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Untitled

by

Alexander Scott Dannemiller

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
Leni Zumas, Chair
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Portland State University
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Abstract

Deeply concerned with body politics, sexual slavery, identity, and technology, this work takes a serious and brutally honest route through the close perspectives of those living it moment by moment. With influences from science fiction, horror, weird, and literary fiction, the untitled novel blends genres for a disturbing account. This novel also plays with constraints in the spirit of many constraint-based writing movements, without the inclusion of names, few identifying markers, and in publication the removal of title, chapter numbers, page numbers, and author name.

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Chapter One

Up on the ceiling the faint orange light of the city cuts in parallel lines that clamber together when a warm breeze rattles my plastic blinds. Even at night, even with my little desk fan blowing across my body on its max setting, the end of the summer heat makes my skin sticky. My pajama shorts and the sweat-stained and tattered straps of my first bra cling tight to my body. Next to me, shoved aside in frustration, the twisted knot of sheets radiate a heat of their own. I try to ignore all this and stare up at the ceiling repeating my name aloud. Rolling the sound of it across my tongue like the billows of a long summer wind, I extend the vowels, and then shift to imitating a car alarm, a bird, or smoke detector. I say my name quick, several times in a row, making it all one long sound, exhaling and deflating my chest until I'm breathless. The fan eats my voice, blowing my name back into the room, keeping it from escaping through the black screen and out the window. If someone heard me speak my name, it would be a crime and they would come for me, and maybe my mother too, and expel us from the city. And then what? I'm not sure. I don't know what's outside the wall. But I continue repeating my name as I toss onto my side where the fan blows on my face. The air it presses against my skin is still warm and will stay warm until the early morning, just a few hours before the sun rises to steal the night's chill away. I flip one way, then another, swirling in my bed like a straw. I am "stir crazy." I laugh between the short syllables of my name. My bed springs pop with a dull *bungt*. One spring refuses to budge and presses against my ribs like a finger. Behind my closed eyes I repeat my name inside my head, letting my throat rest, repeating it as others count sheep.

Our kitchen door slams shut. The two sounds of it, from inside the house and through the window, clash together in a *thud* and *clack*. I sit up from drifting into sleep and stare at the city light outside through the fan. The slits of light vibrate in the same way dying florescent lights pulse. Their flickering almost calms me back to bed. My mother has left again, or returned, it's hard to say which from the door alone. I stand and walk into the hall. From somewhere down the stairs a single light tinges the darkness with an amber glow. A ghost pattern, the remnants of the light through my blinds, lingers somewhere behind my eyes, leaving prints of itself everywhere I look. On my way down the hall I glance into my mother's room and see that it's empty. Her blinds left open, leaving the city glow to square across her bed with its sheets peeled back, one corner dog-eared. It doesn't surprise me. All summer she's left like this, through the back door in the middle of the night. I've watched her dark shape disappear around the house, listened as she opened the backyard gate and closed it behind her. She leaves for several hours and sometimes I fall asleep before she comes back.

In the kitchen all the lights are on. Her mask hangs from the hook next to my cloak and mask. On the counter her pack of cigarettes sit opened. At the kitchen door I cup my hands around my eyes, the double image of my reflection in the glass does the same, and wait for them to adjust to the darkness. In the black, a dull red light blinks on and off from on top the wall that reaches far above our fence and surrounds the city, the wall itself now hidden by night. She's out there in the back yard, walking around the edge of the grass, following the perfect lines of our two-story fence and flowerbeds at her feet. Back and forth in the shadow that is her hand swings the glowing end of a cigarette. I step back from the door when she starts to turn. My white bra and shorts glow in the glass

reflection. The rest of my body nearly disappears as I step farther and farther away.

Under my feet the linoleum tile of the kitchen is warm. When I reach the carpet I turn.

The door opens behind me. Even if I ran now she'd know I was up and then she'd come to my room and ask what I was doing. So I stop.

She takes off her cloak and hangs it, lifting the mask, and then putting it back down on top of the cloak. Her shoes are already off. I didn't notice them there, next to mine, but they sit in a perfect line. She's wearing tan mid-thigh shorts and a green t-shirt stained with sweat under her arms. She's startled to see me. With one hand still resting on the mask she pauses there. Then she shakes her head and picks up the cigarette butt she left on the counter while she uncloaked. Her hair is tied back, tight in a bun, and little strands catch the light, shinning gold in a brief moment.

"What are you doing up?" She says. She tosses the butt in the trashcan and closes the lid.

"The door woke me," I say. "Where have you been?"

"No where," she says. "Just smoking."

She walks past me, the skin of our arms brushing together, hers feeling so warm it leaves the memory of itself behind. I flick the kitchen light off and follow her down the hall toward the stairs. Somehow she finds her way in the dark. My eyes take longer to adjust to the shadows of everything. I press my hand against the wall, letting my fingers trace across the glass of picture frames and the rough brushstrokes frozen on paintings.

"Where's your shirt?" She says.

"You've been going out a lot," I say. "Almost every night this week."

“No. You’re mistaken. If you sleep like that you’re going to catch a cold or something.”

“I sleep like this every night,” I say. “And I’m not wrong. I know you leave. Where do you go?”

She turns at the top of the stairs, her dark form lingers over me a few steps below. For a moment I worry I’ll fall back. I grip the banister tighter.

“I went looking for your father.”

“But he’s dead.”

“No,” she says.

She turns and walks to her bedroom. At her door she turns on the light. The sudden burst of it blinds me. I hold up my hand and blink several times.

“He could be anywhere,” she says. “He could be anyone out there.”

“But you’ve always said he died.”

She disappears from the doorway, stepping back further into the room, and I move closer, stopping at the door. Her room is bare, everything kept in its drawers, perfect and tidy. The large chest of drawers sits against the wall across from the foot of her bed, with a mirror reflecting her as she bends down to open a bottom drawer. Without looking at me she changes into cotton shorts and a loose t-shirt, two sizes too large. The dirty clothes she tosses in a hamper inside her closet. When she’s done her face is still set, cold, with her eyes seeing somewhere far off.

“Before the store tomorrow I have to stop at work,” she says. “It’s almost three. Go back to bed.”

On the nightstand next to her bed the only clock in our house tells me she's right. The little black arms near close to the three. Time isn't something we're supposed to hold on to like that. It bothers me that she keeps it, but she's said it's necessary and claims anyone who says they don't have one clock in their house is a liar. I turn back into the hall. She closes her door behind me, leaving me to stumble blind in the dark, wondering if she's gone fully insane or if my father isn't dead.

In the shower I say my name louder than I could in my room. The water hides my voice more than the fan did, drowning my name down the drain. I gurgle water and try to say it, spitting all over myself. I cough and turn away. The way the water rushes against my back, soft little patters, cold fingers dotting away the heat, makes me tremble awake. As it rushes through my hair I go on chanting my name until my mother interrupts by calling, "Are you done yet?" and I shut off the water in reply.

She's waiting for me in the kitchen, a painting wrapped in brown paper leans against a cabinet by her feet. We get ready together at the door. She straps pads to her shoulders, making them arch at odd angles. We both use bandages to tape down our breasts. Over my stomach I strap a bulge of black fabric with its small clasp clicking in the back. I snap lifts onto my shoes and stand tall as her shoulders. The weight of them makes it a little awkward to walk, but I like the extra height.

"Put this on too," she says. She holds up one of our hunch back pads.

"No," I say.

She gives me a stern look.

"I don't want to," I say. "I'll wear the hip ones instead."

She tosses the hunch back into the cabinet by the door and shakes her head. From the same cabinet she pulls out the hip pads that I can wear like a belt with leg straps. They're snug and make me feel safe. I don't want to feel like I'm carrying a backpack when school is so close and I'll be doing that everyday. Sliding the cloak over my head I can already feel the extra heat of it. The sleeves hang low, almost covering my hands completely, and my legs and feet disappear beneath it. I wait to pull up the hood until I've strapped the mask around back, over my hair, and under my chin. The black mesh pulls down, covering my entire face with a dim oval of shadow. I'm starting to sweat before she even opens the door. As I'm pulling on my gloves she steps close to me, already fully hidden beneath her cloak and mask.

"Smell," she says.

I lean close to her and inhale her scent for today. From her comes a soft touch of vanilla, with a covering of lilac, and then a passing moment of citrus zest. I nod. She steps back and pulls out her ticker from beneath her cloak. It whirrs as she presses the buttons, little type imprints on the paper, then it prints out the paper fully and she tears it off, handing it to me.

"Ready?" She types.

The black ink fades to purple, then completely disappears. I drop the slip of paper as it starts to disintegrate. By the time it reaches the floor it's completely gone. I take my ticker from the pocket of my cloak. It's heavy in my hands; the little keys click softly as I press them. Inside the plastic casing I can feel it working, the ink striking the paper. When I hit enter it whirrs and clatters, pushing the paper out of its slot for me to rip off and give to her.

“Yes,” I type.

We put our tickers away. She grabs the painting and puts it under her arm. My message fades into the air, brushed by her cloak as we walk back through the kitchen and across the hall where she pulls the garage door open. A burst of hot air chokes me through the mask. The heat hangs like a large tongue, lapping at everything. In the middle of the small room our car beeps with a press of the fob. It chirps like a bird and I want her to press it again, but I don't bother asking. Across the black window my mask moves like a black moon in the night. It's even hotter inside the car. She puts the painting in the back on the floor then gets inside the driver's seat. I slide my mask up so I can breathe. She does the same. As the garage door lifts she cranks up the air conditioning and turns on the radio, already tuned to a classical station, the only thing she listens to. We pull out of the garage and the bright sun engulfs the car. It would be a beautiful day if it weren't so hot. The few clouds that linger in the sky refuse to go near the sun, as if they fear its touch.

My mother drives with her hands gripping the wheel so tight her leather gloves squeak. She checks her mirrors cautiously; staring longer than she usually does behind us. In my lap my mask stares back at me. I run my fingers back and forth across the black metal mesh that covers the face, feeling the ridges against my fingernails. Outside we pass through the suburbs. Behind the houses the grey border of the wall sits on the horizon in every direction. Its massive reach making it the furthest thing we can see. Each house we pass looks exactly like ours. The slight differences come in the flipping of the structure on either side of the road, so that the house on one side is the mirror image of the house on the other. We pass a person, draped in their black cloak and mask, walking with a smaller child linked to them with a black leash. The child hurries to keep up by

holding up their small cloak and struggling with their mask that seems too large for ou.

When we sit at a stop sign I notice the house on the corner has a small crack in its foundation. Dead grass forms a ring around its mailbox. Rust covers the metal vent on their chimney. There's a soft itch in my throat, a little heavy weight in my chest. I turn to point out the differences to my mother, but she's looking the other way, watching the road so that she can pull out onto a main street, where our car joins a line of others just like it. Next to us drives a copy of our car. The white metal and black windows show nothing of what's inside. Behind the cars' windows could be anyone. My mother is right, I guess, my father could be there. He could be driving that car or that person walking on the sidewalk, carrying a black bag in ous arms. As we drive farther along the road the strip of small one-story shops give way to taller buildings, four, five, and eight stories tall. Their white concrete and black windows zip by our car as we go deeper into the city. More people walk along the sidewalks here, all of them in misshapen cloaks in the bright sun like living shadows against the white buildings.

We park around the back of a building four stories tall. It's one of the buildings with little squares for windows, instead of the black strips of glass, or the all glass walls that those around it have. We put our masks on. The afternoon heat hits me in the stomach hard. I gasp, but make sure not to utter a sound as I close the door behind me. My mother grabs the painting out of the back and we walk along the rows of duplicated cars to the sidewalk. We enter the antique store from the front of the building. Through the window you can see the displays of chairs, metal fans, and typewriters. Inside it smells like rust and grease or some kind of polish. The wooden floorboards creak under our footsteps. The aisles here are just wherever you can step. Large pieces of furniture, a

cabinet, a chest of drawers, determine the paths. Some of it I worry will topple over on us as we pass. A lamp shakes on a table as my mother walks farther into the store. She goes to the counter, laying down the wrapped painting, and rings a little bell that calls ou. Next to the counter sits a child's rocking horse, it barely comes up to my knees, the blue paint of it chipping off to reveal some yellow wood below. I push down its head and let it rock back and forth. Ou appears from the back of the store. They type messages and pass them back and forth with my mother. Then she hands one to me.

“I'll be back,” she types. “Don't leave.”

I nod. Ou takes the painting and my mother follows ou around the counter. They disappear down the hall where I hear a door open and close. She's told me they look at the painting she's restored, making sure they look right against photos of comparisons. And if she does a good job they sell them here. One of hers hangs on the wall across from me. It's a painting of a large meadow. From behind clouds an orange sun is peaking out. Landscapes, cityscapes, and still life are her specialty. At the front of the store the person we saw on our way in is walking across the floor. I follow the counter to the other side of the shop and look down the hall. A door at the end is open halfway and from somewhere inside there's a steady loud clicking like I've never heard before. It's louder than a busy street, where so many tickers chatter on at once. I move quietly down the hall, passing a door where I can hear two tickers whirring, one of which must be my mother's, her scent still lingering there. At the door at the end of the hall I push it open. Inside is a narrow wooden staircase leading around a corner. A dingy yellow light presses against the stone wall. At the turn of the stairs a bare yellow bulb hangs from the ceiling, lighting a metal door at the bottom.

I try the handle, but the door is locked. Turning back around at this point seems to be the smartest thing, but instead I knock twice against its metal, expecting nothing to happen. A mechanical whirr starts behind the door and a square opening above me slides open. For a moment the blackness of the rectangle looks out at me, nothing shifts or moves inside it. The metal slides shut with a *clink*. A dull mechanical thudding starts up from behind the door. There's a loud *clang* and the door swings open. Patches of flickering yellow from hanging, naked bulbs light the length of a hallway. The end of it made invisible by a bend in the wall. I step inside, looking behind the door. No one is there. A series of gears and metal arms are cut into the wall. On the other side of the square in the door there's a mirror, tilted at an angle so that it reflects into another mirror, which is tilted toward another. I follow the mirrors further down the hall, reflecting back at me the black mesh of a mask like my own.

Around the corner yellow lumps hang against the walls, tinted from the yellow painted bulbs that make the walls sick bile. Before I even step toward them I can smell that they're rotting. A smell of death like a decayed bird I found in our yard. These lumps are birds too, or the heads at least. The one right next to me is a goose head, hammered into the brick by its neck. Its bill points to the ground with the blood from its neck streaking down its feathers and into its eyes. All the lumps are like this, one goose head after another, many decayed, the eyes fallen out and replaced with hollow dried skins. The fresher ones wriggle alive with flies and maggots. The heat and humidity of the tunnel turn the smell a deeper sick stench. I hold my breath and swallow back the acid from my stomach. A little fear crawls on my skin and tells me to turn around and go back

to the shop upstairs. But something else is stronger. Something else inside me wants to see where the hallway leads.

Past the hanging goose heads the end of the hallway opens into a circular room the size of a closet. The wall of the room made completely of ticker machines like the one in my cloak. They pile in rows from the floor to the ceiling, with their ticker tapes facing out, the buttons hidden behind the pile of them. I step into the circle, reaching out toward the quiet roll of paper, and it jumps alive. All of them clatter together. I flinch and step back from the wall. The noise surrounds me with the mechanical whirr of the papers' printing. Their paper falls down around me, some pooling at my feet. The paper slowly fades away, words disappearing as more are printed under them. I take a line of them together from the wall near me and hold the still printing paper in my hand.

“WHO ARE YOU???”

The line repeats across all of them, down the paper to the ticker. They print on and on with the oldest text disappearing, the paper shortly following it, leaving a little wet film on the floor. The sound clatters on.

“WHO? WHO? WHO?”

It continues printing and I'm frozen there, holding the paper as it pushes its way through my hand toward the ground. My chest thumps with the pulsing of the printouts. It's an unaskable question, taboo, illegal, opening both asker and asked to a danger of being expelled from the city. If I answered truthfully, if I gave my name, I'd be breaking one of the biggest rules. I'm terrified that for a moment I think of answering. In my throat I can feel my name already building as the tickers continue to print. A hand on my shoulder makes me jump. I pull the paper and rip it from the machines. I turn to a figure,

its shoulders lumpy at odd angles. The smell of vanilla, lilac, and a soft citrus zest is there. My mother. She takes my hand with the dissolving paper fading in its grip and pulls me into the hall. She ignores the goose heads, not even flinching at their smell. My wrist aches under the twisting of her grasp as she leads me up the stairs. The metal door closes behind us with a loud metal clunk. Once we're back in the shop she turns on me, her fingers working furiously over the keys.

"I told you not to leave," she types.

"I didn't," I type.

But she doesn't bother to look at the message. Again I'm pulled with her out of the shop, past out at the counter. The other person has left. The shop is empty. But the bright street outside is alive with people in their cloaks. In the car she is angry, holding the wheel with the car still off. Her gloves twist around it.

"What was that?" I say.

I leave my mask on because I'm worried I'll cry. Not that it matters if she sees me cry, but I don't want her to see. Nothing really happened that should make me cry. I'm more afraid of her. I'm afraid of what she'll say or yell.

She takes off her mask and I can see her settled panic. She has a worn and tortured look. Her lips press tight together, hiding their shape in a thin line. The blue of her eyes somehow darker than before. With a quick twist she turns on the car and the classical music blares with the air conditioning. Without waiting to check behind her she starts backing up. Then she twists around, half facing me, half looking through the back window.

"Forget it," she says. "Forget anything you saw."

“But what was it?”

The car jolts to a stop, halfway out of the spot. She turns to me in the seat, one arm on the wheel, the other hand gripping my wrist again. I try to pull it away, a sharp pain shooting from her hold, but she’s got it locked there.

“Never mention this,” she says. “Never bring it up again. Don’t ask questions. Don’t try to go down there again. It doesn’t exist.”

When she lets go my arm is throbbing. I turn to the window. Soft, hot tears roll under my mask against my cheek. It’s good I left it on. But I don’t want to be here in the car with her now. If it wouldn’t make things worse I would step out, before she pulls out of the parking lot and into the street. The wound in my chest is pulling me to do it, to just step out and leave, but I don’t, I choke it down, swallowing with the tears.

It’s a short drive to the other stores, not far from our house, where we pull into the parking lot and park outside the ice-cream shop next to the supplies store. People sit outside on benches, waiting to go inside where they can sit in private booths without their masks and eat ice cream. The taste of strawberry flavor, the white scoop with little chunks of red strawberries melting on a cone, lingers in my mouth. The weight in my chest lets go, just a little, thinking of the ice cream. She turns to me as if she has something to say, but I open the door and step out. She doesn’t have her mask on, I slam the door quickly behind me, but I should have waited. I put her at risk of being seen. It would be bad for both of us, but I don’t care.

Inside the store I track her scent as we step between the other parents and their children. Smaller children, no taller than my fake hips, tangle themselves in the leashes their parents pull them by. One child swings their leash back and forth, jumping over it

while their parent picks out glue. Through the body odor wrapped in sweat soaked cloaks and root beer smells I follow my mother's lilac and vanilla with a small hint of citrus. Small children run past, smelling of fried food, cotton candy, and dried spit. My mother's liquid pace carries her between a mother and child, stepping over their black umbilical cord. She reaches into a bin and her hand moves through water, floating in the air, swiping an eraser from the bin and dropping it into her cart. Each movement performed with a soft grace that doesn't give a hint she might still be upset at me. I couldn't ask now, or ever, I guess, what those goose heads were doing against that wall, or who is behind the tickers, or what it has to do with the shop above. I can't ask if she knew it was down there, or what she'd reply to the question they typed. Who am I? Who is she, really? She turns down an aisle and I have to jog a little to catch up.

In the aisle for pens and pencils my mother glances down at the list the school provided. Another person with a small child by our side looks at binders next to us. Our examines the edges of a plain white binder, and then moves on to the next one on the shelf, putting down binder after binder with their corners smashed. The child plays with our cloak, folding and unfolding the edges together, then pulling them taught. A child cries out from somewhere in the store. The noise strikes against my chest. All of us in the aisle freeze, even the small child. It's a small crime to emit a noise that could indicate sex or age, but it's more the tone, the horrible shriek of the cry that pierces my chest. Several more cries join in a chorus. Shrill pins roll down my spine. From somewhere unseen, outside the aisle, a shoe squeaks against the linoleum and a large figure bolts across, running down the rows. I run to the end of our aisle and watch the large figure carrying a limp bundle of cloak and mask over their shoulder, something metallic gleams in our

hand. They reach the door, then the sidewalk. Another person from inside the store follows after them, and together they disappear around the corner. Behind me there's a scuffle. Children are still crying and parents attempt to quiet them without making any sounds of their own. They mass around the backpack display. Their leashes trailing flaccid behind them, severed with a clean cut. Two children break free of the group and run past me. Small laughs muffled beneath their masks as they see a chance to cause more trouble. They head for the front doors, with three parents rushing after them, pushing past me as they go. Another pair of people cut the children off, locking the front doors at the bottom and top. Two short beeps sound out through the store, signaling everyone to go to the front for a rejoining. Back in the aisle of pens and pencils my mother is gone. None of the figures around me have her scent. It doesn't even linger in the aisle. All traces of her are gone. A child grabs my cloak and tugs hard, pulling the neck of my cloak tight against my skin. What a terrible little brat. I shake my sleeve from his grip and he runs off to another figure. As a quiet mob we make our way to the front of the store. I take deep breaths, trying to find the scent of my mother in the crowd. She must be here. It's impossible she left while they locked things down. I watch how each person moves, looking for her languid steps like she's walking through water in the air around her, but none of them move like her. A person next to me hands me a piece of paper, others are passing notes all around us, but I don't recognize the numbers on the paper and so I let it disintegrate in my hand.

At the front of the store we line up for the rejoining protocol. I stand next to the other children in a line, each of us moving one at a time to face the next adult, who types a secret code on their ticker. Code after code is passed to me, the ink turning black to

purple and then fading away, but none of them are for me. As we move down the line adults and children are matched up, passing codes back and forth until the parent takes the child by the hand out of the store. Down the line one of the adults ignores the shorter children, they stand silent, their mask looking back into the store. When I reach the person, ou finally types and hands me my father's birthday. Vanilla, lilac, and the soft citrus smells follow her hand. I type out the reply, the date of his death. As I pass it back to my mother I remember what she said the other night. He could still be alive, she thinks. So the date may be meaningless now. My mother holds the paper up to her mask and watches the ink and paper fade. I hold out my hand, expecting her to take it, but she does nothing. I type the date again and hand it to her, but she ignores me. A child next to me pushes against my padded hips. The parent across from the child waves me on. There's only me and two other children, the third child tries to pass a message to the person who waved me to move on. A woman cries somewhere down the line. One of the adults, the second to the end, starts to bend a little, with a hand to ous stomach. Ous body trembles in time to the cries. A child is missing. The bundle, taken under the person's arm as they left the store, must have been ous child. This is too much. I type out my birthday, my mother's birthday, and the code to our house, handing each one to my mother. She takes each piece of paper like they're money, holding them absently in her hands. I try my father's death date again, pounding against the small keys of my ticker, but when I hold it out she grabs my hand and tugs me outside.

In the car she takes off her mask. Her hair springs out from its tight bun in wisps like the straw of a frayed broom. Under my mask I begin to cry. My chest shudders and a hard splintering shakes in my heart. Each jolt from my cries seems to open it more. It's a

hollow and cold thing threatening to spread. But I can't stop it this time. This is pain that was waiting.

"I know the date," she says. "You didn't need the rest. I know it."

"But you didn't do anything."

My voice sputters between my lips, curled and smeared wet beneath my mask. She starts the car and a flittering horn section bursts from the radio.

"I tried," she says. "I try to do whatever I can."

"Someone took that woman's child," I say. "It could have been me and you wouldn't care."

"Shut up," she says. "Just, shut up."

She holds her mask against her chest and looks out the windshield. Her cheekbones flinch with the clenching of her jaw. Pouches hang under her puffy, red eyes. The cracks around her eyes and corners of her mouth deepen in the bright sunlight pressing against the tinted windows. In this moment she looks older to me than she ever has before. I never see her eat anymore. She sets down my plate and smokes outside on the porch. Her sustenance gained through cigarettes. She's a plant, smoke as her sunshine, absorbing everything through her lips. Clouds of her eating rise to my window like burps. It's aging her, tearing away the fat of her arms and the smoothness of her skin, making it tight and cracked. She's turning ugly, but it isn't the smoke alone that does it. It isn't the smoke at all. The cold air from the air conditioning slowly eats away the heat. Under the bandages holding down my breasts my skin sweats and itches as my chest shakes. Her face blurs with my tears and I look away.

I keep my mask on as we drive home. The warmth of it and my cloak feel like a cocoon of blankets. I bury myself inside a second skin. Outside the car, things move through the tiny holes of my mask's mesh. The dark grain shades trees and people. One layer of shadow placed on top of another. None of them can see me, not even my mother next to me can really know who I am. They can't see my streaked cheeks, red, hot, and drying. I could be anyone underneath this skin. I could be that person leaning against a light pole, or the one sitting outside the café. I play this game until my mother pulls into our driveway and there is no one else I can be but me.

Chapter Two

Out here there's nothing but long, dull stretches of green and brown crops. On both sides of the highway the fertile landscape lays out like short carpet under the dimming, purple sky. The frays of the fields sit with stagnant brush peppered in dirt, real brown earth, rich and unpolluted, without a mixing of litter and chunks of asphalt, just the soil beneath green stems. Far off on my side of the road a tractor pulls metal scaffolding on wheels, spraying crops with water or insecticide, the distance between us makes it impossible to detect which it is. Between that tractor and us only the wind rustles the soybeans. Inside the car everything is a relaxing clatter of noise. Video of a felon attempting to lie in a courtroom plays from my stream over the scene outside. Another video next to the first shows a news report on a new body found in the river that runs through my runaway's home city, but the reports I pull up from their local department say it's male. The weather report to my left claims the next few days above the black hole of the city we head toward will be sunny, calm, and a little cloudy. The report on the male's body glides away and I watch a twelve-yard pass get returned for a touch down. Three other videos play out in my queue, one of a stabbing inside my home city, another of a short documentary on the wall that we head towards, and when that ends there's the soft music before the monologue from last night's late night talk show that supposedly contains a joke about the anonymous city. Behind the sound of these videos my driver slaps the wheel in time to the drums of his spastic music. The thumping bass lost in a clatter of bells and rolling bleeps, an electric guitar hitting the same note in quick succession. Some poor singer's screeching wail breaks from the rhythm they sing over. It's impossible to tell if it's a guy or gal, their voice so distorted with auto-tuning

software that it doesn't even matter. The driver's fat fingers thud in quick smacks against the wheel, with his rings making a soft click each time. They hit *rappabapbap-rappabapbapbap-bapparapbapbap* and repeat. The obnoxious counter-rhythm builds a pulsing pressure behind my temples that has steadily grown since I first got in the car. Even with my stream's volume on high it's impossible to completely drown out his noise. To make it all worse, something in the car is doused with stinging cologne, wood chips, peat moss, a floral beachscape, and maybe even fried olive oil.

The music cuts out. My videos pause and mute themselves. From the back seat there's a soft chime. My wife appears, sitting calmly in the previously empty seat. I'm actually happy to see her. She's still dressed for work in her white blouse, the buttons pulled tight, and a loose, flowering skirt that ends halfway down her shins. I can't see them, but I bet she's wearing those dull black shoes too. She likes them because they hide the scuffs she gets running up and down the stairs. She looks up and smiles at me, brushing a strand of black hair back behind her ear. Even though her entire image carries a dinge of blue it's her eyes that still hold a striking, calm sky. She pulls her little metal cigarette from her lips and blows the vapor. The cloud floats into the wall of the car, disappearing out of the projection's view.

"You look sick," she says.

"I feel it," I say.

My voice scratches in my throat. The ashy flavor of the cigarette I had an hour ago lingers on my tongue. As soon as we stop I'll have another two. I'd forgotten how the analogues burn slow and soft as a dying campfire. The smell absorbed into my hands reminds me to have another. The harsh burning tar additives clawed their way down into

my lungs and made themselves home. I hadn't had an analogue in fourteen years. The calm they brought was something euphoric.

"Your sister called again," she says.

"Is she safe?"

"He's moved a few blocks from her apartment. She just found out today."

"Shit," I say. I look at the driver, he stares out into the road, completely unaware of my conversation. If he looked behind him he would see only the empty seat. My wife's image restricted to my vision, as are my movements in the seat. The implant in his head creates a blind spot where I sit; replacing any gestures I perform with an image of me sitting still and stoic. It's a private line. I glance again at the driver, his hands drumming against the wheel and his eyes locked on the road. It's possible he's in his own conversation, with someone's projected image unknowingly occupying the same space as my wife. "And they still won't do anything?"

"Your friends are worthless. They say he's outside the restraining order apparently. And he hasn't done anything."

"Bullshit."

She shakes her head, blowing another cloud over her shoulder from the corner of her mouth. There's something in front of her. She reaches out, through the driver's seat, and turns the page of a book or magazine I can't see. It's after dinner there now. This is her cooling down period. She may be out on the porch, watching the kids through the door as they stream in the living room. Around her image my stream still vies for my attention like eager gnats, but I ignore it, mentally pushing aside the video queue that's

building up based on my thoughts. The vague shape of a monument I don't recognize fades away behind her head.

"Your new boss better get her out of there quick," she says. "She wants to move in here. I love your sister, I want to help her, but I can't handle that. *We* can't handle that."

"It won't be more than a month. It won't take that long."

"And I'm supposed to tell her to sit tight while you play hide and seek inside the lost city of spooky shadow people?"

"What can I do?"

In my stomach a weight churns to the front. It's hot and sloshing and it presses against my skin, up my neck, across my cheeks. I'm tempted to call the thing off. Maybe I should grab the wheel, spin us around, and tell my employer to fuck off and haul his own ass over the wall.

"She said she should have gone with you."

Now there's a new panic. I press my hand into the dashboard and try to hold it tight. I need another cigarette. I need it so bad I can feel the smoke in my mouth.

"I'd never see her again," I say. "She's crazy. He's literally driving her crazy."

"She's your sister," she says. She takes a breath, then, "There's another problem too."

"Great."

"The academy is threatening to throw our son in lock up."

Her image bends unnaturally, her torso leaning to the left, outside the door of the car, even while she holds her pose with her cigarette gleaming in the air. The projections

aren't supposed to pass the bounds of a room like this. A car seat, maybe, it needs to recreate the movement and will allow a momentary break in reality, but not something as wacky as this. Then the image pops back as it should be, my wife sitting upright, taking another drag. I have to look away for a moment to shake the disturbing image away. Up ahead the highway splits in three directions, two going off to the north and south, they loop around the city at a distance, and one, an off-ramp, disappearing out of view ahead. Above the off-ramp a large green sign reads: "EXIT: CITY."

"What'd he do now?"

"Another fight," she says. She looks up at me. Hold tense blue. "With a sergeant."

"Shit. You know, he's going to get himself killed. At least we'll have nothing to worry about then."

"You think your new boss can fix this too?"

"Completely overhaul the kid's personality? No. I don't think he can do that."

"There's other academies," she says. "Move him there, one of the rougher ones, where they won't take his attitude in training. Where they'll beat the crap out of him. We weren't soft on him, you know. We're not soft on the other two. I'm watching them like a hawk right now. He's just a dick. All on his own he turned into a dick."

I don't think she's right, nor do I think she even really believes what she says, but I can't take the fight right now. We were sloppy with the first kid. Not as strict when he came home after the first fight or falling on his ass drunk. The son of a detective and kindergarten teacher fell apart without either of them noticing. We should have seen it coming. It breaks my heart to think about this person that we let get so screwed up.

The car dips down the exit ramp and hits a road barely paved. Her face goes fuzzy, and then her whole body quivers. The image blinks, twice, then glows red. The connection is dying.

“You’re cutting out,” I say. “I’ll take care of it when I get out.”

She puts her hand down, resting it on some invisible armrest. Her thick lips curl into a smile. It stabilizes my whole body, the sick in my stomach flat-lines, and there’s a little melting in my heart. She can do that, so simply, with just the curl of her lips. My body longs for the heat of hers pressed against my chest.

“Be safe in there,” she says. “Come back to us.”

“Whatever it takes.”

Then she’s gone. My stream dies with her. My driver’s music blasts in full force. Outside the window only the dull green pastures zip by us. Several thousand miles behind us my wife stares at an empty chair next to her, our children playing in the stream in the living room, the noise of it all still with her. In this car here it’s just me and the silent noise of one man’s ill chosen rhapsody.

“How much longer?” I say. My voice sounds weak in the noise.

The driver continues to slap one hand against the wheel while the other fat finger pokes the windshield, pointing straight down the uneven highway.

“When that gray blob is the size of my pinky we’ll have forty-minutes,” he says.

That gray blob is the wall. A fifty-story block of solid concrete circling the city in a philosophical line made literal. The thought of it swoons something in my stomach. Even with the music blaring and my driver’s padding on the wheel, there’s an absence ringing in my ears. A buzz in my head demands the noise of the stream to placate it. A

swirling heat builds in my stomach, two conflicting winds meeting and churning into a tornado. The food from the plane, four mini-bottles of vodka, the clenching stress of what I'm leaving behind, and the wall up ahead, a looming blade that's already cut one tether. None of this plays well together. A flush crosses my face and extends down my neck, into my arms, meeting back in my gut with threatening weight. I open the window a crack and hot air rushes in with the smell of cow shit. The driver shouts and puts the window back up before my finger leaves the button.

"You'll stink up the whole car, man."

"I need air," I say.

He cranks the AC and cool jets blast against my face. I breathe deep and close my eyes. This only makes things worse. The car jostles, weaves across the lane, hitting a divot with a loud thump. His aim for potholes is impeccable. Every few feet we find another one.

When the sky dims too dark a blue the driver flips on the headlights. It's an old car, with everything manual but the gearshift. It moves with every flinch of the wheel like it doesn't want him touching it and he's obliged to barely grasp it.

The wall grows over an hour and eighteen songs. Each song moves us closer to the jut of gray against the darkening sky and what I anticipate as a hell of my own. Ten miles or so before the wall the highway fades into a country-road and farmlands are replaced with expanses of dead grass. Up ahead the fifty stories of the wall blot out the horizon for miles. Not a single building or structure pokes out from behind it. The wall rises like a swell on the shoreline. The dissipating line of the sun shrinks into it, leaving the sky to fend on its own against the darkening blue and purple. When we get near

enough I spot the thin line of black glass around the top of the wall where birds circle and drop behind it. These glass security perches are just barely visible under the smooth line of the wall's top, continuing above the columns that jut out from its surface and mark each mile around the wall. Chunks of the wall are missing, big scrapes and divots where something has scratched against the concrete and taken pieces with it.

"It's spooky out here," the driver says, gesturing to the blackening flat grass on either side of us. "I hear it's even worse inside."

"You've never been in?"

"No, way," he says. "I'd never step a foot in there."

"But you've done drop offs before."

"All the time. I get every kind going inside. Men, women, kids, whole families, each one fooling themselves into thinking it'll be better. I had a guy who couldn't get a job 'cause he robbed a bank, marked his record up, he said, but that's bullshit, you can get a job as an ex-con. I did the run for that celebrity with her son too, you see that?" I nod. "She told me she couldn't take 'the endless stream of assault,' her words. News had a drone following us all the way to the dead zone. Damn thing nose-dived right into the corn. All types go in."

"But never my runaway."

"Don't show me the picture again, man. I can't take that heartache, thinking of her missing. I never watch the news because of that kinda shit."

Bugs pass through our lights, some wisp over the car, others smack with small, soft thuds against the car. I hear it all in the ringing, even over his music.

"How do you handle the silence?"

“The blackout zone? The stream killer, one guy called it. That’s what the music is for. Try to keep it going as long as I can so I can sink right in and ignore the whole thing happens. You gotta find an equivalent. Otherwise you’re going to go crazy in there.”

That’s what I’m afraid of. The stories I’ve heard from others that left the city and entered the stream is one of excruciating pain, their senses overwhelmed with the constant barrage of information. One man described it as walking into a fog where every molecule shouted at you. Flip that around; take away that noise, and you get a deafening silence. You’re left with the sound of your own heart pumping blood through your veins. Hum, my wife suggested, just keep humming a tune to yourself and carry on as many conversations from the past as you can. My stomach turns a warm solid mass.

“Last chance,” the driver says. “Get out now or forever hold your peace.”

“Keep driving,” I say.

The road takes us to a square tunnel that juts out from the bottom of the wall. Large steel doors, each one the size of a barn, open with the loud mechanical clicks of gears falling into place. The sound interrupts the music and I try to fall into their steady beat. Inside, pink lights line the tunnel and reflect off big shiny tiles, tinting their white with a fluorescent pink all the way back to a loading dock and a door at the other end. The driver guides his car onto a track and four loud snaps lock the wheels into place. He puts it in neutral and lets the track pull us in. Two people dressed in black cloaks emerge from behind the black glass of a guard station to the left of the tracks. One walks to the driver’s door and the other steps over the tracks to my side. Their cloaks drag along the floor behind them, the hoods pulled over their heads like grim reapers. Black masks cover their faces, making the shadows of the hoods deep and impossible. The one coming

around to my side stoops with a hunch back bump. When it gets to my window I see the mask is made of wire meshwork painted black. It stares at me like an abyss. My reflection in the window caught between us.

“Here we go,” the driver says.

He unlocks the doors and puts both hands on the wheel, gripping it tight. I rest mine on the jacket across my lap. The people in cloaks open the doors.

“Turn off the car,” the one on the driver’s side says. Its voice a crackle altered by electronics, pennies through a vacuum, distorted speaker at a drive through. There’s no way to tell if it’s a guy or gal. The line delivered in such monotonous tones that there’s not a trace of inflection. The consonants pop against my eardrum like pushing a cotton-swab too far into my ear and rustling it.

The driver kills the engine, cutting short a shrill cry from the radio. In the silence the hum of the pink lights grows. Their bubblegum tinge strains my eyes. Electric moves slowly through the ones close to dying. Without the AC the flush starts again from my neck. A thick baseball of phlegm builds there too. I’m feeling trapped in my own skin.

“Business?” the person says.

“Dropping off this asshole,” the driver says. He laughs.

My stomach flips and I vomit out the door. Hot streaming fluid drains out my throat and nose. Pieces of dry chicken and peas diluted by stinging vodka pour out of me. I shut my eyes, watering from the downpour. I wait until it ends, with the final small strands reaching from mouth to a growing stain on the concrete. When there’s nothing left in my stomach but a dry heave I clean myself up with my shirtsleeve. The driver is

laughing behind me. The person next to me stands with their arms out, looking down at their splashed cloak.

“Sorry,” I say.

The guilt is real. As a father of three I’ve grown accustomed to the vomit and shit that can pour from a body and stain clothes. I’d never wish it on anyone else. I pull myself upright and my head is a swirl. My body shakes with its loss. Wrung out and squeezed from the gut. I hand over my jacket, two bottles of vodka clinking in its breast pocket, and unclip my shield from my belt. It trembles a little in my fingers.

“Detective,” I say.

The person tosses my jacket back and holds the badge close to its mask. It bends it in the light, letting the pink film wash over its gold surface. Children inspect objects like this. I knew a blind man, who had his vision reimplanted, and he’d run his fingers over every object, and then pull it close to his face, almost smelling it. The colors and shapes of things seemed unreal to him, he said, they were objects from a dream he wasn’t ready to believe. The person in the cloak flips the badge back to me and nods at the other.

“You’re late,” the person says from across the driver.

“Then why are we wasting time?”

I step over my vomit and slam the door behind me. My legs wobble a little, still weak from the expulsion of my stomach and sitting cramped in a car for hours. I steady myself on the side-view mirror. The other person says something to the driver then shuts the door and leads me to the far wall next to the loading dock. As they work a key in the door I watch the driver’s car pushed back out the open doors. Behind the car the black expanse of night has settled in. The engine starts up with a burst of music and the driver

flashes on his brights, blinding me. I blink out the traces of headlights from my eyes as the other person pulls a hose down from the wall. They work on the nozzle for a minute, adjusting the spray until it shoots like a fire hose. Then they get to work cleaning out my vomit. From behind me there's a click and the door swings open.

"Sorry about that," I say.

But the person next to me doesn't seem to care. They point me down the hallway. Black glass lines the walls, with a single row of fluorescent lights embedded in the ceiling.

"After you," I say.

"No." They press a hand against my back. It's surprisingly warm, gentle, but firm in a way that tells me I don't have the option of refusing.

The door closes behind me. I've never been claustrophobic. As a child I hid in a crawl space behind the radiator whenever my father came pounding for me. But there's something in the black sheen of the walls that encloses like a sleek, polished coffin or the walls of glossy night pressing against me. Present too is the silence of death, a quiet piercing in my ears. The conversation with my wife plays back in my head, repeating her words, finding her voice in the silence. I try to hum a song but the vibrations in my throat threaten to bring more than sound and scratch the raw burning the vomiting left behind. The lights flicker off. Black lighting flickers on. My white shirt glows neon purple. Across my shirtsleeve the wiped stain of vomit sticks out in a smear of dark yellow. Soap patterns run across my hands and wrists in swirls of pale green. The black light flickers off and red light replaces it. Shadows at the corners of the hall darken, stretch, and I could swear they move too, oscillating on the walls, yet never growing. Creases in my hands,

the edge of them even, deepen in the red. My eyes burn a little. In my gut the emptiness turns, hunting for food to spew out. And there's the throbbing at my temples, returning with a pulse. I don't know if I've ever been this aware of my body or how awful it feels. The distortion is a temporal thing. It will go away. It will pass.

"Walk toward the door." A distorted voice says from above me.

At the end of the hall is another steel door that I make my way to with my hand against the wall. Every few steps my fingers find a seam in the cold glass. How many people are there on the other side watching me? My image wavers next to me in the glass. Here the abyss stares back with my own reflection. The lights switch back to white and my eyes strain to adjust. The door swings open. Through it sits a cage, with its door open, in an otherwise empty room. It looks like the cages we use around evidence lockers, but inside is just a table with two bins.

"Clothes in one, possessions in the other." The voice says.

I empty my pockets: Badge, gun, pack of cigarettes, box of matches, lighter, notepad, and a picture of the runaway, her green eyes catching the light as I toss it in the bin. I take the two bottles of vodka from my jacket pocket and separate them into the bins. The rest of my clothes follow until I'm standing naked.

"Turn off any imps then step through the door."

"Just my flesh," I say.

"You're about to receive a large EMP blast in the next room. Expect pain if lying."

The door on the other side of the room swings open, and through it waits a room of smooth brushed metal surfaces. When my feet hit the metal everything shrinks. My

balls tighten into themselves and my nipples are the only things that erect. There's a soft hum, then a loud dull thud, then a high-pitched whine. I have nothing to grip. My hands ball into themselves as I prepare for the pain. A pressure in my jaw starts up where a tiny imp extends from my tooth and into my brain. I press a hand against the pain, trying to ease it. Nerves come alive, battling around against each other inside my teeth. The smell of cherry pie, the image of a yellow flower on water, my sister's laugh, little flashes of memories activated by the twitching wires in my brain and little nanobots dying between neurons, their last cries bringing these manifestations into the room, into my head. The hairs on my arm and chest move in a breeze I don't feel against my skin. The pain, a searing hot needle in the right of my jaw, grows with a fury. Then the whine stops, there's another dull thud. Remnants of the pain still linger in my jaw, little twitches of the nerves, soothing cold relief, then sharp hot slice, back and forth they pulse. I fish inside my mouth, pressing a finger against my teeth, all feel safe and stable. My finger comes out with a little blood that I wipe against my chest hair, matting it down.

In the next room, on a chair at its center, sit a pile of clothes: underwear, slacks, belt, socks, shoes, and a clean white collared shirt. On top of these are my cigarettes, lighter, matchbox, watch, notepad, and the picture of the runaway. No gun, no badge, and no alcohol. Next to this pile is a black cloak with gloves and a mask on top. The first layer fits just fine. The cloak, however, is a big poncho, two sizes too big. I fight a bit with it, trying to find the way in and under it. My arm goes out the face hole. I adjust and swim in the thing. I'm a child again, tucked in at night in my mother's bed, the mass of it surrounding me, endless, the edges so far away. The mask is a mesh oval, reminiscent of a fencer's, with a chinstrap that fits snug against my face. Another strap goes around the

back of my head. I'm encased in the shade of the mesh, the whole room darkened by the little square pattern. The mesh is distracting, a foreign object so close to my face it feels like I need to brush it away. My face immediately itches. My own breath lingers, the sound of my breathing unusually loud, everything from my lungs trapped inside with me. I fiddle with the mask, slapping it a little, testing how it shifts, but it doesn't twist away from its place. Beneath the cloak my body is warm, already starting to sweat. If I wasn't claustrophobic before, this is a surefire way to make it happen.

There's a person waiting for me at the door. They're shorter than the other two I saw, a little rounder too. They wave me forward and I follow them down a hallway to an interrogation room. They pull out the chair for me and they sit on the other side.

"Please," they say. Their voice altered with robotic distortion like all the others.

When I sit they pull a little, plastic, gray machine from their cloak and place it on the table in front of me. It looks like a calculator, but instead of numbers, there's a small keyboard like an old cellphone. A piece of paper sticks out of the top.

"There's no other space for your briefing," they say. "So this will have to do."

The machine is about the size of an old phone and surprisingly lightweight in my hands. The tiny little keys, letters, numbers, and some special characters depress and release with soft clicks under my fingers. There's a quick whirl and clatter, the paper moves up and I see *aaaaaaaa* across it. The ink fades to purple then completely disappears. The paper disintegrates from the corners, eating away at itself until it reaches the machine.

"What's this?" I say.

“Your new voice,” they say. “Our speaking now is a convenience for you, but in the city you’ll talk through the ticker.”

I set the ticker down on the table.

“Seems inconvenient.”

They offer their palms in a gesture of *that’s how it is*.

“How are you feeling?” they say.

I lean against the straight back of the chair, feeling its rigidity unwilling to bend to my spine. Sitting down now I can feel my body relaxing. The shaking exhaustion from my stomach’s spill and the pain in my cheek slip to some far away place.

“Better,” I say. I reach under the cloak and fish out a cigarette from the pack with my lighter. I pull them both up and reach to lift my mask. They hold up their hand.

“You’ve been briefed about our rules,” they say.

I wave my unlit cigarette around at the room.

“I didn’t expect all this.”

“Your mask,” they say. They tap their own. “Anytime with company.”

I hold out both arms, gloved and covered in the black cloak.

“C’mon,” I say.

“No exceptions.”

My hands go up in defeat. I put away the cigarette and lighter.

“Your runaway,” they say. “You’re sure it was voluntary?”

“There’s her note. Makes her intentions pretty clear. I’d assumed you got all that.”

“Anything else besides the note that makes you think she ran away on her own?”

They rest their arms flat against the table, crossing them in front of their chest.

My guess is that they're a woman. They're a bit bulky around the chest for a male, even for their size. Their height seems right for a woman as well, with no noticeable sign of stooping to hide something taller.

"She's a teenage girl who argues with her parents and has problems at school. Her friends said she's been wanting to run away for years now."

"To here," she says. "Specifically."

"Why are you asking questions that I already answered in the file? What are you getting at here?"

"We've seen cases like yours before. People come in here looking for a missing person, hoping to find them alive, only to find their body somewhere outside the city."

She leans back in her chair and takes a deep breath, the noise of it crackling in the altering voice box. "This city is often used as a last hope that only brings greater heartbreak to a family so set in their delusions."

"And I'm real sorry for those cases, but she explicitly named this city."

"Named?"

"You know what I mean." I wave off the question.

"Not everyone makes it here."

"Past your guards?"

"She'd have been lucky to get to them unassisted."

"So you think she had help."

Again they offer their palms, *maybe*.

“If she did they hid their tracks. There’s no trace of her in any of the cars that have come through here since she disappeared. I’ve done my job out there. And what I have out there points me here, with her trail ending at your wall. Do you have a record of her coming through?”

“No,” she says. “No records are kept like that.”

“Do you have her body in a morgue?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

She leans forward again, her mass folding into itself. She clasps her hands together on the table.

“The pain in your mouth,” she says. “An imp?”

I stand, take off my mask and slam it onto the table, nearly smashing the ticker. She rises with me and steps back, her chair screeching against the floor. My mouth opens wide and I stick my gloved finger into it, pulling my cheek aside and pointing with the other hand. I move my head a little this way, then that, trying to catch my mouth in the light to show her. But she doesn’t move from her place against the wall.

“A gold tooth,” I say. The taste of the glove lingers in my mouth. “No implants. I’m old school. I didn’t lie in my file, any of it, and I don’t lie to you now.”

If I didn’t have them removed like you’re supposed to, if I came into the city harboring imps inside my flesh, there’d be charges of infiltration, possession of contraband and dangerous weapons, potentially espionage, or at the least, suspicion. It would put another critical eye on me that I don’t need as I cascade around the city. So, I lie, knowing the gold sometimes reacts to certain EMP wavelengths, and hope she buys

it, hope whoever else is watching buys it too. They've got to be smarter than that though. Even outside the city there's ways of detecting imps from a mile away. Here, where the security is doubled for that kind of thing, they must have seen me coming down the highway. Maybe they even tapped my conversation with my wife. The image of her bending unnaturally could have been a clue.

"Your mask," she says. "Put it on."

I sit down, pulling the chair up against myself as much as the robe allows with its extra layer of fabric adding to my girth. I slap the mask in my lap, turn it over, and readjust the straps. The whole room darkens again as I put it back on. I'm closed in. She sits down, pulling the chair with her as she does. Definitely a woman.

"Calm?" she says.

"I could use a cigarette."

Her shoulders rise, hold, then fall. One hand wraps around her other. She's taking a moment of her own. Maybe behind that mask she's wearing a headset, with someone piping directions to her. A soft buzz lingers under my skin. The agitation of the need for a nicotine fix and the jittery stress of the situation are finding their ways into my head. My stomach has given up, clenched itself tight in a ball.

"Where do you want to start?" she says.

"Here," I say. "Inside the wall. Show me how everything comes in."

She pauses before she stands. Her mask watches her hands clasped together on the table. She's judging something. It's a pause as human as anyone would have before showing a secret.

Chapter Three

At night everything in our backyard loses its certainty and becomes the vague shape of itself in the dark. Outlined placeholders for what's there in the daylight, a fence, our rusted metal chairs and table in the middle of the yard, a rake leaning with its wood handle swelled and rotted from the rain, stand in for the objects themselves at night. Below my window these memories of our backyard are dimly lit by our neighbor's porch light that slips between the cracks in our fence and over the top of it, the light can't be forced to follow the rules of separation, it's helped by the reflected light of the city against the clouds, their shifting forms traced in tan crayon. By one of our rusted patio chairs a cricket chirps in slow, mechanical grinding. It must be as large as my finger, or larger, maybe the size of a flower's head, maybe larger, maybe the size of a toad, but the sound isn't larger than that. Between its large chirps, smaller, faster, little chirps that squeak like the wheels of shopping carts cry in the night around the larger cricket. They sing back and forth as a chorus that swells in the hot night. A soft warm breeze pushes through the window, brushing away the first day our AC cooled the air in my room to gently lap against my cheeks and wiggle the hair across my forehead. It carries the dying smells of summer, the last few nights of cut grass freedom and humidity, dried earth in the heat. From our garden, even up here, I can smell the faint fragrances of my mother's flowers.

I roll onto my back and a cool tingle washes over my chin and stomach from the relief of pressure, hurting and soothing. I'm not sure how long it's been, maybe hours, since I said good night to my mother and went to my room. There's no trace of her outside the window and I haven't heard the kitchen door slam. Maybe she won't go out

tonight now that she knows I know she leaves. Part of me doesn't want her to stay. I want to know where she goes. I want to follow her out there, looking for my father. If she's not crazy, if she's right that he's alive, then I want to be there when she finds him, maybe find him myself, without her. I slip on my shoes that I purposely brought up stairs with me instead of leaving them by the door. This time I'm prepared to bolt out the door after her. And when I come back home and take off these gym clothes and slip into my pajamas I'll be able to sleep then, knowing where she goes, what she does when she leaves at night. I glance up at my posters on the wall. In the dark they're all the same square size and shape, none of them distinct from the others, just black squares on my slightly less black wall. One is the picture of a waterfall, another a painting of a mountain, and then my favorite, a couple kissing under an umbrella in the rain, their silhouettes far on the stone edge of some city's river-side, across the river are the indistinct shapes of buildings washed silver in the rain, the umbrella bright red with the only color in the poster, but all this is hidden in the blanking dark. Maybe my other already left. She could have gone out the front door, knowing I'd hear her out the back. Or maybe it hasn't been long enough. I've never kept track of the time that passes before she leaves, but it can never be too late because I'm heavy sleeper, loud noises, even the kitchen door right below my window, don't wake me. My mother calls me a lump; she has to shout to wake me for school. I'm usually awake then when she leaves. It couldn't have been this long, could it? Or maybe she left and won't come back. Other kids at my school have had family members disappear. One said their father left for work and never came home. Another, living with their aunt, was abandoned, orphaned to the city and put into a house for children. Or so they've told me. They've broken the rules in their telling.

Telling the gender of their parents, details of their lives, but then these kids are gone too in the crowd, so how could I report them? How could I even know they're telling the truth? But it does seem real, I guess, because it seems like every year there are fewer of us at school. Our numbers rise and dwindle every year, through out the year, and maybe I'll be one of those lost children. There's a pressure in my chest, a soft buzzing like a hive in my heart. Our house is so quiet, there's no sound at all.

I slide off the bed and tiptoe across my room, stepping over the hidden spots under the carpet where I know the floorboards groan. I turn the knob slow, so that the click of the catch is quiet. There's a light from downstairs lighting the stairwell. Behind me the crickets continue their song through my open window. I should have closed the door, but it's too late now. The door to my mother's room is open and inside it's dark. Blue streetlights outside the front of the house shine through the sheer white curtains and give it all a faint dark blue tint the color of a deep lagoon in the moonlight my mother once painted. The bathroom across from my room is a dark black square. I am alone with the sounds of crickets. As I move to the stairs their chirping dulls until it's lost in the folds of our house. Each step has its own soft spot where it announces a foot, but I've remembered them all. The top step is in the middle, the next is a little to the right, and then the right again. No sounds come up to me from downstairs. If she's down there she must be asleep. When I reach the part of the stairs where half the wall opens up to the foyer below, I peek my head around, keeping my feet a step above the edge. A lamp from the living room lights an empty couch and the blinded window behind it. So much of the room is hidden around the wall of the entranceway, impossible to see at this angle. I watch the living room as I step further down the stairs. More of it is revealed and more of

me exposed to it. My mother steps into the light from behind the wall where she must have been sitting in the chair by the fireplace. I turn and take two steps at a time, lunging up the stairs.

“What are you doing sneaking around?”

Her voice freezes me mid-stride, awkwardly stretched across two steps, hand gripping the banister. My heart is pounding, but there’s a relief too in being caught. I step down and turn to her. She looks up at me from the bottom of the stairs with a book closed in her hand. The book’s brown leather cover has a long title etched in gold, it’s one I haven’t seen before, and different from all the other books I’ve seen with their plain black bindings. It’s dangerous to have a book like that. Titles are a book’s name. If spoken, if seen, by someone outside our house, or maybe even inside, I’m not sure, then she’d be taken, expelled, and I’d go with her, I’d go with her rather than stay here, alone, an orphan. The banister is tight in my hand, as tight as the pressure against my chest. She’s small from up here. Her body stands small and rigid in the light. Her face caught between the shadows from the stairs and the light of the living room. In my chest the tightening pulls with an impulse to jump down to her so that she’ll catch me and hold me tight in her arms.

“Nothing,” I say.

“You’re wearing your shoes,” she says. “And running clothes?”

I look down at my shoes and clothes.

“What’s that book?” I say.

She looks at it in her hand, then back at me. We stand in the silence.

“Right,” she says. “Well.”

She turns back into the living room. When she comes out the book is gone. I step down and follow her through the hall.

“I’m leaving,” she says.

She flicks on the light in the kitchen and takes her cloak from the hook.

“Where are you going?”

“You don’t need to know.”

She struggles with her shoes.

“Are you going to look for dad?”

Her hands stop for a moment and the laces hang limp in her hands. I can’t see her face to tell if I’ve struck a nerve. And she doesn’t look up to give me the chance. Her hands go back to work and she shakes her head. I reach over her and grab my mask, gloves, and cloak. The mask and gloves rest on the counter while I hold up the cloak to find its opening.

“What are you doing?” she says.

I pull it over me, everything disappears in shadow again, and then there’s the kitchen light and my mom watching me. Her eyes are stern, but there’s a worry there too.

“I’m going with you,” I say.

“I don’t have time for this,” she says. “I don’t have time to argue about idiotic things you already know are a bad idea.”

She slides on her mask, adjusting the straps. I match her movements with my own mask. Then our gloves go on.

“It’s just as bad for you to be out,” I say.

“No. It’s not.”

“There’s safety in numbers.”

“Not at night,” she says. “Stop it.”

She grabs my hands, stopping me from pulling on the left glove. Our hands tangle together, black leather latched on leather, with my awkward glove flailing up between. I can’t see her face now. She can’t see mine. We’re two blind people arguing without a face to watch. Her voice so taught and wavering, ready to snap in anger.

“You’ll stay here. You will not follow me. I can’t risk it.”

“Then let me go,” I say. “We’ll go together.”

“What will I do if you’re taken from me?”

“What would I do?” I say. “You’d rather leave me here, alone?”

“I know what I’m doing. It’s never been a problem.”

“And what if tonight it is?”

She lets go of my hands. I finish putting on my glove and rub where she clutched too tight. She turns to the cabinets by the door and rummages through them. On the floor she sets a spare pair of her shoes, two shoulder pads, hip pads, and one that goes around the stomach. Then she pauses, her hands on the cabinet doors, with her head drooping down. She’s changing her mind one way and I’m worried it’s changing back the other now. What could she really do to make me stay? She swings around and shoves the shoes at me.

“Wear these with lifts,” she says. Then she takes the two shoulder pads off the kitchen counter. “Stuff these in the toes.”

I change shoes and then strap the other pads on under my cloak. She has no scent tonight. There’s nothing for me to trace if we separate. She smells like linen, her cloak

washed with mine, the scent could be hers or mine, it's too hard to tell. I can't even smell her sweat. My breath, sweat, and the years of both these things built up in my mask, cover any smell from her.

"Stay close," she says. "We can't separate."

I look up from adjusting the strap on the hip pads. Her blank mask stares back at me.

"If we do?" I say.

"We won't."

"But what if we do?"

"I can't code for you. I can't even approach someone that I'm not sure is you. It's too risky that it may be police or... worse. Don't let it happen."

"But what if?"

"Shut up," she says. "You're on your own if it happens. Come home, hide till morning, I don't know."

Her hand is on the doorknob. She turns the key and pauses.

"Not a word outside. Not a sound. Don't type a message. You stay silent until we're back home."

"I'm not stupid," I say.

Her mask watches me. If I could take back the words, it would be better to say nothing. If I'd said nothing from the start it would've been better. I should just have nodded in agreement like a good daughter, of course her ideas are best, of course that's what we should do, of course I should stay home.

"We'll see," she says.

With that she opens the door and steps out. I flick off the kitchen light. The living room lamp is the only light in our house. The darkness makes it hollow, large and empty as though no one had really lived here, just so much unoccupied space that we could fill like some gutted chest. She locks the door and leads me to the street.

Streetlights dot the empty sidewalks, merging together halfway across the street in large fading ovals of blue. Lights inside the houses we pass hide behind their shiny black windows. The dark squares make each house void, empty and abandoned, white cheese with deep unreachable holes, sitting in short green grass. My mother keeps a steady pace, speed walking in her cloak. I'm playing catch-up, falling behind as I watch the street and trip a little on my own cloak. I've run and played in this cloak. I've jumped and dodged balls and ran for others, but now in the night I'm out of place and my cloak tugs in awkward movements, an enemy, trying to tie me up in the darkness. We're headed out the back of the suburbs, a way we rarely go, heading further away from the center of the city and toward the wall. A bright blue-white light hits us. Twin stars beaming from behind. My mother turns to look and picks up her pace. She walks into the grass, out of the light of the sidewalk, and I follow as I watch behind us. It's a car coming from down the street, moving slowly past each house. It could be the police, we'd never know, their unmarked cars look like any other. If it's not police then they're breaking the curfew as well. We'd be criminals passing in the night with a silent understanding that to report one would be to report yourself. We pass quickly along the yards, jogging across the blue spots of the streetlights. The car turns and their headlights flash across a house, pulling into the driveway and disappearing into a garage. There's still a chance they'll go inside and call us in. We move quickly to the park.

The small park is no more than a block and lit sporadically by tan lamps with intricate tornado swirls of bronze all along its pole and at the top, around the glass lights themselves, are metal leaves. My mother doesn't look up at them once. She cuts through the grass, avoiding the main path with its curves through the little park. My feet swish across the grass and my cloak drags in a soft rustling behind me. I pull my cloak up, balling it in my hands, letting my feet free at the shin. My mother must have done this as soon as we entered the park. Her steps softly thud against the grass without the noise of her cloak. We pass in and out of shadows, tan lighting slipping over us with the patterns of the trees. If I weren't close enough to touch her she could pass into one shadow, head right or left, and another person could pass out the other side and I would never know. To our right and left the park stretches several blocks in either direction. It acts as a space between the suburbs on ones side and the business street on the other, lined with small shops. The blue lights from this business street shine through the trees. From my right, between the dark trees, the soft clicks of two tickers joins the crickets' song. Or there may not be tickers at all, but crickets that mimic our sound. It would be a stupid place to have a conversation. The darkness would make it impossible to read anything. And impossible to see what you're even typing.

Then we're out on the sidewalk again and the dark park behind me presses at my back. We maintain my mother's quick stride, reaching the other side of the street before anything can pull me into the park. It looks even darker from the other side of the street. The streetlights barely reach past the tree line. Down the street neon signs hang above doorways. Bars, restaurants, bar and restaurant, pool, strip, all these words lit up in bright red and pink and green and blue like a rainbow scattered and broken and twisted into

bending letters without edge. The street is narrow here, only wide enough for one car.

Further down there's a car parked half on the sidewalk in front of a pool bar. All the buildings here are brick painted white or cream and the blue streetlights give them a cold winter snow glow. From open windows above us people laugh and blare music. A couple fights loudly from a window above a closed restaurant, shouting at each other about who did who wrong. It sounds like music, but slow, with each voice containing its own rhythm. I want to stop and listen, really listen to the sound of their voices, so different from my mother's, so different from any I've heard before on the radio. They have no filter. They say words that I know are wrong to say. They're not performing, they're feeling, they're shouting, they're using their voices like weapons, without knowing or caring if they're heard, and they're dangerous. It's so dangerous. And no one cares that it's a transgression of the worst kind, letting the world know who they are, where they live, and what they feel. They argue about something so trivial, pointless maybe, even for them, and later they may look back, as I do with my mother, and say how wrong they were, but now, here, it is all that matters to them, I can feel it in their voice. They should be reported. We should call the police. Their words are making a fist in my chest, something warm and wet, catching in my throat. It's the angriest conversation I've heard outside my house and it's passing by us like the wind, my mother walks on, she's getting ahead of me, I run forward, after her, but I want to turn back, I want to linger, hearing what they have to say, instead of leaving the couple behind.

We pass a bar with its door open. Loud music plays from a jukebox made of polished wood with flashing rainbow lights around its edges. A deep laugh from a man catches against the singer's high-pitched whine. Two people lean close together at the

bar, their hands disappearing beneath their cloaks. The dark wood inside is lit in neons from overhanging signs for beer and light beer. My mother walks on. We pass other bars and restaurants, their doors closed but the soft murmurs of voices and clicks of tickers escape open windows above them or maybe from the places themselves, I can't tell with our hurried steps, the wind pressing through the mesh of my mask.

My mother stops in front of a bar, its neon sign dead at the first letter, making it an "ar." It needs to be fixed. Instead of going in the bar, we go through an unmarked door, blue wood paint chipping, and pieces of it lying on the ground. She leads me up carpeted stairs that creak loud with our steps. The walls are stucco and chipped and there's writing along the wall in pen and large marker that says things like "torch the pussies," "fucked your mom on all twenty steps," "bird watch," and "bitch twister." There are implications in the names if they are that, but there's no way to be sure. Dark stains and blackened bubble gum spot the grungy carpet of the stairs. Splotches of blotchy tea colors stain the white walls and within them could be faces or suns and moons streaking and smeared, running in the rain. Above us a smoke detector chirps every other step, blinking red, calling out for help. Foreign music blares from a door at the top of the stairs, filling the whole staircase and little hallway at the top with muffled voices speaking in a language I don't recognize mixed in rapid beats of horns and guitar. In front of the door with the music a welcome mat made of fake grass has gouges of grass missing from it and the black plastic shows from underneath in bald patches. My mother walks past all this as if it doesn't matter, as if it's something commonplace. But these are glaring transgressions. An impulse in me wants to take the mat and throw it out the window, screaming for the police, calling for others to help me drag the sickness, the

identified, out. I'm light headed. I grab at the end of the banister as we come around the stairs and stop, just for a moment, trying to close my eyes and close out these details.

My mother knocks three times on the door across the hall. These plain white doors, without markings other than their peepholes and brass knobs, but then there are gouges and scuffs across them that you could point to as being this or that person's door. This one has no mat, but on the carpet in front of the door are white stains and dried mud caked together. This is okay. It isn't intentional. It's a consequence. I repeat it in my head. I try to calm and focus on my mother's black cloak. The door opens a crack and a mask peers out at us, behind it there's only darkness inside. My mother types a message and slides the paper to ou. Ou read it, looks at us, and types a reply to my mother. Ous hands shake, vibrating the paper in the air. When my mother takes it, ou closes the door. She reads it and lets it dissolve in her glove. She nods at me. Something clicks on the other side of the door, sounding like marbles dropping on wood. When ou opens the door all the lights in the apartment are on. Ou stands, mask still on, one hand welcoming us inside. My mother walks straight back into the apartment, knowing exactly where to go. Her feet thump across the glossed wooden floor. I step from carpet to wood and count the small divots, chunks and scrapes that have gone missing, places where the gloss bubbled. Along the white walls are black and white photos of a young couple that grow older from one photo to the next. A family wears bonnets and frills around their necks. Their faces are all long, with set jaws like solid squares of skin and eyelids that have an extra bubble in the bottom. The women's faces, two of them, one much taller than the other who comes up to her chest, are softer with sharp arcs in their upper lips. The other photos continue with the family, gaining color in their faces until the last one hangs glossy with

people in clothes like we wear under our cloaks, sitting in a darkly lit restaurant, finished plates of food in front of them, raising glasses of yellow and brown foaming drinks toward the camera. An older man and woman sit across from a young couple, the younger woman has a darker complexion with bright blue eyes, a tilted smile, half teeth, and half smirk across her face. Her plate is still full of food. My head grows lighter, something straining against the front of my skull, right above my eyes, and I have to turn away from the photos. Along the other wall are paintings of flowers, bouquets of orange and pink, with birds lingering near them on thin branches or their long beaks sticking into flowers. Past a small kitchen though a cut in the wall, my mother is setting up next to an easel. A half finished portrait of the older man from the photos sits in front of her.

On the wall next to her two mirrors in frames hang next to large paintings of a mountain snow capped and squat and a rolling valley with dots of pink and purple wildflowers that looks like one that hangs in our home, but this one is righter, as though the sun is higher in the sky than the view in the painting we own. In the mirrors ou passes behind me. Ous form is much larger than my own. Ou wears no padding and ous cloak falls loosely over ous thin body, only bulging at ous stomach. A tremor passes through ous body as ou moves. There's a stoop in ous neck and ous feet shuffle across the floor to a high back wooden chair near the window with its shade pulled down, hiding the night behind it. In the painting my mother works on the old man's large face is wrinkled with deep folds from his nose to his mouth, the mouth pushed in a fleshy mask of saggy skin around it, jowls and cheeks sliding from the skull like melting butter tacked together with gum. The bulging skin around his eyes has darkened compared to the photos, more pronounced under his dull brown eyes that catch a twinkle of light. The thin white strands

of spider web hair stick to the light pink flesh of his head. Here and there across his skin are brown thumbprint spots where someone held his flesh with chocolate on their hands. The space around his face remains blank, untouched by paint, canvas white. Much of his face is still flat, missing a dimension of shadow and lighting, just flesh colored as it is. My mother mixes paint on a palette, a darker and lighter tan, padding out the brush in streaks on the palette, testing the color. Ou removes ous mask and underneath of course is the old man, looking paler than his image on the canvas, his face shaking a little. From under the cloak he pulls a handkerchief and wipes it across his face. He wipes it across his scalp and hair and behind his ears and under his chin as if washing himself in the shower.

“They won’t turn on my air conditioning,” he says.

His voice is high but phlegmy, maple syrup sticking in his throat, making the voice strained, an almost-whisper. He coughs into the handkerchief. It sounds wet and unfulfilled. When he turns and smiles at us his eyes don’t twinkle. They are dull and worn and crinkle with a stress not present on the canvas. Above his eyes his brows curve down, an invisible weight sitting on the middle like two swings bowed under heavy bodies. My mother has done a good job in hiding this in her painting.

“I haven’t bought fans yet,” he says. “But, I guess I’ll have to. It drops a little outside at night at least. You’ve felt it?”

I nod. My mother leans around the canvas and also nods. She thinks he’s talking to her, but he’s looking right at me. Even with the lifts in my shoes I’m shorter than my mother by an inch or two. He’s got children of his own, or had them, I can tell from the photos, a little knot at my throat at the thought of this, the thought of knowing something

about him, and maybe he knows something about me too, maybe there's a parental way of telling who is a child and who isn't and he knows I'm one of them. I shiver. My legs are tired from the walk. Maybe I'm wrong. He stands there by the chair and watches me.

"Please," he says. "Sit down." He waves to a pink chair behind me. It's a tall wing back chair, covered in pink fabric with little blue butterflies dancing across it, dotted blue lines follow the patterns of their flight. The wings come out from the back, slope down and back, disappearing into the arms. Its legs, slick dark wood, with little toes carved at their ends, have been chipped and exposed the paler wood underneath.

"It was my wife's," he says.

My mother nods her approval at me. I'm relieved not to have to stand while she painted, or sit on the floor, neither of which sounds comfortable. I'm already sweating again. The apartment traps the hot air and presses it against everything. Even the chair radiates and sweats. He waits until I'm seated then sits down as well. The wooden chair creaks under his weight. He presses his back straight against the back of it, which makes him rigid and first there's a small grimace that fades to a gentle smile.

"Ours is good," he says, with a short nod at my mother.

He says it and smiles like he knows my mother is a woman. He says it softly; as though there's something gentler he wants to say. He says it almost like he's saying she's beautiful. If he thought she were a man it would be curt, solid. My mother has these tones, these hidden ways of carrying her voice that tell me what she's thinking in her words. The harsh tones, the gentle tones, the ones that let me know I've done right. She rarely uses those anymore. Her voice is heavy, tired, unbending like steel. It cracks with the cruelty of lightning. But I'm glad he doesn't let on if he knows. He's trying to hide it,

using “ou” instead of “she,” and this kindness to the rules makes me like him a little more. He might think I don’t know. Who does he think I am? Has she ever talked to him? Has she told him about her daughter? What other rule has my mother broken?

Next to the chair I’m sitting in is a small brown wooden box with a glossy painting of a nature scene on the lid. A long waterfall drips over the side of a grassy and overgrown wall. The waterfall framed by large, lush trees, with leaves I’ve never seen before, hanging like flat tongues with bright yellow stripes down their center. And in the sky fluffy white clouds pass with two birds flying beneath them.

“She got that in...” he says. “On one of our trips to see our son. He worked out there for a while, doing aid and social planning. It looks just like that. We saw falls like that everywhere.”

His head droops a little. His eyes follow something invisible along the floor. My mother stops and leans around the painting. She puts her hand under her chin and motions to push it up. For a moment he doesn’t see her. His eyes caught on the floor. Something in him starts. He shakes a little and looks over to me, then sees my mom and raises his head.

“I get lost sometimes,” he says. “Ou did that painting too.”

He points to the meadow scene on the wall, the one that looks like the good twin of our own.

“It reminds me of... well, I guess I can’t say. Have you been outside the country?”

My mother sticks her head around the canvas to answer him with a nod or a shake, but she looks back at me. She looks to him then to me and leans back behind the

canvas, finally realizing he's talking to me. He still watches me as he talks. I'm not sure whether to answer him truthfully or not. I've never been outside of the city, let alone the country. Her paintbrush stands straight in her hand, up toward the ceiling, with fleshy pink on the tip of its brush. I wait for her. She tilts it in her hand, puts it horizontal again, and then dabs at the canvas. I shake my head at him.

"If you're still young," he says. "Go while you're young. If you're older, well, I guess we're both wasting our time."

He sips from a glass of water sitting on the windowsill next to him.

"He's gone now, I guess. My son. They're all gone if they're over the wall, aren't they? We're better off here though. Far from all the pollution they've put in the air. All that noise. Too much of it and you can't have a conversation."

In his eyes is a sparkle. A soft glimmer of light catches the brown and swims in it. He takes out his handkerchief again and wipes at his eyes, then his face, then hair, until everything has been wiped down and he folds it back up and hides it away. My mother has filled in much of his face. It's pinker now, rosier around the cheeks, the highlights of his cheekbones popping on the canvas. She switches paints, washing off the brush in a murky pink cup of water, drying it, and picking up brown and white. She works at his eyes.

"Open the box," he says. He points over to the box next to me. My mother turns to me. She considers it a moment, then nods.

The lid opens light on the hinge. Inside are photographs, black and white, of a younger version of him with a woman, both smiling on a beach, in front of a boat, sitting in lawn chairs, and lying in the grass. Long beaded, wooden necklaces with crosses at the

ends of them rest beneath the photos. Another necklace of pearl, with a blue stone at its center, curls next to a wooden necklace. From the bottom I pull a small yellow note card, written in scratched words that I can't read, and a signature, a man's name, his name.

"All her things that I have left," he says.

The name stares back at me. The circle of the first letter with the swoop of its tail, the mix of cursive and printed letters, sit in such disregard to their nakedness. His nakedness. My chest swells, a small bubble presses, wanting to break free from my skin and cloak and float into the air. My hand shakes, as though it has caught the shaking from the old man, as though his name has given me a part of him. I feel powerful, scared, and sick. I drop the card in the box and close it. My mother is painting. The man watches me. I turn out of the chair, my back to him, falling to my knees on the floor where I lift my mask and expect to vomit at the feet of the chair, but instead I cry out, in one gulping wail. I press my forehead against the slick wood floor. There are no tears or shaking or anything that comes. I'm empty and hollow in my chest. Hands press against my shoulders, guiding me up. My mother, still wearing her mask, pulls mine down, covering my face as I sit up.

She takes me to the bathroom and sits me on the toilet lid. She sits across from me on the edge of the tub. The bathroom so small that she spreads her knees so that my own can fit between them. She pulls her mask off, and then lifts off my own. She rests her gloves in her lap. Her face leans in close to mine, her lips almost pressing against my own.

"What happened?" she says.

I have no answer. I'm not sure. I don't know. His name and the pictures, just thinking about them now causes a panic in my chest. Now I know him more than he knows me and I don't want to. I don't want to know his name, know him, or be here.

"I want to go home," I say.

"You wanted to see where I go," she says. "This is where I go, this is what I do."

"I'm sorry. Can I go?"

"I need to finish tonight."

"I'll go alone, I know the way."

She looks to the door, then back at me. Her eyes say it before her lips.

"No. Of course not. Stay in here if you have to, but you can't leave without me."

"No one even bothered us on our way here."

"I'm not arguing with you about this, not now."

"There was hardly anyone out there."

There's a smack and a sting, the side of my face jolted. Her hand hangs in the air then rests itself against her knee. She didn't even prepare for it, just one quick swipe across my face. She looks as stunned as I feel. She stands and scoots past my knees. Her gloves and mask clasped tight in her hand. She rests them on the back of the toilet. Turning the knobs of the faucet she stares at herself in the mirror then splashes water on her face. Without looking at me she grabs the towel from the rack behind me and dabs her face. Her whole face blushes, red as when she's been out in the garden all day. A rose dusting crosses her forehead and cheeks. The skin marbles red and white and her face becomes just as hard.

"You will stay," she says. "I'm sorry, but you must stay."

The side of my face swells, but then it's in my eyes and everything is wet. There's nothing I can do but nod. The tears come off my face on my fingers and I rub them together until the wetness is gone. She puts her mask and gloves back on. Before I can even move to put mine on she's out the door, opening and closing it around her.

His muffled voice comes through the door. I stand, my mask shaking in the grip of my hand, and put my ear to the door, brushing a few fallen strands of my hair behind my ear. The white paint chills the heat of my ear.

"It's changed us all," he says. "Horribly."

His feet creak across the wooden floor. Something opens and there's soft clattering. I sit back down on the toilet. The pressure of wanting to leave and knowing I can't escape holds tight in my chest. I'll wait for her. I'll sit and wait and stare at this dirty shower curtain growing mold, the dusty soaps in the shape of shells, a black and white photo of a beach, and a magazine, with a name, a picture of a woman smiling on it, her name in giant red print under her face. I expect it to bother me, to upset my stomach, to make me dizzy and lightheaded, but my chest releases its hold. In my hands the cover is glossy and the pages feel thick. The smile of the woman, outlined in deep red, is as white as the moon.

Chapter Four

Through the back hallways there's no noise but the sound of our footsteps muffled under our cloaks and my own breathing trapped inside my mask. Not even the white noise of air filters, or the hum of fluorescent lights, permeates the ether. It's just us, two cloaked figures, walking down white walled corridors, leading us back to the loading docks where I first came in. Behind the mask everything feels pressed in. My peripheral vision blocked by the fabric edges of the mask where the mesh ends. I feel like a horse with blinders. Each corner we round I have to turn my whole head to see where I'm going. A continued loop of a television theme song plays in my head in a weak attempt to drown out the silence. Under my cloak I slip a hand into my pants pocket and feel the matchbox. I rattle it once, not enough to hear it, but to feel the small plastic dinosaurs tumble inside. For a moment, before she opens the metal door ahead, I don't feel so alone.

It doesn't last long. Through the door we're back on the loading dock using the same door I passed through before to enter the long black glass hallway. We have come a completely different way and ended up at the same door. My brain flips, trying to regain its understanding of the space. Across the floor the wet pool of water from the guard's spraying down my vomit shrinks into drains. Everything, including the guard shack and the closed large doors leading to the outside, looks the same as it did before. Before she closes the door I look down the hall, seeing how it bends to the left in a solid white wall broken by one black window. It's far different from the long smooth black glass corridor I went down through the same door. There's no other exit on the dock but the large rolling metal garage door for unloading trucks.

“Isn’t that the same door I went through?” I say.

Her fingers are already typing before I’ve finished.

“Shut up,” she types. “Use your ticker.”

I pull the little machine out of my cloak from a pocket that seems made for it. It’s difficult pressing the buttons with gloves on. I can’t feel them underneath the leather and they’re so small that my fingers bump extra letters. And the black mesh of the mask just adds an extra shadow on them too, so I can’t see exactly what buttons I’m hitting. I hold the clicker close up to my face and it makes me feel old, like I need glasses.

“That’s not tyhe dopr I came through,” I type.

“It’s the only one here.”

Her arm extends with a slight flourish in a gesture that tells me she’s smiling behind her mask. I tap on the larger, metal garage door that rolls up overhead.

“Where does this go?”

“Delivery hold, where we inspect everything that comes in or goes out,” she types.

“Show mee.”

“Next,” she types.

She stands with both hands on her ticker. Her paper dissolves in my glove. My arm, bent and holding the ticker in front of me, starts to ache at the elbow. People here must get huge forearms after typing on these things all day. It’s not that heavy, but the angle and strain in holding the tickers as we do is enough. Old cellphones used to have this effect too, causing tennis elbow without ever lifting a racket. You wouldn’t think

there'd be silent lull in a conversation already held in silence, but here we are, waiting in that same awkward quiet until her thumbs tap slowly on her keys.

"Why are you here?" she types.

"Youu knuiw wh," I type.

"No," she types. "Why are *you* here?"

"Its my job."

"There are other, better detectives your department could send."

"Ouch."

She lets the message fall to the floor and stares at me, waiting for a real answer.

"This is extrnal," I type. "Private work. Off the clock."

"And you took it, why?"

"Money," I type. "And I care. No one else was willing to come."

"Why were you?"

"You're getting personal here."

I'm getting agitated, my fingers hitting the keys with more force. It takes work to type without mistakes, but I want to, I don't want my words cluttered with typos. And there's nothing I can read in her movements. She stands there passively, typing with little effort. My messages come out labored, slow, and when I pass them to her she reads them quickly, drops them to the ground and types back a fast reply.

"I'm looking for threats," she types. "I know your case history, your family, but those don't tell me motive."

"I thought this was the city of the unknown?"

"We take security very seriously."

“I can see that.”

“There’s nothing here that will help you find a runaway.”

“I’m exploring every possibility.”

“You’re exploring us.”

“She could have come through here without you knowing. To find where she is I need to see where she may have been, follow her trail.”

“It’s impossible for her to have come through here alone.”

“You don’t take my word,” I type. “But I’m supposed to take yours?”

“You have less to lose.”

“You don’t know that.”

I think I can hear her breathing. A soft muffled rhythm, not all that different from my own, but strained and a little quicker. It could be the air, a recycling system I’m not aware of, or some other machinery, or it could be her, underneath that cloak and mask, trying to read me from the few words fading in her hand. For once there’s some good out of the silence. She steps around me and guides me down the stairs, past the tracks that guide vehicles in and out. Her cloak sweeps a trail of dissipating water behind it. The edges of our cloaks dampen. She knocks on the guard shack door three times. When the door’s eye slot opens she passes through a note. The guard reads it and responds. The slot closes then the door is unlocked and opened.

The guard sits back down on an empty chair, the one next to him occupied by their twin. They turn back to computer monitors, scrolling data in white against black, and one screen to their left shows video of the outside door. Behind the guards, on a shelf

built into the wall, an old rotary telephone sits silent and above it, hanging from inside the shelf, a small school bell.

“Everything that comes in is recorded and stored for a day, then destroyed,” she types.

“So you wouldn’t even have a record if my runaway came through.”

“No.”

“What about the computers?”

“Closed circuit. This is the only computer connected to that camera. The others are connected with their own trunk to a database outside the city. Only one is connected inside the city, to another database, dedicated to serving this station, and this station alone, information on expected shipments.”

“What does the outside database give you?”

“One time background check before entering the city.”

“And no one’s keeping a record of your lookups?”

“No,” she types. “It’s a government line, secure, no records of searches kept on either end.”

“And this stuff?” I type, pointing to the telephone and bell when she reads.

“Irrelevant to you,” she types. “Internal security.”

“How do you know who these guys are?”

I point to the two guards, trying their best to ignore our typing right next to their heads.

“This.” She points to a black box with a small door hanging on the wall. “Key codes only they have that open and close the doors.”

“Seems liable for a fuck up.”

“We haven’t had one yet.”

“That you know of.”

She leads me back into the larger room. The guards’ door shuts behind us with a clatter and lock. Up on the dock she bangs on the large metal door. Above us the clicking of mechanical engines at work pulls the door slowly up, rolling it above us. It stops halfway. She bends over and passes a note beneath the door. There’s an exchange and the door raises the rest of the way.

Behind the door is a large warehouse full of white, wooden boxes. Many of them that we pass reach above my waist. A series of black letters and numbers have been spray painted across its top. Next to it a box sits open and inside are individually wrapped white t-shirts. Down the room stacks of similar looking boxes reach the ceiling. People in black cloaks rummage through the boxes and write things on clipboards. A forklift behind them picks a box off the top of a stack and sets it down on the concrete floor. From far above us there’s the echoing buzz of fluorescent lights and big circular spotlights, hanging from the ceiling in a line.

“Everything that comes in or goes out through this port is inspected,” she types. “We open every box and search through it. Contraband, invasive species, and other unexpected surprises are on our list. Once it passes we tell the recipient it’s ready for pick up.”

“And these people,” I type. “They all have key codes too?”

She points to the garage door as it closes behind us and next to it on the wall is another black box.

“Even when they leave?”

“Why would they need to code out to leave?”

“Incase there’s suddenly an extra.”

She points up and down the middle of the room and to the corners where cameras hang. We walk down the warehouse, dodging around people in cloaks lifting boxes out of other boxes, opening them on the floor, and the forklift that zooms around with little care. The room echoes with their work. They work independently, without any chatter or typing on their machines. It grows eerily quiet as we walk further from the activity. Tall stacks of boxes surround us like buildings, paths big enough for the forklift cut down to the concrete walls several yards away. Down one path a lone figure strolls. Down another, a person shines a flashlight between two boxes.

“Security?” I type.

She nods.

We reach another large garage door like the one we entered. Next to it sits another small guard shack, with its black windows watching us. She bangs on the metal door three times and it slowly rolls up. On the other side is another loading room, exactly like the one I threw up in, but dry.

“How do you know where you are when all the rooms look so similar?”

“You learn to remember the way. You learn to see the small differences.”

She points to the concrete walls and waves her finger in a pattern I can’t follow.

“There’s a dip in the grain of the concrete,” she types. “And on the railing of the stairs, in the paint sealer, there’s a small bubble by the bend.”

She's right about the concrete, a dark wave extends down from the ceiling, reaching half way down the wall, where it borders a lighter shade of gray. And as we walk down the stairs the bubble of paint glides under my gloved fingers.

"You try to make everything look similar," I type. "Do you fix these things?"

"If it were my house, yes. But this is just a loading dock."

"What does your house look like?"

"Like every house you'll see."

She knocks on the outside doors, three times. There follows the same large, loud mechanical clanking I heard when I first came through the wall. Gears and metal fall into place, somewhere unseen, but heard so clearly through my mask. Before it's opened even halfway I smell the city. Fresh summer air, loaded with humidity, mixed with oil and exhaust. Large floodlights shut out the night from entering a small fenced in parking lot. On either side of the fence's gate tall white towers with black glass sleekly cut like squinting eyes stand at the ready. One lone car sits to our left in the parking lot. Beyond the fence is a boulevard with spry saplings and shrubs caught in the sterile blue light of streetlights and spotlights from the towers. Further through the trees, across the road, another wall looms, tan and squat compared to the one we stand in, with razor wire swirled like pubic hair across its top.

"Trucks pick up here," she types. "There's security to enter through the perimeter wall before reaching the dock. On their way out the trucks are checked against the database. We make sure they're not leaving with more than they came for."

"What about their drivers?"

"They're checked too."

I'm desperate for a cigarette. I can feel the pack burning against my leg through my pocket.

"So, maybe she didn't get in by shipment then."

"Maybe not."

"Let's say I'm moving here, how do I get in?"

She steps outside and takes a deep breath. Above us bugs fly in a tangled mess around the spotlights. When a breeze shatters their clump they zip around confused then find their way back to the light, bouncing off it with dings and ticks. The door closes behind us. She takes me to the car and we get in. Keys sit in the ignition, waiting for her.

"Immigration," she types.

"How do you think a girl would get in?" I say aloud.

The car starts with a soft rumble. It's gas powered. The windows are manual wind ups with a little crank on the door. There's even an old speedometer and gas gauge that I haven't seen since I was a kid. The flat dash seems naked, bare, without a video screen. When she speaks it's through the filter of the robotic accent.

"She wouldn't. Not alone. No child could get in without a guardian."

"Let's say she found a guardian."

"They'd need a birth certificate."

"They fake one."

"And a full background check."

"Could be faked too."

She looks at me, and then puts the car in reverse, her hand snapping down the gearshift. We pull around in a quick circle. With a twist of a knob the headlights flash on. At the gate she honks three times and it rolls open.

“We’re very thorough,” she says.

“And you keep any of that on file?”

“No,” she says. “Burned like everything else.”

We take a right onto the road and drive between the two walls. The street is empty, lit in the blue light of streetlamps. The road curves gently like a spine with blue-gray vertebrae. We drive from light to light with the solid concrete wall fifty stories above us to the right. Its smaller twin to our left, tan, with more character to it, seams every half mile, patterns and swirls like clouds and wind blown waves swooping up from the grassy bottom.

“I need to buy some cigarettes,” I say.

Up ahead a windowed bridge crosses above the road. The lights inside dim behind tinted glass. To the left and right of it, on either side of the road, brighter tan lights cut through the trees, winking in and out behind the leaves.

“You have a full pack,” she says.

“I’m going to need more.”

We pull up to another garage door, just past the sky-bridge, and she honks three times to open it.

“Not a hard code to crack,” I say.

“They expect us.”

“Everywhere we’ve gone so far?”

“Yes.”

“How predictable do you think I am?” I say.

“We got here.”

As she pulls into the garage I open the door and step out. She stops short. I pull out a cigarette, lift up my mask enough to hold it in my mouth, and light it. The chilling night air brushes against my chin and smells like grass. Just above me the sky-bridge is empty in the night. Two metal doors sit closed where it ends at the interior wall. In big shiny metal letters it says, “Welcome,” above the doors. She grabs my elbow and spins me around. Her hand slaps down my mask, trapping the cigarette inside with me. The butt of it bends into my chin and singes me. I dance away, flicking the mask back up and the cigarette to the ground.

“Shit,” I say.

I turn back to her and she jabs me in the throat. I can’t breathe. I cough in a fit. Each gasp and shudder feels rough on my throat, passing through the narrow tunnel. I bend over the ground, hands on my knees, coughing through the mask. When I straighten up she hands me a note. I rub at my throat and take it.

“Mask on, voice off.”

I type back, “Fuck you.”

A few moments of deep breathes and I’ve got my wind back. The ache of her jab lingers in my throat. She takes me in a side door and through more indistinct hallways until we reach the main pathways where immigrants enter. We start at the outside of the wall, where large metal, double doors open to a doctor’s office waiting room, complete with secretary station cut in the wall. A bored cloaked person sketches on a notepad. Out

a thick window another gated parking lot sits empty. Above the entrance doors on the outside a white neon sign says simply, “City.” She explains the process in short messages passed as she points and gestures. Cars stop at the gate, dropping off families or sitting abandoned in the lot. Cars abandoned by new citizens are resold outside the city in whatever place they came from. Immigration never closes. While she types I toss a stick at the fence. It hits with a jingling thud, freezing there for a moment, crackles, and falls to the ground, with a thin line of smoke trailing behind it.

“Worried someone will sneak into your always open waiting room?” I type.

“We control the line to get in,” she types.

Beyond the fence the empty road disappears into the black horizon. Where the floodlights end, so too ends the world. The faint chirping of a cricket carries on a soft wind through the fence. A little whistling tune plays in my head. Television static, a loud roaring snow, presses in past the ringing silence. I take a deep breath to steady my nerves. The pressure in my throat from her jab breathes with me.

“Looks like people are just rushing to get in,” I type.

People sign in with the receptionist, she explains, leading me back through the doors. The city requires all birth and travel documents, originals and copies. Guardians must sign in as well and submit their own series of blood tests. Each test checks for infections, disease, and traces of imps. Back through the hallway she opens a side door to a room with a window that looks into another room. I recognize the layout; it’s similar to the room I stripped down in. But this one is softer, with cushioned chairs and a painting of a mountain hanging on the wall.

“You watch everyone strip?”

She nods.

An adjoining room with floor to ceiling windows looks into a hallway, with rails on either side of a moving sidewalk floor. They play music for the immigrants as they're scanned for skin disease, bone issues, and again for any imps. It's more pleasant than what I went through, she types. I start to respond, but she's already moved on to the next room. A cushioned chair in wood framing sits in the middle of a white tiled room. Here they do an EMP blast on immigrants that claim they don't have imps.

"And if they do?"

Another door opens to a surgical room. A white bed lies in the center of a silver room, tables around the bed glint with scalpels and other pronged tools. She flicks off the light and leads us on. Most immigrants undergo some minor procedure to remove implants, she types. It usually takes an hour or less, with immigrants able to walk out the door in three hours. We stop in the final changing room where they slide cloaks and masks to the immigrants and watch them change into their new skin. In the observation room two large closets are lined with cloaks and masks of various sizes. A tiny cloak for a child hangs on the far left. Next to this closet is another full of pants and dresses, even a suit or two. If nothing fits they'll have clothes delivered to match the immigrant's measurements while they go through the rooms. They have at least an hour from the time they can check the sizes of the clothes the immigrant takes off to the time they're ready for their new clothes. The city tries to match the size and style as much as they can.

We pass through to the last room, another reception area, with more cushioned chairs and a desk where a person reads a book. Here they exchange money from their bank accounts, whatever money they had outside can transfer inside the city. The city can

arrange an apartment or house, shuttle services or car rentals, sometimes even a job. The room is dull white and tan with white cushioned seats, the desk bare, no paintings, no sound at all. The receptionist doesn't even have a computer. Everything is paper, she types, pointing to the locked drawers, and only the receptionist has keys. Money is given in cash, even if it's a large sum, transferred in another room and brought to the secretary, waiting for the immigrant with a receipt. And once everything is settled, the records are stored for a day in a vault, which flash burns the contents the next day. Nothing is kept of the immigrant's life outside the walls.

"They can't bring anything?"

"Cash only."

"What about pets? Or children?"

"Allowed, but same processing."

"And my stuff?"

In my pocket the matchbox seems to rattle on its own.

"You're an ambassador, per se."

She explains that in the early days of the city, before they'd learned from their mistake, they allowed people to bring their belongings, as if moving to any city. But it made the transition more difficult. People hung on to their past lives, names, and it fell out into the rest of the city. So now, everything is swept clean.

"Voluntarily," she types. "Thus the waiting period. They can leave before then if they choose."

"How many do that?"

"One out of a hundred."

“And what happens to the ones that want to leave later?”

“Ghosts out the door.”

Some of these ghosts make their way back to my home city outside the wall. They become transients, homeless without identity, turned down from jobs that won't hire without credit, social security number, or even a name. They're a small number in the population of the homeless and they become spooky legends of nameless. Living, walking, breathing ghosts in a world they can't connect to, turning them invisible to everything from vending machines to food banks.

We walk up the stairs and cross the sky-bridge, through the doors under the welcome sign and down another set of stairs. Then we're in a small park outside the interior wall. A post in the middle of a large circular brick pathway points with generic names. “Downtown,” “west suburbs,” “stores,” and “parks.” How the hell do you find your way around this city? Or even ask for directions?

“That's why she'd never get through,” she types. “She'd never pass immigration security.”

“So, you think she's not here at all?”

“I never said that. But if we saw her, we turned her away.”

“Nice job covering your asses.”

We walk along the edges of the circle pathway. Along the path are small shrubs, perfectly manicured to linear similarity, and large trees lit by tan streetlamps meant to replicate gaslight. It's romantic in a way, like a scene from an old movie. When she hands me a note I have to bend it toward the light, holding each one close to my mask.

I'm looking for a spot to slip away for a cigarette and see a figure sitting on a bench ahead of us, reading a book under the streetlamps.

"Are you going to burn my records tomorrow?"

"No," she types. "As I said, you're an ambassador. Your department, or employer, or whoever sent you has worked out a nice agreement for you to stay indefinitely. But here, a runaway could out wait anyone."

"I'm not planning to stay long."

We take a path that leads toward the person reading on the bench, heading back toward the exterior wall.

"What are your curfew laws?" I type.

"No one out past nine," she types. "I see ou."

Her mask watches the bench as we near. The book sits in the person's lap, their thumb keeping the pages open and splayed apart. They haven't turned a page since I first saw them. They must have heard our tickers and seen us walking through the streetlamps, but they show no sign of it at all.

"Approach from the front," she types.

I watch the bench as we pass under a tree. When I look again to my side she's gone. I continue on the path alone. My feet scuff along the brick under my cloak. Above us the city cuts off the stars and turns the sky a dull hue of grey-blue. I pass under one streetlight, then darkness, and then another light. My cloak drags behind me with a soft swishing noise. They still haven't moved on the bench, slumped as they are. The wind shifts and the terrible stench of rotting, dead animals rides along it, coming through the meshwork of my mask. There's little ventilation in this thing. I blow and huff and try to

get the smell out, but it lingers and becomes stronger as I draw closer. The person on the bench doesn't seem aware I'm here, even as I'm ten, five, three feet from it. Then I'm standing next to it. It keeps its head slumped toward the book. She steps out of the dark behind it. I grab their shoulder and get no reaction; beneath my hand their skin is lumpy and unusually soft.

"Now what?" I type and pass to her over the person's shoulder.

She types a message, taps the figure's shoulder and holds the paper out. The ink slowly fades, then the paper dissolves on its shoulder, and the person does nothing. She steps around the bench and takes the book from their hand. The hand stays clutching the empty space, keeping an invisible page. The stench is awful, rotting flesh, road kill, and the acid in my stomach threatens to crawl up my throat and spew. I think of a meadow on a sunny day, a dog catching a tennis ball, and my boy riding his first bicycle, with these things I tide back the sick. She kneels in front of the person and holds their wrist.

"No pulse," she types. "Lumpy."

The same thing I felt. Bone and skin disoriented in inhuman ways. Yet, from the outside, they look perfectly human shaped, a little thin, maybe, but human still. She stands and looks around us, then to me.

"Don't ever do this," she types.

She lifts the mask off the person, guiding it from the chin and forehead, up and off. A long white object falls into the person's lap. White feathers tumble from the mask. Two long sinuous shapes hang from the hood, more falling loose around the neck, resting on their chest. She steps back, tossing the mask onto the ground, then taking more steps away. Under the weird tan light of the streetlamp it's hard to see. The white shapes

twisted in abstract painting forms, wringed and bloodied together. But then there's the yellow-orange of a beak and the bloody eye sockets of geese. The heads and necks of geese twisted together, bound by their own flesh and feathers, stuffed into the cloak.

She drops the book on the ground next to me and runs off toward the interior wall, her cloak pulled up off the ground, thick legs pumping in white running shoes. Her footsteps are the loudest thing in the night. My legs wobble with anxiety. The shakes of nicotine withdrawal work their way under my skin. That's what I'm blaming it on. I step behind a nearby tree and stand with my back to it. Even in the darkness of the tree the bloody mess smell follows me from the bench. I toss my mask somewhere next to me and light a cigarette. The smell has to go away first. My hand shakes with the lighter. Long drags fill my lungs. My chest beats deeper. An acidic, iron smell mixes with musty ash. The ash crosses my tongue and sits at the back of my throat. But it's not enough. I puff again, bigger, deeper, then release. Each time the space between puff and breath is shorter. The little nerves in my fingers start to buzz. In the back of my head, near the base of my neck, the nicotine is stuffing its cotton, soothing the panic. I finish the first cigarette, burning through it quickly, and light another. My throat, sore from her jab, sore from vomiting, and now sore from the harsh burn of the cigarettes, cracks with the dry smoke. I smell my hand, where my own flesh and the ash have mixed in fragrance. I run the whole pack of cigarettes under my nose. Instead of blowing the smoke out, it goes up into my nose, where I breathe it in and feel my nostrils pricked with needles. My lungs shudder. The cloak of goose heads still slumps on the bench behind me and there at its feet is the book. It's a cheap paperback, three or five hundred pages thick, with a green and pale white image on its cover. I keep a steady stream of smoke blowing up my nose

and walk over to the book. Without looking at the bench I pick the book up and jog back behind the tree. The light from the streetlamps barely reaches me, but there's enough that I can turn the book into the light and see the cover and text. It's a romance novel, a man and woman intertwined on its cover, with a green sheet billowing around them and blending into the grass at their feet. My wife used to read these during our flights from coast to coast. The plots were awful, she said, but it kept her mind off the turbulence. I flip through it, looking for the page that had been opened in the hand. One page is earmarked, but I didn't see that on the bench and there's nothing that jumps out from the text. At the bottom of another page there's a blood stained indentation the size of a thumb. A straight line of pencil underlines text interrupted by text pasted over it, "I became trapped as one of his women, sold into the hidden slavery of his love. [To fully leave the nightmare of persona behind we must respect the role of humanity as one, without fear or damage spread to any one of us.] If I escaped I'd be free, I knew it, and loved, I know this too, fully as myself, where my name would be the secret of my release instead of its condemnation, shared only with those I truly loved. [Until there is peace for us all, there can be no peace for any one.]" The rest of the book remains untouched except for the last page, underlined with that same pencil, "The End."

Footsteps run from the interior wall, running shoes on brick. She's coming back with troops. The cloak of goose heads still slumped on the bench. I light up a third cigarette and look for my mask.

Chapter Five

In the empty street a cold stillness pressed itself against the buildings and sidewalk while we sat inside. Even the bars in the basement of the old man's apartment building have shut down, the neon signs above their doors now colorless, their windows just another pair of dark frames on the long stretch of faded storefronts. Down the street only the blue-white of the streetlights dot the sidewalk. The mesh of my mask dims the scene with an untouchable shadow. Above us, the last light in the old man's apartment switches off. Blinds in an open window next-door rattle in the wind like plastic spoons against kitchen tile. It's creepy, really, with the whole street asleep like this, it's like when my mother has gone to sleep and I'm alone in our empty house with the halls blank and lifeless, lightless, and the stillness of it has an expectation that something bad will disturb it and fill the space. My mother grabs my wrist, pulling it without waiting for me. I'm thrown off balance on the shoe lifts and stumble to keep up, her strength much more than my own even though I'm not so small anymore, even though I'm past her chest in height, almost the same size waist, nearly the same weight, even though I'm practically a copy of her with smaller breasts, my body stretched a little more, my eyes a different shade, but I'm just as fit, more so without the smoking, even though all that she tugs me along like I'm still a kid. I grab my stomach, where I've tucked the old man's magazine into the waist of my pants. My hand presses against the rigid shape of it and its sharp glossy edges dig a little into my skin. The magazine doesn't seem to slip or slide from its place, but its straightness makes it difficult to match her pace with it pressing into my stomach.

Ahead of us on the sidewalk someone passes from streetlamp to streetlamp, the

blue-white light rolling off the back of our cloak like water off a leaf. My mother grips my wrist so tight that my sleeve burns into my skin as our arms bounce with our steps and her hand twists a little. She doesn't notice I'm there at all and when I start to slow, lock my knees, anchor my feet and weight into the sidewalk, and pull against her, trying to pull us away from the other person who she must not see, she jerks my arm so quickly that my shoulder pops and cracks and I think she may just pull it out of my cloak all together if I try it again. Through my mask blows the cool air of night already turning to the air of morning when the birds start to chirp, signaling that soon the sun will rise from behind the wall. When the season is right I can see the sun rise from the wall behind our neighbor's houses, far off in the distance, a yellow whale breaching a grey ocean, or a light bulb from behind a shade, with an invisible hand tilting the lamp, and then it's floating off above us, shimmering on the grain of black roof tops and stretching the shadow of our backyard fence further across the dying grass. It happens earlier in the summer, when I'm free from school, with nothing waiting for me in the morning I can get on a weird sleeping schedule and read until the coolness of night finishes filling our house and when the birds and then the sun have safely returned, then I know, with those things I know that it's time for bed and that is the only thing I want from home. Really, I would wait anywhere for morning to arrive. I could sleep in this apartment window we pass under with the green light that turns everything inside the color of limes. Would it be warmer or cooler to sleep in green light? What about red or blue? We didn't pass that light before or the scuff of white against the brick below the dark tool store or those two bars sitting right next to each other, with their doors sunken below the street and nearly joined together. We didn't pass the coffee shop with the cup left in the window either.

Where are we going? The person ahead rounds a corner and my mother grips me tighter. We move faster and I watch my feet to avoid stepping on her cloak. Sweat builds under my cloak, even with the chill breeze coming through the meshwork of my mask, my armpits dampen and the magazine sticks to my stomach as I move. The magazine sticks and unsticks from my skin like kisses from the face on the cover, with her lips so red, blazing against my belly button, big wet lips smooching there. If the colors bleed into my skin her face will live there in a mirror image melted from my running sweat. We turn the corner and the person is gone. But my mother doesn't stop. She walks on, chasing them, maybe hoping that they'll lean out of whatever hole or corner they've hidden in. They must have gone inside an apartment or ducked down an alley or into a doorway and disappeared absolutely. I want to turn back. I tug my arm against her grip, but she doesn't let go. She's breaking her own rules. We should be hiding from people, not following them.

Down the street a white loading truck sits with its back open and empty, its red lights blink without noise, but I hear the *tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick* in my head. My mother stops and turns around, back the way we came, and the front door of the building next to the truck opens, all at once. A person emerges, dragging another by the armpits. She couldn't have even seen them, but my mother pulls me into the shadow of a storefront archway. The people are the size of my thumb in the distance, two black smudges on the street behind the meshwork of my mask, moving between two blue-white streetlights, one drags the other to the truck, then drops out on the ground and looks into the back of the truck. Her hand presses against my shoulder, then my mask, and my mother pins me against the glass door of the store. She doesn't look behind her, her mask

is pressed against the glass above my head, the chin of her mesh against the top of mine.

From down the street the metal screech of a door echoes, then its loud slam like a soda bottle top being popped off. My mother peeks out, and then pulls me by the wrist and the magazine in my waist slips at an angle and a corner digs into my skin just below my rib cage. As she pulls me back the way we came I look at the truck and see ou still lying alone on the ground. Before I can go to ou, before I can slip from my mother's grip and run down the street to ou, I am bent around the corner by my arm and between us, half way down the street, just before the truck, another person slips out from behind a corner and runs down the street toward the truck, not heading for it, but past it, and then I'm around the corner.

We don't stop moving until we are home. My mother unlocks our back door and holds it open for me, but she doesn't follow. Instead she takes off her mask, tosses it on the kitchen counter without coming inside, and closes the door behind me. Through the screen door I watch her sit and undo the tight bun of her hair, letting it fall below her shoulders. She lays her gloves down on the concrete step then reaches into her cloak. There's a soft click and glow of her lighting a cigarette. I leave before the smoke starts to linger through the door, following me into the kitchen and stinking everything up.

In my bedroom I undress in the dim light of my bedside lamp, tossing my mask somewhere and sliding my cloak over my head without bending. The magazine is soggy with sweat. I can feel it on my stomach before even touching it with my hands. It's bent a little, rippled a little, but none of the colors have run. The chestnut eyes of this woman stay solid as the wood of my desk. Her lips are the livid red of blood. They're a deeper red than blood, really. Or even a rose, I guess. Her cheeks blush with the pink of a sunset

sky that barely ever reaches over the wall, but here it is so close I can touch it. As I change into my nightshirt and shorts her eyes glare at the ceiling. She is half smiling, not quite, but there is something there, like she wants to, but just can't bring herself to it, like when I was sad and my mother used to ask me to smile, telling me I was so pretty, that is how she smiles.

On my bed, with the light bent over the magazine and the window next to it open with my mothers smoke drifting by; I flip through the glossy pages, stopping at each face. A man and woman sit in a field, both wearing sweaters, their arms rolled up, the woman with a large fluffy collar and a skirt, the man in a sweater that begins in a v around his neck, striped maroon and white, his blue pants slightly pulled up at the ankle to show his darker blue socks stretched far above his brown shoes, but her legs are tucked back, hidden, nonexistent on the blanket, a tan basket sits unopened next to them. Oh and their faces. Her eyes looking to the side to his face, half closed, a smile from one cheek to the other, her chin slightly raised, blonde curls around her ears with tiny white dots in the bottom of each, her skin one smooth color of tan white, nose curving slightly to the side with a bump at the end, round like a strawberry turned upside down, but not nearly as red or puckered, but her lips have the color, strawberry lips. And this man, just as happy, looks at her, so only half of his face can be seen, blue eyed, brown hair with a swirl like ice cream bent over at the top and tipped at the end, a jaw nearly square with a dent at the end of his chin, his ears stick out from his hair, naked and untouched, a small mole drifts alone on his right cheek, his eyebrows almost as straight and thin as hers but not nearly as faded. I get up from my bed and take the scissors from my desk. With careful movements

I cut the page around them, starting from the edge of the blanket, up around her shoulders, just around her hair, then over to the man's.

The screen door below my window slaps shut and then the large inner door is pushed closed. I pause with scissors in hand, my light still on, listening as my mother comes up the stairs. She knocks on my door and enters before I can say anything. The door opens halfway and the faint outline of her face is lit from the hall light behind her. My desk lamp barely touches her flushed cheeks. Sometimes, the way her hair bunches itself up around her shoulders, with wisps of blonde shooting in uncontrolled directions from the top of her head to her shoulders, her whole head looks like wires, even under her skin they are beginning to show in the lines around her eyes and mouth, which I can't see now, but I know they are there when she speaks and her mouth takes effort to bend.

"You can never go with me again," she says.

"But, school isn't for another day," I say. "I could go tomorrow if we come back early. I'll be quiet."

"I'm not going out again."

She turns, closing the door behind her.

"What were they doing?" I say. She stops and the side of her face presses against the door. In the dark there's no way to see her expression, but I imagine through the shadows that her eyes are closed and her forehead is pressed down into them.

"Someone was taking a woman."

"How do you know it was a woman?"

"It's always a woman."

"I thought they looked thinner than a man," I say. "Shorter too."

“Yes,” she says.

“Maybe a girl.”

“Maybe.”

“Why would someone take a girl?”

The page I had started working on is of a younger woman. She smiles through a thin red fabric stretched across the bottom of her face. A light shines across her eyes, blue, almost gray.

“What is that?” my mother says.

“A magazine.”

“Where did you get it?”

“From the basement.”

“I’ve never seen that magazine before in my life,” she says. “Where did you really get it from?”

The woman smiles up at me from my lap, I can’t tell if she’s urging me on to tell the truth, or to lie. I’m no good at lying.

“I stole it from the old man.”

She opens the door a little more. Her right hand wraps around the door so that my desk lamp shines on her fingers. The nails have been bitten and torn and the cuticles bloodied. Her face moves into the light and a steady fury burns in her eyes.

“That was an incredibly stupid thing to do,” she says. “You burned a bridge that I can never cross now.”

“You just said you weren’t going back.”

“You didn’t think at all when you took it. He’ll know you took it. How could he not?”

“He doesn’t even know who we are, you’re being stupid.”

“And if I went back?”

“How would he know?”

“There’s no one else who paints for him,” she says. “No one else who enters his home. It was only the two of us and now he knows that the child of the painter is a thief and if he caught you, if he catches me, what do you think will happen then?”

In my chest there is a warm pressure as her voice grows more intense, shaking, and loud.

“We’ll be taken,” I say. “Like the girl.”

The pressure grows up my neck and forms a hot lump in my throat. It sits there, pulsing.

“No,” she says. Her voice softens. “Nothing like that.”

“What would happen then? Would he turn us in? Would we be expelled?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “But you can’t steal because one day, if you do it again, there will be something worse.”

“Like being taken like the girl.”

“They won’t take you like that girl. She was dead,” she says.

“How do you know?”

I’m breathing heavy. The scissors wrap around my fingers and feel trapping. I take my fingers out of them. She sighs into the door.

“I don’t,” she says. “But it’s better for her if she is.”

“How could being dead be better?”

“There are things people do to one another that are more painful than death. Have they taught you that in school yet?”

I nod.

“Like what?” she says.

“War,” I say. “Torture and the camps.”

“Yes,” she says. “That’s how death could be better.”

“But dad is still alive?”

“Yes,” she says.

Outside the crickets are singing to one another. In the silence I worry that our voices could be heard outside the window. I turn to it, and then turn back to her quickly so that she doesn’t leave.

“Was it dad you were following?”

“No.”

“But it could have been. Right?”

“No,” she says. “Your father wouldn’t hide.”

“I saw ou run down the street, past the truck, just as we went around the corner.”

“It wasn’t him.”

“Maybe it will be,” I say. “One night.”

“He will have to come here,” she says. “We’re done going out at night, all right?”

“I got it.”

“That never leaves this house,” she says, looking at the magazine in my lap.

I nod.

She closes the door until it clicks into place. There is a pause, where we both listen for the movement of the other, and then she steps down the hall and walks to her room and shuts the door. For the next few hours I go from page to page, cutting the faces of men and women from the pages, and putting them into neat piles of men, women, couples, until the birds start to chirp and the sun tints the sky from gray to a dull blue.

The sun reaches through my blinds, I feel as though someone beat against my shoulder blades as I slept. My eyes sting until I shower and wash them in the hot water, opening them as the water rains on my face, the tile blurring with a soothing ache. A heavy weight builds in my uterus as the water funnels in and out of my belly button. My period is beginning. My first one came at fourteen and each one that follows seems to be worse than the last, increasing the soggy feeling of my limbs and the amount of blood. Maybe I am too full of blood and that is my problem. My skin acting like some blood sponge that doesn't quite work with my veins, all of which must have leaks. And the only wringing that seems to happen is from my uterus. As I get older I imagine the blood will transform into iron on its own under the gravitational pressure of my uterus, like the core of our planet, and then instead of blood I'll pop out small eggs of iron that I can sell. This fake future is the only thing I have to look forward to with my periods. None of the other girls seem to have them as bad as mine like unrelenting migraines from the gut and striking into my kidneys and up my spine where it rests at the base of my skull and when I step, the heels of my feet carry with them a shock, a small bolt up my spine, rumbling past my gut with pin pricks. None of that was covered in health class. Maybe I've only been talking to boys, who don't know anything about periods. My mother only says

they're awful. She gives me money to buy products from the curtained vending machines that sell pads and tampons, condoms, and foot cream at the back of the store. I'm old enough to go alone, she says, and so I always sneak back there and hide behind the curtain when no one is looking, slipping cash into the machine, hoping no one can somehow hear my choice. My hand waits at the bottom to catch them as they fall so no one will watch the curtain when they hear. Every time I go I feel vulnerable, scared that someone will grab me and shout that they know, now they know I am a woman, before I can disappear outside the store.

Back in my room, as I dry off with the towel wrapped around me, I look over the piles of faces on my desk. The ones that I like least, the ones that seem to have been taken with a camera that wasn't as good as the others, or which have faded or worn on the pages, I put into a pile and tuck into pants pocket. The others I pin to my wall around the bed with little thumbtacks in the edges of their hair. It looks like they're wearing tiny red flowers in their hair with the pins. When I look from one to another and then look back at the one I just looked at, they appear different, none of them familiar to me. It's not that I don't remember looking at one or another, but every time I look at the faces they are new to me. Their eyes a striking color I remember, yes, but the whole of the face, somehow new, as if I'd not seen that collection of features, that specific mouth with those ears and eyes and brows and hair, together before, even though I remember the details themselves.

My mother is waiting out in the back yard near the rusted patio furniture. Her mask is down, the cloak pulled over her head, and on her arm a bird sits eating something from her gloved hand. Its little beak pecks into the ball of her fist. She knows the names

of all the birds and what they like to eat so she can lure them to her like this. When I was younger she showed me how to do it. The birds native to the city have grown used to people in cloaks and masks to the point where if I sat in a spot long enough they'd swoop down and try to steal my food. But my mother knows what they like, if they prefer seed or worms, and she'll sit there with it resting in her hand until one comes down like this. It helps her painting, she told me, to see them up close like this. All summer I tried to lure them on my own, but I could never sit long enough and she didn't want to help me.

I swing my black backpack I packed the night before over my shoulders. Stuffed inside are my usual boring school stuff and tampons and pads, both, just in case, five of each because the last thing I want is a cloak full of blood. When I go to school I have to make sure the padding under my cloak will feel right with the backpack. One day last year I put a shoulder pad in, but only on one side, and the unbalanced weight screwed up my back. Today I got them right, a small one in my back helps offset the heavy weight of the books. It's almost snug, like layers of blankets with a weight pressed gently on my shoulders. Last night I cleaned my mask, spraying the metal with soap, washing the fabric with my cloak. It smells fresh, lavender and the unnatural smell that tries to be a spring valley, but I doubt a spring valley smells anything like that. I step out and the noise of the door scares away the bird. It flutters off, zipping over the fence. She turns and looks at me for a moment. Then she walks over and locks the door, not saying hello or good morning, or anything like that.

Going to school shouldn't make me nervous, but it does, especially when I'm starting a new grade. They tell you ahead of time what you'll be learning, social sciences, history, math, whatever, and so I shouldn't have anything to worry about, but I do. In my

gut, along with all the stuffy, heavy feeling there, it's also flipping, swirling, basically the drain of a shower is how my stomach feels, or a churning clothes washer. My mother doesn't say anything while we drive. She could drive this in her sleep, the same pattern, the same turn by turn, down the road, turn at the tree, down further, turn at the post office, down further, turn at the library, then there's the school. A big square building, painted cream because white was too much of a pain to keep clean, four stories tall, and a whole block wide. Small, cloaked children jump out of their cars, some running to the stairs outside, others being coaxed out by their parents. One parent stands outside a car, holding a backpack and pointing repeatedly to the ground in front of them. A line has already formed by the stairs where teachers wait for the kids. The smallest ones are guided to the line by their parents, there are six tiny kids this year, and their parents stick out above the sea of smaller figures. I pull my backpack from my feet onto my lap. My mother pulls an envelope from her cloak and hands it to me. The money outlined through the envelope in the sun, my tuition for the day. I fold the envelope over and put it inside my cloak pocket.

"It's like they're happy to be here," my mother says.

"Why shouldn't they be?"

"I don't remember school being so exciting. It was a chore."

I point to a small figure walking slowly to the back of the line, our feet kicking the front of our cloak in exaggerated steps.

"You can't be happy," I say. "Maybe you feel like you did."

"How do you feel about it?"

"I'm happy to not be home," I say.

She watches children cross the street from a car then smiles with a lot of effort at me. It takes almost her whole face to smile. I can see the crease of it in her forehead and eyes, like even her hair has to strain to pull up the corners of her mouth. And even then it barely moves half an inch.

“Have a good day,” she says.

Her smile drops away. For a moment her face is pained, almost embarrassed, her eyes dull under depressed brows, their weight even reaching down and bending her mouth into a frown. Then she takes a breath and clenches her jaw. Her mouth and eyes level out into straight lines.

“You should go now,” she says.

I say, thanks, and put on my mask and wait for her to put on hers then I open the door. At the stairs I wait in line and don’t look back, she’s probably just pulled away anyway. We all wait for our turn in silence. Birds fly from tree to tree. Two birds call back and forth from opposite trees, high shrill cries like car alarms. The mornings are taking longer for the light now and the crisp air of it sticks around longer. It won’t be hot until three when we all get out of class. Soon we’ll be dragging crushed leaves with our cloaks and have to shake them out before going inside. The teacher hands me a piece of paper, but I already know what it says.

“Grade?”

“Ten,” I type. I slide the envelope of money from my pocket and hand it to them.

“Straight, left down the adjoining hall, first class room on the right,” they typed it repeatedly. I read a few of the lines then let the ink and paper disintegrate.

I pass through the sea of younger children making their way into the class rooms

in the first building, which has everything from kindergarten to grade eight on the upper floors. Last year I was grade nine and it was my first year in the second building, which isn't labeled at all, they just call it that so we can find our way, but really it's just the same building. One giant cube of education. The first building doesn't have any lockers on the first floor, instead they get cubbies in their class rooms where they stay for most of the day and teachers revolve in and out, so that way the kids don't get confused and lost in the shuffle. Down the hall and to the left the lockers start along the wall of the connecting hallway. I pick one close to the classrooms, but many of them already have locks on them. I shove a bunch of the supplies in, keeping what I need for the first two periods in my bag then I slide a lock on and spin it. Other children my age shuffle around me. Some type out messages to each other in groups. One child, my size, passes with a gait I recognize, their padding always oriented in the same way, two lumpy shoulders and a gut that leans to the left, and I reach to stop them, to grab them by the arm, the code we've shared in the past years ready in my head, but they move too quickly, past me, down the hall toward the second classroom on the right. I press my hip and hear the soft crunch of the faces I cut from the magazine. Before the group near me disperses I tap one of them on the elbow and type out a note.

“Faces?”

“Wut u mean?”

I look over my shoulder for any taller figures. There's just a mass of kids filling the halls as more arrive. I take out a face and pass it to the figure. Ou stiffens, ous spine goes rigid. Their hand lingers out for a moment then grabs the face, bending the edge with their thumb. Ou looks up, as if I shouted at ou, and shoves it into ous cloak. Before

anyone can do anything, before a hidden agent or an over zealous do-gooder can grab my arm, I step into the shifting crowd and disappear with the mass of cloaks.

After my first class the teacher projects the list of classes and what room each is in. I move to the room across the hall, science, where halfway through class someone passes one of my faces. I've passed out three between classes and I'll do the rest between next period. My gut is a mixture of heavy and giddy. Anxious nervous fish swim in my thickening stomach. It's a man's face they're passing. He's an older man, with his chin bent down and a smirk under a hat with the brim swooping all around the edge. The teacher has our back to us, drawing out " $E = mc^2$ " on the board. Then he steps over to the projector and types out, "Part of a physics theory, an important basis for many of the topics we'll be covering." I jot it down in my notebook between watching the face pass from gloved hand to gloved hand. Some of them stop to look at it longer; others are quick to get rid of it, like it's hot, like it's burning them through their gloves. When the teacher looks up and types out a question on the projector screen, the passing stops. Someone next to me raises their hand and passes up the response on one of the blue, special long lasting papers. The teacher types the student's response on the projector then our own reply. The teacher turns and writes on the board and the passing begins again. It finally reaches me and someone has written on the back with a pen.

"The last skin you'll ever see."

It's scratchy lettering, shaky, done in haste and under a desk, half seen, or felt even. My chest flutters and under my cloak my neck flushes hot and red. There's a tingling excitement in my arms and hand. The teacher points to something on the board, but I'm looking over the room, trying to remember from where I first saw the face

passed. A row next to mine, to the left, five desks up, maybe. It could have been further, but to pass that close to the teacher would be risky. It's still there in my hands when I look down and have the impulse to crinkle it up and throw it away. Next to me a student leans across the aisle, trying to glance at the photo. The teacher flashes the next classes up on the board. I pass the face to the student that leaned, but I'm not fast enough. The teacher's mask follows the face across the aisle. And a weight sinks down my chest, hitting heavy in my stomach. The student freezes with it in our hand, still in the aisle. Other heads turn back too, following the teacher's gaze. Someone laughs, a short burst quickly silenced. The bell rings and in a silent pact we all stand and hide one another within our mass. We become a scuffle of cloaks and backpacks out the door.

Between bells I go to my locker to switch my books and get ready to pass the remaining faces. My hand shakes a little with the weight of the books I pull from my locker. The faces crinkle in my cloak and I freeze, scared that anyone around me could hear, but no one seems to have heard a thing. There's a loud thud from somewhere below us. The hall lights shut off, dimming the hallway between the two buildings. Everyone freezes. All tickers stop in one breath. There's screaming, a shrill cry almost like a bird, from down the hall, back in the first building, where all the little kids are. Two large cloaked people come around the corner. One snatches a smaller kid and bolts out the emergency door. Two more people come from the other end and hit a kid in the back of the head, sending ou to the ground. Tall people, much larger than any of the children, follow the first few that already make their way out the same emergency door with children kicking in their arms. A teacher comes out of the classroom closest to the lockers and struggles with two of the fleeing people. Our hands reach for their masks, but the

other two grab and knock the teacher's hands away, one of them punches the teacher in the stomach, and then kicks the teacher on the floor. I spin around and someone grabs my arm. My backpack thuds at my feet. Their hand clamps tight around my upper arm and they pull me with them. Next to me a child says, "No," as they're pulled out the door. I swing a fist down on the person's wrist and my hand collides with hard plastic under their cloak. They knee me in the gut with a sharp crackling pain and everything goes bright. Gravity shifts and I fall back. I can't breathe. Ou lifts me over ous shoulder. It smells like fall, cold crisping air brushes against my face and in my lungs. Below us the hall tile is gone and there's the sidewalk and daylight. I'm tossed in the back of a truck, with another kid thrown in after me. The truck's door slams and locks, shutting out the daylight.

Chapter Six

Above the crest of the wall the sky bleeds a dark poison berry. I tilt my cigarette up until the tip of it reaches above the grey wall line and inhale, watching it burn crimson like a red sun. The soft fullness of the smoke pours down my throat and rests heavy against my lungs where I hold it. I hold everything about it, the cigarette still perched, dying to a dull burn, my fingers tilting it up, letting the smoke drift from the tip to sting my eyes, and in my lungs, so coated already, there is a heavy white balloon that buzzes into my skin. And then that smoke rushes out of my nose, pricking the inside of my nostrils as it goes, and hides the wall in a sheet of white silk. Next to me the last car to arrive still ticks and dings as the engine cools. I put my cigarette out on its tire, ash streaks on black rubber, and toss the butt to the pile between my legs. On the ground they look like shriveled goose heads, burned from the stem, their beaks smashed flat at the end. Across the half full parking lot her stocky figure pushes through doors that lead into the wall. I pick up my mask and stand, grunting a little. By the time she reaches me I'm adjusting the straps of my mask. It's so much darker in here. Even with the blue streetlights above us I barely see the paper she holds out in her hand.

"Let's go," it says.

What a waste of paper. I toss it to the ground as it dissolves. She leads me through the parking lot of duplicate cars, white and shinning metal shoes on wheels, somehow finding her way right to hers parked close to the facility doors. I can't imagine trying to find a car among hundreds of others that look the same without a projected guidance flare or the little orbs that skitter to my car back home. And when we reach the car it just sits

there like a corpse. Not even a hello. Once we're inside I take my mask off and set it in my lap.

"How many did there end up being?" I say.

She draws up her shoulders, tenses, pushes them back against the seat, lets them drop, and then starts the car. Her hand jabs at her throat, turning the voice distortion on. It makes her voice sound like it's tuned to a radio station with bad reception, all fuzz and wavering, worn out VHS, scratched vinyl, overtuned autotune, glitched out, devoid of cadence or tone or pitch, just a flat, androgynous noise.

"How many what?" she says.

"Goose heads."

"Little over a hundred."

"Funny, I thought there'd be more."

"Why?"

"Just seems like it would take more than a hundred something goose heads to fill out pants and a shirt and such."

"How many do you think it would take?"

"I don't know," I say. "Two hundred? Three?"

"Have you seen this before?"

"Shit. Of course I've never seen this kind of fucked up thing before. Why are you interrogating me? I'm not the worse person you could have here."

"No," she says. "But you are what we have."

The clock in the dash glows 6:45. A thousand miles away, over the wall we drive along, my wife will wake our children in twenty minutes. She'll let the buzz of their

alarms sink in and if that doesn't stir them then she'll tear off the covers. In the kitchen she'll pour bowls of cereal and start the coffee since I am not there to do it. They'll take turns showering, brushing their teeth, and dressing while our middle child, our daughter sings to music from her stream. The youngest, our boy, will take too long in the bathroom, recording video of himself in the mirror, drawing on it with toothpaste, and while he sits on the toilet he makes little boats and animals out of the toilet paper, leaving them behind when he finally responds to my wife's calls for him downstairs. They'll have fifteen minutes to eat breakfast while my wife makes herself oatmeal with banana slices and cinnamon or yogurt with nuts and berries and an additive protein and caffeine to make sure she can keep up with the children at school. Between them as they eat their streams project cartoons or sports or whatever they each want to watch. Two empty seats will sit next to them, the one that's been left since our oldest son went away to academy, and mine, newly empty, ready to collect the same dust as his. My wife will stare at them both, just as she stared at his alone, and wonder, now, where both of us are. And just as the coffee finishes the bus will interrupt their streams to tell them that it's right around the corner and they'll run off, grabbing their bags. My wife will call to them as she pours, saying that she loves them, even if she's tired, even if it's done out of reflex rather than the heartfelt expression it deserves. But I would do just the same. And in the quiet of the kitchen, with the boy's bowl sitting half empty and the girl's completely empty, she'll sit and eat her oatmeal alone, watching the news and maybe continue to wonder what I'm doing. In twenty minutes that's what will happen, but right now they're all still sleeping. I slip my hand under my cloak and touch the small matchbox in the pocket, feeling the dinosaurs rattle inside. It's too quiet in the car.

“You have a family?” I say.

“I’m not a part of your investigation.”

“I’m asking casually.”

“It’s not a conversation we’ll have.”

“How you people ever go on dates is mystifying.”

She turns onto a four-lane street and we head toward the center of the city. I watch the corners as we pass and see that there are no street signs, no numbers on the buildings we pass. None of the storefronts have opened yet. We pass still dark car rental, real estate, and clothing stores, which I can only imagine being wall to wall with cloaks and masks. The neighborhood is full of businesses built for arrivals, newly immigrated lost souls trying to reestablish their lives without any record they exist. They’re all literally named these things too, dim signs above their doors marking in big block letters, “car dealer,” “real estate,” and simpler still, “clothes.” At least you know what you’re getting. The buildings themselves are painfully plain; most of them concrete boxes or cinder blocks painted white. What an awful color to choose as your default. Dirt crawls up the walls like moss. Even in the fading, blue streetlight they look like snow slush in the gutters. The surfaces of the buildings and street stay quiet as we pass. No glowing guides for lanes or lighted stop signs. No advertisements reaching out to me with a pack of cigarettes offered by a slim blonde or a stag leaping through a woodland scene, the morning sun between the trees, with the deodorant’s tagline, “The natural man returns.” She stops at a light, still hanging from wires above the empty intersection, and waits.

I pull out my pack of cigarettes and see the goose heads again. Five of them rattle around in the pack, straight and frozen. I crack the window and light up. My throat burns a little, dry and ashy.

“They got water at this place, right?”

“Put up your window,” she says.

“I never got my cup of water.”

“Put it up.”

“You want to suffer with the smoke?”

She flicks on the air and adjusts the vents on her side to point away from her face. Not sure what good they’d do her anyway with the mask still on. I close the window and dab ash into the cup holder.

As we near the center of the city traffic is picking up, cars turn from side streets to fill the lanes around us with duplicates. The same damn car, over and over again. I keep thinking we’re passing mirrors. But the little differences become glaring. One to our left has mud splashed across its back. Another behind us has a headlight fogged up. Blue streetlights melt along their metal bodies like the moon across porcelain. Farther down the street a white truck juts out from the sea like a block of ice. In my head I hum a classical tune and try to listen to the air conditioner’s tones. The car’s engine rumbling isn’t enough. The traffic outside is too slow for any helpful noise. I keep my eyes moving by looking in every shop window we pass.

I stub out my cigarette in the cup holder in quick little dashes. I really don’t want to have to smoke another one, but I do. She’s calm as a pillow, her hands never moving from ten and two, mask glancing at the mirrors. Behind us the sky is purpling, dark

raspberries, maybe, a little sliver of peach. The sky's taking its sweet time to climb over that damn wall. This time of year kills the daylight with every passing day. We're in the down slope now.

"And what about the book?" I say.

"What about it?"

"Is it common, was there anything inside it, have you found others left around town like this?" I say. "Anything. About the book. I'm just trying to make chat here."

"Your case isn't involved with this."

"How can you be sure?"

"Do you think your runaway did this?"

"No," I say. "But she could be at risk as much as anyone if it's a threat. I'm not ruling out any possibilities."

"Could."

"Yes, exactly. I could be at risk, you could be at risk, anyone could, really. So, don't you think sharing information may help you in finding the guy, even if it isn't my case?"

She starts to say something, the electronic buzz picking up on the beginnings of a sound, but it cuts short as a car cuts into our lane. Her foot pounds on the break. They don't even know she's a cop, there's no way of telling. I don't know how she'd even pull them over, there's not a single cop light on her car.

"What makes you say 'guy?'" she says.

"Colloquialism," I say. "And I don't think a woman would do that."

"Now you're being stupid."

“Statistically women are less likely to be as brutal as men in murder. Even for animals. They use poison or a gun.”

“Violence is without bias.”

It is, but it isn't. Violence is a statistic like any other and can be rated and gauged based on the numbers. It's a statistic that may reach further than this city can understand, making its numbers smaller, but they wouldn't even track such a thing here. How can you judge how many of your murderers are women or men when you don't even know their names? How can you approach every crime like it's the first one that's been committed without records to say otherwise? Their laws, still clearly set, apply to those caught performing the act, those tracked down by the sloppiest mistakes. So many crimes here must go unsolved or completely ignored.

The streetlights flicker off as we pass businesses that flicker on. People walk quickly along the storefronts, black brief cases or saddlebags tucked under their arms. We stop at a light and on the corner a café worker hefts two rod-iron chairs, placing them on either side of a table. Through the window another worker places something in their display by the cash register. Their “Open” light hangs dark.

She pulls up to a large apartment building, thirty or forty floors high, with the thrilling name, “Apartments,” in gold lettering above the doors. Two potted plants sit on either side, straight topiaries, the upside down points of an exclamation mark. The building itself is a classic white concrete, with the windows a glossy black. Nearly every building in this city looks like some poor square cartoon ghost with a hundred eyes. From somewhere in her cloak she hands me three keys on a loop. She holds them up, one by one.

“Outside door, inside door, mail,” she says. “Take the elevator to the thirtieth floor, then it’s the eleventh door on your left.”

“No room number?”

“Numbers are still a form of identification,” she says.

“That explains the street numbers too,” I say. “You think I’ll get mail?”

As I put on my mask she’s typing out a note.

“I’ll come by two today. I’ll be standing outside the car, in this spot, and when you approach me I’ll type out: 6525879. You respond with: 211390. Clear?”

“Can’t we just ask about swallows?” I say.

The numbers disappear fast as I repeat them in my head.

To call the interior of the apartment complex bare would be doing it a disservice in the absence of everything it never had. I run my fingers along the white glossy surface of the entranceway walls, glass or plastic, which reflect my glove and shadow behind it like a frosted reflection on the surface of a calm lake. The whole place has the warmth of a mausoleum. On my way through the lobby, and up the elevator, and down the hall, I don’t pass a single person. Along the corridor of the thirtieth floor I pass wooden door after wooden door with no decoration but golden peepholes, bronze doorknockers, and a little slot for mail or passing of messages. Little lamps with squat white shades sit between each door, waiting for their chance to flicker on when night comes around again. I hum a drastic classical tune, traditionally played on the piano, its dower beats slow, then fast and the noise, the vibration in my throat, is a soft comfort to be alone with. Down at

the end of the hall a plain square window frames a creeping sunlight as it makes its way over the wall and chases the black of night to the other edge where a dark grape softens.

Inside my apartment there isn't much either, really. I slip off my shoes in the hall and put them against the wall. There's a little light switch, left off, but I ignore it, just able to see in the dim blue hues that fill the apartment from the growing morning. A black and red, diamond pattern rug leads down the wood floor hallway and into a living room. And damn what a view is there. They left the blinds wide open and across the whole room the bare rectangle gives a spectacular overview of downtown. I plop down on the square, gray couch and take my mask off, letting the whole picture free of the meshed vision. Several blocks away a black obelisk of glass catches the sunlight and blushes purple. Between us the buildings reach only to the twentieth and tenth floors, their rooftops dotted with trees and patio furniture, but mostly the same air conditioner units and vents you'd see in any city. Each building represents a single type that's copy and pasted throughout the city. There's the flat square gray model with long thin windows, the all white stucco with square black blocks, and the sleek black rectangle of all glass. And below them still are the smaller roofs of townhouses, small strip-mall-like businesses, and gas stations. Behind all of it, several hundred blocks away, behind the stretches of downtown and suburb and who knows what else, behind the horizon smudge of white and grey and black and green, there in the far south is the wall. The wall's endless sliver of grey becomes just visible against the purple sky fading to blue.

I stand and look around. A single painting hangs on the wall to my left. It's a majestic landscape of a mountain, one I don't quite recognize, from the valley before it, with the sun setting to its left and turning the peak a coral tone. Beneath the painting, on a

small table that looks specially built for it, sits a radio with an old antenna and knobs and a little window with individual ticks for each station. The anachronism of it all feels absurd. I flip the radio on. Soft violins play a cheery tune, with wind instruments joining. I take the painting off the wall, turn it over, and run my hands along the brown paper nailed to it. I push hard against the paper, ripping into it, and tear the paper open. There's nothing hidden inside. I run my hand along the wall where it stood, but only the nail in the wall sticks out. Replacing the painting I look around the room. Step by step I tear the apartment apart. I take off all the cushions of the couch, flip it, and check the seams underneath. I roll the carpet into the corner and follow the cracks of the wooden floorboards. I move along the edge of the floor, looking for loose boards, where the trim may be cracked or repainted. Using a knife from the kitchen I unscrew the plug covers and carefully sort through the wires. In the bedroom I rip the backs of two paintings, toss the bed over on its side, examine the box springs, under the bed, inside the nightstand, take out every drawer in the chest. In the bathroom I screw off the showerhead, lift off the back of the toilet seat, run my hands all around the toilet, look under the sink, go through the little linen closet. In the kitchen I take out all the drawers, all the pots and pans, all the utensils, look through every cabinet, even the crisper in the fridge, behind the fridge, the coils on the stove, the light above the stove. Anyone below me would think I'm remodeling, moving furniture, clattering around kitchenware. Above me the smoke detectors blink, green, green, and I pull over a chair, inspect each smoke detector. Then the overhead lights that hang in domes from the ceiling. The table lamps I take apart, unscrewing the bulbs, looking inside their sockets. On the radio the classical tune changes to a crescendo of strings and drums, a piano rattles off then fades away to the

horns. I unplug the radio and pop off the back, but there's nothing unusual there. I put it back together and plug it back in, letting the piano overtake the horns again. I'm out of breath, tired, my muscles burn. In my chest the phlegm and ash of cigarettes makes it hard to breathe. I lean against the wall and take out my pack, shaking out another cigarette. While holding it between my lips I move the couch back into place, as if nothing had happened at all. I still don't trust that I'm alone in here. The whole city gives the feeling of constantly being watched.

I sit down on the couch with a glass of water in one hand and my cigarette smoking in the other. I put my feet up on the little coffee table and wait for the sun to creep further up, it's still too far east out of my view, but its effect on the sky shifts the light of the whole room brighter and brighter still.

From my pocket I take out the little matchbox and rattle it. Inside the three dinosaurs lay, the long neck of one laying against the tail of another, while the flying one has isolated itself in a corner. I take off my gloves and pick the dinosaurs out of the box, one by one. The long neck's bright green, plastic skin is rough against my fingers, bumpy with slight vertebrae along its spine. The carnivorous king of the beasts, with its bright orange skin and wide toothy smile, I stand up on the matchbox's flat lid on the armrest of the couch. The red flying one, with its wings stretched out in flight, its mouth open in a scream, I place next to the orange one on the box. And there the three of them rest, little figurines of terror frozen in time. Their organic material waiting to be crushed when I find my runaway and then the tiny little nanorganics inside, appearing as harmless as molded plastic on any scanner, will bloom into the wind, carrying with them a message. Green, I've found her alive. Orange, I've found her dead. Red, scorch the earth, launch an

assault, and send in the drones. Maybe they don't do shit. Maybe if I crush them, there will be nothing but smashed plastic and my dead body. But you take what lifelines you're given.

As the sun's golden tendrils cut their way across the buildings I sit with these three harbingers and try to look beyond the city that's waking to what lays behind the wall. Somewhere, a thousand miles away in another city, my employer waits for a message with his ears readied to the sky, listening for signs of his daughter, my runaway. Somewhere, my wife and two children are waking up.

Chapter Seven

In the back of the truck hands press against my back and stomach, some slip and fumble across my chest or bump into my mask, as kids try to steady themselves. The truck hits two large bumps, knocking us into one another, and refuses to slow down. There's nothing for me to hold on to but the shifting bodies around me. Soft cries start up, some children shout for help, others just cry. The weight of the truck shifts, going around a corner or something maybe, throwing us all to one side of the truck. I step on something soft and a loud cry starts around my knees.

"That's my hand," they say.

A reply catches in my throat, I can't say it, I can't say, "Sorry," but it doesn't matter because the truck sways again and I'm lost in the darkness and bodies.

There's a clink sound from the front of the truck, from where I hear the engine and feel the pull of gravity sliding away, a shaft of light shoots through a small rectangle, then it's blocked.

"Shut the fuck up," the shadow says. Their voice distorted by a deep electric buzz.

A long stick slides through the slot, then there's a bright flash of blue light, a sharp electric crack. The whole cab lights up, revealing more bodies pressed together than I first thought there were. The light flashes again, the electric bolt at the end of the stick presses against a kid and his body slumps against those around him. A final cry comes from the back. A chorus of shushes cut it short. We all fall silent. The stick retreats back through the slot and the little sliver of light cuts off with a clink.

In the silence of the truck the road below us roars over the breathing bodies around me. It's getting stuffy in the box, and a sharp smell of piss is adding to the

enclosed air. A pressure in my chest and head whisper together, telling me to get out. I need air. We all need air. I need to get away.

“When they open the door,” a voice says. “Push right out and run.”

The voice is soft, right by the front of my mask. They must have removed their own mask because there’s no clash of our mesh and no way they could get so close without it. I want to say, “Okay,” or “Yes, of course,” but I stay silent. The soft whispered message comes again, a few steps in front of me, into the face of another. Maybe it’s a terrible idea, I don’t know. I can’t imagine what will be there when they open the door, but it’s unlikely they’ll expect us all to run. I’ve never been the best runner. Two years ago, I tried to run for track, but I fell short of breath after a few minutes, heaving through my mask. But here, it won’t matter because it’s not a race, it’s just escaping and dodging and they can’t get us all at once.

Against my back hands direct me, repositioning my body to where they think the door must be. I do the same for the body in front of me, feeling their mask’s mesh against my gloves, and turning them by their shoulders. We bump along like this, our backs to the front of the truck, waiting for the door to slide up. In my abdomen the warm pressure of my period reminds me it’s never gone away, my insides twisting into an orange iron knot. My hands grip the shoulders in them, tight, tighter than I mean to, and the person gives a little cry. I let go. There’s a practice for dealing with the pain, I should lie down, take deep breathes, apply a heated cloth. None of that is an option. I want to curl up. With one hand I rub my abdomen, following the pain below. Listen to the sound of the truck, wait for the door. Just wait for the door.

The truck slows down, rolling over holes in the road that toss us back and forth. It stops for a moment and there's the idle of the engine. In my throat something is building, a cry, or sob, I'm not sure, but I swallow and keep swallowing until I'm out of saliva. When the truck moves again it turns, slowly, so slowly it's barely noticeable at all, but I can feel the little pull toward the wall and I know. Then it beeps as it backs up. Something bumps softly into the back of it, right in front of us. Two doors open and shut. My heart beats in rapid fire, thudding with such power that I feel it in my fingers. My legs are so weak, like a rubber band laid flat on a table, all the strength stretched out of them. The pain in my abdomen knots one way, sharp stabbing twists, then turns in the other direction. An iron flavor fills my mouth. It's such a familiar flavor, a human flavor, present in all of us. I take a deep breath and the flavor is caught there in the air, all around me rusted, human iron. Then the door clinks, the lock undone. The door slides up, but the light of daylight isn't there. Instead there's a flashing light, black-white-black-white-black-white, at such great speed, pulsing dark and blinding from one second to another. Children scream, filling the truck with their shrieks. Someone pushes my back and I push the back in front of me and we move out into the flashing light. In each flash of light tall figures move on either side of the door, their hands reach out toward the first few kids running out the door. Small blue lights crack, their electric blue pulse breaks the tempo of the flashing light. Crack after crack brings children down to the ground before they even make it a few steps beyond the doors. I'm pushed back, the body my hands rest on resisting my pushing, and pushed forward at the same time. Behind us the pole slides through the slot, flashing and cracking and sending more bodies to the ground. The pressure on both sides weakens as more and more of us fall unconscious to the floor. The

tall figures push kids back, zapping them with the wands, stepping over the bodies of those unconscious on the floor. When you're attacked by a bear you're supposed to play dead because the bear will lose interest and pass over you, or maybe only attack you a little, you curl into a ball to protect your head and organs and you act like you're dead. I go limp, falling against the back of some kid, and then down to the floor, letting my mask clunk against the metal. The kid steps back and trips over me, falling into another. My heart pounds in my chest. I want to be home with my face against my pillow. Their footsteps vibrate through the metal as they near. In front of me, through my mask, I can't see a thing because another body lies on the floor there. A boot stomps down between us, the tip scratching down my mask's mesh. I close my eyes. There's a crack and something bites my hip with fire.

The crackling wakes me from inside my body, along my side, from my hip up to my ribs and down to my knee, my skin crackles and burns. The pain makes it harder to wake, like a heavy blanket pressed against my eyes and head. I just want to go back to sleep, but the pain and air against my skin tells me that it would be best to wake. I am naked on a bed that is not mine. The pillow under me is sewn into the mattress. The bed is bare, with no sheet or cover. I touch the pillow's seam and on my hand someone has written a number, "5986," in black marker. There is wet warmth between my legs and on my thigh blood is drying. Someone has put a towel underneath me and in my sleep I must have leaked onto everything. The dull memory of my twisted abdomen still lingers as a gentle fist rocking its knuckles across my organs. From my hip to my rib cage a big red streak paints my side and where the electric zapped me a welt with two red marks at its center rises from my skin. I touch it, lightly, and get a sharp little prick at the spot. Shit. I

hiss and pull away my hand. I wrap the towel around me like a skirt and sit up in the bed. I am alone in here. I am naked. In my throat a little ball of hate is growing. I am naked and someone must have stripped me, seen me naked, seen me bleeding, laid me to rest here on the bed, touched my skin. I tuck my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them. I am naked and touched. Under my skin things crawl. I'm trapped here, I'm stuck in this room, naked and touched and stolen. A weight presses against my chest, stronger than my legs, but I pull them closer until I feel my whole body shake and a loud bellow rises from my stomach and into my knees and I am sobbing. My screams shake in my ears.

I have been stolen. Stolen away from everything, from my mother and home, my clothes and mask. Laid naked by hands I don't know and didn't see and now I am caught. I am enclosed and lost. This is the fear they tell us about that can happen in the night. This is the place to where people have disappeared. And it is not my fault that I am here. I wasn't out and alone, but surrounded by what I thought was safe in the daylight. It is not my fault. They never told us that fear could take you in daylight, in school, where they're supposed to protect you. My mother, even if she cares to look for me, or cares to tell anyone that I am gone, even if she cares to do anything, will never find me here because the fear that takes never returns. I am naked and lost and under my skin, in my abdomen, in my head, along my side, there are fires and pressures and cracking pain that are the only things I own now.

I cry into my legs until they ache from being bent and folded and pressed against my chest. Then I unravel and feel relief in my stomach. My legs hang over the edge of the bed. On the wall across from me a large painting of a cartoon goose holding a basket

stares down at me. Above a bright, toothless smile long eyelashes stretch from under a straw hat with a blue ribbon tied under its beak. Her apron is pink with frills at the edges. The dirty painting chips away in some places, revealing the gray concrete underneath like boils on her skin. Above me a single light bulb encased in a wire basket buzzes, but there's no light switch or string to turn it off and on. In the far corner, to the left of the goose sits part of a toilet, just the bowl, really, and a button on the wall above it. Next to a small slanted basin extends from the wall with a spigot. It's like someone molded a bathroom out of the walls and didn't care how it looked. In the wall to my left next to the metal door they've built a small slot at eye height and a larger one at the floor. The towel is too small to pull up and cover my chest and also my bottom so I fold my arms over my breasts and sit there, staring at the goose across the room.

My mother, when I was much younger, told me the stories from a goose book. Children in the book wandered away, following breadcrumbs into the woods, which were eaten by the goose mother behind them, so that no one could follow them. The children reached a village where people like us lived, people in cloaks, and they gave the children these cloaks and let them stay. It was a happy story, I guess, because the children came from a town where everyone knew about everything they did, but in the new village they were free from this. They could do what they wanted without everyone watching. My mother later told me, when I was fourteen, that it was propaganda bullshit. The real story, the one she knew, was the children went into the woods and were eaten by a witch. There was the story with the man made of gingerbread, who gets eaten by everyone, too. These stories always made me uncomfortable, something bunching up under my skin. My mother stopped reading them to me when I was five, but sometimes I'd find the book and

flip through it, reading them again. They became darker, each time, and I threw the book away because I couldn't look at the picture of the wolf on the cover without getting the shivers.

Part of the nail on my big toe has been clipped off, a little sliver, perfectly cut in a half-moon. I run my finger along the nail, feeling the sharp edge of the cut. The top slot in the wall opens. I cover my breasts. A dark shadow looks in, and then the slot closes. There's a clink from the door, metallic, an unlocking. A short round person comes in carrying a stool, which they place a few steps away from the bed. A thinner person stands in the door for a moment; they're tall, almost reaching the top of the doorframe. Ou closes the door and leaves me alone with this short one on the stool. From under their cloak ou pulls out a ticker and holds it out. I cover my breasts with one arm and take the ticker with the other. Then ou pulls out another ticker and types.

"How do you feel?" ou types.

I toss the paper to the floor and the ticker on the bed. Without looking at ou I curl my legs to my chest again, holding them close. But I can't look away from ou. If ou moves to hit me or zap me again I'll have to fight back.

"I am your closest ally here." Ou shoves the paper in my face.

Then ou stands and takes the ticker off the bed next to me. Ou grabs my wrist. I pull it back, trying to get it out of ous gloved grip, but it's a warm vice. With a mother-like strength ou holds my arm out and puts the ticker in my hand. I could drop it to the floor or when ou lets go, I could throw it against the wall, I could hold it and refuse to type, or type nonsense, but the strength of ous hand as ou holds my wrist still brings up that fear again. That striking beat in my heart pulses in my chest and through my head.

There is little I could do against ou. The ticker would be of such little help as a weapon. Even if I could hit ou with it, I have no way of getting out through the door; there is no knob on the inside. So, I look up into ous mask, with the cold black mesh staring back at me, and I nod. Ou releases my wrist. This model of ticker is older, heavier, with wider keys that are square instead of circular. Dirt has built up between the keys and there is a sticky spot on its back. As I type, the space key sticks. It clicks and prints much slower than I'm used to.

“I feel awful,” I type.

Ou sits down and scoots the chair a little closer. Feeling the keys with my bare fingers is odd. A barrier is missing there and the plastic feels so harsh.

“What hurts?” ou types.

“My side where they shocked me.” I rotate a little, careful to keep my legs still pressed against my body, and point to the red line.

“What else?”

“My period started.” Then, as ou reads that. “And I'm trapped here, naked, kidnapped, I feel like I'm going to puke. It's fucked up. That's what's awful.”

It's one of the few times I've typed 'fuck' but if there was any time to type it this feels like it. Ou reads this and puts it in ous lap where the other notes dissolve.

“You'll get tampons when they know you're not suicidal,” ou types.

“Oh, great.”

Ou reads my note and smacks me above the ear.

“You'll get nothing if you act like a brat.”

I can't hold it back then, the painful pressure returning in my throat with a new cracking hole in my chest. I cry. But I don't care to hide it. Let this asshole see me cry. Let ou know that I'm hurt and terrified and human. It won't matter to ou, I know, ou's probably seen it before, seen worse, had girls like me lunge at ou and fought them off with ease. It doesn't matter at all, so I let my face burn and soak with rivers etching down my cheeks.

Ou stands and I pull back, pressing against the cold wall. But they don't move to strike, instead ou types.

"I'll return with cream for the burn."

It's false compassion I know. They don't care about the pain I'm in. Why would they?

"What does this mean?" I type and point to my hand with the numbers.

"Your name."

"No," I type. "It's not."

As I grab to tear off the message ou takes the ticker from my hand. The little edges of the keys scratch against my thumb. The message tears off in my other hand. Ou steps to the door, the stool under ous arm, and knocks. Between my thumb and finger the paper dissolves and tingles against my skin. It leaves a wet residue that I rub with my thumb. The tall person opens the door and they both step out.

When they have been gone for a few minutes I lick my thumb and rub at the numbers on my hand. It's a pointless thing, the numbers don't smudge or anything. The identification is mortifying. It's not my name. I must be the 5,986th kid they've taken. I've never heard of so many people going missing. And what do they do with them all?

Where do they go? What kind of person takes a kid from school? Sick, screwed up in the head, completely emotionless. Demented and mentally ill, probably. Greedy? Maybe. Maybe it's money that does it. I want clothes. I don't want to move, but I have to pee. On the toilet I put the towel over the lap to cover me. A little spot of blood has stained its center. The metal seat stings my skin and I shiver. I imagine being home, in our bathroom, with the floral wallpaper and my mother's pink towels. Sometimes she'd put candles in there when she took a bath and leave them burning after she was done. I never lit them on my own because she didn't want me to waste them. Once, after I asked, she let me take a bath with them, and she turned off the lights, letting me soak in the tub. I relax and sit there for a moment, not wanting to open my eyes and see where I am. But ou could come back and see me here, on the toilet. I stand, careful to wrap the towel back around me and tuck it tight into itself. The button on the wall flushes with a quick rush of water that disappears behind a metal flap that closes tight. It doesn't even fill back up with water. I wash my hands with lukewarm water from the spigot; it's a little white, even when running slowly. There's no soap at all. I rub my hands together really quick and dry them on my towel. They smell floral, which is odd. How do people shower in here? Just splash the water all over them?

I'm lying on the bed when the slot opens again, then closes, then the door and ou comes back through. In their hand is a small jar of cream. On one hand ou's put on a white latex glove like doctors wear. Ou puts the stool down near the bed. I don't bother to sit up, since the side with my burn is already facing up. I lay there, my breasts covered by my arm and hand, and wait. Ou opens the jar and puts it on the bed next to me. It smells like vanilla and ointment, oil and mothballs or something. Without asking, ou pulls my

towel down until the lump forming on my hip is exposed. Then ou takes a finger full of cream and rubs it gently on the spot. The coolness of the cream drowns out the burning heat there. Ou goes up and down my side, rubbing in scoops of the cream. It's an oddly mechanical process. When my mother used to put cream on my scrapes she would sing to me and her motions would match the rhythm of the song. Well, she did that until I got older, then it was all up to me to put it on. Ou works like a doctor, strategic in ous movements, ou leans in close to make sure it's all rubbed in. On the jar of cream there's only a long complicated name, no directions, just a simple white bottle with the name written in black marker. Ou leans closer and I smell ous sweat over the vanilla cream. There's a faint trace of alcohol too, rubbing alcohol, sharp as hell. Ous cloak hangs from ous body like it's too big. If I touched ou, if I squeezed a shoulder or rib, I imagine I could feel padding, squishy with foam. When ou finishes ou puts the lid back on the cream and holds it with the latex gloved hand. Then ou pauses. Ous mask stares down at me with the cream at ous waist. I look where I expect ous eyes to be. Maybe in there is some compassion, some pity that will let me go. Ou stands and sets the cream on the stool behind ou. When they take a moment to watch the door I glance behind ou and see the glimmering eye of the goose woman. Then ous hand is around my wrist and lifting my arm away. My other arm covers my breasts. A hard smack lashes above my ear. The leather falls against my skull with a dull thud. My vision spins for a moment, sending ou over me, taking the goose mother with ou. My arm falls slack to the bed. We freeze there like that. My left arm held above my head, the strength of ou lifting me slightly above the mattress, and my breasts exposed. Behind my eyes there's a swelling, a burning fire of hate, and from it comes tears.

I'm back in bed at home. I have to be there because there's no other reality but home. And in my window the sun is coming up. In my window things are blue and cold, but there is a warmth building beyond the screen of my window and I can feel it drifting in. I can feel its warmth against my neck, gently blowing in soft breaths. I pull the sheet up and over my head. Through the white, blue, and yellow striped pattern I watch the whites dim blue and then lighter. The morning brings anticipation in silence. You can feel energy in the air, when the birds are stirring the morning, but haven't sung more than a soft single chirp here and there. The air contains the energy of waking. And I lie there and wait to hear my mother's voice call me down for breakfast because it must be a Saturday when I don't have to worry about showering or going to school on time. I just had school yesterday, right? So this must be the weekend and I can sleep until breakfast is ready. But for now there is only silence and the smell of myself in the sheets, with oils from my skin and the strawberry scent of shampoo.

Ou squeezes my wrist and we are there in the goose room. Three sharp bangs ring out from the door and ou lets go of my arm. I tuck it back across my chest. The door opens with the tall person waiting, holding the door open for the smaller, rounder one. As ou passes the taller one, the taller one places a hand against ous back and pushes ou. But it isn't needed; ou leaves with the cream and stool. The taller figure closes the door. I am left alone. Above me the goose mother watches from across the room, a smile on her face, the contents of her basket hidden by its swinging arc. There's only wicker there. It must be empty. The caged light flicks off.

Chapter Eight

In the shower they left this little bar of soap that is just hilarious. It's smaller than the palm of my hand and is somehow supposed to be for my whole body and hands at the sink. I soap up what I can in the shower, letting the warm rush of water filter through my hair. Must buy: body wash, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, mouthwash, razors, cereal, milk, and beer. Lots of beer. They have to sell beer here, right? Alcohol too. Whiskey, gin, either of those will do. The tile of this bathroom is so clean. Even in the grout there's no sign of mold. It's like a new tub. I sit down in the tub and look up into the shower, letting the water massage my face. Deep breath, in, the lilac smell of the soap, powdery, my face already drying out from the roughness of it, out. Tiny little fingers of water pitter-patter against my cheeks and forehead and nose. Deep breath, in, I'm somewhere near a waterfall, laying on the rocks there, getting the very edges of mist against my face, a beach not too far away, out. I lean back in the tub, my back resting on the gentle slope. The raindrops falling on my stomach are warm and soothing. I reach out of the shower curtain and take out a cigarette. There's five left after this one. Must buy: cigarettes. I lean over the edge of the tub and light it, then slip back behind the curtain. Deep breath, in, the smoke pulling deep into my lungs, the soft buzz of it mixing with the gentle fall of the water, if I fell asleep here I'd be ok, it's too little water to drown, I don't have to worry about the water bill, I could be here for hours, for a whole night, there's no time to worry about, out. I lay in the tub, leaning forward to let the water rain on my face, holding my cigarette out of harm's way, until the alarm rings in the bedroom. It's one of those old alarm clocks with an analog face, hands and all, and a bell. I leave the shower

running and walk to the bedroom, dripping water all over the damn place. Ten minutes until two.

Down on the street she's there, leaning against a car. The sidewalk is busier now, cloaked figures pushing past her, striding down the sidewalk, some pulling rolling suitcases and luggage behind them. Doesn't that point you out? Doesn't the bag, exterior, make you stand out in a crowd? It's black sure, but there you are, the one with the rolling suitcase. I cut across and hold my place on the sidewalk in front of her. The sun is starting to dip already back toward the horizon. There's a stagnant heat in the air that's made itself comfortable and claimed the space for itself, filling up the whole sky. She holds out a little piece of paper: "6525879." Fuck. What was my response? I type back: "217398." She looks at the numbers then back at me.

"You fucked it up," she types.

"Close enough?"

When we get into the car I take off my mask and rest it in my lap.

"See," I say. "It's me."

She shakes her head. Her hand pats the wheel twice. Pat-pat. Then she takes a moment to look out her window. Pat-pat. She taps again.

"Where we going?" I say.

Her hand goes to her throat and there's that lovely buzzing again.

"This is your investigation," she says. "I'm only here as a guide."

"Or a babysitter."

"If you want to equate yourself to a baby, I won't disagree."

Through the window, puffed and polyp white clouds reflect in the windows of the apartment complex. Not a single grey cloud among them. Somehow the weather stays beautiful even with the dullness below.

“Where do you get your water from?” I say.

“An aquifer under the city and just outside.”

“That’s where we go then.”

She starts the car and a soft blast of cold air hits my chest. There’s a pause as her hand rests on the gearshift. Then she rests them on the wheel.

“Do you know what an aquifer is?” She says.

“Yes. We have school as much as you do.” I say. “Do you?”

“What do you think you’ll find there?”

“I thought you were just my chauffer.”

“I’m a chauffer that doesn’t like to waste time,” she says. “Or gas.”

“Is there something there you don’t want me to see?”

With one hand she flicks on the blinker and the other shifts into drive. We pull out into traffic and head back down 15th, east, with the sun floating along with us, racing across the windows of buildings we pass. We’d call it avoiding confrontation or attempting to subdue the situation by not speaking directly to the questions. Avoiding something, maybe. Or maybe she’s just frustrated. Outside the car people walk with hurried steps. A few linger outside of shops, trading bits of paper to each other, and letting them fall to the ground. The papers catch the wind, but disintegrate before they’re blown too far. A tall figure bends to a smaller figure, passing a note. Underneath the cloak could be a small stilt walker, or a tall man on platform shoes. Cloaks hang off of

some figures like window curtains on a post. Their tiny frames beneath the cloaks sweating, no doubt, in the growing heat, drowned by the black fabric. There has to be summer wear, and winter-wear cloaks. The winter noticeably thicker I imagine. But the cloak I wear now isn't all that thin either. Why black of all colors? Why not green or white or tan or even gray? Why something so absorbent of the sun and heat and so invisible at night to make it dangerous? In the history I've read of this place they don't specify the process. There's no record of the panel that decided cloak color or mask shape or even the layout of the city. Everything under a lock and key inside the city itself or destroyed, I imagine. In either case, it's never reached outside the city how this place even formed. And yet here under these cloaks and clothes we're all just the same naked people we are outside. That figure on the corner waiting to cross the street could be a slender woman, who works out every day and morning, her muscled thighs burning from the run. The one she passes as the walk signal turns could be a stout beer-bellied man, harrier than a collie and smashed in the face like a pug. The figure waddles a little, their foot barely clearing the edge of the curb, their cloak dragging across everything, catching a wrapper as it goes and dragging it along. Or they could be switched. It could be an act and beneath the lump of black material could be the slim woman. The slender cloaked figure could be tied tight and taped up fat.

"When I was younger," I say. "I used to sit with my grandfather on his porch in the city and watch people pass. They'd stop sometimes and chat him up. He never left the porch, but he knew everything that'd been going on in the neighborhood. He was like the radio, a neighborhood news reporter, but all the news came to him and he disseminated it among the rest that stopped by. It was funny though because a lot of them had implants

by then. Everything he said they already had heard on the network. Everything was right there in the feed. Yet they still stopped and talked and told him what they'd heard from one person or another because he refused to get the implant."

She keeps her hands on the wheel, doesn't even look over at me in her mask. I take out another cigarette and light it. Four left.

"I need to get cigarettes soon," I say.

Inhale deep and close my eyes. Around me the car shakes in little vibrations. The engine purring somewhere ahead of us, always pushed ahead of us. The air still blows on my chest. Underneath my cloak my skin is getting cooler, in that one spot. And from that spot things radiate outwards, the chill working its way into my limbs where it will spread and chase the heat. Exhale and the smoke rushes out of my nose, tinting everything I smell with the burning ash. He used to smoke too, my grandfather, but he liked cigars, big old things that smelled like cotton candy. They tossed around in his mouth from one corner to the other, growing soggy with each pass. People gave him really nice ones as gifts. But he'd take the cheap ones too if we were stopped at the deli and he didn't have time to make a separate run. He swore as those cheap things unraveled halfway through. Their skin peeling off like an onion's.

"He took me once to a river," I say. "On a really hot summer day. We drove probably an hour out of the city. You can drive outside cities there, I don't know if you've ever experienced that. When you drive out there the city kind of fades away. The buildings die down and become squat things, then there's houses, then there's nothing. Just a wild expanse of green and farms and forests. Stretches of trees, green and brown, thick and deep so that when you look into them there's nothing but more trees and dark

greens and the other side is miles away. We drove on through the forest and the woods until we reached protected parkland. Big brown sign marked the entrance, made out of logs. We went down the hill to this river, brown and wide as two of these streets put side-by-side. Along the shore there were rocks that you could stand on and jump off of into the pull of water. It wore me the hell out. Constantly I had to push against the stream of the water or else you'd end up just taken by it. When we were done my grandpa drove on, following the river even further until it split. Instead of taking the big way, the way where most of the water went, my grandpa followed the offshoot, the little stream that somehow snuck away from the body. At the end of it he showed me where it disappeared into the ground. It shrinks and shrinks, becoming no more than a few inches, then it just sinks into the ground, muddying the whole thing up."

I ash into the cup holder. It's clean and fresh now. She must have emptied it after last time. I feel a little guilty, but I take another drag, pursing my lips around the cigarette, then ash in the cup holder again.

"It fed an aquifer," I say. "A town further down used it for their water. Just like yours."

"Did you dig in the mud and come out inside the town?"

I chuckle and ash in the cup holder. Smoke pours out my mouth as I reply. If I could see myself in the side view mirror through the window, instead of the blackness of the window, I'd look like a dragon as I speak.

"No," I say. "But maybe you all fucked up somehow. Maybe there's a leak."

We drive another five miles, almost clear across the city, then jut over and across again, entering into a warehouse district toward the edge of the city. The wall looms over

us again and it's here I fear that I'll never really escape it while I'm stuck in this city. Its boundaries feel like they're shrinking in on me, eating the city as it goes. We park outside a building with "WATER WORKS" across its front in block black letters. The building one of the white concrete kinds, with thin black windows dotting its face. They have a little yard out front, with a pond and fountain in the middle, spraying water like a blowhole. It's odd to see something so ornamental. I point to it.

"Do all of your water works have fountains like that?" I say.

"There are only two others like this."

"With fountains like this?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that cheating?"

She taps the armrest console between us then points to my mask. I smash my cigarette out in the cup holder. It leaves a nice black smudge that will be impossible to get out without some soap or cleaner.

"You're misunderstanding us."

I put on the mask, feeling its tightness on my face. The sunny outside goes a little dim through the meshwork. My own smoky smell, trapped inside with me.

"The whole point is to make everything the same," I say. "Unidentifiable."

"No," she says. She looks out the window, the back of her cloak to me. There's a lump there, inside the hood, pressing against the fabric. It could be intentional or unavoidable. "That's not it at all."

Inside the plant the sound of rushing water drowns everything out like TV snow turned up on max volume. Our footsteps against the slick concrete floor are made

inaudible. Even the ticks of our tickers as we greet a foreman are swallowed whole. The source of the rush coming from somewhere behind the doors the foreman greets us at inside a little waiting room. Through glass doors to our left a long stretch of hallway leads to closed doors, offices I'm sure.

"I want the tour," I type. "From where the water comes in to where it goes out to the city."

"Well," he types. He actually types it too. "There's not much to see, really." Comma and everything. This guy must be dedicated to the voice of his grammar.

"I don't care," I type. "Where's the water come in? That's really what I want to see."

"Well," he types. "We've got construction going on there now. It's not too safe."

"Ok, give us some hard hats and we'll go."

He's a sturdy guy, when his cloak falls away from his hand as he hands us his paper the wrist of his long sleeved shirt looks like a thick black root. He's not used to a lot of gruff, I can tell. When he reads the last note I pass it takes him a minute. Probably judging how much he could just say no, or should say no, and tell us to fuck off. We could be police, she could be a cop here, she didn't flash a badge or anything, just handed him a slip of paper and he nodded. What does it take to convince people you're law enforcement here? Another secret code? It could be a lie, it could be a trick to kill the poor guy. If I could see his face I could read all this there, I'm sure, but there's no telling really as he stands there and looks at it melting in his hand. I'm just making it all up anyway, he could just be thinking of what the best way to go is, or what he wants for dinner. He could even be a she, a big tall Amazon thing who lifts weights.

“All right,” he says. “Follow me.”

The three of us head through the doors and into a room that smells like a shower. Water has this perceivable odor, fresh and damp. It reminds me of wet rocks, of the river, of my grandpa leading me along and pointing to the frogs that jump in ahead of us. Behind a large glass window three waterfalls of pure white water rush out of tubes and disappear somewhere below us. They’re as big as buildings, white columns of fury. They dwarf everything in the room. He leads us past them and down a hallway. I peak in the windows of rooms as we pass. Many of them are cloistered with computers, expanses of buttons and consoles, and monitors with numbers churning. Cloaked figures sit watching and adjusting the computers, clicking buttons, flicking switches. It looks staged somehow. The whole thing a performance of an old 1950s vision of the future. Shouldn’t there be just one computer? Or just multiple computers? Instead of a whole horror of buttons and knobs laid out across the metal desks.

We take an elevator down. My ears pop as the air presses against my body. The three of us stand quiet, our guide’s back to us, trusting us with no harm. When the doors pop open it’s eerie with silence. The moisture passes through the mesh and gives my face a damp kiss. We’re lead down a small corridor, part of it concrete slick with water, and some of it with cracks and breaks where the rock has come through or never agreed to be covered in the first place. I run a gloved hand along its surface, feeling the texture of it beneath the leather. The moisture clings to the rocks like makeup, a thin layer of damp, darkening its surface against the lights that hang above us. I look back at her, close behind me, and she seems to be watching the walls as well. Then she looks up. I follow the glare of her mask and see how the ceiling dimples with stalagmites. Little drops of

water fall on our shoulders. I turn away before it can hit my mask. From down the tunnel there's a loud banging. Metal thuds against rock in a rhythmic pulse, sending a shudder through the air. At the mouth of the tunnel our guide stops and hands us helmets from a table nearby.

We walk into a ballroom made of rock. Its damp grey walls lit up by large flood lights that I have to turn away from to keep from going blind. Along one wall a trickle of water passes unnoticed. In the middle of the circle of lights figures watch a yellow machine pound a steel piston into the ground. One of the figures walks back and forth, halfway around the piston, then stops and walks the other direction. But we're lead past this scene, down another corridor like the one before. We stop in front of a small cart that's hooked up to a railway. It's like a mini-tram, a golf cart with steel wheels. Our guide motions us to get in. I jump in the back with my partner following me. He gets in the front and pulls back a lever, then presses down a pedal and we zip off down the tunnel.

A small light on the front of the cart lights our way. The rail path is straight, down at the other end a bright light grows closer. Our own little journey zipping through the corrugated passage. If I stuck my hand out it would surely catch and be ripped off. I tighten the grip on my arm and hold it there. He passes back a note that I share with her next to me.

"We're coming up on the bottom of the wall," it says. "Watch your hands."

The cart stops and we're inside another cavernous room, this one much bigger than the last. A bright floodlight sits at the end of the track, forcing us to look away and into the room itself, which is lit by a series of those floodlights, pointed from craggy wall

to the smooth surface of the concrete that must be the bottom of the wall itself. I expect this concrete to be damp, to maybe leak from the water that must seep through the ground, but it isn't. It's perfectly dry. The grey color of it is surprisingly lighter than its color above the surface, which has a dark rain cloud quality to it, but this part of the wall here is almost nimbus or ivory. It's beautiful in a way. Across its surface are faint patterns of ovals like someone washed it too hard with a sponge and left scratches across its surface, but these are intentional, no accident, they're a mark of careful consideration to design, aesthetic maybe even. From where we stand it's overwhelming in the same way the columns of water were. The wall's hidden bottom emerges from the roof of the cave at least six stories above us and disappears into the ground at our feet. It makes me feel small, just as its exposed body does far above us. From one end of the cave to the other it remains bare and untouched, except for pipes coming out of it to our left, big thick metal things, encased with bolts the size of my fist, the pipes jut out from this man-made wall, reach out past a tunnel that goes along the man-made wall, and then are bolted to the cavern's natural rock wall. On either end of the wall there are those pockets, little tunnels that continue along the wall and make a small space with man-made wall on one side and natural rock on the other. And there's that cliché, rock and a hard place, but which is which?

Our guide steps in front of us and points all around. Around us, each standing under a light a few yards apart, are figures unwavering, unmoving like trees. He doesn't type anything to us to attempt to explain them, he must assume I know who they are and what they're there for. But my city guide, she knows otherwise, and hands me a note.

“Guards,” she says. It’s almost insulting, I could have figured it out on my own, of course.

I think of typing back, “I know” or “Duh” but we’re already moving behind us, to where the pipes are. From inside them comes the sound of living water, moving with a great force. There’s a churning inside, like a washing machine, a pulse that continues on cycle. The foreman pats it twice with his big, gloved hand. Then types out a message.

“Water comes in here,” he types. “Sometimes it’s a little slower than others, depending on the season. The river itself is a few miles out from the wall.”

“How many?” I type.

“About ten.”

“And this goes right down to the aquifer?”

He nods.

“It’s about thirty miles below us,” he types.

“And this goes through the wall?”

He looks up at the wall, then back at me, before typing.

“Well, yeah. Of course.”

“Anyway someone could get in and out of that pipe?”

He doesn’t need to turn around and look, we both know the answer, there’s a single hatch on the pipe and while it looks big enough for a man to get into it’s locked on the outside.

“No,” he types. “In the pipe itself there’s a grate, bolted to the interior of the pipe, and a turbine just beyond that. If anyone made it through one, well, they’d be chopped full by the other.”

“Is there any other way through that wall down here?”

“No. Solid concrete all around. It extends another mile beneath us.”

Next to me she’s crossed her arms and I can feel her beaming through the mask. Happy that her glorious city is impenetrable. Probably just thrilled that there’s no way someone could sneak in.

“Mind if I look around?” I type. Over my shoulder the guards are still standing there, unshifting. They must have the most boring job in this place. Night after night, all through the day, while the sunlight and city thrives above them, they come down here and stare at a concrete wall. Or maybe when we leave they’ll pull out a card table from somewhere behind a rock and throw down a couple rounds of poker. No one would ever know. No one would ever see them. Our guide pulls a flashlight from his cloak and taps his hat then points to mine.

“Be careful,” he types. “Watch your head.”

I flick on the flashlight and check out the pipe. It enters the ground at an angle, sloping and disappearing into the rock. It’s a tight fit and would be a difficult climb up. Further past it down the tunnel that runs along the wall I shine my light against the rock, from the roof above me that curves from the wall and down to the floor. It had to take years to build all this, to carve out the rock and earth. At intervals along the tunnel there are support beams, bolted to the rock itself, giant steel beams with a little bit of give to allow them to breathe in expanding and shrinking. Down the tunnel there’s dim light from the miner’s lamps that hang from the ceiling. Along the wall itself there’s a good twelve inches between the rock and concrete of the wall. It’s dark and endless. A slip of the foot and you’d disappear, if skinny enough to fit, and slip down until you become part

of the wall. My flashlight skims along this until it catches a part of this crack that recedes a bit further in, giving a whole yard of space. It seems dangerous without a rail or flag to mark the sudden shift in ground. But as I near I see that the ground here slopes down and leads to a little platform eight feet below me. I take the slope, careful with my footing, the rock and dirt here a little loose. A few pebbles skip from under my foot and bounce down the crack, trickling into the nothingness where their sound is swallowed whole. My flashlight skims along the wall on my left as I grip it, watching for loose rock. Then the light disappears. The wall juts inwards, a divot where it receded more. But no, it's a tunnel entrance. My light only reaches a few feet in before becoming utterly useless in touching the dark beyond. The ground here isn't dirt, but stone, cut into perfect squares and set into the dirt and other stone like brickwork, or cobble stone. As if someone cut the tunnel out of the stone, then shaped the rock, and placed it beneath them. In these stones faint traces of patterns etched into their surface catches my light. I bend down and take off my glove, running my hand along the surfaces, feeling swirls and lines, what could be lettering, foreign symbols at my finger tips. I leave my glove here and walk further down the tunnel. The roof of it is smooth, perfectly round, arching above me the whole way. Then there begin little patterns in the roof too. Crisscrossing designs that look almost like struts and gothic archways carved into the stone. A cold moisture presses against the skin of my hand. The rock feels damp and little patches of green moss have started to grow. Through my mask I smell the damp mildew and something else, something acidic and iron. Up ahead my light catches on something yellowed and long against the wall. Its shape giving a sense of the familiar, something I don't quite know, but at the back of my head is already forming. I stop there and kneel down. My knee

against the cold stone. The coldness permeating through my cloak and pants and pressing vague against my skin. I shine my light back and forth, from one side of the tunnel to the other, checking for lines of wire or fall aways. When there's nothing, I stand and head in. As I get closer to the thing on the wall I smell it. Rotting and putrid, dried iron, flesh in decay. Before I even see the full thing, before my light sees the end of it, the bloodied stump, I know what it is from the smell because it's still there, still in my nose, and now the scent of it just adds to what's already present, making it strong, bringing it out again. This goose head is far decayed. More so than the others. Its eye sockets green and black. The stump a brown and black and green. The neck stretched and sagging from years of hanging. I step back quickly, holding my own throat to keep it all down. I turn away, stupidly, and walk quickly to the tunnel entrance. There's a sense of something behind me, but when I turn back around there's only the darkness my light can touch, but who knows what beyond that. I step back carefully, but quickly. Away and away further until the damp molding smell replaces the rotten. I pick up my glove on my way out and put it on before exiting. Never turning back around until I'm worried I'll slip down the wall and disappear.

I lean against the cold rock wall next to the entrance of the tunnel and breathe deep the damp smell. At my feet is the drop, the little crack that could swallow everything about me. It's overdramatic really. It's a crack, a hole in the ground, nothing more. I turn and walk up the slope. Up ahead the floodlights still shine bright, two figures linger at the opening, passing notes back and forth. And what the hell do I do now? He has to know about the tunnel. Or someone here does. And if he knows, does she know? And do they know how it connects? They watch me as I near, their masks unwavering.

And for the first moment I'm happy to be wearing a mask. I can feel the sweat still on my lip and damp across my forehead. It's terrible to be trapped with my own sweat, to smell the fear in here with me. I take out my cigarettes and lighter. The foreman's large fingers, two of them, touch my wrist.

"No flame down here," he types. "High pressure oxygen area. Natural gas potential. Terrible possibilities."

I nod and put them back, my heart beating a little quicker now. I pull out my ticker.

"How far around do those tunnels lead?" I point to the one I just came back from, the one along the wall.

"All around," he types. "From here and all around the wall."

"And there's ones like this that lead to tracks and elevators and up to the surface?"

"Well, yes. But only six. Mostly leading to service and guard stations. This is the only water works like this."

"No other tunnels?"

Between reading my note and typing a reply there is a pause. His mask looks, at what could very well be my own, or it could be to something past me, over my shoulder. Nothing longer than a glance, nothing that could qualify as a stare or lingering, but it is enough to say he's going to lie.

"Well, no."

On the cart back down the rails toward the elevator I watch the lights zip past above us, counting them as they go. The intervals come at mere seconds. We're cruising

along at a nice ten miles an hour, but it's all we need to cover the five or so from the wall back to the water works. Coming back down here alone would be impossible. The guards alone would make it so. But I don't need to really. What I need is in front of me, driving us back to the elevator. What I need is back at the gate I first came in and in the warehouse with all those pretty boxes. The fortress the city has made itself is, as my host has so quietly gloated, impenetrable, for sure. But there are no doubt things getting through, things always get through the bars of a prison and find their way distributed among many hands. And it's never the structure, but the people that control it. That pause, that fleeting glance behind me, undoubtedly behind me, was enough to know I've been doing this wrong.

When one of your children does something bad, you sit the other one down at the table and ask questions. You make them believe that it's really in their best interest to tell you the truth of what happened. Twisting your words just enough that makes them believe helping you is the best thing because it's good for them. It's not coercion, it's acting, it's prompting, it's manipulating. And it works with real criminals. Put yourself in a room with them and make a big fucking deal about how it's not their fault really, neither of you want to be there, so let's get out of here quickly, let's get this silly little mess behind us, let's get you past the legal hubbub and right to what went wrong around you while you just stood there and tried your best to be a good citizen. You got to read them, really, know what tactic to play, know how to make them give it up so easy it feels like it was their idea all along to start talking.

"This guy feel off to you?" I type and pass to her sitting next to me. I feel like I'm high school again, passing notes behind the teacher.

“No,” she types. “Feels just fine.”

“Got a lot of personality in his letters.”

“So do you.”

“I’m not from around here.”

Her thumb hits a key, then stops. There it is, that pause of thought, maybe doubt, maybe something else, but it’s enough.

“Ask him a few questions somewhere outside his comfort zone?” I type.

“It’s your investigation.”

But an investigation of what? It feels like I’m tailing on one trail hoping to pick up what I’m actually here for. And there’s the whole problem. The whole question of how I find a girl in a city like this in the first place. There’s a method of starting at the edges and working your way in, but here, the edges are so tight that there seems like there’s not a way in. And a way into what? To more questions and more buried dirt. So, I go with what we’ve got, the largest billows of smoke on the horizon, catching my passing attention. We come to the end of the rail and our guide slows us to a gentle stop. He turns around in his seat and passes us a note.

“Well, where to now?”

Chapter Nine

I'm woken up by a hand tugging my arm up, lifting me off the bed. An arm goes under my other side and I'm lifted, up and over someone's shoulder. I pound a fist against their back and feel padding, stiff and hard. My knees try to go into their chest, but there's padding there too. I flail on their shoulder, feeling myself slide off, until they put me down on hard ground. I'm outside the room now. It didn't feel like that long of a walk, or trip, it felt momentary, instantaneous almost. But now I'm in a shower, with grungy yellow tiles and a long wall of showerheads. My towel has disappeared. I curl into a ball and lean against the tiled wall behind me. Its porcelain cold and wet against my back. Three figures stand just outside the lip of the tiled area. A white bulb in a cage above them, just like in my room. One of them holds something up to their waist. The shape of it, the recognition of what it is, comes in the same moment as the water.

At first the water is cold and violent, a harsh blast against my face. I put my head behind me knees and feel the spray of it course through my hair. One, two, three, I breathe with each number, deep in, deep out, I'm home in my shower, the water running over me, falling on me in the tub, six, seven. The pressure dies down a little, becomes still a solid rush, but the harshness, the brutal sting against my skin goes away. So too does the coldness of the water. Shifting from a prickling ice to lukewarm, like tea that's been cooled. But it shifts again. They point it at my feet and blast the harsh cold water. It jets between my legs and splashes brutal against my body. Soft, then harsh, cold, then warm, at my feet, and at my head, then just at my feet.

"Stand," someone says in that altered robotic voice. That gravely distortion. But I don't move. I don't want to move. I will stay here and cling to the wall, grip the tile with

my finer nails until they tear us from one another. The water stops. I don't look up.

Footsteps slosh through the water. There's a heavy smack against the side of my head, right above the ear, where I was hit before. Then there's another, the thud of it going through my body. I fall to my side, my head smacking against the tile. Gloved hands lift me by my armpits and press my shoulders against the tile wall. My hands cover what they can. Down my cheeks run the mixture of cold water and the warmth of my tears. Both sides of my head throb at different intensities, one dull and aching, one like the splintering of wood. In my chest and behind my eyes is a warm heaviness. If I could curl inside myself, if I could be in bed alone in my room and just sleep. All I want to do is sleep. The water sprays harsh against my arm and chest. It moves up and down my body. Cold, harsh, warm, soft. From my face to my feet. The smell of lavender like a subtle suggestion.

"Turn," the voice says. And this time I do. I turn and keep my hands against my body and rest my forehead on the tile. From the back of my head to my feet. Up and down it sprays.

The spray stops and I press my forehead hard against the tile wall, feeling the grooves of it against my forehead. My whole body vibrates with shivers, a cold chill wrapping around me like a blanket. In my mouth, my teeth refuse to stay clenched, they chatter and rattle my whole jaw if I try. My eyes are pressed close so tight that I can feel the strain in my forehead. And outside of me, outside of my these things, my body, my skin so cold and so vulnerable, the air prickling it, outside of this there is silence. The silence of watching. Beyond that further is a soft drip, from my body or the hose, I don't know, just the soft drip. In this moment I could be floating in space, me and the wall, in

the cold darkness of space, with an unknown being lingering behind a bright star, waiting for its moment.

I jump at the soft touch of a towel, pressed around my shoulders. For a brief moment it feels tender, a comforting hug, a warm embrace, a covering to retreat into. Then the hands move fast, rubbing the towel over my body. They pull me from the wall. I keep my eyes closed. Two pairs of hands work on either side of my body, rubbing it with the towel. They brush my face and wipe away the water only for it to be replaced again with my tears. There is a fist around my heart, clenching tight and holding. My arms are lifted up and the towel goes under and down my sides. I pull my arms close and tight to my chest, where the hand is, where I try to cover something. They rub up and down my legs. They rub everywhere.

They lead me, hollow, my body moving but it feels under another's control like I'm some mechanical human form without any insides, it's cold in there, it's cold and clenching, and everyone has gone. They lift a foot and rub under it, then place it on cold dry tile, and then do the same with the other foot. I'm pulled along by my arm, a hand gripping it firmly, but not tight. My eyes stay closed because they don't need to open because if I saw it all then maybe I'd remember but if I kept them closed maybe I'd forget. Through the darkness of my closed eyes light passes like over a thick blanket. The air is colder here, a soft breeze, frigid, as though bending into the refrigerator or lingering too long at the freezer. The floor is smooth and around me moves the shuffling of feet and thick soles of boots muffled by cloaks. Everything inside me feels heavy and I am afraid I'll bleed just then. Not because I care about their floor or getting blood on me after

I just showered, but because I am afraid it will make them angry and my head is already throbbing.

They lead me so far, it could be across the city, it could be in circles. A door clinks open and I open my eyes on accident. The room is bare and silver, the walls mirrored. I watch us enter from the other side. My body is small and wilted next to the large overstuffed figures in black cloaks on either side of me. Damp hair hangs in a disordered mess, framing my face like a willow tree, and between its leaves my hollowed face, the cheeks not sunken anymore than usual, but looking so frail and thin there. They place me in the center of the room. Closer now I can see my reddened eyes, still glossy, the burning given an image. My hands move uncomfortably to cover my body from my own glare. The two figures turn and walk back out the door, shutting it behind them. I'm left alone, surrounded by my own image. The back of me reflected in front of me. An infinity of my naked body, flesh in a sky of chrome, the most colorful thing in the room. The wall in front of me buzzes and part of it bends inward toward me, revealing a door and behind it another figure steps out. In our hand is a needle, full of clear fluid, they step toward me and I step back but they move faster, their long legs covering the distance in two quick strides. One grabs my lower arm and twists it out. Before I can yank it back the needle is there, in my vein, pinching, and a cool liquid follows. Inside my skin there is a cold wash, a tide that sweeps up my arm and across my chest. From there it spreads everywhere, numbing my limbs as it goes until it is in my head.

There is warmth and heaviness on my skin. My arms and legs ache and when I try to twist them to pull them close and roll over, something pulls back. A foggy little dream is there behind my eyelids. Images flash through passing clouds, a clock and a lamp, a

large lamp, with a shade, but it's gone and dark. I'm waking again and feel warmer still.

A voice hums a tune, something high but wavering, then low and constant. The clock still sits on the shelf over there, by the wall, a black shelf nailed to the wall, painted, white.

My limbs still ache, but when I try to move them again, they are held down still. Beneath me is the softness of a pillow. I'm wearing clothes that I can't see fully, but the shirt looks purple, long sleeves with white frills at the end like those pieces of paper my mother would put under a vase. At their edge are cuffs, leather with soft insides that rub against my skin but feel comfortable and soothing. Leather straps reach from the cuffs to the bed. It isn't my bed, but some rod iron form that curls up toward the wall. There's wallpaper there. Red and gold striped wallpaper perfectly pressed with a blue background. These are not my clothes, but they are warm and the protection they afford is comforting. If I move my head too fast the whole room swirls. On the other wall is a painting of a house, a small house made of wood, on the edge of a woods. The window of the house is lit. Dusk is setting in behind the trees. A cat sits perched in the window, so small and tiny from here, but its vague shape is clearly there.

A figure steps in through a door way to my right. When ou stops and stares at me I feel the tightness in my chest again. Ous hands are empty. This simple little thing gives me a breath. I take it in, and then shake as I release it. Ou leaves back the way ou came. Outside the doorway there is the clicking of a ticker, then another. Another figure enters, this one shorter than the last, its gloved hands tight together. Ou stands for a moment, the mask moving slowly as ou looks me up and down. The taller figure lingers outside the doorway. When the smaller one has finished, ou claps ous hands together and turns. There's a simple nod that passes between them, then ou shuts the door and I am alone

with ou. Ous hand touches ous throat and there's a soft buzz. Then a voice that carries that disturbed crackle and electric zapping.

“Excuse my accent,” ou says.

Ou removes one glove, then the other, uncovering long fingers brushed with hair. The veins on the back of ous hands pop and ripple under the skin as ou rubs ous hands back and forth within each other. With their left hand they tug on the leather strap, nothing happens. Ou nods. Their form is so close. The black cloak pressing against the side of the bed. Underneath me the red sheets look so clean. Ou picks off a small piece of lint and rubs it, dropping it to the floor. Then ou kneels on the bed and reaches over. I turn away, looking at the clock on the shelf, and ou rubs a finger down my cheek.

“You’ve been crying,” ou says. “Your eyes are still red and puffy.”

They feel like sand has been rubbed across them. When I blink there is a rawness. And if they were not so already exhausted, so wrung dry from earlier, I would cry now.

“What they must do to you.”

Ou shakes ous head. There's a sudden burst of electric crackling. Ous laughing.

“What I must do,” ou says, between the dying crackle. “To you.”

From ous cloak there is the soft smell of oranges and something bitter, candle wax, or stale breath. I smell it on ous hands as ou grabs my jaw and turns my face to ou. Another finger presses against my skin and forces itself into my mouth. The taste is salty and more of the staleness, bitter, almost chalky. To the left of ou the house sits at the edge of the wood. There is a faint trail of smoke coming from the chimney that I hadn't noticed before. It blows further to the left, but none of the trees, tall pines, move with it. Smoke is lighter than wood. Smoke drifts against the sky. A pressure, a hand, pushes its

way over my shirt. Ou moves down the bed, stepping around my leg on ous knees. Ou bends lower, lifts up the skirt I now realize I'm wearing, and in that moment I feel that there is nothing else.

Through every buzzing word ou speaks I hear the ticking of the clock. Sometimes I turn to face it, watching the minute hand slowly wipe its way around the face, outpaced by the second hand that flicks itself like a busted windshield wiper, like it's suffering from a series of sneezes. But watching the clock only makes me realize that a time is passing. That I have been here over minutes. That it was seven and is now seven thirty. Instead in this time I watch the small house at the edge of the woods. Even when ous form blocks it I imagine its form and still stare in its direction when I can. Out front of the house is a small patch of dirt, where the feet of the owner has trodden a small path, pressed the grass apart until it wore away. A small thin trail leads from the house, hidden here and there by grass, but leads off the frame of the painting, always leading along the woods. The owner has stacked wood on the back of the house, the ends of the logs a lighter brown than the house itself. Little dots of grey or green, I can't quite be sure in the light of the room or from this distance, play through the grass around the cabin. I imagine they're flowers, the yellow kind that turn white and poof when you kick them. In the night sky above the cabin a few stars are starting to shine through. A light stretch of cloud covers like gauze across the sky. If I connect the dots in the right way I can make a small rodent like animal. Something stretched but with pointed ears, its body disappearing into the cloud bank. The tiles of the roof are little squares. The cat still sits on guard, watching for mice to slink out the door and chase after. He stands above me fully in his robe again and I look to the clock and see that it is now nine.

“I almost wished I had,” he says. His voice crackles again as if to hide anything I didn’t now know. “If I’d had the money to fuck you priceless.”

Against my stomach, across my chest, down my leg, across my cheek the trail of him is drying cold. His fingers press against his mask and there is a sucking sound, then they press against my lips.

“You’re a sweetheart,” he says. “You’ll make a rich man’s day.”

He opens the door and leaning against the wall is the taller figure. There’s no words exchanged between them. Ou steps in and I am relieved to see the syringe. The goose smiles down on me. Its face wavers in the clouds. Grey and wobbly clouds pass by it. The walls blend and bleed around its face. Until I fall asleep. Then wake again and things are clearer, but fluffy around the edges, fuzzy, everything feels like there’s a layer of blankets. My skin against the sheets and against the air feels weighted. I sit up in the bed and liquid inside my head sloshes the whole world. The goose mother spins. With my eyes closed things feel worse. The surface of the bed shifts to my left, then to my right, and I feel like I’m going to vomit. I open my eyes again and focus on the goose’s eyes, then her feet. I stare there until the weight presses against my body. A weight that has nothing to do with the drugs they injected into me. It is a weight of the air. Something greater weighing down and pressing on my arms and chest and inside, on my heart and stomach. It presses on my legs and feet. On my eyes it also lingers, and behind them, and on the back of my neck. The gravity of the room is what I feel, what I must feel, the gravity of the bed and ceiling pressing together on my small flesh. This flesh that still smells not like me. I am gone from my own exterior. A foreign object has left itself there, on my surface, and the weight of it presses so far inside that I can feel it in my blood. The

change in the iron of my blood, like the shifting poles of a magnet, things gone askew, red cells and white cells switching direction, polarizing, and the sting and pressure, reaching down and up and out and inside, pulling. And what can it do then but leak? When this skin is so full that nothing inside it anymore can contain the weight of it, where else can it go but out? And when I close my eyes there is a thin seam from which it burns, two small cuts to seep from, down my cheeks, dripping on my thighs. This must be why a snake will shed its skin. Only then could it reclaim its body that has become too dirty to sleep in.

I stand, my legs a little uncertain under my weight. Using the bed to help me along I get to the wall. With one hand pressed against it I reach the toilet and vomit. The hot stream of water and brown burns my throat and nose. The smell of it makes me vomit more. I clutch the metal ring, the brushed steel cold at my fingers and on my chest as I bend and empty everything into the water. A large void is filling my stomach and chest. My whole body shakes, exhausted, and I slump back on the floor, my hands still loosely clutching the toilet. When I was sick with the flu in third grade my limbs felt like rubber, pulled tight then let loose. And even then I was not as shaken as I am now. Spit drips onto my chest. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. There on the hand is the smell of hot breath and saliva not my own. There on the hand is a number in black ink. I bend forward and dip my hand into the vomit pool. Inside the soup is a mild warmth all of my own making. The texture is unbearable. I dry heave, but there is nothing left inside me. I get up and lean against the wall. The harsh granite, or concrete, or whatever, with its cracks and fissures and unsanded surface, rough like a rock face in some places, scratches against my shoulder and arm as I press against it. At the sink I wash my hand with the

soft, lavender scented water. I rub at the numbers, but they stay firm, unrelenting, permanently etched in black. Like a doctor I run the water up to my elbows, then bend, leaning against the sink, and go to my shoulders. I cup the water in my hands and splash it on my face. Again and again I press the button to stop the stream from dying. The water is tepid on the first splash, then cool as it dries. A chill runs through me and my shaking is a different vibration. Up and down I splash the water over my body. I bend over the sink and cover the drain with my hand, letting it fill up until I can dunk my hair in it. Then I let the water escape and wring my hair out.

At the foot of the sink I sit down, my whole body dripping onto the concrete floor, rough against my skin. My knees smell like lavender. Nothing like how I'd usually smell, but nothing like how anyone else smells either. The weight on my skin dries, sinking into it, but lightening. It sinks still, underneath all the skin and to my heart, still, an iron core like the Earth's. At its center spins a molten ball. On its surface the cold crust searched by invaders.

Still wet, I stand, and walk to the bed, and lay there, with my face staring at the ceiling where the caged light hangs. The water from my hair, from my body, will soak into the mattress and I hope take away any lingering scents. But that's all surface. That's all exterior. That's where they can reach and touch. On the ceiling there is nothing to stare at me. There are no patterns to trace up there in the concrete. All the cracks have been smoothed and filled and hidden. It's just me and the light.

The small metal door in the wall slides open and a tray is shoved through on the floor. Onion and garlic smell fills the room. On the tray sits a small slice of garlic bread, a clump of something brown and red and white, green beans, a clump of mashed

potatoes, and a cup of apple juice with a bug floating in it. I pinch the bug out of the juice and carry it over to the toilet. Its tiny legs are wiggling against my fingers. When I release it, its already moving in the air, but it has no wings or they're too wet to fly. It makes a small click against the metal toilet and slides to the bottom. Before I can hit the button to flush it down its already scuttling toward the rim of the toilet. I knock it back in with my finger, but it moves quickly. It's a black teardrop, the light reflecting off its hard back as it runs up the sides. I knock it down again and hit the button. A rush of water swoops it down the hole, the metal trap door of it opening, then closing once all the water has gone. From inside the toilet there's a soft clicking. I kneel down closer and hear it coming from behind the trap door. Another rush of water shoots down the toilet. A black teardrop scurries out from behind the trap door and reaches the rim of the toilet before I have it again in my hands, pressing it against the cold metal. I scoop it up the rim, grab it between my fingers with the other hand, and hold it tight. With all my strength I squeeze my finger and thumb together, pressing against its body, but there's no crunch, only hard resistance. I place the bug on the floor, holding it between my thumb and finger. Like a hammer I bring down my other hand balled in a fist against its body. I smash and smash at it, but there's only the harsh resistance of its shell. Under my fingers the bug's legs and arms and antennae flutter against my skin like eyelashes. At the sink I turn on the faucet and hold the bug in one hand and cover the drain with the other. As it fills up with water the bug squirms in my fingers. If I slip and let it go it will hide in the room until I'm sleeping then it may crawl into my ear. The sensation of its legs against my ear, squirming toward my brain, makes me shiver. My room is clean, my room is sanitary, my room is a sanctuary without spiders or bugs and it will stay that way. And the sink is

filling with water, the bug is completely submerged, but I cannot take away one hand or the water will go down the drain and I cannot release the bug or it will swim and escape the sink and so the sink fills and fills as I hold the bug there under the water, its legs still squirming. How long can a bug hold its breath? My mother used to wash bugs down the drain. Spiders that had sat in the tub, waiting for me to shower, waiting to bite my legs, she would turn on the shower and let it wash them down and we'd never see it again. She'd let the water run for five minutes, then tell me it was safe. But this bug must be different, this bug came in juice, maybe it was born in juice. It squirms still in my hand and as the water nearly reaches the top of the sink I pull back both of my hands at once. A series of bubbles plop up and a great wash of water spills down the drain. The bug is caught in the swirl of it all. Its tiny legs push against the current, but it is too great for the bug. It spins like a fast moving clock, around and around, until it reaches the drain where it disappears down into the blackness with the water. As the water drains I count the seconds. Even once the water has all gone down I let the water run from the faucet, but nothing comes up.

I sit with the tray on my bed. There's no utensils or napkin. I must call them back and point out the mistake. I stand up with the tray and step toward the door. But they have done this on purpose. With a spoon or fork or even a knife I could kill myself, no doubt. I'm sure others have tried, or succeeded and they have learned from that lesson. Even if I did not try to kill myself I could harm one of them. I sit back down and scoop mashed potatoes with my fingers. They are cold and bitter. They clump and fall like packed snow. Their smell reminds me of the cardboard my mother keeps folded in a closet. She says it is for if we ever moved. The thing I wasn't sure what it was is lasagna.

I pause before drinking the juice, but I drink it anyway. I pick the green beans up, one at a time, clutching them like I did the bug. Their dark green color is almost brown. A color my mother would use for trees. A color a painter used for the trees behind the cabin with the cat in its window. I tear off chunks of the garlic bread, each chunk snapping away from the rest of it with a suddenness that catches me off guard. In my mouth it's difficult to chew. The bread could be plastic, a fact that if I were told by a scientist as I chewed, I wouldn't doubt them. Even a child could tell me it and I would believe. My mother made better meals, similar to these. Our house would smell like the dinner for days. I worried that people on the street would smell it on me and know I had this dinner. But she hadn't made them in a long time. Instead we'd get pizza that she would buy from the store and it would smell similar, kind of, in a way. She said they were made with similar ingredients, spices, from the same country, even, mostly, kind of, but I don't remember which country she said. I offer a chunk of bread to the goose, but she only simply smiles down at me, her eyes unmoving, so I eat her piece for her.

In my stomach is an unsettled fullness. It gurgles like a thunderstorm, bubbles like a soft drink. I may throw up again, but I don't really care except I don't want to shake again. My body is just starting to calm again, things are evening out inside me, becoming stable. The slot in the wall opens and I slide the tray back through. Then it closes again. I lay on the bed and leave the faucet running still. Tomato paste is smeared all over my mouth and I rub at it with my hands, not bothering to stand again and wash them off in the sink. It's too much effort and no one cares and I don't care.

A soft shuffling wakes me up. Through the door I can hear something moving. My light is still on above me, so it must not be time to sleep yet. I get up and press my ear

against the door. Two soft thuds, level with the floor, then a sound like a sheet being pulled across. It's soft, but growing louder with each repeating of the sounds. Two thuds, then drag. Behind me the sink still runs. Its rushing drowns out the noises in between the other sounds but I don't dare to turn it off. Two thuds, and then drag. Metal slides open, it sounds so near, but it's not my slots. A thin small voice shouts out, not a word, just a noise. Two thuds, then drag. The metal sound happens again, but this time it's so much closer, this time it must be across the hall. This time there's no shout, just silence. Then a thud, on the other side of the door, I can feel the vibration of it against the door. My metal slot opens. I can't see through it at this angle, only the light that comes through it on the floor. A small hand reaches through the slot, bloody scabs run along its knuckles, the fingernail on its pinky is missing, the spot where it would be is black and bubbled green. The hand pats at the floor, it reaches in up halfway to its arm. There is a number on its hand, the black ink having bled into the skin. The arm is bare and scarred, a fresh cut near the wrist. I'm tempted to step on it or grab at it and hold the hand in my own, but something about it has repulsed me. Instead I stand there, with my arms held at my chest and watch it feel along the ground for something that isn't there. It finally withdraws, but doesn't close the slot and I want to call out and tell it to. There's two thumps and the dragging sound. I take a deep breathe, it feels like coming up out of the tub, from under the water, a big gulp of air that I must have been holding. I must see. I must look out the slot, I know. On my knees I bend down and press my face against the cold concrete where the hand was a moment ago and look out the slot. Two legs drag by on the ground, they are thin and hairless and bent inward, toward each other, so that the bottoms of them and the feet are invisible. Two thumps and they're dragged further along the floor. I see

that it isn't true, they aren't bent inward, there isn't anything below the knee to bed, the legs are gone there. In the place of legs and feet there are only fleshy knobs, two stumps that round off. Across the hall the other slot is still open as well. The tiny square, a little sliver, a little window, into the room across the hall contains only another concrete wall and the slab of a bed. From somewhere down the hall there's a loud metal clang. Heavy footsteps, moving quickly, pad down the hall. Flesh pounds quickly against the concrete floor and two hands slap down in front of my slot. I bolt up and away from the door.

"No," a voice says. It is thin and tired and the word comes as though it knows the reply.

The fabric of a cloak brushes through my slot before being pulled away. More thick, rubber soles, padding down the hallway. They head back the way they came, this time slower. I curl my legs against my chest. The warmth of them is comforting. Their pressure against my chest feels like another body. It reminds me of my mother, the way she hugged me when I was younger, pulling my full body into hers, holding it for minutes before letting go. Rapid boots again echo down the hall. The light is blocked in front of my slot. They shut it quickly, with a loud slap. I stay in a ball but roll to my side with the pillow below my head. Listening to the water rushing down the drain I think of brushing my teeth before bed. My teeth feel grimy against my tongue. Little carpets, my mother used to say, are rolling down from my gums. But there's nothing I can do but rub them with my finger. I close my eyes and imagine a blanket.

Chapter Ten

Outside the water works building our guide is getting ready to say goodbye. He's got his hands on his clicker typing out a long-winded thing, a sweet good bye. She's standing next to me in the sun waiting. It's gotten crisp and clear out here, fluffy clouds meandering their way over the wall, like ships falling off the side of the earth. He hands her a note and she holds it up so we both can read it.

"Well," he typed. "If you have any other questions let me know. Sorry I couldn't be of more help. There's not much exciting stuff here at the works. But I'll let you all know if something develops."

The paper starts disintegrating before I even get to the end of it.

"Can I have a word?" I type. I show it to her then to him.

She nods and he turns away, thinking I meant her, but I touch his arm, gentle like. Nothing more than a brush of the fingers on his bicep. He stops. I lead him over by the wall of the water works while she goes off to the car and gets in. From my cloak I pull out the pack of cigarettes. I turn away from them both, face to the wall, lift up my mask, just enough for my mouth and light up. The way the mask works makes it hard as hell to see with the chin guard blocking my eyes. I have to bend my head down and look at him through my brows so he doesn't see my face but I can still smoke. It's a bitter smoke, a time wasting smoke, I barely enjoy the damn thing.

"How long you say you been working here?" I type it out and pass him the note.

"Well, it's been about ten years."

"And you explored all those tunnels down there?"

"Yes."

“You ever see anyone down there that shouldn’t be?”

There’s no pause this time, his thumbs working at the keys soon as he lets the paper fly in the wind. The breeze sweeps up, takes some of my ash with it, pelting his cloak unnoticed. It’s a relief against my chin and cheek. I feel almost naked, like I’m letting my balls hang out or something.

“No, there’s always been guards down there.”

“Guarding what?”

“The wall, of course.”

“You worried someone’s going to tunnel in?” I type. I hand him the note. I type another, “Or tunnel out?” and hand that to him too.

He shifts on his feet, weight moving from the left to right. His hands adjust on the ticker, they’re getting tired holding it up. He must not talk often.

“You’re not from here?” He types.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, anyone living here would know going out isn’t a problem. No one’s kept in.”

“Is that so? So it’s people coming in you’re worried about?”

He nods at this. Our white pieces of paper keep catching in the wind and flying into the air like dandelion seeds or snow. They catch against his cloak or flip over the grass before shrinking smaller and smaller, then gone. Behind him, in the car, I can see her getting restless, tapping her hands against the wheel.

“What do you know about goose heads?” I say. It just comes out of my throat, but once I say it it’s too late to do a thing about. I take a puff of the cigarette and ash into the

wind, trying to get it to go around him, but it just keeps blowing in his face and on his cloak. For a moment he puts the ticker down. He's ready just to answer me. He's finding the whole thing tedious on his fingers too. They must speak in there or not have much to say. But he takes the ticker back up and types out a message.

"Well, they like bread."

"Down there," I say. "There's another tunnel. And I know it's no accident that it's there because it's got these real nice chiseled stone floors and fancy patterns in the ceiling. And further in, if you're a real brave fellow and go further in, tacked against the wall like a stocking is a goose head. A nice decayed old one. Now, as a smart, intelligent person, who knows their way around those tunnels, who even manages them, right? I imagine you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Over his shoulder I watch her step out of the car and lean against the door. An international signal for hurry the fuck up and let's go home. He's stiffened up now, the ticker tight in his hands. Those thick gloved thumbs of his pressing down on two keys and making the ticker rattle in uncomfortable vowels, the paper feeding out, unraveling like a cartoon tongue. Then they start moving again, his mask bending down to look carefully at the letters.

"It's an old service tunnel," he types. "But no one's used it for years. Not even me. So, I don't know anything about the goose head."

"I got a real good sense of when people are lying to me. Even when it's in text. No service tunnel ever looked that fancy."

He turns around and looks back at her. She moves off the car.

"Hey," I say. "Where's it go?"

There's a quick stride to her steps as she makes her way over the curb and onto the grass toward us.

"What's down there?"

His mask is giving a mile yard stare, looking over my shoulder, over my head, probably to the top of the wall, but I'm not turning around to look. I'm watching his hands, they're tapping out something on the ticker, but they just look like scrambles of letters from upside down.

"She in on it?" I say. "She know what's down there?"

My voice goes down to a whisper as she strides closer. He just keeps tapping out, aaaavvvvaaaaattttttttttteeeeeeeekkkkkkkkyyyyyy, and on and on, long vowels and consonants, ;;;;akkjpimva;ekwpijimvpawe;, jumbles of shit. I push down on the ticker, gently pushing his hands down. I look up at him, from under my mask, my eyes looking right at where I think his are. I want him to see my face and the frustration there.

"What's the goose head mean?"

His thumbs stop under my palm. I take a short drag from my cigarette. Across the grass her cloak drags and swishes, not too far at all now.

"There's a little girl missing," I say. "And those goose heads are going to tell me something. You're going to tell me something to find her. You got kids? You got a girl? It shouldn't matter a damn, there's someone's girl in this black hole of a city and who knows what's happening to her. Are you going to let that slide? Do nothing? What's the story with the goose head?"

She's behind him, her hand reaching for his arm. His thumbs move under my palm. I flip down my mask. Toss the butt, still aglow, into the grass. I tear the paper off

as she spins him around. There's no give to his body, he's ready for it, having waited for her rescue. She's got a note ready for him and in my hand there's one for me.

"They took my brother."

And then it's gone in the wind like dust. She walks him all the way back to the door, typing and trading messages with him. At the wall, birds swoop up from the other side, then glide down into the city. A few circle farther over head. Through the fence that surrounds the water works there's a warehouse on the other side of the street. A figure leans against the wall of the warehouse, smoking a cigarette through a long pipe that disappears under their mask. I walk over to the car and lean against it. The traffic around here is light, only a few cars like ours pass. A larger utility truck rumbles past, orange cones and wires held to its back of equipment and a bucket seat. It's getting too hot now. I'm tempted to roll up my sleeves. She strides over to the car and unlocks the door. We get in at the same time, closing our doors in unison.

"What'd he say?" She types.

"Just where all the good restaurants are." I say. I take off my mask and put it in my lap. Without thinking about it I rub my face with my glove, feel the sweating leather on my face sends an uncomfortable twinge through me.

"Bullshit," she types. It's funny she even takes the time.

She starts the car and reverses out of the parking lot.

"What do you really know about the goose heads?" I say.

For the first time she turns on the radio. There's a loud swoon of classical music. A whole section of strings quickly rising in tempo and tone.

"You worried someone's going to overhear your typing?" I say.

When we get to a stop sign she keeps her foot on the break and types.

“I’m worried you won’t shut up.”

And there’s progress somewhere in that.

It’s 30 after 4 and she’s driving like she knows where she’s going when we haven’t even talked about where to go next.

“Where we headed?” I say.

“Main library,” she types.

“What for?”

“A book.”

I chuckle and take out one of the last cigarettes. It’s not too far away, really, just a few blocks down and I’ve only got half way through the cigarette when we pull into an underground parking lot. Dim fluorescents pass over the car until we find a spot not too far from the door. I step out, pinching off the smoking cherry of the cigarette and shoving the rest of it back in the box. We take an elevator upstairs to the mail floor and enter into a lobby. Sunlight drifts across the linoleum floor from tall windows near the main street entrance. It doesn’t reach very far before it’s choked off by orange hanging lights that look like metal teardrops crying out of the ceiling. She leads me past a curving couch where a figure bends over a book, a backpack laying on the purple couch next to them. They glance up once quickly at us as we pass. She steps up to a counter with turn styles next to it, the shelves of books and aisle cordoned off behind it. A figure there looks up from the desk behind the counter and nods to her. They both step through doors, one behind the counter, one outside, to an office behind glass windows. Above the counter is

a hanging sign, “NO TYPING – USE OFFICE TO REQUEST ASSISTANCE.” Through the window they pass notes back and forth, the clicking of their tickers silent from here. The librarian behind the desk is tall, lanky, kinda shape who easily reaches across the counter to take and pass notes from my stocky friend. The figure on the curving couches bends so far over their book, their mask almost touching the pages, that I worry they may tumble head-first onto the floor. Probably needs some glasses. Or isn’t as used to their mask as they should be. The book in their hands has a red hardback without a single word on it, no title, no author. Back behind the counter are a few books on a restocking cart. One book lays flat, blue hardback cover, no words. Along the spines of the others are letters and numbers, similar to what I’ve seen old libraries use at home, but these are different, more letters, more numbers, like one that says, “OUAT.5932.S5.A23.F3.” Christ, as if finding a library book wasn’t hard enough.

They come back out of the office and we follow the librarian through the turn styles to another elevator just before the aisles of books. While we wait for it to come I glance around the corner. Along the wall are small desks with shelves above them and little blinders on each side. One is taken by a figure who has three books stacked on their shelf, one they idly flip through. Back, far beyond at least twenty shelves of books, a tall window looks out onto another building across the street. Down the other direction is much the same. The elevator dings and we all shuffle into it. The librarian pushes 4 out of 10.

“That’s a lot of floors of books,” I type. They both read it.

“Yes,” the librarian types, “We have well over 50,000 books in this building alone.”

“How many other libraries are there?”

“Six,” the type, “Two others nearly as large as this one. Then there are 3 private libraries.”

I whistle. The librarian jumps a little and takes a step from me.

“Sorry,” I type. “Just staggering.”

The elevator dings right as they hit a key on their ticker and they turn out the door. She looks up at me for a moment before stepping off. If I could see through her mask I’m sure there would be a lingering glare of tinder burning.

The librarian leads us to the right, toward where we’ll be facing the street out the windows, and then to the right again, down the long stretch of shelves. We pass rows marked “A56.F4,” “A57.F4,” and I understand at least part of the system. Down one aisle two figures write with pencil on paper, one showing it in front of the mask of the other and watching me as I pass. It seems like a risk, in a way, maybe a little frowned upon, to use your own hand for a message. The curves and scratches of your hand giving something away. My own distinct for its e’s that look like c’s because I always screw up the extra bit at the top, and its other scratched qualities that I’d have just a good a product if I’d used my toes. Or my mouth. My wife has this beautiful scrawl that’s almost like cursive, but not quite, because she took some calligraphy classes in college. Spread around our table are usually pages of the youngest trying his best to match the example on a big sheet of paper. Thousands of A’s and U’s until it’s just a mouth full of vowels.

We pass another row and there’s a small form, a figure that must be a child, long and stretched across the floor unmoving. I step into the row, thinking they’re dead or harmed, but there’s a book tucked under the mask. The mask nearly pressed against the

pages on the floor. From where I stand I can't see the book other than its edges. One of their feet kick up then falls with a dull thud to the carpeted floor. I step back into the hall and jog a little to catch up. As I go quickly past the other aisle I glance down one, see another child holding up its hands, nothing in them, palms up, together, like they're lifting the air, their mask tilting up to the ceiling. I stop short in my jog and when I look back down the aisle there's only a figure holding a book in one hand while it reaches for another off the shelf, much taller than a child, much bulkier than the one I saw a moment ago standing in its place. I reach in my pocket for a cigarette, but realize where I am. My finger taps the cigarette box, then the matchbox below it. I jog on again to catch up.

We stop at "A79.F4" and the librarian runs their finger along the spines of books, pointedly, from S3 at the top to S65 at the bottom behind them. All of them are orange spined and on the spine of a book near my shoulder, "HNTM.1.S2.A79.F4." The librarian nods at my partner and leaves. I grab an orange book off the shelf and flip it open. On the first page there's just an ISBN-like number and a date, no title, no author name, and not even a publisher. The next page starts Chapter 1, "He never told me that he loved me, but I assumed it all the same, from the time of our first meeting out in the park..." and so on. I flip through it, stopping at random pages, not a single name is mentioned. I put the book back and grab another one, "MLFL.3.S3.A79.F4," "My love flew like a fence post caught in a storm, directed toward no harm, but ripping through all the same," and on and on, with no names in this one either. The soft chime of the elevator dings in the silence. Tossing the book back on the shelf I run quickly down the hall. The figure steps through the elevator doors and I gently grab their arm. They step back against the wall, startled, with their hands up. Inside the elevator I motion on my hand for paper and pencil. The

door closes behind me. From their pocket they pull a little tan piece of paper and a tiny nub of a pencil. Atop the slip of paper is "A10.F6," "IWTW.1.A51.F8," and "A79.F4." I write, "How do you make these books?" Without a word, they reach behind me and press 10.

When the doors open there's a chatter of ticking cut short in a sudden stop. The librarian steps out first into a little square, almost like a lobby, with a couch and a small table strewn with books and three coffee mugs. Around us figures look up from their desks. There's at least five rows of desks in each direction, left, right, and in front of us. The librarian nods to a figure to their right and the figure goes back to typing. Their head tilts over another stack of papers next to the typewriter on the desk. The librarian pulls out their ticker and the small sound of their hand machine joins its larger brothers.

"This is where we make our books," the librarian types. "We're a bit short staffed today, usually each desk is full and busy."

Three desks sit empty to my right. All around the flight of desks are black shelves with their own letters and numbers going down their sides. But on the shelves they don't look like books at all.

"What's on the shelves?" I type.

"Disks," the librarian types. They walk over to the closest typewriter and tap on it. The typist stops. The librarian turns the typewriter, showing me the side of it where a cord and small disk slot sit. Once everything is turned back the typist starts back up.

"And what are they doing?" I type, pointing to the typist.

The librarian takes a page with its face down and holds it up to me. It's a page from a book, dialogue between two characters, with their names still blazing on the page. The librarian returns the page to the pile.

"They take all the names out?" I type.

The librarian nods.

"Doesn't that make the book hard to read?" I type.

"Haven't you ever read a book?" The librarian types.

"I just got here."

The librarian breathes in, then exhales slowly, letting the slip of paper melt in their glove.

"I suggest trying to read one," they type. "But, we have ways of getting around the difficulties."

"Downstairs there's books with pronouns, he, she, etc. You're OK with that?"

The librarian takes out the sheet of paper and their pencil and pauses with the blunted tip resting on the page. Then they write a series of letters and numbers, tear it off the bottom of the slip of paper, and hand it to me.

"Read that," they type. "It will explain it better than I could."

"History?"

They nod.

"What if I wanted more recent history? The past ten years?"

They take back the torn off piece of paper and flip it over, pausing again, then writing a different series of numbers.

"Periodicals," they type after handing it over. "Newspapers and magazines."

“Thanks,” I type.

“I may as well show you this, before you leave.”

They lead me around the elevator, down another hall of aisles, each shelf full of boxes of disks. There’s a mechanical beat, an electric ocean, ending in a loud thud. It starts up again just as we turn a corner. Four large, white machines sit, the shape and look of printers. A figure lingers over to one of them and pulls out a freshly bound book, its cover light blue. The figure runs its hand down the spine where the letters and numbers have just been taped to it. The machine to my right is still piecing a book together.

“We print everything here,” the librarian types. “And stock it right away. We can print from fresh typed copies or from disk, whichever is more convenient.”

“The other libraries have machines like this too?”

They nod.

“I’m guessing if I wanted a soft-cover book, I’d what, have to go to a book store?”

They nod.

“Do they have any books you don’t have?”

“No,” they type. “Most of them print from a library disk unless they want to risk being shut down.”

“For what?”

“Government approval isn’t required, but it’s safer. Every copy of our books are read by a representative who guarantees they don’t contain restricted content. Editing their own runs the risk something may, slip through.”

“Who reads the history books?”

For a moment the librarian looks at me, the slip melting in their hand. The figure working the machines steps around us and places the finished book on a cart. Then the librarian leads me back down the hall, toward the elevators. I guess I shouldn't have expected an answer to that. If they go so far to take names out of every damn book, how the hell would the librarian know the name of, or even what the person looks like, who reads every history book? It's stupid. It's old outside the wall thinking, following one name to another. I'm too damn slow on the uptake here and got nothing to help me. The librarian pushes the down button and I turn the slip of penciled paper in my hand. At least there's this. Maybe reading some history will give me a place to start with everything else. On the elevator the librarian presses 1 with a little star next to it.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about goose heads, would you?" I type.

They take the slip of torn paper their pencil appears again. I expect another series of numbers and letters, but all I get when they hand me it back is, "No."

We stop at the fourth floor where a stocky figure gets on the elevator with an orange book in hand.

"Find what we came here for?" I type and hand to her.

The figure looks me up and down, then hands me the book. I open the first page and last page and recognize it, the same opening and ending to the book we found with the goose head stuffed figure. I hand it back and nod.

I don't bother with the suggestions the librarian gave. Instead I go outside onto the steps of the library while she checks the book out at the front desk. I light the tiny half of the cigarette. Down and across the street a little is a soup kitchen. Ratty cloaked figures mill around outside, waiting in line for it to open for dinner. Even from here I can

see the stains and fringed edges of their cloaks, the worn away black on their masks showing the silver meshing. A few of them hold tight to shopping carts stuffed full of junk. More of them have back packs tied with sleeping bags on their top. Even more of them have nothing.

She comes outside and stands next to me.

“Let’s go,” she types.

I stand and toss my cigarette on the stairs, stomping it out with an exposed shoe.

“You go on,” I type. “I’ll find my way back to the apartment.”

“Will you now?”

“I think I can manage.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just going to grab some dinner.”

She reaches into her cloak and pulls out a wad of cash. The bills look like the old type, green and little fibers of red and blue stamped in the whiter parts, but there’s little else but numbers, no landmarks, no faces of presidents, just big numbers and ivy around the edges, owls and deer and turkeys. I take whatever she hands me, twenty bucks, because I’ll need it for cigarettes and booze.

“Thanks,” I type.

“Tomorrow morning,” she types. “7 A.M. Your part of our code: [Prior code].”

“Sure,” I type.

I watch her go back up the stairs and through the library doors. From the outside it looks like any other building, except above the doors in block letters, “LIBRARY” and a

giant granite stack of books flank either side of the stairs. It's all a little gaudy, really.

Once she's inside I turn and make my way to the soup kitchen.

Not even half a block away I could smell the sweat and body odor soaked into their cloaks. The smell rich with patchouli, human spice, a musk of sleep and slobber, spilled and staled food caught and smeared into their cloaks. The setting sun was no help as it had already done its baking damage to the figures. At the end of the line I tap a figure hunched over a shopping cart on his shoulder.

"How long till they open?" I type.

The figure looks down at my ticker. My message fading away in brown gloves that have been dirtied to look black and worn so that I can see the frayed fabric below the leather. Their ticker swings from their neck on a twine cord. They pull it up and tap out a message. The machine in their hands is slow to respond and ratchets a louder racket than any I've heard before. Its black surface is scuffed and dirtied, a crust forming around its keys. The paper it prints on has been printed on before, recycled, untorn from the roll that has been printed on both sides already. The figure holds up the whole ticker to my mask, not bothering to separate the paper from the machine at all.

"Who the fuck are yo?" It says.

"You want a name?"

"Yo a fed?"

The message overlaps another that reads, "Too much fucked to listen to your bullshit." and for a moment I think it reads, "You been fed?"

"Fuck, no," I type. "Just hungry."

"Yo got a fed ticker."

“How’s it look like a fed ticker?”

“Yo know, Fed.”

“I’m not a fucking fed.”

The figure lifts up its mask, not far enough for me to see their face, but just far enough to spit on the sidewalk near my feet. Then they turn around to lean back on their cart. Down the street from us, back past the library, I spot a convenience store. I leave my place at the end of the line and walk down to the store, buy a pack of cigarettes. Outside the store I take out half the pack and hide them in my cloak pocket. I toss the pack on the ground and step on it, then pick it up and crinkle the edges more. After it looks pretty beat to shit I walk back to the end of the line and light up a cigarette. The same figure is still towing the back line. They look back at me as the smoke blows over their shoulder.

“Want one?” I type.

“Not from a fed.”

“Just take a fucking cigarette.”

There’s a moment that passes where the street yells in our faces. Traffic is starting to fill in the street as people head home from work. A bus passes, painted white with black tinted windows, in plastic letters above the door and the front window “5th to 39th West.” The whole affair catches me off guard, I didn’t even know they had busses here, and he’s got the cigarette I offered held out between his fingers. His mask is up, ready for me to hold up the lighter for him. It’s a fresh lighter, brand new, and this detail makes me wince behind my mask. His face is worn and beaten to hell underneath the mask. Cheek on the right side of his face swelled like a grapefruit, nearly closing his eye there completely. A cropped graying beard hangs low with yellowing around the mouth and

tips. He's an older man and he'd look just like anyone else if his face weren't scuffed up. He's careful not to turn toward the street with his mask up. Instead, he faces the wall and blows the smoke up the granite side, letting it drift past a black window above us.

"New tobacco," he types. "You jst by these?"

"Found them," I type. "Went for a walk and found them down by the store."

"Blllshit," he types. "What do yo want?"

"You come here a lot?"

"Once a day. It's allowed."

"I know," I type. "Just wondering what the food is like."

"It's old lady chm," he types. "Like they make at the chrches."

"Where are the churches?"

Another figure, carrying a large backpack, one you'd take camping, sidles up behind me and tosses the pack on the ground. There's a smell of meatballs and pasta coming off them, mixed with body wash spray, and hand soap. Their cloak looks too big for them and they have noticeably padded their chest, maybe to look like a woman.

"21st and 10th is the closest."

"They got a name for god and his son there?"

"It's not that kind of chrch."

"How long you been here?"

"Twenty peacefl mintes," he types. "Til yo came waltzing in."

The buzz of the cigarette is kicking in and I lean back against the wall, careful not to let him see my face still. Who knows what he thinks I am, but I want that advantage. He's got one hand stuck on the handle of the cart, not letting go as he puffs with the other

hand. When he types he holds the cart with his elbow, putting it down in the gap between the handle and the cart, making sure no one tries to yank it away.

“In the city,” I type.

“39”

“You learn to recognize most everyone that comes by here I imagine.”

“Never seen yo before.”

“Must be new.”

“Too fresh,” he types. “Cloak still pressed. Who yo looking for, fed?”

“A little girl.”

Up ahead the line is starting to move as they let people in. I motion behind him. He looks and nods. He’s not even half way done with his cigarette. We both twist out the cherries and pack them away. Inside the soup kitchen there’s a clatter of metal scrapping metal. Ladles and spoons dip into giant pots and troughs of food, spilling out beans, rice, peas, and some beef stew thing. Down at the end there’s a pile of rolls that a figure serves one at a time with tongs onto plates. One by one the figures take their trays over to the long benches through the room and sit. Those with carts sit over by the wall where they can park them behind them as they eat. A few of them, like my friend in front of me, tie a piece of twine around their wrist to the handle of the cart. There’s no way to reject the food and a little guilt creeps in as I sit across from my friend with a plate full of food while seventeen bucks sits in my pocket and a nice apartment with the water running waits several blocks away. None of the figures hesitate to lift their masks, keeping them tilted so that you can only see their chins. A few beards stick out from below like my friend’s across from me. Next to me, the last figure that shuffled up behind me, has a

slender jaw that could be a woman's, but there's a stubble there that makes me not so sure.

It's decent food, but tastes like bulk, bought in bulk, made in bulk, seasoned and served in bulk, where all the flavors had too much room to spread out and leave it all a little too bland, only a hit of what could be lingering on the tongue. The rolls are made with butter bread, creamy rich things, that when you tear them open are yellow on the inside. The beef in the stew is aged or cured or old or something, a little rough and nearly jerky. The man across from me takes a break half way through and types out with his worn gloves.

"How yong of a girl?"

"Teenage," I type. "Anytime in the past month, starting around the 5th."

"Hard to say."

"Why so?"

"Look," he types and points behind me. There's a figure a few tables over, thin frame, their head only a little over the shoulder of the figure next to them. "That cold be yor girl, right?"

The figures cloak is loose around them and where the hood meets the neck line its torn down. A pin has been stuck through the tear, trying to keep it clasped together, but when the figure moves it shifts and underneath their bare fuzzy chest peaks through. When they dip down to eat a spoon full of stew their teeth show under the mask, crooked, one of the front teeth nearly twisted all around. Their chin is shaved close, bare, maybe even waxed, but I get a feeling it's a man.

"But it's not," I type.

“Yep,” he types. “There’s going to be lots of near misses like that.”

“See any closer?”

“Why yo looking for this girl?”

He tears off a piece of roll and chews it slowly.

“She ran away.”

“Maybe for good reason?”

“Maaybe,” I type. “But, there’s nothing about her life I’d run from.”

He laughs in a short little burst. While he types I take a bite of rice and peas mixed together.

“A teenage girl yo’re not. She had reasons that yo may not even nderstand.”

“You got kids?” I type.

He sops up some of the beef stew with his bread and pops it in his mouth.

“Look,” he types. “There’s lots of things in this city that a girl may rn to and rn from. A girl born here is going to know how to hide. And if things aren’t as bad as yo think they are, then she’ll show to her parents again.”

Next to me the man starts coughing into his napkin. He’s finished with his food now and just sipping on the apple juice they give. Down at the end of our table two figures are passing notes quickly. One of them laughs and I recognize a woman’s voice in it.

“She’s not from inside the city,” I type.

“Then I sympathize with her even more.”

“If she’s happy here,” I type. “If she doesn’t want to go back that’s fine on me.

But I can’t leave until I know she’s safe.”

“Who’s safe? Yo?”

I finish off my beans and wipe my chin clean of their juice.

“Safer than a teenage girl.”

He shrugs at this.

“You know anything about goose heads?”

He tosses this to his tray and lets it melt in the empty spot where his peas were.

With the last of his roll he sweeps up beef broth and a few flecks of rice. Next to me the coughing man leaves, his tray wiped clean, napkin folded neatly on it.

“Lots of new faces today,” he types and nods to the man now leaving.

“Have you seen a girl?” I type.

“No,” he types. “Not in the past month.”

“People have been taken. By the same people responsible for the goose heads.

Who do they take? Do they take people off the streets?”

“I don’t know a thing.”

On the roll next to all he’s been typing me another side of a conversation has played out, “Yes, him.” “2.” “2 down and 3 north.” “Tides come in too steep last night.”

“Took it all.” “Everything of it.” “Yo done asked that.” “Stop crying.” “It’s not like that.”

“Tomorrow, it’s too bitter cold.” “That’s why tomorrow.” “OK.” “I’ll lend it for \$3.”

“Nevermind that.”

“What did the tides take? Where are there tides?”

There’s a hesitation I read as confusion. He reads his own print and stands up, grabbing the tray. I stand up to follow but his hand comes down on my shoulder and pushes me back down with such a heft. His mask pushes against mine and causes both of

ours to close fully down. Behind him the cart skitters on the floor, the twine taught on his wrist.

“Yo don’t read my fcking private conversations,” he says. His voice is a low grumble.

“What do the goose heads mean?” I answer back. My voice steady, calm, but quiet like a hushed library. “Have you seen her? Have you seen the girl?”

“I don’t know,” he says. His hand comes off my shoulder and he takes the tray and his cart over to the washtubs where he splashes in the whole tray. His voice is high and shrill when he shouts out, “Leave me alone.”

The soup kitchen goes dark as the rest of them leave. They’re all suspicious of me now, too anxious to get away for me to ask anyone else questions. I take a bus down back toward the water plant. As I pass a bank the time glows on an old analog clock, backlit in white, almost six now. The bus turns down a road heading the opposite direction from the water plant and I pull the cord. Running a little with my cloak bunched up around my ankles like an old dress, I zip down across traffic toward the plant. Cars honk at me as I run across the street without waiting for the signal, all their horns shouting with the same voice. As I shove through the crowded sidewalk, not a figure makes a sound. My shoulders collide with theirs, my hands hit their bags that swing from their arms, I step on a cloak and catch a figure, causing them to stumble back, nearly falling, and it all happens with the silence of an old film. When I reach the gate I’m huffing pretty hard. The cigarettes burning their smoke and tar still in my lungs. Two people are locking up the front door of the plant. One much taller than the other. They pass each other notes, shake hands, and go to their cars. The shorter one passes first, turning down the street and

around the corner. The taller one drives past me. I run a little alongside. When he reaches a stoplight I pull the handle and get in the car. He shouts and tries to punch me, but I grab his hand.

“Stop,” I say. “Listen to my voice.”

He freezes, his arm locked between both of mine, my hand grips his wrist.

“I’m the guy that came by earlier,” I say. “You told me something, when we were done talking. Tell me what you told me so that I know I have the right person.”

He moves to pull back his arm and I let him go. The light turns green. He checks all his spots and drives through.

“They took my brother,” he says. A high but strong voice comes through the mask. I take mine off and pull out one of the cigarettes I had hidden away in my cloak.

“Mind if I smoke?”

He waves me to go ahead.

“Want one?”

He shakes his head. I lift my mask up, as high as it will go, and light up. I lean back and let the cigarette and nicotine just melt a little. The weight settles warm and comforting across my skin.

“Where can we talk?” I say. “And I mean talk. I’m sick of this typing bullshit.”

I toss my ticker to the floor at my feet, it hits with a metallic clunk and the force of it makes a few buttons print something off.

“I have to go home,” he says. “But I can’t take you there.”

“Why not?”

We stop at a light and he looks over at me. He's still got his mask on, so there's no expression to read, no hint of what he's thinking. But I'd guess he thinks I'm an idiot. That's just fine.

"I'm not taking you to my home."

"Then let's talk fast," I say. "Who took your brother?"

He checks his mirrors and takes a right onto a four-lane road that heads north. Then he turns back and checks the back seat. With a quick move of his hand he locks the doors.

"I don't know who," he says. "We were on our way to school when he was taken. A van pulled up, two figures got out, we tried to fight them off, but they were too big. They zapped us and when I came to he was gone."

"Zapped you with what?"

"Tasers or something."

We stop at a light and he lifts up his mask, keeping his head down so I can't see, and rubs at his face with his gloved hand. He's late to get back started when the light changes green. A car behind us honks.

"Sorry," he says. He puts his mask down and drives on.

"Why do you think the goose heads are connected to whoever took your brother?"

He clears his throat. "A large group of other children were taken around the same time as my brother. Estimates were around fifty or so, if I recall correctly. There was some investigation by the police. Radio and newspapers had something about it every day before they gave up on it. The police had nothing to follow. No plates, nothing left

behind, no one caught. All these kids just taken. My mother was crushed. She couldn't stop crying. Everyday she'd wake up and cry."

In front of us a bus pulls off a little to the sidewalk and we have to wait until he can go around it. We swing around and end up behind a taxi cab. It's a simple white car like all the others, but with a bright yellow light on top with "TAXI" in black letters.

"A month or so later, the city planned to knock down this old building to put a new one in its place, and when they went in to clear it out they found the walls covered in goose heads, nailed right to the walls, just like the one you described. I guess it used to be an old apartment building or something because they found rooms where it looked like people had been locked up. Newspapers said they looked like murder, feces thrown against the walls, blood in some of the rooms. Just beds and toilets in the bathrooms, nothing else. They thought it was a cult or something and that the kids were taken there."

"What happened to the kids?"

"They weren't there," he says. "Place was empty. Everything was still fresh, they said, like someone had tipped them off and they cleared out just a day before."

"Awful," I say. "And the tunnel?"

"Nobody goes in, nobody comes out."

"How do you know? How do you not go in to see? Knowing what you know, knowing what it could lead to."

"I haven't seen my brother in fourteen years. He'd be twenty-three today. For a long time I wondered why they didn't take me too. Now, I think I was too tall, they looked at me and thought I was a parent. I saw what it did to my parents. It destroyed

them. They divorced and my father moved across the city. If I could do anything to keep it from happening again I would.”

“So?”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“It’s sad,” I say. “Damn sad, don’t get me wrong, but that’s not what I’m here to do. I need to find this girl and if she’s been taken down there, which is a possibility I’m not ruling out yet, I need to know if anyone’s been using that tunnel and what’s down there.”

“You ever have an ant-farm?”

“Can’t you just give me a straight answer?”

“If they took your girl, you’ll never see her again. I’ve not seen my brother for fourteen years. How do you imagine you’ll find a girl in however long you got here?”

He pulls off the road and into a convenient store parking lot. We wait for another car to pull out of a spot, all the others taken. Before I can answer him he starts talking again.

“When my father moved,” he says. “The only way we found him was by following the directions to his house he gave us. Turn by turn, written in his scratched handwriting, one numbered street to another. It was on one of the few pieces of paper we kept around that didn’t melt in the wind. That car,” he points to the car pulling out of the spot and driving away from us. “I’ll never see again and I’ll see it all the time. I’ll see it when I get out of this car. I’ll see it right there next to us. But I’ll never see the owner of that car or that specific car ever again. It could be my brother. It could be someone who took him. It could be your girl.”

He pulls into the empty spot and sits there. The clock says it's almost six twenty.

My cigarette is burning close to its end.

"I got to get home," he says.

"Why geese?"

"What does it matter?"

"Nobody ever asked that before? Not in fourteen years? Where do they even get them?"

"They tried watching the geese that come in down by the park pond. This city is a nice little stop for them when they're flying across the country. That pond sees hundreds of them every year. Nobody ever took a one. There's something else about those geese that told the police they weren't the ones being taken too."

"What is it?"

"You go down and look."

"Just tell me."

"The pond geese have black feathers on their head."

"So these goose heads are imported."

He shrugs. "They sure as hell aren't ours."

"But why goose heads? Why not chicken, or crow, or any other bird or animal?"

"One theory they kicked around is because they're easier to catch."

"I don't mean that," I say. "They obviously mean something. Otherwise they wouldn't go through the trouble of hammering them everywhere. So, why goose heads?"

"Well, there's the fairy tales of that goose mother."

"I only know the name, not the tale."

“Then you should go to the library,” he says. “I have to go home.”

He points to the clock. I take the last puff of my cigarette, crack the window, and toss it out. I shut the window again.

“I’m going to need to get into that tunnel,” I say. “I need to know if she’s down there or not.”

“I won’t help you,” he says. “And no one in the works will either. You can try your luck sneaking in, but you’ll likely be shot.”

The way he says it there’s no forgiveness or remorse for me at all. Just straight and matter-of-fact. It is a fact. It’s exactly what would happen.

“The person who sent you after this girl,” he says. “They know a lot about this city?”

“As much as anyone outside the walls.”

“Then they should know to make peace with never seeing her again.”

“I’m sorry about your brother,” I say.

“Me too,” he says.

Chapter Eleven

The sound of the door wakes me. Two figures walk in and stand over my bed. The bottoms of their cloaks are wet and their gloves are cold when they touch me. There's a smell of autumn on them, crushed dried leaves, the cold morning when the dew has been turned to crisp frosting, but it can't have been that long yet. They pull me as they did before, by the arms, and we walk down the hall. We pass other doors like mine, all with their food trays shut. When we go through the door I look back over my shoulder down the hall to the one room that sits closed at the end of the hall, where the body without legs must live.

In the shower they spray me like before. I try to shield myself again, but when I do the water just moves to other parts of my body. In protecting one, I expose another, and the water moves too fast. When they tell me to turn around and I refuse, I refuse to take my hands away again from sensitive parts, they adjust the spray, making it harsher, making it hotter, then colder, until I can't bear it and turn and do what they say. Wet lavender splashes up my nose as I turn and press my forehead against the tile. The water drips down my face, beads quickly jumping from the tip of my nose and chin and falling to the floor. I hold up my arms, I spread, and let the water wash everything from my body. The water stops and I'm beckoned to the edge of the tile where they towel me, their cold hands covered in fluffy white fabric, rubbing across my skin. I shiver, but not because I'm cold. A gross revulsion stills in my throat. At the edge of the light in the shower room, where the bright lights overhead end, and behind the blinding whiteness there is a darkness unreachable, the burning ash of a cigarette lingers. Then, below it, three others light up. Then four. They move like lightning bugs, drifting up and down,

unconnected to any hand. Their amber light let off no real smoke. Sometimes they join, dancing together, almost making a pair of eyes. The two figures that dry me pay no mind to this odd light dance. They take me away without even looking once.

I don't even feel the needle but the hall wavers in an invisible heat, the way it rolls off of the street in the summer and shifts the whole world, it happens, the lines wavy, then fuzzy, and I'm falling against arms.

Around my body I dream is a warm blanket that vibrates with a constant hum. At first, I must struggle against it, to get out, to see the sunlight in the window before it all fades away, but it is too relaxing to move, so I lay there. I lay until I am laying on the ground and the vibration is a noise that sounds like a horn, a car horn, held down. Under me is a hard stone floor that seems like it should be cold, but it is actually very warm. The stone is soft against my cheek, like fabric, but rough where my palm is. I sit up and my head is heavy, weighted by something tight around my forehead, strapped to my chin. Before my hand touches the mesh I know it's a mask. Even behind the dark meshwork the room is very dark and I'm not sure I've opened my eyes, or really woken up at all, until I hear footsteps. My eyes adjust to the dimness. Around me are candles of various sizes, lit and dripping their wax on the stone. Some of the candles are in holders, dark metal holders with little flowers and ivy patterns up and down the metal. More candles are being lit across the room from me. The darkness itself moves over there. The faint outline of a cloak comes through as it lights a whole line of the candles at level with its face. A hand presses against my bare shoulder, flesh to flesh, and I nearly shout.

"Good morning, dear." A voice altered by an electric buzz hums into my ear.

They too wear a mask and a thin cape that drapes over their shoulders, hiding all but their arm and hand, bare and still resting on my shoulder. Their fingers are long and thin, with nails manicured to soft, white points. The fingers, the slender wrist, the hairless arms, and the way the figure steps around me tell me it is a woman.

“We were afraid for you,” she says. “That you’d not wake up, with how some of those horrible drugs affect the young ladies. Some have seizures. I’ve seen it. A terrible mess. How do you feel?”

I nod.

“Come now,” she says. “Use your voice, sweet lady.”

“Tired,” I say. My voice sounds like a pop, a sudden burst that shatters something in my head.

“Yes. That’s the drugs.”

She turns and looks at the other figure. The figure lights candles on a table. From the floor I can’t see what else is on it. Hanging above it, as the candle lights fully light the wall they stand in front of, a goose head faces bows. A red and silver smile swirls from its bill and ends in painted stars of the same color. Instead of eyes, two white stones flicker in the candlelight.

“She’s shaking,” the woman says to the other figure.

Her hands rub up and down my shoulders.

“You’ll warm up,” she says. “Don’t worry.”

The other figure comes from the table with a gold cup. They hand it to the woman then walk across the room to a chair against the wall. The woman holds the cup up to my mask.

“Drink,” she says.

Inside the cup is red wine, or something that smells like it. My mother sometimes drank it even though she preferred white. I shake my head at the woman.

“Use your words.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t want any.”

“Honey.”

She lifts my mask from the chin, not all the way up, but enough to expose my lips. The edge of the cup is soft metal against my lips. She lifts the cup and I drink. She lifts too quickly and some rolls down the side of my mouth, onto my chin, where she brushes it with her finger, all the way to the corner of my lip, then puts her finger in my mouth. The wine is warm in my stomach. I don’t stop shaking, but the jittering of my arms and legs smooth out. My skin feels like a rubber band, held tight and plucked.

“See?” She says. “We don’t waste.”

She drinks some as well. Her lips are full and red in the candlelight. Soft shadows curve around the gentle edge of her chin. Gold glimmers from somewhere in her black hair, back near her ears. When she’s done she puts the cup down on the ground then kisses me. At first there is a shock, a tingle like static at my lips, then that force of boiled anger. A great wall against my skin, presses tight from my lips to my fists. The wine has dulled it, made it into something fuzzy, covered with a sheet, but still it presses. I push my hands into the stone, laying my fingers flat there, imagining them pinned like the goose head. I do this so that I don’t slap her. I do this because I know that if I struck her or the other figure only worse things would follow. In the hallway, outside my room with

the mother goose watching, there is a person whose legs were cut off and that is the only person I've heard say, "No."

She pulls her face away from mine and pushes softly against my cheek with her fingers, guiding my head to look at the other figure in the chair. The arms of their cloak stretch down those of the chair. Two hairy feet, the toe nails long and thick, peek out from under the robe.

"Sit here," she says. "Still as you can, and watch."

She stands, the cape hiding her form whole. It shifts with her arm that reaches out and pulls her mask down into place. Around me there are no doors or windows. No way in or out of the room that I can see. Behind the chair there are two tall candles on either side of the figure, but then darkness. Only half of the room may be lit. The other candles along a stone wall or on the floor, some in circles, some in long candlesticks that reach above my head if I were to stand, in a row of them, six or seven together like a fork, then the ones on the table. The stone is rough on my skin as I adjust, pulling my leg out from under me to sit with my knees against my chest, my feet tight together. The woman walks behind the chair and disappears into the darkness. From inside it a clatter of metal echoes into the room. Her soft voice whispers, but I can't make out what.

Her stride is careful when she returns. One foot falls in front of the other. There's a sashay and strut to it. Her right arm is up, wrist twisted so that the palm is almost facing up, but there's something in her hand. A metal chain droops from her hand to the floor and drags behind her as she walks. It catches, becomes taught, just when she fully enters into the light again. Her mask turns to her shoulder. She tugs on the chain, once, with a quick jerk of her wrist and arm. Something in the dark stumbles on the floor. On hand

and knees a man follows her out. His skin is a dark brown, scarred with thick darker lines on his hairless arms. In his eyes there's a glimmer from the candlelight that carries across his body, a thin layer of sweat or oil giving it slickness. When he crawls close his arms flex and his chest flinches. The chain from her hand ends in a collar at his neck that I can't fully see under his chin and behind his short, graying hair. There are lines in his face that the candlelight makes deeper, a worn cracked face, his eyes puffy, tired, a bruise on his cheek. She brings him close to me and I can see the tired fear in his eyes. They waver like the flames in the wind.

"Have you ever seen a black man?" She says.

I shake my head.

"Honey."

"No," I say.

She squats down, bringing her masked face next to his. Her cape falls in a way that I can see her bare knee. A small purple bruise the shape of a heart on the left one. With a delicate hand she strokes his cheek.

"We have all varieties," she says. "Black, white, even one... what do you call them." She waves her hand in the air. "From the east."

She puts her other hand on his back, switching the leash from one hand to the other, and uses him as a balance to stand.

"Maybe you'll see more," she says.

Wrapping the chain around her hand, she pulls it tight. Then in those same practiced steps she guides him over to the figure. At the feet of the figure the man in chains bends over and presses his head to the floor. The woman bends over the figure in

the chair and slowly pulls up ous robe, as the robe slips up ous body, the man lifts his head off the ground and follows it, with his hands helping him unbend. On the ground, between the naked man at the chair and me, the stone is worn. The grey of it, with the dull amber light of the candles, is darker with a square outline, the size of a small box, then a few stones from it there is a dark splatter, the shape of something tossed and shattered against the stone. Each square of the stone looks hand carved and placed tightly together. Once it must have all been rough, naturally gouged with cuts and holes, but now it's nearly as smooth as our basement floor at home. Even still it's uncomfortable against my butt, but I'm afraid to adjust or move at all. I'm a statue, made of the same stone, chiseled out of the same rock as this floor. Maybe we were never separated, my form cut and planted here with the others, my brothers and sisters, cut from our mother, the earth, and I will stay here with them forever. The chain clatters to the floor. The woman walks over to me and squats in front of me, blocking the chair. Her cape falls around her shoulder and the candlelight flickers against her naked body. The mask she wears is like any other mask, but in its meshwork, where there would be only black, is a faint swirl of yellow or gold, a circular pattern starting from the edges and sweeping in toward the center like a drain. She holds out a hand, the palm up and cupped.

“Come,” she says.

The gravity around my hand is strong, an invisible weight trying to tug it down, but I lift against it and place my hand in hers. She wraps her fingers around mine, her skin is smooth and soft, warm. Yet, it is so strong that she lifts me to my feet with only a gentle tug. Instead of leading me toward the chair, we turn and go to the table. Above it the goose head stares down at me with glimmering eyes. The dried bloody stump of its

neck has turned black, without a spot of blood down the white, slender neck. She stops me there at the table and places a hand on my shoulder, standing behind me, over me, her warm body pressing on my back through the cape. Laid on top of fabric are five knives, each with a different shape blade, two syringes, a small bottle of liquid, a mirror in which my mask is surrounded by the sheen of her cape, a small piece of metal bent into a shape I don't recognize like an 8 but with the bottom ends swirling, curled inward toward each other, next to the metal there's a whip, and under the knives a thick rubber band. She picks up one of the syringes and the bottle, reaching over my shoulders and holds them up just above my head. She puts the syringe in the bottle and pulls it out, its clear half now half full. From behind me she guides my left arm up, placing it on the table, then she taps my veins at the joint.

"Good," she says, her voice soft.

From a small box on the table she pulls out a small square wrapper, tears it open, and wipes my skin with the wet cloth from it.

"Look at the goose," she says. "Have you ever fed one bread?"

"No," I say.

Her hand holds my wrist and there's a small pinch in my arm. I don't flinch at all.

"Good," she says. "Bread isn't good for them. Have you ever been stung by a bee?"

"No," I say.

There's a cold flush in my arm and a hot pressure. Then the two seem to disappear, replaced by a tingling, a warm tingling. The goose head is small. A little larger than my palm, if I held it up to it, but small still. When I first saw it, I thought it was

smiling, but I see now that was a trick of the light and it's actually frowning. Sad, so sad.

There's a pressure on my arm. Her fingers hold a small ball of cotton where the needle was. Now the needle is gone and there's only one on the table.

"This is better than a bee sting," she says. "Quicker. Just a little pinch."

"But it's over already," I say.

She laughs. "Is it?"

She places the needle in the box and pulls a small piece of cotton out from next to it. There's a little bead of blood on my arm where the needle was, it tries to run up my arm, but she wipes it before it gets to my shoulder and presses the cotton against my arm. In the fabric on the table there are swirls like on her mask and two geese on either side. They've been sewn there and I can feel their bodies and the ivy pattern under them against my elbow. They hold little baskets in their hands. Tiny eggs, no larger than the moles on my skin, sit in their baskets, different colors.

"You'll hold this," she says.

She blots the cotton on my arm, the blood has all gone, and I reach for the cotton ball to hold it.

"No, no," she says.

Her hand is around my wrist again. Instead of cotton there's a knife with a curved blade, just above my wrist. The handle of it is smooth leather. For a moment it feels cold, but it warms in my hand. Another pair of hands move around mine and shift the blade there, rotating it.

"Like this," she says.

In a smooth swoop she shows me how to cut. Our hands move together, hers wrapped around mine, from front to back. The curve in the blade points its tip back at me. Inside the curve the sharp edge of it glints in the candlelight. Something warm and soft is in my other hand, the shape of an apple, the number in black on my hand turns purple in the light. My hand is the air, light and caressing, my skin is gone and is just air. Behind my lips my gums and teeth and tongue tickle, caught in the airflow of my body.

“Take slow steps,” she says. Then just a breath later, “Stand here.”

The other needle plunges into his dark skin. He doesn’t even stop. He’s not bothered at all by it. It’s like he hasn’t even noticed the blade is there. She guides me to kneel on the stone behind him. She kneels next to me and together we are looking at apples on a tree. Her hands are so quick, practiced, guiding mine with the rubber band and the knife.

“Front to back,” she says. The pattern of the geese on the table’s cloth repeat across its middle. They go too far and fall off the edge. Our hands glide together, front to back, first at the table, then under the man.

From somewhere hidden in her cape she pulls a bucket and we place the apple inside. It is warm and red. The knife too, she says.

“Front,” she says. “Back.”

I want to cut the air of my body and let my hand go free.

“No, no,” she says.

Her voice is so soft now. The electric buzz has faded away and smoothed to the voice of my mother. The sound smooth and full like pillows, burlap pillows, cloaks full of stuffing. Red paint drips from my fingertips, down my hand, hiding the purple number

there, my name, my number name. My mother will be angry at me now for playing in her paint.

Far away someone is shouting like a goose, honking loudly.

“Why?” I say, but it’s as though I’m reading someone else saying I said it. It’s a suggestion of my voice.

“No, no,” my mother says.

Her hand is around mine again, holding it tightly. The blade curves and points toward me, front to back. Cotton presses firmly against my arm, where the needle let blood loose from under my skin and now it has gone all over my fingers. My mother takes the knife from my hand, the air of my body, I feel it only against my tongue. And I am using it to sing. The figure in the chair begins clicking. The sound is a rough clicking, a chattering, a chittering, a squirrel with a nut or how insects sound as they pour out of a door in the movies, thousands of them pouring, chattering, clicking. It comes from the darkness behind the chair, from the figure in the chair, from all around. Her hand is tightly around mine, turning the blade around, turning it over and opening my hand from around the handle. I sing back to the clicking. I imitate its song and play with variations in my mouth, my tongue tingling in the air of my body.

“One foot at a time,” she says.

The cold wet cloth wipes the blood off my hands and arm. She moves it up and down with a gentle twirl of her hand. The purple number shows black again, the blood wiped clean and revealing it like a curtain. Soapy water drips from it into a tub, turning the white pink and red. In the tub I watch clouds swirl around bubbles, red dancing around pink like ribbons gliding through the water. The blade is sharp against my neck.

“It’s already over,” I say.

His scream is loud in my ear. He spins around when we step away with the bucket. Something is stuffed in his mouth and he spits it, long and pale white, spits it into the bucket, splashing blood. It is the angry wail of tortured soul. Across my chest his arm presses so hard that my skin starts to turn red, in streaks. Above us the ceiling is dripping with blood, splashing on my shoulder and chest as he tosses and we move together like dancers. The woman stands in front of us, her hands up in the air, the cape tossed over her shoulders, her body thick in candlelight. Down her palms the streaks of blood drip to her elbows.

“No, no,” she says.

On the chair ou is writhing. The chattering is so loud, a clicking that won’t stop in the darkness. The man’s breath is hot against my ear even through my mask. He lifts the fabric at my neck from the mask and places the blade there, it curves, still wet with blood, the tip pointing back at me. Her arms are up.

“Put her down,” she says. “We can’t afford her dead.”

Below us, on the cold worn stone, below my feet that no longer touch them, my body is air, my body full of air, a trail of blood drips from the ceiling. The man’s chain drags in front of us like a forgotten tail. It goes under the woman’s foot and disappears in the darkness behind the chair where ou sits silent and the clicking has shut up.

“I’m letting you go,” she says.

She kneels down on the stone, the chain between her legs. Against my neck the blade says good bye and drifts away. Her mask presses against the stone. Against my chest the arm releases, but the red streaks stay. His face is still scared. In his eyes there’s

a desperate pain that makes them waver even more than the candlelight could do. Down his legs the blood drips in a thick syrup. The sweat on his body still sheens so brightly. His red and slick lips look like they're coated in lipstick that has melted down his chin, but that's blood too, on his chest, dripping, not from the ceiling, but on me still. I step back, my body hitting the table. The knife is still in his hand. When he takes a step his body shudders and stumbles. Between his legs there is a bloody hole that follows him and the chain. She yanks the chain, her hands and body striking quick, and the metal flexes then pulls taught at his neck. In the shadowy flicker of the candlelight it is impossible to tell if he slips or crumbles or both at once, but his body hits with a loud crack that fills my whole body and makes it solid again. He does not move. Dark syrupy blood leaks from under his head, reaching out for me across the stone, following its cracks. The woman is crying. Her shoulders shake under the cape as she kneels on the stone. A clicking noise, now soft and gagging, a gulping with an open mouth, comes from the chair and the darkness behind it.

“Call,” a man's voice says. “Help.”

The woman crawls over to the man's body on the floor and takes the knife from his hand. Her body still shakes as she moves with a soft sobbing. When she stands her arms hang loose at her sides, except for the knife, held rigid, the blade out from her body.

“Oh god,” the man says.

At the chair ous body shifts. It turns toward the back of the chair, twisting its hairy legs. His voice calls out a name, too soft to hear it in full.

“Help,” he says.

The woman grabs his mask and pulls it off. In the candlelight only his brown hair, curled in tight locks, and the slender curve of his nose catch the amber light. My body is heavy and full, tight with skin, full of cold lead, grounding me, sticking me to this place, in the mesh of my mask is a dot of blood that for a second blocks the flash of the knife in her hand. She whispers something softly to him, then the knife disappears on the other side of her body, her arm moves in a quick fluid motion, front to back. A wet gagging, a soft clicking fills the room until his body slumps in her arms and her own shakes again in a sob. My hand presses against the table, the fabric of geese under my hand. I pick up one of the other knives, its blade wavy like a river, bending one way and another until it ends in a sharp point. I mean to leave, to go into the darkness where there must be a door beyond. I mean to escape it all and get out.

“No, no,” she says.

Her hand is around my wrist again. But this time it takes more effort for her to pry the knife from my fingers. Before I can reach for another she has spun me away from the table. The knife clatters somewhere on the floor. Her arms wrap around me. I scream and kick against her, but she’s able to lift me, my feet off the ground, and drag me into the darkness. In the darkness I can’t see a thing, but I feel our bodies rise together, climbing stairs. My legs kick out and strike against wood, shoving us in the other direction, shoving us against another wood rail. It cracks, but does not break. She turns and drags me backwards up the stairs. In the candlelight the dim scene looks so small, ridiculous, like a diorama. Two bodies bloody and limp, one against the floor, the other slumped over in a chair. A burst of white light washes out the scene. I close my eyes because it’s too much. I stop wiggling because I’m afraid we’ll fall into the sun. When I open my

eyes again we're in a kitchen, a linoleum floor kitchen. Under my bare feet the glossy pocked floor feels so smooth. If I stand I may fall, I may slip like ice, my feet still bloody, little red imprints left where I touch them down. She drags me to a table where there is a slender black box. She keeps one arm pressed against my stomach, holding both my arms in her grip, while the other reaches for the box and flips it open. There's a single syringe, already full of clear liquid. Outside the kitchen window that we face the backyard is overgrown, the grass looks like it would come up to my shins, and in the middle of it all a rusted swing set has nearly collapsed on its side. The needle pinches my arm. In the last minute of consciousness I want to call out for my mother, the word sticks in my throat, I could almost feel it reaching, touching my lips, but a fear of a response makes it pause for too long before I'm gone.

I wake in another kitchen with my head on the wooden table. It feels at first like a very stiff bed, some painful pillow tucked under my head, but then the grain of the wood brushes my fingers. A red fabric placemat is under my head, a little stain of my slobber that I brush at and wipe the corner of my mouth. A figure is chopping something at the counter. Ours black cloak moves back and forth across the island counter from me. On the table there's a blue vase with long stemmed, white flowers. Their petals are droopy with a long yellow tongue sticking out from their center. Three placemats have been set on the table, one chair left without one at the other end. I sit at the other head of the table. A soft red cushion is underneath me, a towel over it, between my still naked body and the cushion. My hand has been wiped clean of blood. The purple-black number sits boldly on the pale flesh of my hand. When I move my whole head swirls the world with it. It's like someone has filled my brain with soup, thick, but still liquid, and my eyes swish around

with it, everything focusing and unfocusing. Next to me is a large window, a sliding glass door, that looks out into the backyard. But this yard is different than the one I saw before blacking out, this one has a flower bed, stone steps leading back to a vegetable garden, it almost looks like my backyard at home. The sun is setting somewhere on the other side of the house, giving the sky above the backyard a darkening blue with a slight pink fading at its top. The pink reminds me of the blush a woman wore in the magazine I'd stolen, soft, cotton candy they'd called it. The door is unlocked. I try to stand, but my legs give out and I fall back into the chair with a loud *thunk*. My limbs are useless dead weight, a sore aching holding them still.

"Dinner will be ready soon," the figure says. Their voice is unaltered, a high male voice with an accent I don't recognize. He takes something from the chopping board and drops it into the boiling pot on the stove. "I'm almost done here. Then it has just twenty minutes to boil. Then we can all sit ourselves down."

I slump back in the chair and try to cover my breasts but my hands fall into my lap. They feel so heavy. Across from me on the wall is a painting of a man in a uniform facing something to the right. His face is stern, but his eyes are kind, blue, focused on something I can't see. Under his hat, between the ear and the green hat, his hair has been shaven close to the skin. A small line of moles dot the cheek bone, following the curve of it toward his short nose. There's a name on the chest of his uniform but I can't read the block letters from here. Behind him in the painting is a swirl of red and blue ribbons, blowing in an imaginary wind. Next to the painting is a small black and white photograph of a man with a white shirt and jeans standing next to a small girl in a dress, both of them lean against the side of a car, square hard metal, they squint as if the sun is too bright, the

man shielding his eyes with his hand even. On a table below the photo and the painting there's a small glass container, spherical, with the top cut off and a metal lid, inside is a yellow clear liquid, something curled in on itself decaying in the water, white fleshy chunks floating around it.

He comes around the kitchen island and sits down at the table next to me.

"Now we just wait for that to finish." He turns and looks back at the clock on the stove, I imagine, it says 7:15. "We're a bit late, but it seems everyone is now."

There's a heavy tingling in my arm and I flex my fingers under the table.

"I'm sorry," he laughs. "You're probably having a heck of a time figuring out what's going on. You still got time left, see, until about ten, I think she said. And I guess I'm the babysitter. Quite her luck that I was home."

From the kitchen the smell of meat boiling lingers over to us. Meat and vegetables and some spices. My stomach gurgles for it. He laughs.

"Tell that stomach of yours that it'll be done right soon."

Out the window the sky is darkening. A large crow flaps down on top of the fence and cries out twice then starts to peck and clean at itself. Near the door there's a large ceramic pot, its fleshy colored curves stained with dirt, with three dead twigs sticking out of its dirt and between them a tiny little gnome looks in through the window.

"You want to run right out there, don't you?"

I nod.

"Please," I say.

"Well, heck."

He stands, scooting the chair out with his legs behind him. He goes over to the sliding door and pulls it open. A burst of cold air brushes back my hair, tickling along my collarbone and shoulders. I try to reach with my hand to brush the hair from my eyes, but it's too heavy still. All across my body my skin pimples with the air and I shiver.

"Go on then," he says. "Make a good run for it."

Under me my legs waver and when I press weight on them, they shudder and can't sustain. I slip back against the chair again, nearly falling out of it. Instead I lean toward the door. I know it will hurt, I know there will be little cushion in it, the linoleum hard and cold, but I do it anyway, I slouch toward the door, shifting my weight, and fall out of the chair. My arms aren't fast enough, they flail out to the side, and my head hits with a smack. But still I have to try, reaching one hand out, pushing it, like something is blocking it, I push it, push against the air and gravity and slide it along the linoleum toward the door. It's even harder, in some way, to lift myself up enough to crawl. It feels like someone's pushing on my back, keeping me pinned to the floor. I kick my legs out and hit the leg of the table. I try to push against it, but my legs don't cooperate. The crow on the fence cries again. Its call is louder now without the glass. The cool wind has winter's crisp warning of a cold night. And in that gust there's the smell of the flowers, sweet and gentle, soft as their petals.

"Help," I say.

My voice is weak, but I try shouting anyway.

"Help," I repeat it. "Police."

He's laughing above me, still standing at the door. The sound so foreign to me, a harsh crackle, then long stretched out bursts of air. His thin body shakes a little in the shoulders as he laughs. He slides the door closed and locks it.

"At least you tried," he says. "But you're just a sad sack of flesh right now. No better than a pillow."

He squats down and runs a gloved hand over my head.

"If you were mine," he says. "I'd just leave you here."

His voice is flat and the words come like just an observation to himself. He pets my head a few more times then stands up and shuffles around me. His hands lift me up under the shoulder and with some awkward maneuvering he sits me back on the chair. Like I'm just some doll to be put around. Some helpless doll. And in my head the fall onto the floor is throbbing. I can feel it pulsing from my cheek to the side of my skull. Maybe it will bruise. Maybe I've done some real damage, but it's no more difficult to think or see or anything like that. He sits back down next to me. Both of his hands lay on the table, motionless. I follow the gaze of his mask back outside the window where the crow has gone. The sky is growing darker, a dark dark blue, and the rest of the yard is following it, making it hard to see the details of it all. Even the gnome by the door in the pot seems to be shrinking.

"Hold on," he says. He stretches both words out by the vowels. "Hold on. I got something for you to just, well, hold on to."

His hands tap out the words like its music. And at the end of it he stands. He points at me.

"You'll like it," he says. "I know you'll like it."

He spins around and walks out the kitchen, disappearing around the corner that leads to a hallway. Then his mask pops back around the corner.

“You’re not going to try to run off again are you?”

He laughs.

“No,” he says. “No, you’re a good girl. I can tell.”

His foot steps are hurried down the hall. The pot on the stove steams. On the counter next to it is a woodblock full of knives. But my arm won’t raise and my legs don’t feel any lighter. I don’t remember feeling this heavy after they put me out last time. In my bladder there’s a growing need to pee. Above me, against the wall there, is another picture frame, but I can’t tell what’s in it. This whole room has a different feeling than ours did. It seems bigger, somehow, but it should be the same. I don’t know why I think it should be the same. It’s not really, at all. Where our kitchen table was had one end facing the living room, the living room and cabinets weren’t even close to each other, you had to walk past the kitchen table to get to it, and we didn’t have a sliding door, but the one back door with a screen door attached. There’s nothing like that here. If I were home. If I could just be home. It may be right on the other side of the fence. It may be across the whole city from here.

“Close your eyes now,” he says from around the corner. I didn’t even hear his footsteps again.

“Are they closed?”

“Yes,” I say.

He peeks around the corner.

“Liars get their hands stapled together,” he says. “Shut your damn eyes.”

I shut them. I bow my head down until my chin touches my chest. He steps onto the linoleum and moves his chair from the table. A gloved hand touches my wrist and I flinch.

“It’s just me,” he says.

He places one hand, then the other, on the table, scooting my chair a bit closer to the table so that my elbows can rest too and my hands won’t slide off. Then something rubbery is placed in my hands, the texture like a rubber, rough, leather.

“All right,” he says. “Open up.”

In my hands is something like balled rubber bands or cookie dough. It’s much larger than my hands, if I put them together and stretched out the fingers, it would be about that large. I shift it around and my fingers slip through holes. There are two small holes and a larger one at the top. Between them are even smaller holes. And at the bottom there’s a patch of rough fabric that looks glued to the rubber. It reminds me of a sweater I have that’s made of animal fur. Brown and a little frayed at the end, it sticks out from the rubber in uncombed tufts.

“No,” he says. “You’re holding it upside down.”

He shifts it in my hands, rotating it, so that the larger hole is on the bottom. A great swell rises from my chest, from the back of my head to my eyes that widen as I recognize the shape, the form of it, where the eyes should be, where a mouth would fill the empty space that I can see the table through, where a nose would fill out the lump in the middle. With the swell rises my voice, a scream, a slow rising cry. But my hands won’t let it go. They’re frozen with the flesh in my hand. My whole body frozen with it. I can do nothing but cry with the face in my hands and he is standing over me laughing. A

thick coating runs down my throat and I'm coughing and crying until my fingers finally let go and I pull my arms from the table. They flop uselessly in my lap and I bend my head down and away, against my chest, my eyes shut tight. There's a pressure on my shoulder, his gloved hand. He's laughing in my ear now.

"Your face," he says. "Oh. His face too. His and your faces. It was the same face."

Between laughs his words come out in bursts through the mask and right into my ear. I shut my mouth tight and try to close off the cries, but they burst through my lips. He laughs louder.

"You're too cute," he says. He imitates my cries right in my ear. "Too cute."

My face is hot and streaked. When I finally calm down and stop shaking my chest still thumps heavy. Not fast, but heavy, my heart so huge in my chest.

He sits down next to me and picks up the face. Outside it's nearly black now. The sky is a deep midnight blue, a purple as the ink on my hand.

"Don't you turn away from me you bitch," he says.

He's holding up the face in his hands, holding it up to his mask, his fingers sticking out of the eyeholes and mouth. He takes the mouth by the edges and spreads it upwards into a smile.

"Put on a happy face," he says. Then he laughs.

He slaps it down on the table, a loud smack of flesh.

"The human mind," he says. "When you look out there."

He points with his finger out the window.

"Look out."

It's black now. So dark in so little time. Like the sun had somewhere it forgot to be and rushed off without a thought. Only the light from the oven's overhead shines in the reflection of the glass. I can barely see my own face. Distorted in the dim light. My eyes colorless and black. My face looks ragged and worn, doubled in every line in the glass. His black form moves like a shadow across it.

"There's the dark, right? The dark can be all you can see if you focus on it. It's the most overwhelming thing right now. It just blinds out everything else you'd ever think was out there. Nothing but dark, nothing but the lost thoughts and vague shapes of the day, just a few minutes ago. But not even twenty minutes have passed yet. And that window if you focus on the dark that's your mind. Your mind. Right there. The dark window, that's you. But if you just look here, where you can see that reflection of the light, just look at that, and focus on that, then all that darkness just fades away and all you can see is that light. That's the human mind. You get yourself into too much negativity, too much darkness, and that's all you see. But you find that bright spot, you focus right on it, and never let it go. Why, that darkness won't be a thing to you."

He tosses the face back down in front of me on the table.

"It's rubber," he says. "Rubber and rabbit hair."

But I don't believe him. I can't even look at it. I just watch our reflections in the window.

"Do what I tell you, you little whore."

On the table the face is folded in on itself. On the reverse side of it are small dimples like goose bumped skin. He takes it and folds it back further. His gloved finger pointing to a mark on the skin.

“See,” he says. “Made right here, right in this beautiful country of ours. You ever seen someone with a tattoo like that? On the inside of their skin? You got a dark mind right now, child. A dark negative mind that sees things that aren’t even there. You make up lies and distractions for yourself. You dig your own holes so deep, so deep down to your rotten core, just festering, that you can’t even see a joke.”

He takes the mask and tosses it on the counter as he walks to the pot.

“You hungry?”

From here he could be right, the face looks like rubber, it looks face, just a pile of a rubber mask.

“Don’t ignore my questions.”

“Yes,” I say. But I’m not really. My stomach is so twisted and hollowed that any food I eat I’ll likely throw up anyway. There’s no hunger there, there’s been nothing but a ball of gut.

He ladles out some soup into a white bowl, he does it twice.

“It’s circumstances,” he says. “Nature and nurture, working together, that really drive a person to have such a negative outlook. And it makes it difficult to overcome all that then. You really, have, to set your mind to it. Every morning.”

He sets the bowls on a metal tray. Then takes two spoons from a drawer.

“Every morning,” he says, waving the spoons to punctuate the words. “You have to think about being positive. Write it on a piece of paper and stick it on a mirror, or somewhere you’ll look when you wake up, maybe while brushing your teeth. Write down, ‘think positive,’ and read it, look at it, really think about it. You have to work at it.

And when you do that, when you think, ‘everything will be ok, everything will work out,’ it will function in the same way that your negative dark thoughts are working right now.’

He sets the spoons down on the tray and picks it up by the handles. He makes it halfway around the island, then stops. The tray clinks on the island there.

“Napkins,” he says. “The positive thoughts will replace the negative ones.” He pulls two fabric napkins from another drawer in the island. “And those will eventually become your reality.” He folds them into triangles and lays them flat on the tray next to the bowls. Then he picks up the tray and carries it over to the table. He sets it down on the placemat, the one closest to the door, picks up one of the bowls and sets it down where he was sitting, then puts a spoon and napkin next to it. He does this all again but placing it in front of me.

The bowl has a thick brown broth, carrots and peas float around like sinking ships in the muck. A small curved vegetable, almost transparent, sticks to the edge of the bowl. It must be an onion or bamboo. Sliced so perfectly thin. I try to lift my arm, but it’s still heavy and stuck to my thigh. He sits down at his place.

“If you don’t mind,” he says. “I think we’re familiar enough now.”

He tilts his head up and undoes the chinstrap in the mask. With a slow movement he lifts the whole thing up and off. Underneath the mask his skin is pink and raw. My chest tries to cave in on itself. A heavy pressure pushes inward, and in my throat is a dry heave that I cough and swallow down. From the jawbone, just above the collar of his cloak’s neck, his flesh has been cut away. All across his face the skin has been exposed and tight and slick. His ears are gone, replaced by tiny little nubs that stick out from the torn flesh. There’s no hair on his head, or his eyebrows, or eyelashes. The flesh of his lips

barely meet to cover his teeth. His nose is flat, a flat stump with two holes. The whole of it a pink slicked horrible scar. Two dark brown eyes blink at me.

“Oh,” he says. “I didn’t even think.”

He takes my spoon and dips it into the bowl. In the reflection of the window I can see the exposed skin of his face and my own curling form. My arms feel even more numb now. All the energy sapped from me, from my chest, from my head. It feels so empty. It’s hard to breathe. I can’t get enough of the air and I wish he would open the door. The smell of vegetables and meat and whatever spice he’s used is curling in my throat and nose and all I want is the air outside.

“Here,” he says. “Open your mouth.”

He holds the spoon up in front of my face. In the thick broth held in the spoon a carrot leans against a piece of meat, a dark tan, a fingernail sticking up from the nub of a finger. My head is light and dizzy.

“It’s the good stuff. Don’t waste a drop of it.”

Across the pink scar of his face there’s a yellow-white grin.

Chapter Twelve

Back at the apartment I light up a cigarette as soon as I enter and feel it filter down my throat. The shower still runs in the bathroom and its made the whole apartment a little dewy. There's moisture building on the windows giving the city lights a blurred and foggy vision. At the top of the obelisk a red light blinks on and off, which is funny why they'd need that at all since I've not seen a single plane in the sky. I toss my mask and cloak on the couch, strip off my other clothes as I head to the bathroom, taking the toothbrush and paste from my pocket that I bought on the way back. In the mirror I brush my teeth, setting my cigarette down on the counter with the ash end over the sink. My face looks horribly haggard and greased with sweat. Quickly, I splash water across my face, my toothbrush still in my mouth, and use the little bar soap to go over my face. It looks so square in the mirror. The perfect oval of the mask removed to expose the line of my jaw, the thick detail of my nose, my eyebrows, were they always that wild? I swish and spit. Leaving the shower on, I pick up the cigarette, go into the bedroom, and flop on the bed. It's hard, the sheets taught, the whole thing more like a slab of soft stone than a mattress. This thing must have never been used before. Above the bed in the dim light from the city outside, an orange and blue hue, a painting or mirror in its perfect square lay flat, perfectly in line with the headboard and, on the opposite wall, another painting. They must both be paintings because the shadows on each are different. The one across from me, against the opposite wall, has two blobs, maybe fruit, or trees, dark things against a light background. No TV, but there is that radio. I turn it on and take a huge gulp from the cigarette. The sound of the radio and the nicotine work together, easing my nerves, smoothing out the shakes from my hands. I go window to window and open each,

letting out the warm air, letting in a bit of the evening chill, the moisture floating around me. The windows are long slants that open sideways and don't even open all the way, I can barely stick my arm out between the frame and the window. They must cut down on jumpers this way. Enough crazy people in a high rise like this and everyone is looking for the quickest way down. From my robe I take out the little cassette tape recorder. I push down the play button and from the headphones I can hear the soft sound of the shower I recorded earlier. Back and forth I flick the buttons, rewinding it, playing, rewinding it. Each time there's the soft clicks of the tape, it's alive, almost purring in my hands, little vibrations of machinery with its own heart. I press it close against my chest and feel the wash of noise. The announcer comes in at the end of the song and I start to get hard at his voice. Not because he arouses me, but his voice, any voice, a voice talking distinctly with that announcer quality that makes me nearly cry. I don't even pay attention to what he's saying, just the tone mixed with the shower, the wind and traffic from the window, the soft clicking of the cassette player in my hands. I breathe in deep and get a mouth full of smoke that chokes me. When I settle back down I put the cassette player on the dresser that's midway between all the sounds and, having rewound the tape to its start, I press record.

Flicking on the light switch I take down the painting off the wall and flip it over. Across its back is a standard dark brown paperback. From my cloak pocket I take out the pencil from the library and the pack of gum from the store. It's ice-cream flavored, just "strawberry ice-cream flavor," no fancy name or glitzy packaging, no cute graphics, just pink lettering on a white wrapper. The foil comes off easy and I take out two sticks, setting one aside, and begin chewing on the other. While I chew I open the cigarette box,

two left, and rip out the little slip of paper that's supposed to cover them. Strawberry flavoring and the ashy film of cigarettes mix together in my mouth and make some repulsive fruit. The pencil is dull and there aren't any sharpeners in the room, nor do I have a knife, but it will do. On the paper I write what I make up for names: fem-dick, water-works, lib-works, homeless. I have to make it all small so that I have enough room, super tiny, six or seven point font. Under each name I write the basis of what they've said, which isn't much. No way in, no need to go out. She wouldn't go back out. If she found her way in, the runaway would stay in, it's the last sanctuary for her. Where would go if you ran away to a city you didn't know?

Before he left for academy, before he got himself into all that shit, our oldest son had a friend who ran away. The parents freaked out, they thought he'd hop on a plane, or a hypertube, and throw himself a thousand miles away before nightfall. They called the precinct and raised a whole lot of hell. Meanwhile, their son sat in our living room, watching a movie and eating popcorn. Kids like that, kids that run away from nice cushy houses where they throw a fit because their parents say no once and stand their ground, they aren't going to trouble themselves with trains and tubes and the hassles of travel. Instead they'll just go to what's familiar. More of the same, just better because their parents aren't there to give them hell. That kid, that stupid kid. I hated his friends. They walked in and followed his lead in giving shit to his mother. They'd laugh when she asked a question in her lilting voice, asking how school was, repeating what she said back to her with their voices twisting the words. She'd shut off the world for him, disconnect and make eye contact, but he never gave her that. And where was I but watching from the couch, moving him along out the door, and telling him to get the hell upstairs. She'd

brush it off like it was nothing, like the world couldn't touch her, a petal in the wind. Her voice in my ear, her reassuring words, each one as soft as a pillow, that's what I need. That and the stream.

By the time I'm done with my little diagram there's a bunch of helpless words and lines trying to connect to each other. Child theft, history, and school. Goose head, the words stuck together, almost like a name. It feels dirty just to look at it. I take the gum out of my mouth, stick it on the back of the paper, then stick the paper on the back of the painting. Holding it up in front of me, I wiggle the whole thing, but it stays stuck. On the radio the announcer is talking about two important bands that revolutionized the way the guitar is played without mentioning the bands or the people or even the name of the movement they created, making it sound like a whole bizarre reverse game of ad-libs.

After I set the painting back on its hook, making sure it's even, I flick off the light and lay down on the bed again. In my mind I visualize the card on the back of the painting. Each word, the little tickers clicking through the day, floats around in my head. When I try to force them together, making connections that may be there, like whoever left that cloak full of goose heads back in the park and my runaway, it doesn't make sense. There's a flaw in thinking it's all connected, part of some grand scheme, you may be right sometimes, maybe, but more often than not it just makes you miss the true connections, what's really there, the most obvious and simple answers. She couldn't have climbed through the wall, no, nor over it, no. She could ride a shipment through it, on the docks, slipping in one of the boxes, maybe. She could come right through the front door, lie about permission, and have someone sign as a guardian, maybe. Someone would be lying to me then. The whole adventure feels like a run around, wheels turning and

spitting me out. The most honest one, maybe, is my friend at the water works, the one with the kidnapped brother. But what are the chances she'd get taken as well? There's no connection but me. And my guide.

I mean to get up and write that down, to pull back down the painting and draw a little glyph, I lay there visualizing doing it, but I'm already fading with the cigarette still in my hand.

At 7:30 she's banging on my door. Out the peephole I can see her short stubby cloaked form standing in the exact middle of the hallway. I go to the couch, put on my mask and cloak, and open the door just enough to type out a message.

"Yes?" I type.

"6525879," she types.

This bullshit again.

"2538291," I type. "I'm late, I know. Give me five. Want to come in? Tea, maybe?"

"Five minutes, downstairs."

As soon as the message is in my hand she's already walking down the hall toward the elevators. How awful to be so rude, especially at this hour. I lock the door and take the cloak and mask back off. The cloak rattles with the matchbox full of dinosaurs. I step into the shower and do a quick rinse, then step out, leaving the shower on still. It doesn't feel like enough, I could use a proper scrub down, I can tell. Soon enough I'll smell like a regular at the soup kitchen. Before I leave I check the frame of the painting above the dresser again, making sure the gum has stuck and the painting is level. I look at both paintings. The one above the bed is a small cabin scene, it looks dated, the colors faded

from the sunlight through the window. Across from it are two trees, perfectly shaped, nearly into tears, the tops of them coming to a point, with a smaller orchard of them reaching further into the distance on a beautiful day, barely a cloud in the sky. My foot rubs against something in the rug by the bed. The cigarette, fallen from my hand in the night, has left a nice burn mark in the carpet. The tape recorder has automatically stopped recording while I slept. I pocket it with the headphones and hit rewind as I step out.

Outside it's overcast, a thick layer of gray clouds threatening to melt into the buildings, which aren't so different in color. We do the whole code thing by her car and jump in.

"How was your book?" I say.

"What's your plan?"

"For what?"

"For your case?" She says.

A couple holding hands stops outside the apartment, for a moment it seems like they may kiss, but instead they trade notes then separate, one going into the apartment, the other walking on down the sidewalk. It seems like there should be something in it, something in the motion, but there isn't. There's nothing in any of it. It's opaque, like looking into milk and trying to see the penny at the bottom of the glass. And yet, there's still a glass, there's still milk, a penny. The objects the same as they would be anywhere else, just with this covering, the façade. The black cloaks and silence. Everything's so quiet. Inside the car even, just my voice, her distorted voice, but in between it's so quiet. It's maddening quiet. There's so much in that moment being passed up, so much being

left vacant and wasted. Where are the voices that guide and direct? Where is the sidewalk and walls and air that speaks? How do you know anything?

“What’s the closest school to the wall?”

“What side?” She says.

“Any,” I say. “Or all of them.”

“You want to go there?”

“I believe I would.”

As she pulls onto the street I take off my mask and slide on the headphones. I turn the volume down to a low hum, just enough to hear the air conditioning and the sound of the engine, and, if she chose to, her voice. Then in the background of the scene outside the window, as the quiet sidewalk passes, is the low static noise of the shower, an open window with cars humming on the street, and an announcer talking hopelessly about something he can never really describe.

The school is this trifecta of cubes, three grey squat things, three stories tall, connected like arms branching off from a boxy torso to boxy hands. It’s a horribly ugly building, the stucco white of it stained with years of exhaust and moss growing up its side. Grass stains, fallen shins, soccer practice. Oh, how they must save on dry cleaning with these black cloaks, no ugly stains to have to get out with a magic pen. Outside the double steel doors a figure sits on the stone steps, writing notes on a pad of paper, or maybe doodling. They rock back and forth a little, bored, antsy, maybe both. When we approach the figure stands and waves a pathetic hand. She types out a message and hands it to the figure. They type a response and hand it to her. She barely reads it before stepping in front of the figure, leading me up the stairs and through the doors.

“What was that?” I type.

“Security,” she types.

I have to hold back a laugh at this. It’s a lame attempt at safety to have some bored tall kid, I’m guessing, sit on your stoop. We pass rows and rows of lockers down the hall, each looks the same, with no numbers on them, not even a sticker or piece of paper sticking out of the slots. The floors are bleached white tile, worn in some spots, with little divots on the linoleum, scuff marks smeared away, stains of white discoloring where dirt has set so far in its turned the linoleum a shade of tan. No note of a team mascot, no trophy case, and not even a corkboard with announcements. Up and down the hall there’s just lockers and cinderblock walls painted and glazed in white.

“These kids allowed to have fun?” I type.

“There’s recess,” she types.

“How do they make friends?”

“Everyone is a friend.”

“And no one.”

She leads me to an office door that says simply, “Office,” in that font that I’m beginning to recognize as a standard of the city. A secretary takes us back through a small waiting room to a principal’s office. The secretary knocks on the door, covers up the keypad with one hand and enters a code that unlocks the door. Behind the large, oak desk a small figure types on a typewriter, the blue paper in the spool suddenly striking against the black and white of the figure’s cloak and the wall behind them. The room is unsurprisingly bare. Not a single diploma or award of excellence hangs from the wall and it strikes me as so absurd that I realize, in that moment, how just as absurd it is otherwise.

Of the many times I visited the principal's office at my children's school I waited and stared at the many framed papers she proudly hung from her wall. The loops of the letters so intricate they made them unreadable. They were proof, undoubtedly that she was capable of controlling my children and a thousand others like them that tortured the halls of her school. But it was easier for her when the walls were watching and doing half the work. Now here, with the walls so bare and stark white, and only the low noise of my headphones, there's nothing to tell me how competent this person really is. Even the way they type, pecking, one finger hunting at a time, doesn't inspire much trust. We sit down in uncomfortable steel chairs, mine dented in the bottom, as though someone kicked it with their heel. She types something and slides it quickly across the desk. The figure typing briefly looks at it. The paper melts into the wood grain, but leaves no stain or mark behind.

"Yes?" The figure types.

"I'm thinking of sending my kid here," I type.

They sit up and adjust in their seat, scooting the rolling chair a little closer to the desk. Their arms are so short they have to stretch to reach the edge. It could be a child in there.

"Oh?" They type. "You moved recently."

"Yes," I type.

"We'll certainly welcome the child."

They nod and do a little turn away, back to the typewriter, as if that's it, end of conversation, all worries approved. My tape hits a point in the night when I start to snore and it disorients me. The room spins a little before I can type out my next question.

“But, how safe is it here?”

“WE have security, of course.”

“The dope at the front door doodling naked pictures?”

“It’s just as safe as any school you’re used to.”

“When’s the last time you had a raid?”

“A raid?”

“People stealing kids.”

They slide the chair back from the desk; their hands go to their lap, shocked, they’d assure me, that I’d bring up such allegations. Next to me she’s watching the whole thing with her arms crossed, not even bothering to watch our messages pass back and forth. I’ve been purposely closing her out, trying to make her agitated to the point that she stands, and she does.

“I’ll be outside,” she types. And walks right out the door before the figure behind the desk can move.

“You’ll have to excuse them,” I type. “They take the whole thing very seriously.”

“This school has been perfectly safe for some time.”

“For some time? What happened before then?”

They sigh, their shoulders heaving under the cloak. If it weren’t for the headphones I could probably hear it across the room. On the desk there’s a pencil stand with three number two pencils and two pens, one black, one red, waiting to be used. A stack of papers sits neatly at the corner of the desk, behind the typewriter that’s turned a little to the center. In the corners behind the figure are tall filing cabinets, old ones in olive green, metal, with locks. Behind the figure is a smaller cabinet, short, only about

waist high, with a rack for “in” and “out.” The whole scene reminds me of some nightmare of a television show. The figure has a whole long message typed out for me, really straining on each key press of the note, they do it quickly, so that the paper doesn’t melt on them, but they jostle the whole thing with a controlled anger that’s leaking out.

“We are very welcoming to families new to the city, but to repeat what we consider ancient history, which we would much rather do without repeating in any case, is unnecessary for you to understand that we value the safety of all children who attend our school. Any school in this city will tell you the same. We are required, by law, just as any other school here, to provide adequate security for our students, which we certainly do.”

I get to the last word just as the sentence before fades away. What is that magic blue paper and where do they get it?

“You’re saying that there have been problems before though?”

“Didn’t the last school go over this with you?”

“No,” I type.

“This is ridiculous.”

“I agree.”

“There was a situation, as I said, in which children were taken. That’s certainly public record that you can read for yourself. But we have taken drastic measures to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Can you show me?”

This startles them with a sudden shake of the head, which they repeat for a few seconds.

“While I would love to further assure you, I sadly don’t have the time,” they type.

“But I can arrange for the secretary to take you around.”

“Lets say I’m convinced,” I type. “When can we register?”

I take a gamble, not knowing if that even works here.

“We’ll give you a confirmation number today, tomorrow, anytime.”

“And you’d turn them away without it?”

There’s another shake of the figure, from somewhere deep in the lower part of their spine.

“This is ridiculous,” they type. “Was it not the same at your previous school?”

“Of course,” I type. “But you have to be sure.”

“And that is why we have security.”

As I stand I reach a hand out across the desk, awkwardly using my left hand, holding my ticker in the right, throwing the figure off balance with the whole situation, but as I do it I look at the blue sheet. Across the top a series of numbers, the line below a “Case Number:” and another sequence, below that the beginnings of a sentence that we interrupted, “This letter is to duly inform you of the growing concerns regarding supplies short” and there it cuts off. I shake tightly, twice, feeling the small and limp hand recede from mine.

Outside I slip past the secretary and into the hall. My wrangler isn’t here, the whole halls are empty still. Not even the squeak of chalk makes its way out here. No kids wandering looking for the bathroom. No security. What a damn liar, this principal. I stroll down he hall, past a long stretch of lockers, and look inside one of the classrooms. It’s completely empty, the lights flicked off, desks sitting at the ready. On the wall are

posters, one of the solar system, another of the periodic table, another with a giant volcano cut in half to show the subsections, and one near the door with what look to be a chronological order of the presidents, but instead of faces and names, there's a giant date of the time they served with a listing of major laws or events. Founding of the country, freedom of slaves, women's vote granted, civil rights granted, gay marriage, free access of information act, and on and on the list goes up until three years ago. The door's unlocked so I step inside. Against the wall there's a bookshelf with textbooks on science, math, and history. I flip through a history book, scribbles in blue pen in the margins, yellow and pink highlights of sentences and entire paragraphs, kids leaving their traces. Everything is there, from the founding of the country up until fourteen years go, with every name and identifying label spoken around, the words dodging, ever so craftily, from having to name a single historical figure: "This country's first president was elected by the citizens from the position of army general to President of the Country (POTC)." Not even a pronoun slips its way in and when it is unavoidable: "Ous death ended a historic legacy for the country." Ou.

Down the hall I pass two more empty classrooms before reaching one with students in it. The door sits in the back of the room and I'm able to peek in and see what the teacher is doing. They type on a large screen next to them, occasionally turning to the whiteboard on the wall, drawing a neutron and a proton, typing an explanation. A kid passes up an answer to a question, the paper blue. Even here the class is half full, a full two back rows are empty. Its like even the ghosts are being haunted. These black shadows of the walking world, next to the invisible. Instead of them working together,

black hiding the thing beneath it, they have been separated, taken apart, the shadow corporeal, the invisible left to its own devices.

There's doors that lead to the back of the school, where the two arms enclose the middle portion and make a little court yard with a driveway leading up to a loading dock where lunch lady figures are unloading bulk packaged hotdog buns from a white truck. No one stands on guard here. The handle from the outside is unlocked, easy to open, slink right in. Next to the driveway is a little playground fenced in by a black painted fence. A grassy strip around its inner edge with a few trees and shrubs. Jutting out from its middle is a ratty looking playhouse with a gleaming metal slide. Wood chips circle the playhouse. Every damn playground has those wood chips. Newer ones seem to have rubber kinds, so you don't get splinters, and the kids bounce when they fall, but they look just the same. I walk in through the gate and look around the playhouse. Up on the platform, where the wooden bars keep the kids from falling off, where they'd wait to go down the slide, there's something etched into the wood. It's a very awkward climb, but I'm able to fit by walking up the slide and ducking under a metal bar. The top of the playhouse, a canvas and plastic yellow sheet, presses against my head through my cloak. All around the inside of the platform are little carved words and sentences. Some are innocent and innocuous, "HI!," "LOVE YOU," "SCHOOL SUCKS," "FUCK OU," "DICKS," but there's the stranger, "kiss your darlings goodbye," "LOVE MOTHER MOTHER SAVIOR," "electric blue zappppp!!!! your dead," "BEWARE WHITE VANS," "Baby, baby, if he hears you / as he gallops past the house / limb from limb at once he'll tear you / just as pussy tears a mouse." And there, in all this chaos of scribbled vomit, a scratching of a bird with its head cut off that couldn't be anything but a goose.

On the front steps the guard still sits with his stick held between their legs. Ou's legs, I suppose they'd say. They let it slip down and fall against the stairs, clunk loudly, bounce to a stop, then they pick it back up, holds it between their legs again, then lets it fall. I sit on the stone end of the wall that follows the stairs and pull out a cigarette. There's only one left after this.

"Want one?" I type and hold it out to them.

They take a break from playing with the stick and respond.

"No," they type.

I tilt my mask just a little, and light the cigarette under it. Feeling the wind against my exposed chin, a deep drag pulled in, these things together give me a little shiver. At the curb she's sitting in the car, the windows down on my side. With the cassette player still going everything has this feeling of being part of a dream. The bright sun and blue purity of the sky seem fake, a backdrop, a dull emotionless painting like the ones I see everywhere in the city. Harmless things that don't get anyone too mad. I think she has the radio on in the car, but it could be the radio in my apartment coming through the headphones. She looks straight ahead, her head held up by her arm against the door.

"Where are all the kids?" I type.

"What do you mean?"

They let the stick fall again, clattering on the steps, nearly slipping out of their reach.

"Three, maybe more, classrooms empty, or half full. Seems like there's should be more kids for a city this size."

"Do I look like the mayor?" They type. "How the hell should I know?"

“You could be the mayor,” I type. “I could be the mayor. Any of us could be.

Isn’t that the point?”

They shrug, let the stick fall, and pull it up again.

“You go to school here?”

“I’m no kid.”

They’re tall and lengthy, but not adult sized. When they reach for the stick I can see the thinness of their wrists. There’s slackness in their shoulders that let’s them slink from the neck like the body gave up. Things about them still look disproportional, not yet grown in, waiting to flesh out.

“How old are you?”

“Fuck off,” they type.

I take a long drag from the cigarette. The ember reflects a dark orange on the meshwork inside the mask. If it weren’t for the headphones I could hear it crackle, I know, I can feel it practically on my lips, the crackling of the burning paper.

“You been to any of the other schools?” I type.

“One across town,” they type. “For a basketball game.”

Funny, even with all the anonymity they still have teams.

“There more kids there?”

They shrug; let the stick clatter against the stairs. Before they pick it back up they type out, “Sure, I guess. Why’s it matter?”

“Seems weird is all,” I type. “That all these desks are empty. Like they expected more and nobody show. Kids ever go missing around here?”

“Every day, man.”

They pick up the stick.

“Where do they go?”

They shrug, waving their hand like shooing away a fly.

“Seen a van take a kid once. Just pulled up and yanked ou in.”

“You report it?”

They look up at me and their shoulders shudder for a moment, a soft chuckle, a boy’s voice, comes out. He shakes his head.

“Any others?”

He lets the stick fall, picks it up, then he does a little thing, grabbing the stick by one end, flicking his wrist, flipping it up into the air like a baton, and catches it again. I take a final drag from the cigarette, letting the smoke drift into my nostrils, smoke is still trapped in the mask, watering my eyes, stinging my skin. It feels horrible. It would be enough to give it up if my skin wasn’t buzzing, if there wasn’t a calm edge to the moment, a little bit of lax in the day.

“I was screwing around in the grocery once,” he types. “Stealing sour gummies and a soda. A little kid was strung to his mother next to me, but she wasn’t paying no attention. Some dick comes up and cuts the leash and bolts out the door. Most mom’s, my mom, at least, used metal leashes ‘cause of that shit, but this one missed the memo. Fucked up my day.”

“You say ‘mother,’” I type, “How do you know?”

“She screamed and broke down. Started crying right there in the candy. They dragged her out like that.”

“Who? Where’d they take her?”

He shrugs, drops the stick against the stairs, and waves his hand again, dismissing a whole person in the air. I offer him the last cigarette, holding the pack out to him, but he waves it away.

“Thanks,” I type.

I step down past him, then stop.

“You ever let kids sneak in,” I type. “If they forget their code or something?”

“What code?” he types.

And there it is, security hard at work. A system broken and falling apart. When the gatekeeper doesn’t even bother to ask who’s there. I nod and flash him the peace sign, make sure my mask is fully down, and step off. Behind me I hear the stick fall in a clatter against the stairs. I toss my cigarette butt on the street and get in the car with her. As the windows draw up the boy stands on the stairs, tosses the stick in the air, and catches it.

She pulls off, not asking where we’re going, just driving. Under her cloak there’s a jolting motion, her leg bouncing against the floor of the car. She’s antsy, bored, ready to snap for something.

“I need some cigarettes,” I say. “You smoke?”

“No,” she says. Her voice crackles with the short bark of the electric word.

“Where do you get the blue paper? The kind that doesn’t disintegrate?”

“City approval.”

“I’ve seen a ticker use a recycling roll that didn’t disintegrate.”

“Who?”

I hold up my hands, palms up, a gesture of helplessness.

“They wouldn’t give me their name,” I say. “Can you believe that?”

There's a sharp bark that I swear is a laugh, but could also be a scoff or cough or sneeze.

"The first tickers worked like that," she says. "Paper didn't fade. There's probably still some around, but it's pretty rare, most got used up."

"Can I put an order in for the blue stuff?"

"Why?"

"How do you build a case when all your files blow away like smoke?"

"Memory," she says.

"Bullshit," I say. "Even you have courts, surely. Memory doesn't do you any good with a judge."

We stop at a light and at the corner two figures are trading cash for a little bag of white powder. Around them figures move without pausing. Nobody seems to notice the drug trade. I tap on the window, pointing.

"You going to do something about that?" I say.

"Keep watching them," she says.

They turn from each other, the figures that passed the drugs stepping out into the street, crossing with the white little figure blinking on the other side. The one with the money turns in the other direction. It's difficult, but I'm able to track them both in the crowds, as they move on, in opposite directions. The lone figure with the newly purchased white bag steps around couples and parents with children and figures with briefcases, pushing and jostling, trying to get a nice jog going, but the street is too crowded. The other two reach the corner across the street, one stops and the other walks on, they walk too far, someone steps out from a shop behind them, another person runs

across the street at the last minute, fills in the gap, hides the figure. The light turns green.

She starts forward. The figure with the new purchase is already gone, shuffled in the crowd, another shadow blending in with its brothers and sisters. That leaves the lone figure on the corner, waiting to cross the street again.

“And now?” She says.

“At least you’d get one.” I say, tapping on the glass as we pass the figure waiting.

“Who likely holds nothing on them.”

“So they walk.”

“No harm, no foul.”

“This time,” I say.

“And perhaps never.”

“That’s a lot of trust in your criminals.”

“Drugs have been legalized for years,” she says. “Show me the crime.”

“Sale without license is still a crime.”

“Not here.”

She taps the steering wheel with her palm, three times. Tap, tap, tap. The glove moves in a little black flurry.

“Where the hell am I going?” she says.

“Cigarettes,” I say. “Please.”

In the little corner store that she finds I buy three packs of cigarettes, a handle of whiskey, and some cereal. I don’t buy milk because I figure it’ll sit in the car while we go wherever we go next. One figure leans on the counter, trading notes back and forth with the teller.

“You two friends?” I type.

“My favorite customer,” the teller types.

“How’d it start?”

“Ou comes in, buys pack of gum, everyday. I hear ou chew, chew chew. We talk, trade words. Ou’s good company.”

On the TV that hangs from the ceiling some afternoon news is showing pictures of a car crash. Two cars, alike in everywhere, collided head on into one another. Around the scene a yellow “DO NOT CROSS” tape closes it off. Figures are peaking around it, gathered like seagulls kept at bay from a boat of fish. Two other cars, also duplicates of those that crashed, flash red and white from somewhere inside their windows. I never noticed if hers have these lights. Across the bottom of the screen the caption says, “ONE DEAD, TWO INJURED IN SUBURB COLLISION.”

“Stay safe,” I type, gesturing to the screen.

When I get into the car I check around the interior for where lights may be hidden.

“You got blue and reds in this thing?”

“Why would we need them?”

“Great,” I type.

At another light she taps again on the steering wheel. Outside, in front of a café, I see another trade going on. The same little white baggies being handed over, green cash slipped from gloved hand to gloved hand. But this figure, the one taking the money, is small, short, their wrists and gloved hands the size of a child’s. The other figure is tall and looming over them, but there is a secret agreement between them, a fear on the larger

figure's part, perhaps, that if they were to try and overpower the child, another figure would emerge from the crowd and do worse. My runaway is a smart girl. She would go to school, maybe, to continue learning, which she seemed to enjoy. But here, so clearly, is a child who has skipped that, just as there are kids on the outside who do this too, for one reason or another, sling drugs, skip the school, for the money. There's no money in going to school. Maybe she'd get one meal a day at school, but there'd be no shelter, no breakfast, no dinner. But here, slinging drugs, she could get all that.

I step out of the car just as the light turns and she's about to pull away. There's a sudden bark behind me. My eyes stay on the small child with the drugs and money. They seem not to notice me. The taller figure has turned already and gone as just another shadow into the crowd. The child goes the other way, to my right, down the sidewalk. Someone honks their car behind me on the street, either her or someone pissed behind her. It's midday; the sidewalk is packed with shoving figures. They bend around each other or move others out of the way. A suitcase bangs into my knee, I step on someone's foot, the figure ahead of me steps on someone else's cloak and there's a fluster until they're released. No one says sorry, or stops to apologize, trading notes, trading sympathies. The crowd moves on, around each other like black water. These things are everyday consequences here. Cloaks dragging on the street, the more worn of them frayed at the bottoms. Ahead of me the kid pauses at a street corner. There's a moment when they step in one direction, as though to cross, but the signal has not yet flashed with the white figure, it is still an orange hand, buzzing angrily. In my headphones my snoring has stopped. There's a knock at my door and I hear myself yawn and get up, the bed creaking. Under my cloak I find the cassette player. The child steps back onto the corner,

they move to step the other way, but again the orange hand is flashing, buzzing, but they do not turn back to the white figure that now flashes in the direction they originally intended to go, a soft positive blooping sound, beaconing others across. It's a dance, I realize. The child is doing a purposeful gesture. A signal of their own. When the signals change again the child makes the same motion, stepping out, then back. It's almost comical. The child, a foolish cartoon, always too late to make its way in the direction it desires, forced back, only to make the same mistake again, misreading the stop as go and go as stop and the cars serving as the only correction. I rewind the tape in the cassette, feeling it whirl in my hands. Another large figure walks up to the child, they trade drugs and cash. Once the trade is done the child makes their way across the street, heading to my right, and I follow.

A little behind me as I follow the child I sense a car creeping. I first catch it in one of the shop windows, the reflection of one white whale moving slower than those pushing and shoving their way around it. A few cars honk as they pass. It must be her, following me, wondering what the hell I'm doing, but it's impossible that she'd be able to. I'm one black cloak among many, lost in the shuffle of the sidewalk. How could she know where I am? And if it's not her, then who?

The child finishes another transaction and walks halfway down the street. Their form shifts under the cloak. Their shoulders and waist move, right where the pockets in their cloak would be. They're searching for something, more drugs, maybe, or readjusting a stash or a weapon. Once settled they move on, faster now, not stopping at corners. It's more difficult at this speed. I almost lose the child as they bolt at the last minute across a street, the lights nearly changing before I can step out into traffic. We pass over and then

down a one-way street. The car following me has to drive on, further down the street. I take the chance and look back, over my shoulder. Their windows are rolled down, a single stout figure driving the car. On the cassette tape my snoring is starting up again, I'm falling deeper into sleep, yet here, on the street, my heart is picking up. The kid must know I'm following because they're quick to duck around figures, step between couples, breaking their linked hands, their arms tucked in elbows, broken by this quick black wind. And I follow in their wake, through the empty spaces they create, not heeding any training, any foot work done before because I know if I do, if I try to play it smooth, if I fall back to let them think I've lost him that I actually will. They stick to the packed sidewalks, ignoring the streets we pass where they're empty, keeping to the causeways, the main streets, the streets with stores and shops and lunch cafes and coffee shops where business carrying figures crowd my vision. I get so close, so close I could reach and touch their shoulder. Then they turn, slipping right in front of another figure, spilling coffee over their cloak. We go down an alley, crowded in its own way with boxes of junk and a white van parked, the back doors open, a stack of crates already half loaded inside. The little figure runs, their cloak pulled up, little black clad legs pumping quickly against the concrete. I follow still, pulling at my robes, mimicking the awkward jumble of holding everything in my cloak bundled together, including the bulk of the fabric, like a baby at my stomach. The child runs for the van, which seems wedged into the alley, both sides of it blocked off with large metal trash bins. It's hopeless for him, unless he thinks he can jump into the van and crawl through it before I get there. In my ears is the sound of my snoring, in my mask is my heavy breathes, the burning of my lungs so ash laden, thickened. My throat feels fuzzy and harsh like sandpaper and it scratches all the way

down to my heart as I breathe. I slow my pace, taking my time, knowing the child is caught. But he's not stopping, he runs at full speed, right up to the van, then slides, as if playing baseball, under the van. He makes it only a third of the way in, the friction of the pavement much less giving than the dirt of a field. Again I'm running, again my heart is pounding and crying in my chest. He wiggles, shaking himself back and forth as he grabs the van and pushes himself further and further. By the time I get there he's too far for my reach. My hand misses his mask by a good distance. I get down on hands and knees, down on my chest, try to follow him, but its an even tighter fit for me, my cloak catches on something, tugging me back. There's a sudden fear, fully imagined, of someone starting the van, back up, tearing the skin off my back or dragging me on the road. The concrete is cold against my chest through the cloak, the van above giving off a heat that doesn't help my sense of fear. As I stretch my arm toward the child it hurts the muscles of my shoulder and arm pit to the point that the strain becomes a burning, stabbing pain. My shoulder pops. Someone grabs my leg and my cloak. They pull me back and now I'm fighting to stay under, trying to pull myself toward the child who is reaching the other side of the van. My legs kick and strike dull skin. Someone yells. The child is out, they sit up, jump to their feet and run off, down the alley where bright sunlight blesses the stream of shadow figures.

The hands are more forceful, they drag me out and the friction pulls my cloak up. My mask scrapes against the concrete, giving an awful sound. Two figures stand above me. I kick one in the shins again and roll to punch the other in the crotch, but I'm grabbed from above, from someone in the van. They stop my arm and hold it there, poised so close to its target. The figure I aimed for kicks me in the gut. It's so close to the cassette

tape. In my ears I'm snoring, the shower is running, and on the radio is a soft mellow tune with guitars and jazz piano. I'm kicked in the back by the other figure, then the chest, then the ass, right in my ass. I curl into the fetus position, my legs coming up, my other hand cupping my balls. The figure in the van holds on to my other arm, holds it above my head, exposing my chest and stomach that I can't protect fully, and the figures take advantage of this, punching and kicking me. Then they stop, suddenly, and hoist me up. I try to stay tucked into a ball, but they aren't having it. They sit me on the edge of the van. Out at the end of the alley a car has stopped. Its window is rolled down and there she is, her stout figure, watching. My head is bent to the side by a large hand, the hand from the back of the van, forced to my right shoulder. Something sharp pierces my neck and I know it is a syringe when a cold fluid enters under my skin. In my ear, with the headphones knocked a little skew, one resting uncomfortably against my jaw, the other barely holding to my earlobe, in my ear, in my ear I am snoring.

Chapter Thirteen

The kitchen still hangs with the smell of the stew that he forced me to eat. A sick warm acid hangs in my stomach, heavy like fist. I'm nauseous, but to throw up now would only make the situation worse. Feeling that shaking weakness that vomiting can bring, how it upsets the whole body, would make everything worse. So I let the stew with parts of a man sit in my stomach. There's a terrible guilt in it. A terrible feeling of horror in having someone inside me, inside my stomach, with their soul possibly itching around in my head, clawing its way into my own soul. We learned in school that some cultures believed that eating their enemies brought them the power and strength of that person, but I feel none of this, I feel no stronger, only guilt even though I'm not responsible. The whole kitchen is dim, with only the light above the stove still on. Outside the garden is hidden by the black of night and only my dim reflection hangs like a ghost. The light from the stove is there too, like some dying sun. Next to this sun is the slick shape, a cutting sliver of steel, the handles of knives in the wooden block.

I lift my arm without difficulty. It is still weak. When I make a fist I can feel the strain in my muscles and how they don't really push against my skin in the way I expect. They are soft still, as if muffled, as if under pillows, as if not fully awake. But I can stand, I can wiggle my toes and hold myself up on the table with my arms. My legs waver a bit, just a little ripple, the same weakness is there, the pressure of the muscles is soft and gravity is so heavy. The linoleum has a little chill to it where my feet have not touched it. Across my flesh little goose bumps raise and then disappear as I step forward. With one hand out and the other still on the edge of the table I step forward. The air feels so empty, more empty than it has ever been, without strength to hold me up I could fall into it, float

away, only to be pulled harshly to the floor a moment later. And there is the unexpected, a dizziness that swirls in my head, a lingering little wave that pokes against the walls of my skull, rippling in the wake of something much larger. On the counter, across the little island that sticks out from the wall, I can see them, waiting for me, shining in the tan light. There is no sound in the house. Not even the cracks of it adjust in the cold, these noises that scared me so much when I was younger and my mother would try to explain but it was no use, I was convinced it was someone coming for me, a monster, a burglar, a dark shrouded figure with a face of steel, and now I wouldn't be so wrong. But there is none of that, it is silent. My feet stick to the linoleum and when I lift them there is the sound of skin unsuctioning and peeling up. I step forward, falter a little, wiggle in the air. My right hand is out, reaching toward the island, as though my eyes are closed and feeling in the dark. I step again and my body shakes forward, causing me to quickly lunge at the island, falling into it, my ribs, just below my chest, hitting across its cold surface. Holding on to the island I make my way around it until I face the counter, my weight leaning against the island. One step away, my hands out. And when I have it in my hand it feels unbelievable to be holding this object. This long dangerous blade, curving with such precision, such beautiful of a bend, the slight grade of it, a mathematical reality, perfectly measured, coming to a point so small its invisible. It's heavier than it seems it should be, the weight of the handle somehow wrong, with the weight in the tip of it, trying to pull the knife forward, out of my hand, and also into it, from the end of the handle, the handle so slick. I turn, expecting him to be there, lunging at me, but there is only the darkness of the kitchen and the room adjacent to it.

I walk through the kitchen, my hand pressing against the wall, the pantry door, the corner. Down the hall my hand presses again against the smooth white wall, the glass of a picture frame, the image of which I can't see because here it is also dark, here the light is also off. Underneath my feet the carpet is oddly comforting. Not for the softness, but for the way it hides my footsteps. Down the hall the door comes closer. Streetlight shines warmly through the windows at its top. There are three windows, small rectangles, beveled around their edges from which a warm glow, close to the color of the light above the stove, beckons me toward it. I stop, paranoid, sensing something behind me, but when I turn there is nothing. Behind me there is only the darkness of the house, fading from the light at the door into a pure blackness the color of a robe. If he is there, waiting, there is nothing I can do but blindly slash when he comes near enough for me to know. Watching both the front and back I move closer to the door. At the end of the hall it opens into the living room and the stairs above on my right. I press myself against the wall opposite the stairs, watching them, watching behind me, watching the door. He may reach down, grab me by the hair, and so I press my head against the wall, moving my body across a framed painting, another picture in glass, around a small table there whose objects I don't bother to look at. At the end of the hall I peek my head around the corner and see him standing there. The shock of it causes me to flinch, the knife stabbing a small hole in the wall. He stares out the window, the blinds parted by his fingers. The slick red scarring of his face a soft amber in the glow of the street lights, highlight his eyes. The door is only a few steps away. I could crawl on the floor quietly, but that would be slower. I prepare myself, holding the edge of the wall, and awkwardly fling myself across the gap, trying to move like a shadow to the door. But my legs are not ready for quick movement, I stumble and

fall into the corner on the other side of the opening to the living room, my shoulder runs into the wall and pain shoots there.

“Hey,” he says.

I still hold the knife, tight.

“Come look,” he says.

He holds out a hand to me. I raise the knife up, my muscles in my arm straining, why do they still hurt so much now. My other shoulder starts to throb as the shock of the injury fades. The light must catch it, or he’s known its there all along.

“This would be a bad time for that,” he says. “Later you can try. Come look.”

He waves me forward, his hand still stretched out to me.

“Come look, come look.”

I lower the knife to my stomach, the blade pointing toward him, ready to thrust it at him should he make a move toward me. When I shift the weight off my shoulder the blood rushes to it and makes me cringe. It’s a bad tingling, a stabbing, so appropriate it seems. It makes it difficult to hold on to anything as I step once, then again, toward him. When I’m near enough he wraps a hand around my shoulder, careful not to touch the injured one, rests it on my upper arm. Slowly, with care, he guides me to the window and opens the blinds again with his fingers.

“Look,” he says. “Across the street.”

Outside was a suburb street like my own at home, the houses identical in the night, dim stucco white and black windows. Across the street under a streetlight sat a white van with the back doors open, two arms reaching into the night. The front door of

the house the van parked in front of was open, a figure standing, their shape lit from a light inside.

“They’re here for you,” he says.

His voice comes like a whisper over my shoulder. The words brush my hair. His whole body hovers there, not touching, but present in every other way, the heat, the smell of him, giving a certain cloudlike energy around me, a dark halo transferring the words.

Inside the house there’s a flash that lights up the front window, a sudden blue light like lightning across the glass. I can imagine a storm going on inside, a dark cloud pressing against the window, unleashing a wet wind that sweeps across the carpet, darkening a path that it sets on fire in one blast of heat. But none of that is contained. Instead it sweeps outside, the figure at the door stepping out, leading four other figures, and a woman between them. The woman’s naked body a stark white among the black cloaks, shoved from one to the other as they step onto the lawn. One steps behind her and kicks her legs, sending her to her knees. Another steps in front of her, a long stick in our hand. She screams something at them and I hear the pain in her voice but not the words they make.

“Do you recognize her?” He says.

I shake my head. But I know who she is. I don’t remember her face, now exposed to the air, but its details invisible at this distance and light, but her body, the legs, her breasts, these I remember below the cape she wore. Even from here, even in the dimness, I cannot mistake a body I saw, only hours ago, crouched above me, swirling in a nightmare.

“She knows,” he says. “She knows, right, where you are. Right here. Right across the street. She helped me carry the bodies. She helped me place you in the kitchen. She begged me to take you. She knows. She could point to you and they would come for you.”

The figure holds the long black stick out in front of the woman and lightning shoots from its end. It is held, with such practice, that it is far enough to do no real damage but singe the air at her face. Her whole body flinches backwards, away from it, into the legs of the figure behind her. She is rustled up again, held by the figure behind her, held straight up, and the stick is placed against her cheek.

“But she won’t,” he says.

His gloved finger presses against the middle of my back and traces a question mark, dotting the end at the small of it.

“Why?” He says.

The figure behind the woman releases her, steps back, and before she can move back with him the lightning strikes again, disappearing into her body as it writhes and falls slack onto the grass. They pause together, all of them stand still, as if waiting to catch their breath, or for something larger to come, a train, a tornado, the call from the clouds, but there is none of that. Nothing comes for them. The night stays silent around them until the figure with the stick steps toward the woman, places the end of it again against her body, and lights up the night.

“You could save her,” he says. “This woman who drugged you, forced you to castrate a man, planned to rape you, killed two men, one her husband, and fed them to her neighbor. But you could save her. You know where she will go. What delights await her.

If you go, now, you can take her place. Claim she did no ill will. Claim fault of only your own. Tell them of me. I will not stop you.”

In my hand the knife is slipping with the wet of my palms. The two figures pick her up and with the other two they drag her body into the van. When he stops speaking in my ear there is another sound, a ringing, the quiet piercing my head. I can feel the cold of the room they’d take me to, the concrete floor, the broken wall, the stiff bed without a sheet, the mother goose smiling down on me, and lavender, a soft scent of lavender takes the air. My hand grips the knife again, feeling the handle of it, the warm metal there. If I stabbed him now, would he make a sound? Would he shout and draw them here? Do I have enough strength, to strike quickly, before he can stop me, enough aim to go for the throat? As if to answer all these questions my body turns numb. It tingles and is numb at once, to the point where I cannot feel the knife, only the skin that holds it, with little pins prickling it.

They are closing the doors of the van. Two figures sit in the back with her, two get in the front.

“This is your decision,” he says. “Remember this. I offered you their keep, but you chose mine instead.”

His hand touches mine, where I grip the knife. Warm leather moves over my fingers, encasing my whole hand.

“You’ll hurt yourself,” he says.

There’s not a moment of resistance, not a hesitation when I let the knife go and he takes it from me. The tip of it gently, almost indistinct from the prickling inside my skin that has numbed and faded away, presses at my back, where he dotted the question mark.

A bee sting would feel more painful, more severe, this is barely there at all. The prick of a pin, pushed through the top layer of the skin, left to hang there, my finger a pin cushion, I'd done it before with my mother's needles, I'd shown her and she did the same and together when we pulled them away we looked at the small holes they made and I picked at mine until the raw red skin underneath dotted the swirl of my finger. It feels like that, just like that, then it's gone.

"Why did no one help her?" I say.

The engine of the van rumbles through the glass. As it pulls away he lets the blinds close, taking his fingers away. The cloud of his body drifts away from mine. In front of the window at my thighs is a short bookshelf. On top of it are figurines of animals and a small plate on a frame that makes it stand. A ceramic cat's shadow bends from across the shelf and onto my thigh, its little ears making an M.

"Because the city is dying," he says. "It has a cancer, eating it from inside, flesh and bone. Right through the blood stream."

"I don't understand."

My head feels light and the floor leans backward, so I fall forward, my hand clattering into the blinds, bending them. My thighs knock into the shelf and all the figurines dance, their feet as unsure as mine, but none of us fall. A hand rests on my shoulder, the good one, the one undamaged. Through the dark he guides me to a chair. I stare at my thighs, my feet, the ground, to avoid looking at his face so closely. Little upraised bumps line the fabric of the chair and feel alien against my skin. But it's so soft, the stuffing, my body sinks a little into it. Then my body sinks further into it. A slow weight pressing on my forehead, trying to guide it down.

“I’m not tired,” I say. I’m not sure why.

“A great exodus has happened,” he says. “Or, it’d be more right to say there were never enough for an exodus to occur. Some fool built these houses, without a market to fill them, and so they sit, unused, except two.”

“No one else is here.”

He sits down in another chair across the room and sets the knife on a table next to a glass full of water.

“Said so simply,” he says.

We sit in the dark waiting for something, I’m not sure what. There’s nothing left to do with our neighbor gone. In my stomach is a tight knot. In my shoulder is a burning ache. Being so aware of my body again, its discomforts, is not a reality for hope. Where could I be but here? Home, in my bed, my mother downstairs smoking. In a cell, somewhere, waiting to be taken again. And there are more, more places I imagine and picture, my classroom, the car, the park, and on the places appear, almost visible in the room, in the dark where I can shape things to my desire by imagining the shadows bending or the whole scene fading away. But when these places do not fully materialize the dimensions of the room, the depth that exists in the shadows, with this disfigured face watching me from the twin of my chair, the horrible realness of this scene, its inescapable physical reality, is at its most striking. Despite the man across from me I feel alone here. A cold emptiness sits just under my skin. The vulnerability the shadows create feels inescapable, as though the air itself could turn and attack me.

“Who are you?” I say.

“Oh,” he says. “You’re a naughty girl.”

The glass next to him flashes in the dim light. The water within it so clear it could be no different from the glass that contains it. When he sets it down he clears his throat. From somewhere above him a light materializes, his hand falling from its switch to the knife on the table. Under the light his face is even more distorted than I saw earlier. Shadows play across the twisting knots of visible muscle. The whole of it looks like some pink fruit, mashed and mangled and placed back on the skeleton underneath. Most of his nose is torn away. The skin around his lips are tight ends of skin, no sign of their fleshy bumps, just slick slits through which his teeth sometimes flash visible, white and yellow, misaligned. His lack of eyebrows and eyelashes make him seem more naked than anything else. Even when he blinks the lids are of that same raw pink, flashing over deep brown eyes, and I wonder how he did it, how he skinned even his eyelids. The thought of this makes me cringe, my neck withdrawing. Because he's bald the light shines brightly on the top of his scalp, as if it's waxed like the hood of a car, and the small nubs of his ears seem impossible to hear with. He smiles at me, the scarred muscles contorting the pink flesh inside the shadows of the lamp. With the shadows his smile bends and spirals back into itself, his cheeks supported by darkness and not the muscle of anything human.

“Come,” he says.

He stands with a grunt, the knife coming easily in his hand, hanging casually at his side. His hand hangs out between us, waiting for me to take it. It flicks, gestures again, growing impatient and so I take it.

He leads me past the kitchen and into a hallway. The knife flashes and a light flicks on in the hallway. He uses it like an arrow, pointing from the light switch to down the hall. We stop in front of a door, like any of the others in the house, wood with a brass

handle. There's no word, no elaborate speech or introduction, he just lets my hand drop and opens the door. Inside are several shelves of mannequin heads, white things with only the vague hint of the human face in their molding, but on them are pinned masks. Masks of every color of flesh, some darker than I'd ever seen, lit with elaborate lighting along the edge of the shelves. A small spotlight captures each mask and casts a disfigured shadow on the wall behind it. These masks are like the rubber one he showed me before. There is something about the room that makes me dizzy and faint. My head is a little lightheaded and I lean against the doorframe, not because I'll fall, but because the extra support is comforting. In the middle of the room are two heads, one with a dark mask, the other a white and pale mask of a man with a short beard attached. A fan on the table oscillates between the two masks, spritzing them with water that shoots out from a hose attached to it. Next to the fan is a larger lamp, shining so bright on the faces that they appear brighter than human flesh could be. Flesh. Something hangs in that word, some heavy meaning that sinks down my neck and rests heavy in my stomach. Flesh. The flesh of, what? Next to me he is smiling, his hand has taken hold of mine again; I didn't even notice him doing it. Behind that look is an answer to a question I don't understand, he knows something, is laughing at me for not getting the joke. But I do know it. I know it already in my heart, which has made itself uncomfortably present in my chest. It is an unwelcome guest, spreading its arms wide across my body with a cold heavy strumming. It's too much. I step back, understanding the smell of leather and decay, his twisted smile. He doesn't let go of my hand, but waits until our arms are taught against each other.

“They won't bite,” he says.

“I don’t want to.”

His hand tightens around mine, not enough to be painful, but enough to know it’s there, and won’t be letting go.

“You don’t want to? Why didn’t you say so before?”

He pulls me back to the doorframe. The weight of my body caught by his arm alone. My feet drag across the carpet. He holds me close to his body and I can smell the cooked stew still on him with a waxy odor that makes my stomach turn.

“I am tired,” he says.

I expected something else, a threat, his hand or the knife on my body. Instead his face slackens. He blinks twice, the lids heavy, resting for a moment before they open again. He gestures with the knife to the two faces on the table in the center.

“This is nothing to be proud of,” he says. “This is not my choosing or doing. Two men I never asked for delivered to my door like flaming bags of shit. I am the fool that took them in. And there is nothing I enjoy of it.”

Sadness lingers in his voice. He releases my hand and steps inside the room. There is a dream-like quality to how he moves across the room. He takes drifting steps; each one ends abruptly, incomplete in some way. I step backward into the hall. If I were to run toward the front door, he would chase after me, but I’m fast and don’t have to worry about a cloak catching my legs and tripping me. But there’s nothing out there even if I made it. Empty houses for several blocks, maybe more, I don’t know how large the abandoned suburb is. He picks up an older face, one near the door on his right. Its eyebrows are thin, the slenderness of it could mean its female, but there’s no way to tell, really, because they’re all drained and slack on their fake heads.

“A young one,” he says. “Not too much older than you. There was a myth about a woman that could see the future, but she was cursed in a way that made no one believe her predictions, not even when they came true. Years ago there was a man like this myth. He ranted and raved and told stories that no one believed.”

He sets the face down, giving it a gentle pat on the forehead before turning back to me. A moment passes where he looks uncertain. His fleshy brow pulled tighter. The dark brown pits of his eyes stare above me.

“Did they come true?”

“Pardon?”

“Did the stories come true? The ones he told.”

“No,” he says. “They were right not to believe him.”

“I don’t get it.”

He looks down at me. A cold chill runs over my skin and I cross my arms over my chest. In his dark glare his eyes seem to look through my skin to something deeper. Now his body shivers as well, the knife shaking in the light and its reflection dances across the hall.

“Were you the man?” I say.

“No,” he says. “I believed him.”

He turns back to the room and backs out of it, closing the door behind him.

“Then I killed that girl. I followed her home and she sung for me while I cooked. After we ate I had her sing again and while she sang I cut her throat, stealing her voice, as it were. When her boyfriend came home we were both gone. And I went back the next night and listened to the man again.”

“Who was he?”

In the dim light of the hall he presses the side of his head against the wall. Half his face is hidden in the shadow. Next to him a picture of a bird, a red one all alone, sitting on a branch covered in snow. The scene of the picture is comforting. The bird sits like a tiny flame inside the cold. He waves his hand, dismissing the question.

“Another faceless one.”

His hand presses on my shoulder and I cry with the pain that shoots from it. A sharp pain rings out through my body. He lightens its touch but doesn't pull it away. His hand guides me, cringing as I go, down the hallway and into a bedroom with the hall light jutting across the bed. He flicks the switch. There is only one bed, pushed against the center of a wall. Outside the window it is pitch black, but it must be the garden outside.

“Sing for me,” he says.

“I don't sing.”

“Won't?”

“Can't.”

He pushes me to the bed and I sit at the edge of it. There are sheets on the bed. I rub the palm of my hand along its taught fabric. A cool softness rolls along under my touch. I can't help myself from pulling at the sheet, tugging the whole thing away from the sheet underneath, exposing the pillows at the head of the bed. The sheets are blue with dark blue stripes, two of them, along the top edge. Underneath, the pillows are blue and yellow in thick bands of color. They smell clean, a fresh, almost pine-like, scent, and I am so relieved that there isn't a hint of lilac. I put my fingers to my nose and breathe

deeply. Next to the bed is a small table, a dark oak, with a small clock next to a lamp. The clock's hands roll over the numbers, sweeping away the night.

"It's a shame," he says.

I look up, expecting to find him naked, his body scarred from head to toe, the skin pink and twisted everywhere, but he is still clothed, his cloaked undisturbed. He stands in the doorway, looking out the window behind. The light flicks off and his silhouette seems taller in the hall light.

"I'd lock the door," he says.

It closes with a click. I cross the room in the dark and lock the knob. For a moment it seems too quiet. The darkness itself may have swallowed him whole. His existence could be only an illusion of the shadows. Maybe I imagined the whole thing and the house is truly empty, abandoned here with all the others in the lot. My hand moves to the light switch but when I feel it I draw it back. Through the door there's a soft tapping, tap, tap, tap, as small as the point of a knife. The doorknob jiggles under my hand. Under the door the light of the hallway shifts. I step back; afraid he may slide the knife under the crack and slice my feet. But there is nothing, only silence again until his footsteps retreat down the hall.

To walk to the bed I have to hold my arms out and wave them back and forth in front of me until I feel the softness of its sheets. They come as a relief. Waving around in the dark frightens me, not in the dark itself, but that he, or another person hidden away, may be found by my hands. But that doesn't happen. I sit on the bed and look out the window, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The light in the hall goes out. I sit longer, listening for him to tap and try the door again. My breath is tight in my chest. I lift my

feet off the floor and scoot back along the bed until I reach the pillows and the edge of the sheets. I slide my legs under the sheet and a tingle goes up my neck, bristling all the little hairs and the hair on my head, not stopping until it's reached my scalp. The soft pressure of the sheet on my legs feels like a hug. It's a conflicting emotion, really, to feel so unsafe in the darkness here, with so many possibilities for a trap, with this man just outside the door waiting with a knife, and yet, for the first time in months I can wrap myself beneath these sheets. The memory of my room at home and pulling the sheets over my head as I read wells up in my chest. I lay down against the pillow, and let out a soft cry in surprise at how it seems to melt around my head, allowing me to sink inside it. In my mother's room she kept pillows like these, she said they were full of feathers, and too nice for me to use. I miss her. But I miss her like I've always done, the version of her I knew, the one that fills my oldest memories, my first days at school, the first birthdays, her teaching me about the garden, these are the mother I miss. And in the darkness I can almost feel her there. Her body, sometimes curled around mine, warming me as the sun did, a dark, quiet sun. The feathers in the pillow, I remember, were goose feathers.

The sun is already filling the garden when he knocks on the door. On the nightstand by the bed the clock says it's 9:12. Despite how awful he may be, the garden is beautiful. It feels horrible to give him this credit. Like in suggesting this, in saying that he's able to tend to the flowers in a way that keeps them more vibrant than my mom was able, I'm in some way, I guess, saying it's OK what he's done. But it's not what I mean at all. It's only that the garden is so beautiful. The morning dew still hangs off the petals of red and orange flowers, their stocks long and bending slightly toward the ground. Smaller bulbs of purple and blue run along the edge of the grass, reaching far back into the yard.

Even the grass is trimmed to a crisp edge and a rich green the color of a crayon. He knocks again on the door. The sheets are a twisted nest on the bed and I pause as I pass by it, but shrug without doing a thing. When I open the door he's smiling down at me. In the sunlight his face is a lighter pink, almost a soft rose or pastel.

"Are you hungry?" He says.

I nod. I have to use the bathroom as well. Once I'm done I go into the kitchen where he is already cracking eggs into a skillet. He's put on an apron, a red one with dark stains across the chest, and it looks funny over his cloak. Slices of bacon sit on a plate next to the stove, still uncooked. The sliding door along the kitchen table is full of light and dust motes pass through it in slow twirls. I sigh and go to the door. The warmth of the sun presses against my skin. And when I close my eyes the bright redness of its light makes me smile.

"Go outside," he says.

I unlock the handle of the door and slide it open. A burst of birdsong floats into the kitchen. A small brown bird sits on the fence between the yards, crying out to a companion much further away. Under my feet the concrete of the patio is still cool with morning, but warming, I can tell. The smell of the flowers is almost overwhelming. They're sweet, nothing like sugar, but almost a waxy, thick, kind of sweetness. I walk further out until my feet are in the grass. Its soft blades tickle the arches of my feet. The bird, seeing me enter the yard, flutters off and disappears, then reappears as it flies higher over another fence. Then, in a great swarm, a whole flock of the birds appears from over one of the abandoned houses and seems to twirl in the sky before disappearing again over another. I sit in the grass. The little blades bending and unbending under my body,

moving on their own, as if alive. Closer to them now I recognize the blue flowers that follow the grass line around its yard, but I don't remember the name my mother called them. Their petals feel like silk, softer even, than any fabric I've felt. And she would rub one against my cheek. Telling me to eat it. But I knew better, I remembered when she told me they were not for eating, the tone of voice she used then, and now, when she rubbed it against my cheek, and instead I laughed. They are annuals. You must replace them every year, taking out their roots, replacing them with new bulbs, she showed me how. She tilled the mulch, cut back the shrubs, and mowed the grass herself. If I told her all this now, shared these memories with her, she would act as if she didn't remember. When a little chill sweeps through the yard and brushes over my skin I come back to the reality of my situation. Behind me, near the house, there is a gate as there is at my home. And even from here I can see it is unlocked. The sunlight has drowned out the kitchen in a shadow that I can't see inside, so I can't tell where he is or what he's doing, but I can hear the sizzling of something on the skillet. This has to be it, a chance to go, just go. I stand and run to the gate, watching the open door as I go. The grass is solid under my feet, encouraging me, my muscles burning at the idea of movement. But something at the gate makes me pause. The sun catches something that stops me from pressing full into the wood. A metal wire hangs in the air, just at the level of my neck. Lower too, right above the grass, is another thin wire. I move from one foot to the other. The sun moves too, flashing across a zigzagging pattern of the thin wires. Then I see, wrapped around a pole on either side of the gate, hundreds of tiny little strands. At the top of each pole is a little box that they feed into, and above that, a curling piece of metal like a spring that I've seen on top of electrical transformers.

“Breakfast is ready,” he says.

His head is peeking around the corner, the sun giving it the color of raw chicken above that lipless smile. He beckons me with his hand. In the other is the knife, slick with juices from who knows what. As I walk toward him I notice the wires go all along the fence, wrapping around the poles every few feet. A brown bird sits on top of one of the electrical boxes and sings.

Chapter Fourteen

The first thing I smell is smoke. I must be smoking, but when I lift my hand its yanked back down into my lap. The world jostles and gravity threatens to toss me over to the right, but I lean left. A loud engine is rumbling in my head. Everything fades in real slow, fuzzy and liquid, the back of my brain refuses to line up with the front of my brain. It's a nice drug swirl that I wish I could enjoy but things get real clear and I'm strapped down in the back of a van. Three figures sit on benches alongside the van's interior walls and in the middle my back is to the front of the van, a metal wall right behind me. Both of my wrists have been chained to the floor and a ticker sits in my lap. In the middle of the van, right at the knees of the figures, is a box and a monitor bolted to it, four wires coming from it, a long table in front of it. On the table is all my shit from my pockets. The packs of cigarettes, the tape recorder, even the little dinosaurs are rolling around on the table as we take corners. One of the figures closest to the door is smoking one of my cigarettes. The one closest to me notices I'm awake and starts typing. What they type shows up white text on black on the monitor.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

It takes me a few minutes to type out a response, the words showing up one at a time in slow motion on the screen.

"I thought I was a customer," I type.

"CUSTOMERS DON'T CHASE THE SUPPLY."

"Desperate for a fix will make you do stupid shit."

"You have no cash," the one to my left types.

That trip to the store emptied my pockets of all her cash. The stupidest things just slip right past my mind when I don't take the time to think them through. What an idiot mistake.

"Someone scooped it."

"Bullshit," the one on my right types. "You were trying to jump us."

The one on my right is agitated, keeps waving the smoke out of their face and turning to the one smoking in the back. The figure in the back has their face turned away, their mask tilted up, but I can't see a thing from here. There's not a window in the van to crack, the ones in the door look sealed tight. The little tiny white room is thick with the smoke, making us all look a little closer to gray.

"I'd never do a mean trick like that," I type. "I'm just foolish."

"You scared us," the one on my right types.

"I'm awfully sorry about it."

The one on my right smacks the arm of the figure smoking at the back. They flip down their mask and turn to the screen.

"Can we get a break from that?"

They stab out the cigarette on the little table that the screen sits on.

"Thank you," the one on the right types.

The one that smoked wags a hand at my hands.

"Let 'em loose," they type.

The two closest to me look at each other, then the one on my left pulls out a set of keys and unlocks the chains. The one on my right picks up one of the dinosaurs, the red one, and holds it up to their mask. When they set it down they type out another message.

“We got kids?”

“Do you?”

“We’re asking us,” the one on the left types.

“Do... we?”

“Looks like we do,” the one on the right types and points to the dinosaurs.

“Not me,” I type. “I found those. Reminded me of being a kid, you know?”

“Then we don’t.” The one on the left shrugs and leans back against the wall of the van.

The van starts to slow down, the rumbling of the engine fades a little and I realize how quiet it is again without the tape recorder. I point to it.

“Can I have this back?”

“We won’t stop us.”

The pronoun shift makes me uncomfortable. I’m not sure I like where it’s going. But I take the tape recorder anyway and slide it under my robe through the armhole.

“Why’d we record those noises anyway?” The one on my left types.

“It was an accident.”

I take everything else back too, putting the dinosaurs inside the matchbox, picking up two of the packs of cigarettes. I point to the third one.

“On me.”

The figure in the back swipes them before the other two move. The smoker nods their head at me and tips an invisible hat.

“We’re almost there.”

“Where?”

“You want into this?” The one in the back types.

“Into what?”

“Into the game you’re running after. We set you up with some deals and you can actually pay for the shit.”

“You’ll just trust a fool like that?”

“Once you’re with us, the only one of us you have to trust is yourself.”

The one in the back puts down the ticker. From their cloak they pull a capped needle already full of white liquid. Is this what was in the bags I saw being traded on the street? There’s no way of telling. They could be giving me something worse, something lethal. The figure passes it to the one on my left, then it’s in my hand. The one on my left makes a little gun from their hand and shoots at it their arm.

“Pow,” types the one on my right.

This is the slippery slope waiting for a ride. Back in training I hit the major drugs being slung around the city, my home city. Try it before you deny it was the policy. It gives you a sense of the damage it can do. Controlled testing of the abuse, so that when we talked to the addicts we could feel a little of the pain. They kept a real close watch on you after that, had a team tracking you through the stream, watching your every blip in the real and virtual, making sure you don’t get addicted, while pumping you with blockers to dampen your receptors. I couldn’t even get addicted to coffee again. Everything was cut off from us. After a few months things leveled out and most of us came back to the normal life. Now there’s this milky mystery. A whole syringe full of white ink.

“WHO ARE YOU?” Flashes on the screen again and I don’t know who typed it, maybe even me.

The syringe dives into my arm. I push the cold chill under my skin and feel it shoot along my veins. By the time it’s all gone in I’m feeling the motion of the van slow to a soft tide. We make a final turn and stop.

“Moon’s out,” the one in the back says. The windows have gone dark.

Outside it’s night. Around us are tall white trees, their bark scrapping off in long sheets of paper. Further up, way past their white leaves, is an inverse night sky. The stars are black, the space between is white, around each star radiates a silky black corona like drops of ink in milk, bleeding one into the other. I turn to face the van and spot the black hole that has replaced the moon in the sky. Light bends into it and disappears, black on black dots, deep craters that go even further into an impenetrable night that pimples the surface of the orb. The van has turned black. Our cloaks, now white. Their whiteness refusing to blend with that of the grass and trees, letting off an aura of shifting gray. I hold my hands up in front of my mask. The luminescence of my gloves is dulled by the light that radiates from inside the mask itself, the edges of black mesh all glowing white. The motion of waving my hands back and forth in front of my face gives me an absurd flashback to my first time high.

One of the figures places a hand on my shoulder. Without the screen we have to rely on gestures, touch, but I’m proven wrong.

“This way,” they’ve typed, and in the whiteness I can see their white letters glowing on the black paper.

Drugs like this exist outside the wall too. They're some kind of organic-nano machines that mess with the rods and cones in your eye, switch the colors all around. There's worse ones still that can dick around with your brain, without chemicals, but the tiny robots with one specific purpose programmed and ingested. Druggies have shot up and started talking in tongues, tasting the words, seeing them take shape as they say them, it extends beyond a simple projection on an implant and into the sensation of it as it manipulates your brain and gives a tingling high that tells them all is right, even when another voice lingers further back and says, no, it most certainly is not. Gravity does not shift to place you on the ceiling, music cannot take on a taste as vivid as a cheeseburger, and colors do not just change to such a degree that they glow and let you see in the dark. No, all is not right here at all. But it feels just fine.

We go up a path leading further uphill. On the crest of the hill there's a building, three stories tall, black bricks steaming into the white night, the windows blowing in the wind like chimney smoke. They could kill me out here. The thought brings me no discomfort, yet I'm aware how troubling the situation could be. I keep an eye on the woods, watching for more figures to emerge. Underneath my cloak I'm gripping the ticker so tight that the plastic complains with a soft crack. Up in the trees some creature watches us pass. Horns swoop from its head toward the moon. Its black form drifts along the sky like blood in water, a cloud with the distinct shape of an owl, but how can I be so certain? How can I tell where the edges of things lie when the world looks like the careless scribbling of a child's coloring book done in three colors: black, white, gray, and the drifting shades between.

We stop in front of a metal door. The figure in front, I've lost which one is in front and which one is in back and which one is further back still, knocks on the door. A little slot at the top of the door opens, a mask moves across the darkness there, then the slot shuts and the door opens. We file in without any codes being traded. But there's no one behind the door now. We walk down a long hallway, bending to the right, then the left. As we go there are goose heads nailed to the wall. Their white forms now black against the brick, long drips of oil frozen in place. In the corners of the hallway, where one wall meets another, mirrors sit near the ceiling, reflecting our forms as we pass across its body.

"Where are we?" I type, showing it to no figure in particular.

"Where do we think?" The answer seems to come from the ether, but my body is turning to watch where I step, so it must have been from the figure behind me.

"A forest," I type. "Outside the city."

Their shoulders seem to shake a little under the cloak, their form radiating in a mist behind them, making two wings linger at their shoulders.

We reach the end of the hall, where another doorway opens up into a large circular room. Tickers are stacked from floor to ceiling, surrounding us with ticker tape that drips from their mouths and flutter against the floor. Around my feet are piles of paper, still attached at their ends to the tickers, rolling endlessly out from the live machines. The great noise of it seems like it should be unsettling, all the clicks and whirs of the printing paper, but it's a relief from the silence of the forest outside. Figures move behind the tickers, white forms drifting across a further distant white, behind the closer white glow of the tickers and their black paper. Leaning in toward a wall, I read the print

outs, “WHO ARE YOU? WHO? WHO ARE YOU?” repeats again and again. One of my guides prints out their own message and slips it through a layer of tickers. The clattering stops. The wall closest to the guide breaks apart at its center, two halves bending inward on hidden hinges. We step through the tickers, dragging loose paper stuck to our cloaks, and the doors close behind us.

Figures go back to working the tickers. There are more than fifteen of them, sitting on benches with stairs, each level allowing them to bend above each other to push the buttons of the tickers on their portion of the circle. Even though there’s no one else inside the circle they continue their typing. Around us is a much larger room. And as we step further away from the circle of tickers their noise fades and through the brick walls I can still hear the crickets chirping. It is remarkably quiet inside the building. We pass figures lounging on couches, cutting the shapes of ginger bread men out of paper that has words typed on it. “WE ARE ONE,” “WHO ARE YOU?,” and “WE CANNOT DRIFT ALONE.” But gently we push one another forward, a hand rests on my back, mine rests on another, we are a chain of bodies, the cutouts of snowflakes on folded paper. My children cross the street like this, incase one should become scared and try to run back, only to be struck by something they did not see. Or, just because we feel it’s safer, for them to have another body grasped when the unthinkable happens. But it is thinkable. And that’s the trouble. We are quiet going up the stairs, each of us lost in thoughts that are our own, but shared all the same. Their thoughts course from hand to back to my back through my hand to the back in front of me. Through touch we can be one mind, sharing in fears, sharing in sight of the stairs as they lead further around the black case that needs no light for us to see.

At the top of the stairs they are waiting for us. We expect them there because there could be nothing else. The walls have shifted white here, the brick different, covered with them, the goose heads, glowing black against the white like the stars outside. The room is large, taking up the full space of the building, without walls to hide the floor, only beams and thinner pillars dotting the white wood floor and holding the ceiling from its own collapse. We turn the corner and go up another set of stairs. Before the second floor is completely gone from view we look back, I look back, I look back alone before turning the corner and see several figures sitting around a table, sorting piles of powder into bags. Another figure stands at the end of the room, their mask appears to be off, but they are so far that I can't make out anything about them other than the true shape of their head that doesn't follow the same oval as every other bipedal I've seen.

At the top of the stairs more are waiting still. This floor is much like the second, open without walls, easy to see from one end of the building to the other. Yet here the sky is visible, the roof has been removed and above us the stars still bleed their way through the sky. Across the floor is a splattering of black. A large pool that seems to extend its way toward the windows in the way an octopus stretches its legs. The source of this great ink spill stands in the middle of the room at an island made of tables. Four figures work in tandem, grabbing the limp bodies of geese, laying them flat on the table, and chopping them at the neck in one swift slam of butcher knives. There's a certain mesmerizing beauty in how they work. And as we approach I rely on the guide in front of me to lead me there because I cannot look away from the tandem rising and falling of their blades. The sound of it, the force of metal against wood chopping blocks, reverberates across the floor and echoes into the night and it's surprising I didn't hear it outside. The smell of

death floats about us like the black miasma that drifts from the pool at our feet. My cloak becomes thick in it. My shoes stick and slosh through the pool. The bodies of the geese are tossed to a pile on another table behind the figures. The heads are tossed to a table in front of them. Some of the heads and bodies miss the tables and fall to the floor with a dull splash. We stop just to the left of the closest figure at the table. By the stairs that we came up two figures emerge from the white shadows. They stand, waiting.

“Where do they come from?” I type.

The figure closest to us sets down the knife and wipes its gloves against an apron they wear over their cloak. Black blood smears against the white apron. They pull out a ticker out from under it.

“Imported,” they type. “From outside the city.”

“How do you get them through customs?”

They laugh; it is a genuine human laugh, without alteration or electronics. Their voice is raspy, but high, and certain lightness in it makes me think this is a woman, but we could all be man or woman here.

“What are we doing here?” They type and show it to the figure that led us, but make no effort to hide it from me.

I turn away from them all and step outside of the line. The other two figures that were behind me now seem to stand a distance away. I go to the nearest window and lift up my mask. From beneath the cloak I slide up the headphones and put them on. The sounds of the crickets and rhythmic chopping join the recording of my bedroom at night, my snoring in the background. Is this the fifth replay? The third? There’s no way to tell, it’s auto-looping and I’m not sure when I turned it back on. At the window the night air

drifts in and it is only then I realize that it is open and there is no glass here. I reach out, just to be sure, and touch nothing. My arm swirls around the white darkness with its own white glow. When I close my eyes and rub my hands against my lids, these are the kind of shapes I see, the tingling blurs, but here, at the window, they have form and structure. I light a cigarette too. The smell of smoke mixes with the scent of trees and an overwhelming smell of iron and death. The now familiar smell of rotting geese seems to always be in the city. When I turn back around there are more tables in the room. Several more tables that I missed, hidden in the white fog, or maybe they weren't there before, stand with such confidence. There are at least eight of them. Eight sets of figures, chopping and separating goose heads from bodies. I slide my mask down until it covers most of my face and walk back over to the group. From my fingers drifts a black smoke.

“What do they mean to you?” I type, gesturing at the goose heads.

“To us,” the figure at the table types. “They are a unity.”

“Why kill them?”

“They come to us dead. Outside the city their populations are a burden. They are killed to even out the numbers and sent here, to us, for whatever we please.”

“Nobody's going to cook them?”

They laugh. The sound of their laugh seems to come from the recording of my room, as if they stood there in the room with me, laughing as I slept.

“We cook what we can, but many of them thaw before they get to us. They're no good then.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“We have a job,” they type. “Seems someone has been chasing off our dealers.

We are not the kind to exclude. We welcome. We share. This is the true way of the city.

We supply the dealers, we gain trust, and we become one.”

“You’re going to trust me with a supply?”

They pick up the knife and slide a full goose down the line of rollers in front of the table. The whole body of the goose is lifted with ease in their hands. The body splayed out like a piece of bread. They chop, once, a clean cut, right at the base of the neck, and slide the head away. The head goes one way, the torso another, and another full body rolls down the line.

“It isn’t about trust,” one of the figures that lead me here types. “We have nothing to lose in it. There’s a chance here for something more. To make something where there was only desperation. We give an opportunity to rise from a life of fear and desire to one of balance. A release from the anguish of the self.”

“Like,” I type it, knowing how to end the sentence, the name right at my fingers; I hear it in the back of my head. It drifts like a ship just out of sight from a foggy dock. The wake of it laps the shores and makes its presence known. Yet, my fingers hold it back. “I get it.”

They nod. When the other figure has made their last chop, this one touches their shoulder and nods to them as well, gives a thumbs-up. The chopping figure nods emphatically, a full head bounce as they pull another body off the line. The four of us go back down the stairs, back through the two levels, and out the door where the car still waits. The forest has thinned and through it lingers other buildings. A neon light seeps through the black and white of the night, a blue haze fading in around it. Up above us the

stars are growing dim. Tan fluffy clouds meander in from the horizon, covering the white pool of space.

“The forest is disappearing,” I type. One of the figures looks down at it. They pat me on the shoulder and shake their head.

“We never left the city,” they type.

Before they shut the door of the van I see the last of the trees fading away. Their torn paper edges resembling the paper of a ticker, disintegrating to reveal the dead Open light in a storefront window. The door slams shut. A burning smell hits my nose. The cigarette in my mouth smoked to the filter. I put it out on the table in the van. As the drug fades away the rush of nicotine replaces it. My tongue buzzes with the wings of a fly caught under the skin. In my arms and legs is that rusty feeling, that numb tingling that makes my skin feel tight around the muscles. I need a drink. With each turn down another street the drug slips out of my brain and goes somewhere else in my body. Waiting to be flushed out. The situation we ride from plays out in my head again. It’s hard to see it now with the true color of things coming back. It’s very subtle, the black and white reversal lifting, drifting away into the air like the spray of aerosol. Then the cloaks are black again. To imagine them white, how they looked inside the building, seems impossible. There’s no way to trace back where the building had been, how many turns we took to get there, or what else was around it. Even if I’d seen across the street more clearly, what would I have to go on? A bar? A restaurant or store? How could I be so certain that they were there either? It’s a damn clever trick. A street sign would have been the most helpful.

They put me back right where they found me. The alley where I got stuck under the van chasing after the kid. I recognize it clear enough by the crates and the trash bin and how the van wedges so snugly between them. I almost expect her to be waiting for me with the car, but the street is empty when they open the van doors. They step out first, helping me out. My legs are surprisingly achy. It's difficult to stand and hunch out of the van. But it feels good to stretch them out on the sidewalk.

"We'll be here tomorrow," one of them types. They have to bend their ticker toward a street lamp so that I can see. The gesture makes me miss the drug for a moment.

"OK," I type.

The street is sparse. Only a few cars pass me as I walk several blocks, trying to remember exactly which streets I ran down to get here. Soon enough I'm completely lost. It would be possible to retrace the steps I just took and return to the alley, but that seems pointless. Asking them for a ride would tip a hand. I keep walking, passing empty stores, cafes, and one loud strip club, the music blaring from inside. On the outside pink neon advertises "GIRLS STRIP." It blinks on and off. I take the stairs down, two flights, and knock on the metal door that vibrates with loud bass. A figure opens the door.

"How old are you?" They type.

"36," I type.

"\$5."

I pull out the unopened pack of cigarettes and offer them instead. The figure pockets it.

"You get 30 then you're gone or I toss you."

He moves aside. I try to type “Thanks,” but I’m stumbling forward as I do and it becomes pointless to try. The music leads me down a wooden hall. At the end of it pink neon lights border a room of mirrors. Along one side of the room is a long bar where two figures sit with their backs against it, elbows on the edge, watching the stage. Empty black tables buffer the bar and stage. A bored bartender sits doodling something on a pad. She wears lingerie, black swirls over transparent black netting, patterns intertwining over her breasts and ass, with black sheer stockings and a single stripe leading down to high heels. When I sit she comes over with a ticker and a napkin. Placing the napkin down, she types, “What can I get you?”

“Water,” I type.

She shakes her mask but gets a glass anyway.

On the stage a woman is sliding down to the floor, resting her mask against the wooden stage, letting her naked body drip along the pole with her legs wrapped around it. Her body is in tones of blue and pink, making it seem less real. The colors distort the dimensions of her body, a blue shadow falling behind a pink highlight, and throwing doubt on her resemblance to a real human woman. The bar tender puts the water down.

“Keep the change,” she types.

One of the other figures at the bar turns around and waves their empty glass in the air. The bar tender prances over.

I’m careful to lift my mask and sip the drink even though no one’s paying attention to me. The water chills my teeth. I feel it slip back my throat and disappear somewhere in my chest. On the stage the woman is keeping her tempo with the music as it nears a dizzying clash of electronic noises. She taps her heels with the base at the edge

of the stage, arms still around the pole, then swings her body back around it. Everything is off but the mask. Pictures of women line the walls of the club. Some portraits I recognize of famous stars from outside the city, others I've never seen before. Black marker smudges cover their faces. Details in the photos tell me who they are. A woman in a white dress standing over a sidewalk vent, another drinking a can of soda, the whole can blacked out, with all of her face but a mole covered, and another holding up a black marker, a moustache traced in the air, wearing a pink top with "HELL" in rhinestones. The naked ones around them have nothing to go on, just flesh topped with black blotches, some with hair spilling out around them. The song winds down and the woman gathers up her underwear from around the stage. Her mask still secured in place.

I go to the bathroom, a single stall that I lock behind me. Over the toilet a sign warns, "NO JERKIN' IT." Next to it, on the wall along my left, is a painting of a packed beach on a sunny day. Someone has taken black ink to all the faces on the beach and covered them as well. The people in it look like they're from the 20s. The women wear long dress-like bathing suits, black or brown in the dim lighting of the bathroom. The men have those shorts with suspenders, one piece for men. A child in the forefront doesn't even wear a suit, but some formal dress with a wide brimmed hat. Scratched in the paint across the beach are the jagged words of "FUCK YOU." My stream is nearly white and a little thick. The color of it shocks me. It sits in the bowl like cum or liquid chalk. There's a good percentage of it that's probably still alive. Little nano machines still trying their best to mess with my brain.

When I get back another woman has started up on stage. Her bra is already off and she's bending over with her panties halfway down her thighs. My water is gone, but I sit back at the same stool.

"Another water?" The bartender types.

"No thanks," I type. "All these girls from inside the city?"

"What do you mean?"

"They from here? Or they come in from somewhere else?"

"What's it matter? They get naked all the same."

She fixes another drink as she talks to me. I try to watch what she puts in it, but none of the bottles are marked. She pours a brown liquid, white liquid, and a splash from a smaller bottle.

"Are they imports, I guess is what I'm asking."

"I get what you're asking," she types. "But you're not getting that I'm not answering."

She puts the cocktail in a shaker, covers it, and shakes it with her whole body. Then she pours it out in a glass, straight, and drops a cherry in it. Turning to the stage she lifts her mask a little. There's a pause there. She looks to the door and somewhere back near the bathrooms. When it looks clear to her she takes a sip.

The noise of the music has completely drowned out my cassette player. I'm tempted to record the music, but I could do the same with a radio. The other two figures at the bar haven't moved since I've been here. Not a single dollar has been tossed on the stage. It makes me feel guilty. The woman on stage seems no worse for it, her movements without tire, but they have that mechanical step to them. It's the sign of

routine, of practiced and repeated movement, day after day. It's like driving a car. The bar tender leans over to me, the drink wobbling in her hand.

"Are you a cop?" She types.

"If I said no, would you still trust me?"

She shrugs and sets the drink down. Her fingers drop in succession against the bar: one, two, three. The precision of the noise reminds me of the butcher knives falling on the boards.

"You looking for imports?" She types.

"I just want something," I type. "Exotic."

"Exotic? Like out of country?"

"No. Just out of city."

"What you got against city girls?"

She leans against a little refrigerator against the wall and takes another sip of her drink. The woman on the stage is climbs the pole, grabs onto two bars that hang from the ceiling, and swings there, spreading her legs. The muscles in her arms are chiseled. Her shape reminds me of my wife, but this woman is stockier, more built. My wife is a stringy woman. Sometimes her ribs poke through, my fingers running up and down them like staircase banisters. She goes through cycles of not eating enough. The implant that checks her health stats beeps and warns, she tells me, but she turns it off and forgets about it later. When she gets like that, at her lowest weights, I can lift her up when we fuck. But it scares me in a way. It scares me when she doesn't watch out for herself like that, when she forgets to take care of herself. Then before I start to say anything about it

she fixes it herself. It's her warmth here I'm missing most. The lights, wood, and glossy metal make it all feel so damn cold, even with the most flesh I've seen in weeks.

"I'm just looking for something fresh," I type.

"Young?"

"Fresh."

"We're all fresh here," she types. Her hand makes a fist and bags soft against the bar. If she's laughing I can't hear over the music.

"Forget it," I type.

"Don't get pouty. I can find you something, sure. Come back tomorrow."

"How will I know it's you?"

"It'll be me."

"And me?"

"It'll be you."

She slinks back over to the doodle pad, dragging her drink along with her. There's a quick glance to me again, she puts her drink under the bar and pulls her mask down in one movement. The doorman is at my side. Their hand grabs my upper arm tight.

"Any chance of calling a cab?" I type.

They push me out the door and laugh.

"Cabs won't take cigarettes."

"Thanks for the in," I type, but the door is already closing.

I walk the miles back to the apartment, following the streets back by fifteenth. My key left in my pocket. By the time I'm back I can feel morning coming over the wall. The sky out there on the horizon threatening blue. Up in the apartment the shower still runs

and a nice layer of moisture has started on the windows. Drops of water pool and streak down the glass even though they're open a crack. The clock says 6:00 am. I take down the painting off the wall in the bedroom and flip it over on the dresser. In the top drawer there's still my pack of gum. Pulling out a stick I start chewing on the weird minty flavor of it. It reminds me of summer, mojitos maybe, and sitting by the pool, but the memory won't click into place. From my pocket I pull out the pack of cigarettes, rip out the paper, and sit down on the bed with it. My legs are aching from the walk. The thumping of my blood pulses against my socks. I rub my hand over my thighs where a burn has already set in. This city is putting me through a whole new cardio. Outside the walls there was little reason to walk this much, just jump in a cab and it takes you wherever you got on your mind. I write on the paper the connections from tonight. Goose heads imported from out of the city, hacked to bits somewhere inside, drugs that make you see a forest of white, sling drugs on the corner. Next to this I start another column for the strip clubs. Odd things, no faces, just the naked bodies, and a place down on a hundred something where they're dealing imported young girls. I write out a description of the bartender, best I can, the placement of the moles on her body, the size of her bust, the possible mix of her drink. When I'm done I stick the paper next to the other one. There's no overlay yet, no crossing paths, but there's progress. And a hint too that customs at the wall may not be the shining star of good deeds they make it out to be.

I sit on the bed, staring at the painting with the lightning sky outside the window. Removing my mask and headphones with one hand, I set the cassette player on the dresser. While the tape rewinds, I brush my teeth, looking over my face in the steamed mirror. The towel on the floor is damp. It does little good on the mirror, just smearing

more water over the glass. It's starting to get unbearably humid in the bathroom. A fresh mold is forming around the edge of the tub. Every surface in the room has a sticky sweat to it. I flick the switch for the fan in the ceiling. A nice cloud of mist sucks right up through the vent. There's a little chill that comes with it, the air loosening, a thickness dissipating. Back in the bedroom the moisture still sits. On the painting it's starting to wear away the first layer of oils. Colors smear and run over one another, blending in distorted form, like the mountain in it is collapsing. Maybe it's volcanic. The cassette player stops with a sharp click. I set it to record again.

For a good while I lay staring up at the ceiling where a sprinkler gleams a soft blue from the sky. I think my wife would hate this place. Not the city, that's an obvious given, but the apartment. The clean edges of it would be too sharp for her, too perfectly cut. She likes the cushy couches that swallow you. A guest sits for more than a minute in our living room and their body disappears. She likes a ceiling fan too. The hum of the noise at night, the repeated whirl of its circle, it soothes her, she says. Even in the winter she likes it on. She cranks up the heat in our bedroom and lets the fan go all night. My arm moves on its own, reaching over for her body next to mine, only to land against the cold, firm mattress. Outside the morning traffic is starting to pick up. A loud horn that must be the size of a bus beeps twice, then three times, then lays solid until suddenly it stops.

Chapter Fifteen

A pile of clothes sits on the chair at the kitchen table. He sets down a plate with two sausages, scrambled eggs, and cinnamon toast, the butter already melting on it. The air of the kitchen is thick with breakfast. He motions to the chair with a spatula in his hand.

“Put them on,” he says. “If you’d like.”

There’s a pair of underwear on top of a folded t-shirt on top of jean shorts. The underwear is pink with little drawings of cartoon apples dancing across them. They look like kids underwear, but they fit just fine, a little snug. The shirt is a light blue, with a little pocket on one side, big enough for some change or a folded dollar. And the jeans cut off at mid thigh. It feels a little strange now. The clothes seem almost too heavy. They’re a soft constriction against my skin that’s kind of uncomfortable, scratchy. When I sit, the shirt stretches like a second skin across my back. It feels like a shield.

“Fits all right?”

I nod. He sets a plastic spoon down next to the plate. Then a folded paper towel. At his place next to mine he sets down another plate, a metal fork resting at its edge, a linen napkin, checkered red and white, unfolded on top of his lap.

“I didn’t know what size,” he says. “For a bra, or even what you have there.”

“It fits fine.”

“Just fine?”

“It fits good.”

“It fits well,” he says.

I nod. He stabs one of the sausages on his plate and eats it from the end, taking one bite at a time, working his way toward the fork. The plastic spoon seems useless here, so I grab a link with my fingers. It's sweet with a maple flavor and little pieces of bacon inside. As he chews the muscles of his face stretch and jerk at odd angles. The muscle seems to threaten to jump right off his bones. It makes me feel sick to watch, so I turn and look out the window. Birds jump back and forth on the fence, chirping, twittering, fluttering around and playing games, chasing one another across the yard, disappearing again over the fence. He doesn't say a word as we eat, which is fine enough for me. I savor the sausage, then move on to the cinnamon toast, scooping some of the scrambled egg onto its soggy sponge-like form, and letting the whole bite of it melt as I chew. The eggs have a fluffy yellowness to them, as light as sunshine. They make me think of the little chick feathers, with that same pastel yellow that my mom used on her suns. It's what I imagine baby chicks to taste like, like scrambled eggs, the whole thing of them, even the beak. But I know that's not true, really, they just taste like chicken, and I guess if you ate the feathers they'd taste like nothing. I dab the butter off the plate with the toast and pop the last of it in my mouth. It's been a long time since even my mother made me breakfast like this. He takes our plates to the sink, rinses them off, then places them in a dishwasher along with his fork. He's sure to take the spoon too even though it's plastic. The napkin he leaves behind and I rub it over my lips. I do this multiple times, back and forth, even though my mouth is clean and the clean part of the paper towel shows white when I pull it away. I keep rubbing it against my lips, feeling the little soft paper grooves of the towel.

He comes back with a mirror and sets it down on the kitchen table. The mirror itself is oval on a silver stand. He tilts the oval of it down, until my face shows in it. The paper towel is still at my mouth. I look sick, like I'm in a hospital, with one of those paper masks they have doctors wear. But my face looks sick too. I'm skinnier than I'd ever been before, my cheeks and eyes sunken a little. I can see the bones there, the contours of my face, how they swoop down from my ears. Somehow my nose looks skinnier too, but I know that can't be right. There's dullness in my eyes. Two darkened dull green rocks just sit on my cheeks. They glimmered, I remember, like an ocean, my mom once said.

"Tell me what you see," he says.

"Me."

He laughs, the uncovered teeth clacking a little below his missing nose.

"Describe yourself."

I pull the paper towel away, setting it on the table in front of me. My hands fold it all on their own, one corner, then the other, making a little pyramid shape. He's staring at me with his bare eyes. The fleshy pink around them seems to quiver. When I look back in the mirror my face seems unfamiliar. It's like looking at a stranger's face, one I hadn't seen before. But I know that my eyes were green, are still green, I saw just a moment ago. The whole of it though, working together, seems to be someone else, someone new.

"I can't," I say.

He leans back in the chair and sighs. As he lets the air out his whole body shudders. The breath comes out choppy.

"Why?"

“It’s like I’m not me. Like there’s someone else there.”

He looks outside the window then his eyes roam around the kitchen. On the table he taps out three beats with his gloved hand. *Tap, bap, dap*. Using one, then two, then all four fingers. He does it twice.

“Cover your mouth again.”

It’s like he’s not even talking to me, but to the room, to the picture on the wall of the young man in the uniform. I do it though. I take the folded paper towel and cover my mouth. In the mirror I can focus on my eyes and nose. If I look too at my cheeks the eyes and nose seem to fade away. It’s hard, but I lock on to my eyes.

“They’re green,” I say.

“Yes, and?”

“And my nose curves down, with a little bump in the middle, like a speed bump, breaking the swoop of it.”

“And?”

“Little dots of brown checker across my cheeks, from my nose to my ears. Just a few though, not that many. I guess.”

“Not that many compared to what?”

“To the women in the magazine.”

I didn’t mean to tell anyone about that. My hand presses harder against my mouth. Almost enough to swallow the paper towel whole.

“Now cover your nose,” he says.

I do. My lips are pink half-moons, one eclipsing the other with a small round bump in the middle. On either side are the indents of my cheeks, the bony protrusions,

the brown dots fading away. Little fuzzy hairs catch the sunlight when I move one way or another. I describe all this to him.

“Yes,” he says.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you ask me to do this?”

I set the paper towel back down on the table. My hand tips the mirror away, so that it points to the ceiling. He doesn't seem to mind. He stares at the mirror.

“There are things you'll never see,” he says. “Outside the walls of the city there are forests, animals that roam large empty tracks of land, beaches with more sand than you could imagine, and an endless ocean that swallows the horizon like a flat wall.”

“But I've seen those things,” I say. “In the paintings my mother does.”

Again I want to press the paper towel to my mouth. Instead my fingers press hard into its surface, carving shapes like x's into it, not enough to puncture through, but enough to leave an indent until I stretch the paper towel again and make them disappear. I don't know how to be quiet now and it's not a good time for it, I know, I know this and need to stop.

“Paintings don't tell you how the salt laden air smells, or the bellow of the animals to their young, or the trees' scent caught in the air. You can't feel it. It's another person's interpretation, another's vision. You'll never see it. You'll never leave the wall.”

“You don't know that.”

He runs his thumb along the edge of the table, back and forth against the wood grain. I know how it feels, I can feel it too under my fingers as they run over the paper

towel, but there's not much his gloves can let through. His hands must also be disfigured. Maybe they're shaved like the skin on his face. Maybe there's no skin at all, but just the bones, white and clean.

"You don't know what I'll do," I say.

There's warmth inside my chest. I know it now. The oncoming of tears, with how the heat seems to crawl its way up my throat and leak out my eyes. That's what it threatens to do now. But I turn to the window where the flowers are at their brightest in the sun now. The blue and reds of them so vibrant against the green of the grass. There to is the flash of the thin wire along the fence.

"You're a strong girl," he says. "You see something like me."

I tear the edges of the paper towel, turn it in little motions, tear the other edges. The breakfast is heavy in my stomach now. A fine paste sits with an uncomfortable solidness. I'm stronger for it, I know, but it makes me feel ill. The smell of breakfast still hangs around us. It'll be in my clothes. It'll be there when I put them on again. The whole house makes me feel ill. Little dried flowers hang from a clear wire above the patio door. They look different from those in the yard. Their purple and orange petals are as shriveled as his ears. Something about them makes me furious. He doesn't deserve them there.

"Come on," he says.

He stands and the chair squeaks against the floor. In one hand he carries the mirror, with the other he guides me up. We walk through the kitchen and down the hall. He lets go, just for a moment, to open the door with all the faces, where he tucks away the mirror and closes it again. A little way down, before the bedroom I slept in, he stops

in front of another door. This one he has to unlock with a key from inside his cloak. I should know where it leads. This house isn't too different from my own, but there's things about it that aren't right, like they've been turned around or reversed, and it confuses me just where I am. When he opens the door to stairs I feel like an idiot for not expecting it. One by one he takes me down the stairs with a hand on my shoulder. Sunlight stretches out in blocks across the concrete floor like tan rugs. It all looks bare until I reach the last step and look around. Over in the corner is a large, black chair. The leather cushions of it gleam in the sun. I've seen these kind of chairs at the doctors, where they tilt your head way back and look at your teeth with bright lights and start picking at them one by one. But there's no bright lights or magnified glasses to look through, just the chair and a bulb hanging above it. Next to the chair are instruments, metal gleaming, laid out on a table. He doesn't guide me there though. We go in the other direction, to the right, where the corner has another room. He unlocks the door to this one as well, then flicks on a light from a switch outside. The whole room lights up red. Two long tables stretch against the walls like in a cafeteria serving line. One of them has a sink built in. Trays sit underneath the tables. It hurts my eyes to look, but when I close them everything is still red.

"This is the best place for you," he says.

Something in his voice has changed. It's deeper, more level in tone. I can't tell if he's angry or relaxed. His voice is just flat.

"I can't stay in here," I say.

His hand lifts from my shoulder. There's still an ache there, a quiet little memory of something. By the time I turn the door is already closing.

“Don’t,” I say.

It sounds so stupid when I say it. I don’t know what I expect. The door closes. The keys jingle in the lock and turn. I press my ear against the wall and listen to him walk up the stairs. He’s left the light on. The red tinges my skin. Everything looks like its covered in blood. The black is a blood black, the color of clotting and scabbing, the metal a blood silver, ornaments hung in a tree or window, the walls, the wooden walls of the little room, now flushed pink like my lips. I lean against the wall. Again I’m trapped in a cell. A blood cell. The veins of some giant whale. But there isn’t any blood pumping. No sound of a heartbeat. Just the silence of the room.

We’d sometimes play hide and seek when I was younger. One of my favorite places to hide was in the closet, under all the towels and bed sheets. If I breathed slowly she couldn’t hear me. If she opened the door, I held my breath, until I heard it close again. I would wait there until she started yelling my name, screaming for me to come out, saying that the game was over. When I went out though she’d be waiting in the hall. She’d laugh at me, make fun of me for falling for it. She told me she knew I was there all along because she could see my hair in the pile. I do that now. I lean against the door, my feet tucked under me, my arms around my knees. And I breathe real slowly. The house cracks and pops somewhere above me. It’s settling, my mom said, houses do this in the cold and heat. They adjust, just like a human body, getting everything comfortable. Above me too, outside, through the kitchen window, the garden sits with a calm that isn’t unlike my own. Instead of the hard concrete I imagine the grass, soft and ticking. The light in my closed eyes is the red light of the sun, pressed against my lids. There are birds, not here, not now, but then, when I was out there, and they’re in my head again.

That same song of the lone bird on the fence plays in my head, calling out to its distant friend. It repeats the song, on, and on.

Footsteps clamber down the stairs behind me. I hold my breath. Keys slide into the lock. The handle turns and the door opens in one quick movement. My back is to the door, but not pressed against it, so I don't fall, but I can feel his cloaked legs against my t-shirt. A hand on either side clasps my shoulders. His whisper is close to my ear.

"Come meet my friend," he says. "She wants to see my daughter."

I expect his pink face to be red in the light, but he's wearing his mask. It's oddly calming to have it all covered. He could be anyone under there. Maybe even my mother. But this just makes the paste in my stomach grow warm. The sunlight through the basement hurts my eyes. It seemed like only a few minutes, but I must have been in there longer. The sun is now dimmer outside, casting long shadows of the grass at the windows across the floor. They look like little, shadow finger, stretching to my own hand.

He guides me up the stairs and into the hall. The door closes behind us, but doesn't lock. I think to shout out, to call for help in this moment and run forward, out of his grasp.

"Do you want anything in your lemonade?" A woman's voice calls from down the hall.

She's still wearing her cloak and mask, a pitcher of lemonade in one hand and a full glass in the other. Without a warning, we've startled her by appearing right behind her. Even with my clothes on I feel naked without a cloak or mask. My cheeks flush against the air. The window above the sink is open. Outside the birds still chirp, but their

calls seem fuller. The woman makes a soft noise of surprise. She sets the glass and pitcher on the counter.

“You’re the cutest thing I’ve seen all year,” she says.

She hurries over and squats, unnecessarily, so that I’m looking down at her. Before I can do anything she’s grabbed my arms in both her hands and rubs them up and down my arms. I flinch, pulling back from her, but his body presses against my back.

“You’ve never seen a thing like her?” He says.

“Why no,” she says. “How would I?”

In her voice is a twang that he tries to match. I’ve never heard a voice like it. The way her words sing right out of her throat. Her vowels taking on long stretches of a tune that no one else is hearing. She pats me on my arms and stands again. From a cupboard she grabs another glass and fills that one too. There’s three now on the counter. To my left the knives sit in the woodblock on the counter. An impulse tells me to lunge, grab two in each hand, and stab at him. She hands me the glass. Its cold touch shocks me. He takes the other one from her. We raise them in a toast. I watch her over the rim of the glass. Her mask rises just a little, but I can see the gentle curve of her chin. Small brown curls peek out around her neck.

“Shall we?” He says.

He steps back and lets me pass toward the table. She’s close behind me, I can hear her moving, the ruffling of her cloak. I turn, the warning in my throat, a soft rumble of a noise striking up. His hand pushes against my back, stepping with me to the table. He pulls out a chair for her to sit at his place where he ate breakfast. I take my same place.

The light outside is now brighter through the window with the sun falling just at the edge of the fence, turning into a bright gold ball that turns his form into a silhouette.

“She’s a painter,” he says.

“Your daughter?” She says.

“No. You.”

“Oh,” she says. She laughs and lets her hand rise then fall gently against the table.

“Yes. That I am.”

Does he think she’s my mother?

“Tell her what you paint.”

When he lifts his mask and drinks the lemonade it’s impossible to see his disfigured face with the light blotting the details out. She keeps her mask down. The lemonade held tight in her hand. She touches my wrist, the fingers of her glove brushing in soft patters. The movement as light as rain.

“It’ll be boring to you, I’m sure,” she says. “But I like to do landscapes. It’s all they allow, you know. If you want to sell anything, at least. I took a class on still-life when I was outside the city. They used to have us paint more interesting things then.”

She looks around the room, seems to stop at the photo on the wall, and then traces along the dried flowers above the door.

“Like nudes,” she says. “But that’s too old for you. We did fruit too, but I never liked that. It seemed like painting a dead thing, you know. Fruit can’t grow, of course. It can only sit there, and rot, and that’s just depressing to think about it. I tried to sell a few of the buildings in the city, but no one wanted them. They only wanted the landscapes. I find them dull, really. I don’t think it’s where my talent lies. I miss the shades of skin,

you know, like yours, those cheeks, soft dimpled, flushed in the sun, brushed with freckles. You have amazing eyes. They're so vivid. I'd call them emerald green. You know what emeralds are?"

I shake my head, no. But I do, in a way. We studied rocks and gems and geodes two grades ago, it was easy stuff, look at a rock, and write down what it was. Emerald was one I confused with another green one that was milky and you couldn't see through it.

"They're beautiful things." She pats my wrist again. "Just beautiful."

The shadow of him shifts. He gets up and shuffles around behind me. She goes on listing more of her favorite colors. When he gets to the counter I put my hand over hers. The leather is soft against my hand. There's warmth below it, hard warmth, a skinny hand in a layer of fabric and black leather. The whole outfit could be her skin, just her bones underneath. She keeps talking. He sets his empty glass down on the counter. Just as casually he moves to the knives and slides one out of the block.

"Dear," she says. "You're hurting me."

"Don't," I say.

It's not to her, but to him. He's behind her now with the knife. I pull her hand toward me, trying to pull her into me, or over the table, away from him. But it's too little a movement, my own body too small, an impossible action to really do. The blade is at her neck. Her hand flinches under mine, but I'm holding it tight, keeping her from moving it to his arm. Her other hand presses against her chest.

"Please," he says.

Neither of us seems to know what he means. Then he lifts her by her elbow. I'm rooted now to her hand. Mine goes with hers and together we follow his direction. We dance together. The three of us shuffling through the kitchen and down the hall. We pass the small table whose objects I could grab. We pass the photos along the wall, where the faces smile down at us without a care. The glass could be enough, shattered against his body, shoved through his cloak. But neither of us do these things. It's difficult for the three of us to fit together. My body rubs against the wall, the smooth hallway brushes against my arms and only then do I realize how flushed my body is. I'm shaking her hand, or it is shaking me, I'm not sure which, but between us passes a jittering.

"Stop," I say.

"Open the door," he says.

At first I think he means me, but her hand is there, opening the door to the basement. She steps and he follows. I have to let go of her hand. It trails behind her, trying to reach around his body, but only finds the banister. The keys are not in the door. I can't lock them down there. I could push him. Kick all my weight against his body. Then there's her, under him, the knife at her throat. Their wrapped forms reach the bottom of the stairs. They seem so small from here. I remember a feeling like this. My mother stood below me at a slide. Her body was not far at all from me, but finally shorter. It felt good to look down at someone. In my chest it felt light. It feels that way now.

"Come on," he says.

What would he do if I didn't go? If I turned around and closed the door, would he come after me? Is he threatening her, or me, or both? They must have come by a car. Down the hallway the shadows of the porch block the light from reaching the front door.

It's a nice shade. One you could sit out in and watch the clouds pass. I've never driven a car, but I've watched my mom. The woman cries out downstairs. They went to the left, where the chair sits in the corner.

"You'll be just fine," he says.

I'm not sure who he says this to. I step away from the stairs. My hand pushes the door back, further out of my way in the hall, opening it more. He's at the bottom of the stairs. The knife held at his side.

"Don't be rude," he says. "We have a guest waiting."

I go down. My legs have a magnetic pull that tries to drag me back up the stairs. Yet, I go down. The banister is smooth against my hand. All through me is a wind saying to turn around. But I'm there, next to him, as he guides me over to the corner where the woman is strapped to the chair.

He takes off her mask. Already she is crying. She spits at him and the wad of it sticks in the mesh of his mask.

"Fuck you," she says.

"There's a child here," he says.

She screams and tosses her whole body in the chair. He steps back, holding the knife out of the way, careful, oddly, not to stab her then. I touch her hand. It's gripped tight around the arm of the chair. This seems to calm her a little. It makes me feel terrible that it does. The sour flavor of the lemonade sticks in my throat.

"What does she look like?" He says.

His mask turns to me. She looks at me too. But her face is difficult to piece together. Her eyes are swelled with her tears. They may have once been dark brown or

blue. The dying light of the sun makes it more difficult. He hasn't turned on the bulb above us yet.

"Focus on one thing," he says.

I look at her lips. They're a light brown. In the light there's a gloss over them. They look painted, intentionally painted to not be the real color that they are. Her bottom lip curls out in a soft pillow. The top has an arch, almost two little horns, below her nostrils. She swears at him again, pulling the lips tight across her teeth. They're so straight, a perfect edge of white.

"Her teeth are like moons," I say. "She's not my mother."

And I'm not sure why I say that. This seems to cause him no surprise. But the woman's face softens. Then there's the flash of the knife against her skin.

Chapter Sixteen

Death metal pulsates from the ceiling. At first the deep screaming sounds like mechanical burping. The vowels long and drawn out as if gurgling mouth wash. Fast drums and the clatter of guitars follow the scream; together they're an overwhelming swell of noise, simply noise, through the ceiling. It's 3 pm and the sunlight cuts across the bed, forcing me to turn away from the windows. Outside a soft wind ripples across the glass, bending the noise of the traffic below with its flutter. On my pack of cigarettes there's a warning about cancer. The type is plain, without any real edges, just straight lines. The 'o' in "known," is a perfect circle. I take out a cigarette. Lighting it as I roll onto my back. A pain presses hard against my back. Muscles sore and burning from the beating they gave me last night. The sun slaps my face and I have to squint the one eye.

At 3 pm the kids would be at school. She'd be working from home. But with the time difference that's not at all what's happening now. The smoke is warm in my mouth. I hold it there, feeling its weight against my tongue. Splinters throb in my chest and ribs. The taste of the smoke, bitter and dirt, a dry peat, maybe, threatens to leak right through my cheeks. When I let it out, the cloud bursts through the sunlight and dissipates in the shadow of the ceiling. The room is hot and sticky. The air sponges me, with terrible music, sun, and humidity from the shower. I hold the cigarette above me, rolling it in my fingers while watching its washed out glow with my one eye. My stomach feels tight. While I slept a bad dream settled there. The details haven't come back to me yet, but the feeling of it, the cold sadness it left me with, is still in the room. The buzz from the cigarette is making me uncomfortable with the heat and music. I feel nauseous. It could be internal bleeding. My skin itches. It feels too tight, wrapped around buzzing insects. I

smash the cigarette out and sit up. A room can only change so much from one night to the day, but now it's alien. The space is smaller. The nightstand seems too close to the bed. The walls closed in on me over night.

At the window I take deep breaths. My ribs bristle with the quills of an animal. I convulse with the pain and launch into a coughing fit. The shuddering of my body makes it worse. The pain crackles under my skin. It takes a minute for me to settle and when I do I stick my head out the window. The air can't be all that much better than the cigarette. The fumes from the cars rising up the buildings and turn the air into a liquid, shimmering against the building. I hold in the breath. Count to three. Feel that tickle in my ribs. Let it out. In the daylight the black obelisk at the center of the city ripples. Its glass exterior flexes like skin. I lean against the window, pressing my skin on warm glass, and look at the painting. The humidity is warping the canvas. Little swells are forming under the paint. Soft shadows fall unnaturally across its painted landscape. The tape recorder sits motionless on the dresser. The death metal above me stops. Loud footsteps pound across the ceiling toward their front door. Tension in the air thins out, but the silence of it doesn't do much to calm me. My back sticks to the window when I step away. A layer of moisture comes off with me and slides down my back. I take the painting and pen into the kitchen where I set it down on the counter. While I make a bowl of cereal I stare at what I have written so far.

It's disappointing really. I'm no closer to her than I was before. What I do have tells me of chances and possibilities of where she may have gone or may be, but it still feels so distant, too vague, a trail leading in more directions than before. But they're directions. To her? Maybe. And I'm doing what? Working a corner with drug dealers,

selling drugs and ideology to an already fucked up city. Doing undercover work makes me nervous. But here, the whole city is undercover. I chew the corn flakes and milk, turning it to mush, while staring at the words, “strip club” and “drug deals.” As I shovel in another bite the fatness of my swollen lip bumps against the spoon and I cringe. I draw two lines branching out from the words and leave them unfilled. Then in the empty space of the other slip of paper I write “police role?” and “customs?” thinking of the comments from the figure with the cleaver. Customs put on a good show for me. But everything here is dirty.

Even after finishing the cereal I feel empty. My stomach has unwound, but the heat still strangles me. I check all the windows, making sure they’re opened all the way. I take a cold shower and leave it running cold when I’m done. This helps. My body shivers and bumps and when I dry off the tension comes with it. In the mirror my face is a mess. The job they did on me, kicking my head and body, punching me in the ribs and back, has left me purple and swollen. My lip is cut on the side. Someone knocks on the door. I slip on underwear but don’t bother with anything else. I pass the living room and stop. The painting sits on the counter, next to the empty bowl. I take it back into the bedroom and hang it. When I open the door her squat form is standing there, my special code waiting for a reply. But when she sees me, nearly naked, she pushes right in, shutting the door behind her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” She says. Her voice crackles with static.

“You left me,” I say, following her into the living room.

She turns on me. Her hands are gripped together around her ticker even though she’s not using it. Something stops her.

“How hurt are you?”

At first I’m not sure what she means, but I look down and see the bruises on my chest and stomach, and remember my face in the mirror.

“I’ll be just fine.”

This seems to make her angrier, her words come out as a burst.

“You’re in a lot of shit.”

“For getting jumped?”

“For overstepping your boundaries.”

“I saw you,” I say. “You drive off, leaving me there.”

“You shouldn’t have gotten out of the car.”

“I could have been killed.”

The ticker falls against her body, the rope of it catching it around her neck. She raises a fist. The index finger nearly untucks itself, but she seems to consciously hold it back. With each word she hits the air with her fist.

“You should have never left the car.”

“I’m not your puppy.”

“You’re not a cop here either,” she says. “You’re a guest. And as a guest you should listen to what I say and take it under very, serious consideration.”

“What are you threatening me with?”

“Expulsion.”

“You know what kind of heat you’d get for that?”

She turns and I follow her into the bedroom.

“Have you been here all day?” She says.

“Sleeping.”

At the sight of tape recorder she stops. She points at it.

“What is this?”

She picks up the tape recorder. In her hands it seems smaller.

“A tape recorder,” I say. “You’re threatening to throw me out because I didn’t stay on your guided trail? Bullshit. I’ve been walking all over this city alone. But you didn’t want me to follow that kid. Why?”

She pops it open and takes out the tape. Before she can mess it up I take it from her.

“What are you recording?”

I hold it behind my back. For a moment I’m taken back to being ten, fighting with my sister, holding a magazine above her head so she can’t reach it. Standing here now, with this woman in a cloak and mask, in a room that sweats, hiding a tape cassette from her reach, feels absurd.

“It’s off. What are you hiding with the drug trades?”

She holds up the cassette player. In her mind I imagine she’s thinking of breaking it. Maybe she’ll crack off the little door or toss it out the window. Instead she sets it back down on the dresser.

“It has nothing to do with your case,” she says.

“That may not be true.”

“It has nothing to do with your case and when you put yourself in danger it puts me, us, at risk. You are our guest. Your safety is on us. We are more aware of the heat it could bring us than you imagine. You are not the first to come looking for someone here.

And you unfortunately won't be the last. We know exactly what we're doing here. We know the shit storm that comes when an outside officer disappears."

"You left me."

There's no answer. She turns away, stopping for a moment at the painting. Something about it startles her. Then it passes. She picks up the sheets off the floor and tosses them back on the bed. Near the window she finds my cloak on the floor. Next to the head of the bed she finds my mask. She tosses them both at me. I catch them, the tape clattering in my hands.

"Your little speech is bullshit," I say. "If you cared about keeping me safe you would have been down that alley."

"With what?" She says. "There were three of them, maybe more somewhere nearby."

"Where's your backup?"

"Backup? Who do you think you are?" She says. "You have me. Just me."

There's a crack in the electric. It's not a cry or a whimper, not anything so emotional, but her voice shifts in that crack, the pitch of it angry and frustrated. I'm not so sure it's because of me either. But I don't believe her anyway. She shoves past me.

"Get dressed," she says.

I set the cassette tape in the player and snap it closed. While she waits in the living room I slip on a shirt and pants, then the cloak and mask. It's awful under here in the humid apartment. I've crawled under a wet blanket and wrapped an oven around my face. The smell of the strip club, booze and bar cleaner, still lingers in the cloak.

"I need money," I say.

From her cloak she pulls a wad of cash. In very deliberate motions she counts out fifty dollars and hands it to me. I tuck it into my cloak. The dinosaurs rattle in the matchbox. The children must be home by now, the youngest undoubtedly refusing to take off his shoes.

“What did they do with you?” She says.

I go back into the bedroom, grab the player off the dresser, and the ticker from the nightstand. For a moment I consider not taking the pack of cigarettes. The nausea sits unsteadily in my memory. But I can’t risk another craving, so I stuff them in my cloak. The sun has moved across the room already. Most of the painting is in shadow now. Only the headboard of the bed is lit. It’s only been an hour.

“Nothing,” I say. “Just the damage you saw.”

Back in the living room I slip off my mask and put on the headphones. She watches me do this. Where she once would turn away when she saw my face she now seems perfectly comfortable with it. Part of me finds this comforting. To be seen, to be looked at and acknowledged carries with it warmth. It makes me long, in a way, to see her face as well, or any face, to study one like mine. Without seeing the eyes that watch, the reaction of the face underneath the mask, and instead only being greeted with the cold, black mesh of her mask, it makes me shiver. My skin curls in on itself. I want to shrink away. When I speak, I’m sure my voice is thin.

“Ambient noise,” I say, pointing to the headphones.

“They really fucked up your face.”

“I noticed that too.”

I press play and slip the cassette player into my cloak. The sounds of me getting into bed start. The faint sounds of evening traffic mumble in the background. A car horn honks three times and I'm unsure if it's happening in real time or the past. But I like the confusion. There's a way in which being so secluded from the stream of noise and media has turned the world hard around me. It's the physical harshness of now that can't be ignored. Past and future have disappeared, wiped out of my reality, brushed aside and forgotten behind closed doors that refuse to speak back to me. The objects here are dead.

"You going to turn that shower off?"

I guide us to the door without answering.

In the car I tell her where to drop me. It takes a minute but the address registers with her and when we stop at a light she looks over at me. Maybe it would help to know what kind of eyes she has or the shape of her face when she gets pissed off or smiles. Then I could imagine it now, how it might look, what kind of face I'm getting beneath that mask. But it's just that pervasive black metal. The same face that watches me from the sidewalk.

"What are you going to do there?" She says.

"Just look around."

"Bullshit," she says. "You're not going back there."

I unbuckle and step out of the car before she can stop me. My mask held loose in my hand. I step out right next to the window of another car like ours, its window up, the reflection of my face caught startled in its black window.

"Fuck," she says behind me. I close the door before she can finish. The light turns green, but the driver of the car must be so taken aback that they don't move. While

walking around their car I put my mask on, sliding it over my face, careful not to knock the headphones off. Cars honk loudly before I even reach the sidewalk. The line of cars moves forward, crossing the street. The one in the middle lane, her car, speeds up and cuts off the car I stepped out to face. She's turning around the block, heading down the one-way a street down. I hail a cab, a little white bulb on its roof, not even the word "TAXI" or "CAB" printed on it, not even a strip of black and white tiles.

Two figures wait for me in the alley, leaning against the back of the van. When I approach they motion for me to raise my hands to my sides and stop. They frisk me, finding everything on me.

"What's this?" They type, holding the cassette recorder up.

"Want to listen?" I type. "The latest in noise."

They look at each other. The one on the left shrugs and taps the buttons, it records, then stops, then rewinds, then fast-forwards. All this plays out in my ears until they eject the tape and hold it up to the dying sunlight. Satisfied with whatever they see, they pop the tape back in and press play. I'm impressed by the consideration. From the alley they lead me up the street. We push through crowds of figures window shopping and lingering outside cafes. It's a surprisingly nice area of town. Figures bustle out of the stores holding large shopping bags, black, their tops sealed with string or zippers. Inside the stores clothes hang on racks in the windows. No mannequins display if they're male or female clothes. The sign above the door simply, "CLOTHES." Who do they wear them for? There's something to say for personal comfort. Or lingerie for a lover. Under the cloaks they may be just as concerned about how they look and feel as anyone outside

the wall. Personal perception, acting out a role for your own piece of mind, even when the city around you has chosen to ignore the idea of fashion.

Up ahead on a busy corner a kid is passing a bag of powder to a tall figure. Figures around them ignore the transaction. It's like they're passing pieces of paper. The motions so ingrained into their peripherals that it's like watching someone pass a dollar and not noticing it's fake. The figure passes the kid a slip of paper then disappears into the crowd. The two leading me each pass the kid a piece of paper. The kid responds in kind, one for each. The kid's head barely reaches my chest. Under the arms of their cloak, thin wrists and fingers try to hide. They all turn to me.

"Go down the street there," they point. "Stand right in front of the door with the closed sign. When someone comes up you ask what they want. It's twenty for a dime, fifty for a gram, that's all we deal. They give you the money. You do this," they gesture, "for dime, and this," they gesture, "for gram."

One types while the other makes hand gestures, fingers crossed over one another, a thumb in or out depending. It's the same kind of signs I've seen drug dealers use anywhere else.

"Watch the kid. If something goes wrong we're all on it. Got it?"

The ease of this makes it feel like a setup. Every part of it tells me something is wrong and absurd about the situation. To just throw me into it, handling the money, trusting I don't run off or bust them, and trusting them not to be cops and bust me too.

"Got it," I type.

"When you get to that door, tell ou: triangle. If they don't give you money and say: 86, then you beat them down."

Down at the door the figure looks up when I approach.

“Triangle,” I type.

From under their cloak they hand me a wad of cash, singles and other numbers bent around.

“86,” they hand me as they walk toward the corner where the kid is passing.

This is a bad dream. I’ve had this dream exactly, without the masks and cloaks, where I’m dealing drugs. In the dream I’m in a car, driving around with a big guy at the wheel. Instead of people coming to the corner, we go to them, home delivery service of drugs. Except when I hand over the drugs the guy on the sidewalk pulls out a gun and shoots me. Thinking about it now, the dream doesn’t seem all that the same. The car model stands out though, a dark tan, boxy thing, with two doors, and brown heater coils in the back window, giving everything behind us the accent of beef jerky. I’ve forgotten about car models, the differences between a vehicle besides truck, cab, or car. I stand there and watch each car that passes, hoping to see a different color.

We do this routine for the rest of the day. Figures of all heights and lumpy shapes come up to me, passing me cash and little notes saying how much they want already typed up. Some of them jitter, their feet shuffling underneath their cloaks. One figure misses the step of the curb and tumbles into another passing figure. I never asked what we were dealing, or whom we’re dealing to. It would just make them suspicious of a supposed addict, or whatever the hell I’m supposed to be, that doesn’t know their shit. I take sweat soaked cash, torn bills, money taped or glued together. I’m surprised when a figure, perfectly sober in their stance, hands me a bill so crisp the wind doesn’t even bend it. My own process takes a while to get down. At first I’m gesturing and then putting the

money away, but I realize this creates a delay and distracts me from the money. Instead I tuck it in my cloak, then gesture, and this works. We work until the sun has left the streets in dim blue shadows. Street lights flicker on. The crowds thin out as shops close and only the restaurants stay open. A figure approaches me from the corner after talking to the kid.

“Triangle,” they type. They don’t look to me as they hand over the note, but down past me at the street.

“86,” I type back and hand them the money.

They don’t tell me where to go so I walk up to the kid.

“What now?” I type.

Another short figure approaches from the alley. They switch messages. Then the kid types back a reply to me.

“Come on.”

We go back to the alley. It’s dark, the pair of figures are gone. The van sits in the shadows, its white skin reflecting the street lamp across the way. The kid leans against the doors. Out of their cloak they pull a pack of cigarettes and lift their mask. There’s only a tiny flash of orange light against the neck of their cloak, sparks through the mesh. I can’t see their face in the shadows. I join them, leaning against the van and lighting my own.

“Cigarettes are terrible for kids,” I type.

“Fuck you,” they type.

We stand in silence, our hands drifting to and from our mouth as the traffic at the alley dies down. The sickness I felt earlier has subsided. My mouth feels dry with the

cigarette ash and I realize I haven't had anything to drink, not even water. I turn to ask the kid where I can get a drink and see they're holding a small bundle of pages under their mask. The light from the cigarette skimming across the page, stopping only for the kid to take a drag. It's impossible to see the words on the pages, but they look like a small paperback book, twenty or fifty pages at least, missing a cover or jacket. When the kid can, they bend back each page to grasp the whole packet in one hand.

"Can't be good for your eyes," I type.

It's a whole big ordeal for them to type. They have to tuck the pack of pages under one arm, type with the cigarette perched between two fingers, bobbing as their fingers move.

"Fuck off," they type.

"What is it?"

"Fuck," they type, rip off the sheet and hand it to me, then do the same with another, "off."

The two slips of paper disintegrate in the wind. In my ears I hear myself stirring. The traffic on the tape has picked up, morning rush setting in. There's a soft click where the tape must be wearing out. It's followed by another soft click, then the distinct sound of fabric shuffling. A minute later, close to the cassette tape, a drawer opens. I drop my cigarette and it sputters against my cloak, amber and ash trailing it.

"Oh," I say.

The kid steps on the cigarette where it rests on my cloak. Another drawer opens, then one closes. The icy chill spins across my back and I spasm. It wasn't a dream at all then. Dark shapes moving around me in the mute blue color of morning. Caught between

the boundaries of sleep and waking I thought it nothing more than dreams bleeding into the half-awake vision of the room. There was nothing more than the glimpse of it, a single image, distorted with the wavering of sleep, swept away by my return to its darkness. And yet, now, another drawer closes and softer, in the kitchen perhaps, someone opens cabinets.

“There a shelter around here?” I type.

The kid ignores the message, turns a page, and takes another drag of their cigarette.

“I just need a place for the night,” I type.

They put their pages down, but a figure enters the alleyway before they finish their message. This new figure is a little taller than the kid next to me, but still not anything I’d call an adult. When they get closer they reach my chin and no more. The two figures exchange notes. The kid tucks their pages into their cloak. On the tape their search has ended with another soft click, the front door I recognize now. In the bed I haven’t moved, my vision of the intrusion passing without notice. Something silver glints from the taller figure’s cloak. I stiffen, preparing for them to stab at me. Instead they lift their mask and the wail of a harmonica cuts the quiet night. The taller figure leans against the back of the van with us. There’s no real tune to their music, just notes and the occasional slide up and down the scale. I last heard live music like this two years ago in a neon, blue bar, tucked between a mechanic and a barber, both closed by the time the band started up. We still got babysitters to watch the kids then, when none of them could watch each other, and rent hotel rooms, leaving extra coins in the sitter’s account. Those girls reaped all they could from us on nights like that, charging overtime by the hour. Even the

sound of this kid blowing helplessly into the harmonica makes something inside me melt a little. I slouch down until I sit as much as I can on the bumper of the van. My legs and arms feeling loose and buttery. A dull ache for the smell of my wife's perfume hits my chest. When the kid stops messing around I look up. The taller one holds out a message to me.

"You all right?"

"Just enjoying the music," I type.

"I'm trying."

"You're doing good," I type.

"Don't give me shit."

"I mean it. No shit given."

I offer the shorter kid a cigarette, which they take, and light up my own. The taller kid just looks away, down the alley, where a clashing noise of metal has started up. The noise grows louder until a figure pushing a shopping cart rolls in front of the alley. I recognize the cart and junk in it as the guy I saw at the soup kitchen. I'm tempted to hassle him, ask if he's seen any girls at the shelter yet, but I really just want to sit here for a while. The kids pass notes next to me as I puff on the cigarette.

"What time is it?" I type and show them both.

The shorter one jabs the taller one in the arm, but the taller one just shrugs.

"You got someone teaching you?" I type to the taller one.

"Brother," they type.

"How long you been practicing?"

"Only a few weeks now," they type. "He's teaching me before he goes."

“Goes where?”

“He’s jumping the wall.”

The shorter kid takes out their pages again and skims over them with the cigarette.

“Why?”

There’s a moment of hesitation where the taller kid plays with the harmonica in their hands, passing it gently from one to the other, the metal catching the soft amber light of our cigarettes and smearing it. They hold it against the ticker when they type.

“He tells our parents he wants to see the mountains,” he types. “And the ocean.”

“What’s the real reason?”

“He wants a band.”

I cough on the cigarette, hiding my laugh. The cassette tape stops and I have to reach into my cloak to find it. While I shift around the kids pass notes back and forth.

“What’re they reading?”

“Who?”

“Ou,” I type, pointing to the smaller kid.

They pass notes again. The secrecy of it all feels like whispers. Elementary school kid stuff, glares in the halls, secrets I’ll never know about myself. The smaller kid hands me a note.

“Fuck off,” it says.

They both laugh when I toss it into the breeze. It’s still too difficult to tell their sex from the sound of their laughter, puberty not yet bringing any real indication. The smaller kid finishes their cigarette and flicks it against the wall of the alley. It bursts into stars, disappearing behind a trashcan. Down at the end of the alley the street is nearly

pitch dark with the streetlights seeming to dim. Clouds blot out the stars above us, big puffy tumors with the soft tan glow of the city reflecting against their bulgings. With the walls of the buildings and the clouds above us it feels like we're in a box covered by a quilt. Mountains would be nice right now. Or the soft cyclical roar of the ocean. None of my kids have been to the ocean either. I take a long drag on my cigarette, burning it to the filter and tasting the ends of its paper. Through my glove I can feel the heat, threatening to burn a hole. I flick it down the alley toward the street. My stomach growls loudly. At the end of the alley there's movement. Figures come in to the shadows. The kids stand up and I follow suite. The smaller one is quick to shove their papers in their pocket. They don't go in all the way though, the fold preventing them from slipping fully inside. I shove my hands in my pockets, balling them up a little in case we're about to get jumped. But the kids meet the other figures halfway and exchange slips of paper.

"We're done," the smaller kid types.

"Where's my cut?" I type.

"You earn it."

"What was I doing today?"

"Not earning it."

"You get free labor and I go home with an empty stomach?"

The smaller kid shakes his head. They pass a note to the other figures, who are about my size, one of them a good foot taller with bulky shoulders. Their dark expanse blocking out most of the street behind them.

"You work enough, then you're with us, then you get paid," the kid types.

"You're working against the singularity. You to we."

“What the hell does that mean?”

They shift on their legs and shake their head again. Their right hand touches their mask, expecting something else there. The surprise of bumping against the mask seems to jostle them, forcing them to step back and catch themselves. Pages slip from their pocket, gliding along the folds of their cloak and resting on the ground. None of the other figures seem to notice.

“Come back tomorrow,” the kid types. “Work it out.”

“All right,” I type. “All right, I’ll be here. Same time?”

“Same place too.”

The group passes by me without a word or tick. As I move aside I step on the pages, catching them before they drift along with the kid’s cloak. The four of them get into the van, kids in the back, the two taller ones in the cab. In the sudden flash of their headlights the alley lights up like lightning. The light shrinks the alley. On either side the walls close in with the light, the end of the alley not too far at all, even the sky seems closer. I wait until they drive down the alley in the other direction, then I pick up the pages the kid dropped. It’s difficult to see anything on the page. Making sure no one else is in the alley, I lift my mask all the way up. There’s a smell I hadn’t noticed in the alley, old food and urine mixed together in a dismal soup. I light another cigarette. My empty stomach swirls with the nicotine, growling at the smoke’s unwelcome advance. The text on the pages is a small serif, barely an eighth of an inch. Numbers on the pages range from 57 to 82. No indication of a title or chapter. The pages obviously torn from the binding, the glue of it still holding them together. As I flip through I notice another text has been cut, sentence by sentence, and glued on top of the original pages, inserting one

text into the other like a literal copy and paste. From what I can make out the original pages are from a romance novel, with two characters, both referred to as “ou,” maddeningly enough, ending a sex scene in a car and moving inside to a house, where they eat dinner that quickly devolves into innuendo. By the end of the section they’re fighting, one accusing the other of infidelity, first with words, but then one grabs a knife, attempts to attack the other, but as they struggle they again turn to having sex. Throughout this there are interjections of the other text, a propaganda calling for a shift from the self to one of group centric ideals. “The hive, the flock, even in cultures of germs, each of these groups of organisms benefit from the symbiotic relationships they form with their own kind,” the text reads in a similar type. “To ignore our status as creatures of this kind, ones that must think on the level of human existence as one of humanity, not in the singular form, is to ignore the truth of the universe’s indifference toward the individual.” And it goes on, the pasted text looks printed with an inkjet, its background a starker white than the yellowed pages it sits on, intermingled with the couple’s thrusting.

I read the whole thing as I walk, forcing myself to even pay attention to the original text beneath the propaganda. It’s a clever mixture of titillation for the unimaginative and indoctrination for the... uneducated? Maybe. Who knows if they even have a target audience in mind. It seemed to be working well enough on the kid. As I read I glance up, watching the street signs as I pass, counting my way back toward the strip club. It must be late again or nearly there, as I pass only a few stragglers on my way. A paranoia creeps back under my skin when the tape reaches the point of someone shuffling through my apartment. I stop and let three figures pass me on the sidewalk. They meander down to a restaurant that advertises “24 HOUR FOOD.” The empty pit in my

stomach makes itself known again, but I pass by. I'll need to find another place to stay tonight and I want to get this strip club thing over with. If I eat, there's the chance I may vomit with my stomach as much of a mess that is and feeding on nothing but cigarettes all day.

I've read through the pages three times before I get to the strip club. This time I slip the doorman the cover charge and pass by without a second glance. The blare of the music punches against my head. I have to push through it, my head bent down, and bump into a figure on their way out. Neither of us apologizes. Tables are full across the club. Three of them with parties of five and there's only one stool at the bar that's open. A stripper with skin the color of a carrot pivots around the pole. The orange neon lights shift, for a moment the natural white light tumbles down her body, revealing her true brown skin, then switches to a purple distortion. It's a nightmare of a children's coloring book. The bartender gives another figure change and sets a napkin down in front of me.

"What can I get you?" She types. She's careful to hold her ticker right between her breasts. Tonight she's wearing a purple set of lingerie, or at least it looks purple in the blue light of the bar, and garters with thigh high stockings.

"I was here last night," I type.

"That's what we like to hear," she types. "What are you drinking tonight?"

"Something exotic," I type.

In my stomach there's a cold swirl. It moves up my shoulders and down my arms. It's a terrible feeling, being creeped out by your own words. She shrugs, her thin shoulders falling in an exaggerated, but practiced way, where she rises off her heels then falls back on them, making her breasts gently jiggle. Before I can type anything else she's

already moved to grab a glass. She dumps ice in it, then starts pouring liquor in a metal shaker. The song is picking up, a drum line mixing with a frantic saxophone, and the woman on stage spins with it. A figure gets up from a nearby table. They toss two bills on the stage. Their friends at the table pat the figure on the back when they return. At the table next to them a figure sips their drink from a straw, disappearing under their mask. When the bartender returns she slips another napkin under the drink and taps on it with her purple nails.

“Five,” she types.

I pass her the money and pull the napkin back with me.

In a quick scribble of pen she’s written: “Back room – second door – end of next song – knock twice top – once below.”

At the other end of the bar she’s talking to another woman, similarly dressed in lingerie with a mask encasing her face. Neither of them gestures toward me, nor do they seem to even be looking my way, but when the other woman leaves and walks toward the back I understand. While I wait the woman on stage finishes up, collecting the scattered bills on the stage while softer music plays. The next woman slinks up behind her and starts picking songs on a jukebox that sits at the back corner of the stage. This woman is shorter, a little fuller, wearing a white shawl that reaches down to her calves. As she picks songs she shifts her weight from one leg to the other, pushing her ass against the shawl. A figure is at the stage, their mask close to the first stripper’s as she bends over to pick up money. No notes pass between them, but I can’t hear their voices either over the sound of the music. When she’s done collecting the money the figure follows her down the back hall. The background music fades out and a heavy guitar riff rumbles in. The

woman on stage turns and slides out of the shawl, letting it fall along her body until it pools at her heels. She reaches up to the back of her mask and snaps off a piece of cloth. Long brown hair tumbles out of the back of her mask. She bends forward, the hair draping over her shoulders and hanging over her breasts, then she tosses her head, one way with the rhythm of the guitar, then the other. Somehow her hair spins around the mask, over her back, and falls in an arch to the stage. It's impressive. Her hair acts like vibrant plumage even with its plain brown color. Figures at the closest table clap, the smattering sound eventually matching the rhythm of the drums. A figure at the bar hollers out some call that isn't quite clear, but his voice is full and hoary.

Once she's bared everything except her face and the song clatters to an end, I stand. On the bar my drink sits untouched. The smell of sharp whiskey and sweet vermouth is enough to keep it away from me. Even without the drink my legs wobble. I clutch the edge of the bar and take a deep breath. Passing through the club is difficult with the spinning lights. I shuffle between a table and the figures at the bar. Down the hall a door opens and the figure and first dancer who retreated earlier pass me. The second door looks like the first, black wood with a "PRIVATE," sign nailed to it. Behind me is the bathroom and I consider for a moment stopping in and chugging water from the tap, but my hand is already at the door, knocking twice at top and once below. The door seems to open on its own. I push gently against it and if I could hear it over the music I imagine it would creak on the hinges. Instead it glides open so silently it seems nothing happens at all.

The room itself is small, with two couches crammed together in a corner and a small round table in their middle. A small, cloaked figure sits waiting, stretched out along

the couch and facing the door. They wave me in and I follow, closing the door behind me. Inside, the music sounds like a faint memory. The figure pats a spot on the couch next to them. A drink, clear and tinted blue under the neon lights, sits on the table. I'm not sure if the drink is meant for me or what I expect to be a her. I sit next to the figure and pull my ticker out from my cloak.

"You don't need that here," she says. Her voice is soft, traveling on the muffled vibrations of the music outside. "No one's listening."

"What's the drink?" I say.

"G and T."

"Is there any water?"

She laughs, a coy practiced giggle, and shakes her head. She places a gloved hand on my chest. The warmth of it surprises me. It seems to radiate heat that my heart picks up and carries up my neck.

"Just relax," she says.

It's not until she stands that I see how small her shape is. She's a tiny figure, her waist and neck with the tightness of the fabric there revealing an sloping thinly. Her small hands move to the neck of her cloak and pull down the zipper. I grab her hands and hold them there.

"Can we talk?" I say.

"You can say anything you want, honey."

The sentimental address gives me a cold stab in the chest. At the word "honey" something changes in her voice. It's forced, added to the sentence as an afterthought. But

there's something else there too. Something tired in her tone that recognizes I'm going to be a hassle.

"Where are you from?" I say.

"Here," she says. "The city."

She drops to the couch next to me, resting a hand on my thigh. I place mine on top of hers, softly keeping hold of it there.

"Born here?"

Her head moves in a way that wants to toss her hair, but with the mask there's nothing of the effect. She nods. Under my hand she tries to move her own, but I hold it still.

"You know any girls from outside the city?"

"I wouldn't know if I did," she says.

The music outside switches to something with an acoustic guitar played over electronic bleeps. Her body leans against mine. With her other hand she starts rubbing her own thigh. My stomach coils up again, the heavy knot from this afternoon returning. The weight of her body presses against my bruised sides. A jolt of needles strikes up and down my ribs.

"I'm looking for a girl," I say.

"You got one right here."

Her hand tries to move up my thigh again, slipping out from my glove.

"My daughter ran away."

"Did you hurt her?"

The way she says it is playful. Each word carrying a soft weight to it, almost pleading for me to answer with something I don't want to think about. Her hand disappears up her cloak.

"Stop," I say.

I grab her other hand, our arms twisting over our bodies. I'm careful to be gentle, to guide her wrist away from her body as a suggestion, my fingers light in their grip. We freeze together like that. Our masks are close together and under the music I can hear her sigh.

"Have you met a girl like that?" I say. "A girl from outside the city?"

She shakes her head and tries to pull away her hands. I let them go and rest my own in my lap. While the song rattles on she sits next to me with her hands tucked under her legs curled to the side on the couch. She lifts her mask and takes the drink from the table. The exposed skin of her chin peeks out, a slender curve to the collar of her shirt. Two large gulps and she sets the glass back down, half of it gone.

"I'm not looking to start trouble for you," I say.

"Then don't ask questions like that."

"I'm worried about her," I say. "I want to know if she's all right."

She un-tucks her legs and sits facing straight ahead. She's still for a moment, then leans forward and holds her head in her hands. It's an awkward position with the mask, an imitation of the support she'd get without it.

"Who can help me?" I say. "Who can I talk to?"

"She won't talk to you."

Her voice is stronger now. There's a resolve, an assurance there that comes from her chest. I smile at it.

"So you do know her?"

"No," she says. "Not your daughter. It doesn't matter."

She stands, bumping the table with her knees. The drink spills a little onto the tabletop. With the small size of the room she's at the door before I'm up.

"Tell her I'm looking," I say. "Please. Tell anyone."

But if she heard she doesn't make any move to acknowledge it. The music blares past her as she passes through the door and is cut off just as quickly when she closes it behind her.

Chapter Seventeen

He takes her face from the metal dish and gently places it on the white, plastic head that sits on the workbench. Up here, in the room lined with faces, it's impossible to hear her screams, but I can feel them tensing the air. With one hand splayed across the face, holding it place against the head, he takes a band with a clip on either end and wraps it around the head, attaching a clip on either side of the skin. He does this again with another clip that attaches to the bottom part of the face. Then he gently pulls back his hands and admires the work.

"Then we let it sit," he says.

He positions the fan on the table to blow directly on the face, along with a light and a gentle spray of a liquid that he says is not water. The smile on his face never leaves. It stays in place like a mask itself, stretching the pink muscles of his cheeks into jagged points. The light casts his shadow against the wall and the faces that sit on the shelves behind him. I don't look at any of the faces very long. The smell of the room puts something thick in my stomach. My breakfast gurgles. As I watched him cut her face off I had to control my breathing, focusing on it so that I didn't hyperventilate or let the bile snake its way up my throat. And now, in this room, the taste of it isn't far. Above us the dim light of the ceiling has collected a small graveyard of bugs. The shadows of their bodies pile in the center of its dome. I take short breaths. I close my eyes. I focus on the sound of the fan.

"Are you all right?" He says.

"No," I say. My mouth clamps at the word.

"You look ill."

I pull back my shoulders and swallow. Counting to ten, my breath held, I think of summer, my fan pulling in the air from outside and across my bed. Someone is cutting their grass outside my window. The buzz of the lawnmower is a higher whine than my fan. The two sounds mix together in their own electric song. And on the wind of the fan the smell of fresh cut grass blows through the room. A hand touches my shoulder.

“Come,” he says.

He leads me out the room and closes the door behind him. I keep my eyes closed. Here in the hall the faint smell of our breakfast still lingers. Now though it makes me sick. I need to get out of it.

“Can I go outside?” I say.

“All right,” he says.

We go back through the kitchen and out the sliding doors. Once outside I let my eyes open. The faint smell of flowers replacing the skin and breakfast. I sit down in the grass. The sun now is slinking its way toward the fence around the yard. Birds seem to be slowing their flights. Even in their songs they sound tired. I pull at the grass, taking pieces of it and shredding it into smaller bits. A soft breeze pushes my hair against my ear. He sits down next to me, with his cloak pooling around him.

“Why did you do that?” I say.

He looks out above the fence line. The sun, on the other side of him, puts a soft shadow on his exposed skin. It’s a soft pastel in this light. It looks soft to the touch. I shred another ball of grass and let it fall between my legs.

“Have you ever made something with your hands?” He says.

Once for school I had to make a small scene in a shoebox. I decided to make a jungle, so I gathered twigs from around our yard, and bought a pack of plastic animals. I glued leaves to the sides of the shoebox, glued the twigs in place and put the animals in them like they were trees. My mother let me use her paints and helped me paint the background. I think I did this backwards, I think I did it the other way around, the last thing first, the first things last. I don't remember what my teacher said. We kept it in my room for a few months, and then I don't remember what we did with it.

"No," I say.

"When I first came to this city I made things," he says. "Beautiful things, I believe. The process of it isn't important for me to explain, but what I made was . . . distinctive. Each one of these things was different from another. And it made me happy. You've been proud before, surely. You've looked at something you've done and smiled to yourself. You've said, 'Yes, this is perfect. What I've done is create perfection.' Oh, I make it sound so trite. But I was a very proud man to have made all these things. I was recognized for it. Recognized. The word, yes, to re-cognize. To remember a face, a style, a brand, a work, by one person or individual. You've never been recognized, have you? No. Well, maybe. Your family has recognized you. Could recognize you still. In this city that is such a rare thing. It means nothing here. To be recognized is to commit a crime because it is a selfish thing. And . . ."

He stretches out his legs, the cloak dragging along with him. His body reaches across the grass like a shadow. Both hands rest in his lap, the thumb of one wrapped in the fingers of the other.

“Have you ever been lied to? You must have. Everyone has. A lie is a thing that humans carry with us everywhere. We must lie. It is necessary for us to function. And without it we would fall to something horrible. But I believed that what I had made was wrong. Which wasn’t a lie. But was used as a lie.”

A bird flies across the yard, dipping down between the fences, swooping up to flutter down on the fence. He smiles at me. The smile stays there for a moment, then his eyes fall to my lap, to the grass I’ve shredded. My hands hang limp there with my arms resting on my knees.

“I’m not explaining it very well,” he says. “I don’t think I can. No one asks why, or if they do they ask it in pleading. What they really want to say is ‘stop.’ Which can’t be done. What I do, I think . . . is take away a lie. Beauty and truth are one in the same.”

I wrap my arms around my chest and press my face against my knees. With my eyes closed I imagine I am alone. There is nothing far in the distance, no barking dogs or train, no sound of cars passing along the road, only the silent stillness of the abandoned houses around us. And closer again are the birds, the breeze, and his soft breathing next to me.

“What are you going to do to her?” I say. But I don’t want to know the answer. I’m welling up inside. It is a force that feels like it could take a weight of its own and drift upward, pulling me into the sky. My balloon heart, my mother called it once, carrying me away on the wind.

“She’ll go to the geese,” he says. “Join the gaggle.”

I sit up. My hand strikes out with such force that it cracks loudly against the plastic under his cloak. A burning sting lights up in my fingers. I hit him again, on the

shoulder with my other hand. I swing again with my injured hand, but he grabs my wrist with his own. Then he grabs the other. He pulls me toward him, over him, tossing me to the ground. It happens so quickly. His knee is in my chest and his hands pin down my arms. There is nothing in his eyes or face. They stare back at me like the wall.

“I’ve been so kind to you,” he says.

“Let her go,” I say.

My eyes are hot and leaking. Warm tears streak down my face and land in my ears. The weight of him on my chest makes it difficult to breathe. But none of this bothers him.

“Why?”

“It’s so awful.”

“Explain why,” he says. “I’m a fair man. I’ll consider your reasons.”

“I can’t. It’s terrible. It’s not good.”

He shushes and coos at me. But he doesn’t move, he doesn’t let go of my hands or take off any weight. Nothing changes in his face. I close my eyes, but inside there’s only the warm liquid filling them.

“She’ll be gone tomorrow,” he says. “If you convince me before then, something else will be done.”

“You’re lying,” I say.

“No,” he says. “We are bare to the truth here.”

Then his weight is gone. His shadow blocks the sun and when I open my eyes he’s standing above me, looking out over the fence where the wall sits on the horizon. Between deep breaths my tears slow. My heart slows with each breath. Blades of grass

tickle my neck through my hair. There's nothing he could say that would make me believe him. Not a word. He walks back toward the house and pulls keys from his cloak. They jingle like coins in his hands. I can't see what he does. I don't care to look. The sun is turning the sky a deep orange and the edge of the wall into a decayed rind. I remember how its rough surface feels. We went on a school field trip, all of us tied together so that we wouldn't run off. When no one was looking I took off my glove and pressed my hand against the wall. Its coldness surprised me. I expected it to be warm like flesh. Little grit and pockmarks brushed against my fingertips, scratching my skin. Its height so overwhelming I thought it would topple down on us. I've never felt so small. If I was there now I'd press myself through it, hand and face, flesh through concrete. I'm not even sure what's on the other side. Farms with food, mountains, an ocean, and clouds of something I don't understand, something within the cities that move through people and become a part of them. Would it be as warm there? How far can a person go? So many have traveled the world, they've told us this in school, everything has been explored, from the sky to the deepest levels of the sea, there's nothing we haven't touched. There must be nothing left to see, nothing new, no mystery to discover. All the shadows are lit. All clothes made transparent. They told us no one has a secret beyond the wall. Secrets serve no purpose there. A person is laid bare, their lives shared, every second of them, to everyone else. But that's not like what he thinks. This faceless man, who drags a hose out from a box, tugging the green strand in sharp jerks. He makes a piled coil of it, then picks up the end, and walks around the yard, spraying the flowers and bushes.

"She's a person," I say. "Like anyone else."

He goes on spraying the flowers, letting the hose hang in his hand. The handle presses tight in his glove. Water shoots out of the nozzle. The whole thing looks like a gun.

“No one person is any more important than any other,” I say. “But no one is any less either.”

My voice is growing in my chest. He’s at the furthest part of the yard and I worry he can’t hear me.

“Did your mother teach you that?”

“No,” I say. “It’s from my ethics class.”

I tear up a pile of grass from between my legs. Even though I’m far from where he’s spraying the ground feels moist. The air smells like night and holds that soft chill. Above the fences the sky is turning a dark rose, the sun almost gone.

“They torture people,” I say. “The goose people, they torture people and let other people.”

There’s more I want to say, to explain it, but I can’t. The words stick in my chest like a wad of cotton. I realize too that torture is what he has done. Torture I know of from wars, from the way prisoners would be tortured, but we were never told the details, only that it caused people pain and suffering so that they would tell their torturers what they wanted to hear. It’s ineffectual, the teacher said, then they seemed to catch themselves, they paused at the keyboard, their fingers frozen over the keys, then corrected themselves, saying it’s immoral and against human rights. We moved on to morals, what it means to be an individual, not as one that shares their persona, but as a being that lives and deserves life like any other. And I tell him this across the yard. I tell him that this

woman in his basement deserves a life like any other person. I tell him that what he has done and plans to do deprives her of this privilege, her human rights. My voice grows until I am shouting in the night. The lights in the house behind us are all off. He makes his way around the yard until he's right next to me, spraying the last of the flowers, and I'm shouting at him.

"You can't just take that from her," I say.

He walks around me, gathering the hose as he goes, coiling it back up around his arm. It's only his dark shape I can see now. Out past the fence there's the light tinge of the city, the amber and white mix that bleeds into the sky and fades it a light gray. Higher still a few stars pass between the clouds or the other way around. The moon isn't out. Once he's put away the hose he stands at the door, waiting for me.

"Come inside," he says.

Inside he turns on lights and leads me through the house to a door down the hallway across from the room with all the faces. The keys jingle in his hands again and he unlocks the door, flips on a light switch. The room is small, like the other, without a window. A desk sits against one wall, the surface tilted at the height of his waist. A large blue paper has been spread across it with white lines making basic shapes. Above the desk is a shelf with little, wood figures, twisted shapes that spiral in on themselves, and on the wall above them is a black and white painting of a disfigured monster. He pays no attention to the painting. But it's too large for me to ignore, the size of a window, taking up much of the wall. A large wooden frame encloses it, with little carvings of boys with wings, hands, horns, leaves, the branches of trees, all wrapping together, the boys caught in the branches, the branches taking them apart, limbs detached from their bodies. The

images of the frame repeat in the painting itself. The figure at its center sitting on top of a pile of this scene, a mountain of torn children, and adults too, reaching out and crying with their mouths twisted. I try to watch what he's doing, shuffling through papers, putting a stack of papers on top of a small drawer that comes up to his knees, gathering other folders from inside cabinets, but I'm afraid to look away from the figure in the painting. Its body unable to contain its weight, black flesh bulging under the strain of bones that threaten to burst outside the skin, long fingers curled around a staff that grows into a tree and a shape I don't recognize, something like a cross, twisting in on itself, but where its face should be there is nothing but a jagged spiral, the edges of it containing something else that from here look like the tiny needles of a plant or the teeth of a small animal, but when I step closer there seems to be more inside the space of the spiral, microscopic details, a scene, a miniature, something more. He shuffles next to me, searching through another cabinet, and I step past him, closer to the painting. The black of the ink is as deep as a clear night sky, as though a window has been cut in the wall and reaches out past the clouds into space. The light above us passes through it, disappearing somewhere inside. Across the face of the monster the spiral moves, swirling inward. The fine edges of it bend like blades of grass in the wind. The spiral is endless, reaching beyond its center, continuing into a void through the wall. His hand presses on my shoulder. I fall back against a bookshelf, knocking a small wooden figurine with my elbow. It tumbles onto the carpet with a dull thud. Hair and leather have been wrapped around its head. He picks it up and places it on a file cabinet behind him.

“Here,” he says.

He holds out a large packet of papers wrapped in a file holder. The papers have been tossed together, some of blue and pink and yellow, haphazardly shuffled together, sticking out in a messy pile. My chest is cold. Across my skin there's a thin layer of sweat. Behind him, painted on the wall above a short bookshelf is a crude imitation of the spiral on the monster's face. My skin feels jittery, something living beneath it wanting to come out.

"Take this," he says, holding the packet closer to me.

My arms take them, but the weight is heavy and I nearly drop it all. My voice shakes.

"What is it?" I say.

"The woman you want to save," he says. "Everything about her. In these files."

He taps them with his finger. The pressure tempts me to drop them all. My arms feel so weak. The coldness in my chest still lingers. I need to get out of the room, but my legs are locked in place. The painting seems to press against the side of my face. The swirl sticks in the corner of my eye like a bug. Behind him the imitation swirl warns me not to look. His face is solid, the pink of his flesh blushing darker. When he moves toward the desk the light shifts on his face and I realize he's angry, frowning, the muscles of his brow pulled tight into a sharp edge.

Outside the door the hall seems so plain. Its white wall holds small pictures of an older couple. The edge of the painting of a bird sits just visible around the corner. He grabs something off the table, a piece of paper and something else that clunks like wood. Then his hand is on my shoulder, pushing me toward the door. I don't want to, but I look again at the painting before he turns off the light and shuts the door. In the glance of the

spiral a sharp cold blade pierces my chest. The wound stays with me as we go into the living room with the window where I watched them take the woman who had me in her basement. He sits me down in a chair and turns on a light. I stare at the file, its pale tan surface, and the phantom image of the spiral twirls there.

“Open it,” he says.

I open the file and look at the pages. At first the words mean little to me. My mind is still caught in the cold spiral. Letters sit on the page and hold no importance, one after the other of lines and shapes, black against white, against pink, against blue, against yellow. As I go on, my mind starts to fall into the words, putting them together to hear what they mean. I go back to the first few pages and read again from there. From the time the woman entered the city she’s worked in selling houses. She claimed experience with the job, one she had outside the city for several years, and worked in small neighborhoods, suburbs, like the one I lived in, selling houses to families moving to the city. Then she couldn’t sell anymore. She claims that not enough families moved to the city, the market was falling, the paper says. From there she went into city planning, minor construction, turning neighborhoods she’d sold into office space or bars. Mixed between these papers are receipts from markets, grocery stores, clothing stores, restaurants, and adult stores whose items aren’t specifically marked other than “ONE SALE” and a price. She spent a lot of money on these items, hundreds of dollars in a week. There are several little bundles of these receipts, stuck together with rubber bands and paper clips. I only read a few. On the side she likes to paint, attending art classes at night. Typed reports on blue paper follow her from her home to a class and back, describing the streets she took, how long she waited at a light, and what she painted in the class. She starts dating a man,

the pink piece of paper, printed from a computer, says, they meet at work in the city planning office. The paper describes how they walk together, how they touch one another's arms, how they get on an elevator together and emerge from it with their cloaks tangled and disoriented. The man has a family, a wife and two children. The wife works below him in the same company, she doesn't know of his interactions with the woman. But the woman knows. She knows because another sheet of paper tells of someone else following them back to his place, where they go into his home, have sex, and leave before the kids or wife return. Their relationship goes on, each page follows them as they continue to see each other. The woman goes to clubs on her own, where men and women are purchased for sex. She leaves marks on the people she sees. The sheet describes them as "bites in the pattern of crosses," and "as if she tried to eat it off them." She gets angry at the man, a report claims they have a loud fight inside her apartment, things are thrown, glass is broken, and the man slams the door behind him while she screams his name. Her paintings change, she paints the man's face and her teacher makes her leave. The teacher burns the painting. A form, labeled "REQUEST TO INQUIRY," names the teacher and suggests they continue to watch him. But the papers in the file continue on with the woman. She cries in the bathroom at work, her mask sits on the floor of her private stall, through the crack in the door they see her face. Her eyes are blue, they say, stained red from the tears, her lips pout with a small arch at the top, just below the nose, which is a bit crooked but swoops from brow to point and ends in a button, on her left cheek are two moles, and her thin eyebrows point gently in the middle. It goes on, describing other parts of her appearance, anything else they could see, her hair, her ears, and the shape of her body when she stands. Pages are assembled like this, descriptions written in different

text, some on white pages, pink, and blue. She goes out drinking to the clubs. At work she proposes a project to destroy an abandoned suburb, turning it into a park with a lake. Someone within her group opposes it, she suspects it's the man she slept with, the report assumes, but she can't be sure. They fight in the hallway, passing notes back and forth until she hits out with her ticker, denting his mask. Things calm down for months, the reports become accounts of her going to the store, joining a different art class, and painting more landscapes, only landscapes. She tries to take singing lessons but stops after a few sessions. A month later someone else on her team uses her proposal in another district of the city, it passes, but she's calm, she doesn't react. The papers move through years, pages giving brief summaries where nothing important seems to happen, they refer to more detailed reports, ones he didn't include in the file he gave to me. Then it's this year. The man's family has disappeared, "likely left the city," but he remains at his job. They begin their affair again and the woman seems happier. She's given a promotion for a planned renovation of a business district. They go to clubs and abuse women together, beating them until they bruise. Inside her apartment one of the reports finds paintings of him, standing at the edge of a lake, fishing in a boat, and sitting on a bench in a park. Her old proposal of the park is approved; the abandoned suburbs are to be torn down. An investigation on his family's disappearance, if they actually left the city or not, is ongoing.

"I don't understand," I say.

He's sitting across from me in the chair. In his lap he's been reading a book, the pages held open with his gloved thumbs. He looks up, his face unmoving.

“It’s the lie,” he says. “There is no freedom from being watched here. There is always someone following. The eyes of the city are pervasive. Constant. Impermanence, the ephemera of the city, is only an illusion. We were sold into a great trick of promised refuge from the prying eyes of government only to find ourselves in a honey pot.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “She’s still a person.”

“But what kind of person would do these things? Destruction of the beautiful city, for what, an unused park? Another empty space? A woman who knowingly destroys a family and thinks of herself. A woman so self-centered she cares little about those around her. Even harms others for her own pleasure, which is not unlike what you have suffered. Idolizes a man, equally as abhorrent, which you, as a child of this city should recognize as wrong. You would save her?”

The file is heavy in my lap. I’m not sure what to focus on, the information, the woman, but neither matter. I toss the folder onto the floor. Papers, receipts, blue and yellow and pink, scatter across the room.

“You’re crazy,” I say.

It sounds so obvious said aloud. He’s been crazy, always, since the time I saw him there’s been no doubt. It never needed to be said, still, even now, neither of us needed to hear it to know that it’s true. He stands up. At first he steps toward me, my muscles tighten, expecting him to hit me. Instead he bends over and starts gathering up the papers around my feet.

“They lied to us,” he says. “They’ve destroyed its purpose. Demented its form into something horrific. This is how they work. They chip away at it, one piece at a time, until nothing of it is left how it was meant to be. There’s a plan to the shape of it. A

reason for its being. When we started to build this city the beautiful circle had meaning. From the first layers of foundation to the obelisk, each has its purpose. This city is meant to free us from lies, not create new ones.”

He finishes picking up the papers, shuffling them back into the file folder. When he stands straight his back pops. The way his shoulders slump makes him seem worn. With the light from the lamp above me so bright on the back of his head I see now there’s a pattern in his pink flesh, a jagged swirl, imperfectly done. There’s no point in trying to argue with him. Even if I tried to reason that her life, even with things he may say are so wrong, deserves to continue, that no person should be sold or traded, that their body should not be given to another, or injured, just because one person says so. Even if I said all that and more, I could possibly come up with more for this woman with her own love, it wouldn’t be heard.

“You never intended to let her go,” I say. “No matter what I said.”

“You had your say,” he says. “I was fair in that.”

“What about her? Did you listen to her?”

“This is not a trial. There is no process here. We’re not taking statements or witnesses. Everything we need is here. Her actions cannot be argued against or for. What she has done has been done and has resulted in her current condition.”

He walks out the room and down the hall. I listen to him open the door, then close it. Somewhere beneath us the woman still lays on the table. Somewhere in a room down the hall her face is held to a plastic head. The lamp above me feels small in the darkness of the room. Its light fades half way across the carpet, a small rug by the table in front of the couch, black and red squares, triangles, leaves, woven into the rug, growing darker as

they near the window. Next to me on the table is a small glass jar with a metal lid. A pale fleshy object floats in water inside it. Pieces of the object have come off, floating around in the murky water. Beside the jar is a magazine, with a colorful bird taking flight, a yellow border surrounding the cover. I press my finger against the cover, right at the border of the yellow, pushing down against the glossy cover of the magazine. The smooth surface glides back and forth on my skin. I have felt such pressure in my chest these past days. Such great weights pushed in and out, clutching against my heart. And this woman, whose life I can't save, has so much more to face. School sounds so pleasant now. The schedule and simplicity of going home, going to school, I'd like to return to that. I'd like to just learn about these birds. I flip a page of the magazine and look at another bird, this one mostly blue, sitting in a tree next to its nest. The woman is there though, still beneath me. When he returns I'm still staring at the same picture.

"Come into the kitchen," he says.

I get up with, holding the magazine, but he makes me leave it on the table. In the kitchen he starts to make dinner. I sit at the table while he chops up vegetables and some meat from the fridge. He turns on the oven and lets it pre-heat. The whole kitchen fills up with the oven and I should find it comforting, if I were home, I'm sure I would, but there's nothing like that now. Outside the window the yard is black. In the reflection of the kitchen in the window I think I see the swirl, a cold chill runs up my arms. When I move the reflection changes and the shape is gone.

"What's the monster in the paintings?" I say.

"What painting?"

"In the room with the files."

“It’s not a monster,” he says.

“What is it?”

“An idea of what has always been.”

“In school,” I say. “They tell us things simply. Clearly. Directly.”

He stops chopping. From the counter he brings the chopping board, a carrot half finished on it, and sits it down on the table where he sits and continues to work as he talks.

“I work in shapes,” he says. “I plan structures. I draw the things I want to explain. I do not use words. But, look.”

He takes the pieces of the carrot and presses them together, so that they look almost whole again. He nods at them.

“We know the carrot began in this shape. And before that it was a root. It grew from another plant, which in turn grew from another.”

He releases the pieces, letting them tumble around the cutting board. Then as he talks he continues to chop the rest of the pieces.

“Now the carrot is changing again. It is this shape, different than before, different than it will be. Did they teach you how the universe was born?”

I nod. On the table my hands are clutched together. I clutch them tighter. The wood grain on the bottoms of my hands is rough. I press down and move my hands a little, scratching them against the wood grain. His voice has set me on edge now. The way he speaks, the round about way in which he answers things, never fully giving an answer, never really saying a truth, something hard to hold on to, makes me tense.

There's a dreamy sorrow in his voice like how my mother spoke once about my father. It makes them sound lost in a spell.

"But the idea of it being born," he says. "Is a human concept. It's all we know about how things are created. There must be a beginning, we reason, because there was one for us. We can't fathom the idea of forever. Nothing, to us, has existed, simply without beginning. The universe is one of those that always has been. Without beginning. And it will continue on, without end, long after we are all gone."

"And the painting?"

"Yes," he says. "And the painting."

"What is it of?"

"Forever. The idea of eternity. The never ending that we wish to join. It was not crafted in the shape of man, or woman, or any living thing we know. There is no passion, no contempt, no emotion or feeling in its existence. To call it ambivalent is wrong because that too would say that it could be any emotion at all. It is the faceless, endless, eternal being of existence. Simple. Clear. Direct."

Happy with his answer he goes back to the counter and continues making dinner. We eat together, without saying a word between us. I try to put together a plate for the woman, but he stops me. He tells me she would only hurt herself and then it would be my fault. He counts the silverware, pats his hand along my waistline, checking to see if I've stolen any. Then he walks me down the hall to the bedroom where I lock myself in. I don't wait at the door as I've done before. I go to the bed and lay down. From across the room I hear the door handle jiggle. His footsteps move down the hall to the basement door, which closes behind him.

Chapter Eighteen

The wall goes on eternally. Quiet, impassive, it watches over the city in lackluster granite. I follow the streets out to where I first came in and stand across the street smoking cigarettes in the little strip of grass in the middle of a parking lot. Around me the shapeless figures of the city shop in the strip mall. Not too far off I find suburbs, the outer fringes of the city, the closest homes to the edges, the fresh and new stucco white for the fresh and new entering into the black cloaks. But this section of the wall is stagnant. Piles of cigarettes build at my feet and not a single new immigrant enters the city. The shorter, inner wall, ringed by the larger massive wall behind it, one swell of concrete followed by its brother, patrolled at ten minute intervals, one car always just in sight of the gap left by the next around the bends of the wall, this wall of gray, stands untouched by any hand, with only the birds resting briefly on the thin metal wire that runs along its top before fleeing further into the city. I've been told at one point or another that the currents are too low to zap the birds, or it somehow passes right through them. Neither of these make sense to me. Nothing about this wall or the one behind it makes me think a girl could pass through without help.

Around the city the wall continues unhindered. Broken only by the occasional gate, tall iron structures. The spaces between their bars too thin even for a bird. A crosshatch of metal across its back catches paper that blows against it from the city. The paper sticks there for days. It melts in the rain then dries the next day in the sun, decorating the gate with a fine paste. Between the wall and the city proper each neighborhood has a buffer, a zone of small industry that to a new immigrant may give the city hope. The national standard strip malls are a favorite. But here and there are the

small parks with man made ponds. Ducks bathe in the shallows. A figure tosses bread that floats past their legs until they peck at the water with the wet smacks of their bills. Farther on around the ring there's a bar, a restaurant, and a small casino with its own bank inside. Even in the daylight the florescent lights of "SLOTS" blinks in faded neon. Inside a welcome center, on the west side of the city, dust covers glass cases full of newspaper-clippings of the city's founding. Pictures of the tiny little town it first were sit framed and tucked on red felt. Two cloaked figures cut a black ribbon with a small dagger. Nothing looks as it did in these photos. The center of the city changed by industry and a burst of wealth ten years into its founding. Before I leave someone comes over and asks if I want a tour, but there's not much left to see.

When I'm approached I have a series of questions about a girl, the daughter of a friend, a friend of my daughter's, and my own daughter. I ask if they know anyone new to the city because I'm selling homes, insurance, or, if I'm honest, because I'm looking for news from the outside world. Three hours into standing outside the south west wall someone drives up in a car, a patrol I guess, and walk very quickly to me. They don't look as they cross the street. No one drives along the edge of the wall, not along the street that runs against its internal ring. A street behind us the cars take a small highway, the fastest road in the city, that loops around, with the stores, parks, and casino acting as a buffer between. The patrol tells me to move along. They kick the cigarettes at my feet and say I've been loitering, littering, and threaten to cart me off. I'm not sure if they know who I am or if they care. I don't ask him about a girl, my girl, or from anyone outside the city. Instead I'm more careful in how I watch.

I sit at a café table, sipping an iced coffee through a straw, writing down the times each patrol passes. Birds fly over the wall on jet streams, shooting out from its granite horizon like gunfire from an unseen squadron. The birds are divided in their flocks. Those from inside the city linger close to its cloaked habitants. They peck at the bun twists the café patrons drop. They sit atop the silver wire of the inner wall. They seem to heed no mind that everything inside has the same dead face. But apart from these are the immigrant birds. The murders newly swept over the wall seem to have entered into a nightmare. They avoid the edges of the walls. They skitter when a cloaked figure rises from its chair. They stare from across the street at these dark scarecrows that walk with a mind of their own. I sympathize with these tortured creatures. We've both lost the comfort of the noise that comes in clouds outside the city.

The tape in my recorder wears thin. I play it, rewind, record, and play it again, hearing the gradual tear of the magnetic tape. The warping of the plastic becomes part of the soundtrack. In the silence of recording I imagine the chiasmic chatter of the outside world. Faint traces of the weather's voice plays in my head, the temperatures a guestimate from the breeze that sweeps against the mesh of my mask. I read my notes in different voices, imitating accents of international reporters I'm beginning to forget. The recordings on the tape are dull along the edges of the wall. Mostly they contain the soft whispering of the wind against my cloak, an occasional passing car, and the faint sound of tickers as I pass two people.

It takes me two weeks to circle around the wall. My trail, if seen from above, drawing the shape of a sunflower across the city as I make my daily trips to the edges of the wall and back to the alley near the center of the city where I work at night. Along the

way, when I hear it, I stop at the water works and wait until the man I spoke to before goes home to work. I follow him in a cab with the money I earn from slinging. His trips home are dull, sometimes stopping for groceries, or carry out in little white boxes, or, one day, bright, purple flowers. My pockets fill with little slips of paper from the cigarette boxes. "Possibly someone's birthday," I write. But in that moment I've lost track of what day it is, so the date goes unnoted. The cab doesn't have a calendar and when I ask the driver what day it is, they type back, "Second day of the week." We go back and forth, me asking in more detail for the specific day, but the cab driver is resistant. We argue until they kick me out and drive off. I stand outside the man's home, watching the front door, expecting in some way for him to come out and ask me what the hell I'm doing there. But none of that happens. I walk up to the house, sneak along its side, pass through its gate. I'm at their back window, watching from the corner of it as two of them sit on a couch I can just see through the kitchen. At the kitchen counter a figure shuffles through mail. They take a knife from the drawer and cut open envelopes. When they finish stacking the mail into piles they put the knife back. It isn't until they stare out the window, then turn away without reacting, that I realize none of them have removed their masks. A little chill runs up my back. On the cassette tape a crow is cawing loudly to its mate. I feel as though I'm being watched, but when I look around there's no one. The sun has disappeared and left the backyard empty. It is me who has been watching. The chill sinks in my head, cold and disturbing in its swell. For a moment I see the vision of myself, standing outside a family's window, watching with the dark pressed against the glass.

I'm at the corner that night, thinking of this image, when someone vomits through their mask right next to me. The mesh functions as a strainer, letting loose a milky brown fluid, with little red and green chunks sticking behind. They didn't even buy any drugs off of us. Their whole body shakes with the after-effect that comes with unleashing your stomach. The way it leaves a body vacated, muscles loosened, rubbered, empty. They lean with one arm against the wall, their mask pressed in its crook, another hand against their stomach, until someone else comes up to them and touches their shoulder. Together they walk down the street and I leave my post, following them. In the air there's a thin scent of acid, pennies, and sweetened meat. I trail behind by ten feet. They're easy to follow as two clutching cloaks morphed into one stumbling body. The sick figure stumbles again, bends over a bush, and lifts their mask just in time to spew. Behind me the street is empty, down at the corner the young boy is reading his pages. The couple gather themselves. On my tape is a recording of the street during the day. The sound of a truck backing up, its beeping growing louder as it turns itself around in front of me, signals that the recording is almost over. They shuffle on, leaning now against cars, from one to the next, the distance between each must feel like a gap in the earth, threatening to let them fall. At a car parked on the corner they stop. The figure that's held the other up straight bends over the door and opens up, sliding the sick one into the passenger seat. I walk past them just as my tape stops with a soft click and hear the figure, a man, which one I can't tell, complain about food poisoning. As I return to my post I record my footsteps. The silence of the street encloses like a wall, thick, unmoving against my skin.

This feeling persists the rest of the night until the boy with the harmonica joins us. I record him playing without him knowing. I type to him, my clicking the background

noise to his improving pitch, asking him about his brother, his family, and he tells me in increasingly cryptic phrases that his brother is running away. One night he asks me if I've been outside the city and I say only yes. He asks me what it's like. Next to us the younger child reads his pages. Since he first dropped the packet weeks before I haven't had the chance to see what they say now. He still refuses to talk to me and the light is never brighter than the ambers of our cigarettes and the faint glow of the streetlights at the edge of the alley. I tell the older boy that outside the city the air is full of noise. I tell him that it is full of the mind of the world. I try to describe the way it buzzes within your own mind. But there is no right way to explain that outside this silent city of his the ether thinks with you, answering your questions, responding to a desire before it's even fully known to you. There is no way to tell him how goods are built inside your home. Describing the sheer availability of these things, information, products, wouldn't even hint at the reality of it. To come from something like the emptiness of this city, with its still air and desaturated buildings, and enter into the endless wealth of the stream would drive a child mad. So I stop at that, telling him only of the buzz, the way information can be accessed without a ticker and this seems to be enough for him. He goes back to playing the harmonica and I record it silently, smoking a cigarette.

At the shelters I fall asleep to his music. If I've spent too long at the strip club before heading back to the shelter the tape will end early and wake me up with the sudden silence or the snoring of my companions depending on which shelter I've returned to. On my way to and from the wall I find the clubs sprinkled through the city like flower seeds caught on the wind. I play the searching dad, the concerned husband, and the man who doesn't like to be touched. When I ask for young girls some clubs throw

me out, either the women in the room or a larger figure closer behind, threatening me with knives, grabbing me by the throat, pulling my cloak until it wraps around my body like a straight jacket. Those that let me return put me in secret rooms, back rooms far from the stage, or send me to another address where a run down apartment smells of musk and the floor is quick to give way. It's in one of these homes that a young girl cries into my chest through her mask. The sobs shaking her body violently, but her voice never breaks, so we sit there silently while I rub her back and try to calm her. She falls silent and then her body slackens. A cold snap hits my chest. I'm sure that she's dead. I take off her mask and it's the first face I've seen in a month. Her red cheeks glow in the warm light of the bedside lamp. Long lashes close across her eyes, reddened at the edges from her crying. She looks nothing like my daughter, but I'm struck at seeing a girl her age. She is still alive, this one in my lap, sleeping. I lift her up and put her on the bed, tucking the worn sheet around her. At the edge of the bed I watch her sleep and my heart burns.

On nights like this it's impossible for me to return to the shelter. I wander the sparsely attended streets, hoping to find a bar or someone else dealing our drugs, but find neither. Police or muggers, I'm not sure which, follow me until they find another wanderer. They stop them and exchange notes, the stalker's gestures animated, pointing down the streets. The conversation becomes hostile, and when they refuse to return home the cop throws them against a wall and zip ties their hands together. People inside a bar warn me about the curfew. They say it's loosely imposed, mostly to keep the streets clear of kids and the "pure of soul." Yet still, walking the streets past nine becomes a game of chase and dodge between the roamers, each becoming increasingly paranoid of the other. I learn what areas this is more true of, some remain completely empty, surrounded by

abandoned lots fenced in and overgrown or industrial parks where only the homeless bunker down in the alcoves. The nicer areas, those closer to the suburbs are where the game picks up. And in time I avoid these altogether. What people I see here during the day appear as families, and if alone then their cloaks are cleaned and pressed, briefcase in hand, or backpacks tightly strapped to their shoulders. There's no one here for me to question. No home would open its doors so easily to a young girl claiming to be a runaway without proof. And so on most nights I return to the shelters with little for my work.

The drapes of anonymity fall away most clearly on the streets and in the shelters I sleep. When all a person owns is strapped to their back or tied to a cart they become recognizable in what they carry. The man I spoke to months ago with the shopping cart makes his rounds in the central north district of the city. There's no point, I know, in bothering him again, but I ask him again if he's seen a girl. He stands without a word, taking his tray of food and rolling out the door with his cart. The people working behind the kitchen don't even stop him. Masks in the hall turn to me and I'm quick to finish my food. There's another woman I see around. At night she pulls her hair out from under her mask and lets it spill onto the cot as she sleeps. No one stops her from doing this. Someone in the bed next to her sits up. From the edge of their bed they watch her for twenty minutes before lying back down and turning to face the other direction. The woman with the long hair carries a backpack, black like most of the others, but one of the zippers is stuck at the top, so that even with her hair tucked under her mask I can see her around. These glaring distinctions go ignored by the population that pass the homeless. As long as it stays within reason, someone types to me at dinner, no one will bother you

unless they're one of the crazies. These people, they type, are worse than the cops.

They've seen them tear a man down in the street, rip the cloak off him and toss him down a staircase. The man didn't come back up, they type. The whole lot of them disappeared down after. He screamed, they type, but then, and they gesture, their hands exploding apart, the fingers drifting away on the air. People disappear, they type. I type back, I know.

A man who sells me a razor at shelter shows me how to read the city. He lifts his mask too high when he smokes and I see his cropped, blonde beard under the black. It doesn't bother him. When we walk together down an alley I lift mine up high as well and trade him for a menthol. In my ears the tape is whining over the blare of a strip club. The bending music makes me queasy. I take the cigarette slow and let the minty aftertaste tingle on my tongue. He points to a brick below a window, scribbled with a chalky swirl. This, he types, means stay the fuck away. When I press for more he ignores me. The swirls are danger, he types. Then he waves my paper away, letting it disintegrate between us. He points to something the shape of a teardrop drawn in black ink on the sidewalk outside a café. Here, he types, they'll give water around back, but nothing else. There's a horn, which means food, a pyramid, which means they'll put you to work, and a goose, which means they'll take you in. The goose is drawn on the bottom corner of a building, behind a drainpipe, because some of these signs they're quick to rub off. The building is four stories tall, brick painted white, and pigeons sit cooing on the ledge of its roof. It looks like apartments, but all the windows are black and impossible to see into. Up on the third floor one window is open. I stare up at it until my guide tugs me along. He shows me how to find a good sleeping spot by looking at where the sidewalks have been dirtied

and worn away. From a trashcan outside an unmarked white stucco building he pulls out a white paper cup. Stuffed inside the cup is a teabag. He opens the bag and spreads its contents in his palm, reading it like a fortuneteller. It's expensive tea, he types, you can tell by the little pink flowers mixed in. If we came back tomorrow he knows there'd be another one. Someone who lives inside the building has money to toss around, he types. I'm skeptical and I push him on it. He reaches back in the trashcan and pulls out lipstick, the end of it chewed away by small teeth. Rich and with a young kid, he types. He shoves it up to my mask like a prize proving him right. But you have to be careful, he types, some of these trashcans have shredders or compactors inside, stick your hand in, and he claps his hands together.

The kid with the harmonica tells me his brother is gone. He pulls the harmonica out of his cloak but holds it slack in his hand as we lean together against the van and smoke. Down the street a car alarm has been going off. When it finally stops we've smoked through three cigarettes. The brother left this morning, packing a duffel bag of clothes, leaving behind his guitar. He said the kid with the harmonica could have it, but he doesn't know how to play. Their mother is a wreck. She wants the police to do something, but they're refusing. The kid is typing this all out, passing the notes to me and I pass them on to the younger kid, but he doesn't read them. The notes just flap in the breeze and disappear. He doesn't look up from his pages. The cigarette I gave him burning close to the paper, nearly putting a hole in what he reads. A friend of his brother's went with him, he types, there could be more too, but they aren't sure. They only know the friend left too because in his note the brother mentions he's not alone. He lifts his mask higher than he has before and wipes at his face with his gloves. There's a

small scar on his cheek, like a second dimple stretching halfway down to his chin. I offer him another cigarette but he waves it away. The kid with the pages nudges me in the side and I hand it over to him. They aren't even sure the brother left the city, really, he types, his mask covers his face when he watches his fingers glide over the ticker. There's a dedication in this that I've come to recognize with the young. Those that have been raised in the city adhere to the practices even when they no longer make sense to do so. In the shelters you hear quick whispers or cries, people snoring as they sleep, even a laugh breaking the silence and making me jump. But with these kids, even with their masks up, smoking like they're professionals, they stick to the tickers with religious fervor. If I leave them to piss somewhere down the alley, they'll still type back to one another. He tries to play a tune on the harmonica and it comes out too winded. It cuts off short. He slips the harmonica into his cloak and closes his mask. We stand in the silence of the alley and I stop the recorder because there's no point in wasting the tape. Next to me the young kid flips a page and I see in large black ink the outline of a goose. I take the pages from his hand. There's a sharp cry that sounds like it comes from somewhere down the alley, but it's from the kid, his voice echoing loudly off the walls. He tries to kick me in the legs, but misses me in the shape of the cloak. His hand grabs my arm. I shove him back, too hard, sending him down along the back of the van. As he falls he tries to grab onto it, but his leather gloves slip off its metal frame and he smacks against the pavement. Next to me the kid with the harmonica doesn't even flinch.

In the light that spills down from the street I make out the faint shape of the goose. It could almost be a swan, but its neck is rigid, uncurving, and it stands with two large feet, looking upwards. I flip back through the pages and read. What was the

spouting of propaganda is now a preparation guide. Diagrams of the city cross the pages with points given in street numbers. The text details the carrying of the shared consciousness, the revival of the one body, and a return to a true escape from individual prosecution. We are hunted, it says, in ways that we have become blind to. We are lost and drowned in the slack lives of the content. Those that rest in comfort see no trouble in their ills. Those that slip from the city shall be pushed through its walls. In greater detail, lost between lines of rambling theory, instructions for receiving a gift and delivering it against the walls are given. Then, the image of the goose, and on the next page, “TOMORROW.” The young kid is up and takes a swing at me. I toss it off to the side. Before he can try again I hand the pages out to him, he snatches them away, kicking me, this time making contact with my shin. The kid with the harmonica is halfway down the alley. No one else is out there. No one waits to meet him. The younger kid is huffing under his mask. He’s shoving the pages back into his cloak while mumbling something to himself. I walk after the other kid, he’s already at the end of the alley and I want to call out for him, but the words stick in my throat, rasping against the ash covered skin. I can’t get back to this moment again. Too many kids have been lost. There’s nothing guiding me out to him, no sound that’s lingering along with me, the silence of the alley pressing the moment into something too visceral, the light of the street lamp that washes across the kid’s cloak like water, turning its black surface a dim gray, hardens the scene into a halting vision that I can’t walk through. The physical weight of each object presses against my chest. He turns the corner and by the time I reach it the sidewalk is empty, but the street is lined with white vans.

Chapter Nineteen

Before the sun has risen he knocks on the door and wakes me. The blue-black glow of the sky outside the window gives the whole room a blueberry dye color. Maybe the sun is up. It has to be, I guess. He knocks again and I slide out of bed and press my head to the door.

“Yes?” I say.

“Good morning,” he says. “Early day today. Time to get ready.”

Out on the kitchen table breakfast is ready, steaming on the plate. Scrambled eggs, bacon halfway crisp, and a biscuit with the top of it shoved down and some honey and gravy, maybe, poured over its top. It looks gross, in a way, if I weren’t hungry I might turn it away. We eat without talking. I use my plastic spoon, while he uses his metal fork. After we’re done he walks me to the bathroom and tells me to shower. Shampoo, body wash, and a little pink poof hung on the string from the faucet wait for me there. A white towel sits folded on the toilet seat. The scent of the body wash is a tropical kiwi. The shampoo some strawberry floral mix. Together they make me smell like a fruit bowl, but it’s good. I have to be careful not to close my eyes for too long in the shower or I start to imagine that I’m back in the showers where they’re spraying me with a hose. The warm drops massage the back of my head. I turn and let it patter down on my face. In the summer when the rains would come I’d stand outside and let it fall on me like this. He knocks on the door, telling me to hurry up. There’s something familiar in it. My hand floats above the faucet, a memory keeping it still, my mother at the door, asking me much the same.

When we go downstairs I see that the chair is empty, the woman is gone. I don't need to ask. But I wonder when he took her. I wonder if he took her while I was sleeping, or moved her just then while I was in the shower, or if she's still here, somewhere, in the house, hidden away in a room I don't know about. He puts me back in the room with the red light. There's a chair in here now that he moved from the living room. Its large blue wings look purple in the light. On the seat of it he's set a book. A jug of water sits on one of the metal counters along the walls. Next to it there's a banana and an apple, one of them looking terribly discolored, the other just even more intense a shade of red.

"If you need the bathroom," he says. "Use the sinks."

Then he locks the door and I listen as his footsteps fade up the stairs. There's nothing I can hear beyond that. Without windows the solid granite walls of the room are defiant, solid. The red light is already giving me a headache. Three bulbs of it hang in a perfect row down the center of the room. The trays I saw before in the shelves below the counters have been cleared out. A tall metal shelf case, bolted to the wall, looks like a skeleton cleaned so bare it shines in the sick red light. I close my eyes. Open them. Examining my pink skin in the light. A mole on my arm turns to black ink. My shirt a weird color I'm not sure how to describe, blue tinted red, but not quite the purple of the chair. Maybe a lavender, maybe a neon florescent purple. It hurts in the middle of my head and threatens to stretch back further. How long before a hurt encompasses a whole head? Swallowing it whole in a red glow.

The book on the chair is unmarked. Why would I expect anything else? The cover is leather, dark, possibly black outside the red room, but its been worn in its use, with the leather softened along the spine and the ridges on the cover dampened. It opens with a

soft crack. The pages are thin like onionskins. They stick together and I have to be careful to separate them. If I flip them too fast I'll tear them or rip them out all together. Under the red light some of the words from one page bleed through another, with their shadows waiting behind the page like a figure in the fog. I read in the chair, resting my eyes when the red pages start to strain too much.

It is through the book that I'm able to escape the room. At first the words are difficult and don't seem to make much sense on their own. But as I read things start to build, one level on top of another, the soft layers of a cake, until I can look back on the whole thing and see the shape that's starting to form. This sounds opaque, the describing becoming as difficult as the text. This is how it makes sense to me, this is how I can connect with it, this is how it pulls me in and lets me forget where I am. The book is older than I suspect the man without a face is. The language it uses, the construction of its sentences, seem to work in long paths, trailing from one point to another, without stopping to let what has already been said fully form. It speaks of this, to begin to connect we must connect as we think as we say as we speak we must see and connect as that beyond us does as one whole as without an ending as without a beginning to begin to see that an end and a beginning do not stop to consider what we think about its beginning or end but rather one must see the middle as the whole to leave the concept of beginning or ending where it has no place in the middle where we will continue on to connect as we speak only if we think and speak as we do. And I must read the sentences again. When he returns I'm only on the fifth page. My lunch sits untouched on the counter. He looks at it.

"Weren't you hungry?" He says.

"No," I say. "How long has it been?"

“Eight hours,” he says. He points to the book on my lap. “Engrossing, yes?”

“It’s too difficult to read.”

“You’ll get it.”

We eat. When I ask him where he went he says, work. What did he do? He designed a building. What kind of building? Just like all the others. And he seems upset in answering these questions, but not so much because I’m asking, but rather he doesn’t like the answers. Each answer he gives he pauses afterwards, looking out the window where the sun has already faded to a crisp yellow line. The fork hangs in front of him with a bit of potato stuck to its end. He chews with a mechanical motion of his jaw, each bite a calculated choice, up, and then down. Just like all the others. His words linger in my head as I shove pieces of potato together and smash them against my spoon until I’m able to pick them up with the bottom of it as if I’ve pasted them there. Eating all my meals with a spoon bores me. The plastic feels fragile in my mouth. I worry that if I bite too hard on it plastic shards will go into my skin.

“Why design buildings that look the same as ones already made?” I say.

He sets down his fork and refolds the napkin in his lap. A little tremor runs along his hands and disappears into his cloak before coming up his neck to shake his head in an aftershock. We learned about earthquakes in schools, how the plates of the earth shift against each other, one pressing against the other, one diving under the other, one shoving up toward the sky, the whole earth trembling in the wake this collision makes. What inside him has collided so roughly?

“They’re different, they say,” he says. “And, they are, to a degree. Yet, given a box that adheres to all the same principles as the box before, but add to it a wing or shift

the way it folds, the wall of one overlapping the wall of another in a miniscule manner, given that and called a different box. Well, it's not true. From the outside the box is still the same, maybe not with the wing, but otherwise, yes, the same, but take away that small wing, or whatever pointless thing they've added, and it's a box all the same. Four walls and an empty space inside makes a box. What can you do with that? What can you do when the box must never change? On the inside, you change what you can, as much as possible, but its pointless in a way because there's nothing to the outside."

I pile the skins of my potato together with my spoon, lifting one piece up and dropping it on another. The glaze from the carrots is turning solid on the plate. It no longer responds to my spoon's nudging. He picks up his fork again and continues eating. I've been told in the past that I don't understand adult problems. I don't understand why he doesn't stop building these boxes if he hate it so much. Why doesn't he design something else? Adult problems, my mother told me, are like homework, you can't just bend out of them, or things worse than a bad grade will happen. Money are like grades, she said, but instead of getting a bad grade, you get less money, until you get no money. This is why she went to work, she said, the money. I understood that. I suppose I understand why he doesn't stop with his boxes too. But it seems like we should have more of a choice in these things.

"What was the woman's name?" I say.

In the light of the kitchen it's easy to see his eyes. They shift their cold stare to something else, a soft thing, a tired thing. He shakes his head and eats the last bite of his chicken. When he's done he takes the plates to the sink, tossing my plastic spoon in the trash as he passes it, and cleans them.

The next morning our routine continues. It must be a workweek. It must be a week in general. Were they not weeks before?

“What day is it?” I say as he leads me down to the basement.

Another apple and banana sit on the counter next to the jug of water.

“Be sure to eat this time,” he says. “You need to be healthy.”

I set them closer to the chair. While I read I pick them up, tossing the apple from one hand to the other like a ball. The banana I hold to the shape of my palm, then against the back of my hand, then against my face, then my forehead, then my chin, seeing all where the banana fits against my body, in some places it curves better than others against my skin. It fits best against the shoulder, or around my neck, or my knee, both with the leg pressed against itself, and when it’s stretched out. When I read five pages I ask myself if I’m hungry. But the answer is always no. So I read more. By the fifteenth page I eat the banana. I place the peel on the table. It slumps on its side, settling in, shrinking into the metal until it stops, fully relaxed.

The words of the book stick to the walls whenever I look up. The red light burns them into my eyes. I blink several times, looking around the room. I stare at the banana and the phrase, would we wind if the wind did not so easily brush past our ears, floats along its peel. The apple takes the word, fulcrum, along its chewed core where my teeth have left jagged edges. I don’t understand the word fulcrum, or diaspora, or why a measure can be desperate. Not at first, at least, not in these first days. To learn to read, we’re told, let the book tell you how to read it. Use the contexts of the phrase that follows. Use the words you know to make sense of those you don’t. But where do you begin when the beginning isn’t there at all?

While I read on the third day a terrible pressure builds in my chest. The room, its redness, has started to bleed into my dreams. I dream of waking up and everything is red. The sun floats above like a dark rubber ball in a toilet of blood. All the birds have turned a bright red, even their feet and tiny little beaks. The grass is dark red on dark red and when I rip it up drops of blood run along my finger. My finger turned permanently pink. When I woke up and stared into the dark blackness of light I started crying. I was so happy that the darkness was black. Even if I turned the lights on and found that the dream was real, that everything had turned red, knowing that the darkness would still be black made me happy. And the memory of the dream is what causes me to panic in the red room. I take a deep breath and let it shake me as it flows out. My eyes could be stained this way. The red could seep into my eyes and dye them. Everything tainted by the endless rose. I close my eyes tight and cover my head with my shirt. My hands press against my eyes through the fabric. I open my eyes into the darkness I've created. The soft pressure that's been building in my brain while I sit and read in this room fades a little. A cold emptiness fills the space.

Time is being taken from me. I count the days and on the fifth day I think it will be the last. There will be a weekend. All jobs have a weekend. And he will not have to leave and I will not have to go to the red room. I'm not sure what we'd do. Would we talk about the book? It sounds exciting for a moment to share something that we've both read. A conversation outside of ourselves would be nice. I have questions, a list of them prepared in my head. What does it mean to be timeless? Birth and death are beginnings and ends, which leads us of course to believe its true of all things, but if it isn't true, then what are they? How can you continue or be continued without them? But when he gets up

and puts me in the room again, I only ask: What day is it?

We've never given the days names. Like anything else in the city they were referred to only in numbers or the experiencing of the thing. Today was today, yesterday yesterday, and so on. The first day of the week was followed by the second. If today were the fourth day of the week, you would say, "the fourth day of the week." Or to set a date, we'd say, "the second day of the week, two weeks from now," or "the second day of next month," and then you'd count. But you knew all the same. You counted it out and had a calendar that told you in numbers which day was which. Even this system would be flawed, according to the book. To call a thing by its word is giving it a name. Language is a named thing.

At times when I sit at the kitchen table I'm not so sure I've left the red room at all. I'll go back in in the morning, I know, I've come to expect it now when I wake. As I shower I anticipate the redness. The white tiles and white tub and even the water seem to shade itself a color of pink. The red crawls in at the edges of my eyes. Any red object in the room stands out like a beacon. They threaten to spread their color to the objects around them. We both know that all I have to do is wait and it will be true, I'll be in the room and the memory will be red. The book says timelessness is good. To escape the construct of a devised beginning and ending is to get closer to the truth. But it has not yet said what that truth is. While I stare at a sausage link in the morning I wonder if the food is beginning or ending and I come to the conclusion that it's neither. On my plate it is a middle, in my stomach another middle, and from then on it will forever be a middle, moving from one state to another, never will it be nothing.

"Are you okay?" He says.

“Why?”

“Your eyes are shaking.”

I don’t know what he means, but they do hurt. The pressure in my head has been building and I wake up with headaches. I tell him this and that I think the red lights are causing it.

“We need you healthy,” he says.

He continues eating. I’m not sure if we’re eating breakfast or dinner until I look at my plate and see the sausage still there. My throat closes around a tight ball tucked inside. I shouldn’t be like this. This shouldn’t be my situation. Outside the window a bird zips past in the cooling dark of morning. Another flies to the window screen and latches with its tiny toes. It pauses there for a moment, looking around it, then it flies up, grabs something hanging from the roof’s edge, and flies off. My finger is tracing a pattern in the wood grain. When he stops talking I notice the pattern is a swirl.

The light bulbs in the basement stay red. He leaves a sleep mask in the room for me. When my eyes start to bother me too much I put on the mask and try to sleep in the chair. Somehow the light persists. I can hear the red. The soft electric buzz of the light bulbs carries their color through the mask. He leaves a sandwich instead of fruit. The white bread dyed pink. The lettuce decays green. A single slice of tomato pulses in the delight of its redness. When I eat it I taste only the tomato. Apples were not the taste of red. I have found the flavor in the tomato. I laugh and it startles me. It’s funny to have found a flavor of a color, so simply, in a tomato. The phrase too, I have found the flavor in the tomato, at once so declarative, declarative statements, to declare to claim, yes, I remember those, but also at once so ridiculous, so silly. What the hell am I thinking? I am

in a room, made red by tinted glass, trapped here for hours at a time, reading a book that's driving me crazy, eating lunches prepared by a lunatic. I can feel my body then in the empty space of the room. For a moment it's as though I'm looking down on myself, or from behind myself, and able to see the space between my body and the walls and the space beyond that too, the way that the basement fits into the ground and the house sits on top and the earth extends on all sides further out, and even how the house fits within the neighborhood and connects further out to the city. I can feel all this, but not see it, of course, but I am aware that all of that exists beyond the room and I am this small girl stuck here.

“Why is the room red?” I say.

“They never taught you how to develop film?” He says.

“No,” I say. “Photography was for the older kids. They said the cameras were too expensive.”

He laughs. “They’re right.”

“How does it work?”

“If exposed to light, the photographs would be destroyed. But in the red light you can see what you’re working on and it doesn’t effect the photographs.”

“It’s like seeing in the dark.”

“Yes,” he says. “In a way.”

“What did you take pictures of?”

“Oh, anything. I’ve never had the artistic flair for it. They’re terribly bland photographs, nothing to be framed, or appreciated beyond the content.”

“My mother said photos told the truth of the eye, but paintings told the truth of the heart.”

“Not bad,” he says. “But not necessarily true. A photograph can tell just as much about the heart. The difference is in how far it can get from...”

Something out the window stops him. It’s evening out, too black to be morning, and we’re eating vegetables and some meat I’m not sure what it is. I thought it was morning. Above the fence, what must be out past the roofs of the houses, but before the wall, undoubtedly, a soft white glow is fading.

“What’s that?” I say.

He stands and goes to the window, pressing his hand around his face and putting them both against the glass. The glow disappears. The dark black of night settles back in. When he turns a light of his own has died. The shape of his face somehow slackened.

“A mistake,” he says.

In the red room I’m terrified to let my feet droop. A dark red shape ran underneath the chair while I read. It was a swift blur, just out of my vision, disappearing into the book, but really it must have gone under the chair. At first I thought it was my eyes screwing up again. I went on reading. Now there’s a soft scratching against the wall. Tiny claws the size of bird toes try to tear at the concrete. It must be a rat, or a mouse, but I’m not sure how it could get in the room. Did he put it here? I tuck my legs against my chest and use the book, spread open, as a shield at the edge of the chair. My breaths are short, barely anything, in case it can hear me up here. I tense up my whole body, freezing in place like a statue. My body cramps while I wait for him to open the door. I’ve lost track of how long he’s been gone or how many pages I’ve read. It could be just a few

minutes before he returns or it could be hours. Behind the chair the scratching picks up. It sounds as if a tiny mouth is taking little bites from a cracker. It could be just that, but I didn't have crackers. *Scratch, scratch, scratch.* My eyes move along the edge of the chair, back and forth, watching for anything to pop up. A half eaten sandwich sits on the counter closer to me. If I waste it he'll be angry, or disappointed, or both. But if I reach for it. He opens the door and the sound stops. I jump off the chair, landing halfway to the door, and run past him. It's hard for me to fall asleep. In the darkness of the bedroom I think I hear the scratching, but when I really listen there's nothing there. In the morning again it feels safe to enter the room again. When he closes the door I look under the chair, but see nothing. The wall behind it is untouched. Smooth concrete matches the smooth concrete of the floor and both continue through the room. I search the whole room, looking for cracks or holes, anything where something could get in, but there's nothing. The room is solid.

I read for a full day, without taking breaks to rest my eyes. The book says the self is a separation of reality from the human mind that to be focused on the self is to be focused on a lie of the mind's own creation but to ignore that one body belongs to one mind to one heart and so on is ridiculous as well and that a balance must be made in concern with the self as a consciousness separate from the true indifference of the universe and with recognition of the human body as one among many that function as a whole and must live as one connected entity or not live at all. There we can see the endless spiral, the connection without breaking or starting, and the existence that simply is. Against the wall at the other end of the room, at the top of the wall, a small black dot slides down from the ceiling, leaving a trail of ink behind it. Half way down the wall it

stops. It turns to the left and circles inside itself in a closing arc. The dot spins further and further in until it seems to disappear at the center. The taste of red, a tomato, fills my mouth. But as it fills with its warmth it turns metallic. Some of it drips out the corner of my mouth and when I wipe at it and look at my finger I see the blood. The little streak of blood, such a deep red in this light, rolls down my finger, then stops, circles back on itself and spins around. I smash it against the page of the book, pressing hard on the paper. With my eyes closed I count to ten, I breathe deep, taking each breath in and out very slow. As I breathe a soft lavender smell fills the room. Death is not an ending. Birth is not a beginning. This moment is a middle and will be followed by more. Each moment will go on to the next. Death will not stop my existence. My finger throbs under the pressure I've put on it. I pull it from the page and the paper sticks. Using my other hand, I carefully peel off the page. A perfect red spiral remains. The scratching starts up again. I grip the book tight with both hands. A fault line collapses in my chest and through my body the shuddering echo of it works from my heart and into my limbs and further still into my head where it pushes out the pressure of the red and replaces it with a hand that tells me not to look up. Hold your eyes on the page, it says, don't let them shake from their spot. I lock on to the word "freight." The shape of the 'f' balanced by the 't' and the middle, packed so full of sound and the curves of the 'e' and the 'g' and the 'i' smashed between them. The scratching is coming from the wall ahead of me, not beneath the chair. But freight is close to fright, with only a letter being removed, yet both carry things to a destination. The black spiral on the wall pulses inside the lines. Tiny little claws, red, of course, like the nails of birds, scratch in the black ink. I stand up. My feet sink into something warm and wet that covers my ankles. The taste of blood has faded and instead

there is sweet syrup, sticky with sugar. I let it move across my tongue. It feels like a name. From the back of my throat comes the idea waiting to be realized. To speak it would bring something from the spiral. To call out to it as a loved one. The name of a mother, not my mother, not the name of a beginning, but as a channel, a vessel the book says. The book that's still here with me in my hands, pressed against my chest. My other hand is reaching for the spiral. The claws within it quicken their pace. They're excited, I can tell. He spins me around by the shoulder. There, his face is taught, the pinkness turned a dark flame and though the whites of his eyes are also pink there is a sadness pressing in from far back behind them.

“You haven't finished your sandwich,” he says.

“I saw it,” I say.

But it's gone from the wall behind me. The gray slab of concrete remains unmarked. He stands fully and slides the book from my hands. It snaps shut.

“Finish the sandwich with dinner. We need you healthy.”

Chapter Twenty

The sun is still a thought lingering behind the wall when I walk out of the shelter. While I tossed around on the itchy bed for three hours the tape ran out of city noise and so I'm left to the expectant silence of morning as I record the sound of my footsteps. Not even the birds are up yet. Down the street there's a twenty-four hour diner that sells cheap day-old donuts and coffee that tastes like battery acid. It takes four creams and six packets of sugar to clear out the metallic taste. The waiter brings me eggs and toast, both covered in gristle from the grill, and shuts the curtain of the booth, leaving me in the alcove to watch the window as the city wakes. Somewhere from behind the curtain, tucked in an alcove of their own, the voice of a child asks questions and gets shushes as an answer. The child asks, "Why'd you do that?" until a hushed voice answers in soft unintelligible words. I've forgotten the patience needed for children that young. For the way our son would ask benign questions of the clouds or trash that skittered past in the wind. "Where's it going?" He asked. We were taught by the lessons of our first child, our girl, with the constant stream of parental guidance, to use these as positive behavior encouragement moments. We'd answer, "To get picked up by a kind stranger and thrown into the trash" and all creative parenting dissolved to a script. But it's proven to work. At least until they start to turn into young adults and any attempt at training can be broken. Where are they now? It must be nearing afternoon for them. I push my eggs around on the plate until they spell my daughter's name. The small orange-yellow words beam back at me. I miss holding her with her arms wrapped around my neck. How long would it be before they asked questions? I told them a month, at most, and now it's been much longer I'm sure. The night air is starting to turn with the crisp of winter. Even today the dew and

morning frost stick to the edges of the window, pressed like small hands. I put my ungloved hand to the window while chewing on a piece of toast and feel the cold glass. Two figures jog past the window, their cloaks bouncing around them. It can't be pleasant to jog in these cloaks or with the mask strapped to your face. The child in the restaurant is asking, "Where's the sun?" and answering their own question, "Sleeping, soon it comes," with stretched vowels. I eat the last of my daughter's name.

When our daughter scraped her arm against the metal edge of our living room table my wife showed me how to dress a wound. They'd given us some training on these things, but I never really used it. As our daughter howled through her tears my wife kept repeating in soothing tones, "This is how you dress a wound. This will make it better." The memory startles me and I'm still there as I leave the diner. The child's gabbing drifts from a booth along the wall to my left. It cuts short with the sudden silence of the street and I realize the cassette recorder is off, neither playing nor recording. I rewind it, play it, and listen to my footsteps overlap. The city is slowly waking. A few stray cars fly past with the odd mix of sharp sleep that comes when experiencing an untouched day.

From one remembered address to the next, I make my way to those I can remember from the boy's sheets. The stillness of each location bothers me. I'm expecting some sort of stage, a target, something to tell the others what needs to be done, but there's nothing like that. One address is an office building, as plane and white with the unyielding black windows up its sides as any other building that surrounds it. Another is a squat four story building, brick painted white, black window panels broken by black metal, and a short concrete staircase leading to glass double doors. When I reach a small park, no larger than a corner block, I sit down on the lone park bench under a sapling at

the edge of the sidewalk. I take out the pack of cigarettes and with it comes the matchbox of dinosaurs, falling off the top of the cigarettes into my lap. They clatter around inside the box, caught short by a fold in my cloak. As I take the smoke in a long slow drag, I open the matchbox and set the dinosaurs in a line on the bench beside me. I'm tempted to crush one right now just to go home. But what point would there be to return empty handed? I couldn't do such a selfish thing as leave a girl behind. And then there's losing my own name to a failure of the case. The deal only works if I come back with something for him. It's better if I crush the green one and come back with the girl alive. There's money in that one too. I pick it up and turn it in my fingers. The edges of the plastic dinosaur poke against the leather gloves. That's how they work out there. They wrangle up the dirt and if you don't play ball it goes onto the stream for everyone to see. There's plenty of blame to toss around against my oldest boy, my sister's husband, but there's mine too with that one little slip on a dead case. We all have a hand in the pile. And under it lays the girl. The tape stops, I rewind, I record. One at a time I place the dinosaurs back in the matchbox and slip it into my cloak. The smoke of the cigarette blows in my eyes, stinging them.

Another set of buildings, twelve in all now, and it's almost noon by the time I reach a vacant lot. The whole block here is leveled. Small patches of grass grow between torn up concrete. A large pile of gray slabs sit in the center like some jumbled mess of a pyramid. What could they want with this spot? Across from the lot I sit on the stairs of an apartment complex and smoke a cigarette. Nothing has been out of place at any of the sites I've visited. Nobody stops to linger. No construction or glaring statements of rebellion, which I'm not sure what that'd even look like. What is it about these places that

connect them? They're not all structures. They're not all office buildings. There's a park, a vacant lot, a small café, a clothing store, a bus stop on the corner of a convenient store. In my head I draw a pattern across the city, following my path along the streets, but there's no shape to it, nothing that the lines spell out. A crow lands at the top of the pile and caws. Above me, at the edge of the roof, its family responds in low cries. Three cigarettes and the crows gather around the pile of concrete, perched at its edges. My fingers are jittering on the ticker. I type out random words just to record the sound of the clicks and whirl of the printer. A list of names, animals beginning with the letter 'a,' then 'f,' objects in a room, and then the street numbers of the locations I've been. I go through who I've talked to, who hasn't seen the girl, people described by what they do, how they acted, what they typed, no names, no easy points of reference. The sun is bright above me and I'm sweating into the cloak by the time I type my wife's name.

The air is turning thin and making the smells of the city into sharp versions of their fuller summer cousins. It's the seasons that bring the sensation of fullness or emptiness through the smells. In the summer it seems the winds fill up with the smell of food and stuff it around my head, into my nose. In the winter it dies out, the air somehow deflating the senses, purifying the air, making it clean of anything but a cracking cold. We're in that transition now, when everything is stretching. At the corner the kid and I push drugs and the restaurants behind us is wisping fish out its doors. If it I weren't so close to the trash bin where they've already tossed a bag of calamari I'd find the whole thing appetizing. Up and down the street parking is a mess because the white vans still sit on the curb. Not a single van was parked along the route I walked today, but here, for four blocks, they're packed in tight. The kid is in the usual routine, watching my signals

for how much to hand out. My legs are aching from wandering around the city all day.

On the cassette the last of my ticking is playing under the sound of the crows in the vacant lot. I look inside the nearest van while I wait for a customer, but it's a stupid attempt with the black windows. The reflection of my mask stares dumbly back, asking what the hell I expected to see. The crowds thin out early. It must be a weeknight.

Tomorrow the streets will again be empty as people shuttle off to work. I'll check the shelter on fifth, the morgue on thirty-second, and follow a bouncer from one of the strip clubs who told me they have a hook up for out-of-towners looking for something more like home.

Back in the alley we smoke cigarettes and wait for the two figures to drive the kid home. The usual white van is parked in its spot. We lean against it, our hands moving from under our masks to flick the ash on the concrete. The kid doesn't have pages to read tonight. Instead they stare off down the alley, their mask barely tilted up. On the cassette tape the crowd from earlier is passing on the sidewalk, a figure walks by with change jingling in their cloak. I wait for the kid with the harmonica to come around the corner, but nothing passes by the alley and the white van parked on the street.

The two figures show up carrying large bags slung over their shoulders. They plop them down in front of us and pull out their tickers. One has a flashlight that they shine on the slips of papers they hand to us. We get the same address, the numbers fading into my glove, the kids disappearing before it hits the ground. From the large bags they hand us black, burlap bags about the size of a backpack. I can already smell what's inside. The distinct decay of the goose heads filters through my mask. The kid hefts the bag over their shoulder. I hesitate, not wanting to get the stench on my cloak, but holding

the bag out in front of me isn't going to work. Outside the alley figures are piling into the vans, hefting big bags into the back with them. Some figures carry bags like ours, following along with us down the street until they turn off, heading in other directions. Together we're like ants, spindling out from the central hub, crawling through the city with our food. None of them pause. No one seems confused about what they need to do. Any messages passed are done once, without a reply, and the recipient hefts the bag over their shoulder and sets off. We carry the smells down through the cities, passing figures that step aside. When we approach a figure waiting outside a bar I hear them wretch through their mask and flee back inside. The further we walk the less of us there are. We slowly split down into groups of five, then three, and then it's just the kid and me. Hundreds of us must be spreading across the city, with vans piled full going further, or carrying their large bulk packages to key destinations. I imagine one of the businesses I passed this morning, getting a whole bundle of goose heads delivered on its door. It's absurd. What message does it send? For what purpose could it serve? If I asked the kid these questions I know the response would be a sharp, "fuck off." So we go on silently.

Our address is a small apartment complex with two bars in the basement, one on either side of the apartment doors. A soft rock song meanders outside from one of the bars, but I can't tell which. Above us only one apartment has its light on, the window open, with the plastic blinds clattering softly in the breeze. Around us the street is empty and the whole scene makes me nostalgic for something, a college town, maybe. I'm not quite sure. We crouch down at the corner of the building where a small crawl space, barely large enough even for the kid to fit through, leads down between the buildings. The kid sets his bag down and opens it. The smell belches out at us. The kid steps back

from the bag, just for a second, before diving into it. They pull a mallet out and set it on the ground near the white brick wall of the complex. A set of twelve nails follows.

They're large things like railroad spikes with sharp, metallic ends that catch the street light in a pale streak. I take a deep breath, hold it in, and open my bag. Inside is the same supplies, a mallet, spikes, and curled in a pile beneath them are the severed goose heads. But there's a small cylinder in there as well. A metal case, slick brushed steel that twists a part. Inside is a syringe loaded with the white fluid. I turn to the kid to ask about it, the syringe out in my hand. Already they have their sleeve rolled up, the syringe pressing against it, their thumb pushing the white inside. I reach to stop them, but my hand freezes there, grasping in the air. They pull out their ticker and type a message.

“Do it, stupid.”

So I do. The cold milk filters into my arm. The wall in front of me fades to a dark black. Above us, past the black light of the apartment window, the sky flushes white and the ink mark of the stars float to its surface. Our cloaks glow like moonlight against the night. The kid pulls a goose head from their bag, the long white neck rising in his hand as if he's a snake charmer. They nod at me, lifting the goose head up against the brick wall, a white line on black paper. I stand, holding the goose head in place. The kid is careful on the placement, five inches below the cut of the neck, center of the stem. They take a big swing, driving the nail through the neck with a soft squelch. Another swing follows, heavier, their arm almost reaching their back, coming down with a great lash on the spike. The sound of metal in brick echoes down the street. The kid swings twice more then turns away for another head and spike. It becomes apparent that the noise of the spikes in the bricks will be a problem. Even if we stave it out, waiting until the music

from the bar is at its loudest, the pitch of it, the frequency, the sound it may be causing inside the building itself, audible to those in the apartments above us, especially the one with its window open, we're likely to draw attention. So we work quickly, each on our own bag. It's difficult at first, but after the first two I'm able to hold the head and spike with one hand and drive the spike an inch into the brick with one swing. I'm four in, halfway across the bar on the left, nailing a goose head above a window, which from inside I imagine is covered or else we'd already have a crowd. The head dangles there like fallen garland. A new light turns on in another apartment above us. The kid is having trouble getting one of his spikes in. The brick they're nailing it to crumbles away. Under my skin the milk is calming me down. It has this weird buzz about it, a relaxing little buzz, as though tiny fingers massage the insides of my veins. It would be painful if it were anymore intense. I imagine little jolts of electricity pulsing there. A similar feeling to a new implant just activated with the stream flowing through your nerves. The sensation lasts for days until it finally fades away. I'm calm with the milk. My white hands against the black wall are steady. My movements feel practiced, sure of themselves, measured. Each swing hits center of the spike. The muscles in my arm stretch back and spring forward with a precise uncoiling of their tension. Above us the window opens and a white mask peeks out.

"What the fuck?" A voice says. But it isn't from the window. A figure stands by the stairs leading down to one of the bars. They grasp a mug, still sweating, in one hand. Its pale white liquid glows between their fingers. The figure calls inside for others. They're between the kid and me. At first they don't notice the kid behind them, but the kid doesn't stop nailing goose heads and the impact of the nail causes the figure to turn.

More of them come out of the bar, three figures shoving their way past the first. They step back together, looking at our work. Ten goose heads are pinned to the wall across the building, hanging over the windows, some of them doubled up in a line, their black bills drifting gently in the wind. One close to me grabs the bag at my feet.

“There’s more,” they say. Their voice breaks the rule wide open and they all start shouting.

“What is this shit?” Another says.

The kid is still working behind them. At the sound of another nail, the one closest to the kid steps behind them. They grab the kid’s mallet before it can swing down. The kid struggles. The door of the apartment opens and another figure steps out. In my hand the mallet is heavy, a spike and goose head pressed together in the other. I let the goose head slip to the sidewalk with a thud. One of the figures from the bar steps into the street, their hand covering their mask, the smell overwhelming them. Ticker messages are traded between the figure from the apartment and one from the bar. A small grunt and a whisper, a man’s voice, is shared between two others. More figures are emerging from the bar. There’s almost ten of them now. The kid struggles to free his mallet from the other figure, but they’re much larger than the kid, larger than me maybe. My legs are cramping up. The milk tries its best to relax the tension, but I desperately want a cigarette. The figure with the mug shuffles past one of their friends, they pace twice, then throw the beer mug at the brick above me. It bursts in a great spray of white. I turn away, covering my mask from the glass. The boy takes the chance to kick the figure repeatedly in the shins and gut, striking something vulnerable below it. With the mallet freed of the figure’s grasp the kid winds it back over their shoulder. I know what follows. I can see

everything bad that will come of this. The cry to stop lodges in my throat. The mallet snaps a bone. The figure collapses in a loud cry. The crowd of cloaks moves together and apart in one great motion. We're told not to make the first move. Instead, take the defensive, let them come at you and redirect their motions away from yourself. Injure to incapacitate, to disable, not permanently, but enough for them to feel the urge to stop. If I had the implants and the stream to direct me, this may have worked. My mallet would not swing toward an arm, popping the shoulder of a figure lunging toward me. They cry out and fall to their knees. Another figure grabs my cloak from behind. I'm twisted down toward the sidewalk, but my mallet is already swinging around, making contact with an arm. Between the shifting figures, another shoves the kid against the wall and knees him in the gut. A knife glimmers in the figure's hand. Before I can reach him the knife disappears into the kid's cloak, with two quick jabs of the figure's arm. Not a sound comes from the kid as they slump down to the ground.

I take a punch in the chest and swing my mallet at its source. One grabs my arm, holding it tight, trying to pry the mallet from my hand. The spike, forgotten in my other hand, swings down and catches fabric and skin. My hand comes away empty, the spike left sticking out of their shoulder at an odd angle. One figure disappears behind the apartment door. Another goes down with a shot to the knee as they swing at my head. The figure with the knife lunges at me. The blade grazes my side through my cloak. A sharp heat splits across my skin. I go low and my mallet swings hard into their hip. There's a splintering crack. The figure tumbles sideways, falling halfway into the stairs of the bar. Against the wall another figure watches, cupping their shoulder in their hand, their body heaving. They stay there, pinned like one of the goose heads next to them.

Removing my glove I check the kid's pulse. It's faint. Their white cloak leaks a black fluid from their stomach that smells like blood. I cradle the kid in my arms, lifting them from the sidewalk.

"Where's a hospital?" I say. The dampness of my voice startles me.

"Fuck off," the figure says through a labored breath.

Around me the street is surprisingly familiar, but twisted somehow. The colors of course reversed in a negative, but I know this street. The numbers only a few blocks from my apartment complex. There's no reason to think I can save the kid there. I have no medical supplies, but maybe someone in the building can call for help. Here in the street the kid has no chance. As I run the cut in my side burns through my body. My own cloak grows damp with what I hope is my blood, but I refuse to look. Down the streets the city is deserted. Even the bars we pass now have turned off their lights. I turn a corner and run past two figures, hammering goose heads into the side of an office building. One of them calls after me. Shouting something about the kid. At the apartment I burst through the doors and slam against the elevator button. It chimes and opens instantly. The kid's cloak sticks to their stomach, the blackness there an even deeper shade and spreading. But beneath the cloak the kid's chest rises and falls in soft swells. Pressing the kid close against my chest with one arm I fish around inside my cloak for the key, finding it just as the elevator opens.

Inside the apartment the air is thick with the moisture from the shower. I lay the kid gently on the bed. From the bathroom I grab towels, wetting one quickly with water from the running shower. Back in the bedroom I rip the kid's cloak open. Two large gashes shake in the trembles of the kid's stomach. I press a towel tightly against them. A

soft voice touches my ears. This is how you dress a wound, it says. At first I think it's from the tape, but the soft gentle tone, almost in a song, repeats in a mantra I know is my wife's. I wrap the bed sheet around the towel, tying it tightly. Already the black towel is turning white with the kid's blood. I take off the kid's mask and see their face fully. The kid is a young girl, her chin curving gently, long lashes clutched tight together in pain. I wrap the rest of the sheet around her, tucking her in as her body shakes with shock.

Two loud bangs on the door snap against my chest. I've lost the mallet. I thought I held on to it, but it's not anywhere around me. They're breaking in the door, throwing their bodies against it. Halfway to the kitchen two figures burst in. One tackles me and shoves me into the back of the couch. We fall together against the floor. The other figure disappears into the bedroom.

"Don't touch her," I say.

"Shit," they say from the bedroom.

The figure on top of me keeps me pinned down with their knee pressing into my chest. The force of it somehow pierces the cut in my side and a splitting bolt shoots up my body. From the bedroom the figure rushes out with the girl in their arms.

"Don't you fucking take her," I say.

But they don't respond. They're already out the apartment door with the sheet trailing behind them. I press a hand against the figure on top of me. The muscles in my arm feel mushy. Nothing tenses there. I'm lifted up. I try to stand, to gain some placement of my feet so that I can push or swing against the figure, but I fall back against the couch. They pull me by my cloak, tossing me against the corner of the hallway. I stumble forward, in through the bedroom. The headphones have fallen off my head.

Inside my mask they rattle around my neck. I fall against the dresser, slamming my side into the wood, and scream out. The room spins black and white, the colors mixing together, the wall and furniture flashing like a strobe. I'm on the floor, leaning against the bed. The figure stands above me.

They print something out on a ticker and hold it in front of my face. I laugh at it. I can't even read the words. The white on black ink blurs and just as its about to focus the paper disintegrates.

"Just tell me," I say. The words come in huffs.

They kneel down in front of me. It's then that they notice I'm bleeding.

"You cut yourself too?" A voice trying to hide its tone says.

"No," I say. "I tried to save her."

They press a hand gently against my side. The soft contact stings. I hiss. Above us, against the wall, the painting has melted in the humidity. The constant dampness rewet the paint and caused it to streak down the scene of the mountain. Beneath the black streaks another image in shades of white and grey seems to rise from under water. Rippled by the streaked paint and starting to warp with the rest of it, but still, all the same apparent that it's a face. She's smiling, bright and wide, with a soft light catching one of her eyes. Tilted on its side it's as though she's lying down or floating in space.

"You see that?" I say.

The figure turns, a little hesitant, and looks up. Their body stiffens. As they stand their knees crack. The humid air presses heavy on my chest. Under the mask everything feels too close, too pressed together. I'm smothering under the weight of air. A pressure from my side is building across my chest, making it more difficult to breathe. I take off

my mask and take a deep breath, causing a sharp pain to flash across me. The air against my cheeks smacks cool and keeps me from passing out. Then it all calms as the milk tries to work its fingers in my veins.

“Do you know her?” I say.

“No,” they say.

“I do,” I say. “I know her name.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Someone sits at the edge of my bed in the dark. My heart strikes against my chest in fast jabs. I'm sitting up and the sound of my voice hangs in my ears even though I don't remember shouting. A moment ago I was asleep, the covers lay a fallen crumple in my lap. My eyes adjust with the light of the hall and his outline gently fades into detail.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he says.

"How did you get in?"

Of course he must have a key. He always did. There's something in his hands on his lap. He cradles it there, looking at it. Then he lifts it to the light where the needle of the syringe flashes.

"Why?" I say.

"It's a selfish person that asks, 'Why me?' As though they should be exempt from the turns of life. As though a guiding hand could in some way save them."

"It's not that at all," I say. "I just want to know why you'd send me back to them. Why even bother taking me in the first place?"

"There would be no purpose in sending you there."

"Then what is this?"

"A trade."

"For what?"

He sighs and lets his head droop against his chest. The syringe gently rests back in his hands on his lap. I touch my face. Everything is still there, the skin still intact, fully attached. My cheeks are smooth, the nose rests in its same soft slope, and my forehead slumps backwards still as it did before.

“You’ve read the book,” he says.

“Yes.”

The book rests on the dresser across the room. Its square outline dimly lit. I haven’t opened it since I saw the spiral on the wall a few days ago.

“I haven’t finished it,” I say.

“That’s clear,” he says. “If you had you’d understand that it’s of little consequence what happens to you. Or me.”

He stands. The syringe, held carefully in his hands, points toward me. I pull the covers to my chin, pushing my body back against the headboard. A draft brushes against my arms, rolling over my shoulders, but the window must be closed.

“Please,” I say.

“Don’t do that,” he says. “You’re stronger than to beg.”

“I saw it,” I say. “The spiral. I saw the spiral on the wall downstairs.”

He stops above me. His face is covered by shadows, turned away from the hall, making it impossible for the light to touch him. His hand, stretched out toward me, pauses between us. And then it retreats.

“When?”

“A few days ago.”

“Where?”

“Against the wall,” I say. “When you came up behind me, I was staring at it.”

“And?”

“Should there be more?” I say.

His body stiffens. In the darkness of the room he seems taller than before. Almost as though he reaches the ceiling, stretching with his shadow. I pull my legs to my chest under the sheet and wrap my arms around them.

“Have you seen it?” I say.

“Yes,” he says. But I’m not sure I believe him. “I’ve seen it every day of my life.”

“Did you write the book?”

There’s a sound a little like a laugh mixed with a cough. His shoulders shake.

“No,” he says. “Describe what you saw.”

“A drip of black ink on the wall started to make a circle and it spiraled into its center. Then there was a noise.”

“What kind of noise?”

“Like a scratching. Like tiny animals scratching at the wall.”

“Did you smell anything?”

“I couldn’t look away from it,” I say. “It made me walk across the room toward it.”

“Made you?”

“Like a magnet, pulling at me.”

“Did you touch it?”

“No,” I say. “You stopped me. It disappeared when I realized you were there.”

“Did you go inside?”

“I just told you,” I say. My hands drop from around my knees and I press my back hard against the headboard. “What’s inside it? Have you gone inside?”

He steps back from the bed. Something out in the hall, something I don't hear or notice causes him to turn his head toward it. The pink flesh of his face softens as the light hits his profile. Every gouge seems to deepen. A wind presses against the window, sending a soft snap through it as it shudders. His hand latches onto my arm. With the wind he's moved too fast for me to see. He whispers, the words like a hiss.

"No matter," he says.

The needle pierces my arm and a cold flush follows.

"I felt its name," I say. The words drift out of me. They disappear into a dark tunnel.

Then there's red pressing against my eyes. I've gone blind with the redness of the room. It's so close that when I open them I'm startled by the sharp, white of the sun blotting out the shapes of the room. Behind the glossy sheen caused by the drug, the silhouette of a nightstand and buildings further past the window tell me it's not the bedroom of his house. The bright sun passes along the edge of the window to the right of a bed that is again not mine. It is softer here. The mattress and pillow feel like they're made of cotton fluff. My head sinks into the pillow. It threatens in some comforting way to swallow my head whole. Around my body the bed bends to my shape in small rolling hills. I push soft white sheets off me. My clothes appear untouched. Everything buttoned as it was before. The jeans constrict against my thighs as I slide my legs to the edge of the bed. Next to me the windows are endless, stretching from the floor to the ceiling across the whole wall of the room. I cover the sun with my hand and can just barely make out tall buildings crowding around the city, blocking the wall in the distant horizon. At the center of the crowd the metal skeleton of a building juts high into the silver-blue sky. The

bottom half of it has been covered in black windows that reflect the buildings around it.

At its top is the outline of a pyramid, ending in a sharp point. Even from here I can see the little figures moving inside its bones as if ants cleaned its body.

My head is still sloshing when I stand up. The room tips a little, one way, then the other, and I have to press my body against the padded headboard to make it stop. I stare straight ahead. Against the wall there's a white dresser so perfectly square and glossy that it could be made of glass. Above it my reflection freezes in a long mirror that stretches to the ceiling. The girl there clutches the edge of the headboard, her face twisted with a tired fear. I am so old now. My hair hides my ears and drips below my shoulders in a frayed wave. It's been so long since I've brushed it. The glow of the bare white wall behind me hurts my eyes and burns the outline of my body into the room when I look away from the mirror. Not a single picture or painting has been hung. The only decoration created by the doors, two of them for a closet next to the bed, and next to the mirror there's a tall door with a panel of frosted glass down its center. Everything in the room, even the lamp on the nightstand beside the bed, and the brushed glass of a cup, is white.

My legs are heavy and unsure of their function. It feels like I'm hiding weights inside them, pushing with all my strength to drag them through the air. I stumble forward, my hand smacks against the window as I catch myself. The glass is cool. Soft ripples of wind shudder it under my hand as if it's sobbing. I follow the wall of windows across the room, taking my steps slowly, supporting my body against the glass. At the door, faint voices mumble incoherent words. But there are two of them, distinct in their speed and tone. One could be a woman. I'm afraid to open the door. Inside the room I'm fully aware of what is here. It's simple to see what can and can't do harm. Even if the room itself is

somewhere unfamiliar, or dangerous, I could return to the bed and let myself sink inside it. The silver swooping wing of the doorknob is soft in my hand. Its metal perfectly curved to fit against my palm as I hold it. Little curls have been etched into a divot in the slick metal, crawling along it like ivy. They're slick along my hand as I run it back and forth along the curve to its tail. It opens with a click. The door springs toward me then glides open. Down a hall the voices stop for a moment. I hold my breathe until their soft murmur starts back up.

At the other end of the long hallway, brightly lit on one side by the continued wall of windows, a large room opens up like a cave. The ceilings are taller than any I've seen and their length too is made of glass. I clutch the doorframe. My legs are fine, holding strong. But the sudden expanse of the city down the length of the apartment causes my chest and head to spin. The room could tilt, sending me through the glass and into the air where I would tumble to the streets. I can't even see the streets below us, but those that stretch further out and the small cars that move along them are far enough for me to know that I would not survive. A woman steps out from around the corner at the end of the hallway. She stops and brushes her hands down her gray jacket to her skirt. They look crisp and straight, as if they're made of paper. Her blonde hair curls against her shoulders, spilling a little down her back and chest. She turns and sees me standing here, holding the doorframe tight. Something in her ear catches the light and glimmers silver. A soft "oh," escapes her. Over her shoulder she calls to someone.

"She's up, dear."

A man steps out from around the corner, joining her. He's shorter, only by a few inches, but it's noticeable and her slim frame draws attention to his squat shape. Over his

shoulder he's flung a red tie, exposing the line of its belly from its body at his neck. He lifts up a glass of water, gesturing at me with it.

"Morning," he says. "Or, afternoon, really."

He turns to the window and its view of the city.

"I'd like to go home," I say. My voice, thick in my throat, slows each word. I can feel the air practically having to shove the words out.

They turn to each other. The woman's face falls with a frown. She walks down the hall to me. As she nears I see she's older than my mother. Lines have set themselves around her mouth and eyes. She's tried to cover them up with makeup, but it only shows them more, discoloring the skin a darker shade with the false paint. But her eyes are still so active. The sunlight reflects against them, striking the blue at their center and making them the color of a clear sky. Her heels click to a stop just four steps from me. She crouches slowly, bending her knees together to one side.

"Dear," she says. "We can't imagine what you've been through. We won't act like we haven't heard the stories about the stolen children. It's a terrible thing. But we'd like to help you if you'll let us. We'd like our home to be a home for you."

Through the window I can feel the sun's warmth pressing in. Out on a rooftop a few buildings away, a figure bends and disappears behind the wall, then reappears again, and the motion continues. It reminds me of picking weeds in the backyard.

"Taking you home isn't as easy as you may think," she says. "But we can try."

Down the hall the man has disappeared. The woman smiles up at me. She reaches out with one hand. It's surprising how easy it is for her to balance in the heels. She

doesn't waver at all with the shift of her weight. Her palm is up, inviting my hand to rest there.

"You'll be safe here until we can get you home. We'll do all we can to make you comfortable."

Along her ears a series of hoops have been pierced through. They gleam bright silver in the sunlight. White teardrops hang from her lobes. A cold frost may have frozen them there. But the soft pink of her lipstick gives her face warmth not felt elsewhere in the apartment. All the lines of her face disappear in that smile, hidden somewhere inside the muscles of her cheeks. She brushes her hair back behind her ear, then holds it out again toward me. Her eyes never leaving mine.

When I place my hand in hers, her smile grows and the edges of her cheeks press into her eyes, making her squint. Her hand is soft and gently wraps around mine. Already her skin warms mine. A soft tingle, something like goose bumps without the chill, brushes along the inside of my arm and up my neck. She stands, her hand holding mine still.

"Thank you," she says.

But I'm not sure what I've done that really deserves any thanks. We walk down the hall, passing a bathroom that sparkles in the sunlight coming through the windows, another bedroom somehow lit with sunlight from above, and more closed doors whose frosted glass prevents me from seeing inside. In the city streets life is moving on without caring what we do. Cars drive along the streets in glimmering black and white lines. Black cloaks fill the sidewalks in waves, with little pockets of concrete taking shape and disappearing in the crowds. Nothing I do could make them aware of me. Nothing about

us matters up here. Yet, there they are to us, exposed, vulnerable, seen at such a distance their whole shape disappears to the size of a mole on my skin.

“Is it too bright?” She says. “We can draw the blinds.”

“I’ve never been this high up,” I say.

She gasps, amused by the thought of it. A soft laugh flashes across her lips.

“Well then,” she says. “I imagine it’s quite surprising.”

“I can’t see past the wall.”

Far out on the horizon the gray line of the wall still cut across the sky. I didn’t think it was tall enough to block the view from the skyscrapers. But there it was, blocking the land behind it from our view.

“No,” she says. “The wall is over a thousand feet. Not even the obelisk will reach that high.”

“The obelisk?”

She stops as we reach the end of the hall and points to the skeleton frame of the building at the center of the crowded skyscrapers.

“That one,” she says. “They say they’ll finish it in a year.”

“Bullshit,” the man says. “It’ll take them two.”

He sits at a glass table behind a group of couches. Three couches sit in an incomplete square around a small glass coffee table. At its center is a small vase with a purple flower starting to droop over the edge. The flower opens like a star, but dipping as it is now it’s impossible to see its center.

“They’ve already finished half of it in four months,” she says. “That’s beating the record.”

“It’s a mess inside,” he says. “It’s a façade they’re building. No one will move in for another three years, tops.”

He waves us over with his hand. The glass of water is nearly empty on the table. A stack of papers sits on the table in front of him. The high ceilings of the room and the distance of the walls, the sheer size of the cavernous room, makes it more difficult to move than before. There’s too much of it. So much that I could float into it. Yet, the noise of our voices, the way in which they echo off the walls and bounce back to us, fills the room so that the air itself holds weight.

“Come sit down,” he says. “You can see it all from here too.”

She gets me water. And then the three of us sit there, watching the sun move across the city through the window. From his glass is not the scent of water, but alcohol that I’ve seen my mother drink. I’ve sneaked a drink from her bottles and the taste was horrible. Clinical, is all I could think of, like a hospital, or clear tape I use at school. It burned my throat and wouldn’t sit still in my stomach. It seems impossible he could drink it so easily now. The man returns to his papers. All of them are the kind our teachers would sometimes use, with the permanent ink that doesn’t fade in the air.

“Where did you live?” The woman says.

She’s poured herself a glass of thick yellow juice. At the end of the table, next to him, she turns from the window and smiles at me. Her arms cross and uncross on the glass. Under the glass I can see her legs do the same.

“The suburbs,” I say.

“On what side?”

“East.”

“Did your mother and father like it there?”

“I guess,” I say. “At one point, maybe.”

She slips her shoes off. As she talks her toes slip in and out of them. I can tell she’s trying her best to maintain her smile. Not that she’s doing it to be fake, but if we were just talking, normally, she’d see no need to keep it up. I sit on my hands to keep them from jittering. The bare surface of the apartment, where nothing has been left out, not even a toaster on the counters in the kitchen, makes my skin scratch against my bones. I’m waiting for something, but I don’t know what.

“What did they do?”

“Why do you want to know?”

Her smile flickers off for a moment. Under the table her feet freeze in place. But she catches herself and the smile comes right back. She’s tense, her shoulders tight.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s not often that we...”

A look from the man makes her trail off. They try to hide it from me, but I’m watching too close. I’m not sure if she notices this or not. She touches his arm with her hand, her eyes returning to me.

“We’re used to our friends,” she says. “You know, on the street everyone’s a stranger, but when you live together in a place like this you get to know your neighbors. Some of them at least. Or, I suppose, though, they may not be neighbors at all. You don’t think they could lying about living here?”

“Don’t talk down to her,” he says.

Her hand slides back to the glass in front of her. With a quick snap of his hand he turns the page he was reading, flipping it over face down onto the other pile. The hairs on

his face, tiny little things, barely reaching past his skin, give the line of his jaw a soft shadow that grows darker as the sun starts to droop. Puffy bags sit under the skin of his eyes. His whole face looks stuffed, but in very calculated patterns, so that it holds a shape resistant to falling slack. Tough fat. If it's fat at all. While we've sat here his face has steadily grown red. From the cheeks down his neck it seems like something has embarrassed him more and more. He holds his hands together and brushes his fingers across the thick hair on the back of the other.

"We have friends here," he says. "That's what you do in the city. You get to know your neighbors. You know kids at school I imagine. Same thing."

"I don't," I say. "That's not how it's supposed to work."

He unbuttons the sleeves of his shirt and rolls the cuffs down his arm, then he switches to the other arm and does the same. While he does this she sits back in her chair and smirks at him. One of her hands turns the glass on the table, making it rotate in a full circle. A little pink imprint from her lips spins with it, disappearing on the other side, then coming back around.

"I guess we've been living wrong," she says to him. "I'll tell them we're going into exile."

"You live like that and it can drive a person crazy. Even walking down the street is enough to get me feeling insane sometimes. You've never wanted to talk to the kids at school?"

"No," I say.

"Don't you get sick of typing everything out?" He says.

"No."

I take a drink of the water. The chill of it completely dissipated into the temperature of the room. It's almost like drinking spit. My hands are hurting from sitting on them too long.

"She was born doing it that way," the woman says. "Weren't you, dear?"

I nod.

"I've told you it's natural for them," she says. "Typing is how they talk."

"You talked with your parents?"

"At home," I say. "I talked to my mother."

"Not your father?"

"He's gone."

"Gone where?" He says.

The woman touches his arm again. When he looks at her she bends her head and gives a stern little look. He takes a sip from the glass, finishing the alcohol.

"Did you wear the mask inside?" He says.

He stands and goes into the kitchen. She smiles at me, but her eyes follow him as he opens a cabinet by the fridge. The smile fades. I'm not sure what kind of look follows it. Her whole face seems to darken, the muscles softening, but in doing so the lines around her mouth and eyes rise to the surface. Without seeming to notice her whole body slackens and leans back into the chair. And with this her shoulders finally slip, relaxing under her jacket. She looks to the floor through the table. The hand that was so preoccupied with the glass presses against her cheek. Together, hand and face turn to the window where the sun stretches its light from the opposite side of the apartment it started when we first sat down. It didn't seem that long. The days are growing too short. He

pours something in his glass from a clear bottle. Then from the freezer he adds two ice cubes.

“What was that?” He says.

“No,” I say. “We didn’t.”

“It’s ridiculous. The neighbors two down are like that. Don’t even let us say hello. Just type, just type, they say. Type, I guess, not say.”

He sits down, placing the glass down. She smiles at him, then me, and then turns back to the window. There’s a moment where he stares at her, waiting for some response. His hands flop, giving something up to the air.

“Have you been outside the city?” He says.

Under my hands the glass table sweats. A little outline of my fingers smear across it as I pull them back to my lap. It’s uncomfortable to leave traces like that behind. What’s the purpose of this? Why ask me questions that I feel like they know the answers to? Of course I’ve never been outside the city. Where would I go?

“No,” I say.

He closes the folder in front of him, across its front, in thick black marker, someone’s scribbled “#57139.” It doesn’t bother him that I see this. Just as it didn’t bother him that I could have been reading the pages as he turned them. I didn’t though, I didn’t want to know what they could be keeping.

“Would you want like to know what it’s like?” He says.

“Yes,” I say.

The woman stands, taking the glass of yellow juice with her. She passes behind us and into the kitchen. The man seems not to notice she’s left at all. He looks from me to

the window and back again. He smiles with his red cheeks, the packages of fat scrunching tightly into balls.

“Let’s get you some glasses,” he says, but I’m not sure if he’s talking to me.

When she passes by us again the glass is gone. She moves quickly, turning down the hall. A door opens and closes. He takes another sip of his alcohol. From his pocket he pulls out a small square piece of metal. A light above us flicks on and the metal looks blue under it. A door opens and closes. The woman’s heels click on the floor, then she’s back around the corner, holding a pair of glasses in her hand. She sets them down on the table. There’s no smile in her face now. She doesn’t look at either of us. Without a word she turns around and goes back down the hall.

“She wanted to wait,” he says. “But this will be just fine to start.”

He picks up the glasses, holding them up to the light above us, and taps the frame. A soft, faded rainbow passes across the lenses. Little green, blue, and pink dots flash in a series of squares, then disappear. He holds the glasses out to me.

“It will be strange at first. We’ll go slow.”

I’m afraid this moment is a dream. Not that I’m excited, ecstatic, living in some paradise. But that here again will be something unreal. The lighting above us mixes with the setting sun outside and all the white turns a shade of blue. What will I touch here that can keep me grounded? I take the glasses from him. They’re light in my hands. I’m not sure why this surprises me. The metal rims, with its thin wings that tuck behind the ears, seem so fragile. They’re thinner than any pen I’ve held. Across the glass faint traces of color spin and glide from edge to edge. In each hand I take a wing. The look of the woman’s face as she watched him pass into the kitchen comes back to me. There was

something faded there too. A realization of what? That look I've seen on my mother's face. The way their bodies just sink. Their spirit hooked to a dead weight and pulled through their chest. Sunken love, my mother once called it. Sunken hope. The wings snap in my hand, the glasses clatter across the table, freed from their arms.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The beeping of the garbage truck backing up always wakes me up at four. The same damn day of the week. It's these little things that we haven't yet solved that really bother me. We can't come up with a better system than this, this beeping, to warn of a truck going in reverse. Really, I guess I should be mad at the driver because he can't seem to stop going in reverse outside our house. Our house in college. The little tiny house at the end of the cul-de-sac, where there was no good way for the truck to turn around. That was so long ago. It's my pulse, a monitor, the steady rhythm of my heart. The weight of my body, skin wrapped around muscle, wrapped around heavy bone, all of it breathing, poorly. In the dim light of a desk lamp the room is small. Shadows have that way of pressing everything in. Next to me on a pole the heart monitor keeps its steady rhythm. One, two, three, in two-second intervals, each pulse easing me back to sleep. The door opens, letting a light sweep across the room, then fade behind it. A figure checks the monitor and a bloodline going into my veins.

"Where's the kid?" I say.

They take their time in typing something out. My mask and cloak are gone. I'm in one of those horrible hospital gowns, white, half paper and half cotton.

"Don't give me that shit," I say.

They ignore me and hold the print out to my face. The little black type doubles up on me, swirls around a little on the paper. It won't stop. It must be something on the paper, or the drugs in the line. But my eyes are ahead of me, they adjust, the letters settling down in a line.

"Rest," they type. "Significant loss of blood."

It melts in my fingers. The figure is already at the door.

“The kid,” I say.

They don’t stop.

I sleep and wait. The figure returns, ignoring my questions. There are no windows down here. When the lights flicker on I see there’s no clock either. Not even anything to watch while I lay here. I ask for my cassette player, a magazine or book, but the figure ignores me still. The silence of the room makes my ears ring, broken only by the soft pulse of the machine. It’s not enough though. The anxiety of the quiet hospital rises from my chest and agitates my skin. The tube in my arm itches. I hold back my hand and grasp the metal bar of the bed to keep myself from tearing the tube out. My head plays back the last recording and runs through songs I remember from the radio. But this can only do so much before the silence leaks back in. I go through two bags of blood and another bag of clear solution. From the cycling of the lights, on and off, my resource of a sun through fluorescent glows, it’s two days of simple meals and cringing every time I try to sit up. It seems unusual for a knick from a knife to hurt this bad. I run my hand over the bandage wrapped at my side. I poke it and a sharp pain strikes across my body. The shock of it nearly makes me throw up.

On the next light cycle two figures enter the room. One checks my vitals, while the other pulls a chair over to the side of the bed. They sit and type.

“Can’t any of you just fucking talk to me?”

“What were you doing in the apartment?” Their message says. Then they type another one, “no.”

“I live there.”

“For how long?”

“Months now.”

“You paid for it with the money we gave you?”

“How else would I pay for it?”

“That’s what we want to know.”

The figure checking my vitals finishes. Instead of leaving they lean back against the wall and fold their arms across their chest. The other continues typing.

“You also slept in the shelters.”

“Sure,” I say. “So you followed me.”

“Why wouldn’t you sleep in your apartment?”

“I got lonely.” I smile.

“Is the painting yours?”

“Came furnished.”

“You said you knew the child in the painting.”

“Did I?”

They lean back in the chair. The disintegrating paper keeps making my fingers feel wet and a little sticky. They tingle as I rub them together and try to wipe them off on my gown.

“What are you doing with all those goose heads?” I say.

“What were you doing with them?”

“Decorating,” I say. “They must mean something to you.”

“How did the child you took to your apartment get injured?”

“Couple of bar guests got a little upset about the geese. The kid tried to take one down with his mallet, but the bastard stabbed him. I couldn’t get there fast enough to stop it. So, I needed a place to fix the kid up. And your hospitals aren’t the easiest thing to find.”

“Our hospitals?”

They lean forward, passing the notes, then slowly lean back again with each of my responses. Underneath their cloak they must be a little big, or padded. Their round stomach bulges a little even as they lean forward. The bulge and bulk around it seem odd given the taller frame of the figure. If it weren’t for the padding they’d seem commanding and relaxed, slinking back in the chair, with one leg crossed over the other.

“Is the kid okay?”

“How were you injured?”

“The guy came after me when I stepped in.”

“Guy?”

“Yes,” I say. “Clearly.”

“Where is the weapon?”

“Gone now, I guarantee,” I say. “Did the kid make it?”

“How do you know the child in the painting?”

“She’s dead, isn’t she?”

“Who?”

“The kid,” I say. “The fucking kid.”

“Why do you care?”

I try to sit up, but the pain shoots through me again when I bend. The figure standing against the wall steps forward. Their hands out and ready to hold me down. The one in the chair raises a hand to stop them. It's unnecessary. I'm more of a threat to myself at this point.

"Where are my things?"

"Gone now," they type.

"I need them," I say. "Everything, the cassette player, the matchbox, the cigarettes, I need it all. Mostly the cigarettes."

"Why were you selling drugs?"

"Give me my things."

"You lied to us," they type. "And you injured a child. You have no room to make demands."

"I was trying to save that kid."

They stand up and sling the ticker gently against their side. Both of them move for the door. The bulging figure waddles a little with their steps. Behind them the other figure presses a hand against their back, not to hurry them, but for support.

"You're pregnant," I say. There's no reason to say it, not really. The observation would be so easily seen by anyone that's had a child. "I have three."

They stop at the door, the pregnant figure holding on to the knob, with the light from the hall giving away more of the swell of her stomach. Her shoulders rise and fall in a sigh. Together they turn. Her ticker comes up from her hip and she types out a message. The other figure brings it over to me.

"Who are you?" It says.

“Isn’t that breaking rule number one?”

“We’re long past that now,” she says. Her voice is soft and full of a tired weight. There’s a labor to it already. The other figure seems unbothered by the break of silence.

“How’s the kid?” I say.

“Dead,” she says.

I hold tight to the metal bar. A deep breath in, holding that too, letting the crackling pain rest in my side, then out. That’s one child I failed. One has to be all there is. The figures leave the room together. The overhead light shuts off. I count the beeps of my heart as they come closer together now.

When the lights come back on I’m already awake. The nicotine withdraw makes my skin itch. I take it slow, sitting up with the help of the metal bars along the bed. My side burns with the movement and the small splintering across my body returns. It’s a struggle to shove down one of the bars. Once down I slide my legs over the edge, the gown catching on the sheets, exposing my skin to the chilled air. I cry out as I stand. Straightening up stretches the muscles where the knife entered by side, tugging the wound. They must have stitched it up. There’s a chance then of splitting the stitches open if I’m too rough. I grab hold the IV pole and drag it across the room, using it partly as a walking stick to steady myself. My reflection passes by the dark mirror in the bathroom. I only look briefly, but in the moment I see what kind of ghost I’ve become, shambling unsteadily with the bags swinging from the pole. A stooped visage of pale white skin in a loosely falling gown. The gown does little good. It seems to be no more than a sheet hanging on a clothesline, blowing in the gentle draft of my movements. Under my feet

the linoleum tiles are oddly warm. I expect them to be cold and frigid, but they feel almost like skin against my feet. I pause at the door, listening. The steady beep of the machine next to me loudly announces my movements. I press the power button and it gives a shrill cry before falling silent. No sounds come from the other side of the door. Opening it is a bit awkward, as I have to shuffle the pole with the machines out of the way from its swing. It's like a dead limb, a ball and chain that I've been sentenced to carry, a stiff dance partner refusing to do their part. I've never dealt with these before. My wife made it look so easy when she was in the hospital for her pregnancies. It glided painlessly behind her like a tail. The halls are empty here, even of color. Tan linoleum tiles that may have once been white, plain painted walls scuffed with black and silver marks, and the foam board ceiling panels interrupted by florescent lighting. At each end of the hallway it splits in both directions. Doors flank either side all the way down. Most of them closed, with curtains pulled and lights off. As I pass one a few doors down from my room someone inside breaks into a coughing fit. The cough sounds wet and rough in the throat all at once. It continues behind me as I shuffle toward the hall's split, my bags swinging back and forth on their racks. Ahead there's a window with the curtain open. A dim glow projects the square of the window against the wall across the hall. I slow my steps and inch toward the window. From the edge of it I see a boy laying in the bed, with a book resting against his knees. I move to the other side of the hall and try to slip past. Even if I'd ducked the pole would still glide past his window. The movement catches his eye and he turns his head out the window. The other side of his face has been wrapped in gauze, the eye covered too. I smile, gently, a sympathetic soft smile, kind, but acknowledging where we are, but I don't know if he can even see it. At the corner of the

hall there's a round mirror that shows it continuing on unoccupied. I lean around, double checking that it's clear. A little elevator sign pokes out from the wall halfway down. Further along the hall is another mirror, but no bend for it to see around. I notice that all down the hallway in either direction the mirrors line the wall at intervals. They must be watching. It's a system I've only seen in convenient stores and banks in the city, mirrors standing in place of security cameras, the distrust of even closed circuits extending this far. If I were to follow it I'm sure I'd see a hole in the wall with a mask behind it, watching through a bent lens. But I call for the elevator instead. My hand taps against my thigh as I wait for it. A painful ache starts in the arm holding onto the pole, so I shift it to the other hand. Off to the side I wait for the doors to open. The elevator stops at the third floor, then ground, and finally basement, where I am. I'm accepting with blind faith that they want me alive. Why else would they go through the trouble of stitching me up? Why let my room sit unguarded? As the doors slide open I tense, gripping the pole tight and making a fist with the other hand. But inside the elevator is empty. I press 30, the top floor and hold the button in.

The doors open at the 30th floor to an unwallled expanse reaching to the windows of the building. Support beams and the metal bones that wait for drywall covering are the only decoration. The pole rolls across the crisp carpet without complaint. It looks untouched, as though they just laid it down this morning. Outside the windows the city glows in the morning light as the sun just crests above the wall. It's a beautiful view all around. A little ways off, behind a line of pipes that disappear into the floor, a staircase sits in the corner. I roll over to it, making my way through the maze of metal, watching the city lose its morning blue.

Taking the stairs to the roof ends up being more difficult with the pole and machines than I thought. At the landing between flights I take a breath, leaning against the wall. Under the bandages of my side I can feel the sharp complaints of the stitches. It's another fifteen steps before the door. As I come up the last few steps a thought that it might be locked makes me laugh. The sound of my voice echoes back down the stairs. But it is open. A cold gust of wind pushes against the door. The force of it tosses the pole, trying to throw it back down the stairs. I test the doorknob from the outside, see that it doesn't appear to lock, and step out onto the roof. The pole is barely out of the doorway when the heavy door slips from my hand and slams shut. The wind is a constant howl and whistle past my ears. It whips against the gown, tangling it in the pole, and then blows it back against my body with a soft smack. I step on a piece of broken concrete and hiss. The whole roof is untreated, a large gray expanse of cracked concrete and little rocks from its rubble. Around the edge is a brick half-wall painted white with gullies at the bottom for rain run off. I make my way out toward it and turn when I reach the edge.

Across the roof a figure sits on a bucket surrounded by crows. They're faced out toward the city, their back to me. The chatter of the crows is nothing like a song. They repeat the same mournful cry back to one another. From here the crows could be small clones of the figure, wearing their own cloaks and beaked masks. The stoop of their backs carried through family lineage. A strong gust rattles the pole. The edge of the building makes me nervous with the wind. It's doubtful it could blow me over, but the pole is difficult to hold still. I shuffle over to the figure, sliding my feet close to the ground so that I can push the rocks away as I step. When I near they turn. A brown paper bag is clutched in their hand.

“Have a smoke?” I say.

They pull a ticker from their cloak. When they rip it from the machine they hold it out to me, tightly, between their thumb and finger.

“What are you in for?”

“Stab wound,” I say, pointing to my side.

They nod.

“Smoking will make it worse,” they type.

“Should have said I have cancer,” I say.

The wind blows my gown up, whipping it against their mask and giving them an eyeful.

“Sit down,” they type. They pat the spot beside them on the wooden bench. I bring the machines around, still holding it as I wrap the gown around me and sit on the cold wood.

“Well,” I say. “Do you have one?”

From their cloak they pull out a pack and select a cigarette. They hand me a lighter, then a message.

“Good luck lighting it,” they type.

I mouth the cigarette and circle my fingers around it, sticking the lighter in the hole they make. It takes me three tries, but eventually it works. I pass the lighter back. The first inhale makes me cough terribly. I grasp at my side, the pain like being stabbed all over again. This is how I could tear my stitches. Coughing in the howling wind on the roof of a half abandoned building and bleeding out in the lap of a stranger. They could be a doctor. That would certainly help my chances.

From the bag the figure pulls a handful of peanuts. The crows start up again, cawing loudly. The figure scatters the peanuts across the roof. Several of the crows jump on the offering, quickly pecking up what they can. A crow lands next to us on the back of the bench. It caws in my ear then jumps down into the pile of feeding crows.

I have to be diligent with the cherry of the cigarette. The wind cools the end before I have time to let my hand drop from my mouth. Each gust sweeps the ash away without hesitation. It's hard to feel the buzz of the nicotine with the chapping wind against my skin, but it's there somewhere. And when the coughing subsides completely I can sit back and feel my nerves level out.

The sunlight turns the right side of the buildings into golden blades. Its bright sheen pouring down the black glass like honey. One side of the pyramid on top of the obelisk glares so brightly it forces me to look away. How many of these buildings are empty inside like this one? How much of this city is a façade? In a building off near the edge of the tallest grouping lights are turned off across a floor. The sky above it all fades from electric blue to something like tinsel.

"Quite the view," I say.

The machine on the pole that filters my blood beeps twice. A red number on its display flashes, 153, then turns to two dashes. I have no idea what it means, but the blood seems to keep going in. The needle in my arm itches. I'm aware of the pressure there for a moment, the needle stuck like an intruder in my skin. But I turn back to the city and the nub of my cigarette.

"You part of the cult?" I say.

They stop tossing down peanuts, much to the complaint of the crows, and type out: “What cult?”

“The goose run,” I say. “Nailing heads to walls. All those fun and games. You do that?”

They shake their head, no.

“Fuck ‘em,” I say. I stub out the tiny nub of the cigarette and let it blow across the roof.

They toss another handful of peanuts and lean back against the bench. It complains with a loud crack and creak of wood against rusted metal bolts. They type up a message:

“Watch the birds.”

From under their mask the figure starts up a rapid clicking noise. It trills up and down in tone, sounding at some points like a morning bird cooing. The crows fall silent, listening to the noise. The figure’s hand dips into the bag and pulls a large handful of peanuts. In a wide arc they toss the peanuts out across the roof, making a semi-circle. But the crows don’t pounce as they did before. Instead they sit, entranced by the noise coming from the figure. The figure stops. Their shoulders and chest expand as they take a deep breath. On the breath out they emit a loud whistle like a teapot. The tone shifts in my ears, striking sharp against my eardrums. The crows take off in unison, all of them flapping up into the wind. It doesn’t take much to lift them into the rushing airstream, their light bodies carried away like trash. As they speed away they gather together and follow the stream over the edge of the building. There must be around thirty of them, moving as one giant carpet of black feathers and glassy eyes. The squadron disappears

only to burst upward toward the cloudless sky. They circle overhead, once, twice, spinning around some unseen axel. A whole tornado of crows swoops around and around above the building. More birds zip up the side of the building. The edge of it gives birth to flocks of small sparrows, starlings, and robins that join the crows. As they tangle together they're careful to keep their distance from one another. Yet, they move with such precision that little of the sky can be seen between their wings as layer of bird circles above another below and above it. Out across the city an odd thing is happening. Above several buildings the same pattern of birds are swirling.

"What did you do?" I say.

From the tornado above us a small sparrow falls to the roof. One of its wings has been bloodied. The bird tries again to fly, but the wing flaps wildly and sends it against the figure's legs. The figure bends and picks it up. In a flash they slam its head against the side of the bench. I jolt back, the pole shaking in my hand. With delicate care the figure lays the bird on their lap, spreading the wings out with the feet limp in the air. A little, bright orange scroll is stuck to the leg of the bird. From somewhere atop a building a loud buzzing whistle crosses the wind. The figure next to me picks up the sound, imitates it from under their mask. One by one across the city on the rooftops the noise perpetuates until the whole air buzzes with it. And when it stops the birds rain from the sky. Every single one of them drops. Their bodies tumble limp out of view, falling to the streets below. A few hit the roof with a soft crack. They remain there, unmoving. Down below in the streets there's the noise of crashing metal. My hand is tight around the pole. The needle in my arm flinches as the muscles tighten and press it uncomfortably under

my skin. It's then I notice my chest is pounding, with a sick stinging in my gut. I swear a name under my breath.

The figure pulls the orange scroll from the leg of the bird. It unravels into a folded piece of thin plastic, which the figure opens. Across it are large, black, block letters.

"EACH BIRD A CHILD WE WILL NOT ABANDON."

The message flaps in the wind and when they're sure I've seen it they let it go to be swept over the edge. They scoop the dead bird up and lay it down on the other side of the bench. We sit there for a moment. The sky now an empty white. Across the street another figure disappears behind the stairwell door. An echoing cry shakes up to us from the streets below. It's a noise I've not heard in some time. It's the sound of someone shouting. Their words lost in the ripple of the air, but the booming depth of them is still there.

"The goose heads," I say. "Part of the same message?"

"Yes," they type. "Today the city wakes to its horrors."

"You're bringing it down. The wall too?"

"No," they type. "You misunderstand. Haven't you read the books?"

"I'm a little behind on the newsletter."

The blood machine beeps again, flashes its number, then goes back to its dashes. With the buzz of the cigarette wearing off the chill of the wind has begun to numb my skin. The gown is such a useless thing.

"We're restoring the city," they type. "Returning it to its original intents as a refuge, sanctuary, and place of true anonymity. Cleaning it of its crimes. Freeing the stolen children. Reuniting the citizens as they had once been before."

“Destroying the individual.”

“No,” they type. “Destroying its prosecution.”

From their cloak they take out two silver tubes and I know white filled syringes are inside. They hold them out to me. The metal is warm from its place inside the cloak.

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea,” I say, looking at the pole and the draining bag of blood. “Seems like a bad combination.”

“It will do far less damage than they will.”

“Who?”

“The police.”

“We’re well acquainted,” I say.

They stand. I offer the tubes back to them. They shake their head and hold up a hand. With their other hand they offer me a message:

“Hold on to them.”

It drifts from my free hand, disintegrating against the tubes I still hold up.

“I don’t like the high.”

“It’s never been about that,” they type.

A wind pulls their cloak taught against the body. The lumpy forms of pads strapped to their hips and legs stick out like black hills in the night. I let my hand fall to my lap.

“What the hell is it about then?”

“Hiding.”

“Isn’t that what the whole costume is for?”

“Masks and cloaks are not enough,” they type. “Not anymore.”

They give a quick nod, for what I'm not sure, or if it's toward the tubes with the syringes I still don't fully understand why. But they don't wait for any more questions. The figure shuffles over to the stairwell door. When it slams closed behind them I turn back to the city. Not a single bird drifts in the air. For a moment the wind stills and no sound makes an attempt to fill it. The obelisk, one of the only buildings impossible for them to reach the roof, sits undaunted in the middle of the city with the white sun beaming through the clouds and against its slick surface. If the lost children are to be returned maybe my runaway will be with them. What hope do I have now of finding her on my own with this mess playing out? A city already in such paranoia won't do well with the backlash this act will bring. In my hand the syringes grow cold. I shiver and shake the machines with me. From inside there's a soft ringing that grows louder in the silence. The cold sweat of panic already dampens the skin under my arms. I stand, holding tight to the pole. Under my breath I hum a tune we played at our wedding. What would she say about this? What would we do if it were our children? The wind starts up again, tugging on the tubes in my arm. I'd like to say I could imagine her voice in the winds. If I listen closely, I hear an answer, a direction, her sharp ways of saying her 't's, telling me something important, or nothing important at all, just a word or her voice humming along with mine. I'd like that a lot if it were true.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Through the door of my room their voices are muffled. They've been arguing for some time. It isn't so much that they're shouting, but talking loudly, curt, their sentences clipped and ending abruptly. I can only make out the tones of their voices. Hers higher pitched of course. I never heard my mother argue with my father but I imagine it'd be something like this. Similar to how she'd yell at me, but calmer, more peaceful, with the experience of having had conversations like that for years with my father. It's practiced arguing, a debate with the motions all played out. And it goes on for some time. The sun winds down across the city, disappearing behind the edge of the building before it fully fades away somewhere behind the wall. Birds flit past the window and fly to the small ledges along the windows across the city where they settle in for the night. Buildings out around the obelisk's skeleton flash on their lights. Many of their windows remain dark, tinted so black that even the light behind it is impossible to see. From the street below a soft blue glow crawls up the sides of the buildings. Cars lose their shape and gain two beaming eyes trailed by the bright red glow of their tails. When they stop arguing a door is slammed. A light in the hall flicks on through the frosted glass of my door.

I'm convinced they've forgotten about me and that's perfectly fine. I turn on the little bedside lamp, wondering if it shines through my window. If someone were to look in now, would they see me here, sitting on the bed? I wave my hand at the city, but there's no response from the lights or the other windows across the street. The building there, directly across from us, is one of those with the white brick and windows black as night. Impassive, it glares back, refusing to admit anything in or out of its shape. I stand up and walk around the room. My legs feel stiff. The drug has completely worn off by

now, but still my body aches in a side effect. It's difficult to come back from something like that. To return to a reality and be so sure that this, yes, this is the reality that is really real. When I'm lost to the drug it has such a swirling effect that it swallows my whole mind, making me believe that there is nothing outside of its effects and that the world has completely changed. "This is it," I think. "This is now my life." And I am so convinced that now, in these moments, where the true physical sensations of the bed against my finger tips, or the slick top of the dresser, are hard to trust. Does light really work as it appears? Does it cast a tan rectangle across the room? Couldn't it, shouldn't it, be able to reach that corner where a dark shadow refuses its touch? No, there is the metal shade of the light that blocks it from reaching behind itself. Yes, it can only cast that shape and no other because of the form of the light and shade around it. Yes, it must work as it appears because how else would it work? And outside the window the city must be real because here in this room I can feel the door knob of the closet and if I were sleeping or under the influence of the drug one would not be true and then the other as well. This is what science does to you. It makes you believe in observations and rules of "if one, then the other," and proofs, even if they're your own, even if they're wrong, they're proofs, in that moment, of something you can hold on to when all else may be in doubt.

A freshly cleaned cloak hangs by its lonesome in the closet. As I slide it over my head I suck in the smell of the detergent, a bouquet of meadow flowers, a detergent my mother would have never bought. Above the empty hangers on the shelf the top mesh of a mask peaks over the edge like a metal sun. I play at it with my fingers until I can reach it and then I slide the mask on too. Everything fits perfectly. The mask doesn't even need adjustment. The straps snug, but not too tight on my chin. I turn back to the city, much of

its light now dampened by the meshwork of the mask. The room itself is shaded as well. I smile. My cheeks shaking a little as the muscles, now unused to this work, waver with atrophy.

I sit again on the edge of the bed, looking out over the city. Now I feel wrapped, protected by the cloak and mask like armor. Comfortable again in an old skin I'd forgotten. Only my hands remain bare. I search the pockets for gloves, but there are none. No ticker either. There's a knock at the door and through the glass a tall form shifts in the light. She opens the door. Her body jumps back when she sees me. Her hand presses against her chest. There's a moment where she gathers herself.

"You startled me," she says.

She steps inside the room, closing the door behind her. She flicks on a light switch by the door that I hadn't noticed. From somewhere above us, hidden in the ceiling, a pale blue light drowns out the amber glow of the bedside lamp.

"May I?" She gestures to the edge of the bed. I shrug. She'll sit down anyway, what does it matter?

There's not much space between us when she sits down. At first she doesn't look at me. She stares out the window at the city. Her hands lay flat on her thighs. Something passes across her face like a shadow. She rubs her hands down her thighs to her knees, then back to her lap where they rest.

"You don't want to see what's outside the city I take it," she says.

"I do," I say. My voice is soft behind the mask. I'm not sure she even hears it. Her glare remains somewhere out the window.

"Then why break the glasses?"

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

She smiles at me like she knows I don’t mean it.

“I’ll tell him that,” she says. “But you don’t have to be. To him it’s a cheap toy with twenty others just like it. He’s mad because you didn’t go along with it. Why didn’t you?”

I shrug.

“Why does it matter?” I say.

She closes her eyes and rubs at her forehead. Her nails are painted a dark purple-brown. The perfect oval shape like sick eggs pressed to her fingers. These are the kind of women that never work with their hands, my mother told me, but who knows how crafty they can be. Her hand brushes through her hair, unsettling the perfect curls. She does it twice before resting it again on her lap.

“There’s a lot of good this city does,” she says. “But its education is not the best. Outside the walls there’s a vast system that if you had access to would allow you to know anything about the world. The glasses let you access that education. We want you to have it. We want you to learn, as we did. And, I guess, selfishly we want you to see where we live.”

“Don’t you live here?”

Her shoulders rise and fall with a breath.

“No,” she says. “This is like our summer home. A vacation spot, if you can believe it.”

It's this that makes me notice how tan her skin is. My mother never let me tan.

The whole idea of it only slipped out once when she told me about how she spent her summers as a girl. It's dangerous, she said, and there's no reason in the city.

"How long will we stay here?" I say. "When do we go to your home?"

"Oh," she says. It's soft and almost lost in her breath. "We can't take you with us. I'm sorry."

And I believe that she is sorry. The word is heavy off her lips. The weight of it falls in the small space between us. Outside the sky is a dark gray, stars lost in the pollution of the city light, the space between them absorbing what's left. I don't think I had the hope of leaving. It hadn't crossed my mind that that may be why he wanted me to see outside the city. But hearing that it's not a possibility has put a splinter in my chest. She's about to say something else.

"Why?" I say.

The question makes her stutter, caught off-guard.

"It's," she says. "There are a few reasons. One is that you'd find it a bit overwhelming... there's a way that we access information, like the glasses, but without it, that hangs in our city like a dense fog. It doesn't hurt, not to someone acclimated to it, but it would just be too much for you so suddenly. And then there's the issue of your identity. You'd need a completely new set of birth certificates and other documents. But undoubtedly you'd want to come back here, it's your home, and to go back and forth would mean having to do the whole process again and again. And then there's our lives outside this city, which aren't suited to raise a child."

"Why bring me here at all then?"

Her hand goes to her chest again as though I've wounded her there. But there's nothing in her eyes that tell me the gesture is sincere.

"Because we've always wanted a daughter and this is the only way."

"Keeping me locked up here like some princess."

"Would you rather go back to where we took you from?"

"I'd rather go home," I say. "To my mother. She has no idea I'm even alive."

Those last words hit hard in my throat. Burning wet tears fill the bottoms of my eyes. I have no way to wipe them away without lifting my mask, but I don't want her to know I'm crying. My fingers grip around the other thumb, holding it tight.

"We can't," she says. "I'm so sorry, but we can't. Not yet."

"I remember where I live," I say. "I know the address."

"That's not the reason."

"Then what is?"

"We need you to help us. Just for a time."

"It's been too long already."

She takes my hand in hers. I try to pull it away, but she holds it between both of hers. Her thumb brushes over the numbers on the back of my hand. The ink of it still a deep purple.

"This will fade away," she says. "And when it does, you'll be older and understand how important it was that you helped us. We'll never hurt you here. Anything you want, we'll give it to you if we can. We'll treat you still as our daughter. The daughter we've wanted for so long. And what's happened to you before coming here will be like some terrible dream."

I slip my hand from hers and cover it with the sleeve of my cloak.

“No,” I say. “It’s all a part of me now.”

She gets up from the bed and goes to the door. Standing there she looks out the window, the dark reflection of her staring back. They both turn to me.

“Please don’t wear that inside the house.” She forces a smile then leaves, closing the door behind her.

I wear it all the time. The next day and the one that follows when he sits me down at the kitchen table and puts another pair of glasses in front of me. I apologize, as believable as I can, for breaking the others and he waves it away like a fly.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I have more than I know what to do with.”

And then he places the new pair on the table, offering it out to me with a wave of his hand. I shake my head, no. No thanks, I try to say, but it’s too soft and I don’t care enough to repeat it louder. There are books then that he takes from a leather bag hung over the back of the chair. Three of them are textbooks with large pictures of a train billowing steam across a green landscape, a city that I’ve never seen before with a silver arch between the buildings, and a fossilized shell spiraling in on itself. I run my hand over the cover of this last one, tracing the shape of it to its center. The image of the dark black spiral from the basement plays in my mind. A little tremor shakes through my fingers and shivers up my spine. He’s speaking already, the beginning of his sentence slipping past me.

“For you to understand,” he says. “We think it’s a good place to get acclimated to seeing people and appreciating what they’ve done.”

He taps the title of the one with the train on it, then the name at the bottom of the cover. The text looks tacky, orange, block letters, with that disdainful claim of, well, entitlement. What do I care what they're called or who wrote them? That self importance that one man or woman places on themselves is maddening. How will it help anyone but themselves to know these things? It's the ideas that matter. He flips it open and turns to the first chapter. Already on the first page I see the names popping out inside sentences. Names for countries and people given with capital letters, sticking out in the middle of sentences like mountains on a horizon. I can't follow the beginning of the sentences. My eyes jump from one name to another, picking them out too painfully.

"Read some aloud," he says.

"I can't," I say.

Inside the arms of my cloak my hands rub the knuckles of one another, palms moving across the joints in my balled up hand. There's a picture of two children in the corner of the page, their faces pressed together, one black and the other white, they're on a field with a large white net behind them, their faces are so small, smaller than the size of my thumb, and their teeth, white and spaced and crooked and missing, stick out like dandruff on a cloak. Their faces connect with the names, they adopt the names of the countries, when I look to one then the other the names have changed the faces. Dimples appear with this name, a little mole with another, the eyes seem farther apart with this name, and the changes go on little fluctuations that make it impossible to connect them to any one. A painful smile settles across his face next to me. His too looks different now, the rosiness of his cheeks faded, the stubble around his face swept away. Yet, the eyes are

clouded with green, not brown, or blue, was it blue? What color were they yesterday? His nose has bent to an odd angle, maybe even just while we sat here.

“You can’t read?” He says.

“Who are they?” I say, pointing to the children.

He’s taken by surprise at the question. From his pocket he takes out a pair of gold wire glasses and slips them carefully on. He bends over the book and examines the photo.

“There’s no name given,” he says. “Just the credit and copyright. I’d guess they’re just models or it’s a stock photo.”

We go on through the day, trying to read this book. I struggle with each page and we have to stop several times. The names interrupt my reading. I refuse to say them, skipping over them as if they didn’t exist, and this makes sentences feel broken, the words between the spaces abandoned. Each time I do this he grows a little wearier. He gets up halfway through one paragraph and pours us water in the kitchen. When he comes back I can smell the alcohol on him, but what’s in the glass has no odor as he sets them down in front of us.

“Okay,” he says. “This is good.”

He turns the page to a photo that takes up the whole thing. It’s a large group of people. Standing in horizontal lines, arms touching, some of them shirtless, some of them painted in bright colors, their clothes wrap around like ribbons, others in jeans and shirts so plain, but above all that are their faces, smiling and unsmiling, looking out at us. I look out to the window and slide my chair back. My palms push against the table so hard that the waters shake and spill over. It’s afternoon and the sun is smearing orange across the buildings. He flips the page.

“I can’t,” I say.

“It’s okay,” he says. “This one doesn’t have pictures.”

“There will be more. And it just. It’s creepy.”

He gets up, letting out a deep breath, and goes to the kitchen. Two paper towels are balled up in his hand when he returns. He wipes up the water from the table and lets the wet towels sit next to the glasses. Rubbing his eyes, he looks out the window with me.

“We’ll take it slow,” he says. “I didn’t think it would be this difficult.”

“Is it for everyone?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “Certainly people have left the city, but I’ve only talked with adults. The aversion is understandable, and to be expected I suppose. But, well, what do you feel? What’s happening when you look at them?”

“It’s like my brain can’t put them together. Or, it does, but, it’s hard to focus on it, as a whole, I guess. I look away and when I look back things are almost different. Like they’ve changed. It’s happened with you, too. You’re different and changed now than you were a moment ago.”

He looks startled, worried. His brows scrunch together with his frown.

“Different how?”

“I see expressions, happy and sad and all that, but your eyes I didn’t remember. Or how your chin looks.”

“Interesting,” he says. But there’s something disappointed in it too. He looks down at the book. His eyes go somewhere else, somewhere further away beyond the book. “We’ll keep going. We’ll stop today, but tomorrow and so on we’ll keep going.”

So we do. From morning to afternoon when we stop for lunch we go through the books. I sit here, as much as I can stand to sit still, with my mind broken in a fog of names. There are pages, of course, that don't have them. Long stretches defining scientific terms and concepts, some of which I've known before, or impacts of wars on countries, who I recognize from my own books but never knew the names and never care to know them even now. When he doesn't make me read them aloud I skip over them. Ignoring them as if they're blank spaces on the page. Even this is difficult because of the capital letters, sometimes even in bold, drawing my eye to them as I pass by on lines above and below, they reach out for the text around them. While we do this, the woman stays behind the closed the door of a room next to the bathroom. Neither of them leaves me, staying I the apartment all day. And when I'm too exhausted to read we stop and eat dinner. They roll out a video screen from the closet after we're done eating. The man puts on a news channel from outside the city. Flashes of people skip by, one, cut by another, cut by another, each one straining my eyes as I try to keep an order to their faces. So much goes on outside the wall. I shut my eyes and try to listen to the sound of my own breathing. She asks me to remove the cloak and mask every morning at breakfast, but I ignore her. They can't see me on the couch with them, closing my eyes, breathing in deep, holding it until my ears pulse, letting it go.

There's a moment in the morning when they leave me alone in the kitchen. She's locked in her room. He gets up to use the bathroom. I'm quite with moving the chair out. I go barefoot around the apartment. The still cold wooden floor sticks to the bottoms of my feet. Even though I've passed it every day for the past week it isn't until I'm standing here, trying the knob of the front door, that I realize the lock above it has a key hole

where a bolt handle would normally be. The handle too has no way of unlocking it without a key. I try the handle anyway, but it's of course locked. Back in the kitchen I slide open a drawer, then another, looking but not finding any knives. They're all empty and I try to remember where I've seen them pull the cutlery from that they use at dinner. He clears his throat and gestures back to the table.

"What do you do in that room?" I say at dinner.

"Which room?"

"During the day, you disappear into the room in the hall."

"It's nothing," she says. "Nothing interesting."

"Neither is what I do," I say.

They look at each other and he shrugs.

"All right," he says, looking down at his plate as he stabs a bloody chunk of meat.

"Try it."

"It's not a good idea," she says.

"She's not making progress with the books."

"I'm really not," I say.

I slide a plastic spoon of potatoes under my mask. They hate this too. Everything about me wearing the mask and cloak upsets them. She watches me now even with a concerned face, twisting in a knot at her forehead. I know every little detail of her face now. Where the mole below her cheek has been removed and a faint scar rests in its place. Where the wrinkles of her face can disappear but the others cannot, staying like a permanent fixture. Where the sleep gathers in the corners of her eyes until she wipes them away with her painted nails. Together they mean nothing to me, together they're

new, fresh, I've never seen her before, but separately I could paint them. I've become sick with this. Turning the pages of the books and staring at them every day. In my stomach there's a special phlegm ball that rolls itself up and rests heavy, churning the breakfast I finished just a moment ago as I try to compress the details together.

"But it doesn't work," I say. I'm not sure if they've said anything else. They both look at me, startled. His fork poised in the air in front of his face. They look back at one another. She tilts her head to the side, eyes flicking at me, then another motion of her mouth that I don't quite understand.

"Try it," he says. "Five minutes. If it's too much we'll go back to the books."

"What is all this for?" I say. "If I'm not going to leave why bother with the books?"

Her eyes don't meet his in the silence. Instead she stands and pushes the chair back with her legs until she can turn away from the table. The napkin she tosses on the table. With a soft hand he puts down the fork on his plate. I'm waiting, expecting, growing tired.

"Where are your cigarettes?" She says.

Over by the couch she has her arms folded at her chest. When he looks up at her she turns away to the dark windows of the city. I've never seen him smoke.

"I'll get them," he says. Together they go back down the hall. She's not used her spoon. Really there's no need for it at all with this meal. They've only given me a plastic spoon because it's safer, I suppose. She won't even notice her spoon is gone, tucked under the plate as it is now. It's cold in my hand. The smooth metal of its head, the indented swoop of it, pressed against my finger as I slide it closer. I tuck it under the

cloak in the pocket of my pants. There's no plan for it now. Maybe it's not even worth taking if it's found I did. When they come back she's already got it lit and pulling it from her mouth with a billow of smoke following behind it. She goes to a window near the farthest wall and pushes up the glass until it opens a crack. With each puff she presses her lips to the crack, exhaling the smoke into the cold air that I can feel all the way over at the table.

The next day she takes me into the room with her. Inside the white of the apartment continues along the walls. Several little tables are set up around the room, lining along the walls and one in the middle that sits like an island. On all of the tables are little glass balls, the size of them small enough to fit into the palm of my hand, on pedestals with soft black pillows underneath each ball. From inside a ball close to me little spheres of light swirl around one another, blinking in different colors, blue, green, pink, they smear together then separate again. She closes the door, locks it with a key that she tucks inside her pants. Her hands press together like in prayer, the finger tips resting on her lips.

"Okay," she says.

She takes me gently by the shoulders and leads me to the table in the middle.

"Okay," she says it again. "Shit. You're going to freak out."

"Why would you tell me that? What's going to happen?"

"Right," she says. "That'd be good. A walk through."

She picks up a ball from the table, cupping it in one hand and holding it out in front of me.

“You won’t see it,” she says. “But it will come from inside. It takes about two minutes before it starts to set in. Then the room will shimmer. Have you ever been swimming?”

“Yes.”

“It’s like getting into a pool. Or, the fog that comes through the streets in the mornings, sometime around fall. Have you walked in that?”

“No.”

“Well that’s how it is. But it’s not water or fog. It’s little organic machines. They’re completely harmless. They’ll disintegrate like paper in your blood stream after a few hours. They turn into nutrients your body can use. It’s kind of refreshing actually, depending how long you stay in it. You’ll have to take off the mask.”

I don’t even make a move to lift it up.

“Please,” she says. “Just put it up.”

I give her a look when I do. She smiles in return, a little thank you smirk.

“I don’t want to do this,” I say. “I don’t want machines in me.”

“They’re nothing,” she says. “You won’t even notice them.”

“You don’t know that,” I say. “You have no idea what it will be like for me.”

Before I can stop her she takes my hand, holds it palm up, and places the ball in it. The smooth glass is warm from her hand. There’s a small seam that curves along it, making a loop and tracing back around itself. A little flash of light plays against the wall behind her. It brushes there like sunlight caught between the shadows of a tree canopy, then disappears. Another blush of pink crawls across her face. She’s smiling.

“You’ll be fine,” she says. “You see it now, yes?”

“Just the flecks of light.”

Something about it has me on edge. Out of the corner of my eye there's movement, but when I look nothing is there. The ball is so light in my hand, as though it's not there at all. I look to her, my mouth open, about to say something, then it all collapses. There's a loud wave of voices, all of them speaking at once, that burst into my ears as if the car radio has come to life half way through a song. Her face disappears in clouds of images that sweep in from the walls. They move through me like a train. One after another, they blur too fast for me to make out their distinct shapes. Colors bright and muted blend together in a terrible smear. As they pass the sound from them brushes my ears in horrible screams and laughter. Short clips of broken speech spoken in muddled vowels. The stream of it is endless. I turn and the cloud turns with me, the shapes spinning to my left, then they zoom toward me again. My stomach churns, a hot breakfast sitting uncomfortably against my throat. A face glides through my eyes, a car tumbling off a cliff, a bird pecking at a feeder, a man in a suit picking up a small dog, the images are slowing down but still move with such speed that though I know they're moving they're just one frozen picture after the other.

“It's too much,” I say. Somewhere from the chatter of the voices that pass her voice emerges in my ear, loud, the words spoken slowly, each one punctuated as its own.

“Focus on a point,” she says. “Try to pick out an image and focus on it.”

“I'm going to throw up.”

I press my hand to my mouth, holding back the sick that tries to force its way out. Her hand presses gently on my shoulder. There's a weight on my hand, something tugging at the glass ball that's there. She says something else, but her voice is caught

between two passing bursts of song and lost in the middle. Her mouth must be against my ear when she speaks again, it's so loud, so stern.

"Let go," she says. "You've got it in a death grip."

But I'm afraid if I let go that I'll spin off into the cloud of image and sound. Her hand on my shoulder disappears. One by one she starts to pry my fingers from the ball. I still can't see her. Even when she gets it free, when I finally relent and let my hand drop, the images and noise still swirl around me.

"Oh no," I say. "It's not stopping."

The last word is drowned by my vomit. I'm on my knees, a splatter of liquid pancakes across the floor. My eyes close and open and the images are fading. The sounds leave in the distance. Her hand runs along my back, up and down the spine, across my shoulder blades.

"It's okay," she says. "It's all right."

Her arms wrap around me and she pulls me close into her body. A floral perfume from her neck stings against my nose. I want to pull away. The warmth of her body, the warmest I've felt, threatens to raise more vomit, but there is something in it too that I want to press myself into. She pulls the mask completely off and sets it aside. My head rests in the swoop of her collar and neck. Behind my eyes the blurred lights still shimmer. She shushes and coos and tells me it's all right. It sounds like a lie. My body keeps shivering in the motion caught in my head.

Chapter Twenty-Four

By the time I get down the stairs to the top floor I'm out of breath and sweating through the gown. It sticks to against my chest and feels damp and gross as I lean into the cinderblock wall of the stair well. The tiny white space swirls around me. I'm light headed. The stitches in my side pull against the skin, threatening to split open. I could die here, I suppose, is one way to look at it. Tight in my hand the two metal cylinders with the syringes inside press uncomfortably. What would happen if I took them both? The machine rattles as I start to slide down the wall and I have to right myself up. I almost throw up, the liquid reaching the top of my throat before I can swallow it back down again. It's the small space too. It's the tiny little windowless stairwell that keeps pressing in on me. At the top of the staircase through the door I can hear the wind blowing in great furls against the metal. What would it be like to never have your father return home? Outside that door and a few thousand miles away our children are waiting for me to come back from a place they don't understand. And if I didn't, how would she explain that to them? What an odd thing it would be to have your father die nameless in a stairwell. A tight fist compresses around my heart. I take a deep breath. I slow my heart down. I lean against the wall until the machine beeps, flashes the dashed lines, and the shaking in my hands subsides. Shouldn't have had that cigarette. Or maybe it's the calm of the nicotine that lets me even out again. I wheel out of the stairwell and over to the elevator. Two figures are waiting inside for me. One steps forward and hands me a note.

"Come with us," they type.

"Of course," I say. My breath catching a little in my chest.

The one on my left holds out their hand. At first I'm uncertain what they mean, but the weight of the cylinders draws my attention to my own hand. I hand them over to the figure, stepping between them with my machine-laden pole. As we go down I lean against the wall, the bar in the wall pressing into my lower back. The coolness of it makes me shiver, but it's comforting against my warm skin. There's that awful sticky sensation as my sweat starts to chill on my skin. I feel wrung out. One of the figures turns back and looks at me, up and down, then returns to staring at the numbers as we travel down to the basement. They guide me back to the room I left, passing the child with the bandage over half his face, he sleeps now, facing the door, the bandage glowing white in the fluorescent lights. The pregnant woman is waiting for me in the room when we arrive. She sits in the chair by the bed with another figure standing next to her. My two guides wait in the hall.

"I'll want those back," I say to the figure holding the cylinders. They look up at me with a jerk of their mask. And then they look away, down the hall. I shuffle past them, holding myself up by the doorframe before crossing the wide expanse to the bed.

"You smell like smoke," the pregnant woman says.

"I was smoking," I say. "I watched what you did to the birds."

I sit down on the bed, keeping my gown in place as I swing my legs under the sheets. There's a drafty chill in the room now that I hadn't noticed before. The machines on the pole beep at me. As I settle in the heavy weight of exhaustion presses across my body. My arms feel like putty, the muscles strung out, and deep in one the needle sits like a splinter. The figure next to her steps around a framed painting on the floor leaned

against the chair, and pushes buttons on the machine. Through the tubes there comes another cold flow of liquid. A soft relief follows it through my veins.

“It’s a shame it had to be done at all,” she says.

Her voice is cold, but still carries the fullness of before. Her gloved hands rest on her belly, one folded over the other.

“You think your message will do any good?”

“A lot of people here would be happy to ignore it. They’ve done a fine job of that for thirty years now. The birds are only part of it,” she says. She starts to reach for the painting against the chair, but the other figure stops her and picks it up for her. They rest it together on her knees, hiding the swell of her belly. Two slips of paper are stuck on the back of the painting. “We’re not so deluded to think it will all be instantaneous, you must keep in mind. It will be a long process. But, we’re in it for the long haul. We have to be.”

“But you’ve taken children.”

“Never. They come voluntarily. Many of them we’ve rescued from the cells.”

“Yet the goose heads mark where they’ve been taken.”

“Our use of them last night is a message to those who used them before.”

“The stuffed cloak in the park, the one full of goose heads. I’m guessing that was you too?”

“You work with the police then?”

“Not by choice.”

“Yes, that and the others around the city were ours. This reaches far into the institutions of the city. The police are just as guilty of turning away as anyone else.”

“What are you then? A coup? Freedom fighters? Terrorists?”

“I’m sure we’ve been called all those things.”

“What do you want from me now?”

She turns the painting around and I recognize the girl hidden beneath the mountains of my apartment’s melted art. It’s been cleaned a little, some of the mountains removed in a wide arc, revealing more of the girl’s face underneath. The pregnant woman turns it again, so that the girl’s face is upright, but in doing so she blocks her body from my view. The green eyes of the girl stare out at me with a soft light caught inside them.

“Recognize this?”

“Of course.”

“Who is she?”

“My daughter,” I say.

“I don’t have the time right now for you to throw bullshit at me.”

She sets the painting down next to her, leaning it carefully against the chair. The other figure bends to help, but the action is done before they can. Once it’s set the woman places her hands back on her belly and seems to rock a little back and forth there.

“It’s a terrible thing to lie to a pregnant woman,” she says. “You’re lying to two people when you do. And if I let it stand it would be a terrible lesson.”

“All right,” I say. I take a deep breath and the smoke that settled against my lungs presses back out against my wound, making my whole body feel like glass filled cotton shimmering through my skin. A soft hiss escapes my through my teeth. “All right.”

When it passes I start up. I tell them, “She’s the daughter of a client outside the wall. She ran away and all signs point to her being inside the city. So, here I am, looking for her. That painting is the first evidence I’ve seen of her ever being here.”

“You’ve seen her picture?”

“Yes,” I say. “He had quite a few of her, but she was a little older than she is there in the painting. That’s her though. Doesn’t it seem an odd coincidence for her to show up in a painting in my room?”

“Who’s your client?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“What are you supposed to do when you find her?”

“Take her back to him. He’s very desperate to have her back. Seemed pretty broken up about it.”

“And if she doesn’t want to return?”

I shrug and wave my hands out unsure.

“That’s a conversation I’ll have to have with her,” I say.

“You’re convinced though that returning her is the right thing to do?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“You’re a detective or some kind of police, I assume,” she says. “And you’ve never encountered a case of abuse that has driven a girl to run away?”

“What do you know about it?”

“Absolutely nothing. But I imagine a young girl wouldn’t deny her identity over something trivial.”

“My daughter is about her age,” I say. “She’s threatened some pretty big things over some pretty trivial arguments.”

“And how many times has she acted on them?”

None is the answer, but I don't need to say it. The woman pushes against the arms of the chair, heaving herself up. The other figure guides her up gently, helping her steady. They stand for a moment, the woman resting against the other figure, then she nods at them and the step back, their hand lingering for a moment on her shoulder before falling away.

"Leave the girl be," she says. "If we come across her we'll let her know you're looking for her. If she decides she wants to return we'll arrange a meeting."

"I'd like to talk to her," I say. "There's a message to pass on."

"Which is?"

"For her. In my things."

"We have your things, there's no message there."

"I'd like them back."

"I doubt there's anything from him she'd want to hear."

She shuffles slowly to the door, which the other figure opens for her. The figure then bends and stretches to grab the painting.

"It's aged. It can't be less than ten years old. Isn't it odd," I say. "For her to be hidden behind a painting like that?"

In the doorway the woman turns. Her voice comes soft from across the room.

"No. Not in this city."

One of the figures outside the door hands her the two cylinders. She hands them in turn to the other figure behind her and they place them on the chair. At least that's a kind thought.

"Let her go, detective. Leave the city and tell him she's dead."

They close the door behind them and from the hall comes the soft patter of a ticker. The machine next to me beeps, the dashes flash, and the number resets to zero. I need to find my things. The silence of the room leaves a steady nerve exposed in my ear. I'm jittery just laying here. I stare at the blank wall in front of me. Back in his office, when he laid those dinosaurs out on the desk, he told me even if I get close to crush the orange one. Green, he smiled, if she's alive. Red, only if I see her body. And as he set it down he looked at it doubtfully, as if he didn't believe I'd see her body at all.

A figure is setting down a cloak and mask on the chair. The room is dark, the lights shut off, and I'm not sure how long ago I fell asleep. In the sleepy haze of waking up their shadowy form causes a terror to rise in my chest. They step forward and my arms go up, defensively, but they stop at the machine and switch out one of the hanging bags. They don't bother with an apology for startling me. Once they're done with the bag they leave me alone again. I count to thirty. When they don't come back I reach over and turn on the table lamp. The dim light aches my eyes. The shadows of the room are cast dramatically against the wall, big arches and shapes meeting and merging. It's terribly gothic. The whole room looks somehow emptier in the dark. I press the power button on one machine and it wails a long complaint then the screen goes dark. I do the same with the other. The pressure in my arm dies down and so stops the gentle chill push of liquid as well. I peel the bandage off, ripping out hairs along with it. Under the movement the needles move uncomfortably in my arm. A tiny pearl of blood forms at the entry point. I pull out one needle, then the other, letting them drop against the floor. Before the blood can run down my arm I press the bandage back into place and hold it there. In the dim light against the floor little streaks of blood still left in the line trickles out. I take a minute to prepare

myself. I try turning my head, one way, then the other, seeing if the room starts to spin, but no everything stays where it should. Easing out of the bed, I step over the spots of blood on the floor. Two spots of blood have already bled through the bandage on my arm, but spread no further. When I reach for the cloak my hand hits plastic. There, hidden from the light by the folds of the cloak, the cassette player, cigarettes, and matchbox of dinosaurs rest. No lighter for the cigarettes, of course. I put on the cloak, the headphones, then the mask, then the gloves, and put the two cylinders in the inside pocket along with the rest of my things. There's a ticker too and I hesitate but take it too.

As I limp down the hall the narrowness of it causes a little of a panic. Outside the room with the face bandaged boy I stop and lean just outside his window. The light is off inside. The fabric curtain pulled across the window. He might not even be in there anymore. I'd like to check, to look in on him and see that he's all right. But it's a stupid idea, so I continue on down the hall. The elevator takes too long to close; I'm stuck looking down the long narrow hall with a panic attack setting in. I could imagine all sorts of things coming down that hall. Terrible figures, men with guns, axes, or one by one the lights may go out, following me to the elevator to be swallowed in a darkness. I press the next floor up and close my eyes, hiding behind the side of the door with the panel.

Back on the roof I'm alone in the cold howling wind of the night. It whips around my cloak, trying to tear the whole damn thing off. The mesh of the mask causes it to whistle inside. The city is a beautiful black blot lit by a speckle of tan and blue stars across its surface. A little red light atop the obelisk glows, dimming and brightening like a soft heartbeat. I go over to the bench, kicking the broken pieces of the roof. When I hit a large one I bend and pick it up and carry it with me to the bench. Despite the wind it's a

nice scene up here. Someone has cleaned up the dead birds from earlier. The sky still sits empty and I'm not sure if it's because the remaining birds are asleep or if they're really all dead. From the inside pocket I take out the matchbox. It's difficult to see the colors of the dinosaurs in the light of the moonless sky, but I remember their shapes. I press each one into my fingers, feeling their distinct forms through the gloves. I set the yellow one aside. The other two I return to the box and tuck it into the pocket. Out across the city it's surprising how many cars are on the street. It must be late into the night, maybe two or three. Even without some loud club or bars on this street there's still the soft noise of cars driving by caught in the wind. I press record on the cassette player. The tape sounds weak and a soft clicking has started up under the cloak. I hadn't noticed it doing that before.

What did she say? I take the pregnant woman's words one at a time. From how she talked everything points to her knowing where the girl is. She is the girl. But that seems impossible. He talked of her like his daughter so easily. There's the possibility of questioning her, but getting her alone seems impossible. Nobody would leave me alone with her, especially given her pregnancy. I could wait to use the dinosaur until I'm closer to her, but that would likely be a contained space, where it may not work. And she didn't seem so keen on meeting me again. It's possible too that she's left the building. Since she's so far long though, and that they have medical equipment here. The girl may not be here, if she's not the girl. It seemed the woman had talked to her, or she is the girl. But that doesn't mean she's here, if she's not the girl. She'll know though where she is in either case and that may be enough. The rock is heavy in my hand. I'm not sure how hard I have to hit the damn thing. I hold it up, above my head, my glove tight around it. What if there's a good reason? She's gone through a lot to disappear so fully. My arm is

already tired. It's still weak from the needles, right in the bend of it, right where my muscles now strain to hold the rock. I set it down on the bench beside me. And if I say nothing, what happens to my son? The arrangement falls apart. He's cut out of the academy. Tossed into some knock-off military prison. The stupid kid can't keep his shit together. How did we raise such a brazen asshole, so willing to start fights? And the money too would be gone. Where is my sister now? Out over the wall somewhere. Maybe where daybreak is already settling in. She could already be with my wife, hiding from her husband as much as she can. Can you trade one abused soul for another? There's not telling if that's what happened to this girl, this woman. There's no way to know she's not lying. A detective can't pursue his client. I couldn't take the time to pry into his private life, not a guy like that. A guy like that you take what he gives you and trust his word. Don't bite the hand that feeds.

The wind shifts and blows the dinosaur through the slots of the bench, my body no longer acting as its protector. I get down on my knees and search among the pebbles and rocks of roof. My ungloved hand feels for something like plastic. The door to the roof slams closed. From under the bench it's difficult to see who's there. I touch the dinosaur, its spikey back pressing against my palm. When I stand, two figures are on the other side of the bench. A crackling electric voice comes from one of them, I can't tell which with the wind.

"Drop something?" They say.

"Just a cigarette," I say. I reach for my cloak to get one from my pocket.

"Stop," they say. "Keep your hands out."

"How can you see anything up here?"

In the dimness of the city light I can only make out their forms. The rest of them lost in the dark shadows mixing with their cloaks. Something silver flickers across one of them. It could be a gun, a knife, or a cylinder like those I have tucked in my pocket. The dinosaur is still gripped in my hand. In my other hand is the glove, hanging flaccid by the fingers.

“You want one?” I say.

They move together, stepping across the roof with the bench between us. There’s something a little terrifying about a shadow two people long moving together in perfect step. A shape from a nightmare made corporeal in another bizarre day of this city. Under their feet pebbles pop and scatter across the roof. Their cloaks wrap together in the wind, creating a life of its own, a living ink spot against the dim, white brick of the roof. The closer they get the less chance I have to use the dinosaur. Can I trust his reasons of why she ran away? They’re four steps away and moving fast. There’s a weapon in one of their hands for sure. A small pistol with the city light playing off its barrel. I keep my hands up. The two of them separate at the bench, each taking the other side around it. The one with the gun stands at my right. They grab the wrist of my hand missing the glove. They turn it over with their one hand, keeping the pistol fixed on me with the other.

“Open it,” they say.

I let my fingers unfold, the little dinosaur resting on the palm. Our bodies block it from the wind.

“Just a trinket,” I say. “Something from my kids.”

They pick it from my hand and hold it up to the city lights. It rolls between their gloved fingers. The other figure behind me steps closer, trying to get a good look. The

one with the gun puts the dinosaur back in my hand. They slip the pistol somewhere into their cloak. I press the dinosaur tight into my fist.

“We’ll help you leave,” they say.

“Can I see her again?”

“Who?”

“The pregnant woman.”

“We don’t know who that is.”

They each take an arm and pull me around the bench. I slide my hand into my pocket, dropping the dinosaur into it. As we go down the stairs I put on my glove. One leads while the other follows behind me. Down the elevator to the first floor none of us speak or type. We stand in a line against the wall, their hands clasped tightly around my biceps. It isn’t until we reach the front doors of the building that they let go. One hand gently presses against my back. Then the doors are closed, a soft clink of a lock following.

Out on the street there are small piles of dead birds. Each of them gathered a distance from another. On this street alone there must be hundreds of birds. Collapsed, heads smashed from the impact, little sweeping marks in blood trailing across the sidewalk to the piles. The street lamps give them a ghoulish sterile quality as though they aren’t real, but some prop on a stage show. Around many of their ankles the messages remain untouched. Across the street a figure is prying spikes out of their wall. Once freed the goose heads fall with a soft splatter onto the sidewalk. What a horrible mess. I pick the most well lit direction and head down to my right. The cylinders in my cloak jab into my wound and send a bolt of pain through my side. I adjust them quickly, shifting things

around. Down the street in the distance the obelisk breathes through its red light. The cassette tape clicks to a stop. I rewind it and start the playback. The sound of the wind brushing my cloak harshly against the microphone plays softly in my ears. A little calm tries to settle in, but I'm more on edge than before. I've missed a chance and I'm not sure if that's a good thing. I'll find a shelter and sleep on it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

We spend the next mornings in the ball room. She shows me how she does it. She takes a ball in her hand and closes her eyes while she waits. The fog emanates from inside them, she explains. In the future they won't need the glass balls. It'll be air born, she says, pervasive, always accessible outside. But for now they need the source to be close by. In this room the network is a fake. They can't connect to the real one outside the walls. So they had to build their own that imitates it because it's important I try. When she opens her eyes she sees things around us that I cannot. I refuse to touch one again. Not for several days. She focuses on the wall. She says she's choosing an image from the stream. It's a movie, she says. Meanwhile I'm standing here watching her hold the glass ball in her hand as if she's about to bite into it like a fruit. Once I've convinced her I still can't do it we step outside and he's waiting for me at the table. We go through the books still until I'm able to deal with the stream.

"It's normal," he says. "A lot of people have trouble with it."

What bothers me is that the names on the pages are becoming obscured. I can skim over them without difficulty now. As though they've been there all along. They're becoming normalized, he says. Which is a good thing. But I don't believe him. I don't like the idea it permits. It encourages me to remember them, these people, groups, places, specifically, as though they are more important than any other.

"It's a terrible lie," I say.

"What do you mean?"

We stop while reading a history book, things that happened outside the city a hundred years ago. It's my least favorite because it's the most centered around the names.

“To place importance on any one person is to deny what really makes us human,”

I say. “It’s to ignore that what we do is important, not who we are.”

“This says no different,” he says. “The names are only to help you remember what they did.”

“Can’t we remember otherwise?”

He leans back and rubs his eyes. They turn pink around the edges. He gets like this when I start up with things I learned from school. But more and more I think I’m returning to the spiral. Not that it’s right. Not that any of them are right, really, but since the day in the room when I was thrown into the stream, the spiral has come back to me in my dreams. I woke one night and turned to the window in my bed. The lights of the building across the street seemed to flicker in the pattern of the spiral. And as I showered I thought I heard its clicking, the sound of the rodents eating away at something. These moments pass as easily as they come. There and then gone like a breeze. Yet I’m left with the sinking cold feeling in my chest. And the thought of what the faceless man had in his book.

“Let’s just move on,” he says. This is how he ends things before they turn into an argument.

While she’s in the stream I walk around the room to the back shelf. If I look real close into the glass I can see patterns that lay inside. Some of them are more localized recordings she says. Databanks, or something, that don’t so much emulate the network outside the wall, but retain information they need. I’m not allowed to touch any of them without her permission. So I lean close and ignore the distorted reflection of my mask in the glass. Inside this one there’s the shape of two figures, then a third, and then they

disappear. Another has a moving scene, a mountain or a large hill, I can't be sure which, with a bright light closing behind it. I go back to the one before, with the two then three figures. In the center of the room she still stands dumbly with her hand out. She uses the time to do work, she says. Sometimes she'll narrate what she's doing, explaining ways of moving around in the space. I tune her out and watch how her nose twitches as she speaks.

For a moment I hesitate with my hand over the glass ball. There's a pressure in my chest, an impulse, telling me to pick it up. So I do. I hold it out as she holds hers, facing her frozen body. There's no way to tell when she comes out of her trance while I'm in mine so it will have to be quick. The lights linger across her body, disappearing along her green dress, slipping through the cracks of the door. Then it all fades to a white cloud. In front of me two cloaked figures stand trading messages. I imagine moving toward them, focusing on the slips of paper. The image moves to my will. I stand between them where I can see the printed text. These recordings are too easy, she said. We didn't start with them because it isn't what they need to test. Of course I'd be able to use them, she said. Some of them are literally child's toys.

"Important to receive," one of the figures types to the other. The rest of the message has already faded away on the paper.

"With at least two hundred trucks," the other responds. "Not all of them full."

"Facilities are ready in the selected cities."

"And the issues with state crossing?"

"The bill is expected to pass. They'll be classified as refugees."

"Then we're set."

The figure holds out their hand to the other. If I were standing there between them as it seems it would pass right through me. But the other pauses and types another message.

“We’re afraid they won’t be able to handle the move to pervasive clouds.”

“It won’t be an issue.”

“There are quite a few public cases out here already where it’s an issue.”

“I’ll rephrase: It won’t be our concern.”

“It will be when it hits the media.”

The other figure presses their ticker to their chest and holds it there for a moment. It almost looks like they’re praying with it. They nod to no one in particular.

“Time frame for a trial?”

“Another year.”

“How long until the bill passes?”

“Eight months.”

“That’s your time frame. The trial is yours to do with discretion.”

“Then we’re set.”

They shake hands. The scene goes on, but I step back. The time of the recording moves forward, shifting in speed, figures glide by in a blur. When it stops three figures stand together.

“They’re looking for a healthy child,” one types. Two of the figures stand side by side, passing their messages to the third that seems to lean on something the recording didn’t bother to pick up. “Under eighteen.”

“No,” the other types. “There isn’t one I know of. What else?”

“Nothing else. That’s the deal.”

“There’s always something else they want.”

“Not now. If it’s important for you to get this,” the message goes on but the figure tosses it before they finish reading and it disappears from the recording.

“Tell them if they ever want to deal with me again they’ll take another offer.”

“Then you won’t be hearing from them again.”

The figure stands, or attempts to, but there’s a slight curve to their back that bends them forward. Even I can tell in the fog of the recording that it’s some kind of padding. A false hunchback strapped around them.

“And they’ll be sure to see me then.”

“Threats won’t help you with this.”

“There’s no threat. I’ll come for what I need. They can expect me either way.”

A hand is on my shoulder. Another pulls the ball out of my hand. Her voice comes through before I see her.

“I told you not to touch these,” she says. “If he found out you did that you’d be killed.”

“But there’s nothing interesting in it.”

“You don’t touch it. Ever again.”

“Okay,” I say.

Her face is a twist of fury when it finally appears. But there’s something else too, a concern I’ve not seen in days. When she first turned away from him on the first day we sat at the table, it’s like that, but terrified. She puts hands on both my shoulders.

“Can you see me?” She says.

I nod, the whole mask moving with my head. She lifts it up without warning and looks right at my eyes.

“Don’t say anything about this to him. Don’t touch them again. Promise?”

“Yes,” I say. “Promise.”

She smiles. Then her arms are around me. She presses me tight against her body. Through me there passes a flutter, something warm and comforting. I reach around her and hold my arms tight to her body. We stand like this for a moment. She’s not touched me since I threw up on the floor. When she pulls away she’s still smiling. I slip down my mask because I don’t want her to see that I am too.

As I lay in bed I think of what I saw in the cloud from the glass ball. The help that they wanted is part of something larger. I’m a test for something larger. I’m a proof that others will be able to handle the noisy fog. And if I can’t? If they can’t? What will they be refugees from? Never has it been said we can’t leave the city of our own choice. There is nothing to flee from here. There’s nothing that an adult would fear, at least. Would they be taken? I need to see what else is inside the cloud. But it’s doubtful she’d let me wander freely inside now. And if I stay here much longer, what are the chances they’d let me leave? If I’m never successful at handling the constant stream of information, what would they do to me? Would they toss me to another person? Give me back to the figures with the goose heads? I need to get out. The blinking lights of the city outside fade as dreams set in and I can feel my mind slipping through the window.

He sets his glass of alcohol down on the table and waits for me to finish the page. His movements are slow and pause at each point along the table, the glass, the edge, until finally his hand rests again in his lap. Under his eyes are large puffy bags of skin. They’re

redder around the edges than yesterday. He coughs twice into his hand. The morning feels stilted, quiet. I haven't seen the woman all morning. She has yet to come into the kitchen and take me into the ball room. Outside the window puffy white clouds float behind the cityscape. He stands up and the chair creaks under its release. My tongue moves against my teeth, picking out the pieces of toast stuck there still. The toaster he put in a cabinet, third from the left of the sink, below the counter. He makes his way down the hall, shuffling his feet against the floors. When the bathroom door shuts I slide out of the chair and slip over to the cabinet. The locks on the cabinet doors are small things, nothing heavy duty. They're like the locks on diaries or the cheap money box my mother used for her art shows. I slip the spoon handle between the crack of the cabinet doors. The head of it sticks out like a lever. I throw my arm into it. The spoon bends. I bend it back to its rigid shape, move it a little more inside the door, so that it's wedged further between the arm of the lock and the cabinet door. I shove my body against it again and the door cracks, but doesn't open yet. I do it again, two more times, until the wood gives, snapping a little, and the lock pops at an awkward angle. There's just enough space for me to pry my fingers between the cabinet door. With my feet on either side of the cabinet I pull. At first it doesn't give, but as I rock back and forth, pulling more and more, it cracks again and the lock pops right inside the cabinet and the door jolts back with my body. There's not a lot of time. I yank the toaster out of the cabinet and plug it in. Setting it to its highest heat, I turn it on, then run over to the table and carry the book to the counter. I tear pages from the book, crumple them into little balls, and drop them inside the toaster. Four, five, eight pages, I shove inside, using the spoon to cram them down. Already there's the smell of burning paper. I fill the other slot on the toaster. Little flames

flicker out around the pages and the metal mouths. I tear more pages from the book, letting them rest on top of the toaster and the growing flames. Using as much paper as I can I make a little trail around the toaster, leading it across the wall of the kitchen. My hands are sore from the tearing of the pages. Their thick paper, some coated and glossy, burning up so quickly and smelling something awful. Down the hall the bathroom door shuts. I sit back down at the table and wait for him.

“Does it smell like something’s burning to you?” He says.

I look to the kitchen where the yellow flames flicker up the cabinets. It’s quick to spread. The fire follows along the paper against the wall, some of it dying out before it can do harm, but once it hits the book it picks up speed and turns the wall under the cabinets a dark, sick brown. He stares at it for a moment. His hands freeze together where they rubbed together at his stomach. The whole scene captured in time like a picture. There’s a gentle heat building. Someone could be cooking, baking a casserole in the kitchen, if you never looked to see.

“What happened?” He says.

There’s no time to wait for an answer. He runs to the sink, pulling out his keys to unlock the cabinets nearby. From the one to the right of the sink he takes a pot and starts to fill it with water. I’m up out of my chair and run down the hall.

“Fire,” I say. The word shoots out of my mouth like a cannon. I repeat it again and again, running down toward the ball room. With balled fists I pound on the door, shouting the word until she opens the door.

“What is it?”

“The kitchen is on fire,” I say.

A loud beeping rings out from down the hall. The living room greys with a soft cloud of smoke. She pushes past me, her hand brushing my shoulder as she goes. I move, as if to follow her, but I stop and let her go on. Before it can shut I stop the door with my hand. Her keys hang in the lock on the other side of the door. For the moment I leave them there. At the back of the room I take the ball I'd held before and slip it into my cloak. On an impulse I take the three others closest to it. They weigh down my cloak, stretching the pocket. As I run for the door they ding softly together. I take the keys. In the hall the smoke continues to fill things. Another beeping joins in from my bedroom. They call back and forth to one another like birds. She's shouting at him in the kitchen.

"I don't know where it is," she says.

"Then fill these," he says.

The fire has spread across the cabinets. The wall beneath them is black and a hole has started at its center. From the hole another lick of flames makes its way up behind the cabinets. Smoke has turned the whole scene into a dark dream. It blots out the lights of the kitchen, lingering at the edge of the living room. It's at once thin and filling. He runs past me, headed for the hall. At the sink she's filling more pots. She takes one and tosses the water inside against the flames, but it splashes over a tiny part of them. They hiss in response and above her its spreading to the ceiling.

The front door is easy to open with her keys. I take them with me, closing the door behind me in the hall. Through the door the soft beeping continues, echoing back and forth, louder and softer as the two alarms call out to one another. From under the door small wisps of smoke trail behind me. The hall is long, its dull purple carpet lit by ornamental lights, each with its own white shade hiding the bulbs inside. I'm not sure

which way to go. So I pick my left and run down the hall. I have to hold the cloak to my chest, pressing the glass balls inside the pocket to keep them from rattling around. What would happen if they broke? Would I be swept away into their memories? The numbers of the apartments go down in their count. As I pass one there's the clatter of music from a video or song, horns bursting loudly. I cut around a corner to my right and nearly trip over a fake plant. Next to it is the elevator doors. I push the down button, repeatedly, my finger jamming against it. From somewhere down the hall a door opens and slams closed. The elevator dings. Ou waits inside, a small black bag clutched to their side. I step in, calm, slow. The first floor with the little star is already lit up. I press it again, just because, then press the door close buttons. I lean against the wall. All the walls are mirrored. It looks like I'm in an elevator with a million ous. They type something up and pass it to me.

"You forgot your gloves," they type.

The paper tingles against my fingers as it dissolves. The little purple numbers, still resisting to fade away, poke out from under my cloak on my left hand. I slip them under my sleeves and nod to ou. But ou's already not paying attention. Ous hand shuffles through ous bag. The elevator slides down the floors. Each one makes the little lights glow and a soft *bing* strikes through my chest. In the reflection of the wall ou turns and holds something out to me. Limp in their hand hangs a pair of gloves. I slide them on.

"I always carry an extra," they type.

I nod again and give them a thumbs up because I'm not sure what else to do. The gesture makes me feel like an idiot. They look me over again.

"Your ticker too?"

I shrug. Oops. Guess I'm a klutz.

"Now that," they type. "I don't have extras for."

I lean against the wall. There's no gesture I can give for "oh well, you tried, thanks, I guess?" When the elevator doors open I bolt out through the half opened doors. The lobby is dark marble, glossy, my cloak sliding across it as I run. I pull it up a little more so that my feet don't get tangled in it. And when I reach the sidewalk the blowing wind passes through my mask like a kiss. I don't dare stop. I run on. Down the street I run so fast. My heart pounds against my chest. Under my jumping cloak my legs pump and burn. I don't stop at crosswalks, instead I turn to go down the block, passing groups of cloaked people. I knock against them, bumping them out of the way. None of them grunt, none of them even make a noise. The street is soundless of voice. Only the passing cars, the wind, birds sitting on the ledges of buildings, and the soft tickers of people sitting outside a café, these are the only sounds I hear. I run on. Across the streets the same car, my mother's car, our car, wait in the soft hum of their engines for lights to change as I run through the crosswalk. My hand cramps with the glass balls held tight. Running with my arm across my chest makes it difficult to keep a steady form. I must look ridiculous as I jog past clutching my chest. I start to feel light headed. My lungs gasp for breath. I run on until I'm heaving into my mask. My legs wobble underneath me, slowing me to a trot, then to a stumbling walk. Finally I stop and lean against the white brick wall next to an ice cream shop. A figure sweeps the sidewalk outside the door, brushing a pile of crumbs and dirt together next to a pan waiting on the ground. Ou turns and stares at me for a moment. My breaths so labored ou must hear. Above me, passing

through a group of fluffy white clouds, the sun makes its way west, and I realize I've been running east, somewhere in the direction of my home.

Once I catch my breath I stop ou before they go inside the ice cream shop. I gesture with my hands for their ticker. At first they're reluctant, but I press my hands together in a gesture of prayer, a begging. Ou keeps it strapped to them, but lets me stand close to their side and type with it.

"Someone stole my ticker," I type. "Do you have money for bus fair?"

Again they consider this, the pan they've brushed the dirt into held out with one hand as if they're about to serve it to someone. Ou sets it down on an unoccupied outdoor table. The broom already leans against its edge. Ou fishes around in their robe and pulls out a small wallet. I look away as they turn from me. When ou turns back, two dollars brush against the wind.

"Thank you," I type. "I'll come back and tip."

They laugh, softly, hidden away somewhere beneath the robe is a gentle voice. Without a word ou picks up the pan and broom, disappearing into the ice cream shop. I don't remember the exact bus lines. It's been years since my mother let me ride them. But I find a bus stop with a map of the lines and trace one back to the outskirts of the city where it begins to fade away into the suburbs. Figures pass by me without a glance. Again I'm lost in the crowd. I could be anyone. Someone they know. Someone they love. But all I want is to be home, in my own bed, with my mother at the door, calling out my name.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The city is tense in the morning. Figures pass by the piles of dead birds holding up their cloaks and turning away their masks. Some go out of their way to step a wide path around them. Across the city the goose heads drip from the walls, bloodied, decaying, as white tear drops frozen in time and made gruesome over ages of exposure. Some are fresh like white globs of paint dripping down the sides. Crews try to pry them off the walls. Other figures stop them, pulling them away, tossing their hammers into the street. And as the sun starts to cross into the street, sliding down the tops of the buildings, something peculiar happens with the orange bundles tied to the legs of the birds. They dissipate, disintegrating like the pieces of paper passed with ease. I watch a pile of them as it happens. A nearby pair of figures, who a moment ago weren't even paying attention to it, jump from the pile with fear. They wave violently in front of their masks. One of them even shouts, their voice muffled, but frightened, the words garbled in their cry. Other figures around them step back, avoiding the flailing figures. Then the panic spreads to them too. A man removes his mask and cries out for pity. As I make my way to the wall the reaction spreads around the piles. It isn't until I round a corner, unexpectedly bumping into a pile of crows at my feet, that I feel it too.

A cold fist grabs at my heart, wrapping its fingers there and squeezing tight. I can't see it, but the sensation of someone standing above me is clear. A towering figure, cloaked, masked, their hands reaching out toward me. Then they're on me, grabbing at my chest, pressing against my throat. The hands are all over, passing through my cloak and against my skin. Warm fleshy things that don't hesitate in their molestation. The street fades away in a soft fog, not quite white, but rather, another scene taking its place.

A dark room, the walls granite and chipping. The figure is on me, then at once, not, and I'm looking down at a smaller figure on the floor, trapped between the legs of one much larger. The three of us are alone in a cell. A small, sheetless bed to my left, a toilet and sink in the corner. The figure below me screams out, but the larger figure does not stop. I lunge at the larger figure, my hands passing through their shoulders. They go on attacking the smaller figure, removing its mask, revealing the small face of a girl. I cry out. My heart skips into my throat, making the sound a caught tone. The green eyes of the runaway clench shut. She frees her hands and hits the figure, but something under the cloak stops her. I turn away, my hand reaching for something concrete. It hits an invisible wall, well before the sink, and I press myself there. On the wall in front of me, painted in garish cartoon colors, a mother goose smiles down while the girl screams behind me.

I close my eyes and focus on the sound of the cassette tape. It feels like a cop out. It feels like a cruel thing to turn myself away from a moment that she could not. But in her face I saw my daughter's, my wife's, and it's too much for any of them. I listen close as the recording of the shelter at night plays on. A man two beds over snored through the night and his breaths there calm me. The cold chill around my heart starts to fade. When I open my eyes the street has come back. The mother goose more of a phantom with each blink. Up ahead the outer fence of the interior wall gleams in the sunlight.

The guard at the gate refuses to let me in. They ask me twice to move on, but I repeat to them that I'll speak to a supervisor. I'm not sure what I expected. To walk right up and give a name?

"I'm pretty sure it was a woman," I type.

They stare at me, as blankly as a mask could stare so blank. The dull mesh and cloaked form offering nothing. There's no sign they're even packing a gun, but I assume they all are at the wall. That must be what everyone inside the city thinks.

"Look," I type. "I just want to leave."

"Next check out point is a mile that way." They point.

"Why can't I use this one?"

Behind them the double glass doors of the interior wall sit shining in the sunlight. The glare burns into my eyes. Another guard saunters over and stands behind the one I pass notes to.

"Move on," they type again.

Along my way down to the checkout point I light a cigarette and smoke while the recorder takes in the soft patter of my steps. Down here the wind isn't too heavy. It brushes gently against my cloak and occasionally whips back through my mask, taking the smoke into my eyes. I stop for a moment. I take a deep drag in. And hold the smoke in my lungs. The little tingle under my skin starts up. The cotton in my throat rubs as if it's a cat greeting my legs at the door. Down the street to my left, where a dry cleaner sits next to a real estate, a figure is sobbing loudly. Their mask is off, but from this distance I can't see much of their face or hair with their head pressed into their gloved hands. Birds dot the parking lot in front of them.

Once I'm through the doors they lead me to a little vestibule where I'm told to strip and put all objects into a small bin. Before putting the ticker in I type to them, telling them I want to keep anything that isn't a cloak, mask, or ticker. All that bullshit they can burn. But the cassette player, cylinders, which I'm sure they know what they contain,

dinosaurs, and cigarettes are mine. The figure nods, but I don't hold my breath over it.

They send me down another narrow hall. I close my eyes and let my hands guide me along the wall. Breathe deep. One in, one out. Through my eyelids everything flashes red. They put me back in the womb. They let me drown in the blood of the birds. Then it flashes back to white. The door at the other end opens and a familiar shape in a cloak waits for me.

“Where have you been?” I say.

Her voice crackles and buzzes as she guides me to a table where my clothes wait in a pile.

“Looking for you,” she says.

“Not very hard.”

I dress to her back. At the wall she reaches through a slot and pulls out the basket of my stuff.

“We've been busy.”

“I saw that,” I say. “Sounds like you all fucked up pretty big.”

She puts the basket on the table, letting it fall with a harsh smack. The cassette player bounces against the dinosaurs.

“Careful,” I say.

“You're in no place to criticize.”

“You knew about the children being taken,” I say. “And you did nothing about it.”

“It's not that easy.”

“It would have helped me to know too.”

I finish buttoning up my shirt. The dinosaurs I put in their matchbox and slide it into my chest pocket. The cassette player, cylinders, and smokes go into my pants' pockets. Something in the cassette player rattles as it settles. It's odd that it does that.

She takes the plastic tray and slides it back through the slot. She takes another moment there, pausing at the slot, I'm not sure if she's waiting for something or just thinking. The door to my right buzzes and pops open.

"Who are you under there?" I say. "You never told me if you got kids. Or a husband. Or a wife."

She turns around and leans against the wall. There's a simple shrug somewhere under her padded shoulders.

"Tell me at least, did I get it right you're a woman?"

There's a soft chuckle that clatters out of her voice changer like silverware tossed together. But she only shakes her head. Another figure is at the door, holding it open for me. As I pass through she calls to me.

"Who's to say there was only me?" She says.

A car is waiting for me. How they arranged it or had it ready, I'm not sure. It's a wonderful green boxy thing, with silver trim cutting across its body, and a roof that I'm sure turns into a convertible. The driver in the seat has a cheap white mask on, plastic, with little holes in it. A thin cloak like the kind you'd buy at a costume store, covers the top half of their body, but leaves jeans exposed under the wheel.

"Nice costume," I say.

"For the locals," he says.

The open the large gate doors for us. His radio is static until he glides through the doors and then a burst of electric guitar breaks the silence. He takes off the mask and tosses it in the backseat. The hood slides down to rest at his neck. He's a bigger guy, with gentle brown eyes and pock marked cheeks. He smiles and nods at me in time to the music. Little dreads rock back and forth behind his ears. I take out the cassette player and turn it over. Inside its plastic body something clacks one way, then another.

"You got a screw driver in here?" I say.

He points to the glove compartment. Inside there's a little tool kit from which I take a flat head. I set the cassette aside and work on unscrewing the body.

"I never get tired of it," he says.

"What's that?"

"Seeing that fucking wall disappear in the rearview."

But I don't bother looking at it. I can imagine what it looks like. Instead, I glance up to see the horizon in front of us. It sprawls in an endless green. The crops that surround the city blossom in their final days before winter forces their replacements. Far off in the middle of them a boxy machine meanders across the rows. The cassette comes open. In the hollow body, underneath the spools that spin the tape, a little disk, no larger than a coin, slips against the plastic wall as he takes the car tight around a bend. I hold the disk up to the window, letting the sunlight flash against its silver body. Little rainbows shimmer around the edges.

"Old school," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"You just pulled a minidisk out of a cassette player. Rockin' it old school."

“How do I use it?”

“I know a guy,” he says. “He’ll give you a player.”

I turn the disk over and see a note written in black ink: “Let us be.” But it’s another five hours until the closest town. Possibly even further until we reach the guy he knows. And even longer still until I see my wife and kids. It’s a long time to make up a story. To give a lie to each of them and the man that sent me out here. I don’t count on making that money. And I’m not sure what we’ll do with our son. Maybe there’s another way. Maybe this disk gives me an out. I slide it into the pocket of my shirt where it joins the dinosaurs. I put the cassette player back together. For a moment I consider recording the radio and the hammering of his hands against the wheel. Instead I look out the window and watch a flock of birds scatter from the crops. They twist in the wind and for a brief second seem to form a spiral before dispersing. I put down the window, letting the wind brush through my hair. It must be so quite out there in the middle of the field. Out here where the stream doesn’t quite reach, long after the clouds have dissipated around the towns, it must be almost silent, with only the wind and birds to make any difference. A body left alone to itself with the dirt around its toes. It’s almost frightening.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I sit down in front of my mirror and take off my mask. Behind me he's closing the door so quietly that if I didn't see him do it in the mirror there'd be no telling at all. He sets the painting down against the wall then comes up behind me and rubs my shoulders, with his gentle fingers moving in tight circles. The tension there is putty in his hands. Easing out of my flesh and disappearing somewhere down my back. I reach back, touch his hands, not wanting him to stop, then remove the pin from my hair and let it fall down over his hands.

"Will you burn it?" I say.

He looks back to the painting on the floor. When he turns back there's nothing to give a clue what he's thinking with his mask still drawn. But I can tell from the way his hands stop for a moment that he's going to resist me on it.

"But it's lovely."

"You don't need to flatter me," I say.

"No," he says. "She did a good job on this one."

"It looks like all the others."

"You look the oldest in it," he says. "Of all that I've seen."

"There must be twenty more of them in the cellar."

"You're almost." He pauses, his hands stop again. "Happy in it."

I turn to him, the bulk of my stomach making it difficult. It's more cumbersome now; somehow it seems heavier than it did yesterday.

"Please," I say. "Burn it."

He turns away and takes off his mask. His hair is wild, the mask swirling it around and making it stick up in tufts. Even in the dim light of our lamp I can see the gray flecks that are slowly taking over his hair. When he turns he's smiling, warm, agreeable, but it's for my sake.

"As you wish," he says.

"Thank you."

I stand, tottering a little with the weight of the stomach. Then I lift my cloak over my head. My hands rub across the large bulge of the stomach. I reach back, unsnap the material there, and let the false stomach fall with a thump to the ground.

"Our child," he says. His voice mocks shock.

There's a soft knock on the door. He puts his mask back on, while I step over to the other side of the room where I won't be seen. At the door he passes messages. I fix a kettle for tea at the stove while listening to their tickers. It's heating when he comes up behind me, tossing his mask on the table between our kitchenette and the bed.

"They found him on the roof," he says.

There's amusement in his eyes. Passing behind the dark chocolate at their center I can see it's all good news. I put my hands around his shoulders, letting him close in on me, pressing my back into the counter.

"Doing what?"

"He says smoking, but they think it was something with the reptiles."

"Dinosaurs."

"Yes, they found one in his hands."

"What color?"

“They didn’t say.”

“And?”

“And nothing,” he says. “They lead him out and he went on.”

“And?”

“We’ll know more tomorrow.”

The kettle behind me whistles. I turn and take it off the stove, pouring the water over two tea bags resting in our cups. He brushes his hands against the back of my neck then goes to the fridge.

“You’ll stay with me tomorrow?” I say.

“Yes,” he says. “Of course.”

From the fridge he pulls out a bowl of sliced oranges, wrapped in clear plastic. He sets it down on the table and takes off the wrapping. I place our cups down, one on either side of the table.

“Are you so confident in him?”

“No,” I say.

“But?”

I sit down and shrug. Leaning against the back of the wooden chair I pull the cup closer. A gentle wisp of steam lingers over it, curling one way, then the other. Our window is barely open, but I can feel the chill of winter already coming through. It seems too early for it to start.

“But every avenue could be the one out.”

“Is that from your mother?”

“No,” I say. “It’s from no one.”

He looks over to the painting on the floor. Between his fingers the slice of orange is dripping onto the table. He has a habit of peeling at them even though there's nothing left to peel off. There was a time he ate them like apples, biting off the rinds and swallowing them whole.

"I miss her," he says. "I didn't like her then, but I've decided I miss her now."

I take an orange slice and drop it into my tea. It slips down to the bottom and rests there on the curve of its back. A little orange dinge bleeds into the brown.

"You'll still burn it," I say.

"I didn't say I won't."

"I wish she hadn't done so many."

"She loved you."

"I suppose so," I say.

We take our time in going to bed. In the morning he's gone when I wake. The light outside has already lost its blue hue. I stand on the bed and look out past the black obelisk to the gray wall on the horizon. It's darker from this angle, from the west side of the city, and I haven't gotten used to the shadow lasting so long on it in the morning. But I don't miss the house anymore.

On the table I spread out the blueprints. It would be easy to assume that any building looked the same on the inside as it does on the outside, but it would be wrong to do so. This one twists in unexpected halls. Many of the halls leading to dead ends, with no doors on either side, and we'd be lucky if there were a window. I follow the route with my finger, from the first floor on another sheet, to the third, where we'll find a group of them hidden away. In my head I check for pitfalls. I run through the plan, each step at a

time. My eyes fall across objects in our small apartment. The original glass balls with the memories of the man still looking for me sit cradled in a fruit bowl on the bookshelf. Behind them, a row of black bound books, and one blue that I stole from the library. There were so many we had to throw out. His, of course, was the first that we burned. I'm not sure why I took it when I returned for the blue prints. Something about it had pulled me to it in the room, past his swinging body hung from a pipe. Even with the terror of seeing him there, I felt it calling for me. Some nights as I fall asleep I hear the chattering of the swirl. I wake and fear I'll be back in the red room. It comes back to me. The spiral seen in patterns of a carpet, or the trees caught in a wind. At the oddest times it will linger there like a trick of light, waiting for its moment. Even now the way the halls of the building seem to circle back on themselves is enough for me to roll them up.

He returns smelling of smoke. The painting is gone. He tells me of what's happening outside in the city. How the message of my memories is spreading. He still fears, he says, that they'll come for me, knowing my face. The recorded memories could be traced, he's sure.

"But they've been after me all my life," I say. "And now we have the milk." I nod to the holder of syringes filled with white.

And though that's not enough to take away his fear, he nods and relents and we sit together at the table. There's nothing for us today. We'll let the message pass outside. He takes my hand across the table. From here I can only see the blue sky through the window, the angle too low for the buildings or wall to clip its view, and it looks for a moment like the waters I've seen in the memories of the glass spheres. How the sun will

shimmer off such a blue expanse and radiate across the white sand. I ask him to tell me what he misses most about the world outside the wall.

“Nothing,” he says.

“Even now, stuck inside with me?”

“Here I have my peace.”

And I know that feeling. Above the mirror is the painting of mountains from my mother’s home. She insisted I keep it with me. The clouds above the peaks are cold, gray, and tilt in a way that makes them bend back upon themselves. His hands encompass mine, rubbing back and forth with a soft ease. He leans in close across the table. I lean in and meet him half way. Our cheeks press against each other. In the quiet of the room we take turns whispering each other’s names.