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ENDING MY CHILDHOOD: STORIES OF GROWTH

By

Jackson Keller

THESIS

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ENDING MY CHILDHOOD

This thesis by Jackson Keller is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

ENDING MY CHILDHOOD

By

Jackson Keller

Ending My Childhood is a collection of novel excerpts, non-fiction, and podcast scripts charting the growth of a writer as he struggles through the process of grieving. The pieces all explore issues of identity in the digital age, the value of digital art as a medium, and finding meaning in the face of death.

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2019

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis isn't what it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be a work of Young Adult fiction, a single, cohesive novel about a young girl with the ability to see how people were going to die investigating a series of inexplicable suicides. It was supposed to be an exploration of trauma and existentialist philosophy. I spent an entire semester working with my thesis advisor developing story circles, character relationship charts, and all sorts of prewriting materials before I even set a single word to paper of the official manuscript.

Then, two weeks after I officially commenced work on the first draft, my father died of a heart attack in the middle of the night.

Everything changed, of course, and I became less than enamored with this particular project. Part of it was simply the loss of momentum. Since I already had a complete novel under my belt, I knew that momentum in the beginning was important. When you're writing a novel, you're in for the long haul, weeks of lonely, frustrating work. If the initial burst of enthusiasm doesn't carry you past twenty pages, you won't be far enough for the sunk cost fallacy to kick in and force you to finish the rest of it kicking and screaming. Naturally, the grieving process robbed me of this excitement. As a result, when I returned to the draft several months later, I had almost nothing to say. I'd sit in a café for half a day staring at a blank page, several days in a row. The thought of exerting another iota of energy on this novel seemed like a preposterous notion.

Because the novel was poison at its conception, ill-conceived from the word go. All my charts and prewriting, every book I read in the name of research, all tried to compensate for an unavoidable truth: I didn't know the first thing about trauma when I started this, and no amount

of research can prepare you for a genuinely traumatic experience. No amount of research can prepare you for the sleepless nights trying to process your changed world. No amount of research can prepare you for the hollow feeling that nothing matters in the face of the inevitable, a feeling that seeps into every action you take.

Looking over my plot points and my research only exacerbated the ridiculousness of the project. Here I was, in the throes of trauma, expected to execute the designs of a clueless idiot who intended to recreate those emotions from an intellectual distance. If I believed in any sort of cosmic power, I might be tempted to think I was being punished for my hubris. Everything about my old plot seemed wrong. The experience I plotted out wasn't grieving. It wasn't even close.

Why not start over, then? Why not reframe the story to align more closely with the experience? I began to think about the reason I was drawn to Young Adult fiction in the first place: the audience. The Young Adult audience is still developing their tastes, and books they love as teenagers will settle in their brains with far more impact than a book they'll love as adults. I suppose I was convinced that art made a more meaningful difference to a younger audience, that I could express myself and help a large group of people all at once.

These are beliefs I still hold. My view that popular fiction is the most effective form of art hasn't changed. I still believe you can speak real truths and get a broad audience to engage with your ideas with the tricks and showmanship of traditional narrative, and the older I get, the more I know that art leaves its biggest impression on the young.

It's not the Young Adult part of that equation I take issue with. It's the novel. The novel is a relic, a dinosaur losing its relevance in a world changing at an alarming rate. Or at least, the form's in danger. Not due to any of the novel's inherent properties. Novels are still powerful experiences, and I'll sing the praises of longform prose as a medium to anyone who cares to

listen. But the industry surrounding its publication and circulation is trapped in a 20th century mindset. The publishing world moves at a dismally glacial pace. Friends and colleagues would tell me about rejections they got for one-page stories from nobody lit journals months after submission. This is compounded by an order of magnitude when the story is 300 pages, and the queries are going to the world's biggest agencies and publishers fielding millions of nobodies like myself every single day.

During the process of attempting to get my first novel published, it wasn't the rejections that frustrated me: rejection is just part of the game. It was time, how agonizingly long it took to get those rejections. The arrogance of agencies expecting you to submit to them and only them while you wait for months.

With every second that I passes I feel an ever-growing distance between me and the person who finished that novel, let alone the person who started it. With each day I'd keep myself up at night, terrified by the knowledge that I was never safe and could die at any time and my passion project I put so much work and soul into would never see the light of day. I suppose there's the possibility of post-mortem publication, but frankly I won't know the difference if I'm already dead.

Even if an agent loved my novel and made an offer of representation today, that still wouldn't be the end of the waiting. It'd have to go through editors, bureaucrats, committee after committee, and to what end? For them to make a token effort to market and leave it to me to parade myself around social media at every opportunity. It's common knowledge that among Big Five publishers, only established names—the J.K. Rowlings, the John Greens, the celebrities—get any real marketing. The debut authors, the people who need it the most, are left to fend for themselves.

Meanwhile, I'd turned to the internet to help cope with the feelings of loneliness and isolation. This was a trap in its own way, but it was a space I admired more, slowly became swayed by the virtues of dodging the institutions of publishing. I spent hours watching YouTube videos, listening to podcasts, reading stories and essays. All delivered to me instantly, without any wait time on the creator's end. I saw new monetization systems like Patreon allowing creators to get paid directly for their work. If the publishers are going to make writers hustle for their piece of the pie, surely it makes more sense to just hustle without them.

In an age of exponentially growing information, speed is the most important quality for a writer to have, both in the process of writing itself, and in the delivery of that writing. While I was fruitlessly trying to write my novel, a friend had convinced me to be his cohost on a film podcast. In the first few months, it seemed more like a distraction from my "real" work than anything.

But the further I went along, the more I got involved with the online community he was building, the more I started getting into podcasts myself. I became convinced that podcasting was the format that gave me the best chance to succeed. I've been told on several occasions that I have a good reading voice, and one of my greatest regrets is that I didn't keep participating in theater. If the internet was best for the growth of my career, and podcasts would allow me to apply some of my acting skills to my writing, then surely it only made sense to veer away from the novel and into a medium that gave me far greater flexibility.

This isn't to say that I've given up on the novel completely, or that I'll never return to *Implosion Therapy*, the story that this thesis was originally going to be. This is simply a new direction in my growth as an artist.

So what is this thesis, then? A mix of fiction (*Ordinary Chris and Kelly*, *Ending My Childhood*) and nonfiction (*Kirby*, *Quarter Century Reconstruction*). I like to consider it a living document of the journey that lead me to these conclusions. None of these pieces represent a final product, as they still need to go through the process of recording, audio editing, and uploading before they'll be available to the public. I've chosen these pieces to illustrate the endpoint of the work I've been doing throughout my semesters of study. The pieces have been arranged in chronological order to track my growth and the directions I've taken as a writer, and each one is emblematic of a discovery I made about myself as an artist.

The first piece, contrary to what I may have led the reader to believe, is the first few chapters of *Ordinary Chris and Kelly*, the young adult novel I completed before I ever stepped foot on Northern Michigan University's campus. Though I keep saying it was complete, this is actually a disingenuous notion. The first lesson I learned is that no work is complete until it's available for the public to view, and perhaps not even then. After all, this thesis will be publicly available reading, but it won't provide readers access to the complete story.

Why include these chapters, then? Simply put, I believe they're the strongest indicators of my growth as a writer. The opening chapters of *Ordinary Chris and Kelly* were the writing sample provided with my application to the program, but that introduction has been cut, repurposed, reorganized, and rewritten so much that in a way it's actually my most recent work, and most indicative of my current approach. Regarding my disillusionment with the novel, I provide these chapters precisely to illustrate how that disillusionment has shaped my approach.

While I stand by all of my criticisms of the publishing industry and my concerns about a changing, digitized world, there's another aspect to my ongoing attempts to get *Ordinary Chris*

and Kelly published that I had to reconcile. Namely, the samples I was sending to agents simply weren't very good. Nowhere near compelling enough to be considered worthy of publication.

The main problem with my earlier drafts of *Ordinary Chris and Kelly*—that my thesis director made abundantly clear to me—is this: there was no hook. No reason for a publisher to give me a second glance. I always had something of a distaste for the idea of a hook, resentment at readers for needing something flashy at the beginning of a story, not allowing it to move at the pace that it needs to. I thought the hook was a construction born purely from commercial needs. But the truth is far simpler than that: this isn't the 20th century anymore, and not only are long, drawn-out intros unappealing to editors trudging through hundreds of manuscripts a day, they're unappealing to readers too.

And not just readers of popular fiction. This is just as true of editors and readers of literary magazines, mostly freed from commercial concerns. The ease of access to art, the ease of distribution of art, has come with a catch: if an artist cannot justify their existence to an audience quickly, then they're going to be left behind. Replaced by one of the many other stories, songs, movies, and games vying for the reader's time. If the beginning of your story doesn't grab the reader immediately, why should they waste their time on it when there are thousands, millions of works that will?

Given the amount of time I've spent dwelling on mortality and the shortness of life, I've become very sensitive to wasting people's time, and having my time wasted in turn. This is why I've selected the novel's intro in particular. It's the section of the novel I've spent by far the most time revising, and I've come to realize it's truly the most important part. Perhaps the only part that really matters.

The second piece in this collection is “Kirby,” something of an outlier in that it doesn’t represent a piece of another ongoing longform project. Mostly, I’ve chosen to include it because I’m just fond of it and quite proud of it. However, it would also be remiss of me to not include it in a collection otherwise focused on my personal growth. “Kirby” is the product of a nonfiction workshop exercise where Dr. Rachel May, one of my thesis readers, had us writing flash nonfiction pieces every week based on a conceit, or a theme. The conceit I ended up going with was this: find a way to write a piece about myself that somehow tied in to the 12 characters featured in the original *Super Smash Bros*. This piece, named in reference to a particularly gluttonous game character, is something of a prototype for *Quarter Century Reconstruction*. It’s an early attempt to blend my passion for writing, my love of video games, and my newfound exposure to creative nonfiction into one. In a way that’s less quantifiable on the page, it’s also the piece that convinced me my voice could be a powerful tool in furthering my career, as we read the pieces out loud during workshop. My performance of the piece was met with uproarious laughter from the class. To this day, I’m unsure if the piece is as strong in writing as it is in speech, but I can’t deny its importance to my growth as an artist.

I wish there was more intermediate work between *Chris and Kelly* and the rest of my pieces, but the truth is after my father passed away, I wrote nothing at all until I finally gave up on the second novel at the encouragement of some of friends. While I was talking to them about my struggles, I stumbled upon more innovative and consistent ways of delivering longform narrative, methods that seemed far more engaging to me with the loss of preciousness about my own work. Not only that, but under the guidance of my thesis advisor, I studied the ways sitcoms and other television mainstays provided entertaining, often meaningful work week after week. From my travels to Japan for my Excellence in Education project, I learned about the culture of

manga publishing. How authors of stories beloved all over the world like *Dragon Ball* are forced to come up with fresh, entertaining stories on the fly, weaving worlds and decade spanning narratives in chapter after chapter after chapter, all while making sure they stay ahead of the pack and don't get cut from serialization. The idea to create an endless serial took root in my mind and started to grow.

That idea became *Ending My Childhood*, a weekly podcast I'm preparing to launch the audio version of as I write this. With a simple premise, I can mine weeks' worth of stories: what if a despicable, aging alcoholic's childhood drawings were coming to life and trying to murder him? The monster of the week format is familiar to television, and works particularly well on the internet, where Google's algorithms reward the frequent uploading of art. Not only that, but the contrast between the cynical main character and his childlike sidekick allows me to explore both sides of my artistic impulses, giving me equal outlets for making people laugh and smile in comic joy, as well as explore the depths of depression and trauma when the need to make a bigger statement arises.

The story provided here, again, is not a complete narrative. What I have here is only the pilot, but shrugging off the pressure of having everything wrap into a neat and tidy bow is another thing the process of drafting this thesis has taught me. If anything, perhaps it's better that each episode of *Ending My Childhood* be unable to stand alone. After all, if there's a cliffhanger every week, that increases my chances of an audience becoming interested and tuning in every week to hear what I have to say. The text provided here isn't even the final form of this particular episode; that will come when I've got an audio track to go with it. But even then, I'm starting to wonder if there will ever be an ending. With this sort of premise, I could keep making stories for

years, let my characters grow and change organically in real time with the audience. It's an exciting prospect I never would've considered had I remained so rigidly dedicated to the novel.

This brings me to the final piece of this collection, *Quarter Century Reconstruction*, another podcast that I've included the scripts for three episodes. This particular work of non-fiction has its own introductory episode, so in terms of content and intention, I'll allow that to speak for itself. What I'd like to use the space remaining in this introduction for is to talk a little bit about form.

I've placed *Quarter Century Reconstruction* last because it represents the culmination of the rest of the work in the collection. Like *Ending My Childhood*, the final for is going to be a podcast, but unlike *Ending My Childhood*, it's not designed to go on forever. It has a very clear endgame: list my top 25 favorite video games of all time, each with a personal essay to create a near-complete picture of who I am as a human being. Each episode of the podcast is meant to stand on its own, to be a complete work equally accessible to gamers and non-gamers alike, an analysis of what I find so wonderful about the medium while telling deeply personal stories about flawed people trying to do their best in a flawed world.

But if I've learned anything from the internet, it's that the marketing is as important as the content, and this is where *Quarter Century Reconstruction's* podcast format is going to play well with an audience of gamers. When I've finished every single entry in the list, I intend to record and edit them all at once, and release them over the course of 25 weeks and make a countdown to my favorite game of all time. This way, I can get fellow gamers guessing about what will be on the list next, trying to extrapolate based on hints I've dropped in previous episodes of the podcast and eagerly attempting to put together a predictive model of who I am as a human.

This may seem crude, even repulsive, to an audience of academics, but I think there's a simple beauty in it, a wonderful kind of compromise. To speak to harsh truths and difficult issues while still having a little fun with it, to meet people halfway and reach them through a format they're already familiar with. I believe this is the ethos of my work as an artist, and as a human.

I'd struggle to call this a complete document. *Ordinary Chris and Kelly* is continually revised until I can finally get the entire volume published, and I know I have a long road ahead on the two podcasts representing the culmination of my artistic journey through the MFA program.

But that's just the thing, isn't it? It's not a culmination. It's not over, and hopefully it won't be over for a long time. There's still so much for me to learn, different forms, genres, and mediums to explore.

And I think this collection showcases that.

ORDINARY CHRIS AND KELLY

FEBRUARY 2

TEN YEARS AGO

When I was eight years old, I ran away from home because my brother finally said what the entire family was thinking: Dad is dead because of me.

The wood behind my house went on forever. Forever to a kid, anyway. I'm sure it's only a couple of acres—this is Ohio we're talking about, the state's a barren wasteland of beans and cornfields—but it may as well have been a redwood forest to a city kid like me. Conifers blocked the sun with their needles, the dead or dormant deciduous trees stretched a threatening point at me from my place on top a big rock. The snow seeping into my jeans seemed to freeze faster as an icy wind slithered around the gaps in the forest like a boa constrictor preparing to squeeze. It wasn't a violent blizzard, but I was used to the ruthless efficiency of New York's plows. I hadn't walked so far through the snow in my entire life, hadn't felt the sharp aches and bitter cold of plunging your foot into one snowbank after another.

I'd stopped at this big rock because it seemed a good a place as any to take a break and catch my breath, and I figured if Thomas had told Mom about my escape, I had enough of a head start that I wasn't in danger of being caught, yet.

A tear streaked down the black eye Thomas gave me at school yesterday. The wind seized on the weak spot and stung my face. I squeezed my eyes shut. His words pounded against my eardrums and I felt his fists slam into my face all over again: "It's all your fault! If you weren't such a crybaby, he'd still be here! It should've been *you!*"

The worst part was, I knew he was right. I still smelled the cigarette smoke in the taxi cab Dad and I rode to the apartment that night, still heard him scold me for making a scene in public,

still felt the gunshot rattle inside me, still saw the terror in the murderer's face as the apartment lights flickered on and he looked into my eyes, realizing what exactly he'd done to me.

Sometimes I had to wipe my clean cheek because I could still feel a tiny fleck of Dad's blood there.

I didn't have much of a plan. Any plan, really. Just walk forward until I find a good place in the woods to camp out forever. There wasn't much else I could do to get away. This was Leroy, a town of about a thousand people with no bus system to speak of. The thought of hitchhiking hadn't even occurred to me, being eight and all, and even if it had, all that would've done is gotten a concerned adult bringing me to my mother or the police. Or, you know, trafficked and murdered. Maybe that's what I was looking for. I don't know. It's hard to remember what exactly I was feeling in those days.

I finally stood up from my spot and kept going with heavy, labored breath as I dragged my legs out of the snow. Each time my foot hit the ground I felt like whining about the aches to nobody in particular, but I kept my mouth shut. I could do it. I had to do it.

The wind picked up with a whistle before I heard the screams, a shriek that cut through the blizzard, bouncing like a pinball between the trees, getting louder and louder with each successive blast. I slammed my hands over my ears and locked my knees, but the soundwave knocked me to the ground. I closed my eyes and curled into a ball, felt the earth shake the beneath the snow.

Don't cry.

Don't cry.

Don't cry.

These two words repeated in my head over and over, like my thoughts were trying overpower the screams.

And then it stopped.

My eyes opened first, as if I'd be able to see the noise. I slowly uncovered my ears and quickly shoved a hand down my jeans. To this day, I'm not sure if they were damp from the snow or if I pissed myself again.

The blizzard roaring around me seemed like a gentle snowfall after that. Did somebody let off a bomb in the woods? It felt strong enough, but did bombs scream like that? It could've been an animal, crushed by a falling tree or something. But that didn't seem right either. That shriek was too human. The only thing that made sense to me was that it was some sort of ghost, a boogeyman or a banshee.

I've never felt smaller, before or since.

The footprints behind me were filling with snow fast, but I still had a chance to retrace my steps and get out of there. Whatever it was, I didn't want to see it. I started heading back, stopping and checking over my shoulder every few seconds. I swear that something was following me, but every time I looked, there were just more twisted branches.

I didn't get very far. Around the time I started losing track of the footprints I left, another sound drifted over me. Gentle this time, barely audible in the wind, but it was unmistakable. Somebody was crying.

I paused and stared at my feet for a few seconds, then tried to shake it off and keep moving. No, I absolutely did not want to know what was going on. I'd just go home and forget about the whole thing.

Then, like my body was revolting at the thought of home, my black eye started burning. The pain only got worse and worse. I started losing control of my breath and couldn't get Thomas's accusations out of my head.

It's all your fault. If you weren't such a crybaby. It should've been you. All your fault. Such a crybaby. Should've been you. Your fault. Crybaby.

Right when I felt the needles hit my eyes, I tore off towards the nightmare noise. My fingers clawed the inside of my mittens as I pushed my body to its absolute limit, used every ache and pain in my legs as motivation to move faster. When my legs gave out and I nearly faceplanted into the snow, I grit my teeth and sucked the tears back into my eyes. I'd show Thomas. I wasn't a crybaby. It wasn't my fault. I wasn't going to be responsible for whatever was happening out here, too.

I didn't know what I was looking for, but the crying grew louder and louder, guiding me in the right direction. I didn't stop running until I was about to collapse from the exhaustion. But by the time I was about to fall over, I finally found it.

The forest faded into a clearing. Not large, but notable enough for the sun to shine a little clearer. I huffed and puffed as I clawed my way around a tree, almost choking on the freezing air.

I wasn't sure what I was looking at first. There was a person standing at the opposite side of the clearing, but anything else about them was difficult to say. I thought she was a girl, but couldn't really tell because she had her back to me, pressing her face into a wooden plank nailed into the side of a tree. The hair was the tip-off, a mess of pale blonde hair that swirled and twisted in a ratty heap all the way down to her butt. Her arms were tucked in front of her, like she was swaddling something important. An animal, maybe? I leaned back and forth to try and

get a better look, but didn't dare step closer. This girl could've easily been someone in trouble or someone looking for trouble.

I didn't speak, and listened carefully for sobs. They seemed to be coming from this person standing there, but they'd grown much quieter, like they'd finally managed to calm down. I took a few tentative steps forward, clearing my throat, trying to make my presence known.

But the second I approached, she dropped whatever she was holding in the snow and tore at fistfuls of her hair. And she screamed. Oh god, she screamed.

The shockwave flipped a long lock of my hair out of my eyes and nearly knocked me on my ass. I clasped my hands over my ears again, but a sharp ring had already pierced their insides. The tangles of her hair billowed around her and snowfall blasted away from her, like she was brewing tornados with her voice. I closed my eyes in a desperate attempt to make the ringing stop.

The shrieking didn't last this time. I opened my eyes to see the girl striding with long, awkward steps towards another tree at the clearing's edge. Her gangly limbs like a baby giraffe taking its first steps. Her whole body was strange, she looked young but she was tall. Very tall. Way too tall. Like someone stretched a child's skin over a Halloween skeleton. The way everything about her billowed only convinced me this was a banshee haunting the forest.

But that couldn't be true. She couldn't be a ghost. She was too... there. The sky blue of her T-shirt and the pitch black of her gym shorts had a real presence. They whipped around, damp from the storm, but I felt like I could reach out and touch her all the same. Although, if she wasn't a ghost, why the hell wasn't she wearing a jacket?

I didn't have much time to think about this any further. She made a strange lurch and flung her arm back, her fist squeezed hard enough to crush diamond. She was winding up for a

punch, and her target seemed to be the wooden armor of a thick oak tree. I expected to hear a small thunk, and a yelp of pain as she came to her senses.

But that's not what happened.

Her punch connected and tore through the bark. The tree exploded into splinters where she made contact. A million thoughts raced through my head as it began to fall backwards.

That tree must've been dead. That must be it. Sure, it's tall, sure it's thick. But it must be rotten on the inside. There's no way that girl just knocked down a tree with her bare hands.

The fresh splinters and cracks immediately dispelled that theory. I could feel the gravity of the grove shift as the tree began its final descent. The girl just stood there.

Okay, so this is happening. I'm just dreaming. I'll wake up any second now. I'm asleep in New York, I have to be.

But if I were going to wake up, surely it would've been when the tree hit the ground. Surely it would've been when it exploded in a flurry of snow and debris. Surely the earthquake that rocked the soles of my shoes would've jolted my head from my pillow.

None of that happened. I was wide awake. This monster was real.

She took a deep breath and stood up a little straighter. Finally, she noticed me in her peripheral vision and locked eyes. Tears streaked down her reddened cheeks, and her youthful face twisted in pure rage. Now that she was standing up straighter, I cowered in her long shadow.

But the worst thing of all was her eyes. At first, I thought it was a trick of the light, or the result of bleary, messy crying, but the longer we gazed at each other, the more unmistakable it was.

The eyes staring back at me weren't human. Her irises glowed, glared at me in a deep, bloody red.

CHAPTER 1

CHRIS

I woke up to Kelly's icy blue eyes staring down at me. Their concern betrayed the smile that crept across her face as I sat up in my desk and rubbed the sore left side of my face. Christ, they must've intentionally designed these desks to give sleeping students migraines.

Besides her, Mr. Patterson hacking away at some poor bastard's essay in red ink, and the Civil War memorabilia plastered all around, the classroom was empty, silent except for a ticking clock that freed everyone approximately five minutes ago. Everyone was always in a hurry to leave their classes, but none ran quite as quickly as Mr. Patterson's sixth period students. Being in the room with him was punishing enough, but when you knew that in just an hour and a half you'd be on your way home, listening to him prattle on made you want to jam forks in your ears.

"How long have I been out?" I asked Kelly, not particularly caring if the teacher heard me. This wasn't the first time I'd fallen asleep in his class, nor would it be the last. If he didn't notice during lecture, he sure did when Kelly and I sat here like morons five minutes past the bell. Would it really kill her to shake my shoulder and wake me up?

"Pretty much the whole class," she said, brushing a thing tangle of blonde hair off her face, "Don't worry, I took notes."

“Appreciate it,” I said, though I was less concerned about whatever tripe Patterson was talking about today and more about the splinters I’d have to pick out of my hair. Leroy High clearly hasn’t updated these shitty desks since the ‘60s. You can actually see “Class of 1973” carved into the top of mine behind all the cracks. I was surprised that I didn’t get detention for falling asleep this time. Usually Patterson just slips that telltale pink sheet under my elbow and doesn’t even bother waking me up. If he was feeling merciful today, then I needed to get the hell out of dodge before he changed his mind.

Kelly jumped back with a fright when I sprang up too suddenly, and I tried not to look like I was running for the door. But as soon as my hand wrapped around the doorknob, I heard Patterson’s smug, droning voice.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

I gritted my teeth and tightened my grip on the doorknob. Really, what could he do if I just ignored him and bounced?

I didn’t leave, but I refused to turn around. Kelly’s shadow wiggled against the door as she fidgeted, “Um, we were just going home together. Class is over, isn’t it Mr. Patterson?”

“Miss Hatfield, you know very well I’m not talking to you. You’re free to go. There’s something I need to speak with your friend about.”

I finally turned around. Patterson hadn’t even looked up from his desk. Kelly closed her eyes for just a brief moment and opened them again. We’ve been friends since we were kids, you think their color wouldn’t phase me anymore, and usually it didn’t. But every time she opened them I was taken aback by that pale blue. They really did look like they belonged on a husky, or maybe a ghost.

I let go of the doorknob and shuffled out of her way. She shot me a non-verbal “good luck” and awkwardly sidled out door, leaving it to creak shut until it clicked and sealed me in. Clenching my fist in my pocket, I walked back to his desk. Time to get this over with.

“Have a nice nap, Mr. Underwood?” he said, sliding a pink slip to me without even looking up.

Asshole. He was enjoying this. I pawed at the detention sheet and said, “What do you want?” Obviously, this was about more than just falling asleep.

I had to stifle a laugh as he put his grading pen down and clasped his hands with a scowl. Leroy High employed nothing but self-important bozos, but even by those illustrious standards, Mr. Patterson was a real piece of work. With his rumpled brown suit and crusty goatee, he clearly modeled himself after a college professor he once had, but he always looked more like a Confederate general to me. The principal clearly hired him to teach the Civil War because he fought in it.

“Tell me Chris, do you know what I’m doing here?”

Indulging him would be the quickest way out of the room. “Grading papers.”

“Very good,” he flipped through the stack of essays, “Yours seems to be missing. Care to explain why that may be?”

“Forgot about it,” I said with a shrug.

He glared at me over his glasses, “You are aware that this essay is worth fifteen percent of your grade?”

I nodded.

“You are also aware that you need to pass this class to graduate?”

I nodded.

My silence struck a nerve. “Do you think you deserve special treatment? That you’re somehow exempt from doing work because you’re a senior?”

I shook my head.

“Good, because you aren’t getting any. You know I don’t give out extra credit.”

I nodded.

He stood up and leaned forward on his desk to look down at me, probably feeling real big because I was one of the only guys in the senior class he was actually taller than, “I think we would both prefer if you didn’t have to repeat this course, don’t you? So how about you leave your attitude at the door and do your work for once, hm?”

I nodded.

“I’m glad we understand each other,” he said, as if that conversation was remotely productive, “Now leave.”

I rushed out of the room and made my way toward the senior hallway, pushing against the wave of underclassmen scrambling to the buses. A thin coating of a pale, snotty yellow, our school color, covered the lockers and most of the walls. Green flyers with lions, monkeys, and palm trees on them announced the theme for the upcoming prom: Jungle Fever. Jesus. I couldn’t believe they let the student council get away with that. When you’re from the city, that kind of over the top small-town racism never stops surprising you.

The senior hallway was as packed as usual. Everyone took their sweet time since we didn’t have buses to catch. I hoped that at least Thomas had left already, but no, my brother and a pair of his meathead henchmen lumbered around a few lockers down from mine. They either didn’t notice or didn’t care that I’d finally shown up.

Meanwhile, Kelly sat against my locker, already deep in her sketches. Everyone else seemed content to pretend she wasn't there. When she spotted me, her face instantly lit up, greeting me like a sad puppy that's been left alone all day. In all the time that passed since we met, Kelly hadn't changed her look at all. Her wardrobe still consisted entirely of baggy anime t-shirts and gym shorts, and if you thought maybe she just had an early growth spurt and the rest of us eventually caught up, think again: she kept growing and growing until she hit at a truly colossal 6'4, the tallest student at Leroy High and maybe the tallest person in town, period. I was one of the shortest guys in the class, just barely maxing out at 5'5, so together we were quite the sight to behold.

"Hey!" she said, casting a shadow over me as she sprung up, "How'd it go?"

I presented the pink slip without comment. Kelly frowned, also not having to read it to know what it meant. "Oh."

"Yeah."

She stayed silent for a moment, looking at me with the caution you'd give a sleeping bear. I cocked my head at her. Detention was nothing out of the ordinary.

"What?" I said.

Twisting her hair into knots between her fingers, Kelly's mouth hung on the cusp of saying something. Whatever it was though, she let it fall by the wayside and stopped herself with a small smile, "Nothing. I was just worried we wouldn't be able to hang out, but I forgot that it's Friday night. We'll have plenty of time after detention, right?"

"Guess so."

"So, what's the plan, captain?"

I shrugged, "Haven't given it much thought."

This response obviously dissatisfied her. Her smile faltered for the briefest of moments, and she recovered with a fake sounding laugh, “I don’t believe it. Chris Underwood doesn’t have some wacky scheme planned for the weekend?”

The jab didn’t really register with me, “We could go back to your place and have a movie night or something.”

Kelly bit her lip, “I mean sure, but we can have a movie night any time we want. It’s the first day of spring! Don’t you wanna go somewhere?”

“It’s 35 degrees.”

“Okay, it doesn’t have to be *outside*. I dunno, I just don’t really wanna sit around the house today.”

“Alright, I’ll come up with a plan then. Give me something to do for the next three hours.”

Kelly nodded. “And at least detention’s better than dealing with Rich, right?”

That little comment woke me right up. “Oh shit,” I shook my head back and forth, clawing at my hair in frustration, “Shit, shit, *shit*.”

Kelly’s voice went soft, almost fearful, “Hey, calm down. I thought that was a good thing!”

“No. That fat fuck’s going to use this as an excuse to back out of our deal. Well, he’s a dead man if he tries. He knows how much I need this!”

“He wouldn’t have asked you in the first place if he didn’t really need you, right? I don’t think he’s gonna kick you out.”

Unable to come up with any response, I kept shaking my head and went for my locker, making Kelly step aside. However, when I entered my combination and pulled on the door, it

wouldn't open. I never really kept enough clutter in my locker for it to jam, but Leroy High was falling apart at the seams, so it still wasn't much of a shock. As I kept fiddling with it, the last remnants of Kelly's fake smile evaporated.

I stopped and looked back at her, "What? Spit it out."

She hesitated again, but eventually came out and said it, "Chris, have you been feeling okay?"

The question felt like a sneak attack. I tried to look and sound authoritative, "Of course I'm okay. Why do you ask?"

"It's just..." she bit the inside of her cheek, "You haven't seemed like yourself recently."

I wondered if throwing her a bone would get her to back off. "I'm fine," I said, "Just been kind of tired. Probably need to stop staying up so late."

Didn't work. She looked increasingly concerned as she leaned in to whisper, and her voice carried much farther than I would have liked, "You're not having nightmares again, are you?"

I scanned the area to make sure nobody heard her. Most people kept me and Kelly at a good distance, but my brother and his boys were close enough for me to hear what they were talking about. Most people thought Thomas was my older brother, but he's actually my fraternal twin. Hard to blame them since, he had like five inches on me and was built like a rhino. We only looked like brothers in our faces. We had the same brown eyes. He kept his hair buzzed down, but it was the same black color as my shaggy locks. Honestly, looking at the two of us side by side in pictures, like witnessing the results an experiment dedicated to turning one clone into an Adonis and another into a vampire.

Thomas and one of his linemen tended to their phones while the scrawniest of the three tried to stuff his overflowing locker shut. The lineman smacked Thomas on the arm, “Bro,” he said, handing him the phone, “Look at this shit.”

Shock and disbelief slowly dawned in Thomas’s eyes as he scrolled down the page. He wandered towards the middle of the hallway, not paying attention to where he was going while he focused on whatever he was reading in more detail, “Jesus. That’s only half an hour from here.”

The scrawny kid grunted as a few papers slid from his locker to the ground. “The fuck are you guys talking about?”

“Some asshole at Willow High shot fifteen people,” Thomas said.

Certain the only people who could have heard us didn’t, I leaned back in to answer Kelly’s question, “Look, people have nightmares all the time. There’s nothing unusual about it.”

Something in Kelly’s eyes seemed to be pleading with me, like she was holding back what she really wanted to say, “Chris, it’s not the same for you.”

“Yes, it is. Now drop it.”

Kelly looked hurt, but drop it she did. Wanting to fill the silence before she had the chance to ask more questions about my sleeping habits, I said, “You’re cutting it close if you want to catch the bus.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got time to see you off.”

She had a car with no license, and I had a license with no car, so normally I drove both of us home in her baby blue station wagon. Technically, the car Thomas drove was for me to use as well, but since he was always out, I stopped arguing for my right to it long ago. Meanwhile, Kelly had a garishly ugly, but perfectly functional vehicle she could drive whenever she pleased.

Or, she would, if she hadn't failed her driving test every time she took it. By the time we started high school, Kelly had her powers under almost complete control, but something about being behind the wheel made her lose her grip. Some of the stories are actually pretty funny, not that I dared laugh about them in front of her. On her very first attempt, she hit the accelerator too hard and plowed through every single cone on the maneuverability test, crashing into the DMV's back wall for the grand finale. Most recently, she made it all the way to the end of her exam without a single point against her, and in joyous celebration, Kelly accidentally ripped off the steering wheel. The instructor promptly failed her. After that, she decided she was perfectly happy having me as her personal chauffeur, which worked out fine until I inevitably got slapped down with a detention.

Anyway, I felt a little bad trying to send her away like that, but honestly, I wasn't in the mood for chitchat. I guess Kelly didn't have much to say either, so I struggled to get my locker open in awkward silence, save for Thomas and his friends bellowing behind me. As much as I couldn't stand the guy, it was the kind of conversation that turned heads, so I couldn't help but listen in.

Finally slamming his own locker shut, the skinny guy leaned in with a giggling half-whisper, "You ever wonder if someone's planning to shoot this place up?"

Without missing a beat, the burlier goon said, "You know that sophomore they caught jerkin' it in the library? I heard he's got a list."

Thomas rolled his eyes, "I'll believe it when I see it. You'd have to be one dumb motherfucker to actually write out your hit list."

I tugged on my locker again and searched the edge for a place to slide my fingers in, thinking maybe I could pry it open from the inside. It stayed shut. Putting both hands on the

handle and my foot on an adjacent locker for some leverage, I yanked back as hard as I could. It still didn't budge. A few of the other students in the hall were staring now, and that was the point where I officially started getting frustrated. I took a step back and ran both my hands through my hair.

My feeble strength clearly wasn't going to be enough, so I turned to Kelly. "Can you—" I cut myself off when I realized what I was about to do.

"What?" she said, "What is it?"

I ran through all the possible consequences of asking her to open it for me. On the surface, it was an innocent enough request, but there was always the chance she'd see it as a violation of Rule One. The last time I broke Rule One, she refused to speak to me for the rest of that day and a good part of the next. Better to not risk it.

"Nothing," I said, returning to the locker, "Don't worry about it."

Rule One. The secret sauce that allowed our friendship to function, that allowed Kelly's life to function. I was never, under any circumstances, allowed to talk about Kelly's "condition" with anyone, herself included. As far as Kelly was concerned, she was completely normal; an ordinary teenage girl with absolutely nothing unusual about her. To her credit, she held up her end of the bargain very well. I don't even remember what her last major incident was, but that just made Rule One all the more infuriating. If Kelly was so good at controlling herself, then why not take advantage of her abilities? Why actively suppress the thing that made her special?

Still, I didn't dare break it. She could live her life how she wanted, and it really only bothered me in times like this. She could have the door off its hinges in less than a second and nobody would suspect a thing.

Kelly crept over my shoulder and started sizing the locker up. A rush of excitement came over me. Maybe she'd pull it off on her own.

"Do you want me to find the janitor?" she said.

I tried not to frown and kept jiggling the handle, "No, I got it."

I tried prying the locker open again. The door ended up crushing my fingers when I moved my hand the wrong way. That sent me from zero to a hundred. I pulled them out and kicked the locker as hard as I could, screaming, "*Fucking piece of shit!*"

Everyone in the hall silenced at my outburst. Hitting the locker actually did the trick, and a tidal wave of my stuff flooded out as it popped open. Kelly kept her head glued to the floor, scooping up a few of my books and pretending like nothing embarrassing happened. I did my best not to look at Thomas's minions when they started to giggle. Slowly, everyone murmured to each other and returned to their business, while Kelly rose and handed me my stuff.

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it."

Another awkward silence filled the air between us while I reorganized my things. At that point, I wanted nothing more than to pack my shit up and go serve my sentence, but without any conversation with Kelly to distract me, my attention kept wandering over to Thomas. His skinny henchman was sizing me up, like a chimp trying to solve a Rubik's cube in a research lab. Something broke through his pea brain in a fit of laughter as he nudged my brother and not so discreetly tilted his head in my direction.

"What?" Thomas said.

"Dude," he whispered with another obvious gesture, "Your brother."

Thomas glanced at me while his buddy cackled. It took him a minute, but once he caught on, Thomas smacked the guy, “You’re retarded.”

“Nah, Trevor’s right,” the other football player said, “Just look at him.”

Unlike the other two, Thomas made no effort to control his volume, “I have to live with the guy. You seriously think I wouldn’t catch on if he was planning to shoot this place up? Besides, he doesn’t have the balls. Half the time when I get up for a midnight piss I hear him crying in his room. He’s too much of a pussy.”

I slammed my locker shut.

“Chris, don’t…” Kelly whispered.

I paid her no attention as I strode towards them.

Thomas’s goons started laughing and muttering to one another, but my brother stood his ground, cocking an annoyed eyebrow at me, “The hell is your problem?”

I lobbed a punch at him, but he was prepared for it, putting one arm up to block and using the other to casually shove me away. I lunged again, this time grabbing his hair and pulling down while I kneed him in the stomach. He gasped in surprise, but I lacked the power to seriously affect him. He snarled and broke free from my grasp, sending his fist directly into my face. It felt like my skull fissured in a hundred spider-web cracks. The force sent me flying back, tripping over my own feet. I slammed the back of my head on the hard floor. The other students, now crowded in a half-circle around us, let out an audible gasp. A waterfall of blood flowed out of my nose and down the side of my face into a small puddle on the floor.

My vision went fuzzy as pain took over all my senses. It wasn’t something I simply felt, it was something I heard, saw, even tasted. The initial stab faded into a dull, constant thud as I groaned and attempted to prop myself up, but I was too frazzled to make it on my own. Nobody

came to help me up, so I stayed down and craned my neck to search the crowd, blinking as the lights now seemed exceptionally bright against the white walls. There were murmurs and whispers. Unease started creeping into Thomas's expression as he fretted over whether or not he just scrambled my brain. I frowned when I didn't see Kelly among the crowd.

My spirits lifted as they began to part, and I hoped it was Kelly coming to assist me with a concrete-shattering counterattack to Thomas's face.

Mr. Patterson's voice echoed from the other end of the hall. "All right, break it up! Out of the way!"

Patterson muscled between the two people in front, narrowing his eyes at us, "Why am I not surprised?" He kneeled down and offered his hand, but I refused it, finally wobbling to my feet on my own. Patterson sighed and turned to Thomas, "Go to the office. The principal will speak to you first," he turned to me and grabbed my arm, nearly spitting with contempt, "As for you, you're going to the nurse. But don't worry, you'll get your turn. Now walk."

I kept hoping I'd spot Kelly as he dragged me through the crowd, but she was nowhere to be found as it dispersed. She had a real knack for disappearing at the worst times.

"Can't go ten minutes without causing trouble, can you Underwood?" But I ignored him and kept glancing over my shoulder, hoping that Kelly would show herself.

She didn't.

FEBRUARY 2

10 YEARS AGO

I'll never understand why Chris didn't just run. You'd think he'd lose it as soon as he saw me knock down that tree, but he just stood there, looking at me.

I almost laughed in pure shock. All that worrying over anyone finding out about me, all that work to keep my condition a secret, totally ruined in one stupid, stupid moment. He must've been trying to come up with some sort of explanation for what he just saw, but there was no explanation. There was no point in trying to get him to understand when I didn't even understand. My body has always been normal to me, so I don't really know how to describe it. Maybe my real parents knew, but they got rid of me as soon as I was born, so it wasn't like I could ask them. I guess you could say my condition kinda works like a supercharged adrenaline rush. Whenever I get too stressed or sad or angry, a burst of energy flows through me and my eyes glow and I can throw trees and everything I touch shatters.

I walked away without looking back, knowing I'd start crying again if I did. I didn't bother asking him not to tell anybody. Nobody would believe him, and it wouldn't matter if they did. No one would ever find me anyway.

Ice and water slid down my legs and into my socks. On most kids, the snow would've come all the way up to their knees, but it only came a few inches above my ankles. I focused on moving one foot at a time and tried to stop thinking about Chris spotting me.

Come on Kelly, it won't be so bad. You always wanted to go on an adventure. You just need to find the right place. Like... like Alaska! Sure, it's a pretty long way, but once you're there, you don't have to worry about anything anymore. You can do whatever you want there. You won't have to go to school and you can explore the wilderness and play in the snow and live with the animals and you won't have to worry about anyone getting hurt no more and—

I couldn't hold my tears back. Dad was right. If I just stayed in the house the way he wanted me to, everything would've been fine. I remember the first time I asked him about going outside, when I was really little. The cartoon reruns were getting boring, so I spent a lot of time looking out the windows, waiting the whole summer for the school bus to come back. Every day I imagined it stopping at our house. Every day I imagined getting on to have all sorts of wacky adventures and make all kinds of friends. But that morning, watching the bus didn't make me happy the way it usually did. I tore away from the window and went down to our kitchen table while Dad made breakfast. He stayed behind the counter and sliced up an apple, not greeting me with hugs or kisses. Dad always kept a distance. It was safer that way.

“What's wrong, sweet pea? You look sad,” he said.

My question wasn't unreasonable, I don't think, and I tried to say it in a way that wouldn't make him mad.

“Um, Daddy? Why don't I go to school like all the other kids?”

Nearly dropping the knife in his hand, Dad hid his surprise by turning to grab a plate out of the cupboard, “Because you're safer with Daddy than you are with some teacher who doesn't know nothing.”

“But the other kids are safe there.”

Dad cracked an egg over a skillet, keeping his back to me as he talked, “You’re not like the other kids. Why are you asking about school anyway? You not happy here?”

“No, I’m happy. But I get kinda lonely ‘cause you gotta work all the time.”

He said nothing, letting the egg cook a little before coming back to the counter, his stern gaze digging into me, “Kelly, what do you think will happen if I let you get on that school bus?”

“I dunno—”

“Well I do. You’re gonna spend all day surrounded by strangers in a place where I can’t look out for you. You’re gonna have to spend every minute of every day making sure nobody can see what’s wrong with you. It’s too much for you to handle.”

Energy bubbled inside me, but I fought to push it back. Losing it in front of Dad was the fastest way to get punished, “But I’ve been really good lately—”

“All it takes is one mistake, Kelly. One mistake and everyone in the whole world knows about you. You wanna risk that because you’ve gone a few months without breaking my furniture?” He paused and waited for my answer, but I couldn’t keep looking him in the eye, “Well? Do you?”

“No...”

“No, you don’t. Because not a single one of those kids’ll be able to look at you the same way if you mess up. They’ll think you’re some kinda monster, Kelly. You won’t have even one friend. And that’s if you’re lucky. If you end up on the news, there’s gonna be cops and soldiers breaking down our door to take you away from me. That what you want?”

“No!”

“Good. Then I don’t wanna hear no more about school. You have everything you could ever want right here.”

Dad went back to making breakfast, taking the eggs out of the pan and slicing up the last of the fruit. My eyes started burning and I drew my arms to my chest and locked them up tight, putting my head down so Dad couldn't see. I should've left the room and found a place to calm down, but I was afraid if I made any sudden moves, I'd make the situation worse. So, I stayed put, hoping I could cry quietly enough for it to pass.

Dad stopped what he was doing when I sniffled just a little too loudly. His voice was thick with icy anger. "You better not be crying."

I shook my head back and forth, shutting my eyes so hard they started to hurt.

Dad's knife thudded against the counter when he put it down, "Because you know what happens when you do that. I think you better let me take a look at your eyes."

But I didn't listen, keeping myself withdrawn like a turtle. Each one of his footsteps sent a tremor of fear through me.

"I'm not fooling, Kelly. Let me see your eyes, right now."

I should've just shown him. I was gonna get punished either way, but my fear of the basement took over my brain. When he got close, I sprang up to make a run for it, putting my hand on the table to keep my balance. The table cracked and buckled in a flurry of splinters and dust, and I crashed on the floor between both halves.

"Kelly, goddammit!" Dad yanked me up by my hair, pushing my face toward the pile of broken wood like a puppy who just ruined the carpet, "You see? Do you see what I'm talking about? This is why I can't let you outside!" With another yank, he dragged me over to the basement door, shoving me down the stairs because he knew the impact couldn't actually hurt me. The lock clicked into place behind me as I tumbled down every single creaky step before slamming against the hard concrete bottom. I scrambled to my feet. The walls of that

windowless, cramped hole in the ground felt like they were closing in on me. There weren't any lights, and Dad purposefully had all the furniture taken out so there'd be an empty space where I wouldn't wreck anything.

I ran up the stairs to stand right behind the door, stopping just short of banging against it because I didn't wanna break it and make him even angrier.

"Daddy! Daddy let me out!" I squealed.

His voice already sounded distant, "You break the rules, you get punished! That's how it goes!"

"I'll never do it again, I promise! Please, I don't wanna be down here!"

"You wanna go to school? You wanna leave me? Then get this under control! 'Cause I'm not letting you out until you're *normal*."

I screamed and cried as his footsteps echoed away, but he didn't come back. The punishment lasted until the next morning. They always lasted until the next morning.

Sure, it was harsh, but I finally understood what Dad always knew. Everyone would be better off if I disappeared, so that's what I had to do.

A load of snowflakes rushed toward me, drenching my clothes as they melted on my warm body one after the other. My condition had a lot of downsides, but if it was good for one thing, it was running. Well, not literally running. That was just another disaster waiting to happen. But a weird side effect of my body meant that it stayed warm even in the blizzard, and I could walk for hours without feeling tired. If any nine-year-old had a chance of making it to Alaska on foot, it was me. The only tricky part would be food. I really liked food, but I wasn't sure I actually needed to eat. Hunting and stealing both seemed equally bad, but I couldn't think of any other options. Oh well, I'd have to cross that bridge when I got to it.

The coldness of the snow wasn't a problem, but the weather still made me nervous. The wind muffled all sound. I'd already blown my cover by letting one person sneak up on me, and although I'd managed to stop crying, I had no idea if my eyes were still red. If only I'd been thinking straight and brought my pocket mirror, but the only thing I remembered to take with me was...

My blood went cold. My sketchbook. The one comfort I had for the road, and it was gone. I must've dropped it without even realizing.

Then, to make things even worse, a voice rose over the blizzard.

“WAIT!”

The snow didn't fill my footprints fast enough to make hiding an option. I waited with my back turned. Footsteps crunched behind me.

“You forgot this.”

I blinked, batting snowflakes from my eyes, and glanced over my shoulder. Chris reached into his coat and pulled out my sketchpad, offering it to me with a shaky arm.

“It got a little wet. Sorry.”

Huffing and puffing from chasing me, he steeled himself when I fully faced him, gulping and clenching his free hand into a fist. Even though he was obviously scared silly, he did his best to not look that way. I took the notebook from him gently, like he was handing me a sleeping baby, and tucked it under my arm after dusting snow off the cover.

“Um... thanks.”

We awkwardly stared at each other for a little before I turned to start on my way again.

“Wait.” He stopped me. Something in his puppy eyes looked almost hopeful. “Where are you going?”

I hesitated for just a moment, “I’m running away. You’re not gonna tell anyone about me, are you?”

“No. But…” He took a deep breath and paused, like even he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say, “Do you think maybe I could come with you?”

It was a joke, right? It had to be.

But his voice and his eyes were so sincere, so innocent. For a second it didn’t seem like such a terrible idea. He already knew my secret, so there shouldn’t be any issue. Then, the little voice spoke up, *No Kelly, You can’t take him with you. He’s only gonna get hurt if you do.*

Still, I didn’t say no right away.

“Why?” I asked.

He hesitated, like he wasn’t sure he should tell the truth, “I don’t know, you’ll be pretty lonely all by yourself.”

“Aren’t you scared of me?”

“Not really,” I must’ve looked pretty skeptical, because he quickly added, “Okay, a little bit, but I mostly think you’re cool. You seem nice. Your drawings are awesome.”

I thought I was going to throw up. He looked at it. It didn’t make me feel good knowing he liked them; nobody was supposed to look at my drawings.

He continued, “And I don’t know, you’re like a superhero or something.”

The little voice of reason was right. He had no idea what he was dealing with. Maybe if I told him what I overheard that morning, he’d get it and leave me alone.

He tried to say something else, but I cut him off before he could.

“My grandma and grandpa were fighting when I woke up. I know it’s wrong for me to listen without them knowing, but I couldn’t help it. I was afraid it was about me. I guess they had

been talking to a friend of theirs whose grandkids got in a fight at school.” He immediately got they were talking about him and his brother, and somehow the guilt on his face made it much harder to tell the story. I took a moment to calm myself before I could keep going, “And that made Grandpa really scared. He was saying that he didn’t want me in school anymore if the teachers weren’t looking after us properly, because if something happened with me people were gonna get seriously hurt.” All the energy brewing in me made me sick, and holding everything in became impossible. I had to sit down in the snow and tear up a little before I could finish. “He doesn’t trust me, and the worst thing is that I know he’s right. I shouldn’t be in school. I never should’ve been in school. That’s why I’m running away, ‘cause I’m a freak and I never should’ve been born.”

I buried my face in my hands and soon I was a mess of tears and snot. Chris took a seat next to me, but I scooted away to keep my distance. He didn’t try to come any closer. He didn’t try to calm me down. He didn’t try to convince me everything would be okay. He just let me cry. And he didn’t run.

I’m not really sure how much time we passed just sitting there. Fifteen or twenty minutes, maybe even longer than that. Either way, when I’d finally calmed down a little, he unzipped his coat and handed it to me, telling me to wrap my notebook in so it wouldn’t get wet. Feeling how soggy my drawings were already, and not even considering the fact that normal people couldn’t handle the winter with just a t-shirt on, I bundled it up. Then he stood, and I cocked my head at him as he packed some snow into a ball.

“Come on, let’s make a snowman,” he said. He kept packing snow together and rolling it around, only stopping when he noticed I wasn’t moving. “It’s easier to forget the bad stuff if you’re not just sitting around.”

He made another snowball, leaving it at my feet before going back to his. I didn't really see how making a snowman would make anything okay, but I put his bundled coat on a log and reluctantly helped. Weirdly enough, he was right. Rolling the snowball around numbed me. I wouldn't say it made me feel better, but watching the ball get bigger and bigger, leaving a long trail of grass and mud behind it, gave me something meaningless to focus on. It helped me push my sadness away, at least for a little bit.

We sank a good amount of time into making that snowman. I actually forgot Chris was even with me until he rolled back into view, struggling with a snowball about half as tall as he was. He did a double take at mine, which was almost as big as his entire body. We'd packed all the snow in the area into the two unbalanced parts of our snowman. He bent down and tried to lift his, but he could only get it about an inch off the ground without dropping it. Placing my hands gently around it, I took the snowball from him and plopped it on top of the snowman's bottom half. His face flared as we both stepped back to check our finished work. It was a pretty disappointing snowman, a shrunken head lost in a huge body.

"He's kind of a porker, isn't he?" Chris said.

I nodded and scratched my head, wondering if there was any way to fix him. Inspiration hit me when a few big rocks on the ground caught my eye. Chris watched with interest as I gathered them up, comparing them until I found two flat ones about equal size. I grabbed the snowman's head and put it back on the ground, pushing it against what used to be his body. Then, after pressing my rocks into the side of the bigger snowball, I grabbed a few twigs and stuck them at the top. We both started giggling when I stepped away to reveal the finished product: a big head with a goofy, bulbous snow nose, rocks for eyes, and spindly twigs acting as a few stray hairs. Definitely an improvement. I don't even know what was so funny about it, but

we kept laughing, and seeing each other's reactions just made us laugh harder at the silliness of it all.

Chris caught his breath and wiped a tear from his eye, "Well, I've made up my mind."

"About what?"

He grabbed his bundled jacket and handed it back to me, "I'm not letting you run off alone. I'm coming with you, whether you want me to or not."

I smiled and nodded, "Let's go." For once, the little voice didn't object.

We walked side by side for a little while, but having to slow my pace so he could keep up made me a little self-conscious; my legs had never felt so long before. We hadn't gone far when he awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck and said, "Hey, I know you're in my class and stuff, but, uh, I don't think I know your name."

I stared at him in disbelief, and suddenly I was cracking up again.

Chris took on a defensive tone, "What's so funny?"

"You wanna run away with me and you don't even know my name?"

He stared at the ground, too embarrassed to respond.

A goofy grin stuck to my face, "It's Kelly. You're Chris, right?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

Guessing he didn't wanna hear the actual answer, I said, "You're the new kid. The teacher introduced you in front of class, remember?" I'd been keeping my eye on him. Him and his brother arrived in the middle of the school year, just like I did the year before. Nobody really noticed him at first, but pretty soon everyone knew Chris's name. On a real snowy day, during quiet reading time, the screechy tornado siren went off. The teachers didn't want anyone to know it was coming so we'd act like it was a real emergency. We were all a little surprised, and most

of us covered our ears as we lined up for the hallway. That's probably why it took everyone so long to realize Chris was screaming. He hadn't gotten up from his seat until the teacher went over to calm him down, but when she tried to get him to move, he swatted her away and ran out the door to the playground. The class started laughing, crowding around the windows as the teacher ran out to chase him. The gym coach ended up having to leave his class to pull Chris off the jungle gym, and he got sent to the principal's office for the rest of the day.

The other kids started making things up as soon as it was over. The ones sitting near him when he started screaming said he peed himself. Another kid said that while the teacher was trying to get him to come back, he punched her hard enough to leave bruises she had to cover up the rest of the week. From there the rumors got more intense, to the point where everyone thought he was some kinda psycho. The one I remembered most was that he had to leave his old school because he stabbed a girl with a pen. None of it was true, I don't think. Either way, they started making fun of him all the time; first behind his back, then to his face. Nobody even gave him a chance.

I sat behind him in class, and I thought he seemed like fun. He always brought his Game Boy and played it under his desk when class got especially boring, which was good for me because I was tall and could watch over his shoulder. Actually, I was sorta impressed. If I was allowed to have something expensive like a Game Boy, I'd never bring it where a teacher could take it away, but he didn't care. He was willing to risk it. And besides, I knew what it felt like being the new kid. I knew what it felt like to be excited to make all sorts of friends until, slowly, you realize that nobody likes you because you're weird and ugly.

I started thinking about maybe talking to him, but whenever I tried to lean forward and do it, a little voice in my head would say, *No Kelly, that's a terrible idea. What are you gonna do?*

Play tag with him at recess? Yeah, right. You wouldn't be able to do anything normal friends do, and you could never, ever tell him why. Why would he want a friend like that? He's better off without you in his life. Then I'd realize the little voice was right and sink back into my seat, ignoring the new boy while he faded into the rest of the class.

Now I knew for sure I should've just talked to him. Maybe none of this would've happened if I had. Trying not to focus on what could've been, I said, "Where did you move from?"

He stayed quiet, like he didn't wanna tell me. Eventually he mumbled, "Brooklyn."

"Oh. Where's that?"

"New York."

My eyes went wide. He may as well have said he was from the future, "New York? Like New York City?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. Did you like it there?"

Something about his eyes didn't entirely look right. I don't exactly know how to explain it. They were kinda glassy and glazed over, like someone flipped his brain's off switch.

"It was okay. Is Squirtle your favorite?" he said almost in one breath.

I blinked a few times, "Huh?" He pointed at my chest, where the cheerful Pokémon's face beamed from my t-shirt. The change in subject was about as smooth as sandpaper, but I got the hint that his memories of New York weren't really happy ones, and knew better than to push him.

Besides, Pokémon! I'd been waiting my whole life for someone to ask me that, "Yup! Isn't he cute? I like those little sunglasses he always has."

“Charizard’s the strongest though.”

“Maybe, but I don’t really care about which one is the best or anything. I just like watching the show. I’ve never even played the games,” I tried to laugh, “If I had a Game Boy, I’d probably just break it.”

“You can play mine, if you want.”

“That’s okay. I’d feel really bad if I did something to it.” I hesitated. Would he think it was creepy that I’d been watching him play during class? Better not mention it. “But I wouldn’t mind watching over your shoulder. Do you have it with you?”

He frowned, “No. My mom took it away. Besides, I didn’t think I’d be running away from home today.”

We said nothing as we both caught the first sign that this was a pretty stupid idea.

Not wanting the conversation to die, I dug my sketchbook out of his coat and bit the inside of my cheek. I’d never shown them to anyone but Grandma before—not on purpose, anyway—but he’d already seen some of them. If he liked Pokémon, he might actually think they were cool. I flipped through a few pages until I found my favorite drawing and held it out, careful to keep from accidentally touching him. I wanted to say something about what he was about to see, but it all sounded stupid again, so I did the awkward thing and kept my big mouth shut. My arm snapped back to my side the second he grabbed the notebook and I looked away, nervous that he’d think it was lame, but desperately trying to remind myself that he liked it. It was just too much suspense for me to watch.

The picture I gave him was a fully colored scene of all the starter Pokémon running together. It was definitely my best work. Not to say that it was a perfect drawing or that my lines were straight all the time or my perspective wasn’t a little bit wonky or... oh okay, it wasn’t

really that great, but you have to start somewhere, right? I thought I was actually pretty good for my age. My art is the one thing I've always been proud of.

Finally, he said, "You're really a good drawer."

It surprised me. Not his compliment, really, but his face. Like a fire lit behind his eyes, gave the sad looking boy some life as he smiled. I couldn't remember the last time someone said something that nice to me. I dunno, something about his smile told me he wasn't just saying that. He really meant it. That made me blush.

"I'm not as good when I'm not copying something," I said, "But I didn't trace it or anything like that."

He admired the picture for a little while longer before putting his finger on the edge of the page. I had to stop myself from yelping as he flipped to the next drawing.

Don't make it weird. He likes it.

He was about to make another comment when he stared at me in surprise.

"What?" I asked, suddenly afraid of what he had to say.

"Your eyes. They're blue now."

They are? I ran my hand against my face. Without my mirror I had no way to tell for sure, but I felt normal.

We kept walking and talking as he flipped through the rest of my notebook. I dunno if we talked about anything other than cartoons, but that was okay! It made me feel like a normal kid; I never had a conversation like that with anybody. I don't know how much time we wasted talking about nothing, but we only stopped when we reached the edge of the forest. A white blanket of snow spread out forever in front of us. A car cut through the distance in a straight line, but the road itself was invisible.

“So, what now?” he said.

“I, um, I don’t really know. I was thinking it’d be best if I went to Alaska.”

“Alaska? We’re walking all the way to Alaska?”

It sounded stupider and stupider the more I explained it, “Yeah... except I don’t know if we’re even going north.”

Chris peered in the distance at another car inching through the snow. He tilted his head back toward the woods, “Let’s stay away from the road so nobody sees us. We can walk by the trees while we figure out where we’re going.”

We kept moving near the edge of the woods. Slowly, it became obvious that something was wrong with Chris. The cold turned his pale skin red, and it took him twice as long to talk because he kept stuttering over his chattering teeth. It took me way too long to realize he was freezing without his coat, and I was still holding it.

He shook his head when I tried handing it back to him. “Your drawings will get ruined.”

“That’s my fault for not bringing a backpack. Take it.”

Reluctantly, he slipped the coat back on, but since it’d been soaked by so much snow, it might’ve made things worse. He was pretty much putting on a wet towel.

Watching him get slowly get frostbite was the last straw. This was never going to work. I was a real idiot for thinking everything would be fine if I just ran away.

“Maybe we should go back,” I said.

Chris stopped in shock, “What? Why?”

“I’m starting to think this is kind of a stupid idea. We’re not really ready for this.” His sudden glare made my heart sink. What did I say? He sped up, forcing me to chase him, “Hey, wait up!”

He continued walking without looking at me, “You go home then. I’m not going back.”

What had gotten into him? It was like someone had switched Chris for a completely different person while my back was turned. He picked up his pace and kept his head down, making it hard for me to get a good look at his face. Sobs started coming with his shivers.

“Hey,” I said, finally stopping him, “What’s the matter?”

“I’m not going back,” he repeated.

“Come on, you’re gonna freeze to death out here.”

“Good,” he completely broke down, crying his eyes out while marching forward, his words seemingly making him faster. “I’d be better off that way. I hate it here. Nobody likes me and my brother is mean to me all the time and I don’t know why and Mom doesn’t care at all and...” He trailed off, the overwhelming emotion making him lose his focus.

“I like you.”

He stopped again. There was some shock in his eyes, and a little bit of hope. I surprised myself by going on, talking without running my words through any kind of filter, “I had fun with you today. You’re really nice. You made me feel better when I was sad, and you didn’t freak out when I...” I stumbled a little just thinking about my big mistake, “Well, you know. I wanna be your friend, but I can’t be if you run away by yourself, and I definitely can’t be if you freeze to death.”

For a second I thought he was gonna keep going without me. I didn’t know what I’d do if he did.

When he finally answered, it was so quiet that I could barely hear him, “Do you really mean it?” he said.

“Really.” I tried to think of something else to say to make him feel better, “You know, I always kept to myself ‘cause I was afraid that if I made friends, they’d find out I wasn’t normal. But you already know, so that doesn’t really matter, right?”

“I still don’t see why that’s such a big deal,” Chris said, wiping his eyes, “I think it’s cool that you have powers.”

Hearing someone talk about my condition made me uneasy. Even Grandma and Grandpa danced around it whenever they could. I was glad he didn’t think I was a monster, but still, I couldn’t help but feel panicked hearing him talk so frankly about it, “It’s hard to explain. I just don’t want anyone to know.”

“Okay,” he sniffled, “Your secret is safe with me.”

If it wouldn’t have broken every bone in his body, I would’ve hugged him. Wanting to show how thankful I was anyway, I pulled out my sketchbook and tore out that first Pokémon drawing, handing it to him. He didn’t take it at first, giving me a confused look, and I felt silly, because giving him the picture made sense in my head, “I, um, I dunno,” I said, “I thought it’d make us being friends more official, or something.”

All his tears dried with a smile as he neatly folded the drawing and stuck it in the pocket of his coat, “So now that we’re officially friends, what do you wanna do?”

“I think we should go home,” I said, “We’ve been gone a long time. Grandma and Grandpa are probably real worried about me.”

He hesitated, “Maybe we should stay out a little longer.”

“Oh.” I frowned, “You mean you still wanna run away?”

“No... not really... but I’m gonna be in pretty big trouble when I get back. I probably won’t see you again until my suspension is up, and...” his face reddened, “I just don’t want the day we became friends to end with me crying like a baby. Let’s do something fun.”

I smiled, “Okay. What were you thinking?”

“Let’s go finish our snowman. I bet with your super strength we could make the biggest one ever,” he started running back the way we came and waved for me to follow, “Come on! Let’s go find him!”

Energized by his returning enthusiasm, the two of us ran side by side. It was a reckless thing for me to do, but I was too excited to care. How lucky was it that we just happened to stumble into each other? It made me wonder...

“Hey!” I said, “Where do you live?”

Chris pointed off in the distance, “Just outside the woods that way, I think.”

“Wait,” I twisted around, not watching where I was running as I tried to judge how far we were from my house. Grandma told me a few weeks earlier that two boys around my age had moved in next door, but I never went over and introduced myself the way she wanted me to. It couldn’t be...

“The one with the green roof and the puppy statue on the front porch?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“I live next door!”

“What? We’re neighbors?”

“We’re neighbors!”

“You know what that means, right? We gotta hang out all the time!”

“And we can sit next to each other on the bus!”

“And whenever we get bored we can just walk over to each other’s houses!”

We kept going like that all the way back to our silly snow head, and then immediately got to work. We spread out to any area we didn’t clear of snow earlier, making all sorts of snowballs of different shapes and sizes. Keeping the silly nose was our unspoken objective for the finished snowman, but since the nose was a separate snowball, we couldn’t find a good way to keep it attached to the head; it was so heavy that it kept falling to the ground. We tried making all kinds of bodies, even a four legged snow sphinx, but we couldn’t get it to look right.

When I spotted a log with a sturdy looking branch jutting out the top, I had an idea. Chris watched in awe as I dragged the log over and skewered the snow head like a shish kebab. Then, I stuck the nose snugly on the end of the branch, hoping it would hold its weight.

I hoisted the fallen tree, with our creation on the end of it, into the air. I wanted our goofy head to sit at the top of the upright log like a totem pole, but when I tried lifting it up, both snowballs fell apart and rained down on my head.

Chris started laughed, and that made me laugh, and before we knew it neither of us could stop.

CHAPTER 2

KELLY

I left the second Chris threw that punch. Every fight he picked with Thomas ended the same way. I didn't need to watch.

Instead, I went to an empty bathroom and checked my eyes in the mirror. Still blue, thank goodness. I was probably okay to leave, but just to be safe, I waited a little so the crowd in the senior hall could clear out. After a few seconds two more girls came in, and since my eyes were fine, I left so I wasn't that weirdo hanging out in the bathroom by herself. With nowhere else to go, I wandered the halls without any end point in mind.

Way to go, Chris. Way to go. That morning I thought maybe I'd convince him to skip play practice so we'd have more time to hang out, but he was stuck at school for at least the next three hours. And, to make things even worse, he was gonna get suspended, which meant his mom was gonna kill him, which meant I wasn't gonna see him for at least a week. It made me wanna shake him by the shoulders and yell, "*Take your stupid medicine!*"

I could tell he wasn't. I could always tell. Without his medicine, all the things that made him fun to be around, his intensity, his curiosity, his adventurousness, all got sucked out of him and left a zombie shuffling around in his skin. At least until a mood swing kicked in. Then he'd get mad and do something really stupid. Usually picking a fight he had no chance of winning.

Oh well. If Chris wasn't gonna be himself, I'd have to do it for him. I'd think of something fun for us to do and it'd make him feel a lot better. Then, when we finally went home, his mom would catch on to what was going on and drag him back to his therapist and everything would go back to normal. That's what always happened. There was no need to make a big deal out of it. He kept perfectly quiet about my condition, so I had no right to bug him about his. Everything would be okay.

That just left the question of what to do until he finished talking to the principal or going to detention or whatever ended up happening to him. After walking around for a little while, I stopped in front of the hallway leading to the stage, and thought maybe I should go to play practice. Even though I wasn't really part of the play, I'd get bored and follow Chris there instead of going home, so I kinda helped the stage crew unofficially. It'd give me the chance to talk to Rich and smooth things over a little, because if Chris got kicked out, that'd just make him even grumpier, and that was the last thing I wanted. Sure, play practice might've been kinda boring, and all the underclassmen stared at me and whispered mean things when they thought I couldn't hear them, and whenever I read lines for the people who were absent Rich would yell at me for saying it wrong even though it wasn't my part, and the crew all called me Colossus because they couldn't remember my name, but... but at least...

I kept walking. Rich never would've asked Chris to join if he wasn't really needed, and Chris knew his lines. It'd be okay to skip. There was no need for me to talk to Rich. There was no way he'd kick Chris out.

And even if he did, it's not like their stupid deal made any sense in the first place. See, the play Rich was directing apparently needed more boys than the drama club had, so he offered to do Chris's final history essay if he played a part. Rich was an honors student, and Chris had a

good semester if his report card came back without any D's, so I guess it seemed like a good deal. But Chris wasted so much more time going to practice almost every day than it would've taken to just do the essay himself. I know he was worried about failing, but I could've read it over for him if he asked me. I mean yeah, I wasn't as smart as Rich, but if I helped out it'd at least be good enough to pass.

With no real reason to wait inside the school, I went out the main doors and found a dry spot on the curb to sit and draw on. A gentle wind brushed my hair in my eyes as I bent down to grab the sketchbook in my bag. It was always hard for me to appreciate the first day of spring. I barely noticed the change of weather, and the flowers hadn't started to bloom yet, so between the misty skies, dead trees, and globs of melting snow, spring was always just mucky and gross to me.

No, you didn't forget today because of the weather. You forgot what today was because you're horrible and stupid and selfish and awful. You're not allowed to forget today.

With some paper and something to draw with, I could keep myself occupied for hours. Ever since I got accepted to art school I'd been trying to branch out into more realistic stuff, sketching cool things in my line of sight, but if I didn't have a specific thing in mind I always ended up doing some kind of goofy fan art. It's strange, until it was time to apply to college I'd never really thought of drawing as something to make a career out of or anything. I drew just to draw. I guess you could call it a compulsion, like something to keep my hands busy. You need finesse and control to be a good artist. So, I thought maybe if I drew enough, it'd give me the deft touch needed to not break the pencil or the table or whatever. It was something Grandma taught me to do when I first moved in with her, when she first found out what I was. She liked to

paint, and always told me that whenever she was upset, painting helped her calm down. It didn't matter if the final picture wasn't any good, the act of making it was what's important.

Grandma spent the whole morning crying, and you had the nerve to ask her what was wrong. She doesn't even know. She does all these nice things for you and she doesn't even know you're the one who ruined her life. How are you able to look her in the eye, let alone live in her house?

About halfway through my drawing, a gentle buzz repeating from my bag broke my concentration. I took a deep breath and ignored it, not even bothering to check who it was. Grandpa was the only person who ever called me. My grip on my pencil loosened, and my work started getting sloppier. You never really realize how long a phone goes on for until you're trying to ignore it.

What would Grandpa do if he ever found out the truth? He's a pretty old school guy, he'd probably want to take you to the proper authorities. I'm kinda surprised he never figured it out. He's smart, and he has everything he needs to piece together what really happened. He probably figured it out a long time ago and just doesn't want to believe it.

I put my pencil down and looked at my finished drawing. Horrible, just horrible. I must've drawn over a thousand stupid Pikachu in my life and suddenly I couldn't draw one without it looking like a lumpy potato. You'd think I'd never drawn a straight line. What garbage. Why did I waste my time on these stupid cartoons anyway? They looked like crap and they didn't do anyone any good.

My insides felt like they were on fire, and my eyes started to burn.

No, no, no, STOP!

Keeping my head down, I slid my hand into my bag as gently as I could. I don't know why I bothered going for my pocket mirror. My eyes were pretty obviously glowing, and my panic at that thought only made the burning harsher. Then, while I rooted around in there, the phone went off again, and I tore my hand out like the bag was going to bite me.

Quickly running out of options, I hugged my sketchbook and clenched my eyes shut, not caring about how silly I must've looked to anyone walking by. Everyone knew I was a weirdo already, so that didn't matter so long as I kept my condition hidden. It got so bad that I started talking to myself.

"Calm down. Calm down. Everything's gonna be fine," I took another deep breath, and kept talking out loud, like if I said it with conviction that would make it true, "Everything's gonna be fine. You're gonna wait here for Chris. You're gonna take him on some kinda adventure, and you're gonna have a great time. You've got it under control."

The phone rang again, and I reached in and shut it off with one quick motion.

"You've got it under control," I repeated.

KIRBY

I don't know how the McGangbang became a tradition. I can't pinpoint the exact moment my life went totally awry, but it has, and my cholesterol hates me for it.

It was an ideal food solution when Sam and I were teenagers. There wasn't anything to do in my hometown besides meth, and since we weren't interested in that lifestyle, we ended up going for winding drives almost every Friday night. Inevitably, one of us would get hungry and we'd pull into the only establishment open after 9 PM: McDonald's. Without a trace of irony or shame, we'd waddle to the counter, slide a McChicken between the two halves of a double cheeseburger, and shove the whole science experiment into the gaping abyss of our food holes. It cost three bucks and temporarily sated our gluttony. It gave me a weird sense of pride, like my willingness to ingest such a monstrosity was just part of being young. My body could take it.

Sam and I still get McGangbangs when I come home. It started in our college years. We'd meet up during spring and summer breaks and just pick up where we left off, but over time it became a conscious decision. Every time I visit, we soldier to McDonald's and partake in the sacred American ritual at least once.

Only we're not undergrads anymore. I stare at the eldritch wad of meat and cheese product in my hands and feel ill.

Sam has the same look on his face. He takes a solemn bite of his processed punishment and says, "You look like you've aged 30 years."

I stare back at him and don't argue. I've watched my body deteriorate over the course of a year, watched my hairline go down the drain in clumps and gazed at a skeleton in the mirror. He doesn't look much better. Hairier than a lowland gorilla, beneath his black pea coat and newsboy cap he stares at me with perpetually angry eyes. The excitable gleam in them is gone, a spirited frat brother replaced by a guy who hunts people down and breaks their fingers to let them know that Frankie's tired of waiting for his money.

We eat in silence, sitting in the shadow of a building that hasn't been Kmart for years, but nobody has come to take down the sign.

ENDING MY CHILDHOOD

EPISODE 1

PILOT

The first night of the New Year passed like any other at Stucky's, if you ignore the fact I was having a psychotic breakdown. I will say, I feel like I was doing a pretty good job of hiding it.

Since there's nothing to do during the harsh winters but drink, Marquette, Michigan has a bar for everybody. Well, almost everybody. The town's a little too remote to have a dedicated gay bar, but some places hosted drag shows on occasion to fill that void. There's the college town bar that hosted slam poetry readings every Thursday, the sleazy dance club, the country karaoke bar, a few different craft breweries, even a hoity-toity wine bar for the winos trapped in a land of beer and lumberjacks.

Stucky's is none of these. Stucky's is the hole. The hole I had the honor of tending night after night. Not the cool kind of hole. Not like a biker bar. Not the kind of place where people die in mosh pits or anything. The kind of hole that smells like piss no matter how hard I scrub every inch of every surface. The kind of hole with a single fuzzy CRT tucked away above the bar and no music to speak of. The kind of hole that only has pilsners on draft and three dim, dingy bulbs above the bar providing illumination. The kind of hole that has a creepy moose head hanging above the exit that stares at me the entire shift. The kind of hole where miserable dads escape to bitch about their wives.

Yes, the clientele was just like any other night. Our regulars consisted of five or six grumpy old men who grunt "Bud Lite" without ever saying another word to me. That's if I'm lucky, of course. The ones who do talk can't shut the fuck up about libtards or their shitty wives

and constantly ask where “the girl with the big tits” is. Earlier in the evening, I had a group of teens thinking they could get away with being underage precisely because the place is an unscrupulous shithole. They weren’t entirely wrong. My policy is this: always ask for ID, but serve even if it’s obviously fake. Figure that gives me enough plausible deniability if a cop tries to catch me. Besides, these kids shouldn’t have everything handed to them. When I was in high school, we worked for our booze, damn it. Least they could do is scrounge up a fake ID.

Rocky got bored of trotting around the room and curled at my feet behind the bar like a loyal dog. A long, high-pitched yawn echoed from the rows of crocodile teeth lining his furry jaw. “Jeez,” he said, “This is boring. You don’t do this every night, do you?”

At the same time, the only patron in the bar—a crotchety trucker I’d never seen before, probably from out of town—grunted to get my attention. I pointedly ignored Rocky and leaned forward to catch his order. A request for Coors Lite wafted over on his cigarette breath. I had to step over the lump of talking yellow fur on the floor in order to get to the beers on tap.

The murky liquid filling the pint glass caught Rocky’s attention. He sat up and cocked his head, “What is that smelly bubble water, anyway? Can I try it?”

“No,” I say to him.

The trucker glares at me, “What was that?”

Realizing I’d fucked up and answered Rocky again, I turned to the trucker and spoke maybe a little too quickly, “Sorry, just thinking to myself. Here’s your drink.”

I slid the glass across the bar counter with perfect accuracy—almost ten years of bartending will make you a pro at that—and the trucker was an equally adept hand at the catch.

“Preciate it,” he said without a smile before taking a sad gulp.

Yup, it was same old, same old. Except, of course, for the dogasaurus rex that'd been following me around all day.

Rocky whined from below me, "Why not? You've been drinking it all night!"

I turned my back towards the spirits lined up in a row to hide my terrified face both from Rocky and the patrons, and took a few deep breaths to keep from screaming, "*Is nobody else seeing this?*"

Oh, did I make it seem like Rocky was a bar dog? Or maybe a weird little man who crouched behind the bar and handed me glasses the regulars collectively decided to ignore? I'm sorry, let me clarify: Rocky is a cartoon character. He's a literal cartoon character who showed up at my door last night at midnight, here in the real world, pounced on me and squealed about how happy he was to see me. After I spent the rest of New Year's Eve screaming and downing beer after beer in a desperate attempt to make him go away, I blinked my eyes open to usher in the New Year with an apocalyptic hangover and Rocky curled at the foot of my floor mattress, surrounded by beer bottles.

I covered my mouth to keep from screaming again. After taking a few deep breaths, I reached out to touch him, slid my hands over his fur, a sleek, soft yellow that slid between my fingertips with warm familiarity. My hand started sliding down his back on its own, and Rocky made a soft, gentle sigh that managed to calm me for a minute. I closed my eyes, to try and convince myself that I'd just had too much to drink last night, that I was still drunk and let a lost dog in my house by mistake.

But I nicked my hand on something sharp, and pulled back with a yelp. I'd touched one of the razors lining Rocky's back, red as the blood oozing down the clean slice in my finger.

Whatever was happening, this was no dog.

Drops of blood slid off my finger and stained the carpet. I stood up, careful not to wake him, to go get a bandage from the bathroom. I shut the bedroom door behind me, as if “out of sight, out of mind” was a valid approach to this. I swore when I saw the ratty futon in the main room unoccupied by my roommate. I would’ve liked to ask him if he could see the creature sleeping on my mattress. Even just my bloody finger would do. But clearly he never came home from the house party I ditched.

After bandaging my finger, I lingered in the kitchen for a few minutes, even went out of the way to cook myself a full breakfast of eggs, toast, bacon, the works. Took my sweet time eating it too, half the shit got cold on my plate. Any excuse to not enter that room ever again.

But I had to get dressed, eventually. The clothes I passed out in smelled like sweat and tears, and though I lived like a degenerate, the smell was too much even for me. The doorknob felt like it was gonna crumble in my hand as I creaked it open. I jumped back when the little sunlight our apartment got glinted against another blood red spike, this one curved into a hook at the end of his tail batting back and forth. I wasn’t sure if he was still asleep at first; he’d flopped onto his back and was making some weird sounds with his mouth. Those spikes on his back are gonna shred my mattress. If he’s real, that is.

I tiptoed over to my closet, thankful the little sunlight filtering into my room through the solid black sheet I used as a curtain let me see into it. While thumbing through my clean clothes pile, a cardboard edge sticking out from under my massive pile of dirty clothes caught my eye, almost like it was calling out to me for the first time in a long time.

I batted away the socks and underwear burying its dusty top, and opened it to find a treasure trove of tattered paper, smudged pencil, and scribbles. My childhood comics. I’d brought them back with me after my mom tried to trash them when she was moving in with her

new husband. I'd gone out of my way to not look at them, but now seemed an appropriate time as any.

Rocky was in the first "book" (about ten sheets of paper stapled together to form a spine) I uncovered. And the second. And the third. Each one was from a different age, a different point in my life, but all of them featuring him. Yes, Rocky isn't just any cartoon character: he's my cartoon character. The closest thing I had to an imaginary friend, though I was too old for that by the time I came up with him. I always dreamed that I'd get him published in the pages of an actual story, so his design changed a bit over the years, but the core was the same. Like most kid's creations, he was a twisted chimera of all the things little boys loved at the time. You know what they say, bad artists borrow, great artists steal. He had the same basketball nose and mountain eyes as Yoshi, the same spiked edges and slithering tail as Spyro the Dragon, the coloring and lightning powers of Pikachu, all wrapped up in the furry temperament of a happy-go-lucky puppy for good measure.

I looked up from the growing piles of paper scattered around me to the lump of fuzz squirming on my bed. There he was, as close a translation the universe could make from cartoon to flesh and blood. It was unnerving looking at both of them at the same, like those photos of people online who get their eyes enlarged to look like anime characters.

I started digging deeper into the box, wondering if I'd managed to salvage my very first drawing of Rocky, or at least the first story I drew him in.

A groggy, childish voice made me sit up straight, "Whatcha doin'?"

Without even thinking about it, I shoved the papers back in with my clothes and shut the closet door, "Going for a walk!" I don't know why I was so hell bent on hiding the original

documents from my own creation, but I suspected it would make whatever was going on in my diseased brain even worse.

Rocky yawned and stretched out his front paws, “Oh, neat. I’ll come with you.”

“*No!*”

He shrunk smaller, and there was genuine fear in his beady cartoon eyes. I didn’t mean to shout as loud as I did. I can’t believe I was feeling bad for my own hallucination. “No,” I repeated in a much softer voice, “There’s some stuff I need to take care of today. By myself.”

The fear disappeared from him, replaced by sadness, “But I just got here. Can’t I come with you?”

“Another time,” I said, “I need to run these errands alone.”

Let me tell you, I’ve never ran out of that apartment faster. Didn’t even change my stinky clothes. I wasn’t running any errands, of course. I just needed to get away. Ended up wandering around town the entire day. Remember, this is in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, which if you’re not familiar, is covered in a glacier nine months out of the year, so walking was no easy task. I had to keep popping into stores and fast food joints to warm up because I didn’t put on gloves or a hat like a moron. A few people even gave me cash, presumably because I smelled bad and covered almost every inch of town on foot. A nice clerk at McDonald’s even gave me a free dollar menu burger and a drink, thinking she’d done a good deed even though I’m not homeless. Not that I turned the food down. Figure it’s only a matter of time before I am homeless, anyway.

That’s all to say, it wasn’t exactly a relaxing stroll. I was knee deep in a snowbank most of the afternoon, and constantly checking behind my back and giving any yellow object in sight a suspicious glance. Rocky never did show up. For a hallucination, he was surprisingly obedient. Maybe this was a Sorting Hat scenario, where he’d fuck off as long as I asked him to.

If only I were that lucky. He nearly knocked me on my ass when he pounced and squealed the second I walked back into the apartment. Made me wish I'd gone directly to work, but I just had to know if he was still there. I tried to leave again, but this time he insisted on coming with me. As uncomfortable as he made me, I figured there was no real harm in capitulating. I could just ignore him and keep working as usual. It's not like he was real.

Needless to say, I was a moron for thinking something like Rocky could be ignored.

"Bartender! You deaf?"

I was still staring at a bottle of cheap whiskey. The gruff old trucker brought me out of the craziness of the past 24 hours and back to the mundanity of bartending.

"Sorry. What can I get you?" I noticed that his glass was still half-full when I said that.

"You got any resolutions?" he said.

Sweet baby Jesus, this one was a talker. Hell, I'd take conversation with a boozed up, Fox News parroting old man if it meant a distraction today.

"Just one," I said, trying my best to maintain my bartender voice, "I'm gonna stop drinking so much beer."

The trucker grunted. "That's a pussy resolution. You work in a bar. Drinkin's half the job."

"You didn't let me finish. Less beer, more whiskey. I turned thirty today."

Rocky sat up straight at my feet, "You're *how* old?"

Ignoring him, I continued, "Figure I'm old enough to shell out for better booze. If I'm gonna be a drunk, I may as well be a classy drunk."

This made the trucker guy laugh, and his irritation at my absent-mindedness evaporated. "I'll drink to that. Pour us shots of your top-shelf whiskey. Consider it a birthday present."

Stucky's didn't have anything you could call top-shelf with a straight face, but I was more than happy to oblige his request. I poured two shots of our least-disgusting swill and clinked the Dixie cups we were using as shot glasses.

"To getting old," he said.

We both slammed it back. I don't know what burned worse, the whiskey or the fact this boomer lumped me in with him. I was sort of hoping he'd try to reassure me by saying my best years were ahead of me or something.

Still, I appreciate him not lying to me.

As I tossed the paper cups in the trash, Rocky stood all the way up and started looking his body up and down, "Billy! Billy, answer me! Am I thirty? How long was I asleep?"

I leaned against the counter. The trucker took another swig of beer to chase the brown hand sanitizer we commiserated over.

"Do you have any? Resolutions, I mean."

"Naw," he said, "This year's gonna be more of the same old shit. The older you get, the more you realize nothing really changes. Least of all yourself." He paused for a minute, stared at the last few golden drops in his glass, "Not as depressing as it sounds. Sooner you accept that nothing's changing, the sooner you can get on with your life."

At this, Rocky makes a sympathetic coo and trots out from behind the bar. My eyes can't help but follow as he sits at the old man's feet, "Billy, why's this guy so sad? Do you think he needs a hug?"

Rocky pressed his big nose into the man's leg. The trucker flinches and twists to look at the place where Rocky booped him. Rocky goes even further and nuzzles, digging into man's jeans. The trucker swears and stumbles out of his seat, knocking his glass over and splattering

the last few gulps of beer across the bar and nearly falling onto the ground. I waste no time wetting a rag and wiping down the bar. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rocky preparing to get affectionate again.

The sopping rag echoes through the nearly silent bar when I smack it against the counter and yell, “*Stop.*”

Rocky leaps back and shrinks like the frightened animal he’s based on. The trucker doesn’t look at me, keeping his eyes focused directly on the floor where Rocky’s standing. My heart starts to grow hopefully. Just say it. Tell me you can see him. Tell me I’m not crazy.

The trucker takes a deep breath and sits back down, reaching into his wallet for a couple of bills, “Sorry for the mess.”

I sigh, “No trouble at all. Something wrong?”

I follow his gaze very carefully, and want to scream when it starts wandering away from Rocky to other parts of the bar. He’s right there! He’s in front of you! Just say you can see him already!

“Something brushed against my leg,” he said, “There aren’t rats in here, are there?”

I sighed, “If there were rats, do you think we’d be allowed to stay open?”

There were rats, actually. Hundreds, possibly thousands living in the rafters we discovered when a ceiling tile collapsed and they swarmed the kitchen. This was my canned line because it reassured customers without actually telling them no. The health department would absolutely shut this place down if they ever dropped by, and my phrasing implied they’ve already given this place the okay when they absolutely haven’t.

The trucker didn’t look any more at ease. He slapped a wad of bills on the table, “The change is for you. Best of luck with the rat problem, son. And your resolution.”

The bell dinged as he damn near ran out of the bar. Shit. Hopefully he wouldn't snitch to the health department. If he really was an out-of-towner, it seemed unlikely, but the thought still made me nervous. Working at Stucky's was the worst job imaginable, but I needed to pay rent somehow.

...What the fuck am I saying? The rats are the least of my problems. I stared at the yellow fuzzball with his head down and his tail between his legs.

"I didn't mean to scare him. You don't have to yell at me," he said.

God, I really am losing it. It must be the rats. The rats are crawling everywhere right now and I'm seeing my childhood scribbles standing on four legs. I buried my face in my hands and dug my fingernails into my forehead.

"Never do that again," I said.

"Do what?"

"Touch anyone. Ever."

"But he looked sad..."

"Listen to me, you can't just—"

The heavy thud of the cook's footsteps shut me up. I spun around and tried not to look too exasperated.

Baster—a nearly seven foot tall, 300 pound Texan—trundled in with so much sweat dripping down his limp hair and staining his white t-shirt I thought he was melting. "Yo Will, the hell's going on?"

I wet a rag and continued scrubbing at the sticky place where the trucker spilled his beer. "A guy got spooked and knocked his glass over. Don't worry about it."

"Spooked? Didn't see the rats, did he?"

“Probably.”

Baster swore and wiped away a glob of sweat from his forehead, “Well, if *you* see any of the little bastards, holler for me. I’ll take care of it.” He brandished the kitchen knife in his hand, and in case you think he was fucking around, I’d seen him throw a meat cleaver at one and pin it against the wall with pinpoint accuracy. Baster *never* fucked around.

“Will do.” The wad of cash the trucker left caught my eye. I left the rag alone and counted out the cost of his drinks and stuffed the bills in the register. The remaining tip, I tossed at Baster. “Here,” I said. “All yours.”

He gave me a suspicious look, but didn’t hesitate to paw at the money and shove it in the pocket of his sauce-crust ed apron, “I didn’t think you owed me nothing.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why ain’t we splitting this?”

Normally, whoever was tending bar that night gave Baster a cut of the tips. Being as underpaid as both me and Rhonda despite the food being the only reason to come to Stucky’s always rubbed us the wrong way, so we always let him in on the night’s earnings. However, since I ditched my job last night and ignored every single call from my boss and coworkers, Stucky is stealing all my tips I get for the next week as penance. You’re probably wondering why he doesn’t just fire me, but the answer is simpler than you might expect: I begged him no to, and he kept me on because no one in their right mind would ever work for the creep.

“Because Stucky’s hoarding my tips like a dragon, remember?”

“Bullshit, he was bluffing. He ain’t allowed to do that.” Baster reached into his pocket to grab the cash I threw at him.

I crossed my arms and nudged towards the CCTV camera nestled in the top-right corner of the building, pointed directly at us. I doubt Stucky ever watched the thing—too many junkies to meet with in a day to keep tabs on us, surely—but you could never be certain.

“You know better than anyone Stucky can do whatever the hell he pleases,” every employee of Stucky’s was paid under the table by the man himself, “Just take the money, dude. Better you have it than him.”

Baster didn’t argue any further and dabbed at his sweaty hair again, “If you say so.” He paused for a minute, not returning to his post in the kitchen, “Look, Will. I ain’t gonna bullshit you: that’s a real dick move, but don’t hold it against the boss, alright? He ain’t a bad guy.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said before Baster could continue, “What are you doing back there, anyway? The kitchen catch fire? You’re more sweat than man.”

The drafty boards rattled with his bellowing laugh, “Nah, that’s the new and improved Corona Wings you’re seeing. Think I finally perfected the little beauts. Here, I’ll cook up some more. Birthday dinner, on the house.”

He waddled back into the tiny hotbox of a kitchen and I called after him, “It’s only a present if they’re better than the old ones!”

“Blow me. You’re gonna be on your ass from the heat and on your knees from the flavor.”

I laughed as the fryer came to life with a sizzle. But that laugh died when I turned back towards the entrance and noticed Rocky curled up in a corner. His sad eyes shifted towards me in acknowledgment, silently saying, “Don’t worry, I’m being good,” before staring at a wall again. Christ, why was I feeling bad for him? There was nothing to feel bad about. There wasn’t even anybody to feel bad for.

Thankfully, I didn't have to stare at him for too long. The bell chimed as a punkish girl with pink hair flew through the door. Hers was the first face I'd been genuinely happy to see all day. She bounded up to the bar with a smile, "You *are* alive!"

"The usual, Amber?"

"Is that seriously all you have to say? Where were you last night? You told me you were working New Years Eve, but when I show up all I see is Sourpuss Sally flirting with grubby old men. And Baster was too busy working the grill to talk to me!"

"Rhonda's fine. Not sure why you've got such a hate boner for her."

"She hates me. You can see it in her eyes. Trust me, when I make the mistake of coming by when you aren't here, I get the death glare all night. But don't dodge my question. Where were you?"

"Just had stuff to take care of. Now how about that drink?"

She grumped at my curt non-answer, but said, "Yeah, the usual. And take a shot of something cheap with me to make up for last night."

Amber's energy must've caught Rocky's attention. He unfurled from his position and slowly walked over, sitting near her feet and sniffing the air, "Who's this? She smells nice."

I gave Rocky some side-eye after filling Amber's glass, but his expression didn't change, like he didn't know why what he just said was extremely creepy. I suppose by his logic it might not be. Wait, his logic? Or is it my logic? It was difficult to not get hung up on the Freudian implications of that statement.

After Amber and I took the shot, she got to work guzzling her standard piss water pilsner. I've seen some lightweights in my day, but Amber was truly next level. She couldn't have been in the bar more than ten minutes and was already buzzed.

“Oof, tastes as bad as you smell, Will. If Stucky wants people to come in here, he should have more than dad-beer on draft. Why do I come to this place again?”

I’m wiping down the back counter when she says this. I don’t even turn around to answer her, “Because it sucks.”

Amber laughs and snorts. I turn around just in time to see her wiping the foam off her upper lip. “God, I can’t even deny it. Does that make me a hipster?”

“Absolutely.”

Amber is the outlier among our usual clientele, older than a college kid but not old enough to be watching Fox News. The first time she came in, I was pretty sure she had come on a dare, since she came in alone. But she stayed and chatted with me and Baster until closing time, and gave me a pretty generous tip. I was pretty surprised to see her again the next week, and the week after that. It got to the point where on many weeknights it would just be me, her, and Baster all night. One time, she got drunk enough that I had to call a cab, and emotional enough to tell me why she kept coming back: her social circle hung out at more gay-friendly bars, and she had baggage with enough members of that community that drinking there started getting uncomfortable. She popped in here because she was sure it was the only watering hole in town that nobody in her circle of former friends and exes would ever be caught dead in.

She’s probably the closest thing I have to a friend.

Baster comes bounding out the blinding kitchen light with a basket of bubbling lava wings, he says, “Wings, boss!” before sliding them over to us from the opposite side of the bar.

Amber slams her glass on the table and jumps up. “No! I’m not a hipster!” She snatches the meatiest wing out of the basket and holds it triumphantly in the air, sauce dripping down the sides, “This is why I come in! These beautiful hunks of dead bird and sauce!”

“Careful,” I say, “Those are Corona Wings.”

She immediately drops it back into the basket and narrows her eyes at Baster, “You still haven’t given up?”

Baster scowled, “All y’all are doubters. I got it perfect this time. Just try one, both of you.”

The Corona Wings had become somewhat infamous here. They were meant to be Baster’s magnum opus, named both because they’re hotter than the surface of the sun and mediocre Mexican beer features prominently in the cooking process. But previous attempts had come out... less than impressive. One particular attempt tasted like he milked a ghost pepper and left it to ferment in piss for a month. I don’t even know how he managed that.

While she’s preparing to take a bite, I ready a glass of water for her. She immediately starts choking upon sinking her teeth in. She doesn’t reach for the water until she’s eaten two entire wings. She glugs the whole glass down in one gulp and slams it on the bar with a satisfied groan, “Baster, I’m sorry—**hack**—Sorry I ever doubted you. These are the best wings I’ve ever had.”

This is such shocking news I drop my bartender voice for a second, “Wait, seriously? Give me one of those!” Baster smiles as I paw for a meaty piece and rip a piece between my teeth. The heat feels like a kick to the balls, but it hurts so, so good. My eyes immediately start leaking in joyous pain. I put the rest of my wing on a napkin and fumble for the water, guzzling down two glasses. The madman’s done it. He’s put the glory of the sun in a chicken wing.

I don’t even have to say anything. Baster knows he’s won. He laughs as I reach for a third glass, “Happy birthday, motherfucker!”

Amber's still fanning at her mouth, "Baster, you're too good for this place. Why don't you open your own restaurant?"

Baster shrugs his massive shoulders from the end of the bar, "Like working here."

I have to agree with Amber; Baster is too good for this place. One of the reasons I've continued working at Stucky's all these years is his food. It's all just bar food, but he works his magic in ways—sometimes subtle, sometimes insane—that I, as someone who can't cook anything more involving than Ragu, can't even fathom. He probably could open a restaurant and make it a legit attraction, but I suspect there's more to his refusal to do so than just liking to work in this dump. See, when I tell people Baster's a remarkable guy, I don't mean just his culinary skills. Dude's got a hell of a story. We call him Baster because that's the only name he's given us: he refuses to tell us his real name. Otherwise, he's shockingly candid about his crazy-ass past. Apparently, he was a high-ranking member of some criminal organization, and used to traffic drugs across the border with his partner, a corrupt ICE officer. He tells us about individual episodes all the time. One time, Amber was bold enough to ask him if he ever killed a man, to which Baster responded, "It's open to interpretation."

But the fun couldn't last forever. The DEA started catching on to their little scheme, and when the cartel they worked for caught wind of a potential bust, they got rid of Baster's partner before he could compromise the operation. Baster escaped to the absolute opposite end of the country here in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where he's been living out his forties in relative peace. I suspect he doesn't want the attention opening a restaurant would bring him.

Now the only mystery remains is where such a huge badass found time in his insane life to cook the best bar food in the United States.

Amber almost spits out a mouthful of wing. She barely remembers to chew and swallow before speaking. Tears are running down her red face while she carries on the conversation, “Come on, Will can even man your bar! I mean, he’ll probably scare away customers, but at least he can mix a decent drink.”

“Pretty sure anyone brave enough for these wings can stomach a guy with a beard.”

She rolls her eyes, “You’re no fun, you know that? I’m just teasing you,” she leans forward and can barely contain the evil smile on her face, “*birthday boy*. How old are you?”

“You got sauce on your skirt,” I say.

That attempt at deflection was a resounding success. “Fuck!” I dutifully hand her some paper towels as she starts dabbing at her mini-skirt. “Goddammit, this is gonna stain so bad?”

“Do you want me to lick it off?” Rocky says. Lord, I’d managed to forget about him again. I shoot him a dirty look to remind him of our little agreement. Also, creepy.

“What?” he says, cocking his head, “I’m hungry!”

And that’s what we call an opportunity. Baster had his nose dug into his phone, while Amber was too busy frantically wiping down her clothes. I nudge the wing I’d bitten into and knock it to the floor, nudging my head towards it while making eye contact with Rocky when I was sure neither of them were watching. Sometimes you have to feed your subconscious to shut it up.

Rocky’s eyes lit up, “Really? For me?”

Without saying another word, I kick the wing out of the bar area to where he can see it clearly. Rocky jumps in the air and squeals, scampering over to the wing with surprising speed. I’d kinda hoped it keep him occupied for a little while. Oh, how naïve of me. The little fucker

scooped the entire wing up with his tongue and chomped it down—bones and all—with a sickening crunch.

He wagged his tail back and forth and looked at me in anticipation, his mouth and the tip of his nose absolutely covered in sauce. “Yummy! Can I have—”

He didn’t get the chance to finish his request. His eyes went wide, and let me tell you, no matter how strange they were normally, seeing them water was unreal. He started hacking and coughing the way Amber and I had done seconds before. In between hacks, he just kept muttering about how good and how hot it was. Amber and Baster, of course, did not react to the display. Part of me wanted to lay down a glass of water on the floor for him, but that was insanity. Those two would think I was nuts, and I guess they wouldn’t be wrong.

So I let Rocky sputter and choke. But something funny started to happen. The air around me started crackling. The tips of his fur stood up straighter and straighter the harder he coughed. Even Amber took notice of what was going on, if only because of how terrified my face must’ve been.

“Will? What’re you looking at?”

The second Amber finishes her question, a disgusting pile of half-eaten chicken and sauce tumbles from Rocky’s gagging maw. At the same time, the static electricity crackling all around his body expands, shooting towards me and Amber like an EMP blast. A wave of heat rushes over me and the bar goes dark with three quick, successive pops. The shards of the lightbulbs hanging over our heads tumble onto the counter as Amber yelps.

I can see Rocky from the faint kitchen light. He lets out a satisfied sigh. Amber and Baster are both frantically turning their phone lights on and looking around for an explanation they’ll never find.

Right. Like Pikachu. Lightning powers.

Rocky finally realizes what he's done and sheepishly lowers his head, "Sorry."

I'm shaking. Amber is talking to me, but I ignore her. With as much poise and nonchalance as I can muster, I step out from behind the bar. "I'm taking a smoke break."

I don't look at anybody. Not Baster, not Amber, and especially not Rocky. I try to calm my quivering body, grateful for the mask the darkness provides me. My hand is on the door and the bell chimes when I feel a presence behind me. I turn to find Rocky's presence, making himself smaller as he tries to follow me out.

I finally snap at him, "*No. You stay.*"

Rocky whimpers and freezes again. But I don't care anymore, and I don't dare search the dark for Baster or Amber's reactions.

I don't need them to tell me I'm fucking losing it.

*****AD BREAK*****

When Stucky's finally closed for the night and all the clean up work was done, I walked out without even wishing Baster. We were still in the middle of another nasty blizzard that's been raging since yesterday afternoon—the worst one the town's had since the nineties, according to one of the bar's patrons tonight—and part of me wishes I'd been sensible and drove the Elkie to work tonight, but you never know when the customers will be feeling generous and buy you enough to put you over the legal limit. The last thing I needed was another DUI on top of everything else. The Elkie probably would've probably gotten trapped in a snowbank or slid into a tree or something.

You'd think that the tiny ice crystals shredding my face or the fact that I couldn't feel the bottom quarter of my body or the cartoon leaping in and out of the snow around me while babbling like a child would've been more pressing matters. It's not that I didn't notice these things, but they were all infinitely less distressing than how light my pockets felt. Normally, I'd walk out of a shift with a nice stack of tips weighing down my wallet, but given the criminal salary I'm paid without tips, I got paid basically nothing for my work tonight. When the shift began, I was just happy to have a job, but rent's due next week I don't have nearly enough saved up to pay it. Maybe if Ed got a fucking job and actually paid his share, I wouldn't be worried about being on the street every other month.

But while I was mid-brood, Rocky's chirping, irritating voice went lower, and without even listening to his previous babbling, I knew he wanted an actual conversation, "Hey. Can I ask you something?"

I laughed, not stopping to look at him, "That's rich. *You* want to ask *me* a question."

"Y-yes? Is something wrong?"

“Nothing. Lay it on me.”

Rocky didn't even hesitate, “When'd you get so old?”

“About 24 hours ago.”

“No, no, no! That's not what I mean! How old were you the last time we saw each other? Ten, right?”

“If you say so.”

Rocky leaped out of a snow pile behind me and stopped me dead in my tracks. I nearly tripped over the little bastard. “Then how come you're thirty?”

I cut around him, plunging into snow all the way up to my knee to avoid his razor tail, and kept heading for home, “It's quite simple, actually. Time keeps moving forward, and every year on the same day, I officially get older. What do you *mean* how come I'm thirty?”

There's genuine panic in his voice now, “If you're thirty, what have I been doing for the past twenty years? I wanna be a kid still!”

“Oh, is that all? You haven't been doing anything for the past twenty years. You're not real. Don't worry, once I get carted off to the funny farm, you won't have to worry about of this.”

Rocky stomps a meaty dog paw into the snow, “That's another weird thing. Why do you keep saying I'm not real? Sure, I don't know why nobody can see me, but you can, right? Then I'm as real as you are, right?”

That actually gave me pause. Was my hallucination having an existential crisis of its own? Jesus, this shit has too many layers.

Rocky jumped in front of me again, this time with a snarl in his eyes, “If I'm not real, how do you explain this?” He whipped his tail off a snowbank and flung a hunk of snow right

onto my face. As it melted against my skin and dripped into my shirt collar, I felt my heartrate start to rise. I didn't have an explanation for that, unless I was throwing snowballs at myself. I didn't answer Rocky and kept my head down, speeding up to make my quick little walk home even quicker. I cut through the lot of the apartment where Ed buys his weed—nestled right atop a pizza place that closed down ages ago—and ventured through what would be a baseball field come summer when all the snow melted. My apartment was a ratty looking wooden building with a wide view of the cheap side of town (not that Marquette has any area you could call legitimately sketchy) but it was about the only residential area of town where police cruisers speeding by was a not uncommon occurrence.

The light coming from my apartment's large, solitary window guided me through the blizzard, and I couldn't help but groan. Ed came home after all. I was sort of hoping to shuffle inside, run to my room in the back, and immediately collapse upon mattress into an eternal slumber. Hopefully he's so wiped from the partying he did last night, that he's planning on going to sleep soon and not staying up all night screaming advice at Netflix shows that can't hear him.

My apartment is even creepier than most on this block because the door is tucked away behind all manner of enormous shrubbery—likely planted to keep the creeps living in these shitholes from staring at the kids playing little league.

Rocky follows me inside and immediately starts shaking the snow off his fur, dropping it everywhere on the carpet. I'd be lying if I said I had any grounds to be mad, considering the state of the place. My ex took all the decorations with her when she moved out, so the only thing on the stained walls was the vile beige stripes everyone loved in the 70s. It was technically a one-bedroom apartment, but as soon as Ed moved in, he planted his ass on the futon in the main room and never left. He did everything on that futon: ate, drank, slept, smoked, the works. I won't

claim to be a paragon of good hygiene, but even I had my limits. Ed could burrow all the crumbs and wrappers ingrained into his sleeping space in lieu of using a blanket.

The futon of nastiness is immediately where Rocky leaped with his wet feet and yawned, “Finally. Home sweet home.”

That might’ve been the first thing he’s said that I identified with. All I wanted was some sleep, so I bolted for the bathroom, only to find the door closed with dank smoke billowing out the bottom. Great. So much for Ed getting sleep. Ed used to smoke so much weed in the living room that the other tenants in the complex would slip notes under the door threatening to call the landlord cause the smell was seeping into their walls. While I’m not one to throw stones at anyone’s substance use, it’s my name on the lease and I wasn’t about to “be a bro” and get evicted. So, Ed’s taken to hotboxing the bathroom, which works for him because, including the shower, the bathroom is maybe six square feet. Seriously, one time I had a bigger friend over and they literally could not squeeze between the toilet and the sink to piss. He’ll spend like an hour at a time in there. One of these days he’s gonna pass out and hit his head when I’m not around.

I knock on the door.

“Yo,” he answers.

“Don’t mean to disturb you during toke time, but I’d really appreciate it if you handed me my toothbrush.”

He laughs, “Hold on, pooping.”

Nice. Because the image of a baby faced, Jesse Pinkman looking motherfucker pinching a loaf with a doobie hanging out of his mouth was exactly the thing my brain wanted to think about to ring in 2019. This thought was inflicted without my consent, and you must share my burden.

Brushing my teeth almost wasn't even worth it. Almost. But because I didn't brush this morning, the inside of my mouth tasted so foul I was ready to force my way in and grab it myself. Fortunately, after a few seconds, I hear a flush and Ed almost knocks me over bounding out with a cloud of smoke. I cough and fan away some of it as he emerges. Shirtless, wearing nothing but a beanie and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajama pants, with a fattest blunt I've ever seen clenched between his teeth. He hands me the brush with one hand and uses the other to take the blunt out and blow some smoke. For once, I'm thankful for the smell of weed, considering the alternative.

Behind me, I hear Rocky call out, "Hey Ed!"

Ed gets a stupid stoner grin and giggles, "Little dude, thought I'd never see you again!"

It's too late for this nonsense, "I was at work. Like every other night. Also, little dude? I've got like a decade on you."

Ed stares at me blankly for what seems like a full minute before glowing with recognition, "Yo, Will! Where'd you go last night? I waited here for a like an hour and you never showed."

I cringed just thinking about the party. I was supposed to join Ed for an hour or two before going to work. It was a frat party, of course, a gathering of freshman and sophomores who I've become uncomfortably familiar with during Ed's tenure as my roommate. Since I can (and will) get them booze, Ed likes to bring me along to all of his parties, and you know what? It was fun reliving my college days at first. But just one drunken hookup with a sorority girl who thought I was forty later, and the fact I was partying with children nearly half my age came into stark focus. I got a nice, objective look at the creepy manchild everyone but me saw.

Needless to say, I stopped following Ed to parties after that.

“Sorry, got called into the bar earlier than expected.”

“Shoulda just said so, fam. The boys wouldn’t have been offended. Text me next time.”

“Yeah. I will.”

I left him to go back to his hotbox (and to get away from the overpowering dank cloud), and wandered over to the kitchen sink to brush. We didn’t have a real kitchen, just a fridge, sink a stove behind a counter, but it did the job. Our apartment—my apartment—was split evenly between the only two rooms we had. The bedroom was my space, the front room was Ed’s. It really annoyed me that he had access to the fridge 24/7 and I had to tiptoe into the backroom when I got home too late, but I suppose it was better than getting woken up every time he had to bumble out of the house in the morning for class. In fact, since he was on the college schedule and I had my gig at Stucky’s, we hardly ever saw each other unless we were partying.

A chipper voice boomed from Ed’s crumb encrusted futon. “Oh! I totally forgot about this!”

I almost choked on my own toothpaste and spit. He never lets me forget he’s here for even a second. I’m never gonna get used to this.

I spit into the kitchen sink. When Rocky sees that I don’t have anything in my mouth, he continues in his same chirpy little tone, like he’d already forgotten he was having an existential crisis just seconds ago, “You didn’t tell me we had a show about us! Come on! Watch it with me!”

He stared at me, wagging his tail in anticipation. God, it was so creepy when he did that. I know he was supposed to be kind of like a dog, but why did I make his tail so reptilian then? It just slithered against the linoleum in my tile back and forth. Hollywood, take note. This is why

you don't bring cartoons to life. It's ridiculous at best, absolutely, pants-shitting terrifying at worst.

I walked over to the TV and took a seat on the futon next to Rocky, careful to scoot away from a mysterious stain, and scowled. I hadn't even noticed when I walked in, but who else could've possibly been looking at me through the TV screen, rendered by a professional character designer, than Rocky himself? I can't get away from the little fucker.

Ed was watching *Twilight Peaks*. God, what is it with stoners and this show? All of his little friends loved it. This must've been his tenth time watching it.

The futon shook when Rocky jumped onto it and curled up next to me with a smile, "Does this mean we're famous?"

"*You're famous.*"

Even I'm a little shocked by the venom in my voice. Rocky doesn't seem to notice.

"Oh yeah, they replaced you with some girl. Why did they do that?"

Because my bitch of a sister knew she wouldn't be hailed as a feminist hero if she ripped off my source material wholesale... is what I wanted to say. But there's no point airing that dirty laundry with him.

He didn't wait for me to answer anyway, "By the way, what is Ed doing in the bathroom? It smells like a skunk in here all of a sudden."

As if on cue, the bathroom swung open again and a cloud of smoke billowed behind Ed as he bopped back to the futon.

I opened my mouth to say something and caught a nice cloud of smoke for my trouble. I coughed and sputtered and cleared my throat. Again, not that I'm one to judge anyone for their

vices, but at least beer didn't get civilians caught in the crossfire. Personally, I don't really see the appeal of weed. Every time I've smoked it, I've had a nervous breakdown.

"You realize our apartment still smells like weed when you hotbox the bathroom," I say.

"Nah bro, I turn the fan on. We're good." He reaches for the PlayStation controller and hits play. In this episode, an indestructible golem has followed the protagonist, Nadine, back to her home village after she steals a magical artifact from a temple. Her and Rocky, as well as the townspeople, have to come up with traps and other ways to keep it immobilized. They manage to lead it away from the village and find shelter, and it turns into a zombie apocalypse bottle episode situation as the foundation of their shelter grows weaker and weaker and the sun sets lower and lower. It's good TV, but I'm sure this is a concept Naomi stole from me. Like 90 percent sure, anyway.

"How many times have you watched this show?" I mutter after a particularly well-animated action scene of Nadine springing her trap.

"Isn't it great? Dude, you're really missing out. We've been having a blast watching it again. You can get caught up for season two."

My fingers dig into the futon's crusty fabric.

Ed's short attention span drags him to another topic, "Yo, so which parts of this episode are real?"

"What are you talking about?" I say, "None of—"

Rocky pipes up, "This one's pretty close to how it really happened. There wasn't a temple and we didn't steal anything, and the golem was actually a robot made out of Indestructium that the professor built to resist my lightning shocks, but the rest is basically how

it went. Billy didn't have his sword, so we had to collapse the house on the robot just like they do in the show."

Ed turns his bleary red eyes directly to me, "Dude! You're a badass! Why didn't you tell me this show was based on you?"

I want to choke the bastard. "Because—" but my rant dies mid-shout. "Wait, were you—" I hesitated, before deciding to just be direct. He was high enough that he probably wouldn't question my sanity once he sobered up, "Were you talking to *Rocky*?"

At this point, Rocky perks up, cocks his head at me in that very dogish way. "Of course he can hear me. We were watching TV together all day. You know, while you were doing chores."

Ed cackles and claps his hands as he leans back, "Dude, you can see him too? I got the *real* good shit this time. You only had my sloppy seconds and you're seeing cartoons." He pulled out the little baggy of very much ordinary looking weed and shouted, "I gotta find out where my guy *gets* this shit."

Rocky looks from me to Ed and back to me, "You guys are acting strange."

Ed leans over and starts scratching Rocky on the head, which pleases him in a very primal way, "Don't you worry about it, little dude. Will and I are just having a spiritual experience together, you feel me?"

Rocky's tongue hangs out, and he flops onto his back to entreat Ed to a belly rub. "Ohhhh yeah. I feel you. Scritch just a little lower... oh that's good..."

No, no it's impossible. It can't be. Ed is right. I just inhaled too much of his smoke.

I look back at the scar tissue starting to form on my hand and feel my heart palpitate.

“Hey Ed,” Rocky’s voice washes over me, “Maybe you can answer this since Billy didn’t know. This show is supposed to be about me and him, but they changed Billy to be some girl. Do you know why they did that?”

“Brother, I have no idea, but I’m glad they did. No offense Will, but I’ll take a hot chick over a hairy dude any day. So much good porn of Nadine on Reddit.”

“Porn? Reddit? What’re those?” Rocky asks.

Ed howls with the most intense giggling I’ve ever heard, “Holy shit, you’re a riot. You ever been on the internet, dog man?”

Rocky suddenly sounds very grumpy, “I am *not* a dog!”

And I’ve officially hit my limit. I storm over to the kitchen and find a half-drunk bottle of champagne Ed must’ve brought home from his New Year’s Party. I remove the cork and immediately start downing the sucker, not caring at all that I just finished brushing my teeth or that it was Ed’s. He owes me so much booze money that I’ll just consider this payment *I needed* this.

Ed starts chanting “chug chug chug” as I polish off the bottle of mostly flat bubbly in seconds. Still, I felt nothing. This is the problem with being a professional alcoholic. You really can’t feel the drink when you need it most. I immediately fling the fridge back open and thank god there’s beer in there, and twist-offs at that. I immediately get to work putting it down.

Ed’s still laughing. Rocky leans forward and tries to see what I’m drinking, “Boy, you’ve been really thirsty tonight. Are you feeling okay?”

So, apparently, this is what’s happening: I’m not in the middle of a psychotic breakdown. Rocky is real, or at least some kind of collective hallucination, that nobody but me and Ed, my

19-year-old college frat boy idiot roommate can see. Not Baster. Not Amber. Not *anybody* but me and Ed.

Why.

Why Ed?

Why me?

A QUARTER-CENTURY RECONSTRUCTION: THE 25 GAMES THAT MADE ME

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME AND WHY AM I DOING THIS?

I spent the day my father died playing video games in my girlfriend's arms. It was the best possible use of that time, I think. By the time I found out about his passing, it was already the afternoon. I wasn't about to make a ten-hour drive alone, in the dark, across lands Dad and I used to visit that would only serve as a reminder of what I no longer have. That could wait until the next day.

There's an escapism inherent to the medium of games, and not just because the majority are some sort of fantasy. It's hard to entertain outside thought while playing a game, much harder than while reading a book or watching a movie. You're constantly plugged in through some conduit. There's no separation. You're always moving your body, thinking about your next move several steps ahead. Your fingers orchestrate a series of micro-actions. It's impossible to keep all the thoughts out, of course. In the middle of play one would intrude, like how my last words to him were that I'd call him on Sunday to tell him about my upcoming trip to Japan, or how I hadn't let my him read my novel because I was scared he wouldn't like it and I wanted the validation of it being on store shelves so he'd be proud of me. I'd think about these things and bury my face into my girlfriend and cry, but eventually I remembered I had a game in front of me I could use as a shield once again.

Eventually my partner had to leave. Eventually I had to shut the game off. Eventually I had to lie in the dark and try to sleep.

* * *

Dad was never too fond of my gaming habits. I don't entirely blame him. I imagine I'd be pretty disappointed too if I had a son that turned out super sporty. It's a classic tale. Outdoorsy, charismatic father begets doughy, nerdy shut-in. The fact that he raised me in the height of the late-90s panic about kids using shooters like *Doom* as training for acts of terrorism didn't help matters.

He made some token attempts to steer me away, tried to limit my time in front of the console in early childhood, strictly monitored what games I played and made sure there wasn't even a hint of violent content. When you grow up within biking distance of friends' houses, however, it becomes difficult to police that sort of thing. I'd simply go to a friend's house and play games there. Eventually, he gave up on these limitations and took to fighting my much more sympathetic mom about it in private. Her most common counterargument was, "If these games came out when you were a little boy, you would've loved them too."

I think about this a lot. Because despite our surface level differences, I am a lot like my father. We've both been called introspective, both held a deep appreciation for art and literature, in our own ways. Dad was an English major at a small liberal arts college, prayed at the altar of the Western canon. I remember him giving me a copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Catcher in the Rye* when I first expressed interest in writing. When I thought about changing my major from English to something more practical, Dad persuaded me that I needed to be well-read in the classics if I was going to be a novelist.

Even so, I couldn't help but feel self-conscious. I didn't want to write novels, not at first. I wanted to write games, because try as I might to be as invested in the canon as my Dad was, those were the stories that spoke most deeply to me. I respected and treated Dad's books with awe, but never did become attached to them the way he did. Even after I made the switch to

fiction, it was sci-fi, fantasy, YA. A far cry from Hemingway and Melville. I was always self-conscious about letting Dad read my work because of this.

In the back of my mind, I still feel like games are my true calling, that I shouldn't have given up on learning code to make my own.

The older I got, the more seriously I took games as an art form, the more I tried to get him to see my point of view. I'd tell him about some of the stories, tried to sit him down and play a few with me so he could understand the appeal a little better. That particular generation gap couldn't be crossed, of course. He was never going to get invested in *The Legend of Zelda* like me, the same way I was never going to get as invested in Hemingway as him.

But I think even if he didn't respect the games, he eventually came to respect what I saw in them. The older I got, the more serious about art I became, I think he finally understood that *Super Mario Bros.* was more than just a children's toy to me.

My relationship with my father wasn't perfect, but it was pretty damn good, all things considered. What hurts the most isn't that I'll never be able to have a good relationship. What hurts is knowing that we were just getting started on a great one.

* * *

For Dad, he died in perhaps the least frightening possible way. It was a peaceful death. There was no long struggle with serious illness, no traumatizing moment of violence. He just went to sleep and never woke up.

For me, he died in perhaps the most frightening possible way. I had no chance to tell him I loved him one last time, no time for us to address any regrets. My final words to him were on a banal text message. There was no warning, no preparation. Not only did I have to adjust living in a world without the man who raised me, I had to do so with the inescapable knowledge that what happened to him could happen to anybody, anytime.

It could happen to me.

* * *

It's the summer after. I've taken a job working grounds crew at a golf course. It's a pretty good gig, spending time outside left to my own devices, zooming around on golf carts and listening to audiobooks and podcasts while I mow and soak in the sun for hours.

Mom tells me that Dad is smiling down on me while I work, because it's the exact same road through life he took. After he graduated college, he joined the grounds crew at his local course, eventually worked his way up to superintendent and made a decent living doing so for a good twelve years until we moved. I'm conflicted about this knowledge because I like feeling close to him, but the thought also makes me uneasy. I don't want to follow Dad's path too closely. He put away the pen after starting a family, after having me. He banked on passing the torch to me and writing the novel that he never did. It used to make me happy that he put so much stock in me. I dreamed of the day where he'd finally be inspired by my example and get back at it himself. I bought him supplies, books on writing, books full of prompts, for Christmases and birthdays. I figured once he retired, had nothing to do but tend to his garden and drink beer, he could write the lit fic masterpiece he always dreamed of, and I'd be a successful enough author to use some of my clout to get my old man on the shelves next to me.

But that can't happen now. And even if I do achieve that success, he won't be around to see it. I can't help but feel like he died a little unfulfilled, like his investment in me didn't pay off. Maybe he could've gone to his grave a more satisfied man if I'd never existed, if he poured the energy he used on me into his work.

I think about this while I'm at my job and the skies above me become grey. A gentle rain drizzles on me and I think I can finish mowing before it gets really bad. A bolt of lightning fizzles overhead, too close, and the booming thunder rattles every part of my body. My heart

speeds up and my body thinks that it can avoid the danger and I swerve, crashing the mower into a bush. I'm having a full-blown panic attack now. I can hardly breathe, and I feel my sweat even through the torrential downpour. I'm sure I'm going to die because I can't get the mower moving again. I'm a sitting duck.

When I do get it going and take off in the direction of the maintenance shed, the adrenaline in my body wants me to move faster, but atop the machine, atop the big metal target, I can only move at a crawl. I inch back to the shop in a tsunami. Zeus takes potshots at me like I'm a bird and he's a bored kid throwing rocks.

Somehow, I make it back alive, but there's a parallel universe where a lightning bolt strikes the machine and kills me. My mother has to bury her son mere months after burying her husband. My father's hopes and dreams he put into me, extinguished. Nobody will write that novel now.

It's then that I resolve not to follow his path. That's the danger of living your dreams vicariously. They can die at any minute. Who will accomplish them then, if not you?

* * *

The year is almost over, and Mom takes me out to a nice steak dinner to celebrate her promotion. She orders a bottle of wine to split, and I end up having a little too much.

The topic of conversation is a favorite of ours: politics. I make a snide remark about Christians. I pause and think it over for a second, and remember my first brush with death. I did have a chance to say goodbye that time, when I sat the foot of my grandmother's hospital cot, and in her weakened voice she made us promise that we'd keep going to church and be good Christians.

"You know," I say to Mom, "It kind of fucks me up that we didn't keep our promise to Mamaw."

Mom is quiet for a second, "I think about that too. But I just can't do organized religion anymore. It's too filled with hate. I can't not believe in God, though. I want to believe that one day we'll see Dad again."

"That's the thing. I don't think we ever will."

Mom has an excellent poker face, but I see it fall for just a second. See the shock in her eyes. She lets it slide and continues the conversation, but I know that my comment weighs on her because she keeps alluding to it in the following days.

Sometimes I think Dad would be disappointed with the way I've been recently. He'd be disappointed that I'd finally caved and started drinking after 22 years of teetotalism. He'd be disappointed in my atheism. He'd be disappointed in what I said to Mom.

But then I remember: he can't be disappointed because he's dead.

* * *

I'm having an argument with a friend. The kind of argument that threatens to end our friendship. I won't pretend I was in the right on the issue by any moral standard, but I'm not the kind of person to roll over on what I believe in, either.

"Dude," he says to me over the phone, "This nihilism has got to stop. I'm worried about you, but I'm not sorry that I actually care about making this shitty world a little better."

"Well, I'm not sorry that I don't," I say, "You know what I care about? I care about my wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people in my immediate circle. It doesn't matter if I leave a positive or negative impact on the world because I won't know the fucking difference when I'm dead."

We're both crying at this point. My friend finally says, "I can't believe what I'm hearing. I really looked up to you, you know? I feel like I was such a shitty person before I met you, and you were always trying to do good in the world. You were a role model to me."

This catches me off guard. I never saw myself as a role model for anyone. "That person you knew is dead. He's not coming back."

* * *

Sometimes I wish I could be the person my friend looked up to once again. I miss the me whose favorite stories were about simple acts of kindness and soft-spoken heroes. I miss the me who cared deeply about the state of the world, who forced himself to keep up to date with its cruelties if only to try and understand how to make it better. I miss the me who believed that life and the people living it were fundamentally good, and that even seemingly insurmountable issues could be talked through, that even the worst human could be understood and change for the better.

But sometimes I hate that person, and am glad he's gone. Glad because he was a naïve fool, made stupid atop his throne of privileges. There are some issues that cannot be reconciled. There is no objective standard for anything, much less morals, and even if there were, some people can't be redeemed through a convenient three-act character arc. In a world of limited resources, the happiness of one comes from the suffering of another. The things that made me happy—still make me happy—are only possible through the great sins of capitalism. The memories of my father and I eating hamburgers at the old-fashioned diner were created by generations of industrialization and slaughter, an industry with a large part to play in damning the planet to boil. The video games that even now I dedicate so much of my time to are only made possible by the exploitation of people far less fortunate than me, often children. When the things that make me happy cause so much suffering, what is there to do? Give up those things and live the life of an ascetic until my pointless death, knowing I'm doing the moral thing but living every day in misery? Give up on only some things, knowing I'm a hypocrite whose life is full of half-measures like everyone else? Live only for myself and be satisfied by honesty and consistency, knowing it's only serving to make a shitty world even shittier?

This is the great contradiction: in a world where nothing matters, death is the most terrifying and enviable thing.

* * *

Hayli, my girlfriend, is an artist. I've got one of her paintings hanging on my bedroom wall. But my favorite works of hers aren't paintings. They're simple sketches on sticky note that she does at the beginning of some days at her boring office job. She'll draw little illustrations of puppies doing cute things and send them to me over a text. Puppies playing in the snow on a particularly cold day, behind the wheel of a car when I have to travel, behind a typewriter when she knows I have a big project to work on. They never fail to make me smile.

She likes making little surprises for me like that, and one day gave me little wooden dog tags with the faces of my favorite video game characters drawn on them. We end up getting into a conversation about what my favorite games are, which ones made the biggest impression on me, if there's even a difference. We talk for an hour and I'm shuffling the tags around in different permutations. She asks me which ones I would delete from my life if forced to choose. Hayli tells me that she's jealous of my ability to conceptualize my favorites so neatly. I wonder if it makes me too rigid.

* * *

I find myself thinking about that conversation with Hayli again and again in the coming weeks. Why do I have such a deep fixation with lists? Why is it so important to me that I know exactly what things matter to me most, and in what order? It's a habit that goes back to high school, where every year my friend and I would open up a Word doc and update our rankings on our favorite games and movies. I suspect it's another manifestation of my obsessive-compulsive tendencies. My friend seems to think it's something more fundamental to human nature.

“After all,” he says, “Buzzfeed couldn't exist if there weren't enough people like you.”

Eventually, I start making another list. Jotting down the names of video games I hold in high regard. I keep adding to the list and begin trying to put them in order, but it occurs to me that I haven't played many of these games in years, and looking down the list of fifty or so I see a timeline of my life unfolding before me, from games I first played as a preschooler to games I first experienced in grad school.

I begin concocting a mad scheme. My fiction was dead in the water ever since Dad passed. But maybe there was a new project I could get started on, a project with more personal stakes.

* * *

I explain the idea to Duncan, my cousin, my best friend. I've compiled a list of 50 games that are in some way meaningful to me. Over the course of the next year, I'll play through every single one to the end, giving them a rank against the others after completing each entry. When I've finished, I'll have determined what my 25 favorite games are, and I'll write a piece about each of them and what they say about me. One-part game analysis, one-part memoir. 25 seems an appropriate number. That's how old I'll be this October, and it's a fitting time to take stock. I'll have gone through at least a fourth of my life, finally done with school and truly on my own.

My cousin considers this, "It's an interesting idea for a project. You're gonna have to be real tricky about how you make this list, though. You'll have to be objective about it. You haven't played some of these games since high school. How good the game is and how nostalgic you are for it are pretty different issues."

But I don't agree. Attempting to be objective is not only impossible, but antithetical to the project. A work of art's only worth is in the worth its viewer assigns it. This is an opportunity for me to do games writing correctly. Perhaps due to its technological nature, so many gamers are obsessed with the fool's errand of trying to figure out what makes for an objectively good game, but those standards shift all the time. The best game ever by the standards of 20 years ago may be trite and boring by the standards of today. If a game, or any work of art, is important to me, why should I denigrate my own experience by discarding the very emotions that make the work meaningful in the name of an impossible objective standard?

This is the benefit of living in a world where nothing matters.

* * *

I don't like who I've become. I don't like being mean and angry and nihilistic. I don't like disappointing the people I care about, living and dead.

But I also don't like lying to myself. I don't like being naïve.

The pages that you're about to see are a journey. A journey through the 25 video games I love most and why they resonate with me. By piecing these together, I want to paint a complete picture of who am I, who I've been, and who I want to be. I want to chart my growth through 25 years of engaging with a medium I love. I want to understand what it is that drew me to these games, and what I can still take from them. I want to try and put myself back together again now that I no longer have a fundamental pillar to support me.

Video games are no replacement for a father, of course. Even I am not so pathetic as to suggest that. But they are here, and he is not. If we could rely on the people we love to be there always, we wouldn't need art. That's not the way the world works. I like to think he understood that. I like to think that's why he wanted to be a writer.

He never did write that book. I don't have his words to learn from anymore. Even if he did, I'd still have to find my own way.

I like to think he understood that, too.

“RECOGNIZE ME PLEASE”

-*The Beginner's Guide*

I don't care about spoilers much, if the previous episodes of this podcast haven't made that abundantly clear. I knew who died in the Red Wedding before I watched a single episode of Game of Thrones. I like watching detailed retrospectives of game franchises I've never played, and have discovered some of my favorite games by spoiling the entire plot for myself. I tend to think that if you can ruin the appeal of a whole story by telling someone what happens in it, it probably wasn't an effective story in the first place. If the themes don't resonate without the element of surprise, if a work has no aesthetic value to appreciate once you know the twists and turns of the plot, then it's in all likelihood a vapid waste of time, a magic trick.

There are exceptions, of course. Certain stories, certain genres, where spoilers can ruin what would be an otherwise great, even profound, experience. A mystery, for example, stops being fun the moment you figure out what's going on. A good twist can make the catharsis of an emotional gut punch all the stronger.

Such is the case with *The Beginner's Guide*, a work of interactive fiction that's difficult to describe without spoilers. A game that had me weeping openly, wailing alone atop a pile of garbage in a ramshackle duplex. But to even describe what makes the game so emotionally devastating is to put the player's guard up, hell, by even calling the game emotionally draining I'm robbing the game of its efficacy. An informed player will have their guard up instead of accepting the game at face value, they're readying themselves in a fiction that asks them to come with an open heart.

The review that convinced me to purchase *The Beginner's Guide* was not a review in a traditional sense. Jim Sterling, an independent game critic, wrote a “non-review” of it, where he

disclosed almost nothing about the game in an attempt to “say everything about it by saying nothing.” What he posted was a deeply personal narrative that said far more about its writer than its subject, and yet with the benefit of having played the game, illustrated precisely what made *The Beginner’s Guide* so powerful.

That article isn’t online any more. I tried to read it again before writing this episode and got a 404 error from Sterling’s since-remodeled website. Regardless, I’m going to take a page out of his book, though I think it’s fair to say I’ve been doing that all along. *The Beginner’s Guide* is one of the few stories I think is substantially improved by going in blind. Go buy it. It’ll only cost you \$10 and about two hours of your time. There’s no skill or execution barrier like with most video games. There is no fail state or worry that you won’t be able to progress. It just drops you in a 3D space and narrates a story while you interact with some abstract art games. It’s a meditation on art, why we create, loneliness, and the need for external validation.

And that is all I’m going to say about it for the rest of the episode.

But if you’ve played it, the connection to the story that follows will be self-evident.

* * *

JUNE 2006

Stars twinkle above me, visible blinks through the light pollution, but only barely. The layer of dew dampens the back of my t-shirt, and I laugh into the cordless landline in my hands I'd taken out to the trampoline in the backyard. In 2006, my family hasn't completely adopted cell phones yet, let alone gave one to their preteen son.

Normally I like going out at night because I get self-conscious about Dad watching me from the armchair positioned in front of the family room window. I act like a little kid out on the trampoline and I know it, still playing pretend and imagining my own little worlds even on the cusp of puberty. Dad and Mom don't judge me for this. Dad even put up the safety siding on the trampoline up when I was old enough to not really need it because he knows that I like having that extra degree of separation between the outside world and my own.

But I've invited someone else to my little world today. I'm not bouncing around and pretending to be a superhero or reenacting scenes from my favorite games. It's after 7 PM, and that means I'm on the phone with Duncan.

"Wait, hold on," I say, "You made games *before* Joe?"

"I've been using Klik and Play for years. My very first games were made in my elementary school computer lab. They're on floppy disks in my basement somewhere."

We can only talk after 7 o'clock because Duncan's phone got free minutes during the night hours, and Aunt Sharilyn got tired of footing the bill for the long conversations we had nearly every day.

"Holy shit. And you're including these in Joe 2?"

“No, not those. These are my first *Game Factory* games. My oldest games were all like two screens. These ones are full games, though I only finished two of them. Actually...” he pauses to think for a second, “Did I finish Yugoslavian Fight Club?”

“What the hell is Yugoslavian Fight Club?”

“Technically, it’s *Super Mario Bros: Yugoslavian Fight Club*.”

I start cracking up. He giggles along with me and takes a moment to catch his breath before continuing.

“It’s a fighting game starring Mario, who goes underground to Ronald McDonald’s fight club in communist Yugoslavia when the Mushroom Kingdom outlaws fighting for sport. It’s a fighting game where you murder Mario characters in increasingly brutal ways. Honestly, I’m still kind of proud of it.”

“You should be. Mario Galaxy isn’t going to compare.”

He laughs, “Nah, the Nintendo Revolution’s gonna blow our minds when it comes out. Have you seen the trailer yet? You can like dive behind a couch to take cover and it’ll sense everything.”

We keep gushing about Nintendo’s upcoming console into the night, but I’m still reeling from the revelation he’d dropped on me moments earlier: my best friend isn’t just a game developer. He’s been one for years. He’s making a game with such an epic scope, filled with so many secrets that he can include six, *six* games he’s made over the years. And they aren’t even his oldest ones.

When I hang up the phone and shuffle off to bed, I resolve to ask Mom for the same game making software he uses for Christmas.

* * *

DECEMBER 2005

Duncan's my cousin, but I wouldn't say we were really on the road to best friendship until I was in fifth grade or so. He's two years my senior, and although I had a lot of fun hanging out with him and David, another cousin, at various family gatherings, we lived in different towns about 30 minutes away (an eternity in child time) and the age gap was noticeable.

Still, after enough birthdays and holidays, the three of us became close enough that Duncan saw fit to start bringing David and me our own personalized Christmas gifts. It started with a goofy craft, a photo of his face held up with popsicle sticks and black foam. But then the next year he brought two burned CDs: one loaded with music from *Yoshi's Island* for me, one loaded with music from *Donkey Kong Country* for David.

And the next year, he'd bring me a gift that changed everything.

David and I open the package and find two identical CD cases with *The Adventures of Joe* scribbled onto a blank sheet of white construction paper.

"What's this?" I ask, "Another CD?"

David's eyes go wide. "It's done? You finally finished?"

Duncan is giddy with excitement. I think he's about to jump up and down when he nods.

Immediately, David bolts to the boxy PC in the corner of his basement. He throws the disc into the CD drive and quickly installs a file. Nobody explains to me what's going on.

The title screen for *The Adventure's of Joe* boots up. David starts the game and seizes control of a stick figure man wearing nothing but blue pants and a Joe Dirt mullet. A low-quality rendition of a Stones song plays as David flips through a grassland, torching robots with Joe's portable flamethrower and picking up slices of swiss cheese to restore his health.

I still haven't fully grasped the implications of what I'm seeing. I turn to Duncan and ask, "Where did you find this game?"

David briefly takes his eyes off the game to answer me, "Duncan *made* this game."

"Didn't I tell you I've been working on this?" Duncan rubs his chin and thinks about it for a second, "That's right. It was just me and David when I told him. Yeah, I've been working on this for a while. Here, I want to give you guys the tour."

I can feel the pride radiating off Duncan's face as he takes us back to the level select. Their little sisters (both closer to my age than either Duncan or David) gather around us to see what the hubbub is when Duncan gives us the highlight tour of *The Adventures of Joe*. He takes us to a level where Joe travels across a world's worth of biomes, culminating in him scaling a mountain and lighting a yodeling man on fire for shits and giggles. At the end of the level, a (crudely) animated cutscene triggers as Joe's progress is interrupted by a black hole in his path, forcing the player to turn back and do the exact same level they just traversed in reverse, culminating in a battle with the yodeler they torched, now a cyborg. Once that level's done, he brings us to another level in a circus, featuring an entirely new character with a completely unique playstyle and set of abilities. This section of the game climaxes with a battle between Joe's brother and the Neon Cosmic Clown, a godlike entity who the player defeats by shooting nuclear warheads at it. In another level, Joe gets sucked into a computer virus and has to do battle with a sentient (?) semicolon. In another, the player controls both Joe and his brother at the same time to solve puzzles and cross the surface of the moon. The game constantly shifts playstyles and is bursting with the pure creative id of his 12-year-old mind. It has 20 levels, complete with a fully animated story. Nearly every single character and frame of animation was drawn by himself. He even included a digital guide to the game with names and descriptions and

jokes for every single area and monster. *The Adventures of Joe*, despite its obvious crudity, is a hugely ambitious production for a middle schooler.

I watch Duncan and David take turns at the game with my jaw on the floor.

* * *

JUNE 2006

I was the one to start calling Duncan on the phone all the time. Partly because all my school friends were PlayStation fanboys and he was one of the only people down to talk Nintendo with me, but mostly because he'd begun production on *The Adventures of Joe 2* immediately after finishing the first game, and I wanted to follow its development as closely as I could. I'd played *Joe 1* on my Mom's laptop religiously, banged my head against its most difficult challenges and unintuitive design choices and loving every second of it. But eventually I was all done with it. I needed more.

And Duncan was happy to oblige. He'll never have a fan as slavishly devoted to his work as I was in seventh grade. He told me about all the secrets, the bonus features, the inside jokes he was sticking in the sequel, which was shaping up to be the most ambitious project I'd ever seen. 25 unique levels. 12 bosses. A new ability to fly around with a jetpack. A full comic book's worth of story. Five bonus games included. An ultra-secret final level tucked away behind three keys hidden in the most arcane way possible on the most difficult levels. A farm dedicated to housing minigames and other side silliness he felt like including.

The game was a massive undertaking for one high school freshman, but I like to think that I played a sizable part in helping him stay on task as his cheerleader. If I can recall correctly, he really only had one other friend interested in his game development career (David gave up on *Joe 1* when it proved too difficult for him). I like to think that when he got frustrated thinking of new ideas or getting bogged down in a lot of the drudgery of the game development process, he thought about the unbridled joy his pal Jackson would have finally getting his hands on the highly anticipated sequel, and kept going.

Not that I thought about it in those terms back then. Back then I assumed that this came easily to him, that he knew what he wanted out of the game and made it come to life with utmost confidence. From my seventh-grade perspective, it wasn't just that he made any old game. He made a great game. The levels were fun, the comedy landed consistently, the characters and enemies were creative. When you've made a masterpiece like *The Adventures of Joe 2*, you have to be the most confident, creative person around.

I think it's fair to say I idolized him.

* * *

APRIL 2007

It's another day of seventh grade and I'm in my usual position: curled in Dad's armchair with Mom's laptop, and the landline tucked against my ear. Only today, I don't have *The Adventures of Joe 1* or *2* loaded up. I'm fiddling around in the menus of *The Games Factory 2*, an updated version of the software Duncan used to create games.

"Okay," I say, "I'm in the event editor. What now?"

"So, what you'll do is go create a new if/then statement. Have the game sense when the X key is held down."

He's teaching me how to replicate the effect he used to get Joe to fire his flamethrower. Games Factory is mostly a drag and drop, visual language, so I don't need to know any real code, but it is a nice introduction to logic loops. I like to think I'm a quick learner, and with Duncan there to guide me around the trail he blazed I'm sure that I can make my masterpiece game on my very first try.

The game was called *Billy and Rocky*, about a generic anime kid wielding a sword and a quadrupedal creature that was a horrific rip-off of Yoshi and Pikachu. Everything about it is a pale imitation of my cousin's game, from the character designs to the level designs to the music to the story to the jokes, and what was original about it was horrific in hindsight. *The Adventures of Joe* had a playful, mostly kid-friendly sense of humor. *Billy and Rocky's* vibe was *South Park* through the lens of a literal twelve year old, full of edgy "humor" that probably qualifies as criminal hate speech in several European countries.

It saddens me. I poured so much time into that game and learned so much, but it's impossible for me to have any fond memories of it. With *Joe*, we can point to silly, harmless little gags that still make us smile, like how he included Jimmy Neutron as a surprise late game

boss. The game may not be good, or even playable, by an adult standard, but it's a humble beginning full of nostalgia and things about it to be legitimately proud of.

By contrast, I don't think there's anything in my life I'm more ashamed of than *Billy and Rocky*. Its cruel homophobic jokes made me nauseous as soon as a year after I finished the project, when my uncle finally came out of the closet followed shortly by my sister. But even without that uncomfortable fact, it still wouldn't be worth reminiscing on. It was a pale imitation, a hollow simulacrum of Duncan's hard work.

And yet, for an entire year, working on it was the only thing that kept me going.

* * *

Before that year, however, things seemed to be going better than ever for me. Mom had been especially supportive of me taking a go at game development, and put forward the cash required for me to attend a week-long summer camp at the University of Michigan teaching the basics of programming. What made this especially exciting was that I wouldn't be going alone: Duncan's branch of the family lives in Ann Arbor, so I'd get to spend the entire week with him.

The night before our first day at Camp CAEN, Duncan and I stayed up late excitedly laying down the game plan for the week. This wasn't going to be a mere summer camp; this was a meeting of the minds. We were going to create a crossover between *The Adventures of Joe* and *Billy and Rocky*, a game where characters from both "franchises" battle, and it'd be better than anything we'd produced on our own. The Games Factory was a wonderful tool for kids, but we (and by we, I of course mean Duncan) had started brushing up against the program's limitations. In just a week, we'd know how to code like real programmers, and wouldn't be bound by The Games Factory's chains.

It was a hilariously naïve prospect, in retrospect. But somehow I doubt more realistic expectations would've changed the final result.

* * *

JULY 2007

We're packed in front of computers in a warm haze of sweat and summer. Duncan and I sit in the front row where our instructor, a bearded college student who smells like a foul fusion of cigarette smoke and BO, is dicking around on his laptop while the rest of us get to work writing basic programs. Duncan is done within minutes, and I follow not too long after. The kids behind us, all older than me, are too busy playing *Counter-Strike* with each other to even attempt the work that we've already finished.

Meanwhile, I'm bored and don't have anything left to do while I wait, so I've fired up my latest build of *Billy and Rocky*. There isn't anything I can add to it without Games Factory installed on the computer, so I'm just running through the levels I've already completed. I justify it to myself by saying that seeing my old ideas will inspire new ones, but mostly I just like playing my own game. For all the shit I may give *Billy and Rocky*, for being offensive, for being inferior to *Joe*, the pure wonder at having made my very own video game, to just manipulate my own characters on screen, still hasn't quite left me.

I'm absorbed in the level I'm playing when I feel somebody looming over me. They don't poke my shoulder to get my attention, and they don't even say anything until I'm looking at them. The glare from his *Legend of Zelda* belt buckle nearly blinds me, and a dull, somewhat angry face peeks out from behind stringy locks of greasy hair.

"Turn it off," he says.

"Huh?"

"Turn it off."

The volume on my game is on, but I don't understand what his problem is. I can very clearly hear everyone behind me shooting each other, and he isn't asking them to turn it down.

Not wishing to escalate the confrontation, though, I mute the sound on my game. He skulks back to his seat without a word.

Duncan realizes what's going on before I do, "Holy shit, what a loser. Guess he can't stand hearing his precious *Zelda* music disrespected or whatever."

I hadn't even made the connection. I stole background music from the most recent *Zelda* game and played it over *Billy and Rocky's* third level, the level I had been playing through. To this day, I have no idea what his problem was.

I turn around and glare at him. *Zelda Kid*, as he would come to be known between us, has huge headphones covering his ears. I stand up and pretend to step out of the room for a bathroom break and make a not-so-subtle effort to see the progress that he's made on his program.

He's playing Counter-Strike with the rest of them.

I'm so mad my piss evaporates into a fog as soon as it leaves my body. My first course of action when I return to the sweltering computer room is to turn *Billy and Rocky's* music back up, louder than ever before.

As if on cue, our "instructor" shouts to his class without even looking up, "Hey, you all finished with the exercise yet? Can we move on to the next lesson?"

Zelda Kid immediately answers, "We're not ready."

Duncan is glaring at him now.

"Whatever." The instructor says, "Take an early lunch and we'll finish when you get back."

The two of us make the first move, being the only students in the class not embroiled in a shooting match, and immediately make for the doorway for the cafeteria. We're walking side by side when I start to open my mouth.

“Can you fucking believe—”

A gust of wind billows between us as a short kid flies down the hall, the sound of rolling wheels echoing across the brown linoleum floor.

Duncan elbows me and points down, “His shoes! Look at his shoes!”

The kid’s zooming around on Heelys, a late 90’s/mid-2000’s brand of sneaker with a roller skate in the heel that I’m frankly not sure is a thing anymore. Something about the site of him zipping around this college campus on his wheels makes us break down in laughter, and once we catch our breath, we decide to not follow Heelys into the cafeteria, taking a sharp left out the door to a cozy, shaded stoop, a loading dock nestled near some lovely foliage that’s a sight for sore eyes after being trapped in a sweat dungeon for the past few hours.

Duncan and I immediately get to work roasting the rest of our class.

“Jesus,” I say, “Who even are these clowns? It’s like nobody in the room wants to learn anything.”

“I wanna know what hole they dug this teacher out of. These lessons he’s been giving us are pathetic. I could’ve just used Google if I wanted know how to program a shitty calculator.” He sighs and takes a bite of his sandwich, “We were fools for thinking this would teach us what we needed to know to make that *Smash Bros* rip-off.”

I sit on the concrete stairs next to him and stare off into the sky. It’s one of those clear blue, sunny summer days that every childhood summer seems to be in my memory. Despite the little annoyances and the disappointment of the day, I can’t feel too mad.

“Could we just make *Joe vs. Billy* in Games Factory? I mean, we still have almost a whole week.”

“Would that be enough time?”

“We made that party game in a night a few months ago, didn’t we? This’ll be a little more complicated, and we won’t get all the features we want in it, but if we try then Camp CAEN won’t be a total a waste. We can come up with ideas for it during all this downtime we’re getting instead of making Houseformers.”

Duncan laughs. Houseformers, incidentally, are humanoid 3D housepeople we were making in Google SketchUp as a joke. This meme would live in our friendship for so long that we started to include a reference to it in all of our games for a time, including an entire level in *Billy and Rocky*.

“You know, so long as we limit the playable characters to just Joe, Billy, and Rocky, we can handle multiple players the way we did last time, and if we get all the basic mechanics out of the way, we can just drag and drop a bunch of different stages together, but I think we can do it in the five days we have left. Fuck it, let’s do it. Let’s show these jokers that we’re serious.”

Immediately when we got home that afternoon, we huddled around his family’s desktop computer and got to work. Duncan drew up some new battle sprites for Joe, while I thought about what kind of moves my characters would use. Duncan handled the “coding” process since he was more experienced with the program by far, but by then I’d been working on *Billy and Rocky* for long enough to make meaningful contributions, to help resolve glitches when they came up and fine-tune the mechanics. When we got stuck, we’d leave the problem and go for a stroll around his neighborhood, soaking in the sun. About 10% of those walks consisted of game development talk. We reserved the other 90% for dicking around.

There was this one park in particular that we kept passing again and again. It stank of sewage and the water was a sickly green. When we got close to the shore, we could see jagged metal rising from the depths. We waddle closer to the sign, declaring it to be a “nature area.”

Duncan snorts, “Nature area. Give me a fucking break. The audacity of these people. You’d probably dissolve if you touched this water.”

Sensing an opportunity for a bit, I stride over to the sign without saying a word to him, unzip my pants, and start pissing on the sign.

Duncan’s laughing so hard he’s in tears, and I add an extra flourish as I zip up my pants and shout, “How’s *that* for natural, bitch?” He laughs even harder and now I can’t contain myself either. I’m the sort of person who laughs at his own jokes, but I like to think it’s not an ego thing. I just want to share in the moment with everyone else.

The rest of the week went like that. Camp in the mornings, antics in the afternoon, game development in the evenings. On the final night we were cutting it close, right down to the moment Dad knocked on Aunt Sharilyn’s door on the final day.

But we finished it. We had a fully functional (if broken and simplistic) fighting game. A complete product that I was so proud of I immediately brought it to my middle school friends to show off.

Camp CAEN may have been underwhelming, but thinking on it now it set an important precedent for my relationship with Duncan. Most of our extended visits would take a similar sort of format: a big project broken up by walks and goofiness. This development particularly pleased my aunt, who told my Dad one time that I was “like a shark” and “got my son off his lazy butt.”

That comment has really stuck with me for some reason. I think it was the feeling that I was really contributing to this relationship instead of just watching him create from afar or leeching off him for game development knowledge.

We were a real team. The Keller Not-Quite Brothers.

* * *

FEBRUARY 2008

I'm sitting alone in Cloverleaf Middle School's cafeteria, as I always do. Even after an entire semester of living in a new town, I still haven't managed to make any friends. I made a gamble by acting like the class clown I was back in Livonia and lost. The more charitable students thought I was weird. The less charitable thought I was psychotic. Several friends informed me later in life that they were courteous to me only because they wanted to be on my good side in case I came in with a gun. A YouTube video my friends and I made just days before I moved went viral amongst the students, a mere fifteen second clip of me dual wielding nerf guns and calling myself Two-Guns Jackson. It made me famous among the middle schoolers at Cloverleaf in exactly the wrong way. Everyone knew who I was, and could pick me out of a crowd thanks to my "jewfro," an insult I didn't understand. What's wrong with being Jewish?

I'm sitting at the table without any food. There's enough money in my pocket to buy a slab of cardboard grease (pizza), but I don't want to get in the line. There's a bunch of metalheads who hate me heading up the rear. I can wait to eat until they've sat down, far away from me. Besides, the longer I wait, the more work I can get done on my latest *Billy and Rocky* level. I never take notes for classes, but notebooks are useful camouflage for designing games.

Something skids across the table and falls to floor. I crouch down to check underneath, but only see crumbs, and there's no one around me to move anything.

A few seconds later, a Cheeto bounces off my arm and skids across my notebook, leaving an orange streak. There are snickers behind me that I don't want to believe are directed my way, but deep down I know they are.

"Pussy."

I hate the way cheese snacks leave that dust. I hadn't gotten too far on that section of the level, so I could just start over. I rip out the page—keeping continuity between the level's previous sections—and start redrawing the boundaries of my world.

“Pussyfaggot.”

I turn around before I realize what they're saying. The group of boys—all twice my size, different from the metal kids I was afraid of—look away and laugh, louder this time. There's a lump forming in my throat and I'm afraid to breathe or look up lest tears start forming where somebody can see.

My hair rustles and the boys all start screaming with laughter. I brush my hand through my hair and find another Cheeto tangled in its curls. Bile gurgles in my stomach as I pick it out of my hair like a chimp grooming its mate. I toss it away in disgust, rubbing my orange stained fingers on the table for lack of a napkin.

There's no stopping the tears now. I don't know why I'm crying or why these petty actions get to me. Perhaps it's just that things like this happen daily. Perhaps it's precisely because they are petty and meaningless.

I keep my head down so the boys tossing food at me can't see me cry, but part of me wants somebody to see. I want somebody to see my tears and say, “Oh, I wonder why he's sad,” and come talk to me. I want a teacher to see my tears and intervene, but the teacher on guard duty is reading a magazine at the table. His shoulders are broad, he was obviously muscular at one point in time, but the years have weighed on him. I look at the teacher and make a cruel assumption: that he was exactly the sort of meathead who did this in his middle school years, that he teaches in a Podunk hole like Cloverleaf Middle School because he's a failure who didn't

accomplish anything meaningful in his life. I assumed this about all of my teachers, whether I liked them or hated them.

Water stains my notebook and smudges the ink on my paper. Rage burns away my tears as I scribble in the level so hard it threatens to rip the page. There was only one way to win this game, and that was to be a more worthwhile person than anyone else in the school. And finishing *Billy and Rocky* was the key. I'd be a famous game designer by the time I finished high school.

I'm so dedicated to designing I almost miss Dad in my peripheral vision. He's standing in front of the school's main entrance, a paper bag in one hand and a chocolate milkshake in the other. I spring up, careful to tuck my notebook under my arm so nobody can steal it, and nearly sprint right into him. He did this sometimes, surprise me with burgers and a shake from Hardee's (the same restaurant he took me to when I broke down crying while we searched for a house). It's especially welcome today.

He gives me a soft smile as he puts the food in my hands. "Hey big guy, thought you'd appreciate a treat.

I do and I want to give him the biggest hug I have, but I know I can't. Not where the entire school can see.

He notices the redness in my eyes and frowns, "You doing okay today?"

I say nothing and shake my head. I know it makes him feel like shit because he spends too much of his day worrying about me, but I never really saw the point in hiding how I felt about things.

* * *

I say *Billy and Rocky* is what got me through that year, but really it was as much the project as it was a cell phone. Now that I had my own (and a better data plan than Duncan) I could call him whenever I wanted, almost every single night. It wasn't like I had anything else going on in my life.

I remember several occasions where I'd call him and just cry about all the things that were going on, and he'd listen and stay calm. He was my rock during that first year in Ohio. He never got gushy on me in return, which I didn't really notice at first. Again, I assumed that he just knew what to do, what to say, and what not to say, at all times.

* * *

MAY 2010

I'm sitting in Duncan's room. He has a guitar in his hands and plucks at a few out of tune chords. I have his laptop in front of me and an Xbox controller in my hand, mashing the little crayon-drawn man on screen against a wall over and over to try and replicate the wall-phasing glitch I ran into a few seconds ago.

"...Alright," Duncan says, "I think I've got it. This is what I'm thinking for World 3."

He plucks a few rough, solemn notes in a short melody.

"I'll play around with harmonies on the keyboard too," he says, "Make it sound a little more lively. But that's the gist of it. You think it'll work?"

I press the action button my control. The world shifts around my character and traps him in the wall.

"I think I know what's causing your wall problem," I say, "And I'm gonna preface this by saying I don't know shit about music, but honestly I think it's good. It fits for the last world."

He sets the guitar down and crouches next to me on the floor, "Thank god. Show me how you did it."

There's a vicarious rush as I show Duncan how to replicate his collision problem. I don't know the actual code required to fix the problem, but I felt like I was making a real impact on the process by applying my problem-solving skills to it. Being able to replicate a glitch is just as important as figuring out the logic sequence in the code making it break down. Quality Assurance is a fairly thankless task in the world of game development, but it's a vital one, and I was more than happy to fill in the role for Duncan in what limited capacity I had. Kanro Games, the two-man game development squad, was hard at work.

We called ourselves Kanro Games because we thought appropriating a Japanese word (mangled from Google translate as a synonym for “sweet”) would make us look like serious professionals and not like complete fools. Duncan was lucky enough to get an internship at a local tech company, and a boss kind enough to purchase a website domain for us where I hosted a gaming blog with the cringeworthy name “Jackson’s Musings.”

Duncan let out a relieved sigh as he took the laptop from me and started making adjustments to the code, “You’re a lifesaver. I think I finally know how to fix this one.” He sighed as he got it running and started playing a bit himself. “Wish I hadn’t dragged my ass on these bug fixes. Maybe I’d have time to make better music.”

Duncan was building his latest game, *StarLight*, in a framework called XNA specifically designed to build games for the Xbox 360. Not only was he going to put it on the Xbox storefront, he was entering it into a competition called IndieCade, a huge deal that several high profile independent professionals were entering.

I tell him, “You don’t have to submit to Microsoft and IndieCade at the same time, right? You’ll have a little time to work out some kinks for the retail version. Let’s be realistic here, it’s not like *StarLight* is gonna win if Phil Fish is entering *Fez*. Kanro just needs the publicity.”

He was really doing it. When we talked about making Xbox games back in elementary school, it seemed like such a pipe dream. But here he was, a mere senior in high school putting a full-blown video game he made all by himself on the official Xbox storefront.

But I wasn’t jealous. We were a team, and not just because I was helping him test his game. I was working on a script for my next project in the works, a complete overhaul of *Billy and Rocky* without any homophobia and a more refined sense of humor. This would be my real

vision, a comedy with far more intricate characters and dramatic elements, completely removed from its roots as an *Adventures of Joe* rip-off by giving it more RPG elements.

Duncan was a better programmer than me, there's no doubting that considering I was still using Games Factory and he was coding real Xbox games. True, he had more musical talent than me. And although my art had improved slightly, his already superior drawings and animation had improved by an order of magnitude to the point where I'd say there was a distinctive Duncan Keller style. He even drew us a cute cartoon avatar for Kanro's social media presence of us.

But it was in that image that revealed the edge I had over him. He drew me with a pencil in my hand to indicate that my half of Kanro was the one interested in narrative, in exploring the potential for video games to tell stories. A direction he particularly shied away from during the development of *StarLight*.

I found my niche in characters and writing. It was okay that Duncan would be the first to get his game on a real console. He was two years older than me, after all, and I wouldn't be far behind. Once he saw the script for the new and improved *Billy and Rocky*, he'd have no doubts concerning what I brought to the table.

* * *

JUNE 2010

I put the finishing touches on my script, a 40 page document (by far the longest thing I'd written) that took the form of a rough screenplay, with little stage notes indicating where the levels and gameplay would go. This wasn't a complete story, but it was enough of a framework to get a solid idea of what the final product would look like.

I read through the script and had a good chuckle at it. My favorite bits of it come at the very end. The game was going to have two endings, dependent on which title character the player followed when they split up for the final battle. Each route had its own brand of insanity. If you followed Billy, he would confront the villain (an edgelord who had an eyepatch, mangy black hair, an armored cape, and the name "Dark Raven") in a sword fight one on one. After Billy gets injured, and Rocky comes to save him, Raven decides to even the score by jumping into a mech shaped like—no joke—a colossal fucking bird.

But this was child's play compared to the lunacy of the other route. If you followed Rocky when they split up, he'd confront Raven first in a similar scenario, with Billy coming to rescue him after suffering a near fatal injury. Only Billy comes to the rescue in a much more spectacular fashion by slicing off one of Raven's arms. Raven is unperturbed by the loss of his appendage, however, and continues monologuing at the heroes until he finishes his speech by saying, "I see you've cut off my arm. Looks like I need to even the score."

A hole in the ground opens behind him. He backflips into it and rises out of the ground in a mech suit with six arms, each one of them holding a sword. This was the true final boss.

I save the file and smile. I'd done it. It was a masterpiece, filled with lots of laughs and genuine human pathos. The only thing left to do was send it to Duncan so he could give me some feedback.

My hand hovers over the send function on my email for a second. Thoughts of Duncan getting all the way to the end and rolling his eyes at it fill my head. I begin wondering if he's going to laugh at even a single joke.

I close my email for the time being. I'll look it over one more time and send it to him tomorrow, when it's not so fresh. I only want to send him the best possible draft, after all.

I never send him the script.

The game never gets made.

* * *

SEPTEMBER 2011

I'm still sitting at my computer in the dark, ticking away at another word document. Zombies are at the peak of pop culture popularity, and I've decided to leave childish comedy behind me and make my next work a horror drama about a young man who's wronged his best friend and journeys across the zombified United States to try and make amends before it's too late.

By this point, I've realized that I'm no good at programming, music, or art, and therefore don't have the chops to make a multimedia production like a video game. That doesn't make me give up. If writing the story is the only part I enjoy, surely it makes sense to unshackle myself from the narrative limitations of player control and let my characters speak for themselves. I'd upgraded from scripts to novels.

A bright light explodes from the carpet where my phone is charging, a beacon flooding my pitch-black basement room.

It's a text from a friend asking if I wanted to come over and play some *Call of Duty* with a few other guys (my social status at Cloverleaf High had improved significantly over the years). I respond, "Sorry, busy" without even a moment's hesitation. I was so close to finishing this chapter, and I only had two more years if I wanted this book published before graduation.

Duncan had gotten into a nice private tech school, partially based off his publication of *StarLight*, which sold almost no copies, but was a testament to his ability to code and stay dedicated to a task and thus sufficiently impressed the admissions committee. We haven't talked much since he left for college, our near daily phone calls had dropped to maybe once every two months, and he wasn't playing online games much anymore. Every time I sent him a message asking to play some *Halo*, he'd respond that he was busy with an event going on in his dorm. Eventually, I got the hint and stopped bothering him about it, and tried not to be too much of a

baby. He was off having new, exciting adventures, working hard on his game design degree to make his dreams a reality. Kanro may have been dead, but that wasn't going to stop him from working in the medium he was passionate about. I had to work hard too. I had to pull my weight and get this novel finished and published before I went to college, just like he did with *StarLight*.

Duncan was off at a party with his new friends, having a great time.

My new friends were playing *Call of Duty* together, having a great time.

I was sitting alone in a dark basement, writing what I thought this time, for sure, would be my masterpiece.

* * *

DECEMBER 2014

I'm visiting Duncan in his apartment in Wisconsin for the first time. He greets me with a hug and we immediately start laughing and sharing in-jokes, just like old times. He's accepted a job at a small game development studio and I'm on winter break from college, staying with my parents at their new house in Iowa.

I take in the apartment, bask in the glory of his enormous 4K television hooked up to a nice computer he built himself. He's decorated the place with paintings he's made on his own time, but the place is mostly sparse. The island countertop shines around the rest of the kitchenette. The place was small, but comfortable. Adult. Not at all like the frat boy hovel I lived in during the school year.

"Dude, you've made it," I say.

He shrugs, not looking at me as he scrolls through his files for an anime to watch, "I guess."

"You guess? Come on, you gotta admit this is pretty cool. You've got a nice place, but more importantly, there are tons of people with big dreams as kids who never make it happen. But you're doing it! You're a real game developer."

"It's just shitty phone games."

When he says this, something catches my attention in the kitchen that I hadn't noticed earlier. There are 10 identical bottles lined atop his cabinets. Whiskey bottles.

At once I understand. I may not know the details, but clearly being a game developer isn't all it's cracked up to be. The shoe is on the other foot now. In the same way he was there for me while I struggled in eighth grade with the move and with Mamaw's death, I need to be there

for him now. I don't feel up to the task. I don't know what he needs to hear from me, if he needs to hear anything.

I can only speak from the heart, so that's what I do, "Yeah, I guess I don't blame you for not being excited about phone games. You gotta keep it in perspective, though. You've got time to move up to better things. Besides, you published a game on the Xbox when you were a high schooler. That's fucking amazing."

He laughs. Not his usual, full-bodied cackle, but more like a bitter snort, "Yeah, I made the worst game ever made."

I'm taken aback, because I had legitimately enjoyed *StarLight*. I found a great deal of joy in solving its puzzles. I even tried (and failed) to get all the gold medals in the game to try and see the Easter egg he put in specifically for me.

"It's not the *worst* game ever made. I'd say it's marginally better than *Superman 64*."

This gets a more genuine laugh out of him, and we move on to our usual shenanigans. But I can't stop stealing a glance at those whiskey bottles whenever he gets up to use the bathroom. How could Duncan, game development prodigy, feel so shitty about himself and his work to take to the bottle like this? How could I not see it?

And if he thought he was such a failure... what did that make me? I never made a game with even a third of *StarLight's* quality. I never even finished a novel, let alone published one. I couldn't get further than 20 pages in without hating my work and throwing it all in the trash.

I wanted to help. I wanted him to see himself the way I saw him.

* * *

JUNE 2016

Duncan walks in from my parent's kitchen holding a glass of brown liquid, "Dude, this is the worst tea I've ever tasted."

"You're just a tea snob. I'm sure it's not that bad."

"Maybe you're right. Taste it for me, will you? Maybe I just can't stand bottled tea anymore."

I stand up and shuffle into the kitchen, a beautiful nook with a window staring out at a beautiful wood beyond the hill our house was tucked in. The kitchen had shiny, freshly painted walls and cabinets, but almost no utensils to speak of, save what few pots and pans I scavenged from my college house. This is Mom and Dad's house, but I had it occupied for the past month mowing the lawn and keeping it lived in for prospective buyers. Mom had grown sick of being so far away from her friends, my Dad didn't want to give up the promotion his boss just gave him, and they were both sick of living hundreds of miles apart from each other. So, even though they bought the place fully intending to move Dad into it, Mom accepted a job offer at a Country Club back in Ohio and decided to move back there. Since she'd start her job before she could realistically sell the house, and I was a recent college graduate waiting to hear back from grad schools, she offered to let me stay in the house rent free while I worked my old job and the realtor tried to sell the place. It was a sweet deal, to say the least.

I pour a glass from the bottle of iced tea Duncan bought during our trip to stock up on snacks and brought it back into the main room where he flips through page after page of amateur games. I take a deep gulp when I have his attention.

"See, it's not—"

All at once a foul taste crawls up my tongue. I set the glass down and stare at it.

“Holy shit. It tastes like Drano.”

“RIGHT?” He’s cackling in his trademark squealing-from-the-lack-of-oxygen-reaching-his-lungs way, “It’s not just me!”

Duncan’s situation isn’t too dissimilar from mine at this point. He’s still living in Wisconsin, but he’s been laid off from the studio and has been living off his savings while searching for work. Despite the potentially troubling circumstances, he doesn’t seem too concerned. He tells me that this is his big chance to escape the oppressive corporate environment of the studio, and he’s even started a new independent project, something he hasn’t really attempted since *StarLight*.

His place in Wisconsin isn’t too far from my place in Iowa, and since neither of us had anything better to do, he’d come to crash with me for a week like the good old days. We’d recently taken up the (somewhat cruel) hobby of downloading amateur visual novels and playing through them together. It’s more than a little mean, laughing at the unintentionally funny games people spew online, but I like to think there’s a bit of empathy involved in the exercise. After all, we both know what it’s like to think you’ve made a masterpiece and post it online with the self-awareness of an invertebrate.

“Alright, what do we have lined up?” he asks.

I hit the random button and click on the first result the database gives me.

“This one’s called *Rise of the Wolf*.”

“Any photos?”

“Nope.” I click on the link and check its description, “There’s nothing but a sketchy zip file.”

“Think it’s worth checking out?”

“I’m kind of afraid it’s gonna steal my credit card information.”

We’re silent for just a moment.

I click download.

“Fuck it.”

What we find is a miracle, a fever dream, really. Far beyond any expectations we had from one of these games. We alternately cackle and sit in silent awe as the game swings wildly from disturbing close ups of characters speaking not-quite English, creepy 3D mazes that resemble Windows 95 screensavers, and seizure inducing fight scenes between ninjas around dark corners. All peppered with incredible dialogue like, “Gone is the sword, along with him.”

Writing about this experience is so hard to describe, and not just because *Rise of the Wolf* is such a disturbing little oddity. When I’ve tried to show other friends the game, they didn’t think it was nearly as funny or interesting as either Duncan and I did. I think a lot of that has to do with context. We were sitting alone, in a dark room in an empty house, with no idea what we were about to get ourselves into.

But more than that, I think there was a certain wavelength between us in that moment, the kind of wavelength we hadn’t been on since we were both high schoolers working on games together. Being two years older than me, Duncan was always one step ahead in one way or another, be that status in school, accomplishments, or even emotional maturity. But sitting there in the dark, sharing the nostalgia of making weird shit like *Rise of the Wolf* together, I felt like we were finally on equal footing. That I finally understood his internal world a little better, saw him as a more complete human being and didn’t put him on such a pedestal.

We were both in an in between space, and while that was scary, I think we both had a lot of hope for what came next.

* * *

But you already know what comes next, don't you?

* * *

MARCH 2018

Duncan was among the first people to call me when he heard the news about my dad. He bought a plane ticket from San Francisco to Ohio and joined me at the hip for that entire miserable week it took to make arrangements. He waited patiently with my sister's fiancée in the lobby, while Mom got her own affairs squared away by opening a special bank account for me and Savannah. He heard the echoes of my screams just outside the door when I saw my father's cadaver for the first time. He was the first one through the door to hold me tight and cry when the rest of the family was invited in to pay their respects.

This is the only time I've ever seen him cry.

He followed me out of the wake when I got tired of accepting strangers' meaningless condolences and wanted to stuff my face with a burrito. He was ready to say a few impromptu words about his Uncle Jim after everyone gave their pre-written eulogies.

When I dropped him off at the airport, I gave him one last hug and said with a weak voice, on the verge of tears again, "Thanks for saying something at the service. I was so afraid that nobody would."

"Hey, of course buddy. You and me, brothers to the end."

* * *

I want this to be the end of the story, that our bond weathered the tragedy completely and nothing changed.

But the truth is more complicated than that.

* * *

???

I don't remember the context of this conversation. I don't remember who else we were talking to or why we were sharing stories from our very early childhood. Was he just talking to me? It was such a mundane conversation that I doubt Duncan remembers it at all.

But it's a conversation that's stuck with me. He said, "You know, it's funny. When we were little kids, David and I used to hate hanging out with you. And I mean when we were really young. Like, you must've been three. David and I never wanted to be around you because you'd cry about everything. Funny how much has changed."

I fake a laugh, "Yeah, I've always been a crybaby."

But this information shakes me to my core. Not that it should be especially surprising. It makes sense. Two years is a significant age gap when you're a kid, not so much when you're an adult. It's perfectly reasonable for Duncan and David to see me as an annoying kid brother. I suppose our relationship has really been more like brothers than traditional best friends, anyway.

But that one little conversation planted a seed in my mind that would take root, suck the nutrients from my brain to make a tree of anxiety. What if he never stopped thinking like this?

What if I'm still just an annoying little brother to him?

* * *

MAY 2018

ColossalCon. A big anime-themed party at a waterpark that rages for four days. I've attended three years straight. The first two visits to Colossal were life changing experiences, and I wanted all my close friends to take part this year. This, of course, included Duncan. In the miserable months that followed the funeral, "God, I can't wait for Con," became a common refrain between us. Duncan flew all the way from California for the second time in three months to attend with me, and I couldn't be more excited. A nice, drunken weekend of waterslides and anime seemed like the boost my year needed.

But the moment we have the group at Con, things seem off. Jacobo had picked Duncan up from the airport and found me in line. I was so excited I thought I was going to start jumping up and down, but the looks on their faces were decidedly more downcast.

"Hey, what took you guys?" I say.

"We got in the wrong line," Jacobo answers.

"We were surrounded by furrries," Duncan adds.

I make idle conversation and catch up with the guys while we move through the line, and once we get inside, we camp out against the wall and check the schedule of panels and events. A waft of BO hovers in the air as a group of guys and girls in bad cosplay pose in the middle of the hall and shout some stupid meme.

Duncan's face scrunches like he just watched a dog crap on his shoe, "Let me out of here."

I give him some side eye and try to hide the annoyance on my face. They were just kids having fun, no need to be so judgmental. But I try to bury my irritation.

“Hey,” I point to a late-night slot on the schedule, “I think we should hit up this panel. The in-character Q&A’s are usually pretty fun, if a little cringey.”

Another huge swarm of people stampede past us, and I can see Duncan retreat closer to the wall, “I wouldn’t be caught dead going to something like that. God, there are so many people here.”

It takes all my effort to resist grabbing him by the lapels, slamming him against the wall, and saying, “Motherfucker, you better start trying to have fun. This convention is the only thing in my life I’ve had to look forward to and you will *not* ruin it for me.”

Maybe this is the consequence of putting someone on a pedestal for so long. When you finally bring them down to Earth, the faults that make them human are scrutinized to an unreasonable degree.

* * *

ColossalCon, Day 2. There's been a sharp ache in my testicles all week, and it's bothering me to the point where I realize I need to make a doctor's appointment for the moment I return to Marquette.

We have some downtime before the next panel, so I pull out my phone and call the doctor's office before they can close on me. I tell the receptionist my symptoms.

She's silent for what seems like a full minute, "How long have you had this problem?"

"About a week, why?"

She chooses her next words very carefully, or maybe not carefully enough, "If the pain gets any worse, you should go to the ER. It might be a testicular torsion."

The noisy convention around me seems to stop. I'm not sure what that means, but my great-grandfather died of testicular cancer at my age.

"Should I go now?"

"Maybe."

"Uh, ok. Thanks."

The receptionist hangs up. I crack a crude joke at my friends and as soon as they aren't paying attention to me I have my nose in my phone. WebMD, MayoClinic, anything that could diagnose me. The symptoms are vague, as internet symptoms always are. A testicular torsion is when your testicle gets so twisted that oxygen gets cut off, requiring removal if it isn't identified fast enough. The symptoms also indicate the possibility of testicular cancer. This is only a month after Mom received her breast cancer diagnosis. Only three months after Dad died in the middle of the night without warning.

I say nothing to my friends at first, pretend to be enjoying the convention as normal. We get all the way back to our hotel room to stock up on drinks and make plans for dinner. When the

hypochondria can't get any worse, I suddenly announce to my friends that I need to go if I was going to have any fun for the rest of the week because otherwise my mind was going to tear itself apart with fear. I pay special attention to Duncan's reaction when I announce this. He looks annoyed, like my paranoia is the one ruining everything. I don't know if I see him roll his eyes or if my diseased mind just imagines he does.

I waste around an hour filling out forms in the urgent care only for them to inform me that they don't have the equipment to properly evaluate my condition, and that I need to hurry to the ER. I obey.

More waiting. Hours of waiting where I'm not allowed to wear my own clothes, where I have to sit alone in a blinding white room in a strange hospital, convinced that with every second that passes the cancer is spreading through my body.

When the doctor finally comes to check on me, he recommends an ultrasound.

The worst part of getting scanned is the trip to the radiographer's room. I wish hospitals allowed otherwise healthy patients to walk themselves. There's nothing more humiliated than being nearly ass-naked, perfectly capable but being wheeled around like a dying man anyway, crying from the stress of what the scan was about to show.

I'm slathered in warm goop as the doctor uses her machine to stare into my body. Every prod and poke make it hurt worse, and the worsening pain further convinces me I'm dying.

Another humiliating trip back to my lonely room. Mom calls me to ask how the con is. I pretend I'm there having fun with my friends instead of waiting alone in the ER. I didn't want anyone to come with me, I didn't want to ruin anybody's time, but nobody even texts me except to ask when I'm coming back.

The results come back. Cancer free. No torsion. Probably just pulled a muscle at work.

Take it easy for a few days.

The sun has completely disappeared by the time I get back to the hotel room.

When I do return, the reaction isn't relief that I'm okay, but exasperation at how I could be worried over something so stupid and obvious.

I watch for Duncan's reaction in particular, but this time I can't read him at all, like he hadn't noticed I'd returned.

* * *

The incident at ColossalCon convinces me that I need the kind of help only medication can provide. I get a prescription for ProZac at my doctor's appointment I made at the convention. It was long overdue. Even before Dad died, I was a mess of hypochondria, general anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I didn't think my habit of checking my stove I hadn't used all day three times before being comfortable leaving the apartment for an extended period of time was a sign I needed to be medicated, or even abnormal, but talking to some of my friends about these things was enough to convince me.

I approach the drugs with confidence. Millions of people are on antidepressants, and they work wonders for people. There was no need to be afraid. The doctor even told me that the side effects were so rare they were barely worth mentioning, but he was legally required to tell me to stop taking the drug if I started having suicidal thoughts.

I started having suicidal thoughts almost immediately. They were faint inklings at first, a passing impulse here and there. But the thoughts took root and quickly evolved. I genuinely think if I owned a gun while I was on ProZac, I would be dead now.

I couldn't call Mom. If she knew I was even considering abandoning her after what happened to Dad, she'd never forgive me. I couldn't call Hayli. She's already suffered at the hands of people like me. I couldn't make her worry like this. So I immediately contacted my remaining two closest connections.

I called my sister. She didn't pick up.

I messaged Duncan and told him that I needed an emergency Skype session. He didn't see my message for a while, though when he finally did, the worst of it had passed, and I told him that I was doing alright and didn't need to talk.

Later, after I'm finally off the ProZac and stabilized, I finally admit to Duncan that I was having suicidal thoughts the night I asked for that emergency Skype call, but that I was off the offending drug.

His response was deadpan as ever, "Well, I'm glad it's not a problem anymore."

Was it fair for me to be offended? I suppose I didn't expect him to break out in tears or anything, but I couldn't help but feel like his reaction was a little understated to information that was huge and scary to me.

I started wondering if he actually gave a fuck about me.

* * *

Stop being ridiculous. Of course he gives a fuck about me. The guy's my best friend.

Yes. He's YOUR best friend. You're definitely not his. You're just his annoying little brother.

Ok... he probably does see me more as a brother. But what does that matter? He still loves me. We went to Japan together, for fuck's sake!

Yeah, and it seemed like he spent half that trip tired of putting up with your shit. Remember how irritated he was when you lost your train ticket?

But that wasn't really a big deal. Of course he's gonna get irritated with me from time to time.

Anyone can see how grating you are. Ever wonder why you have to be the one to call him, and he never calls you?

It's always been like that! He's just not the type to reach out, is all. Dude's always been a hermit.

He doesn't reach out because talking to you is a chore. Why would he want to talk to you? All you do is whine about dumb bullshit. It's all about you.

Cut me a break! I've been having a hard time, alright? Besides, I was there for him when he was trapped in Wisconsin.

Were you?

...I tried to be.

Are you trying now?

What does that mean?

He was his uncle.

Fuck you. He was my dad.

Keep thinking like that. See how many friends stick around.

* * *

JULY 2010

The sun beats down on Duncan and me as we step out of the old Ohio homestead. He's staying with me for the week, and we've dedicated the week to two tasks: the first, complete *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* 100%. The second, make major headway on our games. We'd spend hours back to back, not saying a word to each other as he ticked away at his code and I tapped at an increasingly lengthy Word document. We need a break, however, and decide to take one that has become tradition: a long walk, a few miles down the road to the park surrounding the reservoir.

On our way out, Duncan spots Dad digging around a formation of rocks, elbow deep in a pond to alter the fountain's waterflow. Jim Keller loved his lawn. He took great pride in keeping a handsome home, and now had three acres to play with; a substantial upgrade from the previous suburban box. We go over to tell him where we're heading out, to keep him from worrying too much about us. Dad let's us go with a reminder to watch out for that blind spot in the road that cars liked to speed by and lets us go, but Duncan feels compelled to complement him on his landscaping.

"This is a lovely water feature," he says.

Dad puts on a faux-offended face and sighs, "Teenagers making fun of me again. Kids these days just don't appreciate my hard work."

I laugh. Dad loved to play the role of the put-upon victim. Duncan stammers in horror, "No, I'm not making fun of you! I really like it!"

Dad's smiling now, "Sure you do. Go on, go. You've got bigger and better things to do than hang around an old man."

I lead Duncan away, still laughing. His face is red and he keeps his eyes glued to the road.

“I really do like that water feature,” he says.

* * *

Later that night, after we've returned from our walk, we talk to Dad over dinner. Hamburgers, baked beans, plain buttered noodles, and canned peas: the Jim Keller classic.

Duncan nervously pokes at a few noodles, "Uncle Jim, I want you to know that I wasn't making fun of you."

Dad's response is completely deadpan, "Oh, I know. I just wanted to mess with you. I mean, water feature? Are you kidding me?"

I crack up so hard I almost slam my face into the heap of butter and pea juice on my plate. Duncan's somewhere at the intersection of disbelief and embarrassment. His protests only make Dad join me in uproarious laughter.

* * *

MARCH 2018

My Uncle Rick, Duncan's father, takes the podium with a few words prepared for my dad. There are six Keller siblings in all, and Rick has taken the stage to speak for the lot of them. Nobody else seems ready to speak.

I'm not sure what to expect. I never was sure what my Dad's relationship with each of his brothers was like. Savannah is my only sister, only slightly older than me. It's difficult to imagine a web of sibling relationships, all disparate ages and genders. Perhaps I'm too tuned out from what goes on in the extended Keller family.

Rick begins, smiling, "So, I don't quite have a speech prepared the way the others did, but what I do have here," he holds up a few yellow, aged sheets of paper, "Are letters my big brother Jim wrote me in college, and let me tell you, these letters are something else."

He clears his throat and begins reading from one dated December 12, 1985.

"Rick of Ages—How are you? I sincerely hope that you have the flu."

Nobody in the crowd is expecting this. Least of all me. Uproarious laughter breaks through the tears and creates a few tears of its own. Rick struggles to contain his own laughter and continues reading when the laughter dies down. He has to pause like that frequently.

"It has taken me a considerable amount of time to write to you after having received your letter sometime before Thanksgiving. But even in light of this fact, you should consider yourself lucky that I am even bothering to answer your letter at all.

"Now then, although you have probably forgotten by now, you posed me a number of questions in that letter to me. The following are the answers:

"Question #1 – How am I? Answer: None of your business.

"Question #2 – How's my new job? Answer: None of your business.

“Question #3 - What exactly do I do on my new job? Answer: You guessed it, none of your business.

“Question #4 - When is my novel coming out? Answer: Although you may not realize it, this is a mot question because it implies that you are interested insofar as you would like to read my novel when it comes out, but since you cannot read and can only understand Dungeons and Dragons language, this question is also none of your business.”

It goes on like that, and the rest of them too, one of them addressed from “Bjorn Borg,” another claiming to be from their only sister, my Aunt Anne. We’re all laughing. Laughing at Dad’s wit, and his surprising crudity that I never saw as his son.

Another one of my uncles, I can’t remember who was sitting next to me now, leans over to me and says, “They were just like you and Duncan.”

Uncle Rick finishes his letters, and the pastor takes the stage in a Cincinnati Mud Hens baseball cap. Mom requested that everyone show up wearing their favorite sports teams. Not everyone was comfortable with the idea, and there were plenty of suits and dresses in the crowd, but Mom wanted the service to reflect who Dad was. The man himself was laid to rest in his favorite Red Wing’s jersey.

The pastor finally speaks, “Clearly, Jim was a man with a great sense of humor. We now invite anyone who has a few impromptu words for Jim to come up and speak.”

The hall is silent. His children, his wife, his best friend, and his brother have already spoken. I look around the room and squirm. The crowd is filled with mom’s friends, Savannah’s friends, my friends—but only a few of Dad’s friends. He didn’t have too many. Jim was a solitary guy, more inclined to stay at home and tend to his garden or watch the Tigers with a Miller Lite in hand than go out to Mom’s various parties and activities. I didn’t think he was a

lonely man, necessarily. But I always worried a little. The idea that there was nobody in the crowd with a story about him on their mind filled me with a very particular fear.

Somebody rises in the chair behind me, “You know what? I’ve got one.”

Duncan takes the stage. He starts by telling them the water feature story, his embarrassment at Dad’s fake offense, the reveal that Dad had been messing with him the whole time. Duncan starts telling us lots of little stories, like the times Dad gently prodded him for the state of his beard, the small roasts Dad would send his way every summer, every Christmas, every long weekend Duncan spent with me. He talks about how he didn’t always understand why Dad’s affection took the form of relentless jabs, but that he always appreciated Dad’s deadpan sense of humor.

He gets the crowd laughing too. And for a brief moment there are no tears on my face. It brings me a strange joy and comfort to know that Dad’s little japes against Duncan are a proud tradition, passed down from father to son. Duncan may have been a big brother to me, but he’ll always be another little brother for Dad to prod at.

* * *

I know you're reading this. You're reading this because I asked you to. You've always given me the best feedback.

Please understand that this isn't supposed to be an attack, or a call out, or anything like that. You haven't done anything wrong. There's just something profoundly wrong with me. My brain creates problems that aren't actually there. I'm doing my best to get better, but it's going to take some time.

Hell, none of this is probably news to you. I wear my heart on my sleeve. That's a big part of what makes me so difficult to deal with.

I just want you to see me the way I see you.

* * *

It was the day after the funeral. Or possibly the day before. I can't quite remember anymore. Most of my very best friends—Hayli, Jacobo, Sam, and Duncan, of course—are all waiting at the tiny ranch house Mom and Dad bought after several moves across state lines, back to Medina County where they first uprooted me all those years ago.

My friends pile in a car and head for my favorite park, that same one Duncan and I went to on the day he complimented Dad's "water feature." We didn't live in walking distance anymore, but I wanted to see it again, and I suspect Duncan did too.

It was like every other March day, cold, foggy. The mud soaked through our shoes as we made the loop through the woods, past the trees carved with thousands of declarations of love, past the memorial bench, we emerge on the other side of the reservoir I've explored hundreds, thousands of times. From our place atop the hill, we watch cars zoom down I-75 toward more important destinations.

The end of the path approaches, but we're not ready to go home yet. The house is crowded and sad today, and even though the damp fog clings to us we'd rather be outside than mourning again. We decide to check the old Keller homestead, the house I spent the second half of my childhood in.

A grove approaches as we trundle down the street, and Duncan grows silent. I stop with him and drown out the chatter of the others.

"Shit," Duncan mutters.

There's nothing remarkable about this grove, just a field that raises to a small hill, boxed in by trees on three sides. But this is an important place for us.

Duncan begins walking into the grove without a word. The others watch him in confusion, and I signal to them that this is something we need to do alone. We climb to the top of

the hill and stop, only slightly elevated above our friends in the road. We've walked past this clearing many times, but never stepped into it. The two of us stand in silence, stare past my friends talking to each other, observing a humid day in July when my best friend complimented my dad on his water feature.

We stumble forward without a water bottle, feeling the sweat evaporate against our skin. The two of us intermittently complain about the heat, but we have more important business to discuss.

"I can't decide if I want to do an open world or not," I say. "It kinda fits with Billy and Rocky's fantasy theme, but I'm worried I won't be able to pull it off in Games Factory."

"Yeah, I debated putting a hub world in StarLight. As much as I like exploring, sometimes it's just not right for the game."

"I never thought we'd be back here," I say. "We've gone off to such distant parts of the country. I thought there'd never been a reason to meet in Ohio again." There's a pregnant pause, "No. I did expect to come back for this. I just didn't think it'd be so soon."

"Jesus."

Our conversation slows as a grey SUV rolls to a stop next to us. There's two girls around our age behind the wheel, "You guys look tired. Need a ride?"

"Nah," Duncan answers, "We're just out for a walk."

The girls look at each other, "You sure? It's like a million degrees."

"Thanks for the offer, but seriously, we're good."

The girls shrug and roll the window back up. I catch myself watching for a little bit as they drive off. I wasn't sure if they were making fun of us or wanted to do something genuinely nice. Either way, my awkward teenage heart sort of wishes we'd accepted the ride from them.

“I feel so old,” Duncan says.

“Yeah.”

I turn back to Duncan. He’s completely forgotten about the SUV and turned towards the grove, snapping a picture of a clearing, capturing two ghosts standing on the outskirts of time in the shot.

“This is really nice,” he says, “Sucks to live here, I’m sure, but at least there’s some good nature.”

“Totally. Taking a picture for posterity?”

He shakes his head, “Nah. This is for StarLight. I’ve been taking photos around Ann Arbor to use as level backgrounds, but the whole city thing feels more like its own section. Maybe World I can be more rural.”

“You know, this little grove might make a pretty good title screen,” I suggest.

He ponders the suggestion, “You know what, I think you’re right.”

Months later, when I’d play the game, I’d see the photo greet me amongst the hopeful title music and smile. I felt like I was part of his work forever.

“We thought it would be so easy,” he says, “We were morons.”

“We were young,” I say. “I’d give anything to have it back.”

“IT REALLY DOES SOUND QUITE ABSURD, ADVENTURE OF A BEAR AND BIRD”

-*Banjo-Kazooie*

I'm sure when my Uncle Travis purchased *Banjo-Kazooie* for his four-year-old nephew, he didn't anticipate that purchase becoming a pillar of said nephew's identity. He probably picked up the box at Toys R Us, knew Mom had gotten me a Nintendo 64 for Christmas, saw a friendly looking bear clutching a happy dinosaur thing in the shadow of a cartoon witch, and concluded it was the sort of thing his nephew would enjoy. There's no way it was an informed purchase. It didn't have any recognizable characters, and there was no way he was keeping his eye on Nintendo Power magazine to find out what games were critically acclaimed. To him, it was a purchase as disposable as a Barney DVD.

And on the surface, *Banjo-Kazooie* does seem disposable. The game is a 3D adventure where you run and jump around candy colored worlds collecting shiny objects to open up new levels to collect more shiny objects. The story is about as low effort as a game can possibly get: Banjo, a lazy brown bear, and Kazooie, a loudmouth bird who lives in his backpack for no adequately explained reason, travel through a castle to rescue Banjo's little sister from the clutches of Grunty, a grotesque caricature of the Wicked Witch of the West. The game is highly derivative of *Super Mario 64*, both in its structure and on a moment to moment basis; one of many imitators in the 90s who dared to challenge Nintendo's mustachioed mascot for market dominance by attempting to beat him at his own game. By all accounts, *Banjo-Kazooie* should be a nostalgic relic I've left no space for in my adult brain. Disposable junk media in the deepest recesses of my mind like *The Weekenders* or *Croc: Legend of the Gobbos*.

So why did this game have me so captivated as a kid? Why have I played and replayed this game over and over, far more than any other game I own? Why, after 20 years, can I not stop thinking about this children's plaything?

* * *

I suppose I should be grateful I grew up in the most boring town on the planet. My sister and I are among the only people I know who don't have any kind of horrific childhood trauma that needs repressing, not like my friends who grew up crushed underneath the despair of rural America. No, we lived the kind of life that's supposed to only exist in media portrayals of the 50's. Mom and Dad in a stable marriage making a firmly middle-class income raising their two children in the lily-white suburb of Livonia, Michigan. When I was a little older, a friend wrote a rap to be our unofficial town anthem, and all I can remember are the first two lines, which went as follows:

I say a yo, yo, yo, from the hood of Livonia

We have space heaters so we don't get pneumonia.

It tells you everything you need to know about Livonia, frankly. We were rich and boring and a bunch of doofuses tried to trick themselves into thinking they were huge badasses by being "from Detroit" when most of us hadn't set foot in the city proper outside of the square mile surrounding the various sporting arenas.

But I'm not complaining. If clueless white kids making dumb raps about space heaters and a lack of exciting childhood stories were the prices I had to pay for a nice house in a neighborhood where my parents felt I was safe enough to ride my bike around unsupervised, then I'd say it's a more than fair trade.

But the thing about suburbs is that they're boring by design. They're grids. They're perfectly proportional pockets of concrete and grass, mass produced and intentionally designed to be as artificial as possible. There is no history to uncover, no abandoned buildings with potentially interesting things hidden within. You know what's in every building: it's either a house or an office. There aren't even any interesting stores, let alone adventures to be had.

Thus, when you grow up in a suburb, you learn to make the square mile your life takes place in more interesting than it actually is. You have to squeeze every drop of fun out of every tiny detail, every nook and cranny of places where you're allowed to go (and some where you aren't) is thoroughly explored, and any oddity is treated like an exciting development, no matter how mundane.

The best example I could think of was probably "The Secret Monkey Place," a grove of trees tucked beyond Taylor Elementary School's playground. Even as a young child I'd had mostly free reign over the subdivision since I lived so close to the school, and had followed the sidewalk leading beyond the playground a few times, but never crossed the field to the microforest surrounded by subdivision on one side and schoolyard on the other.

When I finally did adventure there with some friends, the discovery was a goldmine of adventure. The grove had a dribble of water running through it that only the most charitable could call a creek, and the dirt had cigarette butts and beer cans smashed into it, but the crooked tree towering over the cluster of pines shading me in the grove may as well have been Yggdrasil to a suburbanite like me. The planks nailed into its side led only halfway to a treehouse that was never built, though I was too much of a weenie to climb all the way to the top. And if you did follow that pitiful creek to its end, you'd find an even more magical spot: a tangle of roots and

branches too tight for an adult to fit in, the sort of hidden nook you'd expect to find treasure buried under, or a magical creature sleeping in the protection of its roots.

The thing about the Monkey Place that really fired up the imagination was how it changed. Unlike the staid buildings that dominated the area, the Monkey Place would change all the time. The Monkey Place housed someone else's stories, stories that I could never know, but would do my best to reconstruct in my head. I'd head out when my friends weren't around, and when I wasn't trying to imagine what went on between the older strangers here, I'd pretend I was alone in a fantasy world.

Sweeping changes to the Monkey Place were flashpoint events in my memory, like the winter when Yggdrasil fell. The tree that gave the grove its name, the tree that I'd been too chicken to climb all the way up the way my friends had, was gone. Knocked down in a maelstrom of ice, blocking one of the grove's entrances. Getting in would be even more of a task now.

I didn't know what to do with myself, so I went down the road and knocked on my friend's door, the friend that first brought me outside the boundaries of my everyday school life to share the wonders of his suburban forest haven. A heavy coating of snow soaks through our jeans as we clamber over the branches hidden under the banks we plunge into. It takes us a moment to realize that we've even arrived: with no central structure to the Monkey Place, Yggdrasil has become another dusty branch among hundreds crackling beneath our feet. Eventually, we recognize the old tree. A dead possum lays in the snow next to it, the rotting halted by a thick layer of ice. We stare at the tree in silence, and somehow we know that things won't ever be the same.

Amongst a sea of boredom and monotony, the Monkey Place provided a slice of adventure. Like a little power remained on the one scrap of land in Livonia that remained undeveloped. Finding a place like that always gave me hope, that even a town like Livonia could be densely packed with places to go and mysteries to contemplate.

* * *

There's a strange contradiction in a lot of early 3D games. Most of them understand that 3D worlds naturally trigger that human impulse to explore, but technological limitations made building a world worth exploring difficult. Early 3D games are rife with untextured monochrome polygons, hazy fog meant to mask art assets loading into existing, a lack of anything resembling a cohesive setting. Even the levels of *Super Mario 64*, the gold standard for 3D platformers in its day, often felt more like an obstacle courses than worlds.

What *Banjo-Kazooie* had that few of its contemporaries (and many modern games) didn't, was an eye for detail. Games are complicated beasts, requiring the talents of artists from just about every medium imaginable, from character designers to musicians to actors, all bound together by programmers. In face of the frankly Herculean task of constructing any game, it's understandable the developers would cut corners here and there, reuse art assets, backgrounds, enemies, music. These tactics are unavoidable, to one degree or another, but a developer who relies too much on crutches will find themselves crafting a repetitive experience. If the player never stumbles across any surprises, if they begin to anticipate what's around the next corner in the next level, see the patterns, there is no reason to explore.

In hindsight, *Banjo-Kazooie* took the absolute craziest approach to solve this problem: it didn't reuse almost anything. There isn't just unique music in every level, every *segment* of

every level has a unique arrangement. Even an action as subtle as diving underwater or approaching a portal can trigger a shift in the music. Games like *Mario* reuse enemies so often that they've become icons in their own right, but *Banjo-Kazooie* has no equivalent to the Goomba. Every world has its own breed of disgusting monsters to deal with, from simple crabs on the beach, to psychotic snowmen who lob snowballs at you while airborne, to nigh-invincible ghosts who relentlessly chase you through a haunted hedge maze. No singular monster is mind-blowingly creative on its own, but the amount of variety the game packs into its ten worlds and the charm oozing out of every design makes you want to see everything.

This is the philosophy that drives everything in the game. Why have a blank wall in the castle when you can put a mural of the witch's face there to emphasize her vanity? Why have a giant crab boss without giving it the chance to trade barbs with the heroes? Nearly every challenge in the game comes with a small story. A simple story, but often memorable and amusing, like a pirate who needs you to retrieve his gold from his sunken ship because he can't swim, despite being a hippopotamus. Every side character and enemy has a name and a role to play, and everyone who's played *Banjo-Kazooie* has a favorite. It's this attention to detail that makes the game worth exploring. Its density of detail, the fact that there's something new and exciting around every corner, makes you want to make the game give up all its secrets.

But there's one key element that makes *Banjo-Kazooie*'s worlds feel so alive when it's contemporaries feel so hollow. It's not the details within the game world, but the way the game constructs a space beyond it. Children of the 90s, let's be real: most levels in Nintendo 64 games take either one of two forms: a floating island in an infinite void, or a tiny shoebox delineated by walls, often invisible ones. And truly, *Banjo-Kazooie* is no different. If you know what you're doing, you can investigate every square inch of the level and have all its treasures in ten minutes.

How to solve this problem, then? How do you structured these levels to feel like real places when they're limited to such tiny spaces?

The answer is deceptively simple: don't use any of the artificial tricks of its competitors. There is no unnatural fog blanketing the land. Instead, the game loads its major landmasses in first, and makes the smaller objects appear the closer you get. There aren't any artificial walls to rip you out of the experience. The boundaries are all clearly defined, but they aren't just blank walls. In the forest level, the boundaries are presented as a twisting thicket of trees, like the area you're running around in is just one section of a tranquil wood that stretches for miles. The game makes great use of verticality to make you dream about what lies beyond the boundaries. There's a treasure atop a lighthouse on a great stone archway that takes you so high you can't see anything but ocean for miles as the bouncy beach music dies away and leaves only the sound of gulls cawing around you. If you look down, you can see every inch of this beach, but you can't help but wonder what's beyond the horizon of the infinite ocean surrounding you. Even areas that are more straightforward cliff faces vary the terrain and sculpt the background art to imply the world keeps going, if only you could fly past the barriers.

I always think about this whenever I visit Rusty Bucket Bay, the second to final level and a dingy recreation of a sad English port town. The Rusty Bucket, the ship in the level's name, serves as the focal point as you weave in and out of the sailor's cabins, navigate the deadly pistons of the engine room, and find treasures in the pipework. Most levels of Banjo-Kazooie have a central feature like this. A centerpiece that instantly comes to mind when you think about the level. But aside from the ship, you can explore the town on the perimeter, brave the oily bay polluted by the ship, and when you're all done exploring, you can claw your way to the top of

the Rusty Bucket's smokestack and stare off into the sunset. The only thing standing between you and that sunset is a steel gate keeping the ship at port.

This is the secret to *Banjo-Kazooie*'s success. Rusty Bucket Bay is packed to the gills with excitement and danger, treasures to find and monsters to slay, but over the rooftops of this sleepy port town and beyond the gate, I get an inkling of something greater than where I'm standing.

I wish I could open the gate. I wish I could get the ship moving. I wish I could take it beyond the sunset, beyond the boundaries the developers laid for me.

* * *

At a time before the fall of Yggdrasil, I exit the Secret Monkey Place and stroll over to nearby Dickinson Middle School. It's been closed for ages, and though it's supposedly been used as a community center ever since, I've never seen anybody go inside. Every once in a while, I'll scout the perimeter and try to look in, though the windows are always blocked. Mom used to go to middle school here, but it's been closed since before I was born. The Livonia Public School system had a nasty habit of overestimating how much the city was going to grow, and opened more schools than they knew what to do with, only to consolidate and close a few every few years. This is the fate my own elementary school will eventually suffer. I was part of the last sixth grade class to go through its doors.

I try to imagine what Dickinson would've looked like in the late 70s, when Mom would've attended this hollow shell. I want to go inside, try to piece together what life would've looked like back then, find the last remnants of its many stories. But there's no way in without breaking a window. I consider this for a moment, but am too scared of the consequences.

I leave Dickinson unexplored, and continue farther away from home. In the distance, past the roaring engines of zooming cars, the shopping mall towers just beyond my reach, across a busy road. If I could just go a little further, I could go to the movie theater, Mom's favorite restaurant that has one of my baby pictures on the wall, the neighborhood where the girl I'm crushing on lives. But this eternally busy roadway represents the boundary of my independent existence.

It's not hard for me to make things interesting in the square mile of my world, but I long for the day when I unlock the rest.

* * *

I've mentioned that my dad never cared for the amount of video games that I played, but one of my Mom's more admirable traits is her insistence on, "not being a dinosaur," in her own words. I have to say that I do wish I had a little more of her adventurousness, even if it comes with a heaping scoop of grating optimism.

Mom's made attempts to play video games with me now and then, and insists that once she's retired, she'll finally sit down properly and learn how to play them. Interestingly, despite Dad's curmudgeonly tendencies, apparently he and Mom spent a lot of dates playing a *Super Mario Bros.* arcade cabinet in their twenties. But whereas Dad went no further in his gaming career, Mom always kept an open mind and a watchful eye on this newfangled technology. By the time I was born, games had come a long way from the 8-bit beeps and boops of her early twenties. Games like *Banjo-Kazooie* were fully formed worlds.

Imagine my delight when, a few days after the Christmas I got the game, Mom strolled down to my corner of the cold, unfinished concrete basement and sat next to me while I basked in the glow of a boxy TV with a screen about the size of an iPad.

"Hey bud, is this the game Uncle Trav got you? It looks super cool. Can I play?"

I immediately paused the game and shot up straight. This was a watershed moment. If I wanted a player two, I had to rely on my sister, and since Savannah was the older sibling, there was always the danger of her flexing her seniority and ousting me from the console entirely so she could play. Or no, even better. If I taught Mom to play, that third controller that was currently housing many creepy basement spiders could finally get some use. Three players? At the same time? In the 90s it seemed like an impossible task.

Naturally, I was ecstatic about Mom showing some interest in *Banjo*. I unpaused the game where I sat and shoved the controller in her hands. Unfortunately for Mom, even to this day I can picture the exact spot I abandoned her to fate.

If you're the sort of person that's played video games your entire life, or if you're the sort of person who hasn't touched a video game more complicated than Candy Crush, allow me to explain. Learning to move in a 3D space is a lot like learning a second language; the younger you start, the more naturally it comes to you. Now, with some fumbling, Mom could learn to play a 2D game, even if it took an extra life or thirty. But a 3D game is a whole different ball game. It's impossible to overstate how much dexterity and muscle memory it takes to play a 3D game, especially an early example of the genre like *Banjo-Kazooie*. Sure, a thirty-year-old like Mom could practice and learn, the same way she could practice and learn to speak Mandarin. But it'd require a lot of work, and she'd never as good at it as someone who'd been practicing since they were a toddler.

Also not helping matters: the Nintendo 64's controller, which had about a dozen different buttons and was shaped to only be comfortable in the hands of an octopus person.

This is all to say, the deck was stacked against Autumn Keller before she even picked up the controller. But to make matters worse, her son tagged her in at just about the worst place imaginable: submerged in a sewer pipe, right next to a disgusting tentacle whipping back and forth. Even among seasoned gamers, underwater levels are infamously frustrating, with their awkward camera angles, completely changed control scheme, and sluggish movement. This was Mom's first time playing a 3D game, and I abandoned her at sea without a lifejacket.

"Okay," she says, "How do I move?"

"Press B."

“Which one is B?” she takes her eyes off the screen and holds the controller up to her eyes.

“The green button.”

On screen, Kazooie uses her wings to perform a breast stroke and push the duo forward, crashing Mom directly into the wall of the pipe.

She thumbs at the directional pad on one of the N64 controller’s many prongs, a viable tactic in the old world of 2D, but a useless one in this foreign land of polygons. Banjo doesn’t move on the screen.

“Why can’t I turn around?”

“No, you’re doing it wrong. You have to use the stick.”

“What stick?”

“The one in the center of the controller.”

The bright blue meter on the screen indicating how much oxygen Mom has left begins ticking down. She uses the stick and Banjo bobs around in the water, not moving forward.

“No, no, no!” I screech in the shrillest voice a four-year-old can muster, “Press B! You need to press B at the same time! You’re gonna drown!”

Mom panics and mashes the B button, only now that she’s fiddled with the stick her trajectory has changed, so she goes flying into the tentacle. It smacks a good chunk out of her health and sends her flying back into the sewage.

“Turn around!” I yell, “You gotta turn around, you’re running out of time!”

Mom still doesn’t fully grasp the concept of using the stick to aim her direction and the button to propel her forward, so she continues on her original trajectory and smacks into the tentacle again. She fiddles with the control stick some more and ends up lodging herself against

the pipe wall again, mashing B to swim and getting nowhere until the last bit of her oxygen meter disappears. Banjo frantically paddles in the water and gurgles as water fills his lungs.

Game over.

Mom's face burns and there's a hint of dejection in her voice as she passes the controller back to me, "On second thought, I think this game's too complicated for me. Have fun."

She goes back upstairs, and at the time I don't give the whole farce much thought beyond, "Wow, Mom sure is bad at video games."

Nowadays, though, I wonder how things might've turned out if I'd been a little more considerate. If I gave her a clean save to work from the tutorial and play at her own pace. If she didn't have a four-year-old screeching over her shoulder, maybe she could've actually gotten invested. Maybe I still would've had a player two when Savannah outgrew playing with me.

Maybe I killed an avenue to bond with Mom before it even had a chance to start.

* * *

The game's sense of humor is silly, often crass, but it's clearly a labor of love, a reflection of people responsible for its creation. Teams needed to make video games—even cutting-edge ones—were much smaller back in the day. It's impossible for me to say this with any certainty, but the impression I get from interviews with the developers and the way they gently rib each other on Twitter is that they were a pretty close-knit group, unafraid to let their silliest ideas and inside jokes into the game. They named the cutesy mascot character “Jinjo” because the composer kept calling the character designer “Ginge” after his lovely red hair, and the rest of the team loved how mad this made said artist. The shaman character shouts “Oomenaka!” when he casts a spell because the composer was having a testicle problem and kept shouting, “Ooo, me nackers!” in the office. During the ending sequence on a beach, they put a lady in a bikini carrying a cocktail tray to make it look more like a beach paradise. Nintendo, being notoriously protective of their family friendly image, told them it was too risqué and to censor it. The team happily obliged, but replaced the drinks with two gigantic melons right where her breasts would be.

Banjo-Kazooie is what happens when you ask a bunch of British frat boys to make a fairy tale.

Yet, despite the crude humor, there's an undeniable sincerity to the project. In interviews the team members, who have since all gone their separate ways, express a fondness for the project that goes beyond making a silly children's game they don't care about. It's easy to tell that they're all proud of their work, and many have talked about tearing up when they bring the Nintendo 64 out for their own children to play.

You can see this sincerity in the game itself. Despite all the silliness I've outlined so far, there's one level, Freezezy Peak, that encapsulates the heart of the game. When you enter the level, the game spawns you near an igloo, home to three crying polar bear children. They're crying because their dad has gone missing, and they don't have any presents to open on Christmas morning. From there, you explore a winter wonderland that has you lighting up a Christmas tree, standing atop a giant snowman, and, of course, seeking out the missing presents. The presents say sweet things to you when you pick them up, requesting that you bring them to someone sad, and keep them warm and toasty in your backpack.

When you finally bring the presents to the kids, there's such an unabashed atmosphere of celebration that it feels like more than just completing one task of many. You didn't just collect your next treasure. You saved Christmas.

But what happened to the dad? Well, you find him three feet from his house, laying in the snow and groaning about his belly. When you solve his stomach problem (by dive-bombing him with a toboggan to make him cough up the gold piece he swallowed) he, instead of tending to his distraught children, challenges you to a toboggan race, only returning home to sit in his armchair and ignore the children you've just helped when you beat him.

These are the two sides of Banjo-Kazooie: sincerity with a twinkle in its eye. I can't think of any game to strike a tone like this. Even its own sequels lean far harder into the self-aware silliness. But with the first game, it's like the team's only goal was to make people smile, be that through humor or heart.

I can think of no more admirable ambition.

* * *

The morning after my high school girlfriend breaks up with me, I ask Dad to drive me to the doctor. I tell him that my stomach has been bothering me so badly I can't eat, which is true, but I don't need a doctor to tell me what the problem is.

Dad can see me from the waiting room, keeps a concerned eye on me as I step onto the scale. Despite the nurse putting on her best professional voice, I can tell she's pretty shocked by what she sees.

"You've lost 20 pounds since you came in last month. Have you not been eating?" she says.

I stare at my hands while fidgeting with them. "No. That's why I came in today." I'm too embarrassed to tell her the truth.

The nurse takes me in the back and before long the doctor strolls in, looking bored like he always does. He asks me a few terse questions with his stethoscope pressed against my chest and I do my best to skirt around my theory on what's causing my stomach problems because I don't want to sound stupid in front of this very serious professional.

The doctor recommends a few different medicines for me to try, a few foods to try and eat more of and a few to avoid while my gut biome stabilizes. It's only as he seems ready to dismiss me that I finally speak about my breakup.

"Actually, doctor? I have a question. Do you think... if there was something going on in my life that was really stressing me out, do you think that could be making the problem worse?"

He folds his arms and squints at me, "Yes. What kind of stress?"

"Well, my girlfriend... she broke up with me yesterday. But even before that, I felt like things have been getting worse between us for a little while now."

The doctor attempts to sound sympathetic, but I can tell from his face he's pissed this little high school twerp wasted his time on this bullshit. "That all? Don't worry about this girl. Plenty of fish in the sea. Stomach will get better. You can go."

My nauseous stomach churns and brews as I stand up and thank the doctor without looking him in the eye. I follow the floor to Dad's feet out in the waiting room and hurry him to the exit since there's no prescription to grab.

We get in the car and I can't tell if the road we're going down leads toward school or home. I don't think Dad knows for sure yet either.

"So?" he asks, "What did the doctor say?"

I've already made an ass of myself in front of the doctor. I don't want Dad to know I've wasted his time, not to mention his money. I know he's gonna be mad at me when I tell him what was actually wrong.

"He said it's because I'm stressed."

I can still see my dad's eyes when he turned to look at me. They always shined when he was worried about me, "Stressed? What's wrong, what are you stressed about?"

I can feel those telltale invisible needles prickling at my eyes, but I don't know if I'm gonna cry over being dumped or out of embarrassment, "Jackie broke up with me."

Dad slows down the truck and gives me a far more sympathetic look than the doctor gave me, "I'm sorry, big guy. When did this happen? Last week?"

I wipe some snot on my sleeve because I don't know what to do with it. Dad leans down and tosses the glove box open when we approach a stop sign, handing me a wad of napkins. "No. It was last night, after play practice." Dad doesn't say anything as I open the glove box again to

get clean napkins to dab my eye with. “But I was worried the whole week that she was. I couldn’t stop feeling like something bad was about to happen.”

Dad stays silent for just a moment. And it’s the strangest thing, because I swear he’s about to cry himself. Finally, he takes a turn definitively away from the school and says, “How about you stay home today? I’ll make some soup when we get home.”

That’s all either of us say for a minute, but I need him to confirm what I’ve been thinking ever since I woke up.

“This is stupid. We only dated for a month. I shouldn’t care this much.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” he says, “This is hard no matter how long it’s been. Especially if you’ve been worried about it all week.”

“But I should’ve seen it coming! I should’ve been ready for it!”

Dad sighs and looks out the window, “Did you know that I was engaged to another woman? Before I met your mom?”

That jolt stops my tears dead in their tracks, “What?”

“Yup. You know my hunting buddy, Bob? My fiancé was his sister. That’s how I met him.” He faces forward again, but still doesn’t look at me, “We dated for a long time, but I think my stomach knew she wasn’t good for me before I did. It was the same as you. I always felt like throwing up, it hurt when I eat, all the lost weight.” He sighs, “You get it from me, Jackson. You and me just have nervous stomachs.”

I want to seize on this opportunity. I want to ask him every little detail about this mysterious period of his life that I’ve never heard about. I heard a good deal of stories about the time he spent living under my grandparents, and once Dad hit his thirties and married my mom, I came along shortly after. But that gap between high school and meeting Mom was a strip of film

in my mental reconstruction of my parents' histories cut from the rest of the reel. But to pry any further felt like a betrayal, like he told me only what I needed to know, and any further attempt to mine his unpleasant memories to learn from was a breach of contract as his son. I keep my mouth shut until we get home.

Immediately, I retreat to my room in the basement. I grab all the blankets and comforters from my bed and make a nest in front of my TV. Staying home for a mental health day sounds great in theory until you realize that you have nothing to occupy your time except the thoughts constantly plaguing your mind, the thoughts that have been making a tactical attack against your stomach for a week straight. The old thoughts and new ones, like the slowly encroaching feeling that you've just crossed some threshold with your dad, but aren't fully sure what that means yet.

I do what I always do when there are thoughts to keep at bay. I fire up a game console. I scroll through every game installed on my Xbox, insert disc after disc in an attempt to feel some sort of positive emotion. A few matches of *Halo* and I feel nothing. The saturated rollercoaster levels of *Sonic the Hedgehog* elicit no thrills. The bloody deathmatches of *Gears of War* only provoke aggravation. Nothing seems to be working.

Finally, my sights set on *Banjo-Kazooie*. How long has it been since I did a play-through of it? Three months? Four? Long enough. I boot up the game and sit back as the characters take center stage, quite literally. The elaborate intro animation, a full song and dance number featuring the main characters all playing the musical instruments they're named after, always touches me in a very particular way. It's like the characters know I need them, and pull out all the stops to welcome me back into their magical little world.

I don't progress too far through the game when I hear a knock on my door. I pause as Dad enters and places a steaming bowl of chicken noodle on the TV tray in my room, with a little Jell-O cup next to it for when I feel up to it.

He looks at the screen and makes an exaggerated gasp, "Banjo-Kazooie? I love this game!" Immediately after saying that, he starts singing and dancing along with the little jingle that plays on loop whenever the game is paused, "Alright," he admits, "Mostly, I love the pause music."

I can't help but smile at this. I can't help but smile every time he does this, every time he sees me returning to this game. It's one of the few that Dad unabashedly approves of, which means a lot when I know he's not-so-secretly worried about *Call of Duty* making me go Columbine. Joke's on him, though. The cheeky Brits who made the game stuffed enough innuendo and double entendre in it to corrupt a reasonably astute child, let alone a teenager who understands every single joke.

Then again, perhaps I'm not giving the old man enough credit. If he walked in on me playing a game that was too cutesy, I could expect to get some gentle mockery from him, and he was always telling me to look up old Monty Python skits and other bits of extremely British humor, so maybe he understood what the game was about more than he let on.

I unpause the game as Dad makes his exit, but before he goes, he leans back into my room and just says, "You'll be okay."

* * *

My favorite level in the game is called Click Clock Wood. It's the last level you explore before fighting the witch (well, before humoring her little trivia game and *then* fighting her) but it's very different kind of level from most video game finales. Most games like Mario have you dodging fireballs in volcanos or evading booby traps in heavily guarded fortresses.

Banjo-Kazooie's climax doesn't take place in any such location. When you enter Click Clock Wood, you're treated not to a swelling orchestra, but a low-key, somber melody. You stand atop a stump, with a closed door in each cardinal direction. When you finally open one, you walk inside and suddenly the music springs to life. Rain falls from the sky as you ascend a giant tree. The level seems fairly light on treasure compared to all the previous ones, but once you reach the top of the tree you find two unusual things: a button with a picture of the sun on it, and a giant pink egg in a nest.

When you hit the button, the game cuts back to the lobby where you first entered the forest, and opens another door. Then, upon smashing the conspicuous egg in the nest, a twenty-foot-tall baby bird hatches and falls asleep in front of you. With seemingly nothing left to do in the level, you return to the lobby to check out that new area.

What you find is a level that's remarkably similar, but noticeably different from the one you just left. The melody is the same, but the arrangement is different. The grass around the tree has grown longer, and the goblins who attacked you earlier have removed their shirts and put on sunglasses. Summer is here, and the bird has woken up and wants you to feed it.

While ascending the tree, you notice that the perilous walkways leading you up are slightly more complete, and eventually you come to a house in the branches that wasn't there

during the spring. You can look inside and see a treasure, but the floor hasn't been completed yet, and trying to grab it now will likely result in you falling into the dried-up creek from a height that will almost certainly kill you. When you feed the baby bird, he grows even larger and falls back asleep. With nothing else to do, you again head back to the lobby, certain you hit a button with an orange leaf on it at some point.

It's now autumn in Click Clock Wood, and many of the threads that began in spring can finally be wrapped up. When you ascend to the treehouse again, you find the floor is finally complete, so the treasure you wasted so many lives trying to get in summer is a simple matter as walking through the front door. The baby bird, of course, needs feeding, though strangely he doesn't give you a treasure for all the trouble before falling asleep. Surely, he'll give you one in winter.

And when you finally reach the year's inevitable conclusion, there's not much left for you to find. Ascending the tree is easier than ever, and many of the wood's residents are hibernating. The flower you cultivated by abusing the camel has died, and a chilly wind blows through the wood. The dead plants reveal a pad that lets you take flight, so you can go straight to the nest.

The baby bird is there, of course. Only he's not a baby anymore. He's a magnificent bald eagle now, fully grown and no longer reliant on a bear and bird for feeding. Upon seeing you, he gives you one last enthusiastic greeting before flying away, giving you one of winter's only treasures for taking care of him for so long. And there you stand, alone in the nest, knowing there's nothing left for you to do. Nothing except fight the witch.

I mentioned earlier that everyone who plays Banjo-Kazooie has a favorite bit character, and Eyrie the Eagle is mine. I had such a strange fixation on him that bald eagles were my

favorite animals growing up, but for it's hard to say why this is. Perhaps it's just the time mechanic, the idea that you're taking care of this little guy over the course of an entire year, watching him grow from cute to majestic before your eyes.

Perhaps it's the melancholy. When he leaves, he never comes back. Even if you return to spring and climb all the way to the nest, you'll find it as empty as when he left it in winter.

Perhaps he's just a symbol for what I love about Click Clock Wood: the way it conveys finality, unique among all the video games I've played.

In any case, there's no use hanging around an empty nest, so you leave and pass the treehouse. There's a shut door that wasn't there in fall, and you can't get inside. This image of the treehouse in the wood always captivated me, like the shut door signaled that its occupants have finally moved in. When I was little, I'd go into my grandparent's backyard and play in the playhouse my grandfather built for my aunt and uncle, and pretend that the person living in Click Clock Wood's treehouse was me, that every day was a new adventure with my friends in the forest, that Banjo and Kazooie would take me along with them to explore all the places beyond the boundaries.

That if I lived in the world of Banjo for long enough, Eyrie the Eagle might come back.

* * *

I finish my soup and settle in, not moving from my nest as I go through yet another playthrough of this same static, unchanging game, a game that I've played and replayed at least once a year since I was a young child.

Time goes quicker than I expect, and soon enough my friends start logging on with the end of the school day. My childhood friend, Jacobo, sends me a request to voice chat, and I join his room.

"Hey," he says, "Are you okay?"

I'm a little creeped out, because I haven't told anybody about the break up yet, and Jacobo lives about a hundred miles away. No way word has reached him.

"You know what? Not really. How did you know that?"

"The Xbox told me. You were playing Banjo-Kazooie."

Jacobo gets the first genuine laugh out of me all day.

"What, I can't be that easy to read, can I?"