**I**

Fort Garrington is the first glimpse of a city that interstate travelers see for hundreds of miles: an oasis in the endless maze of Illinois’ cornfields, cattle pastures, and grain elevators. Entering the city from the interstate, newcomers are greeted by the large headquarters of Farvico, Garrington’s largest claim to fame and the largest producer of computer software outside of Silicon Valley. The tech specialists came to Fort Garrington from Chicago in the 1980’s when computer servers were the size of living rooms and Garrington the size of a large farm pond. One mile west of Farvico headquarters, downtown is laid out around a square with a courthouse in the center, as was tradition during Garrington’s founding. However, standing directly outside the square and hiding its original, brick mom-and-pop shops are six enormous, glass-plaid buildings.

Among the thousands of Farviconians inhabiting the confused city, Peter Trenton lived away from the Farvico campus in a humble household near the downtown area. He’d bought the dull-green nest years ago from an old real estate broker who, at the time, had yet to sell such affordable real estate to a Farvico employee. “You sure this’ll do buddy? We’ve got some nice lofts up above the Illinois Banking Union if you’d like to check ‘em out.”

Peter smiled and looked the little house up and down, or rather side to side, and said smiling, “No, sir. I think this is the one.”

Having lived in the dusty house for almost four years, Peter had become a sincere advocate of Fort Garrington, which he found a relaxing change from LA, where’d he’d attended Loyola Marymount. Most Farvico employees adore the clear-glass towers on the square that house hair salons, movie theaters, upscale restaurants, and apartments with real estate prices that no one in Garrington’s past could ever have conceived. All of Peter’s coworkers either lived in the lofts that the broker had recommended, or they had moved to “Farville,” a suburb-like neighborhood north of the square for those employees who’d wished to follow their American dreams of having a spouse, a dog, two kids, and a large back yard for the dog to shit in.

Peter’s house served for him a certain cultural justification -- that though they were all living in Illinois, he knew he was the only Farviconian *living* in Illinois. At parties, he’d visited the large, well-lit apartments or enormous Farville mansions whose walls were decorated with intricate, colorful clocks and paintings from Spain, France, or wherever else. While he enjoyed the parties and the apartments, he lacked the comfort that he felt within his own home, perhaps just for that reason alone: they weren’t his. But Peter recognized a feeling that he’d attributed to his house and his neighborhood that the others he’d visited were all lacking.

When Jeff Hansen moved to Garrington in September, he’d come to visit the little green house after Peter had recommended the area. In search of more permanent housing than his loft apartment above *La Cucina Italiana*, Jeff’s attention was unfaltering whenever Peter boasted about his lovely locality. However, the differences between Jeff’s perception and Peter’s description of the area were vast. Jeff drove his Prius from the west end of Garrington’s square and ventured into the district. Houses lined the streets on all sides, and many of the front lawns were well kept and decorated, though some were littered with enough children’s toys to begin a secondhand Toys-R-Us. Jeff’s GPS interrupted his judgments saying, “In two hundred feet, turn right onto Nishna Street.”

As he turned onto Nishna, Jeff scanned the street for a beautiful green cottage. “In point one miles, the destination is on your left.” Staring down the left side of Nishna Street, Jeff thought he’d finally caught a glimpse of a home that might be Peter’s when, from the corner of his eye, he saw a man mowing his lawn, but the man had stopped mowing altogether in order to give Jeff’s foreign vehicle a questioning scowl. The mower’s engine stopped, and the man called to his wife in the garden and pointed toward Jeff’s car that was creeping by. Feeling self-conscious, Jeff tried his best at a friendly smile-and-wave, but the gesture reeked of half-heartedness. The older couple looked back at each other in confusion, but continued with their yard work as he passed. “The destination is on your left. Now ending navigation.”

He turned into the driveway, now recognizing Peter’s small, red Audi under the rusty, steel car shelter. The small house had been weathered and lacked almost a third of its shingles, and paint was chipped and wearing at the bottom foot of the house. The chipped paint was accompanied by what looked like rubber tire marks, which he assumed to be from a lawn mower, though the lawn showed no resemblance of maintenance in any recent past.

The front door opened and the screen door followed with a thud as it slammed against the house into a dent that was clearly from recurrence. Seeing Jeff in the driveway, Peter hopped out onto the cement sidewalk that connected the driveway to the front door saying enthusiastically, “Hello, hello! So you didn’t get lost, huh?”

Jeff replicated the insincere smile that he’d given the elderly neighbors and said, “Nope, I made it. Thanks again for the invite.”

“Oh anytime. I’ve been trying to recruit more Farvico guys to at least look at some of the homes in here.”

Following Peter through the doors into the cottage, Jeff squinted until his eyes were able to decipher his surroundings among the living room’s lack of lighting. The carpet was brown, and the mud-stained doormat in the entrance read ‘Welcome.’ A gray couch, whose cushions were unevenly stuffed, stood against the wall of the living room facing the television. Above the couch, hung an elegant painting of a wet, yellow Labrador with a mallard duck in its jowls. Unknowingly, Jeff lowered his eyebrows, and Peter interjected justifiably, “Come on. It’s not that bad. The real problem is that I just haven’t fixed the place up any.”

Jeff tried to assure Peter, “Oh, no. I don’t-“

“My favorite parts of the house are back here anyways.”

They made their way into a connected kitchen and dining room with a small table. Jeff agreed with Peters preference to the back if only because light could reasonably penetrate through the glass-sliding door lighting the room some, though also illuminating the dust particles dancing arbitrarily through the room. Peter walked past the small table and through the dining room to a door and said to Jeff, “And this is the bedroom, there’s another connected to the front room, but that’s where I keep all my biking stuff. You don’t want to see that one.”

Jeff peeked into the bedroom, which was oddly large even for a master bedroom. Aside from the darkness, he hadn’t minded the bedroom, but it did little to sway him towards a favorable opinion of the house. Peter had made his way back into the kitchen and grabbed two beers from his refrigerator and handed one to Jeff. They then made their way out the sliding door and sat at the black card table on the small cement patio. Peter drank and said, “So, what do ya think of the place, buddy?”

Jeff replied, hesitantly, “Well I’m all for having a house of your own, Pete, but I feel like you’ve got to fix it up here and there. Otherwise you’re probably best staying in a rented place, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I’ve fallen behind all that stuff, but do you see what I was telling you about? I mean *this* feels a lot more like home to me than those high rises downtown ever did. I always felt a bit… disconnected living there, you know? Living in those buildings in such an otherwise one-story town is basically telling everyone we’re above them.”

“Ok, but have you ever actually heard those complaints?”

“No… Not really, but I’ve really only gotten to know this couple, the Petersons, over here, and Jack *hates* what Farvico’s done to Garrington. He almost stopped talking to me when I told him I worked for them, but I agreed with him about some of the things he was saying. See, his biggest problem with Farvico is that we draw so much attention to the place.”

As Peter’s eyes lit up like they always did before he imparted wisdom, a small poof of white hair peered over the tall, brown fence behind him. “Peter!” The old woman who had scowled at Jeff when he pulled in was peeking over the fence. “Peter, I’ve made potato salad, and Jack’s getting sick of it. Would you like any?”

Peter smiled and said relaxed and graciously, “Oh, Hi Bonnie. I’d love some. Thank you very much. Are you guys almost finished with the yard work over there?”

“Well, for now anyway. Jack got a call from some kid to rollover his 401k so he’s been yelling into the phone for a little while. Say, whose car was that pulling in?”

Jeff blushed mildly as Peter laughed, “That’s Jeff’s. He just got to town not too long ago.” Jeff waved and muttered inaudibly that it was nice to meet her. Peter continued, “I’ve been trying to convince Jeff to start looking at some of the homes around here.”

Bonnie cut in swiftly, “God knows the price is better than those buildings downtown. A town like ours shouldn’t have junk like that.” Peter laughed to lighten the mood, and Bonnie finished, “Well boys, I’d better get back inside. Jack’s probably getting impatient with that poor kid.”

**II**

When work resumed that Monday in late August, Jeff assured Peter he was impressed with the neighborhood, but claimed the reason he wasn’t going to start looking for a home immediately was only because he was dreading the physical move. Peter didn’t understand. As they stood in the break room on the fifth floor, Peter argued, “Well nowadays, it’s pretty easy. I’m sure some of these guys would help you get moved if that’s all you’re worried about.”

“Yeah, I’m just not quite ready. I think I’m just going to stay put for a while.”

Jeff started toward his desk and turned back pointing to Peter, “We still on for lunch today though?” Peter nodded and they continued toward their desks. Though he was fairly new to the place, Jeff already felt a sense of comfort at work just knowing that he had a space of his own. He sat on the top floor of the West Building in Farvico’s headquarters with the other programmers. When he returned, Evan, the thin blonde man who sat adjacent to him, asked, “How’d you meet Trenton already?” Evan did this kind of small talk without taking his eyes from his computer monitor.

Jeff replied, “I’d just seen him in the break room a couple times. Seems like an alright guy.” Evan gave a light nod and tightened once side of his lips.

That Friday, some coworkers went to grab drinks from a bar nearby to celebrate a birthday. Evan forwarded the email chain to Jeff writing, “You down to have a few beers tonight?” The gathering was in a well lit bar lined with large windows cattycorner to Farvico. Evan and another coworker sat at the table looking mildly exhausted as Jeff approached. There was a relaxed conversation ensuing when Jeff pulled back the seat next to Evan saying, “Hey guys.” He sat down across from Kyle, a software engineer on the third floor whom he’d met only because Kyle stopped by Evan’s desk frequently to talk about ESPN headlines. At 41, Kyle was the oldest of the group and the most out of shape. His height gave the impression that at one time he had been naturally athletic, but that had long since passed. He was also one of the only Farviconians who was relatively local, hailing from Omaha Nebraska just two hours West.

The men all ordered beers and began talking about work. A final straggler sat down at the booth next to Kyle, a friend of Kyle’s named Anthony. Both Kyle and Anthony sent frequent emails to mock Evan for having allowed his wife to choose the dog they recently brought home, which Kyle had christened “The Little Rat.” The men greeted Anthony as he joined the table, and Anthony looked to Kyle and said, “Hey, happy birthday, man.” Kyle thanked him, and Anthony asked, “Have any plans for celebrating this weekend?”

“Yeah, I think Lisa and I are going to take the boat out tomorrow, and the kids will go tubing.”

Anthony said to Jeff, “He’s got a slick speed boat,” and then turned back, saying, “By the way, I haven’t been on the boat yet this year. When are you taking us out again?”

“You know you don’t have to twist my arm to get us out on the water. Just let me know when, and you bring the beer.”

Anthony laughed and said, “You got it.” The conversation soon led to past trips they’d taken on the boat. The vivid telling of the time Kyle imbibed too much and tried to jump from the boat but instead racked himself on the railing left all four of them laughing. Jeff then confessed, “Man, I miss boating. I never once got out on the ocean in California.”

Kyle replied loudly, “Man, I don’t know about California in particular, but we go down to Florida in the winters to see Jan’s parents, and I tell ya, I’ve never had more fun that deep sea fishing with her old man. You just drink all day while some guy drives you around and tells you where the fish are. Her dad caught a *huge* Marlin a few years back.”

The men looked impressed, especially Anthony. Once they’d had another drink, Evan turned to Jeff, “Why’d you leave California anyway? Too expensive?”

“Yeah, it was definitely expensive. I also just had some trouble out there. My last coworkers were all so competitive that it just sucked.”

Anthony stopped Jeff energetically. “Well, hey, if you don’t like competition, you’d better watch out for the 3-on-3 basketball tournament in November. Kyle and I are members of the 2013 championship team.” Anthony and Kyle gave an enthusiastic high-five, and Jeff laughed with them.

“No, no, it wasn’t like that. I love that stuff. These guys were competitive in a different way, like one of them would say they did something that weekend, and the other would either explain how they did something better, or if they hadn’t, they’d describe their knowledge of that activity in such detail that the other lost interest. I listened to a man explain for a half an hour how enlightening the classical oboe concert he’d attended was*.”*

There was a brief pause as the men all tried to understand. Kyle broke the silence, “That sounds absolutely awful.” All of the men enjoyed the comment, and Jeff replied animatedly, “It really was!”

“You know,” Kyle added, “Lisa’s got a brother-in-law like that. At Thanksgiving, the guy told me so much about his gluten allergy that I almost took the biscuits to the other room for some alone time.”

Anthony held his arms out saying, “But we all know who’s the worst about shit like that, right?” Pausing to look at everyone, he continued, “Trenton… That guy will go on and on about the stupidest things.”

“Oh god yes,” Kyle agreed, “one time he gave me a lecture about how sitting down all day is going to kill me.” Kyle paused before finishing, “I told him the only person’s health he should be worried about was his own if he kept it up.”

Jeff tried to act unsurprised at their disapproval of Peter, but Evan saw through it. He explained to Jeff, “See, Trenton’s a lot different now than he used to be.” As Evan began, the both Anthony and Kyle began to look at their down at their pint glasses. Evan continued, “He used to hang around with us quite a bit, and that was fine, but he’d just get off on the weirdest things. Mostly he just loved to get this guy going,” Evan pointed at Kyle.

Kyle began to scowl, and Anthony turned to Jeff, “Wait. So you’ve already met Trenton?”

Jeff replied casually, “Just once or twice.”

“Has he tried to convince you to get a house with him yet?”

Jeff was surprised, “Yeah, actually. He gave me a tour the other weekend.”

Anthony turned to Kyle, “See, this is that shit he’d always pull!” He looked now to Jeff and spoke slowly, “He’ll make a point of doing the opposite of everyone else just for attention, and worst of all, he’ll tell you over and over how his decision is better.”

Kyle muttered an expletive before taking a drink. Enjoying the fact that he was not the only one who had felt something was a bit off with Peter, Jeff began to feel himself speaking with more vigor, “But, have you guys ever seen that shithole?”

No one answered immediately, but Anthony looked interested replying, “No way. Have you?”

“Yeah he talked me into coming to see the neighborhood, which wasn’t anything special to start. Then I got to his house, and the guy hasn’t kept up the yard or cleaned the place up at all. Not to mention, the inside smelt like feet and was dark enough that I almost believed I had just walked into a shoe.”

Anthony winced a bit, and Kyle shook his head. Holding one hand up slightly, Evan said to the two men, “But I mean, did I expect any less from the guy?”

**III**

A few weeks later having nearly concluded another quiet weekend, Peter finished a bowl of cereal on his back patio on the warm Sunday morning. He stared out at his yard only to marvel at the plain, overgrown grass. He texted Jeff, “Hey man, what are you doing today?” After a half an hour, Peter had yet to hear back.

He went to Katie’s Flowers while he waited for a response. He entered the small store, which had just opened for the day, and began looking around. His favorites quickly became the Marigolds for their eccentricity, but he recognized that each flower held a beauty unique to itself, so he bought a variety. While Katie, the proprietor, rung up the order, she glanced at the odd selection and then questioningly at Peter only to see a proud smile on his face.

Once he’d gotten the flowers home and placed in the back patio, Peter checked his phone again. It was now 1:30 PM, and the heat of the day made his body feel heavy. He’d received a text from Jeff a few minutes prior saying that he had no plans for the day. Peter asked, “You want to go to lunch in a bit?” Peter dug through the random assortment of tools that he’d accumulated in the garage. He found a large shovel, and though it was disproportionate, it would suffice to get his garden growing. When he returned to the patio, he checked his phone awaiting a response, but it hadn’t come yet.

He grabbed the Lilies and decided they would look best on the east side of the fence so he could see the sun hit their white pedals when it descended behind the house in the evenings. Next he placed the Petunias. Once those were planted he checked his phone to see it devoid any notifications, so he returned. On the opposite end stood the gilded Black-Eyed Susans, whom Peter had reasoned should see the sunlight in the mornings when he read the paper. Adjacent to the Susans, Peter laid the Delphiniums in order to support the centerpiece Marigolds, his personal favorite.

Once the garden had been planted, the sides of the yard were covered with exposed dirt roots of the overgrown grass that would soon decay, but that mattered not. When Peter stood at the foot of his back door, he saw the wonderful Marigolds: the Marigolds who were surrounded by other flowers though not as colorful as themselves but whose presence was essential. Peter wore again the proud smile that Katie and so many others had failed to understand.

The sun had dipped lower now as he had worked through most of its highest hours. Peter’s phone read 5:30 PM, and he read a lonely message from Jeff sent a half hour prior, “Hey man, sorry I never got back to you. I was sleeping most of the day. Let’s get lunch this week?” Peter turned his phone off in order to soak in one final glance at the marvel in his backyard.

**IV**

The six o’clock alarm began an unusually disgruntling Monday morning for Jeff as he’d spent most of Sunday drinking beer on Kyle’s boat. Bags lined his eyes as he tied his tie in the mirror. When he got to work, Evan watched him login to his computer in silence. He laughed mockingly at Jeff saying, “Rough morning there, champ?”

Jeff looked back frowning, “Today is awful.”

“Yeah,” Evan laughed, “I stopped getting as wild as those guys after the first couple times.”

Looking through the emails that had come in over the weekend and earlier this morning, Jeff began to dread the day even more. An email shot through:  
  
 From: Peter Trenton

To: Jeff Hansen

Sent: Sept. 28th, 2014, 7:39AM

Hey dude,

We still on for lunch today?

Jeff sighed then agreed to lunch. He continued his work occasionally groaning audibly enough to elicit laughter from Evan.

When it was 11:58, Jeff made it a point to go to Peter’s desk first. On the other side of the building, Peter sat quietly with his tongue turned outside of his lips, and Jeff’s approach had no affect on his focus. Jeff announced himself, “Hey Pete, ready for lunch?”

Peter looked up surprised, “Yeah, of course. Let me just save this here.” He paused as he swung his computer mouse quickly across the keypad, “Alright. Lets get some food.”

They sat down at a table in a small sandwich shop across the street. Noticing the tiring look on Jeff’s face, Peter asked, “You doing alright, man? Not looking too hot today.”

Caught off guard, Jeff quickly replied, “Oh yeah. I’m just tired.”

Peter nodded and said, “Gotcha. So what’d you do this weekend?”

“Oh, not much really. I cleaned up the apartment a bit and talked to my parents on the phone yesterday. How about you?”

Turning his head in question, Peter replied, “Mine was pretty low key too. I ended up planting some flowers in the back yard yesterday in order to spruce things up a bit, but I also met a girl.” Jeff was about to inquire when the waitress came to take their orders. Jeff asked for a Farmer’s Stack Sandwich, and the waitress turned to Peter, “And what would you like, sir?”

Peter looked at the menu closely, “Can I get the Italian Sub, but is there anyway I can get some pesto on that instead of marinara?” To which the waitress was quick say they didn’t have any pesto sauce. Peter went back to the menu, “Well in that case, I’ll have the Reuben, and I’d like as much kraut as I can get on that please.”

Peter smiled as he handed her the menus, but she was not amused. He leaned on the table shifting his focus back to Jeff as she walked away.

“So you met a lady-friend huh?” Jeff said anxious to see what poor woman had taken the time. He wondered what kind of woman might wake up one day to find herself in a relationship with Peter Trenton.

Peter smiled embarrassingly, “Just some girl I met yesterday. She’s a painter and was selling some stuff at the farmer’s market.”

Smiling satisfactorily, Jeff asked “So did she sell you on anything?”

“Yeah. I bought just a small picture, so she’d agree to get dinner with me. I think I’m going to take her out this Friday.”

Jeff sat back slightly and looked past Peter’s head saying, “Nice dude. That’s great.”

Jeff stared at his monitor later that afternoon and began to date his to-do list to the following day. Once he completed the chore, he saw that he still had five minutes until he was free so he sat back a bit. He looked over at Evan who was trying to finish one last software program before four. “Dude, Trenton told me he’s got a date coming up this weekend… Poor girl.”

Evan replied without moving, “Doesn’t know what she’s gotten herself into.” Jeff laughed contently.

**V**

Leaving Farvico the following Friday, Jeff cranked the car radio and rolled his windows down as he left the parking lot. The sun was setting on a charming autumn evening, but there had been so many stunning sunsets recently that they began to hold a diminishing pleasure each consecutive evening. He began to focus instead on a yearning he had but couldn’t quite identify, an anxiety that had kept him busy his whole life now confronted him as it had almost every weekend of his adult life.

Jeff answered the door later that evening to find Anthony and Evan standing in the doorway with a case of beer in their hands. Jeff welcomed them in, “What’s up guys?” He walked toward the living room of his one bedroom apartment where the television was playing highlights from the baseball games played earlier that day. Anthony and Evan glanced through the well-lit apartment when Anthony commented abruptly, “Nice place ya got here, Jeffy.” Sitting on the couch proudly, Jeff pointed to the refrigerator at the front of the kitchen saying, “You can throw the beers in there if you want.”

The three of them sat and drank slowly, all commenting on the games. Anthony raised his voice about his hatred for the San Francisco Giants. After a few drinks, Jeff began to grow less entertained. He broke a small pause in the conversation to ask, “Either of you guys know of some good bars down here? There’s got to be one we could go check out tonight.”

Evan shrugged, looking to Anthony for suggestions. “Yeah, I mean, we could try Charlie’s. That’s just across the square. They have darts and pool and all that stuff,” Anthony replied.

Jeff pursed his lips and asked doubtingly, “Will there be any ladies there?”

“Doubtful.”

When the men opened the door from the apartment building, the brisk, night air cut through their collared shirts enough that a jacket would have been a smart accessory. The town was quiet, and most of the lights were turned off in the square downtown aside from the Jack’s Gas Station one block east on Main Street. The desolate block was eerily calm. They passed the courthouse in the center of town, and Anthony began bragging about how he couldn’t remember the last time he’d lost in darts. “Well you’re about to remember this one,” Jeff said, playing along.

Finally when they’d reached the opposite side of the square, they could hear the music bumping from a dimly lit building with neon signs in the black windows. As they approached, they could see a couple lone silhouettes emitting tobacco smoke, and Evan opened the door for the men. The bar was in an old building that had likely been intact for a century. The walls were bare brick and mortar with dim lamps hanging above small tables and booths. In the left at the entry, a man sat on a stool, and asked for their ID’s. Behind him, Jeff saw the dartboards. Anthony was through first, “Hey what do you guys want? I’ll get this round.”

Evan began to say, “You don’t ha-,” but Jeff interjected, “Whiskey and Coke please.” Pausing briefly, Evan asked for a beer. Anthony looked back pointing to the unattended dartboard telling Evan and Jeff to claim the board. The two men stood near the board and more thoroughly inspected the bar. Many of the inhabitants wore drab clothing, often camouflage of sorts. A few young women sat under a lamp across the hallway and talked dramatically to one another. Jeff didn’t see anyone he’d recognized until he glanced back through the bar. In a large circular booth in the corner of the bar sat a young blonde woman from Farvico. Jeff hadn’t met her formally but recognized her from a recent human resources lecture about office etiquette and harassment.

In front of the girl now waltzed Anthony, skillfully holding all three of their drinks and the darts between two fingers. Jeff met him to help him grab the drinks. “Thanks for getting those,” he said when they’d reached the table adjacent to the board.

“Of course, buddy,” Anthony replied enthusiastically, “You’re up next.”

Anthony began the game of Cricket singles. When he’d pulled the darts from the board and handed them to Evan, Anthony leaned to Jeff saying, “Dude, I saw Jen LaRite over there from HR… I think I’m in love.”

Jeff nodded in agreement, “Yeah, I think I saw her too. Have you met her before?”

Straight faced, Anthony replied, “No, but I’ve been thinking about harassing someone just to get a one-on-one with her. They both laughed, and it was Jeff’s turn to throw.

Jeff walked to the board and scattered the three darts across the board. “Off to a good start there, Jeffy-boy,” Anthony said mockingly.

As the three of them continued to play, Jeff soon bought the next round, and Evan bought another. There was something about Anthony that convinced Jeff to continue imbibing once he’d gotten to a content state of drunkenness. The men walked to the bar led by Anthony who carried the darts and was loudly boasting, “If I’d have known, I’d have given you both at least a 50 point handicap.”

Evan threw his hand at the comment, and Jeff said, “Wasn’t my day. Just wait until next time.”

The men sat at the bar and drunkenly ordered another drink as they returned the darts to the bartender. Evan yawned and asked to close out his tab, so the other two followed. As he handed his card to the bartender, Jeff’s mood turned violently somber. There was a goal that he’d set for himself tonight without being completely aware of it, and he knew he hadn’t succeeded. While he enjoyed his newly found friends, he recently he felt an anxiety that he’d never known before. Though he was comfortable with his friends, he began to require their attention and approval of his decisions more frequently. He also missed the assurance and intimacy he had felt when in previous relationships. Jeff began to tell himself that he would change once he finally met a girl of his own. He wouldn’t need to drink as often; he would spend more time playing piano which he’d done so much of in California; and he would begin visiting his family whom he missed, but thought of so infrequently while working and going to bars. Perhaps worst of all, he began to think of Peter Trenton and how he had found a girlfriend of his own, which Jeff envied greatly but would neither admit to himself nor to anyone else.

“Hey there, Jeffy. You getting tired?” Once Jeff turned to respond, Anthony continued, “Hey! We lost you for a second there.”

Jeff smiled knowing that he must have looked ridiculous staring into space, open-mouthed and dumbly. Just then, Jeff’s face sprouted a half-grin, and he looked around the room. Anthony looked around after, questioning his sudden movements. Jeff stood and walked towards the back of the bar. Approaching the corner booth, he would normally have felt his hands beginning to sweat, but not this time. Coolly, he looked at the small blonde woman and her friend who now faced him in surprise after his unexpected approach, and he said, “Excuse me. Do either of you speak any French?”

Laughing the two women looked nervously at each other saying, “No,” and “Not at all.”

Beginning to slur his words, Jeff replied immediately, “Me neither. What are your names?” While the ladies laughed again at the terrible pick up line, Jeff sat down in the booth with them. Anthony and Evan were watching closely, but unsuccessfully trying to hide it.

“Jen,” the blonde answered. The other woman who was slightly older and more out of shape said her name was Carla. Jeff focused completely on Jen saying, “And you work at Farvico, right?”

The blonde tilted her head slightly saying, “Yeah. Do you work there too?”

“Yes ma’am. You mean you don’t remember teaching me all about harassment in the workplace?”

Jen smiled, though now only out of politeness, “Oh yeah. I give those talks a lot. I get pretty sick of them.” She paused which was the first of the conversation and continued, “Sorry what was your name again?”

“Jeff Hansen.”

The woman acted like she recognized the name saying, “Ok, that is familiar… Well Jeff it was great to meet you, and maybe I’ll see you around work sometime.” She smiled still acting polite, and Jeff tried to smile as he said “Yeah, maybe,” and stood up to return to the bar.

Evan and Anthony looked at Jeff anxiously as they leaned over the bar waiting for a report. Anthony impatiently whispered, “How’d that go?”

After a brief sigh, Jeff looked at his drink saying, “Could have gone better.”

**VI**

Work ran smoothly the following few weeks and Jeff began to advance in his role to the point that he was able to stop asking Evan for help everyday. Anthony came by that Thursday and asked if they were interested in watching football that weekend. The two agreed after Anthony mentioned that Evan’s Chicago Bears “stood no chance against the Packers.”

“Oh bullshit,” Evan argued, eliciting the response for which Anthony had hoped. “We’re going to put Rodgers in the dirt for good.” The men all agreed to meet at Jeff’s on Sunday and walk to Charlie’s for the game.

The next day was bright and Jeff felt the cheerfulness one normally feels on a Friday. He was humming minutely when, over his monitor, he spotted an equally peppy Peter Trenton. Jeff glanced at Evan, hopeful he was away from his desk, but he was staring blankly at his screen as usual.

“Hey there,” an overly excited voice greeted them, and Jeff turned slowly to respond.

“Hey Pete. What’s going on?” His eyes returned to his monitor once Peter began explaining the argument he’d just won against a coworker. Evan looked over, interested in the interaction.

“… So I think he finally understands that now,” Peter finished, and Jeff looked at Peter once he had finished passively nodding and occasionally saying, “uh-huh.” At the momentary silence, Peter broke in glancing first at Evan and back to Jeff, “You guys have any plans for the weekend?”

Evan made brief eye contact, pursed his lips, and shook his head. After watching Evan and hoping for a better reaction, Jeff replied, “I don’t have much. Probably just relaxing and watching football all weekend.”

Peter nodded, “Who’s your team again?” Jeff didn’t know a true answer. Atop his mind were the Bears which was the answer he provided to Peter. The team name meant nothing to Peter. He nodded to say, “Oh, cool… Doing anything for the game?”

“Not really. We might just watch them at Charlie’s or something. No set plans yet.”

Peter was happy at the news. “Ah, Charlie’s: a fine establishment,” he said mockingly, “Well, I’ll be hanging with Amanda tonight and most of tomorrow, but maybe I’ll join you on Sunday if that’s all right.”

Jeff’s voice grew higher, and he shrugged, “Sure, man. I guess um… You wanna just meet us there?”

Smiling now, Peter agreed, “Definitely. I’ll see you guys there.”

As Peter walked away, Jeff grimaced as if in pain and looked to Evan who grinned at his computer screen, “The boys aren’t going to like you much on Sunday.”

Jeff tried to brush it off saying, “It won’t be too bad.”

When the sun rose Sunday morning, Peter woke easily. The past few weeks he’d found that Sundays were his most productive. Last week, he finally mowed the lawn, and now his garden began to look more natural and lively. His house was becoming more than just a symbol to others.

The farmer’s market downtown was busy since it was the last of the year until next May. Peter bought some organic vegetables and fresh sweet corn. While exiting the square, he caught sight of a booth selling large, refined rocks of varying styles. Many of the stones were limestone, native to the area, which Peter had learned at a local seminar years ago. They were inscribed with poems and some with bible verses. As Peter strolled through the booth, one particular piece of limestone caught his eye: a 10-inch wide, polished oval with the words *“The Best Friends Are Planted”* written across the top. Upon further inspection, Peter noted a shape within the rock itself, something he’d seen in pieces of bare limestone at the city museum. He concluded the discolored blob was indeed a crinoid, a fossilized stem from prehistoric seaweed. Without glancing at the price, he happily grabbed the gem and brought it to the counter.

After placing the momento in front of the Delphiniums, Peter captured a photo of the triumphant arrangement on his iPhone, and he smiled proudly once again at the plot.

At two, Peter cleaned up to go meet Jeff at Charlie’s. He threw on an old San Diego Chargers t-shirt that he’d been given for Christmas years ago but never worn and grabbed the backpack holding his bike lock as he left the house. Approaching the bar on his bicycle, he heard cheers from inside, but all he could see were the dimmed neon signs and a distant television in the back of the bar. Peter locked his bike to a rail downtown and went in to meet the others.

Despite the brightness outside, the bar was able to maintain the dark atmosphere inside that its patrons had come to expect. Peter acknowledged the hostess telling her, “Hi there. I, um, think my friends already got a table. Mind if I go check?” The apathetic young woman gladly motioned with her had for Peter to help himself.

Peter began walking and turning his head to make sure he searched every table in the bar. Near the back of the bar, he saw only Garrington locals, most clad with Chicago Bears attire. Standing in the center of the small bar, his heart sank, and he had an unfamiliar feeling like he was on stage. While imagining all the critical things the locals were saying about him, he noticed a sign in the back of the room which read “Additional Seating.” Peter hurried toward the sign and through another doorway to find an additional room with a long center table for large groups, booths lining the walls, and a football game projected against the nearside wall. He loosened the uneasy fist he’d been holding when he spotted Evan, Jeff, and two others in a booth near the center of the room across from the projected screen. Hurrying to the table, Peter stood in front of the group with the blue line denoting scores projected on his forehead as he greeted everyone. Evan, being the first to have seen him, replied loudly, “Hey,” hoping that Jeff would hear. Jeff said more quietly, “Hey, Pete,” pausing briefly to glance across the table to see Kyle and Anthony who were statuesque. Jeff continued, telling Peter, “If you want a drink, the waiter isn’t coming by very often. The bar’s probably your best bet.”

“Alright,” Peter said naively, “You guys want anything while I’m up?” The men all responded saying no thanks or shaking their heads dully. As Peter approached the doorway, he overheard one of the men goran, “Goddammit, Jeff.”

He ordered a Gin and Tonic from the bar and waited to be served. On the screen behind the bartender, he saw that Green Bay was winning fourteen to six, and he could tell by the advertising on the stadium walls that the game was in Green Bay.

When he arrived back at the table, Peter was greeted by silence, and he did nothing to avoid walking in front of the projector. “Alright, so what’ I miss, “ he said sitting down adjacent to Anthony in the booth.

Making room for Peter, Anthony replied smartly, “Well the whole first quarter to start.” Peter accepted the answer, and the men watched the following play intently: incomplete pass to Randall Cobb. As they replayed the down showing the receiver having blown past the defender but a lousy throw, Peter asked pointing at the receiver, “Is he left-handed?” Everyone looked to Kyle expecting him to know the answer since he followed the team. Kyle said disgustfully, “Why the hell would I know a thing like that?”

Peter responded, “Oh, I just read that often players lead off with the foot of their corresponding dominant hand.” No one responded, and Peter was surprised they didn’t want to hear more. The men instead sat focused on the next play, and Kyle kept his head facing downward for a second.

As the game continued, Peter attempted to watch and maintain interest though with little success. At halftime, Evan, Kyle, and Anthony all made their way to the bar. Peter let them out of the booth, then scooted in towards the wall. Leaning over the table, he asked Jeff quietly, “Do you hang out with that Kyle guy much?”

Jeff hesitated, “Yeah… I mean we all get together and watch football here and there.” He drank from his glass, hopeful that would end the conversation, but Peter continued, “Gotcha. I don’t know him well, but he’s always been a dick for some reason.”

Jeff did his best to lie saying, “Oh well, I think he’s just like that to everyone. Ya know?” Peter nodded, hoping for more information but reluctant to prod. Staring at the halftime commentators on screen, Peter sat thoughtful only briefly before asking, “How much football would you say you usually watch?”

Shrugging, Jeff replied, “I don’t know. Usually most of the day on Sunday, then Monday night and sometimes Thursdays too.”

“Ok, so how many games per weekend on average would you say?”

Throwing his arm in mild annoyance, Jeff said, “Jeez, Pete…” He put his hand on his forehead, “Maybe like seven or eight games.”

“Alright,” Peter pulled out a napkin and pen from the condiments tray. “So the total weekend is 48 hours. Hopefully, you’re asleep for at least sixteen of those hours, so your free time is about thirty-two hours per weekend.” Jeff began to watch anxiously toward the door, making sure the others weren’t hearing them. Peter rambled, “If each football game is two-and-a-half hours long, and you watch eight a weekend, that’s twenty hours of your time gone, which leaves you with about twelve hours to spend eating, showering, and doing any other personal business.”

Peter looked up from the napkin to see Jeff’s face staring into him. He paused, finally seeing the frustration emanating from the other side of the table. Jeff answered impatiently, “What are you getting at Pete?”

Just then Kyle’s shadow interrupted the conversation and both men greeted the others. Kyle motioned to Anthony saying sarcastically, “By all means, after you.” Anthony smiled insincerely. Once they’d all sat down, Anthony pointed to the napkin and asked, “Just some mid-afternoon math to keep you sharp there, Pete?”

Jeff broke in, “Hey, football’s back on.” They all looked back at the projector, but Anthony persisted, “What were you calculating there?”

Peter held up the napkin to the group and presented his findings, “We were just estimating how much time Jeff spends watching games every week.”

Kyle rolled his eyes, and Evan smirked. Anthony continued, “And how is that?”

Pointing to the napkin, Peter said, “Most of Sunday so about twenty hours or about half the weekend.”

“Oh, that’s pretty modest there. Isn’t it, Jeffy-boy?!” Evan laughed with Anthony, and Jeff let a smile. Anthony continued to entertain, “Did you include College Football Saturdays? That’s at least three more games right there.”

Peter enjoyed the positive reception of the topic, so he did the math, “Well if that’s the case, then the grand total comes to twenty-seven-and-a-half hours out of thirty-two free hours in the weekend. So you have four-and-a-half hours of actual, *useful* time.”

The men all looked to one another questioningly. “What do you mean ‘useful time,’” Anthony asked, looking at the others and holding up his glass, “This is the most useful time of my day!” Kyle hit his glass with Anthony’s in agreement but tried to continue acting like he was watching the game.

Defensively, Peter then asked, “How exactly is watching a game whose outcome has no direct affect on your life whatsoever ‘useful?’”

And Anthony, now obviously joking at Peter’s expense, argued loudly, “Stress-relief.” Evan smiled, and Kyle laughed audibly having given up on watching the current play on screen.

Peter didn’t laugh though. Jeff stared intently at Peter as if to say “Just let if go, Pete.” But Peter, waiting for the laughter to subside, then continued, “I’m just saying that instead of pouring your time and money into football, you could be improving yourselves or exploring the world, or something. You know?” As he monitored the table, he no longer saw colleagues but a pack of wolves. He tried to explain himself further, “I mean you could be learning something now, or helping someone else, or even just hiking.”

Jeff now rested his head on his hand. Evan held his glass to his mouth waiting anxiously. Anthony looked to Kyle who’s bright-red face now looked through Anthony to the nuisance against the wall. Slowly and loudly, Kyle began, “Well then, maybe you should quit wasting time, and take a fucking hike.”

Evan looked across the table shocked, while Anthony hid his laughter by facing the projector screen. Peter’s heart sank as he looked at them worriedly, trying to think of a witty retort, but all he was able to focus on was the hurt he was currently feeling. Looking to Jeff as if in need of help, Peter watched Jeff looked back with his palms open to suggest he didn’t know what to do.

No one spoke, and they all watched the football game playing on the wall. The third quarter ended quietly at Charlie’s. When a commercial for Papa John’s Pizza came on the screen, Peter timidly asked Anthony, “You mind if I get out to use the restroom?” Anthony nudged Kyle to stand, and they both shuffled out. Following close behind them, Peter scooted his way out. Watching Peter stand up, Jeff noticed the backpack in his left hand as he walked out of the dark bar into the afternoon. Evan looked questioningly to Jeff who sighed audibly.

The first frost of the fall bit the air that night, and the only sounds heard by the small, green house on Willow Street were the desolate weep that hadn’t been heard in months.

**VII**

Two weeks passed before Halloween weekend arrived, but the holiday seemed to evoke a different kind of excitement than Jeff had remembered. Word around the office was much less about parties and bars and had instead come full circle as most of the employees discussed where their children would be trick-or-treating. Evan told Jeff that he was probably going to take it easy for the weekend, so Jeff emailed Anthony who hadn’t immediately responded.

Later in the day, Jeff felt the light to his left blocked and heard a loud voice bark, “You even doing anything up here, Hansen, or just acting like it?” Kyle stood, smiling at Jeff who was happy to see him.

“What are you doing up here, big guy?”

“Oh, had to drop some reports off to the boss lady,” Kyle pointed to a large corner office at the end of the hall.

“Gotcha,” Jeff replied. “Say, we were just talking a little. What are your plans for Halloween night?”

Kyle groaned, “Well, Lisa’s cousin’s invited us to dinner at their house and to trick-or-treat with their kids who are a few years older than Nathan.” Jeff nodded, and Kyle continued dejectedly, “Yeah… She says I’ve been going out too much lately and not spending enough time with them, so I may not be able to make it out as much.”

“Damn. Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, well that’s probably what’s best I guess,” Kyle smiled and dismissed himself saying he had some work to finish before the weekend.

Having not yet heard from Anthony and imagining himself spending the evening in his boxers in the apartment gave Jeff enough anxiety that he began to resort to drastic measures:

From: Jeff Hansen

To: Peter Trenton

Sent: Oct 31st, 2014, 3:39PM

Hey Petey,

What are your plans for the weekend, buddy?

Jeff Hansen x2242

When Peter hadn’t responded immediately, Jeff began saving his work for Monday and thinking of ways to occupy his free time. Maybe he would finally finish the book that had been on his dresser for the past few months, or he could always catch up on sleep. Just then, Anthony finally replied,

From: Anthony Giangarra

To: Jeff Hansen

Sent: Oct 31st, 2014, 4:01PM

Hey. Sorry, it’s been a shitty day down here, dude. Gonna need a drink tonight. You down to hit the town a bit? Maybe stop by Charlie’s?

Jeff’s heart lightened as he gladly agreed and another email shot through,

From: Peter Trenton

To: Jeff Hansen

Sent: Oct 31st, 2014, 4:03PM

Hey Jeff,

Hope you’re well. I’d love to hang out, but I actually think Amanda and I may stay in this weekend. She’s not feeling too hot.

Happy Halloween

-Peter

Relieved at the declination, Jeff neglected to respond as he restarted his computer for the weekend and put on his coat.

The air began to nip at Jeff’s cheeks every time he stepped outside, and the evenings had become pitch black with daylight saving time having turned the clocks back just recently. As he left the large, ten-story Farvico building, Jeff felt a contentedness knowing that he’d found a companion for the night but lacked the excitement that he’d felt the previously.

As he buttoned his shirt and put on his pants, Jeff asked himself why he was going out and why he forced himself to do this weekend after weekend. In reality, he would show up at Charlie’s, see the same bartender, watch the same TV screen, possibly even play darts on the same old board, but he knew he was going to go again. He would go this weekend; he would go next weekend; and he would likely go a majority of the weekends in the coming months. Though he wouldn’t allow himself to come to the realization, he knew that there lied in his mind a naïve dream that one of these times would be different. It would be just like it had been when he was in school. He’d meet a girl, joke with her about something, and she would be flattered. Maybe they would dance or get a table alone. Then hopefully, when he finally asked, she would agree to come home with him that night or at least agree to meet with him again.

**VIII**

The sun had risen on Sunday morning but the light outside was dim as it struggled to bounce through the clouds. Peter thought about getting up but struggled to convince himself to do so until 10:45. He walked slowly through the silent house and began brewing a pot of coffee without knowing exactly why. He sat at his kitchen table looking out over the backyard. Pearly frost still sat upon some of the dying grass. He looked closer as he thought he’d seen something on the tips of the black-eyed susans whose remaining petals unflatteringly draped toward the ground.

The coffee maker sounded loudly demanding attention, and Peter filled his mug and dumped the rest down the sink through the mountain of unkempt dishes. Holding his mug with two hands and leaning his backside against the counter apathetically, he remembered the night before: that he’d been seen after just having talked himself down. Burning his tongue, he drank the steaming coffee and anxiously imagined work on Monday. Jeff would find out, but Peter didn’t know exactly what would be said. After contemplating a lie that might explain, Peter hung his head, too lazy to devise a plausible story.

A breeze blew loudly enough against the glass sliding door that it drew his attention. Looking to the door and then through it, Peter saw again what he’d dreaded initially: the black-eyed susans had turned brown and droopy, and even the Marigolds were beginning to lose their color. Opening the glass door, Peter stepped onto the cold concrete patio, defeated. The glass door hadn’t deceived him, and he somberly confirmed what he’d seen from the kitchen. Peter dazedly set his coffee mug down on the table out back and trudged inside.

After sitting on the couch in silence for an hour, he stood up abruptly and began getting dressed. The quiet green house watched as Peter sped away in the red Audi that afternoon.

Though the clouds still cast a light gray over the scene, Peter felt lighter as he walked through a rocky hillside that he’d found while looking for fossils in the riverbed last summer. The sky became darker as the sun hung lower in the sky. Arriving at his destination, he ascended a large rock formation perched high over a valley of sediment on the banks of the Nishnahinu River.

Peter stood atop the rock cliff and looked far down into the riverbed, then into the water, and finally to the aged limestone on the opposite bank. The sun momentarily peeked through a slit of cloudless sky as it passed the horizon and proceeded to paint the sky golden red. The water flowed brown in truth but pink in reflection. Billions of particles have run across the same white stones for thousands of years, all following the same meaningless path that would lead them to what is now the Hammenhook Dam just thirty miles south. Hammenhook was no conscious goal of theirs, just an inevitable end to the flow that carried the molecules until their eventual evaporation. But some of them would never make it to the dam. No, some would divert into a stagnant pool on a sand bar, some would be ingested by the deer and the birds, and a special few would miraculously stay atop the chaos just long enough that the sunlight would alleviate them from gravity right there in the Nishnahinu. And as they floated in the air to be pushed by the wind, the muddy, brown water below would continue its journey to the dam, never to think about it’s own demise let alone that of it’s predecessors.

Wiping his eyes in the now dimly-lit evening, Peter shakily made his way down from the rocks and back to the red Audi parked by the highway.

**IX**

Jeff arrived at work groggily and reluctantly the following Monday. He sorted his emails and began planning the projects he would tackle that day. Evan greeted him as he showed up minutely late, “Hey Man, have a good weekend?”

“Sure, Anthony and I just kind of hung out. I guess Kyle’s old lady says he’s got to stop going out so much… How was Pennsylvania?”

Unenthusiastically, Evan responded, “It was fun. Always good to see the family, but never want to be back for too long.”

The two stopped talking and began tapping their keyboards in silence. At 10:30, Jeff spied Kyle walking towards them about as briskly as the large man could manage. Jeff sat back in his chair smirking upon his approach, “Back to see the boss lady again?” He paused then joked, “You aren’t getting canned are you?”

Kyle stopped at Jeff’s desk and smiled our of courtesy, maintaining an abnormal demeanor of purpose as he asked, “Boys, how are we this morning?”

Both responded that they were good and busy. Jeff could tell Kyle had come to talk about something, so he finished, “What’s up with you, big guy?”

Kyle hesitated saying, “Oh, I’m good. Had a pretty quiet weekend at home and put the boat away for winter. Do anything fun for Halloween?”

Evan explained that he had just stayed at home with his family, and Jeff replied, “Yeah, Anthony and I went to Charlie’s, and it was pretty much the usual crowd. Good time though. How was   
trick-or-treating? You pull that Jimmy Kimmel trick on Nathan?”

Laughing loudly, Kyle said, “Nah, nothing like that. It was all fine, but guess whose house we ended up stopping by.”

Looking to both of them and realizing they wouldn’t actually guess, Kyle broke in disgustedly, “Nathan and Sarah waltzed right up and rang the doorbell at Trenton’s shithole house.” Both men reacted silently, and Jeff was anxious to hear more. So Kyle continued ranting, “Yeah, and he didn’t even have any candy for the kids. It’s like he was oblivious as to why someone would be stopping by his house on Halloween.”

Mildly uncomfortable, Jeff jumped in, “Oh yeah. He said he was staying in with his girlfriend. You catch of glimpse of her at all?”

Kyle’s one eyebrow perked, “Girlfriend?” He said surprised, “He didn’t look like he’d had any girlfriends last night…. Now I didn’t bother walking up to say ‘Hi’ or anything, but from what I saw the guy looked pretty beat up. His eyes were swollen and his nose was running.” Kyle looked to the ceiling momentarily as he often did while problem solving, “If he did have a lady, I’d say she left him, because he was not in good shape.”

“Huh,” Jeff said wonderingly. There was a brief silence, and Kyle got up from sitting on the desk and said, “Yeah well, anyway that was my weekend.” He paused as he stretched, “I better get back to it. You boys have yourselves a good time up here.”

Kyle left and Evan resumed typing, but Jeff continued to ponder momentarily before he resumed his morning routine.

**X**

Later that morning, Jeff had just returned from the restroom when he received an email,

From: Peter Trenton

To: Jeff Hansen

Sent: Nov 3rd, 2014, 9:28 AM

Hey Jeff,

Hope you had a nice weekend. You have some time for lunch today?

Thanks,

PT

Jeff minimized the email quickly, so Evan wouldn’t ask about it. He replied shortly after to agree.

At noon, Jeff walked to Peter’s desk across the building. Peter was sitting in his usual spot, but his skin looked pale and the bags under his eyes were low and heavy. As Jeff approached, Peter was typing an email long enough that it spanned the entire monitor. Stopping behind him, Jeff tapped Peter’s shoulder saying, “Hey buddy.”

Peter jumped abruptly, but looked to Jeff saying, “Oh, Jeez. Sorry, Jeff.” He paused as he stood up from his desk to ask, “Should we just go to Mama’s Café across the street?” Jeff agreed, and the men made their way to the elevator.

Walking across Market Street, Jeff noticed that Peter was abnormally quiet. He tried some small talk, “Pretty nice day for winter. Doesn’t it usually snow by now?”

Peter kept his eyes focused on the white painted crosswalk below him and said factually, “It can, but the first snow usually comes in either late November or Early December.” Jeff nodded in understanding as they approached Mama’s Café in silence.

The two sat at a small table near the wall. Kathy, better known as Mama, addressed them quickly after, and both men settled with water only to start. Peter took his first drink and Jeff asked, “So how was your weekend? Do anything fun?”

Setting his glass down, Peter sighed, “Well… It wasn’t great, man.” Peter paused as he grabbed the bridge of his nose in what appeared to be pain. “I just stayed at home all weekend really.” Jeff’s shoulder’s tightened, and there was a mild break before he cut in, “Oh I’m sorry to hear that, Pete. You doing alright?”

“I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately… Been pretty down on myself. Ya know?”

Jeff waited for more information, and Peter clenched his hands together on the table between them. Peter looked at Jeff nervously, and said finally, “I guess I just don’t know what I’m doing here.” Jeff tilted his head, and Peter continued, “I work fifty hours a week, and in the free time that I do have, I’ve been sleeping or laying in bed which isn’t the worst thing in the world, but I mean, I always thought there would be more...” Peter looked at Jeff eagerly.

Jeff sat completely still. He did his best, “Yeah I feel that sometimes, but it’s probably just a phase. I mean, I think we all go through tough times. Back in college, I went to a counselor, just to talk about things, and I thought it helped quite a bit.

Peter shook his head in defeat and looked at the table, “Yeah… Maybe I’ll do that.”

Jeff could tell there was something being withheld. “Well how’s everything with Amanda? Have you told her about any of this?”

The door rang as new customers entered. Peter’s face cringed as he held his head in his hands. He muttered, “It’s about Amanda.” He set his hands back down on the table and declared, “Amanda was never-“

Just then, a man interrupted as he stood next to the table and set his hand on Jeff’s shoulder, “Well look who’s here.”

Jeff looked up, distracted, “Hey there, Anthony.”

Anthony pointed to one of the extra seats at the table and asked, “Mind if I join you?” Jeff glanced at Peter who shrugged apathetically. Jeff motioned to Anthony to sit, and he did. Peter was silent the rest of the meal aside from the few questions Anthony directed towards him. The men ate their sandwiches and returned to Farvico shortly after.

**XI**

Wednesday was calm for Jeff, and he’d completed most of his work by lunch. Pulling out his cell phone, he began to think about what he’d do the rest of the day when a voice on the intercom called out, “Jeff Hansen please report to room 513. Jeff Hansen, 513.”

Evan looked questioningly at Jeff who shrugged in surprise. He took the elevator to the fifth floor, all the while asking himself if he’d done anything wrong the past couple weeks. Maybe he’d made a mistake on a project that he completed recently. 513 was the Jim Nance’s office. Jeff had never met Mr. Nance, the founder and CEO of Farvico, but he’d seen pictures and heard quotes. He knocked and heard, “Come in.”

The door opened with a light push and Jeff saw the men: a Farvico manager he’d never met, Mr. Nance who sat at his large walnut desk, and a police officer who stood next to Mr. Nance. Mr. Nance asked, “Hi. Jeff Hansen?”

Jeff replied quickly, “Yes sir.”

Mr. Nance stood and held out his hand, “Jim Nance, Jeff. Nice to meet you.” He was a thin, old man in a blue suit. He asked Jeff to sit, so he did. Holding the arms of his chair, Jeff listened, “Jeff, thanks for stopping by. Just to let you know why we’re all here, one of our programmers, Peter Trenton, seems to have hurt himself pretty badly yesterday and some of his coworkers said you’d known him pretty well. Is that right?

Jeff’s heart was pounding. Nodding, he said, “Yeah, Peter and I ate lunch together a few times.”

“Ok, good. Well this here is Officer Calvin Reed.” He motioned to the short, blonde man in uniform, “and he’s got a couple of questions for you, and he should be able to answer any questions you might have about Peter as well.”

Officer Reed approached Jeff and shook his hand saying “Nice to meet you, Jeff.” Jeff reciprocated the greeting and sat back down. Leaning against the walnut desk, Officer Reed began, “So Jeff, just to give you a little background here, Peter was found about fifteen miles east of town on a bank of the Nishnahinu River. It seems he’d suffered a big fall and a pretty serious spinal injury among other things. Judging by the frostbite in his fingers and toes, the doctors are saying he must have been there for around 18-24 hours when a couple of hunters found him yesterday evening… Now, Peter’s still alive, but he’s in a non-responsive state in the hospital.”

Jeff felt a heaviness in his chest though his heart continued racing. Officer Reed cleared his throat as he assessed the shock in Jeff’s face, “I know this must be hard to hear, but we just need to gather as much information on the accident as possible. Would you be ok answering a few questions about Peter?”

Jeff nodded.

“Great. Thank you.” He pulled out a pen and notepad, “So, just to start, when was the last you’d seen Peter?”

“Would have been Monday for lunch. We went across the street here to Mama’s.”

“Alright,” he paused to write. “And did Peter mention anything about what he might be doing later that evening?”

“No, we mostly talked about the weather, and he was talking about his girlfriend. I think she may have broken up with him or something.”

Officer Reed looked at Jeff intensely, “Girlfriend? Do you know her name?”

“Her name was Amanda,” Jeff waited. “I never really met her, but Pete talked about her all the time.”

Officer Reed finished writing and bit his lip, “What about her work? Do you know what she did for a living? Or maybe someone else who might know how to contact her?”

“I think Peter said she was an artist. He said that he’d met her at the farmer’s market last summer.”

When Jeff had given the minimal information about Amanda that he could, Officer Reed thanked him for the time and explained how he would be speaking with Peter’s family later this afternoon when they arrived in town. He said he would ask them if they had any way to contact Amanda to get the full story. Before Jeff was dismissed, Officer Reed finished, “Jeff, thanks again for stopping in. I’ll be sure to reach out if we have any further questions. This all seems to me to just have been a tragic, tragic accident… But just to clarify before I leave, did Peter ever say *anything* to you that may have led you to believe he might have planned to end his life?”

Jeff inhaled deeply and held it as he shook his head, “No, not at all.”

**XII**

When Jeff got home that night, he took off his clothes and sat on the couch in silence. He thought about his conversation with the officer that day and then about Peter. He thought about how Peter had looked and their conversation at Mama’s. At 9PM, he finally convinced himself to eat a bowl of cereal. Maybe it was an accident.

Jeff arrived to work on Thursday with red, baggy eyes. He logged in quietly, silent until the middle of the day when Evan leaned over, “Any plans for the weekend?”

Jeff hadn’t heard him initially and finally processed the question, “Uh, no. Probably just laying low. You?”

Evan explained that he might go see a play in town with a girl he’d met online. Jeff responded mostly with nods. Evan asked, “You ok, man? You seem out of it a bit.” Jeff shrugged off the concern assuring his friend that he was fine and focused back on his monitor.

Later in the afternoon, Jeff had simply been moving his mouse cursor in circles for what seemed to be hours when he saw Kyle who must have had to deliver something to his boss. Jeff gave a half-hearted, toothless smile and Kyle an awkward wave. “So have you guys heard?” he asked somberly.

Evan looked at Kyle then to Jeff for a clue before asking anxiously, “No. What about?”

Nodding slowly, Jeff confessed, “Yeah, I found out yesterday.”

“How’d you find out?”

“They called me in to ask me if I knew anything about what happened.”  
  
Evan broke in impatiently, “What the hell happened?”

Kyle explained to Evan, “It’s our old friend, Trenton. Seems he had a fall near the river, kind of near the Swenson’s old barnhouse,” a reference which was lost on both Jeff and Evan.

Jeff finished the story, “Yeah, they told me yesterday that he had a back injury. Said he can’t walk or even move his arms.”

Evan sighed, “Jeez. That’s crazy.” Kyle crossed his arms while they all paused.

“So, what’d they ask you about in there?” Kyle asked.

“They just wanted to know if he’d said anything about what he was doing that night and if I knew anything about it… I told them I hadn’t talked to him in a couple days.”

Kyle nodded as he tried to make sense of it all. Finally, he said, “Well obviously he wasn’t my favorite person, but you don’t wish something like that on anybody.” Evan and Jeff agreed quietly.

**XII**

After work that night, Jeff drove by the Garrington Community Hospital and slowed down near the entrance only to speed away without stopping. He did this Friday night and Saturday once in the morning then again in the afternoon. He felt an obligation to stop, but every time he saw the hospital entrance, he just sped past.

On Monday, an email greeted Jeff at work upon his arrival:

From: Jim Nance

To: Jeff Hansen

Sent: Nov. 10th, 2014, 7:01 AM

Hello Jeff,

I hope you are well.

We received a team line call from the hospital over the weekend. Peter’s mother is here and has heard from the police. She is staying in town and said she’d like to meet you. I called her at the hospital and let her know you would be reaching out sometime this week. Can you please give her a call when you get a chance? I think she just wants someone to talk to about it all. The number I called was (618) 558-2324.

Thank you, Jeff.

Jim Nance

CEO and Founder

Farvico Software Products

6732 S. Main Street

Fort Garrington, IL 67178

Jeff sighed loudly and held his head in his hands as he felt the obligation to both reply to the email and abide by its orders. Glancing over, Evan saw the reaction but elected not to comment. When Jeff returned to the keyboard, the replied:

From: Jeff Hansen

To: Jim Nance

Sent: Nov. 8th, 2014, 7:01 AM

Good Morning, Mr. Nance,

I’ll be sure to call Mrs. Trenton and get in touch with her shortly.

Thanks,

Jeff Hansen

He sat back in his chair and held his hands together while he slouched. He plugged the hospital number into his phone but hesitated to call. He looked at Evan who stared intensely at his screen so as not to be disturbed. Jeff stood up abruptly, phone in hand. He walked to the elevator and rode to the ground floor. The receptionist smiled at him when they made eye contact, but he looked away quickly as he pressed the green “dial” icon and walked into the winter cold in the morning darkness.

When the tone began to sound, Jeff’s immediate reaction was to pull the phone down and press “End,” but instead he waited and paced in front of the main entryway. “Good morning. Garrington Community Hospital. This is Tammy.”

“Um, Hi Tammy. This is Jeff Hansen calling…” Jeff paused awkwardly.

“Hello Jeff. And how can we help you this morning? Were you hoping to schedule an appointment to see a doctor?”

Jeff responded quickly, “No, I’d, uh, actually like to speak with a patient, or actually his guest. Should be under the name Trenton.”

The receptionist’s voice deepened, “Oh, you’re calling regarding Mr. Trenton?” She paused and Jeff questioned whether or not to answer, but she continued, “Jeff, I’m going to check and see if the family is still here. Did you have someone in particular that you needed to reach?”

“Yes, Mrs. Trenton, the patients mother, if she’s available.”

“Of course, Jeff. Let me just place you on a brief hold and I’ll see if she’s available.”

As Jeff listened to the bland, classical music play on phone, he bit a fingernail and considered walking back inside. The music halted and there was a pause followed by an obvious fumbling of the phone. Another pause and then Jeff heard a high-pitched, trembling voice call out, “Hello?”

Jeff spoke quickly, “Hello, ma’am. Is this Mrs. Trenton?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Hi, Mrs. Trenton. This is Jeff Hansen calling. I’m a coworker or your son’s. I heard that you had called in and wanted to see if maybe I could, um,” he hesitated and he questioned whether he really had to go to the hospital, “come stop by sometime and see you and Peter.”

Mrs. Trenton let a small whimper but welcomed Jeff, “Oh hi, Jeff. Yes that would be great. I would really appreciate it and I think Peter would as well.”

“Ok sure. Is there a time that works best for you at all?” There was a brief silence, and Jeff continued, “Maybe I could drop by these evening after work if that works for you all.”

“Sure, Jeff. That sounds good. We’ll be here all day,” she sniffled. “We’ll see you then.”

Jeff said quietly, “Alright, I’ll drop by then. Looking forward to speaking with you.”

“Thank you, Jeff… Buh bye.”

**XIII**

When the clock struck five that afternoon, Jeff felt a ball of lead in his stomach. If he never showed up to meet with Mrs. Trenton, she would call Mr. Nance. Mr. Nance would be livid. Maybe Jeff would quit and begin looking for a job again.

His shoulders kept themselves high and tense, ready for anything. When he arrived home, he leaned against the counter and drank some milk from the carton as he came to terms with the fact that he would have to go to the hospital. He undressed and threw on a pair of jeans and a polo.

It was dark already, and it had become the time of year when Farvico employees spent almost all of the gray daylight within the confines of their respective buildings. Jeff was shivering even through his coat: the only one that he owned and one that any Garrington locals would have referred to as a light jacket. The rain tapped on the windshield as Jeff drove the three minutes to the hospital across the pitch-black town.

Jeff sat in his car after parking in the hospital lot. He gathered himself for a couple minutes with his head against the steering wheel, planning how to make the visit a short one. Finally, he opened the car and stood up. He winced and kept his head down, making his way to the large, heavily-lit hospital doors. The sliding door opened as he paused and entered. The room was bright inside, but the faces weren’t. Jeff saw a woman asleep against the window, and a man sat and watched the silent news on TV while nervously tapping the arm of his chair. Jeff approached the lone woman at the counter. She said, “Good evening. Are you visiting someone?”

“Yes, the name should be under Trenton,” he said, shakily. “Patient’s name is Peter, but I’m uh, supposed to speak with his mother…” Jeff wanted to continue but realized he’d already said too much. The woman held up a finger as she rang a phone number.

She said very calm and practiced as she heard an answer, “Hello Mrs. Trenton? You have a visitor.” She paused and looked to Jeff with her hand over the receiver, “What was your name, sir?”

“Jeff.”

“His name is Jeff,” the woman conveyed awkwardly. She waited, then hung up, and turned to Jeff, “She’ll be right up to see you.”

Jeff paced the front room back to the door once, and he heard the sound of footsteps, small but purposeful. He turned and saw what must have been Mrs. Trenton: a small, thin woman with short, brown hair and glasses. Jeff might have mistaken her for Peter himself had he been a little farther away and she a little taller. Jeff went to meet her at the front of the hallway.

“Hi… Jeff?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jeff replied and his voice cracked. He extended a hand, “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Trenton.”

She smiled sadly, “Thank you so much for coming to visit. Peter had told me all about you.” Tears began to drip from her already red, swollen eyes. She motioned for Jeff to follow.

The hospital hallways smelt like those of his elementary school with a hint of rubbing alcohol. They turned the corner to a separate pink hallway with a sign that said “Intensive Care.” He peered into a room that was empty and then passed another with an elderly man alone in a room. Jeff listened to the old man’s heart monitor as they passed. Mrs. Trenton shuffled quickly, going directly to a room at the end of the hall. Grabbing the door handle, she leaned back to Jeff and said, “He’s been pretty tired lately, so we may not stay too long.”

Mrs. Trenton began to open the door and Jeff pulled it back fully. The room was white and empty aside from a TV in the corner near the ceiling and the bed. Peter lay on the bed in the dark room under the white sheet and wearing a blue hospital gown. His eyes were barely open, and the way his head propped up the pillow made him look even more out-of-shape than he was. Peter’s mother walked directly to the bed and sat. She began petting Peter’s hair, “Peter…” she sniffled, “You have a visitor.” She looked back up at Jeff and smiled. “Jeff’s here to see you.”

Jeff watched as Peter’s face remained dull and blank. He looked pathetic, lying there unable to talk or eat or display any emotion. Jeff stared at Peter until he realized that Mrs. Trenton had been expecting him to say something. Jeff approached his friend and stood next to the bed silently. He felt a pain in his throat and he reached for Peter’s languid hand. “Hey buddy. You’re gonna make it through all this,” he muttered as he cringed. Mrs. Trenton started to cry again, and Jeff motioned to her that he would be outside the door.

Closing the door behind him, Jeff wiped his eyes and sat down. Mrs. Trenton followed a minute later. She sat in the seat next to Jeff and put a hand on his shoulder, “Thank you so much for stopping by.” She said frailly. “Peter might not show it, but I know he appreciates it.” Mrs. Trenton paused and saw that Jeff was still deep in thought. “You know, Peter talked about you often… he said that you were one of the few coworkers he had who he could really relate to.” She sniffled, and continued, “He never was great at making friends… I remember when he was 4 years-old having leave work early to pick him up from the daycare because he threw fits when the other kids didn’t want to do things his was.” She finished slowly, “He was always just his own bird.”

Jeff stopped crying. He knew Peter hadn’t had any friends in Garrington and was surprised that Mrs. Trenton seemed to be aware of the same. She saw the thought in Jeff’s eyes and inquired, “What about this Amanda Peter told me about? Did you ever meet her?”

He knew she would ask but knew he couldn’t tell her the truth, “No, I uh, never did… Pete did talk about her quite a bit. I think he said she was an artist.”

Mrs. Trenton nodded, sadly accepting the information as she too understood. But she made herself believe, “Well I think the police are going through Peter’s cell phone to try to find her number there. Other than that, I don’t know if we’ll ever meet her…”

Jeff concluded that Peter must have gotten his hopefulness from his mother. He ended the conversation with Mrs. Trenton, offering to help in any way he could and gave her his business card so she could reach him. She thanked Jeff again, this time with a hug, and Jeff wondered how such a small woman could muster such a strong embrace.   
  
Sitting in his freezing car, Jeff cried loudly, hitting his head against the seatback. His sadness wasn’t that of pity for Peter or Mrs. Trenton. It wasn’t empathetic nor understanding. Jeff felt a pain unique to himself. Peter had given him the responsibility. He asked Jeff for help, only to be ignored and forgotten. Peter had even known that Jeff wasn’t particularly fond of him, yet he had no other outlet. Jeff knew what Peter was going to tell him about Amanda in the coffee shop that day, and he was glad not to hear it.

**XIV**

Blue and grays danced in through the window like pictures of galaxies he’d seen online. He heard voices, familiar voices. They continued to calm him from the anxiety he’d been feeling for period of time he could not measure. A steady beeping continued behind his head, and a creaking door opened.

“Hi Sweetie, it’s me again.” Peter felt a weight next to him now, and something brushed through his hair. He remembered being sick as a child, and upon the same greeting, he would elicit a cough or hum to encourage the attention. But this time, as had been the case for weeks, he sat still.

The voice continued, trembling, “Peter, I just spoke with your friend from work.” She paused, though Peter was eager to hear more. She continued, “Your friend, Jeff, said that everyone is wishing you well.” She paused as she wiped away a running tear, “I picked these for you. They weren’t doing well outside.” Something was raised and blocked the light on the ceiling. The light returned soon after, and his mother’s voice grew weaker, “They said they’ve been trying to contact Amanda, but they haven’t heard from her yet.”

When his mother looked away toward the door, Peter finally made out what had been placed on the windowsill. The beeping in the room grew faster, and he quickly forgot about the voice or the colors in the window. In that moment, Peter remembered his garden: how he’d loved the Marigolds. But like his mother, Peter knew they would not survive the winter.