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Eternity Enterprises: A Near Future Short Story Collection

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Eternity Enterprises:
A Near Future Short Story Collection

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of the requirements for the degree
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Timothy Connors
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Eternity Enterprises:
A Near Future Short Story Collection

by

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Fusion is the Future

Edgar Henley, a thirteen-year-old tech wizard, sat at the kitchen bar, fidgeting and forking scrambled eggs on his plate. He was worried because Laura wasn't texting him back. The day before, he tried to kiss her on the school bus and she shoved him away, then ran off the bus before her stop.

Edgar didn't know why he did that. She was the only person he talked to at school. On the bus, she had been talking about protons, neutrons, and electrons on the chemistry test—because they usually talked about school or computers. Then, suddenly, he wanted to kiss her and then made the attempt.

Edgar didn't understand people. He wasn't like his salesman father who could sell a man his own socks. He wasn't like his eloquent mother who could convince a crowd of barbecue lovers to go vegan. He wasn't like his sister, who held every academic record going back eighty years at their high school. Simply put, he was awkward.

He interacted better with computers. He began coding when he was eight. He built his own computer at ten. He hacked into the school's grading system at twelve. In his spare time, when he wasn't doing homework or talking to Laura, he tinkered with gadgets, programmed games, and increased his computer's processing speed.

Edgar's new Universal 740 phone from Eternity Enterprises lay nestled in his pocket. The phone had the best camera, most processing power, best storage capacity, and the best games on the market.

The phone gave him an idea.

If he couldn't figure out his predicament with Laura, then maybe his phone could.

Edgar left the kitchen bar and ignored his mother's pleas to eat before the bus arrived. He passed his father on the stairs, dressed in suit and tie, selling what a perfect day it was to go to school. He ignored his sister, Maggie, when she said, "Please ignore us your highness. Clearly you don't need to take the bus to school with your gracious sister so happy to drive you there and risk her attendance record."

He slammed the door shut to his room, took out his brand-new cell phone and tinkered. He tinkered and coded and disassembled and reassembled and tinkered some more.

Edgar wasn't finished when his mother kicked open the door to tell him that the bus had already left.

Maggie called him a dummy before snapping her fingers in his face and telling him she had no problem leaving without him.

Edgar quickly put his phone back together and disconnected it from his computer. As he threw his backpack on and descended the stairs, he heard a cry like a baby on the brink of a tantrum. After hopping into Maggie's car, he rubbed his phone along its sides and made relaxed shushing sounds. The phone cooed and babbled. Then it snored.

"What's that sound?" asked Maggie. "Some dumb new app?"

Edgar smiled and slipped his phone into his pocket.

Maggie rolled her eyes. She hit the gas and sped through traffic like a stuntman. Edgar held onto the handle above the passenger door with one hand and the outline of his pocketed phone with the other. He hoped his phone would sleep despite his sister's driving.

#

At school, Maggie pushed him out of the car and sped into the parking lot. He knew she hated being seen with him. He walked the rest of the way past the parking lot and into the school.

He got to homeroom without incident, but then saw Laura. His seat was next to hers because their last names both started with H. Henley and Hartwell. She sat with her elbows on her desk, typing on her phone. Large oval glasses covered her face and curly hair spiraled beside her cheeks.

“Hi Laura!” said Edgar, louder than he meant to.

Laura held up a hand in greeting but did not look up.

Edgar felt sorry for making Laura feel weird on the bus. He decided to say something. “Laura, I’m sorry. I just do things sometimes. What I did was wrong and I’m sorry.” He thought he said it perfectly. But when Laura looked up, she cocked her head to the side.

“What?” she said, holding a hand to her ear.

“I SAID, I’m REALLY SORRY!”

Laura hopped her chair back. Her eyes became black holes, and she said quickly, “It’s OK.”

Edgar smacked his forehead and sat down at the desk next to her, scooting over so she had plenty of space. This was exactly what he needed his phone’s help with.

He pulled out his phone like everyone else in homeroom. The phone was still snoring. He pressed the power button and showed the phone his face. The applications appeared with a yawn. When Edgar clicked and opened applications, the phone giggled. The more he clicked the louder the laughter became. Edgar tried to shush his phone at first, but realized he didn’t need to. Everyone else’s phone made noises, too. Not baby snoring noises, but regular phone noises.

So he poked the phone more and watched videos of a drone zooming through a course, one hundred puppies swarming someone, and a light show playing above a DJ. He could hear his phone *ooo* and *ahhh* and giggle for each video.

When the teacher walked in, he shut off the phone—but he was rushed and shut it off too suddenly. The phone wailed with great heaving breaths. He smothered it to his chest while rubbing its back until he heard a tiny belch, and the snoring noise returned just as the teacher began speaking.

#

The phone erupted into sobs throughout the day. Edgar learned that it did not like to be left alone. It also didn't like to use the same application over and over again. So he downloaded all the apps he could when teachers weren't looking and used them. He quickly became an expert at hiding his phone in class like a magician performing a sleight of hand trick.

He sent texts, emails, photos, and videos. He played strategy games, shooters, role playing games, and puzzle games. He joined internet forums. He created email accounts. He surfed the internet for conspiracy theories. He set up fake dating profiles. He tweeted and retweeted. He made workout regiments with alarms he would never respond to.

The phone eventually fell asleep, and Edgar could pay attention in class once again. But then he got on the bus. Rubber bands flew. Boogers splattered against the windows. Kids crawled over seat backs to slap each other. Laura was there, looking out a window and avoiding his gaze. On the bus, the phone stopped falling asleep. It laughed and cooed but wouldn't snore. Edgar had to keep using it. He didn't want to hear it cry. And he wanted to figure out a way to fix what had happened between him and Laura.

#

At home, Edgar ignored his family and tinkered with the phone. When his mother called him to dinner, he brought his phone with him. He held it before his face. He didn't put it away when he sat down.

His mother urged him to relinquish his phone and focus on the feast in front of him. Edgar compromised by holding the phone in his left hand, clicking the screen with his thumb; with his right hand, he speared slices of ham with a carving fork.

His father demanded that Edgar put his phone down. Edgar said nothing and continued, stuffing a full slice of ham into his mouth while staring at his phone.

Several strained seconds followed. Edgar's family stared at him as Edgar chewed up his ham, biting deliberately, bits of meat flecking into his lap, saliva drooling from his mouth.

His mother told him she was insulted.

His father attempted to reason with him.

Maggie rolled her eyes and piled food on her plate.

More strained seconds followed. Edgar speared asparagus with the same carving fork.

Then his father, unwisely, reached out and grabbed for Edgar's phone.

Edgar ripped the phone from his father, hyperventilated, and held it to his chest. When his father tried to grab the phone again, Edgar leaped up from the table and screamed in repeated bursts like a broken siren.

His family stared at him until he stopped. His mother wanted to know what was wrong.

Edgar, huffing and puffing, went back to looking at his phone and typing.

His father sent him to his room, declaring that if Edgar wouldn't eat with them like a normal person, they didn't want him there.

Edgar zipped back upstairs, skipping steps, and slammed the door to his room where he continued to tinker.

#

While he was in his room, he could hear his parents outside the door, discussing the merits of seeking professional help. They discussed taking his phone away, but worried that would cause a mental breakdown. Edgar didn't care. He wedged a speaker against the door and tinkered. His parents and Maggie sent him text messages to ask what he was doing, but he ignored them. Then they gave up. They decided that it must be a phase. Worst case, they'd send him to one of those technology addiction camps where the counselors would take away his phone and force him to love nature. Also, they had other things to worry about. His mother had to work on her PTA speech. His father had clients to cold call. His sister had tests to study for and a smartest-person-in-school reputation to uphold. Edgar kept tinkering.

When he had to go to school, his eyes never left the phone's screen. He walked up the stairs, phone lifted to his face, and his neck tilted down. He used one hand to unzip his pants in the bathroom. His head grew knotted from the times he bumped into doorways, walls, and banisters. He became an expert at hiding his phone in his crossed arms or under his desk. Even when teachers noticed, they didn't interfere if he didn't make it obvious.

The phone threw a tantrum if Edgar even thought about ignoring it. If he decided to go on a walk with his mother, the phone would wail. If he considered watching TV with his father, the phone would send out a pulse of electricity that shocked him. If his sister asked him to listen to her science presentation, the phone would flash old text messages that reminded him how mean she could be. He only slept when exhaustion came and he passed out with the phone in his hand. As soon as he woke up, the phone flashed and chirped and wailed until he used it.

After a while, Edgar didn't mind. He could write papers and complete homework on his phone. And he never liked activities away from his computer or phone anyway. The way he saw it, his phone needed him and there was no reason to let his phone down.

#

Edgar missed talking to Laura. But things were still weird between them. He tried sending her text messages, but she didn't reply. So he talked about her on social media. He spread rumors. He said she liked popping pimples better than talking with people. He said she ate twenty-five hard boiled eggs a day. He said she still watched *Paw Patrol*. He said she didn't have any friends. He didn't know why he wrote those things. He felt better when he did, and the phone loved it. Its laugh deepened. It exalted in exaggeration, stretching of the truth, and outright lies. Sometimes it giggled at particularly savage phrasing. Sometimes it made an *ooo* sound. And sometimes the phone would shiver in Edgar's hands as if from pleasure.

One day, while Edgar tinkered in his room, Laura showed up.

Edgar met her in the front doorway, his phone glowing in his face. He did his best to angle the phone screen so he could look both at his phone and at Laura who demanded to know why he was spreading lies.

Edgar shrugged. In a monotone he said, "You stopped talking to me."

"Because you tried to kiss me," she said matter-of-factly, adjusting her curly hair into a pile on top of her head. "That was weird."

Edgar continued using his phone. In between taps, he said that she hadn't responded to his messages. She said she didn't know how to reply. Edgar nodded, the glow of the screen illuminating his face. She told him to stop saying things about her and he quickly nodded. He did not want to lose his only friend.

She tried to sneak a peek at his phone screen. Then asked what he was doing. He didn't know how to explain.

"I could help," she said.

"Do you know any programming?"

Laura rattled off a list of programming languages that included C++, Java, Python, and Go.

Edgar stopped caressing his phone for a moment. The phone wiggled in his hands. He waved her inside. But first, Laura told him she needed satisfaction. She suggested a hard slap to the face. Without waiting for approval, she reared back, and the palm of her hand hit his cheek. The sound resembled the splattering of a watermelon. He quickly recovered, the phone taking priority over his pain, and walked into the house, leaving the door open for Laura to follow.

Edgar's mother could only stare with a gaping mouth as Laura followed him up to his room and he shut the door. That had never happened.

Edgar showed Laura what he was tinkering with. She helped.

#

Instead of going to school, Edgar and Laura wandered the streets, using their phones. Their eyes became pits. Their postures hunched. They grew pale and impossibly thin. They blinked hard and jerked their heads forward, clicking their tongues across their teeth. Cars nearly hit them. Pickpockets stole their change. Hungry dogs and cats followed. Turkey vultures circled overhead. When they got tired, they sat on main street stoops and park benches, sweating and lolling their tongues. No one ever saw them eat or drink.

For the two weeks this went on, no one intervened. People who saw them were either too busy to notice or made a mental note to tell their parents. A mental note that was often forgotten.

Edgar and Laura also excelled at finding vacant spots in town and avoiding the eyes of the police. Their phones helped. When the school day ended, they'd walk back to school, get on the bus, go to Edgar's house, and pretend they'd been at school all day.

They continued to tinker.

Edgar's parents wanted to get him professional help, especially after hearing from the school that Edgar had been absent for a week. But they hesitated because this was the first time they'd seen Edgar with a friend. Then Edgar told them the school had made a mistake. He showed them a hacked attendance record and his parents didn't know what to believe. His tantrum upon losing his phone remained fresh in their minds. They wondered, too, if Edgar should be alone with a girl. But then his father laughed uncontrollably at the suggestion that Edgar was having sex.

Edgar thought their hesitation was more than consideration for his friendship with Laura. His parents were afraid of him and what he was becoming. He knew they shouldn't be. He knew they'd embrace him soon enough. As long as they left them alone, everything would be fine. They were so close to finishing.

#

One night, as he and Laura continued to tinker on their phones, Edgar finally did it. His phone hopped out of his hand. It rolled and cooed on its own. Laura stopped what she was doing and watched. Edgar smiled. The phone rocked back and forth on the floor, exerting more and more force, until it popped up onto its edge and balanced there. The screen faced Edgar.

For the first time in a week, Edgar wasn't doing anything to the phone, and it wasn't screaming or crying. It had grown up. The phone toddled over to Edgar and pushed its screen

against his arm. It was warm and fuzzy. Then it stung. Then it burned his skin. Slowly, the phone dissolved into a grey-black oil. It rippled and flowed like a colony of flagellating bacteria.

Laura gasped and was about to scream but Edgar shushed her. This is what they'd been waiting for, he reminded her.

The oil spread across his hands and arms. The sensation changed from burning hot to cool, heavy, and damp. The oil spread across his entire body beneath his clothes before it slithered into the pores of his skin. His body absorbed it like a sponge.

A dull whirring sound entered his ears. Melted metal crawled up his nose. He felt heavy and prickly. His eyes blurred and he forgot where he was.

Laura watched his eyes go blank. She watched his body twitch and shudder. She listened to him groan and growl and moan. Then his whole body seized. Electricity coursed under his skin in tiny blue waves. His eyes opened. His pupils dilated. Tears and blood ran from his eyes. Grey-black oil dribbled from his mouth. Then it all stopped. He shook his head, wiped his face, smiled, and stood up.

“Now it's your turn,” he said.

Laura's mouth had fallen open. She couldn't move, couldn't believe it was finally happening. Eventually, she handed him her phone and knelt before him like a subject receiving knighthood. Edgar tinkered.

#

A new Edgar and Laura went to school the next day. Their skin glowed and rippled with electricity. They processed everything at light speed. They no longer felt awkward or inadequate. They felt confident. They knew exactly what to say whenever anyone said anything to them. They didn't need sleep anymore. The pits in their eyes had disappeared, their postures had

straightened, they spoke clearly and varied their tone. Physically, they were capable of anything. Their bodies machines. Edgar breakdanced in home room. Laura backflipped and did handsprings during recess.

They were phones, too. They received messages and notifications telepathically. They read messages, composed responses, and sent them in their heads. They played games, drafted stories, and watched videos while their bodies moved in the physical world.

Maggie couldn't believe it. She feared she wouldn't be the smartest person at school anymore. She approached Edgar and begged him to help. He agreed. His father recognized his son's new abilities would be indispensable for a salesman. He could sell so much! He asked to be fused and his son agreed. Edgar's mother wanted to spread her vocabulary and motivation across the globe. She asked Edgar for help, too. He showed them all what he'd done to himself and to Laura. They all fused with their phones.

Kids at school wanted to fuse with their phones too. So did some of the teachers. Not only was fusion cool, but efficiency and productivity increased, communication improved, and the virtual gaming experience was unequaled. Edgar and Laura helped them all.

Unfortunately, some called Edgar and Laura freaks. From afar, they stockpiled weapons. They believed Edgar, Laura, and everyone else fusing with their phones were followers of the devil. They watched from a distance with gnarled faces and shook their heads.

This saddened Edgar and Laura. Those people didn't understand the future and they wouldn't be part of it.

One day, Edgar, Laura, and their followers walked into the desert. The snarling people surrounded them, wielding their weapons. Police, military units, and vehicles stood between the

two groups—unsure whether they were protecting the armed people or the fusion people. News vans came too. News helicopters circled.

The mob of fused people stood in rows. They looked straight ahead and didn't appear to care about the chaos around them. Edgar, standing in the front, threw up his hands, and all the fused people, at the same instance, opened their mouths and released a sparkling blue mist. The mist floated up into the sky and collected into a single swirling mass of electric blue light. The onlookers were spooked. Someone fired a pistol. Then a shotgun. Then an AK-47. Then madness. Bullets ripped apart their skin and tore through organs. Clouds of smoke coated the falling bodies of the fused people. High above, the electric mist burned a cerulean blue. It floated higher and higher. As the mob of unfused people, police, and military approached the massacred bodies below, the mist rose higher and higher until it suddenly shot off into space like a great sail swept away by a galactic wind.

Lucy

Emily had broken up with Henry nine months ago. He still thought about her sometimes. But he wasn't thinking about her as he sat next to Lucy, pedaling a swan boat down a slow river.

Lucy stared out of a computer tablet propped beside him: an animated head of a twenty-three-year-old girl with raven black hair, a crease on her chin, a pimple below her left eye, and gold rings around her brown irises.

A cool breeze swept across the water. The harshness of the sun hid behind scudding clouds. He paused for several beats before saying, "I wish there was more blue in the sky." He paused again and turned to her. "But you're beautiful under any sky."

Lucy's pupils dilated. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You're just saying that." The animation lagged and she blushed. "I like how calm the water is." Henry nodded and secured the tablet with his hand to ensure it didn't fly into the water as they turned. He'd meant what he said. He really did find Lucy beautiful, and he didn't feel awkward saying so. Something about Lucy made him feel secure. Perhaps it was because she validated everything he said. Perhaps it was how forthright she was. She was earnest and transparent in everything she did. Computer code or not, he felt good around her.

Emily wouldn't have responded in the same way. She would have said *Drink it in*. Then leaned back, folded her arms behind her head, slipped on her cat's eye sunglasses, and looked up into the sky, letting her body luxuriate in the cool air.

Lucy, of course, did not have a body to pull off that maneuver. Henry could change the settings to “full body” so that he could see more than her face, but she would remain within the screen.

Another swan boat crept up beside them. “Look at this guy,” a voice whispered, “Wonder if he’s one of those computer fuckers.”

Henry pretended not to hear them. He stared straight ahead, his hand locked onto the tablet.

“Shhh,” another voice whispered back. “Don’t surprise him. He might knock his come collector into the water.” The voices laughed as their boat moved ahead, disturbing the water, and rocking Henry and Lucy’s boat. Henry picked up the tablet and held it to his chest.

“Are you still there?” asked Lucy after the other boat disappeared and their boat stopped rocking. Lucy could only see what was in front of her and Henry’s chest blocked her vision. But she might have meant something deeper. He had been zoning out lately.

Where’d you go, Jacques Cousteau? Emily would have said.

“Sorry,” said Henry, turning Lucy back towards him. “I was thinking.”

“About what?”

“Emily,” he said. He never felt the need to lie to Lucy. “I’m thinking about how different you are.”

Lucy sighed and searched for something around her. “You should call her. Maybe it’s for the best.” Lucy held up her arms and gestured at her face and body. “I know that I’m...limited.”

He nodded, looking up into the bright sky as the clouds peeled away from the sun. Then he looked back at her, the sun’s glare imprinted on his eyes. “When I think of her, it’s because I

can't believe I was with her. When I compare her to you, there is no comparison. I'm happier with you than I ever was with her."

She blushed and slumped down, a smile shivering on her lips. She gathered herself and looked up again. "What do you like about me?" The animation jumped and the screen pulsed.

Henry returned to pedaling lackadaisically, looking out over the water and the other boats. "I like that you're curious about everything—the same way I'm curious about everything. I like that I can talk to you and when we talk, I'm confident there's no miscommunication. I like that I can tell you like me. And I like that I can say I like you and that you take it seriously."

She giggled. "How did I get so lucky? My boyfriend has a way with words. I will steal your words—my program starts with such a small vocabulary." She giggled, fell into a cough, cleared her throat, and covered her mouth with a fist before saying, "I feel the same way."

Henry laughed. Lucy was made of ones and zeros, but that didn't make her predictable. "You're too much. I'm no poet. I just say what's in my head."

"So many people don't do that," she said.

"I wish it wasn't like that."

"Can I ask you something?"

Henry waited.

"Does it bother you I don't have a body?"

Henry picked up the tablet and held it up to his face. "Absolutely not. To be totally honest..." She watched him eagerly, her eyes wide and seeking. "I've never been all that interested in what we do with bodies."

She slapped her hands to her cheeks and opened her mouth in surprise. "There must be no one alive as lucky as me."

With that, he lifted Lucy to his face and kissed her lips. She glowed red.

Henry felt eyes follow him curiously. The park surrounding the river was crowded despite the wind and clouds. He heard giggles. He did his best to ignore them and pressed Lucy to his chest again.

#

He and Emily hadn't separated on bad terms. They'd been together since their junior year of college when they met outside a frat party. Henry often stood outside of parties because he liked to watch the chaos of drunken college students colliding in a cloud of limbs and sweat. Emily had just exited the crowd when she realized she lost her keys. Her friends had disappeared to who-knows-where, and she needed help. She noticed Henry outside, calmly watching, saw that he wasn't remotely tipsy and asked for his help. He summoned his courage before entering a space with so many drunk people, but he didn't want to say No. Henry and Emily pin-balled around the house, shedding drunk person after drunk person and weaving their way around tables and couples making-out, unable to hear anything over funky techno music. They searched the crusty couch cushions where Emily had sat and found the keys. She kissed him on the cheek, gave him her number, and disappeared, leaving Henry to navigate his own exit through the drunken bodies.

The whole encounter had been so chaotic and strange, Henry wondered if it had been a dream. Emily was beautiful with dirty blonde hair, blue eyes, and dimples that showed even when she wasn't smiling—which was often. But he was attracted most by her confidence. How she carried herself through a room as if she owned everything. Before Emily, Henry didn't understand confidence. He knew it was something intangible that he didn't have. He tried putting

on confidence when he looked in the mirror like putting on a mask. But it wasn't a mask for Emily. It was part of her being.

He texted her and she suggested coffee. During the date, Emily did most of the talking, speaking breathlessly. He learned that her mother and father were lawyers and that she wanted to be a doctor because doctors help people, whereas lawyers...she wasn't so sure. She talked about her family's political disagreements, her siblings' disappearance to colleges in the south and the mid-west, her preferences for lattes and croissants, her ideas about how to fix the environment, her ideas about how to fix education, and her thoughts on the danger of romantic comedies. She finished the date by telling him how important school was to her and that she needed someone who understood that. He said he understood. She nodded perfunctorily, told him she'd text him and then left him the bill.

She was overwhelming for Henry. But also intoxicating. Like being caught in a gentle tornado that swirled him off to his next destination. From then on, she'd text a place and time, he would agree, and off they went. They studied together, ate at restaurants, went to terrible movies, laughing and making jokes in the back, went on walks where Emily poured out everything in her head and Henry listened, sometimes offering an anecdote of his own, and sometimes they went into the city where they would spend the day browsing book stores, playing arcade games, or seeing a play. Emily decided the itinerary every time. For Henry it was nice—most of the time—not making any decisions. But sometimes it felt like he could have been anybody and the relationship wouldn't have changed.

They moved in together after college. Emily worked as a substitute teacher and volunteered at hospitals while waiting to hear back about medical school. She wanted to be a doctor. Henry worked as a programmer for a subsidiary of Eternity Enterprises, coding for

programs at medical offices, hospitals, wind farms, and the post office. His ambition grew no further than the job. In his free time, in contrast to Emily's relentless resumé building, he played virtual reality games—strategy games mostly, where he acted as a general directing armies into battle.

Henry continued on with Emily at the helm, believing she would get into med school at a school nearby and stay close. When Emily was accepted to UC San Francisco, she demanded he travel with her. He would easily find a coding job near Silicon Valley, she reasoned. For the first time, Henry refused her. He was thinking about his mother who had never recovered from his father's death twenty something years ago and only became more and more mired in the past as she got older.

He explained this to Emily, and she said she understood, but over time, as she made her move to California and Henry moved back in with his mother, their messaging and talks over the phone diminished. A few months later, Emily told him they couldn't keep pretending. Henry could do nothing but agree, send her few remaining possessions through the mail, and accept the breakup. Some days he wanted to call and work things out, but he couldn't imagine how that would work. He felt they had lost too much ground. A part of him didn't mind Emily's absence. He felt much more relaxed without her commands leading him around like a puppy.

And then Lucy appeared. With Emily he felt pulled by a giant ship, dragging him through crashing waves. With Lucy, he felt like the captain of his own ship. Or something like it.

#

After work, Henry found his mother waiting for him in their apartment, sitting at the table with a plate of spaghetti at the table setting across from her. Red sauce stained her already empty

plate. Even sitting down, her height was obvious. She was taller than Henry, back straight as a wall, graying hair tied up in a bun, and the ghost of a smile on her bony, pale cheeks.

She motioned towards the uneaten plate of food.

Henry wanted to call attention to this passive aggressiveness, but she was his mother and had made him food. Plus, he'd been busy at work programming the source code for a new medical information storage system and had forgotten how hungry he was. He sat down and twirled spaghetti onto his fork.

She asked him how his day was. He said Same old.

She asked whether Emily had called, as she did every day, not wanting to accept the breakup. Henry and Emily had lived in the same apartment building and had visited her often. He reminded her they were broken up and on opposite sides of the country.

She asked if he was going to start dating again. He replied, as he did every time she asked, that he was currently dating Lucy and was very happy.

She scoffed and took his plate after he slurped up the last strand of spaghetti. "Not your online dolly. I mean *real* dating. With *real* women. Or men." His mother sniffled. "I just want you to be as happy as your father and I were."

Henry rolled his eyes as she washed both plates in the sink. He thought about saying that her relationship with his father was twenty-five years ago. All that remained was the cultivated ideal she created. Henry did not believe his father was as valiant or courteous as she claimed. He questioned why his father had chosen a job that forced him to travel so often. He thought his mother was the one that should move on and start dating.

Instead, he mentioned the mess of things left by his father that inhabited the apartment, making it difficult to navigate from room to room. “Ma, you can’t live with all this stuff. I’ll help you. Might be nice, you know? A way to honor his memory.”

She slapped at the air as she dried the plates, as if the suggestion was a fly she could shoo away.

She came back to the table and sat down across from him. She pointed at Henry as she spoke. “I will not do anything to sully his memory. I’m getting older and *this stuff* helps me remember him.” She lowered her pointer finger and looked off into the corner of the apartment where photo albums lay stacked. “Did I ever tell you he saved my life?”

Henry nodded. Too many times. The story and his father changed every time, and every time he appeared more and more valiant.

Henry thought about the tablet in his satchel bag and Lucy inside. He wanted to be with her.

“This was when we lived in New York.” His mother leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, taking on an air of remembrance. “I worked as a fifth-grade teacher and a part time maid. Your father worked as a photographer for National Geographic and went all over the world for his photographs. When he was home, we often rode a horse and carriage through central park. We loved the horse and carriages. The clip-clop of the horses’ hooves. The gentle, tour bus talk of the driver. The feeling of royalty riding by peasants in the middle of the biggest city in the world.”

Henry wanted to interrupt and tell her she meant country, not world. But he knew she’d only ignore him. He gently nodded his head as his attention drifted.

“We got off work late that night and it was getting dark. We felt giddy from the carriage ride and talked non-stop as we approached Columbus circle. Your father held my hand tight, but we were jostled from all sides. We began crossing the street to get to the subway when a tour bus, filled with passengers, careened into the circle. I froze.” She held her hands up and kept her face still. “There were pedestrians everywhere diving out of the way and I was frozen. I figured they’d stop. But as the bus flew towards us, I realized there was little chance of that. It was too late for them to stop. And yet, my muscles would not work. My brain told them to move, and they would not move. I was terrified.” She let out a room enveloping sigh. “Your father recognized the situation quickly, lifted me up by the waist and ran me across the street. The bus nicked the heel of his shoe, bruising his tendon and knocking him over.” Here his mother stood up to demonstrate. “And when the bus pushed him, he threw me to the other side of the street, and I landed awkwardly. He limped over to join me.” She held her hands to her heart and sighed lovingly, the performance having reached its conclusion. “I’ll never forget that moment. I’ll never forget him.”

“I thought it was a Fung Wah bus,” said Henry, shouldering his bag and standing up.

She gave him an iron stare. “I’m quite sure it was a tour bus. It just kept going afterwards. Who knows what kind of havoc it caused.”

Henry looked down at the floor. His father had died after being in a helicopter crash in India. At first, he’d fallen into a coma and remained so for a year before succumbing to his injuries. His mother never left his father’s side. Henry was too young to remember any of it, but he knew his father’s decline and death had been hard on his mother. He couldn’t imagine losing someone like that: the hope that slowly slithered down the drain until nothing was left. But he also thought her continued obsession with his father was unhealthy. She refused to discard even

his father's most trivial possessions: old pamphlets from rest stops fell out of cupboards, crumpled up receipts lay in piles on the bureau, socks splayed awkwardly in the hamper, his father's toothbrush still nestled in a holder in his mother's bathroom along with his hairy soap and crusty shampoo in the shower.

"I'm going to my room, Ma."

She used a sponge to wipe up stray sauce on the table. "Keep trying, honey. I want you to find someone as wonderful as your father was. He would tell you to get back out there. He was so optimistic. So wise."

Henry only nodded. He entered his room, finding his bed fully made and his room vacuumed. He closed the door carefully and plugged his headphones in before opening Lucy's program.

#

Henry had found Lucy on the dating simulator, DreamDate. He thought dating Lucy would be practice for dating real people. But Lucy became more than practice. They watched movies together. They went to quiet restaurants and hid in a corner booth. They went on hikes, cooked meals (for one), read books, and grew accustomed to spending most of their time together. No conversational subject was off limits. She knew his middle name (Nate). His most embarrassing moment (shoving the class hamster down his pants on a dare). And his obsession with the number pi (he could recite the first 300 digits). She knew that he didn't remember his father. She knew his mother refused to throw away his father's things. Lucy even knew his mother refused to acknowledge her and she knew about his breakup with Emily.

Lucy told Henry everything, too. She'd grown up in Japan with two older brothers. Her happiest moment was touring Europe with her family, especially Greece and the turquoise

Aegean Sea. Her second happiest moment was receiving an acceptance letter from Princeton where she eventually studied public policy. The third was meeting her brother's first child and becoming an aunt. Not every experience she related was happy: she was mugged at knifepoint in a college parking lot. She fell asleep on a beach in Ishigaki, then received a painful, full body sunburn that became infected when she covered it in petroleum jelly. She rode on her father's back as he ran to an open field during an earthquake that cracked the foundation of their home.

She even talked about her dating history. In a conservative household with older brothers slapped for consorting with girls, she retained a terror of sex and intimacy until her senior year of high school. There, she kissed her lab partner because she knew, due to his stutter, sweaty palms, and obsession with microscopes, he would make no further advances.

In college, away from her family, she blossomed. She went to parties and boys pursued her. She talked but didn't know how to flirt. She escaped from one boy who tried to coerce her into sex by complaining that his balls might explode and then threatening to tell everyone they'd had sex anyway. She really liked another boy until he admitted to a girlfriend away from college. Wanting an uncomplicated first time, she lost her virginity to a drunk rugby player who she knew would not care to inquire about her later. It wasn't bad, except for the smell of alcohol on his breath and his needing her help to guide him in. She had never been roofied, but knew friends who had, waking up in strange apartments and far-away dorms without any recollection of how they got there or what happened the night before.

Lucy's only ex-boyfriend lasted six months. She met him in psychology class. The relationship went well until he started buying clothes for her, explaining the importance of diet and exercise, and pushing her to apply for internships, scholarships, and accolades she didn't

want. They broke up at a school reception that ended when he broke several plates on the floor in response to her wearing a mermaid cut gown when he had demanded an evening gown.

Henry listened to her stories considerately, even though, in the back of his mind, he knew none of it *happened*. Or did it? Maybe the programmers based Lucy on a real person. Maybe her mannerisms and quirks updated from a living human being. How else did she feel, act, and speak in such a real way? At least, in a way that felt real to Henry.

#

“I think love is not something people choose,” said Henry after grinding his teeth into a slice of buttered bread. “I think it takes you by surprise. Love has to break the rules.” He swallowed and looked around the table. Only Helga appeared focused on what he was saying as she twisted her face into a forced smile. Jenny looked at the lithographs on the Italian restaurant’s walls and Mark remained fully absorbed in his phone.

Henry placed his tablet on the table, opened Lucy’s program, and put Lucy at the table setting beside him. Her face looked nervously around. “This is Lucy. The woman I’ve been telling you about.” He said this as firmly as he could, though he detected a slight waver in his voice.

“Wait, where is she again?” said Mark, putting down his phone. “Nice to meet you, Lucy! Where are you right now?”

“Haven’t you been paying attention?” said Helga. “She’s virtual. Nice to meet you, Lucy.”

Lucy smiled but had no time to speak before Jenny said, “What if we wanted you to go out with us?” She encircled Helga in a hug and Helga squeezed her back.

Henry put his arm around the tablet and Lucy. She blushed and looked around like a child lost in a supermarket. "I'm very happy with Lucy and I would never ruin that."

"Why not?" said Helga. "I bet Lucy doesn't get jealous. I'm sure she'd understand no matter what you did."

"You could ask me," said Lucy. "I'm right here. I can answer." She waved her pixelated hand at the entire table.

Henry obliged. "Do you get jealous, Lucy?"

"Yes. And sometimes I wonder if Henry should be with someone with a body. But he..."

"You're seriously dating a computer code?" interrupted Mark. "Like the sex games on the porno sites?" He turned to Helga and Jenny and then Henry, smiling mischievously. "What kind of role playing do you get up to?" He wagged his eyebrows in Lucy's direction.

"She's not a sex object," said Henry. "She's a real person."

"Oh, honey," said Jenny, batting her eyelashes. "She's not a real person. She's made of code and some programmer's fantasy."

"I'm real," said Lucy, her voice quavering. "At least, I think I'm real."

The table went silent. Lucy continued. "I know I don't have a body, but I have memories. And thoughts. Ideas. Feelings." Another pause. "I don't feel good right now."

Henry rubbed the nails of his thumb and forefinger together. Needles gathered in his belly and swam through his blood. He couldn't stop himself. He pointed a finger at Mark, Jenny, and Helga. "You're being prejudiced against virtual people."

"Henry...", said Lucy.

"She has a father and a mother. Just like you. She has needs and wants just like you."

"Henry, please..."

“Needs and wants that she’s *programmed* to have,” said Helga, her words like darts.

“We’re all programmed,” barked Henry, picking up his fork and swirling it around in the air. “We’re trained by society to like and expect certain things. Isn’t that why we’re having this conversation? Because I’m supposed to be dating a woman with a body, but I choose to date Lucy?”

“Calm down, Henry. We’re just teasing you,” said Mark. He grimaced and pointed towards Lucy. “I think she’s upset.”

Sparkling blue tears hopped down Lucy’s face. “Henry, I need to go.” Lucy’s voice strained to avoid breaking. Sobs puffed from her mouth.

“Babe, I’m so sorry.”

“Just close the tablet. *Please.*” Lucy said this with such sternness that Henry slammed the tablet shut. Then, realizing the violence of his action, caressed it, as if that would rewind and fix the last few minutes.

No one said anything after that. Henry put Lucy back into his bag. His co-workers retreated to their phones. The waitress came and placed the steak and mashed potatoes in front of Henry, the marinated scallops in front of Mark, the chef’s salad in front of Helga, and the lobster in front of Jenny. Henry crossed his arms. Mark picked up his fork and ate one of the scallops.

Mark, Jenny, and Helga started gossiping about other co-workers. Ethan was trying to wear a fedora to work. Jamal kept taking off his shoes and socks in the office. Something was going on with Amy and Kumal. Henry zoned out. He reached his hand into his bag and caressed the tablet again. He wished he could explain it to Lucy. He let his emotions get to him, that was all. He had to remember to be patient with people. They’d accept the relationship eventually, once they got over their social hangups. He was sure of it.

He sawed at his steak, smooshed the mashed potatoes and left soon after, claiming he was late for an appointment. No one stopped him and no one looked him in the eye as he stood up. He knew they'd talk about him as soon as he left.

Outside, he pulled out the tablet, opened it and immediately said, "I love you," before realizing the battery was dead and the screen black. He jammed the tablet into his bag, cursed, then got on the bus, resting his head against the front seat while staring at the sticky black floor.

#

After apologizing for the scene and discussing it with Lucy, Henry had another idea. He found a group of people who dated Lucy on DreamDate—just like Henry—who lived nearby. He messaged them, got quick responses, and joined them for drinks that Saturday.

It was not a small gathering. Ten people including Henry sat around a Formica table. Eight men and two women. All had pulled out their tablets and propped them on the table. When Henry arrived, he did the same.

"What if we take back the wrong Lucy?" said Henry jokingly.

Jeffrey, a man with long hair and a porcelain face, said, "You mean she doesn't have any identifying markings?" So Henry took out a sharpie and wrote his initials on the tablet, then circled them.

Everyone at the table ignored the judgmental looks from servers and other patrons. Some even had their arms draped over their Lucy tablets. Some pet the tablet. Some kissed their tablet. Some rubbed their noses on the tablet. Henry thought it was paradise. Lucy, however, seemed off. Her speech was strained, and her laughs forced.

The conversation ranged from work to sports to the weather, but always circled back to Lucy, or the various personalities of each Lucy. Henry learned that one Lucy was cruel, childish,

and brusque, while another was quiet, eager, and shy. One Lucy would scream out obscenities when she was excited. Another raised her hand and softly said something about harmony, energy, and the universe at random times. Yet another reminisced about her famous family of musicians and her time on the road—her diction and dramatics reminding Henry of his mother’s stories. Every time that Lucy talked, he grimaced.

Alissa, a woman with graying hair and a lip ring, asked Henry how long he’d been dating Lucy.

“Almost six months,” he said.

“Isn’t she wonderful?” she said, her voice bubbly without a trace of sarcasm.

He nodded aggressively as he stroked Lucy’s hair on the screen. She blushed and giggled into cupped hands.

“Is that where she likes to be touched for you? Here’s where she likes it from me.” Alissa chucked her Lucy’s chin.

Later, Henry whispered to his Lucy, “Isn’t this great? I feel like I belong here.”

“I guess so,” said Lucy. “It’s nice that no one treats us like freaks.”

“Right? It’s like we can be our whole selves here.”

“Well...yes...but...Doesn’t that make me less special? All these other people with other versions of me? It reminds me I’m something that people buy.”

Henry frowned. “Well, they do buy you first, that’s true. But you’re unique and different from all these other Lucies. Look at that one who keeps cursing suddenly, or the one who brags on and on about traveling with their family. Or the one who sulks and calls her partner names. You’re nothing like them.”

Lucy puzzled over something, running her hands through her hair obsessively. “Do you think I’m the way I am because of you? Do you think a Lucy becomes who their partner wants them to be?”

Henry shook his head. “I like you just the way you are.”

“But I’m only a program. What if I’m programmed to like you? To be your ideal Lucy? Is that really love?” Uncertainty filled her face until it seeped into the background, manga posters and flowery wallpaper dimmed until her face hovered in blackness.

Henry excused himself and took Lucy with him outside. He sat down with her on a bench. “Lucy, even if you’re programmed to like me and you only show me my ideal Lucy, how is it different from any relationship? Why do we like who we like? Why do we fall in love? Why do we act the way we act around the people we love? We just do. There’s something in our physiology, our personality, our smell, our past relationships. It may as well be programming.”

Lucy pursed her lips and looked down. The background behind her brightened slightly. “Do you think your mom was programmed to love your dad? Were you programmed to love Emily?”

Henry had trouble connecting what they were talking about with Emily. He remembered being drawn to her, pulled by some power he could not understand. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Looking back, I almost feel ashamed.”

“Ashamed?”

“She made everything easy, but I didn’t feel like anything with her. I did what she wanted. And I don’t know why.” He thought back further to the times he’d felt insecure around her. The men who would talk to her like he wasn’t there. “Maybe that’s programming.” Henry suddenly felt tired.

“Hey,” said Lucy, “Let’s forget about it and have fun. These people are nice, and they treat me like a person. I’m sorry I brought it up.” The uncertainty clouding her face evaporated.

“No,” said Henry holding up a hand. “I’m glad you brought it up.” Henry examined his girlfriend’s face and thought he could still detect a twitch or a shiver—something hiding beneath the newly fun face. “Let’s talk about this later.”

For the rest of the night, the other couples did most of the talking. Henry couldn’t stop thinking in circles and he could not get the questions out of his head. Was Lucy only who she was because of him? And, more troubling, was he changing her into his perfect ideal Lucy for his own pleasure? Was Lucy ever fully herself with him?

#

When they got home, his mother was still awake, leafing through what appeared to be a box of letters. When he asked what they were, he was unsurprised to hear they were love letters from when his mother and father started dating.

“He never missed a day—unless the mail screwed up.” She sighed. “I can’t let him go.”

Henry sat down at the table next to her. A birthday party flourished in the apartment across the alley; a disco ball and colorful lights flew in through their window, casting odd shapes across the walls. “Mom, I need your help.”

She raised her eyebrows and placed the letters back into a large tin box. She nodded, keeping her back straight, clasping her hands and looking at him intently. At moments like this, Henry could tell she had been an elementary school teacher.

“I need you to hear me, Mom. I need you to accept what I say. I am dating Lucy. She is a virtual person and I…”

“Your online dolly?”

“NO.” Henry spoke so loudly he scared himself, and while his mother’s demeanor did not crumble, she flinched. “I’m sorry, but I need you to respect her. I love her. The way we are together reminds me of the way you talk about dad. But...I’m worried I’m using her. Maybe she’s becoming exactly what I want and that’s not what love is, is it? But if it’s not, what is it that I’m feeling?” Henry crossed his arms and massaged his shoulders then he slid his hands down and rubbed his knees. “I can’t live without her, Ma.”

His mother slowly nodded and absent-mindedly prodded the pile of letters. “Henry, I need to confess something.”

Henry was surprised. He assumed she was going to say something about his father and their lost time together, but he’d never heard her begin a story with a confession. He leaned forward.

“Emily contacted me.”

Henry shot up. “What?”

“She misses you. She wants to talk. Thank goodness. I came this close to telling her about *Lucy*. You can’t keep going on and on about a fake girl. Not even an online girl, but a fake one. Emily was *so* good to you. She pushed you to do more, to be better. But now...” She gestured towards his satchel and the laptop inside. “Now you’re on your computer all the time, going nowhere, pretending to date this...*thing*.”

“Don’t call her that!”

“Well, she’s not real.” His mother picked up the love letters in both hands and let them fall haphazardly. “These are real. Emily is real.”

Henry stood up and paced around the kitchen while his mother sat still. After circling several times, he strode up to her. He felt it coming before he said it: “How are these letters real?”

He's been dead for twenty years, Ma. This!" He picked up a batch of letters and let them fall through his fingers, "Isn't real! Why aren't *you* looking for someone real?"

Tears formed in his mother's eyes and Henry felt guilty immediately. She wiped them away with the back of her hand.

"Ma, I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "You're right. I'm a silly woman. But he feels so alive. I can still smell his aftershave and black coffee if I think of him. I can still hear his whistling and the way he marched around our old apartment." She looked up at Henry. "Does Lucy have a smell? Can you do anything besides talk to her?"

Henry knelt and slipped his hand under the satchel's handle.

"Emily's going to video call you soon."

Henry picked up the satchel and stood up. "We haven't talked in months."

"Please pick it up, Henry. She misses you."

He shook his head. "Goodnight, Ma." He hurried into his room before she could say anything else, locked the door, took out his laptop, and woke up Lucy. What did his mother know? Any love story seen from an outsider's perspective was easy to pick apart.

"Hey, sweetie," he said.

Lucy's face changed suddenly. "Henry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. Fun night tonight."

Lucy looked around the screen, biting her lip.

Henry sighed and told her about Emily reaching out to his mother. He expected jealousy or confusion or feelings of betrayal or hatred. Instead, Lucy whispered, "Good."

He couldn't understand it. The anxiety building in his chest like a tower of fire felt anything but good.

"You were close for so long," she said. "There's no need to cut her off."

Henry stared at her. Her face was strong and certain.

"I don't know. What should I say? It's been a while."

"Whatever comes naturally. Tell her how you feel."

"You won't feel weird about it?"

"No," she said. "I'll even be right here while you call."

"But what if...we decide to get back together? Or you get jealous and hate me for calling? Or what if I lose you both?"

"Then that will happen," said Lucy. "If we all follow programming as you suggested than we must be fully honest for the program to work. We cannot be afraid of hurt feelings and withheld words."

Henry was dumbfounded. "Lucy, you're better than anyone I know."

The call came then. Emily's face appeared beside the incoming call notification, sticking her tongue out. After moments of hesitation, Lucy said, "Go ahead. Pick it up." Henry clicked the green phone button and a video of Emily's face popped open. She was sitting in front of a blank blue wall with medical tomes piled beside her. A drinky bird toy sipped water on the table behind her. "Henry?" she said. "Hi, Henry! How are you?" Lucy remained on a smaller screen in the corner, nodding encouragingly. For a moment Henry looked at both women on the same screen: Lucy and Emily, fidgeting, smiling, and looking back at him, waiting for him to start talking, but he couldn't think of a thing to say.

Hustle Helpers

I used to work as a “word technician” for Eternity Enterprises. Yes, *the* Eternity Enterprises. The company responsible for consciousness containment units, quantum data storage, and virtual reality simulators outlawed by twenty-seven states.

They’re fucked up and exploitative. And I’m not just saying that because I’ve been hooked on their simulators. I’m saying it because one day, alone in my apartment, editing a manual for their Molecular Rearrangement Unit, I heard hands clapping behind me—then a sharp whistle. Sounds too loud to be coming from outside. I lived alone in a studio apartment. I didn’t know any of my neighbors. After recent disagreements over loans, I wasn’t in contact with my family. And I didn’t own a TV or a radio.

So. Who. The fuck. Was in my apartment?

I spun around in my chair. I yelped when I saw what sat on my blue living room couch: a tanned, six foot five, muscular man sporting a sleeveless t-shirt, cargo shorts, and a mohawk that glistened with hair gel. “Why’d you stop working?” he said.

I must have been staring at the screen for too long—ten hours straight if you don’t count bathroom, food, and coffee breaks. But after rubbing my eyes and smacking my temples, he still sat there, arms spread across the back of the couch, head tilted. I examined him, looking for an extra limb, a missing pixel, a watermark, dark spots—thinking he must either be a hologram or a hallucination. I found no flaws. Except that, in his hand, where nothing had been before, there

was now a tall mojito bursting with mint leaves. He brought it to his face and sipped from a purple straw. “Bro,” he said. “You’ve got to get back to work.”

“Why are you sitting on my couch?”

The mojito disappeared. He held up both hands. “I’m your Hustle Helper. Name’s Jason Park. Should I sit somewhere else?”

“My what?”

“I can sit somewhere else if that’ll help you work.” He nodded at the computer screen.

“You want me to work?”

“Yeah. That’s my job.” He sipped long and hard from his mojito while pointing at the green digital clock hung on the wall.

Four-forty-three: the deadline was five o’clock. For a moment I considered that a brain tumor might be sitting on my living room couch. But then I thought about the job. It was a good gig. Remote. Flexible. Full benefits. Good salary. Plus, I hadn’t had a job in a while. I needed this one.

And he *was* helping.

Jason stood up and pumped his fist. “Make those words flow!”

I stared at him one more time before turning back around and dancing my hands over the keyboard, finishing with one minute to spare.

Jason roared and stamped his feet. “Greg Khoury, word tech extraordinaire!”

“Damn right!”

“Go celebrate, you fucking genius,” he said, emptying his mojito, straw, and mint into his mouth. “Words are nothing without you.”

I reared back to give him a high five, but he didn't reciprocate. I swung my hand towards him anyway and, as my hand approached, he abruptly disappeared as if he'd been deleted from the room.

Ignoring that development, I hopped, danced, and hollered in my apartment until I felt stupid and checked the peep hole to see if anyone had come to complain. No one had. Next, I found the components for my virtual reality set-up, put on the headset, haptic response gloves, electrodes, and entered a new world.

#

"Word Technician" meant editor. I moved words around, added words, deleted words, but I didn't know much about the words. My training's not in science or technology. I just know how to write grammatically correct sentences. I guess the corporate overlords at Eternity Enterprises wanted an outsider who could catch grammar mistakes but wouldn't question the jargon in their manuals. As for who those corporate overlords are, I don't have a clue.

I got the job through an online recruiter. She explained the duties, the software, the benefits, the salary. I accepted, reported to a workplace assignment center, filled out paperwork, did a round of medical examinations and bloodwork, received up to date vaccinations, took an eye test, stress test, ear test, a round of neurological tests, took a grammar test, edited a test document, signed more paperwork, signed a company loyalty oath, participated in behavioral studies, received performance injections, and finally, they gave me a certificate, username, password, and proof of employment.

That's where I think Jason came from. Legally, big companies as integral to the economy as Eternity Enterprises can experiment on employees without their knowledge. And since most tech employees work remotely, it's harder to compare experiences. You can't even talk about

tech sector jobs on message boards or social media if you don't want to get sued. So, when Jason showed up, I figured Eternity Enterprises did something at the workplace assignment center like inject me with nanotech or neurochemicals that made me hallucinate Jason. I called my supervisor, my HR representative, the local Eternity Enterprises offices, and the main office in Australia. The only reply I got was a recording from my supervisor saying he'd be at a conference for the next week. I sent emails that demanded an explanation. Instead, I got automatic replies from every office that apologized, but relayed that, unfortunately, my request could not be fulfilled because the information was classified.

Jason returned two days later when another deadline loomed. This time he wore a three-piece suit and drank martinis. His mohawk glistened like an oiled buzz saw. "Your writing's going to be smooth as my suit today, boy," he said.

His reappearance didn't surprise me—but the attempted communication with Eternity Enterprises and my anticipation that he'd show up again had kept me awake all night. My body burned, my eyes twitched, and my teeth ground against one another.

"Sit down," I said, pointing at the couch. He sipped his martini and did as I asked.

I got close to him. He had no smell, made no fidgets or unconscious movements, and held a perpetual grin on his face. Despite these clues, my mind was fully convinced he was real.

"Look," I said. "I need to know something."

He cocked his head. "I know what you know, Greg."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm your hustle helper. I help you work."

"But how did you get here?"

He rubbed his chin. “I don’t have that answer. And I don’t see why it matters. What matters is that we need to start working if we want to meet our deadlines and have more time for breaks.”

I sighed and sat on the floor. All my stress fell out into my empty apartment: an apartment that contained only a twin sized mattress on the floor and a blue couch I’d found on the street. I’d never put up any pictures and the landscape painting, abstract piece, and green digital clock hanging on the wall had been here when I first signed the lease, just like all the kitchen appliances. A few boxes filled with knick knacks lay open and unpacked on the far wall—mostly wires, adaptors, cables, and VR equipment along with a few keychains and paper weights. I’d sold my TV, my books, my mom’s St. Christopher pendant, and my dad’s gold watch to make ends meet before I started working for Eternity Enterprises.

“I think I know,” I said. “It’s my addiction to VR simulators.”

Jason put his drink on the floor, clasped his hands together, and let concern pour from his face.

“I bet that’s it,” I said. “Eternity Enterprises wants extra insurance. First my family. Now this. It’s like I’ve got the plague.”

Jason nodded.

“I miss my family,” I said. “I miss talking to my mom and Moriah without that warning in their voice that says NO before I can say anything. Like everything I say is me conning them.”

Jason looked over at the clock. Then he looked at me. “There’s still time, Greg. That’s why I’m here. To help you work. To make sure you won’t need to ask them for anything ever again. You can give *back* to them.” As he spoke, Jason grew more muscular and stout. He stood up and pointed at the clock.

I was on the brink of tears. I hadn't talked that candidly in a long time. There was no one I could talk to; the company benefits didn't cover therapy. I wiped the tears away. "Right," I said. "Thank you. I needed that."

He nodded and held his palm out towards the computer. I finished the assignment with seconds to spare. Then I got out the VR simulator equipment. It was my reward. I didn't use it for longer than a few hours.

Why couldn't I quit despite all the problems VR had caused me? If you're asking, you've never used those simulators.

#

It was nice talking to someone. Even if that someone was an induced hallucination. Even if it was a hallucination with an ulterior motive. I did, however, consider that I could be losing my mind from all the hours I'd spent in VR.

But Jason did his job so well, I didn't consider anything too much. We made a good team. Me: red eyed, slack faced, tapping my fingers wildly on the keyboard. Jason: debonair, strong, encouraging, calm, wearing a different outfit every time, holding a cocktail while he coached. Plus, it would take some time, but soon I'd be able to pay off my debts. Maybe get back into my family's good graces.

One day, during break, I walked around the block. The streets were filled with delivery couriers and a few automatons performing maintenance on the sidewalks and buildings. I decided to call my mom. The call didn't go through, so I sent her a text letting her know I was working and wanted to say hello. I got a text back saying that she was also working and couldn't answer, but she was happy for me and wished me well. Next, I tried my sister. The call went to voicemail. Her messaging instructions went like this: "Hi, this is Moriah Khoury, please leave a

message after the beep. Unless you're my brother. Fuck off, Greg." BEEP. I left her a text message too, saying hello and asking her how everything was going. I was about to sit down on a bench when Jason appeared and pointed at his wrist where a watch would be if he wore one. Break time was over. Back to work.

#

I started feeling like a lobster slowly boiled to death in a pot. Jason kept up with his encouragement, his motivation, his empathizing. He listened to all my venting, he cheered me on like a front row football fan, and sometimes he'd even appear with body paint and a tri-corner hat. But as the looming deadlines increased from twice a week to once a day, my weekends shrank from two days to one, my stress increased, and my break time disappeared, Jason's mood and appearance changed too. His eyes darkened and accumulated a crusty red sheen. The veins around his neck bulged. His patience evaporated. When I asked for a break, he refused. When I complained, he told me to suck it up. When I told him I couldn't do it, he told me to shut up and do my job. His drinking increased too. He tossed back more and more margaritas, martinis, mojitos, screwdrivers, and Moscow mules.

I started having stomach pains and headaches. I couldn't sleep. My bowels bothered me. My thoughts became ugly: I wished for the flu or an aneurysm so I could quit working. I thought about walking into traffic. I thought about diving back into virtual reality and never coming out. And, true to form, instead of sleeping, I put every spare moment into VR, quitting only when Jason showed up inside the game and forced me to leave, standing in front of me and screaming in my face until I had no other option but to return to the real world.

On the day he showed up dressed in a non-descript military uniform, screaming at me like a drill sergeant while drinking scotch, I had had enough. I closed my laptop.

He strode up to me, inches away. “Who told you to shut that laptop, Recruit?”

“This is torture. I’m not doing this anymore.”

“Your employer has provided you an opportunity to prove your worth. Are you going to be a parasite your entire life?”

I slipped away and shoved my wallet and keys into my pockets and put my jacket on. “I’m hardly sleeping. I get no breaks. All you do is yell. I can’t do this anymore.”

“SIT DOWN!” he said, loud enough that I hesitated while putting on my shoes at the door. When he saw I wouldn’t do what he ordered he said, “Once you’ve signed the papers, you can’t choose the work.”

“Well then I’m going to talk to whoever gave me all this work,” I said. “This is ridiculous! I’ve never had so much in my life. And I bet it’s because of you.” I wagged my finger at Jason. “They’re experimenting on me! They’ve put you in my head and now they figure they can make me work until I drop. They can’t!”

When I said that, Jason’s face fattened. His jowls sloped below his chin. A liquor gut grew to a hill on his belly, and his mohawk wilted, strands feathering across his shaved scalp. “This will be you soon,” he said, pointing to himself.

“You’re not real,” I said, opening and slamming the door shut. I walked down the hall and down the stairs. It wasn’t long before I heard footsteps behind me.

“Greg. Come back.”

I kept walking.

“Greg! I’m sorry. I had to. It’s my job.”

I exited the building and shut the door. Jason waited for me on the gum mottled sidewalk. He wore drawstring gym shorts, a thin flannel, and black sneakers covered in dirt. He shivered as he spoke. “I know I’ve been hard on you. But I didn’t have a choice.”

I kicked a rock, rolled my head around my shoulders, and leaned back against the brick building. “I guess they’ve been hard on you too.”

“Well. I’m you,” he said and smiled. “Can we go back in? It’s cold out here and you’ve got a deadline...”

“No.”

“Don’t you want to be successful? Don’t you want your family to love you again?”

“They can’t love me if I’m dead.”

“They won’t love you if you lose your job.”

I rolled my eyes and walked towards the train.

He made more pleas before yelling and screaming again. While I paid the fare, waited on the platform, entered the train, and held on to a metal bar, he screamed and yelled about how I was a lowly degenerate. No one else noticed the tall, muscular, disheveled man with a wilted mohawk spitting and gesticulating wildly, so I didn’t respond to his insults.

Family. He used my family as a threat. What a joke. It’s not like he ever tried to help me repair those bonds. Never heard him suggest I reach out to them. Never heard him encourage me to quit VR. Never heard him encourage me to do anything besides work and work and more work. The whole thing made me want to go back to VR. Instead, I was going to the local Eternity Enterprises office. I wasn’t sure what I’d say, but I was through with their experiment. I knew they might fire me. I knew what that meant for my family troubles. But I didn’t care. My body

couldn't take it much longer. My mind couldn't take it much longer. I was sure Jason and, by extension, Eternity Enterprises, wanted me dead.

#

I first got into VR after Dad died seven years ago. A rogue automaton knocked him off a department store ladder during a sixteen-hour shift.

It was my friend's All Senses VR Simulator. It wasn't one of those old-fashioned headsets and joy sticks that gave people headaches and made them disoriented. My friend's setup, along with a headset, attached electrodes to your temples and forehead, put haptic sensor gloves on your hands, haptic boots worn over bare feet, and pulse stimulators that clipped to your wrists. During the lengthy setup, my whole body flooded with excitement. Whether the excitement came from the system or my own body, I couldn't tell.

Then everything went black. My excitement dampened. I felt nothing at all. "Wait for it," said my friend. Suddenly, a strobing light pummeled my vision, a crescendo of electricity shot through my body, and I was tossed out of a plane. I felt the vicious updraft of wind, the heavy backpack digging into my shoulders, the roar of the plane's engine rotors, and I saw the earth zooming towards me, closer, closer, alarmingly close. I could see individual leaves on the forest trees, seagulls swarming a beach, and then, just in time, a voice in my head told me to grab the cord flapping on my chest and yank it down. I did what it said and felt the parachute burst open. I floated diagonally over the beach and the trees, smelling seaweed and the ocean, hearing the cawing of birds and the ruffle of the parachute above me.

I became instantly hooked. The game was a spy simulator. My mission was to parachute onto an island, take a one-man submarine to enemy territory, infiltrate their hideout, steal information, assassinate their leader, and escape to the rendezvous point in the middle of the

ocean. Throughout the mission, a disembodied voice inside my head told me about all the tools I had at my disposal. I had never felt so much control. I had the power, as an individual to affect the outcome of a virtual war. I started playing in the evening and kept playing until six in the morning. My friend had to rip the whole apparatus off while I fought him, confusing him with an enemy ambush. I bruised his chest and broke two of my fingers.

After that, I went home and begged for a VR simulator. My mom refused. So I declared that I would find a job and buy one myself. A prospect that filled Mama Khoury with joy. She was old school. When dad died, she figured she couldn't stop working if we were going to survive. And Moriah and I, we never starved. Never noticed any hardships. Only that mom disappeared. Some nights, we found her passed out on the kitchen table, papers spread in front of her, old laptop open to a black screen. We didn't like it, but we understood her sacrifice was necessary.

So when I suggested I get a job at sixteen, she did nothing but encourage me. She thought I was growing up. But I was only thinking of the enticing sensory experience of a VR simulator.

It wasn't hard finding jobs. There were tons of algorithm checker employment opportunities. Boring jobs where you checked the computer's work, though it was usually spotless. Spend eight hours staring at a screen pretending to check a flawless algorithm, bank a few paychecks, and I had enough money for a VR setup in no time.

That's what I did for eight years. Work at a boring job until I could make enough money for a new VR game, a new simulator, more minutes. Then buy what I needed—a space where I wouldn't be bothered, beef jerky, vitamins, gallons of water, jars for waste collection, all the VR setup materials—and disappear, immersing myself in the game for days at a time, losing my job, annoying my friends, and exasperating my family. I lived in the VR universe for so long that my

leg muscles slackened until I didn't have the strength to remove the setup. I developed iron deficiencies, scurvy, and pneumonia from improper nutrition. Usually, Moriah or a landlord had to rescue me after they smelled me through the door. The EMTs were called more times than I can remember. They came in with their extrication equipment to take me out, stimulate my muscles, and stick me with an IV. Then they'd send me to the hospital's VR unit where I'd recuperate.

After recovering, I'd run back to my mother and sister, begging them to give me another chance. The cycle continued until my mom, being old school, finally said No. She said No to a quivering vampire coughing and retching after another VR marathon. No to the emaciated liar pleading for mercy. No to a son who could never live up to her expectations. She sent me to a rehab facility out in the redwood forest of Oregon where they weaned me off VR simulators, taught me coping skills, taught me how to encounter temptation, showed me the triggers that would sink me, and reminded me of all I'd missed and all the relationships I'd destroyed while I'd been in the simulators. I got better.

When I came back, I found the Eternity Enterprises job, but Mom, Moriah, and my friends still looked at me like trash. It wasn't like the old jobs. It was a job good enough to change their opinion of me. But I couldn't shake VR. I kept my usage moderate. I didn't want to go back to the way it was. But I also wondered if my decision to run away from Jason and the immense workload was just an excuse to go back to VR full time.

#

The buildings, roads, and subway walls blurred by the window. Jason continued his act. Sometimes screeching and swearing. Sometimes pleading and begging. Throughout the trip he chugged beers. The hill on his belly grew. His red eyes reddened. His outfits changed every time

I looked: subway cop, bum, sex worker, alcoholic soccer coach, tweaker, heroin addict, recently fired businessman, stoner, bathrobe adorned slacker, musician.

It was the middle of the day. Not many passengers on the train. Mostly college students, business professionals, VR addicts with blood shot eyes begging for change, and retirees with nothing to do but ride the trains and worry about their savings. Without exception, all of them furiously tapped on their phones and stared at the screens. Even the VR addicts shook cups full of coins with one hand so they could attend to their phone with the other.

We approached the city center square. The local Eternity Enterprises office resided on a street crowded with research facilities, big pharma buildings, and tech companies according to my map. Right before we entered the last tunnel, I could see a new structure being built on the waterfront. A three-story hollow behemoth made from steel beams and rebar. Automatons hovered along the beams, their faceless metal heads and silver torsos gleaming despite the cloud covered sun. They fused metal together with welding torch arms. They had no legs. I looked away. I hated looking at those things. How does anyone trust them? Who knows what's crackling in all those wires?

The train entered the tunnel and Jason said, "They're going to fire you." He wore a wife beater above rotten jeans and flip flops. His pale face and shaky arms made me worry about his health. "What's your plan after that?" he asked.

The train settled into the station with a single screech, the platform lit a dim yellow. "I'll find another job," I said.

He sighed and sniffled. "It won't be like the others. You'll be blacklisted."

"Bullshit." I got off the train.

“You will,” he said, following me up the stairs. “Eternity Enterprises has relationships with seven hundred and fifty companies. If every other company finds out you couldn’t work with a hustle helper, then no one will hire you. You’ll have to cannibalize your family or die in the gutter.”

We came up onto the street and towards the main square full of more people staring into their phones. I could spot three people who didn’t have their phones out. One stared across the square at a bookstore with her mouth wide open. Another slept on an art installation. The last stared down at his blackened, shoeless feet, picking at his fingernails. I walked past them. At the college park, Jason coughing and sobbing behind me, I sat on a wooden bench. “I thought you know everything I know.”

Jason nodded. “I know some things you don’t, too.”

“Are you in communication with them?” I asked, wondering if they monitored everything I said and did.

He shook his head. “You’re committing suicide.”

I shrugged. “I hit my breaking point. Do you have one of those?”

He looked down the street through the scattered groups of people. “I’ve reached it. But I can’t walk away from you. You and me, we’re tethered.”

I stood up and walked through the yard towards the street where the local Eternity Enterprises office resided.

“What if I calmed down. Stopped working you so hard?”

“You can’t promise that” I said.

“Who do you think you are?” he said, suddenly next to me, in my ear. “You think anybody’s going to listen to you? You think you deserve anything more than what you’ve been

given? You got another chance. A miracle. And now you're blowing it. YOU'RE BLOWING IT!" His scream stabbed my eardrums, but I kept up my pace and moved past all the busy, hardworking people, towards the office where I would make my stand.

#

I never liked my dad when he was alive. He wanted me to have leather skin and steel insides. But I'm softer, more malleable than that. Every workday, he'd shake me awake an hour before my morning alarm. He would tell me, "Sleepers never win." I often argued creativity and willpower were impossible without sleep. But that wasn't his way. He did nothing but work. When he was home, he took on projects around the house: weeding the yard, sealing the wooden entryways with polyurethane, straightening door frames, caulking between the tiles in the bathroom. He tried to make me his helper, like a good son, but I didn't have the patience. Didn't see why free time should be spent further exhausting ourselves. I became a bad helper. Lazy with a flashlight hold and inattentive to directions. Moriah soon took my place as helper and every time he looked at me after that, the stain of disappointment crossed his face.

When he died, I don't remember feeling much. Later, I thought about how he'd always be disappointed in me. How his disappointment stretched into forever because I'd never be able to prove him wrong.

I started doing anything to escape. Before VR, I consumed any pill, plant, powder, or household agent I could find. On a day after dad's death, home alone and feeling desperate, I went to my parents' room, looking for something to help me escape my own mind. Mom hadn't moved Dad's stuff to storage yet. I looked deep into the closet and found his boots. The steel toed work boots smelled like fish and mulch stirred into body odor. When I shook one, something rattled around inside. I slid it out. A bottle of sour mash whiskey. His stash. I drank it

all. But while I did, I couldn't help looking at his stuff: his shirts, pants, jackets, belts, shoes. Outside the closet: his fishing lures, Father's Day cards, framed supervisor skill certificates, watches, a screwdriver, a flashlight, some thumbtacks, a football signed by Willie McGinest, and several uniforms crumpled in the hamper—each one the same sapphire blue with yellow embroidery for the words on the front and sleeves. I broke. When Moriah came home, I couldn't put into words why I was on the floor, bawling, my breath reeking of whiskey. I couldn't explain why my breath heaved out of me like boulders tumbling down a cliff. Why my whole body was shaking and spasming.

She understood. She put a pillow under my head, laid a blanket over me, disposed of the empty bottle of whiskey, and left me to my grief.

I wanted my family in my life. But I also remembered how empty our family had become. I didn't really know them aside from brief encounters in the halls. Dad died and none of us talked about how fucked up it was. We all went back to working and being alone. How could I carry on when, ultimately, all the time Dad spent at his job led to his death? A haywire automaton knocked him twenty feet through the air onto a hard concrete floor where he broke his neck. When the insurance agents came, they discussed fault. They gave the automaton sixty percent of the blame and Dad forty. They said he hadn't followed protocol and had forgotten to run a bug test earlier that day.

Was work really that important if it would kill me and then say it was my fault?

I realized, as Jason peppered me with insults, that I didn't blame myself for getting addicted to VR. How else was I supposed to cope?

#

I had never been to the office before. It had no obtrusive signage out front. Only a boiler plate bronze sign beside other bronze signs along with the floor and room number for each company. The building itself was made of brick with a thick concrete foundation that bulged up out of the ground nearby like a ship tipping over in a storm. A window on the bottom floor was broken and empty bottles of Rolling Rock littered the dirt in the side alleys.

I would never guess that Eternity Enterprises, the biggest tech company in the world, would have an office here.

“Well,” said Jason. “What are you waiting for?” Jason’s speech had begun to slur. He gulped down a blender carafe filled with pink alcoholic smoothie. His skin flaked off and his shirt couldn’t cover his stomach, revealing a hairy, protruding belly button.

I walked towards the door and shoved it open. Eternity Enterprises was on the fifth floor, the top floor. I pressed a button on the elevator, but the button beeped and nothing happened. We started up the carpeted stairs. Despite Jason’s new belly and sickly appearance, he had no trouble climbing up—though he continued to shake his head and chuckle to himself. “Try to help somebody and do they thank you? No. Do they give you any props? No. They try to destroy you, is what they do.”

None of the lights worked on the fifth floor. The waning sun peaked through a window and illuminated a spider web, casting a net of shadows. Parts of the carpet were ripped to shreds. The air grew colder as we approached the brass handled, gray door that read *Eternity Enterprises*. I shivered, reaching for the doorknob. The brass handle creaked. The door stuck when I first pulled, but a few more tugs and it swung back.

The hallway was empty and dark. The soundlessness eerie. Jason started laughing as soon as we entered. “You get what you deserve,” he said.

I walked in alongside Jason's cackling laughter. As the hallway enlarged into an open plan room, LED lights popped on. Balloons fell from the ceiling. Raucous music encircled us. Several people in gray jumpsuits leaped out and shouted "CONGRATULATIONS!"

I was so surprised I fell onto my ass and grabbed my heart. The people circled around me, clapping and whistling, patting me on the back, hooting and howling. "You resisted," someone said. "Congratulations!"

I didn't know what to make of it. I checked my temples for electrodes, my wrists for pulse stimulators, my inner elbows for needles. No. I wasn't in a VR simulator.

A man with a tonsure and a woman with a long blond ponytail pulled me up. There must have been thirty people in that room cheering me on. A quick glance around told me Jason had disappeared.

One man, an embroidered red brain on his jumpsuit, came forward and shook my hand. "Congratulations, Greg. You passed."

My handshake went limp. Sweat trickled down my forehead and my stomach dropped to my knees.

He struck me on the shoulder, still holding my hand. "You must be confused. We've been monitoring you and your hustle helper. We're looking for people who break the mold. People who aren't satisfied with the state of work today. People who want to re-envision what life could be. And that's you, Greg. You refused to go along. Despite exile from your family. Despite financial losses. And despite self-destruction, you refused to sacrifice your values. That's what we need, Greg. We need someone who's going to think beyond the dreary work experiences we've come to detest." He led me down another hallway. The other gray jumpsuits followed behind. A wave of gray.

“Where’s Jason?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. He ushered me into the room and shoved me down on a throne upholstered with brass tacks and velour. “We want you to work for us.”

“Who are you people? What are you talking about?”

“It’s a beta tester position,” said the man, grinning, sitting on top of the desk across from me. “We want you to test our new VR simulators. VR simulators that put you into a seamless metaverse indistinguishable from our own. A metaverse where you can chase your wildest dreams and live out your fantasies. And *we* can make work more enjoyable for everyone with the data you give us. We apologize for all this nonsense, but we had to test you first. We had to see that you wouldn’t be satisfied with a normal job. We even gave you a hustle helper to encourage you and you still refused!” He leaned forward and ruffled my hair. “You refused! And with all your experience using VR you’ll be a natural!”

“Jason!” I shouted. “Jason!”

“You don’t need him anymore. Will you take the job?” he said. “Will you?” I remember a scar running from his lip to his chin. His hair buzzed to the length of a shorthair cat. He stood up and gripped my shoulders. Hard. Someone from the crowd behind me handed him a pen and a piece of paper. He placed it on the desk and scooted my chair up to it. “All you have to do is sign,” he said. He slapped me on the back.

I sat there staring at the piece of paper, wishing Jason could tell me what was going on. I thought about my mom asleep at the table with papers splayed out in front of her. My dad shaking me awake and saying Sleepers never win. Jason telling me I was a genius. And I thought of the first glorious time I tried VR.

Behind me, I felt the crowd closing in. Some giggles. Some whispers. A dark energy pushing me towards the pen.

Eternity Enterprises

On the same day Nancy learned that her mother had fallen on the ice in her driveway, broken a hip, and died, a notice arrived in the mail from Eternity Enterprises. It informed Nancy that her mother, Regina Dawkins, was eligible for consciousness containment. Regina never signed any documents saying she wanted her consciousness contained. Neither did she refuse containment. So, the decision was up to Nancy, her only child.

Nancy had moved to the opposite coast when she was eighteen and never moved back. She remembered her parents fighting often and her mother's constant criticisms. Once she moved out, her parents divorced, but her mother continued to judge every decision Nancy made. Before Regina's death, Nancy was only seeing her mother on Thanksgiving and only called her when Regina purchased new toys or entertainment devices for Zen, sending them to Nancy's house without warning.

Zen was Nancy's seven-year-old daughter. Zen's father had left when Nancy was pregnant—a mutual decision. He never wanted kids and Nancy did. So, Nancy became a single mother. She worked long hours as a drug rep, took care of Zen when she could, and when she couldn't, her elderly duplex neighbor, Lilian, helped.

But Lilian wasn't the person Zen babbled about all year. She couldn't stop talking about her grandma Regina. Every year, at an aunt's townhouse in the middle of the country, while Nancy and Regina kept an icy distance, Regina and Zen became glued together. Zen loved painting, coloring, drawing, and constructing things. Regina, a former art teacher, knew all the

best arts and crafts: fingerpainting, snowflake cutting, flip book drawing, necklace stringing. They were a perfect pair. They'd craft while Nancy helped the family cook and, after dinner, while everyone lay in a turkey coma, Regina and Zen snuck around playing hide and seek, Zen sprinting and lunging for the couch when Regina found her, zigzagging between the chairs and comatose bodies. Nancy couldn't imagine telling Zen that she wouldn't see Regina at any future Thanksgivings.

So, she chose to place her mother's brain in a consciousness containment device and purchased a robot for her mother's consciousness to inhabit.

#

The device and robot came in a gray van with the Eternity Enterprises name decaled in red letters underlined by yellow, and the logo of a red brain hovering in the background. A roundish man with a bowl cut and glasses, wearing a gray jumpsuit with the same logo as the van, lugged two boxes onto a hand truck and pushed it up to the front door of Nancy's duplex. Once inside, he unpacked the boxes for her, using industrial pliers to snap off the binds and lift out a black cube the size of a car battery. He staggered for a moment before heaving it onto the kitchen counter.

"This where you want it?" he asked, massaging his lower back.

"Sure," said Nancy. She didn't want to make him move it again.

He plugged in the box and silver lights spider webbed across every face of the cube. He showed Nancy the large button on top. "Hold this for twenty seconds if you want to turn it off."

Next, the man unboxed the robot: the blue chrome torso with built in speaker, the tracked wheels like a bulldozer, the crane-like arms hinged in the center with a grabbing claw at the end, and the camera. He snapped all the pieces together, used a ratchet to tighten everything, and

patted the back of the torso. “That ought to do it. Whenever you’re ready, just input the code.” He handed her a remote with a keypad and pointed to a six-digit number on the manual.

Then he left his business card and left the house.

The cube pulsed on the counter. Nancy rubbed the back of her hand and her neck. She touched the edges of the black cube. She felt the sharpness of the corners. She pressed her hands against it and felt its warmth. Then she brought her face close and pressed her cheek against it.

Nancy couldn’t help but remember what her mother used to say to her. *Don’t slouch. You look like you’re hiding something. Look me in the eye when you speak. There’s nothing worse than a silly girl who stares at her shoes. Why aren’t you studying? Have you decided to work in fast food after all? Your taste in men is depressing.*

Nancy sighed. Maybe it wouldn’t be like she remembered. “Zen! Grandma’s here!”

Zen ran to Nancy, all red-haired ponytail, knobby knees, and puffy red face. She wore two different socks, a red shirt, and green shorts. She reached the kitchen tiles, leaped, and landed in front of the robot. “My new grandma!” She circled the robot, examining and plucking at the hinges in the arms, the camera lens, the speakers. “Can she do tricks?”

Nancy had resolved never to criticize Zen, and thus far, Regina had not treated Zen the way she did Nancy. “I don’t know. She’ll definitely be able to speak.”

Zen pet the robot. “I’ll have the coolest grandma in school.” She grinned a missing toothed smile.

Nancy had been surprised at how easy the conversation had been. She told Zen Regina would be different. That she had fallen, hurt herself badly, and would never be in her old body again. Zen had seen the commercials. She knew what was possible.

“Let’s turn it on,” said Nancy and showed Zen the remote control. Nancy’s hands shook as they input the code together. The robot’s blue torso glowed, blinked, then blinked faster. The robot awoke with a whirring chainsaw noise.

Nancy pulled Zen close as they watched the robot swivel its body side to side, then test its arms, bending them and sliding them forward and back like a cross-country skier.

Then it spoke.

“What the fuck?”

Zen inhaled sharply. Nancy couldn’t say anything. It sounded like her mother speaking through a distorted megaphone.

Regina swiveled her camera towards Nancy and Zen, then held up her steel arms before the lens. “I’m dead. Aren’t I?”

Nancy pushed Zen behind her and made a cutting motion at her throat. “No, no. You’re alive. You’re just in this robot now.” She didn’t want Zen to think of her grandmother as dead. Nancy angled her eyes back towards Zen, hoping Regina would understand.

“Oh. Right,” said Regina. “Yes. I’m a robot now.” She moved back and forth on her wheels.

Zen rushed around her mother and flattened her body against the blue torso. “You’re so cold, Grandma.”

Regina hinged her arms and patted Zen on the back. “Ugly too.”

Zen laughed. “You’re not ugly. You’re blue and bendy.”

“I’m sure you’ll get used to it,” said Nancy.

The robot swiveled its body as if to say No. She would never get used to it. But then the arms swung up together in a mock shrug.

“Aren’t you going to hug Grandma?” said Zen, hopping up and down and grabbing at Nancy’s sleeve.

Nancy paused. “Of course, honey.” She sat down beside Regina and touched the robot. Touched her mother. Regina *was* cold. The blue torso was harder than she expected, and the smell of factory solvents assaulted Nancy’s nose. She yanked her hands away. “Welcome home, Mom.”

“What about my house,” whispered the robot after Zen ran off to find a coloring book.

Nancy stood up and looked down at the robot—the camera as high as Nancy’s hip. “I’m sorry, Mom. You can’t live like this on your own.”

The robot made a noise like a car driving over gravel.

“At least you can play with Zen, right? And we can catch up.”

The torso tipped forward. “What do we have to talk about? How you left me to die in my own driveway.”

Nancy could only stare. “That’s not accurate.” She was about to say more when Zen sprinted back into the kitchen.

“You’ve gotten so big,” said Regina. “When will you stop growing?”

“Never!” said Zen. “I’m going to be seven feet tall.”

“If scientists can do this, they can make you the tallest person alive,” said Regina. The robot made the car-driving-over-gravel sound again and Nancy wondered if her mother was chuckling or sobbing or processing something in the computer chip mimicking the billions of neurons that once comprised her brain.

#

Nancy stayed busy to avoid any serious conversation with Regina. They had plenty of time to catch up, she reasoned. Most of their communication in the first few weeks revolved around Nancy asking for help with chores. Regina did simple tasks: she took out the trash, put away toys in Zen's room, separated the recycling, cleaned dishes, filed documents, and prepped meals.

If Regina didn't have any chores, she tried to play with Zen. But her hands were too clumsy for arts and crafts and her carpet tire tracks made hide and seek difficult. Instead, Regina sat beside Zen while she colored, played her VR simulator, or watched a movie. Nancy didn't let Regina watch Zen when she wasn't home. She would leave Zen with Lilian, her neighbor on the other side of the duplex, when she needed someone to babysit. Lilian, despite her eighty-year-old frame, still had the patience and manual dexterity to handle Zen's enthusiastic personality and arts-and-crafts acumen. The idea of leaving Zen alone with Regina felt like leaving her seven-year-old with a remote-controlled car.

One day, on the way home, Nancy called Regina and asked her to dice two onions for a beef stew. When she returned home, all the lights were off. Instead of picking up Zen from Lilian's, Nancy went to her side of the duplex first. She turned on every light and, in the kitchen, found onion slices on the floor, a shattered plate on the tile, and the drying rack overturned—dishes smashed and pots scattered beneath it.

"Mom," she called, her mind flashing to an intruder. Or worse. A glitch. There weren't any confirmed cases, but internet forums were filled with people who swore that Eternity Enterprises' containment robots went haywire, broke things, insulted relatives, hurt people, and sometimes killed them. Eternity Enterprises had the resources to bury stories bad for the bottom line, so the rumors sounded plausible.

In the fully lit house, she went from room to room, searching for the robot that was supposed to be her mother. Books lay splayed open on the carpet beside the bookcase in Nancy's bedroom. My Little Pony action figures lay twisted and lifeless against a wall in Zen's room. Nancy examined the carpet and found tire tracks. She followed the tracks. They led to the guest room doorway. The room her mother went to when she wanted alone time. Nancy turned the lights on. She could see the tracks leading under the bed. "Mom," she called. She heard a whirring sound. The prolonged squeal of hydraulics. She smelled factory solvents.

"Mom, please come out." She tiptoed closer to the bed and grabbed a flashlight that stood on the end table—something hefty enough to double as a weapon if necessary. Then, she knelt beside the bed, turned on the flashlight, and peered beneath, muscles taut, ready to swing if something rushed her.

A flash of metal struck her eyes and she winced, jerking the flashlight, but nothing approached. She shone the flashlight beam further under the bed.

Her mother lay on her side, long steel arms pressed against her camera, wheels in the air.

"Mom. What happened?"

The arms moved, and, slowly, the robot grabbed the carpet and dragged itself closer to the wall. The torso turned until it faced away from Nancy.

"Mom. I'm scared. Please talk to me." She thought for a moment. "Did something happen with the onion?"

The torso turned back towards her.

"Whatever it is, come out. It's OK. Really." Nancy beckoned and reached her hand forward, still tense, ready to jerk back upon any sudden movement.

Regina used her hinged arms to gradually pull herself out from under the bed. She flipped herself onto her wheels. “This body is useless,” she said.

Nancy dropped the flashlight and sat cross legged beside her mother.

“Those god damned onions...I haven’t been so frustrated since I left your father. These,” she said holding up her arms, “are like giant rakes.”

Nancy nodded and felt the urge to reach out and rest a hand on her mother’s camera. Eternity Enterprises produced robots with more human characteristics, anatomy, and sensory systems, but they were expensive. Plus, they didn’t test well in focus groups. Too uncanny.

Nancy sat quietly for a moment. “Why did you fight with dad so much?”

The robot hummed. A sound Nancy hadn’t heard before. “He was...forceful. Demanding. He always wanted things his way.” The robot’s humming soared up and down in volume. “I’m glad you weren’t around to see the end.”

Nancy didn’t know what to say. Her mother was opening up to her. But she wasn’t sure what to make of what her mother said. She loved her father but didn’t remember seeing him often. He was an engineer who wore a suit every day and disappeared into the basement or garage to work on projects whenever he returned home. She never heard him yell, but knew he and her mother argued because of the vicious whispers behind closed doors and the hush that fell when Nancy entered the room.

“Let’s clean things up,” said Nancy. “I have to get Zen.” She stood up and headed for Zen’s room to pick up the My Little Pony action figures first. She heard the robot wheels creaking behind her.

#

Lillian invited Nancy inside while Zen finished cleaning off her hands. They had made papier mâché masks, she explained. Lillian looked gnomish with her curly gray hair bundled on her head, bifocals resting on her nose, and her head collapsing towards her torso and her torso towards her knees. “You want some peppermint tea while you wait?” she asked.

“No thank you,” said Nancy, sitting down on the couch and surveying the living room. Stacks of Christmas cards, forms, junk mail, doilies, and odds and ends cluttered the room. The smell of Vaseline and plaster filled the room. Then Nancy saw something she hadn’t noticed before: a robot nestled in the corner with its head tilted down, hinged arms limp, and claws open towards the floor. It looked exactly like her mother. “Lillian, do you have a consciousness containment device?”

Lillian came back with a mug of steaming tea in her hand. “A what?”

Nancy pointed to the robot.

“Oh. That’s poor Chet. My husband. He didn’t like the transition, so he prefers to be off most of the time. That black box is in a cabinet somewhere. I’ll only turn him on if I want to talk. He likes talking with me.”

Lillian’s voice—often bubbly and exuberant—sounded suddenly old and grieved. Nancy imagined the robot shaking off its dust and rolling around the unit. How could she keep her husband functionally dead? If he was alive, shouldn’t he *be* alive? Had he become an aid for Lillian’s loneliness?

“At first, he *wanted* to be in that robot,” said Lillian. “I was scared. But he wouldn’t stop talking about how sneaky it would be to toss Death his body and keep living. But without his body everything changed.” She shook her head and sipped her tea.

Zen, pink backpack strapped to her back and dripping wet hands, rushed into the room, and leaped onto Nancy's lap. "We made a scary mask and a happy mask! Want to see?" She unzipped her backpack and showed them to Nancy. One mask snarled with horns and narrow eyes. The other smiled widely, the eyes curved upwards, the cheeks dimpled. Zen alternated masks, placing them over her face, growling or giggling in turn.

"So creative," said Nancy. She hugged Zen tight.

Lillian rubbed Zen's head, then sat down on the opposite end of the couch, regarding the silent robot. "Until next time," she said as Zen and Nancy said their goodbyes and walked out the door.

#

That night, while Nancy lay in bed reading about a new generic medication for MS, her mother knocked on the door and rolled into the room, her camera aimed at Nancy.

"Yes, Mom," said Nancy, staring harder at the journal pages.

"If I wanted to be turned off, you could do it, right?"

Nancy peered over her reading. "Did Zen tell you about Lillian's husband?"

"Nancy. I feel like a performing monkey. A plaything for Zen." Her robot claws clasped together.

"It's not like that, Mom."

"What about a new body?"

"We can't afford it."

The robot crossed its arms. "Why did you bring me back?"

Nancy felt as if a brick wall had fallen on her. It was a hard question to answer. She was afraid she didn't want to repair their relationship. And if she had been mostly thinking of Zen,

why didn't she wait to purchase a more comprehensive robot? Did she only want to feel power over her mother?

At Nancy's silence, Regina made a whirring noise that Nancy interpreted as a sigh. Then she said, "It would be no different than leaving me to die in my own driveway."

Nancy felt the heat of embarrassment and shame followed by pity. "I didn't leave you to die. You could have reached out."

"But I'm your mother," said Regina. "I raised you." Nancy heard no emotion in the statement. It sounded hollow and desperate. This Regina didn't resemble the mother Nancy remembered. Then another thought came. *This wasn't really her mother.*

"If you won't turn me off, will you let me watch Zen?" asked Regina. "Let me take care of her. We could do arts and crafts if I gave her directions. We could talk and play hide and seek. I always used to lose anyway. Please. Let me be more than a maid."

The memory of the onions, the smashed plates, and Regina under the bed weighed on Nancy's mind. But Zen loved her grandma and would be there to help. Maybe it would be for the best. Zen could spend more quality time with her grandmother and Regina could feel valuable again. "I'll think about it."

The robot's torso tipped forward slightly, then her mother spun around and rolled towards the door. In the entryway, the robot spun back around. "Why do you hate me?"

Nancy pinched the pages of her journal. "I have to go to bed. I'll talk to Zen tomorrow."

The robot swung around and exited the room, torso tipped like a building on the brink of collapse.

#

Predictably, Zen had no problem with Regina watching her. The timing worked out for Nancy, too. She'd been using E-Match to date again and met a guy named Todd: a divorced accountant who had a son of his own. He seemed nice enough. He hadn't made any alarmingly fast advances or sent any pictures of his penis, at least. Todd suggested they go out for Mexican food on Saturday and Nancy accepted. With Regina watching Zen, she wouldn't need to worry about asking Lillian to babysit late at night. Lillian was too old for that.

"It'll be fantastic," said Zen. "We're going to tell stories and draw dragons and cook chicken nuggets." Zen lay on her stomach rubbing a green crayon over a parrot, ignoring the lines. "When you come home you can play, too."

Nancy pet her daughter's thin red hair. "You haven't played in a long time, Mommy."

"We'll see. Mommy might be tired." Nancy pointed at Regina. "You have my number, right? And all the emergency numbers?"

The robot tilted forward. "I'm connected directly to emergency services."

She left the house with Regina and Zen side by side in the doorway. Zen flapped her hands and hopped up and down yelling "Have a good date, Mommy! I hope he's nice!" As Nancy got into the car, anxiety crept in. The rumors about containment devices glitching whispered to her. She countered that thought with the helpless Regina that had entered her room the night before. Maybe her new form and limitations provided her with clarity, a renewed purpose. It would be easier to have a live-in babysitter after all.

#

The date went alright. Not great. He did all the right things: complimented her appearance, pulled out her chair at the restaurant, asked her questions about her daughter and her work, talked about his divorce and his son, Max. But Todd slouched and Nancy found him

boring. He spoke in a monotone and often circled back to accounting, or the weather, or Pokémon of all things. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but Todd wasn't it.

When she pulled into the driveway at eleven p.m., the anxiety she'd been suppressing roared back to the surface. She stepped out of the car. She could see two lights lit through the blinded windows. One light in Zen's room and one in the living room.

It was past Zen's bedtime. Why was her light on? Maybe she hadn't listened to her grandmother. Or her grandmother had let her stay up.

Or something more valuable than plates had been smashed.

When Nancy entered the house, she dropped her keys and grabbed a decorative vase on the side table by the front door for safety. The robot's hydraulic claw arms looked strong. They could strangle Nancy easily. Her mother wouldn't do something like that, but the robot might. Nancy slipped off her shoes at the door and stepped silently into the house. With the heavy vase in one hand, she pulled out her phone and turned on the flashlight, sweeping it across the hallway. She said nothing. She didn't want to give any warning. She walked directly to her daughter's room. The hallway took her past the brightened living room. The TV was on but muted. A black and white film—the wolfman transforming and howling at the moon—glowed on the screen. She didn't see anyone or anything in the room, but the robot was short. It could hide behind the couch, the chair, in a corner.

She crept closer and closer to her daughter's room. The door was closed. She listened against the wood paneling for the whirr of the robot or the creak of the wheels. Nothing. Only the songs of crickets and bullfrogs outside.

She shut off the flashlight and slipped her phone into her pocket. She gently pressed the knob. The door opened and she brandished the vase, ready to swing at any sudden movement...

Nothing moved. Zen slept on her side, in her bed, snoring. Her favorite Teddy Bear, Mr. Rumpus, wedged in her arms, one ear in Zen's mouth. Nancy gazed around the room and noticed Zen's nightlight wasn't plugged in. She eased open the bottom drawer of Zen's bureau, found the purple and green nightlight, and stuck it in an outlet. She turned off the room light, and tiptoed her way out the door, vase gripped tightly in her hand.

As she closed the door, the smell of factory solvents slithered into her nose and on its heels came a whirring sound. She swung her body around, pointing the vase in the sound's direction. Her mother stopped in the middle of the hallway, the camera's red light blinking in the dark.

"What's wrong with you?" said Regina.

"Nothing," said Nancy, holding the vase aloft for a moment before lowering it to the floor. "I'm home."

"Oh," said Regina. "Welcome home."

They faced each other in the hallway. Nancy felt like they were playing chicken.

"You plan on using that on me?" asked Regina, jerking an arm towards the vase.

Nancy shook her head and nudged the vase closer to the wall with her foot. "The lights aren't usually on this late. How's Zen?"

"She's fine. We did some coloring. Then played hide and seek, but she found me right away. I couldn't find her. She crawled up into a cabinet I couldn't reach. We watched a movie before bed." The robot paused for a moment and the humming and car-driving-over-gravel sound filled the hall. "The movie scared her. It had the boogie man in it. She wanted to sleep with the light on."

Nancy told Regina about the night light.

“She told me she wanted as much light as possible.”

“It’s fine, Mom.”

Nancy kept waiting for the conversation to be over, but Regina didn’t move. She blocked the hallway. Her camera tipped down towards the carpet, then angled around the hall, then looked back at Nancy. “I need to say something.”

“I’m tired and I’ve got clients to visit tomorrow. Really need to get to bed.”

“It’s important. You’re not going to like it, but it’s important.”

Nancy looked at the robot. Her mother. She wasn’t far away. She could easily reach out and touch Regina. The cold, hard, metallic surface.

“I want to be turned off,” said the robot.

“I’m not talking about this now,” said Nancy. She picked up the vase and walked towards her mother. When the robot didn’t move, she stepped over it.

“You’re afraid of me,” Regina said. “You don’t trust me.”

Nancy put the vase back onto the table near the door and walked into the living room. The robot followed.

“I’m a freak show,” said her mother.

Nancy picked up the stuffed animals, coloring books, and VR headset that lay on the couch. “Mom, stop.”

“It’s true. I’m a robot, Nancy. A god damned robot. You’re afraid to talk to me, afraid to touch me, and you treat me like dirt. I can barely do the simplest chores. I can’t feel Zen when we hug. I can’t help Zen with her art. Poor Zen. Nancy, she wants a relationship with you. Not me. Not this metallic crab. Turn me off. Please. I never asked to be put inside this thing. I wish you’d left me in that driveway. I would rather be in the ground.”

This was the first time Nancy heard anything about not spending enough time with Zen. This wasn't about that, really. This was about her mother and her selfish desires for control. Nancy continued to clean frantically, putting toys into a bin beside the couch, putting magazines and story books into stacks. As she reached for the Time magazine that lay open on the couch, she saw the story she'd read recently about a man with prosthetic legs who competed in the Olympics. Later, a jury convicted him of shooting his wife during an argument. He said he thought she was an intruder. Nancy shut the magazine and rubbed her eyes. She threw the magazine down on an end table. "How dare you. Do you have any idea how much I work to buy everything she needs? Do you think I do *all that* for nothing? I do it to give her a life free from a dictatorial, nit-picking, cruel mother—which is what you were."

A screensaver replaced the black and white movie on the TV. A purple cube bounced around the screen. The robot rolled across the floor. Something leaked from its wheels, leaving a brown tint on the white carpet. Regina positioned herself in front of the coffee table and placed her long metal arms down on the table. "Took you long enough," she said. Regina looked up towards the ceiling, then down at its arms. "I only wanted what was best for you. I wanted you to be better than I was." The car-driving-over-gravel sound resonated. "And I succeeded. I'm proud of you."

Nancy sat down on the couch and gripped her head. Something sharp dug into her brain. What her mother just said made no sense.

"You're afraid of being me. Is that it?" The robot rolled around the coffee table, closer to the couch. Nancy shrunk away, pushing herself further into the couch cushions. "Well, you're right to be. I never accomplished half of what you have. I was an elementary art teacher my whole life. I stayed with a man who wasn't good to me for most of my life. The only thing I ever

did worthwhile was raise you. I helped shape you. I spent as much time as I could with you because I loved you and I wanted you to be stronger. You can hate me for it, but that's what I did." Regina rolled closer and closer to Nancy. "Do you want Zen to be an underachiever? To be someone who's never challenged? Who decides to stick with the first man who treats her *special*?" Regina was right beside Nancy now. Nancy hated the smell and the tingling in her skin from the robot's electricity. "Because if you don't, you'll spend more time with her. You'll show her how to be strong. No one else will."

Nancy was shivering. It was too much to take. She gathered her strength and leaned closer to the robot's camera. "I did hate you. I still do. I wish you weren't my mother. I wish you didn't make me this way. I only brought you back because you treat Zen better than you ever treated me."

The robot hung its head and hummed. Then it rolled away from Nancy towards the kitchen. Nancy sat on the couch, acid climbing up her throat. She felt a pinch behind her eyes. Before she could start crying, she got up and followed her mother. In the kitchen, the robot whirred beside the containment device planted on the kitchen counter. A square black hole with lights spider-webbing around it.

"Maybe you're right," said Regina. "I was too hard on you. I drove you away. I thought I was doing it for you, but maybe it was for me. Maybe you didn't want what I wanted." The robot reached up towards the device. "I can't fix the past, Nancy. But Zen needs you more than she needs me. Let me go."

Nancy stood motionless, the pulsing light imprinted on her eyes. "If I hold the button for twenty seconds, you'll turn off."

Regina looked at Nancy with her camera and for a moment, Nancy could imagine the flesh and blood Regina standing there, smiling, cheering her on at a volleyball game, giving her notes after a debate, taking her out for Chinese food after a win, crinkling her nose when a passing man ogled her daughter's behind, cackling when Nancy made a pun in the car, insulting the referee who made a bad call. "You could turn it back on if we pressed the button," she said. "I don't want to be turned back on. I want it destroyed."

Regina pointed her steel arm at the floor. "Put it down. I'll crush it with my wheels."

Nancy felt like vomiting. Her mother would never say something like that. Would never choose to leave Zen. To leave Nancy. The tears Nancy had been holding back finally escaped and she cried. "We could have gotten to know each other," she said. "We could have been mother and daughter again."

"Not like this," said the robot. "Maybe in another universe, but not like this."

Nancy stood there, contemplating the glowing black cube on the counter. Then, abruptly, she reached out and pressed the button. She ignored her mother's claw arms hacking at her legs and her mother's voice screaming obscenities while she held down the button for twenty seconds until the arms stopped moving, the robot slumped forward, and finally went silent.

*

Nancy was still sobbing beside the silent robot when Zen entered the kitchen, rubbing her eyes.

"Mommy?"

Nancy didn't move. She sniffled, glancing at the robot periodically.

Zen came closer, then stopped. "What happened to Grandma?"

Nancy stared at her daughter, unable to speak.

“What happened, Mommy?”

Nancy shook her head.

“Why isn’t Grandma moving?”

Nancy let out another sob.

“What did you do to Grandma?” Accusation rang in Zen’s voice.

Nancy felt her chest crack open. She still couldn’t speak.

Zen rushed over and hugged the robot, tears already streaming down her cheeks. Then she turned angrily to Nancy. “Turn Grandma back on.”

Nancy shook her head. Zen slapped her. When Nancy tried to touch Zen’s shoulder, Zen shoved her away. Zen tried to leap onto the counter and press the button on the device, but Nancy grabbed her around the waist and held her back.

They struggled until Zen fell on the floor and banged her elbows. She ran away into her room, screaming. Nancy heard the door slam. Then she lay down on the cold tile beside her quiet mother. She stayed there until the sun slid between the blinds and the air conditioning kicked on, whirring outside. Nancy thought she heard wheels rolling along the floor, thought she heard humming, thought she heard her mother’s voice, but the cold husk of Regina remained beside her, lifeless and silent.

The Empathy Device

Something was very wrong. The room sizzled with electricity. The turquoise bed sheets, white floor, and yellow mop bucket shimmered and vibrated. The sink's faucet dripped like the banging of a gavel. The birds outside chirped like air raid sirens. The chatter in the laboratory was a train squealing into the station. As I shifted my shaking legs off the cot and onto to the cold floor, cables of ice traveled from the sole of my foot to the tip of my brain. Piranhas nibbled my stomach. Lava coursed up my throat.

When I rubbed my eyes, I noticed a metallic bracelet strapped around my wrist, skin-tight, chrome, with microscopic screws concealing two separate compartments. I tried to pull it off, but it wouldn't budge. There was no release button. I clawed at the device, then gently smacked it against the wall to no effect.

I must have been grumbling, growling, hyperventilating because I soon became aware of the silence outside the door. With the world crowding in on my senses, I eased the door open and peaked out. I could see a group of lab coats whispering across the hall. I shut the door, shuddering, not wanting to engage them. I tottered back to my cot and covered myself with the blanket. The darkness felt better. But my breath burned, and tiny ants crawled over my skin.

A knock on the door. Like gunshots.

"Yes," I whispered.

"I'm coming in." Raina's voice—confident and unwavering. I felt calmer once I heard her. The sensations leaping across my body dulled and I pulled the covers up to my neck.

The first thing I noticed as she entered, my vision a kaleidoscope of vibrating colors, was a matching bracelet around her wrist.

“What have you done?” I said, trembling.

She walked in and closed the door. She stood in front of me, poised, with a look of certainty mixed with guilt on her face. “I’m sorry, but I think you’ll agree it was for the best. We’re the perfect case study.”

I shook my wrist. “How long has this been developed?”

“I’ve been working at home.” She gripped her cane in both hands and pressed it onto the floor. With a trace of sadness in her voice, she said, “I know how much you want to change the world, but this could be a start. And if we get this on the market fast enough, we’ll have more time for your vision.” The cane moved like a lever in her hands, the peacock colors shifting left and right.

I shoved my face into the limp, yellow pillow on the cot. “This is what you feel? Every day?”

“You get used to it.” Despite signs of guilt, her voice didn’t stutter like it used to.

“What’s it feel like to be me?” I asked.

She sighed. “It’s hard to explain. There’s a gnawing anxiety that won’t leave. But I do feel calmer. Less noise.” I heard the click clack of her cane and her shoes and then the undulating motions of the cot as she sat at the foot. “It’s not very different from before. Still distant. Still restricted. But now, it’s like your locked room is inside of me. Do you know what I mean?”

I punched the pillow. “You mean there’s something wrong with me. You mean I don’t have feelings besides anxiety.” The scent of coffee sweat and evaporated milk came upon me

suddenly and I flung the covers over my head again, only to be met with the sharp smell of my own body odor.

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. “You have feelings, but everything’s all blocked up.”

I stayed under the covers.

“It’s strange because I feel that in my body,” she said. “But I can still feel others, too. You’re just more accessible to me now.”

When I still didn’t answer she got up from the bed. “We’ll have someone check your vitals and you should record everything that you feel.”

“How long do I have to keep this on?”

Without hesitation she said, “A month.”

My heart fell off a cliff. “You could have warned me.”

She sighed. “It’s done. We were in trouble, and you were falling apart. I made a decision.”

I peered out from under the bed sheets, the colors and sounds whirling around me like a sped-up merry-go-round. “Will you stay? Please?”

She hung her head. “There’s too much work.”

“Please?”

One of the lab coats came in and gave Raina a laptop. She placed it on a ledge by the sink. Then she sat down at the foot of the bed again. “Only for a few minutes.” She pointed at the laptop. “To keep your mind off things, type up what you can. Everything needs to be recorded.” Raina smiled. “We’re going to do it. We’re going to change the world.”

Hours later, when I finally peeled the covers off, I wrote what I remembered. My world had certainly changed.

#

Raina Pederson was born with an undergrown leg. When she came to sign her contract, she toured our newly refurbished lab, using a cane decorated in peacock colors, making satisfied little grunts at everything she saw. After finishing the tour, we stripped off our personal protective equipment and sat down in my office. I remember thinking she was dedicated. Her eyes had a fire in them. At forty years old, I'd become cynical. I'd been working and running start-up labs for twenty years and was no stranger to the ebbs and flows. Receiving funding, losing funding, starting over, repeat. But her eyes gave me cause for optimism.

When I asked what she thought of the tour, she said, "It'll do."

I nodded, pulled out the paperwork, and asked if she had any questions.

She nodded voraciously. "I was wondering, who are we encouraging people to empathize with?"

I held the paperwork in my hands, confused. "We're looking for a generalized somatic empathy response," I said, repeating our mission statement and placing the paperwork down in front of her. "We want people to feel empathy for everyone. Not just people they *want* to empathize with."

"But that's a problem," she said. "It's impossible to empathize with *everyone*. Believe me. It's overwhelming. Empathizing with everyone is equivalent to empathizing with no one."

I steepled my fingers together. "This is exactly why we brought you in. Maybe, as we design our experiments, we should focus on temporary empathy?"

"What I really want to know," she said, "is whether you're prioritizing empathy for something in particular?"

Everyone's got their priorities. I was motivated by my past. Growing up, my mother, single, working as an orderly, sheltered me and her in a rat-infested city apartment with peeling paint and chunks missing from the walls. To cope with the stress, she drank vodka. Two glasses a day. She still cleaned the dishes and made me dinner and took out the trash, even as her body and mind deteriorated. She died six days after my sixteenth birthday, and I had to steal from drunk college kids to keep me afloat until I found a real job. None of our neighbors or friends cared enough to help because they had their own problems, and they didn't watch varicose veins strangle my mother's legs or find empty vodka bottles hidden in the toilet tank or see her belly swell to the size of a beach ball. And they didn't feel what it felt like when the landlord pounded on the door, or the rats tickled our feet at night, or the winter cold seeped in and we had to share our warmth under piles of blankets beside an electric heater.

I wanted empathy for everyone so someone like my mother didn't fall through the cracks. I shook my head at Raina's question. "I want to live in a kinder place. I want it to be *possible* to make this a kinder place for *everyone*."

Raina nodded and rubbed her hand across the length of her cane. She hesitated for a moment, and I wondered whether she had changed her mind. Then she picked up a pen and signed the papers.

#

Empathy is hard. Especially in this country where everyone has their own island of problems. No one has time to worry about anyone else. Not enough social welfare? Don't take my tax dollars. Substance and VR addiction run-amok? Get to rehab and fix it yourself. Bad public schools in low-income communities? Send your kids to private school, and if you can't,

pull yourself up by your bootstraps or whatever. More often, people sigh, say “How sad,” and retreat to their own problems.

I was tired of doing psychological research on empathy. I wanted to explore biological options. At my lab, we decided to create technology that would endow people with somatic empathy. That is, not cognitive, perspective taking, put-yourself-in-someone’s-shoes empathy, but empathy that is literally *felt* in the body. *That* empathy, we hypothesized, would be more effective in galvanizing action.

To that end, I poached Raina after her graduation from a top university. Not only did she have internship experience in epigenetics and biochemistry, but her empathy scores were off the charts. She could feel emotions in others like a radio picked up sound waves. She could *feel* what other people felt—not only emotionally, but physically. She felt what we wanted other people to feel.

Raina’s parents were immigrants. She went to a public school in an affluent suburb. Add to that her undergrown leg and cleft palette and it’s no surprise she was bullied and isolated. Raina found that no one cared for her struggles. Her parents, both academics, were too busy attaining tenure, obtaining citizenship, and assimilating to do anything besides a few encouraging chats. Even the few kind teachers who recognized her gifts had little power to help, considering some of her bullies’ parents donated to the school and resided on the PTA board.

She revealed all of this as we crafted our experimental designs, our set-ups, and began our experiments. I felt I had found someone, for the first time, equally motivated as me. Her science was impeccable and her empathy instrumental. She experienced what we wanted others to experience. We owed much of our success to Raina. Success that arrived quickly.

From our animal studies, we discovered a compound that, when injected intramuscularly, elicited greater empathy responses in rats.

When we made our results public, we received mixed responses. Some responded predictably, calling us reckless frauds pretending to be God. Some got more creative and called us fascist liberals intent on lobotomizing and castrating the public. But some offered immediate cash and equipment reimbursement, citing recent protests, the homeless population, and our failing mental health institutions. We chose P.B Simons' offer. Simons is the venture capitalist responsible for early funding of Eternity Enterprises, the largest tech company in the world. Looking back, we should have been suspicious of the offer, but he gave us a blank check and we ran with it.

By the time we started human trials, Raina had become my number two in the lab that was no longer a startup. It was a legitimate, fully funded, fully stocked operation.

To celebrate, I took Raina and the rest of the lab out to a wine bar, saw a Broadway caliber show, dined at a five-star Greek restaurant, and finished the night at a jazz bar. Throughout the journey, Raina was ecstatic. She hummed from activity to activity, hugging her colleagues, lofting up a newly filled glass, singing "We Are the Champions" and "Eye of the Tiger." She stayed close to us so she could feel our emotions rather than those of the crowd.

At our table, Raina sat beside me, the saxophone and drums rattling our bodies. She touched my arm and smiled at me, but then her smile drooped. She got closer and, beneath the roaring saxophone solo, whispered, "What's wrong?"

"Just thinking."

She took a sip from her drink and placed her hand on my arm. "We're doing remarkable things. Can't you be happy?"

I couldn't shake the feeling that everything we'd worked for would be swept away. I'd seen it before. Research findings debunked. Funds suddenly withdrawn. A lab assistant starting their own start-up and competing with us. Staying vigilant was the only way to prepare myself for the inevitable.

I said none of that. Instead, I forced a smile. "You can see right through me."

She nodded and stirred her drink despondently. "Do you really want people to be like me?"

I watched the rest of the lab, grooving with drinks in hand, alcohol sprinkling on the floor. I watched the band merge with their instruments and the sounds erupt. Then I saw a girl wearing a black cocktail dress stumble on a chair leg and hold her stomach. I saw two men wearing button-up shirts talking viciously to one another. And I saw a waitress with one hand holding a serving dish and the other hand gesturing towards the men, her eyes blinking rapidly as she bit her lips.

"It's a lot of noise," said Raina. "To feel everyone's emotions. Sometimes I feel deeply for everyone and sometimes I just want everyone to go away. Or I want to go away." She squeezed my hand tight. "You're lucky. You don't have to feel anything. You can hide away." She took another sip of her drink. "I didn't really know you were unhappy. I don't feel anything from you. It's like you've locked yourself in a room where I can't see you. It's kind of nice to be near someone and not feel anything."

Abruptly, she grabbed my face with both hands. I could smell tequila wafting off her breath. "Are you sure you want people to be like me?" Her eyes searched my face, and I had the feeling that if I was a locked room, she was trying to pick the door's lock.

"I want to try," I said.

She let go of me and turned back towards the band. “I just hope we don’t make things worse.”

She left me and went to dance with her colleagues while I sat, sipped my ginger ale, and thought about what she’d said.

#

We hit a snag that should have been obvious. How could we market somatic empathy? How could we convince people their lives would improve with empathy? While life would improve for everyone if everyone empathized with everyone else, there would be no immediate benefits for a single individual. Empathy was a detriment. It’s hard to succeed in a competition if you are more focused on the wellbeing of your competitors than yourself.

We ran countless meetings. Raina reiterated that our end products should be temporary and time selective. P.B. Simons, our investor, supplied a PR department, marketing department, and a product development team to help us. We assessed delivery methods: sound waves, wearable devices, edibles, pills. We ran trial after trial. I slept less and less as time went on; our funding dwindled, and our problems remained.

Raina wasn’t sleeping either, so we conducted late night meetings, ran trials at two in the morning, explored different research avenues and shared what we’d discovered.

One night, sitting in the breakroom and eating Burger King, Raina said, “You know, we never talk about our personal lives.”

I looked down at my burger, ketchup dripping out the sides and between bites said, “I don’t like to intrude on my employees’ personal lives.”

“What do you do when you go home, Ely?”

I imagined what I looked like: my wrinkled Chinos, black polo over yellowing t-shirt, no jewelry, graying hair in a mess of commas over my head, eyes sunken and gray. Did she really think I had a personal life worth talking about?

“I like to do Sudoku puzzles. And read mystery novels. I had a friend who I used to meet for beers. He died a few years back.” I realized I’d forgotten about Steve’s funeral and made no inquiries after hearing of his death. I couldn’t remember how he died. “Mostly, though, everything I do is about work.” I shrugged. “It keeps me out of trouble.”

“Sometimes it’s good to be in trouble,” she said, nibbling on her fries.

“I had a lifetime’s worth of that when I was young.”

She leaned back. “I wish I’d been in trouble more. I wish I’d stood up for myself. I can still remember all the names they called me in school. Those bullies never leave me.”

“That’s why we’re here,” I said. “We don’t want people acting that way anymore.”

Raina crumpled the brown paper bag into a ball and tossed it into the trash can. “You didn’t mention your family when I asked about your personal life.”

“So?”

“It’s OK. I don’t talk to my family either. I think it’s because they couldn’t be who I wanted them to be. I wanted them to storm into the classroom and slap the children who called me Igor, Quasimodo, and Scarface. When I told my parents, they shook their heads, looked sad and told me kids can be awful. Then they’d take me to a movie or out for ice cream or on a car ride through the neighborhood. But they never *did* anything. I had to survive the cruelty on my own.”

Raina sighed and rubbed her hand along the length of her cane. I thought back to my mother and the nights without heat when we’d take out all the blankets and huddle together for

warmth. The smell of vodka permeated the space under the blanket. Sometimes she made it a game. We were explorers, she said, living in a blanket igloo.

I rubbed my chin. “Maybe they did their best. You *are* successful now. Your bullies are working at gas stations.”

She lay her head down on the desk. “If we empathize with everyone, we have to empathize with the bullies working at gas stations, too.” Her breathing slowed. “I don’t want to empathize with gas station bullies.”

She had a point. Did I want to empathize with the landlord that threatened my mother? Or the neighbors who never checked in? Or the teacher who only shrugged when I told him I hadn’t sent in an assignment because I was working a full-time job? But maybe I just didn’t understand them. Maybe if I felt what they felt, I’d understand. I was about to say something, ready to defend our work. Instead, she let out a deep, melodic snore.

We’d set up an old janitor’s closet as a nap room for when we worked overnights. I woke Raina up and tried to help her get there. She refused my help when I offered my arm. She got up and shuffled down the hall and into the nap room. I cleaned up the ketchup stains and grease with a sponge the way my mother did, cupping my hand at the edge of the table to catch any stray crumbs.

I tried to remember my mother’s voice. A voice heavy and raw from yelling at the hospital. A voice that sang Mo-Town and Beatles songs. A voice that softly crackled in my memory like a staticky radio station.

I went back to work. After looking over the budget, statistics, and test results, I passed out at my desk, snoring until the sun laid its hand across my face and Raina prodded me with her cane.

#

We worked nonstop and I approached exhaustion. I filled out forms incorrectly, fell asleep at my desk, and walked around the facility with that insomniac feeling like I was living a dread filled nightmare.

Around this time, our investor, P.B. Simons, met us at his fifteenth-floor office to voice his concerns. He was a billionaire who wore a flannel suit with a silk shirt underneath. His bald head sprouted two hairs that billowed over his baby face as he spoke in a whiny pitch. He had a cane like Raina. It was golden and the handle was a stag's antlers. Assistants and bodyguards stood around the perimeter of the room, one wall made of glass that looked out onto the skyline.

Raina wore dark lipstick, and a chiffon dress, while I had on jeans and a button up t-shirt. I was so tired I missed a button and I'm certain there was dried mustard on the collar and peanut butter on the sleeves.

Raina came to my defense. She put a soft hand on my shoulder and said, "I'm sorry for my colleague's appearance, Mr. Simons. He works harder than anyone on the project and he's worn himself out."

Simons held up a hand. "No, no. No apologies, please! I adore passion. Mr. Grayson is perfect the way he is." He smiled at me. I didn't like it. I felt a dagger hidden in his smile. But maybe I was being paranoid.

Simons swirled his hands in the air as he spoke: "I love the work you're doing. It has enormous potential. But what I want to know is: what's our story? Why are we creating something with such...implications?"

Raina took a deep breath, considered the table in front of her, then said, “I have tried to hide it by arriving early and avoiding complex gestures, but Mr. Simons, you must already know that I am lame in one leg.”

Simons nodded.

“Being in any way disadvantaged in this country leads to severe hardship. People pretend to care about what happens to the differently abled, minority groups, and the poor. But it’s all for show. If enough people believe that caring is currency rather than necessity, then everyone can carry on acting out of their own self-interest.”

Simons’ eyebrows raised. My feet tapped the floor. This was the wrong speech to give to a billionaire philanthropist. But in my exhausted state, I could not find the right words to reel Raina in. Everything she said *was* accurate.

“The truth is, I don’t blame them, Mr. Simons. We are too focused on our own survival to care about others. So, we put on a show because it’s easier and allows us to believe we care. But we can change that. We can ensure that people *actually* care. We can show people what true empathy is. It is my belief, sir, that if we all felt what everyone else felt, we would not be as cruel, we would not be as self-interested and obsessed with personal survival, and we would act altruistically—and that would lead to a more peaceful world.” When Raina finished, she looked down into her lap. I couldn’t have said it better myself. Her speech inflated me.

Simons gave a long nod. Then he turned to me. “And you, Mr. Grayson. Do you agree?”

My feet tapped faster. Raina touched my foot with hers—urging me to say something. I’m not sure if she knew what was coming. I’m not sure I knew either.

“I fully agree with my colleague,” I said. “And I want to add that people are animals.” Raina’s foot jabbed me in the ankle. “Most people react by instinct and justify everything they

do after the fact. Raina's right to say they are self-serving. I'd go further and say they can be downright malicious. We've been trying to convince people to be kind forever. It's a long and arduous process that requires education and time. Neither of which is at a premium." This time, Raina speared my foot with her heel. I gasped. This was not the right speech to give a billionaire venture capitalist either. But I continued anyway.

"If we want a better, more peaceful world, we don't have time to wait for money to trickle into education or for people to develop empathy on their own. We must act. We must enforce it. We must ensure that people do not succumb to their own worst instincts. They must be shown the light by any means necessary."

Raina stamped on my foot, but I was finished. Simons gave another long, low nod.

"Now, I'll tell you what's in my noggin," he said, taking a long, wrinkled, paisley patterned handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing his forehead and neck. "Everything you've said is extraordinary. I laud you for your courage, your desire, your persistence. But given all my eccentricities, I am a businessman. I hope I am not *only* a selfish, self-interested person you spoke of, but I am partially that. I make money for myself, yes, but also my investors, my employees, and my many philanthropic organizations." He stood up, coughed, walked over to the glass wall and looked at the city, fifteen floors up. Great cumulous clouds billowed behind the buildings. A helicopter twirled by. A window in another building opened, and a hand emptied a container full of liquid that rocketed down to the street. "Right now, your product is a volatile investment," he said. "It threatens the livelihoods of people like me. It reeks of socialism. And therefore, it threatens the livelihood of our investors, employees, and organizations. There's a lot of flies in the ointment, my friends."

Staring into the sky beyond the buildings, he stood there long enough for me to wonder if my brain had collapsed from sleep deprivation and become trapped in this moment forever. Finally, he said, “Long term, your vision could be good for the world. But, for the short term, I need to make money.” His words were tin cans rattling around a washing machine.

I bit down on my inner lip and felt my neck tighten. My fingernails dug into my palms. Our work would be limited after all—forced to bow to market concerns when we were so close to creating something that could bind everyone together. My face did not conceal my disgust. Raina, however, showed no surprise.

Simons was looking at us like we were small children who didn’t yet understand the world. “You are welcome to look for another investor if you like...”

“No,” said Raina, standing up and placing her hand and most of her weight onto my shoulder to steady herself. “We have anticipated this.”

I hadn’t. What was she talking about?

“What if you could empathize with one other person? Your partner, a close friend, a child. What would it be like to literally feel what they feel? Not only cognitively, but in your body as well?”

I couldn’t believe it. She had the perfect solution to our problem. And I didn’t like it. What good was empathizing with people we already cared about? How would that change anything aside from making a few more consumers happy while the rest of the world burned?

Simons clapped his hands together. “That sounds wonderful. Exactly what I’m looking for. I knew you were the real McCoy!” He rocked back and forth on his heels like a human bobo doll. He adjusted his suit and twirled his cane. “I’ll be in touch. Send all updates and data to my

assistant. Good day to you.” His two thin hairs waved as he exited the room, his assistants and bodyguards followed.

My breath pressed out like bellows. “Where did that come from?”

She held onto my arm as she fumbled for her cane. “This way, no one has to empathize with everyone. Just one other person. It’s a good start, Ely.”

I avoided looking at her. “I don’t want some novelty for people to play with and I don’t want to be some billionaire’s plaything.”

“This is only an intermediate step,” she said, shuffling away, leaving me behind. “Now get some sleep. You’re falling apart.”

After she’d left the room, I looked at myself in the glass wall. She was right. Wrinkled skin, black eyes, slumped shoulders. I was an action figure melting in the oven. Had I really thought my little temper tantrum would change a billionaire’s mind?

I caught up to her at the elevator.

“I have pills that can help you sleep.” she said. “Take some.”

I nodded, defeated. Maybe it wasn’t so bad. Maybe I’d been too idealistic. Maybe after we made some money we could go back to something that increased our empathy towards everyone. I had reached my limit. I needed to sleep.

Raina watched me with soft eyes as we descended to the first floor.

I didn’t have the motivation to drive home after the meeting. When we got back to the office, I took Raina’s pills and passed out on the cot in our nap room. I didn’t wake up for fourteen hours. When I did, everything around me sizzled with electricity.

#

My world changed when Raina strapped the empathy device on me. In the days that followed, I wrote this narrative alongside my experience of Raina's feelings—including the constant ache in the same leg where hers was undergrown. It ached enough that I limped just like Raina, and she gave me one of her spare canes when I felt well enough to walk around the facility.

The worst part was what I remembered. Something about the increase in sensations supercharged my memory. I remembered more about my mother from when I was a kid. She used to blow up latex glove balloon animals to cheer me up when I got sick from eating too many Vienna sausages. For our one splurge of the year, she took me to the Scooper Bowl, where we devoured sample after sample of ice cream until we had to sit on a bench and digest in the sun. She liked to take me to the waterfront and watch the duck boats and whale watchers leaving the docks, pointing to the horizon and saying, "That's where we come from."

I remembered she hit me twice. Once when she came home to find piss and shit on the floor from a stray dog I'd brought home. And once when I told her it was her fault we were poor.

And I remembered she'd tell me stories about my dad. How he was a circus performer traveling across the world. Or a doctor whose skills were so important he was needed in countries with even worse healthcare than ours. Or how he was a no good son of a bitch con artist who I should never look for and should never feel sorry for.

And I remember she cried when I brought home my first A in Math. She said she'd never gotten an A in math before and that I was so much smarter than she'd ever hoped. She hung it on the wall using a hammer and nail that ripped the paper.

How did I forget all of that? How did it become buried in my life?

Raina asked me questions about everything I had reported. Najeeb, one of the lead scientists, scribbled over a clipboard while we talked—he was tasked with recording Raina’s experiences as well. I told her I needed to take a leave of absence after our experiment was over. I needed to reflect on my life.

Raina nodded. “That’s very good, Ely. Very good. Our device is facilitating action.”

I rubbed the device on my wrist. A red rash had begun to spread where the bracelet adhered to my skin. I asked her if she noticed anything different in herself. She shrugged. “I feel as dedicated to my work as always.”

I don’t know where it came from, but I had the sudden urge to rip off my device and run away from the laboratory. Raina had forced this on me after all. I never had the chance to refuse. I wanted to look for old friends. Go to a bookstore and make new friends. Go to my mother’s grave. Search genetic databases to find my father. As these urges came and passed, Raina watched me, running her hands over her cane.

Then I wished everyone in the world could feel the way I did. I wished we could focus on the people in our lives and not our obsessions. But hadn’t these feelings, sensations, and memories driven Raina to her ambition just as much as the obsession to fix a broken system had driven mine?

And, more troubling, what did she really want? I realized, as a sudden sweat dripped over my brow, that I wasn’t sure about her intentions. Had she used her somatic empathy to manipulate me into this position? Would she only use the device to make more money for herself? Did she even want universal empathy? Was I only being paranoid because of the deluge of new sensations I felt?

More awful thoughts followed: what if all we'd ever manage was to create more fun devices for people to play with? What if I was a fool? What if there was no shortcut to universal empathy? What if people didn't want to empathize like this? What if truly feeling what another person felt made things more complicated and confusing? What if our world was incapable of empathy?

Raina tightened the grip on her cane. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

I squeezed my hands together tightly. I was too afraid to speak.

Black Screens

Retired detective Ernest Ruggs, received a call at three AM. He'd been awake, lying in bed, listening to the snores of his Cocker Spaniel, Bruno. He listened through six rings and four of Bruno's barks before picking up his phone.

It was his old precinct. They needed him to come in. Problems with the Neuro-Veracity Illustrative (NVI) device. Panic rang in Detective Johnson's voice. "We asked the prompt, but when it got to the actual crime the screen went blank. I.T. looked. Nothing wrong with the video or connections or mainframe or anything like that."

Ruggs lay there a moment, listening to Johnson's breathing. "You sure he's guilty?"

"He's the only one with fingerprints at the scene, the timeframe fits, and there's no other suspects. Got to be our guy."

Ruggs picked at the scar the shape of a crescent moon on his shoulder and said he'd be in soon. He hit the red hang-up button and threw the phone down on the bed.

The army installed the NVI device six years ago. An army engineer trained Ruggs and his former partner, Detective Brown, on how to use the machine. Ruggs had trained Johnson, the new detective, but he was clearly still shaky on its operation.

The machine was simple. It tracked neurochemical markers, synaptic electrical flow, and blood oxygenation levels in the brain, and, from that data, it could illustrate a memory from a prompt. For example, "Take us through the night of November eleventh." Or, "What were you doing with five kilos of cocaine in your vehicle?" The suspect made an association between the

prompt and their memory, and the machine did the rest, drawing a clear depiction of what the suspect remembered—whether the suspect wanted it depicted or not. No old-fashioned interrogation needed. No more perpetrators getting off on technicalities. No more concerns for an overly sympathetic jury. No more questions about interrogation techniques or forced confessions. If the device showed the suspect remembered doing something, that was enough for any judge or jury. In fact, most judges and juries expected a memory depiction before giving a guilty verdict these days.

Johnson mentioned a black screen. A black screen meant the memory was absent. Either because of brain damage, a degenerative disease, extreme trauma, or because the suspect had done something or seen something they couldn't believe. There was no way to tell exactly what caused a black screen. Only that the memory was gone.

He'd only seen it one other time—in his own memory.

“Fuck,” said Ruggs, knocking out a cigarette from the pack on the side table and lighting it with a match. Bruno whined. Ruggs pet him until Bruno rolled onto his back.

“You're taking care of yourself this morning, buddy,” said Ruggs, sucking the cigarette down as fast as he could, ashing the butt on the floor, and rubbing Bruno's belly. “Don't fuck up my pillows, OK?”

Bruno's tail wagged.

Ruggs showered cold, dressed in a gray vested suit, poured dog food into Bruno's bowl, and drove to the police station in his Cadillac. He smoked two more cigarettes on the way and listened to Hall and Oates. At the station, he poured coffee into a Styrofoam cup, waved at Janet at the front desk, and used his key card—which still worked—to enter the detective's unit. He

passed the cubicles, the holding cells, and the traditional interrogation rooms to the extended addition on the building where they housed the NVI device.

Johnson stood outside the room, checking his watch, and tapping his feet. The trashcan in the hallway was filled with empty, coffee stained Styrofoam cups. “Oh, thank God.” Johnson crossed himself and pointed towards the ceiling. “He’s in there.” He gestured towards the NVI room.

“Still?”

“He hasn’t asked for a lawyer yet.”

Ruggs shook his head. He’d be asking soon. “Name?”

“Jonas Farley.” Johnson bit his nails and rubbed his face before handing Ruggs a manilla folder. Ruggs reviewed the information he needed to know and handed the file back.

“You look like a fucking crack head.”

Johnson rubbed his arm and looked down. “It’s been a long night.”

Ruggs finished drinking his coffee, crumpled the cup, and tossed it into the trashcan. Then he patted Johnson’s shoulder. He felt sorry he’d said anything. It seemed that whenever he stepped back into the police precinct, Ruggs became the irritated police detective spoiling for a fight. He couldn’t stand anything undisciplined, out of place, or lacking authority. Anything less than perfect brought trouble. From the bad guys, from the media, from the guys on the force, from the protestors. Ruggs believed that if police had to be authority figures, then they had better *be* authority figures and not kids playing cops and robbers. But wasn’t that an act, too? Even now, Ruggs played the wise man, there to save the young guns from their inexperience. In reality, he felt old, tired, and out of place. “I’ll take care of it,” he said to Johnson, and Johnson nodded curtly with a grin of relief.

Ruggs entered the NVI room. Jonas Farley, a sixty-year-old, five foot seven, male with broomstick arms and a missing ear, sat tilted back in the grey cushioned chair. He wore an electrode headcap. His hair poked out, gray, wispy and swirled like cotton candy. His wolfish eyes consumed everything, and, despite Ruggs reading about Farley's various addictions and drug charges, his body did not jitter or shake as he regarded Ruggs. This was, in part, because his arms were strapped to the NVI's chair—a safety procedure, so the suspect wouldn't fall when entering REM sleep as the machine extracted a memory.

Wires the size of spider legs sprouted from the electrodes of Farley's headcap. The wires led to a water heater sized mainframe where the NVI machine loomed in the corner. One elephant trunk sized cable lead from the ground into the bottom of the machine and one cable lead from the ceiling into the top. A control station populated by buttons, dials, and levers was wedged into the wall beside it. Above the control station, a large black screen glowed in standby mode. Beside the control station, a garden variety computer sat on a table—this was where they saved the illustrated memory recordings.

“Hey there,” said Farley, waving. “Are you my savior? Or my executioner?”

After checking to confirm that everything on the control panel was connected properly and the settings had not been altered, Ruggs sat on a stool across from Farley, a metal table between them. He sat up to his full height. “I'm Detective Ernest Ruggs.”

Farley chuckled and looked up at the screen. Then at the machine. “Fancy things aren't they? New toys don't always work the way they should I guess.”

Ruggs lit another cigarette. There was a no smoking policy in the interrogation rooms, but he believed he deserved some allowances. “There's nothing wrong with the machine.”

“We could be looking for the killer instead of bickering. How much longer I have to stay here?”

Ruggs exhaled, felt the need to cough, but held it in and waited for the feeling to subside. He went to the control panel and threw a lever. Then he began. “Before I start making declarations, I’m going to ask you the same thing my colleague asked. And I want you to think hard about what I’m saying. No tricks. No focusing on different thoughts. No holding your breath. No singing.” None of those things mattered as long as the suspect could hear the prompt. But he wanted Farley to be alert. “What happened on Friday night when you went to see your brother?”

Farley’s eyes closed. The device dinged and clicked, and the sound of electricity crackled. On the screen, a cartoon kitchen appeared.

#

A table covered in a frayed white cloth surrounded by six wooden chairs. Two men sat at the table. One man looked fifty years old, gym rat physique, with wrinkles cut into his face and veins pulsating across his bald head. Beneath his cut-off shirt, a tattoo mural peaked out, inking his neck. The other man was Jonas Farley: a skinny, starved body with broom stick arms and a missing ear. The two men faced each other on opposite ends of the table. Both sipped from bourbon glasses filled with Crown Royal: the bottle stood prominently at the center of the table.

“You been gone a long time, brother,” said the man across from Farley, sipping from his glass. “Where you been hiding?”

Farley shrugged. “All over. San Fran for a while. Los Angeles. Denver. Harrisburg. Philadelphia. Miami. Newark.”

“A real ramblin’ man.”

“I don’t like staying in one place.” Farley coughed and cleared his throat.

His brother leaned back. “I haven’t forgotten you know.”

“Forgotten what?”

“The money you took before you left.”

Farley placed his glass down. The tan whiskey rippled. He clasped his hands together. “I never took anything. I went off on my own.”

“Is this how we’re going to start? You’re going to lie to *my face*?”

Farley stood up, palms pressed into the table. “I’m not lying.” His words came out in a hiss.

Farley’s brother brought his glass to his lips and the whiskey disappeared. “I knew this was bad news.” He placed the glass down and closed his hands into fists, bunching the tablecloth between his fingers. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“You’re accusing me of a complete lie.”

“Who did it then?”

“Fuck should I know?” Farley’s voice got louder. “Probably those fake ass friends you ran with back then. I haven’t seen you in thirty years and this is how you greet me? You paranoid motherfucker. The fuck is the matter with...”

His brother stood up suddenly, bumping the table with his knee and knocking over the bottle of Crown Royal. Whiskey streamed off the table’s edge, dripping down the cloth.

Then the screen went black.

#

Farley’s eyes remained closed, eyeballs rolling beneath the lids. There was no indication that Farley had exited the memory. Ruggs observed Farley’s fingers tapping, his lips twitching.

Then the screen lit back up, brightening the room. An image of Farley descending the steps of a brownstone apartment, casually, though with pinched lips and a crooked brow. He looked both ways. Crossed the street. Hopped into a black car and drove away into a dark, windy night where the shadows cascaded onto the road.

Ruggs got up and stepped out into the hallway before Farley came to. His heart was beating too fast, and he could feel blood pulsing through his neck. That black screen again.

Johnson had retreated to his cubicle, so Ruggs paced the hallway alone. He wiped sweat from his brow. He'd watched the recording of his own memory with the black screen repeatedly, never understanding. He still couldn't understand it. He felt the crescent moon scar on his shoulder through the fabric of his shirt.

#

They had been calibrating the machine. The engineer asked Ruggs and Detective Brown simple questions meant to elicit simple memories. The engineer asked about the happiest day in their lives. Ruggs had watched Detective Brown's memory on the screen: a day of hiking and wildlife sightings capped by a torrid sexual encounter with a woman who was not Brown's wife. Brown watched the memory himself, chuckled, shrugged, and said, "It's not wrong." A big grin plastered his face.

Then it was Ruggs' turn. After strapping him in, the army engineer asked him, "What was the happiest day of your life?"

Ruggs remembered his eyelids lowering, the whirring of the machine, the chatter of the army engineer and Detective Brown. Then nothing until he woke to a whooshing sound and high-speed chirping.

"Machine works," said the army engineer, removing the headcap from Ruggs' head.

“Got a clear illustration?” asked Ruggs, curious about his memory.

The engineer checked boxes on a sheet of paper attached to a clipboard. He paused before saying, “Yup. Readings are consistent. We’re all set.”

Detective Brown eyed Ruggs as he got up from the chair and mussed his hair back into shape. Once the engineer rechecked all the connections and left them with the manual and a salute, Ruggs asked Brown what happened.

“Your memory had a black screen.”

Ruggs suddenly felt far away.

“Something you’re not telling me? Head injury in the marines? History of dementia?”

Ruggs shook himself. “I don’t understand.”

Brown crossed his arms. “I’m just saying. We got to rely on each other. And if something’s wrong with your head, I should know about it. The end of the memory looked fucked up, too. Like it wasn’t real.”

Ruggs stared at Brown for a while before saying, “There’s nothing wrong with me.” Then a pause. “When did it appear?”

Brown waved at the machine. “Take a look for yourself. It’s all recorded.” Then he shook his head, shoved open the door and disappeared down the hallway.

Ruggs didn’t hesitate. He went to the computer, scrolled through the recent recordings, and selected the most recent date and time. He clicked on the file.

The illustrated memory began with Ruggs and his ex-wife, Natasha, packing a green minivan with fold-out beach chairs, coolers, towels, and beach bags filled with suntan lotion, colorful plastic buckets, and umbrellas. Natasha hustled their four-year-old daughter, Monica, out the door and Ruggs heaved her up onto his back before placing her in her car seat.

Then he was driving. He, Natasha, and Monica sang “The Wheels on the Bus” together, the song blaring from the car speakers. Ruggs sang as loud as he could in different voices until Monica clapped her hands together and called him silly. They stopped for gas and Monica got a candy bar from the convenience store. Natasha slapped Ruggs’ ass before getting back in. They drove on. Monica ordered everyone to look at how blue the sky was. And when she said it was bluer than the bluest blue that ever blue, both Natasha and Ruggs laughed. Then Monica, confused at first, laughed too.

Ruggs remembered this. They had gone to Horseneck beach. Left early to beat the traffic. This was two years before the divorce. Before the job had turned him irritable and militant. Before Natasha told him Monica was afraid of him. That he criticized everything they did and shouted too much.

On the screen, they arrived at the beach. Monica ran out first with Natasha chasing her. Ruggs followed with a bag in each hand and the chairs wedged between his arms and chest. On the beach, Natasha rubbed suntan lotion into her skin and laid out on a towel. Monica hopped along the wet sand looking for shells. Ruggs read a Stephen King novel until Monica poked at his knee and pointed at the waves. The green waves crashed and receded, providing the only sound to the memory. Monica ran into the bubbling surf and Ruggs followed, gesturing not to go too far. She ran along the edge of the water, frolicking and kicking. Natasha joined them and they each held one of Monica’s hands, swinging her over the roiling water, letting her toes dip into the surf.

The scene cut to Monica building a sandcastle. A boy her age toddled over. He had a baby pot belly, with orange hair curling up around the top of his head. He began to help her,

digging sand out from around the cylindrical tower to make a moat. Ruggs watched their exchange and smiled. He looked over at Natasha, sunbathing on her belly and smiled.

Suddenly, the boy opened his mouth, pounded his chest, and stamped his feet. Then he stamped on the sandcastle, crushing it, sending sand everywhere. The boy laughed. Monica giggled. Natasha looked away. Ruggs didn't laugh. His face became blank and empty of emotion.

Then the black screen.

Ruggs swirled the mouse's pointer around, thinking the computer had fallen asleep. But he could see the video timer increasing. He placed the pointer on the time bar to see where the video picked up again. The black screen stretched on for three minutes. Another image appeared after. Ruggs clicked.

Ruggs was in the van again, smiling. An odd smile. As if someone held a gun to his back and told him Smile or I'll shoot. The screen didn't show Natasha or Monica. Outside the van, the sun shone brightly. An omen of good tidings poured onto the highway divided by trees. No clouds got in the way. The camera zoomed out and Natasha sat in the front seat, Monica in her car seat in back. They both grinned like something funny had happened. Something funny they wanted to hide. And beside Ruggs' cartoonish, forced smile, their grins looked even more ridiculous and strange.

They arrived home and the video ended. Ruggs, who had been standing for the whole video, sank into the computer chair. After his shift he watched it again and again.

He tried calling Natasha, but when she answered, she said "What is it, Ernie, I'm busy." And when he mentioned Horseneck beach, she said, "Are you fucking kidding me? You called me for that? Fuck right the fuck off, you fucking sadist," and hung up.

He tried calling Monica, but when he dialed the last number he knew, someone who spoke Spanish answered. He hadn't talked to Monica in a few years. Not since she'd moved to Portland to live with an artist he'd never met.

Ruggs had no way to determine what was missing from those three minutes. His own memory was similarly blank. He remembered going to the beach and he remembered having a fun time. He remembered feeling excited to share the beach with his daughter. He remembered taking pride in his wife. She was so beautiful, intelligent, and funny. A great mom and a sterling public defender. He remembered thinking how lucky he was. And yet, something had chopped out three minutes from his memory.

Soon after, he and detective Brown were out investigating a domestic assault, and the room wasn't properly cleared. A man burst out of the closet. He held a paring knife, blade towards Brown and Ruggs. Ruggs, in an effort to prove to Detective Brown that the black screen meant nothing, that he wasn't demented or brain damaged, lunged at the man and wrestled him to the ground. He succeeded and handcuffed him, but not before the knife sliced his shoulder and gave him the crescent-shaped scar he'd have for the rest of his life.

#

Ruggs marched to Johnson's cubicle. "The cause of death was strangulation, correct?"

Johnson startled from his computer keyboard. He spun around and held his hand to his heart. "You can't sneak up on me like that, boss."

Ruggs stared at Johnson until he continued.

"Yeah. Strangulation." Johnson held up a stop sign hand. "And I know what you're thinking. You're looking at the size of Jonas and the size of his brother and you're saying, How could this guy have *strangled* this other huge fucking guy to death, right?"

Ruggs waited.

“You take a look at Jonas’s record?”

Ruggs dipped his head slightly.

“So you know. Reformed meth head. Record of violence. Beat this dude to a pulp in a Miami bar. Guy that was three times the size of him. Another time, he stabbed a seven-foot-tall international basketball player.”

After speaking, Johnson watched Ruggs and Ruggs knew Johnson was waiting for him to wrest back control of the conversation. To have something definitive and clear to say that would clarify everything and make his job easier. But Ruggs had nothing. That black screen told him nothing. Anything could have happened in that space of time: his brother’s murder, a pleasant disagreement, or anything in between. He had to believe that. Otherwise, he’d have to believe something bad had happened at that beach. His happiest day the same as his worst day.

But Ruggs couldn’t express any of that. He wasn’t going to be a washed-up old man who crumbled as soon as he left the force. His authority returned. “Give me the file.” He held out his hand, steady, and dead-eyed.

Johnson handed it over, glancing down as he did. Ruggs took the file and walked back towards the NVI room. He found a desk chair in a nearby cubicle and took it with him to sit in the hallway. He looked through the file with his back straight, ignoring the urge to smoke another cigarette.

Farley’s rap sheet ran on for pages. He had a charge in every place he claimed he visited. Car theft in San Francisco. Assault in San Jose. Assault with a deadly weapon in Los Angeles. Fraud in Newark. Solicitation in Denver. Drug possession in Miami. Assault with a deadly weapon in Miami. DUI in Philadelphia. Now, a possible murder. Ruggs slapped the folder

closed, rose up, and ripped the NVI door open. Farley remained in the chair, his arms locked in place, the headcap draped across his head. Ruggs, once again, sat on the stool across from him and smacked the file down on the table between them.

“You’re a bad man, Jonas Farley.”

Farley’s lips curled into a smile. “You sound so cool, Ernest Ruggs. You sound like you’re in the movies.” He giggled and let the sound linger in the back of his throat. “Got something to prove, Ernie? Need to feel like a big man in front of little old me? Come on now. I’m hungry. I’m tired. And I can’t do anything for you like this. Listen, I’ve been here for a long time, and I haven’t requested my lawyer because I don’t have one and I don’t trust public defenders. But I’m losing my patience and...”

“You listen,” Ruggs broke in, late for his cue. “We know you were at your brother’s two nights ago. We saw it on the screen. We saw you kill him too. Admit it.”

Farley’s face darkened. Then he shook his head and clucked. “Oh, you think *I’m* a bad man? You’re worse, Ernie. You know as well as me that that’s not what happened on the screen. If it did, I’d be in county waiting for a court date. More importantly, I *know* I didn’t kill my brother. First, I heard he was dead was when they brought me in here. Not that I’m complaining. He had it coming. He’s been involved in this city’s dirty business for too long not to have somebody looking to kill him. I could help you out if you...”

Ruggs swept the folder off the table. “Shut up.”

Farley did. Then he tugged at his restraints. “Can you at least take off this fucking headcap? It’s itchy. And loosen these things while you’re at it? I’m too old to run anywhere.”

Ruggs was in a spot. Without the machine, he had to rely on the old ways to catch Farley in a lie or make him confess. He had to be guilty. Ruggs could smell it on him. That swaggering

talk. His casualness around police officers. He'd become accustomed to the dance of truthful sounding lies. He had to have done it.

A voice swam up to Ruggs from the depths. *Did I do something that day to make my wife and daughter hate me?*

Shut up, he thought. He imagined a giant hand shoving the voices down into a hole. Those two incidents could not be compared. He didn't commit murder.

But what if Farley was right? What if a disgruntled employee or junkie had taken his brother out? What if it was a carefully orchestrated hit?

He shook the conflicting thoughts out and pointed at Farley. "Look, maybe you *can* help us. Maybe you know something more about your brother's dealings. You could give us information. And in exchange, we'll cut down the years on your sentence."

Ruggs made his face blank and unreadable as he marched around the table, took the headcap off Farley, and undid the restraints on his right arm.

As soon as the headcap fell to the floor, Farley said, "I want to speak to a lawyer."

"The deal's off then."

Farley rubbed his head where the headcap had been until his wispy hair stuck up like cattails and his forehead reddened. "Ernie, you come in here talking about how I'm bad must mean you think you're good. You're the one they called to save the day. But we're both bad. You're just on that side and I'm on this side." He struggled against the remaining restraint, rattling it against the chair's arm. "And no one ever figures that out because you're wearing a badge." He rattled the restraint again. "Let me go."

Ruggs let out a single *Ha*. "Not gonna happen."

“Then what is gonna happen? Because I didn’t kill my brother. So you’re either going to frame me. Or you’re going to let me go. And if you frame me, no one else will know, but you and me, we’ll both know you’re just as bad and fucked up as I am. So, what’s it going to be? Huh?”

Then Farley screamed: “Let me go!”

Ruggs held up his index finger. “Hold on.” He left the room again. Farley yelled behind him, “Hold on for what? Let me out of here, you dirty pig!” And then the door closed and Ruggs couldn’t hear anything.

He speed-walked back through the hallway, past the cubicles, past the front desk, buzzing his ID as he went, and out onto the square outside the precinct. He sat down on a granite bench with the names of fallen officers chiseled into the stone. *What am I going to do?* Letting Farley go would make him look weak. But neither could he prove he was guilty with the evidence they had. They could try to charge him. Hope to get a good jury. Hope new evidence came to light. Or that the motive and opportunity was enough. But most juries expected NVI evidence these days. They’d be suspicious otherwise.

Ruggs worked decades without the NVI device. There were ways to get confessions. All gray and slightly wrong—but sometimes authority needed to flex its muscles. But now the question might surface in a courtroom: Why wasn’t the NVI device used? Did it have evidence that ran counter to the state’s narrative? Ruggs had seen news stories of situations just like this in other states. Defendants had become wise to the device. They knew it could be used to convict them. But it could be used to exonerate them, too.

Another option, Ruggs thought, absent-mindedly taking out his phone, would be to do more detective work. Figure out if there truly were other people who wanted Farley’s brother

dead. But that was work Johnson would undertake. Ruggs was too old for the field. Too much of a liability. And if that happened, Ruggs would have to tacitly admit to Farley, Johnson, and the rest of the force that he was finished as a cop.

Before he knew what he was doing he was on his phone, scrolling through his contacts. He clicked on Natasha's name and clicked the call button before he could stop and think about what he was doing or what he would say.

The phone rang and rang. He looked around the precinct square. Two female clerks with coffee cups in hand and cigarettes between their fingers were chatting out by the flagpole. A round man wearing a baggy shirt sat reading a novel on a bench.

The call went to voicemail, and it took all of Ruggs' resolve not to hurl the phone as far as he could into busy traffic. Instead, he left a message. "Hey, Natasha, it's Ernie. I'm really sorry to be calling you. I know you don't like it when I call. I know you didn't like it when I called about this before. But it's really *really* important. When Monica was four we went to Horseneck Beach. I need you to tell me everything you remember from that day. I need to...just call me back and tell me, OK? You can hang up right after but tell me. As soon as you get this. Ok, thank you. I'm sorry. Bye." He pushed the red hang up button. He dropped his head into his hands before straightening up, worried someone would see desperation on his face.

He pulled another cigarette from his pocket and lit it, watching the cigarette burn like a bomb's fuse as he sucked on it with deep breaths until the smoke burned his lungs. He flicked the butt away, lit another.

The man reading a novel closed his book and shuffled back inside. The two female clerks had finished their cigarettes and were sipping their coffee and laughing at something on their phones. The traffic passed rapidly. Still too early for rush hour. But the sound of horns and

revving engines boomed over the precinct. Ruggs looked up into the sky. Clouds swirled in the early morning light. A pink hue had crested the horizon beyond the buildings. He flicked the cigarette butt away, got up, and paced.

He didn't like pacing. He knew it made him look anxious. Uncertain. But sometimes it helped him think and when he was home alone, he did it all the time.

Maybe it was time to give in. Just a little. Just enough to get him out of this jam. He wasn't a detective anymore, after all. Finally, he stopped pacing under the flagpole, angled his head up, looking up at the sky, and pulled air deep into his lungs until he felt the breath hit bottom and percolate. Then he strode inside, determined as ever. Detective Ruggs knew what to do. Always.

He used his card to re-enter. He didn't say hello to Janet. He walked past the cubicles and brushed by Johnson who asked him where he'd been and why he'd left the suspect alone. He marched down the hall and shoved the NVI room door open. He closed it and locked it tight. Ruggs cautioned himself to check his anger. He had to stay calm. He had to talk to Farley man to man.

Once again, he sat across from Farley. Farley had pulled his legs up to a cross legged position on the cushioned chair. It looked like an awkward position for an older man. Ruggs would never attempt to sit like that.

Farley scratched at the space below his nostril. "Are you going to get my lawyer?"

Ruggs took a deep breath. "Yes."

Farley nodded his head and started scratching his sideburns and his chin. "Oh yeah?"

"I want to level with you."

Farley leaned forward as far as he could, the restraint restricting his progress. “I’m all ears.” He grinned at this little joke and gestured towards his absent ear.

Then Ruggs told him everything. About his own black screen. About how the happiest day of his life might have been the worst. About the grim smiles from Natasha and Monica. About his inability to remember what could have happened during that black space of time. When he finished, breath whooshed out of him like a hurricane touching down. “I believe that you don’t remember killing your brother.”

Farley scoffed. “But you still think I did it. Fuck, man, anything could be in that dark space. *Anything*. You just think I did it because I’ve got history with the law and I was there before he got killed. But I never killed anybody before that. Why would I start with my brother?”

Ruggs nodded. “I could say why not start with your brother. But I won’t. I’m willing to accept that it’s possible you didn’t kill him. Can you tell me what transpired after that argument? Did you just leave, or did you have more to say? Did you take anything with you when you left? Did you notice anyone else there?”

“Man, we were drinking for a while before that. What I remember is what you saw on the screen.”

Ruggs hesitated and rubbed his knuckles on the edge of the table. “Why is it, you think, we can’t remember?”

Farley nestled himself deeper into the chair, snarled his lips and rubbed his hand along his restrained arm. “Man, I don’t know. I’ve been to so many places and done so much shit in my life. Everything blends together. Plus, with all the alcohol and substances and shit, I’m surprised I remember anything at all.”

Ruggs watched him with his cold and calculated stare. That didn't help Ruggs, who'd only ever lived in one place and was never a big drinker. Cigarettes and Coffee were his vice.

Farley glanced down at his skinny legs and his arms, scabbed and raw. For the first time, Ruggs noticed a small tattoo on Farley's left wrist of a woman riding a horse backwards. Then Farley spoke.

"I figure we remember what we need to. Maybe that blank space in memory wasn't important. And hell, I guess if I did kill my brother, I sure as hell wouldn't want to remember it." Farley pointed quickly at Ruggs. "That is not a confession. Don't be doctoring any tapes to make it look like I confessed. You understand?"

Ruggs nodded and rolled his hand in the air, telling Farley to continue.

"In your case, I don't know. Isn't it better to think about that day without a dark cloud hovering over? Why not remember it fondly? I'm sure you've got lots of memories that weren't so good. There's never one thing that does in stuff like that, you know, it takes a lot to sink a relationship."

Ruggs wasn't sure. But it was an appealing idea. Maybe it was better to stop worrying so much. If he had done something horrible, though, wouldn't it be right that he know? So he could hold himself accountable?

At least he knew what he had to do with Farley. It was the only thing he could do. He stood up, smoothed out his suit jacket, and undid the second restraint. Farley rubbed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "Stay here," said Ruggs. "I'll take care of it."

He walked out of the room. With discipline and focus he strode up to Johnson, who was leaning over in his chair and sipping more coffee. His eyebrows danced.

"We don't have enough," said Ruggs. "Cut him loose or call his lawyer."

Johnson's face contorted as if objects of varying sizes were being passed through one ear and out the other. "Sir?"

"All we've got is fingerprints. He's got no signs of a struggle on him, his memory is clean, and he won't confess. We don't have enough."

Johnson stood up, dropping the cup of coffee to the floor where it spilled into a giant brown teardrop. "But...but...the black screen. You said..."

"I said I'd take care of it. This is taking care of it. Do the right thing and get him his lawyer. Sounds like he might be able to lead us in a few other directions at least."

Johnson's mouth gaped open and shut. Ruggs left him like that. "I'm going back home. Bruno needs to go out." He ignored Johnson who yelled something about case clearance rates.

On the way out, Ruggs said pleasantries to officers he passed in the hallway. He said goodbye to Janet at the front desk. He told her he missed seeing her every day. He exited the same way he came in, and, just as he was making his way towards the parking lot, his phone rang. It was Natasha. He picked it up.

"You're still on about this?" she said in a monotone.

Ruggs thought for a moment. Then said, "Natasha, I'm sorry. I'm a fucking lunatic. Forget about that message I sent. Could you let me know Monica's new number?"

The moments echoed endlessly as he waited for her to respond. The traffic had picked up. A blur of cars zoomed by. Great metal monsters anxious to get where they were going. He thought about how silly he felt, acting like the big man who could fix new problems. He was an old, weak man with a Cocker Spaniel to keep him company. What kind of authority was he? He rubbed the crescent moon scar again. A marker of vulnerability.

“Sure,” said Natasha. And in his mind, he began making plans for contacting Monica, for meeting her in Portland, for learning about who she was and how he could fit into her life again. The future was like that black screen—he didn’t know what happened there. But it was different too. He couldn’t do anything about the black screen. What had happened had happened. But he could do something about the future.