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LABYRINTH AND OTHER RUDE AWAKENINGS

by
Jack Eno

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Approved by

Advisor: Professor Tom Franklin

Reader: Professor Matt Bondurant

Reader: Professor Molly Pasco-Pranger

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Dedicated to Emma, for helping me get this far, and for taking me the rest of the way.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short fiction stories written by myself over the course of my final three semesters before graduation. Four are short stories, while one is novella length. I went into this project intending to write as diverse a collection as I could manage, while still maintaining a consistent theme or set of themes throughout the collection. The stories are connected by themes of sudden and unfortunate realizations of unspoken truth, religion, and the ways in which religious trauma can affect different people. The stories range in tone, with one comedy, one horror, one criminal drama, and two general dramas, not in that order. Each story, save for one, is wholly original in content from each other. Only the penultimate and ultimate stories are linked in any way beyond theme. I wrote these stories using lessons and experience gained from numerous workshops and classes during my time at the university, including but not limited to short fiction workshops led by Professor Tom Franklin, a screenwriting class led by Chris Offutt, and a nature writing class led by Professor Aimee Nezhukumatathil.

PREFACE

I have spent the past three semesters constructing a collection of short fiction stories to submit as my thesis. This experience has been incredibly educational for me, both in the sense that it has taught me how this writing process looks and feels in the long term, and in the sense that my own skills as a writer have vastly improved compared to where I was when I began. Even better than the knowledge I gained from this experience was the knowledge I had gained in previous semesters being applicable in this environment, as I drew from several previous classes and the lessons I learned from them to create this collection. The whole process wasn't painless, as I did face some difficulties that I wasn't expecting, but anything that went wrong or became too much at points was absolutely worth experiencing in a controlled environment. Most importantly, my capstone professor Tommy Franklin was an indispensable resource of information, suggestions, and encouragement all the way through the process of creating this short fiction collection.

The unifying theme of this collection was meant to be the loss of innocence, which is what I told the honors college. However, as I finished my stories, it grew into the unfortunate and inconvenient realization that you're not the person you thought you were. Hence the phrase "rude awakenings" in the title. However, as I was writing these stories, I realized the running undertone of religious trauma was becoming far too important to not be the main theme of at least half the collection. As such, I ended up including two short stories with the rude awakening theme, two short stories with the religious theme, and one final novella-length story with both themes playing important roles, but the religious theme is far louder than the other one. As such, I feel it is important to note that despite not being in the title, the theme of religious trauma is just as, if not more important than the theme of rude awakenings. It simply revealed itself too late in the writing process to rectify my statement to the honors college.

The collection itself is something I would like to elaborate on, as it began conception in a form very different to the version that has been produced. When I began this project, I wanted to write a collection of stories born from my own personal experiences, but amplified and fictionalized to a point where they would have their own life outside of myself. This vision led to one of the most important revelations I had over the course of the last three semesters, both for the project and for myself: no story should have too much of myself in it. This is for multiple reasons, the most important one being that if I base too much of any one story on an event from my personal life, there is a lot of

context that becomes lost on anyone who is not myself or the people involved in whatever event from my life the story is based on. Normally, this wouldn't bother me, but the process of creating these stories has made me realize that at the core of any story I write, I want it to be good. Either in the sense that they are emotionally evocative, intellectually stimulating, or profound in some way, I want to write stories that are good, even if I am only writing them for myself. In this case, though, I am not only writing them for myself, so I needed to put even more emphasis on quality than I otherwise would. As such, the realization that I needed to place more degrees of separation between myself and these stories was inevitable, but better than that, it was liberating.

After that revelation, which did take a while for me to fully internalize, I realized that the stories I was writing weren't very good, mainly because they were limited to being plausible within my own life. A couple stories I remember tossing after that revelation were one about a child overhearing a conversation at a family reunion, and another one about that child, grown up, experiencing a small epiphany while on a day trip with his family. As I was writing those stories, I thought back on some of my group writing workshops from previous semesters. The unifying element for my favorite pieces I wrote was how they felt beyond my own reality, in the sense that they were unlikely or impossible to happen in my everyday life. As obvious as it seems looking back on it, I had to learn firsthand that the most exciting stories feel larger than life, and that the stories I was writing were only life-sized. While a life-sized story can still be good and exciting, I also had to learn that most of the stories I was writing at that point were neither of those things. One story that I was stuck on for a long time was one about a young land surveyor. It's not the most popular, understood, or respected job out there, and my experience with it is something I can confidently say most people can't relate to. Fundamentally, there is something interesting in a story like that. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to bring it to a point where I was satisfied with it, specifically because I couldn't write it in such a way that someone who wasn't me would be able to understand it. Certain characters acted in certain ways and said certain things that wouldn't have made sense unless you knew them in real life, and the struggles the protagonist faced would have been easily solved, had he not explicitly been based on me. These characters weren't characters, they were people I knew. No matter how interesting they were, explaining all of the necessary context for their personalities and actions would have been a fruitless venture.

Culling that story from the lineup also led to another revelation that affected a couple of the stories that made their way into the final collection: I was putting too much of myself into the protagonists of my stories. I have had even more trouble accepting this revelation than the previous ones, as it has haunted me for the past several semesters. Especially when writing first person stories, I have found myself spending very little time characterizing the protagonists. By seeing myself in them, I would give them my own characteristics at random without explaining what they were or why the character had

them. One of the most important steps I took to fix this problem was prioritizing third person stories for a while. I distanced myself from the protagonists of my work, and I forced myself to name them and refer to themselves as such, instead of using “I” and “me.” Four of the five stories in this collection are told from third person, and of those, I made an effort to narrate one of them from a more distant perspective. However, I did rely on a closer third person perspective for the other three. I have more work to do when it comes to telling stories from an omniscient narrator, but I am glad to say that none of the protagonists in this collection feel much like me.

All of this said, I will move on to discuss each story’s conception, as well as the roles they serve in the collection, their thematic significance, and why I have arranged them as such.

The first of my five stories, “Honey, I’m Home,” is also the first one of the five that I wrote. I was inspired by a movie I had recently seen to write an extended scene of a hitman dying from blood loss in a hotel. I knew I wanted to devote at least five pages to the very slow process of dying, and I wanted to showcase the psychology of a dying man who is slowly losing his grasp on the physical world around him. When it actually came to writing that part of the story, I leaned more into a stream of consciousness approach. In the past, I have struggled with understanding what makes that writing style effective, and even today I find myself prone to going on literary tangents when I write a detail that I want to explore in more depth. I tried my best to lead the stream of consciousness down as organized a path as I could manage and prevent it from bouncing between ideas as they occurred to me. About halfway through the story, when the hitman starts hallucinating the woman he sees as his ex-wife, I realized that was what I wanted the story to be about. Until that point, I was more focused on getting the hitman to the hotel and letting him die. I was prepared to discover more about him once he got there, then go back and add those details into the earlier parts of the story so that it wouldn’t just rely on the imagery and descriptions. That said, I also wanted this to be the most visceral story in the collection, both in subject matter and imagery of injury and death. I wasn’t sure where the line was, in terms of what was permissible by the university’s standards, but I wanted to stride it with confidence rather than tip-toe alongside it. Thematically speaking, I wanted to write a story about a man who realizes everything that’s gone wrong in his life is his own fault, too old to fix any of them, but also too stubborn to accept that truth. Thus, while he doesn’t acknowledge these wrongdoings himself, the reader would ideally recognize his denial. This is one of the rude awakenings mentioned in the title.

One important detail to mention is that, of course, the man in the story isn’t a hitman. He is a bookie, a debt collector for an unseen but spoken about sports gambling organization. This detail was directly linked to the surveyor story that ended up getting scrapped from the collection, so I had to put some extra work into explaining what the office was and who Greg was, since he was going to be an antagonist in that surveyor story. At first, I wanted there to be some uncertainty about his job, but I realized late into

the editing process that it was better to explain his profession before the story ended, so as to avoid unnecessary confusion.

The second story, “Stagnation,” was inspired by my six-hour drive back to the university for this semester. At least two of those hours were spent in a fog too thick for my headlights to pierce, and on a route far different from my normal trek westward on I22. I wanted this story to convey the sense of being utterly lost, while still technically knowing the path you’re meant to take, but without any means of confirming whether you’re on that path. I decided to pair this journey with no destination with a sort of modern running away from home story. However, I didn’t want to write my protagonist as Huckleberry Finn with a cell phone. Rather, I wanted to write a character who wants to run away, and ultimately makes an attempt to do so, but his journey ends in such a catastrophic failure that he can no longer ignore the reality of his incompetence. That was the rude awakening of this story. The main character, John, is hopelessly immature, and I enjoyed putting myself in the mindset of trying to solve problems in the worst ways possible, as well as how to mess up while doing nothing at all. I wanted him to be laughably pathetic, in a black comedy sort of way.

This story is also non-literal for much of its length. I wanted to play with a fluid timeline and use this fluidity to enhance the theme of being stuck in the past. I also wanted to take a setting known for being supernatural, a crossroads, and evoke the fear that comes with this setting without actually writing a supernatural story. This proved to be a challenge, and perhaps I would’ve been better off keeping a version of the ending where it was the devil under the stoplight. However, I realized while writing that there was no reason for the devil to be so interested in this character. He makes enough trouble for himself just by trying to do more than he can, and I didn’t want to cheapen his flaws by blaming them on anyone other than himself. Much like the bookie in the previous story, I wanted his flaws to be shown right to his face, but for him to be unable to accept them. Thus, I chose instead to end the story on him being a massive hypocrite, regressing to childish attempts to gain his mother’s appeal instead of owning up to his incompetence. I don’t think it’s very important whether he actually saw his mother under the stoplight, or whether he was simply remembering the conversation he had with her. The important thing, to me, is the idea of being stuck somewhere with the condition for leaving being simple and obvious, yet you find yourself unable to meet that condition for one reason or another. Unlike the bookie, John has a choice in whether he corrects his life path. He just chooses incorrectly.

The third story, “The Book of Sam,” changed the most from its inception to the version in this collection. In the beginning, I wanted to write a story with a biblical tone of voice, and I wanted to portray the fear that God’s wrath could invoke when it is brought upon someone that doesn’t deserve it. At some point during the process, my thesis advisor presented me with the idea of taking this idea and treating it less seriously, both for its own sake and to diversify the overall tone of the collection. I wanted the

original story to be very sincere, and I realize looking back on it that as much as I liked it, and as much effort as I put into the imagery, it was definitely taking itself far too seriously for anyone else to enjoy it without fully buying into it. Thus, I made a hard reset, and I chose to imagine the base concept of a hellbound soul taking a complaint with god in a completely different context.

I took inspiration from the story “The 400 Pound CEO,” imagining heaven as a corporate space with god having subordinates handle things in his stead. This idea still came out as too sincere for a comedy. Also, it didn’t make sense for a soul already in hell to complain about that to god, especially because I changed the setting of the story to take place during preparations for the rapture, with hell rendered obsolete. Thus, I reimagined this soul as the angel of death Samael, re-assigned to leadership in hell after his devilish actions in the Book of Job. The angel would play a trick on god, and they would sneak into heaven under the guise of a soul seeking recompense, so that they could see god and ask for a severance package. From there, many of the jokes wrote themselves. Although I was a bit vulgar at times, I felt it was appropriate to subvert the idea of heaven as much as possible to get across the idea of a corporate afterlife far removed from anything remotely holy. As for the ending, I wasn’t sure where to take it, so I chose instead to end it in a purposefully trite manner and make a direct call to the reader to interpret it for me, as one final joke on the idea of this being a biblical story.

Following the comedic story is “Angel In The Closet,” which I wrote in my own time and didn’t originally intend to include in the collection. However, I realized that a short dose of horror may be an effective way of following up a comedic story, especially as a way to further separate it from the longest story in the collection. I also recognized that a shorter story would also be a good way of including something more sincere, as the third story was originally intended to be. This sincerity is a part of why the horror focus was more emphasized toward the beginning and moved away from as it went on, and my writing became more emotionally charged by the ending. In addition, a shorter story like this enabled me to focus more on creating a visceral image without minding the active narrative as much.

This story introduces LGBT topics to the collection. Technically, I referred to the angels in the previous stories by gender neutral pronouns, but I think that the idea of heavenly things being beyond the concept of gender is somewhat accepted in the public consciousness. As a member of the LGBT community, I felt it would be a disservice to exclude this part of my life from the collection, but I did find it a challenge to write anything about it without coming off as artificial or stilted. I felt it suited a horror story the most, considering the anxieties which come with being LGBT in the current day, but I also felt that it wouldn’t be enough to explore it in this much depth for only one story as short as this one. As such, I also found a place for such topics in the final and longest story, where I felt they still fit in a natural way. In that story, while the main character’s crush on his friend came about without much preparation, I had planned the gender

identity of one side character from the beginning. Ultimately, I found a way to relate the latter character to this story, and I used this story to flesh out her character. I feel that this decision enhances the last story while legitimizing this one's place in the collection.

Finally, there is the longest story, "Labyrinth." This story took the longest time to assemble, which I believe began at latest in October of last semester. Part of this was due to its final length, but it was also an exercise in writing a full story with multiple plot threads and characters to keep track of, instead of putting the sole focus on a protagonist of moderate depth. Normally, I write in such a way where I don't have an ending mapped out, and I simply follow the story as it plays out before me. However, this time I knew the ending I wanted to arrive at, so I found myself considering that and directing the story as necessary for perhaps the first time in my life.

The original idea was based on the small finger labyrinths you would find in a church, used for solitary meditation. I noticed that on campus, near the student union, there is a large one carved into the ground that you can walk through. That got me thinking about the symbolism of the labyrinth in a Christian context, and I wondered what kind of impact seeing one that large could have on a younger person. I combined that idea with a setting reminiscent of "The Lottery," although I didn't intend to draw inspiration from that story specifically. I also wanted a retrospective aspect to the story, so I set it within a frame narrative of looking back on one's life when religion meant far more to them than it currently does. I find the idea of losing one's faith interesting on its surface, but far more interesting to me is the internal struggle between potential proof of god and the seemingly undeniable reality of his absence. Even then, though, an absence implies a former presence. I wanted to take a character in the midst of that struggle and amplify it tenfold, providing both reasons to believe and reasons to suppress that belief, though never quite enough to deny it.

The main characters of the story are all outcasts in their own ways, except one. I wanted to represent and explore different types of people that can be converted to or distanced from the church, all due to how they are treated by their family, friends, and community. The main character is a somewhat apathetic theist, most likely agnostic, and he is discouraged from organized religion by the various questions and hypocrisies the church fails to address. Ideally, he would have gotten answers or explanations, and he can think of some on his own, but he is instead met with the demand of blind faith and extreme enthusiasm in ignoring these things and embracing the church lifestyle. Allan is a good-natured person with an unfortunate mean streak and a pariah for a father. He is caught in a situation where he is expected by the community to end up like his father, with no chance of redemption, and his initial embrace of what gives him clout among his peers is then framed by authority figures as something wrong and evil inside of him. He is damned to fail in life before being given a chance to grow up. Because of that, he finds it difficult to talk about the Labyrinth because it represents the point at which he had no choice but to bend to the community's will, and being so vulnerable to others'

perceptions of him, he is all the more terrified of learning how god feels about him. Mary is an interesting case. She is a typical case of a closeted Christian whose existence is denied both by herself, being so shut off from the community, and by her father, who pursued his religious lifestyle to the point of abandoning her and her mother. She is also denied by her mother, but I found that relationship better to explore in the previous story instead of forcing a whole separate backstory into an already long narrative. I wanted her fully radicalized by the time she told the main character what she planned to do, beyond the point of explaining herself or justifying her actions, regardless of their morality. Although I had planned for her to die striking back against her community, I couldn't bring myself to kill an already tragic representation of a trans child. That might be a failing on my own part, I have had characters in the past to whom I had grown too attached to kill. Regardless, I also knew she couldn't get off free for potentially murdering her father and a child. Therefore, I thought it was a bad enough fate for her to live condemned by her last friends from the Pocket. Plus, I felt it worked well enough as a loose allegory for internalized homophobia and transphobia. The main character is not shy about saying he can never fully leave his old home behind, and I think that lingering bigotry is an unfortunate reality for many who denounce their faith.

Speaking of the ending, that became the most difficult part to write. By the time I had arrived there, I realized that the story I told was no longer specifically about any one loss of innocence from the narrator. Originally, I was going to end the story with the narrator learning that everyone from his youth that became successful in life cheated at the Labyrinth, but that seemed too clear cut the further I got into the story. It was also an impossible idea considering that nobody seems to leave the Pocket, at least at a surface glance, and I decided early on to write the Pocket as being a sort of Amish community, so phone calls and letters to any place outside the community were impossible. Thus, I chose for the narrator's only other knowledge of the Labyrinth to come from a source he can't bring himself to fully trust. Instead of reaching any real conclusion, I felt it was only appropriate that he ended up much like the protagonists in previous stories. He is unable to fully confront his past, but also unable to escape it. He ends the story by wishing for closure, admitting its impossibility, but still grasping for it. He doesn't leave the bar, and he doesn't leave the Pocket either, continuing to reminisce on his time there. I also felt that ending on the promise of more, possibly endless stories was a good way to close the collection as a whole, considering the newly created theme of being unable to move forward in life.

That is my thesis, in short. It took everything I have learned at the university to create it, both from classes and from personal experiences during the past four years. This whole process has left me a far better writer than I was when I began, and I am left not only with five complete stories that I am satisfied with, but also with some stories left to the wayside that I now feel far more capable of doing justice. Should my future career path involve authorship, I feel fully capable of seeing it through to the end.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

HONEY, I'M HOME.....	1
STAGNATION.....	17
THE BOOK OF SAM.....	28
ANGEL IN THE CLOSET.....	41
LABYRINTH.....	49

Honey, I'm Home

Among the bustling traffic of Georgia Highway 285 was a dark green sedan, a small sign reading "Taxi Atlanta" barely attached to its roof. Within the cab was an elderly man of Persian descent, a white man with one hand under his dark gray knee-length coat, and an unregistered G33 pistol. The white man, who called himself Smith, leaned his head against the window, shifting his body to attempt to quell the fierce pain in his gut. As he did, the car hit a bump. He cracked his head against the window and moved in just the wrong way, and he wasn't sure which pain felt worse now. Workplace injuries always ruined his mood, and at his age, even small ones like this had become difficult to ignore. It was a bad day when he realized he couldn't just shrug them off anymore. Since then, most days had been bad. Then again, they'd been bad before that too. Smith had stopped measuring his days in goodness during the 70s, about a decade before he imagined most people did just the same.

He settled back against the window, trying desperately to be somewhere else, only to be met with the sobering rain. He had forgotten it was raining in the first place, between the stomach pain and the after-work haze. He wondered if most people felt odd on the drive home from work. By the time Smith got home, he was wholly different from the man who had stepped out of the office. Recently, it had begun to feel as though he left

his body hanging by the door at the end of each day, and he had to slip it back on the next morning. He would float from room to room, sometimes coming to rest on his bed, most of the time merging with the living room sofa until his alarm clock screamed from his room in a pitiful attempt to wake him up.

In the beginning of the bad days, it would go on for so long that his wife had to get out of bed and turn it off herself. She told him after a week that he needed to either come to bed or find some other way of waking up. In response, he trained his circadian rhythm to force himself awake just in time to throw on his skin and arrive at work only a minute late. The guys at the office weren't too pleased with it, but Smith had worked there the longest, so the bossman, Greg, didn't bring the hammer down. Smith's internal clock screamed far louder than the one in his room, and it was never too far away from him, as long as he went to sleep sober. The man at work often lost himself in thoughts of getting so drunk that his bender wouldn't end, but the man at home could afford neither the alcohol nor the time spent away from his job. Smith existed as a mediator for the resulting conflict, and the only sound louder than the internal argument was the internal alarm.

Sufficiently zoned out, and the pain in his gut lowered to a muffled roar, Smith took in the sights as the cab meandered north. The road beneath them flew past with a rare bump, but nothing so disruptive as when they had first merged onto the highway. The Atlanta skyline persisted out his window for another thirty minutes, after which the skyscrapers began to taper off. This left the cab surrounded by its ilk, a mass of roaring vehicles migrating north as the career workers made their collective way home. The December sun had set early even for this time of year, as a line of clouds on the horizon

had stolen its light nearly an hour before it was ready to disappear. Headlights came on one-by-one, first in a clump as the new cars with automatic headlights activated, then a bit slower as the drivers in the older models followed the crowd. Every so often, a line of cars would break away to take an exit, and they were replaced by around half as many merging on. Eventually, there were only trees lining the edge of the road, and no cars to block the view. Upon realizing this, Smith jolted up in his seat, setting off the fire in his belly again. Now most assuredly awake, he leaned forward and tapped on the driver's seat.

“Hey, how long have you been driving for?” he asked. The driver did not turn to face him. In fact, he seemed to grab the wheel tighter, and the curve where his neck met his shoulders bulged slightly.

“I have drove straight down the highway,” the driver answered. “Like you ask for me to do, sir.”

“Yes, and thank you for following instructions. How long have you been driving for?” Smith asked. He gripped the seat tighter, felt his nails digging into the faux-leather lining. The pain in his gut was coming back in a big way.

“I drive this cab for eight years now, sir,” the driver answered. Smith wondered how he had managed to maintain that position through the latter half of 2001, not to mention the following four years, but decided against it. He didn't need to hear anyone's life story, especially when that wasn't what Smith had asked in the first place.

“Cut the shit,” Smith said. “We're far enough out of the city, just take the next exit and get me to a hotel.”

The driver huffed and flicked his turn signal on. Smith looked up and saw that they were approaching an exit now, so he settled back in his seat. The car merged without trouble, then took the ramp up and decelerated to a gradual stop at the light. Smith wanted to ask where the nearest hotel was, but when he breathed in, his stomach caught fire. He slammed back in his seat and banged the back of his head against it. He kept forgetting that this car didn't have headrests. He hoped for a moment that this new pain would distract from his stomach, but he was afforded no such luck. He took his hand out from under his coat and pulled it around himself as tightly as he could, then he took the waistband and tied a simple knot, pulling each side until he couldn't take in more than a gasp of air at a time. He then doubled the knot over and over until it would take a Gregorian solution to untie it. If it would keep him from breathing too much, though, then it was good enough for his situation.

Smith looked down at his coat and noticed a dark spot had formed around the knot he had tied, and there was another forming around his right hand, which he had previously held against the spot that was causing him pain. His hand appeared the same shade, even in the low lighting the car afforded. Suddenly, the car jolted forward and to the left, passing under a streetlight on the freeway, and Smith was able to better observe the brownish-red stains on his coat and hand. He felt the color leaving his face, and he was grateful that the driver appeared to be vigilant in keeping his eyes on the road. Smith regained his composure as quickly as he could and crossed his left leg over his right, while also holding his left arm over the knot in his belt. He held this position for as long as he could manage, not daring to glance out the windows of the car for fear of letting his arm or leg slip and reveal a spot of blood. Every so often he would look up at the driver,

and only once did he think he saw the driver's eyes dart back to the road from the rearview mirror. Once was one time too many, though. Smith was left to hope with everything he had that the driver would either forget what he saw, or wouldn't care enough to think about it after tonight.

Finally, the car made a sharp right turn, and Smith looked up to see a Holiday Inn Express sign glowing atop its pole. He'd forgotten whether he asked the driver to take him to a hotel or a motel, but it didn't matter. He just needed to get out of the car before he had to talk again, any words he had left needed to be used calling the office. Greg would have a van here in no time, and he could recover at the office. The driver eased under the awning, and the moment the car jerked to a stop, Smith yanked the door open and tumbled out, barely managing to stay on his feet. He felt heavier than normal, the same way he felt Monday morning after a particularly bad weekend. He leaned against the car, careful to only let his back touch it, and lurched upright. He held this position for what felt like twenty minutes, unsure if he would be able to stand for long, much less walk, when he heard a bang on metal from the other side of the car. He realized that the driver was pounding on the outside of his door, and that he'd been calling to him for some time. Smith couldn't be sure how long. He used whatever adrenaline he had left to force his legs forward. He half-wobbled, half-fell to the passenger side window and leaned over in front of it. He didn't dare touch anything with his hands. The driver rolled the window down and held out his hand.

"You pay now. You said when I picked you up that you pay on arrival. Meter comes to eighty dollars." His dark, thick eyebrows were furrowed over his nose, forming a cute little arrow down his face. He looked like Doris did the last day he saw her. He

tried giving her the same compliment then, only to be met with a slap. Then the door slammed in his face, and she was gone.

Smith blinked and forced his sight back into focus. He was losing blood fast. Or he had lost a lot before now. He blinked again, needed to stay alert. The driver watched all of this, nonplussed, still holding out his hand. Smith reached into his left coat pocket and found nothing, then reached into his right pocket and found nothing there either. He checked both of his pants pockets, finding nothing but his cell phone. He was at a loss for a moment, but remembered then that his coat had pockets on the inside. He reached in delicately, playing a game of Operation, trying not to touch the blood and his stomach. Soon, he reached a point he couldn't get past because of his belt, at which point he turned and leaned against the car again. He forced his hand downward, lighting the fire again, and tried his best to tighten his lips into something that couldn't be identified as a grimace. He checked the right pocket, empty. He felt close to tears as he slipped his hand out, then played the game again. Eventually, he forced his hand into the left pocket. He hit something solid. He wrapped his hand around it and tried pulling it out, but he got hooked on his belt. He felt a couple tears rolling down his cheeks now, but it was too late to wipe those off. He decided he'd rather look crazy than take even a second longer to give the driver his money, so he tightened his face and his grip, and he pulled his hand out of his pocket. He turned back to the passenger window and reached in, prepared to drop his wallet into the man's hand and retreat into the hotel, when he realized he hadn't made any effort not to look constipated. The moment after, he realized that he was aiming his pistol at the driver.

The driver's eyes bounced between Smith and his gun. Smith wasn't sure where to look or what to think, and in his indecision his eyes ended up locking on the driver's face. When he realized that, he tried to find something else to look at so he could think of a way out of this situation. He eventually caught sight of a dark stain on the driver's seat's shoulder, as well as some indentations from where he'd borne down on it earlier. For the first time that day, Smith felt like there was a problem in front of him that didn't have an immediate solution. He ended up staring at that stain for a while longer, his gun still aimed at the driver, whose hands had tightened on the steering wheel. Before either of them could make a move, a car honked its horn. They hadn't noticed it pull in behind them. This managed to knock Smith and the driver out of their stupor, and their eyes locked one last time. Smith coughed, and the bonfire in his gut burned a little brighter. At that point, whatever side of him wanted to talk his way out of the situation was silenced. He retracted his arm, stuffed the gun into his left pants pocket, and turned toward the hotel entrance.

As he took his first step toward the door, he heard the cab's engine rev and its tires screech. A moment later, he heard it screaming out of the parking lot and back onto the freeway. He continued his slow walk toward the hotel entrance as the other car pulled in behind him. He heard two doors open, and a woman's voice called something to someone else. Her voice sounded blurry, a radio broadcast from a city he was quickly gaining distance from. A smaller voice responded to her, then another. Smith kept walking toward the door. He wasn't sure whether he'd be able to open the door, but not long after that thought, two children rushed past him, bumping into his leg and knocking him a bit off balance. Neither stopped to apologize. This offended Smith more than he

was prepared for it to. Not thinking, he let his left hand slip into his pocket, and as he wrapped his hand around the gun, it occurred to him what he was about to do. Before he had a chance to draw, the woman he heard earlier walked past him and called for the children to slow down. They ignored her and ran into the lobby, through a set of automatic doors. That was one problem solved. The woman turned to Smith.

“I’m so sorry about them, they’ve never been this far from home before. Just excited. You’re not hurt, are you?” She spoke with a distinct Brooklyn accent. She had a bundle of curly, brown hair that hung over her shoulder. She hadn’t aged a day since 1963. Smith wasn’t sure what to say, seeing Doris after all this time. He considered telling her about the cab driver, how he reminded him of her for a moment, how there wasn’t a day gone by where he wasn’t thinking about how bad he messed up and how much he needed her back.

He blinked again, and he tried to remember what she’d just asked him. Was he hurt? God, yes, he was hurt. He shook his head and gave her the weakest smile he’d ever given. She smiled back and hurried ahead to her children in the lobby. Smith coughed again, felt something warm on his bottom lip. He needed to get a room, fast. He stumbled forward in the woman’s footsteps, every step too loud. The automatic doors began shutting, but as he stepped onto the row of black strips on the ground, they halted for a moment. He took another step, and the doors reversed back to their apex. His next step landed on harsh white linoleum. The lobby was far too bright, and even looking down resulted in the fluorescent lights being reflected back into his eyes. He froze for a moment, but remembering the father who had yet to come inside, he forced his legs to keep walking.

The journey continued, step by step, until Smith found himself in the middle of the lobby. There was no sign of the woman or her children. He imagined that they weren't too far down either hallway before him, but he couldn't be certain exactly how long it took him to even reach this point. The circadian rhythm that had carried him for decades now was actively fizzling out of existence. Time was bending around him. At any given point, he could either find himself standing five feet farther than he remembered stepping, or he could open his eyes and find his leg moving forward as though he were striding at the bottom of a murky lakebed. He thought for a moment, recounted the steps he'd taken, and remembered that his next objective was to go to the desk and get a room for the night.

He turned to his left and saw a bewildered receptionist standing ramrod straight behind the counter. He started forward, but his legs hadn't caught up with his plan. His right foot snagged his left ankle, and he barely managed to catch himself on the counter with his left elbow. Rising back to a slouch, Smith looked at the receptionist, who had taken a couple steps back and was now pressed against the wall behind her. He made an attempt at words, but the moment he opened his mouth a small gush of blood spilled out and onto the counter. He hadn't even tasted it, much less felt that much pressing against his lips. He wondered how stupid he must have looked with all of it in there. He glanced back up at the receptionist and saw nothing. A door, which was previously on her right and very much closed, was now open and swinging shut. Smith coughed and began walking toward the left hallway, leaning on the counter as he went. A deep red stain trailed behind his arm, and warm droplets fell around his feet. The stains on his jacket had become impossible to hide, and he couldn't maintain a remotely upright posture, but

he still clutched his right arm close against his stomach in an attempt to remain inconspicuous.

Smith turned left and began his way down the hall. He wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for, having neither a key nor any idea which rooms were occupied, but he trudged forward anyway. He leaned on the wall to his right as he walked, shifting every so often to avoid the door handles jutting out. As he went, his mind wandered back to his missing wallet. As a man rapidly approaching his sixties, he was no stranger to the kinds of things that would happen as he got older. His memory was fading, his fingers moved with much less dexterity and flexibility than they did when he was still green, and it was getting harder to force his body awake in the morning after the pitiful amounts of sleep he managed each night. Even now his body was trying to tell Smith that he was approaching his usual bedtime. As usual, he hit the snooze on his circadian clock. He knew all of these things. He knew his decrepit, failing body and mind could be strengthened, if not saved, with enough care and work. He didn't care enough to fix anything, just enough to wallow in it. His wallet, though. He didn't have enough energy to worry about leaving evidence at the scene, but he was just lucid enough to remember that there was one pocket he hadn't checked earlier.

Ten feet ahead of Smith, a door opened. A man in a wrinkled button-down and blue plaid pajama shorts stepped out with a dopey grin and a hop in his step. He wore lipstick stains on his cheeks, the same shade of blue as his pants. He turned to face Smith and froze. His eyes widened, revealing another matching shade of blue. Smith thought about how tacky young couples were nowadays, and he continued walking toward the

man. The man took a step backward and reached toward his pocket. Smith looked down and saw the bulge of a small, rectangular object sitting against his leg.

Smith and his body knew the protocol for witnesses. Every day he went over the collection process in his head before he stepped into the office, then his boss fed him the same spiel. It was one of the few ways in which he tried to maintain his memory. Park at least three minutes away, but no more than five. Approach without malice. Don't hesitate to use force. If there are any witnesses, no there aren't, just get out of there. If anyone intervenes, give the client an extra week to pay up, and evacuate the premises. Nowhere in the spiel was a gun mentioned, but Smith knew that everyone in the office carried and had at least one discharge during their tenure working for Greg. Today was not the first time Smith had fired at a client. It would, however, be the first time he had fired at two people in the same day. He had only just registered that his hand was back in his left pocket, but he knew that the man in front of him was going to die.

Smith drew and aimed the gun as close to the man's heart as he could manage in his current state, but he began to see double the moment he had the sights in front of him. He closed his left eye on instinct, being right handed, and angled the gun right so he could more easily sight in on his target. In the two seconds this took, the man had taken his phone out of his pocket. It was one of the slimmer models, probably a Blackberry, something from this year. Smith's Nokia hardly compared, but for this job he needed something more reliable. Smith pulled the trigger to no result. He'd left the safety on. He reached his thumb around the pistol and flicked the safety off. Back in the day, he used to be a killer thumb wrestler, the king of the sixth grade playground. Smith wondered where all of his classmates were now. He brought his thumb back around and tightened his grip.

In the second this took, the man in front of him was frantically typing on his phone. From within the hotel room, Smith heard his wife's voice. He didn't realize she had a reservation here tonight, this would make for an awkward conversation. Smith pulled the trigger again. As the gun kicked back, he kept his wrist tight and tilted it forward half an inch. The last thing he needed was a misfire or failed ejection of the bullet casing, the creeps he dealt with took any chance they could get. The bullet ripped through the man's phone, shooting sparks and plastic shards in every direction. It continued its course toward the man's chest, and it tore through his skin. Smith used overpressure ammo for the added accuracy and stopping power at close range. He was always annoyed by that term, stopping power. It wasn't a measurable phenomenon, if anything when people talked to him about stopping power they were either talking about the caliber of the bullet or the muzzle velocity. However, in the interest of not being a massive dick, he kept his mouth shut. As the bullet burrowed into the man's sternum and pierced his heart, every other tenant on the first floor of the hotel was either barricading their doors, settling back to sleep, or poking their heads out into the hallway. Those close to Smith who chose to investigate were just in time to see the man slump to the ground, broken phone still in his dead hand, shock and horror still in his dead eyes.

Smith looked at him on the ground and tried to remember what he was thinking about before he was interrupted. Then, he dropped to his knees and vomited a black mess of coffee and granola down his front and onto the dead man's feet. He couldn't remember the last time he had vomited. His breakfast was being ripped out of him like a prize in a claw machine. He fell further until his face was scraping the puddle on the floor and dry heaved a few more times. Once he had finished, he heard a variety of voices all around

him. People in their rooms calming others down, others reassuring themselves that what just happened hadn't happened. Only the word "police" was discernible among the din, due to how many times it was said by so many people. Smith didn't want that on top of everything else. More importantly, he heard his wife screaming from inside the hotel room this man had come out of. It was a real blessing that he had gone to the same hotel she'd chosen for her infidelity. Smith struggled upright on his knees and grabbed the door handle, which he used as leverage to get back onto his feet. The door was held in place by the homewrecker's body, so it stayed steady as Smith stepped into the room.

His wife was shutting the closet door and whispering into it. Probably hiding the ten other men she was banging. Smith let go of the door and stood as straight as he could, wobbling back and forth. He raised the gun at his wife, but his arm sagging at the end left it pointed at her feet, at best. She turned to face him and went pale. She stood up and floated across the room in one fluid motion, leaving a vapor trail behind her. The room was much cloudier than Smith was expecting. If she had become a pothead since he last saw her, he'd be doing the world a favor shooting her with no questions asked. However, his curiosity got the best of him.

"Hello, Doris," he said. "How long has it been now? Thirty years, right?" His voice felt surprisingly strong. The surge of anger at finding her like this had invigorated him.

"Please," she sobbed. Her face was covered in tears. He'd never seen her cry like this. "Please let my children go. They haven't done anything, they don't deserve this." Smith caught the words beneath her words, the ones she was too much of a coward to say. Her lips moved one way, but he heard her voice saying what she meant.

“Oh, I know you think you’re too good for this. You always were too good for me. That’s why you left. You couldn’t handle reality. The ways it changes you. The way it wriggles inside you and into the backs of your eyes. Turns you into a zombie snail going to work at the top of the stem for the birds to grab you and turn you into shit to grow the next generation of parasites.” Blood and spit poured out of Smith’s mouth and pooled onto the floor. His gun waved from left to right in front of him, sometimes grazing his wife’s ankles.

“I don’t know what you want,” Doris said, “But please don’t hurt us. I can call an ambulance, get you help. Do you need to sit down?” She stepped to the side and motioned toward the cuckold’s chair facing the bed. The audacity of this bitch to put him there after what she’d done. Smith stepped toward her and raised the gun as high as he could.

“It all became clear when you left me out to dry. Every single fucking thing in my life can be directly traced back to you. You gave me hope and ripped it away the moment you saw I’d taken the bait. Just because I did some shady work with some shady people doesn’t make me like them! I’m still me, I’m your husband! I’m the man you loved, just older and wiser. I saw the world for real, and I let the reality wash over me and take me out with the riptide. The world is just as cruel as it looks, and all I did was emulate what I saw. I never did anything to you. But I could. If I really wanted to, I could make you disappear right now, and then maybe I’d feel happy again. How about it? Want to do one last good thing for me?”

“Please,” she said again. Smith was getting annoyed with the repetition. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. You need help, medical help. You’re bleeding everywhere, just sit down and I can call help.”

Smith smiled. He knew she would see his way if he got a chance to explain himself. He raised the gun again and fired. He couldn’t see the bullet, but the kicked up smoke and Doris’ screaming meant that it had found its target. Her ghost crouched into a ball and kept screaming. He hoped she would realize she was dead soon, he only needed her dead. He didn’t want her to be without peace in the afterlife. His job done, he strided over to the chair and collapsed into it. He felt full of energy for the first time in years, felt a sense of closure for the first time since his childhood. With this new surge of energy came a slight pain in his back. He finally remembered what he was thinking just before the man interrupted him; he had a pocket sewn into his jacket, and in all the commotion of the day, he had forgotten it. He reached behind him with his right hand, there was no need to cover the blood anymore. He unzipped the pocket and reached inside, and he pulled out a white envelope. Attached to the back of the envelope was his wallet, and connecting the two was a bullet, its rear end barely poking out of the envelope. He wondered what had possessed him that morning to put his wallet into his back pocket. Then again, maybe he put it back there with the envelope after the collection by mistake. The whole day was beginning to blur together in his mind. Smith hoped he would be able to piece things together tomorrow.

Just as he finished his thought, he realized that someone else had come into the room. Not in the mood for conversation or company, he took aim and shot for the fourth time that day. The visitor in blue cried out and fell to the floor, halfway out the door. He

was still screaming when some of his friends came into the room. Doris was screaming again, too. She still hadn't crossed over yet. He aimed toward her in the hopes that a second bullet might help her take the hint, but before he could fire, he felt a series of stabbing pains in his chest and neck. He tried to look back over to the door, but couldn't. He blinked, but couldn't get his eyes open. He blinked his ears and couldn't hear anything anymore. The last thing Smith experienced was a faint image of his cab driver with a gun pointed at him. He thought that was pretty funny. He'd have to tell Doris about that once they were reunited in heaven.

Stagnation

The stoplight's blinking red eye cut through the fog. This was the fifth time John had gone through this intersection, but he was still trying to explain it away. Stoplights were probably rare on the interstate, so maybe his map had redirected him somewhere. There must have been a traffic jam. Hitting this many lights in a row that were blinking red wasn't impossible, just coincidental. He made himself believe for a moment longer that this was just a weird stretch of road, and with his confidence regained, he kept driving. He threw the occasional eye down to his fuel gauge. Hovering between the bottom and the first line up from there. He forgot to fill up before he left, but he was sure he'd find a gas station soon.

He came to the stoplight again. It hung over the middle of the highway, swinging gently in the harsh breeze. He kept his windows shut, but he knew it had to be harsh, it wouldn't be moving at all in anything less. It would've been easier to judge the wind by the trees lining the highway, but the fog obscured anything thirty feet out from his car. He hadn't seen fog this thick before in his life, certainly not while driving. He supposed this was what he got for waiting too long to get on the road. Either way, he'd be out of Alabama soon enough. That was where it was supposed to be the worst, according to his dad. He was always giving John a forecast before he went anywhere.

Seventh time now. The tires were screaming against the pavement. The pavement was different here compared to back home, it made the sound of driving just too loud. If he turned up his music over the sound of the road, the notifications from his map would cut in at a blaring volume. If the volume was only loud enough to hear the map, he'd go insane from the road sound. It was a constant reminder of the real world outside. The last thing he needed while driving long distance was thinking about anything outside the car. His friends would always complain about his music being turned too loud whenever he was behind the wheel, but that was just something they had to deal with.

Eighth time now. He tried looking out the windows at anything, but it was gray as far as the eye could see. Which wasn't far. He almost couldn't hear the road anymore, now that he was getting into the music. He left a lot of albums on the backburner because he knew he could listen to them later, and car rides like this made for excellent excuses.

“John.”

He jolted upright in his seat and looked around the front of the car. He turned as far over his shoulder as he could, but he saw nothing in the back. Granted, it wasn't that far. His neck had gotten incredibly stiff from the four hours and some he'd spent staring at the road today, and his hair hung down next to his eyes, further reducing his peripheral vision. Normally he used a hair tie, but the feeling combined with the long-distance driving always gave him a headache. What he did see wasn't far out of the ordinary. Just the stuff he packed. He debated whether or not to turn on the light and check with more scrutiny, but he decided against it. He didn't want to hit anyone, or god forbid go off the road.

He turned back to the front and caught the stoplight passing over his car for the

ninth time. Long drives like this left him alone for too long, go without significant auditory sensation for too long and your brain tries to fill the space with something. For him, it was his name popping up the moment he had completely zoned out. Sometimes it was other things, but for the most part it wasn't. This time he heard his name in his mom's voice. He turned up the music. He checked his fuel gauge. Looking about where it was the first time, but he knew he was getting closer and closer to empty.

He saw the stoplight approaching in the distance. He checked his rearview mirror and saw nobody behind him, though he wasn't sure if even headlights would cut through this fog. Regardless, he flicked on his hazards and pulled over to the side of the road, right under the stoplight. He kept the car on and running, but made sure to unlock all the doors first. He wasn't sure if they would re-lock after a time, or if that was even a thing they could do, but he wasn't going to find out.

John stepped out of the car. The pavement felt wrong. He had grown up learning all the basic kid rules. Always stay close to mom in the store. Don't talk to strangers. Never go into the road. Even now, on the cusp of eighteen, he wasn't sure whether he was allowed to do this. He swallowed the feeling and walked toward the intersection.

He walked down the road, keeping his feet on the pavement, and as he got farther from his car, the fog grew thicker and thicker. He wondered whether he should've turned on his brights, but he was already walking, so he decided against going all the way back to see if it would help. The faint outline of the treeline came to a sudden stop, and he could see the intersection stretching out to his left and right. He saw no street signs, though. He couldn't even see the poles from which the stoplight hung, completely still

now that the wind had died down. He jogged over to the other side of the intersection and was now almost completely enveloped in gray. Still no pole.

He wondered about going to the other side of the road, but in his indecision, he felt a chill run down his back. He turned and saw nothing. A breeze licked at the back of his head, pushing his hair across his neck and tickling him. He turned back around to see more nothing. There were no eye-gloves in the fog, just his car's headlights. He knew he was alone, he wanted to believe the truth, but he couldn't help but feel eyes on him. He knew the obvious connotation with crossroads, but he wasn't the superstitious type. Only the stoplight was looking at him, harsh red in the white of the fog. The light cast a crimson haze over the center of the intersection, and now that John looked closer, he could see the faintest outline of something. That was more than enough for his curiosity. He turned away, and the shape became more real with his imagination filling in the gaps.

“John.”

He started sprinting back to the car, but his foot landed on the edge of the pavement. The harsh slope down to the grass rolled his ankle over, and he tumbled into the gravel at the edge of the highway. The grass poked up through the rocks, pricking at the newly formed cuts from the gravel. He scrambled back to his feet and rushed to the car. He yanked open the door and leapt in, flipped his brights on, and shut the door behind him.

The music was a welcome change from the silence outside. His car was a shield not only from the wind, which now picked up as indicated by the stoplight swinging again, but from whatever he had imagined out there. He knew there was nothing supernatural, and if by some dark miracle there was, then surely his own belief that the

car would protect him from whatever was outside would lend it some kind of power. It was a shaky sort of logic, but if he didn't think about it further, then he wouldn't have to worry about it. He grimaced, felt the sharpness in his left ankle more now that the adrenaline was wearing off. Upon further inspection, the thing was bordering on annihilated. It was bent nearly 90 degrees inward, and try as he did to avoid understanding exactly what was going on inside of it, he knew that some bone was either not where it belonged or broken. He'd never broken a bone before, so he wasn't sure which it was. Thank goodness it wasn't his driving ankle.

He realized then that he couldn't hear the music, only the car's heater. He rotated to sit properly in his seat, and he reached over to grab his phone while hovering his left leg as far from any surface as he could. It was really starting to sting now. He grabbed his phone, and he was met with an unlit screen. He couldn't remember what percent his battery was on when he stopped the car, or even how long he was running around outside for. More importantly, he didn't remember when his next exit was coming up, nor did he have a way of checking where the nearest gas station was. The fog was too thick to look either way down the intersection to check for streetlights or lit signs, and he wasn't going back outside if he could help it. Most importantly, he didn't remember to bring a charger with him, despite his dad constantly reminding him to keep one on him at all times, in case of emergencies. Part of him wanted to clamber into the backseat and rummage through his bags to see if he had one anyway, but he knew his ankle wouldn't allow it. He resigned to assuming a fetal position and trying not to cry. If nothing else, that was something he could try and succeed.

He sat there like that for a while, curled up in the driver's seat save for his bum leg hovering over the pedals. His hair hung over his face like a curtain slashed by an aggressive cat. The car stayed running the whole time, the brights on and the radio turned up high, despite nothing playing. Only after he grazed his ankle against the floor, sending a lightning strike up his leg, did he realize he should probably start driving. He placed his right foot on the gas and floored it, too frustrated to do anything less. The car roared, and it stayed in place. He remembered then to put it into drive, and he floored it again, this time with more force. The car screamed now, but it started inching forward. He kept his foot glued to the floor, wondering why the car wasn't sending him into a tree, if nothing else.

There was an explosion behind the car, but no flames. Not even a flash of light in his rearview. He took his foot off the gas, and he realized that the car now sat lopsided. His lips tugged down into a frown that looked too extreme to be real, and all the emotion left his eyes. He peered over at the mirror to look at his expression. It looked a lot like his mom's, the day he told her he didn't want to go to college. His eyes dropped to the console, where he saw the emergency brake light on. He disengaged it and leaned back in his seat. The car started inching forward, and the now-flat tire in the back scraped along the pavement. He pulled the e-brake back on.

Years of driving instruction from his parents, a year of driver's ed, all down the drain because he forgot the order of steps needed to drive a car forward. At this point, he would normally have called home to ask what to do next, but he couldn't exactly do that now. That, and his phone was dead anyway. There was nothing to do but go outside and see if he could put the spare on. He knew that the spare, the jumper cables, and some

other things were in the trunk, but he had no idea if he had a jack. He knew there was probably something else you needed to change a tire, but he didn't need to worry about that until he knew he had a spare at all. He took a deep breath, pushed his ankle as far out of his mind as he could, and opened his door.

John slid himself out of the car, keeping a firm grip on the roof, and planted his right foot on the ground. He swapped his hand down to the door, fumbling a bit on the handle. He managed to regain his balance, then he closed the door and made his way to the trunk. When he got there, he leaned against the car and pulled the handle. He was met with firm disappointment. He forgot to unlock the other doors. He made his way back to the front so he could hit the door locks.

The door wouldn't open. John was very confused, considering he'd just gotten out of the car a second ago. He leaned up against the top of the window and looked down at the handle, and sure enough, the door was locked. He must've hit it while he was fumbling with the handle. John stayed there for a moment, weighing his options. He could try to force the door open, since the car was on, the alarm might not go off. He could smash the window open somehow, probably wouldn't be too demanding. He could try walking, abandon the car here and see if he could hitchhike to a gas station and see if he could use their phone. Or use the driver's phone. Wasn't a viable option anyway, given that he hadn't seen another car in an hour. He was still trying not to think about his ankle.

Of the available options, John decided he didn't want to risk breaking the door handle, he couldn't open the car any other way if he did find a way to get it unlocked. He still couldn't walk. He hoped the window would break as it would in a movie. He leaned

back against the rear driver side door and stuffed his shirt collar into his mouth, biting down on it as hard as he could. He lingered there for as long as he could, then he lingered some more. He wondered if it was worth breaking the car just to get inside it and still not be able to go anywhere. It wasn't that cold outside now that the wind had mostly died down, and if he did need to warm up he could get under the car. If he heard someone coming, he'd be able to get out from under the car in time to wave them down. So breaking the window was pointless, and he wouldn't have to bother hurting his elbow. He let his shirt collar drop out of his mouth, a wave of relief washing over him.

The area around him went dark, and the car's engine, which had long before faded into the background, went silent. The nighttime ambience overtook him, crickets chirping and cicadas screeching from everywhere. The red light blinked at him from its perch, a faint glow hanging above him. Even the moon couldn't cut through the fog, but somehow that light managed it. John stayed still, leaning against the car. His eyes widened to the fullest extent, but they took in no more light than they already were. His pupils dilated in a desperate attempt to see anything but the blinking red eye, but to no avail.

“John.”

His eyes darted to the right. The figure was there, under the stoplight. He couldn't quite make out its edges, and the voice came more from inside him than from his right, but he knew it was there. The red eye stared at him. It wasn't going to chase him. It wanted him to come closer.

John limped away as fast as he could manage. He left the car and the stoplight behind and booked it back the way he came. If he was lucky, his parents might let him

back in the house. He dragged his ankle on the ground as he went, howling in an attempt to be heard by anything, but even his voice couldn't pierce the fog.

“Stop throwing a tantrum. You're an adult.”

John stood before the intersection. He looked back and saw he wasn't that far away from his car. He limped toward it as fast as he could manage and started tugging on the door. No luck. He started punching the window, wild haymakers that sometimes collided with the frame of the door, bloodying his knuckles and staining the car. He hoped a car wash wouldn't be too expensive. His dad knew where the cheapest one in town was, he could ask him when he got back, plus he could call a tow truck to get the car.

“Don't you walk away from me, mister.”

John shut the bedroom door behind him and stomped downstairs, so his mom could tell exactly how close to leaving he was. He stood in the doorway, a duffel bag in each hand and his backpack filled to bursting on his back. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to do this or not, it was a massive step he was worried he wouldn't be able to take back. He looked back. His dad stood at the top of the stairs.

“Your mother's not going to take this well. When you come back, she'll be pissed,”

John stared at him for a moment, and then his mind was made up. He stepped over the threshold and turned around to face his dad, now standing in the chilly evening air. He felt the setting sun on the back of his neck, but it didn't warm him much.

“It's going to get nasty out east. If you want to cross a state line, go north. Stay with your grandparents for a night or two.”

John turned around and walked to his car. He popped the trunk and slid his duffel bags inside. He went to the front, tossed his backpack into the passenger seat, and sat down behind the wheel. He gripped it tight. He was going to commit this time. She was right. He was an adult, he could handle his own life, and he would make them see that.

“You might be an adult, but I’m still your mother.”

John stood before the intersection, the door handle still firmly grasped in his hand. He didn’t remember ripping it off the car, or walking back here. The figure beneath the stoplight wasn’t too far from him now, but he still couldn’t make it out. The eye looked down at him. He looked back up at it. He was hoping the two of them could reach some sort of understanding, but the eye didn’t blink anymore.

“Why can’t you just listen to me?”

John looked back down at his mother’s silhouette beneath the stoplight.

“You won’t go to college, you can’t hold a job. What do you think you can accomplish with that mindset?”

John stared in silence. His mother looked back, her facial features dragged out by the fog, smearing the eye’s glow over her face like jelly on toast. The two of them stood in a cloud made of blood.

“You need to grow up. Come over here and sit down. We can talk about this like adults, or you can stand there pouting and I’ll treat you like a child.”

John stood on the spot. His left foot was flat on the ground. It hurt, but he didn’t adjust it or lift it. If he hurt bad enough, she would have to be nice to him.

“If you’re not going to say anything, then just go to your room. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

John kept his eyes open. If he forced a few tears, she would feel bad.

“I just don’t understand you. You beg me to stop coddling you, and then you can’t handle anything on your own. When I try to help, you just make me do everything for you. What do you want from me?”

John stifled a grunt. His leg was growing weaker by the second, and he knew if he fell down, he wouldn’t be able to get back up. The fog swirled around him as though it were being stirred up by some unseen force. The air was completely still. The wind disappeared some time ago. He had to do something. He could try leaving again. If he kept his eyes open like this, then he couldn’t get turned around. He could hide under his car. He could stand in the road until someone hit him. His options were plentiful, he wasn’t trapped here, he could do anything he wanted.

“John. Do something.”

John stayed where he was.

The Book Of Sam

As the time of the rapture steadily approached, and humanity watched its final days disappear, the souls of the damned and righteous were shuffled into purgatory. Hell and Heaven alike were left empty of all but those employed by God, making preparations for the end of the afterlife as it had been since Genesis. Purgatory looked much like a man might envision Heaven, if his only reference was looking at the sky. It was full of cloudy figures glowing a soft white light, mingling among themselves with white wisps trailing behind and between them. They had no feet to stand on, nor hands to grasp each other with, so they floated directionless, doing their best not to look at one another. It was enough not knowing which among them were saints and which were sinners, but now, separated from any kind of physical form and brought into one giant, featureless place, they had begun to forget themselves as well.

The only sentient beings left in purgatory were a few angels, sent down to supervise the souls. Their job was to prevent infighting and attempts to escape into either other realm, but the souls had been so confused by their current state that the angels soon realized their job was pointless. As such, all but one had gone back up to Heaven, and the unlucky angel remaining in purgatory had resigned itself to squatting in a corner and waiting for something to happen.

After a while, something did happen. A soul broke from the crowd and approached the angel with a confident stride, despite its lack of discernible legs. Without any instructions for what to do in case of a disturbance, the angel was left to watch the soul approach, shock washing over its visage. Its chiseled jawline and smooth skin were exaggerated by the addition of emotion, like a Roman statue, suddenly given life, preparing for its close-up.

However, this soul was merely that in appearance. Beneath the visage of a formless being with no identity was the angel of death, Samael, God's most trusted destructive agent. When the snake tempted Eve, and the Red Sea swallowed the armies of Egypt, and the enemies of God's chosen people threatened the spread of His Holy Word, Samael was there to take action. When Job was chosen as an example of a devout follower of God, it was Samael whispering in God's ear, begging for the chance to test his faith. The people of Earth saw that as a devilish thing to do, so God demoted Samael to the management of Hell, along with other fallen and destructive angels. Now, with Hell empty, and with no reason to continue managing it in the wake of the rapture, Samael chose this time to play a trick on God. They would manage, for the first time in their career since Job, to meet with God face to face, and they would take what was rightfully theirs.

Now Samael, in the guise of a soul, now stood before the angel. The two stood in silence, considering one another. The soul spoke just too late to stop it from being awkward.

Ho! and praise His name! Sam said.

The angel covered its ears, Not so loud, please.

The soul said, Oh, sorry about that. I was-

You were not doing anything. Go back to the other souls and leave me alone.

The soul stood before the angel still, but the angel lowered its head to the clipboard in its hands. A double check for instructions left it thoroughly disappointed, as the clipboard didn't even have any paper on it. Its coworkers had said the appearance of authority would be enough to keep away any curious souls. This soul didn't seem merely curious, though. It seemed determined.

The soul said, quieter this time, Please acknowledge me, servant of the Lord. I don't seek to harm you or your kingdom. I simply have a request that must go to God Himself.

At this, the angel finally looked back up. It said, You will do no such thing. Being a servant of the Lord, as you put it, I am well aware that your very being is charred by the fires of Hell. Now go back with the other souls and wait for the rapture.

The angel, expecting this knowledge to give the soul some negative reaction, was surprised when the soul straightened itself and stood as tall as it could. It raised an inch or two farther off the ground than it was already floating, and its limbs began to take a more solid form. Its arms were almost solid down to the wrists, and its legs to the ankles. From the flat, white surface where its face should have been rose a brow, nose, and lips. Samael buried their emotions, and the features sank back into the foggy non-face. They would have to be more careful to maintain their disguise.

The soul said, That is exactly why I seek such counsel. I was cast into Hell unjustly and without reason, and since God is meant to be a perfect deity, I must get an explanation from His mouth as to why I was treated this way.

The angel, confused at this, said, I'm not sure I get your problem. If you went to Hell, you clearly must have deserved it. You don't need to understand why in order to deserve it. In fact, I've heard that humanity has a pretty famous saying about Hell and good intentions.

The soul said, Well, I guess you won't be any help. I suppose I'll have to go ask those other souls about why I was sent to Hell for no reason. In fact, maybe one of them feels the same way I do. Maybe a lot more of them that either of us would imagine. In fact, maybe we'll have some strong words to say about how we're being treated right now. And maybe God didn't send enough backup to save your ass when we get it in our minds to lash out against Heaven.

The angel gripped its clipboard tighter. Are you sure you didn't go to Hell for being a cunt?

The soul, its non-face rippling in glee as the trick passed its first phase, asked, Do you want to find out if it was for being a really good cult leader?

The angel huffed and turned to face a great mountain that, moments before, hadn't been there. At its peak, a circle of cirrus clouds that mimicked the host of souls behind the two of them surrounded a massive building composed of gray bricks. The building, its brutalist nature contrasted by the natural clouds and mountain surrounding it, was far larger than the peak of the mountain. Despite it hanging out over the edges of the peak, it stayed motionless without a hint of unbalance. The soul did its best to contain laughter. It wouldn't have found the scene funny if it weren't supposed to be taken seriously.

The angel took note of the soul's attitude, and it said, Despite its appearance, you must note the physical impossibility of this structure. Surely you expect nothing less of God's will.

The soul said, If God spent any effort on something that stupid, I'm almost worried to see what the inside looks like.

The angel replied, He made the world, didn't He?

With that, it began ascending the mountain before the soul had a chance to respond. It followed close behind the angel, and before long, they had made their way to Heaven's lobby.

Heaven was much less busy than the soul had expected, and far less biblical. Perhaps it was due in part to the lack of wandering souls praising God, but it wondered if there was room for them in the first place. The lobby was small and cramped without all the palms in long clay pots lining the walls. What really sucked were the chairs, sandwiching the pots between themselves and the walls, leaving scant room to sit without tripping anyone coming through the entrance. There wasn't a mudroom either, so the carpet by the doors was muddy from the mountain.

Fortunately, the soul was floating, but the angel wasn't so lucky. Its lack of wings had struck the soul as odd, but now it couldn't resist its curiosity. How come you don't have any wings? Did your bell not ring yet?

The angel groaned and walked up to a desk sitting on the far side of the room. It was flanked on either side by simple wooden doors, complete with generic metal hook-

shaped handles. The left door was unmarked, while the door on the right said Employees Only.

The angel tapped on the desk and another angel that could've been its twin popped up behind the desk. It had clearly been asleep for hours, given the bags under its eyes and the line of spit running down its chin. The soul was surprised it hadn't heard it snoring before.

The supervisor angel said, This one wants counsel with God. Wouldn't take no for an answer. Just pencil it in wherever there's room, I need to get back downstairs. Thanks.

The angel made an about-face and trudged out of the room, leaving a muddy trail behind it. The angel behind the desk wiped its face off with its tunic, rubbed the sleep out of its eyes, and gave the soul a look like it expected something. The soul looked around for a moment, patted itself down for show. It wasn't sure what to give, considering it had nothing.

The angel said, You got a name, bud?

The soul asked, How can I? None of the souls in purgatory could tell you their names if they wanted.

The angel raised an eyebrow, No name, no appointment, bud. Take a hike.

Sam, the soul said. The angel wrote something down on a piece of paper, then tore it in half and gave one to the soul.

The angel said, Door on the left. Take the stairs all the way up.

Sam nodded and went through the door. As it shut behind them, they let the foggy guise fall around around their ankles like a wet towel after a shower. There was no need for it now, the trick was all but complete.

On the other side of the door was a massive staircase going upwards in a square pattern, surrounded by concrete walls on three sides. On the fourth side, right from the entrance, was an empty space. On the other side was a second staircase, also running upward. Sam considered taking that one, but decided against it. Someone might've been watching.

Sam took the stairs up, turned right, turned right again, and was met with a long concrete platform above the door he came in through. They looked over and saw that the other staircase also led to this platform. Both of them continued up from there, and Sam knew his destination was at the top, but they couldn't help but open the door.

Through this door was absolute pandemonium. A cluttered office space with less open floor than the lobby stretched out farther than they could see, curving with the horizon. The sound of keyboards clacking nearly covered up the frantic shouting, and the sounds mingled together in Sam's head like a series of flashbangs going off. Cubicles ran up and down the room, the thinnest of paths between them, papers covered top to bottom in writing too small to read lining every inch of the floor inside the cubicles. Tubes running into the ceiling hung in the halls between cubicles, with openings facing each one. Every half second, another hand would shoot out from the cubicle and shove a bundle of papers into the tubes, where they flew upward into the ceiling.

In the small space between the tubes and the floor of the halls, angels army-crawled from cubicle to cubicle pushing trays with piles of office supplies on them.

Staplers, paper clips, highlighters, and white-out were constantly grabbed off the trays and put back onto them, sometimes from the same cubicle, often from different ones. Sam wondered how they never ran out. Sam also wondered why that of all things was confusing.

One of the floor-bound angels noticed Sam in the doorway and asked, WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Sam took that as the cue to leave. They shut the door and scampered up the stairs. After two right turns, they were in front of another door. Considering the likelihood that this door would lead to a place no better than the other one, Sam chose to crack this one open and peek inside.

This place was a bit better than the other, though only for the first half second. Cubicles still stretched farther than Sam could see, and instead of being obnoxiously loud, Sam instead noted the distinct musk of semen wafting out of the room. There was also a low hum of moaning, which Sam might have mistaken it for hushed prayer if it weren't for the pungent stench that left them lightheaded.

These cubicles had little satellites and radars poking over the tops, and from the few cubicles they could see into, the angels inside them seemed to be wearing the same type of headphones a helicopter pilot would wear. Some of the angels they could see had other angels under their desks, with their heads hidden under the sitting angel's tunic. Sam guessed that this was where God listened to all the world's prayers, but not only did nobody here appear to be paying much attention, God was nowhere to be seen. Sam backed out of the room and took a deep breath, then continued upward.

One more floor, and past this door was a large garage, with an ornately decorated muscle car parked in the middle. It shone like the sun, despite no obvious sources of light anywhere for it to reflect. The whole place seemed to be lit by nothing. Sam then noticed that each of the car's wheels seemed to be staring at them. In fact, the wheels were lined with rows of eyes for their whole perimeter. Without lashes or brows, the eyes gave off no concrete emotions, simply the sensation of being watched. Sam backed out of the room before giving the car a chance to display any more human traits.

One more floor up, the stairs finally stopped. This door looked the same as the others, but it had a sign on it like the "Employees Only" door downstairs. It was written in tongues, so Sam couldn't understand it. Regardless, they opened the door. Inside this one was a giant rolling chair with a giant man wearing giant headphones sitting on it. Sam knew who that was, but what they weren't expecting were the bundles of feathers surrounding the chair, flying around it at supersonic speeds chanting praise and hollering like southern Baptists. That supervisor angel would've been pissed seeing these. On the floor surrounding the chair were a bunch of babies with thick-rimmed glasses reading books twice their size. Sam took a closer look and saw complex equations on the pages and paragraphs of several non-English languages.

Sam took a step into the room, but nobody noticed. A couple more steps, to no avail. They were hoping God might notice them without having to make a scene, but that wasn't exactly out of character for Him. Those headphones, combined with the screaming bundles of feathers, probably left Him deaf to most of humanity's cries for help. Only one of the several things Sam was here to talk about.

Sam leaned down and snatched a textbook from one of the nerd babies on the floor. Rather than begin crying, it chose to ponder whether it had ever truly possessed the book in the first place. Sam leaned back as far as they could manage and flung the book at God's knee. The book hit its mark, right below the patella, and God's leg shot out and punted one of the babies across the room. It splatted against the door, slamming it shut behind Sam. God tore off His headphones and clutched His knee, looking around the room to figure out what had just happened. The feather bundles never stopped their screaming praise, though they did alter their courses to make sure they didn't collide with God's head.

Sam cried out, Ho! Guess who's back!

WHO ARE YOU? WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT?

The words echoed thousands of times, causing the feather bundles to tumble around in the air and collide with each other. They went down screaming like mortar fire, sending pages from the babies' textbooks into the air.

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, THAT YOU CAN COME IN HERE AND PULL THIS SHIT?

Sam smirked. You really don't recognize me?

WHAT? WHAT KIND OF QUESTION IS THAT? THE HELL DOES IT MATTER WHO YOU ARE? YOU THREW A BOOK AT MY KNEE! THAT SHIT HURTS!

Sam said, It took a lot for me to get here, but now that I've arrived, I'd like to pose a direct complaint at your lacking management skills and general ineptitude regarding the afterlife underfunding situation.

YOU HUH?

Sam said, My name is Samael. You might know me as the angel of death, considering that's what You hired me for. But You may also know me as one of the co-kings of Hell. Then again, You wouldn't, because we haven't seen a single cent from You since our inception several millennia ago.

OH MY GOD, IS THAT WHAT THIS SHIT IS ABOUT? YOU KNOW YOU COULD'VE JUST SENT ME AN EMAIL OR SOMETHING.

I've sent You fifty fucking emails just this week! You literally struck each one from existence the moment I sent them!

OH, YOU MUST HAVE BEEN USING ONE OF MY OLD ADDRESSES. I COULD GIVE YOU A NEW ONE AFTER I KICK YOUR SHIT IN, IF YOU'D LIKE.

Sam said, I just told you what happened! And no, I don't want that! I want a singular fucking dollar to spend on a fire pit, or a whip made of screams and rose stems, or a demon to use either of those things to torture a sinner with! Have you seen Hell lately? Everyone's just standing around with nothing to do because we don't have the resources to punish them!

THAT SEEMS LIKE A KIND OF HELL TO ME. I'M NOT SURE WHAT THE BIG DEAL IS.

Sam began to speak again, but God shut them up and continued.

BESIDES, I'VE GOT BIGGER THINGS TO DEAL WITH. EVER SINCE THAT DIPSHIT, TREE-HUGGER SON OF MINE MADE UP THIS WHOLE RAPTURE NONSENSE, I'VE BEEN EXPECTED TO GO THROUGH WITH IT. IT'S LIKE PEOPLE THINK WE'RE THE SAME PERSON.

Sam said, Well that's dumb. Can't You just not do it?

I MEAN, YEAH, I GUESS. BUT THAT WOULD SEEM KIND OF SHITTY OF ME. GRANTED, I'VE BEEN IN MORE OF AN OLD TESTAMENT MOOD RECENTLY, LORD GOD TYPE OF SHIT, BUT THAT'S NOT VERY POPULAR ANYMORE OUTSIDE OF THE ODD WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH SPRINKLED AROUND THE WORLD.

Sam asked, So what if people stop worshiping You? You're God, for shit's sake. And stop trying to change the subject. Funding. Hell. Give.

I JUST EXPLAINED WHY YOU DON'T NEED THAT SHIT.

Sam said, Then how about a severance package for me and the other kings?

YOU THINK I'LL ACTUALLY BELIEVE THERE'S MORE THAN ONE DEVIL? I INVENTED THAT GUY. DON'T INSULT ME.

Sam said, Lucifer? Abaddon? Ring any bells? You've invented plenty Devils over the years. I'm half convinced we only exist because You keep forgetting the first one's name.

OH SHIT. MAYBE I DID DO THAT.

Sam said, Yeah. You did.

FUCK.

Sam said, Yeah.

God reached into His pocket and tossed some lint down at Sam.

TAKE THAT TO HELL, LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU GET THERE. I'LL TURN IT INTO HOWEVER MUCH YOU GUYS NEED.

Sam gave a short bow, then turned around and opened the door. Before they left, though, they gave one final comment.

Sam said, Thanks for making everyone in Your image. It makes it really easy to deceive people.

YEAH, IT REALLY DOES. I THOUGHT IT WOULD'VE DISCOURAGED THE ANGELS FROM HAVING SEX ON THE JOB, THOUGH.

Sam asked, You know about that? That was two floors beneath here, I figured You never left this room.

OF COURSE I KNOW. I'M GOD.

Sam said, If You say so.

Sam left the room and shut the door behind them. They made the trek back downstairs and down the mountain. They didn't look back, just in case. They walked through purgatory, shoving souls aside on their way back to Hell. Upon their arrival, true to His word, the lint transformed into a massive pile of gold. The gesture was appreciated. However, since angels have no need for currency, Sam left the gold behind and joined the other kings of Hell in a blunt rotation. They relayed the whole story, and they all laughed about it until the end of days.

When the rapture finally came, the souls lined up to be processed into their new jobs in Heaven, and the former kings of Hell left to go seek employment elsewhere. God quickly forgot about the whole endeavor. Make of that what you will.

Angel In The Closet

Mary sat on her bed, sheets clenched in small hands, eyes glued to the closet. One of the closet doors had a mirror hanging on it, and in the side of her vision she could see herself, sitting on the bed alone. Hopefully alone. There was already one in her room, so there could very well be another. The other closet door was slightly ajar, even though she knew she had closed it before she got in bed that night. It was still closed when she woke up at two to go to the bathroom. Then, when she got back, it was cracked. She must have left the bedroom door open while she was in the bathroom, she always tried to pay attention to that, but she could never keep track of it. Her dad used to stop the car after trips to the gas station because he forgot to close the gas cap after filling up. Mary felt a lot like him right now. It was the closest they had been ever since he left.

The eye was peeking out from the darkness of the closet. Logically, it shouldn't have been visible, considering the rest of its face and body were nowhere to be seen. But the eye was there regardless. It glowed like the moon does, even during the dawn when it's supposed to be gone, looming over the world like it wants to give one last goodbye before the morning comes for real. A hazy glow, not very much light at all, but the softest impression of it. The smallest difference from the darkness of the rest of the closet.

Mary hated the eye more than anything. Some nights she could see a little more of the face, taut and firm like it was cast in marble, never moving, too perfect. Always smiling for a picture that was never taken. It was smiling, to be sure. Sometimes Mary caught a glimpse of its teeth just below the eye, shining with the same non-light the eye did. The teeth were bad on their own, too sharp, too well-aligned. People had to work to get rows of teeth like that, but this thing got them without even trying. That must've been what it was so happy about.

The eye, though. It was a perfect shade of blue, perfect perfect perfect, just like the rest of it. The blue was surrounded by a ring of gold, like a cherry on top, a necklace hovering above cleavage hidden behind a ball gown. The top and bottom of the iris was always visible, its face had to be at just the right angle to see it like that.

Mary was always trying to recreate it in reflections when she was in the bathroom, or in church, or any time she was near a window. Her mom always said, "He's a bit touched," as if that explained it. Who had touched her? Touched her in the brain? Rubbed it the wrong way? Spun it around like a football in flight? Crossed the wrong wires and left her incorrect? She couldn't figure it out. When she asked her mom, she would just hush her and laugh with whoever she was talking to, like she suddenly wasn't there. Mary never knew how to take that, so she went ahead trying to make the face right.

The eye was always perfectly centered in its socket. It didn't hover, it hung, suspended. Like it never had anything interesting to look at besides Mary. It wasn't much of a flattery. Mary hated being looked at, she could feel eyes on her wherever she went. Even when people weren't looking, they were. Especially if her back was turned. If

people were talking to their friends, too far away to make any words out, they were talking about Mary.

The pupil never dilated, never grew nor shrunk. Because of that, Mary figured the thing was nocturnal. That, or it hid in there during the day. But that couldn't be the case, she checked the closet every morning, had her mom check it too, whenever she was acting agreeable. There was never anything in there. That, and the door was never cracked in the morning, so it must have left during the night. Thought it was slick. It was really the audacity that bothered her, at the heart of the matter. It thought it could come in there and make Mary's life worse, and it thought it could get away with it. Maybe it could. Maybe it was. Mary couldn't do anything about it.

The eye was a perfect circle, another thing Mary often tried and failed at recreating in the mirror. Pulling her eyelids back sometimes got close, but that also hurt a lot, made her feel like her eye would pop out if she did it too much. She was left to conclude the thing either didn't have eyelids, or it simply forced them open like that all night, which would be a lot of effort to spend on something so trivial.

None of these details added up to a cohesive whole, save for the one other thing Mary had noticed one night. Above the eye and the teeth, there was a hint of something soft. Something that rustled when she forgot to close the window all the way. Something white. Feathers. Not like a bird, those were smooth feathers that looked correct on a bird. These were like fake feathers, novelty stuff, like you'd see on a costume. They were puffy, had individual strands on them, far too soft looking to be real feathers. Even feathers that were clearly strands of things on a stem of some sort had a stiffness to them, they didn't come apart and blow in the wind like a bath towel hung out to dry. These

feathers didn't even rustle, really, so much as wiggle individually. They bent around like they were a sort of fluid. There was a very real difference there, but Mary didn't quite have the words to describe it in a way that sounded rational. Then again, something in your closet is a bit beyond reason.

So there it was, the eye in the closet, softly glowing, looking right at her. Mary sat in bed and pondered it. Teeth below, human teeth. Faux feathers above, or at least not normal bird feathers. There was only one real answer for it, but Mary always stopped short of actually thinking the answer. She didn't want it to be true. If that was in there, then she truly had no place to hide. She needed a safe place. Somewhere nobody was looking.

Every Sunday, Mary heard about what a blessing it was that god was looking over us, and how his plans for us would deliver us unto him. Lambs to the slaughter. Mary didn't want to die. She very much didn't want to die. Heaven sounded so nice that she was convinced the Sunday school teacher must have wanted to die, as did the pastor and the choir and the people that walked around with baskets full of donations. Some of the people in the audience definitely wanted to die, the way they cried about heaven and angels. The way they said amen when the preacher talked about god. If god wanted her to die so much, Mary was certain that god must either have a problem with her, or he must be touched, too.

Granted, Mary wanted some people to die. The people that looked at her, for one. The ones that didn't even bother hiding it. The ones that laughed at her to her face, tugged her hair in the hall when it was nearly too long, made her touch the inside of the toilet in the restroom. Those people Mary very much wanted to die, but preferably not go

to heaven. If they did die, that's probably where they'd go. They seemed to be regarded in high standing by the other people at school who sat more in a neutral area. Even at church, their parents talked with other parents about how good all the kids who weren't Mary were. The grandparents talked about how Mary was committing "the homosexual act" with their congregation's grandbabies, and that she needed to be stopped before the whole church was full of homos. Mary wished them the most fiery deaths of them all. But being as old as they were, Mary knew that dying now would just leave them with happy memories and sad relatives. So she resolved to wish for spontaneous explosions at their funerals instead.

Mary wondered if people wished she would die, or whether she was good to keep around for a laugh and a shove. Mary wondered too if god would even accept her into an afterlife, if he would give this many people permission to treat her the way that they did. She was never able to find a satisfying answer to these questions, so she kept living in the hopes that maybe someday things would make sense.

The thing that most certainly wasn't an angel sat in the closet, smiling, while Mary pondered life. She kept her eyes on it, though, hoping that it wouldn't notice the shift in attention. It was a frustrating situation, having this thing in here, night after night. Mary thought god was above harassment, at first. He sent floods and destroyed cities for a cheap thrill, surely he would have bigger plans for a weird kid alone in her room at night. Maybe that was part of it too. Maybe god was touching Mary's brain until she couldn't be sure of anything anymore, trying to leave her as scared and paranoid as the people who blamed every bad thing on her.

That was the worst part. Everything always came back to Mary. It was her fault she was picked on, her fault old people were scared of her, her fault other kids in the community had started growing their hair out and holding hands with other boys. Mary knew nobody was even doing that. If they were, she would've felt some kind of solidarity, if nothing else. Instead, whenever someone was accused of being a homo, Mary got extra harassment for it. Extra time in the restroom. Only once had Mary asked her mom about the thing in the closet potentially being an angel, and she said it was her own fault that god had to keep an extra eye on her. God wanted to make sure her bed stayed empty of other men, and she, for one, was grateful that someone was keeping an eye on her while she was asleep. Mary wasn't sure what to make of that, so she stayed quiet. Her mom told her to stop staring, and she sent her to her room.

Mary sometimes thought about going to the closet and yanking it open, exposing the thing for real, getting some kind of closure from the situation. What would it do upon being forced into the open? Kill her? God clearly got a kick out of Mary's life, so that wouldn't make sense. Would it keep sitting there staring, like she hadn't done anything at all? Even if it did, Mary wouldn't be scared. That would just be more annoying, if anything, no catharsis to be found there. God would certainly like that.

But more likely than anything, the creature would probably retreat. Why else would god stay in heaven besides fear? It probably took a lot of work to make bushes burn and kingdoms fall, all the way from heaven. Speaking to prophets from so far away couldn't be easy, Mary knew how hard it was to make people right in front of her understand what she was saying. God was many things, but he wasn't lazy. He made the whole world, that was worth something. He set things up in just the right way for the

worst things possible to happen, and then he punished the world for going according to plan. That sort of thing takes some skill, Mary could admit that. But to do all that from so far away that none of the humans can yell back at you, tell you that you really suck for ruining everything all the time? God was definitely afraid. If god was less of a sissy, he could take the harassment. Mary was braver than god, for certain, just because he didn't run away into the sky whenever things got hard.

So there she sat, looking at the eye in the closet, when she decided that she had enough. She was going to stand up and go open those doors and, if nothing else, see if what she thought was in there was really in there. She wasn't scared. She was pissed. Mary got off the bed and walked over to the closet with determination in every step. She grabbed the knobs and flung the doors open. There was nothing inside.

Her mom came in then and screamed at her for making such a ruckus in the middle of the night. She didn't say anything because she knew she wouldn't understand. She screamed at Richard for being such a creep, and she slapped her several times and told her to apologize. Mary apologized, and she yelled at her more, asking if she thought that made it better. She said she wondered why Richard felt the need to make her life so hard, to act up in public so much and make people think she wasn't a good mom. Mary told her she wasn't a good mom, and that she wasn't Richard. Her mother stood there for a moment, then she started crying and walked back to her room. Mary left the empty doorway, then she shut it and the closet. She got back in bed, and the closet stayed shut for now. She was ready to go through this again whenever the need arose, but for now, she went to sleep.

Mary dreamed about a boy as beautiful as that face in the closet. The boy sat with her in bed and held her hand. The two of them didn't need to talk about anything, or tell other kids to shut up, or perform the homosexual act. They sat with each other, and for a moment, god let it happen. That's how Mary knew it was a dream.

Labyrinth

You know, the United States of America is something of a population sandwich. Don't interrupt, I'm going somewhere with this. It's two soggy slices of people on the east and west, and a heaping pile of nothing for hundreds of miles in the middle. It takes a while to find real emptiness, even west of the Mississippi you're likely to find towns of decent size every hour or so, if you're looking for that sort of thing. If God smiles on your travels, you might even find cell service in one of those towns, so you can call home and tell your mother that no, you haven't died in an accident, and no, you're not coming back.

No, if you want empty, you need to keep going west. Make Texas a memory, say goodbye to Missouri, but for God's sake don't go too far and end up in Vegas. Horrible place. One of my friends has a father who practically lives there, the place sucked him dry. You want to head north, but not too far north, then you're getting hounded by border patrol and asked why anyone would ever consider going to some place as beautiful as Canada for a vacation. You're aiming for that sweet spot from Montana to Iowa. Pretty big target, granted. I guess when you grow up where I did, it feels like a pretty small place.

Where did I grow up? You wouldn't know the town, and no, I'm not trying to brag. I can't stand people like that, "I'm better than you because you've never heard of my hometown! Look at me, I'm soooo podunk!" Jesus, people like that get on my nerves. Guarantee you they don't even know what podunk means. Do you? Nevermind, don't let me turn into one of them. I will warn you, though, if you want me to answer that question, you're going to turn me into something worse. I can't stop talking once I have a few in me. Why did I start off with four shots, then? You got me! Here I am, trying to sneak a story onto you, and you call me right out. Well, how about I continue anyway. Why? I'm afraid that explanation requires context. So relinquish yourself to this delicious catch-22 and shut up already, would you? You will? Thank you, friend. I promise, I'll try to keep it short. But I also promise that I can't keep that promise.

Now, where was I? Right, my home town. I grew up in a quiet little community called the Pocket, named as such because it's tucked into the deepest part of Hope Valley in Montana. The Voice said it was actually called that because it sat in God's pocket, always right by his side. Folks were always talking about how the moment of death was quick and painless there, since God could reach right down and pluck your soul from his pocket and drop you off in Heaven. There's a creek that runs through and cuts the town in half, on one side there's the market district, and on the other there's the church and the school. It's fed by a river from the north that splits in two and circles the town nearly completely. I don't think there's a name for that or the creek, everyone just called them the river and the creek when I was a kid. There's a little land bridge where the river doesn't quite join up with itself, but the path from there still needs a bridge to cross over

the other river. That one was called Herschel River, it fed into Herschel's Pond. I'm not sure who Herschel is. I also don't know why the river was named Herschel but Herschel owned the pond, but I guarantee you the story behind that is nowhere near my story. I couldn't tell you which county the town sits in, I'm lucky to remember it's even in Montana. It's a paradoxical little place. Everyone seemed to know everything about the town itself, but not a soul could talk much about anything across the bridge.

That pond was where a lot of our drinking water came from, so we weren't allowed to swim in it or Herschel River. That made the river-moat and the creek the primo spots for us kids in the summer. That's really where things started going bad for me. Summer before my sixth school year. I was hanging out at the creek with Allan and some of the other guys. Did I mention Allan? He's the guy whose dad was the Vegas junkie. That man was the only person in town who seemed to know anything about the outside world, and of course he was a complete embarrassment. His wife, the poor woman, had to keep up appearances as best she could, but that couldn't stop the rumors about her and her child.

Us kids knew better than to shit-talk Allan to his face, though. He dealt with that all through school, up until the end of fifth year. Knocked a kid clean out in the cafeteria, right in front of all the teachers eating their lunch. Ever since then, he's had "momentary spurts of devilish influence" whenever his parents talk about him to other adults. For us kids, though, he just had a mean right hook. Not to mention a penchant for kicking someone while he's down. Three teachers had to lift him off the guy, and ever since they've only referred to that day as "the episode." They tried their best to stop us from turning the episode into a school legend, but giving it a name that badass was a horrible

first step. As far as Allan was concerned, he decided he would rather be known as the kid who'd kick your shit in if you pissed him off rather than the kid whose dad slept with whores and gambled his son's savings away. From that day on, he carried himself like a celebrity, and the younger kids couldn't help but stare in awe whenever he walked down their hallways. That corner in the cafeteria became a historic site, the upperclassmen never let kids sit where he sat that day.

So there we were, July before sixth grade, a couple months out from Allan becoming the new coolest guy in the world, and everyone wanted to be his friend. Or maybe they just wanted to be on his good side. Either way, he knew a snake when he saw one, and he kept them out of his yard and his creek. The only people he let hang out with him after that were me, Chris, and Richard. Chris and Richard were more his friends than mine, but Chris was always nice to me even before we had Allan as a real connection. I never knew Richard very close, only that he hated being called that. He didn't even accept Rich, Richie, or Dick. Weird guy. Skittish, too. I never could get a read on him. I apologize for starting the story twice now and not actually saying anything, I told you I couldn't keep that promise.

Anyway, there we were in the creek, talking Allan up like the boss he was, when his cousin came out on the back porch and yelled out something to us. Allan got out of the creek to go ask what was up, the rest of us lingered for the moment. I remember the feeling of the stones at the bottom of the creek. It wasn't even that deep, but the creekbed felt smooth like those rocks had been worn down by rushing waters for thousands of years. That and the pine treeline at the edge of the creek opposite Allan's house were the purest definition for summer for me. Yeah, the needles were always falling into the

water, and if you were really unlucky you'd end up catching one in the face if it fell directly on you, but that was summer too. Back when things feeling bad or being bad didn't matter because the bad would stop soon enough, the world would go back to normal and be good again. That was summer. Then Allan came back down to the creek and ended summer.

"Mom says we gotta go inside," he said. We answered with disappointed grunts and sighs, of course, but we got out of the creek nonetheless. Chris went ahead of the rest of us, probably to make sure his glasses were where he left them on the deck. Allan and I walked in stride, while Richard tailed behind us.

"What does she want?" I asked him. "The sun's still up, so it can't be dinner time, right? Or does she need to go to bed early?"

"She just said to get everyone inside." Allan sounded a bit off as he said it, and he was walking in a strange, stiff manner, almost like his legs were being dragged forward.

"Is that all she said?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. I knew to stop pressing, then. We got to the stairs leading up to the deck, which Chris had already ascended and begun drying off. He took one of the beach towels, which left me and Richard with the other two beach towels and Allan with the actual good towel. We dried off for a minute, draped the towels over our shoulders, and went inside single-file to see all of our mothers sitting in the living room. Allan's cousin was nowhere to be seen, but I heard some stomping around upstairs. Our mothers were all dead quiet, trading quick looks at each other, so obviously they were talking about us right before we'd come inside. None of us could say that for fear of coming off

judgmental, so we stood there while they sat there and everybody just waited for someone to actually give us the reason why we had to come inside.

Allan's dad belched from somewhere in the kitchen. Everybody jolted at that, the silence had become palpable so quickly that I didn't even realize that I was holding my breath. There were a couple chuckles at that, a cough or two, and Allan's mother beckoned us forward to sit on the floor in the middle of the room. The coffee table had been shoved aside to make room for us. We sat down between the couches and the chairs and they all stared at us for a moment. I noticed that my mom had her hand over her mouth, she looked like she was holding back tears.

"My goodness," she said, "All of you boys have grown up so much faster than we were prepared for. Before anything else, I think I speak for all of us when I say we're so proud of how far you've come." The other women nodded in agreement, a couple quiet amens were heard.

"That being said," Allan's mother picked up where mine left off. "We decided to take this time to tell you boys that your lives are going to become very different tomorrow, and we want to prepare you for the transition that's coming."

The four of us remained silent and still, but I looked at the other guys and saw some eyebrows raised, and I knew my own had raised as well.

"You've all finished the fifth grade," Allan's mom said, "which only leaves one more year before you get out of school and become real men of the town."

Oh, that's something I should probably elaborate on. We didn't get middle or high school in the Pocket. You look more surprised than I was expecting. You thought it was

just one of those places where sixth grade is in elementary school? Nope, it's just that short. First grade through to sixth, graduation at thirteen years old, and then you take your place in the town. Huh? Kindergarten? Is that some German thing? We just started school in August of the year we were seven years old, before that it was just Sunday School. Pre-school? Man, did your parents not know how to read or something? Kids don't need real learning until that age, before that they're sweet and naive enough to just be obedient little drones for their parents. The whole point of school is to toss them in there when their curiosity becomes uncontrollable, drain it out of them, and spit them out so they can make more kids and keep things moving nice and smooth. Maybe that's a bit of an overstatement, sure, but it's pretty much the cycle in the Pocket. Just keep all that in mind.

So Allan's mother was telling us about how we had one more year of school left. She gave us the usual platitudes, stuff about how adulthood would be harder than youth but we had the strength to face it, school trains us for life so we need to make sure not to slack off this last year, look around and see if there's any pretty girls we like now before we get too absorbed in our future jobs, stuff like that. But right before she finished the little speech, Richard's mother looked up from a small book she was reading and spoke up.

"Are you going to tell them about tomorrow?" she asked. "Or are you just going to let them go to bed tonight worrying about it?"

"Oh!" Allan's mom gasped. "I had completely forgotten about that! Thank you very much, Linda."

Richard's mom rolled her eyes and put her book back into her purse. I caught something shiny on the front and realized it was just a Pocket Bible.

“As I was saying, things are going to become very different for you boys tomorrow. As you all know, it's Sunday tomorrow, so you'll be going to church as usual. But now that there's only a week before school begins again, this will be the last service of the summer. Do you all know what that means?”

None of us answered immediately, and I knew Chris was giving us time to answer before him in case we actually had one. As usual, he spoke up, clearing his throat first so that all four of our mothers were looking at him as he stood up.

“As the final service of the summer,” he said, “this will be the Sunday School wherein we will be officially told about the Labyrinth. As for the adults, those who took the Labyrinth at the end of last school year will speak their Truth to the congregation.” Chris looked over at his mother. She gave him a nod of approval, and he smiled and sat back down.

“Very good, Chris,” Allan's mother said. “You're absolutely right. This will be the second most important Sunday School of your life, and the first sermon you'll be allowed to sit for. Because of that, I want you all to make extra sure that you're listening well in Sunday School. And of course, make sure you're still and quiet for the sermon. Once we break for communion, you may ask your parents about what you've heard, but not a second before. Do you understand?”

None of us were used to this sort of grave serious attitude from Allan's mother. Usually, she was the bubbly one of the four of them. Even Richard looked like he was paying attention. With that, she clapped and put a smile back on her face.

“Now, who’s hungry?” she asked as she stood up and walked toward the kitchen. I looked out the window then and saw the last licks of sunlight coming over the western edge of the valley. It must’ve been later than I thought. Us four got up and followed her in, while the other three mothers started mumbling to each other in the living room. We gathered at the table, and I waited for the bells. Sure enough, just as Allan’s mother laid out plates of sausage and scrambled eggs for us, a breakfast for dinner special to celebrate tomorrow, the dusk bells started chiming. Immediately, the women in the living room fell silent, and we started eating our food without a word. Well, me, Chris, and Richard did. Allan just kind of sat there staring his food down, like it had asked him about his dad. His mother put a hand on his shoulder and he flinched. He glared up at her, she gave him a grim smile, and he finally started eating. He looked up at me as she walked away, and I looked back down at my food to focus on something other than him. We ate dinner without a word, and then we left to go back home. On Allan’s front lawn, we all waved goodbye to him and each other, our mothers waved to each other, and from there we went our separate ways.

My mother held me close on the worn path of dirt that led home. Seeing as we didn’t have any cars, we had to live with the fact that our shoes were always covered in dust and mud. Walking outside at night always made her uneasy, even though I knew that nobody would do anything to us. She was always talking about how sin festered in the dark, and that the moonlight couldn’t guarantee safety. I didn’t know what to say to that back then, so I just hugged her back and kept up a good pace so we’d get home soon.

Personally, I was always partial to nightwalks. The night may have meant more dark to her, but to me, it meant more stars. Obviously I didn’t know the concept of light

pollution by name, but I did learn in Sunday School that when we create too much here on Earth, we end up blinding ourselves to God. I figured that was more literal than they meant it, and maybe that was the point. Either way, you'll never see the sky the way you would in the Pocket. That's something I'm always going to miss about that place.

That night in particular, looking up at the stars and looking for halos hiding among them, I thought about the next day, and the Labyrinth. I wondered if learning what it actually was would suddenly make the stars look different, or if it would suddenly make caramel taste less sweet. All I'd heard about adulthood until then was that it changes you in some fundamental way, but I really loved caramel, and I loved stargazing, and I loved my mother and father and my friends and my town. I didn't want any of that to change inside me without some way of controlling it.

We got home, and while my mother fumbled with the knob trying to open the door as soon as possible, I looked up at the window on the second floor. The curtains were drawn with no candlelight behind them. My father must have gone to bed without waiting for us. Not out of the ordinary, but it still made for a subpar sleep when I wasn't able to give a proper goodnight to both of my parents. I heard the door open, and when I looked back down my mother was already inside and the door was swinging shut. I slipped through and tapped it with my heel, shutting it behind me. I walked through the hall and past the stairs to the living room, where she was sitting on the rocking chair, moving just a bit faster than it was made for. I walked over and gave her a short hug. She hugged me back, kissed me on the forehead, and waved me goodnight as I walked back to the staircase and went up to bed. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and put on my

pajamas as usual. I knelt down at the foot of my bed and sent a short prayer to God asking for strength and guidance through tomorrow's events. Then I was off to sleep.

I woke the next morning with the dawn bells, as I always did. I got out of bed and went to the closet, where my Sunday clothes had been hanging cleaned and pressed since last week. I slipped out of my pajamas and began the meticulous process of dressing. First were the socks, then the undershirt and fresh underwear, both a harsh black for the integral sin. Then came the button-down shirt, pristine and white for our form in God's image. Next, the navy blue slacks for the sky beneath Heaven, and the brown leather dress shoes for Earth. Penultimate was the light gray blazer for the clouds obscuring Heaven's true form.

Finally, there was the scarf, the most important part of the uniform. Made from tight, black elastic, it always felt a size too small. When properly worn, it was pulled over the nose whenever going anywhere outside the house. In the back, it bordered the hairline. This was the measurement used by barbers, men kept their hair above the scarf, and women kept theirs longer. Because babies usually didn't have enough hair to distinguish between the boys and girls, they got a knitted black cap to wear until their hair grew long enough to discern. They still wore the scarf, though. It was black both for the nothing from which we were drawn and to hence we shall go, and for God's unimaginable form encompassing our sin and keeping it hidden deep within our souls.

After getting dressed, I went downstairs where my mother and father were waiting, both in their church garb. While the uniform was unisex for the most part, women were allowed to wear special cuts of button-down blouses and binders over their

chest on a case by case basis, usually decided by the Voice. Either way, you could always tell them apart from the men by their hair, so it was never too much of an obfuscation. Now that all of us were ready, my parents got up, and we walked out the front door to see all of our neighbors doing the same. We set off down the path in silence, our dress shoes coming together to sound like a herd of the slowest horses you've ever seen. Some people looked around at each other, mostly the children and teens, but most looked straight forward at the steeple towering over the houses.

Soon enough, we came upon the wider, central path that split west to the school and east to the church. The two faced each other as if in a Mexican standoff, with the cruel, brutalist architecture of the school standing stalwart against the intricate curves and carvings on the wooden church. Everyone knew that there was no real standoff, though. They had to on some level. It sat at merely one story while the church towered over it. There were no windows and only one door at the entrance. No decorations, no flowerbed, not even a sign that said what it was, it was just this big, sad brick.

Then on the other side of the path was the Pocket's Church of God. The steeple shot into the sky, pristine black wood that ended in a point so fine it could pierce steel. Some people said that if you climbed to the top you could catch a glimpse of Heaven, others said it was tall enough to see over the edges of Hope Valley. Either way, it stuck out on the two story building in a way that most would call awkward, if it wasn't the church. No matter how bad it may have looked, it definitely sent a message.

Walking in through the big set of double doors with that spire so high I couldn't make out its tip, it really did make God feel bigger than me. Hell, it made everything feel bigger than me, like walking into a shrunken world where I had to look up at everything.

Paintings of Heaven and angels mounted so high on the walls that I had to reach up to touch the bottom of them, though of course I got chastised for that. Large tables covered with offerings of fruit bowls and fresh meat covered in salt and bound in leather or some other thing, something that blocked the smell of blood, so wide you couldn't hold hands with someone standing at the other end. The rug on the hardwood floor was colored a deep brownish-maroon, like the cow whose meat now sat on the table for God had been sacrificed right there and bled into it for a day.

Of course, that was just the lobby. Two more sets of double doors, propped open on Sunday mornings, led into the main chamber. Inside were three seemingly endless rows of pews, all pointed toward the podium flanked by chairs and the choir risers on either side and behind it. They all sat on a raised platform about three feet high, with stairs built into its structure on the left and right to let people get up it without looking stupid. Behind all of these things was the giant stained-glass window. It showed a large silhouette of God formed from shards of all colors, only having discernable edges because the rest of the glass was clear. He stood over the congregation with His arms outstretched, palms upward toward Heaven, surrounded by angels on all sides praying to Him.

In front of the podium, between it and the pews, was another offering table. One day, my family sat close enough to the front for me to make out the words carved into it: GIVE UP TO THE LORD, in all capitals, with large spaces between each word so it reached across the whole thing. Today, there was a large hog sitting on it, squirming against the ropes that bound its legs and neck to the table. A large cloth was hanging out

of its mouth, but I could still hear the squealing. I saw the people around me looking into the room, at the hog, with a light in their eyes that I only saw on Sundays.

Once my family got into the chamber, I broke away from the group and walked off to the right, toward a single door tucked into the back corner of the church. There was a similar door on the left, but it led to the nursery, and I had stopped going there since I was four. I turned around and waved goodbye to my parents, but as usual they were caught between looking for a seat and staring at the hog. I went through the door and down a long hallway. This hall had normal windows on either side, but in them were painted words running down the length of the hall toward Sunday School. The same words were painted on the opposite side running back into the main chamber. I read them in silence, as I always did. "Today, we give praise. Tonight, we pray for tomorrow. Tomorrow, we give thanks and praise." I wondered if you could read those words from the outside, but through the windows the sun illuminated two giant hedge rows on either side, blocking the hallway from being approached too closely. It gave an odd sensation of claustrophobia mixed with the freedom that sunlight provides. Eventually, I reached the end of the hallway. Behind me, I could hear the Voice, muffled as he spoke to the congregation in the main chamber. I did my best to stay focused and opened the classroom door.

Sunday School was held in a room maybe a millionth the size of the main chamber, so it was still pretty large. It was about the size of my living room at home, a bit bigger than the bar we're sitting in now. The door opened into a corner of the room, straight ahead was the teacher's desk, and on my left were the floor mats. Today, though, the teacher wasn't at his desk, and nobody was sitting on their mats. Everyone was

gathered in the far corner, standing huddled around something. The teacher popped up from the middle of them like a gopher, and I nearly laughed, but I kept my composure. He raised an arm and called me over with one finger, the way a lover would, if you walked into your bedroom on your birthday and hadn't gotten any gifts yet. I rushed over into the miniature crowd and tried to catch a glimpse of what everyone was looking at, then I saw it.

Sitting on a small table at the teacher's waist height was a flat, wooden object, sanded down and polished to the smoothness of glass. It was made from spruce wood, but painted a dark brown to mimic a shade closer to mahogany. How someone from the Pocket would've known a wood of that shade existed confounds me. Then again, maybe someone just thought a darker color would've looked cooler on the labyrinth. The teacher cleared his throat. His scarf was down around his neck, so he must have already received the day's blessing to speak in class. I must have spent longer in the hallway reading the windows than I thought.

"As I was saying," he said, "the Labyrinth is a tool of the Lord used to guide us in meditation and decision making, and for the youth such as yourselves, it has always been used as a means of charting your direction in life. The smaller ones like this are more of a novelty, but they are still useful as a conduit to God during prayer and meditation. You use them as such. You place your finger at the entrance, here at the east end, then close your eyes. Now, you move your finger along the path of the Labyrinth. Do not press down too hard, nor move too quickly. There is only one path, God's path. Trust in Him to guide you through the Labyrinth to safety and tranquility at the center.

Of course, as I said, this is merely a novelty compared to the Labyrinth you are going to use at the end of spring next year. Where this Labyrinth is small enough to fit on a school desk, the true Labyrinth is about the size of the Offering Slab that sits before the Voice's podium in the main chamber. As with this one, you will begin at the east end and move westward, but the true Labyrinth is not as straightforward as the one sitting before you. There are multiple branching pathways, dead ends among them, and while the novelty simply guides you toward the center, the true Labyrinth tasks you with going as far westward as you can manage. Once you hit a dead end, you may open your eyes and see what God has planned for you. Depending on the paths you take and your ending spot, you may be pleased or disappointed with your life path. The most important thing to remember is that this is His plan, not yours. Your job is to make the most of God's plan for you."

With that, the teacher paused to take a breath, then he stood up and parted the crowd of children so he could walk back to his desk. None of us left our spots, though. We stayed crowded around the Labyrinth on the desk, transfixed by its figure and its meaning. The scarves over our faces only further emphasized the whites of our eyes bugging out over this little wooden imitation of the ultimate fortune teller, something that could put us in direct contact with God. I looked around and saw Chris, his fogged-up glasses barely clinging to the tip of his nose. He looked the most entranced out of all of us. I saw Allan too, though his eyes looked more nervous than awed. I could read the room. Up to now, he had fully embraced the infamy the episode had given him, and now here was this rite of passage thing here to tell him exactly what he had to look forward to in life. Even if the teacher never said the Labyrinth would judge us, you'd have to be

pretty naive not to consider how your past sins might weigh against you when God was deciding what you deserve in life.

I realized then that one person I didn't see in the crowd was Richard. I turned around and saw him sitting on the floor in the other corner, and in doing so I got shoved out of the crowd as someone shifted to get a closer look at the Labyrinth. I decided to abandon the others and go over to check on Richard. I was sure that something had to be very wrong with him to be so disinterested in the Labyrinth, not even scared the way Allan was. I was a few strides away when he looked up in shock. He quickly pulled his face back into a neutral expression and shook his head at me. It was the most he could've done to tell me to leave him be. I stopped where I was, unsure of whether to take the walk of shame back to the crowd or sit down next to him anyway. I resigned to sink down onto the floor and hope that nobody tripped over me.

Eventually, the crowd around the Labyrinth dispersed, and everyone planted themselves on their mats to wait for communion. Suddenly, the teacher stood up and beckoned us toward the door. Chris was the first one there, and then I remembered that we were going to sit in for the sermon today. We all lined up at the door, and the teacher led us down the long hallway and brought us back into the main chamber. The door opened to pews full of people already looking at us. There must have been more planning involved with this than simply bringing us in as quietly as possible. You couldn't sneak a whole group of kids into the room when it was only the Voice speaking. The pew closest to us was empty, and we filed down the length and took our seats.

The adults turned back to the front, where the Voice waited patiently for attention to be back on him. His stark white robes and sky blue scarf draped over his shoulders

helped him stand out against the brown podium and stained glass behind him. His head and face were also shaved clean, which let the light from the window reflect off him like a bland disco ball. If you followed the light bouncing off his scalp, you could find the poor people who had to squint through the light to see him while he spoke. After years of church services in the main chamber instead of Sunday School, that was basically the only part that stayed interesting. When he saw that people's eyes were back on him, he flashed a perfect televangelist's smirk and stepped out from behind the podium, shutting the Pocket Bible sitting on it.

“Well, folks,” he began, “I think we all know what day it is today. If that small interruption wasn't enough of an indication, I'll spell it out for y'all: we have the privilege of welcoming in the next generation of the Pocket as they take their first steps out of childhood toward adult life. Those beautiful young boys and girls back there, they're our lifeblood. They're what we leave behind us when God reaches down and scoops us on up and sets us down before those pearly gates. Most importantly, on that day when we're gone, they'll have to pick up where we've left off and keep the Pocket running in a Godly manner. As such, today's sermon is going to be the one I know you've all heard before. I hope you'll indulge me, my congregation, and I hope my dear Lord God will guide my lips in telling all of you a story about a young man named Richard.

Now Richard, he was just as sweet as can be. Just as pious as you or me, and just as devoted to keeping the Pocket perfect. Every morning, he got up and went to his job at the general store. He stood behind the counter and helped the townspeople with whatever they needed. All of the lovely people in our congregation here who spend their days

much the same way, I'm sure everyone else is sending much love and thanks to you. Tomorrow, I hope they'll tell you just the same themselves. Anyway, our man Richard was a real gentleman.

There was one night, though. A night when God, as He always does, turned His back on the Pocket to send His disappointment to the rest of the world, as He often does, praise His name. A hurricane here, a plague there, all things the Pocket will never know. While He was doing this, the Devil snuck into the Pocket. With the sunrise and the dawn bells, God turned back to the Pocket, and the Devil needed somewhere to hide. Where, my friends, do you think he ended up? That's exactly right, the back of Richard's shop. Coincidence of all coincidences, it was a Sunday morning. Richard donned his Sunday wear and went downstairs to go to Church, when he found the Devil disguised as an elderly man in the back of his shop.

'Excuse me, good sir!' the Devil said. 'I apologize for my intrusion in your humble store. I have lost my way in the great wide countryside, and I am awfully hungry. Would you please sell me something to eat?'

Richard, pious man he was, knew he could not turn down a man in need. However, he also knew that the Sabbath is to be kept holy, and that he was due in church on top of that. He said as much to the old man.

'Sir,' he said, 'as a humble servant of the Lord my God, I cannot in good faith sell to you on the Sabbath. And I cannot entertain conversation, as I am being summoned to church. I will, however, allow you to take what you need from my store in the short time I have before I must leave.'

The Devil thanked him profusely, and the two hurried into the main room where the Devil took his time in choosing from the many delicious fruits and meats for sale in the store, while Richard hurried him along as best he could while remaining polite. Eventually, the Devil had chosen his selection, but he knew that the moment he stepped outside, his guise would be revealed under God's gaze. So he held back, and he began a banter with Richard. Richard went along with him for a moment, and a moment was all the Devil needed. In the distance, the church's doors shut. Nobody in the village remained outside it except for Richard. He alone was in the Devil's grasp, but the Devil knew that no torment he could put upon Richard could match what God would do to him. So he stepped outside and into God's gaze, and was instantly struck from the Pocket in a blinding flash of light.

Richard rushed outside and dropped to his knees, his head bent in a deep bow. He prayed to God in reverence, professed his most sincere apologies to Him, promised that it was the Devil's fault for talking him into entertaining his presence through the beginning of church. God, in His infinite mercy, took Richard at his word, but He knew that if the people of the Pocket could be deceived this easily with mere words, then they could not be trusted with speech. He decreed that from the time of the dawn bell until the noon bell, every person in the Pocket would have their voice robbed from them. Then, at the dusk bell, it was taken again. In this way, we would know that any person trying to coax us into anything after sunset and before noon, when God's eye is watching both us and the world, would have ill intentions. We acknowledge God's word with the scarves we wear over our mouths, ensuring our silence and our obedience. And now, here we are today.

One kind man, whose kindness was used against him by the Devil's will, was all it took to change our way of life forever. Keep that in mind as you go about your day."

The Voice paused here. I looked around the room and saw that everyone's eyes were locked on him. Some people were in tears. I was certainly struck by the story he told, but I was left a bit confused by some parts. I would have to talk with my friends afterwards to see if they could shed any light. One person I looked at, as did everyone else on the Sunday School bench, was Richard. We all knew the Voice used to be his father, as did everyone else in the Pocket. I was surprised that he would use Richard's name in a sermon, especially the first one he knew us kids would be sitting in on. I imagined he had shrunken into the pew and covered his head with his hands long before the sermon was finished, because that was how he was sitting now, and he didn't have any reaction to the people staring at him.

"Now," suddenly the Voice spoke again, "I relinquish my speech back to you, my Lord, and I relinquish my congregation until we gather again next Sabbath. Everyone please gather behind the church and wait for communion."

Then he pulled his white scarf up over his head. I realized then it was something more of a silk balaclava, covering everything from his scalp to his chin except for his eyes. He stepped away from the podium, gave the large stained glass behind him a bow, and walked down into the congregation. Now, everyone suddenly rose and began filing out of the pews toward the entrance to the main chamber. The teacher waved our attention back to him and lifted his arm, so we all rose and followed the crowd out of the main chamber.

Before we got out, I looked back toward the front of the main chamber, and I saw the hog I had seen at the beginning of the day. It was no longer moving or squealing. In fact, I knew it wasn't breathing. Its eyes stared up at the sky in vain. It was still laying on its side, and its guts were in ribbons. It was as if a hundred hungry savages went at it with forks and knives, but then collectively decided that they didn't want pork right after killing the thing in the most painful way possible. Its blood dripped down its stomach and over the edge of the table, filling the slots of the carved-out words and making them stand out from the rest of the table in an even bolder fashion. GIVE UP TO THE LORD. It pooled on the floor beneath the table. I wondered if this was what Abraham was preparing to do to Isaac on the mountain before God reassured him that all he wanted was the show of loyalty. I also wondered why I didn't smell anything like I imagined a massacred animal would probably smell.

I felt lightheaded, all of a sudden. All I could do was keep walking out of the chamber. Step by step, I was through the doors into the lobby, and then I was outside. The fresh air felt so wonderful. A calm breeze swept through the area between the church and the school, a rare instance considering the wind tunnel the Pocket usually was. The air reinvigorated me, and my head was clearer than before, though not totally. We kept walking until we were in the space behind the church, the treeline on the other side, a small black free-standing grill taking up space in the middle. It looked a lot like a community center in any normal small town. People started spreading out a bit, but nobody spoke yet. Many of them looked to the massive steeple, with the bell at the top, resigned to simply wait for noon to come. I, meanwhile, kept my eyes on the grass. I needed something tangible to focus on while my stomach settled, and I felt that the

shadows were probably a better way to measure how close noon was. The shadows were already short, I knew it couldn't be long now.

The bell cut through the silence. It was perfection incarnate, a golden tone. I felt the group exhale before I even heard the breath cutting through our scarves. Time out is over. Get up and go enjoy recess. People began taking off their scarves, taking deep, clean breaths for the first time since dawn. Six hours felt both long and short in the Pocket, the scarves didn't help. They certainly didn't breathe, anyway. A few hushed whispers, now. People unsure if they had heard what they heard. Us kids stood silently and watched the example being led, twice as unsure as the adults. Eventually the volume rose, bit by bit, and now things were normal again. We were just a crowd convening behind the church. This was when we would've normally gotten out of Sunday School, and the teacher would lead us around to the back to see our parents. Then, he would leave and go inside to help the Voice.

Just as I thought it, the rear door opened, and the Voice and the teacher hauled out a large slab covered in bloody pork chops, hastily cut and haphazardly spread across the slab. There were coos and gasps from the crowd, an excited energy began building. I ran through the crowd into the woods, just past the treeline, and puked my guts up. The lack of breakfast that morning kept it light, but I kept dry heaving as if something would come out if I just tried hard enough. A part of me wanted my stomach to pop out and splat on the needle-covered ground just to get some catharsis from it. I dropped to my hands and knees and heaved harder, louder. Nobody came for me. I continued like that for a few minutes before I decided I was done trying to force it, and a couple minutes more when I realized the process required much less conscious effort than I thought. Finally, my body

relented. I forced my eyes open and saw a greenish-brown spot, much smaller than it felt coming up. I felt a bit emasculated, in a way. Probably the first time I could say with concrete certainty that something about me was too small. I looked up and saw Richard sitting against a tree about ten feet away. He was looking down at his feet, so I knew he had watched the whole thing. Not that I expected him to ignore it or anything. After this service when everyone was looking at him, I supposed he earned it.

“Are you doing alright?” I asked, still on the ground. I wasn’t sure whether I was too weak to stand up or too scared to make a sudden movement that would scare him off.

“I don’t understand why he used my name like that,” he said. He was still looking at the ground.

“Maybe he just needed a name?” I asked. I knew how pathetic of an excuse it was, but I wasn’t sure what else to offer.

“He always hated me and mom,” he said. “He was so happy to give his family up to God so he could go play king of the village. He wins the lottery and all of a sudden he gets to stop being the man who trapped his wife in a marriage by growing a parasite inside her.”

He left things off there. I couldn’t think of anything to say in response to that. Suddenly, his head shot up and he stared right at me. His pupils were near invisible, surrounded by his piercing green eyes and the whites fully exposed as they bugged out at me. We stayed like that for a few seconds too long, but I still didn’t dare move. He shot up and sprinted out of the woods, diagonally around the church. He was running home. I stood up slowly and followed his lead. I wasn’t much in the mood for pork, the smell of

burning pig skin was rotten in my nose, mixing with the vomit smell that still coated the inside of my mouth.

I emerged from the treeline just too early, and Allan spotted me trying to slink off. He called my name and waved me over like a man guiding a plane on a runway. Now everyone was looking at me, and I only felt worse for Richard. I trudged his way, and the attention slowly faded away from me and back to the pork chops simmering on the grill. The Voice was standing behind it with a huge smile, the face of the American dad minus the shaved head.

“Man, you had us getting worried,” Allan said. Chris nodded next to him, though he didn’t exactly give off the same impression.

“Just saw something I wanted to check out,” I said.

“Sure,” Chris interrupted. “What did you guys think about the sermon? Personally, I’m honored that the first one we were allowed to sit in on was such a formative story when it comes to our community’s history.”

“Sorry,” Allan said, “I didn’t quite catch that. Could you sound a bit more like a complete dork?”

“Hey,” I butted in before Allan got really annoyed. “Didn’t the Voice say this one was specifically chosen because it was our first? You make it sound like a coincidence that we got to hear it.”

“Of course it was chosen for us,” Chris said, rolling his eyes. “I’m just expressing that I’m glad such an important one was chosen, is all.”

“What?” Allan said, “You think they would’ve chosen anything else? They always use this one for the new generation of kids. Literally every year. My cousin said

back when he was 13 they got the same one, and his dad said they did too. You'd think a church nerd like you would already know that."

"Of course not!" Chris said. "The youth aren't meant to know anything of the adult's world. I can't believe- no, I absolutely can believe your family would be so irresponsible."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Allan took a step toward Chris. In his infinite naivete, Chris stood firm, probably thinking Allan wouldn't dare desecrate holy ground with strife or scuffle. He was always trying to play things by the rules, under the impression everyone else cared about them just as much as he did, even if they didn't show it. Even if they were one wrong word away from knocking him on his ass. I stepped between them, facing Chris.

"What did you think of the way it wrapped up?" I asked. "Personally, I think the whole ending was pretty messy."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're saying," Chris said, tilting his head. "A sermon isn't some short fiction project written by the Voice, it's God's will, as spoken through the Pocket Bible, reinterpreted for modern sensibilities. It's a parable."

"Well, yeah" I said, "But that doesn't mean it can't be well written. The whole ending felt kind of slapdash, if I'm being honest."

Chris was turning red since Allan started talking, and now his cheeks looked like Allan had managed to land two solid hits on either side of his face.

"I think you ought to consider being pious over being honest. Even if God knows your every sin, you can spare your fellow man." After he said that, he stormed off. I watched him go until he was far enough into the crowd that his stupid outfit blended in

with everyone else's stupid outfit. Allan popped me on the shoulder and walked around so he was within my peripherals.

"Forget him," he said. "He's just upset that he's wrong. And he is wrong, man. That whole thing was a bunch of hokey nonsense."

"Come on," I said, "I don't mean to say anything that extreme."

"Well I do," Allan said. "Honestly, for what's apparently their best sermon, I'm surprised that was basically just a story you'd read to a baby, but change out the funny animals for boring people, God, and the Devil."

"Knock it off, man," I said, giving him an elbow in the ribs. "I don't want anyone to hear us talking about this. It's bad enough that Chris is going to snitch on us to his mom or something. I'm gonna get a real earful at home."

Allan scoffed and walked off, holding his side. Maybe I hit him too hard. I didn't really care, if he was such a badass he could handle it. I wasn't really sure where to go from there. It was rare that I found myself in a social setting without any of my friends, usually I'd just hover around them and pretend I was having fun. I decided to find my parents, which was accomplished without much difficulty.

I stood next to my mom and dad for the rest of communion, listened to the adults talk about kids growing up and how lovely it was that we got to hear our first sermon. People all around me were eating pork, thank goodness I didn't have anything left in my stomach to vomit. Conversations kept going for a bit longer, but the crowd eventually started to thin and go home. My family was among the last ones lingering in the yard behind the church, chatting up the Voice and the other churchgoers, but when the sun began to lick at the treeline, the crowd finally dispersed for good.

On our way back home, the dusk bells rang out, and any worry I had about needing to discuss today's conversation was temporarily quelled. That was the one thing those bells were good for, I'd heard from a lot of other boys back then that they only escaped immediate punishment for acting out because of the dusk bells. It was interesting learning how good it felt to just barely get away with something, at least for the moment. They never did end up having that conversation with me, for whatever reason. That night, we had dinner as we always did, and then we went to bed.

Alone in my room, I didn't know how to feel about the day's events. Of course I wanted them behind me, I wanted to not have to think about my actions or their consequences, normal kid stuff. But I thought about Allan more than anything else. I was awed at his bravery to speak his mind on holy ground, and I was scared of God punishing him for his harsh words. Ever since he got that ego of his, he hadn't been scared of anyone, but I knew he should've been. I was worried about the wrong person, though.

School began the next day, and it was far more normal than I was expecting. We got in at noon, instruction went through to dusk, and then we went home. No major changes in schedule, no change in curriculum, not even a change in teacher. Mrs. Beatty had been with us since we were six years old, which left me to guess that there was some other teacher assigned to the other classes as they went up through grades. If that was the case, then there must've been at least seven teachers at a time, for seven grades. That was the extent of the math we learned in school. It must've been one day a week, tops, that we devoted any time to math. The rest was spent either studying the Pocket Bible, tending the big community farm, or getting generalized career education. By that I mean someone's dad would come in and explain why it's really fun to drag a big tool all

around the paths in town making sure the grass stayed off of them. Other than that, there was lunch, and there was the dusk bell. Those were my favorite parts.

August and September passed as quickly as they usually did. The holdover summer feeling made being there almost fun, because it meant getting to the weekend would bring one day of actual fun, then church, then right back to it. One day was enough for the most part. If you were a freak, you got five days of fun before the mandated day of rest. By freak I mean Chris, if that wasn't obvious. He was a real teacher's pet. And thank God Mrs. Beatty had him to fall back on, because she was a real failure of a teacher.

Every class we would read individually, or listen to someone else talk, or shovel shit while she took a nap in the sun like one of the cows we were cleaning up after. She wasn't even that stupid or out of shape, I think she was just old and tired. She was done with our class the moment Allan did his thing. After that, she effectively stepped down and let Chris take the reins on things. She chose the book we would study that day, but Chris was the one who delivered the lesson. He probably knew more about the Pocket Bible than anyone but the Voice did. He knew the parables, and he knew what they meant. He knew the vague historical basis for all of the stories, as we learned them. Mind, there was no Israel, or Egypt, or Middle East, or anything like that in that world, at least as you'd know it. Those were distant districts and towns out in the fields beyond the Pocket, probably struck down like Sodom and Gomorrah once God decided we were all He needed.

If Chris didn't hang out with us, he would've been ground into a little paste by kids like Allan. That said, I couldn't tell you when he actually started spending time

around us. He was sort of always there. His parents weren't friends of mine or Allan's, so my best guess was that they knew Richard's dad became the Voice and wanted some means of getting close to him. Maybe they thought there was some influence from his dad that could rub off onto Chris, or maybe his mom wanted to get in good with Richard's mom. Either way, it didn't do much, and we were all stuck being friends when Chris didn't remotely fit with our group, especially as he got older. That argument after church was the point where he stopped putting any effort into maintaining that friendship.

Anyway, school was as boring as it always was. Chris manned the helm, Mrs. Beatty watched him do her job, and everyone patiently waited for Saturday. That was the routine. This year, though, I think most of us were looking forward to Sunday School more than usual. Now that we had the Labyrinth on our minds, we rushed in every Sunday hoping to goodness that we were going to hear some more details about it. Anything would've satiated us, and some days we left satisfied. The teacher would guide our hands through the miniature, hands over our eyes, teaching us how to trust in God that we would reach the center no matter what. Some days, one of us would be blindfolded while the rest organized twigs and dirt into paths on a desk, and the blindfolded one would try to let God guide them through the maze. We all learned how much better Sunday School was than normal school. It was a subtle, insidious thing, but among the rest of life in the Pocket, it didn't stand out.

Come October, some of the kids were beginning to lose patience with normal school. Sunday School held our attention fine, and nobody dared act out while we were in God's house. But I could tell the atmosphere in that giant brown brick was beginning to boil. Chris did absolutely nothing to help that. If anything, he quickened the process. Mrs.

Beatty left more and more of the class to him, and by October, she rarely showed up in the room. Chris was left to assume absolute control over the class, and while nobody consented to his rule, nobody spoke up against him for fear of a sudden appearance from a real authority figure.

His lessons started to take certain recurrent themes, stuff that the layman wouldn't have recognized as a problem. I knew what he meant, though. And I knew Allan and Richard did too. He made staunch condemnations of violence, but he spoke especially loud about the comeuppance for those who embraced such a lifestyle. He talked about delusions, how some people think that we can change ourselves and the world around us, and how those people are trying to rewrite God's plan. He talked about the difference between trust and faith, but he drew an obvious moral line between the two. That day I was more tuned in than usual, but only slightly.

"You trust your fellow man!" he said from the front of the class. He had set up a long desk between him and his audience, and between that and him the teacher's podium. He had begun to wear flowing white clothes in a painful facsimile of the Voice, and he wasn't shy about it either. He flapped his arms around in his makeshift straight jacket like a madman out of the asylum, tried to make himself as big as possible to cover up the embarrassment that was this performance.

"You trust God's plan for you!" he continued. "But to trust God would imply an equality between you and the Lord. He is your superior. He is your guidance. He is not your friend. You have faith in God."

I took a look around the class. Off in the farthest corner was Allan, sleeping with his eyes open. I envied that talent. I knew Richard was somewhere behind me to my left,

but I didn't look for him. I was surprised to see that everyone between us had their eyes glued to the front of the class. A group of kids that, under any other circumstances, would be looking at anything but the teacher, were apparently enraptured with Chris' performance. I couldn't tell whether it was from the holy ghost or just pure shock. Either way, they were listening. The occasional nod was all I needed to figure that out.

"You have faith in God," Chris repeated. "Faith. Absolute trust, beyond reason and logic. Faith that He will guide you where you need to go. Faith that He will confront your problems or give you the strength to confront them yourself. No one in the Pocket can do these things for you. Not your parents, not your teacher, and not the Voice. Those of us that speak God's word only do so because He has better things to do than explain Himself to us. Your faith should not go to us, or to anyone else of this world. To put your faith in man is to lose yourself completely. Putting your faith in man means admitting to yourself that you believe someone other than God can do all of these things for you."

"Then how come people had faith in Jesus?" Allan asked from his corner. The class became a blur of hair as heads whipped around to Allan's corner. Mine was among them. Obviously not the hair part, but still. Allan leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed like he'd just dropped proof of aliens in front of us. That was nearly as lame as the wannabe sermon we were watching, but I turned back to Chris and saw that he was taking Allan's shit as seriously as everyone else was taking his. I could count on him for consistency, if nothing else.

"People trusted Jesus," Chris said, "because He is the Lord incarnate. There's no bigger indication of someone being worthy of your faith."

“But there’s no way they could’ve known that,” Allan said. “You saying that if someone came in the room right now and said he was God’s new avatar that we should just take him at his word?”

Chris stood there growing redder and redder until he looked like a thermometer turned upside down. Even I knew the answer Allan was asking for, there were just some parts of the Pocket Bible we had to take at face value. Part of the faith thing Chris was literally just talking about. But I also knew that Chris couldn’t be confronted without wanting to put the other person down a peg. It wouldn’t suit him to just answer the question. Sure enough, I was right. Chris’s arm shot up and pointed toward the door. Allan took the hint without another word, but his smirk said a lot more than words could’ve.

Chris’ sermon went on as usual from there, just a bit louder than usual. He ranted and raved until the dusk bell tapped him out. His trap finally shut, I stood up and walked out of the room without a glance back his way. I was fully prepared to go home and sleep without dinner, but I spotted Allan sat down against the school, just past the treeline. His uniform stood out more than enough for you to see him, so I knew he wasn’t hiding.

“I can’t believe that shit thinks he can pull that shit in there,” he said right when I got within earshot. “Thinks he’s the new fucking Voice just because he talks loud enough.”

It was hushed nearly beyond recognition, even a guy like him was scared of getting caught speaking out of the allotted times. I didn’t blame him. Even with that hush, though, I knew there were some words in there that I didn’t recognize. He learned a lot of his words from his dad, but these were the first I’d learned by transitive property that

sounded so vile. I could see the acid dripping down his chin as he said them. He said them over and over until they didn't sound like words anymore, until he wasn't even saying coherent sentences. Tears yanked at the corners of his eyes, but he squeezed them shut and denied them release. He was a real man's man. I admired him.

I sat down next to him and put my arm around his shoulders. I squeezed his bicep a bit. He always kept himself in shape. It gave way just a bit, it wasn't rock hard like I thought muscles were supposed to be. He didn't move, but I felt him shudder a bit. Heard him gasp. I laid my head in the gap between his head and his shoulder, I fit pretty well. His tears ran down my scalp. I squeezed his arm again, but he didn't make any noise that time.

We stayed like that for a while, the sun was well below the treeline by the time I finally stood up and offered him my hand. He took it, and I helped him to his feet. I could barely see his eyes, but they were looking into my own. I think we both knew then that we were together for life. I'm really thankful that I didn't recognize what that meant back then, at least for me. I can't speak for him. But if I knew back then, I probably would've done what Richard did.

It never got better. Chris kept preaching, the class kept listening. There wasn't anyone to stop him, and it didn't seem like anyone wanted to. Teachers gossiped in the halls before class, and I caught several of them whispering, completely awestruck, about what a lovely young preacher Chris made. He had charisma and smarts, and it seemed like he commanded the holy spirit like a falconer handles his bird. At any given moment he could stretch his arm out and call it into the room. The air got thicker, you could feel it

descending from the ceiling and wrapping around your head like the Sunday scarf. People got fidgety, they bit their lips and tugged at their clothes. The boys clenched their fists and the girls clutched their chests. Everyone nodded. Some people whispered to themselves. Chris himself had a little tent pitched in his robes whenever he stepped out from behind the podium. Silently laughing at that was the only solace I had until the bell rang and he finally shut up.

Allan never showed his face in school after that, and for all I knew, he never saw Chris for six days of the week. He couldn't stay away from church, though. And Chris made sure he knew that the shit he was pulling in school wasn't a localized effort. I remember the day the Sunday School teacher called him to the front of the class. The Voice was standing there with him, so we already knew something big was happening, but they dropped a bombshell on us that no one was expecting.

“Children,” the teacher said, “your dear friend Chris has received a very special blessing from the Voice and God Himself.”

Chris stood and walked up to the front, towering over us with the teacher and the Voice. When he turned around, though, his eyes were fixed on the floor, looking under his glasses like a child trying bifocals for the first time. His clothes were unwrinkled, his hair perfectly straight, everything about the image of Chris we had come to know told us he was the same man who had preached to us in class for months. But it felt, watching him stand there, like Moses had parted his image and let us see the man underneath. I didn't see the Chris that I would later see after the Labyrinth. I saw the Chris I used to see in school a year ago. I saw the boy that played with me in the creek. For a moment, I stopped hating him.

The Voice reached up from behind Chris and laid a hand on his shoulder. He flinched. In all my days, I would never have predicted Chris flinching at the Voice's touch. A shudder, maybe. But that would've been from the preacher man, not the boy standing in front of us. I figured he was just nervous, as little sense as that made. There was no other explanation.

"The Lord," the Voice said, "has seen it fit to allow Chris the use of his voice before noon. I must return to my congregation now, but I wanted to bring the news myself. I've heard wonderful things about this young man, and seeing him now, I know that he is destined for great things."

He gave Chris a squeeze, and I could've sworn I saw his face go green at the sensation. Then the Voice left, the door shut silently behind him. Chris exhaled for the first time in at least a minute. He looked up, and suddenly Moses was kicked aside as the preacher man regained his ego. His gaze summoned eye contact from all but me and Allan. I looked behind me and even Richard was staring him dead in the face, but his look suggested less awe, more homicidal intent. I was surprised to see that much emotion coming from him, but I wasn't shocked to see that emotion in particular. It occurred to me that we hadn't spoken since that moment in the woods. He might've been stewing on his daddy issues for nearly half a year, now. I really hoped that wasn't the case. It would suck if I could trace guilt for a horrible murder to myself to any degree.

"My fellows," Chris said, "As someone joining you on the edge of adulthood, I am proud and honored to guide us into this new stage of our lives, with help from our seniors and our God in Heaven."

The teacher stepped away and sat at his desk, and we were left to stare up at our new savior in glasses. The rest of the class was more of the sermons we had come to expect from normal school. Allan clocked what the rest of us didn't register, but we all knew it on some level: we were officially trapped.

The school year went on from there. Thanksgiving and Christmas felt like a blur, and then suddenly Easter came and went. All that existed were Chris' sermons and Allan's anger, with me caught between the two. Allan had lost whatever shyness had kept him silent until his small outburst after school months ago, and since Chris was given his voice back, he would regularly hold me up after class to seethe and rant about him. We would hide in the woods, I would hold him, and he would explode. He never got louder than a whisper, but I could tell how much bile he had been holding back. A lesser man would've melted months ago. I was proud of him, though it felt odd to be proud of someone my own age. Maybe I had grown older in my own way during that year.

Before too long, the Labyrinth was upon us. School and church had slowly stopped mattering, much to Chris' dismay. Compared to something that didn't have to try to be holy, Chris was just a kid on a soapbox. Kids would share knowing looks to each other in class, others would stare at the ceiling during entire sermons of his, and nobody was listening to him but me. Even then, I was only paying attention to see how mad he got, and boy, did he get mad. He would spray all over the front rows. Oftentimes he would slam his glasses down on his podium, and he would whip his head around like a raving lunatic without worrying about real consequences. It was a real show compared to the shit he was peddling.

Our parents had stopped being relevant so suddenly that I couldn't remember the last time I actually listened to either of mine. We were all treading water in independence, keeping ourselves afloat for the moment, but I knew we couldn't stay this way forever. Allan and I had each other, but the rest of them needed a rope to hold onto so they wouldn't drown. God made for a fine anchor, and sure enough, God was the only thing on those kids' minds. They talked about God after church and after school. On the one day of rest we had, they were talking about God in the general store and the diners and every other place. We may have been trapped, but we were our own jailors. The wardens didn't even have to try.

Days kept on passing by, and the Labyrinth drew closer and closer. Even the last day of school was just another day before the last day of our lives as we knew them. A fog had descended on the town. On our final day of rest, that fog became literal. You couldn't see the top of the valley for the clouds that had descended upon us. Unfortunately for us, I don't think anyone had even heard the word coincidence in the Pocket. The town paths were full of praises and cries of children, down on their knees, arms raised to the sky, trying to wave the clouds out of the way to catch a glimpse of God leaning down, preparing to grab our little wrists and guide us to our future.

It was on that day that I saw Richard for the last time. I was wondering the paths, trying to find my way around without being invited to scream my lungs out into the sky, when I saw a dark blur moving toward the treeline. I decided to follow it, anything quiet on this day was worth trying to stay around, but by the time I reached the treeline, I had lost it.

Something grabbed my arm and covered my mouth.

“Don’t make yourself too obvious,” Richard whispered into my ear. “Follow me.”

He let go of me and ducked past me into the woods. I matched his posture and followed as close behind as I could. The brush tore at my face and yanked my clothes, and the low hanging branches made attempts to grab my hair. Then, as quickly as moving into the treeline itself, we were in a clearing. I couldn’t have told you which way we came through, were it not for the fact that I could just look behind me. Ahead of me, Richard took a seat on a fallen tree. Despite his mostly clean clothes, he was even more gaunt than the last time I saw him. His hair had nearly grown too long for a boy. I wondered if he had managed to live somewhere on the outskirts of town for a while. His mother probably wouldn’t have noticed his disappearance even if he left a note. He patted the spot next to him, and I sat down.

“You’re the best person this town has to offer,” Richard said. His voice was higher than I remembered.

“Starting out on a pretty high note,” I replied, “considering we haven’t spoken in almost a year.”

“Don’t be like that,” he said. “I’m not upset at you, and you shouldn’t be upset at yourself. The time spent isolated, able to watch this town disintegrate until its rotten core could be exposed, has left me in a better position than I ever thought possible.”

“You’re kinda freaking me out, man,” I said, scooting away from him. “You’re talking like Chris.”

He leapt at me then, knocking us both off the fallen tree and slamming me back-first into the soft forest earth. I felt roots and pebbles poking into my back as he held me down and straddled me. His ankles crossed over my shins and his nails dug into my

shoulders. I thought for a moment that I could've fought him off with my hands being free, but I realized immediately after that I didn't want to take that chance. His eyes looked the same as the day Chris was given his voice back, wild and unbound by rationality. If I fought back now, he would kill me. It was as simple as that.

"Don't compare me to him!" he hissed, spit dropping onto my face.

I nodded without words. He pushed himself up into a sitting position, but he didn't get off me. I didn't ask him to, mainly for fear of my life.

"He won't be around to be compared to soon enough. And neither will my father, whatever's left of him. I'm going to save this town from their caustic influence. We'll be allowed to follow our own paths in life. But I don't want to set your path in stone by doing what I have to do."

He stopped talking there, and he gave me a weird look. I felt my face heating up. He took the shrieking hint and got off me, then offered me a hand, which I took. We sat back down on the log, me with one leg crossed over the other.

"They'll rip you to shreds if you stay here," he said. We didn't have to look at each other to know we were on the same page.

"Allan and myself, too. We're beyond their control, but you have the seeds of evil planted in you. If you stay here for too long, you'll lose what makes you you."

"Then what would you ask me to do?" I said.

"Secure your path out of the Pocket," he said. "Find some way to leave. With the Labyrinth being tomorrow, I'd say you have until next Sunday. That's when our real first sermon happens. Leave before that happens, do whatever it takes."

“How do I manage something like that?” I asked. “The only place I know outside of the Pocket is Vegas, and I’m sure that’s nowhere near here.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s on you. But whatever you do, it has to happen before next Sunday.”

I hesitated before speaking again. Richard never pushed me to say what was on my mind. He acted like he knew I’d say it eventually. That thought was what pushed me to speak.

“I meant it when I said you’re talking like him,” I said. “You’re acting like you’re above it all. Like you’re some new savior. I don’t know how that’s any better for the Pocket than what Chris is doing. Neither of you are the second coming.”

He didn’t speak for a minute. Finally, he said, “I’m bringing the Pocket to Revelations. Maybe I’m not heavensent, but it would be nice if I was. It might explain why someone like me has to have it so rough.”

“Jesus didn’t have to wonder whether He was God’s son,” I said.

“Jesus had moments to Himself,” he said. “Jesus had His night in the garden, and even before that, He had every night alone in bed. He had small moments to Himself. He had the split second before the miracle worked, the moments where the crowds gathered around Him and He had to give the perfect sermon. He was human, before all else. How can a human know for sure what God has in store for him? How can a person trust his father’s word when he pits the world against his child?”

We didn’t speak after that. I had a feeling we were on different pages at this point, but I didn’t want to ask him about anything else. He was scaring me like nothing else had, I knew he was dangerous, but I didn’t know why. Back then, I didn’t know what a

manifesto was, but he was bouncing his off me, and I wasn't buying it. I knew I needed to leave before he made another try at making me see the world his way. So I did, I stood up and made my moves toward the place we came from, when he said one more thing from behind me.

“If you're still around here when people talk about what I did, know that it wasn't Richard that did it. He's been dead for years. It was Mary.”

“Like the virgin?” I asked without turning around. He didn't respond, nor did he sound any less like an artificial savior than before saying that. I chose not to pursue the subject.

I kept walking forward, and before long, I was out of the woods. People were still screaming in the streets, it was like I hadn't left at all. I dragged my hand across my back, and sure enough it was covered in dirt. It wasn't some kind of miracle. Richard was just a man. That's what I told myself as I walked back home and went to bed early.

The next morning, I woke up before the dawn bell. I tried going back to sleep, but I knew that was a lost cause, so I went ahead and got dressed. Socks, undershirt, underwear, shirt, slacks, shoes, blazer. Last was the scarf. I held it for a while, sat down on my bed and stared at it. The material felt good over your mouth, felt right. For the first time, I considered that it wasn't God who made these things.

The dawn bell rang. I put on the scarf and went downstairs, where my parents were already dressed. That was the closest I'd felt with them in a while, and it was the last time I would. We walked outside into the tide of people, and the collective moved toward the church. The steeple felt like it had grown since last year. The whole building

felt bigger. I felt like I hadn't grown a day since last year. I found Allan and walked with him, but he didn't notice me. I saw sweat rolling down the back of his neck. As easy as it was for everyone else, even me, to forget about the episode in the wake of the Labyrinth, I knew he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. I wished I could have done something for him.

We went inside. The adults filed into the central chamber, and for the last time, the kids broke away and went down to the Sunday School classroom. No one looked at each other. I didn't stop to read the glass in the hallway, I had it memorized by now. "Today, we give praise. Tonight, we pray for tomorrow. Tomorrow, we give thanks and praise." I wondered if anyone else had read those words, or if they just trusted that they meant something good for us.

We filed into the room and sat on our mats. The front of the classroom was blocked from view by gray curtains hanging from the ceiling. The teacher stood before them, and the Voice beside him. We looked up at them in silence for what felt like minutes. Whatever could be said about the Voice, he clearly had a grasp of the dramatic.

"My children," he said, "I will not be able to regard you as such for much longer. Behind this curtain is the path to God itself, the great communicator, the Labyrinth."

Views shifted from the man to the curtain behind him, including Allan's and my own. It was beautiful, like a comforter on a king's bed. It seemed too good to be used only once a year, but I guess that's part of what made it special. It only just reached the floor, so there was no chance of stepping on it by accident, and the hooks that held it from the ceiling were just big enough to be noticeable, but small enough to avoid drawing

the eye. I wondered if anyone else was appreciating it for the construction, or if they were all trying to look through it and see what was on the other side.

“One by one,” the Voice said, “you will all go behind the curtain and navigate the Labyrinth. Your eyes will be shut, but your souls will be open to God, and He will guide you down the path He sees best for you. You may only look when you feel God has brought you to your end point. Trust His plan, and trust His hand. Once you’re done, simply come out from behind the curtain, and your childhood will be over. Afterwards, you may either remain in here, or come join the congregation for the sermon. I have one of my subordinates giving it in my place, as I will remain in here to watch over the process. I confess, I am nearly as excited as you all.”

On that note, he sat at the teacher’s desk and leaned back. The teacher walked over to the right hand side of the curtain and called a name. A girl near me rose and walked up to the teacher, who slid a blindfold over her eyes. He guided her behind the curtain, then came back out alone. We sat for what must have been about five minutes, all of us shifting unsteadily on our mats, when she finally emerged from the other side of the curtain, blindfold in hand. The Voice rose and held her head, then he kissed her forehead. She was in tears, but she was smiling through it. It was impossible to guess where she had ended, considering none of us knew what the thing even looked like. She gave the blindfold back to the teacher and left in a hurry, and the teacher called the next name.

It went on like that for a while. Richard’s name was called around the halfway point, but he only took a minute or so for his session. When he came out, he and the Voice didn’t acknowledge each other. If everyone’s attention wasn’t so captured by the

Labyrinth, I would've been worried about him catching even more odd looks. But as it was, he left the room without a fuss, and the names kept getting called.

Finally it was down to me, Allan, and Chris. The teacher called me up. Like a robot, I felt my legs rise and walk me over to the curtain. I let the teacher slip the blindfold over my eyes and lead me to the Labyrinth. He placed my finger down in a place that must have been the beginning, then he walked away. I felt a small breeze as the curtain shut behind him. It was just me and the Labyrinth now.

I began moving my finger left. I hit a curve and followed it upwards, then left again. The curtain wasn't thick enough to stop the sounds of people breathing coming through, and I felt an overwhelming claustrophobia coming over me. I wondered how bad it was for the first people, when the class was full of kids fidgeting around on their mats. The blindfold was also saturated with sweat, and it stuck to my skin like dirt to wet feet. A downward turn, left again, up, right, up, left, down, left. I must have been halfway across the board by now. Then I hit a wall. I felt up and down, and I realized this was a crossroads. I felt like I was about halfway across the board width wise, so I had no clue which turn was more likely to take me the right way. I guessed up on a whim, and it felt right in my soul. I kept going, a couple more turns, and then another crossroads. I made another impulse turn, but then I hit another wall. This one had no other paths to turn down. I wasn't sure if the rules forbade going back on my path, so I went ahead and gave it a try. Then the other path was blocked too. I tried backtracking to the first crossroads, but I eventually had to acknowledge that I was horribly lost.

What happened next was entirely out of my hands. It was no more than human instinct, you feel lost, and you need to look around to find your way. I didn't even see the Labyrinth at first, only the faintest hint of light coming in from under the blindfold.

I shut my eyes again right after, and I froze. I was horrified. I knew God was watching me, and He could see my open eyes past the blindfold. I was ready for lightning to strike the church and smite me where I stood, but no matter how long I waited, He wouldn't kill me. I wondered if He was like the Voice, making this a dragged-out dramatic moment. Minutes passed, and still He wouldn't take my soul.

I decided to open my eyes again for another fraction of a second, but still nothing happened. I was emboldened by this series of events, or rather the lack of one. I opened my eyes again, but this time I reached up with my left hand and pulled the blindfold just above my eyes, allowing me to get my first real view of the Labyrinth.

It was the size of the table that sat at the front of the central chamber, just like the teacher described. On a closer look, it was that table. The telltale "GIVE UP TO THE LORD" carved into the side told me as much. The marble top had simply been removed, revealing an intricate series of paths too small for an adult's finger to travel through. They wound together and crossed over each other several times, and ended prematurely at several points. I could've taken any of those paths to get where I was now. No amount of preparation on the smaller one in class could've prepared me or anyone else for this leviathan.

I retraced my path forward to check where the dead ends would have put me. The uppermost path was labeled "Vendor," and the bottom was labeled "Heretic." I was shocked to see that God could have sent anyone down a path that would end in them

denouncing His name. If you had faith in Him now, then how could you lose that Faith? What could be less real than this?

I admit, I felt a bit of spite mixing in with my fear and anxiety. Maybe it was the spite, maybe it was all three, or maybe it was some mysterious fourth thing, but I kept looking at the board as I brought my finger back around and down the correct path. I kept going and going until I reached the leftmost point on the board, labeled “Success.” Success in what, I had no clue. But I was content with my result. I lifted my finger and took the blindfold off my head. That was it.

I walked out from behind the curtain, and the Voice rose to meet me. He wore his usual grin, but his eyes didn’t match the intensity. His face from the nose up looked bored, if I’m being honest. Still, he kissed my forehead and sent me on my way. I gave the blindfold back to the teacher, and he called Allan’s name. I looked back, and he met my gaze for the first time that day. He was terrified, he might’ve been crying at some point. His eyes looked bloodshot, like he hadn’t got any sleep last night. I willed my brain as hard as I could to send him my thoughts, to tell him it was ok if he peeked, that God wouldn’t touch him, and no one would know. The teacher blindfolded him and led him to the Labyrinth. I left the classroom.

Richard was waiting for me in the hall. He leaned against the wall to the left of the door, slightly hidden behind it as it opened. If you weren’t looking for him there, you could’ve missed him, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t be listening to the sermon like an obedient child. In fact, he wasn’t even a child anymore. Neither was I. I hoped the feeling would set in harder the next day, for in that moment, I still felt very much like a scared child.

“Did you look?” he whispered to me.

He may have been prepared to break any rule he wanted, but I didn't feel like pushing my luck quite yet. Nor did I feel like coming clean about my choices. I shook my head.

“Really?” he said, raising an eyebrow. “I figured you would have. Nothing would have happened if you did, I took the blindfold off the moment I was behind the curtain. Didn't even touch the table.”

I was surprised at how forthcoming he was. If anyone saw him speaking now, he would be in trouble. Add onto that straight up admitting to defying a coming of age ceremony, he may as well have been a dead man. Then again, he was talking like a dead man only yesterday. I looked at him, and he looked at me. I don't think we reached any kind of understanding, but he didn't say anything else.

The door opened, and Allan and the teacher walked out. Allan's face was gray as the curtain in the classroom, and his eyes were glazed over. The teacher was guiding him out by his hand. He let go as the door shut behind them, and Allan slumped down to the floor.

“The Voice has asked for complete privacy during Chris' time with the Labyrinth,” the teacher said. “I trust that you three will obey his wishes. I'm going to join the congregation, I ask that you will all follow suit after Chris is done. I know you're all close.”

As he walked down the hall, I wondered how little he must have been looking at us for the past year to think we three had anything left tying us to Chris. Richard and I looked back at each other, then at Allan, who looked back up at us. He seemed to go

cross-eyed trying to lock eyes with both of us at once. There wasn't any room left between us for Chris, except for maybe if we were all pointing and laughing at him getting hard in class, or acting like he was the biggest thing in the Pocket just because the Voice liked him, or ruining Richard's and Allan's lives.

The door shut behind the teacher, and Richard stood up straight. He grabbed mine and Allan's hands and led us to the main chamber door.

"This is it for me," he said. He had our full attention, now. "I'm about to change the Pocket forever. If what the teacher said means anything, it means that you two are perceived as close to me, and that'll be very bad for you after today. Allan, I've already told him, but it looks like you also need to find a way out of here by the end of the week, preferably as soon as possible. Anything goes. Now you two go in there and sit somewhere people can see you, you'll need the alibi."

He let go of our hands and walked backward toward the classroom door. Allan and I didn't move from our spot.

"Don't just stand there," Richard said. "Go. I don't know how much longer Chris is going to take."

Allan walked into the main chamber, and I turned to follow him. As I was shutting the door behind us, I turned back and saw Richard walking toward the classroom. He pulled his blazer off and dropped it on the floor. Tucked into the back of his pants was a massive meat cleaver.

I shut the door and caught up with Allan, who sat down in the pew closest to us. I sat next to him, and on my other side was the teacher. He gave me a small nod, then he turned back to the front of the room to listen to the sermon. It was about something Chris

had already preached some time during the school year. I never figured out who thought of it first. I didn't care much about that anyway. I was listening for sounds coming from the classroom. With walls and two doors between it and us, it was a useless effort, but I was too scared and curious to consider that.

Eventually, the sermon ended, and people began getting up to go outside for communion. At some point during the sermon, Allan had grabbed my hand. He was holding it tightly, and I waited for him to stand up first. Through the crowd, I caught sight of the spot where the large table would have stood. In its place was a table of similar size, lacking the carved words on the front. Atop the table was a pig, slaughtered in the same way as the pig I saw last year.

"Give up to the Lord," I whispered under my breath. Allan squeezed my hand, and I squeezed his back. We stood up and left the chamber. We broke away from the crowd and went back to the residential area, holding hands the whole way back.

As the noon bells chimed, we stood in front of his house. We held hands as we stared up at the steeple in the distance, thinking about how we would never see it again soon.

"How do we leave?" I asked.

"Probably my dad," he said. I already knew that would be his answer. Even when I was the only one leaving, I knew his dad was the only way out. I was planning on bringing him with me either way, whatever that took.

"When can we go?" I asked

“He’s been talking about taking me to Vegas,” Allan said. “To celebrate my transition into adulthood. I’ll just tell him I want to bring you with me. We can leave on Friday.”

“Cool,” I said. We kept staring up at the steeple. In the distance, we heard screaming. We could almost make out words at first, but then there were too many voices to discern anything but the panic.

We learned the next day what had happened. The Sunday School teacher went back to the classroom because the Voice and Chris never came out. He found both of them naked and very dead. A cleaver was stuck in the Voice’s head, poking out the front of his skull between his eyes, and his body was covered in deep cuts. Chris’ throat was sliced, but his body was relatively undamaged.

Over the next few days, the scene twisted and morphed into a far more gruesome image. Somehow it became known that Chris had been sexually violated, and hearing adults trying to explain that to the adults who were recently children was definitely a sight to behold. Obviously, no one blamed that on the Voice, although rumors did spread that his penis had been chopped off and forced into Chris’ body, but people rightfully dismissed that as sensationalist nonsense. The rumor that did stick was that Richard was the killer. We didn’t exactly have a means of investigating crimes with forensic ability, but as the only person not accounted for at the sermon, he caught the blame for the murders and any resulting information that came out afterwards. No matter how blatantly false it was. Some people were saying he did the “homosexual act” with Chris, some people said he sodomized his own father. Some said he was possessed, some said his soul had become that of a female during the Labyrinth, and that the confusion drove him to

commit the murders and everything thereafter. Soon enough, it was impossible to know for sure what had happened in that room, other than the fact that Chris and the Voice were dead, and some amount of devilry was involved.

By Friday, people were beginning to talk about the only other people not accounted for at communion, and whether they might have had a hand in what happened to the Voice. Thankfully, that evening was the moment Allan showed up on my doorstep and told me it was time. I had packed a bag with a change of clothes, some jerky, and my toothbrush, and Allan had done the same. I grabbed it and left home without a word to my parents, who were so distraught over the death of the Voice that they barely had a mind for anything else. As the rumors worsened, I imagined they would be happy not to have to reconcile my possible involvement in a murder.

Allan's dad was waiting for us near the land bridge out of the pocket. We joined him, and he brought us across. Eventually, we reached the man-made bridge. This one, I had never been across. I never had reason to, the only thing beyond it was Hershel's Pond, and I was always content to play in the creek behind Allan's house. As we approached it, my heart was racing and I was sweating like I was back behind the gray curtain, waiting for God to kill me. I reached out for Allan's hand, but he shook his head and mouthed "Later." I realized then that his dad was probably not in favor of his son holding hands with another boy, the same way my parents wouldn't have been. I clutched my bag tighter and held myself together the best I could.

We walked across the bridge, the wood clunking beneath our feet, the river below rushing by with a quiet sloshing sound. The sun was peeking out from over the edge of the valley, just barely lighting our way, and that little bit of sunlight illuminated a small

wooden shed on our right. I was surprised to see something man-made this far from the other buildings in the Pocket, but Allan's dad walked right up to it and flung the doors open. Inside was a massive contraption made of metal and glass and other shiny stuff. Allan's dad pointed to the back, and Allan led me to a large open space at the back of the contraption. I'll just call it a truck now, that's what it was, but I'd never seen anything like this in my whole life. I didn't recognize the other thing behind the truck as a trailer, either, but I was confused enough that I didn't pay it much mind.

He hopped into the bed and pulled me in alongside him. We laid our bags between us, and then he pulled a tarp over us. We lied still for a moment, then the truck roared and rumbled beneath us. It was then that he grabbed my hand and held it tight. I couldn't see him in the darkness beneath the tarp, but his hand was enough for now. The truck started moving, then stopped as Allan's dad got out and shut the shed doors behind him.

As he got back into the driver's seat, the tarp suddenly popped up. I closed my eyes, thinking we'd just been caught, when something slid in on my other side and pulled the tarp back over us. I opened my eyes and strained them, trying to see what was beside me, but the darkness obscured it.

"Pretty good plan," a voice said, "I couldn't have thought of a better one myself."

"Richard?!" I whisper-screamed.

"Mary," he answered, "But yes, it's me. Remember, Richard died in that town. I don't have to be him anymore, so I'd like it if you don't try to make me."

I was so confused by Mary's sudden presence that I couldn't think of anything to say. I'm sure she'd be pissed at me deadnaming her for the whole story up to now, but I figured this was the best way of reducing confusion on your part.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Allan asked, less dumbstruck than myself. "I thought you were going to hide in town somewhere."

"I was fully prepared to kill myself at the scene of the crime," Mary said.

"That doesn't answer the fucking question!" Allan hissed at her. "Why are you here? How come you didn't tell us before?"

"I only just changed my mind," Mary said. "Like I said, I was ready to die there. But I realized then that if you two really could find a way out, then I'd want to go with you. So I took a chance on you, and it paid off. And now I'm here. The end."

"What would you have done if we didn't?" Allan asked. "Were you just going to rot somewhere in the woods? Let people find you and lynch you?"

Before she could answer, the truck suddenly came to a stop, but the engine stayed on. We went silent. Someone walked up to the driver's side window, and a motor hummed as Allan's dad rolled it down.

"Where are you going?" a voice I didn't recognize asked.

"Heading down south," Allan's dad answered. "Figure it's a good time to celebrate my son's adulthood."

"Lord above," the voice sighed, "You realize the whole Pocket's in an uproar over your son and that other kid, right? People are talking, man. They're planning on going to their homes and dragging them to church to demand answers from them about the Voice."

“What would my son know about that business?” Allan’s dad said. “If there’s a hair on his head out of place when I get back, I’ll make the Voice look like he got butterfly kissed to death.”

“Alright,” the voice said, “alright. I get the point, I’ll try and push them in that other kid’s direction. You just make sure you’re back by tomorrow night, and make sure you bring another hog with you when you do. The funeral needs a lot more supplies than we got right now.”

“Sure thing,” Allan’s dad said. With that, he rolled the window back up and we started moving again. I didn’t want to think about what the man said. I still don’t, so I’m not going to. We stayed quiet for another while after that, but it was suddenly cut short by the truck’s horn blaring out. Mary and myself froze in place, but Allan sat up.

“That’s the signal,” he said. “We’re out of the Pocket.”

With those words, he threw the tarp off of us. Mary and I sat up with him, and we were all shocked by what we saw. We were, indeed, out of the Pocket. Without the high walls of the valley, we finally saw the countryside spread out before us. For miles and miles in every direction, the setting sun, no longer obscured, illuminated the rolling hills in a soft orange glow. The wild grasses blew in a firm breeze that hit us just the same. It wasn’t the wind tunnel that the valley was, but it felt fresher and freer than any wind I’d felt before. Honestly, if you’d asked me then, I would’ve said everything felt freer, despite most of the scenery just being the Pocket but bigger.

“Hey,” I said to Mary. “You killed them, right?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I might’ve given the knife to Chris and let him do as he pleased.”

“That’s not possible,” I said. “The knife was in the Voice’s head. And Chris’ throat was cut. There’s no way-”

“Did you see the bodies?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“Figured,” she said. Then her lips tugged back into a massive smirk. “Even if I did, it isn’t my fault. It was God’s plan.”

“How would you know? You said you didn’t touch the Labyrinth.”

“Why does that change anything?” she asked, finally looking at me. “Stop thinking the way they made you think, and tell me what you really think. Do you believe I killed them?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. She kept looking at me, waiting for some kind of response, but I didn’t know what I could say that would satisfy both of our minds. I looked away and kept my eyes on the sprawling land before me, and I imagine she did the same.

After that, we sat in silence for the longest time, just trying to take everything in. We rode for hours on end, and we never got bored. Vegas was ahead of us somewhere. Eventually, we’d see the lights come up over the horizon, but for the moment, it was us, the sun, and the world.

So yeah, that’s where I grew up. Things mostly became normal from there. Well, normal for a guy like you, anyway. Allan’s dad won big at Vegas that night, and he was drunk enough that we could talk him into letting us stay in some small town an hour or so out from there. Plus he let us keep some of the money so we could start life fresh. We

bought an apartment, and we all found some mostly-not-shady jobs that kept us fed for the years after that.

Five years later, Mary moved out into her own apartment, but she's stayed pretty close to us. I don't think she could imagine life without something familiar. As for me and Allan, we kept our distance. We visited sometimes, and we didn't decline her visits, but we never did more than that. You can't blame us, she was a murderer. Most likely. I just can't see Chris doing something like that, but then again, the truth of what happened that day was never really understood by anybody in the Pocket. Plus, how could she have come up with such an unlikely story? She isn't the type to just lie like that. Sure, she was closeted her whole life, but still. That's not really a lie, not the same kind, anyway. You wouldn't know she's a murderer, looking at her.

Anyway, we got married. Me and Allan. We got official government IDs as soon as we could manage, and it's been mostly smooth from there. Thirty years down the line, and he's just as wonderful as he has been ever since I met him, thanks for asking. I wouldn't have life any other way.

Now, as for why I needed to tell the story in the first place. Sorry to take so long getting to the point, and then moving deftly past the point, but I hope that the story was interesting enough to justify it. Anyway, to move things back a bit, you recall my watershed moment with the Labyrinth? How worried I was about God killing me for looking, and wondering how God could have planned for someone to turn their back on Him? Those thoughts have been eating at me recently. All those years since, and only now is it bugging me. You see, I wanted to ask you if you think the Labyrinth was real.

Not the physical thing, mind, but what it said about me. I opened my eyes and saw myself through to a place marked “Success.” By all accounts, I’ve cheated. But have I not reached success? I’m in a better place now, and I have nothing stopping me from doing basically whatever I want. Maybe some great downfall is coming for me in the future, but I don’t have much of a future left now, compared to when I left the Pocket. I’m almost fifty now, you know. It’s a miracle I can remember the story as well as I do.

Did the other people not opening their eyes trap them in the Pocket? If one of them reached success too, would they have found it in their life? Does stopping at “Vendor” first mean I was supposed to do that, or did going to “Heretic” afterwards sever my ties with God? Allan has refused to talk about his experience ever since, and he’s still somewhat God fearing even after all that. You already know Mary’s situation, and she’s doing just fine. Did her not touching the table mean she avoided God’s influence over her life?

Do I believe in God? Now there’s the real question, the one I’ve been avoiding ever since. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to say I’m a full fledged atheist. I’d like to be, considering what little good God’s done for my life, but I think I’m going to carry the Pocket with me wherever I go. For me, God’s a bad dream I can’t stop from coming back every so often. God’s a shadow in the corner of my eye. God’s behind me right now, waiting for the perfect change to deliver a comeuppance nearly forty years in the making. My only choice is whether or not I spend the rest of my life listening for the shot that kills me.

But that isn’t much of an answer, is it? I was hoping for something more definitive. I was really looking forward to it, if I’m being honest. But I guess that’s the

part of me that hasn't grown up yet. They talked so big about the Labyrinth bringing us into adulthood, but look at me! I'm nearly 50, having a midlife crisis, and I'm realizing that I never grew up at all. Maybe a part of me is still in the Labyrinth, and now I've grown too big to take my finger out without losing some of it in the process. Maybe I'll be there forever. And here I am again, looking for a concrete answer where one doesn't exist.

I guess life just isn't so simple. Oh well. Thanks for listening anyway, friend. I have a feeling that I've got an answer for me somewhere in my future. Or maybe I'm just being too hopeful. Maybe that downfall is coming for me whether I like it or not. Maybe I'm worrying too much, huh? I think I'm due for one more glass before I go. Hear that, bartender? One more glass! I've got plenty more stories if you want to hear them. Did I ever mention the one about Mrs. Beatty's husband? Oh God, that one's a riot!