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A Wild World

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A WILD WORLD

By

Cameron Michael Contois

THESIS

Submitted to
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2012

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Cameron Michael Contois is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

A WILD WORLD

By

Cameron Michael Contois

This collection of interconnected short stories deal with young adults in their late teens and early to late twenties being confronted by a strange and bizarre world. The events take place between the summer of 2010 and the summer of 2012, in the aftermath of the worst financial worldwide crisis since the Great Depression. Living in an uncertain world, these young adults are bombarded with the strange and paranormal. The stories don't so much focus on the weird events themselves, but the people that live among the unexplained. Relationship issues, sexuality, love and death are themes that connect these stories.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend, Brittney Buchanan, for her unconditional friendship, unlimited belief in my potential, and for being there with a shot of Jack Daniels every time I was ready to give up.

It is a wild world out there, but it's easier to face knowing you have a best friend on your side.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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Introduction

When I was 17, I was diagnosed with a severe anxiety disorder ambiguously named Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I would get panic attacks and go weeks without being able sleep at night. The worst part was the fact that I couldn't get anything done. My school work piled up. In college, I could not complete classes, and ended up dropping out. Useless drugs were shoved down my throat. Drugs with bizarre names, almost mythological names, like Zoloft, Paxil, Effexor, and sleeping pills and relaxers that just made me gain weight and gave me nightmares.

During sleepless nights, I found myself helpless under the inescapable blanket of anxiety and depression. The panic attacks were the worst. I suffered from fast heartbeats, being sweaty, unable to even move off the couch to my bedroom, to even get up to brush my teeth or turn off the lights. During these nights, I became immobile. It felt like I was not in control of my body or thoughts.

I know first-hand how scary not being in control can be. Much like panic attacks and depression, the fear of the paranormal is often a fear of not being in control. Aliens with superior technology can experiment and torture us, and there's nothing we can do about it. Human beings are the lesser species. Ghosts and demons can't be killed and elusive monsters that lurk in forests can tear us to shreds.

The idea that something menacing and uncontrollable can seep into people's lives has influenced all of the short stories in this collection. The idea of the unexplained, whether real or imagined, affecting young lives is much the same as someone suffering

from anxiety or depression. The fear and hopelessness that results from mental illness comes from chemical imbalances in the brain, and your own brain can create real physical symptoms within the body. I use the paranormal in these stories to express these feelings of helplessness. Whether the ghosts, evil government agents, aliens and monsters are real or in my characters' heads, I leave up to the reader to decide. I hope that my prose does create surreal feelings of helplessness that parallels mental illness.

The five stories included in this collection deal with young men and women in their late teens and early to late twenties. I find this time in people's lives to be fascinating. You're not a child anymore, but not yet an adult. You have responsibilities, worries, and fears you have never experienced before, yet still have a youthful dream and energy that so often fades as the years go by. It's a time when most people have already experienced heartbreak, seen corruption in the world, and no longer blindly trust in things such as religion and parents as they once did. However, they are far from jaded, and hope and happiness hide in the world among cobwebs and shadows.

The bizarre and paranormal haunt the characters of each of my stories. Yet, the stories don't dwell so much on the unexplained as on the characters themselves; the narratives explore loneliness, isolation, love and jealousies. What interests me is not the weird events themselves, but the people that exist among the ghosts and aliens. The young adults in these stories are not the people that have their lives together. They are not overachievers, off to college, ready to jump into a career, marriage and 401(k). They are the people that work in restaurants, waitress, are undisciplined artists, and suffer

debilitating mental illness. They exist in a culture where the alcohol flows freely and relationships are marred with instability and chaos.

In 2006, I landed a job working in a kitchen of a local restaurant. After I graduated with a B.S. in August of 2007, I was ready to face the world with a college degree and a new found confidence. I landed a job at a local mortgage business as a loan processor. I answered phones and filled out forms to get people houses. The owner began teaching me how to become a loan officer and we enrolled in a class together to get me certified. I thought that this would be my career. However, in 2008, the economic crisis hit, throwing the mortgage business into chaos. My boss closed down her company to take a more secure job with Wells Fargo. I ended up working full time at the restaurant and quickly began to feel trapped in the job.

I want to convey this feeling of being trapped in my characters. The 2008 economic meltdown was the last nail in the coffin for the idea that a young man or woman could graduate college and move into a high paying job, ready to support a family. As unemployment soared and companies struggled to stay in business, overnight, the world had become an even scarier place. My characters exist in the aftermath of this meltdown. They live in an uncertain world, not quite sure what's the next step to take in their lives. Quinn, Brooke, Kara, Cody, TJ, and Michael all work in food service, living from one paycheck to the next.

Writing fiction helps me express my feelings of anxiousness and depression and helps me keep them in check. My battle with my anxiety disorder continues to this day. And to write about it helps me deal. Getting my feelings on paper acts as a catharsis.

Writing reminds me that the fears in my head are reactions to things that aren't real – just physiological reactions from the reptilian part of the brain; they are unfounded fears just like a child's fear of ghosts.

In the Sam Raimi's *Spiderman*, Tobey McGuire's Spiderman says this of his superpowers: "This is my gift, my curse." I really relate to this quote. I would never choose to deal with a debilitating mental illness, but it has given me insight into diseases that affects millions of Americans each year. Although illnesses such as depression and anxiety disorders are prevalent, there is still stigma attached to victims of mental illness. My personal experience with this illness touches virtually all of my writing. I strive to make the fear, dread, guilt, and embarrassment come alive in my prose. I express my low self-esteem and insecurities in the characters of Quinn, Evan Buchanan, Kara Parks, and Brooke Luehmann. Perhaps writing about it will help people understand the real pain behind these diseases.

Growing up, I watched a show called *Unsolved Mysteries* hosted by the late Robert Stack. Every Wednesday night, I would tune in to watch the show, which reenacted real unsolved mysteries. The show scared the fuck out of me. It would convince me that the world was full of fugitive serial killers and pedophiles. More frightening were the allegedly "true" ghost stories. Even the theme music was terrifying.

The episode that terrified me the most was the one that dealt with alien abduction. I was probably ten or eleven years old when I saw the episode. I had already read part of Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, where Strieber recounts his alleged abductions into space ships by humanoid creatures who did painful tests on him,

probing him with needles, and extracting semen samples from him. So, I had heard of alien abduction before, but it was easy to dismiss the author as a hack out to make a quick buck. But, on the television, watching real people get interviewed about their experiences and watching reenactments of the alien abductions, it was harder to get my mind to dismiss the phenomenon as fantasy. And the abduction stories were horrifying. People claimed they were abducted into flying saucers not only on deserted highways in the middle of the night, but from their own bedrooms, their spouses laying frozen next to them as they were paralyzed and levitated off their own bed and through locked doors and solid walls. One woman claimed to be abducted up into a glowing disc from a picnic in the middle of the day. The idea that I could be frozen and taken by creatures, even with my family near me, became my greatest fear. Alien Abduction still is my greatest fear to this day.

One night in a state of anxiety, it occurred to me that this must be what alien abduction feels like. This is when I began thinking about the short story “The Echo of Stars.” The main character, Evan Buchanan, is a creative nice guy with horrible, horrible things happening to him. This idea is intriguing and horrifying to me, and I hope my writing conveys these sentiments.

Last summer, I spent the last night before classes started at a friend’s camp in Champion, Michigan. We took an off-road vehicle down a deserted road to get cell phone reception, because we could get no reception at his camp. When he shut off the headlights, the only lights were the literally thousands of stars dotting the black night. I said, “Perfect night for an abduction.” Just as abduction is never far from my mind, I

think the idea of the paranormal, from fortune tellers to magic spells, vampires to demons, the strange world of the paranormal is never far from the psyche of even the most scientific people. Ghosts linger on the fringes of rational thought. I try to tap into this aspect of human existence. Our ghosts, religions, UFOs all hint at something that is bigger than us. Ghosts are extensions of our existence beyond death and UFOs are a conquering of the cosmos. I have used the strange to tap into the fascination of the unexplained shared by so many people. My characters are ordinary young adults, who live in the real world filled with pop culture references and are, for the first time in their lives, confronted with real horrors: death and disease and financial hardships.

I remember visiting my cousin Erick as a child. I always looked up to Erick and thought he was one of the funniest and smartest people I'd ever known. Erick lived in Iron Mountain, a town an hour and a half away from my hometown of Marquette. I didn't get to see him often, so it was a special treat to visit him during holidays. I remember one night we were assigned to sleep in his sister's room on the first floor. It was late at night, and we were trying to fall asleep. I could faintly hear my uncle watching television in the next room. Suddenly, the horrifying theme music came on and we both said, at the same time, "Unsolved Mysteries!" That freaky theme music was enough to get us riled up.

At first, I thought it was weird that I would think to include this memory in the introduction of the thesis. I almost cut it from my introduction. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that perhaps the fascination many people have with the paranormal is not only to get a good scare, but because it is a connection to the past,

just as this memory of being scared also fills me with sentimental feelings of being with my cousin. Almost all ghost stories, in some way or another, are links to our past. If you've ever caught an episode of the Travel Channel's *Ghost Adventures*, you've probably noticed that a typical episode recounts the dark history of the place the paranormal investigators are investigating as much as it focuses on creepy EVPs or videos of weird shadows and unexplained light orbs. I recently watched an episode where the three investigators spent the night locked in an allegedly haunted abandoned psychiatry hospital. Many of the alleged ghosts that were said to haunt the place were said to be spirits of victims of lobotomies, shock therapy, and other monstrous abuses conducted during a time of elementary understanding of psychiatry. The hauntings are a sort of retribution for the tortures of the past. The inhumanity and abuse from our not so distant past are the real demons of the world.

I use the paranormal in this collection as a link to the past. In "All Those Conspirators," Cody Bolger is haunted by the shattered life of his incarcerated Uncle Artie, whose grip on reality seems to have been shattered from Vietnam. The horror of Vietnam still affects Cody. In "Chameleon Kara and the Chupacabra," Kara believes her absent father was eaten by the mythical Chupacabra creature, and that is why he has been absent in her life.

The paranormal also expresses fear of losing a grip on reality. Cody Bolger steadily loses touch with reality and connections with people to keep his fantasies real. His inability to take control of his own life and make real, grown up decisions spins his world into a place where everyone is a villainous player in a wicked conspiracy.

Cody Bolger was inspired by a coworker of mine at the restaurant I have known for many years. He's smart, charismatic, good looking and all the girls love him. He never has any problem getting laid. He's also one of the most dual natured people I have ever known. On one hand, he's an extremely kind guy. He loves music and cares about his job and enjoyed spending time with the people around him. If you drink too much, he will literally hold you up to walk you home. On the other hand, he's a raging alcoholic who doesn't believe in education and takes pride in his ability to manipulate people. He once told me that he can plant ideas in people's head, like the movie *Inception*, and make them do what he wants. The son of a pastor, he hates religion, and lives by a movie called *Zeitgeist*, which "exposes" Christianity as fake and provides "evidence" that 9/11 was an inside job done by the American government. Because of anti-religious parts of the movie, he also embraces the conspiracy parts of the movie. He has created a whole philosophy, world view, and belief system not based on anything that is scientifically verifiable, but all fit his own need to protect his hate for religion and validate his failure to complete college. I became intrigued with the idea of someone can shape his or her own beliefs based more on his or her own insecurities and prejudices than real scientific evidence. I took a look at myself and wondered how much I create a world view from prejudice, fear, and unscientific ideas I presume as truth.

I write to show how easy it is for everyone to create worlds around themselves that just aren't real. I want to show how subjective our realities are, and how these created realities can throw their creators into chaos when two subjective realities come into conflict with each other. Cody's reality descends into chaos when his ex-girlfriend

Kara embraces education and academia over his world of conspiracies and anarchist tendencies.

Perhaps the most personal story in this collection is “Ooh, Baby, It’s a Wild World.” The struggles of the main character, Alexis, come right from my own experience failing out of college. For Alexis, there’s so much to do for her classes, but she just can’t get it done. She sits in front of her computer, loses sleep, but just can’t finish her paper. She’s too ashamed to tell anyone and feels inept and worthless as she loses touch with her outside world. A psychologist or maybe some medicine would help, but there’s no one there to even take her to a doctor and she can’t do it herself. She is too terrified of the world outside of her house. Panic attacks physically prevent her from leaving her house. Through Alexis, I hope to have conveyed the physical nature of panic attacks. I strive to show that, although the irrational fear resonates from the brain of the person, the physical symptoms are real and debilitating. Alexis is unable to concentrate on anything, get a good night’s rest, or even leave her house. She is in possession of an evil, haunted doll that terrorizes her. However, being housebound with a demonic doll is less scary to Alexis than the real world. These themes come directly from my experiences with anxiety and depression.

The isolation many of my characters feel, from Cody and Alexis to the conflicted Quinn Murphy and Histrionic Kara Parks, is my own expression of isolation I often feel from the world. Throughout my twenties, as I struggled to hold down a job, finish my undergraduate, and sometimes even get out of bed, I watched friends and classmates graduate and move away. There were engagements, promotions, as I watched peers

land good jobs, buy houses, have children, and move on with life. I hope to convey that fear and uneasiness in Questioning people such as Mandy from a “Peculiar, Evil Creature” and Tyler Adams from “Chameleon Kara and the Chupacabra.

In “A Peculiar, Evil Creature,” Brooke Luehmann’s insecurity is an expression of my own self esteem. She believes that if she were only a little bit prettier, a little bit skinnier, and little bit smarter, she would land her dream guy and live happily ever after. Like Brooke, I tend to always think that I’m not good enough. Success is just over the horizon if I just would lose a few pounds, or write something a little better.

My observations on gender are also prevalent in many of my stories. Americans are becoming much more accepting to LGBTQ, there is still a long way to go. I hope to convey that fear and uneasiness in Questioning people such as Mandy from a “Peculiar, Evil Creature” and Tyler Adams from “Chameleon Kara and the Chupacabra.”

When people assert what proper relationships are and assume about gender roles, it is oppressive and harmful to those forced into roles they don’t want to be in. I show this in the transgendered character of Tyler Adam. Tyler is a transgendered lesbian who is stuck in a highly religious town that wouldn’t accept him. No one even suspects that he would be anything but what society expects him to be, that he would be anything different from what is biologically and religiously “right.” His loneliness overwhelms him.

Some kind of darkness haunts us all. Life has wounded everyone in one way or another. I strive to show this pain, but also offer glimpses of hope. In my stories, nothing is permanent, perhaps not even death. Hopefully, this collection also includes little

sparkles of light in the shadows. We are all connected, no matter how alone we feel.

After all, for young adults, this wild world they are forced to live in is perhaps the scariest monster of all.

The Echo of Stars

When they were kids, Annette chased a brown bunny into the garage and hit the button to close the door, trapping the poor guy inside as he hid behind the snow blower. Evan had witnessed the chase from the front lawn and slipped in the side door to see more. Annette kicked the snow blower, sending the creature into a frenzied sprint around the empty garage. Once the bunny realized there was nowhere left to hide, he hopped to the far corner and stood perfectly still. When Annette approached him, the little guy shook. That's how Evan feels when he looks into the night sky.

Evan Buchanan looks up into the November night, through the sprinkle of snowflakes at the clear patch sky in the east. He remembers the rabbit.

The stars look weak. Appropriate, thinks Evan. After all, that light is just remnants of stars millions and millions of light years away. Light that once burned in nuclear glory, but was long ago discarded and ejected into the black, destined to wander across the universe until the end of days. By the time it reaches this planet, Evan imagines the starlight's not even made up of photons and rays anymore. Perhaps it's merely the echo of the star it escaped from. That's really poetic, he thinks, I should write that down.

Except that star right there, he notes. *That star's not an echo.* It flickers, then grows brighter than the rest of the stars in the sky, a glitter of red and blue. It glows even brighter, a fluorescent blue with a white core, doubling its circumference size before it fades to nearly nothing.

That doesn't seem right. He trudges through inches of fluffy snow that has accumulated in his driveway. His feet sink through the fluff, and snow falls into his sneakers. It stings against his skin and melts into his socks. He pulls his hood over his blond hair with his free arm, his other holds a backpack tight against his back. The bare trees surrounding the long driveway sway in the wind which howls like scary movies.

He notices a satellite in the clear patch of sky and stands still to watch it orbit.

And then, at once, the whole world seems surrounding him seems as distant as those stars in the sky; the sensation of his wet socks the only thing grounding him onto this planet. If that was to fade, he thinks he may just float up into the sky, grasping at branches and power lines to keep him from drifting out of the atmosphere.

He closes his eyes and sees the roof of his house, the way it looks from way up in the sky. He sees it grow smaller as he's taken higher. Soon he can see miles and miles of trees, lights clustered around the towns on the surface of the earth. He can see Glacier Lake and streetlights lining highways. It's not long before he can see continents and oceans and the illuminating lights of the cities. His cold feet are the only reminders he's still on the planet and not lost in outer space.

He walks to the front door and looks through the front window. There are no lights on in the house.

Dad's at the pub again. It's been a cold November.

He takes off his shoes and walks down the stairs to the basement. He throws his backpack on the bed, turns up the heat, and throws his coat on the ground, all in one fluid course of action. He sits on his bed and listens to the wind bombard the walls of

the house. When he can't stand the sound any longer he turns on the BBC on his little flat screen television on top of his tiny bookshelf. Books overwhelm the shelf, piled around the base on the floor and stacked on both sides of the television. He pulls his blue plaid comforter around him and tries to resist the urge to lie down. Finals are just weeks away and he has a research paper due Friday.

He senses he's not alone. He feels the killer deer with big black eyes watching him.

All his life, Evan has had this reoccurring nightmare of the killer deer with huge black eyes. It always starts with him awakening, in his dream, to the deer staring at him through his bedroom window from the woods out back. Sometimes the events vary in the dream. Sometimes he can't move from the bed. Sometimes the deer walks right through the window into his room.

But most of the time, Evan runs to lock all the doors in his house, but when he turns around from locking the final door, that evil deer is already in the house. Evan tries to run but he can't move and the woodland fucker attacks him, ripping the flesh off his leg with cold, mechanical teeth. The dream used to terrify him as a child but now, he just tries to ignore them. They're just dreams, though he's had the dream a lot more frequently since the drowning.

The door to his bedroom flies open and Quinn Murphy stomps in.

"What the hell," Evan says.

Her black hair's pulled back into a ponytail and, because she looks skinnier than he's ever seen her before, her brown eyes seem to bulge out, like a grasshopper leaping

through the air. Her arms look extra scrawny, her waist curves in more, even her boobs seem smaller; the outline of the bra beneath her red shirt seems loose and ill fitted.

“Don’t you people knock? You can’t just barge into my house...” Evan’s voice trails off. “God, I hate Americans.”

She sits next to him and he smells liquor. Quinn’s twenty, two years younger than Evan. She rests her head on his shoulder. “What would you be doing that I couldn’t walk in on?”

“Um, masturbating. I could’ve been masturbating.”

“True, you haven’t gotten laid in forevs. You need to get off somehow.”

“Quinn, go home.”

“Can we go visit her grave?”

“No! It’s almost midnight. It’s negative twenty and the winds like 20 kilometers per hour, there’s no way.”

“Please. Then we can hit up La Bar. S’il te plaît?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Evan looks in her brown eyes and sees the glimmer of liquid pooling above her straight, shiny eyelashes.

“Ok, ok,” Evan says. “But we’re making it fast. On gèle dehors.”

The wind’s blowing harder now, harsh on the exposed skin of his pale face. Evan pulls his tan scarf tight around his mouth, and pulls the string on his winter hood so only his blue eyes are exposed to the arctic air. The snow had stopped and the sky had

cleared; now a blizzard of stars infested the sky. Tall maples and pine trees form a ceiling over the graves. Evan tries not to be annoyed at Quinn's melodramatic grave visits and reminds himself that everyone heals differently. He keeps Annette's tennis shoes under his bed at night and it makes him feel better to know they're there.

But really, visiting a grave in the middle of the night. Evan wrote a poem about a grave yard in his undergrad, and his professor, in a dramatic holy ritual, ripped up his poem in front of the whole class. Like Father Merrin exercising a demon, he declared that it was a cheap way to get thrills and he'd have no part of it in his class. *Vous etes un garcon tres stupide.*

But Quinn doesn't care about clichés or cheap thrills. She kneels in the snow, her body shaking beneath her red pea coat. She wears a matching red hat over her jet black locks and hugs herself with her arms. The night is dark, so dark the branches of the surrounding trees all blend together is one mass of swaying shadows. Evan can barely make out the writing on the smooth, gray gravestone: Annette Buchanan. April 14 1991 – July 1 2010.

Quinn sniffles. Then sobs uncontrollably. Evan leans over and pulls Quinn to her feet and she buries her face in his winter coat.

"I love her," she says.

"I know."

"Sometimes I hear her whisper in the blackness. I can never make out what she says. I can never..." She's overtaken with emotion and cries and cries and then stops in a breath.

“Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“No.” She wipes her eyes with her mittens. “Let’s go to Le Bar. I can’t go home.”

“I have homework to do.”

“Meghan’s there.”

“Alright, we can go for one.”

Quinn sways back and forth as she walks through the dark snow. Evan follows her but glances back at the gravestone and whispers, “Bonsoir, petite sœur.”

“You went to her grave?” Meghan shouts. “In the middle of the night? In the middle of winter.”

Meghan sits on a bar stool, facing Quinn. Evan tries to squeeze in between. Meghan’s frown wrinkles her face and Evan knows she’s got more to say.

“All right, well let’s get a drink...”

“Do you know how goddamn crazy that is? It’s like minus 50 out there and the wind’s blowing like 100 kilometers an hour. What the hell were you thinking? I’m going to call you a therapist right now; you need to be committed. You need to be deported.”

Meghan stops to catch her breath. She’s exasperated.

Meghan Trudeau’s father was a chronic worrier. During her final year of high school, he became convinced, after watching a marathon of How-The-World-Will-End shows on the History Channel, that the world was, indeed, ending. Many nights, he would get drunk with Evan’s dad at the house and he’d talk about how machines would become self-aware and take down the worldwide financial system. Evan’s dad would

nod quietly, ready to accept the impending doom, just as he had nodded silently when his mum had told the family she couldn't stand it here anymore. She left for Montreal the next day.

Evan would lie in his bed downstairs and listen to Mr. Trudeau's rant late into the night. One Sunday, perhaps to outsmart the four horsemen, Mr. Trudeau put a bullet in his brain. Since that Sunday, Meghan's always seemed exasperated.

Meghan's finally done yelling Quinn, so she turns the bar stool to face Evan. "Why are you encouraging this?" She reaches out and touches his arm with skinny fingers. "I needed you guys tonight. *Justin's in town*. He was here."

Evan places his hand on Meghan's back and blood gushes out of his nose. He plugs his nose, but blood's smudged all over his face and drips down his neck and forearm.

"Ew," says Quinn.

Evan runs to the bathroom and when he comes back out, Meghan is gone. Quinn sits on a bar stool by herself, but before Evan can reach her, a boy walks up next to her. Evan recognizes the guy, it's Jake. They graduated together and he was in some of Evan's classes at Bishop University. They were pretty good friends, close in the way casual acquaintances who graduated high school together can still be kind of close.

"Puis-je t'offrir un verre ?" Jake asks Quinn.

"Désolé. Je ne parle pas français," Quinn lies. She's actually become quite fluent in French in her two years of living in Lennoxville.

Jake looks up and sees Evan. "Buchanan, buddy. How are ya?"

“You know, living the dream,” Evan replies.

“Did I see Meghan Trudeau in here earlier,” asks Jake. “What’s she doing back in town?”

“She’s been back for a while,” says Quinn. “You probably didn’t notice on account of the fact she never goes out.”

“Agraphobia?” asks Jake.

“Huh?” says Quinn.

“She still with Justin?” asks Jake.

“They broke up,” Evan says.

Jake grins a huge droopy grin, like a jack-o-lantern three days after Halloween; it takes up his entire face. “Get on that, Buchanan.” Jake looks at Quinn. “Evan’s had a thing for Meghan since Grade 9.”

“That’s not true,” Evan says. In fact, it was summer before Grade 9, when Annette had invited Meghan on the Buchanan’s annual Canada Day camping trip and Meghan had forgotten her swimming suit so she just swam in her panties and a white tank top which became instantly see through when wet, and the sight of her newly curvy hips and small pink nipples had sent fourteen-year-old Evan running back to his tent to hide a raging boner. From that moment on, his love was true.

“So, about that drink?” Jake says to Quinn.

Quinn rolls her brown eyes and says, “I gotta go pee.” She walks to the bathroom.

Jake looks at Evan, “Elle est canon. C’est quoi son truc?”

Evan replies, "Crois-moi, c'est pas ton genre."

Jake shrugs and walks back to his friends in the back of the bar. When Quinn returns she asks Evan what Jake said about her.

"He said you're hot and asked what your deal was. I told him 'trust me, you aren't her type.'"

Quinn insists on sleeping over and crawls her drunk ass into Evan's bed.

"Get me another pillow. There's blood all over this one," she says.

"I wonder how that got there?" He changes the pillow case.

"Will you close the shades, too?" asks Quinn. "And lock the doors. I always feel like people are watching us from the woods."

That's not going to help, thinks Evan. The killer deer can walk through walls.

"I hear a lot of whispers here at night," Quinn pulls the comforters close to her.

"What power does Justin have over Meghan?" asks Evan.

"He's an NHL star. That makes you a god in this country."

Justin LeBlanc had been classmates with Annette and Meghan in high school and one of the best damn hockey players east of Edmonton.

"True," Evan turns on his pillow to face Quinn. "Plus there's that whole dead parent thing." "What do you mean?"

"In grade eleven, Justin's mum, late for one of Justin's hockey games, slid on some ice into an oncoming semi. Bam! Dead mum."

"That's awful."

“For sure. Later that year, after Meghan’s dad blew his brains out, the two of them bonded, forming a we’re-so-sad-because-of-our-dead-parents club.” Meghan confided in Annette that she fucked him in his truck on their first date, which Annette promptly told Evan as soon as she got home. When Justin got drafted to the Penguins two years ago, Meghan followed him to Pittsburgh.

Last spring, when Meghan returned back to town, she confided in Annette that she had dumped Justin after a nasty genital herpes outbreak forced her to stop ignoring all the evidence that Justin had cheated on her. (Evan knew of two girls he’d slept with just in Lennoxville. He’d hit on Annette in Le Bar last Christmas). Forty-eight hours later, Annette told Evan, she’d begged for him to come back to her. Meghan was pretty, with a big smile and puffy white cheeks, but, according to Annette’s recounting of the story, Justin was already serious with a much hotter model who landed the role of Santana on the hit Fox television show *Glee*. (This model was so hot, in fact, that the producers had forgot to test her vocal skills. She was immediately fired during the filming of the pilot, when the producers realized she was tone deaf.)

“I can’t compete with him.”

There’s silence and Evan thinks the girl next to him has drifted off. But, finally, she says, “Meghan Trudeau loves Justin the way Americans loves Kanye West. He has pretty words, flashy stage presence, and laments over his dead mother. You forget he’s complete and utter douche bag.”

“Should I give up?”

Quinn begins to snore.

Evan floats above the bed. His nose is inches from the ceiling. He can only move his neck and is able to turn it and look down at Quinn. She sleeps on her side, reaching out for a girl whose not there. Quinn had met Annette at a soccer camp in Chicago two years ago and then followed her to Sherbrooke. He wonders what Quinn is still doing here now. He can see in her eyes how she much she misses the skyscrapers, the L, the type of big city life she couldn't find up here. He could tell that she sat in the hockey rink longing for Soldier Field, to trade in slap shots for first downs.

Evan floats down the bed and sinks back into the mattress. Quinn grabs his t-shirt.

"I'm so alone," she says. "Annette's being eaten by maggots. They're gnawing on her pancreas right now."

"You told me you heard her whisper. Maybe she's trying to contact you."

"No, she's gone. The whispers I hear are nothing but echoes."

Evan had been wondering since summer if the whispers Quinn hears were from the killer deer, but he realizes she's haunted by some different kind of demon.

Quinn drags Evan to the mall. Evan should be doing homework, but Quinn's upset. She likes to shop when she's upset. Her shoe collection has grown immensely lately.

"If you want Meghan, you have to be assertive."

"I am assertive," Evan replies.

“Buchanan, between you and Annette, she had the balls.”

Evan frowns, but is distracted by a toy store they’re walking by. There’s stuffed penguin with a little Christmas hat.

He knows penguins are Meghan’s favorite animals. When they were kids, she had baby blue bed sheets with penguins on little figure skates on them. He knows a lot about her, like that she likes sushi, hates tomatoes, is a hardcore Separatist, and her favorite Decepticon is Starscream. He buys the penguin. The tag says: Poppy, the Christmas Penguin.

“Maybe they belong together,” Evan says. “Maybe the whole dead parent thing is something I can’t come between.”

“Please,” Quinn swings a Limited bag and an Abercrombie and Fitch bag as she walks. “People die all the time. That’s life. You hungry? I’m going to grab a drink.”

“I am kinda hungry. I always wanted to boycott their dead rents club. I mean dad’s a drunk wasting away and mom never even calls. I know what it’s like to be without a parent.”

Evan’s mom blamed herself for the two miscarriages, which was stupid because the doctors were baffled by the whole occurrence. It was as if both fetuses had just vanished from her womb. Annette always said their mom just used the miscarriages as an excuse to run away. Evan suspects that’s why Annette liked to run so much. Maybe she wanted to run away like her mother, or perhaps to one day chase her down. She played soccer because she loved chasing and being chased.

“When you chase someone,” she once told Evan, “and they chase you, in a perfect back and forth balance, that’s true love.”

Evan’s poetry professor keeps the class thirty minutes over and the sun is setting by the time he walks outside. He doesn’t want to drive the twenty minutes out to Starlight Rock. He should study and write his paper but ever since he could drive, he’s had to drive out to that rock. Once the urge sets in, there’s no stopping him. So he sets out on the highway, leaving Lennoxville in the rearview mirror, to Glaçons camp ground. The sun sets early and fast in November and it’s nearly dark when Evan arrives. The camp roads are still plowed in the winter and he’s able to drive near Starlight rock, which overlooks the big lake, la Lace de Glaçons.

Evan wraps himself up in his scarf and pulls his hood tight around his face and hikes to the top of the rock. Lace de Glaçons hasn’t quite frozen over all the way. He sits on the snow-covered rock, staring at the patch of visible water.

He sat there five months earlier with Meghan at the annual Buchanan’s Canada Day camping trip. Annette had been excited her best friend Meghan was back in town, and had invited her along.

Annette and Quinn were off somewhere getting hammered and doing God only knows what else, and Meghan and Evan were stuck sitting on the rock, sipping off a bottle of Wiser’s whiskey. It was dark, but children were still running around, splashing in the lake and jumping off the rocks. They stared into the night sky.

They'd been drinking all day; they started with Grape Four Lokos at breakfast. Things were blurry. Meghan leaned against him, her smooth, bare legs resting against his. When she turned to face him, he could feel her warm breath on his neck. She smelled like a tiny wildflower in damp earth.

"It looks like all there is in outer space are stars and blackness. But that's not true," Meghan said. "There's billions and billions of asteroids and comets and debris just floating recklessly out there with no purpose or direction. It's like if you shake up a bottle of Goldshlager, all the gold chips that swirl around in the bottle, the liquor's outer space and the chips are impending disaster."

"Do you ever feel chosen?" asked Evan. "Like you're the one."

"Not really. Did you know that when the asteroid that killed off the dinosaurs hit this planet, the Tyrannosaurus Rexes on the other side of the world felt the Earth shake? The collision sent rocks hurdling outside our atmosphere, that then got sucked back and rained down as balls of fire?"

"I feel like I'm chosen, like Buffy."

"The vampire slayer?"

"Yeah, the vampire slayer. There's this one episode where Buffy's vampire lover, Spike, tells her 'You're the one, Buffy' and Buffy replies 'I don't wanna be the one.' That's how I feel."

"Buffy had a vampire lover?"

"Two actually, first Angel than Spike..."

"I thought Spike was evil?"

“Well he was but then he got a soul, but actually Buffy banged him before that but he had this computer chip in his head so he couldn’t hurt humans so he was kinda good... it was all very complicated.”

Meghan leaned in closer so when she spoke, Evan could feel her lips moving on his neck.

“Did you know that if a gamma-ray burst happens in the Milky Way, it would shine in the sky as bright as our sun and burn off the Earth’s atmosphere? You’d get sun burnt even if you hid in a basement and the ultraviolet rays would slowly fry us all. Wanna make out?”

“Ok,” said Evan and Meghan kissed him with slightly chapped lips.

It’s dark now and the clouds have overtaken the entire sky. The tumbling gray lumps in the sky begin to illuminate with flashes of what Evan thinks is lightning. Fluorescent blue lightning. It starts with the clouds in the east, then some in the south, until the clouds in the whole sky are flashing and swirling. Evan no longer feels cold and wants to go home.

He pulls the covers around him and realizes he’s in his pajamas. He *is* home. He remembers nothing about leaving Starlight Rock or his drive home. His cell phone is vibrating. He has ten missed texts from Quinn. It’s 4:13 in the morning. His laptop computer is on, and on the screen are a bunch of equations typed out, equations using symbols he didn’t even know how to get Word to produce.

He sits up and scrolls down on the document. His research paper is over half done, he only had a page and a half earlier. His cell phone rings.

“Quinn, it’s four in the morning.”

“Where the fuck have you been?” Quinn shouts, her words slurred.

“I’ve been doing homework.”

“Where? I went by your house, I went by the library,” Quinn shouts over the phone.

“I don’t know?”

“You always disappear into thin air. It’s so weird.”

It seems perfectly natural to Evan. In fact, it happens a lot.

“You’re drunk,” says Evan.

“Why’re you hiding? I was out with Meghan tonight; yeah Meghan actually went out two nights in a row, and you know who she was looking for? You. Know who we found: Justin. Guess who she went home with?”

“What?” Evan says, dropping the phone.

“She’s probably sucking his ...” Evan drops the phone and Quinn voice is muffled by his sheets. He pulls the blankets around him and shuts his eyes.

The night before Canada Day, Meghan and Evan had stumbled back to the tent. They had finished two fifths of Wiser’s Whiskey and for Evan, life felt like it was on fast forward. She threw herself on Evan, pulling his hands under her clothes and shoving her hands in his. Her skin tasted like fireworks and he wanted to tear all her clothes off, but

he had enough sense to remember that Annette and Quinn would be coming back to the tent at any time. Then he felt nauseous.

Apparently Meghan did too, cause she suddenly ran out the tent and threw up, and the sound of her puking made Evan have to run out of the tent and barf all over, too. The two of them wiped their mouths, crawled back into the tent, and passed out in each other's arms.

That morning, Annette and Quinn had come back but Meghan was gone.

"Where'd she go?" Evan asked his little sister.

"Home," she replied.

"Why did she leave?"

"I don't know?" replied Annette. "Evan, she's bad for you."

"Why?" asked Evan.

"She'll never chase you."

Evan's sister walked to him and hugged him tight. "Happy Canada Day."

That night, Quinn returned to the tent, but Annette did not. The next morning, they dragged her lifeless body out of the *Lace de Glaçons*.

Evan looks at the frozen pond. A few of the guys have already taken the ice, his buddy Jake is out there, and Meghan is sitting on the frozen metal benches on the shore. Then he realizes why she's there. Out on the pond is NHL superstar Justin LeBlanc. Evan considers turning around and walking home, but Quinn sneaks up behind him and grabs his arm and drags him toward the lake.

“What’s he doing here?”

“Playing pond hockey with the peasants,” Quinn says. Justin’s only suited up in half his gear, without a helmet or gloves.

“Got you a plane ticket and tickets for the games next weekend,” Justin says to Meghan from the ice. “Just come to Calgary. Remember the last time me, you, and Sydney hung out on his boat. You ended up wearing his Olympic Gold around your neck in nothing but your underwear.”

The group of guys around Justin laugh, Meghan laughs, everyone laughs at his story. He’s so fricken hilarious. The guys skate away to set up the nets.

Evan and Quinn sit down on the bench next to Meghan. “You went home with *him* last night,” says Evan.

“That’s none of your business, but no, I didn’t.”

“That’s not what Quinn said.”

“Quinn was drunk,” Meghan says.

Quinn frowns.

Evan ties up his hockey skate. He pulls the Christmas Penguin out of his hockey bag and hands it to Meghan. Meghan glances at it and sets it on the ground. “What do I have to do to get to you?” asks Evan.

Meghan wipes her eyes with her mittens. “I’m going to Calgary next weekend. I fly out next Wednesday.”

“Do you think Justin knows you like I do? Does he know your favorite food? Your favorite Four Loko? Your favorite Decepticon?”

Meghan calls Justin over to the benches. "Justin, what's my favorite Decepticon?"

Justin stares up to the sky for a moment. "Um, Optimus Prime."

"Optimus Prime's not even a Decepticon. He's an Autobot," says Quinn.

"Yeah," says Evan.

"Whatever," Justin shrugs. "Buchanan, you playing or what?"

"Let's play." Justin's on the opposing team. Evan skates his heart out, but is out maneuvered, out skated, and occasionally mocked by Justin. Evan playing hockey against Justin is like one of those scrawny professional wrestlers who the announcers always say has a lot of heart, but always end up getting beaten to a bloody pulp by the big guys. It doesn't help that, half the time, Evan watches Meghan. He sees her drop the penguin in a rusty garbage can out of the corner of his eye.

Evan's pissed and skates straight towards Justin. By some miracle, or perhaps with the help of pure rage, Evan gets the puck away from him and heads down the ice in a breakaway. Justin reaches out his stick from behind Evan and trips him up.

"What the hell, man," shouts Evan. "That's a free penalty shot."

"Blow me, bro," Justin says. Evan turns around and shoves him.

Justin laughs. "Whatever, brah," he says. "Annette got all the talent in your family."

"Doucher," Evan shouts and lunges toward him. Justin throws Evan to the ground, landing hard on his right wrist, and then pulls him up by his jersey and punches him in his face.

The doctor stares at the x-rays. "You're wrist isn't broken, just a little sprain. You're going to have a nice swollen eye for a while." The doctor chuckles, then his tan face turns serious. Dr. Chu sits down in a chair.

"There is something I want you to look at," he says, handing the flimsy x-rays to Evan. "There's some kind of metal chip lodged in your forearm. It's bizarre, too. There's no scar tissue around it. I don't recall you ever breaking your arm or getting any pins put in."

Evan shakes his head no.

"How's your sleep been," asks the doctor.

"Not good, doc."

"Evan," Chu says, "Since you've been a kid, you've never slept well. You complain of sleep paralysis and nightmares. Have you given any thought to seeing a sleep specialist, or maybe even talking to a therapist? I know an expert down in Quebec City..."

"I'm ok, really, doc."

"We never choose what ailments haunt us, but we can choose to take control of them. To own them and fight them the best we can. But ignoring them only makes things worse. Please give it some thought."

On the way out of office, a passing nurse says, "Mr. Buchanan, you have a friend waiting for you in the lobby."

Evan stares at the door to the lobby, praying to open the door and see Meghan sitting there. Instead, in a bland gray waiting room seat, sits Justin LeBlanc.

“Hey man,” Justin says. “I didn’t know your sister had drowned. I would have never brought her up. I’m sorry, bro.” He extends his hand and Evan shakes it. What else could he do? Meghan can have the jackass.

Meghan does show up behind a door the next day. When he exits the building from his poetry class, she’s waiting for him on the front steps.

“Don’t you have a flight to catch?” He brushes by her, towards his car.

“Evan, wait.”

“You know, you could’ve waited until you got home to throw away Poppy.”

“Who?”

“Poppy, the Christmas Penguin. Yeah, Meghan, he had a name.”

“It was scary.” Meghan follows Evan, “Penguins freak me out now. That night, before Canada day, I had this dream, there were a bunch of penguins in the tent, surrounding us. I couldn’t move. They looked like the penguins from that movie, *Happy Feet*, but they had big, black eyes. And I woke up in the morning, next to you, I woke up so horny and scared, I wanted you so bad and I was so terrified of those *Happy Feet* monsters that I got in my car and drove home.”

“Have fun at the Flames game. Give Justin my regards.”

Meghan reaches out for Evan, "All Justin ever gave me were lies and self esteem issues." And herpes. "Evan, please, at least help me find Quinn. She's drunk. She's texting me that she just wants to die."

"I'll go get her. I know where she is. Au revior, Meghan." Evan gets in his car and drives away.

At first, he sees only her pea coat, like a rose petals and blood stains in the fresh snow. She doesn't know he's there. She sobs, sucking in air her lungs just can't seem to diffuse.

Quinn kneels over his dead sister's grave, clinging to a fifth of whiskey in one red knitted mitten and wiping tears away with the other. A pitiable Poe crying on the grave of her dead Virginia. Evan laughs at the melodramatic absurdity of it all.

Evan kneels down beside her. She takes a pull straight from the bottle. The sun's setting and it reflects off the snow, making it sparkle like white glitter glue.

"It's my fault she's dead," she says.

"Quinn, it's not..."

"I was drunk and missing home. I told her I hated her and wanted to go back to Chi-town. I called her a stupid dyke and blamed her for making me leave my whole life to come to this frozen hell hole. I did hate her that night. Up here in the middle of butt fuck Quebec celebrating Canada Day. I gave up so much for her. I told her I hope she died. I didn't mean it, but I was drunk and said it all the same."

Quinn turns to look at Evan. "Annette never even cried. She just chugged her Four Loko, ran off into the lake, and went and drowned."

"Quinn, come on. Get out of the cold."

"No," she cried. "No, no, no. I need to be here."

Evan tries to pull her to her feet but she swings her arms drunk and belligerently, shoving and crying and kicking and punching all at the same time. He's had enough struggles and walks away, leaving the girl kneeling beneath a setting sun.

He wants to text her to make sure she's all right, but he can't bring himself to press the buttons. What if it is her fault? What if Quinn really did kill his sister? Five days go by without any word. Evan immerses himself in his homework and it helps a little to get his mind off of things.

December 1st is a sunny day and the rays melt all the snow on the streets and sidewalks. He's walking down a bare sidewalk on campus when he sees her running up him. She wears big, black sunglasses.

"I've been looking for you," Quinn says. She throws her arms around him and holds him until he finally pushes her away.

"I don't have long. I have to get to the airport," she says. "I'm going home. I'll be back in the New Year to get my stuff, of course, but she told me it's ok to go back home."

"Who told you?"

"Annette," Quinn giggles. "I saw her."

“Where?” asks Evan.

“She came out of the blackness.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

“She told me it wasn’t my fault. She wasn’t running from me. She was chasing them.”

Evan thinks Quinn’s gone crazy, but Quinn just keeps on giggling, her black hair glowing in the sunlight.

“Who was Annette chasing?”

“Them,” repeats Quinn, pointing to the sky. “She was chasing them. You see, they keep oblong bubbles in the lake, that’s where they hide. Annette was trying to catch them. I have to get to the airport; I’m going to miss my flight.” She kisses Evan on the cheek.

“Oh, I almost forgot her message for you. She said she was wrong about Meghan. When Meghan came to see you today, she was chasing you. If you chase her one more time, you’ll catch her. I asked Annette what that meant but she said she couldn’t explain because ghosts have to talk in riddles. Oh crap, gotta run. I’ll text you.”

Quinn begins running away and when she gets ten yards away, Evan shouts, “Where’d you see Annette?”

She turns around and shouts, “At the mall.”

None of this makes sense. Quinn’s gone bat shit crazy. He has a million questions, but the one he shouts out first is “What store was she in?”

“The GAP.” She turns back and runs.

“That doesn’t even make sense. You saw the ghost of my sister in the GAP?”

Evan shouts but this time she doesn’t turn around.

Evan walks to his car and when he hears the voice in his head saying he has to go to Starlight Rock.

“Not this time.”

You must go to Starlight Rock now, he hears in his head. It’s a mechanical voice. He drives to a pub and sees his father’s car. He pulls in and has a drink with his dad. His dad is grins the whole time. He asks to read some of Evan’s new poetry and after he does, he says, “I’m so proud of you, son.”

After a beer, Evan tells his dad he has to go, but that they should do this more often. His dad agrees. Evan gets in his car.

Go to Starlight Rock.

Evan drives out of the parking lot, onto the black pavement wet from melted snow, and turns in the opposite direction of Starlight Rock and drives to the airport. The airport is nearly deserted and he spots Meghan at the bar right away. She stares at Poppy, the Christmas penguin.

He sits next to her and sees tears in her eyes.

“I washed him, but he’s still smells garbagey,” she says. “You missed Quinn. Her flight already left.”

“I came to see you.”

“I was so scared of penguins that night in the tent. They used to be my favorite animal, ya know.”

“I remember your bed sheets.”

“You know, when Justin got drafted to the Penguins, I thought it was a sign. I thought that was Jesus, or Buddha, or maybe my dad from beyond the stars, telling me I needed to run away to Pittsburg. I thought if I stopped chasing him, I’d lose touch with my dad, with myself... I’d just disappear.”

“I can’t keep chasing you,” Evan says.

Go to Starlight Rock!

“Look around us, Evan. Our whole story is a garbled mess. I spend the night with you and there’s evil penguins taking you into the sky, Quinn’s seeing ghosts. None of this even makes sense.”

“Who cares,” says Evan. “*We make sense*. That’s all that matters.”

The announcer calls her flight number and she says it’s time to board. Evan grabs her and kisses her lips, but that makes her cry. She grabs her bags and runs to her gate.

He watches her disappear into the terminal and runs to his car. He decides he is going to Starlight Rock, after all.

It’s dark by the time Evan reaches the rock. He parks his car at the base and hikes through the snow up to the top of the rock. He looks in the sky at the dead stars. The wind sneaks by in a quiet tiptoe and the trees creak like he’s trapped in a decaying barn.

At the top of the rock, he looks into the forest at the base of the far side of the rock. There it is, peering back at him. The killer deer. It jerks its head back and forth, never breaking eye contact with its big, black eyes.

“You killed my sister,” shouts Evan. “You terrorized me. I was just a child. You chased my mother away. You chased Meghan away. I’m going to kill you. I’ll snap your ugly little neck. What do you want?”

Silence.

“What the hell do you want from me,” Evan shouts, this time at the top of his lungs. The creature stares back for a long time and then raises its arm and points at Evan with a frail, gray finger. Evan realizes that it’s pointing behind him, and turns to see Meghan Trudeau standing on the rock. He looks back at the creature, but it’s gone.

“How’d you know I’d be here?”

“I’ve known you since I was four years old. I know you always come here,” Meghan says. She approaches him and Evan glances everywhere, but the deer has vanished. His gaze locks with Meghan’s and then he can’t look away.

She turns around, her back against his, and pulls her arms around her. They both stare at the small stars in the winter night sky.

“I’m crazy,” says Evan. “It’s all in my head. There’s nothing out there in the blackness but the echoes of stars.”

Meghan turns to face Evan. She says, “We both know that’s not true. In the black, there’s comets and dark matter and supernovas and black holes and ghosts and quasars and demons, mais je crois que je suis peut-être amoureux de toi. I’m not scared anymore.” Meghan kisses Evan with lots of tongue, and a blue star grows big and bright and floats down from the sky, hovers above the couple for a minute, and then blinks out of existence, leaving the two alone in the starlight.

All Those Conspirators

Sticky footsteps echo behind Cody in the shadows of the black alley, and he knows he's being followed. They've been watching him all day. He clutches the knife in his pocket and ducks behind a dumpster. He listens.

From across the street, his vision blocked by trees, a girl giggles and says something slurred and loud into the evening night. High heels clip clop across the street and she walks into view. She's being escorted by a bulky guy in a tux. She clip clops into the alley shadows and falls against the brick wall, pulling the dude against her. She takes his arm and guides it under her short red dress. Late-season wedding guests.

The girl pushes the guy away and struts around the corner. Her man obediently follows. Cody runs into the middle of the deserted pavement, bathing in the streetlights' illumination. He grasps the knife in his pocket, in its leather case, the whole time. The only sound comes from the terrace above the street, where girls in dresses shiver and smoke, and men in loosened ties boast like it's still the 90s.

Cody makes eye contact with a guy, a younger guy, with spikey hair and a gray vest.

"Hey," shouts the guy. "Hey you." He raises his glass to the twilight. "How the hell are ya?"

Cody turns and runs up the hill. He runs down uneven sidewalks through a groggy downtown, a small Upper Michigan town ready for bed. It's almost midnight. Cody Bolger needs to get home.

* * *

The men are in the black car on the corner, and they've been parked there since noon. They're monitoring him. Cody watched the car from his second-story apartment all afternoon. He pretended to look at the bank across the street or to check out a group of pretty high school girls wander down the sidewalk, acting as if he didn't see the men with black sunglasses on.

Cody shuts his shades and sits down in front of his laptop. They've bugged his apartment; he's sure of it. They hear every time he burps, farts, takes a shit. He jerks off to the shower because maybe the water will provide some cover; otherwise, he can't even keep it up knowing they're taking notes of his masturbation.

He pulls down the blinds a bit to look at the car. It's gone. He sits down at the laptop on his fold-out table in the middle of his kitchen slash dining room slash living room. He stares at his Facebook page. It's 11:54 pm on September 10th, but he just can't wait any longer. He's been waiting all night.

He types 9/11 WAS AN INSIDE JOB. WAKE UP AMERICA. THE REVOLUTION STARTS NOW! and posts it as his Facebook status.

Last year, at this time, Kara sat on his lap. They drank cans of Natural Ice and waited until midnight to post his manifesto detailing the man code-named Agent Zen and his involvement in a conspiracy that lead up to the highest government officials. Zen was the missing link; he was the key to it all.

Kara ran her sweaty hands through his shaggy hair and kissed his ear. At 12:00 am on September 11th 2009, he posted the truth on the web for all the world to see.

“You’re changing the world, baby,” she whispered in his ear. She began unbuttoning his pants.

There’s a knock on the door and Cody knows it’s Kara. He knows that 9/11 made her remember what they were trying to do together. She must have remembered all that she’d known before she’d left him. They were going to expose the truth and save humanity. Kara’s too smart to be fooled by the media, the lies, the oppression of the United States government that had brainwashed her. When it is time for revolution, she will take up arms and...

TJ opens the front door. “Cody, what’s up?”

TJ Murphy is Cody’s best friend. He’s 19, eight years younger than Cody. He’s a smart kid, and Cody knows he will play a part in the coming revolution.

Cody opens up his plastic book case and throws a bunch of documents out on the floor. He turns up his death metal loud so they can’t hear him.

“Agent Zen is a ghost, but Hecox said he was able to find some mention of him on WikiLeaks. Zen was in Kuwait in the late 90s and then again in 2002 leading up to the invasion. Interesting fact, though, we’ve just uncovered, is that we think the agent was spending a lot of time in Texas in the 80s,” says Cody.

“Training in Fort Hood? Or involvement in the detainment camp there...”

“No, Ellington Field.”

“Where Bush flew,” says TJ.

“Yes, and it seems Mr. Zen spent a lot of time in Texas...”

“Schmoozing with a future president,” TJ says, finishing Cody’s sentence.

“Grooming a future president,” says Cody.

“Are you finding any connection to Harris?”

“We’re looking, but I suspect he was in Florida November 2000.”

“They’ve been putting this into motion for years. Reagan was their stooge, and Clinton a distraction. Uncle Artie had the proof and they locked him away.” Cody takes another gulp of 5 o’clock vodka.

“Jesus Cody, you mix that with anything.”

“Hell no. It’s a celebration. Of the truth.”

It’s 9/11. He lies down on the carpet and stares at the illuminated light casing above, filled with dead bugs.

Kara wore an emerald green bikini, and when she emerged from underneath the surface of Lake Superior, she looked like how Cody had imagined the birth of Aphrodite, rising from the sea, cloaked in seaweed. In his mythology class (before he dropped out), he’d shut his eyes, and dreamed of such a beautiful thing rising from the froth of Uranus’s castrated balls.

Kara flung her upper body on top of Cody, drenching him with freshwater. Her bikini top was cold on his defined abs. She put her lips near his face and the stud in her nose reflected sun.

"What do you wanna do today?" she asked him.

"I wanna change the world, babe."

"Me too." She looked into Cody's eyes, but he didn't think she even really saw him. He stuck his hands under her suit, on her ass – grabbing it to consume her. He held her pressed against him tight. He felt her begin to pull her ass away, and that made him pull tighter. Finally, he let her go and she rolled back onto her raggedy old panda bear towel.

They watched the waves slowly lap up on the sand; they were hardly waves at all, only a constant movement back and forth from the shore. Kara was already drying off in the heat, and her pale skin was turning pink except for an odd -haped circle around the new tattoo of the Earth on her shoulder, which remained pale. It was a simple tattoo: the oceans colored baby blue and the continents the color of the maple leaves thriving in photosynthesis under the June sunlight.

Cody could feel Kara's slender fingers touching his side. He opened one eye to watch her under the blazing sun, reaching out her arm at full length so the tips of her fingers had contact with his skin. She began rubbing his abs.

"You're so fucking hot," she whispered.

Kara went to the gym at odd hours, sometimes obsessively. She'd leave at ten pm and crawl into bed well after two. The mornings after those workouts, she wouldn't be able to reach her arms up to the top of the refrigerator to pull the bread down. Cody had always thought this was odd. He never did much of anything and his metabolism kept him fit. Cody was hot and he knew it.

Later that day, Cody woke up to Kara shaking him. The shadows from the nearby trees were stretching across the beach now as the sun began dipping behind them. Her

skin was a deeper pink shade now, like a pink rose, and it seemed like the freckles on her cheeks had gone through meiosis. She sat over him, her back shielding him from the sun's UV assault.

"Maybe we shoulda put sunscreen on more than just our tattoos," Cody said. He poked his own forearm and it stung. "Fuck."

Kara giggled. "Do we have aloe?"

"I don't think so."

"We need aloe. Let's stop by Walmart on the way home."

Cody pulled Kara down on him and held her even as it hurt his burnt skin. He kissed her and her lip ring burnt his own lips. "Walmart is part of the Free Masons plot to control the economic future of the United States," he reminded her.

"But we really need aloe," Kara said. She clung to his forearm and it hurt like hell, but he didn't ask her to stop.

"We do need Aloe," agreed Cody. She laid her head on his chest.

That was only four months ago. How could someone forget so much in four short months? They must have brainwashed her. But when and how? So many questions. The only thing Cody knows for certain is that his life is in danger. Cody clutches the carpet he lies on in his hands and contemplates the one fact he knows for sure:

Agent Zen wants Cody dead.

But maybe Zen wants him to pay first. Kill everything he loved. Agent Zen hasn't bet on Cody's resourcefulness. He will make Kara come back; force her to remember. Zen hasn't bet on how good Cody is at playing the game.

* * *

Kara's blonde hair is curled today, and falls down around her freckled face. She takes the tray of the drinks from off the bar. Cody leans on the bar and stares at her ass. Her short black skirt sways as she walks. She brings the drinks to a far table where a young family sits. She sets the drinks down and laughs her fake laugh at something the father says. The Vierling is at full capacity, which is usual for the weekend dinner rush.

"Hey Cody," Michael says. "Come on, man, it's busy. Get back to work. Don't wanna be here all night, do ya?"

Michael's white work shirt is covered in grease stains and some orange sauce and something crusty on the shoulder. His black hair is cut short, and his brown eyes look tired. At work is the only time Michael looks disheveled; usually he's dressed in a queer polo or some prissy board shorts. Cody doesn't get what Kara sees in him.

Michael's the biggest fuckin' faggot Cody knows.

Cody's worked here longer than Michael and doesn't know how that jackass got to be manager.

"I need a break," Cody says.

Michael rolls his eyes. "K, fine. Get a drink or whatever you need, but then bust out some dishes."

"Yeah. Sure."

Michael disappears through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Michael thinks he's such hot shit because he's a bit bigger than Cody. He rarely drinks, and he works out every day. Cody likes to imagine meeting Michael in the alley out back. Kara's come

back to him, and Michael is enraged, his brown skin red with jealousy. When that fucker tries to fight him, Cody will stab his throat with his jungle military survival knife. "Take that, you fucker," he'll shout. He's considered some other cool things to say as he stabs the prick, but he thinks he'll keep it simple. To the point, so to speak.

The bartender slips Cody a double whiskey and coke and the tumbler is half empty after his first gulp. Kara returns to the end of the bar and sets her tray down, waiting for more drinks.

"Kara, you know what day it is."

"Saturday?"

"It's 9/11," Cody says.

"Oh, I forgot. I've been on a double. Working all day."

She stares at the liquor bottles lined up behind the old, mahogany bar. Cody grabs her shoulder and turns her towards him.

"What?" There are plastic studs in her nose and lip.

"You don't love him."

"Michael's in grad school. He's getting his masters in fall, going for a PfD after that. He's not going to be stuck here in this stupid-ass town all his life. And neither am I."

"He's graduating political science. He's part of the machine. Don't you see that?"

"What're you going to do? Work here all your life. Do your little deals. You're twenty-seven. Time to grow up, Cody."

“What do you want me to do? Go back to school? Become brainwashed into consumerism until one day Zen decides to end me.”

Cody’s smart enough to know that no one needs college. Anything someone needed to learn could be found in the libraries, property of the masses. He doesn’t need some pretentious professor distorting the truth, perpetuating the lies that oppress the people. He’ll have no part in it.

“I want a degree,” Kara says. “I want to go somewhere...”

“Kara, they’re brainwashing you in that place.”

“Even TJ’s back in school,” Kara says. “Can you hurry up with those beers, please?”

“What? TJ would’ve told me if he went back to school.”

“Please, stop,” Kara says. The bartender places two mugs of beer on her tray and she begins to walk away.

“You still want me and you know it.”

She turns back to face him. “I want a life. I want a normal 4th of July. A family picnic. That’s something you’ll never give me.”

Cody pours TJ vodka into a shot glass, the top rim chipped, with only remnants on whatever picture used to be on the front of it.

“I don’t know if I can do another,” TJ says, his boyish grin spread across his face.

“I work in the a.m.”

“Fuck that place,” Cody says. “The Vierling sucks.”

TJ shrugs. "It's a living." He takes the shot and sits back down at the fold-out table. The sink is full of dirty dishes, which leave a musty, foul smell lingering in the kitchen. Cody drinks vodka straight from the bottle.

"Was Leighton working tonight?" asks TJ.

"No, she had the night off. You want her so bad, you faggot," laughs Cody.

"Shut up, bro."

"Shut up, bro," Cody mocks in a high-pitched girl voice. TJ pulls his laptop toward him, trying to ignore Cody. The smile is gone from his big boy face. Cody pulls his laptop in front of him, too. TJ finally breaks the silence:

"What year was Archduke Ferdinand assassinated?"

"June 1914," replies Cody.

"Thanks." Cody rules at trivia. He has all the smarts he needed in his brain. Not like those preppy fags in college.

"What you working on?" asks TJ.

"Oh, just blogging and chatting with Racer X. He thinks he might have found some documents about an alien dissection at Area 51."

"Really? My cousin Quinn lives in Quebec. She has this friend who suffers from missing time, unexplained implants, and nightmares. I think he's an abductee. Quinn also saw a ghost at the mall."

"That makes absolutely no sense." Cody types something in his Facebook chat to Racer X. "So why'd you need to know about the assassination?"

"No reason."

“Kara told me something at work tonight. Are you doing homework?”

“I was going to tell you. My dad said he’d buy me a car if I went back to school.”

“They’ll brainwash you.”

“No, they won’t. I promise. Plus, I’ve found I way to help your Uncle Artie.”

Cody’s uncle’s been in prison for over 30 years, convicted on first degree sex crimes, child pornography, all that jazz.

“There’s this thing called Project Innocence that works to exonerate wrongly convicted people through...”

There’s a pounding at the front door. And again. Bang. Bang. Bang. Cody reaches into his pocket and clutches his knife. “TJ, go out the back and sneak around front.” TJ frowns.

“Go now!” Cody whisper shouts.

Cody opens the door to his apartment and begins walking down the front stairs. He pulls out his knife, . The front door at the bottom of the stairs is a solid white, and on each side of the door are two thin frosted windows. He can see the silhouette of a man behind them.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Cody takes a step down and the stair creaks. He freezes in the middle of the staircase. The black silhouette walks away.

Come on, Bolger, he thinks. Go out and fight like the soldier you are. He clings tight to the double serrated blade. “This knife is everything an injured survivalist needs in a jungle to keep fighting” the website he bought it from said.

He runs down the rest of the stairs and throws open the front door. No one is there. The September night is cold. He creeps around the side of the house. Someone in the first floor apartment has the television on. *Law and Order*. He recognizes the dun-dun sound. He ducks behind some unkempt bushes on the side of the house and peers around the corner.

There, outside the back door, in the dark autumn night, some kid holds a gun right at TJ's face. TJ has his arms raised slightly, palms out.

"Where's Cody," the kid shouts.

"I told you, I don't know. I think he's at work."

"Tell him we want our fucking money. He's got three days." The kid turns and runs.

Cody comes out of the shadows, holding his knife in front of him.

"What have you gotten yourself into?" asks TJ.

Cody lies on the futon and TJ lies on the carpet.

"Hand me the vodka," TJ says. He's now drinking straight out of the bottle, too.

"Agent Zen..."

"That wasn't Agent Zen, Cody. That was some punk kid."

"I just need to do one more deal. I'll have the money by Friday. I'm not worried about them. I'm worried about Zen. I think he's here, in Marquette. I think he's after me."

"How do you know Zen's in town?"

“I can just feel him here.” In Vietnam, his Uncle Artie found out about Zen. Artie thought they were friends. Cody’s uncle wanted to serve his country, honor his family. But the US government wasn’t just going to let Artie walk away knowing information that could take down key figures in the conspiracy. No sir. So they trumped up charges of child rape and planted kiddie porn in his house. Cody knows Artie’s trial was a sham.

Cody shuts his eyes.

“I talked to Kara today.”

“How’d that go?”

“She said she wanted a normal 4th of July.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Idunno, man. Idunno.”

The breeze blowing off Lake Superior was a bit chilly. Kara slid a ragged Northern Michigan University hoodie over her green bikini and held onto Cody’s arm; she was shaking. Cody dug a plastic fork into a pile of potato salad on his paper plate and shoved it into his mouth.

“Kara, you look absolutely adorable,” his mother said. “I see you got rid of the piercings.”

“No, mom, she’s got plastic studs in. She’s still pierced.” He saw the disapproval in his mother’s skinny face. He wanted to punch her in her wrinkly throat.

“Well you look simply beautiful,” said his mother.

“Thank you, Mrs. Bolger. How’s the church going?”

“Good,” replied his father. His father was a small man, with a full head of gray hair. “I’m stepping down as head pastor.”

“Why?” asked Cody.

“Let new blood into that place. I took a job with the law enforcement. I’m helping to rehabilitate substance abusers and help those convicted get back into...”

“What the fuck,” said Cody.

“Cody,” Kara said as a plea. “It’s such a nice day. Let’s just...”

“This is not the way I want to celebrate the fucking 4th.” This wasn’t the way a true patriot should be spending the 4th, choking down soggy cole slaw and charred burgers. He chugged the rest of his beer.

“Dad, you’ve never even smoked pot, you’ve only been drunk a handful of times in your life and you’re working with the cops to rehabilitate people who don’t even need your help. You self-righteous prick.”

“Cody,” his mother said softly. “Some of these people need help. They have children, families...”

Cody threw his half eaten hamburger on the picnic table and stood up. “All you do is condemn something you don’t even understand. All you do is condemn people. Well, you know what, dad. I’m a drug dealer and I give people what they need, not judgment like you...”

“Cody, your mother and I are trying here,” his dad said. “We want to get to know Kara.”

Cody was already half way to his car. Kara had to run to catch up to his side.

“I don’t need those fucks,” he said.

“Of course you don’t, baby.” She took his hand in hers. She was still shaking.

Cody decides he’s going to stay on break a little longer, so he sneaks behind the bar and pours himself another straight whiskey. Leighton Coombs carries a tray full of food past the bar and smiles at him. He watches her set the food in front of her costumers. He studies her tiny body as she bends over in front of her male customers, her blue shirt hanging low in the front, showing her white bra.

After he and Kara broke up, Leighton would embrace him with long hugs, pushing her body into his. She’s almost eighteen, Asian (*South Korean*, Cody thought) and, according to TJ, “the hottest waitress at the Vierling.” Cody prefers bigger tits.

“Do you have it?” asks Leighton.

“Yeah. I need the money by Friday.”

“Come over to my house tonight. My parents are out of town. You should invite TJ.”

“See you tonight.”

Cody helps himself to another whiskey on the rocks before getting back to work. It’s a little after 10 and Cody’s fricken wasted. He almost knocks over the stack of dishes on the salad cooler as he puts the last of the dishes away. He goes to the bar and sneaks another drink, although he’s pretty sure Michael is turning a blind eye to all his drinking. Kara’s the only waitress left in the restaurant, putting chairs up on the tables. It’s just him, Kara and Michael in the whole stupid place.

The phone rings behind the bar and Michael answers it. He hangs up and tells the two of them they're having plumbing problems at the Union Grill.

"Those dipshits at the Union Grill handle anything," Michael says, running his hand through his black hair. "Can you two close up?" he asks.

"Sure, no problem," replies Cody.

Michael looks at Kara and says, "Bye," but it's more like a see you later. Cody clutches the knife in his pocket. Michael leaves and Kara rounds up some rogue water glasses left on a table. She walks into the kitchen and Cody follows.

"They're after you," cries Cody. "Don't you see that?"

"I see that you're drunk," Kara says. She reaches her hand up to Cody's face. Her hand is sweaty but feels cool against his cheek.

Cody stares at her and smiles. "You're so bored with him."

"Fuck off." Kara sets the tray of water glasses onto the bar and pushes him. "Get out of my way."

He follows her through the swinging doors, into the kitchen. Kara turns and tells him to get away. As he approaches her, she inches back toward the salad cooler.

He inches closer until he can feel her chest moving up and down with heavy breaths.

Kara grabs the back of his head and kisses him deeply. She goes right for his pants and undoes the belt. He throws her up on the white cutting board on the salad cooler and reaches up her black skirt and pulls down her underwear to her ankles.

“Wait a minute,” Cody says. He turns his back to her and empties out his pockets on the microwave nearby. He takes his phone and starts recording video and casually props the phone up against the microwave. He returns to Kara. She shakes her legs awkwardly, trying to get her panties to fall over her shoes. Once free, she wraps her legs around Cody and pulls his pants and boxers down.

Her kisses become routine and he moves to her neck. He bites her ear lobe to make her submissive and her body shudders, as expected. He sways his hips to the left, but he can't position him right. She has to take him in her hands and adjust him in the right place, and then there's the familiar feeling of being in her. Yet, it's different than before. His thrust doesn't really penetrate her. Her every gasp for air is foreign to him. Underneath her shirt he clings to her back, scratching her, but yet it's like he can't get a real grip.

She kisses his mouth and his neck once and then leans her forehead on his shoulder. She isn't very wet. Cody comes fast inside her and they both stay motionless for a minute. Kara pushes him out of her and jumps back on the tiled floor.

He knew he'd make her remember.

She slides her underwear back on under her skirt, not making eye contact. She walks through the swinging doors, and Cody stands there, pants down, watching the door swing back and forth until it slowly comes to a stop.

Cody walks across the street, behind the Wells Fargo, drinking stolen whiskey from a paper cup. It's a cold, quiet night and he can feel this small Upper Michigan town

conspiring to bring in a bitter winter, an Ice Age even. Marquette under the siege of mammoths and glaciers.

He hears whispers.

He clutches his knife.

There's a parking lot behind the bank, empty except for a car parked far away. Cody knows he's being watched. He looks up into the windows in the buildings around him. He checks out the deserted black metal fire escapes. High above the streets, the windows of the Blue Lounge illuminate on the top floor of the Verabar. The back entrance to the Lagniappe restaurant is lit by a flickering neon sign.

"Zen," Cody shouts. "I know you're out there. Show yourself, you son of a bitch."

A black trench-coated man walks from the alley. He looks like nothing more than a shadow until he steps into the street light. He's older, but Liam Neeson old, and radiates strength. You would not kidnap this man's daughter because you know he would hunt you down to the ends of the earth for revenge. A dangerous man, to say the least, and Cody drops his cup to the ground and pulls out his knife.

"Agent Zen," Cody shouts. The man smiles exposing white teeth. Hollywood teeth.

The man walks diagonally across the parking lot, closing in on Cody. Cody runs. He runs around the corner, past Remies Bar, up Third Street Hill. He runs between the quiet residential houses. Past the elementary school and two churches. He jumps the fence to the grave yard and runs down the paved path away from the street lights. Dead leaves blow in his face.

He collapses off the path, near a small pond and tries to catch his breath. He wishes he hadn't dropped his whiskey. The grass prickles against his cheek. He shuts his eyes and listens to the wind. That had to be him. That was the man that framed his Uncle Artie. Cody often wishes that Artie had been his father instead of his real dad. Artie was a soldier, a fighter. Not a stupid pastor like his dad, who believes in fairy tales.

His cell phone chimes with a text.

"Shit," Cody whispers. He knows he hears someone in the distance. Had Agent Zen followed him? He runs down the path, which leads behind some houses. He walks behind some houses and sees some people out on a back porch.

"Cody," a girl's voice shouts. Cody walks closer to the house and realizes that Leighton's sitting on the some patio furniture with a drink. There's a fire going in a fire pit. Two teen girl's are sitting on a lawn chair, whispering to each other, and some guy is drinking a beer, sitting near the fire. Cody doesn't recognize any of them.

Leighton gets up and opens a gate in the metal fence to let Cody in.

"Did you bring the stuff?"

"Yeah, I got it. You got the money."

"Duh." She pulls out a bunch of bills from her pockets, all folded and wrinkled: her tip money. "So," she says. "You gonna stick around or what?"

Cody's phone vibrates. It's another text from TJ. He's wondering where Cody is. Cody lays back on the white comforter. Leighton lays her head on his chest.

"I thought TJ was going to hang out tonight," she says.

“I haven’t heard from him,” Cody says.

“Oh.”

Leighton’s parents’ room is all white, and it reminds Cody of the dentist when he was a kid. He hated being there but was always pumped to get the new toothbrush after his appointment. He feels that way now.

“Can I ask you something,” Leighton says, words slurred. She tries to sit up but falls to her side and lies back down, still touching Cody.

“Sure,” Cody says. He drank a pint of Leighton’s parents’ Southern Comfort, but he wants another drink.

“Don’t you think I’m way hotter than Kara?”

Cody blurts out a laugh. “No.” He laughs some more.

Leighton sits up, pouting. “Kara’s such a bitch. She’s a, she’s a, like, Taylor Swift... but uglier.” She giggles uncontrollably and then suddenly stops.

“How am I not hotter?” She pulls off her shirt. “Check out these abs.”

Cody just laughs and shakes his head. Leighton’s frown wrinkles her tiny forehead and, after a struggle, she manages to undo her bra.

“Still think she’s prettier?”

Cody ignores her and so she straddles him.

Leighton frowns. “I’m way better than Kara. She’s such an, a,” Leighton’s words jumble together into an unrecognizable insult. “... golddigger. She’s only with Michael because he paid for it.”

“Paid for what?”

Leighton giggles again. She bounces up and down on Cody and it makes him hard. "Don't ya know? I'm not supposed ta know but dishwasher Nick told me one night when he was drunk after we, well, nevermind." Giggles. "You really don't know, do you? She got rid of it."

"Got rid of what?"

Leighton rubs her flat stomach. "That."

"I'm going to stab Michael in his fucking face." He throws Leighton off of him and pulls his cell phone, his video proof. He stands up to leave.

"Where you going?"

His phone vibrates.

It's from TJ: *hey man, ran into kara. said u were really drunk wen u left work. jus making sure ure not past out in gutter haha.*

"Fuck TJ," Cody whispers.

"What?"

Cody looks at the topless teen girl sitting on her parents' bed. Her eyes are blood shot. He walks to the bed and rips open her button fly. Leighton giggles. Cody knows she's his for the taking, and, no homo, he thinks about TJ the whole time.

Someone's been in his apartment. The fold-out table in the kitchen is turned over. He runs to his closet and pulls out his cardboard box. His files are still there. Cody knows it's Agent Zen. The rest of his vodka is missing, but he doesn't notice anything else that has disappeared. His laptop's on the couch where he left it.

Zen's trying to scare him.

The morning sun is streaming through his windows, and he shuts his shades, dimming the room. He packs a hoodie, some granola bars, his cash, phone charger, gum, and all the random beers he has in his refrigerator into a duffle bag. He runs out the back door and heads west, to the woods.

Cody settles down on a rock on the bank of the Dead River. His beer is warm and he drinks it and watches the water flow. The warm autumn sun feels good on his skin, and he feels like he needs to save it somewhere, in a magic box perhaps, to defend against the inevitable Upper Michigan winter creeping in.

Cody lies on the rock and drifts off to sleep. Out here, in the woods, he feels safe. He dreams of Kara and Agent Zen and TJ and Leighton, all in a blur. It's the first time he's dreamed in weeks. When he wakes, he doesn't know what time it is and doesn't care. It's beginning to get chilly. He puts on his hoodie, chugs a beer, and begins to walk down the road back to Marquette.

Cody sees a car in a ditch with its hazard lights on. He recognizes the car. It's Michael's. Cody sticks his hand in his pocket, making sure the knife is there. He sees Kara and Michael arguing.

"I shouldn't have been driving," Michael says.

"At least we were doing something fun for once," replies Kara.

"I've been drinking with you all day and I hate drinking. Isn't that enough? But you insisted we go for a country drive."

"Well you shouldn't have swerved."

“I didn’t want to hit the chipmunk!”

“Hi, guys,” Cody says.

“Cody,” Kara says. “What’re you doing out here?” She brushes her blonde hair back behind her ear.

“Just a walk.”

A police car comes around the corner and pulls over to the side, flashing its red and blue lights. A woman in uniform exits the car.

“We had a report of a car in the ditch,” the officer says.

Kara and Michael stare silent at the officer.

“Who was driving,” she asks.

“I was,” Cody says. “It’s his car, but they’ve been drinking.”

“I see,” the officer replies. “How’d you end up in the ditch?”

“Swerved to miss a chipmunk. Stupid, I know, but I just love animals.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“No Ma’am.”

The police woman makes Cody follow her finger with her eyes. She seems satisfied and tells them a tow truck is on its way. The officer gets in her car and drives away.

“Why’d you have me meet you here?” asks TJ. The sun’s mostly set, and the street lights have just turned on. The parking lot is quiet.

“This is where I saw him,” Cody says. “This is where I saw Agent Zen.”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re taking classes at the university?”

“I dunno, man. It’s just something I wanted to do for a while now. Become a lawyer or something. I heard about this organization called Project Innocence. It’s dedicated to exonerating people with the use of DNA evidence. If your Uncle Artie really is innocent, this is a way we can work to free him. We can help...”

“He’s here,” Cody says. “Agent Zen.”

“There’s no one here. This parking lot is deserted. It’s time to...”

“We’re in danger.”

“Cody, will you listen to me? We can help your Uncle Artie. You’re one of the smartest people I know. Together we can...”

“Duck!” Cody throws TJ to the ground. Cody hears a whizzing sound and a ricochet of a bullet off the wall behind him.

“What the hell, man” TJ shoves Cody off of him and stands up on the sidewalk.

“Didn’t you hear that?”

“Hear what?” He brushes his jeans off and straightens his collared shirt.

“He’s going to kill us all,” Cody runs into the dark alley, out of sight.

“Cody, will you just listen to me...” TJ shouts, but Cody doesn’t turn around. He’s being hunted and needs to run.

Cody's on break. He watches the early November rain outside the windows of the Vierling from a bar stool. Heavy rain blows against the window. At times, it looks like sleet, ready to become snow.

Kara climbs up on the barstool next to him.

"A short story I wrote in my English class won a contest," she says. "I get to read it out loud this Friday at a dinner for the contest winners and I get to bring a date.

Wanna go?"

"Aren't you taking Michael?"

"Things haven't been so good for us lately, plus he has to work."

Cody chugs his beer for a long time. "Sure. I'll go."

The smooth velvety red walls match Kara's dress. The award dinner is in a conference room at the Landmark Hotel. There's a podium set up in front of the room and groups of people sit around white tables.

Kara's voice shakes as she reads her story. Cody is four drinks and three shots in, and he still isn't comfortable. There are professors and preppy students and pierced students and a few emo ones in the room. The one thing they have in common is that they are all pretentious assholes. Cody's sitting at a table with Kara's English professor, a slim woman with glasses and a chirpy voice. She's a baby bird waiting for her mother to vomit food in her mouth.

Kara was so thankful that Cody went there with him. She squeezed his hand many times throughout the night. When she sat next to him, she turned so her knees

touched his leg. Cody doesn't like being at the table alone with vomit lady, and wishes she was done reading her story already.

The story's about a Catholic girl who lost her faith because of her church's intolerance of birth control, gay marriage, and all that sinful stuff.

"She's got some real talent," vomit lady whispers. Cody clenches his drink.

Kara's story concludes with the Catholic girl keeping faith while not accepting intolerance, and this pisses Cody off. He knows Kara's an atheist like him. Everyone claps when she's done and she returns to the seat quickly, her face red. The waitresses enter the room with trays of food.

Kara leans over and whispers, "Thank you for being here with me."

Cody reaches into his pocket and holds his knife. He feels like a caged tiger staring at mustached lion tamers holding whips and tranquilizer guns. He will never join these brainwashed minions. A waitress sets a steak in front of Cody and a shrimp Caesar salad in front of Kara.

"So where did you get the inspiration for your story?" asks the vomit lady.

What if they've put something in this food, thinks Cody.

"Well," Kara says. "I've always struggled with my faith, being raised Catholic, but not supporting all their beliefs, like gay marriage. I think I'm finally coming to terms with the fact I can have faith and..."

The red velvety walls feel like blood and are closing in on Cody. These assholes know that he knows they're conspiring against him; he can feel it. An emo kid stares at

him from another table. Behind him, professors rattle on about budget cuts, and tenure, and how they hate Governor Snyder. Cody rubs his temples.

“How does the church feel about your abortion?” Cody asks.

Kara’s mouth drops and she and vomit woman stare at him. Cody grabs his drink and leaves the conference room, slamming the door behind him. Across the hall, through glass windows, Cody can see into the bar. He notices TJ and Leighton sitting together at a booth. They have papers and books open on their table. Cody enters the pub and heads to the booth.

“You’re becoming one of them, too.” Cody shouts. “You’re all one of them.”

“No way,” says TJ. “Will you just read my report on the Innocence Project? I’ll email it to you when I’m done.”

“Did Leighton tell you I fucked her?”

TJ stops smiling.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Agent Zen, at a table by himself. Cody stares at him. The Agent raises a glass filled with what looks like Scotch at Cody. Zen takes a drink.

“We effed one night when I was really drunk and high. I barely even remember doing it,” Leighton says. “That’s before you and I started...”

“Oh, you’re dating now?” snaps Cody. “Go fuck yourselves.” He storms out of the pub. It’s dark out, and a cold rain falls against the pavement. Cody walks out from under the awning and into the down pour. He hears footsteps behind him and pulls out his

knife, but when he turns around, the sidewalk's deserted. Front Street's deserted. The whole town is indoors.

He stares at the tall, brick Landmark Hotel, thinking of Kara sitting inside, crying. Being comforted by all those conspirators. The rain's turning to sleet, and it prickles when it hits his cheeks. Cody holds his jungle military survival knife in front of him, ready for Agent Zen, ready to fight, and stares down the deserted street as ice cold water streams down his face.

A Peculiar, Evil Creature

I start to stand up, but Quinn grabs my hand and pulls it back on the Ouija board indicator. I fall back on my knees.

“Quinn, it’s almost three. I have to get some sleep,” I say, but she shakes her head.

“Three’s the witching hour,” states Quinn. “Let’s try one more time. I need to contact her.”

Quinn’s parents’ basement is cold and it feels like a Halloween in spring, not a scary Halloween, but like a Halloween party in an elementary school gym with cardboard skeletons and goofy smiling Jack-o-lanterns taped on the wall. Quinn’s kneeling over the board in plaid pajama pants and looks sixteen although she turned 21 three weeks ago and this is the first night she’s been sober since. Her long, black hair looks silky in the candlelight, and falls around her skinny face.

The Ouija indicator starts moving, really fast. Quinn squeals like a tween girl at a Justin Bieber concert, then shouts, “M-G-O-I-N-G-T-O-S-L-E-E-P -I-H-A-V-E-T-W-O-R-K-T-O-M-O-R-R-O-W-G-O-O-D-N-I-G-H-T.” Little, blonde Mandy scribbles down letters in a notebook.

“Mandy, read it back to me,” demands Quinn.

“It says, um, ‘Go.’ ‘Ing.’ ‘Ho.’ ‘Me.’ Um...”

Quinn snatches the pad of paper out of Mandy’s hands and reads it. She looks at me and says, “Oh, you’re a dick.”

“This girl needs her beauty sleep,” I say. Mandy giggles and I want to slap her dumb face. Maybe it’s the fact that Mandy’s idol is Britney Spears or that she got an A in MA 102 because she wore a cleavage shirt to the prof’s office weekly for one-on-one “help” with her homework. Maybe it’s the fact that the difference between “your” and “you’re” mystifies her, that Stephen is in complete and utter puppy love with her, or that she comes back from a night out drunk and high with just as much money in her purse as she left with (sometimes more if there’s old, rich men involved). I guess I could forgive all that, all of it, if she wasn’t such a goddamn blonde stereotype.

“I have to pee,” I say and head to the basement bathroom, annoyed with them both.

I look at myself in the mirror and hate the black circles under my eyes. I twist the lip ring I’d gotten because Quinn once told me I looked like a strawberry blonde Ke\$ha if I would gape my mouth open more in a scowl, get my lip pierced, and drink more Jack, and I decided I should try it because Quinn thinks the pop star Ke\$ha’s gorgeous and maybe I’d be pretty, too, if I did that. In the mirror, I practice gaping my mouth in a sexual way, like Ke\$ha’s does in her videos, moving my jaw back and forth to find the most suggestive pose. I run my tongue against the back of my fake front teeth.

On Valentine’s Day in fifth grade, we all signed our name to brown paper bags and decorated them with Elmer’s glue, glitter and hearts that we made symmetrical by folding construction paper in half and cutting out half a heart shape with rusty scissors. I’d received one more Valentine than Quinn that year. Everyone in the class had been required to bring a valentine for every other classmate, but gross Eddie St. John had this

crush on me and gave me two. At lunchtime recess, Quinn accidentally slipped on the monkey bar and bumped me because I'd been sitting next to her on the top bar. Q saved herself by embracing the top bars but I fell and bashed my teeth on one of the metal bars on the way down. I knocked out both of my front teeth out. Two days later, at recess, sitting on those same top bars, I showed off my new fake front teeth. Quinn said, "You know, it was an accident. I didn't push you because you got more Valentines."

I wish I had gone back into the city and slept in my own bed in my crappy apartment. I work a double tomorrow and now I have to get up in like three hours, take the train into Lincoln Park, and get to work in time for the lunch rush. But Quinn talked me into staying in the suburbs, trying to contact her dead girlfriend with that damn glow-in-the-dark Hasbro Ouija board. She'll get to sleep all day and drag her ass into work to bartend for an hour before being cut early because we'll be dead on a Monday night.

I am, I mean, I *was*, a math major and that fact, added to my persistent atheism, makes me laugh at Quinn's recent Ouija kick. An afterlife just doesn't add up, and I've only tolerated these childish games because it's the only thing that seems to bring Quinn out of her funk. I believe in numbers and science and at 3 am, my patience for her fantasy is wearing so thin.

I return to the bedroom to see Quinn and Mandy sitting Indian style, surrounded by candles, chanting something in French. Well, Quinn's chanting in French but Mandy's trying to follow and it sounds like a kid trying to sing along with a rap song that she doesn't know the words too and I can't help but *elle oh elle*.

“You’re breaking the mood,” snaps Quinn.

“You have to end this. Annette is dead, Q. You have to move on.”

“I saw her! I saw Annette in the mall, in flesh and blood. She walked out of a dressing room, touched my cheek, and told me it was time to move home. She said she’d always be with me. She promised...”

“Where’d she go?” I ask.

“Huh?”

“Well you saw her walk out of a dressing room. Where’d she go after that?”

“She ran away. I tried to chase her, but that girl’s fast. She was a soccer player, ya know.”

“I’m sure she was an amazing girl,” I say, a tinge of guilt at laughing at her French Wiccan ... whatever the fuck she’s doing. There are tears in Quinn’s eyes.

I sit down on the bar stool a seat away from the two old men Quinn’s flirting with from behind the bar. It’s nice to be off my feet after a double and I’m thankful for the rum and Coke Quinn slides me, although she never looks away from Grandpa 1 and 2. When that girl’s behind the bar, she becomes a sort of star; she becomes taller. Her scrawny arms don’t look so skinny pouring pitchers and setting up shots. Her voice becomes more direct, a steady stream instead of choppy syllables, breaking with uncertainty.

She continues to ignore me, so I drift my focus toward the television behind the bar. There's a Penguin's hockey game on. As I predicted, Flanny's Bar and Grill is dead tonight.

Being friends with the Q is difficult. Quinn's Canadian girlfriend, Annette, drowned last summer in a lake near the town of Sherbrook after a vicious fight between the two of them at some camp ground. According to Quinn, they were both drunk and belligerent but, I have a feeling Quinn was being a cunt and that's why her gf decided to take that fateful midnight swim. They pulled Annette's lifeless body out of the lake the next morning.

Over Christmas break, Quinn had called me, ranting about how she'd seen Annette's ghost in a GAP store. I think she's bat shit crazy. But she's been my best friend all since 2nd grade, and now that she's back in Chi-town it's been inevitable that I'd have to pick up where our friendship left off, no matter how much of a raging bitch she is. Anyway, our friendship makes sense because we're both taking this semester off. At least her bullshit's something to keep my mind occupied.

Quinn frowns a lot while talking to the old men, replying to them in a sarcastic tone. She rustles around the bar a lot, pretending to clean as she talks. The old dudes hang on every word she says. I don't know how she puts up with creepers like these guys.

Creepers who haven't looked my way once.

I want to tell them that they have no chance and to quit fawning over her.

During a Friday night sleep over in sixth grade, Quinn told me how she wanted to make

out with Mrs. Martinson sooo bad. But if she hadn't of told me that she wanted to stick her tongue down our teacher's throat, I would've never known she was gay. The way she relentlessly flirts with guys for free drinks, attention, to fuck with them, sometimes she does it not for any reason except for the fact she knows she can.

On the television, number 24 snipes the puck right by the Red Wing's goalie, into the corner of the net and throws his hands up in the air to celebrate. "... and Justin LeBlanc scores in the shootout, winning the game" the announcer shouts.

"Justin's having a great season," Quinn says. "It's his year, specially since Crosby's been out with an injury." The old men agree, and Quinn proceeds to tell them how she knows Justin, and what a great guy he is. Quinn always pulls out her "I know famous people" stories to keep herself the center of attention. There's the time she allegedly bumped into professional wrestler Chris Jericho in an airport in South Carolina and he asked for her number, the time she claims Charlie Sheen did a body shot off of her in Vegas. I doubt she even really knows Penguins forward Justin LeBlanc.

She holds these grown men's attention with a simple half-smile. I don't know how to do that. I can sit down and work out a complex equation, usually rather quickly. Humans, however, are complex to the point of being unsolvable. There's just too many variables to solve for X.

A cute boy walks in the front door and Quinn runs from behind the bar, which is totally against the rules (our male manager would never consider reprimanding Quinn), and throws her arms around him. She shouts really loud how good it is to see him and

how happy she is that he's visiting. Eventually, she returns back to her bartending, as though it's her choice to return and not, well, her job. The guy sits next to me.

He's tall but has a boyish face, and his smile puffs out his white cheeks. His ears are big and stick out to the side slightly.

Quinn doesn't introduce us, so I say, "Hi, I'm Brooke."

"Hi I'm TJ," he replies. "I'm Quinn's cousin." I recognize his name, every summer the Murphy's take a family vacation to Upper Michigan to visit TJ and his fam. Quinn talks about him a lot. He asks me how I know Quinn, and I say we've been friends for years.

"Oh, you must be Brooke Luehmann. Quinn talks about you a lot."

"All good?"

"Um, yeah," he says.

"So what do you do back up north?"

"I'm studying pre-law..."

"Miller Lite, right?" Quinn interrupts, slamming the bottle in between me and TJ. One of the creeper guys next to me's pint glass is empty and she really should fill it, and TJ hardly looks of legal age, but Quinn doesn't bother herself with details like that.

"How's Cody doing?" asks Quinn. She leads him into a conversation about people I know nothing about and sometimes I wonder if she's making it a point not to include me. Apparently this kid Cody is a conspiracy theorist slash lunatic and I'm wondering why they're spending so much time gossiping about this douche bag.

“... and his latest theory is that he actually believes he can manipulate people by planting ideas in their head. Kind of like in that movie *Inception*. He thinks if he’s crafty enough, he can make people think what he wants them to think. Just got to plant an idea in their head and make them think they thought of it first. The bro’s gone off the deep end. All he does is smoke pot and we’re not really friends anymore.”

Quinn smiles, “But you *can* plant ideas into people’s heads, if they’re gullible enough.”

TJ squints his eyes, “You really think that works?”

“I know it does,” she replies.

TJ drinks his beer, then says, “Where’s the bathroom around this place?” Quinn points him the way, and finally decides to do her job and refill the Creeper’s drink.

“So you’re cousin’s pre-law?” I ask.

Quinn leans on her skinny arms across the bar between us. “He has a little Asian girlfriend Leighton and he loves her very much. I’m so happy for them,” she says in a tone of royalty to the peasant who had just smudged a jewel on her crown.

I walk up three flights of wooden stairs to the little deck outside the front door of my apartment. The view from it consists of neighbors’ decks and power lines, and cracking rooftops of the other buildings. It’s a cloudy night and it feels like rain, but I can feel spring in the air, even this early in March.

“Hi Brooke,” Mandy shouts from the deck below. Her apartment’s right below mine and I can hear most of what goes on in there through the vents: her insufferable

Brittney Spears-esque pop music, the excessive giggling, and obnoxious moaning when she brings a guy home. Kind of makes me wanna shoot myself in the head real bad.

“Come hang out,” she says. “Quinn and her cousin are coming over. It’s a super moon tonight, so we’re going to try the Ouija Board again.”

“I’m exhausted,” I reply, “and what the hell is a super moon.”

“The moon’s really close to earth and so it’s like twenty percent bigger. The increased gravitational pull makes it easier to open gateways to the spirit...” I walk in my front door and lock it behind me.

I crawl into bed and begin to doze off, hearing some muffled commotion from Mandy’s. Stupid Mandy and her halfhearted invite. Quinn never invited me to hang out once in the whole time I was ignored at the bar while she and TJ talked about hikes in Upper Michigan, and crazy characters I didn’t know like that Cody douche bag who, apparently, Quinn said she “would’ve fucked if I liked dick because he’s so hot.” I hear rumbles, like a little earthquake, beneath my bedroom floor. It happens again, this time louder. I reach my hand down and feel the cool floor. It is indeed vibrating, but rumbles to silence like thunder and I’m too tired to get up so I curl up in the covers and forget the whole ordeal.

I wake up to sunlight streaming in my windows through the blinds but the apartment is freezing. I look out my bedroom door, which faces the front door across the small living room slash kitchen. The front door is wide open.

My stomach burns but I keep in mind my fat gut that'll only show my defined abs when I suck it in, and get another 75 sit-ups out of myself before falling on the mat in exhaustion. I turn my head to the side and watch Stephen with an elderly client, helping her lift ten pound weights and then praising her after each set like she'd just thrown up enough poundage to secure an Olympic gold.

He has a quiet confidence about him that he shares naturally with all those he lets into his bubble. While lots of the other trainers attract the big muscle guys, grunting and shouting and cramming protein bars down their gullets, Stephen seems to prefer the elderly and obese clients, those who would be scared of the gym if it wasn't for his diplomatic hospitality.

Quinn and Mandy walk in the front door and it doesn't surprise me to see them. Stephen bartends down at Flanny's on the side and he and Quinn have become really close. Quinn always finds a guy to latch on to as her new "bff" and Stephen is the boy-du-jour.

Mandy waves at me and jumps on a treadmill. She's got on black Nike matching spandex tops and bottom. The top smooshes her breasts to almost nothing and her bare midriff shows off her flat stomach and pale skin stretched over her hip bones which visibly protrude out to her sides. She wears a black headband, keeping her blonde hair out of her face. Quinn comes and sits next to me on the matt.

"He's so hot," Quinn says. Fact!

"Yeah, he is." I say, my gaze focused on Stephen helping the old lady do leg lifts.

Quinn looks at me and then back at Stephen. "He'd be perfect for Mandy. I really should set them up."

I don't know what else to do, so I nod my head.

"Too bad Mandy's with Stan now."

"Stan, the dishwasher?" I ask. "I didn't know they were official."

"Yeah, it won't last long, though. I'll still put in a good word for Mandy with Stephen."

I lay on my back and start doing more crunches.

"It worked last night," Quinn says.

"What worked?"

"The Ouija board. It opened a gateway."

I sit up. "You know you sound crazy, right?"

"I saw her."

"You saw Annette?"

"In the flesh, well, kind of, I guess."

"Shut up, Quinn."

She sticks her bottom lip out. "I don't know if it's really her, though. She could be some weird, evil creature pretending to be Annette."

"Mandy saw this, too?" I ask.

"And TJ."

I can't believe she expects me to believe such a juvenile story. I get up and head over to the free weights. I've had enough retarded children stories for one day.

I sling my gym bag over my shoulder and walk out of the locker room. Stephen notices me and heads over.

“Hey Brooke. You working tonight?”

“Day off. You?”

“Oh, I gotta bartend. You should stop in.”

I smile and hope my cheeks aren't red. “Ok, I will.”

“Hey, you know our boss is having that benefit party to raise money for Japanese tsunami victims at Flanny's this Friday, right?” His voice shakes. “Well, um, I was wondering, since you're a server and all and they only need bartenders, and since I'm just a week night bartender, we both won't be working, and , um, if you'd want to get a bite to eat then head there with me.”

“I'd love to,” I say. I want to throw my arms around him and kiss him, but I focus my energy on my gaping Ke\$ha mouth. He says he'll pick me up at six.

I walk out of the gym and in the parking lot, under the spring sun, I want to jump up and down but I see Quinn leaning on her car, watching me through big, black sunglasses that are comically big for her slender face.

“I told him to ask you,” Quinn says.

“Oh,” I say. “Well, thanks.”

“Mandy's gonna be sad.” She opens up her car door and slams it and speeds away much too quickly for a parking lot.

I've always valued Quinn's friendship. Behind her cattiness, which hides her insecurity, is a good person in flux. In third grade, she threw mud in a Dana Miller's face because she called me a fat cow. She can be loyal to a fault, a cute companion, even a genuine friend. But there's some demon in her, some mean streak that she's constantly at battle with. When she feels abandoned, jealous, or alone, that's when her defenses become weak and the monster rears its ugly head. He takes over.

I stop into Flanny's and it's another slow night. Mandy leans on the bar, chatting with Stephen. I sit next to both of them, and when Stephen's busy attending to some customers, I ask Mandy about the alleged Ouija board incident.

"We didn't need the board once we made contact," she says, her brown eyes round, like an anime character. "She appeared through a ball of light. She was naked and Quinn had to borrow her some clothes."

"What'd she say?"

"I don't know. They talked in a different language. I think it was Canadian."

I stare at Mandy.

"I was so scared, but Quinn wasn't frightened, not even a little. She tried to hug the ghost but it backed away, shaking its head."

"What'd she look like?"

"Tall, blonde, skinny. Really pretty. She looked like she runs a lot. Ya know, toned legs and stuff." Mandy's little peach brow wrinkles, and her thin, perfectly lined and stencils eyebrows are pushed close together. "Annette's so pretty."

What kind of power does Quinn have over Mandy to make her lie like this?

Mandy's obviously upset. This is bullshit.

"Why'd you guys finally make contact last night after all this time. We've been trying since before Christmas?" I might as well indulge her façade.

"The super moon, duh," says Mandy. "It's not rocket *scientist*."

I pat Mandy on the head.

Stephen returns and hands me a tumbler filled to the rim. I sip it. Rum and diet. *He knows my drink*. I chug it, hoping it'll quickly ease the jitters in my chest and hoping my attempts at flirtation won't bore him.

* * *

I don't recognize this bed, or the red wallpaper, but since Stephen's on top of me I don't care. He kisses my neck and reaches up my shirt. This all happened so fast and I'm embarrassed that I haven't prepped better. I haven't shaved my legs or pubes in weeks, but before I can stop anything his hands are down there touching me, and I can't do anything but lift up my hips as he pulls my pants off. His touch is really warm. His hands touching me are hot.

Really hot.

So are his lips. His touch starts to burn. He pulls my arms onto the pillows above me and pins down my arms. It's so hot but I can't move. I can't kick or shake or even kiss back. His whole essence is crushing the wind out of me. He whispers in my ear "Vous ne serez jamais assez jolie pour moi," and then kisses my neck and his lips feel like cigarettes being put out in my flesh. I don't know he said but it rings just awful.

I jerk upright, screaming in pain and terror. I'm still screaming when I realize I'm in my own room. My front door slams open and something comes running in. A black figure is at my door.

"Are you ok?"

My bedroom light turns on and I have to squint to make out Mandy in the doorway. Quinn shoves her way past and stands at my bedside.

"You need to stop all this ghost nonsense," I say. "It's giving me nightmares."

"There's no way I'm stopping," Quinn replies. "Not after I found her."

Mandy looks like she's going to cry and runs out of my apartment. I hear a door slam from below. Quinn sits down on my bed next to me.

"It was so scary, Quinn," I say, still shaking. "I couldn't even move."

"That's sleep paralysis. My friend Evan suffers from that all the time. It's nothing."

"This whole Ouija thing is giving me bad vibes. And I don't even believe in vibes."

Quinn runs her hands through my hair and rubs the back of my head.

"Want me to stay up here tonight?" she asks.

"Yes, please."

She turns off my light and crawls into bed next to me. I lie on my side, facing away from her and she throws her arms around me. I feel her warm, scrawny body push up against my back and my heartbeat finally slows down a little. It's nice to have a cuddle buddy, even if it's just Quinn.

"This is nice," I say.

I take her hand in mine and pull it tightly around me. "I could be happy with just this, if only I was gay." Sleep's settling in again.

"I'd never be with you," Quinn says.

I roll on my back to face her. "What? Why not?"

"We're too good of friends," she replies.

"Yeah." I roll back to my side.

"Quinn, why was Mandy so mad?"

"I don't know? Maybe something happened at work."

"No, she seemed fine at work."

"How do you know?"

"I was there. I went to Flanny's to see Stephen."

"Oh," Quinn sighs. I listen to her breath. It's barely audible, not even a sound at all, really, but more like the residual of ghosts' whispered conspiracies escaping from the shadows.

"You don't think she's mad because I went to Flanny's to see Stephen."

"I don't know, Brooke. Maybe she's just on her rag. I'm tired."

I shut my eyes but sleep is an abstract concept now, some strange mythic animal running wild in green hills far, far away from Chicago.

Mandy's been having dishwasher Stan stay over every day lately so Quinn's been staying over at my apartment whenever she comes into the city. Although she annoys me half the time, it's been nice not being alone so much. We can hear the two of them

wrestle around like horny jackrabbits, and have even made up a drinking game to it. Every time we hear her shout “Oh my god” or “that feels so good” or “just like that” it’s a shot, a double shot for the “come inside me” just to ease the disgust overhearing that fills us with.

Unfortunately, this game forces us to drinking several times a day and night. Never base your drinking habits on the sex drive on kids in their early twenty because you’ll be perpetually drunk, I guess is the moral of this story is. Also, hearing people bang when the only thrills you’re getting are powered by batteries sucks. Big time.

Last night, she shouted out, “Oh my god, Stephen, that feels so good.” (we had to two shots). We heard dishwasher Stan slam the front door of Mandy’s apartment after that one. All this drinking’s making me fat.

The lunch shift today was busy but ended quickly, and I’m glad to be home so soon. I put the key into the door handle, and it turns easily. The front doors already unlocked.

I throw the door open and Quinn’s lying on the couch, watching the movie *Inception*, which she’d bought when TJ was still in town, and has been watching constantly.

“How’d you get in here?” I ask.

“You left your door wide open,” she replies. “You’re going to get raped and mugged.”

“Thanks for the concern.” I distinctly remember locking it this morning and wonder if Quinn’s secretly made a copy of my key. “Why aren’t you at Mandy’s?”

“She’s practicing for her interview?”

“What interview?”

Quinn tells me that Mandy’s applied to Chicago’s Professional School of Psychology and has an interview with them next week.

“Good luck with that,” I roll my eyes.

“She’s got a 3.9 gpa, you know.”

I highly doubt that.

“Anyway,” Quinn says, “I was thinking you’d want to go to the gym with me this afternoon. You’ve been missing it a lot due to all your drinking. I can tell.”

I walk into room and tear off my shirt. I suck in my stomach and stare at lines of my abs. I try to hold my stomach in like that all the time, but I know that I forget sometimes, and the flab must hang out and everyone, like Stephen, probably thinks I have no abs at all.

I take off my bra and throw on a sports bra. It pushes down my breasts some but I want them flatter; they accentuate my fatness. God, I’m so frickin’ big.

“Well, I’m a double major. I’m in clinical laboratory science,” I say, ready to explain that CLS people work in labs and we look at chromosomes through microscopes, so, no, it’s nothing at all like CIS Miami. I take a small bite of my salad.

But Stephen asks the question I dread, “What’s your other major.”

“Mathematics.”

“Seriously?”

“Don’t laugh,” I say, looking down at the white table cloth. “That’s my boring major.”

“Not funny at all. I’m fascinated. What made you pick math?”

I sigh, and the three glasses of wine I’ve had makes me feel brave. “Want the real answer?”

Stephen nods, his green eyes focused right on me.

“In a world of death and rage and cruelty, numbers are emotionless, constant. I find comfort in that. In the mathematics of twirling galaxies, in elusive dark matter, in the wind blown deserts of the Sahara to dolphins playing in the oceans, maybe even in a parallel universe where I’m a Tyra Bank’s next top model... there’s the watchful eye of mathematics ruling over us all.”

I stare hard at the chicken Caesar salad in front of me, hoping he doesn’t see me blush. I’m embarrassed for rambling on like that, but when I look up, he’s smiling.

There’s some local DJ set up in the corner of Flanny’s that they say is having some success on the music scene, although I’ve never heard of him, but Mandy’s told me he knows that girl DJ who may or have not been dating Lindsay Lohan a few years ago and has some original mixes and that’s enough to draw a crowd to this Chi-Town establishment. They have a cheap lighting system set up, and the bossman has our tables stacked up in the other room so there’s a sort of dance floor set up which, this early, only the drunkest of the girls here are currently dancing on by themselves, in some sort of empowerment show of femininity and how they don’t need men. They’re

the most desperate to get laid. It's nice that our boss has gone to this length for a charity event. There's a positive energy in the air even a math nerd like me can pick up on. When I saw Quinn at the bar earlier, she looked uncomfortable. She refused to bartend tonight.

I go to the girl's room to piss and catch my breath from the whirlwind of being with Stephen all night. It's like an evening competing on Jeopardy against that Watson machine; you're always on the tip of your toes to say the right thing against some manufactured, inhuman competition aka Mandy. I walk from the hallway into the crowded room and see Mandy at the bar, talking to Quinn. They're both wearing low cut shirts and torn jeans. Mandy's are torn so much in the front they show off all of her legs, and she might as well not be wearing anything at all. If she sways right, I swear I'll see her vaj, and I doubt she's wearing underwear. Mandy looks exasperated and reaches out and touches Quinn's shoulder, extending some fingers on her thin neck. Q shakes her head "no" and Mandy clutches her shoulder tighter. Quinn pushes her away and Mandy grabs on to the back of her shirt. Quinn faces her again she shoves her so hard her ass falls on a bar stool. Quinn storms off to the dance floor and Mandy rubs her eyes with her sleeves. I walk toward her but Stephen reaches her before I do. He has two drinks in his hands, one of them mine.

Mandy looks at him and he puts his arm around her, and she buries her head in his collared shirt. I sink in my boots and let out all the air in my lungs. Why can't I solve this equation? Numbers make so much more sense than people. I wish I could just plug in some numbers into my calculator and figure out the value of how to get Stephen in

my pants. I laughed at all his jokes, drank four glasses of wine so he could do whatever he wanted to me. But I'm standing there, staring at the two of them and too drunk to care that I'm staring when I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn to see Quinn's cousin, TJ.

"Hey Brooke," he says. He's tall and has to look down to see in my eyes. He's pudgy cheeks are red and his breath smells tequila-ish. He holds a beer bottle extra tight, like someone's gonna pry it from his hand. "Where you been all week?"

"Around."

"I've been asking Quinn to invite you over. She keeps saying you've been busy."

"Just work. I've had free time." Feeling brave after all the wine, I say, "I heard you had a girlfriend or I woulda taken you out to dinner."

His boy cheeks turn redder. "Oh, Leighton? We're not together. She slept with my ex best friend Cody. Before we were together so I shouldn't care, but she's still got some weird fascination with him. I need to focus on school; I want to be a lawyer. She's more about partying. It's just wasn't working. You should've asked me to dinner."

"Oh, I thought you were happy," I say. "I guess I was misinformed. You free tomorrow night?" I hate Quinn.

"I'm leaving town tomorrow morning. I'll be back in the summer, though."

"Look me up," I say. TJ hugs me close and I his cologne smells like hard candy. He's the kind of guy that will grow into a Stephen.

"Hey, before you go, wanna tell me why Quinn's saying she saw a ghost?"

TJ's smile drops. "That thing's not Annette. It looks real pretty and talks French, but it's not a girl. It's a beautiful, evil," he sips his beer, "creature. A beautiful, evil creature. Don't trust..."

Out of nowhere, Quinn pushes in between the two of us.

"Hi guys." She holds a glass of wine, which sways back and forth in the glass. I contemplate hitting the bottom of the glass, splashing it all over her stupid face. TJ notices some slutty girls on the dance floor and disappears in the crowd. We stand in silence.

I watch a couple sitting the bar, a skinny guy in red flannel and a girl, taller than him, kind of pretty, if you ignore her big nose. She's still out of his league. She's annoyed with him and turns away, chatting with her girlfriend. He sets his chin on her shoulder and she elbows him away. He tries to touch her waist and she rolls her eyes.

"Mandy's upset because Stephen's here with you," Quinn says, finally.

"I thought she's dating Stan?"

"They broke up." And like a passenger on the Titanic, I've just been hit by an unforeseen iceberg that's about to sink my whole damn boat.

"It's ok, I reminded Stephen he's here with you."

"I better go find him."

Quinn reaches out and grabs my sleeve. "Just take things slow. That's why he's weary about hooking up with Mandy. He thinks she's too easy."

"I'm going to hunt him down. And Quinn, thanks." She nods and takes a big gulp of her wine.

“Don’t whore it up. He doesn’t like that,” Quinn shouts as I walk towards the bar. The skinny flannel guy and the big nosed pretty girl are making out. I can’t believe it. She’s so much out of that scrawny jackass’s league. What does skinny flannel guy do to balance the equation so it equals pretty girl? Why can’t I ever get it? I can’t add up any of it. I can’t solve for X.

The DJ’s playing a Ke\$ha song, *Animal*. Out of the crowd, Stephen runs up to me and pulls me onto the dance floor. It’s a slower song and we dance close. With the music, his strong arms around me, this is the perfect moment. I look into Stephen’s green eyes and I realize I’m like millimeters from his face. He smells like the sunrise after it’s rained all night.

I’m about to kiss him when I realize I shouldn’t act so easy. Quinn told me he doesn’t like that.

“I need the bathroom now,” I say and run away from the dance floor.

When I return to the party, I can’t find Stephen anywhere. I ask at the bar if anyone’s seen him but nobody has. I drink my whole drink and order another. Finally, I see Quinn near the door. I charge at her.

“Where’s everyone?”

“Mandy’s really upset. Stephen took her home.”

“He left me?” I bite my bottom lip and feel taste the cold metal of my lip ring.

“Wanna get out of here?”

“Yes, please.” I won’t cry in front of Quinn.

When I walked by Mandy's apartment, I tried to look in her window. It was very creeper me but I was too drunk to care. There were no lights on and I was almost convinced no one was home, but after I crawled into bed I had heard nothing but commotion. Stephen had texted me: *You are so thoughtful. I'll catch up with you in a little bit.* He'd texted me later: *Where are you?* but I didn't answer.

I pound on Mandy's front door so hard I hear something fall in her apartment. I hope I broke whatever it is. I see the light turn on through the window and Mandy throws open the door.

"It's four in the fucking morning and I'm so sick of your shouting and screaming," I say. She's in pink pajamas and there are dark bags under her eyes. She looks half asleep.

"Brooke, you're the one that's been up partying all night. You've woke me up three times."

"Who do you have in there with you?" I shout. "Both of you, shut up."

"I'm alone. I thought you were the one having the party."

"Bullshit you're alone," I stomp away on the wooden deck and run up the skinny staircase up to my apartment.

"It's the ghost," Mandy shouts. From my deck I look down at her. She's leaning over her railing, looking up at me. "That ghost is messing with us."

"Go to hell," I say, and slam my door. I know she's down there with him. I jump back into my bed and pull my comforter over my head even though it's really, really hot

in my room. I hear a girl laugh. It sounds like it's coming from in my room, but I know its Mandy laughing at me from downstairs.

That morning, while making pancakes for myself, wiping tears from my eyes, I texted TJ, asking him why Quinn and Mandy were so intent on making up these stupid ghost stories. I pull my unwashed hair up into a pony tail and don't even bother to try and wipe away the smudged make up all over my face.

My phone rings and I'm surprised to see it's TJ on the phone. I pick it up.

"Brooke," he says. "I've heard a lot of weird stories in my day, a lot of conspiracy theories, but I never truly believed them. UFO's at area 51, Free Masons using Walmart to take over America. I kinda thought it was all bullshit. But that ghost, that demon, is real. I saw him with my own eyes. Stay away..."

I hang up the phone.

My iPhone starts vibrating on the table, but I let it go to voicemail. I guess blood really is thicker than water, although this explanation for TJ's words doesn't sit right with me. Not one bit.

April brought warmer temperatures to Chicago, and the sun shown brighter than the earlier months and the green started sprouting out anywhere that wasn't concrete or paved and at the tips of the tree branches. Not that any of that consoled me. It was like staring at a water color painting whose summer colors were carelessly splashed onto a canvas hung in a Siberian prison.

I'd leave work before Stephen showed up and opted to do crunches in my apartment to avoid the gym. Stephen's called a few times, but I didn't answer.

Quinn's been spending most of her time at in parents' basement. She says the ghost appears to her almost every night. They even sleep in the same bed, she told me once, although the spirit will never make physical contact with her.

It's the first day of the season to break 70 degrees, but I'm especially bitter. Mandy told me at work that she'd been accepted into the Chicago School of Professional Psychology's Los Angeles campus. How does someone that dumb get into graduate school and I can't even seem to pull it together enough to finish my undergraduate?

I walk up the stairs to my apartment and notice my door wide open. I run up and see the apartment just trashed. Pictures thrown off the walls, glasses smashed on the floor, cushions scattered over the apartment. I know I'd locked the door this morning. I rummage through the mess and soon realize nothings been stolen.

I swear I hear a girl laugh from my bedroom but know it's my imagination.

I fall to my knees, defeated. I pull out my cell phone and call Quinn. I tell her what happened.

"Of course you can stay at my house tonight," she says. "You're my best friend."

When I show up at the Murphy's house, Quinn's mother lets me in. I walk downstairs and Quinn's on her laptop Skyping with some girl.

"Meghan, if he's got an implant in his arm, just make him get it removed."

“He says they’ll just put it back in,” the girl on the computer screen says.

“Well it’s worth a try.” Quinn looks over her shoulder, and after seeing me, begins talking in French. Their conversation lasts forty minutes longer while I lay on the bed listening to French gibberish. Finally, Quinn closes her laptop and faces me.

“Why would someone trash my apartment and not steal anything,” I say. “Is this some sort of sick joke to make me believe in ghosts?”

“It’s not a joke.”

“I’m sick of this, Quinn.”

“I’ll show you. The Ouija’s back at Mandy’s. Let’s go there and settle this once and for all.”

So we head back into the city.

On the train ride in, I ask why she’s really been staying in her basement so much lately.

“Annette visits me there a lot,” Quinn says. “But I think the gateway’s been closed. We need the Ouija to reopen it. Also, you haven’t been social and Mandy hasn’t been around.”

“What’s Mandy been up to?” I ask.

“I don’t know? Maybe some guy’s keeping her busy.”

I watch the buildings and roads and cars and people that all blur into such a mess that no addition or subtraction or long division could ever sort out. I feel my cell phone vibrate and slowly pull it out of my pocket.

Stephen's texted me: *Where've you been? I miss ya.*

I clench onto the skin of my love handles and hate them. I hate everything.

He texts me again: *Movie this weekend?*

I flip open the keyboard and slam my fat fingers on the little keys: *I'm busy! Why don't you ask Mandy? I'm sure you'd get a BJ out of it* and hit send before I can remind myself of the million reasons not to send it.

I put the phone into my pocket and look out at a world with too many variables.

When we arrive back at my apartment complex, the sky is pink with sunset. Mandy's sitting out on her front deck and despite her year and a half of not smoking, holds a cigarette in her hand. Her teeth are yellow and her tank tops dirty and when she lifts her arm up to rub her eyes she exposes black stubble in her armpit.

I sit on the plastic lawn chair next to her.

"I'm going to open the portal," Quinn runs into the apartment.

"That stupid ghost," Mandy says. "Annette's dead. She's not supposed to be here." A single liquid drop trickles down her small cheek as she takes a drag of her ciggy.

"Have you ever loved someone so much," she says. Her brown eyes look at me like a child and an old woman, all mixed into one. "You're Quinn's best friend. I'm sure she told you. I'd be happy with just one night..."

"I'm sure Stephen will sleep with you." I'm surprised they haven't done it already.

Her gaze wanders up to the pink sky. “Oh, Stephen’s cute for sure. I even accidentally called Stan “Stephen” one night. Didn’t go over so good. But, no, getting with another guy and trying to love him won’t work, no matter how hard I try to make it. Fucking a guy would just be me not being true to myself again. ”

Her brown eyes zero back in on me.

“And what are you saying, Brooke?” She laughs, and it’s first time I’ve seen her laugh in a while. “He likes you.”

“I know you’re much prettier than me Mandy, it’s...”

“Are you kidding me?” Mandy says. “You look like Ke\$ha. We always talk about how hot you are at work!” She lifts up her tank top, exposing her flat stomach. Her round belly button looks ridiculously large on such a small body.

“See that. I don’t have abs like you. God, he likes your abs.” She giggles. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like them, either.”

There’s a huge rumble, like an explosion, followed by a scream, from inside the apartment. We go running in. There’s a golden orb, about the size of a basketball, floating in the middle of the living room. Quinn sits Indian style on the floor, the Ouija board laid out in front of her.

The orb of light grows bigger and oblong until a naked girl steps out of it. The whole process seemed anti climatic and the most surprise I get out of the whole experience is my dismay that the first emotion I feel at this is annoyance that Quinn is not, in fact, crazy and that there really is a ghost bitch that has congealed out of a ball of freakin’ light.

The second emotion I feel is a bit of jealousy that Quinn had hooked up with such a beautiful girl, with her wavy blonde hair that floats and falls around a pale face. Her boobs are small and abs toned, and I'm convinced if I was going to go through an experimental phase, I would touch a girl like this. Her nakedness makes me tingle. When she reaches out for Quinn, the glowing light behind her accents the lines of muscles in her arms.

My senses permeate with supernatural stimulation, the orb and laser beams of golden light, an electrical charge that vibrates the room, the smell of damp soil permeates the air. It's like an *Unsolved Mysteries* acid trip, yet I'm not afraid. Maybe my brain hasn't yet processed that this isn't CGI in a movie screen, but is really happening. Maybe, when the reality of all this sets in, I'll be terrified. But there's something familiar about this ghost, this creature, in front of me. Maybe the familiarity is bred from being haunted by this thing for months. She's hid in my shadows, saturated my air like an invisible fog, penetrated my dreams, but there's more to it. I feel like I've known this thing for a lot longer. I remember her from my childhood.

Quinn runs toward her but the girl holds up her hand. "Arrêt."

"I can't do this anymore," cries Quinn. "I want to feel you."

"It's against the rules. You can't," the girl says in accented English. "You know I want to hold you... but I just can't."

"Quinn," I say. "I know you loved Annette. But it never works out. The person you love always loves someone else. Or they leave you... or just die. It's a simple equation. Love is equal to hurt."

The ghost girl steps closer to Quinn. "C'est faux. Not even death can separate us."

Quinn looks at me, "In Quebec, after Annette died, I was lost and depressed and drunk all the time and then Annette's ghost came to me and saved me from all that."

"Use your brain, Q. Deduce the answer. If you did see Annette's ghost in Quebec, that isn't who you saw." I point at the naked girl. I walk up to Quinn and touch her cheek with my hand. "In the GAP, Annette's ghost touched your cheek. Whatever you saw in Canada, it wasn't that. This thing won't touch you."

The naked ghost claps its hands together, then again, then faster, starting a slow clap. "Well played, Ms. Luehmann. You figured it all out," the ghost says in a deep, male voice with what sounds like a Jersey accent.

I want to cling to numbers, as if those constants can make this thing before me disappear. My faith in atheism has been shattered like stain glass in an earth quake. But I don't feel scared. This thing has slept in a sleeping bag next to me; I've had lunches and dinners and long chats with it about reality shows and politics and recipes for cookies.

Mandy holds up her hands in front of her, making a cross with her fingers. "The power of Christ *completes* you."

"Don't you mean," the ghost says.

"It's not worth it," I say.

"All the prep work to disguise myself as Annette and you ruin it all," the ghost says. "You know how much Rosetta Stone I had to sit through to learn French?" It grabs its breasts in its hands. "Nice rack, though. I could've picked a worse person to imitate."

“You’re cover’s blown. You lost,” I say.

“Stupid girl. I already got what I wanted. These past few months of Quinn’s Ouija play has given me ample time to stick around and do real damage.”

Quinn runs up to the ghost and throws her arms around it. She kisses it and rubs her hands up and down its back naked back. Soon there’s smoke coming off of her and she has to pull away. Mandy buries her head in her hands, falls to her knees, and sobs

“Why’d you do that? She’s not Annette,” I ask.

But the ghost, not Quinn, answers me, “I’d be happy to show you.” It walks to me and places its hand on my face. It’s hot and in a flash of light I hear and see a whirlwind of things that don’t mesh, yet I can make it all out. I see people at the charity party at Flanny’s. I hear Quinn’s voice say, “Brooke wants you to take Mandy home, Stephen, because she’s so sad. Then come back to Flanny’s. She’ll wait for you here.” I see Quinn lead me out of Flanny’s to another bar. I flash forward and see Stephen walk around the charity party, looking for me. He doesn’t find me.

The ghost shows me Stephen bartending with Quinn. He asks her a question, although I can’t make out the words. Quinn shakes her head no.

I hear Quinn yell at Mandy because she’s deserting her and running off to LA and how now she’ll be alone. “Just get the fuck out of town. Brooke will still be here,” Quinn yells. “I’ll never let her leave me.”

But the most prominent image I’m shown is of two little girls, one black hair and one strawberry blonde, sitting on the very top of the monkey bars. When the fair haired girl looks away, the dark haired girl shoves her. The look on the brunette’s girl’s is

contorted; it looks like heartache, or love, or, no. Jealousy? Isn't it all the same? I watch the fair girl bash her front teeth on a metal bar on the way down to the ground and all the integers fall into place, the whole equation makes perfect sense, and I easily solve for X.

I back away from the ghost; my face burns.

"See Brooke, even monsters can't bear to be alone," it says.

"What did you do to her?" Quinn asks the ghost. I look into the supernatural thing's eyes and see Quinn's eyes staring back at me.

"I showed her why you kissed me. Why you're drawn to me. You're part of me and I'm part of you, Quinn. I've been inside you for a very long time. You were right, that day in the gym. What did you call me? A peculiar, evil thing?"

It puts its finger to its thin lips, and all the lights go out in the apartment. The street lights that shine through the blinds even when they're shut have gone dark, too. The only illumination is the naked, pale girl-monster with a male voice in front of us in front of us, whose skin glows the color of fireflies. She fades to black.

I pull out my iPhone for a light source, and I see that text I sent on the train: *I'm busy! Why don't you ask Mandy? I'm sure you'd get a BJ out of it.* I would do anything to unsend, but I no one can unsend a text and I can't make Stephen unread it. I drop the phone and sit on the couch. I can see nothing, not even the supernatural thing in front of me. I think it might have left us until I hear it say, "Quinn, I am a peculiar, evil creature. Just like you."

Ooh, Baby, Baby, It's a Wild World

She heard what sounded like a claw, a large claw tap on the glass on the hallway doors. It sounded large, almost metallic, like a velociraptor's razor sharp claw. Like a raptor tapping her enlarged, sickle shaped toenail on a waxed floor, hunting children. Click. Click. Click. There was darkness behind the stain glass in the doors, the fancy doors that shut off that wing of the house, and Alexis could see nothing through the tinted glass.

She heard a little girl giggle from behind the doors. She had to convince her brain that it was real, that here, home alone, she was hearing these noises that could not be.

Dinosaurs are extinct.

The sound of a claw scraped down the other side of the stain glass into the darkness. Alexis (Lexie, as her friends called her, back when she had friends) threw open the doors. The hallway turned left, and there, on the carpeted floor against the wall, sat the old rag doll. Lannie. Above Lannie was a painting of purple flowers, little blossom of lilacs. Lilacs: Proper non-labian flowers.

Lannie sat upright against the wall, her legs and arms crossed. Her glossy black and white eyes reflected the light from the lamp in the living room behind her. Behind the doors, there were three rooms: the master bedroom, the upstairs bathroom with the massaging jet whirlpool bath tub, and the guest room with the trundle beds.

"Hello," Lexie said into the darkness.

She pulled out her smart phone her parents paid the bill for and thumbed to the voice recorder app.

"Is anyone here?"

Silence. Behind the doors, the hallway turned immediately right. To the right was the master bedroom.

"What do you want?"

Alexis walked into the master bedroom and looked around. The room was dark; the air was ice. She flicked the light but nothing happened. Moonlight streamed in the window and she could make out the yellow comforter neatly pulled over the pillows on the bed that hadn't been touched in weeks. The widescreen television was propped up on the shelf, and the remote was placed on the nightstand where her dad set it before he'd left town three weeks ago. She hadn't seen her parents since September.

She walked back into the hallway and Lannie's little rag head was tilted so that her beady black and white eyes stared up at Alexis. She kicked the doll hard. It flew down the hall into the guest room and landed face down on the purple carpet.

Get a grip, Lex. You're 23 years old. Too old to be scared of dolls.

Lexie walked into the bathroom and flicked on the light switch. Again, nothing happened. The only light in the room came from the night light plugged into the outlet above the marble counter top. She looked at herself in the dark mirror.

"Is anyone here," she repeated, holding her cell phone into the air. She looked at her face. It was getting chubbier every day. All she wanted to do was sleep. Her eyes looked funny. She leaned forward. A reflection of red sparkled off her gray irises. That

seemed weird since there was no red light anywhere in the bathroom. Maybe the night light reflecting off the brown marble counter was causing the redness.

An unseen hand slapped her across the face. An open palm had smacked her, like an invisible trailer park ho had been standing right in front of her and bitch slapped Lexie for stealing her man. Alexis screamed and ran out of the hallway, out of the living room, out of the front door of her house. She ran up the driveway. A sharp pebble stabbed into her bare heel.

A cold October wind blew through the trees and chilled the girl. She wore a tank top and pulled her arms around her breasts to cover her hard nipples. The house was surrounded by forest and there was no light, just different shades of black circling and swaying and lunging in Autumn. The moon tried to shine through cobwebby clouds but not much light could penetrate the cover.

The Greenleaf house was on the edge of a subdivision. Her great grandfather had bought the acres of land they lived on years before. Across the street was a populated neighborhood. On her side of the street, deer that trampled through the flower garden and raccoons raided the bird feeder, somehow scaling the 6 foot vertical pole.

TJ Murphy's car was in the driveway across the street. He must be over at his parents' house for dinner. Or maybe a game a of scrabble. His mother had been ill, and he had been spending a lot of time over there lately. In kindergarten, Lexie dreamed of marrying TJ. He gave her a magic wand on her 7th birthday.

The wand was a small branch he'd picked out of the field, submersed in a puddle of Elmer's glue and shaken red glitter onto. He stuck blue and red star stickers onto the

crooked stick. Most of the stars had fallen off of the branch by the time he crossed the street, running to give the gift to Alexis. She kissed him on the lips and he ran home. He showed up later at her birthday pool party carrying a wrapped box. Alexis didn't remember what was inside.

Lexie stood hunched over, her hands on her knees. She whimpered.

The front door of the Murphy's house opened. Alexis turned and ran down her driveway.

"Alexis," she heard TJ shout. "Lexie, is that you?"

She ran back in and slammed the door. She put her back to the door and slid down to the floor. She gasped for air and pulled her arms under her tank top and shoved them against her stomach. She pulled them around her breasts and squished them into her chest.

She sat still for a long time. She thought she might have fallen asleep for a minute. Finally, she pulled the cell phone out of her sweat pants pocket. It was still recording. She swiped the marker back to the beginning.

"Who are you?" her voice said.

There was a mumbled whisper. She scanned the track back to the beginning and played it again.

"Who are you?" She held the smart phone close to her ear.

She swore the mumbling on the recorder said, "Dirty cunt."

That is totally uncalled for.

There was a pounding on her door and Alexis screamed. She pulled herself up to look out the window was face to face with TJ.

“Lexie, open up.”

Lexie wished she had more clothes on. Not like he hadn’t seen all of her before. Back in the day, she skinny dipped with TJ late into the summer nights. Sixteen, Lex had known better days. Before she got so tired. Before she got so fat.

She opened the door.

“Lexie, I thought I saw you outside in a tanktop. It’s the middle of October.”

“Marty Jr. kept barking at something. Probably a deer.”

“Oh,” said TJ. “Where’s Marty Jr. now?”

Marty Jr. was with Lexie’s parents in Madison. Lexie wondered if TJ had noticed she hadn’t been walking the dog for weeks. TJ was smart; he could catch her in a lie.

“Marty’s old. He’s sleeping.”

“Oh,” TJ said. “You haven’t been in class.”

“I haven’t been feeling well.”

“Oh. Well don’t forget our paper’s due Thursday.”

“I know.” It had been on her mind constantly, actually.

Suddenly, it felt good to have TJ at her door.

“So, you want to come in...”

“Oh, I gotta go, Lex. Leighton is waiting.”

Leighton Coombs was TJ Murphy’s on again, off again, teeny bopper girlfriend. She got around the small town and Lexie wanted to blurt out *You can do better*. But

who, since the beginning of mankind, since the big bang actually, ever broke up with their lover when a friend said, “You can do better?”

Leighton’s legs were harder to close than the JonBenet Ramsey case.

People talked about Leighton—small town America. Lexie was sure people talked about her, too. “Lexie’s a high school drop out.” “Lexie is 23 and still lives with her parents.” “Lexie got faaaaaat.”

“I should get going,” TJ said. “Take care.”

“I will.”

“And hey,” TJ looked past her, into tiled dining room floor. “Get rid of that doll. It gives me the creeps.”

Lexie turned to see Lannie, lying flat in the middle of the kitchen floor. She turned back to see her old neighbor and childhood friend walk down her driveway. She heard a little girl giggle softly, or maybe the wind.

Lexie stared at the blank Word document. She typed: **Freud believed dreams.**

What did Freud believe? Dreams what?

Dreams are awful.

Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He thinks dreams are a link to the unconscious. Freud discusses desires... It didn’t flow right. She backspaced until the word document was blank.

Maybe, she thought, if I just lie down for a second I can sort my thoughts out. She lay down with all the lights on, and pulled the thin blanket around her. The air was

cold. Her basement was cold. The remote was in reach so she turned on Nick at Night. There was an episode of *Friends* she'd seen a hundred times before.

The night before, Lexie dreamt she was lying on her stomach, being held down by a mass of blackness that took no real form or shape. Just a cloud of pressure squishing her into the midnight carpet. The only light was a blue moonlight of the sliver of a moon that seeped down from the sky. She remembered looking up and seeing the wooden frames of her window. *Wooden window frames*, frames of her childhood windows. They had long since been replaced.

The black mist became denser, pushing harder on her spine. She was having trouble breathing. She was able to turn her head to the side enough to see her Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles poster. But the turtles' green faces were distorted, warped, like someone had melted them into a plastic goo and swirled them with beaters.

Then she knew she was dreaming. She wanted to wake up.

But her eyes were so heavy. She opened them for a second. She saw her modern room around her, lit brightly from her light which she had left on. But it hurt to keep her eyelids up and they fell fast. She was back in the black and blue world.

And she couldn't move.

And she couldn't breathe.

She could only lie there, sinking into the carpet.

And try to open eyelids too heavy to lift.

* * *

It was 2:12 in the morning. She realized that sleep wouldn't come. It was too late to pop an Ambien. Maybe if she got up and worked out in the morning it would make her tired enough to sleep tomorrow night. That's what she'd do. She'd get up to work out in the morning.

She awoke at 4 and stumbled into her bedroom. She thought she heard a growl from the laundry room but was too tired to be scared.

Every night she said she will get up and go to the gym in the morning. Every morning she shut off her 5 am alarm. She'd hit snooze on the 5:30 alarm. After three ten minute intervals of BEEP BEEP BEEP she'd turn off the alarm and when her 7:30 alarm beeped on her cell phone, she'd hit the off button. When she awoke again her Psychology class was usually over.

This morning, she shut her eyes so hard it made her head ache. When she drifted off, the sleep was not rejuvenating, but a sleep in a cold sweat. In the clammy sleep state, even though she was wrapped in sheets and a comforter, she woke up wet and freezing.

"I'm going to shove my fist up your hairy pussy," a deep voice shouted. It vibrated the room like it came from a speaker with a subwoofer. Lexie opened her eyes to the gray daylight. A dream? How vulgar.

Rain hit the concrete outside.

There were two texts from TJ. She deleted them. The texts would stop coming soon. He would forget about her, too.

Maybe she could say she was sick. All this blamed on a bug that had hitched a ride on random floating mucus. He germed his way inside her, seeded in her brain.

She dug through piles of clothes. Where were her clean one? Well, she could throw some in the wash. That was a chore.

She heard a pitter patter across the tiles upstairs. A mouse? The sounds became louder, like footsteps. Someone was upstairs... skipping? She heard a little girl giggle. Lexie's chest heaved up and down, trying to take in oxygen. The front of her body, fault line tremors. She took one step up the stairs. Then another. She sat down on the third and listened.

A girl giggled and then:

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Ready or not here I come!"

Lexie stood up and ran upstairs. There was no one there. She walked through each room and saw nothing. She began to descend down the stairs and heard a giggle from the master bedroom. She ran to the bedroom, moving like a minnow dodging a skipped pebble. She kneeled down and looked under the bed. There, curled in a ball, was Lannie.

"Found you," Lexie said. She took the doll, walked outside to the woods, and threw her into the forest. She knew it was in vain; Lannie would be back.

* * *

Lexie stared at her computer screen. She'd stared at it all day, off and on. She hadn't left her house. She skipped her other classes. They were all just lecture. It didn't matter. She needed to get this paper done.

Her word document was blank.

She stood up and went to pee. When she returned to her desk, the word document read: **HELP US! HELP US! HELP US! HELP US!**

Alexis curled up in her bed. Eight pages. Double spaced. If she stayed up all night and did a page an hour she could finish the paper. But she didn't know what to write about. Where to start? Freud and dreams. All she knew of dreams since sixteen were angst.

She hated this place. Upper Michigan was always so gray. She wanted to dream of beaches with little children of hippie parents not old enough to care that they were nude. The bearded father kneels in the sand to begin the architecture of a sand castle while the mom looks on behind big sunglasses. Farther down the beach, shirtless frat boys throw a Frisbee with one hand while holding bottles of cheap beer in the other. Skinny brown girls who just graduated high school wear tiny bikinis covering their flat chest but not much of their asses. The girls lie on bright print towels and laugh at the boys rummaging through the sand.

Music began playing in the the living room.

If you wanna leave, take good care. I hope you have a lot of nice things to wear...

It was Lexie's dad's old record player. Someone had put on his Cat Stevens record. Lexie walked to the living room and stared at the record player, watching the needle move over a black, rigid surface. The cable box in the entertainment center shines 3:14 am in red numerals.

... but a lot of nice things turn bad out there.

Lexie walked down the trail, the curled, brown leaves crumbling under her feet in crunches. The night was so black. The nights were always so black. She held a little silver lantern in her hand, one that her dad used years before when he worked on the railroad, trying to get through Law School. Every flashlight he bought broke, but this trusty thing always pulled through. And in this fall night, dead enough to be winter, Alexis was sixteen and was anxious to meet up with her friends. She had to get her alcohol first. Her buyer, an older boy in college, had gotten her a fifth of Captain. He'd meet her on the dirt road. Her parents were out of town, so she could come home fricken' wasted, and not have to worry about hiding her drinking from them. They were always out of town. Her sister-in-law was pregnant and her mom wanted to spend every minute in Madison, awaiting her first grandchild.

Lexie had been skipping a lot of school and mom hadn't even noticed.

The trail curved through maples and oak, skinny tall trees like bamboo, reaching for the sky, competing for a place in the wild world. Her feet disappeared in the layer of leaves covering the forest floor. She kicked some leaves up into the air and they were taken by the wind. Marty was getting old; the wobbly dog walked up into the trees, out

of sight, to poop and pee and he took for-freakin'-ever. Marty had done the shitting hike for so many years that, at this point, it was merely a routine, a habit. There was no excitement or joy, fear or curiosity in hibernating forests.

She walked farther down the trail, where the trees became cedar and pines and where she never saw chipmunks or deer, but when she looked close, round black spiders scurried in and out of the flakey gray bark of the pine trees. She heard Marty trampling through the dead leaves. The old lantern flickered and, for a moment, she could see nothing at all except the vaguest outlines of forest.

The trail curved and made a gradual descent to the dirt road that gave the county access to its wells. On the other side of the road was a field full of yellow stalks.

Lexie so wanted to be drunk.

"Marty," she called. She could hear him maneuvering through the woods. There was a cracking sound. He stepped on a stick or maybe his bones. His pace didn't quicken, although she shouted his name three more times.

The cloud cover floated to the west and in the horizon a clear sky rose like a morning sun over the land. Soon, the moon was revealed and the whole forest lit up. Lexie could see without the lantern in her hands. She tilted the lamp horizontal to look into the woods to look for Marty and saw the reflection of canine eyes bobbling toward her at a steady pace.

"Come on Marty," she said.

His tail wagged twice that sank back down behind him.

Lexie patted him on the side hard with fake enthusiasm. The truth was, she always gauged her dog playtime she felt she needed to put it to make it seem like she gave a fuck. If she just played with the mutt for a minute, would its tiny dog brain know how much she didn't care??

He didn't know. Dogs are stupid.

She pounded on her dog's side again. Her hand made a thud against his long fur and it echoed throughout the descending road. Across the field, whose dried out grass swayed.

With his tongue hanging out, Marty panted, a constant huh huh huh.

A coyote howled in the distance and Lexie thought the poor guy must be hungry. She could see the light of her house twinkling through the trees. A hint of civilization in the blackness, a grandmother's house beaconing to Red Riding Hood. Starring Amanda Seyfried.

The trail went up and down, winding through the trees. She tripped over some roots she had thought were farther up head and nearly fell on her face. Marty bumped into her. She pulled herself up to regain her composure and Marty walked right into her, his snout poking her in her butt crack.

"Dammit Marty."

Gross. Bestiality.

When she got closer, she stared at the side of her house. There, in the dark window of the master bedroom, there was the black silhouette of a human. It looked like a boy, although Lexie couldn't make out any of the facial features. His silhouette

revealed wavy hair on top of his head. He did not move. She started breathing in and out really fast, first through her nose then through her mouth. She turned around and Marty wasn't behind her.

When she turned back to the house, the being was gone.

"Marty" she called out. There was no sound. "Marty, goddammit, where are you?"

Nothing but the wind blowing. Lexie ran. She ran back to the dirt road. No sign of her dog anywhere. She held the electronic lantern sideways, shining the beam of light all around her. When she shined it back at the trail she'd come from, there was the black silhouette boy standing there.

She limped back to her house; she'd lost all track of time. She unscrewed the cap of her fifth and took a big gulp of her rum. Marty was still nowhere to be found. In her driveway, Alexis looked across the street. Every one of the windows of the Murphy's house was lit up and cars filled the driveway. Lexie imagined Mr. Murphy at one end of their big mahogany dining table and Mrs. Murphy at the other. A dinner party? TJ sits on one side of the table with his cousin Quinn. His sisters sit across from them. There's a big turkey in the middle of the table... no, it's already carved. Big slices of white meat and little scraps of dark torn from the drumsticks and wings are stacked on a fancy pate. Maybe the brown neck is curled around the edge of the fine china for anyone brave enough to gnaw on it.

Lexie imagined there is a big, fancy white bowl with some oriental looking lilies decorating the sides, filled with peas and carrots. Another heaped with mashed potatoes. TJ spoons stuffing out of the turkey. Stuffing's his favorite. A happy family.

Lexie turned back toward her house and saw the being again, the black outline, behind the small glass window in the front door. She screamed. She screamed her lungs empty, inhaled, and screamed again. The second scream morphed into tears, and yelping cry, a panting one may confuse for painful sex.

She ran toward the house and whoever was in the window backed away until she couldn't see him anymore. She threw open her front door and screamed again. She's tried to yell "get out" or "go away" or "fuck your fat mother" but it all blurred into a high-pitched wail. In the middle of the entry way, Lannie lay sprawled out, her arms and legs spread wide.

Lexie grabbed the doll, her favorite as a child, off the floor and ran to the kitchen. She pulled out her dad's big knife, the expensive one he would always bring out when his guy friends were over, there always seemed to be some food item that needed to be chopped. The knife he sharpened with stones and had yelled at her once when she was 7 because she had put it in the dishwasher and would have put it through a cycle if he hadn't have caught her at the last minute.

She took the knife and stabbed it between Lannie's legs. White wiry stuffing spilled out of her. Lexie reached inside the doll and tore out its innards. White fluff floated to the tiles below. She grabbed hold of each of Lannie's raggedy legs, one in each hand. Lexie pulled the legs apart and the rip in Lannie's crotch tore through her

stomach and up to her doll head. The head was sewn onto the body. Lexie took the knife and made a slit under Lannie's right eye. She pulled the plastic eye from the face, taking a good chunk of fabric with it.

"Take that, you cunt," she whispered.

The next day, she awoke with a piercing pain between her legs, inside of her. Her panties were soaked in blood, and she just got done with her period a week ago. She ran into the bathroom and saw a deep scratch under her eye. When she returned to her room, Lannie, intact, was tucked neatly into her covers. Marty didn't come home for three days. That was seven years ago.

She woke up to her phone beeping with a text message. It was TJ: Did you read the email?

Lexie replied: No.

TJ: Professor Boal gave us an extension on the paper until Monday!

Lexie jumped out of bed. This was the best news ever. She showered. Ironed her jeans. She decided her favorite sweater, on her bedroom floor, was clean enough and threw it on. She dried her hair and made scrambled eggs for breakfast. She put some coffee in her thermos and packed up her books. She put on her coat and started putting on her boots.

And then her heart pounded.

Where will I sit? What will people think? I haven't been there in forever.

She began gasping for air that didn't seem to be in the room. She sat on the bench, shaking. She watched TJ, across the street, get into his car. He must have stayed the night at his parents.

Go out there. Say something. He can give you a ride.

Lexie couldn't move. Lexie couldn't breathe. The time ticked by. The clock struck eight. She stumbled down the stairs and back into her bedroom. Waiting for her in her bed was Lannie. Lexie pulled herself under the covers and pulled the doll into her arms. The record player from the living room started playing the Cat Stevens record:

Oooh, baby, baby it's a wild world. It's hard to get by just upon a smile...

Lexie pulled her comforter around her, but in her cold sweat, it was impossible to get warm.

Chameleon Kara and the Chupacabra

Kara gazes out her bedroom window, framed with wood that's covered in chipping white paint, at the glowing red eyes of a hideous reptile beast, and wishes it was Michael. The creature has bluish spiny things flapping off its back. When Kara lived way far up north, Michael would come to her window at night. But these days, he wouldn't come to her window even if he wasn't hundreds of miles away. She wishes he was here now, though, with his stupid grin, holding a plastic Taco Bell bag with a Crunchwrap Supreme in it, her favorite. Michael would bring Taco Bell to her window at night if she was hungry.

The creature outside her window is a Chupacabra, and it had ripped her cousin to pieces over the weekend. Kara's scared, but not terrified. She knows she can fade into her surroundings, into her torn flower comforter, and she knows the creature doesn't even see her. It sulks out of view, into the night.

Although it's the first time Kara's seen the beast, she's known it has roamed these Arizona forests and deserts around her hometown of Hope since she was a little girl. Seventeen years ago, it ate her daddy.

Three days earlier, she'd been living in Upper Michigan.

Like the arch angel, Michael's voice boomed with righteousness. "You've been fucking him? After all I did for you? All the money I gave you?" he shouted. He clenched

his fists and calmed down. Once again, he talked in his saint-like tone, calm and rationale. "I can't believe you've been fucking him."

"No," Kara said, but she knew he knew she was lying. He always knew.

"Just tell me the truth," Michael said.

"I love you, Michael."

"You always tell me what I want to hear," he said so quietly Kara could barely make it out. "You're a chameleon, Kara."

That night, Kara packed an old duffle bag and bought a bus ticket for home. It was the last place in the world she ever wanted to go, but when the Greyhound employee, with a piece of lettuce stuck in her buck teeth, asked her where she was heading to, the only words Kara could make her puffy lips utter were: "Hope, Arizona."

The sunlight that shone in the bus window was hot on Kara's face, and she couldn't sleep anymore. She blinked her eyes and focused on a woman that had sat down next to her. This lady wore a flower print dress and had her hair up in a French braid. There was a bible and anti-abortion flyers sticking out of her purse. Kara didn't want to talk to the lady, so she kept her headphones in her ears long after her iPod died. But halfway through Iowa, the headphones in her ears were aching something fierce so Kara took them out.

The woman seized the opportunity to chat and asked if she had a husband. Kara shook her head no. The woman assured her that a pretty girl like herself would find a man soon and her life would be filled with the joy of motherhood. The woman gave

Kara her whole biography: how she was Catholic and pregnant and had three children at home and a doctor for a husband. Eventually, she asked Kara, “Dear, have you been saved?”

“Yes, yes I have.” Kara replied, and took comfort in the approval in this woman’s eyes by her answer. Kara figured it would be easier to lie about her beliefs than make this lady mad. After all, Kara had been raised Catholic. So what if she was an atheist now.

The woman stayed on when Kara got off in Colorado. She spent the night in the bus station waiting for her the 5 am bus to Hope. She barely slept in the station and continued to nap long into the afternoon in her uncomfortable seat on the bus. When she awoke, red sunlight poured in through the windows and had burnt her skin.

White smoke rose from the horizon. Arizona was on fire; there was so much smoke Kara wondered if the whole freakin’ state was burning. It was hard to believe that there were any safe havens in the fires and Kara called her mom on her cell again to make sure that Hope was safe. Her mother assured her that Hope was protected from the flames, a testament to their town’s unwavering Catholic faith.

The sun was beginning to set by the time she got off the bus. Kara sat on a bench outside the bus station, on the side of a highway a half mile out of Hope. Kara stared into the flat desert, cracked and crumbling, dotted with crisp bushes and tilting cactuses. She inhaled the dry heat and scanned for any sign of a man hiking through the desert. It was a habit she just couldn’t break. As a girl, Kara always imagined he’d come hiking back someday. Maybe, somewhere far off in the horizon, he’d lost his memory

and didn't know who he was. Perhaps he had slipped and hit his head on a rock, and woke up clueless to who he was. And, maybe someday, another bump to his head would cure his tragic case of amnesia that had kept him lost all these years. Like a soap opera Stefano DiMera, he'd come back from the dead; he'd rise from the burning forest ashes.

Those were little girl fantasies. He'd come back if he could, Kara knew he would. But he was long gone. Eaten, digested, shitted out, and dried up into desert sand.

Moving back into Kara's mom's house was anti-climactic. Kara's brother, Jayden Parks, couldn't make it over to help her move in because he was stuck on the graveyard shift patrolling for drunk drivers. It didn't matter; Kara only had one duffle bag to unpack anyways.

Kara's mom had tea waiting for her. She said, "Everyone at church will be so excited to see you on Sunday."

Kara pulls her old, dusty bike out from the garage and wipes it off. She rides it the gas station and fills up the tires. She peddles around the town aimlessly for a while, and ends up at the park across the street from her house.

Kara sits down on the sagging swing hanging from a mustard yellow metal frame. There are two children running around, under the watchful eye of a nervous Latina mother. She glances at Kara nervously. Everyone looks on edge, even the giggles of the children sound superficial. Kara has goose bumps in the hot June heat. Smoke rises from the horizon and Kara can sense the creature roaming the Arizona desert.

Kara tries not to call Michael. She tries to pretend she doesn't have her scratched up iPhone with her, but her palm instinctively wraps around it in her purse and her pink fingernails tap in her passcode. Every time she peers at the iPhone, she's surprised it still works. Michael hasn't shut off her service yet. Kara wonders how long he'll keep paying the bill.

Michael's like a character from a television show or a movie. He's able to break up with someone and that is the end of that. Time to move on. Maybe he *is* an angel, something supernatural. Real people don't go through clean break ups. They drunk dial at three in the morning and fuck their exes after break ups. Real people pick stupid fights with their exes for attention or at least the satisfaction of ruining his or her day.

Saint Michael floats on clouds high about all that. *Fuck Michael*, Kara thinks. *Why won't he answer my texts?*

During their last night in their apartment, during their last fight, Michael shut down. He wouldn't say a word to her until Kara finally yelled, "I hate you. And why'd you call me a chameleon? What the cock is that supposed to mean?"

"You're like the alien Roger from *American Dad*. You have a different personality every week. The Kara I love, she's not even real."

"You're comparing me to a cartoon?"

"When you were with Jessie, you were a Republican. When you were sleeping with Zack, you voted for Obama. Who knows what drugs you did with Matt, but after that you were anti-drugs with Joey."

She took off her shirt, bra and pants, standing in pink bikini bottoms, shelving her boobs in her hands.

Michael continued his rant, "You smoked a lot of pot with Brian and were a conspiracy fanatic with Cody. I was naïve enough to believe I was loving the real you. But none of us ever knew the real you, did we?"

She removed her hands from her breasts and pulled down her panties. Michael turned away and walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and locked the door.

Kara hated his lecture. She hated him. She hated Michael because he wouldn't yell at her more, degrade her, fuck her, slap her. Still naked, she threw her into stuff her duffle bag. Packing up her bras out of the dresser, she pulled out the blue dildo she had bought at a sex toy party the waitresses had had. She and Michael would play around with it during sex once in a while. She had to make him remember. She turned on the sex toy and crawled onto his bed. She rubbed it between her legs for a bit before sliding it inside her. She moaned loud, hoping Michael would open the door and see her on his bed, legs spread, shoving plastic inside her because she couldn't have him. She screamed porno loud, obnoxious and subservient. It got her excited and she thought for sure he'd come rushing out of the bathroom, naked, finishing her off. Thinking of him, she couldn't hold back and got herself off, and when she shut the off the toy she realized he had turned on the radio in the bathroom. He couldn't hear her at all.

So Kara threw the blue plastic penis on the floor and packed up a few of her random favorite things and some clothes. Most of the things in the apartment were Michael's, anyways. She walked herself to the bus station.

A cold hand presses on her shoulder and Kara falls off the swing to her feet.

“Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Marci, her best friend from high school, stands in front of her. Her long black hair blows in the wind. She’s Hispanic, very tall, and pretty enough to be a model. So pretty, in fact, that she actually is a model.

They embrace. Kara doesn’t realize how much she misses Marci until now. In Marci’s arms, Kara remembers the sleepovers in grade school, the first double date in sixth grade at the roller rink, how they always ate Laffy Taffy. Friends like Marci and Kara never really grow apart and Kara, in this moment, feels like she never headed up north to Michigan to escape this Catholic stronghold in the desert they called Hope. In the moment, she’s never left Marci’s side.

“Your mom called and told me you were back in town,” Marci says. “Thought I’d say hi. I’m so sorry about your cousin, Chip.”

“They say his limbs were torn off. Not a drop of blood left in his body.”

“Serial killer,” Marci says. She entwines her tan hand in between Kara’s pale fingers. “What a waste. He just got engaged. He was so happy.”

“It’s the Chupacabra,” Kara says. “Ate him like it ate my pa.”

“Oh, Kara.” Marci touches her cheek. “Wanna go get a drink?”

The Desert Oasis is the kind of bar where they leave peanuts in baskets on the tables and the patrons throw the shells on the floor. Marci’s as pretty as she’s ever

been. Kara notices the toned muscles in her arms when Marci brings another tequila shot to her lips and tosses it back with her head. Kara downs her shot less dramatically.

Kara pulls out her wallet and takes her last ten dollars out.

“Put that away,” Marci says, physically shoving Kara’s hand, holding her wallet, back into her purse.

“I can get this round.”

“Sweetie, I’m a cheerleader for the Cardinals. I do all right. And I saw your breakup on Facebook.”

“I miss Michael,” she says. “I tried to be the girl he wanted. He just wouldn’t listen.”

“Things are finally working out for me. And they’ll work out for you, too, Kara.”

“I’m so glad things are going your way,” Kara says.

“I’m driving out to LA next week. I’m auditioning to be a dancer in a Ke\$ha video.”

The bartender takes the shot glasses away and Marci orders two more margaritas without asking Kara if she wants another. They cheers to her audition.

Marci’s brown eyes grow wide. Kara turns on her bar stool to see what she’s looking at. On the big television screen mounted in the corner, a CNN news reporter stands outside of a police station. The screen reads: Serial Killer in Hope, Arizona.

“Turn in up. Turn it up!” Marci shouts.

“... where the body of Christopher “Chip” Davies was discovered in the desert outside the small Arizona town a week ago. His death is the third brutal murder in what authorities are now labeling a serial killer”

“We’re on CNN!” says Marci.

The chief of police comes on camera and talks about how the FBI has joined the station and that there is a county wide search underway. The perpetrator will be caught soon, he assures the reporter.

The reporter continues, “The brutal nature of these killings have led some to believe some more fantastical explanations to the killings.”

The camera cuts to the reporter standing next to a young man in a police suit. He has short blond hair, freckles and Kara’s nose. The screen reads: Deputy Jayden Parks.

“It’s your brother,” says Marci. “Oh my god, your brother’s on national TV.”

“There have been rumors that, because the bodies have been found ripped apart and bloodless that there are other worldly forces at work, such as aliens. I even heard someone mention that the legendary Chupacabra is behind these killings. I assure you and everyone in Hope that these killings have a logical explanation and we will be arresting a very human being soon. Outlandish rumors do nothing but spread fear, and that helps no one.”

“I understand that the latest victim, Chip Davies, was your cousin,” the reporter says. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“This has been a horrible tragedy. But I find in solace that we have our best people working around the clock to bring this killer to justice.”

Marci's tickled by the whole news report. She orders another round of shots and grabs Kara's arm. Marci shines, even in the dull rundown bar lights. Her face is covered with a thin layer of sweat and it makes her high cheek bones sparkle.

"Wasn't that exciting?"

"Yeah," Kara says and forces a smile.

"Oh my god, I'm being so insensitive. I didn't even think about Chip."

"It's ok. It was pretty cool seeing Jayden on CNN."

"True dat," Marci says.

They cheers and take the shots. Kara doesn't even bother with salt or a lime.

Marci grabs her arm and shakes her.

"They'll catch Chip's killer," Marci says.

"The Chupacabra killed him," Kara says.

"Those are just old town rumors, Kara. What the hell's a Chupacabra, anyways?"

"I saw it."

Marci stares at Kara and puts down her drink.

"I did. He looked like a lizard, but walked up right. He had awful red eyes. Some people say it's an ancient dinosaur creature, but I think he's from space."

Marci takes a drink of her margarita and Kara wonders if Marci believes her.

The cab pulls up in front of the Parks' house and Marci leans over and plants a wet kiss on Kara's cheek.

"I'm so glad you're back," Marci says.

“Let’s do this again real soon,” Kara says. They hug one last time and Kara gets out of the cab. She walks down the short, crumbling sidewalk to her concrete porch. She turns and the cabs still at the street out front. Marci must be waiting to make sure Kara gets safely inside. Kara opens the screen door and then the front door and walks into the dark kitchen. The cab drives off and she walks back outside, sits on the front porch, and lights a cigarette.

She stares at the park across the street, lit only by a single street light. On the other side of the park is another street. She sees someone walking down it. The figure looks like a walking shadow in this dark night. The three dimensional figure of blackness turns and begins walking across the park. Kara rubs the cigarette out on the porch and throws it into her lawn. She runs inside and locks the door.

She goes into her room and shuts the shades. She undresses and crawls into bed naked. She misses lying naked next to Michael. They would come home from work stinking like the restaurant they worked at together, shower together, fuck, and then lay together naked and happy. Kara would be anything she wanted him to be for moments like that.

There’s a *tap tap tap* on her window.

This is it, she thinks. *The Chupacabra has come for me*. She’s scared but all the tequila gives her liquid courage. She stumbles to her shades and throws them back.

Standing there is her old friend Tyler Adams. He’s holding a bag of Taco Bell. She covers up her body the best she can with her hands.

They sit on Kara's bed, eating tacos.

"I was so hungry," Kara says. "I can't believe you brought food."

"This is what we ate when we were drunk in high school. I figured I'd swing by with some and see if you were around."

Tyler's striped V-neck shirt is stained with spills and it's obvious he'd been drinking.

Kara makes eye contact with him, and his blue eyes grow big like they did every day in high school when he saw her in the hall. Every time she was drunk and needed a ride, if she texted him, he'd find a way to get her Taco Bell and then home. Kara suspects that he was madly in love with her.

"You always took such good care of me," Kara whispers.

Kara pulls out her phone, hoping for a text.

"Didn't hear from you much after you left," Tyler says and takes a big bite of a burrito.

"I got so caught up in things. I started dating different guys and was moving around a lot. I moved up to Michigan with Jessie and he left me there to join the army. I eventually ended up with Michael. I miss him so much."

"What happened?"

Kara explains how she fell in love with Michael and how she knew he was good for her. She got back into school while dating him, and made the dean's list. She realized she wanted to be a writer.

“But I ended things so suddenly with Cody Bolger to be with Michael. And I’m not good walking away from things.”

“Did you cheat on Michael?”

“Just once last fall. I was working late with Cody and I just let him fuck me. I don’t why. And the fucker recorded it on his cell phone and then sent it to a bunch of his coworkers. I thought everyone kept it secret but a copy of it ended up in Michael’s inbox last week. That was the end of it all.”

“So here you are,” Tyler says. “At least you got to get away.”

“You can get away, too. Just leave.”

“And who will watch over Maddie? Mom’s so depressed she can’t get out of bed most days. We have no money. It’s just so lonely. And I’m always so alone.”

“You’ll find someone.”

“Not around here. Not in this body.”

“What?” Kara scoots closer to him.

“It’s getting late. I should get going.”

Kara knows she should ask him to stay; he shouldn’t be walking alone through the streets of Hope in the middle of the night with a hungry Chupacabra on the loose. But she wants to be alone. When he leaves she strips again and crawls into bed, imagining a naked Michael next to her.

“Rise and shine,” a male voice shouts from her doorway.

Kara pulls her pillow over her head. “Jayden, shut up.”

“Get up sis,” he says. “Shouldn’t you go out looking for the job today?”

“It’s 7 am.”

“Early bird gets the worm. Get up. I brought some breakfast.”

Kara lies in her bed with the pillow over her head. It’s hot in her room and it’s hard to breath underneath her covers. She smells McDonald’s breakfast and no matter how hard she shuts her eyes, there is no getting back to sleep.

“Ok, fine,” she shouts. “You win. Will you turn on the goddamn AC.”

She jumps out of bed and throws short shorts and a tank top on over her naked body. She stumbles out of the room into the kitchen.

Jayden’s in a navy blue police uniform, sitting at the kitchen table. His blonde hair is neatly cut and he has a little growing under his nose.

“Oh my god, will you please shave that stache.” Kara sits down across from her brother.

“I think it makes me look tough.”

“You look like an eighth grader trying to grow a mustache, ready to show off his first pube.”

“How’d you become so vulgar?”

Kara sticks out her pierced tongue. Jayden throws a hashbrown at her.

“Check out my tattoo,” she says, turning around so he can see the planet earth tattooed on her pale shoulder.

Jayden shakes his head. “I stopped by last night. You weren’t here.”

“I went to Oasis with Marcie.”

“I don’t want you going out, especially to a dump like the Oasis. A girl like you, young blonde... the killer’s going to target you and chop you up in a heartbeat.”

“There’s no killer.”

“Then who killed Chip?”

“It’s the Chupacabra. The thing that ate...”

“Oh, here we go. I don’t wanna hear about Pa getting eaten. Pa ran off to Mexico where he probably stole money from drug dealers and ended up buried out there in the desert in some unmarked grave.” Jayden looks at his watch and stuff the rest of his hash brown in his mouth.

“I gotta run.” He gets up and Kara runs over to him and hugs him tight. He pats her back and pushes her away with his hands on her shoulder.

“Please be careful. Never go anywhere alone and lock the doors when you’re home.”

“I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“Good. There’s no Chupacabra, Kara, but there is some kind of monster on the loose.”

After Jayden leaves, Kara picks up crumbled Taco Bell wrappers off her floor. It was so nice of Tyler to bring them to her. She feels bad that she was so flippant with him. He’d said something last night, something that seemed off to her—a little bizarre. But the memories of their conversation were blurred and she couldn’t pinpoint any words he said. Just cadence and gist remain in her memory of anything they talked about last night. Something about Tyler being lonely.

In high school, Tyler got a DUI bringing Kara home. It was after junior year prom, and Kara went to a party at some rich kid's house twenty minutes out of town. She'd taken some pills and couldn't sleep. Her prom date was lying next to her, naked and snoring loudly. She quietly dressed and snuck out of the big house and called Tyler from the front porch. The sky was getting lighter already. Kara doesn't even remember who Tyler had gone to prom with. He wasn't with his date when Kara called.

Kara let Tyler go down on her the summer after that prom. He had texted her constantly after that. Kara did her best to fade away and started dating some stoner college boy later that summer. A sad feeling sinks into Kara's chest and she feels like she owes Tyler something.

At noon, her phone vibrates. Kara pulls it out, hoping it is a text from Michael. It's from Tyler, asking if she wants to hang out at his apartment. Kara accepts the offer. It's better than job hunting.

Kara throws a tennis ball up into the air and catches it in her hand. Tyler's folding laundry on his bed. His room is neat and he has posters and pictures of girls up all over the walls of his room. There are topless girls from Abercrombie & Fitch magazines taped up with varying lengths of scotch tape. There are pictures of models in thongs lying on tropical beaches with sand on their butt cheeks. There's pictures of Tyler with random, beautiful girls pinned up next to a Ke\$ha poster.

Kara throws the tennis ball in the air and misses it on the way down. She watches it bounce across the bedroom floor.

“Do you play tennis anymore?” Kara asks.

“Naw. I haven’t played in years.”

“I can’t believe he hasn’t called,” Kara says. “Or even answered one of my texts. You’d think he’d want to know I was safe. I mean that’s just common courtesy, right?”

“If he doesn’t want a beautiful girl like you, forget him,” Tyler says. He runs his hands through his shaggy blonde hair and continues folding laundry. He’s folding tiny girls’ panties and jeans that are too big for them.

“Michael said he never knew the real me. He called me a chameleon.”

“You are elusive,” Tyler says.

“Some parts of me I just keep inside,” Kara says.

“I know what you mean,” Tyler says.

Kara stands up and walks to the pictures of Tyler with girls taped up on the wall.

“Who are all these girls you’re with,” Kara asks.

“Just friends. I’m always just the friend.”

Kara looks at Tyler and he’s stopped folding the laundry. He stares off into space and Kara thinks for a moment he might cry. She doesn’t understand what’s going on with him and suddenly wants to leave. She tells Tyler that she has to go look for jobs and runs out of his apartment with hardly a goodbye.

The Oasis bar is busy for a Tuesday night. Kara watches a girl in a cowboy hat dance with a man with bad skin to a Toby Keith song. Marci orders another round of beers.

“Any luck job hunting?” asks Marci.

“I applied a few places.” Kara applied at one place. The McDonalds. She made sure to put a few spelling errors on her application to persuade them not to call her back. Marci turns on her bar stool away from Kara to continue talking to the guy next to her. Marci’s been talking to him all night and Kara’s bored. Kara stares at the condensation on her beer bottle. She looks up at the television. The bartender has ESPN on and a reporter is interviewing some hockey player named Justin LeBlanc. Kara returns to staring at the water droplets on her beer bottle.

Kara pulls out her phone, hoping for a text.

Kara’s excited when she sees Tyler walk into the bar. He sees her and sits on the bar stool next to her. He smells like shaving cream and Absolut. His words slur a bit when he talks. The guy next to Marci pays his tab and begins to leave.

“I’ll walk you out,” Marci says to the man. “Kara, I’m going out for a smoke.”

Tyler buys a round of shots and they kill the time with small talk. It’s going on midnight, but time seems irrelevant in a dark bar. Tyler keeps buying shots and Kara keeps taking them.

“I’m glad you’re back in town,” Tyler tells her. Kara reaches out and touches Tyler’s hand, but when his fingers start to entwine hers she pulls away. He grabs her hand again and presses his lips against hers. Kara pulls her head away.

“I have to find Marci.” It dawns on her that Marci’s been gone a long time. Kara chugs the rest of her beer and practically runs out into the parking lot. She searches around the parked cars, but there is no sign of Marci.

I can't believe she ditched me for that guy, Kara thinks. Kara begins walking back into the bar when she notices a leg is sticking out of them, bent in a deformed angle. Kara looks around and notices two glowing red eyes on the roof of the bar. She can make out a spiny outline of a clawed creature, standing up right. It leaps off the roof to the ground and runs into the desert on all fours. Kara calls 911.

When the EMTs take Marci's body into the ambulance, Kara overhears one of them say, "There's not a drop of blood in this body."

"I don't know, some guy in his thirties," Kara tells the agent. "I told all this to the police and the sketch artist." It's five in the morning and the flickering fluorescent lights in this room are making Kara dizzy.

"Please bear with us, ma'am. We're just trying to..."

Jayden opens the door to the room. Kara jumps out of her metal folding chair and runs to him. He throws his arms around her. Kara cries.

Kara doesn't answer any of Tyler's texts for three week, and he texts at least once a day. *Are you aiight? Want to hang out? I'm worried about you.* Every time her phone vibrate, she leaps at it, like a rattlesnake striking a prey. But the texts are always from Tyler, and not Michael. The only time she saw Tyler was at Marci's funeral.

Kara's numb to Marci's death and it makes her feel guilty that she feels so little. It just doesn't feel real that Marci's dead. Kara tries to make herself cry and rides her bike around a lot out of boredom.

On this Friday afternoon, she decides to go to this old, secluded park surrounded by trees, where she and Marci used to go to have picnics. Kara wasn't allowed to go that far from home, but with her mother at work all the time, there had been no one there to stop her.

She rounds the dirt path and a clearing comes into view.

She sees Tyler standing face to face with the Chupacabra.

Kara jumps off her bike and ducks behind some bushes. The creature reaches out and touches Tyler's shoulder with a rough, red claw. The claw looks rusted. The thing pulls back his arm back and runs into the trees.

Kara rides her bike back to town, through the main street lined with cars. She turns into the parking lot outside the police station and jumps off her bike, letting it coast on the pavement before crashing down on its side.

She runs to the glass plated window that some kind of secretary lady, or whatever police stations have, sits behind.

"Is Jayden Parks here?"

The lady looks annoyed, but picks up her phone and makes a call. She hangs up and says, "I'm sorry. He's out on patrol."

Kara wants to tell the lady it's an emergency and she needs Jayden. She wants Jayden to hunt down the reptile put a bullet between his eyes. Kara wants to yell at this lady to make her understand, but she knows this bitch won't believe her.

Jayden walks in the front door holding a bottle of wine.

“We caught him,” he says. He kisses their mother on the cheek.

He walks into the living room and turns on the news.

Kara sits next to him on the couch.

“We caught the killer,” Jayden says.

“How?”

“The bastard turned himself in.” Jayden explains that Mr. Davis, a teacher at the middle school

Kara had gone to, had apparently been a raging pedophile. On this particular afternoon, he had taken a seven year old boy into the woods that afternoon and did awful things to him. Then he had some kind of break down because he called 911.

“Davis was ranting like a lunatic. He said a vampire had attacked him. We found the boy with his throat slit, covered in that pervert’s semen. Somehow Davis managed to drain most of the poor kid’s blood, too.”

“My God, I know Mr. Davis. He’s a deacon at the church,” Kara’s mom says.

Jayden says that the FBI had found a ton of kiddie porn on his hard drive.

“He’s one sick fuck.”

But he’s not the killer, Kara thinks. The Chupacabra’s still out there.

Kara props herself up to drink wine from the bottle and then lies back down on her back. Tyler takes a drink of the wine and lies down next to her.

“You haven’t talked to me in weeks. Why’d you suddenly call me over here?”

“Why’d Marci die?” Kara asks.

“I don’t know?”

“I think you do. I saw you with it.”

Tyler’s silent for a long time. Finally, he says, “He’s displaced. He doesn’t like happy people.”

“Marci loved her life,” Kara says.

“Chip was getting married,” Tyler says. “The little boy was just a little boy with no worries. Happy people make him mad. And he’s hungry.”

“Why doesn’t he eat you?”

“I’m like him.”

“You’re a faggot, aren’t you?” Kara says. “I don’t know why you don’t just admit it. You’re in the closet and that’s why the Chupacabra likes you. Is he your boyfriend?”

“You know I like girls...”

Kara just laughs. “Just admit you like guys, fag.”

Tyler gets up and walks to the door. Kara sees tears running down his skinny face. “Don’t tell me what I like. You just don’t get it. I don’t know why you have to be so mean.” Tyler slams the door behind him.

Kara stares out her bedroom window into blackness. It’s been a day since the little boy was murdered, and though the papers headlined the serial killer was caught, no tension lifted from Hope. The fires are closing in from the east and the south. Kara imagines the Chupacabra is sleeping sound in a cave, satiated with blood in its stomach.

On dark nights like tonight, Michael would whisper “Kara” and she wouldn’t answer, being careful to breathe slowly to imitate sleep. He would stand up and walk to the apartment window, overlooking the downtown of his little Upper Michigan hometown. She would admire the silhouette, a blob of blackness shaped into a head, body, round curves of shoulders and arms all flowing into the blackness of the room.

Kara misses Marci.

Earlier that night, Jayden told Kara about the the interrogation of Davis. As Jayden watched from behind the mirror, Davis confessed to the detectives about how he had bought the boy an ice cream cone. Mr. Davis was the kid’s neighbor and had had an older sibling in his eighth grade class. The boy was trusting, content, blissfully unaware of the hungry predators filled with bloodlust all around him. Davis had done horrible things to the boy in the woods. Then he claimed a vampire came out of the woods and slashed the boy’s throat.

“It only took two hours to break him,” Jayden said. “He confessed to all the murders.”

Kara knows the monster’s still out there but was too emotionally to argue with Jayden.

Is Tyler the Chupacabra’s friend? Is Tyler buddies with the thing that ate her father. Since Kara’s father disappeared, all the men in her life seem to betray her. Maybe that’s why Kara fucked Cody one last time; she wanted to betray Michael before he had a chance to betray her. Why wouldn’t Tyler be like any other man in her life and betray her with that creature?

Kara remembers something Tyler said when he was drunk: “Not in this body.”

Tyler isn't like any other man.

Kara leaves her shades open and stares out into the desert. Sleep starts to seep into her eyes and she wonders how fire can burn on such a black night?

The unwavering Catholic faith of Hope, Arizona, has worn out, apparently. The time comes to evacuate. Smoke seeps under the doorways of Kara's house and through cracks of windows. Suffocated fog rolls in, thicker and thicker by the minute.

Kara's packing up a few expensive and random things. She's left her laptop out to do a final Facebook check before packing it away. On her newsfeed, she notices Tyler's Facebook status: *Going to wait it out*. She pulls her cell phone out of her pocket to call him, but it doesn't work. Michael must have finally shut it off.

Kara sneaks out the back door, careful not to alert her brother, who's in the driveway trying to make room in his Jeep for more items, or her mother, who's packing a suitcase in her bedroom. Kara grabs her bike from the side of the house and heads into the street.

Kara bikes down the path through a gentle snow of ash. The wind's picking up. She pedals into the parking lot of Tyler's crappy apartment complex and it's hard to see the building through the smoky air. The parking lot's empty except for a middle aged tying down random furniture in the back of an old truck.

Kara jumps off her bike, letting it fall to the pavement, and runs to the side door, which is locked. She runs around to the back and crawls up onto the little wooden deck

outside the apartment. She scrapes her knee on the railing and blood drips down her smooth, shaved legs like strawberry topping on ice cream. She runs to the sliding glass door and pounds on it.

“Tyler, open up,” she shouts.

Tyler glances around, as if he’s looking for a last ditch effort to hide. He succumbs to the fact that he’s been spotted and slides open the door.

“You need to get out of here,” he says as if Kara doesn’t already know. “The flames will be here soon.”

“I came to get you.”

“I’m not going.”

“That’s fucking stupid,” says Kara. “Let’s get in your car and go.”

“I’m going to take my chances here.”

“This isn’t a goddamn discussion. I came here on my bike. You need to take me out of here now.”

“Are you kidding me?” Tyler says, but Kara knows she’s got his king in checkmate because he won’t risk her to fire.

“Let’s go,” she reaches out her hand and grasps Tyler’s and he cringes like she’s stabbed him in the kidney and twisted the blade. She pulls him out of his apartment and they climb over the over the deck railing and jump to the grass below.

The Chupacabra leaps off the roof and lands next to Tyler and Kara. His claw feet sink deep into the dry grass, sending a cloud of dust and ash and smoke swirling into the sky. He leans close to Tyler, smells him with a forked tongue, and backs away.

“Why does it like you so much?” Kara asks.

“He’s like us, displaced and lonely. Not in the right world. Not in the right body. He’s trying to adapt and change to fit in.”

The three stand in a triangle. Kara glances at the Chupacabra, then at Tyler, and back at the monster, in a fluctuating pattern of eye contact and looking away, wondering what happens next, as the world around them burns.