your eyes are the only ones I've never been bothered by. But then, I can't see them, can I?

I'd use music now if I remembered to bring a music player. My head can get foggy with the small things these days. My thoughts only have time for failures.

My eyes slide past the bright vibrancy in the store's interior to look at the mud tracked across the entrance.

"Dad, can we get some sour cherries?"

"You know your little brother doesn't like sour candy. Why not get something you'll both like?"

A little girl stands by the bulk section pointing out various treats to her parent. The location, like everything in these stores, is intentional. Right in view near the entrance for children to immediately point out and beg. Seeing kids be kids would normally bring a smile to my face. I try anyway. Moving my cheeks up and making sure the eyes are creased properly. I've always been decent at plastering a smile on my face and acting relatively normal, even during the big splotches of dark.

Back when I was that little, it was easy to compartmentalize, to be sad and crying inside the house and then immediately shed it all off once I stepped outside. It got harder as I got older and the misery piled up, but the ability to at least smile and act like everything is fine still comes easy. It's always the eyes. The eyes give it away if you're not careful.

I stagger past the kid trying to convince her dad that this time her brother would like the sour cherry candies, he just doesn't know it yet. A chorus of other voices join hers, men and women on cellphones calling roommates or lovers to see if they're forgetting anything. Forgetting things. Forgotten things. Faceless things.

So many faceless things wandering the store. I can see faces just fine. They sit across my memory. But they're hard to look at for long in conversation so they don't slide as easily into what a person is in my mind. People aren't faces. People are words and actions. People are sound and fury. And don't you come at me for that last part. The old bard stole plenty back in the Victorian era.



*Thirteen years old, walking down the dirt roads of the village, edged by tall trees that hide the moon; no houses for a hundred meters and the onset of autumn slowly driving nights into a soft, succulent chill. My cousin is laughing loudly, trying to convince his brother that he was adopted and they're going to send him back before a twig snaps and we stop, staring into the surrounding dark.*

*"Gotta be careful about the spirits in these parts," he says. "Saw this chick down in the cliffs at the canyon, hot as hell. Uncle said never approach anyone good-looking down there at night. They'll pull you into the rapids and drown you." He keeps staring about the woods. "There was a bear down this road before. Had antlers and walked on two legs, talking about laws being forgotten."*

*Our heads rove about at the deep nothing surrounding us. The hair on my arm starts standing, stretched out as far as it'll go; the pulse in my neck pumps away, flooding my head with anxiety. I'm about to say it's all bullshit when it comes, a thickening of the air: hot and acrid. It scrapes against my skin.*

*I've felt it before while waking in a panic, a presence lurking about my house, just beyond the walls, desperate to climb in.*

*Off to the side, from the corner of sight, a shirtless man with a nest of raven hair and no face is crouched high in the branches, watching us despite the lack of eyes. When my head snaps towards him, he vanishes, the branch swaying. Just the wind.*

*I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere.*

*"Run!" I yell. The three of us laugh to cover our panic as we rush towards the next building and its safe lights.*

*Linoleum. I'm at the store. The trees and forest are long gone. It's been years since I stepped foot near that village.*

*You know, I've had dozens of strangers come up to me over the years, saying I look like a cousin, or an old co-worker, or a prior best friend, unfamiliar names placed over my own. I wonder if my face is generic, or if it might've been stolen back then in those deep woods. My identity taken as punishment for thinking I deserved to be there on that land. Now I just...look like someone you know.*

*Guess that makes us two peas in a pod. What you look like has never mattered, I look at you regardless. You could be any gender, any age. There could be oceans between us, or you could live around the bend. What little remains of my heart is glad you're still here though.*

*Wandering the aisles, deals are examined, and staples picked up. Potatoes are cheap and delicious in a thousand different ways: boil them, mash them, stick them in a stew. Cheap ground meats for a budget spicy Bolognese sauce. Some ingredients for chicken and rice burritos, using bulk chicken from the freezer aisle, because money. Along with a tonne of cheap frozen foods to fill out the other days.*

*So much stuff from so far away. There's some guy in the Philippines that doesn't know me, but I eat pineapples made on his farm which are shipped here in cans covered in bright blue wrappers.*

*There are truck drivers and butchers and factory workers that ensure I get to live another day off the food they deliver that will never know me or anyone else that makes use of their life's work. People rarely realize the impact they have on others. Whether through food or anything else.*

I like cooking, or at least I used to. I first learned out of necessity. As a child, my mother slowly stopped doing much of anything, including cook. She became a bitter vegetable growing from her bed, unable to be roused except by liquor.

Wasn't any different, myself, back then. I couldn't be bothered with homework. It ate into my threads of joy and happiness. A lazy genius teachers called me, though I balk at the term. I remember things easily, but that doesn't make me a genius. I'd say good choices do, and I rarely make those.

A can of tomato sauce goes into my basket while strolling down long aisles.

There's something about tailoring food to match others' tastes that got me hooked. The idea that it's more than just a need, something that requires reaching out and understanding who you cook for. Figuring out the small changes to win someone over so you can see the smile they make.

Eggs at the far end of the store are the last thing on my mental list, located next to fridges holding milk that leave the aisle cool across skin. Stores put the things people buy most often far from the entrance, ensuring you shop through as much of the store as possible to draw your eyes to other purchases. Decades of psychology research has gone into how best to design layouts and organize food and goods. The research never stops.

First heard about the concept from my high school cooking teacher. Later, in university I dove through its databases on the subject out of curiosity. The amount of effort put forth to squeeze out more money is astounding.

It's also astounding that all human knowledge can be found at the click of a button, yet no one ever bothers to look. So many things you can learn to help yourself, to help others. But it's easier to sit back, tied up in the same beliefs and never question how you should be walking about stores. Never question which aisles you should be going down and how you should be doing it all.

With everything precariously crammed into a handbasket, eggs nestling at the top, it's off to the checkout. The registers closer to the door are all filled with long lines, but there's a gap of empty lanes followed by a lone active one at the far end. Manned by a young Indian girl, likely on her first job. I line up behind a woman who's just started putting all her things up. Either no one else had seen the register light on, or the girl had been put here to lighten the lines on the other end.

As the items are pulled forward by the conveyor belt, it starts filling up with my own things, leaving enough space and the little plastic divider to keep our things separate. I spot the girl run a pack of meat through the scanner twice by accident. Drawn from my daze, I try and say something when the woman beats me to it.

"Hey, you ran that through twice," she says.

"What?"

The woman repeats herself, "You ran that through twice. I'm not paying thirty bucks for something I'm only getting one of. I swear, the people they keep hiring get stupider and stupider."

The girl tries to give an apologetic smile "Sor—"

"Did you just smirk at me? This is unbelievable. I shouldn't even have to pay for this at all. It's like your head is filled with garbage and I can barely understand you."

The girl's smile vanishes. She tries to apologise again, but I know it won't matter. It was an accident, but some people enjoy making others feel small. The woman isn't yelling, yet her foul words don't stop. I want to say something. I need to say something. My lips won't open, my lungs glued in place, anxiety keeping any sound from passing

out. I desperately wish it's the depression but I'm not sure I could push myself even if the horrific numbness were to vanish. All I can do is stand here, awkwardly pondering how to act and what to say, while she berates the girl.

*"You're so useless, why can't you do anything right? Why do I even keep you around when you never listen! I should get rid of you both! Don't ever expect to come back here once they take you away!" A hand balls into a fist and rises into the air.*

A smattering of shame finally boils up, rising through my gut and into my chest, pushing its way through the thick layer of molasses. I step forward and open my mouth and...she turns away with her bags in hand. Too late. I'm always too late to act. Always too late to try. Too busy lost in my own thoughts and problems to bother helping someone else.

I imagined it, that I could change. The sensation was a stupid dream.

I close my mouth and step up to the register. The black sludge settles back over me. The girl's eyes stay as low as possible as she scans items, but I can see the tears forming. I pay and she hands me the receipt. All I can get out as I take it is a pitiful "Thanks. You're doing a great job." As if that magically makes things right. She simply nods her head. A Closed Register sign is quickly tossed onto the conveyor, and she leaves once I grab my bags.

I wonder if she hates me for simply standing there and watching. I hope she does. I deserve it.

*'Kill yourself.'*

### Chapter 3: Small Animals

...ice on my cheeks and pictures in the frost, will I ever remember  
the cold bird's songs, will I seek...a voice to sing to prove my heart still beats  
in faithless nights alone with you, because they all still come  
in the quiet dark...for who I was then:  
a birdwatching, upright ape holding human tears  
before it all falls into frantic calls  
to find the old me in the three choruses again...

Night fell while I was inside the store, streetlamps flickering to life to provide yellow paths through the winter. The cold dark always comes early this far north. Walking home, my mind is filled with old thoughts.

*Eleven years old, traversing icy streets. The big piles of cotton bordering the road hold blue deep in their crevasses, a side effect of how light scatters in compacted snow.*

*A wail goes out. A child in pain. I used to make the same sounds before mom got sick of hearing crying. An ambulance siren with its urgency and need. Two blocks away I see two kids: Conner sitting on top of Drew. His fists keep drawing back and down over and over as Drew's screams leap out.*

*I stand there, frozen to the ground. Drew's mom comes out, summoned by the cries to chase Conner away, swearing that she'll kill him if he comes near her house or son again while Conner walks away laughing. She brings Drew inside. Several minutes vanish to the void before my feet unfreeze. The blood is stark on the snow as I pass. Bright red flowers blooming in the cold.*

*Conner's my friend and the next day I ask in class why he did it. "I just didn't like his face." He's suspended for a week an hour later.*

*Drew comes back a few days after. He asks if I'll still be friends with Conner, a black and brown scarf of bruises coating his face. "Whatever's going on between you two is your stuff. Leave me out of it."*

Not my problem. Never my problem. Things happen and I leave.

Staring up at the sky, thoughts of my unchanging state drift about like clouds. All carried to the tune of squawking feathered children. I'm so completely worthl—my worn soles hit a patch of ice and fly out from under me. Well, fuck.

I try to cushion the eggs, but my elbow goes flying into the ground. A bolt of lightning spikes down my arm and my head collides with snow and ice, leaving me dizzy. "Fuck me. Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck me. Fucking shit!" After a second, I chuckle a bit as I lay on the cold concrete and snow. Laughing is what I would normally do here. I should stick to the script of "How to be a Human." The sound of a car door opening and closing nearby is followed by a voice.

"Hey buddy, you alright?" An older guy, cloth snaked around his face and neck, calls out as he hustles over, keeping an eye on the ground. An apartment building with a lot full of vehicles stands nearby, in full view of me becoming a fool.

He steps over as I respond, "Yep, just fine. Completely...fine. Just...super annoyed." My head isn't too bad, but my elbow carries a dull ache. I'm lucky I didn't smash my knee or tailbone. That would have been a hat trick of pain and likely a lot

more swearing from my place on the ground. I groan anyway and let off another small “Fuck,” for good measure, though under my breath to keep some level of civility.

“Well, you know what the good book says. Life is misery and all that, but just keep faith that it happens for a reason,” he says. He looks down at me. “You gonna need some help home?”

“Buddha,” I groan.

“What?”

“That was the Buddha, I think. The whole ‘life is suffering’ business. It was uhhh...the First Noble Truth?” I say, wincing at the aches. First learned about that from a metal song before diving deeper into it all but don’t bother throwing that info out. Some of the older Christian folk have some concerns when it comes to metal music. “Fairly certain the Bible didn’t specify that life was inherently painful, just that suffering was caused by original sin, I think.” I take the time to rub the suffering out of the back of my head. The man checks me over, nodding his head along. I don’t think he’s entirely paying attention, but my mouth won’t stop moving. “Think there’s talk about enduring and being stronger for it or seeking to ease the burden of others, but I don’t think the sentiment was ever made that life was meant to be suffering, though it’s been a while since I read a Bible all the way through.”

Technically, I’ve never read the bible all in one go. I did chunks here and there as a kid while investigating why no one was answering my calls about the whole child abuse stuff. Figured I wasn’t doing the prayers right and was missing some sort of cool salute or something. “And I’ll probably be fine getting home. It’s just the next building over,” I say. Sitting up, an old-person groan leaves my chest. Looking in the bag, my eggs are intact. A small solace for my fallen elbow.

“You sound like a pretty smart guy, not a lot of young fellows reading the Bible these days. You sure you’re gonna be alright?” He puts out a hand to help me up. Taking it with my uncracked arm, I slowly rise.

“I think if I really were smart, I would’ve watched where I was going and not fallen on my ass,” I say, checking my legs. No pain. “And yeah, I’ll be fine, but thanks for the offer. Main thing wounded is my pride, and that’s a sin anyway, right? Better off with a few dings in it.” I do start to have doubts about my earlier comments, though. Is there something in the bible about life being suffering? It’s been way too long, and the bible is less a book and more a small library. I know there are some lines similar to the idea that everything happens for a reason, and some of them might suggest that pain is simply another part of the big old plan.

I’ll have to check later. I hate misinformation, especially by know-it-alls who don’t know as much as they think they do. I sound insufferable, but I can’t help it. It’s worse when I’m stressed or embarrassed, but when someone says something, everything I know about the subject comes tumbling out of my mouth. A small frown at the thought of bothering someone by accident creeps up.

Rather than take offense, he brushes snow off my back and gives me a pat on the shoulder. “Well, try and keep those eyes on what’s important from now on then, you hear?” he says. I can’t see his mouth, but his eyes are smiling. Such a chill, old dude. Not even a comment about the weird Buddha talk. He reminds me of a cool grandfather, though my dad is likely older, given that he had me while he was fifty. Old people bang too, you know?

I give an appreciative nod and smile back before picking up my bags and tiptoeing across the rest of the parking lot. "And put on an actual jacket," he calls out as I waddle away, "it's gonna drop pretty low next week!" I slow down so I can stop and turn, giving him a wave and another nod.

The head nod is a language unto itself. Those skilled in its ways can communicate vast speeches with a simple nod, convey a depth of emotion that those blind to its ways will never know. If I ever see him again, I'll give him a nod upwards in passing, a clear sign that a true friendship has blossomed between us.

Another frown as I turn the corner. So busy making sure I hit all the proper smiles and facial expressions that I didn't ask for his name. That should've been more important.

What a nice old guy. Would he have acted the same if he'd known?

*"Do you need a ride? I've seen you around the call center," the elderly lady says from the open window, big curls of grey hair swishing about. The world is empty aside from us, most cars still sleeping in driveways. The summer sun creeps behind the horizon, preparing for dawn as cool air glides over concrete.*

*I was hoping to grab breakfast at the fast-food place the next street over, but saying no would probably be awkward, wouldn't it? My stomach squirms from hunger and the thought of turning down a stranger. "Sure." I don't recognize her myself, but I doubt anyone is out to kidnap me.*

*Normally it's a nice, quiet hour-long stroll to work, because wasting gas every morning is far too costly. A few more months and I'll have enough tuition for university. Then life will start. As I buckle in, the car starts back up, rolling us towards customer care duty for a phone company.*

*"Enjoying the work?" She keeps her eyes on the road as the tires keep spinning. Damn it. Social interactions, my one weakness.*

*Pursed lips before the words come out, "Yeah, it's great! Every day is so different." I hate it. Talking to strangers over and over. The scripts help and the lack of eye contact makes it possible, but the tension boils below the surface during every call, creeping up my spine. The expectation of the conversation turning into something of grotesque violence.*

*Exposure therapy helps a great deal for deep seated fears, letting yourself interact with your terror in a nice, controlled manner. Maybe a few more months of this and I might not panic every day from all the crowds up at the university. Might even be normal one of these days.*

*She says, "I just wish the building wasn't downtown. All those Indians always wandering about. If they're going to be lazy bums, they could at least let themselves be shipped back to their reserve where they belong." My throat tightens. Despite being indoor all the time, my skin still carries a tan that'll never leave. An ambiguous brown that lets people see what they want and expect.*

*She explains how other cities all ship the Indians here because our city is so nice, but we should ship them all back where they came from. Where they belong. I simply sit there, sinking into the seat as my stomach squeezes the empty void within it. Chewing away at nothing.*

*I make non-committal noises as my head bobs about.*

She didn't mean actual Indians like the girl at the store, not here in North America. She meant the native population of the Americas that had the Indian name slapped on them by people bad at math and geography.

Not the most horrifically offensive conversation I've had, though most shy away from calling us Indians in polite company. But treating them like an animal that needed to be relocated was so jarring. Especially when most who find themselves in that state of homelessness are there due to trauma and an inability to escape it. Grief and depression soaked into our blood. Not all of us, but enough that it's all others see. Broken down thieves out to take everything because they have nothing left.

I've had some who only know the beardless Indians from old westerns exclude me due to the facial hair, rather than my ambiguous colouration. Kind of funny how everyone expects North Americans pre-colonialism to all be identical despite the continent's massive size. They see the plains tribes without beards and stop thinking there's anything beyond that, like we're all photocopies of the images from those films.

I've been asked why I still use Indian, myself. Honestly, it doesn't matter. We used it throughout my childhood on the reserve, and at the end of the day, it's all I am to the government. I have an Indian status card and all government documents still refer to me as one. It's too much work and money to bother changing any of it, so they play at using fancier terms on the news and send me docs about being Indian in the mail. All just feels like nonsense. Why should I change it when they won't?

Why is doubt my first reaction to an open hand? Rather than put too much thought into who else the parking lot guy might've been under the surface, it's better to accept that, at least then and there, he was a kind old man who simply wanted to help. It isn't fair to make judgements about him when he showed me nothing but a sympathetic hand. Otherwise, I'd be no different from those who've done the same to me.

There was a time, long ago in my younger and angrier days, that I would've looked down on him for his beliefs. I was pissed that no big guy in the sky came flying down to help with any of my pain, so I started hating God, hating religion, and viewing anyone who bothered to follow either as stupid. The church's history with Indians and my mother's deep-set religious beliefs didn't help.

It was a crass pettiness that I couldn't let go of. Finding out some of my friends were deeply religious was the big turning point. At the end of the day, their beliefs were far less important than the fact we understood each other even if we didn't share the same ideas on floating people in the sky.

I can't honestly state that I know for sure that there isn't some higher power, but it's never appeared to have any bearing on my life. My life didn't get better when I prayed, nor did it get worse when I stopped, it stayed the same degree of miserable. I do still try to be decent. At least, I try when not trapped by crippling depression. Being hurt sucks. I know that too well.

Of course, I could be wrong about the whole prayer and religion stuff. Maybe God or some number of deities really are out there, and the lack of responses are because they're busy fighting off squid-faced monstrosities out to destroy the universe.

Maybe they need prayer badly to keep us all safe and I'm the asshole for not bothering. But if that's the case, I figure they could at least give us an update, right? Maybe a big old tablet shot down saying, "Yo homies, please pray so I can power up and get this next three-hit combo off!"

Where am I? What am I doing? The lawn by my apartment building. The snow crunches below my feet as my arms grow tired from packing around grocery bags.

Worthless thoughts are interrupted by a recognizable call piercing through. Not all birds head south for winter and while I can't see where it came from, the Northern Flicker has the most adorable red cheeks. Usually only hear a couple around this time of year.

I hate it. Thinking. Memories and thoughts spilling out every second, pushing me about in whatever direction they please.

*The water kicks my feet then fills my mouth; salt is all I taste, foam, all I see. A toe hits rough sand below, I push up and get a look above.*

*My mom is laughing on the beach. No one sees me struggling; the waves crash in, taking me further out.*

*Despite how bright the light is, a thousand bulbs shining down on me, I'm invisible. No one notices.*

*My lungs burn; arms and legs keep flailing to grasp something solid. Why did no one teach me to swim?*

The cold clings tightly as I get inside, stuffing groceries in whatever space will hold them. Smatterings of melted snow dirty up the entryway. When did I last clean? Two weeks ago? More? It's normally clockwork, but like most things, it's pushed off again and again.

Rubbing at my arm, I let out the occasional random noise of complaint as I sit back at my computer. Store receipt in hand, I plug in the web address for the satisfaction survey. Every corporate office wants data for their analytics.

After ticking down the row of columns on prices and quality, when I get to the section on customer service, I give the maximum score and write, then rewrite, a glowing review for the cashier. The character limit is an annoyance, but I do my best to fit that she went above and beyond, that I'd rarely seen someone as personable as she was.

It's stupid and amounts to nothing. No idea if she'll ever hear anything from it or gain anything tangible. Just my own self-satisfaction, but I still need to do something, even if small and worthless.

My eyes flick to the side, spotting a lonely spider journeying across the ceiling. I'd have screamed in terror once. Fled the room, and perhaps the house. Even if I wasn't like this, free of emotions, I'd probably be fine. Learning everything there is to know about spiders helped a great deal in getting over the fear. They have their place in the world, like everything else.

"Just keep to yourself, good sir or mademoiselle, and I'll do the same." It pauses, though I doubt it heard me, before slowing descending behind the couch.

Despite having ingredients, I can't be bothered with dinner tonight, so my brother orders out. It's the way of things with us. He pays for takeout and random junk we might need around the house, while I buy groceries and do the cooking and cleaning. At least, when I could be bothered with either.

We sit down at the fancy wooden table in the living room I'd managed to pick up for twenty dollars a while back. The former owner had a terrible story about his wife abandoning the family, wanting to sell the home they shared and all the stuff in it to move on quickly. Sounded like the beginning to some sort of scam, but it ended up all



being legit. So, I gained a far nicer table than I deserved or could afford due to someone else's misery.

I take bites out of a nothingburger, while nothingfries and a nothingdrink sit off to the side. The fries are drenched in vinegar, something that normally sends shocks racing along my jaw, running back and forth along the sides as I scarf them down. Like most other things, though, food is something I go through the motions with.

I eat because I need to. Even the stuff I cook is all repetition of motions I've done a hundred times before for a meal that means little. You're supposed to eat chicken noodle soup when sick to get better. What do you eat when your head is sick?

Technically, the flavours are still there. Chemicals still bind to receptors on my tongue, telling me what I put in my mouth is sweet or salty or a detestable bitter. But beyond that it does nothing. The joy is gone.

The trembling wave of happiness when you sink your teeth into savoury meats or delectable sweets. The memories that come flooding back with each bite. Tasting egg-soaked French toast and remembering every time you smothered the same meal in syrup until it was drenched with maple, ready to coat your soul in sticky sweetness. Of eating cake and remembering the first time you ever tried to make one yourself. The mess, the sore arms from mixing with your silly child limbs, and the final disaster of a product that still managed to be tasty enough to your foolish kid brain. The moments of sitting down with friends or family for a meal and enjoying the company as you experience good food and good people. It's all slowly disintegrating into dust blowing away. Food is another habit.

"So, I was watching a stream recently and they brought up chimpanzees and how they could rip off someone's face," my brother says in a quiet voice. Normal dinner conversation. We come from a well-adjusted family.

Aside from you, he's the only one I really talk to. People always say we look alike, but I've never seen it aside from the black hair and dark eyes. Maybe it's the hesitance in his movements, the attempts to avoid ever touching or bothering others that people see into.

Or maybe I'm not used to my own face. For most of my life, looking into mirrors was to make sure I knew the right expressions when depressed. I could never stand seeing it outside of that.

A lengthy, meaningless discussion on chimpanzees and bonobos slips past my mind. Humanity's two closest relatives: war mongering despots and bisexual hippies. I wonder if either ever experiences depression. You think some ape ever has trouble getting out of a tree in the morning?

We both finish eating and separate to our computers. The night envelopes me while listening to music.

...devoured by the sea and curving paths, but seven promises to stay true to your road alone, you caught me broken down and falling through, so I'll never falter...*to build something great instead of chasing perfection*...lock the door to keep danger out in the eighth thought, with paper armor and hope for unburied futures...*but staying closed keeps you safe*...contrasting natures over gunfire words directing four directions for growing self-confidence...*I heard their music in a clip of a show, maybe I'll watch it*...

Could I have done any of it? Well, maybe not the K-pop, since I'm not Korean, but the rest? If I'd sat down and tried when I was younger, could I have ended up at the

same sort of place? Drunks at my mom's parties would leave behind many things, one of which was a guitar.

There's a loveable ginger from out of England that talked about being shit at singing, shit at playing the guitar, and shit at songwriting when he started out. Yet he's one of the best-selling musicians in the world and a highly lauded songwriter. All because he never stopped. What if I'd done the same? Taken the guitar rather than let it sit in our basement unused for years as a teenager, dust slowly gathering over its untouched wood. Could I have made something of myself back then? Found a way out in music?

I sit there letting it all play out in my mind as a song about cleaving away broken, rusted parts bleeds out of my computer. *Starting a band in high school with friends that catches someone's attention online, a record deal, an album, emancipation by sixteen. Even two years is a blessing. With success, money, and belief in myself, when my friend in high school says she'll go out with me if I ask, I don't laugh it off as a joke. Marrying my high school sweetheart, years of touring the world and playing for massive audiences. Then a divorce at twenty-four from my pregnant wife when the distance and tour schedules become too much, because even in a narcissistic fantasy, I can't imagine everything being so perfect. Pulling back from the band, and then leaving completely, moving to being a producer and songwriter so I can spend more time at home. All so my son will never have to experience the same things I did, with a dad who shows up once a year for a couple hours, then takes off again. All so he would never be alone or unloved. I work tirelessly so that the poisonous misery my grandparents passed to my mom and that she passed to me will never touch him. Even if everything else goes to hell, I want to know that he'll be okay.*

There are thousands of them. Every song a different life lived. Countless memories in my life sit playing through my mind where things are different. None of them end perfectly, but they're always so much more than the constant failures left to me from a life not lived. In desperate times, songs are bits of driftwood, floating maybe's and what-if's to cling to in the empty eye of a hurricane.

Memory, and what it can do to you, is a funny thing.

I still remember the first thought I ever had. It was like waking up for the first time, but I wasn't in bed. *Three years old in the kitchen. Blackness, and then I'm standing here, confusion bursting out of the dark, fully aware with a woman's back in front of me. Mom. She's cooking. I know these things. If I wait, food appears, and growling stomachs vanish.*

*I look down at my arms and legs and shift them around. They're me, but I don't understand. Fingers move about my shirt and chest in curiosity as fabric stretches. I look around the kitchen, seeing things I know about even if I have no memory of how I know: the window, the milky white light of the overcast sky beyond, dishes on the drying rack, walls.*

*The room is filled with the music of new food, something sizzles in a pan while bubbles rapidly form and escape from a pot with a clattering lid. The occasional splash sends up a burst of hissing steam as it contacts the burner.*

*I stop caring about the strange arrival of thoughts and run into the living room to play with toys.* How odd, the things we keep. That endless sky, my mom hard at work for us, the confusion over what I'm supposed to be, but not the tastes that normally colour my memories, what we ate afterwards. I thought about that memory a great deal

over my life, particularly after my mom told me about souls and how they entered babies when they were born.

Back when I still had faith, I assumed that my soul was simply a little slow in popping in, which was why I couldn't remember anything from before then. That the blackness was where souls sat while waiting to enter someone. Memories like that one defined so much of who I was, inspiring my curiosity and questions, but there were also memories like those of my mother. Even long before she died, she was a ghost that haunted me, lurking over my shoulder to tell me I was a failure, that I was worthless and would never amount to anything. That I was garbage that would get tossed out and no one would ever want me in their lives.

Each person is a tapestry of memories. A massive patchwork quilt, with each square a moment in time sewn to the next. The ones that had coffee, or wine, or food spilled on them and stained until you can no longer make out the original image, they still play a part in the totality of who you are as a person. The bright squares, the dark squares, the faded or stained squares, they all make up a part of your identity. In my happier moments, this was what drove me to keep going, even if I kept pulling back from taking chances on new stitching and new patterns. Because even if there is no greater power out in the universe fiddling with the lights behind the scenes, even if there's no hulking-out Jesus duking it out with Cthulhu for the fate of the universe, every single action still matters and can still make the world a better place.

Every kindness you pay to a stranger marks them, changes them in some small way with new threads. Even tiny actions like the guy in the parking lot letting me know that decent people will always exist. Those moments spiral forward through other lives.

Every moment you've had an impact on someone else's life will change them and they'll go on to add new patches to others, with little bits of your own still clinging on.

A domino of memories pushing forward into eternity. A song you sing for someone, a lesson about science you teach to a child, a simple conversation in a parking lot can lead to someone somewhere down the line being saved or having their life enriched.

Even if they don't know you're the person that gave that first push, those first few sewn bits of material. Your existence can be long gone and crumbled into dust, but your impact on the world will be felt in the ripples that build atop each other into waves of cloth.

The problem is, even if I ignore all the dark patches, the rest still sit there accusingly. They point a finger out at me, saying "This was the moment right here. This was the moment you could have changed things and become someone better, someone who would have a real impact on others."

A moment where a teacher asked if everything was fine, and I brushed it off rather than seeking help.

A moment where I sat there looking at a guitar that some drunk had left or thought about the keyboard that my mom had found at a garage sale for ten bucks.

A moment when a ten-year-old classmate saw my first couple pages of an attempt at a novel and said it was stupid. Where instead of quitting, I could've kept writing.

A moment where instead of being disheartened at seeing my friend's painting when I was twelve, I could've asked for tips on improving.

My life is filled with failed actions and lost moments.

I know objectively it's not too late. There are roads still open and waiting to be travelled. Even a simple life filled with small, quiet parking lot conversations can be important to me and others. But the blanket is too heavy and I'm drowning in regret. It's pinning me down, and I can't bear to get up. So, I sit here listening to music and thinking about a better life where I had the courage to take any of the dangling threads my memories are showing to me. I can't imagine being able to leave these thoughts.

## Chapter 4: Small Dates

The shower finished, fog from the mirror is wiped away to reveal a face. Freshly shaved with a slight trim of my hair.

I know what you're going to say, and yes, my eyes are gorgeous tonight, thank you.

And you look quite cute yourself, did you do something with your hair? I'm terrible at noticing those things, but it looks nice. And don't be all bashful. If someone can't call their homies cute, are they even friends? At this point I feel like we're friends. At least that.

My eyes used to be hazel once, by the way. Long before you showed up in my life. Bright green, with a ring of gold around the pupil. Then my Indian-ness came in and turned it all dark with a ring of rust. Melanin production can take a while to start so kids sometimes have lighter eyes or hair when young. Now you can only spot the colour of pine needles if you look closely.

It's still nice enough. Green and purple are tied for being the second-best colors, given they're both half-blue.

Raccoon circles sit under these eyes even when I manage to get enough sleep, but they're fainter today. Maybe it's just me, my mind painting everything brighter. Or it might be the look of excitement bleeding out, reaching beyond my irises, and overpowering any sign of gloominess.

Actual excitement. I feel like a hazel-eyed kid again.

White is splattered across the top of my head in a streak. Do you think I should've dyed it? Might be too noticeable.

First started coming in when I was twelve. A couple strands slipping into my crow's nest, mixing with the black to make it look like it has a sheen.

I was worried I'd be completely white before ever hitting my thirties, but it slowed after that first burst. An elder from my tribe told my mom it was a sign I was an old soul and would be wise in this life. Not sure if that's actually from our people's beliefs or if the old lady just wanted to sound cool.

Our tribe did believe in reincarnation, there's this whole thing about—WAIT! Focus! My hair!

Should I tousle it? Make it look kind of like I've just gotten up? No, no, that's trying too hard. I play with a few strands at the front, nothing big, make it look natural. You have to be natural, or everyone will know you're on your first rodeo. That's right, isn't it?

I should go watch a few more videos online. No, there's no time. I've cooked and eaten dinner with my brother, a delicious spicy peanut chicken dish with mushrooms roasted in bacon grease. Now, there's nothing left beyond plans and excitement.

Butterflies of nervousness float through my stomach. A date like this can change someone's life forever. Everything runs through my head a few more times, preparations mentally double checked. I step out into biting air that nips at my skin.

Fuck, it's incredible. The world is gorgeous in a way only those living in the north know. Late at night in winter, when the clouds are thick and hanging low, light from a decent sized city becomes endlessly trapped. Cycling back and forth as it bounces off the snow on the ground and the wall up in the skies. The clouds themselves get painted in deep strokes of violets and magentas and light pinks, with the city lit up far brighter

than the simple yellow streetlamps and Christmas lights can ever hope to accomplish on their own. It isn't like daylight, but there's something far more magical to it all.

Like your door opens into another world and every single step will take you further and further into fantasy. Lights will stay up for a while even after the coming Christmas leaves. Some of them are simple strings of colour, while others are built as immense displays to wow children and adults alike. The wind is thankfully gone, leaving the air still and the night quiet with few cars on the streets, though flakes fall over and over. There's nothing beyond the sounds of my own breath, puffing out wisps of fog at a pace too fast to be called steady.

I stride out of my apartment, then run and leap. CRUNCH! CRUNCH! CRUNCH! My leg sinks over two feet into the snow before I leap again and again. After that first jump, my momentum dies and it becomes a large awkward waddle, the snow crackling as I wade through it. I consider continuing, but fresh snow has a few hidden dangers; a couple years back, I injured my leg for a month after steps like these.

Ice is always cruel, lurking below the white powder and waiting for someone who's a little too careless. Even if you adore everything else about winter, ice always needs to be given respect. Rather than persist with futile leaps, I start pushing my way forward, my feet low to the ground. There's something nice about forcing your legs to sweep through the resistance, the solid flakes giving way as I wade through frozen fluffy lakes. The plows haven't made paths through the most recent flurries coating the sidewalks, so I push through to the street and trail along the edge of the road.

The air is cooler at night, but I'm not bothered even with a hoodie on rather than a thick jacket. My excitement and energy have me running too hot, turning the air into a gentle cool touch drifting across my face. I make my way through the city on foot. This is something I'll want to savour, and I made sure to give myself plenty of time for the extra journey. My car being out of commission also plays into that, but I'll stick to the idea that this is by choice.

Too often people go for quick satisfaction. I'm not that different in that regard, especially during bouts of depression, but a nice long trip to really take in the sights and let yourself think about how amazing the world can be is a nice change of pace. In several more days, it'll be Christmas, meaning parties and a week later, bright explosions of colour to join the purples and pinks as fireworks are set off during New Years. But for now, perhaps in preparation for the later festivities, many houses have darkened interiors, though the bright exteriors shine in a vast array of rainbows.

The most fantastical of displays shift every few seconds, colours jumping in a steady pattern that dazzle as they crawl from one side of the spectrum to the other. A sleigh and reindeer made entirely of lights and wiring sit atop one building, no sign of Santa himself.

Another building has the trees out front covered from top to bottom with lights of their own, creating large Christmas trees beyond anything found within someone's home, each decorated in an entirely different colour. Glowing candy canes, guardian snowmen, and armed nutcracker soldiers stand ready to battle against the night. Their shining rainbow cloaks ensuring the winter skies keep their colours from the vast amount of light that scatters out and returns. A couple buildings take the extra step of playing gentle Christmas music from speakers, but the sound fades quickly as I pass, the noise subdued out of respect for neighbors.

This is joy in visual form. An orchestra of light conducted by everyone in the city. If ever asked what I think true and complete happiness looks like through colour alone, I'll point to these violets, reds, and greens swirling about each other, a perfect backdrop of pink and purple cotton blankets on the ground and in the air.

No picture or painting could possibly do this scene justice. No container can hold the same level of pure and total glee within, it would leak from every seam, exploding out before any have a chance to bask in it. Or maybe they can, but no one thinks the sights are real? I'd never seen a film or picture with these same living paints, but maybe some director or photographer tried, and it came out all too amazing for anyone to believe it was a genuine sight somewhere on earth. I know I tried and got nothing but garbled colours and something I keep trying to forget.

Towering mounds dot the city. Huge piles where snow from the streets and sidewalk have been jammed into tiny mountains for kids to play on. Winter was the best as a child.

...  
*The ball grows larger and larger until it stands as the base of a brand-new snowman. "Let's make it bigger! An enormous giant snow monster to eat the school!"*

...  
*"Snowball fight!" My eyes shut as snow hits my head and melts into cold water against my hot face. Rivers trail towards my neck sending out shivers that push me further alive.*

...  
*Children clamor over each other to stand atop the massive pile of cotton, each proclaiming themselves ruler of these frozen wastes. "For fighting against Princess Ashley, I sentence you to the parking lot! Die!"*

...  
Snow snaps and pops underfoot. One of my few companions aside from the odd car or truck that's out late. They slowly roll by, likely also hoping to take in every second they can of the fantastical scene playing out in the city. Or maybe they simply worry about the snow and ice. Regardless, it's a quiet night with little beyond the lights and snow raining down. None of it is lonely, however. Not with you. And not with sights like these, passions carefully crafted into brightly lit artwork. Even if the creators are off in bed, their heart is still fully on display.

As the hour-long journey rolls by and I get closer to my destination, I head towards a corner store to grab a small snack. That early burst of excitement while taking everything in left me drained. I step over a grate.

*It collapses downwards, spilling me into the sewers. The shock of the frigid water fills my bones and locks my chest, my hands are left slimy and unable to grab purchase on anything. This is my fourth time drowning, and the water finally gets its hold as I sink. I won't be able to escape like before.* My arms tense, ready to reach out and grab the ground if the metal under me vanishes. It holds steady as I head inside.

Chicken kebabs sit cooked and ready to go, though I resist grabbing anything else. Despite my best efforts, sauce from the chicken coats my fingers as I resume the journey, though I avoid getting any on my facemask, awkwardly pushed aside to make way for the meat. My fingers swish through snow, getting a quick wash.

Winter really is a wonder. All that frost to let you know you're alive, set you ablaze with the burning light of stars.

That isn't some metaphor, you know. The stars? You and me, we're both shining stars. Back at the start of it all, when the universe first burst into existence, everything was too cramped for matter to exist like it does now. It was all this hot, steamy mess of tangled up quarks and gluons in a sexy soup. Then space expanded enough to cool down a bit and that soup settled into the first matter.

But back then, it was all hydrogen gas and some helium to make your voice funny. The rest of it didn't exist, the carbon and oxygen and iron, the building blocks of life and skies and planets. But gravity pulls everything in, grabbing on to anything in range and wrapping it all together in a warm hug. All that gas started spinning about and condensing down into tighter and tighter hugs until finally: ignition. An explosion of light as the first stars were born.

My feet keep trudging through the snow, with more coming down to cover my trail here.

Stars are nuclear reactors, smashing atoms into larger ones. Energy explodes out, shedding vast amounts of burning light. They take hydrogen and mush it into bigger and bigger atoms, all the things needed to make a solar system, a planet, a person. And when all the fuel it has gets used up, some stars end in a fiery catastrophe, a supernova. The pressure inside gets too great and they burst, scattering their stardust into the universe, which gets taken up by new clouds of hydrogen to become newborn stars.

Everything inside you and me, every last molecule in us was forged in the heart of a star. Countless stars lived and died and lived again just so there was enough stuff to make us and everything around us. You're a living, breathing remnant of vibrant explosions, come to life to sing and dance and fall in love and that right there is one of the most beautiful things I can fucking think of. Life is fucking beautiful. You're fucking beautiful—oh shit. The world turns sideways as the ice shows its beautiful face.

My knees crash into cottony powder instead of the patch revealed beneath the fresh snow, while my face lands in a snowbank. Rolling over, the impression of an idiot, too caught up in dumb talks, remains behind. Hopefully, it too will be erased by the falling white tufts that keep plopping down. My facemask is all wet, I should've kept it off until I really needed it. My specs are wiped down with whatever patches of my shirt look dry. Not even a small fall can stop this night from being lovely.

Speaking of love, did you know one of the oldest pieces of writing we have is a love song? Humanity invented written words five thousand years ago, which at the time needed to be embedded into stone tablets, and someone put in the effort to leave behind a sensual song of sweet honey and the taste of a lover. Humanity can be downright awesome sometimes.

Sliding my glasses back on, I still burn, despite my stupid gaffe. In the bright light of winter, cold pressing its arms around me, I ignite. Getting up, I run the last few streets, uncaring of any other ice that might lurk below. There's no grace, no beauty. I'm no elegant deer bounding through deep banks. Just a fool turning a run into an awkward jog as my feet sink over and over into sheets of cotton candy. My breath is ragged, coming out in billowing smoke that puffs away through the edges of my mask. The cold air tears at my lungs as I try to bring my breath under control, small prickles in places that have never felt a pin stab into them before.

My feet finally slow as the house comes into sight. The outside walls are painted white with dark grey lines. Large windows open into what's likely the living room, though they're all covered by blinds. Midnight is finally here and hopefully most of the



world is sleeping. The lights are on in the building across the street from my target, the shades partially open and a sliver of a TV screen showing some action movie.

A black SUV with tinted windows is parked a block from the house and since I'm using the side of the road to travel, I have to step out into the middle of the street. The area is nice, but the vehicle feels oddly out of place. Too fancy. Too sleek.

Is there a figure in the driver's seat? Turning to look in from the front window is too suspicious and the idea of locking eyes right here and now sends my heart racing even more. If I wasn't wearing the facemask, I'd likely have constant puffs of fog floating about my head from the tension that's keeping every muscle in my body under pressure.

Another thought pops in. If you grab a gun and fire it at the ceiling in a crowded restaurant, isn't it the guy who doesn't react that you should be watching? He's obviously the spy, or the protagonist of some action film, right? It's the people that don't react that are the most suspicious. So, do I turn my head and act dopey? Although, who am I kidding, I am a dope, there's no acting necessary.

Give whoever is sitting there a big dumb vacant look, like I do whenever someone tries to talk to me about my problems. I creak my head a centimeter, and then another, the ticks of a second hand on a clock, before I suddenly stop and snap it back forward. It's too much, and I can't. I'd make a terrible spy. But hopefully not a terrible criminal.

At the end of the block, I turn the corner. The city map revealed an alley that connects to the backyards on the street. It's unplowed, though a few vehicles have forced their way through to give some semblance of a path even as more and more snow builds up. This is a lot better than stepping up to the front door and kneeling to pick the lock, assuming the mystery key in my pocket isn't to said door. Something tells me it's far more important than a house key, and the size is all wrong.

I wanted to get a look at the building from the front, spot anything odd or suspicious. Of course, I immediately panicked when that very thing showed up. But I needed to see the front door, make sure it wasn't plowed or with footprints spread about the entryway. Everything I know says that Blair won't be here, but stumbling into someone and scaring them while breaking in is the last thing I want.

Honestly, I should've gone with the bake a cake plan. And yes, I know, chocolate cake with hazelnut frosting would be wonderful. What's that? You weren't going to ask about the flavour? But that's the most important thing! Ah, why a cake? Because if I wander in and get caught, I can claim "I thought this was the house for the surprise party." I mean, how insane would I have to be to bake a cake for a break in? Obviously, a lie like that is so outlandish that it would have to be real. Of course, such saccharine goodness should never be made into falsehoods.

Finding the right fence in the alley after counting them out, I look at the height with dread. Jumping up and pulling myself over is beyond my ability, particularly since my muscles are still sore from the last couple days. I'm unfortunately not the cool criminal with intense acrobatic skills that I first stepped out into the winter night as. A glance along the alleyway reveals an old bin by the next fence over. Brushing the snow off the top, I wiggle it. It's a bit on the light side but will probably hold my weight.

Alright, my dear, it's time for us to break into a house. And yes, I'm making you an accomplice in all of this. If I go down, we go down together, my imaginary friend. After tonight, I'll have everything I want. No, everything I need. I'm sure of it. As my friend, supporting me is only right.

As quietly as possible, I climb on top of the bin and peek over the fence. The neighbor's yard has been shoveled; snow piled up into a neat stack by a shed. The target's yard is a mess of white mounds blown about, a large crate like box sitting by the shared fence. Maybe for composting? It's one of those green chain-link fences with the coating so it isn't exposed metal, and not too high. I can crawl my way over it easy enough compared to climbing up the back fence.

The neighbor's house has a single light flaring on the second floor; after waiting a few seconds it doesn't look like anyone is immediately inside. Dropping into the yard, I hear a growl. A dog comes around from the side of the building, a large rottweiler, black and brown painted across his body. He growls again, his chest rumbling about; a new engine about to explode into high gear.

I take off. Racing towards the fence, his paws collide with my back, and I go down. Rolling awkwardly sideways as I hit the ground, I push back up as his face comes in for mine, hot liquid splashing across my cheeks. Soon as my feet are under me, I scramble over the chain links, my muscles screaming at the sudden intensity of yanking myself over.

My pants snag at the top. I wore loose fitting joggers instead of jeans, since I figured I might need to be more flexible, and they catch on the wiring. As I fall over, my pants stay right where they were, leaving me in a pile of snow in my boxers, wedged up by the compost box. A master thief, they'll speak of me for ages to come.

As I wipe at the saliva left on my cheek, the beast gets onto his hind legs and jumps up. My pants are yanked off the top and violently shaken back and forth before being discarded. His mouth opens, the falling snow does nothing to dampen the sound as it claps against the surrounding buildings, echoing back. "Shhhh! Shhhh! Don't bark! Please don't bark, you're ruining my first criminal endeavor!" I wave my hands about.

I'm certain he could have bit into me if he wanted to when I was running, rather than the sloppy lick my cheek received. It was more like he was playing as I fumbled around in his yard. As my hands wave around, he stops the noise and starts sniffing towards the fence. After a second of thought, I hold my hand up. His big tongue comes out through the plastic-coated wires and starts licking whatever chicken sauce is left on my fingers. "Adorable, your ancestors must be as proud of you as mine are of me." He keeps licking when I hear the backdoor of his house opening. I pull my hand back and duck down as low as possible, staying completely still behind the box. My legs are fucking cold as the melting snow draws threads of heat away.

The dog plops down onto my pants after spinning for a moment, then looks off towards the house. "What the hell are you doing Belle? Did you poop or not? You can't be barking this late at night, people are sleeping." There's a pause and then the voice starts up again. "Well hurry up then and come inside, I'll get you a treat before bed." The dog, Belle, stands up off my pants and wanders to the house, pads happily trotting across the snow. I hear the door closing. I suppose that explains the lack of a doghouse in the yard. Although, Belle, that was unexpected. And here I was thinking we were two majestic men, earning each other's respect through brotherly bonds and chicken sauce.

Although maybe the pooch was a guy, and his owner just wants to call him beautiful. Why doesn't anyone ever call me beautiful? Guys like compliments, too. Have you ever given a guy flowers? I bet they'd like that so much. I would.

Slowly peeking around the edge of the box towards Belle's house, I half expect to see some guy with a shotgun in hand staring me down from a window, given my luck.

It's been a few minutes, my legs shivering away, and the coast looks clear. The light from the upper floor is now off, the blinds closed.

I was too pumped earlier for the cold to touch me but sitting with my legs pressed against snow is another story. Making my way back over the fence after another minute of waiting to be sure, my body trembling alongside my legs, I grab the pants along with the phone and wallet that fell out, climb back over, then put them on. A rather unfortunate streak of drool coats one of the legs. Probably going to leave a stain if I don't get them cleaned tonight.

Do you think thieves have a website where they leave reviews?

- "Guard dog was too nice. Avoided breaking in to keep pooch from getting yelled at." -Some Criminal Person

I'd feel bad for the dog if anyone burgled the place, but the pupper would probably just give a big old dopey look after the fact and be forgiven in an instant.

The large mounds in the yard are a hassle to get through. There isn't much to be done about the path I'm leaving through the snowbanks. I'm not going to stop and shovel the whole area just to cover my tracks, despite the thought flickering through.

I stop and glance at the roof, near the chimney. I could swear I saw a decoration up there for a moment, a humanoid figure leaning against the brick tower, but the roof and house are bare of any lights or ornaments at all. Must have been my imagination.

Reaching the backdoor, I dig into my pocket for the bobby pins to pick the lock.

As kids, my brother learned to do so from a book at the library. He used these skills on one house in our neighborhood that no one lived in, leaving the kids of the area to waltz in to use it as a base. It lasted a good two months before a renter was found and we returned to using our imaginations on trees and bushes for make-believe castles. I, on the other hand, learned the same from online video tutorials earlier today.

There's only a single bobby pin in my pocket though, sitting with the mystery key, my own house keys, and the junk that had fallen out earlier. I hadn't seen anything else fly free when Belle was shaking stuff, so it was either while I was running or when I jumped the fence.

Well fuck, fairly certain a single bobby pin won't cut it. I'm in the same predicament about scaling the back fence again, though as I think things over, making my way back would be easier.

I could literally move the bin to the right fence when I'm in the alleyway. I was too caught up in the moment and hadn't thought of it at the time.

Quiet you, my face is red from the cold, nothing else. Stop gawking at me. Things slip my mind when committing crimes, I'm not used to this.

The backdoor sits there, inviting. I reach out and grab the knob, finding no resistance as it turns. I throw my hands up and give a tiny shout of "Success!" as the door swings open.

People really need to be more careful these days or a bumbling buffoon might come crashing into their house. Before going in, I brush off the snow that's still on my back and pants as best as I can, then kick about my shoes.

I step inside onto a welcome mat. The floors look pristine and citrus scents waft about. After a few moments of thought, I take my shoes off. Dirty water will make a mess of the entire entryway in a few seconds during the winter, and there's currently no one to mop it up.

At that thought, my stomach starts twisting. I killed someone. My excitement drops and then vanishes. I'd been avoiding thinking about it over the last several days as I went through all these hoops and turned the whole thing into a big old game.

I killed someone. He won't be able to mop up the floors because he's dead, and I'm the reason for it. I take a deep breath and breathe out; my glasses are suddenly completely fogged as the air escapes upwards from my facemask. I quickly take it off and then grab at the specs, wiping them down again.

I can't say it was all my fault, but at the end of the day, there had to be some way for things to play out differently. I unzip the pocket on my hoodie, placing the mask inside and taking out a small flashlight. I would've put my keys and bobby pins into the pocket, but I'd found a small hole in it. The light and my mask are likely fine in there, but the keys and bobby pins would've been in grave danger, though as it is, it might've still been safer given everything that happened.

Can't entirely say I don't hate the guy after everything he put me through, but I still place most of the blame on myself. Nothing new for me. I step off the mat, no longer welcome, and shine the light around the place. The blinds are all closed, leaving the inside untouched by the bright winter night. A giant dark cave with a magical pink and purple world held back by plastic.

Turning on the lights or unveiling the windows seems monumentally stupid given that I'm breaking and entering. I try my best to get that excitement back, but it doesn't return. Not like it had earlier or at the nursery when I was caught up in playing detective. This place is a tomb, containing his last message, his last desire, whatever that might be.

I look towards the door, wondering if stepping back out will bring me back into that sense of wonder, or if the thick dark molasses has returned completely to gobble up anything that's sweet. Either way, it doesn't matter, my need takes precedence over even that. Something must come from this. Something important must be here.

A flash of black darts around a corner. "Kitty!" I take a few steps to try and catch up to it, but it's gone into one of the countless corners cats call home. No one saw me right? Look, it's been a while since I played with a cat so it's hard to not get excited (the beast in the woods a few days ago doesn't count for obvious reasons).

I'm of adequate certainty that I won't stumble into Blair here, but I should still take caution. I know she's his daughter and a great deal beyond that, but her appearance is the one thing that's still a mystery. Now that would be a twist, that he has no daughter and his cat's name is Blair. You think that could be it? A classic rosebud scenario.

My light runs about the living room, leaping across a single couch set up before an old TV. A table sits nearby, several chairs that don't match each other scattered about and a lazy deck of cards sitting atop it. A couple cheap cabinets from some department store. Looking through them leads to a large collection of alcohol, while the other has various odds and ends, plus some random tools. It's an old person treasure chest. My mom had one, a big old dresser filled with knicks and knacks, and bric-a-brac.

I'm certain that every old person comes equipped with one. They're used to hold all their absolutely necessary tools. Objects that are only ever used once a decade but must be found somewhere in the house or the world will end. A strange ritual of the elderly to keep back the apocalypse.

I take careful stock of its supplies, on the off chance that something of actual value might be hidden away behind the junk. I do spot a flashlight, but either its

batteries or its bulb is dead. “Oooo, a stud finder.” I hold it up to myself and make a beeping sound before putting it down with a chuckle. I’m definitely getting old. Soon enough I’ll need to resist with all my might to stop from making my own old person chest.

A closet beside the entryway shows some cleaning supplies and fishing rods stored at the back. Shutting it, I nearly trip over some boots. I’ll need to watch my step with the lights off. Looking down and scanning about with my flashlight displays a pair of shoes and two sets of hikers, all the same size.

There’s also a metal thingamabobber built directly into the floor, a worn brush attached to it. I assume it’s for cleaning shoes, though I’ve never seen one before. I would say it was lucky I hadn’t smashed my foot into it, but it’s hard to get anything by my razor-sharp perception.

Turning the flashlight off for a second, I slide up to the front window. Peeking around the edge, I spot movement in the house across the way, the one that had its lights on with a movie playing. The curtain is swaying. Is someone rustling about beyond it? The black SUV is visible from here and no one appears to be hiding out in the front seat, so either they’d left, or there was never anyone to begin with.

I keep going back to the key and his words, but I don’t really know what I’m looking for. I don’t know who he was. I don’t know what I’m doing. I pull back from the blinds and turn the flashlight back on.

You can tell a great deal about someone by what they eat. I don’t actually know if that’s true, but I’m going to say it confidently, so you’ll believe me.

Wandering into the kitchen, the cupboards are filled with a small amount of long-term goods but are far less filled than I would expect, especially from an old person. My mother had loads of food, well past the expiration date in some cases, out of fear of running out.

The occasional “pspspsps” gains no response from a black feline. Also, no cat food or water dish. The smell of lemons is everywhere, would a cat owner use such strongly scented cleaning solution? Cats hate citrus. Maybe it was a stray that wandered in from outside?

The fridge is well stocked with beer along with a few other bits of food, including one jar of sweet pickles, a half pack of cheese slices, and a bottle of cranberry horseradish sauce, the last of which sounds kind of gross.

There’s also insulin, which isn’t too surprising. Diabetes isn’t that uncommon among First Nations members.

My eyes bore into the jar of pickles. That tasty mix of sweet and sour, the delicious crunch each makes as your teeth munch away on them. My mouth starts watering and I my tongue trembles. Maybe I could—no, I’m not going to raid a dead man’s fridge.

From the doorway into the hall, a man stares: long black hair in a red shirt and faded jeans. My head and the light snap towards him, but he’s gone.

My mouth swallows down a few breaths as my chest constricts. In and out, in and out. My heart beats out its own song of panic and fear, the noise pulsing through my ears rhythmically. Ice glides across my skin.

The cat probably wasn’t real, and neither is this. Just my worthless skull tossing out panicked ideas. Ghosts don’t exist.

Did you know that roughly half the information your eye feeds to your brain is all from this tiny circle a little over a millimeter wide? The majority of the stuff your eye picks up is all from that densely packed pinpoint area comprising your central vision. The rest of the entirety of your eye's retina is compressed down into the remaining half of that data. The reason people spot stuff in haunted houses is just the panic and fear.

You expect to see something so your mind is on edge. That messes with your peripheral vision which is already janky. Your brain fills in gaps and makes you see people or monsters, whatever you're expecting to better prepare you for an attack. It's all fear getting to my head.

I repeat the same information to myself several times, nodding my head along to the words. My heart still racing, I open my mouth in a fit of stupidity. "Hey, umm...I wasn't gonna eat your pickles. I was...just admiring them. You've got good taste. I'm just...looking for some answers and I'll be on my way."

The house is placid. There's no deep groan as the wood itself starts creaking or shaking, just the same stillness that's flooded the air since I arrived.

I swear I see wisps of fog coming from my breath, but it's just another trick of the eye. It isn't that cold in here.

I duck my head quickly around the corner with the flashlight, keeping my body back as I briefly look around the corner, my eyes peeled for new spooks. The hallway is empty.

There's a door into the basement I'll save for last. Basements are creepy enough as it is, I'm in no shape this second to go lurching through the earth.

I find the bathroom but the thought of looking into the mirror unsettles me. Instead, I open it to reveal the cabinet behind from the side so I can avoid seeing anything staring back. A collection of pills, some of which I recognize from what my mother took. I grab a picture in case the internet later reveals some dark secret about what the others provide relief from. To my horror, I discover he pushes his toothpaste from the front. What a travesty.

I pass by a heating vent that isn't working, despite the rest of the house feeling quite warm and approach a couple doors at the end of the dark hall. The first has an old piece of junk computer that looks like it probably cost as much as a sandwich. There's a file cabinet but looking through reveals boring tax document after boring tax document. I'll probably take another look through later if there's genuinely nothing else within the house. Who knows, maybe he was the cleaner for some Canadian mob family, assuming those exist.

The boring documents ease my mind into other, more real avenues. Numbers and math. Not ghosts and goblins.

There's one last door, presumably his bedroom unless he likes to sleep in the basement. The nursery didn't provide me with nearly as many answers as I would've liked, though it had far more to do with children than I was expecting. Opening the door leads me straight into a date with pain and misery.