

James SH

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Good afternoon and thank you for coming to my thesis talk.

What lurks in the dark corners of affluent suburban America? Having grown up in such an environment, I can tell you there are many strange things abound; Neighbors calling the cops for improperly trimmed hedges, dictatorial homeowners associations, and semi-incestuous coming of age ceremonies all come to mind.

But there are still more sinister things in these idyllic neighborhoods. The violence of capital and landlordism are left to simmer here, those complicit happily unaware or uncaring of consequences thanks to economic segregation created by increased cost of living and control of municipal funding.

I am presenting a horror novel which seeks to take a look behind the saccharine mask of the suburbs and expose the secrets of its systems of violence to those who dwell in these kinds of areas. In this novel, the protagonist—a young person fresh out of college—stumbles his way into life within an insular suburban town. As his curiosity drives them to investigate small town secrets further, he discovers a mysterious land development group that's more than it seems.

The work is a continuation of my long running fascination with stories. My career has jumped from confessional poetry to narrative poetry to personal

humanity and creation in Frankenstein to examinations of capitalism and worker exploitation in Ridley Scott's *Alien* to Jordan Peele's masterful allegory on "post racial" American liberalism in *Get Out*, horror stands proud as a tool for delivering otherwise touchy ideas to a mainstream audience.

Moreover, my work is informed by the legacy of cosmic horror—this is to say, the genre of horror which focuses on the cosmic insignificance of humanity against the horror of a vast, uncaring universe. While I borrow its imagery, language, and style, I reject its ultimate premise and instead put forth that the truly terrifying, uncaring forces are not those of nihilism, but are instead very much products of humanity.

Now, I'd like to read you a section from the working draft.

James SH

## “Nostalgia” Working Festival Scene

Thomas Cherrygold took the darkened stage in a drab-orange vest with two clashing patterns of plaid, his face even more restrained by fillers than it had been previously.

“It is with the utmost pride that I introduce the Shrouded Entourage! First, let us welcome the Sisters of Love and Clarity.”

At once, two feminine forms emerged from the darkened space behind the door, their bodies obscured by long, floral patterned cloaks. One wore a comedy mask, the other that of tragedy. They curtsied coyly before taking their places among the velvet-upholstered chairs onstage.

Immediately following them were two large, stone-faced men. I recognized one as the owner of the west-side jet ski dealership and his aptly named

son and business partner “Cash”. They delivered a violet fan to each of the Sisters and took their leave.

“Now, please give a special welcome to the Hermited Cleric!”

Continued applause ushered in a man in a deep green hooded coat with a crook’d staff. He stepped carefully around the stage to his seat, making sure to avoid looking at anyone. A woman—one of the homeowners’ association goons who I’d been stalked by previously—arrived on stage shortly after, delivering the Cleric a steel lantern glowing brightly with an electric candle.

I snuck a look down into my lap at my cell phone.

*One New Message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*In the spare room. Found the safe. It doesn’t seem like it has a limit on attempts, but I’m going to need a lot of time.*

I looked over at Olivia, who seemed to be anticipating it. We nodded at each other and returned our focus to the Festival.

“Here he comes now, the Prince of Swords!”

A masked figure decked out in capes and chains waltzed towards the set of chairs, his chest flared outwards. He posed and postured at the audience, his gaze clearly aimed at the women in the room as he took his position. A person whose face I could not see from my seat knelt before the Prince, offering him a large, silver sword. Two empty chairs—the largest and most ornate of the six—still remained empty.

“Next, I present to you the Hang-ed Fool!”

A tall man in a beret took the spotlight, the end of a noose thrown around his neck. He stalked the edge of the stage, eyeing the sitting figures as the end of the hemp rope dangled limply towards the floor. His neck swung back and forth like the marionette of an amateur puppeteer. The four sitting members of the entourage placed a hand next to their eyes, like a makeshift blinder, turning their heads away from the Fool.

“Do not acknowledge him!”

The Fool sneered at the posse, dropping one foot before the other onto the ground and towards the center aisle of the hall. He tiptoed through

the gap in the audience, studying them carefully, then climbed a small ladder into a strange wooden chair that vaguely resembled a lifeguard's post.

A vibration crawled across my leg.

*One New Message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*Still trying. No luck yet.*

“Finally, the Emperor of Shrouds makes his grand appearance!”

Warm purple light spilled across the stage as a large, completely robed man stepped from the shadows. His entire body was covered in white fabric of different sorts; not a single hint of skin peeked through. No servant arrived to offer him any sort of object. He took his seat in one of the ornate chairs and crossed his arms.

“Now, lend us your hearts and breath, dear friends. It is time once again to find who amongst us harbors the Empress of Shrouds within herself.”

Olivia's words from the other night echoed in my head: "The ones they pick never come back the same..."

Four men clad in all black walked to the edge of each audience row, each bearing a large gold decanter. One by one, the men offered the audience members a sip from the posh vessel.

*Brzzzzzt*

*One new message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*Got it! It was his own birthday.*

*Lotta weird shit in here. I'm gonna start picking through it.*

Soon, the enrobed man in my row came before me, extending the pitcher outward. I contemplated faking a sip, but decided I might be caught. I brought my lips to the spout, where the metal taste soon slipped beneath a wave of sickly-sweet liquid. My face did its best to belie my disgust at the horrid rotting fruit flavor.

I looked over at Olivia, who had masterfully maintained her composure in the face of the liquid.

After everyone had drunk from the vessels, the men departed from the room and Cherrygold spoke up once again.

“The entourage will now commune with the ancient currents of Sweet Water.”

The members of the Shrouded Entourage knelt their heads in prayer. After a couple minutes of silent contemplation, they all returned to their former postures and looked towards Cherrygold. He nodded in response.

“It seems as though they have found the Empress!”

He fumbled with an envelope.

*Brzzzzzt*

*One new message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*THEY KNOW WHAT OLIVIA SAW. GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE NOW.*

“Miss Olivia Gifford, you are this year’s Miss Sweetwater: the Empress of Shrouds!”

I looked over to Olivia, whose face had been hollowed out by what I could only call pure terror.

Two burly men lifted Olivia from her seat and carried her to the stage. She did not fight back. Soon, she was seated next to the Emperor, strands of fabric from his flowing robe spilling over onto her chair.

“We present you with the gift of our gratitude, my lady.”

Cherrygold retrieved a large white headdress from a box at his feet.

Olivia’s face had dropped the fear from before, becoming cold and expressionless. Still, some hint of her quick mind showed from behind her eyes.

Cherrygold approached the Emperor, handing off the crown. In turn, the Emperor stood and began to hold out the headwear for coronation.

In a fraction of a second, the Emperor looked down at the small flames beginning to run up his robe. At their origin point flashed Olivia’s cigarette lighter, chrome shining in the spotlight.

The following moments saw the Entourage all trying to put out the flames, to no avail. The fire began to envelop the Emperor and spread to the carpeted stage. In the midst of the confusion, Olivia darted through the door at the rear of the room.

I eyed the crowded fire exits of the now-smoky room before swallowing my trepidation and bolting towards the door behind which Olivia had disappeared.

James SH

Front Matter: An Artist's Statement in Poetics

(repetition two)

Some sunny Thursday

Next please;  
Wait for the flash.  
Covered faces marking  
Glances suspect  
With cloth facsimile.

Load  
Unload  
Load  
Unload  
Load  
Unload  
Load

Clicking; overburdened  
Public car gills  
Uncouple  
Vanishing sunsets

(Friday)

A quiescent  
Swich;  
Edison bulbs bursting.  
He wasn't violent  
Or anything like that.

(Sunday)

Sweet breath  
Weapons yielded;

Black opium and  
A lack of vomit.  
The prototype for a savior,  
Wrapped in a sewer, beneath  
The streets.

(Darkness)

In the Garden  
At night.  
All the plans  
We had blooming  
When hope still arrived.

There are only three of us now.

Early morning  
Stale coffee  
Still drunk;  
Whale calls breach  
Plastic-wrapped windowpane.  
Night beneath the trees  
Still brings whispers from the  
Balcony, with  
Nineteen-twenty still asking me  
What the robins want.

(Sunset)

I am dreaming of  
Shopping malls,  
Microwaves,  
Sugary alcohols. I  
Would cry for everything  
I preached that I hated.

(somewhere far away)

Still stuck

here  
Pouring kerosene;  
Ever mocking magpies  
Plucking berries from the trees.

Polymer daydreams take me  
away  
To some other thursday;  
Lunch? Three-P.M.?  
Asking its significance  
To a dead, weeping god.

(weeks?)

[Please keep in mind]  
[I am writing this from memory;]  
[I burned my journals in the field]  
[To keep the day's light from dying]

A familiar taste,  
Vanilla weight maintenance  
And  
Yellow jacketed  
Bone brushed  
For the first time in weeks.  
Wintergreen spilling  
All down my face.

I'm remembering now  
You and your boyfriend's  
Mother  
Ashing the front porch  
While the army passed by,  
Covered lovelies  
In tow.

O grey  
Potter's Fields forever.

(daylight)

for the first time in weeks  
Dried out eye-burn

Forgetting what it's like.  
Substituting sanguine  
For friendships,  
Family—  
If we have any left.

Felines stalking  
More Corvids on the mantelpiece,  
Calling for darkness.

(sometime nearer)

Day drunk  
Discarded  
Field running,  
Grass-opened lungs;  
Contemplating all the  
People going missing.

I have not concluded  
That God is only cruel.  
But to bear  
Witness to the End,  
What an utter waste of time.

I just wanna see Providence before I die, man.

[Please keep in mind]  
[I am writing this from memory;]  
[I burned my journals in the field]  
[To keep the day's light from dying]

## “Nostalgia” Working Draft

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“Welcome to Sweetwater!” a sign displayed in a garish retro font. The entirety of what appeared to be the town’s Main Street gave off a cheesy anachronistic vibe, like a diner with green shag carpet. Pulling along the deserted street, I noted a public library, an elementary school, a credit union, and several boutique stores. Whatever this town was, it seemed to be much more alive than I’d first imagined spotting it along the lonesome backroad. It was certainly preferable to remaining lost.

As I neared the end of the stretch of the road lit by streetlights, the headlights illuminated a fairly large standalone building bearing large “Wilson’s Restaurant” and “Open 24 Hours” signs. I hadn’t noticed until that moment, but the adrenaline from my little adventure must’ve made me hungry. Turning my wheels, I pulled the car into the attached parking lot and ventured into the great, greasy-smelling unknown.

The inside of the building was something out of a Nyquil dream dreamt in your childhood bedroom. Drops of diluted nostalgia dripped into my mind as I admired the country-home-meets-English-Tudor-pub décor.

~~Just one “tonight?”~~ **“One?”** (Shorter = better, w/dialogue... though if you want the joke or surreal effect, this one could appear to refer to something ambiguous set up in advance...Such as a line about feeling strange being alone, and “But I could be waiting for somebody...” Then the “One?” becomes harsh and clarifying...Or the word might seem strange, in relation to some aspect of the image of the woman as presented.)

~~My focus shifted~~ (When the narrative voice shifts, we know the narrator’s attention has shifted...I’d cut all references to the workings of the mind...)

to the apron-clad woman before me. I smiled and nodded in response.

“Let me just grab you a menu.” She spoke while leading me back through the spacious dining room. It was certainly a quaint little place; the

atmosphere and smell reminded me of the diners my friends and I would haunt in the late hours of the night during our teenage years. I felt a twinge of sadness as I remembered all those nights; though they rarely crossed my mind, I missed them dearly.

A little while later and I was wedged comfortably in a window-adjacent booth awaiting a Denver omelet with a side of hash browns. I sipped excitedly at my coffee and reached to check my phone.

“Urgh.” I muttered, noticing that my phone still lacked reception. With boredom growing, I flipped the menu open once more and turned to the section in the back I’d ignored while initially scanning the menu.

“Wilson’s Restaurant: Sweetwater’s most beloved eatery.” The blurb began, “Founded in 1965, ~~Wilson’s stands as one of the oldest establishments in all of the Sweetwater Township. With recipes passed down from seven generations of Wilsons, we serve all of your favorites with an extra helping of hospitality.~~ At Wilson’s, you’re part of the family!”

I gagged a little bit at the sheer cheese. The rest of the page was filled with photographs of the restaurant over the years; as expected, little seemed to

have changed in the decades gone by. The gewgaws and large fireplace of the 1960's diner all still remained just where they had been in the photographs.

“Here you are, the Denver and hash! Just let me know if there's anything else I can get you!”

~~We exchanged polite looks before I hunkered over my food. For a schlocky diner, they made a damn good omelet.~~ I wolfed down the eggs and turned my fork to the potatoes. Before I'd even gotten a chance to finish them, something bizarre streaked into my field of view.

A stark orange burn crawled across the hillside down into Sweetwater.

Dropping my utensils, I focused my gaze. An enormous beacon swept brilliantly through the distance—a serenade of warm colors painting everything they touched. The glow completely enveloped my mind. Moved, I pulled my sketchbook from my bag and began to draw.

“Mesmerizing, isn't it?”

A spindly man ~~lounge~~d in the booth bench across the table—he must have slipped into the booth while I was distracted.

“This seat taken?” He asked, looking at my semi-dumbfounded expression.

~~Normally, I’d avoid unplanned social interactions, but it didn’t seem like I had a choice here.~~

“Uh, no. I’m just finishing my...breakfast. I suppose that’s what this meal is.” I laughed.

The man smiled in a way that I could not immediately distinguish.

“Glad to hear it. Sorry if I’m interrupting your drawing.”

“Oh, no. It’s alright.” I retorted

The man extended a firm-looking hand.

“Avery. Avery Wilson.”

“Ian.”

I paused to shake his hand.

“So, Avery, what am I looking at?”

“That’s the old Sweetwater Refinery! It’s not a practical structure anymore, but the old timer who takes care of the place likes to let us know he’s still watching out for it.”

“Should I find that charming or sad?”

Ian laughed, his unsettling smirk turning into a welcoming grin.

“Cheeky.” He paused. “What brings you in to town?”

“Family business.”

“I guess we’re two of a kind, then.” he delivered with a chuckle. “Here, let me grab you a slice of our *world famous* strawberry rhubarb pie”

As he got up, I noticed a car slowly driving by the diner. Upon further inspection, it was one of those old-timey cop cars crowned by rounded police lights. While unusual, I figured the police in this town were probably just like most of this town—weirdly wrapped up in their own nostalgia.

Within moments, Avery returned to the table bearing two plates of the aforementioned delicacy.

“So” I began, “you must be one of *the* Wilsons.”

“Yes sir! Eighth generation of proud...Diner proprietors.” He remarked with no shortage of sarcasm in his voice.

Avery was oddly charming. While I wasn't really looking to be social, he was good company.

“Hold on one sec. I'll be right back.”

Avery darted outside and towards the police car I'd seen earlier, which was now parked in the diner's lot. Whatever was going on, it seemed urgent. Avery's expression had become deeply serious; it seemed as though whoever might have been in the car was delivering some dire news. Avery then returned to the diner, his face a muddled combination of fear and frustration.

“Hey, I really hate to do this, but it's kind of an emergency. I'm gonna have to close up early just to be safe. Let me get you a to-go box.”

“Oh” I stuttered, “That's...concerning.”

“Yeah, it is. You should get going. Your food’s on me.” His face hinted at sadness.

“You can get to the highway if you continue east down the road just a few miles.”

We said our goodbyes and I made my way down the winding forest road, the shimmering streetlights of Sweetwater fading dreamlike behind the trees.

After a relatively short drive home, I tossed my jacket onto the couch and fell into a rich, restful sleep. In my slumber, my mind kept returning to the events of that night. Reels of lighthouses, dense pines, and strange mish-mash of buildings played in my resting brain—that romantic orange glow washing over it all.

My mind’s eye turned then to the strangeness of my departure. From the third-person, I watched myself drive away into the distance before the scene shifted to a figure making high-kneed strides through a darkened woodland. I could see that the figure was carrying something—something

long and heavy. It waltzed around weeds and tree roots, ever confident in its destination.

Tendrils of warm orange glow wrapped around my psyche once more and my questions melted into a peaceful nature scene. The wind sweetly threaded itself through the leaves and owls hooted from somewhere unseen. What else transpired between then and my waking, I still do not know.

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It was around midday that I woke to a rapid knocking on my door. Half asleep, I made my way to the portal and checked the peephole. It was Rand, overstuffed tool belt in tow. My hand undid the lock and twisted the knob, begrudgingly.

“Hey there! Thought I’d update ya on the improvements.”

Rand put his hand on the door frame and slouched to the side.

“Well, I threw out my damned back fixing up the roof. I’m gonna hire someone to finish the building’s renovations.”

Oh no! If only *someone* could have predicted that your control freakishness could have resulted in this.

“Fine. Do I need to sign something?”

Rand retrieved a slip of paper from his belt and offered me a shoddy-looking golf pencil.

“Yeah, they’ll need to enter your apartment and I’ll possibly have to put you up overnight if it takes a bit longer than—“

“Ow! Goddammit!” I swore.

My eyes moved downward to see a bloody splinter jutting out of my right middle finger.

“Well, you did bleed on my contract, but it should be valid regardless.”

Rand chortled

I had other choice words but rather chose to reply with a simple “Take care” and shut the door. I respected rand for trying to make an honest dollar, but that man could not read a room to save his life. My bad mood

lingered as I walked the short distance to the bathroom to excise the wooden shard from my finger.

Finishing up my disinfecting and bandaging, I settled down to my computer to computer; there were appliances I needed to help hock. I was fortunate in that my uncle had appointed me a cushy work-from-home job writing all of the newspaper ads for his home goods store; all I really had to do was write short copy that appealed to boomers who didn't understand the internet and occasionally help his friends with their advertising. Of course, I also had to nod along to his diatribes about the illuminati and lizard people at Thanksgiving, but it was a small price to pay for such a relatively undemanding position.

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I was nearly through my second ad when my phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Ian Guest?” A deep voice inquired.

“This is he.”

I figured he must have been a friend of my uncle's who'd been referred to me for work.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions."

I was taken aback by this weirdly upfront approach.

"May I ask who's speaking?"

"I own a small business—I saw your portfolio and I'm interested in purchasing your services."

Weird. I didn't list personal phone number on my website; I figured my uncle must've given it out somehow.

"Were you referred by Jorge Fisher, by any chance?"

"Yes, indeed I was."

My defenses lowered.

"I was wondering what sort of educational background and work experience you bring to the table."

I spent the next few minutes rattling of—and perhaps embellishing—my BA and limited work experience as well as some of my own personal projects I’d pursued.

“Excellent. You’re a very polite and intelligent young man.”

It was perhaps a bit generous for my c-average marketing degree and nepotism-sustained career, but I accepted it.

“Thank you very much, sir. Can I give you any more information?”

“No, thank you. If my colleagues and I decide to call upon your services, I will contact you.”

The phone clicked and I went back to my writing. The interaction was off-putting but not all that much weirder than other client calls I’ve fielded; you sort of get used to it when you’re looking for work. I put the conversation out of my mind and returned to my work.

It was on Friday that Rand’s contractors arrived. Walking home that afternoon, I heard a symphony of sirens rounding the corner before

spotting three ambulances careening at breakneck speed. They blew past me and towards my apartment complex. I fastened my backpack tighter and sprinted in their direction.

To my horror, they were indeed en route to my building—a building which now stood half doubled-over itself, the second floor mostly collapsed.

*Damn it, Rand.*

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After the dust settled and the police had taken their statements, Rand and I were alone on the sidewalk.

“Well, bud, looks like my contractors really screwed the pooch this time.”

*You think?*

“Not to worry, though! Not to worry! I came prepared.” He produced a key from his windbreaker with a small tag hanging off of it bearing an address on one side and “17b” on the other.

“That’s great. Is this another complex of yours?”

“No, but it is the finest suite I could procure. Everyone else had family and friends to move in with.”

*Ouch. Thanks for the reminder.*

“Thanks. Luckily I had the foresight to take my laptop and phone with me when I cleared out for the day. Most of the stuff in there was replaceable.”

“Well, I gotta go make some phone calls. You take care now.”

Rand darted off towards his car. I followed suit and entered the address on the key fob into my gps. It was a brief drive further downtown and through a few side streets.

*Oh joy.*

Rand’s lavish accommodations turned out to be a roach motel. The outside was a mess of crumbling lumber and chipping eggshell paint. Inside the structure was even less inviting; patchy yellow wallpaper, beds with mysterious dark spots, and eau du menthol all bid me a warm

welcome upon entry. I opened my bag onto the bed and tried to make the space as comfortable as possible, making sure to slide my laptop into the motel room's safe.

With the room a bit more to my liking, I grabbed my now empty backpack and shipped out to pick up clothes, toiletries, and other essentials to last me until I heard from my insurance.

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Upon returning to the motel later that night, I was beset by a strange feeling. Something seemed *wrong*. I shrugged off my bag and tried using of the tricks my anxiety counselor had taught me.

*I'm in a new environment,*

*I don't know the area very well,*

*But everything is okay.*

*I am safe.*

I took a deep breath before sitting on the edge of the bed and looked for the TV remote. I'd remembered it laying against the TV, but I had no

success searching there. However, after a bit of ransacking, I was able find it thoroughly wedged under the TV stand.

*Weird? Yes.*

*Sinister? Probably not.*

Gathering myself, I turned on the TV and flipped channels for a bit before settling on reruns of one of my favorites. I laughed a little to myself, half because I was still a touch unsettled and half because I always seemed to find myself watching this same damn show. Ready to be a couch—er, bed potato, I headed to the restroom before fully settling in.

That's where I first smelled it.

From the bathroom came a horrid smell—first subtle, then nostril-wrenching. It smelled as though some kind of wild animal, sopping and mud caked, had taken up refuge in the room. The stench was cold and rabid; a stray lingering on death's doorstep.

I jogged to the opposite end of the room, shielding my nose from the stink. With my eyes glued on the bathroom's doorway, I scooped my

possessions into my bag, not even bothering to get the lights or television. The night clerk, whom I'd run into shortly after exiting my room, shot me a perplexed look.

“Hi, uh, I think there's a dead animal in my bathroom. I'm not sure, but it might be dead.”

She was not at all phased by this.

“I'm sorry about that, sir. Let me swap your room. Free of charge.” She winked. “And I'll get you some coupons for the minibar.”

I walked to my new room, which was thankfully on the opposite side of the motel. By this point, I was calm once again, reasoning that a raccoon or possum must've crawled into my room, knocked over the remote, and then died in the bathroom. Sure, it was a bit unlikely, but how else could that all have been explained? A smelly homeless guy? The smell was distinctly animal—that much I was certain.

My new room proved to be much more livable and possum-free. Soon, I tipsy on bottom shelf whisky and drifting off to sleep.

The timberland rippled in the wind, producing that scent from the bathroom. The forest I'd seen the darkness-shrouded figure lumber through was now overrun by feral dogs howling longingly in the light of a moonlit churchyard. Their bodies were frail and infested with growths and sores. From beneath their feet came scores of humanoid figures, each thrashing to escape the confinement of the soil. The beings all began to march together, patches of skin and flesh falling to the wayside as they slogged on, as if desperately trying to escape something.

Over the hills they climbed, numbers dwindling from rot and decay. They trudged on, continuing to look over their shoulders on occasion. As the horde crawled further and further, a dim glow began to pulse. Soon, the light burned a pleasant auburn and the scene melted away into peace.

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The following week proved to be a relatively positive one; my insurance claim was processing and I was able to receive a pay advance

from my uncle after explaining my situation. The odd dreams continued, but they grew less intense and more focused on the caress of the orange light.

At the end of the week, I finally received a follow-up call from Rand.

“Hey bud. Good news and bad news. Bad news is your old building is gonna have to be demolished and I have no permanent openings for you in any of my other buildings. The good news is that I’ll let ya out of your contract free of charge and give you back your deposit.”

*How generous of you.*

“How am I supposed to find a place on such short notice?!”

“Look, I’ll poke around, maybe find something for ya. I’ll give you a *glowing* recommendation wherever you end up applying.”

“Okay but—“

“Hold up, that’s my other line. I’ll call you back when I have more information. Sit tight ‘til then, trooper.”

I tossed my phone onto the motel bed. As usual with Rand, I was disappointed but not surprised. My thoughts shifted to finding a more

permanent home. I would not be moving back in with my family—that was for sure. Stressed out and anxious, I went out to my car to begin work finding a place.

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Several hours passed and my searches—both online and in-person—had proved fruitless. I'd found a few apartments into town, but they'd all required applicants to make at least three times the monthly rent to be approved. No dice there. A tiny studio had been in my price range, but I wasn't interested in sharing a kitchen and bathroom with two strangers. Frustrated and dejected, I let myself zone out, my car speeding through the rain-slicked roads.

When I finally returned to my senses, I was lost once more. Luckily, the waning daylight managed to cut through the thunderstorm that had been brought by the afternoon. Less fortunately, it seemed that the rain was beginning to pick up, slowly filling the roads. I maneuvered my rear-wheel drive through the growing puddles, eyes fixed upon each waterlogged crack and divot in the pavement.

The shower turned to downpour; my windshield was soon all but opaque with rain-splatters and the noise from the rain had drowned out any others. A sudden jolt seized the wheel, hurling my car towards the woods on the edge of the road. Without input from my conscious mind, my body lunged to control the screeching metal coffin rocketing towards the timberline. My hands pulled at the faux leather wheel, steering into the skid. In a brief flash of clearness through the windshield, my eyes met the tree line. The pines stood tall and rigid, beckoning me to join them.

*Crunch*

My Car swerved over the shoulder.

*Thud*

A cold sweat wracked my body before a piercing ring flooded my ear canals. I scrunched my eyes closed, trying to shake the nerves. The accident hadn't injured me—I was more so just shaken up. Looking out the window, I could see now that the car was thoroughly off the road but stopped just short of the trees.

I shifted the wheel, as my peeks outside led me to believe that the sedan likely wasn't stuck. Finding that to indeed be the case, I tapped the gas pedal and moved the car parallel to the road. My gut told me that it would be alright to try to make it to a safer parking spot, despite my lacking a gps signal and sense of direction. My mind, not wanting to be stuck on the side of an empty road that was quickly turning into a creek, encouraged me to trust my gut.

I took it slow, my brights on and hazards flashing. The drive was, thankfully, noticeably devoid of any concerning crunches or clamors. Several minutes of holding my breath and craning my neck at the windshield later, I found myself at an off-road. I thanked my lucky stars and slowly turned onto the cracked black pavement.

The thick cover of trees provided a nice respite from the rain. I could now hear the gentle breath of the heater and now the clicking of the hazard lights. The road here was noticeably less waterlogged. My foot leaned upon the gas pedal slightly harder, and the car slowly picked up pace.

As I rounded the corner of the lonely road, my headlights caught something in the distance. A small gravel—now mud—offshoot of the road extended past an ornate wrought-iron fence. Beyond that, I could see a towering manor at the end of the drive. I stopped and leaned closer to the window.

The mansion was erected in a style similar to plantation style homes I'd seen before. White pillars held up two floors of balcony space, each fronted by white crisscrossed wood. A good number of windows, each symmetrical and analogous in size, lined the front of the building. It was all topped off by two fourth-floor gabled windows on what could only be an attic space. For something so needlessly enormous, it was surprisingly tastefully built.

Now turning away from the looming manor house, my wheels rolled on along the road. Here, the afternoon sun was just barely able to trickle through the dense trees and rainfall. I cautiously navigated the car down the incline, intensely focusing on the sides of the roads and blind corners as to not collide with any pedestrians or other drivers.

Taking the turn, I found myself driving alongside a sprawling cemetery—graveyard, I suppose, seeing as a rotting church poked its steeple out from the overgrowth of vines. I thought it very peculiar that a graveyard of this size would have been placed in what could only be described as middle-of-the-sticks. Maybe they all died on the Oregon Trail—dysentery or something like that?

*Thrush*

*Thrush*

Something scrambled out of the woods in front of my car. I slammed on the brakes, trying to avoid any further skidding. As I did, a bushy looking beast made its way to the other side of the road. Now at a full stop, I could tell it was merely a raccoon—just a little animal trying to survive in these woods. We locked eyes for a moment, and then I waved at the little creature. It stared for a moment longer before looking elsewhere in the woods and dashing back into the underbrush.

I continued on, undisturbed by the noises of the wooded world around me. I really appreciated them, in fact. It had been a long time since I'd

really, truly taken in a natural scene like this. The rushing of wind, the peeps of birds, the sound of rain sliding down through the pine boughs; it all made for a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere. I'd nearly forgotten the hell that was my living situation. I drove on in the tranquil repose.

Coming up on another corner, I could see a large wooden sign up ahead. My eyes nearly bulged out of my skull once they were able to finally get a clear look at the lettering.

“Welcome to Sweetwater, population 4,205”

I was almost certain there was no way I was near Sweetwater. Granted, my sense of direction in the area wasn't great, but I'd taken an entirely different route than I had last time I ended up here. Still, it was better than staying lost.

Several more miles down the muddy road and I was finally in town. Bathed in sunshower, the town appeared much less mysterious than before. The out-of-time choices for some of the buildings were weird, yes, but it was largely just another boring American suburb—though a small one. I figured it was just as good a place as any to get my car checked

out; I didn't want to hazard having a breakdown on the highway back into the city.

I wheeled along Main Street—which I now saw was actually called Inverness Road. Spotting a banner bearing a tire and a wrench, I turned down Third Street and pulled into the parking lot. Cal's Auto was a long white building with several new-looking trucks behind the large windows. Numerous new cars lined the parking lot. Adjacent, one could see a sizable garage with several cars in different states of repair.

"Hey bud. Whatcha need?" A man with a scruffy red beard uttered, walking in my direction.

"Hey! I skidded over a pothole earlier and I think I heard a crunch. Do you think you could take a look at it?"

"Sure! Why don't you just drive over to the garage over there and I'll give you a little paperwork to fill out."

I made a noise of agreement and shifted my car over into the garage. As I exited, the man handed me a clipboard and a blue ballpoint.

“Just standard liability stuff. Have you noticed anything unusual about the car following your accident?”

“No,” I responded, head down in the paperwork, “just the initial sound like something was cracked. The brakes might be a little wonky, but that could have just been the slick roads.”

“Alright, I’ll see what I can find. It’s probably gonna take me a half hour or so before I get around to your car. That alright?”

“Yeah, I’m not in any rush.” I replied.

“Great. There’s some shops and stuff down the road. I’ll call your number when I’m done.”

Smiling, I nodded and bid him goodbye while retrieving my bag from the backseat. He waved a hearty farewell and marched back into his shop, whistling an unfamiliar tune.

The lightening raindrops slicked down my hair as I traversed the street. Within a few minutes I was greeted by the sight of what must have been the aforementioned shopping area. It was a small strip, containing an

eclectic assortment of storefronts. From where I could see, there was a western-themed steakhouse, a jewelry store, a leggings shop, an upper-scale hair salon with an unintelligible French name, and a chain coffeehouse. How and why all these operated in a town with less than four thousand people, I couldn't say.

After grabbing a violently over-priced coffee, I walked down the remainder of the avenue to see if there was anything else worth exploring. To my surprise, the shops immediately turned to condos. At the end of the road, the condos gave way to smaller houses organized in a neat row. They weren't beautiful, but they were certainly nowhere near as overdone as the mansion I'd seen on the way here. They actually almost reminded me of the house I grew up in.

"Good afternoon! Looking for a place to call home?"

I turned, startled by the interjection. My gaze locked on a tall woman in a mustard-colored blazer.

"Sorry to startle you; I'm Selma Sinclair. Pleased to make your acquaintance...?" She paused as if to ask for my name

“Ian” I spoke.

“Well, Ian, can I interest you in renting any of these lovely new craftsman homes?”

I laughed, uninterested by trying to be polite “I’d love to, but I don’t think I could afford one of these.”

“Nonsense! Sweetwater Properties has the best deals in the tri-county area.” She delivered with a saccharine smile.

I glanced down at the info sheet she thrust towards me and nearly dropped my jaw. The rental price of the house was nearly half of what I was paying for Rand’s crapsack shanty. I almost made a scene of shouting “Sold!” like some brash sitcom character, but I held my tongue; I still had my hang-ups.

“That is an...excellent price point. I’d be interested in more info if you could give me some.”

“Of course!” She pulled a manila envelope from her briefcase  
“Everything you need to know will be right in here. Would you have time to look inside? It’d only take a few minutes.”

“I’m actually trying to kill time right now, so lead on!”

The interior of the house was even more nostalgia-inducing than the outside. It was a small-ish house split into two levels by a rail-less wooden staircase. The dust of vacancy smelled surprisingly homey, as did the soaked-in coffee smell of the compact kitchen upstairs. A humble wood-burning fireplace lined the wall of the bottom floor, ready to heat what could be best labeled as a living room. The whole house reminded me of a better, safer time when I was younger. My gut wanted me to take this place as soon as I could, especially since it would mean being out of the motel.

I thanked Selma and walked back towards the auto shop, still reading over the pamphlets. I was utterly dumbfounded. I’d heard suburban living was far less expensive than the city, but I hadn’t expected the discount to be of that magnitude. Even with the campiness of the town, I was still genuinely hooked-in by the price. I didn’t really need to be in the city

proper, seeing as I didn't particularly have any friends or work commitments in town. I knew I'd moved out to the west coast to experience city life, but I wasn't really too hung up on that anymore after getting a taste of it. Maybe this place could be good for me.

*Brzzzzzz*

An unknown phone number appeared on my phone screen.

"Hello?"

"Ian? It's Paul from Cal's Auto. Car's ready. I had to replace one of the tires and a headlight, but it was nothing major."

I was frustrated by the inevitable fortune that tire would cost me, but relieved the suspension and alignment weren't shot to hell.

"Wonderful. I'm on my way back—I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

--

I headed in to the main building of Cal's Auto which, as I was informed, was where I was to pay for my repairs. Inside, it was immediately

clear that Cal's was much more of a dealership than a garage. I strode past the enormous new pickups, rovers, and SUVs over to the counter. It was quite a large dealership for the size of the town.

"Next in line, please!" A bespectacled woman uttered from behind the counter.

I offered her my debit card and my receipt from the garage.

"Great, thank you. Just one moment."

While I was waiting for my card to process, a satisfied-looking salesman led a young man in a salmon polo and shiny brown boots walked over to a large truck at the front of the showroom.

"Attention everyone! We have another satisfied customer!"

In unison, the entire ensemble of employees stood and clapped wildly. The smiling young man took a mallet from the salesman's hand and proceeded to give a solid thwack to a gaudy faux-gold bell attached to the wall.

*Gong*

*Gong*

*Gong*

*Good for him, I guess.*

The standing ovation finished and I was soon on my way out the door of Cal's.

A half-hour later and my hands were turning the knob to my motel room. A clammy breeze of disappointment swirled, fleeing the abode. I grumbled and spread out on the bed, still half-pondering Sinclair's brochure.

I wasn't sure if moving to a place like Sweetwater was really worthwhile. It was cheap and had easy access to the highway, yes, but it was also just extremely peculiar. It had the odd charm of a small town but with all the trappings of a growing exurb. Something still didn't sit right with me.

The rest of the evening passed without event. Exhaustion took hold relatively quickly and I drifted off to sleep wrapped in scratchy linens.

--

The tall, shadowy figure strode through the darkness, elongated arms still carrying something weighty. It stopped for a moment and lifted its head. It breathed in deeply through its nose—or whatever facsimile of a nose it might have had—as though it were searching the wind for a scent. Whatever it was seeking, it must've found it. The entity lowered its head and continued on its path, ever tenacious in its hunt.

The shape carefully faulted a cement wall and lumbered down a road. On the edge of its path, a neon sign with the words “Econo-Motel” blinked in the distance.

--

My body rocketed awake, releasing a deep exhale. Using my fingers, I separated the blinds and gazed out onto the road where the entity had been in my dream. As expected, the road was vacant. I felt like a stupid child for even considering the possibility that some sort of shadowy

monster was hunting me through my dreams. I'd just overindulged on creepy TV shows and podcasts; that was all—I'd experienced recurring nightmares before.

Even if there weren't any stalkers looking in the darkness outside, the motel still didn't feel very safe—especially given the odd animal break-in a few days ago. I pulled up the Sweetwater Properties website on my phone and scrolled to the “Apply Now” tab, figuring it was my best shot at getting out of this place.

I finished up the application and set my phone back on the nightstand, early morning exhaustion still plaguing my mind. As I laid back down on the bed, I hoped for my next few hours to be free of netherworldly pursuers.

--

I woke in the early afternoon, feeling refreshed from a long night of peaceful, specter-free sleep. Attempting to stay warm, I lazed around in bed, shifting the coarse blankets. My struggle was shortly interrupted by a sharp buzzing from the nightstand.

“Hello?”

“Is this Ian Fisher? It’s Selma from Sweetwater Properties.”

I rubbed my eyes with my free hand, trying to get my mind back together. “Yes, this is he. Good to hear from you again.”

“Likewise! I just called to say that the paperwork has been processed for the house and that you’re free to come get the keys.”

“Great! I should be able to come by the office today if that’s alright.”

“Perfect! We’re on the corner of Crescent and Inverness. See you then.”

I spent the remainder of the afternoon getting myself and my things together before checking out of the motel. With minutes to spare, I made it to the bank to grab a cashier’s check for the deposit. I tucked the check into my jacket and drove towards Sweetwater, confident in my decision.

By seven PM, I was standing before the door to my new residence, all worldly possessions—save for the car—stuffed into my backpack. As I opened the door, a warm gust of air beckoned me inward, inviting me to

relax. My bag hit the carpeted bottom floor with a soft *thunk* as I stretched my tired body in front of the fireplace. To my extreme good fortune, a partial rack of wood and a box of matches awaited me there. I wanted desperately to zonk out in front of a warm fire, but I had work to do and a few things to buy.

The superstore in town was a smaller, more upscale version of the area's normal one. Basically, they slapped a new name on it, threw up a 'Select' or 'Club' –or something to that effect—and increased all the prices. But, as I noted upon entering the sliding glass doors, that upcharge had certainly led to a tidier store without vagrants begging outside. Don't get me wrong—I didn't hate the homeless in the city, I just didn't like being accosted for change while trying to shop.

After buying a sleeping bag, toilet paper, and some food, I sped through the self-checkout, eager to get to my making that fire. I was about at my car when I locked eyes with a familiar face.

“Hey! Ian!” He spoke, sharp features casting shadows in the dimming light of the parking lot lampposts.

“Hey! Avery, right?”

“Yep! Good to see you again! What’re you doing shopping all the way out here?”

“I actually, uh, moved here. Tonight, in fact.” I laughed.

He became visibly puzzled for a second before smiling.

“Well, maybe I’ll see you around again. I really get going, though; my father is expecting me back very soon.”

“Okay! I’ll try to get around to the diner when I can!”

I waved goodbye as he entered his car.

Avery seemed different today; much less open and friendly like the first time I’d met him weeks ago. He seemed distracted by something. I hoped he was alright.

The evening’s fire was as soothing as I had anticipated, and the warm embrace of the sleeping bag was exactly what I needed after my time

at the motel. Gentle warm air slowly rocked me to sleep as I admired the beautiful orange glow.

Morning brought with it a cold rain that trickled down my double hung windows. The fire was long out by this point, leaving a cold pile of ash in its wake. My dreams, though I did not clearly remember them, were pleasant and left me feeling at ease with my new surroundings. Everything felt as though it was finally falling into place for the first time since the renovation disaster. I utilized my feelings of rejuvenation and peace to make myself a nice breakfast of homemade pancakes and catch up on my uncle's ads I had been meaning to finish for the past few days.

The rain continued on through the afternoon and into the evening, stopping just around the time I finished up my work. I decided then would be a good time to check out the backyard.

Flipping on the backdoor light, I could see it was a diminutive yard packed full of overgrown grass. In the back corner stood a small wooden garden shed, now just beginning to turn green from moss and rot. Wilted

flowers lined the eastern border of the yard. The sweet smell of rain wafted through the entire scene.

I approached the shed, examining its black steel latch. Seeing that it lacked an actual lock, I unlatched the door and stepped inside. With my phone flashlight glowing, the interior revealed itself to be bursting at the seams with miscellaneous gardening supplies; a broken lawnmower, various long tools, hedge trimmers, and pesticides of all varieties stood out among the piles of junk.

“Evening, neighbor.”

I poked my head outside, peering out towards the source of the noise. A late middle-aged man in flannel stood in the yard over my back fence.

“Hello!” I replied, walking towards him. “Ian.” I extended a hand.

“Roy. Pleased to meet you.” He completed the handshake. It was firm and confident. “Doing some late night gardening?”

“No,” I laughed, “just checking out my yard.”

“It’s a small one, but it’s got potential. I’d recommend using a weed and feed every other week.”

“Gotcha.” I retorted. “I’ll pick some up when I get a chance.”

“Also,” He continued, “make sure to keep those bushes in the back shapely and away from your neighbors’ fences—the H.O.A. keeps tabs!”

He seemed to take genuine delight in those words. I felt like I could wager a guess at who might have been involved with the homeowners’ association.

I feigned concern for his H.O.A. standards. “I’ll make sure to be vigilant.”

After bidding each other goodnight, we headed into our respective houses. I chuckled to myself about the interaction. I remembered these types from my childhood; one had once called the police on my family while we were weekend dogsitting our aunt’s three dachshunds, explaining that we were in violation of the city’s two pet ordinance. I did sign the contract, though, so I was obliged to keep my property to the neighborhood’s beauty

standards. Plus, I could understand wanting to keep the community beautiful.

Outside of his strange personality, I also took note of his house; it was larger than the other houses in the subdivision. Most of it was obscured by the trees and fence surrounding it, leaving me to guess at what lurked behind them. Even without the darkness, I likely wouldn't have been able to see much of anything.

*Nosiness, thy name is Ian.*

After I'd given up on trying to peer through the trees, I readied my sleeping space in front of the fireplace. I flipped through my phone for a little while until my eyelids grew increasingly burdensome. My body slowly sank into the soft warmth of my sleeping bag.

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I was feeling pretty peppy the next morning. I hadn't really done much exercise before, but I figured it might be a good idea given how much I'd been neglecting it. My tennis shoes seemed like they would be fine, and I had a water bottle in my bag; my light jacket seemed warm enough while

not too cumbersome to jog in. Equipment ready, I stepped out into the chilly misty morning.

The neighborhood was quaint and quiet in the early hours. Houses of similar shapes and sizes lined my street, all seemingly at peace. A few neighbors walked dogs up and down the sidewalks; I scrunched my mouth and made friendly nods at them. Following the street around a corner, I came to a cul-de-sac.

From here, my eyes could more clearly scope out Roy's towering abode. The mansion was built in a contemporary style, albeit with Corinthian columns supporting the obnoxious-looking archway. Fifteen windows of mostly-unmatched shapes and sizes lined the exterior; the only section free of windows was the sore-thumb turret affixed to one of the building's outcroppings. In a funny way, it reminded me of one of my friend's houses growing up. As a kid, I'd been amazed by its sheer size and the presence of a personal elevator, but my mother—who had studied architecture—always said they had more money than sense. I was inclined to agree with her now.

“Good morning!” A middle-aged woman in name-brand athletic gear stepped toward me.

I removed my earbuds. “Good morning, mam.”

“You’re the new transplant, aren’t you?!”

I chuckled. “I am indeed!” I extended a hand “Ian Fisher.”

She flashed a smile and shook my hand. “Helen Mayhew. Happy to finally meet you.” She lifted a monogrammed thermos to her sparkly pink lips. “Are you, by any chance, free tomorrow evening?”

I pulled out my phone and pretended to check my calendar as to not seem like a low-life. “Uh, yes, I am free!”

“Oh, wonderful. I’m having a little bit of a neighborhood get-together and I would love for you to join.”

“I would love to!” I was surprised; I had expected integrating into the tightly-knit community to be much more difficult.

She took another sip from her thermos, the aroma of sweetened coffee steaming through the cold morning air. “Lovely! It’ll be at our house at six fifteen.” She motioned towards the large house opposite Roy’s.

After we exchanged our goodbyes, I jogged back home. Somehow, I was already working up a sweat despite only traveling a few blocks. Though I hadn’t really noticed until now, I supposed I really had let my fitness slide a little bit.

Once I had returned home and cleaned up, I decided I wanted to go out for breakfast. I deserved it for my *strenuous* morning regiment. The internet showed very few restaurant options, and even fewer options that would run me less than \$20 a meal.

*Wilson’s’ it is, then.*

The car pulled smoothly into the parking lot of Wilson’s’. Light raindrops tapped gently on the windshield as my jacket’s arms slipped around mine. The dashboard clock read 9:15am—the earliest I’d been out and about in a while.

“Good morning. Table for one?” A young woman spoke from behind the counter.

“Just me!” I smiled. As I did, an exhausted looking Avery wandered out from the back area labeled “Employees Only” in bold black lettering.

“Oh, hey again.” His gaunt eyes beamed at me.

“Hey, feeling alright?”

“Yeah,” He began, breathing deeply “I’m just getting off my shift.”

“Oh gosh, okay! Get some good rest!”

Avery chuckled. “Unlikely.” He paused. “I could sit down for a coffee, though, if you’d like the company.”

“Only if you’re not too tired. No pressure.” I smiled

Avery turned to the hostess. “I can seat us. We’ll be back by the long windows.”

He grabbed two menus and we made our way to the rear of the restaurant, settling at a set of light-brown wooden table. Outside, little birds

fluttered around the powerlines which swayed against the backdrop of the grey morning. My new friend—if I could've called him that—motioned towards one of the tables.

“So, how's the exciting world of Sweetwater been treating you?” We both laughed a little bit.

“It's, uh, interesting. I guess the guy who lives behind me is a little weird. He seems to take the homeowners' association really seriously. I can't remember his name. Something with an R?”

Avery's hazel eyes, encircled by exhausted darkness, rolled in response. “Roy? Yeah, I've met the guy. I don't know what position he holds, exactly, but he oversees basically all of the building and zoning in Sweetwater. He comes in every once in a while and eats after talking with my father. Never tips. Sends food back about half the time.”

“Ugh. That's the worst.” I supposed I was sort of able to empathize, though the only food service experience I'd had was working a concession stand for my high school's fundraiser one time.

“You two know what you want?”

I scrambled to look through the menu, having neglected it while we were talking. Most likely, I’d just end up sticking with the Denver.

“I’m just getting a coffee.” He turned to me. “The special’s the best thing on the menu. Not even close.”

“Uh, that sounds good. I’ll do the special.”

The woman poured Avery’s coffee and took our menus.

“Anyway, yeah, the guy’s not really the friendliest.” He sipped from the steaming ceramic mug. My eyes drifted outside where small puddles were forming in the pavement. I wasn’t yet used to how much it rained out here.

“This woman down the road also invited me to some sort of block party tonight.” I looked into my phone’s notes where I’d written the info about the party. “Helen Mayhew! That was her name.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve met the Mayhews before. I can’t really say that I know much about her. Congrats on meeting people, though. I know Sweetwater can be kinda tightly knit.”

I shifted a little in my chair. “I was a little worried about that. I’ve been a bit of a recluse since...well, a while, I guess.”

He smiled, “In that case, I guess I’ll have to do my best to make sure you get out more!” We both chuckled “I mean, only if you’re okay with that, of course.”

“Yeah, definitely!” I was taken aback; no one had ever really gone out of their way to be my friend like this before. It was nice.

The waitress returned with ‘the special’ which turned out to be a feast of eggs, potatoes, meats, and pancakes. I stared wide-eyed at the smorgasbord, reaching for my utensils.

“You know, I never really aske—sorry, is it okay if we keep talking while you eat? I don’t want to be rude.”

I dashed hot sauce over my eggs and reached for the warmed mini-pitcher of maple syrup. I'd always felt weird being the only one eating, so conversation to dispel the awkwardness was very welcomed. "Oh, yeah, no worries."

"So, I've been meaning to ask what brought you to Sweetwater. Did you just see the place that night you came in and just decided you *had* to live here?"

I finished up a bite of thick-cut bacon and cleared my mouth with a drink of water. "Sort of. I lived in the metro area and my living arrangement more or less fell apart overnight. Then, I pretty much fell backwards into an opening in the area. Of course, I like the town too, I just ended up here by accident."

"I was going to guess it was something like that; we don't get a lot of young people moving into town." He paused to imbibe more coffee. "So, do you have a job lined up here?"

"I actually work online writing newspaper ads."

“That sounds interesting. How is it?”

Having finished the bacon and eggs, I drizzled the sticky golden-brown syrup on my pancakes. “It’s fine. The hours are really flexible, which is nice.” I gazed outside once more, only to be met with a growing downpour. “How about you? How’s working here?”

My dining companion made a slight snickering sound. “It’s better than nothing, but I’m not the biggest fan of working for my father. But it’s rarely very crowded, but I always have to look busy if I’m on shift. Honestly, I think I spend more time pretending to have duties than actually doing anything productive.”

I struggled for words before managing to mutter out an “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright—I don’t mean to complain. I just wish I were doing more with my associate’s.”

“I feel that. You can bet I didn’t get a journalism degree to sell appliances to the elderly.” We laughed together in camaraderie.

*Misery really does love company.*

We spent the rest of the meal talking about less heavy topics—books, music, and other leisurely interests. For someone who grew up in such an isolated town, he and I sure had a lot in common; it was an extreme stroke of luck.

After I'd boxed up the uneaten remainder of my meal, we said our goodbyes and exchanged phone numbers. My car rolled over the wet tar of Inverness. I was excited for the prospect of having a real friend around here. In truth, I hadn't really had any close friends since high school—more out of lack of effort than anything, really. Making friends was hard enough, but keeping them was even more so with how busy life was.

--

My work filled up the remainder of the day as rain pounded upon my ceiling making nice, satisfying little knocks. In the late evening, I enjoyed a cup of tea by one of the upstairs windows, watching the droplets paint the panes. As the gutters filled with water and began to gush into the street, I found I could no longer stay awake and laid out on my sleeping bag.

*It's really about time I buy some actual furniture.*

The warmth of the orange light faded as a scene of a broken stone building materialized in the night. It was dark, but moonlight illuminated shattered cobblestones woven together by deep green climbers. The air in the building reeked of mold and rotting vegetation. A certain feeling about the room made me suspect someone was here, watching me. My legs marched forward towards a wooden door in the back of the structure.

The knob vibrated against the wooden door as I placed my hand upon the cold iron. Before I had the chance to twist, the door gently drifted inward. Feelings of familiarity pulsed through me. From the third person, I could see myself nod and extend a hand.

--

The following evening I put on a clean white button-down—one of my only somewhat-formal pieces of attire—and slipped on a warm coat. Making my way out onto the doorstep, I secured my two door locks and

started down the road. I wasn't quite sure what to expect at the party, but I was nonetheless thankful for the invitation.

Crisp autumnal air whistled across my face, biting my ears and nose. I'd finally arrived at the long driveway which led to the Mayhews' residence. It was a foreboding edifice of beige, boasting a four-car garage and an enormous outdoor chandelier above the white-brick entryway. The soles of my shoes made contact with the almost perfectly smooth drive as I hiked towards the front door.

"Good evening, Mr. Fisher." A beefy man with dyed salt-and-pepper hair held the door open.

"Good evening. Mr. Mayhew, I presume?" I did my best to maintain polite posture and countenance in the face of social uncertainty.

"You assume correctly." He grinned and beckoned me inside.

The interior of the house was a cavernous mishmash of open floorplans jammed together. From the foyer, I could see a living room, an expansive upper landing, and a kitchen with several islands. Turning my

gaze towards my host, I could spot a large, carpeted staircase that headed to what appeared to be a vast basement.

“Welcome to our home, Ian. We have appetizers and beverages downstairs at the bar. Feel free to make yourself comfortable.” We shook hands, meeting one another in a firm display of respect.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Mayhew.”

“Please, Ian, you can call me Kent.” He smiled confidently, as though he had just made a decision with great certainty.

“Well thank you, Kent. I’ll be sure to enjoy the refreshments.” It was nice to be treated as an adult; my youthful features often resulted in my dismissal or patronization.

“Oh, also,” He raised a finger “the main event begins in about a half-hour in the den.”

What the ‘main event’ entailed was anyone’s guess, but I gave a confident look and began to head downstairs. There, several dozen Sweetwaterites ate, drank, and made merry. I made my way through the

crowd, gravitating towards the spread at the bar. Black plastic trays of meats, breads, and cheeses lined the wooden bar top; at an end table sat a plethora of upper-shelf liquors and clear plastic cups. After making myself a plate of food and a whiskey soda, I began looking for a suitable place to sit down.

“Mr. Fisher!” Helen Mayhew waved at me from the other side of a leather sofa. “So glad you could make it.” She turned to the trio of women behind her. “This is Ian Fisher, the recent transplant.” The women around Helen all nodded in approval. She then turned her hands towards the posse and her head towards me. “Ian, these are my talented employees!”

“This,” she started, “is Mrs. Margot Edwards. She’s a wonderful mother of three as well as the local fitness chick!”

Margot and I exchanged handshakes and pleasant glances.

“Marg, show him! Show him!” My face struck a perplexed expression. With clear embarrassment, Margot lifted the sleeve of her dress and flexed an impressive bicep. After she appeared satisfied, Helen nodded for Margot to drop her sleeve and turned to the next woman.

“And here we have Mrs. Deborah Perry. Wine taster and bible group leader extraordinaire!”

Once again, I made a kind face and shook the woman’s hand.

“Lastly, we have the newest member of my team—the beautiful and talented Ms. Olivia Gifford.”

I repeated the ritual once more, maintaining my play enthusiasm.

“Isn’t he so polite—and handsome? Plus, I hear he’s got a good job in marketing!”

The women laughed and nodded.

“A regular Mister Darcy!” Olivia snickered.

“Well, we’ll leave you alone to chat up the rest of the party while we prepare the main event!” Like a mother goose, Helen led her gang upstairs in a neat line.

Still confused to what the main event could have been, I sipped at my drink and ate a bit of the charcuterie. Looking around, I couldn’t spot anyone I recognized—save for one. In the corner near the bar I could see

Roy standing next to a taller woman in a long black dress. I must have made the mistake of glancing for too long, as we locked eyes for a second. Not wanting to seem rude, I walked over towards him.

“Nice to see you again, Ian.” Ever tired of the rituals of politeness, I nonetheless shook his hand and smiled.

“Good to see you, as well.” Roy turned to the woman next to him.

“This is my wife, Dianne.”

She shot me an unexpected grimace, to which I responded with an awkward nod. I turned back to Roy and made small bits of uncomfortable small talk. Not long into the chit-chat, Diane audibly cleared her throat.

“I think it’s time we get going upstairs, Roy.”

Roy and I made polite nods farewell before I sat down to finish my food. As I was making myself another drink, Kent Mayhew descended the stairs, stopping on the fifth-to-last step. He waved in a wide arc before putting his thumb and index finger into the edge of his mouth. A shrill whistle rang out, silencing the room.

“Okay folks, I think Helen and her girls are ready for everyone!”

Once I'd dropped my empty plate into an ornate brass trashcan, I filed into growing congregation of ascending partygoers. My curiosity was thoroughly ready to be sated as I climbed the stairs towards the living room. Forty-or-so cushioned folding chairs were arranged in symmetrical rows facing the back wall which was itself adorned with a glass-covered gas fireplace and a gigantic rectangular window. Mrs. Mayhew and her clique sat in what I later realized were monogrammed folding chairs. Four ornate blown-glass wine glasses sat filled on the clothed table set out before them.

Helen tapped a small translucent stirring rod against her glass.

*Tinggggg*

“Alright everyone, I'd like to thank you all for coming tonight! Can I get a big round of applause for Sweetwater's newest small business owner, Miss Olivia Gifford!” A deafening ovation erupted into the room, growing to a near deafening tone.

*Huh?*

Helen tapped the glass again. “Now, let’s get down to business, shall we?” Her three subordinated pulled tote bags from under the table and began to pull from them various brightly-colored packages and cylinders. “You all are going to love this. First up, we have this wonderful little supplement; our best-selling Super Berry Energy Burner! Do you ever find it hard to get out of bed in the morning? Got a case of the Mondays every day at work? Kids keeping you up all night? Ever have a hard time,” she shifted her eyes in an effort to look cheeky, “performing? Well, just two of these supplements a day, you can watch your problems melt away!” She held up a little white bottle. “These supplements are packed full of exotic fruits and spices from places like Africa, China, Japan, and Madagascar! It’s an ancient recipe passed down by word of mouth for generations—now available at your fingertips!”

*Well, this is unexpected.*

Helen motioned her head towards Deborah who began a spiel about some sort of collagen supplement. The following hour saw Helen, Deborah,

and Margot making sales pitches for all sorts of herbal remedies for everything from menopausal cramps to cataracts. Near the end of the presentations, Olivia began passing out stacks of paper to each of the rows. When the stack finally came around to me, I was able to see that the papers were, in fact, order forms.

“There will be a drop-box for order forms near the doors when you leave!” I looked up from paper. “And, of course, if you decide you want to take the next step in becoming a small business owner like any of my girls here, just give me a call at the phone number listed on the forms my lovely assistant Olivia just passed out! We’re always looking for new recruits to take on the challenge of a lifetime!”

Once the presentation had finished up, we were left to wander around the other floors of the house. I took another look at the order sheet, seeing if anything was reasonably priced; it seemed rude to be invited and not buy anything. I ended up picking the second cheapest thing on the menu—a fifteen dollar box of “Super Tea” teabags that supposedly helped with sleeping, exercising, and stomach pains. Taking it upon myself to drop off the form before I forgot, I headed over to the drop box. As the paper

slipped into the slot, a chilly wind snuck under the door, bringing my attention in the direction of its source. It was a good a time as any to get some fresh air.

Stepping back outside, I began to put my coat back on.

“Oh, hey.”

I turned toward the source of the voice only to be met with the sight of a tall woman leaning on a short Japanese maple. She clicked closed what sounded like a lighter and stepped into the yellowing light of the chandelier. It was Olivia Gifford, hand lowering a cigarette from her face.

“Don’t tell Margot I’m out here smoking; she’ll throw a fit.”

I laughed, and not out of politeness this time. “Secret’s safe with me.”

“Good.” She smirked. “Did you enjoy the presentation?”

A cold gust of wind blew between us.

“It was certainly something.”

“You can just say it was stupid. I’d be inclined to agree with you.” She replied, inhaling from the cigarette once again.

“I mean, I don’t intend this as rude, but doesn’t this all seem kind of fishy?”

Olivia snickered. “It’s a pyramid scheme—I would never dream of actually putting any of that garbage in my body. I’m only doing it because my mom bought in and then forced me to take up her supplies when she realized she couldn’t. Once this supply is out, I’m going to try to get out quietly and politely.”

I was really regretting offering up those fifteen dollars now. “Jeez. Helen and the other two must really be a vindictive bunch, huh?”

She furrowed her brow. “I’m not sure I’d say that. They’re not bad people; they’ve just gotten caught up in all the glamour and competition of it all.”

“The business or...?”

“Well, the business, but also somewhat just Sweetwater as a whole. Status is pretty important to some of the people here.” She bent down to snuff out her cigarette before placing the dead stub into her jacket. Her hands rifled through her coat’s internal pockets, returning once they had procured a small black package. “Gum?” She offered.

“Thanks.” I took a piece and began to chew at the spearmint stick.

“I should probably get back inside to help them clean up the rest of their things. It was good meeting you, though.”

“Likewise.” I remarked, her back turning to me. Within a few moments, I was alone once more.

Breathing in the chilly evening, my gaze began to take in the atmosphere around me. The enormous chandelier lit everything in a bright off-white glow, casting stark shadows. The surrounding yard was a bustling collection of neatly-groomed hedges and immaculate fields of grass. A “Keep off Grass” sign tied it all together neatly. It was certainly different from anywhere I’d lived recently, but it was something of a call back to the neighborhood of my youth.

Having satisfied my desire for fresh air, I stepped back into the house to find that the party had escaped the quarantine of the basement and spread itself throughout the residence. After grabbing another scotch—this one a double—I waltzed up the stairs and surveyed the scene. Sweetwaterites of all shapes and sizes had spread out among the plethora of leather couches and sofas in the upstairs lounge space; a circle of men stood in a cloud of smoke illuminated by the yellow lights of the back deck. One of these men—whom I quickly recognized as my neighbor Roy—ushered me over with a labored arm movement.

“Ian.” He spoke, removing a lit cigar from his teeth. “Wanted to apologize for my wife earlier. We lost our son recently and she’s been hard to deal with. You know how women are.”

Some of the other men at the deck seemed visibly uncomfortable from his comment but said nothing. Not wanting to seem rude, I nodded. “Yeah, no problem. I understand.”

Roy turned to the rest of the polo-clad men. “This is Ian Fisher, as you all probably know. He’s new in town. Treat him nice!” He laughed.

Sitting down around the gas heater pit, I snagged one of the cigars offered by a moustache-clad man with a fine looking humidor.

“Pleased to finally meet you, Ian.” He tasted the air like a man faking his way through sommelier school. “I’ve heard quite a bit about you. Avery seems to be a big fan.” He reached into his coat and produced a fine looking object of black leather and engraved chrome. With a flick of a small switch, a blue flame crawled out of the neck of the device—what I now reasoned was an ornate cigar torch. “Here.” He brought the tip of the flame to my cigar. The tip of the aged, brown paper slowly gave way to a dim orange glow. A spicy, earthy scent swirled around inside my skull.

“Thanks.” I extended my free right hand towards the man.

He placed the lighter back into the coat on his seat before shaking my hand with an overly-tight grip.

“Pleased to meet you. I hope you’ll find Sweetwater a nice place to live. Not all of us are as poorly behaved as Roy.”

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to laugh at his comment, but I followed the awkward chuckle elicited by the rest of the men. Roy weathered face turned redder than the cherry of his dwindling cigar.

The men shot the shit for a while, going back and forth over frivolous topics I feigned interest in—cigar etiquette, local hot tub cleaning services, home theater systems and the like. To my liquor-dimmed mind, it sounded less like an interesting conversation and more like competition of who could feign the most technical knowledge. Still, these men were the bedrock of the city—I was sure they were knowledgeable about in their respective professional fields.

As the evening progressed, the conversation began to wind down. Blessedly, each speaker had been too interested in his own input to ever focus on interrogating me. While the others were filing back inside, Avery's father pulled me aside. Extending a fresh longneck towards me, the man smiled.

I accepted the bottle and clutched it tightly. "Thanks. Appreciate it."

“My pleasure.” He sipped at his own beer, the aroma of liquor wafting towards me as he opened his mouth to drink. “Here, take a seat. Thought take this opportunity to get to know one another.”

“Of course.” I smiled.

“So, I hear you’re in the marketing business.”

“You’ve heard correctly. I specialize in newspaper ads—physically printed works rather than digital.”

A smile formed under his thin facial hair. “A man of classical tastes, I see. I can appreciate that.” He laughed.

I laughed and nodded slightly, not really knowing how to respond.

“I’m just messing with you, kid. You seem competent. I like that.”

“Thank you. I try to be as competent as possible.”

*When did I walk into a job interview?*

“So, what’s your career plan long-term?”

“Ideally, I’d like to build up my resume and portfolio until I can land a permanent job with a larger company. Consulting is nice, but I’d prefer the stability of a salaried position.”

“Smart man.” He lifted his beer to me as though toasting my decision. “There’s nothing like a sure thing--that’s what I’ve been trying to tell Avery. He thinks he’s too good for the restaurant business.”

“Ah, yeah.” An argument was the last thing I wanted but I didn’t want to seem too enthusiastic to belittle my new friend.

“He seems to really like you, though; maybe you can talk some sense into him.”

*At least he seems to like me.*

“Yeah, I think I could.” I laughed, still unsure if he was being serious.

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Another hour and several scotches later, I was hobbling back through the frigid autumn night.

Even while sober, my sense of direction had never been adequate. True to form, I soon found myself in an unfamiliar corner of the neighborhood. Trying to reorient myself, I looked for familiar landmarks, but couldn't differentiate the similarly patterned houses that lined the cul-de-sac. I stretched my legs out on the grass and took a moment to breathe.

The stars glittered against the darkened sky above me as a few finely manicured blades of grass tickled the back of my neck. On turning my head, I realized had never seen this part of the neighborhood. It was much sparser and none of the driveways had cars in them. The whole area gave off a hauntingly lonely aura.

*If only I'd brought my sketch pad.*

The swift pitter-patter of sneakers on concrete broke the silence of the night. I sat up and turned my gaze towards the source of the noise.

Through the dim light of the few streetlights and the glimmering stars, I could make out a short-statured figure sprinting headlong in the direction I'd come from.

“Come back here!” a voice bellowed.

At this, I scrambled on my hands and knees towards a nearby hedge. As I slid into the obscuring bush, another two figures emerged from nearby yards, flanking the runner.

“Stand down! Right now!”

The rightmost chaser drew some kind of hand-held weapon from their belt and paused to take aim.

“Stand the fuck down! Right now, motherfucker!”

A loud click echoed through the dark, followed by the sound of bone on concrete. The hunted flailed its right hand, as though surreptitiously tossing something aside. The hunters approached their downed prey, brandishing long flashlights.

“We got the scumbag,” he spoke into a chest-mounted radio, “gonna need someone to take ‘em back home.”

I wriggled through the bushes, doing my best to muffle the rustling of the leaves. Murmurs of pain echoed into the wind as one of the figures kicked the prone captive in the ribs.

“You like that, you piece of shit?! You want some more?”

The victim made no attempt to respond.

“You wanna tell us how you and your buddy got out, you sick fuck?”

The captor gargled up a thick well of saliva, spitting it in the face of his prey. “You comin’ back to fuck with my flock? I am the watchdog, motherfucker!” Whoops of brutal delight erupted from the two standing figures.

I remained in the bush, cold sweat dripping down my face. I figured they were just police officers chasing a criminal, but I still didn’t want to get involved.

Several minutes later, a black SUV pulled onto the street, its headlights turned off. One of the men flagged down the vehicle, waving to someone obscured by the tinted windows. As they hoisted the criminal’s

form into the car, it was clear their target was unconscious. The two officers then piled into the SUV and sped away into the night.

Reeling from the shock of the events I'd witnessed and still slightly drunk, I scanned the area for any lingering figures. Seeing the coast was clear, I hobbled out of the brush and back onto the sidewalk. On the ground there, I spotted a small scrap of paper, which I tucked into my jacket before clearing the street.

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It took me an embarrassing number of tries, but I eventually found my way back to the house. I passed out on the couch after taking off my outerwear.

I woke the next afternoon to the taste of my stale breath and the stench of dried sweat. Snaps of pain ran along my body as I peeled my skin from the sun-warmed faux leather.

*Blegh*

After brushing my teeth, I made a cup of coffee with my Italian stovetop kettle. Simple but still full-bodied. As I took in the warm aroma, I wanted to pretend the previous night had been some horrible mirage, but even I wasn't self-deluded enough for that.

The paper from the night before uncrumpled in my hands as I removed it from my jacket's breast pocket. I wanted to feel hesitant about reading the note, but I couldn't seem to muster up the fear. I was downright excited.

"The drugs started to make me sick and i did something stupid and they found me and moved me to the factory and kept me there

They sometimes leave one of the laundry buildings open at night so Im going to try running away tonight and if they findme im sorry please tell everyone its not their fault and please get us help if you find this cause theyre going to kill me i just know it

I love you mom

I love you dad

I love you mom

I love you dad

Tell katy im sorry

im sorry

Im sorry

Im sorry

I love you katy im so sorry i have to leave you please try not to cry and have a good life without me please im sorry.”

(Several sets of numbers and strange symbols appeared at the bottom of the note.)

The ink smeared missive lazed in my hand, taunting me. It laughed at my curiosity. It mocked my thirst for intrigue. *Poor, sad suburbanite. Your life is so boring, isn't it?*

My moment of concern was interrupted by a knocking at my front door. I swept my hair into a cleaner composition and stuffed the note into my pocket.

“Good afternoon, Mister Guest!” A man in a mustard blazer greeted me from the doorstep. “My name is Vince Bailey. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” We shook hands under the deceptively cold blue sky. “I’m from the company in charge of your aunt’s estate. I have some things to discuss with you. May I come in?”

“Uh,” I stuttered, “sure. I’m not all put together at the moment, though.”

He smiled too widely. “That’s fine! It will be brief!”

We sat on opposing couches, my hands cradling the remainder of my coffee.

“As you can probably tell, Sweetwater is a little *old fashioned*.” I laughed politely, unsure of the conversation’s trajectory. “We have a lot of kooky little traditions that we like to uphold, and your aunt was one of the people who really dedicated her life to keeping these traditions alive. As

you are the caretaker of her estate, we were wondering if you would be willing to take up some of her duties.”

My brow furrowed. “Me? Shouldn’t someone from her committee—or whatever kind of structure they use to run that kind of thing?

“I’m afraid it’s sort of traditional that a family member be the one to carry on their loved ones’ duties.” He looked me up and down. “You do know that your aunt—and you—came from one of the original Sweetwater families. You should be proud to carry on their tradition, even if you don’t share their last name!”

I dug for an excuse, gently swirling the dark liquid in my cup. “Well, my job keeps me pretty busy. Will it require a lot of work on my part?”

“Oh, heavens no! Of course not. Just little things and occasional attendance to our little festivals.”

*That doesn’t sound all that bad, if it keeps these weirdos off my back.*

“Uh, sure, then. I’d be happy to help.”

Vince jumped to his feet. “Wonderful. We will keep you posted via mail and telephone! Enjoy the rest of your day!”

His abrupt exit was jarring, but I ultimately chalked it up to Sweetwater strangeness—a rationale I was jumping to more and more.

I returned to the note, where my mind remained fixed for the rest of the afternoon.

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It was six forty-five when I was finally shaken from my catatonic state of rereading. My phone buzzed anxiously on the faux black leather of the couch.

From: Avery Wilson

Hey! I have tonight off if you'd like to hang out :D

To: Avery Wilson

I'd love to! When/where?

From: Avery Wilson

Awesome! I'll be home around 7 if u wanna come by! I live at my dad's house still tho so just come through the basement door :P It's 12981 Gatewater Ln!

To: Avery Wilson

Sounds great! See you then

I arrived at Avery's basement door showered and at least half put-together. My hand trembled slightly, for some reason, as it rose to knock on the glass door of the basement.

"Welcome to my humble little basement!" Avery laughed as he ushered me inside.

Avery's room reflected the more esoteric elements of his personality. Thin wooden furniture and lush, artificial foliage filled the space, with completed jigsaw puzzles of rustic scenes lining the walls. As a final touch, the entire room was lit by the glow of a dozen-or-so handmade candles in receptacles of all sorts. Vaguely floral scents lingered in the air.

I slipped my jacket onto a brass hook by the door. "I have to say, I wasn't expecting...*this!*"

"Sorry if it's all a bit much! This is just my happy place away from the diner."

I offered a friendly grin, realizing my wording might have given the wrong impression. "Oh, no! I like it! I just wasn't expecting it is all."

"Well, we *have* only hung out a couple times—and only ever at the diner." He smirked, sipping from a dark brown bottle on his bamboo nightstand. "And I try not to fuck around too much there—you best believe that place is covered in security cams."

I struggled for a response.

“Want one?” Avery spoke, standing up from the small fridge next to his desk.

“Uh, sure. I could always use a drink.” The rough edges of the bottle cap dug into the flesh of my palm as I worked to free it from the lip of the bottle. Soon after, a rush of liquid trickled down the bottle’s neck into my mouth. I coughed, surprised by the sweet and spicy taste.

“Right, should’ve mentioned: it’s root beer.”

I tried to stick the landing, diverting Avery’s attention from my half sip-cough.

"Anyway," my companion suppressed a smirk, "how's Sweetwater been treating ya'?"

“Pretty alright, I guess.” I took another sip from the glass bottle, making sure to display that I did, in fact, know how to drink a soda without choking to death. “I guess I also met your dad last night.”

Avery rolled his eyes. “Oh god. I’m so sorry about that.”

“I mean, he wasn’t that bad.”

“Let me guess, he tried to butter you up and,” He put on a face of feigned compassion, placing his hands over his heart, “*tried to get you to be the one to get through to poor, troubled Avery!*”

I couldn't help but laugh at Avery's syrupy, put-on voice. “I...fuck, I think that's actually exactly what happened.”

“Yeah, that's what he always does when he finds out I've made a friend.” He glanced over at the door. “Not that I've made a ton, but still.”

“So, uh, does that mean he likes me?”

“My dad doesn't like anyone who hangs around with me, to be honest.”

I winced a little bit. It stung a touch, even though I didn't really know Avery's father.

“Not that it's anything personal against you! He just doesn't like me 'slacking' or whatever.”

My visage turned awkward, perhaps apologetic. “Uh, alright...if you say so.”

“Sorry! I didn’t mean that in a shitty way. Sorry. I’m just venting.” He took a long pull from his bottle. “Anyway, uh, has anything else interesting happened lately?”

His question gave me pause.

*Did he know about what I’d seen?*

*No, that’s paranoid nonsense.*

“I guess this guy named Vince showed up at my door today asking if I’d help out with a parade or something.”

“A parade or something?”

“Yeah, like a festival, I think.”

“Oh,” Avery exclaimed, “it’s probably the Festival of Shrouds”

“The what now?”

Avery giggled at my surprise. “Yeah, it’s this stupid thing the town does every year...for some reason. Everyone gets dressed up and plays

high society for a night. It's basically another prom for people who peaked in high school."

"Have you been?"

"Not in a long time. I went once when I was sixteen—the youngest age they let you attend—and it sucked. Arm gloves are so fucking tacky."

"Oh my god, arm gloves?" I laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Arm gloves, dude. Fucking arm gloves." He tilted his drink back vertically, shaking out the last few drops of amber liquid.

I turned my attention to his wall. "So, puzzles? That's cool!"

"Yeah! I know it's kinda dorky but they're like, soothing. You know, seeing all the pieces come together or whatever."

I ran a finger over the surface for a second before realizing it might've been impolite. "What are all of these images of?"

"They're different places around town. Well, I can't say I know they're all supposed to be places in town, but that's my guess."

“What do you mean? You didn’t buy them?”

He shook his head. “My mom would give one to me for Christmas every year when I was really little—I think she made them out of photos she took herself.”

“Have you asked her?”

“She passed before I ever got a chance to really ask her about them.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine. You didn’t know.” Avery stretched his body out upon a long wicker lounging chair and beckoned me over towards the its twin. “And my dad’s touchy as hell about anything related to her, so I’m not going to ask him, either.”

“That’s...understandable.” I stretched my own body out upon the deceptively comfortable chair, my joints popping. “Maybe you could make a fun adventure out of it! You know, trying to find all of the places in them!”

“I could, yeah. It’s just hard cause I only have so many hours away from the diner, and I’d like to spend them relaxing.”

I was a little disappointed that he wasn't more curious, but I guessed it made sense that he'd be worn down given the circumstances; I imagined working a shitty job like that would do it.

"Hey, uh, Ian, did you have anything in mind for tonight?"

"Not really! I'm down for whatever, though!"

"Sweet! Would it be cool if my other friend joined us?"

"Yeah, of course! More the merrier and whatnot."

Avery flipped through his phone, I assume firing off an 'good to go' text to whomever might be joining us.

"We could, like, drive around or something. If you wanted to see more of Sweetwater, that is."

"Yeah! I'd like that."

"Sweet. That's like, all there is to do around here, anyway." The statement elicited a dry chuckle. I couldn't really blame him for the cynicism. Maybe I just didn't want to.

We lounged around for a little while, just catching up on the new music and books we'd been into. It was nice to have a friend again; I hadn't had any friends outside of the internet for quite a while.

Avery soon got up and undid the lock on the door, waving to someone just outside of my view. As the door opened and the figure made her way inside, I was struck by amused recognition.

"Oh, hey! Olivia!"

She turned to me. "Ian! Good to see you again. I can't believe you're friends with this dweeb too!"

I loaded a sarcastic quip but stopped myself halfway, not yet feeling fully familiar enough with my new friends to partake in playful teasing.

"So, Olivia tells me you two have met each other before?"

"Yeah! It was actually last night at the...block party? I guess that's what I would call it."

“Oh! You got to see ‘ol Olive hock her snake oil!” He turned to her with devilish glee. “Olive! Olive! I need an essential oil that makes customers not act like assholes to me!”

Olive smiled and sipped from the steaming silicone and metal thermos in her hands. “I’m afraid all the essential oils in all the wine moms’ purses in all the suburbs in the world couldn’t make that happen.”

After their shared laughter subsided, Avery stood from his chair. “So, you all want to go for a drive or something?”

“Yeah, I guess. You in, Ian?”

“Sure! Who’s driving?”

Olivia shot back. “I can. You guys just have to promise not to flip a shit about all the junk in my car.”

As promised, Olivia’s SUV was filled to the brim with empty plastic bottles, cast-aside papers, and power bar wrappers. Avery looked a touch displeased with the clutter.

“Ah, gross dude! Did y—”

“Ah, ah, ah. What did I say about complaining?”

Avery threw on a parody of a scowl. “Ugh. Fiiiiiiiiineeeee. But I’m gonna glare at you the whole time!” The two broke into uproarious laughter at his comment.

At that moment, I think I might have actually been jealous. Of who or what, I couldn’t yet pinpoint. I figured I envied the close bond Avery and Olivia shared—and the near telepathic communication between them. They seemed comfortable with each other in a way I didn’t think I’d ever been comfortable with anyone.

“So, Avery, how did you and Ian get to know each other?”

“Oh, uhh,” He grabbed the back of his neck, rubbing his hand along the nape, “I guess he just came into the diner a couple times and we sorta just hit it off.”

I breathed in and mustered all the bravery I could. “Uh, hit it off? I believe you slid into my booth!” My nervousness broke as my companions giggled.

“Ooh Avery! You’re not supposed to fraternize with customers!”

Avery mimed a punch to my arm. “Oh piss off! You were totally trying to give off dark and mysterious vibes, mister ‘mysterious stranger showing up in the dead of night’! Pulling out a goddamn art pad didn’t help, either!”

*Phew. Thank god.*

“Oh? You’re an artist, are you?” Our driver inquired.

“Eh, not really. I just like to sketch stuff.”

We drove around the quiet neighborhoods for a long while, going back and forth over mostly benign topics as Olivia’s hokey acoustic indie albums played in the background.

The town at night was almost serene. Dim lights came from oversized houses, lighting up the manicured lawns and sidewalks. Small trees lined the edges of the road as we drove further through Sweetwater. Larger trees replaced them upon reaching the edge of a valley. The beauty of it all made me almost forget about what I’d seen the previous night.

“Alright, you two,” Olivia looked over her shoulder to us, “time to show you the best place in Sweetwater!”

We meandered through the trees and through a narrow, winding road. Oaks, pines, and maples beckoned us further down the path, further away from the lights of the suburbs behind us.

“Alright, almost there”

We maneuvered down the road until we met the lip of a steep incline.

“Here we are!”

Olivia cheerfully ushered us out of the car and into the dead grass. Before us, at the bottom of the valley, sat a mighty forest—thick and dark. It was illuminated now only by the light of the moon, untainted by man-made glimmers.

Olivia waltzed over to a comfortable looking patch near the edge and patted the space next to her, ushering us over. When we were comfortably seated beside her, our friend rummaged around inside her in jacket. After a

few moments, she produced a glass bottle with photorealistic strawberries embossed upon its wide belly.

“Ah, gross!” Avery piped up.

“Look, you know my uncle watches his booze cabinet like a fucking hawk. This is the best I could do!”

“Ergh. Fine.” He complained, snatching the outstretched bottle. After downing a hearty pull, he tilted the bottle towards me. “Hm?”

“Oh, no, thanks. I, uh, went a little bit too hard last night and I’m still kinda feeling it.”

“Your loss.” Avery giggled, his breath a warm, sickly sweet vodka miasma.

Olivia took a swig and turned to me. “Last night was pretty rough, huh? Had to drink to forget my marketing pitch?”

“That’s exactly it!” I laughed. “But for real, I guess I just got carried away.”

“Speaking of last night, I saw you talking to my uncle Roy. What’s up with that?”

“Oh, Roy? We’re neighbors. I don’t really know him all that well.”

Olivia swigged once more before handing off the bottle. “No shit? I guess that makes us neighbors.”

“Oh, really? Do you live next to him?”

“Nope; live with him. Parents kicked the bucket when I was a kid.”

Avery paused mid sip, clear liquor dripping down his chin. “Hey, don’t you think that’s maybe a little morbid?”

Olivia was already in the middle of lighting a cigarette. “It’s my tragic backstory and I’ll talk about it however I want.” She put the lighter away, a warm ember forming. “Sorry, that was rude. To answer your question, Ian, I live with my aunt and uncle.” She released a strange-smelling puff of smoke from her lips.

I sniffed at the air, furrowing my eyebrows at the mysterious herbal scent.

“Cloves.” Avery quipped. “She can’t just smoke *any* cancer rods. She has to be *special*.”

“Fuck you, man!” She playfully tapped Avery on the top of his head. “I’ll smoke whatever I goddamn want!”

Avery placed the back of his right wrist on his forehead and panned his left across the skyline, as though soliloquizing to an imaginary audience. “*Olivia Gifford: Portrait of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl*.”

“Oh, eat shit!”

The three of us leaned on each other, laughing hysterically.

“But, yeah, Roy’s a real tightass.”

The idea of giving condolences for her deceased cousin crossed my mind, but I figured it better not to pry.

“Anyway,” Olivia turned to face the verdant valley, “you know, they say some horrible things stalk these woods.”

“Oh, cut that out!” Avery interjected.

“Aww, is poor Avery afraid?”

“Piss off! You know I don’t believe in that kinda thing.”

I spoke up. “Horrible things?”

“Yeah.” Olivia grinned, releasing another cloud of clove-scented smoke. “All sorts of rumors. Cannibals. The risen dead. Demons. All sorts of sightings, too.”

“Come on, Olivia!”

“Just let me finish!” She snipped. “But, yeah, there were tons of sightings in the 80’s. Apparently the town was a hotspot for ghost hunters and shit for a while. They never found anything definitive, though.”

“Huh. Weird. Do people ever try to go in there anymore?”

She shook her head. “It’s a nature preserve now; you have to have special permission to be there. I think there’s a rare fungus or something like that in there.”

“Anyway, Olivia, Ian here apparently has some kind of in to the Shrouded Entourage.”

“No shit? How’d you manage that?”

“Some guy just kinda came to my door and asked me if I’d take my late aunt’s place in their organization.”

“Sounds about right. They care about the town’s bloodlines and shit.”

“Uh,” I chimed in, “is it not weird to anyone that this town has a secret order called the ‘Shrouded Society’?!”

“Yeah,” Olivia returned, “but it’s sort of a holdover from the sixties. I think it was some kind of segregation thing that just ended up just becoming a silly dress-up party.”

“Have you been to the ball?”

“Unfortunately.” she groaned. “Roy’s enormous ego forces me to participate every year. He’s one of the council members or whatever.”

“Council members?”

“Yeah, they’re like special positions handed down through family. You get to help them with their stupid little ceremonies and do the secret judging process for the Empress.”

“Uh...what?” I shot her a dumbfounded glare.

“Yeah, it’s pretty fucking stupid. The panelists basically vote on who gets to be prom queen. It’s usually just based on who’s pissed off the council members the least throughout the year.”

“You think that’s what they’re gonna have me do?”

“That’s what it sounds like.” She grinned. “Lucky you!”

“Alright.” Avery declared from between sips of the vertically tilted bottle. “I’ve had enough spooky forest for one night.”

Olivia took the nearly empty bottle and polished off the last few gulps. “Alright, but I’m too fucked to drive.” She tossed me her keys. “That’s on you, man.”

The rest of the evening played out as though we’d all known each other for years. We hung around Avery’s house bullshitting about our lives

and venting frustrations. I went to bed that night more joyful than I'd been in as long as I could remember.

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It was several days later that I was summoned to my first festival council meeting. I followed the postcard's directions to an unassuming building on the outskirts of town. The inside contained a similarly unassuming lodge, decked out in plaques with the names of people and events significant to the town. The signs inside pointed me to a spacious meeting room filled with people waiting in folding chairs. I took a seat close to the corner of the room and waited for events to unfold.

"Attention!" an woman spoke into the microphone at the stage in the rear of the room. "Thank you all for being so willing to help with the fiftieth annual Festival of Shrouds! We are so very excited to have you here! And

now, to get down to business, here's this year's master of ceremonies:

Thomas Cherrygold!"

Cherrygold was a tall man with impressively bad botox which prevented him from fully emoting.

"Gooooood morning everyone!"

The combination of his jubilation and uncanny half-smile was jarring, to say the least.

"I am excited to have you all on board for the fiftieth anniversary of our humble little celebration! Before we get started, though, I want to give a warm welcome to the two new members of our council: my son, Grayson Cherrygold and our late sister Edith's nephew Ian Guest! Let's give them both a big round of applause!"

Fleshy clapping sounds filled the room as I did my best to diffuse the awkwardness that always accompanies being stared at by a group of strangers. I shifted my gaze over to Grayson. He was the spitting image of

his father, but with an air of smugness rather than botox holding his face together.

“Now, this year’s Festival is going to be our biggest ever! So, we’re going to have to put in even more work than usual to make sure everything is ready on time!”

Cherrygold rambled in his upbeat manner for a little while longer before releasing us for a short break. I made my way to the complimentary coffee and donuts, excitedly wrapping my hands around the hot styrofoam of a coffee cup to warm my fingers. Sipping at the coffee, I stepped out into the brisk morning to check my text messages.

“Hey.” The younger Cherrygold came through the door I’d gone through.

“Oh, hi, Grayson.” I returned, trying to swallow the remainder of a bite of donut.

“Look, just cause you’re on this council doesn’t mean you belong here.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve been working my entire life for this. You’re only here because your degenerate aunt got blind drunk and fell down the stairs.”

I stared back, not knowing what to say.

“I’ll play nice in front of the council because I have to, but just know that, if you were smart, you’d leave and take your bloodline with you. You don’t understand what you’re getting yourself into.”

I sipped at my coffee again as Grayson stepped back inside, his face and stride recalculated into those of the upstanding young man I’d seen previously.

The remainder of the meeting was mostly clerical work. Council members were divided into sub-committees, each one led by one of the “elders”—a group of octogenarians in various levels of cognitive decay. I hoped they would be a little more pleasant than Grayson when I did finally get to meet them.

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The following week passed without much event; I was mostly cooped up in the house working on ads for some mid-winter sale my uncle was running.

I did, however gain knowledge of one very helpful

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Thomas Cherrygold took the darkened stage in a drab-orange vest with two clashing patterns of plaid, his face even more restrained by fillers than it had been previously.

“It is with the utmost pride that I introduce the Shrouded Entourage! First, let us welcome the Sisters of Love and Clarity.”

At once, two feminine forms emerged from the darkened space behind the door, their bodies obscured by long, floral patterned cloaks. One wore a comedy mask, the other that of tragedy. They curtsied coyly before taking their places among the velvet-upholstered chairs onstage.

Immediately following them were two large, stone-faced men. I recognized one as the owner of the west-side jet ski dealership and his aptly named son and business partner “Cash”. They delivered a violet fan to each of the Sisters and took their leave.

“Now, please give a special welcome to the Hermited Cleric!”

Continued applause ushered in a man in a deep green hooded coat with a crook’d staff. He stepped carefully around the stage to his seat, making sure to avoid looking at anyone. A woman—one of the homeowners’ association goons who I’d been stalked by previously—arrived on stage shortly after, delivering the Cleric a steel lantern glowing brightly with an electric candle.

I snuck a look down into my lap at my cell phone.

*One New Message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*In the spare room. Found the safe. It doesn’t seem like it has a limit on attempts, but I’m going to need a lot of time.*

I looked over at Olivia, who seemed to be anticipating it. We nodded at each other and returned our focus to the Festival.

“Here he comes now, the Prince of Swords!”

A masked figure decked out in capes and chains waltzed towards the set of chairs, his chest flared outwards. He posed and postured at the audience, his gaze clearly aimed at the women in the room as he took his position. A person whose face I could not see from my seat knelt before the Prince, offering him a large, silver sword. Two empty chairs—the largest and most ornate of the six—still remained empty.

“Next, I present to you the Hang-ed Fool!”

A tall man in a beret took the spotlight, the end of a noose thrown around his neck. He stalked the edge of the stage, eyeing the sitting figures as the end of the hemp rope dangled limply towards the floor. His neck swung back and forth like the marionette of an amateur puppeteer. The four sitting members of the entourage placed a hand next to their eyes, like a makeshift blinder, turning their heads away from the Fool.

“Do not acknowledge him!”

The Fool sneered at the posse, dropping one foot before the other onto the ground and towards the center aisle of the hall. He tiptoed through the gap in the audience, studying them carefully, then climbed a small ladder into a strange wooden chair that vaguely resembled a lifeguard’s post.

A vibration crawled across my leg.

*One New Message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*Still trying. No luck yet.*

“Finally, the Emperor of Shrouds makes his grand appearance!”

Warm purple light spilled across the stage as a large, completely robed man stepped from the shadows. His entire body was covered in white fabric of different sorts; not a single hint of skin peeked through. No servant arrived to offer him any sort of object. He took his seat in one of the ornate chairs and crossed his arms.

“Now, lend us your hearts and breath, dear friends. It is time once again to find who amongst us harbors the Empress of Shrouds within herself.”

Olivia’s words from the other night echoed in my head: “The ones they pick never come back the same...”

Four men clad in all black walked to the edge of each audience row, each bearing a large gold decanter. One by one, the men offered the audience members a sip from the posh vessel.

*Brzzzzzt*

*One new message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*Got it! It was his own birthday.*

*Lotta weird shit in here. I’m gonna start picking through it.*

Soon, the enrobed man in my row came before me, extending the pitcher outward. I contemplated faking a sip, but decided I might be caught. I brought my lips to the spout, where the metal taste soon slipped beneath

a wave of sickly-sweet liquid. My face did its best to belie my disgust at the horrid rotting fruit flavor.

I looked over at Olivia, who had masterfully maintained her composure in the face of the liquid.

After everyone had drunk from the vessels, the men departed from the room and Cherrygold spoke up once again.

“The entourage will now commune with the ancient currents of Sweet Water.”

The members of the Shrouded Entourage knelt their heads in prayer. After a couple minutes of silent contemplation, they all returned to their former postures and looked towards Cherrygold. He nodded in response.

“It seems as though they have found the Empress!”

He fumbled with an envelope.

*Brzzzzzt*

*One new message from Avery Wilson to Olivia Gifford and You:*

*THEY KNOW WHAT OLIVIA SAW. GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE  
NOW.*

“Miss Olivia Gifford, you are this year’s Miss Sweetwater: the  
Empress of Shrouds!”

I looked over to Olivia, whose face had been hollowed out by what I  
could only call pure terror.

Two burly men lifted Olivia from her seat and carried her to the stage.  
She did not fight back. Soon, she was seated next to the Emperor, strands  
of fabric from his flowing robe spilling over onto her chair.

“We present you with the gift of our gratitude, my lady.”

Cherrygold retrieved a large white headdress from a box at his feet.

Olivia’s face had dropped the fear from before, becoming cold and  
expressionless. Still, some hint of her quick mind showed from behind her  
eyes.

Cherrygold approached the Emperor, handing off the crown. In turn,  
the Emperor stood and began to hold out the headwear for coronation.

In a fraction of a second, the Emperor looked down at the small flames beginning to run up his robe. At their origin point flashed Olivia's cigarette lighter, chrome shining in the spotlight.

The following moments saw the Entourage all trying to put out the flames, to no avail. The fire began to envelop the Emperor and spread to the carpeted stage. In the midst of the confusion, Olivia darted through the door at the rear of the room.

I eyed the crowded fire exits of the now-smoky room before swallowing my trepidation and bolting towards the door behind which Olivia had disappeared.

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From: Avery Wilson

“I returned to my father’s office during my shift. You were right—they’ve been monitoring you. They’ve bugged your house, your phone, your computer. They know you’re onto them and they’re planning on paying you a visit today. I suspect they plan to take you in.

As you’ve also certainly figured out by now, the other escapees are encamped in the forest. You need to make your way to the forest if you want any shot at living. Go on foot and take the way through the valley. Stay as far away from Inverness as possible—they’re watching it like hawks. I’m currently making preparations to clear out and set fire to the diner to try to throw them off your trail. Even if my diversion works, though, some of the elders may still be posted around the edges of town, so be extremely cautious.

I can’t promise I’ll make it to the woods with you, but that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make. Please consider this my atonement for everything my family has done.

Just in case I don't see you again, I want you to know that meeting you was the best thing to ever happen to me. Thank you for everything.

You have my love and my faith.

*Yours always,*

*Avery*

My heart rate accelerated to a deafening pace. I vomited on the hardwood.

*I was right.*

*I was right.*

*I was right.*

I was dizzy from adrenaline and lack of sleep. My body refused to give out, however. I couldn't give up yet. Avery was counting on me to survive and help put an end to all of this.

Throwing the last of my necessities in my backpack, I synched the canvas straps around my shoulders and shuffled to the back door. I counted to three, and bolted out the back, locking the door behind me. From there, I darted over the wall and through that horrid, now dilapidated yard beyond. As I navigated the dying topiaries, my eyes caught sight of a great black cloud rising from what I estimated to be the center of town.

*Avery...*

My arm grabbed the ivy covered brick wall of the estate's other edge. After vaulting to the other side, I found myself on the edge of the thinly thicketed valley that led to the woods. I attempted to inch my way down the loose dirt incline before losing my footing and tumbling to the bottom.

A shooting pain filled my left arm. Upon examination, I had barely avoided falling headfirst into a bramble bush, but my arm had been thoroughly gashed. As carefully as I could, I freed my limb from the thorns and continued running. The wind blew at the hanging skin of my wounds, sending burning sensations all down the left side of my body. I bit my tongue to avoid calling out.

While I sprinted, the woods around me bustled with life. Each rustle of the foliage seemed to bear something living. Birds, snakes, and mammals all erupted from the brush and teemed with beckoning. The entire woods was alive and aware of my suffering.

After an indiscernible amount of time, I arrived at the final stretch through the valley. I just had to make it over the road and I was out of harm's way. It was a side road, too, so I felt relatively confident that it would be unguarded.

My view upon arriving at the road proved my confidence to be arrogance. A large black SUV sat at the end of the road, two men leaning up against its exterior.

*Fuck. So close to freedom.*

I crept back into the tree line, making sure to avoid stepping on anything that could create a ruckus. Once I'd found a suitable vantage point, I studied the men's positioning. They seemed to be watching the road in the direction of town, almost ignoring the woods and the other

direction of the road entirely; they must have been posted there preemptively to try to cut off any escape by car.

I took a deep breath and snuck past the car, going farther down the road while still cloaked by trees. When I found a point at which I doubted they'd be able to see me, I made a tip-toed dash for the other side.

Against all odds, my legs carried me over the road and to freedom on the other side. It was a mere few miles to true safety—that is, if the other escapees trusted me. I continued my careful gait through the trees, keeping my eyes on the SUV growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

The sound of leaves rustling and mechanical clicking filled the air.

“AHHHHHHHGGGGGGHHHH”

Pain like I'd never experienced wracked my body. As I collapsed to the ground, I gazed down. My leg was gnarled and bloody, my shin destroyed by the jaws of what I now realized was a bear trap.

Blood gushed from my leg as I battled to retain consciousness.

*Can't...die...here...*

With all of my remaining strength, I crawled along the floor of the forest, still attached to the trap. Moments later, my vision flashed white as the bear trap nearly tore my lower leg from my body. I had reached the end of the trap's chain. I shrieked once more. Surges of cold filled my limbs as I saw the two men surround me. I knew I was going to die.

When I awoke, I was in the back of the SUV. Astonishingly, my arm and leg had been bandaged.

*Why...Why did they let me live?*

Cold horror came over me as I realized my continued survival was likely a very, very bad sign for me. Perhaps death by bear trap would have been the kinder fate. I almost had to laugh as my vision faded out once more.

When I finally came to, I found myself in an old leather armchair, the sun just dipping below the horizon out the window. Across a table—which itself was set with two old fashioned glasses full of an unidentifiable brown liquid— sat a chair nearly identical to mine. A fire roared in the room’s lavish hearth, turning the whole space to a nearly unbearably oven.

A moment later, the large oaken door in the rear of the room creaked open, revealing a set of metal steps leading into an unilluminated basement. That horrid wet dog stench crept into the room, teaming up with the heat to choke my airway.

“Good evening, Mister Guest.” A deep voice spoke from somewhere beyond the darkened staircase. “I haven’t yet had the pleasure of meeting you in person.” Each syllable of the voice seemed to rattle the entire chamber, despite its volume being relatively subdued.

“W-who are you?”

“Why, I’m the one you’ve been looking for all along. Sweetwater is *my* creation. I *am* Sweetwater.”

“Are you...Are you the Developer’s heir?”

“Good guess, but no. I have sired no heirs save for those who follow in my footsteps.”

I shifted my pained leg, trying to soothe the aching. “You...can’t be the Developer. He was old when this place was built; he would be dead by now.

“Oh, I can assure you I am very much alive. As long as the friendly flames of Sweetwater still burns, I will survive.”

*What?*

A clacking sound echoed from downstairs.

“So, Mister Guest, have you finally figured out what’s really going on in Sweetwater?”

“I...I think I have most of it pieced together.”

“So, then, you understand the sacrifices we must make to maintain our peaceful way of life?”

“Peaceful? What about the disappearances.”

“Mister Guest, I can assure you that no one is being harmed.”

“What happens at the refinery, then?!”

“We merely give those lost a place of employment—a higher calling in life. These people were unproductive and degenerate in their past lives; the refinery gives them a chance to serve the greater good.”

“But, aren’t you torturing them?”

“Torturing them? God, no; we’d never do anything like that. Are the living conditions a bit meager? Sure, but compared to the lives they were living before, I am offering them a paradise.” The speaker paused to clear his throat with something of a low growl. “Every smiling child, every family, every single peaceful citizen you see in Sweetwater is only able to exist as such because of the Lost.”

“But...isn’t that slavery?”

“Slavery? They have free reign to choose their vocation, their living arrangements, their commodities. It is the freedom of choice that separates the slave from the free man, is it not?”

“I...I guess...”

Embers cackled from sweltering hearth.

“Mister Guest, you’re a very inquisitive young man. You, of course, understand that what goes on here isn’t any sort of egregious outlier. If anything, Sweetwater is a positive example in this world. Think of all the hardship in the world you turned a blind eye on before you even arrived in town.”

I struggled against the throbbing in my leg, crying out at a particularly sharp pang.

“I deeply apologize for the injuries. It was never our intention to hurt you, but you were unfortunately mixed up in the workings of a terrorist.”

“A terrorist?”

“The Wilson boy.”

“Where is he? Did you do something to him?!”

“I’m sorry, Mister Guest, but he had to be brought to justice. He was plotting horrific attacks on innocent Sweetwaterians—we were lucky that law enforcement apprehended him before he could flee the diner and attack more of his targets.”

“He only burned the diner to protect me! No one was inside!”

“Is that what he told you? Mister Guest, I admire your deep empathy, but you can’t always be so trusting. Avery has been using you to plan his terrorism since you first arrived in town.”

“He...he was?”

“Think about all the strange goose chases he’s nudged you towards; he was the one who got you involved in this mess. Have no illusions about it; Avery Wilson is a dangerous young man and a master manipulator.”

I sat in silence, simmering in the traumas wrought upon my body and mind.

“Mister Guest, we harbor no malice towards you. In fact, when you ran into that trap—which was intended for Mister Wilson—we had already dispatched law enforcement to protect you from the terrorist plot.”

“They were trying to help me?”

“But of course! It’s not as though harming you would be of any use to us.”

“Why didn’t anyone warn me about Avery earlier, then?!”

“We planned to, but we feared he would resort to violence if he were exposed. He is a sniveling little coward in that sense.”

The air in the room grew even thicker, the stench of wet dog soaking every porous surface of the room.

“That leads me to why I brought you here, Mister Guest. You—like all of Sweetwater—were under extreme threat by Avery Wilson. While he is gone now, his ilk—”

“Gone?! Where is he?!”

“He has been taken care of, Mister Guest. I regret that we were forced to use violence against h—”

Rage welled in my muscles, tensening the as they possibly could have been. “You killed him?!”

“You trusted Mister Wilson’s judgment when he claimed to be acting to protect you. Now that his lies have been exposed, you must trust me when I tell you that everything we’ve done was only to protect you.”

My sweltered mind failed to conjure a response. My body began to sink into the cushy leather.

“I am offering you clemency and refuge from the dangers of this world, Mister Guest. All I ask for in return is your compliance. You don’t even have to agree with all of our choices; all you need to do is help us maintain our peaceful lives.”

“Peaceful?! You killed Avery!”

“Violence is an unavoidable part of keeping the peace. Even Heaven runs on blood, Mister Guest. Christ carries a rod of iron, not an olive wreath.”

Steam spurted from the darkened space downstairs.

“Mister Guest, I wouldn’t want you to risk making a poorly thought-out decision. You are an intelligent, inquisitive young man with an honorable pedigree. Please do not waste the gifts you have been blessed with.”

The growing cloud of steam began to take on a ruby hue.

“Please understand that the alternative to accepting our hospitality would be...undesirable. ”

I could feel the muscles in my face contort as further horror came over me.

“While the Lost certainly aren’t suffering, I can assure you a quiet life in Sweetwater is preferable to joining them.”

Fat beads of sweat trailed down my face.

“So, Mister Guest, what will it be?”

“I just...I just have to go back to living my normal life in town? I don't have to help you or anything?”

“Correct. All you have to do is go back to living your little domestic life and pretend everything that happened today was all in your head. Forget about me, forget about Avery, forget about the Lost. Just live a happy little life away from all of this. It's really no different than what you were doing before.”

*Forget about the Lost.*

“So, you'll let me go?”

“Of course.”

The steam and stench burrowed further into my mind.

“All I have to do is forget?”

“All you have to do is forget.”

*Forget about Avery.*

“I...I don’t...I don’t think I can forget.”

“We can help you forget. We have all the luxuries and distractions anyone could ever want.”

“I...what I mean is that I *won’t* forget. I don’t want to.”

“Very well, Mister Guest. I am sorry for your poor decision making skills.”

I swallowed hard.

“Before I go...I need to know something.”

“Sure, inquire away. It’s the least I can do.”

“What are you?”

The voice bellowed with laughter. “Mister Guest, I don’t think I could rightly tell you, even if I wanted to. Time changed me so much that even I’m not sure.” The voice policed its laughter, returning to its previous tone.

“What I can tell you is that, whatever I am, I am very much human.” It

paused, perhaps pondering the gravity of its own answer. “Now, Mister Guest, it’s time to—”

Loud pops erupted from somewhere beyond the door to the hall. Shouting followed, accompanied by a pained shriek. Seconds later, the door to the stairs slammed itself shut and the fire crawled out into the room, setting alight the kindling of the oaken room.

“Ian!” an unfamiliar voice called from somewhere I could not discern. Several loud cracks echoed through the hall.

Smoke filled the chamber as the flames began to consume the surfaces around me.

“He’s in here!”

After another clamor—which I could guess was the hall door opening—four hands carefully hoisted my injured body from the chair.

I limply shifted to see the tall hooded figure I'd glimpsed in the woods. The figure was accompanied by the familiar face of Olivia Gifford, dirty and covered in camouflage paint.

"Come on. We're gonna get you out of here." She spoke.

The taller figure piped up. "Fucking hell. They really did a number on his leg. We're gonna have to get him to medical ASAP."

I hacked up smoke as they carried me from the burning room. My vision began to blur once more.

"He's fading! We've gotta pick up the pace!"

---

A kicked-in wooden door.

Two slumped-over men in the hallway.

A camouflage-painted pickup.

A plethora of varied, unfamiliar people camped out in the woods.

A drab-green tent.

---

Lucidity returned to me as my eyes scanned the sea of olive canvas above. My entire body rippled with warmth. I turned to my left to find that the warmth was supplied by the diligent dripping of an IV.

Turning to my right, I spotted a waifish figure slumped asleep in a steel folding chair.

*Huh?*

Drawing upon what little strength I had, my arm fumbled with a lamp by my bedside.

*Click*

Electric light flooded the tent, bringing illumination to the dew-dropped early morning.

In response, the sleeping shape rustled awake.

“You’re awake!” the voice chirped.

*Avery?!*

“You’re alive?”

“I’m standing before you now, right?” he laughed. “Those bastards were too busy trying to put out the diner fire to catch me. By the time they figured out what was going on, I was long gone.” He grasped my hand lightly, being careful not to cause me any pain. “I’m so glad you’re alright.”

“How did they know to find me?”

Avery grinned with his sharp features. “I convinced the others that having another heir of Sweetwater on our side would be worthwhile, you know, for morale reasons. You’ll have to thank Olivia and Ethan, though, since they were the ones who volunteered to run the rescue mission.”

“I should’ve guessed Ethan was in the woods.”

“A lot of us from Sweetwater are here, actually. The escaped Lost have been kind enough to let us live with them, since we don’t really have anywhere else to go.”

I sat up slightly. “Is the Developer gone? Did that *thing* die in the fire?”

Avery frowned and shook his head. “Some of the others say they can still sense him.”

“Sense him?”

“Some of the people here who spent a long time in the Refinery say that they have some kind of extra sense for his presence. I don’t really know how it works, but Olivia told me they’ve been right before, so I’m inclined to believe them.”

“Well,” I exhaled a labored breath, “I guess I’d better rest up, then.”

Avery placed his left hand near the head of my cot. “Yes, you should. Olivia and I have training today, but I’ll be back to check on you!”

We shared a smile as the weight of his hand lingered on my cot. A gentle, icy breeze rippled the tent’s olive lips.

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Epilogue

Richard Wilson navigated the charred wreckage of the plantation house's east wing. He passed the bodies of two men, both riddled with bullet holes. He stepped over them, unconcerned—the Lost were easily replaced. Turning one last corner, he arrived at the burned-out sitting room where Ian Guest had been held prisoner some days before.

“It seems things were *not* under control like Briggs claimed.” He snickered, seating himself in the surviving wreckage of a leather chair.

“I’ve made sure good sheriff and his arrogant tongue won’t be an issue for us any longer. Their separation has already made my life much, much easier.”

The two speakers shared a grim laugh.

“Once we repair the mansion, may I ask a favor of you?”

The Developer cleared his throat. “I know what you’re after, but tracking Guest and your former son has already proved to be a lost cause. I have no doubt they’re deep in the forest by this point; your revenge will

have to wait.” Embers glowed in the ruined fireplace. “As I see it, Sweetwater’s days might truly be numbered. Though we have them contained in the woods, I can feel those savages growing more powerful with each new dawn. Perhaps, one day, they’ll finally succeed at toppling everything I’ve built.”

“You don’t sound very concerned about that, sir.”

“Why should I be? It is your blood that will soak the streets of Sweetwater, is it not?”

“I suppose that *was* part of the bargain.” Richard Wilson wiped his nose on the back of his wrist, sniffing. “And what will come of you if they succeed?”

“When humans birthed me to devour their kings, they did not bind me to a vessel. They may cut off one of my faces, but another will surely take its place. I will find others willing to bargain with me long after you and your ilk are gone.”

Late morning light trickled in through the cracks in the ruined manor walls.

“It has never been difficult.”