

Are you scared easily?

That's what my trainer asked me on my first day of training. I said no, of course not, or I wouldn't be working in the middle of the woods. Apparently that wasn't the right answer, because my trainer just shook his head and asked me again. I thought about it, then said I supposed it depended on what there was to be scared of out here. If we were referring to bears, then yes, I was easily scared of a raging animal that's three times my size. If we were referring to the nameless threat of monsters and ghosts in the dead of night-

He stopped me there. I guess I'd given him the answer he wanted. He gestured for me to follow, and we started our hike around the main trail of the park. As we walked, we'd stop periodically point to something.

A big tree. 'Two years ago we found a kid lying under this tree. He'd frozen to death during a blizzard. Wandered off and circled back here before we could get to him.'

We walked a bit further, then took a dogleg off the path to the right until we reached a steep bluff. He pointed.

'Down there is where we found the body of a mother and her newborn baby. We don't know how they got there. My guess is she wanted to breastfeed and didn't want to do it on the main path.'

A mile further, and we stopped at a rocky cliff face. He pointed up.

'A kid disappeared right there where you're standing. We found his body halfway up that cliff a month later. We'd searched there at least four times. We don't know how he got there.'

We walked for at least five miles into the woods. There were so many stories and stops

that I lost count. I wasn't sure what point he was trying to make. I just nodded and followed along. At the deepest part of the trail, where a very clear marker had been placed to advise that the trail ended, he kept going into the trees. I stepped over obstacles with great care, while he seemed to know the area by heart. I asked him where we were going, but he just kept going without looking to see if I was keeping up.

I'm not sure how far we walked, probably a half mile or so, when I saw something ahead of us. Through the trees, I could barely make out the right angles of it, and if there's one thing even the least savvy person knows, it's that nature doesn't make right angles. My trainer led us right to it, but the closer we got, the more unsure his steps became. He stumbled for the first time since we'd gone off the path, and I got the sense that he was taking us here only because some sense of duty demanded he do it. We came to the clearing where the angled thing was, and as we broke the treeline, I stopped in my tracks and just stared. I thought it was a practical joke. I looked at him, but he was staring off to the side, facing away from me. We were quiet, looking at the thing.

It was a staircase. A perfect, brand new one. It looked as if it had come from one of the pre-fabbed development houses you see everywhere these days. The carpet was off-white, and it even had a little landing at the bottom. For a crazy second, I could feel a distinct sense of tilting. As if I couldn't quite deal with what I was seeing, and I remember thinking that that was how people who went crazy must feel. As if they're falling, not quickly, but as if guided by something. I shook it off, but I was definitely shaken. I couldn't stand the way we just stood there, as if the stairs were some wild thing that demanded caution. I started to move forward, but my trainer threw his arm out and stopped me. He looked at the stairs, brows furrowed, and spoke

very quietly.

'They're everywhere out here. You'll see them just about every time we go out on a call. It's normal.'

He looked me in the eyes as he said that, driving home the point. I nodded and looked back at the stairs. I noticed that there was no debris on them. No pine needles or animal shit or even dirt. A word popped into my head, and once it got there I couldn't get rid of it. Wrong. It would make a great story on those alien and Bigfoot websites, I thought. I could see the article, a big one on the front of those black-and-white magazines in grocery stores that scream about Batboy and the lady who married a Yeti. *Stairs in the Woods: What Do They Mean?*

'When we get back to the center, I'm gonna give you a couple of forms. You're gonna sign them, even if you don't want this job anymore. You're not gonna talk about anything I've told you today. That goes especially for these. You're not gonna talk about 'em, you're not gonna take pictures of 'em. You're not gonna go to any newsy type places and tell them about how there's weird shit going on out here. You understand me?'

I nodded, a little perturbed.

'I'm gonna give you a little word of advice, son. You're gonna see 'em everywhere. They're never gonna look the same, and that's fine. Maybe they're big, maybe they're small. Maybe they're falling apart and maybe they're like these and they're brand new. You probably won't ever see the same ones twice, but supposin' you do, it's nothing to worry about. That bein' said, you're not gonna go near 'em. This, right here? This is as close as you're ever gonna get. You're not gonna touch 'em or ever, ever go up 'em. And you sure as hell aren't gonna go blabbin' around to the visitors about how they might see 'em, 'cause most of 'em won't. And if they do,

you're just gonna send 'em right to me.'

He stopped ahead. Watched the stairs carefully for a moment.

'They're normal, son. They've been out here as long as I've been here, and that's a long damn time. We all know about 'em. I'm sure you're gonna have a lot of questions, and I know you'll be askin' around about 'em. That's normal too. But you probably won't have a lot of luck talkin' to anyone who's been here more than a year. And sooner or later, you'll get that way too, assumin' you stick around. You'll figure out that they're just somethin' you gotta deal with, and you'll find the urge to talk about them is less... well, there, I guess. And then some rookie will come and ask you about it, and you'll just tell 'em exactly what I'm tellin' you: that they're normal, and that it's nothin' to worry about.'

I didn't exactly believe him, but I just nodded again. There were too many questions to ask, but I one seemed more urgent than the others.

'Why can't we touch them?' I finally asked. 'What happens if we do?'

He cleared his throat and shifted.

'Son, all I can tell you is that a kid once asked me that about a rattlesnake with no venom. I was workin' for another park, and we had it on display in the animal exhibit. Kid wants to know why we can't hold 'im, since he's got no poison. I told the kid that just 'cause that rattler's got no venom doesn't mean he can't bite. I opened the top of the rattler's tank and I provoked him a little. Snake hisses and lunges at me, just about gets me. Kids all scream. I put the lid on the tank and some of the kids are cryin'. The little boy is starin' at me, and I say, 'you still wanna hold 'im?''

He looks at me carefully.

'There's gonna be a lot of things out here you're gonna see that are gonna make you curious. You're gonna wanna talk about 'em and figure 'em out. Go explore 'em and see what's what. But any time that happens, I want you to think about that rattler, son. You understand me?'

I nod.

'Now I'm gonna ask you again, Brauer. Are you scared easily?'

I thought about it.

'I don't know, sir.'

He nods.

'That's the right answer.'

* * *

We had a missing persons call yesterday, one of the first this season. The summer is over, so traffic is light, and we're officially in our Fall/Winter schedule. This means the park closes early, and certain paths aren't open to the public. We do that for a variety of reasons, like animal territories moving and problems with weather-related obstacles. But of course, there's always some idiot who thinks they know better, and they decide to go down there anyway. Maybe they wanna do drugs, or take photos, or have the 'sex in the woods' fantasy. That almost never turns out the way people think. They forget that there's dirt out there; tree trunks aren't soft and cushioned, animals make crazy noises all around the forest, and bugs tend to fly into the most moist areas of the body within seconds. There's nothing sexy about having to stop banging your girlfriend because her ass is full of splinters from the stump you've got her propped on, or

because your dick is covered in crushed gnats. Most of the time, I don't even have to break up any sexual escapades because the forest does it for me. You'll see a couple walk out of the park, their heads hanging, the guy holding the blanket which is bristling with pine needles, and you can bet your ass you'll never see them again. On the few occasions a couple perseveres, I'll let them finish, assuming no kids are nearby. If you can make it to orgasm while banging against a tree, the bark crumbling and getting in your eyes and mouth, you've earned it.

But like I said, sometimes people wander off the path because they think they're a lot more savvy than they really are. The father with a few camping trips under his belt assures his nervous wife and kids that the closed trail is just meant to deter the 'newbies'. It'll be fine, he says, as he leads them around the signs. What he doesn't know is that that area is full of rutting male moose, which are some of the angriest animals out there to begin with. Or that a river overflowed its banks after the summer storms and made the whole area unstable. That's when most of our search and rescue calls come in. Injuries, deaths, missing persons. They're always the worst in the Winter/Fall.

Yesterday, it was a little boy. His parents took him and his sister out to look at the changing leaves. His father, obviously the expert, took them into an area we'd blocked off due to landslides. According to him, his kids were right beside him and their mother. They came to the part of the path where it had been blocked by the slide, and the kids wanted to climb around on it. Seeing nothing wrong with this, their parents let them. Parents get lulled into a false sense of security in national parks, and I don't understand why. I guess they think that even if it's roped off, it can't be that bad. Or maybe they see it some sort of great adventure, a story to tell their kids when they're older and don't care anymore.

Well this is one story this little boy probably isn't going to hear.

The kids were climbing around on this mound of rock and debris, and the boy made it to the other side. His parents lost sight of him, and sent his sister over to get him. The sister stops responding to them, and they go after her. They get to the other side, and, lo and behold, the kids are gone. They search the area, looking all over, and there is no sign of these kids. It's as if they just vanished off the face of the earth.

The father stayed where the kids were last seen, and the mother ran back to the visitor center. We determined that the kids were, in fact, missing, and we let the sheriff's office know. They said they'd send a deputy up to help us, but in these cases we start the search as soon as we determine that the child is missing. Six of us moved out, and we established a meeting point near the mound. A search for a missing person is conducted in a grid pattern, and each square of that grid is searched incredibly thoroughly. If the search is expanded, the grid grows, and more people become involved. In this case, we had no reason to suspect that these kids had gone far, or in separate directions, but we figured we'd operate under a relatively large grid just in case.

I went with the team looking for the missing girl. My partner and I took the west side of the grid, since it went downhill, and most people will go downhill if it's possible. Immediately, we started seeing signs that someone had been through the area very recently. Broken branches, a piece of cloth caught on a branch, footprints in the soil. It only took us about ten minutes to find the girl. She was sitting on a stump, kicking her feet and eating something. Of course, my first thought was that she'd found some mushrooms. That's happened before, though not to me. My best friend, Brian, has seen it first hand. A little boy at a handful of mushrooms, and by the time he'd gotten the kid to the ambulance, he was already convulsing. Kid didn't end up making it.

I didn't want a repeat of that experience, so I ran over and opened her hand. She looked at me and smiled.

'Jim?' I called, not taking my eyes off her red-stained face. 'Get over here.'

My partner ran over. He crouched down beside me.

'Russ, what's the matter, do we need to call in a med code? Is she- oh my god, are those blackberries?'

The little girl giggled and popped another berry in her mouth. Jim and I looked at each other.

'Sweetie, where did you find those?' Jim asked her carefully. 'Did your mommy give those to you before you came out here?'

The little girl shook her head emphatically, chewing.

'No, the man gave them to me.' She swallowed with gusto and smiled at us.

I immediately radio in that we'd found the girl, but there was no sign of the boy. I added that it was a possible abduction, and that the girl was reporting her brother being taken by an unknown male. I stood up and started to survey the area. I could hear Jim quietly talking to the girl behind me.

'Where's your brother, sweetheart, where's he at? Did he come out here with you?'

The Incident Commander radioed me back for more information, and we had a brief conversation. I could hear the conversation continuing between Jim and the girl, but I couldn't make it out over the radio. By the time I'd finished, Jim was standing in front of the girl and trying to get my attention.

'What's up, did she tell you where he went?' I asked. Jim looked troubled. Very troubled.

Not a good sign, I thought. He takes me a few feet away, occasionally looking at the girl over his shoulder. She's still sitting, happily eating the berries.

'Russ, she says a man took her and her brother out here. She keeps saying he was 'fuzzy', and that he had a 'funny face'. She says he brought them out here, and gave her those berries so she could eat while he played with her brother. Kid says the last she saw, the man was carrying her brother on his shoulders, and they went into the forest.' He wrings his hands, looking around in all directions.

'Shit... which way did they go?'

Jim points south. I radio the info in, and once the new team has moved in, Jim and I escort the girl back to her parents. Once she's safe, Jim and I head back out to help with the search. Neither of us says anything until we're away from the others, in a search grid south of where we found the girl.

'Russ-' Jim starts.

'I know.'

He doesn't have to tell me.

Blackberry season ended months ago.

Chapter 2

You don't start out as a Forest Ranger when you get hired. It's a lot like med school, actually. You start at the bottom and you claw your way up, putting in ridiculous hours and kissing as many asses as you can. You start out as a cadet, learning the basics of law enforcement, and participating in intensive training. You're also doing the jobs that no one else wants: picking up trash, repairing signs, maintaining the visitors' center. And you do those jobs with a smile. You're grateful for every single task you get because it gets you one step closer to being out there, with the big boys. But deep down, you're resentful. You want to go out on the big jobs. You know you can handle them; the only thing that separates you from the Rangers is a title and a few years of tromping out in the woods. You stay up late at night, researching the indigenous plants in your area, so you'll know what to tell people to avoid. You learn the symptoms that are displayed when someone eats a poisonous mushroom. You brush up on your First Aid, and when that isn't enough, you take classes to become a certified Wilderness First Responder. You follow the experienced Rangers around, probing them for advice. You become so dedicated to your job and moving up that the Rangers start getting irritated with you. They go to the big boss and tell them to just move you up, for Christ's sake, you're getting in the way. And when they move you up, after almost a year of bottom-feeding, you're proud. You're more proud than you've ever been in your life. The first job you go out on, you're flying. You're going by the book, working twice as hard as everyone else and feeling superior for it. You think *man, I'm gonna be the best damn Ranger this place has ever seen. I'm gonna love this job forever.*

Then you find your first dead kid. He's lying under a tree, frozen to death, only half a mile away from the visitors' center. You get to tell the parents that their child is dead, and listen

to them scream.

You lose your first hiker. The dogs can't pick up his scent, even though he was spotted by several other people before he vanished. His kids have to bury an empty casket four months later.

You see the stairs on almost every call you go on. At first, you do exactly what your trainer says you'd do, and you badger everyone for information on them. You do research online and in libraries, trying to find any leads. But the people you talk to shut you down, and your research leads nowhere. Slowly, you get used to them. They're part of the job now. A nuisance to be worked around. They become black spots on your grid searches, places everyone avoids without discussion. And then one day, you go out on a call, and you see a set that looks like it's right out of a house on the set of *Gone with The Wind*, spiraled banisters and polished cherrywood. You see it, and you realize you don't even want to know why they're there. You want to find the girl who fell down the cliff and hasn't been seen since. You lose your drive to go near them, inspect them, and they become just what you were told they'd be: normal.

And your job, the job you worked so hard for, starts to seem like maybe it wasn't worth all the effort you put into it. But you signed the confidentiality agreements, you've put so many hours and so much work into this job, your dream, that you can't leave. So you go to work every day, and you still love the woods, but you don't work in them anymore. You work around them. And in the back of your head, you keep a chant going at all times, to block out all the thoughts that would love to come bursting out from behind it: *it's normal, it's normal, it's normal.*

* * *

I couldn't sleep last night. I was thinking about that kid who's missing, and listening to

the rain. I wondered about where he was, and if he was staying dry. I don't normally let myself think about things like that, but I couldn't help it. I imagined him curled under a log, listening to the same rain. Cold, wet, his shoes soaked, hungry. His thumb in his mouth, trying to sleep with his arm going numb under his head. I felt my warm sheets around me, looked out the window, was suddenly aware of the roof above my head and the fact that the only thing separating me from that little boy was a layer of wood less than two feet thick. I got up and ran to the bathroom; I made it in time to get most of the vomit in the toilet. I cleaned up the rest and went to sit outside on the deck. The rain was cold, and I could hear thunder in the distance. I looked out into the woods behind my backyard, and I imagined the little kid who was somewhere out there, hungry and alone. Then I started thinking about how I assumed he was still alive, and that led me down a different road. Suddenly his thumb wasn't in his mouth, because he didn't have any hands. Scavengers had eaten off his fingers, and the soft bits of him, like his eyes and lips and tongue. I imagined the rain falling into the pits of his eyes, what kind of sound it would make. Would he still have a nose? I saw him lying under that log, his body stiff from rigor mortise, the gases starting to make him bloat. Soon he'd be wedged in there too tight for us to get out in one piece. We'd have to lift the log up, move it out of the way carefully so we wouldn't pop him like a water balloon. We'd slide him out, his skin damp and clammy from the rain and decomp, and we'd have to have one of the parents ID him because he could have been anyone at that point, any little boy who'd been left in the rain too long, and we wouldn't be able to tell who he was anymore, not for sure; no open casket for that kid, no sir, that's not something the coroner can make pretty with some fake eyes and makeup. He'd go straight into the ground in a sealed box, a little one, maybe bright blue with cheerful teddy bears painted on it, and his parents and sister

standing around the grave, tossing in flowers, wishing they'd never gone into the woods, the father blaming the mother and the mother blaming the sister and the sister will never be the same, she'll blame herself for it all her life, blame herself for her parents divorce and inability to love her because she led her baby brother away, got him killed out there in the woods only a few miles from Burger King and the shopping mall and--

I threw up over the side of the deck. I went back inside, soaked and shivering, and picked up the phone. I called the police department, asked them if they'd had any updates. They hadn't. Of course they hadn't. Not even volunteers would be out searching this late, in this weather. They'd be at home, like me, safe in their warm beds, probably not even thinking of the little boy out in the woods that night, or about the ruined family tossing in their beds somewhere in town. The mother staring at the ceiling, tears pouring silently down her cheeks. Clutching the kid's favorite stuffed toy. Talking to him in her head. The father on his side, facing away, eyes open and staring at the clock, watching the minutes inch by. Waiting until he can get up and go back out to look for his son, who is afraid of the dark and can't sleep unless his daddy checks under the bed for monsters. The daughter, who sleeps but dreams of blackberries and a furry man who takes her brother away into a place she can't follow, a hollow place where it's dark and cold and there are many things with many great mouths that are so very hungry. She cries out in her sleep, but neither parent tends to her. All of them are fighting on their own through their nightmares tonight.

I set an alarm for four-thirty, when the sun would begin to rise. I'd be one of the first to work that day, ready to restart the search. I fell asleep on the floor, my arm curled under my head, my hair soaking the sleeve of my shirt. I couldn't bring myself to sleep in my bed. It

wouldn't have been right.

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I'd bugged a lot of people about the stairs since my promotion to Ranger. I'd ask them leading questions, probe for answers and stories, but they'd rarely give me any useful information. I did learn, though, that they rarely stayed put longer than a few days, and you almost never saw the same one twice. It also seemed that there was some connection between their appearances and the calls for lost and missing people. But no one seemed willing to talk about their experiences with them. They'd rattle off some half-hearted story about seeing one on a call for a lost climber, or a missing kid being found near one, and then they'd suddenly remember rounds they needed to complete, or projects to work on. It was frustrating, and I began to suspect that it was all some kind of big hoax that I wasn't privy to. It was incredibly frustrating, and only made me work harder for answers. I kept at it until I was formally warned to stop harassing people, and I reluctantly backed off. Then, I had a stroke of brilliance, and I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it before. The only person I had neglected to push for information. The last person who might solve the mystery for me.

The last person was my friend, Brian. We worked in separate areas of the park, which is why it hadn't immediately occurred to me to talk to him. He'd made Ranger status a few years before, and had been out on a lot of calls. He'd tell me about them if I asked, but he'd never mentioned the stairs. We met up for lunch at my insistence one day, on the pretext of me asking him about some job-related questions. He was more than happy to help, and was spewing out advice about everything from first aid to the best spots to spy on hot girls skinny-dipping in the rivers. But when I asked about the stairs, he suddenly became uncharacteristically

uncomfortable.

“I dunno, dude, I mean we had the same training, so you probably know as much as I do.”

We were sitting in the employee break area, a small room hidden in the back of the visitors' center, eating our lunches. I'd only recently become a Ranger, and had only seen a few sets during my calls. I was itching to know more about them.

“Yeah, but you've seen more of them than I have. Are they ever huge? Do they ever go up into the trees, where you can't see the top?”

Brian took a bite of his sandwich and shrugged.

“I've never seen that before, but I mean yeah, they can get big I guess. One time I saw some that were about, oh I don't know, thirty feet high? Probably came from some big open house out in the suburbs.”

“What do you mean, 'came from'?” My own sandwich sat, ignored, on the table. Brian finished his own and eyed mine. I pushed it toward him. “Are they being cut out of houses and brought out here? Why the fuck would they do that?”

Brian shook his head and took a large bite.

“No, man.” He mumbled around his mouthful. “That's not what I meant. I just meant that that's what they looked like. I never said anything about anyone bringing them here, that's fucking stupid. How would they even do that?”

“Well I guess it depends on who 'they' are. If it's the Forest Service, maybe they bring them out of foreclosed houses and set them up for fire fighters to train with or something. Maybe that's why we can't touch them. That seems like a lot of work, though, and I feel like we'd be told

if that was going on instead of this weird 'don't ask don't tell don't touch' thing. Besides, who would light fires in the middle of the fucking forest, right?" I joked, nudging him. Brian shrugged and ate silently, looking ahead at the TV on the wall.

"Come on, dude, just tell me if this is all a weird prank. Like the whole part about them being dangerous, that's bullshit, right? Is this like some weird hazing thing? If I touch one, is a stripper gonna come flying out of the top step and give me a lap dance in a sexy Smokey the Bear outfit?"

Brian set the sandwich down and swallowed his mouthful.

"About a year ago, I went out on a missing persons call." He spoke quietly, and I had to lean forward to hear him. "It was an eight-year-old boy, out berry picking with his mom. She said she turned around to get something out of her backpack, and when she turned around he was gone. Vanished in no more than ten fucking seconds. She looked everywhere for the kid but couldn't find him, so we got out there to search."

He picked apart the crust of the sandwich, his eyes fixated on it. I'd never seen Brian like that. He was my light-hearted buddy, my jovial dude who I went to bars and got raucously drunk with. I was suddenly sorry that I'd brought up the topic, but I didn't want to stop him. The room had taken on a confessional atmosphere, and I knew if I stopped him he'd deny that anything about the call been strange.

"It took us two op periods to find him. The second day, my partner and I were out about two miles and I saw a staircase to our left. I got the weirdest feeling, like I knew the kid was gonna be there, and I went to go look. My partner was telling me not to go, that he wasn't gonna go near them, so I told him to stay there and shut the fuck up."

His hands picked apart the sandwich. He piled the pieces on top of each other in a sloppy tower.

“I could see something on the lowest step. I didn't want it to be the kid, but I knew it was. He was curled up on his side, holding his stomach. I knew he was dead, but I still called his name and tried to wake him up. When I knew he wasn't gonna answer me, I radioed in, and we took his body back to base camp. I walked with him the whole way, and his face, man... That kid died in pain. He didn't slip away in his sleep from exposure, he died looking like someone had knifed him over and over in the gut. But there wasn't any blood. It was so weird. I remember thinking, 'where is it? Did it rain last night? Where's all the blood?'”

The tower stretched up, wobbling.

“They took him down to the ME's office for an autopsy. I got a call about a week later from a friend in the sheriff's office asking me if I'd had any other cases like his before. I told him no, and he said was I absolutely sure. I said of course I was sure, I think I'd remember something like that. He said everyone at the ME's office was freaking out, looking for cases like his.”

The tower fell over.

“What happened to him, Brian?” I whispered. He looked at me with haunted, empty eyes.

“When they opened that kid up, the coroner said his internal organs were like swiss cheese. There were quarter-sized holes punched through every major organ except his heart and brain. And the holes were neat. It wasn't like bullet wounds, where the skin or tissue or whatever tears. These were surgical. She told the sheriff it was like someone had taken a hole-punch to the kid's insides. But there wasn't a mark on him, Russel. Not a single fucking mark on that kids body except on the inside.”

My skin felt cold and clammy. I regretted more than ever having started this conversation. I didn't want to hear any more, but Brian kept going.

“There was a hole clean through one of his testicles. That alone could have killed him from shock. The coroner said his death was quick but excruciating. The final moments of that kid's life would have felt like years. And they have no idea how it happened. Not a fucking clue. You know that case is still open? They only allowed the family to bury the body because they filed a lawsuit about it. The ME wanted to keep it so they could study it and figure out just what the fuck happened.”

Brian swept the chunks of sandwich off the table and stood up. He looked down at me.

“I don't know what happened to that kid, Russell, but all I know is that he died within about ten seconds of getting punched full of holes, and I found him on a staircase.”

I couldn't bring myself to follow him after he walked out. I sat at the table for a long time, looking at the TV but not seeing it. Eventually, I got up and went to go get my afternoon assignments. I went home that evening and slept on the couch, pretending I was doing it for a change of pace. My dreams were chaotic and strange, and when I woke up, I felt heavy. I called in sick and spent the day at home, reading and watching the trees outside.

I haven't asked about the stairs again.

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I didn't know why the case of that missing boy bothered me so much. It wasn't anything I hadn't seen before. He certainly wasn't the youngest I've lost, and I've had others go missing in much worse circumstances. Like the toddler that got trapped under a rockslide last April. We

went out with the (Special Unit) to try and rescue him, and we could hear him crying under the rubble. He cried for almost two days before he eventually suffocated when the rocks shifted onto him. That should have bothered me infinitely more than this case. It should have traumatized me and sent me to therapy and broken my spirit or something. But it was just another call, another body to pull out of the park and send to the ME's office. I watched them slide him out from under the rocks, his chest flat, his face red from the exploded capillaries, and I thought about how glad I'd be when the spring runoff was over so I wouldn't have to deal with this shit for a while. What a pain in the ass.

But this kid. He was on my mind all the time. When I was out doing patrols, telling dumbass teenagers to put out their campfires and helping old women off the trails because their arthritic joints hurt, I was thinking about him. As if he was walking behind me all the time, waiting patiently for me to see him and acknowledge that he was there.

After the first two days, the search grew in size to a Type (2?). We set up basecamps all around the park, had volunteers flown in from all over the state. Every available Ranger was out there looking for him. We had the Civil Air Service out there, our eyes in the sky, flying over canyons and valleys with heat-seeking cameras. The sheriff's office brought out the K9s, but they weren't of any help. They followed his scent up to the mound, but just sat down on the other side. They wouldn't go any further. They do that sometimes. We'll take them to a place we know someone's been, and they'll just sit. Those dogs, you can't trick them into moving. The last thing you want to do is get them on a false scent, travel for miles, and have them lead you nowhere

Big searches cover a lot of ground, and they can be incredibly useful, but they're expensive. They're not sustainable. The Forest Service doesn't have an unlimited budget; we

can't afford to feed and house volunteers indefinitely. And even if we could, they wouldn't stay. People get tired. They lose motivation, get discouraged. You can only go out so many days with no luck before you start to think about how there are places you'd much rather be. You've already given this search hours, days of your time. You've faithfully gotten up at dawn every day, put on your hiking gear, and gotten filthy looking under logs, up trees, inside deadfalls. The sympathy, the guilt that drove you there in the first place starts getting pushed out with the ever-growing thought that you've done what you can. The guilt is replaced with irritation. It's not even a kid you know, and here you are getting bitten by mosquitoes, every bare inch of your skin red with itching welts. Having your fellow searchers pick through your hair each night for ticks, burning them out of your scalp with blown-out matches. The insect repellent gives you a rash where the collar of your shirt meets your neck, and suddenly none of this seems worth it anymore. And one day, you decide that you've had enough. You're almost angry at the wake-up call each morning. Haven't you done enough? You have a life, and you've given so much. How can they keep asking you for more when you aren't even being paid for your time? So you pack your things, give the IC the lame excuse of having a job to get back to, or a spouse who needs you, and you drive home, telling yourself that the guilt is just a natural reaction to leaving without any results. You did all you could. It isn't your fault that the kid was stupid enough to wander off and get killed or kidnapped or swallowed up into the earth. You watch the news, waiting for results, but eventually, you move on. You forget.

But Park Rangers, we don't have the luxury of forgetting. We walk through the same woods every day, wondering if at any moment we'll stumble upon the desiccated body of a hiker who's been missing for three years. Every corner we turn, every hill we go over, we expect to see

them waiting for us. We aren't allowed to forget. It's our job to be living reminders of the people we failed to save, a walking embodiment of our inability to protect the visitors we beg to come here. Maybe that's why we don't like to talk much about our experiences out here. It's enough to live with them following us at our heels, waiting to be acknowledged.

By the end of the second week, the search had been scaled back significantly. Almost a twenty square miles of the park had been combed, and not a trace of the kid had been found. Not a single piece of clothing, no footprints, no signs of human activity. Almost all of the volunteers had gone home; only a handful of them, most of them with personal ties to the family, remained. The suspicion that the kid had been taken out of the park started to gain more weight, and the police focused their efforts elsewhere. Local pedophiles were interviewed, and fliers were set up around town. The kid's sister, never much help to begin with, had lost most of her memories of the accident, and couldn't give any new or insightful information. The parents **appeared** on the local news, tearfully **appearing** in their front yard from behind a podium bristling with microphones. They begged the person who had taken their son to return him. *He's a good boy, and we love him. Tad, if you can hear me, mommy and daddy love you. Stay strong, baby boy.* But no leads came in, and all of us knew there'd come a day soon when we'd move on and forget about the kid until someone stumbled on his bleached skull next summer, lying in the dry bed of a creek.

I did the best I could while doing my regular duties. I visited the site where he'd gone missing, looking for anything. I felt responsible, somehow. I was the first responder, the one who'd found his sister. I'd practically been right on top of him. How had I missed him? I waited for the day his parents would come to find me, the man who'd returned only half of their family. I

could imagine too clearly the mother coming up to me, beating her hands against my chest, while the father stood by, feebly trying to pull her off. *How could you let him go?* She'd scream, her eyes red-rimmed from so many hours of crying. *How could you let that man take my baby? You go out there and you find him, you bastard. You find my baby boy!*

I tried so hard to find any trace of him. I combed miles of back country, calling his name. I convinced a friend of mine to let me borrow his bird dog, thinking maybe it could find a scent, but all it found were startled robins, angry squawking things that took off at the sight of the hound bounding through the bushes. I climbed up bluffs, trolled down in gullies thick with stinking skunkweed, peered into the hollow trunks of blown-down trees. I looked for him every day of that third week, even when the supes declared that search was officially off. I saw his face when I slept, looking back at me from atop the shoulders of a tall, undefined man. I tried so hard to find him. For every hour the remaining few volunteers worked, I put in three.

Yesterday, on the month anniversary of the day he went missing, I found his shoe two miles from the mound where he disappeared. A short distance away, I could see the unmistakable outline of a staircase. A metal one, twisting up a short way into the canopy. I held his shoe and looked at it for a while. Then I bent down and dug a small, deep hole. I dropped the shoe in. Covered it with earth and leaves. I got up, dusting my hands on my pants, and headed back to the visitors' center. I finished work and went home. For the first time in a month, I slept in my bed. I had no dreams. I woke up this morning, ate breakfast, and went to work. I helped an elderly man to the center after he slipped on a rough patch of rock and scraped up his legs. He smiled and laughed as I bandaged his legs. *How clumsy of me! But you know, I just love it out here. And I know some day soon I won't be able to come out here. Have to make the most of it while I can, I*

suppose. I agreed, then sent him on his way. I got a pat on the back from my supe for handling him well.

The little boy is still missing.

* * *

We got confirmation today that we're going on a training retreat early next week, held in a park upstate. It's a yearly thing the Forest Service puts on, it's a good way to make sure that we're all up-to-date on things and performing 'in a consistent and efficient manner befitting of the Forest Service.' It'll last for about three weeks; Rangers from all over the state will be there, but the parks will take turns using the land so there's no crowding or stress to the environment. Our park is small and gets lumped in with a few others, so our group usually consists of about twenty people.

The first retreat I went on was incredible. Getting that many of us together, it turns us into puppies. The rookies, we're all over each other; fucking around during exercises, trading stories, getting into fights, having crazy sex in the woods because we know how to do it right. The older, more grizzled guys tend to group together on the outskirts. They've been to so many of these things that it's old news. They're like the old dogs you see at dog parks. They sit on the sidelines, grouped together in a loose peanut gallery. They watch the younger guys, the stupid puppies, run around and bite each others' asses and get completely swept up in the excitement of being together.

For the rookies, it's almost like a frat hazing. We pull pranks on each other, sit around fires after exercises are done and swap ghost stories, trying to freak each other out. There's a lot

of short-sheeting, shaving of eyebrows and heads when the victim is asleep. We're just dumb kids, all getting a chance to fuck around with people who understand how badly we need this time to be normal people again.

This will be my fourth retreat. I'm not quite seasoned enough to join the old farts on the outside, but I'm not a rookie either. I'm in a group that doesn't seem to fit anywhere. You can tell who we are. We're the ones who still hang out with the kids, join in the fun and pranks, but we stand out somehow. Our smiles aren't quite as genuine, we don't laugh as often or as long. We talk in pairs, our heads lowered and our voices low so the kids won't come over and try to join in. You can see the way we watch the rookies, with a mixture of longing and pity. We haven't learned how to shut ourselves off yet, not like the vets. A lot of them, their skin is like leather. The wrinkles under their eyes, on the backs of their necks, they have a permanent layer of dirt. They chain smoke and compare scars. They watch the rookies with expressions of wry amusement. They don't join in the pranks, and they offer no sympathy to the victims. They've been there before.

But us, the in-betweeners, we still have rashes from the bug spray and sunscreen we have to apply constantly in the summer. One or two of us might still be recovering from frostbitten fingers, if the retreat is in the winter. We don't have permanent tans on our foreheads, clear lines where the brims of our hats allow the sun in. When we're alone in our cabins, we still talk about the things that bother us. One night, on the last retreat I went on, the guy in the bunk below me whispered up and asked if I was still asleep. I grunted, turned over on my side so I faced the wall. He was quiet for a second, and then he kept going.

“I see them a lot when I try to sleep.”

From across the room came an earth-shattering fart and a pained groan. We eat a lot of canned beans on these retreats. The guy below me continued.

“The shoes. We find so many shoes and not the people. Where do they go, man? Why do they leave their shoes behind?”

I rolled onto my back, my hands behind my head. I didn't say anything.

“This little girl I found once. We found her shoes five miles from her body, like three weeks apart. But her feet, they were fine. She didn't have any scratches. Looked like she'd just fallen asleep and didn't wake up. Why'd she take them off?”

Someone, maybe the guy who farted, told us to shut the fuck up and go to sleep. The guy below me was quiet, and I started to fall asleep.

“I don't even know why I do this anymore. I can't sleep. I just think about their shoes. I think about these people out there, in the dark, wandering around with bare feet. I did it once. I took my shoes off and walked my whole route that way. I had to call in sick the day after, it hurt so bad.”

I stared up at the ceiling. I felt the bunk shake as the guy turned over.

“I just wish I knew why they did it.”

I could hear him start to snore. I stayed awake that night, listening to him moan and talk in his sleep. Talking about shoes. The next morning, we pretended like nothing happened. That's how these things go. Weird things happen at night, and in the morning, none of it matters. That's what the retreats are really for, I think. As long as nothing ever leaves the dark, they don't care if we talk. If you want to know what it's really like being a Ranger, come to the training retreats. I can't think of a better description of this line of work than to see first hand how it cores you out,

leaves you hollow inside. Ask an EMT, they'll tell you the same thing. One day you wake up and realize that you can't leave work at work anymore. You have nightmares every night, you get diagnosed with PTSD from all the calls you've gone out on, all the bodies you've seen, all the people who have vanished or come back wrong, and you realize you can't do it anymore. But in our line of work, you don't get to leave. People forget, but we're government lackeys. We don't have the option to just leave. Not after all the things we've seen. They have to make sure we're hollow enough inside that anything they toss in will be gone forever before they let us go.

And on top of all of that, it's a completely thankless job. They don't tell you that in training, but it is. People either resent what we do and try to work around us, or they have no idea we exist, and they treat the park like their backyard, which is to say with little respect or dignity. Very rarely do people know what they're getting into when they come out here. Ninety percent of the time, no one is adequately prepared to be out here, regardless of the season. They don't bring protection from the sun, or enough food to last the day. Most people, they assume we'll take care of them. They're genuinely surprised to find that there's no McDonald's out here. I can't even count how many times a woman will come into the visitors' center, her shrieking kids in tow, and demand to know why we don't serve food here.

*This is a **public park**. What kind of park doesn't have a fucking food court?*

We apologize, explain patiently that we aren't here to cater to those kinds of things. We're a park, yes, but we're not a *theme park*.

The woman, she'll get real close to the counter. Lean in and say over and over how she can't believe we don't care about her and her kids. *So this is how you treat the people that pay your salaries?*

She takes her kids, threatening to report us to the BBB. Yelling about how she'll never give us her business again. Her kids, they're still screaming, demanding to know where their Happy Meals are. When she leaves, the guys in climbing gear looking at route maps on the wall turn to you and say, *what a stupid cunt*. You just shrug, say it's part of the job. It happens more often than they'd think. These guys, they're the only ones here who seem even close to prepared to spend a day out here. Everyone else could learn a thing or two from them.

I could fill an entire book just with stories of people who come out in the dog heat of summer with no water. People who hike out to scenic lookouts and pass out because they're so dehydrated, and have assumed that there will be water fountains dotting the landscape. They get heat stroke, drop like flies right where they're standing. When the EMTs bring them around, they're furious. *Why aren't there water fountains out here? Don't you know how hot it is?* It's no use explaining to them that water fountains have to be connected to a water supply to work, that they don't just grow out of the ground. They'll just talk over you about how their taxes go to keep this park funded, and how the least we could do is think about the welfare of our guests.

But you don't take this job because you want the praise, or pats on the back. You take it because you can't stand being in an office all day. You can't imagine grinding out a living staring at a computer screen in a cubicle, breathing in other people's farts and halitosis and despair all day. So you get a degree in Forestry, even though your parents are devastated. They tell you you'll never make any money, that you'll spend the rest of your life barely making ends meet. But you can't imagine doing anything else, because this is all there is. There isn't anything else. Not for you, anyway. You get your degree, and by a sheer stroke of luck, you end up getting a job as a Cadet at the National Forest near your hometown. You pack your things, leave college behind,

and as you drive to work the first day, you think *Jesus, I did it. I'm never going to have to work in a fucking office. I fucking did it.*

I loved my job. I woke up every day excited to be here. The first retreat I went on, I was fucking bananas. All of us were so fucking amped up to be there, practically vibrating in our boots. Living the dream. And it stayed that way for long enough that I thought I was different. We all do, at first. The vets tell us to give it time, to wait and see, but we're so sure we're the exception to the rule. *Sure, man, whatever.* We brush off their warnings, their raised eyebrows when we tell them that we'll never get tired of this work. But it adds up. I didn't notice it, none of us ever do, and maybe that's why it hits us so hard when we get too full, when the stress finally cracks the dam, and all that pent-up ooze comes exploding out. We lose our fucking minds. It happens in different ways, but it always happens. Some guys, they just walk out of the park. They watch a hiker's body get pulled out of ravine, his torso folded in half from the force of the fall into that tiny space, and they just walk away. They don't say a word, and we don't stop them. Sometimes they'll be out on rounds and they'll come over the radio. They don't know where they are, they swear they've never seen this part of the park before. They're lost, and there's things out here, Brauer, *there's something following me.* You tell them to calm the fuck down, you ask for the location of the last place they recognized, but they won't shut up about the thing that's following them. *I can hear it, I can hear it right behind me, it's moving through the trees and I have no idea where I am, Brauer, this isn't even part of the park, where the fuck am I?* You start to lose your patience, this is the fourth rookie this year, and you shout at them to please *shut the fuck up and calm down, where was the last place you recognized?* But they're not even getting your messages because they've got the damn button mashed, they're just babbling into the

fucking radio about monsters and how something isn't right, and they just won't shut up. *I can see them, Brauer, it's those fucking stairs again, I swear to God they show up everywhere but they're never the same, who's putting them out here, why are they out here? Help me, help me please I don't know where I am and it's coming, Brauer, I can hear it, it's almost here and I can see it, it's coming through the trees-* And then the radio cuts out and you scream their name into the mic, tell them to *stop fucking panicking and listen for one god damn second so I can help you you hysterical piece of shit.* But they don't answer, and you and a few others go look for the guy, who was too distracted and full of himself to listen when the guys at training told him this kind of thing can happen sometimes and the key is to *not panic.* When you find him, he's hiding under a tree, curled up in a ball with his thumb in his mouth, his eyes wide and dry from being open so long. You pry his hand away, haul him back on his feet, and shove an Ativan in his mouth. You all have them, another one of those wonderful little things that everyone knows but doesn't talk about. You put your water bottle up against his mouth, spray a stream of water down his throat, and make him swallow. You lead him back, and he holds your hand the whole way, and all you can think about is that you don't have time for this shit, you have places to be and tasks that need to be done before you can go home for the day. You haul his dumb ass back to the VC and make him sit in the break room until the Ativan kicks in, and he looks at you with these big eyes and asks what happened. You tell him that it's normal, it happens sometimes, and when he starts to ask questions you just turn and walk away. Because you have a job to do, you're tired, and you just want to go home. And as you start your rounds, you realize with this big heavy thud in your chest that this job isn't the dream anymore. The dream is being home, safely enclosed in four walls, cocooned in a finite space that you can control and see the ends of. And it hurts you, it

devastates you, because if you don't have this, what do you have? This was all you ever had, all you ever dreamed of. If you don't love this job anymore, who are you?

* * *

When I was a kid, I was absolutely terrified of the dark. I'd sleep with four nightlights on, one in each corner of the room, because I was convinced that if the shadows in the corners were there when I went to bed, they'd come alive while I slept and they would eat me. Or worse, they'd take me away to somewhere where there was no such thing as light, where there had never been light and never would be, and they'd keep me there forever, alone and screaming in the endless night. Mom humored me, but Dad had no patience for it. Mom would check under the bed, in the closet, behind the door for monsters, but my Dad would get frustrated. He'd go around the room, shutting off each nightlight one by one, ignoring my pleas to leave them on. He'd shut the main light off with a hard flick and stand in the door, silhouetted by the hall light. *There's no such thing as monsters, Russell. Be a big man and sleep in the dark like I do.* He'd shut the door, and I'd cry until Mom would come in, turn my nightlights on and give me back the security of the light. She'd pet my head, soothing me. *It's alright, Russ, she'd whisper. But your dad is right, there's no reason to be afraid of the dark. And besides, aren't you my brave big boy?* I'd nod, and she'd smile and kiss my forehead. *Get some sleep, sweetie.* She'd leave the door cracked, letting in more light, and I'd hear them arguing quietly downstairs as I fell asleep.

He's just a little boy, Daniel. She'd say. And you know what the doctor said, it's a phobia, he can't help it. The best thing we can do is to encourage him to work through it on his own.

My dad would light a cigarette and speak from around it.

It's fucking ridiculous, he's eight years old. You know how much we spend on those damn lights?

Oh stop it, it's not that much, Daniel-

And that's not even the real point. We keep coddling the kid, he's never gonna get over it. He's gonna grow up like you and be all neurotic and flipped out about stupid shit like this. You know kids get cancer from sleeping in too much light? Jeff told me that, he says they get cancer because their brains can't shut off all the way or something and it makes 'em go all screwy.

She'd scoff, moving around the kitchen. I could hear her moving around the dishes.

He's gotta learn sometime, honey. He's gotta learn that there's nothing in the dark to be afraid of. No fucking monsters or ghosts or whatever it is he's afraid of.

Shadows, Daniel. He's afraid of the shadows. He says he's scared that they'll take him away.

Now where in the fuck did he even get that from? Kid's got too good of an imagination or something. He gets it from you.

Mom, a successful writer of a few mystery novels, would laugh quietly in spite of herself. I could hear the slightly gross sound of him kissing her.

I just worry about him, Daniel. He's so anxious, so afraid of everything. I wish I could help him.

Another moment of silence, and I imagined them standing there in the kitchen, holding each other, looking toward the stairs.

It'll be okay, hon. Let me take him camping this weekend, I'll have a talk with him. It'll be good to get him out of here for a bit anyway. Kid spends too much time in his room anyway.

She'd reluctantly agree, and I'd roll over with a pillow over my head so I couldn't hear their kissing noises, her little breathy giggles as he smooched her neck and shoulders. I'd fall asleep, safe and warm, but I always faced toward the crack of light that leaked in from the open door. If I kept my eye on that, I'd be safe. The shadows couldn't take me if there was light to keep them away.

Camping in the woods with Dad was wonderful while the sun was up. Fishing, hiking, hunting, it was wonderful. He'd treat me like an adult, and anything he did, he'd let me do. He even let me take a puff of his cigarette once; I only did it once, though, because it made me cough until I vomited. He stood watching me, laughing. *Well now, Russ, you won't be doing that again will ya?*

When the evening came, he'd build a fire, and we'd roast marshmallows for s'mores, or weenies speared on sticks. We never camped in campgrounds, and some places didn't allow fires, but he'd do it anyway, because he knew how to build a proper fire pit, with stones around it so the fire couldn't get out. I'd sit near him, smelling the whiskey he'd drink from a little tin flask, and he'd let me have a tiny sip sometimes. He'd tell me stories about things that happened when he was in the Boy Scouts as a kid, and then we'd have a gross-out competition, where each of us would try to think of the grossest thing we could imagine.

A bucket full of boogers and spit. I'd offer.

A steak with a big worm in it. He'd counter

A rotten apple with a rotten egg cracked over it.

A piece of cheese that's been in someone's bellybutton for a year.

I'd laugh until my sides hurt. He always won. My dad was un-gross-outable.

But as fun as the days and evenings were, I always dreaded the night. We'd always dissolve into arguments about the lanterns.

We're not leaving the damn lanterns on, Russell! It's a waste of battery, and we don't need 'em. You're in the same damn tent as me, I'm right next to you!

I'd try to explain that it wasn't about being with him, it was about *something happening*, something coming out of the dark to hurt us or take me away.

*Nothing's gonna happen to you, dammit, I'm **right there!***

And he'd spend the remaining precious moments of twilight explaining to me that the dark wasn't alive, it wasn't *a thing*, it couldn't hurt me or him or anyone. There wasn't anything to be afraid of; monsters weren't real, ghosts weren't real, and nothing was going to steal me away from him. He'd try to make jokes about it, about punching Bigfoot right in his hairy jaw if he tried to take me away, but I'd just cry and tell him that he didn't understand, that *he wasn't listening*. Eventually, he'd drain the rest of the whiskey from his flask and throw it into his pack.

Jesus Christ, Russell, fine, we'll leave a lantern on and you can put it outside the tent. You're not putting it inside, it'll attract even more bugs than we'll have anyway.

Sick inside from disappointing him, from being such a failure of a son, I'd turn the lantern on and set it outside the tent, right by my head. I lacked the vocabulary to tell him that it wasn't a fear, wasn't something rational that he could explain away. It was a horrible, nameless thing that controlled me every minute of my life, and I hated it as much as he did. I'd have given anything to be like him, to be able to turn the lights off and sleep like he did. To be as strong and as big as he was.

But still, I'd turn the lantern on, powerless and pathetic against my fear, and we'd sleep in

the light, him facing away from me with a shirt tied around his eyes, radiating his disappointment and frustration toward me like a heat lamp.

One time, shortly after his conversation with my mother about my phobia of the dark, we went camping on a beautiful fall day. The park we chose had a river running through it, and we camped a short ways inland. He always tried to put us near a river or a lake, so we had fresh cold water to drink and bathe in. We didn't catch anything that day, but he taught me how to tie my own fly, and we had a lot of fun casting our lines, pretending to hook each other and huge monster fish from the depths of the river. That night, sitting around the fire, he told me about how he and a buddy went out into the woods alone late one night, looking for a ghost that supposedly haunted the area.

We went out real far, and we got lost. My friend, he's freakin' out, wandering behind me and cryin' and carryin' on like he's dying. 'How are we gonna get back, Daniel? Are we gonna die out here?' I told him to shut up and keep moving. And then in the distance we see this weird glow. It's bright blue, and my friend is cryin' even harder and saying it's the ghost, it's the ghost. I went up to it, real slow, and it just got brighter and brighter...

I was on the edge of the log he'd dragged next to the fire, staring up at him, eyes wide. The weenie I was roasting was burning but I couldn't look away. He was a wonderful storyteller, and knew how to drag out suspense. Dad took a drink and looked at the fire.

The closer I got, the brighter this thing was. And I could see it was pulsin' a little bit, getting brighter and dimmer, and my friend is just hollerin' and beggin' me to stop, tellin' me we gotta turn around and go back before the ghost gets us. And then, I see it. I can see what's makin' the glow. And do you know what it was, Russ...?

I shook my head slightly. The charred remains of my weenie dropped into the fire, sizzling. He stared at me, his eyes wide, and there was a dreadful moment of suspense that was so thick I felt like I could almost taste it.

Foxfire! He screamed. I shrieked and toppled backward off the log, my stick flying into the fire. Dad roared, his laugh bouncing off the trees, and hauled me back onto the log by the front of my shirt. I laughed too, subtly wiping my eyes so he wouldn't see the tears of fright that had sprung up. He ruffled my hair.

It was foxfire, son. You know what that is?

I shook my head.

It's a kind of fungus that grows in the woods where I grew up. It glows real bright at night, and it scares the living heck out of people who don't know what it is. Someday you and I will go and find some for ourselves.

I nodded and he handed me his stick with a perfectly roasted weenie on the end. I took it off and gave the stick back to him. He skewered another weenie on it and held it over the fire while I put mine in a bun and started to eat it, my hands still shaky.

My point is, Russ, that if I'd done what my friend did and gotten all scared, we'd have run around those woods for god knows how long. But I was brave, and I knew nothin' out there could hurt me. Because there's nothin' in the dark that can hurt you if you're brave and smart. You understand me?

He took the weenie off the stick, put it in a bun, and set it down on his pack. He got up and went to the side of the tent, where there was a bucket of water sitting, ready to douse the embers of the fire before we left the next morning. He brought it over, and I watched him, not

thinking about what he was about to do.

You understand me, Russ? He said again. There's nothin' in the dark that can hurt you so long as you're brave and smart.

And he threw the bucket of water over the fire, plunging us into darkness.

Instantly, I began to panic. I shrieked, flying out of my seat and reaching for him. My heart pounded in my ears, and all around me there was nothing but the thick, oily dark. People call a room with no lights on dark, but it's not. You can still see the walls, the furniture. Even with blackout shades, you can still see light from the street. But out in the woods, far from any people or houses, there is no light except that from the moon. And on this night, there was no moon. The dark was all around me, sliding into my mouth and down my throat, filling my ears and pressing against my eyes like water. Each panicked breath I took only brought more of it in me, and I clawed at my neck, feeling the muscles and tendons standing out. I couldn't find my father, and I tripped over my feet, sprawling in the dirt. Hysterical, I cried out for him, but he didn't answer. I could feel the shadows wrapping around me, but here they weren't just shadows, they were *things*, living things with mouths and eyes and ears and claws and they wanted to take me away, far away to somewhere where this was light, where the dark was even darker than I could imagine and I'd never get out, I'd never see the light again--

Dad wrapped his arms around me, picked me up out of the dirt and held me in a bear hug. I clutched him like a drowning man, clawing at his shirt and begging him to turn the lights back on, to take me home where it was light and safe and Mom could stroke my hair and give me milk and graham crackers to make me feel better. But he just held on, not saying a word, holding me

close to him while I wailed and begged him for light.

No, Russ, I'm not gonna turn the light on. You're gonna be a brave boy and sit out here with me and we're gonna have a nice little chat in the dark.

I beat my fists against his chest, trying to pull away. I had to get out of there, I had to run until I could find light. Why didn't he understand that there were things out here, hungry things that wanted both of us and didn't care that we had feelings and lives and people who loved us?

But I was so little, and he was so big, and he didn't let me go.

And after a while, after an eternity, when it was still dark and nothing had taken me away, or even tried to take me away, I stopped wailing. My heart still raced, and had he tried to move away I would have started up again, but he picked me up and we sat down, me on his lap. He held me against his chest and I pressed my head into his shoulder. The dark behind my eyes was lighter than the dark outside, and that made me feel a little better.

See? There's nothin' out here in the dark that can hurt you. Nothin' out here but the deer and the birds and the bugs and the trees, Russ. Just sit quiet a minute and listen.

Pulling my head slightly way from his body, I listened. I could hear the wind rustling through the branches of the trees, the sighing of leaves falling. Somewhere in the distance, a twig snapped, and I tensed.

You hear that? That's a little twig, so it's probably big rat or a coon. They like to come out and look for food at night 'cause the bigger animals are all asleep.

I heard whatever the animal was snap another twig, moving away from us. I could hear other things too. The chirping of crickets. The far off hoot of an owl. A very quiet chirp, probably from a bird in its nest above us.

Sometimes the animals out here like to talk, and they can make some pretty spooky noises. You hear a lady screamin', it's a cougar, and as soon as it's light, you leave. Owls can make some scary sounds too, like screamin' or cryin'. But they're just talking to each other, son, just like we are right now. Sometimes you can hear the coyotes barkin' at each other, or maybe a bobcat growlin'. And if you hear a big snap, it's probably a deer, makin' his way through the trees. There are black bears in some parks, but none out here, and some day I'll teach you about those too. But you see, Russ, there's nothin' out here that we can't put a name or a face to. There's no monsters out here. In fact, to the animals, we're the monsters. Big things with big scary tools that move around with no real purpose. Think about that.

I opened my eyes, suddenly brave, and looked around. I could just make out the vague shapes of trees, the faint glow of a few dying embers in the fire. Up above, the stars stood out, bright and clear through the gaps in the trees. We sat like that for a long time, listening to the sounds of the animals, and he talked to me about what kinds of things lived out here, and how to be safe around them.

I started to nod off, my head bouncing off his shoulder, and he carried me into the tent. I fell asleep quickly, and slept better than I ever had before. I woke up feeling more awake, more rested than I could ever remember feeling, and I told him that. He laughed and clapped me on the back, the other hand holding a steaming mug of instant coffee.

That's cause you actually slept, son. That's what happens when you aren't poisoning yourself with all that light!

When we got home that afternoon, I took all of my nightlights out of my room and gave them to Mom. She held them, stunned.

You don't want these anymore?

I shook my head. I wasn't scared anymore. I went back upstairs to take a shower, get all the dirt and stale sweat off of myself, and I could hear her say to Dad:

Daniel, what on earth did you do to him?

Dad laughed.

Just gave him a little push, that's all.

* * *

The buses picked us up at an ungodly hour from the entrance to the park. I've never been good at getting up early, even when I'm looking forward to what I'm doing, and I was cranky. I threw my duffle in the compartment with all the others and shuffled on board. I'd packed at the last minute, throwing a week's worth of clothes in an old, nasty bag that still smelled like the stinky socks from the last training.

I hadn't been feeling well for days. I wasn't sleeping, was barely eating. I'd stopped searching for Tad on my days off, and I didn't do extra rounds anymore, but I thought about him a lot. I saw him on the news occasionally, in those little stories they do on slow days when no one's been murdered or chopped into fine pieces by heavy machinery or won a lawsuit for disgusting sums of money.

In other news, the little boy who vanished almost two months ago is still missing. Police have called off the search in the local National Park, and although Rangers are still instructed to keep an eye out for any sign of the boy, officers are not optimistic about his chances for survival.

A fat cop would come on, talking about all the things he and his men had done for the boy. How they'd spent hours chasing down lead after lead and getting nowhere. How they were very sorry for the family, who was trying to get on with their lives without much success. A memorial service was scheduled for later in the month, and any member of the public wishing to attend could do so.

We're all very sorry for the family, and we will continue to do our best to find little Tad and bring him back home safely. We'll never give up hope.

I'd think of Tad's sneaker, our there in the woods, think about how the cop wasn't thinking about him, but about his dinner or his wife or the woman he was seeing that *wasn't* his wife, and I'd turn the TV off.

The people I worked with noticed the change, noticed how withdrawn I'd become recently. They asked me about it. *You're looking rough, Brauer. You sleeping okay? Insomnia, that's too bad. Have you tried witch hazel? Tea with honey? Standing on your head to push the blood into your brain? Helps kill the nerves, you know, makes you settle down.*

I told people I was fine, that I was taking meds for the insomnia. But my attitude toward the visitors changed. When I came across a woman coaxing her thirteen-year-old daughter out on a ledge beyond a fence to take a picture, I yanked the girl back over, sending her flying onto her ass with a hoarse shriek. Her mother picked her up, dusted her off, and berated me.

The hell's wrong with you, asshole? You tryin' to break her back? If she's hurt I'm gonna sue the hell out of you and this damn park!

I grabbed the camera out of the girl's hands, stepped over the fence, and took a shot of the ground where she'd been standing. I pulled it up on the display and shoved it in the woman's

face.

You see that? I shook the camera. *That's a two-hundred foot drop onto solid rock. You almost sent your kid down there for a picture.*

The woman snatched the camera out of my hands and stormed off, hollering something about my supervisor. I got a slap on the wrist for that, but nothing more. They chalked it up to stress from all the extra work I'd done and gave me a day off. I spent it online, looking at accident reports for local parks.

On the bus, I watched the other Rangers get on, and I felt very alone. I wondered how many of those accidents these people had responded to. I'd counted in my head, and I knew with certainty that in my four years alone, I'd responded to no less than two hundred cases involving missing, hurt, or dead children. I didn't know any of their names, and that bothered me. They were just faces, accident reports, numbers in a tally I shouldn't have had to keep. I'd never wanted children, never wanted that kind of responsibility, but if I'd had one, I'd have duct-taped him to my side before letting him set foot in the woods.

A kid I'd never seen before sauntered down the aisle and seeing the empty spot next to me plopped down and tossed his backpack under the seat in front of him. As we pulled away from the park, the bus shaking and backfiring, he turned to me and held his hand out. I shook it quickly and he introduced himself as Jeff. I nodded, didn't give him my name, and went back to looking out the window. He started talking.

“Man you don't know how long I've been waiting for this. They signed me on as a cadet last year and I just barely missed the retreat that time, I've been fucking dying to go. Everyone says they're fucking awesome and that there's nothing like it. How many you been to?”

I held three fingers up.

“Holy shit man, so this is your fourth? God damn, that's fuckin' awesome. You must know the drill by now, they probably got you on training now, right?”

I took a large sip of coffee, burning my tongue. Jeff looked at me closer. The bus pulled out onto the freeway, the engine revving. I jostled in my seat, bumping into him.

“Hey, man, I know you! You're that dude that's been looking for that little kid, Zack or whatever!”

“Tad.” I corrected curtly.

“Yeah, Tad. Hey man, I respect the hell out of you for what you did for that kid. I wouldn't go out into some of those places even if it was *my* kid that was missing. Like, some of those areas just give me the fuckin' creeps. You know what I mean?”

I stared out the window at the trees flying by. Just a green blur. Miles of green and brown and red turned into a smear.

“Kid's lucky to have you looking for him, man.”

Somewhere in that blur, Tad's shoe was buried under a few loose layers of dirt. There were bugs setting up homes inside it, crawling through the eye-holes where the laces were.

“If anyone's gonna find him, I bet it's you.”

I stared out the window at the blur of green and my eyes melted a hole through the glass, ignited the blur, burned the whole forest down, left nothing but charred trunks and ashes and bones and strange remains of wooden frames reaching up, up, up, and the firefighters are standing around looking at the devastation, scratching their heads, finding the frames and asking each other *hey Bill, you know what the heck this thing is?*

“Actually, his whole thing kinda reminds me of this lady at our park a little while ago. Stupid bitch went out with her kid and went off trail and went missing. Fuckin' predictable, right? Swear to god these idiots have no idea what they're getting into. You know what I'm talking about. Well her kid shows up at the VC, he's the one that reports her missing, and he says she left him there to go and look at something a little ways ahead, and he says he thinks it was some stairs. He says he thinks she went up 'em and never came down, and I mean we all thought he was fuckin' nuts. But he keeps saying, and we go out there and you know what we find? Fuckin' stairs, man. Right there in the middle of the woods.”

My head was starting to hurt, and I rubbed my temples. My mouth felt dry, so I chugged the rest of my coffee, ignoring how it burnt my throat, leaving it raw and stinging.

“You know anything about that, man? You ever heard of something like that? I swear I'm not crazy, but I know what I saw. The other guys won't tell me shit, they just say it's normal, and not to worry about it, but I'm thinking it's some weird joke. Did they pull that shit with you too?”

I crushed my coffee cup, enjoying the give of the styrofoam. The last dregs at the bottom leaked out onto my hand, and I wiped it on my pants. I tossed the cup on the floor.

“You know why they told you it was normal, Jeff?” I kept my voice low. He shook his head, looking at me hungrily. I locked eyes with him. I could feel how tired I looked. “I think they told you that because it's the fucking truth. They probably also told you to stay the hell away from them, and that's also the truth. It's normal. They're normal. Understand?”

Jeff frowned, looked like he was going to say something else, but before he could I turned back to the window and shut my eyes, resting my head against the side of the bus. The roar of the road under the tires magnified and filled my head, blocking everything else out. I

thought I heard Jeff speak once, but I ignored him and kept my eyes closed. At some point, I fell asleep. When I woke up, about halfway to the training camp, his seat was empty.

I slogged through the orientation, where we all got into groups and introduced ourselves. People knew who I was. I was being used as an example all across the state. *You're that guy who went out like every day looking for that kid, I've heard about you! Everyone's saying how you're like the fucking Park Ranger Supreme, didn't you know that? Hey, by the way, did they find him yet? Oh man, that sucks. Can you imagine how the parents must feel? I mean, I guess that's what you get for letting your kid wander off like that, though. He was barely three, who brings a fucking three-year-old to a National Park, anyway?*

You know who brings a three-year-old to a park? I wanted to snap back. The kind of person who trusts Park Rangers to do their fucking jobs. The kind of person who doesn't think it's possible for their little kid to vanish off the fucking earth without leaving a single shred of evidence that he was ever there in the first place. The kind of person who trusts the person looking for their kid to report the only piece of evidence ever found to the police, instead of burying it under a tree miles away from anything. The kind of person who believes that the world makes sense, that up is up and down is down and left isn't right and right isn't wrong. The kind of person who doesn't look at the little patch of trees by the strip mall downtown and think 'gee, I wonder how many staircases could fit in there?'

But I didn't say any of that, because that would have been wrong. Instead, I just shrugged and gave short, non-committal answers. Yes, it was awful that he was still missing. Yes, I'd be helping to train a few cadets this year. No, I didn't think I was a hero. I excused myself frequently and went to the restroom to pop antacids to try and keep from vomiting.

Later, at dinner, I sat alone in the back of the hall. I wasn't feeling up to chatting. I was stirring my mac and cheese, making a nasty paste out of it, when a tray slapped down across from me, making me jump. K.D smiled at me and took her broad-brimmed Ranger's cap off.

“Well look who it is,” she teased. “The hero of the fuckin' year.” She batted her eyelashes. “Will you sign an autograph for me, you big handsome man?”

I chuckled a little and put my fork down.

“Yeah, whip a tit out and I'll sign it for you.”

K.D let out a screaming laugh, and a few people turned our way. She took my hand, kissed it, and dug into her dinner, some vaguely loaf-shaped brown mass in watery gravy.

I'd met her in training, back at my park years ago when we were both new, and at the time I gave her a bit of crap for being one of the only women in our particular group. I also expressed sincere doubts that she'd be able to handle the work, as tiny as she was; not even five feet tall, we towered over her. She'd taken my hand, kissed it, and said that boys only said things like that if they were infatuated. If I wanted to kiss her back, she said, batting her eyelashes, I could bend right down and kiss her ass. It made me laugh until I cried, and we spent the rest of the retreat together. She'd proven to be exceptional at climbing, especially in the snow, but in all areas she left us in the dust. Tough and scrappy and quick, she loved wearing herself out and coming back to base camp exhausted.

K.D was also known for her seemingly endless and voracious appetite. She was afflicted with a catastrophically and unusually high metabolism; rare in women, as she liked to say proudly. It meant she had to eat constantly, huge portions that went right through her. I'd never seen anyone, let alone a tiny Irish woman, put away three pizzas on her own and still have room

for a liter of Coke. She was also the only girl I'd ever met who ate with a primate grip. Most people found it unseemly, but I found it charming.

By the end of her training and cadet period, K.D was clearly a natural in high-altitude rescues, and a lot of parks offered her permanent employment, including mine. She ended up going to a mountain park upstate, and though I hadn't seen her much since, we talked frequently, and got together whenever possible.

“So what the fuck, Brauer, why'd they send you back here? You doing cadet training this year?” A few flecks of meat flew out of her mouth, and she feigned embarrassment. “Oh, excuse me, how unladylike.” She brushed them off the table and kept steam-shoveling food into her open mouth.

“Yeah. After this whole thing that's been going on, they're talking about promoting me, and they want me to train a few rookies who are coming into the park.” I picked at my dinner, more interested in watching K.D eat hers. It was fascinating, she never stopped to breathe or chew. She just kept piling food in and swallowing it whole.

“Shit, dude, that's awesome. I mean, not the kid going missing, but everything else. But speaking of which, tell me about the kid. What happened, he just went AWOL while the parents weren't paying attention?”

I shrugged. “I know about as much as anyone else does. He and his folks were out berry picking, and his sister went to go look at something, so he tagged along. My partner and I found the girl, but by the time we got to her her brother was gone.”

“Yeah, they told us that. Said you found her eating and that she had no idea where he went.”

“She said a man came and took her brother to play, but that she wasn't allowed to go, so he gave her blackberries.”

“That's fucking weird. They've been out of season for months, where the fuck did the guy get blackberries?”

“Well see that's the thing, I don't think there ever was a guy. Tad's sister couldn't describe him at all, and we never found any trace of him or the kid. Not a single thing.”

I saw Tad's shoe, buried under the tree. It had the red Power Ranger on the side. I remembered the pose, it was like a karate-fighting stance. I put my fork down and rubbed my head.

“Well who gave her the blackberries, then?”

I shook my head. Pushed the paste on my tray into a pile.

“How long did you spend looking for him?”

“Weeks. Hours every day.”

I pressed the tines of the fork into the pile, leaving imprints. I walked the fork up to the top and back down the other side.

“I can't believe the IC let you do that. They should have made you go home when the other searchers did.”

“Well, he didn't.”

“I'm just saying, Brauer, you gotta leave work at work, you know? I mean no one's saying you didn't do something amazing but frankly-”

“Look, can we just drop it?” K.D briefly paused her manic eating to raise her eyebrows.

“Sure, dude, whatever.”

The now-familiar feeling of my gorge rising made me sit up and rub my stomach. K.D gestured at her soda, and I took a large drink.

“You look like shit, Brauer.”

I smiled weakly.

“Seriously, you look like shit. Have you been sleeping?”

Her eyes, set just a bit too far apart, were a startling green. It was really a shame she was so homely. She had all the right ingredients to be beautiful. She just didn't have them in the right amounts. I studied her face, and she was so genuinely concerned that I heard myself start talking before I could do anything about it.

“I can't stop thinking about him, K.D. I can't stop thinking about where the fuck this kid went. I need to know what the fuck happened to him and I don't know why.”

I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Talking about it made me realize that Tad's case had taken over my life completely, and that I was close to something, tears or vomiting or screaming. This, all of this, his case, the training, K.D being here, it was all too much. I wanted more than ever to be at home where I could lose my shit in private.

K.D put her fork down.

“You've lost kids before, right? Why's this one under your skin so much?”

I shook my head. The sweat under my arms was cold and sticky and I could smell myself, a sour smell like rotten milk, like a sick baby.

“Yeah, I've lost kids before. Hell there's at least three in the last two years that we never found. But this kid. I was *so close* to him, I was *right there* and I never heard him or saw him or *anything*. What the fuck happened to him, K.D? *Where the fuck did the kid go?* I was *right on*

top of him, I was *right there*. It was like we were just five fucking minutes too late. Like if I had just gone in the right direction, I'd have found him. And that's what bothers me the most, the fact that he was *right fucking there* and we wasted time talking to his sister, who was too stupid to tell us where he was and where she'd gotten her fucking blackberries from or where he'd gone or why she let him go in the first place. *What kind of stupid fucking kid lets her baby brother wander off into the fucking wilderness?* And for that matter, what kind of kid *eats something some dude in the woods gives her?*" My voice was too loud and a few people turned back around to look at me curiously.

"I thought you said you didn't think someone gave them to her?"

"Well she got them *somewhere*, even if it wasn't from some fucking Bigfoot or ghost or pedophile with a stash of blackberries in his fannypack."

I paused, collected myself.

"No, I don't think he was kidnapped, we'd have found something, some broken twigs or footprints or a scent that the dogs could pick up, but her parents didn't give them to her, so someone else had to have."

K.D frowned, thinking.

"Where did you say you found her?"

"We found her on a stump, sitting there with this fucking look on her face like she was just so happy to be there, not even the *slightest* bit concerned that her baby brother was gone from the face of the earth. Just sitting there shoving blackberries in her face, not a care in the world. She was so pleased with herself. Do you know how bad I wanted to slap that kid? How bad I wanted to shake her until her brains rattled around and she'd give us something, *anything* to

go on? My partner was the one that talked to her, he said it was like she was on drugs. Spaced out and loopy.”

I smashed the pile of paste down and poked it full of holes.

“His parents were fucking devastated. They kept asking her what happened, where her brother had gone, and the whole time she was just smiling, licking her fingers and the sides of her mouth and saying that she didn't know, she didn't remember. And I kept thinking that she was lucky she wasn't my kid or I'd have slapped the shit out of her. Here are her parents, crying and begging her, literally begging her on their knees for her to tell them *anything*, and she's just sitting there, enjoying the blackberry juice all over her, not a fucking care in the world. Honestly, I don't know how her parents fucking live with her. They don't ever have her with them on the news. Kid's probably a wreck now. I doubt she remembers anything, so all she knows is that her parents hate her now, and she can't even remember why. And honestly, I think they have every right to hate her. If she were my kid, I'd dump her right back out where I found her, tell her not to come home until she had her brother with her. As far as I'm concerned, she's just as responsible as their parents were.”

I paused, my face moist with sweat. K.D swallowed hard, looked like she might have a few things to say, but she kept quiet.

“And you know what the worst part of this is? He's not even the only one who's vanished like this, K.D. Not even close. I did some research. In this state alone, there are almost 100 cases within the last fifty years of kids vanishing in forests, and not a single trace of them has ever been found. *One hundred cases*. And there are almost as many who are found dead, or with bizarre injuries the coroners and ME's cant explain, miles away where they have no fucking

reason to be. Did you know there was a case ten years ago where a baby, a *one-year-old baby*, went missing from a camp ground up north? You know where they found it? *Twenty miles away*, on top of a *fucking mountain*. The climbers who found him? They were only up there because they'd gotten reports of a different missing hiker, and they found this little frozen baby in the snow. How did he get here? Did someone take him? How? *Why?*”

“Calm down, man. Lower your voice.”

I glanced away. Numerous people were turned in their seats, watching me. I looked back at K.D and leaned close.

“That's all I want to know. I just want to know *where they're going*, why we can't find any fucking trace of them. Why the only time we find them they turn up dead or mangled or so addled they can't remember anything that's happened to them. They're not getting lost, K.D, they're either falling off the face of the planet or they're showing up like they've been through a fucking war zone.”

K.D was watching me, looking at me with an expression of deep concern that made me feel even more unhinged. I felt suddenly claustrophobic, and I checked to make sure the front door was where it should have been. She leaned forward, putting her hand on my mind, and spoke softly.

“The parks are big places, Brauer. We don't even have most of them mapped out completely. A lot of those kids they don't find, they could have fallen into rivers, or caves. There are plenty of places that they could end up where we'd never even think to look. The ones who turn up dead or hurt or, I guess addled, as you put it? There are bad people out there, Brauer. You know it, and I know it, and everyone knows it, and if there's one place a bad person can do bad

things without getting caught, it's the woods. Haven't you seen that picture online that some guy put up back when the 'Deep Web' was a thing? How to bury a body in the woods so that no one would ever find it, and the dogs would just pass it by? There are people out there who that kind of stuff, and it's awful, but there's no mystery to it, just sick people.”

She shuddered a little. I looked at her little hand on top of mine, and I had the sudden urge to grab it and hold it tight until I could believe what she was telling me.

“And as for the ones who end up miles away...”

She frowned and pulled her hand away, brought it to her mouth.

“Do you remember that alpine training I did a while back? Where I went with that group and we all had to go up Mt. Hood?”

I remembered.

“One day, we split into groups to do some practice ice climbing. While I was waiting my turn, I walked off a little ways to go take a piss. I told my group I'd be right back, and I went just far enough that they couldn't see me. I was right behind the treeline, and I did my thing as quick as I could because it's cold as fuck to be exposed like that, and I also didn't want to be separated from the group for that long. So I zip up my pants and start to walk back and...”

She gazed down, eyes unfocused, at her empty tray.

“When I was a kid, I broke my arm. It was really bad, multiple compound fractures, and I had to have emergency surgery. They put the mask over my face and they told me to count backwards from a hundred. I hadn't even started counting and I could feel myself going under, and at first I was terrified. I was fighting against it, trying to stay awake, but it got so hard to fight, and it felt so good to let go and go under. As I went, I thought I could feel myself leaking

out of my head. That's how I remember it feeling, and I had this weird image of my brain leaking out of my ears. It was this nasty gray color. I could hear myself counting but I wasn't even there anymore, I was *gone*. I think I got to ninety-seven, and then I blacked out.

“Up on the mountain, walking back to the group, it was a lot like that. I took about two steps, and I started feeling weird. It was this really pleasant fuzziness, and I remembered that same feeling from when I was a kid. I kind of stopped and looked around, feeling this weird feeling, and I all of a sudden I realized: I have no idea where I am. You know how when you go into a room and instantly forget why you were going there? It was like that, but with my entire life. It wasn't just that I didn't know where I was on the mountain or why I was there, I had no idea where I was or who I was *period*. If you'd asked me what planet we were on, I don't think I could have told you. It was like limbo, almost. I was somewhere, but at the same time I was nowhere.

“I was so confused, and I got really upset because I didn't know what was going on. I think I actually started crying. I turned in a circle over and over and tried to figure out what the fuck I was doing out there, but no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't remember. All I knew was that I was getting cold, so after a while I decided that I must have been trying to walk somewhere to get warm. I turned around and started walking back into the trees, and I couldn't really even feel my legs moving. I didn't have any direction or place I was headed, I just walked in a straight line and figured I'd remember where I was and who I was when I got where I was supposed to go.”

She swiped at her eyes and sat up a bit straighter, eyeing me defensively. I motioned for her to keep going.

“It was the strangest thing, how time felt when I was like that. I was aware that time was passing, but I had no idea how much or how fast. I know at some point it got dark, because I was having trouble moving over rocks and branches and things, but it didn't slow me down that much. It felt like I wasn't really there, like I was watching someone else. I'd pop back into the space behind my eyes for a while, like I was checking to make sure I was still moving, and then I'd just... float back up into limbo.

“I don't really know how long it took me, but I popped back into my head at some point and saw that I was up on top of a really high peak. My gloves were all torn and bloody and a couple of my fingernails were gone. I was looking out over all of this land, so much space, and I got really dizzy and sat down. Then I looked ahead of me and I could see something buried in the snow. And I felt this... This absolute certainty, this indescribable need to go and get closer to it. The best I can describe it is that need to breathe that you get when you've held your breath too long. So I crawled forward in the snow, and I could see that whatever it was went up the slope at a really sharp angle, and I thought it was odd, because I'd never seen anything like that before.”

My heart was beating uncomfortably fast. I swallowed and heard my throat click.

“I got to the base of it, and I remembered thinking that they looked a lot like steps. But that was ridiculous, because I knew how high up I was. And right as I was about to start crawling up them, I heard someone shouting at me. It was like I slammed back into my head, and I could feel how tired I was, and how beat up my hands and the rest of me were. I collapsed and I started yelling back, telling whoever it was that I needed help. They followed my voice, and a guy came up and pulled me away from the thing and he kept asking me what the hell I was doing up here how I'd gotten up here without any equipment. I think I must have passed out, because the next

thing I remember is being airlifted down the mountain to base camp.”

I was picking at the skin around my nails, my eyes locked on her, and I winced when I dug too deep. I put my finger in my mouth and sucked it.

“I was gone for almost an entire day, Russell. They had no idea where I'd gone, and I don't remember that much time passing. I don't really remember anything at all. I climbed up three sheer faces with no climbing equipment in the dead of winter, and no one can tell me how. The doctors did all kinds of tests and scans and as best they can figure, I had some kind of weird fugue state, which is kind of like temporary amnesia. They told me that in that state, I wouldn't have felt pain or exhaustion, and some primal part of me just wanted to get to higher ground. I guess I ended up doing that.”

She tried to laugh, but it was an ugly sound, and I didn't smile. She reached for my hand, the one not in my mouth, and I yanked it away.

“Look, Russ, I know it's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth. A lot of those kids? They probably got lost, just like I did. Maybe when we get out in the woods, where we have no landmarks or concept of direction, some of us just... lose it a little. I was still a rookie back then, I had no idea what I was really getting into, and I was in over my head.”

I stood up, grabbed my hat and shoved it on my head.

“Russell, please, just sit with me. I'm not saying I don't believe you, I'm just trying to help you make sense of this stuff! Please, don't go!”

Her words bounced off my back and into the hall, which had gone quiet. I shoved my way through the doors, ignoring her, and headed for my cabin. I stopped once to dry heave into the bushes, and that made the tears come.

* * *

It's twilight. It must be summer, fire season, because the air is a strange orange color. I'm walking through the forest and my radio is crackling; I'm searching for someone. I must have been looking for them a long time, because my shoes are beat up and full of holes. For some reason, this makes me feel very anxious, and I take them off, keeping the laces. I dig a hole and bury them by the side of the path, and I say out loud that I'll come back for them later. I put the laces in my pocket and keep going. The air smells odd, like ozone, and I tie one of the laces on a tree branch in a large bow. This way, they'll be able to find me. I can feel pine needles and rocks and other bits of sharp things digging into the soles of my feet as I go, but it's better than wearing my shoes. My radio crackles again. A woman is talking, saying something about being quiet, about not waking the boy. She's saying something about how she doesn't want him to remember this. I turn the radio off, since the call isn't for me, and I keep walking.

The smell of ozone gets thicker, and I tie the other shoelace around a small stump. As I stand up, I see a little boy in the distance. This is who I've been looking for. I run toward him, but I can see what he's headed for, and I can't catch up.

Tad! I call. He turns to look at me, but he keeps going. I run in slow motion as he sets his foot on the first step, and the air gets darker. I hear a low rumbling in the distance, and I know if I turn around there won't be anything there. Just the strange orange light and empty space.

Tad takes another step, and I see his left arm blink out of existence. He doesn't seem to notice, and there's no gout of blood or tissue. I push myself, and I speed up. I am only ten yards

away, and I can see the white of his shoulder bone.

He ascends another step. His right leg vanishes, but he doesn't fall. He continues as if it were still there. I reach the bottom step, and I fall. My legs no longer work. I turn to see them, and they've gone over the edge of the world, they're just stumps ending below my hips now. They must have fallen into the endless orange, and I accept this. I crawl up the stairs after Tad, but he is just out of my reach. Every step he takes, a piece of him blinks away. His right hand. His ears. A piece of his torso. Yet somehow, he manages to keep walking up. The rumbling gets louder, more defined.

For each step I crawl up, pieces of me go missing too, but I can't seem to ignore it the way he does. When my right arm is taken, just below the elbow, I'm crippled, and I have to drag myself up using only my left hand. I reach for him with my left hand, but I have no fingers left to grip him with. As he reaches the last step, the middle of his head vanishes, as if it were an orange and someone has cut a slice out of it. From my lower vantage point, I can see the insides of his sinuses, the bottoms of his eyes rolling in their sockets, looking up at something. The rumbling is turning into an earth-shattering pounding, and the trees around me start to collapse into the empty orange space below us. I holler Tad's name above the cacophony, and as his eyes roll down to look at me, he takes the last step and vanishes completely. I wail, but the sound is lost, and I've failed, I couldn't save him. I feel chunks of myself being taken away, falling into that endless nothing, that smoky orange limbo, and when my eyes go I scream and scream and the pounding gets louder and louder and--

Someone was pounding on the door to the cabin. I flew upright, my heart racing, sweat

pouring out of my hair and into my mouth.

“Russell? I'm coming in, are you awake?”

The door creaked open, and I shook the stinging sweat out of my eyes. There was too much happening at once, the dream was still clinging to me like a spiderweb. I couldn't process anything, so I just sat in bed, looking at the sweat spots on the sheets. The floorboards creaked, coming toward the bed, and stopped at the bottom bunk.

“Are you alive?”

I rubbed my sandpaper-y face and peered over the edge. K.D stared up at me; she had a toothpick stuck in the corner of her mouth. I groaned.

“I called you in sick. Your bunkmate said you didn't wake up when role call started so I just clocked you in sick. You can thank me later.”

I groaned again, blinking. She shifted the toothpick from one side to the other.

“You look like shit.”

I flopped onto my back, rubbing my eyes.

“Didn't sleep.” I mumbled.

“How did you not sleep, you've been in here since last night. What have you been doing, counting spiders?”

“Just couldn't sleep.”

“Bad dreams? Poor baby Russ, having nightmawes. Would you wike me to howd your hand while you sweep, poow baby?” She teased.

My heart skipped. I'd noticed it doing that more lately, and I rolled onto my side, my hands around my stomach. The room tilted, came back, tilted again.

Heart attack, stroke, mental impairment, heart failure, blood pressure, my version of counting sheep. All the symptoms of sleep deprivation. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept a full night. K.D sounded bright and alert and full of food and I wished she'd leave. I shut my eyes tight and buried my face in my pillow. It was damp and sticky and smelled awful.

K.D punched me in the back.

“Hey.”

She'd climbed the ladder while I was counting. I shifted away and she punched me again.

“*What?*” I snapped, not looking at her. *Christ, couldn't she take a hint?*

“Here.”

She knelt on the bed and the shadow of her hand moved in front of my face. I cracked one eye open and saw her closed fist inches from my nose.

“I brought these for you.”

I held my hand out. It was shaking. *Muscle tremors*. Another sheep to add to the flock.

She dropped two bright blue pills in my palm. I stared at them dumbly, waiting for them to do something.

“They're sleeping pills. Really strong ones.”

“I don't want these.”

“Don't be a fucking baby, Brauer, take the damn pills.”

“You do realize I have a fucking job to do here, right? That I can't just come here and fall apart and sleep for two days? Christ, I know I missed the call but you should have woken me up, not called me out and made me look like a complete shithead.”

K.D's face was stony, her eyes cold.

“You're a fucking mess, and the last thing we need is you running around out there telling these kids some bullshit stories about kids going missing on...” She waved her hands, balancing against the bed with her middle. “On some fucking stairs you've apparently seen out there. I mean do you even listen to yourself when you're thinking shit like that? Do you have any idea how fast they'll throw you on your ass for talking like that? I did you a fucking favor, Brauer, and you're lucky as hell that I like you or I'd throw your ass right under the bus and take your place at that park.”

One of the pills cracked in my palm. I was squeezing them. I unclenched my fist and there was blue powder in the cracks of my hand. The powdered medicine was turning my skin blue. Sometimes when we recover bodies, they're blue. Especially if they've been out in the cold.

“I'm serious, you need to get your shit together. I don't hear from you for a month, you're out being this big hero, and then you show up here and you're a walking garbage heap, spouting this conspiracy-theory shit about stairs and, and aliens or something.”

I wondered what color Tad was. In his current state of decomp, probably green or brown, or yellow or red from the scraps of his clothes, the dyes bleeding into the liquefying skin. All those colors mixed together but you wouldn't end up with blue. Blue is a primary color, I remembered, it stands alone. No other colors add up to it. They can try, but all they'll make are other things.

“You need to get some sleep. Like seriously, you *need to get some sleep*. Did you know sleep deprivation causes all the shit you're going through? You even said yourself that you aren't sleeping much.”

People are usually blue when they're found in the cold but sometimes they aren't.

Suicides, hangings, they're usually blue.

“Are you even listening to me right now?”

Little kids who choke on things or are choked or die in the water or mud are usually blue.

I inspected my palm. Poked it with my finger.

“Look, I'm Tad..” I said it under my breath, and I didn't mean for K.D to hear it. But she heard it and I heard her hear it and in this awful broken glass moment everything crashed down onto me that she was right and I cringed. How many people had been sitting around us last night? How many of them turned around and heard what I was saying? All it would take was one of them going to the supes, *gee you know I heard Brauer saying some weird stuff at dinner and I'm not so sure he's doing well.* Tad was eating me alive and it's true that hindsight is 20/20, because in an awful moment of perfect clarity I saw just how bad the last few weeks had been, how out of control I'd become. So I swallowed the pills dry, licked the powder off my hand and buried myself under the covers.

“Wake me up at dinner.”

“Get some fucking sleep.”

I heard her creak down the ladder, creak out of the cabin, and by the time she was shouting to a rookie at the end of the path, I was out.

* * *

I was physically unable to get food into myself fast enough. Ideally, I'd have been eating while having my stomach filled with a pump in my side, a simultaneous IV dripping into the crease of my elbow. My plate was piled comically high with pancakes, bacon, runny scrambled

eggs, and I was shoving them all into my mouth in a way that made K.D slow her own frantic eating.

“Jesus, Russ, slow down. I feel you, buddy, but you're gonna have a heart attack or something, I'm serious.”

I swallowed the golf-ball sized chunk of pancake and took a few breaths before resuming my dump-truck impression.

“Is this how you feel all the time?” I mumbled out between swallows.

“Sucks, doesn't it?” She took her utensils up daintily and ate a tiny bite, smiling a prim little smile. I choked briefly on a piece of bacon fat, one end of which stayed in my mouth while the other went down my throat. K.D made the had symbol for Heimlich, but I gagged it back onto my plate and ate it again successfully. She grimaced.

“Lovely.”

I wouldn't even call what I'd experienced sleep. It was more like falling into a coma for almost twelve hours. I wasn't even aware of time passing. The last thing I remembered was K.D hollering at someone, and then it was the next morning and the wake-up bells were sounding. I felt better than I had in weeks, despite a bladder that was about to burst, and I was hungry. Hungrier than I could ever remember being. I'd gotten out of bed, thrown my uniform on, and raced to the latrine, where I pissed for a solid minute. There's very little aside from sleep that deep that feels as good as a piss when you need it most.

In the dining hall, I piled two plates full of food and found K.D in the back, waiting for me. A few cadets and Rangers glanced at my on my way, probably to see if I was still broken and spouting gibberish, but I nodded pleasantly, and they went back to their own pathetic rations.

I was halfway through my second stack of pancakes and had only begun to feel full when my stomach rolled and I stopped, my fork halfway to my mouth. I looked at K.D with wide eyes. She shrugged.

“I told you.”

Outside, I vomited profusely and at length into the bushes behind the hall. I staggered back inside, got a new, much more reasonable plate, and sat back down. I ate slowly, carefully, imitating the elderly people I'd so often mocked eating at picnic tables back in the park. K.D patted my hand.

“I made the same mistake once when I was a kid and I forgot my lunch. You have my sympathies.”

“How do you do it?” I asked, covering my mouth.

“Do what?” Not as polite, she treated me to a nice view of her partially-chewed sausage link.

“Live being hungry all the time like this? I mean, are you always thinking about food?” My stomach had settled, and I sped up a bit. K.D shoveled her food like usual, not pausing to breathe, but now I noticed she did it in carefully measured scoops. And unlike me, she seemed able to talk around her food without spitting too much of it out.

“I always keep something on me. I used to keep those Hostess cupcakes with the little pigs-tails on top in my pockets because they were my favorite, but then Hostess died and so I've switched over to Honey Buns. You know how many calories are in a Honey Bun?”

I shook my head. She groped in her pack, pulled one out and slid it across the table.

“*1000 calories?* Jesus-”

“Look at the daily dosage of fat.” She grinned.

“Jesus *fuck*, this is the only thing I've ever seen with over 100% of *anything*. How are these legal?” I slid it back to her.

“I eat about three of these a day. They keep me going between meals. That's my secret.” She winked and slid it back into her bag. I shook my head in disgust.

“So you're feeling better, I take it?” Her eyes were on her plate, but I could see her smiling between forkfulls.

“Yeah, for sure.” There was a pause where I probably should have thanked her, but K.D just nodded and went back to her food.

“Where'd you get those pills, by the way? I can't believe how strong they were, I was out like a fucking dead man.”

She paused, her fork in front of her open mouth, then continued eating.

“Honestly I can't even remember. I think I got them when I had strep a few months ago and I couldn't sleep.”

“Huh. I thought they felt stronger than normal sleeping pills. Either way, it was nice.”

“I'm really glad! You seem like you're feeling a lot better.”

“Definitely.”

She finished her plate and got up to get more. I watched her walk away, thinking that it was a little weird that her doctor would give her sleeping pills for strep throat. But I'd never had it, so what did I know? She came back with a few pancakes, smothered in syrup.

“So how many calories do you need to eat a day?”

She smiled and tucked in to her food. “It's not really about calories, actually. I've got a

thyroid issue, so my metabolism is fucked up. I rely on lots of carbs and protein to keep me going. It's kind of nice. I see other women whining about how much they'd love to eat what they want, and here I am shoving an entire pizza down my throat.”

“What, you just roll it into a tube and cram it down there?”

K.D choked and covered her mouth. “No!” She coughed out. “I meant in slices, like a normal human!”

“Ah, okay.”

She giggled and put down her fork.

“What?”

She put her head in her hands, laughing silently. “I'm just imagining me opening my mouth super wide like a snake and just, cramming a pizza down my throat whole.”

“That's your secret, I bet. That's how you keep yourself going. Deep-throating pizzas.”

“Russell, stop!”

“What? You're the one who said you shove entire pizzas into your throat. I'm just confirming what you said.”

“You know what I meant!”

I shrugged. “Whatever floats your boat.”

“Oh my God, stop!” She wiped her eyes, which were watering, and finished her food. I put my own fork down and watched, thoroughly full and content.

As we walked out of the hall, she bumped into me, her shoulder barely reaching the middle of my arm.

“I'm glad to have you back. You were looking pretty rough, but it seems like you're back

on track.”

I nodded and bumped her back. I must have bumped her a little too hard, because she stumbled and ran into another Ranger, who was also leaving. He frowned at her, and she apologized, giggling her high-pitched, almost tinkling giggle. He didn't respond, just walked ahead. His eyes were tired, and when he glanced at me, I could see that that tiredness was part of him, that it went deeper than a few months of bad sleep.

“Lighten up, dude!” She called out to him.

I watched him walk away, feeling the sun on my face, and was glad that for now, K.D and I were on the other side of the line that separated him from us.

* * *

The cadets try so hard when they first become Rangers and it amuses the hell out of me. They stand with their feet together, like good little soldiers, and sometimes they'll salute if they think it's the right thing to do. You tell them they can relax, it's not the army, but some of them are actually vets, and I guess it's hard to break that habit of unquestioning servitude. I was the same way, when I first got promoted. You're so grateful to finally be out of the sewers that you kiss every ass put in front of you. I figured it would be the same story with my group, a bunch of tin soldiers in their Ranger hats and new uniforms. They were waiting for me at base camp, a group of four. Three guys, one girl. They saw me headed their way, and one called out to me. I waved back, tipping my hat, and saw that it wasn't going to be the case. One of the guys had forgotten his hat, something I knew he'd regret once we got in deep later in the afternoon, and the rest were slouchers, typical back-of-the-class kids who wouldn't have stood out anywhere. It was

my first training group, I shouldn't have expected to get any of the sharp knives, but it was still somewhat of a disappointment. The girl snapped her gum, her hair shaved close to her scalp, and I saw a few tattoos on her fingers. She nodded her head at me silently in response to my once-over.

“Spit that shit out.”

“What?” She raised an eyebrow.

I pointed a finger at her mouth. She shrugged and spit the wad of gum on the ground. She looked back at me, followed my finger, and seemed to remember where she was.

“Oh shit, sorry.” She picked the gum up and stuck it in a wrapper she pulled from her pocket. I waited for her to finish before I addressed the group.

"So. You're what I have to work with?"

They seemed surprised. I wondered if I'd been a little harsh. I'd had a speech prepared, had worked on it since my supes had told me I was training, and I realized that I'd been rehearsing for an entirely different crowd. In my head, I'd stood in front of a group of ten or twelve rowdy kids, raised my hands and commanded attention expertly. I'd established dominance, asserted control, corralled them with words and tone. But these kids, they weren't bullying me or questioning me or pulling any *what makes you such a fuckin' expert anyway?* They stood in a loose huddle, watching me with a sort of bored but interested attitude. I already had their attention. Standing in front of them, I saw that ninety percent of my speech involved getting and keeping that. They didn't need a drill sergeant, and they wouldn't respond to insults. I could feel my palms sweat a little.

I've never been great with public speaking. It used to drive Dad crazy, the way I'd choke

in front of an audience. I was always that kid you felt sorry for, when they went on stage. I'd hold my script, or clutch the mic with both hands, my knees shaking and my lower lip wobbling, and you could feel the way the audience clenched their assholes. Waiting for me to throw up or pass out or run screaming into the audience, wailing for mommy or daddy. They'd look at each other, grimacing, *oh Christ here we go, Judy put the camera away this is gonna be ugly*. But I never did that, thankfully. I'd just lean into the mic, my voice a girly mousy squeak, and I'd choke and stumble and stutter my way through whatever it was I was obligated to say. The applause at the end was scattered and too polite and you could hear the collective exhale, that palpable relief that it was over, that almost sexual elation that comes after having suffered through something exquisitely unpleasant. Mom would coddle me after, kiss my head and spoon-feed me lies with nothing but good intentions, but Dad would just drive the car silently all the way home, not looking at me in the rear-view mirror. We'd pull up in the drive and the trees would be towering over us and Mom would get out of the car, go up the walk because she knew the ritual, and with his hands on the wheel and the engine still running he'd say *I just don't get you, Russell. I just don't fuckin' get you*. And I'd pick at my sleeves or the seatbelt or the window crank and I'd say I was just nervous in front of all those people. And he'd stare up at Mom in the doorway, waiting for us, and he'd shut the car off. We'd get out and head inside where Mom would give me chocolate graham crackers and milk and let me watch TV. Dad would sit in his chair and smoke and clean a gun or pick the gunk out of a pocket knife or just sit and watch the TV and he'd never yell or hit me but the way he tapped his feet and didn't say anything hurt so much I'd wish that he would.

I never really grew out of that, but I learned little tricks. Associating a color with good

calm feelings and using that color to help yourself along. Imagining you're talking to one person in particular. Not looking at the audience directly. And for the most part I could get through things, when they rarely came up. Now, in front of the rookies, I looked up at the trees and wiped my palms on my shirt and recalculated. *Recalculating... When possible, make a U-Turn.* Nothing came to mind, and before the panic got control, I blurted out the only thing on my mind.

"Look, I suck at this shit. Let's just cut the crap and head out, yeah?"

The four of them grinned, grabbed their packs and shouldered them, and I wondered if that had been the trick all along.

We broke for lunch on a ridge I was familiar with, and they started asking the real questions, the ones I'd been prepared for and had expected. Dale wanted to know what my most technically challenging rescue was. The girl, Lee, wanted to know how many MP cases I'd been on that involved children. The other two had the same question: what was the grossest thing I'd ever seen?

"Easy. Two years ago we had a call about a suspected homeless camp in the south area of the park. I got dispatched because no one else wanted to deal with it, and I figured I'd have to arrest a squatter or two. I get out to the tent and I can tell within about a hundred yards that whoever's in that tent hasn't been alive in a while. I'd know that smell anywhere now, but up until that point I really hadn't dealt with a lot of Boomers."

Dale chuckled and nodded. The other three didn't get it, but I didn't explain.

"So I smear this peppermint Chapstick I have all around the inside of my nostrils, and it burns like a motherfucker, but it helps a little, and I radio in that we're gonna need the ME up here for a removal. I open up the tent, and all I see is a sleeping bag wrapped in a tarp. And it's

wrapped up tight, but I can still tell it's leaking something, and I can see someone's head sticking out of the top. As I'm leaning in to take a better look, I must have turned the volume up on my radio because when dispatch radios back it's earsplitting and it scares the shit out of me, so I trip."

Dale cringed.

"And I fall right on top of this guy. Now it's the middle of summer, and this fucker's wrapped up in a tarp *and* a sleeping bag for God knows what reason, and when I land on him he just kind of-

I put my fists together and moved them apart, my fingers spread.

"Pops. Like a water balloon."

Lee gasped and covered her mouth.

"And that's the day I learned about Boomers. When you've got a body decaying in that kind of heat but in a confined space, they swell up and those fluids have nowhere to go so when they're disturbed, they kind of just explode. Makes a weird noise, too. Sort of like a whoopee cushion. *Pffthppf*."

Dale was hysterical, shaking his head and wiping his eyes. *A whoopee cushion*, he choked out. Lee looked a little green, and the other guys looked sickly fascinated.

"What'd it smell like?" One asked.

"Like shit."

Dale couldn't breathe through his silent cackling, and he toppled over sideways.

"You fucking, you fell- right in- him-!"

"Weren't you traumatized?" Lee asked.

"Oh, I guess. But you guys'll learn, you just sort of deal with it after a while. Dale will tell you the same, I'm sure."

"How many alcohol showers you have to take to get the smell of that shit off?" Dale managed to chuckle out, sitting up.

"Well see that's the thing, no one told me about that. So I ended up buying a gallon of cheap soap and I poured it all into my tub and soaked for about eight hours. But it didn't really help that much, and now I know better. Remember that, guys: isopropyl alcohol will get rid of corpse stench. Get five or six bottles and bathe in it, it's the only thing that'll make you smell even close to normal quickly."

Two of them jotted that down in their field notebooks.

"God, I don't know what I'd do if that happened to me. I think I'd be traumatized for life." Lee shivered, hugged her knees to her chest.

"Nah. It's like Russell said, you just get used to it after a while. Trust me, you learn to laugh about it." Dale chipped in.

"Exactly. I mean hopefully you don't have a lot of shit like that happen, but it will, and you guys'll learn to handle it."

"It's amazing what you can get used to. You learn to detach and look at things through a scope. Like this old lady who got in a wreck right before I retired. Old bitch shouldn't have been driving in the first place, had early signs of dementia apparently, and she was going the wrong way down the street and hit another car dead on. Her air bag hit her so hard her dentures got shoved into the base of her skull, and that's what killed her. When we recovered the body, her jaw was split wide open and her mouth was hanging down to her chin. I turned to the guy with

me and asked him if he thought she looked like a Muppet, with her mouth all like that, and he goes 'Nah, she ain't green enough to be Kermit.' And I swear to you I've never laughed that hard in my laugh, man." He laughed and picked at his shoe. "I think the only thing I never learned to do that with was kids. That's why I left, actually. Just couldn't deal with the kids, y'know? Most of the time, whatever's wrong with 'em isn't even their fault, and I didn't feel right about that."

Lee nodded. "Yeah, I think that's the one thing I'll have trouble with, is the kids going missing and stuff. Is it hard for you, Russell?"

They all turned to look at me.

"No. It's not too bad."

A red Power Ranger shoe.

"Shit happens."

The conversation stalled while I tried to think of something else, anything else, to say.

Dale saved it.

"So why'd you guys want to be Rangers?"

"My old college professor was a Ranger before he started teaching. He got me into it, and I ended up majoring in environmental sciences." Lee contributed.

"My dad was a firefighter, and he helped out with the big wildfires in our area. I thought it was cool what he did, but I've got a bad knee from football, so I can't do it. I figured this'd be the next best thing. Love it, man." One of the guys, Brad, chimed in.

We turned to look at the last of us to speak, Kevin. He looked uncomfortable.

"I guess I joined 'cause of my mom." He finally said. We waited for more.

"Was she a Ranger?" Thank God for Dale. Kevin shook his head.

"Nah, she was a paralegal. But when she was a kid, her parents took her and her sister camping, and while they were out there, her sister disappeared. They woke up one morning and she was gone. They never found her, and my mom used to talk about it a lot. She felt guilty because she was the older sister, and it really messed her up. She used to have these horrible night terrors when I was younger, and she'd be screaming for her sister. It used to make me really upset, and I always told her I'd grow up and find out what happened. So I guess that's why I joined. I work in the park where she disappeared, and I guess I'm just hoping I'll find her eventually. It's stupid, but I dunno, it just seemed like the right thing to do."

He shrugged and wouldn't look at any of us.

"Damn dude. That's intense." Brad remarked, scratching his head. Kevin's face was red, and he fidgeted with the ties on his pack.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well I think it's nice. I think it's admirable that you want to help her out that way. I hope things work for you." Lee smiled awkwardly. Kevin nodded and smiled slightly.

"It's admirable, but you should find your own reasons for working here." Kevin didn't look up. "You're not gonna be out there every day looking for people. Some days, you won't even set foot in the woods. You'll be directing traffic or doing paperwork or doing litter patrol on the paths. If you're in it to search for someone, you'd be better off sticking to volunteer SAR stuff."

Dale raised his eyebrow.

"I'm just saying, it's not the best idea. You do searching out here, yeah, but there's a shit-load that's just boring grind and if you don't have a reason to stick with it you're gonna burn out."

"Everyone's different, man. The kid's got motivation enough, I'm sure he'll do fine."

"Well, here's hoping." I raised my water bottle at Kevin and stood up, shouldering my pack. "Time to be gettin' a move-on. Day's still young."

The low angle of the lighting wasn't doing either one of us any favors. It highlighted the hollows of K.D's cheekbones and eye-sockets, giving her an even more skeletal appearance than usual. She glanced at me and, seeing my equally awful visage, stuck her tongue out and made a *bleeeaaagh* noise.

"Horrifying."

She grinned and turned back to her marshmallow.

"Not lookin' too great there yourself, champ. Nice double chin, by the way. When did you get that?"

I patted the underside of my jaw with my hand.

"Thanks, I grew it myself. I'm hoping by next year I have a triple-decker, but you know, gotta keep the goals realistic."

She snorted. I smashed my chin against my neck and gurgled.

"Why don't you do that all the time, Brauer? It's so sexy."

She reeled her marshmallow back in. It was perfect, only slightly burned. She glanced at mine, and nodded at it.

"Your marshmallow is on fire."

I whipped my head back and saw that the end of my stick was engulfed. I shook the flaming mess off; it plopped into the fire, sizzling.

"Fuck."

K.D ate her marshmallow while I watched hungrily. After she was finished, she grabbed the bag beside her and popped another on the end of her stick. She handed me the bag, and I speared one on the end of my charred stick. A hand reached over from the log next to ours, and I set the bag in it.

"I used to be so good at this." I grumbled.

"Daddy and I used to go camping when I was a kid, he told me the best way to do it is to keep it out of the direct flames but close enough that it's sort of searing, you know?"

I moved my new marshmallow out a bit and could tell she was right.

"You know what my favorite thing to do was?"

"Hmm?"

"I always really liked getting the skin that brownish color and then when I pulled it off the stick, I'd put vanilla pudding in the hole where the stick was, so it was full of pudding. It kinda tastes like... crap, what's it called..."

"Creme brulee?"

"Yeah, that."

"How'd you get it to go in there?"

She giggled. "With a big syringe. Daddy thought it was gross and wrong but I loved it."

I kept a close eye on my marshmallow.

"You and your dad used to go camping a lot, right?" She asked, her mouth full again.

"Yeah. It was a weekend thing we did."

"That's really cool! He liked the outdoors, huh?"

"Yeah. He was real big into that kind of stuff, and he got me into it."

"Daddy used to take us out camping every summer in our Winnebago. He wanted to camp out in tents but my mom wouldn't let him because she couldn't stand not being able to shower. Plus my eating, you know."

"Yeah, that'd probably make things harder."

My marshmallow was perfect, and I ate it right off the stick.

"Good, right?"

I mumbled my agreement around the molten magma of the marshmallow.

"Didn't your dad teach you about that? I figured it was a dad thing."

I shrugged. "He liked making hotdogs."

K.D wrinkled her nose. The senior Ranger stood up and started to speak.

"Alright, let's get the show going. We're not going in any particular order, but try not to talk over each other. No rusty meat hooks, no dead hookers under hotel beds. Keep it original."

"Can they be true stories?" Someone piped up on the other side of the fire.

"I don't give a shit. Just make sure they don't suck."

Someone handed him a bucket of water, and after a quick glance around the circle, the (Director) tossed it over the fire. A few people squealed or gasped, and I felt K.D shift on the log next to me. I heard a girl whisper to whoever she was sitting next to, and her little giggle as they pulled her close. I could feel K.D scoot a bit closer, but I shifted away. I remembered vaguely that she got nervous in the dark, but I didn't really want to coddle her. Once she got used to it, she'd be fine. She cleared her throat, and I closed my eyes to help them get used to the dark quicker. The wind rustled the branches around us; a branch in the distance cracked a bit, and a

girl, maybe the same one, yelped. I rolled my eyes behind my eyelids.

“God you'd think by now I'd be used to this, huh?” K.D whispered, laughing shakily.

“You're fine. Just close your eyes and listen to the woods.”

She breathed out and shifted again. “You're lucky you aren't afraid of the dark. It sucks.”

I grunted noncommittally.

“So... I guess I'll start then?” A male voice from across the circle. We waited.

“Uh, okay... So, there was this urban legend where I grew up about this lighthouse on the bluff. You could take a tour inside it and look at where the lighthouse keeper used to live, and they had a bloody handkerchief on display in the lobby. The legend was that the guy who built the lighthouse in the early 1900s had a young daughter who everyone in town loved. One day, the dad went out sailing, and the daughter waited months for him to come back, but he never did. So she took over the lighthouse, and all her friends kept her company when they could. One day, a group of them come to pick her up for a dance in town, and they were about to leave when she stopped and said she forgot her handkerchief. So she ran back inside, and after a minute they could hear banging from upstairs. They tried to go inside, but the doors were locked. A couple of the guys finally broke the front door in, but by then it was quiet. They saw a trail of blood going up the stairs, so they followed it up into the attic, where there was a trapdoor open. They looked down it and saw that it went like hundreds of feet down into the earth, and the girl wasn't anywhere to be found.

“The legend said that the police looked for her for years, but never found a trace of her. The trapdoor in the attic led straight down into the Pacific Ocean, so they assumed that the killer had dumped her body down there and had somehow gotten back out. But they never really

figured it out.”

We waited to make sure he was done. Someone else to my right spoke up. I knew who he was, a big friendly guy who I thought would make an excellent Ranger, as he seemed to be largely unflappable.

“Eh. I guess that's kind of scary, but I've got a better one. Okay, so there's this guy, and he rides the same elevator to work every day. He works on the top floor, right, and he's always complaining to management about how fucking cold this elevator is. Like the rest of the building is fine, but this elevator is like freezing, constantly. Management says they'll take care of it, but they never do. Every day, he rides up to the top floor in this freezing fucking elevator, and he hates it. He makes a big show about it, comes to work wearing mittens and a scarf and shit in the middle of summer. He asks around, and everyone else says it's not that bad. 'You kiddin'?' He says. 'That damn elevator's like a fucking freezer.'

“Then, one day, as he's riding up, the elevator breaks down. He's stuck between floors, so he uses that little phone thing and tells maintenance what's up. They say 'yeah sure, we'll have you out in a little while.' Dude huddles up in a corner in his nice suit, wrecks all the creases, and tries to keep warm. While he's in there, he's got the phone thing on speaker, and he's whining and moaning about how it's so cold, and how he's gonna sue the crap out of the company if he gets hypothermia in there. Right as he's about to start flipping out, the elevator starts working again, and takes him to the top floor. He gets out, calls maintenance and tells 'em that if they don't get that thing fixed, he's gonna sue. Guy on the other line says 'listen, buddy, you keep saying it's cold in there, but the lady who rides with you every day doesn't seem to mind.'

“Now the guy, he thinks he's being pranked. He starts hollering about how he's gonna

sue, and he hangs up and gets his day over with. On the way down, he's still angry about the whole thing, and he stands in the middle of the elevator, looking around. There's no one in there but him, and he's muttering about how stupid the whole thing is.”

A log creaked, and I took the opportunity to shift my weight. The log made an odd, raspy sound, and K.D snickered under her breath.

“But as he's lookin' around, he hears something strange. It's coming from the ceiling. He looks up, and he just about pees his pants. There's a woman standing on the ceiling, like it was the floor, and she's lookin' right at him. She opens her mouth, reaches down, and... *grabs him!*”

Someone shrieked, and a few people yelped in surprise. The guy telling the story lost it, laughing in great big whoops and saying how he got her, he got her so good. A girl's voice, furious and close to tears, berated him, telling him it wasn't funny to grab her like that.

“That was cheap. What a lame story.” K.D whispered. I agreed.

Once things calmed down again, and the circle was re-established, a young woman spoke up from directly to our left.

“That sucked. If you want a real scary story, at least tell one that's true, or make it seem true. “

“Well then why don't you tell one, since you're such a damn expert?” The guy retorted.

“Alright, I will.” She cleared her throat. “Did you guys read in the news about the guy up in Portland who got admitted to the psych ward with his wife?”

No one spoke.

“I heard about it a few months ago. This guy and his wife moved up there so that he could write books or something, and she got pregnant with their first kid. She had a miscarriage a

few months in, and I guess he woke up and found her miscarrying in their bathroom.”

“That's not scary, that's just sad. I thought you said-”

“She was eating the fetus.”

A recoil rippled through the group. I heard K.D suck in a harsh breath.

“She was sitting on the floor, with it cupped in her hands, and she was eating it. The husband told the cops that she looked right at him and smiled, and there was blood and... other stuff all over her teeth. She said something about just wanting to get it back inside, and the guy lost his mind. Ripped what was left out of her hands and went and called 911. I have a friend who's a dispatcher, he said he got to hear a recording of the call and it was awful. The guy was screaming, holding his half-eaten miscarried child, and in the background you could hear the wife saying 'I love you so much, I just had to get it back inside, I love you.' He and the wife are both in a psych hospital now. I guess she went into some kind of post-partum psychosis, and he's just... A shell, basically. Hasn't said a word since.”

One of the women in the group let out a small noise. There was a whispered *Jesus...*

It was quiet for a long time.

“I grew up near an Indian reservation.” An older man, speaking softly. “I had a friend who used to tell me about the local legends, so I'd know what people were talking about when I went to visit him. One of the things he talked about a lot was the Wendigo. A man with the head of a deer who walked on two legs and stalked the loneliest places of the wilderness, looking for lost and starving travelers. He'd seek them out, and get inside their heads, tell them lies to turn them crazy so he could influence them. In the old days, the natives used to blame cannibalism on the Wendigo. The spirit of the lonely places.

“When I was twelve, that friend disappeared while he was on a hunting trip with his family, along with his older brother. They looked for him for almost a week, and they couldn't find him. His father said they were camped for the night, everyone was asleep in their tents, and when they woke up the next morning, the boys were gone.

“At first, everyone blamed the local homeless population, said that there had to be some crazy hobo out there who took them. But they didn't find anything, and people got scared. They wondered if there was someone out in the woods, someone smart who knew how to get away with awful things like that. My mother stopped letting me walk to school alone, I had to go with a buddy. No one was allowed to play anywhere wooded, we had to stay on the streets and in plain sight. The whole town, everyone on the res, we were all terrified. They searched and searched, and I kept hoping they'd find them.

“One day, I came home from school, and my mother was in the living room with my father. He was holding her, she was crying. I'd never seen her cry before. She ran up to me, gathered me up and held me real tight. My father came over, knelt down and told me he had something to tell me, something very awful and sad. They'd found my friend and his brother, but only the brother was alive. I wanted to know what had happened, how my friend had died, but they told me I was too young to hear it. All I needed to know was that it was a terrible, terrible accident, and that the funeral would be next weekend. My mother kept stroking my hair, crying and telling me how glad she was that I was safe when that poor boy's mother was grieving for her lost child. My father smiled at me, but he looked tired, and there were dark circles under his eyes that I'd never seen before. They buried my friend, a closed casket funeral, and I was there to say goodbye. I thought about how it wasn't fair; he was just a little kid, he didn't deserve to die.

His brother wasn't even there, even though I knew he wasn't in the hospital, and it made me angry. If my friend had been the one to survive, he would have been there. I saw how his mother wept, how she fell on the ground beside the grave as the coffin was being lowered. She kept her hand on it until she couldn't reach it anymore, and she just laid there, her hand stretched into the grave, screaming and wailing for her baby. They had to pull her away and give her sedatives to calm her down. It was awful, one of the worst days in our town and for the res. After it was over, and the obituary had run in the paper, everyone set about forgetting it. My parents never told me what had happened, even when I grew up. They always told me to let it go, that it was better for me to move on. *Nothing will bring that poor boy back, just leave it be*, my mother would say.

“But I never forgot him, and when I was old enough to know how to find people with loose lips, I finally learned what happened to my friend.

“I went to a bar on the res one night, and I found a man who I'd been told would tell me any story I wanted to know for a few beers. I got him good and drunk, and he told me the whole story. The boys had been found a little over a week after they disappeared, in a part of the forest miles from where their campsite had been. The search team found the brother under a fallen tree, holding my friend's body. When they got close to him, they saw his face and hands were covered in old, dried blood, and they rushed to help. But he wouldn't let them take my friend's body. He'd covered the head in his own shirt, and he rocked back and forth, screaming something. The man told me it took the searchers some time to understand him, but what he was saying was: *I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. I followed him and he came back dead and I was so hungry. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to do it.*

“They managed to drag the body away from him, despite his efforts to keep holding it, and when they unwrapped the shirt, they were horrified at what they saw. Hungry, desperate for food and water and not knowing what else to do, he had eaten away the flesh of my friend's face. All the way to the bone. He had popped his eyes out, split them open to drink the fluid inside. All the flesh down to the collarbones was gone, stripped almost completely away. He'd even eaten his little brother's tongue. And all the while, my friend's brother, his face covered in blood, kept screaming that he hadn't meant to do it. The searchers agreed never to speak of it, to tell the mother nothing of what had happened. As far as anyone else was concerned, the boy's body had been eaten by wildlife. They cleaned the blood off the brother's face, told him never to speak of what he had done. But one searcher, he couldn't resist. He asked the boy what had happened. The boy, descending into a permanent post-adrenaline shock, told him only that a voice had come to him, told him that he had to eat to survive. *I didn't want to die*, he told the searcher. *And I was so, so hungry. His eyes were the hardest part. His eyes kept me alive.*

“I gave the man who told me the story all the money in my pockets. I went home, packed my things and left town the next day. But no matter how far I went, I couldn't forget what happened to my friend. That's why I'm here now. So that one day, I might understand what it was like to be that young boy, out here in the wilderness and having only that voice to keep me company.”

No one spoke, made a single sound. I hadn't noticed it, but K.D had scooted closer, and was pressed against me. I could feel her trembling. I didn't move away.

“Two years ago, I was out on a call for a missing kid. He'd been gone for almost three weeks, and I was part of the last group to go out for him. They were gonna call off the search,

because it was heading into the stormy season, and no one really believed the kid was gonna be alive anymore anyway. I was doing grid with my partner, and he goes behind a strand of trees and starts yelling for me to come here, to come look at this. I run over, thinking he's found some trace of the kid, and there's the body, sprawled out on the ground. But it wasn't the whole body. It was just... pieces of him. Half of his upper torso was gone, his left leg, crown of his skull. This kid, it looked like he'd been put through a paper shredder. The cuts were so clean... And in the dirt, we could see this vague outline where something had been. Something long and narrow, with straight edges. This kid... he'd been alive while we'd been searching for him all that time. The body was so fresh, it could have been put there minutes before we'd found it. He wasn't emaciated or bruised, didn't have a scratch on him except for those clean cuts. You could still see a tear on the side of his cheek. He looked so scared, his eyes were so wide. They took the body away, and I never found out what happened... I think about him all the time. About that tear on his face.”

There were a few whispered *Christs* and similar sentiments.

“The kid's body, how it was cut so cleanly like that... I know about something else like that. I wasn't there, but my roommate told me about it. He said he and a few other Rangers were out doing some field work, they went out about three miles into an area that had a lot of reports of strange stuff going on. Usual camper bullshit, stuff like sounds in the woods or weird lights or screaming, so they weren't really expecting to find much, but you know how it goes. They were just about to the area where they were supposed to set up a temporary camp, and to the south, maybe fifty yards away, he spotted...”

The guy telling the story hesitated. He made a few false starts, but couldn't seem to get

whatever he was trying to say out.

“Go ahead.” K.D urged quietly.

“He... spotted some stairs.”

A ripple went through the group. The hairs on the back of my arms stood up.

Collectively, I felt us look toward where we knew the (Director) was sitting. Like guilty kids, waiting to see if the teacher brings down discipline for a slip of the tongue, the word 'fuck' instead of 'oops'. But he was quiet. The guy decided to continue tentatively.

“Some stairs, in between some trees. He said they were big and wooden, that they reminded him of a big Southern home. He wanted to turn around and keep moving, but one of the rookies in the group had never seen them before, and he wanted to go look.”

Someone gasped.

“My roomie, he kept saying that he told him not to, he swore he did. The rookie went over and was looking at them, asking all these questions, but no one wanted to answer him or come any closer. He put his hand on one of the steps, and my roomie says that every hair on his body stood up. I think he described it as a big static shock. He said everyone felt it, that they all backed off further. But the guy who was touching them, he didn't seem to notice it. And then, almost at exactly the same time, they all realized the stairs are gone. My roomie said it happened so fast, none of them actually saw it happen. One second they were there, the next they were gone, but it happened so fast their brains didn't even register it leaving. My roomie put his foot down, said it was time for everyone to get the fuck out, and they all started leaving, including the rookie, who was really calm all of a sudden. My roomie fell back to see how the rookie was doing, and he was fine. But my roomie said he felt like something was really wrong. He couldn't

figure out what, but there was definitely something wrong. Eventually, he looked behind him and saw that there was a trail of blood spatter behind them. He followed it back to them, and it led to the rookie. That's when he realized that the rookie's hand was gone. Rookie hadn't even noticed, it had happened so fast and clean. My roomie didn't want the guy to panic, so he quick pulled off his jacket and tied it around the end of the guy's arm like a tourniquet. Told the guy he had a pretty nasty cut on his hand, probably from a splinter on the stairs, and without letting anyone else know exactly what's wrong, he took the guy back to the VC.

“Rookie went to the hospital, and the doctors couldn't believe how clean the cut was. My roomie said he thought he heard one of them say it was like it had been done with a laser, that's how precise it was. Rookie went into shock almost immediately after it had happened, which is why he hadn't noticed.

“A part went back out to look for the guy's hand, but even though they knew right where it happened, they never found it. It was just... gone. The supes buried the incident, told people it was a freak accident involving an 'unspecified natural disaster', and that no one was allowed to talk about it. But my roomie still talks about it, sometimes. About how fast everything happened, and how clean the cut was. Like whatever those stairs were, it took that piece of the rookie with them went they vanished. I think about that a lot, and sometimes I'm so tempted to go over and wait on a set of stairs until they vanish. Just to see where they go.”

“I think I know where they go.”

An expectant, stony quiet settled in the camp. I could hear K.D breathing in little harsh gasps. I nudged her shoulder with mine, and she flinched.

“Two moths ago I was out on grid looking for a missing woman. My partner and I got

separated somehow, and I was trying to get radio contact with her. But my radio wasn't working, no matter what channel I turned it to it was this squeaky static. I wasn't watching where I was going because I was scared, I had this feeling that things were about to go really wrong, and I tripped on something. It happened so fast, I never even saw it. It was hard, like metal, and I was wearing steel-toed boots so it made this ringing sound, like when you kick a pipe. I tried to catch myself with my hands, and I felt them hit something- and then go right through it. I don't really know how to explain it, but it felt like I was falling through fiberglass. It felt like I was being stuck with thousands of little glass splinters. As I passed through whatever it was, I could feel them everywhere, in my mouth and my eyes and my nose, and I think I must have breathed in because I felt them inside me, too. When I hit the ground, I hit hard, and it kind of dazed me. I knocked my jaw on a rock, and I think I might have passed out for a minute. I broke it, actually. Almost shattered that joint. But I didn't even notice until..."

She sniffled a little. There was the sound of fabric on fabric.

"When I got up, that fiberglass feeling was gone, and I tried my radio again, but I wasn't even getting static. It was just quiet. And I had this feeling that even though everything looked the same, that I was somewhere completely different. I went a little ways back where I had come from and things felt so wrong. It was like being in a dream, and sometimes in the distance, I'd hear this grinding noise. My little sister used to grind her teeth at night, and it reminded me of that, but larger, if that makes sense.

"I can't remember how long I walked, but I stopped at one point because my jaw was hurting. And for some reason, as I was touching it, I looked at the ground and suddenly I realized what was wrong. There were no shadows. None at all. I looked everywhere, and even though it

was light out, nothing was casting a shadow. It was like the light was coming from everywhere and nowhere. And my skin wasn't the right color, either. It had this orange tint to it, like I'd gotten a bad tan. I tried to see up through the trees, because they weren't that thick, but all I could see was something that looked like smoke. It was like I was near a forest fire. The light through the smoke was this dusty orange color, but I couldn't smell anything burning. For that matter, I couldn't smell anything at all. There was no wind, no smells, no sound except for me and the grinding, and I felt this overwhelming sense of... of deadness. Wherever I was, there was nothing alive. No animals, no people, no anything.

“When you look at the trees and your line of sight runs out, you know there's still more trees in the distance. You just can't see them, because of the limit of the horizon. Does that make sense? The world doesn't end at the horizon, you just can't see the rest of it. But that's not how it was there. It was a dead place, and there was nothing beyond what I could see. All around me, I could feel this crushing sense of emptiness, and it felt like it stretched on forever. Like if I stepped beyond the borders of where the light touched, I'd fall into the empty space and never find my way out. I don't know how to explain it... It was beyond what I can describe. But wherever it was, it was a dead place. An awful, empty dead place that was in between things. I started panicking, and I could hear the grinding getting louder and closer to me. The only thing I could do was sit on the ground and curl up and... well it's stupid, but I put my thumb in my mouth, like when I was a kid. I was so scared and I wanted to run but something told me not to and I listened. And eventually it was right on top of me, and it was so loud I thought it was going to kill me. It felt like all the air was being vacuumed out, there was so much negative pressure, and I had that fiberglass feeling again and I couldn't scream or move or open my eyes.

“And then... I was back. It was like... popping. I felt a pop, and I could hear things again. Birds and the wind and my radio making static noises. I had such a distinct sense of being back where I was supposed to be, but it also felt like I'd traveled an infinite amount of space in that single second. I was exhausted, and I passed out.

“When they found me, they airlifted me to the hospital because my heart rate was almost nonexistent.. And I was missing one of my ears. They couldn't figure that out because it was such a clean cut. That's why I wear my hair long now, actually. Before, it was short. I was also hypothermic in the middle of summer, which they couldn't figure out either. But that wasn't even the weirdest part of the whole thing.

“The weirdest part was that even though I was gone for less than five minutes according to my watch, I was missing for two full days. My partner said she'd seen me one second, and the next I was gone. When she went to look for me, she couldn't find me. My radio wasn't working, and there was no sign of me at all. They looked everywhere for me, and they ended up finding me in a place they'd already looked multiple times at the end of the second day.

“I went to my supervisor. I wanted to know what had happened to me. He just advised me to see a counselor that was working for the Forest Service, and advised me not to tell the story to anyone outside of work. He never said it that blatantly, but I got the impression that there would be really bad consequences if I did. So I just... moved on. I kept working as a cadet, and no one talked about it. No one asked me about my ear, and when my jaw healed it was like nothing had ever happened. I actually forgot it until tonight... It's almost like my ear has always been missing, like nothing weird ever happened at all.”

“But what does that have to do with where the stairs go?” Someone asked.

“I told you, when I tripped, I hit something metal. There's nothing metal out there in the middle of the woods. But in the split second before I fell, I could see gray. A straight shelf of gray, right above my feet. And when I passed through it, I could see more of them, leading up into the trees. I went online the first night I got home, and I looked up a picture on Google.

“Those stairs, they were part of a metal fire escape. Just like the one I used to have outside my apartment in the city when I was growing up.”

There weren't any words. What could we say? We shuffled on our logs, breathing quietly, some of us crying or sniffing or swallowing, our dry throats clicking. Some of us, the skin on our backs tightened and prickled. Our balls shriveled against our groins, pulling up quickly, almost painfully, in response to the shivers we suddenly had. There was the sound of hair swishing on nylon as some of us looked over our shoulders into the darkness that didn't seem so soft and familiar anymore. K.D was pressed against me, but found no comfort there. My eyes wide, pupils like marbles, I stared out into the trees, barely able to make out their shapes in the dim light. That old familiar panic, my old friend, tickled its fingers up my ribs, settled into my gut and made itself comfortable. *My old friend, where have you been?* Someone was making a small reedy noise. It was coming from me so I shut it off. I pulled myself together, bit my tongue and used the pain to my advantage. Stories. Just stories. Good ones, the ones based on truth are always good, but stories. No one would risk his neck, his job, and tell the truth with a supe here. I swallowed dryly and waited for the game to end.

And yet. There were still too many things to be said. Too many things sitting at our feet, looking up at us with big eyes and wondering when we'd use them for our little fictional Show

and Tell. Too many things in red Power Ranger shoes and hiking packs and sleeping bags that watched us and waited their turn. There was so much waiting to be regurgitated into the waiting circle, all of us hungry for it and needing it and hoping that our next meal would come, but as someone started to talk, and I started to wonder if maybe these weren't just stories, maybe they were memories actual memories and could this really be happening, a flashlight clicked on. The game was over.

“I think that's enough for the night. It's getting late, and the buses are gonna be here early.” The senior stood up, gathering the half empty bags of marshmallows near him, kicking dust over the fire. Other lights clicked on, people blinked and squinted their eyes and I saw one or two beams flick over the trunks of the trees. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw K.D whip her head around to look at me, thoroughly misjudging my character, and I didn't look at her. I stood up, stretching my back, which had gone pins-and-needles at some point and was causing me significant discomfort.

“That's it? We didn't even vote!” I turned my back on her, turning on my own flashlight and moving out of the circle of logs and light.

“It's late. We need to be up early and I shouldn't have let us go this long to begin with. The votes don't really matter that much anyway-”

“That's not the point! We were having a serious discussion, and-”

“That's enough, Kennedy. If you're so interested in ghost stories, I'm sure you can find plenty online.”

Someone chuckled.

My back to the group, watching the path and the trees swaying, I could hear K.D's quiet

huff, the way she slammed her feet on the ground as she got up and stalked toward me.

“Thanks for backing me up, Russell.” She quickened her pace, walked ahead of me and the rest of the group.

“Jesus Christ, K.D...” I muttered under my breath. I didn't try and catch up with her, didn't want to have to comfort her or talk reason into her or play that part. It made me a shitty friend, and I owed her, but I couldn't bring myself to quicken my step. Instead, I looked over at the couple walking next to me, their heads bowed. She shook her head in response to something her partner said, and as she did I saw a dark hole with clean, surgical edges; I shut my flashlight off, welcoming the dark back.

* * *

As shitty as they can be, there's something to be said for mandatory work retreats. Being miserable away from work reminds you how comparatively tolerable even the worse days are on the job, and you come back with a sense of being new and recharged. You've absorbed a little from the seminars or training or lectures, and for those first few weeks back you get those days where the job seems fresh again.

While I'd been gone, (**confirm season**) there had been a series of small wildfires in the south end of the park, and I went along to help document the damage. Thankfully, it wasn't all that much, and we figured we'd be able to re-open that area in less than **two years**. I joked around with the other Rangers, happy to be back in familiar woods with familiar faces. I'd forgotten my walking stick at home during the retreat, and I was happy to have it back. Old and scratched, the finish gone, it was a critical tool, and I had bonded with it. I greeted it with the

same joy I knew some people greeted their pets or babies.

I fell back into the swing of things easily. People asked me for directions or clarification of maps, and I gave it politely. Children fell, got sunburns, bee stings, mosquito bites, and I administered First Aid. Parents love it when you do that. They watch you bandage their kid expertly, apply ointment, all the while reassuring the worried mom that the kid is fine, they're not hurt, and they see how their kid looks at your badges and your hat. It lights them up, they ask you to pose for pictures, get your name so they can send letters to your boss, commending you for a job well done. Though not great with kids, I'm great with their parents, and most of the time that's all you have to be good at. The kid, all they see is your uniform and your gun. They don't care if you talk to them or smile or laugh at their dumb jokes. They just want to wear your hat, touch your gun, ask you about random animal facts. I'm good at those. I tell them there's over 40 names in the English language to describe a cougar, and they lose their minds. I teach them the rules of snakes: *yellow touches black, you're okay, Jack. Red touches yellow, you're a dead fellow.* Their parents, they can't get enough. They eat it up. They tell you you're a savior, a God-send, a saint. *Just doing my job ma'am. That's what we're here for. No, there's no need to pay me, this is all part of the job. But thank you, very much.*

I had no idea what K.D's pill did, exactly, or how it did it, but it fixed my insomnia. I slept soundly every night, with only occasional dreams of trees, my soaring over them powered only by the flapping of my arms. There were no nightmares, no sleepless nights on the floor, my thoughts chasing their own tails.

My co-workers noticed. *Man, Brauer, they give you a lobotomy over there?* I laughed politely, said I'd just needed to get away for a while. No one mentioned anything from before

training. It was a new season, a new month, there were new policies to implement and new visitors to protect and there was so much work to do, how could any of us dwell on the past? Even when a child went missing, no one brought it up. We banded together, searched for hours, and my heart never raced, sweat never poured down my back or coated my hands and the grip of my walking stick. I was methodical, focused, precise, an example to those around me. We found the kid by a river, sound asleep on a moss patch, not even aware we'd been looking for her. I walked back with her and my partner, listening to them chatter. We reunited her with her family, and we were proud of the job we'd done. We went out for drinks after the park closed, and got thoroughly wasted. A lot of us came to work the next day with baggies of aspirin, alka seltzers, bashful grins raising the edges of our sunglasses.

I didn't hear from K.D for a few weeks. I meant to contact her, but somehow it always escaped my attention. One day, though, I opened my account and saw a message from her. It was brief; I read it with a slight sense of dread. We'd never technically made up after the campfire. I'd skipped breakfast to sleep in later, and we didn't take the same bus back. But I was pleasantly surprised to see that she'd evidently forgotten about it, or forgiven me, as she didn't mention it.

Heey,

So that was some fuckin retreat, huh? They shouldn't call it that, it's deceptive. A retreat is something you do to relax, not go and get your ass reamed by trainers or exercises. But whatever, I guess it was better than that year that it rained the whole time. Remember that? Christ that was awful. I'm surprised none of us got trench foot or something.

Anyway, I actually just wanted to let you know that I'm heading down

your way next week to see a friend, and I figured I'd stop by. You should let me tag along with you at work, then we can be Boy Scouts together and go romping around the woods tying knots or whatever it is Boy Scouts do.

Let me know if you're around, which I know you will be, because you're probably dying to see me. Hope you're sleeping better, don't be a zombie when I get there.

-k.d

I wrote her back, told her I'd be around and that I'd be fine with hanging out. Truthfully, I hadn't thought of her much since I'd gotten back to work, and I was reminded again about the fact that I was an awful friend. I told myself I'd make more of an effort to be social.

When things are calm in the park, it's wonderful, almost euphoric. I was still feeling great, with the rest I was getting, and I found myself enjoying my job more than I had in a long time. When you can enjoy the job you're doing, you notice a lot of things that you wouldn't have before. The sound your walking stick makes on the ground as you do your rounds, a nice meaty *thump*, or a potato-chip crunch if you set it down on a leaf or a patch of pine needles. The way the air smells like pitch and good things and little whispers of nature growing everywhere. You look forward to waking up every morning because you know it's going to be a good day no matter what happens. Someone might need to be rescued after wandering off onto the wrong path, but you're confident that that's as far as the call will go. You'll find them, turning in circles in a dense patch of undergrowth, their cheeks wet with sweat or tears, and they'll see you and run to you and they'll be nothing but grateful. Maybe they'll hug you, shake your hand, *oh god I'm so*

glad you found me I got so turned around and before I knew it I had no idea where I was. You'll pat their shoulders, hug them back, reassure them that this sort of thing happens all the time, and that this is why you're out here. You'll joke with them as you lead them back, *it's easy to get lost out here isn't it? Everything looks the same if you don't know what you're doing. Next time, bring a GPS. Or better yet, stay on the path!* They'll laugh that kind of laugh you hear at the dentist's office when he tells you the tooth doesn't need to be taken out this time. *Haha, yeah, no kidding. Maybe I'll just stick to walking in the little park downtown from now on!* You get them back to the VC, maybe patch up any scratches they got while they were running through the woods in a blind panic, and send them on their way. You'll escort them to their car, wave as they back out and drive out of the park, maybe a little more carefully than they would have before. And you're proud of yourself, of the job you did. This is really what they pay you for. To be the shepherd of all these poor little lost sheep. You wonder if maybe you should upgrade your beaten old walking stick to a big staff with a crook on it.

And on the days that no one gets lost, and there are no injuries or other serious problems, you stop and chat with the visitors. Maybe you know some of them, and you shoot the shit for a while, see what they're up to. Or maybe you're not so good with people, and you give brief but friendly greetings on your way to do your rounds. You go out on scouting trips to make sure all the trails are in good shape. You offer to replace signs that are worn, do paperwork on the crappy rainy days, direct traffic on the day that the park hosts a massive Boy Scout meeting so you don't have to be submerged in the crush of all those kids with their snappy uniforms and unending, slightly embarrassing questions. But even directing traffic, that's okay, because under the choking fumes of the cars and the cigarettes you make people put out before they get in the park,

you can still smell the fresh air, and hear the birds talking to each other, and the wind going through the pines. You feel sorry for some of these people, who must find it so refreshing to be out of the city, out of their high-rise offices or cubicles, breathing in other peoples' bad breath and coughs all day. You can tell who these people are because they take deep breaths, squint up at the sky with their hands on their pudgy sides, and they grin at you and say *man, what a nice day*. And you don't tell them that all days out here are nice, because that would just be rubbing it in. Instead, you agree, direct them to the VC, and privately wallow in that nice little glow that comes with knowing that this is your job. You get paid to do this every single day.

When it's nice, it's so, so nice. It is better than any other job in the world could be. You know the forest by heart, and you know the sounds it makes. The nightmares are gone, you haven't thought about that little buried sneaker in so long. No one has mentioned it, and you put the whole thing in the back of your mind, lock it away in a box and duct tape it shut and shove it way down in the darkest corner of the unused closet in the basement. It almost seems funny now, how obsessed you were over it. The retreat did you some good, got you out of there and gave you perspective. You remind yourself to thank your friend, who will be visiting in a few days. You're even looking forward to that, because things are so good.

When things are good, there is no better job in the world. You are the luckiest man alive, and when you go home and shake the pine needles out of your socks, throw your uniform in the wash after smelling it, inhaling that wonderful fresh pitch smell, check yourself for ticks in the shower, and tuck yourself into bed after a glass of whiskey, you're so happy that it's hard to remember how you ever weren't. That's the wonderful thing about the brain. It has a way of forgetting pain, of casually but firmly shutting those sensations out. Women who have given

birth are good examples of this. They remember the pain, can remember how awful it was, but the farther they get from the act, the less awful it seems, and the more clinical their descriptions become. See, the brain doesn't want you to remember how bad things hurt. It wants you to be able to get yourself in those situations again and again, just in case one day it's a matter of survival, and the choice will come down to life or death. The brain will always choose life. So it has this little trick of helping you lock those things up, of guiding your hands in putting that box away, *it wasn't really that bad, was it?*

And things are good. You go to sleep and you're content. You don't dream. You get up, go to work, love your job, find joy in everything you do, no matter how menial. You joke with your coworkers, joke with the visitors, go for long walks in the woods and find new places that are exciting and beautiful and when the visitors need you, you're there. When things are great, they're great.

But that greatness, that euphoria, it's just like the high from a drug. It never lasts. And eventually, you come crashing back down.

I was helping a woman and her husband plot a course for a three-day hike when my radio exploded. I had just pointed out a nice switch-back that would be a good camping spot when Tim, a recently-promoted Ranger, started screaming into his mic.

“Russ! Russ oh my God please help oh God Russ please!”

All of us flinched, the woman let out a startled little shriek. Horrified, I fumbled my radio off my belt and turned it down. The couple was looking at me, their eyes wide, and the woman stepped slightly away from the counter. I smiled sheepishly and held my hand up.

“I'm so sorry about that, guys. Tim's new, he probably saw a coyote or something, it's nothing to worry about.” I cringed, mentally slapping myself. The woman leaned in and looked up at her husband. *There are coyotes here?* She whispered. I could feel their excitement for their trip draining away fast, and I had to restrain myself when I radioed back.

“Jesus Christ, Tim, what the hell's wrong with you?” I hissed. *“I'm right in the middle of a damn info session here and you come on the radio with that shit?”*

I could hear Tim breathing heavily into the mic. He was whimpering. I excused myself, told the couple I'd be right back, and tried to stress that it was nothing to worry about. She was folding her map, and I knew it was going to take a lot of bandaids to fix what Tim had just done. I hurried to the break room as Tim breathed harshly into the mic.

“It's awful Russ oh my God it's so awful please help me please please-” He was quiet, now, and I growled, rubbing my face. Why couldn't he have been quiet when I'd been out with that damn couple?

“For fuck's sake, Tim, just calm down and tell me what the hell is going on. Are you hurt? What's wrong?” My good mood was ebbing away, and I paced around the room. Tim sobbed and there was a scratching sound on the mic as he brushed against it with his hand.

“I-I was out doing trail mapping and I-I saw something in the bushes and I thought it was a deer carcass so I went over and- *oh Jesus, Russ, please get out here I can't stand it I ain't never seen anything like this before please oh please-*”

“For Christ's sake Tim, pull your shit together, you're fucking hysterical and I need you to calm the fuck down.” I took a deep breath, tried to get myself back under control. I wasn't helping any more than he was. “Rookie, I need you to step away from whatever it is, take a few

deep breaths, and tell me calmly what it is you've found out there. Then, I need you to give me your lat-long so I can come out there and help you, okay?"

Tim whimpered and I could hear the snapping of twigs and dry brush. He hiccuped a few times, and when he'd gotten a few feet, away, he took a few deep, hitching breaths and seemed to calm down a little.

"I thought it was a deer carcass, but it wasn't, Russ, it wasn't. I don't know how long it's been out here, but it's awful, it's so awful and I ain't never seen a dead body before-"

"You've got a deceased out there?" My stomach dropped. "Who is it, Tim? Is it a man, woman, boy-?"

"-I don't know, Russ, it's... It's not a whole body, it's just..." He sobbed again. "Please just get out here I can't do this, please-"

"Give me your lat-long, Tim. Then I can come out and help you, okay?" I fumbled my notebook out of my breast pocket, my hands shaking. Tim rattled off his coordinates, and I wrote them down, then plugged them into my phone's GPS. He was almost three miles away.

"We gotta report this, Russ, we gotta tell the IC-"

"There's no IC, Tim, no one's been reported missing for weeks. I need to get out there and confirm before we do anything else. Don't get on any other frequency and tell people about this, do you understand?"

Tim whimpered.

"*God dammit, Tim, do you understand?*"

"Yes!" He affirmed, his voice shaky.

"Until I get out there, I want you to pull your shit together. Don't touch *anything*. Go far

enough away that it's still in sight but you're not right near it. I need you to stay there and make sure nothing touches that body, got it?" I grabbed my walking stick from the corner and put my phone in its holster on my hip. "I've gotta go back out in the VC, I'm turning my radio down. Don't move, I'll be there as soon as I can."

I lowered the radio as Tim confirmed. I put on an ill-fitting smile, and started to apologize as I rounded the corner.

"I'm so sorry about that folks, but my rookie's gotten injured, so I have to go and rescue him. But if you'll wait here I can get someone else to-"

There was no one at the counter. I stood for a moment, my mouth open. Someone at the wall maps glanced over at me, and I shut my mouth with a snap. I smiled, shrugged as if to say *some people, huh?* They turned back to the maps, and I went out the doors, feeling like an imbecile. I headed down the trail, feeling that good part of myself evaporating into the still, crisp air. I understood suddenly how the alcoholic resents the man who spikes his drink in an attempt to be funny. All that hard work, all that time, gone in a second. My walking stick thudded on the ground, waking up the things in the ground underneath it, and I headed into the forest.

I stayed in contact with Tim the whole way there. For the most part, he kept his cool, only occasionally whimpering and whining. I did my best to be patient with him, but about halfway there something in the woods near him broke a branch, and he panicked. He was babbling, his finger depressing the button so he couldn't hear me, but I tried to get through anyway.

"Russ there's something here there's something coming toward me oh God please hurry up please I can't stand being here anymore with this fucking thing please-"

“Just calm the fuck down, Tim, just calm down and take deep breaths. You're scaring yourself, there's nothing-”

“-oh my God it's circling it's checking me out what am I supposed to do, what if it goes for the body, Russ please get here please hurry up- Oh God it's closer! Russ please-!”

“Tim, *Tim*, just- just calm down, buddy, you're fine, it's probably just a raccoon or something, you're-”

“-hurry up I can't stand this where's the rest of him Russ, where's the rest of him? I want to go back to VC I don't want to-”

“Tim, for Christ's sake I'm about halfway there, you're fine, just calm down. Tim, *Tim*, just-”

*“-hurry up and get here I can't breathe I can't breathe, Russ **please-**”*

“Tim, Tim just shut the fuck up and listen to me you fucking idiot!”

Eventually I gave up, turned my radio down and trudged toward his location. The woods were quiet, and I didn't feel any sense of trepidation or unease. I was just tired. That same aching, familiar exhaustion I'd felt before K.D's magic bullet. I'd only been back for a little over a month, but suddenly a vacation sounded like the best thing in the world. Maybe a weekend trip to the lake, rent a cabin and spend some time relaxing. Get some pot from one of the guys, take it out in the forest and smoke a joint or two. Tim was still babbling, but it was echoing now; I was close enough to hear him. I called out, and his radio cut out. In the distance, I could hear him screaming my name.

“I'm here, buddy. I'm on my way. Just relax, stay where you are-”

But I could hear the telltale crashing of underbrush; the idiot was running right for

me. God willing it wasn't a raccoon that had been in the area, or it would take the first opportunity to go and make a snack out of our stiff. I sighed and picked up the pace. Like an ambulance siren, his wailing increased until I could understand what he was saying.

“-God you're here thank God, you're not gonna believe this, Russ, I've never seen anything like it. Oh God, please don't make me go back there-”

He emerged from a clump of shiny-leaved bushes; stupid idiot had run right through a stand of poison ivy. He'd regret that later, when he was actually thinking clearly and every inch of exposed skin was crawling with a stinging rash. He almost ran full force into me, barely stopping in time to avoid a collision. He put his hands on my shoulders and I bore the brunt of most of his weight; my walking stick creaked and dug into the ground as I caught myself on it. I regained my balance and pushed him off; he stumbled back, his eyes wide and teary.

“Jesus Christ, Tim, you're fine. I'm here, there's nothing wrong. I was trying to radio you and tell you to calm the fuck down but you wouldn't stop talking. If you'd listened I would have told you that there was nothing to be worried about.”

“There's something here, Russ, I've heard it, it's been stalking me or something-”
He was still babbling, wringing his hands and turning to look in all directions.

“Nothing is stalking you, god dammit. It's meat, every predator in the area is gonna be tracking it. They don't give a shit about you, they care about the easy meal that's up for grabs. That's why I told you to stay put. Hopefully nothing's out there now.”

I pushed past him, and he followed at my heels, chattering excitedly.

“I was out here just minding my own business and I saw it in the bushes, and I thought it was some kind of dead deer or something, you know? And then I got closer and I saw

what it was and I just freaked out Russ, I freaked out, I've never seen a body like this, I don't even know what could do something like this--"

"Is this the way you came?" I avoided the clump of ivy, and Tim followed. I didn't mention what it was; there'd be time for that when the guy was thinking clearly again.

"No, no I came from the south, over that way." He pointed to the right.

"Did you see any signs of activity? Any clothing, personal items?"

"No, nothing, it's like the fucker dropped right out of the sky. What do you think happened to them, Russ? How'd they get all the way out here?"

"I'm not a damn psychic, Tim, I haven't even seen them yet. Where's it at?"

He pointed ahead.

"About thirty yards. Man please don't make go look at it again, I can't--"

"You can and you will. I need you to show me exactly how you--"

Something snapped under my left boot. I yanked my foot up and both of us froze, looking at each other with wide eyes. We stayed like that for a strange, long second.

"What the hell was that?" Tim broke the silence, not looking down.

A weird, cold feeling crawled up my gut. I knew what it was. I'd heard it before, once when I was a kid, and once on a grid search. The question wasn't what had made the sound, but who, or what, it belonged to. I stepped back and bent down to look.

At my feet was a long, curved white bone, now snapped down the middle. It wasn't a clean break; the ends were jagged and splintered, and I could see a bit of marrow gleaming inside. There was still fresh blood on it; in a few places, tissue and scraps of muscle still clung to the bone, obscenely bright against the dark earth. I unzipped my jacket, not taking my eyes off of

it, and felt along the side of my torso, measuring.

“Russ?” Tim's voice was reedy, cracked.

The size was about right. Tim started to move forward for a closer look, and I shoved him back harder than I meant to; he fell onto his ass with a hoarse *whoof*. I unclipped my phone from my belt, checked our coordinates, and turned my radio to the main channel.

“VC, this is Brauer. I'm out at the following coordinates, I'm gonna need an IC out here. We've got a deceased. Will update with specifics once I reach the... the main site.” I rattled off my coordinates, not waiting for a response. I turned my radio down and glanced back at Tim, who was still sitting on the ground.

“Get up. I need you to show me where the rest of it is.” He got to his feet unsteadily and brushed off the seat of his pants.

“What is it, man, what the hell is it?”

“Keep a three foot radius around it, don't touch *anything* you don't have to.”

He came closer, saw what it was; what little color was in his face drained out.

“Aww Jesus man, that's a rib, isn't it? What the hell's his rib doing all the way over here?”

“*God dammit, Tim, show me where the rest of it is!*”

Tim flinched. He crossed behind me, giving the snapped rib a wide berth, and started forward into the brush. He got about ten feet before he stopped and gagged.

“*What is it?*” I called.

“*It's another fucking rib, man! It's another- oh shit, oh shit, there's more of them! Oh my God, there's- there's like a line of them, they're just-*”

I moved forward quickly but carefully and confirmed what he was seeing.

Stretching away from us in an almost deliberate line were more ribs. At least six that I could see.

“The body's over there, isn't it.” It wasn't a question. I pointed directly ahead, where the ribs appeared to be leading. Tim nodded soundlessly. We moved forward, stepping around the bones, looking down to avoid stepping on any. As we broke into a little clearing, I thought I saw one sticking out of a fern to my left. It was sort of beautiful, and I felt a crazy tilt in my head. I bit my tongue, hard. Tim was whimpering again.

“What the fuck is this, Russ? What does this?”

I didn't respond. We'd come to the body, and for a second I wasn't able to make sense of it. I blinked a few times, opened and shut my mouth, and like a hidden pattern in a visual puzzle, the scene clicked, came together, and I understood why Tim had panicked.

There wasn't a body in the clearing. Rather, there was a *piece* of a body. From that distance, it wasn't anything recognizable, but I knew it was human. I went closer and covered my mouth to block out the smell of death as best I could. The cuts were clean, surgical, and too precise to be any kind of animal. This wasn't even mechanical. These were cuts that went down to what I was sure was a molecular level of precision. The tissues and ligaments and bones cut so cleanly and easily that they'd left no bruising, no exploded capillaries, not a single shred of muscle out of place. A drop of cold sweat crawled down my back, making me flinch.

The chunk of whatever unfortunate human this had been appeared to be from the upper torso. I recognized the divot between the base of the ribs, or where the base of the ribs had been. I could see that this was where our strange trail had come from, because the body had collapsed on itself without the bones to support it, giving it an oddly deflated look. The top ended just

below where I thought the armpits would have started; I could see the beginnings of the dip on the sides of the torso. I grabbed a small, thick stick and gingerly lifted up the lower half of the body to peer inside the chest cavity. I could see the lungs, pink and healthy looking, but something was missing. It took me a moment, but a twinge in my lower back made it come into focus. The spine was gone. Somehow, this man's, and it was most certainly a man's, entire spine had been completely, cleanly removed. As if it had been slid out like a stick from a half-melted popsicle. The entire sternum was missing as well; nothing held the ribs in place except for the pressure and weight of the meat around them. I removed the stick quickly, losing my balance slightly, and I could hear the strange chalky grating as two ribs rubbed together inside the body. My stomach churned, and I stumbled to my feet, holding a hand over my mouth and taking hitching breaths through my nose. I got to the edge of the clearing before I vomited into my hand, the nasty fluid spraying through my fingers and onto my pants. Letting my hand fall, I retched a few more times before I regained composure. I could hear Tim talking into his radio in that infuriating, babbling tone, and I shut my eyes tight.

I saw, with awful clarity, the deflated portion of the man's torso, and I felt that dangerous tilt in my head again. My tongue, still sore from earlier, brought me back a little, but my thoughts were racing and had that odd, dizzy quality of those we have when we're half awake in the middle of the night. I kept circling around the most obvious question: *What the hell could have done this?* I entertained briefly the idea of some sort of bizarre plane crash, but there was no debris. If he'd been dragged and dumped, we would have seen signs of it. Broken branches, drag marks, blood on the soil and leaves. But aside from that awful trail, like some sort of demented version of Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs, we'd seen nothing. Nothing at all. As if this man,

this little chunk of him, and floated here, dropping ribs as it went, and landed neatly in the clearing. The thought of it floating above the ground, like some kind of awful balloon, made a little hysterical laugh bubble out of me, and that made the tilt come back. I bit my tongue too hard, and felt hot blood squirt into my mouth. I spit it out.

I'd pulled a lot of bodies out of the woods in the time I'd been a Ranger. I'd seen people with injuries I couldn't explain, pulled floaters out of the river and almost mummified remains out of old fox dens, but this was something else. This, whatever this was, had the appearance of being deliberate, intelligent, but I felt sure that it wasn't. It was as if some compelling force of nature, some event that moved with great precision but no intelligence, had caught this man up with it. This unfortunate fucker who'd had the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I glanced over my shoulder, saw the bright cherry red of his insides, and my gorge rose again. I swallowed hard, managed not to vomit. My hand started to itch, the vomit on it aggravating my skin.

Wiping it on my pants, I turned around and looked for Tim, who I'd dimly registered talking in the background. He held his radio close to his ear, listening to whoever was talking to him, giving him instructions and telling him to stay put. He gave the affirmative and signed out; when he clipped his radio to his belt, I could see his hands shaking. He stared at me with glassy rabbit eyes that made me immensely uncomfortable. I wondered if mine were the same.

“Russ?” He was quiet, as if he was afraid to speak too loudly anymore.

“What.” I coughed, spit into the bushes in an attempt to get the last traces of vomit and blood off my tongue.

“Russ... Where's the rest of him?”

I didn't say anything.

We looked at each other, both of us pale and frightened and sick; between us, the body lay on the ground, pale, clammy skin shining like a beacon in the darkness of the forest.

* * *

K.D brought the car to a hard stop, her breaks groaning in protest. She tossed her keys into her backpack and got out, not bothering to check her parking job. The people who she'd cut off at the entrance now parked beside her, and the driver shot her an evil look. She flashed him her badge, which from a distance could be mistaken for a police officers', and the driver quickly looked away. Yanking her backpack out of the front seat, she shut her door and walked up to where the young Ranger was directing traffic, his movements consistent and slightly fuzzy. He didn't seem to notice her, hadn't even turned when she'd come screeching to a halt in the parking lot. She stood in front of him, **but his eyes were glazed and unfocused**; she snapped her fingers near his face.

“Hey.”

He registered the sound with a slow blink, and his eyes slowly came back to focus. His hands kept moving, directing traffic that wasn't there, and he smiled a washy smile.

“Oh. Hey. Can I help you?”

K.D gave him a once-over. One of his shoes was untied.

“I need to speak to Ranger Brauer. Where can I find him?”

The Ranger's smile faded, and something flashed in his eyes for a brief moment. It helped

K.D pin down what was going on with him.

“Oh. Russ is... out on grid search. He's not helping visitors today, but we have... plenty of other staff who can help you-”

“I'm a Ranger, too...” She looked at his nametag. “Tim. What do you mean there's a grid up? I didn't hear anything on the radio coming down here, is it brand new?”

Tim shook his head slowly.

“No, it's been up since... four days ago when we found... a guy.” His hands kept directing traffic, signaling to the left with a sweeping motion, but he was a million miles away. His eyes glazed again, fixed on a point right through her.

“You found a guy? Well what's the grid search for, then? Are there multiples?” She made a quick movement from side to side, shifting her weight, to try and recapture his attention.

“We're searching for the rest of him.”

Tim's eyes grew wide, and his mouth twisted in a hellish kind of smile K.D knew very well. She touched his shoulder, and he jumped a little. His hands lowered to his sides.

“What have they got you on, bud?”

“Xanax. And something else... I can't really remember.”

“Well, just keep taking 'em, okay? Have you talked to someone about it yet?”

He didn't seem to hear her. He touched his lower ribs.

“They still haven't found the rest of him yet...” He looked at her and smiled that nasty smile again. Then it faded, and he went back to directing the non-existent traffic and seemed to forget about her. Reluctantly, but driven by other priorities, K.D continued up the path, looking over her shoulder once or twice. It made her sad to see someone so young, someone who's career

would be over as soon as the grid search was over and he wasn't needed to provide any details. It made her shiver, and **she shoved it out of her mind.**

She checked in at basecamp, which was set up three-quarters of a mile from the VC. The IC recognized her, and was thrilled to welcome her on board.

“We're running around like fucking headless birds out here. I don't have enough volunteers, and our guys are spooked to shit. It's hell out there right now, and between the rumors and Tim...” He shook her hand. “I'd be lying if I said I wasn't relieved to have you out here.”

“It's not a problem, but if you could just check in with Kranz up at-”

“I'll take care of it.”

K.D grabbed a radio from the caddy on the desk and hooked it to her belt. Luckily enough, she kept a spare uniform in her car, and always had her badge on her at all times, so she wouldn't be going out in civilian clothes. All she was missing was her hat, but it was overcast and cool, so she didn't think she'd miss it much. There wasn't anyone to buddy up with, but she assured John that she'd be fine on her own. She'd meet up with Russell and and whoever he was partnered with and stick with them. She had their coordinates, so after filling her water bottle and spraying herself thoroughly with repellent, she headed out into the search area, doing a slow, thorough grid as she went.

Russ had never met up with her the day she'd been in town. She'd grabbed her friend, told her they were going to spend some time out on the job with a really cool guy. But the really cool guy had never met them. She'd called his phone over and over, sent him a flood of texts that he didn't reply to. It didn't occur to her to actually go in the park and speak to his co-workers until her friend suggested it. They'd told her that Russ was unavailable, that he was off radio and

wouldn't be able to speak to her. They had no time estimate for her. She and her friend had left, the friend embarrassed for K.D's sake, K.D seething and hurt. She was not a woman who took plans falling out lightly. She prided herself on being reliable, on letting people know hours in advance if plans were falling through. Upon an old therapist's advice, she lived by a one-strike rule. All people were given equal opportunity with her, but it only took one strike to be sent back out of her life. She intended to make Russ an exception, but remembering later that night how sick he'd been at training, how awful he'd looked, her anger turned to deep concern. She checked the news every day until the weekend, when she could come down there, but saw nothing about any bodies being removed from the park.

Looking back now, she'd recalled how frantic everyone in the park had seemed that day, how the young woman she spoke to was manning several stations in the VC and seemed stretched paper thin. K.D realized that she must have come down the day the body Ranger Tim had mentioned was found. Possibly only hours earlier. She walked a bit faster.

They were bent over at the waist, Russ poking at something with his walking stick, when she found them. She called out, and the young man Russ was with turned around. Russ didn't appear to have heard her, or was ignoring her. His back hunched, he moved forward a few steps and pushed aside a large fern.

“Hey!” She called again. Still no response from Russ, but the young man jogged over to her. He extended his hand and she shook it. There was thick dirt under and around his nails. He had a sweet face, and he smiled at her brightly. She returned it, although less genuinely.

“You're K.D, right? Hi, I'm Tobias, nice to meet you.”

“They haven't filled me in yet on what's going on. What are we looking for?” She side-stepped Tobias and headed for Russ. Tobias caught up, sticking to her side.

“I don't really know. I'm a cadet so they don't tell me much. Just that we're looking for any signs of human activity. I guess they put me with Ranger Brauer because he knows what he's doing.” He grinned again. Under better circumstances, K.D would have been charmed, but Russ' lack of acknowledgment made her impatient. She stopped abruptly and caught Tobias by the forearm. He seemed surprised.

“I'll have Brauer fill me in, but in the mean time, it's best if we spread apart a little. We've got this area covered, so why don't you go and search to the west a bit? You have your radio?”

Tobias nodded and tested it. It let out a little squawk.

“Good. Stay within ear and eye-shot of us, and keep track of where you're covering on your map. Remember, you're looking for anything, no matter how small it is. Let us know if you find something, okay?”

There was something to be said for the blind eagerness of cadets. Tobias puffed up and nodded briskly.

“Yes, ma'am! I'll let you know if I find anything!”

He set off to the left, picking his way through the brush carefully, and K.D approached Brauer. He leaned heavily on his stick, eyes sweeping but unfocused. He didn't appear to have shaved recently; his beard was thicker than usual, giving him a sort of manic, wild look.

“Hey. You didn't hear me come up?” She was right next to him, but still, no reaction.

“*Brauer.*” She said it firmly, nudging his arm. He flinched and glared at her, his eyes now focused and glittering.

“What, Tobias?”

It took a moment, but he registered who she was. He cast his eyes back to the ground, though out of discomfort or relief she couldn't tell. He pushed the fern further out of the way, and took a step forward.

“Hey.” There was no inflection to his voice, no surprise.

“Hey, yourself. You didn't hear me coming up?”

He shook his head, his walking stick thumping a mound of dirt.

“Sorry. I was focused. Tobias has been all over me and I guess I just...” He shrugged and glanced back at her. “Why are you here?” He said it without cruelty, but it stung a little. She walked beside him, doing her own sweep of the area.

“Well first of all, you blew me off the other day. So I *was* coming to chew your ass out. But seeing this, I'm assuming you had other things going on.”

He frowned, his eyebrows furrowing. He scratched his beard with one dirty hand.

“We had plans, remember? I was gonna show you off to my friend, we were all gonna be Boy Scouts.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yeah.”

They walked silently for a minute. Russ yawned hugely. The dark circles were under his eyes again, and her stomach did a nasty turn.

“Oh God, Russ, they didn't find-”

“No.” He cut her off. His stick hit something hard under a large pile of dead leaves, and he kicked them aside. It was an old rotted stump. They kept going.

“Oh. Well that's...” She was going to say good, but thought better of it. There was a heavy silence. She wondered if she'd upset him. She changed the subject.

“When was the last time you took a break? You look like-”

“Jesus, K.D, I'm *fine*. If you came all the way out here to mommy me, I really don't need it right now. Maybe your park is perfect and no one ever gets lost or dies, but shit happens out here and I have to help deal with it like anyone else.”

He walked ahead, smacking aside the brush and ferns with his stick. K.D stayed where she was. Her lower lip quivered, and without thinking she crossed around and kicked the walking stick out from under Russ' hand. He lost grip on it and it landed in a bush nearby with a small *thump*. He whirled around.

“*What the fuck is your problem?*” He raised his hands, as if to shove her, but caught himself and stalked away instead, picking up his stick. He brushed the dirt off of it and shot her an angry, incredulous look.

K.D, her hands at her sides, balled into fists, stared him down.

“My problem is that for the last four days I've been waiting for any kind of word from you about just what the *fuck* is going on! I got here and you were a no-show and my friend thought I was this big fucking idiot. I send you texts and voicemails and emails and *nothing!*”

“*Jesus Christ*, it's been less than a week!” Russ shot back. “You're not my wife, K.D, I don't need to stay in contact with you every second of the day.”

“*That's not the point and you know it!*” She could feel her face getting flushed, and she stabbed her nails into her palm.

“Well then what is the point, exactly? Christ, ever since training you've been all over me

and honestly I can't keep up. I'm *fine*, I've just been busy with this whole thing, and-”

“*You're not fine!* Look at you! You look like you haven't slept or eaten or shaved in days and you know, I didn't want to shove it in your face but after the whole thing with Tad-”

A shadow passed over Russ' face and he started to walk away.

“-I got worried, okay? I thought maybe something had happened with him and I know you, Russ, you're too fucking stubborn to admit that it bothered you and really fucked you up. Now you're out here doing whatever this is,” She gestured around the woods. “And I feel like you're going downhill again.”

Russell stopped and thumped his stick on the ground few times.

“Look.” He didn't turn to face her. “I appreciate that you're thinking of me, I do. But this whole thing...” He thumped his stick on the ground again. “I mean it's nice but I guess I'm just not sure why you're so freaked out about this.”

Her throat felt tight and sore. She fought to keep her voice steady.

“Well gee, Russell, I'm sorry. My mistake. I'll be sure not to give a shit from now on.”

“Okay see *right there*, that's my point!” He wheeled around and pointed at her face, which felt hot and feverish. “I don't understand why you're so upset about this, I-”

“*I'm worried about you, what is so hard to understand about that?*”

“*Why are you worried?* What makes you think anything is wrong because I go a few days without messaging you?”

“*Because I know what it's like to-*” She cut herself off. A tear rolled down her cheek, and her head felt stuffy and hot. She turned around and wiped it off furiously.

“What it's like to what?” Russ demanded.

“Look...” She hesitated, then continued. “I didn't hear from you, and I thought they'd found... You were so fucked up at training and I thought something had happened to you.”

She heard a twig snap, but she stayed facing away, her arms crossed tight against her chest.

“That makes no-”

“It's a phobia, okay? Forget it.”

She heard him scratch his beard slowly.

“So what, like separation anxiety or something?”

She nodded. She felt sick, disgusted with herself. She wanted to crawl into the earth and die.

“Huh. My mom had that with my dad. Before we had cell phones, she made him carry a schedule with him whenever he'd travel, with exact times to call her on it.”

K.D felt dizzy. She sat down and pawed through one of her coat pockets, where she'd stashed a Honey Bunn. Yanking it out of the wrapper, she stuffed half of it into her mouth, chewing furiously. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Russ come over and sit down next to her.

“I never really got it, her anxiety thing. I think you just have to learn not care so much.”

Her throat tightened again.

“It's not that simple, Russell.”

Russell shrugged.

“Sorry. I've never really had that before, so I don't exactly know what to tell you. But I can't just drop everything to contact you when you try to talk to me.” He added somewhat

awkwardly.

Finishing her Honey Bunn, K.D wiped her hands on her pants. She stuffed the wrapper in her pocket and brought her knees to her chest.

“It's fine. I shouldn't have freaked out.”

Humiliation wormed through her gut and made her feel sick. She always felt the same after her panic attacks. Relieved, but thoroughly disgusted and ashamed, as if she'd been caught doing something wrong. And she could never make it right by explaining it, or apologizing. It only seemed to make the self-loathing and regret worse, only served to drop her farther down the rabbit-hole.

“Look, uh. I really don't know what else to say. But since you're here, if you want you can help me do grid.” Russ stood up, using his stick to pull himself to his feet. He held his hand out for K.D to take. She did, and he yanked her up a bit roughly, almost sending her flying.

“Sorry. I'm used to pulling up other big fat dudes.”

She smiled and laughed a little.

“S'fine. I only weigh like three pounds so you'd probably fling me around no matter what.”

They started walking slowly, Russ looking at the ground and prodding the ground ahead of them with the end of his stick. Desperate to change the subject, to get as far away from everything as possible, she asked the obvious.

“It would help if I knew what exactly we were looking for.”

“Oh. Right.” Russ unscrewed his water bottle and went to take a sip, but found it empty.

“Shit.”

K.D offered him hers, but he shook his head.

“Nah. Look, let's just go back to base and I'll refill it. You can, uh, wash your face or whatever, and we'll regroup. I'll go get Ranger Rick over there and have him team up with another grid.”

“Yeah, sure.” As he walked off toward where Tobias had gone, K.D touched her face and was horrified to feel slime on her upper lip and cheek. She rubbed it off, wiping her hand on her pants, and waited for Russ to come back. The humiliation was wearing off, but now the guilt of putting Russ in such an uncomfortable position was setting in. She knew it wouldn't help to apologize anymore, but it would take some time for her to feel comfortable again, to let that guilt go.

Still, she thought, it was a good sign that he'd waited until after she'd calmed down to inform her politely that her face was covered in snot. That made her laugh a bit, and when Russ came back, they headed to base camp in semi-comfortable silence.

On the way back out, after lunch and some aspirin for K.D, he filled her in.

“Four days ago, Tim and I found a partial body out about a mile from where we were when you found me. We're not sure who it is, so we're doing a sweep to try and find the rest of him.”

“What do you mean, a partial? Did animals get to him?”

Russ shook his head.

“No. I don't know what got to him, but it wasn't an animal.”

“So... What, a homicide, then?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well then what, exactly, are we dealing with here?”

Russ described, as best he could, the condition of the body. K.D was fascinated and horrified.

“Oh my God, Russ, that's *awful*. Did they make you go see a shrink?”

“Nah. They just brought in that woman from the state who sat down and made sure I hadn't gone completely nuts. I was a little shaken up, sure, but really only before they confirmed that it wasn't... him.” He shrugged his shoulders a bit and K.D nodded.

“Tim's not doing so hot, though. My guess is that once we're done here he'll be gone. Guy was fucking hysterical when I found him. I think they've got him on Valium or something.”

“Xanax. I talked to him when I got here, he's definitely out of it.”

“Yeah. I guess he's gone into shell shock or something.”

“PTSD. Post traumatic stress. They've probably got him working so they can keep an eye on him. They don't need a suicide on top of a body recovery. That happened at our park, once. Some Ranger found a dead kid and she went home and blew her brains out.”

“Huh. That sucks.”

“Yeah. Ever since then if someone is diagnosed with PTSD or whatever, they work a desk job until the shrink says they're okay. Doesn't really make sense to me, but whatever. As long as it's not my problem I don't really care.”

They reached the site again, and spaced out so there was about ten feet between them.

“Ready?” K.D called.

“Yeah.”

In unison, they stepped forward, each sweeping the vegetation aside, K.D with her feet, Russ with his stick.

They walked mostly in silence. Occasionally, they'd call back and forth to one another, exchanging information about current locations, possible signs of life, or just jokes about the uneven landscape tripping them up. The air was fresh and clean, and by all accounts it was a wonderful day. Being out here, smelling the air, hearing the animals going about their lives and the sounds of the forest breathing and moving, so alive, it was hard to imagine how anything bad could ever happen to anyone. Days like this, K.D found the stark facts of her job somehow absurd. How could anyone die out here, where it was so beautiful and lush and primal? What could be out here that could hurt someone, let alone a grown man? The moss under her feet was soft, the pine needles crunched pleasantly, and she enjoyed the way her boots sank into the spongy, moist earth. She breathed in deep through her nose; she remembered reading somewhere, at some time, that smell was actually the tissues of the nose absorbing molecules from the things around it. She inhaled deeply of the dirt and moss and leaves and animals and forgot, for a time, what they were out here for. As they moved from square to square, marking them off on the map, it was easy to imagine they were on some kind of scavenger hunt. What would a good reward be, for something like this? K.D glanced at her feet and saw a scuff in the toe of one boot. Scuffs always led to little tears, which led to holes; she'd need new boots within a few months. That would be a good reward, she thought. A nice pair of good leather boots. Ones with steel toes that wouldn't give out on her. She dreamed of the boots, moving automatically, expertly maneuvering around obstacles without thinking.

She kept tabs on Russ, though sometimes they lost sight of one another. He walked slower than she did, probing the ground with his stick. He'd carried it as long as she'd known him, and it was by all accounts an extension of himself. His red plaid shirt stood out among the greens and browns, which was, ostensibly, why he wore it. She'd teased him about it when they'd first met, his preference for traditional hunters' plaid. He'd given some predictable reasoning for it, but she found it a charming quirk among the other Rangers, who preferred to wear more professional things under their summer vests. His beard was long now, though he usually kept it cropped, and he badly needed a haircut. Like most outdoorsy men she knew, Russell didn't pay much attention to himself. K.D envied that. While she was hardly a person who bought much into appearance, she carried herself with a sort of self-protective grace that she'd honed with years of practice. A way of hunching inward, her hips slightly forward, her head down. You worked with what you had, and what she had wasn't much.

A branch caught on her shirt and whipped against her when she untangled herself from it. It made a loud smacking sound, and she swore. Russ glanced over at her.

"I'm fine. Just being smacked around a little." She called. He nodded, went back to his methodical poke-and-walk.

K.D checked her phone's GPS app and compared it to the map she'd been given at IC.

"Moving into a new section!" She relayed.

"Kay."

Most people didn't know that searches were done this way. They'd seen movies, saw the old adage where a group of men with flashlights and various baying hounds stormed the forest, calling the victim's name until they were fortunate enough to stumble upon what they were

looking for. Searches in film always tended to have good luck. You never saw the guys out there, searching for hours or days or weeks, getting covered in scratches, which got infected, or pulling bugs out of their socks and underwear. There weren't many women, either. K.D had found that most people, when asked how they thought search-and-rescue efforts were done, would describe a line of cops, mustached and bristling with guns, confidently striding out into the wilderness with little to no examination of anything around them. The victim, almost always alive, would be waiting for them conveniently in the open, by a stream or a boulder. These people, they were almost always incredulous when she debunked this trope. They were shocked when she told them about how searches were done in grids, laying over the designated area like a chess board. All the searchers moving painfully slowly, turning over every stone and log in each square before moving to the next. Looking for someone who was lost was tedious, backbreaking, and soul-crushing. Most people only volunteered once, and if they came back again, it was because they expected something different, as if the first experience was a fluke.

But that was what K.D liked about these operations. She had an eye for detail, although she came across as spacey, and an ability to turn herself off for a while. She'd get into a meditative state, her eyes searching independently of that little one-man-show inside her head, and she'd be gone for hours without realizing it. She enjoyed the meticulous aspect of the job, the turning over of large logs and pushing aside of bushes and ferns. Every scrape was earned, a testament to her dedication to the job at hand; she collected scars like trophies. She was good at what she did, and she enjoyed her work.

She was thinking these things, lost in herself, when Russ called her name.

“Got something. Come confirm.”

“Yeah!” She headed over, moving quickly but taking the time to observe the areas she was passing. Russ was standing, legs apart, looking at something near the base of a large pine.

“What'cha got?”

“I can't tell. What's it look like to you?”

K.D crouched down, squinted.

“God, it almost looks like...” She tilted her head. “Is that the tip of a nose?”

“That's what I'm thinking too.”

K.D stood up, and they both remained where they were, looking at the strange piece of flesh.

“How did you even see that?”

Russ shrugged. “I thought it was a mushroom at first, but it was the wrong color. Didn't know what else it could have been other than human.”

“Christ, you've got good eyes. I'm not even sure I'd have seen it.”

He shrugged again. K.D radioed their location and crossed her arms.

“So... Any guesses?”

Russ shook his head.

“Russ, this has to have been some kind of homicide. Some fucked up guy with, I don't know, a laser cutter. Look at how clean that cut is, that wasn't made by an animal. It's intentional, there's no tearing.”

“That's what I thought too, but look closer.”

K.D crouched again and peered at the bulbous piece of flesh.

“The flares of the nostrils aren't the same size. It's a clean cut, but it was uneven.” Russ

pointed over her shoulder, now crouched as well.

“Okay, but what does that prove?” K.D challenged.

“That's a perfect cut. Why go to the trouble of making a cut that clean if you aren't going to make the thing you're cutting off symmetrical?”

She had no answer.

“It was the same with the other... chunk. It was the cleanest cut I've ever seen, but it wasn't quite even. And that doesn't make sense to me.”

“Oh, so you're an expert on serial killers now?” K.D teased.

“It's just logic and basic reasoning. You're not gonna go to the trouble of cutting that clean if you're not gonna make the rest perfect.”

“Alright, but we're just going in circles now.” They both stood up, hovering over the thing in question. “If we're ruling out animals and humans, then what did it?”

Russ shrugged. K.D sighed. She put her hands behind her head and arched her back, cracking it.

“It has to have been some kind of accident. A civilian aircraft that blew up or something.”

“There'd be scorch marks and debris.”

“Okay, then it was a boating accident and someone dumped the body.”

“There'd be tearing of the skin.”

“Well then what did it, Russ? You're ruling out everything but you're not giving me any kind of suggestions or help, here.”

Russ frowned and stared intently at the tiny piece of flesh. She could see him puzzling over it, trying to piece it together in his head.

“Something precise but unintelligent.”

K.D watched him, waited to see if he'd elaborate, but he kept quiet, frowning at the thing. Her radio crackled, and IC informed her that someone would be out to pick up the remains within the hour. She and Russ were to wait at the site until relieved. She sat down and pulled a Snickers bar out of her pocket. She took a bite and held the rest up to Russ.

“Want some?”

He shook his head absently and thumped his walking stick on the ground gently, the other hand scratching his beard. K.D ate her candy in silence, feet away from, but her back to, another piece in a puzzle that added up to a person who had suffered something that neither of them could make any sense of. *All the king's horses and all the king's men*, K.D thought. Overhead, the birds called in the trees, and what little sun made it through the canopy of trees was warm. It was a beautiful day.

* * *

We're only coming up with little chunks of him. The coroner is getting sick of driving up here twice, sometimes three times a day. The IC offered to put him up in a hotel near here, but I get the feeling he's one of those guys that likes to be inconvenienced. So he's been running up and down the mountain the last two days, bagging and removing the pieces as we find them, complaining about how many miles he's putting on his new car, and how it's exhausting being on call at all hours of the day.

This morning was the third day of the grid. It hasn't hit the media yet, and it either will or it won't, which sounds sort of obvious, but a lot of times there's an in-between. You'll read about

a kid going missing, but you won't hear about the circumstances or what's being done to find him. It'll be a quick blurb, something after the stories about suicide bombings and the fifteenth school shooting this week. They'll switch cameras, and the news anchor will look solemn and say something like: *A young boy has been reported missing in the Umpqua National Forest this evening. A search is currently under way, and officials are optimistic about finding the boy alive. We'll be right back after these messages.* The camera will cut away to some toothpaste commercial or an ad for sleeping pills for the blind, and within about ten minutes you'll forget about it. Usually, they won't even do a follow up, so you won't know what happens, but the information's out there if you want it. This case, I think it's gonna go the opposite direction. It's too weird, too graphic for the public to handle. No one wants to hear about the Forest Service finding a man dismembered over a four mile radius. Bad for business, bad for the Parks. The FS is good about keeping a tight lid on things. Most people don't think about it, but we're a government agency, and some of us know our way around the higher levels, so to speak. It's not that hard to deny someone a Freedom of Information act without actually denying it. Instead, you make it hideously expensive. So time consuming and redacted that it's a waste of everyone's time. Or, easier, you tell the cops to keep the case open. Tell them you're still looking for the guy. The cops, they've got other things to do. They're more than happy to turn it over to the Parks. This guy, they'll be investigating what happened to him for a long time. They'll keep the report open, but maybe someone will misplace the file, or forget about it. And sooner or later, something else will come up, and we'll move on to the next thing. That's how it goes here.

I found one of his fingers this afternoon. K.D's paired with some cop, a young guy who I've heard is driving her up the wall. I know she'd rather be partnered with me, but I've put in a

quiet request to be paired with volunteers and cadets. I know she's got her short hairs up about this, but I don't want to sit around and theorize about what happened to this guy. Whatever it was, it's happened before. K.D's park is smaller, she hasn't seen this shit before, but I have, and there aren't any answers. I'd love to know as much as anyone what's going on out here. What's happening to the kids. But the Parks, they're gonna keep an eye on us. They'll be looking for anyone like K.D, who seems just a little too gung-ho about finding 'the truth'. This job, it's toxic, but it's all I know how to do, and it pays my bills. The best thing I can do for both of us is keep my distance.

This morning, it was the tip of a finger. Someone from the FDPD found it resting in the crook of a fern. Everyone's looking for small pieces now, so the chances of things going unnoticed are at least a little more slim. Because the area we're working in is remote, the senior Rangers are helping lead the cops out to process what the searchers find. I fall into that category, so I've been helping out. I was leading a cop, a tall busty woman named Henke, out there today. Some people, they deal with this kind of thing by making it a part of their lives. It's no big deal to them anymore. I don't know how they do it, but Henke was one of those people. She chattered on and on behind me, not even paying attention to my silence.

“...but you know, I just love it out here. You guys have the best job, I swear. What I wouldn't give to ride around in a truck all day in the woods and go wandering around out here. Are there bears out here? My dad saw a bear once, he said...”

I tuned in and out, picking my way through the bush with my stick. People always assume the job is great, that it's fun all the time. Almost like we're big kids out here, playing in the woods for a living. It's like I've said before, they don't think about the reality of what's out

here.

“...berries out here are edible? I should have picked up one of those brochures at the trail head, I'd love to know more about the wildlife out here. Did you hear about those people on the Oregon Coast who all died from eating poisonous mushrooms? The host picked them, served them right up, had no idea...”

Have you ever gotten a mosquito bite in your ass-crack? There's no way to make it stop. You can put all the calamine lotion on there you want, but it's not going away. You don't think about how your ass cheeks are constantly touching until there's something in there that's getting constantly irritated. Same with vaginas, I've been told. A Ranger who I've worked with before, somehow she got a spider bite right on the outside lip of her vagina. Said it was worse than any yeast infection she'd ever had. And God help you if you run into poison ivy. Some of us are lucky enough to be immune, but if you're not, you get to go on your next week of rounds with a nasty, itchy, stinging rash.

Blisters. Ingrown toenails. Lyme disease. Splinters under your nails and on your forearms. That's what it's like out here. I'm disillusioned, pessimistic at times I guess, but no job is perfect. The myth of the ideal job is persistent, and it's funny how so many people think it's this. It isn't.

“...awful for those families that lose people out here. I can't imagine how you do it, it must be so...”

And it never fails to amaze me how flabbergasted, how absolutely astounded people are when they hear about hikers or campers or backpackers going missing out here. There's no concept of the wilderness anymore. We can't accept it, much like how we can't seem to accept

that the ocean is largely unexplored. We've put boots on every continent, mapped out every major mountain range. We have satellites and cables that run across the planet, how can there still be dark places? People, they don't know how dark it gets out here. How claustrophobic and dense it can be out here. How the lonely places, the boulder fields and tundras and cliff faces, how they can be just as bad. Emptiness isn't empty out here, and I'd take being in the trees, in here with other living things, over the empty places any day.

“...is that? Russell, what is that up there? Do you see that?”

It took me a second, but I tuned back in. I turned around; Henke was pointing up in a tree. I followed her finger to the branch she was pointing at.

“What do you think that is? That's not natural, is it?”

Something up near the top was flapping slightly in the wind. I changed position to try and get a better look.

“Oh hey, that's a shirt, isn't it? Think it's our guy's?”

I said I didn't know. She spoke into her radio but I didn't catch what she said. Something at the base of the tree, mostly hidden by shadow, caught my attention. I went over and crouched down to look closer. After a second, I stood up and brushed the back of my neck. Getting under trees like that, you learn to brush your neck off after you're done. You'd be surprised how many spiders and other nasty things hang off the ends of the branches.

“Henke, you're gonna wanna call the coroner. I'll call the IC. We're gonna need to close off this section if we haven't already.”

“Why? What'd you find?”

There was a sticky pine needle on the back of my neck, caught in the short hairs there. I

picked it off, pulling some strands out by the roots.

“His spine.”

They let Tim go, finally. We'd been expecting it, waiting for the hammer to drop. Tim had wandered around the park in a weird kind of semi-solid state ever since finding the torso. Mostly he kept to himself, away from visitors, but every now and then he'd float into someone's path, and we'd have to go recover him. He never really talked to people, thankfully, but he had a habit of staring at them without blinking, his mouth slightly open, and it definitely unnerved everyone who was on the receiving end. I was usually the one who'd go and reel him back in. I'd find him slightly behind a tree, watching a family with young kids or a single hiker enjoying the view from a scenic outlook, and I'd gently steer him back to the VC. I didn't talk to him because he wouldn't have cared either way. Tim was one of those unfortunate people who don't know they're not cut out for the job until it's way too late. People like him, they don't get better. Sometimes, they do what he did, and they shut down. Sometimes they say they're fine, and maybe they are for a while. But the next time they see something, anything, that reminds them of that one little detail that drove them over in the first place, it's game over. They lose it, and sometimes they take other people out with them. So they get the equivalent of an honorable discharge, no salary but recommendations for other jobs and unemployment. But there's no honor in it. As far as I'm concerned, it's one of the worst ways to go out. So I felt for the guy. In a way, I felt sort of responsible for him. He was the Lenny to my George, and I wanted to avoid a Candy at all costs.

But finally, after about a week of him wandering around the park like a ghost, they let

him go. Someone, I assume a member of his family, came to pick him up, and we all said our goodbyes. When they pulled out of the park, he didn't look back. He just rested his head on the window and closed his eyes.

But with Tim gone, that left an opening that needed to be filled. And as luck would have it, K.D's park was overstaffed. I got word that she'd be joining the team, allegedly on a temporary basis, until someone else could be recruited and trained to take over. She called me to tell me the news herself, but I'd already heard, and I did my best to match her enthusiasm. By all accounts, I should have been happy. K.D is the only real friend I have, and we'll be working together like we'd talked about so much before. If this whole thing with our John Doe hadn't happened, maybe I would have been able to appreciate it. But when we talked on the phone about this job, about her being a real co-worker, I thought she sounded a little manic. A little too familiar. Obsession has a very specific sound to it, and I know how to recognize it. I didn't want to think I was right, and when she got to the park for her first day I was happy. Not the way she was, but it's hard to beat K.D when she's excited about something. I really wanted things to be fine, for her to be an asset to our team and put her skills to use. She's great at what she does; there's a lot of slack she could pick up if she put her mind to it. But unfortunately, I was right.

She's convinced there's something bigger going on. Something that doesn't just involve us, but all the parks. This search we've been on, for the guy Tim and I found, it's gotten under her skin in a really bad way. Whenever we go out together and do rounds, or meet up in the break room on our lunches, it's all she talks about. No matter how many times I tell her to let it go or move on, she won't. She picks it apart over and over, always coming back to something I said. I don't even remember making the comment, but I guess it's stuck with her.

Something precise but unintelligent... That's what you said.

At first I tried to talk her out of it, tell her she's obsessing and she needs to do exactly what I did and let it go. Now I don't even respond. She doesn't seem to notice.

But what if Tad's part of it, too? You don't find it weird that we still haven't found him?

I told her I didn't want to talk about it. Tad's search is officially over, it's been too long. I do everything I can not to think about him, but she insists on bringing him up. It makes me resent her, and I've told her that, but it's like it goes right through her.

There's been stuff like that at my park, too. Not as much as here, but we're smaller, so that makes sense. You remember what those people at training talked about? Russell, what if this is happening everywhere? What if it's not just kids, but all those people who we can't find, what if they're all having the same thing happen to them?

I pointed out that there's been absolutely no similarity in almost any of these cases, but she brushed it off.

They're not identical, but they're all in the same kind of... I don't know, group? Classification?

*Think about how many people we have vanish out here every year. We all treat it like it's normal, because it **is**, but it shouldn't be.*

I told her that people made mistakes. They disappear because they're not prepared. Yes, I admitted, the kids going missing was strange. I wasn't denying that it was odd. But the things I'd said at training, I was whacked out of my mind. She needed to move on.

But don't you see how you're right? I thought you were crazy, and I'm sorry, but after talking to people here and being out in this shit...

I stopped responding.

I've seen the stairs at least three times since I've gotten here. I never saw them that much at my old park. They're everywhere out there.

I didn't like how wide and glassy her eyes were when she said that. I asked her how much she'd been sleeping.

I'm sleeping fine. She waved her hand absently. *I'm not like you, I always sleep great. I don't even dream most of the time.*

I shrugged.

I used to see them every once in a while back at my old park. But I never saw ones like these. These are...

She trailed off and put her hand in her pocket; she unwrapped the Milky Way and stuffed half of in her mouth.

You know I saw one on the last grid we did for that guy? It was huge. She swallowed with some difficulty. *Looked like the old ones at my middle school. I looked away for a few seconds and they were gone. Isn't it weird how they do that?*

I shrugged again and said I didn't really want to talk about it anymore.

Yeah, you and everyone else. She muttered it under her breath and I got up to leave. I didn't feel like making a mistake I'd regret later.

We can't keep pretending it's normal, Russ.

I left.

Our John Doe, we're still recovering more pieces of him. They've been scattered around a five-mile radius, roughly, with no particular order or plan to their placement. The teams were

finding pieces of him every few hours; nothing substantial, but enough to confirm that they were from a human, and not chunks of some animal running around injured by buckshot. K.D was partnered with someone else, a Ranger I don't know very well, because I'd taken over the training of a cadet who's going to be promoted soon. I'd hear her over the radio every now and then, asking me how my partner and I were doing, but I let him answer. I'd been avoiding her since the conversation in the break room, and while I felt slightly guilty about it, I had to look at it as being good for both our sakes. She was still manic about this guy, about these theories she was coming up with, and I just couldn't handle it. I don't think it's wrong for me to want to move on with my life, but K.D, she treats it as if I'm some sort of corrupt cop, burying evidence under the rug to save my own ass. Nothing I tell her makes her change her mind.

It's about half an hour into what I suspect is one of the last grids we'll do for this guy before we completely turn it over to the FDPD when she comes over the radio again.

“Russ, Andy, we're all breaking for a quick lunch. Stay wherever you're at and we'll start back up in half.”

Andy looks at me and I gesture at his radio.

“Confirmed, Ranger Kennedy. Over and out.”

He looked to me for approval, and I gave him a thumbs-up. We sat down and opened our packs, pulling out whatever we'd brought to snack on during the grid. I always packed extra when I knew I'd be with a cadet; a lot of them don't think about eating while they're out here. Same goes for a lot of folks that go out in the woods for camping trips. You wouldn't believe how often we get calls from families asking where the closest grocery store is, while Dad or Grandpa hollers in the background about how *it wasn't even my job to pack the food, that was*

your job, Diane! Either that, or we'll get a call about a hiker who's collapsed into a diabetic stupor because they've neglected to bring insulin or anything to spike their blood sugar. It's as if people forget what the wilderness really is. It worries me, frankly. Were society to suddenly collapse, 90% of us would die in front of our televisions, waiting for the water and power to come back. How many of your neighbors know how to build a shelter out of fallen wood? How many of them can light a fire without any tools, or hunt with a limited supply of ammo? How many can plant crops, or apply First Aid, or track wildlife? I do my best not to think about it, but instead prepare to take care of only myself, while giving only temporary help to those who I run across.

I watch Andy to see if he'll pull anything out of his pack. I'm pleasantly surprised to find that he's come prepared. He pulls out a bag of beef jerky and some kind of ambiguous sandwich that has leaked inside its bag after being crushed. He grimaces at it and tweezers a piece of it out with his fingers. He sees my curled lip as I watch him and he shrugs haplessly.

“Peanut butter, honey and banana. Looks gross, but it's good protein, y'know? Though I didn't really think about it being this sticky. I guess that was kind of dumb.” He puts the piece in his mouth and chews it quickly before swallowing. He clenches and unclenches his hand; I can hear the skin sticking together as he does it.

“Fuck.” He mutters. “You got any Wet Wipes or anything?”

I rummage through my pack and toss him my little travel-sized pack of them. He grins and takes one gratefully, wiping the honey off of his hands. He goes to toss the pack back, but I hold my hand up.

“Keep them. You're gonna need more, that thing's leaking like a bitch.”

Andy grins again and nods, going back to his sandwich. I pull out the PowerBar I've packed and chew on it. It's chocolate flavored, which is the only kind I can tolerate. Dad used to give them to me as a kid when we went camping, and it's sort of a ritual for me to bring them out on grids.

“So I meant to ask,” Andy pipes up around a mouthful of sandwich. “What's up with that chick, K.P?”

“K.D.” I correct. I look around the area absently.

“Yeah, K.D. What's up with her? Is she always like that?”

“What do you mean?” I really don't want to get into this conversation, but according to my watch, we still have twenty-five minutes to eat, and I can't think of any way to steer things toward a different topic without being overly rude.

“She told me to watch for anything weird out here, and that if I saw any of those stairs that I should let her know right away. Then she kinda went off on this rant about how things are weird out here and how I should always be on my guard.”

“Sounds like she was just trying to warn you to stay safe.” I said it lamely, with no real conviction.

“Yeah, but then she starts asking me about if I've ever had anything weird happen to me. I tell her no, that I'm new, and that I've just heard what everyone else has heard, I guess. About the stairs and everything. And she just goes on and on about how it's our responsibility to be safe and make sure others are safe out here, and that if anything happens I should come to her right away so she can- fuck what was it she said? Catalog it, or something. Is she keeping a record of stuff that happens out here for the Service or something?”

“No idea. I'm sure she was just trying to make sure you understood how important it is to be safe out here, though.” I stuffed the rest of my PowerBar into my mouth. It was the last thing in the world I wanted to do, but I couldn't let her go around talking to the cadets like that. I didn't agree with what she was doing, but I didn't want to see her fired. I couldn't ignore that she'd helped me out once. In a way, I was responsible for getting her to this point. I got up without really thinking of it and walked a ways into the trees.

“Where you going?” Andy called.

“Gotta piss.”

I went far enough out that I knew Andy wouldn't hear me, and I let out a large breath I'd been holding. I thumped my walking stick on the ground and closed my eyes. My heart slowed, and I swayed back and forth a little. In the dark, everything around me came alive. I could hear a few crows arguing somewhere overhead. A squirrel, somewhere to the south, squealed and chattered about something. The wind was steady, but not unpleasantly cold, and it created a white noise in the trees. In my mind, I floated upward, up to the top of a pine tree in front of me. I watched the needles rub together, each one adding to that collective sigh in the wind. I floated onward, to a big oak that was losing its leaves, preparing for winter. A leaf broke off with a very tiny *snap* and floated down lazily, see-sawing. The wind resistance against it was almost undetectable but it was there, and it added its own little voice. I multiplied that voice with the millions of others nearby, to the millions of needles rubbing together and the branches creaking, and when all those parts added up it became a very soft whisper. I wondered what the wind would sound like if there was nothing in the way to resist it. If we could hear the sound it made without the seashell effect of our ears, what would we hear? Would it be anything? Under my

feet, something dark and aromatic had been crushed and released a pleasant mossy smell. The pines let off occasional whiffs of sticky sap-smell; under it, the smells of nice clean dirt and the moist undertones of decay. If you stayed out long enough, you could bring a bit of that smell home with you. It didn't last long, but for the few seconds before it evaporated off your clothes you could catch a hint of it, a small portion of that complexity. It was even better when it rained. The rain added thousands of other levels. I wondered what it was like to be a dog, to be able to smell so much more.

I leaned heavily on my walking stick, eyes closed, breath deep and even; for how long, I wasn't sure. I could have fallen asleep that way, on my feet, and never left that spot. But behind me, a branch cracked, and I could hear Andy talking into his radio rapidly.

“...what? I'm sorry, please slow down for a second I'm trying to find him... No, no I haven't seen- Oh, Russell, thank God. K.D wants to talk to you, she says they found something.”

Without opening my eyes, I reached my hand out. He plopped the radio in and stepped back, saying something, but I wasn't listening. Over the radio, which he'd turned down, I could hear K.D babbling. I thumbed the button.

“K.D, it's Brauer. I thought we were breaking for thirty-”

“Russell, oh my God, you need to get over here now. We found something, it's really important, you need to-”

“Why were you searching on your own time? I thought we were all-”

“No Russ, it was under the tree, listen, it was under the tree I was sitting by. I saw the dirt was loose and I dug it up.”

My arms and legs started to tingle.

“What did you dig up?”

“I’m sorry, I’m just- it’s a shoe, Russell. It’s a kid’s shoe. It was buried there, under the tree.”

I squeezed my eyes shut tighter.

“Describe it.”

“What? I don’t, uh- it looks like it, it’s got a Red Power Ranger on it. Russ, do you think this is-?”

I moved quickly.

“Go back to our camp. When we give the signal, keep moving forward until you join a new group. I need to go take care of something.”

“Sure... sure, will do. Is, is everything alright?” He followed me hesitantly, staying a few meters behind me. Everything was fuzzy, and I couldn’t feel my feet. My voice came out oddly calm and from a distance. I picked up my pack, which was suddenly oddly light. I slung it over my shoulders, calm and collected. I handed Andy the radio. He went and stood by his pack, fumbling to put the radio back in its holster at his hip. I watched him do it; his fingers were trembling. My head, my hands, everything felt like I was floating. Weightless.

“Everything is fine.”

She left another voicemail on Bud’s machine, which she couldn’t believe he still had. She asked him, again, to call her, that it was urgent and she needed to talk to him right away. She

hung up and shoved her phone under her pillow, where she hid it when she knew she'd sent too many calls or texts. It was a bad habit; she'd never been good at waiting. She got back online and read the tab she had open.

On Monday, December 17th, local officials reported that a young girl had gone missing while sledding with her parents at Lake Chelan, a popular tourist area. The seven-year-old, whose name has not been released, reportedly while her parents were tending to her younger sister, who was injured after sledding into a tree. While the exact circumstances of the disappearance have not been released, officials were quick to state that there is no reason to suspect that foul play was involved. According to the officer in charge of the scene, Doug Stanton:

"Park officials have stated that they have found evidence that indicates that the girl wandered off on her own into a densely forested area. At this time, we are conducting the search according to the Park's advisement, and we will release further details at a later time."

Witnesses in the area recall seeing the girl, but have not reported any suspicious activity immediately preceding or following her disappearance.

We will continue to update the story as more details become available.

K.D clicked the link that took her to the next part of the article, which had been about a day after the first.

The search continues for the missing Tacoma girl, and officials have broadened

the search to several square miles of dense forest. According to a statement released earlier this morning, the girl appears to have walked in a southern direction, but a heavy overnight snow storm has erased the footprints the team was following. Canines have reportedly been brought in to assist with the search. The girl's parents have not yet released a statement, but are reportedly active in the search for their daughter, who went missing at approximately three P.M yesterday afternoon. Officials are, quote, 'very optimistic' about finding the child alive, as she was wearing heavy winter clothing when she vanished into a densely forested area of the Lake Chelan park.

She skimmed the rest of the article and moved on.

Almost a week since the disappearance of seven-year-old Tacoma resident Cheryl Mazer, and police have reported the discovery of a pair of shoes that match the description of the missing girl. Officials stated early this afternoon that the shoes, a pair of girls' snow boots, were located under a large tree in a section of the search area almost a mile from where the girl vanished. Said one member of the search party, who requested to remain anonymous:

"I can't figure it out. Walking that far in the snow would have been almost impossible for a little kid, but why'd she take her shoes off? It just...makes no sense."

The next article was dated almost two months after the previous. It stated only that no trace of the girl had been found, and that officials were going to attempt to hold another search in the summer, when some of the snow melted. K.D closed the tab and opened up her email. She opened a message in her inbox, which was addressed to herself, and wrote notes about the case in a new reply. She took care to note the date, time, and location of the disappearance, as well as any items found. Also noted was the fact that a trail had initially been followed, but that a large storm had wiped out any further traces of it. After completing the notes, she hit 'Send' and sat back in her chair, her hands behind her head. Her back popped loudly, and she groaned. As she leaned further back, a faint sound caught her attention. Bolting upright, she flew out of the chair and threw her pillow to the side. She answered the phone on one of the last rings.

"Hello?" Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. "Sorry, hello, Bud?"

The voice on the other end was old, a sweet grandfatherly drawl with a hint of perpetual befuddlement. Something that sounded like straw brushed against the mic.

"Hello?" He addressed her by her full name. K.D cringed.

"Yeah, hi, Bud, it's K.D. How are you?"

"Oh, well I'm just fine, how are you?"

"I'm good, I'm good. Did you get my messages?" She propped her other pillow against the wall and sat back against it.

"Oh, well you left so many, I just listened to the first two."

"Yeah, I'm really sorry about that. I, uh, just wanted to make sure you got them."

Her face flushed.

"I was out at the bar visiting with the boys. We have a poker night there once a month,

and it ran a little late tonight. John was telling me about how his grand-daughters are doing, and we lost track of time. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah everything's fine, I just need to talk to you about something."

"How's your mother, is she doing well?"

K.D hesitated briefly. "She's fine. Listen, do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Oh, well sure! What's going on?"

"It's just..." She got up briefly to retrieve her laptop from the desk. "Well, I just wanted to ask you a few questions about your work."

"Well, sure, of course, but what's this all about?"

"I just... It's hard to explain, but if Daddy were here I'd have asked him about this. I don't want to bother you, but-"

"It's no problem. Ask me whatever you need."

"Okay." K.D pulled up her email again. "You and Daddy both worked around the same amount of time, right?"

"Well, yes, give or take. You father, God rest his soul, served... Oh, I think about twenty or so years in the FD. I wasn't in the same line of work, of course, but yes, I'd say I did about twenty-five or thirty. Maybe that's not the same amount of time, but-"

"No, that's pretty close." She wrote it down. "What was it like being a part of all those searches?"

Bud sniffed, and the straw-sound got louder. "Oh, well, it was good, honest work. I wouldn't have done it so long if I hadn't liked it. I mean, the ones that didn't end well were always sad. But it's part of the job when you're in that line of work, I suppose."

"Where did you spend most of your time?"

"Well, my team was based in Rainier National Park, so that's where I did almost all of my rescues."

"So it's a forest, then?"

"Oh, some of it, yes. But of course we were also in charge of the mountain rescues."

"It must have been busy. I've been to that park, it's huge." She moved her laptop to the side.

"Oh, yes, it's massive. I'd say we were doing about three searches a week, sometimes two in a day in the busy season. Mostly just hikers who decided to stay later than they'd planned, but yes, we were very busy. It's a beautiful location, one of my favorites. I loved working for that park. Your dad came out to visit once when you were little, spent a few days out there with me on the job."

"He did?"

"You were very young, probably only a year or so. Oh, your mother was so upset! You were a difficult baby, as I recall, and she was so angry at your father for leaving her all alone with you!"

"Yeah, mom's told me about that. I guess I cried a lot." K.D smiled and rubbed the hem of her shirt between her fingers.

"Oh, yes, all the time. Of course it turned out it was because you were always hungry, but back then they had no idea. How have you been, is your weight keeping up?"

Her hip bones tented the fabric of her shirt.

"Fine. Doing fine."

"That's wonderful, I'm so glad."

"So you said it was pretty busy up there?"

"Well, of course we weren't just doing forest rescues, as I said. It's so strange how people get when they're up on the mountain."

"What? What do you mean, strange?"

"Oh, well just that they don't seem to understand that it's a mountain. It's dangerous up there. Not very forgiving. So a little mistake can turn into a big one."

"Yeah." Her shirt was soft between her fingertips.

"I suppose that's a long way of saying that yes, it was busy."

"How many other parks did you work at?"

"Three or four. It's hard to remember exact numbers when you're as old as I am."

"You're not old, Bud, you're fine-aged." K.D. joked. Bud laughed.

"No, I'm old, sweetheart, but that's nice of you to say."

She smiled and snugged the phone a bit closer to her face.

"Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

The line between them crackled. Somewhere, K.D. remembered, she'd read that a certain percentage of electronic static was lightning strikes across the country.

"Did you like your job? I mean... did it make you happy?"

"Oh, well of course I liked it. I wouldn't have done it for so long if I hadn't liked it. But did it make me happy?"

Her computer whirred and she set it on the bedside table so it could cool down.

"Well, that's hard to say. Did I like being outside instead of in an office somewhere? Of

course. So many young people work indoors- so many *old* people, for that matter. I don't know how they do it. Couldn't ever stand it, myself. Made me a little stir crazy. So yes, it made me happy to be out where no one was making me wear silly clothes and sit at a desk all day. But you know the flip side to it."

K.D nodded, then verbally agreed.

"It's a hard job, sweetheart. You know how tired your father was all the time. This kind of work, it wears a body down. Good to take a break sometimes. That's why I went and worked for the lodge down on Hood for a while, when I was a younger man. Let me clear my head a bit. It's important to get away once and a while."

"Yeah."

"It's a hard job. But you know your mother is so proud of you, and your father would be, too. You're doing important work."

"I know. It's just..." She shifted her phone to her other ear.

The line crackled.

"It's hard. It's really hard."

"I know."

Her shirt was fluttering with her heartbeat.

"Sometimes I think we shouldn't even let people out there. They don't know what they're getting themselves into."

"How do you mean?"

"They're not prepared to go out there and be..." Her tongue touched the back of her front teeth.

"Be what?"

"Listen, Bud, this is going to sound strange, but-" She grabbed her laptop and set it on to of her hip bones. "I've been doing some research."

"Oh?"

"That's why I called you. Because of the things I've been looking up. I need to ask you something, something really specific. It's about the searches you went on."

Bud didn't respond.

"How many people did you lose that you didn't find?"

Silence.

"How many did we *lose*? Well, we didn't really *lose* anyone, per say, they were already lost."

"Well, yes, but how many of them were never found?"

"I couldn't say."

"Was it a lot, or very few?"

More silence.

"What is this about, K.D." It wasn't a question. The charming confusion was gone, replaced with something very hard and sharp.

"I think there's something going on here at my park. Please, I just need to know-"

"I know what you want to know, K.D, and you'll be far better off just dropping it."

"That's not an option, Bud. And if I can't find out what I need from you, you know I'll just go somewhere else. Daddy had a lot of friends, and-"

"Your father was a good man, and I was sorry to see him leave us so soon. But there's

things that you don't need to know, and this is one of them. I'm advising you as a former Ranger to *drop it*. And I can promise you that any of the other men your father was friends with will tell you the same."

"How big is this thing? Is it really that bad?"

That scratchy sound.

"Just let it go. That's all I can tell you."

They were both quiet.

"How many of them didn't come back?" She whispered it. "Please, I need to know. Please."

Bud didn't respond.

"I need to know how many people you lost while you were out there. From the beginning to the end."

The line between them crackled. It crackled for a long time. *Lightning strikes*, K.D thought.

"At least five hundred."

Lightning strikes.

"*Five hundred?*"

"Yes."

Numbly, she typed the figure into a blank email. Her shirt front fluttered rhythmically.

"I'm going to hang up now."

"Did you see the stairs, Bud?" She waited for his response, but the line was quiet. "Did you see them while you were out there? Do you know-"

"I have to go."

The line clicked and went dead.

K.D pulled her phone away from her ear and turned the screen off. It was hot to the touch, tacky with oil and sweat. She wiped it off with the hem of her shirt and set it on her bedside table, along with the laptop. It whirred for a while, then went to sleep.

She was awake for a long time.

The fifth time they called, I turned my cell off. I haven't answered it, or any of the emails they've sent. I don't know how they got them, but it's been a fucking shit-show ever since the case was re-opened. What they want from me I can't imagine. What do they think I'll give them? Exclusive details of the fucking kid? We haven't found anything, we don't *know* anything. K.D has been messaging me non-stop, but I haven't sent anything back. She hasn't been on the search, we haven't seen each other once since she found his shoe.

His fucking shoe.

It's just like how it was at the start again. The park crawling with other FDPD Rangers and cops and volunteers and the peanut gallery at the edges of the closed-off areas, taking selfies and Snaps and God knows what else. The kid's been gone a fucking (month-and-a-half?) but the way they're acting, you'd think he went missing yesterday. I'm stuck out there with the rest of them because it'll look good for us. The tragic hero, out there calling with the rest of them but working just a little harder. I'm out there busting my ass, looking under every fucking bush and in every fucking stump and I'm fine, I'm just fine. The media, they're all over the place, demented Pied Pipers, and the fucking nut jobs are out in force following them around. Ladies with shirts

with his little face on it who aren't even related to him and signs saying things like 'WE LOVE YOU BABY PLEESE COME HOME!!!', waving them around in the parking lot while the local reporters are out there checking in Live. The town's gone fucking mental with it. All the trees on the main drag have big red ribbons tied around them because red is Tad's favorite color and the parents, they're choked up and so grateful for everything we're doing. Dad came out and shook my hand in front of the cameras which were zooming in on my beard full of pine needles and sap and my disgusting, filthy hands, and I'm a hero. I go to the store or the bar or the gas station and everyone knows me, they shake my hand and tell me what a great thing it is I'm doing up there. As if I'm the one who found his fucking shoe. K.D, they don't even know her name. She's hanging back around the perimeter, helping direct traffic and get people to get the fuck out of the way. She's on her normal rounds in one of the pick-ups, going to the campsites and everything is normal for her, everything is just peachy-fucking-keene, but she won't *shut the fuck up*. Every five minutes, Skype pings and it's a new message from her.

where are you????

we need to talk

why is your phone off, are you okay???

message me i know youre home

i need to tell you something

it's really important

RUSSEL ANSWER LOOK AT YOUR SKYPE

I'm not mad at her for finding it. Frankly I'm glad it was her and not someone else. But she's opened up a world of shit and she can't wrap her mind around the fact that I don't want

anything to do with it. That one conversation, she just won't let it go. It doesn't matter how many times I remind her how fucked up I was, and that *she was the one who told me I was fucked up*. No, suddenly I'm the infallible hero who's lost his way and needs to be reminded of what I need to be doing. I'm the reluctant messiah and she knows how I feel about all of this, how uncomfortable it makes me to be put in that role, how little I deserve it, but she won't let it go. I read about a condition online. It's called a *folie a deux*. A madness shared by two. One person loses it, goes off the wall, and it spreads to the other person. Spreads like the common cold. And like the cold, it doesn't take much. Just a little sneeze, a little cough, and it spreads. Gets inside the other person and travels into their moist hot parts and grows and grows until it's stopped by an antibiotic or the immune system. But there's no immune system for madness, you can only quarantine it and stay away and watch as the other person eats themselves alive until there's nothing left of them at all. Or until they kick it. They take their medicine and they get better. K.D, I told her how guilty I feel. I told her it was my fault, and that it's for her own good that things are like this, but she's too fever blind, she's burning up and it's all over her and she's cold even though she's hot. So I stay away from her. I ignore her calls and her texts and her messages and I'm quarantining her as best I can, but she's still out there, and I know people are listening and exposing themselves to it. She won't take the antibiotic and now all that's left is for me to sit here in the dark, with a movie playing through my speakers and my legs wrapped up warm and stay here until it gets light and I can go back to work and be the hero again.

This is all my fault.

The search for Tad consumed the park for another two weeks, which seemed to be about

the average attention span of the public. Any more than that, and without new results they moved on to other, more interesting things, things that had updates and conclusions and weeping victims or families of victims or graphic photos coupled with a warning on the evening news. The mysterious man, who the Rangers had taken to calling 'Jigsaw', was largely thrust out of memory. Through some old connections her father had, K.D was able to find out a bit more about the state of his investigation. The coroner's office had put together what had been found of the man, which only largely amounted to bits and pieces. The largest piece, the spine, was relatively intact, and had been removed cleanly and efficiently from the chunk of torso recovered. As the search for Tad was underway, additional pieces trickled in, but the consensus was that whatever had befallen their friend, he had been cleanly and completely 'chunked'. That's how the coroner's assistant had phrased it when K.D had spoken to him briefly on the phone.

“Whatever happened to the poor guy, which I'm guessing was some kind of industrial accident, he got chunked up pretty good. We've been calling him Starkist. The official cause of death was massive trauma, but since we can't really find any good pieces of him to work with, I think we're just gonna leave it at that. I'm sure eventually some poor sap will find his head or his legs and maybe then we'll be able to tell more.”

“But what do you think happened to him? I mean this is clearly not normal.” K.D pressed.

“Honesty, I think the guy probably got involved in something he shouldn't have. We're not Detroit but there's some stuff up here you don't really wanna mess with, and this guy, he probably just met up with the wrong people. Considering no one's even reported anyone missing, I doubt he'll ever get claimed. We'll probably hang on to him until the cops tell us we can throw

him in the incinerator, and that'll be that.”

The other Rangers, the cops, the coroner's office, everyone seemed perfectly willing, almost eager, to let him go. Something so strange with no conclusion wasn't good for anyone, wasn't good for morale or work ethic, and the higher ups brought down the hammer on Tad's case. Russell continued to ignore her, avoiding her in the break room, her call and Skype messages and voicemails all gathering dust. She saw him from a distance, working with a team, combing every inch of the park, not bothering to set up an area of probability. Everywhere was considered probable. His walking stick making that dense, comforting thump as he moved forward. His beard was thicker, longer, but he was losing weight, and the effect was striking. Privately, K.D spoke to her former boss, expressing her concern, but he assured her that he was in touch with the park management, and they were aware of Russ' condition. They kept the media at bay as best they could, issued statements to the effect that no Ranger would be available for any further comment or interview. But she suspected he was being bombarded with requests and demands anyway. She hated the media as vehemently as her father had. Vultures, he'd called them. Constantly getting in the way, compromising investigations, harassing and tormenting good people in a bid for numbers and ratings. Whenever they'd approached her father, he'd politely but firmly tell them that he was well aware of his rights, and that trespassing in their state was punishable by hefty fines and jail time. That kept them away. She trusted him, had complete faith in his ability to protect her and their family during those times. She could do the same for Russell, teach him how to get the media off his back, if only he'd let her close.

Toward Thanksgiving, there was a massive media surge in the coverage of Tad's case. Briefly, it went nation-wide. The big fish, they caught scent of the blood in the air, and almost

overnight the park was overrun with cameras, reporters, crowds wishing to volunteer, take souvenirs from the park to sell online; *For Sale: Genuine Pinecone From Evergreen Park, All Profits To Tad's Rescue Effort!!!! Bid Starting At \$200*. Their work tripled, and instead of the traditional upkeep and preparation for winter, suddenly everyone was consumed with herding the cattle, picking up after them, keeping them safe. At least four people were seriously injured after falling down large embankments during marches on the paths. One woman with a fractured arm had thoroughly bitched K.D out as she lifted her out of the ditch. *I came all the way from Montana to help you incompetent idiots find this poor little boy and look at me! You can't even run this damn park. No wonder he's been missing! Where I'm from, we'd never allow this kind of thing to happen. You should be ashamed, running this park the way you are*. K.D had jostled the stretcher slightly, making the woman yowl furiously, and apologized through her teeth.

Trying to get into town after work, K.D was met with traffic jams, stuck behind scores of people marching up and down the streets with signs. *BRING OUR BABY HOME!!!!* The poison began to spread once again to the locals, who took up the idea that the park had somehow failed them, that the police were covering up evidence. Surely a little boy could not have just vanished into thin air. Suspicion began to creep through the town that a serial killer was loose. He'd left the shoe as a trophy, which had been found by the very Ranger who'd been the champion of the first search, *isn't that just awful?* A reporter dug up past articles of children who had gone missing or been found dead near or in the park, and suddenly a media frenzy began. *Are Our Local National Parks Safe? What Lurks Between the Trees?* The local news hosted interviews of parents who had lost their children decades ago. They clutched old stuffed animals, held faded photographs of smiling kids, and claimed through their weeping that they'd known this would

happen. Someone was using the park as a killing ground, and it was only a matter of time before more children were taken. As the media and protesters swarmed the park, visitor attendance plummeted. K.D kept to herself, wandering far behind the crowds, picking up after them, directing traffic from under the brim of her hat, and staunchly avoiding anyone with a camera. But she stayed close to Russell, trailing him whenever possible. He lost more weight, his beard looked haggard and patchy. For three days, he didn't come to the park, and his Skype status remained offline. She drove past his house every night, looking for any lights, and only feeling slight relief when she saw them on. She called and called, messaged and emailed, but he didn't answer. At night, in bed on her back, her heart hammered, and she felt sick. She too had lost weight, and all the time her gut squirmed. It was hard to remember to eat. One morning, on her way to work, she stepped on the scale, something she had formerly been religious about, but had neglected for weeks. Just below ninety pounds. Grabbing a plastic bag from the kitchen, she filled it with food, and drove to work. The trees were festooned with red ribbons. Driving through town, it looked festive if you didn't know what they represented. It could have been beautiful, if the ribbons hadn't been red. When she pulled into the employee lot, the bag was empty.

Russell was back soon after, but he seemed flatter, more distant. He had something on his mind, and he turned it over while he worked. It became less common for him to bring his walking stick, which people remarked on. One day after work, she saw him getting into his truck, and she approached him.

“Hey.” She knocked on his window. He rolled it down and looked at her blankly.

“Hey.”

“So. How've you been? You haven't been answering my messages.”

“You've sent me a lot.”

“Oh, yeah sorry about that. I just really wanted to talk to you, figure out what's up with you lately. Make sure you're okay.”

He seemed to think about it carefully.

“I don't really know how to say it the right way.”

“Well, just say it and if I get mad I'll tell you.”

He scratched his beard and looked at something on the collar of her shirt. She followed him and plucked a black hair off. A short one. She had no idea where it had come from. With a quick flick, she got it off. This seemed to shake him out of his thoughts.

“This whole thing with Tad is coming back, and I cant handle it and you.”

She felt an unpleasant lurch in her gut.

“What do you mean, handle me?”

“I just- it's my fault you're so obsessed with this shit now, and I can't handle dealing with trying to fix you and keep myself together with Tad at the same time.”

“I don't get what you're saying, what exactly am I obsessed about?”

He smacked the steering wheel lightly.

“I don't know. For a while you were just so obsessed with these kids and their cases and you know how hard it was for me to get over this thing with Tad. And now that it's back I really can't handle you. I know that's harsh, but-”

But K.D was backing away, her eyes brimming with angry tears.

“K.D, please, I'm sorry, but-”

“You're the one who got me into this, *you're* the one who was fucking crazy about this kid, and you're treating me like I'm this lunatic who's- who's *infecting* you with my crazy!” She swallowed around what felt like a large marble and winced at the pain. “I was just trying to help you and figure this out so we'd know what was going on, because there *is* something going on! I can't just pretend I'm okay, Russ, and you shouldn't either! I can see you're not okay, you look awful and you're ignoring me when I-”

“I'm sorry, I really am. But I just- I can't do this.” He rolled his window up and put the car in reverse. She watched him back out, her lips pulled together and aching, her throat swollen. She wiped the tears off her cheeks roughly and stormed over to her car. *Fuck him*, she thought. *Fuck him*. She thought it all the way back to town. She thought it that night as she lay in bed, unable to sleep. She thought it as she drove down his street, looking in the second story of the apartment complex for the lit window she knew was his.

(somewhere in here, we need to add stuff that shows how far theyve drifted. There's not enough context, I fear.)

The call came in while I was talking to a hiker I know well. He comes out at least once a month and goes on weekend trips. I like him because he's always prepared, has his itinerary completely planned out, lets us know, down to the hour, where he'll be and when he can be expected to come back. We were talking about some of the places I recommended going when I heard someone talking faintly at hip level. I usually make it a point to turn it down when I'm around the public. I excused myself and went a few feet away to answer.

“What's up?”

“We just got a call from B Park about a guy who's been helped down into the camp. Got a report of a noise disturbance. Can you run down there and check it out?”

I threw my backpack and kit in one of the pickups and headed down the road to the campsite where the call came from. A guy, the one I'd assumed made the call, was waiting for me at the entrance to the park. He was wearing hunters' orange, a rifle slung over his back. As soon as I opened the door, he was all over me, gesticulating and sending a fine spray of spit in my face every time he enunciated.

"I don't know what the fuck you guys are doing out there but man if you didn't authorize construction out there you'd better get the damn FBI to go and check it out because-"

"This isn't a hunting reserve, just so you know. It's registered as camping only, so if you were planning on shooting you'll have to go somewhere else. I can give you a map of the registered areas." I grabbed my backpack from the cab and slung it over my shoulders. The guy was still babbling, smacking my shoulders every few seconds.

"-like a damn high rise construction zone, man. The fuck you guys doing out there? It came outta nowhere, too, crested the hill and all of a sudden it was everywhere and-"

"I won't report you this time, but it's really vital that you know where you're shooting. Lots of families, they come out here this time of year to watch the leaves, and the last thing we need is-"

"-not even listening to me, you damn idiot! The fuck you guys-"

"-some kid getting shot in the-"

"-doing out here?"

"-head."

We both paused. His face was red.

"You must be the one that called about the noise disturbance, then."

"Have you not been listening to anything I've been saying? I don't know what the fuck you've got going on out there but it sounds like a bulldozer ripping up-"

"Alright. If you can just put your gun in the cab, you can show me where it was."

He touched the shoulder strap.

"Regulation. Can't have you getting me out alone and shooting me." I shrugged and opened the door to the truck. Eyeing my hip, where I wore my equipment belt, he set the rifle in the cab. I hit the lock button on the key fob twice. Somewhere, a goose honked in response to the horn.

"So how far out are we talking?" He led me into the trees, his hand occasionally touching his shoulder where the strap would have been.

"Bout half a mile."

"You did hear what I said about the hunting reserve, right?"

He grunted.

"I'll give you a map with some sites. I've got a few spots I like that are off the path. You shouldn't have a problem finding something."

I timed my steps with the bounce of his shoulders. I knew a Ranger once, he went out on a call like this once. He didn't remember to check the guy for firearms, and once they were far enough out, the guy shot him point blank. Turns out he was an activist. That's what he called himself during the trial. An activist who wanted to make a point. The Ranger's wife, she got to

be there when they executed the guy. Said that even though they were behind thick glass, when they turned the juice up she could smell the guys eyelashes burning. Said her husband used to wake up smelling that smell, burning hair, and it used to drive them both crazy. After the guy was dead, she left the courthouse, went home, and shot herself in the face. I know all this because I have friends who are cops, who have loose lips and questionable morals when presented with information about spots out in the woods where no one goes, but are easily accessible. The ground is loose there. There are a lot of landslides in the spring.

The man I was following, I didn't even know his name. That was stupid. I asked him.

"Hamill. Mark Hamill."

"Ranger Brauer. Sorry, should have introduced myself sooner."

His shoulders bounced. He was muscular, but I was bigger. Facing away from me, we were at equal advantages. It wouldn't be hard to rush him. I could watch what his hands were doing. But if he had a concealed weapon, which wouldn't be too far-fetched for a hunter, it could take him seconds to turn and shoot. He'd probably have decent aim and trigger speed. His arms hung loose at his sides, swinging with each step, but that looseness was deceptive. Drunks seem harmless until they're stabbing you up under the last rib, digging the knife in while their buddy tries to go for your baton. People are unpredictable. Especially out here, where it's easy to have accidents. Sometimes things happen. Rocks fall off cliffs and hit someone square on the soft part, right on the temple, where things can slide in like a knife in melted butter. Sometimes people are the ones that fall off. They trip or they aren't paying attention and whoop, down they go. Sorry, ma'am, we can only find half of his head, the other's baked onto the rocks down there, it's been hot out the last two days. I'm not saying it's dangerous out here, but what I am saying is that if

people were smart, they'd be a lot more worried about other humans than bears or wolves or boogeymen. Monsters don't need green skin or black eyes or long slender fingers to be scary. In my experience, men with big grins and bottles of Jack Daniel's and cellphones are much more frightening.

"We just about there, friend?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm not hearing it now, they must have heard me calling you. Don't know how, though, with all that fucking noise they were making. Thought you guys were supposed to be saving the shit out here, not selling it off and knocking it down."

He moved his hands, and creases appeared at his armpits. Pulling his jacket tighter around himself. I remember reading somewhere that crossed arms and adjusting of clothing are signs that whoever you're talking to is closed off, and you're better off not trying to talk to them. I glanced down in time to see my left boot sink into a fresh pile of deer scat. Some of the pellets were already crushed; he must stepped in it too.

Abruptly, he stopped, cocked his head, and pointed to the right.

"Bout fifty yards out, that's where I started really hearing it. Don't hear it now, but trust me, if they get going again you won't be able to miss it. I figure the site's probably about a half-mile further down, but I figured I'd let you guys deal with 'em. Wouldn't have called at all if I'd known all you'd do is send one fuckin' Ranger out here to bitch at me about being in the wrong spot to hunt an animal that's in season." His arms were hugged tightly across his chest, and she shifted his weight from one boot to the other. I cupped a hand to my ear and listened, but all I heard was the wind.

"So it was coming from the south?"

“Yeah.”

“Describe it for me.”

He tossed his hands up briefly. “I don't know, man, it was *loud*. Like machinery, or stone-cutting.”

“How loud?”

“Loud enough that I took time outta my day to call you.”

I turned in a slow circle, my hand still cupped behind my ear. There were no tire tracks, no litter, no signs of anyone except us.

“Well, you know sometimes out here, we'll get cave-ins. It's not uncommon this time of year, once the rain starts back up, especially after a wet summer and spring. Most people don't know it, but there's a fair amount of cave structure out here. Could also have been a landslide, there's some slopes about three miles that way-” I pointed off to the southwest.

“I know what a damn landslide sounds like and this wasn't that.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Look if y'all don't wanna admit that you're out here doing clear-cutting that's fine, but don't you stand there and talk to me like I'm some idiot. I've been out here longer than you've been alive, and I know what that shit sounds like, and this wasn't that.”

A small group of sparrows flew overhead, cheeping. I turned my head to watch them through the branches.

“I'm not trying to insult you, I'm just suggesting that maybe-”

I felt it through my boots. In the bones of my toes. We both went still, quiet, and looked at each other for a long moment. It came again. The sense of shifting. Hamill uncrossed his arms

and looked to the south.

“That's it. That's how it started.” He pointed. “It's coming from that way, I think.” He was quieter now. I could see the hairs on his arms standing up slightly.

The shift came again. It made my feet ache slightly, as if my bones were vibrating. This time, it also came with a very low, directionless sound. A pressing on the eardrums.

Grinding.

Hamill started to wander to the south. His eyes were glazed. I caught him by the upper arm and he snapped out of it.

“The hell are you boys doing out there?”

I tried to turn him around, back the way we came.

“I need you to go back to your car, Mr. Hamill.”

It was louder. Closer. I felt it in my groin, and the hairs on our arms were sticking up like small needles. A couple of porcupines in human clothes. I shook my head slightly.

“It's inside the ground. The hell are you drilling for, all the way out here?” Hamill wouldn't move.

“Mr. Hamill, you need to go back to entrance. Now.”

“The hell's out there?” He jerked his arm out of my grip. The sound was constant now, almost electric.

“A structure out there is caving in. Probably an old cave system. I don't know wide it is, but this area isn't safe. Please, I need you to-”

“You've still got my gun in your truck, I'm not going anywhere until-”

“Wait there, then. I'll radio this in and meet up with you, but right now you need to

leave.”

Hamill stared at me, then shook his head and slowly started to walk back. I waited until I couldn't hear his steps anymore before I let myself walk toward the sound.

I followed it in a fog. The sound grew in intensity, the vibration of it rattling inside my head and in front of my eyes, driving them back into my skull. Like a silent jet engine with all the force and none of the screaming of burning fuel and furiously working machinery. A simultaneous pushing and pulling that made the ground under me buzz and hum like a live power line. I fumbled for my radio, but my fingers were blocky and cold and I couldn't figure out how to un-clip it from the holster it sat in. The ground passed under my feet, but I couldn't feel my legs moving. I couldn't feel much of anything, except the pressure on my eyes and the Novocaine numbness that was sitting somewhere in the top of my neck, that last tender vertebra that spears up into the base of the skull. The light around me was brighter but darker, and the sound grew around me, grinding and humming and sending out wave after wave of electrical sparking that made my muscles warm and my stomach lurch. It was a feeling I remembered from when I was a kid, when I'd make a game of seeing how still I could make myself. Relaxing every single muscle so that a wave of unbearable discomfort, of that awful tightening in my balls I got when something frustrated me, took over and washed through every part of me until I'd let out a hacking little bark of distaste and flail, moving my arms and legs and eyes and sweeping it away. The leaves blended together, the colors of the things and the ground and the tall blended into a smeary paste, like a watercolor, like a painting that only made sense if you stood far enough away, and the grinding was under me and over me. I imagined a cave, yawning under the ground, the stalactites and stalagmites, which I remembered with the help of a rhyme, finally meeting and

coming together and rubbing against each other, undoing centuries of one drop of water after another carrying a tiny load of minerals, leaving them behind in a snail's trail before dropping into the puddles that the cave swallowed up.

It was in front of me, and my eyes wanted to roll into my skull so badly, but even when they did I could still see so I kept them there, rolled up under the brow bone and staring at the inside of my head while in front I saw the stairs, marching up ten feet and ending in a landing that was carpeted with something plush and brown. Blonde wood, ash or oak or birch or pine, that brown carpet running up in a chocolate stripe, and it was so plush and soft and I stood at the bottom step, and all around me the colors melted and ran and I heard Bob Ross talking about how there were no mistakes just happy accidents, and that made me smile as I undid the laces of my boots. I just wanted a quick taste, but that wasn't the right word, just a quick taste of the carpet on my feet because how could there be carpet out here that wasn't made of pine needles and decaying bodies and moss and rot and the fairy skeletons of dried up leaves, and one boot was off and the other on its way, and the stairs vibrated, so happy to see me. That's what babies do as soon as they can walk, they go up and down stairs, you're a big kid when you can do that, and the carpet looked so soft and new and I reached out to touch it with my finger and I kicked my other boot off, my toes pulling at the top of one sock, hardly noticing the hairs being pinched in the process, and my finger grazed the tip when suddenly my radio exploded into life, the voice rocketing out of the speaker louder than anything I'd ever heard, and my eyes were dragged out of my skull. A pop, a sense of the air being sucked out and pushed back in, and I was standing in a clearing with no sense of direction or time, and the tip of my right index finger was bleeding profusely.

A terrific pain lit up the inside of my head; a migraine. I groaned, covering my eyes with the palms of my hands, and I felt the warm stickiness of blood dripping down my wrist and arm.

The radio spoke again.

“-up on that report of the noise disturbance?”

With my good hand, I clumsily unclipped my radio and spoke into it.

“We're good.”

“Sorry, there was some interference. Repeat?”

“I said we're good. Minor landslide. No need for further follow-up.”

Little sparks danced in my vision. My temples were being clamped. Ventricular swelling. That's what causes migraines. A bird called somewhere and I vomited quickly. I wiped my mouth and felt a searing pain in my injured finger. I held it in front of my bulging eyes and saw, through tears, that the pad was gone.

“Alright. Go ahead and finish up rounds, nothing else 's come in yet.”

I hit the talk button twice. I managed to stumble over to the base of a tree, where I collapsed on my ass and vomited again. The pain was everywhere, in every fold and pathway and wrinkle and suddenly I was afraid, afraid that I was dying, certain that I was dying. A black spot appeared in the center of my vision, and no amount of darting or blinking would make it stop spreading. It grew and grew until I could see nothing, just an endless black, and my heart pounding, sending wave after wave of blood that was too thick, too big to fit, flooding through the tiny throbbing veins and I scrambled for my radio blindly, reaching for it with clawed fingers, ignoring the comparatively pleasant pain of my missing flesh to press the button and rasp out for help before the blackness poured into my mouth and ears and throat until there was nothing else

but darkness.

(meets someone who is severely brain damaged from stairs

Every bump in the road, every little hill or crack or dip, he'd scream. They'd put him in the back, stretched out with his legs bent at the knees, the seatbelt around his middle and shoulders, but he thrashed and cried out and begged for it to stop. K.D, barely keeping her composure, drove well above the speed limit down the freeway, talking over his agonized cries, offering meaningless comfort that she wasn't even sure he could understand. They'd traced his radio out to a remote spot and found him under a tree, blood pouring out of his nose and ears, and his hands knotted in front of his chest in an awful, frostbitten rictus. The first and second sections of his fingers were bright white, blood-starved from being tensed so tightly. Unable to get him to move on his own, K.D and another Ranger had carried him out, her cradling his head while the other gripped him by the knees. It was stupid, reckless and irresponsible, but somehow when it was one of their own, all the procedures broke down and it wasn't about doing things by the book, it was about getting him out as fast as possible. He screamed the entire way. Earth-shattering screams that cut right through her and made her want to panic, to drop him and cut him open and yank out whatever was causing him so much agony. Over and over, they tried to get through to him, to get him to answer their desperate questions: what had happened? But all he could do was scream until his voice began to crack, and the tips of his fingers turned a nasty shade of bruised purple. Losing her composure, K.D had dropped to her feet, his head in her lap,

throwing the other Ranger off balance and sending him toppling over. Russell's legs wrenched to the side, but he seemed not to notice, and they fell heavily to the ground. She gripped the sides of his face, held it steady so he couldn't thrash, and begged him to stop, to just stop for a moment and tell her what was wrong.

"Please!" She'd sobbed. *"Just tell me what to do! Tell me where it is!"*

For a brief moment, he quieted, and the silence was the most wonderful, welcome thing she'd ever known. He looked up at her, his head in her lap, his eyes blood red from hundreds of broken vessels, and he whispered:

*"There's something wrong with my brain. Get it out, oh please get it out get it
ooooUUUUUUUT-"*

And he had gone back to screaming. He screamed the entire way to the VC, the entire way to the truck.

As they loaded him in the back seat, he looked at her again, and she saw that the left side of his face was drooping, like melted plastic. She choked on her spit and had to take a moment to cough, doubled over by the side of the truck. Now, as they flew down the freeway, she could feel the truck rock as he thrashed, smashing his head against the door.

"Russell please, please don't! Please, you'll hurt yourself!"

She reached back with one hand, tried to stop him, but he just kept slamming into the door, over and over, howling like a dying animal, like a dog being beaten, and she pushed the truck harder, went as fast as she had ever gone. She ran red lights, swerved through traffic, and at one point she passed a cop, going the other way down a small side street, but somehow he missed her, and she came to a screeching halt at the entrance to the E.R.

"Please, someone, my friend, there's something wrong! Please!"

Hearing the commotion, a small group of nurses had come outside, and within seconds Russell was bound to a stretcher, his head secured, and he was whisked back into the bowels of the hospital, his howling fading the farther away he went. When she could hear him no longer, she dropped into the passenger seat of the truck and rested her arms on her bent legs, her head hanging. They let her stay like that for a while, until her shoulders stopped shaking, before a woman put her hand on K.D's arm and told her, very gently, that she'd have to park in the adjacent lot. K.D did so mechanically, and wandered into the main lobby with a Twinkie in her hand. The nurse at the desk eyed it briefly, and K.D looked down at it. The creamy filling was bright in the fluorescent light, artificial and fluffy and somehow perverse. She had no memory of grabbing it, or of eating any part of it. She shoved the rest down her throat whole and took a seat. She shut her eyes and rocked back and forth, the Twinkie melting in her stomach. Somewhere far away, she thought she could hear Russell screaming.

Three hours later, and the lobby was full; the noise was almost deafening. A man across from her, reeking of alcohol, held a cloth to the side of his face and scowled, looking her up and down judgmentally. Every so often, blood would drip off the end of the saturated cloth and land on his pants or the floor. After several minutes of this, K.D raised her lip.

"What?" She challenged, shrugging her shoulders forward.

"I was here first, bitch. Ain't nothing even wrong with you an' I'm cut. I was here *first*."

He briefly removed the cloth from his face and she could see a long, jagged slash arcing

from his nostril up to what was once a hairy eyebrow. Now, the skin, an ugly loose flap, hung over his eye, which itself was shut tightly. She didn't flinch.

"You ain't even hurt. Fuck you." He pressed the filthy cloth back to his face.

He continued to scowl at her, occasionally muttering more obscenities and threats. Somewhere behind her, a baby started shrieking. Other people seemed to handle screaming children with ease, but it was a sound K.D couldn't stand. The thing was probably scared and in pain, but all she could think of was walking over and clamping her hand over the open mouth, muffling the ear-piercing, insistent screeching and restoring silence. She wondered why women never did that. Instead of pleading or scolding or wheedling, why not just stop the problem at the source. Clap a hand over the gaping, toothless mouth and shut the thing up. Restore sanity and order and give yourself some time to calm down and think. It wouldn't hurt the kid. They'd never remember. Babies were idiots, squealing, pooping, vaguely sentient larvae. And surely everyone around you would thank you for it. But this woman evidently didn't think the same way, and the pained screaming went on and on. K.D dug through the pockets of her uniform jacket for a set of earplugs, which she usually kept on her at all times, but came up empty. She remembered placing them on the dresser at home while emptying the dirt and pine needles out of her pockets the night before, and she'd forgotten to put them back. Of course. She bent forward at the waist and rested her head in her hands in such a way that she was able to plug her ears. Her eyes shut, she pressed her fingers into her skull, trying to block out the sound. Seemingly in response, the baby increased its piercing shrieks, both in volume and frequency. Even with her ears shoved as deep inside as they could go, the sound got through, wiggled through every space and jabbed at her like a persistent finger. A human being shouldn't have been capable of such a sound, this cruel

organic parody of a dentist's drill. Her foot tapped, faster and faster as the crying went on and on, and that nagging feeling in her gut grew in intensity until, unable to stop herself, she flew out of her chair and wheeled around, finding the source of the sound: a small Hispanic child, being cradled absently by its morbidly obese mother, who was ignoring it completely.

"Jesus Christ, lady, shut your fucking kid up!"

Every conversation ceased instantly. Someone gasped. The only sound was the child, who had not been affected by her outburst. The nurse manning the intake station glanced at her and issued a curt warning to sit back down and be quiet. K.D obeyed awkwardly, the room still heavy with whispers and the ever-present cacophony of the child. From its direction, a Molasses-thick, heavily accented voice remarked:

"He's deaf. He don't hear nothing. That's how come he so loud. He don't hear himself." It was said with no malice or anger, but a weariness that made K.D deeply ashamed. The man across from her was snickering and trying to get her attention. She ignored him and looked at her hands, which were shaking.

"You're a real bitch, lady. We were all thinking it but damn, you're a fuckin' bitch."

"Shut up." She hissed under her breath, still avoiding him. The man swayed in his chair and cackled.

"Fuckin' bitch. Why don't you go eat a fuckin' sandwich, you bony whore. Grow some fuckin' titties you nasty-"

"Kennedy?"

A young woman with a clip board scanned the crowd. K.D jumped to her feet and rushed over, her hands shoved into her pockets. The woman flipped through paperwork on the board and

asked for her ID before leaning in close.

"You're not his wife or kin, so I can't release any details about his condition, but he's stable. The doctor wants to keep him overnight, but he should be cleared tomorrow morning. We have your number, so we'll give you a call. He's listed you as his emergency contact, is this correct?"

"Yeah, yeah he's got no family or anything so-"

"That's fine. We'll contact you when he's ready to be discharged."

K.D nodded and tried to repeat back to herself anything that had just been relayed to her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't even- I wasn't-"

"It's okay. He's fine, but staying overnight. He'll call you tomorrow when he's ready to be picked up. Go home and get some sleep. There's nothing you can do for him here."

The woman gave her a kind but generic smile and hurried back through the double doors leading to the rest of the hospital.. From all sides came questions, demands for attention, and the now-familiar assertion that *I was first*. She stayed in the small room for a moment, tightening her coat and touching her face, her hair, before wandering through the lobby, avoiding the nasty drunk man and the deaf, still-screaming child, and out into the cold air. The wind raked across her face, through her hair and down to her scalp, and she shivered. There was no worse feeling in the world than knowing she'd done everything she could. She took a step toward the car, then back to the door, and ended up doing this several times. A tiny, barely-there woman doing a solo shuffling tango in front of a hospital at three in the morning. She coughed a few times, pinched the back of her hand, and made for her car. The wind buffeted her, and she felt very small.

He looked out the window quietly, his hands resting in his lap. He had long, thick fingers, and they must have washed them because the nails were clean. He hadn't told her what had happened, and she didn't have the strength of will to ask. The traffic was heavy along the interstate, and they were at a stand-still. K.D turned on the radio to see what was going on. An accident in the right hand lane. Possible fatalities. She started to turn it higher.

“Leave it turned down. They don't want me exposed to loud noises.”

“Oh, of course, sure, sorry.” She cranked the knob to the left, reducing the report to just above a whisper.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, sure, of course, no problem.” She sat higher in her seat, sneaking glances at the small, circular bald patch shaved into the side of Russell's head. The traffic inched forward briefly, then stopped. In front of them, two small children were turned around in the backseat. They pointed at her and Russell. She kept her gaze steady, aimed just above their heads. The silence in the car was oppressive, but it wasn't clear why. Somehow, she felt very guilty. Her truck's engine was loud, she suddenly noticed. She glanced to make sure she was in first gear and jiggled the stick, as if that might help. The gears clicked a bit in protest, and she stopped. The children bounced in their seats. They were making faces.

“They should be wearing their seatbelts.” She remarked.

“What?” Russell didn't turn to look.

“The kids in front of us. Stupid little fuckers are going to get whiplash if we move forward fast enough. I don't understand why parents let their kids do shit like that, it's so blatantly unsafe.”

“I guess.”

His hands were so still. He had a habit of picking at the sides of his cuticles, K.D had noticed it when they'd met years ago, and it was strange to see him not doing it. On the back of his right hand, dead center, was a small bruise. They must have inserted an IV there. She had the strangest urge to take his hand and kiss it. It made her sad, that bruise. She blinked and looked out the side window. A man in a flashy sports car looked back at her, made a jack-off motion with his hand, and gestured at the traffic. *Clusterfuck*. She nodded and made the same motion. He smiled and turned back to his phone. Her stomach growled loud enough to hear over the rumble of the engine and she glanced over, almost panicked, but Russell didn't seem to have noticed. Craning around, she pulled a full-sized bag of Doritos out of the back seat. The ungodly squeaking, crackling noise of the bag made her cringe, and she fumbled to open it. It squealed, the cellophane stretching but not tearing, and she winced.

“Sorry,” she apologized, pulling at the bag harder. The crackling filled the car, deafening her, and she gripped one edge with her teeth. Still, the bag didn't tear. “Jesus christ, fuck...” She mumbled, her face bright red. Yanking in opposite directions furiously, the bag exploded, sending chips flying in all directions. The kids in the car ahead laughed and pointed and mimicked the explosion. K.D shut her eyes tightly and let out the breath she'd been holding. The car now reeked of artificial cheese. Russell didn't move; there was a Dorito resting almost perfectly, comically, on top of his head. Reaching over, K.D gingerly removed it and dropped it back in the bag. She removed a second and third from his lap. Her fingers were greasy and filthy but suddenly she wasn't hungry anymore, so she wiped her fingers on the sides of her seat before tossing the bag back into the cab. She heard it briefly crinkle before falling onto the floor, no

doubt spilling what remained of its contents on the floor. She started laughing, trying to muffle it, but only making herself laugh harder. The kids ahead went quiet and still as they watched her laugh hysterically, tears running down her cheeks, her hands gripping the steering wheel in a death lock. When they started moving again a few minutes later, the kids turned around. The accident was gruesome. Russell watched it go by silently, not looking away as they passed several white sheets. The things that used to be people underneath bled through them, growing as they inched away. He turned his head to watch it until they took the exit, and only then did he turn back and face front. There were Doritos crumbs in his hair.

She helped him to his bedroom, his weight heavy on her. He was weak, his legs shaky, and he seemed to have no balance. Twice, he tripped on his own feet. Once safely in bed, she propped him up, placing pillows behind his back, and followed his instructions, which were quietly given. Pill bottles were removed from his pack, which he'd had when admitted, and placed on the bedside table. A large glass of water was drawn and put there as well. The lights were turned off, the curtains drawn, and the heat lowered. Once his instructions stopped, she started to put on her coat, ready to leave at his word, but he stopped her.

“Can you stay?”

She stood in the doorway, one arm in a sleeve, the other poised in mid-air.

“What?”

“I'm supposed to have someone watch me. I don't have anyone else to ask.” He looked down at his fingers as he said it.

“Oh.” She took her coat off, laid it the end of the bed. “Yeah, sure, no problem.” She sat

in the large leather office chair at his desk and twirled around in it, her feet not touching the floor. “You're tall.” She observed, kicking her feet.

“Yeah, a little.” He said it with a hint of humor. A little spark. K.D, delighted, ran with it.

“But I mean, I guess it isn't hard to be taller than me, huh? Since I'm about two feet tall.” She swung her feet in exaggerated arcs. “I mean look at this. You're like an Ent, and I'm a Hobbit. But without the gross feet.”

“I've never seen your feet. For all I know, you might have them.”

“No!” She squealed in mock-horror. “That's gross, I do not!”

“Nah, I bet you do. You have big hairy Hobbit feet.”

“Oh, shut up, I do not!”

“It's okay, I'm sure someone out there is really into Hobbit feet You'll find love one day.”

He shot her a small, dry smile.

“Oh my God, what do they have you on?”

Russell gestured at the pill bottles.

“I can't remember. Something starting with a 'v'. And a few other things.”

“Ah.”

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the pillows. She listened to him breathing, and when she thought he was asleep, she pulled her phone out and opened a news app. The local headlines were still regarding Tad, and she scrolled through the article absently, looking for any mention of her or Russ; she was grateful to find that there wasn't.

“They came to visit me, while I was there.” He breathed out deeply through his nose. Startled, K.D dropped her phone and bent over to pick it up. She shoved it back into her pocket.

“Who? Oakland (BOSS)?”

He shook his head slowly, keeping his eyes closed. “No. I don't know who they were, but I've never seen them before. They were there when I woke up. I don't remember them coming in. They might have been there waiting, I don't remember asking a nurse about it. I figured the doctors knew about it, so it must have been fine. They kept asking me if I was awake and if I could talk, but my throat was sore, so I didn't say anything.”

“What were they like? Business guys?”

“No. They just looked like normal guys. But one was big, I remember that. Really big. And I thought, he looks like a bodyguard. I don't know why I thought that, but I was pretty sure he was there for security. They kept asking me if I could hear them, and then they started telling me about how they were sorry I'd gotten sick. The leader, or at least the guy that did the most talking, he was saying how it was really a shame that I'd gotten sick out there on such an important job. I thought that was weird, that he kept saying I'd gotten sick. I hadn't even seen a nurse yet, but he seemed like he knew what happened to me. He asks me if I can tell him about what I was doing before I passed out, but I said I didn't remember anything.” He paused.

“Was it true?”

“What?”

“That you didn't remember?”

He stared at the wall across the bed, looking through it. Overnight, he had gotten so thin, somehow.

“No. I remember the whole thing. But I got this weird feeling from them. I think they knew I was lying, but they didn't say anything. The main guy, he just kept talking. I was going in

and out at that point, the meds must have been strong, but I know he said something about 'preserving the sanctity and good name of the park.' I thought it was weird that he'd phrase it that way. And then the big guy, he tells me that what's on it isn't important, just that I have to sign it. The main guy kind of got mad about that, and he said I had the right to know what I was signing.”

“Wait, they had you sign something while you were drugged up? They can't do that, that's illegal. You weren't of sound mind, or whatever.”

Russell shrugged. “I was so tired, I just wanted them to go away. The main guy said it was a contract, a sort of non-disclosure agreement. They wanted to keep this whole thing out of the media, because it would 'jeopardize the investigation.' So basically, I was agreeing that not only would I never talk about it to the media, I wouldn't talk about it to *anyone*. I'm probably committing a felony or treason or something right now. And I started to say something about how that didn't make sense, and that what happened could have had real connections with Tad and other people, but the big guy came to the bed and put his hand on my arm, where one of my IVs was.”

He rolled up his sleeve gingerly. In the crook of his elbow was a nasty bruise. K.D flinched.

“Oh my God, Russel, did he do that?”

“I think he must have ruptured the vein, because it hurt, and I told him that, but he just kept pressing, and he said it was ridiculous, to say something like that. The main guy told me that signing wasn't an option, and the third guy, who hadn't spoken up the entire time, took something out of his pocket and flashed it at me. I didn't see it too well, but I think it was a

badge. The main guy gave me a pen and told me that the sooner I signed, the sooner I could go back to sleep. My arm was killing me, and the big guy kept putting more weight on it, so I signed. I didn't even read it. So fucking stupid, but I just wanted his hand off me, and the second I finished he backed off. And then they left. The main guy grabbed the paper and put it back in his pocket and told me to feel better. He did something to my IV drip, I don't know what, but whatever he did it knocked me out. I wasn't even awake when they left, that's how fast it put me down.”

He fiddled with the hem of the sheet. K.D, stunned, stared at him.

“Before I called you, Oakland called and left me a message. I'm on a month's paid leave. For recuperation. Non-optional. He told me to feel better, and that he hoped the doctors had figured out the cause of my headache.”

“Is that what it was? A headache? That can't be right.” K.D shook her head, which was suddenly very light.

“That's what's on the medical reports. The doctor told me it was a cluster headache, and he's got me on some medication to help prevent them. But I got one of the nurses to tell me what really happened. She said they have no idea. When they put me in the MRI to check for bleeding, because that's what they thought it was at first, an aneurysm, there wasn't anything wrong with me. But when they did an EEG to check for seizures, she said the signals to my parietal lobe were almost completely non-existent, which shouldn't be possible. That whole lobe of my brain was basically black. But as they had me hooked up, it started coming back online, and they had no idea why.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the part of my brain that lets me perceive anything, where I am in space, sensations like hot and cold, wasn't functioning.”

“How is that possible?”

“They don't know.”

“Well why the hell did they send you home? How do they know it's not something really serious?”

“I don't know.” Russell touched the bald spot on the side of his head. K.D got up and came to the side of the bed. She sat down.

“What happened to you out there?”

His face was so tired. So sad and defeated; it hung from his skull in a way that reminded her of famine.

“I got a noise report from Park (B?). I went and checked it out, and they were out there.”

“The stairs.” It was a statement. The inflection was clear.

Russell nodded. “I got too close, and everything was...” He searched, his eyebrows meeting in a furrow. “Wrong.”

“How?”

“I can't describe it, but nothing made sense. Everything was upside down and backwards and inside out, and the sky, I remember the sky was orange. I know I've seen that somewhere else, but I can't... I can't remember where.”

“It was orange?”

“Yeah, but not like bright orange. Like...” He gestured at the closed window. “Have you ever been near a forest fire? Where the smoke is thick, and it turns everything that really strange

color?”

K.D nodded.

“It was like that. But it was just... wrong. It was so, so wrong. And it hurt so much, it was like my skull was being crushed. I remember... I remember taking my shoes off.”

She jumped, as if stuck with something sharp.

“What? Why? Why'd you take them off?”

“I don't... I can't...”

“Are you sure?” She rotated to face him fully, her legs bent underneath her.

“Why, do you know something?”

“I don't want to say, I want you to tell me.”

Russell rubbed his eyes with his fingers. “God, my head hurts...” He kept his head in his hands. “I'm sorry, I really don't-” He stopped. His eyes opened. “Carpet.”

“What?”

“There was carpet on them. Something about the carpet. I don't know what it was, but something about it, it made me take my shoes off.”

K.D was shaking.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, sitting back. “Yeah, I'm fine. It's just interesting, is all.”

Russell leaned back against the pillows. His skin was clammy.

“I gotta shut my eyes for a while. My head is killing me. I'm sorry.”

K.D got up and went back to the office chair, pulling her phone out of her pocket again.

“Yeah, yeah of course, get some rest. I'll be here if you need anything.”

He was asleep in a matter of minutes. While he snored softly, K.D pulled up her email and typed a long message. Her eyes glittered in the light of the screen.

When I was a kid, I used to play this game that I called TimeStopper. The goal was to see how long I could make a single minute last. At first, I started by just watching the clock and counting the seconds in my head. That turned one minute into something a little longer. But I had a feeling I could make it feel longer. So I started saying the numbers out loud, as slow as I could, while picturing a different animal for each second. The minute got longer. One day, my mom saw me doing it and she asked me what I was up to; was I waiting for something? I told her I was stopping time, and she laughed and told me I was a crazy kid. I invited her to play, but she said time didn't slow down for grown-ups. I looked from her to the clock, and something amazing happened. The second hand stayed still. Not for long, but for just a moment. I was shocked, maybe a little horrified. I repeated the motion to see if it would happen again, and sure enough, when I glanced away and looked back, the second hand stalled. By doing this, I could turn one minute into two. I could double time. Suddenly, I could see infinite possibilities. I could live for twice as long! I could stay up twice as late, make my favorite cartoons last two hours instead of one. I could win every game of tag or dodgeball or hide and seek, come first in every race. I was a genius! How had no one else ever thought of this? Rooted to the spot, I spent an hour doubling time. When Mom came to find me, I was too excited to make sense. I babbled about turning one into two, about how I was going to change the world and be a superhero, and she, bewildered, picked me up and listened to me. It took her a while, but eventually she figured it out, and I hugged her tight. I told her I was going to make it so she could live forever, so she'd never die. I

knew about death already. I thought about it a lot. Mom held me tight, and when she started crying I kissed the tears away. Just like she did for me when I woke up at night, screaming the same name over and over. I hated to see her cry. She did it so much when I was that age, and I went through the day carefully, quietly, hoping I'd never do anything to set her off. She was so pretty when she cried, but it hurt my heart, and it would make me cry too. That made her feel worse, which made her cry more. Then she'd start apologizing, which was the worst thing. I told her I was sorry I'd told her about the game, but she held me tighter and told me what a good boy I was, how much I meant to her, and how sweet I was for trying to make things better. When she stopped crying, she looked at me and smoothed the hair out of my eyes, and she explained that nothing could stop time. It was just a trick my brain played on me. Our eyes, she said, weren't like cameras. They took a while to understand what we were seeing, and I was confusing them by looking away and back so quickly. She hugged me again and told me she was so proud of me for having such a wonderful imagination. She hoped I wasn't too disappointed. I rested my head on her shoulder and watched the seconds tick by on the clock.

When they discharged me, they told me I'd have to come back in about a week to have another EEG done. I asked why, and the doctor said it was just a precaution. I wanted to know if he expected me to have any problems, or if I could expect to have any weird things going on. He flipped through my chart and told me that he didn't know. He'd called all the specialists he could think of, and no one had any clue what was wrong with me. My symptoms could range from mild headaches to swelling of the vascular system, mild discomfort to sudden death. He had no idea. The only thing they could tell me for certain was that I was some kind of special case.

Might be written into textbooks, apparently. *The brain's a miracle piece of machinery*, he told me as they unhooked my IVs. *It's amazing what it can survive through*. When they wheeled me out, I saw a few nurses point at me, whispering into each others' ears. I wondered if this was how men who shoved unusually large objects up their rectums felt. Ashamed of their own status as a medical curiosity. The nurses watched me in my wheelchair and I wondered if they were looking at my arm. The doctors were worried about it, but I told them I just bruised easily. When the nurse drew out the IV, a small jet of blood shot out, splattering her nice clean scrubs. I apologized, but she didn't tell me it was okay. She clamped her hand around the crook of my elbow while she reached for a cotton ball in her pocket. I wondered if all nurses kept cotton balls in their pockets. My arm felt glassy and I imagined the blood underneath the skin, the pressure in it building and forcing it up into the fatty layer where I vaguely remembered blood wasn't supposed to go. They gave me a pink Band-Aid, but I took it off so I could look at the bruise when the nurse left. The memory of the men was fuzzy, like everything else. The world was cloaked in a kind of frosty glaze, which would have been festive if I'd been able to rub it out of my eyes after the glamour had worn off. I told the doctor about it before he discharged me but he said it would go away soon. I asked how he knew and he didn't say anything.

I've never gotten sleepy in the car before. I always made fun of Mom for falling asleep on road trips, and she'd always defend herself by saying that it wasn't her fault, that her mom used to drive her around when she was a colicky baby to soothe her, and so she was predisposed to it. Even driving to the store six miles away, she'd fall asleep. I, she said, was made of heartier stuff, and couldn't be coaxed into sleep with anything other than baby aspirin and graham crackers

dipped in milk. But that's changed, apparently. As K.D took us back home, I found it harder and harder to keep focusing. I wasn't sleepy, exactly, but it was strange how the wheels of the cars going by hypnotized me. Even going sixty miles and hour, I could see the individual spokes of the hubcaps, as if they were slowed down. I wondered if K.D saw the same thing, and I tried to remember if it had been that way before the accident, as I'd taken to referring to it. Because it was an accident. In no way was it intentional. My finger still hurts, the pad of it is gone. The doctor bandaged it tight, but he said it wouldn't grow back the same. I won't have a fingerprint there anymore. If I'm going to commit a crime, he suggested I do it with that finger. Inching down the freeway, I watched the wheels of the cars turn, and I rubbed the thick bandage with my bigger thumb and counted the overlaps of gauze. My smaller thumb, smaller hand, I've taken to keeping close to my side, like it's fragile. My hands haven't changed size, but my brain seems to be convinced that they have. I noticed it as soon as I woke up from the drugs they had me on. I was delirious, convinced that the doctors had done some kind of fucked up surgery on me, or that I'd suffered an amputation and been given a poor replacement. No amount of coaxing or reassuring or proof was enough, until they physically put my hands together and showed me that they are still mine, and are still the same size as before. It's my brain that isn't the same.

They don't know what else I can expect as far as side effects go. The nice, Christmas-y frost is still there, but seems to be going away slowly. My hands are still different sizes, but I'm compensating by using the larger one more dominantly. K.D says I favor that side in general, now, the side she says didn't droop when I was still in the thick of the episode. I sent her home after the first night. It felt strange to have her there. A second body in the house, eating and moving and breathing the air and making sounds. She's back at work now. She says that Tad's

search is winding down again. They haven't found anything, and with winter coming there's more pressing things on the bosses' minds. We stayed up late the night she was here, talking about what we thought would happen. I assumed they'd shut that area of the park down, but she says they haven't. She says it's as busy as ever. Everyone has been told that I'm on a vacation, and no one is questioning it. K.D, I can tell she wants me to get better, but she's waiting on me to call her and tell her I'm ready.

My mind works harder to do less. I never realized how many minutes are in a day, and how full those minutes can be. There is just so much time to fill, and it is so hard not to watch the clock. Repetitive things scratch an itch in my head that's somewhere I can't get to, and that I don't think was there before. When I get up. I watch my feet and my arms and my legs and my hands, to see if there's anything different. My huge hand is clumsy and I'm constantly smashing it into things. It's hard not to, when it's the size of a baseball mitt. My tiny one I keep in my pocket. I don't like looking at it. The huge one, I can justify it, somehow. But the tiny one is wrong. It doesn't feel like my hand. Last night, I went into the kitchen and got the biggest knife I have. I pushed it into the skin of my wrist, not enough to cut, but enough to dimple it, and I thought about hacking the thing off. It doesn't feel like mine. I don't know if it would hurt. The only thing that stops me is the ticking of the metronome app I have on my phone. I found it on an Autism support website. They say it helps calm down kids when they're having episodes. Sometimes I'll sit and watch the little digital needle and swing my head from side to side in time with it. Things move so slowly. When I pass my huge hand in front of my face as quick as I can, I can still see it. I think before the accident, I couldn't do that.

Did you know that in a single minute, you can cook an egg in the microwave? While the

egg is cooking, you can take out every little spice jar in your cupboard and alphabetize them, and when that's done, you can arrange your cooking utensils in the jar by the stove according to size. After you've done that, you can grab a fork, knife, piece of bread, butter from the fridge, and still make it back to the microwave in time to open the door before it dings. K.D came over yesterday to bring me some groceries I asked for, because I can't drive. She says I move so fast it makes her sick to watch me. She wants to stay with me and help me around the house because she worries that I'll hurt myself, I'm going so fast. But I told her that's ridiculous, who could hurt themselves moving as slowly as I do? It's her perception that's wrong. She's just perceiving me as moving faster than I really am. I told her to look at me and then away, and she'll see how slow I really am.

Did you know that music will sound slower or faster depending on how much energy you have? That's why sometimes, a song won't sound the same as you remember it. When you listened to it the first time, you were thinking about the job you hate, and you were sad. When you're sad, your brain slows down, and things seem to move much slower than they really are. I asked K.D how she has so much energy, what's making her so happy, but she didn't know what I was talking about, and it would have been too hard to explain. Something like that, it'd take years to get her to understand.

At night, when I'm in bed, I can hear the people in the apartment next to me moving around. They take so long to do anything. I can get up and go to the bathroom and brush my teeth and comb my beard and get back into bed, and they'll still be on the same sentence. I wonder if this is how babies feel. To babies, everything is new, and their brains must be so overwhelmed. Maybe they compensate by slowing everything down. To a little kid, a minute is

like a year, and a year is an eternity. I'll sit in the dark, watching my metronome, and I can think about entire years of my life, from beginning to end, in the span of a single tick. I told K.D I think I'm losing my mind, and she just insisted that I let her stay with me. But it's impossible, and I tried to explain that. There is so much time in a day, I don't have enough energy to be with her for so many years. It wouldn't feel appropriate, wouldn't be right. Today, two weeks after I got out of the hospital, I watched a bird fly past the window, and I could see how its feet curled under it. That's to make them more aerodynamic. I downloaded a movie on my laptop, but it takes so long to watch, and I can't imagine who could possibly sit and watch a week-long movie end to end.

I think there might be something wrong with me.

K.D showed up late last night. I didn't want to let her in, but she was crying, and it didn't seem right to send her away. She says that my being gone is causing a lot of problems. They've been giving her twice the workload, almost like they're punishing her. She says they don't let her stop to eat sometimes, and that she's passed out twice while she's been out doing repairs and getting things ready for the first snow. All the stress just makes her hypoglycemia worse, and no one seems to care. She can't keep enough food on her to get through the day. She lifted her bangs off her forehead; a caterpillar line of stitches crawled along the scalp. *I fell and cut my head open on a rock. No workers' comp. Cost me about a grand.* I can tell she's lost weight. It's vaguely disconcerting, how pale she is. I've heard people say that they knew someone who was so thin

they could practically see through them, but K.D, she's the real deal. I took her hand and watched the blood pump through her veins. It must have startled her, because she made a noise and tried to pull away for a second. *What are you looking at?* I told her I was watching her heart beat through her skin, and she didn't really seem to know how to respond, so she just let me look at her hand. She has freckles, which I didn't expect. I said I didn't know Irish people had freckles, and she didn't know what I meant, so I pointed at her hair. She touched it. *Oh. I'm not actually Irish. Just won the genetic lottery, I guess. But they do have freckles, you didn't know that? Redheads almost always do. I can't believe you've never seen that before.* I guess I've never really paid attention.

I made her some coffee while she rested on the couch I offered her some of my pain meds but she didn't want to take any. The headaches are getting better, I told her that so she wouldn't worry, but they're still around and the meds help most of the time. It was late for coffee but she said she had to stay awake long enough to drive home. She looked at me while she said that but I didn't know what she wanted so I thought I didn't hear her right. *Oh. Well, I just want to be able to drive home safe, you know. I'm so tired, I could probably pass out right here.* I don't know how she could sleep on that couch once, or why she'd want to do it again. It's old. I got it on sale somewhere. I can't remember where. Little things like that are harder to remember right now. I got lost watching the coffee brew so I didn't notice when she came up behind me and looked around me. *What are you doing?* My chin touched my chest; I was bobbing my head in time with the drips, which were falling in slow motion. I asked her if she thought it was weird, how slow they were falling. I opened the top of the coffee maker to see if I'd accidentally made the grind too thick but it was fine. *What are you talking about? It looks normal to me.* She watched me

watch it, and I could hear her breathing. *I'm worried about you. Is this what you do all day? Just sit around and watch things?* The drips formed, got swollen and pregnant before dropping into the pot. Not a steady stream, but individual drops. I tapped the pot and told her it might take a while for the coffee to be ready. *You mean in a few minutes. You said years, but you meant minutes. God you talk so fast, I don't even think you're hearing yourself. Have you told your doctor about that?*

The doctors don't want anything to do with me. I've called and told them that I'm losing it, that time is getting slower and slower while I crash around, my big and little hands running into things and making a mess of anything I try to do, but they don't tell me to come in for more MRIs or EEGs. *Just wait it out, they tell me. It'll get better as the brain heals itself.*

I read a book a few years ago after a weird case I went out on. It was a recovery for a young guy who'd gotten separated from his group. They were visiting from a home that dealt with traumatic brain injuries, TBIs. I remember questioning whether a trip to the woods was really a good idea, in the long run, but no one had an opinion. The guy, when we found him he was curled up in a bush, and he was completely out of it. One of the wranglers, or whatever they're called, was with us, and she talked him out so we could get him back to the VC. The whole way, he asked her the same questions in the same order. 'Where are we? What are we doing? Can we have lunch soon?' As soon as he'd reach the end of the list, he'd go back to the beginning. The wrangler, she told us that he'd been in a motorcycle accident, and it completely wiped out his short term memory. He could remember what he was like before the accident, but he existed in a kind of fog that made him completely helpless. It was awful, and it bothered me a lot. I ended up talking to her outside of work, she was young and sweet and I admit I was

interested for a little while. We met up, and before we got too drunk to talk about things like that she told me if it was something I wanted to know more about I should check out this book. I bought it online and read it over the next few nights. It was amazing, reading these stories of everything that can go wrong with the brain. One man, he had the same kind of problem as that young guy did. He could remember his time in the military, where he was born, his parents, his birthday, but when they asked him what year it was, he'd tell them it was 1952 (?). He was twenty-six (?) and was in the military. And when they'd let him see himself in the mirror, it would horrify him. He couldn't comprehend it, and it would cause him to break down. But all they had to do pacify him was distract him long enough for his brain to reset. And he'd forget about it ever happening. There were a lot of other cases, all of them equally as fucked up. A guy who no longer recognized his leg as his own, and was convinced that the doctors had sewed on a dead one as a prank. A woman who heard deafening music every minute of the day, and had no way to shut it off. A woman who, overnight, lost all proprioception, or body awareness. Unless she was looking at her limbs, they didn't exist. She learned to get around it, but they couldn't cure her.

I've been reading that book again. I've been using some of the tricks that the doctor who wrote it used on his patients to see if they help me. Sometimes they do, but not always. K.D and I stood in the kitchen and I held my hands up, the huge one taking up so much space it almost hit her, and I asked her if she knew about that book. I found it in my bedroom and I gave it to her. She read the title and laughed. *How could anyone mistake their wife for a hat? What is this?* I pointed out the stories I'd bookmarked, and she skimmed through them. *Is this what you think is going on with you? That you're having some kind of neurological problem?* She was sitting on

the couch, the book in her lap, and I didn't know how tall she was. She was the size of a mouse, the size of a skyscraper, and I fell on the ground and sat there looking at her. I heard myself tell her there was something going on, something so wrong with me. My mouth made the sounds to tell her that I was scared and confused and losing my mind here in the dark and that whatever was going on, it was because of the stairs. In books I've read, people use that descriptor. That they hear themselves talking. Maybe when the brain just can't take anymore, that's what happens. It takes over and you use your lizard brain to get what you really need.

And K.D, she got on the floor with me, sat close to me and I saw how big she was, and her eyes were so alive and fast, looking first at my right eye and then my left and she asked me if I was ready to learn more, if I was ready to admit that something was seriously wrong. I thought of the men, of the bruise on my arm, of the ticking clock on the wall and my mother holding me and I heard myself say that yes, I was ready. Tears spilled out of her lower eyelids and she smiled a big smile and the skin pulled tight over her cheekbones and she was so glad she wasn't going to be alone anymore. The thudding in my chest made it hard to hear her but I nodded and more than anything I didn't want to be alone anymore, I didn't want to be stuck in my head. And when she kissed me I didn't even notice, not really, because I could hear the ticking of the clock, I could feel the needle digging into the meat of my arm, and suddenly like a shot to the temple the world clicked and I was there again. Her lips were warm, sticky with the residue of candy and sugar, and I let her stay there for a minute, because a minute was just a minute and I had the time to spare.

The information was there, but buried in a trash heap of other, misleading crap. Even in this, the age of information, it's not that hard to keep something out of sight and mind. It's really just a matter of using the right keywords: instead of missing, use the phrase 'didn't come home.' Instead of 'vanished', used 'briefly stepped away.' Search for 'unexplained disappearances in National Parks', and you'll come up with a good amount, but it's cleverly masked as conspiracy. The sites the listings can be found on are hokey and unprofessional. Certainly not anything a respectable citizen with an eye for Buzz-Feed bullshit would fall for. It's very, very clever. But if you dig deeper, go into the message forums and smaller boards and less-crowded areas of the web, you start to find the real people. The ones who are posting their loved ones' information, distributing flyers around town even though it's been four years and the search is long over. They still want answers, and most of them, they'll talk if they think you have even a sliver of hope to give them. There's something to be said for how damn tenacious people are, even during circumstances like this.

It took me a while to figure out how to type with my mismatched hands, but once I re-taught myself how to do it, I started sending out the messages. On all the major boards, I posted threads. **'Have you lost a loved one under strange circumstances in the woods? Please tell me your story. I will listen.'** The replies are coming in so fast I can't keep up. I've tried to keep it local, but even in this state alone there are so many of them. So many parents with missing children who think I'm a cop or a detective or a member of the media. They want the exposure, they want someone to work with them, and when I ask them for details the doors fly open and there's more information than I know what to do with. Little Thomas from the next town over, he's been missing for almost a decade. She was holding his hand and felt him let go.

When she turned around, she caught sight of him moving through the trees, and within seconds he was gone. She sent me digital copies of the flyer; would I post them around town? A woman who lost her sister in a mountaineering accident two years ago, but the body was never recovered. Woke up in the middle of the night to screaming, found her sister in two pieces at the bottom of a cliff. Ruled as a suicide, but that doesn't explain why the her entire colon was missing. Had I ever heard of anything like that before? She gave me her number and told me to call her if I could give her any kind of help. A wife and devoted mother who wandered out of their summer cottage last spring and left behind her shoes, shirt, and one sock. They found a toe inside one. Ruled as a possible homicide, and the husband was sure he was still under surveillance. How many cases like this had I heard of? Why wasn't I working harder with my fellow officers to help solve these crimes? There are so many of them. On one site alone, there are over two thousand individual replies. Relatives, husbands, daughters, friends, co-workers. They don't know who I am, what I'm up to, but I'm the only one asking the question they've been dying to hear.

I've only responded to one message. It's the only one that matters now. A woman upstate, who is not sure she's using the messaging system correctly. She asks if we can switch on to Skype and talk about her son. She is the only one who has asked me this, so I oblige. She's well-spoken, formal, clearly a cut above the average responder. I ask her about her son, and she tells me the story. Seven years ago, when her son was twenty-three, he took her out on a hike on the AT. She'd always wanted to do it, and he'd surprised her with the three-week trip for her birthday. Going off on a tangent, she explained that this was the sort of thing he'd do. A caring, smart, charming young man. Her only child. She loved him more than she could possibly say.

They hiked the trail together, mother and son, and were almost at the end of the trip when something happened. There was a long pause, and I asked if she was still there. She typed for a long time, so long that I opened a new window and replied to several other responses. It was the early morning, she explained. A beautiful, foggy day. It was quiet, she remembered, it had been for a few days. They'd remarked on it, and assumed that their presence had scared away most of the wildlife. Stepping out of her tent, she heard a low rumble, and briefly the thought crossed her mind that they might have been in landslide territory. Unzipping her son's tent, she found that he wasn't there. She called out his name, circling the campsite and trying to find him, but he didn't answer. This wasn't like him. He'd never leave her alone, much less wander off without telling her where he was going. He was very smart, very good in nature, she assured me. He'd come prepared, and had stressed to her how important it was to stay on the path. Something was wrong, and she panicked. She ran down the path, screaming for him, turning around in circles and looking for any sign of him. How far she ran, she couldn't say, but from the trees off the path came a very small noise. She recognized it instantly. It was the sound he'd made as a little boy when he was hurt. A closed-mouth sob that, she claimed, she would know anywhere. Crashing through the early-morning fog, blind in her panic, she tripped over him and went sprawling, breaking her wrist in a failed attempt to catch herself. She wouldn't know this until later, however, because when she caught sight of her son any thoughts of her were gone. He was propped against a tree, knees to his chest, thumb in his mouth. She thought, at first, that he'd tied a red scarf or shirt or bandanna around his upper face, but his eyes glinted at her, and the dirt around him was damp. Her baby boy, her beautiful son, the top of his skull was gone. Shaved off cleanly, as if with a flat saw. His brain had suffered damage, was exposed. She could see it

throbbing. There was a pine needle stuck to it, and she plucked it off carefully. It was warm, she said, her son's brain. He looked at her with his thumb in his mouth and told her that it hurt. How far she ran until she came across other hikers, she couldn't say. Leaving him had been the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. She'd taken her shirt off and covered his head with it in a loose turban, left him with strict instructions to stay put and not move a muscle. The hikers called for help, and her son was air-lifted fifty miles away to the nearest hospital. She rode with him, holding the hand the wasn't firmly pressed against his mouth. Incredibly, the physical damage to his brain was minimal. It was a grisly injury, but not a terribly damaging one. However, scans showed that something, whether it was hypoxia from sustaining the injury or a hard blow to the temple, where there was significant bruising, had irreparably damaged his brain. The areas responsible for comprehension, communication, and impulse control had been heavily compromised. Massive bleeding had starved those areas of oxygen and blood, and her son would never recover. Her formerly normal child, a smart, talented boy who loved reading and science and was well on his way to a bachelor's degree, was now a full-time resident in a home specializing in traumatic brain injury. On good days, he was almost completely functional. On bad ones, he was catatonic. His only activities were weekly outings to a coffee shop and daily activities designed to 'enrich' him. There was a brief investigation, but nothing came of it, and shortly after the investigation ended he was placed in a home. Now, she told me, it was time for someone to tell his story.

When, I asked, could I meet him?

They got to the shop before I did, and were waiting in the corner, in a few plush chairs. I assumed he'd be with his group, who I knew would also be there, but they sat alone, away from

the rest of the adults, who were playing cards or board games. One of the women, who kept one hand clutched protectively around the handle of her walker, watched me when I came in, and told me she liked my plaid shirt. I've never been great at dealing with the disabled, but I remembered reading somewhere that it was best to just talk to them like normal, so I thanked her and moved on. I sat across from Nate and his mother, Jen. She smiled up at me and shook my hand with a dainty, dead-fish grip. Nate, at his mother's suggestion, also greeted me, but didn't shake my hand. Instead he gave me a strange kind of half-salute, and went back to staring out the window, snapping his fingers rhythmically. Jen said she hoped the snapping didn't bother me. He couldn't help it, she explained. Rhythmic noises calmed him, and he didn't have any control over them. I told her I didn't mind.

He was young. That surprised me. I guess in my head I'd pictured him as being older, prematurely aged, his outsides matching his broken insides. He was wearing a beanie, and if you ignored the snapping and rocking, he was completely normal. It's something that had never occurred to me before that. That you can't always tell how broken a person is just by looking at them. I knew if he took the hat off, I'd be able to see the misshapen top of his head, where the doctors had put a titanium plate in to protect his exposed brain. I knew it would be hard to tell, but he also had a lazy eye, which was only noticeable when he faced you directly. He was a normal kid, who'd been born normal and who'd lived a normal life until something happened late one night and had turned him into a completely dysfunctional adult, who was dependent on others for the smallest things. Jen, her hands were shaky. She lifted her coffee cup to her mouth and I saw the way they trembled a little. She didn't watch him, not overtly, but casually, the way I've seen parents watch their small kids. It's the way you keep an eye on a puppy. You let them go

about their business but you're always watching, waiting for them to get into something or put something in their mouths, at which point you'll need to intervene. Nate rocked, snapped his fingers, and Jan kept her eye on him, probably the same way she did when he was a baby. He'd been hurtled back in time. I wondered how that felt for her.

She told me to ask him whatever I wanted, but it felt strange to talk to him when he wasn't looking at me. But Jan assured me he was listening, so I asked him if he remembered his accident. He nodded and made eye contact.

“Oh, yeah, of course. There's parts that are a little vague, but for the most part I can remember it perfectly.”

He was well spoken; his voice was deep and lusty and I imagined that before the accident he'd used that voice to get more than a few girls to sleep with him. Once again, I was thrown, and I blurted out something to the effect of 'you talk very nicely.'

“Ha, yeah. Most people assume I'm going to sound like some kind of retard. But my speech centers are mostly alright. It's everything else that's screwed up. *Wheeeeeee!*” He squealed it loudly, in a childish voice, and a few people looked over. A minder at one of the tables glanced at Jan, who held up her hand briefly. Nate didn't seem to notice. I asked him to tell me what he remembered. He whistled a brief tune, which sounded something like 'Camptown Races' and clapped his hands, giggling.

“I woke up late that night because I heard this weird sound. I can't quite remember what it was, but it made me think that there was a landslide nearby, possibly. I wanted to get up and make sure that Mom and I weren't gonna be in trouble. *Ha!*” He whistled the tune again and snapped his fingers. “So I went out where I thought I heard it and I was checking out the area to

make sure we weren't gonna have to move. And I kept hearing this noise, like rocks falling. Sort of a clattering sound, I guess. *Whheeeeeeeee!*” Someone behind us made a comment to their table. I didn't quite catch it, but I heard the word 'autistic.' One of the minders got up and came over.

“Everything okay here, Jan?” She smiled a very toothy smile at us and nodded her head at Nate. “How you doing there, Nate? You doing okay?”

“I'm fine.” He kept eye contact with me, his fingers snapping faster.

“He's fine, Cindy, thanks.” Jan seconded. She smiled gratefully. “We're just catching up with our friend, so Nate's a little excited I think.”

“Alright. Well Nate, we've only got about fifteen minutes until the bus comes, but can you try to keep your voice a little lower? We don't want to bother anyone here, right?” Cindy was cheerful, almost insipidly so. I imagined she was fabulous with the needier patients, but for Nate, I extended my sympathies.

“Yeah. Sorry.” He cleared his throat three times, loudly, and shook his head.

“Have a good time!” Cindy left us, and Jan gripped her coffee cup, sipping from it loudly. I motioned for Nate to continue.

“God that woman is a bitch.” Nate grumbled. Jan patted him on the leg.

“Now, sweetheart....” She leaned in and kissed his cheek, but Nate pulled away.

“No, I don't understand why she has to *be* like that.” The stressed word was said in a low shout. He bent his head lower and tapped his feet in a quick staccato. “I'm not an idiot, but she comes over and asks you if everything's okay, like I can't hear her. She just assumes I'm like the other retards-”

“Nate-!”

“But I'm not.” He whistled the chorus from Camptown Races again and smacked his forehead with the palm of one hand. I sipped my coffee loudly and pretended to be comfortable. I could feel my back sticking to my shirt.

“I'm sorry. I can't remember what we were talking about.” He addressed me, snapping his fingers near his ears, but I couldn't remember either. His life was laid out too clearly, too openly for me, and I wanted to leave. Badly. You see a wheelchair-bound mongoloid and you feel sympathy for them, but you don't stop to consider what it's like to be them. You don't think about the dim, half-burned lightbulb of their brains working hard every single moment, cutting through the fog and offering brief glimpses of the rocks in their way. You don't think about how someone has to wipe their ass for them, or feed them. You don't think about the person who has to pay their bills, consider what will happen to them when Mom and Dad are gone. You don't think about it because it's too far away. They're a million miles from you, on a different planet, and you can move on after a brief flash of pity. But Nate, he was too close to me. My big hand held my coffee cup, and my little one was picking at the hem of my shirt, and we were too close. All it would take was one little jump, a quick vault over the fence, and I could be there with him. His eyes were red and tired, and there was no comfort in his injury. Nate was there, he was still the person he was before his accident, but unable to clear the fence to come back to my side. I couldn't look him in the eye and see just how few feet separated us, but the least I could do was give him the chance to reach his hand through and touch the grass. I reminded him about the rumbling.

“Oh, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” He shook his head violently. “Fuck. *Fuck.*”

Jan reached into her purse and pulled out a prescription bottle. Nate took a pill from it and put it under his tongue.

“Ativan. Helps a lot.” He clapped and giggled shrilly. “But yeah, the rumbling. I went to go check it out, see what was going on, and I started feeling high. That weird head high you get with some pot where you don't really notice it until you're about to run into something.”

It seemed like he was waiting for me to relate, which I did. His snapping increased in volume, and his feet tapped faster.

“I just sort of realized that I was standing in one spot, and I didn't know how long I'd been doing that. I had no idea about time, or where I was anymore. I must have wandered a ways because I couldn't see the path or smell the campfire anymore. The parts after that, they're really fuzzy, it's hard to- *wheeee* – remember.”

The barista behind the counter was watching Nate suspiciously. Jan appeared to have noticed too, and she got up to go talk to her. Nate was frowning at the table, clapping his hands.

“It was weird. I'd never felt anything like it. It was just so hard to figure anything out. For some reason, I kept thinking about lighthouses. That's all I could think about. Lighthouses. Lighthouses. I wanted... to find one, I think... Lighthouse. Lighthouse.” He struggled, his mouth working.

“There was something out there. I think. I can't- really remember. But I think there was something out there. A lighthouse? Lighthouse? But that couldn't be right because we were in the middle of nowhere.”

He touched the top of his beanie, and I jerked a little. I'd been told that he had a bone graft where the brain was exposed, but that parts of it were still vulnerable. I hoped he wouldn't

take the hat off. I glanced down at my cup and saw it was trembling in my big hand. I set it down and put my hand in my lap. It was possible he wasn't remembering correctly. I couldn't be sure how much of what he said was fact, or was something his brain was throwing out, pulling from the mixed basket of signals it was creating. But whatever he remembered was troubling him greatly. He rocked now, snapping and tapping and blinking in a steady rhythm that I found myself mimicking with my fingers. Tapping the tips together in time with his snaps.

“I know it's weird, but that's all I can think about. Lighthouse. It was a lighthouse. Lighthouse. I took my shoes off because I remembered something about not getting dirt near the big light at the top, and I didn't want to get yelled at. So I took my shoes off. Took them off. But at the same time I didn't know why I was doing it or what I was doing and I knew it wasn't right, but it was so fuzzy. I can't remember, I can't remember...”

His rocking grew more pronounced, and he touched the top of his beanie before removing it. His head was flat on top, with a few strange bulges. The hair didn't seem to grow around the scars and grafts, so he kept the rest of his head shaved too. He touched the flat part with his fingers, running them along the divots and lumps and he snapped with his other hand and tapped his feet and I wondered if he'd shove his fingers into those vulnerable spots, dig them in and scoop out the memories, and in my lap my big hand and my little hand rubbed the hem of my shirt in time with his rocking, and I knew what he was going to say, and I knew he knew that I knew because he looked at me and he nodded.

“Yeah, they were there... They were there, the ones that go up to the top where the light is. That's why I took my shoes off. Took my shoes off.”

But how did he know? I couldn't remember if I'd told Jan anything. Jan was still at the

counter with the barista, blathering on about something that had nothing to do with us or our lives, nothing that mattered as much as what Nate was telling me. He leaned across the table and tilted his head so I could see the flat part, the part where his brain had gotten a pine needle in it, and I don't know why but I reached out and touched it with my little hand so I wouldn't hurt him any more than he was already.

“I climbed them, I wanted to see the big lighthouse light, so I climbed them, I climbed up them, *wheeeeeee!*” My fingers moved over the scars and grafts and bumps. “*Wheeeeeee*, right up them, *ha!* And I can't remember, I can't remember where they went, or were there stairs? Where was the lighthouse?” My fingers traced the scars and he clapped and giggled and my big hand rubbed the hem of my shirt and he said it again, the lighthouse, lighthouse, lighthouse, and I must have been rocking too because his head stayed under my tiny fingers and I knew he was right, I knew he'd been there, they'd been there, he was me and I was him and-

“Nate? Are you alright?”

Jan stood over us, holding a small plate with a scone on it. My hand shot off his head and back into my lap. Nate sat back and sat very still. I cast a quick glance around the shop, but no one was staring.

“It hurt...” Nate slumped in his seat, his eyes glazing over. Jan set the scone down and went to his side. She put his beanie back on carefully and tilted his head up. His eyes moved, but there was nothing in them. Doll eyes, I think they're called. They respond to stimuli but no one's home. She murmured to him, kissed him on the cheek.

“I'm sorry,” she apologized, holding his head to her side and stroking it gently. “If he gets too excited, he goes into a non-responsive state for a while. I'll have Cindy come help him onto

the bus.”

I hadn't even noticed, but the others in his group were packing up and filing out the door slowly. Jan waved to Cindy, who hurried over.

“Oh, is he out? Alright, I'll grab Dennis.” She trotted back over, grabbed a large man by the arm, and led him over. He bent over Nate and nodded at Cindy, who was on his other side.

“Hey, buddy! It's time to get going, you ready to head out? Can you stand up for me?”

Between the two of them, they were able to get Nate to his feet, where he stood unsteadily. Tucking his arm under Nate's, Dennis slowly walked him toward the door. Nate's hands were curled in front of his chest, his feet shuffling, never picking up.

“I'll see you at three tomorrow, Jan. We'll call you if he's awake before that.” Cindy called over her shoulder. Jan held up her hand and blew a kiss at Nate's back. She watched them leave, her fingertips resting on the scone plate.

"They're a godsend, they really are. I'm sorry if any of that made you uncomfortable, he just doesn't have any impulse control anymore. I saw he had you touch his head, I hope that wasn't disturbing to you."

Not at all, I lied. She picked up the plate with the scone and stared down at it, as if unsure what to do next. "I got this for him. I don't like scones, but he does. I grew up on an Air Force base in Europe, and I've never gotten used to these things. They're not like the scones at home." She pronounced it 'sc-anhs.' She smiled at the plate and rubbed the edge of it. "These are more like cookies. The ones back home are wonderful. Like the biscuits you get at KFC, but with blackcurrants and apricots and things. They serve them with fresh jam and clotted cream." Her mouth worked, and she set the plate down. I wanted to leave. I needed to leave. A headache had

started in the familiar place, right in the middle of my head, and within half an hour I'd be blind with it. She must have taken my expression for sympathy because she smiled my mother's smile and set the plate down.

“I hope whatever he told you will help you with whatever it is you're doing. I can't remember if I even asked you about it. Maybe you told me, and I just forgot.” I started to say something, but she cut me off. “I don't need to know what it is. All I need to know is that whatever you do with his story, you'll help us tell the truth to people. I don't know what happened to him out there, but he's not my son anymore. Sometimes I get to see him, but most of the time, he's just someone who looks like him. The investigation was a joke. No one ever came to talk to him. They got my statement and went out there and did God knows what for a few days before declaring it an accident. What accident? What could he possibly have done out there that would have sheared half of his head clean off? I asked the detective that, I asked the Park Rangers that, and all they said was that it would be better for both of us if I moved on. They didn't find a single thing. Not even the piece of him that he left behind out there. I wish they had. I wanted to cremate it and take the ashes to the Oregon coast. That's where he grew up. He loved it out there.” She pushed the scone toward me, but I couldn't eat. My mouth was dry and foul-tasting, and the lights above us cast strange halos around everything. Her graying hair looked like a cloud.

“My son came back, but he isn't my son anymore. I don't want to know what you're doing unless you can find answers for me.” Jan stood and brushed off her pants. “I have to get going. I need to be at home in case Nate needs me.” I stood up, my stomach rolling, and offered her my hand. She didn't take it. Instead she hugged me, her head barely reaching the middle of my chest.

I didn't know what to do, so I stood there and let her hold me.

“Take care of yourself.” She mumbled something else into my chest, but I didn't catch it, and I didn't have time to ask what it was before she pulled away and left the shop, not looking back at me. The pain in the center of my head throbbed in time with my heart, and in my pockets my fingers tapped together, matching the beat. So much about our lives is rhythm. We don't really notice it until that rhythm is broken.

When they were younger, just starting middle school, K.D used to sit in the back of class and watch him work. He had a very particular way of doing things that she admired, which seemed to be unique to him. He wouldn't wait for the teacher to finish explaining the homework if he understood the assignment. He'd read ahead and start his work, and by the end of class he'd be done, while the rest of the class was barely starting. It was very efficient, and she started doing the same thing. Russell was, by no means, an 'A' student, but when he understood things he turned them in on time, and got perfect scores on them. He was still small at that age, but he had massive feet that he was tripping over constantly, and she knew he'd get bigger, probably bigger even than her father, who towered over her at a massive six feet three inches. He'd bend over his work, his head resting on one hand, or he'd hunch and press his pen deep into the paper and curl his other hand into a loose fist, with the index finger sticking up. She'd seen babies do that, and she thought it was cute. His hair was long, curled at the nape of his neck, and he shook it out of his face. He was also one of the only ninth graders who had to shave. He had no idea who she was yet. She'd never said a word to him.

She didn't have a lot of friends. Even at that age, she was skeletal, and people didn't like her. Her mother didn't let her wear makeup, and she didn't keep up with current fashion, so she was always slightly behind the curve. The girls frustrated her anyway, though. They were jealous of her tiny clothes and bright red hair, but her slightly buggy eyes and ski-jump nose gave her a very odd look, and the combination of everything was just slightly wrong. Sometimes the girls would pass notes through her, and she had the chance to write her own opinions in them, but she didn't. They told her not to read them, but she never opened them anyway to see what was inside. Instead, she'd sit in class and drum a beat on her hip bones, which were startling and visible under her clothes, and she'd watch Russell. That was what she liked to do. Because on the outside he was just a normal kid, and that was fascinating to her. How he was still the same person on the outside even after everything that had gone so wrong. He was so healthy and big and alive, and so completely different from her. She'd pinch the drum-tight skin on her stomach until it bruised, and she'd imagine what it was like to live in his house. How many quiet corners were there? Did they have photos hanging in the halls? What was it like to live in such a sad, sad house?

She asked her father once, about a year ago, if he ever thought about the families of the people he took off the mountain.

“What do you mean, sweetie?” He was sitting in his chair, smoking a Camel cigarette. He used to joke about how they were just a slow, delicious suicide, but he stopped when she told him that it made her cry to hear him talk that way.

“What about all the little kids who don't have a mom or a dad anymore? Don't you every think about them?” She was standing in the entrance to the living room with her arms crossed,

fresh bruises stinging her belly. Her face was red, and she didn't want him to see.

He muted the TV. “Well of course I do. But if I did that all the time I'd never be able to do my job. Things happen, kiddo, and it's sad, but I like to think they'd rather have closure than never know what happened.”

“Are those the ones that bother you? The ones you don't find?”

He put his cigarette out in the ashtray beside the chair and bent his legs, bringing the chair out of the reclining position with a loud click. He patted his lap. “Come here, kiddo.”

K.D padded over, her weight barely denting the carpet, and climbed on his lap. She was too old but she did it anyway. She curled up and rested her head in the crook of his neck. He rubbed her back. “What's going on with you?”

Her eyes open but unfocused, she breathed in the smell of his deodorant and aftershave.

“Nothing.”

“Well, what made you think about those families?”

His heartbeat was strong. She could feel it in her ear and her temple. Her eyes were hot and stinging and a lump was growing in her throat, and she wished more than anything in the world that she could start over. The bruises on her stomach and thighs and chest ached, but even that was fading, and what scared her more than the ache was the nothingness when they were gone.

“I don't know.” She swallowed around the painful lump and closed her burning eyes. He rocked gently and moved his hand up and down her back in slow circles. He had strong, rough hands. She liked to hold them and pick at the calluses when they sat together on the couch. He had 'working-man's hands'. That's what he called them. Always judge a man by his hands. If they

were smooth, you knew he made his living off the backs of others. She couldn't remember the last time she'd held his hands, sat in his lap, kissed him goodnight, without the ache in her throat. It was there all the time, growing like a cancer and eating her up. Cradled in his arms, a skeleton with skin and hair, the ache moved into her belly and head and eyes, and she tried to lose herself in his heartbeat, his deep even breathing. She wished she could remember the last time she deserved to be here with him.

“It's a sad thing, kiddo, when people go missing or get hurt. But that's why I do what I do. So I can help their families understand what happened. And if I can't give that to them, I can at least let them know I tried my best.”

“Do you feel bad when you can't find the people who go missing?”

He thought about it. His calluses snagged her shirt, and he lifted his hand up briefly.

“Well, of course I do. But I feel bad for their families, not for myself.”

Sometimes at night, after the searches where nothing was found, she'd hear him talking to her mother. He'd tell her about the crying families, the hysterical mothers, the furious, confused wives and husbands. How they'd corner him and accuse him of not caring, how they'd throw things at him or collapse at his feet, begging him to go back out and look again. Sometimes she heard him cry.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, kiddo. Very, very much.” He kissed the top of her head. She kissed his cheek and got up and padded back to her room, her bare feet silent. She passed in front of the closed door to her parents' room, where her mother was sleeping. In her own room, after the door was closed and braced with her dresser, she pinched her stomach until every inch of skin was

black and blue.

She noticed he liked to take different routes home. He'd stick with one for about a week, and then he'd change it up. He'd sneak onto different buses and walk a few extra miles home, or he'd take his assigned bus and get off at the wrong stop. She didn't always follow him home, but when she did she tried to stick to an area that was reasonable. He'd never seen her, he tended to look right at the ground when he walked, but she was prepared for the situation if it arose.

Hanging back a block behind, she'd put her hands in the pockets of the hoodie she wore year round and follow his steps as closely as possible. Sometimes he'd kick a rock for a block or two, and when he grew bored of the game, she'd find it and pick it up. She'd roll it around in her hand, rubbing the dirt off before stuffing it in her pants' pocket and waiting to see what he'd do next.

He liked bugs, she noticed. If there was a woolly-bear or a centipede or a daddy longlegs on the sidewalk, he'd stop to watch it, and she'd have to hide behind a car or a tree, or pretend to be tying her shoe, or sit on the edge of someone's lawn and watch the road. Russ wasn't afraid of spiders, and K.D greatly admired that. Once, he found a garden spider making its way across the road. He stooped down and picket it up, speaking to it softly. She only knew it was a spider because at one point it dropped off his hand and dangled there, on an invisible thread. He reeled it back in and cupped one hand on top of the other, creating a little closed dome. The rest of the way home, he talked to it very softly, and despite getting closer to him, she couldn't make out what he was telling it. When he got home, he went inside and didn't come back out, so she turned and trudged the three-mile walk home, her feet aching. At night, she'd lie in bed, with one of the many rocks she'd taken in her hand, and she'd imagine what he'd been saying to that spider.

Maybe he was comforting it. Telling it that it would be alright. That he'd take it somewhere safe,

away from people that could hurt it. Maybe he'd told it things about himself. She'd imagine these things, and she'd slide the rock under the sheets, across her panties, and press it against herself until it hurt. By the time she was finished, and her arm was aching with the effort of keeping the rock steady on herself, she'd be crying. There was no pleasure for her unless it was earned through pain.

When the weather was nice, and the spring was starting to give way to summer, he'd ride his usual bus most days, but get off at the stop near the park. The first time he did it, she wasn't prepared, and she lost him, but it only happened once. After that, she sat closer to him and paid more attention, anticipating an abrupt departure. At the park, he'd skirt around the playground and wander to the far side, where a sizable chunk of forest had been preserved. No one seemed to be in agreement as to how many miles of it there were, but there were well-marked trails throughout, and she knew from her father that if one went in deep enough, you'd eventually reach a barbed wire fence that separated the park from the larger national forest that bordered the town in a wide semi-circle. One year, a little kid got lost in there, and it took almost two days to find her. After that, the city had invested a considerable amount in setting up a large gate that had to be pushed aside in order to enter. Russell would go through this gate and wander inside, with K.D following at a safe distance.

She looked forward to the spring all year, because once he got inside the forest, far enough that the shrieking of the kids on the swings had faded, he came alive. He'd jog down the paths, climb fallen trees and inspect them for fungus and mold, kick rocks over and watch the squirming things underneath scurry for cover. He never hurt anything, at least not intentionally, and would often stop to help caterpillars up onto leaves, or prop a stick against a drooping

sapling so it wouldn't rot. He came across a robin's egg once, lying off the path slightly, and he searched the trees for the nest. When he found it, he tucked the egg into his pocket, carefully scaled the tree, and replaced it. It was the kindest act she'd ever seen, and this is when she started to love him. Far enough down the path that she couldn't be easily seen, she'd crouch behind trees and listen to him talk to himself quietly, something he did frequently. And he'd talk about so many things. The kinds of trees, the probability of rain, how many spiders were living in a square mile of the forest. He was a little old to be talking to himself, but she found it charming. On a single occasion, he brought a pocket knife with him, and spent a great deal of time carving something into a tree. The anticipation of finding out what it said was almost enough to drive her out of hiding, but she forced herself to wait. Squirmy excitement in her belly forced her to shift around restlessly, but she figured the noise of him hacking at the bark would cover her. When he finally moved on, she leaped onto the path and ran to the tree, which bore nothing but three letters: RMB. His initials. She ran her finger along the clumsy letters and put her cheek against the rough bark. Then she heard him coming back, so she had to run ahead and find another hiding spot.

His routine only changed dramatically one day of the year. On this particular day, he would ride to his stop and get off as usual, but instead of stopping at his house, he'd keep going. The farthest she'd ever followed him before was to the grocery store a mile from his house. She'd have kept going, but her parents always made their plans for right after school. Sitting in the movie theater, in the back of the car on the way to the city, she'd think about him, about where he could be going. The cemetery wasn't that direction, it was on the opposite end of town, and there weren't any malls in their town. The only thing out there was... nothing. So where did he go? In

her journal, which she really only used for strange diagrams and pages that she colored line by line, she drew a crude outline of town, and using a map, the things that bordered it. To the south was the cemetery, the feed store, and a strange little house built into the ground, so only the roof showed. The kids in her class had started a rumor that it was used for storing bodies, but she'd broken into it the year before and knew it was just a pump house for the sewer main. She was good at picking locks. To the east, the golf course, main shopping area, and the freeway entrance, which would lead to the city, should one follow it long enough. To the west, the park and edge of the national forest. And to the north... Nothing. Just llama farms and ranches, and a single park that encompassed a small area of scrubby forest. So what could Russell possibly be doing out there?

(do we need to expand here?)

Russell always had a specific look that she thought she recognized, and maybe that was why she followed him around so much. Why she couldn't just let it go. It was a look she recognized from when Daddy had taken her deer hunting last season. Mom didn't want her to go. Mom never wanted K.D going anywhere unless it was with her, but Daddy said that K.D needed to be allowed to have a life. She could hear them arguing about it at night. Mom always turned the argument in the same direction: *what if we lose her again?* But Daddy was insistent this time, that she needed to get back out there. Who would she be safer with? What kind of father would lose his kid twice? And finally Mom caved, crying and making him promise that if he came back without K.D he might as well not come back at all.

They'd gone out to the hunting grounds and set up camp a few miles from where they

were going to be watching for deer. Daddy said that was really important, that you didn't want to be too close to your game. Deer weren't smart, but they weren't stupid either, and they'd be able to smell you if you were too close. They'd always make sure to be downwind too, so their scent wouldn't get blown around. She wondered what people smelled like that was so scary to the deer. Maybe they didn't smell like anything in particular, but it must have been something the deer had never smelled before, something coppery and strong and spicy that made them realize there was trouble coming. That's how the smell of a very certain cologne made her feel.

Daddy made them get up early, before the sun had even come up, so they could get to the grounds in time to have a full day of hunting. He'd showed her how to look for the deer, how to follow their piles of droppings and broken branches where they itched themselves. The deer probably thought they were moving silently, because they had such tiny little feet, but nothing, not even birds, could move through something so dense and leave nothing behind. That's what he told her. She wanted to ask why they didn't find her, then, but it would have ruined everything, and he probably wouldn't have offered to take her out ever again. So she followed behind him, her rifle slung over her shoulder, and did her best to move quietly through the crackly bush. There were birds everywhere, and it wasn't quite fall, so the leaves hadn't turned yet. He probably thought she didn't notice, but she could see him peek back at her every few feet, to see if she was still there. A part of her, that cruel, nasty part that she knew was in there, wondered what would happen if she ducked into a bush or behind a tree. What would he do? Would he think she was kidding and come looking for her, his hands outstretched in boogeyman claws? Or would he panic, call for her and cry and think that he'd never see her again? Would he feel guilty for bringing her back out here? Her body turned to ice when she pictured his strong, familiar face

contorted in a desperate grimace, running around the woods and screaming her name, begging her to come back, while she crouched, hidden away, and watched. She felt tears coming, so she bit her tongue and told herself she'd never ever do that, not even if someone paid her.

How he did it, she wasn't sure, but at some point Daddy decided that they were close, and he put his hand out, stopping K.D in her tracks. She held her breath. Silently, slowly, they crept forward to the edge of a small clearing, where a large buck was grazing. He crouched behind a bush and motioned for K.D to do the same. He put on his hearing protection and she did the same. She dropped to her knees, right into a pile of rotten berries, and watched to see what would happen. Her father studied the buck, looked at its antlers for a while, and then in a deadly smooth arc, brought the rifle up to his shoulder. His body relaxed, conforming to the gun, but bracing for its kick, and for a crazy second she saw herself jumping to her feet and hollering and screaming for the deer to go, didn't it know it was about to get shot, and she started to raise off her haunches but the gun went off, a crack she felt even through the heavy earmuffs, and in the split second before the bullet sliced through the buck's heart it looked at her, and all she saw was confusion. No fear, no surprise, just confusion. *What happened?* And then the lights went out, the buck collapsed, and she was tearing into the forest blindly, blind and mad, her hair flying out if its braid to stream behind her in a cape of fire. The trees caught at her skin, tore into it, ripped her to pieces, and the insects flew with her and lit on the wounds to suck the blood and pieces of flesh up into themselves so she'd never die and she wasn't a person anymore but the red of her hair, the cape of fire in the darkness of the woods.

But no, she was still here, still crouched beside her father, tears pattering into the dirt, and he was holding her, rubbing her back and saying something into the top of her head. *It's okay,*

kiddo, it didn't even know what happened. It's okay. From over her father's arm she could see the flesh of the animal, bleeding into the earth. That deep, arterial blood that was the color of cranberries in candlelight, that color that was still on her hands so many years after she murdered that man, and even though she let her father comfort her, it was for his own sake. Because that was the look she saw on Russell's face every day. He had not caught her scent, was not aware that she was tracking him, wasn't even aware that there was any path of his to track. And someday, maybe not now, maybe not even years from now but decades, she would train her rifle on him and put a bullet into his heart, a bullet she loaded into a gun put into her hands, and he'd look at her with that same confusion before the lights inside him turned off. *What happened?*

It's funny how I've adapted to my hands. I vaguely remember when they were both the same size, and I'm pretty sure I was right handed, but I use both of them now, just for different things. My big hand is really good at manual work: gripping things, picking things up, moving things around, stuff like that. Since it's the size of a baseball mitt, it's great at holding stacks of plates and books and my laptop if I'm moving around the apartment or cleaning. My little hand I use for more precise things, and it's gotten really good at text messaging. I remember before, it used to take me forever to type stuff out because all of my fingers were big. But now that I have really tiny ones, I can do it without any problem. It's good at doing my hair, shaving, trimming my beard, and picking up little crumbs off of surfaces. Honestly I think things work better this way, and I think a lot of people would be happier if they had hands like this. The only real downside that I can see is that you're a little lopsided. Well, that and the wandering.

The little hand, it likes to move around if I'm not watching it. Sometimes it'll get up in my

face and touch it, or it'll move around the couch when I'm sitting and watching a movie and it'll braid the little tassel things on the stupid pillow K.D left here. She keeps telling me she'll take it home but she always finds a way to forget about it. So I have to occasionally watch my little hand and make sure it's not doing anything stupid like that. Maybe that's why I dialed the wrong number. I was half asleep and wanting K.D for some fucking reason, and I guess my little hand decided it was going to take over. I need to learn to pay attention to it more when I'm doing stuff like that, I guess.

The phone rang four or five times, which itself was unusual. K.D worked out this system with me, completely on her own, that if I call her and it rings twice and goes to voicemail she can't pick up. She's obsessed about me not worrying about her, and I've told her I don't worry about anything but she doesn't believe me. And I wasn't really worried when it kept ringing, I was just more curious than anything. It was three in the afternoon, so I knew she'd be on the tail end of her shift. I sleep really late now, for some reason my internal clock is thrown off to China time and I can't sleep when I'm supposed to. I don't know how I'll handle it when I go back to work next week. Then I wondered if maybe something was going on at work, if there'd been some new case, but right as I thought it would go to voicemail, someone picked up. It was a woman's voice, but it wasn't hers, and I didn't know what to do. I don't handle surprises that well anymore.

"Hello, (Tad's last name) residence, (Tad's sisters name, Amelia for now) speaking."

I froze up. My mouth went all tacky and sour and I completely shut down. My big hand was gripped around my bottle of water that I'd taken from the nightstand.

"Hello? May I help you, please?"

My jaw hinges creaked open and I made a noise.

"Oh. I- I think I must have-

"My parents are busy right now but can I take a message, please?" Amelia demanded.

My chest felt hollow and heavy and I think that's what classifies neutron stars. They're made of nothing but they're the densest thing in the universe. Maybe I'm wrong about that.

Amelia let out a long, drawn out, very pre-teen-sounding sigh. "I'm hanging up now."

"Wait! Wait, uh, don't hang up."

She didn't say anything. I blinked and my big hand held the water bottle tighter.

"I'm uh, I'm a friend of your- your dad's."

"Oh, well let me go get him. May I ask why you're calling, please?"

"Oh, oh, no if-if he's busy that's fine, don't go get him."

"Oka-ay. Well can I take a message, please?"

"No, no, uh, that's okay, I was just going to ask him how he- he was doing."

"Oh." I could hear her feet scuffing on what I assumed was the kitchen floor.

"How, uh, how are you doing?"

"Fi-ine? I'm gonna hang up now."

"Wait, please, don't hang up. I-I just want to hear about how you're doing. Your dad and I don't talk much. He says your doing-doing real well in school?" That's something you ask a kid, right?

"Yeah, I guess."

"Are you... Are you doing okay, though?"

"I said I was, yeah."

"I mean, you-you aren't having any-any nightmares or anything?" I saw the water bottle was getting ready to pop so I let go and it fell to the floor, where it made a weird gurgling noise as it emptied into the carpet. The floor underneath would rot if I didn't dry it up. I hoped Amelia couldn't hear it.

"No-oo?"

"I mean you-you're doing okay?"

"Mister I'm gonna hang up now-"

A door somewhere opened, and I could hear a man saying something. There was a burst of soft crackling, like fabric over a microphone, and the man was there.

"Who the hell is this?"

"I-I'm not some weird pedophile or anything, sir." My big hand dragged down my face. What the fuck kind of thing to say was that?

"What the fuck do you want?" He was talking quietly, like he didn't want Amelia to hear. The kind of voice my Dad used to use when the phone would ring late at night that first month after the accident.

"I-I'm sorry, I just wanted to know-"

"I told you fucking vultures not to call here anymore. Haven't you already done enough? We've given more interviews than any other family in this God-damned state and you still won't leave us the hell alone. When's it gonna be enough, huh?"

"I-I'm sorry-"

"Don't call here again."

He slammed the phone down.

My little hand is good about acting on muscle memory, so when he ended the call, it pulled the phone away from my ear and set it on the bedside table, where I usually kept it. I watched it work, and it was amazing, how it just knew what to do. Amelia knew what to do, too. How did she learn to do that? Answer the phone like everything was fine? And she sounded so normal. Just a normal kid answering the phone and talking to a stranger, who had intentions she could never have known. How was she so normal? She wasn't sobbing, she didn't even sound sad. It was like nothing had ever happened. Maybe it was because she was so young. But I was young too, and I don't remember sounding like that. I remember falling apart all the time. Never at school, or around other people, but at the weirdest times. Brushing my teeth and seeing that there was an extra toothbrush in the little cup. Eating my cereal in the morning with the funky spoon that changed color when it was dipped into cold milk. And when I'd cry, Mom would cry too, and that would make Dad angry, because he'd already done all his crying, and he'd get in the truck and leave, which would make Mom cry harder, which would make me cry harder. All I remember for years was crying. Both of us crying all the time. Me because I felt guilty and didn't understand what guilt was or that it wasn't necessary, and her for reasons I'll never be able to imagine. I don't want to imagine them. I don't remember answering the phone, but I know if I had I wouldn't have sounded like Amelia did. I couldn't have seemed normal. And there she was, somewhere in town, right now listening to her Dad go on and on about how the media were the nastiest people alive, and how nothing was ever enough for them, they just wanted constant suffering and anguish so that everyone else could feel better about their own lives. And maybe she'd be sad for a while, but I felt very sure that it would pass for her. Maybe later when she was older it would come back to get her, but maybe it wouldn't. Maybe she never liked Tad to begin

with. Maybe she never wanted her brother at all, was happy he was gone, and maybe that's why I wanted to find Tad so badly. Because of that normal voice on the other end of the phone. Or maybe I just wanted Tad to tell me what really happened, so that maybe after my parents were gone and no one was left to tell me I couldn't do it, I could finally feel something.

K.D takes me to and from work, which I know she loves, even though she tries not to show it because she thinks it'll offend me or make me upset. When she pulls up in the morning, she beeps her horn a few times, quickly, just little *'bleep bleep's*. I drag myself down the stairs and fold into her tiny car, and she always has the seat pulled back for me. I don't know if she drives anyone else around and always puts it back into position or if she just leaves it that way but it makes the backseat tiny, so I have to throw my stuff in the trunk, which she pops open as soon as I open the front door. I know she's doing it as a gesture of good will or whatever, but it got old fast. If she forgets to pop the trunk or she leaves something in my seat, she freaks out and moves it and spends half the ride telling me about how she's sorry, and that sometimes she's just so stressed out from work that she forgets things. I can't tell if she expects me to fall apart or beat the living shit out of her, and I don't really know how to call her out on it. I don't think she's been eating well. She's too busy calling me and texting me and sending me messages on Skype to remember to take care of herself. It's my fault, in the end. I took things too far, and I don't really have anyone to blame but myself.

I called her that night I talked to Amelia. I told K.D I needed her to come over, that I wasn't feeling good and that I really needed to talk. I was wrapped back up in my comforter because I was freezing, I couldn't get warm, and I kept seeing Amelia's face on the last TV

interview her family gave. A calm face, devoid of any kind of stress or sorrow. She just looked bored. She kept checking something in her pocket, a phone I assume, because what else would she be peeking at so frequently? Her parents were talking, and when a reporter shoved a mic into Amelia's face and asked her how she was doing, she tore her eyes away from the phone and shrugged and said she was fine. Her parents were watching her with these big sad eyes, her mom was crying, and they were right. They fit the profile, but Amelia, she isn't right. She doesn't fit, and that night after I talked to her I couldn't get her voice out of my head. *Fi-iine*. While I waited for K.D, I picked at the skin around my nails and hung my head over the side of the bed so I could watch the rug to see if it would dry on its own. I was like that when K.D got there, she let herself in with the key she made me give her, and she rushed in and saw me hanging there and she must have thought I was sick because she yelled and ran over and picked up my head so fast it hurt my neck. Her breath was hot and sticky on my face and she smelled like Jolly Ranchers, the watermelon kind. I let her hold my big heavy head even though she was yanking my beard a little and pretended I wasn't quite all there. She's stronger than you'd think, for being so small, and she sort of push-pulled me back up onto my pillows. I kept my eyes forward and still, and she kept asking me what was wrong, if I was okay. I saw her getting ready to dial a number on her phone, so I came out of it and told her I was fine, but that I had a headache. She ran into the bathroom and got the medication the doctor gave me, and she had me swallow it with some water she got from the kitchen. She stepped in the wet spot on the rug and she swore.

“Ewww, Russell what's on your carpet? Did you-?”

“Water bottle.” I motioned under the bed, where I'd pushed it while I was waiting for her. She bent down to get it, and I could see all the knobs of her spine. I reached out and touched one.

She flinched away from me and I couldn't tell what she was thinking because her hair was in her face, and I couldn't see her eyes. I said I was sorry, and she went into the kitchen. I could hear her banging around, doing God-knows-what, and when she came back she was holding one of the spice jars I'd fixed.

“Russell... Did you organize the oregano by leaf size?”

I had. I'd been bored one evening and my little hand was getting into trouble, so I gave it something to do. I didn't tell her that though. I just nodded. She looked like she wanted to cry, which I didn't understand. She set the jar down on the dresser and came over to the bed and touched my head, right on the top, and her hand was warm. I couldn't remember the last time someone touched me, so I let her do it. And then she did something strange. She bent down, kissed the top of my head, and said she was sorry. I asked her what she was sorry for. She said all of this was her fault, but that didn't make sense, and I told her that, but she didn't listen.

“I just want you to get better... I just want you to be normal again...” She repeated that a few times, saying it into the top of my head, and I don't know why but suddenly I thought of Mom, talking into the top of my head like that after the accident when we'd both cry and she'd try to comfort me, and this sadness fell on top of me and crushed me. It was deep, deeper than anything I could imagine, and like a piece of debris I was floating on top of it, waiting to sink. That sadness, there was no end to it, it was icy and black and it stretched to forever, and I was so afraid of that feeling, of that sudden understanding that that sadness would never go away, that it found me when I was little and I'd been floating in it ever since, doing my best to keep myself afloat and not think about the endless dark underneath my feet. So I did the only thing I could think to do, which was to grab onto the only other piece of debris near me, and hang on as tight

as I could. Her lips were chapped and rough from being outside, but I didn't care, and I pressed against them as hard as I could, holding her by the back of the head and gripping her hair. She was so warm. When I pulled her on top of me, she didn't resist, and she was so light, there was nothing to her, she was full of holes and I knew I wouldn't be able to use her to keep myself floating for very long, so I had to make the most of the little time I had. Her clothes came off, and she was so pale underneath, freckles cast across her whole body like a net. She made noises, said things, but it didn't matter what she was saying, do a dying man's words really matter to anyone but the dying man himself? The taste of her, a sweet, fresh bread taste, and her hands digging into my hair, forcing me onto her, which I allowed for as long as the taste kept me awake, kept me in the present. And when she took me in her mouth and waited for me to say something, all I did was force myself in deeper, because we were both dying, and the words of dying men to each other will be lost anyway. I took her slowly, then quickly, and over and over she apologized, in time with my rhythm, and I let her apologize for something I didn't understand because we were sinking, faster and faster, and when that black light came we let it take us, and we sank down into the darkness. Later, in the quiet of the late night, as I held her and took what little warm from her that I could, she spoke to me, half asleep. She spoke something that sounded like my brother's name, but I couldn't be sure that it was his, so I let her go and went back to sinking slowly on my own, because there would be no more she could do for me, she was too full of holes.

Being at work, it's almost too much. Not because I'm treated differently, but because it's like nothing happened. No one knows the specifics, so the questions I had reasonable,

professional answers for aren't being asked, and I keep finding that it wants to come up at all times, like a burp. Someone will ask me if I can help mend the fences in the picnic area, and my mouth starts to say that yes, my hands are different sizes now, and I'm not sure how it happened. But I don't say that, I just nod and take my tool belt from my locker and go fix the fences. It's funny how you don't realize how much you need to talk about something until everyone refuses to bring it up. Something that isn't really a secret becomes a secret, and that's when it becomes heavy, almost too heavy to hold. It's like I'm fresh from a vacation, the way people treat me. There's no reluctance to force jobs or tasks on me, they heap my plate full, and that ginger stepping around me doesn't exist. If anything, I'm the one treading gently. The strain of appearing normal takes all of my energy, and if I'm not careful I can get absent-minded, which doesn't fit with my old personality at all.

A new job, those first few days fly by. You're so busy keeping your shit together and cramming in as much information as you can that you don't notice the time pass. One second, it's eight in the morning, and at some point you blink and look up and it's noon. You're done for the day, your first shift is over. Every day used to be like that. I'd pull into the parking area, lock my truck and check to see what I'd be doing that day. The excitement wore off eventually, but I never reached a point of stagnancy. There was always something interesting going on. People are always getting hurt or lost or confused. There's always a fence to repair or traffic to direct or a tree that needs to be pruned so the branches don't poke someone's eye out. I ran around doing things, and there was never an end to the things that needed doing. The woods are always taking over things, tearing themselves apart and needed to be put back in order. And it sort of made sense, in a way. Disorder that was actually carefully orchestrated chaos, nature maintaining her

own hormone levels. And I liked being the rogue virus, coming in and altering things for just a little while before being thrown back out.

(Let's add a bit more here, maybe.)

There's something wrong with the woods. I can admit that, I think. You can't say that without people thinking of ghosts or Bigfoot or aliens or any other number of stupid things but it's not that. It's the same kind of thing that's wrong with the ocean, and I never got that before the accident. There's a really common fear of deep water called bathophobia, or fear of depths. I've heard about it before, I just didn't know what it was called. It's the fear of deep spaces or an abyss, anything you can't see the bottom of, really. The ocean is the most common because we aren't around a lot of other things that are that deep. And a lot of people, I don't think they see the woods as a deep thing because it's not vertical depth.

Say you're driving inside a tunnel. You aren't sure how long you've been in it, but it's been a while, and you still haven't reached the end. You don't think to yourself, 'wow, this is a deep tunnel.' You don't use the word 'deep.' You use the word 'long.' As in, 'this is a long tunnel.' And so you don't really think about how much space you're going through, or how much distance you've traveled. But that's not technically right, because the world is round. In space, there's no up or down, there's just a three-dimensional plane in which we can move in directions x, y, and z. The astronauts in the space station, half the time they're completely upside-down, compared to us. But they don't see it that way. To them, we're the ones who are upside-down. So if you consider things that way, and you realize that space is just a box in which we can move freely, you start to see that depth isn't a matter of up or down, it's a matter of *distance*. But it's okay,

you've never thought about things that way before. You're not used to thinking of the ocean as thirteen miles long because no one measures things that way.

But when you start thinking of things that way, it's hard to stop. You start thinking about small things, like your house, or the drive to work. Your drive to work isn't just twelve miles away, it's now twelve miles deep. You jogged five miles today, so you actually dove two-and-a-half before resurfacing and your front door. And when you start looking at things that way, you start to see just how deep our world is. Take, for example, the Challenger Deep, which is the deepest point of the Mariana Trench. It's almost seven miles down to touch the bottom. That's seven miles of water stacked on itself, and while that's certainly a lot of distance to cover, it's nothing compared to the Appalachian Trail. The AT, roughly measured, is over two thousand miles long. That's two hundred and seventy one times the depth of the Challenger Deep. And since we know that space is three-dimensional, and anything can be deep, suddenly we aren't thinking of that space as being long. Suddenly, the AT is two thousand miles deep. And that's just the trail. It snakes through fourteen states, through national forests and mountain ranges and rocky plains. The amount of area surrounding the trail is incomprehensibly vast. And yes, you can argue that the amount of water on the planet vastly dwarfs the amount of land, this is true. But we don't spend our lives submerged in the ocean, negotiating it every day. We don't pass by it on our way to work, or take our children on daytime excursions to picnic at scenic locations on its surface. So when you view things this way, and you start to view things as deep versus long, suddenly you are uncomfortably aware that each time you step foot in a forest, you may have oxygen to breathe and food to eat, but you're submerging yourself in an incredibly vast abyss of nothing.

And like the ocean, there are things in that abyss that aren't friendly. Things that don't feel or think or act with reason or purpose or out of self-defense. They're things that exist for the sake of existing. Things that exist because conditions that we don't understand come together and combine in ways we can't imagine to form things in that deep, deep dark that we will never be able to control.

He was spending more and more time on the computer, away from her. Studying old reports, posting messages on social media websites, sending emails to people. That old obsession, the strange manic energy he'd had with Tad was back full-force, and nothing K.D did would distract him. She was doing her own research, looking up her own reports and new stories, but he'd either know about them or seem not to care. They argued about it frequently. She'd come up behind him while he was working, rest her head on his shoulder and kiss his neck, and he'd jerk away.

“What do you need?” He'd snap. She hated when he snapped at her, and she would tear up.

The eye retina contains some **neurons** that fire only in the dark.