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Fallout: Part One

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FALLOUT : PART ONE

By

Meredith A. Neuman

THESIS

Submitted to
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Meredith A. Neuman is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

FALLOUT : PART ONE

By

Meredith A. Neuman

Fallout is a dystopian novel in which the United States has split into two separate countries: the Eastern States and the Western States. Between these coasts is the Middle Ground, which has been abandoned for a quarter of a century. Ewen King, whose father voices anarchistic thoughts, is unsettled in the East and desires to find a better life for himself. In Part One, Ewen struggles with the decision of staying in the East or moving West, in hopes of finding a better life.

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For Mom and Dad, Becky, and Peter.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis spawned from four words.

It was March and I was desperate for a thesis topic. The proposal was due in days and the closest I'd come to actually *writing* my proposal was putting a header on a Word document. Most of the time I'd invested in my proposal was spent staring at said Word document. I knew I wanted to write a creative thesis, and I knew I wanted it to be in a style I was perhaps unfamiliar with, but my mind was blank.

It was a co-worker who asked me, one day at lunch, "Well, what do you *like*?"

What did I like? Novels and short stories flashed through my mind: Bob Flaherty's *Puff*, Joe Meno's *Hairstyles of the Damned*, Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain", F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The list went on and on. For some reason, I didn't actually *say* any of these titles or authors. Instead, I said four words.

"I like dystopian fiction."

In my defense, I do like dystopian fiction. But, to say my style is like that of, say, George Orwell or Aldous Huxley would be far from the truth. If I could compare my writing to anyone, it would be Augusten Burroughs. I'm dry, sarcastic, and hopefully humorous at times. But, with those four words, I decided to write a dystopian piece.

I wish there was an eloquent way to sum up the process of writing dystopian fiction. Unfortunately, I'm not very eloquent and so the only way I can sum up this process is by saying it is hard. Really, really hard.

The process went something like this: In May, I showed Mark Smith my thesis proposal. I told him I wanted to write a dystopian novella, where the United States is on the verge of a civil war and the protagonist, Ewan King, moves to the abandoned town of Seney, Michigan to escape the unrest. Mark smiled and asked what my timeline was. I said, "I am going to write ten pages every month over break, and then spend the school year revising." Perhaps I should mention that in my six years as an undergraduate and graduate student at NMU, I have never completed an assignment more than a day before the due date. But, you know what they say: sixth time's a charm!

I didn't write any of my thesis during the summer. I wrote a lot of flash fiction and part of a young adult novel, but none of it was dystopian fiction. Fast forward to the fall semester. Mark asked me how my thesis was going; I said, "Great! I'm planning on getting a lot written this semester!" Now, this wasn't a lie. I did plan on getting a lot written during the fall semester. I even forced myself to sit for hours at the library, staring at my thesis proposal and a blank Word document. But, nothing happened. "Sixth year is a charm," I typed into the Word document.

Now, fast forward again to winter break. At this point, I had three pages of my thesis written. I didn't like two of the pages. I said, "I'm going to write my thesis over break!" I may have even told Mark my plans; by this point, I think it would be fair to say he probably thought I was going to write my thesis the week before it was due. I'm certain a lot of people thought this. But, I was so positive I was going to get my thesis finished over break; I had a good feeling! "Sixth year is a charm," I kept chanting to myself.

Okay, so I did write over winter break. I wrote around forty thousand words. None of it was my thesis. This could constitute three entire forty-page theses. My thesis was still only three pages long.

By January, my chants of, "Sixth time's a charm!" were more sarcastic and self-wounding than anything. But then, something changed. One night, stressed beyond belief, I read over my thesis proposal and I said, "I like dystopian fiction." I repeated the phrase a few times, then crumpled my proposal into a ball and threw it in the garbage. I realized, I knew how to write without having an outline. The words I wanted were inside me, somewhere. That night, I wrote nine pages. The next week, I wrote about six. Before I knew it, I was over three quarters of the way done with the first draft of my thesis.

This process taught me two things. First off, I don't do well with plans. My brain works best when I let it move as it pleases, even if these movements confuse me at first.

Honestly, I didn't know what I was going to write until it was on paper. My thesis is nothing like my proposal; even the protagonist's name has changed, albeit only the spelling. It's still dystopian fiction, but there is no civil war, no fallout shelter, no Seney, Michigan.

I'm okay with this. What I planned to write and what I actually wrote are two entirely different beasts. And though I let my mind wander and the words follow, I feel as though my writing was calculated. For example, though *Fallout: Part One* is written in a third person point of view that sticks rather closely to Ewen King, I let the voice travel to other characters momentarily, allowing the reader to understand that Ewen's perspective is not the only viewpoint. While preparing to write my thesis, I read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This is also written from the third person point of view; however, there's the idea that the man and his son are the "good guys," and therefore their views of the world are "correct." This works great for *The Road*, but I was left wondering, "What about the other people? What are their motivations?"

This is a concept I would like to delve deeper into as I continue working on the next sections of *Fallout*. I work to weave the story between Ewen and his fellow citizens, beginning the story as such:

Ewen King stands before the medicine cabinet, squinting through smudges and toothpaste splatters as he shaves. He is vaguely aware of the radio crackling. Directly upstairs, in apartment 3C, Maria Bell hushes her children, who are stacking blocks in the living room, and turns her head to the voice echoing through her apartment. Downstairs, in one of the basement apartments, the Stowitts look up from their game of cribbage to stare at the rectangular speaker

mounted flush above the entryway. In fact, the entirety of the Eastview Living Complex is in some way turning their attention to their radios. That is, all except Ewen King, in 3B, who blows a puff of air into his cheek, tightening the skin as he shaves off a week's worth of stubble. (1)

Though the story is clearly about Ewen, I wanted to make it apparent that there *are* other people with different views; these views aren't necessarily wrong. They simply are not Ewen's views. I read *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, as well, and found I didn't like the stark contrast between right and wrong in this novella. I didn't want my side characters to be one-sided.

The Road gave me another thought to ponder: how did things come to be? McCarthy never comes right out to say *how* things became so terrible; the reader is left to assume. I feel as though this idea opened up the writing process for me. In *Fallout*, I don't say how the United States fell apart; I just say that it happened. In the end, I feel as though *how* something happened may not be as important as *the fact* that it happened, and thus how society deals with the past.

Most of the thesis writing process unfolded like this. I took what I liked and didn't like from books I have read and asked myself how this pertains to what I wanted to write. In doing so, I was able to write dystopian fiction that didn't stray too far from my writing style.

This brings me to the second thing I learned during my thesis writing process. I learned that it is of the utmost importance to keep a bit of "you" in every word you write. Some days, I feel as though I'm simply writing for a grade. I ask myself, "What

do I have to do to get an A?" This shouldn't be the case. I should be asking myself, "What do I have to do to write a story I'm proud of?" With *Fallout*, I abandoned any notion of grades, abandoned any preconceived notions on what I *thought* I had to write. I wrote what, I believe, is a thesis that exemplifies my writing style. Believe it or not, writing a thesis taught me to write for myself, again.

When I think back a year ago and hear myself saying, "I like dystopian fiction," I laugh. At the time, I never thought I would be able to write forty pages of a dystopian novel; it was just an idea backed by hope. Now, I'm looking forward to completing the last two parts of this novel. Looking back, I suppose the sixth time really was a charm.

I.

Ewen King stands before the medicine cabinet, squinting through smudges and toothpaste splatters as he shaves. He is vaguely aware of the radio crackling. Directly upstairs, in apartment 3C, Maria Bell hushes her children, who are stacking blocks in the living room, and turns her head to the voice echoing through her apartment.

Downstairs, in one of the basement apartments, the Stowitts look up from their game of cribbage to stare at the rectangular speaker mounted flush above the entryway. In fact, the entirety of the Eastview Living Complex is in some way turning their attention to their radios. That is, all except Ewen King, in 3B, who blows a puff of air into his cheek, tightening the skin as he shaves off a week's worth of stubble.

Though Ewen attempts to push the voice out of his head, he is always aware of the radio. In the last months, the constant interruptions have become a part of daily living and he is as accustomed to the crackling static that foreshadows announcements as he is the morning weather alerts that wake him. A low buzz from the radio is background noise to Ewen's everyday life. On days when his patience with the voice is low, he takes a blanket and pillow and curls up on the bathroom floor for a nap, where the radio is broken and the air is silent.

The announcements used to be infrequent, simple reminders to tie citizens together, allowing them to know what is going on a hundred miles away without

having to leave the comfort of their living room. But in the last few years, the announcements have become more frequent and less comforting.

Ewen cocks his head upwards, examining the sharp line of his jaw. Heavy creases beneath his eyes and the hollowed indents of his cheeks carve his face into something foreign. Without the black stubble, Ewen is unable to hide the effects of his waning meals. His cupboards are filled with stale cereal, untouched instant potatoes, dusty soup cans. Ewen could eat if he wanted, but since his mother's death, his appetite has disappeared along with his sleep schedule.

The radio's crackle smooths out, and a voice fills the studio apartment. Ewen drops his voice an octave to imitate the announcer's sonorous voice. Some days—most days—it worries him how good his imitation actually is. It's a similarity that Ewen doesn't want to hear or know exists.

"Good morning, my fellow citizens."

It's the same voice that filled his family's apartment when Ewen was a child. A slow, pompous voice that accentuates plurals and drops *r*'s, an accent foreign to Ewen. Often, he wonders if it's the same man, the same voice for more than two decades. As a child, and into his teenage years, Ewen, who often found the voice more comforting than his own father's, yearned to know more about the man. But as he grew older, the curiosity faded. The comfort that came with the continuity of the voice turned into

annoyance. The voice continues while Ewen leans over to rinse shaving cream residue from his cheeks.

“This is a reminder that as of Monday, March eleventh, only emergency phone calls will be permitted between the hours of ten o’clock P.M. and six o’clock A.M. In order to ensure the safety of our fellow citizens and keep the taxation rate at a minimum, we ask that—”

Ewen kicks the bathroom door shut, cutting the voice off mid-sentence. The remnants of a small nick on his chin show up bright red on the towel. He tosses the towel over the shower rod and stares back at the mirror, at himself. Though his hair is a bit too long and the collar of his shirt damp, he looks composed and, to his chagrin, much like his father. Ewen pushes his bangs back and raises his thick eyebrows. *With a haircut and something to be angry about, he thinks, I could actually pass for him.* He lets his bangs fall against his face before tucking his hair behind his ears. Ewen pushes the bathroom door open, hears again the radio’s drone.

On the way to the door, Ewen slips into a black coat that is one size too small, showing an inch of his wrists. He checks his pocket, fingering his identification card for a moment. Right where he left it.

The announcer mentions the rolling blackouts from Friday, assuring his fellow citizens that the problem has been looked into and will be resolved mid-week.

“Your fellow citizens,” Ewen mutters as he pulls on the deadbolt, the screech of metal causing his forehead to crinkle and his eyes to pinch shut. “Your fellow citizens

my ass.” He swings the door open, steps into the hall, and leaves the announcer’s voice inside.

Ewen is unable to escape the voice for long. Large speakers sit atop poles at street corners, spread out in a way that passersby hear a continuous stream of announcements. As Ewen strides down the cracked sidewalk, his gait long and hurried, hands shoved in the pockets of his slacks, he can’t help but take in the drone. The voice, however pretentious, is conversational. Instead of talking at Ewen and his fellow citizens, it seems to talk with them. A voice inside their heads.

The last traces of winter are melting along the roadside, creating rivulets down the shoulder. The sun is low in the sky, peeking above apartments. Boxy brown buildings line either side of the road, the only distinct difference amongst each being the name carved into large signs in the front yards. Each apartment has a trite, forgettable name: Eastview, Southgate, Woodbine, Oak.

His father’s apartment is on the edge of the residential zone and, were it a few weeks earlier, Ewen would have been forced to take the bus. Winter was short but frigid. For months, the streets were slick with ice and plows created piles of snow that stood higher than a door frame. But today the air is mild and the breeze is light. Ewen can’t help but revere the first glimpses of spring.

The streets are calm. At this hour, most of Ewen's fellow citizens are at work, holed in cubicles. Ewen works nights at the Parkview Care Facility, filing patient records and stocking examination rooms. It's monotonous like his former office job delivering mail, as well his job before that at a grocery taking inventory and pricing boxed food. Most jobs, he thinks, are monotonous. Whether you're entering data or transcribing documents, there's a certain habitual action, as if all jobs could be filled by the same person. The only difference between jobs, Ewen has decided, is the place. Cubicle, mail room, grocery store, file cabinet. It's all interchangeable.

Ahead, the crosswalk light flashes a red hand and Ewen stands amongst other pedestrians. One of the speakers looms above their heads.

"...and May eighth will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of The Eastern Unification."

The lights change and the hand morphs into a white, striding body. A woman's tone, mechanical and harsh, unlike the voice from the speaker, counts down from twenty-five. Ewen moves with the crowd, crossing the street, forgetting any mention of The Eastern Unification by the time he crosses the middle of the street. It's not a holiday his family has ever celebrated.

Twenty-five years ago, Ewen was still in his mother's womb; his crib hadn't been purchased yet. Ewen keeps his head low out of habit and before long, finds himself in front of the apartment complex, a one-story, taupe building with windows like a checkerboard. The sign out front reads "Pine Apartments."

As Ewen approaches the door and pulls his identification card from his pocket, the voice announces, *"Later this evening, we will talk with Cynthia Brown. Cynthia, as you may remember, is the wife of Derrick Brown, one of the ten investigators involved with the Western Exploration."* Ewen remembers the coverage, which lasted for weeks. The investigation was deemed inconclusive and officials blamed the disappearances on the Westerners.

He waves his identification card in front of a scanner next to the hinges and a mechanical voice cackles from a speaker above the door. "Hello, Ewen J. King." The voice, which is unmistakably female, pronounces his name "eee-when," something he has become accustomed to since birth. Even in school, his teacher's pronounced his name in a mechanical fashion, ignoring his corrections. "You-win," he would say. "It's pronounced You-win." And his teacher would raise an arched brow and retort, "That's what I said, Eee-when." The locking mechanism clicks and Ewen pushes the door open.

The Western Exploration was an investigation of the Middle Ground, the vast, empty area separating the East from the West. With the East's population quickly outgrowing its territory, the government deemed it necessary to spread West. The thought of hostile Westerners, however, frightened Ewen's fellow citizens. To ensure the safety of the citizens, a group of scientists, sociologists, and environmentalists traveled West, finding suitable boundaries to establish new living areas. They left the first of September with

plans of returning by the end of October. By mid November, citizens began asking questions and the voice no longer assured, *"We expect the investigators with the Western Exploration to return within the week."*

A second group was deployed. Days before Christmas, they returned. Ewen still recalls the grim tone of the voice from the speaker. The report came days after his mother's death and he and his father were on their way to the funeral home when the voice broke through their silence. Other pedestrians stopped to listen, but Ewen and his father kept walking.

"We have received news concerning the Western Exploration. The rescue group found their van three hundred miles to the West, still along the determined course. The van was in working condition, but the gasoline reserves were missing as well as food supplies. No sign of the men was found. It seems as though the Westerners are, as we feared, still hostile."

Midway through the announcements, Ewen's father came to a halt in the middle of the sidewalk, his gray eyes transfixed on one of the speakers. His face held a look of disbelief and his expression, which had been bemused and despondent since his wife's death, suddenly seemed incensed, perhaps envious. With a final glance at the speaker, Ewen's father said, "Well, good for them." Then, he continued down the street, steps brisk and sharp.

It wasn't the first time Ewen thought about the West. Since he was young, he held a curiosity for the region, often asking his father for information and getting

nothing in response. At first, he thought about simple things: did they have the same trees, the same sky, the same people. The government would like everyone to think differently, but, some days, Ewen imagined the Middle Ground to be a large mirror reflecting the same image back at either side of the region.

But, as Ewen grew older, he began to wonder what differences the West held. He didn't think about their government or what the people were like. Most of the time, he wondered what voice they heard on the radio, if they even had radios at all.

His father's words, however, struck a minor chord in Ewen's mind. "Well, good for them." Ewen mouthed the words as he watched his father continue down the sidewalk, unsure of who his father was referring to: the Westerners or the missing investigators.

Days later, after all of Geoffrey's belongings had been moved to his new apartment, they were listening to the evening announcements. The voice was droning on about the missing investigators, discussing how rescue attempts were still in effect. And Geoffrey laughed, the first real laugh Ewen had heard from his father in months, and asked, "How do you rescue someone who doesn't want to come back?"

It was the first time Ewen thought about the West as a destination.

Geoffrey King's entryway is lined with cardboard boxes, the sides of which read "Sara" in large block letters. Two months have passed since the move and, still, Ewen's father

refuses to touch the boxes. The movers asked Geoffrey where he wanted them, and after long moments of silence in which Geoffrey continued to unpack dishes, they placed them by the door, one after another like the walls of a fortress.

When Lily, Ewen's younger sister who lives an hour North, calls to check up on their father, Ewen always says, "We need to do something with those damn boxes." Lily will tell Ewen that these things take time. "He needs to heal," she says, as though she's an expert on a man she rarely visits.

Lily has always been what Geoffrey refers to as a "believer." One who agrees with what the government says, following along and agreeing with announcements with the same naivety as a child following her parents' orders without question. The radios in her family's apartment are always loud enough to be heard in every corner. When the voice speaks, Lily and her family listen with dutiful, trustful ears.

During their last conversation, a week ago, Ewen asked, "Do you remember that gerbil Dad got you when you were five?"

"I never had a gerbil," Lily said, indignant. Ewen didn't respond. He had been there when his father found the gerbil, lying on his back, legs sticking in the air like tree stumps. Geoffrey packed the gerbil in an empty shoebox, bound it with twine, and tossed it into the dumpster outside. The cage and the food were thrown out, too. When Lily came home, Geoffrey told her about the gerbil and she'd cried for the rest of the

night. But, by morning, the smell of cedar chips had diminished and Lily's eyes were dry.

"I'm just saying," Ewen said, "that maybe it would be easier for him to move on if he didn't have to stare at those boxes every day." It was hard enough for Ewen to look at the boxes two or three times a week. He wanted to open the boxes and see if he could smell a faint hint of his mother's perfume. She always wore cheap perfume that made Ewen sneeze but lately he's missed it. When Lily moved, she would still call her mother and sometimes, Ewen felt as though their mother was the only thing keeping the family together.

"That's just like you, Ewen. Ignore everything and it goes away," Lily said before giving a trite excuse for why she had to get going. Ewen avoids Lily's phone calls. They come every day, piling up on his answering machine like dirty laundry on his floor. Some days, he listens to the messages. Most days, he deletes them.

Ewen takes his coat off and drapes it over the nearest box. "Dad?" He calls out over the drone of the radio. The speaker in Geoffrey's living room has been in need of repair since he moved in and the voice sounds robotic and cold. Words, at times, are indistinguishable. "You here?" The apartment is small, a studio like Ewen's, but his father always manages to find places to hide. Ewen looks around, alarmed at how foreign the apartment seems, though he visits his father at least three times a week. The only furniture is government-issued, the same for every apartment: a couch, a chair, a

coffee table, and a floor lamp. A twin bed is pressed against the back of the room. The dining table is small and littered with tobacco.

The furniture is the same Ewen grew up with. Sturdy, square designs in neutral colors to match neutral walls. Ewen's furniture is similar, just a different shade of beige.

Ewen walks into the apartment, scanning the living room and kitchen for any signs of his father. There is no lump in the twin bed, where he can usually be found napping during midday. As Ewen passes through the living room, eyeing the dust that has settled on the coffee table, he reminds himself to come early tomorrow and clean.

The buzzing from the radio shifts to a coherent voice as Ewen approaches the bathroom. "Dad?" The only response Ewen gets is the morning announcements. He toes the door open, peering through the crack with lidded eyes, staying cautious until he sees his father sitting atop the lid of the toilet, scribbling on a yellow legal pad. "Dad, what are you doing in here?" Ewen pushes the door until the knob smacks against the wall. The bathroom is smaller than Ewen's. A stand up shower with a small bench crammed in with a toilet and sink. In the small space, the voice from the radio echoes against linoleum, creating a child-like round.

Geoffrey looks up and presses a finger to his cracked, withered lips before hunching himself even further over his notes. The voice drones, *"On Sunday, March tenth, public transportation will cease at seven o'clock, rather than six o'clock. This will continue*

until further notice. This is a reminder that as of Monday, March eleventh, only emergency phone calls—

“Can’t listen to this shit anymore,” Geoffrey mutters, tossing the notebook into the sink. He slaps open palms against bony knees and squeezes his mouth shut as if thinking, straining to find words to describe his frustration. But he settles for slumping forward and shaking his head. Though Ewen is as disenchanted with the announcements—with the government, even—as his father, he keeps his opinions to himself, always worried what others might say. It isn’t unlawful to disagree with the government, but such discordance is viewed as an attack on your “fellow citizen.” His father once said, “They want us to think dissention is a form of hierarchy, as though our ability to think for ourselves makes us better than our fellow citizens.” Geoffrey has no qualms with voicing his opinions, even in public spaces.

In the sink, a drip of water sloshes onto the pages of Geoffrey’s notebook, smearing the blue ink. Multiple notebooks, in similar worn fashions, are stacked beside the toilet. Pages are ripped and wrinkled, and the sloppiness of the handwriting increasing with each passing day. Ewen leans in to take a look as if expecting to see something other than the morning announcements, transcribed in shorthand.

“You notice they haven’t said anything about the soldiers, Ewen? Not a damn thing.” Ewen watches his father struggle to reach a standing position for a moment before holding his hand out. Thin fingers, bent from years of working in a plastics

factory, grip Ewen's arm as Geoffrey stands. He weighs more than his frame would imply and Ewen has to hold onto the sink as he pulls his father up. "Said two weeks ago—I have it in my notes, Ewen—that there would be further news. And, yet—"

"I know," Ewen cuts in, desperate to end the conversation, one they have almost daily. Every day, Ewen hopes it isn't brought up. "We talked about this yesterday. Do you remember?"

They'd been in the kitchen, washing what little dishes Geoffrey used. Evening announcements were flickering in and out in the living area. Ewen was about to mention he put in a work order for Geoffrey's speaker when Geoffrey said the same thing he always said. "They haven't said anything about the soldiers." His obsession with the soldiers started shortly after his wife's death.

At first, Ewen tried to understand; he asked, "What soldiers, Dad? What soldiers are you talking about?" Often, Geoffrey would speak of past histories, things he learned in grade school, as though it were the present. A confusion that came with age, Ewen assumed. But Geoffrey never had an answer, just noised grunts under his breath. Gibberish.

Later, Ewen called Lily to ask if she knew about any soldiers. He had been trying to keep the topic from her, but he hoped there was some truth to Geoffrey's talk about soldiers. She said, "He's old, Ewen. He's been delusional for years." Her voice was bitter. Geoffrey was one of the reasons Lily married so early. She'd wanted to get out of

the house since she was old enough to voice an opinion, often questioning her father's disapproval of the government. Whenever Geoffrey was ranting about a new government regulation, Lily would say, "They're just doing what's best for us, Dad." Ewen, years younger than Lily and years from fully understanding the voice or the government regulations, was too shy to ask his question: How do they know what's best?

Their mother had often been the calming voice to keep the verbal battles from escalating to wars. Her death was hard on them all, not just Geoffrey. Lily even came to help Geoffrey move, which surprised Ewen because she was unable to attend their mother's funeral. "I have to work," Lily said, two days after their mother's death. Geoffrey didn't begrudge her for this. He wore his work clothes to the funeral and left ten minutes early to avoid being late for his shift.

They spent three days with their father, sorting belongings and taking trips to donation centers. Three days in which Ewen and Lily gave away their childhood belongings and watched the apartment in which they became teenagers and adults turn into nothing but a collection of empty rooms, a collection of cardboard boxes on concrete floors.

Geoffrey insisted on keeping many things that were unneeded. Sara's sewing machine, her wedding dress, and her slippers were put in boxes and labeled with her name. Lily's dolls and Ewen's schoolbooks were put in boxes upon which Geoffrey scrawled "donate." His children didn't argue with this, but one night, after Geoffrey

had fallen asleep and Ewen was idling in the foyer, running his thumb across the hard plastic curve of his identification card, Lily said, "I didn't even know I had half this shit anymore." She bent over to sift through a box that had yet to be filled. One of her old jewelry boxes sat on the bottom, along with a yellow baby blanket.

Ewen saw the fists she made as she reminded herself that she didn't need any of these belongings. Deep down, he knew she didn't want anything, either, which is why they were left behind when she married and moved. Family apartments were large; she had the space for her belongings. But Ewen understood her desire to hold on to these things. "Studios are small," he said.

When Ewen moved he left behind most of his belongings, not because he didn't want them, but because he had no room. There was the thought in the back of his mind that he'd be able to come back and get his things one day, when he was married and able to move into a full apartment. Once his mother became sick, Ewen knew it was too late.

Dropping the boxes off at the donation center had been easier than Ewen expected. Giving a part of his childhood—albeit, the leftover material objects—had been freeing, as if invisible binds were loosened and left behind. That night, he went home and felt the weight of unneeded clothing and unread books pressing in from all corners. He found it hard to sleep that night, the beginning of Ewen's insomniac lifestyle.

Ewen leans back against the door, allowing his father to exit the bathroom before following him to the living area. When Geoffrey walks, he is bent at the hip but his back stays stiff and straight. Even his clothing seems to be covered in dust.

“The power outages, Ewen. They said they would explain the power outages, but they never do. Just keep telling us the problem will be fixed and it never gets fixed.”

Ewen perches on the arm of a chair. Seldom does he sit comfortably in his father’s apartment; he balances on counters, leans against walls, hovers by his father. It’s rare that he gives the appearance of settling down, preferring to seem as though he’s getting ready to leave, even when he’s just arrived. Staying on edge is just a precaution, he always tells himself, in case the weight of Geoffrey’s words become too much. Though he agrees with much of what his father says, there’s a sense of helplessness in the words. Ewen often feels trapped in the dissension, as though he can never escape.

Across the room, Geoffrey’s knees crack and Ewen watches as a grimace spreads across his face. At the viewing, Lily said, “I figured he’d be the first to go.” And Ewen agreed, though his father was more of a fighter than his mother, who always seemed to give up at the first sign of conflict. It wasn’t often that Ewen’s parents fought, and it was even less often that his mother spoke her mind. When she came back from the doctor with news of her illness, the doctor gave her three months to live. She lasted just over six weeks.

Geoffrey settles into the couch and resumes his thoughts. "I bet you we'll have another power outage this weekend."

Ewen searches for a distraction from reality. "Remember the outages when Lily and I were younger?" A smile forms on Ewen's face as his mind recalls draping blankets over oak dining chairs and sleeping in the living room, squished between his mother and Lily. Buses still ran through the night and headlights would light up their fort and make shadows of their angular faces, which Geoffrey would refer to as Germanic, a meaningless description to Ewen. He explained it, once, when Ewen was twelve, how their ancestors came from overseas during a war they didn't agree with, a thought baffling to Ewen.

As a child, Ewen didn't know of a person who would outwardly oppose a government's war or anyone who had ever been overseas. Though he'd seen maps and pictures of the Earth that proved there was more than East and West, all he knew of other countries were irregular shapes surrounded by masses of water. Even now, as an adult, the idea is vague in Ewen's mind, mirroring the blurred understanding of outer space and unreachable planets and moons.

Geoffrey says, "Things weren't always like this. They weren't." His voice sounds as though it's been run over. As his lids close over his eyes, Geoffrey's voice, almost inaudible, whispers, "I wish you would just go."

It's the first time he's explicitly said the words, though they've been hinted at for months. Ewen has tried to keep the words, as well as the thoughts, out of mind. But, the idea remains—has been engrained ever since the initial announcement concerning the Western Exploration—that there is something out there, unknown yet desirable. It strikes Ewen as humorous, though, that the one thing keeping him in the East—his only obligation—is the one person who wishes for him to leave.

Ewen nods and offers a tight-lipped smile. "I know, Dad." He looks over at the boxes stacked in the foyer, packed together like bricks. Earlier, he had thought about mentioning that it was time they looked through the boxes and decided what to do with their innards. But, now, Ewen knows it's not the time.

The voice cuts across the room. *"Good afternoon, my fellow citizens. In an hour, we will be discussing the disappearance of the investigators who traveled West last fall. Cynthia Brown, whose husband—"*

Geoffrey snorts, but stays silent. A tension passes between the pair, floating between jealousy and desire.

By the time Ewen leaves his father's apartment, the street lamps are lit and the sky is a hazy purple. The speakers emit a low, static hum, as though electricity is coursing from post to post. At times, Ewen feels the static push straight through his chest, pulsing in his lungs, numbing his fingers. It overwhelms his senses—even more than the voice—

and becomes louder than busses splashing through puddles and pedestrians droning about work. When the speakers are silent, Ewen finds himself waiting for the voice to speak. But when the voice is persistent, Ewen just wants to escape.

Parkview Care Facility is on the edge of the city, almost two miles from Geoffrey's apartment. In the winter, Ewen is forced to take a work bus, the only bus that runs late and early enough to fit Ewen's schedule. Today is the first day Ewen has been able to walk to work. Along the way, Ewen finds himself pressed in with the crowd. Unlike earlier, the sidewalk is busy and Ewen feels the constant pressure of his fellow citizens and wonders, like he often does, how he can be amongst all these people and not know a single face. Perhaps he's seen a few of them at the post office or at the bank, maybe even at the grocery. But he can't understand any of the expressions, an ignorance Ewen is thankful for.

With each passing block, the crowd dies out. Ewen's fellow citizens slip into residential buildings or meander outside of commercial properties. The towering apartments become pressed closer together, and at times, it becomes difficult to tell where one building starts and another ends.

The further Ewen walks, the more sporadic the voice from the radio becomes. The speakers thin out until there is only one every few blocks and the volume has been turned so low that Ewen can often go long moments without hearing anything but silence. Even the hum from the speakers is absent. Ewen likes this part of his day the

most. During his days off, he sometimes finds himself going for walks in the area, taking in the stuttering silence.

Abruptly, the apartments stop, leaving open expanses of wet earth. Hospitals can be seen from quite a distance, rows and rows of similar, square buildings that rise like apartments. The fronts are a series of automatic doors and stark brick. Windows are few and far between. Like the apartments, large signs sit in front of each building, each depicting a forgettable name. Ewen walks toward the closest building, whose sign reads “Parkview Care Facility.”

As Ewen nears the automatic doors, a buzz from a speaker resonates an unknown tone. It’s distant and deep and, momentarily, Ewen believes it’s the prelude to an announcement. But the sound increases without disappearing, moving from the East and floating above Ewen’s head. When he steps on the black sensor and the automatic door slides open, Ewen looks up. The sky, gray and heavy with motionless clouds, is marred with the movement of an airplane.

Though it isn’t rare to see an airplane, Ewen often finds himself watching their paths, wondering where they will land. His father claims that airplanes used to frequently carry citizens from the East coast to the West coast, but Ewen is skeptical of that fact. Since his early schooling, Ewen was taught that because of their weight, planes were unable to stay in the air for long. A nonstop trip across the continent would be impossible and the Middle Ground would offer no safe place to land.

Ewen stalls in front of the door and lets his eyes follow the path of the plane as it moves across the sky and disappears to the West.

“Excuse me,” a woman says. Ewen averts his gaze from the sky and focuses on the woman in front of him. She stands just inside the building, blocked from exiting by Ewen’s frame. It’s not the first time Ewen has seen the woman. She’s one of the night nurses, though she doesn’t look like one of the nurses. The others are small, middle-aged women with wide smiles and blinding white teeth. Their voices are always an octave too high and remind Ewen of the voice his mother used when he or Lily were sick or came home from school with tears in their eyes.

Ewen never bothers to learn the nurse’s names; they come and go frequently and seem to blend together. This nurse is different. She’s younger than the other nurses, perhaps only a year or two older than Ewen. Her frame is short and thick, the periwinkle fabric of her scrubs stretched tight over firm thighs. Though her head falls below Ewen’s shoulder, her stature gives the appearance of looking down on Ewen.

She smiles, and her lips are tight. “Just want a cigarette before work,” she says when Ewen doesn’t move. Her voice is quick and trite, like that of one of the doctors.

“No, excuse me,” he murmurs and steps out of the way. “I didn’t see you there.”

She steps outside and fishes in her front pocket for a moment before pulling out a pack of cigarettes. “I noticed.” She lights her cigarette and inhales, her cheeks hollowing and thick lips pouting as she does. Thin lines whisker from the corners of her

mouth and eyes as she squints against the lamp light. "Do you ever wonder where they're going?" She offers the pack to Ewen, who declines with a simultaneous shake of his head and hand. When Ewen doesn't answer her question with anything but a raised eyebrow, she clarifies, waving her cigarette at the sky, "The planes. Do you ever wonder where the planes are going?"

Ewen pauses before answering, searching her face for any sign that this may be a time to tell a lie. What he finds are earnest eyes and a frown, a face similar to his father's. "All the time."

She pinches the butt of the cigarette between her thumb and pointer finger, exhaling a stream of smoke before her lips curl into a tight smile. "Me too," she says and reaches out with her free hand, her left hand. "I'm Edith. You work here?"

"Yeah." Ewen reaches forward first with his right hand, then switches to his left, grasping her hand in a soft shake. Her fingers are supple and thick, not thin and scrawny like Ewen's own. "In the file room."

When Ewen pulls his hand back, he feels a tense pull of Edith's fingers, a reluctant release, but eventually she steps back. "They're always heading West," she says before taking a few steps from the building. Ashes fall from her cigarette to the ground and she taps her thumb against the filter before bringing it to her lips. "You notice that?"

For a moment, Ewen hears his dad's voice, questioning if Ewen notices something the voice has said or has failed to mention. "I suppose I've never paid much attention."

"I used to think it was just a coincidence. But then, I started keeping track. Writing it down in one of my notepads. And they're always heading West." When she turns, the sun, barely hanging to the horizon, sets a yellow halo around her body. Ewen has to squint to make out her features, but when he can clearly see her face, he sees the same dazed wonder that his father's face always has. A face that asks, "What if?"

There are things Ewen doesn't tell others. Most of them have to do with his father: the notebooks, the soldiers. Ewen never mentions his Western curiosity. But the familiarity he finds in Edith's face makes Ewen feel as though it's okay to say, "My dad thinks they're going to the West Coast."

For a moment, Edith's face is blank and Ewen fears he misspoke. He balls his hands into fists, nails digging into his palms.

She takes a quick drag from her cigarette and exhales smoke through the corner of her mouth. Then, she smiles. "You never told me your name."

Ewen takes another step toward Edith. He is close enough to smell the smoke of her cigarette, the cheap tang of her perfume. He relaxes his hands and smiles. "Ewen King."

Again, Edith holds her left hand out. "Nice to meet you, Ewen." This time, Ewen firmly takes her hand and shakes, not wanting to let go.

Some nights, Ewen can start and finish an entire shift without leaving the file room. It's a windowless room in the middle of the hospital, not much bigger than Ewen's apartment. Large, gray filing cabinets line the walls and act as aisles throughout the middle of the room. When he first started the job, Ewen was overwhelmed by the filing cabinets which seemed to create a maze in the room. It didn't take long for him to fall into a routine, though, almost blindly meandering from aisle to aisle, wall to wall, pulling drawers open and placing files inside or removing them for examination.

Tonight, when Ewen unlocks the door to the filing room, the voice from the speaker is already echoing against the dark spaces. The voice hovers in the air, repeating the evening announcements. For the most part, the voice rewords the morning announcements about public transportation and blackouts. The voice has become such a constant part of his life that Ewen can ignore it like the sound of passing busses. But then, the monotony is replaced by a woman's voice. He misses the first few sentences, but he stares at one of the speakers, listening to her dry, wavering voice. The door falls against his back, but he doesn't move. He lets the voice seep into the hospital's silent hallways.

"...and he often said he wondered what was in the West. I think, sometimes, the desire to know what was there, just for the sake of knowing, drove him to go."

Ewen is alarmed by how calm she sounds. If anything, she sounds angry that her husband left. He turns the lights on and the brightness softens the words from the speaker, though Ewen knows it's an illusion. The voice asks, *"Do you believe the Westerners were involved in your husband's disappearance?"*

There's no pause as Cynthia responds. Her voice is confident. *"Yes. Derrick was curious about the West, but he wouldn't leave his family. He wouldn't leave his fellow citizens like that."*

Ewen lets the door close behind him, slips his coat off, tossing it on top of one of the filing cabinets. He stands in front of one of the large carts that holds the patient files, letting Cynthia's words repeat in his mind, linger on his own lips. *He wouldn't leave his fellow citizens like that.*

Ewen picks up a stack of files and scans the name on the top file. Broderick, Andrew. His feet unconsciously move to the correct filing cabinet and he pulls out the second drawer, thumbing through other files until he makes room for Andrew Broderick. He drops the file in, sandwiches the patient file between others as his mind flashes images of a coast that is similar to the East's, but somehow missing and gaining qualities at the same time. But the images are, after all, just flashes and they're soon dissolving.

The woman's interview is done and Ewen is able to ignore the voice for most of the night. As he flitters between filing cabinets, he thinks about the pull of Edith's hand and how her eyes locked on his own when he mentioned Geoffrey. He thinks about her face, holding the constant question of, "What if?"

When Ewen returns from work, it is early morning. The sun hasn't risen and, as he walks up the stairs to his apartment, he hears water running through pipes and hot air pumping into apartments. Ewen doesn't bother changing out of his work clothes; he simply toes his shoes off and slips under his quilt, letting his eyes close as the weight of the day leaves his body.

Before he's ready for the next day to begin, Ewen is woken by an announcement. "*Good morning my fellow citizens.*" Most mornings, Ewen will gather his blankets and a pillow, trudge to the bathroom and sleep in silence for a few more hours. Today, however, Ewen opens his eyes and listens.

"Warm weather will continue today, as it should for the remainder of the week. It looks like winter is behind us." The voice drones on, informing Ewen's fellow citizens that only two months remain until the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Eastern Unification, and promises there will be information on the power outages later in the day.

"It is with sadness that we must voice our concern for the elderly living alone in the city. In the past year, the fatality rate amongst those over the age sixty has risen. Due to our concern

for the welfare of our citizens, we will be conducting physicals for all single families over the age of sixty in the coming weeks. This should not cause alarm as —”

Ewen sits up and gathers his blankets in his arms. He stumbles to the bathroom and shuts the door before curling up on the floor.

When Ewen gets to work the next day, Edith is sitting cross-legged on a patch of grass. Her white tennis shoes have been removed and placed beside her thighs, socks tucked inside. The sun is disappearing but the air feels lukewarm. Edith smiles as Ewen approaches and, though a pack of cigarettes and a matchbook are balanced on her knee, her hands are empty and folded in her lap.

At first, Ewen is unsure what to say. Aside from yesterday, he's never seen Edith take her breaks at the front of the hospital. He'd like to think she's out here to talk to him, but he can't be sure. Ewen has come to the conclusion that one can never be too sure about anything when it comes to his fellow citizens. But as Ewen approaches, Edith says, "Ewen King," as if his name alone is a greeting.

"Edith," Ewen says, keeping his voice formal. He stays on the sidewalk but stops near where Edith is sitting.

"No planes today." She fingers the corner of her cigarette pack, and smiles.
"Looks like the filing room will be hectic in the next few months."

Ewen is briefly confused as to what Edith means. But then he remembers the announcement that came early that morning. Physicals for the elderly. "How many patients are they expecting to move here?" Already, the west wing of the hospital is filled with patients who need special care. There is hardly enough room left for walk-ins or emergency patients.

Edith shakes her head. "The patients aren't going in the hospital. They were waiting for the ground to unfreeze. Next week, they're starting to build a care facility between here and the town." She taps the bottom of her cigarette pack until a single stick slides out. "I'll be working there when it's finished." As she lights her cigarette, she looks at Ewen through lidded eyes and waits for him to speak.

When Ewen finally does say, "Well, that's good. Don't want everyone overcrowded," her face contorts, if only for a split second, into one filled with anguish. Perhaps even a bit of disappointment.

But then the look vanishes and she's smiling, breathing smoke out through her nose. "Wouldn't want that, you're right."

"My dad," Ewen starts, "will probably be moved there."

"He sick?" Edith asks.

Ewen shrugs and looks past Edith, where the lawn spreads out in every direction, almost to the horizon. Far off, there are buildings. "Not really, but he's old.

Starting to lose his memory, I think. Keeps saying stuff about soldiers that don't exist, stuff like that."

"Soldiers?" Edith cocks her head and sits up a bit straighter. "What soldiers?"

Ewen runs a hand through his hair. He hasn't showered today and it's greasy, sticking together at the roots. Other than Lily, he hasn't told anyone about this. "That's the thing—I don't know what he's talking about. Keeps mentioning how there have been no announcements about the soldiers. Doesn't make sense."

Edith has to carefully pinch the butt of the cigarette to get the last drag. She stubs it into the grass before digging a little hole with her finger and burying it. "Odd," she says without looking up. "Do you stay with him?"

Ewen wants to tell her the cigarette won't disintegrate; it will be there forever. "No, but I visit a few times a week. To make sure he's eating. Showering. Not plotting against the government."

The last part is meant as a joke and, though Edith smiles, she asks, "Is he?"

"Taking care of himself or plotting against the government?"

"Both, I guess."

Ewen laughs. "He does a little of both, sometimes."

Edith holds out her hand and says, "I'm glad to hear that." When Ewen pulls her up, he holds onto her hand a bit too tightly. But he thinks it might be okay, because she squeezes back.

II.

In the weeks before the Eastern Unification Celebration, a sense of pride swells in Ewen's fellow citizens. On the streets and in apartments, at break room tables and bus stops, there's talk of parades. "Everyone came together," Ewen hears one of his fellow citizens reminisce, recalling the announcement of the East's separation from the West. Cheers erupted in the streets and citizens gathered along the sidewalks, watching the influx of busses bringing new neighbors to the East.

Geoffrey remembers it differently. "It was chaos," he says. He taps his cigarette against the ashtray that never leaves the sill. A breeze comes through the screen and ashes hover and dance in the air for a moment before fluttering to the quilt and blending in against the gray fabric. "People everywhere. The streets were so crowded, busses were at a standstill. Moving inches at a time. No control over the situation." He stares out the window, blowing smoke through his nose. "What a disaster. And now, this business with the physicals."

Since the announcement concerning the physicals, Ewen has noticed a change in Geoffrey. "He's not as pissed off," Ewen told Lily one night.

"Hopefully, he's starting to understand the government just wants to help him."

Ewen agreed just to avoid an argument with his sister. He knew Geoffrey hadn't changed his standpoint concerning the government; he'd simply given up.

Ewen was young, nine or ten, when he first heard his father question the government. He was working on a puzzle—a depiction of New York City’s skyline—with his mother when the radio cackled and the familiar voice reported an update.

“Attention, my fellow citizens. Due to oil shortages, starting in October, busses traveling out of town will run only during the weekends and on national holidays. Officials declare that this shortage should be remedied by December. Again, due to—”

“It’s just not right,” Geoffrey said from the kitchen. His spoon clanked against the ceramic mug as he stirred instant coffee grounds into the boiling water. “First they say we can only travel on busses. Then, they tell us where we can go. Now, it’s when we can go.” He tossed the spoon into the sink, the tinny clang harsh in Ewen’s ears. “And no one does anything, Sara. No one wants to do anything about it.”

The voice moved on to announce the next day’s weather, and Geoffrey stared, defeated, at the speaker.

Ewen’s mother snapped a corner piece into place, smiling at her accomplishment. “No one wants what they’ve never known, Geof.”

Ewen thinks of his mother’s words as he watches Geoffrey close his eyes and tighten his jaw. “Things won’t stay like this forever, Dad. The cities can barely hold everyone as it is.” Though Ewen means for the words to simply be comforting, they are truthful as well. In the Eastern South, it’s been reported that singles are being forced to

double up in the studio apartments. Even some families have been assigned one-room apartments, where the living room acts as a second bedroom.

Ewen reminds his father of the open area between the city and the hospital. "All that space," Ewen says. "They could put in twenty, thirty more apartments." Surely, he often thinks, he can't be the only person to think about this.

"People will want a change. Eventually," Ewen says. The last word is an afterthought, tacked onto a sentence that was already quiet on Ewen's tongue.

Geoffrey doesn't look convinced. "Not in my lifetime. And by that point, no one will remember what things were like before."

Ewen opens his mouth to disagree, but he thinks back to his mother, snapping together the New York skyline. Even now, the busses travel out of town only on the weekends.

Geoffrey smokes most of the morning away while Ewen tries to sort out the food in the cupboards. Most of the items are recognizable; Ewen has the same food in his cupboards. Though he doesn't receive food aid, he buys the cheapest groceries he can. A large portion of Geoffrey's groceries are expired and Ewen wonders if he received them that way.

"Dad." Ewen runs his thumb over the expiration date on a box of instant potatoes. He's surprised grain weevil haven't flocked Geoffrey's cupboards. "You can't keep this shit sitting around. It's not healthy." He balances the box on top of a pyramid

of other expired food items that Ewen has precariously constructed on the stove. "Bugs, Dad. You'll get bugs in here." The words sound as though meant for a child and now, more than ever, Ewen feels as though he's babysitting.

Normally, Geoffrey would spit back a retort about not caring about any damn bugs. Today, he nods, but refuses to make eye contact with his son. "That's what they gave me."

"Well, I'm throwing it out." Ewen pauses and cocks his head toward Geoffrey, looking for signs of a fight. When none surface, Ewen begins pulling more boxes from the cupboard, being sure to check the expiration dates on everything. Some have been expired for months, some for years. The realization that this was going on long before the move, long before his mother's passing is alarming.

When Ewen finishes clearing out Geoffrey's cupboards, he finds there isn't much food left. The pile of boxes and cans and bags going to waste is mountainous and yet Geoffrey is left with half a box of powdered milk, instant coffee, a single bag of rice, and a loaf of bread. There's some cheese and sliced deli meat in the fridge, a couple bottles of condiments.

Geoffrey sits cross-legged on his bed, cigarette pinched between dry lips, as he painstakingly rolls cigarettes, using one of his notebooks as a makeshift table. Ewen watches him, awed at how Geoffrey floats on top of the bed, barely making a dent in

the mattress. Today, Geoffrey didn't get dressed. He's still in long johns and a flannel button-up. White hair sticks out on the left and is flattened on the right.

"Dad." Ewen makes his way across the apartment, stepping over a small heap of dirty laundry. Geoffrey doesn't look up, but he licks the edge of the cigarette paper and twists the cigarette in his knobby fingers. They look like twigs, fragile and twisted.

"Where is all your food?"

Ewen stands at the side of the bed, looking down at his father. All day, they've been replaying the announcement that Ewen heard early that morning. The physicals will begin in the coming week. Those unable to care for themselves will be moved within the month. *"In doing so, we will be able to properly care for our fellow citizens,"* the voice assures. Ewen lets his eyes trace the curve of his father's spine, which bulges from under his flannel like barbed wire. If his father's body continues to dissolve, Ewen knows he'll be living in one of the hospitals.

After a long silence, Geoffrey asks, "Do you honestly think they have enough food for an old man like me?" It's the first time, Ewen believes, that his father has admitted to receiving food aid from the government. Years ago, when money was tight, Geoffrey refused to receive food aid for his family. "I live in their apartments, I sleep on their beds; I'll be damned if I eat their food," he said. Even though he was just a kid, Ewen knew his father would rather starve than take hand outs from the government. Now, he has no choice.

“They have enough food, Dad. They tell us every—”

Ewen’s cut off by a wet hacking cough that hangs in the air long after the apartment has gone silent. Geoffrey begins rolling another cigarette, the routine as familiar as breathing by this point. “Well, that’s good for the people who are getting the food, isn’t it?”

Ewen’s toes curl in his shoes. In the last few months, the voice has assured his fellow citizens that food production is up. Last week, they were discussing a surplus.

“It has to be a mistake, then. I’ll look into it.” Ewen goes back to the kitchen and begins throwing old food into large garbage bags. When he’s finished, the kitchen is empty. The cupboards are bare. Ewen thinks of the untouched food in his own kitchen, food he can’t bring himself to eat. He’d like to carry it here and stock his father’s shelves, but knows that, because of pride and stubbornness, he wouldn’t accept it. Tomorrow, Ewen decides, he’ll pack his food in one of the old delivery boxes and bring it to Geoffrey’s before he goes to work. “They must have gotten your new address wrong,” he’ll say. “I’ve gotten it straightened out, though.” It’s better than his own food going to waste.

Ewen thinks of the voice, announcing the mandatory physicals. He wonders if the owner to the voice has empty cupboards.

Most days, Ewen sees Edith. Often, she'll wait outside for him before work. During warm days, Edith will sprawl on the lawn, shoes forgotten and cigarettes shoved aside. But when it's cold, she'll lean against the building, taking long drags of her cigarette, often throwing two or three butts to the ground before her shift starts.

Ewen will see Edith in passing during his shift, but they never stop to talk. On the way to the bathroom or when he heads outside to take a break, he'll notice her carrying files down the hall, or talking with a doctor. Tonight, he's on his way to the break room when he sees Edith pushing an empty gurney down the hall. He slows his steps and, just before he slips into the break room, Edith looks up and offers a low wave.

Ewen has been keeping an eye on Edith. If she isn't outside when he arrives, Ewen takes winding, meandering paths through the hospital's halls, keeping his eyes sharp for her solid frame and dark hair. The days he is able to catch her glance, he finds himself searching her eyes for a glimmer of hope, a reassurance and understanding. What for, Ewen can't decide.

The other day, Ewen saw her outside the break room with a few other nurses. Though he's always seen a difference between Edith and the others (not just the other nurses, but the other citizens, as well), her stark contrast when placed beside them was unmistakable. She stood straight and looked everyone in the eye when she talked. Ewen

can't remember the last time someone looked him in the eye when they spoke. It's a quirk of which Ewen is appreciative.

The break room is nothing more than a fridge, bare counters, and a table with folding chairs. A coffee maker sits atop the counter, the carafe half empty. Mismatched mugs hang from a rack above the sink. As Ewen picks a bright yellow face depicting a generic smiling face, he listens to the voice on the radio. The break room and the filing room are two of the only areas of the care facility with speakers. There are no speakers in the main part of the building. Once, Ewen asked one of the doctors why there were no speakers. The doctor explained, "We don't want the patients' rest to be disturbed." Ewen thought, "What about their fellow citizens? Don't we need rest, too?" He thought of restless nights in bed, listening to the drone of the voice that didn't seem to sleep, either. But he kept his mouth shut and thanked the doctor for the information.

The coffee pours from the carafe like sludge, slightly warmer than room temperature. Ewen debates going back to the filing room. He doesn't know many people at the care facility and, quite frankly, he doesn't want to know many of them. Aside from the nurses who drop off files, Ewen doesn't speak to any of his coworkers. Most don't even know who Ewen is and probably mistake him for a visitor when they do see him. This doesn't bother Ewen; in fact, he'd like to keep things this way. He's found, from the short conversations he's had with nurses, that he doesn't have much in common with any of them. Most are strict "believers" like Lily, and though Ewen has

no problem with a difference in opinion, he doesn't enjoy lying. He can't feign happiness when his fellow citizens discuss the Eastern Unification Celebration, which is all anyone wants to talk about lately.

However, it is late and Ewen assumes most of the nurses and doctors have already taken their breaks. He sits at the table, clutching his coffee with both hands and hovering over the table. His hair falls around his face like a shield; he should have gotten a haircut weeks—perhaps even months—ago.

“I didn't think you took breaks.” The voice startles Ewen and his body tenses until he sees Edith. She strides into the break room as though it's her own apartment, grabs a mug and turns the faucet on. She passes her fingers through the water, waiting for the liquid to cool. As she fills her cup, she cocks an ear to the speaker in the corner of the room.

“This is a reminder that the Eastern Unification Celebration will begin next Monday with a parade. The parade will start at six o'clock. Because of this, busses will not run between four and ten.”

“Is ironic the word?” Edith asks, pausing as if waiting for an answer. “A Unification Celebration for our separation from the West.” She takes a long gulp from her mug and leans back against the counter.

Ewen offers a small smile before looking into his coffee. “I think bullshit is the word you're looking for,” he says.

Edith laughs before making her way to the table and sitting across from Ewen. She kicks her foot against one of the legs. A bit of Ewen's coffee sloshes over the edge of his mug, which he wipes up with the sleeve of his shirt, then folds his sleeves back to the elbow. The cuffs are loose around the knobby bones.

"So," Edith starts. She leans forward, holding her mug tight between her hands. "How's your dad?"

"He's doing okay, I suppose. Since all this with the physicals started, he's been a bit..." Ewen lets his voice trail off as he searches for words to explain Geoffrey's change in character.

"I know," Edith says. Her voice is quiet and she raises her brows as she searches for Ewen's eyes. "My dad, he's the same way." Edith has never mentioned her family to Ewen. It's not something he's expected her to do; they're acquaintances at best, though Ewen trusts her more than his fellow citizens. "He used to talk about leaving. He grew up in the Middle Ground, before the Unification. Says we could go back and just start over on our own, you know? And now." She shrugs, her shoulders heavy. Her fingers run along the rim of her mug and she sits back. Her eyes are locked on the table when she asks, "Do you ever think about leaving?" Though Ewen is staring right at Edith, he doesn't recognize her voice. Just as his father's voice has changed, Edith's changes, in that moment. It's feminine, soft like the underbelly of a kitten.

Ewen doesn't have to think about his answer. *All the time*, he thinks, and is about to tell Edith as much when a pair of doctors walks in, discussing the new care facility being built. Ewen can't avoid seeing it every day; it's a monstrous building being built a block from the Parkview Care Facility. Their scrubs are starch white and their shoes squeak against the linoleum. Neither acknowledges Ewen or Edith.

Ewen sips from his mug. It's getting to the bottom of the cup and the coffee is thick, almost too strong, but he tips the mug back and finishes the last drop. The doctors are lingering by the counter, eating premade sandwiches. "I should get back to work," he says, making his way to the sink and rinsing out his mug. "But can we talk about this later?"

When he turns around, he finds Edith's eyes on him, head nodding slowly. "Of course," she says. All Ewen can read on her face is, "What if, what if, what if."

He passes by her on his way to the door and brushes his hand over her shoulder. Pausing for the slightest of moments, he leans down to whisper, "All the time," against her ear. He closes his eyes to avoid noticing the way she clutches her mug, her fingers betraying her slack expression. When Ewen leaves the room, the doctors are still talking, their voices like darts through the radio's static.

Ewen calls Lily on his day off. He waits until after he's contemplated eating dinner and blocked out the evening announcements. By the time she picks up the

phone, they only have twenty minutes to talk before the phone lines are cut off until the next day. Ewen still feels as though it's too much time.

Lily answers the phone with the hurried lilt her voice always carries. Ewen's mental portrait of Lily always includes a child carried on one hip and their father's frown spread across her lips. She doesn't even offer a proper greeting, just sighs and says, "Yeah?" It's as if they're already in the midst of a conversation and she's waiting for Ewen to just get to the point.

And so, Ewen gets to the point. He doesn't ask about her husband or her children, her job or when she'll visit next. He avoids allowing his voice to stray from anything other than monotonous. "They've quit delivering Dad's food." This is the first time Ewen has mentioned this to anyone. Though he told his father he'd figure everything out, Ewen doesn't know who to contact.

Ewen can almost hear her eye roll. He remembers, as kids, the way Lily would blink before sending her pupils in an endless loop, an expression that irritated their mother and incensed their father. "What do you mean they quit delivering his food?"

"What do I mean? What else can, 'They've quit delivering Dad's food' mean?" Ewen's words move a bit quicker than he had planned and he has to take a deep breath before continuing, explaining how the food is expired. He leaves out his father's comment about the country not having enough food for an old man.

Ewen checks his watch. They have mere minutes before the phone lines are cut off. “Have you heard about the physicals?” he asks. “Of course I’ve heard,” Lily says. “It’s probably for the best.”

Ewen yearns to agree. Though he has no responsibility to take care of his father and often believes his father doesn’t need anyone to even take care of him, it seems as though it’s his duty. With Lily miles away, Geoffrey has no family other than Ewen nearby. His friends—at least the few Ewen can remember Geoffrey having—have passed or simply lost touch.

Lily grows impatient with Ewen’s silence and asks, “I hope Dad gets moved. You shouldn’t have to babysit him.”

Ewen snorts. “Well, someone has to. The government won’t be taking care of him anytime soon.” As Ewen places the phone back against its cradle, he can hear Lily asking, “What’s that supposed to mean?” But he has a feeling she already knows. If she doesn’t, perhaps she never will.

A nurse arrives at Geoffrey’s on Wednesday, shortly before Ewen normally leaves for work. Ewen doesn’t recognize her, though he has more than likely passed her dozens of times at the care facility. She’s thin and tall, almost standing eye-to-eye with Ewen, her dark eyes like searchlights on his face. “I’m here for the physical of,” she glances at the clipboard she’s holding, traces her pencil down the side of a list. Ewen

glances down, quickly, and notices a series of checkmarks streaming horizontally from most of the names. "Geoffrey Robert King."

Ewen steps aside to let her in the apartment. Geoffrey is on the couch and has been on the couch since Ewen arrived. The nurse surveys the room like a crime scene, focusing on Geoffrey, the unmade bed at the back of the apartment, and the empty kitchen. She turns to Ewen and asks, "Do you stay with your father?"

"I stop by before work." Ewen explains. "My mother died a few months ago and—"

She cuts Ewen off. "How did she die?" Her words are methodical. She holds her clipboard up, the pencil poised, ready to write, as she looks back at Ewen with an expectant eyebrow raised.

Outside, a woman rushes down the hall, holding the hand of a small boy. She keeps her head low, but Ewen can feel her glance into the open apartment as she passes. He kicks the door shut and folds his arms over his chest.

As he's about to answer her, Geoffrey speaks. "They didn't say. One week, they said her kidneys weren't working right. The next, blamed it on a heart palpitation. Didn't bother to do an autopsy after her death, even." His voice is calm, lacking any sort of inflection. "For all this talk about concern for the elderly, they sure weren't too concerned about my wife, Mrs.—" Geoffrey looks at the nurse with gray eyes. The skin around his lids is a pale, ashy yellow.

“Nelson.” She takes a step toward Geoffrey and lowers her clipboard. “And I assure you, we are all concerned about the health of our fellow citizens. Now, if you will cooperate, this won’t take long.”

She conducts the physical like a routine, her vacant stare and stiff movements similar to Ewen’s when he is in the filing room. Her hands move like cement blocks across Geoffrey’s flesh. Ewen watches from the kitchen, scrubbing at unused counters with a dry cloth. Even in the small apartment, Ewen struggles to hear what the nurse says as she checks Geoffrey’s blood pressure and pulse. He barely hears her whispers, “Almost done,” as she warms the head of a stethoscope against her palm before sliding her hand up the back of Geoffrey’s shirt.

Afterwards, she writes on her clipboard in silence, placing harsh checkmarks in a few boxes and scribbling notes in others. She moves through the routine as swiftly as Ewen sorts files and before long, she’s tucking her instruments away in the medical bag and standing, brushing the wrinkles out of her slacks. “Thank you for your time, Mr. King.” She smiles, but it’s carved out of stone, cold and thin.

Geoffrey sinks back into the couch as she strides across the apartment, her gait long and brisk. The door creaks as she pulls it open and she disappears, leaving the apartment silent save for Geoffrey’s heavy, hoarse breaths. He watches the door swing shut behind the nurse, his eyes tracing the over the hinges, down the thin crack along the frame, and then to the floor. The cardboard boxes are still stacked around the foyer,

dust settling on the flaps. He moves his eyes in loops around the letters of his mother's name and turns to Geoffrey when he says, "Well, that's that." His words are sure and strong, a final note.

III.

With the heavy sun and warm May wind comes Geoffrey's moving notice. It's delivered with the rest of his mail, slipped between aid applications and community newsletters. Most of the letter is whitespace, bordering trite sentences and dry comfort.

"Dear Geoffrey R. King," Ewen reads aloud. His voice is the same one he uses to imitate the announcer's voice, and his father smirks at the recognition. Geoffrey is lying in bed, thumbing through one of his notebooks, pages of which are yellowing and wrinkled. The sheets are tucked around his frame, draped over his legs, and the bulbous knobs of his knees accentuate his thin, empty thighs. "We are pleased to inform you that you qualify for free medical and housing aid. To provide these supports, we will be moving you to the Wesbrook Care Facility. This location will allow us to best care for your needs. We will be contacting you within the next week to facilitate your move." Ewen folds the letter in half and drops it on the kitchen counter.

Geoffrey doesn't look up from his notebook. He says, "I won't move."

"I know, Dad." There's the impression, a slight inclination in his voice, that he also means, "You don't have a choice." Just as Geoffrey had no choice when he was moved from the family apartment to the studio apartment, he has no choice yet again. The movers will come and, whether he wants to or not, he will be moved to a new apartment. The only choice he has is what belongings he will pack.

Ewen closes his eyes and rests his palms against the edge of the counter, leaning down until the pressure creates indentations across his flesh. "It's not," Ewen searches for the right word, grasping for synonyms and antonyms that don't quite fit before settling. "Fair. It's not fair, Dad."

A comfortable silence filters through the room. Geoffrey flips through a few pages in his notebook before closing it and letting it rest on his lap. "You need to go, Ewen."

Ewen opens his eyes and stares at the folded letter in front of him. He thinks of Edith. Every day, her desire to move West is more evident and the excitement is rubbing off on Ewen. He finds himself planning what he would take, how he would go about moving, who he would tell, if anyone. And yet, he's pulled to the East, holding on. He shakes his head and turns away from his father. "I know, Dad."

When Ewen gets home from work, his body is tired but his mind is alive. He knows he should sleep; the morning sun is peeking through the lone window in his apartment. But, he's hungry. His stomach growls, the rumble echoing against the empty lining. For the first time in weeks, perhaps even months, Ewen makes dinner. It's simple—Ewen was never a good cook—but sufficient. A can of albacore tuna with cold noodles and frozen peas. He mixes a glass of powdered milk and sits at his dining room table.

Tomorrow (rather, later today) he must go to his father's and begin packing. He knows Geoffrey won't do it on his own but will regret the decision later.

Ewen eats quickly; though he doesn't want to sleep, tomorrow will be long. It is Edith's last day at Parkview. Citizens are being moved into the new Westbrook Care Facility on Monday and the assigned nurses and doctors are preparing for their arrival over the weekend. Ewen has spent the last few days pulling patient files for those moving into the Westbrook Facility. At one point, Edith came to the filing room to drop off new files. It was late, even for a night shift, and Ewen was thumbing through a file for a Wenger, Loren. The grating sound of a key twisting in the lock interrupted Ewen and he shut the file as the door opened, half expecting to see a nurse's generic face. But, it was Edith, and he smiled, unable to contain how pleased he was to see her. Over the last weeks, he'd grown accustomed to Edith. He felt bound to her, connected in a familial way he wished existed between him and Lily.

Edith was in her regular blue garb and she pushed a cart of files in, using her backside to keep the door open as she entered. Most of the time, when files are delivered, the nurses grunt a greeting in Ewen's direction, push the cart inside, and leave. But Edith edged the cart against the wall and let the door close behind her. Ewen could feel her watching as he placed the Wenger, Loren file back in the correct filing cabinet.

"I'm going," she said, her voice steady as a line. When Ewen looked up, she said, "My father," before taking a few steps closer to Ewen. The voice from the speaker was loud, but Edith kept her voice low, traveling underneath the announcements. All day, they'd been talking about the Eastern Unification Celebration parade on Sunday. "He still drives busses for the city, Ewen. He'd be able to take us as far as the Eastern border." She pressed a hand against Ewen's arm, squeezes his bicep. Her fingers were warm, the heat soaking in through the light fabric of his shirt.

"I've never been to the border," Ewen said. The border between the East and the Middle Ground is hardly a border at all. It is miles away and Ewen has only seen pictures. There is no wall, no fence, no barrier. The city simply stops, making way for an empty expanse of green that begins the Middle Ground. Ewen walked to the cart Edith delivered and took a stack of files. "When?" he asked as he began to flit from cabinet to cabinet, opening drawers and making room for files, shoving patients back in their place.

"Soon," she said. She ran her hand over the doorknob as if wanting to leave. Ewen watched her, let his eyes linger on her hand before he settled on her face. She seemed to be searching in Ewen for the same thing he always searched for in her. When she didn't seem to find what she was looking for, Edith twisted the knob and opened the door. "I just thought you should know."

The door shut behind her and Ewen went back to filing folders, his mind flashing with pictures of foreign coasts and empty western spaces.

Ewen scrapes the last remnants of his meal from his bowl before bringing the dish to the sink. The hum from the radio is incessant; when he goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth, Ewen kicks the door shut, silencing the noise.

As Ewen walks to work, he notices the first signs of the parade. Strings of lights hang from speaker post to speaker post, long orange extension cords connecting them to building outlets. Banners hang from street lamps, proclaiming the celebration. Identical signs reading, "Twenty-Five Years of Freedom!" hang from multiple store windows; Ewen stops to look at one and notices, in the corner, a fine print reading, "Provided by your Eastern States Government."

Every year, there is a parade and yet, Ewen has never been to one. From his parents' apartment, he heard the commotion on the streets, the cheers and hollers, singing. But the most he's ever seen of the Eastern Unification Celebration is the aftermath: confetti on the streets and torn decorations falling across the sidewalks. For weeks the remnants of the celebration litter the city until it finally gets cleaned up and Ewen always finds it wasteful.

Ewen stands with the crowd at the bus stop. The speaker is loud, deafening in Ewen's ears.

“And a reminder that starting on Monday, bussing will be unavailable during the day between ten o’clock and three o’clock as we move those citizens needing extra care to the Westbrook Care Facility. This will continue until Friday. If you know of anyone who is moving, we ask that you take some time to assist your fellow citizen with—”

The bus arrives and Ewen waits for everyone to get on before climbing the stairs and sitting near the front, next to a young woman wearing scrubs. She looks like one of the nurses, but her face is unrecognizable. Ewen stares across her, out the window. It’s a nice day, warm with a slight breeze, and Ewen would prefer to walk to work. But, he spent the day with his father, packing and moving cardboard boxes around the apartment. His back aches and his fingers are numb from lifting boxes, one on top of another. “I’m not sure where you’re going to put these,” he said to his father. “I doubt the rooms are big.”

The rooms aren’t big. Edith says they’re smaller than the single apartments and will hold two, sometimes three citizens. Ewen crosses his legs, trying to make himself compact. The woman next to him spreads her legs a bit wider and leans against the window. Her eyes close and she looks as though she’s ready to sleep, something Ewen wishes he could do.

Announcements have been running constantly since he crawled into bed. It was all menial things, announcements that have been made and reworded. But the voice was insistent, never-ending, like a dream on repeat.

“Still, nothing about the soldiers,” his father said, earlier. They’d been packing his clothes—countless worn slacks and faded t-shirts—and Geoffrey stared at the speaker, hopeless. “It’s like they want us to forget.”

Ewen shoved some socks into a box, trying to fit them into empty spaces between shoes. “Dad,” he started, afraid to continue. “What soldiers?”

For a brief moment, Geoffrey stopped folding shirts and glanced at his son. Then, he returned to the task at hand, shaking his head. “You don’t even remember.” He didn’t continue and Ewen dropped the conversation, now wanting to know what he’d forgotten or his father had fabricated.

The bus ride is short; Ewen can see Edith as the bus pulls up to the Parkview Care Facility. She’s standing outside the building, arms crossed over her chest, cigarette dangling from her fingers. The sun is still bright and her eyes are slits. Even from a distance, Ewen sees the creases between her brow, the same furrowed wrinkles his father has and, as Ewen steps off the bus, he can hear Geoffrey, whispering, “Please. Ewen, just go.”

Most of the bus empties at the stop. Ewen is one of the last off, and as he makes his way to the building, he takes cautious steps, separating himself from the crowd. By the time he’s within speaking distance of Edith, they’re the only ones outside and the automatic doors are sliding shut.

“My last day,” Edith says before bringing her cigarette to her lips. “Then a new place, same shit.” Puffs of smoke escape her lips with each word.

Ewen smiles and comes to stand in front of her, places his hand on her elbow. “But you’re almost done.” The crease between her brows gets deeper and Ewen continues, “I’m going with you. West.”

Edith flicks her cigarette to the ground and toes at it with her sneaker. She smiles, and this time, there is no question of “What if?” in her eyes, just as there is no question in Ewen’s mind, no ties holding him back. “I was hoping you’d say that,” she says, and squeezes Ewen’s shoulders, her grip tight. They stand, for a moment, holding one another, before Ewen lets go of Edith’s elbow and backs out of her grip. The voice from the speaker gives a brief parting statement before dissolving into static that lingers in the air.