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PRAYERS OF THE DARK-HEARTED: A COLLECTION OF LINKED STORIES

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Abstract

Prayers of the Dark-hearted is a collection of linked stories written and revised between the fall of 2021 and the spring of 2023. These stories are often autobiographical in nature, but largely fictional, focusing on themes such as family, abuse, alcoholism and addiction, loss, and disconnection.

Critical Introduction

“My obligation is that I must learn more about my ancestors and myself in order to create. Then I must render all our collective experiences into a meaningful form. I call this process “tribalography.” Whether it is fiction, poetry, a play, or history, American Indian writers and storytellers create tribalography to inform ourselves and the non-Indian world about who we are.” – LeAnne Howe, *Choctalking on Other Realities*

I’ve never considered myself a writer. Not even a storyteller. Somebody would ask me what I did that day, or any particular day, and I would stammer my way through an explanation or forget key details and have to say, “Oh, wait, I forgot to mention...” No storytellers here, I would tell myself. And while I loved reading and English classes were always my best subject, it never entered my mind that writing could be anything that I could do in any capacity beyond what school required of me. Not even when a career assessment said I should be a journalist. I don’t even like talking to people, how was I going to be a journalist? Storytellers, journalists, writers all have something to say, they build worlds out of nothing but words, they have some sort of insight into the human condition, the soul of humanity, a voice to the voiceless. What do I have to say that hasn’t been said by countless others? Why would my meager voice matter? Besides, I had no story to tell.

But I kept being drawn back to the pen, the pad, the keyboard. I still had no words and no story to tell.

Or so I thought.

After the ending of a relationship with a person whom I held most dear, I floundered for a way to find peace. Not finding it in anything I read or watched, the only way I could find peace was by writing, by telling the story.

And it was through the telling of the story that I started seeing the threads of pain, loss, and disconnection that had brought me to such a low point. I began to see it wasn't only the suffering of the loss of the relationship that I was dealing with, but the undercurrent of physical and emotional abuse growing up with two people who, while they loved each other and my brother and me very much, did not have a healthy relationship or healthy coping skills. Another aspect of the undercurrent is the disconnection I feel with my culture and heritage. It is difficult to articulate this kind of disconnection sometimes, especially when there are other outside markers of identity—in my case, long hair and a tinge of darker skin—that identify me as Native American. I am Choctaw, Ponca, and white; through these markers, the disconnection is even more off-putting, as it results in a loss of self and a loss of identity. If I were white-passing, would this loss and disconnection be just as encompassing? This is a question that is beyond the scope of this collection, but I want to bring this into conversation with this issue of disconnection at a later date.

While the topic of colonization doesn't come up directly in this collection, some of the effects, do. A capacity to act with violence instead of tenderness and compassion, disconnection from culture and from the land, turning a blind eye to or self-justifying the use of violence, and the escape into oneself or through chemical means are all hallmarks of some type of trauma, including the inter-generational trauma of colonialization. These are all parts of the thread that I was able to trace through this one event, the breakup of my relationship, and see into my

personal past. The threads of pain, loss, failure, and disconnection became a pathway of exploration through fiction.

Furthermore, I would like this collection, at least in part, to serve as a part of the conversation of what follows when Indigenous people are disconnected from their culture. In Native Literature, Native writers often reckoned with reservation lands, ancestral lands, and the world outside of those borders. Native writers like N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko write about lands that they, and their characters, are still connected to, so when the characters have to go into the outside world or if the outside world impinges on them, there is a place, a stronghold, that they are connected to in some way. For the Urban Indian, it can be different, especially if that connection wasn't strong to begin with. As a teenager, some friends of mine would be able to go to powwows or to sweats, but I was never allowed to go with them. A part of that might have had to do with the Christian upbringing I had, especially with a white mother, but another part had to do with having Choctaw family members deeply involved in the church. While some family members were able to pick up some of their language, any customs beyond the language were not practiced. As far as my Ponca side, due to family strife from my dad's era, we never spoke to them or got to know them.

I think this is what excited me about reading Tommy Orange's *There, There*. The characters in his book reminded me of some of the Native kids I knew growing up. But even then I still felt left out. The characters in his book are still very much connected to their traditions, albeit via an Urban Indian culture. Jordy, in my stories, is disconnected in ways that Urban Indians are not: disconnected from land, disconnected from people, and disconnected from culture. For Jordy, the loss of the relationship isn't just the loss of that one relationship. It's the untethered feeling of having no connections, of having no relations, but still experiencing the

inter-generational trauma that comes with being Native. It is my hope that, while most of the stories in this collection are not specifically about colonialization, and its underlying disconnection and inter-generational trauma, at some level, the reader will see these elements. I plan to continue to develop these themes as I write more in this vein. I would like to see this sort of disconnection as a part of the conversation of inter-generational trauma and colonialization.

I believe fiction allows a kind of distance between reality and a story based in reality. By fictionalizing these real-world events that I, and by extension my family, have gone through, I can do more with the characters and allow them to “live.” In a way, this allows the characters to explore their own reality in this fictional world. In doing so, I can make sense of my own pain, loss, and disconnection. And because writing, by its very essence, is a private means to allow a story to live publicly, this work may allow someone else to make sense of their own pain, loss, and disconnection.

While the characters in this collection do not find a healthy peace, I feel I have found a way to begin to deal with the past. And because these characters are the ones who took the metaphorical bullet, perhaps that means that I don’t have to. Ultimately, I would want someone who is going through these kinds of struggles to find a type of peace, as well.

This thesis demonstrates how important it is to not only consume different kinds of literature, but to also try different kinds of writing. For example, some pieces in this collection started out as creative nonfiction that I later fictionalized, which allowed for more movement in terms of character. In other pieces, I have tried writing with an eye toward the poetic. For example, with one writing assignment in the spring of 2022, I was struggling with what to write and with what approach. My advisor and teacher Rilla Askew invited us to the Scissortail Creative Writing Festival at East Central University in Ada. Here, we were exposed to several

types of writers reading from their work: fiction writers, nonfiction writers, poets, all sharing the stage, all sharing their work with us, all sharing a meal and their time with us. While I found all the readings to be well-done and awe-inspiring, there was one that really caught my attention. Arthur Sze was reading from his poetry and, while all he shared was great, there came a line from the poem “Comet Hyakutake” that really spoke to me: “And to the writer of fragments, each/fragment is a whole” (Sze). Through this simple line, I was able to trace out, even before getting to my hotel room later that evening, the essence of my next piece, which became “Default Judgement”, and it was this piece that really helped with a sort of healing within me. Using Sze’s line, I was able to connect fragments from the relationship that broke me to tell a larger story. More than that, however, the line was a means of healing the brokenness I was feeling. The line “each fragment is a whole” (Sze) came to mean, at least to me, a way of understanding the relationship; that I loved her enough to last a whole lifetime but that our time together, while seeming to be a fragment, was a whole on its own. Once I was able to see the relationship as just a fragment, then I realized that was enough. I didn’t need anything more from her. We had what we had, and that was a whole.

While I had initially conceived of my thesis as a mixture of fiction and creative nonfiction, I came to see that the creative nonfiction pieces I’d written would work better as fiction, where, instead of just telling what happened in a creative way, I can allow my characters to walk their own walk. For example, while I had spent a little time in a mental health facility due to certain depressive urges, I never tried to take a chair to the TV. While I might have had the inclination because one of the people in the wing really did love their plastic love stories on Lifetime and Hallmark, I never expressed behavior like Jordy’s. Similarly, while I did, when I was younger, become close to an uncle who gave in to alcohol and drugs, I have never tried

anything like what you will see in “Hiding” even at my lowest point. Also, for the record, I have never hit or grabbed anyone I was in a relationship with.

Fiction is a freedom. It allows writers space to move, to do things, say things, confess things, things that they would never do or say. More than that, these characters live. The choices they make, whether they are similar to mine or not, become their choices alone. Creative nonfiction can be a confessional that helps to exercise demons, true. But only with fiction, even based in reality in some way, can the characters live, move, and breathe.

Ultimately, I want readers to be able to see the humanity in people, especially when they go off the rails of life. I want readers to feel sorrow and empathy for the characters that I create. Perhaps by fostering an understanding of someone’s humanity, we can help see each other, even in our worst states. But mostly, for those going through pain and disconnection, for those who feel alone and like no one cares, I want them to read my work and know that I stand with them and that I know what it is like to hurt and to feel lost, and to know that they aren’t alone and that everything will be okay, even when it’s not.

LeAnne Howe writes, “My obligation is that I must learn more about my ancestors and myself in order to create. Then I must render all our collective experiences into a meaningful form” (*Choctalking on Other Realities*). I am still learning more about my ancestors. I don’t know all I need to know but I am working at it. What I do know is that I still have a story to tell and my relations will be a part of that, not only underlying my writing and my identity, but perhaps I’ll be able to speak of them more intelligently and help tell their stories, for ourselves and for the nonnative. Howe calls this a tribalogy. I hope this small collection will serve as an offering, a start to a tribalogy.

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Ninja Dreams: Call of the Night

He gently ashes out the cigarette he let burn down, nearly unsmoked. It was the screams coming from next door that caught his attention. His neighbor testing out his new surround sound and smart TV. Horror movie screams and wet spaghetti sounds of zombies or some such creature feasting on their victims. Fake screams and real screams sound so different. The past envelopes him in fear.

Even now, years later, he still carries his cowardice with him. He can still hear his mother's screams, her begging him to call the police, haunting him. Horror movie screams will never match the fear in her voice he heard that night, way back then. Or any other night his parents got into it.

But that night, he was only about four years old. What four year old should be saddled with protecting one parent from the other?

More screaming from next door. Horror movie screams, his neighbor's kids screaming over who took whose spot, calls for more popcorn. So much noise.

The light from the setting sun splashed across the yellowed grass, shadows passing kaleidoscopic, the sounds of the nearby train passing to some unknown destination. He took another cigarette out and lit it up, breathing slowly, trying to find a space within himself to crawl into, away from the noise and the memories.

He thinks it was the light that woke him up that night. Rising out of the muffled darkness of sleep, he had become aware of raised voices, straining against each other. Yellow-Orange light burning against his eyelids. He lay there, not wanting to get up, not wanting to let anyone know that he was up. He kept his eyes closed, and tried not to tune in to what his parents were once again arguing about. He wanted to cover his ears but feared moving. But the light kept burning through his eyelids. And he couldn't help blinking them open. The face of Leonardo, leader of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, stared at him from his mother's homemade pillow case, face drawn into a warrior's yell, both hands holding a sword. He couldn't tell if the turtle was going to attack or defend.

Leonardo wouldn't have kept his eyes closed or pretended to be asleep. He knew this, even back then. But he remembered being frozen. Not wanting to know. Before this night, he would have been scared that the police would have been called. But no one called the police around there unless they had to. And some random people's late night argument only would have brought banging on the walls and shouting to shut up. So, he learned not to trust that other people would help, no matter what they heard.

Leonardo wouldn't have approved of them either, he thought now, stretching in his patio chair. The gentle breeze fluttered the hair on his leg. He swatted at it, making sure there were no spiders or roaches crawling across him. He remembered he used to love playing in the dirt until that year they lived at that apartment.

His parents were shouting, screaming at each other. He didn't want to know what they were fighting over, so he tried to shut it out, clenching his eyes as tight as he could. Movement across the sheet he used as a blanket made him sit straight up, his hands swiping over his body, scared he would actually come into contact with a hard shell and tiny legs, sending it flying. No

roaches that he could see. He breathed a slight a sigh of relief, then felt more movement. Before he could start swiping, he could see it was his younger brother trying to sit up, fear in his eyes. Little Stevie, is what they all called him. He took a hold of Stevie, across his chest, gently shushing him, telling him it would be okay, that everything would all be okay. He rocked Stevie slightly, shushing him as quietly as he could. In the dim room, the only light from the hallway, he could see the dreamcatcher his mom bought at a local powwow years before. He concentrated on that, wishing that Stevie wouldn't remember this night or any night his parents fought.

His dad screamed, "Well, dammit, I'm tired and I don't want to deal with your bullshit right now!"

He heard a crash, felt the vibrations and the scattering and tinkling of broken ceramic. He couldn't tell who broke it. Was it an accident or on purpose?

Even now, the accidental breaking of a plate could cause his stomach to drop.

"Yeah, well that's because you aren't a real man, a real man would make sure his woman is taken care of, not in some dingy, rundown shithole!"

And the slap he heard echoes and echoes in his head, even now.

Dad was violent. His body broken from years of the hard labor he put it through to take care of the people in his life, from farm work to road construction, his blood pressure already up and wanting to be left alone. And when pushed, he reacted physically. His dad was the reason why he went for walks when he became angry and refused to engage in arguments, even to the point of just acquiescing. He swore he would never be his dad. He hoped he could keep that promise. A man that could hit his wife and kids wasn't worth much. May as well down a bottle of liquor and fill out the stereotype.

Mom could be violent. Not physically. Her four foot nine frame, barely over a hundred pounds, would intimidate no one. It was her words that she used. Sharp. Razor-edged. Going after a person's soft spots, their most vulnerable areas, their insecurities and inadequacies. Words are not nothing. Words have weight. Words can raise someone up. Or words can maim or kill. Tell someone you love them and watch them smile and soar to the highest of highs. He remembers feeling like he was worth the time and effort for anyone. He remembered his mother's response as loving and caring, saying that he is worth it. But a few weeks later, she was angry about something that happened at work, and not being able to talk back to her boss, she lashed out at him, saying, "You know why no one thinks you're worth the time, you spend all your time in your room reading, like a damn troll hiding in a cave."

It's no wonder why he had a hard time being open and vulnerable. Always expecting that a moment of vulnerability would be used against him as a weapon.

That night, they argued. She hit with her barbed ammunition. He hit.

The apartment was full of the sounds of flesh being slapped and the dull thuds of fists. She screamed at him. He screamed right back at her. She was small but she gave as much as she could. She was no match against him, but still she tried. Until he hit her, knocking her breath out. When she could breathe again, she screamed for Jordie to call the police. At four years old, he had to figure out what was the right thing to do. Protect his mom? Protect his dad? Do nothing?

He lay there, arm tight over Little Stevie, eyes fixed on the dreamcatcher. The light reflected off the wall the dreamcatcher was on. He closed his eyes, clenching, pretending he didn't hear anything or anyone. The light still burned through his eyelids. But she calls for him

still. He buried his face into the pillow, next to Little Stevie, wishing he could be as brave as Leonardo, the sword-wielding Ninja Turtle.

Nothing Gets Through

He and his two friends sat waiting for his date to show up. It was to be a real, traditional double date. But for him, his friends thought a blind date would be best. No apps, no pictures. Just the talking up of good qualities and the promise that they would like each other. Sid and Nancy, as he jokingly called his two friends, were mutual friends with his would-be date and set it up.

The restaurant was nice, but not too nice. They were only grad students, after all. And English grad students were the lowest paid on campus. He tucked his thumbs underneath his thighs, trying to staunch his inclination to fidget. Staring at the parmesan shaker that was a bit off center, and the steaming basket of breadsticks covered with a cloth, he briefly wondered why it was that Italian restaurants became some sort of bastion for romance and fine-dining, even on a budget. He couldn't think of anything sexy about pasta.

Sid leaned in. It'll be okay, he said. Be yourself like when you're with us.

Nancy smiled. Just breathe, she said. She's good people. You've got nothing to worry about.

Nodding in agreement, he turned his attention back to the table and tried to let go. But dating was a very nervous venture for him. If dating was baseball stats and batting averages, he would be one for lifetime. Even a first date was big news for him. So, he was nervous. And it showed. His mouth was dry and he felt he had no control over his limbs. They felt oversized and clumsy and, considering his size, that wasn't too far from the truth. But he had never been more aware of it than this day.

Sid and Nancy tried to make small talk but he couldn't keep track of the conversation, so he just stayed quiet. As per his usual when nervous. He hated this about himself. His ex, his one ex, always wanted him to be more talkative, more assertive. She'd look at him, waiting for him to find his voice. Her patience, superhuman. He could see the look of care, of concern, of love in her eyes, her soft black eyes. She'd look down at the table they would be at, fingers playing at her jade bracelet, a gift from her father back home in China. A shy smile would spread over her lips and she'd nod. I understand, she'd say, and then she would find something to talk about. But even superhuman patience gives out.

No matter where he went or what he did, his emotions were rarely out in the open, always buttoned down. He couldn't help it. An image of his parents flashed through his mind. Smiling, cute couple. Very happy. At least to the outside world. Behind the front door of their modest apartment, his dad's fists and his mother's barbed tongue kept him in line. He learned very quickly that children were seen, but rarely, and not heard. He learned to play quietly or else his dad became angry since his time off from work was so small. He learned that anything he told his mother would eventually be thrown back at him like throwing knives. No wonder you can't get a girl, she says, as big as you are, they are all probably afraid you'd squash them.

The one time he was open with his ex, he let his emotions show. She never said she loved him. Never. Not once. Yes, he could feel it when she looked at him, even when she prodded him to change whatever negative trait he had. But she never said she loved him. As dysfunctional as his parents were, they at least said they loved him. And, while they were horrible about how to show their love, when they said it, it brought him such joy. He always yearned to hear someone else say it. But rejection after rejection. Was the kind of love his parents showed him the only love there was? Or was it that he only deserved their kind of love? But when the relationship

crashed, she wasn't so shy about telling him how she felt trapped and hated him for it. And he lashed out. Not even Sid and Nancy knows. He would take it to his grave. But no matter what, he would never let that happen again.

So, he learned. Never show anything. Never show emotion. He imagined sitting inside an armored tank. And inside his tank, nothing will get through. No fists or slaps. No harsh words. But nothing will get out either. No love. No bursts of passion, none of the words of love that he knows is inside him. Not even the love of his life could find the chink in his armor. Not even love could make him change.

So here he was. Stuck in a loop of misguided but good intentions of friends and the constancy that was rejection. He wanted to be able to share of himself, openly, no prompting. A smile that wasn't grounded in fear and hope and longing. He knew he could no longer live this way, stuck in this emotional mediocrity, stuck in this machinery, clanking around and refusing to feel and be a part of life. He clung to the hope that he could change.

She showed up, walking unhurriedly and never looking at him.

Here goes nothing. He smiled, stood up and moved to pull out her seat. She looked at him and her eyes glazed over. She smiled, tried to be a good sport. But the smile never made it to her eyes. I'm sorry, she said to Sid and Nancy. I just remembered I'm double booked and I have this thing...

Her lie caught in her throat. She shook her head, glancing at him.

They said you were nice and sweet but...I don't think I can do this. Here, her eyes glanced at the rest of him. I'm sure you are nice and sweet, but you're just not my type. I am sorry.

She turned around and walked away, her heels click-clacking on the tile as she made her getaway. He stood there watching her walk briskly away, one hand on the back of her chair. Once she made it out the door, he pushed her chair back in and sat down. Sid and Nancy were pointedly looking at each other, but never at him.

I just can't believe the nerve... Nancy muttered, standing up to go after her.

It's okay, he said, his voice catching. He waved to her chair, nodding. It's okay, his voice clearer now.

Nancy, slowly sat back down, finally glancing at him.

He imagined sitting in the tank again, the hatch firmly closed. He cleared his throat and gave a small smile, forcing it to reach his eyes. It's okay, he said again. How about we order? What's good here?

Broken Promises

When Stevie walked through the front door of his big brother's house, he couldn't help but feel apprehension. His brother, Jordie, sat on the couch, staring at the television. At the moment, just the commercials were playing and it wasn't anything good enough for him to pay attention to the screen that hard.

"Hey, bubba, how's it going," Stevie asked. All Stevie got in reply was a grunt, and a slightly unsteady lifting of his glass of whiskey on the rocks, his preferred drink, to his lips. Stevie joined him on the couch and they immersed themselves in the wonders of some new product designed to solve some dumb problem that really wasn't a problem until some corporation told them it was.

Stevie could feel his stomach about to eat itself. "You eat yet? Wanna Door Dash some wings or something?"

"Pizza is on the table," his brother mumbled, slightly slurred. Stevie looked back at the dining room table. A box of pizza sat untouched, as if it wasn't even opened yet. A couple of paper plates placed haphazardly beside it. Unused, as well. Stevie had a bad feeling.

He was surprised when his brother texted him, inviting him over to watch a ballgame and a drink that night. Normally, when they hang out, it's for big events. Birthdays, big holidays, maybe even a big game like the World Series or Bedlam football between the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State. They didn't normally hang out just to watch a game or shoot the

shit unless something has come up that his brother wanted to talk about. The last time was because his brother and his brother's wife realized they couldn't have kids. They both were so torn up. But Stevie did his best to cheer them up. Playing with the dogs, telling cheesy dad jokes, etc, etc. Stevie could feel this time to be shaping up to be a bit of a doozy.

His brother interrupted Stevie's reverie. "You want a drink," he asked, swirling the remnants of the melting ice in his glass, motioning towards Stevie. Stevie didn't much feel like drinking, but could feel that maybe it would be preferable to have some liquor in his system for whatever bad news his big brother had to tell him. Whenever that would be.

Stevie nodded and a few minutes later, a glass tumbler appeared before him, ice cubes clinking around in the coppery liquid. The smell of the sour mash hit his nose, making the back of his teeth feel like they were floating. He preferred bourbon to whiskey for its smoothness. But it had been a few years since he did any drinking at all. He wasn't in his twenties anymore and much preferred to wake up without a hangover these days. But he took the drink from his brother and then he took a sip, taking the full force of the bitterness on his tongue.

Together, they settled on the couch. Neither saying anything and both sipping away.

Finally, Stevie, either from not wanting to sit in silence anymore or because of the whiskey, asked quietly, where his brother's wife was. She hadn't come through the living room to say hi and to get a slice of pizza, the dog trailing after her, begging for the crust. In fact, there was no dog either.

The silence between them was so great and lasted for so long that Stevie had to question whether or not he actually said anything. Stevie cleared his throat to ask again when his brother, his voice slightly slurred, said, "I'm going outside. Gonna watch the storm for a bit. You can

come and smoke if you'd like." And with that, he stood up, steady enough on his feet that Stevie didn't have to help him walk. It was weird, though. Jordie stopped smoking when he got with Vicky and didn't like that Stevie still smoked. He used to refuse to be outside with him when he lit up. Something must really be bad.

Outside, the day, cloudy and gloomy before, was starting to end. Reds and pinks were forcing their way bravely through the clouds. Lightning struck silently far off to the south. It was difficult to tell if the storm was heading towards them or away from them. They sat on the backyard patio furniture, under the awning. The darkening sky offered no respite for the humidity of the day. Their glasses of whiskey sweat profusely, creating little pools of condensation that dripped down their arms in little, streaming rivulets when they took a sip.

Stevie lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, away from where his brother sat. The smoke going nowhere in the thick, still air. He gently waved the smoke away from his brother. Since quitting smoking, Jordie would fan the smoke away from him whenever someone lit up. Now, Jordie just sat, silently inhaling the vapors. Either his brother had more to drink than Stevie thought, or his brother was being bothered by something more volatile than the smoke. Stevie didn't know which was worse.

"So, what's going on? Where is Vicky at?"

"Her sister's."

After a beat, Stevie realized that no more information was incoming. "Oh. Okay." He didn't really know what else to say. While they didn't normally hang out, when they did, his brother was the talkative one. Which was weird since he was more shut down with other people. Stevie was the social butterfly in those situations. Clearly something was weighing on his brother

but Stevie didn't know how much he should push getting the information. Neither of them were the touchy-feely type. Their parents made sure of that.

So, they just sat. The still air somewhat heavy with cigarette smoke, their whiskey glasses nearly empty and not sweating as much. The lightning becoming more frequent, the occasional thunder clap jarring the earth around them, the evening slowly sinking into night.

Maybe it was the whiskey. Maybe it was the silence. Maybe it was the out of character moodiness from his brother. Maybe all of it. Stevie didn't know, but he could feel his patience thinning. Finally, he said, sharply. "Well? So, what happened?"

His brother said nothing. Stevie thought he saw him shrug slightly but couldn't be sure of it. Evening had sunk into night by now and Stevie could see the vague shape of his brother slouching in the patio chair, the only movement was the slight shake he gave his glass, the remnants of ice melting into each other.

"Fine. Whatever. Tell me or don't." Stevie drained his glass and stood up. "I'm going to go get some more whiskey and a slice. Want anything?" He didn't wait to hear a response and walked to the patio door. As Stevie pulled open the door, he swore he heard what sounded like a choked back sob. He stopped and turned around. He thought he saw his brother's shoulders shake but maybe it was a trick of the lightning. "You okay?"

Silence.

"Whatever," Stevie mumbled. He walked inside. Through the window, he peered out at his brother. Still, brother sat there, barely moving. He refilled his glass and grabbed a slice of cold pizza, heading back outside.

As he finished his slice, his brother cleared his throat. Stevie couldn't tell if his brother was going to say something or if it was due to the smoke from earlier. Stevie looked toward his brother and it looked like his brother was looking back at him. Hard to tell in the minimal light.

Finally came the voice rough with emotion and whiskey. "She left." Stevie imagined the words hanging in the still air, just as heavy and opaque as the smoke from earlier.

Stevie didn't know what to say, so as usual, he said nothing at all and instead turned his gaze back to the sky. Looked like the storm was coming closer.

Stevie could hear his brother breathing heavily, catching in his brother's throat every so often, a slight undeveloped whimper accompaniment. Telltale sounds of someone trying not to cry.

"You okay?" Then, feeling weird about the touchy-feely nature of the question, added, "What happened? I thought yall were doing better?"

More heavy breathing, the faint whimper a little bit louder now.

"I thought so, too. But lately she's been going out with friends, coming home drunk. Telling me how much she hates me. How she feels trapped. On and on. Nothing I say or do is ever right."

"Maybe yall should, I don't know, try counseling or something?"

"She laughed when I suggested it last night. Said she didn't need it. Said she knew what the problem was. That she was trapped with me and hated me. She kept hitting me. I never laid a finger on her before. But last night..."

He stopped short. Maybe it was Stevie's reaction. A sharp hanging of his head or the sound of disapproval that escaped Stevie's throat. They had promised, after what their parents did to them, that they wouldn't raise a hand in anger to anyone they loved and they wouldn't use someone else's words as ammunition against them. A promise that his brother made to his wife. Stevie didn't think he could keep that promise with anyone he loved. He didn't want to break that promise. So, he spent his time alone instead. Maybe promises could only be broken, Stevie thought, shaking his head.

"I didn't hit her. I never would," his glare steady on Stevie, as if reading his mind, not after how we grew up." But last night, she said she hated me and she hit me and everything about her, about me, everything I was ever scared of, that I wasn't good enough for her and that one day she would realize that, all of that came out and I could feel that I was losing her, that it wasn't just drunk talk, that I was really losing her and I...I *couldn't*," he paused, struggling to breathe steadily, to not cry or sob. "I couldn't lose her," he said, forcefully but evenly. "And I...I grabbed her, told her that I loved her more than I ever cared for myself, or for you, or for anyone. But I wasn't telling her, I was yelling at her. And, God, Stevie, the look in her eyes... I will never forgive myself for what I saw in those eyes. I let her go, apologizing over and over again. She only said okay and nodded. Everything seemed okay after that. And today, I come home from work and she's gone. Didn't even leave a note. Just left an old jade bracelet on top of the Indian blanket I gave her when we got married." He was crying now, not trying to hold it back, the sobs deep, soul-racking.

Stevie wanted to reach out, wanted to give his brother a hug or at least put his hand on his shoulder, comfort him. He moved to do so, but pulled back. He wasn't the touchy-feely type. Neither of them were. Or at least wasn't before. They kept their emotions in check, never being

vulnerable, lest they get called out for not being masculine by their father. At the same time, he was disappointed in his brother. They went through some things kids shouldn't ever have to.

The anger was building in his chest. He didn't want to break his promise, too, but the urge to take a swing at his brother for breaking the promise first was getting to be too much. The first raindrops broke him out of his thoughts. Stevie took a breath. The anger wasn't gone but the urge to throw a punch wasn't as strong, either. Stevie took his drink and started heading inside. He paused, pushed the pack of cigarettes and the lighter toward Jordie. "You'll be alright," he muttered, stopping short of calling him a sissy, one of their father's favorite go-to's whenever his kids showed these kinds of emotions.

He left his brother on the patio, in the dark, crying. The storm whipping up a frenzy. Stevie couldn't tell if the sounds he heard outside was the wind and thunder, or if it was his brother. He wished he could have comforted him the way they never were allowed comfort growing up. Hand on shoulder or a hug. Soft voices.

But they weren't the touchy-feely type.

Lost

You can feel the drums beating inside, pounding in your heart. A relic of the past that still lives on—you feel it, you hear it, but you can't quite grasp the beat. The rhythm eludes you. Even so, you do feel the drums, you swear you do. But only faintly, as if from far off—Thunder, rumbling in the distance, a storm that never reaches you, parched earth yearning to be quenched.

English imposed on your tongue, refusing to make the sounds your blood tells you to make. You hear the words, the chants. Something in you, faint in your blood, reaches way back in time, recognizing the sounds, pulls at your heart. You hear your people speaking. You open your mouth to respond—English tumbles out. You dance but your feet move in ways that no rhythm can recognize. You sing but your throat closes up, choking you. Others know who you are because of your name, your skin. But you don't know yourself. You are lost. Your People don't recognize you.

So, you look to others—for different connections. You look to be found, to be seen.

You find each other.

She gently brushes your long, curly hair out of your face, her jade bracelet cool against your skin. She says, "Men in China don't wear their hair long. My father will not like this." *For her*, You think, *You will relinquish your hold on your own culture for her love*. Leaving the salon, you shiver, the spring air cold on your shorn head. What you have left behind, you don't know if

you can ever regain. Disconnected from your people even more than before. For doing this for her, she never says thank you. She never says she loves you.

Then you lose her.

And now, years later, without her, you grow your hair back out. But the disconnection remains, the gap unfilled.

Your tongue still refuses to move in anything but English. You still feel the drums beating in your heart, in your blood. The rhythm still eludes you.

You want to know your people.

But you are lost.

Prayers of the Dark-hearted

Jordy shifted uncomfortably on the vinyl couch, shivering. He clutched his arms tightly to his chest, silently cursing his threadbare hoodie. He should have known it would be cold here. Guess they don't want the other patients kicking up a fuss if they raise the temps too much. Smart. Still though, it was December and he wished he had brought more than a few hoodies and a light jacket.

He shifted again and became acutely aware of the smell of feet wafting in the area. Damn it. He hated these shoes. Self-conscious, Jordy crossed his feet under the space of the couch. If anyone could smell his beat-up Nikes, they didn't say anything. Or maybe they were just off in their own little worlds. He'd bet on that, actually.

The staff had run out of plastic lace fasteners earlier in the week, so now the tongues of his shoes stuck out past his toes without his laces, further compounding the stinky issue with cold feet. And no one likes cold feet. Or stinky feet. Apparently, mental hospitals were quite busy the closer to Christmas it gets. Judging from how many people were here, Jordy didn't doubt that. So now everyone is stuck here with him and his stinky feet. And he...well, he's just stuck here.

Sighing, he looked at the clock for the umpteenth time. Wasn't their smoke break coming up soon? His nerves were on edge. As much as he tried not to be a clock watcher, there wasn't much more to do except go to the group therapy activities and watch TV. And he didn't feel like going to the group therapy today. Didn't feel like baring his soul. Didn't want everyone looking at him and judging him. So, TV it is.

Sunday afternoon football. He had never hated football more in his life. The TV was fixed to the wall with a plexiglass box covering it, the overhead lights casting a glare so that he could only see about half of the screen. His roommate, Pirate Jack as he liked to be called, sat on the edge of the couch, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. “Come on, baby, bring the rock down,” he whispered sharply as the receiver missed the ball. “Damn it!” Pirate Jack was up and moving between the furniture now, pushing aside the empty chairs with his hips. “I told you to bring that damn rock down,” he said, pointing with his fist towards the TV, his face red. Jordy could see Pirate Jack’s face get redder and redder.

Jordy took a deep breath and sighed. So fucking boring. He got up and took a seat at the table beside the couch. Some of the other patients sat around the table, coloring. Big sheets of cartoonish characters doing happy things in happy landscapes. Jordy sighed and sifted through the pile of crayons, colored pencils, and bendy pens. He paused at the bendy pens and chuckled. He held one up. “Do you think Bic sends these like this or does the staff have to take apart each pen to get to the ink-filled tube inside?” He smiled. The other patients only smiled distantly at him and went back to talking about which medications they were on before and what the psychologist said during their sessions with her. Pirate Jack paced back and forth behind the table now, his monologue moving beyond the football game, stopping every now and then to punctuate his point by jabbing the table.

“And then, she, that... that...bitch, do you know what she said to me?!” Pirate Jack whisper-screamed, “she said that I can’t go home until after Christmas, maybe not until after the new year. All because I told her off, that bitch! She asked me, goddammit! She asked me what was on my mind and I told her! How can she punish me for being honest? One of these days, one of these days...”

The other patients waited until Pirate Jack started pacing again, limping along. It was as if everyone could feel something was brewing and didn't want to egg it on. Jordy shook his head. He was the one that had to share a room with the guy and his temper.

Scoffing, Jordy grabbed a coloring sheet without looking at it and walked (*shuffled*, as his flapping, laceless shoes reminded him) for the other side of the wing, where there was another set of a TV, couch, and table. If there are fireworks, he wanted to be on the other side. There has to be something to do over here. Just need to bide time until the next smoke break.

He sat down, the chair sliding over the linoleum. He had to grab the bottom of the orange, plastic seat and inch it closer to the table. He grabbed a color pencil from the community box and prepared to color, turning over a coloring sheet that was left on the surface. A huge butterfly filled the page, with so many intricate designs. Someone had already started on it, coloring in the wings with a vibrant purple and the designs in the wing with bright yellows and reds. She shows up everywhere, doesn't she? Coloring sheets, bumper stickers with orange cowboys hats, sunsets. And now, butterflies. Fuck. Jordy turned the sheet over and rubbed his eyes.

"Friends, I come here today to tell you something. Something dire. Something many of you will find disturbing," the TV preacher intoned ominously. He set his hands on the podium and seemed to lean on it before starting again. "You have all been set-up. We all have been. All of us in this room and those watching at home. God," he emphasized, stamping his foot, "has set all of us up! And how do I know that?" He smiled. "Because God is Almighty. There is no One being like him. If you are being persecuted, like Job, know that God is setting you up for Greatness! Yes, friends, Yes! We are being set up and the proof is in the prosecution, because in the prosecution will be His presence and in His presence, Friends, will be our promotion. Your greatness is coming, Friends. So, when you think you are going through hell, then know that

your greatness will be coming. Do not bury yourself in your pain, Friends. I said, do not bury yourself in your pain! Your rejection, your betrayal, your heartache! Your time is coming, so when you think you are in hell, just keep going and do not ever sto—”

Jordy looked up. Sonia had changed the channel. “He’s so full of shit,” she muttered, looking over at Jordy. Her gaze stayed on him a beat long. Once she set on a channel that was on commercial, she sat down. Jordy had missed his chance to grab the remote. He could only guess what kinds of crap she was going to watch. Jordy had a bad feeling that coming over to this side wasn’t a good idea. He should have just had a damn nap.

“...swiping left or right. That’s why I choose to use eCompatibility! Download the app today and start your free trial.”

Goddamn dating apps. That was why he was here in the first place. That’s where he met her. Was meeting her worth the free trial? The effort? The time? He would have said yes meeting her was worth it, absolutely, but now... now she’s gone, she’s gone and he just wants the pain to end. Is living without her really an option? Is living without her really living?

Jordy realized that his thumb was rubbing against his ring finger. Again. The staff took his ring when he was admitted. For safekeeping, they said. Jordy didn’t think he would ever get used to not feeling the cool metal against his skin. Or worse, he thought he would and that would mean it really was over. He hated this so much. Jordy could feel the tears start up but he blinked them away.

Sonia’s show finally came back from commercial. The Hallmark Movie channel. Yep, should have just taken a nap. Goddamn it all.

Jordy could see Sonia smiling. Bland characters in a bland plot where everyone, no matter the issues, always end up together and happy and smiling. More cartoonish characters

doing happy things in happy landscapes. Real life isn't nice and clean. Real life is messy. Real life is pain. Real life is heartbreak. Take Andy, for instance, sitting in front of the TV in the other wing. The poor sap just sits there staring off into space, ridiculously medicated. He doesn't interact with the world at all. Just existing. His wife died and now he is falling apart. Without the meds he would just cry and sleep and cry and sleep. But now he stares and sleeps and stares and sleeps. Life is nothing but pain. Unless you're dosed up to the gills. Either way is no way to live.

Jordy turned his attention back to the TV and scoffed. The beautiful owner of the successful bookstore and the handsome, scruffy but somehow still coifed construction worker on the screen, smiling and teary-eyed, kissed. The happy, sappy music rose to a happy, sappy crescendo. It seemed these happy characters could always get through their differences and stay together. No matter how incompatible they are or what their mistakes were, they forgive each other and get through their troubles, always together. They don't just give up. Not like her. She didn't think he was worth the effort.

Damn, he missed his wife. More now than ever. The shock of being served the divorce paperwork while he was visiting his mother's house was wearing off. He hated that he ended up in this place. Never thought he'd end up in a damn mental institution. He didn't quite remember what his immediate reaction was, just that he knew he couldn't live without her. He remembered the bridge that crossed the Cimarron, that shit-brown river that flowed underneath. He remembered driving on that bridge often while the sun set or was rising and, despite the nasty brown color of the river the colors painted across the sky and reflected on the water had shown a beauty that he couldn't name and that he felt within himself. Surely, he had thought once, it must have been a sign that beauty could be found even when life was at its ugliest. It had called to him, then, and he promised himself that he would take her out there and they would spend a few

minutes and marvel at the glory and the beauty. But they never did. And then, with the paperwork, the bridge had called to him for a different reason.

That preacher...could he be right? Could God or whoever be setting him up for something better? She was supposed to be his “something better,” someone that made up for the years of pain and rejection and loneliness. He didn’t want to go back to that reality. He couldn’t. He wanted to get to that bridge and jump.

He still couldn’t say what called him back down from driving to that bridge and going over. Maybe it was the witnesses he knew that would be there, driving across the bridge. He didn’t want to traumatize anyone, after all. Maybe it was the hope that he could still talk to his wife and change her mind. Maybe it was his mother shaking him and shouting at him, trying to bring him back to reality, as he sat at the dining room kitchen, staring into nothingness. Maybe it was the look in his eyes that made her say, “We need you here. Promise me. A mother isn’t supposed to bury... Promise me, damn it!” She never finished the sentence. He made a half-hearted promise so that she wouldn’t keep trying to guilt him into not doing something like what he wanted. So, he packed a bag, drove up here, and checked himself in to this place. He needed time to think and he couldn’t do it at work. His mom would make it all about herself. And seeing his wife would only hurt, even if she would let him see her.

Jordy could only know now how he had looked to her. He saw it in the eyes of some of the patients here. In Andy’s eyes. He knows now why his mom made him promise.

And now he was here, sitting on a cold, uncomfortable plastic chair, smell of feet still in his nose, and seeing nothing that will help him stop the pain. And wishing he hadn’t promised his mother. Watching these perfect characters in their perfectly constructed lives and manufactured troubles that always end with everything tied up neatly and everyone happy. The

plexiglass giving an even bigger dimension to the artifice. But here Sonia sits with her tissue all balled in her fist, dumb smile splayed across her face, glassy-eyed. As if all her dreams were coming true watching this drivel. How can she get lost in something so obviously fake? Why do these dumb characters deserve happiness more than him? Than any of them?

New movie now. Jordy slouched across the table, the screen now sideways. More fake heartache and loneliness, followed by more fake happiness. Fake smiles on tanned faces in the middle of a ski resort, impossibly white teeth and coifed hair, and not an ordinary person in sight.

Everything is fake and no normal people could enjoy happiness. Mistakes are forgiven and all differences are bridged no matter what happens. Why can't my life be like this? He wanted to scream.

Jordy, missing his wife, fed up with the pain, no longer able to stand the artifice on TV, screamed. He grabbed the sides of his head and screamed and screamed. He had no thought. No plan of action. He just needed the pain to stop. He didn't want to feel anything anymore.

He pushed his chair back, the metal ends screeching across the linoleum. He grabbed the chair, took a running start, and threw the chair at the TV. Grabbing another chair, Jordy ran to the TV. He hit the chair against the plexiglass over and over again. He could feel the reverberations run up and down his arms and throughout his body after each strike and it felt so good.

*

He woke up in the too-small plastic hospital bed, sweaty. His head felt too big and his thoughts slow. And all he wanted to do was go back to sleep, from the grogginess, sure but he also needed to escape from this reality where she was no longer a part of him.

“Gabriel...Gabriel,” whispered a woman’s voice, somewhere in the corner of his mind or the room, he couldn’t tell. “Did you know that Gabriel came down from heaven to teach me Jewish Yoga? He taught me Polish Yoga. And Chinese Yoga. And all the Yogas all throughout the world. Well, you know, you were there!” The voice chuckled, sweetly.

The voice came to him as if from the past, but it was there in the room. His heart almost burst from wanting to hear the voice but he knew it couldn’t be. Not in that room. Not there with him. He could hear the voice continuing but couldn’t keep track of what she was saying. The words she said didn’t make sense but he yearned to hear more, anyway. It was her voice. He was almost certain of it.

“...Don’t you know? Come on Gabriel, my cute fluffy-haired cupid!”

She came to him then, sitting beside him. She grabbed his hand in hers, cold and clammy. Her eyes were on him in the dim room, but unfocused. She was smiling and chuckling.

“Sonia, you know you aren’t supposed to be in here. Stop bothering the other patients.” Julie, one of the nurses, walked further into the room, hands on hips.

Sonia stood up and walked out, chuckling and smiling, eyes still unfocused. It was scary how her voice was so similar to his soon-to-be ex. He couldn’t remember ever hearing her speak louder than her muttering, before. She just usually planted herself in front of the TV and watched the Hallmark Channel, the occasional grunt or murmur escaping her lips. She paused in his doorway, looking back, and held up a hand, fingers ever so slightly moving.

Nurse Julie made sure that the patient had walked fully out of the room before turning back to Jordy. “That was quite a show you put on yesterday. Anything you want to talk about?”

Jordy kept quiet, just as he’d kept quiet in group therapy all week.

She clicked her tongue and nodded. “Well, okay. The psychologist will need to speak to you soon. You know, I’ve seen a lot of patients come through here. Talking can help. Especially for those that no longer want to be...” She paused, searching for the next word. “Here,” she said pointedly. And Jordy knew she didn’t mean here, as in the hospital, but here in the world.

He looked across to the window.

“It’s tough to be open and vulnerable in front of a bunch of strangers, but it will help you. And if anything, once we start seeing positive change, you will be able to get out of here. Just something to think about.”

He remained silent, staring out the window at the empty bench across the courtyard.

“Okay. You missed dinner, so when you feel up to it, remember we have sandwiches and other snacks in the fridge. And by the way, it’s good that you didn’t break through the plexiglass or break the chair. I think Billing would have charged your insurance for it.” She turned and walked out.

*

The psychologist sat across from him, trying not to tap her pen, almost as if she were trying to condition herself from a negative behavior. “You have been here for about a week now. You haven’t gone to one group activity, and you’ve only attended the group therapy. However, it looks like you haven’t actually participated. What little you told me from when you were admitted, I see why you attacked the television. I do. I understand where you are coming from and why you are hurting. I understand why you felt you needed to take a more, um, permanent action, which is why you are here.”

Jordy avoided her eyes. He felt the tears building up again but blinked them away. He didn't know if he was ready to talk. But he mumbled. "Mom made me," and then promptly shut up. He felt like a fucking child, responding to being chastised.

"Ok, Jordy. You don't have to talk to us. But you will need to stay here until the danger has passed. Once we see improvement in how you deal with your emotions and how you cope, then you can go. I strongly encourage you to attend group. Lean on us and on your fellow patients. Open up and let people in. Then you will be able to go. But when you do, you have to live your life. Whatever she chooses to do, whatever happened between you two, you will have to learn from those lessons and move forward. It will hurt. It will. Nothing can be done about that. But you can't let your pain dictate how you live. You will need to find strength through your pain."

Jordy nodded. He just wanted to sleep. To escape from this reality again. He didn't want to feel his heartbreak over and over again, to see her face every time he closed his eyes, to want to touch her and hold her and to hear her voice. He couldn't do that and live. Why does everyone want him to live in pain?

He turned to leave.

"And you really should thank your mom. Listening to her was a good thing. You may not see that now. But

I am confident that in time, you will."

He could spend a whole year of sessions talking about how his mother's negative behaviors affected him and this one time doesn't make up for it. Instead, he turned the knob and walked out.

*

After the events of the past couple of days, Jordy had missed his time outside. Now, he finally got to get his smoke break and sat by himself, as usual. He took long, slow drags on his cigarette, savoring the bitter taste and the little pains that filled his lungs. The December air made his whole body ache and shiver but it felt good. Brisk.

Briefly, he'd realized he almost given up that feeling. Had he gone ahead with the plan on the bridge that day, he wouldn't be able to feel the shiver, breathe in the cold, clean air. He wouldn't have anything anymore. Including a chance to speak to his wife again. Maybe she would come back to him or maybe she wouldn't. But if he lived, there was still a chance. Who knows the future, after all? He just needed to get the hell out of here. Putting out his cigarette, he walked to where the other patients had gathered. Time to start being more open and vulnerable.

*

He sat in the corner of the room. The chairs lined each of the walls, the therapist on one side. They were starting with everyone telling how they felt today and if there was anything on their mind. Jordy felt so raw. The wounds were still so open. But he promised himself he would be vulnerable and he would heal. Pirate Jack sat next to him, his usual energy dissipated. Whatever meds they had given him kept him in a stupor. Jordy almost missed Pirate Jack's anger. At least the room wouldn't have felt so empty. It would have felt so much more alive. But maybe it would make it easier to share if things were calmer.

Finally, it was his turn. He stared at the ground for a moment. He took a deep breathe and let it out, muttering "I'm good," with the last portion of air, forcing himself to smile.

The therapist looked at him, slightly frowning. "Are you sure? I heard about what happened the other day. We can talk about that. If you're ready."

Jordy shrugged. Smiling, he said, “I guess I didn’t like the movie that was on.” The ones not in a stupor chuckled. The therapist shook her head.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know. I just...Seeing all the happy couples on those dumbass movies, how everything wraps up so nice and neatly. Why can’t real life be that way?” He continued to stare at the floor. The pattern on one of the swatches on the carpet was mismatched with the others, and his eyes traced the oddity until the tears blurred his vision. “I mean, fuck! I miss my wife!”

*

For the next week, Jordy was on his best behavior. He went to all the group activities, he went to group therapy, he shared. He opened up as much as he could. He cried. God, how he cried. He hated crying. But he needed to let it out. He didn’t want to keep the pain inside anymore. And he wanted out of there. Whatever happened after that, well...he’d decide if it came to making any decisions at the time. But for now, trying to let go of the pain and getting out of there was more important.

The psychologist seemed satisfied after seeing him smile and even attempt at a joke or two. She told him he would still hurt but with the coping techniques and continued therapy, he’d be okay and he would thrive. Jordy hoped he could believe her. He prayed that some day he would be able to thrive as she had said. But he could only plaster a smile on his face and pretend he was on the mend. Fake it till you make it, he kept saying to himself.

The day of his release finally came. He shook hands with the staff and walked through the corridors until he walked out into the cold January evening. The sun was just setting. Bright colors splashed across the sky for a brief moment before settling down to darkness. Jordy wished

he could feel joy in his heart, to find the beauty in what he witnessed. He still felt...empty. And now scared, wanting to turn back around and fling himself back into that too small hospital bed.

Jordy shook his head, sighed.

He walked to where he had parked. The staff had been amazed that he had the presence of mind to admit himself. Apparently most were brought there by ambulance or police, with some that were brought there by family. At least, that's what they said. Maybe they just wanted to try to make him feel stronger or something.

He had parked as far from the hospital as he could, facing an empty field. He could hear the traffic going from the local Costco and onto the Kilpatrick Turnpike and silently wished he could travel with them, somewhere far away, to a new life. Somewhere that nothing and no one would remind him of her and that she didn't want him anymore.

He swallowed hard and took the ring from his bag.

It was so natural to put it on his finger that he had to consciously take it back off.

Find the strength through the pain. Where?

He set his bag down and stood at the edge of the dark field. The ring, though small, weighed heavily in his hand. Jordy took several deep breathes and closed his eyes. He imagined tossing the ring as hard as he could out into the field, never to see it again. Her smiling face flashed before him, a memory of a past that could no longer be his future.

Shivering, he put the ring in his pocket and put his bag in the car. Lighting up a cigarette, he turned his phone on. He scrolled through text after text of people wishing him well. His brother sent some funny videos, which is how they process things like this sometimes. His work friends asked if he was alright. One college friend had sent him a picture of herself at the movie

theatre watching the newest Star Wars trailer with her boyfriend, captioned “When you feel better, let’s all go watch the new Star Wars!”

He stopped at one text that shook his heart. “I don’t know what you think you are doing, but you are being so dark-hearted. I bet you are pulling some sort of stunt so that I won’t leave you. It’s all bullshit! The lawyers need your signature so we can end this nightmare of a marriage. Get this done now.”

Jordy finished his cigarette and turned back to the hospital. He could see the other patients through the window, in the cafeteria, eating the crappy hospital food. He considered, again, going back in.

The sound of cars on the turnpike drew him back to reality. She thinks this was a stunt. She doesn’t really know how much he loved her. How much he tried to live up to her demands. She once said, “I see you are trying your best, but it isn’t enough.” Was that really love? He felt the fight go out of his heart. Maybe it’s not that he lost her. Maybe it’s that he never really ever had her.

Fuck it. This is going to hurt like hell.

He took the ring out of his pocket, walked into the field. Using his keys, he dug a small hole in the ground. He held the ring up to the light—silver flashes bounced off the surface. This is what it’s come to. Jordy placed it gently into the hole. Before he could decide to take it out again, he covered it in dirt. He couldn’t make his feet move. Could he really leave things this way?

Maybe. Maybe not.

He popped a cigarette into his mouth and lit up. A bright red Bic lighter. He gently thumbled the grooved wheel. Jordy placed the lighter into the dirt and stamped it down with his foot.

Now he could move.

Jordy got in his car and drove to the exit of the parking lot, toward the sound of the turnpike, and joined the flow.

Default Judgment

We accept the love we think we deserve.

—Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of
Being a Wallflower*

*And to the writer of fragments, each
fragment is a whole.*

—Arthur Sze, “Comet Hyakutake”

Orange and pink hues smear the sky. Dying rays of a cold, January day. You stand on the bridge, the waters of the Cimarron River flowing serenely under you, burnished with the colors from above, ignorant of you and your heartache. You’ve seen others standing in this spot before, camera in hand, watching the sunsets. Your feet rooted at the cement barrier, you have no camera in hand. You heave a sigh so heavy, it could be your last. You wish it would be. Your heart beats of its own accord, no decision of yours. When will it stop?

You spent the entire day in Stillwater. You arrived early, the courthouse looming in front of you, the car window down to let out the cigarette smoke. Chain-smoking only a temporary relief. The cold morning sobering but not cooling the hot pit in your stomach. You took another chug of Pepto. The sun shined as if the world wasn’t ending. The digital clock in the car crept

closer to 9am. You keep catching yourself staring at the clock, praying for it to stop or go back in time. Anything but creeping closer, and closer, to 9am.

You couldn't sit in the lot in front the courthouse anymore. You opened the door to step out and walk your jitters out, but your knees got weak and you almost fell out of your car. Her own car was in front of her lawyer's office across the street from the courthouse. It was parked there, idling. She hadn't seen you, you thought. You realized what would happen when 9am arrived, and you panicked. You weren't ready for it to end, for her to leave. You weren't ready to say goodbye. So, you lost your nerve. You pulled yourself back into your car, threw it into reverse and hit the gas. You didn't care if she saw you or and you didn't care where you went. You just had to get out of there, driving aimlessly.

Remembering the good times will help, you thought. You drove out to Boomer lake. You were able climb out of your car this time. But you still took a swig of Pepto before heading towards the pavilion. The nausea wouldn't go away. Sitting at the covered picnic tables, you stared out at the water, ducks waddling to and fro, but they never ventured onto the pavilion where you sat. You remembered walking with her on the sidewalks next to the water lapping on shore, she would point out the ducks, her accent turned duck into *dock*, her lips upturned into a smile when she looked at you. Sitting at the pavilion, you smiled at the memory. And for a moment, you felt your heart lift, unburdened by the loss. Just for a moment. You would give anything to have her smile at you like that again.

"You could be so handsome if you weren't so fat," she had said. You both were staring at the water after a long walk. Another serious discussion about your issues, your shortcomings. "Do you think any normal woman would stay with someone with issues like yours, with the way you are, that thinks like you think?" What could you really say?

You wished you could go back to the beginning. You remember holding her hands, sitting across the Aspen Coffeeshop table. “I want you to say you are worthy of love,” she said. You said it. You didn’t care if the entire coffee shop could hear you. You want to believe you are worthy. You want her to love you more than anything else in the world. The joy and happiness in her eyes that day...you wanted to see that all the time. You would do your best to be worthy.

Nothing worked right. Nothing. She told her father you were talking about marriage. He arrived from China. He already didn’t like you. You’re fat and he cared a lot about image. And it should have been you to fly to visit him, not the other way around. But she told him that you had potential, so he was going to allow the marriage to take place. He didn’t want to fly back and forth, so you had to get married while he was visiting. You didn’t have enough money for both an engagement ring and a wedding ring. So, you bought the wedding ring, wishing you had enough money for at least a bigger diamond. When he saw the ring, he shook his head sadly. But you didn’t want to let him bring you down. You wanted her to have the experience of a proper proposal with a ring you didn’t have. So, you took her to Boomer Lake, to the little grassy peninsula, at sunset. You thought with the water and the colors in the sky, that it would be romantic. You smiled at her, bent down on one knee, and proposed with the wedding ring. She stared at you, not smiling. She said, “But this isn’t an engagement ring.” She let go of your hand. Nothing went right.

She said, “I see you are trying your best, but it’s not enough.”

It’s not enough.

It’s not enough.

You aren’t enough.

You feel empty, hollowed out.

The good memories were supposed to help. But you felt worse. You wondered what time it was. 10am. The court time has come and gone. She gets what she wants: to be disconnected from you. So, you gave it to her by not showing up. Default Judgment. Uncomplicated, the way she likes things. You were too much of a complication for her. Too much work and effort.

You didn't know what to do or where to go. There was no home to go to anymore. So, you stayed put for the rest of the day, trying to keep the nausea down, napping in your car when exhaustion and tension made your body ache and need sleep. You decided to leave Stillwater, hopefully for good. You got back in your car. You ended up at the bridge that crosses the Cimarron River. You described the sunsets here to her before, how beautiful they were, promising to bring her along one day when she had time, but she never had time. You watched the sky alone, again.

The sun slips below the horizon, splashing reds and pinks into the January sky. You watch in awe at the ways the colors blend and splash, how it reflects on the normally shit-brown water. Then light shines brightly for a moment, sunbeams in your eyes making you squint, then the light blinks out and is gone. You are alone in the cold night.

Cars whooshing behind you. Planted feet on the bridge—becoming one with the cement, as if melted to it—they are out for themselves. You breathe without wanting to.

For just a matter of moments, you were a part of something wonderful and beautiful. Maybe that's all we get. Just a few moments to be a part of something bigger than us, just a few moments here and there and a handful of breaths. And when that is past, all you have is yourself in this big world. What do you do then? What can you do?

Like a spell lifted, you heave a sigh, of your own accord this time. Exhausted, you move towards your car, you get in. You try to call your spirit back to you. Leave nothing behind. You are worthy of love. You deserve to be whole. You start the car, and without looking back, you go.

Life is a series of fragments. For the fragment you had with her, you loved her more than anything, more than anyone, more than yourself. You loved her wholly and would have done anything for her. A lifetime can be lived and loved, even in a fragment of time. It was enough.

Realizing this, you drive into the night.

It was enough.

It was enough.

You are enough.

Struggling

Five days a week.

You wake up alone, take a shower.

You go to work.

You work hard. Call center work. They call it customer service. You call it “kiss the customer’s ass and say thank you” and your own personal hell. You call it that, but you aren’t that bad at the job. You’ve got that customer service voice that makes people trust you and believe what you have to say, even when you don’t believe it yourself. People ask you how you are, you say good, you say fine, you say not-bad-not-bad. But inside...inside you wonder what it’s all for. You wonder what she’s doing, if she’s alright.

Fuck. Keep your mind focused on work. It was a job. And you had bills to pay and student loan debt to muddle your way through. The call center would hire anyone with a high school degree. And here you were, with an English degree but doing not a damn thing with it. These days, when your co-workers give you shit about it, you can’t help but chuckle. A job is a job, your ex used to say.

FOCUS!

The phone rings. You take a deep breathe and release it as soon as the line is automatically picked up. “Thank you for calling One Cellular. How can I help you on this fine afternoon?” Your cheeks hurt from the fake smile they tell you to plaster on your face. *A smiley*

face brings a smiley voice. You wish you could kick the back-office goon that coined that saying right in the shins.

“You fucking people are stealing from me again! You’re thieves! I didn’t authorize any payments today, yet here we go again, money missing from my account!”

And here we go.

“Sir, I understand you’re upset. I would be, too. I don’t like people messing with my money either. So, give me some time to take a look at your account and find out what happened.” Without giving the customer time to respond, you put them on mute and remove your headset. You stare at the screen, looking at nothing in particular, hearing the customer rant and cuss you out and the company you work for. You glance through the account. Any time a change is made on the account, it is auto-notated in the system. And there it is. Last month, before the billing cycle closed, the customer signed up for autopay through the app. The customer bought a new phone with a promotion that said free phone and e-signed the agreement. More than likely, the customer never really read the agreement or the promotion and now the bill is due and wants to argue over it. You take it off mute and tell the customer what you found, and in polite terms, ask if they remember signing up for autopay and if they read through the agreement. They mention they never signed up for autopay and it doesn’t matter what the system show you and he shouldn’t have to read the contract, it should be exactly what they see on the television commercial. You put them on mute, take a deep breath to gather yourself, take them off mute and explain, one more time about contracts, that they signed up for a new line of service with a free phone, and no, this isn’t theft, but please confirm the email address and you will send over the contract and you both can go over it line by line.

While you wait for the customer to decide what they want to do, you look for the mini Crackle bars you had yesterday. Shit was hard to come by. You've never even seen a full size Crackle bar, just one of the mini ones in the assorted bags you get during Halloween. But it's gone. All of them. The bastards. The late afternoon shift was the closing shift but at least that meant you got to sleep in. It also meant that you arrived at work after the morning shift looted any empty cubicles for equipment. Sometimes it would be a missing keyboard or mouse, other times it would be chair. Once you showed up to find your whole station had been looted. From keyboard to mouse and monitors to the cords that connects to the network. Today, it was your stash of chocolate goodness. Bastards.

The customer decides to cuss you out one more time and hang up. You notate the call in your call notation tool, and then you decide if not calling the customer back was worth losing your job. But you do what you are supposed to do. You always do what you are supposed to do. Almost. So, you call the customer back but they send you to voicemail, which you leave—making sure to use your nice customer service voice and reiterate about their contract and their autopay. You hang up.

Staring at the screen, you try to mentally prepare yourself to listen to someone else's pennyante problems again. You take a deep breathe and click the 'Ready' button on screen. A call immediately comes through. Here we go again.

"Thank you for calling One Cellular, how—"

"I hate you so much! You sold me a bum phone! I want my money back!"

“Wow, I hate to hear that, sir. I understand how important your phone is to you,” you say. You hate having to phrase your words like this. It feels so fake. But it’s the job. “What is going on with your phone?”

“It doesn’t work!”

“Right, I understand how frustrating it is when you buy something and it doesn’t work like you think it should.” Barf. That phrasing again. “But can you tell me more? What doesn’t work on it?”

“Everything! Look, I just want my money back!”

“I gotcha, sir, but before we do, we have to see what’s wrong with the phone. What phone are you using to call me on?”

“This one.”

“This one? The one that isn’t working?”

“Well, yeah. It’s the only phone I have.”

You place the guy on mute. You feel a bit spoiled by this job, in a way. If you worked at a front counter job, you’d have to keep a straight face when listening to obvious bullshit. At least with this job, you can put a customer on mute and tell them exactly what you think of them. Small blessings.

“So, your voice calling is working? That’s great news! So, what exactly isn’t working on it? What are you not able to do? Text? Get on the internet?”

“I just want my money back. This is costing me more than what I was told it would. They lied to me in the store. I don’t care whether it works or not. Just give me my money back. Or get me your supervisor.”

The store reps were always fucking up, it seemed. And who got to clean up the mess? You do. So, you do what you can for the guy by sending an escalation request so that the back-office people will have to look at the behavior of the reps and see if there has to be some sort of refund or a credit placed on this guys account to offset what the store reps did. You don’t want to disparage people you don’t know, but it seems they always get some smooth-talking conman working for them. Commission-based performance. Sell or die, you guess is their motto. Maybe they all have matching tattoos that say that. You chuckle, the image of “Sell or Die” encircling a skull. No, a skull that is made of all kinds of diamonds and bling. You chuckle. At least you still have a sense of humor, cheesy as it is.

“Hey, your sales are down,” you hear as you try rushing out the door. Fifteen minute breaks go by fast and you need a smoke bad. But you stop at the sound of the voice, will yourself to turn around. Your supervisor, Chris, sits at his station on an elevated platform within the pod of cubicles. He would have been hard to miss if it wasn’t for the fact that he slouched in his chair all the time.

“What was that, Chris?” You ask, trying not to let your frustrations edge your voice. Unlike your customers, Chris can see and hear you. No mute button for this part of the job.

“Oh, nothing,” he said sarcastically, shrugging, “just that your sales are down. Well-behind everyone else. Come here and take a look at your metrics,” Chris gestures towards the computer screen, never once having looked straight at you.

“I’m actually on my break. Can we talk about this after I clock back in?”

Chris shrugged and muttered, “Sure, why not. I mean it’s not like you actually care about your job anyway.” You had lost count how many times you wished you put a bid in for a different supervisor.

The urge to turn around and take your break was strong. Even verging on leaving completely. But you have bills to pay and student loans to catch up on. And when the ex left, she left all the bills unpaid. So, it is just you. You need this job, as soul crushing as it is. You sigh, stepping up onto the platform to take a look at what Chris was looking at.

“Glad you can join. Take a look at this,” he gestures toward the screen again, still not even looking at you.

But he is right. Your metrics were behind the other technicians in this team and the buddy team in the pod nearby. Long calls, no sales this month.

“Well?”

“Well, most of my customers don’t like the long wait times so they let things build up with a lot of questions. They don’t say anything until it comes to a head. When it does, they call and have a million questions and issues about their phones and their accounts. Like, today, I just got off a call where a guy stopped getting text messages on his phone but had also been having trouble with access to his One Cellular app and then he wanted to set up another payment

arrangement. So, I had to troubleshoot all that and then set up his payment arrangement because he didn't want to do it on the app, even though we got that up and working for him."

"Yeah, I listened to that call and you know what you didn't do? You didn't offer him anything. You didn't try to sell him anything."

"Sell him what? The guy needed a payment arrangement, he isn't qualified for an upgrade since he's in the middle of his lease, he's on the "cheapest" plan that we advertise and he is still continuing to need payment arrangements. There was nothing to sell him."

"Yeah, okay but that kind of situation wouldn't account for all the calls you've taken and this," his cursor points to the low sales number again, "should be much higher."

"Chris, most of my calls are from people that want payment arrangements and a lower bill because they can't afford to pay what they are paying..."

"That isn't our problem and I don't want excuses. It's not your responsibility to decide what's right for the customer. If you offer and they accept, it's on them to make sure to pay the bill and understand what their expenses allow. No more excuses. Got it?"

You sit there glaring at the screen. You don't like the idea of dangling some new promo or new phone like a carrot and tempting the customer to pay more money for something their current phone already does. The difference between an Iphone 12 and an Iphone 13 is minimal. Just so much elitist bullshit. All just for new sales. All just for image.

Your ex-father-in-law flashed in your memories. The reason that he didn't like you was because you are fat and your ex wasn't. Not because he thought you weren't healthy, but that the aesthetics between you and the ex didn't match what he thought a son-in-law should look like.

The lengths people will go to fit the right image. You should know, cutting off your damn hair for them. You shake your head, bring yourself back to the present.

The windows across the call center show bright blue skies. Not a cloud in the sky. Tempting to walk out. Just be free.

But...Rent. Utilities. Student loans. Court fees. How is it that you didn't want the divorce but still owe the damn courts. Fuck.

You nod your head. "Yeah, okay. Got it. More sales, no morals. Can I go smoke now?"

"You have three minutes until the end of your break, so better make it fast."

You rush outside, to the fenced-in smokers area. You find a bench to sit on. Still so cold. You light up and take a looooong drag. Slow exhale. You feel your problems and at least some stress start to float away. And, to think, you never smoked a day in your life before this job and your ex leaving you.

Interrupted by laughter. Eve's laughter. Eve from the buddy team next to you.

"You smoking that like it was something else," she laughs again. "Chris give you shit about your metrics again?"

"Yep," you say between drags. "Y'know, I took this job to help people. That's what the Want Ad said. Not to get people trapped in this never-ending loop of buying and consuming. And for what? So, they have the latest phone that is no different than the previous version? To show what a wonderful little worker bee I am? Yesterday, this lady got locked out of her Insta account because of a texting issue and her two-factor authentication. She started cussing me out but I got her calmed down. I helped her fix the texting issue, she was able to authenticate, and get

access to her account. All her photos of her mom that just passed away were there. She was crying tears of joy to see them. You know what that asshole Chris said? He said that I was her hero and she would have bought anything from me because of it.”

Eve shakes her head. “Cheap bastard,” she says. “He has no humanity. It seems like none of them do,” she nods towards the building. “I wouldn’t have tried to sell anything to her either. But that’s the job. Maybe we trap them in this cycle, but we are trapped too. Got bills to pay. Lives to live. Without the job, where would we be? McDonald’s? Fuck that. So, we stay where we are trapped. That’s the way of the world. I mean, really, what can we do?”

You don’t know what to say, so you just take another drag, exhale towards the sun.

“Anyway, I’ll see you in hell,” she says, giggling. You watch her walk away and she looks back at you, smiling. You smile back. The pangs in your chest make you feel guilty. Been a long time since someone looked at you like that. It doesn’t happen often. You think maybe with Eve...But then the pangs again. The shortness of breath. The nausea. You still love your ex, the way her accent—still thick after years here in the US—made words sound new and exciting, how her smile would light up your world, the way her jade bracelet would brush against your skin when you held her hand or when she touched your cheek. You haven’t been able to let go. You just spend day after day here, in this hell, without her. Work, home, sleep, repeat. You don’t even write anymore. The words that you try to throw together have lost their luster. You just exist. And that’s no way to live.

...Fuck, late again.

Later, you are outside on your last break, the menthol cigarette smoldering between your fingers. You count down the hours you have left. You wonder what it is that you are doing with

your life. You aren't the hero helping people. Most of the customers you "help" don't care, they just want to talk their way out of paying a bill or complain. You are the faceless corporate employee, the customer's favorite punching bag. You can't mirror their behavior and expect to be employed. The wind blows ash all over the front of your hoodie, extinguishing the cherry. You look down at the dead butt of the cigarette. Well...shit. The last cigarette of the pack. You silently curse yourself for not stopping to get some more before work. Now you have to stop by the store when you are exhausted and so done with people.

You make it through the day. Almost. Last customer of your shift reaches you five minutes before shift ends. You take a deep breath and answer the call. The customer screams and hollers at you. You lower your voice and concentrate on making sure the customer knows you are there for her. You fix the issue. It was a simple fix this time and it calmed the customer down. Your supervisor messages you, "Listened in on that call. You were her hero. Would have been a great call but you should have sold her something. Do better. See you tomorrow."

You sit at your desk and stare at the message.

You go home and sleep alone.

You wake up, take a shower.

You go to work.

You just exist.

Call of the Night, Redux

His cigarette smoke drifts lazily for a moment before the cool breeze catches it. Wind chimes tinkle musically in a cheerful note that he does not feel. Wind chimes that she hung up on the awning some time before she left. Train horns blare in the near distance as the tonnage barrels down the tracks, coming and going and never staying in one place for long.

He has been musing about a dream he had one fitful night, back when they were together: walking alone down a dark street, he saw her walking away. No matter how hard he ran after her, he could never catch up to her. She always remained out of reach, while his legs felt like they were in quicksand. He could never understand dream logic, but he could see her face even as she walked away from him. She was always so beautiful, but here she was so happy. Happier than he had ever seen her in real life. So happy his heart hurt. She had her hand over her belly, which was larger than normal. Pregnant with a child he could not give her. In the dream, carried along, smiling, eyes bright, happier than he ever saw her. Then she turned a corner and disappeared. When he reached the same corner, he was all alone. Panic gripped his heart and he shouted for her over and over again. He could feel his throat ache and his lungs constricting. The street grew even dimmer, and he felt himself swallowed up by the darkness, sight and sound choked out of him until daylight pried into his eyes, his heart feeling hollowed out.

After he woke up, he tried to laugh it off. But the dream filled him with such dread. She would catch him looking at her with worry. He'd try to search her face for the same happiness she had in the dream. He couldn't remember the last time he saw her face lit up with pure joy or a genuine smile, or soft words of love. Instead, he saw furrowed brows, pursed lips, and he

received harsh tones. She grew exasperated with this new behavior of his until he told her the dream. Maybe that was the mistake, he foolishly told himself back then. He knew in his heart she was tired of him long before. She would go out with friends—without her ring. She'd come back drunk, ranting about their life together. The long, unproductive hours he spent in front of the computer, the cursor blinking at him urgently, trying to command words to do his bidding. To her, writing was nothing more than a hobby. Something to be done to pass the time when there wasn't anything else to do. To her, he was wasting his time. He should have been working longer hours at his call center job. He should have been trying to get a promotion instead of being on the production floor. To try to write or create, that was a waste of time. Maybe to her, she was wasting her time with someone like him. The dream was the catalyst for the way everything ended. The dream spoke of a future that should have been but couldn't be. Not with him. She drank and ranted until one night, she couldn't stand to see him at his desk, still in his work clothes, typing on his keyboard. She threw her purse at him, yelling at him that it was his fault they couldn't have kids, that it was his fault that she couldn't have a family of her own, that he had no ambition. She screamed how much she felt stuck with him, trapped with him and she hit him and kept hitting him. He thought she would tire herself out, but then she said she hated him as she hit him in the chest and arms until he grabbed ahold of her wrists, pushed her into the wall until she stopped fighting him. He never hit her back. He couldn't do that to her. He just needed her to stop hitting him and talk to him, to love him. So, he grabbed her, hard, and pushed. That was all it took. That was all the reason she needed to leave.

He is left in their home, alone, trying to avoid being swallowed by the darkness in his heart. He shivers in the cold night without a jacket, as if to punish himself. She hated the cold. Had never seen snow throughout her childhood back in China, not until she went up to the

Northern provinces for college. And now, here in Oklahoma, even without much snow, she had hated the cold. No amount of heat or coats or his hoodies could ever keep her warm. Wherever she has gone, it must be somewhere warm.

Oftentimes, like tonight, he'd find himself on the back porch. Cigarette butts and black smudges surrounded his seat on the patio. Dust covered the patio table except the small area he smeared clean so he could place his cell phone and smokes there. The backyard looked forlorn and overgrown. He had only been mowing the front yard this past spring and summer. Just to keep up appearances. If only the neighbors knew what went through his mind every day...

He stubs his cigarette out and lights another. And then another. The red cherry of his cigarettes the only light near him now, the daylight having long since died. With each drag he tries to will the feelings away and the words to flow. He hoped that maybe at least his writing would help. Maybe, he could write and create something that someone would want to read. His writing was the only thing he had, the only thing he could do to keep sane, to keep from being swallowed up by the dark. He remembered what it felt like in the dream. He didn't want to feel that ever again.

But no matter what he did, no matter how he tried to fit each word, each letter, in the right space, nothing worked. A puzzle with all the wrong pieces. Pieces that would never fit together no matter what he did. He could almost feel the words circle and flow around and about and through his head. He tried to capture them and throw them on the page in a way that made the world make sense, that would make her leaving him make sense, that would deaden the hurt. He had to laugh at himself, a walking cliché.

Every day, the cursor blinked at him from his screen, urging him to type. But no words would come. He was completely bereft of ideas. From his desk, the daylight would slowly sink into dusk. And before long, he would be on his phone, scrolling through all his apps just to ignore that damned cursor. He'd let his thumb be his guide. Facebook. Twitter. Even Walmart's app. He would get lost in the product descriptions of even the most off-brand groceries and hoped his meager day job would afford him the opportunity to buy them.

Maybe she had been right all along. Maybe this is only a hobby. No story to tell. No words to bring to life. He can see why she left, why she grew frustrated with him. They were too different. The realization grows...they really didn't fit together. Couldn't. Ever. The puzzle pieces would always refuse to join.

The windchimes still tinkle. Another train barrels by. He can feel the weight rumbling through town. A stone's throw from where he sits. He envies the movement. He feels stuck here. And he realizes, she must have too. He casts his mind to the dream again.

The words start clicking into place and he knows what he needs to write. A re-write. A revision. The last, final draft. He runs back inside, the patio door slamming shut behind him. He types furiously, glow of the laptop the only light in the room. He finally finishes and reads it over.

"You were my world," he reads aloud, "but I wasn't anything to you—just the excuse you used to avoid being alone. The world has shattered, the shards proving your love was a lie. So, all ends now." Tentative fingers held over the keyboard, he slowly types out *The End*.

Another train howls at him. Slowly, he walks outside. He has a date with the night. He smiles, lighting another cigarette, and waits for the dark to swallow him up.

Hiding: Prayer of the Dark-Hearted, Redux

“It’s hard to let go. Even when what you’re holding onto is full of thorns, it’s hard to let go. Maybe especially then.” –Stephen King,

Joyland

He sat in the scant shade provided by the porch, cigarette smoke drifting lazily in the afternoon sun. He tried to concentrate on his breathing. Slow inhale, slow and longer exhale. Bad air in, bad air out. The cigarette box, empty, lay crumpled next to him. That was a brand new one as of this morning. Now, he’ll have to get up and go get another one. Butts and black scorch marks litter his little area on the porch, all from today. Maybe a carton will be best.

He watched as a gaunt figure shuffled up the road. The figure’s haphazard gate was awkward and stumbling, as if nursing a twisted ankle. The figure looked overburdened by an overstuffed duffel bag.

What moron would haul that big, ‘ol thing around? And in this heat?

Almost as if an illusion, the figure seemed to become ever more gaunt the closer he came. The figure seemed to be zeroing in on him and the porch he sat on.

“Oh, Lord. What now? On today of all days,” Jordy mumbled. Earlier that day, his soon-to-be ex had served him with the Final Decree of their divorce. Well, the process server did that dirty job. Jordy wondered, once again, how people can stand to do that kind of job. *Do they enjoy*

bringing some of the worst news that someone can get or to lay low someone's life? Is it easy for them or is it that they are just so miserable that they like spreading the misery around? What sadists. Jordy leaned over and spat on the sun-baked grass. He shook his head and moaned, the future already beating him down. And now this new specter making its way to his door. *Trouble always comes in threes, right? What else will go wrong?*

Finally, the figure came into full view, the gaunt face revealing itself. Jordy had to question if his memories were accurate. This shell of a man couldn't be him. A tall, slightly chubby man flashed in his memories, always smiling and joking. His memories and the...thing that stood before him didn't match well. But still... there was something familiar. Then, Jordy saw the smile and knew, once and for all. *Well, shit. Why the hell is he coming here?* He looked on as this gaunt specter, this ghostly figure, his forever couch-surfing uncle Benny, shuffled towards him. Every few moments his uncle would reach behind and hitch up his jeans, adding a little hop to his step.

Jordy's uncle, his chimoshi, was the youngest of his dad's brothers. The baby of the family. The one that never really grew up and was always looking for the next party and the next drink and the next woman to snag up with. Baby Benny his brothers had once called him. Jordy could never keep up with who was what age, but he knew Baby Benny was in his early 40s. Wouldn't have been able to tell by looking at him, though. Waxy skin, cheeks sunken, eyes constantly darting around. A rope belt was cinched as tight as it would go, but Benny's jeans still hung off his scrawny frame. No wonder his dad told Benny to keep his distance.

Jordy ran his fingers through his curly hair and stood up. "Hey, chimoshi. How ya been? When did they let you out?"

A big smile spread across his uncle's face. Withdrawn gums and missing teeth.

"Nephew!" He held his arms wide open.

Jordy hesitated but gave his uncle a quick side hug.

"I'm all right," Benny said. "Been around. Got out a couple of months ago. Just trying to get back into the swing of things. Getting used to real food again," he said, patting his stomach and smiling, almost expectantly. "Know what I mean?" His uncle roared with laughter.

When Jordy didn't respond, Benny tried again. "Almost had a Native hating on bologna." He roared with laughter again.

"Yeah, I don't really like bologna," Jordy mumbled, shrugging. He remembered growing up and the only food in the house was bologna and stale bread. He wouldn't do that again.

Benny's laughter died down and his smile faded, but then picked up again. He poked Jordy in his stomach, his finger sinking in a good inch or two. "Maybe, but you sure aren't starving, huh?" And, again, he was the only one to find his own joke so hilarious. "Your wife must be feeding you good, huh?"

Jordy rubbed the spot Benny poked, momentarily lost in thought, oblivious to Benny's bluster.

"She left me," he said, clearing his throat, hoping to keep his voice from turning into a whimper. His uncle stopped laughing completely and stared at the ground. He reached out and patted his nephew's shoulder a couple of times, rather awkwardly. Baby Benny would never be accused of being touchy-feely.

Jordy couldn't decide which hurt more, saying she left out loud, or if it was the mention of his largish belly. He never could lose weight like other people. Something his ex always got on to him about. Sometimes, to be silly, she would gently poke him in the stomach. Other times she would insist on making dinner no matter how tired she was, so she could make something light. *No, I'll cook*, she'd say, and then gently swat at his belly to shoo him out of the kitchen, her jade bracelet clacking his too-tight belt buckle.

Still smarting, more from the words and memories than the poke, Jordy said more harshly than he intended, "I suppose you want to stay here, huh? What, did everyone else kick you out?"

Benny shrugged, eyes moving to the ground and sky and everywhere but towards Jordy. His bluster completely gone now. But Jordy eyed his uncle, taking in the appearance that had changed drastically in the last year and a half. His thinning hair was gray and straggly, his skin waxy skin, and eyes that never seemed to rest on any one thing. His cheeks were gaunt. Once upon a time, he had been on the chubby side. Jordy had seen what meth had done to acquaintances and strangers. Was his uncle sick with cancer or was this meth still? Or, maybe it was pills this time. He was certain that he should turn his uncle away. Make him prove he was clean and then let him back into his life.

Jordy eyed his chimoshi and could still remember how youthful he had always seemed. Uncle Benny was so full of joy, a perpetual clown. Jordy could still remember that his uncle would bring over movies, comedies with jokes that Jordy couldn't really understand but his dad and his uncle did, so he laughed with them. And, because Stevie was still little, he laughed with them all, too. When Benny visited, his laughter filled the apartment, contagious. Except the times when he came over all haksi, stumbling around, knocking things over. He'd wake up the whole house. Jordy would sneak into the hall and peek towards the living room. Little Stevie would

sometimes be on his heels, asking what was the matter with chimoshi. He'd see that his dad would be standing in Uncle Benny's way, holding him. Uncle Benny's eyes would be glassy and he'd mutter something no one could understand. Dad would get mad at him and start yelling. He'd say, "Ah, goddamn it, Baby Benny, you smell like you showered in beer. Shit, it's not like you'll remember what I say, anyway." So, he would just grab Baby Benny by the arm, as much to guide him as to keep him steady, and walk him over to the couch. Making him lie down with his head on the armrest, he'd grab the blanket off the back of the couch and, shaking loose the folds, cover Benny with it. Then, he would place a small plastic tub on the floor next to the couch.

One night, Jordy's dad caught him peeking at this unexpected visit from his uncle, but Jordy ran back to his bed, eyes shut tight, afraid of the punishment that would surely follow. He could hear the sound of his dad's muffled footsteps and the "click" from the hallway light switch. He cracked one eye open to check and the hallway light blazed from beneath the door. The door handle rattled and his dad was standing in the light. Jordy clenched his eye shut again. The sound of his dad's steps stopped beside his bed. And then nothing. What seemed like an eternity passed before Jordy could feel the weight of his dad as he sat beside Jordy, the bed squeaking under the burden.

He whispered, "Boy, I know you're up. Look at me." Jordy opened his eyes to see his dad searching his face. His dad looked away. "Your uncle has a—a sickness. He's fun to be around sometimes but he gets—I don't know, sad and antsy. And, like when you and your brother get hyper, y'all start running around and all that, well, your uncle, he's gotta get up and run around, too. But that running around gets him in trouble sometimes. So, I gotta keep him

safe. He's my brother, so I'm his keeper. He's my responsibility, not yours. You're not responsible for him. No matter what he says. Now and when you're older. Understand me?"

Jordy nodded.

"I don't want you to be that," he motioned toward the living room. "You are better than that. What he does isn't all right. But family is family. I expect you to look after Stevie, too."

He moved as if to give Jordy a hug, but paused, hand in the air. After a beat more, he lowered his arm. His dad shrugged, as if saying, *what can you do?*

As Jordy grew older, he realized what it really was like when chimoshi visited, and he disliked it. Benny would appear, out of the blue, with a stack of movies that he said he'd bartered for. They'd watch movies, eat pizza, and talk, and he'd always be the clown, making everyone laugh. Then night would fall and he'd go out, only to come back haksi again. Jordy started seeing something happen in Benny's eyes. Behind his laughter, there was always something...sad and painful. Jordy had a hard time describing it to himself, but he sure did notice it. He caught on to the pattern. The visit. The laughter and good times. Then the leaving and coming back so drunk that Benny could have slept standing up. If he could stand up, that is. But then Jordy noticed his dad was watching these same patterns. He'd be just as happy as Jordy to see Uncle Benny. But as the visit went on and the changes in his uncle's eyes would start, his dad would get quieter. He'd look at Benny the same way he'd look at Jordy when he spilled his Kool-Aid by being clumsy. Jordy knew that look to be disappointment.

Eventually, Baby Benny did a year-long bid in prison. Habitual offender of DUI. After he was released, when he came to visit, he still laughed. He still brought joy. But he looked haunted. He was no longer chubby. He wasn't as gaunt then as he was now, but he'd lost a lot of weight in

prison. So, when he came to visit, like usual Jordy, his brother, his dad, and Benny would watch a movie. They laughed and had a good time just like usual. And at the time he would normally leave, Benny would excuse himself to the restroom. What he didn't know was that, after catching Jordy with a pack of cigarettes, Jordy's dad had set up new smoke alarms throughout the house, including in the hall near the bathroom. So, on this night, when the smoke alarm went off and they rushed to the bathroom, they found Uncle Benny, Baby Benny, trying to stamp out a piece of scorched aluminum. White crystals scattered across the tile floor. There was a light chemical smell, almost like ammonia, but slightly sweeter. Jordy had never seen his dad look so disappointed. He turned to Jordy and told him to take Stevie and go to their room. The look in his eyes told Jordy not to argue. On his way, he heard his dad say, "You got five minutes. Don't you ever come back. Don't contact me. Stay the hell away from the boys. They don't have time for a drug addict. Understood?"

Jordy didn't know what his uncle said, but he heard his dad walk away. A few minutes later, he heard the front door open and close. Jordy gave it a few more minutes and crept out to the living room, Stevie right on his tail. Their dad sat on the couch, staring at the blank television. Or rather, staring in the direction of the television. "Boys? Come on out. I know you're there." Jordy moved to sit on the couch. Stevie sat beside him, clutching Jordy's arm. Jordy tried to gently push Stevie towards the arm of the couch, but Stevie refused to release his grip. His dad shook his head. "Maybe I shouldn't have let him come around here so much." He turned to Jordy. "You remind me of him sometimes. Always wanting to laugh. Stay away from people like that. I tried to help him. I tried. I thought maybe if he was around us he would straighten up. That maybe he could see you and be reminded of himself when he was still innocent." His dad had taken a deep breath, exhaling slowly, eyes still staring through the TV.

“Be careful of who you emulate and who you eventually become. Benny wanted to escape from things that happened to him years ago. People that broke his heart, that broke his spirit. That’s why he wants to laugh so much. It’s why he drank. And I guess it’s why he does what he does now. If you see him, stay away. Stay away or else he will drag you down.” Without waiting for Jordy or Stevie to speak or argue, he got up, pausing to lock the front door and went to his room.

But today, standing on his porch, Jordy recognized something of himself in his uncle, something in his eyes. He wasn’t sure what, exactly, and he wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or bad thing. There was a pain behind his uncle’s eyes that Jordy recognized. Not from long ago, but in himself. That very morning, after being served with the divorce Decree, he had taken a shower, getting ready for work. After wiping the fogged-up mirror, Jordy took himself in. The too large belly and the jowls that needed a shave. The short hair that was going gray at the temples. The bags under his eyes. But it was the look in his eyes that caught his attention. They betrayed the pain he felt. He tried to make several faces so that no one would try to ask him what was wrong when he was at work. He hated prying, nosey coworkers. Too gossipy. So, he kept to himself. But no matter how he tried to mask the pain, it was always there. He called out of work. *The call-center customers and their penny-ante bullshit problems can wait. How could he really deal with someone else’s problems when he can’t take care of his own?*

Now, looking into his uncle Benny’s eyes, he could see what his dad saw, he could see the look of someone who is broken inside, even when he is smiling or laughing. Jordy wondered how long Benny had that look. He remembered when he noticed it as a kid, but how long really? If Jordy wasn’t in so much pain right now, would he have recognized that look in his uncle? He would have noticed it, definitely, but would he have recognized it?

Jordy could hear his dad's words about staying away from Baby Benny echoing in his head. But that look... he shook his head hard. "Alright, okay," he said in exasperation, knowing that his dad would have flipped if he found out. Good thing he lived far enough away that it wouldn't matter. "You can stay. But you have to get a job. From now until you get a job, you can clean up the place. No parties and no friends here. You can hang with them somewhere else but I don't even want them on my property. Can't trust the people you bring around. You'll pay rent and utilities. I'm not your taxi so I won't be driving you around the city like you had me do when I first got my license. My dad chewed me out for that because of the areas you were taking me. And don't bring any drugs here."

"Not even a little weed?" Benny asked, his bluster back, grin spread wide across his face.

Jordy shook his head. "What did I just say?"

Benny looked away and then back again. "Okay. I agree to all of that."

Jordy nodded.

Benny smiled, "Okay, nephew. Now, what's for supper and for god's sake, please don't say bologna or I'll puke," and his laughter filled the afternoon air.

Before the divorce, Jordy and his wife used to take turns cooking. She'd usually cook something homemade and healthy. Something like soup made from spinach and a bowl of rice. For breakfast, just one hardboiled egg, fresh out of the water or a piece of pork in a bun. The greasiest thing she'd make would be a pork stir fry and fried tofu slices. Light meals were easier to work off.

When it was Jordy's turn, he'd throw a frozen lasagna in the oven, or maybe a big pot of chili and some hot dogs. Breakfast for dinner with a big platter of eggs and bacon and all the fixings. Something filling. Something comforting. Sometimes on the nights he'd cook dinner, he'd catch her glance at his stomach. If she were in a slightly playful mood she'd give his stomach a gentle poke and a small chiding, but it amounted to the same. *You're too big.* But he could never change, no matter how much he knew he needed to or wanted to.

But that was all in the past.

Before Jordy knew it, Benny had taken over the cooking and the cleaning. Benny had started to joke he would get himself an apron. Purple was his favorite color. The color of royalty. So it had to be purple, with his name stitched into it. Not some cheapie iron-on deal. Nope, it had to be something that would stand the test of time, grease, and the strongest laundry detergent known to man, he'd say. Something that wouldn't unravel. Something handcrafted that you could tell someone put some hard work into it. Benny brought it up so often that Jordy couldn't tell if he was serious or if he was making fun of their odd domestic situation.

Jordy would start on the dishes or some other cleaning task, and Benny would see him and gently start doing the task before Jordy had the chance to say, "No, I got it." Benny would just smile. Jordy figured he was just trying to earn his keep. Except for the jokes about the apron, he never said or even looked like the chores bothered him.

They'd watch television together when Jordy wasn't at work, or they'd listen to music. Jordy would hang on every word of his uncle Benny's stories about his days as a traveling carnie. Years before, Jordy thought his uncle was a loser by taking a job as a carnie. All the traveling instead of putting down roots and building a family, the crap pay, conning people out of

their money. Now, saddled with a mortgage and still madly in love with a woman who was no longer in love with him, Jordy was filled with wanderlust as he listened to his uncle's tales. Benny talked of all the bands, good and bad, famous and up-and-coming and over-the-hill, that he got to see play live, the parties he got to be in, the women he met, the different places he was able to explore on his scant days off. All the experiences that Jordy could've had if maybe he wasn't so...anchored to his ways. Jordy wondered what could have been if life had broken just a little bit differently. Would he have been more like Benny? Would things be worse than they were now? Jordy couldn't tell. At the end of each night and beginning of each day, Jordy put those notions aside and went to work.

Jordy wasn't charging rent until his uncle could find a more permanent job. Benny applied and applied and applied. He'd have to disclose his felon status and any arrests he had on his record. Unfortunately, because of his past, he had some slight theft charges on his record. Most were dropped, but any potential employers just didn't care. Most of the jobs Benny could do with his past had to do with some sort of customer service or day laboring at someone's house, like painting. Couldn't have a known convict working the tills or around someone's valuables. Or rather, couldn't give a convict a second chance to build himself up. Can't have that.

His uncle almost had a job for a couple of weeks, working the grill at a fast food chain. It was a shit job but he didn't have to talk to customers or be responsible for the cash tills. He just made customer's food and, honestly, he wasn't bad at it. Had life broken differently for Benny, maybe he could've been a comedian or a chef. Who knows? But those aren't the breaks. Not for people like him.

Benny did the job just fine. More than fine. He showed up early every day, said his *yessirs* and *nosirs*, he didn't argue, and customers were generally happy with their food. Jordy was proud of his chimoshi. It really seemed like he'd turned a corner and was being more responsible and productive, leaving behind the drugs. But then came the day that his employer told him he was fired because he didn't disclose his felon status on his application.

"Well, no one else would hire me, not even McDonalds," he told Jordy later, so I had to lie. I didn't have a choice!" Benny sat on the floor, back against the couch and knees to his chest. He looked like a little kid being scolded.

Sounds like a little kid, too. Jordy paced the living room floor. He stopped pacing, hands on his hips. "Why the fuck would you not tell them about your record?!"

Benny shrugged, as if to say *I don't know*.

Definitely like a damn little kid. Jordy clenched his fists.

"The supervisor waited until my shift was almost over before he called me back to the office, fucking acted like they just found out," he whined. "When I asked the guy if he would've hired me if I put that on my application, he looked at me and said 'Hell no, you're a felon.'" He shook his head. "I did what I had to do," he said, nodding with finality.

Jordy knew things could be bad for people with a record, but he never thought he'd have VIP seating to watch the results up close. He sighed, liked he always did when he gave in. "Well, what are you making for supper? It's your night to cook."

*

One night, Jordy was moodier than usual. Uncle Benny picked up on it. They were eating supper. As Jordy picked at his plate of lasagna, Benny asked him what was the matter.

“Nothing,” Jordy replied, forlorn. Benny refused to let it lay.

“Nephew! Whatever this is, you can’t let it eat away at you like this. Shit’ll give you cancer. Tell your chimoshi what’s going on.”

“Next week...that would have been our anniversary,” Jordy muttered. He choked back the tears. Benny didn’t say anything for a time. Then he stood up, said, “You should eat that lasagna. You don’t have any more aluminum foil to cover it up. We have some Tupperware but not enough for this much lasagna.” He went to his bag and pulled out a half empty bottle of vodka. The cheap kind in the plastic jug. He poured them both a shot. “It’ll take the edge off. I promise.”

Jordy took the shot. Four shots each is all the bottle held. Jordy’s head was swimming. It had been a while since he had even touched a drop of alcohol. He wasn’t so drunk that he couldn’t stand up, but he definitely started to feel a distance between himself and his feelings. Not enough though.

“Chimoshi,” Jordy coughed out, having to work harder to get his words out straight. Everything started to feel bendy. “What do you do when the love of your life is gone?” Jordy realized that out of all the stories Benny had told him of the women he met, he’d never talked about love. As if it never existed.

Benny looked surprised, then shrugged. “Dunno,” he mumbled, looking away. He chuckled slightly. “You know me, I ain’t the settling down kind.” But the smile didn’t reach his eyes. A slight smile and cool disregard meant to disarm, not to be honest. Jordy squinted, staring

him down. Or trying to. Bendy. Even a bit tipsy, Jordy could see his uncle thinking, could see the pain he tried to shrug off.

“Liar,” Jordy growled. Remembering back to what his dad said about Benny being broken. “I know you did. Is that why you do them? The drugs?” Jordy felt himself losing control but he needed to know. He needed to know because the shots didn’t numb him. The pain tore at his insides, still. Just deafened slightly by the cheap vodka. He needed something more.

Benny, looking both ashamed and hurt, said, “You know I don’t do stuff like that.” He sat shaking his head, as if trying to figure out how to answer. “You know that I gave that stuff up and now you are just throwing it back in my face? How dare you!” He stood up again and wobbled into the bathroom.

Jordy could hear the water turn on. He made his way to his uncle’s duffel bag. He hoped to find more cheap vodka. Tiny bottles of anything would do. He refused to give in to the pain anymore, refused to live with it.

Nothing. But he kept digging. Deeper.

Stuffed deep inside, under all the clothes, he found what he knew would be there: the baggy, the lighter, and the folded aluminum with dried out substance in the fold and dark scorch marks on the outside. The slight smell of ammonia, but sweeter. He sat on the couch and emptied the white crystal contents of the baggy into the fold of the aluminum, held the lighter underneath.

His chimoshi walked out of the bathroom. They locked eyes.

Jordy thumbed down the cylinder and the flame shot out, cooking the crystal, hot gas rolling out. Jordy, eyes still locked on his uncle, inhaled.

Benny shook his head. “No, nephew, not you too,” he whispered.

Jordy leaned back, slow motion, and exhaled. Feeling no pain. He looked down and poked himself in the stomach and smiled.