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# Sickness and health

Anthony Smith

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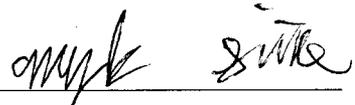
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Sickness and Health

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Anthony Smith

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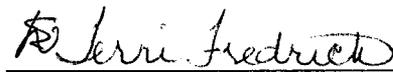
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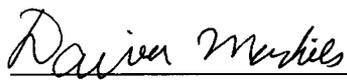
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For my wife who has to put up with me every day

Thanks to Dr. Roxane Gay for helping me make this collection work

## What I Know

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I've been hooked on fantasy-fiction and science-fiction for almost as long as I've been able to read, and I've been trying to write my own stories since I was about eight. It wasn't until high-school that I attended anything resembling a creative writing course, and it wasn't until then that I first heard the phrase "write what you know". It was a deceptively simple phrase, and I thought I knew what it meant. As an avid reader of fantasy and sci-fi it seemed obvious that I should be writing fantasy stories. I never read much non-fiction or realistic fiction, so the thought never once occurred to me that I should consider writing within those genres. When I pitched my thesis to Dr. Gay I had two ideas. The first was to write a novel within the genre I was used to, the second was to continue a more experimental collection of short stories based on personal experiences. Dr. Gay encouraged me to expand, to try something new, and to write the collection. It was a touchy subject and since I'd never written anything like it before I didn't even know if I was capable. The goal was to write a collection of stories about neurotic people in everyday situations: a series of stories about people suffering from depression, paranoia, and various social phobias. I was still hung up on my misunderstanding of "write what you know", so I wanted to avoid this collection. I'd never written a series of short stories before, and I'd never written anything so experiential. Mostly, however, I wanted to avoid it because it came very close to my own life and family. It wasn't until I began to write the collection that I finally understood that these stories are what I know.

In Sickness and Health I attempt to stay within the realistic-fiction genre, to be as realistic as possible. I wanted to focus entirely on the characters, especially Nick, and to

let stories develop as environments for these characters to interact with. The stories I had read which had similar concerns were almost always either novels or epistolary novels. In order for this collection to work I felt I needed to take a slightly different approach. Although this collection focuses on Nick it's the story of how he and Mary deal with his neuroses. In an epistolary novel, like Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea, it's difficult to have important secondary characters. The focus is too much on the narrator. In novels, or even lengthy plays, the focus takes a different direction. Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange and Albert Camus' The Stranger may have very psychologically interesting characters, but at times they become too wrapped up in the story. It is difficult for a novel to have a character's personality and emotions as the primary concern. A collection of short stories was the best choice for what I intended to do. As I wrote, however, the framework I had chosen evolved. Originally I had intended to have numerous characters in my collection: one or two stories about Michelle, three to four about Nick, and the last four or so about completely unrelated people. As I created Nick's interaction with Mary, however, I decided on a different path. The evolution of Nick's depression over time, and his changing relationship with Mary became the focus of my collection. As the focus shifted my short story collection transformed into an episodic novel. This change allowed me to create more human characters rather than caricatures of depression. Giving Nick a series of stories and a consistent series of interactions with Mary brought his neuroses to life, made them more believable. I knew I had made a character I could be proud of when Dr. Gay commented on an early draft of "Buried" that she didn't like how obsessed Nick seemed to be with joining Mary in death because despite his neuroses; she had begun to think of him as a good guy, and not someone capable of orphaning his children.

The only non-science fiction I really read was Shakespeare. There is a dark reflection of humanity in most of Shakespeare's characters, and I think a lot of people miss how human these characters are because they speak in iambics. This was what always captivated me in his plays; his lifelike characters. While some of their traits may feel overblown they seem to me to be realistic representations of life. What I took from Shakespeare was not his style or form, but his rigid focus on his characters, a trait common to plays. Hamlet is one of my favorite examples. The play opens with a seriously depressed young man, his father has died, the woman he loves has been told to keep her distance, and his mother has happily remarried. He's been completely alienated. As the story progresses Hamlet is further separated from his family by the revelation that his stepfather/uncle is responsible for his father's death. His depression becomes paired with paranoia, and he begins to suspect that others may have been involved in some greater plot. His solution is to hide his emotions. Hamlet feigns a quirky insanity, wearing madness as a mask while he buries his suffering inside. At first the madness is just a ploy to keep everyone away from his inner emotion, but as the story develops Hamlet becomes his demeanor. In his madness he sends his friends to their deaths, murders the father of the woman he loves, and even drives her to suicide. As the actions occur it drives him further into the depths of despair. He longs for death as a form of release from the suffering of his life. To a certain extent Hamlet is an extremely relatable character for someone suffering from depression. The only difference is that Hamlet has a visible foundation for his pain.

The same alienation, the burying of sadness, happens in other stories as well. In Sartre's Nausea, the main character, Antoine, is struck by the sudden onset depression.

As he realizes his pain he begins to believe that he is the only person in the world who suffers in this manner. He even begins to contemplate that he is the first person to have come down with a new disease which he refers to as the nausea. Jean-Paul Sartre struggles to put this sort of depression into words, to classify and identify it, but he struggles with the concept. Antoine is not necessarily sad, just as depression is not merely sadness. He is empty. The world is no longer his home, and though he has a place to sleep he suddenly feels homeless. Nothing brings him comfort, and even when he meets someone who claims to suffer from the same sickness he feels like he is alone. There is doubt in his mind that the other sufferer could be the same as he, and even if they suffer the same illness they cannot cure one another. There is a brief spark of energy in Antoine when he realizes that someone else suffers as he does, but it quickly fades when the realization fails to alleviate his loneliness. This is an epistolary novel, however, and much like Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground the focus is on explaining these emotions through stories giving the book an almost philosophical feel. For my novel I never wanted to explain these emotions, merely make them relatable.

Meursault, the main character from Camus' The Stranger, suffers a similar kind of depression. At the start of the novel he learns of mother's death. Camus doesn't tell much about what happens before this, but he presents Meursault as dead to the world. He attempts to act as he believes the world expects him to, but he can't seem to find his emotions, does not understand them. It's as if they don't exist. The presentation of Meursault reveals sadness though. The narrator, as robotic as he may sound, acts as though he is merely a passer-by observing the world around him, like he is not part of the story, merely another reader. By the end of the story a woman, Marie, has fallen in love with

him—an emotion he cannot return. Meursalt does not quite understand love, but despite this there is a slight lifting of his spirits in the way in which he tells the story. He seems happier, and even admits to Marie that he feels content with her. Meursalt has also murdered a man by the end of the story, and is only further alienated by society when they use his strangeness against him. He is treated as a monster, even referred to as the anti-Christ by one inspector for how he reacts to the world. The Stranger came much closer to what I intended to write. The focus wasn't on explaining why the narrator suffered, but instead on relating his suffering to the reader. I drew on this style of narrative for my stories, focusing on the relating of the dysfunction rather than the explaining of it. However, The Stranger is more focused on how this character's personality drives the story overall, and he becomes a queer passenger. This is why I ended up with an episodic novel, which allowed me to focus completely on the characters and use the environment as a backdrop.

In my first story, “Leviathan in Chains”, I attempt to recreate a lot of these concepts. Michelle suffers from strong bouts of depression that she doesn't completely understand; they are triggered by entirely futile, random events, and when they come they leave her feeling dead inside. She is not sad, exactly, but more like Meursalt in how she feels. She still perceives the world, still understands what is expected of her, and is even still aware of her own feelings to an extent. They just don't matter. Although the prom setting may seem like a strong backdrop I try to keep it to just that—a backdrop. It's almost unimportant; it could be any happy setting just so long as Michelle's sudden bout of depression clashes with it. Over the years she's learned the best method in dealing with this kind of depression is to just wait patiently, supportively, for it to go away, very

similar to how Marie handles Meursault's depression. There really isn't any sadness to it, just a vast loneliness that refuses to be alleviated. She further alienates herself by continuing to pretend that she's perfectly fine. She believes that, knowing about her depression, the world would shun her, so rather than share it she covers it up with a mask, much like Hamlet.

On my second story, "Buried", I jump to the end of Nick's story. I refer to it as the end of his story for several reasons. Most importantly is that the entire collection is devoted to Nick's family, mainly the interaction between Nick and his wife, Mary. Nick changes throughout his life, but his depression is always there, and he relies almost entirely on Mary. Her death transfers that point of view. This is as far as Nick will get, he no longer has a devoted wife to help him live. This isn't the end of Nick; it's just the height of his progression. As the second half of "Buried" shows, as well as the third part of "Heritage" my focus will once again shift. Nick's story doesn't begin until he's paired with Mary, and Winry's doesn't begin until her parents' story ends. When I wrote "Buried" I wanted something to end Nick and Mary's story, and I was only able to think of three options. In one idea they grow old together and die. It felt cliché. The second possibility I thought of was to have Nick commit suicide, but this idea ruined his character. I've thought about death a lot, yearned for it frequently, but suicide just isn't an option. No matter how depressed I may get I couldn't consider the idea of doing that to my wife, and having Nick do it just made him seem uncaring, like he didn't love Mary enough. I had originally thought of ending this collection with Nick's suicide; I even wrote a suicide story, but I was so angry with Nick for having betrayed Mary's love in that manner that I ended up breaking my narrative in order to revive Nick and rant at him.

I can't say that I removed this story entirely. In a collection dealing with depression I felt I had to have some discussion of suicide which is partly why I wrote "Heritage". My third option for ending Nick's story was Mary's death. This was the hardest story for me to write in the entire collection. It was a fitting end to the Nick's story though. Mary stood by him long enough, worked hard enough to keep him together for him to manage even with her dead. This was the only way for Mary's accomplishment to be revealed. Nick's continuing without her shows that Mary has succeeded in healing Nick, that he doesn't need her any more.

"Alien Shore" is one of the first stories I thought of for this collection. "Thought of" is probably a bit misleading since this is a retelling of my extended family's vacation to North Carolina and probably as close to non-fiction as my collection can get. They really did try to do a different costume party every night, and on pirate night my family 'stormed' the beach in full costume—I could hear them from the house we had rented. During our stay I was accused several times of being no fun. What I wanted to reveal in this story was what happens when control is broken down. Nick attempts to maintain a constant control over his emotions, or at least to present a façade of control. He smiles when his family expects him to, plays along and pretends to have fun, and does his best to hide his distaste for his family's version of fun. After all, they're his family, and the world expects him to take part in family activities. When he's been given more than he can handle, forced into too many awkward positions, he explodes. His outburst is hardly a fit; it's an entirely human, normal reaction to having numerous people harass him for nearly an entire week. To Nick, however, it's much more. He's just shown how weird he is, revealed that he isn't anything like his family. At the same time he's stripped himself

of his mask. The fake smiles are gone, the boredom is revealed for utter distaste. Nick can only see his reaction as childish; no matter what reasons he had for an outburst he sees no justification in giving into a completely normal emotion. When a mind like his feels the first sting of shame it becomes relentless. It bombards him with images of the past, other sources of shame. Harry, from Herman Hesse's Steppenwolf, has a similar self-loathing. He does not think of embarrassing actions in his past so much as he is embarrassed by his own, human emotions. He is constantly at war with himself to the point of separating into two halves. The one in control, the mask, is his logical side. He is a well-educated man with a thirst for art and literature. Harry, however, believes that the raging emotions he hides within belong to someone else. They are the savage emotions of an animal, and he refuses to accept or to allow them to bear their fangs. Like Nick he struggles to keep those ordinary emotions in check, and is terrified of letting them have any control at all. Worried that he may lose the war, ashamed at the idea of letting his emotions take control Harry frequently considers suicide. This same sort of turmoil exists through Crime and Punishment, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, although with more understandable reasons. Raskolnikov convinces himself he has a chance to be the next great man, and that to realize his potential he must get money through a criminal action. He suffers constantly from guilt, and struggles to control and bury those emotions. The sense of superiority he has only further alienates him from everyone he meets until he is at last humbled by Sonya, who has suffered more than Raskolnikov, and yet managed to remain firm in her faith.

“A Room Full of Strangers” is something I had a hard time finding related works for. Poe was about as close as I got, and in several of his short stories he presents

characters who don't fit in well with crowds, who display building fears at dealing with others. None of these characters present irrational fear of crowded rooms, but there are stories of claustrophobia and social awkwardness that come close. Poe tells several stories in which characters are either buried alive or have a fear of being buried alive, which is actually upsettingly close to how I attempted to depict Nick's feeling of being in a crowd. Most people experience discomfort at being in a crowd at one point or another. Either it's being the spouse or friend at someone else's gathering or just a dislike of being jostled in an overcrowded event. For Nick the discomfort is closer to phobia. It's very similar to how Poe describes being buried alive. It makes his skin itch. "A Room Full of Strangers" attempts to capture a heightened level of discomfort in a way that's more relatable than how most people handle crowds. Instead of just making Nick freeze up I gave him a more visual, more disturbing reaction. A room full of strangers isn't just something awkward for Nick, it's a living nightmare.

"Alone with Shadows" is the first story I had created for the collection, the piece that inspired the whole thing. It was originally a two page short story about a man hearing a doorbell in the middle of the night and reacting violently through paranoia. I was attempting to mimic Raymond Carver's style for a creative writing workshop after we'd read What we Talk About When we Talk About Love. Carver always managed to maintain a sense of danger in his stories, and at any second while reading it felt like something violent could occur. Occasionally the horrific would happen. This was the tone I attempted to convey in the original short story, and I tried to maintain this style in the extended version of my story. However, "Alone with Shadows" doesn't feel like it belongs. It's a story in which Mary is almost entirely irrelevant, she doesn't exist. "Alone

with Shadows” is even written in an entirely different style, more similar to a suspense-thriller than what I was trying to do in my other stories. I may call the main character Nick, but in my mind he could be practically anyone and the story wouldn’t need to change. It still belongs in this collection though; still fits in its own way.

“Heritage” was a great close to the novel. It digs into the concept that Nick’s depression is partly hereditary, partly environmental. In this story I get to spend some time with Nick’s mother and his daughter, and it paces through the story in the same way that Nick progresses. The younger Nick is more troubled, cutting his wrist, taking pills, but the older Nick has come to grips with the loss of his wife and his depression. As dark as Sickness and Health may be at times, opening with a ruined prom and Mary’s death, even souring a wedding in “Sickness and Health” by Nick’s feelings of guilt, I think that “Heritage” offers a glimmer of hope. It’s not a happy ending, exactly; the first two parts are both suicide attempts after all, but it closes with Winry’s chance at happiness.

Sickness and Health has certainly expanded my skill as a writer, as well as opening up a whole new genre for me to work with. It feels good to be able to communicate about internal issues like these, and I hope that I’ll be able to share this work with others, especially those who suffer depression and other neuroses firsthand. Maybe it will show them they aren’t all that alone; even if I know it won’t help alleviate their feelings of loneliness. I plan to submit this work for publication, but I’m almost not sure what to label it as. It’s certainly a work of realism based on non-fiction, but is it a short story collection or an episodic novel? I want to write a few more stories based on Winry, to complete the collection, and to continue the story. I’ve touched briefly on Jessie’s depression, spent a lot of time with Nick’s, and I want to show how that heritage

passes down to Winry. Before this I've never written anything that came close to realism genre or nonfiction, but with Sickness and Health I've accomplished a collection of thought-provoking stories revolving around the depression and neuroses of a single person. I feel like I've managed to distance myself just enough from this work to keep it from being just a personal representation of my own life, but at the same time I've kept it close enough to feel like Nick is just an alter ego.

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## Leviathan in Chains

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The ship spent the entire night in chains, bound to the pier, music bleeding from its gaping windows. For the night it was infested with teenagers. Their dancing looked more like sex than any recognizable form of grace--the few teachers who had volunteered to chaperone the prom were either too worn down from another long school year or too drunk to even try to separate their charges. It would have been difficult either way with only a handful of adults having to keep watch over several hundred couples piled onto several different decks, outdoor and indoor.

Michelle and Nick didn't require watching, for once. Her dress was made of several diaphanous layers, each a slightly different shade of purple. Even though the dress was dark it caught the flashing lights that occasionally strayed from the dance floor and sparkled. She'd already been to two stores before buying it, and had tried on a half dozen other dresses, but the purple of this one caught her eye. It was their favorite color—another thing Nick and Michelle shared. When she saw her reflection in the strapless, low cut dress she felt sexy. It hung loosely against her breasts, just enough to show an elegant line of cleavage, but not enough to make her feel slutty. She hated the shape of her face, the stretched look her high cheekbones gave her. She hated how no matter how much she watched her diet that she could never be supermodel thin. Mostly she hated the size of her breasts. She'd been teased by her sisters, her friends, and ogled by every single guy in high school. They were just too big. She was smart enough to see the irony of everything she found fault in—most of her friends wanted larger breasts and

were jealous of hers, supermodel thin was extremely unhealthy, and, overall, the boy she was in love with thought she was perfect. That was all that should have mattered.

Nick looked goofy, even in his tuxedo. It was a trendy tux, but Michelle thought it looked like he was auditioning for the role of an undertaker in a Broadway musical. The coat hung almost all the way to his knees and gave Nick the illusion of being a bulky man when he was, in reality, about as thin as Michelle wanted to be. He'd done something ridiculous with his hair, which he'd been growing out, and every time he turned his head the plastic beads separating the several dozen strands of loose hair would click as they brushed across the shoulders of his tux. Still it was probably the best she'd ever seen him. Any tuxedo would have done for her in the end—just so long as he was wearing shoes. It was one more of his strange quirks, Nick loved being barefoot, but since it was against the standard rules of every building in the area he settled with sandals. Sandals in the summer, when it was normal, and sandals in the winter when there was a foot of snow on the ground. He had joked with her while they were getting ready for prom that he was going to find a nice pair of dress sandals, and up until she saw him in his tux she worried that he might actually go through with it. She wasn't sure if she would have been able to be angry with him if he had—she loved how he always seemed to act like he was on the way to the beach. He made it feel like it was always summer.

On the way to the prom she felt the same excitement as when she'd first tried on the dress. Any doubts she may have had about the way she looked melted away under Nick's lecherous stare—she was well aware of his every reaction to her dress. But something about the chained ship struck her. It was all so ridiculous. They'd held hands all the way up to the walkway that led onto the ship, and Nick stopped to let Michelle

walk first. He looked around; taking in the lights, the ship, the pale skin of Michelle's back, and, of course, how her ass showed through the thin layers of fabric. Michelle's eyes were glued to the walkway.

*What's the point? All this effort, all this money. Just for one night. One night stuck on a boat that isn't going anywhere.*

The music inside was deafening, and even though they'd arrived a few minutes early the dance floor was already crowded. She felt his grip on her hand, but ignored it, letting her fingers hang limp. Nick noticed it at once. His eyes widened slightly, glancing at his hand as if to affirm what he was feeling. Then he locked his gaze on Michelle's face. She feigned ignorance as she watched the dancers, not even returning Nick's gaze and faking a smile. It was one more reason they had been so crazy about each other. The deeper they got the more they realized how similar they were. Nick could spot every one of her fake smiles, could feel every twinge of pain that was hidden behind them. He saw the sadness that everyone else missed because he smiled like that too.

"Let's find a table." Nick didn't know what had brought on the mood swing or even if it was an actual mood swing, but he knew the best way to handle it. He squeezed her hand for a moment, tighter, forcing energy through the physical bond. When she didn't respond he began walking, still holding onto Michelle and forcing her to follow him as he made his way through the crowd. He pulled two chairs out from the draped table and turned them around so they could sit side by side, watching out one of the nearby windows. They'd been told to be punctual to the prom so the ship could leave the pier and cruise around a small area of Lake Michigan.

“Well, let’s dance.” His voice was energetic, and it should have been endearing to Michelle. Usually when one of them suffered a bout of depression it would drag the other one down instantly. They were too in tune at times. Maybe it was the fact that it was prom. Nick complained about school dances as much as any other guy, and in his own way he actually hated them. The music was always too loud, the room was usually too warm, and in Nick’s opinion everyone always left disappointed. Half the people who went wanted a romantic, memorable night, and inevitably their hormone driven partners just wanted to get laid and brag about it. Nick said it would be a better and cheaper date to just go out to a nice, quiet dinner, and maybe catch a movie. Despite all of these complaints it was always Nick who brought up the topic of the next school dance to Michelle. For as long as she had known him he had never missed a school dance so long as he could have a date. The truth of it was that Nick loved to dance, but he hated the awkward nature of dances. He loved holding someone he cared about close, and moving in response to good music. He hated doing it in a crowd, and to whatever ‘dance/party’ music was currently popular. And just like every other dance Nick got together enough money for his ticket and clothes, and Michelle bought her ticket and dress--they had no misconceptions of male chivalry. Michelle had put her foot down on that on their first date. She’d let Nick pay for the movie and popcorn, but refused to let him pay for dinner afterwards. It just didn’t make sense to her that he should have to pay for everything. If they really did plan to try and stay together forever they may as well learn to split the cost now.

“Michelle?” His concern was obvious, she hadn’t responded to his question right away.

“Not yet, can we just keep sitting for a bit?” She sounded and looked tired, like just the thought of dancing wore on her. Michelle smoothed her dress, her blue eyes on her knees.

“Alright, that’s fine. Are you ok?” He watched her sadly.

She nodded.

He spent the next five minutes squeezing her hand silently, hoping for a response. The insistent squeezing was enough to begin to make her hand feel sore, and in a lapse between squeezes she snatched it away from him.

“Was it something I did?”

“No, really, I’m fine.”

He didn’t seem convinced, but he moved his chair closer to put his arm around her in an awkward attempt at comfort. It was sweet, he didn’t know what was wrong, but he seemed willing to at least try and help. They sat, knee to knee for a little bit, staring at the reflection of prom in the large windows of the ship.

This time Michelle broke the silence, as she shrugged off Nick’s arm. “It’s too hot.”

“Michelle!” A girl from another couple, Samantha, called out while her date pulled out chairs from the table.

“Oh, hi Sam!” The smile that transfigured Michelle’s face appeared in stark contrast to the stern frown she’d been wearing before. It was something they both knew

how to do well. No matter how awful they felt Michelle and Nick could always convince everyone else that everything was fine.

Samantha's voice bubbled. "This is my date, Ben, isn't this so great?" Samantha gestured wildly, attempting to encompass all of prom with her hand.

"Yeah, I love it; this place is really nice isn't it?" There was no hint of sadness in her voice.

"We were a bit late--I was worried the boat would have left, but I saw Leslie and she said that she heard that they weren't going to be leaving the pier at all because of the wind."

Ben nodded an awkward agreement. He hadn't met Nick or Michelle before, and was waiting politely for an introduction.

"Oh," Michelle responded. "I bet that's just a rumor, Nick said he didn't think they were ever planning to take us out on the water." It was the sort of comment he was likely to make. A few people thought he was very insightful, most just thought he complained a lot. "This place's insurance probably doesn't cover a boat full of partying teenagers." In just a couple of sentences she'd turned them from the strange couple stuck in the corner at a dance to a couple deep in conversation. It was the same thing really, but at least it now looked like they were enjoying themselves. It was the perfect way to ensure that the onset of sadness that Michelle felt would be kept hidden; Samantha loved to gossip, and in her eyes Michelle and Nick were having a great time in their own private party.

“I guess that sort of makes sense.” Samantha smiled at Nick, her eyes squinting slightly as the sides of her cheeks rose. “Hi Nick!” She almost waved at him, her shoulder twitched to hold it back. The smile he returned looked genuine.

Samantha turned suddenly, dragging her date back onto the crowded dance floor.

As soon as Samantha was out of sight their smiles faded.

“She seems nice,” Nick commented. He hadn’t actually spoken to her before. In his mind he still hadn’t. Small talk was meaningless, automatic, boring. It always made him feel like an outsider. The world ran on small-talk, and it was all just white noise to him.

“She is.”

“Are you feeling any better yet?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Do you want to dance?”

“No...” She still didn’t know exactly what had triggered her depression, but it was fading a little bit. It had lasted long enough to drain her, though.

“Ok, that’s fine.” He shifted nervously in his seat, the beads clicked again.

“Wanna head out to the deck and look at the water?”

“Ok.”

She stood up, letting Nick take her hand and lead her up the stairs, and out onto the balcony of the ship. There wasn't much to look at. They were too close to the pier to see all of the lights at once. Instead they watched a few straggling groups of prom-goers who'd snuck out onto the pier to get away from the music and chaperones. In front of them was another ship, the Spirit of Chicago. It looked the same as the ship they were on. There was a party on that ship too, a wedding reception. The chains on the other ship were visible even from the back of their own; it was almost all Michelle could see. The florist had taken the effort to place a few flowers and a bit of ribbon onto them, but it only highlighted the fact that even those chains would never release the wedding ship. Not much open water was to be seen. The lights on the breakwater were distracting, and they lit up the artificial shoreline making it look like the ship was not only chained, but trapped in a large cell. It was cold, and even though Nick had put his tuxedo jacket on Michelle, they didn't stay outside long. Nick didn't attempt to put his arms around Michelle; it was obvious he was starting to give up on the night. He didn't even ask her again if she wanted to dance when they went back inside. Instead they just sat down. Even without Nick's sudden turn Michelle felt sadness bearing down on her again.

They sat in silence, not touching, not even looking at one another. If someone had surprised them in that pose they would have thought the couple had broken up and were just waiting for the time that they could meet up with their ride and go home. Whenever Samantha found her way back to the table they put back on fake smiles, and acted like they were having the time of their life.

“Nick, I'm sorry.”

“For what?” He barely even mumbled it. He’d spent most of the night trying to pull Michelle out of her mysterious hole; it was all the reason he needed to fall into one of his own.

“I just... I don’t know... Why don’t we dance?” She reached for Nick’s hand, not waiting for an answer, and practically dragged him to the dance floor, where she wrapped her arms around him, and thrust her hips as close to his as possible. Whatever had brought on her sadness was slowly being chased away by guilt. She loved Nick, they had both been looking forward to this night, and she had ruined it. The dance couldn’t have looked good. Nick stood there, statuesque and morbid, while Michelle swayed, holding onto Nick’s hands. Her eyes were red now. Pain, inner-turmoil, sadness; these she could handle, but she had hurt Nick, and it made her want to cry. She was only able to pantomime a dance for half a song—there wasn’t another one. The prom was over; it was time to leave. They’d been on the dance floor for less than a minute the entire night.

They made their way back to Michelle’s car in the parking garage. Michelle balanced herself on Nick’s shoulder to take off her heels before climbing into the car. The drive was silent; they both wanted to talk but neither was willing to start. When Michelle pulled the car into a park Nick looked at her. She climbed over to the passenger’s side, straddling Nick with her legs. It was an awkward attempt at love making. She kissed him, teasing his tongue with her own, rubbing her body against his, then lifting her breasts to his mouth. She could feel the stiffness through his pants, and reached her hand down to rub at his crotch. Nick only reacted mechanically, when she kissed him he opened his mouth and let her fish around with her tongue, when she brought her breasts up he suckled them like a baby. His hands sat dead at his sides. He didn’t wrap his arms around

her, or lift up her dress and grab her ass. Michelle had to do everything. Even when she unzipped his pants and reached inside to wrap her hand around his erection Nick didn't react. She had to stop. She couldn't bear the idea of one-way lovemaking. It may as well have been necrophilia.

She pulled her dress back up over her chest and lay down against his shoulder, her legs swung up across his lap.

"I'm sorry," Michelle mumbled into his ear.

"For what?" Nick's voice was devoid of emotion.

"Nothing, I guess..." He'd done this to her before. In some vindictive way he always demanded that she clarify what it was she felt she'd done wrong.

"Was it something I did?" Now he sounded concerned. They'd had this fight before, he'd work to make her feel guilty, or he'd blame it all on himself—there was never a middle ground.

"No... It wasn't you, I don't think." She sighed. "I don't know. I was so excited, I've been looking forward to this all week, and I even felt good all day. Then we got there, and I don't know, the whole thing just seemed so sad. I'm so sorry Nick, I just don't know..."

But she did, she knew exactly what it was that ruined their night.

It was the chains.

# Buried

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He hated hospitals just like he hated crowds. The sterile halls filled with medical personnel and filled with sick, sometimes dying people in every room. Hospitals were always charged with emotion—people at their best and worst. Everyone except the occasional happy nurse wore a face that spoke of exhaustion and suffering. Nick had never been admitted to the hospital before. He'd had broken bones, lacerations that needed stitches, and plenty of other medical complaints, but never enough to keep him there for more than a couple hours. His parents had even taken him to the hospital once in high school to try and get him admitted to the psych ward, but he talked himself out of it, convincing the doctor he was just another angst-driven teen trying to teach his parents a lesson. Now he was there nearly every day, constantly, until either a nurse or a family member made him go home to eat and shower. As much as he hated being in a hospital he didn't have anywhere else to go, and it was his turn to display the tired face of misery.

He hadn't spoken to anyone but Mary for nearly a week. Even his own children hadn't heard their father's voice except in the heart-crushing tone he took on when trying to comfort Mary while concealing his panic. They came almost every day; their grandmother, Jessie, brought them. When Jessie would try to stay late in an attempt to comfort her son they would find some excuse to go home. Nick's thirteen year old daughter Winry was already smarter than her father, and as good-natured as her mother. When she saw Jessie attempt to comfort Nick she knew it was just making things worse—nothing could comfort her father, even trying would probably just make things worse. So she would find an excuse, something bordering on truth, to drag her

grandmother out the door in order to leave Nick alone with Mary. That was what Winry knew her father really needed; to be alone with his wife as much as possible.

It was a small consolation. When other people were in the room it felt like Mary was already dead, and everyone was there to take part in the funeral, to try and *share* his suffering. He hated that most of all. This was something that could never be shared—he was losing his life. Mary had given Nick something to live for, and she'd been holding together the corners of his mind with tender delicacy for over two decades. How could he possibly live after her?

*It isn't fair.* The thought was on his mind every day. He wasn't blaming some distant god, the doctors, chance. He was blaming Mary. It was an anger that drove him even further into despair. She was leaving him, actively, on purpose, abandoning her husband and children.

Her blue eyes would blink open, weakly. She would look around the room, as if verifying that it wasn't a dream, that she was in the hospital, that the cancer had brought her to the end. And then she would smile deeply, all of her dwindling energy concentrated to ignore the pain, and push through the anesthetics to smile at her husband. Then she would tell him about her dreams, like she always did, as though nothing were wrong at all. It used to annoy him so much to be regaled every morning. He'd listen, keep his distemper to himself, and play the role of the good husband, but she always had so many meaningless dreams. Now he wanted to hear every word, and was stricken with guilt when he realized her dreams still bored him.

“Nick. You can't stop.” It was the strongest her voice had been all week. She wasn't smiling.

“I know. I’ll be fine.”

“No!” Her shout shocked him. “None of that bullshit. You can’t give up Nick. You have to be there for Winry and Alphonse. You can’t just stop because I’m dead.”

“I…” Nick felt the lump in his throat. It was there whenever he started losing control. Even sitting at his wife’s deathbed he fought to maintain control. His face twitched as his muscles fought to maintain composure.

“Winry will help you. She understands you Nick; even better than I do I think. She’s starting to act like you too.” Nick had noticed his daughter’s recent bouts with melancholy. “She’ll be there for you and Al.”

“That’s not fair to her.” It was all he could say between his grinding teeth. *It’s not fair to me, either.* Any more of this and his control would be gone.

Mary smiled. “She’ll volunteer for the job. She wants to help you; it makes her feel good helping people, making them feel good.” Her face grew stern again. “Promise me you’ll keep going.”

He only shook his head slightly, refusing to make a promise he might not be able to keep.

“Nick, I’m dying, this is my dying wish. Promise me you’ll keep living.”

He still wouldn’t answer her.

“Please. Just promise me this one last thing, and I can be happy.”

It was too much. “I promise, I’ll keep trying,” he said, nodding.

Mary smiled again as her eyes began to close. “Good. I love you Nick.”

He broke down, the lump exploded into a sob. Nick’s tears streamed down the sides of Mary’s arm as he cradled his head against her. He wrapped his arm around her,

clumsily knocking out her IV as he pulled her to him. The world was over. He hadn't cried since he was a child, and now the one person he had been willing to share his emotions with was gone, and she had never even seen him cry.

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No one had to send him home that night. There was nothing holding him to the hospital any more. He wanted to unbuckle from his seat, press his foot hard against the pedal, and drive head on into a semi or a wall. He could only think of two reasons not to follow his instinct.

His children.

A promise to a dead woman.

Nick prayed for his heart to stop beating on the drive home. It was all he could think about. Fire could rain from the sky and he would welcome it. He was surprised when he pulled into his driveway.

He couldn't get out, walk up the steps, and go inside. The house was haunted by Mary now. Every picture, decoration, even the furniture. They were all hers. Nick couldn't face those reminders, couldn't see that house now, knowing Mary was dead.

The passenger door opened, and Winry climbed into the car. She was dressed in the Star Wars pajamas her grandfather had given her last Christmas Eve. She had heard the car pull in, and when the engine continued rumbling, and her father didn't come in through the door she knew that her mother was gone. She wanted desperately to remember her father's face at this moment. For some reason she needed to see it, to see what he looked like when he could no longer bury everything. The overhead light clicked lightly under her finger.

The stubble on his face grew rampantly. His eyes stared off at some faraway place; she wondered if her father even knew she was in the car. She guessed that he did. He noticed everything. His eyes weren't red, she hadn't thought they would be, her father wasn't the kind of man to cry, but they were lifeless. She knew what his dead stare meant, she'd seen him do it before, had been feeling herself do it. It meant he was screaming inside; a wounded beast, howling in pain.

She clicked the light back off, and reached for the keys with the same hand, turning the car off and pulling them free. She leaned across the console to fumble with her father's seat belt before getting out of the car and going around to his door. When she opened it he got out. Her hand felt tiny in her father's as she led him up the walkway and into the house. That was as far as she could get him to move. He became a monument to agony on their welcome mat. It was good enough for now. Winry closed the door behind her father, and went up the stairs to her bedroom. She wanted to cry. It would feel good to let it all out. Her mother was dead. She had been the center of all their lives, and she was gone. But she couldn't cry. She couldn't let herself cry. She fought them back, buried them deep away. She had to be stronger than that, just like her father always was.

She could hear Al through the wall, crying in his bed, trying to muffle his sobs under the covers. He had cried a lot in the past month, but the sobs tonight were different, more violent. Winry got back out of bed and walked into his room to comfort him, and had a moment of complete panic when she realized there was a man in there. She hadn't heard her father come upstairs, but he was in Al's bedroom, on the bed, cradling his son with one arm. He raised his other arm towards Winry, beckoning her over. She came, and let her father wrap his arm around her.

“Don’t hide it Winry. Don’t you dare.” His voice was firm, it was a shock. It felt like he hadn’t ever spoken to her.

“I’m fine.” She mumbled.

“No, you’re not. You can’t fool me. Shove it down as much as you want it doesn’t go away, it’s always there. Trying to hold it back just makes it worse. Don’t you dare be like me.”

“I’m fine.” Her voice cracked, her eyes felt hot. It sounded like a lie.

“You are. You’re perfectly fine. There’s nothing wrong with crying, it’s perfectly fine to cry.” There was no hint of sadness in his voice. Nick had already pushed everything back, but he couldn’t bear the thought of his daughter doing the same. He could feel the side of his shirt growing wet. It was the first time in his life he didn’t feel awkward holding someone who was crying. “I won’t stop, I promise.”

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Waking up the first day after was harder than coming home to let his children know their mother was dead. Even though the bed had been empty since Mary had been admitted it hadn’t felt empty. As long as she was alive she was there. Now, looking across at the twisted blankets and sheets as he opened his eyes it was an instant reminder that she was gone forever. Some of her jewelry still sat on her bedside table alongside a tissue she had never thrown away. The bathroom was another reminder. All of her makeup, face cleansers, moisturizers, her toothbrush and toothpaste, her rinse cup, her drawer. In the shower he used the shampoo and conditioner they had shared; she had bought the kind with moisturizer to keep him from getting dandruff. He toweled off with ‘His’ towel. As he shaved it became impossible not to see the little gel window cling cats

Mary had put on the bottom corner of their mirror. He put on the clothes that she had taken him to the mall to buy. Walked down the stairs and past every decoration and picture that she had hung on the wall, and into the kitchen where she had always cooked their meals.

Winry was in the kitchen, making breakfast. She loved cooking, just like her mother. There were two pans on the stove, one filled with corn-beef hash while she cooked scrambled eggs in the other.

“Get the bacon,” Winry commanded her father when the microwave beeped.

He pulled the microwave door open, and took the plastic bacon dish out.

“Come on dad, get a paper towel, put in on a plate, put the bacon on top of it.”

She teased him—her father was notoriously inept when it came to cooking. “Now grab some plates for us and go get Al up.”

He wrapped his arms around his daughter, and lifted her off the ground. She squirmed cautiously.

“Dad! I’m cooking, this is dangerous, you can’t just grab me like this while I’ve got pans on the stove!” It was the same complaint her mother would make whenever Nick grabbed her while she cooked. Winry’s eyes were red; there were wet trails of tears on her cheeks. When he put her back down she turned around to hug him back. “Now go get Al. We need to eat. Mom would want us to keep on going.”

“Yes, she would.”

It took him several minutes to get Al out of bed. He’d tried to be gentle at first, shaking him lightly, telling him softly to wake up, but when that wouldn’t work he resorted to his usual method. He turned on the lights in the room, flung open the curtains,

and dragged all of Al's blankets off the bed. "I'll be back in five minutes with a glass of ice-water. You can drink it or swim in it, your call."

"Why? What's the point?"

"Your sister is making eggs and corn-beef hash. She'll be angry if you let it go to waste."

"It's not fair though."

"No, it's not fair. You get to sleep while your sister cooks, not fair in the slightest."

"No! You know what I mean."

"I do, kiddo. None of it is fair at all."

"So why?" He was starting to cry again.

"Because she made me promise that we'd keep going, so get up and get going!"

He jabbed his finger into his son's ribs.

"Ow!"

"How?" He mimicked Mary; she always mistook 'ow' for 'how' for some reason.

"First, you get up on your feet," he picked his son up out of the bed and placed him on the floor. "Then, you walk across the hall into the bathroom." He shoved his son across the hall. "And you take a shower... Do I need to help you with this last one too?" He smiled mischievously at his son.

"No!" Al shouted at his father before slamming the door.

Nick's smile faded as soon as the door closed. He walked back across the hall and sat on his son's bed, staring at the wall silently. It was the same stare Winry noticed the night before. He was howling on the inside.

"Dad! Food! Now!" Winry sounded annoyed.

He must have lost track of time. “Coming!”

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He felt more awkward at the funeral than he had at their wedding. Nick, being the widower, was the center of attention. Everyone wanted to shake his hand and hug him; everyone had to ask how he was doing. He couldn't make a move without someone offering condolences. He had to sit and watch as person after person pried open Nick's memory with their recollections of Mary, jabbing at the open wound as they brought everything wonderful about her back to life. Her father had put together a poster board and a video with clips of Mary. Al sobbed almost incessantly; Winry's eyes were puffed and red the whole day even though she didn't cry. Nick's face was cold stone. He only nodded or shook his head at people. He wouldn't speak. He wouldn't cry. It made him feel like an outcast at his wife's funeral, made him feel like everyone was glaring at him, hating him for his refusal to cry, for being so inhuman. When a question required more than a yes or no Winry would answer for Nick, just like Mary used to do.

Mary was there too, of course, in her coffin. Everyone kept saying how peaceful she looked, how happy. She had been happy. When they finally closed the casket, sealing away her face from Nick forever, and drove her to the graveyard Winry grabbed onto her father's hand in a vise grip. She was worried he would somehow die when Mary was lowered into the grave, and fall on top of her. Al had his father's other hand. Together they gave Nick some hope that maybe not everything from this point on would be a lie. Maybe he could be genuinely happy through his children.

They piled the dirt on the coffin, sealing Mary away forever. In a day half of the people in attendance would be back to their normal lives as though nothing had happened. Others might take a week, or even a month.

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“Anyone home?” Winry called out, throwing her keys in the dish by the front door. She had driven home for the weekend from college to visit her family. She pulled her phone out of her purse and pressed the button to call her father.

“Hey, are you here already?” Nick didn’t even bother to say hello.

“Yeah, I’m here, where are you and Al?”

“Al said I needed to buy some groceries. He’s got a recipe he wants you to make and I guess we didn’t have anything it calls for. We’ll be back soon.”

“Alright, bye.”

“Bye.”

She walked through the house, seeing if her father had changed anything since her last visit. She saw the same old photos, the same paintings on the walls, the same furniture, unmoved. The house was the same as it was when her mother died; except for the dust it felt frozen. She climbed the stairs to her bedroom, it too had been left untouched, and dropped her things on her bed. The door to her father’s room had been left open. She hadn’t been in there in a long time, and she wondered if he still had all of her mother’s things out, ready to be used.

It was surprise to find the bedroom had been changed. There was a new comforter on the bed, new pillow cases, and her mother’s bedside table had been cleared off. Her

mother's alarm clock, small jewelry box, phone charger, medicine, even the lamp was gone. Now there was just a box on the table.

It was about the size of a shoe-box and made of solid, black wood with hard corners. There was a lock on it, but her father had left the key in it. She took the box into her lap and opened it.

Pictures slid out the sides as she raised the lid. The box was overstuffed with them. On the top was the last picture she'd sent him. She was standing with a friend in the courtyard at college, waving and smiling at the camera. There was a picture of the vacation they had all taken last summer. The three of them together, the ocean rolling behind them. It was paper clipped to another photo. Winry had never seen it before.

It was a picture of her mother and father. Nick had his arm wrapped around Mary, the ocean is their background. It's dark all around them; a night photo. Drops of water hang in the air; a thousand little droplets reflecting the light from the camera's flash.

She put the beach photo on the side, and pulled out another pair of paper clipped photos.

It was a photo of her graduation from Junior College. Winry was surprised at the sight of it, she hadn't thought her father had come to that graduation, but he somehow had a photo of it. The photo showed her walking across the stage, diploma cover in her hand. She'd been so angry when she got home; she didn't talk to her father for a week.

The attached photo looked the same. Winry tried to make sense of it, it looked like her father has taken her photo twice, but somehow the gown was a slightly different color. After a moment of looking at it puzzled she realized it wasn't her at all. It was her mother. They had both gone to the same Junior College. Her mother had graduated with

the same honors, wore the same color stoles. It was like looking at two different pictures of the same event.

She began to wonder if there were more photos like that as she dug further into the box.

There was a photo of a young boy on the same beach at night, shirtless, running through the spray, surrounded by white crabs. A photo of Mary and Nick, ankle deep in a stream in the middle of a forest. A series of wedding photos. Photos of Winry, Al, and Mary—all taken by Nick who was too nervous to ask a stranger to hold the camera and take a picture. Random pictures of the various cats Mary had owned.

She gasped when she reached the bottom of the box and found the two objects buried there beneath the memories of her mother.

There was a sealed letter, addressed to her.

She knew exactly what it was without having to open it.

She knew because it was rubber banded to a gun.

## Alien Shore

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Nick took over driving when his mother, Jessie, passed over the state line into Michigan.

“Ma? Did that sign say ‘Welcome to Michigan?’”

“What? No, of course not.”

He rubbed his eyes, he felt sore from leaning against the plastic wall of the car.

“What road are we on?”

“I don’t know. You wouldn’t let me use my Garmin, remember?”

“You shouldn’t need it... We just have to drive southeast for a day.” He gazed out the window, hoping to see some indication of how far along they were since Jessie didn’t seem to have any clue without electronic assistance. “Hey! That sign said Northbound.”

“Where are we?” Mary asked, Nick’s outcry startling her awake.

“I think my Ma managed to drive us to Michigan.”

“What? How? You just needed to stay on 80 East. Get off at the next exit.”

Jessie complied, her face red. When they stopped Nick got in the driver’s seat, Jessie moved to the back.

He drove mechanically, one hand lazily on the steering wheel while he rested the other, stopping only when Jessie complained that she needed to stop and use the bathroom again. Her hypochondria didn’t help. She was convinced she was suffering from some combination of IBS and a bladder infection. It was probably just the travel snacks and caffeinated drinks she’d been gorging on. Mary made several offers to drive, but Nick just kept repeating the same mantra, ‘I’m fine’, before turning the music up a little louder.

He was tired. Driving always wore him out quickly. The pillar of black that stretched as far as the eye could see, glistening and swaying in the heat of the sun. Hypnotic yellow dashes constantly appeared and vanished into the rear view of the car. Nick could never fall asleep in the backseat of a car, but in the well-cushioned, posture-perfect front seats, even behind a steering wheel it was always a struggle to keep his eyes pinned open. Loud music and frigid air helped. It gave Jessie even more to complain about. If anyone else had been driving like this Nick would have complained too. The music *was* too loud--and there was no reason to have the AC blasting as high as he did. After the Michigan fiasco Nick wasn't about to let his mother drive again, and as for Mary, she wasn't a bad driver, he'd never say that, but she was an oblivious one. Mary frequently missed obvious danger. If Mary ever were to get into an accident Nick would assume it was partially her fault

So he drove. Michigan to North Carolina instead of Illinois to North Carolina. Stopping every hour to let his mother out. Living on snacks, caffeine, sub-zero temperatures, and blaring music. Bickering with his mother and his wife helped to keep Nick entertained. So did complaining incessantly about almost everything he saw.

It was a fine start to the family vacation.

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Nick's only brother, Richard (Dick), had flown out to North Carolina instead of riding in the car with his mother, brother, and 'favorite' sister-in-law as he liked to call her. Dick had work the day before, and could only get enough time off to spend the week in North Carolina, but not the day it took to drive there. They all helped pack his baggage into the crowded car, and Mary moved to the back seat to let Dick take the passenger's

seat. There wasn't any other way to do it: both Nick and Dick were over six-feet tall, and with the addition of more bags there was no way either of the bean-poles could bend their legs to fit into the back seat. Still, it made the last hour of the drive to the miniature peninsula fun for Nick, who was exhausted from the last two hours of driving when the two women suddenly started demanding that he stop every ten minutes for them to take pictures.

With Dick in the car the couple spent the next hour regaling him with the story of how they ended up in Michigan on a route from Chicago to Raleigh with Jessie behind the wheel. Jessie adamantly refused to take the blame, saying that she'd only ended up in Michigan because Nick and Mary hadn't let her use her GPS device right away. They arrived, amazingly, within an hour of the rest of the extended family.

There were twenty-four people who had pitched together to share the massive, three story beach-house. While almost everyone waved, hugged, shook hands, and greeted each other a few family members, Nick included, avoided the emotional hello by starting to drag everyone's luggage into the house. By the time the rest of the family was done with their greetings the bellboys were mostly done moving twenty-four family members worth of luggage up the flight of stairs that lead to the second floor of the house.

One of the families had been given a map of the place, and had already assigned bedrooms to everyone. Each bedroom had an adjoining bathroom, and most had doors which opened onto an outside deck with stairs down to the ground. It was this that Nick loved the most about their home-away, the outer doors. The private bathroom was in some ways a given necessity, but being able to leave the building whenever he needed to, without having to pass by the occupying army within—it made the whole thing feel

private, like he was actually staying in a very ritzy hotel instead of a family rented house. He felt happy.

Nick had been climbing there slowly, cautiously, the whole trip. Then the car door opened, cracking the seal of frozen air, and it was impossible to ignore that he was at the ocean. Even without a sense of smell Nick could feel the fresh salt swirling in his nostrils, the wet air on his skin. He could hear it calling to him, incessantly, the most soothing sound, mingled with the cry of seagulls. It was rare that Nick would ever allow himself to get so over-the-top poetic, even he thought his reaction to the ocean was sappy, but for some reason he felt so at home whenever it was near. He loved the ocean, absolute love, as much as he loved his wife Mary. And now he had a private door that would let him go out to it whenever he felt the desire.

Just open the door.

Walk down a short flight of wooden stairs.

And he was there, standing on the shore by his only other love.

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The freedom of the vacation was quickly refined and restricted by the family. The vacation planners felt they had been lenient by making family dinner the only required event. Of course it didn't stop there—being together at dinner wasn't enough, the planners had to guarantee that it would be fun. Every night was a different theme, and everyone was required to dress up in a costume for dinner.

Nick hated the idea.

“Just do it to make them happy, it's only for dinner.” Mary wasn't trying to make Nick feel guilty. Her voice was calming.

“Alright. It’s just for dinner, I can deal with that.”

It must have been the combined presence of her and the ocean, but he put on the pirate costume Mary had purchased for him for pirate night. He sat on the bed to wait while she went into the bathroom to put on her costume. She came out wearing a revealing wench costume. The blouse was very low cut and held together in the middle with a loose set of strings. The skirt barely made it past her hips. There was a pair of short-shorts in her hand, but she wanted to show off her costume in its entirety to Nick before they went upstairs to enjoy pirate night with the rest of the family. She climbed into Nick’s lap, straddling him with her thighs, her miniskirt slid up instantly, revealing the thong she’d bought for just this costume. It was black, and there was a white Jolly Roger print on it. She brought her lips to his, and slid her tongue into his mouth for just a moment before pulling back and giggling, then she stood back up and pulled the shorts on under her skirt. “Let’s go.”

At dinner he threw himself into the party at first, shouting ‘Arrr’, ‘Matey’, and any other pirate slogan along with everyone else. After they had finished eating though, someone suggested they ‘storm the beach.’

“No, I think I’ll stay here.” Nick had already taken off his pirate hat and eye patch, and was ready to shed the rest of his costume.

“Oh come on, have some fun.” John, his cousin, was fifteen years older than Nick. “We’re all going so it’s not like you’ll be embarrassed or something.”

His guess at why Nick didn’t want to go was partly right. “No, it’s fine, really, I’m going to go get changed now.”

“Nick, where are you going?” John’s sister, Carol, yelled.

“I’m going to go get changed and maybe do some reading for a little bit.” He’d wanted to get out of the costume, put on his sandals and walk along the beach after dinner, but now he knew it was about to be overrun by half drunk pirate tourists.

“What? Just learn to pull that stick out of your ass and have some fun every now and then. Mary’s coming, Dick’s coming, so get back up here and let’s go!”

He smiled nervously and waved his hand ambiguously before rushing down the stairs to his bedroom, and locking all the entrances to it. Nick was still busy wrestling with his pirate tunic when there was a knock at the door.

“Yes?” He asked politely.

“Nick? I need to get in and get something really quick.” It was Mary. In the room she sat down on the bed, took off her pirate boots, and put on her beach sandals. She just smiled softly. “Thank you for being so good tonight.” Mary leaned back and hugged Nick tightly for a moment.

“Good?”

She leaned her weight on him, throwing her leg over his hips. He could feel the softness of her silky-smooth breasts on his arm. Her lips and tongue wet the tip of his earlobe for a moment before she sat back up.

“I’m going to go out to the beach with them, is that ok? Or do you want me to stay here with you?” There was no hint of lust in her question, and dinner had been very early.

“No, I’ll be fine. You can go out and have fun with everyone.”

Mary smiled, and leaned over to kiss Nick before leaving to play favorite child to her family-in-law.

It was one more reason Nick loved her—she was completely willing to take his place at family events.

Nick never picked up the book he'd told everyone he was planning to read. He lay on his back in the bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to the ocean outside his door. The soothing sound of the ocean was shattered several times by a member of his family as they shouted "arr" as loudly as they could. It did sound like they were having fun, but Nick was just relieved he wasn't with them. The way the dinner had ended was enough to trouble Nick. It was a good night, but the way his family had pressured him into going beyond dress-up, how they reacted when he refused. It made him anxious. He worried what other surprises they might try to force on him.

It was only the second night they'd been in North Carolina, the first night of five for the themed dinners. Dressing up had never been his idea of fun, but he'd played along. Nick hated costumes outside of artistic performance. People were fake enough without them forcing pirate slang down each others' throats. He'd played along for dinner, but he wasn't about to 'storm' the beach.

He blushed as he imagined it. John had been right, a large part of the reason Nick didn't want to go was because he would feel the embarrassment of strolling about in a party of pirates. He considered being on the opposite side of the matter, how he would feel if he were enjoying a relaxing nap on the beach, or just out sitting with Mary, staring at her in her bikini while soaking in the heat of the sand through his beach blanket, drowning in the sound of the tide. Suddenly the beach is filled by a roving party of tourists dressed like pirates, who are just drunk enough to find every pirate slogan they

sling hilarious. He imagined the pirate strangers coming to his towel and shouting Arrrgh down at him.

What do you do in a situation like that? You force an uncomfortable, but polite smile onto your face and play along till they go away, which only further reinforces their belief that everyone loves it.

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The next few nights continued to weigh on Nick. Hawaiian night was next, and it was easy—just a brightly colored shirt and a lei. Mexican night seemed a little offensive, but it was a very white family anyhow, and they didn't storm the beach that night. Nick didn't actually have a costume, so instead he sagged his pants halfway down to his knees, put on a sleeveless under shirt, and shouted *ese* and *homes* all night—the family loved it. The fourth night was gangster night, and the family was less impressed when Nick wore the same costume. Mary still thanked him for playing along with his own family when they were alone, like she was genuinely surprised he hadn't lost it yet.

The last night of dress up was canceled. They'd called it 50s night, but no one knew how to dress up for it except Jessie's oldest sisters who could actually remember parts of the 50s. Instead the entire night became something else.

There were little name cards set around the dining area. Mary had found hers, and Nick, assuming some mistake had been made, took the seat next to her. They had only been told tonight would be a free night, no dress up, no theme, just everyone eating together. He was tired, and looked at the sudden arranged seating like some kind of bad joke. It was one more last second requirement to be a part of the family.

“You can’t sit there!” It was a younger cousin, Carol’s youngest son. He was, at best, obnoxious. Nick often joked with Mary that the kid would grow up to either be a criminal or a politician. He was self-centered, manipulative, and great at lying.

“Why can’t I sit here?” His tone was defensive. Nick suspected the kid of moving his name to another spot. It was something he’d do.

“You have to sit over there,” he gestured at the counter. “You have to sit with your team, you’re on my team!”

“What team?” The family wanted to play a game, not too shocking, and it was the last night of family dinner. The next night was ‘every man for himself.’ Nick would play along, but he wasn’t about to move before he’d eaten dinner just because an obnoxious little kid demanded that he do so.

“John made a trivia game, we’re going to play it, you have to sit with your team!”

“I’ll move after dinner, but I want to eat sitting here first.”

“No! You can’t!” The kid gave up exhorting Nick directly, and walked over to John who was busy helping with dinner. He tugged at John’s pants. He was too far for Nick to hear, but it was obvious what was happening as the kid put on a sad, pleading face and pointed back at Nick.

“Nick, we’re playing a game, you have to sit over there with your team.” John’s voice was stern; the same tone he’d put on when commanding one of his children to bed.

“I’ll move when we start, after dinner.” Nick still didn’t see why there was so much fuss, but his irritation had exploded into anger when the obnoxious child tattled, and the tone his overbearing cousin used only made matters worse.

“We’re playing while we eat, so get up and go sit by your team.” John pointed angrily at the counter.

“While we eat? Look, I just want to eat, so just switch me with someone.”

“You don’t get it Nick! I organized the teams in a certain way, you have to go over there and sit with your team.” He got louder, his face began to turn red.

“Fine, then I just won’t play.”

John slammed his hand down on a nearby counter. “If you want to act like a child I’ll treat you like a child. Get your ass up and go sit with your team!”

Nick was embarrassed and infuriated. He locked up. The little brat came back over to Nick with a smirk of victory on his face. Nick had to resist the urge to punch a child in the face. He still didn’t move. John, too furious to even acknowledge Nick focused his anger on preparing dinner, mashing away at something.

Jessie walked over to where Nick was sitting, making him feel like even more of a child. “Nick, it’s the last night of family dinner, John has been working a lot on this game of his, just move.”

“No.” It was a quiet, stern response. Jessie saw the set of his jaw, as his mother she knew how far his stubbornness could go. Her involvement only stiffened his resolve. It was like an act of betrayal—Nick knew that his mother suffered from her own problems, and it always irked him that she never seemed willing to accept that they were similar.

An aunt made the next attempt. “Nick, why do you have to sit here, why can’t you just sit over there and eat?” Her annoyance at what she saw as a petulant child was thinly veiled.

“My wife is sitting here, I like to eat with my wife.”

“Oh don’t gimme that baloney, you get to eat with your wife every other day of the year, today you have to eat with your family, so move.”

Nick didn’t respond. She threw up her hands and walked away swearing quietly at him.

“Nick,” this time it was Mary. “It’s just this one more night. Please Nick.” Her eyes were red.

He was breaking inside. Everyone in the room was taking turns glaring at him. He’d done so well this week, fitting in, playing along, being the member of a family. Now he could barely contain the sudden rage he felt, it boiled up inside of him. One bratty little kid, that was where he directed his hate, turned the entire family against him, got him to dig in his heels, brought everything crashing down. Now Mary was about to cry.

“No!” He was loud enough for everyone to hear him cry out something, and he finally stood up, but not to change seats. Feeling enraged and guilty he left the dining area and locked himself in his room, burying his face in his pillow.

He’d made an ass of himself. Why couldn’t he have just smiled when John told him to move, gotten up, and changed seats. An hour of minor inconvenience instead of damaged family relationships and a humiliating overreaction. Now he knew they would remember this night forever, add it to the list of reasons why they should estrange Nick. He could see Mary crying, knew she was upstairs struggling to hold it in as beads of water rippled at the corners of her eyes. He could hear them starting to eat their dinner

and play their trivia game like nothing had happened. They were having fun without him, in spite of him.

Nick's mind traveled to a dark place as his temper cooled. He was still embarrassed by his outburst, and self-loathing sat in his throat choking him. It was horrible, the worst feelings in the world to Nick; embarrassment and guilt. He was a child, a stupid, stubborn child. He placed his right index finger against his temple, curled in the rest of his fingers, and cocked back his thumb. Nick splattered his guilt across the rental house's clean bedspread. If only it was a real gun, something quick, sudden. Would he do it?

Driven by the habitual motion, the mock suicide he performed too frequently, his memory played back other scenes to pick at the wound, to fester his hatred for himself, of someone who would react so poorly to such an easy situation. This event would just be one more occurrence in the catalog of guilt his brain kept so pristine.

It played back the end of his first childhood love. He was eight years old at most, on the playground with Dick and another boy. They just happened to be at the playground the same time as Rachel, the girl he loved, and her friend Laura. Nick and the other two boys could only just see them at the far side of the playground, and once again the teasing began. Dick and the other boy teased Nick incessantly about his love Rachel, just like little boys always do. It embarrassed him being the awkward center of attention. Nick couldn't stand feeling embarrassed any more, constantly made fun of.

"I hate Rachel Brown!" He yelled it as loud as he could, he needed it to be loud enough to shock the other two boys, but also loud enough for Rachel herself to hear it. As soon as it was said he'd realized what he'd done, and ran, crying, from the playground.

He slapped himself in the forehead as his shame came spilling out onto the walls. Her name was Alice, she was the first girl he ever kissed, the first girl he actually dated. She was also way beyond him in experience. One night they lay side by side, watching a movie, her back against his chest. Nick put his arm around Alice, his rubbed against something in her jacket, it was round, squishy. He was hungry, he thought maybe it was snack she had hidden away, so he kept squeezing, trying to figure out what it was. Finally, he gave up.

“What the hell is in your jacket?” It was just how he talked as a teenager. When Alice didn’t answer he leaned up on his left elbow to get a look, then he saw where his hand was. “Oh, oh shit, I’m sorry, I really didn’t...”

“It’s ok, you can keep going if you want.” Her voice was understanding. Alice didn’t think it was an accident, or at least she wasn’t sure.

Nick pulled his hand back. It felt like it had been burned. It was another night he wanted to die, the first time he felt a girl up--the first girl he kissed and the first breast he squeezed, and he was ashamed at his own stupidity.

He was on the phone with Michelle. It was an awkward phone call after their break up. They’d tried to be noble about it and stay friends, but their friendship was based on a secret crush they’d each harbored for the other, and after dating half a year they could barely stand the thought of being friends again. Nick was a rat latched onto a sinking ship. He’d gotten his hands on a bottle of sleeping pills, and was taking them one by one as he talked with Michelle, threatening to die if she hung up the phone. She was already dating someone else, and part of his terrorist demands to not take his own life was that she promise to come back to him when they’d had their time apart, and to marry

him. It was the most despicable thing he'd ever done to another person—threatening suicide if he wasn't loved.

He lay there as the light outside faded and the room went dark, memories of things he had done in the past rendering him a worthless creature. He longed for death, to make the pictures stop. It was the only thing his memory seemed to do well, the recollection of his past embarrassments. It even kept pristine the time he had pissed in his pants at the gas station because his mother couldn't get the key fast enough, or the time he'd pissed in his pants at the hippy Christian music festival because someone else was in the bathroom and wouldn't make way—he'd been a toddler, but his memory reminded him of these events as though they had happened yesterday to a fully grown man, and he hated himself for all the things he'd done as a child that he saw as mistakes in hindsight.

The reminiscing was broken when Mary knocked. Nick opened the door silently.

“There are a lot of leftovers. Do you want to come upstairs and eat a bit?” She sounded worried, and when she turned on the light her eyes cast to the side. She didn't look directly at him. He felt stung, convinced she was ashamed of him.

He shook his head.

Mary's eyes latched onto him for a second, the sockets swollen and red. “Nick, you have to eat something.”

“I'm fine.” He wasn't sure if he'd ever used the phrase honestly.

“What if we go out and eat. We can go right out to the car from this door and find some fast food or something.”

This was the real reason he needed her in his life. Mary understood Nick, seemed to know how to work with his lockups. When they were alone he didn't feel restrained,

he could open up, love her, make her laugh. He put all his passion into loving her, and when they made love he was desperate to please her to the point where she would need to beg him to stop, to push his head and hands away while she curled up, giggling and moaning. If he ever asked her what she got out of the deal she would just smile lovingly and answer “everything”.

It was true. She was everything.

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They had to say goodbye to the ocean. The next day everyone would pack up and head home. Nick had been careful to avoid the rest of his family all day, but a few of the people he got along with still managed to talk to him despite his reclusion. A few had even organized a nice farewell to the ocean with Nick, who told them before he fell deep into monosyllables that the ocean at night was an entirely different monster—its vastness became infinite and the sound overwhelming in the darkness. Mary and Nick had gone out and walked the beach in the dark after McDonald’s the night before, and she had insisted they bring flashlights this time.

They picked up five flashlights during the day. Nick drove and was more than happy to go shopping since it got him out of the house. Jessie and Dick were going to come with since along with Nick they were the original trio of the family unit (Nick rarely spoke with his father). Mary was quickly accepted as the fourth member of their group, and both Nick and Dick were convinced that if Jessie had to pick a favorite child it would be Mary. They also brought David, Carol’s oldest son. David was almost the exact opposite of his younger brother, and Nick always felt sad when he saw David. The way

David talked and reacted to certain situations, his basic family life, so much of it reminded Nick of himself.

They walked to the water in darkness, flashlights and camera in hand. Nick and Mary had gotten an amazing camera as a wedding present, and they hoped it would be able to pick up something even in the dark. The sun had long since set, and there was no moon to be seen. Nick took a moment, eyes closed, to enjoy the cold water as it splashed on his feet, and to drift into the soothing rhythm that pounded against him.

When he opened his eyes he could see a small splash of light at his feet as he looked out at the ocean. He could only tell sea from sky by where the stars cut off in a sudden line. Turning round Nick saw David hunched over something on the sand, flashlight close to the ground.

Nick walked over to see what it was, flashlight off, to find a crab. Its shell was no bigger than a quarter. The crab looked like it belonged on some far off planet. Its body was the color of the absent moon. It waved it's pincer in the air as though asking a question before scurrying into a nearby tiny hole. David looked up, sad they hadn't been able to take a picture.

"Maybe we'll find more," Nick smiled reassuringly. It was an exciting and frightening thought. He turned on his flashlight, a powerful Maglite that made it feel like he was holding a portable spotlight, and it lit up a large patch of sand. Dozens of the little aliens scuttled about.

"Hey," Nick called, excited. "Turn on your flashlights before you step on one!" It was amazing he and Mary hadn't stepped on any the night before.

Jessie's gasp was on the verge of a scream.

The invaders covered the beach. There were thousands of them, some as big as a fist, others even smaller than the first they had seen. All of them were an otherworldly white.

# A Room Full of Strangers

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It was a simple invitation, poorly printed black lettering on a yellow sheet of paper. The hospital didn't even spring to have the invitations sent out separately. Instead they packed them in with everyone's paychecks. Mary knew about the party, everyone at work did, it wasn't a secret. The invitations were just a formality to give everyone the exact time and details. Nick sat at the table next to her, munching on a pack of crackers as he watched TV. He'd already gone through his small pile of junk mail, and had thrown away most of what they had pulled out of the box.

"Nick?"

"Yes?"

"The hospital is having a party for employees this weekend. They're borrowing the gymnasium at the high school and catering it." Mary sounded nervous. Her statement carried the tone of a question.

He knew why—she saw the possibility of free food at a social gathering, so she wanted to go, but she didn't know anyone else in the area. She also didn't like making excuses when she had to go to an event alone, but at the same time she didn't want to ask Nick to go. If she asked he might say 'yes' just to make her happy. She didn't want to have to ask at all. He was her husband. He should want to do these things as a good husband, which he was despite his tendencies. No matter how terrified he was of dealing with a public event Nick always agreed to go if Mary really wanted to.

"Yeah, I'll go." Nick knew he would hate the night, but Mary didn't ask him to attend many non-familial events. He would just grit his teeth while he smiled, acted pleasant, and engaged strangers in small talk.

Mary smiled. It was as much of a thank you as Nick would probably hear until the night was over. The gratitude was there, but her smile also hinted at the guilt she felt at Nick's willingness to suffer for her.

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Mary wore a nice sweater; Nick a short sleeved button up shirt. They both wore jeans. Mary was worried they might be underdressed, but as soon as they stepped inside it was obvious no one had any idea what the dress code was supposed to have been for the night. A large portion of the crowd dressed as Nick and Mary had, in casual clothes; others wore shorts, flip-flops, and tee-shirts; and there were even a few people wearing three-piece suits or evening gowns.

"There are a lot of people here." Mary kept an eye on Nick as she said it. She hadn't expected it to be as crowded as it was, and began to worry that it would be too much for Nick. There were thirty tables set up. Every table was filled even though a fourth of the crowd was standing while they ate.

Nick didn't feel the reassuring squeeze on his left hand, and wrapped his right hand absently around his left arm. He winced at the noise in the gym. The incessant drone of the swarm. Indistinguishable noises broken only by the occasional yell of one person announcing their location to another. Some would cuff their hands together like a megaphone in order to shout their friend's name, others would merely screech as loud as they could while waving their arms to broadcast their location, and a few would even try to hold conversations at a short distance by yelling each syllable. Nick's hand would twitch at his arm with each shout; his fingers, unnoticed, began to dig at his skin.

“Maybe we can find a table. We did come a little late, so maybe someone has finished eating already.” Mary had to yell to make herself heard.

Nick winced, nodding as he squeezed tighter at his arm. He didn’t want to become part of the cacophony by adding his own voice.

She dragged him towards the heart of the beast. He stared at the floor as they walked, trying to keep from seeing all the people they were passing through. He wanted to cover his ears too, shut out the noise, but knew how it would look, a grown man covering his ears as he walks through a crowd, it would make him look crazy.

He kept his hands where they were: his left arm, rigid and straight down the side of his body; his right arm scratched at the exposed skin just under the sleeve of his shirt.

“Mary!” She was hard to miss. A large woman in her tank-top t-shirt and Capri cargo pants as she jumped out of her flip-flops screeched at them. She flailed at them, signaling as the flab on her arms bounced wildly back and forth.

“Mary!” She screamed it again, at the same volume, as she leaned over to wrap her arms around Mary.

“Mary!” Mary shouted back. “Nick, this is my coworker, Mary. Mary, this is my husband, Nick.”

“Hi Nick!” Other Mary’s natural volume seemed to be a yell, and her reaction to everyone she met was a hug as she threw her arms around Nick as well, making him squirm uncomfortably.

He hated being hugged by strangers. Hated being hugged by most people he knew, too. Still, he smiled politely and put on the happiest face he could manage. “Hello Mary, nice to meet you.” It was enough of a greeting, and Other Mary forgot them almost

instantly as she screeched out someone else's name and moved on to another group. In the brief gap Nick caught himself scratching at his arm, and stopped.

"I think I see a couple of open seats." Mary shouted and pointed at a nearby table. She pulled Nick around another crowded table. "Is anyone sitting here?" The question was directed loudly at a woman sitting juxtapose the empty spots.

"Yes, they just went up to get something to eat."

Mary frowned at Nick. "I guess we'll just have to eat standing up. It's way too crowded in here. We can just eat and leave if you want."

It was a glimmer of hope for Nick. The nightmare he was having of drowning in a crowd was about to end.

"We're done eating, you can have our spots if you want." It was another woman at the table. She gestured to the woman sitting next to her. "We were about to get up to mingle anyway."

It was torture; he had been given a way out and before he had been able to accept it disintegrated. Mary gave the woman a broad smile as she and Nick took the seats.

"Hi, I'm Joe." It was the man Nick had sat down next to. He extended his hand for Nick to take. Nick twisted in his chair to swing his own up for a brief shake.

"Nick."

The man reached for Mary's hand next.

"Mary."

"That's Nancy, Patty, Michelle, and uh..."

"Anne."

“Anne, right!” Joe had decided he would be the spokesperson of the table, and had practiced being able to memorize strangers’ names quickly. “Which department do you work in?” Most of the room was filled by women. Either a majority of the hospital staff were women, or only the female members of the staff were able to come to the party. That didn’t stop Joe from directing the question at Nick.

“I don’t work at the hospital.” He shifted in his seat, crossing his legs at the ankles as his hand crept back to his arm.

Joe raised an eyebrow, suspicious of the newcomers.

“I do”, Mary answered. “I’m in Surgery.”

“Oh, OK, then you know Patty?” He gestured at the woman seated next to him. Either he knew Patty from before the party, or his parlor trick included memorizing department names. That would explain his first two questions having been ‘Name’ and ‘Occupation’. Then again, as far as Nick was concerned, those were always the first two questions of any ‘polite’ conversation. The first question made sense, the second one seemed dangerously rude. Nick could understand giving his name away, but the ‘what do you do?’ question always felt awkward, even when Nick had a job. A lot of people are ashamed of what they do, or are even jobless, and ‘what do you do?’ can put someone on the spot.

“No, I work nights on the east wing.”

“I’m afternoons on the west.”

They both laughed.

“So, Nick, what do you do?”

And there it was. The second question doomed to be asked in polite introductions.

“I’m sort of in between jobs at the moment.” It was the polite way of saying ‘nothing’. “I’m a programmer.” He began to scratch at his arm under the table.

“Programmer? Like computer programmer?”

“Yes.”

Joe smiled politely.

“Let’s go get something to eat, Nick.” Mary was oblivious. She thought Nick was just being polite, which by all appearances he was being, but he strongly hoped sharing his career path would render him unapproachable for small talk. At the worst the people at the table might ask him silly, basic computer use questions. It would help make the night bearable. “Can you watch our spots?”

“Sure thing Mary from Surgery!”

Mary dragged Nick back through the crowd and to the buffet line, where she piled an assortment of fried foods onto her plate. Nick only grabbed a bit of mashed potatoes and a couple of rolls, the action forced him to stop scratching. Back at the table everyone was engaged in a conversation about one of their administrators.

Joe broke off the conversation to announce to Mary and Nick “Someone tried to take your seats but I stopped ‘em!” He smiled heroically.

Mary devoured the food. It was free, and according to her it was good.

Nick didn’t have any appetite, so he picked apart his rolls slowly, but not in the peace he had hoped for.

Joe wasn’t willing to give up on small talk.

“So, Nick, what’s your favorite book.”

“*If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler...*” Nick didn’t have a favorite, but he had one most people had probably never heard of, and even if they had read the book it would be difficult to talk about.

“Never heard of it. Who is it by?”

“Italo Calvino.”

“Don’t know him either.”

Nick shrugged, his nails found their way back to his forearm.

“Favorite movie?” Joe began to sound like a first date small talk checklist.

“Iron Man.” Nick was being honest this time, but to his own advantage. There wasn’t exactly much to talk about with Iron Man.

“Man that was a cool movie.”

“Yep.”

“Do you play any instruments?”

“Violin.” Another truth, but almost as esoteric as Italo Calvino.

“Really? I play fiddle!”

Nick had to work to keep from frowning. He hadn’t played violin in years, even though he still owned one tucked away above in a closet above the Christmas ornaments. His fingers began to feel wet. “They’re the same instrument, just a different way of playing it.”

“Really?” His crooked smile made it clear he didn’t believe Nick, but that he was just politely choosing not to argue the point. It didn’t matter whether or not he believed it, now Joe had something to talk to Nick about. “I’ve always wanted to learn violin, I

actually taught myself the fiddle, just picked it up one day and started to play around. Same way with you?”

“No, I had years of training. I wanted to learn, but when my parents decided I couldn’t be self-taught they made me take lessons, and I started to hate it.”

“They’re really similar instruments, but it seems like I could probably pull off some of that classical music on the fiddle if I wanted to.”

“Sure, you’d just have to put it on your shoulder and pull the bow gracefully like a violin. Although I tried to play fiddle before I quit, and I have to say I had a much harder time with it.”

“Nah, fiddle won’t fit like a violin does.” Joe wasn’t doing a good job restraining himself from the argument.

“Sure, it’s a bit awkward, part of why I quit was that the posture started to hurt my back.”

“Patty...” Joe had achieved polite conversation, he was done for the moment.

“I’m going to get something to drink.” Nick told Mary. She was deep in conversation about something that had happened on her floor with the woman sitting next to her, but when Nick stood up to leave a frightened hand locked on his arm.

“Nick, where are you going? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just to get something to drink.”

“Oh, OK.” She let go. “Sorry, you just caught me by surprise.”

“I’m fine.”

Mary watched him go. As far as she noticed he seemed to be doing fine. He was talking with people, eating food, and even getting up to get seconds. She began to wonder if maybe she was finally having a positive effect on him, if she'd managed to turn him around. She didn't doubt that he would complain later, that he'd let her know just how much he'd hated the evening, but then she would make it up to him. The thought made her smile. Awkward as he may have been in public he was always so affectionate privately.

“Here you go, Mary from Surgery!” Joe was smiling at her, holding out a napkin.

“Oh?” She took the napkin, looking down at the front of her sweater.

“No, I think you've got something on your hand.”

“Oh, thank you.” She smiled at him as she opened her hand to see a red smear on her palm. It was Nick's blood. Guilty tears broke from her eyes as she realized what they were; that she'd been totally ignorant of Nick's panic.

## Alone with Shadows

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Mary already had her leather coat on, the belt was wrapped and tied at the front. She had the handle of their rolling suitcase in her hand, the carryon bag they used for toiletries sat on the top of the suitcase, balanced to make carrying easier. “There’s some old food in the fridge I need you to throw out. I put it on the top shelf. Do the laundry too, don’t just wash and dry it, put it away when it’s done.”

“Ok.” Nick’s eyes were glued to his computer screen. He was probably only hearing about half of what Mary had been saying.

“Alright, well, I’ll call you when I get there, I love you.” She didn’t mind too much though, the distraction helped keep him calm, and it also helped Nick get through some of his worst days with little complaint.

“Love you too.” It still meant he’d forget ever having hundreds of conversations.

Her lingering spurred him up—he’d mistaken her contemplation for worry and a desire for some sort of proper parting. He gave his wife a quick, warm hug that said he probably didn’t need the distraction of the computer just now, but that it was simply an addiction he’d built up through dependency.

“Take your car if you go out for anything.” She seriously doubted he’d go out for anything, or that he’d take his bike. He nodded absently, already back in his over padded chair. It wasn’t the cold that kept him from biking—if there wasn’t ice on the ground Nick would go outside barefoot, he loved the winter. He didn’t like exercise though.

“Alright, I’ll see you in three days.” She turned to leave.

“When?” The movement caught his attention.

“Three days, Nick, I’ll be home on Monday. I’ll call you when I get there.”

“Have fun.”

She locked the door, and dragged the suitcase down the stairs. After loading her things into the trunk she glanced up at the office window. Nick hadn't closed the blinds yet, but she couldn't see him in his chair. He was probably at the door, turning the lock and putting in the dead-bolt.

It was always a boring drive. Mary would spend nearly two and a half hours on I-57, heading north. There was nothing but fields to the left and right, the occasional barn, and after setting the cruise control to 74mph her only activity would be to hold onto the wheel with one hand while fidgeting with the radio to find a station.

When she pulled into her mother's driveway it was dark. She called Nick.

“Hello?” He always sounded dismal on the phone.

“Just calling to let you know I'm here.”

“Okay.”

She could hear his surprise. He probably had been at his computer the whole time, and didn't realize how much time had passed.

“Anyway, I'll see you again on Monday.”

“Monday? When are you coming home?”

“On Monday, Nick.”

“No, no. I know you're coming home on Monday. Three days you said, pizza in the fridge, don't take my bike out—I listen.” He'd often recite to her the conversations he remembered just to prove to her that he listened. “What time are you coming home?”

“I don't know. I think my mom wants me to help her with some shopping when the stores are open, so probably late Monday.”

“OK, see you Monday.”

“Don’t forget to eat.” She could hear clicking and typing in the background, he was already gone.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Mary hesitated a moment longer before hanging up the phone, listening to him typing on the other end. When they were dating and he had a paper to write she would fall asleep to the sound; it was soothing. As she hung up she wondered how much longer he would have the phone to his ear before he realized it was still there.

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Nick pressed ‘End’ on his phone. He didn’t have to, it had already reacted to the call being closed on the other end and had set itself back into sleep mode. The moment away from his computer was enough for him to realize he’d gotten bored with what he was doing, so he decided to move to the living room and read a book instead; a typical humans versus aliens novel, but the twist was that the hero of the humans felt remorseful at having killed so many living creatures, hostile or not. At page twenty-six he started to hear the soft patter of rain against the window. By page thirty-two the drum of the storm was deafening, and lightning cracked every other sentence, it was difficult to focus, and impossible when the audible storm became visible as the lights began to flicker.

The flicking lights kept Nick from switching to TV or back to a game on his computer. He went on, trying to read through the novel, taking ten-minutes to read a single page. Every time the windows rattled from thunder he would get distracted, and would have to reread a sentence. When he had to use the bathroom he took the book with

him. It gave him something to do while he sat there, waiting, and it was quieter in the bathroom. It was a promising return to the novel, letting him return to the pace he had maintained before the onset of the storm. For the moment the lights had even stopped flickering, and Nick didn't hear any lightning.

Movement caught his eye. Dangling right in front of him from an invisible strand was a small spider. The spider swung back and forth on its web every time Nick took a breath; just seeing it made his skin start to crawl. He closed the book and swatted at the spider with it, breaking the strand and sending the spider into the wall Nick was facing.

Then the apartment shook with a monstrous crack. The lights went out. Nick was still on the toilet, book still in hand, hoping the outage would only be momentary. It wasn't. The darkness lingered, the torrent of the storm sounded louder in the silence of the power outage. He was trapped in a lightless box with a spider. His arm began to itch. He could feel the spider crawling past his wrist, nudging the hairs on his forearm, its delicate legs tickling his skin. He swatted at his arm. The tickling subsided for a moment. Nick finished in the restroom quickly; he needed to get a flashlight.

He knew where it was, he always knew where the flashlights were. Despite the darkness of the apartment he could stumble his way down the hall and into the bedroom. Nick wasn't slowed by the darkness—he knew how to move with caution, and even with the apartment messy he almost always knew where everything was. The darkness was too close though, the corners of the room too far. He imagined other spiders, crawling out of their hiding places now that the lights were out. He began to think that there might be something else lurking in the darkness. Something stirred on his arm again, lightly brushing against his hair. He scratched at it, worried that the spider might be back again.

He felt around the bedside table, grabbing the flashlight he kept leaning against the wall behind it. It was a heavy Maglite. The shaft was long and metallic, the batteries inside lent weight to it. The batteries could power the bright light for a long time, and the weight and durability of it meant he could always use it as a club if he needed to. It made him feel safer.

He shined it at each arm first, to check and see if what he had felt crawling on him was still there. He surveyed his arms carefully, turning over first one, then the other arm under the light. There was nothing to see except skin reddened by a sudden bout of intense scratching.

The bedroom had to be checked next. He shined the light carefully at each corner, ready for when it passed over whatever it was that had given him the feeling that he was no longer alone. The light cast ghastly shadows as it passed over the dressers, the bed, and the lamps on the bedside tables. As the beam moved so did the shadows, and every flicker became most alive just before it receded into blackness.

Nick dropped to his knees, lowering the flashlight to search beneath the bed. The plastic storage containers they kept under the bed blocked his view, so he pulled each one out as he continued his search. There was nothing he could see.

The feeling that he was being watched refused to go away. The hairs on his arms continued to tickle his skin. There was a noise. It was quiet, almost inaudible under the torrent of rain on the windows, like a scraping sound, or a rumbling. It was a groan.

Nick turned the light towards the hallway, the groaning stopped, alerted by the flashlight. The flashlight wasn't enough any longer. Keeping the beam on the hallway Nick took a step towards his bookshelf, groping along for one of the decorative knives he

owned. He took a large hunting knife. The blade had been painted in an attempt to make it look like a historic replica, but it was impossible to ignore that it was just a modern, stainless steel hunting knife.

He crept towards the hallway, flashlight in his left hand, knife in his right, and began to imagine various invaders in his home. He pictured that a man had broken in while he was in the bathroom. Maybe it was a burglar using the cover of the storm to rob someone. Or maybe it was a vagrant seeking shelter: half mad from starvation, drug abuse, and whatever it was that drove him to homelessness in the first place he had become desperate in the midst of the terrible storm. He needed a place to get out of the rain, and Nick's was the first door he found. Now Nick was trapped in his apartment with a man driven mad by his environment. For some reason the homeless man had to have a knife. Nick turned off the light, plunging himself once more into darkness.

He leaned against the wall, just next to the door to the bathroom, knowing that as soon as he discovered the intruder he'd be attacked. Holding the knife out in front of him he turned the light back on and aimed it into the bathroom. It was empty. He turned the light off again, creeping slowly down the hall to the office. Turning on the light revealed another empty room. Just the same office furniture he had been using earlier, unaffected by the onset of the storm. He left the light on as he finished his patrol. The kitchen, dining room, and living room weren't separated by any doors or walls. Nick began to feel a pain in his chest as he turned the light to the last corner. There was still nothing. He checked the front door, the deadbolt was still in place to Nick's surprise, but he began to imagine that it didn't mean anything.

He could hear the moaning sound again. This time it was behind him, back down the hall. Somehow the intruder, whatever it was, had gotten behind him. It was close; he could feel its breath on his neck. It could spring on him at any moment.

Nick pivoted his body, stabbing out with the knife while he turned his head away. The intruder had seen it coming, he'd already moved, out of sight. It was playing with him.

He walked back to the bedroom, carefully. Checking to his left and right with the light as he walked, keeping the knife ready. There was more than moaning now, he could hear laughter. He could see movement at the edges of the light, could feel things moving all around him.

He stepped carefully over the plastic containers in the bedroom. The door to the walk-in closet was closed. He put the flashlight on the floor, aiming it at the door. Knife at the ready, he opened the door and gasped.

There was a man in the closet, standing there. He didn't make a move. The sight of him froze Nick in place. After a minute neither of them had moved. Nick bent over carefully to pick up the flashlight. His hand patted at the carpet, he glanced down for a moment to grab it. The man was gone. Nick stepped into the closet, checking the corners, shining the light at the wall under the shirts, and then closed the door behind him. He put the flashlight on the ground again, aimed at the closet door, and began to pull clothes off their hangars, then sat in the corner of the closet, piling the clothes on top of him. When they came in the light would blind them, and he'd look like a pile of clothes. Nick would have the advantage.

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“Three days, Nick, I’ll be home on Monday. I’ll call you when I get there.”

“Have fun.”

Nick got up and went to the front door as soon as he heard it close behind her. He always did this when she went out. He listened as she clunked down the stairs, opened the door to the stairwell, and closed it. That was his cue to dead-bolt the front door. He always waited for her to be outside before doing this out of a fear of seeming paranoid. Nick knew he was paranoid, knew that Mary knew, but he didn’t want her to know he habitually dead bolted the door whenever she left, and then tried to have the bolt undone by the time she was supposed to get back. Sometimes she’d get back before he expected her, or he’d forget altogether because it had become such a habit. When that happened he would shrug and reply, “Sorry, just a habit I guess”. It was only a lie some of the time.

He stopped to grab a packet of snack crackers from the top left cabinet, and poured himself a glass of cranberry juice before returning to the office. He put the Scotch glass of juice on the coaster by his keyboard, and opened the plastic packaging for the cheese and peanut butter crackers. Nick looked out the window into the parking lot, Mary was already in her car, the white lights on the back fender came on as she backed out of the space, and traded for the red lights as she braked to switch back into drive and pull off. It was still light, but he closed the blinds to the office as soon as she was gone, and then went around and closed the blinds in the bedroom and living room. He came back to the office when he was done, and joined another match in the FPS game he had been engaged in.

He’d been at the top for several matches, even managing to pull one off without a single death, while being responsible for twenty-three kills. His heart had been racing at

alone anyone willing to make the drive in the middle of the night unannounced. The landlord, Bill, didn't drive a truck, he drove a white van.

The bell rang again.

Whoever it was didn't need car help. The truck was obviously running just fine, and they would have had to of passed a gas station and two auto shops just getting to Nick's road. The gas station had a bathroom too, so that couldn't be the reason. It couldn't be a medical emergency either—the local hospital was just ten minutes down the road.

The bell rang again.

*What do they want? Are they at the wrong address? No, you don't ring someone's doorbell that many times when you're not sure if it's the right place, even then you call whoever it is you're visiting to figure out why they aren't answering.*

Nick didn't play his music or games loud, kept his blinds closed, parked in the same space every night, and as far as he knew he hadn't done anything to offend anyone, so it couldn't be someone from one of the nearby houses.

The doorbell rang twice.

It had to be something else.

*Maybe it's some drunken idiot playing a prank, or worse, some drunk idiot convinced this is someone else's place.*

He imagined the drunken idiot had been after a girl in a bar, but she went home with some other guy—the drunken idiot decided to follow the guy, but lost him near this neighborhood, and, seeing the light, was convinced that this was the right place. As soon as the door opened the drunken idiot was going to show the guy who the real man was.

*Maybe he's not drunk at all. Maybe this is just some kind of trick.*

He was a new kind of burglar. He didn't know how to pick locks, or maybe he did and just thought his new method of robbery was more efficient, or maybe even ringing was just his way of casing the place and seeing if anyone was home. He'd have his weapon at the ready, a knife, and would ring until someone opened the door. Then he'd demand they let him in and carry what he wanted out to his truck.

Whoever it was rang again, and then began pounding at the door.

Nick began to imagine that it was worse than a thief; it was a serial killer. He'd ring until the door opens, then get the inhabitant to lead him into their house at gunpoint, forcing them to stand in the tub before he ties them up and butchers them, collecting their body parts in black plastic bags.

The doorbell rang again.

Nick went to the bedroom and picked up the aluminum bat he kept by his dresser. He leaned against the wall and looked out the gap between the blinds and the window. The truck was still there, engine running, but he still couldn't see who it was at the door.

The stranger rang again, and began pounding urgently at the door once more.

Nick didn't have a choice. The noise would wake the neighbors if it hadn't already, and he didn't want to call the police. Part of him still believed it was nothing. He took the bat down the stairs with him, tucking it against the corner, just out of sight.

He opened the door.

The ringer was a young man, probably a student at the university. His hands were empty; it was the first thing Nick checked. His face looked red, eyes glazed, and his smile was quickly disrupted when he saw Nick.

The drive there was mildly pleasant, Mary's reassurance that St. Louis wouldn't bother him had worked, and Nick half-believed he might be able to enjoy the trip, or at the very least bear it.

The outside of the parking garage was foreboding; a series of dark, haunted caverns. Inside, though, it was a nice reprieve. On the second floor of the garage Nick felt enclosed, safe. It was a new shell to hide in. He couldn't see the intimidating buildings; the flow of cars driven by the angriest people on the planet; the vagrants who walked the streets, drunk, begging for money or sometimes even too crazy to do that; even the constant noise that announced that St. Louis was, after all, a city like any other was slightly dampened by the parking garage. The tumult of the city was a distant echo; it felt to Nick like he was watching the city on a bad TV. He sat at the steering wheel encased in his shelters, closed off from the city. Jessie had gotten out of the car as soon as it was parked to stretch and alleviate her cramped muscles.

"Are you OK?" Mary had noticed Nick's state almost as soon as it had begun. It wasn't hard to miss. Both hands on the steering wheel instead of the usual lazy one, a sudden unwillingness to talk.

"I'm fine."

She nodded, and stepped out of the car to join Jessie, who was leaning over the back of the car to look inside in an attempt to see what the holdup was. Nick could hear bits of muffled conversation between the two; it sounded like his wife was trying to distract his mother in order to give him more time to sit in the car. Nick took advantage of it, relaxing enough to realize his hands were still firmly attached to the wheel, his seat-belt was still on, and that his mother hadn't noticed any of it. Jessie, troubled as she had

been in the past, never seemed to understand or notice when Nick was. Jessie suffered her depression in loneliness; she'd long since given into the belief that no one could understand her pain, so she made no attempt to share it. Even though she had been told numerous times before she never could figure out that "Nick doesn't like cities" meant anything more than it did for anyone else; a slight discomfort or dislike of the city and some of the things in it. A slight dislike that most people could ignore for all the wonders a city had to offer. For Nick it was closer to a full blown phobia. Some days he could go to a city and be perfectly fine. He could go exploring with friends, enjoy the food and the sights, and laugh without forcing it. Other visits were much worse.

When he finally opened the door to get out of the car he was greeted by an increase in the city's volume. While the garage dampened the noise from the streets below it also made it echo, and to Nick it sounded like a pair of trains were rushing by either side of his head. He wanted to get back into the car, turn the radio on, and put his hands over his ears. He also wanted desperately to be normal, to enjoy the city, and, most importantly, not to ruin Mary's day trip.

"Sorry." He managed a weak smile. "I just really wanted to listen to the rest of that song."

"Well, let's go," Jessie urged.

"Where are we going?" He was reluctant to leave the garage.

"I don't know, I thought we could just walk around a bit, take in the sights."

It was the worst-case scenario. They had come to see the city. There were no landmarks to take pictures of, or shows to see, or family to visit. Mary took Nick's hand

as they walked out of the garage. It looked romantic, but it felt to Nick like he was a child being watched over by a mother.

Mary was right. St. Louis was nothing like Chicago. The buildings weren't nearly as large, the cry of the city wasn't nearly as loud, everything looked cleaner; they could even cross streets without having to wait for the right traffic lights. The noise of what little traffic there was echoed off of all the buildings in the area, flooding directly to Nick, making it sound much worse than it was. Jessie led the way, turning haphazardly. She really had no destination in mind. After a couple blocks of walking the fact became painfully obvious.

"Maybe we should find a tourist information place?" Mary would have been fine with the aimless meandering Jessie seemed intent on, but every step she could feel Nick's grip growing tighter.

"Why?" Jessie was happy playing urban explorer.

"We could figure out where we want to eat, what things we want to see, when everything closes. It might help us organize better so we don't miss anything."

"That's what the second trip will be for."

They hadn't talked about a second trip. Nick winced slightly.

"There's a lot to see, let's go to the visitor center."

"Alright, I guess, I need to use the bathroom anyway." They'd stopped ten minutes before the city limits.

Mary could feel Nick relax. He distracted himself for a moment. They would have structure now, plans, places to be, times to be there, and, best of all, a plan on when they

would leave the city. It gave him a goal. They'd passed by a visitor center while looking for parking.

Nick made his way to a bench while Mary and Jessie used the bathroom and then spent the next fifteen minutes reading over every brochure they could find. By the time they had finished they each carried a dozen brochures, mostly the same ones, and several versions of downtown St. Louis maps to guide their visit. They showed each other their trophies, discussing where to go first, what spots to put off until the inevitable next visit that had suddenly been silently decided upon, where they wanted to eat.

It all gave Nick even more to think about. He began to create a timetable in his head, allotting estimates to each visit. They wanted to go to a museum. Two hours to walk to the museum and take it all in. After that, lunch. One hour to be given a table and to finish eating. They decided that since they were in St. Louis they had to visit the Arch and the attached museum, and for that they would need to take a train. Nick added another two hours, and tried to keep himself from thinking about the awkward experience of the train ride—waiting on the platform with other passengers, everyone yelling on cell phones over the constant noise of the city and the poor reception. Wouldn't that be good enough? It was just past ten. Wouldn't five hours of city be good enough? Jessie had found a map detailing a historic walk, littered with museums, statues, historic sites. The brochure claimed it was a forty-five minute walk. Nick added another two hours to his tally. They could leave at five. Mary wanted to have dinner at a Mongolian restaurant. Eight hours before he could leave the city.

“Let’s go.” He was firm. He didn’t want their plans to get any further than that. He took Mary’s hand as they started towards the museum, which was only a couple blocks away.

There was a man waiting by another parking garage on the next street. His clothes were clean, his face shaved. He looked young, like just another city-dweller or tourist; Nick tugged Mary’s hand as soon as he saw him, wanting to cross the street early.

“What?” Mary wanted to stick to their path. They stopped at the curb together as Jessie looked down at the brochure for her step-by-step directions.

“Let’s cross here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t wanna walk by him.”

She knew what he meant. It was one of the things about cities that bothered Nick the most--homeless people asking for change. Mary knew it was a problem for Nick, but they had never talked about the details.

A large part of it was fear. Nick’s paranoia fed into his conviction that the city made everyone worse. Homeless people genuinely frightened him. He worried that every homeless person was a crazy drug addict. Who knew how they would react if someone looked at them the wrong way, or responded in the wrong tone of voice when asked for change. There was also the guilt. If his fear took over, and he shied quickly away from being asked for change when he had some he felt guilty at having treated a destitute human being worse than most people treated their pets. He felt guilty that the entire world had done the same. Commercials advertising organizations that rescued abused animals were on every television station, even on the radio, but the movement to help the

homeless was relegated to churches and religious nonprofits. He had asked a friend, who lived in Chicago, what he thought about the homeless people he encountered daily. His friend's response was depressing. He said, "You get used to them. Most people in the city just sort of tune them out and walk right by. Except the guys who play music on some corners, a few of those guys are pretty entertaining."

Even when Nick wasn't terrified enough to fish out his wallet in front of what he thought was a crack-addicted psycho, and to hand over a few dollars, or whatever change he could shake out of his wallet, he still felt the guilt. Did he just fund that person's addiction? Could he have done more? Should he do more?

They also made him feel angry. Like they were the epitome of the city. His feelings of terror, of fight or flight, would always lean towards fight, and he would have to hold back all his fear and hatred of the city to keep from landing his fist into the nose of some poor soul just asking for enough to buy a few crumbs. Of course, he didn't trust other humans, and firmly believed that the homeless people never asked for money to buy food. Why not just ask for food or go to one of the various food kitchens?

He blamed the city for these feelings. It only made him hate it more.

Jessie didn't understand Nick's desire to cross the street early. Mary understood, but thought he was just being paranoid. The man was too clean to be homeless.

The well-dressed man wasn't waiting at a corner. He was simply standing there, waiting for something. He watched the people who were walking. He wasn't looking for a friend, just paying very close attention to everyone in the area. His shirt was tucked in, there was no phone clipped onto his jeans. Despite being clean, his clothes were old—he dressed in decade old fashion, in the kind of clothes supplied by any Goodwill. There was

“Excellent! Now, if you walk to the end of this street, and take a left, then at the next street take another left you’ll find Luigi’s is just on the corner.” He nodded.

“Thanks.”

The man waited, he didn’t ask for compensation, or spare change. He just wanted to seem like he was being a helpful tourist guide, and not like a beggar.

Nick, mortified, couldn’t see any way around it. He couldn’t just walk away from a man so apparently quick-witted, working so hard to make a buck. He fished out his wallet, and handed the man five dollars.

“Thank you very much sir, very kind. God-bless!”

Nick put his wallet back in his pocket. He left his hand in his pocket, squeezing his wallet, his other hand clinched down on Mary’s—she could feel him trembling. It took all his effort to resist the urges in his head.

It was too much. The constant rushing of air and sound from the wind that ran through the corridors of the city, carrying the noise of tens of thousands of lives, cars, trains, pets that ate better than the homeless.

His terror and rage were palpable—even Jessie’s spirits were slightly dampened. They ate their lunch silently, Nick managed to order, but he never even touched his fork. He didn’t have an appetite. When he felt he had sat long enough, watching his food grow cold, watching Mary and Jessie eat, listening to the waiter ask if his food was alright, he dropped the rest of his cash on the table. Far too much for the meal, an extremely generous tip for food he hadn’t even tasted, and grabbed Mary’s hand again. He dragged her back to the car and the parking garage. Jessie and Mary demanded that he stop,

continued to cry that they had not seen everything yet, that it was far too early to leave; they hadn't even see the Arch yet.

Nick didn't leave them with any choice. He didn't even offer any argument. Just stomped back to the car. Unlocked the door. Put the key in the ignition. Started the engine.

He had to get out of the city. He couldn't be asked for change, or his phone, or anything else. Couldn't drown in the noise any longer. He could handle being alone in a small, dark room, but not trapped, surrounded, by a massive city.

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As soon as he calmed down he felt guilty.

Mary hadn't said a word to him since they'd gotten in the car, Jessie never shut up. He'd lost control, panicked, and ruined Mary's day. It wasn't fair.

When he took a wrong turn Mary ended her silence.

"Where are you going?" Her voice was bitter, like she wanted to spit on her husband as she asked it.

Nick didn't answer her. The tone made him feel even guiltier. She hated him now, he knew it.

"Nick? Where are you going? That wasn't the right way."

"It's fine. I know where I'm going."

"Really? Because this road doesn't lead to the highway."

"I know."

"Well then, where are we going?"

"One last stop. One more place."

He'd seen several signs for it on the way in. It was something he might actually enjoy, and he thought it might work to earn him some possibility of forgiveness from Mary. The route took him through a residential area. It was still as clean as St. Louis, but there were no large buildings, no parking garages, it was barely even still St. Louis. The parking lot he pulled into was only half full, and it was surrounded by tree planters. It was like an island of isolation, another hole for Nick to climb into even if it was already slightly occupied.

“Where are we?” Mary’s voice had regained some of its softness.

He unbuckled his seat and got out of the car. Mary and Jessie followed a minute later, making him wait.

Some of the exhibits had wilted entirely from the hot summer. Others were made more beautiful by their autumn coloring. Some had just started to bloom. Mary took Nick’s hand as he began to lead them into the botanical garden. They spent several hours meandering through the gardens, taking in all the exhibits. Nick asked Jessie to take a series of pictures of them at various exhibits. For the first few pictures Mary had to force a smile, but by the last pictures she was genuinely happy. Nick had drawn out his energy, teased her, tickled her, and dragged her day back into something worth remembering. It was the same energy he usually kept hidden away, sheltered from everyone but her. She knew how much he loved her, but it was nice when he let the world know too.

“Nick, I’m sorry.” Mary whispered into his ear as they walked back to the car shoulder to shoulder.

“For what?” He wasn’t trying to be mean, he actually didn’t know what it was she had to apologize for.

“You keep trying, and we had such bad luck today. I’m sorry I got angry at you for freaking out.”

“No. I’m sorry I freaked out. I ruined your day.”

“It’s not your fault. Besides, I had a great day.” She took a quick step in front of him, thrusting her body against his to give him a quick, passionate kiss.

A few days later she hung a picture from the garden on the wall.

## Later

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He has only a few things to do this weekend. Wash the dishes that have piled up over the week, wash and put away the laundry, and maybe vacuum the apartment. It's Mary's weekend to work, three twelve hour shifts: Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

When he wakes up on Friday he feels tired. He tries to stay in bed late, but Mary wants to eat with him before heading off to work, so she shoves him out of bed. Nick turns the TV towards the table and sits down in his boxers. Mary makes a quick meal using the last of the clean pans and plates. They use the last of the large glasses. Mary fills her with ice-water. Nick fills his with orange juice. The TV clicks on as it draws power; their PlayStation beeps.

Nick starts a show on Netflix before taking the first bite of his eggs as Mary tries to tell him about the dream she had last night. She always remembers her dreams, and always makes a point of telling Nick about them the next morning. He only half listens as he watches the TV.

"Don't forget to do the dishes and laundry."

"Ok. Have a good day at work." He doesn't even turn his head to look at her as she leaves the apartment.

He puts his plate on the pile above the dishwasher. Mary has left the pans on the stove—there is nowhere else for them to wait to be washed. Nick turns the TV without bothering to pause the show he has put on. He wants to shower and get dressed before he starts cleaning, but he wants to finish the episode before getting started.

It has a fantasy setting. The main character is a female knight; it never mentions how she became a knight. She is strong, intelligent, and beautiful (of course she doesn't

think looks matter at all). Nick wraps himself in a blanket as he sits on the couch to watch. He pauses for a moment to check the episode timer. Fifteen minutes left. Forty-seven minutes an episode. One more. He can watch one more before showering and starting on his chores.

The episode ends in a cliffhanger. The heroine's best friend, another woman, has been kidnapped by an evil lord. The lord will have the heroine or her best friend. The heroine has one day to offer herself as an exchange. Nick starts the next episode. He'll shower after this one, and then start a load of laundry. Maybe he'll run the dishwasher today too, but he can clean the rest tomorrow.

The show takes an extremely random turn for the second episode. The first episode was a pilot, and it must have tested poorly, because the heroine's outfit is suddenly more skimpy. Although it feels cheesy at first, the second episode proves to be much better. Suddenly there is a more obvious, long-term plot developing. He's hooked by the end of the second episode, he has to see more.

Nick checks to see how many episodes there are. Three seasons, eight episodes a season. It's still fairly early in the day, so he has time to watch one more. He doesn't want to start the dishwasher or laundry now since it will use up the hot water for his shower—he'll do them later.

He wriggles against the cushions of the couch, trying to reposition so he doesn't feel the springs underneath as much. Most of the couch is still in good condition. The middle cushion is as firm as the day they bought it, Mary's side looks clean and is only just showing an indent from frequent use. The cushions beneath Nick are darker than the

rest of the couch; the cloth covering it is wrinkled and overstretched. It looks several years older than the rest of the couch, like it has only been stapled on haphazardly.

Nick still feels tired, it isn't wearing off, he isn't waking up. The show is mediocre, but it's keeping him occupied, and it's going by so fast. And he needs to see what happens next. He can't stop in the middle of the story, he'll get to his chores later—he starts the next episode.

Four hours pass before Nick leaps off the couch guiltily. He rushes to take a shower, but the action doesn't shake away his self-loathing. Four hours entirely wasted. As he dresses he begins to feel the remorse for the wasted time wearing him down. He wants to climb back into bed and lay there, but decides instead to keep trying to get through the day. He heads back into the living room and turns the TV back on. The urge to keep watching is almost unbearable. He has to see what happens next, has to keep watching. The show was just getting really good, and he can tell it's going to be amazing. He just has to keep watching. Maybe after a couple more episodes he'll feel more energetic. He can see the dishes from where he's sitting, they only make him feel more depressed.

“I'll do them tomorrow I guess. I'll get everything done tomorrow and Sunday. I can just waste today, that's fine.”

He starts the next episode.

Then the next episode.

He finishes the first two seasons entirely before his phone beeps.

It's a text from Mary. "Omw." *On my way*. It's the same text she sends whenever she gets out of work, letting Nick know to unlock the door and to call her if she needs to pick up anything on the way home.

She's wearing a pair of loaner scrubs when she gets back. The blue pants are hard to miss against her white top. Something must have gotten on her pants.

"So, what did you do today?" She can probably smell the dishes; she doesn't even need to look to see that they aren't done.

"Nothing. I'll clean everything tomorrow."

"Alright. What are you watching?" She knows how Nick is, and chooses to ignore the simple chores he was supposed to do. He'll get to them later—eventually.

"Weird show about demons, angels, and a knight."

"Any good?"

"Meh."

"Let's go to bed."

"OK."

Mary doesn't complain; she's too tired. She's too tired to even feel annoyed that Nick has probably spent his day doing absolutely nothing while she was at work. She'll keep it all in her head until Monday. Then she'll tell Nick about the crazy man who accused her of trying to poison him, or the woman who claimed the staff was stealing from her, or about the guy, the same age as Nick and Mary, who was in constant pain from various health issues and probably wouldn't make it through the year. She'll probably have those same patients again tomorrow.

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The next morning Nick is up before Mary. He showers first, fearing that if he puts it off like he did last night he'll just end up in the same rut, addicted to some TV show all night. While he waits for Mary to shower he sits at his computer, reading email, newsletters, anything. He debates whether or not he's just extremely lazy, or an addict and has a hard time telling the two apart. When he hears Mary turn off the shower he throws a bagel in the toaster in an attempt to be a good husband. There isn't any clean cookware. He doesn't want her to get upset by being unable to make breakfast. Nick doesn't eat with Mary today. Instead he loads the dishwasher, and then piles up the pots and pans on the space freed up by the dishwasher safe dishes. The small amount of progress makes him feel good. He starts it without thinking—their dishwasher is deafening. He had planned on just getting straight to all the dishes, but now he'll have to wait until the dishwasher is done.

“Bye.”

“Have a good day at work.” He stops her on the way out to give her a hug.

He goes back to his computer and starts flipping through various websites. Out of habit he opens a Flash game site to see if there's anything interesting. There are three games that catch his eye, and he opens them in separate tabs on his browser before trying the first one. It's a traditional side-scroller with a physics engine to simulate gravity. The trick of the game is to adjust the gravity controls to make the character leap different distances. He plays it all the way to the last level before closing it and trying the next one. The next game is a puzzle game, another Bubble-Trouble clone. He shoots little colored balls into the field above, trying to eliminate similarly colored groups. Nick has loved Bubble-Trouble since he first stumbled across it as a kid in arcade. The game ends

abruptly after a surprisingly easy set of levels. He takes the time to comment on it, suggesting that the levels be made more difficult, or that something new be done to separate this game from the other Bubble-Trouble clones. He hears the dishwasher click loudly as the cap for the soap pops open, releasing it into the machine. The third game is a hybrid, a mix of Simulator and RPG. Nick is placed in charge of a town, and he has to build harvesters and manage resources in order to properly equip the adventurer (his character) to set off on adventures into dungeons. He even has to purchase new dungeons with the resources he compiles. This game doesn't have any real ending, it just keeps on going, and eventually Nick gets bored and decides to quit.

When he does he realizes that the dishwasher is silent, its cycle finished.

He's also hungry. After starting the dishwasher he forgot to eat. The time on his computer shows that it's nearly three hours later. He feels slightly dizzy when he stands up, and out of habit he turns on the PlayStation and TV before throwing another bagel in the toaster.

"Just one episode while I eat."

He starts the next episode of the TV show as he spreads cream cheese on his bagel. The show distracts him, and he eats very slowly despite his hunger. The episode is almost over by the time he finishes the bagel, but he still feels hungry, and decides to toast another bagel. Since he's still eating when the episode ends he starts the next one. He doesn't want the laundry running while he watches since the washing machine can be as loud as the dishwasher. He'll start the first load after he's done with the episode.

It's the same thing as last night. He only has one more season to watch, leaving him plenty of time to get the laundry started when he's done. He decides to finish the

dishes tomorrow. Nick watches episode after episode, finishing the series. It ends by leaving room for a next season. Netflix doesn't have the next season on instant yet, or maybe it hasn't been made. He's disappointed, and having to stop watching in the middle of the series is depressing. He's done it again, wasted another day. Mary will be home in three hours, and Nick's spent his entire day playing video games and watching TV. Every second he thinks about it makes him more depressed, and he wants to go to bed, but habit keeps him awake so he can wait for Mary to get home. He finds a comedy to watch, something he's already seen, and uses it to forget that he's once again neglected the dishes, the floors, and the laundry.

Mary sends the same text when she's leaving work: "Omw."

It's the same scene again.

"What did you do today?"

"Nothing. How was work?"

"OK." It's a lie, her day was even worse than yesterday. "What are you watching?"

"Nothing."

"OK." She puts the last bagel into the toaster.

"Hungry?"

"It was too busy today, I didn't get to stop to eat. Did you just eat bagels today?"

"No... I had some chips I think." He doesn't actually know if he's eaten anything besides bagels. "And you made eggs."

"That was yesterday."

"Oh, it was?"

She eats the bagel quickly. "Let's go to bed, Nick."

“I don’t feel tired yet. I’m going to stay up a bit longer.”

“OK. Don’t stay up too much later though, come to bed.”

“I’ll just finish this.”

He still doesn’t feel tired at the end of the movie, so he puts in another one. In the gap between the one movie and the next he begins to feel empty. For a brief minute Nick longs for death, begs his heart to stop beating and to relinquish its grip on life. A wasted life. Years spent sitting on a couch watching TV, or in front of a computer playing games. He’s worthless, and he wonders why Mary puts up with him, convincing himself for a moment that it’s due to her catholic sensibility. She won’t leave Nick just because her religious beliefs are against divorce. He wonders if he should do her a favor. The movie starts, distracting him from thoughts of suicide. He finally goes to bed at the end of it, but it takes him another hour to fall asleep. In his head he repeats the same command over and over.

“Die. Die. Die. Die.” Occasionally the thought gets more poetic or he attempts to rationalize why he should die, and he even goes as far as to reference Shakespeare, but it’s all the same. He repeatedly orders himself to die until he falls asleep.

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Mary shoves Nick out of bed the next morning. When she first tried to wake him he groaned and turned away, so she took a more forceful action.

“Nick. We’re out of bagels, there aren’t any clean dishes. Either go out and buy us something or wash some dishes while I shower.”

“Not enough hot water for that.” He mumbles groggily.

“Then go out and buy something! I need to eat before work.”

“OK.” He begins to pull on his pants while fumbling for his keys.

“Thanks!” She’s suddenly cheerful again, or at least pretending to be to try and energize Nick. She can tell he’s fallen into a mood this weekend, and it always worries her when he’s like this. Mary learned long ago that the best way to get Nick through his sullenness is to act like everything is right in the world.

Nick drives out to McDonald’s and picks them up a couple of meals and a pair of large iced vanilla coffees. Anytime Nick goes out for food he always brings back McDonald’s iced vanilla coffee.

When he comes back Mary is just getting out of the shower. He has just enough time to find something for them to watch before she starts eating.

“Don’t forget the dishes Nick.”

“I won’t. Have a good day at work.”

Nick is still eating when she leaves, still glued to the movie he’s started. Today, though, TV isn’t enough to distract him from his guilt at another weekend of nothing. He pauses the movie, strips off his clothes and takes a quick shower. After his shower Nick clears off a corner of the kitchen table, powers on his laptop, and finds the movie he had been watching. He washes the dishes with his head turned. It takes him nearly two full movies to finish the pile of dishes. As soon as he’s done with dishes he throws a load of laundry in the washing machine, and starts another movie on the TV. When the movie ends he swaps the laundry from the washer to the dryer, starts another load in the washer, and starts another movie. At the end of the next movie he repeats the action, taking the clothes from the dryer and throwing them into a pile in a basket. When all the clothes are

## Comforting

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She hadn't mentioned anything to Nick yet, but she could tell he knew something was up. He'd been quiet all week, hadn't said more than a few words to her. Mary wanted to wait as long as possible, until she was absolutely sure. She didn't want to tell Nick and then have it turn out to be a false alarm. As well as she knew him she didn't have any idea how he might react. Would he lock up? Panic? Break down completely? No, she doubted that he would ever break down—there was something in him that kept him going. She wouldn't quite call it hope; it felt more like his stubborn nature, like he refused to give up just because it was what he thought everyone else expected him to do. In a way it was an act of defiance.

Whenever she took a moment to think about it she realized she didn't know how to react either. Mary went through the motions mechanically. She counted the days, bought the home test, set an appointment with her doctor. It felt like she was just following basic instructions printed somewhere in her head. Inside she felt empty. Not scared, angry, or sad. Not happy. Just empty; numb. It was a feeling that she knew Nick had. He'd described it to her, but she never completely understood it until now.

She stopped at McDonald's after visiting the doctor to bring home something to eat. She hadn't told Nick where she was going. It had been an early appointment and she let Nick sleep while she went out. He was awake when she came back, sitting at his computer, showered and ready for the day.

“I brought home food.” She held up the paper bag.

“Ok.”

They sat down together at the table as Mary took the food out of the bag. She didn't feel hungry, just looked at her egg sandwich while Nick ate.

“Where were you?”

“The doctor's office.”

“Are you ok?”

“I'm pregnant.”

“Oh.”

It wasn't the response she'd expected. Nick kept eating, unfazed.

“Nick?”

“Yeah?”

“I said I'm pregnant.”

“I know. I heard you.” He was calm. His tone was perfectly level. No anger, no panic, no sadness. He finished eating while she watched him, trying to guess what he was thinking. Without another word he walked back into the computer room. A minute later she could hear him typing.

“You should eat,” he called out a minute later.

Mary nodded even though there was no way Nick could see her, and forced herself to take her first bite. The sandwich had started to go cold; the bun was wet from the greasy sausage. It felt like coming alive.

The first bite made her realize that she was famished. It made her feel. As she chewed she could feel her eyes begin to itch. By the second bite there were tears rolling down her cheeks.

She was terrified. What did this mean for their life? What had Nick's reaction been? Had he just shut down completely? She was a floor nurse, she would have to take maternity leave, and Nick was unemployed. Mary finished the sandwich, almost sobbing as she began to panic. It had been too much for her.

She could still hear Nick's rhythmic typing. It was a soothing sound—something she used to fall asleep to when he was still in school and would work late into the night. It stopped her panic just long enough for another emotion to take over.

Curiosity. What was Nick writing? Who was he writing to?

She blew her nose and got up to go see for herself.

“Nick? What are you writing?”

“Well, I'm going to need to get a job, so I'm writing my résumé.”

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Nick was waiting up when she got home from work. It all felt like a dream to her. Her pregnancy was starting to show, and there was still a distant sense of fear that everything was about to change, and she didn't know if everything would work out.

"I'm surprised you're still awake, you had to get up pretty early this morning."

"Yesterday morning." Nick was hard to understand, he was tired. "About twenty-four hours ago."

"How did your interviews go?"

"Mostly the same: Not looking for a full-time employee, looking for someone with experience, couple places that are just looking for free labor and trying to say that my pay would be experience."

"Well, that's just something you might have to do. You haven't worked in years."

"I got two offers."

"Really? Where?"

"There's a video-game company in California, just made a big impact and they need a lot more developers; they offered me a job."

Mary tried to hide her frown. It was Nick's dream to get into video-games, and she'd always known that they'd probably have to move away from her family to pursue it. She could get a job almost anywhere, Nick would probably only be able to find a video-game job on the coast.

"Don't worry, I already called them back and said no."

She'd gone through the entire book, saying the names aloud, listening to the sound of them. There were eight names on her list by the time she was done with the book.

Megan, Sarah, Catherine, Rebecca, Anne, Linda, Anita, and Sharon.

Nick read it over after work, smiling. "These all sound good, pick one."

"You pick one, that's why I showed it to you."

"Too bad she can't pick her own name," he laughed.

"Nick."

"Feels weird having it on a list like this."

"Just pick one."

Sometimes he began to feel like a completely different person to her. It was strange, but she began to find solace in his neuroses. They assured her that Nick was the same person, and they were strangely comforting. He smiled more, seemed happier, and was more active than she'd ever seen him. He even seemed comfortable having conversations with other people. When he would get out of bed to make sure the doors to the house were locked and dead bolted it made her feel at home. His sudden silence when immersed in a crowd, the way he shrank by pulling in his shoulders and crossing his arms, made her confident. Nick was still there, still the same. He was just more in control of his fears than she had ever seen him. She knew why. It was because she needed him to be, and almost overnight, without her ever asking he took control.

“What about Winry?” Nick asked.

“What about her?” Mary had forgotten their conversation in her reverie.

“As a name. Let’s call her Winry.”

“You want to name our daughter after an anime character?”

“Yes.” He wasn’t joking. “Why not? It’s your favorite anime and your favorite character. It’s a pretty name and it has meaning to us.”

“Winry.”

“Well?”

“I love it.”

## Sickness and Health

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They were getting married in a day, and Nick couldn't help wonder if he was doing the right thing. The drive was new, so the open land and uninhibited view of the sky was still exciting to Mary—she didn't ask Nick to take a turn driving. He was working on homework too, so she was even less inclined to make him take a turn behind the wheel. They'd wanted a fall wedding, and Nick would probably be taking classes for another four years, so the planning was a bit tricky. Nick took a Friday and Monday off from school, and they crammed a wedding and a micro-honeymoon into the extended weekend.

Mary didn't know Nick was starting to grow nervous about her driving. Normally he'd read through half a book, if not the whole thing, in a three-hour sitting, but for the drive he only got through the first chapter. He contemplated his nerves during the drive. Mary kept silent so as not to disturb Nick, and Nick quiet so as to attempt to read even if he spent most of his time in thought.

*Why do I feel so anxious? Is it Mary's driving? Is it the wedding tomorrow? Is it having to take time off classes?*

He decided it must be a combination of all three, and probably more.

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They had rehearsal early. Mary was Catholic, so they had to have the wedding in her family church. When they had gone to the church together the first time to meet with the priest and set up the wedding Nick had chafed.

“A lot of people have different opinions on which verses they want read for the meeting.” The priest was a short, bald man. He wore the plain black cloth of the clergy,

but his well-organized office was decorated lavishly. Several degrees hung on the wall in golden frames; he had several ornate crosses hanging on the walls, one on the desk, and another with gems on the ends sitting on the bookshelf that was filled with scholastic-religious texts. Nick barely paid attention to which verses the priest was reciting to them, he just sort of coasted in a haze through the entire meeting. He only had one preference, and his ears caught when he heard the priest say "...when I was a child...".

"No, the other one." Nick hadn't even heard the other verse, but he had always hated the thought of giving up 'childish things' upon marriage. *People should never give up the children inside, you need to be a child to understand and play with them, and childish fun is often safer, healthier, and cheaper than adult fun.* He considered the option of no fun at all, but that only led him to thinking about the divorce rate, which only further settled his mind. *If a couple can't have fun after marriage they're just wasting their lives.*

Near the end of the meeting the priest slid a piece of paper over to Mary. She read it over, signed it, and then handed it to Nick for him to sign as well. As Nick read through the Catholic contract his eyes widened slightly, and his cheeks burned. He glanced at Mary, and decided he would lie to the Catholic Church and sign the paper.

"Did you know about that contract?" He held his tongue until they were outside the church and away from the priest.

"What contract?" Mary responded carefully. Nick's voice was edgy and she couldn't tell if he wanted to fight with her or rant about her religion again.

"The one he had us sign at the end, about raising our children Catholic."

“No. I knew they expected it, but I didn’t know they actually made us sign anything.”

“And you just signed it without asking me?”

“Well, I didn’t think about it. I didn’t really have any other choice at that point did I? Besides, we don’t want children.”

Nick threw up his arms. “God! I hate the Catholic church!”

“It’s just tradition, that’s all.”

Mary listened quietly to the rest of Nick’s rant. She’d heard it all before. At the end of his tirade Nick broached a new topic, almost like he was attacking Mary, and not just her church.

“If we ever do have kids we’re not going to make them choose any religion, and I don’t just mean Catholicism, I mean Christianity.”

“What? We have to teach them something.”

“Fine, we’ll teach them all the major religions. All or none. They get to choose. I want whatever kids we have to be able to choose their own paths.”

“We should at least teach them about Christianity.”

“If we do it will just be the concept of Christianity. We won’t make them go to church or Sunday school, and we’ll tell them there are other religions and that those are good too, it’s up to them.”

“Nick, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Yeah, whatever, it’s not like we’re having kids any time soon.”

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After the wedding rehearsal Nick took a bag of clothes and got into his brother's truck. Mary and her sisters had plans to go to Chicago, hit a few different bars and a fancy restaurant, play a few bachelorette party games. Nick didn't want a bachelor's party. He didn't like parties, so instead his plan was to just spend a relaxing evening hanging out with his brother. Even though they'd been living together for over a month Mary's family expected them to have different beds the night before the wedding—Nick even half suspected Mary's family thought they had different beds at their apartment.

Dick took Nick to an old-fashioned barber he'd found using the phone book. The place didn't even have a website, and he'd spent several hours calling barber after barber until he found a place that still did shaving. Nick usually maintained his own beard, but he'd never used a straight razor before, so there was always a bit of shadow from the stubble his electric couldn't quite get to. Old movies had given him the idea that a barber could give him a great shave, and make his skin look smooth and new, so he'd asked Dick if he knew anywhere in the area that still offered shaving with a straight razor. Nick's brother drove him several towns over, and the place did look rustic—it was promising. The floors were old, hard wood. It had a full screen door that looked like it barely fit in the wooden, un-painted frame. Every step they took on the building's stoop or inside thumped loudly on the hollow wooden floor. The place even had an old-fashioned barber pole.

The people inside the building ruined the feel of it though. There was a man waiting on a brightly colored plastic chair next to his eight year old. The man's thumb worked away on the scrollbar of his smartphone as he read email, news articles, and whatever else to keep from feeling bored. Just like his dad the eight year old had an

electronic toy too. He jabbed wildly at his Nintendo DS with a Sponge Bob stylus, even over the deafening CD player Nick could hear the clicks. The woman who was cutting the man's other son's, a five year old's hair was even younger than Nick. The other woman in the shop was a bit older, in her forties, but she suffered from the same chatterbox disease most hair-cutters suffer from. Nick had this picture of a silent, older man who would hold his head firmly in place and 'whisk whisk' off went the stubble.

"Hi! How can I help you?" The older stylist shouted over the music.

"I called you about a shave and a haircut."

Nick was surprised his brother didn't include 'two-bits' and laugh at his own clever joke.

"Oh, right! Are you the groom to be?"

"No, my brother is."

"Congratulations!" she shouted at Nick.

"Thanks." He responded quietly, almost a mumble. *Why does everyone say congratulations? I got engaged and it was all I heard, now I'm getting married and it's the same thing.* He'd asked his brother and Mary about it, but the only answer they'd ever given was 'they're being polite.' They didn't understand the question.

"Well, let's get started. Sit down over here." There was only one vacant barber chair, but she patted it with her hand anyway to signify that he should sit. Nick sat, taking his glasses and hair tie into his hands, and putting them in his lap as the stylist threw a cover over him. Then her hands were in Nick's hair. "How short do you want it?"

"Just long enough so I can still tie it back."

She wrapped her hands around his hair like a tie, and raised them to the back of his head. “So, like, here-ish?”

“A bit lower.”

She moved her hands down.

“Yeah, there’s good.”

“OK.” She began to cut his hair, too short. The whole time she spent asking Nick various questions about his life, his bride-to-be, things she had seen on television and hoped he had too (she frowned when he said he didn’t have cable). When he tied it back after she was done he could only get it to the back of his head, about an inch higher than he wanted the tie to go. Exactly where she’d wanted to cut it to in her first suggestion. *Oh well, the sides are cleaned up well, it won’t show up in photos.* “Good?”

“Yes.” Nick didn’t like it, it was like she hadn’t been listening to what he’d wanted, but he didn’t want to be rude, and if Dick heard Nick make any comment of dissatisfaction he’d start demanding a free haircut, or to speak to a manager.

She nodded, and yanked the cover off Nick. He began to put his glasses back on as he stood up.

“Um, are you going to do the shave too?” Dick had been playing on his smartphone while Nick had his hair cut; he’d put it away when it looked like the stylist was finished.

Nick didn’t want this woman shaving his face, he still had the image of the wise, older barber, so he’d been hoping they’d all forgotten about it, but Dick had driven nearly an hour for this shave, and he’d spent even longer calling around asking for a place that still would.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot.” It sounded like there was more she had to say; almost like she wanted to apologize. She put her hands on Nick’s beard, wrapping his chin with her thumbs and index fingers. “Am I shaving off the whole beard?”

“No.” His voice was louder this time. He didn’t want to yell, but he wanted to make sure she heard him clearly. His face looked goofy without a beard. “Just trim the beard so everything is even, and shave the rest.”

She nodded, and began chattering some more as she trimmed his beard confidently. This time the chattering was directed at Dick, who loved conversing with strangers. The stylist realized Nick was one of those customers who just wanted to sit there quietly, and decided to leave him alone. It was easy, and the stylist took confidence in the simplicity of evening out something as wiry as a beard. As she leaned the chair back to lather Nick’s face a lot of her confidence had faded. She’d never actually shaved anyone before, she’d just been taught how. Her apologies when Nick winced as she cut into his cheek or neck said it all.

“That place was really nice, I might come back here.” Dick had been distracted finding a radio station playing something he wanted to hear for the first few minutes of the drive.

“It’s definitely not worth the drive, I wouldn’t bother.” Nick had been cut in three different places, and the third cut had so shattered the stylist’s confidence that everything she shaved after the third cut was darker and rougher than if Nick had shaved quickly with his electric. The whole thing had been a major disappointment.

“Why not? What other place does a shave, and they did a good job with your hair.”

Nick pulled his hair tie out, there was no point leaving it tied when it was too short. “The hair cut is one of the worst I’ve had in a while.” He always found it difficult not to argue with his brother. “She cut it a couple inches too short. It feels nice, but it’s at that funky length where I look like a mop-head or a girl.” Nick thought that tying his hair too high made his ponytail look girly.

“Well, at least the shave looked nice.”

“I’m bleeding in three places, and I can feel stubble on most of my neck and my right cheek. I’m going to have to shave again to fix it and to hope that the nicks heal up by tomorrow morning.”

“Really?” Dick hadn’t looked at this brother that closely, he was too busy flirting with both of the stylists and fidgeting with his smart-phone to notice. “Shit, maybe we should go get our money back.”

“No, just keep driving, I don’t want to do anything stressful today.” *Anything like listen to you make an ass of yourself by demanding we get a free haircut after I told her everything looked good.* “Anyway I can fix it, the hair isn’t that bad, I’m just annoyed at the shave. I’m fine.”

“Why’d you give her such a big tip?”

“Just being nice, you know? I’m getting married tomorrow, so that’s a once in a life-time haircut if we do it right.” *And how can you tell someone who knows they’re giving you your wedding haircut they did a bad job? That doesn’t fix the haircut.*

Dick shared a narrow driveway with half dozen other cars. He lived in the dank basement of a townhome with a cat and a dog. There wasn’t a single door in the basement, just two shower curtains. One shower curtain for the shower, the other on the bathroom

door frame to create some semblance of privacy; it didn't even reach the floor. The lack of doors or exhaust fans was part of the reason everything in the apartment felt wet.

When Dick ran the shower the steam would billow out unimpeded and soak into his couch, a coffee table that had to be moved back and forth to create a pathway either to the couch or the 42" television, and the bed that was kitty-corner to the bathroom. Dick had two closets. The one in his makeshift living room was sealed off by a pet gate; it was the cat's room. The cat was graceful enough to get in and out to use the litter box and eat, but his Dachshund wasn't. The closet in Dick's bedroom was so overstuffed with clothes and storage boxes that Dick had been forced to take the sliding doors off their rails, they sat next to the closet door's frame, leaning against the wall.

"Let's watch a movie." Dick suggested, already shoving the coffee table against his couch so he could open the cabinet that held his television.

"Sure, I guess it is kind of late."

"What?"

"Nothing."

When it was over Nick fumbled around with the remotes on the coffee table until he managed to get the TV and the stereo system turned off, then he went into the bedroom, took off his jeans and socks, and climbed into his brother's bed. It was soft, but it felt cold and wet.

It was strange for Nick though. Despite being in an unfamiliar environment, after having a bad day, he slept. Better than he normally could even when it was his own bed.

He even dreamed that night. He'd spent his entire life feeling like he didn't belong anywhere—never getting along with his family, maintaining very few friendships.

Mary gave him somewhere he belonged, and the thought that they were finally getting married tomorrow made him feel like he finally had a home.

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The church had double-booked. Nick didn't know it was a mistake churches could make, but when he arrived there was another group of guests in the chapel for a baby shower. Nick arrived just in time to hear the priest trying to wrap up.

“We've got a wedding in here next, but I would like to invite you all to stay and chat if you'd like, I'd just have to ask you to do so either in the lobby or the hall downstairs which would have plenty of room for everyone.” People began to clear out, most going straight for their cars, some made their way down the stairs to find the hall, a few lingered in the lobby chatting. One woman stood near the doors of the lobby. Nick could see purple and gold flowers decorating the aisles of the chapel, and there were other decorations matching the wedding's color scheme in the lobby too. *Guess they do that early.*

When the priest came out to the lobby to shake a few hands and to greet Nick he was immediately set upon by the woman who had been waiting alone.

“Are you the head priest of this church?” The poison in her voice was unmistakable.

“Yes I...”

“You've got a lot of nerve pushing us out like that; we have every right to stay in the chapel if we want.”

“I'm sorry but we've got to start getting ready for a wedding...”

“What are you thinking scheduling two events on the same day? I know a lot of people in the church and the bishop will hear about what a jackass you’ve been. This isn’t how a priest should behave.”

“Take it up with whoever you want; I haven’t done anything offensive or wrong.” He was shouting back now, a short bald man yelling at an overweight red-head. He tried to walk away from her to Nick, but she continued shouting at his back.

“I’ll have you kicked out of the priesthood for this! You’re not representing the right Catholic ideal here! This church is a total sham!”

“Out! You get the hell out of here right now!”

The impact of a priest shouting the word ‘hell’ at her was finally enough, and she rushed out the door intent on sending a vicious letter to the Bishop in Joliet.

“Sorry about that, some people are nuts.” The priest smiled easily. He’d dealt with a lot of people much worse than the angry woman. “Let’s get you into the side room while you wait, we’ve got Sister Amy waiting for Mary out back, she’ll take her to a different waiting room. Are you nervous?”

“No,” he said, lying, but he didn’t feel like sharing with the priest *why* he was nervous. Nick looked forward to getting married; he didn’t look forward to having to wait in a line outside the chapel to shake every guest’s hand, and even to hug whoever felt like showing that kind of affection. And for some reason he’d begun to feel guilty.

The priest patted Nick on the shoulder as he ushered him into a waiting room. “I need to go get ready myself now, I’ve got one of the church’s ushers waiting for your groomsmen, he’ll show them in here and then tell you when to come out and get ready.”

“OK.”

The priest left Nick alone. There was a mirror covering one of the walls in the room. Nick felt like he was looking a stranger. The tuxedo fit him well, it had been tailored and hemmed specifically for his height, and he wasn't used to seeing pants or sleeves that didn't pull up just short of his ankles or wrists. His hair was lighter than usual. It had dried more completely since so much had been cut off the day before. There was no hint of shadow on his face—he'd spent fifteen minutes shaving that morning to make his face look perfect. He even asked his mother for help in covering up the nicks on his face with makeup. He looked perfect in the mirror.

It all felt fake. Like he was working hard to fool someone into thinking he was entirely normal. He was tricking Mary with a church full of flowers, expensive clothes, and a fake face, hiding who he was behind it all just long enough to get her to agree to the whole thing.

None of it was fair to her.

He was alone with his thoughts for a few minutes before his best man Jack and another groomsman came in. Dick came last. He only managed to get back just a few minutes before it was time for the four of them to line up next to the bridesmaids and march into the chapel. When the music finally changed and Mary appeared, led by her father, Nick couldn't stop smiling. His lips twitched at the sudden thought that he should scream at her; to warn her away.

Now she was marching down the aisle to him, and they were about to be officially declared husband and wife. It didn't change their lives at all, but now Mary's family wouldn't be able to tell her to leave Nick—they were traditional Catholics after all, and they wouldn't dare go against the sacrament of holy matrimony.

*She doesn't know what she's getting herself into.*

The smile was just out of his control as he struggled to keep everything locked up and contained. The longer the ceremony went on the tighter his throat felt. There was a hard lump he couldn't swallow, and he wasn't sure he would be able to recite his lines for when the time came. There was an ache in his stomach, like it was overflowing, inflating, ready to burst. Nick couldn't let anything out though, he didn't know if he'd be able to put it back in. A hundred people stared at his back, a hundred people to witness if Nick let go and broke open.

*Am I fooling them too? Or do they see through the trick?*

He didn't know what would happen if he let those emotions take over, didn't even recognize what emotions were trying to dominate him. Would he start to sob? Would he laugh? If he let those emotions loose would it be both at once? Or worse, what if everything he had ever bottled came crashing out the instant he squeaked open the floodgate even the slightest? Would he go stark-raving mad at his own wedding, and start screaming at the top of his lungs, laughing with tears in his eyes as he lost control of everything he had struggled to hold together?

“...Nick, repeat after me...”

It was time to recite his lines. Would opening his mouth release the latch on the gates? Nick got through his lines, quietly, quickly. Then went back to grinding his teeth as his cheeks twitched under the pressure of a rigid smile. *Is this fair? I feel like I'm going insane at my own wedding, is it fair to bind her to this? I know that sooner or later I'll probably lose it entirely.*

“...Mary, repeat after me...”

*We've talked about it. She knows that it's a possibility. She knows I've got problems; she's already had to deal with some of them.*

"...in sickness and in health..."

*Maybe she thought I wasn't serious? I know she's said before she wants to try and make it better, but I've told her all she'll probably do is slow it down. Can she slow it down enough? How much longer can I really last?*

"...to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do." The recitation was automatic.

*Maybe she would have been better off having never met me. How would her life have been that way? Better probably. She just has to say no and walk away.*

"...to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"Of course I do." Her eyes were red.

# Heritage

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After her eighth pill and third glass of wine Jessie called her youngest son. She hadn't written a note, there had been nothing she wanted to say. There wasn't any single reason for this suicide, she wasn't taking any poetic vengeance, and everyone she cared about already knew that she was in pain. She had been for a long time. This was her last resort; there were no other avenues of respite to try. Jessie hadn't spoken to anyone that day, had planned to avoid it to ensure that her death would come. But as she began to feel the first wave of grogginess her chest began to ache. She was in pain, and had no more qualms about what she was doing, but she worried what it would do to Nick, and so she called him. Her drugged mind was convinced he was too far to help, that even if he somehow figured out what she was up to he wouldn't be able to make it in time.

"Hey ma." Nick's voice was slightly hushed. "What do you want? I'm at work, I can't talk right now."

"Oh, nothing." Her voice sounded wrong. Hoarse. She didn't realize until speaking that she was crying. "I just really wanted to call and tell you how much I love you and your brother."

"Have you been drinking?" The drugs had softened her consonants.

"Yeah, just a little. I'm fine though. I just need you and your brother to know that I love you so much."

"Ma? What's wrong?" His voice was no longer hushed. Jessie could hear a loud clatter and the sound of wind as it blew across Nick's phone.

“Nothing. I’m fine. Just tell your brother I love him. Bye.” She hung up the phone hurriedly, worried that he might figure out what she was doing. It didn’t matter; there was no way he could get there fast enough to stop her. Not this time.

She’d married at seventeen. It was young love, and at first they were happy. She was twenty-five by the time Dick was born, and they were the perfect family. Her husband had a good job; she was learning how to be a housewife. Dick was a curious boy, and it felt like she had to visit the emergency room on a monthly basis after he learned to walk. Nick came three years later. A home birth. He slipped from his father’s hands and fell on the bed as soon as he tried to pick him up.

By the time Nick was four the happiness had gone. Jessie’s husband stayed away on business trips, somehow resentful of the path his life had taken. The feeling that she’d been abandoned by the man she loved broke Jessie’s heart daily. He was her world. Jessie felt dead, tired every day. She stopped watching her children, spent every day in bed, getting up only to put something together for her children to eat. By the time Nick started junior high she stopped even getting up to feed them. It was then that her husband asked for a divorce.

They tried living in separate parts of the house. Jessie got a job at the grocery store, and the two boys saw their parents even less. Dick learned from his father and stopped coming home at all. Nick learned from his mother, and slowly became a shut in. Every day he would get home from school, make a sandwich, and spend the rest of the day watching TV. At night she would hear him crying in his room. She didn’t get up to help; it only made her feel even more tired. A few years after the divorce her husband

announced that he'd fallen in love again, and that he was marrying his secretary. Jessie had to find her own place; he was selling the house they lived in for sixteen years, and taking the kids.

The pills and alcohol did their work quickly. Her eyes felt heavy, her pain dulled. The room was going dark. She had a brief dream before dying. Vivid.

There was a loud crash. Someone yelling. It was her husband's voice. He was there to rescue her. No. Like always he was there to scold her. He tore her out of bed violently, wrenching her arm hard, and carried her out to their first pickup truck. She could even smell the cigarettes in the cab. She had quit smoking when Dick was born, her husband kept smoking until Nick's birth. Angry or not, it was good to see her husband again. If he was angry it meant that he cared.

When she woke up in the hospital everything hurt. Like they had ripped her open and thrown in all new parts. Dick was in the room. His eyes were red, but he glared at her. She was still alive.

"I'm sorry."

"What the fuck do you think you were doing?" The vein on Dick's forehead was hard to ignore when he yelled. He looked and sounded just like his father.

"I'm sorry." She began to cry again, not sure if was apologizing for having tried, or for having failed again.

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Large drops of blood splashed on the mini-van's seats, staining them forever, as they fell from Nick's gashed wrist. He felt lightheaded, but only partly from the loss of blood. There was a strange giddiness, like the act had made him happy. It was his second attempt; the first had been an attempt to OD on Paxil. It was not his second time approaching an attempt. There had been many over the years.

There was something strange about both attempts, he realized. He didn't feel sad when he took the pills, or when he cut into his arm with the knife, missing all of the major arteries. He felt angry. It was as if all the rage he'd bottled up over the years had exploded, turning towards self-inflicted violence. He hadn't felt like he wanted to die, just that he wanted to take vengeance on himself.

It was Nick's father behind the wheel of the van, driving like a maniac. They had put the child-safety locks on the doors so Nick couldn't dive out onto the pavement. He had thought about it several times, but not seriously. For some reason the whole thing made him want to laugh.

No one in the van was laughing. Nick knew better than to laugh. It would make him look crazy, after all.

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Winry hadn't set foot outside all day. She didn't have a reason to, there was nothing outside for her, and she had the day off. It was a lucky coincidence; she was having what her father used to refer to as an 'off day'. She woke up that morning and no matter how hard she tried could not think of one good reason to get out of bed. Not that she was enjoying laying there, she just couldn't find the motivation to wake up and live.

Nick used to tell her the best way to deal with an ‘off day’ was just to push through it, act like nothing was wrong, ignore all of her bleak thoughts, and just keep on going. Most importantly was to remember that an ‘off day’ wouldn’t last. Sometimes there might be several in a row, but there always came that one morning when everything would be fine again, like the batteries had run out and just needed a bit of downtime to recharge.

She’d learned to trust her father’s experience in the matter, and after having suffered through her own off days Winry knew that Nick had been right. There was no real way to fix them, she just had to find some way to go through the basic motions, ignore how she felt, and hope that tomorrow she would wake up recharged.

This was one of the worst she’d had in a while though, so she treated it differently. She woke up and ate a bowl of cereal instead of cooking something, and then she picked out a pile of books and stacked them on her bedside table. They were all old books, her father’s books. She’d read them all before, but whenever she felt drained of life she would return to them. Feeling like she did always made her feel closer to her father. He had spent his entire life like that, had managed to maintain a loving relationship with Mary, and to raise two children despite his bouts with depression. He always told Winry she was so much stronger than he had been. She didn’t think so.

Nick had told her about the stupid mistakes he made so she wouldn’t have to. He took the time to talk with her about how she felt, and to share with her how he had dealt with his own feelings. And no matter what he was always been there for her. She knew from speaking with her mother that Nick hadn’t had most of those luxuries. Her grandmother had been the same, but she kept everything to herself, and her uncle Dick,

good-natured as he was, was never able to understand or help Nick. Mary told Winry that part of what made her love Nick so much was that he needed her. He had been completely alone until he met Mary, because no one was ever able to completely reach or understand who he was inside.

Winry may have been able to deal with her mood swings better than Nick had, but she had a family who understood her completely, and knew exactly how to help her. It was easy for her when it had been hard for Nick.

Nick had been forced to commit his own mother to the hospital three times. Her fourth attempt had been the successful one. Although Nick had made several attempts at his own life, none of them had seemed completely serious. They were simple acts of violence, enough to frighten but not enough to kill. There were times in his life where he became a shut in and would speak in nothing but mono-syllables for days, but he never reacted as strongly as his mother had. At Jessie's funeral Winry couldn't help but notice a slight twitch in her father's cheek. He was desperately fighting back a smile.

Winry herself had never made an attempt. She'd thought about death frequently, but her father's advice rang true in every situation, she just needed to wait it out, and the desire for suicide would disappear. Nick asked her about it once, on the anniversary of Mary's death.

“Have you ever tried to kill yourself Winry?”

The question had been completely unexpected. They were sitting together, just the two of them at dinner. Al was at his part time job.

“What? Dad? Where did that come from?” She said it around a mouthful, holding her hand over her face, further muffling her words.

He smiled strangely. “I was thinking about my mother.”

“Oh.” Winry hoped that would be the end of the conversation.

“Well?” Nick was set on getting an answer.

“No... I mean... I’ve thought about it, but I’ve never tried to...”

“That’s great!” He sounded genuinely cheerful. “I’m so proud of you.”

Odd as the statement was it made Winry happy. Her father was proud of her for not having tried to kill herself. He saw it as progress, that Mary’s effort had not been wasted.

Halfway through the third book her phone rang. It was her father.

“Hey dad? What’s up?” It was strange, he never called her. Nick hated talking on the phone.

“Oh, nothing,” his voice was clear; there was a strangeness in his tone. It was the same voice he had used when she had found the gun and confronted him about it. “I just wanted to call and tell you how much I love you and your brother.”

“Dad? Is something wrong?”

“No, I’m fine. I really am.”

“Is Al there?”

“Yeah. You wanna talk to him?” He was ready to pass her off, just like he always did when he was on the phone.

“Yeah, put Al on.”

“Hey Sis.” The phone changed hands quickly.

“Is dad alright?”

“No. He’s acting weird.” Al sounded annoyed.

“How so?”

“I don’t know. He said he was going to visit mom, and then he came home and hugged me for like five minutes. Said it was something he used to do to ma when they were first dating. Count out a good, long hug. Wouldn’t let me go. Then he said he had to call you up for something. And,” now Al sounded worried. “He’s been smiling. I mean actually smiling.”

Winry’s eyes felt wet, she could feel the trickle of a tear down her cheek.

“Sis? You there?”

“Yeah, Al. I’m here. I wish I was there. That hug sounds nice.”