

The Shadows of Bright Mill

THE SHADOWS OF BRIGHT MILL

HENRY DAVID FLOYD

The Crunch of Bone	2
Artifact: Article	5
The First Day	7
Artifact: Welcome Email	28
The History Exhibit	30
Artifact: Floor Manager's Log	47
The Fire	48
The Applications	72
Meeting Jae	95
The Tour Guide / 4A	108
Artifact: Building 4A Article	123
The Bleachery	125
Artifact: Encephalopathy Article	140
The Argument	142
Artifact: Floor Manager's Log, 1924	158
The Horrible Thing	159
Artifact: Letter from Ava Day to Jae Rhodes	169
Tommy	172
The Chase	189
The Breakdown	210
The Reunion	215
Artifact: Letter from Jaelynn Rhodes to Ava Day	227
The Rescue	229
Artifact: Letter from Richard Day to Ava Day	238
Artifact: Ava's mysterious draft	241
The New Exhibit	242
Artifact: Paper Scrap	252
Epilogue	253
Afterword	255

The Crunch of Bone

I gradually realized with a shock of mingled horror and delight that the crunch of bone was even more rewarding than I'd expected.

I could feel the power draining from his body with every gurgling bellow, with each successive shout, shouts that were finally, after so many years unimpeded, meeting their match by way of blood and spit and tears and fragments of skin and bone meeting them and partially drowning them before they were able to struggle their way out and finally reach my ears.

Finally the shouts stopped coming, the staggered jolts of breath stopping with them. The countertop was now fully obscured by the mess, and yet still I could not will myself to unclench the fistful of hair that still remained in my right hand, though the surprising weight of his sagging head was now pulling hard at it.

I was still staring at the countertop. For some reason it was taking more energy and courage than I'd expected just to shift my gaze down to the head hanging limp from my hand. It was as though something in me was begging me not to do so. But this was the moment. I'd finally done the thing, and now was my chance to see the spoils of my victory.

When I looked down, I was momentarily confused by what I saw. Then it all began making sense.

The long, bleach-blond hair in my hands was spattered with random splotches of deep scarlet and curdled, crusty brown, the blue silk scarf hanging limply from one side, perhaps only still hanging on because it was plastered there by blood. Gritting my teeth, I yanked the head upwards so I could see into the face that I already knew had never been his.

I'd seen this face so many times in the mirror, and certainly it was not the first time I'd seen it in swollen purples and reds. But now it was time to finish the job.

Any silently simmering regret or doubt that had been burning under the surface when I thought it had been Nate's hair in my fist was now wiped away, and suddenly my conscience felt clear as day, an immense relief washing over me. The anger that rose in me now was cleaner, purer, unmuddled.

When I thrust the ugly face back into the countertop, it was with more strength and vibrance than I'd yet been able to muster up. Harder, harder, harder, faster, faster, faster, until the face was no longer even a face, but more closely resembled a blueberry pie. Not enough. Not yet. Harder. Faster. My arm ached, but raw lightning was coursing through it. I was finally free. I was a being of pure energy and light and I would never have to see the stupid, hateful, blotchy face of Ava Day again. I was free of that miserable existence, of the burning, searing shame that came with being Ava Day. That embarrassing failure of a human being, that stain on the family tree—

SLAM—

you stupid, bumbling, ungrateful—

SLAM—

fucking waste of breath—

CRUNCH—

fucking bitch, you smear of human scum, you—

SPLATTER—

disrespectful, ungrateful little cunt, you—

SLAM—

Hot stinging tears of some kind sprung to my eyes, and to the best of my ability I could not figure out what kind of tears they were.

Then Al barked, an actual, real, full dog bark.

That was such a rare occurrence for Al, that perennially silent, weird little dog, that it actually woke me up.

Al was standing over me, panting with his teeth slightly bared in fear, as I finally unclenched my fist and lifted it from the hardwood floor which, judging by the sudden searing pain and bruises, I had so recently been fighting.

In an immense amount of pain I rolled over onto my back. It felt like every muscle in my body had been severed and reattached somewhere incorrectly—everything was throbbing, stretched too tight, and pulling in the wrong direction.

I hugged Al, and though he could not hug back, I felt hugged.

I began crying.

Artifact: Article

Bright Mill Finally Finds a Future

The Providence Journal – June 15, 2010

BRIGHTVILLE, RI — As the demand for urban living continues to grow, real estate developers across New England are turning to the region's rich history of textile mills for inspiration. From Lowell to Pawtucket, these once decrepit and abandoned mill buildings are being transformed en masse into modern living spaces, with quaint architecture and exposed brick walls that nod to the past while embracing the present with modern amenities. Soaring ceilings, oversized windows, and locations squarely in the middle of bustling communities have developers wondering why they didn't pounce on these buildings sooner.

One such mill that is slated for upcoming renovation is located in the quaint village of Brightville, just fifteen minutes from Providence. Few outside the immediately surrounding village would guess that the decrepit Bright Mill was once a formidable juggernaut in the international textile industry, the birthplace of the Fruit of the Loom brand, a major producer of Union uniforms during the Civil War, and, for one year, the single largest cotton manufacturer in the world. History will tell the story of how the once-roaring textile industry gradually declined with the automation of textile jobs and the rise of cut-price imports from overseas, and Bright Mill slid into seemingly irreparable decay by its official closure in January of 1970. But with Tuesday's approval of a multi-stage renovation plan drawn up by a developer with a history of bringing historic industrial buildings back to life, Bright Mill could soon become a vibrant community hub once again.

As more and more people seek the convenience and vibrancy of city living, the engine of mill apartment renovations shows no signs of slowing down. And with the upcoming renovation of Bright Mill now all but guaranteed, residents of Brightville are eager to see their most beloved and beleaguered landmark transformed into a modern, thriving community hub once more.

The First Day

The footprint was faint enough, and the ceilings high enough, that it likely wouldn't be noticed by anyone who hadn't been sleeping directly beneath it. The oily, slightly smudged print of a work boot was positioned one of the clean, crisp wooden planks masquerading amongst the sea of older, grayer, decaying boards that proceeded out of sight behind one of the chunky wooden ceiling beams, each with its own unique cluster of bolt holes, bent nails, empty metal sockets, and splatters of white paint. It was a strange sight for my half-asleep mind to process this early in the morning, especially in this state. Why I'd been cursed with another one of these bizarre nightmares, especially one starring the only man I'd ever truly loved, was beyond me.

I winced as a bolt of pain shot down my back. Sleeping on the bare hardwood floor had been far from ideal, but if Amazon's shipping estimates were to be believed, I wouldn't have to do it for much longer. I grimaced as I hauled myself upright, and my vision slid blearily across the ceiling beam and down the blank cream-colored walls. I grabbed the mug of water on the floor beside me, and grimaced slightly at the taste of the water, which was tainted by the swirling remnants of yesterday's midday coffee. I guess at some point I was obligated to get a second mug if I was supposed to live here for a whole year.

In every pair of roommates I've known, I've noticed there's usually one who seems outwardly to have their life together but freaks out at the slightest thing going wrong, and one who, despite their outwardly messy life, remains the level-headed one and calms the other down. That was Al: forever the level-headed one in the room.

I surveyed the nearly-empty studio apartment with bleary eyes, reorienting myself to the three cardinal points in the room: the sticker-covered laptop on the floor to my left, the neatly stacked pile of clothes directly ahead of me, and the beat-up ESP Volsung 200 leaning against a

corner of the room's weird little alcove to my right, all six strings sprouting uncut from their tuning pegs making it look nearly as disheveled as me. In addition to a second mug, I suppose I was also obligated to get a dresser at some point. But that would require spending money on one, putting it together myself, and actually internalizing the fact that this was my home now.

With a groan, I leaned over and lifted the lid of the tiny off-brand coffee machine on the floor, and inserted a pod from the open cardboard box next to it. Both had arrived last night in the mailroom after a devastatingly coffeeless morning from which I almost didn't recover. I pushed the silver plastic start button, and with a sickly moan, the brand new machine sputtered into action as if it was taking its last dying breaths. From across the room, Al gave the machine a nervous sideways glance.

I grabbed my laptop off the floor, heaved myself back into an upright position, and flipped it open. Just as with every morning since I'd moved in, the email flickered into life on the screen.

My first introduction to Bright Mill had been the leasing manager's rambling attempt at a welcome email, which after three panicked and sleepless weeks of simultaneous job-hunting and apartment-hunting had felt like nothing short of a miracle sent from the heavens, and it had more or less accidentally become part of my morning ritual to re-read it. After all, it was going to be the only little dopamine rush I had to start my day until I was able to pull a job acceptance letter out of my ass.

Her misspelling of Al's name as "Pal" (not the worst I'd seen by a long shot) hadn't even fazed me, as my mind had continued to make its way through the spaghetti of information in the email. The attached map of the complex wasn't particularly helpful either. Apart from the three rectangular behemoths facing the road, labeled as Buildings 1, 2, and 3, the remaining jumble of

bizarrely-shaped buildings blended confusingly into one another, and were numbered with a randomness that seemed almost intentionally unhelpful.

My first impression of the mill was that, despite the inexplicable hubbub surrounding its ongoing history exposition, it was at least pleasantly distracting in its uniqueness. I could picture by contrast the soul-crushingly identical corridors of some newly built apartment complex—straight, clean, perhaps even color-coded by floor—becoming an inescapable padded cell of my own making. There was an unexpected breath of fresh air about the jarring un-same-ness of every inch, the almost deliberately confusing floor plans, the sly gall it seemed to have in getting my overconfident ass lost on the way to the mailroom on my first day. I'd wandered from my room on the second floor down the hall and through the connecting stairwell into the adjoining building while completely forgetting Debra's explanation that Building 21's second floor was not connected to its first, and found myself trapped in a maze with stairwells that only went up, and before long found myself two buildings over on an elevator connected to neither of the prior buildings, unable to get back to where I started without a key card.

But “pleasantly distracting” was the most I could hope for in a new living space. At the end of the day, it wasn't home. It was foreign, it was devoid of any of the things that formed what I once called home, and above all, there was no Nate in my bed at the end of the night.

I put the laptop to one side, took another gulp of mediocre coffee, and after a heated internal debate, successfully convinced myself to get up and begin my day. My brain always put up a pretty good argument against it—what would today consist of, anyway? Probably the same ebbing and flowing cycle that had filled the last week of my life—initially hopeful job-searching, melting into melancholy mourning of the loss of the life I'd planned, devolving into writhing existential horror for a few hours, finally collapsing into a midday nap—and did any of those

require getting out of bed?

But getting out of bed was always the first step. One day at a time, Ava. One day at a time. *This is only temporary. You'll be out soon.*

Move-in day had been mercifully easy, thanks to my worldly possessions being pared down to almost nothing after the breakup. I took so little from that apartment, and so quickly, that I hardly even remember doing it. All in all, apart from my laptop and a week's worth of clothes, I had kept nothing but my snow-white whippet Al and my trusty electric guitar. Oh, and that one framed photo of myself from before the relationship, which I'd grabbed on my way out the door.

Of course, in the unlikely scenario that anyone other than myself ever ventured into this apartment, I doubt they'd even recognize the girl in the photo, framed by a messy nest of short black hair and pounds of black eyeliner, clad in tight, ripped black jeans and Chucks, and draped in the oversized slate-gray band T-shirt that I had designed for my friends and I in preparation for the concert, where we'd been captured here shouting in mid-jump, forever frozen in time. I'd been having fun, but it was childish fun. It was actually kind of embarrassing in hindsight. The decision to grab it on the way out the door hadn't been a logical one.

The face reflected back at me in the bathroom mirror, with its long, pin-straight, bleach-blonde hair and tortoise-shell glasses, complemented by the white turtleneck and blue silk scarf I'd groggily pulled from the pile of clothes against the wall, was another person altogether. An adult, with all the positive and negative connotations that little word carried with it.

I drew the scarf closer to my face and inhaled deeply. A faint hint of cherry still lingered. Oh, Nate... Nate, Nate, Nate. I had come here with little more than the clothes on my back, yet in one small way, he was still here with me. I closed my eyes and held Nate's face in my mind's

eye for another few seconds, eyes closed. Even if I never saw him again, I still had the scarf.

At least I still had Al, and the guitar. And when Al was sleeping, which he always was, and my guitar-playing energy reserve ran out for the night, which it always did, I always ended up with the job search to keep me occupied.

Crunching numbers for a venture capital firm hadn't been the most interesting or rewarding job, but it had certainly paid the bills and left me with a decent enough chunk of savings. When I had realized I wouldn't be able to take the job with me—with Nate's car no longer available for carpooling and the only decent available apartment in the state as far away as it was possible to be in Rhode Island—I hadn't actually minded too much. The loss of that relatively anonymous 9-to-5 gig paled in comparison to the other things I'd recently had to let go of, for one thing. Unlike relationships, jobs could be swapped out for new ones with a minimum of emotional upheaval.

My father had been quick to point out that many people in my situation would have been forced to move back in with their folks, and that I should count my blessings that I had the remaining chunk of savings I did. I wasn't sure how the money that I'd personally worked for counted as a blessing, but either way, I was not about to move back in at 28 years old—even if I *had* been on good terms with him, which I was decidedly not.

Then again, I had been a little more confident in making that decision before my savings took that classic one-two punch of the security deposit and the first month's rent, plus the off-brand twin mattress that would be arriving tonight, plus the coffee maker and countless other little things I'd suddenly realized I'd need in order to live on my own. The rejection letters were starting to land more heavily in the pit of my stomach than they had a week ago. Next month's rent would be the scraping bottom of the barrel if I didn't have a job by then.

“Well,” I mumbled into my coffee mug as I finished the last few drops, “I think it’s about time to go...”

There was a rustle behind me as Al shot up from his bed and stood at attention.

“...outside.”

Al exploded with unbridled joy, just as he did every morning. Every day, for a brief moment, it seemed like confetti and balloons dropped from the ceiling, even if just for a quick morning pee. I had hardly finished pulling on the brown suede chelsea boots Nate had gotten me two Christmases ago when Al was excitedly dragging me down the stairs and out the back door, weaving impatiently past me as I heaved it open. Led tirelessly by this bucking bronco, we bounded out from underneath the shadow of the skybridge connecting Buildings 1 and 11, and down the brick-paved footpath into the heart of the complex.

From the road, you’d be forgiven for thinking the monstrous quarter-mile-long wall of brick formed by the three main buildings was all there was to the mill. But from here on the other side, those buildings felt like a battlement protecting us from the rest of the world as we wound our way through our own funny little walled garden. Suddenly the existence of cars and roads and the modern day seemed miles away, with only the gentle burble of the sparkling river and the whispering of the trees on the other bank as the soundtrack to our walk, the only reminders of the twenty-first century being the occasional hum of a window fan or sparkle of string lights from a nearby window.

As the owner of a dog bizarrely unfazed by the danger of passing cars and requiring constant vigilance on sidewalks, I’d been particularly pleased to discover the picturesque brick footpath winding through the curious, village-like assortment of smaller buildings between the main mill buildings and the river. It had been the high point of my first day here, a comforting

sign that I might actually have chosen a decent place to play home for the next year. And beyond that, marveling at the bizarre shapes and arrangements of the smaller buildings provided a welcome reprieve from the swirling thoughts that were inevitably crowding my head by walkie time.

The path was not so much a planned footpath with buildings on either side of it, so much as it was the only negative space in the labyrinth of brick formed by Bright Mill's smaller buildings, each conjoined or partially engulfed by one another in such a way that it was often impossible to tell where one building ended another began.

Al pulled me eagerly past the wide, squat building from which the towering two-hundred-foot brick smokestack grew, and the sun was momentarily blotted out as we passed. Then left under the strange brick archway sprouting from its other side. This archway confounded me perhaps more than anything else in the complex, as its top few feet seemed to contain a corridor just tall enough for an oompa-loompa, which after soaring over our heads and pivoting 45 degrees then morphed into one wall of the windowless facade of some long-gone building to our right, which cast a monstrous shadow across the ground in front of us.

Then, for a moment, the path came right to the shore of the sparkling Pawtuxet, where Al took the opportunity to select an ideal spot for a second round of urination, climbing up onto the flowerbed and leaning awkwardly against the gate which prevented him from falling ten feet into the river. After an anxious moment cursing him for locking me into such an awkward situation, I decided to diffuse the tension by stepping up onto the flowerbed near him and leaning over the railing to do a bit of sightseeing.

It certainly was an interesting scene. From the back of a nearby building, a large, rusted iron pipe protruded, turned downward toward the water, then terminated before it reached the

surface, looking like an elephant's trunk forever suspended in the act of reaching for a drink. Beyond that lay a series of windows on the long pointy buildings, or to be more precise, something that used to be a row of windows—while a few glass panes remained, some appeared to be vents, one had another severed pipe sticking out of it, several were bricked up entirely, and one had a bundle of electrical wires protruding from its corner and wrapping around its side where they disappeared beneath a row of hedges next to me. I felt like I was getting a peek behind the curtain at a play—this is what an old mill really looked like, at least the parts that were deemed unworthy of restoration.

I was just about to look away when I was startled to see what looked like a huge face peering back at me. A few buildings away, almost completely out of view and only visible by really craning my neck around the back of the nearest building, two tall vertical windows on the back of Building 3 were positioned squarely above a large arch set into the foundation at the water line, through which water lazily flowed in and out as the wind rippled gently across the river, although at this moment it was not an arch at all, but a gaping maw. Its expression was a little jarring at first—not shocked or angry, but something harder to read. The raised sills above the windows looked like raised eyebrows, and just barely visible somewhere in the shadows of the dark mouth were the jagged, broken teeth of whatever abandoned machinery lay behind it in the darkness. It looked like it had just witnessed something shocking but had been frozen in time before being able to draw a breath and shout about it.

It was at this point that Al reminded me that he'd finished peeing quite some ago now, and had been apologizing to passers-by about his mother's weird behavior as she leaned over the railing for the fifth minute straight. Okay Al, you're right. Sorry. Let's go.

The path wound past a little building that narrowed almost to a point as it juttied out into

the water on its curious little peninsula, before leaving the river once again and becoming a narrow sort of cobblestone road between some of the strangest buildings of all, one with projecting second and third levels propped up by a steel pole on one corner like a crutch, the stumps of three severed pipes protruding from its facade like sprouts from a potato. Their conjoined facades formed looming brick walls of Picasso-like arrangements of doors and windows and windows-that-were-once-doors and doors-that-were-once-windows in the strangest of places. Finally, as we passed underneath a series of skybridges and a huge steel beam projecting from the side of Building 3 to hold up the hollow facade of another long-lost building on the other side of the walkway, the fence of the dog park came into view.

The park was quite sizable, at least a hundred by a hundred feet, and raised up on a big cement foundation three or four feet thick in most places. I opened the gate, unleashed Al, and set him free. He shot off like a bullet, weaving in and out of the pieces of rusty old mill machinery decoratively dotted around the park.

Bzzz. My phone buzzed in my pocket just as I closed the gate behind me. I sat down on the bench and pulled it from my pocket. It was a group chat whose name I hadn't seen in nearly 11 months, but which rose from the dead every year around this time: Finance Bros Xmas Party.

The name had originally been tongue-in-cheek, but in recent years had frequently felt a little too accurate for my tastes, as if over time they'd felt some cosmic pull to fulfill the name they'd given themselves. I didn't mind their antics most of the time, but at the end of the day, Nate had chosen them, not me, so it wasn't really my place to decide. Plus, as I'd drifted further and further from my middle school gang over the years, these guys were really the only friends I had. And the annual Christmas party, as unruly as it sometimes became, usually ended up being a pretty great time.

But that had been when I was with Nate. It felt like another lifetime to me. I hadn't heard so much as a peep from any of them in the last month, and convinced myself I'd been secretly blocked, with new group chats without me probably created behind my back. But maybe this new message was proof I was just being paranoid. Maybe this was my way back out of the deep dark hole I'd found myself in. All of this filtered through my mind in a muddled mess as I finally unlocked my phone and read the texts:

Heyoooooooo it's that time again

@Tim Your house this time?

I bit my lip as I debated whether or not to reply. None of them had responded meaningfully to me in weeks. I knew exactly why, of course, but I was still hanging on to the assumption that the smoke would eventually clear and we would continue being friends. I really hoped so, anyway. I'd already lost all Nate's other friends. And my dad. If the rest of the Finance Bros slipped away, I would be truly alone.

A few times I'd typed out a lengthy novel of a message, hoping to clear the air and reconnect with the guys. But I'd never had the willpower to pull the trigger and send it. There is a certain utterly hopeless embarrassment that comes with asking if you're still a part of something that you already suspect you are not, like stepping out onto a platform you know is about to be pulled out from under you, knowing this and still choosing to do it anyway for reasons known to no one. It leaves you falling, spinning endlessly in an emotional void from which you are unsure whether you will ever return. Sometimes you just fall and fall.

The text bubbles kept flooding in. Now two more of them were coming, now three. Now we'd moved on to discussing snacks.

Against my better instincts, I began typing out my own friendly, nonchalant response:

Hell yeah! I really want to reconnect with you guys

My thumb quivered unsteadily above the Send button, so close to the screen that I was daring a stray quiver to hit the screen and send it. Perhaps that way I could tell myself the sending would be accidental, a situation I just stumbled into, rather than an embarrassing attempt to stay relevant.

Then, as if thrown through a window attached to a brick, the next message exploded onto the screen.

We're not inviting Ava are we???

My heart plummeted.

I hope not that would be fucking weird

Well if she does show up, nobody get too close to her or you could be the next one in line

Fucking witch

Then one final message:

She's still on the chat you dipshit

And then, just as suddenly as they'd started, all the texts disappeared, replaced by one line of thin, gray letters floating in a white void:

You have been removed from this group chat.

In a matter of seconds, all of the strength I'd gathered to get myself out of bed that morning had evaporated. The weight on a string in my stomach dropped again, pulling all my internal organs with it. There I was again, falling through the earth's crust, through a deep, endless void, dizzy with hopelessness, falling, falling, falling...

As if on cue, an excited snort came from Al's direction as he finished his first parade lap around the perimeter of the park, checking first this rock and then that one for pee messages,

then the bench, then shooting me a look as he passed by. *Stop moping on the bench and come join me, mom!* Oh Al, you wonderful, stupid, innocent little guy.

I took another deep breath and lifted myself off the bench. A year ago, whoever would have thought Al would be my guiding light? He was right: it was no good sitting here moping, I already did plenty of that in my apartment. What was the mantra I had given myself the day I moved in?

This is just temporary. I'll be out soon.

That's right. Everything's not falling apart. It's just different now. Everything would fall back into place soon, I just needed to keep my head above water in the meantime. I could take it day by day. As long as I could still perform a good reset during moments like these, I was golden.

I purposefully shoved my phone back into my pocket, took a deep breath of fresh December air, lifted my chin as I'd always been told to do, and looked out across the dog park and the jagged and mismatched outlines of the mill complex standing tall behind it.

I didn't exactly have the time or energy to devote to diving into the history of a cotton mill, despite all the hubbub that was apparently being made about that little history exhibition. I suppose I had no real problem with it—I did explore an abandoned building or two back in the day—but trying to sell me on the excitement of an old mill at this moment in my life felt a little like promoting a new album to someone in the middle of a funeral. I'd been excited enough just to have a place to put a mattress that wasn't my dad's house.

But it did seem strangely handsome from this angle. It was an eclectic bunch, buildings of varying shapes, sizes, and materials jumbled together like an impossible puzzle, each with tall, strong, time-weathered walls standing proudly against the modern urban development that had

begun to reclaim the rest of the town. From deep within the belly of it all, the massive red brick smokestack reached proudly into the sky, white letters down the side proudly proclaiming “Bright Mill” to everyone in town, topped by a periodically blinking red light. I suppose there was something reassuring about the fact that these buildings had been standing for who knows how many years and were still living their best life, despite their obvious flaws and scars. If I was destined to be around for even a fraction of that long, I could only hope to have the same kind of resilience. They’d clearly been through a lot, but they’d survived. Why shouldn’t I?

All in all, this really wouldn’t be such a bad place in which to live out this weird in-between year while I got all my shit together.

This is just temporary. I’ll be out soon.

“Let’s come see what’s over here, Al!” I whispered excitedly as I approached him, guiding him over to one of the rusty machines. Coils of iron cables were rusted solid around a huge flywheel attached to some kind of motor. Al sniffed it briefly, then turned away to continue his search for smells elsewhere. My bad, Al. You and I are interested by different things.

Suddenly, Al made a mad dash over to one particular spot, just about precisely in the center of the dog park, with his nose working furiously against the ground. It was probably fresh pee or poop, knowing Al, but on the off chance it was some kind of discarded human food he shouldn’t be eating, I followed him over. As I approached, I didn’t see anything. No droppings, not even the damp spot of a pee puddle. What the hell was it? Oh well. My fault for having the inferior nose, I guess.

An inordinate amount of time went by with his nose still glued to the ground. “C’mon Al,” I said in my most motherly I’m-being-nice-but-listen-to-me-now voice and pulled gently on

the leash. “Mama’s getting cold.”

He simply would not stop sniffing the spot, as though his nose was rooted to the ground. Round and round that one little square of ground he went, his nose wiggling ever more intently with every second that went by.

“C’mon Al,” I repeated, a little more firmly. “Time to go home.”

This time, not only did he not listen, he looked back and forth between me and the turf and let out an exasperated little cry, as if to say, “Can’t you see this?!”

I wandered over to the machine he was currently interrogating. Unlike the other machines in the park, which were made up of more delicate bits and pieces which were probably only here in one piece because they’d rusted together over time, this one was one big monolithic rectangle with nothing that could be identified as moving parts. Then, in one huge, weird wave of nostalgia, I recognized it from my long lonely nights watching viral YouTube videos and memes when I should have been studying for my high school science finals. It was a hydraulic press, the kind they’d stick a camera in front of and squeeze the shit out of an action figure or a lava lamp, just to see what would happen. Seeing a rusty old one here, in its actual natural environment, was almost jarring.

As I got closer, I realized the source of Al’s intense scrutiny must have been the strange mess dribbling down its side. In the darkness I couldn’t quite tell whether it was some kind of food spilled or thrown there by some careless resident, or whether it was maybe the rather sickly product of another dog, but the smear of dark mush was capturing Al’s attention like never before. I traced it downward with my eyes, down behind the back of the machine, until something behind it came into focus, almost entirely in shadow but outlined by the moonlight. Al and I scared each other by jumping back almost exactly the same time.

There, lying on the ground, was a human arm. A small human arm, small enough to be a child's, with what looked like entrails of flesh and gristle leading up to the meeting point of the two massive jaws of the press where.

I clamped short a strangled little scream as soon as I humanly could, and whipped around hastily to see if anyone was nearby. I would like to believe that it was so I could find someone to call over and have more than one eyewitness, but it was actually just to make sure nobody had heard me scream. And then, elderly millennial that I am, it was only then that I remembered I had a phone in my pocket I could use to illuminate and photograph the sight in front of me.

As my eyes adjusted to the blinding burst of flashlight in the dark park, I realized with a mix of relief and embarrassment that the object on the ground was not in fact a human arm, but the gnarled, scraggly limb of a tree, probably thrown during a recent storm from the nearby cluster of trees by the river. A particularly ugly rust stain running down to the ground from between the jaws of the press was not, in fact, blood and entrails. Christ, it was my first day and I was already starting to lose it. Get it together, man.

The only thing that lifted Al out of his misery was the sound of a basement door on the back of Building 3, creaking slowly open and then hanging slightly ajar. In the light of the emerging sun, I couldn't quite make out what was inside the dark room, apart from some vague movement coming from within, but I was at least as curious as he was. I felt a little flash of nostalgia back to a younger me, who would never turn away from such a thing when curiosity called.

But I wasn't younger me. I was older me. Older, more tired, and more desperate for a job so I could put some non-instant food on my table. Or at least get a table.

We finally reached the back door of Building 1, and Al and I hauled ourselves back up the stairs and down the long second-floor corridor until we reached Apartment 212. I closed the door, plopped down on my bed, and opened my laptop, determined to put in a few good hours of job searching.

After a few moments, sensing that something was missing, I walked to the fridge and cracked open a Stella Artois, then returned to my laptop to hook myself up to the job search machine once again. It's five o'clock somewhere, right? At least I'm not drinking on the job. I should be so lucky.

Before putting on the job-search harness, I allowed myself a little digital appetizer. I scanned my browser's clusterfuck of open tabs and located one that triggered a tiny pop of serotonin: my old blog site.

There was a time when having my own blog felt like a pedestal rising up from underneath me, presenting me with glorious fanfare to the internet as someone graduating from the world of the Nobodies into the world of the Somebodies. It felt like I'd just been given a car and been pointed down a vast highway with no speed limit. No, it felt like being given my own planet in a newly discovered solar system.

When did that all change? Now there was no great fanfare in my head, just emergence into a vast larger world of Nobodies. It was less like getting my own planet and more like being assigned my own dot in a vast barcode matrix. No matter what I did with this dot, it would always be too small to be seen.

But just as with everything else in life—my music, my relationships—I knew the only way to move forward while staying sane was by allowing myself this conceit, suspending my disbelief, humoring myself by blundering onwards in the utterly unhinged hope that one day it

might mean something. It was like granting a dying child's wish: it would ultimately be expending a huge amount of time and energy in order to please a small part of me that would likely be dead by morning. But just like granting a dying child's wish, you do it anyway.

You know you don't have anything to say anymore, said the silently blinking cursor in the "New post" box on top of my Following feed. *You're embarrassing yourself by being here. Go get a job.*

With a sigh I closed the tab, and the job search in the neighboring tab eagerly leapt into its place. Okay... yoke on, chains tightened. The sound of a whip cracking echoed through my head. Here we go.

An hour passed by that felt like a day. Then another, then another and another. The whip cracked and I searched onwards. I typed what I had to type, pressed the buttons I had to press, adjusted my resumé time and time again in the choreographed dance of edits and copies and pastes of different segments I'd developed in the hopes of wooing each potential employer I found, until I began to feel more like some kind of organic machine than a person. I could feel the edges of my brain blackening and rotting off, like the wilted edges of so much lettuce.

God, I wanted to stop searching. That was the only thing in the world I wanted right now. Just to stop for one moment, to rest for a second while my fate waited patiently for me on the other side of the screen. But I couldn't stop pulling. Not until I got to the finish line.

* * *

I was reawoken by a flash of lightning and a crackle of thunder outside the towering window next to my bed, momentarily illuminating the blackened room and searing the silhouettes of distant skeletal tree branches into my retinas. The morning's melancholy gray skies

had not resolved whatever they had been melancholy about, and had instead devolved into a pitch-black and furiously stormy evening.

I suppose a floor lamp would have to be another entry on that nonexistent mental list of things I'd eventually have to buy for this apartment, if I was ever able to admit to myself that it was really my home now. While the towering ten-foot windows flooded the room in some much-needed Vitamin D during the day, there was something eerie about the way the lack of any built-in lighting brought a gradual descent into nightfall, the bare white walls around me gradually getting darker, colder, bluer, until nightfall left the harsh white glow of my laptop screen as the only light in the room. No wonder I'd dozed off.

Look how out-of-sync you are with your circadian rhythm, the screen whispered to me, although the whisper felt more like a shout in the center of the silent, ink-black room. *Look how out-of-place you are in the real world.*

As sheets of rain spattered harder and harder against my bedroom window, my heart sank as I realized it was past time for Al's evening walk. The last thing I felt like doing right now was going outside in this downpour.

I took a deep breath, staring absently at the blank wall, and murmured to nobody, "Do you wanna..."

Out of the corner of my eye, Al's formerly lifeless body shot up like a firework, his gleaming blue eyes suddenly wide open, his body quivering with anticipation.

"...go outside?" I finished.

Al's whip-like tail slashed around wildly as he leapt up, whipping the edge of my chair with a *clang* and shaking his entire torso from side to side as he hopped around excitedly. It never failed to amaze me how excited he got about doing the same simple thing multiple times

every single day. I felt jealous, honestly. Was it just because he didn't have the capacity to put together that the weather outside the window was the same weather that would shortly be enveloping him? Perhaps. But I was still jealous of his excitement.

"Better get your raincoat out, buddy," I murmured, frowning at another lightning flash outside the window. I prayed that Al would want to keep the walk short—as long as he didn't want to do a full loop through the complex, our short trot to the nearest patch of mulch would be mercifully sheltered by the second floor connector of Building 11, which joined our building right above our back door. I fished the bright orange whippet-shaped raincoat from the messy pile of dog stuff next to the messy pile of human stuff and wrangled it onto Al's manically writhing body.

Our first steps outside may have been sheltered from the downpour by the connector to Building 11, but any residual warmth was soon blasted away by a gust of frigid winter air that barreled under the connecting bridge like a wind tunnel, rife with the heavy scent of the rain around us. With the sunlight extinguished even earlier than usual for a December evening, the mystical sheen of the two blue lightbulbs under the skybridge sparkled in the dancing droplets and scattered across the puddles on the ground like a hall of mirrors in the blackness, the reflections disrupted and shattered like glass as we splashed across the wet pavement. It seemed like it should have been a beautiful effect, but that switch wasn't being triggered in my brain at this moment.

I grimaced as we left the shelter of the Building 11 connector and passed into the wall of rain, silently sending Al telepathic *hurry up hurry up hurry up* messages. As Al began one of his interminably long urinations, during which he met my gaze several times with an expression that said *Listen, I'm not happy about this either*, it finally hit me why the blue lights affected me the

way they did. A memory surfaced, a memory that seemed impossibly distant but in actuality was only a few years old. The unceasing cackling of four intoxicated boys in a darkened basement—all certainly over 18 by this point, but “boys” was still the word that came to mind—silhouetted against the harsh blue light of an old curved-front television with “No Input Detected” displayed in white block letters in the corner of the screen, the light amplified several times over as it illuminated the thick clouds of smoke pervading the room, the repeated *thwack* of darts being thrown at the wood-paneled wall, one boy cackling about how mad his old man was going to be but continuing to do it all the same, suddenly feeling like an animal in a cage as one of them occasionally came over to where I’d sunken many miles into the old couch in the corner and offered me another puff, and I tried to slow my heartbeat and clear my mind enough to piece together the words necessary to communicate that I’d already had far too much, thank you. The input from all five senses had coalesced into some frightening and yet-to-be-discovered sixth sense which still seemed to wash over me from time to time, a combination of confusion, colored light, dizziness, humiliation, and despair.

As the sound of pee against mulch finally fizzled out into silence, Al yanked me excitedly back along the path into the complex, squinting into the rain. I felt guilty for having hoped I could coax him to cut this short.

As we passed under the archway leading to Building 9 we got two more blissful seconds of reprieve from the rain. Around the corner stood the empty brick facade. Through the bars of the gate I noticed the cracked-open basement door we’d noticed earlier was still hanging slightly ajar, bathing the gravel around it in hazy golden light spilling from inside. The rain seemed to momentarily get quieter as I focused on the wavering light, whose strange, gentle pulsing still hinted at some hypnotic, repetitive movement within.

I could tell Al was a little curious too. Like me, it would take a lot to interrupt his mission of returning to dry warmth, but his attention was set keenly on the door as well, his eyes now sparkling orbs reflecting the golden light like sparks dancing deep within his shadowed face.

Against my better instincts, I stepped gingerly up to the gate and lifted the latch open, Al following in stride. The crunch of my footsteps and the gentle pitter-patter of his paws synchronized as we made our way gingerly across the gravel towards the back of Building 2. By the time I got close enough to touch it, I felt almost transported out of my body.

A machine of some kind was spinning and dancing inside, skeletal arms reaching for the sky then falling back down, metal legs pumping furiously and rhythmically, huge rotating leather belts whirring as they soared from its depths up towards the ceiling and out of sight, where they may well have continued to spin up into the heavens. Every inch of visible space was writhing in a kind of constant hypnotizing motion, backlit only by a dim golden glow and obscured by the silhouettes of tall, blurry figures huddled around it and making a variety of repetitive, automatic motions themselves. Paralyzed by curiosity, I was about to take a step closer when my arm was almost yanked out of its socket.

Al had darted away from the door with more violence than I'd ever seen him move with before, toppling me over into the cold, dirty gravel, my free hand searing in pain as it caught the weight of my body and ground to a halt.

"Al!" I choked out. "What on—"

From my pained position on the ground, I looked up at Al's face. With eyeballs bulging madly from his skull and lips retracted to show his canines, he was still straining feverishly towards the stairwell entrance, his spindly legs and body shivering with something I recognized more as fear than cold.

“Al, what are you...” I trailed off, my voice quieter and more fearful now as I hauled myself up off the ground, fumbling with my key fob as I held it against the keypad.

As soon as the door opened, Al dragged me quickly up the first set of stairs before the door even had a chance to swing closed behind us, then finally slowed as we reached the second floor.

As we stepped back into Apartment 212 and I gingerly closed the door behind us, I let out a long, shaky breath, and locked eyes with Al. He no longer looked actively terrified, but rather exhausted and hurt, as if I’d done him wrong in some way. “What is it, buddy?” I whispered to him, knowing there was no way I could know the answer. After another few moments of searching in the depths of Al’s eyes, I wandered over to the little alcove off the side of my apartment where the guitar sat propped against the wall, ducking slightly to avoid hitting my head on the top of the entryway, which I’d already done several times, then standing back up to full height once I was fully inside it. I couldn’t for the life of me imagine what purpose this odd little space must have served, but it must have been an addition—above the entrance, the outline of what was once an exterior window was still plainly visible.

I sat down gingerly on the lone black folding chair next to the guitar. Hopefully, this would be one thing that could stop me from obsessing over the bizarre incident that had just happened. Back to center, Ava. Back to center.

It’s only temporary. You’ll be out soon.

I grasped the neck gingerly and began picking out one of the earliest songs I remember learning on the guitar: Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*. The notes and chords echoed strangely around the empty room, augmented every so often by a rumble of thunder from outside, sometimes underscoring a powerful chord with an apropos thunderclap, sometimes interjecting

unexpectedly in the middle of a melancholy passage. Somewhere along the line, the melody fizzled out as my chronically inadequate memory lost its grip on the tune.

Then it was just me and the storm.

I turned around to look at Al. Despite the thunder, he had crashed as soon as his head hit the bed and hadn't moved a muscle since.

I don't remember falling asleep, but it must have been somewhere around midnight.

Artifact: Blog post

Let me tell you about Nate

by avaday, June 3, 2021

Nate is my rock.

I know that's cliché. Believe me, as a girl who once thought herself an aspiring writer, I'm well aware that's as cliché as it gets.

And yet, I like the phrase. When my ship is being thrashed by the tide, he's always there to anchor to. Whenever my feet are exhausted from days of trying to stay steady on an undulating surface, there he is, a solid and unmoving surface to step onto at the end of the voyage.

Even his face, if you'll allow me the embarrassment, looks carved from stone. Eyes like confident, determined pilots looking from the B-29 Superfortress windscreens of his steel gray eyes, teeth designed to rip meat from tigers, broad shoulders designed to lift preying animals from my struggling body, beat them to submission, and carry me to safety. That masculine ideal, a sheer wall of man. Many a one-time friend had at one time mentioned how hot he is and how jealous they were. But I suppose that's why we're no longer friends: they had their faces glued to the window and eventually realized they'd never be able to afford the merch. Or rather, that it had already been taken: by me. Sorry girls—some girls just have all the luck.

[Broken image file. Caption: Cinematic photograph of a Boeing B-29 Superfortress flying through the clouds]

Artifact: Welcome Email

Email from brightmillleasing@gmail.com to avaday25@gmail.com - December 21, 2022

Hi Ava - Welcome to Bright Mill, the most beautiful renovated mill apartments in the northeast!

Please find attached a map of the complex. Your apartment will be 212 which is on the second floor of Building 1, that's the big one out front. Mailroom is the bottom floor of Building 21, which is attached to Buildings 1 and 2 - but you will have to enter from the first floor, the second floor isn't connected to the first. Just a heads up, you can enter Building 2 through Building 21 or through the skybridge, but you won't be able to get back in that way with your key—just a word of advice to plan your routes when it's cold or stormy outside. Haha New England weather!!!!!!!

Please note that the skybridge from your building to Building 13 (the one they're currently removing the second and fourth floors from) is off limits right now or maybe forever unless those wretched contractors ever finish that building!!!! If you ever need anything, I work at the office in Building 11 - the one connected to yours at the second floor but that connector's not accessible either - exit under the connector and use the outside entrance - Brightville Brewery is also in that building, on the far side with that bit that hangs over the river - and if you need me after hours I live in Building 9, the one with the smokestack—please keep in mind that the tunnel in the archway between Buildings 21 and 9 is not accessible either (belongs to residents of 8A) so please use the outside entrance if you ever want to visit. DO NOT use the red door as that leads into the old furnace pit and there is no handle on the inside!!! There is a cool expo on the history of the mill going on in Building 19 right now (that's the little one in the parking lot)

Can't wait to meet you and Pal!

Best,

Debra Rockwell

Manager, Bright Mill Apartments

Chairwoman of the Bright Mill Foundation, a 501(c)3 Nonprofit

The History Exhibit

I tried to relish the brief moment of childlike wonder I still felt in the first few seconds of consciousness, as a few scattered shards of sunlight made their way through the glowing gray clouds outside my bedroom window, gently awakening me as they warmed my eyelids. For a second, it was just me and the sun, and everything made sense. Then the footprint on the ceiling came back into focus, and as usual, reality began to sink back in.

I reached down and grabbed my stale-coffee-laced mug of water, awakening Al on cue.

“Morning Al,” I gurgled groggily through a night’s worth of post-nasal drip, cringing at the sound of my voice. I raised the mug to my lips and took a generous swig to finish off the remaining water I hadn’t consumed during the night. Once it was empty, I reached down and placed it in the coffee machine, dropped a pod in, and pressed start.

Trying to relish the comfort of my makeshift morning routine, I reached over to the other side of my bed and heaved my laptop up onto my lap.

Click. Debra’s rambling welcome email graced the screen in all its glory. It was a sad little ritual, I was all too aware of that as my eyes passed over the mess of letters and numbers before me. But what other rituals did I have? Waking up to a kiss from Nate? Long gone. Breakfast? Not worth it anymore, especially with no income. Saying good morning in the group chat? Clearly not. Ritualistically trying in vain to replicate the last burst of happiness I’d felt? That would have to do. It was better than nothing.

Nothing... that’s the thing that really scared me. When this ritual ran its course, and I had nothing left, then I’d really be shit out of luck.

There is a cool expo on the history of the mill going on in Building 19 right now (that’s

the little one in the parking lot) Can't wait to meet you and Pal!

I squinted out the window, trying and failing to locate Building 19 among the sea of weird little buildings. Come to think of it, I hadn't yet checked out that display, despite Debra's most impassioned pleas. That was something I had planned on skipping, especially considering how freshly bitter, upset, and nonfunctional I'd been upon my arrival. Strangely, checking out that exhibit now seemed like a very attractive proposition, which had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I couldn't bear another second of the one task I'd saddled myself with. I already knew exactly what I would find if I clicked on the tabs next to this one, anyway—a hundred jobs completely unrelated to mine, a hundred I was wildly underqualified for, and ten jobs I was a perfect fit for but would get rejected from, all of them soul-crushing in their own unique way.

No, I thought as I took my first sip from the steaming mug of coffee, that little history display might actually be a fun and refreshing way to start this new week. After all, I'd put in a solid few weeks of job searching now, I'd done quite well. And now, I'd read this welcome email enough times that I deserved to know what it was all about.

I walked into the bathroom and flipped on the light to begin my morning routine, which had been pared down to the absolute basics. I didn't have any reason to leave the apartment, apart from walking Al, and even then I wasn't particularly concerned with how I looked to other people in the complex. I didn't have the energy to go friend-hunting or people-pleasing in a place that was only supposed to be my home for this weird little in-between year while I got my shit together and rebooted my life. So at least for now, I was perfectly content with brushing my teeth, running a brush through my hair, and walking out the door with little to no makeup depending on how awful my face looked that day.

But as I caught my reflection in the mirror, I thought something looked off—more “off” than just the usual sallow skin and under-eye bags I was beginning to get accustomed to. I leaned in closer to make sure it wasn’t a trick of the light. There was some kind of yellow discoloration around my right eye. It wasn’t terrible, but it was still hard to look away from. It almost looked like the mostly-healed shadow of a black eye. But this discoloration was definitely new, it hadn’t been there yesterday or the day before. Fortunately, with a little reinvigoration of my rusty skills with foundation and concealer, I was able to render it invisible. That was odd... I’d definitely have to keep an eye on that. By the time I brushed my teeth, ran a brush through my hair, and flipped the bathroom light off, I’d forgotten about it.

Time to get excited about a mill! I told myself. In my head, I grabbed myself by the arms and shook myself excitedly, like an overzealous grandmother greeting a six-year-old on her birthday. *Big buildings! Steam power! Old white guys! Let’s goooo!*

I walked over to the door and pulled on my trusty black peacoat, at which point the formerly motionless Al sprang into action, tail whipping through the air and the scent of a thousand putrid but lovable dog breaths filling the room.

I leashed him up, slipping the leash over my right arm so I’d still have a hand free while the other held my coffee, and opened the door, catching a strong whiff of something spicy that must have been cooking in a neighboring unit.

On the rare occasions in which I’d left the building so far—almost exclusively for Al’s walkies—I would usually turn right towards the rear stairwell and exit through the seldom-used, nondescript back door so Al and I could most quickly reach the lovely little oasis that was the footpath through the back buildings. But today, paying a visit to Building 19 in the parking lot would mean actually making use of the building’s grand front entrance for once, just like the

majority of normal non-shut-ins who were actually employed and had cars parked out front.

It felt pretty sad to gain some excitement simply by using a different door than usual, but here I was.

I turned left and walked purposefully down the hallway, passing underneath half of an old brick archway that appeared to continue through the corridor wall into a neighboring apartment. My eyes aimlessly scanned the passing brickwork as we made our way down the central stairwell. *All right, what's your story then?* I asked the walls. Maybe I could get into this whole mill thing. I could certainly use something to focus on that wasn't a glowing screen full of job rejection emails. It would be good for me. It would be healthy.

Just like choking down broccoli or brussels sprouts, I retorted with an eye roll.

Shut up, I answered. *I will be interested in this! I will make it happen!*

I exited the stairwell onto the first floor and walked through the grand front foyer that had clearly at one time been the bell tower, passing the big staircase on my right, and pushed open the heavy front door with a grunt. The crisp December air immediately whipped my hair into a frenzy as we stepped outside, and I clenched my free fist in my coat pocket as it slammed shut behind me. Al leapt excitedly and gave me a wacky smile as a tornado of dry, gray leaves whipped around us, the last remnants of an autumn that had so recently seemed vibrant and beautiful. I nuzzled into my scarf, wishing it were something bulkier than silk, and made my way across the parking lot to the funny little building with the funny little white square with the funny little red number 19 in it.

Within the eclectic family of Bright Mill buildings, this one was the runt of the litter. It was a compact little single-story building with funky little ornamental supports under the roof overhang. Too small and fancy for mill machinery, probably originally some kind of front office

or gatehouse.

Good! I exclaimed. *See, you're getting good at this already!*

Don't push it, I warned.

I walked up the three old cement steps leading up to the ancient-looking dark green door on the side, grasped the handle, and pulled.

I lost my balance as the painted-shut door remained firmly in place, and stumbled backward down the steps, narrowly avoiding a complete wipeout on the pavement. A quick look around confirmed that at least one amused onlooker had been watching. Lovely.

With another look around, my eyes fell upon the extremely obvious newer white door on the side. I grasped the handle—my feet firmly squared on the ground just in case—and pulled.

I'm not quite sure what I expected, but at first glance, the history display was underwhelming to say the least. I felt for a moment as though I'd walked into a storage room where someone had left their old science fair poster boards. Informational panels protruded from each of the three walls in front of me, making the building feel even smaller and more claustrophobic than it already was. Above each panel, blurry reproductions of old engravings and grainy black-and-white photos appeared to show the evolution of a complex that hadn't so much been built as it had grown very gradually from a speck into a behemoth over the course of a century.

Skimming through the titles at the top of each panel—and cringing internally at the choice of bright red Comic Sans—the central bragging points seemed to be the mill's heritage as a producer of uniforms during the civil war, and shortly afterward as the birthplace of the Fruit of the Loom brand. If I was being honest, neither of those factoids particularly rocked me to my core. But *I would* be interested. *I would* make it happen. I imagined grabbing myself by the back

of the head and shoving my nose into the informational panels. *Look!* I yelled at myself. *You will be interested in this! It is good for you!*

The first panel told the story of a young man named Robert Bright, who in 1846 was working as a clerk in the company store of a small, decrepit waterwheel-powered mill on the banks of the Pawtuxet when its owner was elected to the Senate and began looking for someone to lease the mill in the meantime. The entrepreneuring young man jumped at the opportunity, and three years later he and his brother decided to purchase the mill outright and start selling fabric to local merchants. After many years of modest success and diligent saving, the Bright Brothers would tear down the old mill in 1863 and replace it with an enormous new beast powered by the latest in steam engine technology—a building immediately recognizable even from the grainy photo as Building 1. Along with the new mill was born a new clothing brand called Fruit of the Loom, and the Brights rapidly snowballed into a national superpower of clothing production. The local dominance of the new mill was such that the growing village that had formed around it was christened Brightville.

From that point forward, the photographs showed a series of expansions and additions to the mill so rapid and frenzied they could only have been the product of an obsessive mind. For the next century, no two photographs existed of the complex looking quite the same. In total, 33 more buildings of assorted sizes and shapes appeared, many constructed at odd angles to fit on the increasingly cramped property along the riverfront, each one over the years sprouting additional floors and extensions in all directions, some built on the still-visible ruins of previous buildings, some sharing a wall with one building and partially engulfing another, some with enclosed tunnels between them that later evolved into intricate archways or entire miniature buildings of their own, with Dr. Seuss-like angles, overhangs, and ledges, and with towering

smokestacks appearing first here, then there, then somewhere else as ever larger and more modern power plants were constructed to power the rapidly growing complex. Almost every building changed noticeably from photo to photo, with ornate facades appearing and disappearing and new doors, windows, and loading bays appearing like splotchy acne on the faces of formerly handsome buildings, their presence sometimes cutting older windows or archways in half and leaving strangely fractured and mismatched designs in their wake.

Looking at the aerial photograph at the end of the panel, it looked to me like someone had dropped a Lego building set on the floor and left most of the buildings exactly as they were, some sideways, some diagonal, some broken.

The tremendous variety of buildings was at least partially explained by the next panel—“Vertical Integration”—which described how the mill attempted to include every conceivable aspect of production from cotton seed to finished clothing in one place, eliminating reliance on third-party suppliers and achieving complete self-sufficiency. Trainloads of raw, freshly harvested cotton plants from the nearby farms they owned would be delivered to one side of the complex, and out the other side would emerge a variety of completely finished, ready-to-wear clothing, some of which was even sold in their own Company Store, which became Brightville’s go-to marketplace for the next century. The panel boasted about the eclectic and colorful community this created, from farmers to machinists and engineers to seamsters and weavers to designers and artists, all working in the same complex toward the same goal.

The last panel—“Benevolent Management”—proudly described how the Bright Brothers became widely-loved pillars of the community thanks to their philosophy that taking care of and giving back to the workforce was both a moral responsibility and a financial boon—they believed that happier and healthier workers made better products. A series of photos showed the

construction of Brightville's school, church, hospital, company store, and worker housing by the Brights on their own dime, ending with a photo of the elderly Brights dancing at the wedding of a young couple who met at the mill.

I stepped back and surveyed the three panels. *Look*, I called to the version of myself that had grabbed the back of my head and pressed it into the panels, *I read all the information. I was mildly interested. Aren't you proud? Did I do good?*

But as much as I looked around my head for that other me, she was nowhere to be found. It was just me, sitting alone in my head. And now I had one more drawer of mostly useless information to file away into the endless wall of file cabinets in my head.

I was just about to turn away and bring Al back to the apartment for another miserable few hours of job searching, when I found myself strangely drawn to a detail in one of the photographs on the wall. Between the graininess of the original photograph and the piss-poor quality of whatever printer Debra had commandeered to create this monstrosity, it was almost impossible to tell for sure, but what could be seen of the face looked jagged and gnarled, and its single outstretched arm looked strangely haunting. What was this guy's story? I was just leaning closer, my face nearly as close to the panel as the other Ava had wanted it to be, when—

"Hi Ava!" came a bubbly voice from behind me. I whipped around to see a tall middle-aged woman with frizzy hair and a volume of caked-on makeup that veered dangerously close to clown territory. Suddenly the bright red Comic Sans font made sense.

"Debra!" I exclaimed, trying not to stare at her grease-painted eyebrows and obscenely blue eyeshadow, "I recognize you from your photo in the email!"

"Oh, this must be Pal!" she said, leaning down to rub Al's head.

"It's Al, actually," I said.

“Al?” she said, performing the same subtle brow-furrowing as most people did when they first heard the name.

“It was originally short for Alabaster. Because of his color. Then that turned into Alabastard, because he *wouldn’t settle down at night*,” I crooned, sliding into my dog voice as I gave him a rough little head scratch.

I could see from her frozen smile and brief look around that she hadn’t found it funny. What, is someone nearby going to overhear the word “Alabastard” and decide to break their lease in protest? Come on, lady. That was the only funny memory that I’d surfaced in months. Throw me a laugh.

“Okay, well,” she chuckled awkwardly, still maintaining the clown smile, “I was just checking in here, I’ll be back in the main office if you need me. Have a good day!”

Just then, a passing question that had formed earlier in the day popped back into my brain.

“Hey Debra,” I piped up, gesturing towards the photographs behind me, “do you happen to know the purpose of any of the skybridges connecting each building? I noticed they’re all different, like I noticed a lot of them go diagonally from one level down to another.” From what I’d picked up in a cathartic bout of internet research between job applications, I was picturing carts full of fabric leaving the looms on the top floor of one building and being rolled down to a lower floor of the next building for storage. Maybe she would know where the different machines had been located.

Debra swelled with pride, clearly seeing that her moment had come to finally become a sage and a mentor to an inquisitive resident. “I believe the bridges were so that mill workers could get from one building to another.”

I was struck dumb for a second by the stupidity of the response. Really? And were the doors designed to allow workers to enter, and the floors designed for workers to walk on?

“Oh,” I finally choked out. “Thanks!”

“No problem! There’s some more interesting information in the display here,” she said brightly, gesturing to the informational placards I had just read.

“Thanks,” I said again, with a little less vigor. I don’t know why I thought she’d know any more about the history of the mill than what was on the printed placards in front of her. She was clearly just hired to move units. Maybe it was just to cover up a little embarrassment at my nerdy question, but I almost felt personally wronged by her lack of interest. Why am *I* more curious about the mill than you?

I guess that made me the weird one. Joke’s on me.

Nevertheless, I left Building 19 feeling strangely energized by a subject that I had only ventured to explore on a whim. Even though I left with more questions than I went in with, they were questions that nagged at me in an exciting way. Even Al seemed to have an extra pep in his step—I think he could tell I was relieved to have found something new to wrench my mind out of its moping, self-pitying, job-hunting rut. He was always more in tune with emotions than I gave him credit for.

As I opened the front door of Building 1 and entered the base of the bell tower which now served as the little entrance foyer, I finally turned my attention to the staircase, wondering how I hadn’t been more curious about it before. The grand staircase with its ornately carved wooden banister opened up right next to the front door, wound its way up the tower wall, and ended abruptly at the newly installed ceiling, above which was now some lucky resident’s bell tower bedroom. And yet, I noticed with an inward laugh, the renovation had seen these stairs

outfitted with modern grippy rubber edges all the way to the ceiling, despite the inescapable fact that they would never be used. Despite the staircase's inherent oddity, I realized its position in the foyer meant it was relegated to never be more than a passing sight, only ever seen by people passing briskly through on their way to or from something.

The architectural quirks and patchwork walls of the building now sprang to life as I passed them, no longer resigned to subconscious footnotes in my mind as I began piecing together clues from the old photographs that still lingered in my mind. This huge severed pipe poking out of the wall here must be the same one whose other severed end sticks out into the mailroom... I wonder what it was for?... that big cement rectangle had clearly been an exterior window before Building 21 was built on the other side of the wall... that strange arc design set into the brickwork at ankle level halfway up the stairs must have been the top of a doorway that led outside before this new stairwell blocked it off. The stairwell seemed to melt away from my peripheral vision as the Bright Mill of the 1860s flickered into focus in my mind.

I returned home, opened my laptop, and reopened the Google Docs tab I'd closed a few nights before. I'd started a list of all the buildings in the complex, partially to help me remember where important things were, and partially just to keep myself from going insane.

Building 1 - apartments - me!

Buildings 2-3 - more apartments

Buildings 4-8 - ???

Building 9 - was engine room?? now apartments - debra home

Building 11 - main office & other ??? - debra work - behind bldg 1

Building 13 - east of 1 - under construction - every other floor removed?

Buildings 19 & 20 - standalone offices - history display in 19

Building 20 - ???

Building 21 - connects 1 and 2 - mailroom 1st floor - 1st floor not connected to 2nd - 1 story on parking lot side, 3 stories on river side

Buildings 26 & 30 - ???

Buildings 10, 12, 14-18, 22-30 - dont exist???

Thinking back to the exhibit, I edited Building 3 to read *was bleachery - now apartments* and hit enter.

Why was it even important to me to know what these buildings were used for? Would I care a few days from now when I frantically pulled up this document to remember where the mailroom was? I didn't know. I guess I was just letting myself have some fun.

Then of course, on cue, came the unmistakable voice of Adult Ava. I'd had my fun, and now I had to suck it up and get back to work. I had to get back to job searching. The starkness of the empty studio apartment around me only accentuated that need.

With a sigh, I dragged the mouse up to the top of the screen as if it weighed a million pounds and changed tabs. And once again, I was greeted with the same cursed job feed that I was greeted with every day. I halfheartedly clicked the refresh button, hoping beyond hope that this little action would have a different outcome than it had the past few hundred times I'd done it.

Nope, not that one. Nope, not that one either. That one wasn't even remotely relevant. Stupid site. Nope, that one requires a degree that I very clearly do not have. Nope. Nope. Okay, this one looks promising. *Click*. Name, age, address, degree. *Click*. Upload cover letter. *Click*. References? Who did I even know? I feel like I used to know at least *some* people. Previous

employer, I guess. God, what was that woman's name? It had barely even been a few weeks since I'd left and I'd already flushed out almost every piece of information about that profoundly forgettable place. Ugh. I'd look it up later.

Time and time again, as if being drawn upwards by some kind of gravity, my gaze slid away from the screen and up to the window in front of me. The tiny pinprick sparkles from Christmas lights twinkling from somewhere inside Building 9, the constant unwavering motion of the roaring green river visible just behind it, the gentle swirling of the melancholy gray skies through which a struggling white light seemed eternally to be just breaking through only to be swallowed up again by another gray rolling cloud, all of it seemed to have a magnetic pull on my gaze as I tried tirelessly to glue my eyes to the screen.

Just temporarily—temporarily, mind you—I opened a new tab to the right of Indeed, and ran a few Google searches for “bright mill history”.

Almost immediately, I seemed to have stumbled upon an endless river of articles, both new and old, providing a stream of fascinating and peculiar information about the mill that up until very recently had been nothing but a desperately thankful new place to put my dog and my guitar.

With a little bit of flexing my online sleuthing skills, I had been delighted to stumble across a grainy but legible photocopy of the Mill's original National Register of Historic Places entry form circa 1972. While much of it focused on the mill's importance to both the textile industry and the town that formed around it, it also had a few interesting things to say about the buildings themselves. While most of the academic terms went over my head, I felt validated by the description of the complex's peculiar mish-mash of architectural styles, something I hadn't had the words to describe on my own, as the construction of new buildings switched randomly

from red-brick brutalism to ornate Romanesque arches design to stucco scored to resemble ashlar and decorated with peculiar brick details, which the article called “a naive but appealing attempt at formal architectural adornment.” Was that... architectural shade? I grinned and saved the PDF to my desktop for future reference.

It wasn't until I got to the attached photographs that a more eerie mood began to descend. I figured the mill hadn't been in fantastic shape during this era, the silent decades between its closure as a mill and its renovation as apartments, but I hadn't realized quite how ugly it had become in between. Dark, grainy black-and-white photographs accentuated the decay and decrepitude outlined in the report, jagged shadows and boarded-up windows lending it a very haunted-house look. Buildings that I'd walked past hours ago were suddenly shown to me in strangely mixed states of disrepair. One had a small, shabby-looking ramshackle wooden office tacked onto the front, somehow in an even worse state than the older building it was attached to, with knocked-over filing cabinets visible through the half-open plywood door. Another had its original stone doorway mostly boarded up, the upper half repurposed for a huge metal exhaust pipe that was hanging askew from the top half of the doorframe, with a new makeshift entrance bashed unceremoniously into the brick wall beside it.

I turned to the last page and had to suppress a small gasp as I was struck by a very strange and arresting full-page photograph. For a split second my brain had interpreted it as a horrible, ghoulish, rotting face, but then I recognized exactly what it was. The side of the building stretched straight down to the water, with two tall windows forming eyes and a large archway over the water forming a mouth, though notably more jarring than when I'd seen it on yesterday morning's walk. The top half of the left window was bricked up, and from this brick sprouted some large iron apparatus with rusted, disconnected pipes sprouting from it in several directions,

as if an alien life form had burst through its eye. The bottom half of this window retained its grimy glass panes, but immediately behind these was visible the back of some large object blocking the view inward. The other window's top half was taken up by a rusty metal vent, its bottom half split into yet two more halves, wooden boards covering the top half and only a single row of tiny glass panes remaining at the bottom. There was a large, dark stain underneath the brick sill that looked eerily like a black eye. Within the shadowy archway that formed the "mouth" there could be seen some cracked, rotten wooden structure stretching down into the water that may have once been some kind of dam, but in this case looked like a mouthful of moldy, rotting teeth. The stucco facade that formed the face's skin was cracked and crumbling, paint chipped and peeling.

I squirmed involuntarily. It felt like seeing a picture of a loved one who had been horribly beaten up. The rusty pipes sprouting from one bricked-up "eye" seemed like an alien parasite, and the effect of the mouth's reflection against the water gave the unnerving impression that it had been frozen in time while screaming into the void.

At this point, I was self-aware enough to know I had no other option but to continue down the rabbit hole.

I switched back to the Google Docs tab, and hit enter after my list of buildings, bumping the cursor down onto a new page. I stared at the crisp, blank white screen for a few minutes, watching the cursor blink on and off, on and off. It was a little exciting, this blank slate. If I put my mind to it, this could make an interesting little personal research project. Maybe even the start of a cool blog, if I stuck with it.

I entered a new subtitle, **The Suffering Mill**, and began typing.

Have you ever had the misfortune to visit a family member in the hospital after a life-threatening accident or injury? If you have, you may have been struck silent by the sight of a once-healthy face ravaged by scars and bandages, bruises and unnatural swelling, a temporarily misshapen and altered face which your heart recognizes but something in your brain wants to run from, as if the face was in danger of losing its identity and becoming something else altogether.

This is the phenomenon I experienced when looking through history at the many faces of Bright Mill. When I first moved in, I wasn't sure what I was looking at or what I was looking for, so I wasn't immediately struck by it. But as I came to learn how the building had changed through the ages, I was suddenly struck by this unshakable feeling of discomfort.

Surfaces once clean and free of blemishes are now only just visible under layers of scarring. Oddly-shaped additions begin to look like bad plastic surgery. Bricked-up remains of beautiful archways with newer utilitarian doorways bashed in nearby begin to resemble a sewn-up mouth with a hole punched in the cheek for feeding. Leaning facade walls and the visible remains of collapsed buildings still left standing begin to feel like bodies left above ground in a cemetery. The overall effect is that of a building that's been through the wars—or worse.

A little smile crept across my face. This was the kind of thing I used to do all the time. I'd stumble across a topic that hooked me, and just let that hook pull me wherever it wanted, taking me on an hours-long ride from one website to the next, even if it took all night and I was half dead the next morning. The resulting documents ran the gamut from impressively organized research projects to rambling streams of consciousness and everything in between, all saved and semi-organized for my own future perusal. By high school, I had amassed hundreds of these documents in a folder on my Google Drive aptly named "Things". On a rainy Saturday when I was bored out of my mind, as an only child, they'd come in real handy. It was my cool little personal library, and I had it all to myself.

That was before Nate came along and helped me shed some of my more obsessive and unproductive habits, of course. Nate had called it my Aspergers Files. "Who is this even for?" he

had asked, the first time he had caught me doing this. I had explained it was just for me, and no, it would likely never be seen by another pair of eyes. He had said that talking to oneself was a symptom of mental illness. I'd deleted the folder after that, and we agreed I wouldn't make one again. I knew old habits were the hardest to break, so I tried to remain vigilant to never let myself fall into that trap again.

Or, I should say, I usually did.

With a deep sigh, Adult Ava took control of my body, moved the cursor up to the File menu, looked at the title *Bright Mill* one more time, and selected Move to Trash.

Time to crack the whip again.

The Fire

I toyed with the blue silk scarf in my hands, watching the funny way its occasional silvery strands seemed to shimmer in the pinpricks of Christmas lights surrounding us.

“You like it, don’t you?” Nate looked expectantly at me, eyes unblinking.

“Of course I do!” I exclaimed.

“Put it on then!”

I slowly, carefully wrapped the scarf around my neck. It was actually very nice, truth be told, if not something I’d normally have picked out for myself. Then again, Nate had proven time and time again that he knows me better than I know myself.

“It was very expensive,” he added. “But you deserve the best.”

“Thank you,” I responded mechanically, trying to inwardly amplify my happiness with the scarf at least loud enough to drown out the pervading sense of discomfort. What *was* it about this Christmas that had felt so uncomfortable? I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. But it felt like something was up.

“Oh!” he said, with a glint in his eye. “There’s one more for you.”

My vision went a little blurry as something caught in my throat. I knew what it was. And yet I didn’t, and yet I did. My heart started beating a little faster.

“Just one extra little thing here,” continued Nate, contorting himself to reach for something behind the tree and emerging with a small package, delicately wrapped in the same paper as the others but this time with a delicate, translucent, ice-blue ribbon tied in a bow at the top. It actually matched the new scarf quite well, though whether or not that was intentional or just a happy coincidence is now lost to time.

My heart was pounding. It was around this point that I became aware that the Ava

receiving the present was not the Ava watching the scene unfold. The Ava receiving the present was perfectly calm, even a little curious. The Ava watching the dream was drenched in a cold sweat, jaw clenched, fingers scrambling at each other, breaths coming short and shallow and rapid-fire, as if being forced out by gut punches.

“Do you know what it is?” asked Nate coyly.

“No,” answered Ava honestly, with a curious smirk. “Should I?”

Nate’s smile faltered just a little, then returned. I don’t think I’d noticed that bit before, the last time I’d seen this. Or perhaps I had, and it hadn’t seemed particularly relevant.

“Go on,” he said, his eyes locked hungrily onto the small present now in Ava’s hands. “Open it.”

A sound like rushing wind began filling the room as Ava’s delicate fingers crawled curiously across the wrapping paper, selected an ideal place to begin, and started carefully tearing it open. The rushing wind became a roaring storm, and soon everything was obscured except a pinhole through which I could just see Ava’s fingertips pulling the paper back just far enough to reveal—

With a gasp, I shot bolt upright in bed. For a moment, the outline of my empty apartment was completely warped and obscured by a rainbow haze of tears, leaking down to join the pool of sweat covering my clammy face.

The first thing to emerge as the tears cleared was Al’s pointy little face, looking on in silent worry as I caught my breath. Then, finally, the footprint on the ceiling came lazily into view, and I composed myself for the next day at Bright Mill.

* * *

As I opened the back door of Building 1 and the sunlight hit my face, I made a specific note to draw in the fresh winter air and hold it in my lungs for a few seconds before exhaling. I remembered what I'd promised myself last week, to keep myself from falling apart entirely:

Keep on moving. Keep on doing new things. Even if it's mindless, you can't just sit and stew. You can't just sit all day in the pit in the messy blankets on your bed, because that pit will become bottomless, and you will become swallowed up. It had happened before, and it could easily happen again.

I exhaled, feeling my muscles and tendons shift slightly up and down my skeleton as I did so. Along with the lingering petrichor of last night's rain and the faintest floral scents from the season's last dying flowers, the air seemed to have another strange, woody scent swirling subtly within it. I couldn't place exactly what it was, it was only very faint. It almost reminded me of the campfires I used to have with Dad, or the top-shelf scotch that Nate sometimes let me try.

Good, good. These were the little things I'd be able to focus on when my mind wasn't exclusively consumed by a rotating selection of job boards, guitar pieces I'd played a thousand times, and my stubbornly silent friends. Use all your senses. Feel the ground. Smell the air. Take it all in.

As I approached Building 11, my eyes fell on the seemingly random arches set into the brickwork at odd intervals between the two levels of windows. I thought back to the photographs from the history exhibit—these must be vestigial remnants of former, smaller windows of some past permutation of the building. Somehow, it made me uncomfortable. It had the unnerving effect of looking like a face whose eyebrows were in the wrong place.

The woody smell seemed to get stronger as I walked along. I was now fairly sure it

wasn't just some everyday smell that I had been missing—I certainly hadn't smelled it here yesterday. As I walked, and the smell became stronger, swelling from a subtle undertone to an eye-watering wall of smoky, woody odor present in every inhale, and I tensed as I realized it was undeniably smoke. Smoke, fire, ash.

I looked up. The sky was as clear as day, no plumes of smoke were visible nearby, and no crackling of wood or screech of fire alarms could be heard. A woman passed behind me calmly walking her goldendoodle and whistling to herself, clearly not reacting to the smell. That was odd. Maybe the smell was coming from further away than I thought? I wrapped my scarf around my mouth and nose and continued walking.

I stopped momentarily in front of the entrance to the main office in Building 11. My sunny reflection in the glass door was so bright and opaque that I couldn't see a thing through it. For a second I just looked at myself, something I didn't often get a chance to do these days given my lack of a full-length mirror. I mentally patted myself on the back for doing another good job covering up that bizarre yellowness around my eye. But I suppose that was only to be expected, I'd mastered that skill quite a few years back.

Stand up straight, said Nate's voice in my ear. *You're slouching. You'll look more confident if you stand up straighter. Sexier, too. You'll get better jobs, earn more money.*

Shouting. As I returned to the present, I realized the background noise around me had condensed into... people shouting. Muffled, though. It must have been coming from behind the door.

My bright, sunny reflection so completely blotted out any visibility through the glass door that I was shocked half to death when it burst open, nearly hitting me in the face, to reveal none other than the grease-painted, pantsuited figure of Debra, barreling forward with feverish

momentum.

“Ava!” she gasped as she nearly walked into me, the black paint streaked across her eyebrows contorting cartoonishly in confusion.

“Oh—hi Debra!” I stuttered, awkwardly holding the door open for her as she stopped momentarily.

“Sorry,” she said, glancing feverishly at her gold watch. “Have to go. Have a good day!”

“Debra!” I called after her, whirling around to face her as she rocketed towards her car, but still holding the door open with one hand. “What’s going on?”

Debra pirouetted on one sickly pink heel, a leather handbag with a gold Coach logo on it swinging wildly in her wake. “What?” She looked as if I’d just asked her bra size.

“The smell,” I repeated, less confidently, the open door digging into my fingertips as I held it open.

“I don’t smell anything,” she said shortly, glancing desperately at the gold watch on her wrist. “Sorry, I’m going to be late for lunch with new investors. I have to go.”

My face fell. Great, just me again. I watched helplessly as Debra hoisted herself into the driver’s seat of a large maroon SUV with tastelessly chromed wheels and shining winged “B” logos as far as the eye could see. *Bentley Bentayga*, read the chrome letters on the tailgate as it nearly reversed into me and then shifted laboriously into drive. The name was just as ugly as the thing itself.

“Have a good day!” repeated Debra awkwardly out her open window, a stick of blue eye shadow clutched in one long-nailed hand as she stepped on the gas and pulled awkwardly away in an overly aggressive cloud of engine noise.

As I emerged from the departing whirlwind of Debra, I realized with a sigh of relief that

through the entirety of that awkward interaction I'd successfully remembered to keep the door open with my foot. Heart pounding, I took another acrid, smoke-filled breath as the shouting once again filled my head—Building 11 was now mine to explore. I stepped forward as effortlessly as I could, in my best impression of someone with an actual reason to be in this building.

The shouting seemed to be coming from the conference room directly in front of me. The door was closed, and the windows were glazed, but a chaotic cacophony of voices seemed to be coming from directly behind it. I could just pick out a few words... “outrageous”... “serious”... “families”.

I was just creeping closer to the source of the noise when I heard footsteps coming around the corner of the hallway. Thinking quickly, I dove into the bathroom located directly next to the conference room. Mercifully, it was empty. I located the stall closest to the conference room wall, closed the door, crouched down next to the toilet, and pressed my ear against the wall.

“Mr. Nevins,” came a reproachful voice, which seemed quite fed up with his adversary. “I appreciate your ceaseless attention to detail regarding the company’s books, but we are talking about deaths here.”

“This company,” came a deep, gravelly voice that apparently belonged to a Mr. Nevins, “like any operation with the good fortune to grow to this size, has become a living, breathing thing. And occasionally, like any organic body, it becomes infected and has to shed some dead cells. Then it is back to running healthily again, and we are none the worse off for it.”

“With all due respect, sir,” replied the first voice, “this was not an infection, it was a fire. In fact, most reports regard this fire to be a direct result of poor working conditions and reckless

disregard for safety codes.”

A fire? When had there been a fire here? I certainly hadn’t come across any evidence of a fire, in the apartment listing or during my recent walks around the complex. I pressed my ear harder to the wall and listened more closely.

“Let us be clear here,” replied Mr. Nevins in a condescending tone, “we are not discussing the burning of a city, or even a building, but rather *one* floor of *one* building—”

“The largest and most important building in the complex, sir!”

“—and as it so happens, this incident not only paves the way for the much-needed fourth floor for Building 1 which I have proposed in several meetings past, but in fact it has already done some of the work for us, vis-à-vis the convenient removal of a peaked roof that needed to be demolished to make room for the fourth floor anyway.”

“And the *people* that were removed, sir?” countered the first voice. “Do you also feel that the removal of these men’s lives was a gift from the heavens?”

I furrowed my brow at a thought that had almost escaped me as the conversation continued—Building 1 *did* have a fourth floor. I had explored it yesterday. I had been excited to discover it was home to the one skybridge in the complex that hadn’t been walled off, shooting directly over Building 21’s first floor and into Building 2. At any rate, I certainly hadn’t noticed any fire damage to the roof.

“It is truly devastating,” continued Mr. Nevins with a great heaving sigh, “that we lost the lives that we did on that day. But we cannot let an unfortunate one-time occurrence stick a wrench in the gears of the most well-oiled machine in this country! Moving forward with this fourth floor is crucial to ensuring this mill becomes the best possible version of what it could become, rather than accepting the status quo and resting on our laurels. That is how great

businesses die. We must push forward and transform it into the best possible version of what it could become,” he repeated, as if he found this phrase particularly delicious. “If we approve this package, which includes among other things a truly mind-boggling sum for the affected families—families which I will remind you are no longer in the employ of the mill—the record profit we are on track to post this year will be all but wiped out. Wiped out!” he repeated vigorously, with what sounded like a fist pound on the table.

“With all due respect, sir,” came the calm but shaken response, “we are talking about more than profit. Historically, sir, this mill has been uniquely successful because of the symbiotic relationship, if you will, the mutual respect, care, and camaraderie shared by its management and the families they employ, with the common pursuit they all share. If the Bright Brothers were still alive, they would—”

“If the Bright brothers were still alive today,” interrupted Nevins, “they would be a hundred years old and being spoon-fed cream of wheat in their infirmary ward. There is a reason they retired and sold the mill when they did. My last name is not Bright, and my business strategy is not theirs. One might say it is more practical, more efficient.”

“Sir...” responded the other man doggedly, “if nothing else—if you fail to respond adequately to this disaster, the community will be devastated, and the mill’s reputation tarnished. This is bigger than money.”

“Nothing,” came Nevins’s response, for the first time undercutting his adversary’s volume so that I quickly had to hold my breath to hear it, “is bigger than money. That may not agree with the storybook you read to your children at bedtime. But nothing is bigger than money. Every meal that those workers feed their families is purchased at our company store. Every house that they eat it in is leased to them from our company,” he continued, his volume rising

once again. “Every breath they take is paid for by the profits of our company. If we make a habit of decimating our bottom line with these absurd handouts, not only do we risk angering the shareholders to whom we have already signaled a massive profit, but we toss away a golden opportunity to construct the fourth floor that we desperately need to stay on top in this ravenous market. And if you continue to let your fragile emotions blind you to this clear truth, then I cannot reasonably keep you and your team in my employ. How *dare* you pin these deaths on me!” he shouted suddenly, his voice now quivering with rage. “How *dare* you insinuate that I am performing some manner of evil act by looking out for my company’s bottom line!”

“Sir, I didn’t say—”

“Mr. Williams,” he growled, “I think it would be best if you leave and return tomorrow with a fresh mind.”

“Sir! You don’t mean—”

“If you don’t cease this line of questioning immediately, you will find the termination of our contract in your inbox on Monday.”

After a moment of lightheadedness, I remembered to begin breathing again. I was not only a little shaken, but also confused. They had not only mentioned adding a fourth floor to a building that already had one, but referred to “mill workers” several times, as if this was still a functioning mill. If I didn’t know better I would say it sounded like a conversation from some time in the past. But I wasn’t in a desperate enough state of mind to begin mixing reality and fiction quite yet.

With the feeling of pins and needles flooding my right leg, I heaved myself out of the crouched position I was in, gave the toilet an obligatory flush in case anyone was in here with me, and left the bathroom. The door to the conference room was cracked open.

As I calculated a way to casually sneak closer to the door, walking very slowly and quietly in its direction before making my departure from Building 11, I almost screamed as I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Sorry to frighten you!” said a young woman with a buzzcut, white glasses, and a cherubic face, brushing lightly by me as she approached the room and opened the door. “Just getting the last of the cupcakes out of here. Are you looking for someone?”

For a moment I just mouthed silently like a goldfish, looking through the door as she pushed it open. A mostly-empty tray of store-bought cupcakes was sitting in the middle of an empty conference table strewn with empty paper plates, at the head of which was a massive television displaying the words “Happy Birthday Laura!” over some confetti clip art. Apart from a few stray office chairs, the room was completely empty.

“No,” I said, much too late to sound natural.

“Oh,” said the young woman, looking briefly confused. “Well... have a good day!”

“You too!” I said awkwardly, heading quickly for the exit and bursting through the double doors as quickly as possible.

Instantly, I exploded into a coughing fit as the thick, acrid air hit my lungs. The atmosphere around me smelled and felt like I was walking directly through a fire, though none was to be seen or heard as the sun peeked through the clouds and illuminated the clear winter air through which the lady with the goldendoodle was now returning. “Are you all right?” she asked as she passed me.

“Yep!” I managed to choke out, wrapping the scarf around my mouth as I marveled at the complete lack of any reaction the woman was having. Was I having a stroke?

For the entire remainder of my short walk back to Building 1, which did indeed have four

stories, my mind was stuck in a rather useless loop of wondering what I had just heard, and then assuring myself I must have misheard it. Before I realized it, I was up the stairs and at my door.

When I stepped inside, Al greeted me happily, then laid back down to sulk when he saw me open my laptop, as per usual.

I shivered and felt an involuntary gag rising in my throat as the job posting website appeared on my screen. I quickly switched to my Gmail tab, where there was something much more pressing to deal with.

Compose new email. To: brightmillleasing@gmail.com. Subject: Info on Building 1 fire.

Hoping against hope that this would be Debra's time to shine, I typed out a quick email asking for any information she had on the Building 1 fire and the ultimate fate of the deceased workers' families, and hit send before my inner worried self could stop me. Great—that was done. Hopefully this could make for a great new chapter in my blog.

I looked back over at Al, whose face was sulkier than I'd ever seen it. Man, that guy knows how to work his eyebrows. So I thought of something that would cheer us both up.

"It's a little early," I sighed to no one in particular. "But, I think it's time... for a walk."

Al sprang up, tail wagging and tongue flopping frantically from side to side. Yes, Al, we will be going for a walk, and we're going to make it a useful one, too.

We're going to try and figure out what the hell mama just heard in Building 11.

I leashed him up, Al's tail wagging his body as though he simply couldn't believe his luck that it was already walkie time, and together we shot like a bullet down the back stairwell. As I pushed open the back door and Al spilled forward onto the pavement, I counted my blessings that yesterday's storm had passed and that we would not be drenched in a downpour this time when we emerged from under the overhang. But as I proceeded purposefully in that

direction, my arm was yanked back by Al, who had not taken another step, and was in fact standing firmly in place with his snout held high in the air, the tip of his shiny black nose wiggling wildly and picking madly at the air as if reaching to catch a butterfly with it.

For a second I was confused. Then the smell hit me again, an acrid smoke bomb that made me feel as if I'd stepped directly into a campfire. So it *wasn't* just me.

"Good boy!" I whispered to Al, kneeling beside him, "What do you smell? What is it?"

After a long minute in which my question hung loudly in the air, desperately begging for an answer as Al resolutely refused to answer me, he seemed to give up on his olfactory investigation and allowed us to proceed forward again.

This time, I was straining my ears for any hints of conversation before we even got to the front door, wondering if I would be able to hear anything unusual again. I tried to look as natural as possible as we strolled by the front door, slowing down as I tried to tune in to the noise from inside.

I stood by the door with my phone held to my ear, doing my best impression of someone impatiently waiting to be let in by a friend who was definitely there but definitely just not picking up. Finally, a young man opened the door and left the building, briefly holding it open for me with a "come in" gesture just long enough for me and Al to squeeze through before it closed behind us with the "snick" of the automatic lock engaging again. Thank you, kind stranger, for letting me into this building that I am definitely supposed to be in.

Immediately my breath quickened as the quiet echoes of a conversation wafted ever so faintly through the hall. It did sound like the very same voices, even the very same cadences as before—I thought I could even pick out the word "families" at one point.

Taking in the rustic interior of Building 11 once again, I continued the fake phone call

vignette as I strolled casually past the door to the conference room, which was now wide open and very plainly revealing an even emptier room than before, with cake remnants removed and the “Happy Birthday Laura” screen now occupied by a small Windows logo drifting lazily from corner to corner.

Nevertheless, the voices seemed to be getting louder. This was unmistakably Nevins and Williams again, I could swear it. But no matter which direction I turned my head, I simply could not pinpoint where it was coming from. It seemed to be coming from all around me, yet from miles away.

As the confused and frustrated expression on Al’s face brought me back to reality, and I realized I was standing awkwardly with my dog in the doorway to an empty conference room I had no place being in, I realized it just couldn’t be true. Stupid Ava. It was probably just a regular old conversation coming from somewhere else in the building. There must be plenty of those. Nate would be so embarrassed for me right now.

I stepped back outside the room and leaned back against the wall, silent phone pressed stupidly to my ear.

“Can I help you find someone?”

My heart froze. It was the very same young woman with the buzzcut and white glasses that had just seen me earlier. And the expression on her face, less helpful and more serious this time, told me she clearly hadn’t forgotten me. What the hell did I say now? What could this *possibly* look like other than some weirdo repeatedly snooping around a building she wasn’t supposed to be in? With my best nonchalant face on, hoping that some clever words would appear on my tongue as I spoke, I drew in a breath to explain why I was here.

“Nothing,” came Nevins’s voice suddenly, blasting through the open door as though

projected from a loudspeaker and causing me to eject my phone from my hand, “is bigger than money.”

“Oh—I’m sorry!” I sputtered. The young woman looked almost as shocked as I did. “I was just—”

“That may not agree with the storybook you read to your children at bedtime,” boomed the voice, the anger rising gradually in his voice in precisely the same way I’d heard it shortly before, causing me to break my train of thought once again.

“You were just what?” asked the woman simply, narrowing her eyes. It wasn’t asked angrily, but she was clearly suspicious.

“I’m sorry, this is embarrassing,” I laughed, trying as naturally as I could to speak over Nevins’ continuing dialogue. “Al and I—that’s my dog—we were just—”

“Every breath they take is paid for by the profits of our company!” came Nevins’ voice, now deafeningly loud. Al was now tugging frantically, his eyes bulging and his teeth bared just as they had been when he’d seen through the open basement door the previous night.

I half expected the woman to be frustrated, angry, to say “Get out” and point towards the door, or I at least hoped she would, knowing in my heart that I fully deserved it. But instead, the eyes that met my gaze were narrowed in confusion, almost curiosity, like she was trying to solve me like a riddle. It was not a look that said *What is this girl snooping around here for?* so much as it said *Do I know you from somewhere?*

“Sorry, I—” I didn’t continue the sentence but instead gestured helplessly towards Al, trying desperately to communicate *There’s nothing I can do, clearly I have to let this happen* with my eyes as I let him pull me towards the building’s front door and out into the parking lot.

Thankful to have had an excuse to leave without an explanation, I tried to reign in Al’s

frantically leaping body as we ran along the side of the building and neared the entrance to Building 1. But he could not be reigned in. Once again nearly ripping my arm from its socket, he pulled me up the stairs and didn't slow down until we reached our floor.

"Al! Don't you... don't you want to go for a walk?" I begged breathlessly as we stumbled back inside the apartment and I closed the door closed gently behind us.

For the umpteenth time, Al resolutely refused to answer.

"What did you hear, Al?" I whispered, kneeling down and resting my forehead hopelessly against his and closing my eyes. "Did you hear that too?"

Still no answer from Al. Instead, Nate's voice reverberated inside my head.

You should have kept that document in the trash, Ava.

He was right. I had started this week trying to restore some calm and normalcy to my life, and I'd let it become chaotic and confusing almost immediately. I felt as though a weight was hanging inside my body as I flopped lifelessly back onto my mattress and covered my face with my hands, a weight that was tied to all my internal organs, pulling them down, down, down into the bed. I had never felt so heavy.

Well, with any hope of a happy healthy day now fully out the window, there was only one thing to do. What was the use of holding back now? I had nothing left to lose. I opened my laptop, opened Google Books in a new tab, narrowed my search to newspaper archives, and typed in "bright mill building 1 fire".

And there it was. An archived newspaper article from 1929 explained how the third floor of Building 1 had caught fire, when a leather belt meant to drive four machines was hooked up to six in an attempt to boost production without any extra expenditure. The belts had begun slipping on their axles and the resulting friction caused a fire. Supervisors had fled immediately. The

doors to the factory floors, now locked by the new management during working hours to prevent unwanted smoke breaks or theft of materials, hadn't been knocked down by firefighters before eleven workers burned to death and four jumped from windows onto the pavement three stories below. None of them survived. Construction of the fourth floor had commenced two weeks later.

Curiously, none of this had been included in the history exhibit in Building 19.

I deleted my query and searched "bright mill disaster". When a surprisingly long list of articles popped up, I didn't know whether to feel excited, or dismayed, or depressed. This was not the direction I'd expected this research project to go.

It was at this point that the bottomless, endless rabbit-hole research mode Nate so detested kicked in, for the first time in years. I couldn't hold it back. Hours passed by. Articles bookmarked, YouTube videos watched and rewatched, timestamps written down, with all the trappings of a bright-eyed, overachieving college student blasting through a research assignment but with none of the coherent end result to show for it.

Hours later, with three more empty bottles of Stella on my desk, I was still hungry for more information. Not the kind of hunger that could be cured with a meal, but the hunger of an addict. Always searching for more, never full, never satisfied. Darting across the screen madly as page after page of results flew by, my eyes fell upon an archived article from 1921. *Disaster at Bright Mill: Lessons from the Deadly Collapse*. The incident that unfolded had also been conspicuously absent from the display in Building 19.

New Bright Mill owner is under scrutiny following the partial collapse of several floors resulting in two deaths and further injuries. Initial evidence suggests that the collapse was the result of the new oversized looms and carding machinery installed by new owners Consolidated Enterprises upon their purchase, which significantly reduced working space and required four

small extensions to be constructed where the machines overshot the confines of the floorplan, and drew the ire of building inspectors who cautioned against retrofitting any further new machinery without significant structural reinforcements.

The incident is unfortunately not without casualties, as the rapid descent of a newly installed loom from the third floor into the second trapped longtime carding machinist Mr. Thomas White in the small extension built to fit the new oversized machine, and partially mangled his body in the still-spinning loom as it fell through. Unable to proceed past the fallen timber, brick, and machinery which had cut off the extension from the main factory floor, workers on site were forced to think rapidly and utilize the mill's cargo pulley to remove already-damaged brickwork from the exterior and lower the loom to the ground fully intact with White's body still mangled within it, in much the same manner that they had so recently lifted the new machinery into the building. Unfortunately, it is not expected that Mr. White will survive his injuries at this time.

In an impassioned correspondence, Mr. Henen Pinswea, longtime painting contractor for Bright Mill, cites last year's sale of the Mill from the retired Bright Brothers—one of which sadly passed away on Sunday—to New York's Consolidated Enterprises, noting that the new owners have “no regard for the health and welfare of the community that made this mill the greatest in the world,” and suggests that “Robert Bright is rolling in his grave” at the reckless nature in which the Mill is now being run.

Manager Maxwell Nevins is scheduled to appear in court to defend himself on the Twentieth against accusations of the potentially unlawful installation of overweight and oversized machinery in the aging mill.

The course of my runaway research into the mill had undeniably been changed tonight.

With my mind reeling from these articles, I knew I had to do something.

I opened up Google Docs in a new tab, and navigated to the Trash folder. I selected the document called Bright Mill, and clicked “Restore”. There it was again, back in the “Things” folder, adorning my screen in all its glory.

I scrolled down to the passage I’d already written entitled “The Suffering Mill”, and began adding to it.

But the deeper I dive into its past, the more I realize it was not just the buildings that were suffering. The mistreatment of the buildings was a reflection of the mistreatment happening inside it. It is precisely the same people that afflicted both kinds of wounds, and for precisely the same reason: the greed and corner-cutting that was pervasive in the many successive owners of Bright Mill throughout the 1900s. The line between the mill and its workers became first blurry and then indistinguishable. The people were there because of the mill and the mill was there because of the people. Each supported and was a part of the other. The history of one was the history of the other. Scars on one were scars on the other. When one was abused, so was the other.

Yes, oddly shaped additions betray the installation of larger machinery than the mill was originally designed to handle. But they also betray the assignment of more work than the workforce originally agreed to handle. Classically beautiful doorways and windows were bricked up or converted to crude exhaust outlets as new machinery was rearranged to maximize profit with no regard for comfort, sunlight, or air quality. But at the same time, the classically beautiful relationship between boss and employee was pummeled through in order to maintain profit margins, and relationships between the workers and the administration became even uglier than the buildings they were taking place in. Even the subtle brick ridge running between the third and fourth floor of Building 1 reveals where the roof once sat before a deadly third-floor fire was used as an excuse to spend millions constructing a fourth floor instead of compensating the deceased workers’ families.

As working conditions deteriorated, workers that were once respected as the beating heart of not only the mill but also the community became nothing but cogs in the profit machine that were replaced when their health and wellbeing inevitably declined.

I paused as I read what I'd written. I... liked it. It wasn't much, but it felt less like I was mindlessly obsessing over something now, and more like I was uncovering the complex truth of a situation that nobody around here seemed to care much about. For a moment, I was actually proud. This could really be something, if I put some real time into it. A blog... a newspaper column... hell, maybe even a book one day. Maybe this could be more than just an Aspergers Files document.

But something was nagging at me. An extra paragraph was lingering in my head, one I wasn't sure whether I should write.

At the end of the day, it's just you, Ava. You might as well. Let's be real. No one else is ever going to read this.

Pursing my lips, I added one more paragraph to the document.

Some days, it feels as though the evil that transpired in these buildings has seeped into the very fabric of time. There are those who say that if you pay close attention, you can see the mill workers of the past slaving away at their machines through doors. Some say if you listen carefully in the right place, you can hear the faint echoes of cursed conversations from the past, workers begging for shorter hours, a mill owner salivating at the opportunity to build a fourth floor on the charred remains of the dead while callously denying compensation to their families. Some say, when the moonlight hits the old machinery in the dog park at just the right angle, you can even see the mangled arms of the children who lost their limbs to it—but only for a fleeting, cursed moment, before reality settles itself again. It's almost as if the mill and the workers have become one, their pain and suffering etched into the very fabric of reality, forever unresolved, forever hanging in time.

Then I went up to the subtitle I had written in bold above this entry—"The Suffering Mill". I deleted it, thought for a second, then typed "The Shadows of Bright Mill" in its place. I sat back and looked at the document as a whole, strangely proud and uncomfortable at the same

time. It was actually becoming rather lengthy now. A memory flitted through my head of a similar document a decade earlier that had vanished into the ether when Google's servers experienced a hiccup that erased half a day's worth of work. I diligently moused up to File > Download to save a copy to my computer. A second later, *Bright Mill.doc* appeared in my Downloads folder with a jovial bouncing animation.

If I was going to be turning this messy document into a blog, I would need some better sources. I had a great start with these newspaper archives, but what I really needed was some modern-day sources. The only trouble was, I didn't know anybody in Brightville, knowledgeable or otherwise. I didn't even know where to start.

Well, I did have one contact. I had Debra.

I switched to my Gmail tab, and began composing a new email.

Hi Debra!

Let me start by saying I loved the mill history exhibit! I had no idea the mill was such a big part of the region's history. I was just doing some more research on the mill afterwards, and found a few interesting tidbits about some of the unfortunate disasters that occurred throughout its history. For instance I learned that my apartment is right in the spot where a floor collapse occurred in 1921! I thought that was interesting, and such a sad tragedy that could have been avoided. Do you have any more detailed information about the causes of these disasters and/or the workers who died in them? If not, do you have any contacts you can direct me to who might know more?

Thanks,

Ava

Sent. Wow, that felt pretty cool. I mean, it was awkward, and it was nerdy as hell, but it felt real, unlike the interminable job hunt that had been sucking up the last few hours. I suppose it was probably time to return to that now.

No sooner had I clicked over to the Indeed tab than I was startled by a loud notification *bing!* and my attention was drawn back to my Gmail tab, which now had a red notification

bubble hovering over it. Wow, could she really have responded that quickly? Maybe Debra was a night owl. That would certainly make this process a little easier!

One bold, unread email sat atop the bottomless stack of emails clogging my inbox. But the “from” line did not say Bright Mill Leasing—instead, it just said “Proxima”. I scanned the subject line and the snippet of body text visible in the inbox preview.

Regarding Your Promixa Wealth Application

We received your application for the Assistant Wealth Manager position online! Unfortun...

My heart plummeted. Of course. I didn’t need to open the email to know what followed. I right-clicked the message and selected Move to Trash.

I sat for another few minutes in silence, eyes closed in a silent attempt to meditate away the fear of joblessness—next to homelessness, next to lifelessness—growing a little colder and a little more uncomfortable with every moment that passed. The dank prickles of a clammy sweat began forming on my skin. Soon my body was losing its structure and beginning to melt into my mattress.

Come on Ava, back up on the horse. You know what? Allow yourself a little more time with the Bright Mill document. Keep on swimming in that ocean. The waters were warmer there. If you’re going to make it through the night, you at least deserve that little prize.

For a moment, I could swear I heard a faint, dismissive snicker from just over my shoulder.

I switched back to the Google Docs tab. As my eyes scanned what I’d written for a second time, reality began to set in. You thought this was such a gem that it deserved saving a

copy, like it was some kind of delicate treasure that couldn't be lost? Nobody would buy this drivel. What was I now, a writer? That would be an even stupider career choice than graphic design. Nate's reaction had been strong enough when I had told him I'd wanted to be a graphic designer—it was burned into me, from the words themselves to the facial expression that accompanied them. I could only imagine what it would have been like if I had said “writer” instead. I fumed, furious with myself for slipping into childish habits now of all times, when I needed to focus on adulthood most of all. I could be back in a high-paying job and contributing to society tomorrow if I just tried a little.

Nate had been right after all. This document *was* a sure sign of mental illness.

File > Move to Trash.

With a gratuitously loud slam of my finger against the trackpad, I closed the tab. And what the hell was that other tab next to it? I clicked onto it—of course, that stupid newspaper archive about the floor collapse. The grainy, black-and-white newspaper clipping once again took its place on my screen.

Just as I hovered my cursor over the X to close that one too, something struck me about the photograph at the top of the article. The odd placement of smaller and larger windows next to each other on the damaged mill extension in the photo seemed somehow familiar. A little too familiar.

Without even thinking about what I was doing, I put the laptop down on the bed beside me, stood up, and walked slowly over towards my guitar, where it sat in the odd little alcove off the side of the apartment.

There it was. One smaller window on the left, one larger window on the right, and directly beneath them, a strange pattern of strangely misaligned bricks in the center. Bricks that

were cleaner, squarer, newer, and cut into odd shapes around the edges to fill the jagged outline where something had once punched a hole through the wall.

Slowly, blankly, I sat down on the floor, with nothing better to do, chewed my lip and stared dumbly at the brick formation, unable to stop myself from vividly picturing the scene occurring directly in front of me.

Crackle. Roar. Crunch. The thick, paint-speckled wooden roof beams above me splintering like matchsticks and collapsing around me, a roaring, oily steel contraption blasting its way through the ceiling, gears hungrily spinning and churning as they lunged directly for me.

I shook the vision from my head and resumed the position that so often brought me peace: hands hovered over the keys, eyes closed, lungs full. I began playing, and the sound of Beethoven filled the empty room. Briefly, I was at peace.

Blam. There were the men scaling the side of the mill supported by the cargo pulley jutting out from the roof, bashing away at the remains of the brickwork as they strained to hook the pulley's cable onto the rogue loom, and struggled to keep the man's mangled body from being ripped in two as the machine swung perilously back and forth on the cable.

I clamped my eyes tightly shut as a pang of pain ripped through somewhere behind my right eye. My ears rang for a second as I gently rubbed the eye with my palm. Maybe I had somehow hurt my face while pressing my head against that bathroom wall. Or maybe I had just been spending too much time on my laptop and was getting a tension headache.

Nate had always told me that could happen. He'd make a point of warning me of tension headaches when I'd been researching something online for a while, perhaps writing one of these documents. He said it could be incredibly bad for your eyes, and also for your brain. Of course, this was usually just a way to get me to put it down when he wanted something else. And it was

always the same thing.

Bing!

My fingers went numb. The brief moment of happiness subsided almost immediately, like a wave retreating rapidly back to the ocean. This was going to be another job rejection email. Oh well. Let's go through the motions, Ava, let's open it up hopefully and act so surprised when that's what it is.

My eyes widened as I read the preview line. Bright Mill Leasing. And not just that, but the beginnings of a friendly reply. Maybe there was a god! Or at least maybe there was just a world outside of job hunting.

Hi Ava!

Glad you enjoyed the history expo, it was a labor of love for me and the Bright Mill Foundation! I'm not familiar with any floor collapses or fires at Bright Mill. Be careful what you read online—there is misinformation and fake news everywhere these days, someone may be out there just trying to get some clicks.

Best,

Debra Rockwell

Manager, Bright Mill

Chairwoman of the Bright Mill Foundation, a 501(c)3 Nonprofit

I closed my eyes and slowly lowered my head into my hands. I sat there for a minute, not sure what else to do, wondering what else I could possibly have expected. Then, barely opening my eyes again, I closed my laptop screen and pulled the covers up to my chin.

That night, I fell asleep in an uncomfortable haze, helplessly staring through the darkness at the barely-visible mishmash of bricks behind my guitar. I dreamt that I was playing guitar when the roof collapsed in on me again, endless tons of angrily spinning machinery raining down on me from the heavens. But this time, nobody came to help.

The Applications

“A Stella, please.”

“Short or tall?”

“Tall.”

I grabbed the glass and turned around to find a seat. Mercifully, the little table in the back corner was open again, just as it had been last night. I suppose it worked in my favor that it was the only seat in the house without a great view of the water rushing over the mill’s dam—the row of towering two-story windows stopped just before the corner of the building. Still, I was pleasantly surprised any night that a brewpub with an entire apartment complex at its front door wasn’t packed to bursting.

I hadn’t originally intended to eat here two nights in a row. It certainly didn’t align with the diet I’d been half-heartedly following for the last few years, although with no more Nate in my life I’m not sure who I was doing it for anymore. Plus, I suppose my notable lack of breakfasts and lunches probably more than canceled out whatever excess calories I’d be consuming today. That is most certainly what a dietician would tell me, and I didn’t feel any desire to fact-check it.

More importantly, I was also painfully aware that every swipe added another few bucks to my upcoming credit card bill, a bill aimed squarely at a rapidly dwindling bank account. Then again, job hunting is a tough job that requires fuel. You need to spend money to make money, right? Isn’t that what Nate always said?

I teetered my way gingerly over to my table, impossibly-full glass of beer in one hand and laptop in the other, desperate not to clumsily bash one into the other in front of a crowd of strangers. As I sat down with that mission mercifully completed, I gently placed each item onto

the table, took a swig, and opened up my laptop.

I was immediately taken by the row of tabs across the top of my browser window, a veritable clusterfuck of them, so impossibly dense it looked more like a sawtooth than a row of tabs. I remembered that they were split vaguely into the first half of tabs being job-related and the second half being mill-related, approximately tracking the course of my devolving focus that night. I clicked through them absentmindedly.

Fire Consumes Top Floor of Bright Mill

Disaster at Bright Mill: Lessons from Deadly Floor Collapse

Two Dead in Acid Vat Explosion at Bright Mill Bleachery

The night that had caused this excruciating morning came back into focus. It had been well after noon by the time I'd dragged myself out of bed, and despite the number of hours slept surely totaling eight or more, I still somehow felt like I'd fallen asleep and immediately been woken up by a blow on the head with a sledgehammer. Perhaps it hadn't so much been "sleep" as a very gradual eight-hour descent from half-awake, self-pitying spiraling down into nightmare land, and as soon as I'd stayed in nightmare land just long enough to actually have one, I'd been yanked back out of it.

As desperately as I wanted to appease my aching brain by picking up my mill research, adult Ava was telling me that starting this morning on such a depressing note was sure to end poorly. As per usual—perhaps even more than usual—it would be better to start off with a good, clean, honest few hours of job hunting.

Well, no better place to start than with my Gmail tab. Better get a good look at all the rejection emails I'm bound to see. Rejection emails didn't even make me that mad, honestly—I vastly preferred them to the default of no response at all. At least with a rejection email I could

cross something off my list.

While there were indeed two rejection emails sitting at the top of my inbox, they weren't what caught my eye. No, that would be Debra's stupid, stupid response to my inquiry last night. I re-read it, and re-read it again. It seemed almost willfully ignorant. I'd get to job searching all right, but this came first. I began furiously typing.

Hi Debra,

Thanks for the tip, but I actually learned about these events from historical articles available in national newspaper archives. The floor collapse was written about in the February 4, 1924 edition of the Brightville Banner, and the Building 1 fire on January 10, 1929. You should check them out! I was thinking of using this research for a blog dedicated to the forgotten lives lost in the mill industry of this era. Most seemed to be due to mismanagement and disregard for workers' safety and welfare at the time, and some of it seemed to be covered up afterwards. I apologize if this is all a little too nerdy, I know your job is all about the here and now and not about history, but from our conversation at the history exhibit it sounds like you might have some contacts that might know more! Again, please feel free to forward me to someone that might know more and I'll get out of your hair!

Thanks again,

Ava

I realized with a start that one woman was looking in some confusion at me, and a second later, realized the confusion was probably due to the teeth-grinding and probably cartoonishly pained expression that had involuntarily been sitting on my face for the last few minutes. The

woman looked away quickly as we made eye contact, and I shimmied down in my seat so that my face partially retracted into my scarf. I nuzzled into it, as though it were an invisibility cloak and the woman at the next table would shrug and think *Oh, I guess she's gone.*

“Hey there!” announced the waiter cheerfully. “Another Stella?” He threw his hand excitedly towards my glass, his hand frozen in a position that implied he very much expected an affirmative answer to his question.

“I—”

How much is that on your credit card now, Ava? It sure is a good thing you have a job lined up to pay off this month's bill.

The waiter's hand trembled in anticipation.

Don't you dare, Ava. Don't you—

“Yes, another please,” I heard myself say. “Thanks!”

“Great, be right back!”

I don't know why Nate was so mad, Stella had been his idea in the first place. Stella had been my drink of choice ever since Nate had suggested it on our second date. He had pointed out that the Imperial IPA I'd ordered could come off as too masculine and aggressive for a woman entering the professional world, and that Stella was a better fit for my personality, especially if I was going to be winning any contracts at Nate's company. As with so many things, I'd found he was right, and had adopted Stella for both business outings and my personal life when Nate began stocking it in the fridge for me.

This was just my unemployed era, after all. It would be okay to return to the Aspergers Files just during this era. No, Ava, not the Aspergers Files... your cool little personal library.

Just saying that line in my head felt like convincing myself to eat one too many slices of

pie. Overly rich and saccharine. And irresponsible. I suppressed a tiny gulp of nausea.

Oh, hell. It's just temporary. I'll be out soon.

February 1922. Workers' strike continues after massive pay cuts and mandatory 56-hour work week announced. Fifty families were evicted from mill-owned housing in Brightville as the strike lingers on. Governor San Souci on Monday called in the National Guard after a riot damaged several buildings in the complex, and a machine gun was installed atop the Building 1 bell tower. Two men were killed and several more shot and wounded as a crowd approached the mill for the second time this week, and one woman was seriously injured by a policeman on the ground while trying to break up a fight.

My eyes widened. I tried to picture a machine gun mounted on top of my building's bell tower, supposedly a symbol of bright new days, community, and togetherness. It was difficult to imagine the sleepy streets of Brightville running with blood.

I wrote a paragraph in my Google Doc, then switched back to the archives and scrolled some more.

January 1929. Bright Mill bleachery worker Gerald Nichols commits suicide by slitting his own throat one month after sustaining life-threatening full-body chemical burns falling into a vat of bleach. Nichols had received no compensation from mill owners Consolidated Enterprises and was sent a bill for damages to the floor of Building 2. Nichols was found deceased in the bathtub of his mill-owned house, the bathroom window of which looks directly upon the bleachery across the street where the incident occurred.

Another paragraph in my Google Doc. The tone of this document was starting to become pretty dark. Not what I'd intended.

Okay, but this was the old days. No one had rights, everyone was being mistreated. This wasn't just a Brightville problem. If I scrolled forward a bit, I bet I'd see more cool stuff about the expansion of the mill and what it was used for in later decades. I zoomed forward in the search results to the 1960s and tapped on a random article.

June 1961. New owner of Bright Mill in hot water after newly constructed warehouses discovered to contain makeshift living quarters. As Bright Mill struggles to remain relevant in the dwindling American cotton industry amongst the threat of cheaper foreign imports, owner Johnson Bankwell—the building's fifth owner in two decades—has had his hand revealed.

After an anonymous tipoff, five mill workers and their families were discovered sleeping in makeshift living quarters hidden inside Buildings 28 and 29, two adjoining buildings added to the east wing of the complex only a few years ago. When reached for comment, Bankwell provided a short statement explaining that the live-in arrangement was made to “lend a helping hand to workers who have fallen on hard times.” But employees speaking on condition of anonymity say the arrangement has a more sinister motive—to increase productivity by forcing impoverished workers to work illegally long hours without breaks in return for their accommodation, as well as encouraging unpaid child labor from the children living there. One employee said his son was encouraged to perform cleanup underneath dangerous moving machinery and was instructed not to speak with anyone about his work.

This new revelation provoked even more questions regarding these massive new buildings recently constructed on the east wing of the historic complex, when residents and workers questioned whether the mill was currently producing anywhere near enough product to fill the enormous footprint of the new warehouses. Apart from their enormous size, the buildings in question first caught the eye of Brightville residents due to their “cheap and dirty” clapboard

construction, leading one resident we spoke with to label them “massive eyesores” against the rest of the historic brick and stucco mill. Another pointed out the buildings’ curious lack of exterior doors—they are accessible only via enclosed wooden skybridges connecting them to two nearby buildings in the complex.

From the scanned photograph attached to the article, I saw a dizzying spaghetti bowl of familiar brick and unfamiliar clapboard buildings mashed together in an unrecognizable mess, which made even the present-day’s remaining jumble of buildings look tidy by comparison. The dizzying maze of skybridges in the photo made the mill resemble a child’s hamster farm.

Upon closer inspection, I realized the monstrous warehouses in question occupied the space where the complex’s dog park now stood. I’d been running around with Al on the foundations of secret worker housing.

The article continued:

This comes on the heels of a working conditions claim brought by a secretary who complained of losing feeling in her extremities after her office was moved into the unheated skybridge between Buildings 1 and 13 to allow for the installation of a larger automated weaving machine in the west wing of Building 1.

The construction of Buildings 28 and 29 marked the umpteenth in a nearly constant line of additions and alterations by a succession of recent owners, each of whom has inherited a more desperately struggling business than the last. The fate of the new buildings remains unclear for now, and will likely be determined after the hearing.

My brow furrowed as I switched back to the Google Doc in front of me, my eyes guiltily drawn to the Indeed icon in the neighboring browser tab, but never quite strongly enough to rip myself away from my current mission. The simple document that I had originally started to document the purpose of each building, and had gradually sprouted into a compilation of the many curious quirks of the mill I had grown so fond of in the last week, had now unraveled into a rambling treatise on the murky history of a building whose structure and soul had both been mangled by an increasingly greedy succession of owners. It was simply too much to handle right now. Okay, job search, you win this round.

The dreaded job board eagerly took its place on my screen, showing countless finance jobs that did list undeniably attractive salaries. That's what I would focus on. Your savings are dwindling, Ava. Money is important. And yet, despite all the attractive numbers stacked up on this screen, I was still getting nowhere. I'd been coming back to this same spot over and over again looking for something that felt like a hazy mirage—a job which played to my mathematical strengths and paid well and felt fulfilling. Even as I failed to picture what this mystical job could be and increasingly doubted its existence, somehow I kept trusting this godforsaken job site to procure it for me. What was it they said about the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results?

I know what I'll do! I piped up desperately. I'll find a new job board to search on!

Okay! I responded, I'm just desperate enough to think that might work!

Perfect! I cackled manically. Then that's what I'll do!

Not only would that increase my chances of finally getting a job, but more importantly, it might also soothe my aching brain as it complained ever more loudly about looking at the same exact website all day every day. There was sure to be some novelty value in just seeing some

new colors and a new font on the screen every once in a while. Right, brain? Right?

Maybe, my brain replied suspiciously. We'll see.

Too late, stupid brain, I retorted, we're already doing it!

Yep, I agreed. She's right, brain. You'll see.

I googled "job board" and plenty more came up. Why hadn't I tried these before?

Ah, Jobzilla. Yes, I'd heard of that one. And look at those lovely purple graphics. That would keep my brain's cogs turning, wouldn't it?

Hmph, replied my brain. How about another beer?

If that's what it takes, brain. I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine.

"Another round?"

Right on cue, the waiter had exploded into existence behind my shoulder and was again reaching a trembling hand toward my empty glass. Had I just summoned this man into existence?

I instinctively cringed, waiting for Nate's voice. But I was delighted to find that, at this moment, Nate was little more than a blurry, amorphous blob of a shadow somewhere in the back of my mind. Perhaps he was making some blurry sounds with his blurry mouth, but at this moment I couldn't decipher what they were. In my mind, I blew him away like a puff of smoke.

"Yes, thanks," I answered. A corner of my mouth inadvertently twitched upward into a smirk.

The waiter smiled back nervously. "Gotcha," he said hesitantly. "Be right back."

I confidently filled out my personal information, education, prior work experience, and skills. Okay. Next!

"What are you interested in?" A bunch of bubbles with purple text in them blossomed onto the screen in a cute little animation. For a second, while my brain lagged behind my

eyeballs, I just sat there, mildly amused. Then I realized they were job categories. Finance. There's a word I recognized. I clicked the Finance bubble, and it popped, bursting into several smaller bubbles with more specific categories. I leaned back in surprise, eyebrows raised, and shook my head. I get that it was supposed to be cool, but I was starting to feel like I was in some kind of funhouse.

Let's see. Corporate financing, check. Investment banking, check. These words were so familiar to me, like a well-worn glove, and yet they felt so irrepressibly drab and awful as I stared at them on my screen. I tried to pep-talk myself through the selection process. You need the money more now than ever. You know you paid for college courses in this. Most importantly, you know you're good at it.

Involuntarily, I scrunched my eyes shut and bowed my head down to my chest. But they're so boring. Dull, dull, dull, so desperately dull and tedious and stuffy and boring and desperately DULL.

I opened my eyes and took another drink.

Fine, brain. I'll give you one thing for shits and giggles.

I moved my mouse away from the cluster of "Finance" bubbles that had popped up and hovered over "Media". The bubble burst and smaller bubbles appeared in its place. Graphic design, check. Packaging design, check. Animation, check. A tiny smile started to creep its way across the corner of my mouth.

You know you're not going to choose any of those jobs, right? Nate's voice hovered over my shoulder, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I could almost feel his smoky breath on the back of my ear right now. You're not going to be able to feed a family with one of those stupid artist jobs. You're not making t-shirts for your old going-nowhere friends anymore.

You just want to play all day instead of working, that's what it comes down to.

I'm not going to apply to any of those jobs, I responded quietly. I just want to see them.

Why did I go through all that trouble of getting you a job at my firm? Nate asked coldly. A job that you then stupidly left to get this fancy new apartment? Did that mean nothing to you?

Stop. Please stop. Yes, I know. Let me fuck around just a little bit. Just one little bit. Please. Or else my brain's gears will stop turning.

Okay... submit.

Limit to only Quick Apply jobs? What the hell did that mean? "Only show jobs that have integrated our Quick Apply feature. Automatically apply with one click using the information from your profile. Link to a Google Docs document to keep your information up-to-date." Oh hell yeah. Maybe this was the site for me. If I had to re-enter the same damn names and dates in one more application I might just throw this laptop into the Pawtuxet.

Entry-level financial analyst? Okay... Apply. A tiny check mark barely had time to appear before the job poofed off the screen and the next one slid up into its place. Neat. This wasn't so bad. Look at me, I'm being productive. Entry-level tax accountant? Apply. Uber driver? Nope... report as spam. Accountant? Apply. Uber driver? Nope. Chief Financial Officer? Get real... Assistant finance manager... Apply... Amazon warehouse worker, nope, report spam... Assistant graphic designer? A spark of happiness awoke somewhere inside me. There was the shits-and-giggles job hiding amongst the real adult ones, the little piece of bacon in the salad that Dad used to hide to convince me to keep eating it. Sure, why not. My mouse was already hovering over the Apply button, I may as well click it.

You said you weren't going to apply to those, came the ghostly voice. You're embarrassing yourself.

A pang of dull pain ripped through my right eye. I slammed my eyes shut and the pain subsided a little, but the world began spinning nauseatingly beneath me. Come on, brain. Just a little more of this and I'll reward you with some sleep. Something between a headache and an eye-ache continued to throb dully just beneath the surface.

A notification from Gmail came in. Great, the rejections are already flowing in.

Nope, even better. A reply from Debra.

Ava,

On the contrary, Bright Mill was famous for the good relationship between the workers and the management - it's part of what made it so successful. We like to think we continue that trend today with the friendly relationship between ourselves and our tenants, and we wouldn't want to sour that relationship. Be careful what you read online, and above all, be careful what you post online about Bright Mill. Please be aware that we are very mindful of misinformation that might tarnish Bright Mill's legacy and that we will take any measures necessary to stop the spread of this misinformation.

Best,

Debra Rockwell

Manager, Bright Mill

Chairwoman of the Bright Mill Foundation, a 501(c)3 Nonprofit

What the fuck. Slowly but surely, gears were shifting in my brain, even though the sludge deposited there by a few strong drinks. I had pegged Debra for a clueless and ditzy trust fund baby, obsessed more with money than the heart and soul of the place she managed. But this last

reply sounded... dare I say it... devious. Threatening. Evil. I had made it abundantly clear that I had discovered something about her mill that she claimed not to know, provided sources, and now... this? We wouldn't want to sour that relationship? I scanned the message again. We will take any means necessary? Maybe dumbass Debra wasn't so dumb after all. I could feel myself spiraling even deeper as I considered this insane possibility.

I stared for a second at her email signature. What was the Bright Mill Foundation?

I opened a new tab and typed "linkedin.com" into the address bar. If anyone was the kind of person to spend an inordinate amount of time on LinkedIn, it was Debra. Sure enough, she popped right up as a suggestion at the top of my screen. I clicked her name. There, proudly displayed under her big bold name, was that same line—Chairwoman of the Bright Mill Foundation, but this time, the name of the foundation was highlighted in blue. God, the novelty of an internet mystery that actually goes somewhere. I love it. Click.

I clicked the "People" tab. There, floating in an empty void of white, was a single profile picture—Debra's, with the word "Chairwoman" written underneath it in italics. She was either the only employee of this foundation, or the only one willing to admit it on LinkedIn.

Well, that's that, I thought aggressively at myself. Better get back to job searching.

Okay, I responded. And yet, as I watched my fingers stride across the keyboard of their own accord and open a new tab, I made no attempt to stop them. They'd typed "lookup company public records" into Google and hit enter, and sitting there at the top of the pile of search results was exactly the link I'd been trying to think of but couldn't quite remember—the EDGAR public records lookup page on SEC.gov. Jeez, I said, inwardly throwing my hands up as I watched my fingers continue to work, these stupid hands really have a mind of their own. What can you do?

A few feverish clicks and tip-taps later, and I was faced with another almost completely

white screen, this time showing a single public document proving the existence of the Bright Mill Foundation: Articles of Incorporation. I clicked to view the scanned document. I don't know what I was expecting, but it was just about the most infinitely vague single page of legalese I'd ever seen. I must have read it over three times before my internal legalese translator, rudely awakened after a years-long post-college slumber, finalized the translation as "This is a company that is being established to do company-like things." Ultimately, the only things on the page with any meaning whatsoever were helpfully condensed at the bottom. Date of incorporation: January 1, 2018, Brightville, Rhode Island. Officers: One (1), Debra Rockwell.

Could the Bright Mill Foundation really have been brought into existence purely to decorate an email signature? I wouldn't put it past her. She seemed like the kind of person who would bring a company like this into existence just to put it on a bumper sticker on the back of her ugly Bentley.

That said, I hoped that's all it was. Because if it was anything more than that, well... it couldn't help but seem a *little* sinister.

I began furiously typing out a reply. It was just as well that my current state of mind didn't lend itself to writing any more than a single sentence—a single sentence is all I needed.

Dear Debra,

Do you have ANY information of any kind on Bright Mill between 1920 and 2018?

Ava

There, Debra. The one thing you and I have in common is we're good with numbers, so you can hopefully calculate as well as I can that that's 98 years that's missing from your stupid

little history exposition, and that's more than a little weird.

Come on, Ava, pleaded adult Ava from somewhere in a distant corner of my brain. Please, just a little more job hunting. You're going to hate yourself if you don't.

Fuck you, I spat back. You're in cahoots with Nate, I know it.

Adult Ava gave me a look that I knew was coming, a look that can be given only from someone who knows they're right to someone who knows they're wrong, from mothers to their children, and from people to themselves when they're miserable, drunk, deep in a hole and threatening to keep digging it deeper.

Fine. One final blast of focus and energy. I took another swig of beer, burped, clicked back to Jobzilla, and clicked to the next page of results.

I looked blearily at the column of purple "Apply" buttons, the job listings next to them beginning to melt together like a soaked watercolor painting. I hovered my mouse over the topmost Apply button and clicked. And then clicked again, and again and again as each job disappeared with a pleasant little animation and the next in the list slid into its place. I closed my eyes and kept clicking. Click click click click click. Okay, this wasn't so bad. The headache raging behind my eyeball was finally starting to subside.

You don't really have a headache, said Nate. You just don't want to put in the work to get a real job.

I opened my eyes. As the screen came back into focus, I saw the stack of little notification bubbles in the lower corner of the website. A weight plummeted in my stomach.

Applied! Shared "Bright Mill.doc" with Summit Capital.

Applied! Shared "Bright Mill.doc" with Starr Graphics.

Applied! Shared "Bright Mill.doc" with NuWealth, Inc.

Applied! Shared “Bright Mill.doc” with Apex Design Group.

Applied! Shared “Bright Mill.doc” with Prodigy Finance.

Applied!...

The stack of notifications went all the way up and off the top of my screen. Processing the words I was reading, I lowered my throbbing head slowly into my hands and tried not to scream. Instead of my resume and cover letter, I’d just sent my stupid Bright Mill research doc to about a hundred companies.

Bang. It felt as if a tiny bomb had just been detonated somewhere behind my right cheekbone. This time I let out a tiny gasp. God, what the hell was happening to me? Maybe I really did need to take a break.

At some point, during which I am fairly sure I settled my tab, I made my way uncomfortably back to my apartment, feeling nauseous and slightly panicky. *Hey*, one cell of my brain croaked desperately to the others, *at least you’re not driving!*

It weirdly felt like I was driving, though. I remember getting the distinct impression that I was seated in a control room inside my own head, driving a robotic version of my body using a system of levers and pulleys that I was completely unaccustomed to, just well enough that I was able to maneuver this slovenly corpse across the parking lot, under a few skybridges, through the back door, and up the stairs without falling or stumbling once. I remember feeling somewhat proud of this feat, yet still feeling as though everyone else passing by was doing a much better job of piloting their bodies around from place to place.

Apartment door closed heavily behind me, I stumbled toward the bathroom, felt blindly around for the light switch on the dark side of the wall, and after a few poorly aimed jabs, flicked it on.

A horrible face flashed into view as the mirror came into focus. Where yesterday a strange putrid yellow had surrounded my eye, today it had sprouted deep purples and blues, in an undeniable replication of a black eye. As the shock subsided, I furrowed my brow in confusion as I wracked my muddled brain to figure out what could possibly be causing this. There was barely anything in my apartment at all, let alone something that I could have whacked into this hard, even sleepwalking. I didn't know what the hell this was, but it was certainly not the result of a computer screen.

For a minute, I couldn't bring myself to look away from it. While it had been shocking at first glance, upon closer inspection it looked rather like a watercolor depiction of some starry nebula from outer space. It actually reminded me uncannily of that desktop wallpaper I'd used for years on end when I was young, "Starbirth" by the artist Digital Blasphemy. It was almost kind of pretty, in a weird way. And apart from the occasional pang, it didn't hurt *that* much. And who was going to see me, anyway?

With a feeling of dread, I realized I still had to take Al out for his evening pee. I could take the sunglasses and hoodie route, or the makeup route. No, you idiot, no normal person would be wearing sunglasses at this time of night.

Okay. Makeup route it was, then. I can do this.

I spent the next few minutes in a dissociative state, dabbing robotically at the bizarre wound with foundation and concealer, trying in vain to mask it so that I would have the option of going outside or fetching my mail without eliciting screams. The best I could do was transform it into a murky, slightly discolored smudge across my eye—perhaps enough that someone could interpret it as a makeup accident, rather than the tapestry of burst blood vessels that it was. That would be good enough for now. Good enough for a dog park in the dim light of dusk, anyway.

I leashed up Al and we headed down the stairs, out the back door, through the complex, and towards the dog park.

A jagged streak of luminous clouds was seared across the black horizon, giving the impression that the earth was on fire. The crisp evening air sent a chill across my skin as I waited patiently for Al to find his spot and do his thing. I dug my hands deeper into my pockets, silently praying that nobody else was going to enter and see the makeup disaster currently disgracing my face, and walked around to peruse the various pieces of old mill machinery dotted around the center of the park.

I walked over to the elevator motor, casually marveling at the intricate system of pulleys and gears, and the rusted-solid bundle of thick iron cables draped loosely over the main pulley. By the looks of it, they were literally more rust than metal by this point—I wondered how that hadn't been considered more of a tetanus liability. I guess the dogs are just peeing on it, it's only humans that have the intrusive urge to grab things.

Bzzz.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. It was a notification from the Finance Bros group chat. Against my better judgment, I hesitantly tapped to open the message.

When the Messages app opened up, however, there wasn't a new message bubble at the bottom of the conversation. Instead, where the text box had previously been, there was now a small gray line of text:

You have been removed from this group chat.

The weight plummeted down again. I could feel it pulling on my heart, my lungs, even my brain. For a minute I just sat there with my eyes closed. I had played out this possibility in my head a number of times, and now it had finally happened. I didn't know which of those

caused me more pain. It was right there in the name the whole time. I was never a finance bro. I was just a finance bro's fiancée. And then I wasn't. Why the hell had I done that to myself? I should have left the group chat weeks ago. They never believed my version of things anyway. Of course, they'd never had any problem believing Nate's stories.

Trying to ignore the weight, I meandered over to the next machine, trying to smother the newly reborn sadness blossoming inside me.

I'm not upset. I didn't need them anyway.

I didn't need them anyway.

As I looked closer, I was filled with a sense of dread. There it was again, the mush in the machine. Dare I look? I have to, to prove to myself that it's not real. To pin myself back down to reality. I have to look, and see all the nothing awaiting me. Or at worst, a tree branch. But what I saw was neither of those things.

A young boy in filthy clothes was writhing on the ground, clutching at a bloody stump where his forearm should be, and suddenly his screams filled the night air as if the sound had been abruptly un-muted. A wave of nausea collided with my blind panic as I realized the thing caught in the machine was part of a human arm, mangled beyond recognition and pouring a waterfall of deep scarlet blood onto the ground beneath it.

Shaking uncontrollably and trying not to yell, I stumbled frantically towards Al, fished the leash out of my jacket pocket, and after a few shaky failed attempts successfully hooked him up. I looked back toward the machine. I then did something I hadn't planned on doing: I ran.

I ran. I ran and ran. I didn't know what direction specifically I was running toward—or whether the thing I'd seen had been real—or whether Al's eager running beside me was also fueled by panic or just by excitement—or if I even should have run at all, or if I should have

stayed. All I knew was that it felt like my eyes had just been poisoned by something very unnatural, and I was unable to stop the visceral reaction that was propelling me forward.

I was just slowing to a brisk walk as we wove between the contorted, misshapen edifices of Buildings 6 and 7, the light from the rising moon lighting the evening sky and reflecting in a messy smear through my watering eyes before it was blotted out by the silhouette of Building 9's towering smokestack.

Where the protruding upper floors of Building 4A met the angled edifice of Building 6, the negative space between them at ground level formed an odd little alcove at ground level, from which a hunched figure was slowly heaving itself up from a crouched position and standing to full height. The figure was huge, at least six feet tall even with its heavily stooped posture, and cloaked in a thick black trenchcoat that was torn, folded and patched in so many places it might have been the sewn-together scraps of several trenchcoats. One huge arm reached out in my direction, and in its grasp a dimly flickering lantern came into view, the struggling orange flame barely visible through grimy, smoky glass. From his other side no arm protruded at all, and the sleeve was pinned up to his shoulder. As he raised the lantern, a metallic clunk came from what looked like an enormously oversized, tarnished brass pocketwatch fastened to a sash underneath his trenchcoat and rattling against its metal buttons. Finally his face was thrown into sharp relief, a horrifying, one-eyed face so cracked, scarred, and warped that it might also have been made from the sewn-together scraps of several faces.

As the man clunked toward me with heavy footsteps, his shallow, rattling breath became audible. I was actively drawing my own breath into my lungs, which would probably have released itself in another involuntary scream, had another voice not pierced the silence at precisely that moment.

“Hey! Are you okay?”

I looked around, startled, to see where the voice was coming from. My gaze wildly swept wildly around the doors and windows nearby, finding no source for the voice, and when it returned to the footpath, the man had disappeared without a trace.

“Hello?”

I whipped around and realized with a rush of embarrassment that it was the young woman with the buzzcut and white glasses, the one that had caught me hanging around the very building she was leaving right now.

I might have curled up and died right then and there if I’d had the wherewithal.

“Yeah, I’m... I’m okay,” I finally blurted, realizing with a frazzled look around me how absolutely insane I must have looked. I put my hands on my knees and tried to catch my breath as naturally as possible. Al was sniffing around.

“Oh my goodness, your eye! Do you need help?” she asked worriedly, walking towards me. “Can I get you anything?”

“My—my eye?” I sputtered, now even more thrown off than I’d already been.

“You’ve got a black eye!”

“I do?” I asked automatically, then remembering this morning, breathlessly added, “Oh, it’s just some yellowing, it’s just from—I can’t even remember where it’s from, actually, I tried to cover it with makeup this morning but it must have—”

“It’s not just yellowing, girl, that’s a whole-ass black eye. Are you sure you don’t need any help?” she pressed. “You look like you just saw a ghost!” Her large golden pyramid earrings swung gently back and forth as she attempted a polite laugh. I think I must have shown some kind of reaction in my facial expression, because the laugh stopped fairly abruptly. “...I’m

Jaelynn. Jae for short. Nice to meet you, for real this time!”

“Nice to meet you too,” I wheezed, affecting a smile. As I caught my breath and my heartbeat gradually slowed, my mind now had the energy to be distracted by her arresting outfit. A suit jacket with a dazzling black and white pattern was parted to reveal a thin red tie over a white button-up shirt, and chunky black pumps clopped against the ground as she walked alongside me, her pyramid earrings swinging with every step. Before I could properly formulate a compliment, it started rolling out of my mouth. “You look...”

What did I want to say? Even at the best of times, I don’t know how I would have ended that sentence, let alone in this frazzled state.

Cool? No, we’re not in middle school.

Pretty? No, too personal.

Dashing? What?! *Dashing!*? Jesus. You’ve officially lost it.

“Thanks,” she interrupted with a laugh, generously rescuing me from the ledge at the end of my sentence, “I just came from a retirement party at the office. I don’t usually dress like this,” she added with a smirk. “Retirements, birthdays, it’s been nothing but nonstop parties at work lately. Not that I’m complaining! I do have to keep hauling out nice clothes, though. I’m going to go through everything in my wardrobe at this point!”

It was clear to me that she was vamping now, riffing to make me feel better until I caught my breath. I must have looked like a real wreck for her to treat me this nicely.

“Well listen,” she continued, “I’m sorry about how we first met. I didn’t mean to back you into a corner like that.”

“No, it was my own fault,” I offered, as my heart returned to normal speed and my brain began working again. “I was being weird. I—I was supposed to see Debra about something, but I

came at the wrong time and she wasn't there. Then I thought I heard something weird in the conference room," I continued, patting myself on the back for working some truth into the lie, "so I went back to see if I heard it right but obviously, obviously it was nothing." My sentence fizzled out with an unconvincing laugh as I fumed with embarrassment.

Jae's face went strangely slack. "What did you hear?"

For a moment I stood paralyzed, unnerved by her reaction, and unable to think of what I should do next. Then, as I so often did, I took the easy way out.

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head. "I've just had such a crazy day, that's all. I'm sorry."

Jae's eyes narrowed again, in precisely the same way I'd seen them do once before, and neither of us said anything for a minute. Then, she broke the silence.

"Do you want to come up to my place for a cup of tea?"

I almost burst into tears on the spot. It was the single nicest sentence I'd ever heard anyone say to me.

Meeting Jae

“So, do you treat everyone who comes running wildly through the mill this nicely?” I laughed nervously as we climbed to the third floor of Building 1, Al following eagerly behind me with his tail whipping wildly as if this unexpected field trip beyond the second floor was the most astonishing thing ever to happen to him.

“Not everyone,” replied Jae with a confounding smirk. “Just some of them.”

“Why me?”

“You seem interesting,” she said with a nonchalance that made it sound convincingly like a normal response. I tried for a few seconds to think of a response, and failing to, fell silent. After an awkward, silent walk down the interminably long hallway, she stopped in front of Apartment 312, opened its door, and motioned me in ahead of her. “What kind of tea would you like? Black, green, chamomile?”

“Um, green I guess... thank you!” I choked out. Anything that wasn’t stale coffee water would be a significant improvement over the norm.

312. She lived directly above me. I hadn’t even considered that we might live in the same building, but it made sense now that I thought about it. I lowered myself gently onto her couch—her wonderfully warm, soft couch—and performed the most natural-looking stretch I could muster as I looked around her living room. God, imagine having a couch in your apartment? This was luxurious.

To my left, Janelle Mon  e’s face emerged from a veil of diamonds on an off-white poster with big, blocky letters spelling out *Dirty Computer Tour 2018*. On my other side, none other than Bright Mill itself emerged from the center of town in a richly detailed illustration, labeled in flowery script across the bottom as *Brightville - 1889*. I recognized the illustration from a rather

shabby print I'd seen in the Building 19 history exhibit, as well as countless pixelated, watermarked versions of it in Google Images results, though reproduced here with vastly more clarity than I'd ever seen before. That was a curious combination of posters I'd be willing to bet didn't exist in another room.

"I never asked your dog's name!" exclaimed Jae over her shoulder, the clink of an intricately carved iron kettle hitting the stove jolting me back to the present. "Who is this handsome guy? Let's get you some water!"

"This is Al," I said, "short for Alabaster." I performed a split-second calculation, and then resolved to continue: "Or more recently, Alabastard."

Jae snorted uproariously as she filled a bowl from the tap and brought it over. "I love that!"

A tiny smile crept across my lips. "He's the only person keeping me company here. We just moved in. Had kind of a nasty breakup. I was only able to bring a few things with me." I felt her smile fade as quickly as it had appeared.

"Oh no, I'm sorry to hear that," said Jae. "Well, at least you got Al!"

I laughed a little without thinking. "Trust me, my ex wouldn't have wanted him anyway."

Jae's smile had disappeared altogether. "He didn't even put up a fight?"

"Probably would have put up a fight about the furniture, the TV... basically everything else, before this guy."

"Hm," she grunted.

"What?"

"I guess I just have an inherent distrust of anyone who wouldn't want to keep their own dog."

“He was actually a good guy,” I countered quickly. “He just didn’t really vibe with Al. And beyond that, we just... wanted different things out of life, I guess.”

Jae was focused intently on the stove at the moment, chewing her lip.

In an effort to find a way out of the conversation, my eyes landed on a small decorative table on the opposite wall, on top of which sat a record player, with an album propped up against it. The words *Sister Rosetta Tharpe - Godmother of Rock n’ Roll* were scrawled in curly yellow script over a photo of a woman in a sparkling gown clutching an early electric guitar. Just in front of these was a small picture frame with a tiny, time-yellowed photograph that looked absolutely ancient, depicting an old man in an army uniform.

“Who’s this?” I asked casually, gesturing toward the photo.

“Oh, that’s Grandpa Fred. Well, that’s what we call him anyway,” she said, her smile returning as she picked up the photo. “He’s actually my great-great-great... great-grandfather, I think. He was in the Massachusetts 54th, the first black regiment in the civil war. 1863, same year the mill was built,” she added with a nod towards the ceiling. “The uniform on his back was made right here.”

“Wow,” I said breathlessly. “That’s amazing.”

A shrill whistle filled the air as steam began shooting from the kettle on the stove, and Jae walked back into the kitchen.

“So you work for the mill?” I called over to her.

“Technically I work for a company that works for the mill. I’m the Senior Preservation Architect,” she sang with false pomposity, before snorting a little. “Which is a stupid title because I’m not actually an architect, and ‘senior’ just means ‘only’. Basically I’m just a historical advisor. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has me here to make sure the

property managers stick to the historical guidelines and don't do any dumb shit that would lose them their funding. Any remodeling or renovation work they do, they have to consult with me and I have to sign off on the final plans. It was a ton of work, those first few years of the big renovation. Digging up old photographs, researching period-correct building materials... 'Course now there's only one building left to finish, but they are taking their sweet-ass time with it, so I guess my job is safe for now. Other than that, most of my job is telling maintenance they can't do things because it violates the guidelines, and getting yelled at for it. I'm not very well liked around here," she added with another snort.

"Historical advisor, huh? You're very... uh..."

"...young to be a historical advisor?" finished Jae, taking the words out of my mouth at precisely the same moment as my brain scrambled to claw them back.

"No!" I lied. "I just..."

"Don't worry, it's the first thing literally everyone says. People always picture an old wrinkly guy with a tweed cap or something. Like you had to be around when the building was built in order to follow a set of rules. Well guess what honey, I don't think anyone from 1863 is around to do this job. Actually," she added with a derisive laugh, "the oldest people here would only remember it from the 60s and 70s, and that's the generation that really ruined this place anyway."

"Oh yeah," I chimed in absentmindedly, "Building 28 and 29 and all that."

Jae tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. "That's a very specific bit of knowledge. Did I somehow find a fellow Bright Mill nerd?"

"Not really," I said quickly, shaking my head, "I mean, probably nowhere near as much as you. In a good way, I mean! I just fall down rabbit holes sometimes. On the internet. That

does sound like a super cool job though! How did you get into that line of work?”

“You know, I was just trying to figure that out myself,” she said, looking toward the ceiling. “I did have a little picture book about a mill back when I was a little kid. *The Mill on Blue Hill*. Maybe it was that. Well, after high school I followed my first love out west, and got a few cool jobs out there. I had my dream job for a hot second, worked at the Winchester House. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of—”

I nearly spit out a mouthful of tea. “The Winchester Mystery House?” God forbid she ever saw the Winchester House document in my Things folder. I buckled inwards, suddenly feeling like a child meeting a rock star.

“Yeah! I got a job as a tour guide for a year, which was pretty cool, and I was meeting and greeting all the right people. I swear I had my hooks in to work my way up to a job where I could really make a difference. Lots of mysteries that couldn’t be answered without access to things that weren’t public, and I knew I was just the person that could do it.”

She trailed off for a moment, a deafening silence filling the space between her cup of tea and mine, until she began pouring again. “And then the pandemic,” she continued with a sigh, like everyone who has ever sighed those words. “And they let most of us go. Got a job at one of those historic reenactment villages out in the middle of nowhere, but that was awful.” She made a face like she’d just tasted something vile. “Started to feel like I was living in a damn cartoon. I was in a bad place. Had a nasty breakup of my own, and decided to move back to the east coast, and Bright Mill had literally just started accepting residents. They only had Building 1 renovated at that time, they were still working on the rest. So my dream job basically found me.”

I was still bobbing in the warm rippling waters of all that had just been revealed to me, bobbing and spinning like an otter in a lagoon, until I was brought back to the present moment

by a question that bubbled to the surface.

“How much do you know about Debra?” I asked with as much nonchalance as I could muster.

Jae gave a little snort that assured me I wasn’t out of line. “More than I’d like to. She brings the drama with her everywhere she goes. I think the whole office feels like we were there for her divorce proceedings earlier this year. Guy didn’t have a penny to his own name and tried to walk away with half of Debra’s wealth.”

“Well, that’s just it. I just thought it was... impressive,” I continued cautiously, “that she can afford that Bentley and that Coach bag on whatever they pay as an apartment leasing manager.”

“Oh, it’s a Coach bag this week? Last week it was the Kate Spade. Good question though. Debra,” she said, leaning towards me and speaking slowly, “lives on her *in-her-it-ance*.”

“Inheritance?” I asked. “From what?”

“Haven’t figured that one out yet,” said Jae, shaking her head. “All that woe-is-me oversharing, and I haven’t been able to figure that one out. But I’d love to know.”

“Why does she still work here if she has that kind of inheritance?”

“That’s been *my* biggest question,” said Jae, with an excited air-jab toward my chest. “I’d say she must like the job, but she sure doesn’t act like it. She does what she has to do, but she sure hasn’t spent any time scratching the surface of the place’s history. I think that space in her brain is too full of square footage and monthly rent figures. Well, let’s just say, I’m not here because of the people,” said Jae with a subtle smirk. “I’m here for the mill.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “It’s a hell of a place. Debra doesn’t know what she’s missing. They don’t know how lucky they are to have people like you working here.”

Jae took another sip of tea and looked up at the ceiling. “It’s a really interesting dilemma to pin down exactly what the original heart and soul of a building is, when it’s one like this that’s evolved so much over the years. Like, of course we approved reversals of some of the later alterations, like those ugly wooden additions, restoring the windows that got turned into exhaust outlets, walls that got holes punched in them to run wires through, things that were obviously poor uses of the existing building. But not everything is black and white like that, a lot of times it’s tough to know where the line is—what counts as an alteration that should stay, and what’s an alteration that should go? At what point was the mill last truly... *itself*, and not some mangled and altered version of itself?”

That last line seemed to have a ghostly echo as it hung in the air. I felt a small knot tighten in my stomach. I gazed down into the shimmering, warped reflection of my face in the cup of green tea I was drinking, and exhaled through my nose at it, fogging up my glasses slightly. At what point was *anything* last truly itself, and not a mangled and altered version of itself?

Jae noticed the pause. “Ugh, I’m sorry. That was super boring.”

“Not at all!” I exclaimed, jerkily lowering the cup from my lips and shaking the fog from my head. “Honestly, it’s so cool whenever anyone devotes their whole life to something, with a passion like that. That was me for a while,” I added absentmindedly, “with music and art.”

“Was?” asked Jae. “What happened?”

I frowned, analyzing the past few years of my life and wondering how to best answer that. “I guess I just... got really into my career, a few years back.”

“What’s that?”

“Finance.” The word fell from my mouth and flopped to the ground like a wet noodle.

And Jae was worried she'd be the boring one.

"Oh," she replied, clearly doing her best to sound interested. "How did you get into that?"

I paused again. "I guess I just wanted to build a solid career that I could one day feed a family on. My ex got me a few good jobs at his family's firm. It sounds so stupid next to the cool stuff you're doing, though." And it was true. I was rapidly second-guessing every decision I'd made leading up to this moment.

"I'm sure you can do wonderful things in finance! I mean, I couldn't do what I'm doing without finance people to make it all happen, right?"

"Sure," I mumbled. Shit, that probably came off as rude.

"You sure you're not just indulging me?" Jae asked.

"Not at all!" I spluttered. I really thought it was the other way around.

"Not a lot of people think a job in historical preservation is more interesting than a flashy finance job."

"I'm really interested in history, too!" I added awkwardly. "I've actually been working on a bit of a research project on the mill myself."

"No way! Could I take a look at it? If I may be so forward?"

"Sure!" I blurted.

Oh Ava, you moron. You naive, bumbling moron. That's from the infamous Aspergers Files, and now you're going to show it to someone whose actual literal job is historical research? Nice going.

Unable to backtrack now, I took out my phone and opened Google Docs as Jae brought over her laptop. With one weak tap I surrendered, and the link was AirDropped to her computer.

"Thanks!" she said brightly. She lowered her glasses and settled in for a few minutes of

reading that I was fairly sure would kill any chance we had of becoming serious friends. I sipped my tea helplessly, embarrassment burning inside me like a furnace, until she finished reading.

Finally, she looked up. The look on her face was flat, without even a hint of a polite smile. Oh god, here it was. What was it going to be? A stilted “It’s good”? A little pat on the back? A gentle “Needs some work”? Lay it on me, professional woman. Tell me how stupid it was.

“You did hear it,” she said bluntly.

I was so taken aback I couldn’t think of anything else to say than “What?”

“In Building 11. You heard an argument in the conference room about the fire in Building 1. And whether to do anything for the families of the workers that burned to death.”

After a few moments of opening and closing my mouth like a goldfish, the only response that made its way to my mouth was... “But the conference room was empty.”

“I know,” she said simply.

“And they were talking like it was...”

“1921.”

I sat there, still not sure what to do except stare at her.

“Are you going to ask me if you overheard a conversation from the past?” she said.

“Yes,” I said meekly. “But I mean... how would that be possible?”

“I don’t know,” said Jae. “But it keeps happening. Conversations from behind a wall. Silhouettes behind a window. Visions through the crack in a door. I can never tell when they’re going to be there.” She gulped. “I think they happen more often at night. But that argument about the fire... that one happens during the day too.”

“You mean... that same argument’s happened before?”

“I must have heard it fifty times now. Word for word. Never anywhere near that loud and clear, though. That’s when I knew something was up. That’s when I knew you heard it too. No one else has ever reacted to it before.”

“I just can’t bring myself to believe in ghosts,” I said. “Do you?”

“No,” she said immediately. “But...”

I could see a whole mill’s worth of gears turning behind her narrowed eyes. For a moment I almost wondered if she would ever respond at all. Then, with a terpsichorean terseness that seemed to chill the room’s temperature by ten degrees, she said simply:

“Energy doesn’t disappear.”

A thick silence followed. “We definitely need to look deeper into this, right?” I blurted. “I mean, we can’t just pretend this isn’t happening. We have to... like... investigate, somehow. Right?”

“When I first moved here, I tried to figure it out on my own,” said Jae softly, shaking her head. “But I hit a wall pretty fast. I’ve spent a lot more time trying to convince myself I didn’t hear these things than trying to actually figure them out. I got rid of most of the records I made of what I’ve heard or seen, or when or where... I mean... it just makes no sense.”

“Well...” I looked helplessly around the room, unable to believe what I was hearing. “What was the best theory you came up with?” I asked.

“Nothing really. It’s really far-fetched. I don’t think it’s anything.”

“Lay it on me,” I said. “Whatever you’ve come up with is better than nothing. Which is what I have.”

“It seems like some kind of shadow of the past reflected onto the present. I don’t think it’s anything we can directly interact with, because it’s not really there. But clearly only certain

people can see it.”

“It depends on the observer,” I offered.

“Depends on the observer,” she muttered to herself. Then again, slightly louder,

“Depends on the observer! That’s right!”

“What?”

Jae rose quickly from the couch and walked over to a closet door, which she opened and began rustling through what sounded like boxes of papers.

“Are you familiar with quantum superposition?”

I screwed up my face as if I was genuinely trying to remember what quantum superposition was, and not just waiting for her to explain it to me like a baby. “Refresh me.”

Jae closed the closet door and returned with a battered old folder filled with a chaotic stack of loose-leaf notebook paper. She peeled back a few, then began speaking, perhaps reading something from a paper inside.

“In a quantum superposition, something exists in two different states at the same time, and only resolves fully into one state based on how it’s observed. As in, these echoes we’re seeing are trapped in some kind of in-between state between the past and the present, and only solidifies into one or the other based on how it’s observed. And, for some reason, who it’s observed by,” she added. “Obviously not everyone is observing these events.”

“How many other people have seen this before?” I asked.

“Nobody,” she said, and swallowed. “As far as I know, nobody except you and me. I really thought I was going insane.”

“How is it possible that we’re the only two people who have ever experienced this?” I asked breathlessly.

“Well I have two possible answers. First, nobody else observes the mill the *way* you and I do, at least judging by your document there. Everybody else just kind of passes it by. Everyone sees it as just bricks and mortar. Even in my department, everyone else seems to just be obsessed with the rule book. They don’t think of the mill as though it’s... a living entity, in the context of its past, its present, its role as an institution inextricably woven into the lives of thousands of people at any one time, probably millions across the centuries. An entity with some other kind of energy pervading the structure of reality. It’s a different kind of observation we have, seeing something as a holistic entity, looking for traces of the past in every shadow, the way we’re always trying to put it together in both the past and present.” She paused for a moment to catch her breath, then continued with a more sober tone. “And secondly... even if someone else did see or hear those things, they’d never tell anyone, for fear of sounding crazy.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you,” I admitted. “I didn’t even really mean to.”

“Neither was I,” she said solemnly. “I’m glad you did. Even if it was accidental.”

The two of us sat in silence for a while.

“You’re right,” she said, looking down. “We have to find out what’s going on. I can’t just go back to trying to ignore it. I have to start researching again. Even if I have to start at square one.”

“Well, I’m determined to find out if you are,” I said confidently. “Want to meet up later and discuss it in some more detail?”

“I get off work around 5:30 most days. Want to meet here tomorrow at 6?”

“Sounds great! I’ll be here!”

Part of me felt like I’d just tricked her into hanging out with me. But part of me really didn’t even mind that. She was the first friend I had that wasn’t Nate’s in almost a decade. I

deserved this.

Oh, and I suppose we should probably figure out what the hell is going on with the mill, too.

As I hesitantly stepped out into the hallway and closed Jae's door behind me, I noticed a curious little detail I'd missed on my rather frazzled way in: a small whiteboard was stuck to the front of her door, along with a magnetic dry-erase marker. Apart from a tiny "Love you! - mom" written in the lower right corner, the entirety of its surface was taken up by one goofy message written out in curly script:

Bright Mill says my puns have cotton out of hand

Suppressing a smile, I chewed on my lip as a debate raged heatedly in my head over whether I should do what I wanted to do.

No, I shouldn't. Too embarrassing. No way.

Yes. Yes way. Why not? I was riding high at the moment, and no one could take that away from me.

I bit my lip, gently erased Jae's message, quietly removed the marker's cap, and wrote in its place:

Wool you be my friend?

- A

As quickly as my body would let me, I stuck the marker back to the whiteboard and

power-walked back down the hall, smiling for the first time in quite a while.

The Tour Guide / 4A

I never dreamt in a million years that I could be excited to get up at six o'clock in the morning.

And yet, as the first confused shards of grayish sunlight began trickling into the room, the sound of my alarm did not trigger the familiar response of throwing my shoulder out by lunging for my phone in a white-hot panic and blindly fumbling with it until a finger hit the snooze button. The feeling was very strange—for the first time, the earliness of the hour struck me as a positive thing, like there was more time in which to potentially soak up the thing I was looking forward to. It evoked blurry memories of early childhood, when every morning waking up felt like another chance to explore more of this bright, shining new world, rather than another day pushing the same old boulder up the same old hill.

I looked groggily outside. It was not the cold, suffocating gray I'd grown so accustomed to. It was a warm, hazy gray with a faint tickle of static to it, like watching an old flash bulb fire in super-slow-motion, the first little sparks writhing eagerly on their many criss-crossed filaments in the brief moment before the entire sky was to be lit up in full.

After a highly uncharacteristic full half-hour spent doing my makeup in the mirror, a confused glance from Al, and a solemn promise that I'd be back for walkies by the normal time, I made my way eagerly down the stairwell and pushed open the back door, where Jae and I had planned to meet up.

The smell of burning outside was starting to feel normal. I still tried to steal glimpses of the passing faces around me, hoping that at least one person might display some hint that they smelled it too—but nobody did. It was getting easier to ignore now, and I subconsciously prepared for it every time I stepped outside just as naturally as one shields their eyes from the

sun.

I took out my phone and quickly scrolled through my Notes app, where I'd jotted down a list of questions for Jae to avoid the inevitable brainfreeze that would occur if I tried to remember them on the spot. Whether or not I'd actually get around to asking them would be determined by how awkward the vibes were at their designated asking time.

Minutes trickled by. I waited. And I waited some more. 6:05. 6:07. No Jae yet.

Slowly but surely, the weight began dropping inside my stomach again, pulling all my other organs down with it. Realization washed over me like a cold shower. Of course Jae wasn't coming. Why on earth would she want to see me again? She met me when I was in a blind panic, then I had the nerve to ask to hang out again. How desperate was that? Of course she wasn't coming, you idiot. She probably just said that to get you off her back. I guess it had been nice of her to string me along for the rest of the night, rather than telling me to the face that she thought I was—

“Ava!”

With an immense sigh of relief, I saw Jae walking around from Building 11. “Jae!” I said back stupidly.

“Sorry I'm late, someone put my key ring back in the wrong spot. You sure you still want this tour?”

“I sure do!” I replied, trying not to sound too manically excited.

“All right then! Well, I only have a little bit until I have to get to work, so it'll be the abbreviated tour. So I guess, if we're going to start chronologically, we start at Building 8.”

“Why was it called Building 8 if it was the first building?”

Jae laughed. “Don't get me started.”

I laughed back. “Come on, I’d love to get you started!”

Jae looked back at me with an inscrutable half-smile.

“I mean—I would love for you to—you know, tell me about—”

Jae snorted.

“—the building numbers,” I finished weakly, my face suddenly red-hot.

“I got you, I got you,” laughed Jae. The way the morning sunlight sparkled and danced in her gold-flecked green eyes reminded me of some dark vault being opened to reveal a pile of emeralds. “Well, if you must know, the building numbers have given us plenty of trouble over the years. Basically they were numbered in the order they were built, but with a ton of exceptions. 1, 2, and 3 have always been that. But that’s about it. Building 4 used to be that courtyard behind Building 3.”

I turned around and frowned at the pointy building I knew as today’s Building 4. “But what about—”

“Used to be called Building 28,” said Jae, expecting the question. “At some point after the collapse of the original Building 4, a new owner took over and decided to renumber half the buildings.”

I paused, wondering if I knew where this was going. “...and the Building 28 that was where the dog park is now?”

“Same story. There was no more Building 28, so when that was built it became Building 28. It just goes deeper and deeper. Reason #900 why research on this place is so hard. Reason #900 why they needed someone like me. They wanted that sweet historic building renovation money from the government, but couldn’t even begin to untangle its history enough to get historically accurate plans approved.”

“So... Building 8?”

Jae cackled. “I’m sorry, you’ve already got me going on tangents about work. I’m the worst. Well, this wall is the oldest one on the property. This building was here before it was even Bright Mill, back when another little mill was here on the property in the early 1800s. It was the waterwheel house. See this big arch near the ground here?”

A huge, sweeping arch was visible in the brickwork, probably 20 feet from side to side but rising no more than a few feet from the ground, its entirety filled in with newer brick from the other side.

“Where we’re standing, right now, used to be water.”

I looked down stupidly at the ground, as if expecting to see water beneath me.

“The water used to flow down from there—” Jae motioned towards the far end of the complex, where the “face” on the back of Building 3 lived—“and flowed down through this building, which was suspended above the waterway, where it turned big waterwheels in this building and powered the original mill. By the time the Bright brothers tore down that old mill and built this one, it had fallen into disrepair. It actually looked just like this for a while. Until they decided to use its bones for a machine shop, at which point with 7 other buildings completed, they called it Building 8. Keeping the steam engines running was a full-time job, so they were constantly fixing little gadgets and machining new parts in this building.”

“So in its past life it drove the whole mill, then in its next life it was crucial to the survival of the mill even when a new technology came along and supplanted it.”

“You get it! So yeah, that lasted for about 50 years, until it fell into disrepair again. By this time the Brights were long gone and the new owners were using new machinery brought in by external companies. They’d just call in that company to come fix it whenever something

broke. There was no call for on-site fixing anymore. So they literally just let it rot here. Which is weird to think about now, but when you're driven solely by money, and it would cost money to tear down a decaying building, well, you just don't do it. That was a real theme here for a few decades. Actually, they even put a temporary building here during the late sixties, at the very end of its life as a mill. Just a shitty little wooden office building, you can actually see the outline very faintly, right there." She pointed to a faint white outline, about half the original building's size, on the far wall. "They basically just put it right over the rubble of the old one and used it as an office until the thing fell apart again."

"So this building has had like three lives," I said. "Each one shorter and sadder than the last."

"Yeah," said Jae meaningfully, looking at me deeply. She seemed to be searching me for understanding, finding it, and drinking it in. "It's exactly like that."

"What exactly is this... this..." I gestured toward the unusually-shaped wall of building 8 that was somehow also not a wall but a tunnel that turned 45 degrees as it continued past the front of Building 8 and formed an archway over where we were currently walking, and finally terminated at the front of Building 9.

"That's a very good question. It's one of the mill's most unusual architectural features. It started out as the east wall of Building 8, until the Knights bought it and built the first boiler house right around here." Jae motioned toward the empty space between Buildings 8, 9 and 1. "The boiler house shared this wall with it, so it became taller, and juttied out a little—this was like a little overhang at the front of the boiler house." She gestured toward the part of it that juttied out over the side of Building 8. "Then by 1890 the complex had expanded so much they needed more power, so they tore down that boiler house and built a new one, Building 9." She

gestured toward Building 9. “And that big wall, previously shared between 8 and the old boiler house, was repurposed to carry the main steam pipe running from the new boiler house into Building 21, where the steam engine itself was located.”

“A whole brick tunnel and archway just to carry a pipe?” I said.

“The most important pipe in the whole complex,” she answered. “Anything goes wrong with that pipe, the steam engine doesn’t get any steam, and the whole mill shuts down. It was like the place’s aorta.”

“Makes sense. I noticed the little windows in the top of the archway, but I was like, there’s no way there’s enough room in there to be a footbridge. That tunnel must be, what, 4 feet tall max?”

“Well, technically it *was* used as a bridge between buildings. Its primary purpose was carrying the steam pipe, but if something went wrong in the boiler house and it was snowing outside, you bet those mechanics were crawling through that tunnel, inches from an 18-inch pressurized steam pipe, to get into Building 9 without going outside.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“It was probably the least dangerous thing they’d do all day,” laughed Jae. “But yes, workers would get severely burned doing exactly that. Wow, I never thought I’d meet anyone who cared about this stuff.”

I looked back up at Jae. Her dark silhouette clashed brilliantly against the sun, like a solid, ink black stamp on a world of vague pencil scribbles.

“Oh! Ava!” Jae exclaimed, looking around at me with such sudden conviction that my heart nearly stopped. “I meant to tell you. I think I know where Debra’s money comes from. I probably should have figured it out forever ago.”

I screwed up my face in confusion. “Debra? What does she have to do with anything?”

“Her big drama in the office this week was how difficult it’s been to legally change her name back after the divorce.”

“And?”

“To Nevins. Debra Nevins.”

A second passed while the cogs turned in my head. “You mean like...”

“Yep, like the conversation from Building 11.”

I scrunched up my face. “And you’re sure it’s the same...”

“Yep, I looked it up. Bright Street Capital is a subsidiary of a company that goes back in a long line of Nevinses. Even when the lease on the mill and the company passed through a bunch of different owners after its heyday, the deed for the building remained in her family. How did I not put that together earlier?”

I chewed my lip, then asked the question that was begging to be asked. “Do you think that’s the reason she never seems to have any information about the mill’s past? Maybe she isn’t as dumb as she looks, and she’s actually trying to protect her family’s legacy?”

Jae raised her eyebrows. “That would be a hell of a twist. She sure fooled me into thinking she was a shallow, ditzzy old bag showing up to collect a paycheck and protect an investment. Sorry,” she added quickly. “That was terrible.”

There she was again, silhouetted against the burning sun. She was so real, so solid. Her pyramid earrings swung gently in the nonexistent breeze, scattering the sunlight as they did so. I couldn’t hold it back, it slipped right out. “I love your earrings,” I blurted. God, I hope she didn’t think that was too weird.

“Thanks!” she said, “They were a Christmas gift from my dad.”

I almost stopped in my tracks, but caught myself. I think Jae noticed the little stumble.

“You all right?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said flatly.

What right did that sentence have to slap me across the face like that? A fog started descending silently over me. I could feel how wrong it was, but that didn’t stop it. It pissed me off to no end that he had that kind of power over me.

“I don’t get along well with my dad,” I said simply.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “My dad, um... he passed last year. Felt like we were just getting to know each other.”

What was this, a contest? God, what a luxury it must be to have your dad disappear on good terms, with such finality and certainty. What a luxury it must be to have your pain wrapped up in such a neat little package with a neat little bow on top. What a luxury it must be to have the kind of pain with a simple identifiable cause; the kind of pain everyone can rally behind, the kind of pain that even if it rips you apart, you can point to the cause and say, that’s why. What a luxury it must be, to be haunted by a monster you understand, a monster with a one-word name like Death, instead of living in crippling, never-ending confusion while you wait for the monster you used to love to strike again when you least expect it. God forbid you only have fond memories left. God forbid you are now free to rest in the comfort of these memories any time you want. How greedy must someone be to want more than that? You could still have the nightmare going on today. And you’re upset because you only have that squishy little pillow of fond memories to rest your head on, while for someone else the waking nightmare still continues.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring down the mood.”

Jae's hesitant words punched a hole in the fog, and for a moment I could see through it clearly.

"That's all right," I said mechanically.

I allowed myself a glance over at Al as we walked. I saw the furrow in his brow and the confusion in his eyes as we walked, as if he was silently judging me, as if he could hear every single word I had just thought to myself.

Of course she didn't mean it like that. What the fuck was wrong with me? I was bound to screw up this friendship within a week. I'd bet big money on it.

"Sorry, I was miles away," I said with a forced little chuckle. Jae smiled just as mechanically as I'd spoken to her.

As we rounded the final corner, the most curious building of all came into sight—the one with the boarded-up windows, its second and third stories protruding oddly from the first, one corner of the huge overhang supported by a single metal pole, and the other blending into Building 6 where the two buildings were conjoined at an angle. It looked like the building had been battered and bruised and was now leaning on a crutch as it healed. The first floor entrance, consisting of a single bricked-up window and a locked door, was cast permanently in the inky shadow of the overhang. The door itself was recessed even further into the already-recessed ground floor, preceded by a very old and uneven set of three stone steps, making the entrance look as though it had gradually sunken deeper and deeper into the facade to hide itself from view.

"How about that building?" I said hopefully.

Jae's face fell a little. "That one's off limits."

"Why?"

Jae took a deep breath, shifting back into tour guide gear. "The structure wasn't deemed

suitable for rehabilitation. Of course they could have done a full gut and rebuild, but for whatever reason it was deemed not feasible with this building. Probably had something to do with the conditions that led Building 4 to collapse all those years ago.” She motioned to the rocky courtyard on the other side of the building, which must once have been a very large building indeed.

“So it’s just empty?”

“Maintenance uses the ground floor for storage, I think. Just boring stuff, ladders, leaf blowers, snow blowers, that kind of thing.”

“You *think*?” I prodded. “So you’ve never actually been in there?”

“Nope,” she said, and even as she said it I thought I detected a note of regret in her voice.

“Well... *could* we go in?”

Jae sighed heavily, the same way I frequently did when my inner adult was about to censor my inner child. “We shouldn’t. They really didn’t touch this one, so it really might not be structurally sound. Probably has asbestos in it for all I know. If something happened to you in there, my job would be on the line.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.”

Jae paused again, trying to give me ample opportunity to change my mind. “You’re probably going to be disappointed,” she pressed on. “Really, it’s just going to be an empty building with some ladders and paint cans.”

As we approached the door, the protruding ledge above cloaked us in shadow. The awkward stone steps leading to the doorway caused us to stoop as we climbed them. Jae pulled out a small keyring, found the key she was looking for, and inserted it into the lock on a shiny silver door handle that clashed awkwardly with the aging, sagging door to which it had been

affixed, its forest-green paint flaking off in various places to reveal patches of dark, aged wood that was surely several times older than I was.

The first thing to hit me was the smell. I couldn't put my finger on it, whatever it was that made a building smell old. Instead of the aggressively neutral smell of the other renovated buildings—one part fresh paint, one part Windex, one part Febreze, one part empty void—it smelled distinctly like wood, with a touch of mildew, perhaps a little oil and grease. My heart leapt at the tiny sliver of the building just visible beyond Jae's head, though I couldn't quite decipher what I was seeing. In the thin stripe of sunlight spilling into the darkened building it just looked like a jumble of metal somethings. Even if it was nothing special, it still felt special. Just days ago I was trying my hardest to picture what was behind that creepy door, and suddenly someone like Jae had popped into my life with the literal key to finding out.

I realized I was staring at the back of her head as she fumbled with the lock. For some reason, at that moment, the question that had been nagging at me all day bubbled to the surface and came out.

“So... why did you take me in, anyway?”

Jae burst out laughing. “Take you in? Like you're a stray cat?”

“Well... you know what I mean.” I blushed. “I mean... why didn't you just run away?”

“Well...” she began, looking toward the ground. “I guess I just—”

Then suddenly, with the *snick* of a key leaving its lock and the oaky thud of an old wooden door, we were shrouded in a complete, perfect, heavy darkness.

“Shit,” muttered Jae. “Maybe I should leave this cracked a bit, so we can see what we're doing.” Then there was a quiet jingling of keys. Then another. But no crack of light. “Shit,” she repeated, more urgently this time. “I think it's jammed.”

I took a few ginger steps forward, and immediately banged my foot against something metal. I turned blindly to my left, hoping to avoid the object, and walked face-first into a tangled mass of metal bars. I bit my lip and swore under my breath. A few blind gropes in the air seemed to confirm that I'd walked into a massive pile of junk.

"Are you okay?" asked Jae?

"Yeah! I'm fine," I said quickly, feeling what seemed like a stack of metal folding chairs teetering atop a stack of more unrecognizable metal objects. "Where are you?"

"I'm—"

Suddenly a gentle breath warmed my forehead. Some stray speck of light that had managed to leak into the blackness glanced off a golden polyhedron hovering millimeters from my face, and like the afterimage of sunlight when you close your eyes, the image of a gold pyramid earring burned itself fleetingly into the blackness of my vision. I felt lightheaded and my head swam, as though I was suddenly floating in outer space.

"Ooh, sorry!" said Jae, backing away. "I can't see shit."

"It's all right," I stuttered.

More crashing noises came from "I didn't expect it to be this... this..."

"Trashed?" I suggested, as Jae's periodic crashing noises seemed to move further away.

Just then, I heard a spine-tingling noise. A muffled howl of some kind, though whether from a person, or a dog, or a baby, I wasn't sure. I also wasn't sure where it came from—it sounded relatively close, yet impossibly distant at the same time. I was just straining my ears to see if the noise would come again, when the silence was broken by a much closer voice.

"Ava?" called Jae. "I think the other exit's over here. Are you following me?"

There it was again. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the brief echo of the indistinct

noise, as if that would make a difference in this pitch black room. It seemed to be coming from inside the building, though maybe from another section.

Thud. My knee hit something cold, metal, and very hard. I groped in the dark as my kneecap rang with pain, and found a spindly steel structure of some kind, sprouting from the ground directly in front of me. A cautious step forward and more nervous blind groping confirmed that the offending structure was a spiral staircase.

“Ava?” called Jae again, from further away this time. “Was that you? Are you okay?”

“Yes!” I called. “I just found a ladder, I was going to see what’s on the second floor.”

“Please don’t,” answered Jae immediately, “I told you it’s probably not safe.”

“I’m just going up for a second,” I announced, wondering as I said it where all this confidence was coming from.

There was a pause, then Jae’s voice rang out from the darkness again. “Okay, but please be careful. I’m not liable for anything that happens while I’m not here, okay?”

I nodded, then, realizing my stupidity, called back “Yes! Have a good day at work!”

The blackness to which my eyes had just become accustomed was suddenly lifted, as a shard of sunlight spilled into the room. For a second, through the gaps between the rusty metal steps in front of me, I could see Jae’s distant silhouette against the harsh light of the open door she’d found at the other end of the room. “Bye Ava,” she called, then closed the door.

Part of me sank slightly. But not enough to distract me from the noise I’d heard earlier. As the glowing rectangle of the doorway shrank to a thin sliver of light and then disappeared entirely, the noise came again. And this time, as my eyes once again adjusted to the oppressive blackness surrounding me, something else became visible. Very faintly, a sort of orange-red glow was filtering down the stairwell from the floor above me.

My head swam and I felt a sudden pang of nausea as my head passed above the ceiling and entered the dank air of the second floor. Smells and sounds immediately swam around me that I had been completely unaware of on the floor below. A tight, rattling breathing, uneven inhales and exhales from what sounded like a very unhealthy pair of lungs indeed, became almost instantly audible, obscured slightly by the soft but constant hum of some sort of machinery. Finally, even my sense of vision leapt unexpectedly back into action, as the source of the faint orange-red glow suddenly crystallized into view. A thin, horizontal sliver of blazing, fiery, molten red somewhere on the far wall was dimly illuminating the rest of the floor, its angry glow rhythmically throbbing in time with the faint mechanical hum, its eye-searing brightness rendering everything in its immediate vicinity impossible to perceive as my eyes suddenly swam with painful throbbing spots. I blinked rapidly as my eyes began watering, a ghost of the painfully bright line slashing across my eyelids with each blink.

Another shuddering cry rent the dank air, now painfully close and completely unmuffled, nearly sending me tumbling down the stairs in shock. Then, finally, I saw something different than just darkness pierced by that blinding hair-thin line of fire. Something tangible, almost identifiable. And as they suddenly thrust their way at me through the darkness, hovering, shaking, wriggling, scarlet and black, crusty and bandaged, I had only a second to process what it was.

As the hands reached out to me from the darkness, fingertips blistered and blackened, filthy bandages trailing in their wake, I caught only a half-second glimpse of their owner. It was not a grotesque, evil face of the horror movie villain that might match the hands, but instead the tortured grimace of an innocent young man, terrified, pleading, eyes watering, biting his own lip to restrain from crying out into the darkness again. But it was too late. My body had already

processed its knee-jerk reaction and thrown itself backwards, screaming.

With a jolt I felt myself tumbling down the rusty spiral staircase, down into the blackness of the first floor. Unthinkingly, I blindly cast forward in the general direction I remembered seeing Jae leave through the side entrance, and stumbled painfully over something that could have been a lawnmower, biting down hard on my lip as I limped forward, one hand outstretched. Finally my hands hit a dusty wall, and by some miracle, after only a few seconds of blind groping, located the door handle and pulled it open.

Wobbling slightly as I descended the three steep steps with legs that suddenly felt weak, I lowered myself onto the last step, and sat there for a few minutes with my head in my hands. As my breathing slowed, I removed my head from my hands, leaned back, and gazed up at the second-floor overhang looming above me. My chest began tightening again as my eyes traced a crack in the concrete floor almost all the way from one side to the other. I blinked, and a wave of dizziness washed slowly over me. Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, I could swear I saw the hulking mass of concrete suddenly shift in place. My eyes darted instinctively to the metal pole that was holding it up. It wasn't there.

Wait... yes, it was. From my disorienting viewpoint, my eyes had gone to the wrong corner. Of course it was still there, you idiot.

I got up quickly, mechanically, from the stoop and began walking toward the brewery. I needed a drink.

Artifact: Building 4A Article

Bright Mill Near-Collapse Shakes Trust In New Owners

The Brightville Banner – March 7, 1946

BRIGHTVILLE, RI — A building at the Bright Mill and Bleachery suffered a severe structural fault on Tuesday evening that left one worker severely injured, and which many at the scene say could easily have been a fatal collapse. An extension of the second and third floors which protrudes over the building's entrance in a cantilevered overhang reportedly cracked and shifted in position during working hours, causing a large fracture through the entirety of the second floor and further damage to the entire building as machinery shifted suddenly. As a town almost solely in the employ of Bright Mill, this most recent event comes amidst Brightville's increasing frustration with new out-of-state leadership they consider sloppy, reckless, and profit-hungry.

The building in question, marked on plans as Building 4A, was one of the last additions to the mill to be overseen by the Bright Brothers before their passing. Originally constructed as part of a plan to link several smaller buildings along the riverfront into a continuous structure, it was modified numerous times by successive owners—modifications which many workers are blaming for the structural failure.

The late Maxwell Nevins' purchase of the property from the Brights' estate in 1920 created a minor fracas in Brightville when, citing a renewed focus on profitability, the adjoining Building 6 was gutted and converted to an extension of the production line, involving the immediate dismissal of the local seamstresses and artists previously working therein and the flattening of the building's iconic classical European facade to allow for stacked loading bays and a seamless merger with Building 4A.

Last year, third and current owner Checker Foxwin ordered the expansion of the Building

4A-6 complex once again, this time to accommodate the retrofitting of a singeing line—a row of newly-patented machines that repeatedly passes finished bolts of cloth over hot flame in order to burn off stray fibers and loose or frayed ends. These were deemed necessary after Foxwin’s first few months saw the installation of new lower-cost weaving equipment in the main body of the mill. When faced with the inability to expand the ground floor due to space requirements for loading and shipping equipment outside, Foxwin insisted the second and third floors of the building still be expanded, creating an overhang over the front entrance.

“There are so many ways this could have been averted,” says a source within the mill, speaking on condition of anonymity. “The decision to install a singeing line was already egg on Foxwin’s face, as it was clearly a concession to the poor quality of fabric being produced by his cheap new machinery, and must immediately have canceled out any cost savings he must have hoped for with said equipment. The decision to install this machinery at all, let alone to wrangle it into a building already weakened by previous reckless modifications and further modify that building in such an irresponsible way—these are desperate choices being made by somebody who neither knows nor cares how these structures were designed, someone who is making decisions from a desk a thousand miles away at the expense of both the mill itself and the workers within it. Let us not even broach the subject of the injuries and deaths already associated with these new singeing lines in their short time on the industrial market.”

In a brief statement yesterday evening, Foxwin placed the blame for the structural failure squarely on the contractors hired to complete the project, saying he was “profoundly disappointed” in the poor craftsmanship, and vowed to ensure the building’s stability with innovative structural improvements. Our source says the proposed structural improvements are limited to the installation of a metal pole on the corner of the overhang that suffered the failure.

The Bleachery

“Honey,” I called sweetly into the neighboring room.

No response.

“Honey?”

I walked into the den. Nate was sitting cross-legged on his bean-bag, Xbox controller in hand, messy black hair rendered even messier by the pair of headphones buried somewhere in it, bearded face glowing white in the light of the television in front of him, surrounded by an ethereal cloud of cherry-scented vape.

“Honey?” I repeated for a third time, this time accenting it with a wave and a subtle body motion.

He looked over, hit a button on the controller, and removed his headphones. “Yes?” he asked in a voice dripping with forced patience.

“Have you seen my black leather jacket?”

“Oh, yeah. I actually threw that in with the Goodwill stuff. Thought its time was probably up. Right?”

A moment passed as I processed this. “You gave away my jacket?”

“Sure!” he said. “It didn’t really fit with your new style anyway. It was some store brand and had those, like, stupid shoulder things, right?”

I frowned, trying to suppress the blow I felt at this reduction of my trusty, war-tested black leather jacket to one insulting sentence. It had been one of the only things I still owned from before I’d met Nate. Then a second thought occurred to me. “Is that also where my old Fyasko shirt went?”

Nate looked less sheepish about this one, practically snorting as he nodded. “Oh, yeah.

That one was pretty embarrassing, huh?”

I took a deep, calming breath. “Whatever. But... just... please don’t do that again.”

Nate looked up suddenly. “What?”

“Please don’t do that again. Without my permission.”

Nate put his headphones down again, looking disgusted. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re my parent and I’m a fucking child,” he fumed.

“I’m literally just saying, please don’t give away my things without asking, just because you don’t like how I look in them.”

Nate pivoted rather quickly to a kindly smile. “But you look so great now, the way you dress these days. You look so clean, so sharp. You look like you could *be* somebody. It suits you so well.”

“You just like it because it’s your... *type*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he spluttered. “Can I help if I’m attracted to intellig—”

“You’re not attracted to intelligence, you’re attracted to glasses!” I shouted.

“You think this is just about me?” Nate retorted, pretense dropped. “The whole world is watching, in this day and age. How you are seen by the world, that’s *everything*. You can’t walk around looking like a sloppy child, and expect to get promotions and—”

“You’re literally wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt and a pair of ratty ten-year-old headphones right now! How can you sit there and tell me how I should look when you’re sitting there looking like a—”

Bam. I woke up with a gasp, head pounding. My whole body seemed to ache with built-up tension as the footprint on the ceiling came into focus.

I couldn't even remember what the next word was in that scene. Part of me would genuinely be curious to go back in time and find out. Whatever it was, it was just close enough to the sudden end of the tape, so to speak, that it never made it into the memory banks, before the ringing, throbbing, the glowing spots...

Sometimes, fathers teach their kids how to swim by throwing them into the deep end. And they cry, but they learn. And when you're as dumb and childish as me, sometimes your own peers have to teach you how an adult should present themselves by throwing away stupid remnants of your past. As with most harsh realities in life, I learned the hard way.

As frustrated as I'd been with Nate, I couldn't deny he was right. That's the thing about love. You can be crying half the time, and it can still be good for you. And then you don't realize what you have until it's gone.

I missed the feeling of Nate's hand, caressing or otherwise. Even when he was mad, it was a luxury to have that energy there to bounce mine off of, to give me a sense of place, a sense of meaning, instead of having my energy evaporating out into this empty wasteland, with nothing to anchor it, nothing to define it. I was just a useless organic machine polluting the desolate wasteland of nothingness around me, uselessly and mindlessly burning fuel until I eventually broke down and stopped working. Say what you will about Nate, but he knew how to fix a machine.

I shook my head and wrenched myself out of bed. I needed to clear these thoughts from my head.

* * *

My heart thumped excitedly as the skybridge between Buildings 1 and 2 came into view.

I walked gently down the first few steps, and I felt that familiar freeing sensation wash

over me. It was as though the floor was glass: I immediately felt the lack of building around me, the lack of structure, the lack of definition. There was nothing but air beneath this floor, and I was suddenly suspended in this liminal space between two states of being.

Which building am I in? I asked myself excitedly, knowing the answer already.

Neither, answered my brain with a giggle.

I looked around and held my breath for a moment to make sure no one was coming down the hall to witness this moment of childish nonsense. Then I sat down softly on the middle step and peered out of the tiny window, at the random strangers passing by on the sidewalk, at the distant cars passing on the street, at the flocks of birds flying occasionally overhead.

Okay now, I was here for a reason. What did this look like in the past? I looked around excitedly at the skybridge, then ahead of me at what I could see of the winding Building 2 hallway, then behind me at the stairwell of Building 1. Who and what were going through here? Come on, leaking past. Do your thing. With visions of the past dancing through my head, I opened my eyes.

Nope, nothing. Just the same old cream-colored walls and nice new carpet that I'd just sat down on. Not a hint of mill equipment, or workers in overalls, or spools of cotton fabric being rolled from building to building. Same stupid winding apartment hallway. Damn it... how did this even work?

Oh well, I thought. Whatever was happening, if it was even real, I was stupid to think I'd be able to have any kind of control over it. And the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that whatever Jae and I thought we'd seen. Maybe it just felt good to relive a little of my childhood by playing pretend supernatural games. At the end of the day, that's probably all this was.

And you know what? That was okay. That would have to be okay. I could still take solace in the meditative peace I found here in this little skybridge, my little happy place.

I looked out the window at the passing cars. They always seemed to go so slowly from this far away.

Then, from the right edge of the window, something caught my eye—an old souped-up hot rod, passing by on Bright Street. It was a deuce coupe—a 1932 Ford, painted in the same saccharine cherry red as the one on Dad’s calendar. Now, I was the last person you’d ever call a car nerd, in fact I probably couldn’t identify a single other car even if you put a gun to my head. But I’d recognize a deuce coupe for as long as I lived.

The day he’d called me into his home office to breathlessly announce he’d officially quit his job and secured the funding to start RDC, I had been a bit underwhelmed. It was hard to understand how someone could be so excited about a business that primarily involved moving numbers around on spreadsheets, even if that business was your own. But even more than the business itself, Dad had been absurdly proud of the name he’d chosen for it—not only did it stand for Richard Day & Co., but also, as he had giddily reminded me no less than three times that day, Red Deuce Coupe. It was to remind him what he was aiming for—when the valuation of the company hit \$1 million, he’d sell it and buy a red deuce coupe. He’d explained this while gazing fondly upon the wall calendar above his desk, which had been open to January 2009 since January 2009, thanks to the “impeccable” red ‘32 Ford adorning it.

I whipped out my phone and raced to snap a picture before the shiny red blur left my field of vision. Yes! Got it! I swiped over to Messages to send it to him... and then reality washed back over me, like a bucket of ice water tumbling down from a prankster’s half-open door.

I saw on my screen the last text I’d received from my dad, almost a month ago. Move-in

day had been the day after my birthday, and he hadn't texted me about either one. It might have sounded silly, but I was terrified that this year he wouldn't even send his yearly Christmas text. He'd texted me with bulletproof reliability on every birthday and holiday since I'd gotten a phone, which hadn't even made sense at first since we'd lived in the same house at the time. Even as he'd grown a little more distant over the years, and his attention began being leeched away first by a promotion to partner at his old firm and then by the launch of RDC, he'd still kept the flame alive with holiday and birthday texts as reliable as clockwork.

I couldn't rip my eyes from the text. Distant was one thing, but I'd never seen him actually sound... evil. Not until that text, shortly after that day's explosive argument.

The text he'd sent immediately before it was *I hope you're proud of your choices*. That might have sounded innocent enough out of context. The last text was six words: *No job. No friends. No home.*

I gave the screen a violent flick with my thumb, burying the message behind a flurry of less hurtful messages from the months prior, messages that for the longest time had just been increasingly frustrating rather than genuinely hurtful. It had started off innocently enough, with the kind of overreactions you come to expect from most parents—you'd think I was getting face tattoos, flipping cars, and shooting up heroin, when in reality the greatest transgressions I'd made were wearing black lipstick and smoking the occasional joint at a Green Day concert. Thank god for Nate, Nate who plucked this deadbeat off the path of grisly doom and destruction, and helped her set course on the gleaming yellow brick road to success in life: good posture, pretty blouses, and a B.S. in business. It wasn't until recent events that communication had become openly hostile. What I just didn't understand is how someone who had been such a kind and loving father to me for so long could eventually become... that. The kind of guy who wouldn't even

drive his visibly upset daughter and her paltry few possessions to her new apartment. I could take his car, sure. But no, he wouldn't drive me. He had work to do.

But I'd already answered this question for myself, on each of the countless times I'd asked it over the past few months. It was because, as far as I could see, he valued my success over my happiness. He valued me more as an extension of himself and his own success. Someone that would go on to do great things while carrying on the family name, rather than a person who he should ensure was as happy as possible. It hadn't always been like that. But when he took the turn that led him down the road to RDC, that's the territory he'd ended up in.

He was driven by being proud of me, not by seeing that I was happy. I suppose one could easily look like the other for a while. Until something big happened, and then suddenly the difference between the two became glaringly obvious.

With that in mind, I thought, I shouldn't even mind that he hadn't texted me for a month, missing my birthday and my move-in day. Why would I even want to speak to someone who operated like that? It was for the best. I shouldn't even mind the silence. *I shouldn't.*

But unfortunately, I couldn't trick my own mind into going down that road. I felt what I felt, and that was misery. Deflating like a balloon, I buried my head in my hands. I still couldn't believe my own father had sunk to that level.

No friends, no job, no home.

I was jolted out of this fog by a sudden lurch of nausea, a brief feeling of dizziness, and finally a stampede of rapid, heavy footsteps stomping through the skybridge, shaking the floor slightly as they approached.

I opened my eyes to see a flurry of legs passing directly by me. Two scrawny young men in matching, cheap-looking suits were being led by one portly man in a much nicer suit, a pocket

watch on his breast with a gold chain, and thick leather shoes, marching directly past me and into Building 2. One of the scrawny men seemed to cast a brief, confused glance in my direction, but continued on without stopping as though he hadn't seen me at all. As the sea of pant legs passed by, I couldn't have been less prepared for what I saw in their wake.

Gone were the blue-gray carpet and cream-colored painted walls of the skybridge I had seen just moments ago. In their place, an uncomfortable, unfinished wooden floor now stretched beneath me. All around me, unpainted wooden exterior siding was fully visible through the skybridge's exposed rusting iron frame, which creaked ever so slightly as the group traversed its length. A shiver coursed through my body as I noticed the air around me had suddenly become at least thirty degrees colder.

"So we're going to insulate this bridge," announced the large man in front as the group left the skybridge and entered Building 2. The men seemed for a moment to be slightly blurred at the edges, but the harder I concentrated on them, the more clearly they came into focus. "We'll save a fortune on heating, and maybe it'll shut the fellas up for a while. Make it seem like we're throwin' 'em a bone, you know, make a good first impression as new owners. Then, in order to accommodate this year's increased production targets, we've revised our plans for Building 13, that'll be the storage building on the other side there. Double the number of floors. That should be completed either next year or in '31."

I quietly lifted myself off the floor of the skybridge and, looking nervously around me, followed closely behind the group of men as they walked through Building 2, trying to seem as nonchalant as possible while taking in the sights around me. Instead of the narrow apartment hallways I'd gotten used to, a cavernous expanse stretching the full width of the building surrounded me, populated by a dizzying array of machines and men tending to them which I

could barely take in. Part of me was so hypnotized by the repetitive motions of the complicated old machines that I wanted to stay behind and explore them. But something about this conversation was even more interesting.

“Sir,” piped up one of the other men with some concern in his voice.

“Yes?”

“Forgive me for asking, but doesn’t it seem rather unlikely we can make Building 13 twice as tall, sir, at this late stage of planning?”

“No, Johnson,” answered the large man, swelling with pride. “That’s where I’ve been particularly ingenious, you see. Not twice as tall. Twice as many floors, in the same space. Instead of three ten-and-a-half-foot ceilings, it’s going to become six five-foot-three ceilings. Do you know how big a pressed bale of scutched cotton from our Building 1 baler is, Bob?”

“Five by five by five feet, sir. But—”

“Precisely. No more haphazard stacking to the ceiling here and there, most of it is wasted space. Every inch will be used on every floor. Locating and unloading the right product for deliveries will be twice as fast.”

“But, five-foot-three ceilings, sir? Won’t that be awfully cramped for the workers going in and out of it?”

“The building’s not *for* the workers,” explained the large man slowly, as if to a small child. “The building’s for the cotton. Cotton is money. People are only in there for minutes at a time. Product is in there 24/7. We’re not selling people. We’re selling cotton.”

The other man fell silent, apparently happy enough with this answer. I realized with a spark of nerdy juvenile excitement that we were approaching the skybridge to Building 3, a skybridge which in the modern day was sealed up at both ends. I tried to soak up the sight as we

passed quickly through it, the same exposed rusting iron frame and clapboard siding that I'd seen in the other skybridge. Nothing impressive—in fact, a little sad—but still infinitely more exciting than the bland blue carpet and cream colored walls in the skybridge I'd become accustomed to.

It emptied out into another cavernous room stretching the length and width of the building, this one populated by a staggering assortment of massive steel drums and enormous tanks of liquid stretching from floor to ceiling with circular glass windows through which liquids of various colors were being whipped around wildly, many with ladders leading up to their dizzying tops, each with all kinds of rollers and pressers feeding material in and out of them.

“No changes currently planned for the bleachery,” continued the large man in front as he made his way along one wall of the building, gesturing to the machines and the sweaty workers who were tirelessly running from tank to tank. “We’ve asked them to increase production using only what they have, and they’ve done it. That’s efficiency for you! It’s their increased output that’s helping us hit our new production targets.”

“Sir,” called one of the men, frantically loading a new spool of cotton fabric into a machine that was rapidly gobbling it up and feeding it into an open tank whose surface was roiling and burbling with a clear liquid whose harsh chemical stench was starting to shrivel my nose hairs from across the room. “With all due respect, we can’t sustain this level of output.”

“I’m sorry?” said the supervisor, clearly affronted by the outburst. The two scrawny men following him turned away, suddenly fascinated by the walls and ceiling.

The worker pulled a large lever on his machine, and with a descending whirl, the fabric feed slowed to a halt. “It’s just not humanly possible sir,” he pleaded, gesturing to the gnarled chemical burn scarring his right cheek with a hand bearing an almost identical burn. “Look sir, I got this on Christmas, tryin’ to rebalance the peroxide levels before the next ream loaded. It’s a

wonder I didn't fall in with the rate I was movin'! You can't expect one person to work both these machines at 20 reams an hour!"

"Oh, but I do," said the supervisor calmly, leaving the two men to walk over to him, a look of quiet fury blooming under his red, puffy face. "I do expect that of you, and so does Consolidated. It's in your job description."

"I didn't know what 20 reams per hour meant when I signed up for the job!" sputtered the man. "I'd never worked at a bleachery before!"

"That sounds like a lack of proper research on your part."

"I'll sue you!" he exclaimed suddenly, overcome by a sudden wave of confidence, looking around wildly at his colleagues who all seemed to be pretending not to hear him, their sweating faces buried in their work. "We all will! I'll draw up a class action lawsuit!"

The supervisor approached the man, slowly but purposefully, until their noses were almost touching. "Nicholson, is it?" he asked icily.

"Nichols, sir," said the man.

"Nichols, where do you buy your family's food?"

Nichols frowned in confusion. "Same place as all of us, sir. The company store, it's the only one in town."

The supervisor shook his head slowly, affecting an expression of mock concern. "Oh, dear. I wouldn't be surprised if our cashiers refused to transact with you, Nichols, if you had pending litigation against the Company."

"Then I'll—I'll quit, and get a job at a more reputable mill!"

"Where would that be, Nichols?" asked the supervisor calmly. "Natick Mills, a Consolidated property? Newton Mills, a Consolidated property? Masterford, a Consolidated

property? I wouldn't be surprised if their hiring managers found an issue with your litigious nature, either."

"I—"

"Not to mention, that would require picking up and moving your entire family to a new town. That would be especially stressful if you had difficulty breaking the lease on your mill-owned house." The last three words were stretched out unnaturally as the supervisor's eyes bored sternly but calmly into the worker's.

Nichols' eyes darted around briefly, as if searching for another way out of this trap. Then they landed on the additional ream of uncolored cotton fabric that the conveyor belt had deposited at his station during the conversation. Finally, after a labored breath, he pulled the lever to restart his machine and replied, "I'll try to hit 20 an hour today, sir."

"Indeed," said the supervisor with a satisfied smirk. "In the future, I think it would probably be easier to hit that mark if you didn't stop working to argue with your supervisors."

"Yes sir," grunted Nichols, not looking up from his work. "Noted."

With that, the supervisor turned on his heel and returned triumphantly to the two men waiting by the skybridge, both of whom now suddenly remembered his existence and resumed conversation as if nothing had happened.

"So I'm not going to take you out to Six because of the weather. Sadly we only have skybridges from One to Two and Two to Three at this time. But that is where I have another ingenious plan," he said with a smirk, gesturing out the window to Building 6 which was visible across the complex. As I crept quietly closer, I realized something looked different about it, but I couldn't make out exactly what. "Weren't you saying you learned something about this one in your classes, Peterson?"

“Peters, sir,” responded one of the young men eagerly. “And yes sir! This one’s designed in the Italianate style, with some Lombard Romanesque there! Unusual style for a mill building, but the Bright—”

“Thank you Peters, that’s quite enough,” interrupted the supervisor with a smirk. “Yes, it’s very pretty isn’t it. Unfortunately for you, that’s about to change. As you may know, this rather ridiculous building currently houses our fine detailing and finishing weavers. They receive some of the plain clothing from Three that would normally go straight to export, and use it to complete custom orders for women, and the artsy-fartsy type of man that likes ridiculous clothing and doesn’t do real work. Well it’s not a very profitable endeavor, and I’ve calculated that we can cut that department, gut that building, and install two of those new hundred-foot spinning mules on the ground floor and six looms on the top. If we replace that ridiculous facade with a flat brick face we can have loading bays on both levels, each with a bridge to the back of Seven which is already connected to Two, it can essentially act as an extension of our existing production line and add greatly to our weekly—”

“Get rid of the facade, sir?” interrupted Peter.

“Yes,” said the supervisor with an annoyed glance.

“But... sir, that building is a piece of art. I read about it in my classes last year. The Bright brothers became very interested in architecture as the mill expanded, and they explored a variety of different historical styles with each new building they added. They said it made the mill feel less dreary for the workers and boosted morale, and kept the mill a vibrant centerpiece for the community. That building is a variation on the Italianate style, you see the tall arched windows, the larger arches there, the decorative corbels supporting the—”

The young man’s increasingly impassioned plea was interrupted by a derisive chuckle

that grew into a roar of laughter. “Look at this kid,” said the supervisor, turning to the other young man who quickly affected a forced smile of his own. “He likes the *architecture* of it! It’s in the *Italianate* style! Boy, are you queer or somethin’?”

“No sir,” said Peters quietly, looking at his shoes.

“Let me ask you somethin’, Peters,” he said, choking down his laughter to take on a more serious tone. “How many additional dollars do those absurd windows bring us in profit every week?”

The young man was so red his cheeks were practically glowing like a hot burner. “None, sir,” he answered quietly.

“Then I don’t see any reason to keep them. Listen kid,” he said, lowering his voice and stepping closer. “I don’t know what they taught you in your little classes. I don’t care if they taught you to fetishize the Bright brothers like every other goddamn worker that comes complaining to me.”

“I don’t—”

“But you’re not in school anymore. You work for Consolidated now. And I work in the real world, where production numbers pay our salaries, not the number of funny windows on our buildings.” He made to turn away from the young man and continue down the hallway, but then turned immediately back to him and stuck a finger in his face, causing him to stumble directly into the supervisor’s belly. “Let me tell you something about the Bright brothers, Peters,” he continued, his voice tightening into a snarl. “They had it real easy. They could afford to coddle their workers like goddamn babies and still have enough left over to play with their little bricks, but it ain’t so easy anymore. We have to work for our money now. If you intend to keep the position that I so generously offered you not two hours ago, you will refrain from bringing up

those names again, or else you might find yourself not working for their pretty little mill anymore. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir,” whimpered Peters, his eyes wet.

“Jesus Christ, kid.” At last, he moved on down the hallway.

Suddenly, a door opened directly in front of me. I can’t describe exactly how it happened—I hadn’t seen the door before, but as it opened, suddenly it was there, two feet from my face. Behind the door, a poorly shaven man in a Patriots sweatshirt holding a baby in one arm poked his head out.

“Uh... can I help you with something?” asked the man, as the baby cooed politely.

“N-no,” I stammered, realizing I was standing in the middle of the Building 2 hallway directly in front of the man’s apartment. “Sorry, I was just lost. I was looking for someone else.”

I moved out of the man’s way and watched him helplessly as he left his apartment, locked his door, and made his way down the hallway. The same simple, anonymous apartment hallway that I’d seen so many times before. There were no bleaching vats or conveyor belts to be seen. Just plain, cream-colored walls and a row of gray apartment doors.

I closed my eyes for a second to try to regain my composure. What had I just seen?

I meandered slowly back down the hallway, through the carpeted and well-insulated skybridge back into Building 1, down the stairs to the second floor, and finally into my apartment before closing the door quietly behind me.

Al ran up to me with his tail wagging and sniffed me all over, as if to say, “What is it, mama?”

I don’t know if I could explain it to you, Al. I don’t know if I could explain it to anybody.

Well... maybe one person would understand.

Artifact: Encephalopathy Article

New Study Raises Severe Concerns About Brightville Water Safety

Providence Journal — December 4, 2022

BRIGHTVILLE, RI — A study commissioned by the Rhode Island Department of Health last month has determined that a branch of the Pawtuxet River in the Brightville area may have been highly contaminated with carcinogens and neurotoxins for decades, in far greater levels than were reported at the time. Through a process called sediment core analysis, researchers determined that historical levels of lead, mercury, arsenic, trichloroethylene, and other harmful chemicals may have been present at nearly 100 times the currently accepted safe limit for much of the past century, despite public reports to the contrary.

While water from the Pawtuxet no longer makes its way directly into Brightville homes since the town was hooked up to the Providence water supply in 1972, the findings present a longer-term concern for residents who grew up in the area prior to the switchover. The presence of these waterborne contaminants is strongly linked with the development of cancers and neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease and toxic encephalopathy later in life. For some residents, direct exposure to the river during this period may have resulted in long-term health conditions whose symptoms may only be emerging in the present day. The prevalence of Parkinson's disease in Brightville is more than twice the national average, a statistic whose recent emergence helped prompt the study.

"Nobody was thinking about cancer when they were playing in the river at six years old, or running through the sprinkler in the backyard," says Mark Rawlings, a member of the environmental forensics team. "I know at least when I was growing up, every kid in Brightville went down to the river to play during the summer. We showered in it, we filled our pools with it,

we drank it—even those with home filters didn’t have a chance of filtering out all these chemicals at the levels we now know were present. And now, people are rightfully shocked to find out that even after decades of good health, the long-term effect of this contamination is just now rearing its ugly head.”

The study notes that the assumed cause of the contamination is the Bright Mill and Bleachery, which over the course of its 107 years in operation was the source of numerous environmental debacles. The first such incident occurred in April of 1926, when a deteriorating bleachery tank that had not been inspected in years leaked thousands of gallons of sulfuric acid into the river. The effects were twofold, not only contaminating the river but also destroying water filters at the filtration plant downstream, causing levels of other dangerous chemicals to spike as well. This was followed by numerous similar incidents in the following decades, which resulted in what the Department of Health calls “a deep and lasting proliferation” of carcinogens and neurotoxins in Brightville’s groundwater.

Why are we only discovering this now, decades after the mill’s closure? According to Rawlings, it’s likely a combination of technological limitations and corruption. “Some of these neurotoxins and carcinogens have only been identified in recent years, so no test existed for them at the time. But as for the more commonly-known ones—lead, mercury—well, we also have to consider who was doing the testing. Not only was testing much less frequent and much less accurate in those days, but more often than not they were being performed by consultants in the employ of the mill. In other words, the mill was tasked with policing itself. I won’t say anything further about the management of the mill at that time, but I think the numbers speak for themselves.”

The Argument

I watched excitedly as my phone clock ticked over from 5:59 PM to 6:00 PM. I'd been waiting all day for the moment Jae had said she'd get off work. I'd reapplied my makeup to make sure the mysterious black eye was nowhere to be seen—though it was getting tougher to conceal by the day—but after almost half an hour and what felt like a gallon of concealer, I'd done it. I was ready. I was out the door before the clock hit 6:01.

I marched excitedly down the hallway, trying to gather my thoughts into some kind of usable order as visions of the rusty skybridge, red-faced supervisors, and enormous vats of bleaching agent filled my head. How would I present this to her? She would have to believe me, right?

By the time I got to the top of the stairs, a cold trickle of embarrassment had washed over me as I remembered the pun I'd written on her whiteboard. I felt my face flush with a cold heat. *Wool you be my friend?* Jesus Christ. Yeah, that'll really prime her to believe you've experienced time travel.

But as her door came into view, I saw my message was no longer there. In its place, in Jae's fat, playfully aggressive handwriting, it said:

Bright Mill didn't produce any animal fabrics, only cotton

And then below that, where her mother's note had been:

But yes I wool :-)

My heart fluttered. I tried to suppress a smile and act cool as I rapped on the door.

Almost immediately, Jae opened the door with a knowing smile. I stopped holding mine back, and said rather stupidly: “Hi.”

“Hi Ava,” she said brightly. “That might have been the worst pun I’ve ever read in my life.”

A flush of embarrassment began welling up inside me, until she continued.

“That’s an extra ten points for you.”

The smile broke out even wider across my face. Jae led me in, and I happily plopped down on her couch again, once again taking in the fascinating decor of her apartment.

“Tea?” chimed Jae, heading into the kitchen.

“Sure!”

“So what’s up?” she asked, filling the kettle.

“Before we get into... you know... the topic at hand, there's something I need to ask you. How much do you know about Building 13?”

“Well,” began Jae, starting to thumb through the left side of her folder, “it was originally the main cotton storage building. That's why the floors were so—”

“I know what it was used for,” I interrupted, realizing a second too late how rude I must have sounded. Luckily it just ignited that bright, asymmetric smile in Jae.

“I figured. I thought maybe you were testing me or something.”

“I meant, have you been watching the construction?”

“Not really. To be honest, I would, but... I don’t want to make myself mad about the Union Renovation deal.”

“The what?”

“It’s the only building I’m not presiding over as renovation architect,” Jae said with a grimace. “They went with a third-party renovation management agency for that one. No idea why, and it’s taking so damn long I’m dying to know what’s holding them up. Except I know I’ll be happier if I just sit on my hands and let whatever unfolds unfold.”

“Well then you might be interested to know not only have they installed and removed the same elevator 3 times, but also that Union Renovation and Consolidated Construction are owned by the same guy.”

Jae’s face went from disbelief to confusion. She opened her mouth to say something, then sank into silence and narrowed her eyes. “But why... Why would they...”

“I’m pretty sure they’re self-dealing. I think they’re stretching out construction to keep the contract going for some reason.” I realized I was treading dangerously close to her area of expertise, but I also knew I was treading completely within my own. I knew what I’d seen on my laptop screen this morning.

Jae’s eyes were still narrowed. “But even if they’re owned by the same company, wouldn’t they still just be moving money in a circle? They couldn’t make money just from moving money in a circle.”

“Not unless there were tax credits involved.”

Suddenly comprehension began dawning on Jae’s face. “So Consolidated is charging Union for construction work, and then...”

“And then the government is footing 30% of the bill. Every thousand dollars Consolidated charges Union for, Union only has to pay \$700. They are moving money in a circle, but every time it goes from their left hand to their right, the government steps in to cover part of it. It’s like an infinite money glitch. Except it’s the taxpayers who are really paying for the

glitch. In this case, the disenfranchised taxpayers of Brightville.”

For the first time in a long time, it was Jae’s turn to be slack-jawed. “Damn, that finance degree really paid off,” she said breathlessly. “That was hella cool. I would love to see you in a suit.”

I swallowed as I scrambled to think of a response.

“I just mean,” she continued awkwardly, “it’s good to see a woman take charge in the boardroom.”

I stopped short. “In the what?”

“Boardroom!” she called after me.

“Oh!” I laughed nervously, closing my eyes and shaking my head. “Yeah, maybe one day I’ll put this body of knowledge to good use.”

Jae smirked. “I can think of a few ways you could... Never mind, sorry.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I took a deep breath and tried to sprinkle in a heaping spoonful of confidence. “So anyway, should we get down to business?”

“What?”

“I mean, you know... the...” I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath. “The voices. The glimpses of the past.”

“Oh... Yeah,” Jae said slowly, and cast a long, meaningful look toward the folder on the table.

“Jae,” I began, knowing that if I didn’t dive in right now I might never say it at all. “I think I saw something yesterday that was more than just a shadow of the past,” I said. “I was

fully... I think... *in* the past. It was all around me. I was there.”

Jae’s mouth was slightly agape as she put the kettle back down. “What do you mean?”

I had hoped for something closer to excitement from Jae in response to this new revelation, but at the moment it seemed almost more like concern or disbelief.

“I mean, I didn’t just hear something, or see a person, or something like that. I was actually there for a little while. I don’t know how to even describe it. Less like I was catching a glimpse of something through a rip in the fabric, and more like... like I fell all the way through the rip for a while, and was then pulled back out.”

“You were there?” she repeated slowly, brow still furrowed. “Like... walking around in it, and everything?”

“Yes,” I said. “And I don’t understand it any more than you. But it was like, the closer I got to it, the more real it became. Until I was in it, and it was completely real.”

“What do you mean by... pulled back out?”

“Well, I was walking around with these guys in the bleachery—in Building 3—and I heard whole conversations and everything, and saw the machines, and saw Building 6 through the window looking how it used to look and everything, until suddenly someone’s apartment door opened in front of me, and when I looked around it was back to the modern day.”

Jae shook her head slowly, then left the kitchen and walked over to the coffee table. “Schrödinger,” she murmured. She picked up the tattered folder, removed a sheaf of paper, and began rifling through it.

“What?” I asked.

“Have you heard of Schrödinger’s cat?” she asked from behind the stack of papers.

“That’s... the thing where you don’t know if the cat is alive or dead until you open the

box, right?” I said, relieved to have landed on something I vaguely recognized.

“It’s not just that you don’t know if the cat is alive or dead. The cat is both alive *and* dead, until you open the box and look at it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That doesn’t make much sense, though. I mean a cat can’t be medically alive and dead.”

“It’s not really about a cat,” Jae explained patiently. “It’s more like a metaphor for the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics. At the quantum level, in certain situations, until something is observed, it can exist in two different states at once. The mere act of observing something can actually affect its state, and cause it to resolve into one of the two states. It’s more like the quantum nature of reality exists as a superposition of multiple potential states of being, and the act of observing the event itself determines how it resolves into what we call reality.”

After a few moments of stunned silence, in which my heart suddenly seemed to be beating a little faster and my face felt a little hotter, Jae’s eyes peeked over the stack of papers, as if checking if I was still here. “Sorry,” I said, “I just—that doesn’t make much sense to me. I don’t really get...” I paused, looking for a word. “Science.”

Great, Ava. Great. You’ve never sounded smarter.

“No, I don’t blame you!” said Jae, dipping back down below the stack of papers in her hands. “This has been argued about for the last hundred years. We still aren’t really sure how reality works at the quantum level. But the point is... at first, these... these time leaks, they’re just glimpses, shadows. But if the fabric of reality is warped and torn badly enough by whatever energy is pervading here, fraying, folding back on itself, bits of the past can be imposed in some kind of superposition at the same point where we’re experiencing the present, to the point where if you’re able to fully observe that event, it resolves into reality. At least for as long as you’re

directly observing it.”

“But then if you stop observing it,” I added, “if you disappear back into your own thoughts, or even just close your eyes...”

“Then it drops back into that unstable quantum state between dimensions, between the past and present. You said it ended when someone opened a door in front of you, right?”

I nodded.

“Your attention was drawn back to a stimulus from the present day. You weren’t observing that leaked pocket of time anymore. So it slipped back into that trapped state... that in-between.”

“So what causes these events to... leak out, in the first place?” I asked. “Even if we decide that these random moments from the past are being warped into some quantum state... why? How?”

“It’s not just random moments from the past, though, is it?”

I narrowed my eyes. Then I realized what she was getting at.

“We’ve never seen a glimpse of someone getting a raise, or having a birthday party thrown. Or anything from the Bright Brothers era, for that matter.”

“No,” I said. “Only negative events.”

“More than that. I think it’s only events which have been traumatic in some way. Think about everything we’ve experienced. You smelled the fire. We both heard the meeting where they decided not to repay the grieving families of workers that were lost in that fire. You saw the bleachery.”

“And the arm...” I muttered to myself.

Jae frowned. “The what?”

I gulped. “I never told you why I was running through the complex, the night you met me.”

Jae looked down. “No, I guess I didn’t. I didn’t want to ask.”

“I saw an arm, mangled in one of the machines in the dog park. A child’s arm. And then, for a moment, the child whose arm it was, bleeding out on the ground.”

Jae put her hands to her mouth. “Oh my god,” she said through her fingers, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said quickly. “I’ve seen worse.”

Jae resumed her composure. “They’re all events that make up the web of trauma—generational trauma—that make up this mill’s past. And—again, I don’t really know what I’m talking about, but follow me—there’s enough of that energy concentrated right here, that it’s beginning to strain and damage the fabric of time.”

“What?” Now we were really doubling down on the scientific mumbo-jumbo.

“So...” Jae made her way back to the couch and sat beside me. “Our current understanding of reality is that it’s sort of this fabric of space and time, right? And we know that certain forces can cause this fabric to bend and warp, like the immense mass of a star or a black hole. A star warps the fabric around it, causing things nearby like planets to roll in a spiral around it, like water spiraling down a drain. But in the fourth dimension instead of the third. That’s gravity, right?”

“Sure,” I said quickly, with my most nonchalant nod. Come on, now she was just showing off.

“Well... it seems to me that certain other forces can warp that fabric, too. Like the energy of certain events. Dark energy, from dark events. Energy that usually warps spacetime so little

we'd never notice it. But enough of that dark energy in one place, over a long period of time, and the weight of that energy stretches the fabric so thin it's almost transparent. Now, I've never been one to believe in good and evil as any kind objective, scientific thing. But maybe when enough of these 'heavy' events happen in one place, the kind most people might call 'evil', the kind of chain of events that causes lasting generational trauma across an entire community, it weakens that fabric in localized spots until it becomes unstable. And then these events appear to fully leak through the damaged fabric of spacetime, still in this not-past-not-present state."

I sat for a minute, rolling this all over in my head. "So many traumatic events happened in the same place, affecting the same community for so many generations, that they damaged the fabric of reality around them, to the point where they're now caught in this quantum state between the past and the present... and are leaking all the way through when they're directly observed by the right people?"

Jae nodded.

"But these events can only be seen by certain people, and at certain times. Most people passing by don't notice a thing."

Jae seemed to deflate a little as I said this. "Yeah... I don't have any explanation for that. I don't know how that fits into it. But as far as I can work out, it's either this quantum superposition thing, or something science hasn't found a word for yet."

"So it could be something..." I paused as I searched for a word.

"Supernatural?" she offered hesitantly, grimacing as if the word tasted sour.

"I guess," I said slowly, "but I've never believed in anything supernatural before."

"Neither have I," said Jae, "but I've also never overheard a conversation from 1921 every time I walk down a hallway before."

“So...” I tried to think of a polite way to phrase my next question. “How confident are you, regarding this whole... quantum superposition explanation?”

Jae swallowed and looked down at her lap for a long time. “Not... very.” She looked up at me hesitantly, like a child who’s just been asked if they’re telling the truth. “I mean... I didn’t major in this, I’m not a scientist. Not by any stretch of the imagination. All this theorizing, all these notes, these scribbles, are just made of what I was able to piece together from long nights of internet research over the years.”

Well, that part I could certainly understand.

“So no,” she continued, head in her hands, “I don’t really know what I’m talking about. It’s just the only way I can figure out how to contextualize it. Nothing else makes sense to me. It has to abide by some kind of logic... it has to. If we don’t have logic, we have nothing.” Then a tense pause. “Hey... can I be honest with you?”

“Of course.”

“There’s still a huge part of me that doesn’t believe any of this. Any of what I just said. Anything we’ve seen.”

I couldn’t hide my disbelief. “What the hell are you talking about? You’ve seen it! You’ve lived it!”

“Okay, but it still doesn’t make any sense at all. Right? I’ve always been a student of history, and if history has taught us one thing, it’s that over and over again, people attribute the unknown to magic or the supernatural, and eventually it turns out to be something entirely explainable. I know what’s real and what’s not real, and with our current understanding of science, this just doesn’t make any sense. It’s fun to discuss it like this, but at the end of the day, it can’t be what we’re saying it is. It just can’t.”

“But...” I spluttered. “You know I’ve seen it too! Unless some *extremely* intense performance art is going on in Building 2, I just spent ten real live minutes in 1929. I confided in you and told you that from the bottom of my heart. Are you calling me a liar?”

“No,” spluttered Jae, “I’m just saying that between trusting our senses, and trusting science, I trust science. I’m going to trust common sense over human senses every time. It’s just how the world works.”

A harsh whistle pierced the air as the kettle on the stove boiled, flecks of water spurting out of its mouth along with the jet of hot steam.

I sat there with my mouth agape. “How can you say that? I’ve just come to you with a secret that I’ve never told anybody else, that I *could* never tell anybody else, because they’d think I was insane.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jae, closing her eyes. “Maybe it is what we think it is. It just doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. I believe we’re seeing... something.”

“Maybe,” I added, “if you’re *a student of history and science*, we should do what scientists do and keep gathering more data, instead of pretending the problem doesn’t exist.”

Jae nodded, eyes still closed. “Of course,” she said softly. “You’re right. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. Let’s just pretend I never said that. That was stupid.”

A long stretch of silence passed as the weight of the conversation hovered around our heads. Jae got up and headed into the kitchen to finally take the kettle off the burner and pour our teas. Then, mercifully, she broke the silence with a huge, swelling intake of breath.

“Hey, do you want to just chill here for a while? We’re gonna go insane if we keep talking about this all night. There’s this new stand-up by Sam Jay I have queued on Netflix for tonight. I could make some popcorn.”

The news that Jae believed neither me nor herself about the one thing that had held our budding friendship together still rang uncomfortably in my ears. But popcorn and a comedy special honestly sounded great at the moment, and I was thankful to have something new and light to shift my focus to. “Sure,” I said, trying to swallow my discomfort. “I’d love that.”

I can’t believe she doesn’t believe me, I thought.

Shut up, I answered. Move on.

“I like your scarf, by the way!” she offered brightly as she brought our teas over to the coffee table.

“Thanks,” I said woodenly, twiddling it with my thumb and forefinger as my entire body tensed up a little.

How could she just take what I said and throw it out like I’m crazy, or some kind of liar?

Shut up! I answered. Move on. We’re getting over it. We can still be friends. You know you don’t want to fight with her.

“Where’d you get it?”

I sighed. “My ex got it for me, this last Christmas.”

“Oh my god,” she said, hitting her forehead with her hand. “Sorry to bring it up again.”

“It’s all right. He, um... he actually died in a car crash a while back. I probably should have told you that the first time.”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” she said softly. “I had no idea.”

“Yeah. He meant everything to me. We actually split up shortly before that, we um... we just decided to go our separate ways. Wanted different things out of life. But he’s kind of the one that made me who I am today. Everything. My job, my clothes, my manners... he helped me become a respectable adult. Before Nate, I was a punk rock chick, if you can believe it. I wanted

to make T-shirts for a living.”

“*You* were a punk rock chick?” laughed Jae disbelievingly. “I probably would have been so into you.”

I choked on my tea with a percussive series of coughs and sprayed some of it down the front of my shirt.

“Jesus, are you okay?” asked Jae, taken aback.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry, I’m just super clumsy,” I wheezed, trying to regain my breath through the droplets of tea in my esophagus. “I probably choke on something I’m drinking like once a day.”

“Me too, me too,” said Jae, in what seemed like a desperate attempt to make me feel better. Maybe she really did feel sorry about what she said. “Anyway, what happened to punk rock Ava?”

“I wasn’t in a great place, back then,” I continued after another sip. “Nate got me back on the right track. He taught me how to dress nicer, how to be more professional, how to stand up straight, how to enjoy better music, how to attract better friends, all that stuff. Plus everything I know about finance, obviously. Everything I am today is because of him, so in that way he’s still sort of with me.”

“Wow,” she said quietly, more to herself than to me.

I frowned. “What do you mean, ‘wow’?”

“I just mean,” she said slowly, “I had a relationship like that once.”

“A relationship like what?”

Jae took a deep breath. “She didn’t like how I dressed, she didn’t like when I cut my hair like this, she didn’t like when I put on the music I wanted to listen to. She didn’t even like us

being close in public, either. It was easy to get used to that, for it to feel normal after a while. Eventually I realized it wasn't good for me. That it was a poisonous way to live. I loved her, but I could tell she wasn't going to change. It was her fatal flaw. So I broke up with her. And she kind of went crazy on me. That's when I moved back to—"

"What are you suggesting?" I interrupted. "That Nate was poisonous? Or controlling? Without even knowing him?"

Jae's face dropped. "I—I'm not saying that," she said cautiously, "I'm just saying, you know, you change how you look and how you act just to be with someone, it's important to let your real self—"

"So I'm not my real self now?" I said, sitting up straighter, a fire suddenly alight inside my stomach. "Are you saying I'm not my own person now? That he manipulated me? Because that's a fucking awful thing to say about someone who I loved very much and who isn't around to defend himself anymore."

"No! I'm not saying any of that!" Jae blurted. "I'm sorry, that's not what I meant at all. I overstepped."

"Yeah, you did," I spat, surprised by my own words but unable to stop them. "You don't know what I was like before him. He picked me up when I was in an awful place. He saved me. He made me a new woman. I was *nothing* before him."

"I'm really sorry Ava. I shouldn't have said anything at all."

"No, you shouldn't have," I fumed, filled with some kind of hot, acidic confidence. This sickly sweet rush, this motivation to stand up to Jae, it was the most energy I'd felt in weeks. "First you don't believe me about the things we're seeing, then you insult my dead boyfriend and make assumptions about our relationship? Maybe you're not the person I thought you were. I

think I should leave.”

“Okay,” she choked out softly, her eyes shining, as I headed towards the door. “I’m sorry.”

“He made me who I am today!” I repeated as she closed the door behind me.

The acidic confidence was starting to burn inside of me. I knew it was burning too hot. And I knew it was misplaced. And I knew it was going to keep burning, hotter and hotter, until it wasn’t confidence at all anymore, but just an open wound I would have to bandage up on my own time. But I could deal with that later. That was a problem for later me. I walked briskly down the hall, hands balled into fists, still trying to maintain some sort of surface-level huff, to try and stave off what I knew would emerge later.

Sure, I’d had my share of scraps with Nate. It hadn’t always been smooth sailing. But at least we’d been sailing, and not being pushed overboard and frantically treading water like I was now. Yes, there had been confusion, there had been pain, there had been suffering. But it had been nothing compared to the nights spent drenched in the cold, clammy terror of the possibility of losing him.

During the worst of it, there had been nights when desperate thoughts had flitted across my mind in frantic desperation—reaching out for help, telling somebody what was happening. But those fleeting thoughts had never surpassed the horrible realization that those options might mean losing him, and being alone. Utterly, profoundly, horribly alone, and walking this cold, barren, frightening earth without him by my side. My love, my guide, my teacher, my translator, who translated the harsh reality of the world into something I could understand.

So many nights, I would have to walk that tightrope strung between the pain of living with Nate and the pain of living without Nate. I had to walk that tightrope for the rest of my life,

and I had gladly and fully committed to doing so, but god did I get exhausted sometimes. Sometimes it felt like my legs would buckle, walking this tightrope. Sometimes I even wished they would. Some nights I would dare them to fail, to give out from under me, so I could finally glimpse that mysterious third option that lay in the dark void between the two evils. At least then there would be peace. At least then, in that moment, I might know.

But that was *my* tightrope to walk. And hell if I was going to let someone I barely knew give their shitty, uneducated opinion on it. Who asked her? I didn't need Jae. After all, she had only agreed to hang out with me in the first place because... Because why? Why on earth did someone want to hang out with... me? Especially given that she found me sobbing my eyes out on the stoop of a building and never even asked me why? I didn't actually know.

No, I knew why. Because I was the only one who backed up her crackpot spacetime theories, because she could get out her stupid folder again. Because selfishly, it made her feel like *she* wasn't crazy. Because I was another data point for her. Not because I was an interesting human.

I couldn't remember ever hating myself more. Somewhere deep within my body, the once-overflowing acid had now condensed into a white-hot ball of iron that was slowly burning its way down through my stomach, leaving scorch marks as it sank through layer after layer, melting and heating its contents to a rolling boil that felt destined continue until I was nothing but a cold, empty shell.

As a net calculation, I'd be better off dead. I knew that. Jae knew that. Jae wouldn't *say* that, of course. Maybe if I got her drunk Jae would say that. But for now, we were all playing that godforsaken game we all play when we're sober where we're not allowed to speak those truths.

I opened my door, pulled myself sluggishly inside, and closed it behind me, resting my head on the door as I did so, eyes closed. I looked at the small, pitiful pile of clothes... at the laptop still sitting half-open on the bed with that hellish job board just visible in the nocturnal, zombie-like glow of the screen, ready for me to plug myself back into it... at Al, looking inquisitively at me as I collapsed onto my mattress and deflated like a balloon.

Well, I definitely got one thing right. Nate made me who I am today.

And with that horrible thought, I began sobbing uncontrollably, like a small, helpless child, directly into the mattress, muffling the sound in the folds of the blankets.

Did your little rendezvous with your new little friend wash away the fact that something completely bizarre and unexplainable is happening all around you, and you have no way of rationalizing it as an adult who knows that kind of shit isn't possible? Did your new little friend make you forget that you might be losing your goddamn mind in this stupid, empty little excuse for an apartment? Did she make you forget that you still have no job, no friends, and nothing to show for your pathetic little life?

As I tried desperately to fall asleep, begging my wet pillow to let sleep come to me and silence the thoughts, I realized I felt the same way toward myself at this moment as I did towards the flies. The tiny little flies that buzzed insistently inside my ears during campouts with my dad, when I'd had my first real meltdown as a young adult. I'd been trying to put an already-miserable pre-teen day behind me with a night of sleep. But the flies were always louder. I felt a primordial, animal rage at their very existence as slap after slap couldn't kill them, and the promise of desperately-needed sleep slipped inexorably away as they just kept buzzing, whining, crying, every passing hour nursing a seething rage with the realization that the entire essence of their being was to be a blight on those around them, the thought that all of

existence—at least the little sphere that I could see—would be incalculably better if they disappeared forever.

Now, I was both Ava and fly. But there was no great cosmic hand that could simply slap me out of existence. No, the only person with the power to do that was me, and with humans I'd learned it takes a lot more than just a simple slap. I was still here and breathing, after all.

Suddenly, I was yanked out of this spiral by the unmistakable sound of gunfire. First one round of shots, then the muffled, sweeping, blood-curdling scream of a crowd, then another round of shots, then more scattered screams, all hellishly muffled and warped by the closed window. I stumbled over to it and threw it open, eyes darting desperately around in the darkness, trying to see anything beyond the sheet of falling rain that was rendered impenetrable by the light from countless bedroom windows reflecting off it.

Silence. Nothing but a dense, sticky, rain-spattered silence, which my mind could fill with nothing but visions of National Guard troops at the top of the Building 1 bell tower, peering down the sights of a mounted machine gun, waiting with bated breath to obey the next command.

Then the sound came again. But this time, my chest unclenched as I realized what I was hearing. The unmistakably metallic sound of hailstones bouncing off the air conditioning unit installed in the wall directly under my windowsill. Then the screams came again, and as my ears strained into the dark void, I realized it was just a torrent of wind rushing down the wind tunnel formed between the weird little mill buildings by the river.

Ava, you fucking mess. You fucking embarrassment to the human race. Having finally embarrassed yourself in front of the last remaining person in your life, you've now completed the package and embarrassed yourself.

In my last waking moments, just before collapsing into a shallow, nightmare-addled

sleep, I lashed an arm out, grabbed my laptop, and switched to the Google Docs tab.

File... Move to Trash.

Artifact: Floor Manager's Log, 1924

Manager's Log, April 1924

34 reams completed today

Scutcher #4 out of balance - consulted Nevins, will not fix

Met with Nevins about possibility of more layoffs

— VB

The Horrible Thing

The night sky outside my window was a snarling, unnatural burnt orange-red, too inflamed and upset to let go of its color and blanket the world in black.

I stared blankly at the glowing screen in front of me through glazed eyes that had long ago refused to continue processing any information that came through them. This interminable job hunt, at one time almost an exciting prospect for renewal and excitement in my life, had disintegrated first into a desperate race to the bottom to sell myself into a new job, and now into some kind of broken, neurotic, zombified ritual that was separated from any kind of reality. The keyboard had remained untouched for almost an hour. I was staring through the screen and into a void of nothingness, until finally the screen auto-dimmed and then shut off to save battery.

Awoken from a horribly uncomfortable trance, I took a deep breath and looked around to reorient myself. My gaze fell upon the old photographs lined up on the windowsill, my short black hair frozen in chaotic weightlessness in mid-jump concert. I had been so happy then. We had so much fun together that night. Who *were* those other kids I was with? God, I couldn't even remember their names now. That one was Heather... or was it Hannah? No, definitely Heather. What the hell was her last name? I wonder what she was up to these days.

No, there was no use wondering. If there was one thing Nate had been absolutely right about, it was that I needed to let those childish friendships go in order to focus on my career and on making more professional friends that didn't waste so much of their time with concerts and custom T-shirts and texting about gossip and this and that. But it sure seemed a lot harder to make friends now than it used to.

I took another sip of Stella. There must be *something* that would give me some kind of feeling.

When was the last time I felt happy? It was hard to tell. I suppose the history display in Building 19 had been surprisingly interesting at the time, but since then I'd realized that it was a pretty misleading and sanitized version of history. The magic was gone. It would seem like an insult to revisit it now, if it was even still there.

After a bit more searching, my mind came to settle on the skybridge between Buildings 1 and 2. Something indescribable about that first day, sitting there between the buildings in a surreal floating hallway that nobody ever used, watching through the tiny window as the distant cars passed by the mill. Despite bricking up the entrances to all of the other surely unsafe skybridges during renovation, some good measure of effort had been put into restoring this one for public use, despite its rather unhelpful location and complete lack of foot traffic. Must have been the same guy that put all those grippy surfaces on the staircase to nowhere in the bell tower.

It told me that someone cared about something.

I downed the rest of the bottle of Stella and cracked open a new one. I didn't care how much sense it made. In that skybridge I had uncovered evidence of... of *passion* of some kind. That was something that didn't appear very often nowadays, and I was going to follow it.

I opened my apartment door, meeting Al's puppy-dog eyes of sorrow with an *I'm sorry* look. *I'll explore the mill with you later, buddy. Tonight, I'm going alone.*

Barely even able to keep myself on this plane of existence, I kept my eyes shut an extra few seconds with every blink as I walked through the halls. Gradually, the cloud of troubled thoughts—the job search, the dwindling bank account, the loneliness—mercifully began to numb into nothingness as I glided up one staircase and down another, passively taking in the time-scarred walls of the mill around me. I felt oddly like a puppeteer pulling my legs and arms back and forth with strings.

I tried to stretch out the feeling as long as I could. I tried to melt into a ghostly form, drifting benignly from hall to hall, each new hallway not quite feeling like home but feeling infinitely more like home than the jail cell that was my empty studio apartment, crowned by the tiny, angrily glowing screen that sucked up all my waking hours.

Truth be told, nothing had quite felt like home for a long time. Dad's place had certainly begun to feel pretty alien towards the end of my stay there. Energetic conversations over dinner, rosy-cheeked Christmases, and long Friday nights sharing laughs and a pan of nachos in the glow of a raucous TV comedy had gradually given way to the eerie silence of an empty living room and long evenings spent alone on the couch, desperately flipping from show to show in an attempt to rekindle old laughs while dad slaved away on the other side of the wall in his home office, moving numbers from one corner of his screen to another in indentured servitude to the red deuce coupe on the wall. Some nights, when the door would still be locked when I knocked to say goodnight and got only a distracted "goodnight" in return, I would picture a dark office with a single spotlight shining upon the wrinkled calendar, my father kneeling on the floor and bowing in exaltation to its holy image.

Living with Nate came a lot closer to feeling like home, especially at first, but it still never felt quite the way I'd dreamed it might. There was a certain freedom I'd enjoyed as a child, the ability to do and say whatever I wanted without fear of judgment, that I'd always imagined I'd be able to exercise to the fullest extent as an adult. And yet in other ways, I still felt more like a child than ever. All of the smallness, none of the freedom. Life with Nate was a compromise, a constant struggle to live up to expectations, and it took work, and it hurt, though at the end of the day it felt like *something*, which was better than the deafening silence back at Dad's.

Just as the soft, gauzy feeling began disintegrating, I was shocked awake by a very real

wave of frigid cold air that washed over my body and raised every hair on my body. I snapped my eyes open in surprise.

I was in almost complete darkness. A single, impossibly harsh pinprick of yellow light was the only thing piercing my vision, which I slowly realized was coming from the twisted filament of an ancient-looking lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Despite its painfully bright glare, it somehow did an abysmal job of lighting its surroundings, which remained shrouded in shadow.

A sudden wave of dizziness washed over me, and I moved a hand to my stomach. With coldness and confusion rapidly sobering my mind and my eyes still adjusting to the darkness, my breath caught in my throat as I saw what looked like a man laying haphazardly on the floor in front of me. But the more my eyes adjusted, the more horrifying the thing in front of me became.

Perhaps the thing had once been a man, but its face was a horrid, putrid, almost alien caricature of a face, apparently disfigured by extreme age yet disconcertingly reminiscent of a young child, with one shining blue eye sunken into its shadowy socket and one cracked, cloudy glass eye in a dark, blood-rimmed pit, one smooth, rosy cheek contrasting horrifically with the wrinkled, rotting, blackened skin of the other, which sagged off the bone and fluttered like tissue paper with each labored, rattling breath it drew in. Worse still, I realized the limbs that at first appeared pressed to the floor were actually fused to it, discolored flesh melding seamlessly into floorboard as if it had melted there and congealed, shivering, throbbing and stretching in vain against the rotting wooden planks as the thing began to writhe more desperately by the second, awoken from whatever slumber it had apparently been in.

Even as my eyes continued adjusting and the rest of the room sharpened, I realized the thing itself somehow remained blurry at the edges, the outline of its horrifying body seeming to

wander in and out of focus no matter how hard I concentrated, maddeningly evading any attempt to focus directly on it.

The thing coughed a disgusting, wet cough, spraying the ground with tiny flecks of black, and then croaked a single word, in a horrible, dusty voice, as if it hadn't spoken in centuries.

“Help.”

Panicking, I looked behind me and found nothing but a wall of grimy bricks. When I whipped back around, the thing's one good eye had landed on me, though it was squinting painfully in what little light was pervading the room. The room was barely as large as the two of us, its rotting wooden walls stretching not ten feet before terminating in another dusty brick wall. I was frozen in place, rooted to the spot, with my mouth open, helplessly trying to comprehend the sight in front of me.

With what looked like an impossible amount of exertion, the thing lifted its misshapen head and looked directly at me. “HELP!” it yelled, more urgently.

Trying to remain calm and fill myself with confidence, I finally spoke.

“What are you?” I demanded shakily.

The thing drew in a shaky, labored breath, and slowly reached its one functional limb towards me.

“You can... see me?” it choked out in its horribly distorted voice. “You can... hear me?”

As its one good eye focused on me, I saw something in it that was not malice. Something that was more like pain, or desperation.

“What are you?” I asked again, a little more gently this time.

The thing lowered its misshapen head, gazing at the floor and narrowing its eyes. “What am I...” it repeated, and then again, with more confusion, “What am I?”

There was a long pause as I stood frozen, wondering what to do with this response. Then it continued, as if it had finished researching the question.

“I don’t... I don’t remember,” it wheezed. Then, slowly, it turned its gaze towards the ceiling, as if recalling a long-lost memory. “I was something great, once... I was one with them, and they were one with me... We worked so well together... we were so happy...” Then it trailed off, wincing as it shook its grotesque head slowly, as if wondering how he could possibly have been so wrong. “No, that can’t be... no... I... I worked here. I remember working here, long ago.”

“You worked here?” I repeated in an awed whisper. “How long ago? How long have you been here?”

The thing widened its one good eye and gazed down at the floor. “How long...” it muttered. “How long...” It was slowly shaking its head and gazing at the floor with confusion, as if it could not understand the question. The thing drew in a deep rattling breath that shook its fragile body. “Forever... For as long as I can remember, anyway... I was somewhere else... then something happened... suddenly I was trapped here, I don’t remember how. I just remember knowing that this was forever... time and space stopped working... I don’t know how many hundreds of years ago... I was nowhere, I couldn’t move, I couldn’t breathe... until just... just now...” The thing screwed up its face even more than I had thought possible. “Now time is moving again... how did you do that?” it asked, looking up at me with a hauntingly pained look in its one blue eye.

“I don’t know,” I said quietly, automatically, glancing around again at my cramped surroundings. Of all the times for Aspergers Files Ava to rear her head, I suddenly realized where I was: one of the bricked-up skybridges between Buildings 2 and 3, on the other side of the

bricked-up entryway I'd been walking towards. The dank, rotting, unfinished floor was enveloped in a thick layer of sawdust and splinters. The single lightbulb was fastened slightly off-center in the lone socket in the middle of the drooping ceiling, rusted and corroded from years of disuse. Splattered across the floor, the walls, and somehow the ceiling as well were puddles of what appeared to be some thick, soupy liquid.

No, those weren't puddles, I realized as my eyes continued adjusting to the darkness. It was... skin. It was a patch of skin on the inside of the skybridge. The same blotchy, veiny skin that covered the thing before me. The line between the thing and its surroundings was rapidly becoming indistinguishable. Then the thing began speaking again, startling me.

"Friends burned to dust," it muttered. "Promises broken. Everything ruined." I stared blankly at it, horrified, unsure how to respond.

Then it turned to me, more fully than it had before, its twisted torso writhing into position, a strip of thin, blotchy skin between its body and the floor ripping with a sickeningly wet sound as it did so, and beads of blood—or something darker, blacker, oilier than blood—began budding up in the tear, then soaking into the floor beneath it, which I now realized was discolored with a million previous bloodstains. "Help me," it said, opening its eyes wider, its one blue eye pleading manically in silence, its cracked glass eye shifting slightly in the other socket. "You have to help me!" The same black liquid that was leaking from its wound had begun welling up in its mismatched eye sockets as it thrust its one good hand and grabbed wildly in my direction. "YOU HAVE TO HELP ME!"

All voluntary control over my body momentarily left me as I closed my eyes, screamed, and took a violent step backwards, expecting to plaster myself against the brick wall behind me and delay the impending horror for another few precious seconds.

But then my stomach gave a lurch, and with a sudden feeling of falling through space, the floor came up to meet me with a sickening *thud*. Not a dank, rotting, sawdusty floor, but the clean hardwood of Building 2's main hallway. In front of me, the bricked-up archway stood perfectly normal as it always had, clean and well-lit, like an eyeless, expressionless face nearly invisible in the otherwise featureless brick wall.

As I got to my feet and stumbled back to my apartment, it felt strangely as though the world was attached to me with a series of bungee cords, moving almost in parallel with me but not quite, wobbling uncertainly at the edges and jiggling too and fro as I moved. Before I could even fully get a grasp on my thoughts, the autopilot in my head had mercifully delivered me back down the hallway, through the skybridge to Building 1, down the stairs, and down the long corridor to my front door.

The moment I stumbled in and shut the door behind me, I grabbed my laptop and flipped it open.

I opened Google Docs in a new tab, and went to the Trash folder.

File > Restore.

If I didn't document this, this vision that was beyond all reason but was still freshly seared into my eyes, I was lying, even if just to myself. And I was done doing that. With a shallow, shaky breath, I hit enter a few times and began typing a new section.

The Man of the Mill

I had a horrific vision last night. I cannot comment on the veracity of what I saw. For all I know it may have been a dream. At least I hope it was, though I have reason to believe it was not.

Imagine if you will, a tiny, dark, deserted room deep within the belly of an old cotton mill, a room that nobody has ventured into for perhaps a hundred years, in which

everything is covered with a layer of lint and sawdust and the air is bone-chillingly cold. You think you are alone. But then you see the figure before you. A horribly deformed figure, impossibly young and impossibly old, with features of both, but the charm of neither and the horrors of each, his charred, melted skin fused to the ground from which he is frantically writhing to escape, unable to speak anything but a single word - "Help". Then, neither understanding how you got there nor how you were able to escape, you first wonder if you will spend the rest of your life waiting for that horrible sight to appear to you again. Worse still, you wonder if that reality might be all around you, all the time.

As I sat contemplating what it could have meant, one possibility occurred to me. Perhaps the man isn't *in* the mill... perhaps the man *is* the mill, and the mill is the man. He is the mutated, overstretched, patchwork remains of the soul of the mill incarnate, used and abused and then left to rot out the rest of its years in agony just out of sight while modern day man toils on around him without a care in the world. And to this day, he is struggling to breathe.

I don't know how or if I could have helped him. All I know is that there is an intense suffering, hidden away on some level of reality that I cannot hope to fully comprehend.

Oh, Jae. Jae, please, if you could only be here to read this. You might be able to help me understand all this.

I looked at the page on the screen, the cursor still blinking silently, almost mockingly, at the end. The hairs on the back of my neck bristled.

Who is this for, Ava?

It's just for me. Just a little thing I'm writing for myself. I just like to write things down.

Do you think anyone is ever going to read this? Seems like an awful lot of wasted time you could be using for job searching.

I know. You're right. File... Move to Trash. There. It was done. Now please go away.

Is this what you do when you're alone? When you're alone? Alone? Alone? Alone?

I shook the voice from my head. Jae would have understood. Jae wouldn't have said that

to me. My eyes welled up with desperate, hopeless tears. If there was any chance I didn't have to be alone, I would take it.

I turned around and scanned the room for a piece of paper. I instinctively looked for a printer to take a fresh piece from the tray. But of course, the printer had been Nate's. He'd been right to take it, he'd needed it more than I had. Come on, there had to be *something*.

My eyes landed on the only scrap of paper in the room: the stapled packet of welcome papers given to me by Debra, with the phone numbers for the local internet and electric services circled unnecessarily in purple highlighter. I found my purse, fished around for a pen, ripped off the front page and flipped it over. Then I began writing.

I looked at what I'd written. Some small, weak part of me, some leechlike part of my brain thrashing weakly about with hunger, bumbled something about shame, embarrassment, about whether it was safe to disclose all this, what she might think of me when she read it. But it was a part of my brain that did not have any strength left, and I let it struggle itself quietly to sleep as I folded up the paper and got up to leave my apartment.

I walked purposefully down the long corridor. The journey seemed like hours, step after step after step, hundreds of footsteps, hundreds of miles perhaps. Then finally into the stairwell, up the stairs, past the entrance to Building 21, past the bricked-up window, until I reached the third floor. For what seemed like another sad, lonely hundred miles I walked, paper in hand, until I saw her apartment number and finally stopped.

I stood in front of her door for just a moment longer than I meant to, just wishing I could see inside it again.

Then I slipped the paper under her door, straightened up, turned around, and began the long walk home.

Artifact: Letter from Ava Day to Jae Rhodes

Letter from Ava Day to Jaelynn Rhodes - December 23, 2022

Dear Jae,

I'm sorry. I acted stupidly. I overreacted and I'm sorry. The only thing I can think of that could explain my actions is some context.

Nate asked me out in our freshman year of high school. My dad was especially excited about the new relationship. As a by-the-books, big business guy himself, he didn't like the anarchic, fuck-the-police, punk rock attitude I was growing up with or the fact that I wanted to make band T-shirts for a living. He liked the way Nate filed down my rough edges, made me presentable, got me headed towards a profitable career instead of art, and even got me dressing more elegantly.

Nate proposed to me last year on Christmas. I didn't know what to say, or rather there was only one thing I could say, so I said yes. We were planning a wedding for this Christmas. I spent months crippled with anxiety about that night, reliving over and over again the moment I helplessly said yes. It just didn't feel right. About a month ago, I finally told him I wanted to take some more time before deciding to marry him. We had a huge blowout fight that ended with him storming out and driving off into the night. He didn't come home. We found out the following morning that he had crashed into a tree on a back road at 70 miles per hour. He died instantly.

Obviously everybody asked me about what happened. I told most people I didn't know any details. When my dad asked, I laid our relationship bare and told him about the argument we'd had that night. I thought he would understand. But he didn't. He acted very weird for a while, and then we had this horrible fight where he blamed me for Nate's death. He said Nate was the best thing that ever happened to me, my best chance of becoming something in life, and that I let go of him, and now look at what happened. He said the silver lining was that at least this could teach me a lesson about holding on to the things that are important to you. And as harsh as that sounded at first, I think there was some truth to it. Indirectly or not, I killed Nate.

So I still think about him. I still wear the blue silk scarf he gave me that Christmas, to remind me who I could be if I tried. If anything, I just think he deserves to be remembered and respected, and not gossiped about now that he doesn't have the chance to defend himself. The least I could do is continue down the path that he started me on.

I hope I see you again on better terms, and that we can discuss what's going on with the mill. I have a lot to tell you. I know I'm a weirdo. I know I'm unstable. I know I freaked out on you. But if we're right about what's happening, this is about more than just you and me. This is more important than just us.

Come see me literally any time. I'm unemployed.

Sorry again,

Ava

Tommy

Shiff-clunk, shiff-clunk, shiff-clunk, shiff-clunk.

Looms number 4 and 5 were running at breakneck speed today. This was good. This was exactly what she'd need to get her supervisor's attention. The bobbin in Loom 5's shuttle would be running out in 3, 2, 1—and in a flash she was there, brake lever thrown back with one hand, shuttle removed with one hand, flipped open with the other, empty bobbin removed with the other, full bobbin loaded with the other, shuttle flipped closed with the other, shuttle reinstalled with the other, brake lever thrown forward with the other. Finally allowing herself another breath, she marveled at how quickly her own hands moved. Behind her eyes burned a thrilling mixture of fear and pride, as though she couldn't quite believe what she was doing. To her right, the finished sheet of fabric

She looked up from her hands and toward the single clock gracing the wall above. Wait for it... wait for it...

Go.

Her mind raced to keep count of the number of rotations made by the loom. Twenty in the first five seconds - that was good. Actually, that was perfect! This is the day she'd hit 240 rpm. Imagine telling Mr. Peters that. Imagine Mr. Peters coming over and noticing her export bin was noticeably taller than anyone else's on the floor. Mr. Peters had told her on her first day that she was now a loom-working machine, and by Jove, she—

SCHLICK-clunk, shiff-clunk, shiff-clunk.

She shouted and doubled over in pain, clutching her hand. She'd looked away from her hands just one second too long, let them get a fraction of an inch too close to the shuttle run, and the shuttle had sliced her hand clean open. Blood poured from her palm, and she gave a second

scream as she caught sight of all four phalanges showing through the wound.

She could no longer hear the machine clearly, its noise replaced with a ringing static, but the machine continued as though nothing had happened, running just as quickly as ever. Eyes wet with tears and lip firmly clenched between her teeth, the woman inhaled deeply and rose up again. But rather than reach for the lever to shut off the machine, or even continue her work, she froze, even briefly loosening her left hand's death-grip on her right. For a moment it was unclear why, but following the line of her gaze revealed the cause.

A thin, dark red line now ran down the center of the woven cloth leaving the production side of the loom. She looked on helplessly as row after row of thread was woven into the fabric, a sliver of bloody flesh wedged between two of the comb wires leaving a streak in the same spot on each pass. As the shuttle passed through the bloody wires its momentum tossed a small amount to the side with it, so that the effect on the finished fabric was that of an infinitely long wound bleeding slightly on one side.

Just as the woman seemed to be gathering her composure to grasp the lever and turn off the machine, it was done for her.

"What exactly is going on here, Watkins?" The man who had pulled the lever, in a black suit, walked around to her side to better assess the fabric piled up in the export bin.

Watkins looked as if she would rather her whole body had been chewed up by the loom than face her supervisor at this moment. "I'm sorry sir, the shuttle took a piece of my hand, sir—"

The supervisor looked furious. "The shuttle did that? Of its own accord?"

Watkins gulped. "I looked up at the clock, sir, just for a moment, to see if I could—"

"What is the one thing I repeated to you on your first day here, Watkins?"

“Don’t take your eyes off the fabric, sir.”

“Good god,” said the supervisor, grabbing a length of bunched-up cloth from the export bin and raising it over his head, so that the last several minutes of weaving stretched out before him.

As he pulled out more, the thin line of blood seemed to expand, bleeding further and further out to the edges of the fabric, until eventually the fabric at the bottom of the pile appeared to be almost completely saturated, with only frayed edges of white bordering a vivid, glistening mass of scarlet.

“I’m so sorry sir—it looks like it kept spreading after it landed in the bin, sir—”

The supervisor dropped the bolt of fabric and rounded on her. “Thank you for that enlightening explanation, you stupid cow. Now go wash yourself up. I suppose you won’t be able to continue work today.”

“No sir.” The woman wrung her bleeding hand nervously, trying to steady her breathing and contain and contain any further screams. “Actually I—”

“Yes?” asked the man.

“I was just thinking sir—The wound is rather large sir, it took out most of my palm—I don’t know if I’ll be able to man the looms with much speed if this heals funny...” She gulped and continued fumbling with her hand. “We can’t feed five kids on just John’s paycheck sir, I don’t know what I would do if I can’t get this job back.”

The supervisor blinked. “Let us hope it doesn’t heal funny, then.”

Suddenly the woman and her supervisor became very small, and the dusty, oil-stained floor retreated further and further away. Row after row of looms came into view, each one adding its own shiff-clunk shiff-clunks to the cacophony of mechanical sound, each one spitting out yard

after yard of wet, bloody fabric into row after row of blood-filled export bins.

I woke up with a gasp. My palms throbbed where my fingernails had been digging into them.

I could at least make something out of this. I opened the laptop and began typing.

The thread of the evil that happened in the mill is like a strip of blood etched into the fabric of time as the loom of reality, with death stuck in it

I screwed up my face in disgust as I read it back. What the hell was that? I should be used to this by now, I wake up with some idea that sounds great and as soon as I try to bring it into reality I realize it's absolute nonsense. One more thing that Nate used to do for me. Now I'm all alone and have to waste my own time finding out for myself. Who would be reading this anyway?

I didn't care who was reading this. Maybe I didn't care if it looked like I was crazy. Who did I have now anyway? Certainly not Jae.

I looked at the paragraphs I'd written yesterday. Then I added some more.

The mill has been sick for a long time. It's oozing its past like pus.

Enter.

It's been expanded and rebuilt so often and so carelessly, overweight machinery crammed into it until it collapses, worker deaths brushed under the rug in the name of profits, that the building's soul is now little more than a Frankenstein monster tainted by death and greed.

Over the years, the mill became a grotesque slave to its owners, suffering and falling apart at the seams, but being forever beaten, bloated, and surgically altered until it fulfilled its new greedy owner's desires. Wounds, left unclean and improperly treated. It started bleeding. It became unstable, and now its past is bleeding. Leaking out like pus.

Pus? Would that scare too many people away? But it was true.

Clumps of its past are leaking around the edges like pus from a wound, perhaps trying to expel the decaying souls trapped under its skin.

No, that was no use. Now I really was just speaking to myself. I was describing some kind of insane phenomenon that nobody in their right mind would believe. The only reason I believed it myself was that Jae had also seen it. But at this point, she might as well have been a figment of my imagination too.

How could I be sure if any of this was a figment of my imagination?

Oh my god. What if I recorded it?

How had I not thought of that before? I have a phone in my pocket for a reason, don't I? All I had to do was point the camera forward and walk in. Then I'd post it on YouTube. Maybe I'd become an internet sensation. Or maybe just one or two people would see it. That would be more than good enough.

It was decided. That's what I'd do. There was no other choice now. And this time, Al, you can stay home. I don't need a broken arm today.

As I descended the stairs, a familiar sinking feeling threatened to dampen my determination by reminding me that I probably wouldn't see it again. What were the chances I'd see it again? I pushed open the heavy door with the understanding that I would probably just grab a quick breath of fresh air, regain some composure, and return back inside.

The moment I pushed the door open, a gust of biting cold winter wind hit me like a bus, almost knocking me off my feet. I guess I didn't need Al to do that for me this time. I nuzzled into my scarf, wishing yet again that it had been made of something bulkier than silk, and even tried wrapping it around my ears, but it made no difference. This scarf was a lot like me, I

thought. Pretty enough on the surface, but utterly useless in the real world.

It was so bone-chillingly cold that several times I considered turning around and retreating to the warmth of my apartment, cuddling with my nice warm dog and forgetting about everything. But I wouldn't let myself.

It might not have been any more than one minute, but it was a minute that lasted an eternity. The icy blaze of wind and snow roared ferociously as it encircled me, although even a roar felt inadequate to describe its relentless, unceasing ferocity. At least when a lion roars, it eventually exhausts its breath and must inhale again. It was inhuman, this unceasing, infinite, unbroken wall of sound and fury. The cold bit aggressively at the edges of my eyelids, my nostrils, my dry, chapped lips, and numbness began to spread through my face. The wind was beginning to take on a solid form, smacking and thumping at every surface in its way, the now absurdly inadequate blue silk scarf visibly straining at its cheap, thin seams as one end of it whipped and snapped in the turbulence. As I passed under the archway supporting the Building 9 tunnel I prayed it might provide even the briefest few seconds of reprieve from the raging snow, but somehow no such reprieve came, as if the snow were an omnipresent force that could not be stopped by any mere wall of brick.

For a brief moment, my addled mind conjured up the image of a warm body in a thick coat huddled against me, helping me through the storm, lending me their warmth. In the moment, I couldn't tell whether it was supposed to be Nate, or Jae. Or even maybe my father. It was just somebody. Anybody. Until it wasn't, and reality flooded back in, and in place of the warm body, I saw next to me exactly what had always existed next to me, storm or no storm: a cold, empty void filled with a furious storm that only I seemed to be able to see.

The veneer of competence I'd maintained on and off for the last few days wore rapidly

away, and raw screams from my insomnia-addled brain began to shine through to the surface. Tears that felt like they were instantly crystalizing as they began welling up in the corners of my eyes, blasted into frigid streaks across my temples by the raging wind. The tears became sobs, sobs which I probably would have restrained if they had been audible, but which disappeared instantly into the screaming wall of noise around me. Somewhere in that minute, everything else ceased to be. It was just me, the frigid storm, and animal screams.

“STOP!” I screamed madly into the wind, my voice cracking. “STOOOPPPPPPP!!!”

Perhaps the storm heard me. Perhaps it was just the effect of something leaving my body at that moment. Though the snow whipped around me as furiously as ever, the ear-splitting din seemed to fade ever so slightly away. Somehow, I had finally reached the gate leading into the courtyard that was once Building 8, and through its bars, with a surge of excitement, vindication, and dread all rolled into one, I saw it. The old basement door was hanging drunkenly askew, strangely unaffected by the wind whipping around it, and an unmistakable hazy golden light was pouring from it, a light that was not quite still and static but appeared to be pulsating and morphing rhythmically from the movement of the blurry silhouettes in front of it.

With numb, shaking hands, I pried the handle open and stepped up onto the raised courtyard. Feeling more confident now that I had no neurotic whippet in hand, I slowly and silently plodded towards the light, never taking my eyes off it in case it might not be there when I looked back. Finally I reached the door. I slipped delicately through the doorway, trying not to push it open any more than it had already been so as not to arouse suspicion. While I was fairly certain that I couldn't be seen by whatever shadows of the past were being cast here, I couldn't take anything for granted. As I emerged fully into the warmth of the factory floor for the first time, a sudden wave of vertigo almost knocked me to the floor.

All concept of space from floor to ceiling was rendered abstract and unmeasurable as the ceiling was fully obscured by row after row of spinning axles and the countless thick rotating leather belts they were driving, which draped downwards in all directions into the writhing sea of machinery in a fashion that seemed almost as random as if they'd landed there like some enormous ticker tape after a parade, yet felt strangely precise in its randomness. The machinery completely obscured every inch of floor, such that the silhouetted bodies of the workers tending to them looked at first like disembodied torsos growing like plants from a bed of writhing and gnashing iron.

Nevertheless, two men were milling about the area nonchalantly in one of the few narrow corridors barely visible between two rows of looms, blissfully immune to the almost sickening churning movement surrounding them on all sides. One of them was pointing towards an area on the far wall, where a huge square of unnaturally clean, bright red bricks stood out from the ruddy, grungy, oil-speckled brick surrounding it. With a double-take, I recognized it as the freshly bricked-up entrance to the skybridge to Building 3. The very same skybridge where I had seen that horrible thing fused to the floor. But that wasn't possible... that was on the top floor, and I had just walked in through a basement door.

I cast my gaze to the windows, and realized with a start that not only was it not the basement, but it was very much neither nighttime nor winter. Golden sunlight shone in through the grimy glass, illuminating a sunny bird's eye view of the complex from what must have been the top floor of the building.

"So uh, what the hell happened to the bridge to Three?" asked the man gesturing to the bricked-up entryway.

"Some bright idea by Henderson. You know, the new guy they sent down here last week.

You know the machine in Three that got all fucked up when that kid got caught in it?”

“Yeah,” said the other man off-handedly, as if this might be an everyday occurrence.

“Well, apparently the new one they got to replace it is so fuckin’ long it blocks the entrance to the bridge. No way into it now, and no other place to put a machine that big. So he calls in bricklayers over the weekend to block up the entryway. *It was drafty anyway*, he says, *it was drafty anyway*,” repeated the man, starting to laugh. “*It was costing us a fortune in heating bills*. Can you believe these guys?”

“So,” replied the first man, furrowing his brow, “it’s blocked up for good?”

“No, it’s bricks that dissolve like fuckin’ cotton candy in the mornin’. Course it’s for good ya fuckin’ moron!”

The other man chuckled, repressing a smirk at his own expense. “But I mean, how are we gonna get our pallets over to Three at the end of the shift now?”

“Oh, he had an answer for that one,” said the first man. “He said go fuck yourself. That was the long and short of it anyway. Roll the damn pallets outside and lift ‘em into Three using the cargo pulley, like in the old days before they put the bridge in. He said make one of the kids do it if we don’t want to. Most of them ain’t even technically on the books anymore, but you can always find one willing to help out for a few pennies. Won’t affect the books none that way.”

“Why don’t they just—*oof!*” The other man doubled over as a young boy ran headlong into him.

“Sorry-y-y-y-y!” came the boy’s trailing apology, his voice bouncing with every step as he ran toward the door with a box of cotton scraps.

“Speaking of kids,” continued the second man, “didn’t I hear they got new self-cleaning shuttles now? Why the hell they still using kids to clean up under the mules here? God knows

Consolidated has the money.”

“They ain’t gonna spend extra money on new machinery while these ones are workin’ just fine,” replied the first man, “and the kids are doin’ the cleanin’ for free.”

“Well they’re gonna keep havin’ kids mangled in those things the longer they keep usin’ ‘em. That’s gotta cost ‘em something in the long run.”

“I dunno Harry,” replied the other man helplessly. “That’s their calculation to make, not mine. Ayyy, Tommy!” The two men looked around at a scrawny teenage boy with a long pimply nose and glasses with a crack in one lens who had just entered the room. “What the hell you doin’ here? Ain’t you a bleach boy in Three now?” The man gave Tommy a light, friendly punch in the arm, but the boy’s face remained stony.

“I got somethin’ serious to talk about, guys,” he said in a hushed voice.

“Ain’t your dad supposed to teach you that?” laughed one of the other men. “When a mama and a papa love each other very much—”

“I’m serious, guys!” said Tommy, briefly raising his voice before looking nervously around him. “Consolidated just sold us to some rich oil tycoon out west. They been lookin’ for a buyer since the Japs surrendered and the army uniform money dried up, and this guy’s been buyin’ up mills all across the country—they say he’s never even set foot in a mill before, he just knows how to milk ‘em real good for profit. He’s bringin’ in all new management ‘cause Consolidated’s takin’ their guys with them, and they’re all gettin’ ten grand in severance. For doin’ nothin’!”

With a sigh, one of the other men shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. “That’s rotten. I hate to say it, kid, but that sounds like business as usual ‘round here.”

“But here’s the thing,” continued Tommy. “The new guy wants to convert us to electric.

All the mills are doin' it. Instead of the steam engine drivin' all these machines by belt, they're gonna throw a generator on the thing and replace all these looms and mules with electric doodads. And that's gonna cut jobs in half. They do all kinds of stuff by themselves and they don't require half as much maintenance. At least two hundred men gonna be let go next week. And guess what all these workers are gettin' for severance?"

The two men were now as stony-faced as the boy. Neither of them dared talk.

"Yeah," said Tommy. "Zero. Zilch. A letter home saying don't come into work tomorrow, or ever, and by the way we own your house so move out by the first, start paying us crazy rent, or go to jail. Half the town's gonna be destitute. All while Consolidated management leaves with millions and new jobs already lined up at other mills."

"You're fuckin' kidding," mumbled one of the men in disbelief.

"I wish," said Tommy. "So me and the other guys in the bleachery are going to try and start a strike."

The two men's expressions both exploded into disbelief. One leaned down. "Are you serious, kid? You can't do that!"

"Why not?" argued Tommy flippantly.

"You know what happened back in '22, kid? Consolidated cut wages in half and made it a 56-hour week. Strike lasted months, people started gettin' violent when Consolidated wouldn't budge. Governor called in the National Guard and put an M2 on the bell tower—"

"And they killed two men," finished Tommy. "One of them was my uncle. That's one reason I hate these bastards so much."

"Hate whom?" came a sinister voice from behind them. All three men looked around to see a tall, thin man in a black suit looking sternly down upon them.

“Sorry, Mr. Peters, sir,” said Tommy quickly. “Just a friend of mine. Nobody you would know.”

The man grimaced skeptically. “Funny seeing you here, Tommy. I thought the bleachery team stole you from our ranks years ago.”

“I was just—um, I was just—”

“It just so happens that we could use an extra man on scutching today,” interrupted Mr. Peters. “Why don’t you go turn on that last one at the end? That should give our numbers a nice surge by the end of the day. I’ll let the bleachery team know you’re here.”

Tommy looked nervously around, then with a resigned sigh began walking down the line of huge, loudly whirring machines along the wall.

Reaching almost to the ceiling, each hulking beast of a machine bore a closed metal door with a glass window through which could be seen vast clouds of cotton fluff being whipped around at dizzying speed in a tornado of hot air and then beaten senseless by rapidly spinning spiked metal rods. At the end of the machines’ shared export chute, clean, smooth mounds of cotton were leaving the machines absent of the stems, seeds, and coarse fibers that had been present in the raw plant being fed into the other side.

Tommy stopped when he reached the final machine, which remained dark and silent until with a groan he pulled back a massive lever on its side. A formerly motionless cog nearby engaged with the rotating leather belt draping down from an axle on the ceiling, and the machine began spinning up. But as it did, a loud thumping came from inside of it, growing slowly but surely into a visible shaking as the machine reached full speed. As I watched breathlessly, it reminded me of an unevenly loaded washing machine, except ten times as large and ten times as loud.

“Mr. Peters!”

The man whipped around. “Yes?”

“With all due respect sir, this machine is severely out of balance. You can hear it. You can see it! When’s the last time this was serviced?”

“Our machines rarely need to be serviced,” said Mr. Peters dismissively. “Servicing a machine that is still performing its job perfectly well is no better than throwing banknotes out the window.”

“Sir—”

“I will be back at noon, and I expect to see five more bales processed when I return. Oh,” he said, turning to leave, “I should tell you I’ll be leaving my position next week. But it sounds like you already knew that.” And with that, he began walking away.

Tommy’s face screwed up into a grimace, realizing the man had clearly overheard everything. Then, with a burst of confidence, he whipped around and shouted after the man.

“You know, there was a time when this mill loved its workers like family!”

Mr. Peters stopped in his tracks and slowly turned around. “Loved?” he repeated indignantly. “*Loved?*” He stepped up to Tommy’s face, looking like he might punch him out. But instead, he just uttered a single line, slowly, acidically, and so quietly I could barely make it out from where I was standing.

“Boy, are you queer or somethin’?”

And with that, he turned on his heel and walked away, disappearing down the staircase at the end of the floor, leaving the two men and the boy looking nervously back and forth at each other.

“Maybe the management this new guy brings in will be better,” offered one of the men,

raising his voice to ensure he could be heard over the increasing din of the vibrating scutching machine.

“Are you kidding?” shouted the other man. “They’re always the same! No matter who’s in power in these big national operations, you know they only promote the brown-nosers. And that’s if they promote anyone, usually they just fill the positions with their friends and let the workforce toil away with no prospects for promotion. Only time the supervisors were respectable around here was back in the Bright Brothers days, when everyone knew each other, and the guys that owned the company lived among the workers. And that time has long, long—”

His sentence was cut short by a scream of agony. The door on Tommy’s rattling scutching machine had burst open and a blast of scalding hot air and cotton dust shot directly into his face. Between screams of pain, he stumbled backwards behind the row of machines, rubbing madly at his quickly reddening eyes with one hand and blindly groping forward with the other as he proceeded directly towards me. He was going to run right into me.

“Tommy?” shouted one of the other men, scrambling to stop his own machine before running over to where the boy was stumbling wildly across the floor, the scutching machine still spewing a jet of scalding hot cotton dust into the air. He was headed right for the bricked-up entryway to his right—I was sure he was going to land face-first into the fresh bricks. But then something happened which made me literally double-take in disbelief. He twisted and stumbled his way directly into and through the bricked-up wall.

He was simply there one moment, and gone the next.

I was frozen to the spot. I couldn’t believe what I’d just seen. Had that been what *I* had looked like when I ended up in the skybridge with that horrible creature?

He hadn’t observed it since it had been bricked up, I thought. In his head, that was his

reality. So that's where he ended up.

I shook the disbelief from my head and looked around in amazement at the scene around me. Maybe I could try to process what I'd just seen later. Right now, I had to take this opportunity to soak up everything I could.

A massive machine which I recognized from my research to be a spinning mule took up the entire left side of the building. Against the wall, a dizzying row of thousands of parallel spools of cotton thread spun ferociously on their spindles as the gargantuan carriage, easily over a hundred feet long, paced feverishly back and forth on rails stretching the length of the floor, pulling and twisting the uneven cotton yarn into fine threads. The huge claws at the end of the moving carriage rose and fell rhythmically with each cycle as they swapped and twisted thousands of threads in a single precise, macabre movement like monstrous skeletal fingers rapping against an invisible table. The sheer size of the carriage produced the dizzying illusion that the entire building was shifting back and forth every few seconds, and only added to the feeling of claustrophobic seasickness I was trying to swallow down.

A young boy and a young girl stood at the end of the carriage rails, darting into the carriage's path and hopping from rail to rail to collect any residual cotton scraps they could before the carriage returned, roaring toward them through a cloud of steam with iron claws retracting and extending like storybook monsters.

Part of me wanted to reach out and rescue them from harm's way each time the carriage roared toward them. But this was a reflection of the past, right? And even if I *could* move them, which I probably couldn't, it surely wouldn't go unnoticed. For better or worse, this was their job. If someone didn't collect those scraps, they would build up and inevitably be lit ablaze by a stray spark in this hotbed of grinding mechanical fury.

Suddenly, from behind a loom, Joe gasped and grabbed Harry by the shoulder and motioned in my direction. “Look Harry! Just there!”

“It’s just a trick of the light, Joe,” mumbled Harry, not looking up from the loom he was busy tending to. “We’ve been over this.”

“No, really! Just there! Look at that and tell me that’s not a ghost!”

Joe pointed more distinctly at me, or at least directly in my direction. With a start, I began questioning my understanding of the situation, rewinding quickly through my conversations with Jae. I was fairly sure he couldn’t see me, anyway. Whatever this was, this thing that I was experiencing right now, it was some kind of reflection of the past, a mirror, a shadow cast across time. He could no more reach out and grab me than if I tried to shake hands with a shadow. Right Jae? God, I wish she’d been here to see this.

Oh my god. How had I been so stupid? Was I or was I not a twenty-first century millennial?

I dug frantically in my pocket for my phone. If I could record this, that would change everything. First and foremost, Jae would believe me. Secondly, Jae would believe *herself*. If the combination of her own memories and my memories weren’t enough to blast through the brick wall she’d built around this situation, this irrefutable collection of moving pixels would have to do the trick. Then maybe she’d trust herself enough to get to the bottom of that stack of scribbles she had in that folder. Let alone what would happen if I posted it online, maybe on my blog. My heart thumped like crazy as my trembling, sweating fingers finally wrestled the phone from my pocket. After almost dropping it to the ground, I tapped the screen.

Nothing.

I tapped it again. The screen remained resolutely, stubbornly black. Come on, not now!

Could it really be dead? Or was this some godforsaken side-effect of being here in time?

“It looks like a girl, Harry,” said the mill worker called Joe, his eyes not leaving me.

“Look, the outline there. It’s hazy, but look. The blonde hair. The long coat.”

“Holy shit, Joe, you’re right,” muttered Harry, narrowing his eyes in disbelief as he stepped out from behind the loom and came more into focus through the steam. The heaving breaths of the mill machinery were louder than ever. The man named Joe was still pointing directly at me with a shaking finger, his eyes screwed up as they bored directly into me, searching me like a map.

“I seen one of those before, Harry, I swear it,” exclaimed Joe defiantly. “You didn’t wanna believe me but I told you I seen spirits. This place is haunted! Leave this place, spirit!”

I swallowed hard as I now reversed my sweaty fumbling with my phone, trying to shove it back into my tight pocket, wondering feverishly how it could ever have possibly fit there. They weren’t just looking in my direction. They were looking *at* me. And now, his fear morphing rapidly into determination, Joe was walking quickly in my direction.

The Chase & B29

Whether I was a ghost or not, I didn't want to know what this man could do when he got to me. I turned around to run, but just as I did, the carriage of the spinning mule shot into my path and knocked my feet out from under me. I stumbled to the ground, clutching my ankle.

"You hear that echo?" exclaimed Joe, looking back at Harry. "That was a scream from the other side! From beyond the grave, that's what it sounds like! I heard it before! I dunno 'bout you Harry but I ain't gettin' haunted today!"

I lifted myself off the ground and hobbled towards the exit. My throbbing ankle was beginning to bleed from where the iron chassis of the mule carriage had struck it. No shadow could do that. That certainly felt very real, I thought feverishly as I gasped through the pain, and so were the dark spots of blood dripping onto the wooden floor behind my foot. The sinister mechanical breathing of the machine, a wall of sound that emerged from the roaring of leather belts on their pulleys and the impossibly fast whirling of a thousand spools in first one direction and then the other as the carriage heaved back and forth, spared no thought for an organic creature like myself being struck down in its path. The hundred-foot-long, multiple-ton machine had shrugged off my delicate bony ankle like it was nothing. I had been in *its* way, after all.

The man was rapidly gaining on me with every lumbering step I took, Harry following curiously in tow. I cursed my own clumsiness. Of course I would do this to myself. What would happen if he caught up to me? If he took a swing at me, would it injure me in real life, in my current timeline? Would it pass right through me like I was a ghost? How did any of this work? What the *fuck* was happening? I was so stupid and greedy, so eager to see more nerdy mill stuff without spending the time to figure out what in the name of science fiction was really going on here. How could I have been so careless?

Then, in a moment of panic, I remembered something I'd talked about with Jae. Just close your eyes... stop observing it. With no observer, this freaky little pocket of time will fade away, dissolving back into that in-between quantum state outside of time. I shut my eyes tight and pictured the present day in my head. Come on... come on...

A horrific, stabbing pain shot through my bleeding ankle, and I let out a cry through teeth that were clenched together so hard I feared I would chip one of them. My eyes inadvertently shot back open.

The roar of the mill was louder than ever, and the man was closer than ever. He would soon be within arm's reach. My eyes blurred with tears, I stumbled back through the door and began breathlessly limping, each footstep following me twice as quickly as my own.

I was headed down the crooked alley created by the mishmash of triangular buildings behind the apartments, past Buildings 6 and 7, down towards the dog park. Worse still, it was becoming clear this was still very much not the apartment complex it had been when I'd slipped through the door—the roar of wind and snow was gone, replaced by the endless din of shouting workers and the roar of machinery echoing through my head as every single building around me thrived with frantic motion in the beating sunshine. The skinny little building to my left was packed with men in overalls, the bricked-up loading door on the second floor was now not bricked up at all but flung wide open as two men emerged pushing a pallet of cotton bales across a metal ramp over my head and into Building 2, and Building 8A was nowhere to be found; instead, an imposing brick building stood where I expected to see the hollow ruins of Building 8. There wasn't a square inch of unused space. There was nowhere I could hide. I wracked my brain... if only Building 28 were still there at the end of the complex, that would probably give me some place to rest.

As I dragged myself forward I could almost begin to feel the man's breath on the back of my neck. My bloody ankle was complaining more with every excruciating step.

Suddenly, just in the nick of time, it clicked. *Building 28*, I thought. Building 28 was built around in the late 1950s. This layout was definitely the 1930s. My obsession over those historical photographs might finally pay off.

Could I hide by phasing into a building that didn't exist yet?

I staggered towards what I could now see was the open grassy field where I remembered the dog park to be, clenched my eyes tightly shut, and pictured the grainy black-and-white photograph of Buildings 28 and 29 from the article I'd read, in all their ugly, sprawling glory. I pictured the behemoth standing there in front of me, with myself inside of it, calmly perusing all the product in storage, completely detached from this cursed timeline. I prayed with every fiber of my being, hoping beyond hope this stupid impossible trick would work again, not sure whether I was more likely to get caught by the man behind me or whether some present-day observer would see me stumbling like a drunken idiot into the dog park with no dog, until—

Clunk clunk clunk.

My footsteps did not turn into soft pats against the grass of the dog park, but into woody thunks against an old floor.

I opened my eyes and was met with a dank, musty darkness, the unmistakable darkness and coldness of nighttime, broken only by jagged gashes of harsh yellow light from a floodlight outside leaking in through thin gaps in the old clapboard walls. The roar of the busy mill had disappeared, a thick silence hanging in the stale air around me. A brief pang of nausea washed over me as I collapsed to the floor.

This must be it. It had worked.

For a moment, I just laid there on the ground, relishing the silence, the lack of suffocating steam and oil residue, the lack of approaching footsteps behind me.

The stench of stale cigarette smoke hung in the air as I collected myself and looked around nervously. There didn't seem to be a perfectly straight line in sight. Every board was ever so slightly askew, every surface had some small gap in it. It looked like it had been constructed either by drunks, or by someone racing to meet an impossible deadline, or both.

A haunting, cavernous space extended out in front of me. I scrunched my eyes shut and put my fist to my forehead, calculating the way out. Building 28. Left side of Building 28. The closest exit would be... the skybridge to Building 11. A skybridge that no longer existed in my present, torn down along with this building long before I moved in. The skybridge to Building 13 would be the other way out, but who knows how much further away that would be. The towering stacks of cotton and rows of shelving units threw off my sense of scale hugely. Even Al knew how huge this place was—he'd run the perimeter of this foundation many times in the dog park, and that was no quick sprint. God, I missed Al. Where was he now... whatever the hell "now" was?

But as I looked to my left, all I saw was cotton. Stretching out into the darkness, teetering towers of massive, tightly belted five-by-five-foot bales of dense white cotton—tens of thousands of sheep's worth, I had to imagine—were stacked in teetering towers nearly to the ceiling. Along my right, huge six-foot spool drums of thin, clean, trimmed spools of finished cloth, in varying shades of white, gray, beige, and indigo blue. For a struggling mill in the 1950s, this was a truly huge amount. I wondered if they must be cranking out more than they could sell and storing the excess in this building.

I had no choice but to walk forward. I had the distinct feeling of being in a haunted hedge

maze, complete with creaking floorboards and disorienting lighting.

When I turned the next corner, I finally saw something that wasn't cotton. Directly ahead of me, still somehow impossibly far off in the distance, a row of blank, windowless plywood doors extended down the wall. If my sense of direction was correct, I thought, this must be the shared wall between Buildings 28 and 29, the two identical and equally massive parts of this one behemoth whole.

Ever since I was little, mysterious unmarked doors had always had a pull on me. This was a dangerous time for that kind of intrusive thought, for sure. But at this point I was so lost down the rabbit hole of this already-impossible circumstance, what did I have to lose?

I allowed myself a peek into the first door, and the stale cigarette smell immediately doubled in potency, causing me to hastily bury a cough into my scarf. Thankfully, I was right about the building being unoccupied. A small, ugly office, dizzyingly different from the vast expanse I'd just come from. A cartoonishly tall stack of paper-stuffed binders teetered on the corner of the small desk, and on the opposite wall hung a calendar with bold black font announcing January 1951, next to an equally unremarkable blank plywood door that must have led into the adjoining building.

Well, that hadn't been too bad. I could certainly afford myself a peek into the next door. I opened the next door and immediately had to suppress a gasp and stop myself from slamming it shut. In a much larger and deeper room, a single candle illuminated four rickety-looking twin beds, three of them occupied. As the back of the room came into focus, I realized the bed in the far left had a child in it, and the one on the far right contained two children huddled together.

As the details of the room filtered in, I saw two small, humble side tables located between the beds, each with a small collection of photographs scattered upon them. Unable to stop myself

from taking a closer look, I took another soft step forward and leaned down to see the contents of the table between the beds to my right. Next to a hairbrush and an ashtray, a tiny oval-framed photograph was propped up facing one of the beds, depicting a man, perhaps a father or family member, I thought. As the man's features came into detail, I was shocked to recognize the face.

There was no mistaking it. It was the man from the bleachery with the chemical burns on his right cheek. These must be the children, or maybe grandchildren, of that poor man who had slit his throat in his bathtub after sustaining even further burns. And here were his descendants, still holed up in this big ugly building on the same piece of property. History was repeating for generation after generation. I shook my head silently. Why did they keep coming back? How could they keep doing this to themselves?

Then the silence was broken by a cough.

I scanned the beds in a hot panic, and after passing four sleeping heads, my eyes met those of a young boy with a blonde bowl cut, whose eyes and nose were just barely peeking out from under his blankets. His eyes were wide and filled with at least as much panic as mine. In the spur of the moment, I put a single quivering finger up to my lips and silently mimed a shush.

I raced to the plywood door at the back of the room, slid the deadbolt quietly open, pulled myself through it, closed it behind me, and dropped to the floor with my back against the door.

With a horrible creak, I could hear the doorknob in the other room begin turning. I struggled to get myself positioned under the bed as fast as possible while making a minimum of noise. In a panic, I could not calculate whether I would be able to hide myself fully before whatever was out there entered the room.

From the opening doorway came a blinding light, which after adjusting to the dark storage building seemed to scream with an impossible brightness. I sat frozen, unable to think as

the wall of light washed over me. In the split second before I pulled my head fully underneath the bed, a face emerged from the wall of light, and for the second time that night I was shocked to see a face I recognized.

The light was coming from an oil lantern, clutched in the gnarled claw of a tall figure dressed in black rags, its other arm missing entirely. I only saw the face for a fraction of a second, but it didn't take any longer than that. The image was already burned into my head. The light cast into sharp relief the jagged peaks and valleys of a rough, scarred face with only one eye. It was a face that would have been frightening even if I hadn't seen it before.

I had seen that face, that man, that thing, with its outstretched claw holding its lantern in the alleys of Bright Mill. It had chased after me. And now it was here, again, entering a room full of helpless sleeping children. It was a horror movie come to life.

I held my breath as the gnarled thing approached the bed, its heavy, dirt-clodden boots thumping against the ground, until finally it drew in a hoarse, rattling breath, and uttered the first words I'd ever heard it speak.

"How are you doing, son?"

The broken but kindly voice wavered as he leaned down to kiss the boy on the bed.

"Good," said the boy groggily, with an exaggerated yawn. "Tired."

"That's a good boy," said the man. "Rest up now. You and Timmy have to be on the floor in three hours."

"Again?" whined the boy. "Why can't we wait until the bell like everyone else?"

My mind struggled to rearrange itself. The knot in my stomach, once tied there by fear, now sunk lower as this sad new reality washed over me. For reasons I did not even want to consider, this man and his children were living in a warehouse, his children were forced to come

into work at five the next morning, and he himself had not come home until two.

“Because Daddy’s boss said so,” answered the man heavily.

A disgruntled sigh came from the bed above me. “I don’t like Mr. Dawson,” said the child.

“Don’t say that about Mr. Dawson, son,” said the man as softly as his gravelly voice could muster, each word sagging under an immense weight. “He’s doing this for us. Mr. Dawson is the one that let me stay on as night watchman, after...”

“After you lost your arm,” finished the boy after a pause.

“Yes, Charlie,” said the man defeatedly. “They wanted to send us away forever with no pay, when the machine took daddy’s arm. We wouldn’t have any place to sleep, or any food to eat. Mr. Dawson and I used to work together, back before the incident. He’s the only one of *them* that used to be one of *us*.”

There was a pause, then the boy’s voice ignited with a new passion. “But why is he making me and Timmy work here?”

“Charlie—”

“I know why you told me to say I’m thirteen if anybody asks, Papa. It’s because we’re not supposed to be working here. Mr. Dawson is making us.”

“No, Charlie,” explained the man in a pained voice. “*I’m* making you work here.”

“What?”

The man gulped and shuffled his heavy feet. “We owe so much money to the company, Charlie. We buy our food from them. We used to rent our house from them, back when we had one. And it was hard enough as it was, especially after Mama passed.” The man took a deep breath. “This is the only way we can pay off what we owe. I asked Mr. Dawson if you kids could

help.”

“But what if one day I have the same job as you had, and I lose an arm?” cried the boy.

“Then this all just repeats again! Why would we keep doing this?”

“Because if we don’t,” said the man softly, “then we can’t afford food. If we don’t, we go hungry, and we sleep on sheets of cardboard in the park. If we don’t...” the man gulped. “Then we die.”

There was a long silence.

“I hate this stupid bedroom,” murmured the boy, so softly that I could barely hear him.

It’s not even a bedroom, I thought. And here I was, upset that my sink didn’t have a sprayer nozzle.

“One day, you’ll have a better life,” said the man. “This mill won’t be around for much longer, the way things are going. But you’ll have bigger and better opportunities.”

There was no response. I could picture in my head a child’s head lolling to the side, despite his best attempts to be a big boy who could stay awake in the wee hours. Something that only seems cool to a little kid, but quickly loses its edge once you’re an adult and you know the things that cause people to be awake in the wee hours.

“Goodnight Charlie,” murmured the man.

“Please stay,” came a sudden, impassioned plea from the boy. “Just this once!”

“I can’t,” sighed the man, in a voice that told me he’d had this conversation ten times before. He reached a gnarled fist into his trenchcoat and pulled out what looked like a grotesquely oversized pocketwatch, attached by a thick chain to a sash around his body which made him look oddly like a prisoner. He patted the side of the huge watch where I could just make out a large keyhole and the letters BUEK. “If I’m not at my next station in 5 minutes to

put the key in, they'll know I'm off my rounds, and then I won't even have this job anymore. And then... I have to go," he repeated, choking up as he stuffed the clock back under his coat. "I'm so sorry. Goodnight Charlie. I love you."

"Goodnight Papa," came the autonomous, barely-conscious response.

Then there was the clunk of a door, and a deep, deafening silence.

With a start, I realized I still had the photograph of the bleach-burned man clutched in my sweaty hand. I sure as hell wasn't opening that door again. I slipped the photograph into my pocket, unsure of what else to do.

To my left, at the end of the row of plywood doors, was the entrance to the skybridge. It had been right there the whole time, and I had almost thrown my entire night in jeopardy because of my foolish curiosity.

As I slowly but surely approached it, still trying not to put too much weight on my still-aching ankle, I could see this skybridge was twice as long as the one in which I'd meditated. Aimed upward at a dizzying diagonal angle towards the second floor of Building 13, the dusty plywood floor drooped noticeably in the middle and was littered with trash and scraps of cardboard. In some places, the dark, sagging moldy wooden beams running along the sides were reinforced with other dark, sagging moldy wooden beams, and yet other sections of the wall were fully missing, exposing the outer layout of clapboard. The frigid temperature was not surprising.

I slowly but surely made my way towards the skybridge and hobbled my way up the incline, ducking so that my head wouldn't hit against the rusty exposed iron frame of the abnormally low ceiling. Exhausted, I stopped at the halfway point, right by the single solitary little window. I couldn't see much out of it beyond a few hazy pinpricks of light from nearby

street lamps and houses. My fleeting moments of meditation in the other skybridge, between 1 and 2, had brought me peace and comfort in past moments of uncertainty. Perhaps this one could do the same for me now.

I gingerly sat down and leaned back against the uncomfortable plywood wall of the skybridge. As the panic finally began to subside from my mind, a lingering thought filtered back into my head. As generation after generation experienced worse treatment with each successive owner of Bright Mill... why on earth did they keep coming back? Couldn't a man take stock of his father's mistreatment and decide to work elsewhere?

I fished the photograph out of my pocket and took another look at him. All at once, the incident I'd witnessed in the bleachery came flooding back to me. The mill was their entire life. If they left the mill, they lost *everything*. They'd have no job, no friends, and no home.

Even if they were treated right at the beginning, people change. And then suddenly you find yourself all wrapped up in a situation. How could you possibly deliver the news to your family that you'd decided to up and leave everything all at once? What would your family say?

No job... no friends... no home.

I buried my face in my hands as my eyes started to well up. God, what had my life become? At the very least, I could still have been friends with Jae. I could still picture myself, her, and Al hanging out together in the dog park, laughing in the sun, sitting on the benches and discussing the old machinery as Al zipped around the perimeter like a speeding bullet. Oh, the things that could have been, had I not been the utterly useless waste of life I am.

It was getting much, much too late for all this. I needed to head back home and get some sleep. That was the only thing that could potentially help me now. I slowly peeled my eyes back open and looked to my left, back toward the exit of the skybridge. And for a moment, I didn't

even process what I was seeing.

Instead of a peek back into the interior of Building 28, all I saw in its place was a blank wall of concrete stretching from the floor to the ceiling.

And to my right: exactly the same thing.

I was trapped.

I shot up, wincing and internally kicking myself as a lightning bolt of pain shot through my ankle, and hobbled over to the concrete wall on the left.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. What was it Jae had said? I had stopped observing the leak. As I had slipped into the daydream about my life, I had slipped back into the present day. And this skybridge didn't exist in the present day. Where was I? What would I see if I looked out the window? I paced feverishly back to the middle of the bridge where I squinted to see out of the tiny, grimy window.

It was nothingness. Complete blackness. Not the blackness of night we are all used to seeing, pierced by starlight and the faint ambient glow from the windows of night owl residents. Just complete, utter, flat, featureless, impenetrable blackness. Nothingness. I was nowhere. Nowhere and no time.

Maybe this was my fate. Maybe I should let myself go here. Who would care anyway, if I died of starvation right here in this nonexistent bridge? Suspended in some unreachable pocket of space and time between the past and the present where nobody could get to me—wasn't that basically what my life had already been? No job. No friends. No home. A father that wouldn't even speak to me. The world had awarded me a friend in Jae, which I had ruined, and a place to live for a year, and now that place was going to be my undoing.

I slid hopelessly back down the wall, my overtired eyelids growing heavier by the

second. I don't know what time it was supposed to be here in this nowhere, no-time pocket universe, let alone what month or year, though every bone in my body said it must be late at night. I couldn't take any more. I just needed the sweet release of sleep. I would give in. I would let go. This would be the end.

My eyelids closed gently, the unnatural silence around me pressing on my ears like bales of cotton. Spools upon spools, reams upon reams, bales upon bales of cotton. Faint images of slow-motion machinery cranking away, mile-long spinning mules sliding gently off their rails and up into the clouds. Fuzzy wafts of cotton freshly delivered from the fields being drawn into scutching machines and spat out into buckets. The world of dreams and fantasies was coming for me, and that was okay with me. Shapeshifting mill buildings floated by on bales of cotton, windows and door frames closing and opening like eyes blinking, bell towers snaking their way up, down, and around other buildings like boa constrictors, roofs leaping up cartoonishly from their buildings as new floors shot up beneath them, then collapsing into thin air as their walls decayed into the mouths of vines and overgrowth as if hundreds of years were passing with every second.

Suddenly I saw a horrific vision of myself from above, with grotesque, mutilated patchwork skin and one eyeball cracked, my skin melting and my body fused inextricably to the floor, unable to tear myself free, a labored groan bubbling through years of phlegm, my one free arm waving feverishly at a frightened young woman before she disappeared from sight, never to be seen again.

I sat bolt upright in a cold sweat, wide awake. No. I couldn't let that become my future. I can do this. *I can do this*. Not a sentence I found myself using very often these days, but by some miracle I was able to fill my head with it now.

This is only temporary. You'll be out soon.

I slammed my eyes shut as tightly as I could and pictured Bright Mill as I had just seen it moments ago—the towering bales of cotton, the shivering family sleeping in their tiny twin beds. I was in this skybridge because I was simply venturing from building to building in the course of my daily work, my soulless daily grind, hauling pallet upon pallet up and down this frigid, freezing skybridge. I was just going to check how many reams of coarse white we had in stock, perhaps, to see if we should have the guys in 3 adjust the mules to spin a finer consistency. Asian imports had eaten up all the demand for comfortable shirts and blouses and all that. It was coarse fabric or nothing, just like our ancestors the civil war days, or else that was it for the mill, and if it was it for the mill, that was it for me and my family.

With my eyes still closed, ignoring the throbbing in my foot, I heaved myself up and walked the rest of the way up the slanted wooden skybridge, refusing to be worried by the bobbing of the plywood floor underneath me with every step. Here we come, I'm going to feel my foot hit the level floor of Building 13, then I'm going to take another step, and then another step.

And then, just like that, it happened. My next step was not into a concrete wall but onto a level floor, something vastly more solid and sturdy than my previous few steps.

Just another few seconds for good luck.

I blindly turned left, took another few steps forward, and opened my eyes. I had never been so grateful to see the inside of an aging, run-down mill building before. By the harsh yellow light of that same trusty 1960s halogen floodlight, piercing in through grimy, ceiling-height windows and an omnipresent haze of floating sawdust, cotton dust, and whatever other ungodly debris was present in this rotten old building, I could see beyond another few small stacks of

cotton bales, in the far corner of the floor, a tiny wrought-iron spiral staircase growing like some kind of surreal vine from the floor to the ceiling.

It couldn't possibly have been more different than the broad, square stairwells I was used to seeing—the narrow, swirling staircase spiraled like a DNA helix, its central segmented iron pillar looking like the vertebrae of a spine as it snaked its way from floor to floor. It felt strangely, hauntingly organic as I approached and delicately stepped onto it.

Holding my breath as if that would somehow reduce my chance of falling off the rickety staircase, I stepped cautiously downwards. I tried at first to run my hand along the rusty handrail to steady myself, but yanked my hand away as the rough, gritty surface of the rust ground against my palm. No tetanus today, thanks. Mercifully, I reached the bottom unscathed, and made my way through the mostly-empty first floor towards the front door. I stepped outside and had to suppress a small gasp at the sight of the mill in front of me. Somehow, I had failed to remind myself that the building would look like those old black and white photographs from the National Register of Historic Places form. And somehow, it was even worse in person.

The towering smokestack loomed eerily over me, belching out black smoke in irregular intervals with the mechanical equivalent of a coughing sound, its base emerging from a deformed, unfamiliar extension of Building 9, soaring upwards in a rough tapestry of differently colored bricks, crowned by the sinister, eternal blinking of the all-seeing red eye, forever watching over the mill like the Eye of Sauron. White bricks that had originally been arranged to spell out “Bright Mill” down the side of the smokestack had been haphazardly replaced over the years with bricks of various colors and patches of mortar, so that the words had now devolved into something more closely resembling an alien alphabet. It looked as though the mill was trying to speak its name but only garbled sounds were coming out.

Set into the gnarled, bruised face of every building, a plethora of differently sized and shaped windows had been shoehorned into the crumbling remains of the ornate brick window frames, the surrounding space patched with cement here and wood there, the remaining panes of glass broken more often than they were intact, with some missing windows entirely covered by sheets of tarpaulin or white plastic. Power lines ran in large, ugly clumps from haphazardly placed poles directly through smashed windows and door frames, overgrown to the point where the power lines could no longer be distinguished from the vines that were consuming them.

Everywhere that an elegant entryway or a proud brick stair tower once stood, rickety metal temporary staircases and sagging plywood landings now led up to the once-beautiful doorways on second and third floors.

Random piles of timber littered the ground in various places, whether removed from some collapsed structure or destined for some future project I couldn't tell. Across the formerly open pathways between buildings, multitudes of huge, rusty, sagging steel pipes stretched from one wall to another like life support lines, layers of thick insulation peeling and flaking off their lengths, poorly supported by makeshift wooden structures drilled into the old brick walls as they vibrated aggressively against the holes they ran through.

Around some of the newer doorways bashed into the wall where one was never meant to be, the edges of the doorframe were already crumbling, revealing layer after layer of stucco, then brick, then concrete, then another type of brick, then wood, looking as though its age could be determined like a tree by the rings in its trunk.

The gut feeling of dread I felt in that moment was so horrific, I couldn't bear to look at it anymore. Photographs had been one thing, but there was no way I could have prepared for the sick, black, evil energy pervading every inch of this decrepit, mistreated ruin, just knowing that it

was actively being used.

I looked down at my feet, and was surprised to see a fine layer of snow on the ground. Even if it had been snowy in my home timeline, it certainly wasn't supposed to be snowing here. Maybe the timeline was breaking down. Maybe it had finally been stretched a little too thin. Except then, as my eye lingered on the snow, I realized it wasn't snow at all.

A fine layer of white mold covered the grass, coming into clearer focus the longer I stared at it. Thicker and hairier in some places than in others, with patches of blue appearing in some clumps, this was certainly mold. The whole earth in front of me was moldy.

Something was very, very wrong here—I felt it just as much in my stomach as in my head. I had to get back into the present day. I felt a sudden pang of loneliness, longing for the warmth of someone, even of my old pal Alabastard. I needed to feel the more stable energy of the mill as it stood today, complex and imperfect and scarred but clearly pushed back in the right direction by someone who cared. Ankle throbbing, I started hobbling as quickly as I could in the direction of Building 1, feverishly trying to plan where and how I'd try to make the jump. But before I could, I let out a horrible gasp as I rounded the corner and saw that Buildings 1, 2, and 21 were... bleeding.

There was no other word for it. Thick, black liquid was oozing from every mismatched, broken window, from the doorways, whether bricked up or not, and now even from the makeshift holes in the old brick walls where pipes and power lines had been shoved in. I whipped around to look behind me—they were all bleeding. Every one of them. From the connections between skybridges, from the edges of the ramshackle wooden extensions fused unnaturally to the front of once-beautiful entryways, even from the top of the smokestack. I watched in horror as belches of thick black liquid oozed exploded from the top of the crumbling smokestack, gradually

culminating in a huge, black bubble forming at the top of the smokestack which grew surreally larger and larger like a balloon, and finally burst in a horrifying splatter of oily residue that rained down upon Building 9 like thick, black, sizzling mucus.

As I gaped in paralyzed horror at the black discharge running down the grimy windows, I noticed that the workers toiling away inside the building seemed to be flickering in and out of existence, phasing in and out of reality.

With a horrific crumble of brick and mortar, the wall of Building 9 began to crumble to pieces just as I passed it, causing the roof to sag dangerously as its support disappeared. From behind the crumbling wall became visible the enormous boiler and steam engine, its huge ten-foot-long steel piston pumping back and forth along the ground at frightening speed as its flywheel spun faster and faster in a circular blur of metal obscured by clouds of steam.

With a dizzyingly abrupt snap, the obscenely oil-painted face of Debra the leasing manager flickered into existence so close to me that I almost ran into her. At the same time, the stormy sky was suddenly replaced with a sea of beautiful cloudless blue. “I think the engine room was in here!” exclaimed Debra in her bubbly voice, pointing excitedly towards Building 9 which now stood fully intact next to me, from shining new red brick walls to freshly repainted smokestack.

And then just as suddenly, Debra flickered out of existence as the roiling red sky surged back, angrier than ever, the remains of the building once again sagging under their own weight and beginning to crumble even further.

With the deafening boom of a bomb detonating, the steam engine exploded with a flash of fire and a huge cloud of steam, sending enormous metal shrapnel in all directions, one huge piece of iron hitting a man in the abdomen and pinning him against a wall as easily as a child

might pin the tail on the donkey. The light disappeared from his eyes instantly.

Snap. The blue sky and sickeningly jovial Debra flickered back into existence. “The engine room! Right there! Isn’t that *fun*?” she laughed giddily.

Snap. From the depths of the swirling stormy sky, a massive chunk of the iron flywheel came plummeting back down from the heavens. To my horror, it landed directly on top of an old man in dirty overalls, instantly crushing his entire body against the pavement and sending a fragment of skull skidding across the pavement.

Snap. “What’s wrong, Ava?” asked Debra sweetly, furrowing her brow, the rays of a sunny day briefly illuminating her frizzy hair. “Is there anyth—”

And with that, she was gone, her voice severed mid-word, the discolored, oily, vine-covered, bleeding ruins of 1960s Bright Mill and a roiling stormy sky suddenly rushing back into existence. The fire in the exploded building beside me was being whipped into a firestorm by the harsh, freezing wind as it roared with impossible intensity through the complex, whipping through the alleys and archways with ear-splitting volume. Worse still, in the place I’d been hobbling towards this entire time, the back door of Building 1 underneath the overhang of Building 11, there was only a clean, flat wall of brick. Of course, I realized with a pang of utter hopelessness... Of course that doorway wouldn’t be there. That stairwell didn’t exist yet.

Suddenly the roaring of the wind was pierced by a percussive, explosive sound. A distant cloud of screams arose from my right. Looking up, I saw exactly what the sound was. Two blurry black silhouettes were hunched over something mounted to the top of the Building 1 bell tower. And as one pointed off into the distance, down the east side of Bright Street, the other leaned over and pulled the trigger.

A shower of bullets sprang from the vibrating machine gun on top of the bell tower, and

moments later, a series of puffs of dirt appeared in a line in the ground beside Bright Street below. “Surrender now!” called one of the men. “Surrender and we will cease fire!”

A hoard of people became visible as they rounded the corner and began heading down the winding maze of buildings, directly towards me. The machine gun rotated effortlessly on its axis to follow them.

“Fire!”

With a deafening rat-tat-tat-tat-tat, twice as loud now, a barrage of bullets came streaming down. As I ran toward the river in panic, two men were thrown backwards onto the pavement and lay there bleeding out as the crowd rushed around them with increasing intensity. From the spot where I’d hit the railing overlooking the river and clung onto it for dear life as I caught my breath, a huge, familiar face caught my eye.

Thick, black, oily discharge was bleeding profusely from the two towering windows that formed the eyes of the huge, grotesque face on the back of Building 3, trickling and bubbling down a facade so cracked, scarred, and embedded with foreign objects it was barely recognizable. One window was now devoid of any glass whatsoever, consumed completely by sagging pipes, huge bundles of wires, and rusting vents that seemed to have consumed it like a cancer, and the brickwork at the top of the other had been bashed through, giving the effect of an eyebrow contorted in pain as a deluge of filth exploded forward from its open mouth, the rotting chunks of wooden gate that had formed its “teeth” suddenly ripped off with the tide and carried away down the furious, murky river.

“Jae!” I screamed aimlessly into the howling wind. “*Jaaaaae!*”

She wouldn’t even help you if she could, a voice echoed through my head. *You scared her away. You scare everyone away.*

I narrowed my eyes, turned back toward the complex, and ran headlong into the chaotic whirlwind before me, aiming vaguely for the spot where the rear entrance to Building 1 had once been, and hoping against all hope I'd finally mastered the trick to phasing in and out of these godforsaken time leaks.

Thunk. My forehead and knee hit the wall simultaneously, knocking the wind out of me. The swirling storm above me came back into focus as I fell back to the ground, landing in a puddle of thick, black discharge pooling on the pavement as it oozed from the windows and doors around me. I was about ready to give up.

"Al!" I choked breathlessly as the unearthly wind whipped my hair up and around my head. "I'm coming to get you Al!" With my eyes closed, feeling the last remaining wisps of warmth circle my heart as I pictured Al's awkward, pointy face, I crawled forward through the discharge, dragging my ankle behind me and scraping my knees on the rough pavement with every crawling step, until suddenly—

Artifact: Blog post reply

Reply by avaday to avaday

by avaday, December 23, 2022

Quote from avaday's post:

“Nate was my rock.

I know that's cliché. Believe me, as a girl who once thought herself an aspiring writer, I'm well aware that's as cliché as...”

Reply from avaday:

What the fuck is a chiseled jaw? Broad shoulders? The fuck are you on about?

I really want my man to look as if he is made out of stone rather than flesh?

I really want to believe my man is an unmoving, uncaring manmade sculpture? An imitation of a person but less lifelike?

What I really want more than anything in a mate is all the cold, sterile inhumanity of a million-dollar marble block, so long as it maintains the aesthetics of someone who can hurt me?

Not to mention the actual capability and willingness doing so?

Ability to hurt comes before basic human decency? Before love, even?

What I want more than anything is a lack of humanity? Coldness? Aggression?

Ava, fucking think about it.

The Breakdown

I stumbled into my apartment and slammed the door behind me, startling Al out of his sleep. I leaned back against the door and slowly slid down to ground level, until I was sitting with Al between my splayed legs, sniffing my tear-stained face relentlessly. Oh Al, you poor, sweet, innocent thing... what I would give to just live a nice sheltered little life like you, never having to leave the safety and warmth of this little apartment... and I could have done exactly that. I decided not to. It was all my fault.

For the next five minutes, I just sat there, back against the door, in my lonely, sparse little apartment, with nobody in the world but this beautiful naive dog to cry to. At least I could hold him. I held him more tightly than I'd ever held him before.

Finally, Al's perpetually wiggling and poorly controlled snout bopped me in the cheek, which might have been funny if it hadn't sent a shockwave of pain through my already-sore eye socket and drawn me sharply back to reality. I pulled myself up off the floor and hesitantly entered the bathroom to look at it in the mirror, worried about what I might find.

I clutched the edge of the sink and almost had to restrain the urge to vomit.

Perhaps on another day, I might have been more frustrated with my hair, which had been left untreated for so long that I had about two inches of black roots before the bleach started, and was frizzier and messier than I'd ever seen it. Or my glazed, red-ringed eyes, or my puffy, sallow skin. On another day, in another time, perhaps I would have been bothered by the lightly bruised scrape on my forehead from bumping into the brick wall. But I hardly noticed any of these as I took in the face in front of me.

Splattered across my right cheekbone was a massive, ugly splotch of dark purple and maroon decorated around the edges with hideous pus yellow, and in the middle, a reddened and

horribly bloodshot eye. My swollen lower eyelid sagged and pushed my right eye partially shut. It looked less like a beautiful purple nebula of stars this time and more like someone had hurled a jar of grape jam at my face from point blank. My chapped and discolored lips were bleeding from the wound in the right corner of my mouth, where a dark, bloody scab had formed, then reopened, then formed, then reopened again.

I gulped hard and closed my eyes. I had seen this face only a few times before. And I had been so sure I would never have to see it again.

There was only one thing to do: the same thing I always used to do in this situation. With my hands quivering slightly, I reached for my concealer with one trembling hand and began to gently apply it to the skin around my eye, wincing more with every touch. No... this was no good. I needed to dab it on harder. *Suck it up Ava*. My pulse quickened and my eyes watered with every successive searing, painful dab, each one more firm than the next in an attempt to get the damn stuff to stay on. It wasn't making a goddamn ounce of difference. Goddamn it, where was my green stick? I must have left it there... that was long gone now... With a twitch, my eyes flitted between the disgustingly discolored patch around my eye, my bloody mouth, and the black roots unevenly sprouting up from under my bleached hair.

Bzzzz.

My focus was pulled away from the mirror by a notification on my phone. That was odd. Nobody texted me anymore. I shakily pulled my phone from my pocket, and was taken aback by two things that gave me pause.

The first was the time and date. 12:01 AM. December 25. It was Christmas. The day had finally come. Christmas, a word that had meant so many different things to me over the years. One stupid date on a calendar, and it had changed my life so many times.

The second was the text message notification. The sender, in one tiny, bold word: **Dad**.

Was it possible that he was texting me Merry Christmas? Like he used to do every year back when I was a child, and Christmas just meant sparkling trees, Santa Claus, and candy canes? Could hell have frozen over, my Dad finally burying the hatchet and treating me like a daughter again? I could really use a father right now. I clicked on the notification to open the Messages app.

The text didn't say Merry Christmas. Instead, it was a different sentence. A single, solitary sentence that made rage well up from an unknown source deep within me.

Hope you're thinking about Nate today.

Fuming, my heart hammering as I looked in the mirror, my body beginning to shake with directionless rage, my vision blurring as boiling tears filled my eyes, an anguished scream coming from somewhere deep inside me, I saw my arm lash out from underneath me and lob my phone into the exposed brick wall where it cracked with a sickening crunch. I threw open the drawer under the sink and clumsily retrieved one of the few items inside it: a small pair of silver scissors. Before I knew it, I had a fistful of my hair clenched in my left hand, cutting madly at it with the other. Lunge after lunge after lunge, the scissors dove at the dry, frizzy, bleached locks of hair like a lion disemboweling its prey, the first lunge so violent and poorly aimed that my fist knocked my glasses off my face and onto the floor.

The scissors were neither sharp nor large, but after some blurry expanse of time that felt like a whirlwind the shears dropped from my shaking, cramping hands. I looked up at myself in the mirror and caught my breath.

It was not pretty, this choppy, uneven mess of black hair with only the faintest traces of bleaching remaining near the tips. But I didn't hate it. In fact, some unexpected feeling rose up from deep inside me. I was *free*.

I was free from that stupid mane of stupid fucking blonde hair that I never fucking liked in the first place. I *knew* that woman in the mirror. I hadn't seen her in a long time. I knew her, and I kind of liked her. And I would fight for her. However messy, however unphotogenic, however horribly bludgeoned, at least it was *me*.

I gingerly leaned down and picked up my shattered phone from the ground, and thanking the lord that it still worked, took one blurry, shaky picture of myself in the mirror. The first photo of myself I'd taken in many years.

I felt an itch on the underside of my chin, as I realized some of the blonde hair chunks had fallen into the folds of the blue silk scarf still messily hanging around my neck, now decorated with a few dots of blood from my lip. With my heart still hammering away, I clenched the scarf in my fist, ripped it from my neck, stormed into the next room, threw open the window, and flung the congealed mass of scarf and bleached hair scraps out into the night, where they floated delicately downward into the abyss. "FUCK YOU!" I screamed into the cold darkness outside, unable to stop myself.

Suddenly brought back to earth by the volume of my voice echoing back to me, I dropped down below the windowsill and sat with my back against the wall, deflating from what had just happened. The cold December air was filtering into the warm room, causing the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck to stand on end. But I had never felt less like I needed a scarf.

With one shivering arm I raised my phone, and through the spiderweb of fresh cracks in the screen, found the message from my father, and painstakingly pecked out a reply with one

shaking finger.

I am thinking about Nate. I am thinking about how whenever I asserted myself he hurt me, in more ways than one. I am thinking about how he hurt me, controlled me, disrespected me, and manipulated me into a disgusting patchwork of my old self and the new person he wanted me to be. And I let him do it because I didn't think anything of myself. He preyed on my weakness. I am thinking about the many years I've spent with my real life on pause. And I'm finally about to start living again. I can't un-be with Nate. I can't undo the awful things he did to me. But I can learn from the past, and learn how to treat myself with some respect, and dignity, and confidence, and to never let anyone treat me like that again.

With the same shaking finger, I hit send. Then, just before lowering the phone back to the ground, I sent one more message.

Fuck Nate, and fuck you.

My phone fell to the floor with a clatter as I finally let my eyes close.

The Reunion

It had now been a full hour of staring at the footprint on the ceiling.

I had recently been awoken by a curious and possibly worried Al, alternately licking my face and gently sniffing it with his wiggly little nose and bulging eyes to try to glean some understanding from the scent of my tears. I had been confused for a split second why I had woken up slouched underneath an open window in the depths of a cold December night, and where my glasses and scarf had gone, before it all came rushing back to me in a blurry wave of nausea. I had stumbled into the bathroom and gingerly lifted my glasses from where they'd fallen onto the bathroom floor, and seen that one lens now had a crack running all the way through it. My phone hadn't been the only casualty of the night.

I had then checked my freshly cracked phone—4:12 AM—and trudged over to my bed, where I lay now, sore, drained, and impossibly tired.

It was deadly silent. Even the noisy upstairs neighbor had stopped clomping around.

Worse still, whether it was a product of my sleep-deprived brain or not, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was standing outside my door. Shadows had been interrupting the omnipresent strip of incandescent hallway light spilling through the gap under the door that had always functioned as my night light, whether I wanted it to or not. But even at this moment, the light seemed to be broken by a silent, occasionally shuffling shadow. Then it disappeared, and there it was again. Yes, undeniably, the shadows of two legs. Just standing in front of my door. My muscles, tired as they were, were now tensed and ready to get up at the sign of any sudden movement.

What if I was seeing things and there was nothing there at all? Or, even if someone was out there, what if it was just some random person looking for their friend's apartment? Would I

look like some kind of unhinged, feral monster throwing open the door in their face?

But at 4:12 AM? Who's looking for their friend's apartment at 4:12 AM? And even if they were, wouldn't it be best to get it over with and make it clear this isn't it?

Oh, what the hell. What did I have to lose at this point?

I tore the covers off, launched myself upright, and immediately winced as I lifted the weight off my throbbing ankle. I limped quietly over to the door, paused for a second, then flung it open.

"Jae!" I gasped.

Jae was standing silently in the hallway, squarely in front of my door, both her hands supporting an enormously oversized bar of Hershey's chocolate.

"Ava!" she gasped, equally surprised. Her eyes had not gone straight to mine, but above them. "Your hair!"

"Oh... yeah," I sputtered. I briefly scrambled to think of some quick and convenient explanation, but coming up with nothing, sank into a tense silence that grew heavier second by second. Without my glasses, the blurriness of the hallway behind her threw Jae and her inexplicable Hershey's bar into sharp relief, only adding to the dreamlike dizziness overtaking me. Belts slipped and gears ground in my mind as a week's worth of words made their way to the surface of my sleepless brain. I closed my eyes and took a breath.

"Jae," I began, "Listen—I'm so sorry about—"

"I saw it," she blurted. "I fell in. I was there. I believe you."

"You... you saw..."

"I felt so awful after that night," she said, slamming her eyes shut as the words poured out, "and I went exploring the complex, trying to see the things that you saw... I don't even

know what I was doing, it was such a miserable night. I was just about to give up when I... I fell in, and I was so scared, and I don't know what happened, but something happened and I got trapped in one of the skybridges, no way out, and nothing outside, it felt like years, I thought I'd never get out—" She suppressed a sob. "I'm so sorry I didn't believe you, and for all the things I said. I should never have said those things about Nate—"

"You were right about Nate," I said softly.

The air between us seemed to be pulsing as the silence returned, ringing with some sort of confusing energy, the weight of unspoken words, the pressure of the continuing silence increasing again, until Jae took a deep breath and punctured it again.

"I got your letter," she said simply. "And I just felt really terrible, and I wanted to say I totally forgive you and I understand. I'm really sorry about how things went. I wish I could have talked to you earlier, but we never exchanged numbers, and I didn't know what apartment you lived in. Then I finally remembered where I worked and realized I could probably find it if I went digging in the office," she said with a small, embarrassed laugh. "So I was... I was just debating whether or not to leave this for you. Merry Christmas," she offered in a quiet, awkward voice as she handed the chocolate bar to me.

I accepted it just as awkwardly. I was now standing in my doorway dumbstruck, heart pounding, holding an oversized chocolate bar, my eyes watering in the blinding light of the hallway as it poured into the black apartment, shielded only by Jae's shadow.

Jae's face softened as her eyes returned to my hair. "Ava, are you... doing all right?"

"Not really," I said, a little bit too quickly. Then, hearing the words bounce back to me, I lunged forward and hugged her. Tears welled up in my eyes as I squeezed her tightly, surprised at my own strength.

“Oh my god,” murmured Jae delicately, hugging me back. “I’m so sorry... Is there anything I can do?”

“I had a little bit of a crazy night,” I choked out, wiping the wetness from my eyes.

“I can see that,” she said gently. How was she not running away at the very sight of me? I must look like an absolute lunatic right now. I suppose it wouldn’t be the first time. Suddenly, she raised her hand to her mouth.

“Your eye,” she exclaimed, gesturing up to it.

Oh god, what was it now? How much worse could it possibly look than it already did? Was my eyeball now physically falling out of its socket or something?

“Your black eye,” she said breathlessly, “it’s gone.”

“What?” I asked, not sure I’d heard her correctly. I raised my hand absentmindedly to my cheek.

“It’s completely gone.”

Oddly enough, it didn’t hurt under the pressure of my fingers this time. How could that be possible? Only a few hours ago it had looked almost as bad as any black eye I’d had in years. I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I just walked slowly to the bathroom, groping blindly in the darkness for the light switch. From the corner of my eye, I could see that the sink area still looked like a crime scene, scraps of bleached hair littering the counter with a broken pair of glasses and an open pair of hair-covered scissors lying spread-eagled on top of them. But that wasn’t what I was focused on right now.

I was focused on my face. Jae was right—there wasn’t a hint of black, blue, or maroon to be found. It was like it had never been there. My lips were smooth and undamaged. More than that, my skin looked cleaner and clearer than I’d seen it in years.

“It’s gone,” I repeated in a barely audible whisper. Slowly, as if being operated by marionette strings, I raised my hand to my newly shorn hair, then to my temple where my fingers absentmindedly tried to grasp and adjust the arm of a pair of thick-rimmed glasses that weren’t there, and then to my neck, where I was so accustomed to feeling a blue silk scarf.

“You know Ava, you were right after all,” said Jae, “that there was a bit of a selfish ulterior motive behind inviting you up to my place that first night, beyond just wanting to make sure you were okay of course. I think you probably figured that out.”

I nodded weakly. “Nobody just invites a crying, hyperventilating maniac into their home.”

Jae took a deep breath. “I suppose I mostly just invited you up that first time because you—“

“—were the only other data point you had. I get it.”

“—were cute,” she finished.

There was a beat in which the both of us, straight-faced, processed what the other had said. Then Jae burst out laughing.

“You think I invited you up to my apartment and then continued this whole friendship with you because... I needed more data for my research?”

I suppose I probably should have been flattered, but instead I was simply speechless, confused, lost, yearning, scratching. I couldn’t wrench my gaze from the dim, slightly distorted face staring back at me from the bathroom mirror. It was at once intimately familiar and completely alien, this face, no bruises, short scrappy black hair, no glasses, no blue silk scarf. There seemed to be a slight halo around it, ever so slight... unless that was just the glow from Jae. Well, the glow from behind Jae, at least. It seemed like the glow from Jae, anyway.

“I have one more question,” added Jae hesitantly from the doorway, perhaps in response to my silence.

I looked at Jae’s blurry silhouette against what my unaided eyes now saw as a hazy halo of light spilling from the doorway. “Yes?”

“That thing you added to the document... about the man melted to the floor... is that true?”

I gulped. Of course. I’d shared the public Google Docs link with her. She’d been able to see all the changes I made. Then, as if a switch had been flipped in my brain, embarrassment turned to inspiration. I stumbled from the bathroom towards my bed, fumbled around for my glasses on the dark floor, found them, and walked back out toward the doorway.

“Jae, there’s one more crazy thing I have to do tonight, if you’ll humor me.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re going to Building 2.”

“Why?” she asked hesitantly, “Who do you know that lives there?”

“No one,” I said simply. “We’re going to the bridge to Building 3.”

“That’s—” she began.

“Yes, it is,” I answered. “Let’s go.”

I walked determinedly towards the door, ignoring Al’s confused little face as it rose sleepily from the foot of the bed. I walked out into the corridor, momentarily blinded by the harshness of the bright lights, and was relieved to hear Jae following along behind me.

“You know how we were talking about how the fabric of time has been strained to breaking point by that dark energy?” I began. “And these glimpses of past events have been the past leaking through those rips? Well, what if that kind of thing happens way more often than we

think, but usually nobody gets a chance to notice it because time is so good at healing itself, like a living thing? Think about getting a cut on your skin, all your insides don't leak out, it heals up pretty quickly and most people won't even notice it."

"OK?" said Jae breathlessly.

"Well, one year I had this awful wound on my arm for a while that got so gross and just would not heal, and I eventually realized it's because there was still a little piece of glass buried deep in there, and it wasn't able to fully heal itself until I got it removed. Has that ever happened to you, with a piece of glass or a splinter or something? Suddenly your body's not so good at healing. If it's bad enough it may not heal at all, it'll get infected, so long as that foreign object is still stuck in there, it's just trapped in this state of trying to heal itself, swelling, leaking pus..."

"OK," responded Jae, looking slightly nauseous. Incredibly, she was still power-walking alongside me as we barrelled down the stairs. If this wasn't throwing her off, nothing would. It was too late to stop anyway, it was all coming out at once.

"Well, what if the time leakage around the mill is getting worse and worse—time isn't healing itself, because—" I continued breathlessly, wrenching open the door to Building 21 at the bottom of the stairs, "because some foreign object is stuck really badly somewhere in its timeline where it shouldn't be? Like, instead of the past just leaking into the present like we keep seeing, this event got stuck somewhere in the middle, caught up in its own infected timeline?"

I could hear nothing but breathing next to me as Jae and I walked the length of Building 21 and proceeded into Building 2 on the other side. "Something like what?" she finally asked.

"Something like a person," I asserted with unexpected confidence, approaching the bricked-up entrance to the skybridge to Building 3, "like a person in 1947 who accidentally phased into the wrong version of a skybridge from the wrong time—maybe the first time the

timeline had ever ripped—and is now trapped there in a misplaced pocket of time, in that in-between quantum state between past and present, that no-man’s-land, and can’t escape no matter how badly the mill leaks its past around it like pus.”

“1947...” muttered Jae, brow furrowed, “Someone already working in 1947 might be a hundred years old by this point... couldn’t they be dead?”

I shook my head. “If they were in our timeline that’s proceeding normally, the one with me and you in it right now, sure. But this little pocket of time got detached, stuck, completely separated from either the past or the present. It happened to me once, and from what you’ve said I think it happened to you too, and luckily we were able to get out, but I don’t think everyone was so lucky.”

“You keep saying he... do you actually know who it is?”

“He was blinded, he was in immense pain. The amount of dark energy in the area was at its highest, the fabric of time had been weakened to its breaking point, and for the first time, it ripped. And he accidentally stumbled into a version of the skybridge from the previous week, from before it was bricked up. The last one he’d seen.”

That made it click for Jae. “The last one he’d *observed*,” she added. “The version of the skybridge that was his reality.”

“And once he’d passed through that rip, and then the timeline resolved itself again, with him stuck in this bubble outside of time. And with the mill constantly trying to heal the rip but never able to do it, and the timeline only getting weaker and more frayed in the meantime.”

Then her brow furrowed again. “But... blinded? You saw this happen?”

“I did,” I said bluntly, rushing down the stairs with her trailing closely.

Suddenly, we were there. The impenetrable wall of bricks that had once been the entrance

to the skybridge to Building 3 stood steadfastly in front of us, the line between the redder, cleaner bricks of the 1940s and the darker, more scarred and pockmarked bricks of the surrounding wall subtle as ever, but to me, clear as day.

“You’re sure about this?” asked Jae.

“No,” I answered. “I’m not sure about anything. But I know what I saw. And I can...” I debated whether or not to say it, and risk scaring away Jae for a second time. “I can feel the energy of it. Something’s very wrong behind that wall. Something is stuck.”

Jae looked at me with what might have been a tad of skepticism, but she hid it rapidly. It looked like she was having a heated internal argument. She motioned up toward the ceiling where a thin metal pipe ran through a small hole drilled through the bricks, apparently carrying electrical cables through to Building 3. “Couldn’t we at least... rip that out, and look through the hole? So we could at least look at what’s in there and be sure?”

“You know that wouldn’t work,” I said. “We’d probably see nothing but an empty skybridge. That’s what’s here in this timeline, the one that’s been proceeding normally. We need to find that dislodged pocket of time another way. We need to transport ourselves there. To that foreign object trapped outside of time, in a pocket universe, in a quantum superposition, whatever you want to call it, that hasn’t been able to resolve itself into past or present. We have to phase into it.”

Jae gulped. “How?”

To that, I had no immediate answer. To be honest, I had never been able to nail down how and when it worked. I looked at the wall, and realized I really and truly did not know what I was doing. I was just about to say so, when I saw the look on Jae’s face, as though she’d been mustering up the courage to say something for a while.

“I think I finally figured out when it happens,” she said tentatively. “But I’ve been afraid to say it, in case I’m wrong. And because none of it makes any sense.”

“Well it’s probably more than I know, because I know nothing. Go for it.”

Jae closed her eyes and composed herself. “Think about each time we’ve seen a glimpse of the past.”

“They’ve all been dark or traumatic events from the mill’s past,” I responded. “We discussed that already, right?”

“Yes, but *when* did you see them?”

I paused and thought it over.

“I’ll go first,” offered Jae. “I first heard the Nevins conversation in Building 11 on my first day working here. I spent my lunch break in the bathroom, sobbing about my ex, the first time I heard it.”

My stomach dropped, but the look in Jae’s eyes signaled that she wasn’t looking for pity. She wanted me to move on.

“I saw the mangled arm...” I paused and thought. “I saw it right after my only group of friends removed me from our group chat, and it really hit me that I was truly alone.”

Jae grimaced. “What about the bleachery?”

I paused to think. “I was sitting alone in the skybridge between 1 and 2, and... something reminded me of my dad. I got really upset about how he treated me, and the things he said, and this whole... situation.”

“And then, when you saw...” Jae motioned toward the wall. “This?”

“I saw a kid get blasted with scalding hot cotton dust by a malfunctioning machine on his first day back, and accidentally phase into the bricked-up skybridge while no one was

observing... That was right after I had a breakdown and saw some awful, awful things, fighting my way through that snowstorm and wishing I could be with—”

Jae looked up. I gulped.

“Wishing I wasn’t alone,” I finished meekly.

“Every time, it’s when we’re in a dark place, feeling depressed, or alone, or mistreated.”

Jae looked at the ground and shook her head. “I think this is beyond the reach of any kind of... quantum physics, or superposition, or any of that shit. I’m sorry I wasted so much time on all that. Now I know there must be something more.”

“Only when we’re feeling pain and despair do we see the moments of the mill’s greatest pain and despair,” I continued, moving uncomfortably past the apology and focusing on the matter at hand. “For a moment, we’re on the same wavelength as the mill. For a moment, we’re running on the same energy.”

Suddenly, another memory bubbled up to the surface. “The voices in 4A...” I mumbled, mostly to myself. “What caused that?”

“What?” asked Jae. “You heard voices in 4A?”

“Yeah,” I said stiffly. A few seconds too late, I’d just put together why a bit of the past had come leaking through at that moment, and I wasn’t about to tell her to her face. “Nevermind, it was nothing.”

“You heard voices from the past in Building 4A? While you were with me?” she repeated. “That’s definitely not nothing. What do you think caused that?”

I heaved a massive sigh. “Okay, but you’re going to think I’m a terrible person. I *am* a terrible person.”

“I promise I won’t,” she said, and there was something about her voice, the clarity, the

warmth, the honesty, the sweetness of it, that convinced me to continue.

I swallowed. “You’d mentioned my scarf, and you’d said you got yours from your dad before he died, and I just caught myself thinking—” I stopped myself, knowing full well I’d be made to continue.

“Thinking what?”

I closed my eyes and squeezed her hand. “Thinking that it must be a lot nicer to have a dad that was dead and you’d had a great relationship with, than a dad that was alive but estranged the way my dad is,” I rambled, waiting for the impending explosion. “That even if he was dead, having his story end in a good place and forever be remembered as a great man who loved you was better than being stuck in the middle of an ugly story that was still dragging on and still rears its ugly head every other day. I know it’s wrong, I promise I don’t really believe that, it was just a horrible thought that occurred to me when I was in a bad place. I’m so sorry. I’m a bad person.”

I waited for the response, eyes still involuntarily locked shut. “Jae?”

I opened my eyes. Jae was looking at me with an expression I couldn’t quite read. It didn’t immediately seem shocked, or hurt, or angry. It was closer to pensive, thoughtful. Her hand was beginning to feel sweaty against mine. The tension was unbearable, and I was beginning to think I shouldn’t have said anything at all. Then she did something I hadn’t expected: she closed her eyes and took a step forward, dragging me with her.

Artifact: Letter from Jaelynn Rhodes to Ava Day

Dear Ava,

I'm sorry.

I don't want you to apologize for overreacting, because there would have been nothing to react to had I not completely overstepped my bounds. I have no right to talk about someone I've never met and who isn't here to defend himself anymore, to assume things about a relationship I was never privy to. I am so completely and deeply sorry for your loss, a loss which I can't imagine myself, and so embarrassed at how I handled it that night.

But more importantly, I believe you. I believe everything. A few hours after our argument, I went for a walk around the complex to try to feel less miserable, kicking myself for what I'd said, and wishing I'd find you again sitting on that stoop so we could start all over. I was in a pretty bad place. I was headed towards the dog park, my vision was blurry, and I could barely see where I was going. And suddenly, I was trapped. I was in a skybridge, and it was bricked up on either side, and there was nothing outside the window but blackness, deep, impenetrable blackness. It felt like years that I was trapped in there. I pounded on the walls and they didn't make a sound. I wished that at least I could have been trapped with you, because at least you would understand, at least we could figure something out together. But I was all alone, more alone than I've ever been in my entire life. I don't know what it was that ultimately brought me back to the present, maybe it was just the thought that I needed to apologize to you so badly, the hope of making up with you, and being friends again.

Ava, I may look like I have my life together and I may seem confident and bold when I think I know what I'm talking about, but that's a technique I worked a long time to perfect and it's not the whole truth. I've always had trouble believing in myself. When times are tough, I let logical analysis take over, like it's the only thing that I'm sure exists, and it leaves no room for belief. No room for faith in what I think, or I know, is right. I literally let logic and calculation override actual memories of actual things I knew I saw and heard. But you wouldn't let that truth go, Ava, and you were right. Now I know it's reason and logic that has its limits, and there are bigger things out there to be discovered.

But more than anything, more than anything else those hours or years in the skybridge to nowhere taught me, it's that this is more than just some physical phenomenon. This is more than just a dumb sketch of ripped fabric. This is something bigger. Something that can't be captured in a physics textbook, or paraphrased by someone who's overconfident in physics because she got an A in a few classes. Now I accept that this is outside of my comfort zone. And I admit that, and I'm ready to tackle it together with you.

Thank you, Ava.

Jae

P.S. Merry Christmas!

The Rescue

I can't say exactly what it looked like, since I was focused on her face at the time rather than looking straight ahead, but I certainly know what it felt like. All the light seemed to be sucked out of the room sideways, less like a light being turned off and more like dust being sucked up by a vacuum, and for half a second I was falling, my stomach lurching as the floor seemed to shift beneath us, my hand desperately trying to hold onto Jae's, when suddenly gravity seemed to lock firmly into place again. Then came the cold.

Jae screamed. As my eyes adjusted to the dim, musty room we suddenly found ourselves in, I saw the horrifying, partially melted creature stirring, awoken by our sudden appearance, its edges blurred, its horrifying form somehow infuriatingly out-of-focus. Jae instinctively threw herself backwards, but managed only to knock the back of her head on the dusty, grimy brick wall that was now an inch from our backs. Riding the wave of adrenaline as long as I could hold onto it, I launched directly into a conversation with the thing before us.

"We're here to help you," I said confidently in the direction of the frustratingly blurry thing. From the corner of my eye, I could see Jae gaping helplessly at me.

"Help?" The thing croaked. For a moment I worried that I had set it off again, like an alarm, and that it would be yelling for help again for the rest of the night, so I made sure to get out in front of it by speaking quickly.

"You worked here," I said simply. The creature had stopped struggling against the melted skin that was holding it to the floor, and nodded. I hoped I sounded both friendly and firm.

"When was that? Do you remember a year?"

The thing looked down again. "When..." Its good eye rolled from side to side as it considered the question. "I remember... bullets... that was the last thing... that must have

been... twenty-two,” it croaked, its disused voice becoming a little clearer with every word, its speech a little less slurred.

That can’t be right, I thought. I had been so sure this was what remained of the guy who stumbled in here in 1947.

“But that can’t be,” it murmured, each new revelation compounding the desperate confusion in its voice. “I remember... New Years 1955. I spent it alone on the grounds here, as a night watchman. When the bell tolled, I was sitting on the stoop of Building 6... crying. Because when I’d left the kids to start my shift, *they* were crying... when they found out we couldn’t spend it with...” But then it stopped itself again, and its eyes jolted open as if it had just been slapped. Suddenly it interrupted itself once more with the sharpest, most jagged rattle of a gasp I’d heard yet, its body jerking backward so forcefully that a length of veiny skin joining its arm to the floor ripped at the corner, and began bleeding black fluid into the sawdust beneath it. “No, that can’t be... I remember... I remember dying, in a bathtub, bleeding out, as I looked out the window, into my own face... into my own face...” it repeated again, confused by its own words. “But that can’t be... that was... it doesn’t make any *sense*!” It drew in a rattling breath and let out a broken cry. “What am I?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I improvised feverishly. “How did you get here? Into this skybridge? Do you remember?”

The thing seemed to settle a little as it pondered. “I was pulling a lever... on the scutching machine. The steam-powered one. That’s it!” the thing choked out excitedly. “That’s where this... this body came from... It was the last year of steam, before they brought the electric machines in... So it was nineteen... forty-seven.” It seemed briefly proud of itself, but then reality seemed to come crashing back down onto it. “And then... something happened. And

I was nowhere.” It wailed loudly, collapsing onto the dusty floor and heaving a horrible, wet, grinding sob, tears of thick black oily liquid leaking from both sockets, both functional and eyeless.

So it's not just Tommy, I thought. Its physical form may have started out as Tommy. But this... thing, this entity, was already around, something that was already growing, and then took hold in this physical body that got trapped in this little pocket universe. A new host for an existing infection.

I winced as the harsh pinprick of light from the single antique lightbulb repeatedly danced across the crack in my glasses lens, sporadically weaponizing its beam like a ray of sunlight hitting an ant through a magnifying glass. I reached up and removed my glasses.

The cramped skybridge was small enough, and poorly-lit enough, that its newfound blurriness didn't make much of a difference. But more surprising was the fact that the melted thing in front of me was suddenly crystal clear. No longer were its edges blurred, its face permanently impossible to focus on. Instead, in contrast to its newly blurred surroundings, every discolored mark on its skin, every imperfection in the grimy glass of its left eye were suddenly thrown sharply into focus. I tried to put this new information aside as the thing continued piecing together its own existence.

“But then I began feeling so many other things... the flow of energy, in and out... I felt a cruelty enter this place, a dark energy, a disregard for life. An evil. It took an eternity to understand this feeling. But I had eternity.” It placed its one free arm gently down onto the filthy floor, as if comforting the building. “I felt it all... I felt the fires, the bleeding, the rusting, the sledgehammers, the disgusting hands of the men sloppily piecing me back—piecing it back together—the lies, the shootings, the greed, the slime, the drowning, the deaths, as if they were

happening to me... I could feel scars that I'd never even seen... I felt the people walking on my floors, people shooting from my roof, people knocking holes in my skin, feeding, using my body for evil. And then finally I was alone, alone and crumbling, dying in slow motion. I felt like I'd been beaten up in slow motion and then left to die in slow motion. I don't know what I am," it said, looking over its disfigured body in disgust as it melted into the floor, "but it's not good that I'm here." It coughed, flecks of yellow mucus flying from its misshapen mouth. "I'm not—it's not healing..."

"You're not healing? What do you mean?" I asked, still breathless.

"They forced me—" The thing shook its head, then continued: "they forced it—to grow beyond its natural limits... all in the pursuit of profit. Knocked down walls, reshaped it like plastic surgery... until it was a grotesque patchwork, more alteration than original building. My friends burned to death in fires... crushed to death under machinery... they plowed forward with every change under the sun if it made them another dollar, no matter if it wounded the mill, killed people inside it, or changed it so completely that it didn't even remember its original purpose. I can't—it can't remember its own face." Suddenly, it inflated itself with a deep breath, and let it out in a shuddering, shaking sob. "And now it's too late. Everyone I knew is dead... everyone that spoke my language... gone... now I'm stuck here forever."

"It's not too late," I said firmly. "We found you a way out of here. For good. Here..." Against my own judgment, I reached out a hand to take the creature's. After a moment's consideration, it grasped mine back, and I exerted a great amount of self-control in not pulling away. It was so cold it seemed to be actively sucking warmth from my shivering arm, and even in the dim light I could see the oily residue on its flesh was staining mine.

"Now," I said as calmly as possible, "close your eyes."

The thing took another rattling breath through its lopsided mouth. “Why?”

“Just trust me.” I shot a look of rather crazed confidence to Jae, who despite her shock looked like she was putting all the pieces together in real time. “I’m from the future. You wouldn’t understand.”

With a gentle shudder and a look of utter submission, the thing closed its good eye, and I turned to Jae.

“Close your eyes,” I whispered in her direction. “Make your mind blank.”

“How?” she hissed back frantically.

With my remaining hand, I grabbed hers. “Trust me,” I whispered back, and gave her hand a comforting squeeze. This time she didn’t respond, and I could hear her breath slowing and calming.

After a pause in which no one spoke, I spoke up again. “Okay, it’s time for you to come out. But you have to keep your eyes closed. You can’t open your eyes until I say so, okay?”

The thing didn’t respond, but something about the way its murky breathing slowed, down to a calm level, told me it was ready. Trying to keep my own mind, not to think about what would happen if I was wrong, if the walls remained solid and the thing remained glued to the floor with its own flesh. I turned my focus once more to the feeling of Jae’s warm hand in mine, and took a step forward.

With a feeling as though the ground had suddenly accelerated beneath us like a treadmill, and a blinding splash of light from the other side of my closed eyelids, a wall of warmth washed over us. But it was a warmth subtly different from the warmth Jae and I had come from just moments ago. It was... thick. Steamy, almost.

I opened my eyes. Steam was indeed hovering lazily in the air around us, as men in

overalls crowded around monstrous machines, massive leather belts connecting each one to the furiously spinning axles running along the ceiling beams. The low humming and rhythmic click-clacking of the looms and the gentle hiss of steam sounded dreamlike, almost hypnotic. The room smelled vaguely of tobacco and oil.

I looked to my left. Jae had opened her eyes and was taking in the scene with slack-jawed astonishment.

I looked to my right, and my jaw fell open too.

I was holding the hand of a tall, scrawny young man with a rumpled blue shirt, black suspenders, and a pair of glasses with a crack in one lens. He had bags under his eyes and a thin film of what might have been soot on his face, but he was otherwise a perfectly normal and handsome looking young man, one I'd seen before, though now with two curious, sparkling eyes that had within them both youth and impossible age, which were now starting to well up with tears.

"Joe," he said breathlessly, almost too softly to hear. "Harry."

A man tending to one of the machines threw a brief, confused look over his shoulder, then did a film-worthy double-take. "Tommy!" he exclaimed with a laugh of disbelief, throwing back a lever on his machine which ground to a halt. "How you been? Your face looks great!"

"My face..." Tommy absentmindedly touched his face, looking confused.

"Thought you'd be all burnt up after what happened with that scutcher! You don't look half bad for only a few days' rest!"

"The scutcher!" exclaimed Tommy, as the incident rushed back to him once more. "Oh, yeah! It hurt like hell, but I just... took a few days off. Used a, uh... salve." The word tumbled awkwardly out as if it was the first time he'd ever spoken it.

“Okay,” said Harry, chuckling. Then, suddenly, his eyes landed on me. “Hey... Joe, doesn’t that look an awful lot like that ghost you saw? With the weird clothes?”

Joe turned to me and did a double take. “Holy shit,” he mouthed slowly, his eyes wide. “You... you real?”

“Of course I’m real,” I laughed. “What, did you think I was a ghost? No such thing. Come on Jae, these guys need to get back to work.”

“Aight. See ya!” called Jae over her shoulder as we turned and left, relishing one last glance at the bewildered faces of the two men. As we approached the intricately figured wooden front door of the building, Jae turned to me and whispered. “So now we just...”

“...close our eyes,” I finished with a nod. “Stop observing it. Think about current day Bright Mill.”

Feeling a little odd standing still in front of the door, we each closed our eyes, and the sights, sounds, and scents of the steam-filled room began to melt away.

“Can we go back to your place after this?” I whispered. A sudden snort of laughter came from her direction and I nearly opened my eyes. “What?”

“Sorry,” she laugh-whispered back. “It’s just such a casual question, in the middle of this... this...”

“Well, do you want to?”

“Of course,” she whispered back. I could still hear the smile in her voice.

“Okay, let’s go.” Eyes still closed, I stuck out my arm to push the metal push-bar of the present-day front door I hoped would meet my hand, and sure enough, with a metallic *clunk*, there it was. I opened my eyes as I pushed the door open and drew in a deep breath of the clean, crisp air.

Sparkles of sunlight glinted off Jae's glasses to my right and the cars in the parking lot to my left as we walked along the front face of Building 3. I never thought I would be so excited to see this sea of bland midsize sedans and SUVs again, but right now, it felt positively magical. As Building 2 approached on the right hand side, I found myself looking up at the unused skybridge between them and its impenetrable black windows. I smiled a little, knowing that for once it was truly empty.

* * *

I was about to close my laptop when a red notification bubble popped up in the corner of my Gmail tab.

“Welcome to the Bright Mill Foundation!”

I frowned in confusion for a second, then opened the email.

Hi Ava! We are pleased to inform you that we have accepted your application to join the media team for Bright Mill Foundation! After further review, the board was highly impressed by your unconventional application format.

We were impressed by the graphic design portfolio on your website and your general presentation of ideas, however the initiative you showed with this rather unorthodox application was particularly impressive. Your study on the lesser-known aspects of the mill's history was incredibly complete and well-researched, and your holistic and fully integrated view of the mill's history and how it relates to the current day was particularly unique. I took particular note of your closing phrase 'We can't undo the damage from our past, but we can bring it to light and

reflect on what happened and how we can do better in the future.’ It is precisely this kind of optimistic and holistic view of our history that we hope to focus on for future media projects as we welcome you into our team.

Pending completion of a background check etc., we would love to get your employment off to a running start by jumping right into this program involving a rethinking of the current history exhibition as a larger public attraction and an expanded marketing campaign showcasing the mill’s history from your perspective, in preparation for the opening of Building 13 to new residents. Let us know if you can join us for a brief orientation in Building 11 on Monday morning at 9:00 AM—if not, we would be happy to have you next Monday instead.

Yours,

Ray Mandeville - Interim VP, Bright Mill Foundation

I sat back in my folding chair with my mouth hanging agape.

“You got accepted!” exclaimed Jae, peering excitedly over my shoulder. “I heard you had applied! I’m surprised you didn’t tell me!”

“I... didn’t know,” I murmured, the beginnings of a smile beginning to allow itself across my open mouth.

Artifact: Letter from Richard Day to Ava Day

Letter from Mr. Richard Day to Ava Day, December 31, 2022

Dear Ava,

I don't expect you to forgive me. I don't expect you to even read this. But let me start this letter by first apologizing profusely for my text on Christmas morning, and for many texts prior to that.

Late on Christmas night, I had what I'd like to call a Christmas Carol moment. I tried to text you, I tried to call you, but nothing was going through. I have to assume it was because you blocked me, and I don't blame you for that.

When I got that text, I cried for half an hour. I could never have imagined that Nate was... the kind of person he was. No, that is a lie. That is a white lie. I could and did imagine it. I think somewhere in me I suspected it all along, and I didn't want to believe it. I was furious at the very possibility. I was angry at myself for possibly letting it happen. And that turned into anger at you, because I didn't know how to handle that possibility. In a way, I felt like I had done it to you.

I know we never really talked about it, but we struggled a lot when you were very young. There were some very dark times, when just keeping you alive, fed, and sheltered seemed like the most I could hope for. And when I saw my daughter heading for a life as a starving artist, it scared me. It reminded me of a very troubled time in my own past, and selfishly that's all I could see in you. When Nate came along, I thought it was the best thing that ever happened to you. He would keep you safe. He would prevent you from living the reckless life I lived as a young man. A life of

unreliable jobs in the arts, too much time spent with friends and too little time working, overdrawn bank accounts, overdue bills, too much time spent “fighting the system” instead of ensuring “the system” could keep my newborn baby fed and clothed. Combine that with your mother’s sudden departure, and my own father’s incessant scolding, and eventually I was frightened into living the practical, safe, money-driven life. And the one impractical dream I let myself keep, to keep the child in me alive—the red deuce coupe—became my downfall. When I was promoted to partner at my old firm, and for the first time we were living comfortably, and then I left to start RDC, and that red deuce coupe was in sight at the end of the tunnel, I thought I had won. I finally felt like I was doing something right. I thought I had proven my father wrong. But instead, I had become just like him. I was continuing the cycle. I became distant, inconsiderate, and money-driven. I let it consume me whole. From that day forward, I’ve been wracked with anxiety, terrified of losing the company, when I should have been terrified of losing you.

I just wanted to make you the best possible version of what you could become. Instead, I should have focused on who you already are, which is infinitely more precious.

Anyway, on Christmas night, I prepared an order for the sale of RDC. I’m going to invest some of the money and save the rest, and God willing, it should last me until social security kicks in. With the time and energy I will now have at my disposal, I will fill it with you, the most important thing I have ever had in my life. I was absent for too long. Now I am back. For good. Whether you accept me back into your life is up to you. Tell me everything, and I promise you will have my full self at your disposal. Please tell me what you are up to these days.

I love you, baby girl.

Dad

P.S. There's also a health-related issue I need to talk to you about, but I'd much rather have that conversation in person, if that's okay.

Artifact: Ava's mysterious draft

It was the first time I ever saw the world in front of me rippling and waving like when something hot is creating heat waves. But it wasn't because of the heat. The whole world was printed on beautiful paper streamers flapping gently in the wind, and its population was just the two of us.

The New Exhibit

I woke up staring at the footprint on the ceiling.

I'd slept quite well. I was rather astonished at how good this no-name mattress had been treating me these last few months. The same couldn't be said for the rotten little coffee machine sitting unused by the side of the mattress, dusty, turned away as if in passive-aggressive scorn. But it hadn't been used in at least a month now. There was no need, Jae's was much, much better.

* * *

The yellowing bricks hadn't disappeared right away.

The glimpses of the past had stopped. We'd both spent plenty of time in Building 11 listening for any hint of the Nevins conversation. We'd spent many late nights sitting together on the bench in the dog park, with no mangled arms or creaking floorboards to be found.

The first thing I'd noticed had been the disappearance of the burning smell outside. I'd gotten so accustomed to the pervasive scent of burning buildings that its sudden disappearance felt almost heavenly at first—my head was filled with scents I'd never noticed before, the smell of trees, blossoming flowers, and the occasional wafts of sizzling meals floating down from residents' windows felt like exploring the place anew, all while standing still.

We'd even taken a good eyes-scrunched-shut run at the wall in Building 2, visions of the bricked-up skybridge firmly planted in our head, followed by a lot of laughter as we rolled on the hallway floor and clutched the sore spots on our heads, ignoring the curious glances of onlookers returning to their apartments with their hands full of grocery bags. I'd come a long way since bumping into that guy in the hallway had once caused me half an hour of burning shame.

Still, the presence of those bruised bricks—looking somewhat healed, but not entirely gone—gave us reason to worry. No, those hadn't disappeared for good until Debra's

announcement.

It had certainly taken both Jae and I by surprise. For Debra to come to her senses about the mill's troubled past was one thing, but to actually donate her fortune to the Brightville community by way of the Bright Mill Foundation? That was something else neither of us had put on our bingo cards.

"I only wish I'd learned all this sooner," she'd written. "In your last email to me, you asked me if I had any information about Bright Mill between 1920 and 2018. You never received a reply to that, because... I didn't. With one sentence you made me realize there were 98 years between the Bright Brothers era and the opening of the apartment complex, and that's not a short time. It's generations, in fact. I finally started doing some research, starting with the articles you shared with me. Then the document you submitted with your Bright Mill application made its way into my hands, and I knew I had to change something. It seems only right after learning the grief that my ancestors caused to the Brightville community, and after years of profiting from the mill myself, that I should finally do something with the Bright Mill Foundation, a foundation I admit I first created just because it sounded like the right thing to do, and up until now has been completely wasted. Starting today, it will become something very real indeed."

Jae had summed it up succinctly, after a shared moment of stunned silence looking at her laptop screen together. "She wasn't evil," Jae had said. "She was just dumb the whole time."

I'd snorted so hard coffee had come out my nose. Suddenly, as though waking up from a dream, the thought of Debra Nevins—sloppily applying blue eyeliner with one hand while piloting her ugly Bentley across the parking lot and nearly hitting three parked cars—having the wherewithal to concoct an evil plan, or hide anything from anyone, seemed beyond laughable.

It was hard to pin down exactly what role each piece had played—removing a foreign

object from the infected wound in time by delivering Tommy back to his proper time, the Nevins family money being returned to the community from which it had been extracted, and, as of later this afternoon, laying bare the full and true face of Bright Mill to a public from which it had long been hidden. But as an unseasonably warm February reared its head, everything had finally returned to normal.

Jae had asked me once if it was possible that we hadn't seen any more time leaks not because the mill was healing, but because we were happier now and no longer accessing the dark places we'd each spent the last few months stuck in for our own reasons. She had a point—I had felt an awful lot happier the last few months, and resolved a lot of the things that had been hiding in the darker corners of my mind. Her question still echoed like a whisper in the back of my head some nights as I was trying to fall asleep. But I was confident that this afternoon would see the last piece of the puzzle slot into place.

"Hey, you made it!" Jae beamed brightly as she opened her door.

"Yeah," I said, "and I didn't even have to rifle through anyone's files to find your apartment number! Wow, you look sharp," I added, drinking in the sight of her impeccably tailored fire-engine-red suit jacket and pants.

"It's only because of this awesome t-shirt," she said, parting her jacket to reveal the black shirt underneath. Thick white block letters spelled out *Bright Mill At 160*, inverting to black where they crossed over the white silhouette of the mill's towering smokestack. The design was capped at each end with a subtle gray sentence—at the top with "Where we've been" and at the bottom with "Where we're going". It was my first shirt design for a Bright Mill Foundation campaign, hopefully the first of many, and it only looked a little bit ridiculous underneath Jae's otherwise breathtaking outfit. "You're killing it too!" she added. "Loving the leather look by the

way. Not missing the scarf.”

“Thanks!” I blushed, straightened the new leather jacket which was pulled over an identical T-shirt, and gave a twirl on the spot in my new combat boots, then brought my face closer to hers. “Hey, how’s my eye look?”

Jae paused for a second while she studied it, then smiled. “Beautiful.” Then the smile grew wider. “You know that black eye’s been gone for ages. So when are you going to stop asking me that?”

“As long as you keep giving that answer.” A big, stupid grin broke across my face as Jae stepped out of her apartment and we began the long walk down the corridor towards the stairwell.

As we turned to enter the stairwell and began our descent past the entrance to Building 21, the sealed-off lower half of a former second-story window, and the bricked-up top of a former doorway, I turned to Jae and took a deep breath. “Do you think we’ll ever tell anyone about the things we saw?”

Jae frowned for a moment and took an equally deep breath. “I don’t know. I have reason to believe there are others out there who have seen what we’ve seen, and are too scared of sounding crazy to tell anyone. I mean, I was one of those people. But that’s a discussion for a later date. Right now, today is all about you.”

The big stupid grin returned to my face, and I squinted in the burst of sunlight as Jae pushed open the front door. It was an unseasonably warm day for February. The air smelled green and gold, warm and comforting, and was electric with the sound of a multitude of tiny things coming to life.

As we approached Building 13, a flash of light glinted off the side of the huge bell

mounted decoratively on the ground near the patio overlooking the river to commemorate the days when it had been mounted high in the Building 1 bell tower. A small child of three or four years old was walking around it in awe, and began excitedly slapping its side with his open palm, screaming in excitement at the resulting muffled *thunggg*, before his father gently grabbed his hand and presumably told him to stop. The moment the father looked away, the young boy looked under the bell, grabbed the clapper that had been gently swinging in the breeze, and pulled it back like a slingshot. Milliseconds later, the resulting gong of the bell rang so loudly and clearly through the complex I thought it must have been heard the whole state over. It sounded like it could have been brand-new. A multitude of amused eyes glanced over, sparkling in the sun, floating on a gentle wave of appreciative laughter that melted quickly back into the sound of birds and bugs.

Then I saw him. He was leaning awkwardly against a car I didn't recognize, less like he was a cool guy in a movie and more like he had gotten out of his car and then frozen in paralyzed indecision. I couldn't believe how tired he looked—he seemed to have aged a decade in just a few years. He must have seen me first, because he was already looking right at me. At first I thought it looked like he wanted to cry. But then, as he saw me, he smiled.

“Dad! You came!”

“If you'll have me,” he said softly, wrapping me in a hug as I ran to him. It was the first hug of its kind in more than a year. For a second, everything else melted away. It felt like coming back home. Something about the hug was slower, weaker, more tentative than the hugs I remembered—but no less full of love. When I pulled back, he was grinning sheepishly, his tail still very much between his legs. His eyes were a little wet after all.

To break the tension, I gestured to the car he'd been leaning against. “Is this new? It may

be red, but it's no deuce coupe."

His reaction was not the polite laugh I'd expected, but a long, unsteady intake of breath. "I... I did get a deuce coupe, actually. When RDC hit a million. I had it for all of one month."

I frowned, looking back at the car. "Then... what..."

"I sold it last week. It just... felt wrong." I gaped at him as he continued. "I had done crazy things to get my hands on it. I let my assistants go, took on their workload and worked a lot of long nights to get the company as lean and profitable as possible before selling. And it worked, I got the thing I had always wanted. And it wasn't worth it."

"But that was the whole end goal of RDC, wasn't it?" I said, shaking my head. "I mean, you named the company after it!"

"I think that's all it was. It was a goal. Then I hit it, and the goal was gone, and the car was just a car." He looked at his shoes and sighed, as if disappointed in himself. "I even took it for a few joyrides down this way a few times. I was curious to see your new place. I didn't even realize until I saw it that it was the same old mill we used to explore as kids. We used to wade into the river and throw the ball around, then come up here and tell ghost stories. And when we got older it was the place everyone came to—"

I think I must have been listening too intently, too quietly, because he caught my eye at that moment, with just the slightest hint of a shaky smile, and started over.

"Anyway. I thought about coming in a few times, but I never did. I kept looking over at the passenger seat," he mumbled.

"Well, I'll hop in the passenger seat of this jalopy any time," I laughed. "In the meantime, let's go learn about Bright Mill! Oh," I added, catching Jae's eye as she waited patiently against the wall of Building 13. "And this is Jae."

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” said Dad, nervously shaking Jae’s hand as if she was the Queen of England.

“All good things I hope?” came Jae’s obligatory response.

We made our way toward the entrance together, Jae and I restraining our brisk gaits to stay with Dad. He certainly walked slower than he used to. Visions of brisk hikes in the woods and wild romps through the snow in the backyard reeled through the back of my mind, as I watched the tired shuffle of someone who, for the very first time, I was starting to see as an old man.

“I can’t believe this is the first time I’m getting to go inside Building 13,” I laughed quietly, blushing a little as I looked over at Jae. “I’ve seen so many construction photos I almost feel like I’ve lived in it. But never the real deal. I know that’s not the reason I should be excited today.”

“You can be excited for any reason you want!” came Jae’s immediate and forceful response. “You deserve to be excited! Go ahead, add it to the Google Doc!”

“The Aspergers Files?” I muttered, quietly enough that only Jae could hear.

“The Ava Collection,” corrected Jae with a smile.

We stepped into Building 13, and I felt the last piece of the puzzle slot triumphantly into place with a satisfying thunk. Glorious new life had truly been breathed into it—gleaming, burnished hardwoods stretched from brick wall to brick wall under our feet, and sunlight shone in through two rows of half-height windows, a relic of its old, cramped five-foot ceilings. Almost all of the first floor was taken up by the new history exhibition. It was at least four times the size—and at least a hundred times better-looking—than the one I’d first seen in Building 19, what seemed like centuries ago. It really was everything I’d wanted it to be and more.

I could barely make out my newly redesigned informational placards behind the throng of bustling people, but the banners I'd designed looked fantastic hanging from the towering new first floor ceiling standing sturdy and proud eleven feet above us all. I was delighted to see that the selection of mill machinery I'd requested to be moved in from the dog park had made its way in unscathed.

"I'm so proud of you," whispered Jae, as we looked around at the new and improved exhibit. "This is amazing."

"Thanks," I babbled, swelling with pride.

Behind Jae, I noticed my father, taking in his surroundings like an infant looking around at the world for the first time. His words came weakly. "You did... all..."

I nodded, beaming, and the moisture returned to his eyes.

With the new educational panels, I had dusted off both my graphic design skills and my research skills, with long-lost photographs upsized to stunning clarity, and revised blocks of educational text—most of which had once lived in my Google Doc—arranged elegantly around them. Much of the first panel retained the same text from the earlier exhibit, outlining the origins of the mill and the Bright Brothers' journey to success through production of civil war uniforms and the Fruit of the Loom brand. I'd replaced a few of the photos, however.

"Thank you so much for including Grandpa Fred," whispered Jae in my ear, as she smiled down upon the professionally enlarged photograph of her great-great-great-great-grandfather.

Next to these, freshly installed, were a series of entirely new panels. One, labeled "Mill Disasters", was devoted to the buildings. It described the fire that took down the roof of Building 1, the floor collapse that resulted in a man being hoisted out of my bedroom wall while mangled in a loom, the unchecked decay and misuse of the buildings under its subsequent owners, and

more. More importantly, it called out the causes and responsible parties behind each—the overloading of the buildings with more machinery than they were built to withstand, the misuse of buildings for purposes for which they were never designed, the decades of flagrant disregard for safety regulations—and explained how each was to be rectified going forward.

Another, labeled “Working Conditions” was devoted to the mill workers. One section described the slashed wages and grueling hours implemented after the Consolidated takeover, leading to the strikes and riots of 1922, alongside a vertical photograph of two National Guard soldiers manning a machine gun mounted atop the Building 1 bell tower and, next to that, the names and photographs of the two workers gunned down on February 21.

Alongside a photo of a ten-year-old boy with a filthy face, ripped overalls, and a crooked flat cap was a section describing the rampant usage of child labor long after laws were passed restricting it. Further paragraphs were devoted to the wide-reaching social and financial control flexed by each subsequent monopolistic corporate overlord that took over the mill and by extension the entirety of Brightville, the improper housing of impoverished workers, and finally the rise of the female workforce and the fight for fair wages and modern safety precautions.

Capping it all off at the end was a new panel, for which I’d consulted a guest author named Jaelynn Rhodes, about changes to how modern restoration work was carried out on aging buildings with respect for their history, integrity, and dignity.

I allowed myself a minute to take it all in, and for once, it didn’t feel like I had stepped into a storage closet with someone’s science fair poster boards. And more importantly, with each history panel, I didn’t feel like I was reading a lie anymore.

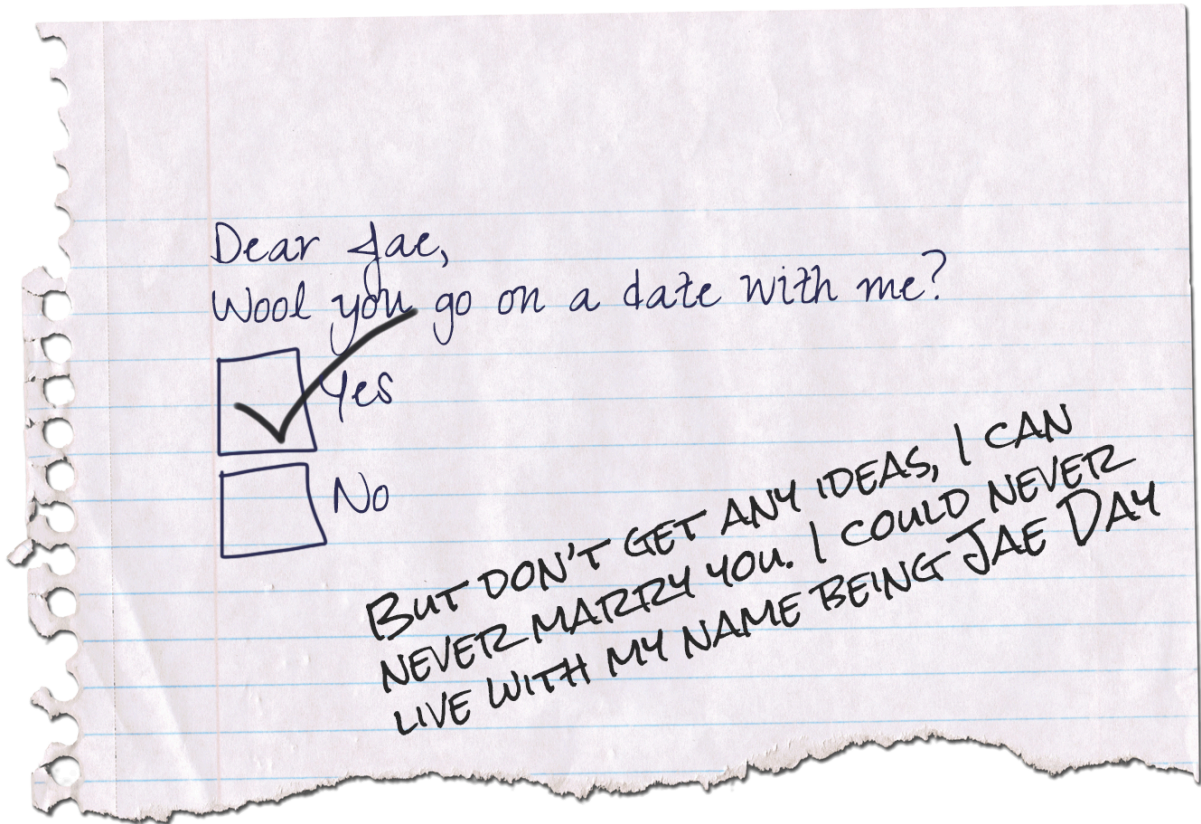
I didn’t feel like I was *living* a lie anymore.

Jae and I smiled together as we read the last line of the last board, embossed in large bold

font:

We can't undo the damage from our past. But we can bring it to light, learn how to grow from it, and blaze a brighter path forward toward our future.

Artifact: Paper Scrap



Epilogue

Dad was one of ten recipients of the first Bright Mill Foundation grant. It was awarded to those Brightville residents whose life-threatening diagnoses could be verifiably linked with the industrial chemicals contaminating the Pawtuxet River prior to 1972. When he'd finally admitted to a doctor what he'd been going through and got diagnosed with toxic encephalopathy, after years of stubbornly trying to hide his symptoms, he had said his life turned around. He'd been relieved to learn that, along with his more obvious muscular symptoms, his mood swings and transient anger in recent years also had a cause, something he could put a name to, and that it wasn't truly the person he was becoming, because he'd been secretly worried it was.

I'd had no idea what his life was truly like in recent years, and my memories of him locked in his room doing work for RDC now took on a new meaning as I learned of the real him, desperately, woozily trying to focus on his work, relying on an increasingly absurd cocktail of apps and timers to keep him focused on a single task, locking the door in embarrassment as he shuffled back to his desk and grappled with this mysterious demon, and then during the years that I was living with Nate, living what became an increasingly isolated, disordered and unhygienic bachelor life, convincing himself that everything would be fine so long as he was still able to continue moving ever-growing numbers around on spreadsheets and sending canned emails to important people. It finally occurred to me why I so rarely saw him anywhere other than seated at his desk, why I hadn't seen him behind the wheel in years, not even to help me move into Bright Mill the day after my birthday, and why he might have given up the Red Deuce Coupe so quickly. He spoke of how his shame and stubbornness had thrown gasoline on his increasingly erratic mood swings and converged to produce the worst few years of his life, years for which he now incessantly begged my forgiveness, trapped in a vicious cycle as his increasing

frustration, solitude, and immobility kept him home alone and began a years-long drought of medical attention when he could have used it the most. Doctors couldn't promise that his life would ever be quite the same again, due to how long it had gone untreated, but still, he was happy.

He was happy, not only because he now had medication for his gradually worsening symptoms, but for the opportunity to get one final clean chapter in before the beginning of the end, a chapter in which he loved and accepted his daughter for who she was.

The following month, Dad finally did take ownership of another red deuce coupe, albeit in 1/18 scale diecast model form. Reflecting on his month-long prior ownership of the real deal, he'd said the reproduction was better than the real thing anyway.

It was on this that I reflected as I munched on the eggs that Jae had so expertly poached for me, and gazed up at the immaculate 1889 illustration of Brightville on the wall of the apartment in which I now lived.

The reproduction was better than the real thing anyway. My gaze drifted from the precisely-etched lines of the poster to the pockmarked and paint-spotted expanses of exposed brick on either side of it. I'm not sure if "better" would be the word in this case. Simpler, for sure, easier to comprehend. All the trappings of style and mystique of the thing it represents, with none of the responsibilities of something real that gradually decays and dies if it's mistreated, like a classic car, or a person, or a mill.

Afterword

The construction, layout, and troubled history of Bright Mill are closely based on that of Pontiac Mills in Warwick, Rhode Island. Many of the historical events in this story are based on events that occurred at Pontiac Mills and other textile mills in the New England region. Any references to any persons living or dead are coincidental—with the notable exception of Benjamin and Robert Knight of the real-life B. B. & R. Knight Company.

Thank you to the Warwick Historical Society, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and the many hundreds of historical news clippings available on Google Books for help in my research into Pontiac Mills and the trials and tribulations of the Pontiac community through the centuries.

It is not yet known whether any time leaks have been detected in the area.