

**Familiar Quarters: Stories**

**By Roman Hladio**

**A Senior Comprehensive Project in Creative Writing**

**Submitted to the Department of English at Allegheny College**

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**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree**

**2 December 2022**

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Professor Bakken \_\_\_\_\_

Professor Miller \_\_\_\_\_

**I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the college community as a whole.**

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Roman M. Hladio

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## Preface

The first time I remember feeling regret was in the middle of an afternoon on a roaring summer day. I was four and had just woken up from a nap in a sterile, hotel-style room at a summer camp to my mom telling my brother what we could and couldn't do on the property while she ran her retreat. No movies, at least until the sun started to go down, no staying in the pool if everyone else was leaving. I wondered if I should have gone to Canada for the weekend with my dad and younger siblings. I closed my eyes again, imagining the car, the thick, fold-up dvd player in my lap, and I have been cursed since. There is no way for me to know what choice is correct or not, I know this now, but I still don't accept it.

Two years ago, I wrote about the ship of Theseus thought experiment. The question is, if the planks of Theseus's ship were replaced one at a time until none of the original planks remained, at what point is it no longer the same ship, or is it always the same ship? It's a philosophical quandary I often ask of myself. I ask it of my stories too; are they still mine if they

aren't what I originally created and if I used feedback from other people? I don't know who I am as a writer. I hoped writing this collection might have taught me, but it was just another thing I did here as my own planks got pulled out and slotted in. Maybe one day I'll figure myself out, but right now all I know I can do for sure is be cognizant of when a plank is swapped and hope I find a moment to call my ship of Theseus something else.

The stories that comprise *Familiar Quarters* are about a lot of things—family, coming of age, grief, anxiety, artistic expression, and of course, regret. But the regret my characters feel is not the same regret that I wrote of above. That is my own personal regret; the regret of making the decisions I made within my stories. See, I am not decisive. On the one hand, it sharpens my writing, my characters perusing the world just as I do, opening doors as they please just to get a taste of what's on the other side. On the other hand, these pieces went through such drastic revisions that the original is almost unrecognizable compared to the new. The speculative turned realistic, realistic became magical, lighthouses became jazz clubs on a whim, draft upon draft fill both my digital google drive folder and the purple Allegheny College folder I taped a sticky note reading "Roman's COMP" to in serial-killer type. Each one shoots a pang of guilt through me; it's a reminder of one more thing I failed to finish, even if it paved the road for what came out of it.

In this collection, I arranged the stories to funnel into obscurity. They are not connected, but in this order, they force an inward trajectory. It's an inverse tablecloth trick. The tablecloth is pulled slowly. Fine china and glassware shift slightly before tumbling to the ground and falling to pieces. That's how the real world often works; the trajectory of a situation is obvious, but the shattering is still surprising. There is an alternate order to read these stories in, though, and that's how I'll be discussing them in this preface. It doesn't change the content of the story, it doesn't

make a secret surprise appear on the last page, but it does show you my trajectory of growth. The second order of this collection is a linear timeline of when these stories were written. They rise and fall with the cadence of my breath, and they describe my personal and professional development. This preface might help us both find where some of my planks were changed.

Like all writers, I am an egotist. I want you more than anything to understand my world. Writing these stories and this preface is the closest I can get to opening my skull and dropping my brain into your head to show you how I think. Look for seams as we take all the old planks I've pulled out of myself and piece them once more into a ship. Some might call the one we're building here the original, but I'm yet to be convinced. Welcome to this little, egotistical packet of my regrets. I hope you stay a while.

\* \* \*

I never wrote creatively until the second semester of my sophomore year of college. When I wrote my first story two years ago, I reached into the boiling pot of stories my Baba told me about immigrating from Ukraine during World War II looking for a story seed, then promptly spilled the mess of it all over six pages. It is rich with memory and timelessly linear as it weaves the narrator Petro's entire life into the brief moment in which he reckons with adulthood.

When I wrote this story, I had two things I haven't seen since: burning passion for a new hobby and time. As the world struggled under the weight of COVID-19, I sat alone in my room haunted by the memory of a literary review I wrote during my sophomore year of highschool on David Benioff's *City of Thieves*. He opens the book like a memoir, sitting down with his grandfather who tells him stories about serving as a Soviet soldier during World War II. Originality be damned, I knew I could write that story, too. My Baba was a seven year old girl, far from enlisting like Benioff's grandfather. The voice in this book is immensely reverent and

feverishly speckled with history. In the second chapter, the narrator is arrested by Russian soldiers. As he sits in his cell, he thinks, “The night was never going to end. The German’s had shot down the fucking sun, they could do it, why not...” (Benioff 19). Benioff’s voice is toned and weighty, not just in sound but in emotion. He creates palpable fear with hyperbole.

Experiencing how Benioff manipulated voice gave me a baseline to set up mine. I was still able to write about the immense violence, I could capture similar sentiments of lost identity, but hearing my Baba’s stories from the perspective of a child allowed me to explore different: sentimentality, incomprehension, and anxiety not of impending conflict, but simply the unknown.

While Benioff used hyperbole and other forms of figurative language to create a sense of weight, I used white space. Scenes in “Ancestry” are often capped off by a break, leaving the reader in a moment of desperation or despair. As Petro helps gather his sisters to leave their home, he reflects on a moment of shared camaraderie and liquor with some friends. The group of young boys try to frame violence as entertainment like a younger boy might, but eventually find reality in their speculation: “All that was left were soot stained pigeons pecking at debris. We’d sit by the creek, taking swigs from the bottle, hoping to feel warmth in the darkness swirling within us” (Hladio 19). The section break immediately following these sentences provides a moment of breath after falling into the swirling darkness. It gives the reader time to process, just as Petro is actively doing, but also increases the weight of the line, leaving it to soak until the reader finally moves past it. It was all I could do to mimic the same weight I feel relistening to these stories. Baba tells them in quick snippets, and understanding doesn’t always come as fast as they happen, but sitting in what she has said shows their true depth.

Something I quickly learned while writing this story (and that I've found time and time again as I constructed this collection) was that I hate writing endings. I struggle to call anything complete. It can always be better. Instead of creating hard endings, I found myself often trying to leverage the power of a symbol. I can't continue to write a story forever, but I can set Petro on a wide open plain, with his village in darkness behind him as the sun falls across the ground ahead. I think of this as a subtle, journalistic flair of mine; the truth of the story is provided, and the end becomes my opportunity to point you in the direction I think it's supposed to go next. Someday, I think I'd like to come back and follow that road myself. Until then, I wish Petro the best of luck in his journeys.

\* \* \*

"Ancestry" was an enigma in that it's the only piece in my comp that didn't go about an extremely drastic, entire-story revision. The ending is very different from the original, but revision became the keystone of this collection as I produced new content.

In his book *The Art of Revision*, Peter Ho Davies invokes the Britishism "suck it and see." Davies implies that the only way to get anywhere within a revision is to make a choice and stick to it until it becomes apparent that the choice is correct or incorrect; to pick a piece of hard candy and "suck it and see." A good friend told me on one of the many occasions we sat across from each other scrambling for creative productivity, "sometimes you just have to call a thing done." These two pieces of advice got me through my collection, and they're still getting me through writing this preface because, as I said above, I'm restless with my craft. In this sense, Davies became the gas for my project, and I quickly had to realize that calling something done wasn't finding my tank empty, but just hitting the brakes. I might drive more later, but I have to stop for now.

“The Bluff Still Looms” is done. There, I said it. The first draft of this piece was written over a year ago. It started as a somewhat-speculative car drive with a ghost in the passenger seat. What I landed on with it, though, was a very real depiction of grief and different modes of grief.

The truth is, I didn’t give “The Bluff Still Looms” the respect it deserved as a story. I didn’t read much while writing it. What I did read was my own work. “Ancestry” helped me find the bones of a switchback narrative within this piece, and I pulled that to the foreground. Had I read some magical realism at this point, I’m sure I could have found some way to make a ghost live in the real world, but I didn’t. The last line of dialogue in Benioff’s preface to *City of Thieves* is a dialogue tag from his grandfather. “You’re a writer. Make it up,” (Benioff 5) is the advice he gave to Benioff, who was worried every detail hadn’t been worked out. Even though this piece is not based on any real events, I forced a similar pressure on myself. I felt this story had to be *right* without knowing what right was. Instead, I took this story to the New York State Summer Writers’ Institute, where I met a group of people who were much more interested in the reality of this story than the magical. So I opened that door and here we are.

As I fiddled through my own mind to come up with a story of my own, “The Bluff Still Looms” morphed into a very close, introspective piece. The narrator spends the entirety of his present action alone. There is no dialogue, just thoughts and emotions racing through his head as he pushes himself to drive farther and farther. At one point during my writing process these past few months, I began to assume that writing in first person was bad for me because I placed myself into the character too much. Now I realize that I accidentally forced that feeling upon myself by not exploring other writers’ interpretations and representations of emotions. I started the first draft of this piece by letting my own voice and emotions take over those of my narrator: “I hate this goddamn stupid town. I don’t actually know what I’m doing here, and I hope this all

makes sense to someone. I think I understand sometimes, at least I try my hardest to. I don't want to be here, or anywhere really. I hate this goddamn beautiful town." My first draft was so obsessed with the "I" that the story had no direction. I was nervous and frantically trying to create bite-sized vignettes so my readers could understand where I was starting from. The draft had beautiful moments, but it wasn't coherent, and so much of what I wrote was just me making claims about myself on the page.

After a second draft and a workshop at the Institute, I took my story to a drawing board—literally. I mapped out all the spandrels and doorways my story had, and picked the ones that both myself and my readers found most compelling. Here's the first paragraph of the version within this collection:

When someone asks where I'm from, it's easier to tell them what I see on the roads. No one knows a town tucked in a valley, but they might understand rolling hills. Or turns so sharp and sudden that one row of tires scutters into a parallel patch of grass or gravel and the hair on your neck stands up. Small flocks of clouds in the sky. Leaves still strong and green even into fall. On Main Street, there are more potholes than open shops, and a train stops time for ten minutes as it crosses the road. They might understand a stillness in everything, each house a headstone. (Hladio 1)

While the first draft opened a bunch of similar doors to this one, it's easily discernible that I'm sucking and seeing here. That's basically all that has become of the first paragraph. Much of the emotions and referenced landscapes are the same, but they've been developed into beautiful pictures rather than statements. Each sentence carefully sculpts the narrator and setting and tone

of the piece, and prepares the reader for the death and subsequent journey back to all of this that will be announced two paragraphs later. Here's the big issue with this revision: I read Davies' essay after I completed this story.

I'm glad that sitting on so many of my spandrels and checking what was behind all their doors worked out for me eventually, but I was doing it all wrong. All the radical revisions I made to this piece mostly sucked and didn't see. I created a sprawling story that needed to be cut down so the actual story within it could shine. In reference to writing, Davies says that "an experiment *isn't* a failure if it disproves a hypothesis" (Davies 74), but I wasn't doing experiments or testing hypotheses, I was just writing. I let it float adrift, not paying attention to what was changing or when. I just wanted it to get done. That's why I have such a hard time calling it done now. Every time I reread it I know it's the same story, but I can't help but ask myself where all those other planks went.

Yes, I do regret this piece. I lament everything it could have been and everything I may have achieved had I put less pressure on completion and more on answering my own questions, but regret—like grief—is a powerful teacher. "The Bluff Still Looms" taught me that in order to write future pieces, I should lean into what I know, but I can't rely on it. In an episode of the podcast "Book Exploder," George Saunders discusses how he developed the character and voice of a 12-year-old girl. Saunders implied that he—and most writers—know universal truths about some roles, and they're able to assume *enough* of the role to write from that perspective (Orlean). By spending so much time trying to parse my voice from the voice of this narrator, I learned a similar lesson that helped me develop characters within the rest of my project. I forced myself away from my own voice, yet still used my own experience as a way to add interesting development to characters. I can't make people think like me, but I can make my characters.

\* \* \*

I did not set out to write “The Blind Will See.” When I started it, I was stuck in a similar situation with “The Bluff Still Looms.” The first draft was full of introspection; the main character, Harriet, was only lying in bed, listening to doors open and close, and piecing together a narrative about the world.

A peer of mine at the New York State Summer Writers’ Institute told me in workshop, “You can write as many pretty sentences as you want, but if you’re not developing plot, they are nothing.” She was a pretentious screenwriting professor at some university in the midwest, had won awards for her fiction, and—I assumed—was only in this workshop because she wanted to get close to Mary Gaitskill, our workshop leader. After getting over the condescending tone, her advice never left me.

“The Blind Will See” was the first story I wrote after the institute, and it’s representative of my changed thought process. Each line in the first draft passed the “is this a good line?” test, but as I approached revision, I picked my pieces to suck and see, and read the draft again, always asking myself, “what does this do here?” So Harriet was no longer just laying in bed, she was praying in bed. And she was praying in bed and listening for footsteps because her father told her that if there was a knock at the door with no footsteps preceding it, then it was the devil coming to take her away.

Then, an advisor hit me over the head with magical realism, and I ended up falling into “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” by Gabriel García Márquez. In the piece, a man finds what the town later presumes to be an angel in the mud near his home, trapped on the ground, impeded by his own wings. The townsfolk kept him in a chicken coop, and the priest gave a sermon:

He reminded them that the devil had the bad habit of making use of carnival tricks in order to confuse the unwary. He argued that if wings were not the essential element in determining the difference between a hawk and an airplane, they were even less so in the recognition of angels. Nevertheless, he promised to write a letter to his bishop so that the latter would write his primate so that the latter would write to the Supreme Pontiff in order to get the final verdict from the highest courts. (García Márquez)

García Márquez had captured my attention. I finished this piece, then read it again, hypnotized by the floaty, playful third-person narration and obsessed with the idea of belief he constructed. By all accounts, the townsfolk were looking at an angel, a man with wings, as the church told them. But here was the priest, warning everyone that belief was not enough, it needed to be on paper. Blind belief is necessary until the thing is right in front of you, then it is time for skepticism. And, of course, there was the devil. The greatest invisible evil. I watched, through this piece, as the lines of human belief in my head began to blur. So I took García Márquez's third person narration. While he kept his discourse free and indirect, I tightened mine to the perspective of a follower, Harriet. She was lost in the complexity of belief, and I wanted to explore that—I wanted to see the greatest flaws in how people believe. Then, I wrote my opening line: "Harriet wanted to see the devil."

García Márquez also wrote a lot of worldly imagery into his piece—another thing I took inspiration from. In a second draft, Harriet sat in her bed and prayed, and the prayer was answered by an incarnation of John the Baptist. From then on, each time I presented a saint within my piece, I tried to mirror them with a bit of brutality to further blur the lines of belief:

“Then she would turn her head to look out into the dark, blue world beaten into that unclear quiet out her window and close her eyes as grasshopper lined teeth went on about redemption. Harriet eventually fell asleep to the rhythmic spitting of the Jordan falling upon her and that comforting weight at her feet” (Hladio 44). I wanted this scene to set the tone for the piece. The language and graphic details are gross, the tone is humorous, and the characterization of Harriet being comforted by it all puts a sideways pressure on it all that leaves you wondering what the hell it is you’re reading. To me, this scene embodies the relationships we actually form through religion. Blind belief is often used as an excuse to put blinders on and walk through the world unafraid, even when there is danger. But nothing is ever that cut and dry; everything is gray like the line the sea and sky share in García Márquez’s piece. Uncanny character reactions and unclear language helped me describe all that in this piece.

In my arc as a writer, this was my highest point. I read García Márquez and Charlotte Perkins Gilman viciously, compared to the two or three pages of a novel I’d pick up while writing “The Bluff Still Looms.” I made it through three or four drafts of this story in two weeks and came out the other end with something that reads so radically different from the first draft, but feels the same. Davies wrote in *The Art of Revision* that if you as the writer begin thinking, “What I’d really like to add to the story is...” then you should do it (72). I read that portion of his book while I was writing this piece, and it shows through. It is absurd. It is magical realism. I had fun writing it.

\* \* \*

In the span of one month, I wrote nine drafts of “The Last Jazz Club on Earth.” I’m never happy with my creative work. I am obsessive to such a fault that I obsess about having that fault.

This is the voice that echoes throughout my collection of short stories. Each character is obsessed with their faults, whether they be physical, mental, or emotional.

So, two weeks for four drafts of “The Blind Will See” and four weeks for nine drafts of “Jaz Club.” For those keeping score at home, that seems on par right? The difference is that each draft of “Jazz Club” was radically different in premise, plot, and setting. Comparing the first to the last, they are unrecognizable, even if I continue to think otherwise. (It’s my ship, what can I say?) I tried to fall into “The Last Jazz Club on Earth” the same way I started “The Blind Will See”; I sent the protagonist searching for something. This time around, it was her voice rather than the devil. I found myself caught in a feedback loop, though. I was riding a writer’s high having just completed a story I was proud of. I figured I was a natural now, that it would all just happen. So I fell into a habit I became all too familiar with when I was writing “The Bluff Still Looms”: I stopped thinking about experimenting with my own story—sucking and seeing—and instead put pressure on myself to just get something done.

I eventually did discover this about myself and find my footing once more. The piece that pushed me to the finish line here was “Real Women Have Bodies” in Carmen Maria Machado’s collection *Her Body and Other Parties*. The way she passively added a global crisis into her piece taught me how to pace my own story, as my characters faced emotional and physical hardships. In Machado’s world, women are literally fading away and the crisis becomes politicized, placing similar emotional battles on a global stage. Machado’s narrator discovers that these women are sewing themselves into dresses and fights to free them: “I cut the places where one thing is stitched to another. I unlace bodices. I can see them, the women, loosened from their moorings, blinking at me” (Machado 147). What I loved about “Real Women Have Bodies” were breaks from the narrative like these, where Machado’s narrator acts on the nagging voice in her

head. I found inspiration in how Machado crafted her internal narrations and the anxiety they held.

As I wrote my narrator for this piece, I tried to feel a similar sense of anxiety, but made it more intrinsic than extrinsic. Rather than having Frankie act as a result of fear of the impending flood, I wanted the flood to come after she came face to face with her own insecurities. To do this, I used a lot of water imagery as I wrote from her perspective, whether it be references to the waves of music notes, or feeling pressure like water:

I can't help to take on all the pressure of it. It's hard to move. My feet locked, not heavy like a block of ice, but running underwater and it's all collapsing in at once. ... I'm pulling myself through the pressure as best I can, a race because I know the lights will be on and if I'm late that's just one more reason to sink. (Hladio 24)

In earlier drafts of my story, I kept trying to force other people to realize Frankie's emotions. I got over that bad habit (though I wished I had figured it out four drafts earlier), and slowed it all down. Frankie's internal narration became something that forced me to enjoy this piece because I found I could relate to it. In an interview on *Her Body and Other Parties*, Machado says that she's not trying to write toward themes in her stories, but rather writes about them because she is preoccupied with them (Button). While writing "Jazz Club," I was preoccupied with creating a perfect collection and writing a story ten times better than my last one. I almost forgot that I was supposed to have fun. I didn't think back to Davies' line "what I'd like to see in this story is..." because I wasn't thinking about what I wanted, I was thinking about what would get it done. So I took my shot with Frankie and leaned into what I was feeling. Once I got to the eighth draft, this

story was easy to write because I had gone through the gambit of trying for perfection and failing. Frankie's story was just as much mine, and all I had to do was make the rest of the story happen around that.

What I regret most about this piece is how long I spent fighting myself to figure it out. It all came so naturally when I stepped back—I wrote the final draft in two days, and it was not an insignificant change. I moved so many planks to get this story together, more than I had too, so many that on some level I'm convinced I ended up using all the planks of my first draft to write this story. The problem, then, was me. I was just putting the ship together poorly. I hope I remember this in the future. I probably won't, but there's a shot.

\* \* \*

At the end of the "Suck It and See" chapter, Davies makes the claim that "without a flawed hypothesis, we can't find our way to a true one" ( Davies 79). I was so afraid of finding a flawed hypothesis in one of my stories that I spent much of my semester placing characters in vacuums in their own heads and in their quests. I came into this project—and my writing—thinking that characters were all there was, the entire time forgetting that waves crash against the stern of the ship, and rocks scratch its underside. I found my stories when I looked out at the world around my characters and opened doors.

When I wrote about the ship of Theseus, I made the unearned claim that I was Theseus. I am a ship, always looking into myself, waiting to see when I feel different even though I never will because changes come so subtly. Having now completed these stories, I can at least look behind me and see this fleet I've built; each ship with planks I've picked up along the way or exchanged for a spot on a different boat or taken on myself. They are bruised and imperfect.

Some have been changed so much that an observer might say the original is a completely different ship. But they all still float just the same.

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## The Bluff Still Looms

When someone asks where I'm from, it's easier to tell them what I see on the roads. No one knows a town tucked in a valley, but they might understand rolling hills. Or turns so sharp and sudden that one row of tires scutters into a parallel patch of grass or gravel and the hair on your neck stands up. Small flocks of clouds in the sky. Leaves still strong and green even into fall. On Main Street, there are more potholes than open shops, and a train stops time for ten minutes as it crosses the road. They might understand a stillness in everything, each house a headstone.

What I miss most about high school is the bells. There used to always be something to signal when one thing's over and it's time to start another. Now, courses end when a lecture ends, or when I'm bored and walk out. It's not like there's no college back home, but it's not the grant-funded science buildings and freshman dorms with air conditioning, it's Steve Harris's uncle reading a physics book over the summer, stumbling through it with a few 18-year-olds who never outgrew town and a flock of retirees from the city who only have time and money to

waste. I'm here, though, away and gone, and I'm trying my best to make it count for something. I'm not looking back. But the stench of the mines doesn't come off easy, and it's hard to compare to a mall when your equivalent is a creek bed of cans and smokes. I'm sitting alone in my room with a bottle opener held against a twist-off Yuengling when Mrs. Dobson calls to throw the past in my face.

"Downy passed early this morning."

I set the bottle opener down. She continues.

"He was peaceful as ever, in his recliner. I know you and he—"

"Thanks," and my hands won't stop shaking, like Pa's did, holding that green bottle tight in one hand, gripping the air tighter in the other. I used to try deep breathing or other things I saw online, but that never worked. I chuck the bottle toward the wall, watching the cap turn over and over, then the tip hits and that golden liquid, the same my Pa drank, pours out and in it I see Downy in my rearview. I'm watching the day I left for school through hops, and as I said goodbye, he gave me his buck-toothed grin. I think I wanted him to say something special, maybe to tell me he was proud, but he wasn't like that. Instead he said, "Don't lose yourself tryin' to find yourself. I'll have this plumbing fixed by the time you're back." Then he was pissing off the porch and I was pulling away. So, I left. Two years, I'm still lost, and Downy's gone to that piss-gold void. Pour one out for Downy, I guess.

Pa didn't like making decisions. He would sit around, lounging on the couch for days until desire struck him. Downy made me feel like Pa once today already, and that's sign enough for me to start doing anything else. So I walk around the glass on the floor and started packing. Dress shoes in a plastic bag, then to the far end of the duffel, everything else, suit wrapped in a garbage bag. Still, it doesn't compare to the tight cubes Downy could make of luggage. His rows

of socks and extra shoes stood at attention, not clumped like a yolk waiting to be scrambled. It was ironic that I packed like Pa, and more ironic still that Pa had served at some point in his life—I don't care to know when. Downy had a spot for everything, especially in his shop. All his cars, all his tools. All those bright travel mugs from every truck stop or gas station I'd never heard of lined up by shade first, then alphabetically if they were too close in color. Downy had been everywhere—at least it seemed. I'd sit with him for hours asking about the spots on those cups, making him pull up memories of old cars and lives he no longer lived. He just loved the road, I think. Spending so much time running himself on fumes to get away from home left him bound to end up stuck in a garage somewhere. That somewhere just happened to be right where he started.

\* \* \*

I was seven and sitting in our old van when Pa just took off from the mechanic's lot in a bright red car I didn't know the name of yet. Ma was dead five years then, and Pa kept himself occupied with life by playing fast and loose with the law, I was just along for his ride. Pa hadn't lied when he told the mechanic that the van's frame was starting to rust, but as the tires of that red car threw asphalt and dust up toward us, the old man who had been under the van stood quickly and quietly. He looked from me to the empty road Pa had fled down then back to me, before walking back toward his office. I sat alone. No Pa, no old man under our car, just me in this hot lot with the windows down staring at the road. I wasn't hurt or upset, just alone, and the worst thing to feel as a kid is alone. With age, the world is still familiar behind misty eyes and asphyxiating mucus, but as a kid, it's like an alien planet. Then the old man's back, saying his name's Downy and gesturing with a Coke and a pack of nutty bars. He cracked the can and handed it to me, my throat numb to the carbonation.

“So you like cars like your old man?” he asked.

I nodded slow, plucking the chocolate diamonds from between crests of wafer.

“You have a favorite?”

Downy’s lot was full of sporty cars, all in different states of repair, but my eyes landed on that cream colored pick-up he drove around town. I could take it mudding, I could get away into the woods and drive until I found a secret hideout to spend the rest of my days in. I could sleep in the bed and stare at the stars. But it was a truck, not a car, so I turned back to him and I shook my head no. Downy kicked around some gravel.

“Y’know, that car your Daddy took, that Firebird, it was my Auntie’s. Beautiful car, can’t say the same about the driver.” He smiled at his shoes. “Yeah, I was probably your age. Was working on it with my Pops and asked if I could drive it back to her place. He said yeah, but I couldn’t reach the pedals so I sat on his lap and drove.”

I choked the chocolate and coke down, neither as sweet with both together. I missed Pa. I wished he had taken me back home with him, or wherever he was, and we could’ve gotten a stuffed crust pizza and skipped between different game shows during commercials while I sat on his lap. I wouldn’t have even minded if he drank.

“Now, uh, hold on a minute. There was another part of that story. So we were driving, right. And, uh, Pops said, ‘ah I told your mother we’d stop and bring sandwiches home for dinner!’” The corners of his mouth started turning up. “Now, I hadn’t learned to park, so as we pulled up to that sub shop I pulled the wheel a little too hard and rolled us right through their front window. After that they put up a drive thru.”

Confusion and sadness like cookies and coke felt like nothing, and that’s when I heard him let out that cackle for the first time, a deep guttural sound that emphasized the inhales with

high whistling tones, like a squirrel stalling an engine right before it could turn over. I didn't really believe him—or don't anymore—but I let that laugh infect me, and soon I forgot about confusion or sadness and was just seven.

When Pa finally came back, it was with an escort of blue and red lights. Downy and I had moved to a bench in his workshop to play Crazy Eights. Downy had seen something in me, or just seen my dents and scratches. We had made a deal: he gets the fuzz to let Pa off easy, and I get to come back whenever to play cards and ride with him. As he stood to go talk to the officers, he put out his hand, and I shook.

\* \* \*

The contents of my bag are already scrambled by the time I reach the lot. Warm fall air pulls steam off everything and billows like smoke off coals. The lot is uncharacteristically empty, most people having already left for the long weekend I had planned on spending in, and Downy's truck sat surrounded by the mist. Crisp air, too warm for a hoodie, too cool for a t-shirt. Downy would've called this a working day, spent twice as long with the cars or on the tractor cause the breeze kept him cool enough. Pa liked these days too, cause it meant I'd be in school and he could do whatever the hell pleased him for seven hours. I thought it was all bullshit, figured anyone could do whatever and shouldn't hold the weather of all things liable to their productivity or what have you. It's hard to imagine Downy of all people taking his forever nap on a day like today. He would've loved to work on something. The wind picks up for a second, and I almost see his silhouette at the hood of his baby, tinkering away. I toss my bag and myself in the cab. The clutch is a little sticky after the rain, and as the air kicks on—just fixed again last week—all I smell is Downy: that mildew-tinted motor oil and firewood he left everywhere he went. I press on the gas, let off the clutch, and urge this truck forward toward home.

Downy used to say you had to be careful or the road would pull you in, that everything would bleed together leaving just a hypnotic gray line. I learned to check my mirrors every few minutes, read road signs as they passed, name trees to myself—but the world feels off today, like the leaves are either too green or too brown, and the signs are angled to reflect the sun. Now, falling south down the highway, I try to treat each white line like the rung of a ladder, its shape consistent and familiar, but still I struggle finding the next one. I stall, scared I'll fall on my ass.

\* \* \*

By thirteen, I was spending every Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday at Downy's. School and home were on the west side of town, and Downy's on the east, so I'd walk Main Street as the brick structures that lined it clipped the bottom of the sun. Soon, Mrs. Clark was whispering across her porch to Mrs. Dobronski about Pa's latest petty theft, and more about me and Downy. I remember feeling like Mrs. Clark was following me everywhere then, whispering to other teachers when she'd substitute at school, chatting in windows above Main Street as I walked by, shouting between the open windows of cars trapped at the single broken light.

I kept my eyes glued to my shoes, sometimes looking up to see how far ahead of me the building's shadows had gotten. It was entertainment to Mrs. Clark and her posse of mothers; a big game of telephone, everyone trying to one up each other until Downy was going to sell me off to some foreign country. No one cared what happened to me, they cared that they were right. So I kept walking until I finally felt the setting sun on my neck again and the ground broke from shadowy pavement to sunlit gravel and I knew I was back at Downy's. I'd look up to see him with a face full of grease and a smile, and I'd smile back.

“Figured we’d drive across the tracks today.” Downy’s cheeks kept pulling higher, and I was sure his smile would break in half. I’d race toward his pickup, sling my bag off my shoulder and toss it into the cab.

I knew he had been looking at my bruises since we got in the car, but he ignored them as usual. With a foot on the clutch, a foot on the break, and a turn of the key, I felt the truck come to life under my feet. Then, just as Downy had tried to explain to me countless times, I stepped on the gas lightly, and began pulling my foot away from the clutch, but the car sputtered and stalled. I tried again. A slower release, faster on the gas, the engine roared as we rocked back and forth, and then the engine light came on and we sat in still silence. I brought my fist to the edge of the wheel, and tried to pretend my anger superseded the pain emanating through my hand even though it never did.

“Maybe try—”

But I started the car again before Downy could finish. I would do this myself, and turned the key until it felt like it might snap between my fingers. I laid my foot on the gas hard, letting the engine rev up, and lurched the truck right out of the lot and onto the road. Downy held himself by his seat and the dash with an iron grip, but didn’t say anything. He just kept looking me up and down and I wanted to slap him so hard he looked right out the windshield instead. The blood vessels in my head became so tight the edges of my vision started to shake. He was scanning my body. I don’t know whether it was because I was finally driving or because the bruises looked more purple today, but something influenced his usual ignorance.

“How’s your old man doing?”

“Oh you know,” I’d say, as always. “Fine,” because it was just another part of life, nothing to call home about. Nothing Mrs. Clark ever called home about. By now we were

coming up on the tracks near the outskirts of town. I'd been sure to pick a route that had no stop signs so I didn't have to shift, and had been keeping us somewhere between second and third. I don't know how we avoided traffic that late in the afternoon, but looking back I'm sure that's the only reason I made it as far as I did without rear-ending anyone.

The truck had started to whine. I was pressing on the gas a little too hard for this gear, I knew, so I pulled back and tried to let us coast a little. "What was your old man like?" I pushed back.

Downy sucked air through his teeth and held it there like he was trying to detect its flavor. He was quiet. The tracks were still ahead of us, but I was looking far beyond them, watching the last bits of sun strike the bald stone bluff ahead of us.

"Desperate," he finally said. I cast him a sideways glance, hoping he'd continue, but he was just staring back at me, then turned to look through the windshield. He threw his finger up in front of him, pointing at something catching sunlight through the windshield, "Slow it!" and I jammed my foot on the break. We came to a screeching halt as the crossing gate dropped the last inch to its final resting place on the truck's hood. Then the train pulled past in front of us.

"Woooo-eee kid." Downy chuckled. "You really choked the chicken with that one." I stared at my feet as I shoved them onto the clutch and brake, and the engine roared back to life. We sat idling in silence as the train passed in front of us. To me, the hood's white-stained-yellow paint looked undamaged, but even at the time I knew I'd never hear the end of how I had scuffed up the hood of his baby and almost got us run over by the train. "You know the truck can stop *without* being stalled, right?" he poked.

The train roared past, and I used the excess noise as an excuse not to respond. Avoiding his gaze, I peered out my window, searching for the end of the train and wishing I had just gone

home after school instead, but caught my thoughts before they could get out, shoving them down quickly, because I knew it wasn't actually true.

Once the gate lifted, I slowly pressed on the gas and let off the clutch. We rolled forward and then the engine tugged and the truck pulled on and I felt something catch under the pedal so I let off slowly, again, trying to keep the engine running but I felt a slight stutter and—stalled again.

\* \* \*

The dull glow of the gas light catches my attention. I've driven straight through golden hour, that gray ladder with white rungs bleeding past. Sun falls faster than the leaves now, I guess. I can almost hear Downy in the passenger seat complaining about it. *If mother nature's tryin' to keep it as warm as summer all year round, least she could do is find a way to keep the sun up.* He always wanted to tinker all day then try to keep going through the night, but the lighting in his garage was piss poor, and the sun always said when it was quitting time.

The upcoming exit's sign lists "Muncho's Gas'n'Snacks" left off the exit. So I follow and count the mile markers to keep me occupied. Three more. Downy loved driving at night, always telling me how great it was to feel lost when everything was familiar but you just didn't realize it. Two more miles. In this moment, I couldn't believe him less; the night had consumed everything not illuminated by my headlights and the cracks and potholes looked no different than at day. One mile. It's starting to bother me that I only remember him as some stalwart philosophizing hero who only comes to mind with inspirational one liners. The exit snuck up on me, and I braked hard to right myself into the correct lane. I follow the off-ramp, take a right, and pull into a station completely unmarked save for a tall sign that might've once been green.

Although the lot looked clean and mostly free of weeds, most of the windows in the quaint building are boarded up. I pull in only to find the pump locked. Of course. I climb back into the driver's seat because I'm tired, ready to call the drive a wash. It made no sense to drop everything and scramble back down the highway all for Downy, putting my life on pause to head down a one-way street of memories I tried to close off years ago. But I change my mind. I can't stop, not now. I won't let all the neighbors put Downy in the ground with all their fake sorrow. All their hate and conspiracies gone for a day to pretend love, only to bring it all back up once the dirt's on top of him. I'd send them all away. I never needed their concern and I sure as hell don't want their sympathy now. I close my eyes to blink, but before I realize, they wouldn't open and I let myself sleep.

\* \* \*

I was sixteen. No one was at the cemetery but me and Downy. The rest of the town felt like they had no respects to pay, and afterwards, only judgements to pass. Pa had died on Friday morning; by Saturday he was in the ground. Digger Joe, our cemetery man and mortician, liked to get his work done quick—one check to make sure they're really gone, then six feet under before there's time to think poorly of them. I was always surprised that he could beat the gossip posse.

Pa died in a crash, driving drunk into town to get more booze. I could've stopped him, I remember thinking that as he grabbed the keys. Could've jumped on his back and fought him. He was still stronger then, though, and uninhibited. He parked the car between a tree and a boulder, and sent himself through the windshield into a pine box.

In the cemetery, I was gripping a flat rock with a curved divot on the top and a point on the bottom. I remember thinking it was Ohio-shaped. The bottom gave it the impression of a

point without the sharpness just like the state—it wanted to have strength, but in reality it couldn't even force itself as part of the midwestern sea. Both faces were smooth, almost soft. I looked back trying to picture where I had picked it up and imagined a parade of ghosts following me, all stopping for a heart-rock, and coming to Pa's grave. All that was really there was Digger Joe shoveling through his own pile of rocks, picking the best ones to sew through the dirt above his next coffin. I started rubbing the rock, its face felt less and less soft, or the skin of my thumb was finally giving way to the dry sediment. Pa's name looked fake on the headstone. He didn't deserve a name. He was someone else. My finger slipped right in the middle crease of that rock, and aiming at my own last name, I pitched like a skipping stone, and sent it into the air. It struck the stout cross extending from the top and fell straight down to rest right on top of the freshly turned dirt. I wanted to never see that rock again. I wanted it to be lost out in a lake and erode invisibly, but it sat there in the dirt and I stared at it.

“Hey, c'mon man.” Downy had grabbed my shoulders and was holding me still in front of him. I flinched, but I stayed there with my back leaned against him. It wasn't comforting, but it was warm in the sharp breeze. A drop of water hit my hand, but when I looked the sky was still blue. Without Pa, I had no idea where I'd go. Everyone was dead or didn't care. Ma, Pa, I'd never even known if I had more family than that.

That's when this dream always shifts. Sometimes, the ground catches on fire, and Downy tries to pull me away but my feet are stuck to the ground and I wake up still feeling flames licking at my feet. Sometimes, Downy and I get in the car, we drive far away and stop for fast food and he pretends not to notice when he bites through his hamburger wrapper and all just to cheer me up. Sometimes a strange woman who has the same eyes and chin as Pa shows up to take me to a nice house with a pool and a yard as big as two of the lots our house sat on, or to

take me to an orphanage, or to run me and Pa's headstone over as Downy cusses her out and yells for me to move. It's always changing, always different. For the first time, though, Downy turned and left me there alone and nothing happened. No fire, or mystery Aunt, or road trip. Just me. I stood there, noticing nothing, feeling nothing, alone until I began to notice how sore I felt from a warm, faux-leather seat, and how my neck hurt from lolling around unsupported all night, and in the moment before I opened my eyes, everything was just black.

\* \* \*

Light hits my face and I wake in that Muncho's lot. Warm morning hues spread across the clouds and if anyone is coming to unlock these pumps and throw some greasy dogs on a roller, they'd have done it by now. Still, I hope for some glimmer of humanity to pop up, but nothing happens. I start up the engine and drive past the building one more time before I decide to drive across to the other side of the exit to fill up. As soon as I cross over the highway, right before the on-ramp, I see it: "Muncho's Gas'n'Snacks," then below it in smaller type, *Open 24 hours*.

I am well acquainted with the roads leading south, and I know that my tires will eventually hit the white rung so long as I let them drop, not without caution, but without consideration. Still, I keep track of road signs and billboards to stay out of that hypnotic pattern. I know I am getting close to home when I pass Dean's Taxidermy and Ice Cream. Its billboard, a deer holding an ice cream cone with fluff popping out of its seams and a pile of entrails off to the side. The actual shop is buried out in the woods somewhere. Then the bluff appears in front of me as if I have been summoned home with the thought of an odd business pairing. The rock juts out of the ground abruptly in the front, and slopes down much more gradually in the back.

When I was younger, before Downy, I'd hike up there on Saturdays and during the summer. There was a small pond at the top, and from that, a crease that ran down the bluff's face.

The locals called it God's Forehead, because most fathers who worked in the mines around there eventually ended up with that same crease etched into their faces. All the old ladies said you can only see God's forehead cause He kept His eyes in the ground, looking out for everyone under there. Downy called it Satan's Asscrack. All those hills around us were the walls of the bowl, and the one way out got covered by those big cheeks. Ruddy red bricks formed a street below them, the buildings adding texture and shape.

Main Street in the morning is serene, with street lights darkened by the morning sun, the buildings like teenagers on the weekend keeping their eyes shut just a little longer even if they're awake on the inside. It's beautiful in the same way it always has been, but I know those windows will open and all those same people will be looking out. Right now, it's just quiet. The hum of my tires on brick fills the air, and I ride that sound to the newer paved road that starts in front of Downy's shop. I move past it, down the first road I ever drove, and swear I can almost feel him there in the passenger seat, with his slick grin and colorful commentary on how I downshifted too fast or too slow. I roll down my windows and slow to listen as I approach the tracks—an old habit Downy forced after that one time—but there is no train, just gravel and tracks that are eventually consumed by trees and hills.

Some pieces of the tracks do eventually loop back and run parallel to the road farther ahead, and between them is the old train station—a squat, sturdy building covered in ivy and stained dark by years of rain. It used to be a big deal in town, the main hub of travel. Now, people just know it as the lot everyone uses when they go visit the cemetery. I pull in, stiff with sweat.

\* \* \*

Digger Joe got Downy in the ground quick. The still-fresh tread of the backhoe led me over to his plot. No footprints, no pomp, no one wanting to remember the good or trying to forget the bad, just loneliness pouring down like piss off a porch. Downy felt close like I imagined a father should be, warm and open and waiting for a call whenever it comes but not forcing it on you. But he wasn't. He mostly let me go to voicemail, never held me up or celebrated the first time I changed a spark plug. Not that Pa would have either, but I wanted it.

Downy's grave looked fine, nothing special. A stone with a name and some dirt and some plants. That's all anyone really needs. So I made it. That's great. I'm here with my shoes in the dirt by myself and there's nothing to do. I came all the way back to a town I fought so hard to leave for a man I held to some imaginary standard in my head and all I have to show for it is this stupid truck. I don't know why I came back; I had no plan now that I was here.

"Can I help you with anything, kid?" The voice behind me was gruff and dirty, and for a moment I thought it could be Downy, but it was just Digger Joe with his mud-caked hands. HE was looking at me skeptically, like I didn't belong.

"I'm just leaving," I said. He nodded as I turned back toward the truck. As I slammed the door, I settled on heading up the bluff, seeing everything for one last time, then putting it all behind me.

The road at the base of the bluff was a rough pattern of cracks and branches. I looked hard at them, trying to remember some from all those days I walked up this hill, staring at my shoes and everything beneath them. I used to step on all of them, thinking they might make Pa's back break since Ma was gone. I'd get lost jumping from crack to crack, and before I knew it I'd be at the top. That was what living with Pa was like, too—staring at the ground, hoping it all passed fast. I was so close to his headstone and our house. This town was his entire life for all I

know. I thought about turning around and hiking to his grave. His spot would be completely mud this time of year, but I still felt pulled to it. I'd go and sit in the mud by his headstone and notice a spot where someone had come and dug to plant some flowers but never actually put anything in, leaving just a pool of water and mud. I'd consider planting something at that moment, though I'd never actually come back to do it, but I'd think about it.

I was hypnotized by it all, but I felt the hair on my neck standing up as I realized my tires were shaking against the edge of the pavement, scrapping high tufts of grass as I tried my hardest to lift my eyes from the road and pull the car away from the edge. But I couldn't. My tires scraped against the loose edges and spun in the mud as I stepped on the gas to right myself, then caught on something and the truck was thrown right into the truck into a maple tree.

My leg ached, but I was fine, I knew it almost immediately. The hood of Downy's truck was wrapped around the trunk. I climbed out of the car, shoving the airbag away from me and started limping my way down the hill toward town to find a tow truck or mechanic or somebody to help me out. The trees were all still green, and I pulled at them like a kid, but none of the leaves or branches snapped off, so I kicked a rock down the hill instead. I kicked the rock all the way along the tracks and back into town, and left it in the lot of a garage somewhere.

### Ancestry

“Get up. Now.” Tato’s harsh words pierced through my dreams, coming through the mouth of a fairy I had caught dropping sweets into my shoes. “Up, Sinu. Wake your sisters, and bring them outside. It’s time to go.”

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, opening my mouth as a question formed in my mind, but by the time I could see again, Tato was gone. My shoes stood at attention near the foot of my bed, just as I had left them. I had been keeping them close ever since Tato told me his plan.

“I need you to be ready, Petro,” he had said late one night as we locked up the pigeons. I had found them living in the space above the door and had spent countless hours trying to teach them how to deliver the letters I had just begun to write. Mamo told me she’d boil the birds if they couldn’t do anything by the end of the week. The birds didn’t learn, but Mamo didn’t keep her promise either. Now, they just pecked at the ground as if they were chickens, though they still had the good sense to come back at the end of the day. Tato had told me that we had to go

because he could read and write, which made the neighbors like him. He said the Soviet soldiers would kill people like us because they wanted to be everyone's favorite, they wanted to be the special ones. I thought it was pretty dumb to kill smart people because they usually made better plans. "They want us to be complicit, Petro." I nodded, leaving the coop to continue the chores he and Mamo had laid out for me.

I jumped up and slid into my shoes. I had been practicing every morning since that day at the coop. Vika and Lesya turned restlessly in their sleep, quickly rolling into the empty space I had just created in the bed. It wouldn't have been hard for Tato to wake us all at once. I shook them both.

"Stop it, Petro. Let me sleep!" Lesya scooted away, bumping into Vika, who in turn gave a sharp jab to her stomach, exclaiming, "Hey! What was that for?"

"Quiet, both of you!" I hissed, trying to mimic Tato's sturdy tone. "We're leaving soon. Get up, and get dressed. And no talking."

\* \* \*

I had friends who knew about the war. Last summer, we'd sometimes talk about it, swimming in the creek on hot days. They always seemed excited: the metal wagons with big guns on them, weapons that could drop people like ragdolls and shoot 300 times faster than our slingshots, and the girls who would throw themselves at the uniformed men. Those were their favorite things to talk about. But sometimes, usually on the rare occasions when Vasil or Andriy had swiped a bottle of *horilka* from their fathers' stash, we'd talk about the real stuff we knew about the war. How the Soviets were taking the towns around us, and how all the men—even boys our age—were enlisted or shipped off to work camps, and how dirt football fields had turned into piles of mismatched limbs due to undiscovered landmines. The towns had been raped

and pillaged and burned until the ground became as dark as the night sky. All that was left were soot stained pigeons pecking at debris. We'd sit by the creek, taking swigs from the bottle hoping to feel warmth in the darkness swirling within us.

\* \* \*

After a lot of moping, my sisters finally settled down in a spot near the front of the wagon, nuzzling themselves in between sacks of bread and dried meat that Mamo had prepared earlier in the week. I couldn't tell what time it was, but the moon had already passed its highest point, and Mamo held bags almost as heavy as the ones beneath her eyes.

"Petro, bring the sacks from the kitchen and the big pot," she said. "Leave everything else. We don't want them to think we planned this."

It took three trips to gather everything. I stopped and glanced around, the pot still under my arm. Why did we have to leave it all behind? Who would notice if a few books were missing from the small shelf in the corner or if we took Mamo and Tato's wedding candles? I couldn't bear the thought of a fire consuming everything sacred to me, to us. Checking over my shoulder to make sure she wasn't watching, I raced towards the stubby cupboard, grabbing my cousin's knife from the bottom drawer—its ivory handle seeming to glow in the darkness—and pulled the wood-carved cross down from the kitchen doorway. The knife had supposedly helped him survive his deployment so it would surely help us survive ours, and the cross was my last birthday present from him before he died. Outside, I slipped both into the rucksack that held a few pieces of clothing while Mamo strapped in the donkey.

\* \* \*

Four days ago, my cousin had returned from the war. We saw him—still in uniform—walking around town with his wife. The drabness of his garb made it hard to miss the badge that

had replaced his left arm. We heard whispers of what happened from relatives, each new story filling in what the last had left out. His troop had reclaimed a village very similar to ours. The Soviets must have escaped as they arrived, and their bombers came two days later. He miraculously re-appeared at his base camp days after the bombing run, was given the best medical attention possible, and was honorably discharged for his valiance. Tato told me that a man who went through something like that was never the same, and the glazed look in his eyes told me everything else I needed to know.

Our extended family avoided talking about it in detail until he was found dead a day later. Andriy thought he had done it himself; another boy said it was the work of a self-proclaimed patriot who thought my cousin had somehow failed in his duty. I liked to think a Soviet spy sought to end what his brethren had started.

“Show some respect, boys!” Mamo had crept up behind us, giving each of our cheeks a sharp smack.

In any case, I knew that his death had made up Tato’s mind.

\* \* \*

“All right, Petro.” Tato beckoned me over to the wagon from the spot against the wall I had been resting at. “Up you go. We have to be gone before the sun rises and anyone cares to notice.”

I climbed into the back, carving out my own space near the girls. Mamo followed behind me, leaving Tato to carry the reins. I could feel the exact moment he started tugging the donkey along. I looked back towards our house as our wagon rolled down the bumpy dirt road. The dull clay walls, which had been the backdrop of my life, now seemed lifeless. The thatch roof looked identical to all the houses around it, all of them shells protecting the hearts living inside them.

Eventually, we rolled to a stop. I glanced up from the stick I was whittling with a flat river rock I had found while swimming that warmer season. A few yards ahead stood the church where my whole family—aunts, uncles, grandparents, and great-grandparents—had been baptized. Tato handed Mamo the reins and walked hurriedly up the steps leading to the priest's door on the side of the church. Vika stirred.

“Where's Tato going?” she asked.

“Just to collect our documents. He'll be back soon, just be patient,” Mamo said.

“Are we moving?”

“Yes, Vika, it'll be like we're moving. Now hush, and I'll tell you a story of what our new life will be. When we get there, you and Lesya will have a whole bedroom separate from Petro, and the three of you will go to school. Your teacher will ask you, ‘Where did you learn to read so well?’ and you can tell her, ‘My Tato! He's a genius!’ And Petro can raise all the pigeons he wants, maybe even chickens because it would be nice to keep a few more eggs...”

\* \* \*

I had my first kiss next to those steps. Kateryna Kolisnyka and I had snuck out of vespers one night and sandwiched ourselves between the steps and the big willow that grew beside them. She was one of the few girls in town who was attractive and I wasn't related to. I gave her some flowers I had found by the creek earlier, and she gave me a kiss, which I promptly returned. The service must have ended early, though, because the next second, I heard Mamo shouting my name, calling me a heathen and a pervert. Kateryna ran away as I got dragged ear-first to the sacristy, where I was forced to confess to Father Mykhailo while Mamo listened, making sure to interject when I forgot my sins.

\* \* \*

Tato reappeared a short time later, a stack of papers in hand. He opened the rucksack and tucked them in, raising an eyebrow at the trinkets I had stowed away, not saying anything.

With Tato at the reins, we began pulling away from the church once more. Its figure had always scared me as a child with the weathered planks emerging from the wheat fields surrounding it, the three steeples reaching like hands towards the sky, and the dull metallic domes catching the moonlight at bent angles. It moved like a ghost, materializing in front of me, then fading into the night a moment later. The steps were the last thing to disappear into the midnight haze.

I leaned my head on a sack of bread in the bed of the wagon and cupped a hand over my exposed ear, trying to block out the story Mamo kept telling over and over again. The wagon felt like a cradle, but my thoughts and the rocks in the road kept bouncing my head around. Would we ever return? Who would feed the pigeons? Would Vasil, Andriy, and the other boys and men fight or let themselves be taken and killed?

I fell asleep, dreaming of my village. Above, pigeons with flaming feet flew through the skies. They landed everywhere—in the fields, on top of the houses, and in Father Mykhailo's hair. In the end, there was nothing but rubble and ash and bone.

“Up, Sinu.” I woke to Tato shaking my leg. “Your turn at the reins.”

Everyone else was asleep. Tato took my place in the wagon, placing his hat on my head as he laid down. I looked down the road ahead, through the endless expanse of fields that was my home. The sun broke the horizon behind us, casting our long shadow through the monotonous plains. I did not look back.

### The Last Jazz Club on Earth

There was a time when I cared about what I looked like in front of the patrons. I cared that they'd see perfection in a red dress, and that perfection would haunt them for the rest of their lives. Dressed beyond Sunday bests, I wore funeral reds so bold and crisp they'd take a program and forget it in their backseat only to be found by a friend years later who'd ask why the hell they went to a jazz club. They'd become somber as they thought back to the one night of perfection in their lives as I stood on stage, their body malleable from the beat and I manipulated that, forcing frisson down their necks. They'd try to explain the low lighting, the tinge of moldiness in the air, the decrepit building palatable like an old couple's home, but they never could, so they'd place the program back in the pouch behind their seat and keep the bright red and deep chills in their mind for themselves.

When the lights are off, I can see bass notes floating between streams of cigar smoke burning throughout the club. I reach out to touch them and they pucker against my finger then

fall away into millions of other waves. It is perfect. Music is perfect. It's all about symmetry, really. The waves lock together in special ways that make it all pleasurable. Perfect symmetry. In the darkness of backstage, I still have a shadow. It's dull and faded, really only there if I look hard enough and want it to be, and I do because it's the last chance I get to see myself, to fix anything before I walk out there, and this twin tied to my feet is burned away. Pray the hairspray holds. Pray the cotton balls stay tightly packed into the toes of my shoes. Pray sleeping with the window open didn't build up too much mucus and that smoke doesn't choke the precious air away. This is everyday. I treat it like it's my last, because I know someday it will be. I will be perfect. I will sing forever, and I will never stop because I sing, and I won't ever change, I know it.

I can't help to take on all the pressure of it. It's hard to move. My feet locked, not heavy like a block of ice, but running underwater, and it's all collapsing in at once. Then the floating bass notes are pushed away, blown up into the tiniest waves by applause and I'm pulling myself through the pressure as best I can, a race because I know the lights will be on and if I'm late that's just one more reason to sink.

\* \* \*

Malcolm's Big Band was tire-deep in water two days out from town. They took a stop in a penny bar off the highway, where the saxophonist dropped a solo that earned him an extra drink for each minute he kept it up. With each pause for air he'd take another drink and another drink, and his finger fumbled across the keys of the sax. At some point, the sun came up and he went down. The band was back on the road, slogging through rising water, the same water that had nipped at the shoelaces of the bandmate they left behind them, forgotten, sleeping sprawled across the bar, never to wake up again.

Malcolm told them to move fast, don't hedge any bets, get to The Last Jazz Club on Earth so they could play the gig and get the hell out of there. Anyone who knew of the club was at it most nights, and anyone who was missing theirs had no idea where the hell it was. The club's name fell into Malcolm's lap one night after a gig, when some hippie-like joe schmoe came up to him as he was collapsing his mic stand and winding sound cables around his arms. The guy handed him a program.

"I'm telling you man," the hippie said, "I found myself out in that place. It was like the waves of the universe were there and I was just reborn."

Malcolm ignored him. Another looney trying to get him to some hole-in-the-wall trash heap. Club owners did it all the time; some random patron would come up with a card or an address and tell him it was the only real stuff they'd ever heard. They were addicts, all of them, Malcolm included. But he knew better than to throw himself at their mercy.

Then, the clubs started calling him. First it was a fluke cancellation, then two more, and the next thing he knew, his tour turned into a single-night gig in a Florida punk club. Malcolm needed to perform, an itch beyond scratching, he wanted to burn it away, and he'd do anything. So he pulled out the map and his manila folders of clubs with cards and programs and phone numbers scrawled onto napkins, drink stains still visible. Only one picked up. And now, he was on the west coast, the front man of the most famous Big Band ever, strolling alone into the most dank, devout, strung out place he'd ever been.

The Last Jazz Club on Earth hid most of its flaws well with low lighting, but Malcolm's eyes were well adjusted to the dull glow of Edison bulbs. He sucked in the thick cigarette smoke and his lungs sighed with delight. He had quit three years ago, but never stopped.

The only thing hungrier than the booze-lathered linoleum were the patrons, saliently suffering until the music kicked on and they became satisfied. Waves of bass notes washed over the crowd sitting in cracked vinyl booths in the old diner they called their jazz club. One man in torn jeans and a thread-bare beanie bounced with delight, each bounce echoing through the bending floorboards beneath him. A woman sat legs crossed on a barstool, holding a beer with both hands as she slurped the foam off the top. The stage shook with each kick of the drum; it was particleboard layered across an old buffet line. This, Malcolm thought, was the definition of scum. On stage was another part of the noise. Malcolm tried to keep every singer from every club straight, but the truth was they all dreamed themselves into the same stereotype: A bright red dress to contrast the black mic stand, celestially dark black hair crafted into hollywood waves that fall into loose sheets around the shoulders, a face so meticulously and perfectly sculpted it looked just like the others. It was inevitable that those girls became just a part of the ambiance for Malcolm, just as his neck stopped tingling like everyone else when the band came to a close on their first tune and the harmonies fell in line, one by one, and the room buzzed with a quiet electricity that could only be described as right.

As he sat down, though, the band struck up their second song. The singer's jaw fell open to send out the same old noise, and Malcolm wondered if she'd sing this classic the same as the lady who made it famous or the pompous man with a black quiff that brought it back.

*Birds flying high, you know how I feel.* Malcolm could feel each of the hairs on his ears begin to rise, and a warm shiver melted down his spine like a mass of molten brass.

*Sun in the sky,* she was singing low and deep, paced and purposeful, *You know how I feel.* It was easiest to just memorize the path of the song and regurgitate it, but Malcolm knew this

was something beyond that. This voice led him from the first to the minor third, up to the fourth and drowned him in the fifth.

*Breeze drifting on by, you know how I feel.* It was measured, a decision, an attack, and he was captured.

*It's a new dawn.* A siren. *It's a new day,* Malcolm propped himself up on his elbows like so many others around him. *It's a new life, for me.* He allowed himself, finally, to be drawn in.

*And I'm feeling good.*

\* \* \*

The band felt the anxiety beating out of my chest and held it to theirs. They took it in close, let it flow from their shoulders to the pads of their fingers, knees to the tips of their toes. This was my song, and together, we stepped through the murk of it all. We moved together, tied in our union.

Off in the crowd, I saw him. None of our regulars wore a pinstripe suit, but it was really the greasy blonde rat tail that gave him away. The front man. The frontest man. Malcolm, but without his Big Band. He could play any instrument, and he was here in my club. He recorded an entire album with only himself because he didn't trust anyone else to tell the story of loss and newfound love he had written. Four brass players quit before he went on by himself, and at least one of them stopped playing altogether. I read that somewhere. It was believable enough and no one told me I was wrong.

I felt the first verse slipping as Malcolm raced through my head. Perfect wasn't good enough. I had to be uniquely new. As pure as a newborn, as flawless as a freshly paved road. A road the neighborhood kids have been dreaming of riding their bikes on for a week because they felt in their bones that wheels wouldn't just glide on it, they'd hum.

But I was an old road. The kind that had been there for twenty or thirty years. Malcolm, sitting in a booth out there without his big band, was a contractor who already knew how I was graded. I pushed the song forward.

*Fish in the sea, you know how I feel.* The bass behind beating in time with the drum as they rolled, a wave across the floor.

*River running free, you know how I feel.* I was a river and I knew it and I felt it, the sheen of water on cracking seal can be brighter with the right lights and right angle.

*Blossom on the tree, you know how I feel.* And I realized the oily black cracking seal was the permanent road, not some quick show we'd all been waiting so many decades for. The world was natural in its broken state with our cheap fixes painted overtop of it, and nothing would ever change that because the new pavement will also eventually need sealed and then we'd be right back to me on stage and Malcolm with no big band looking up at me as I sang my song with a band smaller than he'd ever played with, connected by a thread to my heart, and Malcolm will never even get close enough to see it.

*It's a new dawn,* I gathered everything I had in my voice, the end of the road in sight, walled in golden trees and encapsulated by a sky so blue I could've been drowning. *It's a new day,* no, I was drowning and I saw it all; Malcolm without his stupid big band, the jazz junkie drooling in his seat in front of me, the bartender washing a glass without nodding his head like usual. Through the smoke and music, standing on that warped stage, I knew they all were reading the words in my mind before I was even thinking them, and nothing felt natural and everything was bad, but I was so far along now and I can't just cut it and start over I'm right by the edge so I push. *It's a new life,* and whatever was still lodged in my throat and ate the music right out of the line as I reached higher to seal the song into this room and rid myself of it.

\* \* \*

“For me.” The singer’s voice had broken into a whisper, and Malcolm sat straight up, swiping at stray strands of spit as if he had just woken up from a nap that was never intended to end. She was pissed, he could see it in the flash of her eyes, the tightening muscles in her neck. She glowered into the microphone and held a finger against her ear and a hand to her chest, letting all the music she made resonate through her as she lined up the notes of the last line.

*And I’m feeling good.*

Malcolm hated when his musicians messed up. Once, his saxophonist who was laying in the quickly submerging penny bar forgot where the shout chorus ended and started into a new verse before Malcolm had finished his solo. Malcolm just set down the trumpet he was playing and walked off stage. He walked right to the bus to gather up all his instruments, and then he rented a van to drive himself to gigs. It was a gesture, and the band knew if that happened again, he might be more inclined to pack himself up and leave them all together.

Whatever Malcolm had heard in The Last Jazz Club on Earth, though, wasn’t a mistake. It wasn’t an accident. It was beautiful. Yes, the notes hadn’t come out clean, her voice groveled under the weight of them, but Malcolm desired that feeling again—to be so sucked into a song that it felt like his life was ending when the trance broke. He wanted that feeling again. So as the singer dropped off the stage and walked to the bar, he stood quickly to join her, knocking over his glass of water. He fumbled the cup, but eventually caught it close to his chest, and got in line with every other patron for the chance to buy the singer a drink. His feet were no longer sticking to the floor. A thin layer of water had spread throughout the club and still dribbled in from the doorway. Outside, streams ran down the streets, but there was no rain. Eventually, when the patrons left, they would think it had just stormed while they watched the show, but they wouldn’t

see the big pockets of water forming behind the buildings, and they wouldn't notice the water in the pier had risen a few inches higher. They all just stood in line.

\* \* \*

The last thing I wanted at the bar after a show was to see all the patrons. When the house lights were down, they weren't real. But now, I knew they had all heard me fail. They were all compliments and cash wads, ready to fight the bartender for anything I asked for. But I sent them off one after another.

It was late when Malcolm walked up. He had seen every flaw I had and would pull each apart, and I'd never forget those two notes. They'd ring in my ears forever like the black sheep they were. He sat down, and whatever bubble was holding back the last of the pressure I was bound to feel popped.

"Francesca," he said.

"Frankie is fine."

He offered me a drink like everyone else. Like with everyone else, I declined. I liked patrons to think they were below me somehow, but the truth was, I was afraid the sharp liquor would split my throat open as it went down and the only one to blame would be me. Malcolm rose a hand from his pocket to his mouth. He dragged chapstick across his lips until they were bright cherry red. They were dry and cracked and oh so perfect from playing anything, everything, all the time. They moved flawlessly, shaping into letters and words so effortlessly as they rounded into vowels and popped with consonants. Then I realized he had been talking to me.

"I'm sorry?"

"May I sit with you?" he repeated.

I forced a smile that said sorry and nodded because I was beyond trusting myself with words.

“Your singing was really lovely.”

I looked at him quizzically.

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Francesca, I’ve been doing this too long to care about inflating egos.”

Well, any old drunkard would tell me I did good, but this was Malcolm. I massaged my throat and hoped the massaging would ward off bad notes next time.

“I know you’re worried about the mistakes, but trust me, it was beautiful. I promise. Once you get as good as me or you, the mistakes aren’t mistakes. They come on purpose because we just know.”

I tried to swallow but my throat caught and my hand stopped. It couldn’t be true. But he was Malcolm. The last of the patrons made their way out the door, and the bartender disappeared with bags of trash. We were alone.

“Will you sing some more tonight, Francesca? If it’s not too much to ask.”

“The band’s all packed up. They’re gone,” I whispered.

“We don’t need a band,” Malcolm said, standing up and reaching for my hand. He led me toward the stage. The bass was lying on its side and he picked it up and started my song again, as sweet and smooth as the band had played. *Bum, ba dum, ba dum, ba dum, ba dumba ba dum*. I felt it flowing through me, free and clear as ever. I was exhausted, though, but he didn’t care, he just wanted to hear me sing. I opened my mouth and let it fall out of me.

\* \* \*

*Dragonflies out in the sun*, Malcolm felt the hypnotizing pull of each note Francesca created. It pulled him in time, rattled his fingers and forced them to keep plucking along to their shared heart beat. *You know what I mean don't you know.*

*Butterflies all having fun*, her notes rang loud and clear through the club. Malcolm slipped, his body slumping slightly as the music washed over him. The strings snapped loud against the fingerboard, and it caught Francesca by surprise as she choked out, *you know what I mean.*

*Sleep in peace when day is done*, Malcolm righted himself, the snag in Francesca's voice sending it back through him again, *that's what I mean.* He played along, his notes again staying in time as they marched along with their *bum, ba dum, ba dum, ba dum, ba dumba ba dum.*

*And this whole world is a new world, and a bold world—*

Malcolm's eyes lit up as Francesca held the note. His brain was vibrating with the music, he was sure, and his vision was darkening. Then, like a knife in his ear being twisted, Francesca fell out of key and the note dropped and dropped, breaking Malcolm from the sleep he was falling into, the bass in his hands, sinking deeper until it was completely and utterly wrong.

*For me!* She finished, and Malcolm was lost in it all. Confused. Hurt. It wasn't entirely right. It wasn't the same as the first time. But he still wanted it, he still wanted more because he felt the imperfect notes ring inside him somewhere.

"That was gorgeous," he half lied. Francesca smiled. Malcolm set the instrument down, and she led them backstage to the stage door. Neither noticed the foot of water that had filled The Last Jazz Club on Earth.

\* \* \*

Malcolm was walking me home, and I normally didn't let that happen because my house was far up the hill, but I wanted him to grab my hand again like he did when he walked me on stage. When we got to mine we looked at each other in the dark, no shadows here, and he said goodnight and I smiled and nodded back because I didn't know what else to say and I didn't know where my voice was anyway. He said we should meet up tomorrow, and I nodded again.

"Where should we go?" he asked.

I remembered he's not actually from here, so I reached down into my gut and pulled my voice back up just to say, "the pier," and this time he smiled, so I turned and went inside and closed the door without looking back so it feels like I'm not actually leaving him.

That night, I dreamt Malcolm held my hand and walked me on stage. I fluttered over the pressure as the wings in my chest beat faster and faster. He was warm and smelled like burnt candle wicks drifting through the window in the middle of the night. We bowed together and he wrapped himself around me and then I woke up.

Nervous got me dressed before the sun was out. We hadn't decided when to meet, so I'd be there and be ready for him. The road from my house to the club wrapped around town and dumped off at the pier. It was the route I was second-most familiar with. Often, I'd walk it and wonder what it would take for a limb to fall off one of the dead trees beside the road, how hard it'd fall, if I'd survive if it fell on me. The morbidity kept me on my toes—it kept me going.

The trees stretched out and out, one branch to the next, to the next; they grew and grew and pointed out toward the hills in the distance. The hills used to be powerful, they reached high into the sky, towering, intimidating, mysterious and beautiful. They rolled like waves of music—their tall crests inevitable. But the hills had been shrinking away. Not overnight, but

subtly—a decrescendo. One afternoon a few months ago, they were still tall and well-braided in their season, they hosted trees of yellow and orange which were vibrant flames scorching the clouds away. Then the snow came, and as slowly as the last bits of life drained from the trees to make way for a fine white coat, the hills began to exhale. It was so subtle, like the last note of a song, that I hadn't even noticed. Then it was spring and the hills were as sunken as an empty chest cavity. Flatline. All that remained were crests like tortoise shells sticking out of the water. The trees had been submerged and their pastel buds were swept up and carried to the pier. When I got there, the dock was nowhere to be seen, so I sat where the water meets the grass and kicked the buds into shapes in the green water. They are more beautiful like this, anyway. Then Malcolm was there sitting next to me.

“I love a good tree,” he said looking behind us. I didn't think I could explain the hills to him. “They're so big out here, I swear I could just about wrap my hands the whole way round them and they wouldn't touch. I swear I could kiss them and I'd feel no closer to the center than we are now, they're so round.”

“I'd say these are pretty average trees,” I said.

“Well I don't care what they are, I like them. We don't have them this big back east.”

We sat in silence. I thought about asking why he was here or where the band was.

“Why do you want to perform with me when I make so many mistakes?” I asked instead.

He sighed. “Because I want to.” Then he paused for a minute, and I waited. “You're like me. I just want you to know that the audience doesn't care. They're going to praise what they can't do. Their world isn't going to end just because of a few bad notes. Just do what you can and don't get bitter about it.”

I thought he was lying because it all seemed too bland and easy and obvious, but I couldn't put together a response so I didn't say anything. We sat together, me kicking at petals, Malcolm applying chapstick and pulling at calluses on his fingers from playing.

"Do you want to go get coffee?" he eventually asked.

"No," I said.

"Do you want to walk?"

"No."

"Well then, what do you want?"

I thought for a moment, then jumped up and grabbed his hands. "I need to practice."

"I told you," he said, not standing. "You don't *need* to. You don't need to do anything. You're fine, just stop trying so hard, no one cares."

I dropped his hands. "I'm going to practice because I *want* to," and started walking away. Soon, Malcolm stood to follow.

\* \* \*

Malcolm's big band stopped again, this time for gas and coffee. The tour manager went to get off the bus first, but didn't realize how high the water was until he slid off the bus's middle step and fell face-first into it. The bus driver laughed, so the manager splashed water back up at him. In the time it took the driver to wipe his face off, clean his glasses and look back, the tour manager was nowhere to be seen. He hadn't gotten back on the bus, and none of the crew saw him inside the station. They waited an hour before heading out, and by then, the water was on the bus's third step.

It was entirely Malcolm's intention to force Francesca to accept imperfections. The two were marching through the foot of water they had missed the night before. He had told Francesca

on the way over that he loved being in clubs while they were closed, they smelled better without all the riff raff and the music was always so much more pure. The overnight damage had been excessive. Trash and cups and light wooden chairs floated throughout the place, and on top was a fine sheen of what Malcolm assumed was all the drinks spilled onto the floor over the year.

Francesca was already on stage while Malcolm pulled himself up, the particleboard chipping where the pair had thoroughly soaked it. Francesca handed him the bass again, and again he started his *bum, ba dum, ba dum, ba dum, ba dumba ba dum*. She burst into the last verse of the song, as strong as she could, scaling intervals with the clarity of a pane of glass.

*Stars, when you shine*, Malcolm's fingers cried out from under ripe calluses, but the pain wasn't what set him out of time. He plucked subtly against Francesca's cadence and it stalled her, forcing her to pause and regroup before *you know how I feel*. She cast him a pleading glance, and huffed at him.

*Scent of the vine, you know how I feel*, Malcolm knew she had climbed the scale here to reach for the climax of her song. He shifted his hand down and played it all a half step out of tune. Francesca was onto him. Her face flared up bright red with anger. Malcolm reached one hand up to the tuning peg of his G string.

And right as Francesca breathed in to catch her highest note, Malcolm tightened the tuning peg hard to the left, again and again until the taut string snapped, slapping his hand and denting the wood of the instrument as it fell to the floor.

"What the hell are you doing!" Francesca stormed over to him and shoved the bass to the floor. The side wall of its body caved and the neck snapped in two, all of it still held together only by the three remaining strings. "I told you I need this!"

Malcolm's fingers were still crying and a line had burned itself across his hand where the string had snapped. The rushing sound of water echoed behind Francesca.

\* \* \*

This was how he treated me? All I wanted was to sing and be perfect and have what I thought was a goddamn professional help along the way and now my bassist has no instrument and I don't even want to sing because what the hell's the purpose if I've messed up this much in one evening already. This is exactly why I don't let anyone get close to me or my voice. I can't stand it. Anything I do is for me and not them and all these Malcolm's ever do is show up and try to turn me into them when I'm not. Bubbles are bursting all around me and it's all crashing down. A million tons of water falling on my head that I wish I could stop. The weight is too heavy, so I sit on the floor, but the stage is creaking and shifting, and then there's a pounding on the door.

\* \* \*

Malcolm heard the knock too, but when the door slammed open, it was a wave of water washing in. Patrons had come in too, swept up in the deluge, gurgling and spitting up the water carrying them along. There was the ripped jeans and beanie guy, then Francesca's drummer was swept past, still swinging at the water like it was a kit in front of him. Malcolm grabbed Francesca as the wave hit the particleboard, soaking it through.

"I'm sorry, okay?" he begged. "I'm sorry, we have to go now." She let him pull her to her feet. The stage groaned loudly as the patrons floated through the place, and before the pair could even acknowledge it, it had snapped and they were in the rising water.

\* \* \*

I can't see. I can't feel Malcolm. I'm flailing wildly, and then I hit a wall, then a faux marble countertop, and I pull myself onto the buffet that helped hold up the stage. Most of the club's furniture is swirling around under the force of the water, and I shout for Malcolm, but I can't even hear myself over the roaring water. I see someone who had been clinging to a booth yanked away and I'm relieved to see it's a regular, Samson from the deli, and not Malcolm. I crawl toward the other end, looking out toward the door as the guy who always wears a cowboy hat and his wife are swept in, then a bike, then branch, but no Malcolm. He's gone, and I have no idea what to do. I'm trapped here on this island, but there, floating by the back hall behind the stage, it could be the same striping of his suit so I jump next to it, but grab a handful of mutilated curtains. Defeated, I feel the pull of the water on my back and let it take me. I'm swept down the back hall and toward the back door before I even feel the hands on my shoulders, see their calluses, and Malcolm is pulling me. We stop on the other side of the back door.

"Are you ready?" he asks, and I start to ask what he means, but he pulls the door open and the water shoves its way in, the door smashing us into the wall behind us. After a minute the pressure against the door lightens, the water's mostly equal. We slide out from behind the door in chest deep water, and pull ourselves out, gripping onto the sides of the club for stabilization as the water fights hard to push us back. I turn to make sure Malcolm is following me.

We push on, making ground window by window as the waves suck us back toward town. Then, we run out of jazz clubs. I turn the corner and let the water hold me against the wall. It froths around us, full of my town, leaping up into my mouth and I try my best to spit it out but more water replaces it. Malcolm reaches for a tree branch in front of us and I follow him. Up close, the trees don't look like the same gangly arms and fingers, but still I feel each grip me back and help me along, toward the top of the hill. We half-swim, half-swing our way toward my

house, the hill still unsubmerged. The water is rising but we're rising faster, each tree at a time. The closer we get, the more I allow myself to feel hope that we might survive all this, me and Malcolm, that I live to forgive him if we survive all this.

"Oh," I hear Malcolm whisper on the branch ahead of me. He's struggling against the tree, trying to throw himself backward with the force of the water. "My leg's caught."

I can't see it, but I imagine the arms of the tree wrapped around his leg, trying just as we are to feel stable as the world falls apart around it. I slap it and plead with it, *let him go, please let him go, we're so close*. Then I hear the tree starting to wail, it's a sharp, high sound echoing throughout the wood. The water pushes against it harder, and I feel my grip on Malcolm's tree shift so I grab for a different tree, and all within a moment I hear the wood snap. I don't look back to see him, I just trust he's there, and climb one tree at a time, until I pull myself onto the bank that once was my front yard. The front door's still intact

\* \* \*

In my waterlogged shoes and waterlogged dress and waterlogged house, I pour myself a conservative glass of scotch, a gift for myself after my first show. I opened it and had a sip, and it burned going down so I spat it back up as quickly as I could. I thought it was tearing my throat apart and I couldn't let that happen. Now, nothing mattered, I just wanted to see if it could actually make me feel good. I'm sipping scotch with my eyes closed trying to determine how high the water is by feeling how cold my legs are. I wish I could just belt out a perfect jazz classic so smooth and clear the water has no choice but to subside right here on the spot. I want nothing more than to cuss myself out for falling for the idea that I could be anything less than perfect. My red dress is torn and stained dark by the water, and I'm sure I can hear Malcolm gurgling somewhere out there in the waves. The stars set long before a bird started tapping on

my window. It's pecking away like there's no tomorrow, and I'm not convinced it's wrong. It flutters, beating its wings and body into the glass and I think to it, *go, please go sit somewhere else. You have so much to do and see, you can sing and be free, so please go.* But it stays, frantically pushing against the window. I push my way through the knee-deep water over to it and tap back, and try again to sing, *it's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life, for me.* I try my hardest to sing, even though nothing comes out and the bird's beak is hitting against the window harder and harder. *It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me.* The bird slams its small, frantic body into the glass, its beak pecks it once more and spiraling cracks appear across the pane. *And I'm feeling good.* It floats in the air for a second as the water passes my knees, and I watch through cracked glass as it flies away.

### The Blind Will See

Harriet wanted to see the devil. It had been what she and Marsha started calling their week of divine intervention. The pantry's backstock of canned goods had already run low, and the Kindnesses of staff were running lower, especially since Father Stephen had once again foregone direct depositing pay last week. Harriet listened to Marsha go on about the upcoming baptisms and her kid's soccer game. Without inventory, there wasn't much to do, so Harriet listened. Marsha was always especially short when the pantry required a divine intervention to stay afloat, and this week was no different—Marsha's husband's company was bought up, and there was an office reshuffling, and vacation time during the move, and everything was so bleak Marsha was just about ready to pass right on.

“I just pray he doesn't bring that laptop,” Marsha continued. “Hand to the lord I swear the devil's in those company files, just tempting him over to it and over to it. I could beat the devil into him. One more email, I swear it!”

Harriet nodded. It seems more and more like that these days, she concluded. The devil in everything, demanding his tithes of attention. She had never met—or even seen—the devil, but she was curious. Everyone else seemed to be able to see the devil so easily, much more easily than God. Harriet hoped she'd at least nailed down seeing God, but sometimes she still wasn't sure..

“But we're going to this lovely beach home southeast a bit, oh just down 74,” Marsha went on. “And I am so happy. I'm finally off my health kick, just in time for beach shape...”

Harriet nodded and listened and knew that Marsha's health kick was substituting meals for plain romaine, water, and pills from the Believe It And Weep blog, and she was sure that was him. Right in the health kick. Not the fire and pitchfork and red horns, but a suit jacket and a too-small tie. Khakis and black shoes with colorful socks because no one sees them, and it's okay to be unprofessional where no one sees it. Harriet put the thought out of her mind; she was sure the devil should be more obvious.

\* \* \*

Creaking found its way to Harriet's ears often. She listened to the doors in and out of her apartment, even counting footsteps. The counting didn't help her sleep, though, nothing did anymore. It was a job, an exhausting task. But Harriet liked hearing her neighbors go out and down the hall toward the laundry room, up the unstable steps and slide a key into the door three over, bottles and refuse shifting against each other on their way back out to the trashroom again. Listening was something she was good at, and she knew it.

Once, Harriet's father told her that the night her Grandpa had died—or disappeared—Grandma heard a knock on the door with no footsteps leading up to it. They slept in different beds, and Grandma peeked toward the door and saw a red light underneath, so she

pulled the covers over her head. Grandpa got up to answer. The door closed and the light went away and Grandpa never came back. Her father said that Grandma said he went straight to hell that night, where he belonged, and that if there was a knock at the door with no footsteps leading up to it, it meant the devil was tired of tempting and came to collect. Her father had meant to scare her, she knew, but it was easy enough to listen for steps. With age, Harriet found herself no closer to being afraid, but still she counted, still she listened.

She'd just spent the day in bed, watching the tall window across from her as the sky began to bruise itself blue with the weight of the day while the clouds pushed the sun down to choke out the last of its warmest hues, and then it was dark out. She couldn't remember if she had fallen asleep or just blinked rather slowly, but all too quickly the hall was quiet. Harriet didn't keep a clock in her room, but she called this time the unclean hour, mostly because it was too ghastly for anyone to want to do laundry. Harriet herself was unclean. It had been a hard day of rest; Harriet made sure there was nothing to do beside sit, and the listening came quite frequently then. The quiet dark of the unclean hour was when Harriet prayed.

"Oh lord," she'd start. "Send food to the shelter. Heal Mr. Gatlin's leg so he can work and not need our canned goods anymore. Take away the health kick, and please show me the devil so no one else sees him anymore."

Usually, this was followed by silence. Occasionally, a door would slam and Harriet knew that her prayer didn't make it, or floorboards would creak so she'd whisper an Amen and hope something was different tomorrow. Then, she'd reach to her bedside table to get the lamp, and open her eyes only when the lights went out. The scarcest nights of all were the ones like tonight, Harriet would open her eyes to find the plattered head of John the Baptist at the foot of her bed.

"I thought I asked you to knock," Harriet quipped. "What if I was indecent?"

“All are indecent when they stand before the tribunal. Repent and you will be cleansed.”

“Bless me forerunner,” Harriet would reply. “Wash away my sins.”

“Even your prayers are sinful. Your Penance will be long, and no more will you seek out the devil, for the Lord is coming, and it will be soon, and all those...”

Then she would turn her head to look out into the dark, blue world beaten into that unclean quiet out her window and close her eyes as grasshopper lined teeth went on about redemption. Harriet eventually fell asleep to the rhythmic spitting of the Jordan falling upon her and that comforting weight at her feet.

\* \* \*

Harriet took her time walking home from work. She'd meander, usually with a cart of extra donations that did not fit the church's demands. Harriet would take the extras, but often kept few for herself. She often would walk with her cart and look for the devil on the sidewalks. Father Stephen and Marsha found him so easily, and Harriet figured he could certainly be found if she walked slow enough and looked hard enough, handing out cans of peaches or dry packaged noodles or breakfast bars all the while. She would walk until she came to Mr. Gatlin's underpass, and she would poke him awake with something from the cart.

“Thank you, sister,” he always said. He called everyone brother or sister. Marsha found him odd and usually gave him fewer cans because of it, but Harriet liked the acquaintanceship.

“Have you seen him today?” she would ask him.

“Sister, don't go looking for him, I told you.” He paused to look at Harriet and knew she would look anyway. “I did see two brothers down the road, one quite red and mad. His blood and muscles on the outside,” Harriet listened dutifully, nodding all the while, then would fix his leg

back on top of his pillow and hand him a bottle of water if his breath seemed out. “I pray you be careful out there sister. Just know I’m praying for you.”

Harriet kissed his head and pushed her cart forward down the road, wiping the oils Mr. Gatlin left on her face as she went.

\* \* \*

Mr. Gatlin hadn’t lied—he had no reason to, he was a religious man—there was a red man dragging another man around. She had walked three blocks from Mr. Gatlin’s underpass where a creek ran under the road, and the two were there strolling by the edge of the water. The man being dragged seemed deflated, his face pulled into a long cry for help. Harriet thought of a malformed gingerbread man only to quickly remind herself she was looking at a real person. His legs seemed to sway as the pair of men walked along. Since it seemed there was no conflict for the moment, Harriet parked her cart and dropped over a low portion of the bridge to get down to them.

“Are you him?” The man turned to look at her, and his victim—or partner, Harriet really could not tell from their actions—twisted so sharply around the red man, a towel wrapped around him, that she felt the need to close her eyes and stifle gag.

“No, sweet child, I’m only Saint Bartholomew.” She could see now that the wrapped-towel man was full of clean incisions where he had been flayed open, and as the wind picked up a bit, a stream of air caught the stomach and the skin inflated. Harriet watched as an inconsistent breeze pulled the face skin taught, creating the illusion of youth only contrasted by the gray beard and bald head. Then, just as easily the air pulled away, aging the skinsuit until it landed right back into its resting, draped position. “Why do you search for the devil?”

“So there will be food at the shelter, and Mr. Gatlin’s leg will be healed. To get rid of Marsha’s health kick and make sure no one sees him anymore.”

“Oh child,” the Saint said, almost signing. “The leather maker cannot make a coat before tanning and preparing the hide. You place yourself on a path of sin instead of salvation. Go home, confess yourself to Father Stephen, and never seek the devil again.”

Harriet disagreed but did not object. The saints were saints for a reason, and she could hardly become one if she didn’t listen and got herself killed by the devil.

“Can you at least tell me what he looks like or where he is?” she asked, exasperated. “I just want to know where to see him so I can help.”

“Then come with me,” the saint said, legs swaying like wayward sails. Saint Bartholomew wrapped his skin up around his shoulders like a scarf, stepped down into the stream, and began walking into the tunnel.

Harriet didn’t, though. She was stubborn in her ways and tired of holy men and their water. She stood on the bank and watched Bartholomew push on into the dark, his skin occasionally catching a draft and flaring up behind him. When he was finally out of sight, she returned to her cart and kept pushing her way home.

\* \* \*

“Oh lord,” Harriet prayed one night. “I wish I knew where to see him. I want to find him myself, not where someone else leads me. Tell me how to find him.” She had considered trying Marsha’s health kick herself, or maybe seeing if Father Stephen had a work laptop, or maybe he was just living in some broken part of herself and she couldn’t see it. Someone would have seen, Father Stephen or Marsha. Then she heard someone shuffling down the hallway, shoe soles

rustling across carpet, scuffing those creaky boards. Harriet whispered *Amen*, reached for the lamp, opened her eyes, then laid back until sleep came.

\* \* \*

Marsha was back from vacation, her husband all moved into the new office, and all she could talk about was the baptisms she missed while she was gone. Harriet was indifferent, but glad to have company once again. It was nice to have someone around who could see, she thought.

“My husband didn’t notice, but I know that health kick worked because all those other men down there were watching me,” Marsha said. “If I wasn’t a good Catholic, I could float wherever I wanted in this world, he better know he’s lucky to have me around.”

Harriet nodded and lined up identical cans of clam chowder. The time of divine intervention had passed after eleven days, and the pantry was full of approved goods from anonymous donors who all happened to be members of the parish.

A knock on the door startled both, and the clam chowder Harriet was holding fell to the floor and split.

“Damnnit!” Marsha cried, feet covered in chowder. “I don’t care if the people who take this shit eat it cold and off the floor, but we’ll run out of inventory before they get here if you keep that up!” Harriet mumbled a sorry and picked up the can. “I apologize for my language, I should know better than that in our Father’s house,” she continued. “I’ll get the door.”

Harriet had just gotten a bucket as she heard Marsha open the door, and it slammed shut as the water hit the bottom. When she came back, the pantry was empty. She looked outside and Marsha was gone.

Father Stephen didn't believe Harriet when she stormed up the rectory's steps shouting about Marsha and the knocking and her Grandfather.

"There's a difference between the stories we tell to keep children in bed at night and the demons and angels that roam our world," Father Stephen said.

"But Father," Harriet said, "why do we lie to children if it is a sin? Are they not driven away from faith when they wake and find that the devil isn't behind their bedroom doors?"

Father Stephen's brows pulled so tight the longest, grayest hairs touched, and his chin dropped with a frown. "Harriet, we all have moments of doubting our faith."

"No, I—"

"Please finish what inventory we have, then come back and let me pray through this with you. Call if you find yourself too lost in your thoughts without Marsha there to help." Father Stephen turned back to his study and left Harriet alone in the doorway.

\* \* \*

Harriet did not stay to see Father Stephen that evening, and even left the pantry altogether after their conversation. She decided to walk home, hoping he wouldn't come to find her on her way out. It was a difficult thing, she thought, to have your faith doubted when you know perfectly well that isn't your intent. She just wanted to be able to see like everyone else, to find him in something, test his limits, see how to stop him. Yet everyone tried to stop her, even the saints.

As Harriet approached Mr. Gatlin's underpass, she noticed he was not there, but a woman was there in his stead. She appeared emaciated, skin stretched taut over bone with nothing in between, and head encased in bronze. A loose ring of discolored pale skin hung on the left ring finger, and legs bent at right angles in opposite directions. Harriet was paralyzed, certain this was

the devil or at least an arbiter of his will. She wanted badly to turn and run back to the church pantry, tuck herself between the shelves where it was safe and empty. She was sure she had seen the devil, *and now the devil can go right back to hell*, she thought. But Mr. Gatlin. Oh poor Mr. Gatlin, that hellish fiend must have him, she thought. Harriet reluctantly broke free of her paralysis and marched toward the devil.

“I feel your fear,” the entity said almost as soon as Harriet took one step under the underpass, its shallow voice echoing beneath the copper encasement. “There is no cause for it. I am Saint Catherine of Siena, my dearest.”

“What have you done with Mr. Gatlin?”

“I have sent him up to heaven. He wished to tell you himself, but it was his time, so I remained for you.” The saint tried to pick herself up, but her head lolled back under the weight of the metal and her legs remained bent at those angles.

“And where is Marsha?” Harriet asked.

“I did not take her.”

“Then I wish to see the devil so the shelter can be full of food, and free all salaried employees. To destroy the health kick and send him away from all humans.”

“You seek salvation, not the devil, dearest,” Saint Catherine said. “You must commit yourself wholly to salvation, follow its darkest paths. Take my ring as a sign of your commitment, and seek out the path you have strayed from.”

As soon as Harriet took the ring, Saint Catherine began floating up, and through the underpass, and sailed off far into the sky.

“I still pray!” Harriet shouted. “Which path is it if I still pray?” But the saint was gone and all Harriet had was a ring of flesh. She cupped it in her hands.

\* \* \*

Harriet had been walking, going nowhere in particular. She continued even as the sun began to set, holding that ring and thinking on what the saints had told her. They were mistaken, she thought, she prayed every night and had never strayed from Father Stephen's teachings, except for today she guessed. She was kind, compassionate, gave as much as she could, and took as little as possible. Harriet shook the fleshy round in her hand, hoping the devil might hear it and finally find his way to her, but he hadn't. Now, the sun was setting and Harriet had nothing to show for it besides the small piece of flesh Saint Catherine had given her. Harriet found herself walking more quickly out of the building's shadows, and out into the last rays of light streaming through town. She was on a bridge, watching the sun go down and as the sky once again bruised itself blue, when she realized it was the same bridge Saint Bartholomew had gone under. With the last bit of light, she climbed down that lower piece of concrete, walked down to the bank, and confronted the darkness underneath it. Harriet slid the ring onto her finger, dropped into the water, and walked in.

\* \* \*

There was only darkness under the bridge, and though Harriet tried to comfort herself by thinking how close to the surface she was, she couldn't help but imagine the concrete walls had somehow expanded and she was lost deep in a cave. She was surprised to find walking not so difficult now that both shoes were completely waterlogged. The stream stayed at a consistent depth, touching just above her ankle. A light appeared in front of her, and behind it was the sinewy body of Saint Bartholomew, skin billowing in the caves' breeze.

"Is this the way?" Harriet asked.

He did not answer, but draped his pelt across Harriet's neck, and it filled with air and puffed like she had seen on him. But it did not blow away. He pointed deeper into the cave where lights began springing forth one after another, and Harriet followed.

She came into a circular room, the doors on all sides of it sliced the middle into a cross, and in the middle stood John the Baptist, fully corporeal with his plattered head in hand.

"Lay," he said, and Harriet did, gripping Saint Bartholomew's skin tight.

John the Baptist placed his hand on Harriet's head, sending her down into the water, past where her feet had been standing. Above her, the Baptist kept spitting that water of the Jordan down on her. Harriet knew she wasn't drowning. She was alive and encased in the living water. Up, through the rippling surface, through the bridge, through the sky, she saw golden gates etched with all the lies ever told by humanity sitting atop a bed of clouds. Harriet closed her eyes as they began to open and listened for the creaking of the doors, but they didn't make a sound. Instead, a golden light pressed itself against her eyelids, burning her, begging her to just open up and look at the glory above her. Harriet held her eyes closed even tighter, letting the light sear them shut, and she prayed wordlessly for the light to go away so she could see.

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