**DIMMER**

**Our land was orphaned, given up into the murk.** It happened slow, falling in, an ebb that wouldn’t end. I was just a girl.

At first it was a feeling shared in months of stillness, stalling out. Soft dread seeped in and tapped against my chest, like something wrong had slipped into the world, or something right spilled out. Distant air turned spotted and filled with lint. There was the buzzing, then the crusting in. A lull crawling through the inches of every place I had ever been. The whole town was surrounded. Tumbling under. Eventually it touched me too.

At some point during those final regurgitated days it found its way in.

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**Old light packed tight with grit and grain**. The dust from our former lives. If only it would gleam for me, I might find a way to rearrange—**reclaim**.

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**Back then, in early dwindling:**

Bil and Mom and me, up in our house on the hill pressed tight against the woods. Our town below us by a dirt road. The sun going blind in the kiltering slab of sky, a tiny marble now, just a cataract.

In the mornings I take Bil down the road to the school, through the trees and past our car, swallowed on its side in the roots and rocks where Mom left it when she stopped going in to work. Afterward she said she would be around to cook more for us, and now she cooks so much that every day we leave our house with aching stomachs and backpacks stuffed taut with tuna sandwiches.

It hasn’t settled in for us yet, this whole other kind of thing. It’s what’s underneath the sunset before it gives up, even as you think it can stay this way forever, always in the twilight. And right now I could feel that I want it to. It’s been past a year now under the dim glint of sky rashed over in shadow. Despite what we have already lost, all that’s decayed, it’s not an ugly thing to watch the sun die even as it rises. Watch it set deeper by the day. Through all the ugly things this dumb feeling will stay with me, still afterward in hard contrast, like the sharp border of shadows surrounding light. So precise and defined I hope it won’t break. It can’t.

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**I fight with fists to wake from sleeping** to see the days begin. Days always thinner, shriveled, unwell, days moving from dark to dim to dark again, blearing deeper all the time. Watching from the window wanting for some single spark to surface, I feel as big and endless as nothing or even smaller, still swirling in some dream. I prop up higher on the deflated cushions of the couch and peer harder through the lack. I want to know where it starts. I stare as hard as I can, out into that solid system of darkness. I stare until I think I can decipher it, until my forehead sticks to the slick glass I fall asleep again.

When I wake up the sun is already up, a smeared blip behind the forest, bleeding out somewhere far away. A beam gasps through branches and spatters across the glass like spit. Spinning around the light in the grains I see them move—all these tiny black specks. Swimming like schools of fish, breeding like mites.

I can feel something brimming in me still. The constellations and their names I can’t quite remember. It’s been years since I’ve seen them, since Dad first showed them to me. Before the moon blinked out of orbit, before my bookshelf rotted off of the wall and all those names in the pages of my star books grew mold and molded into new names. Names impossible to pronounce.

But I feel them still out there, the old names, out beyond where this sickness won’t ever reach them.

Every remaining day I decide to watch the light and learn where it goes. I’ll show Bil and I’ll show Mom and we will learn to go too.

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**I’m in the corner farthest from the window,** tracing the stain under my desk with my toes until I can feel its shape wrapping underneath my forehead. I learn its crusted soak of webs and flecks, spelling its name until the period ends. School started five weeks ago and I try to remember what my new homeroom teacher says, anything he says, but I never can and the other students can’t seem to either, can’t seem to even know where they are. Even the new teacher seems like he doesn’t know what he’s saying. He murmurs on about state capitals and long division like he’s phrasing things from inside a dream, his face a ghost, a phantom limb.

I don’t recognize a single kid in this class. I keep staring across the rows of desks, waiting for someone to turn and look my way. I wait for any kind of movement at all. It’s always so silent, silent even when the teacher is talking. The stale air in the room bakes my blood, makes me feel like I got hit in the head with something big. Dust pumps down from the vent above me in constant hush. It pelts across my quiz sheet and slips my scribbles. Every answer I write is wrong, a garbled guess. None of these questions were in the review.

Across the row beside me, I sometimes think the boy with the long hair looks familiar. Sometimes when I look at him he looks like I’ve known him all my life. I think about writing a note and smuggling it to him, but I can’t think of what to say. I can’t seem to summon up a whisper. I try to bump my foot against his foot but my leg won’t move in the right direction. I just look at him until I learn he is never going to look back and I look at him for so long I forget what it is I even thought I saw inside his face.

The bell rings at random now, with a sound I can only hear from the buzzing in my neck. Everyone shuffles around each other in a slow blur in the hallways of our school. Everything that once felt familiar feels removed. Everything feels departed and replaced with something else.

I’ve been searching for my friends from last year along the lockers or in the lunchroom. I looked for them in the stalls of the bathrooms, behind the windows of other classrooms, on or beneath the bleachers outside, standing inside the folds of the curtains along the stage. Each day that passes I try to think of their faces or their names. I skip class and try to think of where to search for them next. I lay down across the lip of the tunnel slide they weren’t found hiding in and I listen through the heavy, immobilized air and try to think of what their voices ever sounded like.

Mostly, I just listen for the sound of any voice at all.

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**Bil brings me out** onto the roof ledge outside of his window. We hide with dangling legs over the gutter lip and scan the collapsing horizon. You can hear the constant gargle, the swallowing of itself. Each morning we make a game of guessing where it will shrink to next. The mountains, the foothills, the far fields and forests, the sparse outskirting houses, the gas station on the road rising south out of town. We had been able to see it all from our home only so many weeks or months before.

Though I wonder how long it’s really been.

Now we just watch everything smother out in the shadow. And we wonder how many more mornings will be spent this way. We wonder when the last morning might be, when the last thing we will be able to see is each other, before we will be able to see nothing at all.

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**Grass and stone and brick and building sides** diluting every day, wrung of all color. Blue is rancid with bugs, and red with rot. When the paint on our bikes went bad it took the chains and the gears and the cable brakes with it, scattering off deep into the clutter of the forest to never be found again. So now we walk home from school. And many of the trees in the woods along the road are in peeling themselves bald now of their bark. They slump together shedding their skins upon our shoulders until they stand slick in the ground like pale flutes, and I wonder what intention written within them would allow that to happen.

I ask Bil why his arms and legs are coated in a crust of gray paint, why his backpack smells like he crapped inside it.

He says, “We can learn how to live from here on out, Sherese.”

I swat the gnats swarming a nebula at his neck away and say, “I thought we already knew that pretty well.”

“Maybe we just thought we did.”

I don’t say anything back. It’s hard to talk to him when he gets weird like this. I have to bring it back around only through a certain way and so I ask him to tell me a story.

“I don’t know any.”

“Bullshit,” I say elbowing him, “I’ve told you *loads*.”

“Not really.”

“Yes, really—a whole lot.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Gosh. I’ll tell you again, just let me see.” I try to think of every story that I kept close in my head and told him so that he could keep it close in his. I try to figure out which one I can start just enough to have him finish it. I settle on one from the storybook with the crushed spine Dad gave us saying it had once been his.

“In the millionth room of the one-hundredth hallway of a very large house,” I begin, “there lived a boy, the youngest boy of a very large family. He was fat and slow and sweaty and unliked by every single one of his siblings. Even his parents didn’t like him very much and forgot all about him pretty soon. He played alone and stayed in his room all the time except for when he was really hungry, and he was hungry all the time.

“He cried a lot, quietly into his pillow so his brothers and sisters wouldn’t hear him through the wall. He was sad all the time. But because he was sad all the time he was also very smart. He was smart because his sadness grew and grew and stretched his head until he could think up all sorts of incredible things...”

Bil and I cut through the woods the rest of the way home along our secret route and I’m still telling the story of the boy in the very large house. We sit on the porch steps until I finish and Bil never once interrupts to tell his own version. He doesn’t ask any questions, not even when I don’t bother to explain that the mouse had appeared from inside the boy’s porridge bowl like the other things, or that it was the sister in the room across the hall that killed the mouse.

I was hoping he would correct me.

After I’m done, Bil sits there beside me and doesn’t say a thing, doesn’t do anything besides pick at the splinters in the floorboards. I could tease him but I don’t. I could feel mad at him but I’m not.

We stay this way for a moment. Then my eyes begin to see how Bil’s skin under the edges of the paint looks rashed. I start to notice how the stench bubbling out of his backpack has layers to it, each worse than the one before, a lot worse than the smell when he leaves the sandwiches Mom packed gathered in the bottom pouch for weeks. Quietly, I unzip the pouch and when I pull open the fabric my chest tightens from the smell—I can barely breathe. I hold my breath in my cheeks and look inside. The smell could make my eyes peel. It could strum my throat and crack my teeth. There is something at the bottom, under his pencil box. Something big and sort of round. I hold the backpack open more toward what light there is. The thing inside Bil’s pack is wet and covered in notepad paper, all papier-mâchéd.

“What is this, Bil.”

“A school project,” he mumbles.

He doesn’t move and I get a sharp feeling in my stomach as I continue to look at it. There’s something all clumped beneath the wet paper and half-dried glue. It looks like fur.

Gently I pull one strap of the pack off Bil’s shoulders, then the other. His arms slide limp out of the loops and then I’m holding the pack in my hands. I try not to shudder as the weight in it shifts and sags to the bottom.

“Bil,” I say, “let me get that paint cleaned off your arms.”

He looks tired. Loose inside. I think maybe I’m tired too. I tell him to go inside and he does.

This isn’t the way today was supposed to go. I found something behind the house this morning and I wanted his help with it. Together we were going to figure it out.

Instead I go to the toolshed and get a shovel. With the shovel in one hand I return to the porch and pick up Bil’s pack in the other. It’s heavy and damp at the sides and I struggle to carry both over the yard and across the hill through the trees. I go until I can’t see our house anymore, in case Bil is watching from the window. I dig the hole under the side of a bush and toss the whole pack inside.

The smell is still there, even after I bury it deep in the dirt and walk back to the house. It’s still there when I go inside, still there after I take a shower under the haphazard spurting of the spout, after I make sure Bil takes one too. It’s still there when I tell him he can have my old backpack as I close the door to my room. It’s still there at the kitchen counter during dinner, still there in my bed when sleep comes for me early in the night like a rogue cloud and it’s still there even then to fill and fill up my dreams.

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**The mint salve webs my fingers** as I press small circles into the cracked skin of Mom’s back. I scoop more out from the jar and try to send it further in, loosen the work of the break in the corners of her neck, the valley of her shoulder blades, the numb slab of flesh reaching down to her hips. I press my palms down harder and search in the dense, unyielding meat for those secret knots to soothe. My hands aren’t ever strong enough to untie them and I imagine Dad’s hands, growing out of the air over my own to knead Mom’s muscles back to life.

“My sweet girl,” Mom whispers.

My hands jolt like there is voltage in her voice. And then I notice how I’m frozen still. I scoop out more salve and keep massaging, keep pressing circles through her.

I thought she was asleep. Is that right? Maybe, I think. I don’t know what it was I thought that she was.

Sometimes when rubbing Mom’s back there is a feeling I get, like some teetering thing could slip and suddenly I won’t remember how to breathe. It’s like standing on the lip of a hole and not being able to know if the hole is in front of you or behind. A few times, I’ve thought that if only I could press harder and press right, I could rephrase anything at all along the crooked path of Mom’s spine, like one tug of a single fiber in that snarl of muscles is all it might take.

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**And this is something** I sometimes think about. It could be from a dream I dreamt when I was three. It might be something I remembered and then forgot that I ever remembered it. This might be the first time I’ve thought about it. But maybe I made it up. Maybe I am making it up now.

Mom’s bathroom has two mirrors. One over the sink, shoved into each corner against the ceiling so the edges are chipped. Pressurized from being squeezed there, over the wall. But this isn’t the other mirror, the mirror that bulges out.

It’s the small one hanging on the wall behind the door. The heirloom. Somehow that word spells itself there even though Mom never once said it. She’s never said anything about this mirror and I’ve never once asked.

It’s a circular mirror no bigger than the back of your head so you can do just that, look at the back of your head. Check your bun or your braid—whatever. Buckle the bind on your necklace. If I ever wore a necklace, I would use it for that.

I don’t think Mom uses it because the door is always blocking it and it’s something you don’t even know is there until you swing the door closed and it is there. There it is. The heirloom. Mom’s mirror. And you’re sitting on the toilet peeing and staring up at it. And it is there.

It might bulge out from the wall even though you don’t know why you would think that.

It’s a flat, round mirror as round and as big as the back of your head. I don't know why it is an heirloom but it is. It's Mom's mirror but it belonged to someone else too. That’s something you can feel. You can feel it for a fact. It has a frame made of old wood. It has polished splinters sticking out of it like barbwire.

And you think: *Where did this mirror hang before?* It’s like you’ve never seen it before now. Still, it is there. And it is still there.

I’m staring at it now. I’m not saying that it is staring back. It’s not staring back. It doesn’t do that. I can’t even see myself in it because it’s up so high, where the back of Mom’s head would live, if she used the mirror.

And if I were that tall, tall enough as Mom, I would be able to see into the mirror. I would be able to see the other mirror inside that mirror.

And then: I would be able to see all those **other** mirrors.

And I think: *If I turned my neck away from this mirror and looked into the mirror above the sink. I would. I would be able to see both mirrors. I would see all of them at once.*

I look inside the mirror, the one behind the door. All I see is part of the ceiling and the light that is flickering across the ceiling. And the ceiling is brown. And so is the light. So **brown**. Almost black. Almost burnt. But the ceiling is orange. And it is. Because I look at it and it is orange. The ceiling in Mom’s bathroom is always orange. But I look. I look back at the mirror and it is. The ceiling. It is **brown**.

And **that**.

That is not paint.

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**Something snuck itself away** in the ceiling here. It isn’t waiting any longer. I’ve felt it amassing millimeters in the unknown spaces above the squares of plasterboard, behind the half-light throb of the florescent panels. But it isn’t just above. I’ve felt it crawling through the conduit racing between the outlets. I’ve felt it inside the pencil sharpener nailed next to the door. I’ve felt it in the creases of tar around the windows across the room, sealing us in. And most often, I feel it in teacher’s voice. A second voice superpositioned behind his, a second lesson. Not about rate and ratio but a whole other spurting kind of math. Buzzing numbers gushing out their lengths on an axis curling out of bounds from X and Y. And beyond that—numbers without numbers, formless forms floating eternal and yoking and knowing **greatly:**

**listenn**

*No*. I won’t. I’m going to walk out of class. I just have to get these feet to move, try to figure out which signal I have to send them. The right one is quickly fading out. In the corner of my eye I can see the boy with the long hair taking notes. Stretched across his page: tight trailing orbs of scribbles like cysts with teeth. Across the shoulder of the girl who sits in front of me I see the same thing etched. Her fisted pen pumps up and down the page before shooting over the edge of her notebook to scratch more meanings in the grain of her desk.

And I feel the pencil gripped inside my own palm. And I look down at the page open on my desk. And I look at the small scribble fixed there, opening its tiny eye.

The shudder hits me then, it shakes down my arms and slaps my elbow against my notebook and sends it falling to the floor. I find a way out of my desk, a way out of that circuit closing beneath me. Teacher’s voice blips and putters on a pause, his lips twitching up and down. The whole class is looking at me. And I feel a pull. The strength of that yank moving in.

I make clumsy steps up the row of desks before it can grab me. I come close to teacher standing humming at the front, his whole face clattering now. When I pivot toward the door I expect to feel his fingers come ripping out at my shoulders or my hair.

But then I’m in the hallway. And already that yank is feeling faint. I walk past the classroom doors and when I push the metal bar on the door at the end of the lockers there is only a click and a swivel and a promise that I will never come back here again.

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**We have found where** light goes though. Some light anyway. Into the pockets. Gathered bits of it. It could be any sort of place, really. I showed Bil the one I found under the eave of the roof on the backside of the house, tucked up against the rafter beam. It’s just a small one. Like a coin. But together we’ve been looking and there are others that are bigger.

Mom thinks we’ve been going to school. It’s better not to go. It doesn’t matter anymore. The school no longer calls when we don’t show up.

Mom no longer picks up the phone.

So Bil and I look for the pockets. I take him through town. At first it’s a competition. Then it is a map we make together. Bil spots them from far away. Through walls, even. I swear. I notate them into my grid paper booklet. We debate closely and give each one careful rankings.

Brightness: ~~6~~ 5

Size: truck tire

Hue: purple-pink, orange

State: steady/non-flickering (smearing)

Angle: any

I fill the bottom of the maps with footnotes of where the pockets are. I leave space in our measurements so we can come back to each one and measure them again.

“Over here, Sherese,” shouts Bil. We are in someone’s backyard. I’m inside a doghouse. A glob of light pools across the wall and I can see in here pretty well.

Size: ~~plate~~ no, teacup.

Angle: strongest below and left.

I fill it in.

“Sherese,” shouts Bil again. I crawl out from the entrance and look for where he is. It’s dark outside the doghouse and I can’t see him anywhere. I look to the windows of the house up above. The curtains are pressed against the glass like gauze. Like dead moths. Does anyone live here? So many seem gone now. And I don’t know to where.

“Bil just hang on,” I say.

“Over the fence,” he yells from somewhere behind the fence.

“Okay.”

I hold my booklet in my teeth as I climb up the rails of the fence to the top and fumble my legs over the top and when I drop I nearly land on him.

“That was close!” I say stumbling.

“Yeah.”

He grins at me. And I want to take the measurements of that grin.

He tugs on the end of my shredded shirt. “Check this one out,” he says.

We round along the fence between two other yards and step back into the woods. I follow him down a slope below the road. Without my Maglite it’s so hard to see the ground, see the shapes of sharp stones and sticks without feeling them first, and I fall on my shins and knees. Bil holds my elbow to help as I pull myself up. When I’m standing, I see a chain of cats tethered each to the other by their paws and tails, hanging down from a branch behind Bil’s ear. None of them have heads.

I grab Bil’s hand in mine and ask, thumbing below the hill, “Is it this way?”

“It’s in the gulley.”

He plows downward and pulls me further within the thicket until we stand choked in a cloud of leaves and thorns dipping over a slippery edge. Bil pushes his back against my hips when he starts to hear me skating pebbles.

“Just over *there*,” he whispers.

I can already see the glow before we go around behind the hillside.

And I follow him into the gulley.

Brightness: 7 (Bil says 8)

Size: DOOR

Hue: red-orange

State: steady/flickering

Angle: any

It’s the biggest one we’ve seen.

It’s trapped up inside a clustered cage of trees. Trees still wearing all of their bark. Slathered across a web of branches. *Breathing*, I think.

If it wasn’t caught up so high I would try to reach into it, pull myself up, stay inside there forever.

“Is it growing?” I ask Bil.

“How could it be growing?”

“Because it looks like it is.”

Bil looks toward it in a way like he is bending away, trying to catch a glimpse of something that is or isn’t there, out in the distance.

“I don’t see anything,” he finally says.

We both stay silent for a while. I think about throwing a lasso into the trees, tethering the light pocket to a loop on my jeans and leading it home to Mom. If I could let it be for her I would trundle it right through her bedroom door.

Something could happen.

In the space of this silence I watch the cobwebs on Bil’s face glint like tiny fissures and I wonder what it is in this light that makes him look so flat, so fragile. He is the strongest person that I know. I just want the things that make sense to still make sense.

“It’s not good that it’s here,” he says without looking at me.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. “Why are you talking so weird lately?”

He just glances at me before keeping his chin toward the dirt like usual, like a string is holding him there.

I wonder what the hell it is he means. I wonder what the hell about Bil a lot lately. It *is* good. It’s good that it’s here. This is the only good thing.

Bil doesn’t say anything, and for once I’m glad that he doesn’t. I thought he wanted something like this. I want to ask him what it is he thought he wanted.

I don’t ask him though—I don’t want to.

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**We’ve been trying to do dinner**. We’ve been trying it for weeks. My stomach surges into sour cramps when the hour comes, but I want to have dinner even still. I’ll slurp down whatever can of cold old broth Mom decides to give me if it means there is a chance something could be found at the bottom of my bowl. I think it’s how she knows we are alright. Like the quantity of what comes out of the cupboards is what keeps us from getting sucked into outer space.

I sit on a stool at the kitchen counter while Mom leans across it hunting through her pans and appliances. She always settles for the same items every time: her biggest pot. Her biggest spoon. And she’ll pull the pot across to the stove until it scrapes up onto the burner.

I try not to watch. I don’t want her to need to give up some uncertain smile. I’ll work on some sort of thing in my composition notebook so she’ll think I’m doing schoolwork. This way she can ask me,

“How is your brother doing on his assignments?”

And I can say:

“He got an A on his last report.”

“That’s good,” she can say, “I want you to help him if he falls behind, Sherese.”

And if she holds the spoon limp in her hand like she doesn’t know what it’s for, I’ll say:

“It’s okay, Mom. We’re doing fine.”

She gives me her smile. This one is less uncertain but still turned in her face in some way that is impossible to understand. The creases in her forehead bundle together and make their own sort of smile. I don’t like to think about how they bother me, but I can’t help it—they do. They give me a gross feeling. It’s like they are breeding right there on her face.

Because a thing in Mom is unhinged. It bends through every part of her until she’s standing all wrong in her nightdress. But the right word might really be **unhitched**. It’s more than just how her body moves now. How she shambles. It’s further down inside her. A tiny ball of her that isn’t where it is supposed to be. And maybe by only an inch. Any little distance though, in anyone—and I think that means anything is allowed to happen.

She turns toward the pantry door and when her hip loses its brace on the counter edge she clunks over at a strange angle. She looks like she is engaging into some slow, wild fall before her hand claws out and grips the lip underneath the sink.

“I can get the food, Mom,” I say hopping from the stool. I’m already opening the door to the pantry before she can tell me she is okay.

I ask her what she needs. And this is what we find:

2 cans chicken broth

1 can creamed corn

2 cans kidney beans (some kind of beans anyway)

2 jars pickled onions

1 jar pickled asparagus (with some other stuff)

It’s generally the same thing, always. More beans now that we ran out of any sort of meat. All the store has now is mostly cans with missing labels sitting in dusty rows in the half-empty aisles. Mom will sometimes send me off with a list and I make my best guess from the old signs still chained to the ceiling. The last time I went there was no cashier to ring me up at the front—no one there at all. I had to wedge Mom’s bills in the crack of the closed register before I walked out the automatic doorway which was frozen halfway open and buzzing like it was about to catch on fire.

Mom opens each can in a fumbling process until they all plop together in her pot. She clicks the igniter and reclicks over and over until a couple of stunted flames futz out of one small portion of the burner. The stove top starts making this high whistling sound like the connector is leaking but Mom doesn’t seem to notice. She plunges her arms into the cupboard above my head for bowls and tells me to call for Bil. I almost start to shout his name but then don’t. Maybe it’s all the shadows resting in here. Somehow the density of them won’t let me do that anymore. Won’t let me shout in this house at all.

So I go up the stairs to go get him even though I know I should have shouted. I really should have shouted loud. Somehow that seems to be the difference between trying to do dinner and having dinner, just us three.

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**But the phone still rings sometimes**, and you wonder who could be calling us. It rings and it rings and you wonder and you wonder until you go down stairs and you pick up the phone.

And say, “Hello.”

You hear the static. Its groan pressing through the perforations in the plastic. And already you’ve come to realize that the static is a planet—a planet untethered from the solar system long before. And you listen to your breathing while you wait to hear something besides your own breath, beyond the static, or way down inside it. Somewhere under the surface of this planet,

[*this planet way larger than Saturn*]

who doesn’t want to return to everything,

[*to anything outside the static*]

but instead wants to return you to it. And you think maybe you can hear the static hearing you breathe. And a crazy barking sort of feeling clusters up inside you when you think that if you listened to the static long enough, it **could**. It could return you. You feel its gravity. And sometimes when you are by yourself in certain moments you think about picking up the phone and holding it tight to your cheek until it does.

Then you hear the voice. You hear it pressing slowly up through the static to the surface in giant needles.

“*Helll-ohhhhh*.”

“This is Sherese speaking.”

You hear the clunk and mumble of discarded signals getting crossed. A billion-trillion hands and fingers sneaking along the membrane between you and the other end of the line. It pummels across the inside of the receiver like a sandstorm. And you hear the other voice; you can hear it rising up to you from far away. Or maybe falling:

“*Thiss...iss. Sherressse.......speakkingggggg...*”

And sometimes you talk to her. You used to talk to her a lot more. Now you’re trying to learn not to. You’re trying to learn to leave the phone unplugged.

But when the phone begins to ring again you learn you still haven’t learned anything yet.

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**Sleep is a menace now**, a place with trapdoors under trapdoors that I could fall through and through forever. When I wake up it is to the sound of the beams in our home buckling under the lack of light.

[*Is there a dream this time?*]

So much is just nothing. A smudge of unliving sandwiched between one small day and the next.

But I want to be determined. I tell myself I’m still determined as shit. Someone in this house has to be.

So I stay still in my bed and feel the dust on my pillow sift across my eyelashes. That sponge of sleep is still there, the last car on a slow train taking away down the tracks. Something big was in there this time and I can almost remember it. Just a hushed weight bending there, waiting for me to recatch it before it dissolves. But this time it circles back around. A tiny bone in that soup. I pick it up and feel its shape.

I’m not letting this get away from me.

I take the bone and stab its tip deep into whatever I am

[*in a dream*]

And one dream enters—

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**Something happens that wasn’t a dream**.

Brightness: 10

Size: A whole house

Hue: Any kind you can perceive

State: solid/flickering/

[*entering*]

Angle: any, reflective

Coagulated across the needles, dipping the branches, slumping in arcs. It sways. Or dances. I want to call it a ghosthouse. A phantom mansion of light.

It cloaks our faces with shine.

And it *has* grown. It’s been growing here for days. I knew it would. I could say this much to Bil but I don’t. It’s already there inside his face. Because now I can see more than just the whites of Bil’s eyes, the black of his pupils. I can see the green.

I crunch up slowly to the trees, afraid I might send it trampling away. It shimmers, stratified. It blazes in layers. It is a vent or a vessel and deep in its pulse I see something move.

I see myself, reflected there from somewhere else. Some other sort of woods. Not up close but from a distance, so I can hardly recognize that it is me. But it is me. I’m standing there and looking away. Looking not at us. Looking deeper in.

So I look for Bil. I look for him with the other me inside the light and even though he is standing right here, right next to me, he isn’t there. And seeing this I think maybe he can see that too. Maybe he can see that he isn’t there.

I can’t get myself to talk. I want to say something and I don’t know what it is.

And then the other me is turning and turning away, further into the light. And even though I am here and the other me is there it feels like I am turning too.

So I reach up and touch the light.

And it blinks out.

It’s gone. Gone completely.

**Our endless potential to lose, I noticed it then**.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**There’s a bleating in the woods** around our home now. I heard the ruptured burble sing out from the stupid quiet like a dying fawn or rabbit, the sound of its death transmitted into each brittle bush and cove of stone until it is delivered to us surround sound. It’s been here for two days, its repetition always rising. Under my ear muffs I loaded cotton swabs and candlewax, but the choked mumble still remaining is beginning to tell me a different tone, a croaking chuckle, almost worse. No matter what I try, the sound—it travels into some other change so that new splinters start to glitter in my brain.

I need this to end.

But anything that ends only gets replaced by another beginning, even sicker.

Mom sleeps through most of the day now and I wonder the sort of thing she hears. Bil is staying shut up tight inside his room and I haven’t tried yet to budge the door. I know that when I do it has got to be for something good.

I keep stepping around the house thinking of what to do. This isn’t boredom. This is desperation. Whatever I figure out to do I know I need to do it quick. Bil needs it too. This sound is slipping through me in a skittering itch that gets more diseased by the centimeter. It’s wadding up in my nailbeds like it is getting ready to dissolve them. And I think if I stood still for long enough it would.

I tiptoe out of the living room to the sun room and count my steps, making sure I step on all the cracks. I need real luck right now and you can only find that where you choose it for yourself.

The sun room is being eaten up. I can’t remember when it was since I was last in here. It’s like a mountain of coals in here. Like being buried way down inside the dirt. I ram my toe into a thing. I’m not sure what it is. A giant fossilized roach crouched under the nest of soot.

Then I remember—this is the dinner table. This is where we used to sit and eat cake on birthdays and Mom made a rule we couldn’t use our hands. This is where we surrendered to our homework, and drew pictures of dogs—all those *dogs*—and gave blessing for and from the world that we never knew could moult away and leave us with just the skin.

This is the dinner table. Buried now under the black shell of our discarded old crap. A pile of everything we let settle into some deserted remainder. Sealed in that heap I find the birdhouse I had spent days on but never finished. The birds who I thought were going to come from all over and never did.

I let my hand sweep through the charred rime that has clung to everything here and pass my fingers across the window screen. I rake out the scuz from the tiny wire cubelets until I have a mini window for myself. I can see a sliver of the yard. The dirt growing jaundiced in the space next to the shed. Dad’s clutter of tools still leaning where he left them.

And then it comes to me. One good idea.

I listen for the bleating and find it almost soft now in this room, a fizzy sob lost in the grey.

But when I step into the hallway it gushes back up into a clacking grimace like the fussing of some monster machined in pain. I can feel it gripped in the flex of my joints when I climb the stairs to Bil’s room. And when I raise my fist to knock on his door my fingernails set themselves to burst open like hinges to a trap.

But why knock? Since when have I ever knocked on my brother’s door? What I always do is just barge right in. And if I could just do that right now without thinking.

My hand fumbles up around the knob and when I clutch it it flexes in the wood like a loose tooth. I thought it might be locked. But when I twist the knob it turns softly and feels ready to plunk out onto the floor.

The door opens inward with hardly any push and gummy chips of wet wood rain down from the gaping frame.

“Where at, Bil?” I look around his room and feel the flutter of my stretched-out pupils strain to open wider in their orbits.

I can see things—his bed, his pillow, his drawing board and stuffed gorilla. I look and I can see what’s there but even then it’s like staring straight through mud. A sour smell yanks over me and punches up inside my nose. Oh no—that’s **bad** but still I step into Bil’s room. It’s so **brown** inside here and I don’t know where he is. I look around the post of his bed, the leg wedged down into a black bar opening between the floorboards. He isn’t there. There’s still this sound and still this smell and this shit I am sick of thinking will not stop, will not change at all, ever.

Bil is in his closet. Lying in the pile of his clothes, his sneakers, his pairs of boots. Lying there staring straight into nothing. His clumsy bangs pasted across his forehead. And that’s what it is. It’s the Nothing in the room. It’s the spread of a certain kind of mold that you can’t even see but still know it’s there from just the feel. It’s a million black rooms extending out from the back of Bil’s closet, a million black rooms sandwiched wall-to-wall and in every single one of them not one single thing happens differently.

**And what happened is this:**

Bil rolls his eyes across the ceiling until he is looking at me. Looking at me from out of a different room. I reach and pull my earmuffs off. Cotton balls bounce off my face and land on his floor.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

He just keeps looking at me with eyes like glazed doughnut holes. But I can see he’s still there, seeing me and seeing me still when his eyes drift back to the ceiling. He just doesn’t want to.

“Bil...*BIL*.” The trespass of my voice fractures off inside this room and all those other rooms like echoing catacombs. Bil rolls away from me and presses his face into the mess of clothes.

“*What, Sherese*.”

“....Do you want to dig a fort with me?”

“....”

“I know you’re okay. Sit up.”

“....................”

“Stop playing, okay?”

“........................ *I’m not*.”

“Trust me. Just come outside.”

“*I’ve got stuff to do*.”

“You aren’t doing anything. There’s nothing else to do.”

“.........*homework*.”

“What?”

“.......*I’ve got homework*.”

“You’ve been going to school?”

“...”

“Why?”

“*Because*. *Mom wants us to*.”

“Don’t go there Bil.”

“.............................................................”

“It’s not right there.”

“...*It’s not right here*.”

“......”

“*So don’t tell me what to do*.”

“.............................................................................”

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**I didn’t try to change a thing**. I don’t wonder how until afterwards, when I go to the door and pull it closed while seeing Bil still lying there motionless with his head buried in his clothes like a crumpled puppet. And I don’t think I wondered even then. When the door sticks shut and the knob plops out to disappear on the floor or somewhere beneath, I just want to get away from all those rooms inside Bil’s room, like something is living in one of them that would want to keep me there forever.

And in my head I’m blaming Bil. I feel it flush up in an embarrassing way in my face when I stomp down the stairs, the sound of the bleating breaking open in the walls all around me in tons of tiny speakers. Wriggling up the volume as pores push up plugged with the trilling beaks of rotten baby birds.

I can’t stand to hear it anymore.

I bust out the screen door and move from the porch to the shed, almost running. Dad’s shovel is there. I grab it and walk around the back of the shed, to a spot that I’ve been thinking about. There is a patch of dirt here that hasn’t turned like the rest.

And if I could just stab the shovel into the ground here. Which I do. The shovel is a key. This is what I have to think. I turn it and have to think it turns like a key turns.

And maybe it does. Because when I kick down the blade and lever a clump of clod out from the ground my ears pop in the most painful way, like all the air has been sucked away from around me. When it floods back in I can’t hear a thing. I can’t even hear the sounds of my body or my brain. I scrape out another load of dirt and think maybe it will stay this way, until the end. I think about how many things are still left. But I don’t want to think. I just try to stare off to remain in simple substance and limit myself to the digging.

When my pyramid of dirt has accreted into a small monolith, I realize I’ve been hearing the rhythmic scratch and scuffle of pebbles piling up and pouring off for some time. The dark is beginning to lean closer in and I can barely make out the laces on my shoes. I turn around in the tight quarters of my hole and look up at the black mass of the house. And I listen to this silence.

And I listen.

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**I sit in the dirt and seek protection** from small fires. I gathered the mulched tinder of ragged weeds and brought them to the pit I’d made out of bricks in the hidden place beyond the shed. Two hills sag into each other here and make a tucked away rut. Bil used to call this spot the Buttcrack. There is a big root you can sit on like a bench from the tree hanging down overhead and underneath nests our checkerboard and Uno deck now pulped and peeling with slime.

I lean over the root and strike another Sulphur match into the weed halo I’ve sculpted and watch it choke on the bitter leaves. I rest my head between my knees so I can better breathe in the smoke. I’ll let it wash through my throat and burn my lungs like a prayer. Bring true through pain. Like only a real prayer probably would. I watch the frail flame circle around in the gutter of twigs and see how long I can take it. This short windless rope of smoke rising right into my face. I would peel back my eyelids and let it gather there if it meant something might stir. Might stutter. Might shift.

I listen for a single sound in the mute glaze of the woods beyond the hissed crackle of my fire pit. Ten minutes goes by before the distant thump

[*whoof* ]

of another tree collapsing breaks our game of mum. The smoke rumbles in my chest and I finally allow myself to release the fit of coughs I’ve been saving up. I bob as deep as I can into the dizzy gel of air that worms around my head as each cough racks in my ribs. Maybe it could carry me off with enough. I count them out and when the twenty-fourth puffs out of my singed lips I can breathe again. I try to guess how many coughs it would take. *Maybe just a few more.* But the tissue in my throat feels like it has been scraped away and I can’t. I untwist the cap on my canteen and let the sour water swish at the back of my mouth. It tastes bad but at least it pacifies the scratch in my esophagus.

When I close my eyes a tiny beat starts to speed up inside me. Somewhere in my gut, just a mumble, a crumb. A quick glimmer I’ve never felt before, so small but raw in its opening it makes my forearms start to shiver. Shiver bad. For a moment I think my arms might break out in weird hives. Something even weirder than hives. I have to hold my breath in case it might slip—

[*whoof* ]

Then it settles. It settles so slowly that my brain jams and I can’t think even a single thought until it is over and when it is over I can think one thing which is how I thought that I would be left in the same way at the end but I’m not.

I’m not in the same way anymore.

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**I press a fingertip** across the blisters pulsing in my palm and picture an itch spiraling through the air like a sickness. All you have to do to let it in is scratch.

The smells of the dirt beneath the earth cling to me in different rings and I’ve gotten to know each one, like family. All you have to do to know them is dig like you are digging for things that can’t be found.

I go to the pantry for what food is left, following a trail of mud clots tracked by my shoes onto the linoleum layer over layer. I’ve taken to sleeping outside. In the trenchfort. There are too many places starting to move out of bounds. Three cans sit behind the pantry door and a jar of old honey, all crystalized into fossil, too tough to eat. I get a knife from the drawer and chisel out a big flake to suck on. I look at the three cans and think about what is left.

I went back to the store yesterday, ready to take whatever was left on the shelves. At this point there was nothing left in the pantry and when I got to the store I found there was nothing left there either. Not even the shelving or the signs or the registers. Nothing but a wide empty room filled with mounds of gray detritus. The automatic door was gone too, in its place a square opening stained in streaks of ash.

I walked out through the empty lot wondering what to do. I was feeling the lining in my stomach grow more ossified in hunger by the hour. I thought about Mom and how she hadn’t come out of her room in three days. I could listen to her occasional movement on the mattress or at times the sound of an opening drawer, but I hadn’t found the courage to try the door.

I passed down the middle of each street, thinking about how I couldn’t return home empty-handed, wondering which house would be best to break inside of first. I went up to a STOP sign and swung around and around with my outstretched arm, letting the edge of the channeled post bite down across my raw hand. I tried focusing in on the pain.

When I swung around again there was someone standing there in the street.

[*Bil*.]

I held myself still. It was a girl. She stood there frozen at my height sixty feet away. My head was still spinning. She looked like she was glaring at me. I let go of the STOP sign.

“Hey,” I said, though it came out as a stuttered breath and there was no way she had heard me. And then I felt my feet start walking towards her.

Her hands trembled up and fisted the sides of her dress. I could see she was wearing glasses with thick rims bent at an angle over her wide eyes. Something thick like tar was pasted up in a section of her hair. Another section stood short and frizzy like it had been shorn out of her skull.

“*Guh*—*nuh*. *Guh*. *Nuh*. *Nuh*.” She was making this weird noise.

And I stopped walking towards her. I think she wanted to die. I can’t say exactly why it was so clear, just that it was there.

I raised out my open hand. “You’re okay,” I said, “We’re okay.”

But she wasn’t. She wailed at me. Her crying was sudden and sharp, thick with hiccups. I could see tears break open in waves underneath her glasses, steaming up the lenses.

I felt like running to her then.

**And doing what**. There was nothing left to do. She stood there shaking insanely with her fingers clawing there in the fabric against her hips, her bony shoulders knifing up and down. She was still looking at me.

And I turned around and I walked away.

I walked away.

And as I walked the volume of her crying increased or carried with me so that I heard it steady and unfading until I was at least two miles away. I found myself wander off the side of the road and into a storm drain. I sat there for maybe an hour hugging my knees. I sucked on the frayed threads poking out of the holes in my jeans. I didn’t cry. I didn’t know how. I wanted to.

I ended up breaking into four houses. I found a single can of food inside each house. In the last house I found the jar of honey with the can. And I found a can opener and I opened the can.

“1 can black olives,” I said, and ate them without a spoon.

\*

I look at the three cans sitting on the shelf. Spaced perfectly apart. Craters of dust rim the spaces where all the other cans once sat, each meal now marked with an empty grave. I think about all the food that Mom made and I didn’t eat even though I wasn’t full.

And I listen down the hallway for the door to squeak open, or the creaking of the floorboards.

Nothing.

I open up one of the cans (1 can green beans) and dump it into a saucepan. I like cold green beans more than hot green beans, but right now it doesn’t matter. I try the igniter on all four stove burners but nothing catches. I go to the trench to get my Sulphur matches and try lighting them again. A couple pinhead-sized flames totter out of the backburner and that’s it. They look like little pairs of blue eyes staring out of the ring and when I hold my hand near them it almost feels cold.

I turn the burner off. I go out the door with the saucepan and my matches in hand over to the Buttcrack. When I finally get the fire going, the half-light is already crawling away through the trees to let the night in. I prop the pan up on the bricks to let it cook over the bundles of dead weeds. I feed in more twigs and I wonder if it is right to still call this obliterating nothingness *night*. This is surely something else. This could wipe me out. And it wants to. **Maybe it will**. Each time it seems to get stronger, flood in thicker. It has already taken so much.

I stir the beans with a stick until they begin to smack and sizzle. I take them inside and under the weak putter of kitchen light I notice I charred the bottom of Mom’s pan black. I scrape out the beans into two bowls and glance again down the hallway. She is still there, in there somewhere. I wonder if I could start a forest fire with the silence burning here, if that would be enough to save us. All the things I could light up. Push back the collapse. **Then nothing will be left but ash**.

When I push on Mom’s door it scrapes against the frame but doesn’t open. I set down the bowl on the floor and pull up on the knob with one hand. The door jangles up in the wall and then swings open easily.

It’s dark in here, darker than the woods. I’m afraid to try the light switch. I’m afraid to find out what happens if it doesn’t turn on. I can just make out the black outline of Mom’s bed, the rise of her body under the sheets on the mattress. I stand there in the doorway for two minutes, just trying to hear if she is still breathing. *Can she see me?* There’s no way to tell if her eyes are open or closed.

“Mom?” I ask. I can’t help but whisper. “I made us dinner.”

For a long time there is no response. I step closer to her bed and listen to her small scratchy breath. Then I lean up against the bed and feel among the blankets for her. I find her wrist. When I touch her she makes a short inhale.

“*Oh. Oh. Sherese. I must have fallen asleep.*” Her voice floats out of some other place, almost imaginary. Her wrist slides under my hand until her fingers are grasping mine. And I want her to sit up and hold me. I want her to kiss the shit out of my forehead.

“I made dinner,” I say again, “green beans.”

“*Mm. My sweet girl.*”

“Oh geez though. I left it in the hallway. Sorry. I’ll go get it.” I start to move away from the bed but her fingers stay gripping mine.

“*Did you get your brother to eat some?*”

**He left. He isn’t going to come back**. **He hasn’t been home for days**.

“He doesn’t like them. I tried though.”  
 “*He has to eat something,*” She says, and her grip tightens a little. “*He’s too precious. I think he is small for his age.*”

“He’s really strong, Mom. He could beat up anybody. I mean—he wouldn’t though.” I try again to pull my hand away, thinking of the beans getting cold on the floor.

“*Where is Bil? Would you bring him in here?*”

“I. He’s outside somewhere.”

“*Go get him.*” I start to notice something in Mom’s voice. A small twitch of static flexing in.

I lean onto the bed and my cheek falls against the jutting bone of Mom’s hip. Mom lets go of my hand and I wrap my arms around her waist. We stay that way for a moment, unmoving. Mom’s arm stays limp at her side.

“*He should come see his Mother.*”

I can smell Mom’s dried sweat beneath the sheet and another smell with it, like spent electricity.

“*He should be with his Mother now*,” she says, almost croaking. She shifts kilter on the bed and the pills in the sheet prickle against my face like batteries, making my tongue go sour.

“I’ll go and find him, Mom. I’ll bring him back.” I push myself up off her bed and return to the door.

My feet tingle pins and needles as I step away from her, and in my hand where she held me. Then I’m clutching the door and trying to get it to clunk back into place. It takes me several loud tries and when it finally sets right I think I hear Mom say something else, but whether it is said in my head or in the static popping against the other side of the door, I’m not sure. I take my bowl of beans from the counter and stand there trying to convince myself I imagined it. But when I fork some beans into my mouth they buzz against my gums and sting my teeth.

**This whole house**. Now all of it has been taken too.

I return to the trench and eat the beans there alone. I’m starving and the beans don’t buzz anymore, but I have to nearly choke them down when they slide over my tongue, lukewarm and tasteless.

When I crawl inside my bundle of quilts to fall asleep, I don’t dare pretend Mom is lying there next to me. Outside the trench, I can hear the signal of what she said, still groaning.

*Clunk*. *Clunk.*

[***Don’t come back without him***.]

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**The maintenance yard behind the school** is a good place for boards. Anything thick to clap and cover over the tight sprawl of my tunnel pressed up now beside the shed. When I ran out of the available scrap we had I began prying boards off of our nearest neighbor’s fences, but that soon proved to be dumb work. Hardly anything left in the remains of the sky, reduced now to the color of cardboard and lead. There isn’t much time left before the end. I took my Maglite and my Leatherman and Bil’s old wagon still bent on its axle.

And I went down the road into town. I spent hours looking for easy scrap until I found my way here.

There is a good pile of boards leaning against a tree here, waiting for me. I just need to find a way to strap them into the wagon. They are a little bigger than I need, but that’s okay. I need them to be sturdy.

I wish I had thought to bring straps. I didn’t want to come this far into town. And I hadn’t planned at all to come near school. The feeding is further along here than everywhere else and I wish I could have just stayed inside my tunnel, where it’s safe. But it won’t amount to anything if I don’t get these boards and finish the work before it fully settles in.

But damn. Is there no single sort of strap to be had in this yard or what. Not even wadded all up in these stinking barrels, or knotted along the chain links in the fence. If I don’t find something soon I’ll have to head back without the boards. No way are they going to stay on the wagon by themselves.

Then it comes to me. Where the perfect strap will be nearby. It isn’t a place I’d like to go. But when I duck under the curling flap of links in the fence I find out I’ve already made up my mind. There is a short path from the yard along the school. I cut off and head along the playground. When I slip under the Big Slide there is another sound clanging faintly beyond the crunch of my feet on the woodchips.

I look out through the thick nebula hanging down all around, to the hazy forms rising on the other side of the blacktop. I recognize the basketball hoops standing on their poles there. But wrapped around the pole of one is something else. A thing that’s moving.

I can’t help stepping out on the asphalt, moving slowly in that direction so I can see what it is. I step to the rhythm of the clanging ringing there and I watch the fuzzy shape swing one direction, swing another. When I get halfway across the blacktop, the shape stops swinging, just twists around and around. And when I get close it stops doing even that. And the clanging stops.

And then I can see what it is. It looks like a bunch of trash bags wrapped up and wound through rolls of tape, an electrical cord, different ribbons. At the bottom, two small shoes poke out and point down floating inches above the ground. A pale liquid runs out of a corner of the bag and drips on one shoe like wet flour.

My fingers climb up in the air and touch the top of the hanging wad. They pinch a bit of the brown plastic there, enough to tear a hole. The hole opens wide until I can see what’s stuffed inside there. It’s wet and covered in paper, all papier-mâchéd. A small purple thing is protruding out from a gap in the soggy scraps and when I look at it everything starts to feel like shit. Like shit trying to squeeze its way into my pores.

I try to hold my breath as I peel the paper back, but there is no breath within me. No breath to be found. The tips of my fingers fumble and grasp at the flaps pasted there. Fumble and grasp. Fumble. Grasp.

I rip away the paper in clumps and click on the shine of my Maglite. I try again to breathe.

It isn’t Bil.

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**I wasn’t going to use the cord**. But I did think about it. When I used my Leatherman to cut out the twist wrapped under the arms, it occurred to me that this cord, if I could get it free from the hoop, would suffice. And it would be quicker.

Later on I will realize that it would have been in some way better.

When the cord snapped and the boy dropped down against me—that was the start. That was when I knew for sure I had not been preserved.

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**I continue to the gym**. To the ball closet. It’s a giant wooden cabinet on wheels and because all the balls are just shoved up inside there, the doors have a tendency to push open on their own. So the gym teacher had fixed a cam strap around it to keep it closed. I know which door to go in so I won’t have to go very far. It opens on the side of the gym closest to the stage and just left of the stage is an alcove. That’s where the ball closet is.

I tell myself it won’t even take a minute. But then myself tells me to leave. Tells me it isn’t worth it. **A few boards lidded over aren’t going to save you**.

So. I’ll still try.

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**The door opens in a cough of rust**. I force it wide through the squeal of the hinges and look inside.

Darkness. No light at all. Like a churning mass of smoke that has been trapped in here for years. It whispers its edges across my face. I can see the dust swept into dune-like curves on the wood floor before me, then nothing.

I step inside and let the door shut against my back with a hush. For a while I just stand there frozen dumb and facing the black void of the far wall.

Somehow the gym feels much larger since I was last in here, maybe six times as big. Maybe more. No way is that true, but it still feels that way. I listen to the silence and make sure I’m alone before I click on my Maglite and shine it around me. The walls and the floor race away past the light and are quickly obliterated into the shadows before reaching anything else. I turn off the light.

There’s a gross smell here, stagnating from somewhere close by. A sort of familiar stench gassing up the air.

I want to knock back against the bar on the door and leave sprinting. I think about the girl I saw on the street. I wonder where she is right now, this very second. And I think about the boy they strung up on the hoop.

I think about Bil.

I turn left and follow the wall towards the stage. I keep my hand along the wall to guide me and so I don’t stumble. And I start counting my steps.

When I reach the bleachers, I’ve counted 764 steps on my left foot. Something has definitely changed here. The bleachers in my way unfold out towards the center of the court.

Where the smell is coming from.

I decide to keep going under the bleachers. I fold myself over the first of the metal ruts crisscrossing under the benches. As soon as I’m under I smash my teeth under my lips against another bar and bounce back, disoriented. I feel around and find myself inside a cage twisting in every direction. This was a crap idea. I think about whether it would be better to go back out—maybe go over the top of the bleachers—or use my flashlight to continue on. But before I can do either, that’s when I hear it.

It’s behind me, back the way I came. Somewhere inside the distance between the bleachers and the door.

And it sounds like footsteps except its steps are wet, sloshing. And I’ve never heard footsteps that sounded so heavy. Like they could splinter through the floor.

I grip the metal in front of me and feel it tremble. And I listen to the steps that aren’t quite steps at all and wonder how I didn’t hear them before, how once I heard them I’d already been hearing them. And I know I need to move. It’s far away still but already much louder than when I first heard it. And it is coming **here**.

But before I move, a part of me stays and considers letting it find me. I try to slap this voice across the face but somehow I miss and then I find out this voice is in control now because then I sit down. I sit down all neat, all crisscross applesauce in this sad space under the bleachers and wait for this thing slumping across the gym to come find me, to come kill me or do something worse. And when I listen to this voice, I find that it isn’t the voice of terror or even dumb curiosity. It is just a voice telling me that there is no point in running because there is no point at all.

Whatever happens next will just be a disappointment to what could have happened all along so why not just let this happen? It has to. Sooner or later.

Why argue with that? I don’t even know.

So I’m just going to sit here now. Let this shit come get me, since it has been coming for me.

It has been coming for me all along.

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**I count 253 steps**. And everything changes. It changes because now I can hear its breathing.

And the curdle of what lives there inside its breath.

This when I find out that whatever else can happen, if anything else can still happen, it could never be as bad as **that**.

So I run.

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**I’m only some several cubes** further along in the matrix of metal under the bleachers when I feel its entrance. All the snapping happening back there. And the torqueing squeal. Maybe there are worse things—but I haven’t met them yet.

My shins and elbow are already slick with warm blood from running into metal edges. I grope for my Maglite in the twisted fabric of my jean pocket and when I pull it out my Leatherman yanks up too and goes clattering away, lost. I click on the Maglite and shine it in front of me. I can’t even see the end. Just the corridor of jutting bars leaning away into blackness again. I hurdle over a bar and feel it hum from the thing squeezing under the bleachers behind me. Everything chatters from the immense pressure. Hot wind shoves at my back, stinking. Stinking a smell you would never believe could even be real. And all I can do is keep going.

I try to find some rhythm in all the hurdling to go faster. But I still keep smashing into each new bar I have to cross. And the cubes in front of me, each one frames the next one and on and on until the only mercy is the way they bend away slightly to obscure an infinity, as if on the curve of the earth, or the floor of the void beyond. And what this is, you think, you know you’ve seen it before. You’ve seen it before in Mom’s bathroom, staring at the space between the two mirrors. Each splice in that curve of mirrors a whole life you have lived or are living in which everything presents in exactly the same way as what came before. **Exactly the same as what is happening now**. And what else could there be. Was there ever any sort of chance? There is this cube and now this one and now this one, each one a cage shaking with the weight rushing in behind me and gaining. And if it doesn’t get me in this one it might get me in the next one, and if not that one then maybe the one after that. It is only ever the same. This is the answer to when you looked up in the sky when there were still a couple stars to be found there and you wondered what was meant by something like fate. This is what was meant.

I hurdle over another bar and land skating on something wet on the floor. I slide backwards and my head beats down across the bar behind me and then I’m out.

Almost. Oh. **Pain**.

My head’s too gummed up to make my body move, but I still won’t be out for it when it gets me. When it happens.

That’s too bad.

I hear another contracting pulse as it pushes through another cube and again, another. You can hear the metal bend around it and the wood above it splinter and crack. And then it pulses through again and there is more splintering and more cracking.

Some feeling tingles back into my hands and my fingers touch my Maglite, pillowed in the dust and ancient candy wrappers. I lean up as much as I can and shine it down near my feet so I can see what I slipped on.

It’s a wad of newspaper strips, soaked in flour water. I stare at it clinging around my sneaker like a washed up jellyfish.

This is what will happen. What always happens.

And I think I let Bil go. I let him go because I didn’t understand what was with him and I didn’t want to. And I wonder if maybe there could ever be a glimmer in one of these cubes or cages where I wouldn’t be here because I could have tried to help him. Maybe I would end up here anyways, but if I tried I’d still be better off. A whole hell of a lot better off.

It pauses in a cube and then pulses again. Only a couple more left.

But.

But if I’m still here, just barely. Maybe Bil is still here too, just barely.

Maybe there is still a chance. Just barely a chance.

So I stand. I stand up as tall as I can in this confine under the bench and I turn around. I hold my Maglite tight and I grit my teeth and I close my eyes. I keep my eyes shut because I know what will happen if I open them. And I shine the Maglite right at it, holding it with my arm straight out like some stupid wand. But it’s not stupid. It is magic. It is magic and it works because I say the magic words as I light it up. I say, “Fuck you,” and I say the words well.

And it works. Halfway through the pulse it shifts into a sort of shuddering halt. I don’t open my eyes. I just step backward still holding the light right at it and feel the next bar press against my waist. And carefully, I climb backwards over the bar, with my eyes still closed and my one hand still shining the Maglite at it. And I say “Fuck you,” again.

And then I’m out. I turn and open my eyes and already I know I’m out from under the bleachers because I know that when I open my eyes I will be.

And I am. And rather than look even once back at the bleachers I continue on. I raise up my amber circle of light and it lands on the ball closet standing there up ahead like a forgotten friend.

It looks like it always did, like maybe not everything in this town is meant to be taken away. And the strap is right there, clinging tight around its sides, holding in that flood of balls, the harbinger of gym hour.

But fuck that, I didn’t come here for a fucking strap. I didn’t come here for that.

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**I take the stairs** next to the ball closet. They go up through the side of the wall and enter stage left. I climb them to the landing and then consider my next move closely, as though one error in action through movement or direction might allow the return of the thing under the bleachers, or some other result just as bad.

The stage curtain is drawn before me like the surface of a deep underground lake—smooth and placid, nearly impossible to imagine there could be anything beyond it but endless darkness. I sweep the beam of my Maglite across it and the light is immediately engulfed, as if pulled right through the threads in the fabric. I shine the light upwards toward the ceiling, and find the length of the curtain spreading far beyond where I remembered it once hanging on the skinny metal tracks. The ceiling is gone and my eyes quickly lose sense of any notion of a horizon to the columns of velvet folds.

I try to determine which direction feels the most right—if I should look for a break in the curtain to my left or my right, crawl underneath it—or stay away from it entirely. Before I can attempt any of these actions, I hear the footsteps.

And for a moment I think the thing under the bleachers might be following me again, but then realize that these footsteps are cautious and small. I can barely hear them. They are only just within the fringe of all audible noise beyond the surface of the curtain.

I hold my breath and listen.

Each footstep is placed softly down within the space of several moments so that each one sounds solitary and discontinuous, not part of any human motion. I begin to convince myself it must be something else, but then I recognize what made me certain to begin with, inside the sound—an undertone: The skin on the bottom of a clammy foot sticking to the floorboards and then peeling away.

And as uncertain as I was about where I was going before, I am more uncertain now.

Then there is running. Feet slamming out over the stage. And my heart jolts like a cold metal wire is poking it. The air is pushed out of my lungs and I step back, no longer in control of the noise I’m making. The sprinting pounds across the floorboards beyond the curtain right at me.

And the Maglite is still on. I scrabble for the button and somehow I can’t find it so I take the light and push into my shirt, smothering it against my stomach.

I stand there frozen and try to figure out how to ready myself for when they come ripping through the fabric at me.

Then there is a **thud**. A thud I can feel shimmy up through the soles in my shoes. And someone starts gasping for air. Gasping for air in steady, achy gulps. The sound beats out at a strange meter and ripples into the matte spiral of silence and darkness constantly shifting all around.

I picture two warm hands reaching through my ribs to cup my heartbeat. Slowly it calms down and I can focus enough to try to listen again. I close my eyes and push my mind into my eardrums. Somehow I slip into here easily, like I’ve been in here before. I let my body fade away until I am just two eardrums floating in space. Two eardrums dilating, growing wide and sending tiny roots out into the muffled air beyond the curtain to pick up any stray vibration. They seek out in ranging hairs until they fill with the throbs of the gasping there. The sound splashes over them in powerful waves and the roots nearly get swept away in its current. Then they push past, through the sound and then they pick up something else. Something standing on the shore of those gasps.

There are three.

They stand over this person on the floor, just a kid, and my roots feel across the space around them until the solidity of their forms are transmitted to my brain through the static. I can almost touch them. When I listen they stick out like bits of cinder between my toes. It’s the same kind of feeling.

And I notice another noise. Little blips tapping away. Not quite Morse code but sort of close. Whispers that aren’t even whispers, just the hushed smacking of lips. One and then the other. A conversation.

A few more words are mushed out in their mouths and then it sounds like something has been decided.

I hold the flashlight against me and try to muffle the sound of the switch as I click it off.

And then one pair of feet starts moving in a direct line to where I am. I reel all my roots back in until I’m inside my body again. Maybe they can feel me too. I’m just as solid as they are. And whether they can or not, it doesn’t matter. They will find me either way. I need to make a decision. The pair of feet steps right up in front of me on the other side of the curtain and then stops.

And then there is the soft stutter of the velvet folds being lifted up.

I start running down the stairs. I don’t try at all to be quiet. I’ve got one idea right now and I don’t know if there is anything else I can do. The rubber on my soles drums across each step, booming. I try to picture the count of the steps in front of me and pray that I won’t miss one.

Then I’m on the gym floor and I ram up against the box of the ball closet, smacking my forehead. I don’t wait to feel the pain. I kick off my shoes and feel up against the box until I find the strap. My fingers trail it to the center where the cam is positioned.

The feet are moving down the stairs now. They are already close to the bottom.

I jam on the lever with my thumb and pull the cam loose. It catches for a second on the frayed webbing and then slips free. I yank on the strap and feel it slide out through the eyelets until it is in my hand. I turn around and feel the tremor of the feet coming down onto the floor next to me.

And then all the balls come flooding out.

I leap away before the balls have a chance to make me trip and I feel something grapple into the hair behind my neck. I tuck my chin to my chest and charge away. The fingers clamp down hard but I keep going. I feel my hair unwinding from the fist and I jerk forward before another hand joins the first. A clump of screaming hair detaches from my skull and then I’m free.

The balls rap out across the floor and I think I have maybe ten seconds to get away. Probably less since a lot of the balls are flat and slap down on the floor without a bounce and stop making any noise. I run into a slide before the far end of the stage and pull myself mutely over the lip. Then I am a ghost. I am a ghost who slides into the gap between the curtain and the wall where no one will know where I am.

I contract my stomach muscles and breathe through my nose as slow as I can. Slow enough that I can equalize with the air pressure and dissolve away. A few wiffle balls still roll clicking away across the floor and that’s it. I send my roots out for the one that found me at the closet. I hear a deflated ball whistle out more air as a mislaid foot lands on it. He’s still there. He doesn’t know where I am.

I allow myself to return attention to the ones on the stage. They are still standing by the kid on the floor. The gasping has calmed down into sniffling sobs. I listen to the sobs and then I know for sure it isn’t Bil. Bil doesn’t cry and if he did cry he wouldn’t cry like that.

We all stay in our places, none of us moving. The two standing over the kid remain still as if waiting for me or the other one to make another move.

I wait for them to stop waiting. And wait.

And then there is the sound of duct tape being stretched out. It stretches out for an arm’s length or even longer. The sound of the sobs is twisted and then gagged out.

Then the gagged sobbing is being dragged away. The kid who isn’t Bil slides limp across the floor with their fading steps, unresisting.

Then they are gone. They pass beyond my range of reception through an exit at the back of the stage. And standing in the darkness, alone on the edge of the stage, I think about one thing. I think about how it isn’t Bil who is being dragged away. I think about how maybe it is Bil who is dragging this kid.

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**I’m going to follow them**.

And I try to figure out the best way to do that. He is still near to the closet, looking for me. He steps in a broad, slow circle before stopping. I listen out, feel for his presence in the stillness when there is a whamming ripple sent out from him across the floor.

He’s trying to scare me out.

That’s not going to work.

I lean forward and press my whole body against the curtain. I feel the clumps of lint roll over my eyelids and I smell the fungus clinging to the sheet in rings of habitation. I try to get a better sense of its substance. How to pass beyond its boundary without alerting him to my intrusion.

Then he is moving again. He moves with purpose. He moves along the wall there and then he is at the bleachers. He thinks he will find me underneath them. And already I hear him move over the first bar.

Something tells me the thing under there, it’s still waiting for someone. Even if it isn’t me.

I’m not going to stick around any longer.

I can’t bear to hear the sound of when he thinks he has found me, only to find out he has found something else. I drop low and slide underneath the curtain.

Then I’m inside the stage and already skating in my socks to the back exit. I try to get there before I hear it. I try to make it in time to not hear a thing.

But before I get there, I hear him find it. There through the curtain back behind me.

And then I hear the sound of it finding **him**.

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**I try to remind myself** this is just a hallway. This is just the hallway where I always sat [*right there*] during lunchtime, cross legged on the floor with my bagel sandwich and library book. That was part of me. That happened.

But now it is hard to know which direction the floor is in. My feet want to go in all the wrong spots. The dark here is a storm. It pelts across me in wheels of flying grains that collide against each other into obliteration. I stumble over to the wall for guidance. When I find it something inside contracts when I touch it, like cartilage creaking. And I pull my hand away, realizing the wall is not likely to help me forward.

So what. I just need to keep going somehow. I’ll find Bil and I’ll—bring him home. I’ll make him come back with me. Then something will change. I have the strap still wrapped around my hand but that doesn’t matter. The fort doesn’t mean anything anymore. Something is going to change. Might still be able to. I’ll find him.

Or I’ll find something else. Something wrong. And then that will be it.

I reach up and touch the raw prickle at the back of my head. There is a bald patch there now, hiding under my hair. A small clearing in a dense forest. I’ll put myself there. I poke it with my fingernail and locate myself on that pinpoint of pain.

Then I close my eyes and stand still until I am certain of my center of gravity, my attachment to the floor. And I overlay my mental map of the school upon whatever this place is now, and I find myself on that map, a blinking dot. Then I walk forward.

And I pass by the rooms. What remains of the rooms that once claimed me.

This is the computer room where I had typing class last year.

This is the cooking room where the teacher wouldn’t ever let us eat the food we prepared.

This is the hallway to the woodshop. Mom wouldn’t let me take that class, despite my begging. She came and talked to the school counselor. So I spent that hour in the library.

This is the Responsible Thinking Classroom. I was sent here twice, for reasons.

This is the Study Hall.

This is Homeroom Class.

[*No life inside*. *Nothing left now at all*.]

I’m not sure where they went. I listen for footsteps, for smothered crying, for anything at all.

Maybe I will have to double back and search some of these rooms, even though I don’t want to. I remember what was once inside them. And I don’t want to find out what is inside them now.

I continue down the hallway. Past all the classrooms I never had a class in. Blank black boxes lining up on my map.

Here is the drinking fountain.

And here is the last row of lockers before the hallway turns corner and opens up into the lunchroom. I always stayed away from here. The stupid order of the tables. Who could sit where.

I’m still standing in the mouth of the hallway when I hear them. Their weird blipping. The hushed spit bubbling back and forth on their lips. Out in the middle of the lunchroom, between the rows of tables. I try to listen.

Except something else is in there. Something descending into the lunchroom—

[*a mountain*]

—unmaking this space. I can feel it creeping down in increments.

My hair sifts up around my face, pulled forward in the air. And my feet are buzzing. I can only just stop them from walking straight in to surrender me. I keep my knees locked and lean backwards.

I need to find out what is still left.

I guide my roots out again, calm like smoke along the floor. Under the fuzz pillowed in the carpet. Seeking out, testing each new inch carefully. I find the tables and chairs turned over into a mad mess, piled into a barricade. I sneak through the spaces underneath. And beyond—wet blankets of scrap. And stink. Something lying on the floor I can’t force myself to investigate. So I go around it.

Here they are. Their cold dusty feet. I can feel them gripping the kid who isn’t Bil. There is a damp slide of something across his skin. They are papering him up. Packaging him. I can smell the sour glue on him. He worms away from the process and one of the two steps down on his stomach. He huffs out pain.

I don’t know how to stop this. I don’t know if I believed I ever could.

So I just remain still at their feet and watch. And I don’t do a thing.

**This is when it touches me**. The sting of it pushing through, leeching into my roots.

Scuttling in like hands made out of drills.

Oh no and **saws**. I pull the roots back but I **can’t—***Andit’seatingmeit’seatingme*—tear it out it’s in me

tear it **out**

**And I screamed.**

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**I don’t hear them come** for me when they do and then I’m being picked up off the floor. I can’t hear anything beyond this awful ringing. And I try to move, to do anything beyond lay here stiff and shivering, but something’s wrong—something is out of line in me now. All I can do is feel his arms tighten around my stomach and yank me up against his body.

The kid that is holding me is big and his terrible breath in my face is a smell I find I’m already acquainted with, despite my current state. The departed sound of his name clicks over and over through the clunking of my leaden head, unexisting now in my memory. But still I remember him. I remember who this is. And I wonder if he can somehow remember me. I really hope he can’t.

He starts dragging my limp body and my head bends backwards toward the floor, where the severed ends of my roots graze the carpet with each step and send bundles of shrieking alarms slicing across the undermeat of my skull. I don’t know why I can’t pull them back in my head or lose them; they tangle in a haze around me, each end speaking **pain**, each end speaking **end**.

And this goes on.

I get dropped to the floor. My head lands on the other kid I think. Maybe his foot. Maybe his face. I feel the clammy slick of pulp and glue on him press onto my neck. I wonder if I ever knew this kid before, if we were friends or ever had class together or once joined eyes and had a slivered glimpse that we would share the same fate. I feel his frantic, half-suffocated attempts to breathe under the mesh of paper and tape on his face. And I wish I could do something for him.

“*I’m sorry*,” I feel myself whisper.

And then I get stomped in the stomach. It hurts but just barely, compared to this other pain.

This pain of being partially eaten away.

And whatever it is that did this to me, I begin to notice it again, overhead and within this room—all around. A denser coagulation of certain menace. Cascading inward, applying its own sick gravity to the room. And then I feel it noticing me notice it.

The air goes thick like wet cement and gets stuck in my lungs. It holds me down and I can’t even cough. Can’t inhale or exhale at all. The belly of the kid underneath me buckles, heaving. And then it wraps down rushing and brings us both inside its choking weight.

The ringing in my ears is smothered out.

And the weight, the **weight**, to feel this extended around me forever.

Everything inside me is going to collapse.

As if knowing this, it peels away a tiny bit and a small bubble of oxygen finds its way into my lungs. It holds me like I am nothing but a tiny puppet. I’m slid away from the other kid and then he is gone.

And it strums across my ribs and prickles upon every part of me. Pondering. My skin is scoured by a billion-trillion frozen needles sneaking all over me.

And then I hear it say my name.

It says my name, its slow groan caked in maggot crust and cold hunger bubbling into my ear through the shredded ends of the roots.

It says my name in smears of tar pulsing through an ocean of thrashing veins.

It says my name inside something like a laugh and I feel it wreathe around and around me.

And laughing, it grips me and begins stabbing itself into what remains of my ears.

**And this pain is worse**.

This pain is Nothing. Nothing writhing into me.

To unmake me.

**Or remake me into something else.**

Something I can’t stand to think about.

I can’t think.

I can’t—

[*I am a statue of stone. Crumbling in the sunlight.]*

**Sherrressssee**

[*This is all that I am. Pain is outside of me, unconnecting.*]

**We are of one Shheresssse**

**[***There is no Sherese. There is only stone.*]

**We have Bil**

[*There is only stone.*]

**We feasted on godfleshhh** [*There is only stone.*] **and awokee to** **enter here through the carrcass** [*There is only stone.*] **and now we will feasst and ennter thenn through you** [*There is only stone crumbling to pebble and dirt and joining the rest of all pebble and dirt upon hills*] **like we diid withh your brother** [*to swallow into further pebble and dirt under further hills*] **like we did withh Bil** [*to find further stone and be remade further again.*] **join him throughh uss through you**

[*This is the life cycle of all rock.*]

***Liissttennn***

I don’t listen. When I click on the Maglite with its bulb already pressed up against my ear the flash wipes white-hot through every bit of me, searing. And then it is gone. There is nothing there to listen to.

I feel the floor against my back. And I open my eyes. The Maglite burns flooding across my face and I turn away crisped.

I was almost turned there. I was almost not I. I wasn’t—

He grabs me by the hair. **Demetri**. That’s his name. Demetri yanks my hair and my neck gets wrenched into the wrong direction.

But I still have the Maglite on. I hold it tight. And I blast him in the face with it. My eyes adjust to the brightness and I see him stumble away clawing at his eyes. Why isn’t he wearing any clothes? He’s all covered in the crust of something, a different skin. Like Bil was, that one day.

I swing the light around and look for the kid they took. He was right there, beside me. There is just a wet bundle of paper and plastic there now. And these other mounds around me, these other piles of scraps—

I get grabbed from behind. This time by Demetri’s friend. I didn’t hear him coming. He grapples around me and his hot breath on my cheek doesn’t make any sound. His slimed fingers slide down my arms. And then he starts licking my neck.

I’m done with this.

“Fuck you,” I say squirming, or try to. The words—I feel them leave me but they make no sound. No sound at all.

So I stomp down on his toes as hard as I can. He lets go. And I face him. This kid all spent of any substance. He is grinning at me with wide lips covered in spit, his face lost of all symmetry. And he hobbles back toward me.

I still have the strap wrapped around my hand. I let it fall unraveling from my wrist and then I swing it at him as hard as I can. It strikes him in the eye. He curls up into a ball even before he hits the floor. I step over him and then I bring the Maglite down like a hammer on his hands reaching for my waist.

Demetri is coming back at me from my side when he sees this happen. And he stays wide of me. I step back and keep the light pinned on him. He squints at me, smiling at our standoff. His mouth jumbles up and down, drooling. He’s trying to scare me by saying something like always did. He doesn’t realize I can’t hear a thing.

*I know what you are. You’re just Demetri. You’re still just Demetri and that is all.*

I bolt away and he sees his opening.

That’s what I thought.

I immediately swing around with the strap flying in a grim arc. Too fast to even see it hit him. But he stops. Hunching over. His hands grip his throat and he stays there holding himself.

I’m already running away. I don’t need to see what happens to them next. I already know.

I run out of the lunchroom, down the hallway. Just a dark hallway.

It is just a dark hallway.

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**Inside the fort** I wait for the end. It’s coming soon. It’s real close. I can’t even see my hands now—haven’t been able to see anything at all for a while now. Maybe it’s here already.

So what.

**What was still left didn’t matter.**

I got out of the school. I left the boards where they were in the wagon and walked home. I didn’t run. It was all dark—everything. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to find home, or what remained of it.

My Maglite died as I started going back up the the hill. I couldn’t hear and I couldn’t see and I kept falling over rocks and sticks. Routine would not guide me. I barely knew where I was. I was not somewhere. I was crawling the rest of the way.

Eventually I found the fort. I didn’t find our house. Despite knowing where it would be, where it is—it’s still not there. I looked for so long. The longest time. Crawling in circles. Grasping. It’s just not there.

I fell back inside the fort through the hole in the boards, still reaching for the porch steps. There’s still no finished ceiling here. Nothing to protect me, to hold back—what? Just this. Nothing. And nothing else is going to come.

I crawled under the pile of quilts and stayed there in a tiny ball. I’ve been here ever since. And I’ll be here forever still. In this tunnel that leads to nowhere.

I wonder where it would have lead if I hadn’t stopped digging.

I had stopped when I did because Bil’s backpack had found me in the ground. I was chopping away at one bit of the wall and then it was just there. Not where I buried it. But it fell out of the wall anyways and then it was there at my feet. Stinking fresh. So I buried it again farther away across the hill. I should have burned it instead.

I should have burned it because some amount of time will go by where I’m not sure if I’m asleep or awake—now it’s like there is no difference between the two—and I think if I turned or moved at all some part of me will touch it, will touch Bil’s backpack. Like it has returned and been waiting for so long just for that. To remind me of how wrong I was.

But I don’t know that. I tried to though. I really tried to know something.

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**All that there is** is just this.

And still.

And still.

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**Every hour now** is just one hour, all the same.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**There**.

Something.

Something there.

Touching. Touching something.

Touching me. Something touching me.

Was it there. Here. Against my something. My something—arm.

Does it move?

It does.

Arm does something. Does different moves.

What? All of me?

*Yes*. *You move*.

I move. I am moving.

I am touching it.

*So what is it?*

It is tough. No. Hard.

It doesn’t move. But I can move it.

*Maglite*.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**This is all still here.** Somehow. Somehow I’m here too. I’m holding the Maglite. I click the switch and nothing happens. The light in there died. There is no light left.

The quilt is still on top of me. I can feel the dirt that has sifted inside of my shirt.

Inside this tunnel. The fort. Still something. What else is here?

Empty cans. A spoon. A dirty knife. My box of Sulphur matches, empty. Some other things.

*Batteries?*

A few. Used ones though. I remember this pile.

*Try them*.

What’s the point.

Okay.

I was right. Still nothing.

*There’s two more.*

[*sigh*]

There. See?

**What**.

*What?*

Shining.

It’s *shining*.

It is on.

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**The Maglite stays on** for maybe a couple minutes and then it dies again. Long enough to leave the afterglow of the tunnel seared through in my head, the blistering clutter of this tiny cavern.

For what end? Now it’s dark again.

*So. There’s still light to be found*.

Not really. I’ve tried that already.

Bil and I both did.

*Written in your booklet*.

Yeah. In the booklet. It’s right here, too.

*Look.*

How. Maglite’s dead.

*Try.*

The Maglite stays on again for something like a minute and dies. In the time it’s on I study the pages holding my smeared maps of what we found. Our light pockets or whatever. Dumb things. Dumb how much I tried. How much I cared. Each feverish written detail. Each page aching to matter. All the notations scribbled everywhere.

‘this one is not just here’

‘only with eyes closed’

‘ones in the storm drain could be speaking’

‘has knocking sound’

‘Bil says we need to look bigger’

*He’s right.*

Why? I don’t know what he meant.

*The maps. They are too small.*

It was the biggest book I had that hadn’t molded through.

*No. The maps. They are drawn too close. Too tight together.*

That was how I could fit it in.

*And what you didn’t fit?*

It was everything we found.

*You’re not convinced.*

It’s too late to get it right.

*So remain here.*

*Having never tried.*

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**I gather the pages** one by one and tear them free of the book. I’m not sure why. To quiet this dumb notion still here. This last thread in my life that hasn’t torn free. So. I’ll let it learn the hard way.

I find one of the scrap boards hanging over the top of the fort above me. Then I take the cam strap and tie one end over the stick, and wind the rest of it tight around the handle of my Maglite. Eventually I get it to hang there in front of me, after a stupid amount of time. The next step is to fan out these pages, get them ready. Try to understand what I can before I see them again for the last time.

Not anything obvious. Damp and fuzzy with loose fibers. Certain spots worn completely through. Some bits that have balled up away from the pages to further remove any meaning from this place that was once a place.

Okay.

I click the light on. Once I blink away the bitter glare, I can see the marks and lines and words again, smearing away, close to illegible.

And this, being the last thing I will ever look at.

Feels like a bad joke. And I don’t know where to start looking for the punchline.

I find the pages that mark what we found closest to our house. And because I don’t know what else to do, I start working my way out from here on the maps. Across the hill and then down to the neighborhood below. Some of the pages overlap and between others there are huge gaps. It looks like a mess, not anything like a map at all. Nothing here fits together.

The Maglite dies. That was maybe forty seconds.

I turn it on again and begin counting. I finish putting the remaining pages into place in seventeen seconds. When the light goes out at twenty-six I still haven’t figured out anything new. All those **X**’s plotting off into nowhere. All of them gone now. I don’t know where a single one could still be.

It’s only when I turn the light on a couple more times, the latest lasting for only five seconds that I notice something. Not a direction or a place. Not exactly. Just the pockets that we found—when most of them faded out—the ones that lasted longest condense down on the pages in a certain way. Not in a trail. Not even in some sort of correlation. Just that it looks a thing. Like a—*constellation*.

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**A constellation, exactly.** Two more seconds looking at it makes it a little more obvious. The way it pivots away from our house in the axis of some arm, and ends there at the end of its shape at the last one we found, the one inside those trees. And this shape, I don’t know what it could be. It looks sort of tangible but it could just be something inside me forcing some meaning.

I pull myself out of the fort. I can feel the dirt scratch over my cracked palms but in this total darkness it hardly feels real. Hard to believe even the ground is still left.

But still I stand up. And somehow I start walking. I focus hard on the rhythm and sensation of my footsteps to be sure that is what I am actually doing.

The sounds are all gone now, my ears still reeling with ache. And that ache, along with the touch of my hair against my cheek, or the cuffs of my jeans gripping my ankles—all of that is already starting to feel faint. Part of some final fade. And I’m not sure if I’m ready for what comes after that. But maybe I am.

I’ve got the Maglite in my back pocket. I don’t think it has anything left. Probably nothing more than a blink.

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**So that’s it**. That’s all there is. I’ve traced the whole thing. I’m pretty sure I followed it well. Still nothing. This constellation, or whatever it is, it’s just dead like the rest. As if they ever meant anything anyways. Just imagined outlines surrounding nothing. Shaping nothing. Pointing to nothing.

So I’m going to sit down. My knees are numb and rubbery. My jeans are stuck to my shins with blood. And I’m tired. Tired of learning the same thing too many times.

When I slump down on the ground the Maglite jams against my hip. I pull it out of my pocket and fall back against a rotten stump. It caves in into a mound of dust and cradles my head like a pillow. This is where we found it, the ghosthouse. In the cluster of trees behind me. I passed through between them and felt the bald slick of their barkless trunks, just like the rest of the woods now. And no kind of light held there within them.

Did it really even happen? In a life like this one, could such a thing even be real?

*Bil knew. He saw it too. He found it*.

I want to see one last time. Any kind of thing. I take the Maglite and point it ahead of me. And I click the switch.

The flashlight lurches in my hand and a hazy twitch of light flashes away and then gone, pulled away into the black of the woods beyond.

I hold the Maglite and run my finger across the rim near the bulb. Broken glass pricks into my skin. The bulb is shattered.

And I toss it aside. I wish I hadn’t hoped. I wish I hadn’t hoped for just a little bit more.

I sink down further into the pit of the stump and start to close my eyes.

But then I don’t.

I start to see something. Something there ahead. A tiny breath of light, far away in the dark. So faint I can only see it through the corner of my eyes. But it’s there.

It saw me too.

I pull myself out of the stump. Detritus cascades down my back. When I stand up it takes me awhile to find it again. I think maybe it’s gone but then it breathes again and I see it. A response. It wants me to find it.

I stumble forward. I want to run but I know that I can’t. I don’t know how many more times I can fall before I won’t be able to get myself back up.

For the longest time I weave through the woods, through the narrow of the gulley towards that light, my head filled dumb with hope. My heart spiking raw. It’s not getting any closer. I’m not getting closer.

Is it leaving?

It’s leaving.

Then I can’t see it at all. I’m climbing up a tall slope, pulling loose rocks and slipping on cinders just to gain another inch. I hope I’m still going in the right direction. It feels like I am but I don’t know.

I reach a mossy ledge and claw myself over. I have to worm through a wall of scrubbing thorns just to make sure I don’t fall back down. I feel my shirt catch and then rip long down my side but still I keep going.

And when I’m through I push over the top and finally, it is there.

Gathered ahead and glowing in the distance. Gleaming for me. I can see the path ahead. I can see what’s at the end of it, just a glimmer.

A breeze slips across my skin and my arms shiver. It’s cold here. Like it’s going to storm. Let it come. I’m ready for it.

I can see my hands. The brittle needles snapping under my feet. I keep going to where it all rises up into that last bit of light. Almost at its edge now. It bends across and around me now, like a flood. And beyond—the other side is waiting. It’s still left.

**But if I looked back**