An Excerpt From
-River's Edge-
A Novel

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This novel has taken many forms since it first entered my mind over two years ago. It started, like many of my ideas do, with a few simple ideas, none of which actually stuck. This process of figuring out what a novel is about, and how best to approach it, could be called an exploration, but if it is an exploration it is one of self-discovery more than anything else. What route do I want to take? What do I, personally, care about? If I am going to be hanging around with these characters, these settings, this meandering story, for years, then what is going to keep my interest and motivation? How do I find the balance between keeping that interest while also fending off skepticism or discouragement? The creative process is, to say it lightly, a difficult machine of ebb and flow, not unlike the tides of the river Ivan Santiago Mendoza is found in.

The first ideas had a lot to do with virtual reality and a group of kids trying to make sense of reality versus this new, fake reality. That story is still in me, somewhere, and will most likely be written eventually (unless it goes to the place where all forgotten ideas go; wherever that is), but from there sprouted a whole new slew of ideas. Some of the characters stayed, though they evolved and morphed into totally different beings. It suddenly was about a death, one involving a grandfather of the same female protagonist, and a sort of anchor of a family just ready to crumble. That beginning began with an extremely detailed outlook of the town of Astoria, Oregon, and from there followed each individual character as they each tried to make sense of the inevitable death of this character. A lot of it was forced, overly sentimental, and a little too dramatic. There was a lot of try-hard writing within its walls, and while many of those things could certainly be ironed out in later
revisions, I realized it wasn’t quite the story I wanted to tell through a lot of thinking and ruminating about the subject, about my writing, about what story I was trying focus on in the first place.

There was a thesis prospectus in the middle of this, where I decided I would focus on literary point of view, and how they could work in conjunction with one another. With this in mind, I spent last summer deeply thinking about these things, but mostly I went back to the drawing board and simply allowed myself to write a zero first draft. I realize now that zero first drafts are processes that my long-form writing has been missing for years. It’s almost childlike in a way to be able to just sit and write and not care about form, plot, consistency, or even if I’m making sense or not. My inner judge was able to be set aside (well, for the most part), and I could just write. Now, there were certainly deadlines in the back of my mind, and of course there were other worries regarding the story, but I tried my best to turn them off. Instead, I made the narrator a sort of spirit of Astoria, who was simply following this family around as they went from scene to scene. Deaths were present, as were deep conversations, disappointments, and tragedies. So were random, family moments. There was a while where I wondered if this sort of thing could work, and maybe it could for a different story, but for this, I just wanted to follow my weird pseudo spirit around as he traveled freely in this world and followed this family. After writing about 80k-90k words, I set it aside for a while, coming back when my personal schedule and deadlines told me I should.

When I did come back to the story, I spent a lot of time feeling somewhat pigeonholed because my thesis prospectus made me feel boxed in to my decision to write a novel in multiple literary point of views. My original vision had changed over the course of time, as visions for novels are wont to do, and while I kept experimenting with point of view and mixing third limited, third omniscient, and even first-person all together in one novel, it just wasn’t working for what I knew I wanted to do in the back of my mind. After thinking about it for a while, I finally relented, and realized that if I was going to spend such a large amount of time on a project, then I was going to do
it the way I wanted to, even if I would have to shift my thesis some to mold around what I was doing, instead of trying to mold what I was doing to my thesis. So that is how the first-person point-of-view with my narrator was born.

Then came the ideas of childhood disappearances and deaths, and a story that was told through a subject that I’ve found myself caring about more and more as I’ve gotten older: nostalgia, and how our brains work through neural pathways. I didn’t necessarily want to tell a story that could easily be replicated in a movie, or one that was easy to work through in linear fashion. I wanted a narrator who thought in these neural pathways that we all think in, who went on diverging thoughts and who connected stories that sometimes seem related, and sometimes don’t, to the subject at hand. I wanted readers to try to connect these dots, and naturally be willing to follow along with her as she tells her tragic, though in some ways relatable, story. I wanted deep images, ruminations, and discussions about topics that are all linked with her, her time in the past of the town she grew up in, and her relationship with Ivan, the boy who was murdered fifty years prior.

Some of the decisions I’ve gone back and forth with had a lot to do with the time period and the exact setting. At first, I had the narrative present far in the future, and her memories sometime in the early 90’s. This was because I grew up in the early 90’s, and that’s where my experience lies, but I also realized that I didn’t have a lot of interest in attempting to make this novel into some science fiction/dystopia/etc. novel in the future, and I didn’t want to do a lot of world building for some 2050 world. Instead, I wanted to focus on the relationships between people, the setting, and simple literary details because those are the kinds of things that I enjoy and care about when I read. In the same way, I had at first written the place as the place where I spent most of my time growing up: Astoria, Oregon. What I realized, whether I was talking about the far past or the present or the time of my childhood is that writing about the exact place I grew up put me in an awkward place. There were multiple things I wanted to censor, or didn’t want to talk directly about, or sort of
avoided because of my personal connection. What I decided to do instead was create a new town that, while still very much inspired by and based on the place I grew up, allowed me to write about things a lot more freely.

And I suppose that is a repeating theme with me and my relationship with this novel—this idea of feeling freedom to do what my instincts are telling me that I should do. Whether this is the point-of-view, how I want to tell the story, or the setting not being my childhood town, it all comes down to a similar want for a release from the cages we often build for ourselves. I think it’s easy to forget that it isn’t just about the inner judge whispering negative thoughts about what you are working on or your writing ability, but also feeling the need to do certain things in your story due to all sorts of outside sources harboring in your mind.

One thing I want to discuss is the nature of my narrator’s quest of sorts, and the question of a mystery that is, basically, unsolvable. What is it inside of a person, inside maybe all of us, that requires some amount of closure? How does one find peace if they are forced to relive moments of a traumatic incident that has never, and may never, bring that closure? What does a person have to do in order to obtain that sort of closure? While I don’t claim to know the answers to these questions, I am doing what I believe nearly every fiction novelist must do: ask questions, explore them, and accept that there is no one true answer to many of these questions. Aria may never find out why or how, exactly, Ivan died that night, but the question is less about whether or not she will, and more about whether or not she will find peace regardless. I would call this the act of exploring themes and symbolism and trying to see what comes out from the other side.

I’ve mentioned narrative present already, but one thing I realized I wanted to do when I figured out what the point-of-view is, who the narrator is, and what kind of story I wanted to tell was that I wanted to have a story that weaved in and out of time. Because of this, the narrative present is one that is in modern times, but the story and Aria’s flashbacks span many years, and
don’t go in any particular linear order. Instead, various aspects of the town remind her of old conversations and all help to provide what she believes she desperately needs. The use of this shifting narrative from an established narrative present is reminiscent of many novels that I enjoy, like those by Kazuo Ishiguro and Margaret Atwood, and allows me to study not only the way Aria dealt with Ivan’s death when she was a teenager, but also how she has dealt with it throughout much of her adulthood.

One element I’ve been focusing on in my work for a while now is cutting down on the use of sentimentality and over explaining character’s reasoning for actions or feeling certain ways. While finding proper balance is a process, I feel like this alone has been one of the biggest improvements to my writing in a long time. When I first write out dialogue, for instance (and this section of my novel is no different), I tend to write very long, over-explanatory dialogue that borders on extreme sentimentality. The same, sometimes, with certain dramatic scenes. This is because it is easier for me to overwrite at first to try to gauge reasons behind character’s actions, or for me to truly understand what’s happening and how it is happening. After all, as a writer, I am my book’s first reader. But once I go back through the work, I take out probably a good 80% of that information, and tighten everything up. A good example with this is the conversation between Aria and Charles, her brother, when they are at his San Diego apartment. Previously, I had swaths of large dialogue exposition that was overdramatic and meant to try to elicit some kind of feeling from the reader. By cutting out a lot of that and keeping it simple I believe I am able to achieve a rounder sequence that keeps readers asking questions, and allows readers to try to figure out their own opinions on events without forcing anything down their throat.

The editing process for this novel has been quite strange, honestly. I’m not used to showing people my work until it is at a point where I feel like it’s the best I can make it. This means that my work is finished, has gone through multiple drafts, and that I’ve had sufficient time away from it in
order to have better perspective. With this one, though, I’ve run multiple early drafts of (admittedly much different stories) the work in workshop, and I’ve been in close contact both with my departmental advisor for my Honor’s Thesis (Gabe Urza) and my Honor’s Continuation Independent study instructor (Cornelia Coleman). This means more scrutiny and questions and comments regarding my work before I even have all of the answers and trying to edit while still maintaining forward momentum.

This particular problem—being able to edit while still maintaining forward momentum—is one I’ve struggled with off and on while working with this novel. I work best with a routine, with my work placed in a reclusive state, away from both praise and scrutiny, as both can be quite detrimental. Too much praise too early can make me complacent (why do I need to work hard when I already am the absolute bomb?). Too much scrutiny and I become discouraged and start asking questions about the plot, character, and theme that I probably shouldn’t be spending too much time focusing on yet. At the same time, this has also been quite good for me. While it is quite different from what I’m used to, different isn’t always strictly worse. It’s just different. It has given me a new outlook in how, perhaps, to make sure I am going in the right direction from the start. While there’s no way of telling yet if that will make the rest of the novel more coherent or give me less work later on when I’ve actually completed the entire body of work, in theory having a better idea what the novel is about and what I’m trying to say from the start will offer more cohesion as I keep adding more.

There’s still plenty more to do, here. The novel, while probably not going to be monstrous in length, will be much longer than you see here. While the voice throughout is something I quite like, there’s a few places here and there where it can be brought out more. And while I continue to work on the story and adding and taking away parts, it’s inevitable that scenes and memories will be moved around, and that I will eventually have to do some kind of linear time table to better see
everything that happens, when, and why. I certainly don’t pretend to have all the answers yet, and there’s a pretty darn good chance I will never have all of the answers. How and why Ivan dies, for example, may never be answered within the confines of the text, and I am a believer that if a writer can’t answer big elements like that within the text, then it belongs to the reader. Because that is one of the biggest elements of writing that I believe gets lost in a lot of the books on writing and the media. Writing is a communication, a relationship between writer and reader. As I continue to work, my goal and what I believe all writer’s goals should be, is to continue to strengthen that relationship by providing the best possible voice, creative use of time and setting, and a strong sense of description and imagery. I will continue to work on that, and much, much more as I explore more of Aria’s life, and the nature of this novel. I look forward to it.
March, 2015

Yesterday, on the 50th anniversary of Ivan Mendoza Santiago’s death, I found myself at his childhood home for what I said would be the last time.

Nowadays, the name Ivan Mendoza Santiago may not mean much to you, but if you ask anyone as old as me who was around back then, they would certainly agree that the mystery of his disappearance is still, even to this day, the darkest shadow this town has ever experienced. He was only fourteen at the time, and when he was pulled out of the river two weeks later, everything in the town seemed to go silent before inevitably exploding into a cacophony of speculation. It was an accident, suicide, murder. People everyone had known for years became suddenly suspicious. Every detail of his life, no matter how small, was scoured, picked clean, and those of us who knew him well were left to take the brunt of it all. I would know. I was the last reported person to see him alive, and everyone knew it.

There are many reasons why he and I had built such a strong relationship from the beginning, and why that relationship had, eventually, dwindled. 1960s Oregon was a place of creativity and blazing with technological hope, but we were both children of immigrants and minorities in a place that had long prided itself on constructing the perfect white utopia. We both enjoyed the weird, the fantastic, the beginning of what could only be classified as geek culture. And
beyond all of that, we simply got along in the way that any twelve-year-olds might have at the time, despite being two blossoming members of the opposite sex.

Now, his childhood home has since changed a great deal. For instance, when his family lived there, there was a bamboo bush off to the side of the driveway, a wild sprouting thing with shoots that jutted out like swords. Near it were these large maroon boulders that we sat on and played near, drawing sticks in the mud and hunting for potato bugs underneath the smaller rocks. Back then, the chimney puffed smokestacks into the evergray sky, and I remember once asking my mother if all the chimneys in the world created the dark clouds during storms. She had laughed, of course, and told me that it was actually God who made those clouds, who drew the many faces the sky could make. Now there is no chimney, no smokestack, no billowing force for the sky to mimic. Instead the roof is all flat and triangular, little breaking up its layered shingles. Even the stack of firewood that used to sit by the side of the house has been replaced by random planks of wood, leftovers from some project no doubt.

The yard is also greatly altered. The rhododendron that bloomed pink and white—fat and siren-like flowers for the tumbling bumblebees—were all taken out, every bush, and much of the clean-cut-grass that his father took so much pride in has been replaced by a series of stepping stones and gravel. The monkey puzzle tree, with its curled branches of deadly scales, that used to sit in the middle of the yard, which was Ivan’s favorite, had been cut down sometime in the years since I’ve been gone. I wonder if it was because it had started to die, or if it was for some other, perhaps aesthetic, reason. As you may already know, they are called living fossils, nearly impossible to kill organisms that are almost experimentally unique. To see it gone has perhaps been the greatest hurdle to overcome bridging these two generations together. My memories of the past with my acknowledgment of the now.
Over the past couple of months I’ve grown obsessed with these changes, and have taken to standing out on the sidewalk near the driveway of this old house of the Santiago’s and pondering about all the possible differences in the inside, too. I’ve tried to imagine what it is like in there, what they have changed that would inevitably shock me in a similar way as the lack of the Chinese pine has. What have they done with the kitchen, that small space Ivan’s mother always complained about, with the hanging pans above the sink, or the little hideaway nook I once locked Charles in when he was still small enough to fit, or the hallways, with the slippery oak flooring that we’d slide around on in our socks? What did they do to the living room where all those animals lived, where all those neon lights and warm glows of heat lamps radiated? How about Ivan’s room, that place I spent so much time, where all of those memories perhaps still linger?

I’ve been thinking a lot about the power locations have lately, these little places where our nostalgias fester and grow over time. They are like Petri dishes left out to harbor whatever ecosystem they will, molding and forming true living spaces in our minds. I didn’t move back to the town until just over three months ago, well after the majority of these renovations had been completed, and as I’ve gotten older I’ve thought about the possibility that my memories of my childhood could be wrong somehow, little expectations that don’t exist in any reality. But there are many aspects of this house that I will never forget, even if they do seem a bit fragile in my old age, and I guess it’s just being back in this town that has sparked so much exploration into the past versus the present. That has made my mind so overactive lately.

Nonetheless, it was yesterday when I went back to look at that house for what I told myself would be the last time, and because of that I had perhaps lingered there too long. I had forgotten my rain jacket, and it was drizzling—the rain dripping from my eyelids down my lower lip, mixing with the snot from my sniffling nose. There was no wind, and little noise save for the footsteps of that rain, of water leaking from gutters. I had hoped to put a lot of thought into that house, but I just
couldn't focus on what I needed to focus on. There was the bird feeder, too tacky and decadent, hanging on the porch, which used to be where the potted plants would go. There was the car in the driveway, some newfangled, boxy thing that seems out of place compared to the old station wagon that used to occupy that same spot, along with the plethora of bikes that would haphazardly be tossed near the garage.

Eventually the front door, now painted white instead of dark red, now with frosted glass windows, opened and a young woman walked out. She looked up at the sky, perhaps contemplating the rain, before walking towards me. She was wearing slacks and a pullover hoodie, strands of her brown hair flowing out of it. I remembered when my hair used to do that, how easily it grew into a wild mess that stuck to everything, that would get tangled as easy as cords. When she approached me she smiled, asked politely if she could help me. I was deep in thought about one thing or another at the time, so it took me a minute to process what was happening, though Nancy, bless her heart, would tell you that that sort of thing happens quite frequently now. The woman, who I now know goes by the name Alice Fizdale, was thankfully patient, and allowed me to collect myself.

“No, no, thank you,” I said. “I was just looking at your home while on one of my walks. It’s quite beautiful.”

“Oh. Thank you.” She turned towards the house and gave it a once over, looking at it, I imagine, with new eyes. “But there’s still so much to do.” Dark splotches formed on her hoodie. She shivered, but did a well enough impression of hiding it.

I waved my hand dismissively. “Nonsense. I’m sure you have put quite a bit of effort into it already. I’m sorry for standing out here for so long. I just became tired, these damned knees not what they used to be, and have grown quite fond of just marveling at this house of yours. I guess I just lost track of time.”
“You’re too kind.” She looked down bashfully, and in that I saw lines form around her face, these little aging giveaways. I wondered, in that instant, if she was a mother. If the halls of Ivan’s old house, however they looked now, were giving a new generation of little feet and young eyes memories that I was never able to provide. But she looked quite young, mid-thirties maybe, and these days women can wait until eternity to have children. Time has slowed down, the sands fall at a more even pace, and at least some of the medieval expectations of women have thankfully been set aside, though my mother, may she rest in peace, would still be one of the first to tell you that it isn’t enough. She was thin, the hoodie large and baggy on her. Her eyelashes were similar to the kind my friends and I would try to replicate well into our twenties, during some exhausting event or another.

“Oh,” she said suddenly, realizing something. “I’m sorry, would you like to come in and rest for a few minutes?”

“No, no, I don’t want to be a bother. I can be on my way in another minute here.”

“It’s no bother at all. Come on. I’m not really doing anything save for baking a few cakes for my kid’s school auction.” She turned. “What’s your name? I’m Alice.”

I nodded once. “I’m Aria. Aria Khatri.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I followed her up the driveway and onto the porch and towards the door with the frosted glass. I remember when I was younger and my elementary school, too, would have auctions. My mother, bless her heart, would work tirelessly in the kitchen to provide for them. Most of the time, she made casseroles, these pungent dishes almost burnt on top and creamy in the middle—the splash of orange from carrots and green in peas—that would fill the room with the clawing smell of tuna as they baked, glistening in the yellow light of the oven. Sometimes, Ivan and I would watch them sweat, the expert slits on each side, the rising shape similar to the Christian ichthys. It was her or her mother’s recipe, I’m not sure, and something that was a regular rotation in our family dinners,
even though my father hated them. He always claimed their smell made him nauseated. This wasn’t unusual, though. My father often complained about smells, even ones that most of us couldn’t notice much at all, even ones most of us liked. Flowers in a spring meadow, for example, or even the sweet nuttiness of oatmeal.

Ivan’s father, Arias Diego Tómas Mendoza, loved them, however. Every time my mother would enter one of her steaming ichthys’s—still in their dutch oven and glass-covered—into the silent auctions, he could be found, like clockwork, wandering over and putting his name down. It was one of the only items he religiously bid on at these events, always spending far too much on them despite my mother’s protests. She always told him she would gladly bake him the dish for free, but he rarely accepted the offer, often writing it off as a gift for the kids. I knew this to be a ruse, though, because Ivan once told me that after these occasional auctions, his father could be found in the kitchen, eating the leftovers over the sink in the middle of the night, consuming easily half the dish in a single, almost monstrous, binge.

“It’s just this way,” said Alice, opening the front door and wiping her feet on the matt. Flour and chocolate and cinnamon wafted out the door, which was so different than the smells I was instinctually expecting, both from the memory of my mother’s own baking, but also from the memories of entering this house so long ago, back when Ivan’s father would heat up my mother’s dish, which I would sometimes bring with me against his wishes, which would, at best, muddle with the myriad of others smells that congregated in that house. The muskiness of his sweat. The amalgam of animal bedding and reptilian feces. The feint cocktail of algae and reef water bubbling in iridescent tanks.

Being back at this house, visiting for the past month or so, has made me curious about what happened to Arias Diego Tómas Mendoza since I left. I’d heard rumors, saw remnants during the few times I’ve visited, but searching out facts has been more difficult than I thought. What I could
gather, over the years, Arias never moved from this house, not after his divorce, not even after Ivan’s death. Not after that house must have had more ghosts than angels. It seemed like the more that happened to him the harder he gripped, the more he resisted leaving the three-story house on 15th Avenue. Not when he fell the first or the second time. Not when he started to go blind.

Instead, he practically boarded himself up. There were even reports, after he passed years ago, of the items strewn about the house. The bags of old toys. Entire rooms covered in crags of long-useless mementos. I wonder what Ivan’s sister Sofia was doing during this time. I wonder if she tried to help and, if she had, if Arias turned her down.

In time, he became somewhat infamous in the town. I’ve stumbled on his name while researching old newspapers for what I’ve missed over the years in places like the local archives or the Coastal Research Lab in the public library. He had become a shut in, a hoarder, a mysterious figure that kept the shutters closed and everyone else out. I cannot help but try to imagine what had gone on in there, behind closed doors. Arias Mendoza, all alone, half-blind, wandering around a house of shadows, the leaking street lights in darkness coming in through the blinds. I wonder if any teenagers tormented him in this state of stupor and old age, if they ever tried to break in or stood on the sidewalks—like Ivan and I used to in front of legendarily haunted houses—and whispered about the lurking menace inside?

I remember the first time I had met him. My brother Charles and I were invited over to their house after we had been going to Saint Mary’s Star of the Sea for maybe two, three weeks. Ivan had approached me on our first day, and while I was less than receptive of him at first, wary of any boy who was so willing to approach me, we quickly became friends. As I’ve already mentioned, it was incredibly awkward being anything but white in a school, in an entire area, that was like a blanket of lighter shades. It didn’t help that my mother was white, had been born and raised in Oregon herself, or that my brother was named after her father, my grandfather, a liver-spotted huge man with a
smile of gold. We were brown, with the only little bit of solace being that we weren’t black. Oregon
has, to pardon my French, a fucking legion of racist histories

We both were fascinated by monsters and the pictures they showed after the Disney ones at the cinema. The darker, the weirder, the better. We were inspired by the mysterious, the unknown, the twilight of madness those stories exhibited. I’m not sure if you remember them or not, but back then the movies were so magical, even the horrible, corny, goofy ones that failed miserably to portray any resemblance to reality. We played Shoot the Moon, and made plans to walk the Riverwalk, to ride the trolley and glance out at that river and wonder what, if anything, lived inside of it. It didn’t matter that he liked basketball and I couldn’t care less about sports, or that I was often guilty of having bouts of reclusive behavior. We, for whatever mysterious reason, and for every obvious reason, gravitated towards each other.

On that first day at their house, Charles and I knocked on the door and were greeted by Ivan. I nodded towards him at first, but then noticed something behind him. An animal, scaly and spined, slinking along the floor. Neither Charles nor I had ever seen something like that before, and I wasn’t sure if it was some kind of intruder—a creature from the sewers or some radioactive lab—or something that was supposed to be there. I meekly pointed towards it, and when Ivan turned to see what it was I pointed at, he looked back at me and smiled.

“That’s Elvis,” he said. “Our red iguana.”

“Elvis?” I asked.

“Yeah. My dad hates Elvis, but my mom loves him. I think she called him that to spite my dad after he brought a random iguana home.”

“That thing’s an iguana?” asked Charles.

“Yup.”

“It’s huge!”
“There are bigger ones. I think he’s about six feet, including his long tail. Sounds bigger than it really is.”

“I think it’s pretty darn huge!” said Charles.

We walked through the front door, which opened into a foyer that led directly into their living room on the left. We followed Ivan into it, and I remember my eyes widening. I couldn’t help but be in awe of that place. The entire area, save for the couch in the corner and a television set, was completely covered in various fish tanks and terrariums, with plants and colored lighting that cast everything in a multicolored, nebular hue. The muffled pulsing of crickets brought memories of evening strolls. My nose itched with sawdust. And there was an acrid muskiness in the air, a combination of odors I couldn’t even begin to understand. Barnyard, moist earth, a larvae science experiment I did years earlier at my old school in California.

Ivan showed us around the living room. There were so many kinds of reptiles and amphibians there, so many different types of fishes and exotic plant life that we’d never seen before. In one corner was a hidden ball python, in another a skittering fire salamander roaming the moist floor of its little enclosure. Sticky-footed crested geckos lined another tank, at least three or four of them hanging out on vertical glass. Starfish and clown fish, yellow tang and blue jaw triggers and longnose hawkfish. Pink and orange and aqua corals, spiraling algae and other various sea plants, almost dancing in the water current. A bearded dragon waving its hand and bobbing its head, perked up at the sight of visitors. And over by the side, an emerald tree boa, the prize of the entire collection, one that Ivan swore was impossible to touch, impossible to take out of its enclosure, which hung by a single stick and glanced at us with unmoving silver eyes.

“It bites,” said Ivan.

“Hard?” asked Charles.

“Oh yeah.”
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Just then a little girl, maybe seven-years-old, entered the room. While I may have been bashful when I was her age, hiding behind the legs of my parents, she was the opposite. Giddy, skipping, humming some tune or another from the time. Her long curly hair was like a mane of perpetual entanglement, and she seemed totally and completely content, seemingly unaware of everything that was going on around her. It was a quality that would, later, make Ivan and I make a pact to protect her from the unknown dangers of the world, dangers that neither one of us ever imagined befalling ourselves.

“Hiya,” she said.

“This is my sister,” said Ivan. “Sofía.”

Charles looked at her and then back at the animals. I said hello.

“Watcha doing?” asked Sofía.

“Looking at the animals,” said Ivan. “Why don’t you go play?”

“I am playing. Hey, hey, Ivan, remember when dad had to clean that tank?” she asked, looking up at her big brother, pointing at the emerald tree boa, still coiled around its lone, horizontal stick, still staring straight ahead with those amber eyes.

“Yeah.”

“It bit him so hard he started yelling and yelling.”

“That’s so cool,” said Charles, peering reverentially into the tank.

“Charles!” I said. “That’s not nice.” He didn’t notice, though, or didn’t care, his shyness seemingly leaving him in a flash. He only had eyes for that reptile, its scales spinning with bolts of white, a tongue flickering out once or twice, and those eyes, never leaving our general direction.

“That’s okay,” said Ivan, smiling. “It was pretty cool.”

That was when Arias came in from the other room. I remember looking up at him and thinking that a giant had entered, a man so tall that he almost had to bend through doorways. I had
always seen my grandfather as a large man, and he certainly was, but Arias Mendoza was a different kind of large, the kind not encountered in everyday life. He wore a Hawaiian shirt, embroidered with dozens of bright flowers and tropical birds, and had large, black-rimmed glasses. He gave us a quizzical look that seemed to ponder what must have been an interesting sight. Four kids, two he’d never seen before, gawking over a single animal tank, housing an animal that, if legend held true, was a feisty, dangerous thing, an animal that refused to be touched.

Later on, Charles and I would both giddily discuss the attention Arias commanded, and how worried we were that this mythically huge man was angry at us for crowding one of his prized animals, or for neglecting to do some important family ritual, like taking off our shoes before entering the house or failing to keep our voices down. Instead, he simply looked at us, at first almost like we were all aliens, a longwinded, bespectacled investigation, and then with a big smile that stole all the potential fear from our minds.

I don’t really remember what all he said to us then, but I do recall him shaking his head with laughter and his big, wondrous eyes, like a child’s, as he walked around the room, offering to show off, even take out, any reptile or amphibian we wanted to see. Well, save for the emerald tree boa, which, he said, wanted to stay where she was. That was the first time I think I ever really saw reptiles like that, all of these various kinds that didn’t exist in the wild anywhere that I knew. I couldn’t even imagine the world they came from, where a person could walk outside and see a bearded dragon or a rainbow boa, glistening with pearlescent greens and purples, where a six-foot, supposedly unimpressive, red iguana would be perched like a cat or a baby deer in someone’s driveway. He even had poison dart frogs, infamous animals during my childhood, ones brightly colored in neon blues and reds and blacks, ones that we were promised to kill a man with a single flicker of their tongues, but ones Arias Mendoza swore were harmless in captivity.
But I didn’t mean to get off track, to start talking about Ivan’s father and the first time I had been to that house. I was talking about yesterday, when the woman named Alice Fizdale invited me into her home, Ivan’s childhood home, and how we were entering, past the door with the frosted glass, and how it would perhaps be my last time. This was an exciting moment for me, but also kind of terrifying, as opening routes for your memories to traverse often are.

But when we walked into that entryway, I found myself somewhat disappointed. At first I couldn’t really figure out why, but looking back on it now and thinking about it a great deal this morning I’ve come to a greater understanding. It wasn’t any of the obvious renovations that have been made over the years, as they weren’t especially significant. And it wasn’t necessarily the lack of change, either. The few pictures Ivan’s family had by the entryway during those years were simple, like the ones painted by Ivan’s aunt, showing rolling fields of golden wheat bristling against an Aegean sky, or their family portraits, manufactured facsimiles of reality. They were replaced by beautiful, albeit melancholy, black and white photographs of landscapes. They seemed to contrast with one another, seemed to create a sort of shifting mood depending on where you looked and which order you looked at them in. There were lonesome, gothic pines with swirling clouds behind them. There were mountain ranges with the white orb of a sun off to the side. And one of a chapel, the shadows swallowing parts of it to give it a certain insidious edge. The flimsy shoe rack and ceramic rooster jar were welcome omissions, leaving the space more open and roomy.

What I think, and I may need to reflect on this more, is that my disappointment came merely from a lack of feeling. Perhaps I wanted sentimentality. So much had happened in that house, and I was almost expecting it to have been trapped in a bottle all these years, ready to froth out in tidal waves of cognition as soon as I opened it. I suppose, looking back to that yesterday morning, I was expecting, hoping maybe, for an experience like what happened when I saw my brother last month,
where even something insignificant, such as Ivan’s childhood home’s entryway, would spark something dormant within me.

We were sitting on his San Diego apartment balcony, which overlooked an almost manufactured, too-clean walking area three-stories below. There were trees and plants and flowers, but each seemed calculated, far too controlled, clipped and pruned and weeded and stripped of any originality, as if the entire space was machine-made and simply plopped in by some machine to give the illusion, but not the impression, of beauty. The chairs we sat in were comfortable and rocked easily, though perhaps creaked a little too loudly, and the side table had an assortment of tea cakes and mugs of steaming coffee. We had been walking around parts of San Diego for most of the day, so we were both tired, my feet especially calling for a soak, and I knew that Charles had other things on his mind, perpetually checking his phone for any missed texts or calls.

“He’s fine,” I said. “Just sleeping. You know that.”

“I should probably check on him.”

“You just did six minutes ago. You have to let him rest.”

He didn’t say anything, but his shoulders slumped, relaxed a little, but I could almost feel the tension in the way his eyes closed, his jaw clenched, his hands grabbed the chair’s armrests. He let out a big breath. “What am I going to do, Air?”

“Just be there.”

He opened his eyes and sighed, shaking his head. “What a fucking mess.”

“What?”

“Do you know what the doctors said last week? They couldn’t find a reason for his current bout of pain. It’s just a big circle with these people. I don’t remember doctors being so useless.”

“I like my doctor.”

He didn’t say anything, just stared off, maybe at the couple walking in the park blocks below.
“Everything will be okay,” I said.

“You don’t know that.”

I took a breath. “Okay, I don’t. You’re right.”

“Giving up that easily? You know, there was a time you’d fight with me for hours about shit like this.”

“I’m too tired. Do you have any beer?”

He nodded. “I’ll get one for you.”

“No. I’ll get it. If you go I won’t see you for half an hour. Frank needs his rest.” I stood, my feet pulsating, as if they were wondering why I wouldn’t just leave them alone. I went into his kitchen and grabbed a beer and came back. Charles’s apartment was nice. Small, like most halfway affordable places in San Diego, but nice. They both have a sense of Feng shui, something I’ve never been able to quite get down. Places I live always have elements that don’t seem quite right, no matter how much I meddle. But when I enter their apartment, a throw blanket could be casually tossed on a chair and it would look like the perfect spot. Its living place. Each item, no matter how mundane, had a home, and none of it, when examined closely, made any logical sense. How could a lamp, turned just a certain way, seem to fit so well, but when turned another, seem glaring and tremendously wrong?

When I got back on the balcony I handed Charles a beer, too, and sat back beside him. We didn’t say much for a while, maybe just a few observational things here and there, but I could tell he was preoccupied. He was being quieter than usual, and if I’ve known my brother at all, he has tells that give him away. The way his leg constantly moves when he becomes nervous, or how he starts peeling away splinters from wood furniture.

Finally, he spoke up. “I wish we had met sooner. Before my hair turned gray.”

“Who? You and Frank?”
“Yeah.”

“To be fair, your hair started doing that in your twenties.”

He barely glanced at me, the joke clearly falling flat. “You know what I mean.”

“Charles, you’re moping.” I looked at him. He didn’t look back, didn’t even glance this time.

“It’s not going to help.”

“I could do without the lecture right now.”

“That’s fine. I’m just saying.”

I looked away and for a while focused on the sunset and the manufactured park below. The oranges splashing against the remaining blues, the pinks showing a bit of themselves, but it all seemed so numb and washed out from the sunsets of my childhood. I’m not sure if that was the first time I’ve noticed the change—I’ve had to before—but it just seemed so faded, as if, ironically, it was a painting left out too long in the sun. A hummingbird, perhaps a Costa’s, was flickering from balcony to balcony, tasting the many flowers and plants people had for decoration. We sat and nibbled on the cakes and drank the coffee slowly. It tasted like what I had always attributed to expensive coffee. Bitter, too many flavors, a clashing that my taste buds have never been able to understand. The tea cakes were good, though, like everything Frank baked. The guy is a wizard when it comes to baking. It probably helps that he is a math professor and a perfectionist to boot. Where I would get impatient, would be too lazy to measure perfect amounts, Frank could be seen, practically with a magnifying glass, making sure not a speck more than the required ingredients was placed, making sure to stir just right, to touch his creations the way they needed to be touched. Not too sweet, a touch of raspberry, a simplicity that helped soften the aggressiveness of the coffee.

After several minutes, Charles finally spoke again. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. He was just really excited for you to come into town. To show you around.”
“It’s okay. He knows I understand.”

“It’s just been really hard.”

“I know.”

I thought about this for a minute. I watched a squirrel in the balcony across the way maneuver itself along a gutter, crawl up along its perforations, defeating gravity with its acrobatics, and then leap into someone’s personal garden. It disappeared in a wisp of what I identified as aristida purpurea and madia elegans. “You’ve always worn your heart on your sleeve,” I said. “So it’s understandable.”

“And you’ve always kept everything closed up, even to yourself.”

“It wasn’t meant as an insult.”

He swept his hand over his forehead, where his bangs used to sit, a nervous habit from before his hair had receded. “I still can’t believe that you’re moving back to Oregon. After all this time.”

I had been waiting for this subject to be broached. When we had gone to the Museum of the Arts, and wandered the stone walls, through the roman-inspired pillars, looking at various installations, some that talked and some that hid within themselves, I expected my brother, never one to totally understand the serenity of art, to ask about it. To interrupt my crowded solace while looking at a Native American headdress, or a Peruvian modern landscape of mountainous greenery, but he didn’t. And nor did he bring it up during lunch, a rum and coke tilted in his hand, a tortilla chip dripping salsa in the other, pop music, that horrible cacophony, playing far too loudly in the background. In a way I had been dreading the subject, unsure of how to explain myself, unsure how to admit what I really hoped to do up there, after being gone for over thirty years.

“Yeah,” I said. “I can’t really believe it, either.”

“Why?”
“Why am I moving back?”

He nodded.

“I don’t really know. I guess I just long for familiarity.”

I’d considered this exact question after deciding to move back a couple of months prior. It was seemingly out of the blue, and while I’ve had a history of being rather spontaneous at times, I’d lived in the same Bostonian home for the past twelve years, a home I thought would be my last. Instead, the idea came to me one day, probably while I was doing some mundane chore, like taking a shower or doing the dishes, and like many ideas it became almost sticky, and spoke to me at night. So I called Nancy and Ben, the couple who had been taking care of my grandfather’s old house for the past ten years, ever since my mother fell ill and couldn’t take care of it anymore, and told them that I was planning on moving back, at least temporarily, and that I needed the space.

“You’ve lived in a lot of places,” said Charles. “Why not move back to Arizona, or Alaska? Or go somewhere you’ve never been before? Get a fresh start?”

“Let’s change the subject,” I said. I suddenly became tired, and I could feel a headache creeping on. I drank the last bit of beer in the glass and shifted, unsure if it was the right time to excuse myself to get another.

“I don’t think you’re ever going to figure out what happened, Air.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes, tried to control my breathing. I started to feel the calming friend of a buzz coming on. It’s always amazed me how perfect the weather San Diego consistently has, how we can sit out here in the middle of November and, while it has its off days, still get consistent sunlight and good enough weather to bask in.

What I didn’t want to tell him was about the dreams I had been having, of an older Ivan, going along with me on my day to day routines. None of it was frightening or particularly strange in the context of the dreams, but I always woke out of sorts, sweating, staring into the hazy darkness of
my room, feeling entirely unreal for the rest of the day. Have you had a dream of someone from your past, alive or dead, and woke with the feeling of lingering ghosts? I didn’t want to tell him about the gnawing in my bones and my mind, how, even fifty years later, Ivan’s closed eyes, his waterlogged, translucent blue body still runs freely in my memories.

“I don’t know. I was ready to leave Boston. It just made sense. Now please, just leave it.”

After a couple of minutes Charles stood and said he was getting another beer, but I knew he was checking on Frank. I tried to find something else to focus on. Another squirrel; a calling bird into the setting sun; even a single flower, blowing in threads of wind. But there wasn’t really anything that could take my mind off the upcoming move, off growing anxieties of visiting River’s Edge for the first time in over thirty years. I wonder what it is inside of us that craves focus, that needs to grab onto something, anything, in the physical world outside of ourselves. That refuses to allow our minds to get what they really want.

My trip in San Diego only lasted a few more days after that night. During that time, Frank’s energy levels rose and fell to varying degrees, and even came with us to visit the San Diego Zoo. While Charles’s anxiety rose and fell, like a heartbeat, he seemed mostly better after that evening on the balcony. Smiling and cracking jokes, even reminiscing some about our childhood. It wasn’t until the last day, when my bags were out on the sidewalk and Charles was standing with me while I waited for my shuttle—Frank too tired to come out to say goodbye—when the prospect of me moving back to Oregon once again infiltrated our conversation.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“About?”

“About moving back. I mean, we both remember last time.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m just worried about you.”
“You have nothing to be worried about.” I couldn’t look at my brother, instead feigned interest in the traffic, peering down the road to see if my shuttle was within eyesight. I could feel his eyes on me, though, and when I finally looked at him he genuinely seemed concerned. “Really,” I said. “I’ll be fine. It was a long time ago.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “Living back in that house is going to be weird,” he said. “A lot of memories. I wonder what it even looks like now.”

“It’s been getting taken care of. You know that. But I’m sure a lot has changed. A lot always changes.”

“And yet nothing at the same time.”

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I took off my jacket at Alice’s request and following her through the double doors on the left and into the living room. The biggest difference, besides the covered-up fireplace (a change that honestly makes little sense to me), and the lack of Animalia, was the carpet. Gone was the tan carpet, covered in stains that accumulate, almost reproductively, when children and iguanas roam a place freely. Instead it was now a soft, spotless teal, one that added a splash of color to the otherwise drab white and gray that now covered the walls, the French double-doors, the trim, even the various cabinets carefully placed around the room. I remembered Alice mentioning children, though none were in sight, and neither was the chaotic tempest that inevitably follows in their wake. The house was, save for a few items here and there shoved in seemingly random places on the bookshelf, spotless.

She directed me to one of the plush chairs in the middle of the room, and then sat in the one across from mine. She asked me if I wanted anything. Coffee, tea, a diet coke. But I said no. Instead I just sat in that chair and looked around the place that was only somewhat recognizable. In some cultures they believe that places hold power, that each footstep and each occurrence can, and does,
create echoes throughout time and space. It was probably only ten, fifteen seconds, but the silence between us felt stretched out, longer somehow. I glanced through the huge window that looked out over the Columbia River, that dangerous mouth, and even though my vantage point was not ideal while sitting in that low chair, I could still see the top half of the river and those rolling green hills of Washington, and of course the apex of the Megler bridge and even the part of a shipping vessel, probably Japanese, red and black and white, drifting across the surface. I also saw the top of a massive tree, a Douglas fir easily over three hundred feet tall, that sits below in one of Ivan’s old neighbor’s backyards. I remembered it wavering in strong winds and rain when I was younger, withstanding storms of lightning and ice, the black shadow and creaking of something waving during those infamous dark and stormy nights. I remember scheming with Ivan during some nights, trying to find some way to climb all the way to its tippy-top, though these were just silly, impossible childish fantasies.

The rest of the living room was put together simply. There were little distractions. A china cabinet filled with various plates of different sizes, which was similar to the china cabinets my mother used to have, though these cabinets were more modern—more straight lines and less ornate designs—than my mother’s. More photographs of landscapes splattered the walls. On what used to be the fireplace mantel a few beautiful ornaments sat, including a white and gold clock, maybe the size of my hand.

“That clock is lovely,” I said.

She looked around and then spotted it, almost as if she was surprised it was there at all. “Oh. Well, I bought it at one of the auctions for my children’s school. It was a silent auction, and honestly, I just saw it and decided that, well, I had to have it. I just love the golden leaves that surround the white face, don’t you? Our kids broke the last clock we had.”

“My house is so lovely, though. How do you keep it so nice?”
She laughed bashfully. “It’s nothing, really. It helps that they are all in school now, and that I do a lot of work at home.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m a graphic designer.”

“Oh? What do you usually work on?”

She shrugged. “All sorts of stuff.” She pointed towards the landscape images that hung around the house, that greeted me when I walked through the entryway. “A lot of freelancing, really. I helped a local photographer, John Grayson, if you’ve heard of him, with his images, for example. He’s wonderful at catching images and working lighting but doesn’t know anything about computers and editing work, so he hired me and ended up gifting me prints of many of the pieces we worked on. That’s just one example.”

“They are beautiful,” I said. I didn’t want to tell her how melancholy they felt to me, how they made the rest of the house, Ivan’s old house—now so modern and contemporary and almost lifeless—seem practically silent. We sat there for a couple of minutes, me pretending, I suppose, to marvel at the various pictures around her house, and trying not to let my lack of emotion get to me. Finally, I cleared my throat.

“What school do your children go to?” I asked.

“Saint Mary’s Star of the Sea. It’s a Catholic school down the way.”

“Oh?” I asked. I tried to hide my surprise. “I didn’t know they reopened.”

“I think it’s been open for about five years now. We really like it, actually. Why do you ask? Was it around before? We’ve only been here a few years, and don’t really know the history of it.”

“Yes, it was, but that was a while ago, when I was still a child.”

“Did you know anyone who used to go there?”

I hesitated. “Yes,” I said. “Me. And one of my old friends.”
“Well, isn’t that interesting?” she said, smiling.

I looked at her, many thoughts and ideas coming to me, and felt inside my purse for a pen and paper just in case. For months I had been fantasizing about this moment, and I wasn’t going to let it go to waste. “By any chance,” I said, “does the name Ivan Mendoza Santiago mean anything to you?”

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It’s been two weeks since I visited that house for what I said would be the last time. For the better part of those two weeks I spent at my home, tending to my garden which has become unruly, almost crawling with dandelions and common chickweed and bristly hawksbeard. My garden is a place for relaxation, where each plant has been picked for its aesthetic qualities, to combine a myriad of colors and leaf types and varying heights to bring a feeling of calm into a looker’s heart. Even in the head of this winter the various shapes of plants bring me a sort of solace. In the middle is a fountain with stone frogs spewing water into a middle well, trickling water down the sides into a separate reservoir. While it was still beautiful and some hues of dirt and dew can add a sort of simple character to an item, I had let it go too far and had ended up spending an entire afternoon on my hands and knees scrubbing the sides of it. I suppose I should feel lucky I can still do this, crawl on all fours and tend to the garden myself, even though Nancy doesn’t like when I do it, says that Ben can take care of the garden just fine, but by the end of that particular day I had felt so tired that I could barely make it back inside to my chair, could barely boil a pot of tea, and my fingers, sore and frigid, weren’t even up to the task of turning the pages of my novel.

I had pulled the weeds, trimmed the plants, cut away the bad pieces so they could restore to something new, and tended to the fertilizer. Though it is much harder for me now to stay in the same position for too long, to be down on my knees or even leaning against my hips and sides, being down there on my own volition sometimes reminds me of those moments in my childhood,
when Ivan and I would go out and play in the dirt and look for insects. It’s funny. When I was young I hated to garden, to weed, to be asked by my parents to rip the dandelions out, always with a snake-tongued dandelion weeder, cutting underneath their fuzzy carapaces with a pseudo crowbar. It was always work to me, boring and monotonous work that only seemed to delay all the adventures I really wanted to go on. But as I got older the monotony had, curiously enough, become one of the main selling points, a soothing, almost lucid experience of going at something with an end that is both hard to define and hard to reach. No matter how far I think I get, how much progress I believe I’ve made, there is always more to do in a garden, and even if I think there isn’t, the act of just sitting and marveling at it is its own kind of action towards it.

Being out there and putting my hands through the cold, wet soil, the flaccid heads of worms curling and wriggling, breaking free of the surface during the rainier days, only serves to propagate this obsession my thoughts have had on Ivan lately, the memories of when we used to go out together, like the day when we got into a childish fight in the rain, had rolled around the mud like dogs before Grandpa Charlie had found us. But I think it started when I was back inside of that house and when Alice Fizdale brought up St. Mary’s Star of the Sea, the school that had closed so long ago, that our parents had put us in when we first moved to Astoria, not because we were Catholic but because they wanted the best possible education for us. It was a place of many firsts and many lasts. Of broken bones and basketballs and bullies and kisses and everything else you could expect. It was a place of goodbyes that weren’t really goodbyes. It was a place that I rarely enjoyed, but that my nostalgia still, even now, homes in on.

I remember feeling this exact way, just last month, when I was planning to meet Sofía Santiago for the first time in over thirty years. My memory isn’t quite what it used to be, and there was far too much going on in my mind to remember details such as the weather or the busyness of the establishment, or even, quite frankly, what I had ordered to drink. My doctor has told me that I
shouldn’t be drinking anymore, that it is bad for so many different parts of my body that I’ve lost count, but it is one thing that I can’t see myself ever, entirely, giving up. Either way, I had arrived early, and she, just like when we were younger, arrived late. I had already secured a small table at the back of the Silver Cove, a popular restaurant that you’ve perhaps heard of, which sits on the docks, near the stewing waters of the Columbia. I’ve only been there a couple of times, and each time I’ve found myself somewhat disappointed by the manufactured, pop-music food they serve there, as if, by trying to cater to everyone, they end up catering to no one. But as I said, they are popular, and Sofía recommended it, so there I was, drinking some fruffy drink or another, looking out the window and waiting for her to arrive.

I was sitting and stirring my drink and looking out at the waters, lost in thought, when she finally arrived. It reminded me of Charles’ and I’s first day of school, when Ivan had left her to approach me during recess. And while I could be projecting, thinking back on it now has made it more significant, a bridge of sorts into the past. She had brought her grandson with her, a little fellow with wide eyes and round cheeks, and in those eyes I saw Ivan’s. They were so similar, and the look he gave me, all curiosity and an excited fierceness, was like a flashback to that day in January, fifty-two years earlier, one of excitement and nervousness and curiosity.

If it wasn’t for her grandson, though, I’m not sure if I would have recognized Sofía. My memory seems to think of her in flashes, of still photographs, instead of the person I had known for the better part of three years. Even though it had obviously been quite some time, trying to piece together the missing years put me almost in a sense of culture shock. What must she have thought of me? Was it as jarring for her as it was for me? Did she remember me as well as I remembered her? The little girl pulling on her father’s shirt, tagging alongside her increasingly irritated brother? The little girl roaming the world with us, cackling like a witch, getting so easily lost, being so easily
trusting? The most obvious target to get taken, the one who should have ended up on that river’s edge?

“I hope you don’t mind that I brought my grandson. This is Simón.” Her hair was just as raven black as it was when we were kids. I wondered if she dyed it, or if she had merely won the lottery. My hair had turned more gray than anything else over the years. I stopped trying to dye it long ago. What was the point? She was thin, much thinner than me, and her makeup was made up in ways that I haven’t had the patience for in years.

“No, no, of course not. Hello, Simón. How are you today?” I stood up to greet them but Sofía waved me off.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, giving me an awkward smile. She gave me an awkward hug, pulled out a chair for Simón, and then sat across from me.

“Hiya,” said Simón. His hair was long and curly and wild, sticking up all over the place, and he wore a green and white t-shirt with some kind of creature, maybe a robot, plastered on it.

“Are you having fun today?” I asked him.

His legs dangled from the chair and he kicked the air with them. He smiled. “No not yet but I will. Abuela promised that we would go to the toy store today.”

“Oh, is that so?”

He nodded fiercely. “Yes. They have dinosaurs there and I want one.”

“I see. And do you like dinosaurs?”

“Of course! The stegosaurus is the best one. It has a spike tail and it hits things with it.”

“Simón, volume please,” said Sofía.

“Sorry, abuela.” His voice turned to an almost whisper. That only lasted a few seconds, however, because before long he had rushed into a long tangent—his voice becoming louder and louder as he went—about the rest of the toy store’s offerings, and how he hoped he and his
grandmother would get ice cream too, just like they usually did, and how his favorite sea animal was a sword fish because it was the bravest of them all. When he finally stopped he had to take a long drink of water, gasping, searching for breath after such an arduous explanation.

Again, I couldn’t help but see Ivan in Simón. Not just in the eyes, but the way he spoke, the way his excitement would lead into a practical avalanche of spewing thoughts, becoming wider and wider, running away into a tangential series of cliffs and crags. It’s true that I previously called Sofía to this meeting for more than just casual conversation, but it was seeing Ivan in the mannerisms and eyes of Simón that became a gift I never thought I wanted. I had gone looking for some recognition, some semblance of nostalgia from Sofía. Instead, I got much more than that.

I turned to her. “How have you been? It has been a long time.”

She nodded and put her hand on the table. “Yes, it has,” she said. “I’ve been okay. Lately the shop’s business has been unexpectedly booming, which is great, but also pretty stressful.”

“What is it you do nowadays again?”

“Oh. I own a small bakery down on Market street. Just a little post-retirement project I decided to pick up. For the first few years business has been off and on but recently it’s been getting quite popular. I am very lucky.”

“I see. The town has changed a great deal since I’ve last been here. I suppose that shouldn’t be surprising, as growth is expected, but still. I’ve been walking downtown a few times since moving back and I can’t help but view everything in the lens of our childhood. Very few places are still around, and the ones that are have given me more surprises than not.”

“A lot really has changed,” she said, nodding. “Though I can’t remember the specifics, I know it has.”
Just then we were interrupted by Simón humming a broken, yet catchy song of some sort. Sofía hushed him, but the interruption gave me the perfect opportunity to finally broach the subject that was the reason for scheduling this meeting to begin with.

“Simón, did you know that your great uncle used to hum in that same way when he was little?”

He shook his head.

I nodded, and glanced at Sofía. She had a look that I couldn’t place, one of maybe sternness or curiosity, I’m not sure. I looked away before I could gather too much from it and focused my attention on Simón. “Yes, your great uncle Ivan was a wonderful singer when he wanted to be. Sometimes, when I was visiting he and your grandmother’s house when they were little, he would need to take a bath and sometimes I could hear him singing through the walls. Isn’t that interesting?”

Simón watched his shoes as he kicked through the air, the heels of which would thump against the wooden chair. “What kind of stuff did he sing?”

“Oh I have no idea. He would mostly make up his owns songs, I think. Right, Sofía? Do you remember those songs?”

I turned to Sofía and her look had turned cold, one of almost accusation. Her eyes had narrowed and her lips had thinned out. She studied me carefully, I imagine trying to work through my intentions, though I couldn’t be sure.


I nodded. “Of course,” I said, chuckling.

Sofía didn’t laugh.
He began to hum the same song as before, but this time, with permission, even louder and more robust. His left arm began jutting out this way and that, as if he was karate chopping some invisible enemy.

“How much do you know about your great uncle, Simón? I’m sure your grandmother has plenty to say about him.”

“Oh, wow! Like what?”

“We should go,” said Sofía. When I looked up at her, I noticed that her eyes still had not left me.

“So soon?” I asked. I looked out towards the river through the great window and tried to make out the single boat that drifted in the middle of it. My eyes have only gotten worse over the years, so making out any specifics of the boat was impossible. Instead, I pictured my grandfather’s old boat, the one Charles and I spent so much time wandering around on, and I just let my eyes go unfocused, as I sometimes do when I’m unsure where to look (a habit I had, no doubt, gained from my father, who would spend most of his meals staring out windows, seemingly lost in thought), and all the gray colors of the day muddled into a mix of whirling paints.

“Yes,” she responded.

“Can we go to the toy store and to get ice cream and maybe to go feed the seagulls, abuela, can we?”

I looked away from the river to catch Sofía nod as she stood. She put on her coat and helped Simón off his chair. Just as she was leaving she looked at me, almost with pity. She ruminated for a moment, and I simply sat there looking at her. My fingers absentmindedly pawed at the table, looking blindly for my drink, for something, anything, to do.

“You need to let this go,” she said. “Please, do not try to drag us all back down with you again.” She paused for another second or two before turning around and leading Simón out of the
restaurant. I watched them until they were out of sight and then turned back towards the river, watching the still waters and that blurry white mass far off in the middle of it, probably filled with fisherman tossing nets into its murky waters. I tried not to focus too much on what she said, or the obvious vitriol behind it, and instead on the whorl of the river and the clouds combining into hosts of gray. I ordered another drink, and then another, and began pondering all of these things more. I took out my journal and pen, unsure what I was going to write, unsure what information could be gleamed from such a short encounter, and began to doodle until ideas, as they always do, started to manifest themselves. I still need to figure out another way to approach her, to see her grandchild again, but that will be for another day.

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Earlier this morning I went for a walk into town. It was faster, easier even, to drive there, but nowadays there are times when the idea of getting behind a wheel is deeply unappealing. The two miles it takes to walk from my grandfather’s old home—the home we stayed during the few short years we lived here—into the heart of the town was surprisingly mellow. It was a bit chilly, as was to be expected, and the plants were weighed down by mildew. The air was heavy with moisture, and a light, cool mist dusted everything in sight. Much of the road into town lacks a sidewalk, and coils like one of Arias’s old snakes. The side of the road is perpetually muddy, and shoes stick to it like flypaper. But I was prepared, wearing an old pair of tennis shoes I had fished out of one of my moving boxes earlier. Trees of all kinds envelope the area. Red alder, pine, douglas fir, western hemlock, even a few junipers. I’m one of the few people who still remembers a time when this town wasn’t so populated by ferns. Imagine my surprise coming back to see just how much they had spread over the years. Only a few cars drove by as I walked, my cane in hand due to my aching knee, and I once again became aware of the dangers of the blindsides along that road. I realized I would one day have to acquire the courage to walk it at night.
Being out there that early made it easy to picture the way the world used to be. There weren’t a lot of sounds, save for a few birds that were beginning their morning songs, and the smells were that of morning mildew, cedar, wet morning grass. If I closed my eyes while I walked, simply listened and tried to be in the moment, I could almost imagine the different asphalt these roads used to be made from, and if I didn’t pay too much attention to a driving car, to the new sounds of engines and tires, I could picture an automobile from those days, like a Ford Falcon, a turquoise hummingbird of a car fluttering, gliding almost, through the concrete world. At one point I stopped moving, and I just listened, and I imagined, and I stood there waiting for something to happen, but when I opened my eyes everything was the same and the past disappeared, as it so often does.

I walked by the driveway to what used to be Mr. Jenkins’s house. It’s a long, steep gravel road that seemingly comes out of nowhere, an easy to miss pathway cut through a horde of trees. I thought about walking up there and seeing what all had changed over the years there, too, but I decided against it. Instead, I continued towards the town, though I couldn’t get that house out of my head. During the old days Ivan and I spent a lot of time up there. It was a perfect middle ground between our homes and Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins were always so accommodating. Their own children had moved on years earlier, and while it could be argued that my grandfather’s land was larger, with a pond and more space for children to play in, the Jenkins’s felt like a whole new world for us to explore.

As you might recall, in the early 1960s the fear of strangers as dangerous entities for children was just starting to manifest itself. I know there has always been some fear of the unknown, of the stranger so to speak, probably since the dawn of humanity, but in small town America it had become comfortable, perhaps too much so. The idea of anyone hurting children, of taking them in the dead of night and crushing their skulls and throwing them in the river was practically inconceivable. I still remember the leads on the nightly news programs, highlighting vicious attacks and disappearances
of boys and girls of various ages. While it certainly wasn’t as bad as the late 70’s and early 80’s—when milk carton ads and fearmongering rose to an all-time high—and nearly everyone’s parents still hadn’t evolved to believe true danger existed, it was during such a prosperous and hopeful time for our country that I think it stuck out more. I still remember one boy in particular, with his messy bowl cut and his chaotic freckles, and his sepia picture circulating on an almost nightly basis. Few people at the time had a dark enough imagination to truly believe that someone would hunt down, kidnap, and murder a child, even when that seemed like the only plausible explanation.

I suppose this is a roundabout way of saying that, while neither my parents nor my grandfather knew the Jenkins’s particularly well, among others between our house and the town, it was never considered a problem that we spend time there. We would go into their old barn, which was mostly being used for storage, even then, and would hunt for what we considered to be hidden treasures. We often played in their garage, going through their son’s old playthings. While these toys, clothes, and other items were all outdated and may as well have been ancient relics when it came to our interest in them, we made games out of trying to find the weirdest, or funniest, or oldest thing we could find. Sometimes Mr. Jenkins would offer us iced tea, or Mrs. Jenkins would invite us to come with her into town and buy us ice cream or chocolate. Mostly, though, we just played in their field, which was allowed to go somewhat wild over the years. It was the sort of thing that drove my grandfather mad whenever we mentioned going over there, and he would remark on Mr. Jenkins’s inability to take care of his own land. But Ivan and I loved it. It was like moving through some fantasy world, where the grass and other plants were capable of growing into Jurassic era size and strength.

Walking by the Jenkins’s old driveway reminded me of one time, when we were maybe eleven or twelve, when we were creeping separately through the tall grass, hunched over, science fiction squirt guns in our grips. Back then, the squirt guns weren’t the monstrosities they are now.
Instead, they were these little rocket ship like plastic devices that required constant fill up. Because of this, I believed I had outsmarted Ivan, and had, after we went our separate ways for our battle preparations, procured a metal bucket from Mr. Jenkin’s and filled it with water. While I kneeled through the weeds, I carried the bucket with me, ready to refill at a moment’s notice, ready to outlast Ivan with his despicable ammo supply.

This was a particularly hot day in Oregon, and there was a sort of miniature drought that had scoured the pacific northwest during the past week. Everything was dry and crackled beneath each step I took, no matter how carefully I tried to walk. It was the sort of day that every child understood completely without truly comprehending the magic that goes into sunlight. As an adult, worries about Vitamin D deficiency and seasonal depression have offered a new look into what a sunny day means, but, especially back then, they were simply days of getting outside and having something to actually do. But Ivan and I rarely needed a reason to go outside. There were plenty of wet, rainy days where we would go down town or into the forest or go searching for tadpoles. It was just that the sunny days had their own ways of drawing us out.

It was when I thought I heard Ivan in the field and decided to crouch down even lower when I noticed something near me, lying in the dirt and grass. I crept closer. I couldn’t stop and I couldn’t look away. What is it inside of all of us that does not allow us to save ourselves? For a twelve-year-old girl, I considered myself brave and tough. There were plenty of times when Ivan was hesitant to do something, like jump from a tree branch or pick up a spider, that I would gladly do. Maybe it was a competitive fire inside of me, or maybe I simply got a certain thrill from doing deeds that others found taboo. Either way, there are certain things that no twelve-year-old should have to experience. Finding your neighbor’s dead dog is one of them.

Motley was an old German Shepherd mix, a gruff dog who often sat in the middle of the fields when it rained. Sometimes, Mr. Jenkins would tell us stories about when he was young and
how feisty he could be, about how he once scared away a prowling cougar who had been terrorizing
the nearby forest. How he would argue whenever he was told no, would bark and yell and whine and
fight for typical dog supremacy. The Motley that Ivan and I knew was slow, quiet, and mostly kept
to himself, though he enjoyed being rubbed on his stomach. He had a bad limp, which was probably
caused by hip dysplasia, and tumors had started to form around his body in various, strange masses.
Looking back, it isn’t surprising that Motley had died, though the time and the place was certainly
surprising. When Mr. Jenkins found him, after I came in, stone quiet and wide-eyed, was noticeably
upset. It was the first time that I had encountered death, especially for a creature I had grown quite
fond of. That was the last time we played there again.

Either way, I was talking about when I decided to take the two-mile walk to down town, and I decided not to go check out Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins’s old property, to see how time had shifted that place, as well. Instead, I continued along the curved road through the many tall trees in the morning mildew and kept to my thoughts, listening to the birds and, at one point, the babbling of a nearby spring that was being fed from the town’s runoff. I don’t know about you, but I find it quite amazing how peaceful these natural sounds are to my ears. It isn’t just about being in nature, feeling the chilly breeze run its soft fingers along your skin, but something instinctive and primal in the serenity that such assonants brings. The closer I got into town, though, and the more houses started to crop up around me the less of this serenity I felt. The trees dwindled and while I could still hear birds singing, there was something different about the way they sounded.

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I realize I haven’t yet said much about my parents. If you are at all into oceanography I am sure you’ve heard of them, even if only in passing. Salil and Sarah Khatri, the inventors of the P174 AUV, or autonomous underwater vehicle. An old model, for sure, but it was one that was featured on multiple shipwreck expeditions back then, ones that they gladly went on. While some of their
other efforts can be found down at the Columbia River Oceanic Museum, the internet, and, if you look hard enough, within the histories of the oceanic robot frameworks, I’ve found that history has a tendency of depleting the individual from its memories. Their scientific findings survive within these archives, yes, but little else does. Not my father’s smell, or the way my mother smiled half-smiles. Not the way they both looked when they were disappointed or a little annoyed by Charles’ and my’s antics. Not the way they dealt with everyday life. Instead they are merely names pasted inside books now, next to achievements that are slowly being swallowed by rapid, inevitable technological advancement. Is that what being remembered boils down to? Eventually not being memorialized and celebrated as organic living souls, but instead as hollow names without a voice, without morals and values beyond the black and white? Without hobbies, without likes and dislikes, without an acknowledgment of time spent outside of their contributions? Just a simple rock, a memorial, a place within the forest that slowly erodes and slowly, inevitably, gets forgotten.

Yesterday morning, as has become custom since moving, I started searching through my many still-unpacked boxes. As you already know, having moved before I’m sure, unpacking is a slow process, but I’ve found recently that no matter how much I unpack my new home still seems to be missing something. It is not because it is uncomfortable, per se. It isn’t. But because it simply feels incomplete. When it comes to my garden, no detail is ignored or ever entirely finished, but inside my house, the place I spend much of my time—where I sleep, where I wander the halls and sit in my chair reading during the nights when that sleep won’t come—I’ve always had a tendency to place furniture and other objects in the first logical, most convenient place and leave them there until it is time to move again. There is little method beyond first instincts, beyond ease of use. Regardless, I have found myself far too restless these past three months, and while I have never been one to be necessarily calm within the confines of my own home, especially one with so much history in it, this was enough for me to start searching for answers.
I had decided to ignore many of the boxes I have already rifled through. While I will certainly have to unpack those eventually, it is the discovery of old items made new again by remembrance that I was most interested in. The first couple of boxes I opened held nothing of interest—old clothes, moth-eaten curtains from two or three houses ago, random yard decorations—but it was the third box that contained my mother’s tea cup collection. It had warnings of fragility all over it, and inside each item was covered in bundles of socks and blankets, with swathes of bubble wrap. I hadn’t opened the box in years, and somehow, at least from what I could tell, all of the tea cups and even the lone tea pot I had were still in-tact.

It surprises me that I had managed to put them out of my mind, even forget about them completely, until yesterday morning. I don’t remember my mother actively collecting these while I was growing up, but she must have because the cabinets that used to sit in the living and dining rooms would get more and more full over the years. They have many different shapes and sizes, with a variety of designs. Some are Disney, covered tastefully with iconic cartoon characters. Some are mythical in nature, a mermaid or fairy, and others contain more natural scenes, blossoming flowers and trees, Celtic and Japanese, wrapping branches and symbols and colorful patterns around various bulbous bases. Eggshell, whisper, vivid, opal whites with gold, silver, baby blue trims. Looking through them, unwrapping each one from its Styrofoam and bubble protection, brought me back to the time when my mother, bless her heart, had taken the time to show me these, really show them to me, for the first time, that night when I had come to visit for a week during a particularly tumultuous time during my late teens. I had felt, like so many my age, that the world was crushing me, that there was an impossibility to the expectations of a generation that grew up in a world far vaster, far more opportune, than the one I had crawled through.

This isn’t to take away from my mother’s accomplishments. Even from a young age she was deeply interested in the ocean, and, from about the age of three or four showed a certain
precociousness when it came to science and math, two subjects that still, perhaps, are not well
catered towards girls. And it didn’t matter how good she was at them. Very few people believed in
her. She rose above all of that, and so of course I would never belittle what she did, but at the time,
when we were both sitting not even ten feet from where I looked through those boxes yesterday
morning, at the then-dining room table, I couldn’t help but be furious with her, maybe even jealous
of who she was allowed to be.

I had just arrived two nights earlier from Fairbanks, Alaska for a short trip for the holidays.
My parents had only been back in the area for a few months, to take care of my grandfather who
had suffered his first stroke. Earlier that summer, I had moved to Alaska to take a chance on a
young love that makes little sense now. I’m sure you’ve been through the machinations of
heartbreak yourself, but it’s a certain type of heartbreak that includes abuse that is particularly
damaging. You may not agree with me, but it almost seems like a rite of passage for women to be
treated horribly by the opposite sex in order to move forward. Nearly every woman I have ever met
has had stories, and they would be considered lucky if the number of those stories could fit on one
hand. It has almost become ingrained in our society, like poisoned, rotten roots underneath a
crumbling foundation. Regardless, I was staying near the town with my parents and Charles was
slated to be visiting within the next day or two. My mother and I were both sitting, as I said, at the
dining room table, a redwood behemoth my grandfather had built when my mother was much
younger, drinking coffee. In the middle of the table was a tin of Royal Dansk cookies, their spiraling,
crystalized shapes a perfect design that still, to this day, has not changed, though I swear their taste
has. Familiar mixes of cinnamon and clove in the air conjured a kind of childhood, Christmas
giddiness in me. On the table were a couple of tea cups, which my mother had, just a few moments
prior, carefully excavated from their respective boxes. I don’t remember which ones they were
specifically, but she had brought them out to show me these elements that I had barely paid any attention to before.

At the time, I viewed this as a way for her to undermine what I was currently dealing with and continue to not trust me, but I think, even then, I knew there was more to it than that. I was tired, and it was the evening. My father was probably in his study, which was a small, almost shed-like building located in the woods behind the house, perpendicular to the pond. The evening dusk through the windows was the kind that slowly creeps on you, making rooms darker and darker, washing everything in a mask of slow burn purple blurriness. My mother was saying one thing or another about a particular tea cup in her hand, trying to point out certain elements that she was apparently proud of, but I found it hard to pay attention.

Instead, I kept glancing out into the slowly manifesting night and remembering that particular night on March 15th, 1962, at the time five years prior, when Ivan had left and was never seen again alive. It was a similar sort of night, an uncommonly warm one for the time of year, the skies a little cloudy, but nothing compared to the Alaskan winter darkness. The night Ivan disappeared he and I had both been sitting at that very table playing Monopoly. It was the usual affair with Monopoly. First smiles and laughter and overall good sportsmanship, followed by aggravation and exhaustion. Even to this day I like to blame the nature of that game for our moods, for what ended up happening next that pushed him away, even if I know it’s silly to do so.

He left shortly after, against my wishes, through the swallowing darkness, but there was no reason to think that something out of the ordinary was lurking out there. He had taken his bike, which was later found thrown haphazardly twenty feet off the road in a cumulus of bushes. For days after his disappearance, the police believed that he had either run away, or, at the worst, some wild animal had got to him and he was injured somewhere out in those woods, though both theories had holes. If he ran away, why wouldn’t he take his bike? If there was some dangerous wild animal
roaming, why had no news or reliable sightings occurred? Why had no remains of animal destruction been found? When he was located weeks later floating by the pier in the river, over four miles away, everything was thrown out, and speculation roared even louder. I still remember the last words he said to me. I still remember his mother and father’s worry. I still remember getting the call when he was found.

I still remember lying to the police about our last interaction.

Either way, my mother apparently noticed my attention was elsewhere while she was trying to show me her tea cups and had snapped her fingers, as she sometimes did, and spoke to me. “Aria, are you listening to me?”

“Not really,” I said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you not going to talk to me?”

I looked at her, away from the window. The years had been kind to my mother. The little gray hair that sprouted from her head had been expertly hidden by her morning routine. She had bags under her eyes, probably from years of lack of sleep, and widow’s peaks were starting to spread from her eyes like cracks in glass, but save for those little details that could barely be called imperfections she could have passed as the same woman, the same age, the same snapshot as I always seem to have of her when we were all so much younger. Looking back, I find myself wishing I would have asked how she managed it all. To have a successful career, to be a mother, to still look nice while getting perpetually older, especially during such a tumultuous time for women. Lord knows I’ve had my struggles, and I grew up during one of the generations that spearheaded the notion that American idealism should extend past race and gender. These are the types of things you never think about when you’re young.
“Do you really want me to talk, or do you just want me to say what you want to hear?” I asked.

She didn’t respond at first, instead simply looked away, her hand still holding the tea cup.

I stood, walked towards the window and looked out towards the forest. From here, during the day, you could see the pond, and sometimes, if you were lucky, you might notice something jump or move inside of it, or maybe the crane that often perched on a log on the side of it soar and rip something from the surface of those quiet waters. The crane was tall, and was often statuesque in its rigid, epic stance. While I was never able to get close enough to it, because it would immediately perk up and spread its wings, lift off into the air and be gone within a few seconds whenever I tried, it was one of the better parts of being back home, like a friendly, unchanging reminder. Nowadays, fifty some years later, that crane is gone, inevitably long dead, like so many other once dependable aspects of my old life. During the night, however, the pond was just a black mass, only ever giving itself away in the occasional slice of moonlight, and the trees that spread out around it let little else through. The police, during their investigation, had wondered why my parents had so easily let Ivan leave and go alone through that kind of black wilderness—no street lights, only a few neighbors for miles, a forest with all kinds of unknowns—as if a fourteen-year-old boy needed permission to do anything.

“I just want you to let me in,” my mother said.

“I have,” I said.

“You can’t keep holding on to these things.”

I looked at her, baffled that she was being so nonchalant about this, angered that she would believe that tea cups, measly, stupid tea cups were somehow more important. “I can’t just let him fade away,” I said, trying to keep my voice level.

“He won’t.
“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“That means nothing.”

I could feel my impatience and anger rising, and with it my voice. “Eventually his memorial will just be another stone, another weather worn object for generations to ponder over. Don’t you fucking get it? This isn’t a joke. He deserves more than this.” My chest tightened. My pulse pounded through my body. My stomach soured, acid burning and muddling into a concoction of wicked alchemy. I fought back tears.

“Aria. Calm down. Please sit.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“He’s gone. It’s been over five years. Why can’t you accept that?”

I walked away that night, walked out of the house through the backdoor into the same darkness that Ivan did five years earlier. This time, it was my mother’s protests that hung behind me like comet tails, instead of mine to Ivan’s. I went out toward the pond and the woods, and everything in that near-darkness seemed silent and unmoving. I wondered then if that was what Ivan felt when he left. The silence, the still nature of everything around him, before everything changed.

As I walked I noticed the smell of tobacco and saw the ethereal nature of smoke. As I got closer to the pond, I noticed someone sitting on the bench my grandfather had built when I was younger. Sometimes, the crane, that regular old friend, would perch on the bench and stare into the still waters, but at night he was always hidden away. When Ivan and I were much younger would have conversations questioning where the crane went during these starlit nights Was it simply up in one of those trees, or did it live somewhere else, perhaps even miles away, in the rolling hills of Washington or in the swaths of dune grass and cold sand near the ocean? Maybe the crane was like those old fairytales, a changeling of sorts, a creature that shifts into something else—a beautiful
woman or some mythological god—during the after-hours, and I was, years and years later, a 19-year-old woman, walking in on it post-transformation. But when I got closer, I realized it was my father, instead.

“Dad?”

“Oh,” he said, shifting, and I saw the slight ember glow of the cigarette as it fell to the ground and was swallowed by his shoe. “What, what are you doing out here?”

“Since when do you smoke?”

He shook his head. “I don’t.”

“You used to scold grandfather so much for his smoking. Now you are, too? How long?”

He sighed, kept looking out towards the pond, and put his head through his thinning hair. I could barely make out any of his facial features, not even the beard he had, apparently, become increasingly flippant about shaving lately. “A couple years,” he said.

My eyes followed his, out into the dark ripples of the quiet pond, and I wondered then if he was thinking the same thing I was. About the flashlights, the shouts, the searching through the wildwoods of night and day in search for a boy that had disappeared in the dead of night. I sat next to my father and tried to work out what to say. I’ve always been fairly cognizant of my parents as people, but remembering that night I believe it was the first time I started to relate more to my father. His worries. His flaws. His anxieties. He just always treated them the same way I did. As shadows that needed to be hidden away, instead of shined on by light.

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Last night, I went out into the forest. I know I should not have but as I was sitting there by the fire and trying to read, the wind knocking against the house and the pitter patter of running rain
on the rooftop, I could not get it out of my mind. The weather report had only warned of a light storm, no lightning or thunder, nothing too dangerous to avoid. It was late, maybe eleven or so, and I had been drinking. A near empty bottle of Chardonnay sat on the side table near me. The house groaned a little more with each gust of irritable wind. I was already in my pajamas, and I should have been getting ready for bed, considering I had an appointment to meet with the Librarian in the morning. But, as it turns out, old ghosts speak loud words. I put on a sweater and my rain jacket and boots and grabbed a flashlight before heading out into that mess of a night.

Have you ever been out around the trees during the night, when the wind is blowing and their leaves and branches are saying their own kind of words? I have yet to figure out the best way to describe it, but there’s a certain kind of freedom that comes from being out there. Everything is so very loud with the wind moving and swaying certain natural elements around, but there’s also a certain silence between it all. It reminds me of when Ivan was twelve and I was thirteen and we were out there in my grandfather’s tent during a similar night, camping and shrouded from the house by trees.

We had seen plenty of films and read plenty of books about the dangers of the wild, and we loved to tell each other stories and try to spook one another by the beam made by flashlights. But that night was one of those nights where every noise in the forest could be a creeping monster, or maybe, simply enough, a prowling murderer. We didn’t need overactive imaginations to see it. The wind growled and whistled, and the rain came down hard, like the perpetual tapping of metal pins. My parents almost cancelled our plans altogether due to the weather, but considering what I had to do to convince them to let us camp alone begin with, I wasn’t going to allow that to happen.

This night was the first night Ivan and I did anything like this. Before that, we would spend time together at each other’s houses and out in the world—especially at Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins’s—and even a couple of times he was allowed to stay the night, though convincing our parents of such
activities the older we got turned into a difficult affair. At the time, I didn’t really understand why. Ivan Mendoza Santiago was my friend, and while we were both at about that age for that sort of thing, the idea of seeing him, or anyone for that matter, as a sexual object was completely foreign to me. It didn’t help that sex education back then was so subdued and quiet that, even if my mother was willing to be rather flippant compared to most at the time, it was difficult to read between the lines. Still, our parents allowed us to do this thing, under fairly strict rules, in the woods behind my childhood home, though my parents also made me invite Charles, who had become almost parasitic in his persistent need to be around me during those years.

Annoyingly, Charles became scared after about an hour of being out there, so Ivan and I had to escort him back to the house where my mother took him inside and offered to give him hot chocolate. When we were asked if we wanted any, both Ivan and I looked at one another before saying no, silently agreeing that, as delicious and comforting as hot cocoa seemed that night, it also seemed like cheating. Instead, we went back out into the woods and to our tent, closed up the zipper, and tried not to listen too closely to the arrangement of varying sounds that went on outside of those thin, cloth walls.

There’s a certain proximity with another person you can only obtain if you are in the tent with them, in the cold and the rain and the unknown slithering in darkness. I don’t remember us saying much that night, but I do remember the sound of his breath, and seeing his sleeping bag, a voracious caterpillar in the dark, hunched and moving from time to time. I remember somehow knowing that he, too, was awake, and that we were both inches from one another, chaos happening just outside of our small sanctuary. Eventually, he turned towards me and looked at me, my eyes somewhat used to the dark, and smiled.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I said, blinking, trying to understand the peculiar look he was giving me.
Walking out in the woods with my flashlight beaming through the crevices in the trees, the hallowed sound of leaves fluttering, brought another kind of memory as well, except then there were many of these flashlights slicing through the night from various directions. Calls for Ivan’s name joined all the other sounds and no matter how wet or cold it was it didn’t matter. I was only fourteen at the time, but somehow I felt much, much older. I hadn’t allowed myself to cry, but instead felt a complete anger towards Ivan. How could he run off, and how could he just disappear like that? How could he do this to all of us? How could he do this to me?

Their search party was entirely unorganized. There were of course the local farmers, and members of the local sheriff’s office, as well as a few parents and teachers from school. But searching two miles of forest, let alone anywhere else Ivan Mendoza Santiago could be, was impossible. Nothing like this had happened in the area that any of us had heard of, and none of us could allow ourselves to even imagine something sinister happening to Ivan. At this point he had been gone for maybe twenty, maybe twenty-two hours, so hope that he could be found out there somewhere, either hurt or lost, or possibly just camping out in some ersatz hideout was still a logical possibility. I had wanted to go out with them and search as well, but my parents didn’t believe it to be a good idea, and any argument to the contrary was almost instantly shut down by my grandfather. Even now I do not believe it was out of fear that something could happen to me, but possibly something else. It was worse enough in their eyes that I was the last person to see him, that I had let him leave near midnight, that the sheriff’s department was already sniffing around and asking me and my parents uncomfortable questions.

But I do remember staring out into that dark forest that night as flashlights pierced through the rustling, manic leaves, wondering just where Ivan could be. He had never done this before, although we had, obviously, talked about doing similar things plenty of times before. Running away. Being outcasts. Slinging bags over our backs and catching a train and doing something that was, I
suppose, overly romantic in a sense, like join a big top circus. Help put sets together. Train the elephants. Fly with the trapeze. Dress up in peacock, phoenix colors and paint our faces in wild designs and wow audiences with our fire turning skills, our knife throwing skills, our tiger taming skills. It was a way to grab adventure. To fling ourselves into the unknown. What if he had grown tired? What if, after our fight, he had decided to go through with it without me? Had left me alone to fend in this increasingly boring town by myself? In a way he did do that, but even as the hours and then the days went by, I could never have imagined—no matter how many horror movies I watched or how wild my imagination became—the specific way he did.

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Being inside of my childhood home has become quite lonely. It is strange being inside of this house with so many memories after so many years, this ersatz version of this place we used to live. I wonder what my grandfather would have thought of all the changes that Nancy and Ben have made over the years. While they have done a good job taking care of the house, it’s only natural that, over time, their own flair has become muddled with everything else. You cannot simply stay in a place, live in it, take care of it, be within its walls, feels its bones and its histories, without adding your own to its alchemy.

The elk head, for instance, which hung fiercely in the middle of the den, has been replaced by a painting of a lighthouse overlooking a vast, colorful sky, the sea slapping against

Truth be told, I am unsure why this place is lonelier than my house was in Boston. Maybe it is the quiet pond or the forest or the fewer numbers of people. Maybe it is because it is so old and yet so new. I do not know. What I do know is that I often find myself walking its halls at night, unwilling to turn on the lights, feeling my way in the darkness as the tips of my fingers glide along the coarse wallpaper. This canary-yellow wallpaper with the hazy eggshell designs, like vapor, had
always been a topic of contention with our family. My grandfather hated it. So did I. But my mother, who had, despite arguments to the contrary, the final say on such matters, thought it to be soothing, beautiful, a nice contrast with the dark wood floors and the multitude of fishing décor that riddled the house. Back then, wall-to-wall wallpaper was a big deal, and often felt luxurious, even when it was ugly and tacky, so it was hard for any of us to put up much of an argument. Looking at it now, and feeling it during my nightly walks, the textured, grainy surface rubbing against my skin almost like leather, I wonder why it has never been replaced, or even repaired. The small water stains. The burn marks. The edges where the old wallpaper has curled into itself. The faded colors. It’s almost like the house, too, has skin, and similar to my own has carried an entire life with it, scars and all. There comes a point where those scars cannot be repaired. They live just as much as anything else.

It’s amazing how much bigger a place like this can seem when you are by yourself. When we were younger, there were often people in an out of our home. Whether it be my grandfather and his crew—drinking beer on the patio or getting ready for some expedition trip through the Columbia and out into the Pacific—or the various scientists and inventors and lawyers that came in and out over the years as my parents worked tirelessly to unlock the secrets of deep sea exploration. And of course, there was Charles and me and anyone we had visiting. Nowadays, though, there’s just me, and sometimes Nancy and Ben checking on a few things here and there. I have asked them to dinner a few times, but they always seem so busy, coming by quickly and efficiently and leaving shortly after.

A couple of nights ago, however, when I got back inside from working on my garden, I received a phone call. The house still has one of those corded telephones, and while I do have a cell phone, I rarely carry it around with me. It’s enough to try to learn how to use it and all of the new features that seem so streamlined nowadays, it’s another to lose sight of myself and everything around me within its hard-shell. When I went to answer it, my hands still dry with dirt, I had
anticipation that maybe one of my many feelers were calling me back. But I instead found myself disappointed when I heard my brother’s voice on the other end.

Don’t get me wrong. As I said, being within the confines of that house has made me, I suppose, a little stir crazy and lonely, which is not quite the feeling you should have when coming into the summer months, and I love my brother, but anticipation is an interesting thing. Hopes that you didn’t think were worth a thought earlier become great, imperative things in the seconds leading up to potential answers.

And so I answered the phone, breathless because I had to rush from the entranceway through the house to the kitchen—where the corded phone resides—and felt that lightness in my chest that so often comes during similar moments. My brother asked me how I was doing and told me that he was just checking on me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“Nothing. What do you mean?”

“Is Frank okay?”

There was a pause.

“Charles?”

“Yes, he’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Air, really, I’m just calling to catch up. It’s been a couple of months.”

I rested the phone on my forehead and tried to catch my breath. It was rather warm that day, and even in the evening the air was almost muddy and sultry. It had rained the previous day, and no matter what I tried to do sheens of sweat seemed to just cling to me. Days like this aren’t helped by the lack of air conditioning most buildings, especially older ones, have in Oregon. Ben has brought over multiple fans for me recently, but I don’t like the whirling, white noise, drowning out the still,
creaking sounds that, for whatever reason, I find to be comforting. After a few seconds, I sighed and told Charles that I was fine, that there was no need to check up on me. He asked what the big deal was, and why I was acting like he was being an inconvenience.

“You’re not,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m just frazzled today.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Near me on the kitchen counter was my purse and sitting beside it the notebook where I’ve been jotting down notes from my various expeditions into town. The soles of my feet ached, made doubly so by the flat arches my feet have gained over the years. A headache began spreading above my eyelids, molecular tendrils slowly traveling and multiplying and reaching farther and farther into my mind.

“Air, I’m worried about you. So is Frank. You should come back here and stay with us. Get away for a bit. Make this your home.”

“I am home,” I said, and told him that I had to go. He tried to stop me from hanging up, but I made one thing or another up, probably about food burning on the stove, and got off the phone. I am not particularly proud of feeling disappointment over hearing from my brother, my last shred of family left, but my focus was too distracted and ruminating about too many things for me to feel any sort of remorse. I went into the living room and sat in my chair and closed my eyes, listened to the groans of the house against the wind and tried to slow my breathing and my heartbeat. Eventually, I fell asleep, and I dreamed of walking down a spiral staircase into a great labyrinth. Older Ivan—the Ivan that never came to be—was beside me the entire time, silent, unwilling to speak. When I woke a few hours later, I wasn’t sure where I was or what was happening. I just know I had been crying. Once I was awake, I had new resolve. I would find a way to speak to Sofía Santiago again, and she was going to tell me what I needed to know.