



The Patron Saints of Maple Falls

A Novel by M. Magnuson

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For -

You, Me. For probably my Mom. Probably Mr.Holle...Probably Paul McCartney.

I wrote this because I wanted to have fun.

Chapter I -1001

Smile, come on Hal, smile.

Sitting alone in his bygone bedroom was Hal. A fifteen year old tall and skinny city kid with bright copper orange hair. And we're talking 6'3, zero percent body fat and the bright copper pots you'd see in a Caesar Raffaello cooking show.

He didn't care at all about what just happened. He didn't care that he didn't own a bookshelf. Only printer paper boxes of books and journals and that childhood stuffed monster, turned mascot of his room, good ol' Naugahyde.

Hal took a break from the late may heat sweat and pressed the real estate ballpoint pen to his journal.

"True Happiness is achieved through true sadness. We've hit rock bottom so many times that it's just normal. We just pick up the pieces and try to have fun with what we got.

Hal looked around at the empty 1920s apartment covered in cigarette smoked walls.

Greetings readers to journal #276, May 28th 1985. You know my name, Hal Capher. New journal, same old me dealing with these repeat problems. Yeah, he took everything this time. So I'm standing in my sixth home packing my life into fragile cardboard boxes for the seventh time."

Hal lifts up a few boxes.

Mold. Mold in the floor, ceiling, sinks, even in the bathtub. Anything that's nasty usually spreads.

Outside the apartment of 1001, packing the remainder of their belongings was Alice, sweet Alice. Copper haired as well and still rocking t-shirts from 1969. Off she carries that turntable to yet another place she'll go. Eleven notches are etched in the fake wood paneling. Some day the room will run out, where will ever be a home for Alice, sweet Alice? She nestled the record player in a quilted nest and slammed the hatch of the stationwagon. Kicking the 'Hendrix Forever' bumper sticker like Charlie Chaplin and called out for her son.

"Hey Hal!" Spoke Alice from the kitchen. Hal closes his little black book and places it into the inside pocket of his book bag. He grabs his wallet from a steel army container his grandfather had. The United states flags are marked over with peace symbols from his mother when she was his age.

Dead on shot of the countertop of where the kitchen sink used to be. Hal and his Mother Alice just stare at the empty space without saying a word.

"He even took the kitchen sink." Alice said, placing her arm on Hal's shoulder.

Hal and Alice looked at each other like this situation was a given, but immediately started laughing hysterically.

As the final boxes were packed they were now in the garage, a couple of cracked sodas and baseball bats were in their hands. Alice skidded a crib across the oil stained cement.

"My mom always kept everything. Even when something broke she'd fix it and still use it.

Hal remembers his mother wrapping red leather around a dining room chair.

"Quick, staple gun!"

Back in the garage as they reminisced "You were six, you didn't have the strength to fire a staple gun."

She kept everything because when she was fifteen her dad remarried. His new VFW queen that smelled of the same smokes, but powdered like a clown to barely cover the wrinkled mess of a face she horribly maintained told him...neigh, forced him to have a yard sale to make way for her "useless crap".

Gone was Mom's childhood in just 2 hours and twenty-five dollars. All that was left was her record player, her records and her jean jacket covered in Beatles patches and pins. Which she wore still to this day.

But with this recent incident, I believe mom saw a new clean slate.

Alice bashed the crib with her baseball bat. Wooden dowels shot in every direction.

"Yeah, Baby! Come on, give it a swing."

Hal started bashing it as well and starting trading hits. Zane, One of the neighbor kids on a third hand me down bike strolled in to see what the commotion was.

"What are you guys doing?" as Zane struggled to get his footing.

"Fun stuff, wanna join us?"

Zane was excited as Alice handed the bat to him "Well, take this bat and bash that stereo over there."

The three of them started an all out war on the stereo, a dresser and a plethora of garden gnomes.

Around sunset the three of them sat across the floor of the living room eating fried chicken, flaking mashed potatoes and watered down coleslaw from the chicken joint across the street.

As per usual the pushing forty, hips for days in a sweats Aunt Nancy entered through the front door with a stack of bills and supermarket ads, but dropped it all the floor after seeing her sister's empty apartment.

Alice without hesitation covered Zane's ears and was ready for the storm that was Nancy's signature rants.

"WHAT THE FUCK?! THAT SON OF A BITCH, PIECE OF SHIT, TWO BIT ASSHOLE! I'M GONNA FIND HIM AND RIP HIS SOUL INTO FUCKING SHREDS! YOU HEAR ME?! YOU DON'T FUCK WITH NANCY!"

While storming back into the living room Nancy noticed Zane and changed her tone to a fake hesitant smile.

“Oh hi Zane. Still doing the candy drive?” Nancy rummaged through her comically large purse and pulled out a five dollar bill.

“Here’s a fiver...I’ll take five baby ruths.”

“We’re done with the candy drive.”

In exhaustion Nancy simply slipped the fiver in Zane’s pocket “Just take the fiver...I...I need a clean conscience.” Nancy faked smiled again and slunk down next to her sister Alice. “You know where he is?”

Alice took a sip out of her styrofoam cup of red wine and with the utmost dignity responded “Don’t know, don’t care.”

My mom stood there emotionless, but kept sipping as Nancy rested her head on my mom’s shoulder. It’s terrible to get used to the shit my dad pulls on us.

“Want some of this home cooked meal?...Saved the wings for you Nance.”

So, have you ever wondered what happened to that free spirited hippie girl who would flash you for a tab of acid and who thought Jimi Hendrix was god? Well she didn’t marry Jimi Hendrix, but she did marry his roadie, my dad, my asshole of a dad. Yes, the guy who took the kitchen sink. They met on the second day of woodstock. My mom brought up the second day because the first day was with Bryan. “Bryan sells mattresses, that’s not too bad right?” She would always bring up.

We Flashback to Alice accepting a joint from Hal’s Dad.

They stayed in touch, dad even moved in with mom when he found out she was pregnant with me. Grandpa did not have any of my dad. Complete opposite assholes that clashed, but drank the same beer and watched the same sports.

Once she had me, grandpa kicked us out and we started traveling with my dad across the country. But pretty soon that all ended. It was going from hotel to hotel that got to her. Sure they were lavishing hotels, especially for a roadie, but hey it was Jimi Hendrix as my mom would say. It was just not a home. Sure, my mom was once hit the head by a beer bottle by her dad, but she at least had her sister Nancy and her friends. That and she noticed that my dad was smuggling cocaine in my stroller and diaper. So with

just Me and that record player, she took the next flight home. Jimi gladly paid for the flight and handed her a wad of twelve hundred dollars.

For the next fifteen years she worked at the same U of M records job with Aunt Nancy, Porsha, Mona and half dead dave. Dave was obviously on something, but he did the job well.

“Close your journal and pack your stuff Hal. You and your mom are crashing at my place. I’m not letting you sleep on these damp floors. No way, no how.”

Outside of Nancy’s 50s style rambler. Nancy pulled up her boat of a car, accidentally hitting the trash can for the millionth time.

“Winston, what are you doing in the trash can?!”

Inside Nancy's house and to the cluttered and mismatched colored guest bedroom, Hal placed his bottom on the waterbed and was weirded out by the jiggle.

Nancy is divorced and none of her three triplets children come and visit her. She says they’re all the way in Arizona and are busy with school. In truth those drop out pieces of shits are burning alive on this hell on earth. I mean how do you even flunk out of Arizona state? Her guest room is now inhabited by a sickening porcelain doll collection. All in rows like a nazi army and facing the bed, peering into your soul as you try to sleep.

Nancy going through Alice’s mail after a cut and filing of coupons finds a red letter and cracked the handmade seal.

“Oh look a letter from aunt edith. I thought she was dead.

Nancy read the letter inside as she stepped over Alice who was sprawled on the floor.

“Correction, now she’s dead. And...Oh shit!”

Later Nancy rummaged through her closet and Alice was showing off pictures of Great Aunt Edith and her summer cottage to Hal.

“Oh how I missed the summers we had in Maple Falls. Sure Aunt Edith was a bitch, but we had such a blast. Remember Lake Winnepasaga Nance?”

Nancy plopped on her ever jiggling waterbed with a yellowed photo album.

“I lost my virginity there...Sorry Hal, you probably didn’t want to hear that.”

Alice looked deeply at the photos of the many off adventures she had in Maple Falls. Summer carnivals, seeing a hard day's night with a young love heart, even infidelity of young love was nostalgic to Alice.

Alice looked up “You know...This might sound crazy.”

Fade we go from Hal, Alice and Aunt Nancy and to a second story bedroom, the room of fourteen year old Sloan Gonson. Her long black hair was still in a nelson’s market shopping bag. A usual thing done by teenagers after listening to Bad Reputation by Joan Jett for the 1000th time.



Sloan’s bedroom was a fairly decent size, but was crammed with guitars, amps and an endless pile of clothes.

Now some would call what Sloan does as crazy, but sometimes you need to vent out loud and quite frankly nobody knew she did it. It was a private affair as she called it. She started talking to her imaginary audience. “Why can’t I have a normal dream? So here I am as a doctor and in rolls on a stretcher is none other than the king of rock and roll, Elvis.

I try to operate on him, but he starts chowing down on a meatball sandwich. I try to maneuver to make the

incision, but the low and behold, the meatball sandwich trails with him.”

Sloan walks over to her bathroom and starts brushing her teeth, but continues to talk.

“So I just gave up and took the opportunity to ask him a question. Not a question on any particular song or album, I feel that if you meet a hero you should ask them about their retrospect. I asked the king, did you have fun? And he says to me, I swear it, “Honey, a girl got on the right stop, but I left. Weird huh?” Sloan has quite the diction, she loves to play with words.

Sloan picked up a pink shirt from the floor and gave it the sniff test and accepted it as her shirt over her beater.

“Now if it wasn’t apparent with Elvis and his meatball sub, I, Sloan Gonson, love playing, listening and breathing music. There is a smell! That oddly enjoyable musty smell of a record sleeve...Note to self, market that smell fragrance as a candle for Loudon to make. But anyway, brace yourself! You know that dream of walking to your favorite store in just your Pjs? Well, I do that everyday.” Sloan raised her eyebrows and smiled, turning the corner out of her room and down the hall she opened the door and viewed a whole little record shop from a second story balcony.



“Welcome to Maple Tree Music Connection. This shop was started in 1968 by Forsythe and Betty Gonson or Mom and Dad for short. We sell everything here, from Bach to rock. But check this out, Sc’mon!”

Sloan entered in a side room in front of the shop that had a-

“Rich mahogany Steinway grand piano, with enough top space to serve an entire thanksgiving dinner on. Ma and Pops also teach lessons on piano, guitar, vocals, trumpets, trombones, the list goes on.

Sloan picked up her acoustic guitar and started plucking along.

“This here is my Gallotone. I’ve had her since as far back as I can remember. My Grandmother gifted it to me. My whole family has that musical touch. Grandma Annie plays the guitar, my twin brother Loudon plays the guitar and drums and my Cousin Joan plays the best sea shanties on the accordion. Ma

and Pops even met through music. Though those are lots of stories to tell and we're just beginning. In due time, aight? I'm late for this beautiful day, catch you on the flipside!"

Sloan exited the store and it flashes to white, not even revealing her town.

Back to the station wagon, going on a drive on the highway in the country, long saying goodbye to the cities.

So we're headed off away from the cities to a humble town called Maple Falls. We were bequeathed Aunt Edith's summer cottage and her pig Ulysses. Oddly we always got a honey ham from Aunt Edith every christmas...I'm just not gonna make eye contact with that pig when I get there. Mom got a new job at the local nursing home and I'm set to finish my freshman year at Larkin Academy, the school for the sheltered, as the pamphlet led me to believe. Jesus, how many crosses are on this pamphlet?

Mom would kill me if she heard me use the lord's name in vain that way. She's a catholic through being born again. You kind of need the faith and extra help of the church when you pinch pennies like us.

At a pit stop, Hal and Alice are on the roof of the station wagon eating fast food breakfast.

My mom really does try her hardest. She always just always seems to get the shit end of the stick. But she always stays optimistic...With the help of a big bowl of weed and activities like family game night and the roller rink. She's a mom, but she's a kid to the world. Thirty-Two, some of her high school friends are now just having kids.

Graceland by Paul Simon played on the radio of the station wagon "Paul, this is different. I like it."

Wrappers were thrown away and they both got in the car headed towards the skyscraping maple trees.

Due to Nancy talking about bad juju, we visited Aunt Edith's grave.

The Graveyard was located on a large hill just to the east of the entrance of Maple Falls. The three huffed and puffed. Hal in front, with Alice helping Nancy. "Oh god, what's buckling now?!"

Hal reached the top and sitting by a gravestone was a red haired girl who was talking to it.

Hal signaled a sorry, but the red haired girl got up, gave one glance and walked down the hill.



Alice had found Aunt Edith's plot.

The headstone looked to have been there since the civil war.

"Apparently Aunt Edith was gifted the headstone and plot by her father when she was born." Nancy added.

"It says her death, but when was she born?" Hal asked.

"No one really knew...I thought this

headstone would answer that." Alice answered.

Our station wagon rolled down the main drag of Maple Falls. It was a midwest tourist town straight off a postcard. The drag was by the lake, antique stores, the VFW, the chamber of commerce and a convenience store. For no regular man can handle the immense bowel pressure of fast food dipped in a grease bucket.

The station wagon screeched into a parking spot, showing off another bumper sticker that read 'Sit on it'. And Hal rushed into the convenience store known as 'Snacks and Candy'.

Hal bursted in and frantically looked around, the shaggy convenience store owner took his headphones off and placed his sucker on a small wooden stump that had the perfect mold of the sucker.

"Did you come eastward?"

"Uh, bathroom?"

"We keep the bathroom over there, little rabbit."

The delay of the pointing in the direction was purely agonizing to Hal. Hal rushed to the bathroom.

"Holy shit!" Shouted from the bathroom, then bolting out to greet Bent per as usual was a patron of snacks and candy, a long dyed blonde hair fifteen year old that looked like the spitting image of Eddie Van Halen, but with glasses of Buddy Holly. Our golden boy, Loudon Gonson.

“That wasn’t human.”

Loudon placed a snack cake in a bun and drizzled melted cheese all over it.

Alice entered the store.

“Alice? You came back to wonderland.” Said the clerk.

Alice slapped her jeans and smiled “No way man!”

In the five minutes it took to go to the bathroom, I found myself looking at my mother smoking a joint with the convenience store owner, known simply as Bent.

“Hal, the first person I see in Maple Falls and he’s an old friend. Hal, come here. Bent, this is my son Hal.”

“You spawned the white rabbit? Awesome.” Bent offered the joint to Hal but he declined. Bent then offered him licorice.

All around the convenience store was your usual stock of snack cakes, potato chips and soda pop, but also framed photos of Bent with different communities in Maple Falls doing his usual rounds of volunteer charity work. Weaving yarn, pond hockey games and commerce meetings with meat loaf specials.

“Hey Gonson. You’re short a Spillman. Why don’t you invite the little rabbit to the game?”

“Can you skate?”

“He sure can!” Alice waved away to her son as she took another puff of the joint.

In my first fifteen minutes in Maple Falls I was in a garage of a rustic wooden house. It was your normal garage on one side with bikes and piles of sports gear, but on the other side was a desk with a tandy computer, stacked nature journals, field guides, compasses, sprawled out blue prints. It looked to be an office, till I realized Loudon pulled down his mattress via a chained slab like in Frankenstein. It was his bedroom.

Loudon and I rummaged through his garage and he threw back each piece of hockey gear without even looking and me catching, avoiding and mistakenly catching skates and later not catching anything at all.

So Loudon goes to Larkin Academy as well and ya gotta figure I should try to make some friends. That and Mom drove off without me. She did the same thing with basketball practice at the red circle back home. I made some of my best friends through that, but now being one hundred and ninety miles away...Guess I gotta do it again.

“Helmet, knee pads, skates, stick, snack cakes! Let’s blow this pop stand!” Loudon smashed his helmet with his stick.

The two walked to the fence of the basketball court with the game already in progress.

A kid named Zaccane skated up to Loudon and Hal, he brushed back his hockey mullet hair

“The hell were you?! Your sister is creaming us to a pulp! Ooo snack cakes.”

“Snack cakes are for winners. Everyone this is Hal! He just moved here like what, half an hour ago? Hal, that’s our goal. That over there is Gupp, he’ll show you the ropes on defense. Gupp, you got the rookie, aight?!” Loudon pushed Hal in, with him skating over to Gupp, who was also fifteen like Hal, but he was one giant motherfucker. Six-foot-nine and shoulders that could carry entire trees. Though with the face of a goofy and awkward teenage angel.

“So like, you gotta stop the ball with the stick. Make sure they don’t like...er... score, eh?” He spoke with the thickest Canadian accent.

Across the lake, the station wagon drove up the private farm house by Lake Winnepesago. Alice held up a photograph of Edith Manor and pulled it down to reveal its current state of vines and worn out wood.

“Hey Nance, how old is this place actually?”

“Nobody really knows, from what I've heard anyways.”

Walking in the front entryway with boxes in hand they were greeted by a painting of a sickly skinny dog. In fact, the house was filled with nightmare fueled paintings. Always emphasizing on shadows and haunting stares.

Chandelier crystals dangled from the thinnest of strings. Walls that bulged and cracked by time. Water damage that had unique shades of brown and yellow,

“Well, this place is a fixer upper, but it’s home.” Alice didn’t mind the state of the place, she was just happy that everybody finally had a bedroom of their own.

Ulysses the pig came walking by and plopped on the rug.

Alice looked at the pig all confused “Oh, it’s an indoor pig...I didn’t know that was a thing...Who the hell has been feeding him? Hello?!”

The rattling of the house shook and gave a hissing noise

“Probably the radiator.” spoke Nancy.

“In the summer nance?”

Back at the makeshift rink, Hal was looking everywhere as everyone was going everywhere around him. Going incredibly fast, but casually keeping conversation with one another. Loudon pulled out his always handy camcorder and filmed his friends.

“Man my skin is dry from this heat, Loudon, you got any Lotion, man...Fnah!” Zacone asked as he giggled to himself.

“Yo, how much we got saved for live aid?!” Loudon shouted

“I second that!” Sloan Shouted

“Dad pays me fifty cents less the minimum wage and your dad pays you in doughnuts and the heavy metal section at your place...So very close, if my math is right.” Another player, a black kid named Woodsy shouted.

“Well with my side business, we’ll get there in no time. Yo Zacone, twenty bucks for a polaroid of the nudie scene in Fast Times at Ridgemont High?”

“Loudon, you creep, you actually took a photo of it?”

Loudon nodded “Ten bucks?”

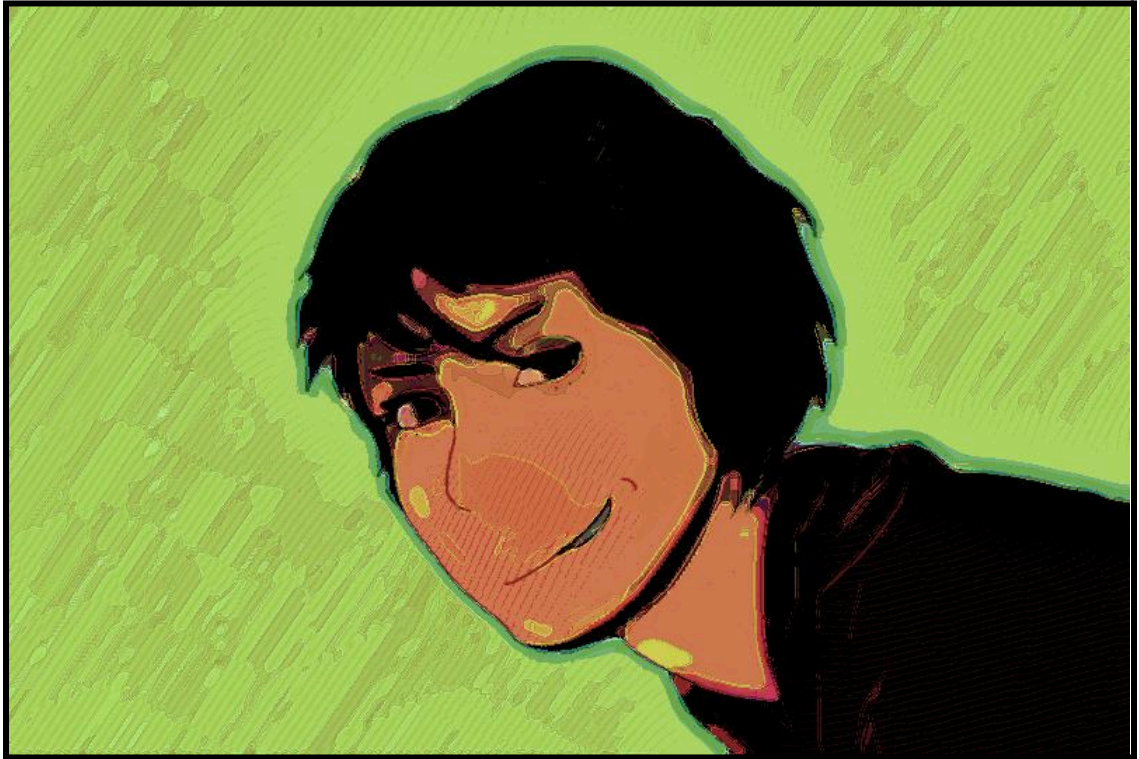
“Deal.”

“So what’s the story on the new guy?” Sloan knocked the ball toward the goal and Hal blocked it.

“Third time he has blocked a shot from me.”

“And?” Loudon questioned.

Sloan's head tilted "Well, something like that gets my attention."



Later Sloan got the ball from Loudon and she went to the goal with Hal following. The two battled for the ball. Sloan kept smiling with each good move he made. Until Hal slung back and helmet launched in the air. With an unfortunate blow to the face from Sloan's elbow faded everything to white.

Hal awoke on the sands of Lake Winnepesago at night. Looking up, he smiled at the fireworks. He looked over to see who was next to him, but back to reality he went.

"I think he's coming back...Uh, what's his name? Hey, Holmes, you're gonna be alright. I got ya, I'm witcha."

Hal awoke to the sight of Sloan, holding a bag of peas on Hal's head

"Hi."

"Hi. I'm the one that elbowed you...Sorry. The injury doesn't look-"

Sloan lifted the peas and her eyes widened.

The two looked up at the heavenly sky and smiled back at each other.

Chapter 2 -So they met

Inside the basketball court the team known as the Whales of Larkin Academy resumed playing their off season game without Sloan and Hal as the two sat on the bleachers. Sloan mended the bruise and Hal twisted tissues in both nostrils.

“Aren’t I supposed to lean back?”

“Old wives tale. Trust me Holmes, I know how to deal with blood. Do you want blue or red?”

“Uh, red.”

Sloan opened the cooler and tossed Hal a sports drink and opened up one herself, taking a sip.”

“So, what really is your name?”

“Hal Capher.”

“Sloan Gonson. Nice to meet you Holmes. And apologies again for elbowing you.”

“You’re all good and you’re all good to play, I’ll be fine.”

“Two minute penalty.” Sloan winked, “Plus, I can’t leave you alone.”

Sloan on first impression looks very comfy. Laid back in stance as she spreads her arms to the bleachers to hope to catch any breeze on this summer morning. Her hot pink beater fraying, her holey and paint splattered jeans, her stick taped in orange and blue ‘W’ or ‘M’ on the stick? Everything she wore looked like she loved immensely, just like that Donovan song. I know this because I noticed she shined her yellow dandies at me.

“Yeah Holmes, they’re like my favorite pair of socks.”

Sloan turned to us “He rocks a yellow dandy. Trying to pinpoint my first impressions on this tall drink of water to the left of me. Look at this guy though. Sure our Gupp is six-foot-nine, but he’s 100% Geante French and sucks at being a winger. Hal is definitely prime for hockey and so far he’s good at it. Could use a few pointers, but I got him covered. Other first impressions on the face value. Cargo shorts with giant ass pockets... You think he’s holding? Baby blue t-shirt, extra long button up with giant pockets... Seriously, what is he hiding? Red baseball cap with the name ‘Shinders’ on it. Huh, never heard of ‘Shinders’, must be his hometown.”

“So where are you from Hal?” Sloan spoke to Hal with her utmost casual presence. She loves talking to anybody, that’s anybody, that’s just who she is.

“Twin Cities.”

“City boy, what brings you out here?”

“Well my great great..actually I don’t know how many greats there are? Umm Aunt, left us her farm home just across the lake.”

“Wait...No, are you talking about Edith Manor?”

Hal nodded.

“Get out of town, that place is like for real, haunted.”

Back at Edith Manor Alice and Nancy stood at the top of the root cellar door.

“The hell is a root cellar?” Nancy asked.

“It grows roots...I guess?”

“Do you remember this being here when we were kids?”

“I swear this wasn’t here.”

“Who the hell built it then? It’s unlocked.”

“Oh god, why does it need a lock? What the hell are you doing?”

“I own this place, I gotta see it.”

Alice and Nancy both closed their eyes as Alice quickly opened the cellar door with Nancy throwing a brick.

“Why’d you do that?”

“I don’t trust this house. Your house, my brick.”

More than two minutes had passed and Sloan and I just kept talking.

“That’s so cool, your own record shop. What kind of music do you like?”

“Well that’s a big question Holmes.”

“Well that’s a good thing.”

Sloan smiled “Yeah? Well, I love the Stooges, Joan Jett, David Bowie, Queen.”

“Good, good, good, good. Prince?”

Sloan got excited “Yes, Minnesota represent! Wait, do you have a Prince encounter?

“Yeah, quite a few actually. A buddy of mine lived on the same street as his family. He loves to bike in the neighborhood.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No!”

Back in the root cellar

“No! No! No!” Nancy swatted at a bunch of bats

“Relax Nance, they’re just halloween decorations.” Alice squeezed one and the squeak calmed the mood.

“Well why are they... Actually that’s kind of fitting. God, I think I threw out my back.”

“Nance, You always throw out your back.”

Hal looked at Sloan and these thoughts he had came, usually came to his journal at the end of the day. Always word for word with his insane database of a memory

First impression on looks.

No makeup, the only thing added is a scar under her right eye and recent stitches above her right. Pinked skin from heat, a per usual effect of Minnesotans in the start of summer. She speaks with an equal relaxed tone, emphasis on slang words, whether it’s a part of the modern world or her own diction.

“Yeah Holmes, I dig it. I love Concussion Cody. He’s such a scab biter.”

Hair is a mess, but all in the right places, ya know?... I uh, I don’t know how to write out of this? Yes, she’s definitely beautiful, but she probably heard it all the time, so best to keep it to myself.

Sloan turned to us “Yeah, he’s cute.”

Back outside of the rink. The Goalie skates up to Sloan and Hal.

“Hey, you coming back to play?! Loudon is actually doing pretty damn good without you there!”

She lifted up her goalie mask and it was the same redhead girl at the cemetery. She and Hal both noticed each other.



“Holmes, this is my cousin Joan. Joan, this is Hal. He just moved to Edith manor and he invited us over for burgers ‘n’ such.”

“I did?”

“We have the burgers, little rabbit.”

“Why does everybody keep calling me that?”

Joan looked at Hal “Because you're harmless...But alright, cool. So you coming back to the game?”

Both nodded, Sloan notices that Hal got up with her.

“You ready?”

“No.” Hal thought in his head.

“Yeah, I’m game.” He said instead.

Sloan smiled, “Groovy.”

The two skated up together, until they had to divide to their sides.

Back at the root cellar

Nancy threw up her arms “Alright, we saw all of it...can we-”

Suddenly the cellar door shut and Alice and Nancy looked at each other wide eyed and screamed. With the screams reaching outwards to ulysses the pig chilling out atop of the cellar door.

Hal, Sloan, Joan, Loudon, Woodsy, Zaccone and Gupp walked the pathway to Edith manor. A beautiful dirt road trail that follows lake Winnepasaga. All of them absorbing the atmosphere and getting to know Hal and Hal getting to know them.

Zaccone’s family owns the Jelly Jar restaurant. Gupp’s family owns Gupp’s meats, Woodsy’s family owns Rolseth Drugs just next door to the record shop owned by Sloan, Joan and Loudon’s family. All places found on Donovan street. All friends, all neighbors in this tight knit town. The only one who didn’t talk much, well not at all was Joan.

Hal stopped in front of Edith manor and looked at its decay.

“You alright Holmes?”

“Yeah, it’s just given me a certain vibe?”

“Evil Dead?”

“Yeah!”

“You’re not alone.” Sloan chuckled

Later Gupp is outside the window in the backyard starting up the grill that had a make date of 1947.

“Grill Works!”

“Oh god, he actually lit that thing?” Joan said in shock as her eyes ventured back into the kitchen.

“Grill good, stove, fridge...kitchen sink.” Hal smiled at the deep kitchen sink as he turned on the faucet.

Sloan and Loudon found themselves exploring the house.

“Ah, Sloan. There’s a pig.”

“Holmes, you have a pig?”

Hal entered the living room “Oh god, it’s really there, isn’t it?”

The door rattled up and scared off the pig. Loudon screamed and pressed his whole body on the door.

“Run! Sloan, tell mom and dad I love them!”

Hal listened in on the muffled voices “Wait, I think that’s my Mom down there.”

“No Hal! That’s what the demons want you to believe! They’re dead and they’ve harvested her body. Run, run!!”

Later outside on the picnic table everyone is out, indulging in bites of Gupp burgers together.

“Gupp, these burgers are always perfect. What’s the family secret?” asked Loudon.

“Mom says love, dad says fat.”

Alice pointed out at Gupp, swallowing a mouthful of grease “So you said your family owns the butcher shop? Is your father’s name Galen?”

Gupp nodded with grease running down his smile “That’s my papa.”

“Your last name is Gupp! Your father now runs that place...is he still...Huge?”

“Eh yeah, he can crush a beer can with two fingers.”

“That Canadian accent is still there, huh?”

Loudon applied more mustard “You know Bent, you know the Gupps. What happened, why didn’t you come back?”

“Well woodstock and having him. Just didn’t have the time to visit and-”

Sloan and Hal were flipping through Hal’s cassettes and Sloan shot up.

“Woodstock?!”

It was something else that first day. I don’t really know these people, but here they’re with me knocking golf balls into the woods of my backyard...My first backyard.

Hal looked over to Sloan strumming her guitar to ‘This will be our year’ on her guitar to Alice.

I guess I’ll call this home.

The Maple Falls gang waved goodbye, but Sloan lingered a little longer than the rest.

“You should...stop by the store sometime. Hang out ‘n’ such, ya know?”

“Yeah sure, like tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that sounds cool. We open at 10am.”

“Cool.”

Sloan let out a small awkward laugh “Cool...See ya then.”

Hal walked back inside and got a soft punch in the arm from his mom.

“Cool. Ha! She’s cute, you gonna ask her out?”

“Mom!”

Outside walking the trail, Zacccone gave the same soft punch to Sloan.

“Ha! You think he’s cute.”

“Shhh! Yeah, but shut your pie hole dude!”

Chapter 3- *If I were a carpenter*

Maple Tree Music Connection, approximately 10:05am.

Sloan's Dad 'Forsythe' dips his doughnut in his coffee, opens the register and starts filling the till.

Walking along the main drag, Hal took a stroll toward the lake as he noticed someone from the lake docking with a canoe. It was Joan.

"Hey, Joan."

"Hello." She said blankly as she held up the canoe and held her cooler with the other hand.

"Here, let me help you."

"I do this everyday, I'm fine." Joan lugged her canoe to the holder and bungeed it back in place.

"You fish?"

"Keen eye." As Joan herself did not make eye contact with Hal.

"Listen, I didn't get the chance to apologize for startling you at the cemetery yesterday."

"It's a public place, you're fine."

"You sure?"

“Yeah. Listen, I’m gonna leave...bye.”

At the Entrance of Maple Tree Music Connection, the door jingled and Loudon came over to greet Hal.

Meanwhile in Sloan’s messy bedroom. She woke up to an alarm of 105.9, the local radio talk show was just finishing off.

“Still no word on the stanley cup heist. No traces, no leads. Who do you think did it? Let us know, by giving us a call and let MN hear your thoughts. This is ‘I know what I know’ by Paul Simon.

“Groovy.” Sloan’s feet woke up and tapped outside the covers

Sloan did all of her morning routines. Shag up her hair, brush her teeth, floss and try endlessly to find two socks that match.

Walking out of her room and to the balcony to the store, she saw Hal flipping through some records and leaned on the railing and gave a warm smile.

“Hiya Holmes.”

“Hey.”

Sloan opened the doors of the tutor room. “You want a song? Sure I’ll give ya one.”

Sloan picked up her Gallotone and tuned it up.

“Just picked up this song recently.

Sloan played ‘if I were a carpenter’ by Tim Hardin, but only as an instrumental. We follow her hands and focus on the guitar and glances at Hal.

“There’s lyrics and all-”

“Yeah? I’d love to hear 'em?”

“Yeah?”

Hal nodded. Sloan smiled and began to sing.

Later in the house’s very 70s style kitchen with yellows and fake wood interior. The pop of the English muffin went out of the toaster and into Sloan’s hand.

“You didn’t have breakfast?...Well I’m making this one for you. I got a golden rule on never leaving the house without breakfast. It helps the day. Plus, Loudon makes the best jam and you gotta try it.”

Sloan spread the jam and handed Hal the English muffin.

“Thanks.” Hal, set down the english muffin as he licked off the jam from his finger.

“Uh-oh. Holmes, too low.”

“Pardon?”

“Pick it up!”

In coming crashing in like the evil dead demon shot of a slobbering creature coming in hot and freezing a frame with utmost terror.

So, out of the shadows it pounced on me, my first instincts were that I was attacked by the werewolf from American Werewolf in London. My second instinct was this was my death and I had to make peace with god during that final moment...Until I got up and found it was-



“Hal, this is Cinnamon. Don’t worry, he won’t bite, he’s the sweetest boy.”

Sloan hugged and patted the 140 pound Saint Bernard/Irish wolfhound mix.

“My....My....Lungs.”

“Oh, sorry Holmes. Cinnamon, off of Hal! Come here boy!”

“Sorry, just not used to dogs.”

“Oh right, city boy. Bet you’re especially not used to big ones

like cinnamon here..." Sloan glanced over and saw Hal back up a little. "You know what..Here, you trust me?"

Hal nodded

"Then you trust my dog. Here, give me your hand."

Hal let out his hand and Sloan placed some bacon in his palm and held Hal's hand.

"Cinnamon! Look what Hal has."

Cinnamon came over and with a dopey smile and slurped up the bacon.

"Holy shit." Hal said.

Sloan smiled and handed another piece to Hal.

"You got this one Holmes."

Cinnamon slobbered up the bacon and Hal had the biggest smile on his face.

The two walked down the main drag of Maple Falls. Sloan had her guitar slung her Hummingbird acoustic and fiddled around a tune while giving the dime tour of the town.

"This is downtown Maple Falls. Right next to the music connection is Rolseth drug. It's been there since the 1860s. It actually made national news about ten years ago when an employee found a bottle of heroin mixed in with some tylenol."

"Down that way is Culver hardware and Surplus. Need a circular saw and a mannequin? That is...That is Loudon's store. The store is owned by Mr.Culver, but it's usually run by his grandson Tommy. He's nine and can mill you anything. He also sells handmade stained glass at the farmer's market."

The two walked past a mural of Maple Falls' on Donovan street, it was the 100th anniversary 1854-1954.

"Yet-Fei's, the best Chinese food you'll ever have. Won-tons are sublime. The owner is such a hardass though. Adds to the charm, I guess. Mrs. Sweet's ice cream."

The two passed the swirling ice cream cone head

"Eat an entire bucket of their ice cream in one sitting and get your picture on the wall and a free t-shirt. Loudon has tried and failed and thrown up on this challenge three times."

The two passed the town diner “The Jelly Jar, best burgers, best milkshakes, best everything Holmes. Coming up is the VFW. You can tell by the-”

Hal covered his nose tightly “Oh god!”

“Yep! You sort of get used to the smell...sort of.”

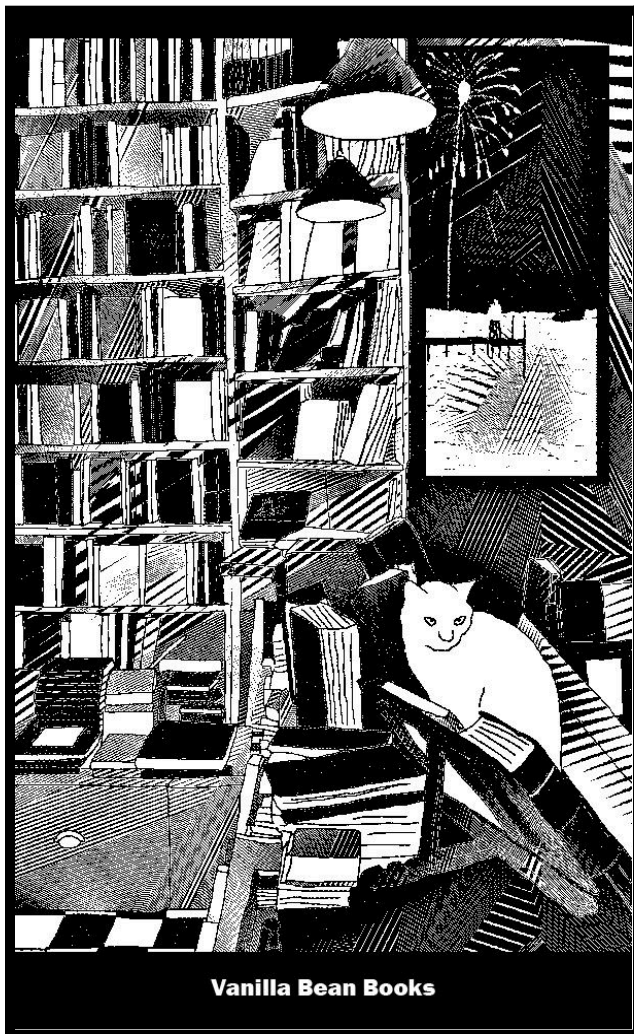
Sloan covered her nose and the two powerwalked as the chimney of the VFW belched.

“Over here is Black Cherry antiques and Vanilla bean books. That’s you isn’t it?”

“Pardon?”

Sloan opened the door of the very narrow Vanilla bean books.

“Sc’mon holmes, I wanna see you tinker.”



The two walked into the tightly squeezed, but high ceilinged Vanilla Bean books. Emerald rugs laid the dark brown hardwood flooring. Every nook was packed with books to the very top.

Hal muttered titles and authors as he went from book shelf to bookshelf, tapping each shelf in rhythm with a hyper focus

“Bradbury. Something wicked this way, mine!

Christie...Death on the Nile. Dickens, Delillo. Gotta pick up white noise soon. Irving! Yes, Garp! Scratch that off the list. Sorry, you’re waiting and-”

“No, please, keep browsing Holmes.”

Sloan scruffed the store cat owned by Ms. Erickson the shop owner.

Back on the main drag of Maple Falls, Sloan helped Hal slide his newly purchased used books into his

book bag.

“King City?”

“Yeah, after high school ‘N’ all.”

“Big city kid to the biggest city. So, you’re used to skyscrapers right?”

“Well uh-”

“Here we are! Here’s big bob. It’s the namesake of our humble little town. Sc’mon.” The two rested underneath the enormous maple tree. The tallest standing tree in Maple Falls. Adjusting the hillside, it’s the tallest thing standing in Maple Falls.

“She’s exactly 100ft. Measured by the founder of this town. That’s him over there.”

Hal looked over at a bronze statue that laid right beside the tree. The likeness of a frontiersman with a menacing stare down, rifle in hand, pointing exactly at Hal as he got up and inspected it. Hal looked at the plaque underneath the statue.

“Jeremiah Ulysses Oxford Cornelius Cornwall Jackson...The ninth...Mmmhmm. ‘I never met a man I couldn’t kill and that includes you.’

“Uh-huh.” Hal laid back down with Sloan

I didn’t tell Sloan that to get to the highest floors of Minneapolis or Saint Paul, that you needed to work there. A keycard or a secret pin. I myself have never reached that high up. I guess it’s the same thing with this tree. Though instead of a bachelor’s degree and a tie, you need guts and a strong rope tie.

“What do you wanna be?”

“Journalist for a magazine. Don’t care which one, it just matters who is not an asshole to my work.”

“Your work?”

Hal reached into his book bag and pulled out his journal.

“First I must always ask. May I draw you?”

Sloan blushed “You want to draw me? Yeah, sure. Go ahead Holmes.”

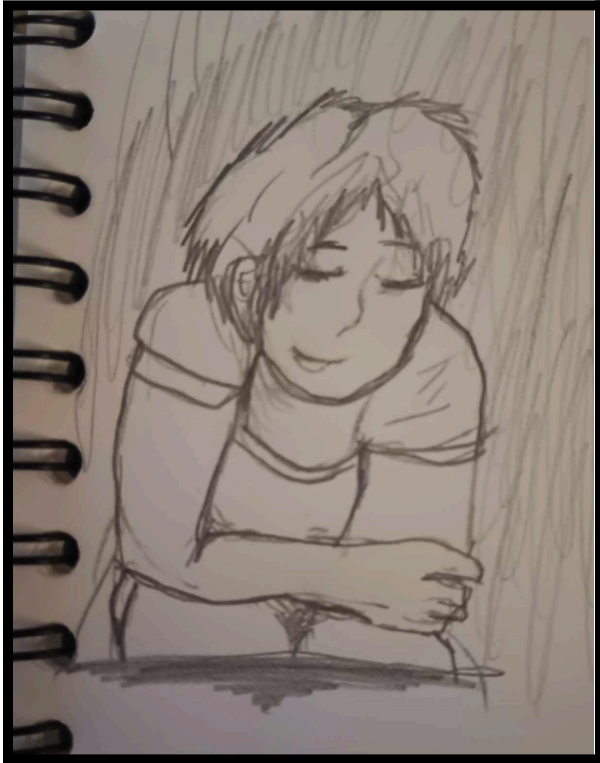
“Good, good. Best to keep that same position.”

Sloan looked over

“No way, you’re actually-”

“Gotta keep that position.”

Sloan smiled “Sorry, it’s just...this is far out man.”



“Lips, nose, well, your hair is fun to draw.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you got a real Joan Jett looking kind of hair style.”

Sloan turned to the side “Holy shit! Shit, shit, play it cool Gonson!”

She got up and carefully circled around to the drawing and saw a portrait of herself.

“Holmes...”

“And then I’ll ask the question “How do you feel?”

Sloan zipped to us “My heart is thumping like crazy, but I can’t tell him that...Not right now!”

“I feel with my heart?” Sloan zipped back “Shit,

what did I just say?”

“No I mean..Actually, I like that.”

“I really dig this Holmes. You got some groovy talent. So you’d interview people and such?

That’s actually pretty cool. Maybe you’ll work for Rolling Stone and do a piece on me and my music?”

“Yeah maybe, hopefully someday. I’m assuming your career is music?”

“Not really a career. Just kind of a need, a desire, a feeling, but yeah. Hopefully a way to make the moola.”

I didn’t say it, because we kind of got lost in those leaves above us. Patches of light shimmering with each gust of wind. Next thing I knew, I was in a morning snooze with Sloan. Maybe she saw my eyes got heavy and joined in, or maybe we felt the same comfort. All I know is, I woke up to her.

Hal's eyes opened, then Sloan's.

"Hey." Hal said first.

"Hi...Mmm..What time is it?"

Hal checked his wristwatch near his palm "11:45."

"Shit! We gotta move!"

Sloan grabbed Hal and dragged him up and they both sprinted.

"Why are we running?!"

"Cause we're on a crusade!"

The two sprinted uphill on Osland Ave and down a tree shrouded street and finally stopped at the incredibly old Saint Michael catholic church.



The two entered the church and circled the sanctuary, coming across saints of Cecilia, Elmo, Francis de Sales, Fiacre and Hal stopped as Saint Mark stared him down.

“You know...He really looks like-”

“Holmes, come on!”

The two started up a stone staircase that led to a faint light.

“No hand railings okay. Do you trust me?” Sloan let out her hand again.

Hal nodded and handed himself to Sloan.

“Alright, no letting go. Trust me, it gets scary. So please hold on tight.”

The two walked up the stairs and saw a peer of light get bigger and finally shining in their eyes. Their red sneakers planted on the grass. A lookout to all of Maple Falls.

“Welcome to the garden of Eden Holmes.”

Hal looked in awe as he walked the small garden of marigolds and hydrangeas.

“Time?”

Hal was still holding Sloan’s hand and twisted his wrist without leaving a grasp.

“Perfect timing.”

The bells of the church rang and that is all they could hear. Sloan walked over to the ledge and popped a squat. Hal then followed and looked out to Maple Falls and Lake Winnepesaga for the first time. Houses and stores were dwarfed by towering Maples that filled the hills of Maple Falls. The sounds of the choir had stopped for a prayer.

Sloan started strumming ‘If I were a carpenter’ by Tim Hardin and sang the lyrics to the wind and Hal beside her.

Chapter 4 - Larkin Academy

In the locker room Hal walked past a tall, but also hairy man shaving his stubble and oiling his thicker than Tom Selleck's mustache... Well mustache.

"Uh, Mr.A? It says here I'm supposed to get a gym shirt from you?"

The grizzled man who looked to be in his thirties laughed "Mr.A is out on the field. Hi, I'm Dan, Dan Friendly, I'm a lot like my name." Dan smiled and shook Hal's hand with quite the impressive grip.

Dan put on a shirt that read 'Class of 1988' and hustled out.

"What the hell?"

Like I said, I'm attending Larkin academy for the remainder of my 9th grade year. Larkin is such a strange school, it's incredibly poor and tries to be something so hard with so little resources. Case in point, I'm currently playing tackle football with no gear. There is no sense of how many yards I'm gaining from this hulk of a somehow fellow ninth grader chasing me down. The end zone doesn't have our team name, no bleachers, no scoreboard, no gym. I was actually on a field across from our school and across the local grocery store Nelson's market.

Hal adjusts his shoulder and writes at his desk at home as he reminisces during the end day.

Down I went again...But it didn't matter, I woke up again the same.

"Holmes. You alright?"

"Yeah, you okay lil buddy?" The hulking ninth grader was Gupp. He picked up Hal and held him in his arms.

Well, that was new.

"You tall one, front and center!"

Wearing the tightest shirt and the shiniest of bald heads was Mr.A. A specimen if I had ever seen one. His muscles could bend steel. He looked up to me with his 5'7 height.

"You're the second tallest one here, I'm signing you up for next year's basketball team. First and last name student!"

Sloan came over and grabbed Hal's shoulder. "He's actually on the hockey team Mr.A. Could you pencil him in for our team? His name is Hal Capher.

"I am? I mean, I am."

"The one team I do not coach, figures."

"Why don't you teach the hockey team?"

"Well, for as much as I give 110 percent, Coach Bent is one hell of a coach that I can't compete with. His level of excellence in coaching the sport of hockey is precise precision."

"Coach bent?"

"Yes, the man that runs the convenience store, that has a ranking system of flavors of fruit pies."

“He ranks the fruit pies?”

“You’re all set Capher, we’ll keep in touch for the football season.”

“We don’t have a football team Mr.A.”

“I was only partaking in a clever joke, Gonson.” Mr.A signaled Hal away from Sloan and whispered in his ear. “We have an underground football team coming next fall. We’re unofficial and do not play with other schools. We play against juvenile detention kids and show them that crime doesn’t pay.”

After class Hal exited the locker room and rifled through his bag “What the hell?” and pulled a bible.

“Why is there a bible in my bag?”

“Oh that’s from Janie.” Gupp answered.

“Who?”

“The gargoyle that perches at the church?” Woodsy chimed in.

“Oh yeah!”

“It’s a whale!!! Slapshot!” Loudon whacked the ball with his stick and looked back at Hal as they wandered the bright halls of Larkin Academy.

The school is a repurposed set of office buildings. Glued together with an insane charter school dream.

“Capher! You’re mine today! Listen to me, for I put chool back in school. Sc’mon!” Loudon grabbed Hal with his hockey stick and Hal walked with him. “2nd period! History with Mr.Pointe.”

Mr.Pointe is our history teacher. But he’s also a Korean and Vietnam war veteran. He is the last echo of the American war, before the UPN, before the tri-countries formed.

Mr.Pointe took off his prosthetic leg in class “How can you run from charlie, when they shoot your leg? You stagger forward and return the favor.”

“Wanna get some grub at Snacks and Candy?” Loudon spoke halfway through history class.

The history class ditchers entered snacks and candy.

“History is written by the leaders. You want blinded patriotism, go ahead. You want history, go to the library. You want some unique history? Go to someone like Bent. Here, open that little black book you always carry. Yo, Bent. What used to be here before Snacks and Candy?”

“Oh man, this used to be all farmland as the eye could see. Over there was...Corn...Over there...Corn...Over there.

Bent paused and Hal licked his lips with his pencil on the page.

“Man, I used to know this one.”

“Corn?”

“Oh, I remember! It was a rock.”

The bells of Snacks and Candy rang. Alice entered.

“Mom?”

“Hey guys, what’s up, aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

“Uhhh, aren’t you supposed to be at work?” Loudon said confidently with his chest up in the air.

“She’s on her lunch break genius.”

“What class are you missing, genius?”

“Well, it’s now art.”

“Oh good...I mean, just get your ass back to school!”

Hal exited the store in a dash.

“Me too?”

“I’m not your mom...But yes.”

Loudon quickly exited and Alice took a drag off the joint Bent handed to her. “Little dorks.” She said with a light coughed chuckle.

Third Period Art. It was in a repurposed warehouse. Safety signs were still bolted to the wall, but decorated with stained glass. And just a shit ton of rugs, bean bags and couches were all around the class.

All run by Miss Jezebel. The hippy, gypsy art teacher that always spoke with the softest voice, followed by the loudest clanging of bracelets and wooden necklaces.

“Sorry we’re late Miss Jezebel, we saw an unconscious bird and Hal gave mouth to mouth to it and saved its life. Ooo, sponge cake!”

Loudon served himself a slice of sponge cake. Miss Jezebel jangled her bracelets over to Hal and circled painted on his cheeks

“Healer. This is how my people speak to your good deeds “ She started to cry. “Please enjoy my offering of sponge cake.”

Hal whispered to Loudon. “Her people?”

“I think she’s from detroit.” Loudon handed Hal a slice of Sponge Cake.

“There are no assigned seats Hal, please sit wherever you feel most comfortable.”



Hal took a seat in a bean bag which sat next to Sloan licking her lips and smiling at Hal.

“Most comfortable, eh?”

“Now, imagine you’re under African skies.”

Miss Jezebel said in a whimsy twirl.

The two stared each other down like dueling outlaws in a sergio leone film.

“Draw.” Sloan said with a light snicker.

Both reveal their works. Sloan’s is an average drawing. Hal’s hair looks like straw. Hal’s portrait of Sloan is downright beautiful to her eyes and gives Sloan three reactions. Anger,

amazement, lovestruck in the form three fucks.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck. Holmes, look at that!” Sloan slugs Hal in the arm.

“Ow!” Hal says with a chuckle.

“Oh, sorry. Was that too hard?” she said playfully.

After school Sloan slammed into Hal on the rink. Knocking him down

“Ow...”

“Oh, sorry. Was that too hard?” She said this time with concern.

“Nah, I’m...Just me a sec.”

“That’s a little better. Holmes, you got to be honest with me. That’s all I ask.”

Loudon skated over “It’s true, she’s the best player. Let her know how much you can take.

“Yeah?”

Loudon moved his thumb back and forth, with it giving off horrible cracking sounds.

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!” Woodsy also added, while ripping out, unbeknownst to Hal, his prosthetic arm and waved it at hal. Prompting Hal to scream.

“God, that never gets old.” Woodsy chuckled while skating off while Sloan and Loudon helped Hal up.

And this was my new routine. My new life, with new friends and a place I was trying to call home.

Sloan tapped her Stick to the boombox and ‘Takin’ Care of Business’ by BTO started playing. She started rocking her head up and down and side to side.

“Feel the groove, holmes?” She then grabbed Hal’s hand.

“Sc’mon, take my route.”

The two circled around the rink.

The next day Hal waited on the phone in his kitchen. The dial tone, still giving no answer.

I was homesick, but at the same time I was having the time of my life.

Hal exited the kitchen and saw Sloan leaning on the wall with her stick.

Another day Joan and Loudon dragged the Canoe out to Lake Winnepasaga. While Sloan taught Hal a few chords on her guitar.

They paddled and Sloan jokingly paddled with her hockey stick.

With the canoe Drifting, the four passed a single joint down to one another.

“You guys ever think of parallel dimensions?” Sloan pondered in a high thought.

“All the time man. Like, so many possibilities. Like fuck...There’s a me out there that’s like the drummer for def leppard man.” Loudon added.

Hal took a puff and passed it to Sloan “Here’s the thing though. In the span of existence, the impossible is inevitable.”

“Fuck, that’s deep. You’re smart Holmes. Like seriously dude, that was smart.” Sloan puffed and passed the joint.

“Thanks...Hey are those corn dogs?”

Sloan started laughing and coughing uncontrollably “Those are cattails!”

I got to meet every local.

Hal answered the door and a well dressed milkman was in his doorway.

“Greetings new residents of Maple Falls. May I speak to the man of the house?”

“Uhhh...It’s just me and mom...Are you a milkman?”

“Apologies, you are the man of the house. Yes indeed young man I am. My name is Stan and I supply the entire tri-cities of Maple Falls, White Tail and Hugo with nutritious values known simply and wonderfully as milk.”

“Cool, we just buy-”

“No father? I kind of understand. You know I didn’t have a mother growing up, but I had a father and he

was a milkman. Just like his father before him and his father before him. I had the milk that came from the teet of the beautiful surrogate mother that is the cow.”

“What?...Listen I-”

“You know, in some countries, the cow is a sacred animal. A gift from the gods they say.”

“We already-”



“And as messenger of the nectar I am tasked to make sure that every man, woman and child in this town has their god given right of calcium, vitamin B, D and something to wet their corn flakes in the morning.” Milkman Stan shed a single tear, like he always did when reciting that speech. “So how many bottles can I sign you up for?”

“One bottle I guess? Whole milk.”

Later that night Hal was shopping with his Mom at Nelson’s market. Loudon peered over with his cart.

“You’re shopping all wrong.”

Loudon tossed in two eggplants “You literally just put the eggplant in the oven and put it over pasta with any sauce. Easy meal and it’s tasty.”

Loudon tossed in tater tots, green beans and cream of mushroom soup in the cart “You’re Minnesotans and you haven’t made tater tot hotdish?”

Loudon shopped for his family. He’s been doing so since he was ten. His Mom and Dad thought it was cute at first. Until they realized Loudon’s shopping chopped their budget in half and reduced a belly in Mr.Gonson. They don’t even shop with him, Loudon’s on their checking account and he fills out a check whenever he checks out. And well, low and behold.

“Only \$16.34 for all of that food?!” Alice took out her checkbook and \$5 bill for Loudon. Loudon took it and slid it in Hal’s pocket square.

“Tis my pleasure, Caphers.” Loudon took his groceries and walked past the winner’s wall of fame. He stopped at a golden potato beautifully displayed on a purple velvet blanket in a glass case. He sighed and whispered to himself “Someday Loudon, Someday.”

So we inherited a house, but we also inherited something else.

Alice, Hal, Ulysesses and the gang ventured through a giant junk pile in the middle of the barn by Edith Manor.

Alice got up from a pile “Okay, we have a broken glass pile, Weapons pile, bullets are separated, for there are just too many of them.”

“Yo big boat, I found you some gear!” Loudon pulled out hockey equipment from the wooden crate and threw them to Hal.

“See Holmes, I knew you had hockey in your blood.”

Loudon set the leather helmet on Hal’s head.

“Alright, where’s the helmet?” asked Hal.

“That is the helmet man.”

“This is the helmet?! What happens if I get hit?!”

Loudon bent down and pulled out a dusted bottle of whiskey “You drink this.”

“Okay, there’s gotta be better gear in here.” Loudon brushed off milk crate after milk crate and came across two suits of armor lying on the ground.

“No-”

“Way!” The siblings said, for the ninth time while fully dressed in the armor.

“Guys, what about heat stroke?!” Woodsy shouted.

“I don’t care!” Loudon giggled as he hit his sister with a golf club.

“4th period. All things math with Mr.Morris. The tail end of algebra 1.” Loudon guided Hal into the room.

Mr.Morris muttered to himself as his balding head streaks over a chalkboard. “I don’t care, why do I even, who really am I, why did I choose this life?”

“Mr.Morris is currently going through his third divorce, and he’s...He’s the problem he can’t solve.” Loudon said and the two sat down.

“Alright class, this is the final. All things must end, that’s how life goes. No cheating, it never pays. Trust me.”

“A final? ah...Mr.Morris?” Hal raised his hand.

“If you listened in my class, you’ll do fine.” Morris said without even giving eye contact to Hal.

“Well sir, it’s actually my first day.”

“Oh, sorry. You kids all look the same to me. Well you can skip this test if you want to do manual labor.”

Hal looked confused. “Is this a lesson for my future?”

Meanwhile down the hill at Saint Thaddeus nursing home, Alice is prepping breakfast on gray tray after gray tray for the residents.

Alice poured a giant bowl of grape nuts and looked at her supervisor.

“When?”

“To the brim, Mrs.Nygard needs to poop.”

The same gray trays and plates are plopped in the sink and Alice power washes all of them.

“No, you have an ‘A’ and it’ll take you down to an ‘A-’ if you skip this test and help build our gym with the shop class.

“Is this legal?”

“Do you care if it isn’t?”

“No.”

“Neither do I.”

Hal walked into the open gym and talked to the shop teacher Mr.Fuh “Huh?! You’re gonna have to speak a little louder! I’m Mr.Fuh!...What?!...Here, figure something with this! That’s the lesson!”

Mr.Fuh handed Hal a socket wrench and he noticed Sloan tightening some nuts on the bleachers.

“Holmes! Third class together eh? Glad to see you.

“Hey! Ah no, I’m here because of math.”

“Damn, you’re smart enough to ditch a test?”

“So this is a common thing Mr.Morris does?”

The two continued together, tightening bolts, lifting seats and horsing around.

“No, no, it’s true Holmes. Every tool is a hammer.”

“Bullshit, what about a-”

“Just give me the goddamn tool and I’ll show you my faith in this.”

Sloan hammers successfully with a wrench, a clamp, needle nose pliers. “The pliers actually make it easier to hit the mark.”

Hal pondered quickly with bouncing possibilities that might stump this theory “Okay...I got one!”

Hal rushed off and returned with a back saw. Sloan looked at the back saw and was not impressed by Hal’s challenge and took the saw and slammed the handle to perfectly put the nail through the wood.

During the last ten minutes of class the two sat on the only finished bleacher seats. Only managing two, but feeling quite accomplished.

“Yeah, I got that test after lunch. Sucks for this summer that I’m not gonna see you as much. This failing test is gonna cement a failing grade. Summer school fucking blows.”

Lunch time.

Sloan is standing up with Joan whilst chowing down on turkey gravy.

“Yo, meerkat. What’s the deal?”

“I don’t know, I thought he’d sit with us.”

“Ah, the city boy. Yeah, I saw him flirting with Erin.”

“What?!”

“Gotcha. You do like him, though can we talk about anything else?”

Sloan turned over to us. “If and when life gives the opportunity, my cousin Joan would forever sail the ocean alone. She loves fish, sailing and the absence of noise. She hates the commons, we usually eat outside, but is dealing with it today because she loves me. She’s also dealing with me playing it cool, until he makes his move. It’s not even been three days...time is weird ain’t it? I am playing it cool, right?”

“Sloan, your hands are submerged in your mashed potatoes and gravy.” Joan added.

“Oh...Fudge.”

Sloan looked around the school for Hal, munching on an apple and found him outside on the usual lunch table she sits at, writing on a piece of paper.

“Huh. Yo Holmes!”

“Oh hey!...Uh, I was just...I uh...Huh, this seemed clearer in my head when I-”

Sloan sat down and noticed the math test that was fully written out with a blank name.

“Holy shit, is that the math test?”

“Uh yeah. Mr.Morris said cheating gets you nowhere...but I thought-”

Sloan leaned into the test on the picnic table “Well...Maybe..You could teach it to-”

About ten minutes later.

“Thanks again Holmes. I swear this is a one time only thing.”

“No problem at all...Hey, I was uhh...wondering-”

Sloan’s eyes peered at us “Oh my god, he’s gonna ask me out. Time is weird, eh?”

“Was wondering if you would...Uh like to-” Hal pressed his thumb to his nose.

“The guy has ambition, so let’s meet him halfway. Let’s give him that little push, aight?”

“Pick me up at seven for bowling?”

“Yeah.” Hal’s eyebrows raised.

Sloan zipped up her brown backpack and pecked Hal on the cheek as the bell rang

“Sweet.”

We follow Sloan as she smiles and lightly dances around the halls and gives Joan a big hug and walks up the stairs.

“Does this mean I gotta be nice to him?”

“Yes!”

“What about Loudon?! You know he’s gonna be weird about it!”

“Fuck!” Sloan stopped in her tracks and slammed her foot to the ground.

“You picked bowling, didn’t you?!” Joan asked with a smirk.

“Fuck, man!”

“The brotherhood has spoken!”

Sloan looked down and pointed at her cousin “Oh god, Joan Helen Wyland, shut up! I’m gonna deal with this!”

Back down the hill of Saint Thaddeus Nursing home. Alice was introduced to the resident doctor and also Joan's father.

"Dr. Wyland... But uh please, just call me Harvey."

"Alice Capher."

"Murray Mellman! Tuna on rye!" spoke the small liver spotted man on the bed.

"Hello, yes. Uh, Mr. Mellman, your diet says you can't have tuna."

"Fine! Egg Salad!" Murray spoke, even louder this time.

"Or egg salad."

"Well christ, what can I have?... Well?!"

"Hang on, I'm looking."

Harvey came back into the room with a menu and handed it to Alice.

"This is Murray's menu. Sorry, he's quite a special case."

"Thanks... Wow, that's a lot of red."

After school Sloan was trying on clothes for the date.

"Wow, that's a lot of red. I look like a tomato." Sloan picked off numerous fuzz balls off a giant red sweater. She ventured downstairs to the living room and found Loudon polishing his bright red bowling ball.

"Loudon, do I look like a tomato?"

Loudon shook his head, but remained focused with his bowling ball.

"Thanks."

"You look like a used tampon!" Joan remarked in the corner recliner with a newspaper.

"Argh, thanks Joan."

"Wait, why are you worried about how you look? Are you going somewhere?"

Sloan looked at her brother "No... Not really."

Loudon stares out with a glare and snaps back to his ball. Sloan forces a smile and heads back upstairs and looks at us “No, I’m not explaining the brotherhood to you! No, just trust me, it’s dumb, like real fucking dumb.”

Joan checks her pocket watch “Well I gotta split.”

“I told you not to jinx me!”

Joan exited the Gonson house and strolled heading down Donovan street.

Up Osland Avenue and taking a left on Kaminsky street, Hal entered the nursing home and plopped down on a chair in the lobby. As he opens up a magazine he then notices a resident around the age of ninety slowly making his way in front of Hal. Slowly but surely the old man gets to the chair next to Hal and slowly but surely sits down right next to Hal. All in real time and Hal gives a friendly smile as the old man slowly but surely rotates his head to smile at Hal, but then suddenly passes out in a snore on Hal’s shoulder.

Joan enters the nursing home and notices Hal in the lobby.

“What are you doing here?”

“My Mom works here. You?”

“My Dad works here.”

“Huh, small town.”

“Yep, it is...Guess you’re not used to that.”

Joan looked at the old man that was slumbering on Hal. “Getting to know Herman?”

“Yeah.” Hal chuckled as the drool of Herman traveled to his T-shirt “Oh...No, that’s not supposed to-”

Joan sat down across from Hal “He used to be the mayor of this town. He’s got a lot of fun stories I’d bet you’d like to hear.

“Really? Yeah, actually I’m a-”

Joan stopped him “You’re a writer, I know. Sloan won’t shut up about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you got your little date tonight. Are you nervous?”

“A little.” Herman snorted to Hal’s response.

“Okay... Just promise me one thing? Don’t be a heartbreaker. Sloan, she keeps her heart on her sleeve. Can you do that for me?”

Hal nodded.

The doorbell rang at the Gonson house and Sloan walked up to the door.

“Just don’t kiss on the first date. That’s a golden rule...right?”

Sloan opened the door and the moon was perfectly lit behind with Hal and the two shared an awkward, but cute smile.

Sloan turned back to us “Ah!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Look at you Holmes.” Playing it is completely cool on the outside.

“Oh hey man, what’s up?” Loudon said as he peered over the side with his bowling ball wax.

“We’re coincidentally going bowling as well!” Sloan blurted out.

“Oh, you wanna come with us?” Hal asked.

“Well that’s signed, sealed and delivered. Sorry Holmes.” Sloan said to us.



The three entered the bowling alley that hasn’t been updated since 1955. Halo Cigarette machines, ratty bowling shoes and the overhead smoke was overkill. You could hardly see the lanes from the

entrance with the level of smoke.

“Loudon is very serious about the sport. He always takes the same lane, Lane 24. Always on the same night. Always focussed and in his own little bowling world. And it gets quite intense.”

“I am the ball, I am the ball. Everyone else is pins. Pins will fall, I will only prevail.”

Loudon perfectly spirals the ball and bowls a strike.

“Which is perfect for Holmes and I.”

“Lane five please.”

three pins, four pins and one pin get knocked down.”

“This is Loudon’s sport, but for the rest of the population, everybody sucks at this game. Though it’s never about skill, it’s all about ambience and the house chili. Oh, the house chili. Mmm... Not tonight though. It’s so damn good, but gasses always prevail. Not the best for a first date. That’s reserved for lovers...TMI?...Guess I’m just a bit nervous.”

Sloan tried to pick up the bowling bowl and it slipped out of her hands.”Oops, I’m a little sweaty.” She said cutely and awkwardly to Hal.

“So, when did you start playing hockey?”

“All my life. Mom and Dad used to take Loudon and I to the ice rink all the time.”

“How did you get so good?”

“Eh, if you love something so much, you’ll eventually get there. That and breaking into the ice rink on the hottest summer nights for practices.”

“Woah, wait really? You didn’t get caught?”

“People go to sleep, Holmes. We’ll take you on a midnight run sometime.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course.”

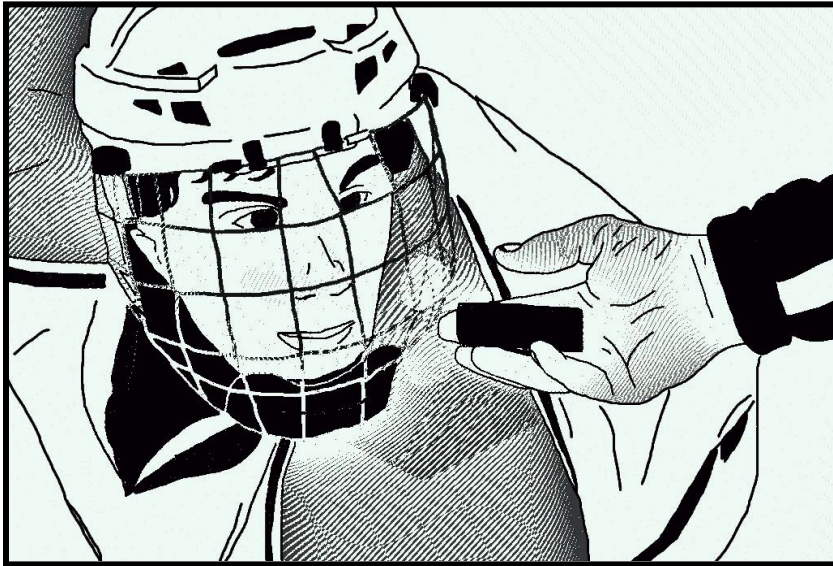
More threes and open frames were bowled.

“So how did you convince them you could play with the boys?”

“It actually happened after Loudon got a nasty hit to the temple by a puck.”

Looking back to 1978 during a mites game, drunken parents are booing and cheering for Loudon's injury on the ice. Sideburn and handlebar mustaches were beautifully in fashion galore.

"He was asked if he could still play and he just stared at the puck and said-"



"That's a big Oreo."

Back at the bowling alley "They needed a player, so the coach finally quit his bullshit and put me in. Made captain a week after the game."

More pins are knocked down.

"I gotta say, your mom is probably cooler than you."

"This is true."

"She probably has so many crazy stories."

"Yeah, she's finally telling me more of the crazier ones. Guess it's the sign of growing up."

"It's such a big house to be alone."

Meanwhile at Edith Manor, Alice is reading a book in the big estate. She notices a big creak and is weirded out.

"Kinda lonely, wouldn't you think?"

Back to Alice smoking a joint and listening to 'One toké over the line' by Brewer and Shipley.

Sloan looks at us in confusion "What?" She looks down and notices she's about to spoonful some chili into her mouth.

"Woah, fuck! I swear I don't even remember buying this."

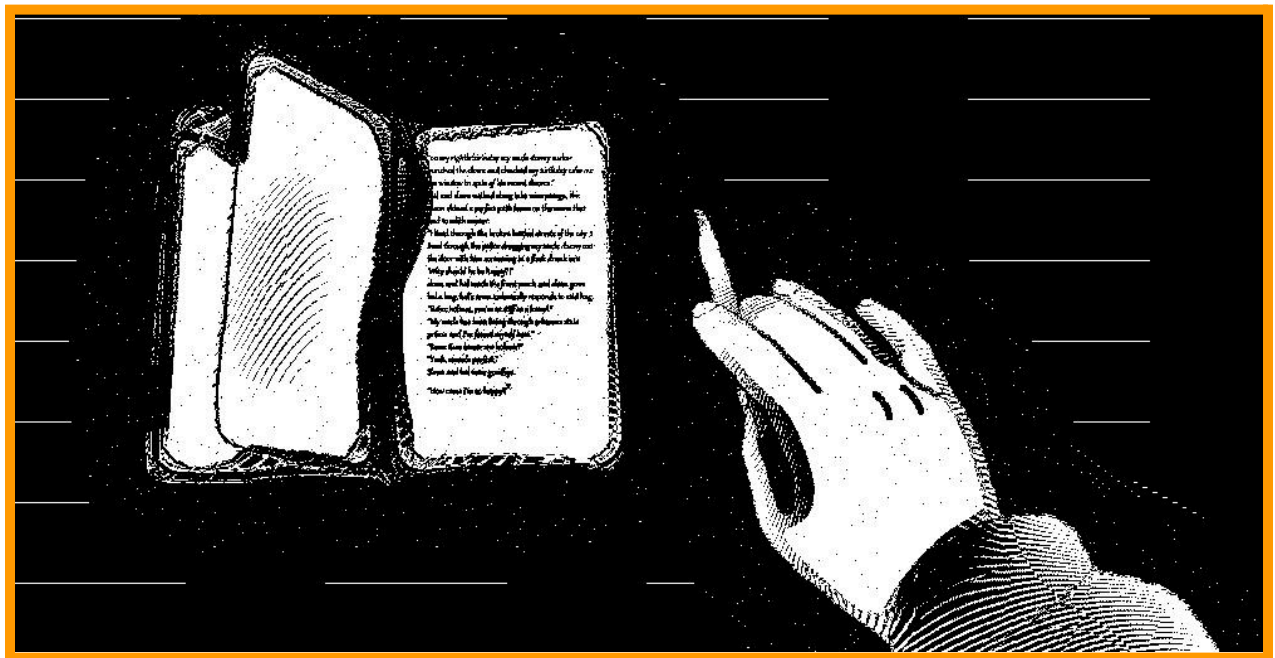
The lights then went down and a '300' spotlight illuminated around the bowling alley. Balloons and lasers then filled the bowling alley with 'Rock and Roll All nite' by Kiss played on for patrons. The loud speaker went off with the owner giving it his all.

"Groovy, totally rad! Congratulations again Loudon Gonson. On your totally tubular 300 game!"

"It's the fourth '300' in a row Larry! Face it, it's not special anymore!" The owner's wife said over the loudspeaker.

"Cut the music! Set up the pins!" Loudon shouted directly.

After the game we found ourselves walking to Edith manor. Only the sounds of crickets, our feet on the dirt road and this endless conversation that drove me in with every word. Lit by moonlight and those stars, those stars that were kept hidden from me till that night.



On my eighth birthday my uncle donny sucker punched the clown and chucked my birthday cake out of the window in spite of his recent divorce.

I lived through the broken bottled backyards. I lived through dealing with the police dragging my uncle donny out the door with him screaming "Why should he be happy?!"

Hal and Sloan stood at the front porch of the old house.

He's been living through Arkansas state prison, and I've found myself here.

Sloan licked her lips and etched her right red shoe in the dirt. Looking up into Hal's eyes and they waved goodbye.

How come I'm so happy?

Chapter 5 -

I heard it on the radio



Hal, Sloan and Loudon were in the tutor room. Hal looked over the pieces on the wooden chess board, observing every possible move. Loudon was simply laying back, with an Apple in hand. Munching with patience for Hal's move.

Hal moved his bishop forward two spaces.

"Bad Move." Loudon moved his queen forward "Check."

"How do I keep losing?! Am I actually just bad at chess?"

Loudon shook his head “No, you’re pretty alright for your age.”

“My age?”

“Well, the queen to bishop three wasn’t a good move.”

“Queen to bishop three? My god I’m playing against a computer.”

Sloan smirked at her brother and Hal, turned to us and said

“I met my best friend in the womb. Ma and Dad said when we were born, Loudon held my hand whenever our blobby baby bodies were next to each other.

When we were seven I broke my leg falling out of the maple tree in the garden. Loudon without question hoisted me over his shoulder and placed me in a wheelbarrow and wheeled me all the way across town to the local clinic.

Last year we were at a kiss concert and it didn't look like we'd be able to meet Paul Stanley when he was signing autographs to rows of fans after the show. Until Loudon had one of his special kind of brilliant ideas and lit his t-shirt on fire and waved it around screaming “Heaven’s on fire!” with everyone, except me and Paul Stanley running for safety. Paul even said to me “Little girl, you got balls.”

He’s my right winger, he’s my drummer, but most importantly, he’s my brother, my best friend.”

The four sat on the dock by Edith Manor. Joan had her line out, Sloan was strumming her Martin Acoustic and Hal was etching the both with a stick of charcoal. Loudon took notice of the other’s concentration, as his boredom leaned on a maple tree.

“Hey, let’s go bowling.”

“Three more fish.”

“After this drawing.”

“Eh, I’m already comfortable.”

Loudon threw out a stone to the lake and we find him later in the day at Culver surplus wandering the aisles with Tommy.

“Don’t you keep yourself busy with hockey and gardening?”

“Yeah, but winter always comes and that cuts out seventy-five percent of my stock.”

“What about indoor plants, like succulents?”

“Please Tommy, indoor plants are cruel to the natural order of mother nature. Succulents are not for Minnesotan habitats in the first place.”

“Don’t tell that to the ladies at the farmer’s market.”

“I won’t, they’re ruthless. I just want to express myself, like how Sloan does with her music and Hal with his writing. I need that artistic voice to share with the world.”

Tommy looked at his notebook of stock “Well I don’t have anything for the world. How about the county?”

Loudon wheeled equipment into his garage and set up a card table in the middle of his room. Placing and dusting off an old radio transmitter, his record player and plugged in the microphone.

“Well that was easy.” Loudon pulled out a large antenna from an enormous brown box “Now for the hard part.”

Loudon exited through Sloan’s window and she rolled her eyes, following him out to help him.

Sloan went on her tippy toes, handing Loudon a power drill that was attached to an extension cord, that was attached to another extension cord, that was also attached to an extension cord, that was plugged into Sloan’s bedroom.

“Come on Sloan, reach!” Loudon reached on top of a secluded shack on the roof. A shack only having entry through the roof walkway. Beside Loudon being the antenna that was larger than a baby elephant.

“I’m trying!”

Loudon grabbed the drill and started drilling the channel master universal mount. Which Loudon referred to by name every time.

“Does this look right?” Loudon drilled in and skidded across the roof with the drill.

Later Loudon covered in dirt and twigs came back to his garage, flipped on the receiver and grabbed the microphone.

“Good evening United! It is June 10th, this is the first broadcast of truth talk with your host Brother Louie. The revolution this nation is about to hear. But first, ‘Fascination’ by The Human League.”

Loudon put down the needle and organized his space.

“Loudon’s station was on the air for all of Maple Falls and two neighboring towns. Three people tuned into 105.7: The Truth, that first night. A truck driver in a truck stop shower off of highway 51. A farmer in the neighboring Dugan Creek and yours truly, Sloan Gonson.”

Sloan looked up at the night sky and up at the antenna, but back down at her boombox.

“And then the music ended and he started to talk more...Until eight in the morning. Twelve straight hours guys.”

“That’s how they get you. You buy their product, but you’re really the product. A billboard walking in their malls. And I’m not talking about soda pop or candy bars. I’m talking about those designer jeans made in sweatshops. Yes we’re united, but not with the countries that are the true backbone to this country.”

“What if this was still the United states? Would it have been better off or worse?”

“What is in the sewers of king city?” Loudon’s hair was tied in a ponytail and snack cake wrappers were scattered around the controls.

The sun had shone and Sloan tossed Loudon his backpack and pointed him out.

“Think about it, united! This is Brother Louie signing out for now on The truth, 105.7. And remember, the voice of the truth will be heard!”

Sloan and Hal were in the midst of squats in gym class to start their day. Sloan held a medicine ball and chucked it at Hal and he got the wind knocked out of him “Pirate radio? He’s illegally pirating his own radio station...Because his plants are gonna die?...Yeah, that sounds sane. Isn’t he afraid to be caught?”

Sloan chuckled “Brother Louie isn’t afraid of the man...He’ll be fine though. Like, why would the FBI be suspicious of our town. Shit, it’s not even labeled on maps.”

Mr.A stepped in while lunging with his incredibly toned thighs and perfect posture “Times up Capher, toss the ball to Gonson. Punctuality is the key to success!”

“Fair point.” Hal lugged the medicine ball back to Sloan and winded her in return “Nice Holmes.”

“Aquequate Capher! Sloan is number one, she’s either pitying you or sweet talking. And if that’s the case, keep it PDA Gonson! 701, 702, 703.”

Sloan turned to us “Sweet talking. See Mr.A has a ranking system for all his students. He has your ranking and number of your score memorized, but keeps the board of the school’s ranking to humiliate us. But, it is the only class where I’m the top of the class. You see, I’ll tell ya something.

Loudon and I are likewise and different in many ways, but I don’t think there is any bigger difference between us when it comes to academics. Like I’m a B student in history, C in science...But Math...Well, uhhh.

“Uhhh.” Sloan stared at her paper with complete confusion.



“ $\frac{1}{2}$ times the base of 18 which is 9.” Loudon tapped his pen all over the paper and Sloan followed.

“What, it’s times? You just divided it...right?”

“Well, you see when you multiply with a fraction you-”

“Loudon is a genius at this stuff. Here he is, not even in my class, helping me out, but it never ever makes sense.”

It's not like I don't care, the looming 'F' is quite a motivation to try my damndest. I legit feel numb trying to figure out math. Like I'm brain dead and can only contribute drool to the equation."

Mr.Morris walked up to Loudon who had a pile of research covering the entire table.

"Loudon, I'm missing your homework."

"Oh sorry." Loudon rummaged through his papers all over the place and pulled out two papers and handed it to Mr.Morris.

"What's this?"

"Oh, sorry, those are counterpoints to oil drilling. " Loudon grabbed the paper on top and Mr.Morris noticed.

"It's incomplete, you're missing the last five equations."

Loudon grabbed the paper and filled out each equation in under ten seconds and handed it back to Mr.Morris "Sorry, had a busy day yesterday."

Sloan looked at us "Those last five equations took me all night yesterday. I can guarantee Loudon got all of those right and corrected Mr.Morris' grammar on the worksheet." Sloan sighed and blew her hair up.

Loudon not only had his voice on the air, others had joined the revolution as guests. Loudon fitted headphones for them and heard their struggles with the man.

Mr.Nelson was the first guest "It is inevitable that a big corporation will take over the market for groceries in Maple Falls. A giant one stop shop for groceries and whatever the consumer wants. I say consumers, because that's all these corporations see. I, you see, I see customers and with due time, friends. I have a face in my business, these corporations do not."

"This is true, my family has been going to Nelson's market since we moved here. Everything we need is there, against everything we don't need."

"Yes! 100 percent yes! There is so much needless crap at these stores. You walk into these stores and you know what you find?"

"What?"

“A maze that leads you to nowhere.”

The day after that it was Wesson, a backwoods homeschooled kid from a neighboring town called GunPoint. Population 2, him and the founder, his daddy.

“Gun control is needed in this country. It doesn’t take a genius, it takes an idiot to pull a trigger. It takes a professional to understand the power this mechanism can shoot and handle it with the utmost professionalism.”

“So the military?”

“No. I strongly disagree with military use and affairs. My father was a Vietnam draft dodger and I fully agree with his reasons ‘I’m not dying for my country and its oil. Death is not my choice.’”

Loudon looked over to his arm and noticed goosebumps on it.

Another guest was Alice Capher

“Yeah, they treat you like shit and flush away your complaints and charge you for the complaints. Perfectly legal, perfectly corrupt.”

“To the land bastards of the poorly named uphill housing, I am sorry for the excuse your life has manifested in this world. The sheer inhumane nature of your business is beyond sad and voices the echo of how small and callow you function as...Well, I can't even call you a human being. Your actions reek of millions of years of regression. You mistreat innocent people and take a net profit in your small pointless world of the suburbs, not taking a gander of what maybe your actions will lead to.

Housing is a given right and you strip that with rusted water and charge the victim with said rusted water. Like how you will strip for lucifer in after end days as he tongue fucks you to oblivion. Sorry, I Had to use religious analogies, for that's how closed off people poorly function. For you don't believe in karma now. Though you yourselves being the psychos that slash tires and poor sugar in gas tanks. You don't believe someone has the power of ridicule, for you're not creative enough to think in the long term. You don't think or understand the ever changing world. You don't understand how a platform and how easily it can boycott your business, no matter how small your business is to the world and no

matter how pointless you feel at the end of the day. One article in a newspaper and your reputation is toast. We're not talking about the news, but it will get there someday."

Loudon drops the needle "Trust is needed to sustain life. Ask yourself this, would I lie to you? By the eurythmics."

"Holy shit kid." Alice said when taking off her headphones.

"We got four minutes till our next program. Thank you for coming, Alice. Swing by anytime to vent."

"Oh, I got plenty more complaints."

Loudon chuckled "Yeah, Hal said you did...Uh, there's a complimentary dinner served by my family. It's taco night and should be ready in ten minutes."

We follow Alice through from the detached garage to the kitchen at the front of the house.

"Hey Alice, grubs on." Sloan greeted Alice as they prepped a suburban taco. Flour tortilla, ground beef with the taco seasoning packet that has no further explanation of what's in it. Industrial, white and black lettering, shredded cheese, diced baby tomatoes and a heaping dollop of watery sour cream.

The next day Hal was a guest on 'The Truth'

"So what are you saying, people here can't change the world?" Loudon asked.

"Yeah, a lot of people in the country don't really want to change the system. They only dig a tradition of laws, even if they're broken and or out of date. If you want change, you gotta take it to the city."

"Well, how would I reach them with my range, I'm only a pirate with limited...Wait?"

Flying the pirate flag on the channel master universal mount now drilled to the family sailboat. Sailed by Joan on the Mississippi river south, with Loudon speaking to every town they passed on their voyage to the twin cities.

"We are approaching Aikin, population 1,900."

'Pump Shanty played by Charlie and the smokestacks had just finished on the airwaves

"Good morning Aikin. Questions and complaints are open to the air waves."

Sloan turned to us back in Maple Falls “Hal and I decided to stay here. Me, I’m not much of a city person and well Hal said he had a date.”

Hal opened the doors of Maple Falls Five for Sloan. “He’s pretty smooth for a 16 year old... Yeah so, movies are always a want and a need for me. Like Maple Falls Five is a home away from home. Smell the popcorn, hear the punch out cabinet. It’s just simply perfect. And this-” Sloan taps on a poster with a list of movies “Thursday night fright is held at the start of summer and ends on Halloween and is a free screening throughout. Yes, you heard that right, free. Is that legal? Who gives a shit! Hal and I are gonna see Frankenstein, but check out this setlist of amazing movies ahead of us. Invisible man returns, Curse of Frankenstein, Jaws, Revenge of the creature, The man who laughs, The 7th voyage of sinbad, Night of the living dead, Dracula, Horror of Dracula, The Tingle, The beast from 20,000 fathoms, The Blob, Abbott and Costello meet Frankenstein, The Invisible Ray. With it all ending beautifully with the original King Kong. But sc’mon, it’s movie time!”

Chris, the curator of the event, was part way introducing the movie, “The makeup applications for Boris Karloff were revolutionary and in my opinion, unmatched to some modern movies.”

Chris was interrupted by an employee with a piece of paper.

“Uh, ladies and gentleman, please do not be alarmed, but I’ve just been informed another Tingle sighting has been reported. It was last seen at Snacks and Candy about 15 minutes away. No one was hurt, but many snack cakes were stolen.”

“What?” Hal chuckled.

Sloan smiled and handed Hal some popcorn, “It’s a local thing. We’ll see the Tingle later in the season.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Me too.”

“It’s Alive!” Shouted Colin Clive as Doctor Frankenstein.

The DIY phone system rang and Loudon's eyes peered wide open "It's alive! It's Alive!" Loudon stopped and gathered himself and professionally answered "Hello patron, you have The Truth. What is your inquiry?"

"Yeah, triton oil is trying to add their pipeline to my town. What can I do to help stop these goddamn oil barons?"

"Well, I'll tell you this news anchor Chick Halloway has recently started promoting a bill to stop the pipeline and put more tax dollars to the research of KRG fuel."

"You think KRG is reliable?"

"It is in its infancy, but you gotta be patient with its research. It's renewable, but please give scientists time on stabilization. Case in point, ford didn't give time and killed innocent people with the pinto."

Joan rang the bell, signaling a new town ahead.

"Brainerd approaching! Population 12,000!" Joan screamed.

"Hello brainerd, let your voice be heard."

"Hey Brother Louie, my buddy Wally listens to you in Dugan Creek. My question to you is, what's your thoughts on police reform and prisoner corruption?"

"Excellent question caller. You see you can't bank every single problem on one force. You can't trust anybody that just passes the test. Reform is needed like how doctor's go to seminars to continue learning the ever changing medical advancements. Soon the tools of the doctor will be obsolete, as well as the gun in the holster of the sheriff."

"Saint Cloud, population 50,000!"

Loudon, went out of the boat and observed the land "50,000, that's our biggest yet. Saint Cloud, you're on the air."

"Hey, so I'm pretty fucking hungover. What's your best advice in getting rid of this bitch of a headache?"

"Mmmkay. Uh, Sushi and orange juice."

“Really?”

“Yeah, high emphasis on salts too, my good friend. Are you a student at the university?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s your major?”

“I’m unsure. I’m thinking about communication. What do you think?”

“Nah.”

“Clearwater!”

“Monticello!”

“Anoka!”

“Excuse me sir, are you...are you baked?”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaah-” The slow and low timbre of the caller continued trying to finish the word over the course of thirty seconds. To the point where it sounded like a small engine in the distance.

Till the caller let out the final breath and breathed in, followed ever so quickly with a direct, but laid back “No.”

“Minneapolis! Population 372,000!”

“Oh boy, we’ve arrived at the first twin before the capital city! Hello caller, Minneapolis and brother Louie are listening.”

“Yeah, I was wondering, are there better and tangible solutions to cleaning the ocean?”

The anchor is dropped and Joan rushes down and grabs the microphone.

“I got this one Brother Louie. Plastic alternatives are available! Here’s how the old ways work and the new ways fail. The world doesn’t have to make everything out of plastic!”

Joan knocks on her canteen “Here that, that’s a steel canteen. Cancel all plastic water bottles this instant!”

The catalina docked on raspberry island in downtown Saint Paul. Loudon paused the broadcast and exited the boat. Meeting them at the island was Hal’s friend from Minneapolis. A bear of a metalhead by the name of T.K

“You must be T.K?”

“The one and only.”

“So you alright with helping us help us unscrew an antenna, lug it up the stairs and walkways,
And wheel it all the way to the capital to speak the truth via a pirate radio?”

“Sure, you got the beer?”

Joan held a six pack of booker beer.

“Sweet, toss one here!”

Two minors and a 28 year old metal head wheeled the pirate radio through downtown Saint Paul
as T.K perfectly pulled and drank the booker beer in the brightest of broad daylight.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?” T.K commented and belched.

“It’s high noon here at Saint Paul. Our final stop on our trek down the mississippi. If you have
any questions, come to the capitol to..Car!”

T.K stopped in his tracks “We have the crosswalk sign you fucker!” T.K shouted.

“I’m joined with Twin Cities local T.K. Any words for the listeners T.K?”

“Yeah, come to the 7th entry this Saturday to see the band I play bass in.

“What’s the name of the band?”

“The blood sucking fuckers.”

“Ah... Ya heard it here, Minnesota. The blood sucking fuckers, this Saturday at the 7th entry.”

“Uh-Oh...Steps.” said Joan

“No prob,hold my beer.” T.K handed his beer to another kid.

“Uh, T.K?”

T.K noticed the kid staring at the beer can “Oh, sorry little man.” And handed the beer to Joan.

Wheeling in the capitol was already a packed scene. An activist group was about to take the stage
for their cause.

“Who are these guys?” Joan asked.

“Minnesota Nature. They’re an amazing environmentalist group that supports wildlife, stopping the pipeline. Basically all their efforts are to help this planet.”

Loudon took the microphone out and looked at the array of local news stations and wedged his in the middle of them.

Loudon, T.K and Joan sat down and Loudon rested his hand on his chin. He never talked through the broadcast, he simply listened. He had found people with a voice just like his.

Chapter 6-

Dominion Day



Sloan sat on a lawn chair outside the storefront of Maple Tree Music Connection, she was surrounded by others on lawn chairs, in fact it was the whole town.

“So I believe...Actually...I know I’m gonna miss an event as big as woodstock. That being the concert known as Live Aid.

Elton John, David Bowie, The Who, Neil Young, the reunion of Led Zeppelin since the tragic loss of John Bonham...But more so, Queen. It's the summer and Queen just hits in such a sweeter way, ya know? In the same way Jazz is better on a rainy day or classical music with the snow. Under pressure, Seaside Rendezvous, You're my best friend, Killer Queen, Bicycle Race, Stone cold crazy, Somebody to love, Las Palabras De Amor, We are the champions, Fat bottomed girls, Don't stop me now, Crazy little thing called love, all have those sounds of summer heat. They have an ebb and flow like waves...Yeah, yeah they do...They do. And then there is Bohemian Rhapsody. A song that captures the ballad of summer days. From the ominous, to a carnival carousel, to a roller coaster. To finally a gentle reminder that our worries don't really matter. Anyway the wind blows is where we flow and it lands us in the summer of 1985. But, I'm gonna miss the best day of the summer of 1985. It would take a miracle to have a day that's better and it being here in Maple Falls. I mean Dominion day is fun, but sc'mon. Oh, gotta go though, we're on. Gotta play the game.''

Sloan got up, grabbed her bucket of candy and rollerbladed back to the Maple Falls hockey team that passed out candy at the 1st of July parade. Skating along the main drag Sloan spotted Hal and skated over to him.

"Sup Holmes. Enjoying the festivities?"

"Yeah, this is quite something. We don't have stuff like this in the cities."

"Wait, you serious?"

Hal nodded.

"What, do you guys also not have sunshine or rainbows? Well, actually this is nothing. Just wait for the skeleton hunt next year!"

"Skeleton what?"

"Eh, best to experience that one first than explain it. Hey, wanna trade?"

Sloan handed Hal a couple of packs of licorice, pecked him on the cheek and took his red cap, placing it backwards on her head as she skated away."

"Find us after the parade, at the front gate of the carnival, Mmm-kay?!"

“Yeah!...Yeah.”

As I watched her skate away and launch a full sized candy bar with her hockey stick to an overly excited shirtless man in the stands, I knew one thing had clicked in my brain. I have a crush on this girl. Holy shit, I got a crush on this girl. Woah, where did this come from? Soooooo, all my natural moves will soon break down in an awkward mess when I see her after the parade. I guarantee it. For when I plopped on the bench with Mom and Aunt Nancy and watched the floats for Snacks and Candy, the giant golden potato float of Nelson’s market, The Jelly Jar, Mrs.Sweet’s drumstick anthem, the VFW, where I swear to you they were marching with real rifles. An impeccable dragon dance from Yet Fei’s. All were great, but all I was thinking about was that girl named Sloan.

A woozy four year old child sat next to Hal. swirling his cotton candy with finger, he then barfed right in Hal’s lap.

Well, until that happened.

At the front gate, Loudon tacklehugged Hal.

“Big Boat, welcome to the Maple Falls 1st of July festival! You have three guiding experts on what’s fun here. Sloan is all about the rides, Zacccone is an expert on all games and bingo hall. And me, my friend, I am the expert on what’s on the menu. Corn dogs, cotton candy, cheese curds, mini doughnuts. I promise you will enjoy all of these by the end of this glorious day. Also watch your feet, sometimes raccoons run wild here. Well not wild, the carnies have domesticated them. Alright, food first!”

Joan grabbed her cousin by the collar “Loudon! We don’t want Hal or for you to puke on the zipper...Again. Plus it’s tradition to ride the tilt-a-whirl first.”

Sloan turned to us “The tilt-a-whirl was actually invented in Minnesota. In a town called Faribault by this guy named Hebert Selllner around 1922 or 1926, the history is kind of fuzzy with each passing senior citizen I ask. There’s a lot of things you learn about your backyard when you read the fine print. But here’s the thing though, these rides haven’t been updated since 1922. Check out that beautiful rust. Once Loudon and I thought we found the original paint, but the carnie said it was just blood.”

Hal, Sloan and Loudon piled in the tilt-a-whirl. Looking above at the graffiti of a heart with the text reading ‘Trent’s dick. “Fine print my friends, fine print.” Sloan said to us.

While riding the tilt-a-whirl Loudon shouted “Lean to Hal!”

With that Hal was squished by his new friends as they spun wildly.

“Lean to me!” Loudon shouted again as he giggled at the dizziness.

“Next is the Gravitron.” Sloan motioned in a stagger of dizziness.

The gang went away from the ninety degree weather into the one hundred and twenty degree domed craft that is the Gravitron and laid on the burgundy boarded mats that surrounded the center control console.

With the start of the spin, Hal felt the weight press on to him and his board shifted upwards along with everyone else.

The pressure gave you only enough strength for your head tilt. To which Hal saw Mr.A on the ride, who was standing up.

“Try harder Capher!” Mr.A pointed at Hal and put on his sunglasses.

But also a tilt to see Sloan. Both giggling they reached out to hold each other's hands, but fell back down as the ride slowed to a stop.

Every end of an activity was a rush to the next. Zacccone showed off his skills in the ring toss game, the coin push game and the horse race.

“Hey Holmes, we're going on the ferris wheel!”

Sloan and Hal rushed to the cab and entered. Hal looked around and noticed

“So, just us?”

“Yeah, I want to show you something.”

As their ferris cab ascended upwards Sloan grabbed Hal’s hand and pointed out when they reached the highest peak. “Check it out Holmes.”

“Woah, I can see Edith Manor... Wow.”

Sloan and Hal looked down and saw that they were still holding hands. They looked into each other's eyes and...and....

"Highty ho there, children!" Shouted Aunt Nancy, with Alice from a cab across from them.

Both Sloan and Hal let go and waved back.

After they got off, Nancy greeted them with "God, this sun is giving me a bitch of a burn, or a rash? Hey kids, you on a playdate?"

Hal gave a stern look to nancy

Sloan rested on Hal's shoulder "Yes we're on a playdate. What are you guys up to?"

"Taking a break from moving in."

"Moving...what?" Hal tried to stutter out.

"Got a job at your mom's work....well my work. I'm gonna be a Nurse's aid!"

"Don't you-

"Need a CNA? Yeah, I got that five years ago. It was during that time where I didn't know what to do, so I just got degrees."

This is very true. Aunt Nancy out of sheer boredom and endless free time earned a CDA, CNA, PCA and a Hazmat certification. Yeah, I'm puzzled on the last one too.

"So yeah, I'll be across the hall if you need anything roomie."

"Nancy please, we don't want to interrupt their playdate."

Hal then gave another stern look to his Mom.

"We're just about to hit the bingo hall, wanna come?" Sloan then grabbed Hal's hand again.

Alice noticed and smiled at Hal.

"Uh actually, I was gonna show Nance the silent auction. We'll catch you two later."

We passed by the prizes for bingo that anybody had the chance to win. A basket full of booker beer, a basket full of grill spatulas and a basket full of packs of halo cigarettes. There seemed to be no restrictions on age or taste.

"Bingo, I got a bingo!" An old lady staggered upwards with a single hand raise.

Hal looked over and saw the old lady in a scooter receive her basket full of cigarettes.

“Oh...no. That’s-”

Everything at this fair was a far cry from the cities. In the cities we have co-ops and everyone is always watching their weight with whatever new diet craze was circling around the skyways. Here, it was much different.

Here It’s called a-

“This is a corn dog covered in cotton candy.” Hal inspected the neon blue covered corn dog.

“Yeah, it’s called the lint roller.” Loudon said, proud of his creation and naming.

Nah, here it was unique. That’s what you get with a new location, no matter how much you know.

See when you first meet someone, the only thing you see is temperaments.

Melancholic

“Oh god, are you actually going for it?” Joan placed her finger on her tongue

Phlegmatic.

“Oh come on Joan, it’s actually pretty good.” Sloan said.

Choleric.

“Come on buddy, join the cult.”

Now that left me, Sanguine. I’ve always been the leader in the group. How does it imply to this group that’s been together since birth? I was a leader that was an outsider. Just like King Arthur as he took the sword from the stone.

Hal took the corn dog and took a bite and smiled.

Beyond the temperaments that were melting in this July heat, like that pistachio ice cream cone that was inches from me on the sidewalk. I was seeing the heart of each of these individuals for the first time. For they had invited me into their world.

Hal looked down at the corn dog and then to Loudon. He looked over to Joan hugging her stuffed turtle and then looked over to Sloan with the ferris wheel behind her.

“Nazis! That is your enemy! This is your weapon! Have at it!” Shouted a retired world war one and two veteran as he handed a bayonet to a group of ten year olds that charged at painted sandbags, made to look like nazi soldiers. Striking the sandbags released candy and cap gun ammo.

“Oh no, It’s hitler coming in hot!” The old man laughed and wheezed as he reeled in a hitler sandbag.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got him!” The old man then reached for his ankle knife and slashed open the fuhrer, releasing all of his chocolate and jawbreakers.

Onlooking the event was Hal eating a bag of mini doughnuts, absorbing it all in.

“Come on holmes, it’s time for the zipper!” Sloan took a mini doughnut and grabbed Hal.

Onlooking the ride your first instinct is, how is this legal? Your second instinct is, I wanna ride this thing. It was like a ferris wheel, but long with its core. Instead of a cab, you were given a cage, like the animal you were for going through with it. I watched the cages spin endlessly without stopping as we approached the ride. Joan was the only one sane to stick behind, but that was their secret. Three people needed to be in a group to convince the carnie...Actually it’s not that hard to convince a carnie. Let’s face it, the word safety is not in their vocabulary. Too many syllables for their liking.

“Alright keep you hands and feet...Uhh, just don’t do anything fucking stupid.”

The carnie slammed the cage and the three of them rocked in place until they were juttet upwards for the next passengers.

“Ready Loudon?”

“Ready.” Loudon took out his portable tape deck from under his shirt and slipped in a cassette that read ‘Styx 4 ever.’

The two siblings started singing the opening part to Renegade as it played on a little tape deck, the ride shook and rose upwards.

Hal looked up to graffiti in the ride of a heart that read ‘Bille’s bush’

To the top and when the ride dropped from behind to start the spin, the two siblings screamed and sang Renegade as Hal started a delayed scream as his life in this cage would not stop rotating. Hal had

lost count after the fifth rotation as after that, all he saw was a caged blur and heard the two were still singing.

Once the ride ended, the siblings high fived, with Hal who had his hands cemented on that metal bar cushion, completely stiff and felt out of body until Sloan put her around his shoulder.

“You alright Holmes?”

“...Yeah, all groovy.”

Hal then pulled out a large screw from the metal bar, looked at it in fear and put it back in.

The sun was starting to set and the gang was at the hockey rink. Loudon slap shotted a bunch of smoke bombs at Woodsy.

“Ah, Piccolo pete! It’s so damn loud!”

Loudon threw one up high in the air, sounding like a phoenix.

Sloan skated over to Hal who was on the payphone outside the cage.

“Glad you guys are having fun too...Yeah, like I said. I’ll be back to visit very soon. I got the car on mom’s days off. Yeah, okay. Yeah. Have fun without me. Say hi to the gang for me...Later.”

Hal hung up and saw Sloan circling around.

“Yeah sorry, I had to check up on Mads and the guys in the city.”

Sloan stopped circling “Gotta suck to move away from your friends. You doing alright?”

“Yeah. I’m fine...Ummm, yeah.”

“How long have you known mads?”

“Since the 4th grade.”

“Damn....You..uhh...Was she like your girlfriend?”

“Who, Mads? Oh no, just close friends.”

“Cool cool...Uh, we should go to the lake, it’s getting dark.”

At the beach of Lake Winnepasaga, Sitting between Hal and Sloan was golden boy Loudon as he took out glow sticks and bracelets from his knapsack and tapped them and wrapped them around his body. The rest of the gang just stared at him.

“Does he normally?”

“No, he’s been bragging about this all year. I think he’s gonna pull it off so well. It’s beautiful isn’t it?” Sloan cracked a glow stick and passed it to her brother.

“Yeah, like going under the christmas tree and looking up at the lights.

“Hey, I do that too!”

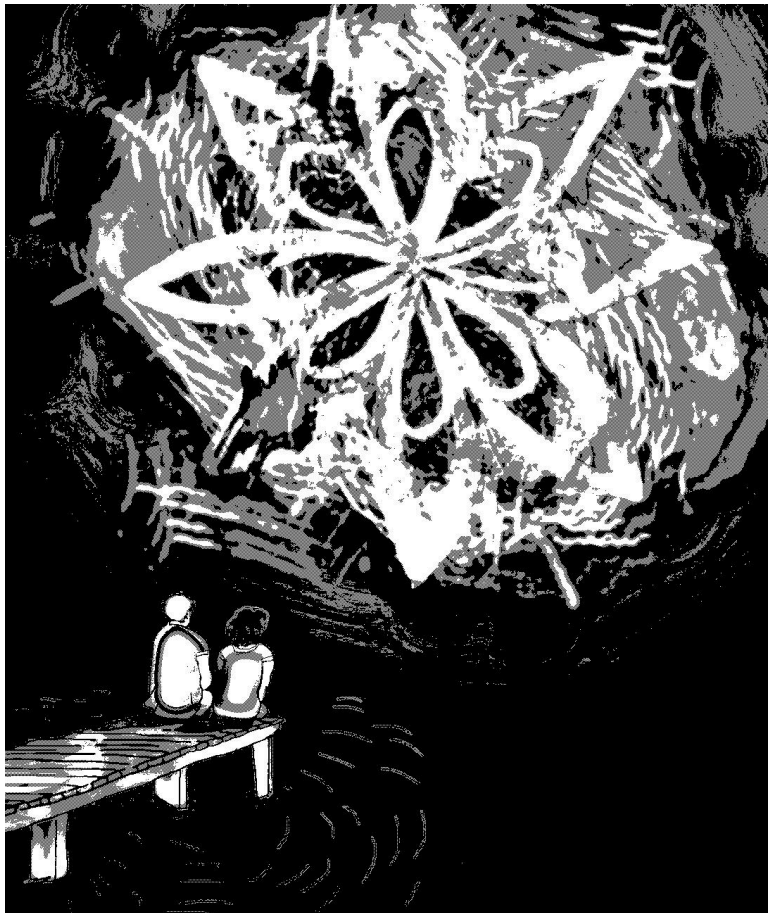
A firework shot up from the barge in the middle of Lake Winnepasaga, through the middle of Hal and Sloan.

Sloan looked over to Hal and then Joan. Joan gave the thumbs up and told her to shoe off.

“Hey Holmes, that dock is empty. That’s always the best seat and-”

Sloan didn’t even finish her sentence, she just took Hal by the hand and they ventured through the crowded gatherings of blankets, tent chairs and stubbing toes on unseen water coolers.

They laid down on the dock and watched each firework fire in the air.



“Ooo!” Said the crowd.

“Ahh!” Also said the crowd.

Until the fireworks finale went off and Sloan whispered in Hal’s ear. Hal smiled, looked in Sloan’s eyes and looked back up at the fireworks.

That 1st of July night, after the fireworks, after our friends and the rest of Maple Falls left the beach, Sloan and I waved goodbye to Joan and the walking lighthouse known as Loudon...And with that, Sloan and I were alone with Lake Winnepasaga.

She turned on the radio and tuned it to

a station after Brother Louie's real talk and we danced to this song. What a night and what was that, as Hal looked up.

"Is that a bi-plane?"

"What's that Holmes?" Sloan placed her hands around Hal's neck and danced with him. Hal looked down at Sloan, smiled and placed his hands around her hips and completely focused on her.

What song do you ask? We just don't know.

Hal was a little embarrassed and Sloan pulled him back and said "Don't stop, come a little closer."

We searched endlessly with just the lyrics we remembered. Lyrics so simple, but exactly just in our moment.

Then, descending down, what seemed to be fireflies of all neon blue surrounded the two and circled a swaying dance.

"What in the world?"

"Yeah." Sloan said as the fireflies formed a flowing curtain around them.

The song spoke to Sloan as she thought.

The song spoke to Hal as he thought.

The two then embraced in a first kiss and held as the lights dazzled around them.

Both looked at each other, smiled and kissed again.

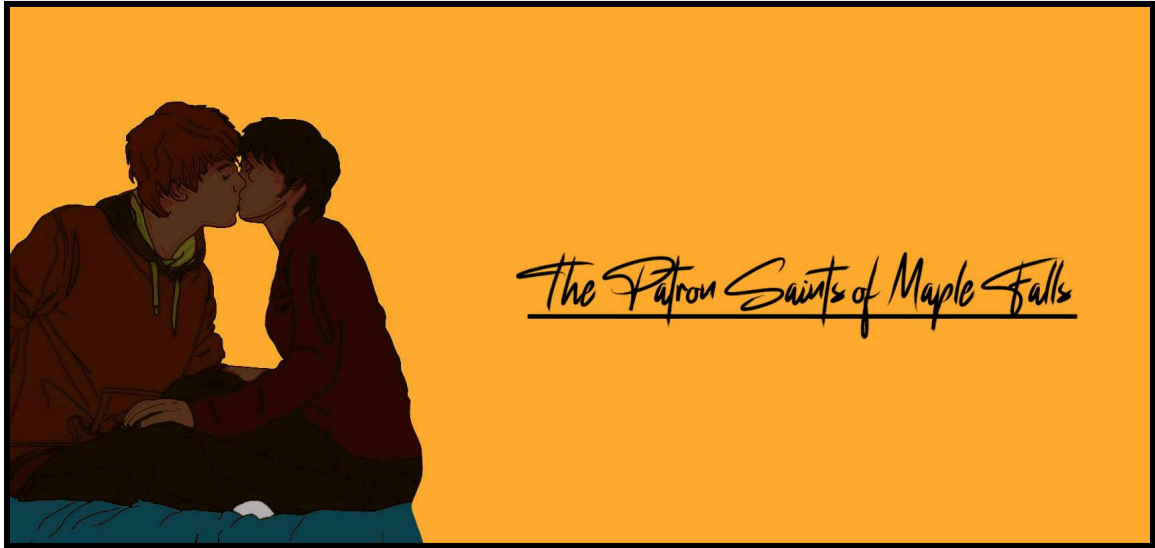
"What did you whisper to me during the fireworks?"

"Kiss me."

Both chuckled and then kissed again.

Chapter 7-

Vignettes of Maple Falls



I spent the entire night thinking about what just happened throughout that day. Feeling the moments and feeling everything that's her and just her. I was swept away to something and somewhere.

I was duct taped by nine hooded people and later to a tiled wall. My beautiful night had ended and my flop sweat fearful morning had started at three.

The duct tape was ripped from Hal's mouth.

"We are the brotherhood, speak your damnation!" Spoke what sounded like a robot.

"Who are you, what do you want with me?!...Why do you sound like 'Let's groove' by earth, wind and fire?"

"See, this is why Sloan likes him." Spoke a hooded figure.

"Silence!"

A large candelabra was lit and revealed seven green hooded individuals.

Suddenly a door opened with Sloan in her Pjs and sneakers, Joan peeked from behind just to see the fun. The brotherhood shrieked and ran back to the shadows.

“Loudon, get Hal down, right now!”

“Loudon?” Hal looked at the hooded figure.

“Sister, we must see if he is friend or foe...Through the trials!”

“The trials!” Everyone repeated with snake-like voices.

“Sloan, should I be worried about any of this?”

“No, you’re in the boy’s bathroom, for crying out loud!”

One of the brotherhood members accidentally nudged the urinal flusher.

“Operation grab him!” Loudon and the brotherhood grabbed Hal and booked it out of the bathroom.

Later that day, after all the duct tape was removed, Sloan and Hal played a one on one casual game of street hockey.

“Sloan, you know you’re not really the typical girl.”

“Oh Holmes, we missed a strip of tape.” Sloan ripped it from Hal’s back “How do you figure?”

“Well ya know. Girl stuff.”

“Well, I think the typical girl is stereotyped in all these factions. A girl can be them, a boy can be them, but I am me....And you are me and we are all together.” Sloan winked.

“So what stereotypes do you fall into, shopping?”

“See, I don’t get that one? Who doesn’t want groovy sneakers?”

“Well, high heels.”

“Oh, fuck that noise. Prince Rodman taught me that high heels were originally made for horseback riding. So it’s not just a so-called girl thing.”

“Prince Rodman?”

“Ren Fest, I’ll take you there some year.”

“Huh, well speaking of which, what about horses?”

“I know how to ride a horse, But no. I didn’t braid their hair and have a collection of plastic horses with gumdrop names. Dude, I also grew up with a brother...Come to think of it, it was just you and your mom. What was that like?”

Hal remembers reading beauty magazines at the beauty salon as he and Aunt Nancy got haircuts

“Hal, what lipstick says I’m a responsible adult?” Alice asked him.

“Doesn't matter, a lighter and brighter shade always brings out our hair color.”

Another day Alice places the tiny 1970s Beatty Box television set on his dresser during a sick day.

“Soup and saltines are all prepped in the kitchen and here’s some television to keep you cultured. Put down the giant ass book you have, Hal.”

Hal pulled down his copy of Moby Dick and looked at the television screen of the soap opera ‘With Winter, comes spring.’

“Case in point Holmes.” Sloan said as she tried to retrieve the ball, but slid to the ground.

“Shit!”

Hal wrapped Sloan’s arm with thick dark tan gauze and Sloan’s blood stained it a deep dark red.

“So how bout’ skincare?”

“Ick, dermatology? Bite my scab!”

“I’m guessing these other scars on your arm are not birthmarks. How many bones have you broken?”

“Oh that’s a big question Holmes. Let’s see, I broke my right leg falling off the bunk bed at three. The left leg falling out of the front yard maple tree at nine. Then I broke my right arm 2 weeks later whilst cushion surfing.”

“Cushion surfing?”

“When you take the cushion of the couch and ride it down the stairs.”

“Ah, of course.”

“Uh, my first hockey injuries were mostly skin related. From this part of my arm to this end I had the whole thing stripped off and it went completely missing on the blacktop.

“Oh, holy shit!”

“Yeah, like a strip of bacon. Oh! I broke my pointer and pinky at the same time and my hand made a ‘rock on’ sign in a cast for the start of that year.

Hal peeled an orange slice and handed it to Sloan “Fitting, still played?”

“Still played and got stitches here, here, here, there...uhh...Everywhere.” She pointed at all of herself.

The day had ended. Amazing how fast 17 hours with someone can fly by and yet then it was the next day.

I just had that feeling when waking up, that I couldn’t wait to see her again. So much so that we both saw each other out of breath at the location we agreed to meet at.

“Did you run here Holmes?”

“Was just gonna ask you the same thing.”

“Eh, cardio. You?”

“Sure...Can I buy you a milkshake?”

Sloan got up from her side of the booth at the Jelly Jar and sat next to Hal. She gave a warm smile and kissed Hal on the lips.

They kissed at the lighthouse.

Kissed in a canoe.

Kissed at a bonfire at Edith Manor.

Kissed on a tree branch in Winnepesga woods.

Kissed in the back corner of culver hardware and surplus next to the socket wrenches.

Kissed at a screening of Back to the Future.

Kissed during a hockey game.

“Yo, guys! You’re so supposed to be kicking each other’s ass, not kissing each other!” Joan shouted.

Chapter 8 -Grease

A greasy hamburger hit a flat top grill.

Food. We need it everyday. No stop, always our stomachs in constant demand. Wherever we go, we burn energy. In the city you could go for a bagel, a hot dog, a gyro, those things on a stick with lots of pulled meat. In these parts of united partnered nations we mostly just get variations of the burger. Cheese, bacon, egg and a crap ton of onions. God! So many onions that'll make you cry for our sorry souls.

Hal is sweating over a grill, flipping over a dozen hamburgers.

Flip till it sweats. Yeah, well I think I'm overcooked.

Earlier that day in the Gonson living room, the Maple Falls Gang is sweating profusely on the couch. Woodsy is on the chair and freaked himself out by his own wooden arm tapping him as it fell off the top of the couch.

Zaccone finishes and places his fourteenth popsicle stick in his collection. He groans with a blue ring around his lips.

Gupp simply was face first on the floor.

“...Sloan!” Shouted Loudon who was sitting right next to Sloan.

“Hmm?” She said with closed eyes and exhaustion.

“Sloan!”

“I said, Hmm!!!”

“Good...you’re alive. Just...Checking.” He blinked the sweat out of his eyes.

Sloan lazily opened her eyes to us “So yeah, the air conditioner crapped out on us this morning. Mom is currently shopping for an air conditioner as I speak. And when it’s Mom with a big purchase...She’s gonna-”

Mrs.Gonson was chatting at the department store with an employee.

“Oh, please tell me more about that one. Sorry, am I a bother?”

“Not at all. Golly, you’re so polite.”

“And you’re a great salesman. Gee, I love this store too, I could-”

Back to Sloan “Literally be there all day. As for dad-”

Dad walked in with a cup of usual peach tea and cheery mode “Anybody thirsty for tea?”

Loudon sprung up like a meerkat and saw the piping hot cup of tea his silvery bone hair father was drinking.

“Are we just a joke to you father?”

“Oh come on, it's not that hot!”

Forsythe opened up the blinds and Loudon screeched like a vampire.

“Back in Georgia, we’d have days up in the one hundred and twenties. Sometimes on Sundays. And my Dad would still do his service...But uh, Also, who ate the popsicles? Like all the popsicles. I just bought them last night.

Zaccone burped.

“Ah...Carry on.” Forsythe exited out of the room and the gang moaned for a bit in harmony.

Meanwhile on screen was a commercial for Cici lemonade with spokesman and actor Ronald Reagan appearing on screen drinking a tall glass of lemonade.

The whole gang licked their lips as good ol Ronald finished his glass “Mmm, I love me some Cici lemonade. I drink a glass everyday. And not just for the refreshing taste, but Cici lemonade has more vitamin C than those competing lemonade brands. And shucks, even good ol orange juice.”

“Loudon, is that true?!” Gupp asked with his face still on the floor.

“Eh, marketing ploy.”

“Well Reagan can surely sell it. He should run for co-president.”

“Eh!” Loudon responded. “Sloan!”

“Hmmm?!”

Why are we still here?!”

“Cause Guitars ‘n’ drums...Music...Fun.”

“Well, why don’t we play?!”

Another long pause filled the room.

“Too hot!”

“Alright, I gotta get to work.” Gupp flipped to his back, the fabric design of the carpet lined his face.

Sloan with a delayed reaction got up, her skin sticking to Hal. “Hold on!”

Later the whole gang is crowded in the back freezer of the butcher shop.

Papa Gupp opens the door. “Your ten minutes are up.”

“Sorry guys. I tried.”

“To spare our skin from third degree burns, the only affordable answer was Snacks and Candy.”

Sloan grabbed the handle of the door to snacks and candy and felt the burn of the metal.

Alice and Bent were smoking a joint by the register.

The gang was now in the midst of a Dig Dug game at the arcade cabinet by the salted nut rolls.

“Damn, and that was our last quarter!” Zacone slammed the machine.

“Our last quarter? You mean to tell me, between the six of you, you only could muster three quarters?” Alice asked.

“Well...Uh.”

“Me thinks you kids need to get a job.” Bent passed the joint back to Alice.

“Don’t you guys get paid for working at the record shop?” Hal asked.

Loudon laughed “For putting records in sleeves, like for an hour tops?”

“Yeah, pops pays in heavy metal records.”

“Seeds and fertilizer here.” Loudon added.

“Pops can literally run the store himself, we just help from time to time.”

“Fuck man, Dig Dug is not gonna make me join the soulless workforce. No way, no how.”

Zaccone raised his fist in protest as Bent hung up a poster that read Van Halen, Kiss and Talking Heads this December in Milwaukee.

“Nevermind.”

Now you don’t really think about your first job. You just say ‘Yes’ and shake the hand of whoever hires you first. And-

Hal shook the hook of his new boss named Lefty, the owner of a drive in restaurant named after him. He had a hook for a left hand, but he always used it as the dominant one and never used his other hand, not once, not ever.

“You’re hired.” Lefty tossed Hal an Apron.

“Thank you sir, but the ad said-”

“You’re a cook. Men are cooks.”

The boss threw more aprons at Loudon, Woodsy and Zaccone.

“Girls are waitresses.” The boss threw red and yellow shirts and skirts at Sloan and Joan. “Can you two skate?”

The following first day of the job had passed and Sloan and Joan were skating with precision and sweat on a usual horribly packed lunch rush.

Sloan turned to us while skating

“I’ve only eaten here once before. Threw up from their chili dog on our way back from Thunder Bay. See, this place is right next to the freeway. It’s more of a truck stop than a drive in. Hence why I am about to do this.”

Sloan chucked a booker beer into the open window of a semi truck. “The boss says I have the spiral of Johnny Unitas.” Sloan skated to the drink station and prepped four twisty bags of ice.

“I quit. This is so inhumane.” Joan wiped her brow and threw the soggy paper towel to the trash.

Sloan etched a tally on the inhumane chalkboard. “Talk about a second day, eh?”

Sloan skated over to the open kitchen and was greeted by Zacccone with brown splattered hands.

“So sorry sloan, I was unclogging the toilet.” Zacccone licked his fingers, raised his caterpillar eyebrows and brought up a chocolate malt order with a smile like a goof.

“Nice one Zacccone. You mind handing these to the others.”

Sloan handed the sandwich bags of ice over to Zacccone.

“Of course! Makes sense, give it to the one whose arms are numb from cookies n cream. No problemo.”

“Hal, you mind coming over.” Sloan asked

“Lil busy.” as Hal flipped burger after burger.

“Let 'em burn! This is important.”

Hal came over and Sloan grabbed him by the collar of his t-shirt and smooched him.

“Thanks, I needed that.”

“...Me too.” Hal was in a loving daze and was only broken out by the grease fire igniting back on the grill.

Work is always consistent, but the schedules are not. We work mornings and sometimes we work nights. Neither schedule is ideal.

Sloan held a bunch of bendy straws to the gang at the start of their morning shift.

So with no consistent schedule, we all decided to pull straws for the job we’d be tasked for that day. And let chance, the gods, or fate decide our layer of hell.

Zaccone pulled a straw that was pink.

“Pink..Not too bad.”

Pink is patty prep. Get in with all your grubby hands...Oh I should mention, we don't have gloves here. Go into the cold and slimy beef and form over about seven thousand burgers for the day. Sounds a lot, but at least you get to sit down. Pink is later tasked with making Malts and shakes.

Woodsy pulled out a blue bottom tipped straw.

“Blue. I'm sorry guys.”

Blue is veggies, condiments and chili prep. It's the easiest job. He will later be tasked with the dishwasher.

“The gods are in your favor my friend.” said Loudon as he pulled out a straw and it was tipped yellow.

Yellow is onion and mushroom prep. Simple job of cutting and grilling them too. But tasked with the second hardest job of being on the grill making the burgers. Though nothing compared to the true demon of the straws.

“I'm so sorry Holmes.”

Sloan and the whole gang came for a big group hug. Hal lifted up the skull straw.

“We didn't give it a color. Those colors at least deserve something. We gave the worst a skull. Death here is known as fry prep.

Hal took big white bucket after big white bucket. One by one out of the walk-in freezer. All with pre prepped fries floating in water. He drained them, put them in the fryer and blanched them. Finishing off every bucket and placing them in a big black tub and placing them in the freezer.

Hal was huffing and puffing with the rush before opening.

Oh, that wasn't it.

Hal positioned a potato on the potato masher and smashed the potato into fries into those infamous big white buckets. When every bucket was full, Hal hosed them to the brim and placed them in the freezer. The endless loop of Sisyphus, if you let it.

Skull gets the easiest job afterwards. Oddly enough, fries. More like it's god giving mercy to the potato...Cept maybe the grease burns.

"OW!"

"Yo, Do you need a medic?" Woodsy asked.

"Nah...I'm fine. Thanks dude." Hal served all the orders with fries and called the waitress'.

"Sloan, Joan, Jessie, Joann and Sally!"

Joann and Sally skated up and they did indeed look like forty year old versions of Sloan and Joan.

"God!" Hal still said in shock.

"Hey Hun, mind giving me a light?"

Hal slowly took the pilot grill lighter and lit Sally's halo cigarette.

"Thanks hun."

Sloan skated up exhausted.

"God, this is the pits. I could use...a cigarette."

"No!" Screamed everyone in the kitchen.

Sloan chuckled and shoved dishes into the dish pit. "They noticed it too. Hey, you know that Joann just ordered the fish?" Sloan put up the ticket.

The whole kitchen is disgusted and makes hurling noises in unison.

Joan opens up the white container and finds the culprit to all the screams. As the whole kitchen staff is huddled back, Loudon and Zaconne arm themselves with Knives and ladles.

"Ah, I see." Joan held a wiggling gutted fish. "This right here is a bowfin. Also known as Mudfish, mud pike, dogfish."

"Each name got less appetizing the further you went. " Loudon added.

"Is it a zombie? Do we have to kill it with fire?" asked Zaconne.

No it is not alive, but its nerves are still in working order. Common for fresh fish and especially trash fish. Huh, that's a clean hole right in the middle of it." Joan threw the Bowfin on the grill "Carry on gentlemen."

A pragmatic person would think that explanation would calm our nerves. Nerves were never calmed.

“Burn you demon!” Loudon shouted.

Woodsy then slammed it with a tenderizer.

Later Joann sunk her teeth in a fish sandwich. “Mmm, it’s so tender.”

Closing time. The whole gang got into Zacccone’s earwig. It’s a knock off bug, but it’s...it’s got four wheels. Hal was sleeping on Sloan’s shoulder.

“Shit, that’s right. He lives across the lake. Fuck! I’m so fucking tired man!” moaned Zacccone.

“It’s okay, I got him,” said Sloan.

At the Gonson house, Loudon, Joan and Sloan lugged Hal up the stairs.

“Yeah, bullshit on you got him.”

“Well, I got him for the rest of the night.”

They got to the top of the stairs and Loudon made kissing noises and a funny voice as Hal was propped to his side.

“Big Kisses. Sloan want giant man. Holy shit, Big boat is out!”

Sloan picked up the yellow bakelite phone on her nightstand as she saw Hal slumber on her bed and called Alice.

“Hi Mrs....Miss...Oh, sorry. Hi Alice. Uh Hal is dead tired from work and I was...Yeah, that’s what I was gonna ask...What do you mean you never did this for your parents?”

The next morning Hal’s eyes slowly opened and saw Sloan fixing a hole in her jersey with a needle and thread.

“Morning Holmes.”

“Hey... Why am I here?”

“You were dead tired and Zacccone didn’t want to drive you home.”

Hal took off his blankets to reveal him still in his uniform “How about that.”

Sloan snickered. "I wasn't gonna undress you holmes. We're dating, but we're not yet at that level of dating."

"Yet?"

"Such an optimist."

"Well now I stunk up your sheets." Hal, disappointed, smelled the stench in the air.

"Dude, I took two showers. I still smell burgers and pickles on me as well. You're cool."

"Does my mom know I'm here?"

"Called her last night."

"Do your parents know?"

"Loudon, Sloan, Hal, breakfast!" Hollered Mrs. Gonson from the kitchen.

"I lied to my folks that you slept in Loudon's garage."

Later at the yellow floral designed kitchen table, with all matching chairs, the whole family and Hal sat down and ate breakfast.

I've never really had a full family breakfast around the table. Usually mom would make pancakes and we would eat them over Tom and Jerry cartoons on the boob tube. Sloan's family was straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Dad was reading the newspaper, mom was serving omelets, orange juice freshly pressed and those english muffins with the same jam Sloan made me. Cinnamon was firmly planted in between my knees, watching my every bite.

Hal threw a piece of bacon into Cinnamon's mouth.

I had tamed the beast.

Loudon, Sloan and Hal headed for the front door. Right next to the new air conditioner in the living room.

I felt good about the road ahead of me. Whatever was ahead of me, I was ready for it.

The three of them slunk to the heat and onto their knees immediately after they exited the door. Hal looked down at a thermometer that had fallen down and melted to the sidewalk.

Dozens of tickets were put up. With each one Sloan and Joan apologized. Loudon looks at the grill and we see him ponder in concentrative exhaustion that it is entirely filled with burgers.

Zaccone sets down fries “That’s all of them from prep...What do I do?”

“Prep more.” Sally said, puffing smoke into the kitchen that was already low on oxygen.

“No, not again!” Zaccone held himself in fear.

“Guys, I’m gonna help. Joan, you got my tables?” Sloan took off her skates and threw on an apron.

“Gotcha covered.”

The blazing sun was hitting the gang hard. Hal is sweating from his brow, but turns on the sink’s knob to hot, thawing out his hands from the milkshakes. Movement slowly came to his fingers.

Sloan finishes cutting the potatoes and hands them to Zaccone.

“Good, I’ll be...Loudon?” Sloan looked over at her brother Loudon, now in his tighty-whities and sweating with quite a deranged face.

“What is it, do you want my soul, is that what you want?! It’s not the burgers and fries you want, you want to reach into my chest and pull out my soul! Then come on you sick bastards! Let’s get it on, let’s get it on like Donkey Kong!”

Loudon rushed out of the kitchen and onto the blacktop. Potato sacks had been tied to his feet to protect his soles.

The rest of the gang ran out for him

Nobody knew what to say, they just wanted the nightmare to end.

But then suddenly all realized as they turned back, that a grease fire had torched the roof of the building.

After all of that, I think it was an act of mercy given by god.

Sloan and the gang all counted their money on a pink park bench outside of Gupp’s meats and she turned to us “We each over the course of three days made \$55. Enough for snackage for the rest of the

summer I guess. A price to pay for your soul. But hey, it's on a resume and well, it was enough for Holmes to get a job in his own air conditioned paradise."

Sloan rang the bell on the counter at vanilla bean books. Hal got up from filing across the shop and met with Sloan who handed him a plastic bag.

"Alice said you forgot your lunch."

"You called my mom?"

"Force of habit of calling you. We talked more about Hendrix. She says I'm too cool for you."

"Makes sense, but you got my lunch. Dude, you went all that way?"

"No, I made you a new lunch."

"You made me a new lunch?"

"Eh, It's just tuna fish on rye with some potato chips and some lemonade...And some cookies I baked."

"Cookies?...Dude, these are oatmeal raisin cookies!" Hal took a bite. "Oh man, these are so good. Sloan, you really didn't have to."

"Eh yeah, but I wanted to."

"You did?"

"Well yeah, I really like you."

"I really like you too. You know it's kinda dead during this time and no adult supervision."

Come the next day, the following and the following after that, Hal had remembered his lunch and so did Sloan as she sat on the hard oak front desk where Hal jocked the register and exchanged thoughts, stories, love and oatmeal raisin cookies.

Chapter 9 -Ballpark beer

We find ourselves with our Maple Falls gang, just outside Snacks and Candy by the dumpster. Loudon is bashing a television set while the gang is sipping sodas and biting into licorice.

Loudon stopped in his thwacks and had a thought, the first thought of the day “Wait...I got an idea.”

Sloan turns to us as she exits Zaccone’s ratty earwig that sounds more like it runs on a three packs of cigarettes a day coughing fit, than an actual engine. Out to the stale beer smelling air of Macallan park. “Welcome to Macallan park. Named after R.W Macallan. A local Minnesotan...Hero?...Sure. See, just before Dominion day, the region formerly known as the United States of America, now of course our beautiful United Partnered Nations was trying to gain ownership of Minnesota from Canada. Weird to think that Canada, America and Mexico used to be separate governments...Anyway, Macallan challenged then President Andrew Johnson to a drinking contest to secure Minnesota as a Canadian territory. The

challenge was accepted by Johnson, thus signing himself a death certificate. For Johnson, seven hours into the competition fell face first into a bowl of cashews and died of alcohol poisoning... Well, that's at least how the movie went. Good movie, Belushi plays Macallan and Akyroyd plays Johnson. It's a classic."

The game had already started, but you couldn't really tell. For, about fifty percent of the people were roaming around the outer ring. Beer stands, hot dog stands, hamburger stands. All repeating in that order in the endless loop. You'd ask for a hot dog and with one press of a button, the dog was there via a chute that descended from the ceiling. This stadium, like so many, is owned by MCM Bank. So it incorporates the tube technology to everything. It's even used for batting practice.

Hal handed a fiver and it was shot up through the tube.

"Sc'mon Hal." Sloan nodded over.

We bought nosebleed seats, but with everyone chowing down and ball hawkers going for foul balls, we got seats up in front and quite literally in the action at the foul ball line.

A ball is whacked and immediately it hurtles towards Hal. "Oh, shit!"

Sloan caught the ball in the nick of time, with her glove lightly tapping his nose.

"Ball one." Sloan tossed the ball to Loudon.

"Ball one." Loudon repeated and tossed it in his backpack.

"You alright Holmes?...Where's your glove?"

"I uh..."

"Jesus, Capther, did you play any sports in the twin cities?" Loudon tossed him a glove."

"I played basketball."

"Yeah, was gonna ask, how are you so tall when your mom is so short?" Woodsy added.

"Uh, my dad is 6'7."

"Damn, that's almost as tall as Gupp!" Gupp added.

"Well I wanna play against you holmes. One on one sometime?"

"You bring the ball. I'll be there."

The effects of Dad stealing all our stuff is still tough. With Aunt Edith's bequeathed house, came bequeathed items. The furniture was all ready with cushions that had no bounce and were non loungeable. Mostly for only upright stiff positions. Added with normal everyday objects like the scissors that are so sharp, when dropped, it can cut through antique mahogany flooring like butter.

Obviously a ninety something lady didn't have a basketball lying around. I'm sure she's probably older than the sport itself.

Sloan nudged Hal "Yo, Holmes, you want a story? That's where you go."

Hal pointed out at the Bullpen for the Minnesota Stouts "There and them?"

"Yeah Holmes. Just look at them. I just so want to hear those stories in that Bullpen. See the old man talking to the rookie giving practice swings. There's a whole age old story being told right there."

Listening in, we hear the old mullet and mustache baseball player talk to the rookie

"See up in the stands, left of center field. Ex-Wife and her new lover. Not even fully divorced...How many fingers of his do you think I can break before it becomes a felony?"

Back in the stands, vendors by the dozen walk the stairs for customer needs that are too tired to walk or move. No hot dogs, no peanuts, just only selling cheap, but expensive beer.

"Beer, Beer, Beer!" Was the only word they said to make a sale.

With the same answer from the stadium patrons.

Followed were slung shots of full cans of beer landing in hands and baseball mitts. One in fact flying past Hal's head.

Hal took action and confronted the careless vendor, only to be handed a beer and being passed by.

No card, no pay, not even a word as this minor held this cheap can of booker beer.

I looked over to the others as I sat down and just stared at the pull tab of the can.

Sloan took notice of Hal and held his hand that was holding the beer.

"Hey...Uh...Like, we don't want to get caught."

Hal's eyes locked with Sloan's. Sloan's other hand took the beer and lifted it up and gave the beer to a passing security guard. A security guard who was delighted and didn't take notice of where it came from, just only in the beer.

Two root beers were cracked open.

"You sure? We don't card." The clerk asked in concern.

"Yeah, we're cool." Sloan handed Hal a root beer and sat down with him.

"How you doing holmes?"

"That obvious?"

"Yeah, but whatever. Go at your own pace."

"Well my dad's a drinker. Just thinking about hereditary shit, ya know?"

"Sorta...My dad's in AA."

"Wait, your dad? Your tea drinking dad?"

"Yeah, actually my Mom wouldn't marry him if he didn't stop drinking. He's been going ever since. Hasn't missed one meeting. He has the chips framed in his office, which pairs well with his coin collection."

"Now that's sounding more like your dad."

"But yeah, I feel it, I guess. I'm a lot like my dad. I just don't want that part of him. I mean we have the same ears, what more is there? Do you look like your dad?"

Hal paused and came to a weird realization "...I don't know."

"Well, you're a lot like your mom." Sloan pulled out a joint and handed it to Hal.

The mullet and mustache player that Sloan pointed out, now pointed out Sloan as he held his chili filled dog. "Hey!...Come with me."

Five minutes later Sloan, Hal and the rest of the Stouts ate hot dogs and smoked weed in the dugout, laughing their asses off with shared stories.

One player said "Yeah Frank, I'll invite you to the orgy."

"Does this rash look infected?" said another.

Meanwhile other baseball players were simply chanting “Chug, chug, chug!” at a beer drinking contest, as per usual tradition.

“Yeah, I’ll have his head on a pike by the end of the game.”

“Hey kid, you’re my size. Wanna take my swing? I got to spew.” The Baseball player took off his jersey and handed it to Hal. Hal paused for a bit and looked at Sloan and then the team.

“Well, go on out there skinny!”

Number 34 pressed a helmet on him and took him out of the dugout and onto the plate.

“Okay, hit the ball. Easy as that. Got it?”

“I...I guess.” Hal looked over at Sloan.

“The fuck did he get himself-” Sloan raised up her thumb up and mouthed ‘Fuck it’ with a smile.

“Yeah, fuck it!” Hal cracked his neck and went to home plate.

“Now batting, Jose Zaragoza.” The announcer said on the loudspeaker.

Back in the stands, Zacone got up from his seat “Holy shit, it’s Hal!”

“Alright, well let’s see...How fast can a baseball really go?” Hal’s eyes blinked and missed the ball.

“Strike 1!”

“That fast apparently. Alright, I just got to focus on the ball and swing.”

“Strike 2!”

“Fuck it!”

Hal blindly swung the bat with the next pitch and it made contact with the ball. Soaring high into the nosebleed seats.

The whole gang and the crowd went nuts.

“Jose, run the bases you drunk fuck!” The catcher shouted at Hal.

Hal went out and ran all the bases with the biggest smile on his face.

Amazing how crazy can mend your problems. How fear can fix the problem.

Hal steps on home plate and with it, crushes a beer can that is laid right upon it.

Through the radio waves, on a cafeteria table tuned to that exact game was Alice listening in at work.

Dr. Wyland passed by “Are you a baseball fan?”

Alice tuned it to a rock station playing ‘Time Between’ by The Byrds.

“Ah, groovy, the byrds.” Dr. Wyland walked off.

“Aren’t you gonna ask if this seat is taken?”

“Is this-”

Alice slowly pushes out the chair on the other side of the table.

Back at the game Sloan pulls Hal by the shirt into a photobooth. Sloan and Hal start making out and the photos are taken one after the other.

“Oh, last one! Look at the camera!”

Hal and Sloan turned to the camera. Hal was in a daze and Sloan smirked.

Sloan grabbed the photos and handed the other copy to Hal “One for you, one for me.”

The gang found themselves the remainder of the afternoon staring at the clouds in the grass with the other baseball players. Several joints were being passed, along with the pretzel man handing the players a savory doughy reward after a losing game.

“That one looks like MSP news’ anchor Chick Halloway.” Loudon pointed out.

“That one looks like a mermaid.” Joan pointed out.

“That cloud looks like a treasure chest.” Hal pointed out.

“That cloud looks like rain.” A player said.

“Woah, deep.” Everyone responded in unison.

“What do you see, Sloan?” Hal asked.

“I...I think I see the little dipper.”

“What, where?” Hal looks to where Sloan is pointing “Oh, yeah, that’s Polaris and... Wow.” The two looked at each other and both smiled as they grasped interlocking hands.

Chapter 10 -Last days of Summer

Breathing in scuba gear, Joan flopped out of her canoe and into Lake Winnepasaga. Sinking to the bottom sand floor, she laid back and stretched out her arms and legs. Drifting in her favorite peace.

The same day Sloan arrived at Edith Manor before Hal got up. She found herself in the living room with Alice, looking through scattered cardboard boxes “Yeah, you won’t find many pictures of me in there. My dad sold most of them in a garage sale.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I know. I know the kind of person who sells family photographs, but what kind of person buys family photographs is a mystery to me.”

“Whose this?”

“That’s my half brother.”

“What’s his name?”

“No idea. My Dad hardly talked about his other family much. He never returned to them after the war. He started a completely new life.”

“Damn, that’s insane...Don’t take it the wrong way, but it’s kind of crazy that your life happened because of a dick move.”

Alice chuckled “No, you’re not wrong. My Dad was a piece of shit.”

Alice passed the joint to Sloan, she took a hit and passed it to Alice “Shit, this stuff is premium.”

“The perks of being an adult. Long gone are the days of picking seeds and stems out of your stash.”

“Oh, I found one of you. Wow, you really look like my cousin Joan in this one.”

“How so?”

“Cause you look fucking pissed.”

“That’s your reasoning? Okay...Yeah, that was the day my Dad and Step Mom kicked me out.”

“Yeah, Hal said you were only seventeen? How did you survive at that age?”

“The one who took the photo, Hal’s father. He took me in when he found out I was pregnant. Though sadly it took some convincing, even after I moved in. Though when he was on tour with Jimi, it was pretty chill. After Hal’s dad I had the cash to live with on my own.” Alice took a puff.



“Jimi?! As in Ezy Rider, Voodoo Child with a slight return, Hendrix?!” Sloan coughed and caught her breath.

“Yeah, Jimi recorded that before Hal was born.” Alice handed Sloan a picture of Jimi and her.

“Holy shit!”

“Sloan?” Hal came walking down the stairs and gave a few scruffs to Ulysses the pig.

“Hiya Holmes.” Sloan passed the joint to Alice.

Driving down the dirt road to the rink and blasting ‘Burning of the midnight lamp’ by Jimi Hendrix, I sat in the back with the utmost confusion at the friendship my mother was making with Sloan. My mom is indeed only thirty-three, but still, the principle of it all. Oh god, that wording!. Am I lamer than my own mother? Will the rebel youth never live up to the 1960s? Again, the wording Capher.

At the rink, while fitting their skates, Hal confessed “I can’t believe you got high with my mom...Over pancakes.”

After a simple skate we went back to Sloan’s.

I’ll tell ya something, the Gonson family home does not have an area of wall that was not bare. Framed photos of family vacations, family reunions. All organized like puzzle pieces on the wall. Even photos of family concerts. Last year was apparently a kiss concert in Wisconsin.



Hal looked at the concert photo of Sloan as Paul Stanley and Loudon as Ace Frehly in a giant littered field by the stage.

Sloan and Loudon are twins in DNA and it shows, from similar hockey scars to their own slang. Sloan calls me ‘Holmes’ and Loudon calls me ‘Big Boat’.

His reasoning?...No Idea.

Sloan noticed Hal rifling through the photos as she brought in a giant wooden dome cedar trunk

“This is trunk 1 of...I don’t know, Loudon would know, he takes all the photos. But this one has a lot of older stuff.”

Sloan took out a scrapbook that read ‘It’s a boy and a girl!’

The opening pages detailing the first days Sloan and Loudon

had on this earth. Birth certificates, photos of Betty, Forsythe and Uncle Stu holding them.

Hal turned the page and saw quaffs of hair underneath a yellowed piece of tape, both completely jet black as the day they were clipped.

“Oh, your mom did this too?”

“I know, isn’t it cool? Like they could totally clone us in the future.”

“You have such dark hair. Who are your people?”

“Mom’s side is mostly English and French. Dad’s side is a mystery, he was adopted. He never found out who his real birth parents were.”

“Man, that sucks.”

“I know! It’s weird just having a piece of your life missing.”

“Do you guys visit the adopted family much?”

“Dad’s originally from Georgia and we’ve visited the church that his dad preached at. Here’s him.”

Sloan passed a photo of an older black preacher holding the bible close to his heart.

“Dad was legit left on the doorstep of his church as a baby. And George and his wife...Uhhh...Mabel, brought him into their home and kept Dad a secret. This was 1936 after all.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, shit sucked. But they raised him, homeschooled him. Grandpa George was the one who taught Dad to play the piano.”

“What happened to him?”

“Grandpa George was an older guy when he took Dad as his son. He was about 50 years old in that photo.”

“Did you ever get to meet him?”

“He died a year after Loudon and I were born. Happened around Christmas time. The only time we spent Christmas without the Wylands. Dad even played for the Christmas service. The church mails us a letter every holiday from the current pastor. Dad keeps them in this binder here. He visits pretty much

every summer. He says he picks the summer because he misses the heat that can bake breakfast on the sidewalk.”

Time had passed and a lot of photos and precious things were scattered on the floor. Betty stopped in and watched the two from a distance and smiled.

“What’s this one?”

“That photo? That’s the night my parents met. See the number my Mom is wearing? Those were her work clothes after a double shift waitress/singer job. It was some uptight Italian restaurant, that was apparently nothing special, except the piano player that queued her in when she sang. Check him out, Holmes.” Sloan pointed to the man behind the piano.



“Is...Is that your dad?”

Sloan nodded and smiled.

“How old are your parents?”

“Mom is 47 and dad is...49.”

“Damn, your mom is 47?”

“Yep, good genetics...Dad on the other hand...Well he was born middle aged.”

“It’s some kind of wonderful miracle we were born in the same year.” Hal said.

“It’s a miracle that you’re here...Kind of wished you’d have moved earlier.”

The two kissed “Say, what song did they perform that night?”

“It was ‘April Showers’

Hal started playing the piano horribly “How does it go again?”

“You putz.” Sloan snickered, sat down and started playing it.

“Well, where’s the lyrics?...Well, guess I’ll have to sing it myself. At last, my love has come along.” Hal sang in a tone deaf voice.

“Oh god, holmes! Here, you win!”

“When the sun gives way to april-”

“I said you won!”

“Well then come on, don’t be shy.”

Sloan started from the top. With first eyes closed, then eyes for Hal.

Walking to Edith Manor Sloan strummed her Benedetto electric on a pig nose portable amp.

“People only see two sides, but there are three sides.” Hal stated.

“The third eye?”

“Nah, only Prince can see that. But there is one side with one ideology and another with a differing ideology. There is also a third that sees both sides. Maybe they see the truth, maybe they see a better answer, but what matters is that they see both sides now.”

“Both sides now?” Sloan started strumming ‘Both Sides now’ by Joni Mitchell in the style of Pat Martino.

When the two entered the forest island in the heart of the maple trees, Hal tried to speak, but his voice never uttered a word. For the tip of Sloan's pointer finger hushed any from his lips. She mouthed with exaggeration and body language “No speaking, trust me.”

Hal nodded and Sloan mouthed “Sc’mon.”

Cracks of twigs, rolling pebbles and tumbling stones. Splashes of fish in the stream, leaves of emerald, crimson and gold rustled after a wind whistle. Squirrels scurries, bird songs as the two took a dip in the watering hole.

Sloan mouthed “Look” and the two saw a family of deer. Buck, doe and three fawns circled around the water. In the middle of the watering hole was a staircase of stone that circled a two person fit oasis of clover.

The two laid down with the forest playing that tune for them to a midday slumber. A joint was lit and smoke was on the breeze.

Back at the rink on another day, the last day of summer vacation actually, Sloan circled around Hal “You’re pulling your punches Holmes.”

“Well, I am pretty big and-

Sloan stopped with her hockey stick “I don’t care that you’re a foot taller than me. Case in point, notice how you’re on the ground?”

Sloan helped Hal up. “This is hockey Holmes. You got to trust me to take a fall, as I trust you with a shoulder check to the wall. I can take you, let that steam out! I know it’s there!”

Sloan started huffing, puffing and grunting like a gorilla “You’re an animal Holmes, Show me it!” Sloan and Hal were facing off, Sloan knocked him down again, “Come on, show me! Or am I gonna score



another goal on you?!”

Hal got up and raced over for a save at the net.

The ball rolled forward and with his stick, Hal guided it to Sloan’s goal. The two battled it out, but Hal pushed Sloan out for a slapshot goal.

“Yes!...You didn’t just give me that goal, did you?”

She shook her head. Sloan’s smile was immense, her heart fell hard for this city boy.

The two after the game laid in the grass, completely covered in sweat, trading

swigs of a sports drink.

“Sloan, why hockey? For like you personally.”

“Well I think...I think we could solve so many unnecessary disputes between one another by playing hockey. Like man, whether you're a teacher,plumber or especially politician, the feeling of checking your opponent is a hell of a sweet release. And like, the only lasting scars are visible, rather than emotionally left in, ya know? Then the game is over and you're just left with yourselves and how you really feel about the other.”

“How do you feel when you're with me?”

“Weightless.”

The two kissed and watched the clouds in the sky.

Chapter II -First days of Sophomore year

First day of school.

The alarm went off for every student of Maple Falls, tuned into 105.9 you'd be hearing School Days by The Runaways. Hal was pulling down a button up from the wire, Loudon was brushing his teeth and Joan was already reeling in a fish off the dock of Lake Winnepasaga. Sloan was calmly bobbing her head to the music, still in bed.

"How do they expect me to get up for school when they're playing this song of these angels, these neon angels on the road to ruin...But uh, it's the first day of school, what do I got for y'all?"

Later that day Sloan walked the halls of Larkin Academy “Well we start with a bang! First period is-” Sloan held her guitar and read off her classes off a ratted up yellow lined note card “...Fuck! I read that wrong. Guys we have 1st period-”

Meanwhile at Geometry class, Mr.Morris made a pie chart that had the header of ‘My Bank Account’ and two halves.

“You see, my ex-wife gets half of my money. Even though she did jack shit in the marriage and that money is clearly mine.”

Sloan turned to us again “Why is math always 1st period? Like I suck at math already, you think I’m gonna be better at it at eight in the goddamn morning?”

“Okay second period band!”

“Miss Gonson! I expected punctuality from you! Explain your tardiness?” Spoke Mr.Stern a balding gray haired man with the most perfect posture and a scar vertical to each eye.

“Uh, Hal is still getting used to the campus sir.”

“Who is this Hal?”

“Uh, Hal Capher Sir...Mr.Stern.”

“Ah, my new 2nd chair trumpet. Do not make your tardiness a regular folly Mr.Capher, or you will be bumped to the 3rd chair!”

“I’m sorry-”

“No apologies. Apologies are for sore losers. Sit down, now!” Mr.Stern smacked down his baton.

“Alright, let’s begin where we left off.”

“Uh, left off?” Hal raised his hand “It’s the first day.”

Mr.Stern rolled his eyes in annoyance “Fine! Fourth chair clarinet, hand him a skirt!”

An unnamed student and the only one sitting on the floor was the fourth chair clarinet handing Hal a grass hula skirt.

“Thank you Mr.Stern.” the 4th clarinet said sheepishly.

“Get out of my face 4th clarinet. 2nd trumpet!” Mr.Stern only called the 1st chairs by their actual names, everyone else was just a chair. “You can sing back up at first. Do you know the tokens?”

“Ummm, yes?”

Mr.Stern raised his baton and Sloan started singing ‘The lion sleeps tonight.’ and Hal looked in deep confusion as he had followed the dance of the other hulu skirted classmates while singing the doo-wop classic.

Loudon played the giant drums in the back and Sloan also did the Clarinet solo as she was also 1st chair.

After band class the whole gang sat down at the usual picnic table outside of the school.

“God, this school is either teachers that go above and beyond or...Are Mr.Morris.” Hal said.

“That’s public schools for ya, big boat.”

“You’ll get used to his teaching, Holmes.”

“Yeah, sure. Hal, you know how she got the first chair?” Loudon said as she pointed out his sister with a celery stick.

“How?”

“Variaciones Concertantes.”

Sloan suddenly jolted in her seat “I told you not to repeat those words!”

Sloan put herself back together and munched on a sweet sixteen apple “Well, it’s okay. You got your writing.” Sloan added.

“Well, it’s not a competition. I’m not like I’m the school’s writer.”

“You’re not.” Joan answered.

“Yeah and also not the school’s artist.” Sloan added

“Wait...Then who is?”

Meanwhile at the sunshine room library, Hal was handed a comic box full of fully illustrated and photo copied comic books titled ‘Lotion Man and Captain Moron’. And it was written and illustrated by our golden boy Loudon Gonson.

“Holy shit.” Hal flipped through the comic and started reading.

“See Holmes, he started making these comics like...What? The 6th grade?” Sloan asked Loudon.

Loudon nodded timidly and organized the comic books in the right order.

“And they were an instant hit here in Maple Falls. This right here, the school paid for the entire catalog. Though check this out.”

The gang was in english class “Mr.Mcguire’s desk has the latest issue.”

In Mr.A’s office “Mr.A is rereading a classic. The cardboard boxes of doom.”

At the art class garage “Miss Jezebel has a commissioned painting of Detective Dozen.”

“What are they about?”

Mr.Morris walked in on the conversation “They’re a group of detectives who solve crimes under the same face, but with over a dozen personalities. Detective Red is my favorite. Detective Green needs to die, Mmmkay?”

Hal pointed at Mr.Morris in disbelief as the somber math teacher left the art studio.

“Yeah, I know! Mr.Morris can actually enjoy things.” Sloan chuckled as Hal kept reading Loudon’s comic.

The comic book is absolutely phenomenal. Though the only person who hasn’t said a thing about it, is the creator himself. Loudon is like that, you gotta get into his world to understand that he’s an absolute genius and savant at everything he touches. About a couple of days ago we were at Culver hardware and surplus and he was buying coping saws, gouges, spool clamps, verniers and drawing compasses’. I had to ask what he was making. He said ‘I don’t know, been thinking about making a violin.’ He doesn’t show off, others show him off. And that’s where I see the biggest relation with him and Sloan. They only create, they don’t care what other people think. Makes you think huh, when I’m out there in the world. Do I write for the newspaper and what they want? Or do I give them what I created? Do I give them myself? Makes you think and then you realize, it’s only third period home ec. A class solely dedicated to being taught how to live. Our introduction is called ‘Apple Pie’.

Hal kept checking the recipe and his measuring spoons “Wait, how many teaspoons of nutmeg?”

Sloan shrugged “I don’t know Holmes. I just kind of like wingin’ it.”

Mr.Holloway looked at the apple pie “You melted cheddar on top, good on you Sloan.”

Mr.Holloway took a bite and another bite “Great on you Sloan.”

Sloan’s slice was the only one taken away.

Hal threw his towel over his shoulder and asked Sloan “May I?”

Hal tasted it, took another bite and another bite till it was finished “Damn Sloan, how did you learn to bake?”

“My pops.”

“He does make a damn good lasagna.”

“Yes he does, award winning.”

“Award winning?”

“Blue ribbon lasagna.”

“Hey, wait a minute! I’ve been to Lasagna stock at the state fair! Maybe we’ve-”

“Crossed paths? Yeah, that’s very likely.”

“Princess kay of the milky way? I always vote and get ice cream every time I go.”

“Dude, I’ve ridden in the buttermobile. Martha’s cookies?”

“Best cookies on the planet! You should make tiny ones like Martha’s, it’d beat the itch of waiting a whole year to get them again.”

“Oh, I couldn’t make them as good as Martha’s.”

“Ya sure?” Hal pointed a spatula to Sloan’s pie.

Sloan licked her lips and brushed back a blush “Thanks Holmes.”

Before class I thought of my future, now it’s a wonder of my past through those streets of the state fair. Like how many times we crossed paths and maybe, just maybe.

August 1976

Little Hal gets to milk the cow. Little Sloan the next day drinking the milk.”

August 1978

Hal loses his tank to space invaders. On the leaderboard it reads 'SAG' on the top.

August 1981

Sloan is dunked and Hal walks by with a corn on the cob.

August 1983 at sweet martha's cookies. One bump of our later day patron saints, but a hello wouldn't happen for another 23 more months.

But in the end, I'm just glad I'm in the present. I hold it tight and wish for only it and nothing else.

Sloan looked for the teacher to turn the other way and kissed Hal quickly on the lips.

Since moving to Maple Falls I've witnessed a lot of homes other than my own. You know that I spend most of my days at the Gonson's house and store. What they are like in their habitat. Like Loudon himself, creating his improved ecosystem in his backyard

But outside the strums of the Sloan, the knots of Joan, or the crock pot Macaroni of Mr. Gonson, we have other friends. I learned that Gupp's house is built for the size of his family.

Sloan hopped up on the counter and reached for the cookie jar.

Hal walked in and saw Sloan and couldn't help but snicker.

"Shut up!"

"I'm sorry, you just look like a borrower."

"You're not getting a cookie."

Bent's apartment is actually a top of snacks and candy. It was what you expected, but also did not expect.

The Maple Falls gang entered the apartment and the flooring was-

"It's just one big mattress throughout." Hal answered.

"Yeah, it's a pain to flip it, but it's worth it."

At Zaccone's house it was quite the opposite "Open, fire!"

Current laws are being placed so that any person can not own more than over 25 firearms. The Zacccone's currently own 756 firearms. Their garage where they store their weapons, cars and lifetime supply of beef jerky that Zacccone's dad won in the summer of 1976, is bigger than their actual house.

Hal walked through the house.

The house hasn't seen an update since 1933 and is much in need of renovation or as Zacccone's brother puts it 'detonation.'

Zacccone's brother's hand was down his pants and went in for a handshake with Hal, realizing the error in his courtesy at the last second.

"I'm gonna go wash my hands."

Loudon stopped him and spoke under his breath "I wouldn't if I were you, the water is brown." Loudon took out a moisty nap and handed it to Hal "I got a bunch in my pocket if you find another thing gross."

Hal and Loudon shot off rounds into beer cans on a fence with a couple of shotguns.

"How does it feel, big boat?"

Hal was shaking "This thing is too powerful. No one should handle a thing this powerful."

"Ha! See this is what I wanted to get out of you Hal."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a smart cookie Hal. What are you, a futurist, moralist, do you see that we're all binary with different variations by our times?"

Hal chuckled "I don't know, I guess I'm me."

"Which is?"

"Happenstance I guess."

"You feel you don't control your own destiny?"

"The world doesn't revolve around me, I revolve around it."

Loudon cocked the shotgun and fired "Hence the little black book?"

“Yeah, it makes the world and my thoughts more clearer...But to correct you, I’m not a smart cookie. I’m actually kind of dumb.”

“Someone who is smart is the first person to admit and compel they’re dumb.” Loudon pulled a skeet shot that shot whiskey bottles “Case in point.” And opened fire at the bottle.

“Hey Loudon, is that a bullwhip?”

“Yes it is Hal, yes it is.”

Loudon went over to a bullwhip and started to unwind it “Intelligence is purely effort. Take the initiative and mold your own experience. The Zaccone’s have the money for change in their surroundings, but they either piss or shoot it away.” Loudon whipped the whiskey bottles to a shatter.

Hal tapped Loudon on the shoulder “Is that a cannon Loudon?”

“Yes it is Hal, yes it is.”

Loudon packed the cannon and slid the cannonball down. “Well then how would you envision a future world Loudon?”

“For us? We need to connect more to just one singular area. Leave the freeways and highways alone. Let nature reclaim its land.”

“How about these singular areas?”

“They would need to be a perfect balance of nature and eco-friendly resources, so no cars.”

Loudon lit the wick and the cannon fired into Lake Winnepesaukee.

“So like, just transit?”

“People give fault. A mathematical based schedule of interweaving trains with stabilization units will cause little to no accidents. Imagine taking a train to a grocery store located on the 20th floor.”

“Hey!” Zaccone’s older brother came out in flip flops and flop sweat from his bowl cut over a lack of an air conditioned house. “You call that firepower?!”

Zaccone’s brother pulled out, what looked to be-

“Is that a flamethrower, Loudon?”

“Yes it is Hal, yes it is.”

Zaccone's brother lit the family's weekly garbage pile up. Quite a tall stack for a family of three in the span of seven days.

Like Loudon said earlier that day 'Intelligence takes effort'. Those who do not progress will die young and they will miss the burning of the world.'

But here we are.

The gang was back in math class. "167 times 53." Loudon asked Sloan

"I don't know, why are you asking me math questions in math class?"

"I said quiet time!" Mr.Morris mumbled as the entire class had nothing to do as Morris took a nap at his desk after a long night at his second job as a bartender. With the good ole "Don't say anything and you won't get homework." deal.

"Somebody hit the trip wire." Loudon said.

The door opened and it was Miss Shannon the school receptionist.

"Hey Morris, just looking for Spillman. He's got to get ready for his speech."

"Spillman has shop class right now." Sloan said.

"Oh sorry, thanks Sloan."

Miss Shannon left and Loudon got up "I'll set the trip wire again."

"Hey!" Mr.Morris tossed Loudon a snack cake "Class, snack cakes are for winners." Mr.Morris went back to sleep.

Hal was in the midst of sketching a drawing during lunch and Sloan walked over and saw herself.

"Hey, it's me...With goggles and a cape?"

"Still?!" Hal tore out the drawing and was about to crumple it.

"Wait, what are you doing?!" Sloan snagged the drawing back.

"He's been trying to draw a new character for the series. He created her and she's gonna be in a run of the dozen detectives, but he keeps drawing you by accident." Loudon added.

"Well, who is she and who is she about?"

“She's a high schooler named Alley Albright, who can switch her brain to Ultrasmart mode and solve big city crimes. But only for at most 24 hrs. Otherwise she has to make up for the time she's superhuman, when she is human. She also has super strength and can leap modest sized buildings.”

Loudon answered.

Sloan looked at the drawing and then smiled “Then draw me on purpose.”

Loudon confidently slid over a sheet “Please sign this likeness waiver.”

As days went on Hal went over to the Gonson residence. He wasn't just Sloan's boyfriend, It was a collective. As they all bounced ideas out for Alley and how she could fight alongside Detective Dozen, Marshmallow Mindy, Gray Duck and Crash Test Tim.

“Like how is Alley gonna work in our universe. She is silly, but your stories are a little darker...She can work with Detective, but how about Lotion Man?”

“Have less unnecessary explosives?” Sloan added.

“Well, it's not my universe, it's your universe. Why don't I make my own and we can crossover when we understand more of this.”

Loudon blinked rapidly for a bit “Hells fucking yeah. That's a great idea.”

“You guys should name your universes.”

Sloan turned to us “And that's how the imperfect circle arc started.

She turned to us again as copies of the first issue of their collaboration hit the shelves. Detective Dozen and the Alley Albright mystery.

“The two best known writers and artists in Maple Falls, working together. People are going fucking nuts.”

Mr.Morris slammed the issue in front of Hal and Loudon “Capher, give the next issue first and I'll boost your grade.”

“Ha! He can't do that for me.” Loudon slapped the back of his partner.

Sloan turned to us “So yeah, like I said best known.”

Outside in the canoe alone was Joan and a journal. Drawing a detailed school of walleye with a story above and below it.

A nibble came to her fishing pole and she closed her book for an easy pull and reel in of a walleye, just like the ones in her journal.

Lounging on the windowsill in the tutor room, Sloan finished the last page of Alley Albright vs. The Music Monster.

“Damn, that was so sad. I hope Music Monster is okay.”

Hal saw her shedding a tear, when she read Music monster was unplugged and faded to radio waves.

“He’ll make it through.”

“No spoilers though!”

“I promise.”

“How did write his lyrics so perfectly?”

“Well, he was slowly dying. The truth comes out in that kind of pain.”

“You’ve had that kind of pain?”

“Well, everybody hurts.”

“That hard though?”

Hal shrugged, “I don’t know, anybody can write.”

“Show me.”

Sloan pulled out her Gallotone and started plucking and playing an instrumental.

“Well, what can I write with that?”

“Well, what’s on your mind?”

“Uhhhh?”

“Well, who's on your mind?”

“You.”

“Well, be true and write about how you feel about me.”

“You’re not gonna help me?”

“They’re your feelings. Like I said, be true to yourself.”



The strike of the song was on the tip of Sloan’s finger tips of her sunburst bass, her casiotone keyboard, her martin acoustic and as usual, strumming the fastest on the Gallotone. Hours of frustration of finding it, losing it and finding it again through blisters that were no longer a worry as she began to strum to the rhythm. First mumbling some scattered thoughts along this

journey. To finally repeat the lyrics “Get there, to the state fair! Corn Dogs, chili dogs and cotton candy for you and me!”

Hal entered the store and popped a squat, placing a magazine on the floor and accepted a slice of toast from Loudon.

“Damn, it sounds pretty amazing...Why the state fair though?”

Joan leaned in “I’m pretty sure she’s not aware of it. Just bathe her and get her to bed will ya?”

The next day Sloan was at Hal’s work and flipped through old poetry.

First Longfellow

“We get it, you like nature.”

Second Sylvia Plath

“Jesus.”

Third Charles Bukowski

“Nope.”

Hal reached the darkest corner of the store that was the poetry section “There you are. Wait, poetry?”

“Yeah Holmes, I really want to get into it. So much so that I even signed up for an after school poetry club.

“There’s an after school poetry club?” Hal was handed a flier and looked at the fine print.

“This says pottery.”

“Really?” Sloan snagged the flier and squinted at the blurred poetry line.

“Do you need glasses?”

“No way man. I don’t need glasses.”

Hal spun a reading glasses rack to the side of the register and pulled out a pair of wayfarer glasses “Here, these will do.”

“No way man.”

“Do you want a caveman brow?”

“Caveman brow?!” Sloan sighed and put them on.

“Holy shit.” Hal said with a gaped mouth.

“Yeah, this is why I don’t wear-” Sloan slid them off.

“No, no.” Hal wrote down on a notecard and handed it to Sloan.

She put the glasses back on and the notecard read ‘You look beautiful.’

Sloan exited the store and looked back at Hal at the register, smiled as she pressed her new glasses up and pulled out her journal and began to write with a midday stroll.

Chapter 12-

Mr.Buttons



It starts out simple, doesn't it always? We're back in school and It was an English homework assignment from Mr.McGuire that we must do a book report on a person who lived a generation before our parents. McGuire said "These are people that are passing this world onto you, keep their right morals and change their mistakes. Those are the questions I want you to answer in a four page report due after the end of the month. Take your time with the questions, really listen to what they have to say....Oh and don't hold up on their racism. I've heard it all and I assure you, I can take it."

Now every kid usually just interviewed their grandparents, but this detective is flat out of them and had to resort to sweet my boss Ms.Erikson. Who lives by the primrose dandelion trail to her small one floor house. Rented specifically for the luxury of not having stairs to climb and free hot water heat.

I was meant to ask the questions, but my distractions were not on the leisure of the due date, but of one furball that warmed this cold heart. A one month old kitten by the name of Mr.Buttons. Mr.Buttons wasn't like the other cats, for one he was cuter with his size. Like I could fit him in my pocket and watch him sleep with his little paws sticking out. We would play hide and seek and he'd always meow when I couldn't find him. We'd play in the yard and put out dandelions together, And his lack of coughing up furballs and cat farts like the other cats was quite the bonus. Ms.Erikson after all always fed her cats the wholest of milk from Milkman Stan.

But with one cracked open door and one conversation with Stan that lasted too long, Catastrophe hit.

"And that Hal Capher, is why we call it two percent milk."

"Good to know Stan, have a good one."

Hal walked back to the front porch and noticed the door ajar and swiftly went inside to sound the alarm.

"Roll call, roll call everyone!"

Hal took out his notepad and counted all nine of Ms.Erikson's Cats. "Elwood, Judge, Myrtle, Martin, Raymond, Veta, Kelly, Ethel.... Wait, where is he? Oh god, where is he?"

Looking under Ms.Erikson's three hutches, under her cedar chest, under her piles of newspapers.

The search for Mr.Buttons had a cold trail, but I was only kidding myself on where Mr.Buttons was. I looked out the screen door and found my first clue as I exited and walked down the steps. A single tiny paw print on the bottom step. Mr.Buttons was lost in Maple Falls and it was all my fault.

"You think love will be there, but it vanishes like a black cat in the night...Quite literally actually." Sloan was coaxing Hal through these moments, arm around his waist and repeating "We'll find him, I promise. Did you check the whole place?"

“He would have meowed, it’s our game. I cleaned that entire place head to toe. I found newspapers dating back to the 1870s and a fruitcake intended for a Christmas party in 1968.”

“Huh, well they make for a hell of a doorstep.” Sloan added.

“And that’s the only answer, Mr.Buttons is out there, somewhere in Maple Falls.”



Sloan, Hal, Loudon and Joan journeyed to the four corners of the Maple Falls plastering missing flyers for Mr.Buttons. They all agreed to meet at the Jelly Jar once they ran out of flyers. Sloan was the first to arrive, then Loudon, then Joan. Stirring the empty bowl of her soup special, Sloan was worried. For they had been there

for an hour and Hal had not yet arrived.

The waitress came up to Sloan “Telephone for you Sloan.”

“Hello?” Sloan spoke on the bakelite telephone in the back kitchen.

“Hey, sorry I couldn’t make it.”

“Hal?! Where the hell are you?!”

“Uh, I just ran out of flyers. I doubled up mine. I’m in a phone booth looking out what claims to be the world’s largest lightbulb...I guess they’ve never heard of a lighthouse.”

“Oh my god, you walked to wyoming?!”

“I walked far, but I know I didn’t walk that far!”

“No, the town over is called Wyoming and the lightbulb is at least five miles away. You want me to get Zaccone to pick you up?...You sure?...Okay. Uh, I'll be at the store. Do you wanna spend the night? Cool, I'll leave the light on, just tap on the glass.”

Sloan was strumming her arianna acoustic around nine at night and rushed outside as soon as she saw Hal.

“Holmes, are you alright? God, it's almost dark!”

“I couldn't find him.”

“It's alright Holmes, we'll find him. We got all weekend, I'm witcha on all of those days. No more going alone,okay?”

“You really mean that?”

“Yeah, with all my heart. Now you promise?”

“Yeah, with all my heart too.”

“Good, there's leftovers in the fridge. Help yourself. I gotta thing with Joan, I'll be back in 45, alright?”

Sloan pecked Hal on the cheek and left through the door with her Galloone on her back.

Hal took cling wrap off the lasagna from the fridge.

“Shit.” Hal lifted the phone from the hook and called his mom.

“Hey, I'm alive.”

“Oh yeah, Sloan called. You guys have fun, sorry to hear about Mr.Buttons.”

“Yeah, we'll find him. Thanks ma... Wait, Sloan called you?”

“Yep, she's a keeper.”

“She is.”

Whilst Hal was eating alone, Mr.Gonson came downstairs to see him in his kitchen.

“What do you think of the lasagna?” As Mr.Gonson said lifting the light switch to reveal Hal in mid bite.

“Is this mozzarella?”

“Yep, family recipe.”

“It’s really good.”

Mr.Gonson placed his bedtime tea on the table and sat down with Hal.

“Hal, Loudon is over at Spillman’s house. My Sloan is the only kid in this house at the moment. And I heard through the grapevine that you two have started dating.”

“I’m sorry, I can leave if-”

Now I haven’t caught you red handed. I’m not gonna put my foot down and tell you to leave. You’re a teenager, you’ll climb through the window like I did at your age. I’m here to tell you that I see you as a good kid, keep it that way and you’ll be a good man. Do I make myself clear? Can I trust you?”

“Yeah you can trust me sir.”

Mr.Gonson took a sip of his tea and got up “Good, remember rinse up. I’m not letting my daughter date someone who doesn’t do their dishes.”

I was thinking over why Mr.Gonson let me off easy, until later I realized how much lasagna was caked on the pan. It took quite the elbow grease to clean it off with steel wool. All Mr.Gonson wanted from me was effort. To not be some snot nose punk that’s dating his daughter. That doing your dishes is the simplest and basic human act of decency and if you can’t even do that, then throw in the towel, because then you ain’t worth shit in the kitchen. You don’t deserve the food that you ate if you don’t do the dishes.

Hal was in bed as Sloan lifted her bedroom window and entered and slipped into bed.

“What color are my panties?”

There was a long pause, but Hal confessed “Pink.”

Sloan let out a little chuckle “Sc’mere big spoon.”

Come next morning Sloan, Hal, Loudon and Joan were knocking door to door asking if anybody has seen Mr.Buttons. When they got to Woodsy’s house he followed with the group and when they got to Gupp’s house, he followed too. Come around 11am the whole school was basically behind the gang and soon enough the whole town took notice and followed in.

“Is this a cult? Because fool me once-” Bent closed his shop as usual and walked to the front.

“Oh, little rabbit, are you running this cult?”

“We’re looking for this kitten. Have you seen him?”

“No, but I’m witcha.” Bent took a flier and pinned it to his shirt with a Woodstock button.

Hal then realized as he turned around to see the numbers that followed him and he took Sloan’s hand.

“Alright, we’re dividing up to cover more ground! Leaders got to know the lay of the land! Sloan, you’re the leader of group A. Nelson, you’re group B! Mr.A you’re group C!”

“Why can’t I be the leader of group A? It’s in my name?!”

“Deal with it, jock strap!”

“And Bent, you wanna be Group D?”

“It’s more fun to be a follower than a leader, but sure I’m game.”

They all split from the four corners, group A was tasked with Winnepasa Woods. Alice and Aunt Nancy took notice and joined in “Hey guys, this is great timing I got to give Aunt Nancy a walk.”

“At what percentage is she on your nerves?” asked Hal.

“Oh it could have peaked at one hundred if you didn’t come along. She has no goddamn life.”

Alice looked down and saw the two holding hands “Oh cool, you guys are dating. Do your thing,



I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Well, that was simple, I hope my parents aren’t awkward.”

“Oh, your dad and I had chat about it last night.”

“...Really? How did it go?”

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“He threatened me with a switch, saying it’s a family tradition.”

“What?!”

“Pish posh Sloan I’m only kidding. We had a friendly chat and we exchanged trust.”

“It was that simple?”

“I guess.”

Sloan turned to us in the coming sunset “I promised Hal that I was with him throughout this all, It’s now 9pm and we’ve whittled down to just seven people. We’re following a lead of a furball through the southside of Lake Winnepasaga. Hal looks like a swamp monster staggering in the lake, but he’s still making kissing noises and calling for the lost Mr.Buttons.

“I think I found him?!” Woodsy shouted from the forest and suddenly was chased out by a white tailed fox. “Nevermind! Nevermind!”

Trailing behind the pack, Hal and Sloan stood in confusion as they saw Milkman stan gathering brush and twigs into a pile and pouring milk into it.

“What the hell?”

“I got this Holmes, Stan what’s up?”

“Oh Sloan! This may look a little odd, but cats love whole milk and our little buddy can easily be spotted on this even playing ground if he attracts the scent of the red cap.”

“Well thanks for helping us out.”

“My pleasure, also I’m just kind of bored because my route was cut short this morning.”

“How so?”

“You didn’t hear? The milk shipment for this morning had a wreck on Mildred street. No one got hurt, but it’s a shame that today was a day where half of Maple Falls didn’t get their milk. Even after going into my personal supply. Lost a lot of glass soldiers today on that highway.”

Hal was then struck with an epiphany, asking Stan “I’m sorry, but Milk, all over mildred street?”

“Oh kid, don’t cry over spilt milk. That’s my job.”

Hal grabbed Sloan. “You with me?”

“Always.”

Driving up to Mildred street in Alice’s oldsmobile at the strike of 11pm, Sloan and Hal exited the car. Hal looked around and there as he spotted, he spoke “Thicker than water, flows in the same river.” Hal picked up an empty bottle of Florence farms milk, tossed it to Sloan and she ran over to Hal. Looking down at the sewer grate with him as puddles of spoiled milk surrounded it.

“Holmes...er, Oh!” Sloan stood dumbfounded in her realization that the nickname for Hal came full circle.

Sloan helped Hal lift the sewer grate and looked at him.

Dropping into the milk curdled water Hal let out a large gagging cough from the horrendous stench.

“You alright Hal?”

Hal shushed Sloan “I think I heard something.”

They stopped in silence and then the faintest of a meow came from a distance.

Hal gasped “Little guy!” and sloshed his way towards the meow.

And low and behold in a bag of cheese doodles was our Mr.Buttons, with his little face covered in artificial orange food coloring.

He didn’t care that Mr.Buttons smelled of sewage and spoiled milk, he only cared that the little pussy cat was safe. He knocked on the door of Ms.Erikson’s house in hesitation, but she was awake due to a Columbo marathon. She was overjoyed and cuddled Mr.Buttons as Hal handed him to her.

Sloan turned to us “We said our goodbyes and with the door closed we walked back to the car and here we are.”

“Hal, I don’t know, I’m kind of speechless and-”

Sloan grabbed Hal by the shirt and they were kissing to the point where they had to catch their breath.

“What was that for?”

“Come on, are you blind? That was for what you did this past weekend?”

“Yeah, but you were with me the whole time. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Yeah, I’m witcha.”

Hal smiled at that remark and pulled Sloan’s shirt forward for a kiss.

Back home, Sloan Slid down the ladder from the roof of her house, she walked the moonlight glow to the dock to where Joan was waiting.



Sloan slung forward and tuned her guitar to the right notes.

She then started strumming ‘Long, Long, Long’ by the Beatles. Gently letting out the lyrics with her soothing voice as the two cousins drifted their toes in the water.

Joan joined, whispering the lyrics and finally letting tears roll down from her.

Chapter 13 -Decathlon 1985

“Blowmobiles! Blowmobiles! Blowmobiles!” Zacone shouted with blowing air horns in the air.

Sloan got up from the bleachers of the local karate dojo on Osland ave and waved to us.

“This is Maple Falls annual decathlon. The terminology of a decathlon is, ten events in the span of two days. Usually 100 meter dash, shot put, pole vault, you get the picture. Well our event is and has always been sponsored by the residents of this tri-city area for the past 131 years. You’re gonna see everybody here. For no matter who you are, no one can resist, blowmobiles! Woo!!!!!!!!!!!!” Sloan joined the festivities and caught up with the Maple Falls gang constructing their boats out of just a single sheet of printer paper.

“So, huh...Like this?” Hal folded his paper into a hexagon and the base took shape.

“Yeah, that’s a fortress. It’s got weight and is lower. You don’t want speed on your first blowmobile, so you’re doing good, Big Boat.”

Hal looked over and saw that Loudon shaped his creation into a spring loaded frog and Joan had her blowmobile as an actual paper boat with its name written in sharpie 'The U.S.S: I'm gonna kick your ass'.

"Are you sure I'm doing good?"

Sloan quickly crumpled her blowmobile into a unique mold "Holmes, no design is wrong. You're doing good."

The loudspeaker turned on and Mr.A spoke into it "Contestants, put down your Blowmobiles and trusted judges will secure your blowmobile. We will not repeat 1979! The Williams family has a lifelong ban from our town for that reason."

"Lifelong ban?"

"This is blowmobiles, Hal." Zacccone stood next to Hal covered in Blowmobiles merchandise. Trucker hat, pajama pants, a t-shirt that read 'I'm gonna blow you away at Blowmobiles 1981'. Even novelty glasses that read 'Blowmobiles'.

The Maple Falls gang went through the long gauntlet of the first round. Hal set down his blowmobile on the Blowmobiles approved oval-shaped kitchen table and eyed the White Tail River high quarterback, then to Sloan and finally to the referee.

"Absolutely no hands, keep it fair and keep it clean. 3, 2, 1. Blow!"

The quarterback blew in and outwards the blowmobile headed for Hal's. Hal blew his Blowmobile to the side as both rotated around the table.

But the opposing blowmobile caught up to Hal. It had speed, but also weight, Hal's first opponent was for sure an expert not to mess with. He had to think smart and fast.

The blowmobile was now on Hal.

"We have a pin!"

"Hal, get out of there!" Sloan shouted from the crowds, clenching her fists.

Hal blew out of the hold and blew his blowmobile on top of his opponent. He then saw his opening and blew him off. With Hal's blowmobile halfway on the edge, just barely making it.

“Winner! Hal Capher!”

Joan knocked down her opponent. Loudon crushed his opponent with a right angle blow.

“Math, sucka!” Loudon banged the table with a second win.

Sloan knocked down a worthy opponent during the third round. It was Woodsy with his king blade that could not cut with a blow, but looked badass as hell.

“Down goes king blade!”

The Maple Falls gang huddled with each other. Loudon led the pack as they all tried to catch their breath.

“Alright, we’re all qualified for the next round. No hard feelings on beating each other, just make sure we kick Zacccone’s ass. He wants that trophy back and he’s bringing the hurricanes.”

Zacccone with his black dragon origami dominated the tables with his excellent precision of blow techniques.

“I heard he took pregnancy classes to perfect his breathing form. How are we gonna beat him?” said an 8th grader to another 8th grader.

It was the semi finals and down went Aunt Nancy, Milkman Stan, Spillman, Mr.A, Miss Jezebel, Candlestick connie and the entire cast of the Maple Falls theater’s next musical ‘Home on the iron range’. Which then pitted Hal vs. Bent and Joan vs.Sloan.

Hal tried his absolute hardest, but Bent blew Hal’s fortress to the ground with his paper doughnut.

“Good game Little Rabbit. See you at the next event.” Bent and Hal shook hands by the wrist.

“Alright dude, don’t go easy on me.” Said Sloan during her match.

“Sloan sets down her random creation.” Spoke Dick Nelson “A random creation that got her this far to go against Joan’s ‘Uss I’m gonna kick your ass’. The tension is in the air and the crowd is silent. The coin toss for the song has been flipped, it’s heads! Sloan gets the pick.”

“Jump by Van Halen.”

The two battled to the synths of the Van Halen as the two blowmobiles clashed and fought for the table. Near falls and impressive skills from the two cousins, but with one blow away from an attack that went too far which caused Sloan's creation to fall and Joan was victorious.

"Unbelievable! Joan Wyland is heading to the finals!"

Sloan hugged her cousin and joined Hal back on the bench as they watched Loudon win his coin toss.

"Runnin' with the devil by Van Halen."

The battle was so intense. Loudon's sweat poured as every attack of Zacccone's dragon breath nudged his little frog to the edge to finally he had no breath in him to save the little amphibian from the ground.

"Parker Zacccone is heading to the finals against Joan Wyland!"

Sloan patted Joan on the back and gave her a water bottle "No talking. Save your breath for the match. You got this champ!"

Joan set down her little ship that could and watched as the coin landed heads for her.

"Dancing Queen by Abba."

And with the winds of north, south, west and east. Joan sailed her ship around the waves of the dragon's destruction. Joan felt the music and glided a dance around the table.

"Of all the things that make her smile...Abba?" Hal said out loud.

"She's magnificent and oh my god! Joan's blowmobile is airborne!" Shouted Nelson.

Joan's boat sailed in the air and landed directly into the dragon, knocking him down for the win!

"Joan Wyland is our blowmobile champion!"

After receiving her golden fleece. Which was a literal golden fleece sash, Dick Nelson made the announcement on the loudspeaker "Rest up well, we'll see you tomorrow for the Le Tour Du Cul Meutri!"

"Wait what, what's that?" Hal asked.

"It's a bike race...Do you have a bike, Holmes?"

The next day tightening the nuts of his '83 stumpjumper was our golden boy Loudon with a toothpick pursed at his lips, a stained white beater and wool slacks like it was the turn of the century. He dusted off gravel with his messenger hat and placed it on his head as the whole gang saw Hal roll in with

“Holy shit, that’s a 1936 Schwinn aerocycle!”

“Told you he would know what it was, Holmes.”

Loudon went in to inspect it and marveled at it’s

“Near mint paint job and lights. I can’t trust you with this.”

“What?” Responded Hal with a tilt of the head.

“Here are my keys, take my bike.” Loudon tossed Hal a giant keyring of keys.

“The next is Le Tour Du Cul Meutri. Held by the Gupps.” As Sloan said, spreading out a map of Maple Falls with a trail marked in red arrows.

“The Gupps...Really?” Hal asked.

“They’re French Canadians, the Canadian side really took over in the gene pool. But the event is fully based on their meat market delivery history from this small town village in France where their family is from.” Loudon spun his bike wheel.

“The objective is biking up Osland ave.”

“That’s not too bad...I guess.”

”With forty pounds of meat on your bike. That you must deliver on said route. Turning on Warren, going downhill on Victor and then finally going down Donovan street to Gupps meats, with exact earnings in hand.” Loudon handed Hal the map.

“And this is only the second event?!”

“There are eight more Holmes.”

“There’s eight more?!”

Later Papa Gupp went up to the mic as all the cyclists were lined up at the starting line of the race. All dressed in a rainbow of turn of the century suits and messenger hats “Mesdames et Messieurs, bienvenue à la Tour Du Cul Meutri, présentée en partie par Gupp’s Meats. Les challengers d'aujourd'hui

sont chargés de parcourir à vélo l'itinéraire emprunté par mon arrière-grand-père lorsqu'il était enfant dans la petite ville de Trouville.”

Hal started fiddling his thumbs and checked the temperature of his meat.

“Chaque morceau de viande doit être livré et la monnaie exacte doit être prise et rendue. Pédalez fort et amusez-vous. Bonne chance. À vos marques, prêts, partez!” A gunshot went off and Hal shook in his seat, almost losing his footing as he watched others bike past him.

Hal then peddled uphill Osland Avenue. Getting high up he passed Zaccone.

“No fair! Come on god, give me a growth spurt and...rocking sideburns!” He tried to pedal harder.

Passing Milkman Stan, Loudon found himself at his first door. “Pork shoulder, check!” The homeowner handed out his cash and Loudon reached out the pork shoulder like it was a baton race.

Hal let out his order early to save time. The sausage links started to unfold but he caught them before they could hit the ground.



Loudon and Sloan were neck and neck after Louon’s rib drop on Victor Ave. Looking back they both saw Hal taking third. Reaching Donovan avenue, Sloan went in for a ram like it was Ben-Hur. Loudon did not want to scratch the priceless bike and avoided any contact.

Sloan took the advantage and pedaled faster to the finish line “Sloan Gonson is first!”

“Loudon takes second and Hal is third.

“Winner, Sloan Gonson!”

Hal got off his bike and in a deep sweat, caught his breath, but was handed a skateboard by Sloan.

“Wait, what the hell?”

“Didn’t think your Aunt Edith would have one. Sc’mon, the third event is in ten minutes!”

“Ten minutes?!”

The third event was a ‘Do a kickflip’ contest. “3, 2, 1 Do a kickflip!” Shouted the event’s curator, Bent.

Sloan hunched down on her board and pulled off the first kickflip seconds into the contest.

Followed by Loudon 20 seconds in.

Everyone else, including Hal jumped on the board and had no lift.

Sloan started a manual into a 540 shove-it “You need some pointers Holmes?”

“Nah, I think I got this.” Hal fell and his board went rolling.”

Sloan came back again with a helipop and skated up to Hal. “Ya Sure?”

“Mmmkay, What am I missing?”

“Alright Holmes. Take the nose of your right foot and slide it forward and to the right. Rinse, repeat, rinse, repeat. Repeat the motion and bake it into your long term.” Sloan said as she made the motion of Hal’s foot.

“See, this is how you’re so smart.”

“Psssh, I’m not... Thanks Holmes.”

Hal lifted up the board and landed his left foot to the side.

“Almost there Holmes, now commit to it. Land even if it’s on the deck.”



1st try, 2nd try. 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th and on lucky number 7, Hal landed a kickflip.

Loudon, Joan and Sloan cheered for Hal's kickflip.

"Congrats Holmes. You're coming with us to the next round. Aight...I think we got quite a bit of time till the next event..." Sloan paused and looked around "Everybody in town is on this street. We have a rare opportunity here." Sloan reached in her bag and pulled out a couple of joints and lit them both and skated off.

Swerving a figure eight, Sloan passed the joint to Hal as our four friends went down a gentle hill while Sloan started singing 'Ring of Fire' by Johnny Cash. Hal continued as the whole gang traded off after each line of the song.

Sloan turned to us "The 4th event was underway and Hal is now feeling quite at ease with whatever event is thrown to him."

Hal is fitted into a suit of armor and balloons are being attached all around the suit.

"Makes sense, right? I'd be the same if I visited the Twin Cities."

Hal walked out as he was more balloon than knight and swung at Bent, the red balloon knight.

As indeed 99 luftballons by Nena played, as it always did on a constant repeat for this event.

"Me in the cities though? Eh, I gotta really like the guy though."

Hal screamed in the air and popped Bent like crazy.

Sloan looked over at Hal and then smiled at us "I do."

5th event.

Hal was handed a paper airplane and noticed writing on it.

Unfolding it, he read "You can blow, but can you fly?...What the hell?"

Everyone gathered at a three way intersection. Our contestants, spectators and fans were atop city hall.

"Across the street atop of Sweet's ice cream is your landing zone. Whoever lands there is qualified, whoever reaches the highest points on the target zone, will be our winner!' Shouted the mayor of Maple Falls, also known as Maple Falls' brightest star, Stanley Scott.

Everybody loved Mayor Scott. He was a star athlete when he lived here, he moved to the twin cities and went to college with Chick Halloway. Had the choice to run mayor in Saint Paul, but decided to start his political career back here, back home. He improved the community by starting a food shelf organization with Nelson's market a couple of years ago. I'm actually pretty certain in the twin cities we got food from that exact organization. Full circle, eh?

A shotgun fired and Hal ducked again "Yep, the guns keep getting bigger." And he rushed towards the pile of paper and constructed a paper plane.

Planes were thrown by everyone, but not a single one made it to the roof of the ice cream shop.

Loudon constructed his first paper airplane with precise cuts with a cutting tool and compass.

He then went up to the ledge, licked his finger and checked the wind. He positioned himself to take the wind, rather than fight against it. He finally with all the precision threw his paper airplane and it simply crashed into the building.

"Fuck!"

Loudon did eventually make it along with Sloan, Hal, Bent, Joan and Robbie.

"And the winner and hot dog! With a bullseye, Hal Capher!"

Everybody cheered and Mayor Scott came over to Hal "Come on Capher, give me the biggest high five you got!" He spoke with such a humble voice and sweet voice, like Jimmy Carter or Jimmy Stewart.

Hal reeled back and gave the mayor a high five, so much so the mayor lost his balance in the following crowd cheer. With a scream, everyone looked and Mayor Scott wasn't there.

Everyone looked down on Donovan Street and twitching from a fall was a badly broken Mayor Scott.

"I'm okay!" Screamed a hopeful Mayor Scott.

Later Mayor Scott was being wheeled into the ambulance "Have fun Maple Falls. Cheer louder for me, okay!"

As the doors of the ambulance closed, everyone looked over and stared at Hal.

The 6th event! Mini Golf!

Everyone remained staring and glaring at Hal as he sunk in a hole-in-one.

“Hole in-one for Capher.” Dick Nelson commentated blankly.

The crowd slowly clapped and kept their eyes on Hal.

Sloan turned to us “I’ll make sure no breaks his legs, Mmmkay?”

7th event.

A cannon fired and Hal didn’t even shake a muscle. For he was in Zaccone's backyard as contestants were firing rifle shot after rifle shot at clay pigeons.

Knocking on the outhouse, Sloan said “Holmes, you in there?”

“No way I’m participating in an event with guns, when people want to shoot me with said guns!”

“Holmes, I’m pretty sure nobody in this town is a murderer. That’s Wisconsin.” She said the latter in a direct way “Besides, you can’t stay in this outhouse forever.”

“Yes, I can! It’s surprisingly furnished.” Hal said directly as well.

“Well, then do you trust me?”

Hal opened the door to Sloan’s hand “I witcha all the way Holmes.”

“Same.” Hal grabbed Sloan’s hand and the two walked for Sloan’s turn.

The next morning was the 8th event and is the oldest known event this year, so old that it’s be immortalized at Booker farms on a mahogany sign outside the giant haystack.

“Needle in a haystack. First introduced to Maple Falls in 1857. This challenge involves all individuals to look for 1 of 5 needles hidden in the 74 haystacks that lay ahead of you. Those five winners will be eligible for the next event. There is no time limit, only patience.” Hal read off as an abrupt gunshot caught him off guard.

“Jesus, what the hell?!”

“There’s no telling when the event starts. That’s the fun of it, Holmes.”

“Cool!” As he blinked to check his existence and ran for the haystacks at 6:00am

10:45 am struck the clock. First was Robbie Babitz.

“Yo Holmes, Joan set up camp. I’m gonna get us a hot dog, sounds good?”

Hal emerged from the haystack “Thanks.”

5:45pm. Second was Bent.

Hal walked over to Joan who poured him a homemade stew.

A patron was on the top of the haystacks and screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get there.” Joan handed Hal his stew.

12:07am. Third with a flashlight in hand was Loudon.

Sloan slumped over to Hal who was still searching for a needle.

“What’s up Holmes?”

“Eh, nothing much. Y’all just broke my brain.”

Sloan kissed Hal

“That’s better.”

And the two fell asleep on a haystack.

Eight hours later, Sloan reached under her butt and pulled out something sticking at her.

8:07am.

Fourth was Sloan.

“Mmm, I smell pancakes.”

And at the break of noon, 30 hours later from the start.

Fifth was Hal.

“Boo!” the crowd went.

Hal staggered over and handed it to Dick Nelson who placed the needle and his name in the giant wall of winners. And walked over to plop at the rest area as Joan poured him a bowl of soup.

“Like a shaman.”

“You buddhist Holmes?” Sloan asked.

“After that, I am. Enlightenment has been reached.

The 9th event.

Hal was escorted into the changing room and fitted into a pork chop costume “Wait, why am I porkchop?!” Hal looked over at the others who were fitting in other food costumes.

“Sloan, why are you a tomato?”

“It’s the name of the game Holmes. How do I look?”

“Like a tomato.”

“Good. This time, good.”

Loudon emerged as a stalk of corn “All you sons of bitches are gonna lose. Corn, corn, corn!”

‘Corn’ was chanted by the crowd as Loudon exited the dressing room and onto the set, high fiving and hyped the crowd even more.

Sloan slid a shopping cart over to Hal “Yo, number 5! Have you ever seen Supermarket Sweep?”

“No, why?”

“Hmm, guess I had more sick days than you. Well it’s a game show in which you answer supermarket questions for points. But the real fun is the shopping section. You’re on a time limit to gather as much food in your cart as possible. Make sure it’s expensive food though, your meats, laundry detergents, etc. There are also special prizes scattered throughout the course. Don’t go looking for them, let them find you.”

“Wait, why are you helping me?”

“Well, cause I want to see you through the end of this run. Besides, I didn’t give you all the tips and tricks. You’re still going down.”

Sloan kissed Hal on the lips and brought him over to his podium “Chop chop Holmes.”

Party cannons suddenly shot with confetti and ribbons. Synth sounds and multi-colored spotlights filled the stage. Until one big spotlight appeared in front of a giant paper bag of groceries and Dick Nelson emerged from the bag with roman candles in each hand “Welcome Maple Falls to Fast Times Foods. I’m your host Dick Nelson!”

Sloan turned to us “Now if you thought Loudon was a hype man. He’s got nothing on Dick Nelson during his game. Just look at my brother in awe of Mr.Nelson’s theatrics.”

“Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! You get a coupon, you get a coupon! Should we break out the T-shirt guns?!”

After passing out coupons, Dick pulled a T-shirt gun and fired shirts out in the crowd.

“That’s what I’m talking about! Yeah hoo!” Nelson then howled like a wolf and walked behind his podium, tapping his question cards and talking to the public access cameras “Welcome one and all to Fast Times Foods! As always this our second to last event, leaving us with just five contestants. By the end of this, we’ll be left with only two. Who will make it through the gauntlet? Let’s meet our contestants.”

Dressed as a head of lettuce was Bent “Our first contestant is the owner of Snacks and Candy. Give it up for Bent!” The crowd applauded and Bent smiled at the camera with a peace sign.

“Bent, it says right here that you’ve been concocting a new flavor of slushie and that you’d like to announce it here?”

“That’s right dick. Sweet pickle slushie.”

“Oh boy bent, that’s sure gonna fly off the shelves.” Dick rolled his eyes and headed over to Loudon.

“Our second contestant is Loudon Gonson!” The whole crowd cheered for Loudon at such a loud disciple that everything in the building started to shake. Even the breath mints were rattling.

“Always a fan favorite. Says here Loudon that this year you’re donating your much loved hair to charity?”

The whole crowd gasped.

“That’s right Dick. All of it goes to locks of love for someone in need of a good wig.”

The whole crowd awed and gave a round of applause to Loudon.

“What a guy. And look at this! Not just one, but two Gonson kids! Ladies and gentlemen give a hand to Sloan Gonson!”

The crowd cheered as she waved to the camera

“So Sloan, you came first for the decathlon in 1982, before the ban of the soapbox races. You think you have what it takes for Fast Times?”

“It’s the same basic principle Dick. I think I got what it takes.”

“Well we’ll see. Our fourth contestant, Hal Capher! Now some of you may oppose this contestant, but we do have word from Mayor Scott that it was an accident. Isn’t that right Hal?”

“Yes sir.”

“Sure it was.” Dick responded quickly and with all distaste towards Hal “Gonson, kick his ass.”

“Uh Dick, he’s my boyfriend.”

“Oh, apologies. Babitz!”

“Yes sir?”

“Kick Capher’s ass.”

“With pleasure.”

“Our final contestant. Robbie Babitz!” Dick looked at his cards “What’s your story Babitz?”

“Well uh as everybody knows-”

Sloan turned to us “Oh god, fucking Babitz! How did this joker get so far in the games? Like seriously, I think he’s a turd, you think he’s a turd...Actually, when did you guys actually get here?”

Back to Nelson “Remember to be gentle with the food as possible. For all the food in your cart is being donated to the Twin Cities food shelf. But also remember, there are no rules in the market. Steal, crash and fight your way to the top.

Hal’s eyes widened and realized that the rules had jumped straight from the supermarket to straight to hockey. He could see the blood pumping through every contestant against him.

Hal turned to sandwich signs that read ‘Kill Capher’ and ‘Break Capher’s bones!’

Hal in fear grabbed his cart, which was made of cheap slapped together lumber.

“Oh your marks, get set! Shop!”

“And there they go! Every contestant sped off, racing to the meat market. Battling each other like chariots in rome. First piling up steaks, pork chops, prime rib. Oh it looks like Sloan has already found the hidden Foie Gras! Here’s the thing, will she find the caviar? Yes! She found the caviar just as I was saying it!” Nelson commented for the crowd and public access channel 29.

“Here comes Loudon, T-boning Bent’s cart. Ooo! Clean up on aisle 5! That's gonna reduce his amount, for that hole is a monster!”

“Everyone is now rushing over to pet foods. Now they gotta be careful with this one. Broten dog food is the only one that is on sale and you want to try to avoid that. Even the smaller bags are worth more than Broten now!”

Sloan stopped her cart and ran up the rolling stairs as it was rolling and snagged an oversized inflatable bottle of Pepto Bismol.

“Sloan has found the first secret prize. Can anybody, Oh my god! Hal has found the hidden garden gnome! Viewers, he has a full cart! Can he survive to the finish line without getting smashed to a million little splinters?!”

Hal looked up to the loudspeaker “Wait, what?!”

All he could hear was metal wheels rattling closer and closer. He acted quick, throwing the gnome onto the dog food and bolted down to the bakery. Ducking a swat of a french bread that Robbie unsheathed.

Hal backed up and backed up so more, until he reached the glass of the birthday cakes display. Laying on top was a cream pie.

Hal grabbed it and smashed it in Robbie’s face.

Rushing around the bend, Sloan met up with Hal. Loudon followed behind.

“Sloan you tractor!”

“Tractor?!”

“I mean traitor!” Loudon grabbed a squeeze bottle of ketchup and squirted it forwards.

Sloan reached for a bag of naval oranges and started chucking them on the floor. Loudon dodged all but one that made direct contact to a wheel. Shaking and losing control, Loudon lost his top load of bran cereal.

All Reached the finish line before the timer ended and all carts were full. But who spent the most and who fell short?

Nelson market workers rang up every item and printed their receipts for the nail biting results.

“In fifth place with \$252.64 is Bent Benedict!”

“In fourth place with \$325.61 is Robbie Babitz!”

“And in third place with \$376.97 is...Sloan Gonson!” Mr.Nelson handed Sloan the bronze potato.

“Coming in second with \$401.34 is Hal Capher!...Crap.” Mr.Nelson tossed a silver potato to Hal in spite

“Which means, the golden potato goes to Loudon Gonson with \$445.75! Congratulations Loudon! Jerry, take his picture and put it on the wall of winners!”

Per ceremony tradition, Dick Nelson in a king’s garb opened the glass case and took out the golden potato.

Kneeling and looking up at the smoothed fool’s gold potato was our winner of Fast Times Foods.

“Carry the honor and the prize shall forever be with you.” Dick Nelson then handed the potato to Loudon. Tears filled his eyes and he lifted it up to the crowd for a cheer.

Event 10. The final event.

Hal walked into a locker room and saw tights with lightning bolts printed on both pant legs.

“Oh no.”

Walking out to a dark arena with a crowd stomping their feet to the beat of ‘We will rock you’ by Queen. The spotlight was shone on Hal.

“Entering the arena right now, headed for the orange corner. Our first finalist, reigning originally from the Twin Cities. Weighing a grand total of 155 pounds in a 6 foot three frame!”

“How do they know my weight?” Hal whispered to himself as he approached the wrestling ring ropes.”

“Give it up for Hal ‘Hercules’...Capher!” The crowd booed, until the sounds of someone sorta familiar came on the loudspeaker.

“My fellow Maple Fallians, neighboring White Tailians, Dugan Creekers, Gun Pointers, Wyomianites and Hugoians. Did you miss me?”

Wheeling in on an R.C table and slowly revealing a tilt to come standing before Hal, was Maple Falls' brightest star, Mayor Scott covered neck to toe in a full body cast.

"Hol shit!" Almost everyone said in unison.

"I want to thank Larkin Academy's robotics team for bringing me back to the people I love so dearly."

His device looked like it was from a '50s B-Movie and he was the monster. But he still had that mayor Scott Smile, but with many missing teeth from the fall.

"One of them being this young man here, Hal Capher. Now many of you are passing the blame on my fall on Hal here. And I'm setting the record straight. Hal...I asked for a whopper of a high five and you gave it to me. I'm asking y'all to forgive him and blame it on an accident. Can we all agree on that?! Show me some hands if you agree!"

The crowd muttered a bit.

"I said, can we agree on that?!"

The crowd cheered and clapped for a change of heart.

"Thank you, thank you. He's a good kid. So Hal, I'm asking another one, right here."

Mayor Scott did indeed have one arm permanently up with his palm out. "Asked the Doc to have it placed like this for this exact reason alone."

Hal lightly high fived the Mayor and the crowd cheered.

"I'll tell ya kid, better thank Forsythe at Maple Tree Music Connection for the kind words he said about you to me."

"Forsythe? Sloan's dad?"

"Alright, let's get this party started!"

The Arena then went dark again and a fog machine with laser lights appeared at the other entrance. 'Sledgehammer' by Peter Gabriel was playing on the loudspeaker.

“In the green corner. Weighing 135 pounds at a staggering 5’7. Give it up for Loudon ‘The Sledgehammer’ Gonson!” Loudon emerged twirling a golden sledgehammer in hand and pumped it in the air.

Loudon was theatrics galore. He wiggled his fingers, high fived and even kissed a baby on the top of the head in the crowd.

He entered the ring and slammed the sledgehammer to the ground and grabbed the dangling microphone in front of him “Welcome to your doom Hal Capher!” Pointing at Hal he dropped the mic and glared at him.

Sloan looked over to us “In the question of who do I root for, because I love them both. My answer is...I hope they both get pummeled. It’s more fun that way.” Sloan cheered them both on with the rest of the Maple Falls gang.

Hal went over to Sloan and handed him his wallet “Yo, can you hold this. My tights don’t have pockets.”

“Yeah, they’ve got a nice shape to them, Holmes.” Sloan kissed Hal and was about to put the wallet in her pocket, but she noticed a piece of plastic for holding pictures. Opening the wallet, she saw the photos of them at the baseball game.

“Holmes.” Sloan smiled and felt it with all her heart and little tears of pure happiness. Then looked at Hal in the ring and shouted “Loudon, kick his ass!”

“I’M GONNA BREAK YA, RIP YOU TO OBLIVION, REINCARNATE YA!...AND THEN I’M GONNA BREAK YA AGAIN!” Loudon tossed the microphone and went to his corner to hype the crowd with more showboating.

Mr.A signaled our two wrestlers to the ring “Alright I want a clean fight. Keep it extremely appropriate and try not to kill each other.”

“What?” Hal questioned.

“Shake hands.”

Loudon grabbed Hal’s wrist and shook “Don’t hold back Hal. Just like hockey, Mmmkay?”

The bell rang and the two circled around the ring. Hal going further back and Loudon dancing his feet like Muhammad Ali.

“Train a comin’!” Loudon came in and close-lined Hal to the ground. Hal looked up to Loudon trash talking “Get up fool!” Looking at Loudon’s feet, Hal grabbed them and had Loudon spilling to the ground. Hal bumped and launched from the ropes and landed his elbow to Loudon’s chest.

Loudon took the impact and immediately got him in a choke hold and slammed him to the ground.

Loudon got on Hal’s corner pole and pumped up the crowd as they cheered him on. Hal went over, but Loudon took a backwards leap of faith and landed on Hal.

“Sorry about that one Hal, you okay?”

Hal reached his hand out and Loudon helped him up. Hal pulled Loudon to the ropes and closed-lined him to the ground and went for the leg.

“1, 2!” Mr.A shouted.

Loudon got up and two friends both looked at the crowd and smiled at each other. With Loudon throwing him out of the ring.

Sloan rushed over and handed a wooden chair to Hal “Here Holmes.”

“What?! This is a-”

“Breakaway chair. Act quick, he’s coming this way.”

Hal turned around and smashed the breakaway chair on Loudon and he fell to the ground ,but rolled under the ring.Rolling back he came back with a giant chinese vase.

Hal looked over at Sloan and smiled and just embraced Loudon smashing the fake vase into his face.

Hal grabbed Loudon and two slammed right into the wooden folded table.

Loudon picked up Hal by the arm and threw him back in the ring and with that Hal folded his arms as he saw Loudon leap for him. Falling, Hal thought what he would later write with his opposite hand

Sometimes you see your loss heading straight to you and you gotta swallow your pride and take second place.

Shit, I am surprised I even got this far. And that's what really matters, the journey to second. First may come some day, but Loudon deserves that gold.

"1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10! He's done for, Winner!"

The entire arena rushed the stage. Loudon shouted "Yo Adrian! I did it!" as he lifted his golden belt.

Wrong sport, but nonetheless epic.

Sloan tried to get to me after congratulating her brother. But yours truly was down for the count and had no say in being picked up by Mr.A in his oddly clean shaven arms to the locker room.

Everybody later saw me, as Loudon wouldn't ride in the parade without me and his sister...And some girl he had just met.

Chapter 14-

The Demonic Demons of Maple Falls: Grimm Days



It was a windy and cold night at Edith Manor. The windows rattled, the porch bench kept knocking the wall. Torches appeared in the distance.

The Maple Falls gang was holding tiki torches that were leftover from a luau surplus at Culver Surplus and Hardware, being used for the perfect happenstance of thick 8pm fog on the trail to Edith Manor. Sloan dressed as Dracula took a sublime breath in and out and turned to us “This is so goddamn beautiful. We just got back from the haunted hayride. You missed out guys, it was scary, cheesy and just a blast. Loudon got dunked in the bucket of blood. Hence why his costume looks more like a fruit roll than a mummy. But this fog! This fog is so wonderful! Oh man, I could roam around all night, but Alice, Nancy and Bent have prepared a late night party at Edith Manor. Along with a special ghost story from our own Hal Capher. But first we have one more tradition here in Maple Falls, Sc’mon.”

The rest of the gang followed in their costumes. Hal as Edgar Allan Poe. Loudon as the red mummy. Wesson dressed as Elmer Fudd. Gupp dressed as a giant maple leaf. Woodsy dressed up as the Raggedy Andy, with Zaccone dressed as Raggedy Annie. Spillman dressed up as Calton the doorman and Joan dressed as Captain Nemo.

“You thought Edith Manor was haunted? Check out this place, Holmes.” They all walked up to a gate just up the trail from Edith Manor.

Opening the gate they walked up to an impressively large estate. More royal, but still withered by age.

Sloan knocked on the door “Nobody answers, but it’s just tradition to knock.”

To their surprise though, someone did indeed answer the door. A man looking like Elvis on laundry day answered the door “Thank god and gravy! You here to fix the plumbing?...Oh, howdy. You trick r treaters?”

“Uhh... Yeah.” Sloan said in confusion as she looked at the man at the door with giant sideburns and nautic sunglasses.

The Elvis looking man grabbed beef jerky to his side and handed them to everybody “Sorry, I got no candy. Protein is good, right?”

“Nice Elvis costume.” Sloan said dumbfounded.

“Huh?...Yeah...Long live the king.”

The giant door slammed and the whole gang all looked at each other as if they had seen a ghost.

Back at Edith Manor in the living room, Hal came up to a podium and knocked a gavel and got everyone's attention.

"Good evening ladies, gentlemen and the ghosts that haunt this estate."

Sloan smiled with her fake fanged teeth as she made eye contact with Hal and got comfortable in her seat.

"I am here to tell you a tale. A tale of shock, torment and endless screams of the night. A tale filled with ghosts, goblins, witches and warlocks. Demons and creatures. A tale filled with you and I in the dark endless night sky. It all started on an unassuming sunny fall day. The entire population of Maple Falls had flocked to something new in town. Just across the way into Winnepesago woods, circus tents.

"There were games, jugglers, magicians and cotton candy for Loudon to drag out the rest of our Maple Falls gang to join him in the festivities."

"Come one, come all! Experience the miracles of Mr.Wickedly. Wish for anything you want and it will come true!...Also it comes with a free cup of booker beer!" Announced a man on stilts, breathing fire in the air.

Loudon looked at the large line for Mr.Wickedly "Well that's how you market something."

Inside was Mr.A talking to Mr.Wickedly. A man who looked completely out of time with his long charcoal suit and looking to be headed out of time with his age. He was blind, eyes of silver, but still checked his pocket watch from time to time.

"I wanna be the strongest man alive."

"As strong as stone?"

"Yeah!"

"Then your wish is granted!"

Mr.A got up and received his free beer.

"Next!"

"Well what do people under 21 get?" Loudon asked

“Free box of screaming yellow zonkers.” Slithered a pale man at the ticket counter.

Sloan was first.

“What is the wish you grant?”

“Well I wish I was more agile on the ice.”

“Ah, like a spider?”

“Sure?”

Next was Hal “I wish I could be better at pottery.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, otherwise life is pretty perfect here.”

Last was Loudon.

“I don’t know, I’m kind of lost sometimes. I’d like my head to be the game.”

“Your wish is granted.”

“Cool, where’s popcorn?”

The three succeeded and munched their popcorn “To free shit!” Loudon proclaimed.

“Anybody see Joan? Is she still in the line?” Hal asked.

“I saw her go by the southside, she’s fine. Probably sneaking in some fishing.” Sloan added.

But as hours went on, Joan never turned up. They went back to Maple Tree and she wasn’t in her room, nor any room in the house.

Sloan took out her walkie talkie and called for Joan. No answer at all. “She’s not on the water, she never forgets her walkie talkie.”

Loudon took his walkie talkie “I’m still gonna try. Sloan and Hal stick together. Ask the locals first and then go back to the woods. Call every half hour okay?”

Hal and Sloan nodded.

The first place they checked first was snacks and candy. Bent was not behind the counter.

“Weird...Bathroom?” Sloan said.

Opening the door of the unisex bathroom, Hal and Sloan heard instant growling and closed the door as fast as they could.

“Wolf?!” Hal asked.

“Yeah, wolf!”

“Any bright ideas?!”

“Eh, run like hell?!”

“Okay, three, two, one!”

The two bolted away and ran from the wolf that was in Bent’s clothes. Sloan threw down a rack of snack cakes.

The wolf immediately went to the snack cakes and started chowing down on them.

The two ran fast and back to Edith Manor.

“Loudon, wolf at Snacks and Candy. Over.”

No answer.

“Loudon, are you there? Over!...Loudon! Loudon!” Sloan held the walkie talkie and the two waited for a couple minutes “Holmes, I’m scared.”

Hal breathed in the cold air and went to the thermostat “It’s okay. We’ll find them. Everything is fine. God, why is the heat off and the windows open?”

Walking down the stairs completely on fire and lighting the entire the staircase a blaze, was Aunt Nancy “Why is it so fucking hot in here?!”

Hal took immediate action and grabbed the fire extinguisher and sprayed it on Nancy, but it gave no effect.

Nancy looked down at the fire extinguisher and at Hal “Well, we’re fucked.” And the three of them escaped the house and watched as Edith Manor burned a cinder.

“So what the hell is going on here?!” Sloan shouted

“Well, this is gonna sound crazy, but!...Could you back up Nancy, I don’t want to catch on fire too.”

“Oh, sorry.” As Nancy kindled and burned the ground in which she stepped.

“Nancy, what did you wish for at Mr. Wickedly’s booth?”

“Uh, to be hotter. Why?”

Sloan and Hal watched as the monkey’s paw wish was right in front of them.

“Fuck! Sloan, what did you wish for?”

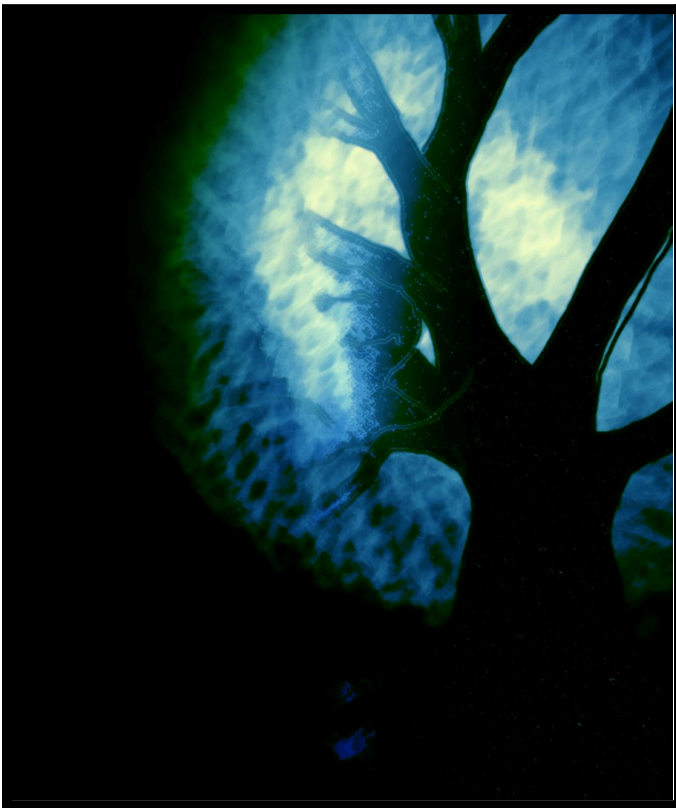
“To be better at hockey.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, sorry I couldn’t think of anything. I was only thinking of the free popcorn.”

“Same. Well, we gotta fix it. We don’t know what the wish will give us?”

“Well, I’m gonna go jump in the lake. What are you guys gonna do?” Nancy asked.



Hal and Sloan opened the doors to the barn and pulled out two wielding axes.

Later, the couple found themselves in the woods of where the circus tent was.

“Where is it? Wasn’t it right here?” Hal asked.

“Uh, Holmes. What time is it?” Sloan said in a fright.

Hal looked at his pocket watch “6:30, why what’s up?”

“Look.”

The two watched the sun quickly set and a harvest full moon appeared above them.

“Now, that’s not normal at all.” Sloan remarked.

Suddenly water splashed at their feet, even though they were not even close to the water.

“Holmes, promise we’ll find Joan and Loudon.”

“I promise.”

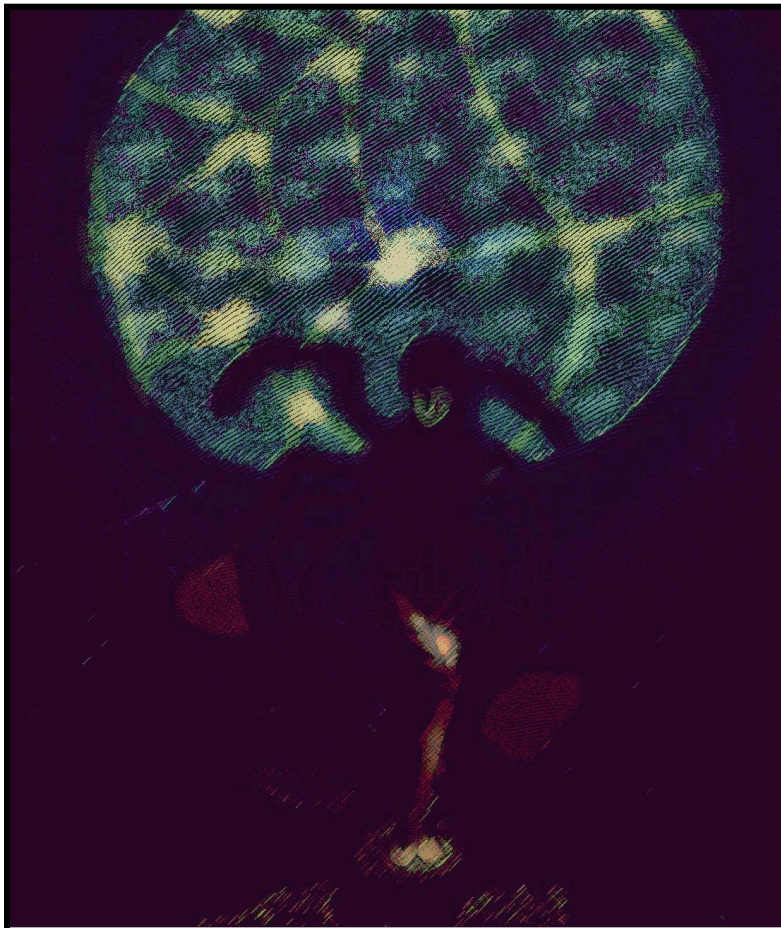
Suddenly the mud clasped both their feet and they were dragged away in different directions.

Back in Maple Falls the effects of the wishes of Mr.Wickedly affected more than just Bent and Nancy. Mr.A was suddenly trudging through Donovan street, slowly turning to stone. Zaccane froze to crystal ice and shattered on the streets. Mr.Morris just ceased to exist. And Mr.Nelson had the body of Johnny Unitas grow out of him like a siamese twin.

For our heroes, bubbles came from the lake by an unfamiliar shore of Winnepasaga woods.

The cursed kiss of the scaled spider was of Sloan as she emerged from the lake.

The waters came to a mellow and she saw her reflection.



Eight arms came to her grasp and swatted the water from fright. Only to confirm that this was no trick, but a curse of the shrouded forest of never ending night.

Something rustled in the lake, a figure in shadow emerged from shore about twenty meters from Sloan. She looked around in fear and sweat. Looking out in the distance, until she spotted the figure in an orange jacket.

“Hal!”

The figure appeared out of the shadows and it was Hal. But his

entire body was made of wet dripping clay. His body was trying to form ever so badly.

“Sloan?” Hal muffled in an exhausted breath.

“Hal, it’s okay. I’m here!”

“What am I? What happened?” He said as he saw a glimpse of himself in the water.

They sat and rested and molded Hal at shore for a half an hour, until some form of a face was given. Sloan pulled out Hal’s pocket watch from his jacket, looked at the watch and heard it ticking, but staying at midnight.

“Are you okay to walk?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Holmes, why aren’t you freaked out by me?”

“Cause you’re still you.”

Sloan kissed him where his lips were now and helped him up.

Walking around the forest they called out the names of their friends. Until one responded “Hey, I’m not a soccer ball!”

“Loudon!” Sloan picked up Loudon, who was simply just his head.

“You’re just a head.”

“Yeah and you’re a spider. What else is new in hell?”

The three walked out to find Joan, Loudon was nestled in Sloan’s human arms.

“So I think I got it out pretty lightly.”

“Out lightly, you’re just a head dude!”

“I don’t think I am. I have a sensation of a body. Throw some super glue on my neck and I’ll be golden. I can actually feel it moving, it’s wet.”

“Then It’s probably in the lake. We all emerged there, let’s go back.” Said Hal.

Back in the lake the three did see a figure come out of the water. But coming to them wasn’t Loudon’s body, but a staggering yellowed, translucent, faceless giant that barely had the structure of a human.

“Oh god, that can’t be...Uhhh, Joan?” Sloan asked

The giant stood in silence.

“Stomp once for no, twice for yes.”

The giant slowly stomped twice.

“Holy fucking shit.” Loudon said in deep concern and acceptance of his cousin.

Meanwhile across the woods at the giant circus tent, caged like a monster...Was our Joan who awoke in a shock and still looking the same. No curses were casted on her, not yet.

“Guys!” Joan fell back down as caged vultures around her in the room cawed and rattled in their cages.

“Enough! Enough!” Mr. Wickedly took his cane and knocked every cage as he walked the circle that the cages were in. Finally whacking Joan’s cage.

“You, do not disturb my birds! They hate to see what they once were.”

Back in the woods Sloan took command “Alright, let’s do a head count.”

“Excuse me!” Loudon’s head shouted from the ground.

Sloan with a cursed kiss of the scaled spider. Hal the body and face of molding clay. Uneven, warped and staggering in structure. Only to be rivaled by a nine foot tall pale and faceless giant only responding yes or no with one or two stomps of the feet. The giant reached down and picked up the head of Loudon and cradled him in her arms.

Loudon positioned himself “Ah much better...So now what?”

“I don’t know, this shit is bigger than us.” Sloan responded.

“So what, we’re gonna cut our losses and get flapjacks at the Jelly Jar? Hate to break it to you Sloan, I need a stomach for that!”

“Look for the stars to find your path.” Muffled Hal.

“Yeah, the north star. We’re fine with getting back, I know the forest like the back of my hand.”

“Yeah, same here! But Sloan, this place ain’t making a lick of sense!”

“Loudon, please!”

“Please what? Face it, we’re screwed! You’re a spider, I’m headless, Hal is freaking play-doh, Joan is every nightmare I’ve ever had...And that tree over there is bleeding!”

Hal went over and snatched Loudon's head and pointed him to the sky. The stars formed words to their right path.

"Do not fear, follow these here lights to your prophet and answers to the first steps to the cure of your curse will be answered...Huh, shucks what are we all bickering about? Let's shag ass!"

Sloan took her brother's head from Hal and kissed his clay face "Good thinking Holmes."

"I'd smile back if I could."

"I know, but I feel it from ya." Sloan linked one side of arms around Hal and they all walked towards the shooting starlight in search of their escape.

The crackle of the fire was only heard as the others awaited more from Hal's story. "I gotta use the bathroom."

"Oh come on!" Shouted Bent as cheese doodles flew up in the air.

As Hal finished his bathroom break, he leaned on the wall before entering the living room.

"Yeah, I know he's so talented." Zacccone said.

"Yeah, he's like a modern day shakespeare." Gupp added.

"Yeah, he can play the kazoo with his asshole!" Loudon shouted. "Yo Big Boat, we see you! Sc'mon and continue the story. We're antsy!"

Hal smiled and walked back to the podium and continued the story.

"To be fair the opening is a reimagining of 'Something wicked this way comes, but the rest is mine. Ahem! Alright, the gang walked the trail of stars and Loudon felt a weird sensation."

"Woah! What the hell am I doing?"

"What does it feel like?" asked Hal.

"It feels like I'm...digging into someone's skull. Oh god, has my body turned evil?!"

Meanwhile Loudon's body was at the circus tent. He wasn't digging into skulls, but gutting pumpkins. As his body was tasked as the new chef for the crows and Joan.

Body rushed back to the black cauldron and tried to put a wooden spoonful to where his mouth would be. Finally it admitted defeat and poured it down his esophagus.

“And now I’m drinking the blood of the victim, fantastic.”

“Hey, I think we found what we’re looking for!” Sloan announced.

And in front of them was a pup tent and a fire to the side of it.

“Halt. Who goes there?” A cloaked figure threw sand like material to the bonfire and white haze came from it.

“Who are you?” Sloan approached the cloak figure and it turned around to reveal it was a familiar face.

“Janie?!” Everybody shouted in the story and back at Edith Manor.

“Why is Janie in this story?” Asked Zacccone.

“Sssshhh! Continue Hal.” Sloan rested on an armchair, eager as hell to hear more.

“I am to you, a prophet. I come from a long line of demon slayers.”

“Fucking awesome.” Loudon said in the story and at Edith Manor.

“So you know what’s going on?” Asked Hal.

“Yes I do. Mr.Wickedly has casted a curse upon this town and sadly unto you four. Spectors have already crossed the planes, demons will awaken their damned souls. We have to act fast and smart to stop Mr.Wickedly from spreading the curse. Follow me, we have very little time.”

They walked through the woods and past a cemetery of ghosts trying to crawl out of their graves.

“We must walk around the cemetery. They’re too many looking for souls.”

“And turn to demons?” asked Sloan

“Yes, through broken darkness.”

“Broken darkness?”

“Broken darkness is passing through planes by force. Usually done by a demon like them. Trying to get a soul is the only way to fully pass through as a demon.”

The trees around them suddenly started to bend and came closer to the Maple Falls gang.

“They have control of these trees. We gotta move!”

The gang was cornered by the maples, with roots sprouting from the ground and forming a cage around them.

Janie pulled out a machete and started whacking at the tree limb cage.

“Jesus fuck!” Loudon shouted.

“Hey!” Janie took in resentment and tossed the machete to the yellowed monster.

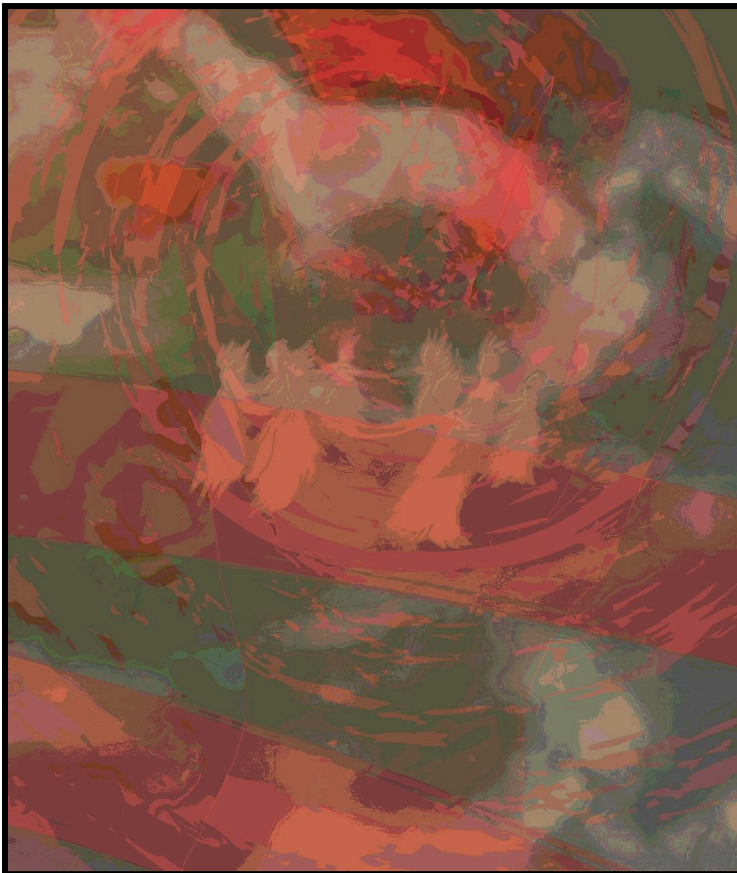
“Here, Joan, get us out of here quicker!”

The gang looked out in the woods and heard moans. Ghosts of popping torsos came out of the soil.

“Don’t panic, we have time. They’re too weak at this point.”

“What about that one?!” Loudon pointed at a ghost trying to escape the soil in the cage. Everyone scurried to the corner and stood and saw the ghost struggle to free itself into their cage.”

“Good lord, who is he?! ” Sloan aksed



“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Loudon asked.

“I don’t know, because there are literally billions of demons out there.”

“Billions?! ” Sloan exclaimed.

“Yeah, a lot of horrible people have once lived on this plane and want to reclaim it and end their eternal damnation forever. Our guy right here is actually putting up a good fight to escape. You hear that unbearable cracking noise?”

“...Yeah.” Hal finally agreed as they listened to the unsettling noise.

“Yeah, those are his bones forming, snapping and reforming.”

The gang together felt disgusted.

Loudon’s body even made the gesture of trying to cover a mouth for throw up.

“Body, did you just throw up?” Joan said as body stirred the pumpkin stew.

“Oh god, I threw up and I don’t even know how that’s even possible!”

The yellowed monster got through and the gang escaped through the opening.

The gang found themselves past the cemetery and spotted spirits out of the soil.

“Great, death is just everywhere today, isn’t it?” Loudon rustled his head away and hid in Hal.

“Why are they conjoined?” Hal asked.

“Some spirits are conjoined as they crawl back from hell to this plane. There is no path, only dirt.

It is safe to pass them at this time. All seem to have harvested a soul each.”

Loudon’s head was brought to the front of the pack “And that’s supposed to be good news?!” as he whispered loudly, with Hal covering his mouth and bringing his head back.

“Yes, a pure soul in grasp is only good for twenty-four hours. With no soul, means the shadows drag them back to hell.”

“Yeah, we got to get the fuck out of here.” Sloan said.

Back at the tent.

“Alright, we got to get the fuck out of here. Loudon’s body, do you have a plan?”

Body pointed upwards in an idea and went to his knees and drew a pumpkin with his finger.

Joan rubbed away the drawing “No Pumpkins! We gotta get out of here. Do you know where the keys are to get me out of this cage? One stomp for ‘No’, two stomps for ‘Yes’.”

Loudon’s body stomped twice.

“Alright, get those keys and I’ll handle the escape plan when I’m out.”

Loudon’s body let out a thumbs up, rushed to the door and missed it with a quick bump.

Back in the woods Janie rushed towards a certain tree.

“Yes! An olive tree!”

“Great! Why are we having martinis?” asked Loudon.

“An olive tree is a sacred tree. So sacred it can grow in darkness and remain pure. Please, take one, it will help us in battle.”

Each took an olive. Sloan fed one to Loudon and formed an opening in Hal’s mouth for him to chew. Then followed with a smile.

“We’re gonna get through this.” Sloan kissed Hal and Sloan at Edith Manor was up closer to Hal who was now on the couch with her.

Loudon’s body quickly came back with rattling keys.

“Quick, get him!” A guard shouted.

“Great!” Joan shouted and followed.

“Great!” As she saw Loudon’s arms covered in nine sets of skeleton keys, ninety in counting.

“Fantastic Loudon! We have 90 keys and 90 seconds to-” Joan turned the first key and it opened the cage.

“Huh?” Joan took body by the arm and dragged him under the tent and into another.

Back in the woods a bright light came towards them. Janie held her ground and placed her arm in the way of our gang, pressing her glasses closer in.

“Halt! I am a prophet of god!”

“Yeah? Well I clean old people’s asses for a living!”

“Aunt Nancy?!”

Joining the gang was Aunt Nancy.

“Yeah, the lake didn’t work. Stood in the water until chiggers started biting my ass.”

“Alright whatever, come with us.” Janie said.

“But don’t follow too closely.” Sloan added.

Sneaking out of the room, Joan and Body found themselves in a hallway with dozens of doors as the only exits

“Oh great, it’s fucking Scooby-Doo. Okay, let’s try door number 1.”

Joan and Body went through door 1 and came out door 3.

“Okay, it literally is Scooby-Doo!”

Back in the woods everybody heard a certain crunch sound.

“Shh, do you hear that?” Sloan pointed out.

Everybody looked behind them and holding a bag of potato chips in his teeth was Bent the Werewolf and a clan of demons. The gang started running for their lives.

Back at the circus tent Joan and Body exited out the 11th door.

“Okay, this is getting annoying!” Joan then took the sword from a standing suit of armor “If there is no door, make one!” Joan stabbed the wall and dark nether grabbed ahold of the sword and a single scream echoed from the walls. The room around them then disappeared.

Back in the woods.

“Look, a patch of blue sky!” Janie noticed.

“Yeah, how is that gonna help us?” asked Sloan.

“Oh heavenly father, we ask of you to grant us defense in our crusade.”

“Yeah, like that’s gonna-”

Four flaming swords soared down from the heavens and pierced the soil.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Sloan grabbed a sword, kicked a demon and beheaded another with her sword.

Hal grabbed his sword and stabbed a demon to a fiery demise as it turned to ash.

“Wait, Janie. Why aren’t you grabbing your sword?!” asked Sloan.

Janie lifted up with sprouting angel wings and blasted an array of demons with lightning.

“Nevermind!” Sloan said casually, slicing through more demons.

Back at the circus a room appeared to them and they were on stage with a lion in a cage and a lion tamer.

The lion tamer jumped at Loudon’s body and they started wrestling him and trying to choke him out.

“Oh god, ow! Ow! Ow! Oh no, my body is trying to kill again!”

The yellowed monster took the demon and slammed it to the ground.

“Oh, nice kill Joan.” The yellow monster squished the demon’s bones with its giant mutated foot.

Joan backed up and was met with the roar of the lion.

“Okay, this might be a stupid idea. Loudon, kick his nuts and get over here!”

Loudon’s body did in fact kick the lion tamer in the nuts and Joan opened the cage and let out the lion, who immediately went over to devour the tamer.

“Alright, let’s get the hell out of here!”

Loudon’s body reached for the tamer’s belt on the side and pulled out his gun and strapped it to his waist.

The gang finally met up with Joan and body outside the tent.

“Guys it’s Joan?!” Sloan turned to the yellowed giant. “Okay?” Saying with emphasis and slight concern.

“Guys, she’s with my body! Not Joan, kick my ass!”

The yellow creature obliged and Joan stopped it.

“Wait! Why do you want to kick your own ass?...Nevermind. Hi all, how’s your endless night been going? Spider, clay man, headless Loudon. Mmm-hmm, Mmmkay. Also, who the hell is that?”

“...Uhh, we thought it was you. It’s friendly though.” Hal said.

“It’s probably Bent.” Joan said.

“No, that’s bent?” Loudon added.

The WereBent came from the bushes and to our Maple Falls Gang.

“Alright, let’s shag ass!” Loudon’s head said.

Loudon’s body then shot the wolf and put the gun upwards to Loudon’s face and at first confusion, then realization as he blew the smoke and was taken in his body’s arms.

Gone went the wolf and emerged as Bent as he got up.

“Wait, you’re not dead?!” Sloan questioned.

“Yeah, you just have to shoot me with a silver bullet, it doesn’t have to be the heart.” Bent said with a limp in the leg.

“Alright, everybody shut the fuck up and listen!” Janie got everybody’s attention “To stop Mr.Wickedly we only have to speak the words of god. Sorac Khan, Sorac Khan. Twice and only twice. And only when he’s a full demon. Any traces of Mr.Wickedly and it won’t work. It’s not meant for mortals. ”

Loudon’s body handed his head to Sloan and took out a sharpie and wrote it on the palm of his hand.

“Wait, repeat it so-” Joan couldn’t finish, as the ground around them shook and Mr.Wickedly then emerged from the dirt. His body slowly started twitching towards them. “Halt! Your souls are mine!” Mr.Wickedly spoke with two voices.

“Yep he’s possessed.” Janie said as she conquered lightning from her hand and shot it at Mr.Wickedly, not even flinching with the hit.

Mr.Wickedly threw her to the side “Foolish mortal! I will drag all your souls to Hell!” The demon shouted as it continued to form its body.

“Yeah, bullshit! We’re not evil, you can’t drag us to hell.” Loudon shouted with the utmost confidence.

“Well actually-” Janie tried to correct Loudon, but the ground opened a fiery pit to hell.

Demons started clawing their way to the gang and drooled blood from their half melted faces. Satan himself was on the bottom, trapped from the waist down and just barely reaching our friends.

“Body, what are you doing up here?!” Sloan attached herself to the wall and pushed it upwards to Loudon’s head.

Loudon jumped in his seat “Jesus Hal, how do you write this scary shit?!”

“It’s not real, man. That’s how I can write it. Demons, witches, shadows without a body and sylphs in the sky, it’s just fiction man...Fiction!”

Suddenly rapping scattered underneath the floorboards and every pair of sneakers lifted up. Eyes widened, Loudon covered his neck and screeches came from everyone in the room. Everyone, but Hal. Sloan then took notice of Hal's smile and mouthed to him. "Bravo Holmes."

Out emerging from the root cellar door was not a ghoul or a ghost, but-

"Boo!" Alice, Nancy and Bent shouted.

"You weenies having fun with your story?" Alice snagged a handful of pretzels and the three went back to the porch.

"Thanks guys. Okay, where were we?"

"Hell was pulling us in." Sloan responded.

"Right! Hell was pulling us in. Till all but a Loudon head shouting out the final words on the palm of his hand.

"Sorac Khan! Sorac Khan!...Is that it, did it work?"

The ground stopped shaking and the fires of hell disappeared to dirt. Everyone crawled up back to their regular selves. Loudon saw he was whole again and hugged himself. Sloan lept at Hal and kissed him all over.

And the yellowed monster revealed herself to the Maple Falls gang. A final specter, it had been Aunt Edith all along. She waved to them and faded upwards to an opening sunshine sky.

"Her spirit is with God now." Janie waved and the gang followed with her.

Chapter 15 - My first camping trip

Loudon was walking through and found a large maple tree that was burnt and halfway down after lightning struck it during a stormy night.

He knocked on the wood, inspected it all around and smiled. Opening up his duffel bag, he pulled out an ax, he pulled the protector off and next thing we see is Loudon placing the chopped, fashioned shaped, sanded planks wood on his poker table.

Swiveling his medical stool he went tummy to his work bench that was the length of the side wall. Guiding his finger through the labeled cabinets above, he stopped at 'Stop the violins' and bumped his fist to it to open quite fast. From left to right he picked out perfectly organized coping saws, gouges, spool clamps, verniers, drawing compasses', calibers, scrappers and a giant jack plane that he swayed in the air as he danced to the sounds of Vivaldi, Tchaikovsky and Brahms.

Pulling out an aluminum sheet of a violin template, Loudon kissed it and took a sheet of wood to his template and traced cuts in the wood.

Outside the garage the world kept going in rhythm, while he kept working through the hours.

Loudon looked at the clock as he was sanding and saw 4:45am, shrugged a 'whatever' and kept sanding as he turned up the symphony to his headphones.

“In order to have order in life Holmes, you gotta get a rhythm.” Sloan started strumming ‘Get a Rhythm’ by Johnny Cash to the day to day rhythms of Maple Falls. Bent stacking the shelves of Snacks and Candy. Ms.Erickson set down every piece of fruit known to man, with Mr.Nelson bleeping in a rapid,



but slow pace. Milkman Stan rotating bottles of milk.

Joan letting out a fly fish line and reeling it back in.

Alice cleaning the spittle of Mr.Sands while Ms.Beak

slowly walks her canary on a leash. A student at Maple

Falls music connection repeating the keys of

Mr.Gonson. Sloan continued to strum and missed a

chord. “Happens. Hey, get a rhythm.”

Days had passed and Loudon strung his final string to

the sunrise of a cold Saturday morning. He swiveled his

work on his EF brewer medical stool and scooted a

stand with a how to play violin for beginners booklet

laying upon it and started to play to pluck basic notes

out of tune as he adjusted the strings.

Hal sat by the lake with his journal.

You see, I’m not the only one from the Twin Cities that

has arrived at Maple Falls

See, this is still a tourist town. This town always gets tourists this time of year, usually suburbanites from anywhere in the metro or south of the metro. Usually cake eaters, trying to capture their youths with their family.

“Names Bob, that’s the wife barb. Here’s our oldest Janine. She’s going through a goth phase. And our youngest Tyler. He’s a lil spitfuck, but he’s a charmer...Usually when he wants a candy bar at every gosh darn pit stop.” Spoke the thickest of midwest accents. High on nasal and low on self shame with the tucked in cut off slacks from Dayton's. A signature creation from Bob himself.

The oldest rolled her eyes as the youngest rolled around his head like a propeller.

But then comes their cruel reality, that it's not the 1950s anymore.

"Oh I know the area like the back of my hand. I explored Winnepasaga woods when I was a boy.

Went to the christian camp here back in the 50s."

It's the mid 80s and times have changed and places change.

"What's that, the camp burned down?"

People change.

"Burned down by the owners...Okie-dokie, that's a darn shame. Can scratch that location off the tour." Bob said, trying to keep a chipper attitude as the leader of his family clan.

The estranged relationship with your father, is now an estranged relationship with your son.

"Tyler, come on, it's time I taught you how to set up a tent. Tyler? Tyler!" Bob ran over and caught his son who was about to jump off of a deer stand.

"Oh sweet mother Mary and Joseph, Tyler. What did I tell you about climbing? You could break a leg...Again." Bob caught his breath and wiped his flop sweat.

"Why is there a deer stand doing out here? It's not deer season...Right?"

Confidence is there, but perfect execution is long forgotten.

Bob was struggling with setting up the tent. Each metal bar folding down with each movement and the instructions unraveling a new duo layer sheet. "How in god's-"

Only Resulting in a passable execution and a few extra bolts to spare.

My backyard was always shared and always filled with broken bottles to a trail to the freeway exit gas station.

But here I am with the wilderness, finally out there with two sherpas that'll guide me away from death that's not by drive bys, but by mountain lions, tiger striped mushrooms and bears, oh my.

Sloan, Loudon and Joan separately rolled out their army green pup tents. Scattering wooden stakes and hammering them all in place around the tent. Pulling them all up in under four minutes flat. No one was faster in certain steps, nor slower.

Sloan looked at Hal “There are modern advancements to camping, but with each advancement comes a step removed from you and nature. The only thing between me and the earth is a two person sleeping bag.”

The four of them hiked a trail looking for a specific shrub as Loudon showed his sketchbook of the “Beaked Hazelnut. *Corylus cornuta*. See you don’t want to confuse the foliage with Minnesota’s other Hazelnut, the american hazelnut.”

Hal looked at both etched leaves that looked to him- “They look exactly the same.”

Loudon chuckled, “Oh, they’re totally different, my good friend.”

“So, the tree people keep the American name?” Sloan asked.

“Yeah, scientists don’t care about changing politics in that sense. We just care about funding and big oil fucking off and dying in a small hole. Ah! Here is the shrub, hard to find because he’s just a little feller. Aren’t you?”

Hal looked further in Loudon’s sketchbook and saw beautiful drawings of detailed trees, leaves, birds, even a drawing of droppings of a deer were stunning in detail.

“Good lord, Loudon, these drawings are something else, man.”

“Eh, you should see Joan’s drawings?”

Hal looked over at Joan, he didn’t know she drew too.

“I’ll think about it.” She responded with very little emotion

“I respect that.”

“I know you do.”

“Holmes, I can show you my art skills.”

The four trailed to creek bed and Sloan pulled some clay from a watery deposit.

Back at the camp, Sloan molded, stretched and measured whilst chatting it up with Hal as Loudon and Joan fished for tonight’s dinner.

“You wrote yourself as the clay creature because of me didn’t you?”

“That obvious?”

“You visit me in art class everyday. You lied to Mr.Mcguire that you have to calibrate the steam valve of the kiln.”

“And don’t I do that?”

“No, you watch me make pottery or we sometimes make out in the bathroom outside the classroom.”

“Exactly...But also yes. Got you on my mind, I guess.”

“Ditto.” Sloan revealed a mug that read ‘Holmes’ and she scraped the remaining clay with her finger and wiped it on Hal’s nose and walked to the fire.

“Oh! Yo Holmes, can you calibrate the steam valve for me?”

Dinner was served. Pan fried Walleye meat, baked beans and choice of either peaches or pears in a can.

“Thank you Joan and Loudon.” Spoke Hal

“Sloan applied the lemon, thank her.” Loudon said with a mouthful of beans.

“Hey, I got dessert.” Sloan pulled out pre-pan packaged popcorn and placed it above the fire.

After the meal, Hal felt his stomach, it was beyond full. “Oh god, that was so much food.”

“That’s the joys of nature, big boat. Camping’s dilemmas are not taxes, or bills by 1000 other names. It’s merely just survival. So stuff.” Loudon stuffed his face with more popcorn.

“I’m gonna clock out a bit early. Hibernate I guess.” Hal kissed Sloan on the lips and headed for the tent.

Her brother and cousin looked at her.

“What?”

“You guys kiss a lot.” Loudon pointed out as he rolled his eyes and smiled.

“Yeah, so.”

“Do you like, love him?” Joan asked.

“I really like him.”

“But, do you love him?” Loudon asked.

“I really like him, let’s not push it.”

“She loves him.” Joan slugged Loudon.

Before Hal tucked out for the night, he picked up his journal “When I was a kid I wasn’t surrounded by affection from two people in love. Mom never dated anyone and the closest thing I had to model relationship was sadly my Aunt Nancy and her on again, off again, on again and gladly off again at the moment ex-husband Vern.

Flashback we go. As Vern was kissed by Nancy, 6 year old Hal was making curious eye contact as he scooped giant spoonfuls of honey toasted triangle cereal in his mouth.

With Vern giving unpleasant eye contact back. Being a part of the generation that just didn’t want to show love and affection, in the times of love and affection. Those stick in the muds that went to woodstock, but you know for damn sure they didn’t appreciate it. You know damn sure they’ve never smoked a joint in their life and the only records in their collection are John Wayne movie soundtracks. The same movies he falls asleep to after his NRA meetings. Not quite the male model you want to have around. So, my introductions were always false love. You ask, oh love is universal. I don’t think so, it takes an idiot to love a maroon like vern.

Back in Nancy’s apartment “I was an idiot for marrying him.”

“And going back to him.” Alice added.

“And going back to him.” Nancy repeated.

“Again.”

Nancy sighed “Again...I promise this is the last time.”

The clock winded back and we were at Saint Thaddeus.

Aunt Nancy was scrubbing Mrs.Nygard with a giant comical sized yellow sponge “Oh my Mrs.Nygard, your toes are painted. Who painted them for you?”

“Seven years ago, my husband painted them with a special kind of paint. Son of a bitch died with the secret of that paint. I’d kill for ruby toenails.” Spoke a cigarette smoked voice of Nygard.

“Well I can check the hardware store and see.”

“Oh, you would?”

“Yeah Ny Ny, we’re buds.”

“Thank you dear.”

Alice looked over as her feet dangled on the arms of a wooden chair as she indulged in brown sugar and strawberry oatmeal and a rather tense episode of ‘With Winter, comes spring’.

“Walter, I don’t love you. I don’t love anybody, I don’t think I can love ever again.”

“Preach!”

“I got another letter from Vern.”

“Give it here.”

“I got rid of-”

“Give it here!”

Nancy rolled her eyes and pulled the envelope out of her purse and handed it to Alice.

“So who’s Vern?”

“My ex-husband. He wants to get back together with me.”

Alice took out her zippo and reached underneath her chair for a steel bedpan. Lit the letter and plopped it in the bedpan “And his wife, they’re-”

“Polygamous?” Mrs. Nygard finished the sentence to Nancy and Alice’s surprise.

“What? I may be an older woman, but Walter and I did it all.”

The door behind him closed as Harvey heard all and saw the fire burn in the bedpan. Harvey looked at the soap playing and pulled a chair next to Alice.

At the end of what Alice and Harvey called a wonderful ‘Half assed shift’ as coined at the time out card puncher and by the front door of Saint Thaddeus.

“Oh my god, me too! Like I have time to read, but usually a bookstore is closed when I get all my shit done. So one day I picked up an Archie digest and I now pick one up every grocery visit. Got Hal hooked on them too.”

“Same with me and my Joan.”

“Yeah...I just noticed something. We’re still at work, we can leave...But I want to continue this conversation...But I got...An empty house, huh.”

“Same.”

“Grocery shopping...Friday.”

“Thursday...Laundry?”

“Monday.”

“Same...You wanna get some chow mein?”

Staggering into a midnight hour tent. Sloan laid upon Hal.

“Hey Holmes.”

“Hmm?” Hal said with his eyes still shut and mumbling as he was half asleep.

“I really liked your ghost story...How did you write it?”

“I don’t know, I just wrote it.”

“But like, how?”

“By doing it.”

“Yeah, you just said that.”

“If the story is in your head and you want to get it out, you’ll get it out.”

Well, where did you learn it from?”

“Here, there, everywhere.”

“Well is there like a book you learned it from?”

“Yeah...Like all of them. My hand is asleep.” Hal wagged his hand in the air to wake it up and went back to holding Sloan’s hand.

“Well, is there like a ‘how to’ book?”

“Writers don’t write ‘How to’ books. Only people that don’t write, write ‘How to’ books. Kind of a bootstrap paradox...Like where did their so-called knowledge of writing come from when all they do is give advice?” Hal chuckled with that thought.

“Well someone has to give you the push. What advice do the writers give, they had to have been asked this question. What’s the damn secret?”

“There is no secret. Anybody can write. Shit like I said, it was just ‘Something wicked this way comes.’ But I wanted to tell it differently. My voice. Everybody has their unique voice. They’re my words and only I can say them. That’s why so many biographers have so many thoughts on Richard III. But hey, can’t knock Shakespeare, eh?”

“Huh, I guess you're right.”

“‘I guess’ is a perfect answer to it. But I do have an answer on who gives the push.”

“Yeah, who?”

“To me? You. We have a ‘For somebody’ page for that reason. The first words are never the story, but the life of the person who wrote it.”

“I’m your life?”

“You’re a big part of it.” Hal finished the sentence while yawning in the air like a dog.

Sloan felt it in her heart and kissed Hal all over.

“Sorry, I’m wide awake and I forgot extra batteries for my cassette player. Got anything to read?”

“Crime and punishment.”

“What’s that about?”

Hal yawned more “Alienation from society in 1860s Russia.” Hal handed Sloan the heavy ass book.

“Er...Got anything else?”

“I got my journal. Got some nonfiction and fiction in there.” Hal handed Sloan his journal.

“You cool with me reading it?”

“Yeah, it’s always open for you.”

“You know, you’re really sweet when you're sleepy.”

“Yeah, cool.” Hal kissed the air “Sorry, I tried to kiss you, but my head didn’t move.”

Sloan kissed Hal one more time and grabbed Hal's headlamp and saw him quickly fall back to a slumber.

Sloan opened up the journal and found a story called 'Queen of fire'

In darkness, wandered one of the first figures of our existence. A figure of no substance, only an outline of gray. Barely visible to the naked eye.

Out in the distance was bright light, she ran towards it and came across to what it was, a fire. She finally was able to see herself as her hands came closer to the fire. Until the flame swirled around her arms and she became one with it.

A darkling wick igniting. Thus born, the queen of fire.



Creatures of land came as one or remained as islands as they rested. Closing their eyes till the end of time. They'd sometimes wrestle in their slumber, that's how earthquakes come to be.

Though the king of water is everywhere. Always moving, always housing, quenching or waving a fine hello to the shores.

The queen of fire wandered the lands. The grass did not like her very much, for her footprints burned a trail that always led to her.

The rocks were more kind to her. They let her walk their paths by the shore. Until one day the waves were a bit too friendly and almost put out our Queen of fire.

So the rocks decided to make her a pair of shoes. Thus she could walk anywhere on the earth.

In the years, wandering animals came for warmth, but sadly would never stay with her for long.

The duke of air came, but always breezed past her. The light king would always warn her before the rain king came down. And the trees, flowers and mushrooms would always walk away whenever she came.

She was alone.

Sloan looked up from the book and looked at a drooling Hal and brushed his hair with a smile and went back to the story.

Until one day, a new creature, a human being, came to her side. She backed away and warned them not to come closer.

Though with a foolish reach, the human being touched the flame. They screamed and ran away from her. Leaving her alone again once more.

But only once, for the human had returned the very next day. This time with cloth around their hand and a dead fish pierced by a rod of bamboo in the other.

The queen of fire stepped back again, but the human dropped their things and folded their hands in their armpits.

The queen of fire took notice and watched the human inch forward, slowly but surely. Until the fish on the stick dangled above her fire flickering head and sniffed the air as the smell of cooked fish filled the air.

They both smiled and the fish dangled back to the human and took little nibbles and their hunger slowly faded away.

The human then guided her to come with them.

There she found a whole village of these humans. They bred pretty quickly in those first years.

The king of water was there, in the freshwater river. Exiting out the river he looked puzzled at the presence of the queen of fire and kept his distance. He had never forgiven himself for almost putting her out with his hello.

The human showed the king of water the cooked fish and pointed at the queen of fire and rubbed their stomach.

The king was surprised as the fish swam through him.

The days had passed and the king and queen became good friends through their shared love of life.

Even inviting mother nature.

The king of water took a cup of water from himself and handed it to the queen of fire and they watched the water boil. Mother nature took a hibiscus blossom and added the final touch and handed it to the humans.

The human smiled and thanked the three and took his daily offering of fire upon his torch to his village. The human stopped and then suggested warmth all around.

“But I don’t want all the world to burn.” Said the queen of fire.

The next day, the grass, The trees, the plants, the flowers, the mushrooms noticed that the queen of fire did actually give life and they were sorry.

She accepted their apology and said “It’s okay, we all did not see my light until now.”

They wondered if she could help them. They all wanted to grow and wanted to spread more around the earth. The duke of air helped them breathe, the water king helped on rainy days, but they needed more to grow.

The rocks told her that the moon was created from rocks of another world crashing to ours and a part of them floated to our sky. And maybe, that a part of her could be in the sky as well. For it did help the water to say hello.

The queen of fire looked at her hands as the fire trails swayed in the air in a dance. She clasped her hands in the air and the energy flowed to the sky and formed the world a sun.

It was then, the queen of fire gave us days on this earth, as the rocks returned and gave us nights.

Giving us the first second of eternity.

Sloan closed Hal’s journal to the drawing of the queen of fire dancing on the sun.

Meanwhile on another campsite. At the strike of midnight. The whole family was woken up by a gunshot. The whole family screamed and saw the shadow of a deer slumping on their tent.

Bob was awake to that literal start of that day and stirred his seventh cup of coffee at sunrise. Meanwhile rummaging through an off beaten trail. Hal followed Loudon looking for the right tree.

“Ahh, there we are.” Loudon plucked the pine needles from the tree.

“So this is the tree? How do you make the tea?”

This is an eastern white pine. Very lightweight and beautiful, but we’re only in need of the pine needles. They’re jam packed with vitamin C.”

Back at the camp Loudon placed the needles in a mug and poured hot water from the kettle onto them. And handed the mug to Hal.

“You are like your father.”

Loudon smiled, “That’s high praise.”

Back in her tent Sloan woke up and exited the tent, to find her brother teaching Hal to cook a family stew recipe.

“You can grow them in your garden easily, I can help you start one if you like.”

“Yeah, I’d dig that a lot.”

Sloan looked at the burning fire below the pot and smiled at Hal.

“What?...Oh, it’s really all Loudon. You know that.”

“Mmm, no. The queen of fire.” Sloan’s smile got bigger when Hal realized.

“Oh yeah.”

Sloan kissed Hal’s journal and handed it to him “Keep it up Holmes.”

We all change, but nature still shines the same when the parted clouds come and we just lose ourselves to it, rather than over it.

Hal was handed a joint by Loudon.

“What’s your favorite twilight zone episode?” Hal asked and took a puff.

All four of them said “Fuck.” in a unison emphasis. Including Hal, who realized how hard that question really is.

“The mannequin episode.” Joan answered.

“Yes!” All said in unison.

“The one where the astronauts don’t know they crash land on earth.” Loudon answered.

“Yes!” All said again in unison.

“The one where the writer writes his own wife into existence.” Hal answered.

“Yes!” All said a third time in unison.

“Oh dude, the Rod Serling ending was perfect.” Loudon replied.

“The one where the guy travels back in time to his boyhood town.” Sloan answered.

“Fuck!” All said in unison a fourth time.

“Okay, favorite star trek episode next?” Sloan said.

Chapter 16 -Turkey Day



Sloan opened up her curtain to reveal that all of Maple Falls was a winter wonderland. Her smile motioned to us “Finally!”

“Fleece lined jeans, snow pants, boots and a parka with pockets full from last winter. What did I leave in here? Ticket stub to Breakfast Club...And a forgotten breakfast.”

Sloan squeezed the plastic wrapped snack item, but it slowly regained its shape.

“Anyways! People also say they dislike winter. And In defense of my favorite season, I answer with ‘Ya just don’t dress properly. Ya see, the way you wrap yourself for bedtime is how you should dress for the winter.’”

Sloan hugged herself in her gear “Bundled to perfection.”

She opened the door and walked down Donovan street.

“There’s also a will to walk in the winter. Make sure to walk with your feet pointed inwards and always have pure confidence in your steps. Strike with the tip of your foot first, don’t dilly dally, that results in a fall.

Make sure to always stare down on your path. Sidewalks are sometimes unpredictable. Always go for slush over ice. Pro tip, at the end of winter, dunk your boots in puddles, it cleans off the salt on the fabric and will be nice and clean for next winter.

She walked past the snow shoveling store fronts.

“When I was a kid, after every snowfall I would shovel every driveway on the street. After learning I could make money from it, I shoveled the next two streets. Followed by whatever house would give me money. I made \$500 in one day from that giant snowstorm of ‘81. Ma and pops found me across town on a boonies driveway, sleeping on my shovel. I was bedridden for two days, but I bought that amazing lemonburst Les Paul with that money. Plays like a dream. The preferred guitar pick when playing Misty Mountain Hop.”

“Everybody, soups on!” Loudon pulled out two baking pans of eggplant parmesan, setting them on the table in the dining room of Edith Manor, followed by lighting the elaborate candelabra centerpiece as Alice, Hal, Sloan, Nancy and Bent sat down for the meal.

“Loudon, this looks amazing. Where did you find the candelabra?” Hal asked.

“There was a crate filled with over a dozen of them in the barn. I also found that rocking horse, a crumhorn and this bullwhip.

Loudon cracked the whip forward and everyone jumped in their seats.

“Anyways, this really is amazing. It’s like Thanksgiving with all you guys here. Shit, that’s coming up.” Alice remarked.

“Where do you guys go for Thanksgiving?” Asked Sloan as she took some caesar salad from the wooden bowl.

“Well, here I guess?”

“Family pretty far?”

“Pretty dead.”

“You mean it’s just gonna be You, Nancy and Hal?”

“Yeah, where does your family go for Thanksgiving?”

The day before Thanksgiving we waited for our ride that was coming southbound. Sloan’s Uncle Stu lives in Texas and picks up family members along the way. Sloan, Joan, Loudon and I were up at school and we’re the second to last stop.

Hal started counting everyone “Uh, all together we have nine people. This doesn’t make a lick of sense?”

As the buses left except one that has seen better days stopped and opened its doors for the gang.

“Hey Hal, check this out man, isn’t this like so totally cool!” Shouted Alice from the window of the bus.

“What the hell?”

Exiting the bus was Uncle Stu. Mid fifties, having the belly to show his years of drive thru hamburgers and hockey game hot dogs. But his smile under his bushy mustache spoke so much on how much he cares about his family.

“Come here honey badger!”

“Honey Badger?”

“Uncle Stu gives everyone nicknames based on what animal they look like. He works at a zoo back home in Texas. Uncle Stu, this is my Boyfriend Hal.”

“I shovel shit, put it there Hal...Whoops forgot to wash my hands.” Stu said as he gave the strongest handshake known to man and belly laugh that probably could wake up the dead.

“Uncle Stu, what animal does Hal look like?”

“Hmmm...A deer, cause I want to shoot him.” Uncle Stu gave off a wheeze and cough laugh. “I’m just joshing you, I say that to everyone. But you do have deer qualities, but I can’t call you dear, that’s what I call Brenda. And she’s a lot prettier than you.....Hmmm, I deem you Buck. Oh I almost forgot! Squirrel, you see those presents in the back. Would you mind bringing them up?”

Alice came up with two presents and handed them to Stu.

“You got a nickname too eh?” asked Hal.

“Now I’m sorry I can’t make it for your guy’s birthday, so you’re getting something a little early.”

Uncle Stu tossed a big Nelson’s market shopping bag with bows all around it to Loudon. He opened it to find firecrackers, bottle rockets, piccolo petes and so many other kinds of explosive fireworks.

“Uncle Stu...I’m gonna cry.” Loudon ran up and hugged his Uncle.

“Glad you like it, Skunk. That’s it.” Uncle Stu walked back into the bus.

“Uncle Stu!” proclaimed Sloan.

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” A gold colored hockey stick was tossed to Sloan.

“Dude...” Sloan looked at the signature on the blade that read Gordie Howe.

“No way, no way, no way!” Sloan went up and hugged her Uncle and after that everybody climbed aboard the Wyland express. Which read on the side of the bus.

Sloan and Hal sat down next together and Loudon and Joan sat in front of them. Loudon immediately got up after sitting and made an introduction for Hal.

“Family! This is Hal Capher! Sloan’s boyfriend, Allie, friend. That is all.”

“Thanks Loudon.”

Joan got up and brought Loudon down to his seat. As she herself went down, she noticed her Dad in the front talking to Hal’s Mom.

Sloan turned to the other side.

“Alright, let’s do a run down of the relatives, but in their own words if we can sort of bend the rules...if we may.” Sloan winked at us and walked over to a mustached man with a pot belly whittling a wooden mallard with a buck knife “This is my Uncle Bill. He’s actually quite famous...Local famous...Bird famous. He can and is in the midst of whittling every species of bird in known existence. Tell them Bill.

“I uh, sell them at the MN history museum’s gift shop. About 20 bucks a pop for a usual sized bird. I do work with bigger sizes.” Bill spoke with such a monotone, but sweet voice. Like Wilford Brimley.

“Bill whittled a Vorombe, the largest bird that once walked this earth.”

“Measuring 3 meters in height. Weighing in at about 1500 pounds.”

“What kind of wood did you use?”

“Alder. The same wood as my kitchen cabinets.”

“Can you see how he’s related to Loudon, but yeah, the sucker is huge, scares the socks off me whenever I sleep over.”

Sloan walked over to Aunt Sue.

“Aunt Sue is an environmental lawyer. She works directly with the UPNO. The united partnered nature organization.

“Sloan, why don’t you ever come over. I see Loudon almost every week.”

Sloan turned to us “He goes for the connections for UPNO, but also for the fact that they have his dream greenhouse and he manages it in exchange for fertilizer and a special plant they only grow. Yes, our Aunt is our dealer.”

Sloan walks over to Brandy “This is Stu’s kid Brandy...She’s...More like her mom.”

“No I’m not, my mom is a bitch!”

Sloan to us “Exactly.”

“Brandy’s kids Mason, Boone and Odie are all from 3 different fathers. Mason’s father lost all their money on a single roulette game. He bet on 37 black and well...There’s only 36 numbers on a roulette wheel. So bravo on that.” Sloan rolled her eyes “Boone’s father died after a cheese eating contest in Wisconsin. I was at the funeral, it was an open casket and he did indeed reek of molded cheese. Odie’s father is Brandy’s current boyfriend Boyd. He doesn’t talk much, nor does he move much.”

Sloan looked at the bearded lumberjack looking Boyd who was a stern and still statue as he held his trusty hatchet in his lap.

Everybody exited the bus.

“I’m going to hunt. I won’t be back till 3pm tomorrow.”

Loudon whacked Sloan’s arm “Holy shit, he talked!”

Boyd kissed Brandy and stared at Sloan and Hal who took notice, as he reached for his rifle and walked into the woods alone.

The house was straight out a romantic's wants and desires of a final place to end the noise of the world. A rich red oak, three story house, eight bedrooms and a pine tree that stood by a warm glowing bay window. The only sounds came when I walked inside and heard everyone chit chatting inside as I was greeted by even more family members.

“Don’t worry Holmes. I’ll do the talking.”

“Great Uncle Mulberry, always the first hug. Yeah, I brought hummingbird, The D-28 and my Gallotone...No, I will not stop playing the Gallotone. It ain’t country, but it has my sound.”

Sloan continued conversations with hugs and kisses from family members, just naming them off one by one.

Sloan turned to us

“Great Mary-Belle, Great Uncle Linus, Great Florene, Bev, Galen, Earl, Sig, Kent, Rita, Lashel, George, Sandy, Jack, Diane.”

Sloan turned to Hal “The ones that aren’t uncles and aunts are my mom’s first cousins. So I’m their second cousin. Don’t ask about blood relation, it confuses me still to this day.”

Just the family that was on the bus was more than my family...The Wyland family tree is a god damn redwood.

“Now I don’t remember being related to you...Yet.” Grandpa Gord shook Hal’s hand.

“Grandpa Gord!” Sloan pursed her lips and stared down her Grandpa in a playful manner and hugged and kissed her Grandpa.

“Where’s Grandma?”

“In the music room of course.”

“Cousins are probably in the music room too, sc’mon Hal.”

“Oh, that’s right. We haven’t even gotten to the cousins. Did you say music room, is this also another music store?”

Hal walked into the giant room filled with the rest of every family member and every unique instrument either on the wall or in the hands of the family members. Hal had only Sloan’s hand in hand with also the coins in his pocket to make a tune. It was better on what he could play with the guitar. That’s why he didn’t bother to bring his guitar, though Sloan handed him her beat up Gallotone and gave him a wink.

“Sloan, I can’t.”

“You can fiddle. You’re in good company with the best teachers. Besides, I don’t want you fiddling your thumbs for two hours.”

“Two hours?”

“We’re a music family, Holmes, what did you expect? Everybody, This is my boyfriend Hal. Hal’s a first year, so embarrass him with some Minnesota nice, Mmmkay!”

Sloan took out her Hummingbird guitar.

“Well Sloan, I also can’t. This guitar means a lot to you. I shouldn’t be-”

“I trust you Holmes. Oh, that’s-” Sloan started pointing out the cousins

“Jamie, Terry ,Lyle, Vic, Mandy, Thomas, David, Christopher, Debi, Dallas, Hannah, Luke and over here is Grandma Annie.”

Grandma Annie was a small thing like Sloan, short hair like Sloan. I guess the image she wanted to be her entire life. Huh, I guess it wasn’t just Joan Jett.

“Got a song for me Grandma?”

“This one is only for you. Got yourself a tall sycamore, eh?”

“This is my boyfriend Hal.”

Sloan sat down as she realized Hal pulled out from his Wallet the same orange metal pick she had given him the day he first visited Maple Tree.

Annie noticed how Sloan looked at Hal and smiled as she played ‘Sweet as the flowers in may time’

Sloan paid attention to the lyrics and made eye contact with Annie as her Grandmother gave her a wink as Sloan held Hal’s hand.

“Yo Sloan, you got that Leo Kottke album in the mail?” Cousin Thomas asked.

“Yeah, the cover of Poor Boy with John Fahey kicks so much ass.”

“What did you think of stealing?”

“Yeah!”

“You got the second, I got the first?”

“You’re on.”

Thomas started strumming and Sloan followed in shortly after.

The other family members stopped what they were doing and watched. Didn’t matter if it was just two people playing, they all had the ear for the song.

Hal watched Joan and Loudon set up Loudon’s drum set.

I had always wondered why Joan never played an instrument, until I realized she did. She never just played around me, or for Maple Falls for that matter. For one of her instruments doesn’t really travel, it stays put in as a centerpiece of the room.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me? Holy shit.” Hal said as he held the Gallotone to his lap.

Joan sat down in her chair and held her Great Grandmother’s harp.

“Fucking finally, play us a piece!” Sloan shouted.

Joan didn’t look at the crowd, even though everyone stopped for her as she positioned her fingers on the strings and played ‘Clair de Lune’ by Debussy.

It was absolutely a unique sight. So much harmony, so much gentleness. Joan hardly has ever spoken to me at long lengths. But that song spoke to me. A spoke to all of us as we just listened.

After the song Sloan and Hal found themselves outside walking the family trail. “Yeah, she’s the only one out of us that really plays the Harp. Like really. Loudon, Thomas, Lyle and Terry have all tried, but none like Joan.”

“Damn if it’s the only instrument to play-”

“Oh, she plays the accordion and piano too. It’s an unwritten rule for a Wyland to know at least two instruments.”

“And remind me again on your-”

“Guitar, bass, drums, washboard with thimbles. Clarinet, flute, piano, banjo, xylophone.”

“You glossed over the washboard with thimbles, like it was nothing.”

“Tis a jamboree in my family, Holmes.

We walked down the trail of a hill. A single thread of rope guiding us. Sloan kept chatting downwards. I bet she could walk this entire trail with her eyes closed...and in crutches...Let’s face it, she probably has done the latter.

“Sooo, what’s your family like outside of your Mom and Nancy? Did you celebrate with your extended family?”

“Yeah, we used to go to my Grandpa's apartment most of the years. It depended on when he needed money or was lonely...or both.”

“Grandpa on your mom or -”

“Mom’s side. Grandpa Butch. Oh Grandpa Butch was a character.”

Grandpa butch during the Thanksgiving dinner of 1979 was a 73 year old veteran of WWII. This was quite obvious because he wore his uniform everywhere. It wouldn’t matter if he washed it, he’d still always smell of stale bourbon and Halo cigarettes.

Despite his bitter relationship with my Mom and his forgetfulness of Aunt Nancy, he actually took a liking to me. Maybe it was because he always wanted a boy...that wasn’t a fuck up like Uncle Donny. Maybe it was the relief that he had to only care about me three-four times a year. Or maybe it was

a man who realized he failed as a father and wanted to make it up as a grandfather. No matter the fact, the things he taught me were not suited for a ten year old.

Grandpa Butch looked at little Hal's cards "See, you got two pairs. You might want to play it, but watch Hinkley's bluff."

"Mom wasn't too keen on Grandpa inviting his army buddies for Thanksgiving dinner, but to our surprise, they knew how to cook and clean dishes."

"But Grandpa, you just told him I have two pairs. Won't he fold?"

"Don't worry Hal, Hinkley can't hear for shit. The son of a bitch had ears like a bloodhound, got them shot off by a german."

"Come on Hal, let me teach ya how to make bloody mary!"

Grandpa Butch showed off his trench knife "Yeah, you don't want to touch the blade, it still has the blood of a german. That's loser blood Hal."

Everyone was sitting around the table, while the Houston Oilers and Dallas Cowboys game blared on the television.

"Dad, where did you buy this turkey?"

About two days prior Grandpa Butch and his VFW buddies were stalking a turkey on the sidewalk of a roseville suburb. Grandpa Butch slowly took out his pistol and cocked it.

Hal spit out the bullet.

"And he passed too?" Asked Sloan.

"Yep."

"I'm so sorry."

"Nah, he died a happy man."

Grandpa Butch just before his death was at the key gentlemen's club on Macallan street in the north loop. Counting ones to an even

"thirty-four dollars, there. Will that do it?" Grandpa Butch handed the cash to the dancer.

Grandpa Butch sat there, reached and held his left shoulder. "Yeah, go ahead."

Sloan was called out by Aunt Nancy. "Sloan, what am I stepping in?!"

"I'll take the blow. I'll be right back okay?" Sloan kissed Hal and the lips and ran back to the house.

"Howdy there feller."

Hal turned over to see three Dritts.

"My name's Boone, this here is Mason and that's baby Odie. Ya know like in Garfield. Momma loves Garfield, but third daddy says cats are for pussies." Boone brushed his nose and quickly swished a booger in his hair.

"Yep." Hal wanted out of this conversation with this deep woods eight year old.

"Baby Odie found a dead turtle in the creek over there." Boone wailed his left arm in every direction, but who really cared.

"Poked it with a stick until it got borin'. Mason is gutting out the little feller right now. Wanna see?"

Sloan grabbed Hal's hand "Sc'mon, I wanna show you something Holmes."

"Oh thank god." whispered to himself "I'd love to Sloan...faster Sloan."

Entering the house Hal looked at basically the Wyland history all on the mahogany walls.

"Okay Holmes, we're gonna start here." Sloan pointed to a map of England "So the Wylands originated from England and in old English it means land by the road. And there is a reason for this, see my great great...uhhh...Ancestors were originally from Cornwall England."

"Like the founder of Maple Falls?"

Sloan stuck out a finger "Loudon, Joan and I dug deep to find if you were related, and it kills me tell you that Cornelius Cornwall apparently burned any records he had on him and his family and claimed he was American born and was raised by a moose...Anyway, so Cornwall is a peninsula."

I always loved hearing a crazy ass story, especially of Cornelius Cornwall just flying by as an anecdote.

“And my family used to be fishermen and originally the last name was Woodland, but when they came to the states in 1663, they changed it to Wyland when they settled by a main route in Virginia. And here is one of the few things left from Cornwall.”

Centered above an armchair framed a tattered painting of a sandy beachside “My ancestor painted this of Cornwall the day before he and his family voyaged to america...When did your family come here Holmes?”

“Holy...Uh, the Caphers didn’t write anything down.”

“Till you.”

Hal smiled “I got a few stories. I have a few pictures of them with pigs...Actually a lot of pictures of them with pigs.”

“Do you know what you are? The shock of red is irish?”

“Scottish actually, uhh German, my mom thought we were Swedish, turns out it’s Finnish, Jewish which is kind of a funny story.”

“How so?”

“Oh god.”

“No, no. Now you gotta tell me Holmes.”

“Well my mom and I really never visited the family on my dad’s side. But my great aunt Leelee lived on the other side of town and my mom said ‘I was raised to visit family, no matter how bad the blood of your father is.’ And she was a sweet lady, mom actually didn’t mind the visits and she was actually one hell of a cook, it wasn’t until they were having a conversation about my dad’s curly hair. Mom said it was the jewish side and Leelee refused to believe her very christian family would marry a jew. And then she let out her answer with ‘He’s got curly hair because there must have been an N-word on the woodpile.’”

“Holy, did she say the N-Word or the whole-”

“The hardest Gs of a word I ever heard from any pronunciation...So uhh... let’s hear more about your family.”

Sloan chuckled and pulled out a diary. "God, how am I going to follow that? So uh, every generation went more north. We even ended up in Quebec when a relative heard of the French in the area.

Check this out." Sloan handed Hal the diary.

"This is his diary, it reminds me of you."

"Sloan, Uncle Stu says he needs help with making patties, but he specifically asked for you and you alone." Sloan's mom said as she came in with the groceries.

"Be right there!" Sloan guided Hal to a rocking chair in a peaceful reading nook in the den and kissed him on the lips and went out the front door.

November 15th 1821.

"I had just made it to the big city of Quebec after a large and endless wander through this hellish winter. I don't stay in the towns I pass for long. Merely only for a cup of coffee or a glass of wine ...depends on when I get there. Though you lose track of the day with the winter, when it's only 5pm and I have my first glass, not realizing the length of night I still have remaining. Today is one of those nights. The sun had just set and in walks a beautiful lady as my first glass was served. I did not drink it, but offered it to her with the bottle in hand. She offered a side of the bed after a few drinks. Well I'm pretty sure, I don't speak a word of French and she's naked across the room as I write this."

"Holy shit."

November 16th 1821

"As I left her apartment I wanted to tell her that I wanted to see her again. I just didn't know how."

Hal's hands accidentally skipped forward to a later page and realized it was quite literally all french to him. Hal continued where he left off and read about fifty more passages, but was soon interrupted by Mrs. Gonson.

"Sloan finished the patties and is by the creek with the cousins, why aren't you with... Oh Sloan said you were a reader."

"I'm sorry, uh Sloan said I could-"

Betty chuckled, "You're alright, that's Howard's journal right?"

"Yeah, it's getting a little harder to read on. He's using more French than english."

"You read that much?"

"Yeah, I like it a lot."

Betty smiled and took in more with silent gratification like her daughter and went to a drawer and pulled out a stack of papers.

"He swore off English after he became fluent in french. These are more of Howard's stuff."

Betty set down the pile.

"Oh and uh if Cinnamon, Peggy Sue, Baxter, Coors, Kurt, Oscar or Meyer..Dear lord there are a lot of animals here. Well if they try to eat it, don't feel bad."

"Oh, I'll be careful."

"Eh, Coors can be quite jumpy. That little son of a gun bit off Mason's finger."

"Oh my god, why do they still have the dog?"

"Mason cried when they tried to take the dog away. Anyway, have fun."

"Wait, I said I can't read french."

"Look at the page dummy."

Hal looked down in his lap and went page to page looking at beautiful charcoal drawings of Clothilde. Finally landing on a self portrait. The trail of strands of hair covered her eye like Sloan. The resemblance was uncanny and Hal had got a feeling when Sloan entered the room, pulling down to see her coming in with two coffee cups of cider.

She noticed him staring and chuckled "What is it Holmes?"

Sitting together in the school bus was Harvey and Alice. Stu was coaching Betty on handling the rig. "I really shouldn't be operating this...No one should. I feel one slight turn will tear the cars next to me into tin foil."

"Yeah, it makes you feel you own the road, doesn't it?!"

An awkward silence occurred until Harvey asked Alice “Aren’t the seniors there just a pain in the ass?”

“Oh god yes! They have no lives, so they just pester me with the stupidest shit.”

“Yeah, I had a ninety four year old patient accuse me of stealing his glasses that were on his face.”

Alice chuckled “Ms.Henson always says, “I knew an Alice, she was no good. She was rotten and I hated her.” Everytime I come into her room.

“Everytime?”

“Word for word?”

Sitting on the end of the dock was Joan, she was reading a tattered marine biology picture book and was skimming her boots across the water. Though her peaceful reading was interrupted by Boone, Mason and Odie.

“Hey, whatcha reading?” Boone said as he came up and broke Joan’s bubble and he looked at the pictures over Joan’s shoulder.

Joan was frustrated at first until Mason peered over and commented “We like picture books, that’s a pretty looking turtle. We just saw one in the woods, but ours had a yellor chin.”

“That’d be a blanding turtle mostly found in freshwater ponds covered under mud, this right here is a green sea turtle that can be found in the atlantic, pacific and indian ocean.” Joan responded with a change of heart.

“Are you from the ocean?” Mason asked?

“No, I’m from here.”

“Can you show us some critters around here? Mama’s still out getting scratchers and we’re bored.” Boone asked.

“Sure... Yeah.” Joan closed her book.

Being greeted by an electronic whip and yee-haw as they entered the store the adults witnessed the fluorescent mammoth of a store that is Big Buck’s Booze.

“Hey Alice, I’ll show you the wine! Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!” Stu said as he grabbed a cart with such joy and giddiness.

As Alice left, Betty remarked to Harvey “You two were chatting up a storm back in the bus. You and Alice.”

“Uh yeah, we shot the shit about our kids and work. Making conversation. The usual.”

“The usual?”

“The usual, yeah.”

“Pretty casual. You two friends?”

“Yes, we’re just friends.”

Betty jabbed Harvey in the arm playfully “Got a little defensive there.”

“Well, I don’t want the kids to think... Well you know how kids assume the worst out of us?”

“Would it be the worst?”

“No..I mean...Hey! I know what you’re doing!”

“Oh, I’ve missed this side of Harvey. She is quite the looker.”

“Well...uh.”

“Oh come on.”

“Err.”

“Harvey.”

“Yes, she’s very good looking.”

“Oh look, margarita mix.”

“Betty?...But you don’t-”

“Hi.” Alice said as she lifted a bottle of rum that was blocking her from the aisle over.

Suited up in Joan’s old boots and panchos were Boone, Mason and Baby Odie overlooking Joan in a shallow part of the lake.

“Okay, so hiding in these areas of the lake are catfish and we’re gonna catch one.”

“We ain’t got no poles.” said Boone.

Joan shook her hands “All we need are these. Now you just reach your arm in and wait for the bite.”

“Does it hurt?” Asked Mason.

“The cold water is worse than the bite, but you gotta eat if you’re in the wilderness and this is a quick fix if you’re short a pole. Oh, I got one!”

Joan wrestled the fifteen pound catfish from under the water and the boys flipped out and were in awe of the catch of the day.

“So cool, are we gonna eat it?”

Joan gave a little smile as the catfish wiggled in her grip.

Back at Big Buck’s Harvey and Alice were walking together.

“How the hell did we raise them to be normal?” asked Alice.

“I don’t know, I don’t even know how. I look at other parents that are exhausted and think how the hell did I get so easy... Well actually Joan is going through a phase, but she’s a good kid.”

“No, it’s not a phase, my Hal is going through the same thing.”

“How so?”

“Well I can’t wrap my head around Hal, the kid is so smart, too smart. But I know deep down they’re blaming themselves.”

“Why would they blame themselves?”

“Well coming from experience I always blamed my dad and for good reasons. And I raised Hal like how I wanted to be raised. But it’s hard and when your apartment has thin walls, they hear you cry. They’re kind of raising us. When did Joan learn to cook for herself?”

Harvey chuckled “You’re right.”

“How old?”

“Six.”

“Six?!”

“Is that too young?”

Over at the picnic table by the reading nook, Joan was showing the boys how to prep a catfish.

“Mama said knives are dangerous,” said Boone.

“Well you just got to know how to use one.”

Joan sliced the catfish “Once you’re past the ribcage, you have a clean slice to the tail and we got a filet. To remove the skin we start at the tail and down pressure our way forward.” Joan stabbed the table with the knife

“It just takes practice. Wanna try, Boone?”

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Forsythe and Nancy were prepping in the kitchen as uncle Stu, Betty, Harvey and Alice entered through the kitchen door.

“We got the beer!” Uncle Stu swung a ninety-nine pack of cheap Booker beer round the kitchen and Forsythe ducked “Jesus, look where you’re-”

Nancy with her minimal task of cutting tomatoes and lettuce for the burgers was bonked in the head and fell to the ground.

“Now, look at what you did. Dear, can you help Nancy, I’m covered in macaroni.”

“Already on it.” Betty helped Nancy and Stu handed Nancy back her coke bottle glasses. “Sorry to have hit your melon miss.”

“No, it’s okay. I was only just holding a knife.”

Stu cracked open a beer and handed it to Nancy to further his apology. “Thanks.” Nancy said quietly.

“Oh, how’s the macaroni coming?”

“Just about done.”

“Oh Alice, you gotta try Forsythe’s macaroni.”

Alice took a bite. “That is the greatest thing I ever tasted.”

Stu grabbed a full plate full “Hey Nancy, Loudon and I are going to the garage. We both brought fireworks. Wanna join us?”

“Forsythe, do you mind?”

“Please, be the adult supervision.”

“I’m gonna check on Ma, be back shortly.” Betty kissed Forsythe and exited through the front.

“So where’s Hal?”

“He’s in the den with Sloan, they’re reading some family books and looking at scrapbooks.

“Alright, I better go-”

Forsythe stopped Alice “Eh, just let them be...they’re having a moment, they don’t want us parents to ruin it.”

Alice let out a long breath and resumed Nancy's tomatoes “Jesus Nancy, you can’t even cut straight.”

“Something’s on your mind Alice, dish it out. You’re in good company.”

“Oh, it’s nothing on Sloan and Hal...it’s just me...”

“Dish, dish.”

“Well, I had Hal when I was seventeen and now he’s fifteen. And that’s just screwing with my mind, ya know?...Oh god, now you think I think Sloan’s gonna get pregnant. And I...I don’t mean it like that.”

“You don’t think I don’t worry about that?” Forsythe chuckled

“Good...Ughhh. I finally got him out of that dump of a city and he’s finally getting the family he deserves. This right here is proof. Giant sucker of a turkey, mashed potatoes that aren’t from the box and this macaroni. Holy shit! It’s so good!”

“Well I can tell you that Hal is a smart kid.”

Betty came back to the kitchen.

“Yeah, I was just talking about this with Harvey. Hal is too freaking smart. I don’t know where he gets that from? He definitely doesn’t get it from me or his father.”

“He gets it from you.”

“Yeah, uh huh. Sure.”

“Alice, I don’t read his grades, I mean his character is smart. You’re worrying about him, well that’s good. I know a handful of parents throughout my PTA experience that don’t give two shits about their kids. You caring about your kid’s well being, means you’re doing good as a parent... especially as a single parent I may add.

“Hey Alice, can I ask you something personal?”

“Shoot.”

“Did you ever date after you left Hal’s dad?”

“Oh god no, the idea of bringing over some guy made me sick to my stomach.”

“Well how about now or after he graduates. You’re still young Alice.”

“God, tell me about it. At the liquor store I was hit on by the clerk that had to have been no younger than twenty-one.”

“Oh god, gag me with a spoon.” Betty remarked

“Oh yes...So how did you get lucky with the perfect husband?”

“Perfect husband?” Forsythe asked, “I was a mess when I met her. I’m the lucky one.”

Betty smiled at that remark. She’s heard it over the years. But she loves his love.

“Trust me, as an aspiring singer I dated all the duds until I met Forsythe. I didn’t meet him until I was thirty.”

“Wait...That’s means your like-”

“forty-seven.”

“Shit, you look terrific for forty-seven. You had twins at?”

“Thirty-two. Glad I got it over at that age.”

“You didn’t have kids until you were my age now?...Jesus.”

“Yeah, if the right guy comes around you could have more.” Forsythe added.

“Uh huh.” Alice brushed it off.

Harvey entered with some flint in hand. “Hey, what did I miss?”

Back in the den Joan walked in and caught Hal and Sloan cuddling “Gross, do you know where the flint is at?”

“Anything fire related, Loudon would know where it is.”

Joan walked past the doorway of the living room and saw her Dad and Alice talking and laughing.

“You have a beautiful laugh.” said Harvey

“Joan hey, how are y-” Betty said as Joan rushed out of the house.

Back over to the fire pit, Loudon walked over and saw the prepped catfish with Boone, Mason and Odie patiently waiting for Joan.

“You kids wanna see how you can light a cookout with a firework?”

The boys turned their heads and all together cheered.

Medium rare burgers, dolloped macaroni and baked beans were being served to Wylands, Gonsons, Caphers and a Dritt. The other Dritts and Loudon were eating the catfish by the firepit, Loudon came over for a root beer and some kettle chips.

“Hey Loudon, have you seen Joan?” asked Sloan.

Loudon shook his head.

“She didn’t ask you about the flint?”

Loudon shook his head again and shook the third can of root beer and walked back to the pit.

Sloan walked over to Uncle Harvey “Uncle Harvey do you know where Joan is?”

There was then a full search party that was looking for Joan. Burgers got cold and still no sign of Joan.

Hal looked over to the cornfield and walked in and with Joan hearing rustling she said “Go away!”

Hal emerged and saw that she was crying

“Oh god, it had to be you.” She said,

Hal didn't say a word and sat down with Joan. Hal bobbed his head back to the sounds of Joan's name being "That's a loving family...so that ain't the problem. So what's up?"

"If you must know, I saw your mom with my dad."

"And?" Hal responded with emphasis.

"I basically saw them flirting."

"Oh!...Is that what you're worried about?"

"Yeah, aren't you?!"

"Shh, they might hear you...But I hear you...Uh yeah, I understand how fucking weird that would be. But they're not teenagers like us. Before themselves, their first love is for us. And your Dad is not gonna leave you in the dark. I'm sure of that."

"Oh you think that's your clincher? You don't have problems, you don't know what it's like."

"Care for others is a good mask for your own problems. That's my clincher."

Hal brushed off the tear from her face and got up "To avoid awkward reasoning, make up a lie about you getting lost on the trail for more firewood."

Hal then walked away.

Sitting next to Sloan and Hal was Joan with a burger in hand. She looked over to her Dad and Alice talking. And looked over to Hal and Sloan. "You guys want to hike the second trail with me in the morning?"

"You want Hal to come with?" Sloan in a surprised gaze pointed her spoon at Hal.

"Yeah, what do you say Hal?" asked Joan.

"Sounds good."

Uncle Stu through a broken nightstand to the fire "Some people throw out perfectly good firewood."

Grandma Annie and Grandpa Gord sat down with the kids by the fire.

"Wish I had a guitar, but I'm so stuffed."

"I can get it, the Gallotone?"

“Yeah, but it’s okay, you have to-”

“Be right back.”

Grandma Wyland looked at Sloan as she looked at Hal get up and head to the house.

“I know that look.”

“What look?”

“Your Grandpa gives me that same look. The eyes never lie. Now tell me, you like that boy?”

“I do Grandma, I do.”

“Do you love him?”

“Grandma!” Sloan rolled her eyes and looked away.

“Eyes forward my dear.” Grandma tapped Sloan’s hand.

Sloan looked at the fire and groaned and looked at her gram

“You do, well are you gonna marry him?”

“Grandma I’m only fifteen!”

“Your grandfather was only seventeen. Sometimes you just know...Well do you love him?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“Yes.” Sloan said a little louder.

“Yes, about what?”

“Yes I love!-” Sloan stopped her shout and saw her Grandma smile. Sloan blew her hair up followed by a

“Him...Hal.”

Prepping for bedtime in the girl’s room were Sloan and Joan.

“So how come you’re inviting Hal to the hike? It doesn’t ring Joan to invite people.”

“You like him. Why not invite him?” she quickly answered and looked away.

“Something is off, Joan Wyland is never this casual.”

“Nope.”

“Joan...Joan.”

Joan quickly sighed and grabbed Sloan and brought her to the window facing the garage.

“What am I looking at?”

“My Dad and Hal’s mom.”

“So they’re just drinking wine together...like they did at dinner and charades...well they were charades partners ...Oh god!”

Joan then snagged Sloan’s shirt and dragged her back to the room and closed the door and immediately a knock was at the door.

“Fuck off for a bit Brandy!” shouted Joan.

“Fine, bitch!”

“I didn’t get lost on the trail.”

“Yeah, worst lie ever.”

“Hal came up with it. After I saw his mom and my dad I ran to the field and bawled my fucking eyes out. Hal found me and told him about our parents and he said some reassuring words like my Dad loves me first and....I don’t know, it made me feel better...I’m sorry I’ve been kind of a bitch to you two. Now can we stop with the feelings, it’s gonna make me throw up?”

Sloan smiled at that moment and later she laid awake, she got up and went over to the boy’s room. Loudon, Boone, Mason and Odie were all snoring and Sloan saw that Hal was wide awake. Sloan tiptoed over and whispered to Hal “Get dressed and meet me outside by the front door.”

Hal exited the front door and saw Sloan coming up the stairs and grabbed his hand. “Sc’mon, I want to show you something.”

Running through the forest hand in hand, the two came to the other side to a hockey rink.

“Now this makes sense why you dragged me out here at midnight, of course your family has an ice rink.”

Sloan reached into her bag and pulled out a remote, pressed it and giant lights shined onto the ice rink.

“Let me guess, my skates are in the bag?”

“Sloan pulled Hal’s Skates out of her bag and smiled.

They skated hand in hand, “This is what I wanted to show you, it’s easy to feel, but hard to



describe. I love hockey
and I’ve been to a
million rinks, but none
have ever felt as special
as this one. But it
proved the world is
open to more...and you
know it isn’t always just
a place.” Sloan and Hal
stopped, Sloan rested

her head on Hal and they both just enjoyed the moment.

As they drifted away but only slightly from each other they both kissed and felt love.

Those moments when I open my eyes and all I see is snowfall. Strange how you open your eyes



in a dream and
feel at ease,
skating above
and past coral.
Following
schools of
fish, smacks of
jellyfish and

bales of sea turtles. Maybe we’ve always been meant for the strange. For dreams are our subconscious
spoken thoughts in the hush of the night.

Echoing moments of wanted feelings.

How does this one speak to me?

Hal stopped in his tracks and looked ahead, of a whale breaching through the frozen ice.

Woken up by the thundering noise in the dream, to peacefully in the locker room with Sloan in his arms with a two perfect burrito wrapped in a blanket.

Sunshine shone into the locker room.

“Mmm, did you sleep well?” asked Hal

“I can sleep anywhere, concrete is comfortable with me.”

“Oh, I can’t do that.”

“You didn’t sleep well?”

“I slept perfectly, I slept with you by my side.

Sloan smiled while biting the bottom of her lip and kissed Hal “Sc’mon, breakfast is probably ready.”

Prepping breakfast was uncle Stu dancing to How D’Ya Like Your Eggs in the morning by Dean Martin and Helen O’Connell. Hal and Sloan walked into a mixture of kitchen and cigar smoke. Vents and the window opening to the cold November morning rushed into the house.

“Morning Honey Badger, morning Buck. What are you having this morning, flapjacks or eggs?”

“Flapjacks Uncle Stu, like always.”

“Omelette sounds pretty good actually.”

“You’re no fun Honey Badger, you Buck. I like your style.” Uncle Stu pointed his spatula at Sloan and then Hal.

“Oh boy Hal, you had to bring up omelettes.” Sloan took her flapjacks from the warmer and drizzled syrup all over her stack.

Ole Buttermilk Sky by Mike Douglas played on the radio.

“Listen Missy and listen good sir. Omelettes are an art form.” Uncle Stu pointed at his ingredients.

“Brown eggs, mushrooms, green, red and orange peppers.”

“Is it really necessary to have all colors? Don’t they taste the same?”

“To some people, but me, every color of pepper is unique and special. We got cream cheese, corn beef hash and baby tomattys. Spices, pepper, chives, cayenne, dill, tyme, curry powder. And most importantly hot sauce. So what’ll it be?”

“Uh, I guess all of it?”

“The works? I like your style again Buck. Patty or link turkey sausages on the side?”

“Uh, link.”

“Sloan, you reeled in a good one. This man knows his breakfast.”

Singing Birds and the bees by Dean Martin, Uncle Stu Served the thick and tall omelette to Hal, His eyes couldn’t believe the mass as he lifted the hefty omelette.

“Eat up fast, we got the hike coming up after this.” Sloan said as she took a bite of hal’s sausage.



Plopped on the swing on the porch was Hal and his bloated stomach. “Uhhhhhhhhhh.”

“Come on Holmes, it’s only a five mile hike.”

“Five?” Hal said sheepishly.

“Yeah, burn the calories for Thanksgiving, Mmmkay?!” Joan tossed him his gear.

“Why do I need all this gear?”

“We take the Wyland trail. You don’t want to be scrapped, or fall, or catch hypothermia. Also watch for poison ivy and oak.”

“What’s that look like again?”

I committed to the hike. I had to, otherwise I’d be lost in the dust and loose gravel of the

upwards climb of jagged rocks that were only supported to the peak of Modest Mountain. Yeah, modest

my ass. I often think of where I was exactly one year ago to where I am now. And most of the time this year, every comparison doesn't compare to this point.

Hal got up to the final ledge and was helped up by Joan and Sloan. Sloan patted him on the shoulder and the two left Hal alone with Loudon

"So how does it feel?"

"Am I supposed to be feeling something?"

"Yeah, you're peeing on top of a mountain. Etch your name in the clouds big boat!" Urine flowed and Hal thought to himself "You know, every scenic moment is always shared with Sloan. But here's another Gonson that leans on me.

It's strange. I've known a big portion of this family for only one day...Shit, the ones who invited me, have only known me just shy of almost five months. They invited me to the most family orientated holiday on the calendar."

Loudon took a bite out of his homemade granola bar and the sludge filling trailed down the mountain.

Loudon, Joan and Sloan watched Hal write his thoughts in his journal and etch his view.

And it all stems from a girl that grabs my hand to somewhere new, to something new."

"Sc'mon Holmes."

Hal quickly shut his journal and followed the path down the mountain. Down through the woods, past the ice rink and into the house.

Walking past the dining room of the main table, to the second table in the living room. Passing all the handwritten cards to finally Hal's name.

Sitting down next to Sloan and his mom. Sloan gave him a wink and plopped mashed potatoes on his plate.

"I'm thankful for my son, I'm thankful for nancy. And I'm thankful for you guys opening your home to us."

Everybody's eyes turned to Hal "I'm thankful for my Mom, Aunt Nancy...I'm thankful for Maple Falls...I'm thankful that Loudon invited me to play that game of hockey. I'm thankful that Sloan elbowed me in the face and the frozen peas she placed on me afterwards.

Hal poured a serving of peas on Sloan's plate.

"She sat down with me for more than the two minute penalty. During that conversation I never wanted it to end and I hope it never does." Hal buttered his Brown 'n serve.

"She's one of the sweetest, adventurous, funniest and honest people I've ever met. And it makes all the more sense from you all. Thank you all." Every family member took notice of Hal's words. Especially Grandma Annie who saw Sloan "Holmes." and the two kissed.

"How in god's name am I gonna follow that up?" Sloan chuckled with tears in her eyes as she tried to gather thoughts.

"I'm thankful for Mom, Dad, Loudon, Joan, Grandma Annie, Grandpa Gord, Uncle Stu, Uncle Harvey. Uh, don't hate me for not mentioning your name! All of you!...Ugh, he's staring right at me, isn't he?! Sorry Holmes, some people aren't that good with words like you. I'm thankful that you care about me that way, because I care about you that way. And it means the world to me that I get to share you with the ones I love." Sloan turned to us in a whimper

"I think I'm in love."

The two kissed again.

And that something new is, I think I'm in love.

Chapter 17 -Friday I'm in love

The following morning, Uncle Stu is in the kitchen, preparing himself a morning turkey sandwich whilst tuning the radio, until it reaches a station playing 'Friday I'm in love' by the Cure. Stu reaches for the knob, but his head starts bobbing to the song.

"Huh, is that a bi-plane?" He said as he looked out the window.

Toasted turkey sandwich, toasted turkey sandwich, toasted turkey sandwich. All jam packed with homemade mayonnaise and the finest of american cheeses. You know the kind, the kind that can be used as an adhesive.

A drip of mayo landed in Hal's journal. Loudon flicked his finger on the page and ate the mayo.

"So what's on the agenda today?"

"This." Loudon circled his finger around the room.

The Wyland's are not like your cookie cutter family. You know the ones, the ones that go to Wisconsin water parks. Or those families that go with sun dried summers with overpaid rides of a dancing mouse in an American's hellhole known as Florida. The Wyland's have a return to home. Memories baked into the fresh baked cookies or the caked dust on the board games from Christmas past.

Loudon took out the board game called Mouse trap. Unfolding the manual to its nine pages, Loudon looked at the pages. Staring, staring, flipping over and back again.

"Yeah, fuck this."

Later Hal struggled to retrieve the puck with his flat tin Gordie Howe in a game of tabletop rod hockey.

“Fuck, fuck!”

“And Barry Gibbs gets the steal!” Loudon commentates.

“It’s not looking good for the red wings. Long gone are the hat tricks of ‘68.” Joan commentates, speaking into a piece of licorice.

The red tiny buzzer goes off “Ooo, halftime! 5-0. A brutal lead from the North Stars.”

“You’re telling me Loudon. Today’s halftime is sponsored by this burp.”

Loudon belch was on command, “So Sloan, tell us how you’re dominating the ice with such spirit?”

Sloan came back with a towel on her shoulder “It’s all about heart Loudon. We didn’t get this far without the love of the game. It has been rough, my right winger Bill Goldsworthy is still recovering from Coors biting his head off back in ‘83. But he still hustles and gets those goals without sight.

“Inspiring, simply inspiring. Joan is with Hal of the Red Wings. How is he Joan?”

“Not too hot Loudon. It seems Hal is indulging himself in a large bag of cheese doodles. Love handles are sure to come.”

Sloan smiled incredibly hard at Hal and her best friends behind him. Joan was the final piece of the puzzle for Hal to join the group. For up until that point it was only blood, it was only family, that thankful love...And there it was in Hal.

The next day in the old barn. Resting upon haystacks was almost every member of the family passing around joints.

Hal received four joints at once “I uh-”

“Smoke 'em all at once Hal.” Loudon suggested.

Hal shrugged his shoulders and took a hit from all four and passed that quick high forward.

“So, like what’s all y’alls favorite memories here?”

“Fuck!” The whole room said in unison.

“Okay, so that’s hereditary.”



With every story told by the relative, it always revolved around and went back to Grandma Annie. So I got curious.

As the second generation was packing, Annie finally had an open chair next to herself. Hal walked into the den and Annie immediately greeted Hal.

“Hiya there, young fella.”

Hal smiled, he saw Sloan in that one simple, but warm greeting “Grandma Annie, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“What’s your favorite memory of Sloan?”

Sloan was outside the entryway, her eyes a little glazed, but heard that question and felt it in her heart.

“You like her don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Do you love her?”

“Grandma Annie!” Sloan entered and grabbed Hal’s hand and sat down “Don’t answer that one Holmes. Annie, he asked you a question.”

Annie tapped her finger to Sloan’s nose and smiled “Oh there are too many to tell, but I do love this one quite a lot.”

Flashback we go to Sloan as a two year old stumbling her way through the same den. Grandma Annie watched over her as she tuned her guitar.

Sloan then reached for a glass of water on the tv tray and accidentally dropped it on the stone front of the fireplace “Shit.” She said in such a cute and innocent way.

Sloan and Hal looked at Grandma Annie “That’s your favorite?” Sloan asked. As Hal started to chuckle, as the rest of them followed.

Later the second generation was packing their cars.

“Yeah, mom and her siblings and cousins are taking a vacation in thunder bay. It’s a yearly tradition.”

“But, we’re stranded and we have school tomorrow.”

“We do have school tomorrow, but we’re not stranded.”

Hal’s head tilted in confusion.

Our Maple Falls gang was running for the open car of the iron range train. Loudon was even twiddling his banjo in suspense as he trailed behind.

Bags and guitar cases were thrown in the car. Followed by the gang jumping safely onboard. Hal’s eyes widened as he just realized what he just did and where he was. He pinched himself multiple times. The car was pretty empty, except for one tarped item.

Joan and Loudon unveiled the load and it was a pristine model T automobile and with Loudon’s amused ears. “Awoogah!” The horn went.

Hal watched as Sloan dangled her feet out the door and admired the grain fields to her hummingbird and her harmonica about to play, but patted the spot next to her.

Hal sat down as Sloan blew into her harmonica and strummed ‘Freight train blues’ by Bob Dylan.

The song ended and Sloan kept strumming “You know my mama’s cousin went to high school with Bob Dylan in Hibbing. Everybody says they did, but only a fool and a truth can call him a weirdo... That and the yearbook truth. Funny how a hero can be that close, but so far away. Just a neighbor that sang to the world.”

“You know Sloan.”

“Hmm?”

“My Dad was never there for a single birthday...But for all the things he stole, he left his records. Mom was confused because everytime he brushed our lives in such a shitty way...There'd always be a new record on the pile. Mom chalked it up to him being nuts, sure that's obvious. But like how he got together with my mom, I think he could only talk in music.”

“Hmmm yeah. No matter how mad you get, music brings everybody back.”

“Yeah...Bob Dylan's Highway 61 was the first one in that pile. I guess he was a rolling stone and gathering no moss. To be forever on his own.”

“What was also in the pile?”

“Are you experienced by Hendrix, all the doors, all the who,all the beatles.”

“Who was his favorite beatle?”

“Uh...Paul.”

“Same... Yours?”

“John... Wait,really?”

Sloan pointed at Loudon “Ringo.” and then pointed at Joan “George.”

“George is my mom's favorite.”

“Makes all sense.”

“How so?”

“Well for you. You're stubborn and believe in instant karma...But you have a beautiful soul.”

“Well I'm glad you're Paul and not Yoko.”

“Dude, she whales on Sunday bloody sunday.”

“You're right. ‘Grow old with me’ makes me cry everytime I listen to it. What's your favorite Paul song?”

“Beatles is When I'm 64, solo is... ‘Maybe I'm amazed.’ Oh fuck! Coming up,Get on the right thing! Shit, there's a lot.”

“‘Let me roll it’ is my favorite of his solo stuff.”

“Fuck yeah!”

“Yo, you guys talking Beatles?” Joan handed Hal a joint.

“Yeah, we were sharing our favorite John and Paul songs.”

“Seaside woman for me is my favorite Paul song.” Joan added.

“Magneto and Titanium Man is so groovy.” Loudon chimed in.

“‘It don’t come easy’ is my favorite Ringo song,” said Hal.

“No-No song for me.” Joan said.

“Goodnight Vienna!” Sloan said as she puffed the joint.

“It’s always Octopus’ Garden for me. The man only needed one song to write for the Beatles to blow everybody out of the garden. Favorite John song is Strawberry Fields forever.”

“Lucy in the sky with diamonds is a masterpiece.” Joan added.

“Have we finally gotten to George? Long, Long, Long is the greatest song ever written!” Joan started.

“Crackerbox Palace.” Loudon added.

“What is life?” Hal added.

“Something.” Sloan said.

“Wait..Hang on. You didn’t say your favorite John song, Sloan.”

“Grow old with me, just like you. Favorite Beatles Paul song?”

“When I’m 64, just like you.”

“Figures.” They all said in unison.

Sloan rested on Hal as they both watched the grain fields and pastures pass by. No farmers, just merely the cold November wind as Hal took out his blanket and covered the both of them.

“Tell me more about your time growing up.” asked Sloan.

“Okay, only if you tell me yours.”

“Mmm-kay.”

Flashback we go, Ten year old Hal was slammed to the lockers and was cornered by three bullies.

Sloan struggled in math class with her brother turning it in quickly and heading out to kickball.

Hal sat out the guidance counselor's office and overheard the conversation the guidance counselor had with his Mom.

"He's not fitting in. He's not speaking and kids just don't respond well to that. And he's not speaking to us. We know he's listening, he's excelling, but not raising his hand. He's not asking for help."

Sloan was in the same situation.

"She's not excelling in any subject. She may have to repeat the 4th grade if she doesn't make a change."

She didn't listen in, she just hugged her headphones closer.

"He may be on the spectrum, he may be autistic."

"She may be on the spectrum of ADHD."

"Hal?" Alice questioned that logic.

"Sloan?" Forysthe and Betty questioned.

"But Hal is social. He just can't relate to some of the blockhead kids here."

"Please Ms. Capher."

"No, you know how kids can be cruel."

"Sloan is incredibly focussed. She can knit and play as many instruments as her brother. Math is just a subject not clicking for her."

"And that's not normal." Both guidance counselors said.

"How is that not normal?" All the parents asked.

"Like I said, it's just the spectrum. It could progress, best to medicate, making it a routine rather than a last minute change."

Alice stormed out of the office and grabbed the journal out of Hal's hands "You call that autistic?" And showed the guidance counselor a detailed drawing of two people resting in a snowbank.

“See he’s doing just...-” Alice actually looked at the drawing “Shit Hal, this is really good. Who are these two?”

“I don’t know, it’s a recurring dream I keep having.”

“If this is how my son wants to express himself, then so be it. Get out of his hair, he’s fine.”

“She’s fine. We’re not cutting back her music. She loves it and it stays. I’ll be up till midnight to help my kid with her homework if I have to.” Betty said with not a slam, but with a statement that indeed stuck.

Sitting on the swing sets. Our two were alone with a guitar and journal respectively, 190 miles apart. But sitting down next to Sloan was Joan and sitting down next to Hal was Mads.

“Thank you.” Mads and Joan said in unison.

“Hey bitch.” Some bully grabbed Mads’ hair and pulled at it in the lunchroom.

Hal immediately got up and sucker punched the bully “You alright?” Hal asked Mads

“You alright?” Sloan said to her cousin Joan, who she only saw at holidays, was now adjusting to Maple Falls.

“Wait, Joan isn’t from Maple Falls?”

Sloan peered at Joan “Joan, can we tell him where you’re from now?”

Joan looked over and smiled at Hal “I’m from the Twin Cities. Saint Paul.”

Hal looked over to Joan in confusion.

“Moved to Maple Falls when my Mom died when I was ten.”

“You alright?” Ten year old Sloan said to ten year old Joan who was at the Eden on the balcony of Saint Michael.

“...No.”

“Do you mind if I hang out with you?”

“...No.”

Everyday Joan sat down with Sloan and Mads sat down with Hal.

Each day Mads got Hal to open up “Can you like, teach me to draw like you?”

Each day Sloan got Joan to open up “Can you play that one Beatles song you played for me?”

Mads knocked on Hal’s apartment door “Hal, it’s your little girlfriend!” Mads blushed and Hal rolled his eyes to his mom “Be back before dark.”

“Or you can sleepover. Just call.”

“I’ll be back before dark.” The ten year old said directly.

Sloan pulled out the family canoe “Here, this is the family canoe. You can use it anytime.”

Sloan, Joan and Loudon walked the streets of Maple Falls just like Hal, Mads and Isaac walked the streets of Minneapolis.

“I can’t wait to meet Mads someday.”

“Well, we gotta go to the Twin Cities then.”

“Eh...She’ll love it here though.”

“You really don’t like the city, do you?”

“Well, didn’t you call it a hellhole?”

“Yeah...But a fun hellhole.”

“Yeah, I guess...someday.”

A few weeks had passed and two birthdays were being celebrated.

Sloan opened a potato sack and pulled out a smaller than usual guitar.

“Woah, Holmes.” Sloan’s jaw dropped and she delicately held it.

“Yeah, I found it in the barn. Thought you could shed some-”

“It’s an 1850s century Tilton.”

“Knew you’d know it. Oh yeah, I got one other present for you.”

Hal took back the guitar from Sloan and took out the orange pick from his pocket.

“Got a few pointers from some of your relatives during the holidays.”

Sloan blushed “Oh Holmes.”

“Oh, I’m not done with the blushes. Remember...uh...The song you played for me when we were on top of saint michael?”

Sloan nodded and blushed even harder.

“You mind singing the Carter side?”

Hal started playing ‘If I were a carpenter’ and Sloan followed in singing with him.

“I gave you my onlyness, give me your tomorrow.” The two finished the song with a kiss.

“Holmes, I really can’t accept this. One, it’s an antique and should be handled with the best care.”

“Which is what you’ll give it, so you deserve it.”

“...But I also want you to keep playing.” Sloan smiled and bit the bottom of her lip as she rushed over to the guitar room.

“This is a gibson dove. It pairs with my Gibson hummingbird. Like how you pair with me...Also I think the orange sunburst fits well with you...So how about a trade?”

Hal nodded “Sounds like a deal.”

Sloan licked her lips and handed Hal the Dove guitar “Can you play the song again?”

Hal smiled back and began to strum.

Chapter 18-

Toasting over an open fire



Sloan shuffled through the junk pile in the Edith manor barn. Pulling out anything that was anything back from the 1800s when it was last touched “I’m not finding the auger Holmes!”

She looked over the very end of the barn to a white sheet covering something quite large.

Outside pushed by just Sloan, Hal, Joan and Loudon was something quite big and wooden in white. It was a sleigh.

“God and that was four people pushing that.” remarked Joan.

“Yeah, that thing is gonna need a lot of horsepower.” Loudon said as Sloan looked over at him and smiled at her brother with quite the idea.

Zaccone turned on the radio of his 1971 earwig that was chained to a giant sleigh.

Sleigh ride by The Ronettes started playing “Safety be shit, but I call this fate, am I right? Who cares! Get in the sleigh and let’s do some doughnuts!”

Fitted with a rudolph nose and antlers on the front grill, Zaccone zoomed the snow covered roads with the rest of the gang behind him like a Norman Rockwell painting...Well, if Norman Rockwell listened to Iggy and the Stooges.

Hal entered Maple tree music connection and the first clue was the jingle of silver bells on the front door, followed by a censor that made a ‘Ho, Ho, Ho’. Hal looked around and saw tinsel wrap every which direction, adorned by bright colored round ornaments. Fake snow stuffed in every crevice of the store. A giant plastic snowman waving in a frozen standstill with a smile that did not reflect Hal’s perplexion. “Sloan?!”

Sloan got out from the 10th christmas box from the basement crawl space and pulled out a giant candy cane and leaned on it.

She had on a christmas sweater of christmas trees and a brushed back her Elf hat “Hiya Holmes.” she said as a toy train passed behind her.

To my surprise Sloan is quite the soul of the Christmas spirit. And It’s not the entire Gonson family, it’s just Sloan. All curated by her with a slowly built collection that bloomed out the chimney when she got seventy-five percent of the collection at a fateful estate sale of more than happy relatives of the deceased to give the entire collection to Sloan for free if she could “Get it the hell out of their sights.”

Later the two passed a joint outside in the snow “What’s your Christmas spirit been like before you laid your eyes to mine Holmes?”

Christmas 1984:

“I told you, I don’t like satin! It makes me look fat!” One of Nancy’s terrible triplets shreds a satin blouse Christmas present, while Alice and Hal take a bite of the Christmas key lime pie.

“This is a pretty good pie. Where did you get it?” Hal said to his mom with their lower leveled, slightly annoyed, but what else is new for those banshees, conversation.

“It’s store bought.”

“This is store bought?” A lamp is thrown and shatters on the wall.

“...Yep, Red Owl.”

“Damn. Gotta remember this pie for next Christmas.” Another lamp is thrown and shatters on the wall.

“More Cool whip?”

Sloan placed her fist on her chin and looked at her boyfriend.

Sloan held the door of Saint Michael as Hal went in “Sure, what the hell.”

“Holmes!” Sloan whispered loud with a smile.

“Jesus!” Hal said as he passed the crucifix.

“Holmes, stop throwing me in and making me laugh!” Sloan whispered in Hal's ear.

“Good god and-”

Sloan covered Hal’s mouth “Holmes!” She whispered.

“Sorry, but look.” Hal motioned across the room of Janie staring Hal and Sloan down.

“Don’t worry, she’s just an outsider to you...And me now.”

“You now?”

“Yeah, I've been skipping a lot of church to sleep in with you.”

“So do you guys believe in god?” Hal asked.

“Eh...I think so?” Sloan answered.

“Ehhhhhh.” Joan answered.

“Nope. Scientifically it makes zero sense. Cider?” Loudon handed Hal a cup of cider.

“So why are we all here?”

“Kick his butt Loudon!” Loudon was facing against Tommy in a game of air hockey in the youth area of the church. Hockey trading cards and candy were being used as bets.

“Worship time!”

“Oh come on, all ye faithful!” Loudon threw his paddle and followed the others to the sanctuary.

During the first twenty minutes pastor Mullenberg rambled about the importance of Christ in Christmas “You see the candy cane is really not an object of santa, but really of many people of the bible. The cane being of Methuselah, turn it upside down and you get a ‘J’ of our lord Jesus.

Hal stared deeply into Pastor Mullenberg’s thick eyebrows and reached for an offering card and half pencil in the pew and started drawing the pastor and quietly handed it to Sloan.

Sloan unfolded it and saw Pastor Mullenberg with caterpillars for eyebrows.

Sloan lurched down and tried to hold in the laughter and grabbed Hal and the two snuck out of the sanctuary and up to the snowy Eden in the bell tower.

Sloan tried igniting her lighter, but to avail. Hal then took out the swiss army knife that Sloan gifted to him and pulled out the small knife and ripped off the safety top and lit it right away and then lit the joint in Sloan’s mouth.

Sloan took a hit and wrapped her legs around Hal and the two started making out.

“Keep me warm Holmes.”

“You never get cold.”

“Shut up, you know what I mean.”

Sloan and I walked up hand in hand to the lone pine, mere meters from the Wyland house.

Tinsel, lights and Grandpa Gord hanging ornaments of wrapped-

“Squirrel feed and bird seed. Here, you’re a tall feller.” Grandpa Gord handed me a bundle of tied squirrel feed and I started decorating the tree with Grandpa Gord, Sloan, Mason and Baby Odie.

“So, you’re back with us. Tell me son, you’re gonna put a ring on my granddaughter?”

“Grandpa!”

Hal blushed and just kept working. Grandpa Gord smiled and chuckled at the two.

“There’s so many. Did you wrap them all?”

“Annie and I wrap ‘em all. This is nothing, it’s only a day’s worth. Squirrels are hungry fellers.”

“How long does it take?”

“Time with Annie, that’s all that matters.”

After all was finished, I looked up to the top of the tree “You got a star for the tree?”

“We got an angel, perches itself though.” Sloan winked, speaking just like her Grandfather.

“Sc’mon Holmes, soups on!”

The gang entered the house and Hal realized something on the floor of the entrance. He picked up a plastic wrapped item “Why is there a fruitcake on the floor?”

“Oh, that’s a doorstep?” Sloan answered

“No, it’s a fruitcake.”

“Well now it’s a doorstep.” Sloan knocked on the rock hard fruit cake “Grandpa Gord was gifted that fruitcake in 1945 and well you know how terrible fruit cakes taste?... Well they soon make a hell of a doorstep.”

Hal gently placed the 40 year old fruit cake on the floor and continued his way to the edible food.

As I walked inside, I was greeted by the family. Everybody said their greetings, hugs, kisses to Sloan... But also to me. Everybody knew my name and even continued conversations with me from that past Thanksgiving.

So much in conversation that Sloan grabbed me a plate of a meatloaf sandwich, barbecue potato chips and baby dill pickles.

“Sc’mon Holmes, we gotta carb up for the game.”

Later on the family rink “Well hockey has been in this family since 1875.” Loudon continued a conversation with Hal.

“Is that when-”

“When hockey was invented.”

“Of course, why wouldn’t it be?”

“Sure there were many precursors to hockey, like polo and a 1787 engraving of a man with a stick and bung on the river thames...But that’s beside the point. Hockey was started in Montreal and the Wylands were one of the first to play it. The first being my great great grandmother Verda Wyland.”

“Is she a precursor to Sloan?”

“She explains a lot of her genepool, though you needed that as a lumberjack. When James Creighton pitched the concept of the game to Verda, she suggested the right wood and legend has it, executed the first shoulder check.”

“Yo Loudon, pass the Oreo!”

I suspected that playing against Sloan, that I’ve already played against the hardest player. I was wrong...Dead wrong.

Cousin Lyle slammed Hal to the wall and into a snowbank outside of the rink.

“Oh hey Hal, glad to see ya again.”

Lyle helped Hal out with his stick.

I’ve been hit, but never so hard and never has it been followed by an offer of a bison beef stick.

Later trudging through the snow on another family trail, our gang plopped on top of quite the summit.

“Holy shit!” Echoed Hal and he turned to the gang and whispered to them “There are no mountains in Minnesota. Where are we?”

“Well there’s mount eagle, mount moose, mount disappoint.” Joan corrected

“Exactly.”

“But this is not a mountain, it’s a hill. The namesake of these hidden hills. Just a smooth sled ride. And-”

Loudon jumped on his sled and slid down the right side of the hill.

“Loudon, no!” Joan chased after him.

“What, what?! What’s going on?”

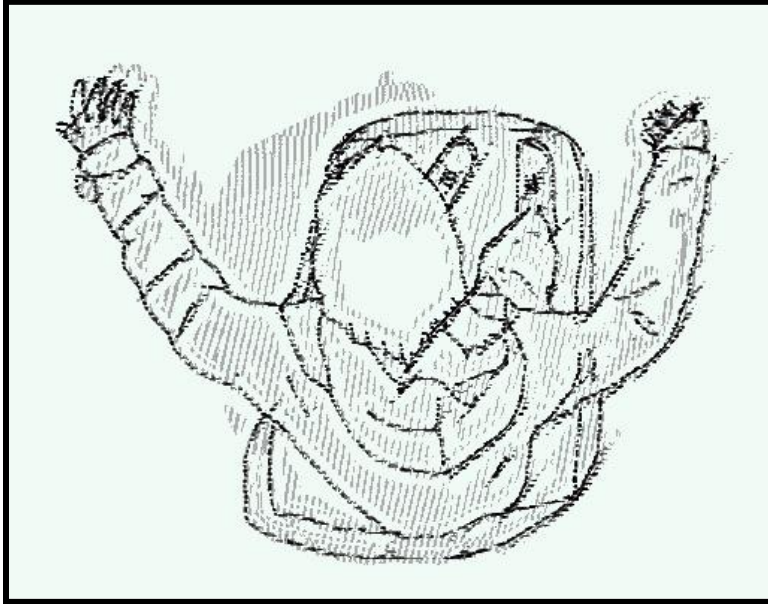
Sloan sighed “Rules are, steering straight or left and you’re fine. Steer right and...Well-”

“Well what?!”

“So when Loudon was eleven, he went right and well, he sailed beautifully in the air...But landed in southbound lanes of the highway.”

“The highway?!”

“Yeah, the local news...then the tri-nation news called him coffin boy..And well.”



Loudon was heading at full speed, laid back and pressed his headphones closer to his ears and Sail Away by Styx played for him and he sailed off the ramp into the air.

Getting up, he positioned his feet mathematically perfect and held his parka in the wind to gain more wind like a sail. Clear across the cars and landed perfectly and gently on the

other side like a feather to the hill.

Sloan turned to us, “Anything can be landed, if you’re willing.”

Later that night the whole family was jamming to the theme of popeye.

Sloan smiled as they finished and watched Hal completely perplexed.

“Holmes, you alright?”

“Popeye says ‘I yam, what I yam. But he eats only spinach.’”

“Holy shit...How much did you smoke?” Sloan giggled.

“I don’t know.” Hal giggled with her “Play the speed racer theme song!”

As everyone’s high mellowed and Hal snoozed in between Uncle Stu and Grandpa Gord.

Someone else came upon a midnight clear.

Every year, it felt like to Forsythe that his father was sitting in the pew with him as the silver bell tolled for Christmas day at Hidden Hills Baptist.



Come the next morning everybody went down the stairs for all those perfectly wrapped and bowed Christmas presents. Though some stayed upstairs for the traditional game of cushion surfing. Joan set up the pins downstairs and Loudon jumped, bowling himself a perfect strike.

“Undefeated!”

Come present time, Sloan handed present after present to Hal, walking along the Christmas tree outside the house.

“Hold up, I don’t have that many arms. Geez, you got a lot of presents.”

“They’re not mine.”

“What?”

“Look at the name Holmes.”

Hal twisted the presents and it revealed his name on all of them. From: Grandpa Gord and Grandma Annie. Seasons greetings from Uncle Stu. Tis the Season from Betty and Forsythe. Ho! Ho! Ho! From Loudon.

“This one is obviously from Joan.” Sloan handed a cloth covered present to Hal.

“But...I didn’t get any for the extended family.”

“Don’t worry Holmes, I put your name on mine. And Christmas is not about presents, it’s about this-”

Hal watched as all family members sat around in a circle.

“Soak it in Holmes. You’re at home with us.”

Each family member opened up a present. Joan opened a new longbow with hand made arrows. Stu opened up a fine bottle of scotch and went to hug his sister Betty. Forsythe opened up a bottle of BBQ sauce from his hometown and hugged Uncle Stu. Loudon opened up a giant box of moon pies and went to hug Hal.

“I love you big boat.” tears were actually coming from his face.

Alice opened up knit dolls of Cheech and Chong from her sister Nancy as she opened up a horrifying porcelain doll from her bag. Everyone inched back as Nancy held it close to her heart.

“Demon,demon,demon.” Loudon repeated.

Sloan opened her present from Hal and found a small inflatable John Lennnon “Oh, John! This is the one I’m missing!”

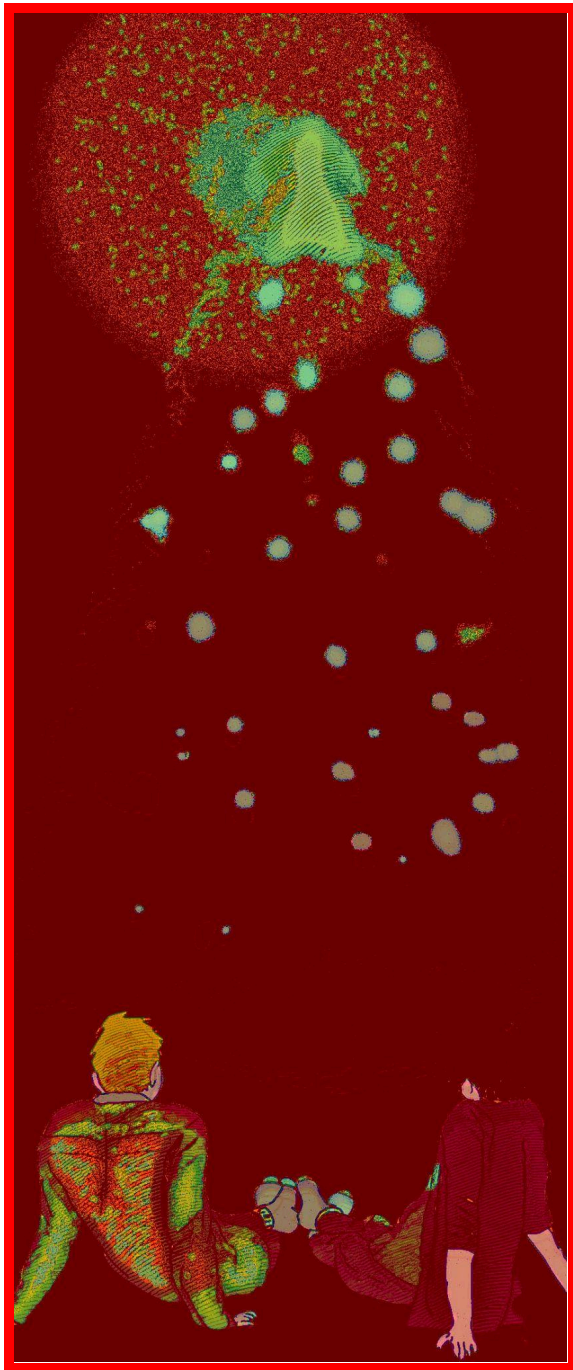
“Yeah, now you got a complete-”

“Wait, what’s this?”

“Oh, it’s just a-”

Sloan opened up a tall and skinny sketchbook. Opening up, each page was a drawing of every person Hal has met through Sloan. Flipping through was multiple drawings of just the gang. One of Sloan in her hockey gear. It kept on going.

Loudon looked down at his present and noticed the sketchbook in the wrapping and saw the same



sketches along with Joan as they flipped in silence.

“Wow.” Loudon only let out as he was later left speechless in seeing a drawing of them all together.

Sloan slunk on Hal’s shoulder and tugged him tight, grabbed a licorice from her stocking and pressed it to his lips. With a bite from him and her.

“You went above and beyond for the present holmes.

You really like me...But here’s the thing...So do I.”

Sloan slammed her present to Hal on his chest and kissed him quickly on the cheek.

Hal looked at the wrapping paper that was “Is this wrapped in duct tape?”

“Yeah, I hate wrapping. I have no patience for it. Open it, open it!”

Hal ripped it open to find an orange, white and blue beanie with the stitching of ‘Holmes’ on the flap. Hal looked at Sloan “Did you knit this?”

Sloan nodded “There’s more. Open! Open!”

Hal pulled out a matching scarf.

“Saw that your winter fashion was so 1890s. So I decided to update it. Do you like it?”

“I love it...I love...Thank you so much, Sloan.” Hal’s mouth was agape to which Sloan pushed Hal’s chin up with her fist ever so slightly.

“Eh, it was nothing Holmes.” Sloan leaned into Hal’s ear “Uh, I love my present a shit ton...Can we process these feelings we’re having, like a make out sesh in the bathroom with the fan on blast?” Hal nodded “Yes please.”

Chapter 19 -A tale of Twin Cities



Hal sat down on the first step of the staircase of Edith Manor. Christmas was over, but he spun a single wrapped present in his hand. ‘To Isaac, From Hal’.

Across Lake Winepasaga, Sloan turned to us in the tutor room.

“Whenever I get a new album I only listen to it when I know no one will bother me and always with my headphones on. Hal knows not to bother me, but you can never listen to a whole record with him,

without him bursting out into colorful, but distracting commentary. He can last about three songs in without talking now. So he is getting better everyday. Truth be told, he's been pretty quiet, which is pretty off for him.



ten and he was an eighth grader.”

“Shut up Holmes, listen to this album with me.”

There are three phases to listening to a new album. First is the experience. Just let the music flow through your soul and don't think about how anything works in the song. That's for the second listen. Paying attention and deconstructing lyrics, understanding the rhythm...the technical stuff. Like hot damn, listen to that fuzz pedal, what a break, please just let this religious era of the artist die already. Then finally is listening to the songs with the ones you care about. But for once, Hal told me to shut up when I played 'Let it be' by The Replacements.”

“Shut up, Tommy?!” Hal picked up the record and pointed at Tommy Stinson.

“You know him?”

“Yeah, I had a Root Beer drinking contest with him at a corner convenience store.”

“Wait, really?!”

“Yeah, I threw up and he won. Granted I was

Later at night Hal took a bite of his lasagna at the Gonson family table “Wait, you want to go to the twin cities?”

“Yes, I’m willing to go if you’re my guide.”

“Shit that’s a big leap for you, Sloan.” Woodsy said, sitting next to Zacccone and Gupp.

Mr.Gonson set down another pan of lasagna “Don’t your parents feed you?”

“Dude, it’s lasagna night.” Zacccone scooped himself a serving.

“Dude, there’s a north star game the next day. You think we could spend the night at Mad’s house?”

“Well...I don't know about her place. But I could talk about it with another friend.”

Hal was back home, the kitchen phone on his shoulder and was on the line with Mads “So you’re cool with this?”

“Yeah...”

The whole gang was all set to make the trip. Loudon had recently inherited Uncle Stu’s van and he was making the finishing touches with a mural on the side of the van. A mural of beautiful maple trees and a stream right in the middle.

“Yeah, I’ve been watching a lot of Bob Ross.”

Our Maple Falls gang piled in and made their way to the twin cities.

Making a first pit stop in a little town called “Uh, the next town is called...Forest Lake?” Joan looked at the map.

“Sweet mother of mercy Loudon floor it!” Hal screamed.

Hal exited the gas station, tightening his belt “No more burger whop.” and looked around at a slew of more gas stations and fast food joints “So where are the forests and lakes?” Hal looked at the town’s sign and its motto “As good as it sounds...What the hell?”

The gang passed through Lino Lakes, Blaine, New Brighton, Roseville, into Como Park where Loudon found himself knocking on the door of a connection through UPNO.

“You got the goods?”

The old man handed Loudon a couple of bottles of box elder maple syrup.

“Okay, where’s my Northern Bobwhite?”

Loudon handed him that bird sculpted by Uncle Bill.

After the deal was done, the gang found themselves driving past the state fair grounds and onto university ave.

“Making another pit stop. AxeMan Surplus for potato handguns and rubber chickens.

Down university the van went. Past porky’s, past the witches tower. Past the U of M into dinkytown and to the Hennepin bridge over Nicollet island. Into a parking garage just across the street from a candy store called Candyland.

“It’s the greatest cheese popcorn you’ll ever taste. Ma and I swear on it.”



Greeting inside was Mads talking it up with a friend behind the register.

“Mads!” Hal ran up and hugged Mads.

“Fucking 6 months man! I missed ya.”

“I know, I know...Been busy.” Hal pointed back to the Maple Falls gang and introduced everybody as they ordered.

Munching on cheese popcorn and scottie dog licorice Loudon watched as they passed multiple tall people.

“Good god, the cities are full of tall ass people! They make Hal look short in comparison.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing about the cities. My height is average, besides Gupp, y’all are just tiny in Maple Falls.

Now, sc’mom. Nicollet is not our price range and not our scene. It’s historic and Scandinavian royalty with its Dayton’s and Peavey plaza skating to city lights.”

Joan nudged into Sloan “Hal’s just loving this.”

“But no! We’re Hennepin Avenue kids. We’re the riff raff before Loring Park. We’re not here for five stars, we’re here for the brutal honesty of L.S.D. Liquor, Sex and Drugs.”

Hal took everyone on a tour.

“Right here used to be the longhorn, but now it’s zoogies. The best punk shows used to be here, now they’re more 7th entry or Station four, if you want a quick concussion with those brilliantly placed poles. But uh, Mads and I snuck in this place to see the plasmatics, that show was wild.”

Sloan stops Hal “So, you know my family runs a music store. My family lives and breathes music... We’re here for the Replacements and you open this side we’ve never seen. Why didn’t you show us this side before?”

“I just assumed you weren’t a punk. You punk?”

Sloan looked at Joan and Loudon “Yeah, we’re punk.”

Mads turned to Hal “Music Land?”

“Music Land.”

Sloan sat in a turntable booth and listened to ‘Real World’ by Husker Du off of Metal Circus. Her head bobbed to rhythm.

Sloan flipped through record to record finding Black Flag, Stiff Little Fingers, Misfits.

“This place is amazing.”

“Yeah, it’s a good chain. But you guys gotta check out cheapo for more of Bob’s stuff.

“Bob, Cheapo?”

“Yeah, we’ll get her some suburbs and Tetes Noires.” Mads added.

“Oh fuck, yeah I gotta drop in and say hi to Polly. Are they still using Barbie?”

Mads laughed “Yeah, they still do. I just saw her at the fetus last week, they were just in King City playing a show.”

Sloan pointed her records at Hal and Mads “What language are they speaking?”

Hal looked at Mads and then Sloan “Local.”

Sloan watched as they exited music land and Hal walked ahead with his boots pressing on the shattered booze bottle shards on the grounds of Moby Dick's bar. His arm guided us away from it and across the way to the corner of Shinders books.

The gang looked around the wide sprawling book store of every genre known to man and beast that dared to pen such a tier beyond erotica. As Joan's eyes went down to smut, trash, sloppy seconds, filth and finally 'daddy's disappointment' with the sign in the shape of a heart.

"Hal fucking Capher!" A dirty blonde curly haired girl in big dip dyed square '70s glasses and a fringe suede jacket known as Kalina came over and hugged and kissed Hal on the cheek.

"Jesus christ Mads, I thought you were just fucking me! He's actually fucking here! You're actually fucking here! Dude, I got my nipples pierced."

"Of course you did Kalina."

"Jace! It's fucking Hal!"

Jace, a punk with a lip chain piercing came over and hugged Hal. His metal jostled and jingled with every movement.

"Hal, I thought you like moved to bum fuck nowhere. How's life?"

The Twin Cities gang stood on one side and the Maple Falls gang on the other. Jace and Kalina were the oldest of Hal's old circle. And the circle is big, called the red circle in the Lowry neighborhood. A non-profit, nine room Victorian art house that houses weekly revolving art shows from local twin city painters, poets, novelists, musicians..."Uhh, nude sushi?" Loudon, Sloan and Joan walked into the room.

"Room 2, It's called nyotaimori. The Japanese art of presentation of sushi on a nude woman or man...Saturday's model is Sasha. A local art student at the U of M." Loudon read off the pamphlet.

"Well go forth." Sloan nudged Loudon.

"I'm too scared." He whispered.

Loudon and Sloan looked over to Joan reaching down for a roll "Hey, It's free tuna guys."

Jace handed Hal zine after zine. "Here's all the zines you missed."

"Ha! The sweet potato, a buck each right?"

“Friend price is always free.”

“Pity price is always a couple fivers.”

“Thanks man. Hey I know Mads is keeping it hush hush. But I’m sorry about Isaac. I didn’t think he’d go that far.”

“I know, I know...Me too.”

“You gonna visit him?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Sloan overheard as Kalina grabbed her hand “Hey Sloan, I gotta show you the recording room. Sc’mon.”

“Yo Harper, Barlow! This is Sloan. She’s a country girl.”

“She, chill?” Harper, a tall lanky black man in his mid thirties in a long red red velvet coat over a floral button up and red beret took a joint from his lips and exhaled.

“She's chill.”

“Cool. Grab anything on the wall.”

Sloan looked over and saw every instrument known to man on that wall. Of course it was revolving, of course they had a crumhorn like it was the 16th century. She panned over and noticed one sticking out over the others. A 1964 Fender Stratocaster.

“Kind of fitting, don’t you think?” Sloan said to us.

Loudon sat at the drums, Barlow took the acoustic.

“So, do you like Dylan?”

Barlow nodded “Any song.” as he said quietly.

“Any song? Time passes slowly?”

Barlow nodded again.

Hal, Mads and Jace came into the room on the other side of the glass as the three played ‘Time passes slowly’ by Bob Dylan.

Mads looked over as Hal sat down on the stool, sipped his tea and gave Sloan his fullest attention. They both mouthed a 'Hi' and gave a smile before Sloan closed her eyes and sang into the mic.

Mads sat down with Hal and took notice "You love her, don't you?"

Hal looked back to Mads and nodded "I do...I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

After the jam sesh the whole gang followed Hal through the halls of the Red Circle art school. An art school that caters to grades 9-12 that was just next door to the art house. The gang only heard one repeated word through those halls.

"Yo Hal!"

"What's up Hal?!"

"Where have you been Hal?"

"Hal!"

"Hal!"

"Hal!"

Sloan turned to Hal "Holmes, you're pretty popular."

"Eh, everybody knows everybody here."



"So did you go here?"

"Just for a year."

"Did you like it?"

"Made some of my best friends here. Yo, funny!"

"Greetings and salutations Hal." Said a short bowl cut girl with

a gray blouse and a black poodle skirt.

“Guys, this is Funny. Funny and I used to draw together all the time.”

“Hey Hal, I bunk with Tenacious. Wanna smoke a bowl with us?”

“Yeah, that sounds cool. We just gotta say hi to Butumbi first.”

“Wait, he’s back?” Funny was excited at heart, but her voice was always monotone.

“Yeah, Mads said he just got home yesterday.”

“Where is he?”

“Where do you think?”

The gang exited the warmth of the community center of the school to the sidewalk trail to the basketball court, past the slow plows and gliding on the icy patches with ease.

“Tell me again why we’re playing basketball in the dead of winter?” asked Joan.

“The same reason we play hockey in the dead of summer.”

Suddenly all were shocked by the sound of a roar. Zacccone stumbled in his path.

“What the fuck was that?!”

“Oh, that’s him!” Hal with an excited smile came rushing to the sound of his good friend Butumbi. Who was absolutely wrecking it on the court with a self alley oop and let out another roar.

He’s called the Jurassic man for that reason. Standing at 7’2 with an even bigger smile for his friend. Butumbi ran over and gave a big bear hug to Hal.

The Maple Falls gang walked up and Butumbi was still hugging Hal, leaving Hal to gasp out “Good to see you too man.”

Butumbi looked over “You must be Sloan. Do you want a hug too?” He spoke with the deepest, but sweetest Congolese accent.

Sloan walked over to the picnic table. Seven thermos’ with labels of Hal, Sloan, Joan, Loudon, Woodsy, Zacccone and Mads were piping hot to warm their cold noses.

“Muamba Nsusu, chicken peanut soup. Mama’s recipe.” Butumbi explained as he hook shot the basketball into the net.

“Mmm, this is so good.” Joan was enjoying every bite.

“You want to play a game of five on one?” Hal asked.

Sloan looked up “How hard can he be when it’s just him?”

“Loudon!” Sloan passed it to Loudon, who passed it to Joan, who passed it to Hal.

“Guys, what’s the problem?” asked Hal.

“It’s 14-5!” Sloan shouted.

Hal laughed with Butumbi “Yeah, that’s per usual. Okay big tall from Saint Paul. Jump ball.” Hal bounced the ball under Butumbi’s legs and got a lay up.

“Still falling for that, huh?”

“I gave you that one to you Hal.”

“Sure you did.”

Butumbi passed the ball to Hal hard. Hal returned the ball with the same throw.

Sloan watched as Hal stole the ball from Butumbi and shot the basketball with his hand covering his eyes, but opened them at the last minute.

“Holmes, you’re pretty good.”

“Thanks. Butumbi and I used to play together in school. Turned into a whole summer of basketball. Both of us were scouted and he somehow got the scholarship lined up for King City.”

“Not anymore my friend. The Peace Corps is too important.”

“Dude, kick fucking ass. I’m proud of you man.”

“Thank you.” Butumbi shot the ball with his eyes fully covered and made the basket.

“That’s how you fucking do it man.”

“Fuck you.” Hal said playfully.

“Fuck you.” Butumbi returned the playful remark.

Later in Funny and Tenacious’ dorm, the whole Maple Falls gang and Twin Cities gang laid down and passed a couple of bowls around.

“You’re cute, you wanna see my whip collection.” Tenacious asked Loudon.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“So Hal, how’s life in Maple Falls?” Funny asked.

“Eh, the usual. Blowmobiles, spent 30 hours looking for a needle in a haystack, started a line of comic books with Loudon, Met a girl. You?”

“The usual as well. Sabotaged governor Benson’s campaign. Fashioned fake IDs and puked on the rollercoasters at wine world, broke a boy’s heart.”

Sloan looked over at the framed art pieces above Funny’s desk “Funny, are these yours, I really dig them.”

“No, those are all drawn by Mads.”

Sloan kept scrolling her eyes and looked at one of a squiggled orange figure on the ledge with two yellow squiggle figures.

“Woah, this one is cool. It looks like Hal.”

“It is.” Mads responded “And thanks.”

Later that night Sloan turned to us “First Avenue is a legendary venue. I’ve read so many stories on this place and the 7th entry. Stories of Joe Cocker when it was Depot, It’s Uncle Sam era, the godly Prince era that we live in. Like seriously, I’ve been listening to Raspberry Beret on repeat all day. But damn, R.E.M, Psychedelic furs, The Cure, Ministry, The Suburbs.”

Entering, Sloan was in awe at what she saw.

Bob went up and shredded the opening to ‘Bastards of Young’ and the crowd’s screams competed with Paul’s.

Jace puffed his cigarette next to his cup of Booker Beer and head banged his way to Hal and Sloan who were getting a music history lesson from T.K.

“Hey Brother Louie and fish girl!” T.K bear hugged Loudon and Joan.

Sloan turned to us “So T.K has apparently been to every Replacements show and apparently every show here from 1970 on.”

“Yeah, my mom had been bartending at Duffy’s and quit to work here because I was more about rock and will always be about rock. Survived fucking shitty pop music and Englebert Hump a duck! Rock is life, rock is my roll!...Disco is pretty fun too, gotta love Abba.”

“Preach!” Shouted Joan.

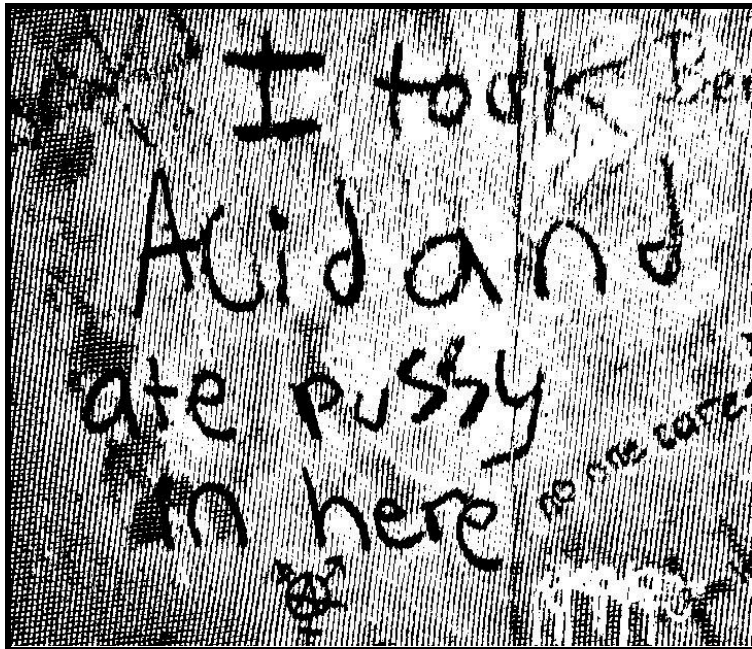
T.K snorted a clear nasal passage in one inhale and downed his Booker Beer.

“Need a refill. Wanna meet my mom?!”

Sloan weaved through the venue passing Bob, Tommy, Grant, Greg, Lori, Kat, Chan, Blaine, Gary, Mark, Karen, another Bob. Grant, Tim, John, Dylan, Dave, Karl, Dan and Sean. All passed by for a push of the bathroom door.

Graffiti covered the bathroom walls of poetry, lyrics, advice and wandering thoughts, which were usually of the most crass tones ‘Whatever happens in Vegas, stays in my anus’ ‘Psych majors have no souls and today’s date in purple spray paint.

Music stopped and commotion was going around the venue.



Sloan exited the bathroom and the room was pitch black, but then finally purple lights shined all around and pointed to the stage. A heavenly keyboard started a Minnesota classic as his royal badness spoke the opening of ‘Let’s go crazy’ as everyone went crazy.

“No fucking way!” Everyone in the venue shouted in unison

Prince emerged from the backstage

and smirked to the crowd as he went to the mic.

Sloan and Hal found each other and their excitement was cloud nine as Prince rocked the house with this secret show.

Hit after hit was played. Raspberry Beret, Take me with U, Purple Rain. Until it was reaching the countdown to the new year.

Prince shouted “Everybody together! 10, 9, 8, 7-”

Sloan grabbed Hal by the side, Hal grabbed Loudon and Loudon grabbed Joan. They all held each other and counted “6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Happy New Year!”

Pop streamers and confetti shot all around the venue. Prince and his band started playing ‘This will be our year’ originally by The Zombies.

Sloan and Hal kissed, Loudon kissed Hal on the cheek and Hal returned the kiss with the whole gang laughing hysterically.

After the show the gang was heading back to Hennepin Avenue to the number 4 bus stop.

T.K gave everybody bear hugs and was just so drunk off his ass. “Yo, you guys rock! If you ever need shelter when that bomb drops, just call up my bunker, okay?!” T.K waved goodbye in a stagger.

“Is he being serious?” Joan asked Hal.

“Well-”

“Hey, yo bitch!” Shouted someone across the way and walked toward them.

“Pull up your hood Sloan and Joan. Mads, Kalina, Jace.” Said Hal.

“We’re on it.” Kalina put her arm around Joan.

“Hold tight, we’re okay. Just keep your head down.” Hal reassured everyone.

After safely getting to Kalina’s house, just a couple blocks away from the red circle, the gang rolled out their sleeping bags on Kalina’s bedroom floor. Filling up every inch of her 200 square foot room.

Everybody said goodnight. And a kiss of the lips from Sloan and Hal was heard by Mads.

Later that night, after everyone was asleep, Mads just went to the bathroom. She stared at herself in the mirror and slunk to the ground.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Went three gunshots in the middle of the night. Sloan quickly woke up in a speechless gasp and she checked everyone who was sound asleep. Tears rolled down her face as she sat there.

She then got up and left for the kitchen. She slunk to the cabinets below and her eyes were locked on the bakelite sky blue telephone on the wall.

The lights flicked on and Sloan looked over in shock to see it was Mads. She sat down next to Sloan “Sloan, what’s wrong?”

“I...I heard gunshots and...uh...I can’t sleep with something like that...I uh...” No tears, just pure shock came from Sloan.

“Sloan, it’s okay. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry that happened...Should I go wake up Hal?”

Mads took the milk from the burner, poured it in a ‘I heart King City mug, followed by the powder dust of a cocoa packet and handed it to Sloan.

“Yeah, Hal was the quietest kid for the longest time. He only spoke to me and was hardly ever home. I could always find him in the library if I wanted to hang with him, which was basically everyday.”

Sloan chuckled “The latter is Holmes. He always falls asleep with a book open on his chest.”

Mads chuckled “That’s him. You know what broke him out of his shell?”

“He said it was when a bully wasn’t bullying him, but bullying some new kid.”

“Yeah...Me.”

“No fucking way!”

“Yeah. Hal sucker punched the bully after he pulled my hair and called me a bitch.”

“4th grade?”

“Eh, city life. So he-”

“Got punished because he was a foot taller. Until he wrote a five page letter to the principal explaining his actions.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Sloan looked at Mads as they flipped through old polaroids of Hal and Mads. She looked at Mads' eyes.

"You really like him, don't you?"

Mads looked out "Yes...But he loves you...Which is fine...Do you love him?"

"I do...I'm sorry."

"Don't be...Friends?"

"Friends."

The two clinked their mugs "I am so glad you're not some heinous bitch." Mads chuckled.

"You're welcome. You down for more stories?"

"About Hal?"

"Nah, how about just you?"

Mads smiled, "I'll brew some coffee."

Chapter 20 -A tale of Twin Cities: Part 2

“Callaghan, your visitor is here!”

Isaac, a kid walking in an orange jumpsuit walked over to the lunch table that Hal was sitting at and sat with him.

“Hey, I match your parka.

Hal didn’t say anything, he just hugged Isaac.

“Yeah, you were right.” Spoke just a kid, but a prisoner.

“Yeah, but I was wrong about not seeing you again.”

“Yeah... You see the sight?”

“Not yet... How does it look?”

“All gone. Riddance.”

“Riddance?”

“Riddance... Best I could do with what I was. Yo terrence!” Isaac held up a cigarette and the guard lit it up.

“How many years have you got?”

“God, Mads let out nothing huh? 15 years with probation. Judge gave me five years off cause I'm a minor or some shit.”

“31.”

“31.”

“How's it like in here?”

“Best room I've ever had.”

Later Isaac unwrapped the present and found a plush naugahyde monster and smiled.

“So you guys like serious?”

Hal took out his wallet and showed a photo of Sloan and him.

“Oh yeah you are, wallet worthy. She's pretty, do you love her?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck, what? I was only joshing... You serious?” What happened to you? Like this is good, but you've always been, ya know-”

“I know.”

“Like trish is fucking hot and you turned her-”

“I know.”

“Mads and I thought you were-”

“I know!”

Time had passed only an hour. They were only given an hour

“I’m glad you got out of this shithole. Never come back.” Isaac said in a loving manner.

“I’ll visit next time in town.”

“Love you man.”

“Love you too man. I’ll keep trying to get Mads to see you.”

“Nah, she should have known better after me calling her a bitch.

“Yeah, well I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.”

“Yeah and I would have been here sooner.”

Hal exited the JDC and ran down the street to the diner across the street and sat down in the booth with Sloan.

“How are you doing Holmes?” Sloan poured a cup of coffee for Hal.

Hal was trying to catch his breath as Sloan got up from the other side and sat next to him and held him.

“No, I’m just catching my… Thanks.”

“How you feeling?”

“Better.”

Hal and Sloan walked downtown St.Paul, passing Mickey's Diner,the other Candyland and walked through Rice park, past shepherd's road and looked out to the Mississippi river

“What’s your favorite thing about the cities?”

“Snow days.”

“Snow Days? Wait, you had snow days?”

“Yeah, nobody knows how to drive in the cities. But yeah, it’s the quiet of the cities. Only the sounds of the daring trudging through temporary mountains we call snow banks. Probably why I feel at home in Maple Falls, it’s nice and peaceful there.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, sometimes the cities gets too loud.”

Later at the North Stars game, it was by the end of the game.

“Sloan, you doing alright?”

Sloan turns to the other side “Okay, here’s the thing about saying that. It’s alright to say...Just not four freaking times in a nail biting fourth quarter where the stars are behind by one point! Ah!!! It’s alright here, I’m not missing the game. I believe this void doesn’t apply to time and space.”

Sloan takes a puck and places it in the air. It does not drop.

“See...But uh...The truth of the matter is, I actually have something on my mind and I guess it can’t wait till after the game.”

“Kind of.”

“How so?”

“Well I don’t want to spoil the fun, but truthfully...I want to go home. I lied that I wanted to spend another day, because you got excited about showing me more of the city.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of homesick myself.”

“Oh...alright.”

“You do know I mean Maple Falls?”

“That was too corny. You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“Well we’ve been sleeping on the floor of Kalina’s bedroom floor and if I’m gonna sleep on the floor, it better be with you, some privacy and-” Hal whispered the rest in Sloan’s ear.

“...Why are you describing yourself making a sandwich?”

“Because we’re both over thinking and we should be watching the game.”

Sloan threw the puck in the air and turned to the other side.

“Where is the drama of this relationship? I think movies and sick day tv soaps have lied to me...Food for thought.”

Sloan caught the puck as did the North Stars goalie.

The next morning Sloan, Hal, Joan and Loudon were back in Lowry. Having one last hangout with Mads.

“Well Holmes, there is one place I want to visit before we leave.”

“Where did you have in mind?”

“Well...Only if you wanna.”

“Anywhere.”

“The place you lived in before you moved to Maple Falls?”

“You... You want to see that apartment?”

Sloan nodded.

Hal and Sloan entered the 63 bus and headed farther past the skyscrapers into the suburbs where the buildings got older and the damage of the forgotten past was never repaired. Store fronts of shattered glass and lines for the clinic stretched outside to the cold.

Sloan looked over at Hal as he let out a sigh as he tugged on the rope to signal a stop.

“Watch your step, they don’t plow over here.” The two held each other's hand and they walked to the apartment that was on the corner near the stop.

Shouting was heard from the third floor and Sloan held Hal’s hand tighter.

“Here it is...It’s still empty...Wanna go in?”

“But you don’t have-”

Hal whacked the window, thus unlocking it. He lifted the window of the first floor to his old living room and the two slunk in and stepped their boots to the carpet floor.

Sloan turned to us as she walked the one bedroom apartment “Each turn was a crack in the wall, I held him tighter. Just so glad that he is away from this and with me now. Not even 7 months, this was Hal’s home. Not even 7 months we’ve known and fallen for each other. 190 miles away from me my entire life.”

Sloan turned to Hal “There’s only one bedroom. You said it was yours, where did your mom sleep?”

“The living room. Right there.”

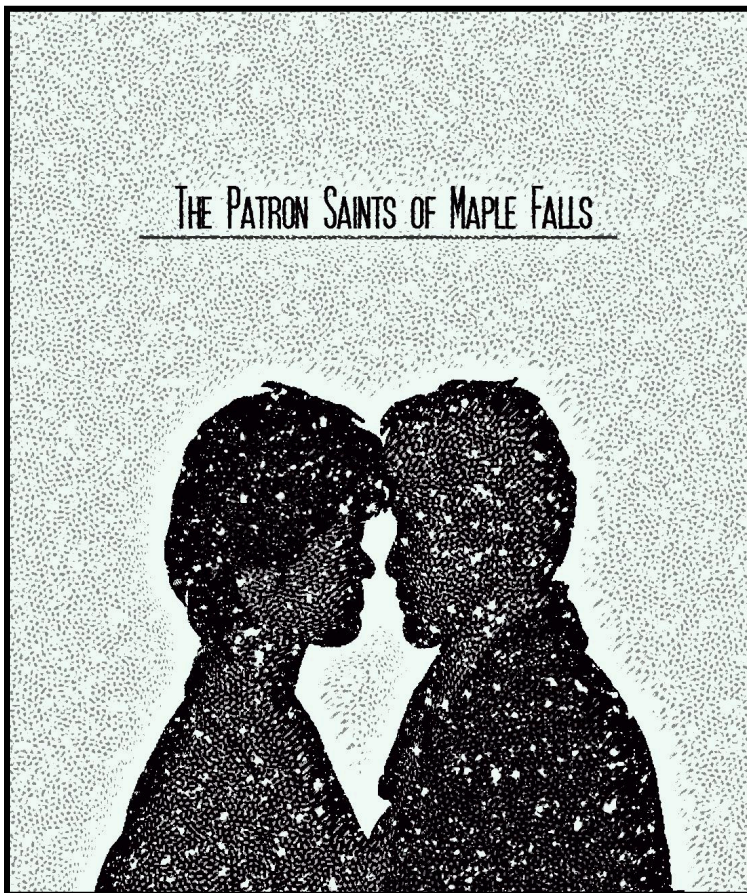
“Really?”

“Yeah...Sounds kind of weird in hindsight I guess.”

Hal slunk down and Sloan followed.

“Holmes, you alright?”

“Can we go home?”



“Holmes?”

“Hmm?”

“Are we literally ending it here?”

“Sloan, this is just the beginning.”

“Cool.” Sloan smiled with Hal and the two kissed.